

Psalms are ancient resource for a novel time: Part 2

February 1, 2021

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, many want to know how long this can go on. In [Part 1](#), we focused on Psalm 13 and considered two big ideas about how the Psalms help us in these difficult times. Here, we consider three more big ideas.

3. Praying the Psalms can strengthen our relationships.

One of the first lessons Scripture teaches us is it isn't good for us to be alone. This truth is not only biblical; it's scientifically proven. Loneliness depresses our spirits and harms our bodies. Lonely people are at higher risk for heart disease, obesity, anxiety, weakened immune systems and cognitive decline.

This is part of why COVID is taking such a toll. We see it with children cut off from their friends and senior adults isolated in nursing home rooms. A key factor determining resilience in the face of adversity is the presence of relationships.

Psychologists today recognize what the psalmists knew thousands of years ago. As Christopher Cook and Nathan White note in their essay in *The Oxford Textbook of Public Mental Health*, talking regularly with God equips us to cope with and rebound from life's traumas.

Praying the Psalms strengthens our relationship with God. Prayer implies you think God can hear you, even if you feel like God's hiding God's face. It also implies you think God can do something about the problem.

When the need for social distancing imposes solitude on us for an indefinite length of time, the “communion of the saints” can become a literal Godsend. Praying the Psalms is a way to join together—albeit remotely—with the untold millions who have prayed and are praying these words. You are not alone in these thoughts; you are not alone in your prayers.

In her book *Living through Pain*, Kristin Swenson writes: “Reading [Psalms] ... is to discover that what may seem to be unbearably unprecedented suffering actually has company and sympathy in a shared human condition. Listening to these ancient poems may round off the cruel edge of loneliness that pain can bring.”

As we read Psalms, we are not just listening to ancient testimonies of suffering and celebration. We are joining our voice with the chorus.

I find particular comfort in remembering one of those choral voices is the incarnate Jesus—our high priest who can sympathize fully with our human experience (Hebrews 4:15). When we pray the Psalms, we are not alone.

4. Praying the Psalms reorients us.

The Psalms teach us to yell, curse and blame. They also teach us honest lament is the means by which we can—and ultimately should—move into genuine praise.

Psalm 13 begins with brutal honesty about the psalmist’s negative emotions, then turns to praise at verse 5, with no indication the psalmist’s situation has changed.

But I have trusted in your faithful love.

My heart will rejoice in your salvation.

Yes, I will sing to the Lord

because he has been good to me (Psalm 13:5-6, CEB).

The movement of the whole book of Psalms leads us in this reorienting turn.

Most of the psalms at the beginning of the Psalter are individual laments, shifting gradually to community praise toward the end of the book. Lament shouldn't be rushed—a few psalms never make it to praise—and lament never completely goes away. But the ultimate destination of prayer is praise.

Part of how the Psalms lead us to praise is by reminding us of God's character and past actions. Psalm 13:5-6 reminds us God is characterized by faithful love, goodness and salvation. Psalms about creation, God's wisdom, God's kingship, and how God delivered, provided and loved in the past all serve as reorienting reminders.

5. Praying the Psalms helps us tell and remember *our* story.

The Psalms give us the words to pray when we don't have words. Their reminders about God's character and work help us see how our experiences fit into the larger story of God and God's relationship with God's people. All of this means praying the Psalms helps us figure out how to tell our own story, how to make sense of who we are, and how to find our purpose in the midst of life's challenges.

Telling our story is not just cathartic. It's another key part of healing from trauma of any kind and building the resilience to survive whatever the world throws at us. The good news is, the more you tell your story, the more you strengthen your resilience.

The Psalter not only sets the example of telling our stories to ourselves and

to God, it also models sharing our stories with our communities. These ancient prayers are deeply personal and imminently relatable. For thousands of years, they have been sung and prayed as testimonies to the fact we are not alone, no matter how alone we feel.

Conclusion

In one of the great mysteries of inspiration and revelation, the words of those crying out to God have become God's words to us in the book of Psalms—a grammar for how to pray, a script for when we don't know what to say, and a reminder we are not alone in the struggles of life in the world.

As you pray the Psalms, consider what feelings they give you permission to feel, how they connect you to God and to others, the ways they reorient your perspective on your situation, and how they help you understand your story and how it fits within God's larger story.

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.

Rebecca Poe Hays is assistant professor of Christian Scriptures at Baylor University's Truett Theological Seminary. The views expressed are those solely of the author.