

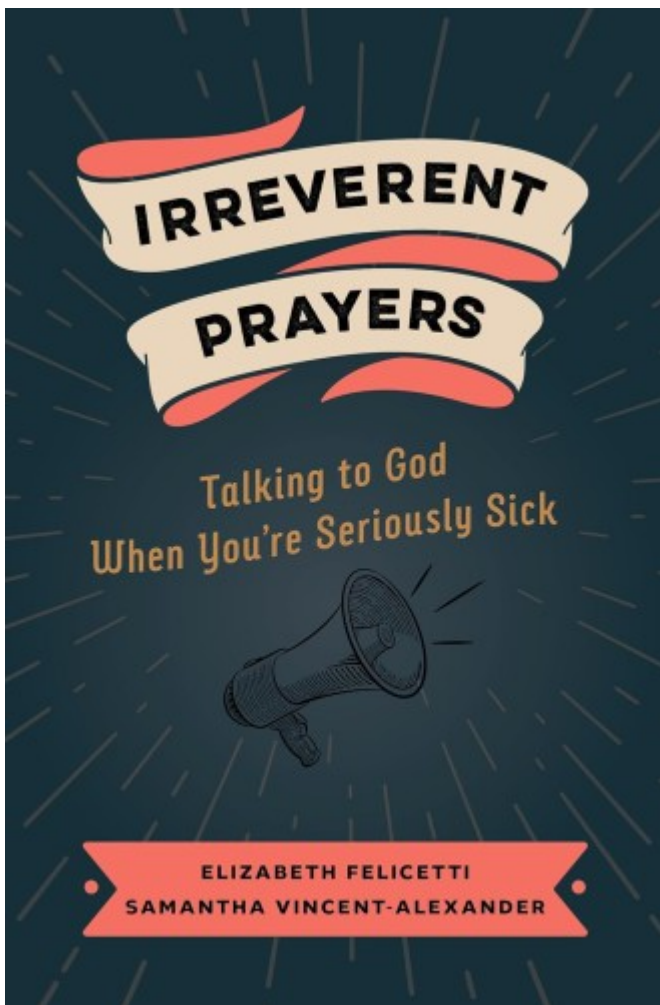
Dear God, you can do better

Two Episcopal priests tell God exactly how they feel about being seriously ill.

by [LaVonne Neff](#) in the [October 2024](#) issue

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In Review



Irreverent Prayers

Talking to God When You're Seriously Sick

By Elizabeth Felicetti and Samantha Vincent-Alexander

Eerdmans

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RW-REPLACE-TOKEN

A few days after having surgery for cancer, I imbibed *Irreverent Prayers* in great, refreshing gulps. I wept, I laughed, I felt entirely understood—and I wished I could give the book to all pastors, chaplains, health-care workers, caregivers, spouses, and friends of seriously sick people. Sympathy is easy, though not always helpful. This book provides a deep dive into empathy.

The authors are Episcopal priests who were close friends for years before each of them experienced serious illness firsthand. Elizabeth Felicetti, who died in August, was diagnosed with breast cancer and then, three months later, lung cancer. Samantha Vincent-Alexander, infected with MRSA, hovered near death for six months. Despite repeated attempts, both found praying nearly impossible. The formal prayers in the Book of Common Prayer didn't help.

The only prayers that came close to reflecting their feelings were from the Psalms. Lament, curses, cries of abandonment—those raw emotions mirrored their own. “I thought you would appreciate my prayer this morning,” one of them texted the other. “God, I need to stay healthy because my husband shouldn't have to deal with that bullshit.” “We should write a book full of irreverent prayers,” the other responded: “Dear God: we don't care that you can draw out a leviathan with a fishhook—your response to Job sucks. You can do better.”

Felicetti and Vincent-Alexander's prayers are irreverent only if one's definition of *reverent* is addressing God in 17th-century English. Instead, they are heartfelt cries from believers who desperately want to sense God's presence and aren't afraid to tell God how they feel. The first prayer, “Variation of Psalm 22,” mirrors Jesus' cry on the cross: “My God who heals, why have you abandoned me?”

Some half of the prayers interact with biblical passages. Paul, for example, suggests that the Philippians concentrate on things that are pleasing and praiseworthy. OK, but not yet, prays the recently diagnosed person: “I want to be positive, but I need some anger first. Let me be angry. Let me not care if my anger scares other people.” Paul tells the Romans that suffering leads to endurance, character, and hope, but “my suffering isn't producing any endurance,” prays the person in pain. “I am okay skipping character, but I would really like to get to that hope part.”

Some prayers are cheeky: “Jesus, do you remember when you said to consider the lilies of the field? I want you to know that I have considered them now, and it’s not helping. It’s not helping at all.” Some are poignant: “Dear Jesus, who promised to send the Holy Spirit when you left this earth, where are you? I am lonely.” Some are cries from the depths of despair: “Oh God, . . . since my most recent bad news I have trouble doing anything, including praying to you. Let me be lifted on the prayers of others. Help me to see life and eternity through your eyes.” All are honest.

Interspersed with the prayers are thoughtful, deeply personal, and sometimes laugh-out-loud reflections on the authors’ own experiences of anxiety, illness, frustration, depression, and—yes—hope. For quick reference, the reflections and prayers are arranged in chapters according to need, from initial anxiety to relapse and the prospect of death, and each prayer has a descriptive title. Well-wishers and caregivers may want to look first at the chapter by that name, which includes such prayers as “Prayer for Patience for the People Wishing Me a Speedy Recovery,” “Prayer for My Tired Spouse,” and “A Plea for Jesus to Talk to My Doctor.” Scanning the table of contents, I immediately turned to “Prayer about This Chest Tube,” which ends: “Get this tube out of me, soon, and not because I died or because it fell out. Get it out and let it stay out.” “Amen,” I fervently echoed.

As much as I love this book, it isn’t for everyone who’s seriously ill. Some people are happy to pray as they always have, whether spontaneously or aided by formal prayers. Some use denial as a coping mechanism, and who’s to say they’re wrong? Even so, the authors understand that what a sick or injured person says may not reflect how she actually feels. “Holy Spirit, send me the strength to answer ‘how are you?’ honestly instead of feeling the need to comfort the questioner,” prays the person who is tired of keeping up appearances. “Please also make my questioners’ tongues heavy so that they don’t try to make me feel better but instead just hear me.”

I’m lucky, or perhaps blessed, at least for now. I’m doing fine, but I’m keeping this book handy in case I need it later. In the spirit of the book, I offer my own irreverent prayer: *Jesus, I appreciate the respite, but I’m not thanking you for it because that seems presumptuous when so many sick people aren’t getting any respite at all. Please at least encourage those who treat, visit, or love them to look at this book. Please, Lord, give the caregivers a double dose of empathy. Amen.*