

**PART - II**  
**ON THE PSALMS**

## Law, Sin and Guilt in the Psalms

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We are at the threshold of the third millennium and it appears certain that in this new age the concept of sin and the concept of guilt will change. So predicts a well known author in his latest book.<sup>1</sup> At the end of three chapters dealing with this theme, he quotes the famous psychotherapist Albert Ellis:

The concept of sin is the direct and indirect cause of practically all mental disorders. The more sinful or guilty the person feels, the fewer the possibilities it will have to be happy, healthy or even law-abiding. The therapist's chief function, and his most important one, is to be able to help the patient to remove the last vestige of guilt in him.<sup>2</sup>

In all fairness both to the author and the psychotherapist one must concede that religion, especially the Judeo-Christian type, has indeed caused considerable damage in the lives of its followers by an undue exaggeration of the concept of sin and guilt. There can be no denial of this fact given the evidence of many who have suffered on account of this abuse. That having been said, still there lingers on in the mind a disconcerting question: Should we throw the baby out with the bath-water? Have sin and guilt no place whatsoever in the life of human beings? Do experiences of sin and guilt have only damaging functions?

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1 Carlos G. Valles, S.J., *Happy New Century! The Millennium of Hope*, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand, 1999, p. 78.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 120.

It is these questions and concerns that motivated me to look into the psalms, especially the seven so called 'penitential psalms'<sup>3</sup> where the psalmist acknowledges explicitly his sin and guilt. Can we sing these psalms in the new age? Do these psalms have the potential to heal or are they potentially injurious to psychological health?

## I

An interpretation and use of these psalms, for that matter any other psalm in the book of psalms, must take into account the fact that none of these 150 psalms has an absolutely isolated and independent existence. They may have had such an existence before becoming a part of the present collection. In the present collection, which has its own peculiar canonical stamp, every psalm enters into a web of relationship with the other psalms. An individual psalm is like a pericope in the narrative section of the Bible. One understands the full import of a psalm when it is considered from the overall perspective of the whole book of psalms. The book of psalms, properly so called, has its own internal unity and coherence. Obviously, there is no narrative sequence guaranteeing such a unity. But there is definitely an emotional sequence bearing on a coherent theology which guarantees a unity to the entire book.

The book of psalms has its own specific spirituality, its own unique faith perspective. We need to take note of such a faith stance. Some scholars in recent times have sketched a 'theology of the psalms', organizing the faith of the psalmist according to the key ideas which run through the psalms like a thread (*leitmotif*).<sup>4</sup> One such basic *leitmotif* is the 'Presence of the Lord'. This presence of the Lord is qualified. The one who is present is 'the Lord who reigns'. This is a root metaphor, because "whatever else is said in the psalms about God and God's way with world and human beings is rooted in the meaning and truth of this metaphor. It is systemic for psalmic language."<sup>5</sup> The sovereign presence of the Lord is discerned in two patterns of activity: the creative activity of the Lord in bringing forth the cosmos and the world, and his saving activity in shaping the movement of history.<sup>6</sup>

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3 Pss 6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130 and 143.

4 Roland E. Murphy, "The Faith of the Psalmist," in *Interpretation* (1988) pp. 229-39.

5 James L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns: A Theological Handbook to the Psalms*, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1994, p. 6.

The faith of the psalmist, however, is not naive so as to take for granted that this presence of the Lord is always ready of access. The psalmist is only too painfully aware that the presence of the Lord often is veiled, hidden (cf. Pss 13:1; 22:1, etc.). It is indeed an 'elusive presence'.<sup>7</sup> God is indeed near the psalmist, but hiding behind an impenetrable mask. It is this very hiding which discloses an intrinsic quality of divinity - the freedom of God. The presence of God cannot be controlled nor manipulated. Thus, respect for the mystery of God (allowing God be God) becomes intrinsic to the faith of Israel.

Let us look further into the nuances of the relationship between the psalmist and his God. The psalmist dares to address this Sovereign Presence (even if it is veiled and hidden at times) as a 'Thou'. When we look at the 'Thou-speech' in the psalms we learn a number of things.<sup>8</sup> First, it underscores a concrete and specific relationship between an 'I' (the psalmist) and a 'Thou' (God). Second, it acknowledges and affirms the 'Thou' as the grounding of the 'I' of the psalmist. Third, the psalmist's address to this 'Thou' is never the first form of address, but always a response, a response to the love already poured out into our hearts (cf. 1 Jn. 4:10-11). Fourth, the 'Thou' who is addressed in the psalms is one who can be trusted. The 'Thou' is trusted as merciful, gracious and steadfast love. Fifth, in the face of this absolute and jealous 'Thou' there can be no other alternative reliance and alliances.

The sixth point needs perhaps to be emphasized and elaborated. The nearness of this 'Thou' is a commandment. The presence of God is an imperative, a summons to obedience, a call to surrender. This is an important insight which captures the heart of biblical spirituality, specifically the spirituality of the psalms. Ps 119:151 brings out this by juxtaposing God's nearness and the commandments in the typical Hebrew parallelism,

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6 Ibid., p. 7.

7 Samuel Terrien, *The Elusive Presence: Towards a New Biblical Theology*, Religious Perspectives Vol. 26, Harper & Row Publishers, San Francisco, 1978, pp. 278-337.

8 Walter Brueggemann, *The Creative Word: Canon as a Model for Biblical Education*, Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1988, pp. 92-117.

But, Thou art near O Lord,  
and all thy commandments are true.<sup>9</sup>

Thus, if commandment is the mode of God's presence, then obedience is the mode of human knowledge of God, of human experience of God. And so it is not an exaggeration to say that obedience is the ontological character of being human. 'To be is to obey', said the great Jewish thinker Abraham Heschel.<sup>10</sup> No wonder Paul considers obedience as the core issue both in the case of the human predicament and in the case of human salvation (see Rom 5:19; also 1 Cor 15:21). But this obedience must not be seen as a condition for God's love, as a *condition* for communion with God, but as a *consequence* and a response to that love and communion. Obedience is the dynamic harmony which flows from the habit of living in the Sovereign Presence.<sup>11</sup>

Thus the heart of the theology of the psalms is the Benevolent Presence of the Sovereign Lord in creation and in history which can be trusted, which is also a summons to obedience.

## II

Some similar 'theological intentionality' is discovered when one studies the final redactional and canonical structure of the entire book of psalms, paying special attention to the beginning, the end and the movement of the material in between.<sup>12</sup>

Ps 1 is placed in the beginning intentionally as a preface to the entire collection. This psalm presupposes a morally coherent world, which operates according to a reliable pattern of deeds leading to

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9 This in turn is the poetic expression of the Deuteronomic spirit revealed in Deut 4:7-8. See Brueggemann's discussion of this central idea in *The Creative Word*, pp. 114-18. See also Terrien, *The Elusive Presence*, for a similar insight, p. 314.

10 Quoted by Brueggemann in *The Creative Word*, p. 102. The longer quotation in the same page is more elaborate: "Do I exist as a human being? My answer is: 'I am commanded, therefore I am.' There is a built-in sense of indebtedness in the consciousness of man, an awareness of owing gratitude, of being called upon at certain moments to reciprocate, to answer, to live in a way that is compatible with the grandeur and mystery of living."

11 See Terrien, *op. cit.*, pp. 287-288, 325. This is an important point for understanding the penitential psalms and will be taken up later.

12 This is exactly what W. Brueggemann does in an excellent and elaborate article, "Bounded by Obedience and Praise: The Psalms as Canon," *JSOT*, 50 (1991) pp. 63-92. I give here only a brief personalized summary of that paper.

consequences. Accordingly it presents, through a simple contrast, trustworthy outcomes of a life of obedient faith and its opposite. Standing at the beginning of the psalter, this psalm intends that all the psalms that follow should be read through the prism of this *torah-obedience*.<sup>13</sup> [The second psalm, as the other half of the book's introduction, serves corresponding and complementary functions. It identifies 'Kingship of the Lord' as a central and recurrent topic of the book and it states a thematic opposition, as in Ps 1, the contrast between the reign of the Lord and reign of the kings and rulers of the nations.<sup>14</sup>]

Ps 150 seems to have been placed at the end of the book also intentionally as a conclusion to the entire collection. In fact, the last six psalms (Pss 145-150) form a kind of 'cascade of praise' culminating in enthusiastic and unconditional praise. (Unlike other psalms of praise, Ps 150 contains no reason nor motivation for praise.) This concluding psalm expresses a lyrical self-abandonment, an utter yielding of self, without self-interest, calculation or any hidden agenda.

The two psalms (Ps 1 and Ps 150) make two central theological statements respectively. God's demands are non-negotiable, and God's fidelity is reliable. And correspondingly the life of Israel begins in obedience and ends in praise. Thus, the parameters of the collection of psalms which reflects the life of Israel are obedience and praise.

Problems begin to crop and tension mounts after crossing the threshold of the book. The theological affirmations of Ps 1 appear to be naive and not adequate to lived experience. As we move into the middle of the psalter we encounter psalms of lament which reveal a world of enraged suffering and protest against the simplistic faith of Ps 1. Ps 25 is representative of such laments. The psalmist experiences the failure of the steadfast love of God, the covenant fidelity that guarantees moral coherence. The heart of the psalmist indeed wants to believe Ps 1 but his actual experience is a reluctant witness against it. It raises questions about God's fidelity, about the moral coherence

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13 This psalm in fact indicates the function of the entire book of psalms as torah of the Lord. Although the psalms are actually prayers, human words addressed to God, they also function as Word from God to his people giving instruction, teaching and direction. The redactional position of Ps 1 had made this hermeneutical shift possible. See J.L. Mays, *op. cit.* p. 121. See also Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture*, SCM Press, London, 1979, p. 513.

14 J.L. Mays, *op. cit.*, p. 122.

of God's world and the relevance of obedience. And along with the questions comes a petition, a deep yearning for more of God's steadfast love than is now visible.

The candour of lament (as expressed in Ps 25) moves gradually to a gratitude rooted in confidence that God's steadfast love will indeed prevail. We find such confidence in Ps 103, a representative of another type of psalm. In this hymn the reality of trouble (in terms of guilt and death) is still present and powerful. But what is decisive about this psalm is the confidence (born out of faith that is deep and tested) that God's steadfast love can override guilt and death. The psalm affirms that in the end, it is not human righteousness but the abiding love of God which matters decisively.

How is this dramatic movement from suffering (Ps 25) to confidence (Ps 103) made? Ps 73 seems to provide the passage. It is significant that this psalm is placed near the middle of the entire psalter and at the beginning of the Third Book.<sup>15</sup> This psalm, like Ps 1, begins with an affirmation that God presides over a morally coherent world. But the verses following immediately (vv. 2-13) voice a passionate protest against that confident affirmation. However, that protest is not sustained for long. As the psalm develops, the protest is transformed into trust. Verse 17 indicates that transformation. As the following verses reveal this transforming experience must have been an experience of deep communion with God. And this experience induces the psalmist to re-perceive reality and re-describe his faith. The retribution described in Ps 1 is understood no longer in terms of material goods or material disadvantages but in terms of intimacy with, or estrangement, from the Lord. The psalmist is profoundly contented with the fact that the God of long-term fidelity is present, caring and powerful and attentive. Hab 2:4 captures this whole experience succinctly: "The righteous shall live by his faith." The LXX version comes even closer: "The righteous shall live by my (God's) fidelity."

Thus, within the boundaries of Psalms 1 and 150, there is a 'narrative' of a staggering drama. The beginning of the narrative (Ps 1) presupposes God's fidelity as the basis for the torah-piety. The next move in that narrative-arc is the conflict and tension where that

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15 The psalter is divided into five books to resemble the five books of Torah: Book I (Pss 1-41); Book II (Pss 42-72); Book III (Pss 73-89); Book IV (Pss 90-106); Book V (Pss 107-150).

pre-supposed fidelity of God is doubted and questioned on the basis of inscrutable suffering (Ps 25). In the experience of deep communion with God, and with the feeling of deep contentment even in the midst of suffering the narrative-arc reaches its high point of climax (Ps 73). After this, the narrative-arc descends towards the definitive goal of resolution. Even in the company of ongoing trouble the psalmist learns to trust and celebrate God's steadfast love (Ps 103). Finally, the narrative ends in total self-abandonment and uncalculated and unconditional praise (Ps 150).<sup>16</sup>

My humble suggestion is that there is one more crucial element that seems to have played a dynamic role in this narrative flow. And that is the awareness of the universality of sin (Pss 14:1-3 = 53:2-3; 130:3) and the acknowledgement of one's own unrighteousness (Pss 6; 32; 38; 51; 102; 130; 143). Our next step is to consider these psalms. But before we come to the psalms proper let us consider briefly the 'semantic context' of these psalms - that is, the semantic triad law-sin-guilt.

### III

Although a number of synonymous words are used for law in the OT, it is the word 'torah' that captures the heart of OT law.<sup>17</sup> Torah means instruction, guidance, direction, a way of life. It is in the theology of Deuteronomy that we discover the core of this law. In Deut 7:6-11 we see that the election of and covenant with Israel is an act of pure, unconditional love on the part of God. Freedom from Egyptian slavery and giving of the land are the prior actions of God, pure gift, independent of any deserving merits on the part of Israel. But the full appropriation of that freedom and the proper possession of the land depend on a specific way of life, on the obedience of Israel to the law of the covenant<sup>18</sup> (see Deut 30:15-20). Israel did not perceive

<sup>16</sup> The narrative thread that is outlined here is not, however, altogether simple and straightforward. What is sketched out here is the narrative of a decisive 'faith movement'. But the placement of the psalms reflect, true to lived experience, the complex psychological process of appropriating this faith movement. That is why one can find a psalm of confidence (Ps 23) before Ps 25 and a painful lament (Ps 88) even after Ps 73.

<sup>17</sup> See *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. III, Abingdon Press, New York, 1962, pp. 76-88.

<sup>18</sup> See ch. 1 in J.G. McGonville, "Law and Theology," in *Deuteronomy*, JSOT Supplement Series 33, Sheffield, 1986, pp. 10-20.

the law as a burden or as an imposition from God on the people, but as a benevolent gift from God for the maintenance of the wholeness and health of the covenant community (Deut 6:1-3). "Thus, the primary law of 'love of God and love of neighbour', or more explicitly, the Ten Commandments, flowed as a natural or spontaneous consequence of the covenant between God and the people."<sup>19</sup>

The prophets cautioned the people that breach of the covenant stipulation, if not repaired would bring God's judgment down upon Israel. That is, cutting oneself from the fountainhead of life has serious implications. The concern of the prophets (who were the conscience of the people) was to call the people to repentance and to a re-consecration to the covenant stipulations. Although, torah and wisdom moved in different spheres, there was a 'torah-izing' process within wisdom literature (cf. Prov 3:7; Job 28:28; Eccl 12:13-14). These were the bold attempts to bring torah and wisdom together. Wisdom, which is discernment of the secrets of life, is not an end in itself, but concerns the life and will of the life-giver.<sup>20</sup>

The spirit of the law (the torah theology), as delineated in the Pentateuch, prophetic and wisdom literature, can be found scattered throughout the psalter.<sup>21</sup> We have already seen that the torah-piety of Ps 1 sets a definitive orientation to the entire book of psalms. It identifies true happiness and joy with torah-obedience. The juxtaposition of cosmic speech with categories of torah in Ps 19 brings home the truth that the torah of the Lord is just as certain and everlasting, just as much a part of the nature of reality, as the succession of day and night and the regular course of the sun. And in Ps 119, line by line all the various situations and moods that belong to

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19 Francis Pereira S.J., *Gripped by God in Christ: The Mind and Heart of St. Paul*, St. Paul's Publications, Bombay, 1991, p. 48. According to the OT, law was an expression of the grace of God. The distinction between the OT as a book of law and the NT as a book of grace is without ground or justification. Paul's polemics against the law in Galatians and Romans are directed not so much against the understanding of law in the OT as a whole as against its understanding in contemporary Judaism, as a result of historical development after the Exile. See Pereria, pp. 51-54; see also *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. III, pp. 90-94.

20 Brueggemann, *The Creative Word*, pp. 106, 110.

21 J.L. Mays, *op. cit.*, p. 131, note 12. Besides the three explicit torah-psalms 1, 19 and 119, J.L. Mays cites 14 other psalms that contain a torah motif: Pss 18, 25, 33, 78, 89, 93, 94, 103, 105, 111, 112, 147 and 148.

the relation between the Lord and the servant of the Lord are dealt with, always with one of the torah terms as the medium of relationship.<sup>22</sup>

In sum, we can say that law sets the 'boundaries' for the kind of life to be lived in intimate union with God and in communion with other people. It will not be an exaggeration to claim that law defines the very ontological character of humanness. Within this mind-set, sin is understood as estrangement from God and community, alienation from being authentically human. And this reality of alienation is expressed variously as 'missing the goal' (*hata*), 'perversion' (*'awah*), 'rebellion' (*peshah*), 'wickedness' (*rasha*), etc. What is significant in the biblical usage of these words is that these very same words are used to express 'guilt', the result of sin. Thus in biblical understanding sin and guilt are a package deal.<sup>23</sup>

It is interesting to note that the word 'wicked' occurs right from Ps 1:4 onwards more than 90 times in the book of psalms alone. It denotes a godless person, or a person who is god unto himself. This conception of sin is the most characteristic view of the OT and it corresponds to the distinctive biblical awareness of the intensely personal character of God. It is also worth noting that the psalmist does not associate himself with this wicked person (see Pss 1:1; 26:5; 31:6; 139:21, etc.). And yet on the other hand, the psalmist acknowledges his own sins. This means that there must be a qualitative difference between the wicked person and the psalmist-sinner. In my opinion, this difference has to do with a set of attitudes and a corresponding way of life. On the basis of what we have seen above, we can say that a wicked person is the one who does not surrender himself to the sovereign and benevolent rule of God and does not come within the boundaries of obedience and praise. He is a law unto himself. Accordingly, there is neither guilt nor repentance in the wicked person. But the psalmist acknowledges the sovereign rule of God and remains within the boundaries of obedience and praise. And yet he experiences a struggle, a kind of struggle that is so poignantly described by Paul in Rom 7:14-24. When the psalmist fails in the struggle he becomes aware of the distance from God. And this

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22 J.L. Mays, *op. cit.*, pp. 128-35.

23 See *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*, Vol. IV, Abingdon Press, New York, 1962, pp.361ff. for an extensive study on 'Sin and Sinners' in the Bible.

distance is interpreted as a punishment from God, a sign of God's wrath. But it is a biblical circumlocution for the punishment one has wrought upon oneself. The awareness of such a distance has psychosomatic consequences, in terms of mental anguish and bodily suffering.

#### IV

In the next step, I hope to bring the insights culled from motif-study, canonical study and the study of semantic context to bear on our understanding and use of the seven penitential psalms.

#### **Psalm 6**

This is the first of the penitential psalms, though interestingly neither the word for sin nor the word for forgiveness occurs in the psalm. It is obvious that this is a prayer of anguish pleading for deliverance from the agony and affliction the psalmist is experiencing. But what is not clear is whether the trouble is psalmist's own making or caused by his enemies (vv. 7-10). The opening couplet suggests that this is a penitent's cry for renewed relationship with the Lord. The same verse also indicates that the psalmist perceives his affliction as a punishment from the Lord, as a sign of God's wrath. And that experience is linked to the experience of the absence of the Lord: "How long, O Lord, will you wait. . .?" (v. 3).

The Hebrew mind saw a nexus between sin and sickness<sup>24</sup> which is reflected in the healing miracles of Jesus (see Mk 2:1-12). Within strict monotheism there was no place for secondary causes; everything was attributed to one God. The Hebrews believed not only that sin had psychosomatic consequences in sickness and suffering, but also that sickness and suffering implied sin. In other words, 'suffering of the innocent' would be a contradiction in terms for a Hebrew mind. The book of Job and the cross of Jesus are the strongest protest against this simplistic two way equation of retribution theory. The suffering of an innocent person may have causes other than sin.<sup>25</sup>

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24 See Terrien, *op. cit.*, p.288 and J.L. Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, John Knox Press, Louisville, 1994, pp. 163-65.

25 Modern day psychology has seen a profound and pervading link between the mind and the body. Practically every sickness and bodily suffering is explainable in terms of negative and destructive attitudes and states of the mind. If we identify these

Wrath of God (v.1): This much misunderstood biblical phrase has caused terror in the minds of many about a capricious, angry and punishing God. It is possible to comfort these troubled minds by reading this phrase as a 'theological circumlocution' for "an impersonal process of sin automatically working itself out and turning into its own punishment".<sup>26</sup> But that would miss the theological intent of the phrase. The phrase indicates God's personal reaction to sin. However, God's wrath can be said to be the obverse side of God's steadfast love. It is a way of cautioning and arresting human self-destruction. This is so because the final goal of God's wrath is not destruction of human beings, but bringing them back to life (see Ezek 18:23). What is intended is that one pays heed to the warning and returns to life. In vv. 2-4 the psalmist seems to be saying that he has suffered enough, has heard the warning and the time has come for God to return to the psalmist.

What have the 'enemies' done to the psalmist (v.7)? It is possible that the enemies of the psalmist, like the friends of Job, inferred from his affliction that he was a sinner and made it public, thus causing shame, an unbearable emotion for an oriental. To the personal grief a social stigma is added.

The psalm that deals with deep despair up to v. 7 ends with a note of certainty. "The poet, in one moment, has jumped from the mood of despair to that of certainty. The miracle has happened. Not a miracle that comes from the outside but a miracle that takes place inside man."<sup>27</sup> The Lord has heard the prayer of the psalmist and forgiven his sins and restored his health and re-established his name in the community.

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negative and destructive attitudes and states of the mind as 'sin' then the sin-sickness nexus found in the Bible has relevance today. However, it is obvious that the suffering experienced by an innocent person as a result of physical torturing by another person does not fall within this category.

<sup>26</sup> See Brendan Byrne, *Reckoning with Romans: A Contemporary Reading of Paul's Gospel*, Michael Glazier, Delaware, 1986, p. 51 and John Ziesler, *Pauline Christianity*, The Oxford University Press, 1983, p. 78.

<sup>27</sup> See Erich Fromm, *You Shall Be As Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and Its Tradition*, Fawcett Premier, New York, 1966, p. 165.

## Psalm 32

This is a didactic poem intended to 'instruct the way one should go' (v. 8). The lesson to be taught has to do with the importance of 'confession of sins' in one's life. And the advice the psalmist imparts is born out of his personal experience. The psalmist presents the point through contrasting two states of mind: When the psalmist was unwilling to confess his sins he experienced a deep anguish, as if being eaten up from within (vv. 3-4). Through his sins (whatever that sin may be, he does not mention it) he has created a 'distance' from the Lord and that had an impact on his person. But like a stubborn mule (v. 9) he would not pay attention to it or he would try to ignore it, or possibly rationalize it. But the inner reality had its own logic that would not fit the psalmist's reasoning. The festering wound would simply not heal.

But the moment the psalmist confesses his sins the situation changes, the trouble ceases. He experiences forgiveness, which is another word for God's steadfast love. The psalmist is reconciled and reunited with the Lord. It is this exuberant joy that results from such reunion the psalmist gives expression in the opening verses: "Happy is he whose transgression is taken away, whose sin is covered." This experience is the basis for the instruction (vv. 8-9). The psalm also underlines the fact that the confession is possible only with a deep faith in the Lord who is 'gracious and merciful' (v. 10).

## Psalm 38

This alphabetical psalm repeats the elements of both Ps 6 and Ps 32. Like Ps 6, the present psalm interprets personal suffering as a punishment from God. It also assumes the same kind of sin-sickness nexus. However, the description of the distress is more detailed here (vv. 3-10). Here again, the action of the enemies highlights the shame and the social stigma the psalmist suffers. Even friends and neighbours avoid him (v. 11). As a result he is 'silenced' - he can neither hear nor speak (vv. 13-14).

Like Ps 32 the present psalm expresses a deep trust in the Lord who will answer his prayer and forgive his sins (v. 15). The adversative 'but' in this verse is significant. The psalmist has no one to trust, no one to turn to but God. Based on that trust he confesses his sins. The psalm ends with a renewed plea for help and the nearness

of the Lord. And it is a plea addressed to a personal God: "My God, My Saviour."

### **Psalm 51**

This is a penitential psalm par excellence. The title, "A psalm by David, after the prophet Nathan had spoken to him about his adultery with Bathsheeba" indicates the context of the psalm (2 Sam 12:1-15). The plea for mercy (that is for forgiveness) in the very first verse sets the tone of the whole psalm. And the plea is motivated by a strong faith in the compassion and steadfast love of God. The psalm proceeds to depict the experience of an authentic repentance.

David begins the next section (vv. 2-9 framed by the phrase 'wipe out all my evil') with an acknowledgement of his sins. He further qualifies that his sin was an offence against God and God only. This does not mean that David was ignoring Uriah, the victim of his sin. He is only voicing a basic truth that "for every relation in which man stands to his fellow-men and to created things in general, is but the manifest form of his fundamental relationship to God."<sup>28</sup> Having confessed his sin, he next declares that the punishment and judgment by the Lord as just.

In v. 5 David seems to go beyond his individual sins to encompass comprehensively his whole existential condition. This is not a verdict on the marital act of his parents as sinful. It is a poetic expression of the fact that he is part of the human predicament that is prone to evil (This is something similar to what Paul says in Rom 5:12-13). Here is a profound insight that sin is not only a culpable act by an individual, but a force beyond and independent of the individual.<sup>29</sup> This verse seems to be central to the psalm, because the following petitions flow from this insight (vv. 6-12).

Verses 7 and 9 present the petition in negative terms (remove, wash out, wipe out). In the light of v. 5 David's prayer here is not only

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28 See Keil-Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament*, Vol. 5, *Psalms*, W.B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1976, (Second Book of the Psalter), p. 135.

29 This is not yet what Augustine would develop as the doctrine of original sin, that sin is transmitted through the act of procreation. The verse does suggest a hereditary aspect of sin, but a legacy that is passed on not so much genetically as culturally with deep psychological overtones. See Kathleen Coyle, "Original Sin - A Residue or Some Primal Crime?" *East Asian Pastoral Review* 29:3 (1992), pp. 330-44.

for forgiveness of individual sins, but for a healing at the root, 'a deliverance from the predicament of his self'.<sup>30</sup> His plea is for nothing less than a new creation (vv.6,10,12; cf. Jer 24:7; Ezek 11:19; 36:26).<sup>31</sup>

David's prayer for 'willing obedience' is significant. He recognizes the truth (which the entire psalter seems to exhort) that only those who begin in obedience can move ultimately towards praise (v.15). Further, true joy and happiness can be found only in a life that is bounded by obedience and praise (vv. 8, 12).

In Judaism there were 'sacraments' of reconciliation and a feast of Atonement. But this psalm insists that these external signs are of no avail if there is no inner disposition of true repentance (vv.16-17; cf. Isa 66:1-4). The two personal petitions for mercy and for recreation of a willing and repentant heart are repeated in v.18 on behalf of the whole community of Israel. "Be kind, rebuild the walls of Jerusalem."<sup>32</sup> In v.19, with a poetic economy of words the dynamic of the entire psalm is compressed. "Then you will be pleased with proper sacrifices."<sup>33</sup> What is true in personal experience is true for the whole community.

## Psalm 102

Tradition uses this as a penitential psalm, although the word for sin occurs nowhere. There is no indication of confession, no plea for forgiveness. The pithy description of the pathos of the psalmist and the causal link of God's wrath are the only indications that this psalm is a penitent's prayer. What is worth noting in this psalm is that it is a diptych, one panel dealing with personal plea (vv. 1-11), the other panel dealing with the petition for the community (vv. 12-22). Another point of the psalm is the contrast between the ephemeral nature of human existence (vv. 3, 11, 23-24) and the eternity of the Divine.

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30 See J.L. Mays, *Psalms*, p. 201.

31 The commentary of J.L. Mays on these verses is very perceptive: "Many of the prayers for help say, 'Change my situation so I may praise you.' This one says, 'Change me, I am the problem' ... In biblical vocabulary, what is said of heart and spirit characterizes the condition and direction of a person's life." See J.L. Mays, *Psalms*, p. 202.

32 I understand this petition not in the physical sense, but in the symbolic sense of recreating an obedient community of Israel.

33 V. 16 need not be interpreted as anti-cult, nor v.19 as contradiction to v.16. Both the verses are held together by v.17 which gives the true significance of cult.

Having said this I must leave this psalm and proceed to consider the next psalm 103 which has relevant features for our theme of law-sin-guilt.

### Psalm 103

This is a hymn, framed by the characteristic phrase "Praise the Lord, my soul" (vv.1, 22). This hymn of praise celebrates the steadfast love of God (vv. 4, 8, 11, 17) personally experienced by the psalmist as forgiveness for his sins. The psalm presumes the traditional view on the connection between sin and sickness, accordingly attributes healing to forgiveness, a point that is made clear by the parallelism of v. 3. This experience moves the psalmist in v. 8 to reiterate the traditional credo of Exod 34:6-7. We must remember that according to the Bible mercy, compassion and steadfast love are the essential characteristics of God.

The psalmist does believe in the moral symmetry outlined by the retribution theory (v.10: 'as we deserve'). But the moral order is not an impersonal system of acts and consequences. If it were so, then nothing but despair is in store for us humans, because, 'no one is innocent' (cf. Pss 143:2; 130:3). For the psalmist the crux of this moral order has to do with personal relationship with, or alienation from, the Lord. And the ground of his hope is the fact that the Lord takes the initiative in reconciling us (cf. Rom 3:23-25) and mending the broken relationship. The basis of his knowledge is the knowledge of God that we are fallible and transitory beings (vv. 14-16), and the character of God as infinitely loving Father (vv. 11, 13).

The psalm mentions 'those who fear the Lord'.<sup>34</sup> This phrase is a "designation used in the psalms for those who seek to make the Lord the decisive orienting centre of their lives. The fear of the Lord is simply reverence practiced in trust and obedience."<sup>35</sup> The parallelism of v. 17 and v. 18 brings out this point forcefully. This does not, however, mean that God's love is conditioned by obedience. On the contrary, obedience becomes a response in gratitude to the love

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34 Although this is a literal translation, it may evoke negative sentiments in the heart of the reader. "Those who honour the Lord" would be a more adequate translation as the Good News Bible has it, keeping in tune with the original intention of the phrase in connection with God's love mentioned in vv.11, 13, 17.

35 See J.L. Mays, *Psalms*, p. 329.

already given, indeed, the fore-given love. Following on the heels of exhortation on obedience is an exuberant hymn of praise, thus reaffirming the strong connection between obedience and praise.

### **Psalm 130**

This psalm is the prayer of a penitent from the depth of his despair. The situation is clearly the consequence of the personal sins of the psalmist and the resulting guilt. But the psalmist is not debilitated by that guilt, because he believes in the forgiving mercy of the Lord. The rhetorical question in v.3 is answered by the faith statement in v. 4: The Lord does not punish us as we deserve (cf. Ps 103:10). In fact, patience, compassion and forgiving mercy are the very characteristics of God, the very nature of God (cf. Ps 79:9). Contrary to popular fear, God is not a revengeful and punishing God. Interestingly, the 'justice of God' (also translated as 'righteousness of God') consists in forgiving mercy and steadfast love. This is the right way of behaving for God, as it were. This is why the psalmist says that the experience of being forgiven leads him to "honour the Lord" as one who has been true to himself (v. 4).

This, however, is only a statement of hope, albeit grounded on the past experience of the psalmist and his community. At this moment, the psalmist is still waiting for the experience of that forgiving love - a waiting that is conveyed by that telling metaphor in v. 6. The hopeful waiting of the psalmist is rooted in the deep trust he has in the Lord (vv. 5, 7) whose love is constant, who is ever willing to save. The psalm ends with a note of hope also on behalf of the community.

This brief psalm brings home a truth which is absolutely essential for understanding and praying all the penitential psalms, namely, the very nature of God is to forgive and save the weak and fallible humanity.

Incidentally, this penitential psalm is also one of the psalms of the ascent, that is, a 'pilgrim psalm'. Combining these two genres and in conjunction with other pilgrim psalms, Ps 130 seems to be adding one more sentiment in the heart of the pilgrim. Ps 122 had expressed pure gladness of the pilgrim at the prospect of coming into the presence of the Lord. The present psalm exhorts the pilgrim to take cognizance of the general human predicament and to rely solely on the forgiving love of the Lord - a childlike reliance that is portrayed so beautifully in the next psalm 131.

## Psalm 143

The first couple of verses of this last of the penitential psalms is significant for the consideration of our theme in this paper. An opposition is set up in these verses between the righteousness of God and the unrighteousness of human beings. The juxtaposition of 'righteousness' and 'faithfulness' in chiasmic form suggests that these two are synonymous. This is a reiteration of a point that we have already seen in Pss 103; 130: The righteousness of God consists in his faithfulness. In the OT righteousness is a concept related to covenant fidelity. God is righteous in being faithful to his side of the covenant relationship which is not conditioned by the faithfulness of the human covenant partner. This is how God's faithfulness includes patience and forgiveness in the face of human failure. The psalmist appeals to this faithfulness of God - a faithfulness that was proved by God in the history of Israel. The ground of psalmist's trust and hope (vv. 6, 8) is the remembrance of that history (v. 5).

For the rest this psalm deals with a situation of distress caused by an enemy and subsequent plea for deliverance from that situation. And this raises a question regarding both the classification of this psalm as a penitential psalm and the linkage of the first two verses to the rest of the psalm. My guess is the following:<sup>36</sup> The statement "no one is righteous in your sight" (expressed earlier in various ways in Pss 14:1 = 53:1; 103:10; 130:3) seems to play a decisive role in the dynamic movement of emotions within the psalter. In the earlier laments, the psalmist had protested against the unjust and atrocious behaviour of the enemy and accordingly had prayed for retributive justice. Such a protest is brought to voice in the present psalm too. But that protest is prefaced by a sobering thought that no one (including the psalmist) is righteous. And therefore, logically, the psalmist cannot pray for retributive justice, but can only plead for God's righteousness, that is, God's forgiving love.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> See J.L. Mays, *Psalms*, p. 434 for an alternate interpretation.

<sup>37</sup> However, the psalm does not take this inherent logic to its ultimate conclusion, namely, that God's compassionate forgiving love is as available to the enemy as much as to the psalmist (cf. Mt 5:45), because the psalm ends with a petition for the obliteration of the enemy. Similar petitions in earlier psalms are understandable. But in this psalm, at this final stage of faith movement within the psalter, such a petition is an intriguing puzzle, to say the least.

## V

In this final section, I want to do two things. First, keeping in mind the 'meaning-horizon' within which the seven penitential psalms move, I want to gather the main features of these psalms in a synthetic way. The starting point for all these psalms is the psalmist's experience of sickness and shame. It is in fact an experience of guilt, because the psalmist attributes the cause of this sickness and shame to his own sinful behaviour. It is an awareness in mind and body of the impact caused by his own disturbing of the order and harmony of reality as established by God. This natural consequence inherent in the order of reality is, however, interpreted in personalistic terms as punishment from God, which in turn is experienced as separation from God. So long as the psalmist was trying to avoid or ignore the root cause of his affliction he was able to experience neither peace nor health. But the moment he has the courage to bring it to consciousness, acknowledge his sin and seek forgiveness and reconciliation he begins to experience healing and peace. The basis of his courage is his indomitable faith in his God who is an embodiment of love, compassion, mercy and forgiveness; a God who does not delight in the death of his children but wishes their well-being. The healed and forgiven psalmist now prays for the grace to live a new life, a life of renewed communion with his God. Learning from his own experience he then prays, in a compassionate way, for the whole community which is also in need of reconciliation and renewal.

My second concern is to explore the relevance of these psalms for us today. Before we proceed with such an exploration it is important to realize that relevance is a relative term, depending on the kind of person who uses these psalms. These psalms have a certain vagueness about them. Even though they are emotionally charged, still there is a lack of specification about the kind of sickness, the type of sin the psalmist experiences. However, the vagueness seems to be intentional, and therefore an advantage - any person who has committed any type of sin can easily identify with the psalm and make a profitable use. But, there is also a danger. The danger is related to the 'meaning horizon' the reader brings to these psalms. For example, how does the reader understand law, sin and guilt in his/ her personal life? What is his/her understanding and experience of God, not only at the cognitive level, but at the emotional level? The modern reader has to be informed of perspectives proper to the adequate use of these

psalms. Here, I want to propose a perspective of some of the key issues involved.

First, the understanding of law. While the Bible does lend itself to interpreting law as something given by an authoritarian despotic God who demands servile obedience, another positive interpretation of the biblical notion is possible and necessary. Laws, taking into account the relatedness and interconnectedness of human beings, attempt to define the ontological conditions and boundaries of being human. Human well-being, both individually and collectively, depends on the observance of these laws. However, laws don't cover every aspect of human well-being. On the other hand, not all laws (biblical, ecclesial, or social) are conducive to our optimum growth and well-being.<sup>38</sup> Thus, an uncritical attitude towards laws can cause two types of dangers: on the one hand, one may be totally unaware of behavioural hazards, just because they are not prohibited by any law. On the other hand, one may be unnecessarily afflicted by a multitude of sins while in fact they are trivial matters.<sup>39</sup>

This has an immediate consequence for an understanding of sin. Sin cannot be too narrowly associated with laws. "Sin is not disobedience of irrational authority, but violation of human well-being."<sup>40</sup> This violation takes place through 'egocentric separateness'<sup>41</sup> and/or through attachments and addictions.<sup>42</sup> And yet, this seems to be the common, even if mistaken, path all human beings tread. But this is not alarming. What is really alarming is to take this mistaken path as the normal and the only path available for human beings - an ostrich-like attitude that declares that there is

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38 See Erich Fromm, *To have or to be?*, Jonathan Cape Ltd., London, 1976, pp. 120-125. See also Erich Fromm, *You Shall be as Gods: A Radical Interpretation of the Old Testament and its Tradition*, Fawcett Premier, New York, 1986, pp. 125-40. Although I would add the transcendental dimension to the humanistic perspective of Fromm, I find his insights very appealing.

39 See Carlos Valles, *op. cit.*, pp. 81-91 for stories of people who have suffered tremendously by taking seriously what is in fact trivial. See also Sean Fagan, *Has Sin Changed?*, Gill and Macmillan Ltd., Dublin, 1978, pp. 35-36 for a clear and critical understanding of the relationship between sin and law.

40 This was an opinion of Thomas Aquinas quoted by Erich Fromm in *To have or to be?*, p. 122.

41 Erich Fromm, *To have or to be?*, p. 124.

42 Gerald May, *Addiction and Grace: Love and Spirituality in the Healing of Addictions*, Harper Collins, New York, 1991, pp. 91-118.

nothing wrong with humanity. But avoiding or rationalization of a problem is no solution. One has to face the problem as a problem, sickness as sickness and also to realize that there is an alternate, healthy and authentic way of being human. This is my understanding of the basic and sole function of guilt feelings. While neurotic guilt feelings are inhibitive, debilitating and destructive, a healthy rational guilt is both a warning about the sickness and a calling towards healing. In other words, a person with neurotic guilt feelings feels hopeless and stuck, as if he/she has reached the *cul de sac*, the point of no return. But the person with healthy rational guilt feelings believes in the possibility of repentance and reconciliation, believes in the gift of forgiveness.<sup>43</sup> Forgiveness is actually the fore-given love, which is another aspect of the 'unconditional love', which in turn is another term for the 'indwelling grace'. This grace is not an intrusion into human life, but a given, intrinsic and inherent gift which accounts both the beginning and the continuing of human existence.

These positive and life affirming perspectives are the *sine qua non* for the proper use of the penitential psalms. Whether in the third millennium or in any other future millennium, as long as we remain human beings who evolve through trial and error towards ever renewed consciousness, these penitential psalms will always have significance and relevance.

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43 See James Sullivan, *Journey to Freedom: The Path of Self-Esteem*, St. Paul's Publications, Bombay, 1987, pp. 107-34; Joseph Bonet, *Be a Friend to Yourself: A Handbook of Self-Esteem*, Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, Anand, 1996, pp. 51-66; Marilyn Gustin, *From Victim to Decision-Maker: Keys to Personal Growth*, Better Yourself Books, Bombay, 1984, pp. 43-49. All these books on the one hand make a distinction between healthy, rational guilt and irrational neurotic guilt and on the other hand emphasize the significance of the former.