

# **Psalms are ancient resource for a novel time: Part 1**

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How long? How long can this go on?

This question is often repeated in conversations I've had with family, friends, students and colleagues weighed down by the global pandemic.

Our professional lives have been disrupted because of working remotely, or because we are one of the millions who have lost jobs. Our social lives have been decimated, and our relationships with those in our own households are strained from being cooped up together for months under these stressful conditions.

The Centers for Disease Control has released data indicating the pandemic has [negatively affected the mental and/or behavioral health](#) of 40 percent of all those surveyed, with more than a quarter of young adults aged 18-24 having contemplated suicide because of COVID-19 and its seemingly endless shadow.

Our spiritual lives are not immune from COVID stressors. Most of us have not been to a "normal" church service for almost a year. Small groups have had to learn to strengthen their lives together via Zoom, while children shriek in the background and eyes glaze over from hours already spent on a screen. Some of our most senior church members grieve the realization they might never get a chance to go back to church without fear.

Pastoral staff agonize over how to be the body of Christ with social distancing, capacity limits and the responsibility not to put congregants at undue risk, while facing harsh criticism no matter what they decide.

While we ask, “How long?” in response to a new coronavirus, the question is an old one that echoes throughout the book of Psalms. For thousands of years, this “prayerbook of the Bible” has given voice to many of the emotions with which we currently struggle.

A few big ideas about the Psalms can help us embrace more fully this gift of Scripture as a resource for healing and resilience.

## **1. Foundationally, the Psalter is God teaching us how we *can* and *should* pray.**

Psalms is a collection of songs and prayers. God has transformed these human words to God into God’s words to humanity—into sacred Scripture. That means God is using this ancient collection of prayers to teach us how to pray.

I often tell my students the Psalter is “the original Lord’s Prayer.” The very structure of the book of Psalms signals its pedagogical function. The five-book division of the Psalms echoes the five books of Moses that gave instruction on how to live as God’s people. Psalm 1 is a “*torah* psalm,” or a psalm about God’s instruction. It establishes all the following psalms as part of God’s instruction.

If we are to take seriously the authority Scripture bears, then we need to take seriously the ways God is teaching us to pray in the Psalms, even the ways of praying that make us uncomfortable.

## **2. God teaches us to be brutally honest**

# about our emotional and spiritual state.

The Trauma Healing Institute, which partners with ministries around the globe to help bring healing to those suffering from various forms of trauma, has produced a free resource titled "[Healing from the Distress of the COVID-19 Crisis](#)." Though not intended to be exhaustive, this resource identifies five feelings the pandemic stress is causing—helplessness, anger, fear, loss and isolation.

In just the opening four verses of Psalm 13, the psalmist screams out to the heavens all of these emotions.

*How long will you forget me, Lord? Forever?*

*How long will you hide your face from me?*

*How long will I be left to my own wits,*

*agony filling my heart? Daily?*

*How long will my enemy keep defeating me?*

*Look at me!*

*Answer me, Lord my God!*

*Restore sight to my eyes!*

*Otherwise, I'll sleep the sleep of death,*

*and my enemy will say, "I won!"*

*My foes will rejoice over my downfall (Psalm 14:1-4, CEB).*

The initial fourfold repetition of "how long" (vv. 1-2) echoes the question many are asking these days and suggests deep pain has moved beyond eloquence. The desperate cry for rescue (v. 3a) comes from one who is helpless and incapable of managing all that's going on around him.

The repetition and harsh demands reflect anger at the God who inexplicably lets the pain continue and fear that God truly will abandon

him. The psalmist's pleas for God to restore his sight (v. 3b) imply loss.

The entire lament implies a deep sense of physical, social and spiritual isolation.

The psalmist doesn't pull any punches. He names what he is experiencing, and he feels like it's God's fault it's all happening. While we may feel uncomfortable acknowledging our helplessness, anger, fear, loss and isolation, naming our experience is critically important for healing.

"The first step to recovery is admitting you have a problem" is cliché because it's true. The Psalms give us permission to own our darkest moments fully, to curse enemies, to blame God, and to articulate our despair in our prayers.

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God is the great healer. One of the ways God brings healing is through the gifting and training of mental health professionals. I strongly encourage you to take advantage of these human resources. I also invite you to take comfort—and hopefully some healing—from the ancient words of the Psalter as we face the ongoing challenges of COVID-19.

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We will consider three more big ideas about the Psalms in [Part 2](#).

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