

## COMFORT FOR TRAGEDY

**Richard Fox**

***'It was a hot windy day when I received the phone call that there was a bushfire in our area, I was worried. This was eerily similar to the Ash Wednesday bushfires in 1983.***

***Initially I thought the fire was going to miss us. But it was much bigger and moving much faster than anyone thought. We were in trouble!'***

I'm Richard Fox and this is *Messages of hope*. Today I'm sharing how bushfires affected my family and the community we grew up in. How do you pick up the pieces after the devastation of a raging bushfire? Or any devastating tragedy?

I'd just started working in the office when my parents rang. They told me, 'There's a bushfire near the family farm.' I didn't think much of it. I had a ton of work to get through. The last thing I needed was to worry about a bushfire. I rang Don who lives on the farm and he wasn't worried. He said, 'There's lots of smoke but it looks like it's going to miss.'

Not long after, my parents rang again saying, 'This is really serious, it feels like the Ash Wednesday fire.' My parents had survived the catastrophic Ash Wednesday fires in 1983 and this did feel eerily similar. Unknown to Don and just over the hill, the fire had started tracking down our valley. We were in its firing line.

I immediately rang Don again who wasn't sure what to do. The fire fighters had told him it was too late to leave and they'd gone off to fight the first front. All he could do was turn on every sprinkler, close up the house, and hope. I was on the phone to Don when the fire hit. His last words before the phone cut out were, 'The fire's coming over the hill and the bushes out the front have just gone up, I have to go.'

The next hour was one of the longest hours of my life. Was Don ok? Did he survive? All I could do was stop work and start praying. 'Dear God, please save Don. Have mercy Lord, have mercy.' I wasn't worried about the house or the old hay shed out the back. I just kept praying for Don.

It's times like these that we realise that life is far more important than things. It certainly gave me a renewed perspective.

I was worried about Don, had he survived?

After the fire had passed through, I tried calling Don not knowing if he had survived or even if the phone would actually connect! After what seemed like forever – the

phone connected. Thankfully I breathed a huge sigh of relief as Don answered the phone, 'Hello'

And then he said 'I thought I was gone. I thought, 'well this is it.' We both took a deep breath and realised what a miracle it was that Don was still with us.

After hitting the bushes out the front, the fire moved down beside the house. You could even see where embers had landed a foot beside the house and had burnt up to the veranda. It then tracked back behind the house around the water tanks and up to the old hay shed which was full of hay. The fire went right up to the shed - and then simply moved away. I couldn't believe it! It didn't burn the shed. If that had gone up, the radiant heat alone could have burnt the house and Don might not have survived.

Sadly though, my brother's house, in the next paddock, was destroyed by the fire. The fire had roared up the gully and hit his house with such force that it knocked the roof off and sent bricks flying 30 meters away! Thankfully no-one was home. But I still recall the phone call I made to tell him that his house had been destroyed. We were gutted.

The fires were random and devastating. It burnt one house but left the other. Even a fireproof house was destroyed while an old cottage in the scrub survived. The fires didn't discriminate and trying to make sense of it is not easy. So where do you go to start making sense of all the loss?

Do you blame someone? But does that actually make it better? Do you look for what could have been done differently? But that doesn't change what happened. Why were some properties burnt and others not?

Going through a disaster like this made me realise how small we actually are. That the size of a bushfire could bring so much destruction so quickly and so randomly and so out of control, that it made me think of what's really important and where God is in times like these.

It made me think of one of my favourite bible verses, *'Can anything separate us from the love of Christ? Can trouble, suffering, hard times, hunger, nakedness, or danger and death? ... I am sure that nothing can separate us from God's love.'*

Through such devastation, God is with us. He loves us and has promised to always be here for us. Sometimes it's hard to see, but he is caring for us. We can trust in him to help and reassure us, even in times of disaster.

This was even more real for me as I drove around the area in the weeks after the fire. I listened to lots of heartbreaking stories from neighbours – and amazing stories of survival.

Even my daughters would say 'I wonder who dad is going to listen to today.'

Initially, people were in shock, but as the days and weeks went by, the reality that this wasn't just a bad dream started settling in. The hurt was lasting long after the fires.

There was so much heartbreak but also so much community support. So many people helping out on the farms. There were groups of people helping put fences up, clearing burnt trees, and trying to sort through burnt-out homes. The local churches had started making and sharing meals. They'd visit with a meal and ask the owner if they were ok. Often the owner would say they're fine and that there were people worse off than them. But after a few more questions and giving them time to talk, conversations about what had happened would last for hours.

Visiting people and giving them the time to talk, helped comfort us all. Even though we couldn't do much to take the pain away. The fact that someone cares was just what we needed. It's not easy to talk about what happened, and there are people worse off. But having the opportunity to talk with someone about what happened helped work it through in our minds.

Comforting each other is sometimes the best gift we can give. It's a gift that God gives to us. God is here to comfort us in our grief and sadness. He does this through the comfort we share with others. Even when we feel like we have nothing more to give, God gives us the comfort to share with others. He does this through the gift of his son, Jesus Christ, who knows what it is like to suffer and is here for us to lean on.

Looking back, immediately after the bushfire had gone through our family farm and seeing the damage - it was all overwhelming. Seeing the blackness and destruction I didn't know where to start.

The air smelled of smoke. Everything looked black. Like a child had coloured it all in with charcoal. The wind in the trees was a dry rustle, like someone shuffling through fallen leaves. It was a harsh sound in a landscape that was otherwise silent. What used to be a constant chatter of birds was now eerily absent of them.

And then, only a month after the fire, we started to notice new growth. The trees started sprouting leaves from their trunks and branches. Birds had returned and the farm was showing signs of recovery. It was amazing to see it heal. It was the hope we needed. It was God's gift of new life.

People were recovering too. The fires had taken their toll emotionally. But there were signs of healing. People in the community had rallied together and there was a renewed sense of community. New connections and friendships had been made.

People had discovered they loved to help out and people were realising that they also needed help. The comfort God gives us through Jesus Christ was being shared.

We can't survive a fire on our own. Thanks be to God he is with us through it all.

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