

### ***"Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity" Ecclesiastes 1:2***

It has been said that we are living in a post-Christian society. Whether America was ever a "Christian" country at all (an arguable hypothesis), I think most readers would agree that it is not "Christian" as it nears the close of the twentieth century.

Instead, a worldview known as "secularism" prevails.

Secularism will always fill the void that is created whenever the Lord Jesus Christ and His word is dismissed as the basis of ethics.

A post-Christian society, like a pre-Christian society, an unChristian society, and an anti-Christian society, is, by definition, a secular society.

What, then, is secularism? The book of Ecclesiastes provides an intriguing answer to that question.

### **A Sermon About Wisdom**

Ecclesiastes is one of three Old Testament books classified as "wisdom literature" (with Job and Proverbs). Unlike Proverbs, which contains very practical wisdom for daily living, Ecclesiastes and Job explore the deeper philosophical questions of life.

While Job explores the emotionally charged issue concerning the purpose of human suffering, Ecclesiastes is concerned to address the more basic question of the meaning of life.

Why am I here?

What is the purpose of my existence?

Does life have meaning?

These are the questions haunting the man who calls himself "the Preacher" (Ecc. 1:1).

By designating himself "the Preacher," the writer implies that he is going to deliver a sermon. The text for the sermon is 1:2: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity."

The next ten chapters are an exposition of that text from an autobiographical perspective as the Preacher records his own personal search for meaning in life.

Chapters eleven and twelve form the application of the sermon.

### The Mood of Modern Man

Though Ecclesiastes was written some three thousand years ago, its message is remarkably contemporary. The key word in the book, appearing some thirty-eight times, is *vanity*. The Hebrew word *hevel*, translated *vanity*, suggests the thought of what is left after a bubble bursts. The word means *futility, emptiness*, and *meaninglessness*.

"Futility of futilities," the Preacher sighs, "all is futile."

This tone of despair and pessimism pervades the entire sermon.

Solomon's message is unmistakable:

"Life is futile and meaningless.

There is no purpose to human existence."

Now, the concept of futility is pessimistic enough, in and of itself, but the Preacher compounds the mood by using a literary form that expresses the superlative degree:

"Vanity of vanities...."

He is talking about futility taken to the maximum degree - the epitome of emptiness - ultimate meaninglessness.

That is about as cynical and pessimistic as a person can be.

No doubt, many modern people would agree with the Preacher that life is not worth living. It seems senseless and absurd.

Such a mood of skepticism and cynicism prevails today.

Depression is epidemic, maybe even pandemic, in our society.

Prozac, Eli Lilly and Co.'s wonder drug, is a household word for more than twelve million people around the world. ("The Wizard of Prozac" by Tracy Thompson, Washington Post, Nov.21,93).

Those who are not depressed are, in many cases, generally pessimistic and unhappy in the routines of daily life.

The routine and mundane dimension of life is looked upon as a necessary evil that must be endured until 5:00 p.m. on Friday.

Modern man lives for the weekend, saying "thank goodness it's Friday," and dreads "blue Monday" because it begins a new work week of the mundane and the ordinary.

Why do people think like this?

Because they have bought into a hedonistic philosophy that teaches that happiness is the

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*summum bonum*

(the chief good) of life:

In the words of a popular shoe commercial, "Life is short; play hard."

So they pursue leisure as the ultimate diversion from what Sigmund Freud called "the every day unhappiness of normal human experience."

They indulge themselves in recreation, hobbies, amusement, and leisure in a quest for personal happiness.

Ironically, in their pursuit of pleasure, however, they only serve to compound their misery.

Does "every day, normal human experience" have to be unhappy? Scripture says 'no.' God desires man to enjoy all of life (I Tim. 6:17).

Sadly, however, our leisure oriented society is more depressed than ever.

Modern conveniences and comforts have not produced greater happiness, but it seems, less contentment with life.

This is the paradox of hedonism.

Philosophically, this mood of despair is called nihilism. Nihilism, meaning "nothingness," operates on the basis that everything is meaningless and chaotic.

The nihilist believes that nothing has ultimate meaning or significance.

Because he is committed to being "realistic" the nihilist has no tolerance for optimistic concepts like humanism.

In fact, he considers the humanist, who believes in the innate dignity and potential of man, supremely naïve and pollyanna-ish.

As this, the bloodiest century in human history, draws to a close, the nihilist cannot accept, in the name of realism, the humanists utopian claim that man is evolving into godhood. All evidence argues against the idea that people are inherently good.

The nihilist is, in other words, too honest to be a humanist, for humanism is unrealistic. It is inconsistent with the facts.

The humanist says that life has meaning because each individual is unique and important, and has unlimited human potential. It looks for meaning in life subjectively, in one's own self.

Convinced to the contrary by the evidence the nihilist concludes that there is no meaning to life and settles for despair.

He is, admittedly, more realistic than the humanist, but he fails to consider that reality is not limited to the physical, tangible, and material universe.

The person who fails to factor the existence of God into the equation of life, if he is realistic, will ultimately come to the conclusion that all is futile and purposeless.

*If he is realistic!*

In the final analysis, there are only two possible worldviews open to realistic thinkers: secularism and theism.

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Secularism leads inevitably to the despair and hopelessness of nihilism. Theism, a belief in the existence and providential intervention of God, leads to hope and meaning.

One does not have to look far to witness indications of nihilism in modern Western culture. Hope is conspicuous by its absence in practically every genre. The things that help us to understand a culture because they reflect and mirror the mood of the age, like music, art, literature, and theater, all breathe a spirit of despair. The crude, the crass and the vulgar are celebrated in the fashion world. Contemporary musical styles express a kind of disorder and dissonance, in sharp contrast to the symmetrical melody and harmony of say, classical or even folk music. Much modern art is sensual, chaotic, and dissonant, an existential expression of the mood of the artist. Even literature today breathes this spirit of despair like the familiar poem "Rugby Chapel" by Matthew Arnold:

*Most men eddy about*

*Here and there -eat and drink,*

*Chatter and love and hate,*

*Gather and squander, are raised*

*Aloft, are hurled in the dust,*

*Striving blindly, achieving*

*Nothing, and then they die.*

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In movies, the despair of an existential (i.e. subjective, man-centered) philosophy of life is evident in the crass thirst for violence and destruction. Nihilism produces a desire to destroy, because if life is meaningless, death becomes the ultimate solution. Though he promises happiness and fulfillment, Satan, the thief of hope and purpose, ultimately kills and destroys (Jno. 10:10).

The sexual perversion of our society, furthermore, is another expression of the mood of despair. Francis Schaeffer writes, "it is often in the sexual area of life that men hope to find some kind of meaning when they have abandoned the search elsewhere." (p.38) Harry Blamires concurs, pinpointing the philosophical basis of sexual ethics: "In no field of human experience does secularism more insidiously drag man towards a sub-human level of living than in that of sexuality...glamorizing passion at the expense of responsibility, duty, and chastity." (p183).

What is the cause, then, of this mood of despair? A view of life and the world known as secularism.

### Secularism, The Spirit of the Age

People believe that life is futile and meaningless because they fail to factor God into the equation of life. Secularism operates as if this world were all that there is, disregarding the eternal and thinking only in terms of the "now." Carl Sagan, in the introduction to the television series "Cosmos," expresses the essence of secularism concisely. As the camera pans the starry heavens, Sagan says, in deep reverential tones, "The cosmos is all that is or ever was or ever will be."

That is pure, unabashed secularism.

In Ecclesiastes, the Preacher defines a secular worldview by the phrase "under the sun": "What profit hath a man of all his labor which he taketh under the sun?" (Ecc. 1:3).

That phrase, used over thirty times in the book, is the key to understanding Ecclesiastes.

Life under the sun is life from a strictly earthly perspective, without God in the picture.

Life without God inevitably produces a spirit of despair and hopelessness.

There is no meaning, no happiness, no sense of purpose, and no joy when life is confined to this world alone without consideration of the One who is beyond the sun.

That's the message of Ecclesiastes.

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Peggy Noonan, former speech writer for Presidents Reagan and Bush, wrote in a 1992 issue of *Forbes* magazine:

*"I think we have lost the knowledge that happiness is over-rated - that, in a way, life is over-rated. We have lost, somehow, a sense of mystery - about us, our purpose, our meaning, our role. Our ancestors believed in two worlds, and understood this to be the solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short one. We are the first generations of man that actually expected to find happiness here on earth, and our search for it has caused such unhappiness.*

*The reason:*

*if you do not believe in another, higher world, if you believe only in the flat material world around you, if you believe that this is your only chance at happiness - if that is what you believe, then you are not disappointed when the world does not give you a good measure of its riches, you are despairing."*

(From The Florida Times Union, Jacksonville, Thurs. June 23, 1994)

The connection between secularism and despair she cites is the very point Solomon makes in Ecclesiastes. The individual who says "Vanity of vanities, all is vanity" is the person who lives "under the sun," without an eternal perspective. Secularism inevitably leads to cynicism and hopelessness because hope depends upon the existence and providence of the God of hope (Rom. 15:13).

Secularism, life lived from a strictly "this-world" perspective without consideration of how God fits into the picture, is the spirit of our age, the dominant philosophy of the day. In fact, it is the spirit of every age because it is "the pattern of this world."

When the New Testament speaks about "the world" (e. g. "Love not the world..." [1 Jno. 2:14]; "Be not conformed to this world..." [Rom. 12:2]; "Whosoever is a friend of the world is the enemy of God" [Jas. 4:4]; "Keep yourselves unspotted from the world" [Jas. 1:27]), the reference is to this dominant worldview known as secularism.

"The World" might be defined as "life, lived and thought, apart from God."

According to this definition, even professed Christians can be worldly.

The tendency to live as if God does not exist, like practical atheists, is very real.

The temptation to conform to the pattern of this age, to fall in line with popular culture, to accommodate the world, to restrict our lives to "under the sun" criteria, to maintain the *status quo*

, and to operate from a strictly secular frame of reference is very strong, even in the lives of believers.

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It is possible for a Christian to get so caught up in "the rat race," and, by virtue of the sheer pace of daily life, lose contact with God.

If it wasn't possible there would be no need for warnings such as "Be not conformed to this world" and "Love not the world."

The professed believer who fails to spend time with God in prayer each day, read and study God's word, attend public worship, encourage his Christian brother, and submit his thinking and behavior to the Lordship of Jesus Christ at each new juncture in the road of life is worldly to the degree that God is not a part of his life.

The more the world controls the lives of individual believers, the less power the church will wield in its Christian testimony.

In contrast to the secularist who thinks only of his interests, his moment in history, his place in society, and his life now, the individual who thinks Biblically approaches life in the light of two worlds. A Christian is someone who once lived for this world alone, but now he confesses that he belongs to the next world (Ps. 17:14-15):

*"Once earthly joy I craved, sought peace and rest; Now Thee alone I seek, give what is best."*

He now travels earth's roads by heaven's map, weighs earth's treasure on heaven's scale, bears earth's burdens in heaven's strength, views earth's tragedies in terms of heaven's triumph, fights earth's battles with heaven's weapons, and values earth's trophies by heaven's standards. He thinks in terms of both life now and life hereafter regarding suffering (Rom. 8:18; 2 Cor. 4:17-18), priorities (1 Tim. 4:8), and even death (Phi. 1:21).

He says with Asaph, "Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel, and afterward, receive me to glory.

Whom have I in heaven but thee? and there is none upon earth that I desire beside thee" (Ps. 73:24-25).

He lives by faith, persuaded that God is (that is, that God exists, that God is real, that God is there) and that God is active in the lives of those who diligently seek him (Heb. 11:6).

Because his life is based on this other-worldly perspective, it also assumes a richness of meaning and sense of purpose now.

Harry Blamires summarizes these two competing worldviews insightfully:

*"To think secularly is to think within a frame of reference bounded by the limits of our life on earth: it is to keep one's calculations rooted in this-worldly criteria. To think christianly is to accept all things with the mind as related, directly or indirectly, to man's eternal destiny as the redeemed and chosen child of God." (Blamires, p44)*

### Chasing the Wind

We have seen that worldliness is essentially a matter of eliminating God from the picture and focusing instead only on life "under the sun." Those who live by this philosophy inevitably become so preoccupied with this life that personal happiness and welfare become their sole concern. In their quest for that ever elusive peace and contentment, however, they eventually become so frustrated that they adopt a spirit of pessimism, cynicism, and despair. It is significant that "the Preacher" illustrates the futility of this search for meaning and purpose by the image of the circle in Ecclesiastes 1:4-7:

*"One generation passeth away, and another generation cometh...The sun also ariseth, and the sun goeth down, and hasteth to his place where he arose. The wind goeth toward the south, and turneth about unto the north; it whirleth about continually, and the wind returneth again according to his circuits.*

*All the waters run into the sea...unto the place from whence the rivers come, thither they return again."*

When God is left out of the definition of life, all appears terribly monotonous and aimlessly repetitious. Few images illustrate futility like a circle. People commonly express frustration at a lack of forward progress by saying, "I feel like I've been going in circles."

Like a hamster in a wheel, many people expend tremendous amounts of energy in the tasks and responsibilities of daily life, but because life is not lived for God's glory, according to the guidelines laid down in his word, and in the awareness of his daily presence, they make no progress for all their effort.

They are going in circles, living aimlessly.

Living without God is like breathing without air, eating without food, seeing without sight, talking without words, and hearing without sound.

Because God is not factored into the equation of life, secular thinkers can make no sense out of the world.

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All appears random, arbitrary, disconnected, and disjointed.

There is no rhyme nor reason.

*Hic et nunc*

- life is meaningless.

The Christian, however, because he thinks in terms of God's existence and personal presence in the world, sees history, not in terms of a circle, but of a straight line, with a definite point of beginning (Gen. 1:1), a specific goal (I Tim. 6:15), and a progressive development of the Divine plan moving toward the attaining of that goal. History is really His story, the unfolding of the drama of redemption that God purposed before the world began.

Does that mean that everything that happens in history is predestined by God?

Absolutely not, for God is not the author of sin.

But it does mean that he is in sovereign control of creation, superintending his world, working his will and providentially overruling even the wicked acts of men to our good and to his own greater glory (Ps. 76:10; Gen. 50:20).

In a word, the difference between secularism and Christianity is the difference between a natural and a supernatural view of the world.

In his search for meaning, the Preacher pursued the whole gamut of human experience. He sought fulfillment in labor (1:8,13,14), in knowledge (1:16-18), in pleasure (2:1-3), and in the accumulation of material things (2:4-10), but he came to the conclusion "all is vanity and vexation of the spirit" (1:14,17; 2:11).

The phrase "vexation of the spirit" is a picturesque phrase that means "chasing the wind" or "grasping for the wind."

Have you ever watched a little boy playing outfield on a Little League baseball team? Every coach knows the frustration of looking up and watching his centerfielder pretending to catch imaginary fly balls with his glove.

"Johnny, what are you doing?" the coach yells.

"Keep your mind on the game."

So many people live life like little Johnny plays centerfield, oblivious to the real issues, grasping for the wind.

How long would a person have to chase the wind in order to catch up to it and finally seize it? Yet so many people spend their lives chasing happiness and contentment apart from God, only to find that they are chasing wind. Apart from God, the search for significance in life under the sun is an optical illusion, a mirage, a pipe dream.

It is an attempt to grasp the wind.

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It is not wisdom to live like that.  
It is the quintessence of folly.  
Yet that is the way that most people spend their days, running in circles, chasing the wind.

It's no wonder that Solomon sinks in the mire of despair and hopelessness. "Therefore I hated life," he says, "because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for all is vanity and vexation of spirit.

Yea, I hated all my labor which I had taken under the sun...Therefore I went about to cause my heart to despair of all the labor which I took under the sun..." (Ecc. 2:17-23).

As the hopes and dreams of youth give way to the disappointments and frustrations of mid-life, the person who, by faith, cannot see God "standing somewhere in the shadows keeping watch above his own," will slide faster and faster down the slippery slope of cynicism.

I am convinced that the great challenge of aging is the challenge to resist the tendency to become cynical, mean-spirited, bitter, and sour and to retain that childlike sense of wonder, joy, gratitude, humility, and faith in one's Heavenly Father.

When I hear people say, "Oh, nothing surprises me anymore; I didn't expect it to turn out anyway; nothing ever works out for me; youth is a mistake; manhood a struggle; old age a regret," I know I'm talking to someone who has lost sight of God.

Secular thinking will always end in cynicism.

### Is Life Futile?

Ecclesiastes does not end on this pessimistic note, however. After analyzing the futility of life without God, the Preacher affirms that life lived with a conscious awareness of God is supremely meaningful:

"Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth" the Preacher counsels (12:1).

Moreover, "because the preacher was wise, he *still*

taught the people knowledge" (12:9; emphasis mine).

He concludes "the whole matter" by urging his young auditors, "Fear God and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil" (12:13-14).

With God in the picture, all of life, be it work, education, recreation, leisure, relationships, or the use of material things, is meaningful.

The purpose of life, consequently, is to enjoy life as God's gift and to devote it to his glory by worshipping him and obeying his commandments.

That is the whole duty of man.

That is a real sense of purpose.

When we, as believers in the Lord Jesus Christ, factor in the further truth of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, life takes on even richer meaning. In I Corinthians 15, Paul was dealing with the same spirit of skepticism in the church of Corinth expressed by Solomon centuries earlier.

The social pressure in that intellectual climate to the doctrine of the resurrection had intimidated some of the Corinthian Christians to abandon the doctrine.

Throughout the chapter, Paul argues that all is futile if Christ is not alive.

If Christ is not risen, he says, then you "believed in vain" (v. 2).

"Your profession of faith in him was meaningless," says Paul.

If he is not alive, he further argues, then my personal experience was "in vain" (v. 10).

If Jesus is still in the grave, then preaching is vain, your belief of the gospel is meaningless (v. 14), and your trust in Christ for the forgiveness of your sins is futile (v. 17).

Paul's point is that the whole Christian life is an empty sham if Christ is not alive.

But, he affirms, he is alive, risen from the dead, and because he lives the Corinthians would live after death also (vs. 20-57).

Listen now to his grand conclusion:

*"Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord." (v.58)*

Is there rhyme or reason to life? Is teaching God's word an exercise in futility? Is contending for the faith once delivered to the saints a meaningless endeavor?

Is faithfulness to the doctrinal and ethical principles of Scripture in a pagan environment just so much unnecessary trouble?

Is it vain to resist temptation, to risk the public antagonism associated with following Christ, to seek to cultivate true Christian character, or to throw oneself into the lives of others in the service of Christ?

Is it futile to make a living, to train your children to be godly, to build a Christian marriage, and to ease the burdens of those less fortunate than yourself?

The answer to all of these questions is a resounding "no." Labor in the Lord is not in vain; it never has been in vain and it never will be in vain.

On what basis can Paul make such a claim?

On the basis of the fact that Jesus Christ is alive!

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Because he lives, nothing we do "in his name" is futile, but supremely purposeful and meaningful.

What a message of hope!

Without God, all is vanity and vexation of the spirit.

But when we live "under the sun" in the knowledge of the One who lives and reigns "beyond the sun," all of life has significance.

Futility gives way to purpose.

Chasing wind is abandoned for pursuing Christ.

Despair gives way to unspeakable and glorious joy.