



Toyohiko Kagawa

Biography Timeline: **July 10, 1888**, born in Kobe, Japan, the son of Junichi Kagawa, a Buddhist member of the Japanese Cabinet and secretary of the Privy Council, and a Geisha girl; **1892**, both parents die and he is brought up by his father's neglected wife; **in his teens**, leaves Awa and lives with an uncle in the city of Tokushima, where he enters the Boys' Middle School; encounters Presbyterian missionaries Drs. Harry W. Myers and Charles A. Logan and begins to attend English Bible classes to learn English; **1904**, becomes a Christian and is baptized by Dr. Myers; uncle throws him out; **1905**, with scholarship help, moves to Tokyo to attend the Presbyterian College, Meiji Gakuen; studies Kant, Darwin, Ruskin and Tolstoy, from whom he gains an appreciation of pacifism; **summer of 1907**, in the Toyohashi area (near Nagoya), meets Nagao Ken, whose ministry on behalf of and among the impoverished inspires him to give his service to the poor; becomes gravely ill with tubercular pneumonia, but has miraculous recovery after having "a peculiar mysterious experience – an ecstatic consciousness of God;" transfers to Kobe Theological Seminary; **Christmas Day, 1909**, moves into the Shinkawa slums in Kobe; **1911**, graduates from Kobe Theological Seminary; ordained as an evangelist in the Japan Presbyterian Church; **1912**, unionizes shipyard workers; **May 1913**, marries Haru Shiba who also assists him in work in the slums; his work draws attention of government; **1914**, enters Princeton University ; **1915**, attains MA degree in experimental psychology; **1916**, attains Bachelor of Divinity degree; returns to Japan; **1918**, organizes the Labor Federation; **1918-1921**, organizes unions among factory workers and among farmers **1919**, jailed during the "rice riots;" **1921**, jailed again during the shipyard strikes; **1920**, publishes autobiographical novel *Crossing the Deathline*, which eventually sells more than 1 million copies, making Kagawa a household name throughout Japan; **1923**, released from prison, where he had been sentenced for labor organizing activities, Japanese government appoints him as Chief of Social Welfare in response to devastating earthquakes in Tokyo and Yokohama; establishes credit unions, schools, hospitals, and churches, and writes and speaks extensively on the application of Christian principles to the ordering of society; works for universal male suffrage (granted in **1925**) and for laws more favorable to trade unions; **1928**, founds the Anti-War League; **1939**, visits Gandhi in India; **1940**, arrested after publicly apologizing to China for the Japan's invasion; **1941**, visits the U.S. in an attempt to avert war between Japan and US; **after 1945**, leader in postwar recovery of Japan; despite failing health, devotes himself to the reconciliation of democratic ideals and procedures with traditional Japanese culture; **1950**, tours U.S. giving 400 speeches in 137 locations at 31 colleges and seminaries; **1954**, tours U.S. and attends World Council of Churches gathering in Evanston, Illinois; **1959**, publishes his last book, *The Purpose of the Universe*; **April 23, 1960**, dies in Tokyo; Emperor posthumously awards him Japan's highest honor, the Order of the Sacred Treasure; among his more than 150 books are: *Christ and Japan*; *Living Out Christ's Love*; *Brotherhood Economics*; *Songs from the Slums*; *Poems*; *Across the Death Line*; *Meditations*.

Repeatedly nominated for Nobel Prizes – Literature (1947 and 1948) and Peace (1954 and 1955) – Toyohiko Kagawa was one of the most exemplary organizers of practical Christianity that anyone in Japan or the rest of the world had ever seen. For most of his life, he regarded himself as an evangelist, and yet he became renowned as a social reformer, poet, preacher, and unwavering pacifist. Compared to Gandhi and

Schweitzer because of his unflagging care and compassion for the poor, he would eventually be known as *"The St. Francis of Japan."* (1)

Kagawa was first and foremost concerned with living the principles which Jesus exemplified in his life and ministry. *"To walk in prayer, continually asking and receiving power of God, and again to transform this power into new actions of love, this was the religion of Jesus."* (2)

What Kagawa learned about Jesus in the Bible compelled him to humble himself and to attempt to do as Jesus did. He said, *"I read in a book that a man called Christ went about doing good. It is very disconcerting to me that I am easily satisfied with just going about."* (3) When he was 19, during a time of recovery from a grave illness, he was graced by *"a peculiar mysterious experience – an ecstatic consciousness of God."* (4) Thereafter his gratitude for life and his determination to live as faithfully and fully as possible rarely diminished.

Eschewing the primacy of doctrine and the finer points of theology, Kagawa yearned for all people to live out the practicable precepts from the parable of the Good Samaritan, to go and "do likewise." *"The God of Jesus is a God of Action,"* he believed. (5) For Kagawa, the practical ethics of love comprised the essential meaning of Jesus' way of life. *"There are theologians, preachers and religious leaders, not a few, who think that the essential thing about Christianity is to clothe Christ with forms and formulas. They look with disdain upon those who actually follow Christ and toil and moil, motivated by brotherly love and passion to serve. . . They conceive pulpit religion to be much more refined than movements for the actual realizations of brotherly love among men. . . The religion Jesus taught was diametrically the*

opposite of this. He set up no definitions about God, but taught the actual practical practice of love." (6)

Kagawa believed that Christian faith was to be lived out in all aspects of life, including economics. And all of faith was reconciled in the cross. For Kagawa, the cross symbolized the power of the love of Christ and the power of suffering for righteousness' sake.

While passionate about social justice and untiring in his ministries of public witness, and even though he would meet world leaders of all kinds and in places, including Gandhi,(7) Kagawa consistently lived a life of humility. In his bearing, his spiritual practices, and his basic attitude toward life, Kagawa expressed a simple, humble trust in God: *"Do your very best, but after that leave the matter entirely to God. Here you find the secret of beauty of a man's life. After all your efforts have ended, believe that God will take the best care, and rest in His holy arms."* (8)

Kagawa's humility extended directly to his living circumstances and even to his times in prison. While serving time in the Tachibana prison in Kobe, his cell was much like his shack in the slums, six feet square. Even though he was imprisoned in such a cramped space, he managed to walk two miles every day, thus creatively imagining *"my residence as being two miles wide."* (9)

A Prayer by Kagawa - "Our Lord of Light"

"O God, keep our whole country under your protection. Wipe out sin from this land; lift it up from the depth of sorrow, O Lord, our shining light. Save us from deep grief and misfortune, Lord of all nations. Bless us with your wisdom, so that the poor may not be oppressed and the rich may not be oppressors. Make this a nation having no ruler except God, a nation having no authority but that of Love." (10)

A Found Prayer in Kagawa's Poetry

I want to be ever a child
I want to feel an eternal friendship
for the raindrops, the flowers,
the insects, the snowflakes.
I want to be keenly interested in everything,
with mind and muscle ever alert,
forgetting my troubles in the next moment.
The stars and the sea, the ponds and the trees,
the birds and the animals, are my comrades.
Though my muscles may stiffen, though my skin may
wrinkle, may I never find myself yawning
at life. (11)

Praying with Toyohiko Kagawa – Suggestions for Use

- Day 1 Pray the “found prayer” from Kagawa’s poetry (“*I want to be ever a child....*”). Pray today that you may never find yourself “*yawning at life.*”
- Day 2 Pray today by using Kagawa’s prayer “*Our Lord of Light.*” Repeat three times the phrase “*Bless us with your wisdom, so that the poor may not be oppressed and the rich may not be oppressors.*”
- Day 3 Pray today as Kagawa did by first meditating on how Jesus “went about doing good.” Now ask yourself the following question: Am I “*easily satisfied with just going about*”?
- Day 4 At the beginning of this day pray for God's assistance as you strive to do the very best you can in every task, encounter, and event that will be part of your day. At the end of the day, pray a prayer of release and supplication, trusting that God will take care of you (and all else!) so that you can “*rest in [God's] holy arms.*”
- Day 5 Consider how your own personal economic life can become even more Christian in your daily life. Pray for wisdom and a discerning heart in your prayer reflections during the next week.

Day 6 Consider the sacrifices others have made so that your freedom and political practices can be enacted and enjoyed. Give thanks for their courage and witness to equality and justice. Call them by name: _____.

Day 7 Give thanks for the life and work of a good and gracious man named Toyohiko Kagawa, whose memory may be less known to us than other spiritual luminaries, but whose bequest to Christian history is a magnificent testimony of God's grace.

NOTES

- 1 Kenneth Sanders, "Toyohiko Kagawa: The St. Francis of Japan," *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 4, No. 4, (April 1931), p. 308.
- 2 Toyohiko Kagawa, *The Religion of Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1930), translated by Helen F Topping, 1931, p.84.
- 3 Cited in Mark R. Mullins, "Christianity as a Transnational Social Movement: Kagawa Toyohiko and the Friends of Jesus," *Japanese Religions*, Vol. 32 (1 & 2), pp. 69-87; originally very likely a poem of Kagawa's, that has now become, through ceaseless repetition, part of his legendary legacy in the public domain.
- 4 Quoted in Claudia Genung-Yamamoto, "Christianity in Action: The Life of Toyohiko Kagawa," *National Christian Activity News: The Newsletters of the National Christian Council in Japan*, #747, Fall 2010, p. 2.
- 5 Kagawa, *The Religion of Jesus*, p. 19.
- 6 Quoted in Dan Graves, "Toyohiko Kagawa, Japanese Original" @ <http://www.christianity.com/ChurchHistory/11630620/>
- 7 See Genung-Yamamoto, "Christianity in Action: The Life of Toyohiko Kagawa," pp. 2-4, and also Mehadev Desai, "Gandhi and Kagawa," Homer A. Jack, ed., *The Gandhi Reader: A Sourebook of His Life and Writings* (New York: Grover Press, 1956), pp. 347-348.
- 8 Kagawa, *The Religion of Jesus*, Chapter Three- "Jesus and Prayer"
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Toyohiko Kagawa, *Meditations* (New York: Harper & Row, 1950)
- 11 Toyohiko Kagawa, *Songs from the Slums: Poems*, trans. by Lois Erickson (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1935)

FOR FURTHER READING, STUDY, AND REFLECTION

Mehadev Desai, "Gandhi and Kagawa," Homer A. Jack, ed., *The Gandhi Reader: A Sourebook of His Life and Writings* (New York: Grover Press, 1956), pp. 347-348.

Claudia Genung-Yamamoto, "Christianity in Action: The Life of Toyohiko Kagawa," *National Christian Activity News: The Newsletters of the National Christian Council in Japan*, #747, Fall 2010, pp. 2-4.

Toyohiko Kagawa, *Across the Death-Line*, trans. by Ichiji Fukumoto and Thomas Satchell (Kobe, Japan: Chronicle Office, 1922), revised edition released as *Before the Dawn* (New York: George H. Doran, 1924)

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Toyohiko Kagawa, *Songs from the Slums: Poems*, trans. by Lois Erickson (Nashville: Cokesbury Press, 1935)

Robert Schildgen, *Toyohiko Kagawa: An Apostle of Love and Social Justice* (Berkeley:
Centenary Books, 1988)

Kenneth Sanders, "Toyohiko Kagawa: The St. Francis of Japan," *Pacific Affairs*, Vol. 4, No. 4, (April 1931).