

# **GROWING OLD GRACEFULLY**

## **A GUIDE FOR OLDER PARENTS *AND* THEIR ADULT CHILDREN**

by

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## **CHAPTER ONE**

### **THE BENEFITS OF GROWING OLD IN CHRIST**

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As I write this, I am in my late fifties; therefore, the subject of growing old gracefully is becoming increasingly important to me. Moreover, since my parents and my wife's parents are all turning eighty this year, Rutu and I are thinking daily about our God-assigned privilege of caring for them. Since you're reading this booklet, you are probably in a similar position: either you want to finish well yourself or, as an adult child with aging parents, you have a compelling desire to help your parents land the plane of life on a smooth, wide runway.

Unfortunately, it is likely that you have received little or no biblical instruction on the matter of growing old in Christ. Reviewing my forty years of adult church attendance, I cannot recall one sermon on growing old in a God-honouring manner—not one! Churches frequently offer an abundance of instruction to address the first twenty years of life. "Do you have toddlers? We can help. Teenagers? Let's turn to the book of Proverbs." In contrast, very few churches do much to prepare mature saints for the final twenty years of life. However, the last twenty years of life are just as important as the first twenty. In fact, I think it is safe to say that a naughty eighty-year-old can cause just as much chaos in a family as a naughty two-year-old. Personally, I don't want to turn into a grumpy, cantankerous eighty-year-old; therefore, I am writing this booklet for both my benefit and yours.

And, yes, let me go on record straightaway: "I, Joel James, as sound of mind as I am ever likely to be, give my children and other caregivers permission to read this booklet to me in my declining

years." The truth of the matter is I want to apply my own counsel—the Bible's counsel really—about growing old in a way that reflects the character of Christ. Together, my wife and I aspire to apply God's Word in a humble and consistent fashion as we enter the final lap of life so that we will be a blessing to our children and to everyone else.

Worldly people view growing old with a barely concealed sense of revulsion. As Christians, when we open our Bibles, we find that God reveals a completely different attitude toward aging. To highlight that, let me begin by expounding four benefits of growing old in Christ: *anticipation, influence, children* (i.e., spiritual children), and *devotion*.

## **BENEFIT 1: ANTICIPATION**

The first benefit of growing old in Christ is *heightened anticipation*. The physical challenges of old age make it easy to become earth-focused rather than heaven-focused. Assailed daily by various afflictions, older believers in Jesus Christ must keep their anticipation of heaven on high boil. The apostle Paul provides an excellent example of this:

*Momentary, light affliction is producing for us an eternal weight of glory far beyond all comparison, while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen; for the things which are seen are temporal, but the things which are not seen are eternal. (2 Corinthians 4:17-18)*

Eyes that can no longer distinguish the miniscule squares of a cross-stitch fabric and that cannot read the fine print (or any print at all) on a business contract *can still see heaven*. Brains that struggle to

remember temporal things, such as where you put your reading glasses ("They're hanging around your neck, Dad"), can still anticipate eternal glories. While gladly acknowledging God's sovereignty over the length of life, we understand that no Christian is closer to heaven than an elderly Christian. In Romans 13:11, Paul wrote, "Salvation is nearer to us than when we believed." That is doubly true of elderly saints, and that should heighten their anticipation of heaven. In John 10:10, Jesus said, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Heaven is an infinitely better life than this one. It is a life without sin, sorrow, pain, or death; it is a life ruled over directly and visibly by Jesus Christ. And that life is waiting just around the corner. Anticipating it in a heightened, zealous fashion should typify all Christians who aspire to grow old gracefully.

In other words, a heavenly mindset is a rising tide of spiritual encouragement that carries an older believer over the discouraging sandbars of life. For example, when Paul wrote 2 Timothy, he was about sixty-five years old. For the last thirty-five years, Paul had given himself body and soul to the service of his Lord. As he wrote 2 Timothy, which was his final letter, Paul's situation was nothing short of gloomy and depressing. A sampling of his instructions and statements to Timothy highlight that fact:

*Do not be ashamed ... of me ... (2 Timothy 1:8)*

*All who are in Asia turned away from me ... (1:15)*

*I suffer hardship, even to imprisonment as a criminal. (2:9)*

Contemplating the future of the church, Paul wrote this:

*Difficult times will come ... (3:1)*

*Evil men and impostors will proceed from bad to worse ... (3:13)*

*The time will come when they will not endure sound doctrine.*  
(4:3)

Reflecting on his current situation, Paul added these words:

*Demas ... has deserted me ... (4:10)*  
*Alexander the coppersmith did me much harm ... (4:14)*  
*At my first defense no one supported me, but all deserted me.*  
(4:16)

Not very encouraging, is it? If he had been walking in the flesh, Paul would have arrived at the end of his life in a funk of discouragement and pessimism. To combat that temptation, Paul anticipated heaven:

*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith. In the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing ....*

*The Lord will rescue me from every evil deed, and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom; to Him be the glory forever and ever. Amen. (2 Timothy 4:7-8, 18)*

Considering the brutal physical persecutions that Paul had been subjected to for three decades, it is safe to assume that by age sixty-five he was daily assailed by a medical encyclopaedia of bodily aches and pains. More recently, he had been blindsided by a series of heart-wrenching betrayals. The church leaders in the Roman province of Asia had "turned away" from him, and Demas, one of his



closest co-workers, had abandoned the faith (2 Tim 1:15; 4:10). Nevertheless, Paul did not sink into an abyss of self-pity; instead, he fixed his hope on the fact that Christ and heaven had drawn closer than ever before: "The Lord will rescue me ... and will bring me safely to His heavenly kingdom" (2 Tim 4:18).

## **BEYOND PAUL**

The New Testament records other memorable examples of elderly people joyfully anticipating God's future grace as well. For example, when Mary and Joseph brought the eight-day-old Jesus to the Temple for the redemption ceremony required by the Mosaic Law, they were met by two people, Anna and Simeon. Anna was eighty-four years old, and although Simeon's age is not recorded, he doesn't sound like a teenager. First Simeon:

*There was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; and this man was righteous and devout, looking for the consolation of Israel; and the Holy Spirit was upon him. And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Christ. And he came in the Spirit into the temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to carry out for Him the custom of the Law, then he took Him into his arms, and blessed God, and said, "Now Lord, You are releasing Your bond-servant to depart in peace, according to Your word; for my eyes have seen Your salvation, which You have prepared in the presence of all peoples, A LIGHT OF REVELATION TO THE GENTILES, and the glory of Your people Israel." (Luke 2:25-32)*

And then Anna:

*There was a prophetess, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years and had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple, serving night and day with fastings and prayers. At that very moment she came up and began giving thanks to God, and continued to speak of Him to all those who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem. (Luke 2:36-38)*

An anticipation of Christ's first coming stimulated an unquenchable hope in the hearts of Anna and Simeon. In the same way, our anticipation of Christ's second coming (or of our home-going to Him), should produce a dynamic and sustaining joy in our hearts in the final decades of our earthly lives.

In short, one of the benefits of growing old is that worldly distractions fall away. The hormonal frenzies of youth are long past. You have navigated the challenges of raising children and have served your time in the workforce. At this point, you can't even recall if you had a mid-life crisis or not. With the hinderances and distractions of the first six decades of life out of the way, you can see the road ahead distinctly, with an undistorted field of vision that reaches all the way to heaven. The eyes of faith discern its celestial glow. Although you sometimes struggle to hear the music at church on Sundays, you have no problem hearing the saints and angels singing around the throne of God. That heightened anticipation of heaven is the first benefit of growing old in Christ.

## BENEFIT 2: INFLUENCE

A second benefit of growing old in Christ is *influence*. Old age typically involves a transition in which the direct leadership exercised in your younger years morphs into influence or indirect leadership. Influence is, in its own way, just as impactful as direct leadership. For example, the godly older man who has served his church as an elder for multiple decades might no longer be the man on the elder board who drives the ministry forward. He no longer shoulders the administrative, shepherding, and teaching loads that he once did. Nevertheless, he must never underestimate the influence he has on the younger men around him. For them, his accumulated fund of biblical wisdom, gentleness, and courage is an invaluable resource. In the same way, a woman's leadership in the life of her grandchildren will, in most cases, not take the form of the direct authority she exercised over her own children. But that does not make her influence in their lives inconsequential—not at all. In fact, direct leadership and influence function like a seesaw or a teeter-totter: when direct authority goes down, the other end of the teeter-totter, influence, goes up. That indirect leadership is the special sphere of the elderly.

*One generation shall praise Your works to another, and shall declare Your mighty acts. (Psalm 145:4)*

*Even when I am old and gray, O God, do not forsake me, until I declare Your strength to this generation, Your power to all who are to come. (Psalm 71:18)*

In light of these verses, I am appalled when I hear Christian grandparents gleefully exclaim regarding their grandchildren, "Our

job is to spoil them!" Besides sounding like a subtle form of revenge against their children, that statement exhibits a tragic failure to understand the formative power of grey-headed spiritual influence in the lives of youngsters. God wants you to enjoy your grandchildren in many ways, but especially by speaking to them about His strength, power, wisdom, goodness, and glory: "One generation shall praise Your works to another, and shall declare Your mighty acts" (Ps 145:4). Young people of all ages need that spiritual influence. The eager three-year-old child, the worn out thirty-five-year-old husband and father who is working himself to death, the mother of four who feels like she is climbing Mt. Everest every day when she clambers out of bed—they all need you, the grey-haired Christian, to exercise your encouraging and correcting influence in their lives. In Proverbs 25:11, Solomon says that all words of encouragement are a work of art; he describes them as "apples of gold in settings of silver." However, the words of older saints are especially beautiful and inspiring.

As an example, consider how the elderly Moses spoke to Joshua and the nation of Israel in one of his final speeches:

*Then Moses called to Joshua and said to him in the sight of all Israel, "Be strong and courageous, for you shall go with this people into the land which the LORD has sworn to their fathers to give them, and you shall give it to them as an inheritance. The LORD is the one who goes ahead of you; He will be with you. He will not fail you or forsake you. Do not fear or be dismayed. (Deuteronomy 31:7-8)*

Moses' forty-year term as the *de facto* king of Israel was finished; therefore, now it was time for Joshua to take the reins. Moses'

words, "Be strong and courageous .... the LORD is the one who goes ahead of you," were the stimulating encouragement that Joshua needed to hear from his elderly mentor. In fact, it seems that Joshua never forgot how Moses' final words inspired him, because Joshua gave a similar exhortation to the leaders of Israel when he retired from public life just under the age of one-hundred-and-ten.

*Now it came about after many days, when ... Joshua was old, advanced in years, that Joshua called for all Israel, for their elders and their heads and their judges and their officers, and said to them, "I am old, advanced in years. And you have seen all that the LORD your God has done to all these nations because of you, for the LORD your God is He who has been fighting for you ....*

*Now behold, today I am going the way of all the earth, and you know in all your hearts and in all your souls that not one word of all the good words which the LORD your God spoke concerning you has failed; all have been fulfilled for you, not one of them has failed. (Joshua 23:1-3, 14)*

Even if you no longer exercise the direct authority you once did, as an older saint you still have a powerful ministry of *influence*. A timely warning, an insightful word of advice, an uplifting chat, a quick hug or slap on the back—they are all hugely encouraging to the younger generation. Don't overlook that benefit of growing old in Christ.

### **BENEFIT 3: SPIRITUAL CHILDREN**

While the joys of children, grandchildren, and perhaps even great-grandchildren are a benefit of old age, under this heading I am

referring to *spiritual* children. The apostle John opened his third epistle with these words: "The elder to the beloved Gaius .... I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth" (3 John 1, 4). As far as we know, Gaius was not John's biological child; in fact, he was John's spiritual child. And the fact that Gaius was walking faithfully in the ways of Christ ignited fireworks of joy in John's heart. Watching those whom you have disciplined through the years flourish in their faith is one of the blessings of growing old in Christ.

Many years ago I gave an update in the Spanish ministry at Grace Community Church in Los Angeles. After my report, a man approached me and said, "Do you remember me?" His face was familiar, but I could not place him until he added, "I'm Oscar." Then it clicked. Ten years before, when I was still in seminary and working as a custodian at Grace Community Church, Oscar had wandered onto the church campus one night, an illegal immigrant with no home, no food, and no hope.

Since I was the only one on the cleaning staff who spoke some Spanish, I was appointed to supervise Oscar until someone from the Spanish Ministry could arrive to help him. As we waited, we shot baskets in the church gymnasium, and I preached the gospel to him in my school-boy Spanish. Ten years later, Oscar was now a committed believer in Jesus Christ and attended Grace Community Church along with a wife and children. He exuded joy as he explained that our talk that night while shooting baskets in the gym had been the start of the process by which God had drawn him to faith in Christ. At that moment, I experienced the delight the apostle John described when he wrote, "I have no greater joy than this, to hear of my children walking in the truth." Seeing Christ-honouring

fruit in the lives of those whom you have evangelised, disciplined, and counselled through the years is a thrilling benefit of growing old in Christ.

#### **BENEFIT 4: DEVOTION**

Who better than the prophet Daniel to illustrate the benefit of devotion?

*In the first year of Darius the son of Ahasuerus, of Median descent, who was made king over the kingdom of the Chaldeans—in the first year of his reign, I, Daniel, observed in the books the number of the years which was revealed as the word of the LORD to Jeremiah the prophet for the completion of the desolations of Jerusalem, namely, seventy years. So I gave my attention to the Lord God to seek Him by prayer and supplications, with fasting, sackcloth and ashes. (Daniel 9:1-3)*

The first year of Darius was 539 BC, and that meant Daniel was about eighty years old. Entering his eighth decade of life, Daniel was still functioning at an elite level, serving as the chief administrator of a massive ancient Near Eastern empire. Thankfully, we don't have to imitate that! However, we can emulate Daniel's devotion to God, a devotion that continued undiminished from his idealistic teen years recorded in Daniel 1 until he was an octogenarian in Daniel 9. In spite of the fact that Daniel administrated an empire, he still unrolled a scroll every day (in this case, the prophet Jeremiah) in order to reflect on the promises of God. Moreover, the prayer that Daniel prayed in chapter 9 after meditating on the words of Jeremiah is unquestionably one of the great prayers of all the Bible. Daniel was unique: at age eighty he still had to carve time out of a busy

schedule to study God's Word. However, by that age most older people are able to enjoy unharried devotion to God's Word and to prayer—a devotion uninterrupted by the emergencies, anxieties, and pressures of youth and middle age.

Furthermore, the opening season of old age, when your energy, strength, and mental clarity are still functioning at a high level, is an excellent time to devote yourself to undistracted service to Christ and the church. Jay Adams writes:

*There is no need for a person to waste the last years of his life watching TV. He may still have a productive place in God's Kingdom if only he will. People with time on their hands, who do nothing in the service of Christ, tend to become ingrown, self-centered and sicker than those who busy themselves with productive ministry. That ministry may differ from their ministries in earlier times, but every older believer ... may serve in some capacity .... It is important for younger people to see the old runner still on the track.<sup>1</sup>*

As you age, your opportunities for active service might diminish. However, as your circle of service contracts, the time you have to dedicate to personal Bible study and prayer should expand. Let Daniel be your model. Get a large-print scroll. Ask your grandchildren to download an audio Bible on your phone. However you go at it, redeem the time, because uninterrupted devotion to God's Word and to prayer is a wonderful benefit of growing old in Christ.

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<sup>1</sup> Jay Adams, *Wrinkled But Not Ruined: Counsel for the Elderly* (Woodruff, South Carolina: Timeless Texts, 1999), 22, 23.



However, while there are many benefits to growing old in Christ, there are also many challenges. Let's consider some of those challenges in the next chapter.



## CHAPTER TWO

### WHAT IS AGING?

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Some years ago, Jay Adams wrote a small book on aging entitled *Wrinkled, But Not Ruined*, in which he defined aging as *a process of loss*.<sup>2</sup> The losses of old age are many, including loss of stamina, loss of friends, loss of independence, loss of job, loss of finances, loss of home, loss of spouse—and eventually—loss of life. The apostle Paul summed up that process in one short statement: "Our outer man is decaying" (2 Corinthians 4:16).

In contrast to Paul's brevity, in Ecclesiastes 12 Solomon penned an extended and unforgettable metaphor in which he compared the physical and mental declines of old age to a grand, timeworn manor house that is slowly falling into ruin. It is perhaps the most evocative description of aging ever written:

*Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near when you will say, "I have no delight in them"; before the sun and the light, the moon and the stars are darkened, and clouds return after the rain; in the day that the watchmen of the house tremble, and mighty men stoop, the grinding ones stand idle because they are few, and those who look through windows grow dim; and the doors on the street are shut as the sound of the grinding mill is low, and one will arise at the sound of the bird, and all the daughters of song will sing softly. Furthermore, men are afraid of a high place and of terrors on the road; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags himself along, and the*

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<sup>2</sup> Adams, 1.

*caperberry is ineffective. For man goes to his eternal home while mourners go about in the street. Remember Him before the silver cord is broken and the golden bowl is crushed, the pitcher by the well is shattered and the wheel at the cistern is crushed; then the dust will return to the earth as it was, and the spirit will return to God who gave it. (Ecclesiastes 12:1-7)*

The imagery is, on the whole, not difficult to unravel. The watchmen of the house are the hands. Strong as a vice for decades, now they tremble rather than grasp firmly. The previously straight-and-strong mighty men are the legs and back, now bowed with age, no longer able to carry the heavy burdens they once did. The grinding ones that eventually go on strike due to their insufficient numbers are, of course, the teeth. Large gaps now appear where an unbroken row of ivories once shone.

The gradually dimming windows of Solomon's house are the eyes whose vision is now grey and hazy due to myopia or cataracts. The doors to the street that previously allowed social interaction, but that are now tightly shut, are the lips. Because of age, communication diminishes; stimulating conversations become more and more infrequent. In part, that is because it becomes hard to hear what other people are saying. The ears no longer process sound as well as they once did, not even the raspy noise of two millstones grating together as the servants grind meal to make flour. In the same way, the voices of the preacher and of the worship leaders at church seem, unaccountably, to have fallen to a whisper: "Why can't the preacher speak up? Why can't they sing louder? People don't speak as clearly as they used to," complains the elderly person. Ironically, says Solomon, although the elderly man can no longer hear the sermon or the music at church, nonetheless, at four in the morning

the tiniest chirp of the smallest sparrow instantly wakes him, and sleep takes wing, never to return.

And heights? The man who used to carry five cement roof tiles on his shoulder up a ladder now becomes paralysed with fear when he reaches the third step while carrying no load at all. In the same way, the "terrors of the road" lead to paralysis behind the steering wheel. Driving feels like a video game set on its fastest mode. Snowy hair (for those fortunate enough to retain it) blossoms like the white flowers of an almond tree in spring. The travails of arthritic joints mean that the elderly person drags himself or herself along with the angular, disjointed awkwardness of an injured grasshopper. And eventually, the internal organs—the cords, bowls, and pitchers used to draw life-giving water from the well—collapse. And, of course, death follows swiftly.

Derek Kidner sums up:

*In one's early years, and for the greater part of life, troubles and illnesses are chiefly set-backs, not disasters. One expects the sky to clear eventually. It is hard to adjust to the closing of that long chapter: to know that now, in the final stretch, there will be no improvement: the clouds will always gather again, and time will no longer heal, but kill.<sup>3</sup>*

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<sup>3</sup> Derek Kidner, *The Message of Ecclesiastes: A Time to Mourn and a Time to Dance*, in *The Bible Speaks Today*, ed. J. A. Motyer (Leicester, England: Inter-Varsity Press, 1976), 101-102.

## A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

Many would consider Solomon's description of aging in Ecclesiastes 12 (and Derek Kidner's summary of it) to be depressing. I don't. Actually, I consider their biblical realism to be a breath of fresh air, especially in contrast to the naïve rhetoric about aging that one finds in worldly books and on the internet. For example, I recently came across a book entitled, *Aging Is a State of Mind*, to which my response was, "Yeah, until it isn't." It is one thing to display a plucky attitude toward aging when you are sixty and still retain most of your mental and physical prowess. It is quite another to be cavalier and carefree when you are eighty-nine and cannot get out of a chair without help. By all means, stay active and be upbeat as you grow older. But don't be deceived by well-meaning rhetoric: if you live long enough, there will come a time when aging is no longer a state of mind.

In short, stubbornly denying the realities of aging and death is not a Christian practice. Solomon points that out in his usual attention-getting fashion: "It is better to go to a house of mourning than to go to a house of feasting, because that is the end of every man, and the living takes it to heart" (Ecclesiastes 7:2). There is no point in stonily denying God's warning to Adam about the consequences of eating from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil: "In the day that you eat from it you will surely die" (Genesis 2:17).

But does Solomon's description of the falling-down house in Ecclesiastes 12 mean that Christians are supposed to listlessly succumb to the effects of old age? Of course not.

## A DIFFERENT APPROACH ALTOGETHER

Biblically speaking, aging is neither to be railed against nor denied. Rather, Christians are to view aging and death *as our final earthly way of glorifying Jesus Christ*. That puts a different light on it, doesn't it? Viewing aging that way changes everything. I draw that principle from Romans 14:7-8, where the apostle Paul wrote, "Not one of us lives for himself, and not one dies for himself; for if we live, we live for the Lord, or if we die, we die for the Lord; therefore whether we live or die, we are the Lord's." There it is. Aging and death are our final earthly ways of glorifying Christ.

In other words, youth and middle age are, in part, a time of preparation for the homestretch of life. As Solomon reminds us in Ecclesiastes 12:1, youth is a time to establish a habit of trusting God: "Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth."

Furthermore, youth and middle age are a time to accumulate biblical wisdom: "How blessed is the man who finds wisdom and the man who gains understanding" (Proverbs 3:13). Youth and middle age are a time to weave the fruit of the Spirit—love, joy, peace, patience, and so on—into the fabric of your life so tightly that old age will not fray them or tug them out (Galatians 5:22-23).

If aging and death are the final ways that we glorify God in this life, then truly we want to grow old gracefully. In the next chapter, we will consider how to do that.





## CHAPTER THREE

### THE VITAL ROLE OF FAITH, HOPE, AND LOVE IN AGING

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One of the apostle Paul's favourite ways to evaluate the spiritual maturity of a church was to assess its faith, hope, and love (1 Cor 13:13; Col 1:4-5; 1 Thess 1:2-3, etc.). It is an equally effective way of evaluating the maturity of individual believers. In fact, exhibiting *faith* in God's promises, *hope* in Christ's return, and *love* for God and your neighbour is a wonderful way to grow old gracefully.

#### FAITH

*But having the same spirit of faith, according to what is written, "I believed therefore I spoke," we also believe, therefore we also speak, knowing that He who raised the Lord Jesus will raise us also with Jesus .... Therefore we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. (2 Corinthians 4:13-14, 16)*

Paul was in his middle-to-late fifties when he assured the Corinthians that the irreversible decline of his outer man had no inner, spiritual parallel. Because of the "beatings without number" that Paul had absorbed through the years (2 Cor 11:23-26), when he looked in the mirror, in Ecclesiastes 12 terms he saw that his roof was sagging, his paint was peeling, his shutters had fallen off, and his front door was hanging by one hinge. It did not matter. Paul's indomitable faith in Christ kept him perpetually renewed, spiritually speaking. Moreover, his faith in the resurrection of the dead kept Paul's inner man vibrant, even as his outer man gave way to the ravages of both hardship and age. Faith in Christ and a confident expectation of resurrection were essential to Paul's plan for growing old gracefully.

However, faith does not merely look to the future. Older Christians should also have faith in God's promises to care for them today.

Addressing the nation of Israel, God said this:

*Listen to Me, O house of Jacob ... You who have been borne by Me from birth and have been carried from the womb. Even to your old age I will be the same, and even to your graying years I will bear you! I have done it, and I will carry you; and I will bear you and I will deliver you. (Isaiah 46:3-4)*

God's attentive personal care does not evaporate when you move into a retirement facility. Notice the prayer of the author of Psalm 71:

*O God, You have taught me from my youth, and I still declare Your wondrous deeds. And even when I am old and gray, O God, do not forsake me, until I declare Your strength to this generation, Your power to all who are to come. (Psalm 71:17-18)*

Clearly the psalmist expected a positive answer to that prayer. In other words, whatever you lose as you traverse the closing decade or two of life, never misplace, forfeit, or forsake your faith in God. Faith in the gospel and in God's pledge to provide personal care for elderly saints keeps your inner man vibrant and robust even when your outer man begins to sag, shuffle, and shake.

## HOPE

Christian hope is in many ways indistinguishable from faith.

However, perhaps the two can be differentiated in this way: faith looks *back* on God's historic promises and actions; hope looks *forward* to their final fulfilment. For example, faith looks back on Christ's redeeming work on the cross. Hope looks forward to the final fulfilment in heaven of Christ's victory over sin and death. Elderly Christians might, at times, lose sight of their hope when their eyes of faith are, as it were, plucked out by the discouragements and suffering of old age. Therefore, to grow old gracefully, you must hold fast to biblical *hope*.

Our hope is, of course, founded on the unchanging nature of God's character and promises.

*In the same way God, desiring even more to show to the heirs of the promise the unchangeableness of His purpose, interposed with an oath, so that by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie, we who have taken refuge would have strong encouragement to take hold of the hope set before us. This hope we have as an anchor of the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast ... (Hebrews 6:17-19)*

Time changes us, but it does not change God. Nor does it alter God's saving promises. And those facts are "an anchor to the soul, a hope both sure and steadfast" as we, unlike God, experience the combined ravages of time and change.

Older Christians also have hope because we know that Jesus was victorious over the very process of decay and death that daily assails

our outer man. Paul wrote that Jesus "abolished death and brought life and immortality to light through the gospel" (2 Timothy 1:10). Life and immortality supplied by the eternal Son of God is just what we need as we face the process of loss that ends our earthly lives.

The simple truth is, those who have been united to Christ through faith in His death and resurrection do not need to live under a cloud of pensive anxiety regarding aging and death: "Since the children share in flesh and blood, He Himself [i.e., Christ] likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil, and might free those who through fear of death were subject to slavery all their lives" (Hebrews 2:14-15). Because Jesus defeated sin and death, biblical hope scours away all traces of the fear of death. Of course, no one looks forward to the *process* of dying which sometimes involves great physical pain. Nonetheless, death is a scorpion whose poisonous stinger has been amputated by Christ: "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting? .... Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Corinthians 15:55, 57).

Faith and hope are powerful spiritual tools that renew your inner man day by day, even as the outer man steadily decays. But what role does *love* play?

## LOVE

*'You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the great and foremost commandment. The second is like it, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.'* (Matthew 22:37-39)

In one sense, to grow old gracefully all you need to do is love God and love neighbour. That's it. Nothing else. After all, at what age do the Lord's two great commandments cease to have authority? In fact, we never outgrow those commands. Sadly, however, some elderly believers act as if Christ's mandates to love God and neighbour expire when one reaches the age of seventy or eighty. As a result, they become increasingly irritable and grasping; they use their age and infirmities as a ready-made excuse to be grouchy and self-absorbed. Inevitably, they do not grow old gracefully. They have forgotten that the two great commandments have no "best by" date. Until we draw our final breath, those commands guide our every thought, word, and action.

It might seem novel to assert that loving God and loving neighbour is the key to aging gracefully; however, that principle was modelled by the apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians 4. In verse 16, Paul wrote these familiar words: "Therefore, we do not lose heart, but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day." However, perhaps that statement is too familiar, making it easy to overlook the significance of the word that opens the verse. The word *therefore* creates a cause-and-effect link between verse 16 and the statement that precedes it. In other words, verse 15 divulges the key to Paul's daily spiritual renewal. In light of that, let's read both verses in succession:

*All things are for your sakes, so that the grace which is spreading to more and more people may cause the giving of thanks to abound to the glory of God. Therefore we do not lose heart but though our outer man is decaying, yet our inner man is being renewed day by day. (2 Corinthians 4:15-16)*

What fuelled Paul's daily inner renewal? Topping the list were his love for God and his love for neighbour. First, neighbour. How did Paul open verse 15? He wrote to the Corinthians, "All things are for your sakes ..." Could there be a more powerful assertion of neighbour-love than "All things are for your sakes"? Equally important to Paul's daily inner renewal was his love for God and for God's glory. Paul rolled out of bed each morning energised by a compelling hope that one more sinner might be saved that day, creating an outburst of thanksgiving that would abound "to the glory of God" (v. 15). The result of Paul's love for the Corinthians and of his love for God and God's glory was this: "Therefore, we do not lose heart ... our inner man is being renewed day by day" (4:16). Loving God and neighbour was a key part of Paul's not-so-secret formula for growing old gracefully.

Jesus' command to love God is expressed in many of the principles we have already covered. We love God by having faith in His promises, by fostering hope in His future actions, by means of the undistracted service and devotion of old age, and so on. Therefore, in the next section, we will focus on Jesus' second command, the command to love neighbour. What does loving neighbour look like when I am seventy or eighty years old? Let's find out ...

## CHAPTER FOUR

### SPIRITUAL DANGERS FACED BY OLDER BELIEVERS

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Elderly people face many dangers, for example, the one-centimetre difference in height between their living room carpet and their kitchen tiles. Although physical dangers of that nature pose a very real threat to the unsteady feet of old age, the most pressing hazards for elderly Christians are *spiritual* dangers.

#### EXCEPTIONAL AGE, ORDINARY SINS

Perhaps the predominant spiritual danger for those who aspire to grow old in Christ gracefully is the temptation *to use exceptional age to excuse ordinary sins*. Let's admit it, as we grow older it becomes convenient to foster the delusion that some of our attitudes and actions are no longer sinful: "Now that I'm seventy, I have a free pass when it comes to self-focus, rudeness, bitterness, and anger. My life situation means people simply have to tolerate my cranky behaviour. My exceptional age excuses my ordinary sins." To counteract this, as I age, I am beginning to ask myself questions such as, What will the fruit of the Spirit look like when I am seventy or eighty years old? Is it inevitable that the love, joy, peace, and patience produced by the Spirit will, like milk, spoil as I grow older, souring into self-focus, grumbling, anxiety, and anger? Shouldn't the Spirit's transforming work continue strong and sweet to the end of my life? Shielding ordinary sins behind the excuse of extraordinary age is, perhaps, the overarching spiritual hazard for older Christians. However, under that heading lurks a number of more specific dangers. Let's consider six of them.

## DANGER NUMBER 1: GRUMBLING

While all Christians are inclined to grumble, I think it is fair to say that older people are doubly tempted to succumb to this sin. However, Paul categorically condemned the sin of grumbling in Philippians 2.

*Do all things without grumbling or disputing; so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world.*

(Philippians 2:14-15)

For many older people, grumbling is the only sport they are still able to participate in, and they do so at an Olympic level. However, grumbling is not a sport. It is a blameworthy and defiling sin—a sin that Jesus died for. Furthermore, the sour milk of a persistently peevish attitude not only incites God’s displeasure, it also hinders human relationships as well. Jay Adams writes, “Some older persons develop an attitude problem that drives others away. Those who have tried to befriend them soon come away vowing never to make the attempt again. All they have heard when they were together was gripes, complaints, and grumbling. Some are even nasty. They seem to think that their age entitles them to say or do whatever they wish.”<sup>4</sup>

What do elderly people grumble about most frequently?

Undoubtedly health complaints top the list. As we age it is easy to

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<sup>4</sup> Jay E. Adams, *Wrinkled But Not Ruined: Counsel for the Elderly*, (Timeless Texts: Woodruff, South Carolina, 1999), 51.



turn every conversation into an anatomy chart of bodily aches, pains, and dysfunctions. If you are at the point where your only outing is a trip to the doctor, a concise report regarding your latest appointment and the health crisis that provoked it is perfectly appropriate. However, an exhaustive recital that begins with grouching about hair loss and descends centimetre by centimetre down your body until it culminates in a gory description of your in-grown toenails is a blessing to no one. In fact, habitual self-absorbed complaining about anything—politics, the food at the retirement centre, or the manifold faults of your caregivers—does not inspire family and friends to visit and converse with you. On the contrary, it drives them away. In short, old age gives you the opportunity to be a relentless grumbler or to be consistently grateful. Which will it be for you?

*Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father. (Colossians 3:17)*

## **DANGER NUMBER 2: FEAR-DRIVEN DECISIONS**

Anxious thoughts about an uncertain future are a temptation for elderly people. Moreover, sinful fretting frequently joins forces with an older person's diminished powers of judgement to give birth to *fear-driven decisions*. These are decisions that seem perfectly logical to the elderly person fabricating them, but which are outlandish and nonsensical to everyone else. For example, imagine the eighty-two-year-old man who stays with his adult son or daughter in Pretoria. Although he now lives in Pretoria, the first eighty years of his life were spent in Bloemfontein, a city about five hours' drive away. Since his new surroundings make him feel fearful and anxious, he resolves to return to the city of his birth. No longer able to drive, he

determines that he will *walk* the 450 kilometres to Bloemfontein. Thankfully, his children catch up with him a few blocks from home, already disoriented and lost, but absolutely determined to carry out his plan.

The most notable biblical example of this is Abraham and Sarah. In Genesis 15, God promised them descendants more numerous than the stars of the night sky; however, after ten years of disappointed, fretful waiting, at the age of eighty-five, Abraham gave way to their joint anxiety, and he and Sarah concocted a crazy, fear-driven plan to “solve” their problem:

*Now Sarai, Abram's wife had borne him no children, and she had an Egyptian maid whose name was Hagar. So Sarai said to Abram, "Now behold, the LORD has prevented me from bearing children. Please go in to my maid; perhaps I will obtain children through her." And Abram listened to the voice of Sarai. After Abram had lived ten years in the land of Canaan, Abram's wife Sarai took Hagar the Egyptian, her maid, and gave her to her husband Abram as his wife. (Genesis 16:1-3)*

The consuming anxieties and tunnel vision of old age can lead to some very interesting decisions. Therefore, as we grow older, it is doubly and triply important that we love neighbour by fostering a humility that seeks counsel from proven, trusted sources. Unilateral decisions are perilous at any age: “Without consultation, plans are frustrated, but with many counsellors they succeed” (Proverbs 15:22; see also 11:14; 24:6). However, as we move into our seventies and eighties, schemes fabricated inside our own heads or discussed only between an elderly husband and wife without the balancing input of younger minds become exponentially more hazardous. Therefore, as

you age, build up a habit of seeking input from proven, trusted counsellors: spiritually minded adult children, the elders of your church, and so on. The older we get, the more essential their contributions become.

### **DANGER NUMBER 3: DRIFT**

*Drift* refers to the *purposeless activity or purposeless inactivity* that sometimes typifies elderly people. Quoting Adams again, "Many people who eagerly looked forward to retirement find, if they do not die soon afterwards, that it isn't [all] it's cracked up to be. They die inside, curl up, and become lifeless."<sup>5</sup> Why does that happen? Because God created human beings to function best as running water, not as a stagnant pond. In the long term, no one flourishes on a routine of trivial, self-pampering activities, nor on the mind-numbing and vigour-sapping inactivity of staring at a television or computer screen.

In other cases, in order to escape the stultifying boredom of old age, elderly saints drift backwards into the past, obsessing over a laundry list of historical failures and regrets. As a result, they slowly spiral into a dark well of depression. Or perhaps they spend their days gnawing on the dry bone of some long-cherished bitterness or snarling at family members whom they believe betrayed them twenty or even thirty years ago.

Yet other elderly people drift into endless daydreaming sessions in a futile effort to resurrect the pleasant relationships or life situations of the past. Aspiring to escape from a painful or tedious present, they

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<sup>5</sup> Adams, 24, 31.

steadily withdraw into a haze of golden memories. While there is nothing wrong with pulling out a photo album and thanking God for the blessings of past successes and relationships, people who consistently live in the past eventually forfeit the ability to distinguish past from present. As a result, they gradually lose touch with reality, demonstrating the truth of the axiom, "People don't *lose* their minds; they *give them away*." Solomon specifically warned against this kind of daydream drift: "Do not say, 'Why is it that the former days were better than these?' For it is not from wisdom that you ask about this" (Ecclesiastes 7:10). A walk down memory lane thanking God every step of the way might be an invigorating form of exercise for an elderly person who is no longer able to rise from his bed. However, an undisciplined yearning for the good ol' days can quickly turn into an arid form of self-pity that keeps one from loving God and neighbour in the present.

Rather than live in the past, mature Christians should divide their view of time into three categories. They are to be *past-focused* in regard to the work of Christ, but *present-focused* and *future-focused* in everything else. The apostle Paul expressed that reality memorably in Titus 2:11-13, "The grace of God has appeared [Christ's work in the *past*] ... instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age [a sanctifying *present-focus*], looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus [an edifying *future-focus*]." Endeavouring to keep your thoughts about the past, present, and future in proper balance is a vital part of growing old gracefully.

In regard to the present, Solomon gives people of all ages this charge: "Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might"

(Ecclesiastes 9:10). As an older person, your physical strength won't be what it was five or ten years ago; nonetheless, stay involved in your church, your family, and in other pursuits as long as you can. Stay active. Keep serving. The older ladies in our church are a wonderful example of this. When they work in the church kitchen preparing meals for our pastors' conferences, let me assure you, they are *not* drifting. They are slicing, dicing, chopping, stirring, rinsing, drying, sweeping, mopping, chattering, and giggling. Drifting? Never! Good work, ladies!

#### **DANGER NUMBER 4: DENIAL**

The problem of *denial* is exemplified by that perky book title I mentioned to earlier, *Aging Is a State of Mind*. It would be absurd to check out of life the moment you turn sixty-five; however, stubbornly denying that the tide of time is creeping up the beach of life is equally irrational. The notion that your body, your relationships, and your living situation will be substantially the same at eighty or ninety as they were at age fifty-five or sixty is naïve. In fact, when King David obstinately denied the slow decline of his mental and physical abilities, his lack of sound judgement nearly cost him his life.

*Now when the Philistines were at war again with Israel, David went down and his servants with him; and as they fought against the Philistines, David became weary. Then Ishbi-benob, who was among the descendants of the giant, the weight of whose spear was three hundred shekels of bronze in weight, was girded with a new sword, and he intended to kill David. But Abishai the son of Zeruiah helped him, and struck the Philistine and killed him. Then the men of David swore to him, saying,*

*"You shall not go out again with us to battle, so that you do not extinguish the lamp of Israel." (2 Samuel 21:15-17)*

David had never needed help in combat, not when tussling with bears and lions, nor when clashing with genetic mutants like Goliath. However, David's failure to acknowledge his diminishing athletic prowess would have been fatal but for the timely intervention of his nephew, Abishai. Do you think it was easy for David to admit that he could no longer dominate the battlefield? Of course not.

Nonetheless, those who aspire to grow old gracefully must anticipate and embrace the reality that their memory, situational awareness, balance, and strength will steadily diminish with age. Making sensible self-assessments based on present realities (rather than on past triumphs) is a characteristic of spiritually mature people. When addressing the subject of spiritual gifts, Paul wrote, "I say to everyone among you not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment" (Romans 12:3). Exhibiting sound judgement when assessing ourselves does not apply only to spiritual gifts; it applies to every area of life, including those areas directly affected by aging.

How can we apply sound judgement as we grow older? How about avoiding ladders? My father-in-law was an electrician his entire working life. Naturally, he spent his days climbing up and down ladders, never once experiencing a fear of heights. However, one day (in his middle-seventies) when he was supervising a repair project on the roof of his house, he ascended halfway up an extension ladder and froze, paralysed by a sense of imbalance and fear that he had never previously experienced. He clung to the ladder with desperate hands as the muscles in his calves began to tremble and cramp. "No more ladders for me," was his humble and sensible commitment

after he shakily made his way back down to the ground. Growing old gracefully includes anticipating—even predicting—such crises, so that you can avoid them *before* they happen.

For me, avoiding ladders will be no great sacrifice. I will be perfectly happy to pay some young man to clean the solar panels on the roof of my house one day. But what about giving up my car keys? As I age, I have made a commitment to hand my car keys to my children (or some suitable proxy) each year and say, "Only give them back if you think I am safe to drive." Ouch! But isn't that what loving my neighbour looks like when I am seventy or eighty? "*Your safety* is more important than *my independence*." Everyone is delighted for you to drive as long as you are safe. Indeed, it is far more convenient for them and for you. However, a stubborn denial of your declining reaction time when seated behind the steering wheel of your car is no way to love your neighbour. Therefore, seek feedback from people who will have the honesty and courage to give you a true assessment of your driving abilities. That is what godly humility looks like at age seventy-five or eighty.

Honestly preparing for and accepting the incremental declines of old age *before* they happen is important. I cannot tell you the number of times my father wistfully said of his elderly mother, "If she had only moved to the retirement home a year or two earlier, she would have had the mental capacity to adjust to her new surroundings and to make new friends. But she waited too long to make the move, and as a result, the transition was far harder than it needed to be."

*Denial* also has other manifestations, for example, a naïve and stubborn refusal to prepare oneself for the death of friends and family members who are a similar age or older. I was once called on

to counsel this situation: “A woman in my church is angry at God because of the death of her mother. She is saying, ‘How could God take my mother from me at this time when I'm struggling with depression?’” Seeking more information, I asked, “How old was her mother?” Answer, ninety-two. Astonished, I asked, “How old is the woman you are counselling?” Sixty-seven. I responded, “She is angry at God that her *ninety-two-year-old* mother died? Did she imagine her mother was going to live forever in this life?” Without ever becoming morbid about it, older Christians prepare themselves so that they are not blindsided by the death of an elderly spouse, dear friends, or close family members.

In summary, growing old gracefully requires preparation. Don't languish in denial, waiting for a tragic accident or for a series of stormy family meetings before you admit that the declines of old age have begun in earnest. Prudent believers look ahead, judiciously making sound decisions about their finances, living situations, and driving practices before a crisis takes place, not waiting until change has to be forced on them by their exasperated children.

## **GOOD EXAMPLE, BAD EXAMPLE**

Would an example or two be helpful? First, a good example. Moses provides an example of a man who prudently recognised his declining abilities and acted decisively. According to Deuteronomy 34:7, Moses had unabated physical and mental vigour up to the closing days of his life. However, when he suddenly felt his strength slipping away, he wisely handed over the leadership of Israel to his long-term subordinate, Joshua, admitting, "I am a hundred and twenty years old today; I am no longer able to come and go ..." (Deut 31:2). Rather than cling to the leadership duties that he had



faithfully fulfilled for forty years, when it became clear that his flagging energy and mental acuity could no longer cope with the demands of his office, Moses exhibited godly humility and stepped aside without a series of painful and awkward confrontations.

If Moses provides a good example of anticipating the changes of old age, King David provides a bad example (hardly surprising after the battlefield incident we noted earlier). In the opening chapter of 1 Kings, one meets a very unfamiliar David: an elderly man, king in name only, feeble, bed-bound, and unable to generate sufficient body heat to stay warm. Clearly David had clung to the sceptre long past the point that he should have passed it to Solomon, the son that David had already privately identified as his replacement. David's rash delay resulted in a doddering, befuddled, out-of-touch "king," who was surrounded by a tornado of intrigue, chaos, and political manoeuvring. Civil war could easily have been the result. If David had thought a bit more about loving his neighbour, he would have passed the throne to Solomon much earlier.

The same kind of intrigue and chaos transpires today when elderly parents stubbornly delay pivotal decisions about their finances and living situation until they are no longer capable of making those decisions. Rather than mulishly denying the realities of aging and death, seek your children's input and make sensible decisions *while you are still fully able to do so*. That includes making a will (a final act of love toward your children, allowing them to avoid the legal complexities and expenses that transpire when someone dies without a will). It is not that you have to go straight from your office retirement party to a frail-care unit. Of course not. However, exercising wise judgement and loving your neighbour means that you

anticipate and prepare for the changes of old age in ways that are a blessing to everyone involved.

## **DANGER NUMBER 5: PRIDE**

The pride of old age can manifest itself in many ways. First, *in a dogged refusal to receive help from other people*. Have you ever said, "I just don't want to be a burden to my kids!"? I appreciate the sentiment, but stop saying that. It is not biblical. In fact it is just a form of pride. If you live long enough, you will be a "burden" to your children. You will need their help. That is both inevitable and *normal*. In fact, in 1 Timothy 5, God commands children to care for their elderly parents: "If any widow has children or grandchildren, they must first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of God" (1 Timothy 5:4). It is axiomatic that parents save up for their children (2 Cor 12:14; Prov 19:14a). Nevertheless, it is equally true that God commands children to assist their elderly parents. It is a classic example of the saying, "What goes around comes around." Your children were a so-called burden to you for the first twenty years of their lives, but you happily fed them, housed them, clothed them, transported them, and loved them. That's normal. Eventually it will be their turn to do the same for you. That's normal too.

By all means, save for your retirement if you can. However, acknowledge that no matter how much money you salt away, at some point your children or grandchildren will have to care for you physically, emotionally, spiritually, and—perhaps—financially. Therefore, no more moaning about being a burden to your children. Save wisely, but embrace the fact that one day they will care for you,

and God will be honoured by their sacrificial care *and* by your humility to receive it.

## **GROWING BACKWARDS TOWARDS INFANCY**

God designed the family as a “what goes around comes around” operation because *the final stages of aging are a process of growing backwards toward infancy*. Unpleasant to think about, but true. Humbly embracing that reality is essential to growing old gracefully in Christ. Nobody wants to become a perpetual passenger, to wear nappies, or to be dressed and fed like an infant. In fact, that might not be God’s plan for you. But if it is, has the Spirit of God worked enough humility in your heart to respond with meekness and gratitude if you have to be cared for like a child in the closing years of your life?

For a Christian, it is not shameful to receive help. Let me say that again: it is not shameful for a Christian to receive help from others. On the contrary, it is shameful for a Christian to be hard to help. Those who follow Christ should be the easiest people in the world to assist and care for, because *they are humble and grateful people*. They are people who understand and embrace the concept of grace. We who have received salvation from God by grace alone should not struggle to receive lesser, more mundane forms of grace from other people—including the grace of help from adult children or other caregivers.

Let me share an illustration of how my wife and I learned the importance of being easy to help. Early in our marriage, after two exceedingly difficult pregnancies compounded by disabling bouts with both pneumonia and bronchitis, Rutty went through an extended

season during which she lacked the physical strength to care for our home, our children, to run errands, and so on. Especially upsetting to her was the fact that all of her domestic duties naturally devolved on me. Being a conscientious and loving wife, at first she struggled to accept my help with a grateful attitude. She returned to her usual sunny, thankful disposition when I explained to her, “I am happy to serve you and the kids. In fact, the only thing that makes it hard is when you resist my help or don’t receive it with a cheerful attitude.” She changed immediately. Years later I had the opportunity to imitate her noble example when I also went through an extended season of poor health. Receiving help with a cheerful, humble heart must typify those who aspire to grow old gracefully.

## **OTHER EXPRESSIONS OF PRIDE**

Pride is also seen in the older person who *selfishly demands to be the centre of everyone's time and attention*. As always, I must acknowledge that we should always respond with extra grace to those who are suffering from disorienting brain diseases: the elderly father with Alzheimer’s has no idea what time it is when he wakes up his adult daughter at two in the morning to ask for a drink of water. That, however, is markedly different from the elderly man who demands instant attention from his children no matter how trivial the matter. Outside the stream of busy, productive life himself, he refuses to make allowance for his family’s busy schedules, multiple obligations, and other legitimate pursuits. Alone in his room, he fosters the habit of thinking only of himself. Therefore, even the smallest inconvenience balloons entirely out of proportion and becomes, to him, a monumental crisis: “The light in my living room has burnt out. You must come and fix it *now!*” Seven phone calls over the next hour underline the urgency of the matter from his

perspective. Waiting until his son comes home from work or until his daughter has collected the kids from school is not an option. It must be done now! If his children fail to give his concerns instant attention, he pouts and flings absurd accusations of abandonment at them.

While dementia can play a role in such scenarios, in other cases it is simply an attitude of self-focus and pride. Sadly, rather than considering others before themselves, elderly people can, at times, become unbearably impatient and wilfully blind to the time pressures and manifold obligations of younger, more active people. As always, the apostle Paul's words provide an infallible corrective: "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others" (Phil. 2:3-4). That is what loving my neighbour looks like when I have to wait an afternoon or a day until my children come and replace the burnt-out globe in my living room.

Another form of pride is seen in the older person who *demand*s authority simply because of his or her age. This person's Bible has been reduced to one verse, Leviticus 19:32, "You shall rise up before the grayheaded and honour the aged." He or she conveniently ignores the balancing implications of Paul's instruction in 1 Timothy 4:12, "Let no one look down on your youthfulness." How easy it is to forget that honour is best *given*, not demanded.

Cross-generational relationships function smoothly when older folks refuse to despise the young, and when the younger folks intentionally honour the old. When that pattern is reversed, when the old demand honour and the young demand prominence, then

tensions escalate rapidly. In short, focus on the command that requires *you* to change, not on the one that requires the other person to change. For example, as an older person, I should be thinking this: “I will let the young people worry about honouring an old codger like me. They are accountable to God for that. What I need to focus on is making sure that I don’t despise their youthful enthusiasm and lack of experience.” When that kind of humility replaces pride, generational tensions promptly evaporate.

## **DANGER NUMBER 6: SELF-CENTREDNESS**

For the elderly, the sin of self-centredness takes many forms. Its first manifestation is often *a self-centred retirement*. J. I. Packer describes this danger well:

*You are off the treadmill and out of the rat race. Now, at last, you ... can concentrate on having fun. You have your pension; health services are there to look after your body. And clubs, trips, outings, tours, competitions, games, parties, and entertainments are provided in abundance to help you pass the time. So now go ahead and practice self-indulgence up to the limit.<sup>6</sup>*

That might sound very alluring at first, but, once again, the command to love neighbour does not expire when we reach the end of our working lives. That does not mean it is wrong to enjoy the rewards of a lifetime of hard work. Besides faithfully serving in their church, Ruty's parents also enjoy an annual holiday on a cruise ship. We have told them, "Go! Use your money. Don't leave anything for us.

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<sup>6</sup> J.I. Packer, *Finishing Our Course with Joy*, (Crossway: Wheaton, Illinois, 2014), 27.

Spend it all and go down with the ship." Our parents have worked incredibly hard their entire lives, and we are delighted for them to enjoy the legitimate fruits of their God-blessed labours (Ecc 5:18-20; 3:22; 8:15). However, the command to love God and neighbour means that retirement cannot be a season dedicated to an interminable procession of self-serving activities.

Another form of self-centredness is *hoarding*. "There is a grievous evil which I have seen under the sun: riches being hoarded by their owner to his hurt" (Ecclesiastes 5:13). While it is natural to find comfort in a bevy of familiar possessions, Christians—whatever their age—should be primarily concerned with heavenly, not earthly treasure.

*Store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:20-21)*

Beware of the sin of hoarding. As you age, actively plan to downsize your house and possessions. When you are no longer able to use all your tools, books, baking pans, and tea-sets, or when you no longer have the space to store them because you are moving into a small retirement flat, enjoy your possessions one final time *by giving them away*. Adams writes, "This certainly is a more pleasant way to dispose of one's belongings before death than to wait and think [about your children] squabbling and fighting over them when [you die] .... There may be a young couple starting out in marriage with very little who could be helped by such gifts .... Let go of things that

are no longer of real use."<sup>7</sup> Randy Alcorn adds, "Five minutes after I die, what will I wish I would have given away while I still had the chance?"<sup>8</sup>

After hoarding, a third self-centred sin of old age is *exercising tyrannical control over your family*. Children and grandchildren are a blessing from the Lord. However, the expectation that they will plan their lives around you can easily lead to manipulation, bullying, conflict, and bitterness when they do not.

[Your adult children] *may be required to relocate .... Moreover, even if they live next door, they will not have time to cater to you—especially, if they are trying to support and train a growing family of their own .... If you are going to be happy and satisfied in old age, it will not be because of what others do for you. It will be because you have learned to live a contented life with your Lord.*<sup>9</sup>

Don't be the self-centred elderly mother who demands that her children's and grandchildren's lives revolve around her. Don't be the father who manipulates his adult children's affection by playing Snakes and Ladders with the inheritance money.

A fourth self-centred sin of old age is the temptation to *be excessively attached to a particular house*: "I have lived in this house for forty-seven years, and I'm going to die in this house!" I understand feeling an emotional attachment to a certain house, neighbourhood, or city. I am starting to sense that tug myself.

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<sup>7</sup> Adams, 76, 81.

<sup>8</sup> Randy Alcorn, *The Treasure Principle* (Multnomah Publishers, Colorado Springs, 2001), 81.

<sup>9</sup> Adams, 76-77.



However, loving my neighbour means that when planning my future living situation, I must give equal or greater consideration to the convenience of my children—the ones to whom God has assigned the task of caring for me in the closing years of my life. Again, the apostle Paul's words must be our guide: "Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 2:3-5).

In contrast to the obstinate declaration, "I am going to die in this house," let me suggest an alternative: "God has given you, my children, a duty to care for me in my old age. How can I make that job as easy as possible for you? How can I make that a joyful responsibility, not an onerous duty? I have some desires—of course I do—and we can talk about them. But I want to show my love for Christ and for you by making it as easy as possible for you to care for me."

## **CONCLUSION**

The rulebook of the Christian life does not change as we grow older. We still obey God's Word, with all its life-changing commands about humility and loving others. In fact, growing old gracefully requires the same grace and the same fruit of the Spirit that are essential to the earlier seasons of life. New situation, same rules. Growing old is a daunting endeavour because of its irreversible losses and changes. But whatever else changes, one thing remains comfortingly constant: in Christ, the rules that guide our attitudes and actions—things like faith, hope, love, and humility—never change.



## CHAPTER FIVE

### HELPING YOUR ELDERLY PARENTS GROW OLD GRACEFULLY

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If growing backward towards infancy is uncharted territory for elderly parents, it is equally so for their adult children. In fact, at times the steady declines of old age might eventually lead to a virtual reversal of the parent-child relationship. As a child, your interaction with your parents started as one of authority and submission, governed by the command of Ephesians 6:1, "Children obey your parents." When you reached your early twenties, direct obedience fell away, and your interaction with your parents morphed into one of influence and honour, governed by Ephesians 6:2, "Honor your father and mother." By the time you need this booklet, your relationship with your parents has probably remained substantially unchanged for five decades. Now, however, in the closing season of your parents' lives, the teeter-totter of influence and authority is starting to tilt slowly back towards you, the child. That can be a disorienting change for everyone involved. And unless that transition is handled by both sides with grace, wisdom, and humility, it can lead to tension, inflammatory exchanges, bullying, manipulation, and exasperation.

Therefore, to conclude this booklet, I want to address the matter of *how to parent your parents*. As adult children, we are just as susceptible to sin and foolishness as our aging parents are; therefore, we need coaching too. If your parents are entering their seventies, eighties, or nineties, what principles do you need to keep in mind? Let's focus on two: honour and care.

## PRINCIPLE 1: HONOUR

*Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right. Honor your father and mother (which is the first commandment with a promise), so that it may be well with you, and that you may live long on the earth. (Ephesians 6:1-3)*

The obedience of Ephesians 6:1 fell away when you got married and established a new family unit or when, as a single adult, you moved out of your parents' home and began to take full financial responsibility for your life. However, the honour commanded by God in Ephesians 6:2-3 never falls away. It might change shape over the decades; nevertheless, honouring your parents is a life-long duty. Interestingly, the Bible never precisely defines what that duty looks like. However, the Greek word translated *honour* provides a clue. It meant *to count something as valuable*. Whether or not your elderly parents can sustain themselves financially, can prepare their own meals, dress themselves, or are likely to leave a large inheritance, you are to treat them as immensely valuable. That's baseline. No matter how frail, confused, time-consuming, or exasperating they are, God commands you to treat your parents as a priceless treasure.

## PRINCIPLE 2: CARE

As your parents age, the *attitude* of honour must join hands with the *action* of caring, that is caring for your parents' physical, financial, emotional, and spiritual needs.

*But if any widow has children or grandchildren, they must first learn to practice piety in regard to their own family and to make some return to their parents; for this is acceptable in the sight of*

*God .... But if anyone does not provide for his own, and especially for those of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. (1 Timothy 5:4, 8)*

Family is a care-package that encompasses the entirety of life: conception, birth, infancy, childhood, adulthood, and old age. According to God, one motivation for adult children to care for their elderly parents is the principle of *reciprocity*: children are "to make some return to their parents" (1 Tim 5:4). That is the family version of the maxim, "What goes around comes around." Caring for our parents at the end of their lives is a God-commanded expression of gratitude for the expensive, time-consuming, and self-abdicating care they expended on us during our childhood and teen years. Did your parents do a poor job of caring and providing for you when you were a child? If so, grace helps you look past their failures. After all, God loved us and adopted us into His family despite the complete absence of any merit of our own. Surely we can follow His example when it comes to loving and caring for neglectful parents.

If the principles of reciprocity and God's grace are insufficient goads to spur you to care for your parents, Paul added another compelling motivation: a Christian who defaults on this duty "has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (1 Tim 5:8). While a genuine believer cannot lose his or her salvation, no one wants to discover how God treats a believer whom He considers to be *worse* than an unbeliever. God smiles approvingly on Christians who joyfully care for their elderly parents; He frowns sternly on those who do not.

You might recall how scathingly Jesus rebuked the religious leaders of His day for devising tricky schemes to circumvent their familial duties. Misusing the practice of dedicating votive gifts to the Temple, the

Pharisees and scribes concocted a sly plan that they believed gave them a copper-bottomed excuse for not spending a penny on their elderly parents.

*Then some Pharisees and scribes came to Jesus from Jerusalem and said, "Why do Your disciples break the tradition of the elders? For they do not wash their hands when they eat bread." And He answered and said to them, "Why do you yourselves transgress the commandment of God for the sake of your tradition? For God said, 'Honor your father and mother,' and, 'He who speaks evil of father or mother is to be put to death.' But you say, 'Whoever says to his father or mother, "Whatever I have that would help you has been given to God," he is not to honor his father or his mother.' And by this you invalidated the word of God for the sake of your tradition. (Matthew 15:1-6)*

Their excuse might seem credible at first: "Mom, Dad, all the money and possessions that I could use to assist you have been dedicated to the Temple in Jerusalem." But let me expose their ruse. In Judaism of that era, one could bequeath a financial legacy or a piece of property to the Temple; however, that vow did not have to be fulfilled immediately. It could be completed at any point up to the time of the person's death. These artful dodgers were keeping their needy parents at arm's length by vowing to dedicate a large gift to the Temple in the future, but in the meantime, they continued to use that money or property for themselves, hypocritically lamenting that they had nothing with which to help their elderly parents. Is it any wonder that Jesus denounced them?

Things are hardly better today. When the siblings convene a family meeting to arrange care for their aging parents, perhaps one brother

angrily interjects, "I am at a crisis point in my business right now, so I can't help." Somehow he has enough money to maintain a holiday home at the coast, multiple timeshares, three SUVs in the driveway, and two or three costly hobbies; nonetheless, his economic situation is "too tight" to make a monthly contribution to the care of his parents. Having spent decades using his money exclusively on himself, he has no intention of altering that practice. In the same way, one of his sisters has time for shopping sprees, daily trips to the gym, weekly nail sessions, and afternoon-long gossip sessions with her friends, but somehow she cannot spare an hour to visit her elderly mother in a retirement facility. Are tight finances and a busy social schedule really the sticking points for those adult children? Probably not. Selfishness and bitterness are the more likely culprits.

In God's plan, biological family is the first line of defence in crisis—including the slow-developing "crisis" called old age. However, God is more specific than that. According to 1 Timothy 5, God has wisely placed a large portion of the responsibility of caring for elderly parents into the capable and compassionate hands of a family's *women*, those members of the family who are typically the most adept at expressing mercy:

*If any woman who is a believer has dependent widows, she must assist them and the church must not be burdened, so that it may assist those who are widows indeed. (1 Timothy 5:16)*

By God's design, much of the day-to-day care for elderly parents will be handled by the women in that family. That does not mean that the men get to play golf every Saturday while their sisters and wives dutifully visit their aging parents. Not at all. The men should also be involved at every level—financially, practically, and emotionally.

However, since the men usually shoulder the income-earning responsibilities, the daily work of caring for elderly family members is especially the sphere of that family's servant-hearted women.

It is a suitable and God-ordained division of labour. Women typically have a heightened interest in family matters. Moreover, the needs of the weak, infirm, and lonely easily stir their innate sense of compassion. Like a flower, a woman's dedication to her family first comes to bloom when she gets married. It expands over time to include her children, and then, in an important and satisfying final phase of life, it swells to include both her grandchildren and her elderly parents. Have you ever asked yourself what the hyperkinetic wife of Proverbs 31 did when she was fifty or sixty years old, after her children had left the home? She continued to love her family, enthusiastically spilling out her time and energy on a soccer team of grandchildren and on her elderly parents and parents-in-law. According to 1 Timothy 5:16, that is how God's plan for family care is supposed to work.

Sadly, western culture has plucked many Christian women out of the home, thrusting them into the work place as if they were men. And that has made it increasingly difficult for those women to fulfil their vital, God-appointed role as family caregivers. Women who are "workers at home" (Titus 2:5) have the time and energy necessary to fulfil 1 Timothy 5:16. Women who work outside the home typically have money, but not time. Their money might allow them to pay for a place at the retirement village, but in most cases their personal care and attention is hit-and-miss. God designed human beings of all ages to function best in a loving family environment, not in a confinement facility. Therefore, Paul urges adult children—men and



women—to give direct personal attention to caring for their parents (and for other elderly family members when necessary).

In light of that, before you automatically follow the practice of western culture and enrol your aging parents in a retirement facility, first consider caring for them in your own home, or in the home of one of your siblings. With some parents, severe health challenges, dementia, or painful relational tensions might make home-based care an unworkable alternative. However, family is God's first line of defence. Socialism assures us that caring for aging parents is the government's duty. Selfism assures us that it is someone else's—indeed, *anyone else's*—duty. However, 1 Timothy 5 makes it clear that, whenever possible, God's first option is for elderly parents be cared for in a family setting.

Having given that charge, let me again acknowledge that there are situations in which it is unwise or impossible to care for elderly parents at home. Furthermore, the arrangement that worked well when your mother was in her seventies and early eighties might become unworkable when she reaches her late eighties, because of her (or your own) declining health. In such cases, make a wise decision without being encumbered by false guilt. There is no denying that caring for elderly parents at home is a demanding undertaking. When my wife was young, for a short time her mom cared for one of Ruty's grandmothers and for both of Ruty's great-grandmothers, while simultaneously raising two children of her own who were under the age of four. Family love doesn't get much harder than that! But since no one in their family had the money to pay for professional care facilities, it was simply what needed to be done.

Coming back to the principle of reciprocity, the time, energy, and money required to care for elderly parents in your own home has an obvious parallel: the time, energy, and money that they expended on raising you when you were a child. By God's design, what goes around comes around. Therefore, by all means, enjoy God's blessings when you reach middle age; however, make your plans with one eye on your biblical duty to care for your elderly parents.

## **PARENTING YOUR PARENTS**

Because aging is, in its final stages, akin to growing backwards towards infancy, the adult children of elderly parents must prepare for a slow reversal of roles as their parents age. When your parents reach their seventies and eighties, depending on their mental acuity and physical health, you might need to begin to relate to them as if they were teenagers rather than experienced, fully capable adults. Like teenagers, they will be able to handle a lot of autonomy; however, they might need more advice and guidance than before. When your parents were forty or fifty years old, they probably did not ask your advice regarding where to live or what car to buy. At eighty or ninety, they might need that input, just as a teenager would. Eventually, you might have to supervise every major life decision for them, overseeing their bank account, paying their bills, organising their internet service, fixing things in the house, and giving them rides to the doctor—almost as if they were children. At the end, because of cancer, Alzheimer's, or some other disabling disease, you might even need to care for your parents as if they were toddlers or infants.

That great reversal, parenting your parents, is not an easy transition. Therefore, in the final chapter we will consider six dangers faced by adult children who are fulfilling that role.





## CHAPTER SIX

### THE DANGERS INVOLVED IN PARENTING YOUR PARENTS

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#### DANGER 1: DISRESPECT

*Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but rather appeal to him as a father, to the younger men as brothers, the older women as mothers, and the younger women as sisters, in all purity. (1 Timothy 5:1-2)*

One of the pitfalls of caring for parents who are growing backwards towards infancy is *disrespect*. Paul cautioned Timothy (who was about age thirty-five at the time), to avoid sharply rebuking an older man; rather, Timothy was to treat older men respectfully, as if they were his own father. Likewise, Timothy was to address older women with the same family affection and gentleness he expressed toward his beloved mother, Eunice. Unfortunately, some older people seem to imagine that what Paul wrote was, "*Never rebuke an older man.*" That, of course, is self-serving and wrong. In fact, Paul told Timothy that even the elders of the church, respected, godly, and usually older men, were to be rebuked publicly if their sin required it (1 Tim 5:19-21). In other words, biblical rebuke has a role in every adult relationship, regardless of the age of the two people involved. Nonetheless, 1 Timothy 5:1-2 implies that adult children should speak to their elderly parents with a gentleness and patience commensurate with their parents' age and position.

For example, if an older parent (or aunt or uncle) moves into your home, it will be important to lay down some mutually agreed upon house rules. Regular family meetings will be necessary to resolve the disappointed expectations and tensions that result when adults who

have not lived together for the last fifty years are suddenly thrown together in one house. At times, gracious reproof will be part of those family "staff meetings." In the same way, if an elderly parent is treating the workers in his or her retirement facility in a harsh manner, the children must gently confront it. Sin is still sin. Nevertheless, adult children must not bully, berate, or browbeat their elderly parents. Disrespect is simply out of bounds for adult children who are parenting their parents.

Are you wondering how you will handle being a mother or a father to your own parents? Here is an easy test. How did you handle your children when they acted in a foolish or exasperating manner? If you steamrolled your kids with anger, threats, and other forms of intimidation, you will probably be tempted to do the same with your new children—your parents. Elderly people can be slow, bewildered, and preoccupied with trivial concerns. They make inane decisions, decisions that you will have to reverse, exhibiting patience and good humour all the while. Even though the teeter-totter of influence and authority is tilting more and more in your direction, it is important to honour your parents with patient love.

## **DANGER 2: GREED AND MANIPULATION**

Proverbs 19:14 says, "House and wealth are an inheritance from fathers." The process of inheritance should be a blessing both to elderly parents and to their adult children. Sadly, however, the closing decade of parents' lives can become a nightmarish affair, as their greedy, manipulative children queue up to exploit them. The most notable example of this in the Bible is Rebekah and Jacob's appalling scheme to trick Isaac into blessing Jacob, rather than his older brother, Esau.

*Now it came about, when Isaac was old and his eyes were too dim to see, that he called his older son Esau and said to him, "My son." And he said to him, "Here I am." Isaac said, "Behold now, I am old and I do not know the day of my death. Now then, please take your gear, your quiver and your bow, and go out to the field and hunt game for me; and prepare a savory dish for me such as I love, and bring it to me that I may eat, so that my soul may bless you before I die." (Genesis 27:1-4)*

Rebekah and Jacob, with no apparent twinges of conscience, hastily fabricated a deception that included raiding Esau's closet to procure a set of clothes, some clever work in the kitchen by Rebekah to prepare Isaac's favourite meal, and a set of goat skins strapped to the back of Jacob's hands to dupe his father into thinking that he was his gorilla-like brother. In spite of their efforts to deceive him, Isaac's suspicions were aroused. Nevertheless, Isaac was unable to see past the deceptions contrived by his wife, nor was he able to disentangle the spiderweb of lies woven by his son, Jacob.

*Then [Jacob] came to his father and said, "My father." And he said, "Here I am. Who are you, my son?" Jacob said to his father, "I am Esau your firstborn; I have done as you told me. Get up, please, sit and eat of my game, that you may bless me." Isaac said to his son, "How is it that you have it so quickly, my son?" And he said, "Because the LORD your God caused it to happen to me." Then Isaac said to Jacob, "Please come close, that I may feel you, my son, whether you are really my son Esau or not." So Jacob came close to Isaac his father, and he felt him and said, "The voice is the voice of Jacob, but the hands are the hands of Esau." He did not recognize him, because his hands*

*were hairy like his brother Esau's hands; so he blessed him. And he said, "Are you really my son Esau?" And he said, "I am."*  
(Genesis 27:18-24)

Lie was added to lie, deception heaped upon deception. It was all part of a nefarious plot to steal family pre-eminence from the older son, Esau, and to secure a double portion of the inheritance for Jacob. Caring for elderly parents should *not* look like that. Nonetheless, greedy clashes over the inheritance frequently cast families into a state of civil war. Christian grace avoids such squabbles. Rather than plunging into the fray to get your bit of the loot, commit yourself right now not to fight over a certain piece of furniture or over who gets the house.

Making that commitment has been easy for me. Besides their home, my parents' most valuable possessions are the tools my dad accumulated during his years as a carpenter. I have neither the desire nor skill to use those tools (thankfully, both my brothers do), so Dad's wood chisels and power saws have no special attraction to me. Furthermore, I live in Africa; therefore, my parents' home does not allure me either. And since I long ago pinched all the good books from their library (with their full knowledge, I must say), they have no earthly possessions that I covet. That, however, might not be the case with you and your parents. However, if it is sinful for your parents to bang the table and shout, "I'm going to die in this house!", then it is equally wrong for you to bang the table and shout, "I want the house!" Inheritance battles are repulsive to those whose citizenship is in heaven (Phil 3:20). Therefore, we must embrace the attitude encouraged by Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:7, "Why not rather be wronged? Why not rather be defrauded?"



## MOM MUST LIVE WITH US!

The manipulation and bullying of elderly parents can be motivated by things other than the inheritance money. For example, a daughter might assert, "Mom *must* live with us, not with my sister in Cape Town!" Well, maybe. Is that how your sister sees it (not to mention your mother)? The desire to do good—or, to be frank, to be in control—must not lead you to imagine that you no longer have a biblical responsibility to consider others' interests before your own (cf. Phil 2:3-4).

In most cases, group decisions that include input from your parents and from your siblings will keep greed and manipulation under control. On the other hand, if every family member demands the same level of input into mom and dad's affairs, things can become a muddle very quickly. A friend of mine once saw two lionesses fighting over a warthog: one had a mouthful of hindquarters, the other a mouthful of head. The game of tug-of-war ended when the lionesses ripped the poor thing in half. Some elderly parents feel just like that warthog when each child grabs a limb and shouts, "Mom must stay with me!" Daily care can be shared by all the children if they live in the same city. In other cases, by general consent—especially the *parents'* consent—one sibling will shoulder the majority of the daily care, while the rest of the family helps carry the financial burden. If your role is on the financial side, acknowledge that the brother or sister who is providing the daily care might not arrange everything exactly as you would, thereby avoiding a family ruck over whether Mom should, for example, drink instant or filter coffee.

Whatever your family arranges, keep at least two pairs of eyes on the finances. That helps eliminate tricky deals, such as when a new car is purchased "for Mom" from her savings account by the son in charge of her finances, but eventually it comes to light that she never drove the car; rather, her grandson drove it to varsity every day and the petrol and maintenance costs were unfailingly paid out of her account. Involving multiple family members in major financial decisions minimises opportunities for those kinds of dodgy ploys.

### **DANGER 3: ALLOWING INTIMIDATION**

Sometimes adult children intimidate their elderly parents; however, it is equally common for a cantankerous, wheel-chair-bound parent to manipulate, browbeat, and intimidate his or her children. One author writes, "Those who have had successful careers are often in dominant positions when old age sets in .... [It should not] surprise us when such persons ... become tyrannical in their own family ..." <sup>10</sup> And, indeed, they do act as tyrants. They are, in their minds, the patriarch or matriarch of the clan, and therefore, their word is law. Let's acknowledge that it is not easy for an aging mother to transition from running her own home to submitting to her daughter's house rules. Nor is it easy for an elderly father to accept that his son now has broader knowledge and greater administrative insight than he does. Therefore, be patient as you parent your parents. Consult frequently; genuinely weigh their input; honour their desires whenever you can. However, do not allow a bossy elderly parent to place an unendurable strain on your family because of his or her imperious opinions and self-centred demands.

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<sup>10</sup> J.I. Packer, *Finishing Our Course with Joy*, (Crossway: Wheaton, Illinois, 2014), 46.

In short, honouring your parents must not be allowed to degenerate into sinful man-fearing. Leviticus 19:32 instructs, "You shall rise up before the grayheaded and honor the aged, and you shall revere [literally, *fear*] your God; I am the LORD." The closing command and statement of that verse contain at least two implications. First, we honour the aged because we fear God. Second, we fear God more than we fear the aged. Balancing those two principles allows you to graciously resist the demands of a parent who, wittingly or unwittingly, seems set on dictating your family's living situation, finances, schedule, holidays, schooling choices, and so on. Ultimately, caring for your parents in their declining years should be motivated by love, not fear. For example, when my grandmother moved to a retirement home to close out her life, my parents visited her virtually every day. They did that motivated by compassion not intimidation, and that made their visits a joy, rather than an onerous duty.

#### **DANGER 4: ABANDONMENT**

Sadly, my parents' commitment to visit my grandmother nearly every day is all too uncommon. We are all familiar with horror stories regarding an elderly parent who was checked into a retirement facility by his or her family and never visited again. Whether you care for your parents in your home or place them in a suitable care facility, the abandonment so often practiced by the world is not a Christian option. As an adult child, your plans for middle age and early retirement must factor in the time, effort, and financial sacrifices required to care for your parents (and, if necessary, for other aging members of your family). Just as a young married couple actively plans their lives around the demands of raising small children, so

adult children need to plan their schedules and finances, fully alert to their biblical responsibility to care for their aging parents.

Worldly marketers present a picture of retirement in which a handsome, healthy, athletic sixty-five-year-old couple enjoys two decades of unhindered travel, luxury, and self-pampering. The advertisements they create never seem to mention our God-given duty to care for our parents. We should not be surprised. The world always disdains God's plan for the family. In some cases, your parents might need little or no financial help. In other cases, they might need help at every level: relational, practical, and financial. Therefore, when your children marry and move out of the home, enjoy a season of renewed togetherness with your spouse. However, also look ahead, consciously preparing for the changes that will probably become necessary when your parents begin to require increasing levels of attention.

Sadly, the abandonment of elderly parents can happen even if you care for them in your own home. J. I. Packer confesses:

*In my early years, one of my grandmothers lived with us in our home. When I recall the setup, I wince. She was, as far as I know, in fair health for a medium old. Daily she stayed in her room, eating breakfast and lunch off trays we took up to her, until evening mealtime [when] she would come downstairs and eat with us, after which she would sit in her chair ... speaking when spoken to but not otherwise until bedtime .... She left the house only once or twice a year, when a distant relative with a car would come and take her for drive. Otherwise she remained house bound .... We effectively excluded her from ... family life*

*and thus, I imagine, made her feel she did not count as a member of the family.*<sup>11</sup>

Of course, the flipside of the abandonment problem is a scenario in which caring for your aging parents intrudes on and eventually nixes all other family activities. As they age, encourage your parents to pursue a life that does not include your minute-by-minute attention. Prepare them for the fact that, at times, other people will have to care for them, not just you. They might pout and make untrue accusations of abandonment, but a parent-centred way of life will quickly sap the joy from your marriage and other relationships. Therefore, strive to avoid both extremes: dismissive neglect on one hand and suffocating preoccupation on the other.

#### **DANGER 5: EXTENDING A PARENT'S LIFE UNNECESSARILY**

Modern medicine includes many blessings. Two of them are its ability to extend the lives of the elderly and, at the same time, to improve the quality of life that older people experience during those years. Knee replacements, anti-inflammatories, and pacemakers make possible a level of activity today that was often out of reach for older folks in past generations. However, there is also a downside to medical technology. There comes a time when medical care no longer imparts *more* life to the elderly; rather, it simply stretches out *the same amount of life* over more and more years. And when that "stretching" includes painful treatments and interminable confinement to a hospital bed, it is not always a blessing. As wise doctors often note, it is important to distinguish between using medicine to prolong *life* and using medicine to prolong *death*.

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<sup>11</sup> 30-31.

In light of that, the final decision that you might need to make with (or for) your elderly parents is whether or not to employ an expensive, gruelling medical treatment in an effort to endlessly extend their lives. No two situations are exactly the same; therefore, it is impossible to prescribe *the* answer to questions, such as, "Should we encourage our seventy-eight-year-old mother to undergo chemotherapy or not?" We know that Paul said, for Christians, "to live is Christ and to die is gain" (Philippians 1:21). For an elderly believer in Jesus Christ, the glories of heaven are gain, even if his death is, at the same time, a sad loss for us. In light of that, adult children need to exercise caution when they are tempted to pressure an elderly parent to undergo chemotherapy or a painful, life-extending surgery so that he can live a year or two longer—especially if much of that additional year or two will be spent awash in a sea of painkillers and confined to a high-care unit. Personally, I incline toward avoiding extreme interventions in such cases. After all, just how hard do I want to work to keep my elderly parents out of heaven? As I see it, if they are ready to go, I need to be ready to let them go. Of course, if your elderly parents are not believers, that might alter your decision somewhat. In every case, it is good to ask, "Am I extending my parents' lives with this arduous medical treatment primarily for *my* benefit, or primarily for *their* benefit?"<sup>12</sup>

## **DANGER 6: DELAYING DISCUSSIONS ABOUT AGING**

Just as parents sometimes wait too long to talk to their pre-teen or teenage children about sexual purity, so many adult children wait too long to talk frankly with their parents about the transitions of old

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<sup>12</sup> At times greedy adult children might withhold legitimate medical treatment, fearing that its cost might diminish their inheritance. This too is wrong.

age. My advice is, start early. In most cases, you will have to broach the subject because they will not. Therefore, as your parents move toward retirement age, bravely and quietly mention the fact that, one day, their lives might not look quite the same as they do now. Your parents might appreciate the fact that you have raised a difficult but important topic. Alternatively, they might launch into a forty-five-minute rant about how they do not need anyone's help. I prefer the first response; however, it really does not matter how they respond—at least not initially. All you are doing is introducing the topic in order to prod their thinking. Next year, mention it again: "Someday you might not be able to keep up this big house. Have you thought about that?" You don't have to win the argument—in fact, don't make it an argument at all. If your parents want to bluster and rage, let them talk themselves out. Your initial goal is simply to get them thinking. Most parents need a nudge or two to start preparing for what lies over the horizon. Be gentle, but be persistent. In that way, when they reach the age that such discussions become essential, they will be ready to downscale their house, sell their business, consider their future living arrangements, and so on, without relentless pressure from you. Your gentle promptings, initiated well in advance, will be just the encouragement they need.

## **CONCLUSION**

Growing old is hard—so hard that it should never be attempted by the young! Only people with six or seven decades of life experience can face and conquer its challenges. However, general life experience is not enough. Growing old gracefully requires the saving work of Jesus Christ in our hearts and the daily empowerment of the indwelling Holy Spirit. It takes biblical wisdom, trust in God's

sovereignty over all of life, and an ingrained practice of humility and loving neighbour.

It is important to prepare for the transitions of old age. Therefore, let me encourage you to begin today. Start by working with your adult children, not disdaining their help and advice. Consider others to be more important than yourself. Be grateful and easy to help, not cantankerous and crabby. And as the years flow by, never use your extraordinary age to excuse ordinary sins. Keep your faith strong, your hope vibrant, and your love for God and neighbour fresh and vital. That is how a believer in Jesus Christ grows old gracefully.