

# THE PURSUIT OF DARWIN

*by Roger W. Sanders*

*"It seems ludicrous that I once intended to be a clergyman. Nor was this intention and my father's wish ever formally given up, but died a natural death when, on leaving Cambridge, I joined the Beagle as a naturalist."*

—CHARLES DARWIN'S  
AUTOBIOGRAPHY (1876)

"For this is good and acceptable in the sight of God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth." —1 Timothy 2:3–4

**D**arwin the God-hater, bent on overturning Christian culture: this is how many Christians view Charles Darwin. But let's dig a little deeper.

Actually this is easy to do because Darwin kept a personal diary from an early age until his death (see sidebar "The Life of Darwin"). When we dig, we find not a satanic ogre but an intellectual who embodied the many contradictions and conflicts prevalent in the British culture of Victorian England—a man like any other, a man whom God wanted to save. Even secular biographies unwittingly shout, "God pursued Darwin."<sup>1</sup>

## WHAT MADE DARWIN TICK?

Growing up in a wealthy middle-class family, Charles was devastated at age eight when his mother died. His father, a successful physician, was emotionally distant. Nevertheless, Charles soon learned how to convince "the Doctor" to give him what he wanted. In adult life Charles often put this skill to use to enlist help or sway peers.

Though quiet and well-mannered, Darwin was self-centered. For example, when he listed some twenty pros and cons to decide about pursuing courtship and marriage, all dealt with his own comforts and security.

Despite his self-centeredness, Charles could be generous. Most of his life, he supported the South American mission that evangelized the natives of Tierra del Fuego. He was not concerned about their souls, but he did want to see these "savages," whom he met during his early voyage on the *Beagle*, have a better life. Though not attending church in Downe, he became close friends with the vicar, and the villagers recognized him as a kindly, benevolent parish patron.

Like many science-types, Darwin took himself seriously. In early years, this came out as he tried to please superiors and mentors. As an

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adult with many responsibilities, he focused more on professional, social, political, and economic success. As his ideas on evolution developed after the voyage on the *Beagle*, he was torn between openly stating his views and secretly nurturing them until a time when expressing them would not ruin him or his family.

As a youngster, Charles scoured the seashores, hills, and woods in his efforts to be the best collector of shells and beetles. This birthed a love for cataloging specimens and information. While traveling on the *Beagle* for nearly five years (1831–36), he honed these skills to enrich the museum coffers of England and ensure his instant acceptance into the scientific establishment when he returned. Later, these same skills turned him into a one-man assembly line to compile, analyze, report, and theorize about his collected observations.

Darwin's travel journal, *The Voyage of the Beagle*, was an instant success. The 30-year-old celebrity reveled in the attention lavished on him in London's

intellectual circles—until violent stomach pains began to trouble him. This condition motivated him to seclude his family in Downe, where he insisted that colleagues meet him privately.

As heredity became better understood, he suspected his chronic illness to be congenital because his parents were first cousins. Since he had married his own first cousin, he began to blame himself for signs of the disease in his children (see sidebar “Darwin's Struggle with Evil,” pp. 32–33). In addition, stress may have played a big role.<sup>2</sup> He had to hide his true thoughts from a professional world that would ostracize him if they became known. In 1844 he finally exposed his theory to a trusted colleague and admitted that it was “like confessing a murder.”<sup>3</sup>

## WHO INFLUENCED DARWIN?

Despite Darwin's association with evolutionists and the antireligious, such as Robert Grant, Thomas Huxley, and his dilettante brother Erasmus, a number of people God placed close to Darwin reveal a God reaching out to him. His father, the Doctor, had forsaken the atheist leanings of grandfather Erasmus as the Darwin name became more connected with wealth,

respectability, and political correctness. Instead, he wrapped his son, Charles, in an Anglican formal education with plenty of exposure to the Scriptures and Christian orthodoxy.

Years later he recollected that, when heading to Cambridge to train for the ministry, he “fully accepted” the Apostles' Creed or, at least, “had no wish to dispute any dogma.”<sup>4</sup> Charles became especially close to Christian mentors, such as botanist Rev. John Henslow and geologist Rev. Adam Sedgwick, and friends like strongly evangelical Robert FitzRoy, captain of the *Beagle*.

More than these men, however, the “Wedgwood women”—his mother, sisters, wife, and daughters—were closest to Darwin emotionally. Though Unitarian,<sup>5</sup> they kept the question of eternity before Darwin. By the time Charles and Emma were married, he already doubted a personal God, the inspired Bible, the soul, and eternity.

In her anxiety whether Charles would be a branch thrown into the fire, Emma tried reaching him through letters in which she implored him to take to heart Jesus' Last Supper discourse in John 13–17.<sup>6</sup> In what Darwin called her “beautiful letter,” she said, “There is danger in giving up revelation . . . in casting off what has been done for



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Darwin voyaged around the world for nearly five years on the *Beagle* (1831–36). The publication of his travel account, *The Voyage of the Beagle* (1839), gained the 31-year-old Darwin renown. He would not publish *On the Origin of Species* until nearly twenty years later (1859).





your benefit as well as for that of all the world. . . . I should be most unhappy if I thought we did not belong to each other for ever.”

He kept that letter safe all his life and jotted on it for her to read, “When I am dead, know that many times, I have kissed and cried over this.”<sup>7</sup> Through the power of the Holy Scriptures that Emma lovingly shared (and despite her own personal doctrinal error), God had shown him the way of salvation.

### A PRODUCT OF HIS TIMES

Though God pursued Darwin through exposure to the Scriptures time and again, he resisted. He resisted in part because he was the product of a culture that struggled against biblical authority, despite being Christian in name. In particular, the majority of British clergymen and clerical scientists followed natural theology, a view of God

that took root in the late 1600s. In Darwin’s youth, they held that we can discover God and His attributes from human reasoning alone without reference to the Scriptures.<sup>8</sup> This mistaken approach led to three foundational concepts of natural theology, which undermined biblical authority:

- Creation is unchanging; otherwise the revelation of God would change and we could not know Him. *Problem*: Denies Adam’s Fall and the Flood and their consequences.
- Creation has been allowed to run on its own according to the fixed laws of nature, which have always operated the same way as they do today. *Problem*: Denies miracles can happen.

• Wherever the Bible disagrees with science, God accommodated the words in the Bible to ancient man’s primitive understanding, and science must be accepted as the true explanation. *Problem*: Science trumps Scripture.

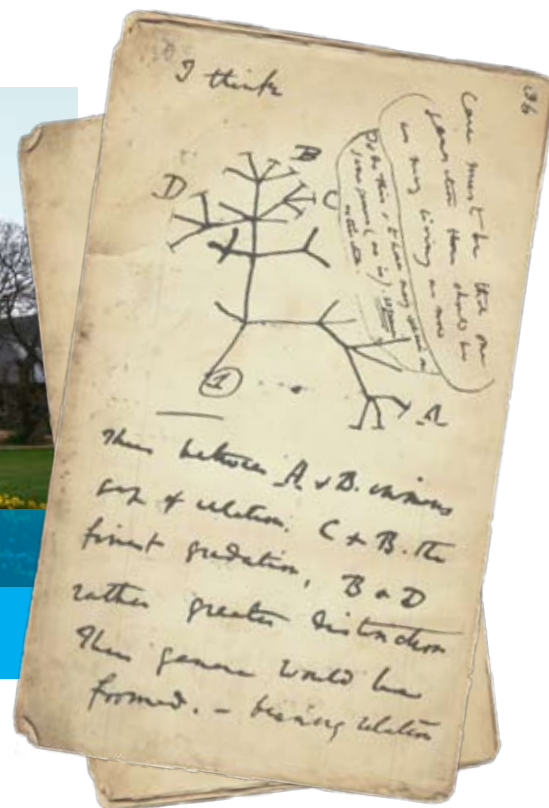
Based on this mistaken theology, the scientific dogma of Darwin’s day insisted that species could not change, even though the Bible never makes that claim (see “Do Species Change?” p. 36). On the other hand, people could see the earth changing as rivers flooded, rocks eroded, volcanoes erupted, and earthquakes wrenched the landscape. Therefore, they concluded that the earth had changed since creation

## THE LIFE OF DARWIN

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|--|---|
|  | <b>1809</b> — Born in Shrewsbury, western England (February 12)   |
| Mother dies  | <b>1817</b>   |
| Collects sponges with evolutionist Robert Grant  | <b>1825</b> — Enrolls in medical school at Edinburgh  |
|  | <b>1827</b> — Drops out of medical school   |
| Begins close association with botanist Rev. Henslow  | <b>1828</b> — Enrolls in Christ’s College, Cambridge  |
|  | <b>1830</b> — Graduates from Christ’s College; assists Rev. Sedgwick in geology field research; embarks on a five-year journey aboard the HMS <i>Beagle</i> as freelance naturalist |
| Field work in Galápagos Islands  | <b>1831</b>   |
| <i>Beagle</i> returns to England; Darwin joins scientific establishment  | <b>1833</b> — Experiences first attacks of chronic stomach illness  |
|  | <b>1835</b>   |
| Marries first cousin Emma Wedgwood; <i>Journal of Researches</i> (now called <i>Voyage of the Beagle</i> ) published | <b>1836</b>   |
|  | <b>1838</b> — Moves family to Downe, a village southeast of London  |
| Eldest daughter Anne dies at age 10  | <b>1839</b>   |
|  | <b>1842</b> — Becomes friends with Thomas Huxley  |
|  | <b>1851</b>   |
| <i>Origin of Species</i> published   | <b>1853</b> — Becomes friends with Thomas Huxley  |
|  | <b>1859</b>   |
|  | <b>1871</b> — <i>Descent of Man</i> published   |
| Death, April 19; burial in Westminster Abbey, April 26   | <b>1871</b>   |
|  | <b>1882</b>   |



Darwin moved his family to Downe (above) in 1842. There he continued to develop his theory that would change the scientific community forever. One page in a series of notebooks (right) shows a sketch about Darwin's preliminary speculations about common descent.



but very slowly by these same processes. Because the sedimentary layers are very thick in places, most scientific observers of the early 1800s concluded that these geologic changes had taken millions of years. Hardly any of them believed in a literal global Flood and all it implied about rapid change.<sup>9</sup>

So when Darwin set off on the *Beagle*, he was a half-hearted “creationist” molded by the science of his time. He believed the earth was eons old,<sup>10</sup> species had never changed (although it was unknown when they were created), and the Bible had nothing relevant to say about the issue. He was in a financially privileged class, eager for acceptance by the aristocratic scientific establishment, and wary of social radicals and revolutionaries.

Darwin had been taught to think. The trouble was he started without a grasp on the authority of Scripture and with wrong assumptions. So when the *Beagle* took him past fossil-filled strata, eroded valleys, unique island faunas, and submerged volcanoes, he saw nature in ways never taught to him in England. He saw species as the product of change but not change following the global Flood. He saw rock strata as the product of processes but

not processes stemming from the biblical catastrophe. He saw diverse kinds of plants and animals but did not recognize the gulf between distinct “kinds” that God had originally created.

But perhaps most importantly, Darwin could not see how a benevolent God could allow the death and suffering he saw in nature and in humanity (see sidebar “Darwin’s Struggle with Evil,” pp. 32–33). Death and suffering must have always been a part of nature since creation—that is what natural theology said. If so, then this God was not the God of Christianity or the Bible but was unfeeling and distant and only a maker of starting points, materials, and natural laws. From these Darwin reasoned that all of life’s diversity unfolded gradually without God’s trifling with the details.

If he could but show that species do change and propose the natural laws that originate new species, he could convince his peers that evolution is true. To the ruling class and clergyman scientists, who had already compromised on an old earth, the last remaining barrier to evolution was the nonbiblical litmus test of species fixity. Darwin was such a perfect product

of his time that, despite all his years of worry and indigestion, his scientific arguments in *Origin of Species* overwhelmingly convinced his peers.

Most British Christians had already adopted a low view of Scripture wherever it referred to science, believing science was more authoritative than Scripture. So evolution did not create any conflicts. They largely embraced evolution as God’s way of creating over long eons, despite its requirement of painful death and suffering over millions of years. In fact, evolution became a point of national pride. To the British elite, Victorian England evidenced the heights to which evolution could carry the human intellect and government.

Did Darwin realize that his assumptions and ideas reflected a rejection of Scripture’s authority to speak on every area it touches upon, including science? Surely so—but he did not seem to be greatly concerned about this; a lack of scriptural authority had been part of the religious and scientific training he had received from parents, tutors, and peers. So he did not see this as a main issue.

# MOST ASKED QUESTIONS ABOUT DARWIN

- **WAS DARWIN TRAINED AS A SCIENTIST?** Yes and no. In those days no one was trained as a scientist. One was trained in medicine, liberal arts, or theology and took up science as a hobby. Darwin began in medicine at Edinburgh but finished a Bachelor of Arts degree at Cambridge in hopes of becoming a county parson. While at school, he excelled in natural history under the personal tutelage of medical and theology professors renowned as accomplished geologists, zoologists, and botanists.
- **WERE DARWIN'S PARENTS AND GRANDPARENTS EVOLUTIONISTS?** Darwin's grandfather Erasmus Darwin, a physician, was a political freethinker committed to evolution. Maternal grandfather Josiah Wedgwood was a wealthy industrialist and friend of Erasmus but a Unitarian and little concerned about the topic. His father Robert Darwin sought respectability and never publicized his views on the topic.
- **WHAT DOES THE *BEAGLE* HAVE TO DO WITH DARWIN?** Lots. At Rev. John Henslow's recommendation, Darwin was invited passage on the HMS *Beagle*, which was assigned to survey the South American coast. The captain, aristocrat Robert FitzRoy, wanted a gentleman on board who could conduct natural history surveys and with whom he could fraternize. Darwin made full use of the opportunity to gain recognition as a skilled geologist and biologist.
- **WHAT DID *ORIGIN OF SPECIES* SAY ABOUT HUMAN ORIGINS?** Nothing. Darwin was acutely aware that it was too hot a topic in 1859. He waited until after the scientific community embraced evolution to publish *The Descent of Man* in 1871.
- **WHAT DO FINCHES HAVE TO DO WITH DARWIN?** Darwin collected many bird specimens on the Galápagos Islands. He found the finch specimens confusing and did not realize that they were all variations of finches until a bird specialist back in England examined them. Darwin did, however, recognize right away that the mockingbird species on the island belonged to one variable group, causing him to doubt that species cannot change (see "Finding God in Galápagos," p. 40).
- **DID DARWIN EXPERIENCE A DEATHBED CONVERSION?** No. The rumor stems from Lady Elizabeth Hope, an evangelist and temperance leader, who visited the Darwins one afternoon six months before his death while she was doing missions in the area. Her story was published in the *Baptist Watchman-Examiner* in 1915 after she had immigrated to the United States and had been actively writing gospel tracts for years. She doubtless embellished her story, which boiled down to seeing Darwin read the Bible (which he could have been, given his interest in comparing philosophies). She commented on his admiration of the Scriptures but did not say that he made a confession of faith or renounced evolution.<sup>11</sup>
- **WHY IS DARWIN BURIED IN WESTMINSTER ABBEY?** His disciples engineered it. Darwin planned to be buried in the Downe village churchyard. However, his cousin Francis Galton and "Darwin's bulldog" Thomas Huxley successfully used their scientific and political influence to petition Parliament for burial in London's most famous Anglican church.



Did he realize the philosophical consequences of his ideas? Definitely—his clandestine notebooks, which he dared not show even close friends, reveal that he struggled with the fact that evolution could undermine people's belief in God. But he seemed more bothered by what undermining others' faith might mean to him and his social standing than what it would do to other people.

Although Darwin sought to understand the origin of life-forms in purely scientific terms, he could never disentangle it from religious questions. Was God involved or even there? Was Jesus's sacrificial death pointless?

Though God had pursued him enough for him to know where to find the answers, Darwin never took the questions back to the Bible to find God's answers. He chose not to look. ■

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> One of the most readable of these and source of much of this article is *Darwin: The Life of a Tormented Evolutionist* by A. Desmond and J. Moore (New York: Norton & Co., 1994).

<sup>2</sup> The medical nature of Darwin's illness continues to generate debate. See: R. Colp, Jr., *To Be an Invalid: The Illness of Charles Darwin* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), which argues for stress as the main cause; A. K. Campbell and S. B. Matthews, "Darwin's Illness Revealed," *Postgrad. Med. J.* 81 (2005): 248–251, which argues for lactose intolerance accentuated by depression.

<sup>3</sup> In a letter to J. D. Hooker; see Ref. 1, pp. 314–315.

<sup>4</sup> N. Barlow, ed., *The Autobiography of Charles Darwin: 1809–1882*, with original omissions restored (New York: Norton & Co., 1958), p. 57.

<sup>5</sup> It is not clear what the Wedgwoods believed as Unitarians. They may have been merely antitrinitarian and held that God was present only in Christ when He was on earth, still allowing Him to be the only means of salvation. At least, they did not appear to actively adhere to Universalist teachings.

<sup>6</sup> Ref. 1, pp. 270–271.

<sup>7</sup> Ref. 4, p. 237.

<sup>8</sup> This was intended as a prerequisite to studying the revelation in Scripture (See W. Paley, *Natural Theology: Or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity*, 12th ed., J. Faulder, London, 1809). However, the contorted naturalistic explanations for such things as death and disease led to irresolvable inconsistencies with the Holy Scriptures.

<sup>9</sup> A minority of geologists continued to accept Noah's Flood as the source of major geologic formations. See T. Mortenson, *The Great Turning Point: The Church's Catastrophic Mistake on Geology—Before Darwin* (Green Forest, Arizona: Master Books, 2004).

<sup>10</sup> Darwin had learned old-earth geology from Sedgwick, who believed the earth was molded by periodic regional cataclysms. However, Darwin took Charles Lyell's *Principles of Geology* (vol. 1, Murray, 1830) on the *Beagle* and was converted to gradualism and uniformitarian geology a few weeks into the voyage (Ref. 1, pp. 116–118).

<sup>11</sup> For further information see J. Moore, *The Darwin Legend* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Books, 1994).



**Dr. Roger Sanders** earned his PhD in botany from the University of Texas. Currently, he is the associate professor of science at Bryan College and is assistant director of CORE (Center for Origins Research).

# DARWIN'S PERSONAL STRUGGLE WITH EVIL

by Roger W. Sanders

The doctor tries to look away as he says, "I'm sorry. I've done all I can. Your daughter is dying."

How would you respond? "God, this is hard to bear. Please give me eyes to see from Your perspective. Take my despair and turn it into joy." Or would you say, "God, why are you doing this to my family; what has this little girl done to deserve this?" Even born-again Christians struggle with pain and suffering.

But what if you had never placed your personal faith in Jesus Christ? Would you be more inclined to cry out, "What kind of God are You? This is all Your fault. I'm not sure I can still believe You exist."

That was Darwin's situation. He was 42 years old and his 10-year-old daughter, Anne, who had developed such a strong emotional connection with him, the joy of his life, lay dying. Her physical trauma hadn't appeared suddenly. Less than a year earlier, she developed a stomach illness like the one that had plagued him for 12 years. But hers was more severe, more feverish, came more often, and lasted longer. Likewise, doctors were puzzled by its cause. He took her

Darwin could not understand what kind of God could allow the death of his 10-year-old daughter Anne (below).



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to the health retreat where he had received the most help, but she found no relief.

At the end he stayed close at her side, at times relapsing into his own illness. After days of writhing with agony, she wasted away and passed into a coma before slipping irretrievably from her sobbing father.

Darwin's faith was not in Jesus Christ, only in what he could see, touch, and understand. Perhaps more than any other scientist of his time, this hurting father came to understand the evil that really exists in the natural world—"red in tooth and claw" as the poet Lord Tennyson described it. The death of Anne just made the evil touch him personally. As far as we know, it also made him turn away from God once and for all.

Just how profoundly he came to reject God is evident from this private message to his family, penned late in life and intended to be read after his death: "I can indeed hardly see how anyone ought to wish Christianity to be true; for if so the plain language of the text seems to show that the men who do not believe, and this would include my father, brother and almost all my best friends, will be everlastingly punished. And this is a damnable doctrine." Apparently, he understood the New Testament doctrine of salvation through the substitutionary death of Christ but did not believe it.

The blame for his turning away must fall partly on the church and the theologians and scientists who, decades before Anne's death, had already given up a biblical view of history. Adam's Fall and the Flood no longer had meaning as real events that shaped our world. The church foolishly explained that God created parasites to prod men to cleanliness, and mice to feed cats. The cat's capture of a mouse makes both the cat and the mouse "happy."

Without the Bible's explanation that Adam's sin brought death and a curse on the world, there is no satisfying answer to why evil exists. We also have no logical foundation to explain why Jesus needed to come to earth as a divine "second Adam" to defeat death (Romans 5:12–14; 1 Cor-



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**Darwin did not accept that Adam's sin was responsible for the death he observed in nature (above).**

inthians 15:44–49). The church failed to give Darwin a satisfying answer for the sight of a snake devouring a fallen baby bird or the pain of losing his daughter. Those in the church who claimed that God brought Adam's "very good" world into existence through millions of years of death and suffering made God out to be an ogre and a liar.

Darwin simply was unable to resolve suffering and death with a God who is good, just, and merciful. For him, the "Creator" was distant, caring little whether the world was very good or very bad. Rejecting the biblical view, he reasoned that death and suffering were integral to operation of the present world and had always existed.

Darwin proposed a new natural law—natural selection—which assumed that death has operated from the beginning. With this naturalistic, impersonal force of natural selection, he found a substitute for the God of the Bible, who is the Creator of all life-forms, the eternal Judge of sin, and the only possible Redeemer of fallen mankind and of our corrupted world. ■