



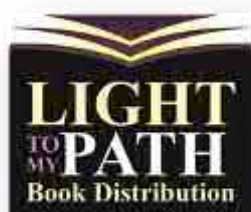
A Biblical Perspective on Aging

**What the Bible
Teaches About
Growing Old
and Our
Responsibility
Toward the Aged**

F. WAYNE MAC LEOD

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Preface

Being old is not something any of us wants to admit to. Old age brings a unique set of problems as we watch our bodies and minds no longer respond in the way they once did. It is easy to feel helpless and frustrated as we find ourselves slowing down and pulling out of activities we once enjoyed. It is also easy for some societies to push aside the elderly and not respect them for their many years.

What does the Bible say about aging? What are the promises of God to those who find themselves in this phase of life? What are our God-given responsibilities toward the aged? Does old-age mean that we are no longer useful in society and church? What are the challenges of old age? These are some of the questions we will touch on in this study.

This is not self-help book nor is it psychological in nature. This is a simple Bible study on the theme of aging. The Bible speaks openly about this subject. It is my goal to examine the Bible's perspective on aging and the aged. I trust that this study will be a blessing to those who are old. I trust it will also be a challenge to them to share the wisdom of God with the younger generation. I trust also that it will be an exhortation to the younger generation to learn to respect and draw from the vast resource of wisdom and experience we have in the older people around us.

We need the elderly in our churches. We need to tap into the wisdom and experience they offer. May the Lord be pleased to use this simple reflection on aging to bring encouragement and blessing to those in the middle of it. May he also use it to stimulate the body of Christ to a deeper respect and focus on the needs of the elderly in our society today.

God bless,

F. Wayne MacLeod

Chapter 1 -

Am I Old?

What is old age? In some cultures, this is a sensitive question. This is particularly true if the culture does not value those who have reached this stage. Old age can be a difficult time in life. I have spoken with many who have struggled with not being able to do what they used to do. Accepting the changes old age brings is not easy. We can feel unproductive and useless. We can find ourselves depending on other people to help us accomplish the necessities of life. Having people help us bathe and get dressed is a reminder of our weakness and frailty and can be very humbling. Watching our bodies weaken can be discouraging. Old age, however, is an inescapable reality for many of us. Unless the Lord takes us in the prime of life or He returns, it will be a certainty.

I have met many who have refused to acknowledge they are old. They see it as a sign of defeat –as if old age was an enemy. We speak about “getting old” but find it difficult to admit we are old. We speak of old age as we speak about a disease. The symptoms of this disease are numerous. We see a person of advanced years who can no longer hear or see well and whose mind is forgetful and say, “he’s old.” If we have full use of our faculties we do not see ourselves as old. Old age, however, is not a disease. It is a normal part of life.

We speak about “keeping young,” but this does not change the number of years we have been on this earth. Old age is not defined by how healthy or unhealthy we are. Deuteronomy 34:7 says this about Moses:

7 Moses was 120 years old when he died. His eye was undimmed and his vigour unabated. (Deuteronomy 34)

To the very end of his life, Moses was full of energy. He was healthy and full of life but according to Deuteronomy 34:7 he was “old” when he died. While our definition of old age may differ from culture to culture, my concern in this study is to examine what the Bible says on this important subject.

As we look at the book of Genesis, the concept of old age is constantly changing. Genesis 5 gives us a list of ten important men from Adam to Noah. The average lifespan of these men was 907 years. Methuselah was 187 years old when he began his family (Genesis 5:25). He would live another 782 years to see that family grow and have children.

Genesis 6, however, recounts the story of increasing corruption and sin on the earth. God determined that He would cut the lifespan of humankind from 907 years to 120:

3 Then the LORD said, “My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh; his days shall be 120 years.” (Genesis 6)

This decrease in lifespan did not happen immediately. Genesis 11 gives us a list of 8 descendants of Noah up to the time of Abraham. What is striking about this list is that

the lifespan of these men continually decreased from generation to generation. Shem, the son of Noah lived for 600 years (Genesis 11:10). Terah, the father of Abraham, however, died at the age of 205 (Genesis 11:32). The average lifespan after the flood to the days of Abraham was 394. Every son could expect to live at least 60 years less than his father.

By the time we get to the David, this lifespan had further decreased from the 120 years promised in Genesis 11 to 70 years.

The year of our life are seventy,
or even by reason of strength eighty;
yet their span is but toil and trouble;
they are soon gone, and we fly away. (Psalm
90:10)

The Psalmist expected to live seventy or eighty years before he died. While some may live longer than this, this is generally the number of years we have on this earth. From the 907 average before the flood to a mere seventy or eighty today, the lifespan of human kind has dramatically decreased. What was old before the flood is unheard of in our day.

In Numbers 8, when the life expectancy was about 120 years, God gave this command to the Levites (the temple servants):

23 And the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, 24 "This applies to the Levites: from twenty-five years old and upward they shall come to do duty in the service of the tent of meeting. 25 And from the age of fifty years they shall withdraw from the duty of the service and serve no more. 26 They minister to

their brothers in the tent of meeting by keeping guard, but they shall do no service. Thus shall you do to the Levites in assigning their duties.” (Numbers 8)

It was the command of the Lord that the Levites retire from full service at the age of 50. This retirement did not remove them from all responsibilities but they were no longer responsible for carrying the heavy articles of the tabernacle as it moved from place to place in the wilderness. This hard work was handed over to the younger people. Those over the age of 50 were then given the task of supervising their younger brothers in the work.

The Levites, above fifty years of age, might superintend and assist their junior brethren in the ordinary offices, and give them and the people counsel and instruction; but they were exempted from carrying the tabernacle and from other laborious services. (The Treasury of Scripture Knowledge, Laridian: Cedar Rapids, Iowa, comments on Numbers 8:25)

What is important for us to see here is that the Lord God recognized that the body of a 50-year-old was not as strong and resilient as that of a younger body. He made provision for this and commanded that all the heavy work be done by those who were younger. The Creator of the human body, knows what that body can do. He is fully aware of the growing weakness in that body. The challenge, for us, however, is to accept this reality ourselves.

In Leviticus 19:32, the Lord commanded His people to respect those who were gray haired and old by standing up in their presence:

32 You shall stand up before the gray head and honour the face of the old man, and you shall fear your God: I am the Lord (Leviticus 19)

We will examine this verse in another context later in this study. For now, however, notice that God speaks here and commands His people to stand up before the presence of the gray head and honour the face of the old man. Scripture speaks directly about old age. God calls those who have reached a certain age "gray haired and old." To call someone old, in some cultures, is insulting. The Scripture does not see old age in this way. God commands the younger to stand up when an old person enters the room and to honour those who had reached an age where their hair has turned gray. Commenting on this passage the commentator John Gill states:

Thou shall rise up before the hoary head ... Or "before old age" which may be discerned by the hoary or grey hairs upon the head; that is before the grey-headed man, or an old man, and one was reckoned so when he was of seventy years of age; for so it is said, one of sixty years is arrived to old age, and one of seventy to grey hairs. Fagius relates, that according to the tradition of the Hebrews a young man was obligated to rise up when an ancient man was at the distance of four cubits from him, and to sit down again as soon as he had passed by him, that it might appear it was done in honour of him. (Gill, John, John Gill's Exposition of the Entire Bible: Laridian: Cedar Rapids, Iowa, 2013, Comments on Leviticus 19:32)

The important Jewish work, The Ethics of the Fathers (Pirkei Avoth), speaking about the various stages of life says:

22. ... Five years is the age for the study of Scripture. Ten, for the study of Mishnah. Thirteen, for the obligation to observe the mitzvot. Fifteen, for the study of Talmud. Eighteen, for marriage. Twenty, to pursue [a livelihood]. Thirty, for strength. Forty, for understanding. Fifty, for counsel. Sixty, for sagacity. Seventy, for elderliness. Eighty, for power. Ninety, to stoop. A hundred-year-old is as one who has died and passed away and has been negated from the world. (The Ethics of the Fathers (Pirkei Avot), Chapter 5, section 22, http://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/680274/jewish/Ethics-of-the-Fathers-Pirkei-Avot.htm)

Notice that the age of 50 was the age for giving counsel. This corresponds with the law of God requiring the Levite to retire from hard physical work and act as a supervisor for his younger brothers. According to Jewish tradition, the age of sixty was a time of “sagacity” or discernment. Years of experience made these individuals keen and discerning about life in general. By the time a person arrived at the age of seventy he or she was considered elderly.

What do we need to understand here? First, God has only given us a certain amount of time on this earth. On an average, Psalm 90:10 tells us that we can expect to live seventy or eighty years.

Second, God understands that in the final years of our life we will not have the physical ability we once had. He made provision for this in His law and expected that those who arrived at the age of fifty would begin to make the adjustments necessary. This is how God created us. We need also to recognize our limitations as we age.

Third, while God did not expect the Levites of 50 years and above to be as physically strong as their younger brothers, he still had a role for them to play. They were to supervise and share the wisdom and understanding gained by their years.

Fourth, notice that God has no hesitation in calling people old. "Honour the face of the old man" He told His people in Leviticus 19:32. From God's perspective, being old is not a shame but an honour. To fear old age or to treat it like a disease is to dishonour the Creator.

Generally, we have a total of seventy or eighty years to live. As we reach the age of 50 and 60 we begin to realize that we are in our final years. While there may still be plenty more strength left, we do understand that there is a limit to what we can achieve. Being old does not mean being unproductive. For some, these are the most productive years of their life. The years of experiences, have given wisdom and discernment. They have chipped away unrealistic goals and plans and made us more focused. They have shaped us in ways that make us more effective. Old age, is a badge of honour not a disease. The declining body is not who we really are. It is merely an aging shell that houses the wisdom of years.

For Consideration:

- Is it possible for us to treat old age as a disease? How is it different from a disease?
- Do you fear old age? What do you fear about it?

- What are the challenges of old age?
- What are the benefits that come with old age? What is the connection between old age and wisdom?
- Have we been able to tap into the wisdom of old age in our churches and society?
- What did the Bible require a younger person to do in the presence of an old man or woman? How do we show respect for the aged today?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to give you grace to accept old age.
- Take a moment to pray for the aged in your community. Thank the Lord for their role and influence.
- Ask God to give your church a deeper respect and appreciation for the aged in your midst.
- Ask God to help you to understand how you can encourage and minister to the elderly in your community.

Chapter 2 - Effects of Old Age on the Body

The Bible does not hide the fact that old age will take its toll on the human body. In fact, it speaks quite openly about this.

One of the first references to the effect of old age on the physical body comes in Genesis 18. In this chapter, an angel came to visit Abraham with a message from the Lord. He told Abraham that by the same time the next year, Sarah, his wife, would give birth to a son (Genesis 18:10). Genesis 18:18 makes it quite clear that Abraham and Sarah were old when they received this message:

11 Now Abraham and Sarah were old, advanced in years. The way of woman had ceased to be with Sarah. (Genesis 18)

One of the symptoms of old age was that Sarah could no longer have any children. Notice the response of Sarah to the words of the angel:

12 So Sarah laughed to herself, saying, "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?" (Genesis 18)

Sarah understood the effects of old age on her body. She saw herself as being worn out. She could not imagine being able to conceive a child, carry him to term and have the pleasure and strength to raise him.

Genesis 27 speaks about the effects of old age on Isaac, the son born to Abraham and Sarah in their later years:

1 When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called Esau his older son and said to him, "My son"; and he answered, "Here I am." (Genesis 27)

Genesis 27:1 tells us that when Isaac grew old, his eyesight became very poor. His eyes are described here as dim. The Hebrew word used here for "dim" has the meaning of becoming dull, darkened or weak. Isaac's eyes failed him in his old age.

What was true of Isaac was also true for many other Biblical characters. 1 Samuel 4:15 tells us about the priest Eli:

15 Now Eli was ninety-eight years old and his eyes were set so that he could not see. (1 Samuel 4:15)

Notice the connection between Eli's old age and the fact that he could not see. It appears that it was his age that stripped him of his sight.

Joseph's father Israel, suffered from the same issue in his old age. When Joseph brought his sons to his father to be blessed, Israel had to ask him who they were (Genesis 48:8). Genesis 48:10 tells us the reason for this:

10 Now the eyes of Israel were dim with age, so that he could not see. (Genesis 48)

It is quite clear from this that the cause of this blindness was the age of Israel –his eyes were “dim with age.”

King Ahijah experienced this loss of sight in his old age as well. We read in 1 Kings 14:4:

4 ... Now Ahijah could not see, for his eyes were dim because of his age. (1 Kings 14)

This, loss of eyesight is, however, not the only effect of age on the body. In 2 Samuel 19 we read the story of how King David returned to the city of Jerusalem after having been forced to flee because of the revolt of his son Absalom. During this time of flight, a rich man by the name of Barzillai provided David and his men with food and provisions:

32 Barzillai was a very aged man, eighty years old. He provided the king with food while he stayed at Mahanaim, for he was a very wealthy man. (2 Samuel 19)

It is significant to note here the phrase, “Barzillai was a very aged man, eighty years old.” Scripture viewed this man of eighty as being “very aged.” While Barzillai was very aged, he still had a ministry to David and his men. He supplied them with food and supplies during this difficult time in exile.

David recognized the support Barzillai had offered him and wanted to reward him for his compassion in this time of his need. He offered to have Barzillai brought to Jerusalem where he would provide for him for the remaining years of

his life. The response of Barzillai to David is important in the context of this study:

34 But Barzillai said to the king, "How many years have I still to live, that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem? 35 I am this day eighty years old. Can I discern what is pleasant and what is not? Can your servant taste what he eats or what he drinks? Can I still listen to the voice of singing men and singing women? Why then should your servant be an added burden to my lord the king? (2 Samuel 19)

Barzillai's response helps us to see the effect of old age on his body. Old age had stripped him of the ability to enjoy some of the very basic pleasures of life. He was not able to enjoy the taste of his food and drink. He could not enjoy the sound of singing for his ears were failing him. Barzillai refused to go with David to Jerusalem because he felt that in his old age he would no longer truly enjoy the pleasures David wanted to offer him. He was content to remain where he was – where everything was familiar and life was simple.

In 1 Kings 1 we read about David in his old age:

1 Now King David was old and advanced in years. And although they covered him with clothes, he could not get warm. 2 Therefore his servants said to him, "Let a young woman be sought for my lord the king, and let her wait on the king and be in his service. Let her lie in your arms, that my lord the king may be warm." 3 So they sought for a beautiful young woman throughout all the territory of Israel, and found Abishag the Shunammite, and brought her to the king. 4 The young woman was very

beautiful, and she was of service to the king and attended to him, but the king knew her not.

One of the effects of old age on David was that he could not keep warm. Even when they covered him with clothes he could not get warm. Notice, that the verse says, “they covered him with clothes.” It appears that other people were dressing him in these clothes. Was he unable, at this time to do this himself? We are not told. What is clear is that his servants were helping him with this dressing. The only way they could keep David warm was to find a young virgin to lay in his arms so that her body heat might warm him. They searched throughout the kingdom of Israel for a beautiful woman to serve the king in this way. What is important to note here is that 1 Kings 1:4 tells us that though she slept in his arms, the king never had a sexual relationship with her. In his old age, this sexual drive appears to have been stripped from him.

Probably one of the most powerful descriptions of the effect of old age on the body comes from the book of Ecclesiastes.

1 Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, “I have no pleasure in them”; 2 before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain, 3 in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed, 4 and the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low— 5 they are afraid also of what is

high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets— 6 before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, 7 and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. (Ecclesiastes 12)

Let's take a moment to consider what the writer of this passage is saying. The context of Ecclesiastes 12 is a challenge to the youth of the day to remember their Creator. The writer tells these youths that there were evil days coming. The term evil does not refer to something sinful so much as days of difficulty and trial. He goes on to describe these evil days.

These will be days, the writer says when you will say, "I have no pleasure in them" (verse 1). This is reality is what Barzillai said to David, when he said:

35 I am this day eighty years old. Can I discern what is pleasant and what is not? Can your servant taste what he eats or what he drinks? Can I still listen to the voice of singing men and singing women? (2 Samuel 19)

The day was coming for the youths of Solomon's day when the pleasures of their youth would be taken from them and they would no longer desire them. This was also the experience of Sarah in Genesis 18:

12 "After I am worn out, and my lord is old, shall I have pleasure?" (Genesis 18)

Beyond the loss of these pleasures in life, the writer of the Ecclesiastes goes on to describe a day when the sun and the light of the moon and stars would be darkened and the clouds would cover the sky (verse 2). The picture here reminds us of the description of the eyesight of Israel in his old age. His eyes grew dim so that the light of the sun was darkened and his eyes were covered in clouds so that he could not see.

The writer to the Ecclesiastes continues his description of these “evil” days in verse 3 where he tells the youth of his day that the keepers of the house trembled, the strong would be bent, the grinders ceased because they were few and those who looked through the windows would be dimmed. Notice what is happening here. If this is a description of the effects of old age on the body, we see that what used to be bold now trembles. What used to be strong is now bent over. The teeth (the grinders) that used to grind food have cease to work because they are few. The eyes that look out the window are now dimmed and do not see very well.

In verse 4, the writer describes the doors on the street as being shut as the world of the aged becomes smaller, fearful of venturing out too far. The sound of grinding is low because of the loss of hearing. Rising early in the morning at the sound of the birds becomes normal for sleep no longer comes easy. The daughters of song are brought low either because they are unable to sing or because they cannot be heard.

Fears begin to take over. Verse 5 describes the fear of heights. It also describes “terrors along the way.” With the aging process, the weakening of the body and the loss of mental sharpness, these fears are normal. What used to be so easy now becomes fearful.

Notice also in verse 5 the reference to the almond tree blossoms. These blossoms were white in colour and may refer to the whitening of the hair with age. Verse 5 also describes a grasshopper dragging itself along. What was so full of energy and strength now can barely drag itself from one place to another.

Verse 6 paints a picture of a snapped silver cord, a broken golden bowl, a pitcher shattered and a wheel broken at the well. The reference to gold and silver refers to the value of these objects. These valuable objects, however, now have been broken. The pitcher and the wheel were used for drawing water out of the well. They have a very specific purpose and were very useful for those who came to the well. That usefulness, however, is shattered and the ability of these objects to function as they once did is no longer.

Notice eventually what happens in verse 7. The dust returns to the earth. These bodies were made from the dust of the earth and to the dust they will return. The soul, however returns to God where it will remain. This is the great hope we have in our old age. While the body may weaken and eventually return to the earth, the soul of those who know the Lord will enter the presence of the Saviour and God.

The Bible makes it very clear that the body in which we dwell will age and deteriorate with age. In a sense, it is God's way of weaning us from this world and the attractions of this world. It is God's way of preparing us for something even greater. As our body declines with age, we begin to look forward to the day when we will enter the presence of the Lord and be freed from this sinful earth and its limitations. The aging of the body is a sign of better things to come for those who know the Lord.

For Consideration:

- What are the effects of old age on the body?
- What are the challenges for the elderly as they watch their bodies break down emotionally and physically?
- How can we prepare spiritually and emotionally for the effects of old age on the body?
- What can we do to help those whose emotional and physical strength is not what it once was?
- Is it possible to become bitter and frustrated because our bodies do not allow us to do what we would like to do? How do we deal with this before God?

For Prayer:

- Are you suffering from the physical and emotional effects of aging? Ask God to show you how He would have you respond to these symptoms.
- Ask God to forgive you for any grumbling and complaining you may have done because of your age. Thank the Lord that while this is often a difficult stage of life, it is all in His purpose for us. Thank Him that He is still in control.

- Do you have relatives or friends who are suffering the effects of old age? Ask the Lord to show you how you can be a blessing to them?

Chapter 3 - The Honour Due to the Aged

Scripture has some important things to tell us about our responsibility to honour the aged. In fact, those who have advanced in years, according to Scripture, are worthy of special respect. The Law of Moses required that people stand up in the presence of the elderly:

32 You shall stand up before the gray head and honour the face of the old man, and you shall fear your God: I am LORD. (Leviticus 19)

Commenting on this the commentator John Gill says:

Fagius relates, that according to the tradition of the Hebrews a young man was obligated to rise up when an ancient man was at the distance of four cubits from him, and to sit down again as soon as he had passed by him, that it might appear it was done in honour of him. (Gill, John, John Gills Exposition of the Entire Bible: "Leviticus 19:32", Cedar Rapids: Laridian Inc. 2013)

According to Gill, Hebrew tradition required that a young man rise to a standing position when an older man came

within 6 feet or 1.8 metres of him and only sit down again when he passed by. This was done to show respect for his age.

We have an example of this respect for the aged in 1 Kings 2. In this passage, Bathsheba enters the presence of King Solomon.

19 So Bathsheba went to King Solomon to speak to him on behalf of Adonijah. And the king rose to meet her and bowed down to her. Then he sat on his throne and had a seat brought for the king's mother, and she sat on his right. (1 Kings 2)

Solomon is the king of Israel at this point. He occupies the highest position in the land. People who came before him would bow in respect for him and his position. Notice, however, what takes place when his aged mother enters his presence. Solomon "rose to meet her". He stood up in her presence to honour her as an old woman and his mother. Notice also that he bowed down to her. The king of Israel, to whom all Israel would bow, now bows down in the presence of this aged woman to honour her. Only then did Solomon sit back down on his throne as king. Solomon, however, refused to let his mother continue to stand in his presence. He ordered that a seat be brought for her. This was not normal procedure for those who came into the presence of the king. Solomon, however, respected her age and position and so had a chair brought for her. Notice finally, where Solomon placed that chair. Bathsheba sat on his right. By placing her on his right side, Solomon again was giving her a place of honour. King Solomon, demonstrates every courtesy and respect for his aged mother.

What is true of actions, is also true for words. When Timothy was a young pastor, the apostle Paul had these words to say to him:

1 Do not rebuke an elder man but encourage him as you would a father (1 Timothy 5)

While Paul commissioned Timothy as a pastor and Christian leader, he challenged him to show great respect and discipline when it came to dealing with older men. Timothy was to be careful in how he spoke to these elder men in his congregation. He was to say nothing that would show disrespect for them and their age.

This respect for the elderly and how we speak about them or to them is illustrated in the book of Job. Job's friends had gathered around him and were discussing the reason for his pain and suffering. There was a disagreement among them over why God had stripped Job of everything he had. Among those present that day was a younger man by the name of Elihu who had been listening to the words of Job's older friends. Elihu is somewhat frustrated when the older men were not coming up with the answer to Job's suffering. In Job 32:6-7 he speaks:

6 And Elihu the son of Barachel the Buzite answered and said:

"I am young in years,
and you are aged;
therefore I was timid and afraid
to declare my opinion to you
7 I said, 'Let days speak,
and many years teach wisdom ... (Job 32)

The words of Elihu show us how he was thinking. He recognized the age of those who spoke to Job. He was timid and afraid to declare his opinion before such aged and wise men. He understood that their length of days had brought them wisdom and insight. He did not want to interrupt them because he felt that their wisdom was vastly superior to his. While Elihu does eventually interrupt these men and speak his mind, we see the attitude of his heart and the desire he had to listen to the wisdom of these aged men. He was not quick to rebuke them but gave careful thought to what he was going to say lest he showed any disrespect.

In 1 Peter 5, the apostle commanded younger people to be subject to the elders.

5 Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. (1 Peter 5)

The elders spoken of here are not just those who had the position of elder in the church but also those who were of a certain age. Peter expected that the enthusiasm of youth would be held in subjection to the wisdom of age. This required that the old and the young work together in harmony. Enthusiasm without wisdom can lead to great disaster. Wisdom without the enthusiasm and strength of youth can lead to nothing being accomplished. We need each other if we are to advance the cause of Christ.

Paul challenged the older women to teach younger women in Titus 2:3-5 when he said:

3 Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, 4 and so train the young women to love their husbands and children,

5 to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled. (Titus 2)

We will examine this passage again in another context but for now what is important for us to note is that Paul is challenging the older women to use their years of experience as wives and mothers to encourage the younger women. This meant that younger women needed to listen to these older women and their advice. They were to respect the God-given role of the older women in counsel and teaching. They were to honour these women because of their age, wisdom and experience.

How easy it would be for these younger women to say: "Times have changed. These old grandmothers don't really understand what we need to do today." Paul reminds these young wives, however, that years of experience cannot be tossed away in an instant. These grandmothers had much to teach them and they would do well to listen to their advice –this required an open mind and a willingness to listen and submit to the advice of these old women.

While there are other passages of Scripture that speak to this matter of honouring the aged among us, what we have examined here is sufficient for us to understand that Scripture requires that we respect those among us who are advanced in years. This respect comes because of their many years of service and the wisdom that has been attained by those years.

The Scriptural passages we have examined in this chapter required that God's people honour the elderly among them in three ways.

First, they were to honour them by standing in their presence. They were to pay physical respect to the elderly. This physical respect can be shown in different ways. The question we need to ask ourselves is this: Have we become lazy and disrespectful in how we treat the elderly in our midst? Solomon, offered his mother a chair as a sign of physical respect for her, her age and position. Whether it is rising up in the presence of the elderly or offering a helping hand, if we are to honour the aged, it will require a physical effort of some kind on our part.

Second, the elderly are to be honoured by the words we speak to them or about them. Paul told Timothy not to rebuke an old man. I have been in the presence of people who have demeaned the elderly by their words. When they take longer than expected to get dressed or to walk somewhere, I have heard people speak impatient words to the elderly. When their memory begins to fade and they repeat themselves, I have seen children become angry with their parents for repeating themselves. Honouring the aged requires that we watch what we say or how we speak to them or about them.

Finally, the aged are to be honoured by the way we listen to their advice and counsel. Paul instructed the older women to teach the younger women. Age is a vast pool of wisdom that we need to tap into. The younger women of Paul's day were to spend time with the older women and listen to their advice. The younger men were to submit themselves to the counsel of the older men.

How often have we repeated the errors of the past simply because we have refused to listen to the people who have lived through these errors. If we are going to show honour to the aged, we need to respect their counsel. We need to understand that they have much wisdom and teaching to

offer. Their God-given experiences has taught them much. They have been through what we are struggling with now and have much insight into what it takes to come out the other side unscathed. We would do well to honour their wisdom.

For Consideration:

- Does your society show respect for the elderly? Explain.
- Consider how you speak personally to the elderly people close to you? Do your words demonstrate impatience and disrespect for their age?
- Have we tapped into the wisdom of the aged among us? Has your church benefitted from the experience and wisdom of the older members? Are we doomed to repeat the same errors of past generations because we are not listening to the experiences of the elderly?
- Does the fact that our culture has changed mean that the wisdom of the elderly is irrelevant today? Explain.

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to show you if there is any way that we have abandoned the elderly among us and lack respect for them and their contribution.

- Ask the Lord to show you how you can tap into the wisdom and experience of the older people in your church.
- Take a moment to thank the Lord for the years of service the elderly people in your midst have had in your church and community. Ask God to continue to bless them in their old age.

Chapter 4 - Responsibility Toward the Aged

In the last chapter, we saw the Biblical requirement to honour the aged. This honouring of the elderly places us under a certain responsibility. Scripture is clear that those who walk with the Lord must take this responsibility seriously.

As we begin, listen to the prayer of the psalmist in Psalm 71:

9 Do not cast me off in the time of old age;
forsake me not when my strength is spent. (Psalm 71)

The prayer of the psalmist reflects a deep fear in his heart. It is the fear that he would be forgotten and cast off in his old age. While this prayer is directed to God, it is the fear of many who reach their final years on this earth. In the hour of their greatest need, many of our elderly find themselves alone and lonely. When they need support and help, there is no one to walk with them.

While Psalm 71:9 is the prayer of an aging man, it is nonetheless a warning to us. It is a reminder to us of the needs

of the elderly in our midst and their cry for support and encouragement. We are the hands and legs that God will use to be the answer to the cry of the psalmist. We need to be ready and willing for God to use us to be the answer to their prayer.

In the Old Testament book of Ruth, we have an example of a young girl who demonstrated what it meant to care for her aging mother-in-law.

Naomi lived with her husband in the country of Moab. They had moved there from Israel during the time of a great famine in their homeland. They had two sons. Naomi's husband died when they were in Moab and she was left to raise her sons by herself. Her sons grew up and married Moabite women. Eventually, both of these sons also died and Naomi was left with only two daughters-in-law. Unable to provide for them, she decided that her only course of action was to return to Israel where she would live out the rest of her days. She told her daughters-in-law to return to their families where they would receive the support and care they needed.

One of these daughters-in-law, however, refused to leave Naomi. Ruth chose to leave her nation and return with Naomi to Israel where she would stay with her and care for her in her old age. Returning with Naomi to Bethlehem, Ruth would go out into the barley fields and glean what was left after the harvesters had finished. She would return with the barley and, in this way, provided for her mother-in-law. Eventually, Ruth married and bore a son to carry on the name of her husband's family. The care of Ruth for her mother-in-law in her old age did not go unnoticed by the inhabitants of Bethlehem. Listen to the words of the women in the community in Ruth 4:

14 Then the women said to Naomi, "Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! 15 He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you, who is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him." (Ruth 4)

The women in the community were profoundly touched by the example of Ruth and her care for her aging mother-in-law. They spoke of her as a daughter-in-law who loved Naomi and was more to her than any son could ever have been. Naomi was not cast off in her old age or forsaken when her strength was failing. God gave her a daughter-in-law who cared for her and provided for her in every way imaginable. Ruth is a wonderful example of one who honoured her aging mother-in-law.

In Matthew 15, Jesus condemns the Pharisees for using the law to their own benefit and abandoning their responsibility to honour their aging parents:

4 For God commanded, 'Honor your father and your mother,' and, 'Whoever reviles father or mother must surely die.' 5 But you say, 'If anyone tells his father or his mother, "What you would have gained from me is given to God," 6 he need not honor his father.' So for the sake of your tradition you have made void the word of God. 7 You hypocrites! Well did Isaiah prophesy of you, when he said:

8 "This people honors me with their lips,
but their heart is far from me;
9 in vain do they worship me,

teaching as doctrines the commandments of men.” (Matthew 15)

Notice what is happening here. The Pharisee had aging parents. These parents were dependant on him for the necessities of life. The Pharisee, however, instead of providing for his parents, dedicates the money to God and tells his parents that he had nothing to give them. In doing, so he neglects his duty toward his aging parents.

What is important for us to note in this passage is the response of Jesus to this practice. He told these Pharisees that they had made “void” the word of God (verse 6) –in other words, they completely ignored the teaching of Scripture and their sacred obligation toward their parents in need. He called them hypocrites (verse 7). He reminded them of the words of Isaiah who spoke to a people who honoured God with their lips but whose heart was very far from God. He went as far as to say that they were teaching the commandments of man and not the commandments of God.

This practice of devoting money to God when they had parents in need, was not from God. God expected these religious leaders to use their resources to care for the aged among them. The apostle James would express this concept in these words:

27 Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world. (James 1)

The faith that God requires is a practical one. It is a faith that sees the needs around us and does what it can to minister to those needs. To give everything to the church

and ignore the needs of the elderly in your own family is contrary to the will of God.

In 1 Timothy 5, the apostle Paul speaks to Timothy about how to care for the widows in the church. In this chapter, he gives Timothy some important instructions in dealing with this group of aging women in the community.

Paul begins by telling Timothy that it was the duty of every Christian family to minister to the needs of the widows in their family:

3 Honor widows who are truly widows. 4 But if a widow has children or grandchildren, let them first learn to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God. (1 Timothy 5)

Notice in verse 4 that Paul told Timothy that those households who had widows in them were to “show godliness to their own household and make some return to their parents”. That return was in the form of provision and compassion in their need. To show compassion and provide for the needs of these widows was an act of godliness that was “pleasing in the sight of God.” It was the spiritual obligation of every Christian family to provide for the needs of the aging widows among them. Paul would go on to tell Timothy that those who refused to do so had denied the faith:

8 But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for the members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. (1 Timothy 5)

These are powerful words but they show us just how important this matter is to the Lord God.

Paul would go on in 1 Timothy 5 to tell Timothy that the church also had an obligation toward widows who were over the age of sixty.

9 Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, 10 and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work. (1 Timothy 5)

It appears from 1 Timothy 5:9 that the early church had a list of widows over sixty years of age needing support. These women were at an age where it would not have been easy for them to provide for their own needs. Obviously, also they were without family to care for them and so the church took this on as a spiritual obligation. With only a certain amount of resources available to them, the church required that these women be of good reputation and known for their Christian life and service in the community.

What is clear in this passage is that the church of Paul's day had a plan in place for the care of the aging in their body. First, they encouraged families to care for their own. Where there were no families to care for the aging Christian widows, the church itself would reach out to them and provide for their needs.

What we see here in these verses is that there is a spiritual obligation placed upon a believer to care for those who are aging in their midst. The act of caring for the aged is a

godly activity that is pleasing in the sight of God. To neglect this duty, according to Paul is to deny the faith. To deny our responsibilities by burying ourselves in religious activities was considered by Jesus to be hypocritical, a denial of the Word of God. The care of the aged in our midst is an obligation placed on us by the Word of God. We must not cast them off when they are old or forsake them when their strength is failing.

For Consideration:

- What was the fear of the Psalmist in Psalm 71:9?
- How does Ruth demonstrate her care for her aging mother-in-law?
- How is the care of our elderly relatives a spiritual obligation?
- What did Jesus have to say to those who said that they had devoted their time and resources to God and couldn't care for their elderly parents and relatives?
- What plan did the early church have in place for the care of widows over 60 years of age?
- What ministry does your church have for those who are elderly?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to minister to the fears of the aged among you.
- Ask God to show you if there is something more he would have you to do for aging relatives in your family. Ask Him to show you their needs.
- Ask the Lord to show your church if there is a ministry it can have to the elderly in your community.
- Ask God to forgive you for times when you have not taken this responsibility seriously.

Chapter 5 -

The Sin of Disrespect

Scripture is quite clear about how we are to respect and honour the elderly in our midst. God's people did not always follow this teaching. There were times when they dishonoured the elderly and took advantage of them.

In the last chapter, we examined how the Pharisees would dedicate their money to the Lord and not use it for the care of their aging parents (Matthew 15:4-9). Jesus told these religious leaders that by refusing to care for their parents in the name of their religion they were making void the Word of God. He called them hypocrites for their lack of respect to their aging parents.

This is not the only example of disrespect shown to the aged in the Bible. Another shocking example comes in Genesis 27.

1 When Isaac was old and his eyes were dim so that he could not see, he called Esau his older son and said to him, "My son"; and he answered, "Here I am." 2 He said, "Behold, I am old; I do not know the day of my death. 3 Now then, take your weapons, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me, 4 and prepare for me delicious food, such as I love, and bring it to me so

that I may eat, that my soul may bless you before I die." (Genesis 27)

Notice here that Isaac could no longer see because of his old age (verse 1). Notice also that he knew that the day of his death was coming (verse 2). His desire, before he died, was to bless his eldest son Esau. He asked him to go out and hunt some game so that they could share a meal together and he would give him his blessing before he died.

Rebekah, his wife, was listening when Isaac spoke to his son Esau. As a mother, however, she loved their younger son Jacob and wanted him to receive the blessing instead of his older brother. Hearing what her husband had to say, she contrived a plan. She told Jacob to bring her two young goats. She prepared these goats and giving them to her son told him to bring them to his father, pretending to be Esau, so that he would receive the blessing instead of his elder brother.

Jacob was quite fearful of doing this and expressed his concern to his mother:

11 But Jacob said to Rebekah his mother, "Behold, my brother Esau is a hairy man, and I am a smooth man. 12 Perhaps my father will feel me, and I shall seem to be mocking him and bring a curse upon myself and not a blessing." 13 His mother said to him, "Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my voice, and go, bring them to me." (Genesis 27)

What is important to note is the cause of Jacob's fear and hesitation. He was afraid that his father would discover his lie and curse him instead of giving him a blessing. His fear is about being caught and not about the disrespect toward his father in his blindness and old age.

Encouraged by his mother in this plot, Jacob covered himself with goat skins to give the appearance of being hairy like his brother. He followed through on the deception by lying to his father and stealing the blessing that, by right, should have gone to his brother. Isaac did not know what had happened until the blessing was given and his son Esau returned home with the game he had hunted.

In this example of Genesis 27 we have the story of a wife who willingly deceived her husband and encouraged her son to lie and steal what belonged to his brother. We see Jacob's disrespect for his father Isaac. He took advantage of his father's blindness and inability to taste his food. Jacob would have to live with the reality of what he had done to both his brother and his father.

We have another case of disrespect for the elderly in 1 Kings 12. In this passage, we read the story of King Rehoboam. Under his father, Solomon, the people of Israel felt oppressed and burdened. When Rehoboam came to power, the people asked him to ease the burden they had been feeling under his father Solomon. Rehoboam, asked for time to consider their suggestion.

His first response was to go to the old men in Israel to seek their counsel. These wise old men offered their advice:

6 Then King Rehoboam took counsel with the old men, who had stood before Solomon his father while he was yet alive, saying, "How do you advise me to answer this people?" 7 And they said to him, "If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants forever." (1 Kings 12)

The advice of the old and wise men of the nation was to treat the people with kindness and compassion. They told the king that if he did so, the people would willingly be his servants forever.

1 Kings 12:8 tells us what the response of Rehoboam was to the counsel of these wise old men:

8 But he abandoned the counsel that the old men gave him and took counsel with the young men who had grown up with him and stood before him.
(1 Kings 12)

Rehoboam abandoned the counsel of the old men and chose to consult his young friends instead. These friends advised Rehoboam to be strict and hard on the people, putting them in their place. Rehoboam chose to follow the advice of his friends and informed the people that life under his reign would be even more burdensome than under his father.

The result of this declaration was that all the tribes, except for Judah, abandoned Rehoboam. They chose their own king and set up a separate nation to the north. The newly formed nation of Israel would wander from the Lord and abandon His ways. In showing no respect for the wisdom of these old men, Rehoboam divided his nation and set brother against brother for years to come. Again, this is a decision he would have to live with for the rest of his reign.

In Lamentations 5, the prophet Jeremiah describes the great devastation that had come to the land because of the sins of God's people:

11 Women are raped in Zion,
young women in the towns of Judah.

12 Princes are hung up by their hands;
no respect is shown to the elders.
13 Young men are compelled to grind at the mill,
and boys stagger under loads of wood.
14 The old men have left the city gate,
the young men their music.
15 The joy of our hearts has ceased;
our dancing has been turned to mourning.
(Lamentations 5)

As Jeremiah examines the condition of the nation under the judgement of God, he grieves over many things. Their women had been raped, their leaders were hung, their young men were reduced to slavery, their elders were shown no respect and the old men had left the city gate where they would offer wise counsel to the people of the city.

What is particularly striking in this list of grievances is the inclusion of the elders and old men. Showing no respect to the elders is in the same list as women being raped. The disappearance of the wise counsel of the old men is noted alongside of the reducing of Israel to slavery. For the prophet Jeremiah, the disrespect shown to the elderly in the capture of Israel was a horrendous sin on a par with the raping and enslaving of Israel's young men and women.

The prophet Isaiah speaks about the judgement of Judah and the city of Jerusalem because of their sins in Isaiah 5. In that day, the Lord would withdraw His blessing from them and they would be left on their own. The result would be great devastation and confusion in the land. Isaiah describes this devastation as follows:

1 For behold, the Lord God of hosts
is taking away from Jerusalem and from Judah
support and supply,
all support of bread,
and all support of water;
2 the mighty man and the soldier,
the judge and the prophet,
the diviner and the elder,
3 the captain of fifty
and the man of rank,
the counselor and the skillful magician
and the expert in charms.
4 And I will make boys their princes,
and infants shall rule over them.
5 And the people will oppress one another,
every one his fellow
and every one his neighbor;
the youth will be insolent to the elder,
and the despised to the honorable. (Isaiah 5)

The result of God withdrawing His blessing would be devastating to the nation. The supply of food and water would be cut off leaving the inhabitants of Jerusalem to starve (verse 1). The military would be without strength, leaving the people defenceless against their enemy (verse 2a). The leadership of the nation also would be removed, leaving the people in total confusion (verses 2-4). The result would be total lawlessness as people oppressed each other (verse 5a). Notice also in verse 5 that the “youth will be insolent to the elder.”

Again, it is important that we note that this reference to the disrespect to the elderly is included in a list of terrible events that would take place in the nation. Insolence to the aged is included with the starvation of the people of Jerusalem and the defencelessness of the nation against her

enemies. This cannot go unnoticed. This shows us just how serious a sin this matter of disrespect for the elderly was in the eyes of the Lord.

The question we need to ask ourselves is this: Do we have the same heart as the prophets of old when it comes to the elderly in our society? Do we understand the heart of God toward those who are in their final years? To honour them is to honour their Creator. To dishonour them is to be guilty of very serious sin.

For Consideration:

- How does Jacob show disrespect to his father in his old age? Have you ever taken advantage of an elderly person? Explain.
- Does your society or church respect the wisdom of the elderly or are the elderly seen as being out of touch and old fashioned? How important is it that we not fall into the sin of Rehoboam?
- Are the elderly in your church and society given the honour they deserve or have they been forgotten? How can your church bless the elderly?
- How serious is the disrespect of the elderly according to Scripture?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to be a blessing to the elderly in your community?

- Take a moment to consider the contribution of the elderly in your church and society over the course of their lives. Thank the Lord for them and their contribution.
- Ask the Lord to forgive you for the times when you have become critical and impatient with the elderly in your church, society and family. Ask God to give you grace to be more respectful of them at this time in their lives.

Chapter 6 - The Blessing of God on the Aged

In the last few chapters we have seen how Scripture reminds us of the honour due to the aged and elderly among us. Disrespect for the elderly is listed among the most terrible evils of any society. As we continue to examine this important teaching, I would like to take a moment to consider the promises of God to, and His dealings with the aged.

In the last chapter, we touched on the concern of the Psalmist in Psalm 71 when he prayed:

9 Do not cast me off in the time of old age, forsake me not when my strength is spent. (Psalm 71)

The psalmist experienced a measure of anxiety as he considered getting old. As his body aged and his strength abated, his concern was that the Lord not forsake him at this vulnerable time in his life. God understands these concerns. Scripture reminds us that God will not abandon us in our old age.

In Deuteronomy 34:7 we read about Moses:

7 Moses was 120 years old when he died. His eye was undimmed and his vigour unabated. (Deuteronomy 34)

From the age of eighty, Moses led his people through the wilderness. For forty years, the strength of the Lord was with him, enabling him to accomplish all that he had been called to do.

What was true for Moses was also true for Caleb. After the land of Canaan had been conquered and portions were being allotted to the various tribes and families, Caleb approached Joshua to speak to him about his portion. Listen to his words in Joshua 14:

9 And Moses swore on that day, saying, 'Surely the land on which your foot has trodden shall be an inheritance for you and your children forever, because you have wholly followed the Lord my God.'
10 And now, behold, the Lord has kept me alive, just as he said, these forty-five years since the time that the Lord spoke this word to Moses, while Israel walked in the wilderness. And now, behold, I am this day eighty-five years old. 11 I am still as strong today as I was in the day that Moses sent me; my strength now is as my strength was then, for war and for going and coming. 12 So now give me this hill country of which the Lord spoke on that day, for you heard on that day how the Anakim were there, with great fortified cities. It may be that the Lord will be with me, and I shall drive them out just as the Lord said." (Joshua 14)

Caleb understood that God had a purpose for him. He was giving him a land as an inheritance for him and his children. That land was filled with fortified cities and enemies

who would keep it from them. Caleb approached Joshua, as the leader of the nation to ask permission to obtain the land the Lord God had promised him. Though Caleb was 85 years of age, he told Joshua that he was still as strong as in the days of his youth. He knew that he had not yet seen the fulfilment of God's promise. There was a land to be conquered for his family. While this may likely have been his final great conquest, Caleb, as an old man, was going to use the strength the Lord provided to see the fulfilment of God's purpose for his family.

Speaking to Naomi, in the book of Ruth the women of her day said:

14 ... Blessed be the Lord, who has not left you this day without a redeemer, and may his name be renowned in Israel! 15 He shall be to you a restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age, for your daughter-in-law who loves you is more to you than seven sons, has given birth to him. (Ruth 4)

In her old age, Naomi was left without a husband or sons to carry on the name of her family. The line of her family would have died with her. God, however, had a purpose for Naomi. He had a plan to bring the promised Messiah through her line. When all looked very bleak and hopeless, the Lord moved in her life in a wonderful way. He gave her a daughter-in-law to carry on her family line. The women of Naomi's day saw what had happened and spoke the words quoted above. Notice particularly how they spoke about God being a restorer of life and a nourisher of her old age through the child that was born to her family. In her old age, God restored her hope and gave her renewed life and courage. He did not leave her, but reached out to her in a very special way. In those days, Naomi would hold on her knee a child who would carry on her name and the

name of her family. When all seemed hopeless, strength and hope was renewed in her old age.

The strength of God is available to accomplish the purpose of God. The strength to accomplish the purpose of God is not available to youth only. Moses, Caleb and Naomi were strengthened in their old age to accomplish the will of God.

Not only do we see the Lord God giving strength in old age but He also pours out His blessing on the elderly. Consider what the writer of Genesis says about Abraham in Genesis 24:

1 Now Abraham was old, well advanced in years,
and the Lord had blessed Abraham in all things.
(Genesis 24)

Notice that even through Abraham was well advanced in years, the Lord had blessed him. In his old age, he bathed in the richness of God's blessing on his life. He looked over his life and saw the tremendous richness of God. As he looked around him, in his final years of life, he saw the children God had provided according to His promise. He saw the abundance the Lord God had given him. I am sure that his heart was overwhelmed as he contemplated these things. He would go to his grave experiencing the fulness of God's blessing on his life.

In his time of trial, Job's friends came to comfort him. While they had their various opinions as to why Job was suffering, the words of Eliphaz are nonetheless important for us to consider in this context:

24 You shall know that your tent is at peace,
and you shall inspect your fold and miss nothing.
25 You shall know also that your offspring shall be

many,
and your descendants as the grass of the earth.
26 You shall come to your grave in ripe old age,
like a sheaf gathered up in its season. (Job 5)

The expectation of Eliphaz was that the blessing of God would be on the aged. He expected that the Lord God would bless the elderly who loved Him with offspring and they would be gathered up like a sheaf in its season. Like the grains that were harvested in the field, their lives would be a blessing to many. They would be harvested at the time when they were ripe with fruit. They would die knowing the rich blessing of the Lord in their lives. While that blessing may differ from person to person, surely those who know the Lord can lay down their lives in their old age conscious of the fullness of God's provision despite the obstacles that have often been strewn on their path.

The prophet Isaiah shares a great promise of God to the aged.

3 "Listen to me, O house of Jacob,
all the remnant of the house of Israel,
who have been borne by me from before your
birth,
carried from the womb;
4 even to your old age I am he,
and to gray hairs I will carry you.
I have made, and I will bear;
I will carry and will save. (Isaiah 46)

Through Isaiah the prophet, the Lord reminded His people that He was the one who had given birth to them as a nation. He had brought them out of the womb. He would not abandon them in their old age. He would carry them when their hairs were grey. He who made them, would bring

them to safety. God does not just provide for those who are at the height of productivity but also for those whose productive years have waned. His compassion for us does not diminish when we are weakened by our age. He who created us in our mother's womb and delivered us safely into this world, will carry us safely into His presence when our life on this earth has ended.

What is important for us to see here is that God's eye is on the aged. He strengthens, blesses, provides for them in their final years of this life. He carries them when they are unable to find the strength themselves. His compassion for them does not diminish when they are frail. God watches over those who love Him. In their final years, they will know His presence just as they did in their younger years

By seeing how God treats the elderly, we gain a better perspective of what He expects of us. He does not ask us to do anything that He, Himself is not already doing.

For Consideration:

- Is God's devotion only to those who are productive? Does his love for us diminish when we can no longer be as productive as we once were?
- Old age is a time when we especially need the strength of the Lord. We have seen in this chapter, how God strengthened Moses, Caleb and Ruth. How has the Lord strengthened you?
- What are the blessings God has given you over the course of life? Take a moment to consider

some of the richness of God's blessings on your life.

- Do you know someone whose body has been breaking down but who has demonstrated thankfulness to God for His blessings?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord that even when we are not able to be as useful as we would like to be, His love for us does not diminish. Thank Him that He loves us more than all the things we do for Him.
- Take a moment to pray for God to strengthen and encourage the elderly in your church or society. Ask Him to give them strength to face the trials of getting older. Ask Him to help them to know His presence in a special way as their body grows weaker.
- Thank the Lord for the richness of His blessings in your life. Ask the Lord to open your eyes to the things He is doing. Ask Him to keep you from becoming blind to these blessings amid your struggles.

Chapter 7 - Service in Old Age

Generally speaking, the body weakens with old age. We are not able to do the things we once did. This does not mean, however, that the elderly are unable to serve the Lord. There are many examples of men and women who were mightily used of God in their final years of life.

As we consider this topic of service in old age, I would like to begin with a passage we have already examined in another context. We read in Numbers 8:

25 And from the age of fifty years they shall withdraw from the duty of the service and serve no more. 26 They minister to their brothers in the tent of meeting by keeping guard, but they shall do no service. Thus shall you do to the Levites in assigning their duties.” (Numbers 8)

In Numbers 8, we have the law of God for the Levites who had reached the age of 50 years. The Law of God required that they withdraw from the “duty of the service and serve no more” (verse 25). The passage goes on, however, to say that they were to “minister to their brothers in the tent of meeting by keeping guard, but they shall do no service” (verse 26). The key to understanding this passage comes in our understanding of the word “service”. It appears that

service referred to the heavy work of transporting the tent from place to place in the wilderness. Whenever the people moved the tabernacle, all its heavy curtains and poles were disassembled and carried to the next location. This was a responsibility that required strength and hard labour. God was giving the men of fifty and above a relief from this heavy responsibility. This was to be handled by the younger men.

While the heavy responsibility of disassembling the tabernacle, and carrying it from place to place was taken from the Levites of fifty years and older, they were still involved in the ministry. Numbers 8:26 tells us that they were to minister to their brothers and keep guard at the tabernacle. They were to oversee the work that went on in the tabernacle. Though not as physically demanding, this was a position of even greater responsibility for these older men.

We read of Sarah and Abraham who bore a son in their old age. Abraham was 100 years old and his wife was 90 years of age when she gave birth to their son Isaac (see Genesis 17:17). God gave them strength in their old age to bear a child and to raise him to carry on their name.

In the last chapter, we spoke of Caleb, who, at the age of 85, was empowered by the Spirit of God to wage war against his enemies and conquer a territory that he would pass on to his descendants (see Joshua 14:10-12). In a similar way, Moses (age 80) and his brother (age 83) were chosen and empowered by God to lead the Israelites out of slavery and into a land of their own (see Exodus 7:7).

While the above examples required the strength of the Lord in aging bodies, there are also other ways the Lord uses us in our later years. Listen to what 2 Samuel 19 tells us about Barzillai the Gileadite:

32 Barzillai was a very aged man, eighty years old. He had provided the king with food while he stayed at Mahanaim, for he was a very wealthy man. (2 Samuel 19)

As a “very aged man” of eighty years, Barzillai provided food for king David when he was in flight from his son Absalom. When he returned to Jerusalem, David wanted to reward Barzillai for his generosity (2 Samuel 19:33-40). Obviously, this act of compassion ministered very powerfully to the king in these days of exile and flight.

A similar event took place in Judges 19. Here we have the story of a Levite who was on his way to Bethlehem with his concubine. Unwilling to stop in the land of foreigners, he pressed hard to get to Gibeah where he expected to be offered hospitality from his own people. Arriving in the city, he waited in the town square searching for someone to give him a place to stay.

14 So they passed on and went their way. And the sun went down on them near Gibeah, which belongs to Benjamin, 15 and they turned aside there, to go in and spend the night at Gibeah. And he went in and sat down in the open square of the city, for no one took them into his house to spend the night.

16 And behold, an old man was coming from his work in the field at evening. The man was from the hill country of Ephraim, and he was sojourning in Gibeah. The men of the place were Benjaminites. 17 And he lifted up his eyes and saw the traveller in the open square of the city. And the old man said, “Where are you going? And where do you

come from?" 18 And he said to him, "We are passing from Bethlehem in Judah to the remote parts of the hill country of Ephraim, from which I come. I went to Bethlehem in Judah, and I am going to the house of the Lord, but no one has taken me into his house. 19 We have straw and feed for our donkeys, with bread and wine for me and your female servant and the young man with your servants. There is no lack of anything." 20 And the old man said, "Peace be to you; I will care for all your wants. Only, do not spend the night in the square." 21 So he brought him into his house and gave the donkeys feed. And they washed their feet, and ate and drank. (Judges 19)

In his time of need, this Levite found the support of an old man. This old man took them in and cared for them. He fed their donkey, gave them food to eat and washed their feet. This old man alone was God instrument of compassion to strangers in his town.

The experience and wisdom that comes with old age is also a very important tool in the hands of the Lord. In Job 12:12 we read:

12 Wisdom is with the aged,
and understanding in length of days (Job 12)

We have seen how failure to recognize this wisdom caused the nations of Israel and Judah to separate under the reign of Rehoboam, son of Solomon. Had Rehoboam listened to the wisdom of his father's old advisers, things may have turned out very differently for him. Listening to the foolish counsel of his young friends, however, was dev-

astating for the king and his nation. There is a vast resource of wisdom and experience in the elderly among us. We would do well to tap into this resource.

The psalmist understood something of the significance of the wisdom and experience that comes with age when he wrote:

18 So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to another generation, your power to those to come. (Psalm 71)

Notice the prayer of the psalmist. He wanted to have the ability in his old age to proclaim God's mighty power to the next generation. After years of walking with his God, the psalmist wanted the next generation to understand the power and wonders he had seen. He sensed that it was his obligation to share his experiences with the next generation so that they too would walk with God and come to know Him and His wonderful deeds.

Who can share the wonders of God like those who have experienced Him over years of trials and blessing? The psalmist pleaded with God for grace to proclaim the greatness of his God to the next generation. Surely, this is a tremendous obligation and ministry for us in our final years of life. God calls us to proclaim His worth to those who will follow behind us.

In the gospel of Luke, we read about the prophetess Anna.

36 And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin, 37 and

then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. 38 And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2)

Consider the wonderful ministry of Anna. She was a widow of 84 years of age. She spent her final days in the temple worshiping and praying night and day. From Luke 2:38 we see that she also spoke of the Lord to all who were waiting for the Messiah to come. She spent her last years in full-time prayer, worship and sharing the hope of the Messiah to come.

As we age and retire from our occupations, the temptation is to sit back and “enjoy life.” There is certainly a place for this but we see in the aging psalmist and in Anna, individuals who felt a call to prayer, worship and declaring the goodness of the Lord in their final years.

Giving instructions to Timothy about widows, the apostle Paul said this:

9 Let a widow be enrolled if she is not less than sixty years of age, having been the wife of one husband, 10 and having a reputation for good works: if she has brought up children, has shown hospitality, has washed the feet of the saints, has cared for the afflicted, and has devoted herself to every good work. 11 But refuse to enroll younger widows, for when their passions draw them away from Christ, they desire to marry 12 and so incur condemnation for having abandoned their former faith. (1 Timothy 5)

In this passage, Paul tells Timothy to enrol women of sixty years and older in the register of the church to receive support. These women were to have certain qualifications before being enrolled. Paul lists the qualifications for these widows in verses 9-10. The reason it was important that these enrolled widows had these qualifications was because they were being supported by the church and expected to serve as ministers of the church. They were given responsibilities of caring for the afflicted, ministering to the saints and expected to be involved in "every good work" (verse 10). The reason the younger women were not to be enrolled was because they were still able to be married and have a family. The temptation for them was to abandon their ministry at the church in favour of being married and having a family. Paul wanted to spare them of this temptation.

What is important for us to see here is that the widows of 60 years and older were enrolled as servants of the church and received support from the church for their ministry. These widows were busy in Christian duty and were likely a very important part of the work of the early church.

Let me conclude this chapter with the words of the psalmist in Psalm 92:

12 The righteous flourish like the palm tree
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.
13 They are planted in the house of the Lord;
they flourish in the courts of our God.
14 They still bear fruit in old age;
they are ever full of sap and green,
15 to declare that the Lord is upright;
he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in
him. (Psalm 92)

Notice that the psalmist tells us that the righteous will “still bear fruit in old age” and they will “declare that the Lord is upright.” It is true that our ministry may change in old age but by the grace of God we can still bear fruit and declare His goodness. The challenge of these verses is for us to realize that we do not ever really retire from serving the Lord. We have, even in our old age, an obligation and privilege to serve Him.

For Consideration:

- What role were the Levites to play after the age of fifty?
- Take a moment to consider the role of the elderly in your church and society? What responsibilities have they taken on.
- In this chapter, we have examined a number of elderly people. Make a list of the various ministries they had in their old age.
- The psalmist wanted to proclaim the might and power of God to the next generation. How has God revealed this might and power in your life? Have you been able to encourage the next generation with the truth of this power of God?

For Prayer:

- Thank the Lord for the wisdom that comes with a long life. Ask Him to give you the opportunity to share that experience and wisdom with those who follow you.

- Ask the Lord for the ability to share His power and blessing with the next generation. Thank Him that you have the ability to impact this next generation.
- Do you wonder what God has for you to do? Ask God to open your mind to see the opportunities He places before you.
- Take a moment to pray that your life would declare the goodness, grace and power of God to the next generation.

Chapter 8 - The Temptations of Old Age

In this final chapter, I would like to consider a series of verses in Scripture that address the temptations of old age. What these verses show us is that we cannot ever let down our guard. The battle for righteousness will continue until we are in the presence of the Lord.

As we begin, I would like to consider two aging mothers of the Old Testament. We have already examined them in other chapters in a different context so I will not go into detail about them here.

MISUSE OF AUTHORITY AND POSITION

The first mother I want to look at is Rebekah. In his old age, Isaac, her husband was blind. It was his desire to bless his eldest son Esau. Rebekah, however, loved her younger son Jacob more than Esau and wanted him to be blessed in the place of his brother. In Genesis 27, we read how she came up with a plan to deceive her husband. She told her son Jacob to disguise himself as his brother and receive the blessing. When Jacob questioned this for fear of being discovered, Rebekah answered:

13 ... "Let your curse be on me, my son; only obey my voice... (Genesis 27)

Using her influence as an aging mother, she demanded that her son listen to her and obey what she had told him to do.

We have a similar incident in the life of Bathsheba, the wife of David. As David approached the time of his death, a young woman by the name of Abishag was added to his harem to minister to his needs. During this time, David's son Adonijah, realizing that his father was close to the time of his death, decided to declare himself king. When David found out about this, he declared Solomon to be the rightful heir to the throne.

When David died, Adonijah approached Bathsheba with a request. He wanted her to go to her son Solomon and ask that he give him Abishag, as his wife. While this may seem to be an innocent request, there was something very deceitful behind the plan. Commenting on this the NIV Bible Study notes say:

Possession of the royal harem was widely regarded as signifying the right to succession to the throne. Although Abishag was a virgin, she would be regarded by the people as belonging to David's harem; so marriage to Abishag would greatly strengthen Adonijah's claim to the throne. (NIV Bible Study: Laridian: Cedar Rapids, "Comments on 1 Kings 2:22)

Adonijah wanted to use the influence of Bathsheba to convince Solomon to give him Abishag. In doing so he is communicating that he was the rightful heir to the throne and

not Solomon. Bathsheba willingly goes to Solomon with this request.

What we need to understand here is that with great authority comes great responsibility. These two aging women used their position for evil. God requires respect for the aged in our midst. That respect, however, cannot be taken for granted. As we age, we must continue to surrender our desires and ambitions to the Lord. We must seek His purpose and will even when that is not what we want.

LACK OF FAITH IN WHAT GOD CAN DO

Another temptation of the aged is that of having a lack of faith in what God can still do. Consider the sin of Sarah in Genesis 18:12. When she heard the announcement that she was going to have a child in her old age she laughed and said:

12 ... "After I am worn out, and my Lord is old, shall I have this pleasure?" (Genesis 18)

Sarah saw herself as a worn out old woman. She could not imagine that the Lord would still have a purpose for her. At her age, she felt that God had done all He could do with her. She could not believe that God would give her a child and strengthen her to raise that child in her nineties.

How easy it is, as our bodies and mental sharpness decline, to feel like Sarah. We fail to dream of what God can still do through us. Our prayers, are like those of Moses in Exodus 4:13 when he said: "Oh my Lord, please send someone else." We feel worn out and cannot imagine having the energy or drive to embark on any more spiritual adventures. We content ourselves with where we are and our prayers are more for God to use other people. Our faith

will just not permit us to believe that God can still use us. This lack of faith, can cause us to sit back rather than stepping out into the purpose of God.

STEPPING BACK –NOT TAKING A STAND

In 1 Samuel 3:13 we read these words of God about Eli the priest:

13 And I declared to him that I am about to punish his house forever, for the iniquity he knew, because his sons were blaspheming God, and he did not restrain them. (1 Samuel 3)

Eli was an old man and his sons were priests. His sons, however, were disregarding the law of God and engaged in immoral practices. Eli knew what was happening but did nothing to stop his sons from practicing such evil. These sons were grown up and able to make their own decisions. Eli was old and for some reason chose to leave his sons alone. Maybe he was not ready to face the conflict that confronting them would bring. We are not sure why Eli, in his old age, did not intervene but his actions are not uncommon.

It is easy for us to say nothing, especially as we age. We don't feel like we have the right to speak out about the situations we find around us. We feel out of touch with the newer generation and don't feel that they would want our advice or intrusion into their affairs. We feel like we lived in another time and another kind of world. We hesitate to criticize or challenge the upcoming generation. God expected Eli to speak out and do something about the evil his sons were practising. He expected that he use his years of experience and wisdom to challenge the next generation and remind them of their obligations. Eli's sin was the sin of not

taking a stand –he did nothing while the name of God was being blasphemed.

DISCONTENTMENT

The writer of the book of Ecclesiastes tell us:

3 If a man fathers a hundred children and lives many years, so that the days of his years are many, but his soul is not satisfied with life's good things, and he also has no burial, I say that a stillborn child is better off than he. (Ecclesiastes 6)

Notice what the writer says here. He describes a man who has had many children (a sign of the Lord's blessing). This man lives many years to an old age but his soul is not satisfied with the good things God has given. It would be better that this man was not born says Ecclesiastes 6:3. To live many years without being satisfied in the blessings of the Lord is a tragedy.

As we age and things begin to become more difficult, it is easy to forget the blessings of the years. How easy it is to focus on the hardships and not the goodness of God. When our children have moved away and are now occupied with their own families and our partner has died leaving us alone, how easy it is to dwell on our misery. When our body simply will not do what we want it to do and we are dependent on others to help, we often fail to remember the many years of blessing and the faithfulness of our God. What a tragedy it is to end a life richly blessed by God with a bitter spirit because our later years are difficult.

The challenge for us in our final years is to remember our Creator and the richness of His blessings in this life and in the life to come. Even in our old age, we have much for

which we need to be thankful. We have seen the hand of God in our lives. We have experienced His faithfulness. As we prepare to meet Him face to face, let us do so with a heart full of gratitude. Let us resist the bitterness and discontent that tempts us when our strength fails.

THE OLD WAYS

Ezra 3 speaks of a time when the temple of God was being rebuilt after the nation of Israel returned from exile. These were incredible days for the people. God was restoring His blessings. Many of those present had never worshipped at a temple. They had spent all their lives in exile. As the temple foundations were being laid there was a mixture of feelings in the crowd that gathered to witness this historic moment. Listen to how Ezra describes this moment:

10 And when the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments came forward with trumpets, and the Levites, the sons of Asaph, with cymbals, to praise the Lord, according to the directions of David king of Israel.
11 And they sang responsively, praising and giving thanks to the Lord,

“For he is good,
for his steadfast love endures forever toward Israel.”

And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. 12 But many of the priests and Levites and heads of fathers' houses, old men who had seen the first house, wept with a loud voice when they saw the foundation of this house being laid, though many shouted aloud for

joy, 13 so that the people could not distinguish the sound of the joyful shout from the sound of the people's weeping, for the people shouted with a great shout, and the sound was heard far away. (Ezra 3)

When the foundations were laid, there was a great shout of praise to the Lord. Among those present, however, were old men who had seen the former temple. The response of these men was quite different: they "wept with a loud voice". Why would these men weep? Some may see here tears of joy but Haggai seems to shed a different light on this. Writing to the people about this new temple he says:

3 'Who is left among you who saw this house in its former glory? How do you see it now? Is it not as nothing in your eyes? 4 Yet now be strong, O Zerubbabel, declares the Lord. Be strong, O Joshua, son of Jehozadak, the high priest. Be strong, all you people of the land, declares the Lord. Work, for I am with you, declares the Lord of hosts, 5 according to the covenant that I made with you when you came out of Egypt. My Spirit remains in your midst. Fear not. 6 For thus says the Lord of hosts: Yet once more, in a little while, I will shake the heavens and the earth and the sea and the dry land. 7 And I will shake all nations, so that the treasures of all nations shall come in, and I will fill this house with glory, says the Lord of hosts. 8 The silver is mine, and the gold is mine, declares the Lord of hosts. 9 The latter glory of this house shall be greater than the former, says the Lord of hosts. And in this place I will give peace, declares the Lord of hosts.'" (Haggai 2)

The prophet Haggai speaks to those who had seen the former temple of Solomon with all its silver and gold (verse

3, 8). Those old enough to see the glorious temple of Solomon saw this temple as being inferior to what they had in the past—it was as nothing in their eyes (verse 3). Haggai, however, reminds these old men that the Lord would descend on this temple in power and glory. He did not need the silver and gold that was in Solomon's temple—all this belonged to Him anyway (verse 8). God promised that although this temple looked like nothing in their eyes, the glory of this temple would be “greater than the former” (verse 9).

Notice what is happening here. The older generation was not happy with the changes that they saw in the temple. They looked back to former times when things were different. They remembered the gold and silver that lined the walls of Solomon's temple and when they saw what was available to them now, it just wasn't the same. They wept thinking about how things were in the past. God reminded them that He was still working in the lives of His people. The people of this next generation would worship in a very different temple but His glory would fill it just as He had in the past.

It is not easy to adjust to change at any age. In this case, however, we see the struggle of the older men to adjust to worshipping in a building that seemed inferior to what they had in the past. In our day, we have seen tremendous changes. The upcoming generation responds to a different kind of music. They are not as content to maintain traditions. In an age of technology, many of them bring their cell phones to church instead of a Bible because their Bible is an electronic Bible. Sometimes these changes can be overwhelming for those who have grown up in another tradition. God, however, is still at work. He is building His kingdom. Haggai challenged the old men of his day to realise that although what they saw before them was very

different from what they had experienced, God was still advancing His kingdom and would reveal His glory in a wonderful way.

PERSEVERANCE IN RIGHTEOUSNESS

In Titus 2 the apostle Paul has some things to say to Titus about the elderly in his church:

2 Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. 3 Older women likewise are to be reverent in behaviour, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, 4 and so train the young women to love their husbands and children, 5 to be self-controlled, pure, working at home, kind, and submissive to their own husbands, that the word of God may not be reviled. (Titus 2)

Paul speaks to Titus about older men and older women in these verses. He challenges the men to be steadfast in faith and love and to be dignified and self-controlled in their thoughts and actions. He challenges the older women to be respectful in their behaviour and not become guilty of slander or of drinking too much wine. Instead they were to encourage the younger women by their example and teaching.

In the town where I live, I sometimes go into a coffee shop. These coffee shops are often filled with older men and women. While this is a great opportunity to be with friends, sometimes they become places of gossip and slander and jokes that were better left unspoken. Old age is not a time to let our guard down. The apostle Paul reminds the old men and women of his day to persevere in the spiritual battle that rages before them. The shield of righteousness

must be carried with us to our dying day. The enemy will continually seek out our weakness. As we age, we can be sure that he will do his best to distract us and take us down the wrong path. We will wage this war of righteousness until our last breath.

The wisdom and experience of age places us under a greater obligation to God. The increasing weakness of our bodies and minds will require even more faith in what God can do through us. We will be tempted to stand back and let the younger generation do things or we will struggle with discouragement as we watch everything we knew change before our eyes. Old age brings new temptations and struggles. This means that we will have to dig deeper into God's Word. It means we will have to rely more fully on our Creator. Old age ought to draw us even closer to God. It ought to make us more dependent on Him. It is the final stage of our Christian life before entering the presence of the Lord. What a shame it would be, after living a victorious life, we would fall short so near the finishing line.

For Consideration:

- How did Rebekah misuse her authority and lead her son into error? What kind of example did she give to him?
- How did Sarah show a lack of faith in what God could do for her in her old age? Do you still see the unlimited power of God available to you?
- What role does the older generation have in correcting and challenging the newer genera-

tion? What is the difference between challenging the next generation to righteousness and godliness and wanting things to be the same.

- How easy is it to become discontent when life in general becomes more difficult? Are you able to see the Lord in your struggles?
- What are the challenges of old age? How should these challenges drive us more and more to the Lord?

For Prayer:

- Ask the Lord to help you to be a good and godly example to the next generation.
- Ask God to give you a faith that will not let go, even when your body and mind are not as strong as they used to be. Thank the Lord that while we may not have the strength we once had, His strength is unlimited.
- Ask God to help you to see the richness of His blessings even when things don't seem to be going as well for you.
- What are your temptations as your body ages? Take a moment to ask that the Lord give you grace to accept what is happening and the ability to commit these things to Him with joy.

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