

Noted evolutionary biologist and atheist, Richard Dawkins, writes the following, “Faith is the great cop-out, the great excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence. Faith is the belief in spite of, even perhaps because of, the lack of evidence.” And again, “I am against religion because it teaches us to be satisfied with not understanding the world.”

To be a person of faith, Dawkins suggests, is to ignore the evidence, to be satisfied with an ignorance about the world. I would suggest that Dawkins goes too far; according to his own criteria, his perspective alone is credible, rational, believable. But as Tim Keller writes, “Believers *and* nonbelievers in God alike arrive at their positions through a combination of experience, faith, reasoning, and intuition.”¹ Which is to say, everyone has reasons to believe what they do.

And so the question becomes not simply, “*what do you believe?*” but “*why do you believe it?*” If we were to test Dawkins’ own beliefs, would they make better sense of the complexities of our world and human experience? Which worldview is more believable? Secular or Christian?

In the middle of the 1st century, Peter, one of Jesus’ original 12 disciples, wrote a letter to a group of Christians scattered throughout the Roman Empire. This group of Christians were neither large in number, nor influential. They had been scattered because of persecution; they were living in exile because they had confessed

faith in Jesus as Lord. And yet, Peter didn’t encourage these Christians to hide themselves and stay safe, in fact, quite the opposite. He writes, “*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect*”.²

Over the next four Sundays, I will be preaching a series that I’ve entitled, *Reasons To Believe*. I’m not going to pit faith against science, for these two are not mutually exclusive. Instead, I want to look at some of the particular needs, or impulses, within human existence, arguing that a Christian worldview offers a more comprehensive explanation than a secular one.

If you enjoy reading, I would like to commend a book to you as a companion during this preaching series. The book is entitled, *Making Sense of God*, and the author is Tim Keller; I will be drawing upon thoughts and ideas from this book in the coming weeks.

If you are already a person of faith, I trust this series will both strengthen you in what you believe, and, perhaps enable your conversations with unbelieving friends. If you would not identify as a person of faith, but you are open to exploring the Christian worldview, I trust this series will give you something to think about.

All that I’ve said so far is meant to be introductory, in just a moment, I’m going to launch into the sermon, but before I do, I want to define a term that I have already used a few times. The term *secular* can be

¹ Timothy Keller, *Making Sense of God: An Invitation to the Skeptical*, 2.

² 1 Peter 3:15.

used in at least three ways:

- First, a *secular society* is one in which there is a separation between religion and the State. In essence it means that no one religion is given preference or power by the State. By this definition, Canada is a secular society while Saudi Arabia is not.
- Second, a *secular person* is one who does not believe in God, in a supernatural realm, or in an afterlife.
- Third, it follows that a *secular age* is made up of *secular people*. If there is no God, and no afterlife, then all the emphasis in life is placed upon the here-and-now.³

Generally speaking, I support the separation of religion and State; I would prefer to live in a country where the State doesn't control religion, and one particular religion doesn't control the State. All that to say, this series will not address the relationship between religion and State. Instead, it is the other two meanings that I want to interact with.

How does a secular person, or a secular age, understand the complexity of human need and longing? And, does a secular worldview offer a better explanation of these realities than a Christian one?

I want to begin this morning by addressing a need that exists within every human being, namely, the need for meaning and satisfaction. As we begin, I want to invite you to turn with me to Ecclesiastes 3.

“There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: 2 a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, 3 a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, 4 a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance... 7 a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, 8 a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.”

There's a few things to notice right away. First, the author employs a rhetorical device known as *merismus*. Each pair of opposites is meant to communicate two extremes and everything in between, and so, Ecclesiastes 3 provides us with a quasi-comprehensive picture of human experience. Old Testament professor, Iain Provan writes, “The first pair of opposites is the most all-embracing as far as human life is concerned... ‘there is a time to be born and the time to die’.”⁴

Second, it's worth noting that in listing these opposites, the author doesn't provide a particularly “*religious*” perspective. In other words, these opposites don't describe life as from the perspective of faith, or life as God wants it to be, they simply describe the way things are.

The second half of verse 3 rings true for most of us. Living where we do on the North Shore, we are well-accustomed to construction and the traffic that comes with it; there is a time to tear down and a time to build. But this is true not just of cities, but of people, and of families. There are times when things need to be built in our lives, and times when things need to be dismantled.

³ Keller, 2-3.

⁴ Iain Provan, *The NIV Application Commentary: Ecclesiastes/Song of Songs*, 87.

In the same way, verse 4 describes the way things are for all of us; weeping and laughing, mourning and dancing are a part of our human experience.

There's a time to be born and a time to die, but what are we to do with this in between period? What are we living for? Where are meaning, purpose, and satisfaction to be found in this life?

illus: The story is told of two road crews, both of whom were called upon to dig a trench, by hand, along a rural road. The first crew was at it all day and by the early afternoon, they needed to be relieved; the second crew was then called in to take over from the first.

The second crew was told to dig a trench 4 feet deep by 30 feet long; after they had completed the task, the foreman told them to fill in the trench. They moved a little further along the road and were given the same instructions, “Dig a trench 4 feet deep by 30 feet long.” After they had completed the task, they were promptly told to fill in the trench. Once again, they moved a little further along the road and were told to dig a third trench; the crew threw down their shovels and refused.

Only then did the foreman realize his error; he hadn't told the crew *why* they were digging the trench. Just down the road was an Orphanage. The foreman was looking for a crack in the water line; runoff from the cow pasture had contaminated the water, causing children to become sick. Their job was to find the crack, and get it

repaired. *What a difference it makes when we know the why behind our activity.*⁵

When a person says that their life feels empty, more often than not, they're making a statement about meaning. They may be beautiful and intelligent, successful and influential, they may have lots of friends and material comfort, and still feel empty. What purpose does their life serve? Are they accomplishing anything? Does any of it matter?

Russian author, Leo Tolstoy, is widely considered one of the greatest writers of all time and yet at the age of 50 he began to suffer from a crisis of meaning. One day, his books would be forgotten, and his loved ones would be claimed by death. In light of this reality, Tolstoy writes, “*The question was: why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything? Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?*”

Some secular thinkers suggest that this crisis of meaning can be avoided by one simple move—stop the search altogether. There is no ultimate meaning in the Universe they tell us, and so, when we stop searching for a meaning that is “out there, somewhere,” we can begin to create meaning for ourselves.⁶

The strategy then is to find meaning in whatever is meaningful to you: being beautiful, or artistic, or successful, or athletic, or helping others. But for many, this too rings hollow.

⁵ Greg Ogden and Daniel Meyer, *Leadership Essentials*, 85.

⁶ Keller, 61.

Let's think for a moment about a matter related to meaning, namely, **satisfaction**. When we're young, we assume that when we land the right job, acquire enough money, or choose the right partner, we will find the satisfaction we seek. The difficulty comes when we arrive at this destination but satisfaction evades us.

Listen the words of the Teacher, taken from Ecclesiastes 2,
"1 I said to myself, 'Come on, let's try pleasure. Let's look for the good things' in life'...3 I tried cheering myself with wine...4 I also tried to find meaning by building huge homes for myself and by planting beautiful vineyards...8 I collected great sums of silver and gold, the treasure of many kings and provinces...9 So I became greater than all who had lived in Jerusalem before me...10 Anything I wanted, I would take. I denied myself no pleasure...11 But as I looked at everything I had worked so hard to accomplish, it was all so meaningless...There was nothing really worthwhile anywhere...17 So I came to hate life".

Jonathan Haidt, author of *The Happiness Hypothesis*, writes, "The author of Ecclesiastes wasn't just battling the fear of meaninglessness; he was battling the disappointment of success... *Nothing brought satisfaction.*"⁷ It's the law of diminishing returns; what once thrilled the heart, now leaves us cold.

Keller writes, "Even as we taste the moment of contentment, we sense how fleeting it is, that it will soon be wrenched from our grasp.

It begins to fade away even as we tried to embrace it...The ephemeral [fleeting] nature of all satisfaction makes us long for something we can keep, but we look in vain."⁸

That's not to say that secular people can't find meaning or satisfaction apart from Christianity—many can, and do—but there are inherent difficulties in the secular approach. As I began this morning I asked the following question, "*How does a secular person, or a secular age, understand the complexity of human need and longing?*"

The psychological human need for meaning is inarguable, the question is, *why is it present in humanity at all? How did it get there, and what purpose does it serve?* Evolutionary biology has no answer. A secular worldview cannot provide evidence-based-answers to our human experience. The best it can do is tell us to ignore our longings (simply pretend they're not there), that there is no meaning in the Universe (in spite of the universal human hunger for meaning), and to settle for pursuing satisfaction where it can be found, however fleeting it may be.

Perhaps there is something missing from a secular worldview that is necessary for human flourishing. Perhaps the reason we long for something beyond us is because there is something beyond us.

⁷ Jonathan Haidt, *The Happiness Hypothesis: Putting Wisdom and Philosophy to the Test of Modern Science*, 82; as quoted by Tim Keller, *Making Sense of God*, 77.

⁸ Keller, 80.

Christianity and Secularism are fundamentally at odds, especially when it comes to understanding the nature of reality. Secularism is committed to the idea that this world is all there is. According to this view, there is no God, no after-life (neither heaven nor hell), and consequently no ultimate meaning or purpose in this life. With no God to tell us how to live, life is what we want it to be—life is what we make of it. There's more I could say on the matter, but it might be easier to show you.

illus: In 1989 a movie entitled *Dead Poets Society* was released and went on to receive popular acclaim. It features a High School teacher, in an all boys school, who inspires his students to make something of themselves. Let's turn our attention to the video screen.

Carpe Diem, in the way it is used by Williams, is the quintessence of secularism. “*Life is what you make of it; create your own meaning; find what will satisfy you and chase it down; make something extraordinary of your lives.*”

Is it just me, or did you notice that every student depicted in the scene was a white, wealthy, privileged person? It's perhaps not surprising that secularism tends to flourish in places where affluence, freedom, and individual rights exist—this milieu propagates the illusion of self-creation and control.

We may think of ourselves as gods, but we are not as powerful as we think. There are things that we cannot stop from beginning and other things we cannot prevent from ending. The sun rises and sets without our permission. Relationships begin and end, often, despite our best

efforts. We cannot stop time. We cannot prevent death. When relationships break down, when bodies break down, and losses pile up, this here-and-now approach to life fails to sustain us.

Christian faith offers an alternative explanation of reality. Life is not, first and foremost, something we make—it's something we receive. Iain Provan writes, from a Christian perspective, “*carpe diem* is an expression of faith, not of self-fulfillment. It is, rather, the patient and joyful embrace of daily life as it comes to us as a gift from God.”⁹

We don't create meaning in a meaningless Universe; meaning is found in relationship to God. It isn't our beauty, intelligence, or skill that makes life meaningful, it's the fact that God loves us beyond measure. And so, Christians do seize the day, but they do so knowing that this world belongs to God, and they along with it.

Further, when it comes to finding satisfaction, Christians embrace the tension of the “*already and not yet.*” There is much for us to enjoy in this world: friendship and family, adventure, art, sport, work, or travel. This is a good and beautiful world, and yet, ultimate satisfaction cannot be found in temporary things.

Reflection: We're going to pause for a moment, and I want to invite everyone to engage in a reflection exercise. I want you to call to mind a moment in your life that you might describe as “perfect.” Maybe it was a perfect sunset, seen from the top of a mountain or on a tropical beach. Maybe it was your wedding day, or a birthday; maybe it was your graduation, or the day you got the big promotion.

⁹ Provan, 99.

What was your perfect moment? Have you got it? What were you feeling at the time? What do you feel as you reflect on it now?

When we find ourselves in a perfect moment, we want it to last forever, but sometimes, in the middle of such moments, we feel a twinge of sadness, knowing that the moment will slip away. The sun slips beneath the horizon, the party ends and it's time for cleanup, the promotion was exciting, but now it's just hard work.

Some people spend their lives chasing perfect moments; when Christians are at their best, they know better. Fleeting though they may be, Christians recognize these moments as a whisper, pointing to what is yet to come. Lasting satisfaction is coming; the best is still ahead of us, not behind. In his book, *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis writes, "If I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world."¹⁰

4th century theologian, Augustine of Hippo, taught that we are fundamentally shaped in life by what we love. He recognized that not all loves are not created equal; when we fail to love "first things first" our lives fall into disorder, which in turn leads to our unhappiness.¹¹

Tim Keller writes, "The ultimate disordered love...and the ultimate source of our discontent—is...the failure to love God supremely... Whether we acknowledge God or not, since we were created for

[Him], we will always look for the infinite joy we were designed to find in loving communion with the Divine."¹²

And so, we bring harm to ourselves when we love anything more than God. When we love our children, friends, or spouse more than God, our sense of security will rise and fall with their well-being. If they flourish, we flourish, but when they are wounded, confused, or suffer loss, we are crushed.

When we love our reputation more than we love God, we become obsessed with what others think of us. We are driven by the expectations of others. Just when we think people are happy with us, another expectation arises, one that we can't or won't satisfy, and so, we are never at rest, never content. When we love our job more than we love God, we need to constantly achieve, to reach our goals; when we fall short, we are unconsolable.

The problem is not that we love things too much; the problem is that we love God too little. When we love God supremely, the rest of our loves are brought into order—they are important, but not ultimate. The best this world has to offer is not enough to satisfy our longings. We want more because we were made for more. We were made for God, made for a world that is yet to come.

As I come to the end of my sermon this morning, I return to the question I asked in the beginning. The human longing for meaning and satisfaction is inarguable—it drives us. But why are they there in

¹⁰ C.S. Lewis, as quoted by Keller, 91.

¹¹ Keller, 89.

¹² Keller, 90.

the first place, and what does that tell us? *Does a secular worldview offer a better explanation than a Christian one?* **Pray.**