

## Ps 7: Communing with God in the Depths

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The psalms, as Israel's and today the Christian's prayer book has a lot to teach us in the art and content of prayer. Since they are born of a human experience nurtured and interpreted by a faith that is based on God's revealed word in human history, the psalms have at their core an experience with which everyman can easily identify. It is the joys and sorrows of life, the certainties as well as the doubts, the individual together with the communitarian circumstances of human existence that constitute human life. When one lives this reality in God, finding God's purpose in every happening and returns this same reality in the freedom of love to God, then certainly one has become a contemplative in action, one who sees the face of God and lives, one who communes with God in the depths.

Human history is thus transformed into salvation history, and man has discovered meaning in life that transcends the ephemeral and the contingent and gives substance to existence. The psalmist has expressed this discovery of the inner depths of his being in the artistic form of poetry, wherein the images used powerfully conjure up parallel images contemporaneous to our culture and which offer the possibility of translating the basic experience into an idiom intelligible to the reader and the pray-er of today. The psalms "are the many-toned voice of prayer in the widest sense, as the soul's address to God in confession, petition, intercession, meditation, thanksgiving, praise, both in public and private" (A.F Kirkpatrick, LXXX).

It is necessary, therefore, to read the psalms analytically to arrive at the substratum of the human experience, discover the dynamics of the growth of the experience and its interpretation on the level of

human reason conditioned by the psalmist's culture, and then its faith interpretation born of the religious experience of the Israelites, so that we come to rediscover and appreciate man and his spiritual essence, we arrive at an understanding of his encounter with the living God expressed in the Hebrew poetry of the psalms.

But at this point, if we are to make the psalms our personal prayer, there has to be a transposition of the experience into our own personal lives and the understanding of the encounter with the Risen Lord present in the experience as he lived it in his own earthly life, understood it as he prayed the psalms, and as he now lives it in his mystic presence in us through the power of the Spirit. The past now gets subsumed into the present of the Risen Lord and through faith opens us to that future where God will be all in all. Our faith nurtures our devotion and moves our love to give to God the glory that is his due and to our neighbour that witness of a love that is faithful and surpasses all understanding. In this way the praying of the psalms draws us into the art of communing with God in the concrete realities of life, affording us the constant possibility to enter into that union of mind and heart with God which is the true spirit of prayer.

Keeping this in mind, let us approach Ps 7 to enable us to pray it with the psalmist, with Jesus and with the Christ.

### **The Literary Form**

Ps 7 is an individual lament, according to Gunkel, and deals with the immediate concern of an individual worshipper. This type is identifiable by a "common theme which is characterized by the same or similar modes of expression and intensity of feeling, the worshipper obviously being in some form of distress and frequently bewailing the enemy or enemies by whom he is continuously persecuted" (A.R. Johnson 169). Further, this type of psalm has specific characteristics as:

a) the certainty of a hearing - expression of a conviction that his prayer will indeed be heard and accepted.

b) the vow - where the psalmist anticipates his gratitude to YHWH by promising the offering of a sacrifice or singing a song of thanksgiving, a cultic measure for securing the divine favour.

c) a description of his sufferings in very general terms and highly figurative language, giving the worshipper's fear of death and his sense of already belonging to the world of the dead.

d) and assertion that YHWH has caused, or at least has permitted, the trouble, so that the worshipper pleads his innocence, or affirms his guilt but always seeks the manifestation of divine justice in his liberation from the present anguish (cf. Johnson 170-175; 201).

In these psalms the evildoers can be seen as workers of black magic (Mowinckel), or those who having broken the law cannot for want of evidence be tried by the ordinary judicial procedure (H.Schmidt), or foreigners (Brilland), but it is enough if we were to take the term in the general sense. The enemies of man can be one's self-righteous neighbours, or even one's friends of past days who interpret one's misfortunes as God's retribution of sin and the curse working itself out on the one who dared challenge God's law and made his evil plans the way to happiness and prosperity. Death itself, in the strict sense, was a weak form of life, so any weakness in life, and not merely physical sickness, was regarded as a degree of death in which one was brought dangerously close to the Underworld (Johnson 205).

The psalmist, in identifying himself with the poor and the despised, places his trust in the Lord who always stays by the afflicted and the lowly, thus revealing his righteousness and his justice.

**The original Psalm** (cf. Briggs 51) is seen in 1-6, 9a, 13-17 with additions as a plea for judgement against the nations (7-8), a judgement between the righteous and wicked in Israel (9b-12), and a liturgical couplet of praise (18). But others, like Sabourin, maintain the unity of this psalm, as the lament is of one falsely accused, betrayed by a colleague and who is now seeking from God vindication of his innocence and judgement against the enemies. The structure of the psalm is found also in Ps 17, which has the same theme of justification by God of the psalmist in the face of his enemies, thereby advocating a unity of the psalm.

### **The Experience / Event**

The psalmist is hunted down by his enemy/ies for some crime of which he is accused - returning evil for good (4) - but of which he is innocent. Ready to accept the law of just retribution (3-5) he comes to the Temple and by means of an oath of exculpation (4-6) calls upon God to establish justice, knowing at the same time that the wicked will perish by means of their own wickedness (10-14). This vindication is needed for the sake of the people, who must see the justice of the Holy

God (17). "YHWH has to interfere, if the malice of the enemies is to be struck at the root and brought home to themselves... The Psalms of lamentation trust God to do great things and expect great things from him." That is why the distress is painted in somber and gloomy colours (Mowinckel I, 203).

Here, **the experience** is of a man, 'in mortal terror who is left trembling and short of breath', thoroughly helpless and yet 'feeling that in God he will find a place of safety in which he can trust'. This terror is the outcome of the pursuit by an enemy who is consumed by "that demonic and bestial purpose of destruction to which man falls and at the mercy of which man is if he lives apart from God" (Weiser 136).

Here man loses his honour (5) and is threatened to be deprived of his balance of mind, but his faith and trust in God leads him to understand that God in his righteousness will both protect and help him, while in God's plan sin works out its own condemnation to destroy the sinner thus defeating the very purpose of the evil done.

**The title** links this psalm with David's treatment at the hand of Cush the Benjaminite, and should be located in the scene of 1 Sam 22:8; 24:10; 26:8. Then the accusation is that David was seeking to destroy the life of Cush the Benjaminite. This would explain David's feeling of the sense of injustice at the false accusation; but the danger that threatens him becomes no less serious. Hence his deep trust in the God who alone can save him. It must be these various elements that we should remember as we read the psalm, for only then would we experience what David is going through, and could we identify the experience of Jesus as he prayed this psalm or identify ourselves with the psalmist in our moment of similar experience. The background of the psalm is in 1 Sam 21-26.

### **The Dynamics of the Experience**

First the psalmist asserts in an impassioned plea for help his trust in God in the midst of the fears that envelops him (1-2). Protesting his innocence, he is prepared to suffer the just punishment for the crime, if found guilty (3-5). But sure of his stand, he appeals to God to act as judge and vindicate his cause (6-8), because this will reveal God's justice to the nations of the world (7). This leads him to a prayer that the justice of a righteous God be made manifest on earth (9), a conviction which is developed in 11-17. God is set against evil and

will bring about its destruction (11-13), but 'sin contains in itself its own judgement', is self destructive, and evil works out the destruction of the evildoer (14-16). This certainty of the triumph of justice over iniquity leads him to sing his doxology of the righteous God (17).

Thus we notice how the psalm begins with a declaration of trust that is repeated at the moment of transition from declaration of innocence to appeal for justice, and then concludes with a hymn of praise to God who rewards that trust. The psalmist encounters his God in suffering calumny and injustice as a God who is on the side of the upright and righteous. His confidence stems from his certainty that "YHWH will positively intervene and protect the psalmist against an imminent danger" (Mowinckel I, 204) because of his innocence which thus affirms the righteousness of God.

Cultural elements in the psalm, through which the message is conveyed, are found in 'the oath of exculpation' also termed 'negative confessions' (3-5), (other examples are in Job 31:5-40 and Ps 137:4-5), the '*lex talionis*' (3-5), the **imagery used of God** as 'shield' who will conceal and protect him (1); as just Judge seated on the throne with the nations around him to hear his judgement, a sort of United Nations court; the Judge who wields his punishment by means of sword, bow and fiery arrows, thereby indicating the leader of the army that attacks the well defended city, or of the hunter ready to kill the lion that is attacking the prey (2); **of the mischief maker** as the one who digs a pit only to fall into it (15) or of one who, like Samson, will pull the building down upon his own head (16), or of the woman in childbirth who gives birth to a child that is mischief (18); **of the evildoer** requited for evil as one crushed to the dust (3) with his wicked deeds burying him (16); **of himself** as the prey pursued by the lion in the wild (1-3).

The crime is seen as 'violation of covenant and personal injury' (Briggs 53), 'treacherous breach of friendship and covenant', 'acceptance of bribes', failure to treat a friend as a friend.

Later on in the psalm, the perspective changes from that of an offence against an individual to the judgement of God against the nations seen as opposed to Israel (6-7), only to return to the individual, but now opposed by the wicked of Israel (8-9), thereby showing us the psalmist as a **type**, the righteous against the wicked. This enables the psalm to become one of universal application rather than one that is merely individualistic. This is clear from the repeated use of 'righteous/just' - 8 times in 8b-11.

## Human Interpretation of the Experience

In suffering injustice one sees things in their right perspectives and true proportions: one's helplessness to do anything about the situation. Man confronted by the contradictions of life draws them deep into his inner life of consciousness, and human reason can hardly make sense of them. The absurdity of the injustices of life can only make man affirm the meaninglessness of existence. That one does not destroy the perpetrator of injustice, or the cause of these contradictions of life, could come from various reasons, but ultimately the human mind understands that destruction of the other is no solution to human problems. He therefore appeals to God to make sense of the situation.

## Faith Interpretation

God's holiness is seen in avenging the injustice done to humans and this leads them to place their trust in God and in God alone - a God who is just and who defends the cause of right.

The cause of unjust situations is the intrinsic sinfulness of the present human state, which brings about mental and spiritual distress. The remedy of this situation is to be found in communion of mind and heart with God, from which would ensue peace and harmony with man, even with one's enemies. Pain, suffering and distress is ultimately a sign of one's separation from God, and can be overcome only by relating oneself to God in his mysterious plan of salvation for a sinful world. The power of God has to enter into one's life and man is to experience the active, living presence of God in these moments drawing him onwards to an identification with God himself, the Father of love. It is to this Father and his plan that man must both surrender and commit himself if he is to enjoy the blessedness of God and find meaning in the contradictions of life.

"Man fully alive is the glory of God", but life here is seen by the psalmist as the enjoyment of honour, reputation, which the righteous can claim as his RIGHT. God in defending the right of the righteous person, establishes righteousness in the world and thus reveals himself as the faithful one, true to his covenantal promises. He is the God who is *Hesed* and *Emeth* and the experience of his protection of the righteous man is seen in his destruction of the wicked one. "The god of justice (is) not a capricious deity like the gods of men" (Knight 41).

Faith in God demands the experience of the human situation with all its limitations, but at the same time the experience of the power of God who controls and directs human history in all its human wanderings. From this faith flows confidence and trust in God, that quality of the human spirit which enables one to transform what is destructive of the human spirit into the triumph of life. "The hidden providential rule of God is the factor which determines the deeper relationships of an order of events which is both purposeful and just" (Weiser 139).

What then is **God's purpose** in allowing one to suffer loss of honour, disrepute, injustice? It is the glorification of God - the manifestation in history of a God who is faithful and true, whose rule over the destiny of man does not entail curtailment of the abuse of human freedom, but the working out of divine justice that allows sin to bring about its own consequences, death of the evildoer who rejects the wisdom and goodness of God. The human spirit, conscious of the righteous God, experiences confidence and trust in God which enables one to ride the turbulent seas of life even when buffeted by the storms of human injustice and tossed upon the waves of human oppression, violence and the abuse of power.

The prayer of Jesus is always directed to the glory of the Father, the manifestation of his love here on earth. Even in his agony, the prayer of Jesus is to the Father that his will be done. In this moment where he goes through this experience of utter human helplessness and injustice, his prayer was "not my will but thine be done", and so also is the prayer that he taught us "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven." This indicates to us how Jesus confronted the contradictions of a situation that evoked such dreadful struggles and powerful emotions in him that he could affirm "My soul is weary unto death" (Mk 14:34). His was a prayer in utter darkness made on the guarantee of the certainty of his faith - "ABBA, all things are possible to you."

The answer to Jesus' prayer did not come in the removal of pain or distress, but in the strength to conform himself to the will of the Father - to love, to lay down his life for the other. "For, of course, it is out of pain and suffering that the kingdom of God arrives" (Knight 40). No longer the law of retribution, the *lex talionis*, but the law of love guides his response, his surrender to the Father. He must grow in sonship by 'becoming the first born of many brethren' and 'as the pioneer of our faith' lead his brethren to salvation. Learning obedience

through suffering he becomes perfect and shows us the way to transform the instrument of death into the giver of life; that way is the love of the enemy.

This outcome of a life lived in communion with God amidst the adversities of life now becomes available to each and all of us. God delivers us from the contradictions of life not by removing them, but by enabling us to relate them to him in prayer. There he unfolds the mystery of self-emptying and self-giving love that loses one's life to find it in him who so loves us as to give us his only Begotten Son who in turn loved us so that he emptied himself, took upon himself the form of a slave and became obedient unto death on a cross for our sins and for our salvation. The glory of God is revealed in this sacrificial death lovingly accepted and willingly offered to the Father. He invites us to join him in this same mystery as we encounter the malice and wickedness of our sinful brethren, so that our love be purified and our selves be truly freed from all sin and we become true children of the God who is love.

Man is to live his life in freedom and this will come about when he can affirm his dignity as the child of God in every situation of life. It is this which will establish the foundations of society, where individuals and nations accept the truth, that God made man his child, then the world will become the kingdom of God and the truth will have made mankind free - a humanity reconciled to God will be a humanity experiencing peace and love. Persons are far more important than things, and the true dignity of the human person is to be the basis of all social order. This dignity is born of one's knowledge of one's being, one's acceptance of the consequent responsibility and founded on the knowledge of God and his will and the experience of him.

In this analysis of the psalm as prayer, we come to learn how we can pray to our God in Jesus Christ in the midst of our trials and tribulations. Today we live in a civilized world where peaceful communities are the rule rather than exceptions, unlike the days of the psalmist. Yet there are moments, even today, in the reality of the world and of our nation, when we find ourselves the objects of persecution, of violence, of discrimination, when our human rights are curtailed or denied us. This often leads us to ask: "Lord, why I?" This is especially true of the marginalized of our country, the dalits and the many others who are discriminated against because of their birth. The same can be said of women in our country who are often treated as objects and

have their basic human rights denied them. The natural instinct is to retaliate, to seek vengeance, while we know that our christian faith tells us to offer the other cheek. How then can we pray this psalm and reconcile what we say with the teachings of Jesus?

In the Old Testament "revenge... (is a) means of keeping passions in check, and securing a legal system in the primitive social conditions under which Israel were living as nomads and in great measure also after settling down. The request for revenge denotes that the sense of justice is alive and may not be violated... (it must be taken to express the knowledge and the faith that God will not allow justice to be violated" (Mowinckel I, 204). This is so in the case of Israel but also in the case of the nations, thus revealing the Old Testament man's faith in YHWH as Lord of the nations who will judge the whole earth.

But in the New Testament, the teaching of Jesus has no place for revenge but only for forgiveness, since the power of God is to be seen not in his condemnation and destruction of man, but rather in his love and his desire to save man (Jn 3:16). God's justice is manifested in taking us as we are and bringing us to conversion, where we repent of our sins and turn to the living God. "God's righteous ones are his forgiven ones, whom God has brought home, perhaps if they had wandered away and got lost" (Knight 40).

Our psalm of lament will take our human situation, but experiencing the power of the Spirit of the Risen Lord we will rise from seeking vengeance and retribution to seeking the power to love, to forgive, to become like God our Father himself, giving good things to all. We will not condone injustice, we will make use of it to accomplish God's plan for our sinful world. We will make ourselves available to God to reveal his glory, the power of his transforming love here on earth. To forgive, to reconcile, to make foe into friend, even at the cost of one's life is to truly identify oneself with the Lord who reconciled us in the blood of his cross to the Father.

Praying the psalms of lament as Christians means praying them with the spirit of the beatitudes of the man who has experienced God not merely as the God of Covenantal Justice, but as the God of Covenantal Love, that knows no boundaries and has made itself incarnate and visible in the one who reconciled us to himself while we were still his enemies. The experience of Jesus as Saviour in our lives is the experience of God-with-Us who draws us to imitate him in drawing others into our love and the love of God himself through the

mystery of the cross. The faithful love of God for us today must pass through the cross as it invites us to draw into ourselves those who have done us harm so that we can repay them with good, and thus become children of our heavenly Father. It is "the creative love that God puts in the heart of his righteous people, the love that gives them power to do for others what God has first done for them" (Knight 40).

The spirituality of the man of the New Testament, rooted in the faith that accepts Jesus on the cross as man and God, enables him to respond to that plan of God to make all things new, to bring about the world of peace and love, justice and truth, harmony and communion, by sharing in the life-giving death of the Christ in our world of today. Sorrow and distress has the potential of destroying the one whom it burdens, but when the power of the Risen Lord enters into it, that potential becomes one of giving life not only to self but to others. Today when our world seeks to avoid pain in all its forms, and to escape from what it sees as the meaninglessness and absurdity of a life in which pain and anguish have so much a part to play, the word of God, in the psalms of lament, offers us a way to discover God's ways of dealing with contradictions and his way of transforming the negative into something positive, death into life through the power of the one who died on the cross that he may give us eternal life.

This is the power that enabled Gladys Staines to say of the murderers of her husband and two young sons, that she does not hate them but only forgives them. If all our world could but understand the transforming potential of suffering borne in love then we would not have divisions of class and caste, of gender and creed, but we would have that harmony of human existence, those communities of human solidarity where Christian love born of the love of the Crucified Lord would be the motive force of all that each and everyone would do to and for his neighbour. The psalm prayed with the heart of the Lord who loved his Father and all his brothers with the purest of love on the cross of Calvary will make us like him who gave up his life so that others may live.

Communing with God in the depths entails meeting God in the weakness and sinfulness of the human situation, but as a God who takes upon himself this evil so as to redeem it with the power of his love. When we experience this power of love in us and share it with others in the grief and agony of life, then we will experience the ecstasy of being one with God in his love.

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