

A woman stands on a beach, seen from behind, holding a dark umbrella with a yellow scalloped edge. She is looking out at the ocean under a dramatic, cloudy sky with a sunset or sunrise glow. The overall mood is contemplative and serene.

# P Prayers *for* Difficult Times

Conversations with God  
about Things Often Left Unsaid

HELEN REICHERT LAMBIN

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## INTRODUCTION

# Starting from Where We Are

Full disclosure here. I'll admit I don't pray nearly often enough, or consistently enough, or with enough focus. I tend to pray in fits and starts—particularly in fits, as when I'm having one about something. It is when life becomes more problem-shadowed that I am prompted to pray. It's not so much that I pray *for* something (although certainly I do that too), but rather it's a matter of my seeking *to* talk to Someone. Someone who is both one of us, but more, much more; Someone I trust and who understands and accepts me beyond comprehension; Someone who cares beyond human caring; Someone who is there, for me, even if nothing apparently changes—at least immediately—because of it.

People have been praying across centuries and across continents. They do it in words and in silence, in song and in art. They do it alone and as a community, at the happiest of times and at the most difficult of times. They do it because they were taught to, because it was a tradition in their family or tribe, and above all because they wanted and needed to do *something*. And what they have done, and still do, is pray.

The cave paintings at Lascaux, France, some 17,000 years old, could indicate a form of prayer for good hunting for food and a sign of respect for the animals that would become the food. Utensils and decorations buried with loved ones point to belief in a journey beyond—an act of hope and faith, conscious or unconscious, we still practice today. The Hebrew psalms, three thousand years old, are perhaps one of the best-known forms of ancient prayer. And yet reading them today can bridge millennia: prayers of love, grief, fear,

joy, and thanksgiving; prayers for protection and forgiveness; and yes, prayers for destruction of enemies. (As far as the latter, as they say on TV occasionally, “Do not try this at home.”)

Prayer has been defined in various ways. As I use here, it simply means talking with (whether out loud or silently) and waiting to listen to God (however you imagine the divine transcendent reality or mystery that transcends our rational selves), or perhaps it means just listening, without words of our own but receptive to whatever comes to us. But in both cases it is a conscious effort to “lift the mind and heart” to God, as it says in the Catholic catechism of my youth.

But prayer is a two-way conversation. There is Someone else there when we do it. In my case it is the God of the Christian faith, handed down to me from my family. But for others it is something else. There are different paths. Whatever God is, “it” is big enough to overcome our human brain’s lack of comprehension and imagination. So, go ahead and pray in your own way and in your own tradition and take anything from this book that is helpful to you and leave the rest.

Sometimes it can be difficult to get “there” with prayer, wherever your “there” is. For that, scriptures and other holy writings from the various religious traditions can be a good jumping off place. Call it a leap of faith if you prefer. It can mean reading methodically or just reading along until something speaks to you: a chapter, a paragraph, a verse. Sometimes the spiritual reading inspires the prayer. Other times the prayer comes first and then we look for insight from others.

What amazes me in searching for the right words in the Bible is how often I can find ones that mirror what I’m feeling, what I’m thinking, what I’m agonizing over. Here are people who lived so many generations before me, in very different times and very different cultures, in distant places I’ve never seen and probably never will. And yet, back through the centuries, back across all those miles, is a bridge we can cross to share understanding of the God beyond understanding, the God who became part of human life.

Now let’s have a word about the words *God* and *Lord*. When I am praying, I am not speaking theologically. I am calling out to the Almighty from the

depths of my soul. What comes out of my mouth is both "God" and "Lord." So if you don't use either of those two words, substitute your own.

At the end of each of my prayers in this book, I have added a short quote from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson, a Presbyterian minister who has translated the entire Bible from the original ancient texts into contemporary American English. You may find this jarring at first, but if you give it a chance you will find it often makes familiar passages of the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures fresh and accessible to you.

At the end of each chapter, you will be invited to write your own prayer, in your own words and from your own starting point, about your own difficult times. The point is, prayer has to begin where you are. The concept isn't original with me, of course. It's been said often, but it is always surprising for me to rediscover. And so these are my prayers for my difficult times, which I share with you with some trepidation but in the hope that they might help you find your own prayers for yours.

*Helen Reichert Lambin*  
*Chicago, Illinois*



PART ONE

Prayers for  
Difficulty in Praying

# TIMES OF DIFFICULTY IN PRAYER

The purposes of prayer are sometimes summarized as adoration, thanksgiving, oblation (offering up), contrition, and petition—or other words to that effect. Petition always comes last on this list, as if we’re trying to sneak it in so maybe God won’t notice. But asking God for something (even if it is only the word “help”) is part of every personal prayer I pray and encouraged in group worship in the prayers for the community and others in need. The question that arises is: What is the purpose of the prayers for others and ourselves? If someone is alone or friendless, is God really going to say, “Too bad, you don’t get healed, employed, loved, saved?” I asked that question of Fr. Carl Dehne, SJ, a retired theologian, teacher, preacher, spiritual director, and nursing home chaplain, as we walked along a street in St. Louis one day. His spontaneous answer was that petitioning God is the “divinization of the pray-er.” That is, through asking God for something we are motivated and supported to share in God’s work. I was so intrigued by the answer I that I simply stood in the middle of the sidewalk, trying to grasp it. Suddenly there was a huge clap of thunder and lightning flashed across the sky. Now that’s what I call punctuation.

## ✠ Prayer for When You Can’t Pray

Lord of Listening, how can I ask you to help me pray when I don’t know how to pray any longer? It’s like going in circles, since the act of asking for help in praying itself involves prayer. Last year I could pray like clockwork. Tic, tic, tic and I’m into the rhythm. Well, all right. It wasn’t all that smooth and easy. But I could still do it well, at least most of the time. And I actually *liked* doing it. But now it’s as though my capacity for prayer has somehow leaked away while I wasn’t looking. Or while I wasn’t praying. So I guess I have to leave it up to you, All Loving God. From my mouth to your ear. Now, what’s that you’re saying?

*How gold is treated like dirt, the finest gold thrown out with the garbage, priceless jewels scattered all over, jewels loose in the gutters. (Lamentations 4:1)*

## ❁ Spilled Words

Lord of Prayer, my words do not roll off my tongue with grace and poetry. There are those who can do so with poetry, and their words endure. Like the psalmists. Mine spill from my heart. They leak from the cracks and fault-lines created by sometimes breaking. Big and small. Here and there. So hear me, God of Wisdom, and help me listen to you. And, yes, allow me to remember that part of that listening is to keep up my part of the conversation—in my actions, in my words, but in your grace.

*Receive and experience the amazing grace of the Master, Jesus Christ, deep, deep within yourselves. (Philippians 4:23)*

## ❁ Mostly Prayer

I'd like to pray more often than I do, God of Irony. But then come the distractions, like a herd of cats: things I'm worried about, excited about, mad about, glad about, forgot about; shopping lists, text messages to be returned, the car alarm down the street; or simply side trips of thought. With all that trouble and bubble, my words and thoughts turn to babble. So how do I quiet my mind and heart? Here you are, THE Transcendent Being who invites me into your company anytime I want, yet I can't focus. What emerges from me is a kind of Mostly Prayer, mingled with a lot of Muddled Me. I don't think I'm going to make it soon into Real or Pure Prayer. So if you'll settle for what I've got to offer, Approachable Lord, I'll keep on trying.

*If you seek God, your God, you'll be able to find him  
if you're serious, looking for him with your whole heart and soul.  
(Deuteronomy 4:29)*



# TIMES OF ATTITUDE

*Attitude* is a rather elastic word. It can be positive, meaning something like energy and confidence: “Let’s have some attitude.” It can be negative as in: “I don’t like your attitude.” (“And I don’t like yours either.”) It can be neutral or, rather, generic—meaning what the speaker wants it to mean or thinks it means. I see attitude as a kind of acted-out perspective. It is that which shows up in what I say or do and how I do—or don’t—do it. It is my attitude that affects other people. And it is attitude that draws me closer to or farther from God.

## ❁ Stiffened Spines, Not Necks

God of Strength and Gentleness, there are times, many times, when I am called to be flexible. There are times when I am called to lean into the prevailing winds. This is not one of those times. This is one when I need to stand firm, to stiffen my spine—and yet not become stiff-necked in the process, head turned away from your face. And I don’t know if I am up to it, Lord of Acceptance. How am I to do this on my own? Or rather, how can we do this together? Help me to act with wisdom, courage, and honor. Remind me always that if I turn to you, you will be there with me, to sustain me with your divine grace.

*Be brave. Be strong. Don't give up.*

*Expect GOD to get here soon. (Psalm 31:24)*

## ❧ Other People's Attitudes

Sometimes, Listening Lord, I get really annoyed with other people's attitudes. Not so much their actions, but their outlook. The one grows out of the other, doesn't it? And I think: How can they not see clearly what needs to be done? How can they not recognize the path to get there? How do we get them to listen? And maybe, harder still, how do I learn to listen to them? Because it's remotely possible that they don't like my attitudes and actions very well either. Teacher God, your Son, when he was among us, worked with such an ordinary, yet extraordinary in many ways, group of disciples. Guide me to work wisely and lovingly with both the ordinary and the extraordinary attitudes in my life.

*Were you listening in when God planned all this? Do you think you're the only one who knows anything? (Job 15:8)*

## ❧ (Make) Room at the Top

God of Power and Humble Service, you give and welcome all our gifts. On those days when I'm feeling well supplied with a good attitude, and enjoying it, help me to remember to be grateful and, equally, graceful. For the moment, I may be sitting on top of the world—well, at least with a glimpse of the summit. But *your* summit isn't a narrow promontory. Rather, it's a vast plain or, better, a beautiful meadow where there is ample room for all. If necessary, remind me (gently, if you please) not to overdo it, but to leave space for others, their feelings and their concerns, and, yes, their attitudes and their gifts.

*His sacred mountain, breathtaking in its heights—  
earth's joy. (Psalm 48:2)*



# TIMES OF DOUBT

There are people who never have any doubts about their faith. They have rock-bottom conviction and it stays solid. No major fissures. No high magnitude quakes. I'm not one of them. Sometimes I see my flame of faith burns brightly, giving both warmth and light. Sometimes it flickers and wavers like the candle I've carried in Easter Vigil processions. No matter how I try to shield it—cupping my hand, hiding it behind taller people, I'm afraid any moment it will go out. So what then? Possible plans: walk on in darkness; get back the light from someone else along the way; share my light with someone else along the way.

## ❖ Gift and/or Grace

I didn't achieve it. I didn't acquire it. I probably sometimes don't even recognize it, God of Faith. I would say that it was a gift. Except that a gift is generally something you can do with what you want. And I think maybe this gift comes with some kind of user's guide. And there is another question. A gift often springs from love—but not always. Sometimes someone feels it is owed. But just what would it be that you owe me, Giving Lord? So maybe it's more like a grace. Or maybe it is gift and grace. Or maybe I just shouldn't try to define it in words. Don't get me wrong. However this gift/grace showed up, I'm glad to receive it. So how do I say—or show—my thanks? Or is that maybe part of the user's guide?

*I'll give you a new heart, put a new spirit in you.  
I'll remove the stone heart from your body  
and replace it with a heart that's God-willed, not self-willed.  
I'll put my Spirit in you and make it possible for you to do  
what I tell you and live by my commands. (Ezekiel 36:26)*

## ✿ Spirit and Breath

What would I do without faith, God Hidden and Revealed? Whatever would I do? I have questioned it. Ignored it. Leaned on it. Played silly games with it. And taken it for granted like the air I breathe. When I think of being without faith, I feel...suffocated, as if I am at high altitude where the air is so thin that I gasp for breath. I think I'm suddenly beginning to understand, just barely, why your Spirit is called "the breath of life." I know I asked this before, and I know I'll need to ask it again...next year, next month, later today. But please, Faithful Lord, teach me how to nurture and care for the breath of faith.

*God formed Man out of dirt from the ground  
and blew into his nostrils the breath of life.  
The Man came alive—a living soul! (Genesis 2:7)*

## ✿ Big Questions

We can't prove faith, Lord of No Proof. Or, for that matter, we can't really understand it or thoroughly explain it. That may have bothered me once, but not anymore. I don't really understand electricity, much less the Internet. Some physicist, God of the Universe, maybe a friend of yours (and maybe Richard Feynman), said: "If you think you understand quantum mechanics, you don't understand quantum mechanics. Maybe that's the same way with faith. So how can I expect to fully comprehend a transcendent God? The question I'm trying to figure out these days is how to live my faith in this world. Because that's the part that can be really hard.

*So let's do it—full of belief, confident that we're presentable inside and out. Let's keep a firm grip on the promises that keep us going. He always keeps his word. Let's see how inventive we can be in encouraging love and helping out, not avoiding worshiping together as some do but spurring each other on, especially as we see the big Day approaching. (Hebrews 10:22-25)*



## About the Author



Helen Reichert Lambin has been writing practical books on scripture, theology, grief, and prayer for over thirty years for ACTA Publications.

She is especially known for her best-selling book *The Death of a Husband*, which broke new ground for books on grief because of its honesty, transparency, and insight into the realities of widowhood.

Her most recent books include *Prayers for Sleepless Nights* and *Constructing a New Normal*. She is presently working on a new book on the death of a sibling or close friend or relative.

Now in her eighties, Helen lives in Chicago, where she enjoys her children, granddaughter, and grandpets. Because of her many tattoos (all done since she turned seventy), Helen is known in the local media as “the tattooed grandma of Edgewater.”

MESSINESS ANGER  
DOUBT FRUSTRATION  
GUILT ABANDONMENT  
BITTERNESS LOSS SELFISHNESS  
DISAPPOINTMENT ABSENCE  
MISTAKES HOPE  
DEMENTIA  
REMEMBRANCE EXHAUSTION  
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