DATE: November 8th, 2026
TEXT: Psalm 70
THEME: Prayers of various kinds bring us to wholeness.
SUBJECT: Healing
TITLE: How Long, O Lord?

Main question: How shall we find healing from trauma?

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Prayer: Gracious and loving God, fill our minds with your Word and help us to be curious. Increase our love for one another, and inspire us with a commitment to create a transformed world, starting with ourselves. Amen.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was a German Lutheran pastor and a well-respected theologian. He was a founding member of the Confessing Church in Germany, a network of churches that was created to oppose Naziism when Hitler came to power in 1933. Bonhoeffer had come to the U.S. in 1930 to teach and study at Union Theological Seminary in New York. He felt that the academic rigor there was lacking, but he met several people who introduced him to the Gospel of Social Justice. As a result, he became very sensitive to injustices that racial and ethnic minorities experienced in the U.S. as well as the lack of interest and involvement of churches when it came to bringing about integration and racial healing. He returned to Germany after only a year, but that year was very formative in his life; in fact, it was his experience with black church leaders during that year that led him to oppose the rise of the Nazi regime in 1933. Over the next 10 years, he spoke out against totalitarianism in Germany, worked and taught in an underground network to train pastors in the Confessing Church movement, became a pacifist and refused military service. He was continuously monitored by Nazi officials and was ultimately arrested in 1943 for his "subversive" activities. He survived two years in prison before he was executed in 1945, just a few weeks before the prison camp was liberated.

A month after his arrest, Bonhoeffer wrote to his parents from prison: “I read the Psalms every day, as I have done for years; I know them and love them more than any other book” (Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison: The Enlarged Edition,* ed. Eberhard Bethge (Touchstone: New York, 1997), 40.) In the same letter, he wrote, “One of my predecessors here has scribbled over the cell door, ‘In 100 years it will all be over.’ That was his way of trying to counter the feeling that life spent here is a blank … ‘My time is in your hands’ (Psalm 31) is the Bible’s answer. But in the Bible there is also the question that threatens to dominate everything here: ‘How long, O Lord?’ (Psalm 13)” (Bonhoeffer, 39). Psalm 70 doesn’t explicitly ask that question, but you can hear it between the lines: “Hasten, O God, to save me; O Lord, come quickly to help me.” One could easily slip in the line from verse 1 of Psalm 13: “How long, O Lord?”

Bonhoeffer once famously said: “The only way to understand the Psalms is on your knees, the whole congregation praying the words of the Psalms with all its strength" (Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s Meditations on Psalms, ed. Edwin Robertson (Zondervan, 2005)). I wasn’t on my knees when Chris read Psalm 70 a short time ago. What does Bonhoeffer mean? Certainly one can <u>read</u> the Psalms, and perhaps even understand them, in any position. What’s up with the knees?

He’s talking about times when life is very hard, hard enough to drive us to our knees. When the rent is due and there isn’t enough money to pay it. When close relationships end through death, divorce, estrangement or memory decline. When we’re surrounded by people who feel joy while we feel pain. When depression sinks into our souls and there doesn’t seem to be a way out. Psalm 70 speaks to these circumstances, speaking the words that we feel and offering some comfort in the fact

that we're not the only ones who feel them. When we're metaphorically - or physically - on our knees, as Bonhoeffer certainly was many times during his imprisonment, there's a sense of solidarity with the psalmist who writes, "May those who seek my life be put to shame and confusion; may all who desire my ruin be turned back in disgrace." Whether "those" are actual people or circumstances and events, this psalm gives us language to lament as we cry out, "How long, O Lord?" It even asks God to punish "those," which doesn't seem very Christian. We're called to clothe ourselves with patience, compassion and forgiveness (Col. 3:12-13) and to think of others as better than ourselves (Phil. 2:3). But I'll be real: if someone were to seek my life I might well ask God to put them to shame and confusion. And if someone were to libel (verbal defamation) or slander (written) me, I might pray that God would turn them back in disgrace. I freely confess to you that I'm not a perfect Christian. While I'd also pray that God would bless those who seek my harm, I'd probably pepper those prayers with petitions to turn back those who slander me in shame - maybe not in those words, but I'd feel that. Psalm 70 offers Biblical precedent for expressing raw feelings that we may feel we shouldn't have, but which come up anyway - try as we may to rise above them. Giving voice to difficult feelings is one way to begin to heal. Speaking our feelings out loud to God gets them out in the open so that we can acknowledge them, examine them, reflect upon them and hopefully move beyond them. The alternative is not to acknowledge our outrage and to keep it locked away inside. That's the stuff of which trauma is made, and that is not the way to healing.

Author and therapist Resmaa Menakem talks about healing from trauma, particularly generational trauma. In his book, My Grandmother's Hands (M. Resmaa, *My Grandmother's Hands* (Central Recovery Press: 2017), he says that much of the trauma that we carry around with us has been passed down to us from generations of violent physical experiences borne by our ancestors. This accumulated trauma has not healed and is living in our bodies now. Menakem focuses primarily on three groups — European Americans, African Americans and police officers — and he connects behaviors found in each of these groups to the creation of race and racism over the past 500 years. He says that Medieval Europe was a brutal place where people inflicted great harm upon each other. When Europeans explored the world and eventually came to the Americas, they brought their unhealed trauma from all that harm with them. Rather than dealing with it in a healthy way, they created a culture of white-body supremacy that soothed their trauma; wherever they explored and settled, they, in turn, brutalized those whom they encountered. Their trauma-induced culture of white-body supremacy blew through Black bodies and native bodies on this continent that continue to live out in destructive ways for everyone involved. His attention to police culture, in particular, is based on the experience of many African Americans who experience the police, not as protectors of their bodies, but as violators of their bodies. This police culture has its origin in white-supremacy culture.

Psalm 70 cries out, "May those who seek my life be put to shame and confusion; may all who desire my ruin be turned back in disgrace." Perhaps this was a cry of unhealed trauma from the depths of the poet's soul, uttered from a body that was broken and desperately needed hope as it knelt upon on the floor of a jail cell, of a

run-down tenement, of a roofless alleyway that served as a temporary “home” or of a roofless soul that could not find comfort in grief. “Hasten, O God, to save me; O Lord, come quickly to help me.” How long, O Lord? Will you forget me forever?

Resmaa Menakem would say that healing from trauma involves recognizing, accepting, and moving through pain that remains lodged in the body. He offers ways to begin doing that in his counseling sessions and in his book through meditation that involves breathing, visualization and sensing the state of the body. Where might it feel tension? Where constricted? Perhaps an image makes it feel threatened. Perhaps another makes it feel relaxed. I’m not a therapist and this isn’t a therapy session, but I commend the book to you.

Getting back to Psalm 70, however, I continue to wonder what caused the poet to feel such grief. Did the writer ever work through the trauma — psychological or physical — that produced these words: “As for me, I am poor and needy; come quickly to me, O God. You are my help and my deliverer; Lord, do not delay” (Ps. 70:5)? We’ll never know — either the cause or the outcome. We only have evidence of someone in deep despair thousands of years ago. Though the words are old, however, the feelings are very familiar — very contemporary. Perhaps writing the words down offered some comfort to the original author. Preserving them, transcribing them and translating them down through the centuries have offered thousands of others comfort as well. This process of acknowledging pain — facing what we don’t want to face — is what Menakem calls *clean pain*. “By walking into that pain,” he says, “experiencing it fully, and moving through it, you metabolize it and put an end to it.” “Clean pain is about choosing integrity over fear. … When you come out the other side of this process, you will experience more than just relief. Your body will feel more settled and present. There will be a little more freedom in it and more room to move” (Menakem, 166).

The alternative is *dirty pain*: avoidance, blame, denial and generally dealing with pain from our most wounded places. This neither helps us nor anyone around us. (See other specific examples of ways that white supremacists deal with dirty pain on page 166.) I'll also mention that Menakem has a challenge for white progressives like me who seek to metabolize pain through a desire to fix problems right away or by taking all the energy in the room by freaking out or bursting into tears. That's my version of white fragility and it does no one any good. Better to cry out to God: How long, O Lord? "Hasten, O God, to save me; come quickly, Lord, to help me." Better to walk through the pain then to sidestep around it. Better to acknowledge it, recognize it and accept it so that I can move through it to the other side.

When we're in pain, it's natural to cry out, "How long, O Lord?" Shall we say, "In 100 years it will all be over?" This kind of response may offer a measure of comfort to some, and I won't say that that's not appropriate. I will say that healing from pain is a rough road no matter how we approach it. The psalmist gives us a model for acknowledging pain and, perhaps, that's a way to begin working through it. Resmaa Menakem provides a therapeutic way to recognize and process pain that lives in the body. Maybe all of this can be called prayer, and people of faith have turned to prayer for millennia, both to accompany action and to seek healing when meaningful action seems futile. Which path to take? How to identify a meaningful action? Reinhold Niebuhr offers some guidance here when he wrote this well-known prayer around the time that Bonhoeffer was visiting the U.S. in the early 1930s: "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, courage to change the things I can, and wisdom to know the difference." I pray that you may have that wisdom, and I pray that God may heal your distress and bring you to wholeness again.