



# Alas, and Did My Savior Bleed

The first stanza of the original lyrics by Isaac Watts read:

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

This hymn hauntingly draws the contrast between the beauty of Christ and the stain of our sin, causing us to reflect again on the drama of the choice of Jesus Christ to give his life for ours. The substitution, “For sinners such as I?” in the last line, does not significantly diminish the meaning. And yet, something has been lost by the absence of the vivid imagery of not just our sinfulness, but our worm-hood.

This vivid contrast is introduced in scripture by Bildad the Shuhite, Job’s friend who is convinced that Job’s misfortune is a result of his sin. Seeking to convince his unbending friend, Bildad concludes his argument (Job 25:6), “How can someone be righteous before God? How can one born of a woman be pure? . . .How much less man, who is but a maggot—a son of man, who is only a worm!” This is classic biblical theology—God is good; we are sinful. God is holy, we are unholy. God is beyond description and reach; we are worms. Without God’s intervention we are spiritually lost.

Fortunately, God has intervened. This image is used again in Psalm 22:6, “But I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by people.” In this, Psalm 22 becomes a path back into the hymn as we sing it today. This psalm, which begins, “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” was in the consciousness and on the lips of Jesus at his crucifixion (Matt 25:46). Many scholars have suggested that when Old Testament texts are quoted in part in the New Testament, it is intended that the larger Old Testament text should spring to mind. So, we might suppose that Jesus was crying out not just the first verse of Psalm 22, but invoking the whole terrible, lonely prayer, including the lament, “I am a worm and not a man, scorned by men and despised by people.” As we read in the Christ-hymn in Philippians 2, he lowered himself from the realm of deity to the depths of humanity. This psalm has long been read as the prayer of Jesus in his last moments before death. The whole world was on his shoulders. His suffering was real in every sense of suffering—physical, emotional, spiritual.

The beautiful Savior took on the ugliness and tragedy of the depths of our human-ness. Indeed, our Savior did bleed and die for sinners—the very worst of us and the worst in all of us. He bled and died to roll the unbearable burden of our sin off of us that we might be set free to give our lives freely and fully to God.

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