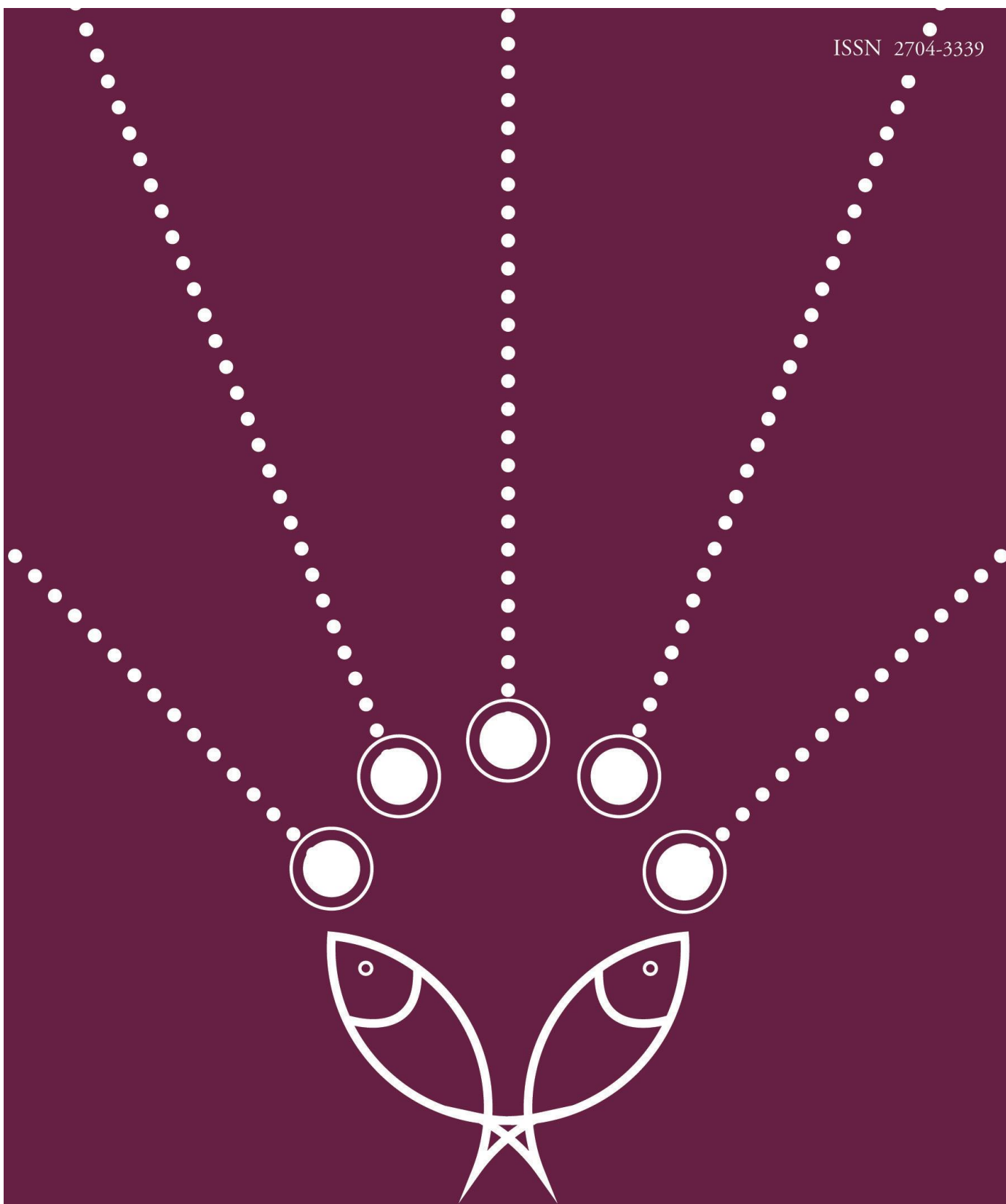


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Vol. 3, No. 1 (2021)

FRONT MATTER

Front Matter
(<https://ajol.ateneo.edu/apms/articles/533/6796>)

Editorial Notes
(<https://ajol.ateneo.edu/apms/articles/533/6797>)
E. Luc Mees, MDJ

ARTICLES

New Ecological Equilibrium: A Perspective for Our Long Conversion Journey
(<https://ajol.ateneo.edu/apms/articles/533/6798>) 1-12
P. Wiryo Priyatama, S.J.

Rebuilding from COVID-19: Pastoral Leadership Towards A New World
(<https://ajol.ateneo.edu/apms/articles/533/6799>) 13-23
Christina Kheng

Signs of Pandemic, Symbols of Hope: A Sketch of Pastoral Work in Liturgy
(<https://ajol.ateneo.edu/apms/articles/533/6800>) 24-40
Antonius Firmansyah, S.J.

Building Pastoral Capacity in the Post-Pandemic Era alongside of "Human Fraternity"
(<https://ajol.ateneo.edu/apms/articles/533/6801>) 41-55
Greg Soetomo, S.J.

Lamentation and Hope of University Students During the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Light of Psalm 73
(<https://ajol.ateneo.edu/apms/articles/533/6802>) 56-71
Nikolas Kristianto

Spiritual Life of the Christian Immigrant and Non-Immigrant Family
(<https://ajol.ateneo.edu/apms/articles/533/6803>) 72-89
Moses Mary Apreku

Preventive Measures Against the Sexual Abuse of Minors and Vulnerable Adults in Pastoral Ministry Today
(<https://ajol.ateneo.edu/apms/articles/533/6804>) 90-108
Nchumbonga George Lekelefac

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All

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(<https://ajol.ateneo.edu/apms/titles>)
- Author
(<https://ajol.ateneo.edu/apms/authors>)
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- Ethics Statement ()
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(<https://ajol.ateneo.edu/apms/page/contribute>)
- Online Submissions
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- Author Guidelines

LAMENTATION AND HOPE OF UNIVERSITY STUDENTS DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN THE LIGHT OF PSALM 73

Nikolas Kristiyanto

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic is challenging our faith and theology. Its impact is evident in our daily activities. For this reason, this article asks, “How widespread is the impact of COVID-19 on university students’ activities?” Then it tries to analyze that impact by using the structure of Psalm 73: (1) the *credo*, (2) lamentation, and (3) hope. It then provides a simple pastoral strategy to accompany the university students during this difficult time. This strategy involves all lecturers at every faculty in the university to redesign the teaching materials that can help students to reflect and to deepen their experiences during this difficult situation.

Introduction

COVID-19 has changed our world unexpectedly and dramatically. The immediate responses, at national and international levels, try to limit the spread of virus SARS-CoV-2. On the other hand, every person tries to get through this pandemic. They have their own difficulties and struggles, including the university students. For them, the impact of this pandemic is evident in their daily lives as students. There are 97% of respondents (university students) in this research who claim that they bring all their own lamentation and hope in their prayers. Moreover, based on the research of Bentzen,¹ the phenomena of worldwide searching for the word “prayer” on Google search engine intensively has increased during the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in March 2020. This behavior reflects the worldwide interests and actions in our real world.²

In March 2020, the share of Google searches for prayer surged to the highest level ever recorded, surpassing all other major events that otherwise call for prayer, such as Christmas, Easter, and Ramadan (Fig. 1. [a] and [b]). The World Health Organization declared the COVID-19 a pandemic on March 11, 2020. The level of prayer search shares in March 2020 was more than 50% higher than the average during February 2020. For comparison, the surge in Google searches for prayer was 1.3 times larger than the rise in searches for takeaway and amounted to 12% of the rise in Netflix searches or 26% the fall in searches for flights, which all saw massive changes globally, since most countries were in lock down and air traffic was shut down.³

-
1. Jeanet Sinding Bentzen, “In Crisis, We Pray: Religiosity and the Covid-19 Pandemic,” CEPR Discussion Papers 14824 (2020). Also available at https://www.economics.ku.dk/research/corona/Bentzen_religiosity_covid.pdf (accessed Dec. 19, 2020).
 2. Helen Susannah Moat et al., “Searching Choices: Quantifying Decision-Making Processes Using Search Engine Data,” *Topics in Cognitive Science* 8, no. 3 (2016): 685–96.; Christopher Y. Olivola, Helen Susannah Moat, and Tobias Preis, “Using Big Data to Map the Relationship Between Time Perspectives and Economic Outputs,” *Behavioral and Brain Sciences* 42 (2019); Robert L. Goldstone and Gary Lupyan, “Discovering Psychological Principles by Mining Naturally Occurring Data Sets,” *Topics in Cognitive Science* 8, no. 3 (2016): 548–68.; Patricia A. Cavazos-Rehg et al., “Monitoring of Non-Cigarette Tobacco Use Using Google Trends,” *Tobacco Control* 24, no. 3 (2015): 249–55.; Jeremy Ginsberg et al., “Detecting Influenza Epidemics Using Search Engine Query Data,” *Nature* 457 (2009): 1012–14.
 3. Bentzen, “In Crisis, We Pray,” 1–2 (Figs.1–2).

Figure 1. *Worldwide Google searches for “prayer” during the past 4 years*⁴

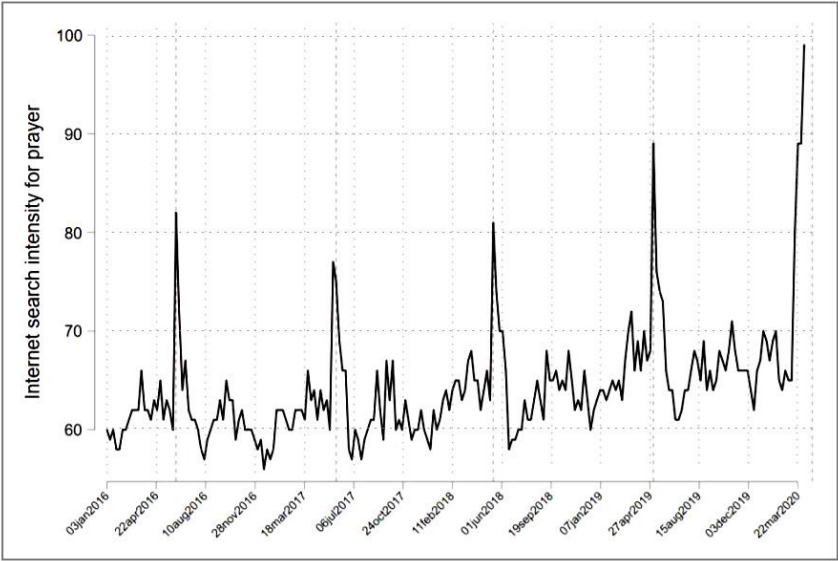
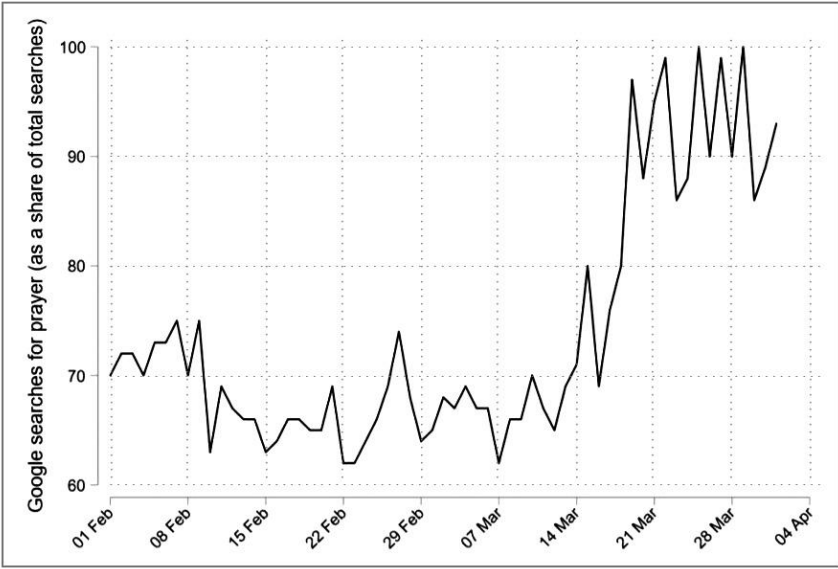


Figure 2. *Worldwide Google searches for “prayer” during Feb 1 to Apr 1 2020*⁵



4. Ibid., 2.

5. Ibid.

Furthermore, this critical situation also poses a challenge to our faith and theology: How can our faith and theology be capable to respond this “sign of our times” and to provide an analysis and meaning for it? For that reason, this article is a part of an effort to give meaning and an analysis to this difficult situation.

This article will focus on:

- (1) *Lamentation and hope of university students in this pandemic situation.* There are 92 students of Sanata Dharma University, Yogyakarta, Indonesia, who participated on this research. They come from various religious traditions in Indonesia. They share their own difficulties, hope, and struggles on this situation as a university student.⁶ Majority of them have to study from their hometown virtually. They came from 59 cities and 19 provinces in Indonesia.⁷
- (2) *Psalms 73.* This psalm will be read and analyzed as a tool to read the experiences of the students on this difficulty situation.
- (3) *Pastoral insights.* Based on these two points ([a] lamentation and hope of university students and [b] Psalm 73), we try to propose some pastoral insights to accompany university students on this pandemic situation.

Lamentation and Hope of University Students

Based on this research, there are some lamentations and hopes of Sanata Dharma University's students during this pandemic. This is the result:

The majority of lamentations of students are about (a) limited physical activities (21%), (b) difficulties to understand their study materials (because of online learning) (21%), and (c) difficulties to meet up and hang out with friends (12%). On the other hand, their hope is more general. They want (a) their situation to be a normal again (41%), (b) to have a better public health (18%), and (c) to do many things like before (11%). Moreover, no one of respondents mentions for “a better internet” on their list of hope during pandemic. This is so

6. “In Asia Pacific, inter-religious and ecumenical dialogue is a particularly important aspect of the Church's task to promote growth towards truth, harmony, and the positive transformation of society. Just as important is dialogue with culture, including communal beliefs, customs, traditions, and ways of thinking, being, relating, and working.” (Christina Kheng, “Critical Reflection and Pastoral Creativity: The Pilgrim Way of the People of God,” *Asia Pacific Mission Studies* 2, no.2 [2020]: 5.)

7. There are 34 provinces in Indonesia. In this research, the respondents come from 19 provinces. It means that they come from 55.8% of provinces in Indonesia.

surprising. On the list of their lamentation, there are 9% of respondents who mention the difficulties of internet for their study.

Generally, after analyzing this data, there is an important point that students can express their lamentations more details and specifics. But, when they had to express their hopes, it seems that the majority of students can only express their hopes (for the future) in general terms, and not specifically: they want (1) a normal situation again, (2) a better public health, (3) to do many things like before, and (4) to be a better person.

Figure 3: Lamentation of University Students During Pandemic

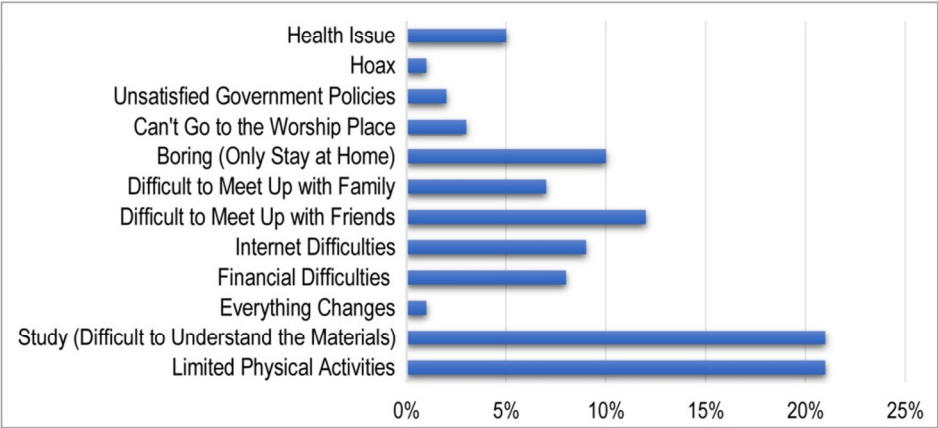
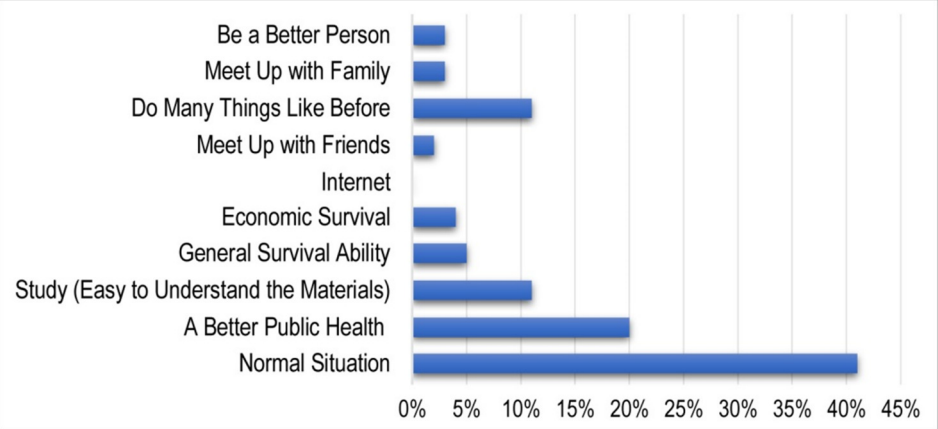
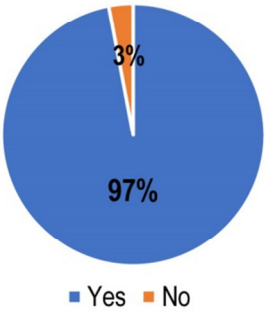


Figure 4: Hope of University Students During Pandemic



From 92 respondents, there are 97% respondents who bring their lamentation and hope in their daily prayers. Therefore, we can say in general that religious sensibility among the students is still high during this pandemic.

Figure 5: Do you bring your lamentation and hope on your daily prayers?

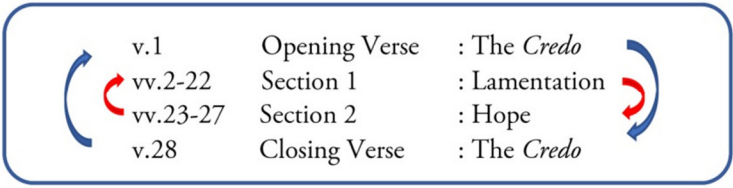


Psalm 73

Psalm 73 has a profound contribution to understand the enigmas of life.⁸ Walter Brueggemann recognized psalm 73 as a center and it has a crucial role for psalter as a canonical book:

In the canonical structuring of the Psalter, Psalm 73 stands at its center in a crucial role. Even if the Psalm is not literarily in the center, I propose that it is central theologically as well as canonically.⁹

Psalm 73 can be divided to be two big sections with an opening and closing verses:



8. Jiří Moskala, “Psalm 73—Its Structure and Theology: I Delight in God’s Goodness in Spite of Devastating Problems,” *Journal of the Adventist Theological Society* 27, no. 1–2 (2016): 154.

9. Walter Brueggemann, “Bounded by Obedience and Praise: The Psalms as Canon,” *JSOT* 50 (1991): 81. Cited by Moskala, “Psalm 73,” 155.

Text Psalm 73¹⁰

Opening Verse

¹ Psalm of Asaph

Truly, God is good to the pious;
 God is good to those who are pure in heart.

Lamentation

² But as for me, my feet almost stumbled;
 finding no foothold my steps slipped.

³ Because I was jealous of the boasters;
 I saw the prosperity of the impious folks.

⁴ For they have no worries
 their bodies are perfect and well nourished.

⁵ They are not acquainted with the hardships of ordinary humans;
 they are not affected by human struggles.

⁶ Therefore pride serves as their necklace;
 violence, the robe they wear.

⁷ Being well nourished their eyes protrude;
 they bathe in the imaginations of their hearts.

⁸ They speak evil from below;
 they talk oppression from on high.

⁹ They direct their mouths to heaven;
 their tongues walk the earth.

¹⁰ Therefore their followers return hither
 for they have abundant waters.

¹¹ They say: “How could God know?”
 “Is there knowledge with the Most High?”

¹² Look here, this is how the impious folks are —
 unperturbed till the end they increase their wealth.

¹³ Entirely in vain I kept my heart clean,
 withheld my hands from evil;

¹⁴ remained vigilant the whole day,

10. This is the translation from I. J. J. Spangenberg, “Psalm 73 and the Book of Qohelet,” *QTE* 29, no. 1 (2016): 156–58.

admonished myself morning after morning.
¹⁵ If I said; “I want to talk like this!”
 I would have been unfaithful to the circle of your children.
¹⁶ I reflected and tried to understand
 but it was burdensome in my eyes —
¹⁷ until I went into God’s sanctuary
 [and] understood what will happen to the impious.
¹⁸ Indeed, you put them on slippery ground;
 you let them fall down in ruins.
¹⁹ How suddenly they are destroyed;
 they die, they decay — a total waste!
²⁰ Like a dream when the Lord awakes;
 when you arise, you despise their image.
²¹ For when my heart was sore
 and my kidneys pained,
²² I was stupid and did not understand;
 I was like an animal with you.

Hope

²³ However, I was constantly near you;
 you grasped my right hand.
²⁴ You lead me by your counsel
 and afterwards will receive me with honor.
²⁵ Whom do I have in heaven [but you]?
 and I desire nothing else on earth.
²⁶ Even though my flesh and heart may decay;
 God is the rock of my heart, my portion — till the end.
²⁷ For those who are far from you shall perish;
 you silence all those who are unfaithful to you.

Closing Verse

²⁸ But as for me, God’s nearness is good to me;
 I have made YHWH my refuge —
 to proclaim all your works.

General Commentary on Psalm 73

This part will be divided to be three big sections:

1. The Psalm of Lamentation (vv.2–22)
2. The Psalm of Hope (vv.23–28)
3. The *Credo* (vv.1,28)

The Psalm of Lamentation (vv.2–22)

Psalm 73 has lamentation verses (vv.2–22). In the lament psalms, we can find the depths of the heart of God's people.¹¹

They had an idea of how life was supposed to be and how God was supposed to work in it. When life did not meet their expectations, and God was not responding as they thought he should, the people cried out to him.¹²

On the other hand, the psalm also demonstrates the process of moving from disorientation to orientation, from lamentation to hope.¹³ This psalm also describes the reality that Israelites had to face their sufferings before faith.¹⁴ Furthermore, in Psalm 73, we can find the collective experiences of Israelites on one side, and there is a very personal struggle of the psalmist on the other side.¹⁵

The wicked is described in Psalm 73 who seem to have many advantages in their life.¹⁶ On the other hand, the psalmist wants to say, "Where is the justice of God?" It can be read in the first section, the lamentation section (Ps 73:2–22). This section can be used to read the experiences of the students during this pandemic. There are 38% of the respondents who had felt at one moment that "There is no justice of God, I can't feel it." One of them said, "During this pandemic, someone can easily get what he wants without putting any effort, but

11. Lori Glenn, "Crying to the Lord: The Psalms of Lament," *Leaven* 4, no. 1, art. 7 (2012): 18.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 115.

14. Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentation*, FOTL 15 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 71.

15. Christine D. B. Jones, "The Psalms of Asaph: A Study of the Function of a Psalm Collection," dissertation (Waco, TX: Baylor University, 2009), 63.

16. Jones, "The Psalms of Asaph," 64.

I can't – I have to struggle for it. God is not fair.” It is not about “someone is wicked or not”, but “Where is the justice of God?” This is the important point for the psalmist and also for the students during this difficult time. For this reason, Psalm 73 can be used to read the experiences of students.

Moreover, before pandemic, they had many advantages in their life: (a) they could hang out with their friends, (b) there was offline learning at the university, (c) they could do many physical and outdoor activities, (d) they could go to the worship places, etc. They are so “jealous” with their past, before pandemic. Verses 3–5 can help them to express their feelings nowadays:

³ Because I was jealous [...]

I saw the prosperity [...]

⁴ For they have no worries
their bodies are perfect and well nourished.

⁵ They are not acquainted with the hardships of ordinary humans;
they are not affected by human struggles.

Now, (1) the students have worries for their bodies (health issues). (2) They are acquainted with the hardships of students, i.e., how to understand the materials better at home. (3) They are affected by human struggles, i.e., some of them have to struggle with financial difficulties. And they cried out to God as the psalmist (v.11):

¹¹ “How could God know?”

“Is there knowledge with the Most High?”

This verse (v.11) can be a climax of the distress of the psalmist. This verse does not deny the omniscience of God, but the psalmist tries to question the divine practical knowledge or God's interest in human affairs (cf. Ps 10:4,11,13).¹⁷

[...] at the heart of the psalm [73] is a person in distress, a person who is confused, a person who turns to God (for there is no one else to turn to) in his hopelessness even while questioning God's goodness.¹⁸

17. C. A. Briggs and E. G. Briggs, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (New York: C. Scribner's Sons), 144.

18. Glenn, “Crying to the Lord,” 19.

On the other hand, the interesting point is the opening verse on this psalm. Even, the psalmist is so frustrated about his situation at that time, he still begins his psalm with a simple *credo* that expressed “God is good” (v.1). In this point, we can find that in the difficult time, the psalmist still tries to trust in God. In other words, “God is still good”, even the psalmist is aware of the situation around him which is not so ideal for him. The *credo* is the core of the psalmist’s faith, even he is in a situation of distress.

The psalmist tries to be a realistic that the world is not as he wishes it would be. All the lamentation is described from verse 2 to 22.¹⁹ The psalmist writes 21 lamentation verses. It means 75% of this psalm – more than half of the verses – talks about lamentation. These lamentations do not eliminate the *credo*. Furthermore, lamenting is an act of deep faith, not an act of unfaith.²⁰

[...] Life was not always great. Life is disoriented and messy. Laments enter into life and into the pain. Facing the circumstances, events and situations that hurt us most is how we move to new life and joy. The one who laments may feel that God seems far off – “there,” but far off. Lamenting, therefore, allows God to come into our lives and to struggle with us. The lament psalms raise questions about God, his power and his relationship to his people.²¹

The Psalm of Hope (vv.23–28)



After lamenting his situation, the psalmist tries to reflect his life in the new perspective. He tries to feel the presence of God in the midst of *chaos* of his life. He finds a joyful feeling in simply being close to God. The word $\gamma\mu$ (“with you”) in v.23 communicates a sense of the here and now.²² Therefore, the hope is not only about *future*. It talks also about *present* – *here* and *now*.

19. I decided to put vv. 17–20 as a part of lamentation because “This is a counterimage to their ‘happiness’ lamented by the psalmist in vv. 4–12.” (Hossfeld, F. et.al., *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100, Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*, translation of: *Psalmen 51–100* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), 232.). Moreover, in vv. 21–22, the psalmist still lamented his situation that “his heart was grieved, his spirit embittered, and he was senseless and ignorant” regarding to the reality in vv.17–20.

20. Glenn, “Crying to the Lord,” 18.

21. Ibid., 18–19.



22. Spangenberg, “Psalm 73,” 164.

	A	^{23a} However, I was constantly near [with] you;	
	B	^{23b} you grasped my right hand.	
	B'	^{24a} You lead me by your counsel	
	A'	^{24b} and afterwards will receive me with honor.	

Furthermore, even the situation is messy and disoriented, the psalmist is constantly with God (cf. v.23a) and afterwards God will receive him with honor (cf. v.24b). The protection of God is shown by the image of (1) grasping hands (cf. v.23b) and (2) leading the psalmist by God's counsel (cf. v.25a). The psalmist is not alone; "God is always with him." This is a big consolation for the psalmist.

The hope of the students can be based on their practical faith – they still pray during this pandemic (97% respondents). They try to stay close to God. They believe that God will make everything normal again (41%). This belief keeps them surviving in this time of pandemic.

In the second part of the psalm of hope (vv.25–27), we can find that the psalmist tries to focus on the physical weakness, i.e., my flesh and heart may decay (v.26a). On the other side, God is described as his spiritual strength, i.e., God is the rock of my heart, my portion till the end (v.26b).

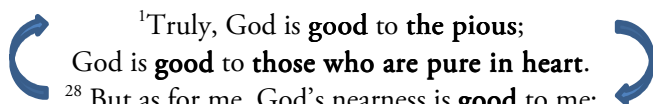
	A	^{25a} Whom do I have in heaven [but you]?	
	B	^{25b} and I desire nothing else on earth.	
	C	^{26a} Even though my flesh and heart may decay;	
	C'	^{26b} God is the rock of my heart, my portion — till the end.	
	B'	^{27a} For those who are far from you shall perish;	
	A'	^{27b} you silence all those who are unfaithful to you.	

The psalmist expresses his desire on earth only to God alone (cf. v.25b). And he knows that "for those who are far from God, they shall perish" (cf. v.27a). He depends on God. He puts his hope in God. Even, he believes that in heaven, there is no one he has but God alone (cf. v.25a). And for those who are unfaithful to God will be silenced (cf. v.27b). Being faithful to God is the foundation of his hope.

From this section, we can find that the psalmist has many lamentations to the situation around him (in detail and specific), but in hope, he backs to God to put all his desire in God alone (in general). It also can be found in lamentation and hope of our respondents which expressed their lamentation about their situation in details and specifics. On the other hand, they described their hopes in general terms.

The *Credo* (vv.1,28)

Many scholars already noted an *inclusion* in v.1 and v.28 by involving the word *bwj* (good).²³ It makes a formal and logical connection between the opening psalm and the psalm's end.²⁴


¹Truly, God is **good** to the pious;
 God is **good** to **those who are pure in heart**.
²⁸ But as for me, God's nearness is **good** to me;
I have made YHWH my refuge —
to proclaim all your works.

From this *inclusion* (vv.1,28), we can find that in v.1, the “good” does not have a specific explanation. In this case, the “good” is so general: *good* to the pious and to those who are pure in heart.²⁵ Furthermore, in v.28, the “good” has a function to clarify v.1²⁶: *First*, “good” (*bwj*) (v.1) means to be close to God (v.28); *second*, “the pious” and “those who are pure in heart” (v.1) means “those who have made YHWH their refuge – to proclaim all God’s works” (v.28).

Moreover, *yna* (ʾānī) (a pronoun independent, first person common singular) in the opening of v.28 is used as a “real emphasis.”²⁷ It can be translated as “I am” or “It is I.” Then, the word “*yna*” (ʾānī), in v.28, has also a function to clarify “the pious” and “to those who are pure in heart.” In other words, the psalmist tries to mention himself as “pious” and “pure in heart” – “That I am.” Finally, we can say that Psalm 73 is a faithful psalm to God that begins and ends by the *credo*. So, lamentation and hope – in the middle of the psalm – can be read as a content of the *credo* of the psalmist.

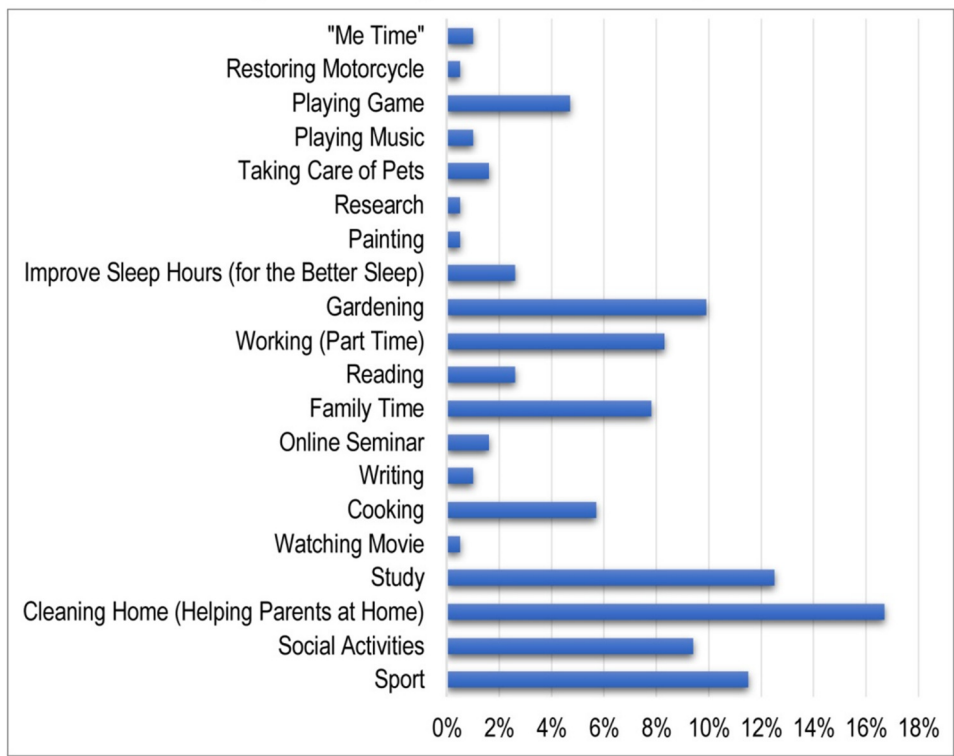
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23. Cf. J. Krašovec, *Antithetic Structure in Biblical Hebrew Poetry*, VTS 35 (Leiden: Brill, 1984), 43.; J.C. McCann Jr., “Psalm 73: A Microcosm of Old Testament Theology,” *The Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in Honor of Roland e. Murphy, O. Carm.* (eds. K.G. Hoglund, et al.) (JSOTSS 58; Sheffield: University of Sheffield, 1985), 250.; J. L. Mays, *Psalms: Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1994), 241.; K. Schaefer, *Berit Olam: Psalms* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 2001), 177.; L. Boadt, “The Use of ‘Panels’ in the Structure of Psalms 73–78,” *CBQ* 66 (2004): 539.
24. G. T. K. Wong, “Psalm 73 as Ring Composition,” *Biblica* 97, no. 1 (2016): 21.
25. “Heart,” in Psalm 73, is a key concept in this psalm. The word “heart” occurs six times in this short psalm (vv.1, 7, 13, 21, 26 [2]). The “heart” is the center of the intellect. (J. L. Crenshaw, *The Psalms: An Introduction* [Grand Rapids, MI: W. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2001], 115.)
26. Ibid.
27. Brown-Driver-Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994), 58 (in BibleWorks Version 10).

Pastoral Insights

Beside the lamentation and hope of the students, we can find also the *credo* from them: “God is good.” The *credo* is described by their daily prayer to God (97% of respondents). They still believe that “God is good during this pandemic.” Clarissa said, “I become more faithful to God during this pandemic. I spend more time in prayer.” Moreover, Karisma shared her experience with her friends, “We pray online together.” Another case with Patrisia, she has a new experience with her family during this pandemic: “We – as a family – pray together at home.” Even there is an explicit statement from Fairuz: “Pandemic is a good time to go back to God.” These are some expressions from the students related to their faithful life to God during pandemic.

This research also found 20 positive activities of students during this pandemic:

Figure 6: University Student's Activities during Pandemic



From this data, we can realize that students are so creative and they have many initiatives to do many things, e.g., “gardening.” They said, “Before pandemic, *gardening* never came to my mind, but now I like to do it.” Therefore, accompanying them during this pandemic, we need only to organize and to link them based on their activities, initiatives, and concerns. We don’t need to create many new activities for them. They can find their activities for themselves. Furthermore, our challenge is how to invite them to reflect and to deepen their activities and experiences during this pandemic to be more meaningful. In this case, we don’t need also to make a new online activity in campus, but we can collaborate with every lecturer at the faculty to use their daily online class and materials to reflect and to deepen students’ activities and experiences by linking them with the provided teaching materials. Then, all of these can be also used as a pastoral activity – accompanying the university students – during this pandemic and it can be a part of their curriculum of study.

Conclusion

The structure of Psalm 73 (the *credo*, lamentation, and hope) can be used to read the university students’ experiences during this pandemic. (1) They show their *credo* by their daily prayers that “God is good,” where (2) inside their prayers, there are lamentations and hopes during this time. However, (3) they are still trying to do many activities to get through this difficult situation. At least, there 20 positive activities that they are doing until now. (4) The pastoral strategy to accompany them in this pandemic situation can be collaborated with all lecturers at every faculty in the university by redesigning the provided teaching materials that can include the methodology to help students to reflect and to deepen their experiences and activities during this time. Finally, (5) we can say together with the psalmist, “God is good (v.1). God’s nearness is good to me; I have made YHWH my refuge²⁸ — to proclaim all your works²⁹ (v.28) [during this difficult time in our world today].”

28. “The basis for the psalmist’s trust lies in his conviction that God is good (v.1). The goodness of God guarantees a reward in heaven for those who are faithful to him.” (M. Dahood, *Psalms II: 51-100* [Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1968], 196.)

29. “[The psalmist] discerns the action of God to which he now joyfully and humbly testifies before the congregation by incorporating his own experience of God in the larger context of the whole redemptive work of God.” (A. Weiser, *The Psalms* [Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1962], 516.)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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