

When Life is Meaningless

SCOTT HOEZEE

A curmudgeon is defined as an irritable older person who hates hypocrisy and is not afraid to point it out. Other words to describe curmudgeons include: grumpy, irascible, cynical, and irreverent. All in all, curmudgeons are not people of bright hope or optimism, and so you wouldn't expect to encounter a curmudgeon in the Bible, except that we do. He is known as the Teacher, and he wrote the book of Ecclesiastes. Today on *Groundwork*, we will begin to explore this strange and rather unsettling biblical book. 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, we are welcoming our listeners to a short series—just a three-part series—that is going to cover the major themes of the Old Testament book of Ecclesiastes. Now, the book has twelve chapters. We are not going to hit everything, but there are some major themes that weave through the whole book, and each of the three programs in this series will pick up on one of those themes.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, this book is considered a wisdom book. Proverbs is a book of wisdom as well. We see that often with the wisdom literature as well, but in this situation, like you said in the introduction, this Teacher has a very dim view of life...kind of a dismal view...it is not optimism; it is not yay, yay, happy, happy, joy, joy; it is more sober and more sometimes cynical, I would say.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; a dim view indeed; and I think, Darrell, that tempts us to look away from this book, or we are tempted to pick up...there are a few places of brighter sentiment, including the very end of the book, in Chapter 12, which we will get to in the third program of this series. So, it is tempting just to scoop up the somewhat brighter parts and let them eclipse the darker parts, but that is just not going to work. So, we are going to have to take this book head-on, unsettling though it may be; and indeed, the voice we encounter is that of what we would describe as a curmudgeon.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, I think of grumpy people when you talk about curmudgeons. It seems like we have a lot of those curmudgeonly kind of guys in history.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

Oscar Wilde, Gore Vidal, William F. Buckley, and H. L. Mencken; and in Reformed circles, we may remember a Calvinist curmudgeon named Peter de Vries.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Peter de Vries, yes. He was a novelist who wrote some pretty good but very cynical and dark novels, coming out of the Reformed tradition. Some of us might also remember the TV news show, 60 Minutes, which has been on for a long time...

DARRELL DELANEY

Tick, tick, tick...

SCOTT HOEZEE

And it used to always conclude with that figure of Andy Rooney, who always concluded about a four-minute segment in which he made wry and usually very cynical observations on various aspects of culture; but you know, those names you mentioned: Vidal and Buckley and Mencken, de Vries, Rooney...they are not exactly a who's who of religious figures. In fact, curmudgeons usually skewer and take a cynical view of religion, along with everything else. So, you wouldn't expect a curmudgeon to show up in the Bible.

DARRELL DELANEY

And yet, we do. We see one right here, and we are going to look right at it here in the book of Ecclesiastes. Listen to these words: ¹The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem: ²"Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher. "Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless." ³What do people gain from all their labors at which they toil under the sun? ⁴Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever. ⁵The sun rises and the sun sets, and hurries back to where it rises. ⁶The wind blows to the south and turns to the north; round and round it goes, ever returning on its course. ⁷All streams flow into the sea, yet the sea is never full. To the place the streams come from, there they return again. ⁸All things are wearisome, more than one can say.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is the opening of the book, and it is a doozy. Meaningless, meaningless. That is a current translation, Darrell, in quite a few different Bibles. Some of us maybe remember older translations that had *vanity*, *vanity*, *all is vanity*. I remember that growing up. The actual Hebrew word there is the word *habel*. It is a very puny word. It sounds more like they are clearing their throat than a word...*habel*. The literal meaning of *habel* is breath...vapor...just so much hot air; and when I have preached on this, Darrell, I have said: You know what the best translation of *habel* is? It is phhht. You know, it is like p-h-h-h-t; and that is what he says life is. All of life...what does it come down to? Phhht; it is nothing.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is nothing; it asks nothing. I mean, the world just keeps going. The sun rises, the sun sets, and everything goes back to the way it was the day before; so, it can be a repetitiveness...a monotony that goes on and on; but the same thing every day; and so, the phhht that you are referring to helps us to understand that we shouldn't put too much value into what is happening in life. It is kind of a sobering view of life; it is not an idealistic, rose-colored in my eyeglasses or in my shades kind of view.

SCOTT HOEZEE

These are definitely not rose-colored glasses. He goes on in verse 10 of Ecclesiastes 1. So, you just said, Darrell...it is monotony; everything is the same. So, he says: ¹⁰Is there anything of which one can say, "Look! There is something new"? It was here already, long ago; it was here before our time. ¹¹No one remembers the former generations, and even those yet to come will not be remembered by those who follow them.

So, there is no such thing as novelty. Everything is the same. You think you came up with a new idea? No; somebody thought it up a long time ago; forget it. You are not going to be remembered. You know, the old saying is: we all die twice. We die when we stop breathing, and we die when the last person who remembered us dies; and then it is as though we had never existed. That is how this book opens.

DARRELL DELANEY

You know what is interesting about that is that in philosophy classes when I took ancient, medieval, or modern philosophy, there was always the next philosopher who says: Hey, forget what that other person said. I've got the new idea for you right here. You need to pay attention to this. And it actually is only an adaptation to the same idea. And scripture is clear where there is nothing new under the sun. I mean, just because I had a new idea, it might be *nuanced*, but I cannot just believe that I have a brand-new, original idea that no one has ever thought of before; and the writer is trying to let people know: Hey, if you are thinking idealistic about that, you probably should come out of the clouds.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I have often thought that in terms of theology. It is sort of like, you know, you think you have a new theological idea? I bet Augustine thought it up in the 4th Century; just look it up...3rd Century...whatever it was.

On the comedy program Saturday Night Live, there is a character...a recurring character named Debby Downer, and Debby Downer...on various sketches, Debby Downer would be at an amusement park; Debby Downer would be at a dinner party; Debby Downer would be at a class reunion; Debby Downer is at a wedding; but no matter where Debby Downer goes, she is a storm cloud on the horizon, because no matter what positive thing somebody says, Debby turns it into a negative; and then they have the sound effect, you know, wa...waaa...you know, every time she says something sad, it is like, wa...waaa, and everybody around her just sort of gets depressed, until they cannot even stand being around her!

DARRELL DELANEY

So, for those of you who are in the new part of this generation, I was thinking about the movie: *Inside Out*. There are five personalities, and one of them happens to be Sadness. So, Joy is trying to cheer sadness up, which doesn't make any sense. Though they have the same memory, they are like: Yeah, I remember when we were on the swing...Joy says that; and then Sadness says: Oh, yeah; that is where we fell and bumped our head and started crying. It is just like the downer thing that you are saying. It is really interesting how those situations look different to different people for different reasons.

SCOTT HOEZEE

If you really do know a Debby Downer or a Teacher type...we didn't mention that, by the way...but the Hebrew word for the Teacher...the author of this book...is *qohelet*...

DARRELL DELANEY

Qohelet.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which is preacher or teacher, but we are going to go with teacher in this series; but if you meet someone like the Teacher...a Debby Downer...you know, you just eventually kind of walk away. Either that or you get sucked into their negativity, but if you don't want to do that, you don't have much choice but to walk away because it is just too heavy; but again, somebody like this, we believe under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, wrote this book and it is in the Bible. What do we make of that? What accounts for these dark, dark musings? Well, we will continue to think about that in just a moment; so, stay tuned.

Segment 2

DARRELL DELANEY

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

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Darrell, we said earlier that Ecclesiastes is part of the wisdom tradition of the Bible, but as we have already seen, overall, the Teacher...the author of Ecclesiastes takes a pretty dim view

of life; but since this is a wisdom book, maybe there is some merit...something good that he could say about wisdom and the pursuit of it.

DARRELL DELANEY

Let's dig deeper into Chapter 1 for this. It says: ¹⁶I said to myself, "Look, I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me; I have experienced much of wisdom and knowledge." ¹⁷Then I applied myself to the understanding of wisdom, and also of madness and folly, but I learned that this, too, is a chasing after the wind. ¹⁸For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, that is the end of Chapter 1. Does it get any better in Chapter 2? Let's see. Verse 14 in Chapter 2: The wise have eyes in their heads, while the fool walks in the darkness; but I came to realize that the same fate overtakes them both. ¹⁵Then I said to myself, "The fate of the fool will overtake me also. What then do I gain by being wise?" I said to myself, "This too is meaningless (phhht)." ¹⁶For the wise, like the fool, will not be long remembered; the days have already come when both have been forgotten. Like the fool, the wise too must die!

DARRELL DELANEY

Of course, he is pointing out that the wise person and the fool are both going to die and both are forgotten. So, don't make a big deal out of being wise or gaining knowledge, because...I mean, scripture tells us knowledge puffs up anyway...so, you cannot make a big deal out of what you gain for yourself in knowledge or wisdom, because you are going to end up passing away anyway. It is all going to be meaningless.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Now, we will say that there will be eventually in this book a few more positive things about wisdom. In the short run, at least, it is still better to be wise than foolish, but the Teacher here keeps taking the long view. You know, in the short run, fools might suffer for their folly, but in the long run, it doesn't make much difference; both the fool and the wise person breathe their last breath at some point. So, what about pleasure? How about just trying to enjoy life? You know, what about having a good time? We are still in Ecclesiastes 2, and the Teacher addresses this as well.

¹I said to myself, "Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good." But that also proved to be meaningless. ²"Laughter," I said, "is madness. What does pleasure accomplish?" ³I tried cheering myself with wine and embracing folly—my mind still guiding me with wisdom. I wanted to see what was good for people to do under the heavens during the few days of their lives. ⁴I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. ⁸I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasures of kings and provinces. I acquired male and female singers and a harem as well—the delights of a man's heart. ⁹I became greater by far than anyone in Jerusalem before me. In all this my wisdom stayed with me.

DARRELL DELANEY

^{10a}I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure. ¹¹Yet when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind (phhht); nothing was gained under the sun.

SCOTT HOEZEE

By the way, some people have theorized that the Teacher was Solomon or somebody who might have been like Solomon; and the references we have seen in the last couple of passages about being a king in Jerusalem and being the greatest in Jerusalem sometimes adds fodder to the idea this is either Solomon or somebody who wrote this is kind of putting these words in Solomon's mouth; but in any event, wisdom and folly kind of come out in the wash. Pleasure...hmmm...that is short-lived, too. So again, there it is. What is there that is of any lasting value?

DARRELL DELANEY

So, we are sweeping through...we are kind go doing a survey of these little themes here. It is important to note that in later episodes we will address wider themes; one of them being time, one of them being work. We are going to go deeper into those later in a couple of episodes after this, but right now, we are just giving a flyover of some of the things that the Teacher is addressing right here in this chapter and in this section, but it is interesting how there are people who are older who reminisce and they look back and they say: We had some good times. I did a good life...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

I worked hard; but then if we put our identity and our value in all the things we have amassed for ourselves, then we realize that that too is a chasing after the wind, and that is what the Teacher is trying to let us know.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is fun to hear from older people—retired people, as we say today, in their retirement years who look back fondly on their life of work. They don't miss it, but they enjoyed it. As pastors, Darrell, we have also had to counsel with people who looked back on their life's work and say it is nothing.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes, that's true.

SCOTT HOEZEE

It is just dust in the wind. It reminds me of a movie called *About Schmidt*, and it is the story of Warren Schmidt, who worked for almost forty years as an actuary for Woodmen of the World Insurance Company in Omaha, Nebraska. Anyway, in the opening scene of the movie, Warren retires. A few weeks into retirement, he finds himself really bored, so he puts his suit back on and goes to the office to talk to the hotshot young guy who took his job from him, and said, you know: Hey, anything I can do for you? You need any advice? No, no, no; you know, I don't need any advice, and so forth. Well, when Warren retired, he had left all of his files in boxes for this young man to use, you know, because, you know, that is Warren's life's work; but when he leaves the office after the young guy who replaced him says he doesn't need any help, on his way back to his car, he passes a dumpster, and he looks closer, and all of his boxes were in the dumpster. The look on his face told you he felt like his career, his whole working life, had been literally and figuratively dumped; and I think the Teacher could identify with that feeling.

DARRELL DELANEY

Because the Teacher had a chance to experience some of these things, he realized that none of this stuff is going to last. It doesn't matter if it is pleasure; it doesn't matter if it is knowledge; it doesn't matter if it is riches; he realizes that life is fleeting, that life is phhht, and it is going to be here and it is going to be gone. Now, that actually challenges us to look deeper into what the meaning of life really is, and I think that is part of the reason he is writing this in the book.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; if this book seems unsettling, maybe by the Holy Spirit it is calculated to do that. I like what you just said there, Darrell, that maybe this is forcing us to face issues we would rather not face...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But the Holy Spirit is using the Teacher...is using Ecclesiastes...to make us look at those things in the context of faith to figure some stuff out.

DARRELL DELANEY

If we allow this book to do what it is supposed to do, it is going to challenge us to look deeply into situations that we would rather not look into; and so, let us let the book do its work in our hearts; and as we conclude this episode, we would like to talk about exactly what that means. So, stay tuned.

Segment 3

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Darrell Delaney, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, and this first episode of a short, three-part series on the strange Old Testament biblical book of Ecclesiastes. So, we have seen, Darrell, the Teacher being plenty grim; not much worth anything in life. Does he ever sound a more upbeat note? Well, here and there he does, and here is one from Chapter 5:18-20: This is what I have observed to be good: that it is appropriate for a person to eat, to drink and to find satisfaction in their toilsome labor under the sun during the few days of life God has given them—for this is their lot. ¹⁹Moreover, when God gives someone wealth and possessions, and the ability to enjoy them, to accept their lot and be happy in their toil—this is a gift of God. ²⁰They seldom reflect on the days of their life, because God keeps them occupied with gladness of heart.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, we have some really sobering, dim kind of...appearing to be dim messages from the Teacher; but then, you just read one that actually sounds a bit positive. So, I mean, it is tempting for us to rub out all the negative things that we think we might be hearing in this book, and just focus on the positive things that sound great, because we have this tendency toward optimism and moralistic things...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

But I think we need to understand it. Like a piano, there are sharps, there are flats, there are major chords, minor chords, and you cannot have music without all that stuff working together. So, our life has mountain highs and valley lows, and God works in between and in the midst of all of that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There you go. I think that is exactly right...good analogy on the piano and on the nature of music. You cannot have good music without a little bit of everything. So, we don't want to just elevate the good stuff. We don't want to gut Ecclesiastes of its power. The statements of faith that we *do* find, I think, in this book, Darrell...when you see them against the backdrop of all that is realistically grim and despairing, they shine a little bit brighter, but not just that. I think that the very poignancy of faith—the power of our faith—which is itself a gift of God, it gets deepened if we are able to hold that faith kind of in a creative tension with honest assessments of life and how fleeting life seems to be.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, this is a wisdom literature book. Would you consider Job a wisdom literature book as well?

SCOTT HOEZEE

A lot of people do think Job is wisdom, yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

The reason I bring that up is because there are no neat and cute answers—there are no pat answers in that book, there are none in this book...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

And to find faith and allow God to speak to you in the midst of chaotic situations, and not quick fixes and not easy answers, this is where faith means the most; because we are looking in a glass, but we are looking dimly...we are looking through a keyhole; we cannot see everything, and in our finitude, we need to have faith in order to help us to walk through these uncertain times.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes, and it is just honesty to admit we cannot see everything. We are looking through that keyhole; but even so, what we see through the keyhole we don't like.

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I mean, there is just some unsettling things. As you just said, too, Darrell, I think our human tendency is to want to run quickly to resolution...

DARRELL DELANEY

Sure.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, we like to decorate our dens with, you know, nice counted cross-stitch verses from the Bible that sound like neat and tidy, or little Precious Moments figurines emblazoned with a pithy little slogan that makes life seem all neat and tucked in at the corners and no loose ends hanging out there; and indeed, I have seen people's houses decorated with that stuff. I have never been to a house of a Christian person who had a bust of the Teacher on their mantel, you know, with his furrowed brow, his lips curled, and it says phhht on the bottom. No, that is not a very cheery thing to put on the mantelpiece, and I don't think anybody does.

DARRELL DELANEY

And you know what is interesting to me; I appreciate the Teacher, because the Teacher is that friend that you have who will tell you that you have salad in your teeth. They will not let you walk around thinking that things are a way and they really aren't that way. This person is telling us the reality of life and how life is short, and we have to pay close attention to what it means to have faith in a God who is able to work in the midst of challenging situations; but we cannot believe that if we don't address the fact that there some difficult situations, and that there are some things that are meaningless.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And in that way, Darrell, I think, really, Ecclesiastes is a preview of the cross of Christ, right? Life's tough, rough, jagged edges...life's loose ends...they don't get tied off neatly, even by God. What did God's Son have to do to redeem us out of this chaotic and difficult world? Well, he didn't save us just by, you know, saying a bunch of pretty sayings on a mountainside. He had to go to the Place of the Skull and get crucified. That is what God had to do to take on this world.

DARRELL DELANEY

So, because Christ loves us so much, he had to enter into this meaninglessness; he had to enter into the phhht. He did that because he loved us and he wanted to make sure that he showed the way of how we live in

humility, and how we live in vulnerability and transparency, to trust in God; and the Teacher is saying that we need to make sure that we understand, we don't need to put our own value, our identity in all these things we have amassed for ourselves, but we need to trust in the God who cares enough to make that point to us, to bring it to our attention.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; you know, we saw earlier in this program that the Teacher said there is never anything new under the sun. You think you came up with a new idea? Somebody thought of it before...nothing new. Well, you know what? The crucifixion of God's Son was something new. That had never happened before, and nobody could ever have imagined it happening; but because it did, this grim world that Ecclesiastes and the Teacher is really good at describing to us, that grim world turned a corner because of Jesus on the cross.

DARRELL DELANEY

And you know what is beautiful is that God had a way to address the situation, because without him, without hope, without his providential care and intervention into that, with the new thing you just mentioned...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

Then the phhht of life rules; and then we have no hope; but our comfort comes from a God who, even though he is God, he came in and he actually received the damage and the punishment that comes as fallout of this world, but also was able to help redeem it and show us the way.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The things the Teacher is realistically noting all throughout the book of Ecclesiastes...those things don't have the last word, you know. God will have the last word, and we are going to think about that in a future episode as well. I liked how you said, Darrell, that Jesus entered our phhht. He entered the fleetingness of human life. He himself died at a fairly young age, even in his day, I think; but that tells us that, you know, when God tackled the problems that Ecclesiastes so well describes, the solution wasn't neat and tidy, it wasn't what anybody expected; it wasn't even what the disciples expected...you know, they thought they would need a political savior; but no, God knew better; and so, for now, that is our bright hope, and that has to be enough for us now. It has to be enough for us in a world where seldom do we find enough of anything, but the cross of Christ is enough. Thanks be to God.

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Darrell Delaney. We hope you will join us again next time as we continue our study of Ecclesiastes by focusing on the Teacher's reflection on the nature of human work.

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

DARRELL DELANEY

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