

VANITY FARE

UNDERSTANDING THE TIMES 2



T. M. MOORE

A REVISION STUDY FROM
THE FELLOWSHIP OF AILBE

Vanity Fare

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Understanding the Times 2
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The Fellowship of Ailbe

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Welcome to *Vanity Fare*

Christians have been sent to the world as Jesus was sent, to embody and announce the coming of God's Kingdom on earth, as it is in heaven (Jn. 20.21; Acts 1.8).

This is a high and holy calling. It's also a daunting challenge. To succeed in this endeavor, we'll need to be like the sons of Issachar, who understood the times in which they lived, and thus knew what Israel should do (1 Chron. 12.32). These are *secular* times, times when people live "under the sun" rather than "under the heavens." Which means that many people today are living a lie.

This helps to explain why their lives lack significance, purpose, and joy. Everything about their worldview ends in death, thus denying even their fleeting moments of happiness any real or abiding significance. If life is a banquet, then all the fare is vanity, and feeding on the wind.

Solomon knew about living under the sun. But he also understood living under the heavens, and in the book of Ecclesiastes, he imparts wisdom for those who think they can beat the odds, live it up, deny God, and somehow find lasting happiness.

His advice to the people of his day is as sound for us as it was for them. His observations can be of much help to us as we seek to understand our times and know how best to fulfill our callings.

ReVision studies are designed as brief introductions to the subject under consideration. We hope they will enlarge your worldview, help you to become more firmly rooted in Scripture, equip you to minister to others, and stimulate you to want to learn more about the Word of God and the Biblical worldview.

We're happy to provide this study at no charge. If you find these studies helpful, we hope you'll consider sending a gift to The Fellowship of Ailbe, to help us in making these resources available to others.

May the Lord bless your study of His Word.

T. M. Moore
Principal

1 Nothing New under the Sun

*All things are full of labor;
Man cannot express it.
The eye is not satisfied with seeing,
Nor the ear filled with hearing.
That which has been is what will be,
That which is done is what will be done,
And there is nothing new under the sun.* Ecclesiastes 1.8, 9

A world without God

Ours is a disenchanted, secular age, a world which has relegated God and spiritual matters to the *Wunderkammer* of history.

We will not understand the weirdness, violence, narcissism, and sensuality of the times in which we live until we accept that, for most people, even for many if not most of those who profess some measure of belief in Him, God simply does not matter. He is strictly *pro forma*; our allegiance to Him is merely perfunctory; He's a good luck charm we call on from time to time, but don't really expect to deliver on anything that matters.

Ours is a world without God. The modern age celebrates its liberation from such things as revelation, divine Law, spiritual vision and discipline, or any moral restraints on human freedom. It regards itself as magnanimous in tolerating those who yet believe, though its patience can run short at times. It worships at the altar of reason, science, and technology, for it finds in these the promise of maximum freedom, prosperity, indulgence, and length of life.

Ours is an age in flight from God, and it is our duty and calling who yet believe in Him, to make sure we understand the times, so that we may know what God requires of us for His glory and our good (1 Chron. 12.32).

A conscious rebellion

The modern age, and with it, the age of secularism, began around the middle of the 18th century in France, with a conscious decision on the part of certain free thinkers to rid themselves and the world of God.

Atheistic intellectuals called *philosophes*, fed up with the hypocrisy of the age, resolved to establish a new paradigm for thought and life. Rousseau, Diderot, d'Alembert, and Voltaire, among others, pooled their considerable intellectual powers to the task of rethinking the world without God, without angels and demons, and even without the Church, and considered that they were quite original and doing a very good thing. Together, they created an *Encyclopaedia* of all knowledge, in which they rewrote the history of ideas and things from a strictly this-worldly perspective. They announced the birth of the Age of Enlightenment, and provided a palette from which subsequent scholars and thinkers repainted all of learning and life without need of or reference to God.

To appreciate the success of their endeavor, only consider the curricula of public schools and universities in our day. Some acknowledgement of God may be allowed, but only as a historical or literary curiosity; the rest of a student's education during those formative years proceeds without any reference to or need for Him.

Been there, done that

But what the *philosophes* failed to note was that there is nothing new under the sun. The experiment of living apart from God had been tried many times before, and always with the same dismal result. A world without

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God does not lead to greater freedom, prosperity, and enjoyment, but to disappointment, despair, and death. With respect to the project of rejecting God and throwing off His authority, humankind has often been there and done that, but always to its own chagrin and dismay.

The Bible records an early effort at living apart from God, together with an honest assessment of the endeavor. King Solomon learned the hard way that life without God is a vanity fare of emptiness, uncertainty, and death. The first years of his reign over Israel were a model of the divine economy functioning and flourishing through the institutions of human culture and society (cf. 1 Kings 1-10). Having gained the wisdom of God to rule his people well, Solomon governed the nation with one eye fixed on the will of God – “under the heavens,” as he put it – knowing that this was the way to wisdom and success. Everything to which he put his mind or hand prospered, and the people of Israel and the surrounding nations flourished right along with him.

But sometime late in his reign, Solomon strayed from the path of trusting in God into an experiment of living “under the sun,” the results of which were disastrous. The book of Ecclesiastes is Solomon’s account of his sortie into a kind of secularism. He wrote it as a plea to his son, confronting his narcissistic and materialistic leanings, and pleading with him not to repeat his father’s terrible mistake of living as though God doesn’t exist or doesn’t matter.

Solomon ultimately recovered from his errant ways; his son, Rehoboam, would not. The book of Ecclesiastes outlines the folly of thinking that we can make our way in this world without reference to God – “under the sun”, as Solomon says. It can thus help us understand the folly of our own secular age, and consider what we who live “under the heavens” must do to turn our generation’s thoughts to God once again.

For reflection

1. What is secularism? Why do secular people consider that faith in God is not necessary?
2. How can you see that secularism has powerfully shaped the way people live? Which aspects of the secular worldview do you most often encounter in your daily life?
3. As Solomon expressed it, what’s the difference between living “under the sun” and living “under the heavens”?

Next steps – Preparation: Have you identified your Personal Mission Field? Watch this brief video ([click here](#)), then download the accompanying worksheet, and discover the calling God has for you in this secular age.

2 Starting Point for Understanding

I have seen all the works that are done under the sun; and indeed, all is vanity and grasping for the wind. Ecclesiastes 1.14

Made in God's image

We will not succeed in communicating the Good News of Jesus to our secular age if we refuse to understand their worldview, and the ways that worldview shapes their daily lives.

But this does not mean that we *agree* with the secular worldview, nor that, in our approach to our secular neighbors and friends, we will allow their views or opinions to dictate the terms of our conversation. It further does not mean that we will *ever* be content for our unbelieving friends and neighbors simply to believe whatever they want, without urging them to reckon with the truth that is in Jesus.

The secular person has concluded that God is not relevant for his life. If we grant this conclusion, we will not make the effort to show Christ's love or urge our neighbors to believe in Him. We would simply leave them alone.

But in fact, this is precisely where many Christians are in our day. They are allowing their unbelieving friends and co-workers to pipe the tune of conversation. They don't want to hear about God – or at least, so we suppose – so we oblige them by declining to initiate conversations on spiritual matters. We keep our religion to ourselves, because we do not understand that our secular colleagues are image-bearers of God, no less than we, and that they will not find any lasting peace, purpose, or joy in life apart from a relationship with their Creator and Lord.

We know something about our unbelieving contemporaries which they deny, but cannot escape: They are made in God's image, and they will only realize full and abundant life as that image is revived, renewed, and refurbished through believing in and following Jesus Christ. This must be the starting point of all our efforts to understand the times and know what we as Christ's ambassadors must do.

Solomon understood this, and he urged us not to lose sight of this important fact.

The tough questions

The starting and ending point of secular thinking is that there is no God, no spiritual realm, nothing beyond what we can see, feel, hear, taste, and touch. All that exists reduces to some form of matter or energy. "The cosmos is all there is or was or ever will be," as the late Carl Sagan limned the secularist's basic presupposition.

But even though one may start with only himself and the material world, he must nevertheless address the tough questions of life: Who am I? Where did I come from? What kind of being am I? Why am I here? Where is it all going? And so forth. Something in us wants to *know* the answers to these questions, as reams of literature, an unending chorus of pop music, and miles of cinematic film have repeatedly shown.

Animals do not ask such questions. Human beings are not animals. Human beings are *homo sapiens* – the creature who *knows*. People are engaged, if only to some extent, in a conscious quest to understand themselves and their world, and to make sense and meaning out of their experience. Our secular neighbors may deny the Biblical teaching about the image of God in people, but they cannot escape the reality of that image, or the quest for knowing it engenders.

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Solomon on life without God

Solomon's decline into a form of secular thinking was a gradual process, as, indeed, it has been in the Western world. We can see in his experience a distant mirror of our own since the days of the *philosophes*.

Having achieved the pinnacle of wealth and success, Solomon began to think too highly of himself and his achievements (Eccl. 2.1-9). This led him to speculations about the world and experiments concerning his place in it that rejected the revelation of God and relied on the strength of observation, reason, and experience.

Yet nagging questions drove him to seek answers by observing the patterns of nature – rain, sun, the winds, and the cycle of waters – and to reason about lessons to be gained from history (Eccl. 1.1-11). But no solid answers presented themselves.

He reflected on his experience in government, and on the ways of rulers and nations. He explored the realm of madness and folly, and plunged himself into his work, as well as a variety of relationships, in a futile attempt to forge meaning out of experience.

In the end, he could not; he hated his life and what he had become, as he realized that, at the end of it, nothing would remain. His observations, reasoning, and experience apart from God led him to the conclusion that one cannot make sense of life without fearing God and submitting to His Law (Eccl. 12.13). He did not learn the answers to all his many questions, but he relearned the most important point of all.

In his quest for understanding from an “under the sun” perspective, Solomon ended up disappointed, disillusioned, and despairing – much the place our secular generation has come to in the box canyon of its worldview. The secularist trumpets with confidence his conclusion that life makes no sense, has no purpose, and is devoid of absolute meaning or value, but he says it with such absurd conviction and passion (“Methinks the lady doth protest too much”) that he seems almost to be pleading with someone – *anyone* – to talk him out of his views, and give him something other than stale, secular, vanity fare to feed on.

Our unbelieving friends and neighbors may not always show the unrest and discontent residing in their souls, but we can be sure it is there, a futile attempt to suppress and deny a spiritual reality that just won't go away.

For reflection

1. What does it mean that people are made in the image of God? How can you see that, even in the lives of those who do not believe in God?
2. Just because don't agree that they are made in the image of God, does that mean we should not keep that in mind in our dealings with them? Explain.
3. What do you consider to be the “tough questions” everyone thinks about during their lifetimes?

Next steps – Conversation: Ask one of two of your unbelieving friends about the tough questions they wrestle with from time to time.

3 The Vanity of Relationships

*Two are better than one,
Because they have a good reward for their labor.
For if they fall, one will lift up his companion.
But woe to him who is alone when he falls,
For he has no one to help him up.* Ecclesiastes 4.9, 10

Made for relationships

The image of God in people realizes its fullest potential in relationships of various kinds. In the beginning, God made human beings male and female, saying that they together expressed the image of God (Gen. 1.27). In the combining and blending of our interests, skills, personalities, aspirations, and powers, we achieve our greatest fruitfulness and fulfillment.

It is doubtless for this reason that Bible has so much to say about the importance of relationships, and how we should conduct them. Marriage, friendships, neighbors, societies, partnerships, and parentage are all presented as integral to human flourishing. The Scriptures teach that relationships succeed best when they are governed by attitudes of love, respect, caring, self-denial, mutual edification, and sacrifice. What ruins relationships is self-interest, an attitude which is difficult to sustain when one is keeping one eye on God, but that too easily becomes the guiding principle when one is pursuing his life only under the sun.

Human beings are made for community. We thrive best in relationships of mutual affirmation, encouragement, sharing, help, and edification. Such relationships require trust and love, and every human being longs to know such relationship.

But, as Solomon understood, when men are cut off from God, from the fount and focus of love, sustaining meaningful relationships can be a challenge.

A catalog of relational woes

As important as relationships are, they do not factor large in Solomon's account of his own wanderings apart from God. While he understood the power of relationships to bring health, peace, joy, and prosperity, his observations, reason, and experience told him that relationship tended to be more disappointing than beneficial.

The world apart from God, and apart from His power to love others selflessly, can be a lonely and depressing place. In Solomon's observations on relationships, we sense the hope that springs eternal in the human breast – that deep-seated longing for relationships that bless – but we end up experiencing the disappointment that too often results in relationships which are detached from eternal anchorage.

The problem, Solomon explained, is that people are sinners and fools (Eccl. 9.3). We may not acknowledge this, but it is true nonetheless. Our hearts are bent toward self-centeredness and evil, and the surrounding culture of wickedness and injustice only encourages us to give vent to our sinful inclinations (8.11). Solomon was describing only what he observed and experienced in his own day, but he may just as well have been writing about our sensual, narcissistic, and violent age.

Solomon bemoaned the fact that many of our closest associates tend to be fools and flatterers, more interested in getting something than in giving what may be meaningful or helpful to others (7.5, 6; 10.12). It's good to have a close friend you can rely on, Solomon opined (4.9-11); however, all too often, people are

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inconstant, untrustworthy, and ready to stab you in the back (7.21, 22).

In a world apart from God, every neighbor is named Jones, and we waste ourselves with envy and frustration trying to keep up with them (4.4). The best relationship people can hope for apart from God is marriage (9.9); however, under the sun, seduction and perversion stalk the land, and with them, all the adulterous temptations that have wrought havoc on marriages in our secular age (7.26).

We can't live without relationships of various kinds; but apart from God, we struggle to make those relationships anything other than a competition for place, power, and possessions, in which, as often as not, we end up with the short end of the stick. Such fare is but the measure of our vanity, when we make ourselves, rather than God, the center of our world.

Our narcissistic age

The problem with sustaining meaningful relationships in an age that cuts itself off from God is that everyone is "looking out for number 1" – to recall a widely-read Robert Ringer title from the '70s. In our secular and materialistic world, people are regarded means to ends, objects to enjoy, use, and discard as we see fit, only there for what we can get from them.

And while there are of course many exceptions to this truth – and these only because of the grace of God – the fleeting nature of happiness, contentment, and durability in relationships confirms Solomon's warnings about the vanity of relationships in a world without God. We know that we need them, that we are made for relationships, but our experiences of relationships in a secular world is all too often self-serving, predatory, hurtful, disappointing, and mean.

People today are made for community, for relationships, and for love, but they struggle, and mostly fail, to realize the full potential of such relationships, because they lack the power of God to make them work.

For reflection

1. We cannot escape the need to relate to others? How many different relationships characterize your life? What is the purpose of each of these?
2. Do you agree that, in perhaps most relationships, the driving question is, "What's in it for me?" Why?
3. Meditate on Philippians 2.5-11. How did Jesus provide a new model or template for thinking about relationships? What can we learn from Him to help our relationships realize their full potential?

Next steps – Conversation: Talk with a Christian friend about the role of relationships in life. What's important in a relationship? What makes relationships work best? What gets in the way of good relationships? How can believers help one another to maintain fruitful relationships?

4 The Vanity of Work

Then I hated all my labor in which I had toiled under the sun, because I must leave it to the man who will come after me. And who knows whether he will be wise or a fool? Yet he will rule over all my labor in which I toiled and in which I have shown myself wise under the sun. This also is vanity. Ecclesiastes 2.18, 19

Double-minded

The secular world expresses a divided mind about work. On the one hand, work is regarded as a necessary evil, an inescapable feature of the human experience. When we meet someone new, the first thing we ask is, “What do you do?” Meaning, “What’s your work?” We all work. Work is just what humans do. No one’s going to hand us on a platter, free and clear, all we need to survive and flourish. Everybody needs to work, if only to maintain a level of existence that’s not slipping into squalor, degradation, and despair.

But just as soon as it’s possible, we’ll put this work thing behind us and go into retirement, when we’ll finally be free to do as we please, without the necessities of punching a time clock every day.

On the other hand are those who consider work as a way of carving a niche for themselves, establishing an identity, or achieving certain objectives in life. Work offers an outlet for creative energy, a framework for satisfying labor, the ability to make meaningful contributions to others, a context for establishing status, and a variety of material rewards. Since everyone needs to work, in some form or another, we should find the work we’re most suited for, or that we most enjoy, or that holds out the most promise for personal success, and devote ourselves to it for as long as we can.

Each of these views of work achieves the same outcomes – material benefits and other rewards – and ends up in the same place – with the workers in the grave. Some insist that work isn’t worth the effort, and look for ways to avoid it as much as possible. Those who must work, or who choose to, look upon those who don’t with a mixture of scorn and envy.

The value of work

In a secular world, where no eternal horizon orients our work, the real value of work is measured by its material contribution, both for the worker and for those he serves. What does our work contribute to the economy? And what reward comes to us from our work? American education is aimed at this objective, to prepare students to take their places as contributing members of a materialist economy.

But work is hard and often tedious; the rewards can be fleeting and even uncertain; and under the sun, people find it difficult to attach enduring meaning and significance to their labors. You work all your life to get the stuff you think will make you happy, then you die. How meaningful, really, can that be?

Work thus understood can have dehumanizing effects. We sense that we are merely cogs in some machine. We don’t matter as persons – with longings, fears, and hopes – but only as contributors to various bottom lines, ours and the entity for which we work. Increasingly we have seen that, once it is determined that machines can do the work of humans, or that human work can be done more inexpensively in other locales, workers are discarded, jobs are eliminated, and government steps in, if only temporarily, to ease the economic crisis such transitions can create.

We work like dogs, and yet our work is at best only partially satisfying. Surely there’s something more?

Work requires dedication, but it carries with it a great deal of uncertainty. Solomon understood that, for this reason, putting too much stock in work be like feeding on the wind.

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Observations on work

Solomon was a hard and productive worker all his life, and he employed many laborers in his numerous and varied projects. He understood that work is the way men must secure the goods they need to survive; yet merely meeting our material needs doesn't satisfy the appetites men feel within them (Eccl. 6.7-9). We spend most of our waking hours toiling at our jobs, struggling to make a living (4.7, 8), but the material rewards our work produces cannot give us the satisfaction we require for consistent happiness.

Yet for most of us, finding happiness in work and family is about the most we can hope for (5.18, 19), which is not all that encouraging a prospect, given the many uncertainties that swirl around our relationships and our jobs (9.11). You might work and toil all your life, only to see your job transferred overseas or your retirement squandered by foolish executives. Work can be a most unpredictable source for happiness, given its difficulty, uncertainty, and limited rewards.

Plus, a man works all his life to accumulate things and wealth, but when he's gone, what's to become of the fruit of his labor? It could be as easily wasted by a fool as conserved and enlarged by a wise executor or heir (2.18-23).

In a secular world, work cannot fulfill the need for deep-seated affirmation that every worker longs to know. When we've achieved as much as we can through our work, we're still left wondering whether life isn't bigger than work, more significant than things, and more enduring than a job.

Work matters, because human beings were created to work (Gen. 1.26-28; 2.15). But when the goal of work is only maximizing life under the sun, rather than serving the eternal purposes of God, satisfaction can be fleeting, significance elusive, and rewards just another entrée in our vanity fare of secular cuisine.

For reflection

1. God created human beings to work. Why? What is so important about work that God considers it vital to human experience?
2. Do you think that work can become an idol, promising our highest hopes and demanding our greatest devotion? How would you know if your work was beginning to become an idol?
3. Work can create a certain amount of uncertainty, anxiety, and worry. Explain. How do people who work deal with this?

Next steps – Conversation: How do your non-Christian friends and coworkers feel about their work? How would they explain the purpose of work? What frustrations do they feel about their work? What do they hope to realize from their work? Does their work satisfy their deepest longings and hopes?

5 The Vanity of Wealth

*He who loves silver will not be satisfied with silver;
Nor he who loves abundance, with increase.
This also is vanity.
When goods increase,
They increase who eat them;
So what profit have the owners
Except to see them with their eyes?* Ecclesiastes 5.10,11

How much?

“How much is enough?” asks the bumper sticker, then answers its own question, “Just a little bit more.”

Whether as the pursuit of riches or of things, the notion that wealth can bring meaning and happiness to life is as old as the human race. In every generation and culture, people have lusted for wealth in one form or another, in the misguided belief that riches are the yellow brick road to freedom and bliss. That the record of history is littered with the disillusioned, disappointed, and decadent lives of the wealthy seems not to matter. Each generation hears the siren promise of wealth and sails eagerly toward it, convinced it can navigate the rocks and make the lie the truth.

The drumming of a materialist worldview into the minds of young people – through education, advertising, and pop culture – has made the quest for wealth and the things it can buy the driving force of human life in our secular age. Knowledge, however acquired, is only as good as the material rewards it brings, which is why the study of history, art, poetry, and music have all but disappeared in schools, while the STEM curriculum – the key to economic success – dominates the education of our children. We have become no longer *homo sapiens* but *homo economicus*, a species that exists only for getting and spending.

Truly, as Solomon observed, there is nothing new under the sun.

Get it while and however you can

For many people in a secular society, wealth is the key to happiness. Things and material comforts are glorified as the *sine qua non* of the good life, the end every reasonable person should seek. People struggle to accumulate wealth by working hard all their lives; for most of us, though, work enables us just to get by, with only a little left over.

Others seek to acquire wealth by shortcuts: winning a lottery or sweepstakes, making it big on a TV game show, inheriting someone else’s hard-earned wealth, or perhaps even stealing whatever they can.

The vision of the “golden years” features an abundance of retirement funds, good health, and leisure time to enjoy the “good things” of life.

Erasmus, one of the greatest minds of his day said, “Whenever I get a little money, I buy books; if I have any left over, I buy food.” He would be regarded as an object of ridicule or pity by our secular age – certainly not as a role model for the young.

The idea that wealth can bring happiness to people for whom this life is all there is, is an illusion, as any number of miserable millionaires can testify. In a secular world, accumulating wealth is just one more vanity in a life without meaning.

Solomon on the vanity of wealth

Few people who ever lived have accumulated as much wealth as Solomon. 1 Kings 10 relates how the nations of the world flocked to Jerusalem year after year to gawk and wonder at the wealth and wisdom of Solomon. And they all brought their gifts to add to his incredible riches. In Ecclesiastes 2.1-10 Solomon outlined his many achievements, and all the pleasures and riches he was able to acquire by the work of his hand. His was wealth to die for. Houses, vineyards, pools; servants, flocks, herds; silver, gold, precious items; wine, women, and song. Solomon had it all: “So I became great and excelled more than all who were before me in Jerusalem” (2.10). He boasted,

*Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them.
I did not withhold my heart from any pleasure,
For my heart rejoiced in all my labor;
And this was my reward from all my labor.* Ecclesiastes 2.11

But now firmly set in his hiatus from trusting in God, Solomon reflected on the meaning of all his great wealth:

*Then I looked on all the works that my hands had done
And on the labor in which I had toiled;
And indeed all was vanity and grasping for the wind.
There was no profit under the sun.* Ecclesiastes 2.11

How many wealthy materialists have echoed that same sentiment?

Solomon reflected gloomily on those who seek riches as the key to happiness. The wealthy lose sleep worrying about how they’re going to keep the riches they’ve accumulated (5.12). They can become miserly and manipulative in the preservation of their riches, taking advantage of others by various means to secure their own prosperity (5.13). If he makes a foolish investment, the wealthy man can lose all his riches in a moment (5.14). Strangers, sycophants, and governments threaten his wealth by one means or another (5.11; 6.1-3). Besides, we’re all going to die, and no one knows when his number may be up; there just isn’t enough time to acquire and enjoy all the wealth we think we need (9.1, 2, 11, 12).

Not even wealth can enable men to escape the vanity that is the inherent property of a secular age. People today want to be happy, as people in every generation. But they’re looking for happiness in all the wrong places. The vanity fare of wealth will no more satisfy the hunger in their souls than will relationships or work.

For reflection

1. Why do you suppose people keep falling for the notion that wealth and things can bring complete happiness and fulfillment?
2. Christians face this temptation as well, and not always successfully. Wealth and things are not inherently evil. They have their place in the life of faith. But how can we keep them from becoming an idol, to which we look for that which only Jesus Christ can provide?
3. We do not disparage our neighbors’ desire to find happiness, but we want them to know the real joy that comes from knowing the Lord (Ps. 16.11). How would you explain the difference between happiness and joy?

Next steps – Conversation: What is the measure of true happiness? Ask some of your secular friends how they gauge happiness, what they are pursuing as the ideal of the good life. Listen, and see what you can learn.

6 The Vanity of Politics

*Woe to you, O land, when your king is a child,
And your princes feast in the morning!
Blessed are you, O land, when your king is the son of nobles,
And your princes feast at the proper time—
For strength and not for drunkenness!* Ecclesiastes 10.16, 17

A great leveler

Lord Acton asserted that power tends to corrupt. More accurately, we should say that political power tends to bring out the natural corruption lurking within each of us. And, since in this country at least, every citizen has a role in the political process, it's not surprising that shading the truth, serving our own interests, vilifying opponents, fostering social polarization, and pausing the neighbor-love button attach to all participants in political activity.

For over a generation now, many Christians have believed that their freedoms and flourishing depend on getting the right people in office. Believers have made political agendas a more constant and public focus than seeking the Kingdom of God and His righteousness. As a result, we are routinely disappointed, embarrassed, and embittered by the outcomes our investment has achieved.

Which is to say, very little.

Allegations of moral compromise and outrage on the part of those in public office are as predictable as the seasons, and this leaves many people angry, disillusioned, and demanding someone's head. Lately, Christians have been willing to overlook the moral failings of certain politicians and public officials, preferring to ignore or excuse the dalliances and dumbnesses of those who favor their agenda, while denouncing and damning those who do not. In this regard, we're pretty much like everyone else.

Politics is thus a great leveler: It brings out the corruption in all of us. Solomon saw this long ago.

Sordid business

Most people in our secular society do not hold politicians in very high regard. I suspect this is because they don't see them as noble, selfless, and committed only to the public weal – which is how we tend to see ourselves. We consider politicians as a necessary evil – smooth-talking, truth-twisting, high profile, self-serving bottom-dwellers who exist on a diet of pork, power, and photo ops, and who could care less about the real needs of ordinary people.

Politics is sordid business, but somebody has to do it. And, in our secular age, most people look to politics more than any other source to provide cures for everything that ails us. Deep inside, however, they know that this, too, is just one more course in the vanity fare served up by our secular age.

Politics deals in power, the power to run other people's lives to your advantage and that of your friends. It's sadly natural that, knowing this, people will try to secure as much as possible of the available power for themselves and their agenda. Yet I suspect the most common affection associated with the political process is not exhilaration, but disappointment. All the bluster, pandering, finger-crossing, blaming and denouncing, and other forms of hot air associated with the political process make it truly a feeding on the wind.

Nevertheless, every new political season finds more people involved in the process, more polarization along more spectrums, more lies and false promises, more money raised and wasted, and more hopes dashed.

Solomon on politics

Solomon advises us to be careful around politicians. They can become fools who listen to no one's advice but their own (Eccl. 4.19). Instead of administering justice, they wink and nod and look the other way as injustice prevails to their advantage (3.16; 5.8; 8.11).

In a society where people live only "under the sun," no absolute law exists to guide politicians in whatever they choose to do. They become a law unto themselves, making decisions based on what they think is in their own best interest, and insisting the Constitution justifies their actions (8.2-5).

One must be careful, however, of what one says or does around politicians. Politicians are suspicious sorts, and they have ways of finding out those who wish them ill, and of getting to them first (10.20).

In a secular society, government is the highest level of power anyone can envision or achieve; but governments are comprised of sinful, self-seeking, frustrated, discontented people, who just can't seem to find a way to know real meaning and peace in life. If the most we can hope for in our lives is a government that will provide a just, fair, and open society, where every person is free to pursue his or her own sense of the meaning of life, then we're going to be disappointed.

Even King Solomon, who began so nobly, wanting only to serve the nation of Israel with the wisdom of God (1 Kgs. 3.3-9), ended up using his power to line his pockets and indulge his every fleshly desire (2.1-10). A secular worldview is not capable of producing any higher form of life than this.

So it's natural that politics and government should be for many of our neighbors a source of irritation, frustration, anger, confusion, and cynicism. If we understand this about our times, we will avoid regarding politics more highly than we should, and keep our focus on and trust in higher powers for the full and abundant life we and our neighbors seek.

For reflection

1. Why do you suppose people so readily gravitate to politics to solve social, moral, and economic problems?
2. Meditate on Romans 13.1-5. There is a role for politics and government in human life. But what qualifier did Paul set to guide us in thinking about and participating in that role? What does that mean?
3. Understanding that politics is a "great leveler," how can we talk about politics, and use political conversations in our calling to the Kingdom and glory of God (1 Thess. 2.12)?

Next steps – Conversation: What do your non-Christian friends or co-workers expect of politics? What hopes do they pin on the political process? How do they feel about politics? Ask a few.

7 Living in an Open Grave

*But if a man lives many years
And rejoices in them all,
Yet let him remember the days of darkness,
For they will be many.
All that is coming is vanity.* Ecclesiastes 11.8

As good as dead

I've painted a rather dour and gloomy portrait of our secular age, I'm afraid. As we look around, people appear to be having fun, enjoying life, making friends, attending to their responsibilities, minding their own business, and wishing others well. Probably no one we know seems as morose and discouraged as Solomon can sound in the book of Ecclesiastes.

It's true, people are living longer and filling their lives with more things and circumstances conducive to a measure of happiness, be it ever so fleeting. We are the "now generation," living only for the moment, filling our lives with as many positive experiences and enjoyable moments as we can, stacking the deck of life with good things, good friends, and good times so that, whatever dismal or discouraging card this day may deal, we'll have a trump to play against it.

We seldom look back, and we don't dare look ahead – not too far ahead, at any rate. For if we look too far ahead, we'll see ourselves dead, buried, and gone, done, over, finished. No amount of fun and adventure in the present can keep us from entering the "days of darkness," which will finally prove the vanity of the lives we've lived.

We're as good as dead already. We just won't admit it to ourselves.

A too-small horizon

The adherent to a secular worldview passes his life in an open grave. He is limited in what he can see of the world because his horizon stretches only as far as the setting sun. He is walled in by the circumstances that life in a world of limited opportunities, natural obstructions, insurmountable obstacles, and narcissistic people affords. He is anchored to the ground, or, rather, in it, from the moment of his birth.

Granted, some people's hole in the ground may be larger and more handsomely appointed than others, but sooner or later the dirt is coming down over them, too, just as it will over everyone else.

And once they've crossed that horizon, which draws nearer every day, they know there's no turning back. And they hope there's no *further* horizon, which they've heard about but ignored, that they may have to contend with beyond the grave. For *that* deck, they know implicitly, is seriously stacked against them.

Solomon sensed the terror of those who glimpse the coming days of darkness, and he wanted us to glimpse it, too.

The ultimate leveler

Throughout the book of Ecclesiastes death stalks King Solomon. His wealth and power won't allow him to escape it. Death could come at any moment. Will anyone be around to mourn him when he is gone? And even if so, what difference will that make? What will happen to the riches he has accumulated and the many wonderful things he has done? Will he be forgotten by history, like almost everyone else?

Vanity Fare

As he grew older and began to see his body decline (Eccl 12), Solomon was haunted by the certainty, the inevitability, and the horror of death. He may have been the greatest king of ancient Israel, but when he dies, even the mangiest dog in the street would be better off than he (9.4-6).

Death is the ultimate leveler for those who live only under the sun. Dust and the grave are the most any of them can hope to achieve, and, in the grand scheme of things, that doesn't present a compelling case for a life of charity and sacrifice toward others.

People with no faith in God live in the fear of death all their lives (Heb. 2.15). They don't talk about it; instead, they do everything they can think of to postpone it, insulate themselves from it, or euphemize it and soften its inevitable blow. They hope to live on after death in their children, works, or the monuments and institutions they erect to themselves, but deep inside they know this, too, is vanity.

Every day of his life the secularist fears the first shovelful of earth, raining down upon his head. He knows it's inevitable, but, given his lack of an eternal and unchanging horizon or framework, he cannot really consider his demise or that of anyone else anything other than a fact of existence – neither a triumph nor a tragedy, merely a fact, signifying nothing. He may weep at a friend's funeral, but his tears are only for himself and his prospects. Secularists of every stripe, size, and sex are going to die, and darkness for "many days" is all they can look forward to, all they can hope for, all they may ever expect to know.

That secular people live otherwise, however – seeking happiness, meaning, purpose, hope, love, and joy – indicates that they suspect the secular worldview they espouse is a lie. The secularist *knows* he is more significant than he will admit, *knows* that life is more than stuff, and *knows* that death is not merely a fact, but a tragedy.

But only someone as wise as Solomon, or a believer in the truth of God, can tell him why.

For reflection

1. What are some ways people try to postpone or euphemize death? Why do they do this?
2. How can we see that the writer of Hebrews is correct when he says that people fear dying (Heb. 2.15)?
3. What is the Christian view of death? How would you explain this to a non-Christian friend who had just lost a loved one?

Next steps – Conversation: Solomon wanted his son, Rehoboam, to look ahead and see where his life was going. Should we be doing this for our unbelieving friends and co-workers? Why or why not? Talk with some Christian friends about this.

Vanity Fare

Questions for reflection or discussion

1. What does Solomon mean by the phrases *under the sun* and *under the heavens*? Why are these relevant for our times?
2. Solomon says that life under the sun is “vanity.” How is he using that term? Do you agree with him? Explain.
3. Why must the things secular people look to for meaning and happiness – relationships, work, wealth, politics, and so forth – *necessarily* leave them disappointed?
4. Is it important for us as believers to understand the mindset and worldview of our secular neighbors? Why?
5. What’s the most important lesson you’ve learned from this study? How are you putting that lesson to work in your life?

For prayer:

The Fellowship of Ailbe

The Fellowship of Ailbe is a spiritual fellowship in the Celtic Christian tradition. Our goal is to promote revival, renewal, and awakening, following the teaching of Scripture and the example and heritage of our forebears in the faith.

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Thank you.