

Prayer...



A DIRECT
CONNECTION
WITH
GOD

by Greg Albrecht

Tuning in to Eternity

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In the movie *Frequency*, (released in 2000) Dennis Quaid plays a New York City police detective struggling with life. His father, a firefighter, died in a blaze trying to save another person, and this event has haunted him since he was a boy. He moves into his parents’ former home in Brooklyn and while rummaging around the house one day discovers his dad’s old ham radio. After managing to get the dusty set working, the young man toys with the knobs trying to connect with other ham operators.

At first he encounters lots of electrical interference, but on this unusual night, marked by the rare appearance of the Northern Lights over the East Coast, the troubled detective makes contact with a fellow New York Mets fan—his deceased father, living in 1969, just days before his death. An accidental cross-time radio link (thus the movie’s title, *Frequency*) connects a father and son across 30 years.

The film’s premise is an imaginative take on the long cherished wish of time travel, blending a great suspense story with science fiction and a strong message about the value of family. Perhaps one of the most striking suppositions this movie proposes is that humans can communicate beyond the limits of time.

From the perspective of Hollywood human encounters with dimensions that transcend the time and space we inhabit produce entertaining and monetarily enriching creative products. For Hollywood, the premise of *Frequency* is a good story, but it’s not reality. It’s not the perspective of God.

The creator God, the architect of the heavens and earth, has eternally lived outside the limits of time. He devised and engineered time and he controls its boundaries. God is infinite. God has no beginning and he will never end. He was never born and he will never know death. He has always existed and he will always exist.

As the architect of human life, God created us in his image (Genesis 1:26-27). Being created in God's image doesn't mean that we "look like" God, it means, among other things, that we are created with the potential, and even the desire, to communicate with him.

Just as the adult son in *Frequency* yearned to connect with his deceased father, humans desire to connect with our heavenly Father. In his infinite wisdom and love, our heavenly Father has made a way for us to reach across the limits of time and communicate with him. God, who knows all, sees all and understands all offers us a direct connection. We don't need to locate a rusty old ham radio in our parents' attic. We don't need to wait for a bizarre electrical storm that enables us to make contact. We don't need special effects from Hollywood. According to the Bible, we need none of these things. We only need to speak and we will be heard.

What frequency are you on? Maybe you are looking and searching for God, but you don't know how to find him. Maybe the only times you have prayed are those times when you are really in trouble, and God is your last hope. Maybe you only pray when you promise God that if he will just help you this time, you will do whatever he wants you to.

On the other hand, perhaps you've been a Christian for some time. In fact, you've talked to God many times over the years. But for you prayer has become a chore to be endured rather than a source of joyous connection with a loving, heavenly Father. Your prayers seem dry, brittle and lifeless. Your spiritual life is in a rut.

As a Christian you may be confused by prayer. Early on in your Christian life someone may have told you that God hears every prayer, and you believe he does, but lately it seems like he's not responding to your prayers. You've been diligent and persistent. You consistently bring your requests before him but nothing seems to happen or change.

Does prayer work?

What is prayer anyway? Is it just another religious ritual we endure? Is it something we have to do to keep God happy? What if you didn't pray before a meal—would you be in deep *do-do* with God? And why do we only "say grace" before a meal—why not pray before we go to the movies, to a concert

or to a baseball game? Is prayer all about persuading God to do something that he is reluctant to do?

There are people who "prayer walk"—walking around an objective they believe needs to be "claimed for Christ." Others speak of themselves as "prayer warriors"—this term has always bothered me, for it seems to me we are saying in order for our prayers to be answered as we would like, heaven needs to be stormed and overwhelmed by our efforts. Some have "concerts" of prayer—it seems to me that one of the beliefs behind such events is the idea that God is more impressed with huge crowds of people praying about a particular need than he is with a solitary prayer.

Is prayer some feel-good thing that makes us think that we have done what God wants us to do, and once we do it's his turn to make us happy? One of the big questions is: "Does God really listen to my prayers?" This thought is often closely tied to another question, "Does prayer work?" Because, after all, if it doesn't "work" then why waste the time?

In our North American way of looking at things, when we ask "does something work?" we are really asking the question, "Will I get the thing I want in the way and the time that I want it?" As North Americans we want the answer to all our questions quickly. Our

society started promising us fast, even instant, results long ago—maybe even before you were born. As I recall, getting something quickly in my generation started with instant mashed potatoes. My mother was aghast that something as important and basic as mashed potatoes could come in a box, and with little effort and time mashed potatoes could be on the table.

Today we want to download our music from the Internet faster; we want our packages shipped to us overnight; we want our pizzas delivered to our front door in 30 minutes or less; we want to send and receive text messages in seconds. Speed is of the essence. For things to work, they need to happen now—if not yesterday. For Americans, if it takes until tomorrow it means that it doesn't work.

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But does prayer work that way? When we make a request known to God, does he jump to and respond immediately? Do we expect answers to our prayers like we expect our pizzas, in 30 minutes or less? Do we expect God to send us a text message or e-mail answer to our prayer, downloaded on our computer using a high-speed heavenly DSL transmission line?

Does prayer work? Of course it works, but maybe not in the way we define “work.” Our answer may not come to us immediately, like a 30-minute pizza delivery. It probably won’t come to us as an audible response or a grand experience like fireworks exploding. God is not a servant who comes running the moment we ring a bell, or a showman waiting to entertain us.

What is your “relationship” with God?

God has not offered us the relationship of a master to a servant or a hotel patron with a bellhop. He doesn’t offer us the relationship of a parent who is too busy to care about the welfare of his children.

Before we go any further with the question of whether prayer works, we must understand the nature of our relationship with our heavenly Father. He’s in charge; we’re not. He’s sovereign and we’re not. He’s immortal; we’re mortal. He lives outside of eternity; we’re captive inside this world and the restraints of time. He’s uncreated without a beginning or end; we have a physical beginning and we will one day have a physical end.

The first step in prayer is to understand this relationship we have with God. If we are struggling, churning inside, wrestling with the idea that God is not listening and prayer is not working, we may need to rephrase the problem—things are not happening *as we would like*.

Most human beings have an extremely one-sided view of the relationship God offers to us. When we’re hurting, when we’re in pain, when a loved one has an illness, when we’re out of work, when we have financial difficulties, or there’s some problem in our marriage or family we turn to God almost as a last resort to see if God will answer our prayer. We’re trying to find out if prayer will work for us. But that’s not the kind of relationship God wants to have with us.

In fact, many of those prayers won’t be answered, at least not with a “yes,” because we haven’t started from the right place—an intimate, personal, direct connection between a child and Father. God offers us a bond with him based on the riches of his grace that he pours out upon us. He has saved us from the difficulties, heartache and misery we find ourselves in—the addictions, the imprisonments of mind and the sins that have destroyed our lives.

God relates to us as his children, as people who have been made new when we came to him and accepted Jesus. We are no longer who we used to be, but new men and women of God, because Jesus Christ lives his life in us. The life we once lived we no longer live; that’s the old person.

Another idiom or metaphor used in the Bible is that God adopts us; we were without God at one time, orphaned without a spiritual father, but he adopts us, brings us into his own family and now we have a special, intimate relationship with him.

We now have this special and unique relationship, but he is always the Father and we’re the children. Sometimes he says “yes,” sometimes “no.” What kind of parent always says yes to every request of a child? Would you answer “yes” if your child said, “I’d like a diet of only peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches and ice cream sundaes, please!”

When our heavenly Father does not deliver, we conclude he’s not listening to us. What we’re actually saying is that he didn’t cave in to our desires, and for some reason, probably unknown to us at the time, our heavenly Father knows best. His response may be “no,” even in situations that are desperate or painful. He may tell you that answering your specific prayer in the affirmative would not be good for you, not what you need at this moment, not part of the bigger plan he has for your life. The thing we ask for, even relief from struggle or hardship may be what we want but may not be what we need. The Apostle Paul found himself in a similar predicament:

“To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.’ Therefore I will boast all the more glad-

ly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong" (2 Corinthians 12:7-10).

It would have been easy for Paul to have said, "But God, I only want to be useful to you, I only want to spread the good news about your Son; please take this trouble away." But the Father, whose thoughts are higher than ours and whose plans are greater than ours, was able to tell Paul "No, I have a greater purpose in mind for your current situation if you'll only trust in me, depend on me, rely on my wisdom and understanding instead of your own."

In all the responses God may have to our prayers, his underlying goal, the sweeping perspective of his connection

to us and his communication with us, is to make our relationship with him stronger, deeper, more rich and meaningful and full of his love.

In John 15, Jesus says that our heavenly Father is like a gardener in a vineyard and Jesus is like the vine. Every branch living in the vine, or abiding as some versions of the Bible have it, will bear fruit. Believers in Jesus are the branches.

Our idea of "abiding" might be a once a week or once a month relationship with God. Our actions might say to God, "When the bills come in I'll talk to you, or when I'm in a difficult spot I'll get in touch. If someone gets sick in my family I'll bring my concerns to you."

If we're residing in God's house we will understand how the household works and have a different kind of relationship with God than an occasional visitor. As a resident in the house of God, abiding there, our requests and prayers will be far different than the person who only comes home when he runs out of money, is hungry and needs clean laundry. Of course, as we continue with this metaphor, it is important to know that no matter how far you may have strayed, no matter how long it is since you've visited home, God always leaves the light on.

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Getting a "Handle" on Prayer

Citizens' band radio was the technological rage of the mid-1970's. "CB" radio, as it was popularly known, became famous through its use by truck drivers and its portrayal in television, movies and music. Users of CB radio had their own lingo and had conversations using a nickname or "handle" rather than their given names (somewhat like email addresses today). Slang phrases unique to this way of communicating have since gained a footing in our common everyday English. Code words and shorthand—like "Smokey" for an officer of the law or "put the hammer down" for shifting into high gear and pressing the accelerator to the floorboard—became well known.

Some think that there's a special language associated with speaking to God, or a unique "handle" that we must use in addressing God. Maybe you were taught that "real" prayer must take place in a large cathedral, while speaking in tongues, while using special words and phrases that obligate God to respond, or while using King James "holy" language, like "thee" and "thou." You may have heard that in order for prayer to be effective it must be done in certain places at certain times. You may have been taught that a prayer offered by a minister, a priest or a pastor will be much more effective than yours.

You may have been taught that if you really want God to do what you want him to, then you should pray to dead people (saints) and they will join you in your own petition, and as a result your prayer will have a better chance of "getting through." You may have all kinds of ideas about prayer that may be right or wrong, but are probably more grounded in your experience and religious indoctrination than anything else. What does God's word tell us?

The model for prayer

In Matthew 6, Jesus begins his explanation of the how-to's of prayer by starting with the *don't-do's*. He says in Matthew 6:5-6, "And when you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, for they love to pray standing in the synagogues and on the street corners to be seen by men. I tell you the truth, they have received their reward in full. But when you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."

Don't pray to be seen by others. Prayer is not all about impressing other people. When you pray, make sure you are

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praying to God for the purpose of communicating with him, not to be seen by others to be admired by them or to be seen as the strong religious person that you would like others to see you as.

In the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:9-14) Jesus contrasted a respected, religious leader (the Pharisee) with someone who was held in contempt by the public at large (the Tax Collector). In the parable Jesus described them both offering

prayers in a public place, the temple. In a telling comment Jesus said that the Pharisee "prayed about himself" (Luke 18:11)—while the Tax Collector simply asked God for mercy.

Our prayers should be directed to our loving heavenly Father. In prayer we are not talking to impress another human being, but we're having a personal, intimate conversation with One whom we cherish and love and who cherishes and loves us back. When we talk to God we should go to that place in our hearts reserved for our dearest friends and loved ones, a quiet place where we can be honest, open and personal.

How do we get to that place? Perhaps this literally means finding a physical location that is quiet and alone. But sometimes this is more of a struggle of the will. You may have to start your prayers by admitting to God that you don't feel that close to him today, that you're struggling to draw near to him. Just this simple admission may be enough to start a momentous time of conversation with the Father.

Simply being in a private place does not guarantee that our prayers will be directed to God—and neither does offering a prayer in public, at a worship service, necessarily mean that we are praying so that others will be impressed with us.

In verse seven Jesus also warns us about superstitious beliefs about prayer: "And when you pray, do not keep on babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words." Avoid formulas or magical mantras. Some people get this notion in their minds that they've now prayed what some call the prayer of positive confession and now God must do what they've asked.

Prayer is not some secret, magic phraseology, akin to opening a spiritual bank vault. Some people believe that if we only get the correct numbers in the correct order using the correct method, then, presto, the door to heaven will be opened and God will grant us our desires. If we find ourselves thinking this way about prayer we should think again.

God is not interested in silly ideas we have about how we are going to manipulate him into getting what we want. He isn't interested in us "putting in our time" in prayer, he isn't more likely to answer King James English prayers than a prayer in which you talk to him the way you talk to anyone else. He isn't interested in the length of your prayer. God is not impressed with our babbling.

Some would have us think that God only starts listening to us after we have prayed for 30 minutes—then, after we have put in our time, he starts listening. Such an idea is just another religious innovation that has no place within authentic Christianity. God knows your needs; he knows your pain, your angst, your worry. You don't have to keep repeating, over and over for God to hear you. God hears you as soon as you start praying—he is not impressed with those who make a show of long and lengthy prayers (Matthew 23:14 NKJV).

Prayer can be heartfelt, spontaneous, or it can be prepared, carefully written ahead of time. Most importantly, our prayers should come from the heart, and not be stilted, repetitive recitations that are nothing more than religious rituals.

What about the Lord's Prayer?

You may have been taught to pray the Lord's Prayer. Is this

an example of a vain, repetitious prayer? Not necessarily. The Lord's Prayer can be vain if we think that merely repeating the words have some magic effect, or if we pray certain words as a matter of mindless repetition, without considering the meaning behind the words.

If the Lord's Prayer is offered to God, as a prayer, word for word, while considering the profound meaning behind the words and phrases, then it certainly can be an effective and meaningful prayer. One of the benefits of praying the

Lord's Prayer is the fact that praying that specific prayer is a way to be one with the eternal body of Christ—for Christians have prayed that prayer for almost 2,000 years.

But we don't have to ever pray the Lord's Prayer. There's no requirement that we ritualistically repeat those very words. Some are held in slavery to the religious, superstitious idea that if you don't pray this prayer a certain number of times you won't be heard. The Lord's Prayer is a model prayer or sample

prayer, a methodology—a way to organize prayer. We can pray the Lord's Prayer or pray prayers based upon it. But to pray the Lord's Prayer would not be "babbling" like pagans; the prayer is quite brief.

What about how long we pray? Many benefit by having what they call a "quiet time" or "devotional time" where they may pray for 15 or 20 or 30 minutes at once. As a young Christian, I used to believe that I had to pray for 30 minutes, and that if I didn't God would not honor my prayers or be pleased with my effort. I would look up at the clock and see that I'd only prayed for 23 minutes and I would be disappointed. God rescued me from this wrong idea (among many others!) and relieved me from this burden. A concentrated longer prayer is not wrong of and by itself, but the belief that we must pray for a specific amount of time before God hears us is. God is not interested in seeing us "put in our prayer time."

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Time to Talk

Jesus begins the Lord's Prayer with this statement: "Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name" (Matthew 6:9). The first thing we pray about, the first thing we focus on, the priority of prayer is who God is, what he's doing, what he represents. We should express our thanksgiving and gratitude that God is God, that he is love, that he gives us his grace and love, and that he is in charge and we're not.

We need prayer—God doesn't need our prayers. We are dependent on God, not the other way around. This is part of what it means to glorify and praise God, to hallow his name.

Because of Jesus Christ we can call God our Father, but he is still our heavenly Father and his name is "hallowed"—an old English word meaning "to be honored as holy or sacred." God is holy, perfect; He lives in unimaginable magnificence and glory. Prayer is not a time for us to try to change God—prayer is a method and tool that helps us become the kind of people that God can change.

Prayer is gratitude and thanksgiving

Prayer is a time not just for asking, but for considering what God's already done, from the profound—salvation, forgiveness of sins—to the earthly—the air we breathe, our family, our health, our job, our home. Our prayers should be liberally salted with thankfulness as we remember the ways that God has answered previous prayers, as we consider family and friends, as we think about the mercy of a good and loving Father, a Father who is not holding our sins against us if we have accepted his Son into our lives.

We have the example of Paul, whose most common prayers of thanks focused on the people God had brought into his life through his ministry. Colossians 1:3 is just a small example of this habit of Paul's: "We always thank God, the

Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you.” As Paul urges the Philippian Christians to lift up their fears and anxieties to a God who will care for them and grant them peace, he makes this statement, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God” (Philippians 4:6).

We should present our concerns to God and ask for God to act on them. But even in doing so, we can be thankful that our God loves us, that he hears us, that he wants what is best for us, that he has acted on our behalf before and that he has the power to bring about good in the present situation.

Make prayer honest and real

There are people who have had such a dysfunctional and perhaps horrific experience with their father they find it impossible to pray to a heavenly “father.” Their memories of childhood are so ugly and repulsive they can’t say “father.” Again, calling God your father is no magical linguistic necessity, it isn’t precise vocabulary that must be utilized.

God is not our father in a physical way. He is not a parent in the way an earthly parent is our parent. Earthly parents are all imperfect. Our heavenly Father is perfect. It is appropriate and right to relate with him using this term. But if you can’t pray to God as Father, pray to Jesus. Or call him Lord, God or Creator. Find the “handle” that’s comfortable for you and appropriate in describing the relationship you now have with him as one of his redeemed and forgiven people.

Because of our special and intimate relationship with God, we can be real and genuine with him. Look at the other “Lord’s Prayer” in John 17 for an example of this: “I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word. Now they know that everything you have given me comes from you. For I gave them the words you gave me and they accepted them. They knew with certainty that I came from you, and they believed that you sent me. I pray for them. I am not praying for the world, but for those you have given me, for they are yours” (John 17: 6-9).

Jesus’ language here is not exacting. He is not using the most lofty verbiage. There are no four-syllable words here,

although if that’s the way you speak, God certainly accepts that also. I’m struck here by the way Jesus speaks from the heart. He’s conversational. He’s passionate. *He’s himself.* Prayer is not pretense. Prayer is not posturing. Prayer is real, heartfelt connectivity and communication with our Lord.

Prayer is a way to acknowledge sin

In Matthew 6, Jesus prays, “Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12). In confession, we come before God and acknowledge who we are, as we earlier acknowledged who he is. There is repentance, there is surrender, there is humility and there is a reminder in this portion of prayer.

Some think that we need to confess our sins one by one and unless we confess each one, God will not forgive us. That’s not what the Bible says. The point of the Lord’s Prayer is that we, in prayer,

come before God, telling him that we are needy, we are dependent, we are sinners, we fall short, that we need his help. If we have to acknowledge every sin of which we have ever been guilty, most of us would be out of luck—for we can’t remember the sheer number of sins we have committed.

Some might say, “He knows what I’ve done; why drag out the dirty laundry? Why do we need to confess?” The confession is not for God, it’s for us, so we don’t get the idea we can do whatever we want without accountability. It isn’t so that after we confess God can say, “Alright, you’re forgiven of that sin. Are there any others? I’m glad you remembered that one, because unless you remember and confess you’re not forgiven.”

Through this portion of prayer, we confess our sins, we confess our inadequacies, we confess our humanity, we confess our need. We are but human; we are creatures of the flesh. We have lust and envy. We are greedy. We covet. We don’t think the thoughts we should. We often fall into anger. We lie. We distort ideas and facts so that we will come off looking good. It’s not a beautiful picture, is it?

But even though we don’t bring a beautiful picture to God, the good news is that when we enter into his presence, when

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we go to “his house,” we enter into a *place of grace*. God wants to hear us, he’s happy we are home, where we are comforted. Jesus our high priest, our intermediary, our advocate, is there. The Father is there; the Holy Spirit is there; the angels are there.

You should not be fearful or apologetic as you come before our loving God, but know that he wants to listen to you and talk with you, regardless of what sins you’ve committed or how unfaithful you’ve been lately. We go there to find mercy in our time of need, not to receive judgment, not to receive punishment, not to receive verbal chastisement.

God is always in the posture of the prodigal son’s father: “Come home!” Remember, we pray to find grace and mercy. And we pray because of grace. Grace envelopes our whole attitude of prayer; it’s the relationship we have with God.

Prayer can be offered anytime, anywhere, always

We’re told in 1 Thessalonians 5:16-18: “Be joyful always; pray continually; give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God’s will for you in Christ Jesus.” In other versions of the Bible, this command is translated, “Pray without ceasing.” The idea is the same—we can and should pray all the time. Some people ask, “When should I pray? Is there a special time?” Some think that the best time is early in the morning. There is no required time. We can pray at any time, and we should.

Jesus tells of a woman who would not give up seeking justice from an uncaring judge. The woman continually knocked on the judge’s door and would not relent until the judge decided her case. Jesus used this story to illustrate a principle of prayer—that we should always pray and not give up (Luke 18:1). You don’t have to pray for 30 minutes or pray the Lord’s prayer word for word. We can pray in 10-second intervals or 5 minutes or an hour.

We should pray without ceasing, in all circumstances. In Philippians 4:6-7, we’re commanded to pray as we’re feeling anxious and worried. We can pray when we’re at home with our children before bed. We can pray at the hospital with a sick friend. We can pray as we’re preparing dinner. We can pray silently in our own minds as we’re having a conversation with someone. We can pray as we’re frustrated or joyful, hopeful or despairing, sleepy or alert, in sickness or health.

We also don’t have to pray in any particular position or place. Some have been taught that God doesn’t really listen to you unless you’re on your knees. There’s nothing wrong with kneeling but some can’t kneel. What about people who are confined to bed? Can they pray? Of course they can pray. We can lift our hands to God during prayer. Do we have to? No, we don’t have to, but can we? Of course we can.

Many bow their heads in deference and reverence to God. Do we have to do that? Maybe you’re mountain climbing, dangling from a rope. That would be a great posture and place from which to pray effectively.

Prayer can include requests

In Matthew 6:11 Jesus encourages us to pray: “Give us today our daily bread.” God longs to hear us ask him for things. He enjoys it. And that’s usually where we start in prayer: “Can you help me with this? Can you heal me?”

As this verse commands, when we request things of God it is a good time to thank him for requests we’ve received in the past. We’re asking God to grant our requests, and yet we’ve forgotten that he has granted others before. We should say, “Father, thank you for answering so many of my prayers.”

As we bring our cares and burdens to the Lord we are lifted from the anxiety, stress and worry of our daily lives, the rat races, the rushing from place to place. And in this peaceful, restful, gracious time, the peace of God that transcends understanding guards our hearts and our minds. As we’re told in Psalm 55:22: “Cast your cares on the LORD and he will sustain you; he will never let the righteous fall.”

This is a time, as you give God your requests and petitions, to also cast your worries upon him. Jesus says: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest” (Matthew 11:28). When we pray, we’re in the presence of our loving heavenly Father. It’s a time to tell him what’s on our minds, to unloose our heavy burdens, the things we’re worried about letting other people know, the embarrassing secret sins, the private struggles, all our requests—make them known to God. Don’t hold back.

Listening to God

Prayer is a time for us to talk with God. We can sound off, we can cry, we can plead, we can ask forgiveness, we can share our hopes and dreams. But conversation is not a monologue. In order for a conversation to be communication, then the other party must share their thoughts. There is a time for us to be quiet and listen! How do we listen to God?

The primary way in which we listen to God is through his Word. The Bible tells us about the relationship God wants to have with us, including how to communicate with him. It tells us who he is, what he is like, the story of his relationship with mankind, his plan of salvation for all humans, facts about the life, death and resurrection of his Son. Without the Bible we would be left groping for ways to know God, understand God and communicate with God. Without the Bible we would be left to our own senses to sort out why there is such order and beauty in the world, but also such pain and cruelty. The Bible helps us know God and how to grow in our relationship with him.

The Bible lets you know to whom you're talking

Because God is not flesh and blood standing in front of us, the Bible is his source for helping us understand who he is. Just as understanding the characteristics and values of a friend or family member informs our conversation with them, so does understanding the characteristics and values of our heavenly Father enhance our communication with him. If you really want to learn about someone's interests, listen to them. If you want to learn about God and the things that interest him, read and listen to his Word. God is interested in people, first and foremost. He's interested in people coming to know him through his Son, Jesus Christ. As we're told in 1 Timothy 2:4: "[He] wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."

God wants those who know him to be changed in thought and behavior. That starts by comprehending on a deeper level your personal identity as a Christian. The Bible says that when we accept the perfect and complete sacrifice of Jesus Christ on our behalf, we are loved and forgiven, risen to new life and given eternal hope.

Paul explains this in Ephesians 2: "But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ even when we were dead in transgressions—it is by grace you have been saved. And God raised us up with Christ and seated us with him in the heavenly realms in Christ Jesus, in order that in the coming ages he might show the incomparable riches of his grace, expressed in his kindness to us in Christ Jesus" (Ephesians 2:4-7).

Our basic identity has fundamentally, permanently changed. God wants us to think about ourselves in this new way, not in the old way as slaves to sin, but as children set free to receive his love, to love him in return and offer the same to others.

The Bible can help as you become a spiritual adult

You can start talking to God at any time, 24-7, no matter what your circumstance, no matter how desperate you might be, no matter how far away from God you may feel. And we can express ourselves in any way—it need not be polished prose. God will listen to us though our grammar might not be the best or our vocabulary inadequate. But this doesn't mean that we should be content to barely be able to articulate our feelings. We want to move beyond being little children (Ephesians 4:14).

A baby can get a reaction with giggles and gurgles, but we wouldn't want our children to continue to communicate with us that way the rest of their lives. God wants to have a mature, adult-to-adult relationship with us. Knowing Scripture and making it a part of the way we think and live is a critically important part of our spiritual growth and maturity.

Jesus acknowledged the change in relationship between himself and his disciples in John 15: "I no longer call you servants, because a servant does not know his master's business. Instead, I have called you friends, for everything that I learned from my Father I have made known to you" (John 15:15).

There's no better way to know what's important to God ("the Master's business") than learning what the Bible says. The Bible helps us to talk with God in an adult to adult fashion. John emphasizes the vital connection between knowing what's important to God and prayer in 1 John 5: "This is the confidence we have in approaching God: that if we ask anything according to his will, he hears us. And if we know that he hears us—whatever we ask—we know that we have what we asked of him."

Prayer—a spiritual transformer

Communication can change us, whether it's over a short-wave radio, CB radio, cell phone, email or any other means. When we communicate we learn, we draw closer to someone else, we connect with them. Sometimes our conversations touch on light topics such as favorite TV shows, the weather or sports. Other times we delve into problems at work or home. And sometimes our discussions can lead us into painful subjects. When we communicate, we connect.

Through prayer we do more than just talk and listen, but we enter the spiritual realm where we can be intimately touched by God and transformed. That's the power of prayer. Spending time with anyone, learning about their priorities and discovering their character will cause you to reflect on your own priorities, values and character, whether for good or bad. So as we come in contact with the God who made us, seeking a direct connection with him on the basis of what we've learned in his Word, sharing our hearts and what's going on in our lives, God will transform us.

Learning to talk to God after failure will change you.

To step into God's presence—when you know you've failed, when you know you've committed acts of wrongdoing, when you feel ashamed for your behavior—is an act of faith. It's a decision to believe what God says, that his opinion of you is based on what Christ has done for you and for your decision to trust in Jesus' perfect work for you on the cross. Coming before God in those moments transforms us into people who are standing before God because of his grace, as opposed to thinking that we deserve to be in his presence.

In the book of Hebrews, Jesus is compared to the Jewish high priest entering that part of the temple called the Holy of Holies. This is the place where God was, from a Jewish point of view. Of course God is not somewhere, he is everywhere. But to help the Israelites understand him, God gave them the tabernacle, and then the temple. They had this picture of God's presence in the Holy of Holies. The human high priest of Israel could only enter into that place once a year, to make atonement for the sins of all the people.

Now in the New Testament, and most notably in the book of Hebrews, we are told that Jesus is our high priest, he is our advocate, he is the one who is there, and because of him our prayers are always heard, not just one time a year, not just one time a month, not just when we're in church, not just when we have a Bible in front of us. Regardless of how long it's been since we've spoken to God, regardless how faithful or faithless we've been lately, he always welcomes us because Christ is there, interceding for us.

Jesus is our attorney who stands on our behalf in heaven, in the presence of the Father: "Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us" (Romans 8:33-34).

When we pray, Satan, our adversary, is accusing us, asking God why he would listen to our prayers, why he would take the time with a sinner such as ourselves. "Don't you know what this person has done?" Satan charges us. "Don't you know how imperfect they are, how much they've sinned?" Jesus Christ always intervenes, telling the Father, "I want this prayer answered because of my work on the cross. They're coming in my name; therefore I support their request, their prayer."

According to Matthew, Mark and Luke, when Jesus died on his cross the curtain of the temple, which hung in front of the Holy of Holies, was torn in two. And this was not a cheap plastic shower curtain, but a thick, heavy, richly ornamented and beautifully woven curtain. It didn't gradually fray and rip, but was torn in one motion at the death of Jesus.

The way into the Holy of Holies, which until then had been available once a year to one man, was torn top to bot-

tom to show this was a divine act. Hebrews 10 tells us that Jesus' atoning work on the cross has made possible entrance into the holiest of all places, the heavenly glories of God's throne: "Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body" (Hebrews 10:19-20).

Talking to God helps eliminate guilt as a driving feature in our lives and transform our sense of who we are because of his great love for us. When we pray, we talk to a God who knows us inside out, upside down. He has X-ray vision about our sins, desires, talents, hopes and dreams. God is not shocked when we put anything on the table. If we've spent most of our lives learning to hide the dirty stuff, conceal the embarrassing stuff, pretend we have no faults or problems, then we need to learn to get over it. God knows about all of our bad stuff already. Many are held captive to the religious notion that they need to hide from God, because if he really got to know them he wouldn't like them.

God loves us—not because of the parts of our lives we want him to know about—he loves us in spite of the fact that he knows everything there is to know about us. Such open and transparent communication will enable you to be more honest, more humble, more sincere, and not just with God, but with your spouse, your children, your siblings, your friends, your neighbors. If you can express dependence on a loving Father, you will be able to more quickly share your burdens and troubles and needs with other Christians.

Prayer will change you. After all, God doesn't need to change. You may have seen a plaque in Christian bookstores that goes something like this: "Prayer changes things." The truth is more properly defined—"Prayer changes *us*."

Prayer is not a tool for us to try to manipulate God into doing what we want. Prayer is not a method for us to attempt to change God's mind. Prayer is a way in which we enter God's presence and come out on the other side transformed and changed. Prayer helps us discover God, experience him and come to know him in deeper and more profound ways.

What PTM Is All About

Plain Truth Ministries (PTM) is all about leading people to Jesus Christ and authentic Christianity with the main, plain and sensible teachings of the Bible. We are dedicated to being clearly focused and centered on Jesus Christ. We combat the deadly viruses of religion and legalism by identifying them for what they are and by pointing out the pitfalls and potholes into which Christians can fall.

PTM resources

If you have been beaten up and left for dead by religion, if you have been deprived of a meaningful relationship with Jesus Christ, you're not alone. Millions have suffered and others continue to suffer at the hands of religion. We have many resources to help you if that's been your story. Those resources are largely contained in a ministry within PTM—"First-Aid for Legalists" at our website, www.ptm.org. Be sure to check out the rest of the PTM website for many other helpful resources to understand the liberty Jesus offers you.

Join with us

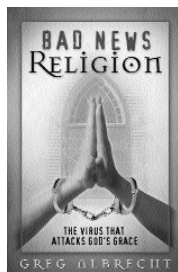
Though individual stories vary, the Christian church is tainted by religion and legalism, and PTM feels deeply for all those who still suffer in the festering swamps of religious legalism. It's our burning desire to help others recognize the bondage that legalism is—but even more importantly that they know that Jesus wants to free them—to rescue them from oppressive religion.

At PTM we seek to be a tool in God's hand to rescue people from religion and help them develop a deeper relationship with Jesus—helping to expand the Kingdom of God on this earth. That's the motivation for what we do, and we hope that you will identify with us in that and see its importance for the body of Christ. We also hope that the Holy Spirit will move

you to join us in this critically important work, so that together we may provide our resources to many others.

**Also by Greg Albrecht: *BAD NEWS RELIGION*
*The Virus That Attacks God's Grace***

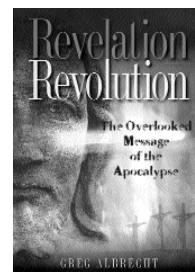
Since the church first began, Christians have had trouble accepting God's grace. Humans have substituted order, holiness, regulations and a long list of things to avoid in place of God's free gift. *Bad News Religion* is a liberating exploration of how we, in the name of religion, have shifted the focus from the work of God to our ability to become worthy of salvation.



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