



Blaise Pascal:
A Thousand Sparks of Truth

Part 7: Wretchedness



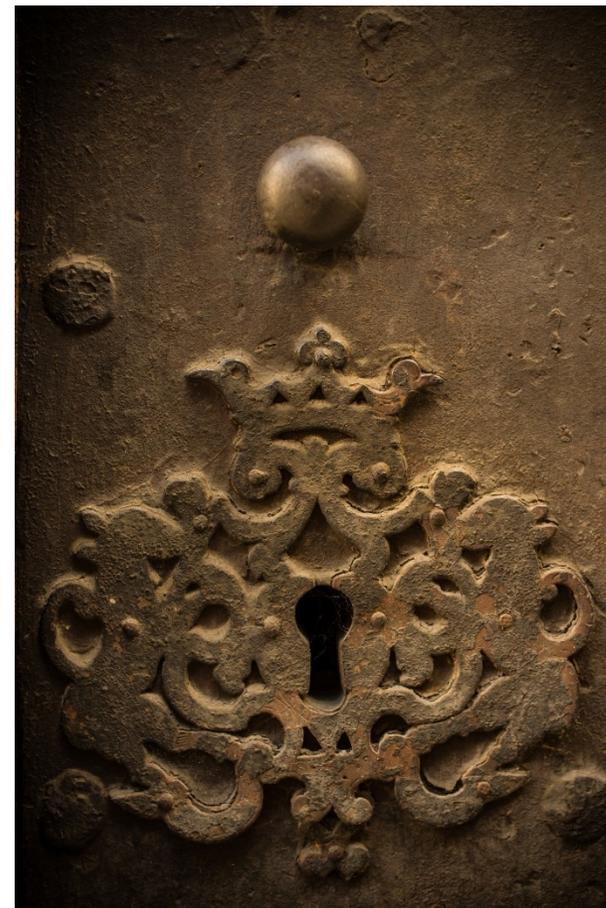
Introduction

What we have seen so far in our study of Pascal is how he systematically eliminates the props with which man sustains himself in his illusions. Cherished values, empty vanities, and multiplied diversions are shown to be purely imaginary, arbitrary concessions to the convenience or prejudice of the moment.

With great insightfulness and laser clarity, Pascal amassed a preponderance of evidence demonstrating the unhappiness of man. Man as man is unhappy to the core of his being. Using Pascal's word, man is *wretched*. With this as his starting point in apologetics, he begins to illumine the path that leads from wretchedness to happiness.

Pascal's Whole Argument

“Pascal is going to argue that man is like a very strangely shaped lock, with weird protuberances and indentations; and that Christianity is like a key – an equally strangely shaped key – that fits the lock; that Christianity alone explains both the protuberances and the indentations, man's greatness and his wretchedness; and that Christ alone can actually lead us from wretchedness to happiness. That is the ‘bottom line’ or fundamental point of the whole argument of the *Pensées*” (Kreeft).



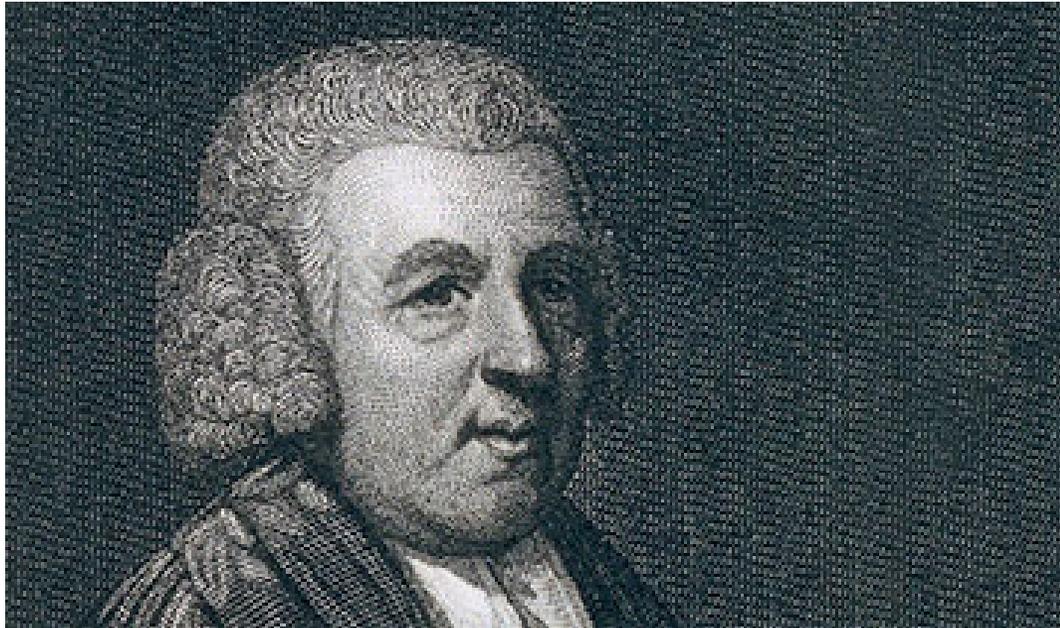
The Meaning of *Wretch*

- **Wretch**, *n.*, “one who is sunk in deep distress, sorrow, misfortune, or poverty; a miserable, unhappy, or unfortunate person; a poor or hapless being” (OED).
- **Wretchedness**, *n.*, “a condition of discomfort or distress caused by privation, poverty, misfortune, adversity, or the like; great misery or unhappiness” (OED).
- Pascal uses *wretchedness* in the sense of *unhappiness*.
- The opposite of being *wretched* is being *blessed*. “To be ‘blessed’ is to be happy in a very full and rich sense” (Grudem).

Wretchedness in the New Testament

- The Greek word means *wretchedness, distress, trouble, misery*.
- “There is none righteous, not even one...there is none who seeks for God...destruction and **misery** are in their paths” (Rom. 3:10,16).
- “Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your **miseries** which are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments have become moth-eaten” (James 5:1).
- “**Wretched** man that I am! Who will set me free from the body of this death?” (Rom. 7:24).
- “Because you say, ‘I am rich, and have become wealthy, and have need of nothing,’ and you do not know that you are **wretched** and miserable and poor and blind and naked” (Rev. 3:17).

John Newton's Epitaph



John Newton
1725-1807

JOHN NEWTON,
Clerk,
Once an Infidel and Libertine,
A Servant of Slaves in Africa,
was
by the Mercy of our Lord and Saviour
Jesus Christ,
Preserved, Restored, Pardoned,
And Appointed to Preach the Faith he
had so long labored to destroy.

Amazing Grace

*Amazing grace! How sweet the sound
That saved a **wretch** like me!
I once was lost, but now am found;
Was blind, but now I see.*



(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction

I can't get no satisfaction
I can't get no satisfaction
'Cause I try and I try and I try and I
try
I can't get no, I can't get no



Pascal's Outline of *Pensées*

“First part: wretchedness of man without God.

Second part: Happiness of man with God.

otherwise

First part: Nature is corrupt, proved by nature itself.

Second part: There is a Redeemer, proved by Scripture” (6/60).

Daniel Greene - American Artist



“If your initial drawing is wrong,
the entire portrait will be wrong.”

Greene's *Eleanor Roosevelt* & *Clara Barton*



Wretchedness & Diversion

- “The basis of all this lies in the **wretchedness** of human existence. Realizing this they have taken to diversions” (10/167).
- “Nothing could be more **wretched** than to be intolerably depressed as soon as one is reduced to introspection with no means of diversion”(36/117).
- “Being unable to cure death, **wretchedness**, and ignorance, men have decided, in order to be happy, not to think about such things” (133/169).
- “They have a secret instinct driving them to seek external diversion and occupation, and this is the result of their constant sense of **wretchedness**” (136/139).

Wretchedness & Diversion

“When I see the blind and **wretched state of man**, when I survey the whole universe in its dumbness and man left to himself with no light, as though lost in this corner of the universe, without knowing who put him there, what he has come to do, what will become of him when he dies, incapable of knowing anything, I am moved to terror, like a man transported in his sleep to some terrifying desert island, who wakes up quite lost and with no means of escape. **Then I marvel that so wretched a state does not drive people to despair.** I see other people around me, made like myself. I ask them if they are any better informed than I, and they say they are not. Then these **lost and wretched creatures** look around and find some attractive objects to which they

Wretchedness & Diversion

become addicted and attached. For my part I have never been able to form such attachments, and considering how very likely it is that there exists something besides what I can see, I have tried to find out whether God has left any traces of himself” (198/693).

How Wretched Is Man?

- “Man is vile enough to bow down to beasts and even worship them” (53/429).
- “Wretchedness induces despair. Pride induces presumption. The Incarnation shows man the greatness of his wretchedness through the greatness of the remedy required” (352/526).
- “We desire truth and find in ourselves nothing but uncertainty. We seek happiness and find only wretchedness and death” (401/437).
- “Without Christ, man can only be vicious and wretched. With Christ, man is free from vice and wretchedness....Apart from him, there is only vice, wretchedness, error, darkness, death, despair” (416/546).

How Wretched Is Man?



- “Only sentient beings can be wretched: a ruined house is not. Only man is wretched” (437/399).
- “Unless we know ourselves to be full of pride, ambition, concupiscence, weakness, wretchedness and unrighteousness, we are truly blind. And if someone knows all this and does not desire to be saved, what can be said of him?” (595/450).
- “The more enlightened we are, the more greatness and vileness we discover in man” (613/443).

Results of the Fall

“By this sin they fell from their original righteousness and communion with God, and so became dead in sin, and wholly defiled in all the parts and faculties of soul and body. They being the root of all mankind, the guilt of this sin was imputed, and the same death in sin, and corrupted nature, conveyed to all their posterity descending from them by ordinary generation. From this original corruption, whereby we are utterly indisposed, disabled, and made opposite to all good, and wholly inclined to all evil, do proceed all actual transgressions.”

- Westminster Confession of Faith, Chapter VI, Sections 2-4

Past Felicity

- “Pascal argues that, wretched as he truly is, man would not so frantically pursue elusive happiness unless somewhere within him there remained a glimmer of past felicity (happiness)” (Krailsheimer, p. 24).
- “That is the state in which men are today. They retain some feeble instinct from the happiness of their first nature, and are plunged into the wretchedness of their blindness and concupiscence, which has become their second nature” (149/430).

Man's Greatness & Wretchedness

- “Man’s greatness comes from knowing he is wretched: a tree does not know it is wretched. Thus it is wretched to know that one is wretched, but there is greatness in knowing one is wretched” (114/397).
- “All these examples of wretchedness prove his greatness. It is the wretchedness of a great lord, the wretchedness of a dispossessed king” (116/398).
- “Man’s greatness and wretchedness are so evident that the true religion must necessarily teach us that there is in man some great principle of greatness and some great principle of wretchedness” (149/430).

Man's Greatness & Wretchedness

- “*Man's Greatness*. Man's greatness is so obvious that it can even be deduced from his wretchedness, for what is nature in animals we call wretchedness in man, thus recognizing that, if his nature is today like that of the animals, he must have fallen from some better state which was once his own....Who indeed would think himself unhappy not to be king except one who had been dispossessed?” (117/409).
- “...it is certain that as man's insight increases so he finds both wretchedness and greatness within himself. In a word, man knows he is wretched. Thus he is wretched because he is so, but he is truly great because he knows it” (122/416).

Man's Greatness & Wretchedness

- “...thus the whole universe teaches man either that he is corrupt or redeemed. Everything teaches him his greatness or his wretchedness” (442/560b).
- “All things on earth show man's wretchedness and God's mercy, man's helplessness without God and man's power with God” (468/562).



The Wretchedness-Greatness Paradox

- Only in Christ can the paradox be resolved. “It is not only impossible but useless to know God without Christ” (191/549).
- “Knowing God without knowing our own wretchedness makes for pride. Knowing our own wretchedness without knowing God makes for despair. Knowing Jesus Christ strikes the balance because he shows us both God and our own wretchedness” (192/527).
- “Without the Fall, man would still be happy, without Redemption he could only remain wretched, and in the Incarnation God reveals himself in the only form comprehensible to a creature of finite understanding...” (Krailsheimer).



The Wretchedness-Greatness Paradox

- “But at the same time, we know our own wretchedness, because this God is nothing less than our redeemer from wretchedness. Thus we can know God properly only by knowing our own iniquities. Those who have known God without knowing their own wretchedness have not glorified him but themselves” (189/547).
- “Those who have known God through a mediator know their own wretchedness” (190/543).
- “It is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness as to know his wretchedness without knowing God” (446/586).

The Wretchedness-Greatness Paradox

“It teaches men then these two truths alike: that there is a God, of whom men are capable, and that there is a corruption in nature which makes them unworthy. It is of equal importance to men to know each of these points: and it is equally dangerous for man to know God without knowing his own wretchedness as to know his own wretchedness without knowing the Redeemer who can cure him. Knowing only one of these points leads either to the arrogance of the philosophers, who have known God but not their own wretchedness, or to the despair of the atheists, who know their own wretchedness without knowing their Redeemer” (449/556).

Two Examples: Job and Solomon

“*Wretchedness*. Solomon and Job have known and spoken best about man’s wretchedness, one the happiest, the other the unhappiest of men; one knowing by experience the vanity of pleasure, and the other the reality of afflictions” (403/174).



God's Answer To Wretchedness

- “Man is not worthy of God, but he is not incapable of being made worthy. It is unworthy of God to unite himself to wretched man, but it is not unworthy of God to raise him out of his wretchedness” (239/510).
- “The God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, the God of Jacob, the God of the Christians is a God of love and consolation: he is a God who fills the soul and heart of those whom he possesses: he is a God who makes them inwardly aware of their wretchedness and his infinite mercy: who unites himself with them in the depths of their soul: who fills it with humility, joy, confidence and love: who make them incapable of having any other end but him” (449/556).

God's Answer To Wretchedness

“All the days of my life I bless my Redeemer, who implanted them in me and who made a man full of weakness, wretchedness, concupiscence, pride, and ambition into one free from all these evils, by the power of his grace, to which all glory for this is due, since nothing but wretchedness and error come from me” (931/550).



Beatific Vision



Wayne Grudem

1948 -

“When we realize that God is the perfection of all that we long for or desire, that he is the summation of everything beautiful or desirable, then we realize that the greatest joy of the life to come will be that we ‘shall see his face.’ This seeing of God ‘face to face’ has been called the *beatific vision*, meaning ‘the vision that makes us blessed or happy.’”