

Finding Meaning in Life and the Passing of Time

SCOTT HOEZEE

The 1960s produced a lot of memorable music. The Beatles, Simon and Garfunkel, Bob Dylan and others turned out songs that continue to be very popular. In October 1965, the group the Birds, released the song *Turn, Turn, Turn*, and it burst the biblical book of Ecclesiastes on to the consciousness of the world. They took the first eight verses of Ecclesiastes 3 and sang them straight out, until the very end, when with the addition of just six words, they made this chapter into an anti-Vietnam ballad. After the line: There is a time for war and a time for peace, the Birds added the words: I swear it's not too late. Well, today on *Groundwork*, we will look at that same chapter, and what the overall book of Ecclesiastes has to say about the subject of time and our human lives in time; so, stay tuned.

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, this is the final episode of a fairly short, three-part series on the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes; and we have already looked at the overall theme of the book, that life is just finally phhht...it is light...it is transitory...it is *hebel* in Hebrew...it is a breath or a puff of air; and we have seen the author...*qohelet* in Hebrew...the Teacher. He has tried to find meaning in wisdom and in pleasure and in work, but in some ways it all came out empty. He said, you know, people in the long run just kind of get forgotten anyway.

DARRELL DELANEY

We also looked at work and the importance of work, and how we need to have the right motive when working, not so that we can envy others and try to outdo them, like keep up with the Joneses; and also, we learned about money. If we use money in the right way and we have the right heart, we don't love money and try to hoard it, we can actually use it to be a blessing to someone else. So, vocation is very important with the right motive, and so is generosity.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But one of the things that weaves through the book is this sense of time; and obviously for a book, Darrell, it makes sense; a book that is primarily about the fleetingness of life. It makes sense that time...the very concept of time...is going to occupy a significant part; and that brings us to Ecclesiastes Chapter 3. These are the verses that that musical group the Birds turned into a hit song in 1965.

DARRELL DELANEY

It says: There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under the heavens: ²a time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to uproot, ³a time to kill and a time to heal, a time to tear down and a time to build, ⁴a time to weep and a time to laugh, a time to mourn and a time to dance, ⁵a time to scatter stones and a time to gather them, a time to embrace and a time to refrain from embracing, ⁶a time to search and a time to give up, a time to keep and a time to throw away, ⁷a time to tear and a time to mend, a time to be silent and a time to speak, ⁸a time to love and a time to hate, a time for war and a time for peace.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, here the Teacher is saying: Look, there is a season and a time for everything; and as we have been saying, Darrell, this is a wisdom book finally. Ecclesiastes is part of the wisdom tradition of scripture, and what that says is the Teacher is saying: Look, who is the wise person? The wise person is the one who knows what time it is.

DARRELL DELANEY

The wise person not only knows what time it is, but they know when to do what at the right time; so, they know what to do, when to do it, how to do it, and the right way to do it. It is interesting to me because it echoes the Old Testament—1 Chronicles 12—where the sons of Issachar were actually applauded for understanding the times and the seasons and acting accordingly. I think that a wise person is able to distinguish. You are not supposed to be laughing when everybody is crying; you are not supposed to be building up when everybody else is tearing down. You have to know the difference.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, we have looked at the book of Proverbs before here on *Groundwork*, Darrell. That is the premier book of wisdom that we all think of right away when we hear about wisdom in the Bible, but we noted that a lot of proverbs technically contradict each other, right? So, you get one proverb that says: Rebuke a fool firmly or he will persist in his folly...okay, fine; read on another couple of chapters and all of a sudden you get a line that says: When you encounter a fool, walk away quietly because your words will just be wasted on him anyway. So, it is like wait a minute; so, which is it, Proverbs? Rebuke a fool or walk away? And the answer is: it depends—it depends on the fool, it depends on the situation, it takes wisdom to apply wisdom, and that is sort of what *qohelet*—the Teacher—is saying here: There is a time and a proper occasion for everything, you just have to figure out which is which and act accordingly.

DARRELL DELANEY

That is the interesting part that I think the Teacher is trying to help us understand. You are going to need to be a discerning person to know what time to do what thing; and so, what the Teacher has been doing is helping us understand that we don't need to place undue value on the things that we achieve, and the things that we can do, because that isn't wisdom, that is foolishness, to not understand that those things are temporary and they are finite; but we need to understand that having faith and trusting in what God has given us to do, that is really where the meaning comes from, especially when God approves of our work.

SCOTT HOEZEE

As you read those verses a few minutes ago, and there were eight verses, boy, it really covers the waterfront, right? I mean, it covers just about almost every season or type of situation that you could imagine; but I think, Darrell, the fact that each pair are opposites tells us that, you know, we would all love it if life was just one long, ceaseless time for dancing and embracing and drinking and eating and laughing, but that is not so. Half of life, perhaps...as much as half of life, the Teacher is saying...might be the things we would rather not do: funerals and crying and refraining from embracing; weeping, times to give up; you know, there are some times when it is good to keep looking for something, and eventually you have to get to a point, sad though it may be, to say we are done. You cannot ignore half of life when you live before the face of God. You are going to have to go into all of life as a person of faith, and figure out how to behave and feel in it.

DARRELL DELANEY

Life has positives and negatives. You cannot just deny, and live in this world, that it doesn't exist. Well, you are going to have trials. If you live long enough...old people used to say this...they used to say: If you haven't been through anything, go ahead and just keep living; because the brokenness of this world is around us. We cannot avoid it; we cannot be like ostrich and stick our head in the ground and hope it is for the best. I mean, we are going to encounter these things; and the Teacher is pulling the wool off of our heads so that we can see that some of these things have their limits. There is a time for this and there is a time for that. So, we need to be able to discern how to act accordingly in each one of those times.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It reminds me of the Aldous Huxley novel: *Brave New World*. In the future, Huxley imagined a society that was massively engineered to avoid all suffering, right? The problem was, the people in that brave new world weren't physically healthy. As it turns out, you know what? Our bodies need the adrenaline that gets produced when we are afraid...

DARRELL DELANEY

Interesting.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Or when we are sad; and so, in this novel, everybody in the brave new world has to get a monthly injection of adrenaline so that their bodies keep functioning. I think it was sort of tongue-in-cheek for Aldous Huxley to say: You think you can live your whole life placid and happy? It isn't healthy; it isn't even human. Physically, you cannot take it, and emotionally you cannot take it either. You have to go through all of it. We actually wish it weren't so, but just because we are believers in Jesus Christ, we are not shielded from bad stuff sometimes.

DARRELL DELANEY

Now we see what you just said in the book of Psalms. I mean, we have laments in the Psalms, we have praises in the Psalms; but it all is a part of the human experience, and the Teacher is trying to help us understand that. In the next segment, we are going to encounter a marvelous section that we want to unpack for you that we believe is the heart of this book; so, stay tuned.

Segment 2

SCOTT HOEZEE

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Darrell, let's get right at what you just hinted at a moment ago at the end of the first segment: a marvelous verse...a mysterious verse in Ecclesiastes

3:10, 11. It goes like this: I have seen the burden God has laid on the human race. ¹¹He has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

God has set eternity into our hearts. What could that mean?

DARRELL DELANEY

Man, that is a lot to unpack. It could be its own series, to be honest, the contrast of us being in this finite world and being finite, but we serve an infinite God who we are made in the image of, who has set eternity into our hearts. It is something that we really need to look into; and the fact that we are made in God's image could be a hint, because in Genesis he talks about how we are made in his image...in Genesis 1:26-28; and so, because we serve an eternal God who created us, that could be one way that he set eternity in our hearts.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, I think that is exactly right. Even in this same chapter in Ecclesiastes 3, a few verses down the Teacher notes that on many levels, humans and animals are the same (verses 18, 19); and indeed, on the sixth day of creation in Genesis 1, God creates the animals, and that includes us. Human beings were created on the same day as the rest of the animals; and in one sense, the Teacher says in verse 19: Surely the fate of human beings is like that of the animals; the same fate awaits them both: As one dies, so dies the other. All

have the same breath; humans have no advantage over animals. Physically, yes, he's got a point. Elephants die, I die; you die, a giraffe dies. What is the difference, the Teacher says? Except, that is only in the physical level, and that is where that image of God comes in that you were just talking about, Darrell.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; so, as image bearers, we have logic, we have reason, we have understanding, we have consciousness; we actually know right from wrong...morals...we have that. See, animals only have instinct. We have a great distinction, because we bear God's image. God thinks, God reasons, God loves, God feels, God grieves; and I think that because we have those characteristics, that is definitely going to separate us from being an animal. It is definitely going to be different for us because we are distinctly made in God's image.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Somebody once said an individual human being is greater than all the stars in the heaven because the stars don't even know themselves, but human beings alone can know themselves and others, right?

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I love birdwatching, but birds never watch me. Birds don't keep track of different kinds of people they see, but we keep track of different kinds of birds we see because we can study what is not us, and that is a chip off the old divine block; that is part of the image of God in us; and it also means, Darrell, we can become aware of God...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And so, we have a relationship with an eternal God, as you said a moment ago; and that gives us the sense of eternity in our hearts, but why did the Teacher say that this is a burden? This is a beautiful, lyric verse: God set eternity into our hearts. If you just read that part, it is like wow, that is beautiful, but he prefaces it by saying: I have seen the burden God has placed... Why is it a burden?

DARRELL DELANEY

I think it is a burden because it makes this time more meaningful and more important. It also hurts that this time is short. So, okay, we've got eternity in our hearts, and eventually we will live forever and ever with God; but because of the fall of humanity, we have been cut short. Like life wasn't designed to live this short. Eighty years...ninety years... and we are done? That is one of the problems that we have the burden to say: Okay, it is a short life, and we have to make it honor God; but then, the bad news is, we weren't designed to live this short life; we were designed to live a longer life than this.

SCOTT HOEZEE

C. S. Lewis, whom we quote often here on *Groundwork*, once did what he does so well, and came up with an almost pitch-perfect analogy. He said: You know, fish in water don't notice water; a fish is totally unaware of water while it is in water; water is where it swims, it can breathe in the water, it makes little fish in the water, it eats in the water; a fish in water has no awareness of water. Only when a fish gets washed up on the beach does it start to think: Oh, oh; something is not right. Where is the water? *Now* he thinks about water. Well, Lewis said, you know, we seem to be fish out of water as human beings. We live in time, but we lament its passing. We notice time in a way a fish doesn't notice water. The swift passing of time must not be our natural habitat.

DARRELL DELANEY

If we were built to last forever, it took Adam a long time to die, even though the curse of humanity was on him because of his disobedience. Still, because God built his body so well, it took a long time for him to pass away. I don't think we were meant to pass away. I think death is an intrusion...it is a thief and a robber; and if we had the ability to live the way God designed us to live, then we wouldn't have to worry about the burden of eternity being in our hearts because we would live for that eternity; but because life has been cut short, we often look back. I wake up in the morning, I've got sore joints, I'm like, where did this come from? When I was younger, it wasn't an issue. I bounced right out of bed, but now the decline is happening; I am getting older, I've got more gray hairs; and the eternity piece of wanting to be with God and wanting to live with God is in my heart, but I know that this life is short, and I have to make it count. I have to do what God wants me to do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Where did all the years go, right? That is such a common question. As we are recording this now, my daughter just had her 30th birthday; and it is like, how can that be? She cannot possibly be 30! I don't feel any different; but I am obviously 30 years older than when she was born and I was in my 20s. Where did the years go? Again, if we were in our natural element, in the swift...phhht...passing of time, we wouldn't notice it, and we sure wouldn't lament it. The fact that we notice it and lament it tells us, yes, as you were just saying, Darrell, we were built for something more; and so, that sense of that more...that moreness...is that a word? That sense that we were built for something more than a life that just sort of whizzes on by, for now; that is a divine gift, but it is also a burden.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes, it is a burden, and if you don't look at it the right way, it could send you into a: well, you only live once so you might as well live it up...

SCOTT HOEZEE

YOLO...right?

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes, YOLO...yes; but if you look at it the way God wants you to look at it, I don't think God has given us that burden to torture us or to make us feel bad. I think that it makes us understand that there is something other than us and bigger than us, which is God; and we have a consciousness that can connect to that God. He wants a relationship with us, and he is pointing to that. So, even though we have the Teacher, who seems to be cynical and a downer...like you said earlier, Debbie Downer...but this is the Teacher who is going to tell us the truth, and even though we don't always want to hear the negativity that we think it is, it is sobering; and the Teacher will conclude the book this way. We want to look at the rest of this series and close out this series by thinking about what implications it has for us; so, stay tuned.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Darrell Delaney, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and Darrell, we are in the final part of the final episode of three episodes on the book of Ecclesiastes. So, it is time to get to that last chapter, Chapter 12, where we read this:

¹Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, "I find no pleasure in them." ⁶Remember him—before the silver cord is severed, and the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, and the wheel broken at the well, ⁷and the dust returns to the ground it came from, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. ⁸"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Everything is meaningless!"

DARRELL DELANEY

So, in his own curmudgeonly sort of way, he is actually being pretty positive here by saying: Hey, honor God while you are young. Get into the habit of serving God; get into the habit of making sure that everything you do points to God, before all the troubles of life hit you hard. I think that I miss some of the days when I was back in my mother's house when she was taking care of all of the bills and everything...the food on the table. I had none of these responsibilities that I have now; as I am a husband and a father now, I realize what she had gone through to make the provisions for me; and this writer is telling the people to do that while they are young...trust God while they are young...and honor him early.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And we were just saying in the last segment that in some ways, Ecclesiastes 3, 10, 11, where we read that God has set eternity into our hearts, is sort of the centerpiece of the book; and you were saying at the end of the previous part of this program, Darrell, you can take that sense of eternal...you can take the frustration we feel at how fast life goes by. You can do one of two things with that: You can go into despair and say: Well, you know, you only live once...YOLO...let's just party down because what else is there to do? But you could also take that eternal sense and let it raise your sights higher; and that is what the Teacher is saying here in Chapter 12: You can set your sights higher than just the limited horizons of this life. Know that there is a creator; remember him in your youth; remember him all the time, really. Let your vision rise above the phhht fleeting nature of life; even though, in verse 8...what we just read from Chapter 12...he goes right back to the very first verse of the whole book: Meaningless! Meaningless! Phhht—phhht says the Teacher; everything is phhht; but maybe he is winking at us a little bit by now, Darrell. We have come a long way in this book, and maybe he knows that we know now that doesn't have to be the bottom line.

DARRELL DELANEY

Even though he is saying the same refrains, we have a different understanding of what he is trying to teach us now. So, even though the refrain is coming back, we can understand that there is a reason for that; there is a method to his madness, if you will; but then there is an unexpected twist, where the person who is writing talks about the Teacher; and this is the first time it is not a direct quote from the Teacher, which is really interesting to see. Right here in verse 9 of Chapter 12 it says this:

Not only was the Teacher wise, but he also imparted knowledge to the people. He pondered and searched out and set in order many proverbs. ¹⁰The Teacher searched to find just the right words, and what he wrote was upright and true.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, we said at some point in this series that some people have theorized, although it is never self-identified in Ecclesiastes, that the author of Ecclesiastes, the Teacher—*qohelet*—maybe was King Solomon; or, we were supposed to kind of think of King Solomon because he is described as a king in Jerusalem, and a lot of the descriptions fit Solomon's life; and so, here a narrator...a heretofore not heard from outside voice...the narrator comes in, and as you said, all of a sudden talks about the Teacher in the third person, and says: Well, I know he has been kind of negative, but you know, I want to put a stamp of approval on this book. The actual conclusion of the book is summed up by the narrator. Now, we are going to move to 12:13:

Now all has been heard; here is the conclusion of the matter: Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the duty of all mankind. ¹⁴For God will bring every deed into judgment, including every hidden thing, whether it is good or evil.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, what I don't think it is saying, Scott, is that, okay, we can just paste a happy face on everything that was just said, and it is going to be better and we are going to figure it out. I don't think that is what is happening here because...I mean, the truth of the matter is, there are some things beyond us. A wise person knows that they don't know enough, or they don't know much. I always tell people this when they ask me how do I know, or they will say to me: What do you know? And I say: I know a little more than a little bit and a little less than a lot, and that ain't saying much. That is what I will say to people, because a wise person knows

they cannot know everything. This book shows us our limitations. We cannot know it all.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The wise person knows what he doesn't know, right? The wise guy thinks he knows everything, right?

DARRELL DELANEY

There it is.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The wiseacre...the wise cracker, as my dad used to call them...they think they know everything. That is not a mark of wisdom, but of folly. So, because we have that eternal sense in us, we sense there is more; there is a Creator, so fear God, keep God's commandments. He gave them to keep you safe. God gave his law, right, we have said that before on *Groundwork*. It was a gift to Israel. It was like the owner's manual for creation. Follow it, things work. Ignore it, things don't. So, color inside the lines, live happily inside the moral boundary fences where God put them...don't keep moving the fences to make it more convenient for yourself...and if you do this, yes, sometimes life seems like a grind on a daily basis. There is a lot to discourage us; this whole book has confirmed that, but we can set our sights higher, too.

DARRELL DELANEY

When we set our sights higher, it actually reminds me of the scripture that says to set your hearts and your minds on things above...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

Where God is, not on earthly things; and so, when we have eternity in our hearts, we have the ability to set our minds on things above, and we don't need to just remember the Creator in the days of our youth, even though the scripture says that we need to remember him every day of our life—every day that we have that he has given us is a gift so that we could honor him and we could allow God to have the final say in situations that we don't understand and that we don't know what we should do. He is the one who has always known. We trust him in unknown situations.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Everything the Teacher said is true. A lot of it has been dark and grim...phhht...it is all true, but there is more, right?

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The phhht nature of life doesn't have the final word, God does; and speaking of the final word, let's go to John 1: In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning. ³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. (And then this): ⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of all humankind. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Ecclesiastes, Darrell, is about the darkness; but in the darkness now a light shines...present tense.

DARRELL DELANEY

The light that shines there is the light that we hold onto in situations that appear super dark to us. It is one of the reasons why Ecclesiastes is in the Bible, so we can admit that these things are happening; that we have dark and dim situations, but yet, the light shines in that darkness. That light, when things feel bleak, is still with us; that light, when things feel discouraging or fearful, is still with us; and we can trust our God in that

situation; and that is why he entered our time, and he can redeem us for all eternity. Thanks be to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Thanks be to God. Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Darrell Delaney. Join us again next time as we continue to dig deeply into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives.

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DARRELL DELANEY

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Printed on December 21, 2024