

The Most Difficult Book in the Bible

Many people consider Revelation to be the hardest book of the Bible to understand. Not only is it filled with symbolism, but there's no consensus within the church on how to interpret it. There are many different interpretations, and that's caused so much confusion that some people avoid the book altogether.

But I think there's a book which 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 understand everything it's saying. It's generally agreed that the book *does* have a meaning; it's just a matter of figuring it out. I've never met anyone who said that Revelation was utter nonsense. However, there *is* a book in the Bible that some people *do* say that about. Not only is this book difficult to understand, but some have wondered if it should be included in the Bible at all! A few people have even suggested that reading this book makes you a worse person.

I'm talking about the book of Ecclesiastes. This book gives some people all sorts of problems. 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, though, is different. That book is so difficult that some scholars simply don't know what to make of it. Commentators have come up with all sorts of wild theories. Some think that the entire book is an example of ungodly, naturalistic thought. Others believe that the book is uninspired. Some teach that Solomon wrote the book at the end of his life and it's an example of his insanity. When it comes to Ecclesiastes there's a lack of unity and a great deal of confusion.

It's not hard to understand why that's the case. If you read

the book it's easy to think 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 it's not surprising to hear someone complain that life is meaningless, it is surprising to hear *the Bible* say that. Life is meaningless? Really? Surely Ecclesiastes 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 isn't saying this because he's meditating on the wonders of the afterlife. Instead he's 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".

Is it any wonder that so many people shake their head at this book? It hardly seems like the sort of thing you'd want people

to read! Can you imagine a preacher telling his congregation that they would all be better off dead because their lives are meaningless?

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

I think there *is* a point – a very important one. This book isn't nonsense and it's 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're 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 isn't a random collection of mindless ramblings; it's 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 tells us that he was a wise man who sought words which 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 wrote 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 was that the duty of man was to fear God and keep his commandments. That's the only thing in life which is meaningful and worth doing. Everything else in life is folly. Some people may claim that meaning can be found apart from fearing God and obeying him, but they're fools. *There is no meaning or worth apart from God.*

Since we know that's his conclusion, we can work backwards and read Ecclesiastes in light of that thought. Doing that changes everything and gives us a very different perspective.

In chapter 1 when he says “all is vanity”, he doesn't mean that there's nothing in life which is meaningful. Instead he's telling us that mankind is essentially building sandcastles on the beach, and the tide is coming in and will wipe them out. He points out that people can build whatever they want, but one day we will die and turn our possessions over to others – and there's 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'll 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 he draws from this is that labor, in and of

itself, isn't satisfying or meaningful. One day you will lose everything you've spent your entire life building, and there's nothing you can do about it. If you're looking for meaning then it can't be found there.

Before we go any further, I realize that God makes our life very meaningful indeed. But the author isn't examining life from an eternal perspective. He's not asking the question "As we serve God, is our labor meaningful?" What he's 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's not lived for the Lord – *which is the very point the author of Ecclesiastes makes* in the last chapter of this book! It's vital to understand that the author is examining the facets of life *all by themselves*, apart from God, to search for meaning. He's doing this so he can point out that *only in God* is life meaningful. He wanted to show the utter vanity of life without God.

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

Ecclesiastes 3:19-20: "For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity. All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again."

It's true the Bible teaches that there's a huge difference between people and animals. Those who believe in Jesus will never die and will go on to inherit everlasting life (John 11:26). Once we bring God into the picture life becomes meaningful – but without God it's a very different story! If one excludes God

from the picture and just looks at life itself, you're forced to conclude that mankind isn't better than animals. That's exactly the same conclusion that the world has drawn: since we all die, ultimately we're just another kind of animal. If you exclude God you'll always be forced into that conclusion. You simply *cannot* find any meaning apart from God. In a universe that's 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 Solomon made).

Ecclesiastes wasn't written 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's no meaning to be found anywhere. Even wisdom itself is meaningless apart from God because both wise men and fools die:

Ecclesiastes 2:15-16: “Then said I in my heart, As it happeneth to the fool, so it happeneth even to me; and why was I then more wise? Then I said in my heart, that this also is vanity. For there is no remembrance of the wise more than of the fool for ever; seeing that which now is in the days to come shall all be forgotten. And how dieth the wise man? as the fool.”

Wisdom alone can't save you. Wisdom is better than foolishness but ultimately you'll still die. Apart from God, death is the end. The dead know nothing and can do nothing, and are cut off from what goes on under the sun¹. After death your work, your existence, and even your name will be lost as time wipes it all away. After a while you'll be entirely forgotten and it will be as if you had never existed at all.

1 Keep in mind that Jesus said those who believe in Him will never die (John 11:26). That's why the Bible compares the death of Christians to sleep! The bodies of the departed saints may be dead for now, but their souls are with Jesus in Heaven – which means they're still alive.

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

The problem is that some people don't think 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. The book points out the folly and futility of a godless life and urges people to consider their ways while there's 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. Without Him everything is meaningless and deeply unsatisfying.

Ecclesiastes doesn't support atheism. Instead it's a powerful tool against it. This book shows where atheistic thought ultimately leads and offers a cure for it. The book tells atheists that their life is meaningless and their labor is done in vain. Ecclesiastes refutes all attempts at finding meaning apart from God by showing there isn't any meaning to be found. The truth is that meaning, purpose, and hope can only be found in God. That's the point of Ecclesiastes.