
Wisdom for Life

DUANE KELDERMAN

New Years is one of the most meaningful seasons of the year. There is something mysterious about the passing of time. It is a time to ask: What is life all about? It is a time to look back on the year that is ending and to look ahead and think about what is really important in life. The book of Ecclesiastes was written by a person who obsessed with understanding the meaning of life. During this first month of the new year, let's spend some time looking at the book of Ecclesiastes to see what we can learn.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast, and joining me on today's program, and for the next several weeks, is Duane Kelderman. Welcome back to *Groundwork*, Duane. It is great to have you.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Good to be back.

DAVE BAST

And as you said in the opening of the program, we are going to spend this month digging into the particular part of scripture that is this wonderful book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament, part of the Wisdom Literature. It is especially appropriate, I think, to do that in the new year, toward the beginning, because we are more conscious of passing time now, as you said. In a sense, it is arbitrary; one day is just like another. We just have placed this calendar overlaying our days and our years; but there are special days when we do think more about life and the passing of time.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Yes, and I think that around New Years, as we pass from one year to another, is when we do become more aware that this is a limited asset; time is a limited commodity. We only have so much of it; and what makes it even more complicated is, we do not know how much we really have.

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is right. All of us do that at birthdays, I suppose, but we are doing that on our own, individually.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Right.

DAVE BAST

At New Years, we all come together and realize, wow, the calendar has flipped. We better take a look at what is this all about? What does it mean? How do we spend our time? What is the best way? In a sense, the wisdom literature of the Bible I think is designed for that very thing. It is to help us with our day-to-day lives. The best way to invest what God has given us.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And there is a brutal honesty about this book. This book is not a book that is known for clichés.

DAVE BAST

Right; the author traditionally is held to have been Solomon. Actually, the term that he uses for himself is a Hebrew word; it is *qoheleth*, and in some translations that is simply what he called, *qoheleth*. It is difficult to translate, but often it is translated as the Preacher, so maybe in the course of these programs, when we reference: The Preacher says, what we mean is, the author of the book; or sometimes maybe we will say Solomon because he says he was the son of the king, the prince, living in Jerusalem, and traditionally he has been understood to be the wise man, Solomon, the author of all of the proverbs; or perhaps it was somebody who wanted to tap into Solomon's reputation for wisdom depending on which scholars you listen to.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Yes; the book is a hard book to get ahold of in that if you begin a sentence saying: The main point of Ecclesiastes is: You will really get quite divergent answers to that question. Certainly, one of the answers has to be that one of the main points of this book is that life is vain; there is a vanity to life. Thirty-five times Ecclesiastes talks about life as being vain and meaningless.

DAVE BAST

"Vanity of vanities, all is vanity," says the Preacher.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Right. There is certainly plenty of evidence for that. How many people do not have the experience of going to work one day to a mound of paper and they work their way through it all only to wake up the next morning and beat their way through traffic again only to start all over again; and you can have the feeling that what is this all about? Is this actually going anywhere? Is it actually doing any good?

DAVE BAST

Or, you know, you think about how devoted we tend to be to our families. Most of us have children, and we invest countless hours and years, and even dollars, into the task of raising and shaping and forming a child; and that is all good, and if it all turns out well, you love your children and they love you; and yet, then they go off – if everything works right, they go off and do the same thing with their children, and kind of leave you behind; and you might be tempted to think: What is the point of it all? And if you think far enough ahead, your great great grandchildren are not going to have a clue who you were; so, even that seems, in a sense, kind of meaningless, futile, vanity.

DUANE KELDERMAN

So, that is certainly one of the big themes of this book. Another big theme of this book that would be the completion of that sentence would be: Enjoy life. Enjoy life. Several times throughout this book this writer says something to the effect of what is said in Chapter 3, verse 13, that everyone may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all his toil. This is the gift of God. Many times throughout this book he says: Do not take life so seriously. Enjoy life.

DAVE BAST

Yes; well, there is a lot of emphasis on just the goodness of ordinary, everyday pursuits, of what we eat and what we drink, and certainly a lot of us do take pleasure – maybe too much pleasure – in the joys of the table, the joys of the home, even the joys of work and study and play; all those things that fill most of our hours; and the message of Ecclesiastes is that is good; go ahead.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And I think all of us have some notion of what God is going to ask us when we stand before him someday, and we are sort of driven by what we think God is most concerned about. I do not think it dawns on most Christians that maybe one of the questions God will ask us someday when we stand before him is: Why didn't you enjoy life more?

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is a good one. I can imagine him saying: Here I spread all of these pleasures out before you; all of these really wholesome pleasures; these good gifts that I gave you, and you just kind of took them and grumped your way along. How about more joy? How about more happiness? How about more satisfaction in the ordinary things of life?

DUANE KELDERMAN

You live 70 years and there were 300 sunrises, good ones, a year. How many did you enjoy?

DAVE BAST

Well, and then, if we are talking about how do you fill in the blank: What is the main theme of Ecclesiastes, there comes this tremendous verse at the very end of the book in Chapter 12:23; the writer says: Now all has been heard – I have kind of laid it all out before you – here is the conclusion of the matter – drum roll – this sounds important – fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of human beings. So, that too could be suggested as the message of Ecclesiastes: Fear God.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Yes; and I think it is tempting to sort of run these up against each other, but I think what we will see as we go on into Chapter 3, now, in our next segment, that actually there is a way that all three of these live together and coexist in a way that can really help us live our lives.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

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

DUANE KELDERMAN

And I am Duane Kelderman. We want to look a little bit at Ecclesiastes 3 now, and I would like to read just a couple of verses from Ecclesiastes 3. The chapter begins, of course, with probably the most familiar segment of Ecclesiastes:

¹There 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. It goes through all of those different times of life; and then in verse 10, he says: 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.

This preacher is in search of this key that will unlock the mystery of life. He has come to realize over the course of his life that he cannot understand it all; yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end.

DAVE BAST

Yes. That is a great passage, and certainly central in the theme here of this wisdom book – this wise book – that is attempting to help us see clearly what the issues are in the living of our lives. Most of us tend to go through on cruise control, I think. We are much more concerned about just getting through the day and getting to the end of the month and paying the bills and all the other stuff that goes on; and we do not step back and say: What is it all about? What am I here for? Is there any overarching sense of meaning or purpose? Is there something bigger than this? So many people do reach at some point – maybe it is a crisis or just something triggers this in them, but they stop and pause and say: Does it have any meaning? Is this all there is? That famous question. And that is the burden that Ecclesiastes talks about.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Right; the phrase “the burden of the gods” has been used to describe this chapter and these verses, and I think it is worth just asking what exactly is the burden of the gods that he is talking about? I think it is the

combination of three things: First, God has made everything beautiful in its time. Things do fit together. There is a wholeness and a symmetry to life. That is the first part of the burden, which in itself is not a burden. Then the second part is that he actually has set eternity in our own hearts. We have, as his image bearers, a thirst to see it whole, and even some capacity to see it whole; but then the burden comes with the third thing, and that is we cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end. We are like children trying to do an adult crossword puzzle. Try as we will, we are human; we are not God.

DAVE BAST

We just cannot figure it out. That tremendous phrase, “eternity in their hearts” – he has set “eternity in their hearts.” Somehow, we know instinctively that there is more than just this life.

There was a great missionary in the last generation named Don Richardson, and he wrote a book that he entitled *Eternity in Their Hearts*; and he was also kind of an anthropologist, and he had studied all of these cultures; and in instance after instance, there were myths or legends that people had that prepared them for the Gospel; for hearing about the God who is God over all. Somehow they knew, and somehow we know. I just think it is so interesting, we have around us now what is called the new atheism. A lot of people who pride themselves, and they think it is reasonable to dismiss the idea of God. The phrase they sometimes use is: There is no ghost in the machine. All we are is a piece of meat that happens to think. That is what a human being is. There is no soul, there is no spirit, there is nothing beyond the material. And we know that is not true because we have this sense – this longing for something more. It is eternity in our hearts; and I think it was C. S. Lewis who said: A fish does not feel wet because it is living in the sea. That is its environment. If we were simply material beings with no soul or spirit, we would not have this longing for something more. We feel wet, which says we do not really belong here. We are not simply creatures of this world and this earth.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Right. We are going to see as we go on in this series, that there are at least three different ways that we try to solve the riddle of life; to get through the burden. One is with more knowledge and wisdom; one is with more pleasure; and one is with more work. We think that if we do those things, somehow they can transport us to another level; and I think what we will see as we look at each one of these individually over the next three weeks is that there is nothing inherently wrong with any of those things; but to think that they can bring us to that higher level; to bring us to the point where eternity in our hearts is touched, that is the flaw that we will be looking at over these next weeks.

DAVE BAST

Well, and those three things are probably the three most common things that people actually do live for, or devote their lives to. Some people devote their lives to the pursuit of knowledge and gaining ever increasing wisdom, and some people live simply for pleasure, more or less, and that is not necessarily pleasure in some gross, sort of drug taking way. It could just be the pleasures of their hobbies or pursuits or families; and a lot of people live for their work, for their career, for advancing, for ambition; and none of them – Ecclesiastes is going to drive home to us – none of them is the answer. None of them ultimately works as something that will give meaning and satisfy our spiritual hunger, this longing that we have for something more – something beyond.

DUANE KELDERMAN

I wonder, too, how Christian worship relates to all of this? When you said something a minute ago about God has set eternity in our hearts, it strikes me that the closest I ever come to feeling or seeing something whole is in the words of a great hymn, where it is not so much a proposition, but it is evocative. It brings me into another level of life, and it brings me to God in a way that it is not just the words.

DAVE BAST

Well, I think that music can do that, certainly; and worship can do that. Even outside of a worship setting, some piece of music... what it does, it seems to me, is it triggers longing in us for something that we do not have, that we cannot find, even in the good things. You know, one of the problems with the good things that

God has made is that we cannot hold onto them. We have to surrender them, ultimately. We lose them. But even when we have them, somehow we are still longing for something that we do not have; and that goes back to the fish in water. It is as if fish in the ocean should long to be on land, even though they have never experienced that. What is it that we are longing for that this world cannot satisfy? Nothing in the world – that is Ecclesiastes' message to us – nothing in this world can satisfy that deepest longing because it is ultimately a longing for God; it is an eternal longing; and that is a clue to our true nature and our true need.

DUANE KELDERMAN

If we stopped at that point, this could be pretty depressing; but when we return, we will see that there is a very positive message that Ecclesiastes has for us, even as we grapple with these profound realities about life.
Segment 3

DUANE KELDERMAN

Hi, I am Duane Kelderman.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and Duane, we have just been talking about this longing that people have that Ecclesiastes points out – eternity in our hearts. So, why do we get up in the morning? What are we... If we cannot solve the riddle or the burden that comes from having a good world and good things and not being able to find satisfaction in any of them, what makes us go?

DUANE KELDERMAN

Well, that is a great question, and I think Ecclesiastes addresses that question. Other parts of scripture do, too; but I think the first answer to that question that Ecclesiastes gives is that even though we do not see it whole, there is a whole. God is sovereign. God rules the world. This world does hold together in Christ; and when he says in Chapter 3:14,15:

¹⁴I know that everything God does will endure forever. Nothing can be added to it and nothing taken away from it. God does it so that we will revere him. All of these seasons of life, we do not see how they all hold together, but they all are under the sovereign rule of God.

If you go back to Genesis and to the Garden of Eden, the problem was not Adam and Eve when they were content being Adam and Eve. It was when they wanted to be God that they got into trouble.

DAVE BAST

It makes me think of that marvelous little psalm, Psalm 131, where the psalmist says: ¹Lord, I am not high-minded; I am not haughty; I am not proud; I do not occupy myself with things that are too high for me.

There is a sense in which Ecclesiastes' advice for us – the preacher's advice is do not get all too worked up over these things you cannot quite understand or pull together. Just recognize God is in control. The Lord is there. He is managing – he is handling – and you get on with the things he has given you to do.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Well, and that leads beautifully into what I think is the other piece of good news that Ecclesiastes gives us. Not only is God sovereign, God is also good; and Ecclesiastes says a big part of life is enjoying the good gifts that God has given you to enjoy. Verse 12: There is nothing better, the preacher says, than to be happy and do good while we live, that everyone may eat and drink and find satisfaction in all of his toil. This is a gift of God.

DAVE BAST

Yes; in fact, at least a half-dozen times throughout the course of Ecclesiastes the Preacher is going to tell us: Hey, just focus on the good things that God has provided; the goodness of life itself, and accept that with gratitude. Use these things. Like you said, maybe on that last day one of the questions the Lord will ask of us is: Why didn't you enjoy more? Why didn't you have more happiness in the good days? The good days always outnumber the bad.

DUANE KELDERMAN

Yes. Again, what we will see as we go forward in this series is that whereas you might think that, if you know more, then life will be more satisfying to you; or if you work harder and are more successful in your work, in your business, then life will be more satisfying. The fact is, none of those things are true; and that a part of living as a creature in God's creation is accepting our creatureliness, and enjoying life as the creature.

DAVE BAST

I think there is so much wisdom here, it is expressed by Ecclesiastes in written form, but it is lived out by ordinary people in what we call common sense, which is altogether too uncommon in the world, but just the normal wisdom of the human race, which has consistently said: Take each day; live one day at a time; take the pleasures of that day, savor them; do not be always thinking about tomorrow. One of the things I think we do that is a mistake is that we put so much freight into things that we are looking forward to; big events; and, oh, it is going to be so much fun and so much pleasure; this vacation trip that I am planning; this cruise; this marriage that we are going to have; the wedding and all that goes into that. And then we get to the experience and it lets us down; or maybe it was good, but there is a letdown afterwards.

DUANE KELDERMAN

We always think that if we win the 425 million-dollar lottery, we will not let it ruin *our* lives, even though it ruins almost everyone else's.

DAVE BAST

Yes; so, the wisdom of the day is: Get up in the morning and say thank you that you are able to get out of bed; and enjoy your breakfast; and whatever tasks are before you that day, just live it to the full and find pleasure in them. This is wisdom, and this is the message that we can get combined with... Okay, there are these deep questions – there are these really big issues that we struggle with. Well, we are not going to figure it all out, so leave that in the Lord's hands and live for him day by day.

DUANE KELDERMAN

And I think this message is particularly appropriate for an increasingly global market where we get tricked into believing that the only way that we get that satisfaction is with another purchase; with having another one of these things; with another experience; whereas, the experience of this person was – and it is the experience of every human being – that those things do not fill us – those things do not fill us – and that the simple things of life are the things that fill us.

DAVE BAST

Yes; and here is the conclusion of the matter, says our writer in Ecclesiastes 12:

¹³Fear God and keep his commandments. This is the whole duty of people. And I do not think that is at odds with his message to enjoy life, either, because the commandments of God are meant to guide us in the way of true happiness and real blessing.

Well, anyway, that is all we have time for today. We are going to come back to Ecclesiastes in future programs. So, thanks for joining our *Groundwork* conversation, and do not forget, it is listeners like you with your questions and feedback that will keep our topics relevant. So tell us what you think about what you are hearing and suggest passages or topics you would like to hear on future *Groundwork* programs. Visit us at groundworkonline.com and join the conversation.

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