# Let Death Teach You How to Live

*David Gibson**

Some of life's greatest gifts are found in the strangest of places.

Alex Zanardi won gold in the handcycling event at the 2016 Paralympics in Rio de Janeiro. Fifteen years earlier, as a Formula One race car driver, he lost both his legs in a high-speed crash in Germany. On receiving his gold medal in Rio, Zanardi said, "I feel my life is a never-ending privilege. . . . Even my accident, what happened to me, became the greatest opportunity of my life."

I sit up and take notice when I hear someone like Zanardi speak. There is always something beautiful — and disorientating — in finding a gift where we only thought to find tragedy.

Zanardi's words echo the worldview of that most unusual of books in the Old Testament Scriptures: Ecclesiastes. Many have been baffled by its repeated refrain, "Vanity of vanities! All is vanity" (Ecclesiastes 1:2), and by the discordant ways this part of God's word seems to speak about life in his world. But the brilliance of Ecclesiastes is to unearth gifts in that most awful, most strange, and most bitter place of all: death.

## DEATH'S STRANGE FACES

The Teacher of Ecclesiastes does not sugarcoat death; for him, it still stalks the world as a curse. Yet his genius lies in exploring the distinction between death in general, and my own death in particular. With hammer blows, Ecclesiastes reminds me that my death is certain, that my death is coming, and so meeting it in advance today, on the way, can be one of the greatest gifts I can find. I am learning to live by preparing to die.

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* David Gibson (PhD, University of Aberdeen) is the minister of Trinity Church, Aberdeen, where he lives with his wife, Angela, and four young children. He is the author of *Living Life Backward: How Ecclesiastes Teaches Us to Live in Light of the End*.

Here are three strange faces of death in Ecclesiastes, each of which comes to us bearing gifts.

### *1. Death Is a Surgeon*

In Ecclesiastes 1:1–11, the word *death* is not used, but in lyrical tilt, with tidal ebb and flow, the rhythmical poetry is an ode to death's all-pervasive presence: "A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever" (Ecclesiastes 1:4). The point of this poem is that the world itself seems to chase its tail and not get anywhere. Everything is cyclical, not linear.

The Teacher uses creation to nail the paradox of life in this world: it is a place of permanent repetition *and* constant change. In a world of permanent repetition, where we end up doing the same old things seven days a week, again and again, we long for something to interrupt it — a new job, a new relationship, a new house, a whole new chapter — then we die. And in a world of constant change, we long for something to give us permanence — the gym, the health plan, the insurance policy, the face-lift — then we die.

Surgeons operate on human bodies. They wound and cut in order to heal and make whole. In Ecclesiastes, death is a cardiologist, the most skillful of heart surgeons. The desire for gain, for a surplus — something left over to last forever because I lived — is a great motivating desire of every human being. We want to achieve something and be someone. And the greatest obstacle to our ambition is death. In grace and mercy, God uses death to operate on our heart's anxieties and fears, our restless striving and straining and toiling for gain, for greatness, and for a forever-after legacy which God has placed off-limits for fallen, rebellious creatures.

### *2. Death Is a Preacher*

One of the most striking verses in the whole of Ecclesiastes is 7:1: "A good name is better than precious ointment, and the day of death than the day of birth." Like the sound of nails screeching down a blackboard, our whole being recoils from the notion that the day a person dies is better than the day a baby is born.

But the Teacher's point is that funerals and crematoriums and hearses and open graves and tears on the pillow at night are the amplifiers God uses to address a world obsessed with the trivial and the fleeting. "It is better to go to the house of mourning than to go to the house of feasting, for this is the end of all mankind, and the living will lay it to heart" (Ecclesiastes 7:2).

All preachers grapple with how to lay things to the heart. How to get us to feel, and see, and believe, and trust, and hope, and savor, not just with our heads, but with every fiber of our being. Ecclesiastes knows that coffins lay things to the heart better than cribs. They're better preachers.

New babies have life ahead of them, but what can we say about them yet? Not much. But sit a while in the next funeral you attend, and look and listen. What is said — and left unsaid — about the deceased person? Was she wise, generous, humble, transformed by grace? Did she love the Lord Jesus? Or did she spurn her Creator and live out her days as a satisfied squatter in a corner of the King's grounds, attending to her own puny empire?

What will be said about *you* when it's your turn to lie in the coffin as friends and family gather? Receive the gift of death's sermon. Lay it to heart. Today.

### *3. Death Is an Artist*

In Ecclesiastes 9:7–10, immediately after another reminder that everything done under the sun will come to an end for each of us, the Teacher gives us a command: "Go, eat your bread with joy, and drink your wine with a merry heart, for God has already approved what you do" (Ecclesiastes 9:7).

Death does not just destroy. It urges us to sketch life and light on the canvas of our lives while we can. "Let your garments be always white. . . . Enjoy life with the wife whom you love" (Ecclesiastes 9:8–9).

The logic here is that death loosens my grip on God's gifts, as if they were ever mine by right, and instead frees me to see his world for what it is: the lavish endowment to wayward creatures of abundant good things we do not deserve. Death frees me to enjoy things for what they are, rather than what I want them to

be. Creation is there to be enjoyed and lingered over, not plundered for my gain or manipulated for my fame.

Food and drink, love and sex, work and beauty — these things become even more enjoyable when we paint them into our lives, knowing one day they will pass. Try and hold on to them, or worship them, and we will find we are chasing the wind with only fistfuls of mist to show for all our effort.

### OPEN YOUR HANDS

In one hundred years, it is near certain that almost no one will remember you ever lived. Think about that. If it's true, then here is Ecclesiastes' portrait of a life well lived: open a nice bottle and open your home. Share what you own. Give away what you have. Remember your Creator. Enjoy your loved ones. Fear God. Love his law. Treasure his gospel.

All of these things are God's great gifts. And strangely, death can open your hands to receive them.