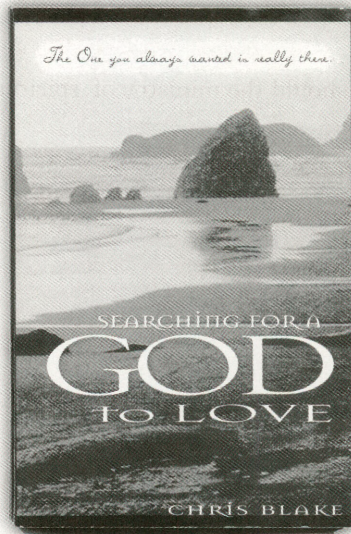


Searching for God's Map of the Cosmos

by Chris Blake



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Prayer—Communication with a Friend

Unusual maps fascinate me, whether of ocean floors or the surface of the moon. The first time I saw a world map created in the former Soviet Union I was intrigued to find the U.S.S.R. stretching across three-fourths of the world; the United States was split in half on either side. Hanging on my office walls are maps of “Native American Tribes” in North America (I live in Dakota), a “Down-Under Map of the World” with Australia dominating top center; and a photo of the Milky Way galaxy. Each map gives a different perspective on reality. If for some reason I’m feeling stressed, I’m calmed when I look at the Milky Way’s 100,000 stars and think, *How does this matter in all of that?* I think about how God views the universe, the earth, me. I’d love to see God’s map of the cosmos, and in a way I can—through prayer.

I don’t know how prayer works. I don’t understand exactly how God “speaks” to us, how He honors our personal freedom and yet accomplishes His designs, or why some *obviously* good answers don’t occur, and some

obviously bad requests seem to gain a positive response. I can't comprehend why God seems to intervene in seemingly small matters when children are dying. So when I share what appeals to me about prayer, it's not with the idea that I have God all figured out. I do know this: somehow prayer enables God and ennobles me.

Often we labor under the illusion that prayer is only something formal, something desperate, something absolutely magical. Sir Eric Roll tells the story of a little boy who was overheard praying fervently, "Tokyo, Tokyo, Tokyo." Later, when he was asked why, the boy replied, "Well, you see, I've just taken my geography examination in school, and I have been praying to the Lord to make Tokyo the capital of France." Prayer isn't about miraculously changing the world atlas. Prayer is primarily communicating with God—as vital a role to spiritual health as breathing is to physical health.

A common problem with prayer is found in not hearing any answer. In praying we can feel like Ernestine, Lily Tomlin's nasal telephone operator character: "Have I reached the person to whom I am speaking?" A man once confessed to C. S. Lewis, "I can believe in God all right, but what I cannot swallow is the idea of Him attending to several hundred million human beings who are all addressing Him at the same moment." In his answer, recorded in *Mere Christianity*, Lewis presents the possibility that God's time is different from our time:

Suppose I am writing a novel. I write "Mary laid down her work; next moment came a knock at the door!" For Mary who has to live in the imaginary time of my story there is no interval between putting down the work and hearing the knock. But I, who am Mary's maker, do not live in that imaginary time at all. Between writing the first half of that sentence and the second, I might sit down for three hours and think steadily about Mary. I could think about Mary as if she were the only character in

the book and for as long as I pleased, and the hours I spent in doing so would not appear in Mary's time (the time inside the story) at all.

God is not hurried along in the Time-stream of this universe any more than an author is hurried along in the imaginary time of his own novel. He has infinite attention to spare for each one of us. He doesn't have to deal with us in the mass.

You are as much alone with Him as if you were the only being He had ever created.

God is not too busy for us, nor is He unwilling to respond. Bill Hybels writes in *Too Busy Not to Pray*, "I get tired of hearing about 'secrets to prayer' to get past God's reluctance, to reveal the little-known way to pester our way into His presence." We don't need to beg God. God is better than that. The Bible does say we need to persist. Why?

When he was thirteen, Nathan said to me, "I want a Mercedes." Through deft questioning, I came to realize that he meant his mother and I should go out *now* and buy a Mercedes for him, though he would allow us to drive it until he received his driving permit. He seemed sincere enough, though obviously added.

Understand, I love to give things to Nathan; I gain great pleasure in giving, and I especially enjoy surprising him with gifts. He doesn't have to beg me to do it—I'm looking for opportunities to give. But I didn't buy him the Mercedes he asked for. Three considerations came to mind: 1. Did he truly mean it? (He quit asking shortly afterward.) 2. Did he really need it? 3. Would I be doing him more harm to grant his request? In the case of the missing Mercedes, my finite wisdom seemed to register *No*, *No*, and *Yes*.

Persisting in prayer may indicate the depth of our desire, and as countless cautionary tales point out, we should be careful what we ask for. Furthermore, our motivation can be a problem. A critical distinction looms between a childlike dependence on God and a



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childish demanding of God. Part of prayer maturity is this: we need to learn not to get what we want but to want what we get. It may be appropriate for a one-year-old to view Daddy primarily as a giver of horsy rides and chewing gum, but one would hope a thirty-one-year-old would hold a more complete view of him. We truly love God when we love Him more than the gifts He offers.

When God refuses to perform just because we say so, He frees us from our false, idolatrous notions. Richard Foster reflects, "For me, the greatest value in my lack of control was the intimate and ultimate awareness that I could not manage God. God refused to jump when I said, 'Jump!'" For this reason, I'm somewhat uncomfortable with aspects of the "claiming promises" approach to prayer; as though we can hold a grudging God's feet to the fire with "Remember? You *promised*." Most of life is conditional to some degree—my promise to take the children to the park Sunday may be contingent on a thunderstorm rolling in or the car expiring.¹ On the other hand, promises are designed to be kept. Asking, believing, and claiming God's promises have resulted in astounding answers to prayer. Jesus' prayer, "Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done" allows the wiggle room God deserves, especially with absurd or selfish requests.

Often God takes an indirect route to answer our prayers. The mother of Augustine prayed all night that God would stop her son from going to Italy because she wanted him to become a Christian. While she was praying, he sailed away to Italy, where he converted to Christianity. Naturally, his mother believed for a time that her prayers had gone unheard. As with any healthy relationship on earth, a friendship with God is characterized by mutual freedom.

The Bible book of Psalms merits a subtitle: *Raw Prayer from Passionate Believer*. I used to wonder why some psalms are in the Bible, for they are riddled with doubt and violence. (What prayers would you publish if you were God?) Psalmists fume, harangue, question, and scold. They also laud, celebrate, confess, and exalt. Alden Thompson writes about his growing experience with the psalms:

I developed the habit of being quite careful of what I did and said in God's presence. My prayers were polite. Any agony of soul was kept well under cover... Now bring the two problems together: the violent and passionate words of the psalms and my polite little prayers to the great God of the universe... I

finally awoke to the fact that God's people had been quite frank with Him all along. I had simply robbed myself of a great privilege... If David and the psalmists could be open with God, why couldn't I? And that was the beginning of a real friendship with my God.

Huckleberry Finn discovered that he couldn't pray a lie. God is interested in honest communication, but with God we go to another level. God knows we cannot live in peace with unresolved guilt, so Jesus says to first clear up directly with a person any tension or misunderstanding, then confess our specific sins to God to receive the healing of memory.² It's as hard to absolve yourself of your own guilt as it is to kiss the top of your own head. God cleanses our wounds and sets us free.

King Frederick II, an eighteenth-century king of Prussia, was visiting a prison in Berlin when a story of confession developed. The inmates tried to convince him that they had been framed, duped, and unjustly imprisoned. Amid their protests of innocence, the king spotted one man sitting alone in a corner oblivious to the commotion. When the king asked the man what he was there for, the prisoner replied, "Armed robbery, Your Honor."

The king asked, "Were You guilty?"

"Yes Sir," he answered. "I entirely deserve my punishment."

The king then issued an order. "Release this guilty man. I don't want him corrupting all these innocent people."

When we pray, we should ask for mercy, not justice.

Notes and References

1. The farmer maybe praying for that thunderstorm. People pray for contradictory answers, and God cannot honor both requests.

2. Terry Muck asked hundreds of spiritual leaders, "How do you know when you need to pray?" Their most common response was, "I get irritable with people."

Chris Blake is professor of communication at Union College in Lincoln, Nebraska, and former editor of *Insight* magazine. His book, *Searching for a God to Love* is available at www.adventistbookcenter.com or from the ABC at 1-800-765-6955. It is also being released to the general public by Word Publishing.