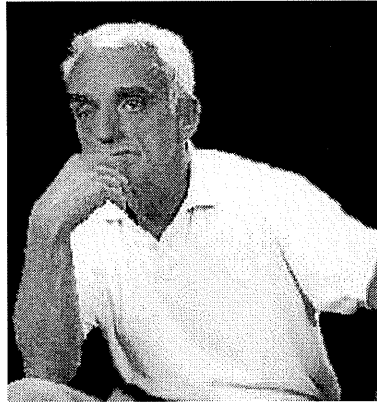


Living As God's Beloved

An interview with Brennan Manning about how we can experience God's love.

By Paula Rinehart



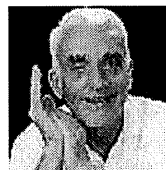
Photograph by Michael P. Smith

It's easy to say the words, "God loves me." Scripture continually proclaims His love, and it's the centerpiece of the gospel. Yet while we may be able to give a short discourse about God's love, actually experiencing the love of God can be quite a different matter.

Jesus invited us to abide in Him. That's an open invitation to live the big and little moments in the safe circle of His accepting grace. Yet many of us spend the bulk of our lives feeling somehow excluded from the offer. That the love of God could actually embrace us at the core of our being is no more than a wistful thought.

For 40 years now, Brennan Manning has directed his life and ministry toward helping others experience the reality of God's love. A wise old Franciscan priest told him years ago, "Once you come to know the love of Jesus Christ, nothing else in the world will seem as beautiful or desirable."

Those words proved to be an almost prophetic description of Brennan's later ministry. Though he spent his early years as a Franciscan priest, Brennan now focuses on God's love as he speaks and leads retreats for largely evangelical audiences.



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His own spiritual journey has taken him down a variety of different paths. He has taught seminarians, labored with the poor in Spain, and ministered to "shrimpers" and their families in Alabama. Brennan is also a recovering alcoholic and active in Alcoholics Anonymous. The author of *Abba's Child* ([NavPress](#)) and other nonfiction books, Brennan has recently completed

his first work of fiction, *The Boy Who Cried Abba*, published by [HarperCollins](#).

This interview with [Discipleship Journal](#) took place in New Orleans, where Brennan makes his home with his wife, Roslyn, and their two daughters. Brennan shares what God has taught him through the years about the hidden surprises, the obstacles, and the utter necessity of knowing yourself as a man or woman loved by God.

DJ: What are some of the most important things you've learned about God's love?

Manning: As a man I love the Jersey shore, Handel's Messiah, hot fudge and my wife, Roslyn. I love what I find congenial or appealing. I love someone for what I find in him or her. But God is not like that.

The God and Father of Jesus loves men and women not for what He finds in them, but for what He finds in them of Himself. It is not because men and women are good that He loves them, nor only good men and women whom He loves. It's because He is so unspeakably, unimaginably good that He loves men and women, even in their sin.

It's not that He detects what is congenial and appealing and He responds to us with His favor. He is the source of love. He acts; He does not react. He is love without motive. That's why Augustine could write those incredible lines: "In loving me, you made me lovable."

Does God love me because I spend time with AIDS victims and alcoholics, or because I spend an hour in prayer every day? Or because I'm rigorously faithful to my wife, Roslyn? If I believe that, I am a Pharisee who feels entitled to be comfortably close to Christ because of my good works.

The gospel of grace says I am loved for one reason only and that is because God loves me . . . period.

Every page of Christian Scripture declares that He loves us in a way that defies human comprehension and escapes human limitation. That is why I can say with theological certainty: God loves you unconditionally as you are and not as you should be, because you are never going to be as you should be. God loves you in the morning sun and the evening rain, without caution or regret. If God ceased to be love, God would cease to be God.

When we experience ourselves as someone deeply loved by God, it comes as such a surprise because the love of God is so radically different from our natural way of loving. In the church we tend to produce amateur theologians rather than witnesses of Jesus who have really experienced Him.

DJ: What shortens the gap between our head knowledge of God's love and our heart understanding of His love?

Manning: Listening. In the evangelical world there's too much talking and not enough listening, too much head and not enough heart. Our prayers tend to be so noisy that if God did speak, we wouldn't hear Him.

When you come to a deep place of stillness with the Lord, you're not waiting for God to make a move, you are aware of the moves God is already making.

Mike Yaconelli, founder of [Youth Specialties](#), shares one of the best examples of experiencing in your heart what you've known in your head. After his first silent retreat, Mike commented, "It took only a few hours of silence before I began to hear my soul speaking.

. God had been trying to shout over the noisiness of my life and I couldn't hear Him. But in the stillness and solitude, His whispers shouted to my soul, 'Michael, I have been calling you, but you haven't been listening. Can you hear Me, Michael? I love you. I have always loved you. I've been waiting for you to hear Me say that to you, but you've been so busy trying to prove to yourself that you're loved, you haven't heard Me.'"

DJ: Is the discovery of the love of God different for men and women?

Manning; It's certainly true that men and women share the common longing to be loved unconditionally. It's like Henri Nouwen said of us all "The greatest danger in the spiritual life is not success or popularity or power—it's self-rejection."

Men seem to need a transition from the pride of finding our coherent sense of self in our career or our ministry to finding our identity in the unconditional love of God. Women tend to run into more internal barriers such as self-condemnation.

DJ: How does fear become a barrier to knowing we are loved?

Manning: I think of the scene in the gospels where Jesus raises the daughter of Jairus. The people sit listening to Jesus talk about how she is "asleep," yet they know that she is actually dead. The Jerusalem Bible translates Jesus' words this way: "Fear is useless. What is needed is trust" (Mark 5:36).

Fear is the enemy of trust. And fear operates in so many ways in our lives. Many of our actions are rooted in needing to live up to the unspoken judgments of others, and trying to live up to who we ought to be. We do this rather than trusting God and relaxing in the brokenness of who we really are.

Fear is what keeps us distant from each other because we are all trying so hard to live up to each other's expectations of a good Christian. We can share lots of good things together—we can pray or go to Bosnia on a missionary trip—but often the one thing we can't share is our sinfulness. That's where we feel isolated and alone. Our pious fellowship doesn't permit a person to have any weaknesses.

DJ: What is significant about opening up to others about our failings and weaknesses?

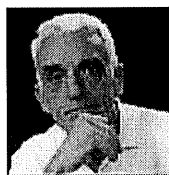
Manning: This is what real freedom is all about. I am not a spiritual giant. I am a poor, weak, sinful man with hereditary faults and limited talents, loved unconditionally as I am, not as I should be.

When I can let that be known in some way, there is less to hide, and I am less tempted to offer you the bright, shining image of my impostor self. This "impostor" me feels I have to build up an illusion of perfection in order to be loved.

DJ: What do you mean when you talk in *Abba's Child* about "being loved in your sinfulness"?

Manning: In some ways it's about making peace with our brokenness as human beings who are made in His image but who woefully fall short. We somehow think that pop psychology or positive thinking or getting enough people to mirror back our loveliness is what will bring us to a place of self-acceptance. It doesn't work that way. Self-acceptance is the experience of salvation rooted in the acceptance of Jesus Christ on Calvary. And when we surrender with childlike confidence and trust that Jesus accepts us as we are—even in our sinfulness—that becomes the root of our own self-acceptance. Then, paradoxically, we are free to forget ourselves and turn our eyes toward Jesus and other people.

I remember this naive idea I got as a child growing up Catholic. If I sinned, God frowned. But when I went to confession and repented of my sin, God smiled. Somehow my confession implied a change in God, which is absurd. Confession only implies a change in me.



Photography by Michael P. Smith

If the sunlight I'm feeling on my shoulders is the love of God, and I choose to sin and walk into the darkness, I move . . . not God. When I repent, I walk back into the light that has continued to shine all the time.

Living by grace and not by performance really came home to me when I had to face myself as a broken-down drunk living on a quart of vodka a day in Ft. Lauderdale, Florida. That is where I came to know that God loved me as much in a state of disgrace as in a state of grace. I reamed love is never based on performance. It's not based on our moods. It knows no shadow of alteration. Jesus is indeed the fulfillment of Isaiah's promise that the bruised reed of our lives He will not crush.

DJ: How did you learn to experience and not just know about the love of God?

Manning: This journey began, in the fullest sense, in an unexpected encounter with Christ in 1956 in a little chapel in Pennsylvania. I had a powerful experience of the love of Jesus that sealed the call of God on my life. At that moment, the entire Christian life became for me an intimate, heartfelt relationship with Jesus.

I feel like a little boy who kneels at the edge of the seashore. At first I could sense the waves of Christ's love coming up very gently on my legs, lapping around my ankles. Over time those waves have swept me off the beach and carried me further and further into the heart of Jesus Christ. My faith moved from a national kind of thing into a love affair.

If I look back over the years and ask, "What has led me deeper into the love of Christ?" I would point to being faithful to set apart a period of prayer each day and a rather lengthy period of silence and solitude every year—a silent, directed retreat of five or eight or ten days.

I don't know how people say, "I love God with all my heart and soul," and yet don't give Him any time. The people who matter in my life I make time for, not because I should or I must—I want to. The simple truth is that we move toward what we want. And when you find a desire that transcends all the other desires, it really grips your life.

What is often overlooked is that prayer is not primarily about gaining some insight from the Word or having an intense emotional experience. It's primarily an act of love. Spending time with God might be dynamic one day, and I might fall asleep the next day. But showing up is an act of love.

I must resist the temptation to grade my time with God by how it makes me feel. It's not that I am going into prayer and hoping that God will show up and be present. I go into prayer hoping to become aware that He is already there.

DJ: How has your struggle with alcohol been an occasion of grace?

Manning: Alcoholism led me to discover that I was not only in bondage to booze, but I was also in bondage to human approval. One wonderful thing about the fellowship of Alcoholics Anonymous is that everyone who comes to the meetings knows that everyone there has made a slobbery mess of his or her life.

I know now that if I let people keep me on a pedestal, it's going to endanger my sobriety. That's why rigorous honesty about who I really am is a way of protecting myself and making me conscious that I'm only a drink away from the next drunk. Without this struggle, I don't think I would have known the extent to which I was living in the cage of human approval—and I would not have known the depth of my longing for grace.

DJ: What do you do when you lose touch with your own sense of "belovedness"?

Manning: Losing that sense of belovedness makes me look at how I am spending my days and distributing my time. It's like a blinking red light grabs my attention immediately and says, "Brennan, you haven't been taking care of your soul. You may be running around doing a lot of good things for people, but you are missing the point."

But there is a real confidence that if I just create the space, if I am just still again before God, that sense of belovedness will return. That's what the Psalms say and it's true. "Be still, and know that I am God" (Psalm 46:10). The Hebrew word for know there means "to experience."

If we become still, we will begin to experience. The wisdom of God is to become still. We need to still the noise and the clamor and the chatter of our lives and just wait. He will make us aware of His presence.

DJ: Describe a silent, directed retreat and why it's helpful.

Manning: The basic premise of a silent, directed retreat is twofold: First, that God gives Himself to you completely only in silence and solitude. And second, that God (to use Isaiah's imagery) has lured you into the wilderness to tell you something.

He has called you there by name to speak to your heart. Most of us think God would speak to Billy Graham or Mother Teresa, but He wouldn't speak to an ordinary person like you or me. That's just not true.

The directed part comes out of the Catholic tradition, but is more and more found in evangelical circles as well, sometimes phrased as mentoring. A spiritual director is someone who listens and who helps me listen to God. He or she is not afraid to challenge me.

The old theological maxim is that grace is mediated to people by people. Grace is going to come through others. It requires the humble acknowledgment that I need others on the journey. A spiritual director is just a master listener; the real director, of course, is Jesus.

Most people go on their first silent retreat intrigued and intimidated. They say, "I'll go stir crazy in the silence. I've never been still more than an hour in my life." This is really just the fear of the unknown.

Utter stillness is very close to death. Activity and busyness make me feel that I am vitally alive. Being still reminds me of my death, and I don't want to get too close to that. But then, part of what comes out of a silent retreat is a deeper awareness of the limited time I've been given.

I'm a pilgrim on a journey, and there is a growing sense of homecoming. I am going back to my Father's house. Silence and stillness can remind me of all that.

DJ: You write about living in the present moment. How can we live this way more effectively?

Manning: First, I would recommend Brother Lawrence's classic book, *The Practice of the Presence of God*. *Silence on Fire* by William O'Shannon is helpful as well, as is Thomas Keating's book on centering prayer, *Open Mind, Open Heart*.

As far as growing in the discipline of living in the present moment, I sometimes tell a Chinese story about a man being pursued by a tiger. The man runs as fast as he can but the tiger is gaining on him and suddenly, he spots a rope anchored to a tree trunk and hanging over the edge of a cliff.

The man shimmies down the rope and notices that he's suspended over a mass of jagged rocks 500 feet below. Up above, the tiger stands glaring at him, longing for his dinner. Down below lies certain death. Then he sees a couple of mice begin to gnaw on his rope.

Suddenly the man looks around and sees a giant strawberry sitting right within his reach. He plucks and eats it. "Yum, yum," he says, "that's the best thing I ever tasted in my life."

If the man had been preoccupied with the rocks below (the future), or the tiger above (the past), he would have missed the strawberry of the present moment. Life is like that. And experiencing the love of God is like that. Right in this moment is the place of encounter.

So I encourage people to practice the discipline of tuning in to the present moment. Take two minutes just to stare at a flower, to become utterly still. Begin with a short period of time and practice being totally attuned to what is around you. What happens is that you get more and

more aware of God breaking into the ordinary moments of your life.

» **See Also:** *On Your Own: The Unforced Rhythms Of Grace*



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PAULA RINEHART is a member of DJ's editorial advisory board and pursues a busy writing and counseling ministry. She and her husband, Stacy, are on staff with The Navigators.

Few people know that Paula once glued her eyelashes together as a child—just out of curiosity. Today she spends her free time on less harrowing pursuits such as bicycling through small North Carolina towns with her husband.

On Your Own
**The Unforced Rhythms Of
Grace**