

"Growing Old Gracefully"

I once saw a photo in the newspaper of a 92 year-old man. His jaw was set. He had a defiant look on his face. His fists were clenched. The caption for the photo was: "Fighting old age!" The newspaper commended him for this spirit.

"Fighting old age." Could there be others, besides this 92 year-old man in the newspaper photo, fighting old age? I would think! *Some people resist getting old by trying to look young.* Using all sorts of cosmetics to cover up wrinkles and blemishes; hair coloring to ward off the grey. Dressing young and hip. This can work out well for some, I suppose. But for other older people it can also make them look kind of goofy! For some people, the thought of getting old creates a sense of *dread*, or *anxiety*, as we wonder what the senior years will bring.

But the title of this message is "Growing Old *Gracefully*"! Many, many years ago, when I was a lot younger, I preached a sermon with this title. Let me quote a few things I said in that message. "I believe God intended the sunset years of life to be good, beautiful, satisfying! God intended the aging process not to be a sad ride downhill towards decay, but rather a satisfying climb towards the heights!" Wow! How inspirational is that! I said those magnificent words almost 50 years ago! Then someone snapped their fingers, and I got old.

Now there are wonderful blessings being an elderly citizen. You get to make new friends: your cardiologist, your urologist, the rheumatoid-arthritis and orthopedic physicians in town, your hearing aid specialist. You may join the host of others who qualify for cataract surgery, and you get a pair of those Hollywood movie star type sun glasses that have onlookers wooing and wowing your hot looks! You develop a close relationship with fine men like Mr. Ben Gay and Arthur Itis.

And you experience that special joy that can come when you get out of bed and some part of your body hurts – reassuring you that you're still alive! And you can laugh just as hard at the same joke no matter how many times you hear it – because you forget it 2 minutes after you heard it before! And you're excited to know that if your memory slips just a little bit more you'll be able to plan your own surprise birthday party, and be totally surprised when it comes!

Well, what about growing old? How can we experience the aging process in a positive, life-affirming way? Maybe even grow old...*gracefully*? ***First, don't wrap up the meaning of your life in what happens to your body.*** Because our bodies are going to wear out. (I don't really need to tell you that, do I?). Even if you're only 35 or 40, you probably have less physical energy or agility than you had when you were 20. There aren't many professional athletes in their prime at age 40.

2 Corinthians 4:7 says, "We have this treasure in earthen vessels." Our bodies are like earthen vessels: "jars of clay" or "clay pots," could be the translation. When all of our life is wrapped up in just the *physical* side of life, in seeking pleasure and satisfactions for the body, then old age can bring sadness, a sense that the essence of our life is slipping away.

E. Stanley Jones was a noted missionary-evangelist, author of many books. On the opening page

of his devotional book, *Growing Spiritually*, he writes this: "Many people are so closely linked with their bodies that the decay of the body means the decay of the person. They have lived to make the body comfortable...to satisfy the cravings and appetites – so that their very persons are bound up with the fortunes of the body. When it decays, they decay. Life's supreme tragedy is to watch the triple decay of body, mind and spirit in yourself or in another. No tragedy can compare with this." How many people are simply living their life at this level – the *physical* side of life.

We humans are a blend of body, mind, and spirit. Finding joy and purpose in our older years requires developing those parts of us beyond just the physical aspect. ***Cultivating our mind can be a way of preparing for, and enjoying, old age.*** As we get older, we probably don't have quite the stamina to do the physical activities we once did – so it's a great opportunity to further develop our mind. Read books. Do crossword puzzles. Take an online course (or in-person course). I read about a man from New Jersey, Luis Rich, who became a college freshman at the age of 85. Get a part-time job that you enjoy. Take up a musical instrument. Delve into a new subject – learn all you can about astronomy, or history, or politics (well, maybe not!). Take up a new hobby. Things to keep your mind sharp. I kind of regret never taking flying lessons, even though my dad was a pilot, and I flew many hours with him. So I fly – but on my flight simulator – and I travel all over the country and all over the world.

I think you get it! Try to keep our minds sharp. Learn something new every day. Take on tasks that will help you grow.

But then there's the "spirit" – the spiritual side of life. And that's even more important! ***One of the best ways of preparing for old age is to begin a relationship with God when we are young.*** We were created to have fellowship with God – to have a relationship with our Creator! *Jesus makes that possible! He came to save us, to be our Savior.* Our sins separate us from God, but Jesus died to forgive our sins, and restore the relationship with God that was lost because of our sin. If we go all through life, into the senior years, and are still not saved, we have missed the most important thing in life!

Some of the difficult things about the senior years are the losses we experience. We can lose our health, lose our physical strength and mobility, lose our memory. Many seniors experience a loss of income. Nancy's dad used to say, "Yeah, the golden years, when the doctors get all your gold."

We can lose family members and friends. I was especially close to two other pastors. We would meet for lunch several times a month. We could let our hair down, be ourselves, gripe about people in our churches who were a pain in the neck (yes, you heard me right)! We loved and supported one another. One of the other pastors died in his 60's, and the other pastor commented that this was the beginning of our having to say goodbye to people we know and love (because of our age). I've spent 5 out of the last 6 Saturdays, I think, either conducting a funeral or attending a funeral of someone Nancy and I know and love.

My mom moved into Quarryville Presbyterian Home when she was in her 90's. She immediately connected with 2 ladies there and they became a threesome. They attended my first service here. But within a short period of time, both of them died, and it hit mom hard.

There are many losses that can make life difficult as we grow older, but there is one thing we will never lose – and that is *God* – and a relationship with God if we trust Christ as our Savior and follow Him. The senior years bring change, but God is *changeless* – One whom we can always trust and rely upon!

2 Corinthians 4:16 says, "Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day." For those in Christ, even though our physical body may lose its strength, and start to deteriorate, the Holy Spirit in us can renew us day by day!

2 Corinthians 5:1 says, "For we know that if the earthly tent we live in (i.e. our body) is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven." There's more to life than just our physical body, and the physical side of life! What could be more sad than someone in their 70's, 80's, 90's who come to that point in life, and have left God out of the picture?

Whether the later years of our life are filled with sadness and despair, or joyful hope and peace, is largely determined by how much we have over the years paid attention to the *spiritual dimension* of our human existence!

Luke, in his gospel, tells us about a man named Simeon. He was an elderly man who was "righteous and devout". The Holy Spirit revealed to him that he wouldn't die before he would see the Messiah. When Joseph and Mary bring Jesus into the temple to present Him to the Lord, Simeon is led to go there. And he takes the baby Jesus in his arms, and full of praise says, "Lord, now I can die content! For I have seen Him as You promised me I would. I have seen the Savior You have given to the world. He is the Light that will shine upon the nations, and He will be the glory of Your people Israel" (Luke 2:29-32). We too can live our last days on earth with a sense of satisfaction and peace when we have embraced the Christ in our life, and devoted ourselves to Him.

One more thought on how we can prepare for our senior years: ***Do something worthwhile for God.*** The retirement years can provide us more time to do things other than work! But don't just use the time for selfish pursuits when there's a world out there in need.

A husband and wife couple in one of the churches I served – Bill and Anna Wright - moved to Florida, and became involved in starting a new church! I have a friend my age who asked if he could use me as a reference, because he wanted to take part in a children's ministry in the neighborhood, Child Evangelism Fellowship.

I remember Bill Gaither once saying that a part of him just wants to sit in a rocking chair on his porch in Indiana, but Bill Gaither is in his 80's, and his gospel music ministry is more far

reaching than ever. He still sings in the Gaither Vocal Band, he participates in a daily radio program, he does concerts (he'll be at the Giant Center in December). He helps produce weekly TV programs. He writes songs – he's written hundreds of them. He said when he and Gloria were young, and one of their songs became a hit, he said to her that their days of traveling in the music ministry would soon be over. Not!

I referred to E. Stanley Jones, the missionary-evangelist whose influence for Christ was felt around the world. He was still active in his work in his 80's. He said, set yourself to be gracious to somebody every day. "You will find life worth living if you make it worth living for someone else."

Do something for God, whatever your age. But don't quit just because you get old. You may say, "Well, what can I do? I'm homebound...my hearing's not so good...I can hardly get around anymore." So? You're still alive! There's a lady named Anna that can teach us a lot. Luke 2:36-38 tells us: "There was also a prophet, Anna the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was of a great age, having lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, then as a widow to the age of eighty-four. She never left the temple but worshiped there with fasting and prayer night and day. At that moment she came and began to praise God and to speak about the child to all who were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem." Anna devoted herself to prayer. You can pray – no matter how old or limited you are physically. How much better off the world would be, the church would be, if more of our elderly folk devoted themselves to *prayer*. You can send cards, write letters, make phone calls to people who are alone, or in need of some encouragement or cheer.

I love what the writer of Psalm 71 says. "Since my youth, God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds. Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, my God, till I declare your power to the next generation." Isn't that beautiful! The psalmist says, even when I'm old and gray (or bald!), stick with me, God, stick with me. For I want to talk about You and Your greatness to all the younger people, all the generations to come. Isn't it great if over the years we've come to love the Lord so much that even in our senior years we want to do all we can to talk about the Lord to the next generation. That's even more important, when more and more of the young people have less and less exposure to church and the message of the gospel!

So, we *can* grow old....gracefully! Full of God's grace and mercy! And that can make all the difference in the world of how we live out our final days on earth.

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