

## ***#livingmybestlife***

The thing that gives me most joy in my life is the relationships I have with people around me. But when those relationships go wrong, seriously wrong, life can be absolute hell. And I believe that loneliness is a very serious problem today that can affect our mental and physical health.

But when relationships go wrong between groups and nations, the scale of that hell can be massive.

So why do we inflict such pain on each other? Is it because we're unintelligent and haven't worked out how to avoid doing so? Clearly not! Just look around at some of our incredible scientific discoveries and technological achievements – mind-blowing!

The problem with relationships is not *knowledge* but *motivation*. For example, we all know that good diet and exercise are key to good health, but somehow it's easier not to bother. It was only when I discovered that I had heart disease that I was motivated to make the necessary changes.

If we're honest, what really motivates us, at individual, corporate and national level, is self-interest. But is 'getting what we want' *really* what makes us happy? Is it what makes *you* happy? Is it what makes *me* happy?

Am I being unrealistic about myself? Arrogant, even? I'm not sure, but what I *think* makes me really happy is doing things for and with other people.

Now, just suppose for a minute that there's a God. Suppose it's a **good** God, and not the type of God who just sits in heaven telling us what to do and what not to do, and zapping us if we don't do it. Wouldn't a **good** God try to help us in our relationships with one another?!

There was a man once who had something to say about this. He lived about 2000 years ago in Palestine, in a place called Nazareth – though in fact he was born in Bethlehem and then spent his first few years as a refugee in Egypt.

At the age of about 30, he started wandering around Palestine talking to people about God, and it was as if he knew God personally – he talked about God as his loving father. People found this really attractive and huge crowds came to listen to him. What's more, many people said that they had been healed by Jesus from all sorts of diseases.

Unfortunately, Jesus was much too outspoken. He was quite rude about the religious leaders, saying that they had a totally wrong idea of what God was like. Somewhat weirdly, Jesus said that if they wanted to know what God was really like, they should look at him: "If you've seen me, you have seen the Father," he said.

The religious leaders got really angry, and tried to stone him, saying "You, a mere man, are claiming to be God!" Eventually they persuaded the Roman authorities that he was a political troublemaker, and he was crucified.

Of course, when Jesus was killed, his followers were totally devastated. But fast forward a few weeks, and clearly something dramatic has happened. They're going around telling everyone that Jesus has come back to life! And they're doing so with incredible boldness, risking their lives.

What's going on here? After cowering behind locked doors, they are now publically saying that "God has raised this Jesus to life, and we are all witnesses of the fact" and "Jesus, whom you crucified, God has made both Lord and Christ."

They are also saying that Jesus has gone back to be with his Father in heaven, and the Father has sent the Holy Spirit to live *inside* them – yes, God who created the whole universe actually living inside us! Astonishing claims, and the Christian faith then spread around the known world.

So, Jesus claimed to be God, and now the disciples are saying that God, as the Holy Spirit, can live inside us: God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Confusing or what?!

No, I can't **explain** this, but it tells me that God **IS** love. By definition, in essence, God **IS** loving relationship. What's more, we're invited to be a part of that loving relationship. That's what transforms people's lives and motivates them to love and serve others, even their enemies, despite the suffering that can come. That's what has hit me so powerfully, after 50 years as a Christian.

So if God is like what Jesus is like, and not the toxic image of God that many of us have grown up with, maybe that invites further investigation. You might like to read one of the Gospels to see what Jesus did and said. (Mark's Gospel is short enough to read right through in an evening.)

My prayer is that you'll discover the amazing love that God has for you!

Paul Bev. 3.12.18

## ***Part 2 – How can I enter into this relationship?***

If after reading a Gospel or two, you're attracted to the God that Jesus tells us about, you might want to think about how you can get to know him personally – to enter into the sort of relationship that I have found so life-affirming and life-transforming.

Well, the Gospels will have given you all the basic elements you need to know – the life, death, resurrection and ascension into heaven of Jesus Christ – but if you also read the first two chapters of Acts, you'll then know a bit about how the Holy Spirit comes to live in people's lives.

When two people get married in Church, someone will probably offer them some 'marriage preparation'. Sure, they love each other madly, deeply, but before they make a lifelong commitment to one another, they need to understand how that relationship can work, and they need to be realistic about themselves.

I think the same is true if we want a relationship with God – we need to understand about how that relationship can work, and we need to be realistic about ourselves.

God only, ever, always loves us madly, deeply, and through the whole of the Old Testament and into the New Testament, God has pursued us humans, trying to get us to come into relationship with him, but all the time we say, "Thanks, but no, I'd rather live life in my own way."

God's response is to allow us freedom of choice, but he warns us, "If you don't live in relationship with me, it will all go horribly wrong!" And it does. The result is that we mess up our own lives and we mess up each other's lives. This is what the Bible refers to as 'sin'.

We read in the New Testament how God continues to pursue us in love, actually coming, himself, into our world as a vulnerable human being. Jesus tells us – and shows us – how wonderful it is to live in a loving relationship with God the Father. What happens? We kill God! He's the only man who has ever lived a perfect life... and we kill him.

But then God raises Jesus from the dead; God, in Jesus, destroys death and sin and has complete victory over it, and he offers to give us victory over sin and death too.

How does that actually work? How does Jesus' death and resurrection make all things new and restore our relationship with God? The Bible gives us clues, but it's a mystery; I can't explain it – but neither can I 'explain' God! However, it's what billions of Christians have believed and experienced for over 2000 years. That's why, worldwide, the church is still flourishing.

So, to make it personal, talk to God – tell him what you feel. If you feel that life has abused you, tell him so (he understands – Jesus was abused bigtime!); if you realise that you've abused other people in any way, admit it to him; and tell him that you'd like to know his wonderful love in your life.

Maybe you could say something like "God, if you're real, please come and live inside me. If you do, I'll do my best to get to know you better day by day and help others to know your love too."

But there's no special formula – just tell God, honestly, how you feel, and ask him to help you. He will, trust me! Well, don't trust me, trust yourself to the God you've seen as you've read about Jesus of Nazareth.

And find someone you know who is a Christian (me, even) and tell them that you want a relationship with God through Jesus, and they'll do their best to help and encourage you in your new-found faith.

May God bless you as you get to know him better!

Paul Bev. 9.12.18