

# Back of the Book

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Date: 17 November 2019

Preacher: Graeme Shanks

[0:00] Well folks, wonderful to see you this morning. Let me encourage you to have Ecclesiastes chapter 12 open in front of you. Gary's already led us in prayer so helpfully. So we will just dive straight into Ecclesiastes chapter 12 this morning.

Before we do, let me just encourage you to come on Wednesday evening to the Word 1-1 training evening. It'll be 7.30 in the upstairs hall. It'll be great to see many of us there.

I've read John's Gospel, read it with my mate from football. We did it in four years. So you're in it for the long haul if you kind of do it. But let me just tell you, it was just one of the most thrilling things I've been involved with.

So let me encourage you to come on Wednesday night and we'll together think about how we could get God's words open with our friends. But Ecclesiastes chapter 12, we're finishing this little series that we've been in over the last number of weeks in Ecclesiastes.

And as I've perceived it, it's been a book that has helped us as a congregation to slow down and to think about life under the sun.

[1:08] Now, just to kind of get us into this this morning, I don't know when the last time that you bought a book was. Some of us are into Kindle. Some of us, like me, a bit of a traditionalist, like a like a normal book.

But every time I buy a book, I wonder if you're like me. Every time I buy a book, the first place that I go is to the back cover. Right, because it's in the back cover that you you hear snippets from people who've read this book before or snippets of people who know the author or something like that.

And the back of the book kind of tells you what you can expect if you're if you're going to pay for this book. They tell you kind of what you're in for. And we kind of do this with books.

Now, I just picked up a random book on our shelf. I think this is one of one of Alex's, but she's on route, so she can't tell me. And it's called A Thousand Splendid Sons. I've never read it.

OK, but this is what A Thousand Splendid Sons says in the back. It says, only the hardest of hearts could fail to be moved by this book. OK, that's pretty good. Evening Standard, a masterful narrative. He is a storyteller of dizzying power.

[2:13] Nice. OK, Daily Telegraph. Hossiani, I think that's the author, has that rare quality of being a Dickensian knack, having a Dickensian knack for storytelling.

There you go. And in the Daily Mail, it said, it's a gripping tale. It is too, a powerful portrait of female suffering and endurance. So I've never read this book before, but reading on the back, I'm actually quite intrigued as to see what that's about.

Probably won't read it, but, you know, it's what we do with books, isn't it? It's what we do with books. So here's the one question I want to ask you with that kind of in mind. And if you've been here over the number of weeks that we've been in this book, you think about this question.

And if you haven't, maybe today's the first Sunday that you've come along. Ask somebody who's kind of been here over the last few weeks. Here's the question I want you to think about.

Ecclesiastes, imagine it's being published as a novel.

OK, you're being asked to write something on the back. What would you write on the back? What would you write on the back? How would you communicate to people what this book's been teaching you?

[3:16] How would you tell people? How would you help them understand what this book has made you do or made you feel in your life? What would you put in the back of Ecclesiastes?

Because the thing is, if you come with me to verse 9 of chapter 12, actually we're given some words to put on the back of the book.

Right? Verse 9, we hear another voice. It's not the teacher's voice anymore. It's the person who's put this book together, who's compiled it. And they want us to know both what the purpose of all of it was, their hard work in doing it, and they want us to know how we should feel now that we've read it.

So let me just make a beeline for the metaphor that's right at the heart of verse 11. Got it there. So the question is, the wisdom of this book, what is it like?

What is it like? Is it like sweet nectar for the soul? No, it's not like sweet nectar for the soul. Is it like a cup of warm cocoa when you've been outside in the freezing cold and you come into the warmth and you get that feeling in your gullet thinking, oh, it's warm.

No, it's not like that. Is it like taking a herbal bath with classic FM on in the background and a little scented candle to make you feel all nice? Is that what this book is like? No, do you see the metaphor here?

[ 4 : 40 ] What is this book like? It is like a goad. So there is the line in the back of the book. This book is like a cattle prod.

Now, would you read that? This book is like a cattle prod. So this book is meant to come at us like a sharp pointed stick, the kind of one that the shepherd would use to keep his sheep from wandering off and drive them where he wanted them to go.

That is what this book is like. And I'll put my hand up and say, wrestled with this text all week, that is not the metaphor that I want to hear. It's not the kind of metaphor that I want to hear.

Nobody is putting that verse on the side of a coffee cup. Okay, no one is finding that verse and that image on their 2020 wall calendar. There's January.

Oh no, what is it? It's a shepherd with his goad. Somebody asks you in small group, what is your favourite Bible verse? Nobody is coming up with this one. This is not the metaphor that we want, but let's stop and think about the fact that it is the metaphor that we need.

[ 5 : 48 ] Isn't it? It's the metaphor that we need. So the wisdom that's in this book of Ecclesiastes, every single nugget given, every single observation made, every single question raised, every single frustration aired as it's resonated with us over the weeks about what life under the sun is like, is meant to be for us like the goads on a shepherd's stick.

And the aim is that we would feel the goads and that we would go with the goads.

Okay, that we would go with the goads. And with that in mind, let's wrap up today. Let's take two things from these verses today and take them away from this book as the kind of writer sums up what he's been all about, what he's been trying to tell us.

Two things. Okay, here's the first thing he's been telling us. He's been telling us to face facts. Verse 9, come with me. 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. So the guy that's brought this together is letting us know that Solomon really wrestled with the big questions of life, really wrestled with it.

[ 7 : 07 ] And the two verbs kind of take us there. They help us see it. What did he do? Firstly, he pondered. You see it? He applied his mind. He chewed it over in his brain. He wrestled.

He considered. He sat and he stood on it. And what else did he do? He searched out. So he went looking for his answers to his big questions.

He turned over every stone in his pursuit of meaning. So he both sat still and thought and he went out and he found. Sat still and thought, went out and found.

And I think that is why, as I've journeyed with this guy over the last eight weeks, nine weeks, I love him. I love him. I love him. I love him. Because he embodies biblical faith, doesn't he?

He embodies biblical faith. This is not leave your mind at the door. However, this is trust grounded and based on the thought through evidence as we apply our God-given reason to the world in which we live.

[ 8 : 11 ] That's biblical faith, isn't it? It's biblical faith. That's what this guy is doing. And what has he concluded after his pondering and his searching? He's concluded, end of verse 10, that what he's saying is truth.

Now, it was author Herman Melville, the guy who wrote Moby Dick, who called Ecclesiastes by far the truest of all books. It's the truth about life.

What we've seen is that it's a gift from God, isn't it? Life is a good thing given to us by a gracious and good God to enjoy and to use the things that he has given us for his glory, knowing that one

day we will have to give an account for what we've done with his stuff. But the dominant theme, the dominant thing about this book, the dominant word is that word vanity. Vanity. Vanity. We are mortal and finite human beings.

That's what he's been saying. You know, I'm reminded of this every Saturday, especially at this time of year. Because two o'clock comes into my sport, right, into my football, and the team news comes in.

[ 9 : 20 ] But the teams, who's making the three o'clock games? Get the team news in. And you hear that such and such isn't playing. And you think to yourself, what's happened? Have they pulled a muscle?

Have they torn a groin? Have they broken a leg? What has gone on? And then the commentator tells you why they're not playing. They're not playing. Because they've got a dose of the flu. Right? Now this is some of the fittest and the strongest human beings that are alive on the planet today. These are some of the athletes who are at the pinnacle of their career.

And what are they floored by? They are floored by a little bug in their system. Isn't it? It makes you feel, doesn't it? Your humanity, doesn't it?

When you get floored by a tiny little bug, it kind of shrinks you down to size. And this is what this guy's been saying, that life is vanity. It's like the smoke coming off a candle.

[ 10 : 14 ] It's here one minute, it's gone the next. Just when you think you've got it sussed, when you think you've got life tamed in your pocket, it somehow eludes you. Life is but a breath.

It's but a breath. From our little girl Chloe, we take our little girls to nursery every morning. Chloe's favorite game at the minute is, can I see my breath?

Can I see my breath? She goes, daddy, daddy, daddy, look. Can you see my breath? She says, yes, I can see my breath. We've turned it into a little game.

A little game is whose breath can last the longest. Right? So she's doing this. She goes, ha. Grace doesn't quite get it. She goes, we're working on that. But she's going, ha. So the two of us go, one, two, three, ha.

And the thing about whose breath can last the longest, the thing about the game, it's extremely frustrating. Do you know why? Because nobody wins. Because you can't tell whose breath lasts the longest. I'll let her have the victory.

[ 11 : 12 ] But you can't tell whose breath lasts the longest. A little exercise for you this week. Let's make the most of the freezing cold. That's what he's saying, isn't it? Life is but a breath.

And he's used that word 38 times in this book. In other words, you say it and you forget about it. He says, no, no, no, no, you come back. Life is but a breath. The way you go. No, no, no, no, no, you come back.

Life is but a breath. That's the truth about life. It's but a breath. And it's the truth he's trying to be telling us about death. No matter what you've accomplished in life, the same fate awaits us all.

The truth about life. The truth about death. And when you bring those twin truths together, friends, you understand that this is like a shepherd's goat. Leading us. Leading us.

Driving us. And these truths are, these sayings are meant to be, verse 11, like nails firmly fixed. Get that image in your head. Right? In other words, these truths about life and about death.

[ 12 : 13 ] They're meant to be nailed in our minds as we navigate our way through this life under the sun existence. There's the truth about life. And there's the truth about death. He's saying face up to the facts.

The second thing I've been trying to do is help you fall down and fear God. Because here's what he's aware of. He's conscious that there are tons of other ways out there of understanding the world.

And I think that's what he means when he says, verse 12, that there is no end of making books. No end of making books. There's a book theme here in this one. You might have sussed that. No end of making books.

I remember my best friend at university. I lived with him for five years. Four years. After university, he moved down to Oxford. I remember Alex and I going to visit him and his wife.

And they showed us around Oxford. And I remember them taking us to Oxford University. And he pointed over there and he says, there's the library. Right? What was it? The Baudelarian Library or something like that, isn't it?

[ 13 : 15 ] And that library has been the legal deposit library for the last 400 years, which means legally every book that's published in the UK is in that library. Right? And given that in 2014, looked it up this week, UK publishers released more than 20 new books every hour.

You'll appreciate there's a lot of books in the Baudelarian Library. Mind boggles, isn't it, the insurance premium on that place. That is a niche search on comparethemarket.com, isn't it?

But that is a lot of books. A lot of books. A lot of facts and figures. A lot of research. A lot of different ways of understanding the world. And what Solomon's doing here is that he's applying that loving, fatherly concern.

I think we get that. If you see it, it's conveyed in that word son here. Son, I love you. Listen. He's pleading with his listeners to understand that they can study, study, study, study, study.

That they can read, read, read, read, read. That they can search, search, search, search, search.

But what he's pleading with them to see is that true wisdom is found in this verse 13.

[ 14 : 20 ] Here's the starting point. To fear God and keep his commandments. Fear God. It's been a big theme of the second half of this book. The word that describes the disposition of the hearts who have understood rightly and responded rightly to who God is.

Words like awe. You're speechless before him. We saw that in chapter 5. Humility. We realize that he is big and that we are small. Reverence.

We just bow before him. The holy, holy, holy God. Devotion. We love him. Adoration. We want to serve him. Dedication. We are his and obedience.

Tell me what to do, dear father. There's one pastor I heard recently describe it. To fear God means that his frown is your biggest dread and his smile is your greatest delight.

What does the compiler of this call that? He calls that, do you see it? For this is the duty of all mankind. In other words, this is the reason that you and I were created. Life lived in relationship with this God is where life is to be found.

[ 15 : 31 ] He says these words are like goads. Ecclesiastes is like being led by a shepherd's goad. And so the question that comes at us as we finish this today, whoever we are, whatever you think about this Christianity business, is, is, are you going with the goads?

Are you going with the goads? It's interesting because central to the New Testament is a man by his own admission who was kicking against the goads.

Before he became a follower of Jesus, he was kicking against the goads. Paul is he stands before King Agrippa in Rome. And you can read about this in the later chapters of Acts. Paul is standing before King Agrippa.

It's not in Rome, rather, sorry. King Agrippa. And he's telling King Agrippa why he does what he does. And he's telling them why he lives like he lives. And he says this about the moment when Jesus burst into his life.

Acts 26. We all fell to the ground. And I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? Amazing. That's how closely Jesus identifies with his people.

[ 16 : 45 ] Is it hard for you to kick against the goads? So Paul's life mission up until this point is to kill Christians. That is his purpose in life. But Jesus is in his mind.

He's in his mind. I don't know how that has happened. Maybe it's happened as he's been persecuting these Christians. Dragging them off to kill them. Seeing Stephen Stone. That he's seen the reality of the risen Jesus in the lives of his followers.

But whatever's happened, Jesus is in his mind. He's a roadblock that he can't get past. He's a song in his head that he can't get out. But he's refusing to act on it. That's what Saul's doing.

It's like he's suppressing the truth. It's like that time when you go on holiday and you've got a swimming. You're in the swimming pool and you've got the beach ball and you're trying to press it under the water. Trying to keep it under the water.

That's what suppressing means. Keep it under the water only for it to burst back in your face. And Jesus stops him in his tracks. And he says, Saul, how long are you going to keep going against the goads?

[ 17 : 48 ] And that's the point where Paul waves the white flag of surrender. That Jesus, you are the risen king. Of course, we'd read later on, Paul, he's writing to the church in Philippi from prison.

And he would say, and get this, he would say, for me to live is Christ. And for me to die is gain. Which, as somebody pointed out to me, must have made him the most frustrating prisoner to have under your command.

Imagine you're a guard. And you say to Paul, stop talking about Jesus. And he says, I can't. For me to live is Christ. And you say, well, if you don't stop talking, we'll kill you. And he says, great. Well, for me to die is gain.

Right? Which, of course, is the most freeing place to be in life, isn't it? Knowing that Jesus is everything. Maybe you're here and you're saying to yourself, well, listen, if only I could have one of those moments, then maybe I'd believe as well.

Well, let me just ask you, whose words are these? Ecclesiastes, whose words are these? He said, there's Solomon shanks. Come on, we've done that before. No, no, no. But wait a minute. Whose words are these?

[ 18 : 56 ] Look at verse 11. The words of the wise are like gourds. They're collected sayings like firmly embedded nails given by one shepherd. So God often refers to himself throughout the Old Testament that he is like a shepherd to his people, Israel.

So it's God's way here of saying that, yes, these are human words. But these are my words. These are my words. Of course, words that would reach their crescendo when Jesus, God, and the flesh would arrive in the scene and declare about himself in John chapter 10.

Words loaded with historical and poignant meaning. I am the good shepherd. Good what he is. And shepherd what he does.

So important, isn't it, in our Christian lives that we know both of those truths about Jesus. That we grasp both of them. Because if he is good, but he's passive, right, that is no comfort for lost sheep. And if he's bad and he's active, then that's even worse news for lost sheep. But praise God that Jesus comes in the scene and declares, I am the good shepherd.

[ 20 : 08 ] The one who came seeking the sheep. The one who knows his sheep as God incarnate and knows what each of his sheep are going through.

He stood in our place. The shepherd who rose to win his sheep and the shepherd who lives to intercede and walk with his sheep through every dark valley, through every waking moment of their under the sun existence until he calls us home.

That's what makes him the good shepherd. Oh, how the Father has loved us. What kindness he has shown in giving us his son. He's poured out his love lavishly in giving his son in whom are found all the treasures of wisdom and of knowledge.

He's the shepherd king who will one day jump to the earth. This is at the verse 14 here. And do what it says. Be the just judge of every human being. Divide them into sheep and to goats, to eternal life and to eternal judgment, depending on how we have responded to him.

And the shepherd king who declares to all those who would hear and respond to his voice that he has come, that they may have life and life in all its fullness.

[ 21 : 27 ] As Gary was praying earlier, forgiveness, adoption into the family of God, that we are sons and daughters. And to a life of denying self, taking up cross and following and knowing Jesus.

And paradoxically, Jesus is saying that is where life will be found. Friends, just as we close, let me just tell you one guy's story about how this is real for him.

His name is Sam. Sam is a member down at Nidrae Community Church. And some of you might have seen it. His story appeared online this week.

And in it, he talks about how he used to be really high up in a gang down in Wales. Down in Newport, I think. Down in Wales. And one evening, this lady just came up to him and just told him about Jesus.

And they were in a nightclub of all places, right? She just came up, told him about Jesus. And he thought she was on something and offered to sell her some drugs. But for the next few months, as that message resonated in his mind, he just could not shrug it off.

[ 22 : 33 ] And in his own words, and you can read it online, Jesus nagged him. Jesus nagged him. And here's what he says happened one night. He said, the night I broke down crying in front of my boys, I think I'd realized that I was a sinner.

I understood, even in a very clouded kind of way, that Jesus went to the cross for my sins. So he breaks down in front of his gang members. He leaves the gang.

He finds his way up to Edinburgh. Now he's a youth worker at the church there in Nidrae. And here's what he does now. Here's what he says. He's a youth worker. And he says, talking about the kids that he looks after.

I need to tell them the gospel. I can't not do that. It's like I've got the cure for cancer, you know. If one of my people had cancer and I'm sitting on the cure, how unloving would it be for me to keep that from them?

Well, we've got the cure. The cure for death. The cure for sin. How could we not tell people? So that's what I do with these young lads. I spend time with them and tell them about Jesus.

[ 23 : 39 ] Now, I don't know about you, but that is why I do what I do. And that is why I follow this shepherd. Because he is this kind of saviour.

He's in the business of seeking and finding and saving sinners. And of transforming lives from the inside out.

So reading Ecclesiastes, it's like being led by a shepherd's goat. That's the phrase, isn't it? It's like being led by a shepherd's goat. But thank goodness that that shepherd, his name is Jesus.

And thank goodness that he calls himself the good shepherd of his sheep. Let's pray. And maybe in the quietness of your own heart, maybe you want to offer your own prayer to God this morning, this afternoon.

Asking that you would know Jesus more as your good shepherd. And Paul would write this in Ephesians chapter 1. I pray that the God of our Lord Jesus Christ, the glorious Father, would give you the spirit of wisdom and revelation in the knowledge of him.

[ 24 : 57 ] And so, dear Father, we ask that you would do just that in our lives. Lord, whatever is going on here today in our lives, whatever is worrying us, whatever is burdening us. Father, whatever weight we're carrying around, we pray, Lord, that you would help us fix our eyes on Jesus.

Thank you that he is the good shepherd of his sheep. And I pray that you would open our eyes, that we would be enlightened, and that you would give us that spirit of wisdom and of revelation in the knowledge of him.

Lord, thank you that you hear us and that you love us outrageously. And I pray these things in Jesus' precious name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.