



# **Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End**

*David Gibson*

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**What if it is death that teaches us how to truly live?**

Keeping the end in mind shapes how we live our lives in the here and now. Living life backward means taking the one thing in our future that is certain—death—and letting that inform our journey before we get there.

Looking to the book of Ecclesiastes for wisdom, *Living Life Backward* was written to shake up our expectations and priorities for what it means to live “the good life.” Considering the reality of death helps us pay attention to our limitations as human beings and receive life as a wondrous gift from God—freeing us to live wisely, generously, and faithfully for God’s glory and the good of his world.

## Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End Details

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# From Reader Review Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End for online ebook

## Becky says

First sentence (from the preface): I am going to die.

Premise/plot: Living Life Backward is a commentary on the book of Ecclesiastes. David Gibson addresses the contents of each chapter focusing on the big themes of the book. (It isn't exactly a verse-by-verse commentary. But all the big ideas of the book of Ecclesiastes are discussed and the text of Ecclesiastes is included so I don't hesitate to call it a commentary.) The main premise of this one is simple. Gibson writes, "I am convinced that only a proper perspective on death provides the true perspective on life. Living in the light of your death will help you to live wisely and freely and generously....I want to persuade you that only if you prepare to die can you really learn how to live."

Lesson from chapter one: "Ecclesiastes is a meditation on what it means to be alive in a world that God made and called good, yet which has also gone so very wrong, often in catastrophic ways."

Lesson from chapter two: "Death can radically enable us to enjoy life. By relativizing all that we do in our days under the sun, death can change us from people who want to control life for gain into people who find deep joy in receiving life as a gift."

Lesson from chapter three: "One of the ways we learn to live by preparing to die is by realizing that death means judgment and that this is a good thing. It gives my present actions meaning and weight, and it gives my experienced losses and injustices a voice in God's presence. What is past may be past, but what is past is not forgotten to God, and because he is in charge and lives forever, one day all will be well. Every single thing that happens will have its day in court. This brings both comfort and challenge."

Lesson from chapter four: "If you can live in this world in such a way that the person or people beside you—your friend, your spouse, your children, your brother, your sister, the people God has put in your path—are your waking concern and your dominant focus, then you will find happiness."

Lesson from chapter five: "The ear is the Christian's primary sense organ. Listening to what God has said is our main spiritual discipline. We need someone to tell us to listen because we want to look and speak more than we want to listen."

Lesson from chapter six: "Death is an evangelist. He looks us in the eye and asks us to look him right back with a steady gaze and allow him to do his work in us. Death is a preacher with a very simple message. Death has an invitation for us. He wants to teach us that the day of our coming death can be a friend to us in advance. The very limitation that death introduces into our life can instruct us about life."

Lesson from chapter seven: "To die well means everything I have in this world I hold with open hands because I love Jesus more than anything and anyone else, and I'm happy to go home to him."

Lesson from chapter eight: "There are better things to do than succeed, more important things to do than make it in the world, and there are worse things to do than fail."

Lesson from chapter nine: "Only Christ can make any life, young or old, truly beautiful or truly happy. Only

he can cure the heart's restless fever and give quietness and calmness. Only he can purify that sinful fountain within us, our corrupt nature, and make us holy. To have a peaceful and blessed ending to life, we must live it with Christ. Such a life grows brighter even to its close. Its last days are the sunniest and the sweetest. "

Lesson from chapter ten: "I want to suggest two ways to help you evaluate where you are in relation to these two things: the pleasure of the Bible and the pain of the Bible. They're attitude testers, ways of taking your own spiritual temperature. First, you can measure whether you find the Bible delightful, not by how often you read it or by how much of it you read, and not by whether you find it easy or difficult to read, but by whether you approach the Bible expecting to be surprised. Bible delight is born when you expect it to teach you something you did not know already. The more childlike you are toward the Bible, the more likely you are to find it having just the right words for you. Second, a way to evaluate your relationship to the Bible's pain is to ask yourself, when was the last time you submitted to it and acted on what it says, even when you did not like it? Have you ever obeyed it when you found what it was saying offensive? Reinterpreting the Bible to mean something different is always a moral exercise before it is ever an intellectual one. That is, if we do not like what the Bible says because it confronts us, then we will always find some way of changing what it means so it lines up with the world we want to live in instead."

My thoughts: *Living Life Backward* is packed with rich insight on how to live life. It isn't necessarily restricting the "how to live life well" to how to live a Christian life. Ecclesiastes has lessons to teach everyone after all. It is a contemplative book; a book that can easily be misunderstood and misapplied. I loved so much of what Gibson had to say. I also loved the quotes that he shared.

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### **James says**

A walk through the challenging beauty of Ecclesiastes, "*Living Life Backward*" has reframed and refined some of my own impressions of that biblical book in ways that make it even more beautiful as a component of God's word. Less commentary than Derek Kidner's or Iain Provan's books on the same, David Gibson's book is well-written, accessible, and thought-provoking. The author revisits his primary thesis--we are all going to die, and this should have something to say about the way we live--throughout as he touches on the nooks and crannies of "The Preacher's" argument. In every chapter, he also ties the message of Ecclesiastes to the Gospel message of Christ in skillful and compelling ways. I am half-way through teaching a bible study on Ecclesiastes and will be using the text as a resource as I prepare my lessons, as well as drawing from some of Gibson's own chapter questions to prompt deeper discussions within my group.

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### **Andy Huette says**

This is probably in my top ten all time reads. It's an explanation of Ecclesiastes in relatively short, understandable, and applicable terms. The author argues, on the basis of Ecclesiastes, the secret to living well and enjoying God's gifts in life is understanding that life is short and we will die. It's blunt, direct, and wonderfully helpful. This is probably the best Christian Living book I've read in the past ten years. I highly recommend it!

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## **Caitlin Allen says**

Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End by David Gibson 4 ?'s

Thank you to Crossway publishing for providing me with a copy of this book. All opinions in this blog are my own.

I haven't blogged in a while because I haven't been reading. For the past three weeks, my life has revolved around moving. Now that my life is back to semi-normalcy, I decided to pick up where I had left off. I did read this book in two sections – before and after the move.

This book is so convicting in all the right ways. It helps show how relevant the Old Testament still is in the believers life. It is easy to see it as 'old,' and not question how it is still applicable to today's times. Gibson takes this book of the Bible and shows exactly how it is applicable and so needed. His take on this book can be seen as morbid. At first, I didn't know what to think because he spares no time getting to the point. And if you don't mind the minor spoiler, I'll post it here: You are going to die. That's the point of living. He challenges you, as the reader, to reflect on what is your life going to look like when it happens. This matter is not like others in life, some choose not to get married or have kids. Dying is not up to you.

Gibson takes this point and the Preacher of Ecclesiastes' message and makes it applicable. He breaks the book apart, which I appreciated. I have not studied this book before and throughly enjoyed how he took the book and taught from it. I was challenged by his study to make sure that I live in light of what the Preacher is saying. I appreciated how his chapters were in distinct chunks with a specific topic. This helped keep the focus narrowed. I also liked how, if this were to be done as a study, there were questions provided for that at the end.

Overall, Gibson is an author with a heart for God. He delves into His word and shares his knowledge with others. I appreciated the fresh take on an Old Testament book, and enjoyed all that I learned from it. I will revisit this throughout my life to make sure when the day comes that I gain, (Philippians 1:21) my life will reflect Christ, so He gets all the glory.

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## **Kelly says**

I put this on my to-read list thanks to it being WORLD Magazine's accessible theology book of the year. In this book, Gibson presents well-organized analysis, examples, and practical applications about the truth and themes found in the book of Ecclesiastes - most importantly, he explores the question how do you live the "good life" now knowing that you will inevitably die? Gibson's writing style was structured and readable and occasionally comic; I particularly liked chapters 7 and 8. My only complaints were a lack of depth and Gibson's occasional over-generalizations and over-simplifications of the ideas found in Ecclesiastes.

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## **Josh says**

Excellent. Every Christian should be familiar with the message of Ecclesiastes, and Gibson is a worthy guide.

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### Jeanie says

**To die well means I realize death is not simply something that happens to me; it happens to me because I am a sinner. I realize that in a sense I cause my own death. To die well means I realize that every time I see a coffin, it preaches to me that the world is broken and fallen and under the curse of death-and I am a part of it. It means I realize that I am not owed three score years and ten by God. It is only because of his mercy that I am not consumed today. To die well means realizing that from the day I was born I lived under the sentence of death, and I am amazed that God spared me as long as he did. It means I have been heading for death from the moment I was born. It means I have been laying up treasure in heaven, and that is where my heart is. To die well means everything I have in this world I hold with open hands because I love Jesus more than anything and anyone else, and I am happy to go home to him.**

Ecclesiastes is a great teacher of reality and facing our limitations. I will be honest, the beginning of this study challenged me that it gripped my heart in that I am holding on to things that have no eternal value. That life is a gift and how do I value that gift from the creator. How easy it is for us to know this in our head but to live it in the mundane of life can be challenging. Our search for significance and happiness many times is a search of self instead of a pursuit of God and who he is.

Is our pursuits in what we gain and not the gift? Think on that for a moment. Do not answer that quickly. After reading this study, you may have a different answer than before you started. There is so much wisdom in the book of Ecclesiastes - what appears gloom and doom is really joy and glory. About what true enjoyment really is. As Gibson so eloquently expresses, you can not truly enjoy what you worship. Enjoyment comes from the putting true reality in place. That God is control and worthy to be worshipped. *The man who makes sex his God, and who worships it, discovers that actually what is normal, pleasurable, soon becomes inadequate and not enough, and he becomes chained to a path whereby he begins to enjoy only perversion-which of course is no enjoyment.*

Death is a teacher of how we are to live this life now. What really matters and our reality. *Death reorients us to our limitations as creatures and helps us to see God's good gifts right in front of us all the time, each and every day of our lives What if the pleasure of food is a daily joy that we ungratefully overlook? What if our work was never intended to make us successful but simply to make us faithful and generous. What if it is death that shows us that this is how we are meant to live?*

If I were to nominate the best Christian book this would be it. It left me undone to the core and stirred my heart. I highly recommend.

*A Special Thank You to Crossway and Netgalley for the ARC and the opportunity to post an honest review.*

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### Sydney Avey says

Living Life Backwards is a bracing read. It's like splashing cold water on your face and examining your reflection in the mirror with this question in mind: In light of the fact that I will age and die, how am I doing?

Many people go only skin deep with that question. (How am I holding up compared to my peers?) The writer of Ecclesiastes invites us to consider the heart of the matter. How does the fact that, despite our best efforts, all earthly life ends in death affect the way we live?

When I was young, my mother always countered my complaining with a maxim, Life is short and then you die. Today, forcing young people to face such an unpleasant thought might be considered abusive. But I didn't think of it that way. My mother's words gave me a perspective that has carried me through life. In the eternal scheme of things, is whatever absorbs your attention and gives you no peace worth your time?

In an examination of the book of Ecclesiastes, David Gibson addresses the issue of facing death. He steps us through Ecclesiastes and clears up some of the misconceptions we have about the text. Life is not meaningless. In the context that Gibson provides, eat, drink and be merry is not a consolation, it is a command.

### Contemporary applications

Gibson offers contemporary applications of the ancient rumination on the life well lived. Among my favorites is, "Death is coming. So do your bucket list--not your to-do list." This is not cheap advice. Such thinking involves a paradigm shift that moves our focus away from addictive behaviors to joy-filled living.

A careful reading of the Wisdom books of the Bible, especially Ecclesiastes, gives a prescription for the anxiety that plagues mankind. Distracting ourselves until the day we die is an unhappy business. Delving deeply into the mysteries of life, making wise decisions early in the game that bring a measure of peace at the end--these are the activities that will allow us to look at our faces in the mirror without flinching.

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### Alex says

This is tough. Gibson starts strong by unabashedly forcing us to examine death, and it's only then that we can examine life. And there were some passages in here that have really given me something to think about. But, those were sparse, and ultimately, I found this book lacking in depth. And perhaps that is my problem; not Gibson's. Perhaps he wrote this specifically as an introductory overview and it's my expectations that are out of line.

One of my favorite sections was a brief study of nostalgia. Gibson explores the idea that nostalgia is both a magician and a thief, creating an illusion that the past is greater than it really was and in the process it steals joy from our present circumstance. That was a mind-bender I've really enjoyed pondering in the days since reading.

The biggest issue is that I found Christ lacking in the pages of this book. Gibson's theme—living well by preparing to die well—can only be realized in Christ. We cannot separate wisdom and joy and peace in this life from Christ. I know Gibson does not intend to make that separation; but without explicit, constant reinforcement of Christ, Christ, Christ, this book runs the danger of misguiding readers into futile self-help.

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### Nick Gibson says

A winsome defense of Ecclesiastes as a manual for joyous, responsible Christian living rooted in realism about death and the hope of future life. Gibson is easy to read, warm in tone, and pulls together thoughts from a broad range of thinkers. Excellent for reading aloud.

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### **Scott Sauls says**

#### **Excellent**

Compelling treatment of a challenging book of the Bible. Highly recommend for any pastor, teacher, or learner wanting to delve more deeply.

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### **Ryan Spillers says**

Such a great book! Understand life by understanding death. I highly recommend it to all.

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### **Porter Sprigg says**

This is an excellent book that explains Ecclesiastes in a fascinating and accessible way. It has made me think about death and dying a lot more than I usually do. But that's a good thing, a main goal of Qohelet himself! The reality of death should not be one I ignore in denial but one I face and then make decisions in light of. Gibson is a great writer and I highly recommend this book.

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### **Ben Chidester says**

The content fostered good discussion in a small group, but it was the discussion that was more memorable than the content itself. I was disappointed that Gibson didn't tie Ecclesiastes, with its despairing of the vanity of life, into the Gospel much at all. I guess he was trying to focus on Ecclesiastes in itself, but it felt strange as a Christian book to not make such ties.

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### **Richard Klueg says**

I reserve 5 stars for exceptionally good books, and I was not long into this book before I figured this would fall into that category. Gibson's explanation and application of the Bible's book of Ecclesiastes moved my understanding of and appreciation for that book up to a new level. The idea of living life in the light of one's coming death does not come across as morbid or fatalistic. On the contrary, I found myself encouraged and challenged to live a life of joy and purpose in the presence of God. Highly recommended!

