

LIVING AND TALKING WITH ATHEISTS

Why I Am A Christian?

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This morning I am going to conclude my series that I have called LIVING AND TALKING WITH ATHEISTS.

We began this series early last month as we looked at some of the issues that our atheists friends and neighbors have raised with us concerning our faith.

The springboard for this series has been two books, The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins and Letter to A Christian Nation by Sam Harris. I have tried to illustrate and illuminate some of their claims about Christianity.

Both men, at the core of their arguments, claim that religion is passé and it is time for us, who are believers, to get over it and move on with our lives.

And when you set aside your prejudices, when you truly listen to what they (and many, many others) are saying --- it is fairly easy to understand why so many people are turning away from religion and are looking for solutions to some of the world's most complex issues in other places.

I began this series looking at the issue of God and science.

In Dawkins' mind, science has made God obsolete.

Science can explain all of the questions of life. Thus we no longer have a need for God.

We then looked at the ways that religion in general and Christianity in particular --- have been used to perpetuate evil in the world.

- We talked about the role of the Bible with slavery
- And the ways that Christianity has been used to keep certain groups of people in subservient positions.

Particularly women

- And how religious folk tend to talk about one thing and do the opposite → Jesus called these kinds of people hypocrites

The next week we talked about how Christianity has been used to kill and torture millions of people.

- Crusades
- Inquisition
- Manifest Destiny

Harris and Dawkins claim that religion is the most violent institution ever known to humanity.

If that wasn't enough, the following week we looked at some of the disturbing passages in the Bible.

- Passages that make God seem paranoid
- Or blood thirsty
- Passages that are contradictory with others

The Bible just isn't a reliable source our non-Christian friends will tell us. Certainly not something that should be taken literally as THE WORD OF GOD.

Then last week we wrestled with the question → If God loves us, why do we suffer.

Why believe in a God who doesn't do anything for us??

Why pray if it doesn't "work"?

And that gets us to today.

How can one still believe in God despite all that our atheist friends proclaim to us?

What I am going to try to do today, is tell you why I am a Christian, why I choose to follow the way of Jesus, despite some of the problems.

I know that I will not answer all of your questions and I hope that you will write those concerns and questions down and then take the time to come and dialog with me about them.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of the greatest preachers of the last century wrote a book addressing many of the issues that we are struggling with. In Dear Mr. Brown: Letters to a Person Perplexed, Fosdick is writing letters to a young man who is struggling with his faith. He writes:

Dear Mr. Brown,

I am glad that, in my last letter, I happened to remark that some people who disbelieve in God are really disbelievers in some particular idea about God. You write now, wondering whether this may not be your trouble --- that you have in your mind a picture of God that makes belief in him difficult, if not impossible. This may very probably be a major factor in your problem. Men use the word "God" continually, but what varied pictures of him and ideas about him are in their minds!

He goes on later and says: "Tell me about this god you don't believe in." "I probably don't believe in that god either. Let me tell you about the God I do believe in."

A number of years ago, Joyce Waring grabbed me after a WWE class that I was teaching, I think we were doing the WRESTLING WITH GOD class, and she said to me that she wasn't sure that she believed in the God that we were struggling with. I remember saying to her, I am not sure I believe in that God either.

What I do believe in, is the God that is revealed to us through Jesus.

Richard Dawkins in his book states that his goal is to make the reader an atheist by the time that they finish the book.

That is an interesting goal, but it also points out one of the realities of this discussion. And that is, being an atheist, like being a follower of Jesus is a faith choice.

No matter how good Dawkins' arguments are, or how good mine are, neither one of us can prove or disprove God empirically. It always comes down to a faith choice.

One of the questions that we have to ask ourselves is → in the end, which system makes more sense?

Which one makes my life better?

I want to share with you some of the reasons why I believe in the way of Jesus.

My first reason is a very personal reason, but one that at one time was one of the most compelling reasons for believing in God.

When I look at creation → I see God.

When I look at a Sunset
When I am at the ocean
When I am in the forest

I SEE GOD

Our grandparents saw nature as proof of God.

(Psalms 24 NRSV) The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it; {2} for he has founded it on the seas, and established it on the rivers. {3} Who shall ascend the hill of the LORD? And who shall stand in his holy place? {4} Those who have clean hands and pure hearts, who do not lift up their souls to what is false, and do not swear deceitfully. {5} They will receive blessing from the LORD, and vindication from the God of their salvation. {6} Such is the company of those who seek him, who seek the face of the God of Jacob. {7} Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in. {8} Who is the King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty, the LORD, mighty in battle. {9} Lift up your heads, O gates! and be lifted up, O ancient doors! that the King of glory may come in. {10} Who is this King of glory? The LORD of hosts, he is the King of glory.

Since the age of enlightenment science has tried to explain creation.

Dawkins would say to you that science can explain creation and would do so through two primary theories.

First, that the universe was created through the big bang
Second, that evolution is how life developed on the earth.

What Dawkins doesn't understand is that many of us have no problem with those theories.

I believe that God was behind the big bang and evolution and thus can say, no problem to those ideas.

I SEE God in evolution – I SEE God in nature

The second argument is one that makes sense only if you are a believer, for someone on the outside, they see it pretty much as a circular argument.

And that is, God created us as more than just cells, and molecules.

We, as humans are different from the rest of creation.

Dawkins would tell you that we are just a machine.
A collection of molecules and electrical charges.

I think we are more than that.

What makes us different, is that we are filled with the breath of God.

(Genesis 2:7 NRSV) the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being.

Obviously, that is a faith statement, but I think that we are more than just atoms and molecules.

God created us with a vision to be something more than what a common animal is.

We are filled with the breath of God and as such are given the opportunity to be a part of something bigger than us.

We are filled with God's moral vision for us and for the world → the challenge for us it to grasp it and live it.

Without God, it is every person for themselves.

God wants us to recognize that we are all in this together!

That is the Way of Jesus!

The third reason why I am a follower of Jesus has to do with my experiences with God.

We all have had times when we have realized God is with us. Times when the distance between God and us is very thin.

History is filled with these moments. Times when people have encountered God and it has changed their lives.

The Bible is full of these stories

- Abraham
- Moses
- David
- Peter
- Paul
- Mary Magdalene
- Of course Jesus

But my hunch is, you too have had moments that have been transformational in your life.

Last week I shared with you the story of my brother Stewart. Through that experience I came to know God in ways that I had not before. It changed me and made me who I am today.

You too, probably have a story or two to share.

Let me share another story.

William Neal Moore was a 22 year old soldier, who was hard up for cash.

A drinking buddy told him about his uncle, Fred Stapton, who kept lots of cash around his house. In Moore's altered state of mind, Stapton's cash looked like the solution to all his problems.

Unfortunately, the robbery didn't go well.

Stapton heard Moore trying to enter his home and fired at the intruder. Moore shot back in the darkness and heard someone fall to the floor. When he turned on the light, he found 77 year old Fred Stapton dead.

Moore pleaded guilty, and was sentenced to death in July 1974, just three months after the crime.

But a strange thing happened on the way to his execution: Moore found a new life.

He learned he wasn't so low as to be out of the reach of God's mercy.

He changed.

He became that "new creation" that Paul talks about.

(2 Corinthians 5:17 NRSV) So if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!

He became known as the peacemaker on his prison floor → he began to care for the other inmates. He began to encourage them.

Stapton's family was so impressed by Moore's contrition and his changed attitude that they became advocates to spare his life.

A few hours before he was to be executed his life was spared.

In 1991, William Neal Moore was paroled from prison, after more than 17 years behind bars, 16 of them on Death Row.

Lee Strobell, met with Moore and asked him what happened while he was in prison. He asked:

Was it the rehab program in prison that changed you?

Was it the therapist?

Was it some type of medication that you took, that helped you see the radical change that you needed to make?

No, Moore answered → it was none of those things, it was Jesus Christ.

He changed me in ways that I could not change myself

He took me from a self absorbed, angry, young man – into someone who began to care about others → ONLY JESUS COULD DO THAT

Today, Moore pastors a little church between 2 housing projects in Rome Georgia and constantly is going out telling his story to young people trying to offer them a better way.

Some of you know exactly what Moore is talking about.

We may not be murderers, but through the grace of God, through following the way of Jesus we have become better people.

And we experience not just personal transformation, but also we see God through our experience with the community of faith.

When we are there for each other for the good things in life → and for the bad.

When we hold each other's hands

When we sit and listen

When we bring a meal

When we write a note

When we pray

We are the presence of God → encouraging each other in the way of Jesus.

Why am I a Christian?

I am a better person

I am a better father

I am a better

Dawkins starts his book with the goal of turning us into atheists.

The biggest problem with Dawkins and the other "new atheists" is that they are responding to a form of Christianity that you and I for the most part reject.

They are reacting against a form of Christianity that they find offensive.

Unfortunately, there are many Christians who perpetuate this form of Christianity.

- Narrow minded
- Anti-intellectual
- Anti-science
- Lacks compassion and charity
- Judgmental
- Hypercritical

But when Dawkins and others began writing it is as if they assume that all Christians are like that.

But we are not → that is only a small minority of Christians.

They don't define us.

Unfortunately --- too often they are the face of Christianity that non-Christians have of us.

Let me tell you something → when you engage your neighbor who is a non-believer into a conversation about God, they are not going to be won over by how skilled your arguments are.

They are not going to be won over because you can answer all their questions.

They are going to be won over → when they see the love of God working in your life.

When they witness your:

- Compassion
- Love
- Acceptance of others

When we live out the words of the author of 1 John:

(1 John 4:7-12 NRSV) Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God. {8}

Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love. {9} God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. {10} In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins. {11} Beloved, since God loved us so much, we also ought to love one another. {12} No one has ever seen God; if we love one another, God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us.

What do people see in you?

Judgmentalism

Hypercritical spirit
Or love that changes everything?

God can never be proved or disproved → as hard as the Christian apologist and atheist try.

Ultimately, it is a faith choice.

Which way makes more sense?
Which way offers a road to a better life?

I started with a quote from Harry Emerson Fosdick, I want to end with another one. He said:

I would rather live in a world where my life is surrounded by mystery than live in a world so small that my mind could comprehend it.

May we live the Way of Jesus, even though we cannot fully grasp it, and allow others to see that love through us!