

CHAPTER 1

THE THIEF

Barry Davis

Prison guards escorted Barry to the grossly overcrowded cells.

The motley crowd of inmates seemed so young, yet many had committed outrageous crimes, including murder. Perhaps the prisoners wondered who on earth this Englishman was, with the build of a boxer, a funny Spanish accent and a never-ending smile?

Fortunately, Barry was only visiting!

His travels had taken him halfway round the world to South America where life was vastly different from his home town in Lancashire, England.

Looking into the faces of those dark-haired young lads – faces hardened by crime and the poor conditions – maybe Barry's mind wandered back to the circumstances leading up to a 'chance' meeting with an Irish family which altered the course of his life.

Barry does not have very many childhood memories. Those he does have are tainted with the painful touch of tragedy. His mother and father had five children: three girls and two boys. Barry was number four and, when he was only seven years old, his mother died of a brain haemorrhage.

'The last time I saw my mother alive was in the lounge at home. When I next saw her, ironically, she was in the same room, but in a coffin,' recalls Barry with sadness.

Barry's dad was only thirty-six years of age at the time.

Although friends of the family worked tirelessly with his sisters to avoid the children being taken into care by the social services, they could not prevent Barry getting into trouble.

By the age of fifteen, Barry was already dealing in stolen goods. A Saturday job with a lorry business introduced him to a world which revolved around money: a lifestyle which was unknown to him before. He began to steal to keep in with the friends he had made in the local pub, where he was a regular. In the last year of school, Barry's life took a turn for the worse. He began to fight with his dad, was expelled from school and his police record began to grow. Consequently, he was sent to a detention centre for what was called the 'short, sharp shock' treatment. Once the six weeks were up, he emerged, still having an uncontrollable temper and a persistent problem with stealing. The only difference was that he was simply a little more cautious.

In an attempt to control his temper, Barry took up boxing. This was a mixed blessing as it involved associating with some very shady characters. Barry seemed to be on an uncontrollable downward spiral, despite attempts to salvage his troubled life.

A job with a construction company meant he had money in his pocket. In fact, he even managed to buy a house. He began to acquire possessions. Soon, the love of money and 'things' began to entwine and strangle his life again.

In May 1987, Barry began working with an Irish Catholic man who had twelve children! Although he

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was not aware of this at first, this was to be a turning point in Barry's life. As Barry worked alongside his mate, he discovered, from conversations, that several of the twelve children had become 'born-again' Christians. Barry's previous experience of this type of person was limited to recollections of The Daily Mirror newspaper reports on the visit to Blackpool by the American evangelist Billy Graham.

To be quite frank, Barry didn't have much interest in God.

To him, God was something you found out about when you died. It wasn't that he didn't believe in God, but he didn't understand how you could know God in a real way – being a Christian meant just attending church in smart clothes on Sundays and that sort of thing!

Slowly, Barry got to know some of the children who were Christians. He remembers one girl in particular. She lived in Leeds, was a physiotherapist and owned her own house. Her dad used to take Barry along with him when he visited her to do odd jobs around the house.

'The very first time I met her I could tell that there was something different about her. I couldn't explain it.'

She introduced him to her friends. He studied closely how they behaved - and was impressed! They never preached at him, but he was intrigued.

His mind went back to his early childhood when his mother had been alive.

'...she had sent us, holding hands in a line, up the cobbled streets to the local Baptist Mission hall, to Sunday School. I only attended for about two years,' remembers Barry.

His lifestyle since those days was a far cry from those times of childhood innocence.

A poster, on the back of one of the doors in Philomena's house, caught Barry's eye. It was the famous poem about footprints:

FOOTPRINTS IN THE SAND

One night a man had a dream.
 He dreamed he was walking along the beach with the Lord.
 Across the sky flashed scenes from his life.
 For each scene, he noticed two sets of footprints in the sand:
 One belonging to him, and the other to the Lord.
 When the last scene of his life flashed before him,
 He looked back at the footprints in the sand.
 He noticed that many times along the path of his life
 There was only one set of footprints.
 He also noticed that it happened
 At the very lowest and saddest times in his life.
 This really bothered him and he questioned the Lord about it.
 'Lord, you said that once I decided to follow you,
 You'd walk with me all the way.
 But I have noticed that during the most troublesome times
 in my life
 There is only one set of footprints.
 I don't understand why when I needed you most, you
 would leave me.'
 The Lord replied, 'My precious, precious child,
 I love you and I would never leave you.
 During your times of trial and suffering,
 When you see only one set of footprints in the sand
 It was then that I carried you.'

Anon

'By this time I was getting interested in the kind of Christianity I had seen being lived out in the lives of Philomena, her brother, Vinny and other 'saved' members of her family.

I would ask lots of questions. The gospel message was explained to me. I don't think I had ever heard it before. Someone told me his story of how he had become a Christian, how sin separates us from God, but Jesus had died to bridge that gap to bring us back to God. I really didn't understand it at all.' Barry remembers thinking, 'It can't be that simple ...so easy...

'A man gave me a Bible to read. He told me to read it for myself and see what God had done and why Jesus had died for me personally. I had never been bothered with books, but I started to get interested in this one. I had read most of the New Testament when I came to realise who Jesus Christ was, why He had died, and that He was alive and could change my life. There was a lot I didn't understand, but I understood enough to ask God to save me and change me.'

As Barry read the Bible, he realised that if he became a Christian his life would change. Some of the company he kept and things he did would have to be different. He thought seriously about the cost of becoming a Christian.

One day soon after this, he came to a point when, through what he had read and through the working of God in his life, he knew he had to act upon what he had learned. He had to accept it and trust Christ as his Lord and Saviour or do nothing and reject all that God had shown him.

'I saw that all the things that were stopping me becoming a Christian were nothing compared to the benefits of trusting Jesus. I took the step of committing my life to Christ. I got on my knees and asked God, if He was there, to come into my life and change me.

'That prayer was the first one I can remember praying seriously in my life; I have not been the same since.'

Barry knew that God had answered his prayer that night. He experienced a peace within which he had

never known before. He received the same joy that he had seen in the Christians he had met. He stopped swearing and over a period of time many other things changed, including his bad temper and stealing habits. Also, God gave him a desire to read the Bible and pray. He felt he had entered a relationship in life, which he had never known existed.

Since he became a Christian, things haven't always been easy for Barry. Some people thought that it was just another of his schemes; others thought that he had gone mad; some said it wouldn't last.

God doesn't promise a cosy life, but He does promise that He will never leave us (Heb. 13:5).

'I realise that becoming a Christian was the best and most important decision I had ever made in my life. I have the confidence of knowing that my sins are forgiven and that I have a place in heaven. I don't deserve any of this. I only have this assurance because I am trusting in what Jesus has done for me.'

Barry Davis went on to study at Belfast Bible College. For several years he worked in a rehabilitation centre for prisoners. After a short trip to South America, he felt that God was calling him to work there full-time. He now lives in Nicaragua, sharing the gospel with prisoners in the jails of that country. He is married to Soosun and they have one child.

If you are a prisoner, ex-offender or family member of the former and would like help with any spiritual questions, please contact:

The Prison Fellowship, PO Box 68226, London, SW1P 9WR
info@prisonfellowship.org.uk

Or: Day One Publications, Ryelands Road, Leominster, HR6 8NZ

Further reading: *Born Again* by Charles W. Colson
ISBN 978-0-8007-9459-0, Revell