

# Nature In The Light From The Cross

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“In the light shining from the cross [of Christ], we can rightly interpret nature’s teaching.”<sup>1</sup>

The statement raises some relevant issues: What questions would we as Christians ask about nature? What does nature teach? How can the cross of Christ illuminate our understanding of nature? What do we want to understand about nature? What is a human? What is our origin, identity, our destiny? What is nature? What is its origin? What is evil? Where did it come from? Is its existence compatible with a Creator? How does the cross help us answer these questions? The following discussion is an attempt to explore these questions in the context of the early chapters of Genesis and the Passion narratives from the Gospels.

To begin with, let's define the term "the Cross of Christ" and ask some key questions about nature and the presence of evil in our world. In a broad sense, the cross encompasses Christ's pure and self-sacrificial life and ministry on earth, climaxing in His death on Calvary and followed by His glorious resurrection. Defined in this way, "the cross" becomes "the center of all teaching and study" and can be applied in "the daily experience in practical life."<sup>2</sup> In a narrower way, however, the "Cross of Christ" is limited to the events surrounding Christ's death on the cross. In this discussion the cross is primarily taken in the latter sense, although we should keep in mind that Christ's death was the climax of His whole life of service and love.

This article<sup>3</sup> explores the way in which the events of crucifixion day help us understand nature. We find that the events of that day affirm important themes from the first chapters of Genesis, including the nature of humans as sons and daughters of God, the unwelcome presence of evil in the world through the fall of Adam and Eve, the status of

nature as a dependent creation, and the self-sacrificing nature of God. Undoubtedly, a richer and deeper meaning could be developed from a broader study, but our approach may serve as an introductory exploration and a stimulus to further study.

### **THE CROSS AND CHANGES IN NATURE**

God's creation and lordship over nature are taught not just in the story of Creation, but also in biblical passages that deal with Christ's life on earth and His death. Consider, for example, Matthew's account of the crucifixion:

*“From the sixth hour until the ninth hour darkness came over all the land. About the ninth hour Jesus cried out in a loud voice, “Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani?”—which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ When some of those standing there heard this, they said, ‘He’s calling Elijah.’ Immediately one of them ran and got a sponge. He filled it with wine vinegar, put it on a stick, and offered it to Jesus to drink. The rest said, ‘Now leave*

*him alone. Let's see if Elijah comes to save him.' And when Jesus had cried out again in a loud voice, he gave up his spirit.*

*At that moment the curtain of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The earth shook and the rocks split. The tombs broke open and the bodies of many holy people who had died were raised to life. They came out of the tombs, and after Jesus' resurrection they went into the holy city and appeared to many people" (Matt. 27:45-53).*

Several supernatural events are presented in this passage which link God, nature and the cross: darkness at mid day (**v. 45**), a violent earthquake (**v. 51**) and the bodily resurrection (**v. 52**). The cause for these events cannot be located in nature, but in the supernatural, and in this way they revealed God in control of nature.

The Genesis narrative of creation presents God as the Creator: "And God said, 'Let there be light,' and there was light. . . . And there was evening and morning--the first day" (**Gen. 1:3, 5**). The New

Testament identifies the Creator as Jesus: “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God . . . Through him all things were made” (**John 1:1-3**). The New Testament also affirms Christ’s lordship over nature: “Who is this? He commands even the wind and the water, and they obey Him”(**Luke 8:25**). These passages, read together, lead us to two conclusions: first, Jesus of the cross is the master of nature, not its servant; second, nature is a creation, dependent, intended for a purpose.

God is the creator, owner, and master of nature (**see Gen. 1:1; Ex. 20:11**). The universe is a creation. It does not operate on its own, it has no properties of its own, no rules of its own, no existence of its own. It is wholly, completely, and always dependent on God for its existence. God spoke the universe into existence, something we have never observed. God created living organisms, something we have never observed. Because of this, we must learn about the relationship of God and nature through special revelation, rather than discovery.

One special revelation that illuminates the question of nature is the cross of Christ.

## **GOD'S CREATION, THE ORIGIN OF EVIL, AND THE CROSS**

For example, does the cross of Christ tell us about the origin of evil? Consider the first cry of Jesus from the cross: "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" (**Matt. 27:46**). Christ had lived in the presence of His Father throughout His sojourn on the earth. Why then this separation between the two persons of the Godhead? The answer sheds light on a previously asked question: what is a human? God created humans as responsible beings, accountable to Him for their actions. Although created with freedom of choice, God commanded Adam and Eve to obey His instructions. They were not to eat a particular fruit (**Gen. 2:15-17**), and they perfectly understood the instruction (**Gen. 3:1-3**).

But the serpent presented an argument against God's statement. The argument was based on both logic and observable evidence, yet it was false. The

observable evidence was that the serpent was touching, and apparently even eating the fruit. The serpent did not die, but was able to speak and reason, apparently as a result of eating the fruit. The logic was that if eating the fruit could benefit a serpent in this manner, it could make a human being like God Himself. “‘You will not surely die,’ the serpent said to the woman. ‘For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.’ When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good for food and pleasing to the eye, and also desirable for gaining wisdom, she took some and ate it. She also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate it” (**Gen. 3:4-6**).

Eve’s action was not one of planned rebellion; she was deceived. The evidence she observed with her own eyes appeared to support the words of the serpent and to contradict the words of her Creator. Unfortunately, Eve chose to believe what she saw rather than what God had told her. The result was separation from God; work became a toil and sweat;

thorns and thistles, suffering and pain became part of life; and Adam and Eve had to leave their first home, the Garden of Eden (**see Gen. 3:17-23**). God's expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden was an act of His mercy. God did not want sinful human beings to have access to the tree of life and thus live forever in sin with its painful consequences.

Nevertheless, sin had its devastating consequences on both the human and nature. Paul states this truth graphically: "Therefore, just as sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned." "For if, by the trespass of the one man, death reigned through that one man, how much more will those who receive God's abundant provision of grace and of the gift of righteousness reign in life through the one man, Jesus Christ. Consequently, just as the result of one trespass was condemnation for all men, so also the result of one act of righteousness was justification that brings life for all men. For just as through the disobedience of the one man the many were made sinners, so also



through the obedience of the one man the many will be made righteous”(Rom. 5:12, 17-19).

Follow the biblical portrayal. God created humans in His image (Gen. 1:16, 17), gave all they needed, including freedom. They freely chose to believe the false evidence presented to them rather than to trust what had God said. They became sinners and subject to death. Along with them, the beauty of nature came under the curse of sin. And God became flesh in Jesus Christ who paid the penalty for sin by sacrificing Himself in our place. Through that death on the cross, restoration of the human and the nature to the ideal of the pre-fallen has become a reality.

The cross tells us who we are. We are not a result of a cosmic accident. We are neither risen from lower creatures nor fortuitous arrangements of molecules through an evolutionary process that took millions of years. Instead we are sons and daughters of God, albeit fallen from sin by our choice. But we are rescued from eternal death and restored to fellowship with God by the sacrifice of Christ.

In order to understand the problem of the origin of evil we need to consider carefully both **Genesis 1-3** and Christ's experience on the cross of Calvary. In the light from the cross we see that evil is the result of human distrust of God's word. In other words, Adam and Eve trusted the evidence of their senses above the word of God. Eve saw that the tree was good for food. She also saw that it was pleasant to the eyes. Then she saw that it would make one wise. Moreover, the talking serpent was an empirical evidence that could not be denied.

Some have suggested that the story of Eden was intended to be read as a parable and not as a historical event. That type of approach to the text of Genesis is not supported by Scriptural evidence (**Matt. 19:4-6; John 8:44-45; 2 Cor. 11:3**). Yet even if one decided to take this story as a parable, the meaning is still very clear: God's word is to be trusted, above reason and empirical evidence. Not to trust God brings sin and death. The reason why Christ had to die was that Adam and Eve did not fully trust God. Thus the cross of Christ illuminates

the question of the origin of evil. Evil comes from rebellion against God; from considering our human reason as superior and therefore more reliable than God's word. This rebellion against God was first led by Satan, and in the Garden of Eden the human family joined in.

The Bible clearly teaches that God maintains the existence of the entire universe and that includes the life of rebellious beings who misuse their existence to cause evil. Although God does not cause evil, He allows it to exist. This is because He gives all created beings freedom of choice. The cross reveals both our status as valued children of God and also God's self-sacrificing plan to free us from evil.

### **THE CROSS AND SEPARATION FROM GOD**

When humans were created, they were in a close and direct communion with God. It was only when Adam and Eve sinned that they became separated from Him. Thus the separation came as the direct result of sin. Says the prophet Isaiah: "Your iniquities have separated you from your God; your

sins have hidden his face from you, so that he will not hear” (**Isa. 59:1-2**).

But Jesus knew no sin; how could sin separate Jesus hanging on the cross from the Father? The answer is that Jesus took responsibility for our sins. Note what the apostles testify:

“God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (**2 Cor. 5:21**). “He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sins and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed. For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (**1 Pet. 2:24-25**).

Peter’s testimony reflects the core theme of the Song of the Suffering Servant of the Lord found in **Isaiah 53**: “Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace

was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all. ...Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and though the Lord makes his life a guilt offering, he will see his offspring and prolong his days, and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand. After the suffering of his soul, he will see the light of life and be satisfied; by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many, and he will bear their iniquities. Therefore I will give him a portion among the great, and he will divide the spoils with the strong, because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors. For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors" **(Isa. 53:4-6, 10-12).**

Christ's cry on the cross came from a sense of the separation from God brought on by His acceptance of the responsibility for human sin. This tells us something about ourselves: we are sinners, yet highly valued by God. This concept of human value

immediately takes us back to Creation and Fall: “Then God said, ‘Let us make man in our image, in our likeness, and let them rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, and over all the creatures that move along the ground.’ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. God saw all that he had made, and it was very good. And there was evening, and there was morning—the sixth day” (**Gen. 1:26-27, 31**).

Humans were originally created “very good.” They were without sin and not separated from God. But sin spoiled this good situation and brought in separation and death. Thus evil is presented in the Bible as an intruder, something that was never intended by God. The cross of Christ, on the other hand, reveals that Christ came to defeat evil. Jesus made this goal of His life on earth” clear through the following words from **John 12:27,31**:”Now my heart is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save me from this hour’? No, it was for this very reason

I came to this hour. Now is the time for judgment on this world; now the prince of this world will be driven out” (**John 12:27, 31**). **1John 3:8** reiterates the purpose of Christ’s life and death: The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the devil’s work. Thus the cross of Christ reveals not only the painful reality of our separation from God brought about by sin. The cross also reveals the remedy for evil.

### **THE CROSS AND THE COMPLETE RESTORATION**

At this point we may consider a few more questions: What did Jesus mean when He pronounced from the cross the words “It is finished” (**John 19:30**)? What was the significance of the temple veil being torn? The apostle Paul argues that Jesus Christ died in our place so that we could once again be acceptable to God: “Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending

his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit”

**(Rom. 8:1-4).**

Jesus bore our sins on the Cross, and He died in our place. By doing so, He vindicated God’s character in both justice and mercy. The temple was the location where the symbolic lamb was slain in the place of the individual sinner. The torn veil (**Matt. 27:50-51**) symbolized the end of the Old Testament sacrificial system, as what that system signified was fulfilled in the lamb of God hanging on the cross. The renting of the temple veil from top to bottom was a supernatural event, signifying that the death of Jesus opened the way of salvation for repentant sinners, and they can now come boldly into the Most Holy Place. **Hebrews 4:14-16** says: “Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess. For we do not have



a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin. Let us then approach the throne of grace with confidence, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help us in our time of need.”

Thus, the cross reveals Jesus as victor in the cosmic conflict with Satan. At the cross, Jesus crushed Satan (**Gen. 3:15**), and overcame Satan. He died in our place, and gave us freedom to choose life. Moreover, in the light of the cross we see Jesus’ death as a substitution and the remedy for sin. As Paul states: “God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement through faith in his blood. He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished—he did it to demonstrate his justice at the present time, so as to be just and the one who justifies those who have faith in Jesus” (**Rom. 3:25-26**).

Jesus on the Cross triumphed over the powers of evil led by the prince of this world. But the same

cross reveals Jesus as the sacrificial Lamb of God, dying in our place so that God's justice and mercy might be seen by all and also that we may have the eternal life. This is aptly expressed in the following quotation: "Christ was treated as we deserve, that we might be treated as He deserves. He was condemned for our sins, in which He had no share, that we might be justified by His righteousness, in which we had no share. He suffered the death which was ours, that we might receive the life which was His. 'With His stripes we are healed'."

The results of Christ's victory over sin and Satan will be fully manifested when in the end our whole planet is completely transformed, and "the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God" (**Rom. 8:21**).

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we affirm that Genesis 1-3 and the gospel accounts of Christ's death on the cross shed light on each other. When these two narratives are

studied together we can see that humans are fallen sons and daughters of God, nature is a dependent creation, and evil is the result of sin. We can also conclude that God cared about human beings from the very beginning and that Christ's death on the cross releases us from the penalty of sin.

The Cross reveals the self-sacrificing nature of God, a principle only faintly reflected in fallen nature. The cross of Christ illuminates the question about the remedy for evil in nature.

Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948) 8: 325.

See *Ibid.*, 320.

This article is based on a paper read at the Gloria Patri conference, June 26-29, 2008, Wyboston Lakes Conference Center, Bedfordshire, United Kingdom. Unless otherwise stated, all scriptural passages are from the New International Version.

Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1940), 25.