



## WORMS

By Rev. Will Nelken

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A discarded board had been lying on the ground for over a year. When I moved it I discovered it had become a shelter for earthworms—dozens of them!

I would have been disgusted by the sight, but they looked like good fishing bait. To a robin or a blue jay, they would have looked like a feast!

The sight of those worms brought to mind a phrase from an old hymn, titled “At the Cross,” written by Isaac Watts in 1707, that I used to sing often:

Alas! And did my Savior bleed  
And did my Sovereign die?  
Would He devote that sacred head  
For such a worm as I?

Modern versions have changed the words of the last line to “for sinners such as I.” Still true, but the original phrase was so much more graphic. And with good reason!

From his deathbed, Charles Wesley thought it a fitting image for the lyrics of a final hymn that he dictated from his deathbed:

In age and feebleness extreme,  
Who shall a helpless worm redeem?  
Jesus, my only hope Thou art,  
Strength of my failing flesh and heart:  
O could I catch one smile from Thee,  
And drop into eternity!

We may wonder what fascination these 18<sup>th</sup>-century hymn-writers had with worms! But considering that many of them were familiar with farming (and perhaps fishing), I suppose they were also familiar with worms.

Earthworms give advantage to garden soil by pulling dead organic materials into their burrows to eat, thereby mixing it with the soil to improve its structure and water filtration. Their burrows aerate the soil and increase its moisture retention.

And then there are maggots, which are not worms per se, but the larvae of a fly—though, at a glance, they look somewhat like worms. Maggots are particularly disgusting, mostly because of their association with dead flesh and rotting foods.

## Humans as Worms

Job was a character of the Old Testament, who in a single day was overcome with excruciating tragedy. As his harrowing experience dragged on, day after day and month after month, he could not make sense of it. His life had not followed a simple mathematical formula—his goodness and generosity had not led him to a life of prosperous ease, but of unspeakable tragedy and haunting pain.

Bildad, when faced with the tragedies that had befallen his friend, Job, objected to Job's profession of righteousness, for he could not conceive how any person could be considered pure and righteous before God. He lamented:

*"How can a mortal be innocent before God?*

*Can anyone born of a woman be pure?*

*God is more glorious than the moon;*

*He shines brighter than the stars.*

*In comparison, people are maggots;*

*we mortals are mere worms."*

(Job 25:4-6)

Bildad's words suggest that God—who is greater than the heavens—is too pure to be related to mere humans. He could not see God's redemptive side, leaving humanity as hopeless as maggots or worms, which we associate with death and the grave.

Helpless and hopeless.

You may find Bildad's illustration distasteful for the mention of maggots and worms, but it is somehow fitting, for the psalmist, King David (a man after God's own heart), used the same imagery:

*"In You our fathers trusted; they trusted, and You delivered them. But I am a worm and not a man."* (Psalm 22:6)

Like his forefather Jacob, David thought himself unworthy of "the least of the mercies" which God had shown him. "Worm" was a fitting expression of that unworthiness. His sin had rendered him "less than a man" before God.

## Identifying with Worms

This verse is part of a larger text (Psalm 22) that is recognized as a prophetic reference to the Messiah. In that context, these very words express the Messiah's identification with our sin and spiritual poverty—He died in our place, as if Himself a sinner. No longer a man; less than a man—just a worm.

In a comment on that verse from Psalm 22, Matthew Henry wrote:

“What little reason has man to be proud, and what great reason to be humble! So weak and impotent, and so easily crushed, and therefore a very unequal match for Almighty God. Shall man be such a fool as to contend with his Maker, who can tread him to pieces more easily than we can a worm? ...Let us therefore wonder at God's condescension in taking such worms as we are into covenant and communion with Himself, especially at the condescension of the Son of God, in emptying Himself so far as to say, 'I am a worm, and no man'.”

Isaac Watts likely had these passages in mind when he expressed his own sense of unworthiness with the lyrical phrase, “for such a worm as I.” He was illustrating a theological concept known as total depravity. Wikipedia defines it correctly: “The doctrine of *total depravity* asserts that people are, as a result of the fall, not inclined or even able to love God wholly with heart, mind, and strength, but rather are inclined by nature to serve their own will and desires and reject His rule.”

This teaching stands in diametric opposition to the modern emphasis on positive self-esteem and self-image. Please don't misunderstand me—no one needs to think less of themselves; we just need to think *accurately* of ourselves, and we need to think of ourselves less.

## Thinking Accurately

In order to think of ourselves accurately, we all need to see ourselves as God sees us. And He sees us BOTH as utterly corrupted through the fall of Adam, AND wholly redeemed by the sacrifice of Jesus.

The notion that humanity has it within themselves to lift themselves by their bootstraps and improve themselves on their own—that god is within everyone and we simply need to actualize our innate goodness—that we can conquer our sense of superiority and racial prejudice, and the corrupting influence of power and greed, by humanistic measures—is utter folly. It is a lie. It is THE lie, for at its heart is the denial of the Savior, and to deny the Son is to deny the Father also. In other words, it is the denial of God (at least the God who reveals Himself in the Scriptures).

Secular, godless humanism has crept into the church (in the name of rational thought and evolutionary enlightenment) and persuaded us to trade our divine birthright for a mess of stew, leaving us empty and blinded and confused. We've amassed a thousand religions of self-help, yet we are destitute of compassionate love and vying for worldly power and possessions, for we have denied the providential power of the Living God, our Savior, Jesus Christ.

Our only hope exists in the redemption God has provided through Jesus Christ!

*The wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life through Christ Jesus our Lord.*  
(Romans 6:23)

### **Rescued from Wretchedness**

Paul, the apostle of Christ and the premier missionary of the First Century, said of himself, *"What a wretched man I am!"* (Romans 7:24). (Today, he would be urged to attend classes or counseling to improve his self-image!) He was describing his awareness of the residual weaknesses within him in his repeated struggle to obey God consistently. A wretch. An unworthy worm of a man.

Paul blurted out in desperation, *"Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?"* His situation seemed hopeless. His battle seemed endless.

Although Isaac Watts ended the first stanza of his hymn with that awful question, "Would He (Christ) devote that sacred head for such a worm as I?" the hymn goes on to express the wonder and majesty of the divine grace that has rescued us from sin through Christ's reconciling love on the cross.

Over 100 years later, Ralph E. Hudson added a refrain to that hymn that points us to the singular answer that lifts the weight of grief for good:

At the cross, at the cross  
Where I first saw the light,  
And the burden of my heart rolled away,  
It was there by faith I received my sight,  
And now I am happy all the day!

There is another old hymn that highlights the amazing wonder of God's grace. It is called "Grace Greater Than Our Sin."

Marvelous grace of our loving Lord,  
Grace that exceeds our sin and our guilt!  
Yonder on Calvary's mount outpoured,  
There where the blood of the Lamb was spilled.

Dark is the stain that we cannot hide.  
What can we do to wash it away?  
Look! There is flowing a crimson tide,  
Brighter than snow you may be today.

Marvelous, infinite, matchless grace,  
Freely bestowed on all who believe!  
You that are longing to see His face,  
Will you this moment His grace receive?

[Sing the chorus, if you know it.]

*Grace, grace, God's grace,  
Grace that will pardon and cleanse within;  
Grace, grace, God's grace,  
Grace that is greater than all our sin.*

The author of a letter to Hebrew Christians wrote (Hebrews 2:6-8):

*In one place the Scriptures say,  
"What are mere mortals that You should think about them, or a son of man that You should care for him?  
Yet for a little while You made them a little lower than the angels and crowned them with glory and honor.  
You gave them authority over all things."*

Let that soak in... *"Crowned with glory and honor!"*

Sin's effects are crippling—more than we realize—but it is no match for the mercy of Christ, who gave Himself for us.

### **The God of Mercy**

To Paul's desperate question, *"Who will rescue me from this body that is subject to death?"* he gave his own answer: *"Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!"* (Romans 7:24-25).

I tell you again, God knows full well the depths of the hidden sin within you (better than you know it!). You were doomed for a Christless eternity—the Lake of Fire and Sulfur. We all were!

But God sent His Son, made in the likeness of a man, to redeem men and women, boys and girls, from that awful fate... because of God's mercy! And He has done it!

By His death and resurrection, Jesus rescued us from Hell, and by His ascension He restored our fellowship with the Father. Now the Father loves you, just as Jesus loves you. He has adopted you as His child. He calls you by name. He has tattooed your name on His palm, and no one can erase it.

Romans 8:

*<sup>31</sup> What shall we say about such wonderful things as these? If God is for us, who can ever be against us? <sup>32</sup> Since He did not spare even His own Son but gave Him up for us all, won't He also give us everything else?*

*<sup>37</sup> Despite all [our difficulties], overwhelming victory is ours through Christ, who loved us.*

*<sup>38</sup> And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. <sup>39</sup> No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.*

There's one more hymn that comes to mind:

My sin—oh, the bliss of this glorious thought—  
My sin, not in part, but the whole,  
Is nailed to His Cross, and I bear it no more;  
Praise the Lord, praise the Lord, O my soul!

It is well with my soul!  
It is well, it is well with my soul!

*Thanks be to God, who delivers me through Jesus Christ our Lord!*

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I owe the skeleton of this message (and the title photograph) to a friend and fellow minister, Stephen Weber, who publishes a daily devotional newsletter, which I have enjoyed for years.