



Wrestling with God
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WRESTLING WITH GOD: THE AFTERNOON I KICKED THE FLOWERS!

The sun had reached its zenith in the broad expanse of cloudless blue; the backcloth against which birds swooped serenely on this warm day. Suddenly, there appeared from the right a faint dot behind which trailed the thinnest of white lines, as if delicately painted by an invisible hand. The speck moved slowly, very slowly, across the “canvas” heading towards its eventual destination, until at last it vanished, leaving only a white tail to offset the blueness of the sky.

The quiet observer of this scene sat watching, until his eyes gave up the chase, fascinated and scarcely able to avert his gaze. Just think, within that mere fleck—a dot no bigger than a full-stop at the close of this sentence—were several hundred people. The busy crew, the obliging cabin staff, the excited passengers: all speeding towards a destination unknown to him. Who were they. . . where had they come from. . . where were they going? He would never know. He wondered what they would have thought had they realised this lonely figure, thousands of feet below them, had been watching their progress so intently.

The “full-stop” had now disappeared. Soon its passengers would disembark, but where? It might be one of the world's romantic cities bustling with excited vigour, or perhaps, an exotic clime where palm trees swayed. He could picture his unknown, and unseen, “friends” walking famous streets, breathing mountain air, lying on sun-drenched beaches, or swimming in warm clear blue/green waters—and, unlike him, without a care in the world!

The frustration of the housebound stimulated a fertile imagination. How he longed to feel warm golden sand oozing through his toes again, cascading over his feet; to splash in milky sea as it sprawled along a sunny coastline; to stroll the cobbled side streets of an ancient European town; to ascend a foreign hillside and admire the mountain ranges beyond: all this had once been his delight, but now, he was unable to walk a half step from his wheelchair. Never to walk again,

or even to stand unaided! It was a fact confronted on a daily basis, without bitterness, but nevertheless sorrowfully.

THE SITUATION

I am that man.

At the time of writing: officially housebound since November 1987; anchored to my chair, since two months later. A flight of stairs blocks my passage to the front door (the chair-stair too awkwardly positioned for use), and “difficult” steps my entry into the garden. I view the latter through my study window. Of course, my wife Margaret and I could move house, but at what upheaval to our lives? We could have structural alterations made to it, but at what expense? All this has been suggested by many, my preference though is for the *status quo*. I make no complaint.

One can understand, then, why the passing specks I watch so intensely from my front room window possess such significance for me. The trails they leave behind them etch their messages across the sky: “FREEDOM!” It means so much, hedged in as I am by walls, as familiar to me as old friends. That is, on good days; on others, as welcome as the bars of a prisoner's cell.

The good days far outnumber the opposition, indeed most days join their ranks, and when melancholy (never depression) descends on rare occasions it is because my three greatest enemies have opened the door for him: exhaustion, frustration and pain. He picks his moments carefully. I have dragged my body across floors without his companionship; have lain paralysed upon my bed on many occasions, and still by God's grace have managed to keep him at bay; have suffered the embarrassment and indignities disability sometimes produce, but still refusing to gain him access.

Ah, but to sit at the window watching Margaret leaving the house alone to attend our children's weddings and graduations, THAT was hard, very hard, particularly for her. I watched the car leave the kerbside each time, and the Lord and the walls (NEVER anybody else) watched me. . . well, never mind. Undoubtedly, the greatest burden disability produces for the sufferer is the effect it has upon the carer.



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HOW IT ALL BEGAN

In 1959 I was a twenty-five year old theological student, and one Lord's Day found me preaching at Abercarn, Gwent, Wales. I was preparing for the evening service, when suddenly without warning, a dull ache throbbled behind my left knee. I limped my way to the church, and far from the pain and discomfort easing up, I was obliged to preach with my leg resting on the pulpit chair behind me. Thoughts of how I was going to get to my parents' home in Cardiff featured strongly.

I had no car in those days, and was therefore dependent upon British Transport, but it was providential that Margaret (my fiancée at that time) had decided to travel to Abercarn for the service. Somehow, by my hopping and leaning heavily upon her small frame, we struggled to arrive at my parents' front door. By this time, my temperature had risen to 103 degrees, which meant an immediate departure for bed. The doctor arrived the following morning. He left puzzled.

From that memorable evening, to the diagnosis twenty four years later, the pain returned to behind the left knee every eighteen months or so. The pattern never deviated: first without warning the dull ache and the swelling of the left leg and foot, then within the hour the very high temperature, followed by two or three days sweating it out in bed. It occurred at home and abroad, during holiday time or not so, whilst driving, or swimming. "Red-leg", as we called it, was no respecter of times or occasions, and a course of antibiotics was its only fear and our only solution.

Eventually, "an extra dimension was introduced. Staggering and stumbling, and at times falling, were becoming commonplace. At first, I took little notice, being far too busy in the pastoral and preaching ministry in Pembrokeshire. That is, until one autumn day on Tenby south beach, when my left leg refused to function. My shoe was full to overflowing with sand as I dragged my leg back to the car. Strangely, I drove home without any problem, and was able to walk from the car to the front door as if nothing unusual had taken place. However, Margaret and I could see warning lights flashing.

MUCH TO THINK ABOUT

Soon, the inevitable happened. After a series of interviews with consultants, and the accompanying scans and X-rays, in September 1983 (now with a pastorate in North Wales) I entered Walton hospital, Liverpool, for further tests. The information was soon forthcoming: the dreaded "MS" (multiple sclerosis) was now mine, which whenever mentioned in the press, is referred to as "that crippling disease"!

The messenger having just departed, I lay upon my bed, thinking. "MS!", I kept repeating the phrase, like a bride rolling her new name around her tongue. "I have MS, fancy that!" A "crippling disease" lay dormant within me, and yet at that precise moment, I could have leapt from my bed, jogged around the ward, done a few press-ups, and jumped back onto the bed! "Well, well," I kept whispering to myself, "I have MS!"

I was struck by the irony of the situation. Throughout my two decades of pastoral ministry, I had been involved with a number of sufferers with MS. I had conversed with them, read the Scriptures to them, prayed alongside them, pushed their wheelchairs, and taken them for afternoon drives. Now, I suddenly realised how little I had known them. How often I had been unwittingly glib, when in my attempt to comfort, had merely quoted an apt Bible text without too much thought behind it: e.g., "My grace is sufficient for thee." (2 Cor. 12:9) What had I experienced of their alarms, fears and indignities; their constant need for courage? Very little, but one thing was now certain, I would soon be sharing them.

The grim realisation had dawned. Alone in the ward, with the corridor outside bustling with activity, it was time to examine my relationship with almighty God. Was it in proper working order? It would certainly need to be in the coming months and years. Nothing could be taken for granted, I therefore sought heaven's mercy as at the first, and committed myself to Christ afresh. Whatever was going to happen, however prickly the pathway, God had mapped it out for me. A new ministry had opened up, in which far from telling others



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that God's grace is sufficient for their every need, I now had to prove it in front of them! (Phil. 3:10)

MUCH TO REFLECT UPON

An anchor is required, when told one has an incurable disease, and that what lies ahead are black clouds, "turbulent seas", squalls and storms of varying hues. My background could not have supplied one, where religion masqueraded as grace, and "the church" had been substituted for the Lord.

I reflected upon the early years of World War II, a boy of eight, escorted by my mother to a house just yards from Cardiff's beautiful Civic Centre. One hand was slotted into my mother's, the other carried a little music case, and Mrs Thomas my singing teacher awaited us each week with a cheery smile. For about three years the theory of music was my companion, as I sang my pieces, and trilled my scales to the monotonous regularity of the metronome. That is, until one day, Mrs Thomas recommended to my parents that I should attempt the choral scholarship for entrance to Llandaff Cathedral School and its choir.

Thus, in the mid 1940s, I was introduced to a realm where religious formality took precedence over saving faith, rites and robes over preaching, and the altar over the Bible. As I was rising to become a "Dean's Scholar" (the cathedral soloist, among other things), I was also descending at the same rate into deepening rebellion against God and my good upbringing. Religion I had in plenty, a cathedral service every Sunday morning and during the school term one each evening from Mondays to Fridays (!), but I knew nothing of God's grace in salvation.

That is, until I reached the unlikely setting of a drama college, in 1954. At my public school, Hurstpierpoint College in Sussex to which I had gained another choral scholarship, I had been involved with the Literary Society and its performances of Shakespearian plays, but it was still a surprise to my parents when I announced I wanted to be an actor. During the three years of my training, at the Cardiff College of Music and Drama, God quickened me, and I entered the

professional theatre, not only as a fledgling player but also as an infant Christian.

I quickly discovered my elderly Christian friends were correct, that despite the claims by certain show business and sporting personalities, it is not possible to serve God and mammon at the same time. That is, without compromising one's Christian's walk. In any case, after eighteen months in the theatre, I was delivered from making any further attempt at trying to do so. Something remarkable occurred.

It was February 1957, and I had arrived at the Devonshire Park Theatre in Eastbourne in readiness for the evening's performance. I opened the stage door, greeted the doorman, and reached for a letter addressed to me. Having turned myself into "B. Kagan" in T. S. Eliot's *The Confidential Clerk*, I sat at my dressing room mirror and opened the letter, which I guessed had arrived from my pastor in Cardiff (Jack Sharman). I was correct. I had told him I was in "out-of-season" Eastbourne; he now, in turn, informed me that the great missionary Hudson Taylor had been in "out-of-season" Brighton when God summoned him to go to China.

Then it happened. Alone in the room, and without the slightest hesitation, I jumped up and heard myself saying audibly, "God wants me in the ministry!" Two days later, my contract having expired, I left the theatre and have never looked back from that dressing room experience to this moment in time. Many years of study lay ahead, and from what my peers told me a "brilliant" career was sacrificed, but I knew the Lord had a work for me to do—and nothing could possibly supplant it, in terms of privilege and personal joy and satisfaction.

THE AFTERNOON I KICKED THE FLOWERS!

The story just related has a bearing upon my having MS, although needless to say at the time I was blissfully unaware of what lay well ahead for me. In that dressing room, God tested my willingness to obey him, instantly and without question. A year later, a few months into Bible training, he prepared me still further for future service and suffering. If, through his grace, I have been of use to him in either



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sphere it is surely due to the events of that extraordinary afternoon in 1958.

I had just returned from the principal's study with some bitterly disappointing news. Having informed him I believed my calling was to Britain and not to some foreign field, he reminded me this would mean many more years in training. Possibly, as many as nine. I felt as if I had been sentenced at the Old Bailey!

What patience I possessed snapped. After three years training for the theatre, which I had willingly sacrificed for a lifetime spent as a missionary, after further study that door had also been slammed in my face. Besides, Margaret and I had been hearing wedding bells, but they would now have to be silenced for an indefinite period.

I left the principal's office stunned, angrily gritting my teeth. The "board" appeared filled with snakes, and shamefully, I was blaming God for emptying it of ladders. How many Christians have been, and are, in that position like children wanting (demanding!) only the smoothest of pathways upon which to stroll, yes stroll, to heaven. Yet, it is "through MUCH TRIBULATION" we Christians enter. (Acts 14:22)

AN UNEQUAL STRUGGLE

In an agitated state, I made my way to the college garden where, behind the tall hedgerows away from prying eyes, I paced the meandering pathways between the rockeries. For three long hours I waged a private war against the turn of events (alright, I admit it, against God), pouring out my complaints to him who knew "my thought afar off." (Ps. 139:2) Like many young men in my position, for whom patience lies beyond the fingertips, I was anxious to fly ahead with my schemes unhindered by halters. But I was about to receive a rude awakening.

In lectures the question had often been posed what the cross is that every Christian has to carry (Lk. 14:27), and now I knew; obedience to the will of God for one's life without hesitation, question or complaint. In fact, to follow Jesus' example. (Matt. 26:39) Yes, but what does that mean? Often Christians pray, "Lord, make me more

like Jesus", forgetting that he was "a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief." (Is. 53:3) A daring prayer!

However, following Jesus' example and bearing one's cross is a necessary "halter", and those who wear it are privileged to do so, it being the symbol of the spiritual baptism of having been crucified with Christ. (Gal. 2:20) Mere words, or actions in themselves however commendatory, cannot testify to the quickening experience, but rather true repentance and personal submission to Christ do. If he is not one's Lord, it is doubtful whether he is one's Saviour either. One dare not try to separate the two, although many claiming allegiance to Christ try hard enough to do so - and think somehow they have got away with it!

The challenge was presented to me. Christ possessed a cross, given him by the Father, with which he staggered to Calvary—for a sinner like me. He had "delighted" to fulfil the Father's will (Ps. 40:8), always doing "those things that please him" (Jn 8:29), but was I, even if it meant inconvenience and self-sacrifice? Did I REALLY love Christ sufficiently to reply to that question in the affirmative? Despite hanging my head, I continued petulantly muttering my objections, while leafy twigs and the nearby flower felt the rough edge of my shoe.

I sought to escape Christ's gaze, but failed as one after whom I was named had once done, and in my mind I could hear the same pertinent questions being asked (Jn 21:15-17). Did I REALLY love Christ? Of course, I did! But then the Holy Spirit replied by searching the nooks and the crannies (an experience every student preacher needs to be confronted with) when he suggested that my order of priorities was awry.

The truth had dawned. It arrived as a terrible shock to be confronted with reality; that although my love for Christ was genuine, it came a poor third. Third? Yes, that was the blow which injured my pride. My personal desires were top of the agenda, followed by a zeal for Christian ministry and study, and loping far behind was a mere affection for the Lord himself. In truth, my heart was lukewarm, and I was only fit to be "spewed" out. (Rev. 3:15, 16) I was visibly shaken.



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At the time, I was only four years old in the faith, but I considered myself committed to my Lord and Saviour. That afternoon there was revealed to me was the startling truth that I was not as I had assumed myself to be (who is?); God's thoughts not being our thoughts. (Is. 55:8) In short, assessed by heaven's values I was a hypocrite. In a very small way, I was beginning to understand how the apostle Peter had felt.

A CONVERT, OR A DISCIPLE?

So, for four years I had been unwittingly play-acting, a charge which stung, in the light of my time in drama college and the theatre. I was in reality just toying with the Christian faith, assuming that a convert and a disciple were the same person. A convert is selfishly anxious to avoid ending in hell (understandably!), but is not willing to enter any further into the Christian experience (Phil. 3:10). For that person, the Christian life consists of Lord's Day observance, perhaps merely one service, and possibly the midweek meeting—maybe, if there is nothing “better” to do. Little else, apart from the occasional good deed. The soul is treated carelessly, private devotions an option; Christ is present somewhere, but far from the centre (2 Pet. 1:10).

Again, the challenge was presented to me. Christ seeks DISCIPLES, men and women who from a love for him, will obediently follow close behind carrying their crosses—AT WHATEVER THE COST. The disciple, in contrast to the mere convert, places Christ first (literally) over all things, and at all times. His family, and even his own life, must be subordinated (“hated”) (Lk. 14:26). Hence, when Christ had started his final journey to Jerusalem and Calvary (Lk. 9:51), with all that meant in terms of self-sacrifice and total commitment to the Father's will, he brushed aside superficial offers to follow him. They had to be made aware that discipleship entails spiritual toughness. (2 Tim. 2:3, 4) So let the dead bury their dead, and such is the vital importance of discipleship, proverbially there is no time to say farewell to family and friends. “Forsaking all” for Christ is what is required of his followers (Lk. 14:33), “looking back” is unworthy of such a high calling. (Lk. 9:57-62) I had just learned another lesson to equip me for service and suffering.

THE BREAKING POINT

In the distance I heard the bell summoning we students to tea, the first time that afternoon I had been aware of life beyond the garden, but I was in no position to heed it. I felt sick in my heart, shaken, and broken in spirit. I wondered how I would be able to return to the main building and mingle with my friends again. I felt as if the laser beam of holiness had penetrated my soul; a lighted torch had scraped the nerve-end of my conscience.

But still God had not finished with me. Supposing he did not want me to serve him—ever—and intended using someone else instead? What if he told me to break off my engagement, or as with Jeremiah (16:2), commanded me to refrain from ever getting married? Would I still love him? Did I love him for himself, or merely for what I could get from him? Sadly, there was no doubting the answer. Although I wanted to be of some use to God—a desire which has never left me to this day—unwittingly, I had expected it to be on MY terms.

I sat down on the gardener's rickety old chair nearby, head in hands, tearful. Ministry and marriage had been expected within the year, but now both would have to be shelved indefinitely. Instead, God was commanding me to begin the long and slow hard climb for the third time. I could either go forward, obediently and submissively, trusting him from day to day—or, seek my own short cuts knowing he disapproved. What did I intend doing? Christ was claiming me for discipleship, and preparing me for suffering, urging me to place him first; to love him more profoundly than anyone or anything else. And all this for the rest of my life.

I thought of Abraham. What greater trial of faith and commitment could one have than to be told to be made willing by God to offer up his only son as a sacrifice? Yet, we read, that without questioning the Divine intention, Abraham “rose up early in the morning, and saddled his ass”, and off he journeyed to the appointed venue. (Gen. 22:1-3) He had had many more reasons for flouting God's commands than I had, but his faith and love for him were greater than any personal consideration. As Abraham is the “father” of all those with God's gift of faith, I too wanted to be “blessed with faithful Abraham.” (Gal. 3:7, 9)



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THE TWIST IN THE TALE

After three hours “wrestling” with God, I walked slowly from the garden a transformed young man. This had not been a mystical experience, no extra-biblical “second blessing” encounter. It was far more practical than that. Knowing the pioneering ministry I was to be given, and the future struggles with constant ill-health, the Lord had offered me discipleship, and I in turn had offered him myself in a wholehearted and solemn vow. (Eccles. 5:4) I knew there was no turning back.

As I returned to the other students, keeping what had happened a secret (and doing so for very many years), there was something I was unaware of, because the Lord had graciously refrained from telling me. Unlike me, he knew my experience in the garden had little to do with the reasons for my bitterness when I had entered it, but was in fact a preparation for the long-term. He knew that twenty five years later (1983) a doctor would sit upon my bed, and tell me I had multiple sclerosis, and that in 1997, another one would inform me I also had cancer. Try telling that to a CONVERT and observe his reaction, but when a DISCIPLE hears the news, he thanks God for the privilege in the spirit of 2 Cor.12:9,10. It is the only way for a Christian to cope with the “problem” of suffering.¹

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<sup>1</sup> If these issues resonate with where you are at in the school of God, facing difficult providence in life, we recommend for further reading Dr Larry Crabb’s *Shattered Dreams: God’s Unexpected Path to Joy* (WaterBrook, 2010).