

GROWING OLDER
IN GOD'S GRACE

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INTRODUCTION

Growing older is a privilege not everyone can enjoy. For those who do reach their senior years, however, it is a period of time filled with both opportunity and significant challenges. Each period of our lives has its own unique opportunities, and our senior years are no exception. We have the incredible opportunity of influencing grandchildren—sometimes even great grandchildren—and of being an example of true Christian longevity to those younger members of our congregation. It is a time during which we may be tempted to retire completely from Christianity and turn the work of the church over entirely to the younger members, which is understandable to some. It is also true, however, that the younger members of the congregation need the wisdom and experience of older Christians. There should be a true, mutual respect between the older and younger members of the Lord's church.

In this book we will discuss many of the opportunities and challenges of older age. The subject matter is meant to inspire discussion when the book is used as a classroom reference. As we grow older, each of us has our own experiences and stories to tell and the opportunity to be inspired by those older biblical characters who successfully traversed the often difficult path of growing older. It is my sincere prayer that this book will be challenging, uplifting, and hopefully even inspiring, and that each chapter as it is read and studied will bring us a clear realization of the wonderful and unique privileges that we have as older Christians in God's kingdom.

A SENIOR CITIZEN IN CHRIST'S CHURCH

Introduction

After birth, we begin to progress through different ages, stages, passages, and transitions. We move from infancy, to toddlerhood, to childhood, to adolescence, to teen years, to young adult, to middle age, and finally to the beginning of the golden years. People enter and leave these various stages at different ages in their lives, so I have developed a litmus test to see if you are qualified to be called a senior citizen.

1. Do you ever feel confused?
2. Do you feel frustrated and overwhelmed?
3. Are you a little more forgetful than in the past?
4. Are you experiencing more fatigue?
5. Is an afternoon nap more appealing?
6. Are you spending more time at doctors' offices or in the hospital?
7. Do you have more aches and pains than in the past?
8. Are you less patient with your spouse, other family members, or friends?
9. Are you taking more medications?
10. Do you feel unappreciated, alone, misunderstood, even angry, for no apparent reason?
11. Do you lose things more often?
12. Are little problems becoming big problems?
13. Are you less active?

14. Do you gain weight more easily and lose it slower?
15. Have you had body parts replaced—hips, knees, valves, stents, etc.?
16. Do you have a major illness, which has become all-consuming in your life?
17. Are you always in pain?
18. Does change bother you?
19. Is your hearing or sight growing worse?
20. Does heaven mean more to you now than it previously did?

If you answered even one half of these questions with a yes, it is a good indication you are a senior citizen.

Retirement Is Called Heaven

Ever since Adam and Eve, older people have experienced similar problems in the aging process. If we live long enough, we will not only experience, but suffer through, the physical, mental, and sometimes spiritual problems associated with aging. In order to successfully travel the dangerous path of aging, we must develop a sense of humor. This will allow us to avoid the bitterness and cynicism that often come with aging. We must learn to laugh at ourselves, to be humble, and able to see the humor in many of the limitations and disabilities of growing old. For this reason, I will begin each chapter with a little humor or wisdom. I wish I could remember where I have found all of the humorous stories and examples that I will be using. Unfortunately, over the years I have simply clipped out and put in file folders humorous stories, often losing the source. I will give the source when available.

A Little Humor

Have you noticed the stairs are getting steeper, groceries are getting heavier, and everything is further away than it used to be? Yesterday I walked to the corner and I was dumbfounded to discover just how long our street has become. And you know

people are less considerate now, especially the younger ones. They speak in whispers all the time. If you ask them to speak up they just keep repeating themselves, endlessly mouthing the same silent message until they are red in the face. What do they think I am—a lip reader? I also think they are much younger than I was at the same age. On the other hand, people my own age are much older than I am. [My mother at 96 in the independent living home kept referring to all of the people around her, most younger than her, as “those old people.”] I ran into an old friend the other day, and she didn’t even recognize me! I got to thinking about the poor dear while I was combing my hair this morning and in doing so, I glanced at my own reflection. Well, goodness gracious! Really, now even mirrors are not made the way they used to be. Another thing. Everyone drives so fast these days. You are risking life and limb if you happen to pull onto the freeway in front of them.

All I can say is, their brakes must wear out awfully fast, the way I see them screeching and swerving in my rear view mirror.

Clothing manufacturers are less civilized these day too. Why else would they suddenly start labeling a size 10 or 12 dress as an 18 or 20? Do they think nobody notices what they do? The people who make bathroom scales are pulling the same prank. Do they think I actually believe the number I see on that dial? Ha! I would never let myself weigh that much. Just who do these people think they are fooling? (USWU, “*Age Is Only a Number*”)

We Are Living Longer

With our incredible medical advancements and by eating well and exercising regularly, people are living longer and healthier than ever. Yet, when we reach a certain age, we are expected to automatically begin to think and behave as an older person. Retirement ages are often dictated to us by government, business, and family expectations. *Retirement* is a word I have tried to eliminate from my vocabulary, because in most important ways,

we should never retire. We may experience changes in emphasis of our work and how we spend our time, but we should never get to the point where our goal is simply to do nothing but play, nap, and watch TV. That is the essence of a second childhood.

Bible Examples

- Joshua was old when he began leading the children of Israel into the Promised Land. At 85 he delivered a powerful speech, speaking of the strength he had received from the Lord.
- Moses was 80 years old when he led the people toward the Promised Land.
- Abraham was 75 years old when he left Terah to start a new life in a strange, distant land, and he was 100 years old when he fathered Isaac.
- Sarah was 90 years old when she bore Isaac.
- Daniel served under four kings and had great influence throughout his entire life.
- In his old age, Noah was still pounding pegs and finishing the ark, defying skepticism and criticism, remaining faithful to God's words, even in the face of the harshest rejection.
- Job, as he approached old age, had to start all over again. He had lost everything important to him in the first part of his life, but regained it, along with even more in the latter part of his life. It was all because of his faithfulness and trust in God.
- Joseph, after having reached a mature age, came to the greatest test of his life: the test of forgiving those who had sinned against him. With grace and forgiveness, he proved that these two essential biblical qualities will carry us far in life.
- David lived a very long life. At the end of his life, he suffered greatly. Part of that suffering may have been as a result of the sins of his earlier life. We do reap what we sow. But part of it was simply the aging process. He obviously had poor circulation, and Abishag, the Shunammite woman became the first

human bed warmer, keeping David warm and comfortable in a non-sexual way.

- Saul, however, as he approached old age, allowed bitterness, jealousy, and resentment to be the predominant qualities of his life, overshadowing an otherwise acceptable life when he was younger. Bitterness, anger, and jealousy do more harm to the container in which they are stored than to anyone on whom they are poured. These qualities destroy us from the inside out. They may steal away previous victories.
- Solomon, during a portion of his later years, was quite discontented, having experienced all of the pleasures and material benefits this life can afford. But he finally experienced a revitalization of spirit when he began to recognize what the real priorities of this existence should be; that is, to acknowledge God, serving Him and others. Solomon said, "The end of the matter; all has been heard. Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man" (Ecclesiastes 12:13).
- Isaiah and Jeremiah, great prophets of God, continued to speak their words of history and prophecy until the end of their lives.
- Paul referred to himself as an "old man" (Philemon 1:9), but as an old man he continued to work in the kingdom of God. The psalmist said, "My mouth is filled with your praise, and with your glory all the day. Do not cast me off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength is spent" (Psalm 71:8, 9).
- Peter lived to be an old man and continued working all of his life, serving as an elder in the Jerusalem church.
- John wrote the book of Revelation as an aged man on the isle of Patmos.
- Zachariah and Elizabeth were past their childbearing years, yet God visited them and instructed them they would have a son. This wonderful couple, who believed the voice of God and were true to His word, became the parents of John the Baptist.

CHAPTER 1

Let's examine the life of Anna. The daughter of Phanuel, Anna was married only seven years when she was widowed. She remained a widow for at least 84 years. Luke 2:37, 38 says, "She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day. 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." When we look at this great woman's life—a woman who was either 91 or 105, depending on how you calculate the time—she was in every way a model older person. During her life, she no doubt experienced much loss and sorrow, yet she did not allow it to make her bitter or resentful. Rather, she kept herself busy in God's work and spent much of her time in fasting and prayer. How wonderful it is to see an older person who has a lifetime of obedience and love for the Lord, one who has remained faithful through the good and bad times! She was rewarded by identifying the child Jesus.

Anna stayed busy. Her goal was to serve God and help others, remaining faithful to the first and second commandments. She did not isolate herself, although she did confine herself to the temple and to the work there, but she was also busy interacting with God's people as they came in and out to worship. Almost all of us who reach our senior years will have experienced much grief and trauma, as well as many losses that have brought tears to our eyes and hurt to our hearts. We cannot, however, allow these to cause us to pull our world in on top of us and not trust people or God or refuse to commit to good works and new relationships. We cannot live like turtles in a shell. We must have interaction with others, and the best interaction is with God's people. Anna kept busy doing God's work, interacting with and serving others. There is no doubt that Anna was a woman of God's Word, a prophetess who worshiped Him daily. In my life I have known several faithful, godly women who devoted themselves to studying God's Word, teaching it to younger women

and children, exemplifying Christ in every way in their lives, and using all of their talents and abilities in God's service to others. What a wonderful legacy!

Anna also prayed regularly. Her prayers were heard. Her prayers sustained and uplifted her, giving her the strength and courage to continue in her service to God and others. Another wonderful quality of Anna's is that, at the end of her life, she never lost hope. There are so many older (and, I might add, some younger) who need a *hope transplant*. Difficult times, losses, pain and suffering, have taken away hope from so many. The aloneness of old age can cause one to lose hope. But Anna believed in the future, and she believed that she was to be an active, faithful part of that future. As we grow older, we must never lose hope. Hope is what sustains us in desperate times. Anna's faithfulness was rewarded by being able to hold and bless the infant Jesus.

All of these great men and women who lived beyond the middle age period of their lives were particularly distinguished by how they used their last years. Trust in God and His Word, attitude of mind, spirit, and character; all play an important part in how we deal with and successfully traverse growing older.

The History of Retirement

In the early history of man, there was no retirement. People worked and labored until death. In early biblical times, when there were a number of people who lived to very old age, retirement was not a part of their lifestyle. It was the culture that people continued to do whatever they could until they died. As history passed, the elderly population began to increase, and the numbers reached critical mass. "It was no longer just a matter of respecting the aged. Older people were everywhere, giving advice, repeating themselves, complaining about their health problems, trying to help, and often getting in the way of younger people in their quest for upward mobility."

In 1883, Chancellor Otto von Bismarck of Germany had a problem. The Marxists were threatening to take control of Europe, so to help his countrymen resist that takeover, Bismarck announced that he would pay a pension to any non-working German over the age of 65. Bismarck was smart, because few people lived to be 65 at that time. Bismarck set an arbitrary world standard for future generations for the exact year at which old age would begin and established the precedent that government should pay people for growing old.

William Osler led the foundation for the scientific information regarding old age and retirement. In 1905 he delivered a valedictory address at Johns Hopkins Hospital where he had been a physician-in-chief. Osler said that it was a matter of fact that the years between 25 and 40 in a worker's career are the 15 golden years. He called that span the "constructive period." He went on to say that workers between the ages of 40 and 60 were mostly uncreative and therefore only tolerable. But after 60, the average worker was useless and should be put out to pasture.

Living Longer

Life Expectancy in the United States

1600–44 years

1700–47 years

1800–60 years

1900–71 years

2016–79 years

We are an aging society.

In the U.S., a large number of aging factory workers were slowing down the assembly lines, taking too many personal days, and usurping the place of the younger, more productive men with families to support, causing increased unemployment among the young workers. These attitudes further reinforced

the concept of retirement. During the Great Depression, when good jobs were hard to come by, the situation was intensified. Francis Townsend initiated a popular movement in California, proposing retirement at age 60. In exchange, the government would pay a pension of up to \$200 a month. President Franklin D. Roosevelt felt this was too generous. And so, in 1935, he initiated the Social Security Act, which made workers pay for their old age insurance in advance. Thus began the current definition of retirement, which is “leaving your job between the ages of 62 and 65 and doing whatever you can afford to do to occupy your time.” Then and now, most retired people wish there was something they could constructively do. Many have opted to volunteer their time to charitable organizations or to become entrepreneurs and begin second careers, but few relish the idea of retiring to a rocking chair, watching TV, or playing with their computer or phone all day.

Unions certainly have played their part in the retirement controversy, insisting on rigid guidelines for retirement and proposing even earlier retirement than 60 or 65 in situations in which they want a younger workforce to take over. There are certain occupations for which retirement comes even earlier. In the military, retirement age comes after 20 years of service. This is also the case with most first responder jobs such as fire, police, and emergency services, meaning that many in America retire from their first job around 40 years old. Then they are faced with the decision of beginning a new career or simply sitting back and waiting for true old age and death to overtake them.

What a Waste

There are 10,000 people in the U.S. reaching age 65 every day, many who have already retired or are in the process of retiring. The number is almost staggering: 10,000 new retirees every day. One of the greatest wastes of valuable resources is the disregarding

of the experience, knowledge, influence, and maturity of these retirees who are put out to pasture and often disregarded and forgotten. Among these people are highly educated, informed, hard-working, healthy, mentally sharp individuals who still have so much to contribute to society, but are encouraged on every front to simply retire, get out of the way, enjoy yourself for the rest of your life, and become silent non-contributors.

I do not believe we are going to reverse the concept of retirement any time soon, but we certainly need to re-think the idea that those who are retiring no longer have a place in active society, business, politics, or religion. So many people are resisting the pressure for early retirement and view their last years as their best and most productive years in many areas. Some of the greatest accomplishments in the history of the world have come about because of people who refused to let an arbitrary age keep them from thinking, working, and being active in their particular field of expertise.

*Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in His hand
Who saith, "A whole I planned, Youth shows but half;
trust God: see all, nor be afraid!"*
by Robert Browning

Good Secular Examples

Winston Churchill was 77 when he entered his second term as prime minister of Great Britain. He served until he was 81, but he remained politically active until he was 91. Benjamin Franklin was 75 when he negotiated peace with Great Britain. He was 81 when he worked out the compromise that resulted in the U.S. Constitution. Michelangelo was 71 when he was appointed chief architect of St. Peter's Cathedral in Rome. He died at 89, still creating the beautiful frescos on the walls of the Pauline Chapel. You may not know the

name, but Marion Rice Hart completed a solo trans-Atlantic flight in a single engine Beechcraft Bonanza when she was 84 years old. Frank Lloyd Wright, the great architect, was 91 years old when he completed New York's Guggenheim Museum. Yitzhak Shamir became prime minister of Israel when he was 76. At 84, he was still active in government, negotiating peace talks. Colonel Sanders was 65 when he established his first Colonel Sanders's Southern Fried Chicken business, which eventually became KFC. Mother Teresa was ministering in Calcutta and traveling around the world with her message of hope, peace, and love until she died at age 87. There are so many other people who accomplished great things in their older age, such as Albert Schweitzer, Florence Nightingale, and Billy Graham, who continued writing and inspiring into their nineties. We should never allow a number age to keep us from good work and accomplishments (Source: David Turner, *Biblical Studies*).

Often, when we age, we become uninvolved. Never lose your value. Engage with your children, your grandchildren, your friends, church, or wherever you find yourself. Each relationship adds value to your life. Our children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren need to know our history. They need to know how we grew up, the circumstances and conditions of our youth. They need to know what we hold as valuable and important. They need to know we are patriotic, that we thank servicemen and women every time we see them, that we appreciate teachers, preachers, doctors, police, and others who devote themselves to helping us. One of our major responsibilities as a parent or grandparent is to educate our children and grandchildren on our values and history.

Retirement is not a biblical word, nor is it a biblical requirement. We can never retire from God's work or from our responsibilities to God. The Bible does speak eloquently about retirement. It's called heaven. Each of us has talents, abilities, and opportuni-

ties, and God has blessed each of us with certain unique resources. We need to use these in the kingdom of God and to His glory until death. That does not mean that as we get older we cannot refocus our attention and efforts. In fact, retiring from work can often open up new avenues of service to God. It is wrong to waste years of education, training, and skill development simply because the calendar turns to a certain date and age. We must be faithful till death.

Questions

1. Discuss some symptoms of old age—ways you feel now that you did not feel when younger.
2. Discuss biblical examples of men and women who accomplished great things when older.
3. Why is it important to stay busy in your senior years?
4. Discuss the opportunity and the necessity of prayer at all ages, but especially as we grow older.
5. Discuss a history of retirement and why there are some areas of our life from which we can never retire.
6. How many people retire each day in the U.S.? What impact does that have on our culture?
7. Name several good secular examples of people who accomplished great things in their older age.
8. Is *retirement* a biblical word?
9. Is retirement a biblical requirement?
10. Are you content at your current age?