

“Meeting God in the Stages of Life – The Senior Years”

Two elderly ladies had been lifelong friends. Over the years, they had shared all kinds of activities and adventures. They were closer than sisters. Lately, their activities were limited to meeting a few times a week to play cards. One day they were sitting opposite each other at a card table when one looked at the other and said, “Now don’t get mad at me...I know we’ve been friends for over 80 years, but I just can’t remember your name. I’ve thought and thought but can’t remember. Can you please tell me what your name is.” The other lady sat and glared at her. For at least 3 minutes she just stared and glared. Finally she asked: “How soon do you need to know?” I guess you could say this was a “senior moment”.

This is the last in this series of messages on the stages of life and how God wants to be present during all of our life stages. Today we will look at the “senior years.” These are sometimes called the “golden years”! I like George Burns’ definition of old age: “Old age is when you don’t have to own antiques to sit down on something that’s over 80 years old.”

By and large, people are living longer today. Even though in the U.S. over the last several years the life span has actually gotten shorter, people are living longer than they did 50, 100 years ago. The average life span in the U.S. in 1900 was 49.

Since there are more people alive in their 80’s and 90’s, some make a distinction between the “young-old” and the “old-old”. The “young-old” are those 60-75, and the “old-old” are 75 plus. Now don’t get mad if you’re older than 75! I’m just quoting the “experts” (and we all know “experts” aren’t always the “experts” they may claim to be!). Actually, there are some 80 year olds who look younger than others who may be 60 or 65.

It is probably fair to say that our culture is not too kind in its attitude towards the aged. *Youthfulness* is idolized. Whereas many cultures accept old age as a natural part of the sequence of life, our society tends to *resist and deny* aging – we do all we can to stay young and look young. The *cosmetic industry* is booming because of it! In many cultures, older people are revered. They are looked upon as a source of wisdom or practical knowledge. In our culture, the elderly are sometimes just tolerated, or scorned. One of the factors feeding into this is the *information explosion*. In years past, if it was time to plant one’s crops, the young went to their dad or granddad to find out what to do. Today, information and technology is expanding so fast that kids don’t go to dad or granddad to find out how to work their computer or smart phone! Actually, it’s the other way around! Our culture as a whole isn’t particularly patient or respectful towards older persons.

What are some of the issues that we face in the senior years of life? One of the biggest is the *losses* we face in our older years.

There is the ***loss of health***, for one. A lot of seniors are concerned about health issues. As we get older, our *body* begins to wear out. We experience aches and pains we never had before. Perhaps there is chronic illness, or physical limitations. An older gentleman had a serious hearing problem for a number of years. Finally he was coaxed by his family into going to a doctor, and he was fitted for a very expensive hearing aid that really helped his hearing improve. The man went back to the doctor after a month for a checkup, and the doctor said, “Your hearing is almost perfect. Your family must really be pleased that you can hear again.” The man replied, “Oh, I tell them hearing aids don’t work and I can’t hear a thing. I just sit around and listen to the conversation. I’ve already changed my will 3 times.”

Our memory may start to go. (There was something else I wanted to say here, but I forgot what it is).

Many in their senior years lose their husband or wife. For most, this means radically reorienting their life, without their partner.

Once we get up into the 80’s or 90’s, ***we lose many of our friends.*** I remember my one grandmother talking with sadness in her voice about how so many of her friends were now gone. It’s like the like the older woman who said so many of her friends out there in the cemetery.

Then there is the ***loss of independence.*** A person may have been very independent, and prided herself on all she was able to do. But now she may need a walker or a wheelchair. Or perhaps depend on her children, or neighbors, or the staff at nursing home. This often generates a huge *loss of self-esteem.*

For some elderly people there is ***the loss of their home.*** They no longer have the stamina or mobility to tend for their house or yard, or perhaps financially they can’t keep up with home ownership. So they have to give up their home, and *all the accumulated memories.*

Part of losses at this stage might include the ***reduction in financial resources.*** Some in their senior years are financially well off. But others . . . Often the cost of *medicines and prescription drugs* takes a big chunk out of one’s limited income.

So, many elderly people have to cope with a myriad of losses. This can cause sadness and depression. It’s not unusual, therefore to have apprehension and fear as one faces the challenges of getting older!

But there are also blessings and benefits associated with the senior years! We can have more free time – to do what we want, to travel, to do things we never had time to do when we were employed or busy raising our kids. If there are grandchildren,

or younger children who are relatives, these young ones can add much pleasure to the senior years.

Yes, there are some hefty challenges to be faced in the sunset years of life, but I also believe that these can be good years, years filled with the blessing and presence of God!

The Scripture text today is Psalm 71. This psalm was written by an aged man of faith as he seeks God's deliverance from his enemies, from sickness and shame. These words of a godly old man can show us how to find the resources of God for our senior years. I call it a "Prescription for Old Age."

First of all there is *prayer*. The entire psalm is a prayer! It's a prayer for deliverance. In you, O LORD, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame. In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me and save me. Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress. Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel" (Psalm 71:1-4).

There were things this man had to face in his later years. But he was able to pray that God would deliver him from the things that threaten him. Look at verse 9: "Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent." Whatever we face in our senior years – fears, losses, loneliness – God will not forsake us! God is this man's rock and fortress: "Be to me a rock of refuge, a strong fortress, to save me" (verse 3). God can be our rock and refuge – and *prayer* is a way we get in touch with God's power that can sustain us.

Also, there is praise. Living a life of praise to God is part of this "Prescription for Old Age". The psalm writer says, "My praise is continually of you" (verse 6). Notice, he doesn't just praise God once in a while, but continually. He says, "My mouth is filled with your praise, and with your glory all day long" (verse 8). Here again he praises God "all day long"! He wants to increase his level and frequency of praising God: "But I will hope continually, and will praise you yet more and more" (verse 14). Then in verses 22-23 he says, "I will also praise you with the harp for your faithfulness, O my God; I will sing praises to you with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel. My lips will shout for joy when I sing praises to you; my soul also, which you have rescued." He praises God for God's faithfulness to him.

What a great attitude! Praise! How many older people are grumps? Like the *Grumpy Old Men*. Of course, there are grumpy old women, too! And there are a lot of younger people who are grumps! But here's the point: We can spend our later years complaining, bitter, nit-picking. We can have a negative attitude. Or, we can *fill our days with praise for the Lord!*

There was a pastor/preacher on TV named Gerald Mann. He was an older man. His wife died, and he shared some of the sadness he felt with his TV audience. Shortly after Gerald lost his wife, he interviewed Charlie Shedd. Charlie was a pastor and author, who wrote some practical and very helpful books. Charlie, too, had lost his wife Martha. But around the time he was interviewed he had just gotten married again at the age of 83. He said how wonderful it was being so old. You could go to a movie theater, he said, and you don't have to wait in line. You just walk up and people will let you in! Charlie had a delightfully cheerful, positive attitude!

Thanking the Lord and praising the Lord does everyone a whole lot more good than bellyaching and moaning our way to the grave!

There is another thing about the old man who wrote Psalm 71 that gives us a clue to discovering joy and the resources of God in our senior years. That is **purpose**. He had a purpose in life – even in his later years. Look at what he says, “My mouth will tell of your righteous acts, of your deeds of salvation all day long, though their number is past my knowledge. I will come praising the mighty deeds of the Lord God, I will praise your righteousness, yours alone. O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to all the generations to come” (Psalm 71:15-18). This man's purpose is to tell of God's righteous acts (vs. 15), to proclaim God's wondrous deeds (vs. 17), to tell of God's might to future generations (vs. 18).

First, notice, he had something to keep him occupied. From all I have read, all the data indicates that we are so much better off if we keep mentally and physically active in our later years. *Physical exercise* has proved to be beneficial and can add to our life span. Keeping *mentally alert* seems to be a deterrent against dementia. I will never forget a 90 year old man in one of the churches I served. He was quite a character. He worked out at a local fitness club, but warned that I shouldn't go there because there are too many nice looking women.

I think we all realize that we are better off if we stay active. But let's go beyond the point of saying “just stay active”. *What kind of activity* we do counts too! Notice what the writer of Psalm 71 said, “O God, do not forsake me, *until I proclaim your might to all the generations to come*” (Psalm 71:18). Isn't that a worthy mission for one's senior years! Pass the faith on to the next generation! I think of another retired man in a church I served who had a great passion for evangelism, for sharing the gospel and witnessing to others about the Lord.

This is a far cry from the attitude of many senior citizens today (even Christians). They think or say, “I've paid my dues...let somebody else do it” (we hear that in churches). “I want to retire and simply relax and enjoy life.” I don't think the

modern concept of “retirement” is even found in the Bible! Of course, there is nothing wrong with wanting to retire from a place of employment, to do something else but work there! Perhaps to do some of the things we never had time to do while we were working. That is different from retiring with the attitude: I’ve worked hard all my life, doing for people. Now I just want to lay back and *let people do for me!* Or just frittering away our remaining days and years in trivial, self-absorbing activities. If you’re a disciple of Jesus, you *never retire from being a disciple!* There are always people who need to hear the good news of Jesus. There are always hurting people who need a loving, helping hand.

I want to challenge you older folk to be involved in ministry for Christ. Even if you’re limited physically in what you can do, you can do something! There is a beautiful story in Luke, chapter 2, about a lady named Anna. Anna is 84 years old. A widow for many years. Look at what she did: “She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came, and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem” (Luke 2:37b-38). She had a devoted ministry of prayer and fasting. When Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus to the temple to be dedicated to God, she began to praise God and speak about Jesus as the Messiah.

I challenge you to be involved in something for the kingdom of God! Do something with your life that matters! My mother was a member of Lampeter United Methodist Church. That church had some faithful lay people that regularly visited my mom. She appreciated their visits, and so do I. I think of two other Christian men, traditional church people who in their retirement years caught a vision of how the church needs to change. They worked enthusiastically to bring renewal and a new sense of vision to their congregation.

I’ve been sharing what I believe is a good “prescription for old age”: prayer, praise, purpose, and then there is ***preparation***. He came to the last stage of life *prepared* in the best possible way! “For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth. Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from mother’s womb. My praise is continually of you” (verses 5-6). He didn’t wait until the end of his life to “cram for the final exam.” He had a faith that had begun way back in his youthful days.

One of the major tasks of older adulthood is what some call “life review and integration”. In other words, to make sense of your life, to be at peace about ending your days. I believe this is difficult, if not impossible, without a *meaningful religious faith*. And as a Christian, I believe it is only through Jesus that we have peace with God through the forgiveness of our sins, and the promise of eternal life.

The time to develop a relationship with God and a meaningful faith is early in life.

Don't put it off until you are old. After all, there is no guarantee that we will live to an old age.

I've seen people come to Christ in the last few hours or days of their life. And that is a wonderful thing! God welcomes us even then, just as Christ pardoned the dying thief on the cross. As a pastor, I've been by the side of a few people in their hours, and sought to lead them to Christ. If you are older, and you have not yet committed your life to Christ, do it now!

But if you come to Christ in your younger years, you will be so much better prepared for death. Besides, *we will be able to live out the adventure of having Christ be there with us through every stage of our life*, to guide us, strengthen us, and make our life count for something of eternal significance.

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