

HOW AN ANGEL SAVED MY FAMILY FROM BEING BURNT TO DEATH

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IT WAS THE EVENING of Wednesday February 18th 1981 at the end of the earth. I was living with my wife, Ann, and three of our four young children in Punta Arenas, the most southerly city on the mainland of South America, and earlier that day I had received news from England that my father had died. I'd just been asked to say a closing prayer in the Methodist chapel in Fitzroy. Fitzroy is a district of Punta Arenas named after the British admiral, Robert Fitzroy, who explored that part of the world. (He had been the captain of HMS *Beagle* on Darwin's famous voyage.) I found myself praying, "Father, we know that we need not fear anything, not even an earthquake or a fire, for whatever happens to us we are secure in your hands, and you are ordering all things in love for our good." I had never prayed such a prayer before in English, let alone in Spanish.

I wanted to return to England immediately to help my mother with arrangements for my father's funeral. This involved a visit the following afternoon to the International Police in the city centre to make arrangements for recovering my passport from Santiago. It had been there for several months while our applications for permanent residence were being processed. The local police assured me that I could collect it on my journey back to England, which meant that I could go the following day. I was about to return to our house and start packing when I realized I needed to visit a travel agent to book a flight. But after a few steps in the new direction something stopped me. For two days a phrase from the Bible had been swimming through my mind and it raised its head above the surface again: '*My times are in your hands*'. So I stood still on the pavement with traffic and people passing by me, and once more I prayed to God.

"Lord, my times are in your hands. Shall I go straight home or shall I go to the travel agent first to arrange a flight back to England?"

And somehow the Lord's answer came into my head: "Go home. Ann needs you."

I sometimes wonder how many disasters we might be saved from if we took more time to listen to God. Forty years before the terrible siege of Jerusalem in AD 70 Jesus warned his followers to flee to the hills when they saw the Roman armies approaching. Instead of that the majority of the population rushed into Jerusalem seeking refuge behind the city walls. In the ensuing siege 1,100,000 people died of starvation, and when the city finally surrendered and the soldiers entered they found only 97,000 people still alive.

A black collective taxi displaying my bus route number drove towards the bus stop where I was waiting for a bus. In those days collective taxis were large old saloon cars that sagged into the ground like punch-drunk boxers longing for a knockout to bring their fight to an end. Deciding to save time rather than money I accepted the driver's invitation to get in, and for once I was the only passenger. When you are crushed together in a back seat with two complete strangers bumping up and down

in unison over potholed roads you do sometimes wonder whether you've made the right choice of transport.

"You're going to Fitzroy?" the driver asked, as though he knew the answer already.

The drivers of 'colectivos' had to keep to their designated route, and they normally drove fairly slowly because passengers, at least in those days, could flag them down anywhere, not just at bus stops. But my driver was different. Disobeying orders, he took the shortest route possible to our house, driving as though his life depended on it. He was in such a hurry that when I got out of the car at the end of our street he was off again even before I'd managed to close the door. I thought I had annoyed him by taking too long to get out. It was only when I reached our house that I learned the reason for all the haste: the open doorway was filled with smoke.

My first thought was that everyone must have got out, but I stuck my head inside and called out several times, "Is anyone there?" There was no response. I retreated into the front yard and put my bag down in what seemed to be a safe place. There were no mobile phones in those days to summon a fire brigade, and I wouldn't have known the number anyway. I cried aloud, "Help me, Jesus!", and went back into the house. I had to be sure it was empty. Already there was so much smoke I couldn't see anything. This time I heard my daughter's voice upstairs. Putting a handkerchief over my mouth I ran up the stairs and found her on the landing. I more or less carried her down. As we reached the ground floor, flames from the open-plan dining room singed her eyebrows. We made it outside to safety.

"Is anyone else in the house?" I asked.

"Nathanael is. We were playing in our bedroom. I told him to follow me."

The internal hardboard walls of the house were insulated with slabs of polystyrene, which by now was fully on fire. Whatever remained of the staircase was completely hidden from view by a curtain of oily black chemical smoke. I began climbing again and bumped into Nathanael in the pitch darkness. Our five-year-old had come nearly all the way down on his own! I tucked him under my arm like a rugby ball and turned to face the flames. I didn't know if the lowest stairs could still support us or whether they were even there any more. But in rugby there is only one way to score a try. You go for the touchline, regardless of whoever is or is not in the way. Somehow I touched down with my small son in the open air.

Ann was now shouting for help from the first-floor bedroom window. She had been fast asleep, taking a siesta after a morning of teaching at the British School. The smell of smoke had woken her up.

"What shall I do?" she called.

"Come down the stairs!"

"I can't. They are all in flames."

"Then you must jump. I'll try to catch you."

"I can't do that!"

I remembered there was a short wooden ladder in the yard. A neighbour appeared and together we lifted the ladder up to the level of the bedroom window. Ann was able to clamber down it to safety, although she did twist her ankle on the final jump. By now other neighbours had appeared on the scene.

"Where's Jonathan?" I asked the world at large.

Jonathan was our three-year-old, the only one in the family still unaccounted for. Mary, a teacher from England, also lived with us, but someone reported that she had jumped from her bedroom window and had been taken to hospital. That was good, but why had no one mentioned little Jonathan? Was he unconscious somewhere in the house? Where was he? Somebody said he might be with his 'granny' across the street. The widow, Carmen Barria, had become a dear friend to all our children, and especially to our youngest son. Perhaps he had gone over to her house for some reason. I knocked on her front door and Jonathan himself opened it, safe and sound!

By this time there was an enormous crowd of onlookers in the street. Two or three fire engines arrived, together with policemen and some marines trained in firefighting. Then some reporters and photographers turned up. Next day there was a front page report in the main local newspaper claiming that all six of the city's fire brigades had come to rescue us! The firemen who did turn up put out the fire and saved our most precious possessions, but we believe it was the Lord who rescued my family by bringing me back to the house in time.

The following day I returned to the scene of devastation and looked around the kitchen where the fire had started. The floor was black with smoke and the remains of burnt lino. All that was left of the two internal kitchen walls were charred wooden frameworks with gaping holes through them. On the outer two walls the wallpaper and part of the hardboard panelling had burned away. Everything had burned, except for one small corner of the kitchen. At floor level two small areas of patterned wallpaper were still intact. On the smoke-blackened floor between them were two light-coloured rectangular patches where something had been standing during the blaze. Our next door neighbours told me that they had removed as much as possible from the house for safekeeping after everyone left, including Ann's small stock of jewellery, so they must also have taken whatever had stood in that one unburned corner of the ground floor. And then I remembered what it was. Two 5-litre plastic cans filled with paraffin for our paraffin stove had been standing there. Miraculously the inferno had bypassed that one small explosive corner of the house, in the very room where the fire had started. *"Not even an earthquake or a fire..."*

THIS ARTICLE IS AN EXTRACT FROM MY BOOK, 'Z: The Final Generation – Biblical prophecy predicts the date of Christ's return.' It considers the arguments for the reality of God, the truth of the Bible, and the evidence that Jesus Christ will shortly come again to rule the Earth. You can buy it post free from my website www.booksforlife.today.