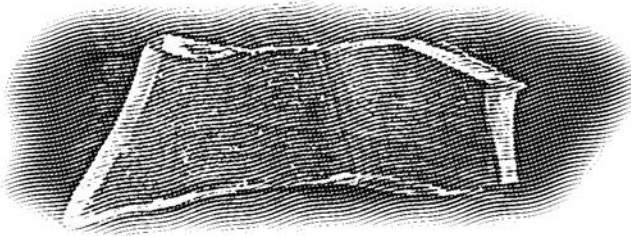


Through *a* Glass, Darkly



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week's Study: *Job 41:11; 1 Cor. 6:19, 20; Gen. 3:17; John 12:31; 1 Cor. 1:18–21.*

Memory Text: “The wisdom of this world is foolishness in God’s sight. As it is written: ‘He catches the wise in their craftiness’ ” (*1 Corinthians 3:19, NIV*).

Theologian William Paley wrote a book in 1802 entitled *Natural Theology* in which he argued that one can use observations of nature in order to develop an understanding of God’s character. He wrote extensively on the ways in which the features of animals exhibited the care and skill of the Creator. Paley may have made too much of some features, however, because he failed to recognize the effects that both sin and the Fall have had on nature, but his general argument has never been refuted—despite numerous and vociferous claims to the contrary!

Charles Darwin, in contrast, argued that a God who designed every feature of nature would not be good. As evidence, he referred to a parasite that feeds within the living bodies of caterpillars and the cruel way in which a cat will play with a mouse. For him, these examples were evidence against the existence of a loving Creator God.

Though Paley was obviously closer to truth than was Darwin, this week’s lesson will examine what the Bible has to say regarding the question of what it is that nature reveals, and does not reveal, about God.

**Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, February 16.*

The Earth Is the Lord's

A scientist once challenged the need for God; he argued that he could create humanity just as well as any God could. God said, "OK, go ahead and do it." The scientist began to gather some dirt, but God said, "Wait a minute. Make your own dirt!"

Though this story is only a fable, the point is clear: God is the only One who can create from nothing. God made all the material of the universe, including our world, our possessions, and our bodies. He is the legitimate owner of every thing.

What's the basic message to us in these texts? More important, what does this message tell us about the way in which we should relate to the world, one another, and to God? *Ps. 24:1, 2; Job 41:11; Ps. 50:10; Isa. 43:1, 2; 1 Cor. 6:19, 20.*

A favorite Christian hymn begins with the words, "This is my Father's world." It truly is our Father's world because He created it. There is no more legitimate claim to ownership than creatorship. God created and therefore owns the entire universe, the heavens and the earth, and all that is in them.

Not only does the world belong to God, He claims ownership of every creature on earth, as well. No other being (at least that we know of) has the power to create life. God is the only Creator and, as such, the ultimate owner of every creature. We are all completely dependent on God for our existence. We cannot give God anything except our allegiance; everything else on earth is His already.

More so, we are God's not only by creation but, even more important, by redemption. Though a wonderful gift from God, human life has been greatly damaged through sin, and it will end in death, a prospect that denudes life of all meaning and purpose. Life, as it now exists for us, isn't all that great. Our only hope is the wonderful promise of redemption, the only thing that can make things "right" again. Thus, we are Christ's by creation and by redemption.

A Fallen World

One thing is certain: the world in which we now live is vastly different from the one that came forth from the Lord at the end of the Creation week. Certainly, powerful evidence of beauty and design exist almost everywhere; however, we are sin-damaged beings living in and trying to understand a sin-damaged world. Even before the Flood, the world had been negatively impacted by sin. “In the days of Noah a double curse was resting upon the earth in consequence of Adam’s transgression and of the murder committed by Cain.”—Ellen G. White, *Conflict and Courage*, p. 32.

How was the world “cursed,” and what were the results of those curses? *Gen. 3:17; 4:11, 12; 5:29.*

The curse on the ground for Adam’s sake must have involved the plant kingdom, because its results would include the production of thorns and thistles. The implication is that all of the creation is affected by the curses resulting from sin. The Ellen G. White quote above states very clearly that the curse upon Cain was not limited merely to him but rested on the whole world.

Unfortunately, the curses due to sin didn’t end here—because the world faced another curse, which greatly damaged it. That, of course, was the worldwide Flood. “And the LORD smelled a sweet savour; and the LORD said in his heart, I will not again curse the ground any more for man’s sake; for the imagination of man’s heart is evil from his youth; neither will I again smite any more every thing living, as I have done” (*Gen. 8:21*).

The Flood disrupted the system of watering that God had established at Creation, stripping the soil from parts of the earth and depositing it in other parts. Even now, rain continues to leach the soil, robbing it of its fertility and further reducing the crop yield. God graciously promised not to curse the earth again, but the soil we have inherited is a far cry from the rich, productive soil that God originally created.

Read Romans 8:19–22. Though these are difficult verses, how do they relate to what we have studied today? More important, what inherent hope can we derive from them?

The Ruler of This World

“The LORD said unto Satan, ‘Whence comest thou?’ Then Satan answered the LORD, and said, ‘From going to and fro in the earth, and from walking up and down in it’ ” (*Job 1:7*).

“Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour” (*1 Pet. 5:8*).

As we have seen, the world belongs to God, both by creation and by redemption. But we mustn’t forget, either, the reality of Satan, the reality of the great controversy, and the reality of Satan’s attempt to wrest control over all that he possibly can. Even though, the Cross made his defeat certain, he’s not going down quietly or gently. His wrath and destructive power (though limited to a degree by God in ways that we certainly don’t understand now) must never be underestimated. We mustn’t forget, either, that however often issues may come to us in shades of gray, the ultimate battle boils down to only two forces: Christ and Satan. There is no middle ground. And, as we know, so much of this world falls under the banner of the wrong side. Is it any wonder then that the world is so damaged?

Read John 12:31, 14:30, 16:11, Ephesians 2:2, 6:12. What important truth about the reality and power of the evil one is found in these texts?

In the book of Job, some of the veil that hides the reality of the great controversy is pulled back, and we can see that Satan does have the ability to cause great destruction in the natural world. Whatever the phrase “the prince of this world” entails, it’s clear that in this role Satan still exerts a powerful and destructive influence on the earth. This truth gives us all the more reason to realize that the natural world has been greatly damaged, and we need to be very careful about the lessons that we draw from it regarding God. After all, look at how badly Darwin misinterpreted the state of the world.

In what ways can you see, clearly, the destructive influence of Satan in your own life? Why is the Cross and the promises found in it your hope?

The “Wisdom” of the World

As humans, we have gained an incredible amount of knowledge and information, especially in the last two hundred years. Knowledge and information, however, are not necessarily the same thing as wisdom. We have also gained a much greater understanding of the natural world than our forefathers ever had. A greater understanding, however, isn’t the same thing as wisdom either.

Read 1 Corinthians 1:18–21, 3:18–21. How do we see the powerful truths of these words manifested in our time and context today, almost two thousand years after they were written?

There is so much in human thought that challenges God’s Word. Whether the issue is the resurrection of Jesus, the creation itself, or any miracle, human “wisdom” (even when buttressed with the “facts” of science) must be deemed “foolishness” when it contradicts the Word of the Lord.

Also, as stated earlier, so much science today, especially in the context of human origins, begins from a purely naturalistic perspective. Even though many of history’s greatest scientific geniuses—Newton, Kepler, Galileo—were believers in God and saw their work as helping to explain the work of God in creation (Kepler once wrote, “O God, I think Thy thoughts after Thee”), such sentiments today are often mocked by segments of the scientific community.

Some even seek to explain away the miraculous stories in the Bible by arguing that they were really naturally occurring phenomena that the ancients, ignorant of nature’s laws, misinterpreted as divine action. There are, for instance, all sorts of naturalist theories that seek to explain the parting of the Red Sea as something other than a miracle of God. A few years ago, one scientist speculated that Moses was on drugs, and so he just hallucinated the idea that God gave him the Ten Commandments on tablets of stone!

However silly some of this might sound, once you reject the idea of God and the supernatural, you need to come up with some other explanation for these things; hence, the “foolishness” that Paul so clearly and prophetically wrote about.

Through the Eye of Faith

Psalm 8 is one of the best loved of the psalms. To David, as a believer in God, the Creation spoke of the Lord's majesty and love. What specific lessons did David see in the creation, as recorded in Psalm 8? Also, considering what we know about the creation today—the moon and the stars and so forth—in contrast to what was known back then, why should David's words seem even all the more remarkable?

Only in the last one hundred years have we really come to begin to grasp the vastness of the cosmos and, hence, our physical smallness in comparison. One can't even imagine someone like David, apart from divine revelation, having any idea of just how big the "heavens" were. If he was in awe back then, how much more so should we be, knowing that, despite the size of the universe, God loves us with a love that we can't even begin to fathom?

Read Psalm 19:1–4. What did David see in the heavens?

Many have looked up at the stars at night and recognized the greatness of God and the smallness of humanity and have praised God for His care. Others have focused on the problem of evil in nature and blamed God for the problems that are, in fact, the result of their own choices or of the devil's activities.

To the believer, the creation truly speaks of God's care, even amid the evil introduced by Satan. Yet, even as powerful of a testimony and witness that the created world is, the revelation is incomplete, especially due to the results of the Fall and the curses that it has brought.

Read John 14:9 and then think about Jesus on the cross. Why must the Cross always be the main revelation to us of the nature and character of God?

Further Study: “I have been warned [1890] that henceforth we shall have a constant contest. Science, so called, and religion will be placed in opposition to each other, because finite men do not comprehend the power and greatness of God. These words of Holy Writ were presented to me, ‘Of your own selves shall men arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them.’”—Ellen G. White, *Medical Ministry*, p. 98.

Discussion Questions:

- ❶ Think about the “threefold curse” (Ellen G. White, *Spiritual Gifts*, vol. 3, p. 88) on this earth (the curse resulting from Adam’s fall, from Cain’s sin, and from the Flood). The cumulative effect of these curses, compounded over thousands of years, means that our present world is much different from the way that it was when God first created it. Why, then, must we be careful regarding the conclusions that we draw from the present world about what it was like in the beginning?
- ❷ Think about the work that science does, especially in the area of origins. There are no written labels to explain what we see. Science is entirely a human undertaking, and the human mind is limited in its scope and is prone to resist divine authority. Furthermore, Satan’s influence is strongly felt in nature, so that much of what we see is incompatible with God’s self-revelation in the Bible. Why is it so important that we place greater confidence in Scripture than we do in science, especially when considering unique events such as the Creation of our world?
- ❸ We do not understand all aspects of the tension between Scripture and science, but God is far wiser than we are, and we must acknowledge that there is more to the creation than science can ever discover. Why should we, in fact, not be surprised to find some tension between the supernatural events recorded in the Bible and the materialistic approach of science?
- ❹ Look at the Ellen G. White quote above. In what ways are we seeing this being fulfilled in our own church? How can we deal with these dangerous challenges to our mission and message in a way that—while never compromising our position on Creation and the Word of God—still keeps the church a “safe place” for those who are struggling with these difficult questions?
- ❺ Read Romans 11:33–36 and Job 40:1, 2, 7, 8. How reliable is human wisdom when attempting to understand the ways of God? What should be our attitude toward the difficulties that we encounter when trying to find harmony between science and Scripture?

The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Genesis 3:16–19*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Distinguish between general revelation, through nature, and special revelation.

Feel: Appreciate how nature’s messages, though mixed, can still help us to better understand who God is and who we are in relation to Him.

Do: Allow the limits of the curse to teach us our creaturely limits and the ways in which we are dependent on God.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: General Versus Special Revelation

A What can we learn about God through the curse of Eden?

B What is the difference between special revelation and general revelation?

II. Feel: Appreciating Our Creaturely Limits

A How do the Edenic judgments confront us with our creaturely limits?

B How do these judgments, despite their limitations—or perhaps because of them—actually provide us comfort and security in a fractured world?

III. Do: Living Within Our Limits

A How can you learn to relate to God from personally confronting the limits of Eden’s curses?

B In what areas of life can you learn to depend more fully upon God than you are now?

► **Summary:** God reveals Himself through special revelation but also through nature in more limited and general ways. General revelation through nature sends mixed messages about God. Job gives us some perspective on why natural evil occurs; yet, evil is still permitted by God. The reason for this occurrence is that humankind’s Fall was, in part, due to the desire to transcend creaturely limits and become co-deity with God. God’s corrective measures resulted in curses that increase human limitations. These limitations help us to more easily acknowledge that we can never be co-deity and to recognize our need to depend on a God higher and more powerful than ourselves.

Learning Cycle

► **STEP 1**—Motivate

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Nature gives mixed messages about God due to the Fall, satanic activity, and our sinfulness. Nevertheless, nature still reveals a gracious and loving God, even as we live under the Edenic curse.

Just for Teachers: Remind your class that while nature can show us things about who God is, the mixed messages in nature place severe limits on how much we can accurately know about God through nature.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, natural theologies were a popular pursuit of many Christian intellectuals. This fixation with natural theology led to great debate over how much we could know about God through the study of nature. Most Protestants were pessimistic about the ability of natural theology to reveal God, due to their belief that both nature and human reason were blighted by sin. Out of debates over natural theology, a distinction was made between two types of divine revelation: general and special. General revelation refers to aspects about God that can be inferred through the study of nature. General revelation is seen as limited in what it can reveal to us. Paul gave only two of the invisible attributes of God that the Gentiles could infer from nature: His eternal power and divinity (*Rom. 1:19, 20*). Undoubtedly, we can infer more, but there is no question that general revelation can be lacking in clarity due to the mixed messages in nature.

By contrast, special revelation is the type of revelation in which God communicates specific, clear information to humans through prophets, dreams, visions, and direct speech. It seems likely that many of those natural theologies produced actually read special revelation into nature, creating a greater clarity than is present in nature. But even the presence of calamities, disease, and uncertainty in this world can be a witness to the love and grace of God.

Opening Activity for Discussion: Share an experience in which something seemingly negative turned out to be a blessing in your life. What does this outcome suggest about the way in which we perceive calamities and troubles in our lives?

► STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: While Genesis 3 contains the first clear gospel promise, the curse on man and the earth still plays a redemptive role in human experience and thus testifies to the grace and love of God.

Bible Commentary

I. Thorns, Thistles, and Death: The Curse That Speaks of Love (*Read Genesis 3:16–19 with the class.*)

“The heavens declare the glory of God” (*Psalms 19:1*), said the psalmist, but who gets the message? Animist worshipers often have a far more fearful view of God because they find nature to be capricious and uncertain. Will the future bring flooding or drought? Will my child get sick and die, or will she grow to adulthood? Calamity and blessing both seem to be a wink away.

The devoted Darwinist seems little better off. What kind of God would purposely create through random, suffering-saturated processes? David Hull, as noted previously, feels that “the God of the Galápagos”—of random, evolutionary processes—“is careless, wasteful, indifferent, almost diabolical.”—David L. Hull, “The God of the Galápagos,” *Nature* 352 (August 8, 1991), p. 486. Other theologians assert that evolution shows God is good but limited in power. He cannot eradicate the suffering and evil, but He empathetically suffers with us. Either way, we do not seem to have “the sort of God to whom anyone would be inclined to pray.”—Page 486.

On the other hand, believers in Creation see a basic order and rational structure in nature that testifies to a mastermind Creator. Both Psalms 8 and 19 laud this perspective. Belief in Creation played a key role in developing the scientific method because those scientists believed that God would create in orderly, rationally understandable ways, making predictive experimental results possible. Therefore, in spite of the influences of sin—disasters, diseases, and the like—scientists still discerned a fundamental order and logic in nature. Nature thus presents two faces: one of haphazard evils and one of divine order and design.

The conflicting messages found in nature lead to deep questions about God, especially in regard to theodicy. How can nature testify to a good God when babies die, et cetera? Seventh-day Adventists have leaned toward the theme of the great controversy to help explain the mixed message of nature. Based on Job’s story, we blame natural disasters on the general results of sin or on direct, satanic activity. But this thinking does not adequately explain the judgments of Genesis 3. Because God pronounced a curse, including death, on humans and the earth, it seems that we must account for more than

mere satanic influences in order to explain natural evil. Why would God impose thorns, thistles, and death?

It may be argued that the fundamental problem with Adam and Eve was a failure to acknowledge and accept that they were creatures with finite limitations living under divine sovereignty. The couple tried to transcend their creaturely limits and be as God, without limits. Thus, God’s disciplinary action had to fit the transgression; so, God imposed a curse, increasing the level of limitations on humankind in order to reiterate and reinforce the idea that we are limited creatures in need of the Creator’s sovereignty. While God does not bring about all natural evil, He allows humanity to follow its ruler of choice, Satan, but not without protective limitations. Hence, we have mixed messages of curse and blessing in this world; yet, when taken as a disciplinary tool, even the curse speaks of a loving God, seeking to help us to reenter a proper relational orientation with Him. Thus, even the mixed messages from the curse reflect grace, as much as the first redemptive promise does in Genesis 3:15.

Consider This: Paul tells of having a “thorn in the flesh” (*2 Cor. 12:7*), which God would not remove. Rather, God told Paul that His power would be made perfect through Paul’s weakness—the thorn in his flesh. Paul thus used the thorn as a tool to train himself to see “thorns” as disciplinary tools of blessing that teach dependence on God. What are some thorns that you can turn into spiritual tools, teaching you how to better depend on God?

► **STEP 3**—Apply

Just for Teachers: Our lesson this week briefly touched on the judgment scene of Genesis 3:8–21. This is the first biblical example of God conducting an “investigative” judgment. Note the order: first, God conducts an investigation; then He passes judgment.

Thought Questions:

1 Why did God conduct an investigation? Why did He not just come in, pronounce guilt, and get the process over with?

2 What was the purpose of holding humans accountable in Genesis 3? Was it disciplinary? Redemptive? Punitive? What in the story provides evidence to support your answer?

► **STEP 4—Create**

Just for Teachers: We live in a world that encourages us to push, even defy, our limits. Yet, part of a proper relationship with God requires that we acknowledge His design limits for us that were given through creation.

Activity for Discussion: In what ways are you prone to disregard God’s limits for your life, and how can you better acknowledge your need for His sovereign reign in your life?
