

The Most Difficult Book in the Bible

If you ask people what they think is the most difficult book in the Bible, many will say Revelation. That book is filled with symbolism and requires a great deal of effort to understand. There are also many different interpretations, and that has led to so much confusion that some people avoid the book altogether.

But if you ask me, I think there is a book that is even harder to understand than Revelation. As confusing as Revelation may be, it's possible to learn a lot from it even if you don't fully understand everything it is saying. Moreover, everyone agrees that the book *does* have a meaning; it's just a matter of figuring it out. I have never come across anyone who has said "Revelation is utter nonsense and has no meaning. The best thing to do is to skip the book entirely and move on. Just act like it isn't even there."

I say these things because there actually *is* a book in the Bible that some people think is utterly meaningless. Not only is it difficult to understand, but many people have wondered if it should even be included in the Bible at all! When they read it they gasp in astonishment and wonder who allowed it to be in the canon of Scripture in the first place. Some people have even suggested that reading this book makes you a worse person.

If you haven't already guessed by now, I am talking about the book of Ecclesiastes. This book ties scholars up in knots. The book of Revelation may be difficult, but at least that book has several well-established interpretations. When scholars discuss Revelation they spend their time debating which interpretation is correct. Ecclesiastes, however, is a very different story. That book is so difficult that scholars simply don't know what to make of it. Since commentators have nothing to go on they come up with all sorts of wild ideas. Some people think that the entire book is an example of ungodly, naturalistic thought. Others think that the book is uninspired. Some teach that Solomon wrote the book at the end of his life and that it is an example of his insanity. When it comes to Ecclesiastes there is an utter lack of unity and a great deal of confusion.

It is not hard to understand why this is the case. If you read the book it is easy to think that it was written by an atheist. Just look at what it has to say:

Ecclesiastes 1:2-3: "Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity. What profit hath a man of all his labour which he taketh under the sun?"

While I'm not surprised to hear someone complain that life is meaningless, I am surprised to hear *the Bible* say that. Life is meaningless? Really? That's a Biblical idea? Surely it doesn't really mean that! But if it doesn't mean that then why does it keep repeating it all throughout the book?

Ecclesiastes 2:17: "Therefore I hated life; because the work that is wrought under the sun is grievous unto me: for **all is vanity and vexation of spirit.**"

All is vanity and vexation of spirit, and all is a waste of time. The writer even goes on to say that it's better to be dead than alive, and not being born at all is better still!

Ecclesiastes 4:2-3: "Wherefore I praised the dead which are already dead more than the living which are yet alive. Yea, **better is he than both they, which hath not yet been,** who hath not seen the evil work that is done under the sun."

Solomon is not saying this because he is meditating on the wonders of the afterlife. Instead he is saying it because this life is meaningless and everything is a waste of time. His opinion of life boils down to this: “it’s just better off being dead”.

So is it any wonder that scholars shake their head at this book? It hardly seems like the sort of thing you would want people to read! Can you imagine a preacher telling his congregation that they would all be better off dead because their lives are a meaningless waste of time?

So what’s going on here? What is the point of this book? Why is it included in the Bible? How do we make sense of all this?

I think that there *is* a point here. This book is not utter nonsense and it is not uninspired drivel written by someone who desperately needed antidepressants. Ecclesiastes contains wisdom that we need to hear. The reason we have so much trouble understanding the book is because we don’t understand the question that the writer was trying to answer. Our problems with this book will melt away once we understand what he was trying to accomplish.

First of all, right in chapter one, we are told what the writer set out to do:

Ecclesiastes 1:13: “And I gave my heart **to seek and search out *by wisdom*** concerning all things that are done under heaven: this sore travail hath God given to the sons of man to be exercised therewith.”

The author examined all of life to see what was meaningful and what was not. The book is not a random collection of mindless ramblings; it is a unified picture of a man examining all the different facets of life, one at a time. Nor is the writer a lunatic. The end of the book points out that he is a wise man and sought words that were upright and truthful:

Ecclesiastes 12:9-10: “And moreover, because the preacher was wise, he still taught the people knowledge; yea, he gave good heed, and sought out, and set in order many proverbs. **The preacher sought to find out acceptable words:** and that which was written was upright, even words of truth.”

At the end, after having considered everything, he concludes this:

Ecclesiastes 12:13-14: “Let us hear the conclusion of the whole matter: **Fear God, and keep his commandments:** for this is the whole duty of man. For God shall bring every work into judgment, with every secret thing, whether it be good, or whether it be evil.”

His conclusion is that the duty and role of man is to fear God and keep his commandments. That alone was meaningful and worth doing. Everything else in life is folly. Some may claim that there is meaning apart from fearing God and obeying him, but they are fools. There is no meaning or worth apart from God.

Since we know that is his conclusion, we can work backwards and read the book in light of that thought. Doing that changes everything and offers a very different perspective.

In chapter 1, when he says “all is vanity” he does not mean “there is nothing in life that is meaningful”. What he is trying to point out is that mankind is essentially building sandcastles on the beach, and the tide is coming in and is going to wipe them all out. He points out that a man can build all he wants, but one day he will die and turn it over to others and there is no telling what they will do with it. Moreover, the only things one can do are the same sort of things that previous generations have already done. Sure, you can amass great wealth, build great things, and do great wonders. But then you

will die and lose it all and turn it over to someone else – “And who knoweth whether he shall be a wise man or a fool? yet shall he have rule over all my labour wherein I have laboured” (Ecclesiastes 2:19). The author hated knowing that ultimately he would lose his life’s work and turn it over to someone else.

The conclusion that he draws from this is that labor, in and of itself, is not satisfying or meaningful. You will ultimately lose everything you spent your entire life building, and there is nothing you can do about it. If you are looking for meaning in your life then it cannot be found here.

Now before we go any further, I realize that in God life is very meaningful indeed. But the author is not examining life from an eternal, spiritual perspective. He is not asking the question “As we serve God, is our labor meaningful?” What he is asking is this: “All by itself, with no other considerations, is labor meaningful?” His conclusion is no, it’s not. It’s just vanity.

Can we agree with that? Absolutely. Life really is meaningless if it is not lived for the Lord – *which is the very point the author of Ecclesiastes makes* in the last chapter of this book. It is vital to understand that the author is examining the facets of life *all by themselves*, apart from God, to search for meaning. He is doing this so that at the end of the book he can point out that *only in God* is anything meaningful at all. When we read this book we tend to assume a spiritual perspective that the author was deliberately *not using*. He wanted to show the utter vanity of life without God.

For example, in chapter three he considers mankind itself and realizes that men and animals both die. Both grow old and return to dust. He therefore concludes that man has no preeminence above animals; both are of the dust, and both return to dust again.

Now, as Christians we know that there is a huge difference between people and animals. People who believe in Jesus will never die and will go on to inherit everlasting life. Once we bring God into the picture life becomes meaningful – but without God it is a very different story. If one excludes God from the picture and just looks at life itself, you are forced to conclude that mankind really isn’t better than animals. That is exactly the same conclusion that evolutionists have drawn: we all die, and ultimately we are just another kind of animal. If you exclude God you will always be forced into that conclusion. You simply *cannot* find any meaning apart from God. In fact, in a universe devoid of God you really *are* better off dead, because at least then you don’t have to suffer the many horrors that life can offer (which is another point that Solomon made).

Let me repeat this one more time: Ecclesiastes was not written in order to analyze life from an eternal perspective. It was written to analyze each piece of life *all by itself* to see if it had any *inherent* meaning. The author concludes that it doesn’t; apart from God there is no meaning to be found anywhere. Even wisdom itself is meaningless apart from God, because both wise men and fools die. Wisdom alone cannot save you. Wisdom is better than foolishness, but ultimately you will still die. Apart from God, death is the end; once you die you know nothing and can do nothing, and are utterly cut off from what goes on under the sun. Your work, your existence, and even your name are utterly lost as time wipes it all away. You led a meaningless life and now you are gone, and after a while you will be entirely forgotten and it will be as if you had never existed at all.

That is what the world looks like without God. Those are the conclusions that atheists will ultimately be forced to draw. When you stare deep into the well of godlessness you will find nothing but bleak despair. A world without God offers nothing but utter hopelessness.

The problem is that people don’t think that deeply about life. They just go on, consumed with whatever they’re doing, and never stop to think things through – so Ecclesiastes thinks it through for them. It points out the folly and futility of a godless life and urges them to stop and consider their ways while there is still time. The writer urges people to bring God into their life and find meaning and purpose there. With God life becomes worth living and the perspective changes, but without Him it is all in vain.

Ecclesiastes does not support the atheistic cause; it’s actually a powerful tool against them. The book graphically shows where atheistic thought ultimately leads and even offers a cure for it. The book

tells atheists that their life is meaningless and their labor is done in vain. They will die just like animals and their wisdom counts for nothing. This book refutes their attempt at finding meaning apart from God by showing that there isn't any meaning to be found. Meaning, purpose, and hope can only be found in God. That is the point of Ecclesiastes.