

'[They] will still bear fruit': Learning to grow old faithfully according to Scripture

My AIM today: Help us understanding aging from a biblical perspective, and to be encouraged to keep living for Christ even in our old age.

"Most want to live longer, few want to grow old" (Will Willimon)

TO DISCUSS: Reflect on this statement. What might the writer mean? Do you agree?

How do you feel about ageing in general?

1. Are you "old"? Y/N

a) On the one hand, "old" is relative...

Medical researchers only recently discovered that the arteries of young men can be 'aged', while some people attain a 'ripe old age' with cardiovascular systems resembling those associated with much younger people. Are we aged if we choose to retire at the age of forty-five or fifty, or are we 'aged' when we first become eligible for social security? Do we become 'aged' when we leave our own apartment and move into a residence complex where our fellow residents are classified as being 'elderly'? There simply is no unequivocal meaning for the 'aging' or 'aged'; moreover, we cannot be sure when we are speaking in the language of physiology, psychology, economic status, athletic ability and physical co-ordination, medicine and health status, political influence, familial role, or something else. More than most of us realize, aging is a state of mind; we are what we think we are, the ways we perceive ourselves, and the ways we imagine our family and our community to perceive us. Aging is, at the very least a relative term.

- Robert Katz

b) On the other hand, getting "old" is a reality... (Psalm 37:25)

Imagine

...because we know we are going to die one day (Eccl 9:2)

2. Why might we fear old age?

Psalm 71:9-11

- Worried about the loss of former strength

*“Do not cast me off when I am old;
do not forsake me when my strength is gone” (71:9)*

- Worried his troubles will not go away

*“For my enemies speak against me;
those who wait to me conspire together.
They say, “God has forsaken him;
pursue him and seize him...” (71:10-11a)*

- Worried about being alone

“...for no one will rescue him.” (71:11b)

Other common fears¹:

- Regret
- the stripping away of so much which once gave identity – career, phases one and two of parenthood, appearance, possession, recognition
- having to grieve more – multiple bereavements
- despair at being useful
- disproportionate concern with comfort and well-being
- narrowing of horizons
- children who don't believe
- loss of interest in things and appetite for life
- unforgiveness
- anger at the world being out of our control

¹ This list is provided by the theologian David Field, and cited in Ian Knox, *Finishing Well*.

3. How might people often respond to the process of ageing?

- a) Denial

- b) Resignation

- c) Selfish living

The better (biblical) response?

Back to Psalm 71...

For we have the promise of Isaiah 46:4

*Even to your old age and gray hairs
I am he, I am he who will sustain you.
I have made you and I will carry you;
I will sustain you and I will rescue you.*

So how can we grow old well, in a manner that is pleasing to God?

4. Ageing in Scripture

Angle 1: A biblical survey

Get into little groups, and look at the following verses. Then answer this question: In these verses, what is old age associated with? How do these verses imagine or conceive of the experience of old age?

- Job 12:12, 1 Kings 12:6-16, Proverbs 3:1-2
- Prov. 16:31, Lev. 19:32, 1 Tim. 5:1-2
- Psalm 92:12-14, Titus 2:2
- Ecclesiastes 12:1-8
- Numbers 8:25-26
- Psalm 71:9

Painting a particular picture for us:

+ve

-ve

Angle 2: Biblical characters

Luke's Gospel

John's Gospel

Paul

Angle 3: The life and death of Jesus himself

- i. Consider that Jesus died _____, which reminds us _____ is more important than _____.
- ii. Consider that later life might actually be the most _____ portion of your life.
- iii. Consider the _____ of Christ himself

It is

- The wisdom of God (1 Cor. 1)
- The glory of Christ (John 12)
- A place of honour (Phil 2:5-11)
- Weakness (1 Cor. 1)

Which means our old age can be....

Biblical/Theological summary and synthesis so far

1. Aging is natural
2. Aging is not glamourized
3. It should be an honour to be aged
4. Simply being old, however, doesn't automatically make someone honourable
5. A. Therefore, older people should strive especially to be exemplary in faith.
B. The ultimate way to do so is by living a cross-shaped life
C. The time to prepare for old age is now.
6. On the flipside, nowhere in the Bible are people pitied or patronized simply because they are old.

5. How then, should we run the last laps of our race?

Hebrews 12:1-3

LAP 1: Post-retirement

Preliminaries:

- Don't live your remaining years in contented selfishness.
- As far as possible, prepare well before you hit this stage

How you can run this lap well

- Pray
- Pass down the faith (Ps. 71:8, 145:3), by
 - Investing in intergenerational friendship and encouragement
 - Offering life wisdom in a non-judgmental way
 - Setting a life example
 - Displaying hopefulness
 - Leaving behind a legacy
- Continue in discipling and serving

We sometimes "behave as though spiritual gifts and ministry skills wither with age. But they don't; what happens, rather, is that they atrophy with disuse."

- J.I Packer

- Continue in learning and obeying

LAP 2: Preparing for the finishing line

“One thing I have learned is that dying well is rarely a coincidence. Rather it results from choices made throughout life. After all, dying well is nothing more than living well right up till the end.”

– John Dunlop

ACCEPTANCE

BELIEVE (afresh for renewed growth)

Sanctify, O Lord, the sickness of your servant N, that the sense of his weakness may add strength to his faith and seriousness to his repentance; and grant that he may live with you in everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

(‘For the Sanctification of Illness’)

Seek CONTENTMENT and CLOSURE

It’s ok to be DEPENDENT

“I sometimes hear old people, including Christian people who should know better, say, ‘I don’t want to be a burden to anyone else. I’m happy to carry on living so long as I can look after myself, but as soon as I become a burden I would rather die.’ But this is wrong. We are all designed to be a burden to others. You are designed to be a burden to me and I am designed to be a burden to you. And the life of the family, including the life of the local church family, should be one of ‘mutual burdensomeness.’ ‘Carry each other’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfill the law of Christ’ (Galatians 6:2).”

– John Stott

EMBRACE Letting go as you FOCUS on the FINISHING LINE

If life means Christ to us, then death....

“Life well-spent is long” – attributed to Leonardo Da Vinci

Materials used for preparation of this seminar/further consultation

- Talks by theologians Garry Williams and David Field
- Richard Hays, ‘The Christian Practice of Growing Old: The Witness of Scripture’
- Ian Knox, *Finishing Well*
- John Wyatt, *Dying Well*
- J.I Packer, *Finishing our Course with Joy*
- John Piper, “Not Dead Yet: Fighting Nine Fears of Old Age”,
<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/not-dead-yet>
- John Stott, chapters 7-8, ‘Dependence’; “Death” in *The Radical Disciple*
- Peter Maiden, *Radical Gratitude*
- Derek Prime, *A Good Old Age*
- Will Willimon, *Aging*