

Low Man Lyric: A Christian Perspective

Warning: this is NOT a feel good article

One, two, three, one
My eyes seek reality/My fingers seek my veins
There's a dog at your back step/He must come in from the rain
I fall 'cause I've let go/The net below has rot away

So, my eyes seek reality/And my fingers seek my veins
The trash fire is warm/But nowhere safe from the storm
And I can't bear to see what I've let me be/So wicked and worn

<refrain>

So, as I write to you/Of what is done and to do
Maybe you'll understand and won't cry for this man
'Cause low man is due
Please, forgive me

My eyes seek reality/My fingers feel for faith
Touch clean with a dirty hand/I touched the clean to the waste
The trash fire is warm/But nowhere safe from the storm, yeah
And I can't bear to see what I've let me be
So, wicked and worn

<refrain>

Please, forgive me
Please, forgive me

So, low the sky is all I see/All I want from you is forgive me
So, you bring this poor dog in from the rain/Though he just wants right back out again
And I cry to the alleyway/Confess all to the rain
But I lie, lie straight to the mirror/The one I've broken to match my face

The trash fire is warm/But nowhere safe from the storm
And I can't bear to see what I've let me be/So wicked and worn

<refrain>

Please, forgive me

So, low the sky is all I see/All I want from you is forgive me
So, you bring this poor dog in from the rain/Though he just wants right back out again
My eyes seek reality/My fingers seek my veins

This is the second song from Metallica's *RELoad* album that I have analyzed, so I won't go into much discussion on the song's background here. All I will do is restate that James Hetfield was going through an extremely low point in his life at the time he wrote the songs to this album and the album preceding it (*Load*). The raw emotions he went through are plainly visible here and in the other songs.

In this song, I believe we are hearing from the point of view of a suicide's final thoughts. There are those who claim that while this is a breakup song, it is not one involving suicide. It is true with songs that, unless the writer explicitly talks about the lyrics, they can often be interpreted in many ways. This is because the time constraints a typical song means each word is often loaded with symbolism. How one interprets any given symbol can greatly affect the overall understanding of the work. But I feel there is quite a bit to support the suicide interpretation.

Perhaps most obvious is the line "my fingers seek my veins," which implies one checking for a pulse (something often associated with checking for a sign of life), but could also suggest slitting one's wrists. But there is much more. The line "of what is done and to do" has a certain finality to it that, in my opinion, goes beyond merely starting a new life after a breakup. The line "so low, the sky is all I see" suggests he is lying down outside, which seems quite odd for an apparently homeless protagonist to be doing in the middle of the storm he describes.

And there is the curious choice of instruments for this song. A hurdy-gurdy is used in this song to tremendous effect. It dates back at least to the 12th century, and was a favorite instrument for wanderers to stand in public areas and play for donations. With its very first note, it brings to mind an old, worn out homeless man. The song is done to a waltz, and even this is used to suggest suicide. If one pays attention to the hurdy-gurdy as its notes hover just above the other instruments and the vocals, we notice that it changes every three beats of music. For the first set of three beats, it plays more or less steadily, while the second set of three has a rapid cycle of notes rising and falling. Taken together, it appears to me as a musical representation of the heart monitors seen so often in hospitals. The protagonist's last words in the song tell us he is once again searching for a pulse, immediately after which only the hurdy-gurdy remains, and it comes to a halt to end the song.

And for my final piece of evidence suggesting a suicide, the very title suggests it. One of the most famous suicides in the theatrical arts was in Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, where the play's protagonist, William "Willie" Loman hangs himself at the climax of the play. But while Willie was a victim of his own pride and blamed everyone else for his failures, the anonymous protagonist of this song suffers from depression. Not only does he blame himself for everything, but considers his benefactor as a saint.

And regardless of how one interprets individual verses, the despair heard in the song is undeniable. He refers to himself as a dog twice, and the second time he admits he just wants to get in trouble all over again. He believes he ruins everything he touches ("touch clean with a dirty hand/I touched the clean to the waste"). He is so disgusted with himself that he breaks his own mirror because he "can't bear to see what I've let me be/So, wicked and worn." He constantly asks for forgiveness from his benefactor, whom he apparently believes will continue to support him. This suggests he feels he is bringing his benefactor down as well.

C.S. Lewis claimed that there is but one sin, and that this sin is "pride." For him, every other sin is but an expression of pride. I do believe that there is truth in this, but I also think that despair is a special form of pride. In all other forms of sin, pride is deciding that there is something we found that is greater than God (and therefore pride and idolatry are synonymous). Put another way, pride is deciding one knows better than God what is good for oneself. But despair is not something one normally thinks of as something better than God. It usually manifests itself when one realizes just how wrong the idols they chose really were. Many people, when broken down so low, do indeed return to God. But others still don't, and pride finds its ultimate expression. Still unwilling to admit God is

greater than they are, some decide that if they can't fix their problems, then not even God can fix them. It is here that true despair is seen. And it is in this relationship between pride and despair that the most interesting facts of the song can be found.

On one hand, we have a very subtle suggestion of religion: "my fingers feel for faith." The phrase "keep the faith" comes to my mind here. According to Webster Online, this phrase means "to believe in, trust or support," and this goes along well with the preceding lyric "my eyes seek reality." The protagonist is clearly looking for something to hold on to as he is being overwhelmed with his life. This does not necessarily mean it has to be religion, but Hetfield has struggled with God for most of his life. It was mostly the efforts of his wife that kept Hetfield from giving up on God altogether. So let us explore this a little bit. We see that forgiveness was always there: "so you bring the poor dog in from the rain, though he just wants right back out again." The protagonist has no doubt his benefactor will always take him in, nor does he doubt he will mess it all up again.

When we do accept a religious meaning in these words, we see a terrifying thought. The faith the protagonist had in God was not enough. Being sorry was not enough. Forgiveness was not enough. Perhaps a few Christians will look at this as proof the protagonist is going to Hell. It is not my business where the protagonist (or anyone else for that matter) goes. Jesus made it clear in the triple parables found in Luke 15:1-32 (The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin and The Lost Son) that we are to rejoice whenever someone who was lost is saved. But it *is* my business to *help* the protagonist find salvation, and to help others to do the same. It is not the ultimate fate of the protagonist that concerns me here, but why some might write him off as a loss.

I suspect in most cases, it would be because of a cancerous belief that faith alone saves. Nowhere in the Bible does it say this, and James 2:24 explicitly states this is wrong. Jesus Himself says obedience will lead to salvation; disbelief will lead to damnation. Yes, faith is important, as is forgiveness. But Jesus gives us examples that explicitly show forgiveness is not enough. There are four detailed examples of Jesus curing lepers in the Bible (Matthew 8:2-4, Mark 1:40-45, Luke 5:12-14 and 17:11-19), and leprosy was associated with certain sins against God (Leviticus 14:10-32 prescribe guilt and sin offerings as atonement for leprosy). In all four cases, Jesus directs them to be inspected by the [Jewish] priests in order to be let back into the community as prescribed by Mosaic law (Leviticus 14). The curing of disease is proof that God forgave their sins, but they still remained outcasts. They needed to be integrated back into the community through atonement.

The song gives us no real clue as to what happened while he was with his benefactor, although drugs are at least partly responsible for whatever happened. We do not know if the benefactor enabled his problems by covering up the damage done, or if the protagonist was in some way held accountable for his problems as a condition of coming back. I'll get back to this idea soon, but for now we do have an idea of what is needed to complete salvation. In addition to faith and forgiveness, one needs a conversion. Most people have faith, even if it is weak. God exists outside time and space, so his forgiveness is always there. But we must make an effort to integrate ourselves into God's community. We will never fully succeed in this effort, and this is where the healing powers of Jesus come into play. But as long as we are sincere in changing ourselves, we have hope for salvation. As such, even in the wretched and fatal state, the protagonist has hope if he is willing to not only change himself, but to allow Jesus to change him.

And now we come to the final point I will consider here, and that's the practical aspect of forgiveness. Again, we don't know how the benefactor treated the protagonist, other than the benefactor was always there for him. The protagonist has clearly hurt the benefactor, but nothing is

said about whether it was an aggressive hurt or from simply letting the benefactor down. And he clearly knows his suicide is going to hurt the benefactor even more.

Helping someone in need is something all Christians are called to do, but we are also told that not all our efforts will bear fruit. Indeed, in the parable of The Sower (Matthew 13:1-23, Mark 4:1-20 and Luke 8:4-15), we are told that most of our efforts will fail. But in the cases where we are successful, the fruit will far outweigh all the effort put into it. Salvation is ultimately a personal affair, and we may never see the fruit of some of our efforts. It is proper to grieve when someone we tried to help becomes lost, and it is proper to use real solutions to real problems. It can hurt to know that we are not the ultimate solution to someone else's problems. But if we approach each situation with prudence, we should never blame ourselves for what others do. All we can do is our best, and when our best isn't good enough, all we can do is seek better help and trust in God. After that, we should not let our pride get the better of us and lead us into despair ourselves.

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<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cdgVEb4xYBc>