

Times of Difficulty in the Last Days

In 2006, a book entitled “The God Delusion,” by a British author named Richard Dawkins, was released. Although this book has been around for almost 20 years, its impact is still being felt.

Dawkins is one in a long line of atheists who, among other things, seek to undermine the truths of the Bible. And yet, there’s a difference between Dawkins and many of his predecessors.

This man is one of a new group that’s been called, “the New Atheists.” Unlike many of those who’ve gone before them, this group is aggressively seeking new converts.

Dawkins writes: “If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down.”

Fast-forward now to just over a year ago. On Easter Sunday, March 31, 2024, Dawkins was interviewed for a story on a British radio program. In the interview, he said that he identifies as a “cultural Christian” and that he prefers to live in a country based on Christian principles and would not want the United Kingdom to become an Islamic nation. He said that he identifies with Christian society and that he would choose it over other countries based around other faiths, namely Islamic nations. Speaking to LBC (Leading Britain’s Conversation) Radio’s Rachel Johnson — the sister of former British Prime Minister Boris Johnson — Dawkins said that he was “slightly horrified” that Ramadan lights were put up in London instead of Easter ones.

On that radio interview, Dawkins spoke highly of certain things that pertain to Christianity, but he also spoke clearly of his own beliefs.

“I do think that we are a culturally Christian country; I call myself a cultural Christian,” he said. “I’m not a believer, but there is a distinction between being a believing Christian and being a cultural Christian. I love hymns and Christmas carols. I sort of feel at home in the Christian ethos. I feel that we are a Christian country.”

Included in the things that he likes about Christianity, Dawkins referenced the beautiful architecture of Christian cathedrals as well as kindness that’s shown by Christians, particularly as it pertains to some groups that he believes are consistently marginalized in the modern culture.

As important as it is to show kindness and to turn away from sinful partiality (James 2:1- 4), Dawkins is an example of someone who picks and chooses what he wants to accept or reject of Christianity based on his own personal preferences. Clearly, by his own admission, Dawkins is not a true Christian and does not generally accept Christian teaching. Although we might not be surprised that many in the secular culture arbitrarily pick and choose what they want to believe or not believe, sadly, even true Christians can also get caught up in picking and choosing the things about God and the Scriptures that they’ll accept or reject.

As we come to the text for this new series of articles, the Apostle Paul is writing to Timothy, his child in the faith. Paul writes this letter as he sits in a Roman jail awaiting execution. As he writes what will come to be his last inspired letter, it’s certain that he believes his life to be nearly over (4:6-7). What finds its way into this last letter is Paul’s focus on the future health and well-being of the church.

That being true, what does Paul focus on primarily? It's interesting to note that he puts a special emphasis throughout this letter on the fact that, no matter what happens in the culture around us, the word of God must go forth.

Why? Because it's the word that, by God's own design and plan, will transform lives as the spirit is working in concert with the word. And this belief is not unique to Paul.

It was our Lord Jesus himself who, quoting Deuteronomy 8:3, said: "Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God." (Mt. 4:4) In effect, Jesus is saying that we will become spiritually weak and faint of heart if we're not being nourished on a steady, healthy, diet of God's word.

Christian pastor and statesman John Stott has written that "churches live, grow and flourish by God's word, but they will languish and perish without it." In order to set 2 Timothy 3:16-17 in its context, let me remind us of Paul's words at the beginning of the chapter: "But understand this, that in the last days there will come times of difficulty ..." (3:1) The phrase translated "last days" refers to the time between the two advents of Jesus Christ. In other words, the last days began at the first coming of Jesus, and they'll continue until he comes again. This is supported by many scriptures, including Acts 2:17, which picks up on an Old Testament quote from the prophet Joel (see also Hebrews 1:2; James. 5:3; 2 Pet. 3:3).

So, then, Paul is not merely speaking of some distant-future time to come, but rather he's reminding Timothy that these "last days" have already begun in the first century. Paul wants us to know that, as we await the second coming of Jesus Christ, there will be times that will be especially punctuated by "difficulty." These times will be marked by an abandoning of God's word, and the character qualities and behavior that comes about because of that abandonment.

"And people will be lovers of self, lovers of money, proud, arrogant, abusive, disobedient to parents, ungrateful, unholy, heartless, unappeasable, slanderous, without self-control, brutal, not loving good, treacherous, reckless, swollen with conceit, lovers of pleasure rather than lovers of God, having an appearance of godliness, but denying its power." (3:2-5).

Further in the letter, we read: "For the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths." (4:3-4).

So, then, what's the answer to addressing the times of difficulty in the last days? Paul is calling on us to keep the focus on God's word.

Unlike Richard Dawkins, and others like him, who want to pick and choose what they'll accept or reject about the holy scriptures, Christians must be those who, along with their own regular study of the Bible, gather weekly on the Lord's Day in a healthy, local church for the public preaching and teaching of the word of God.

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