

“Seventy-Something”

Ecclesiastes 12:1-6 says this, “Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come, and the years draw near when you will say, ‘I have no pleasure in them’; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return with the rain; in the day when the guards of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the women who grind cease working because they are few, and those who look through the windows see dimly; when the doors on the street are shut, and 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; when one is afraid of heights, and terrors are in the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails; because all must go to their eternal home, and the mourners will go about the streets; before the silver cord is snapped, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel broken at the cistern.”

The sun, light, moon, stars darkened...strong men bent...doors on the street shut... the grasshopper drags! What is this about? This is symbolism - engaging imagery of what happens as we grow older! The disintegration of our body as we age. Do you notice how colorful the Bible is here?

For instance, verse 2 says, *“before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark”*. Our physical senses are dimmed and dulled. *“Clouds return with (or after) the rain”* – this could mean depression, or one problem after another crops up. For instance, a person may have balance problems, then he or she break their hip, then circulatory problems follow, etc.

In verse 3 it says, *“Guards (or keepers) of the house tremble.”* What’s that signify? It probably refers to one’s arms and hands – hands and arms are shaking. What about *“Strong men bent”*? Here it’s no doubt speaking of one’s legs. Perhaps having issues with one’s back.

Then it says, *“When the grinders cease because they are few”*. You can probably guess that one! This is talking about our teeth! Molars. They cease because they are few! Any of you missing grinders? Anyone have fake grinders? *“And those who look through the windows see dimly”*. What’s that? The eyes! Any of you have trouble with small print? The last number of Bibles I’ve bought I’ve had to make sure the print is large enough for me to read. I’m going to be having cataract surgery in a few weeks.

This next one, if you get this, you hit the jackpot! In verse 4 it says, *“When the doors on the street are shut”*. What in the world does this suggest? Some think it means the ears and one’s loss of hearing. But others maintain that this is an Eastern expression for *constipation*. So you wind up taking laxatives, or drinking plenty of prune juice! Next, it says, *“The sound of grinding fades”*. This could mean hearing loss. Normal conversation is shut out and missed. My wife Nancy says I can’t hear any more. I tell her she mumbles too much.

“One rises up at the sound of a bird”. What’s that? Insomnia – getting up early in the morning, every little noise awakens you from sleep. You rarely sleep through the night. *“All the daughters of song are brought low”*. When you get older, often your singing voice is not what

it used to be! I've known older people who quit the choir and maintain, "I just can't sing any more." George Beverly Shay and Cliff Barrows were with the Billy Graham team, providing music for their crusades. A few years ago they both were on one of Bill Gaither's Homecoming concerts. At that time, Bev Shay was close to 100 years old and Cliff was up there in years. They sang a song together, and to be honest, it wasn't that good. Their voices were just not what they used to be!

The colorful description of the results of aging continue in this passage from Ecclesiastes chapter 12. "*When one is afraid of heights, and terrors are in the road,*" (verse 5). This depicts the worry that we sometimes find in elderly folk. They're afraid to go out at night, fearful of falling, fretting about the way the world is going. These words suggest the whole frail, fretful demeanor that we sometimes see in aged people. "*The almond tree blossoms.*" Grey hair! White hair! (Some say this is better than no hair!)

The next description is funny: "*The grasshopper drags itself along and desire fails.*" How does a grasshopper move? Hop, hop, hop. Here it pictures one dragging itself along. Desire diminishes. Elderly folk sometimes lose interest in things they were once enthused about. So here's an individual who at an earlier point in life took pride in their home, but now they let things go. They haven't changed curtains in a dozen years, haven't painted the woodwork in 20 years. "*Because all must go to their eternal home*" In verses 5, 6 and 7 various phrases are used to describe physical death.

We age, and our body wears out, doesn't it? If we're 80, our physical strength and stamina is not what it was when we were 45. If we're 45, we're not what we were at 20. (*Show a video clip of a lady offering grace at a banquet and in the process talking about getting old.*)

Sometimes helps if we can have sense of humor about growing old! ***But in other ways, the aging process is not funny! We age. We are mortal.*** Psalm 90:10 says, "The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away." Since this is true, a realistic appraisal of life recognizes this, and accepts it!

But you know, the words that we have looked at from Ecclesiastes are not the only words in the Bible that speak to the aging process! So far, the Scriptures we've looked at are kind of pessimistic, depressing. They don't offer much hope. Some Bible scholars say Ecclesiastes was written by someone who lost his faith, and can represent an outlook one might have if that person is without Christ.

Let's look at another Scripture that talks about being seventy-something, or eighty-something, or even ninety-something. Turn to Psalm 71. This psalm is an old man's prayer for deliverance from his enemies. And this man's view towards aging is quite a contrast from that of the writer of Ecclesiastes. The difference here is this: ***Here's an older man who has faith in God and has had a lifelong relationship with God.*** Look at how he begins the psalm: "In you, O Lord, I take refuge; let me never be put to shame" (Psalm 71:1). God is his refuge. Look at verses 5 and 6:

“For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth. Upon you have I leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from my mother’s womb. My praise is continually of you.” This man's faith in God dipped way back into his youth, even childhood. So he didn't arrive at the sunset of life with God as a stranger to him. God had been his refuge and his rock and his friend throughout all his life.

How different from a lot of people today who come to their final years on earth having ignored the spiritual side of life. They have no church, no pastor, no prayer life, no understanding of the Bible. No clue to the way of salvation. No practical experience of God. And so, you might find this person scrambling around for some kind of belief, something to hang onto or hope for as their life draws to a close. It’s like the elderly lady who suddenly began to read the Bible every day, and was seen praying a lot more than she ever did before. Her grandson quipped that grandma must be "studying for the final". The writer of Psalm 71 didn't wait until the night before to "study for the final"!

I had a relative for whom I was concerned about his spiritual condition, his soul. I had prayed for him for years. Then I heard he was in the hospital with serious medical issues. The prognosis was not good. I visited him, and was praying that he would be open to talking about the Lord, and that I would not have to force a discussion about the Lord. No sooner had I entered the room than he brought up the subject. In a heartfelt way he assured me that he did believe in Christ and that he prayed. Well, I praised God for that! I continued to pray that he would have the assurance of salvation. Since then, he died. But what is sad, to me, is the fact that he did believe, but spent his whole life basically apart from any church involvement and the fellowship of other believers.

The psalm writer goes on: “Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent” (Psalm 71:9). Even this man of great faith had to pray that God would stand by him in old age. The senior years can be very trying - as we have to cope with a number of *losses*: the loss of health, friends, family members, our independence, our physical agility and stamina. But here’s good news: If we have given our life to Christ, the *inward part* of us is being renewed daily by the Holy Spirit living in us! 2 Corinthians 4:16 puts it this way, “Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.”

Also, this man’s experience of old age was more positive than that portrayed in the Book of Ecclesiastes because *he had meaningful work to do*. Hear what he has to say, “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. Your power and your righteousness, O God, reach the high heavens” (Psalm 71:15-18). Isn't that beautiful! He had a mission! And that was to *pass on his faith to future generations!*

Here’s a question for you. How many times are the words “retire” or “retirement” (in the sense

of retiring from a job) used in the Bible? In the King James Version, the word "retire" is used a total of 4 times (as far as I can tell), and none of these references have anything to do with retirement as we think of it today!

Where in the Bible is it taught that we work hard until we are 62 or 65, then spend the rest of our life taking it easy, enjoying ourselves, and doing what *we* want to do? I've met people who say, "I've worked hard all my life, doing what I had to do, now I'm going to enjoy myself and do just what *I* want to do!" I've met *Christians* with this outlook. They were once active in a church. But now they say "Don't ask me to serve....I've paid my dues; it's time now for the younger people to do it." Where do you find that attitude in the Bible? Jesus didn't say, "Deny yourself, take up your cross, and follow me, until you're 65." The Lord didn't say, "Whoever wants to be first must be servant of all" - but after the age of 62 you have My permission to put yourself first and let others serve you." He didn't say, "The harvest is plentiful, and the laborers are few. Pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers (between the ages of 18 and 55)."

Don't get me wrong: Retirement can be good! I like being a part time pastor instead of being fulltime at this point in my life. *But I don't want to retire from trying to make a positive difference in this world and impacting people for Jesus Christ! I don't want to spend what time I have left piddling my life away in selfish, trivial pursuits!* In a couple of weeks I plan to preach on the Prayer of Jabez. Jabez prayed that God would enlarge his territory and sphere of influence for God. I pray that prayer just about every day, that God will give me more and more opportunities to touch people's lives for Christ.

The writer of Psalm 71 wanted God to use him to tell the next generation about His deeds of salvation! I want to challenge you who are in your 60's or 70's or 80's to ask God to use you to influence the next generation for Jesus Christ. Work with children. Maybe you can sign up to take a turn with the children here on Sunday morning. Share your faith with young people in your family, your neighborhood. I hope and pray, *collectively*, that those of us in the church who are older will be willing to give up certain things that we may like in the church, and be willing to change, so we can reach younger people with the gospel (younger people don't "do church" like we did 40 or 50 years ago).

One more quick note: the writer of Psalm 71 could have a very positive view and experience of the senior years because *he had discovered the ultimate reason why he was created*. It was to praise and glorify his Creator! Look at what he says, "I will 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" (verses 22-23). A spirit of praise just kind of oozes out of this entire psalm! *No one is ready to die until we have first discovered the reason we were born in the first place: To praise and glorify God!*

Humorist Garrison Keillor once wrote: "When you hit 50, you have to stop complaining about getting old, the strangeness of it, the fascination, the horror, etc. etc. That was okay in your 30's and 40's, but now that you're old, it's time to shut up on the subject. You shouldn't complain about aging for the simple reason that nobody gives a hoot...so learn to be cheerful about it."

