



# Creative Prayer

Chris Tiegreen

SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF GOD'S HEART

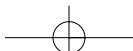
# Creative Prayer

Chris Tiegreen

SPEAKING THE LANGUAGE OF GOD'S HEART



MULTNOMAH  
BOOKS



CREATIVE PRAYER

PUBLISHED BY MULTNOMAH BOOKS

12265 Oracle Boulevard, Suite 200

Colorado Springs, Colorado 80921

*A division of Random House Inc.*

All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated, are taken from the New American Standard Bible®. © 1960, 1962, 1963, 1968, 1971, 1972, 1973, 1975, 1977, 1995 by the Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. ([www.Lockman.org](http://www.Lockman.org)). Scripture quotations marked (NIV) are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®. © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society. Used by permission of Zondervan Publishing House. All rights reserved. Scripture quotations marked (ESV) are taken from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version, copyright © 2001 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

ISBN 978-1-59052-931-7

Copyright © 2007 by Chris Tiegreen

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher.

MULTNOMAH is a trademark of Multnomah Publishers and is registered in the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office. The colophon is a trademark of Multnomah Publishers.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Tiegreen, Chris.

Creative prayer / Chris Tiegreen.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-59052-931-7

1. Prayer—Christianity. 2. Creation (Literary, artistic, etc.)—Religious aspects—Christianity. I. Title.

BV210.3.T53 2007

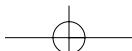
248.3'2—dc22

2007000879

Printed in the United States of America

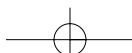
2007—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

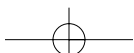


# Contents

Acknowledgments .....	vii
Introduction .....	1
<i>A Personal Approach to God</i>	
1 The Breath of Life .....	5
<i>God Is Not a Formula</i>	
2 Born to Be Wild .....	23
<i>The Nonconformity of Conforming to Christ</i>	
3 More than Just Words .....	41
<i>The Mysterious Power of the Tongue</i>	
4 Express Yourself .....	57
<i>Praying like a Charapa</i>	
5 Listen with Your Eyes .....	71
<i>A 20/20 Conversation</i>	
6 Emotional Prayer .....	89
<i>The Pitfalls of Vulcan Christianity</i>	
7 Tangible Prayer .....	103
<i>When Words Are Not Enough</i>	



8	Artistic Prayer .....	117
	<i>When Words Aren't Even Needed</i>	
9	Intimate Prayer .....	133
	<i>The Love Language of God</i>	
10	Full-Contact Prayer .....	149
	<i>A Sacred Lifestyle</i>	
	Conclusion .....	161
	Notes .....	165



## Acknowledgments

One of my greatest desires in writing a book, especially this one, is to conform carefully to biblical truth without conforming rigidly to traditional expressions of it. The first part of that desire depends on the feedback of others, the second part on their encouragement. I deeply appreciate those who offered their input after reading the manuscript or hearing me speak on the topic of creative prayer, including my wife, Hannah; my co-workers at Walk Thru the Bible; my friends at Daystar Fellowship; and members of the Multnomah team who contributed their expertise and enthusiasm to this project. They have all demonstrated a rare balance in the body of Christ, between conformity where it matters and freedom where it doesn't. I'm extremely grateful for that.



## Introduction

# A PERSONAL APPROACH TO GOD

There once was a young man who was deeply, passionately, zealously, joyfully in love with a young woman. Every time he saw her, his heart leaped with exhilaration and hopefulness. He knew—absolutely *knew*, beyond the shadow of a doubt—that she was the perfect match for him. If ever a guy was smitten, captivated, whipped, or any other word that describes consuming passion, it was this man. He loved her with the best of all possible loves.

He took such delight in her that he could never refrain from communicating his love. He gave her gifts, painted pictures, wrote poems, sang songs, danced, cooked meals, gathered flowers, and described his overwhelming love in the most beautiful words—though words often seemed horribly insufficient. The feelings of his heart constantly flowed forth. He could not keep silent.

The young woman loved the young man too. She adored him, in fact. She received his gifts, his words, and his creative expressions with joy—even when she didn't exactly understand them. And she also frequently expressed her feelings to him. How? She told him how she felt, albeit briefly and usually by cell phone. Just words. No gifts, except on holidays. No paintings, songs, dances, or poems. No meals and no flowers. Just talk.

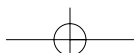


The problem in this relationship, of course, had nothing to do with a lack of love. It was entirely about communication. The young man let his love overflow in every kind of expression—his voice, his service, his talents, his visual creativity. And she communicated with him only one way: through talking to him.

That's an unbalanced relationship, but it's an accurate picture of the way many of us communicate with God. He speaks to us from the love of his heart with pictures, symbols, music, scenery, tastes, sounds of nature, smells of plants and incense and rain, and the soft, gentle caresses of the wind, of the waves, and of other human beings. And how do we express ourselves to him? For most of us, during a disciplined time each morning or evening. And it's usually nothing more than words.

Our words can be very heartfelt. But considering the multidimensional ways in which God communicates with us, spoken language is desperately one dimensional. It offers an extremely limited expression of our hearts.

Think about that. How did God express himself to people in the Bible? His revelation came through the real experiences of people who saw visions, had dreams, and interacted with him through the physical elements of life. God gave a rainbow to Noah, a ladder to Jacob, a burning bush to Moses, an ark and a tabernacle to Israel, a giant to David, a marriage to Solomon and his beloved, a family to Isaiah, figs to Jeremiah, dry bones to Ezekiel, a wife to Hosea, a vine to Jonah, and horsemen to Zechariah and John—to name a few. His voice has come in the sound of thunder, a waterfall, singing, a fire, a wind, a gentle whisper, and more. God expresses himself in terms of fragrance, sound, touch, taste, and anything else our senses can take in.





*Real love—or real emotions  
of any kind—can't be contained.*

This book will make the case that real love—or real emotions of any kind—can't be contained. Words aren't enough to express them. Corporately as a church, we're pretty good at creating music and liturgical art to express ourselves to God, but there's so much more for us to do—especially as individuals. Real love is irrepressible and comes out in many, many ways. By its very nature, it's creative.

Before we get into the specifics about creative prayer, I need to be clear about what these words mean in this book. By creative, I'm not talking about the kind of creation that only God can do. Genesis uses two words for God's creative work: *bara* and *asah*. *Bara* means “to create” something out of nothing, and no human being or other created being is able to do that. Only God can. He certainly allows us the privilege of partnering with him by praying for the new creation, but I'm aware that this is a partnership, not a unilateral ability of humanity to create something out of nothing. In other words, this book is *not* an attempt to deify human beings.

*Asah* means “to make” something out of material that already exists. In Genesis 1, for example, God created (*bara*) the heavens and the earth, but he made (*asah*) the expanse, sun, moon, and stars. On the seventh day, God rested from all that he had created (*bara*) and made (*asah*).<sup>1</sup> Bible translations often use these words interchangeably, sometimes translating *bara* as “made” and *asah* as “created,” but they are fundamentally different.

Human beings do not *bara* anything, so when we discuss *creative* prayer, we're talking about the common usage of the word today: imaginative, artistic, original, visionary, and so on. We're also, at

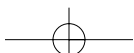


times, talking about the power of prayer as a partnership with God in the new creation. I use the words *create* and *creative* broadly and imprecisely in this book because we use them broadly and imprecisely in modern English.

*Prayer refers to the two-way  
communication we have  
personally with God.*

I also use the word *prayer* very broadly and imprecisely. We frequently think of prayer as asking God for something, and it certainly includes that. But it also includes praising God, thanking him, and listening to him. In this book, it refers generally to the two-way communication we have personally with God. That two-way communication happens in a lot of ways, and we will use *prayer* to describe all of them. Think of the subject as “a creative prayer life,” if that helps.

Though this book will discuss human creativity extensively, the point is not simply to encourage more creative expression. The world has quite a bit of that already. Neither is the point to encourage more creative expression *about* God. The church has quite a bit of that already too, all throughout its history. The purpose of this book is to discuss creative expression *to* God, to let our interaction with him overflow with our whole personality—emotions, artistry, and everything else he has put within us. After all, that’s how God communicates: like a young man madly in love with his sweetheart, unwilling to confine his love to mere words.



## THE BREATH OF LIFE

### God Is Not a Formula

Long, long ago, our planet was shrouded in darkness. It was a mysterious chaos, a completely unordered mass of raw material. There were no plants, no seasons, no dry land, no light. “Formless and void,” Scripture describes it. Shapeless and empty. Confused and meaningless. Deep and dark. Desperately lifeless.

But a Spirit brooded over the deep. As a wind caressed the waters, he blew away the darkness and hovered over the surface of chaos, contemplating his design and breathing the Breath of meaning into the emptiness.<sup>2</sup> The Hebrew word means “to hover, to move, to brood.”<sup>3</sup> His movement was a mission of fertility, and soon this formless mass exploded in creativity. The shapeless raw material became beautiful.

Not long after, God formed the shape of a man out of the dust of the ground. Genesis says he breathed his own Breath into this lifeless being; face-to-face and mouth to mouth, the divine Spirit



awakened humanity—the pinnacle of creation. The first sensation this new creature felt was the warm Breath of a creative God; the first thing he saw was God's face. His surroundings were already lush with life and fruit, stunning in beauty, and perfectly suited to sustain the created order. The Master had painted, sculpted, written, and orchestrated wonder and majesty into his work. The Breath that hovered, the Wind of God, was powerful, perfect, and extremely imaginative.<sup>4</sup>

Adam didn't rise up into life to see a blueprint, to hear an explanation, or to find a matrix of complex codes. He awoke to find pictures and sounds and scents and tastes, to feel the warmth of the Breath and the cool of the breeze, and to have those sensations laid out in a progression of time so he could witness the interplay of creation. This Spirit that brooded had not painted by numbers or followed an instruction manual. God thought "outside the box" in everything he did. He didn't even have a box to think outside of.

*God thought "outside the box"  
in everything he did.*

The first couple, we are told, had been made in the image of God—the God whose Spirit hovered and breathed. They had been entrusted with a taste of the Creator's creativity, blessed with a reflection of his imagination. They would have the ability to create using the tools and raw materials God had given them, and there would be almost no limit to the ways they could express themselves.

Why did God create people in his image? Over the course of Scripture, the answer becomes obvious. We were made in the image of God in order to relate to him. We each have a mind, a will,



emotions, a voice, facial expressions, gestures—everything we need to communicate at a personal level. And, because the One we relate to is highly imaginative, we have the ability to do it creatively.

But human potential took a nasty fall when the first couple gave in to temptation, and we know the tragic result. The God who made them came to them in the Garden—in “the cool of the day,” most translations say, though it’s literally “the Breath of the evening,” in the Spirit who had hovered and exhaled life into the chaos—and they hid. They had no urge to communicate, to relate to their Creator as they were designed to do. Expression turned inward as they suppressed themselves in hiding.

Creativity took an ugly turn after that. We read of the son of a murderer who became the father of “all those who play the lyre and pipe.” Another son of the same murderer was the father of those who forge bronze and iron.<sup>5</sup> And for millennia, the creative breath of humanity sang music to false gods, crafted hand-carved idols, and designed offensive atrocities like the tower of Babel in an attempt to become divine. Human ingenuity and expression didn’t cease; it just got really, really twisted.

*Human ingenuity and expression didn't  
cease; it just got really, really twisted.*

We get a glimpse of restoration much later when God led his people out of Egypt and into the wilderness. He gave specific instructions to Moses for making the ark of the covenant and the other articles of worship to be used in the tabernacle. And for only the second time since time began, the God of Israel filled a human being directly with his Spirit—that fertile Wind of creativity that

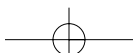


once hovered over the deep. Who was it? An artist. Bezalel, or *Btsal'el*, meaning “under the shadow of God.” His name is derived from a root word that implies not just shade, but a shadow that *hovers*.

God breathed into Bezalel and (by implication) Oholiab, skilled craftsmen, so they could make a work of art.<sup>6</sup> The New Testament tells us that this work of art—actually a collection of works of art, as the tabernacle included multiple elements—was a copy and shadow of heavenly things.<sup>7</sup> It is exhibit A in the argument that God values physical expressions of invisible realities. Many centuries later, he would incarnate his Son—not just an expression of the invisible, but an embodiment of the eternal One. But the tabernacle in the wilderness reflected the courts of heaven and pointed to the coming of the Son. God commissioned this work of art because inward truths are to be expressed outwardly.

That’s a major statement from the Lord of a now dark and defiled creation. Centuries, even millennia, had passed since the last time he breathed into humanity at the dawning of creation, when a mound of dust was filled with life. Now, at the moment when a covenant of worship was established with a chosen people, he breathed again. Two wood- and metalworkers were gifted with divine creativity. They would craft a highly symbolic picture that would point to redemption, a re-genesis, a new humanity free to express itself to its Creator. Once again, this time spiritually, chaos was being called to order.

So God commissioned these two artists, and flesh was again filled with divine Breath. The box they made, the ark of the covenant, also reflected the pattern: a spiritual reality expressed in created materials. This intersection of God and humanity would be a model of things to come. The mingling of minds and emotions between the eternal and the temporal, the Creator and created,



would continue to produce pictures, symbols, sounds of worship, smells of sacrifice, graphic images in prophecies and parables, and much, much more. And none of it—absolutely none of it—would fit a formula.

## A MULTIMEDIA GOD

God is not a formula. That should be obvious to us, though religious instincts have always tried to make him one. But if his varying modes of expression weren't clear to us before the incarnation, they certainly should be now. God showed us plainly how he communicates.

Long ago, this Creator of the universe clothed himself in human flesh and walked our dusty roads. He also ate our food, wore our clothes, lived in our towns, talked to our ancestors, felt our emotions, and experienced all the pain our nervous systems can experience. He lived a thoroughly human life.

*Long ago, this Creator of the universe  
clothed himself in human flesh and  
walked our dusty roads.*

This wasn't the first time our Creator communicated with us, of course. He spoke to our father Abraham in the form of physical messengers; he spoke to Moses in the form of a desert brush fire that didn't destroy the brush; he showed his face in a daytime cloud and a nighttime fire; his voice thundered from a mountain; his angels sent audible instructions to his servants; and his Spirit, his Breath, inspired prophets, priests, and kings to preach, write, and sing.

But when he clothed himself in flesh and walked among us, his communication got much more tangible to a much larger audience.



He gave us concrete examples. We can learn a lot from how the God-man expressed himself to others. His words and actions tell us much about how our Creator interacts with us.

One of the first things we learn about his communication style is that it was extremely varied. Take his healing of the blind, for example. On some occasions, he spoke words of power and authority, and the blind regained their sight.<sup>8</sup> On other occasions, he simply touched them and they were healed.<sup>9</sup> And sometimes he combined spit and dirt and the touch of his hands to restore sight.<sup>10</sup> One such healing even included a bath in the pool of Siloam before blindness left.<sup>11</sup> In this series of nearly identical issues, Jesus expressed himself differently almost every time. He did not relate to people using a formula.

In fact, almost nothing in Jesus' ministry fit a formula. Sometimes he taught with straightforward preaching; other times he used obscure parables. He responded immediately to the faith of one Gentile<sup>12</sup> and played really hard to get with another.<sup>13</sup> On many occasions he was very vocal toward the authorities who opposed him,<sup>14</sup> but at history's most critical moment was absolutely silent toward them.<sup>15</sup> He often waited for people to come to him before helping them; other times, he approached them even when they didn't seem interested.

Throughout the pages of the Gospels, we see a Savior who is simultaneously accessible and elusive, public and private, vocal and silent, complex and simple, profound and plain, never likely to say exactly the same thing to the same people twice. And the ways he communicated ranged from the obvious, like straightforward speech, to the enigmatic, like drawing in the sand, cooking fish on the shore, prophesying in pictures, preaching in parables, cursing a fig tree, dipping his bread with a traitor, walking on water, calming





a storm, being illuminated on a mountain, hearing a voice out of heaven, receiving a descending Dove, and eating a somber meal with eternal significance—to name but a few. None of these actions were just routines of the day, the activities that get us from one place to another and accomplish the tasks we need to get done. They were the first-century version of a multimedia event involving sights, sounds, smells, tastes, and touch. They demonstrated a wide range of creative expression. If Jesus had written a book titled *A Savior's Guide to Effective Communication*, it would have no conclusion. It would be open-ended, because he kept varying his style.

His Father has been no less creative throughout the centuries of human existence—and before, for that matter. We don't know all the amazing creatures of heaven, though we're given glimpses in Scripture of living beings with wings, four faces, multiple body shapes, and dazzling light or glorious colors. But we do know of the creativity of God's visible creation: majestic mountains and waterfalls, unfathomable seas, breathtaking shorelines, colorful landscapes, intricate ecosystems, delicate flowers, elaborately designed insects, stunningly beautiful people, and so much more.

But those are just the visual aspects that seem most obvious to us. God has also filled this world with music-making creatures, roaring rapids, the angry thunder of a black sky, and the rhythmic waves of the sea, and he's given us ears that can tune in to these aural wonders. He has created aromas both pleasant and repulsive—and with divinely orchestrated consistency, the pleasant scents lead us to beauty, and the repulsive ones warn of us danger. He has given us textures and temperatures that can make us feel warm and fuzzy, cold and lonely, tired and sore, loved and accepted, and overwhelmed with ecstasy. And the tastes...well, try visiting the array of ethnic restaurants in nearly every major city in the world, and you'll



never run out of wonderfully intriguing flavors to sample. The expressions of God in the physical world are uncountable.

His expression in spiritual matters is no less diverse, though we pick up on his voice and actions much less easily there. Even so, we can read about them in our Bibles if we haven't experienced them ourselves. We've already mentioned the rainbow that made a promise to Noah, the burning bush, the thunderous voice, and the glory cloud by day and the pillar of fire by night. Add to that the fire that fell from heaven on Elijah's altar, the aroma of burnt sacrifices and incense in the tabernacle and temple, the blood and bitter herbs of the Passover, the sulfurous smell of judgment, the simple tastes of the supper portraying redemption, and on and on and on.

*According to Scripture, God is vocal,  
visual, tactile, and in every other way  
sensory in his expression.*

The obvious truth is that God, according to Scripture, is vocal, visual, tactile, and in every other way sensory in his expression. He is a creative communicator from Genesis to Revelation. That's easy to see in events like the Exodus and the path to the Promised Land, the worship in the temple, and the cross and resurrection of Jesus, as well as in the graphically visual books of Daniel, Ezekiel, and Revelation. But the imaginativeness of God's expression is discernible everywhere in Scripture, not to mention everywhere in our day-to-day routines, if we're sensitive enough to notice. The libraries of the world couldn't contain all the descriptions of his creativity, and we would never have time to read all those descriptions anyway. But why read about them in the first place? Look around. His personality has a pretty wide range.



## AN EMOTIONAL GOD

Where does all this creativity come from? God didn't just invent senses and a full range of emotions. He has them. We know this because he describes himself this way in Scripture. Clearly spelled out on the pages of your Bible is a God who loves passionately, burns with jealousy for those he loves, gets angry, hates all manner of sin, has deep compassion for his people, rejoices with singing, celebrates the return of his prodigals, and accomplishes his will with zeal. God's description of himself conveys an intensity of feeling beyond compare.

That sounds too human for most people; it seems suspiciously like a God made in our own image. We don't understand how he who is not surprised by anything can have swells of feeling that correspond with changing circumstances. He seems in Scripture to react to the events of history and the hearts of human beings. That portrayal makes him awfully vulnerable, not worthy of the omniscience and omnipotence Scripture ascribes to him elsewhere.

So we theologize these emotions out of God, telling ourselves that he describes himself this way so we can understand him on our terms. But if he is describing himself in emotional terms without actually feeling those emotions, he's not helping us understand him; he's guilty of false advertising. The God of truth is portraying himself in a way that isn't true. That's not possible.

No, God's emotions are true and very real. Despite our theologies, the "human" aspects of God didn't originate with us. God has humanlike senses and a full range of emotions not because we've made him in our image; *we* have God-like senses and emotions because he made us in *his* image. As humanistic students of religion, we've reversed the cause and effect, as though we were the beginning and God's feelings were our invention. But finding similarity



between the human and the divine isn't as idolatrous as we often make it out to be. In the Bible, God makes the connection himself.

God's creativity springs out of this truth. As a sentient, emotional being, he is very expressive. The diversity of symbols, signs, smells, sounds, and speech in the Bible are evidence of a Being who has to convey his feelings. We who are made in his image can understand that; we have an inner compulsion to express who we are and how we feel. And we exist in a world like ours because God has the same compulsion. Unexpressed emotions are unsatisfying emotions. They have to be let out.

God's urge to share his feelings with us isn't limited to the Bible. He did not stop conveying his thoughts to us when the canon closed. Are we really to believe that after the first century this expressive Deity, filled with passion, love, and resolve, was content to confine his communication to words on a printed page? Not a chance. He still speaks, and he's still creative in the way he does it.

## MONOCHROME TALK WITH A MULTICOLOR GOD

But this is a book about prayer, isn't it? So why are we spending so much time on God's communication with us rather than ours with him? For one thing, listening to God is a huge part of prayer. For another, if we don't understand how he speaks, we can't understand how he hears.

When we don't understand the creativity of God's expression or the emotional fount from which it springs, our prayers get reduced to the spiritual equivalent of a long-distance telephone conversation. We close off our eyes, ears, noses, mouths, and nerve endings from the constant flow of thoughts and feelings coming to us from our



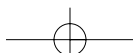
Creator. Instead, we define his mode of communication in terms of quasi-monastic spirituality, or whatever other preconceived principles of piety our minds have constructed. We're like someone who sits in a symphony hall wearing earphones, because we're sure that if God speaks, it's going to be through the channels we've already tuned to, or like someone who visits the art museum and spends most of the time reading the guidebook rather than viewing the masterpieces. God becomes a monophonic recording or a black-and-white exhibit, and while we listen for words and watch for signs, he gushes with the full majesty of his imagination. In the process, we miss a lot.

*How we perceive God will dictate  
how we communicate with him.*

How we perceive God will dictate how we communicate with him. That's why it's important to recognize the multifaceted ways he has expressed himself to (and through) his creation, including us. Before we can pray the way we were meant to, we have to understand the way he communicates. We have to get a glimpse of the Technicolor, surround-sound God who comes to us in total sensory experience. Only then can our prayers connect clearly with the One who made us.

## LOST IN LEVITICUS

Pick up any used Bible—even one pored over by a long-faithful saint—and you'll probably find groups of pages less worn than the others. The cleanest pages will likely begin near the end of Exodus and extend through most of Deuteronomy.



It's no mystery why even earnest Bible students skim over this section of Scripture. It's a labyrinth of obscure prescriptions for rituals and righteousness. It speaks of precise measurements and materials for a tabernacle no longer used; of seemingly endless sacrifices for more occasions than we'll ever encounter; of unpleasant specifics on sores and bodily fluids; and of unspeakable immoral behaviors, unfamiliar dietary restrictions, and inapplicable military censuses. We may begin Genesis with zeal, but zeal turns to determined obedience soon after Exodus 20.

I remember many attempts as a teenager and young adult to read the Bible all the way through. I always began where one should begin, which means I got a good grasp of creation, the patriarchs, and Cecil B. DeMille's most famous script. But the Law beyond the Ten Commandments always boggled my mind.

It's not that I didn't want to understand. I just couldn't. By the time I got into the warp and woof of leprous garments, I was hopelessly lost. I was far removed from the cultural context, and any commentary I found was much too weighty for a guy reared in a sound-bite generation. This portion of God's Word remained inaccessible. Forever inaccessible, it seemed.

But several years ago, I recommitted to reading through all of God's Word again and again. Biographies of spiritual giants of bygone eras reminded me that the Bible was much more understandable in pre-television times. Why? Because understanding the Bible is a matter of spending time in it—reading it, meditating on it, soaking it in, even picturing the events and imagining yourself an eyewitness to them. A fifteen-minute time slot between the sitcom and the baseball game may be enough to catch up on the headlines, but it's not enough to learn the mind of God.



*Understanding the Bible  
is a matter of spending time in it.*

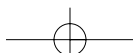
So I decided to learn, not by studying word by word, but by imagining thought by thought and event by event. I followed the example of an old missionary I'd read about who spent much time in the Word. He would read each book seven times before moving on. He felt that seven readings was the minimum number by which he could expect to begin to grasp it.

I didn't imitate him exactly, but I followed the principle. And, amazingly, here's what I found: I still didn't understand Leviticus.

Not the outcome you expected, is it? And though it sounds terribly anticlimactic, I kept reading, and a funny thing happened on the way to the Promised Land.

Sometime during a reread of that strange legal document, I began to smell the smell of sacrifice. The vision of a constant stream of blood flowing from the altar began to impact me. The aroma of incense, the sound of bleating, and the hazy air rising from burning flesh filled my disturbed heart. The busy rituals of preparation seemed to say to me over and over again that there once was a vast, tragic rift between me and my God, and there are two things I can never, ever take casually: my sin and his holiness.

The winds of the wilderness and its annoying dust came to symbolize elements of my current environment. The stress of Israel's constant moving yet never arriving explained a lot to me about the human experience. I began to identify with the wandering; it became my story, and the God who guided the wandering with that mysterious cloud and pillar of fire became my God in a new way. He suddenly seemed more frightening yet more familiar, majestic yet

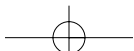


merciful, transcendent yet intensely personal, just as he should have seemed all along.

I also came face-to-face with the trauma of fallenness and the crisis of God's presence. I began to understand the weight of this human condition, the drastic distance we had driven ourselves from that pleasant walk in the first Garden. I was reminded that God doesn't just say of our rebellion: "That's okay, I'll take care of it." It's a much bigger deal than that.

Most of all, I found my appreciation deepening for the One who fulfilled this Law, the One who became Israel on our behalf and forever completed this cumbersome covenant. The fact that God cared enough to set up a system for people to relate to him in truth and learn of his holiness—however complicated that system might be—excited me nearly as much as the fact that he satisfied the system himself in our stead. He told us the complex secret for relating to him and then became the complex secret himself, which allowed us to relate to him simply as a Person. He handles the complexity, and we desperately trust him for that. I love that kind of law.

No, I still don't understand all there is to know about Leviticus—or any other part of God's Word, for that matter—and I probably never will, no matter how many commentaries I read. But I feel its weight. I'm certain that every measurement, every material, and every sacrifice is highly symbolic of eternal truths in heavenly places,<sup>16</sup> somehow pointing to the ministry and the cross of Christ. I suspect that some of the Law is perceptible only to the ancient Hebrew mind, and I'm pretty sure that parts of it make sense only in the high courts of heaven.<sup>17</sup> We'll be given further insight into those parts one day when we're allowed to walk the halls of those courts. For now, some legal and Levitical issues remain shrouded in mystery.





I'm okay with that. God never asked my finite little brain to master eternal realities by intellectually dissecting and explaining them. He'd rather I embrace him than decipher him. In a radical departure from my past tendencies, I'm now comfortable with his omniscience and my lack of it. I don't have to explain everything.

*God would rather I embrace him  
than decipher him.*

All I know is that somehow as I repeatedly read those mysterious sections of Scripture—and not simply read them, but incorporated into the reading all the sights and smells and sounds implied therein—Leviticus and its obscure companion books came alive. I saw illustrations that have stuck with me. Suddenly, the wisdom of the God of Israel was more profound and majestic than I thought. The depth of the Old Testament shed light on the New. The plan of salvation grew more mysterious and yet more simple. The grace of our Savior became more precious and more worthy of my worship. And certain pages of my Bible are much more worn than they used to be.

To me, this experiment proved that God's communication is more of a spiritual sensory experience than a cognitive process. The alternative to my approach to Leviticus would have been to study the text for syntax and semantics and glean intellectual ideas about the nature of God—something akin to reading a biography of Leonardo da Vinci and describing his personality. But what do we really know about Leonardo if we haven't seen his work? Not much, or at least not much that would actually help us feel a connection with him. Descriptions aren't very personal.

God could have just spoken descriptively of himself rather than



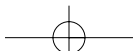
being a character in the biographies of his people. He could have given us Scriptures that list an eightfold path or a twelve-step process or a legal code independent of historical context. And we could have come up with our rules and principles from that even more easily than we have from Scripture as it really is.

But clearly God prefers to interact with us at a more personal level. And like any person, he has a multitude of media at his disposal. I found in Leviticus and beyond that his Word was more than his words, that there were snapshots, scents, and soundtracks imbedded in those pages. The Bible, history, circumstances, nature, and the community of faith can become sensory experiences.

## BEYOND FORMULAS

When I lived overseas, I did everything I could to immerse myself in the culture. I studied the language, ate at places few tourists had ever seen, bought clothes at local shops, and adopted gestures and postures that fitted the environment. Why? Because in all my training and preparation, two principles had been drilled into me: (1) effective communication travels through common bonds, and (2) immersion is the key to establishing common bonds.

When “the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us,”<sup>18</sup> God immersed himself in our culture. He spoke our language. But the common bond doesn’t end there; we are given new life so we can become citizens of heaven rather than citizens of a fallen world. He adapted to our culture in order to bring us into his. In a sense, the purpose of Scripture is to immerse us in the culture of God, and the Breath that he blows into the redeemed establishes our new citizenship. We become God-filled humans as dramatically as the dust of Eden became a God-filled human.



*In a sense, the purpose of Scripture is to immerse us in the culture of God.*

As people filled with the Breath of God, we need to learn his language. We need to let ourselves be stretched into the customs and values of heaven, and we can communicate only by expressing a common bond with the Creator. And the only way to do that is to learn that our old formulas don't translate into this new environment. In fact, when it comes to creative expression, none do.

God is not a formula, and I'm glad. An unimaginative builder never would have made the world we live in or hovered over its chaos and rearranged it for beauty. He never would have shaped a pile of dust for a multitextured, multidimensional relationship and breathed the warm Breath of life into it. He would have made a mechanical world, filled it with androids, and set it all in motion. Any variation from programming would be called a problem, not a nice surprise.

Instead, God picked up a heavenly palette and painted this universe in its colors. He sculpted living beings, some of them in his own image, and the Wind of heaven animated them. And for that to mean something—for living beings to be able to relate to him—we had to reflect his personality. We had to be designed for creativity.

