

The Seven Penitential Psalms

The Book of Psalms is the great prayerbook of the Church, even as it has always been for the Jewish people. There is truly a psalm for every occasion in life. Over the centuries, seven psalms in particular have been a source of insight and meaning to those in need of repentance, those harrassed by sin, those who need to accuse themselves of sin and turn to God's loving mercy for rescue. In fact, the Church has attached indulgences to these psalms (as well as others) to encourage the repentant faithful to pray them. In the *Handbook of Indulgences* we read, "A *partial indulgence* is granted to the faithful who, especially in preparation for sacramental confession: 1° examine their conscience with the purpose of amendment; 2° devoutly recite an act of contrition, according to any legitimate formula (e.g., the *Confiteor*, the psalm *De profundis* [Ps. 130], or the psalm *Miserere* [Ps. 51], or any of the *gradual* [Pss. 119-133] or *penitential psalms* [Pss. 6, 32, 38, 51, 102, 130, and 143])" (USCCB, Grant 9). I thought it would be good during Lent to meditate on each of these Seven Penitential Psalms.

Unfortunately, I don't have room this week, so we'll examine the first two next week. But don't let that stop you from looking over them yourself and beginning to use them in your Lenten prayer discipline.

The Seven Penitential Psalms

We begin this week with the first of the Seven Penitential Psalms that I wrote about last week. While I would love to put the whole psalm in the bulletin, I think I won't to save myself space. So you'll have to get out your Bible as you read these articles.

Psalm 6

This psalm expresses a person's experience of guilt and sickness before God and harrassment from evil forces; here the psalmist pleads not for justice, but for mercy. In the ancient mind, of course, all sickness, failure, and defeat were the result of personal sin. While we understand that that is not always the case, we know that these evils are all connected in some way to the primordial evil of the Original Sin and fueled by our own actual sins. The psalmist begins by asking God for mercy, showing that he both admits his guilt, as well as showing that he looks to God for forgiveness and salvation. In his pain and anguish, the psalmist asks God to do seven things: 1. Do not reprove me; 2. nor punish me; 3. have pity on me; 4. heal me; 5. turn back; 6. rescue my soul; 7. save me. Not only do these prayers clearly express this person's feelings and needs, but the seven-fold repetition may suggest a perfection or completion to the prayer since "7" is the number of completion. The perfection here, of course, is a prayer of perfect contrition. We ask ourselves: Do we truly make a point of calling out to God for mercy and salvation when we are in trouble? Do we continue to ask even when God feels far away and seems inactive? It is worth noting that despite the psalmist's self-admitted guilt and his piety, he cannot help being a little exasperated with God's seeming delay. "LORD, how long...?" he asks in v. 4. Even for the authors of Sacred Scripture, God's time was not always an easy thing to wait for. And yet, he does not allow the passing of time to deaden his sense of guilt, or normalize the pain of his current life, or embitter him towards God. Rather, he perseveres each night in remembering, regretting, and crying over his sins and the evils (foes) that have arisen from his choices. In his

prayers, he does not ask that God forgive him because of his righteousness—he knows that he is unrighteous and unworthy. Rather, he prays that he will escape Sheol (Hell, for us) so that he will be able to remember and praise God. Structurally, the repetition of the Divine Name (signified by LORD) in the first five verses draws attention to the lack of the Name in v. 6, for God is not present to the dead (whom we know to be the spiritually dead, i.e., the damned). It is also interesting how important praising God is to the psalmist, reminding us of how the Saints in Heaven praise God continually. Finally, the loss of sight in v. 8 reminds us of how sin and distress always cause us to lose our direction in life. We ask ourselves: Despite our natural impatience, do we persevere in the daily life of conversion and repentance? Do we shed tears (at least metaphorically) as we examine our consciences each night? When God forgives and saves us, do we make a point of returning to the Eucharistic Assembly to make our offering of thanksgiving and praise?

In the end, the psalmist's patience is rewarded; God hears and answers his prayers. By the end of the psalm, he has found the forgiveness, healing, and peace that he has sought for so long. And yet, we can ask whether this triumph of goodness is based on a historical event in the psalmist's life, or simply on a growth in his faith. We notice that most of the assertions in the final verses of the psalm are in the future tense. In either case, we find that God is faithful to His promises. When He answers our prayers in the way we desire, He is giving us a foretaste of Heaven, when all our desires will be satisfied. When He does not answer our prayers as we desire, He gives us the grace and faith to accept our sufferings with Christ and find in them the path to Heaven, where our crown will be all the more glorious the more sufferings we have endured in this life for Christ. We ask ourselves: Do I trust in God when He promises in Christ to forgive me, save me, and help us through life's difficulties? Is my faith strong enough to find God's presence and healing even when my earthly situation has not improved? Most of all: Am I motivated to confess my sins continually and sincerely because of my love and trust for God, Who brings joy and peace out of contrition and humility?

The Seven Penitential Psalms

We continue this week with the second of the Seven Penitential Psalms. While I would love to put the whole psalm in the bulletin, I think I won't to save myself space. So you'll have to get out your Bible as you read these articles.

Psalm 32

In this psalm, the psalmist combines thanksgiving and instruction. It seems that he has experienced sickness or disgrace because of guilt, but when he confesses this to God and asks pardon, he is saved. Although the psalm dramatizes the process of repentance, confession, and salvation, it actually begins and ends with happiness. Beatitude is promised to "the man whom the LORD imputes no guilt" (v. 2), while rejoicing is the duty of the "righteous" (v. 11). In between these assertions that the sinless life is the truly happy one, we see the psalmist experience what we all have experienced when we sin. At first, he keeps his sin to himself; his silence suggests that he is siding with death here, for the land of the dead is silent. But he cannot ignore his conscience and feels the hand of God weighing him down (vv. 3-4). Finally, he

cannot take it anymore and confesses his sin (v. 5). Nor is this confession only internal, as the words “I declared,” “I did not hide,” and “I confess” indicated. What is interesting is the internal struggle that has to build and build in his heart before he is ready to confess; and yet God’s response to the psalmist once he does confess is immediate, simple, even understated. In only a quarter of a verse (v. 5d) we have the climax of the whole psalm: “and you took away the guilt of my sin.” How simple God is, and yet how complicated we make our lives! We ask ourselves: Is there some area of our lives where we feel our conscience weighing us down? Am I hiding my sins even from myself? Do I believe that changing my ways to live without sin will actually make my life happier? Do I believe that God will forgive my sins if I confess them?

Building off of his personal experience, the psalmist then begins his teaching and thanksgiving (vv. 6-7). Everyone should do what he has done in praying for forgiveness. If they do, then no matter the encroachment of danger and sin (symbolized by flood water), they will be guarded by God and can rejoice. More instruction follows with a change in audience (in vv. 8-9 the “you” has become singular in the Hebrew). Is this the psalmist addressing the public or God addressing the psalmist? As often happens in the Psalms, the speaker is unclear and open to interpretation. Either way, this final instruction counsels against the stubbornness that the psalmist originally showed in his own repentance, comparing it to the attitude of a horse or donkey (v. 9).

Wickedness brings sorrow, but God’s mercy—received by confessing our sins—brings true happiness: this is the concluding teaching of the psalm. We ask ourselves: Am I willing to share the story of my own sinfulness and God’s mercy towards me with others, as the author of Ps. 32 did? Do I encourage the people around me to repent and believe in the Gospel of Jesus Christ, even when this might bring hostility down upon me? Most of all: Am I ready to confess my sins right now, both in my heart and in the Sacrament, or does that stubbornness still exist in my own heart, which makes me slow to admit and confess my sins? Am I, as the psalmist says, still acting like an ass? (Sorry, couldn’t resist!)

The Seven Penitential Psalms

We continue this week with the third of the Seven Penitential Psalms. I had initially hoped to get through all seven before Easter, but that’s obviously not happening. So, we’ll just have to keep reflecting on them during the Easter Season—not inappropriate with the upcoming Feast of Divine Mercy. While I would love to put the whole psalm in the bulletin, I think I won’t to save myself space. So you’ll have to get out your Bible as you read these articles.

Psalm 38

In this psalm, the psalmist spends most of the time lamenting the evils that are part of his life; finally, he admits his sinfulness and expresses his complete reliance on God. We might say that the author of this psalm is somewhat obsessed with his problems. He lists them all: he is sick (vv. 4, 8), he is a sinner (v. 5), his physical strength is failing (v. 7), he is psychologically and emotionally distraught (v. 9). To add insult to injury, his personal condition has been aggravated by social effect: his fair-weather friends ignore him (v. 12), and his enemies use his weakness as an opportunity to attack him (v. 13). Yet the psalmist clearly sees all of this as God’s punishment, the “arrows” with which the Lord has smitten him (vv. 2-3). While people today

often have difficulty reconciling a loving God with One Who punishes for sin, our psalmist (as most ancient people) has no such difficulty. He understands that God's anger is a reaction to his sin and that God's punishment is meant to recall him from sin, i.e., that it is a discipline motivated by love. We know that he feels this way because the evils in his life that he perceives (rightly or wrongly) as the Lord's punishments only cause him to turn to the Lord more earnestly. What the psalmist has dramatized is how once we let sin gain a foothold in one part of our life, it begins to make the rest of our life fall apart too—it causes us to dis-integrate. We ask ourselves: What pains, anxieties, sorrows, or evils are part of my life? Can I see a connection between these circumstances and sinful choices that I make or have made? Do I perceive these evils as the punishment of God? If so, does this cause me to love God more and want to stay closer to Him? If not, does my understanding of the cause of these evils lead me to a greater repentance and love of God?

In the face of all of the evils of his life, the psalmist finds relief in one thing: prayer. The psalmist does not even try to fix things on a human level or counter the attacks of his enemies (vv. 14-15). He believes that the only true solution to the problems is in God. He exemplifies the attitude of abandonment to God or resignation to God's will. He will patiently wait for God's action (v. 16) since he knows that he only has himself to blame when it comes to these consequences of his sinful actions. In fact, he has returned already to a life of virtue and good works even as he suffers the results of his former sins (v. 21). Despite his return to God, he does not yet feel that God has returned to him. He feels his strength failing and fears that his enemies will vanquish him if God does not act swiftly (vv. 17-21). The psalm ends in a cliffhanger, leaving the fate of the psalmist unresolved. One thing, however, is clear—the psalmist will continue to place his hope and his faith in God as his Savior. Even as the darkness closes in about him, he will press forward towards the light, believing that his repentance and virtuous life will be enough to help him persevere until God delivers him—even if that is at the very last second. We ask ourselves: Do I search for consolation in prayer, especially the prayer of repentance? Do I place more value on human solutions to my problems, or on waiting patiently on God's saving action? When I feel that God is absent in my distress, do I consider that this is an inevitable result of my past sins? Do I also remember that it is only a feeling that God allows for my purification since He is always near to me? Even in the midst of darkness, depression, and despair, have I renounced my sinful actions and returned to deeds of virtue, mercy, and love? Most of all: Am I convinced that if I truly repent with a sincere heart, then God will save me from evil, even if things seem to get worse? Truly, the night is always darkest just before the dawn.

The Seven Penitential Psalms

We continue this week with the fourth of the Seven Penitential Psalms. Even as we rejoice during the Easter Season, we still recognize our sinfulness and our need for mercy. It is fitting as we celebrate Divine Mercy Sunday that we consider today the most beloved of all the Penitential Psalms. While I would love to put the whole psalm in the bulletin, I think I won't to save myself space. So you'll have to get out your Bible as you read these articles.

Psalm 51

We know that the Psalms were originally used in the liturgical worship surrounding the Temple in Jerusalem. Still, it is not always clear who wrote many of the Psalms and why. Ps. 51, however, is one of the Psalms for which we know quite clearly the origin. In fact, vv. 1b-2 tells us, “A psalm of David when Nathan the prophet came to him after he had gone in to Bathsheba.” (If you don’t remember this story of David’s great sin, you can find it in 2 Sam. 12.) This is King David’s heartfelt psalm of repentance and cry for mercy. The psalm takes place in three movements: prayer for personal cleansing (vv. 3-11), prayer for personal renewal and right sacrifice (vv. 12-19), and restoring the city and the liturgy (vv. 20-21)...(or at least this is one way of dividing the psalm).

The first movement can be defined using David’s words that God “blot out,” “wash,” and “cleanse” his sins (vv. 3-4). These verbs are then repeated in reverse order in vv. 9-12. In this first section of the psalm, David begins by doing two things: first, invoking God’s mercy and love; second, admitting his guilt. True to David’s profound relationship with the Lord, he considers his sin to have been first and foremost against not Uriah, whom he has murdered, nor against Bathsheba, with whom he has committed adultery, but against God Himself (v. 6). His selfishness and lust has cut off his relationship with the Lord of Life. He is unclean in God’s sight. In fact, the image of cleansing is the preferred one in this psalm, reminding us that forgiveness from sin is less like hitting the delete button, and more like scrubbing a stubborn stain out of your favorite shirt. So deeply rooted does David feel his guilt to be that he traces it back to even before he was born—indeed, to the moment of his conception in his mother’s womb (v. 7). While this is a bit ludicrous in reference to the particular sins David has just committed, what he has recognized in his repentant state is the brokenness and tendency toward sin that our human nature has suffered from ever since the Original Sin. This so-called concupiscence is indeed with us from precisely conception. The first movement of the psalm ends with David recalling that what God desires is a true and wise heart that revolts against sin. How he wishes he had kept his heart pure in this way and not fallen into sin! But he believes that God can cleanse his heart and make it pure again. Just as people and objects are purified by the sprinkling of water or sacrificial blood with a branch of hyssop, so David envisions God using the ceremonial hyssop branch to purify his heart. Just as the Israelites in Egypt were instructed to use hyssop branches to smear the blood of the Passover lamb on their doorposts in order to be freed from the Angel of Death, so even though David’s sins are crimson red with blood (cf. Isa. 1:18), he can be set free from death and be made white and pure again by God’s redemptive mercy. We ask ourselves: What are the sins that I feel the most shame for having committed? Do I believe that God’s mercy is great enough, good enough, powerful enough to forgive these sins? Do I understand that God’s mercy must be allowed to work in my soul, scrubbing me clean through a process that is sometimes both long and painful? Am I shy about calling the sacrificial Blood of our Redeemer Jesus Christ down upon me because it means admitting the depth of my guilt and uncleanness? Do I believe that Christ nevertheless desires to love and forgive me?

In the second movement of the psalm, having invoked the redeeming blood of the paschal lamb

(a.k.a. Jesus Christ), David begins to leave behind his self-accusatory attitude and instead pray for a return to a righteous life. Once the heart is clean again through repentance and God's action (for us, the Sacraments), in other words, once the state of grace has been recovered, one feels again all of the benefits that were lost by serious sin. David speaks of being able to stand before God's Face (v. 13a), having the gladness of salvation (v. 14), and being in possession of a steadfast, holy, and willing spirit (vv. 12b, 13b, 14b). Indeed, this tripple spirit that God inspires seems to signify to the Christian mind both the Holy Spirit, as well as a veiled reference to the Holy Trinity Itself. Having renewed his relationship with God, David's first inclination is to evangelize—to call other sinners to repentance (v. 15), an attitude that reminds us of two of the Spiritual Works of Mercy, i.e., to instruct the ignorant and to admonish the sinner. Indeed, the emphasis on testifying about God to other and singing His praises (vv. 15-17) is almost presented as a necessary consequence of forgiveness since it flows into the following verse: God does not desire burnt offerings (v. 18)—is it then a sacrifice of praise that He requires? More clearly, however, what God desires in place of literal animal sacrifice is “a contrite, humbled heart” (v. 19). David, who as Israel's second king and first to bring the Ark of the Covenant into the capital city, was a priestly figure in his own right, is obviously well acquainted with the ritual process of sacrifice and atonement surrounding the Tabernacle (this is before the Temple, you remember). Nevertheless, he understand that all of this ceremony is useless, is not what God desires, unless it is connected to the proper interior disposition. The word “contrite” in Hebrew is related to the verb “to crush.” It is only in the crushing of our heart—of our pride, our self-will, our sinfulness—before God that we become obedient and pleasing to Him and useful to ourselves. This reminds us also of why we strike our hearts, symbolically crushing them, when we pray the *Confiteor* prayer at Mass (“I confess to Almighty God...”). We ask ourselves: Once I have repented of my sins, do I allow the inflowing of God's Spirit to lift me up and inspire me with the joy and the motivation to work hard on my relationship with God? Do I allow that joy to overflow in a testimony to the Lord before others? Do I see evangelization as a recompense I can make to the Lord, thanking Him for forgiving me? Do is recognize the importance of contrition and crushing my self-will even when I have restored a right relationship with God? When I go through the rituals of prayer, Confession, Mass, and the other rituals of my faith, do I try to form an interior disposition of contrition and obedience that matches the words my mouth professes?

In the third and final movement of the psalm, a connection is made between restoring the individual's relationship with God and rebuilding the city of Jerusalem. Many scholars believe vv. 20-21 are actually a later addition to the psalm from the time when the Jews were returning from the Babylonian Captivity and rebuilding their homeland. Later addition or not, there is clear spiritual instight to be gained from these verses. When the person falls into sin, he is cut off from the community, he cannot participate in the liturgical assembly, where God calls His People together as one, holy People. After repentance, the individual can rejoin the community. This is symbolically depicted as rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem (v. 20). Then also he can offer a burnt offering that is pleasing to God (v. 21)—because, of course, it is done with the right

interior disposition and as part of the liturgical community, symbolizing and fostering the unity of the People in God. We ask ourselves: Do I see how my own sins affect not just my own relationship with God, but serve in some way to tear down a part of the city of God, the Body of Christ? Do I likewise realize how my conversion and repentance brings healing and strength not only to me but to the whole Church, at which the angels rejoice (see Lk. 15:7)? Once I have been restored interiorly, do I make public witness of my thankfulness by rejoining the People of God at Mass or other ceremonies where I can supplement the joy of the community with my own? Most of all: When I sin, does my repentance, recommitment, and life of thankful praise follow the pattern of spiritual health understood and dramatized by King David in Ps. 51? If part of this process is missing in my life, am I prepared to try and fix it and improve my spiritual health?

The Seven Penitential Psalms

We continue this week with the fifth of the Seven Penitential Psalms. Even as we rejoice during the Easter Season, we still recognize our sinfulness and our need for mercy. While I would love to put the whole psalm in the bulletin, I think I won't to save myself space. So you'll have to get out your Bible as you read these articles.

Psalm 102

This psalm is significantly different than the other Penitential Psalms. The psalmist does not pray to God as one who is guilty and seeking forgiveness. Rather, the psalmist is complaining to God about his situation, but at the same time confidently praying that God change the fortunes of both himself and his entire nation. The reason, however, why this psalm is counted among the Penitential Psalms is because of its presentation of the swiftness of human life, how little time is allotted to us to live a godly life and grow in our relationship with the Lord. This, the Church hopes, will put us in the mind for examining our life and experiencing that daily conversion. The psalmist begins by crying out to the Lord because he is in distress. His account of his sufferings include fever, loss of appetite, weight loss, depression, insomnia, and social abuse (vv. 4-9). He compares himself to an unclean bird in the desert (v. 7) or a lonely, moaning bird on a rooftop (v. 8). These bird images are ironic since birds usually bring to mind the ideas of freedom and flight. The psalmist's enemies even use his name as a curse, so desperate is his plight (v. 9; e.g., they would curse people by saying, "May you be like so-in-so"). Because of his suffering, the psalmist realizes how passing all worldly goods really are, including life itself. He compares life to "smoke" (v. 4), "dried up grass" (vv. 5, 12), and "shadows" (v. 12). The psalmist feels that his days have been "cut short" (v. 24) and that even the whole created world wears out like an old piece of clothing (v. 27). This is all seen in contrast to God's eternity (vv. 25-28); He alone is master of life and time. Thus, He is asked to intervene and make "now" an "appointed time" for mercy and renewal (v. 14). A final consideration of this psalm is how, after complaining about what seems to be personal distress, the psalmist then makes an appeal to God not for himself, but for his people: rebuild Zion, he prays (v. 17; the reference being to the capital city of Jerusalem which sits on said mountain, and hence the entire nation), for its stones and dust are precious (v. 15). This again reminds us of how the healing of an individual is a

benefit to the entire people, and healing of the nation will have significant effects in the life of the individual.

We ask ourselves: Do I take time to reflect on the shortness of life, the inevitability of death, and how each opportunity which God sends us knocks but once? Are there circumstances or decisions in my life that I would not be satisfied to leave as they are now should I die today? What can I do to begin to fix these situations? Do I consider the effects of my sins on the Holy People of God? Likewise, are there broken systems or ministries within the human side of the Church that contribute to my own problems? Do I pray and work for their reformation? Most of all: Am I mindful that now is the appointed time for mercy, and will I make an effort to open myself to God's mercy in the Sacrament of Confession before my time runs out?

The Seven Penitential Psalms

We continue this week with the sixth of the Seven Penitential Psalms. Even as we rejoice during the Easter Season, we still recognize our sinfulness and our need for mercy. While I would love to put the whole psalm in the bulletin, I think I won't to save myself space. So you'll have to get out your Bible as you read these articles.

Psalm 130

After Ps. 51, this psalm (which is also one of the so-called Gradual Psalms) is probably the most well known of the Penitential Psalms. It is often referred to by its opening two words in Latin, *De profundibus*, meaning "From the depths." And indeed, these words set the tone for the entire psalm, which is often used to express prayerfully the family's grief as part of the funeral rites of the Church. The psalm is a complaint where the psalmist calls out to God (vv. 1-4) and then expresses his trust that God will hear him (vv. 5-8). What the psalmist's prayer is is never made clear; as such, this psalm becomes applicable to every deeply held longing of our hearts. It is nevertheless clear that, whatever the psalmist's problem is, he feels like he's been cast down into the darkness, deepness, and isolation of hell. "The depths" refers to the ancient Jewish conception of the underworld as "Sheol." It seems that this feeling of rejection arises from the psalmist's awareness of some sin since he enunciates the theological principle that none of us are pure before God: "If you, LORD, keep account of sins, Lord, who can stand?" But, he continues, "with you is forgiveness" (vv. 3-4). This is how all of us feel when we stand in God's presence and honestly examine ourselves—we cannot stand before God with perfect integrity. And yet, God does not hold this against us, but forgives us as long as we repent and ask His forgiveness. The psalmist then expresses his trust and hope in God, or as he puts it, his willingness to "wait for the Lord" (v. 5). (Indeed, to "wait" and to "hope" are synonymous.) This waiting is dramatized in the psalm both by its comparison to sentinels keeping the night watch and looking forward to daybreak, as well as by the very repetition of the words (v. 6). And, of course, there is great significance in the image of waiting for daybreak, or the dawn, because that is when light begins to drive away darkness, fear and danger are banished, and rest and peace comes to those who have been on an edgy night watch. This is also how God's presence affects us when it 'dawns' upon us through recognition and repentance of sin. Who is it that the psalmist instructs to keep this hopeful watch? Not merely himself or a kindred spirit, but

the whole people of Israel, i.e., the Church. God, he promises, will redeem all His people with “plentiful redemption” (see vv. 7-8). We ask ourselves: When I feel cast down into the depths, whether by my sins or the sins of others, do I call out to the Lord? Even when it feels like the Lord is not answering, am I willing to wait like a sentinel for His grace to dawn upon me? Am I humble enough to declare before God that, even if I can’t remember any sins or failings, that I am nonetheless guilty? Do I take the idea of examining my conscience seriously, both before Confession and on a nightly basis? Most of all: Do I believe in the infinite mercy of God that will redeem me no matter how far I have fallen and draw me forth from the deepest pit of Hell into the dawn of grace that precedes the eternal day of Heaven for the just?

The Seven Penitential Psalms

We finally finish this week with the the Seven Penitential Psalms. As we examine the seventh Penitential Psalm, I encourage you to remember that the whole point is to use these psalms as part of preparing for Confession. They are officially approved Acts of Contrition which can be used inside or outside the confessional, they provide us with a partial indulgence, and most importantly the open our souls to the grace of repentance and conversion. While I would love to put the whole psalm in the bulletin, I think I won’t to save myself space. So you’ll have to get out your Bible as you read these articles.

Psalm 143

Ps. 143 is similar to several of the other Penitential Psalms. The psalmist is oppressed by enemies. Also, like the psalmist in Ps. 130, he does not mention a specific sin, yet is apparently aware of current or past sin since he prays “Do not enter into judgment with your servant; before you no one can be just” (v. 2). The psalm opens with four pleas (“hear,” “listen,” “answer,” and “do not enter into judgment”). These pleas begin the first movement of the psalm (vv. 1-6), in which the psalmist laments the internal and social evils that he experiences, but ultimately turns to the memory of God’s deeds in time past when He was faithful to His People despite their unfaithfulness (v. 5). As in Ps. 130, the psalmist feels that he is already living in Hell (v. 3), and as in Ps. 38, he experiences physiological reactions to his guilt (vv. 4, 7). The Hebrew for v. 3 says literally that he is being ground into the earth, a reminder that (as in Ps. 102) he is dust and unto dust he will return. All of this pain, however, only serves to deepen the psalmist’s longing for God, and as he remembers the works of God’s Hands, he stretches out his own hands, raising them up in prayer (vv. 5-6).

The division of this psalm into two movements occurs in the text itself as v. 6 ends with the untranslatable Hebrew word “*Selah*,” indicating that a pause should there occur in the recitation of the psalm. The second movement (vv. 7-12) consist of a series of requests for God’s help, each followed by a reason that God should act. What becomes evident in these requests is that the psalmist depends not on himself, but on God. He cannot overcome either his sin or the consequent evils on his own; only God’s mercy (vv. 8, 12) can do so. The psalmist significantly asks God to teach him to God’s will, as opposed to his implied sinfulness and selfishness in the past. Again harmonizing with Ps. 130, the psalmist expresses his trust in God’s mercy, which is connected with the dawn (v. 8). Of all the reasons why the psalmist asks for mercy, the final one

is the best, namely, because “I am your servant” (v. 12). As Konrad Schaefer writes in his work, *Psalms*, from the *Berit Olam* series, “How can God resist such a sincere, passionate request which ends with the signature ‘your servant’?” (p. 335) We ask ourselves: When I feel depressed, defeated, or in pain, do I allow these earthly evils to bring clarity to the spiritual evils that exist within my soul? Do I gain confidence in God’s mercy from remembering His ancient works of salvation? Do I stretch out my hands to Him in prayer as I examine my conscience and prepare myself for Confession? Am I willing to surrender myself and my fate into God’s Hands, relying not on my own merits, but on God’s goodness and desire to forgive? Most of all: Do I see myself as God’s servant, focused on living my life in the way that is most pleasing to Him and most obedient to His commands?