

ATHEISM'S REVIVAL
EPHESIANS 4:17-24

HEART OF THE MATTER - A WORD FROM KEN

The opposite of hope is despair. When high school students lose interest in their studies, few will likely name despair as the cause. More likely the dominant questions will be “what’s the point?” “Who cares?” “What’s the use?” But the keen observer will spot despair lurking in the shadows. The absence of hope.

When a spouse decides that a marriage is irreparable, hope vanishes. Despair settles in. When a cynic kicks the intellectual props out from under a shaky believer and mocks the foundations of faith, despair rolls in like a dense, cold fog. When the bottom drops out of a business, when those smear headlines undermine the campaign, when a shocking revelation betrays a respected leader – despair follows close behind.

We call it an “exercise in futility.” It’s time wasted. Energy spent. Resources invested. Gone. For no purpose at all.

Sad to say, atheism is making a come-back these days. It’s been nearly forty years since TIME posed the question on its cover – “Is God Dead?” Stunningly, within ten years after that infamous cover appeared, America elected its first “born-again” President. Evangelicals became a dominant political force. Churches went mega. Para-church endeavors went from mom-and-pop to multi-million dollar global enterprises. The “religious right” became a regular focus in the evening news. But in recent days, for a growing number of commentators, “religion” emerged not as the solution, but as the problem. For them religious people are the driving force behind war and terror and bigotry and hate. A back-lash has been brewing. Now a brazen collection of philosophers and scientists have targeted religion as the culprit. (See the New York Times bestseller list.) They’ve decided that Freud was right after all – religion is a mere drug (“opiate”). It ought to be illegal.

Francis Schaeffer called it “dropping below the line of despair.” It’s the abandonment of hope. It’s what Paul would call the philosophy of futility.

Sure, there’s plenty of evidence. Religion too often has been abused. In some cases, badly abused. But here’s the **heart of the matter**. Our theology informs our behavior. Futile thinking triggers bad behavior. Separation from God results in hardening of the heart. Sensitivity gone, sensuality moves in. That course of study? Abandoned. That marriage?

DISCUSSION GUIDE

AUTHENTIC INTERACTION · COMPELLING CONNECTION · IRRESISTIBLE EXPERIENCE
LOVING ACCEPTANCE · EVANGELISTIC INFLUENCE

Violated. That business enterprise? Ditched. That ministry? Cancelled.

Paul drives home the truth. The grand, eternal plan of God has practical implications. Apart from him, we slip below the line of despair. What’s the use? What’s the point? And soon we’re caught up in the dominant current of “every kind of impurity.”

But, says Paul, that’s not Christ. He offers so much more. He pulls us up from below the line with a “new self,” a new attitude.

From darkness to light.

BACKGROUND - Growing up, for Paul, is entering into the fullness of God in Christ. It is becoming mature. As we grow, our behavior modifies. The way we live is a reflection of what’s going on in our hearts. The philosophy of futility justifies a life of self-gratification. Knowing Christ turns us from self-destruct to a “new self.” We enter into the joy of becoming like Christ.

Read Ephesians 4:17-24

Think it over...

1. What is Paul referring to when he speaks of “living like Gentiles”?
2. Does futile mean stupid? If not, what is futile thinking?
3. What drives the ignorance of this way of thinking?
4. When sensitivity is gone (NIV), or people become “calloused” (ESV), what is the result?
5. Can lust ever be satisfied?
6. What is Paul’s alternative to this futility of thinking?

Bring it home...

1. Would you say that Paul’s description of first century Ephesus parallels our world today? In what sense?
2. Have you experienced despair? Can you share something about it? What is the impact of the absence of hope?
3. How is futile thinking related to a calloused heart?
4. How has lust become main-stream in our culture?
5. How does knowing Christ become an alternative to the philosophy of despair?
6. What are the ways we learn about Christ in verses 20-24?
7. Do you know someone living below the line of despair? What do they really need?

SHARE. SUPPORT. AFFIRM. PRAY.