

THE KEY TO LIFE

Authors: Mel and Susan Finlay

Words matter. Whether we are in a business setting, on vacation with our family, conversing with friends, or making a formal presentation, the words we use are of critical importance. Carefully chosen words can quickly illuminate a thought, paint a lasting picture, convey fresh insight, provide comfort, or prove to be as caressing as a gentle touch. Flipped off thoughtlessly, they can lead to misunderstanding, pain, and bitterness.

Finding the right word, phrase, and sentence takes care and deliberation.

Eugene Peterson took on this challenge in developing *The Message: The Bible In Contemporary Language*. He carefully selected English words to convey the complexity of perhaps the best-known description of life with God, and translated it this way:

*The Word became flesh and blood,
and moved into the neighborhood.*

John 1:14

Other translations have also attempted to convey the original meaning: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us” (NKJV) “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.” (NIV) “The Word became a human and lived among us.” (New Century Version).

While the exact words vary from one translation to another, the meaning they seek to express is abundantly clear. The meaning is that God has deigned to take on human flesh with human blood coursing through His veins, and chosen to live in our midst.

The God Who has done this needs to be placed in context if we are to comprehend the enormity of the statement and begin to grasp its application to our lives. The God that John writes about in the fourth book of the New Testament is the same God who has been

described in 39 different books in the Old Testament. He is the Creator of the universe and everything that exists, wherever it exists in the universe, not just on earth.

He is the God who desires relationship with His creation, and most especially with human beings. More than that, He seeks out and enters into a special relationship with one particular group of people, the Jewish people, demonstrating through that relationship His desire for all of humanity. His desire for relationship, and His relationship, does not end with the Jewish people. Rather, His relationship with them serves as a prototype, a living example, of His desire for relationship, and the nature of that relationship, with every human being.

Without getting into all of the intricacies of the Trinity, John in his Gospel simply declares that the Word which became flesh, God who became flesh, is known to us as Jesus. Jesus is the Word who moved into the neighbourhood.

Life with God, as the followers of Jesus understand it, starts at that point. God is not remote, not subject to the vagaries of life, not an invention of some desperate soul who could not find internally the answers to life's major questions so concocted a myth of "Otherness" as a substitute for his own failings of comprehension. The God by whom and with whom we have life is One who makes Himself known in the same way as our neighbours make themselves known – by living in the neighbourhood.

Whether we ever get to know our neighbours or coworkers is as dependant on our own volition as it is on theirs. We cannot complain about how unfriendly our neighbours are if we have never made the attempt to speak to them, to engage with them at some level. They may rebuff our overtures of friendship – that, after all, is their choice, but it is not incumbent on them to make the first effort at establishing a relationship.

John makes clear that God does not wait for us to take the initiative in establishing a relationship with Him. Far from it! He moved into the neighbourhood, through His Son

Jesus! He initiated. It is up to us to respond. Thus, life with God begins with His action, not our own.

Of course, John could write that way because he had actually seen Jesus, traveled with him, slept under the same trees on the same hillsides at the same time. John had watched him, listened to him, learned from him, and struggled to understand much of what he said and did.

That was then. This is now. Jesus doesn't live in our neighbourhood in human form. So how do we have a relationship with this God who wants relationship? How do we get to know the God who made Himself known in human, flesh-and-blood form? In short, how do we have life with God?

First and foremost, by opening ourselves up to Him. We take Him at His word, that He really does want to be in relationship with His creation, and in particular with human beings. How do we know His word? By reading it, and listening for His message to us.

We cannot read the Word made flesh, that is, we cannot see the human Jesus. But we can read the Word that God has given to us, preserved through the centuries in the Bible, the testimony of those who actually lived in Jesus' neighbourhood, as well as those who lived centuries before and pointed the way to Jesus, the Word that has been passed along from one generation to another. We can read the words of those who experienced God directly – labourers, physicians, shepherds, professionals, advisers to kings - who were chosen by Him as spokespeople to bear testimony to what they knew from first-hand experience to be true.

Secondly, we can open up a line of communication directly with God by praying to Him. No matter how much our neighbour may desire a relationship with us, that relationship cannot happen if we do not talk to him or her. Similarly, we cannot be in relationship with God who desires to be in relationship with us unless we talk with Him. Prayer is the

means by which we talk with Him. The more active and vital our prayer life, the closer the relationship we have with God.

Even though we cannot read the Word made flesh, that is, the human Jesus, we are not left alone in our relationship with God. Jesus promised his disciples that he would not leave them comfortless, that he would not leave them alone. Once he departed, he would send the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, to be a living presence in everyday life – as real, and as authentically God, as Jesus himself has been during his life on earth, and as he is today, reigning at the right hand of God. This Holy Spirit is the same Spirit that was in Jesus as he walked the earth.

Life with God, then, is neither ethereal nor lifeless. It is real, and present, and authentic, because through Jesus Christ it is a life of relationship with God.

All of the clutter that stands between us and God, all of those things that are labelled “sin” and that are really only the things we deliberately, or unintentionally, put between ourselves and God, everything that gets in the way of our relationship with God, has been dealt with, at least from God’s side. Jesus has removed all of that through his life, death, and resurrection. He has taken away the reasons to be separated from God by taking on himself the consequences of our actions, and allowing us to stand before God in direct, uncluttered, authentic relationship with Him. It remains for us to acknowledge the clutter in our lives, the sin that separates us from each other and from God, to accept God’s forgiveness offered to us through Jesus Christ, and to turn and live as people in relationship with God.

Because the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood in the form of Jesus the simultaneously human and divine one, and because the deadly consequences of sin – the clutter of our life – have been removed through his death and resurrection, we can, if we choose, live in God’s neighbourhood, conversing with Him through prayer as we do in normal conversation with our other neighbours.

Life with God, life in relationship with Him, is offered to us by God. Whether we accept it is up to us. Life with God is our choice, and is the real key to life.