



Death by Living: Life Is Meant to Be Spent

N.D. Wilson

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A poetic portrait of faith, futility, and the joy of this mortal life.

In this astoundingly unique book, bestselling author N. D. Wilson reminds each of us that to truly live we must recognize that we are dying. Every second we create more of our past—more decisions, more breathing, more love and more loathing, all of it slides by into the gone as we race to grab at more moments, at more memories made and already fading.

We are all authors, creators of our own pasts, of the books that will be our lives. We stare at the future or obsess about the present, but only the past has been set in stone, and we are the ones setting it. When we race across the wet concrete of time without purpose, without goals, without laughter and love and sacrifice, then we fail in our mortal moment. We race toward our inevitable ends without artistry and without beauty.

All of us must pause and breathe. See the past, see your life as the fruit of providence and thousands of personal narratives. What led to you? You did not choose where to set your feet in time. You choose where to set them next.

Then, we must see the future, not just to stare into the fog of distant years but to see the crystal choices as they race toward us in this sharp foreground we call the present. We stand in the now. God says create. Live. Choose. Shape the past. Etch your life in stone, and what you make will be forever.

Death by Living: Life Is Meant to Be Spent Details

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Douglas Wilson says

Got to read the galleys, having already read the rough manuscript. This is fantastic.

Valerie Kyriosity says

March 2018 — Listened to a long stretch of another book today before deciding it just wasn't good Sabbath soul food. So I scrolled through ye olde iPod for something better suited and settled on a sixth trip through *Death by Living*. (*Settled* not as in *settled for something less*, but as in *settled in*.) For a few days I'd been vaguely out of sorts; as usual, *DBL* sorted me out. Gratitude is liberation.

April 2017 — Seemed like a good time for a relisten.

My theme for 2013 was *joy*. This year it's *gratitude*. So an early re-consuming of *Death by Living* was in order: "Gratitude is liberation." "Burden your moments with thankfulness."

This time through, I went with the audiobook (for which I bartered with the publisher for part of the price of a cake). It's read by the author, which is always the best way.

When I finished it last night, I was still working on a project, so I scrolled through the audiobook listing on my iPod in search of another listen. I came across a small stash of biographical lectures by John Piper and clicked on the first one before I even took time to note the title: "How Few There Are Who Die So Hard!" Adoniram Judson lived by dying. He laid down his life over and over and over again in nearly forty years of missionary work in Burma.

Most of the stories in *Death by Living* aren't quite so harrowing as decades of torture, repeat widowhood, and the loss of eight children to disease in a preindustrial pagan country, but the idea is the same: Whatever life you're called to, live gratefully, live sacrificially, or you're really not living at all. Being a living sacrifice isn't usually a one-off event; it's a day-by-day, minute-by-minute pouring out of life. It's death by living. I woke up this morning with a renewed eagerness to receive every circumstance with thanksgiving and to get much, much better at loving my neighbor. Gotta love a book that inspires *that*. Thanks again for the kick in the pants, Nate!

A fun moment: A few weeks ago, I entered Jim Wilson's house for the first time. I was taken aback to be taken back in time at the sight of the carpet. It was the exact same stuff my mom had installed in our house in Baltimore (and which I'd had the great pleasure of ripping out about fifteen years ago). *Golly*, I thought. *How long has that been here?* And his grandson delivered the answer: "...the gold-brown carpet that has been

there since before I was born." I did the math. Yep, sounds about right.

Initial review of print version.

Valerie Kyriosity says

N. D. Wilson mentions early in this book his childhood penchant for hitting his sisters. I don't think he's quite grown out of the habit, because *Death by Living* delivers slug in the arm after slap in the face after sock in the jaw. And dang it all if he doesn't almost make it fun. *Get up! Get busy! Get living! Get dying! Look at how joyful and glorious it is when you do!*

I posted several quotes on my blog. Here's another one (from pp. 40-41) [brackets are mine]:

When faced with unpleasantness (trouble) there are only two ultimate responses (with many variations). On the one hand, "The Lord gives, the Lord takes away, blessed be the name of the Lord." On the other, "Curse God and die." Variations on the latter can include whining [whap!], moping [bam!], self-pity [pow!], apathy [zap!], or rage [biff!]. Variations on the former can include laughter, song, retellings, and an energetic attack of obstacles.

If God gives you (or makes you) a joke, what are you meant to do in response? (Receive it. Laugh.)

If God gives you an obstacle, what are you meant to do in response? (Receive it. Climb it. Then laugh.)

If God gives you more profound hardship, what are you meant to do in response? (Receive it. Climb it. Then laugh. Exhibit A: His Son.)

On page 73, he asks what kind of character you'd like to be in the grand and wonderful story we're all bound to contribute to. I thought of one character I dread being, but too often am: Mary Musgrove from *Persuasion*. All hail the High Queen of the Self-Involved Whiners! This book made my inner Mary Musgrove laugh, not by silly, distracting antics, but by revealing the solid joys and lasting treasure at the foundation of all the obstacles and hardships of life.

See, it turns out trouble's not a bug, it's a feature. I was quite surprised to find myself convinced [zing!] that troubles were a built-in characteristic of life in Eden, not just a result of the fall. But I won't give that away: read chapter 6, "Born to Trouble," which is worth the price of admission.

Death by Living made a lazy, lily-livered lout like me want to dig deeper, work harder, die jollier, and live thankfuller. A welcome kick [boom!] in the keister.

Stephen Altrogge says

I know I'm going to get crucified by the Wilson fanboys for rating this book so low, but it just didn't live up

to the hype. Don't get me wrong, ND Wilson is a great, creative writer. But honestly, it felt like the book tried too hard to be creative. There were many points where the creativity seemed to actually hide the point he was trying to make. I struggled to take away one main point from this book. I sort of feel like I should pull a George Costanza and say, "It's not you, it's me," to this book. Maybe the problem is me. Maybe I'm way too dense. I just wish the book could have been a tad more linear and knit together. I really wish I could rate this book higher. I tried to like it, I really did. But in the end it didn't do it for me.

Nick says

Wilson is an artist pure and simple. I guess I could also say that he is a weaver because he takes images, themes, and stories and braids them together beautifully.

Family stories, travel stories, existential reflections--all through the lens of life with God.

I keep referring back to certain pages and lines. Several times I had a lump in my throat.

Wilson makes me wish that I did more to suck the marrow out of life and experience all that God has given me with wonder-filled eyes.

This is the kind of book that I want to recommend to everyone I know.

Becky Pliego says

This book is a favorite of mine (I try to read it every year). This time I listened the audio version and enjoyed it very much too.

Felipe says

Nathan nasceu para escrever e morrer. Leitura de tirar o fôlego.

Ivan says

N.D. Wilson writes with Chestertonian joy. I'm devouring this book with rapturous exultation. Highly, highly recommend it! Few books have so moved me as this one.

* * * * *

"Stories are soul food.... We are narrative creatures, and we need narrative nourishment—narrative catechisms."

"Her voice is sweetness itself, part apple pie and part clean laundry left to ride the wind in the sun. Always has been."

"A ninety-five-year-old man sits in his chair with a wandering mind because a century cannot pass without many blows."

"Heat rises. Man is born to trouble.... God tells stories that make Sunday school teachers sweat and mothers write their children permissions slips excusing them from encountering reality."

"Take up your life and follow Him. Face trouble. Pursue it. Climb at its roar like a tree planted by cool water even when your branches groan, when your garden leaves are stripped and the frost bites deep, even when your grip on this earth is torn loose and you fall among mourning saplings."

G.M. Burrow says

Only *The Lord of the Rings* has made me laugh and cry at the same time, but *Death by Living* came close. It certainly made me do both, even if at separate moments. By the time I finished, I was so full of *sehnsucht* (that “overwhelming bittersweet yearning that bleeds into joy”), I felt ready to detonate—like Agent Smith in *The Matrix*, split by the light-spear, but in a good way. I wanted to live. I wanted to die.

I was glad that I could do both, right now.

You’ve heard it said that from the minute you’re born, you’re dying—as if that’s a bad thing. N. D. Wilson shows that death is not just the last enemy, it is the calling to which we are called, a calling which we can fear and lament and ignore and refuse (for a while), but only to our harm. You are a pitcher, and you will be poured out. You can be vinegar or you can be wine, but you will pour regardless. You can be dumped out and wasted in the cracks on the sidewalk, or you can be poured into goblets and drunk by others, for others. The choice is yours. Age well. Mellow. Do not despise the Hand that tips you. Do not begrudge the mouths that drink you dry. You follow the Man who shed His blood like wine for you.

“A grim morn, and a glad day, and a golden sunset,” wrote Tolkien as Theoden lay dying. *Death by Living* is Wilson’s sketch of man’s golden sunset as intended by God, captured by words to make your blood pound, ready to be shed. It made me want to grab life around the middle and squeeze, but not forever. I will let go. My life for yours, every day, until I have nothing left, and then I will let go one last time.

“This is my body,” Nate says to his children. “May it be broken for you.”

The morning is grim only for those who do not know the story.

Brandon Miller says

Five star ratings are for books that changed my life. Books that will never be forgotten, by me or anyone who is silly enough to ask me what my favorite books are.

This book got five stars.

I don’t know where to start or where to end. This book made me conscious of ever passing second and it slipped by into eternity, but didn’t overwhelm me with a sense of insufficiency. It reminded me that I’m not in control of my life, and that I don’t have to be because Christ is. It encouraged me to enjoy the journey, and

the people who journey with me.

It convinced me that maybe big international vacations are best done once children know how not to throw up in a moving vehicle. (I'm sorry for all of Rome.)

This book is encouraging and fun and wonderful and will always have a place on my shelf, if it isn't in my palm.

Gabriela Bevenuto says

"Entenda isto: nós somos ao mesmo tempo pequenos e imensos. Não somos nada mais que barro moldado que recebeu fôlego, mas não somos nada menos que autorretratos divinos, a arfar e ofegar ao longo de cordilheiras de arcos narrativos épicos preparados pela própria Palavra infinita. Encha-se de orgulho e gratidão, porque você é pequeno e recebeu muito."

Sarah says

I swallowed this one whole. I raced to read it, then re-read and re-read it again. It's the kind of book you hide under a pile of grammar books so no one will steal it away. It's the kind of book that makes you snarl at Sister Dear when she asks if you are finished yet. ((So Sorry, Jesse)) It's the kind of book that keeps you up late, trying to remember everything your grandparents ever told you about their stories. It's the kind of book that puts you in awe of the Maker and MasterStoryteller- it's the best kind.

Becky Pliego says

An invitation (impossible to turn down) to live a purposely, fully, and grateful life -and be excited to live it facing the finish line.

Read it again, and again I laughed and cried with this book in 2015.

2017 - Read it again. Started it the same day that N.D. Wilson had to go into surgery to have a brain tumor removed. Seemed the right time and the right thing to do. I am grateful I did. And I am grateful he has given more days to write more pages-

Heather says

This is good stuff. I would even venture to say it surpasses tilt-a-whirl...

Aaron Fox says

I must say that I really wanted to enjoy the book more than I ended up actually enjoying it. Death by Living covers a topic that I think about fairly often that I hope you do too: are you going to live to die, or die that you might live longer?

Mr. Wilson has so many points I agree with in this book, but honestly (I know Brandon and Megan will disagree), the 3 star rating has to come from the delivery. As in Notes From the Tilt-a-whirl, he uses the same, scattered writing style that I'm not too fond of. And while I have asked myself why I don't seem to be understanding Wilson the way he wants me to, I have come to the realization that it is not always my job. I am a fairly normal and educated person (don't be deceived by the Pigeon Toady as my profile picture), and probably fit into Wilson's target demographic. For that reason I cannot blame myself, but I also do not blame the author as I know several people in my same demographic that just love his books.

Again, I really wanted to like this book. Wilson made many great points that ended up being muddled or lost in the confusing writing style. Sorry, Mr. Wilson. Thought we were... Vibing.
