

## **Choose: Darwin's Faith**

Evolution Sunday \* Feb 12, 2006

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I invite you to roll your imaginations back nearly 200 years ago...  
We're in England, among well-educated professionals.  
We live in a society that has never seen a chimpanzee;  
Have never heard of invisible viruses causing illness;  
and the mark of a good surgeon is one who is fast --  
as anesthesia does not exist.

In this society theology reigns as the great arbitrator of all truth,  
science must answer to God.

It was into this world-view, on this very day -- Feb 12<sup>th</sup> --  
in 1809 that Charles Robert Darwin was born.

Son of a physician,  
Charles arrived at medical school in Edinburgh at the age of 16.  
Finding the screams of patients suffering surgery, unbearable,  
two years later, he enrolls at Cambridge "to read for Holy Orders"  
that he might become a country parson who's also a naturalist --  
a common practice in those days.  
In fact, most naturalists were clergy who  
interpreted "the book of nature" as revelation of the Divine Creator.

While in school, the young Darwin is influenced by Herschel  
who claims:

"Science should claim it's own authority,  
separate from Scripture." (24)

Charles Lyell uses geological evidence  
to challenge the Bible's reckoning of the age of the earth. (26)  
Darwin's converted and leaves the path toward ordination  
to commit himself fully to science.

In 1831, at the age of 22, Captain FitzRoy invites Charles  
to join the HMS Beagle's 2-year expedition of the South Seas.  
Naturalist Charles is thrilled & accepts this opportunity to work. (25)

During his trip Darwin makes extensive observations -- writes hundreds of pages and collects 1,000's of specimens.

About walking through a forest in Brazil among "numberless species of ferns and mimosas" Darwin writes, "it is nearly impossible to give an adequate idea of the higher feelings which are excited; wonder, astonishment and sublime devotion fill and elevate the mind." (27)

"Among the scenes which are deeply impressed on my mind none exceed in sublimity the primeval forests un-defaced by the hand of man; whether those in Brazil, where the powers of Life are predominant, or those of Tierra del Fuego, where Death and Decay prevail. Both are temples filled with the varied productions of the God of Nature: no one can stand unmoved in these solitudes without feeling there is more in man than the mere breath of his body." (27)

After visiting the Galapagos Islands in the Pacific, off the coast of Equator, Darwin notices distinct, but linked species, on each of the arch-i-pelagoes. This causes him to doubt the orthodox belief that God originates each species by a separate act of creation, (29) a literal reading today's passage from Genesis.

Charles returns to England in October 1836 and seeks the help of ornithologist John Gould in identifying his avian specimens. Gould shows that the birds, which Darwin believed to be different species, are in fact, all finches.

Here, Darwin has tangible evidence of the transmutation of species -- and an invitation to describe this natural process, which will challenge orthodox belief in God-centered creation.

### State of Science and Theology

To give you some idea about the primacy of faith over science of this era, many physicians will not attempt to alleviate women's suffering during childbirth, believing it to be "consequent upon the temptation and fall of our first mother, Eve" referring to the account in Genesis.

Thankfully for Emma, Charles did not hold to this belief, and when anesthesia was discovered in 1846 he supported its use and administered chloroform, himself, to her as she gave birth in 1850.

Darwin knew his ideas were radical -- and feared the reaction of fellow naturalists. However, he continued to make notes, study, and write a theory of evolution -- the natural progression of species. Darwin was not alone in this. Herschel coined the phrase "mystery of mysteries" referring to the unknown law of nature that would provide for the replacement of one species by another.

Darwin also believed all creatures shared a common ancestor, placing humans among animals.

What then, of the role of metaphysics? He believed in the possibility that human beings had immortal souls & that there was some sort of afterlife w/ punishment or reward. (34) but wasn't able to prove this scientifically.

Darwin read philosophy, esp. David Hume and was influenced by Hume's belief that our arguments for the existence of God are a byproduct of human thought, a response to human anxiety about events beyond our control. (23)

Too, Darwin had also been extremely troubled by witnessing the trade of human slaves while on his travels aboard the HMS Beagle. This caused him to deeply question human morality as an inherent, God-given attribute.

In 1835 a chimpanzee named Tommy arrived in London, dying only a few months later.

Jenny, a young orangutan, arrived in 1837 and lived two years, followed by another Jenny who arrived in 1841. (38)

Among visitors to the monkeys, were Darwin and his children, as well as Queen Victoria.

Of the second Jenny preparing and drinking tea, the Queen said, "too wonderful," and then commented that the orang was, "frightfully, and painfully, and disagreeably human." (40)

In the wake of the monkeys on view in London, clergy & scientists both adamantly stated that humans are superior to animals.

Darwin comments,

"Man in his arrogance thinks himself a great work, worthy of the interposition of a deity. More humble and I believe true to consider him created from animals."

Charles knew that "the religious sentiment" was never "strongly developed in him."

We wasn't given to prayer

and found the Old Testament an untrustworthy record of history.

Since the New Testament claimed Jesus' Christhood as a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy,

his faith in orthodox Christian theology also failed.

He disagrees with those who used "evidences" in Scripture and the natural world (47)

and would be deeply appalled by the modern claim

that Intelligent Design is a reasonable scientific theory.

However, Darwin knows his future wife is a believer, so he asks his father for advice.

Dr. Darwin tells his son Charles to conceal his true beliefs,

as "some women suffered miserably

by doubting about the salvation of their husbands,

thus making them to likewise suffer." (48)

Charles, however, opts for honesty and tells his fiancée Emma that while he doubts "Christian Revelation", he does hold to Christian morality, and wants to believe in an afterlife and promise of salvation, but to date has found no argument satisfactory.

Emma and Charles were raised Unitarians -- Christians who do not believe in Jesus' divinity, but that he is a mortal revelation of God's truths.

Like other liberal Unitarians, Emma believes religion is "an affair of the heart, not the intellect." She believes in an afterlife, finding comfort in eternal reunions with loved ones. Emma believes that salvation is gained through belief in Christ. So, she is deeply concerned about Charles' faith, or lack of it.

While courting, Emma writes to him:

"My reason tells me that honest and conscientious doubts cannot be a sin, but I feel it would be a painful void between us."

They speak honestly with one another, and search for a shared faith. (56)

They marry in January of 1839 and soon Emma is pregnant with their first child. Again, she worries about Charles' faith.

In a letter to him, stating she finds it difficult to speak of these things in person, she thinks his scientific approach to religion is futile, as faith is "above our comprehension."

Her concern is that Charles will not experience eternal life, and that in "giving up revelation" -- Christ's offer of eternal life -- he's committed a sin of ingratitude, "casting off what has been done for your benefit as well as for that of all the world." She closes by expressing her love for him and her happiness for their marriage.

Charles keeps this letter and reads it frequently.

Years later he wrote upon it --

"When I am dead, know that many times  
I have kissed and cried over this." (58-59)

Charles continues his scientific work and in 1844  
reveals to fellow scientist Joseph Hooker,  
who would be a life-long friend  
his "secret" theory of evolution through natural selection  
explaining "the simple way by which species  
become exquisitely adapted to various ends."  
Hooker is quite supportive. (85)

At this time, Darwin perceives primary laws of nature  
residing beside Scriptural Revelation,  
calling these God's "most magnificent laws"  
suggesting that "the existence of such laws  
should exalt our notion of the omniscient Creator." (86)

He is also struggling with the reality of pain and suffering,  
noting that all species undergo cruelty and pain  
as a result of purely natural processes, including humans.

Darwin holds that natural laws are ordained by God,  
as well as the processes that result from them,  
but that God does not have concerns  
about the individual consequences of those processes. (86)

In July of 1844 he asks Emma to read his evolution theory.  
She responds with Paley's claim that  
the structure and function of the eye prove the existence of God --  
reasoning that only God could have designed  
such a complex mechanism.

Emma's comments strike at the heart of his theory.  
Darwin sets aside the work until he can respond to such challenges,  
pursues other scientific matters, and raises a family. (88)

Charles and Emma had a large household of children!  
Their first son, Willy, is born in December of 1839.  
About two and a half years later their first daughter,

Annie, is born in March of 1841.  
 In the next ten years, Emma gives birth to seven more children.  
 Her last child, born 3 years later, arrives when she is 48.

Their children are all baptized and confirmed  
 in the local Church of England.  
 The family regularly attends services,  
 however, Unitarian Emma objects to the recitation of the Creed.  
 During that part of the service the Darwin family do not face the altar  
 rather they face the congregation  
 and "sternly looked into their eyes!" (128)

Emma's Unitarian belief is in the personhood of Jesus Christ  
 "whom God sent to teach men their duty  
 and to persuade them to practice it." (Joseph Priestly, 126)  
 She believes, unlike Charles,  
 that it is God's will for us to suffer from time to time,  
 in order to be corrected for our own good.

She and Charles have strong moral beliefs  
 and teach their children the equality and value of all persons,  
 as well as compassion toward the feelings of animals.

Charles reads a great deal of philosophy and scholarly works  
 about Christianity and the Bible.  
 He appears to have been searching for a foothold  
 on which to build a Christian faith he could honestly share  
 with Emma and his children.

In the fall of 1848 Charles father, Dr. Darwin, dies.  
 He was an "unbeliever" and his sons reflect upon his eternal fate.  
 Charles' brother Erasmus, writes:

"[I] feel anything but how good God was  
 to take him without suffering more." (135)

A year later, at the age of 40, Charles abandons his search  
 for a belief in Jesus as Christ.  
 It is also during this time that his health declines --  
 Emma believes it due to the nature of his work  
 and the mental turmoil it creates.

Charles is wracked with boughs of vomiting,  
 which set his nervous system on edge  
 and leave him trembling and unable to work.  
 (Physicians now believed he was suffering  
 from an illness acquired on his travels overseas.)

Keep in mind that modern medicine doesn't exist.  
 Eager for a cure, Darwin considers Dr. James Gully's  
 water treatments which draw a fashionable crowd  
 to Malvern, SW of Birmingham.

In 1849 the family and their servants rent a villa  
 and Charles begins treatments -- packed in wet towels,  
 icy showers, foot baths, spinal wash, and sweating.  
 Charles' health improves.  
 At home, Charles continues the treatments.

The next year Emma and Charles are certain  
 that their eldest daughter, Annie, is now ill.  
 They take her to the ocean for "sea baths" which don't help.  
 Nor does medical care from established London physicians.  
 In 1851, Annie is sent to Malvern for the water treatments.  
 Emma remains home, late in a pregnancy.  
 Annie's governess and nanny, and then her father, go with her.

Charles, quite close to Annie,  
 keeps in regular contact with his wife through the post --  
 which is delivered twice a day.

A week before Annie's death, Charles writes to his wife:  
 "Your note made me cry much,  
 but I must not give way,  
 and can avoid doing so by not thinking about her.  
 It is now from hour to hour a struggle between life and death.  
 God only knows the issue." (186)

Emma's sister Fanny also joins them in Malvern.  
 By Easter Sunday, Annie is very weak and loosing consciousness.  
 When able to speak, she is extremely kind and grateful.  
 Three days later the 10-year-old Annie dies.

Charles writes to Emma,

"Our poor child has had a very short life but I trust happy,  
and God knows what miseries might have been in store for her.  
She expired without a sign.

How desolate it makes one to think  
of her frank cordial manners.

I am so thankful for the da-guerreo-type [photo].

I cannot remember ever seeing the dear child naughty.

God bless her.

We must be more and more to each other, my dear wife." (194)

Charles leaves Malvern before the funeral,  
though Annie's governess, nanny, and aunt are present.  
Darwin says he is glad for the Anglican service,  
finding comfort in it's words.

This was not Charles and Emma's first child to die.  
Their second daughter -- Mary Eleanor --  
had died within three weeks of her birth, nearly eight years earlier.

### Child Mortality

150 years ago in Great Britain, 1 out of every 200 children died.

Death in childhood was a fact of life. (229)

Currently, the death rate is closer to 1:5,000

...though folks in this room who know the painful loss of a child,  
in childhood or adulthood.

Of the Darwin's ten children, three would die prematurely --  
Mary Eleanor who died days after birth,  
Annie who died shortly after her 10<sup>th</sup> birthday,  
and Charles Waring, their last child, who died in 1858, still a toddler.

In fact, the day of Charles Waring's funeral,  
his father's colleagues -- Hooker and Lydell --  
presented a joint paper by Darwin and Wallace  
on their theories about the origins of species.

Religion offered many views on childhood death,  
none of which soothed Charles.

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He could not believe in a "heavenly recall,"  
 or "the deep blessing of sorrow",  
 or the "cost of original sin." (204)

After Annie's death,  
 on Sundays he'd walk with the family to the door of the village church,  
 but would not enter for the service.  
 He still believed in a Divine Creator,  
 but could not believe in God's infinite goodness --  
 as all sentient beings experienced a great deal of suffering.

Emma found some solace in the promise of Heaven,  
 and sought the aid of spiritualists,  
 but she could perceive of no reason why God would take her child.

I wish Emma could be here this morning  
 to reflect upon our Gospel reading  
 about Jesus being asked to perform a healing,  
 and of choosing to do so.  
 Many of us have been faced with the pain  
 of asking for a cure of loved one,  
 and of that healing not being given.  
 This is an ancient challenge to believers.

Emma hardly ever spoke of Annie,  
 though evidenced great emotion when she did.  
 Charles confided much of his thoughts about her death  
 to his writings and correspondence to others.

As was customary,  
 Charles wrote a memorial of his daughter, ending with:  
 "We have lost the joy of the household,  
 and the solace of our old age:  
 she must have known how we loved her;  
 oh that she could now know how deeply,  
 how tenderly we do still and shall ever love  
 her dear joyous face. Blessings upon her." (217)

Her death had a profound impact upon Darwin the father,  
 as well as Darwin the scientist.

Charles simply believed God was not involved.  
Annie's death was due to natural process. (210)

He took comfort in knowing that Annie had had a happy life,  
but he wanted to know what natural processes had taken hers,  
and his other two children's lives.

He feared that their physical weaknesses were hereditary.  
Emma and Charles were first cousins  
and emerging research showed such close relatives  
often produced weak or deformed offspring. (230)

It wasn't until 1877, 16 years after Annie's death,  
that a "germ theory" of infection appeared.  
Charles called it:

"the greatest triumph to Science;  
and now I rejoice to have seen the triumph." (231)

Annie probably died of tuberculosis -- a disease not then known.  
Charles Warning was probably born with Downes Syndrome,  
also an unknown condition at the time.

Darwin was very responsive to parents whose children had died.

To his dear friend Hooker after the death of his son, he wrote:

"I shall be glad to hear sometime about your boy,  
whom you love so.  
Much love, much trial,  
but what an utter desert is life without love.  
God bless you." (272)

Darwin was also a fan of George Elliot's writings.

About attempting to outlive sorrow, she wrote:

"Do any of us? God forbid.  
It would be a poor result of all our anguish and our wrestling,  
if we won nothing but our old selves at the end of it --  
if we could return to the same blind loves...  
Let us be thankful that our sorrow lives in us  
as an indestructible force, only changing its form, as forces do,  
and passing from pain into sympathy --

the one poor word which includes all our best insight  
and our best love." (290-291)

As Darwin evolved as a scientist, his faith in God continued to wane.

Many wrote to him, trying to convince him of proof of God's existence,  
but Darwin always kindly replied  
he witnessed no such scientific evidence -- though wished to.

He wrote to close friends that he worried that our human minds,  
being evolved from lower forms,  
might not be trustworthy resources for discerning God.

And as a senior, Darwin wrote,  
"I think that, generally, and more and more as I grow older,  
but not always, that an agnostic  
would be the most correct description of my state of mind."

As Darwin aged he found little interested  
in much other than scientific labors,  
and stated in this Autobiography:

"If I had to live my life over again,  
I would have made a rule to read some poetry  
and listen to some music at least once a week." ...  
"Perhaps the parts of my brain now atrophied  
could thus have been kept active through use." (308)

Though poetry and music, which he'd adored as a younger man,  
ceased to engage him, he never waned  
in his respect for all sentient beings  
and was known as a man with a very big heart.

Charles Darwin was an honest man,  
who risked much to speak the truths he witnessed.  
His lifetime of scientific work ranges from keen observations  
of barnacles, human emotions, and earthworms,  
to ground-breaking theories about the evolution of species  
via natural selection and the common origin of all life forms.  
Darwin's work, and that of his evolutionist peers,  
are the cornerstones upon which all modern biology stands.

As science continues to reveal the deepest mysteries of life -- from the minute wonders of DNA to the darkest black holes of space; through observable patterns of weather and disease; we will continually have new information to process.

My hope and prayer today as we celebrate the 197<sup>th</sup> anniversary Charles Darwin's birth is that we commit ourselves, as progressive Christians, to the on-going work of evolving theologically.

I believe our "Still Speaking God" can guide us in BOTH the wisdom of faith and the knowledge of science.

It saddens me that the theologians of Darwin's era, and some in our own time, are not prepared to humble themselves to on-going divine revelation.

May God bless Charles Darwin and all scientists whose compassionate work has ended much suffering.

And May God guide us, as we seek a faith that embraces the many wonders and challenges of this observable life. Amen.

**Prime Reference:**

Darwin, His Daughter and Human Evolution by Randal Keyne. New York: Riverhead Books. 2002. THIS is the prime resource for this sermon -- all notated pages to this source.

**Secondary References:**

Darwin: Discovering the Tree of Life by Niles Eldredge. New York: W.W.Norton and Company. 2005.

Darwin's Dangerous Idea. Video. © 2001 WBGH Educational Foundation and Clear Blue Sky Productions, Inc. 120 minute video from the "Evolution Series" depicts dramatizations of Darwin's life and interviews with modern scientists. Written and directed by David Espar and Susan K. Lewis. Sr. Producer David Espar. Hayward Library: Video 576.8 D

The Earth Moved: On the Remarkable Achievements of Earthworms by Amy Stewart. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. 2004.