



Soul stories JACOB BALI

'I had a moment of clarity: despite how lonely the journey felt, God was with me'

The year was 2014, mid-February. It was a typical working day, going through my morning routine in the stables of Hyde Park Barracks as a soldier in the Household Cavalry Mounted Regiment of the British Army. Spring had come early this year, the flowers were already starting to bloom, bumble bees were bumbling along, and the horses had just returned from being out to grass over winter and were being made ready for the start of the busy ceremonial season.

It was an average morning. Everything was normal. Little did I know that the events of this day, so unexpected and unforeseen, would change the course of my life in ways I could never have imagined.

One moment, I was brushing the tail of a horse; the next, the horse was spooked and kicked out with full force. I found myself on the ground, and the rest was a blur. Paramedics, A&E, X-rays, hospital appointments, physiotherapy sessions, and finally I was admitted as an inpatient to the Defence Medical Rehabilitation Centre at Headley Court, where I would spend a further year of painful physiotherapy and undergo surgery on my left thigh.

The prognosis? It was unlikely I would ever be able to walk on my left leg in the foreseeable future, and I would have to be medically discharged from the army.

To say I was shocked would be an understatement. I was spiralling. My world had been turned upside down.

Thus began what some call 'the dark night of the soul', a term used to describe a period of intense spiritual struggle and questioning. It is a



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time when one's faith is tested, and one may feel distant from God or uncertain about one's spiritual path.

Amid the pain and uncertainty, I was lost in a sea of questions. Why did this happen? Where did it all go wrong? Why me? Whose fault is this? Where is God in all of this?

I had so many questions but so few answers, so I looked for solace in the only places I knew: prayer, the scriptures, my family, and my church. Their unwavering support and the comforting words of the scriptures became my pillars of strength in those dark days.

It was during that year in the hospital that I was introduced to contemplative Christianity. While meditating using the ancient practice of *Lectio Divina* (Divine Reading), I had a profound moment of clarity and a sense of peace – that despite appearances, despite how lonely the journey felt, God was with me. God was always with me. I also had a familiar feeling – a feeling of purpose, of being a part of something greater than myself. This feeling I originally had long before I thought about joining the military. I felt the familiar feeling of the call to ministry.

After much soul-searching, I had a conversation with my minister and, together, we agreed to continue the discernment process. The rest, as they say, is history.

The passage that had such an impact on me was from Psalm 23: 'Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.'

The Hebrew word translated as 'mercy' is *chesed*. This word also means steadfast love, loving-kindness, unwavering devotion; faithfulness, loyalty, unfailing, unconditional, merciful, rich, wonderful, transformative, graceful, all-encompassing, exuberant... The list goes on.

It was this passage that had such a profound impact on me, guiding me through the darkest of times and showing me the comforting power of scripture. Indeed, God's steadfast love was with me in the moment I felt most unsteady, and God's light was shining even in the dark night of the soul, transforming my perspective and guiding me towards a brighter path.

I had always had a sense of calling, and some years before all this I completed TLS (Training for Learning and Serving) and applied for ministry. I was told back then that I needed life experience and a friend recommended joining the army. Because I was interested in chaplaincy, I researched which regiments had the highest suicide rates and other pastoral needs, but I was selected for the Household Cavalry. People there knew I was a Christian and called me 'Padre'. People close to committing suicide talked to me about their story.

After I was medically discharged, I pursued the call to ministry again. I felt called to chaplaincy, and trained at Westminster College doing placements in hospitals and mental healthcare units. The Moderators unanimously recommended I went for pioneer ministry, which was unusual at that time for someone new to ministry, and I became an evangelist at Crossway URC in London.●

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