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FAITH LIFTING  
PRAYERS

*A Celebration of Humanity*



# INTRODUCTION TO FAITH LIFTING PRAYERS BY AUTHOR GREGORY LANDSMAN

I lost something along the way...

I wasn't born hating the way I was. But during my first year at school I became aware that the way I looked was not right. I was beaten, rejected and spat on.

The pain of rejection literally tore at my soul.

I was a child of God; what right did anyone have to ridicule and abuse me for things that I could not change?

I was only six years old and desperate to understand why other children felt the need to do this and for the life of me I couldn't work it out. So, one afternoon I took all my clothes off, stood in front of the mirror and looked at myself from head to toe.

I stared hard until I could see the visible results of my six mixed bloodlines and what made me a physical misfit in other children's eyes.

All my differences seem to rise up and cut me into little pieces. For the first time I felt bitterness and anger in my heart. I hated everything that everyone else rejected, ridiculed and laughed at. Looking into my own eyes I saw that I hated myself.

In that awful moment I believed they were right and I was wrong. What was God thinking when he made me?

I was ugly and that became my truth.

But my story does not begin with the beatings and abuse, my choices, my addictions, or my career in the world of fashion and supermodels; it goes back to a Thursday afternoon when I took my first breath in the country of my parents.

Many people say that the country you are born in shapes your character. In my case it broke it down. I was born in South Africa, a beautiful place whose ugly Apartheid system ensured that I would be robbed from experiencing any form of self-acceptance. This system pumped out angry prejudice and gave me lessons that moulded my beliefs about which

physical features gave me value and made me acceptable in the eyes of others. From as early as I can remember I knew that the colour of my skin, the texture of my hair and the width of my nose would determine my quality of life and my freedom

At home my skin colour didn't matter, yet it defined everything beyond. I was learning the code of the black world and the white world and as a coloured boy, who was accepted by neither, I had to learn to fit in between.

In Johannesburg I was thrown into a schooling environment that was without doubt, the worst time of my life. I was constantly scared to death that my skin was the wrong colour, that my hair was too curly, my nose too broad and that I would be beaten because of my differences. Added to this was the terror of knowing that if I was beaten I could not defend myself against the bullies.

The boys at school saw my differences and punished me. I was like an alien who did not know how to talk like them, spit like them or kick dirt like them as they walked. I didn't know any of those things and more importantly, I did not want to know.

Being spat on and taunted, along with the fierce pleasure they got from torturing me with their insults, reminded me every day that I was a misfit. My differences were endless, and all I could do was try to survive when they descended on me in a group of five or more.

I tried to dodge the kicks, the fists and the vicious laughter that burst all around me. I was humiliated and beaten, my body bruised and dented, but beyond that I was terrified of letting my emotions out. My mind screamed, 'Do not let them see you cry.' I knew that if I shed one tear there would be no stopping the rest and I would never live it down. I had enough to live with; I didn't need any more names. To look strong, I battled the tears, pushing them down my throat even when I felt broken.

Every person's voice has a right to be heard. But I made a promise to myself to never let out any desperate sobs. Yet every day the urge to scream and cry out for help, to beg them to stop always rose in my mouth, but only for a moment. I would clench my jaw and keep my mouth shut. Not once did I ever cry out in front of them. I did not want them to think I was weak and so I never let them know that I was hurting.

And when the worst was over I would pick up my emotions along with any dignity I had left and walk home to my grandmother.

Back then I didn't know that being abused and spat on eats at the heart of a child's dignity and these kids fed on mine every day. I never really knew why they felt the need to do that.

At night I would sit on my bed in the dark and think, mostly about how to be stronger. I had to figure out how to be a better boy, but I did not know how to be anything other than what I was. Even then I knew that anything gentle or caring had nothing to do with being a man, and that I was not good enough in the eyes of so many in my life.

My sense of self suffered horribly and even today I can think of no deeper sadness than when we are asked to give up aspects of ourselves to prove our value. Nothing invalidates us more as children and adults than believing that we are not good enough. Nothing leaves us feeling more hopeless than when we know we cannot change aspects of ourselves that we believe are flawed. Nothing wrongs us more deeply than feeling judged, not only by others, but also by ourselves.

I suppose most of my lifelong insecurities were born in those days. Those children did the job of unbending my smile and breaking my self-belief. I was unaware at the time, but this is how I learnt to shame myself, to fill my body with hate and to know that cruelty lived in children.

But it was the self-hatred that came from feelings of shame, that I shoved so far down within my body that they unknowingly festered and rotted the root of goodness that makes us all human.

This stamped my life.

As I write this I feel the sadness of knowing that more often than not trying to look strong has nothing to do with strength, but everything to do with self-abuse. And as a child, rather than let my hurt, my tears or my rage out, I kept these emotions locked inside of my body until they broke me down.

My grandmother, or Ouma as I called her, was a deeply religious woman who encouraged me to talk to God. She would tell me, 'Only God knows.' But whatever he knew, he never shared with me. I did not understand his ways. I didn't know if he even existed. If he did, to me he was merciless.

Night after night we would kneel and pray together, 'Gentle Jesus meek and mild, look upon this little child,' but still every day I was beaten. My prayers got louder, yet nothing changed. I asked every night, 'Jesus where are you? Why don't you help me?' But I never heard from him. To me

Jesus was deaf. All of my prayers, in the face of my fear and sadness, had no meaning. I was so angry at being left alone to deal with my torture that eventually I stopped praying.

My body constantly ached from the stones that were thrown at me and in a strange way being beaten every day affirmed that I was no good and deserved what happened to me. I began to believe that this was the reason that God had abandoned me.

My childhood footsteps became heavier as I carried my wrongness into the world. I hated myself and it felt like I was fighting a losing battle to be a boy. I must admit it took me many years and many experiences to recognise that if I wanted to be happy, I had to fight for my right to be myself, as trying to be someone else just never seemed to work.

My relationship with God did not re-emerge for many years. In my twenties I had a health scare that terrified me. When the doctor told me we would have to wait three weeks for the results, there was a part of me that wanted to pray for my health, to be strong, to live a healthful, happy life, but throughout my life my attempts to reach God had failed again and again. It was my own fear that my prayers would once again go unanswered that stopped me from praying.

I realised that my life was void of any spirituality. I could hear Ouma always telling me, 'God is good,' yet I had lived Godless for most of my life. I had to believe that whatever had brought me to this point had done so to heal all of the hurt and damaged aspects of myself.

I had not been on talking terms with God since my childhood, but when I got my medical results, I wanted to scream with relief. Instead I did something that surprised me, I prayed. I knelt down and prayed to a God I had wondered about for most of my life. 'Thank you, God. Thank you for giving me another chance.' For the first time my prayers were not the empty words that I muttered as a child. In that truthful moment I experienced the power of prayer that came not from empty words, but from my heart. This started healing my anger towards God.

More of Ouma's wise words came flooding back to me. She said that we all have different paths, but that all paths lead us back to God. There was a truth in her words I had never felt before.

Carrying the shame of my childhood into adulthood meant there were bits of me that I liked, but not enough for me to live a happy life. Ouma insisted that God had plans for me, yet for so long I had a difficult time accepting that.

Maybe it was easier for me to abandon my spirituality, because the day I made myself wrong I had made God wrong. I wanted to live a full life, to open myself to life and make sense of my confusion. I wanted to heal the aches and find the courage to face my sorrows and shame; as something inside was whispering that I had everything to create the life and love I knew I deserved, but to find peace with God, I had to find peace within myself.

My life lessons taught me that I could not outrun my insecurities and no matter what physical changes I made on the outside, nothing had changed on the inside. I was still a broken child walking around in an adult body.

The true irony of my life is that I have spent much of it in the fashion and beauty industry, in some of the most physically focused environments on the planet.

Yet it was through this polarised experience that I realised that I was no happier when I was accepted physically than when I wasn't.

At my lowest point, when I could run no further and had nowhere to turn, I turned inward, and for the first time faced my fear of having never been enough.

At different stages in my life I wouldn't have believed this, but I now know that the only reason I lacked belief in God as I grew up was because I lost belief in myself, my life and my ability to love. God didn't abandon me as a child, he had guided me to learn and understand beauty in real terms.

True beauty is more than a defined set of physical characteristics. It is faith lifting and expressed by each of us in the way we think, the way we feel, the way we live and the way we love.

It was through this journey that I came to know that there is beauty in every one of us, not just some of us.

Discovering this truth is a personal journey that we all make. And it is a lifelong one filled with moments of joy, sadness, tragedy and triumph.

For me spirituality is the freedom to love, honour and respect all aspects of who we are, all people and our lives. As regardless of our religious alignment, when we connect to the beauty within ourselves, we not only become spiritual beings, but beautiful beings.

If my years on this earth have taught me anything it is that it makes no difference where we come from, what we look like, where we live or what we do; as people, we are all worthy of celebrating our innate goodness as human beings and the vulnerability that comes with the physical body and the human spirit.

I called this book Faith Lifting Prayers, a celebration of humanity, because from my personal experience, when we combine faith with acceptance of our differences, the beauty of what makes us special and individual ignites naturally.

Knowing this inner truth helped turn my life around and I began to feel the goodness of God and the goodness of who I am.

Every prayer comes from my heart and is an affirmation that...

I believe in the equality of beauty  
That no one is better than who we are  
And in the same breath no one is less  
In this truth lies our hope, our freedom  
And our strength to live a good life

Gregory Landsman