

A Wise Perspective on Work

DARRELL DELANEY

Back in the 1980s, there was a hit song called (everybody is) *Working for the Weekend*. The idea was that work is a drag and just something you have to go through, but at least the money you make allows you to have fun, or maybe have a party on the weekend. Also in the 1980s, there was a hit called *Nine to Five*, and its theme song said: Working nine to five, what a way to make a living; you can lose your mind, it's all taking and no giving. Again, work can be a grind, but is that all work can be? Ecclesiastes has a lot to say about work, and although a lot of that is also rather cynical, we can dig into scripture to get some deeper insights as well; so, stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney; and Scott, we are in program two of our three-part series here on the book of Ecclesiastes; and in the first program, we talked about the Teacher, who is pretty much a curmudgeon; and he has given us a lot of reflections that are down to earth, and given us an understanding of life being a vapor, which we just kept saying “phhht,” because that is basically what it means. It is a short vapor, and there is not a lot in there; it is just brief and it is gone.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; we are sort of like a bubble rising to the top of a glass of champagne and eventually it just pops and it is gone. That is life, the Teacher says. In the first episode, we said: Well, maybe the Teacher found great merit in pursuing wisdom, because this is a wisdom book; meh, not so much. How about pleasures? Nah, they are fleeting. How about undertaking great projects? Nah, nobody remembers you when you are gone anyway. So, that is kind of the way it went, although we did see that that realistic engagement with life really helps us understand that our faith has to be realistic, and God is realistic, and that is why he saved us through Jesus on the cross, which is where we ended up in the previous program in this series; but now, one of the main themes that weaves through Ecclesiastes is work...labor...toil. So, we want to see what the Teacher has to say about that.

DARRELL DELANEY

Before we go into the scripture that talks about that, Scott, I just wanted to clarify the difference between working and toiling. So, toiling, on one hand, is really for a sinful motive. If you are trying to amass things for yourself so that everybody can look at you, or you want society or your neighbors or whoever to think you are somebody...you are trying to get your identity...your value...your worth from what you produce, then that is actually toiling, which this writer considers to be meaningless.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; if all you want is the bling...if all you want is the attention...right; then that is sort of the sense of toiling or slaving away. You really don't take any pleasure and you don't endow any meaning in the work, it is just a means to an end; and the end is to shine brighter than your neighbor; and when that is all you care about, then, indeed, that is toil. You know, it is not meaningful work; it is slaving away; it is just toil. Work is a cruel taskmaster then.

DARRELL DELANEY

So then, on the other hand, work happens to be something that is honorable, it has its own intrinsic value when you do it in the right spirit...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DARRELL DELANEY

When you have the right motive. If you are working to be a blessing to someone with your hands; if you are working.... your work doesn't make you who you are...but you actually find a way to serve, and vocation is what we talked about earlier, in the last episode; if you can find your vocation, and you can honor God that way, then work is good.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, let's see what the Teacher has to say on this subject of toiling in Ecclesiastes Chapter 4: ⁴And I saw all toil and all achievement spring from one person's envy of another. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind. ⁵Fools fold their hands and ruin themselves. ⁶Better one handful with tranquility than two handfuls with toil and chasing after the wind. ⁷Again I saw something meaningless under the sun: ⁸There was a man all alone; he had neither son nor brother. There was no end to his toil, yet his eyes were not content with his wealth. "For whom am I toiling?" he asked, "and why am I depriving myself of enjoyment?" This too is meaningless—a miserable business!

DARRELL DELANEY

Man; I see a couple of problems in this passage here, Scott. One of them being that the person works and achieves out of envy for another person. So, basically this is the classic definition of keeping up with the Joneses. I mean, you have someone who sees an achievement...or like maybe they have a nice house or a nice car or they make a lot of money, or whatnot...this person sees that and says: I have got to be better than that, or I have got to work harder; I have got to go to work and stay longer because I want to make sure that I show myself as like that. I want to keep up with them; and that isn't a healthy way to look at work or a healthy reason for working.

SCOTT HOEZEE

No, it is extremely shortsighted, right? I mean, talk about just some very limited, envy-driven, sinful, short-term goals: I just want to be better than them. I am sick of his having a bigger boat than I do...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am sick of his having a boat and I don't even have a boat; and what the Teacher here says in Chapter 4, and what we just read is: You know what? There is no bottom to that. We are going to see that in a little while, too, about riches. There is no bottom to that. You are never going to get to the point of saying: Okay, good; you know, I am just blessed. That is what he says here, you know: You could better just have one handful of tranquility...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In your life, being satisfied, than two handfuls of toil that aren't enough. It will never be enough when you are driven by envy.

DARRELL DELANEY

And you know, the green monster, envy, is never, ever going to take into account context.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

We don't know what that person went through to get what they have. They might have gone to school for twelve years. There might be an inheritance from a loved one they don't see anymore, and they have this thing that they bought, but it is not going to bring the person back. We just don't know the context, and that is why it is a shallow view. You shouldn't even mess with it, and it shouldn't be a part of what toiling is for you. Toiling is very unhealthy for you. The second person that we see is one who literally works ninety-nine hours a week and doesn't have time for anything else. I had seen a movie about this once, where the guy was rich, he was successful, but lonely and bored. He had no family; and then he woke up in a dream and there were children all around...his family...he had a wife, he had kids...and he chose that second life because it had more meaning for him, as opposed to working and just going to bed and doing it again...working.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Workaholism...the famous saying, you know, you never have time to stop and smell the roses...

DARRELL DELANEY

That one.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Because, indeed, there is no end to it, right? We have said, there is no bottom to it; and when work becomes so overly important...I mean, there are parts of Ecclesiastes that says, you know, maybe it doesn't matter at all, but it is also possible to make it *too* important to you; and then people suffer. Here is this man, the Teacher says. He didn't have a brother, he didn't have children, he was all alone. He was busy, but you know, that was sort of it. It sort of reminds you of the legend of King Midas...the good man...the king with the golden touch, remember?

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that story ends tragically when he reaches out one day and touches his daughter, and she turns to gold...lifeless gold. So, the first part of King Midas sounds good; all he had was gold...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But then, the bottom line was: Yes, but in the end, *all* he had was gold.

DARRELL DELANEY

Right; and the writer of this book is saying if you put all your trust in what your hands produce, you are pretty much on dangerous ground, because that in and of itself is meaningless; and I am trying to figure out how do we not let drivenness take over in us? How do we learn to pace ourselves and not get caught up in the rat race? One of my favorite songs is: *In Christ Alone*. There is a line in there that says: When fears are stilled, when strivings cease...

SCOTT HOEZEE

When strivings cease...yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am trying to figure out, when do the strivings raise up in me and when do I have to confess them; and how do I get off of that and stop trying to keep up with the Joneses? Only God can help us with that, and I am really, really glad that our identity is not tied up in what we produce.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think, Darrell, we have both known some people...I knew a former pastor, even...who had sunk so much of their identity only into their work that when that was taken away from them...they retired, or you know, whatever...they were lost. Some of them got extremely depressed. They didn't know what to do when they weren't super, super busy fifty-sixty hours a week. That is not good either. That is a chasing after the wind, the Teacher says; but in just a moment, we are going to discuss another motive some people have, and we have touched on a little bit: it is the motive of riches for riches' sake. So, we are going to take a look at that in just a moment, so stay tuned.

Segment 2

DARRELL DELANEY

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, in this second episode of a three-part series on Ecclesiastes, we said we are going to talk about the theme of work, and that weaves all through it; and we just said...and we are going to see this before the episode is done...when our work comes from good motives, it will be a good thing, but when it comes from bad motives, like envy; or when work becomes an end in itself, so you are a workaholic, those aren't good motives; but there is another not so good motive behind work that the Teacher of Ecclesiastes also wants to talk about.

DARRELL DELANEY

In this section, we are going to continue that conversation, but we need to understand that life is more than work, and that is the problem. When you work for work's sake, or you work for what we are talking about here, which would be the love of money, then you run into all types of problems; and I just want to look at this verse here because the Teacher has something to say about that in Chapter 5: ¹⁰Whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless. ¹¹As goods increase, so do those who consume them. And what benefit are they to the owners except to feast their eyes on them? ¹²The sleep of a laborer is sweet, whether they eat little or much, but as for the rich, their abundance permits them no sleep. ¹³I have seen a grievous evil under the sun: wealth hoarded to the harm of its owners; ¹⁴or wealth lost through some misfortune, so that when they have children there is nothing left for them to inherit. ¹⁵Everyone comes naked from their mother's womb; and as everyone comes, so they depart. They take nothing from their toil that they can carry in their hands.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, there it is; the love of money. It is sort of an interesting thing. He says, you know, those who have less sleep better than those who have more, because all night long they are worried about the stock market; all night long they are worried about their investment portfolio; all night long they worry about on what a slender thread all of their wealth hangs. It is never enough! The father of a friend of mine once said to my friend: Son, don't ever make earning more money all the time your bottom-line goal; because you know what? At the end of the month, you are always going to have the same amount. Now, you might think: Boy, I earn fifty thousand dollars a year; and then, let's say, a couple of years later you've gotten some promotions and now you are getting sixty-five thousand dollars a year; but then you say: How come I don't have any more money at the end of the month than I had when I was making fifteen thousand dollars less? You know

why? Because when you get more, you spend it.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, what you are talking about, Scott, is the insatiable appetite of what this earning money can do to some people. So, your cost of living goes up, but your tastes go up as well. This thing is going to be something more expensive to you, especially if you are not a good steward. My mom used to always say: Money happens to burn a hole in your pocket when you have to spend it...you have to hurry up and spend it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

If you do that, it is definitely a chasing of the wind because you are going to end up with nothing at the end of that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Don't work just for the money, the Teacher is saying, because that is a bottomless pursuit. You will never hit enough. You know, I think maybe I have met a few quite wealthy people in my life, who, I think honestly could say: I've got enough; but you are going to tend to meet far more people who don't know what enough would even look like. I mean, if that is all you're focus...what would enough look like? You could ask somebody...somebody could ask *me* that. I am not sure I could answer it either. It is like: Well, Scott, how much is enough? How much money would you need per year that you would say that is enough or more than enough. I don't even want any more. I don't know what the answer would be, and probably a lot of us wouldn't; and that, the Teacher says, is chasing after the wind. It is just phhht, because it is all going to...you could lose it all overnight, and then if that is your whole life, you have lost your life; and that would be an over-identification with your wealth.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, the Teacher is always sounding like this. Straight, no chasers; straight shot right between the eyes. Like I said in the last episode, this is the friend who tells you, you have something in your teeth. They let you know they are not going to sugarcoat anything for you. So, I mean, it is really hard for us to get some optimism or some cheerfulness from the Teacher, but there is a verse right here that is going to be as close as we can possibly get to what it means to be positive here.

In Chapter 9, starting at verse 7 it says this: Go, eat your food with gladness and drink your wine with a joyful heart, for God has already approved what you do. ⁸Always be clothed in white, and always anoint your head with oil. ⁹Enjoy life with your wife, whom you love, all the days of this meaningless life that God has given you under the sun—all your meaningless days. For this is your lot in life and in your toilsome labor under the sun. ¹⁰Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might, for in the realm of the dead, where you are going, there is neither working nor planning nor knowledge nor wisdom.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, he can only get so positive here, and he keeps punctuating this with, you know, just phhht...you know, just do your best, phhht...phhht, you know, phhht; but he does say some interesting things here, Darrell. He does say: Look, you can enjoy life because God approves your work. We are going to talk more about that in a few minutes, but if you have this sense that God notices your work...if you have the satisfaction of thinking that God approves what you do...well then, you can relax a little bit. That was really, in Israel, the purpose of the Sabbath—a day where you don't work and you just trust God, and you trust that God is satisfied with what you do the other parts of the week, so now you can just relax into the grace of God. So, there *is* something positive to that notion, that God approves of our work.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, it isn't all meaningless, then. There is a lot in life where God can approve of your work. It means that work can be positive when it is done for the right motive; because motive is going to be absolutely important:

Why do we do what we do, Scott? If we know the answer to that; if we allow God to speak into that; I think the Teacher is challenging the motive of why people do what they do in this book; and if we could realize that, you know, money isn't the main answer; working hard isn't the main answer; if those things we know are chasing after the wind, but if God approves of our work, he notices, he is excited about it, and he is endorsing it, I think that is a good place to live; from a clear conscience, you could stay there.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; knowing that God remembers even when other people forget, or when other people don't notice. I have had the great privilege to write several books in my career, and I remember after I wrote my first book, in the late 1990s, and it was published, and I got copies in the mail, you know, from Eerdmans Publishing Company; and it is like, well, there. I am a published author. My life is going to take off now. And it is like, nothing changed. Most people I met had no idea I had written a book, and they didn't care. It is like, nothing changed! So, I was hoping to become a world-famous author, forget it; but God notices your work, the writer says. Even though everybody else forgets it or isn't even aware of it, God remembers it. So, set your heart on the things that endure; and that is what Jesus said in the Sermon on the Mount: Matthew 6:19: "Do not store up for yourselves treasure on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal."²⁰ But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.²¹ For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

So, as we are going to see in a minute, when we dedicate our work to God, it makes a huge difference; and we will wrap up this program pondering that in just a moment; so, stay tuned.

Segment 3

DARRELL DELANEY

I am Darrell Delaney, with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and we have been in this book of Ecclesiastes. This is number two of our three-part series, and we have been talking about the Teacher, who happens to not sugar-coat anything.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

The Teacher would not let us believe or have rose-colored glasses about anything that he is saying. He is letting us know the sober reality that many of the things that we put value on are meaningless. So, how do we live? What are we supposed to take from this, Scott?

SCOTT HOEZEE

And in this episode particularly, what do we take away from his reflections on work? Well, first, let's just admit unless you are independently wealthy and never have a need to work, for most of us, whatever the work is we do, it is going to occupy a big chunk of our lives. What percentage of your time do you spend on your job? It is a lot of your waking hours if you are a working person, but the question is, can we see our work...you mentioned this earlier, Darrell...as a vocation, from the Latin *voca*, meaning a call; and you know, Darrell, you and I are pastors, so people often ask us: Tell us about your call, Darrell; how did you get called into the ministry? And I think people...and my wife really chafes against this...get the impression only ministers are called. Other people just get a job; but the Reformation...and Lee Hardy, a philosopher from Calvin College, now Calvin University, wrote a wonderful book years ago called *The Fabric of This World*, in which he recovered the Reformers' insight...John Calvin, and especially Martin Luther: Everybody is called.

DARRELL DELANEY

I think it is interesting that you bring that up because in scripture I see in the Old Testament that there were people who were anointed by the Spirit to build the temple, like measurements and skills in architecture and construction...all these things. It wasn't people who were preaching and teaching God's Word; and I am not sure why we have that view this day, but everyone who works, everyone who has hands to do things,

everyone who is adding value somewhere, that could be a vocation and a call from God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and so, we opened this episode with that song: (everybody is) *Working for the Weekend*; and we don't have to work for the weekend and treat Monday through Friday as a nuisance on the way to partying hardy on Saturday and Sunday, or something. No; it is not a slaving away...it is not burdensome toil that we talked about in the first part of the episode. God wants to have us view our working hours as the fulfilment of a calling; and that means, secondly, Darrell, that certainly our work is not just a means to getting a bigger bank account or a flashier car.

DARRELL DELANEY

Like I said before, the Teacher is exposing the motive behind why we want that stuff. If it is so that everyone can look at us and see that we are important or we want them to think we are special, then we actually are chasing the wind. I think the heart is that we can use the money that we give; as long as we don't love it and hoard it, we can bless. The Bible says it is more blessed to give than it is to receive. So, if we can contribute, we can tithe...we can be a blessing...we can leave an extra tip at the restaurant when the server comes by...whatever we can do to help folks, that money is a means to answer some of the tangible situations that we run into in this world.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; if we see our work as a calling, then we see what we earn from that as a chance to serve...

DARRELL DELANEY

Exactly.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Martin Luther had this great passage that I read years ago, and I cannot remember where it was. It may have been in some of his Table Talk conversations that some of his students wrote down. Martin Luther said: You know, when God answers our prayers, he doesn't do it through dramatic, divine intervention most of the time, he does it through ordinary, mundane things. God works through people. And so, Martin Luther, in talking about the Lord's Prayer at one point, he said: Just imagine; a family gets up, they are at the breakfast table and they pray the Lord's Prayer together, including the line: Give us this day our daily bread; and then Luther said: You know what? At that very moment, as that family prays that, a baker across town, who got up at 4:00 a.m.—he is, at that very moment, pulling his first loaves of bread out of the brick oven, and that is the answer to their prayer. Give us this day our daily bread? The baker on the other side of town is fulfilling that.

DARRELL DELANEY

I love that you are talking about how God uses people to bless other people. One of the prayers that I pray is that I would repose in the fact that before I set my foot on the floor in the morning, God has already solved the problem that I think I am going to run into that day; he has already set provision because he is a providential God; he has already fed us; he has already solved all the issues. So, you are pointing out, Scott, that other people around are the ones who are part of the answer to that prayer; and I too could be part of an answer...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DARRELL DELANEY

To a prayer for someone else, if I am available and allow God to use me, and if I don't use the money or the work to identify me, I could use them as tools to bless other folks.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and that is the third point. You just ran right into it. That means there are no insignificant jobs. Everybody is part of God's providential plan. Good truck drivers, people good at repairing electrical circuits, careful bus drivers, people who inspect restaurants to make sure health codes are maintained so nobody gets sick. There are no unimportant jobs; and when all of us do our jobs well, life just goes better. I was thinking about that. I recently was rewatching part of that movie, *Sully*...

DARRELL DELANEY

Oh, yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we all remember, if we were alive back in January 2009, that day when that U.S. Airways plane had to ditch into...they had run into a whole flock of geese, and took out both their engines, and they had to land in the Hudson River...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

In New York City. Captain Sullenberger landed the plane intact, but it was in freezing water...it was in January in New York...it was in freezing water, and the plane was going to sink eventually; but you know what? Within minutes Staten Island Ferry operators, the people who brought people on a boat to the Statue of Liberty. Fishermen...they all revved up their engines and headed straight to that plane; and in twenty-four minutes, those good sailors got all 155 passengers off the wings of that plane, out of the icy river—just guys going their job. It is not always that dramatic, but it is always that good when people do their jobs well.

DARRELL DELANEY

I remember the picture of everyone standing on the wings...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

Where everybody was waiting to be rescued; and you bring out a fantastic point of how every job was necessary. It was kind of an all-hands-on-deck mentality...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Clearly, yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

If everyone does what God has called them to do, I don't need to envy you; I don't need to be jealous of you; I don't need to be upset with what you have, because God has given me what I need; and so, it is really beautiful to see that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; we talked about this before, but the composer Johann Sabastian Bach, at the bottom of every piece of music he wrote, were the letters: SDG, from the Latin, soli deo gloria: To God alone be the glory; and I don't care what you do. If you are a baker, you put SDG on your rolls; if you are a mechanic, you put SDG on the muffler you just fixed; because when we do everything to God's glory alone, then our work is not a burdensome toil, it is a joy. Thanks be to God.

DARRELL DELANEY

Thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Darrell Delaney and Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we conclude our study of Ecclesiastes by examining the Teacher's reflections on time and what makes life meaningful.

Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to share what *Groundwork* means to you, or to tell us what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Groundwork is a listener supported program produced by ReFrame Ministries. Visit the website, reframeministries.org, for more information.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/a-wise-perspective-on-work>

Printed on January 21, 2025