

Special

*“O love of God,
How rich and pure!
How measureless and strong!
It shall forevermore endure—
The saints’ and angel’s song.”*

APPARENTLY THINGS ARE DIFFERENT NOW, but my United States Navy boot camp experience in 1969 included considerable abuse—both verbal and physical. The company commander of each unit was given broad license to express his animated pique in any number of ways. Any hapless recruit, fresh off the farm and still wet behind the ears, who found himself falling behind in ranks or marching out of step with the rest, could quite literally receive a sound boxing of the ears, or a hard slap up the back of his head.

Likewise, the colorful descriptions with which the company commander referred to his charges were mostly profane, insulting—and wholly unsuitable for this publication. But all expressed the fundamental position that we were all the lowest of the low, dogs, worms, worthless, and generally disqualified from participating in civilized society. Even the simplest “boot” realized that this was all for effect—designed to reduce us all to a common low level from which the Navy could then rebuild each of us in its own peculiar image—but it

was still rather unpleasant and demeaning to be so regularly referred to as a “worm.”

Something Special

The principle of the depravity of man—the fact that every person since Adam is born with a sin nature—is central to the Christian faith. For without it, man would not need a Savior. Everything Christ did, from His birth to His resurrection, would have been for naught if man were not born in a sinful, depraved condition. Absent his inherent sin, man would require no redemption. And the Bible would be a lie.

So, since man *is* born into sin, it is easy for the believer to think himself the lowest of the low, and utterly unworthy of any heavenly affection. Some Christians today think that the lowly boot’s relation to the company commander is a fair description of the believer’s relation to God the Father. They see themselves as something worthless, as something one would wipe from the bottom of a shoe, and God as

the stern company commander loving to box them about the ears.

On the contrary, God loves *us*. He selected us out as something special. He does not redeem dogs and cats or frogs croaking in the pond. He did not die for trees or roses or green beans. He did not pen His word in the language of little green men on Mars or the opalescent slime oozing on the planet Zardoz.

Over every other species, in the sight of God, humankind is special. But it isn't that God loves us because we are special. No, we are special because God loves us.

"For you are a holy people to the Lord your God; the Lord your God has chosen you to be a people for His own possession out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. The Lord did not set His love on you nor choose you because you were more in number than any of the peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but because the Lord loved you and kept the oath which He swore to your forefathers, the Lord brought you out by a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt."

Deuteronomy 7:6-8

The Lord God did not set His affection on blowfish or whales, on salamanders or whooping cranes, on prairie grass or rattlesnakes. Instead He set His affection, first, on the Jews: a tiny band of people that would spring forth from the union of Abram and Sarai of the Chaldees. Later—all according to plan—His special affection would be extended to those who came to Him through the Son: Jesus Christ, who had sacrificed Himself for their redemption.

But not even that describes fully the love of God for His people. For one might volunteer that the individual's act of faith—of believing in Christ as Savior—is the critical requirement for enjoying God's love. Not so.

But God, being rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in our transgressions, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)...

Ephesians 2:4-5

Based on Himself

Even a crusty, foul-mouthed company commander can *eventually* have some affection for some of those in his charge. Ours even invited a couple of us sorry boots to his home for a Saturday barbeque. But he didn't love us all the way back when we were getting our induction physical, before boot camp began for us. At that time, he didn't even know we existed. Nor did he love us during those early days when

we couldn't walk a straight line, or make our beds correctly, or stand night watch without falling asleep on our feet. In those early days we were just faceless, bald-headed blobs to one who had seen so many hundreds before. Only after he got to know us did he express even a small amount of kindness toward a few of us.

Everything God does is based on His own righteousness, not the imperfect merit of others. He loved us before we were even a twinkle in our father's eye—because God's love for us is based on Himself, not us. He loved us before we knew Him, when we hated Him, when we considered Him brutishly unfair—because God's love for us is based on Himself, not our future. He loved us when we ignored Him, thinking Him ineffective, even impotent—because God's love for us is based on Himself, not our behavior. He loved us even when in our anger we rebelled against His lordship, His decisions that didn't square with ours—because God's love for us is based on Himself, not our faithfulness in loving Him.

For one will hardly die for a righteous man; though perhaps for the good man someone would dare even to die. But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.

Romans 5:7-8

Believe in His Love

It is difficult for the average person to accept the terms of God's love. Either in arrogance the person doesn't believe there is a God who loves, or he doesn't care or believe that the one who exists would love him. Or in abject contrition the person doesn't believe that one so high and mighty and holy would stoop to love one so simmered and steeped in sin.

Repeatedly throughout His book, from Genesis 1:1 to Revelation 22:21, God tells us of His love, His longsuffering with our sin, His redeeming compassion, His never-tiring forgiveness. He reminds time and again that we are *not* worms. Indeed, in the blood of Christ, we are co-heirs with the Lord—brothers and sisters who will reign *with* Him. Time and again God tries to convince

us to believe in His love for us, but nowhere does He say it better than in what is perhaps the most familiar passage in His word. dsj

"For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life. For God did not send the Son into the world to judge the world, but that the world might be saved through Him."

John 3:16-17

*The love of God is greater far
Than tongue or pen can ever tell,
It goes beyond the highest star
And reaches to the lowest hell;
The guilty pair, bowed down with care,
God gave His Son to win:
His erring child He reconciled
And pardoned from his sin.*

*When years of time shall pass away
And earthly thrones and kingdoms fall,
When men, who here refuse to pray,
On rocks and hills and mountains call,
God's love so sure shall still endure,
All measureless and strong:
Redeeming grace to Adam's race—
The saints' and angel's song.*

*Could we with ink the ocean fill
And were the skies of parchment made,
Were ev'ry stalk on earth a quill
And ev'ry man a scribe by trade,
To write the love of God above
Would drain the ocean dry,
Nor could the scroll contain the whole
Tho stretched from sky to sky.*

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Frederick M Lehman