

Growing Old The Best is yet to Come

[New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]

The Bible is full of stories of people who did impressive things in their old age. You could think of Caleb, one of the twelve Israelite spies sent to spy on Canaan. The Israelites rejected Caleb and Joshua's report, choosing to be scared by the report from the other ten spies of giants in the land, and faced 40 years wandering around the desert as punishment. The book of Joshua records how the people of Israel ultimately ended up in the land, and started to conquer it, and destroy some of their enemies. You might remember the walls of Jericho fell down, for example. Bit by bit the Israelites started to take control of their inheritance. Then in chapter 14 of Joshua, we come across Caleb again. By this time he's an old man. Listen to the words of 85-year-old Caleb recorded in verses 7-12:

"I was forty years old when Moses the servant of the LORD sent me from Kadesh Barnea to spy out the land, and I brought back word to him as it was in my heart. Nevertheless my brethren who went up with me made the heart of the people melt, but I wholly followed the LORD my God. So Moses swore on that day, saying, 'Surely the land where your foot has trodden shall be your inheritance and your children's forever, because you have wholly followed the LORD my God.' And now, behold, the LORD has kept me alive, as He said, these forty-five years, ever since the LORD spoke this word to Moses while Israel wandered in the wilderness; and now, here I am this day, eighty-five years old. As yet I am as strong this day as on the day that Moses sent me; just as my strength was then, so now is my strength for war, both for going out and for coming in. Now therefore, give me this mountain of which the LORD spoke in that day; for you heard in that day how the Anakim were there, and that the cities were great and fortified. It may be that the LORD will be with me, and I shall be able to drive them out as the LORD said."

You can't help but be impressed by Caleb. There he was at 85, and he asked for some of the hardest territory to conquer, fully confident that God would help him drive out the Amalekites and win the land for the Lord's people. What was his secret? Or you might think of Moses at 80 years old, boldly leading the people of Israel out of captivity in Egypt. Perhaps you might remember Simeon and Anna in Luke chapter 2, full of life and spiritual insight in their old age. They were two individuals who recognised who the Lord Jesus was, just after His birth, at a time when almost everyone else was blind to the fact. Like I say, the Bible is full of impressive older people.

Recently on Truth for Today, we've been considering the subject "Growing Old", and we're continuing that series today. I have to say that when I was first given this subject to speak about, I felt a little apprehensive. I'm currently the youngest member of the Truth for Today team. What could I have to say that was profitable about growing old? I've not experienced the challenges of old age yet. What do I know?

But as I've thought about the subject, I've been encouraged by the apostle Paul's words to Timothy, a much younger servant of the Lord. In 1 Timothy 5 verses 1 and 2, Timothy was encouraged to exhort older men as fathers and older women as mothers. Timothy had a role to play in encouraging and challenging those older Christians. He was to view them as fathers and mothers, and speak to them in a way that reflected that.

Over the course of the past 2 years or so, whilst the COVID-19 pandemic has so affected life in the UK, I've become increasingly aware of the older Christians I know; and I've come to appreciate them much more as fathers and mothers in the Faith. I guess many listening today can identify older Christians who have been a great help to them in their walk with the Lord. We should be so thankful to the Lord for people like that. Some of those older Christians I appreciated, have died over the course of the pandemic and gone to be with the Lord. I can't help but feel the loss, especially since the various restrictions on contact with others limited how much I was able to see them and benefit from their godly insight. Lack of contact with these godly older Christians has made me wish I'd done more to encourage them earlier.

And it's in that spirit that I want to approach our subject for today. My prayer is that, as we reflect together on some verses from the Bible today, it would be both an encouragement and a challenge to any older Christian listeners. Of course, I hope all listeners will find something useful from this message. All Scripture is always useful to all of us. But, very specially, it's my intention to exhort older men as fathers and older women as mothers.

Today's title is "The best is yet to come!" I suppose that as you hear that, you'll immediately think I'm going to talk about heaven. What a prospect awaits the Christian. One day, we will either die, or the Lord will come again. In either case, if we've been saved, we'll go to be with the Lord for all eternity. Won't that be glorious? And we'll definitely get to thinking about heaven before we finish today's message. But first I want to take us again to 1 Timothy, and to some verses that, on the face of it, might seem like a strange place to start at for a subject like this. Let's read together chapter 4, verses 7-9:

"But reject profane and old wives' fables, and exercise yourself toward godliness. For bodily exercise profits a little, but godliness is profitable for all things, having promise of the life that now is and of that which is to come. This is a faithful saying and worthy of all acceptance."

Did you notice that in these verses Paul speaks about two lives, one now – "the life that now is" and one in the future – "that which is to come." Paul says that godliness, which we could simply define as living in a way that pleases God, is profitable for both lives. It's useful both for now and in the life to come. Paul mentions some things that won't help a believer at all – profane and old wives fables. And he mentions some things that will help a little bit – such as bodily exercise. But he says that even reasonably useful things, like exercise, only have a temporary value. And that's true, isn't it? As we're thinking about growing old today, it's really evident (isn't it?) that no matter how much exercise we did at 21 we won't be quite as fit at 81. There's a reason 90-year-olds don't enter the Olympic 100m sprints! But Paul says there is something more than physical exercise that we should all focus on in our lives. He says, "...exercise yourself toward godliness." He's using the image of an athlete in training and saying, "Apply that kind of discipline to your walk with the Lord. Show the same diligence, as an athlete would, in your living for God and pleasing him."

So, let's take that image and develop it a little. Athletes in training are careful about their diet and make sure they don't eat things that will weigh them down. They cut out the cakes and the calorie-laden foods and eat fruit and vegetables, for example. I think Paul is encouraging us to make similar choices in our spiritual training. Cut out activities that we know are not going to help us. Don't do things that will encourage greed or lust or covetousness. Drop things like that with the same diligence that athletes drop chocolate from their diet. Athletes are diligent in their training.

They go out no matter the weather, no matter whether they'd rather stay in bed, no matter what. They train and they train because they have a goal in mind. They want to win a competition. Paul encouraged Timothy to apply the same kind of discipline to godly living. To spend each day, no matter what, getting to know the Lord better and learning how to live in ways that please Him. Paul says that this kind of godly living is "profitable for all things." It has promise for us now, and in the life to come. Paul says that being concerned about godly living is always going to be beneficial. It's always going to be good for us. Much more useful and profitable than physical exercise, important though that is. And that's true no matter how old we are.

So why have I started here today when we're thinking about growing old and how the best is yet to come? Well you see, as we get on later to talking about heaven and the joy that awaits believers, I don't want any of you to think that if you're old, all there is to do is to look forward to heaven in some sort of resigned anticipation of better days. I know and admire an older Christian lady who sometimes comes close to thinking like this. She often tells me she was too old now to be any use to anyone. When we attend church conferences and things like that, she enjoys them but sits in her chair thinking none of the younger families want to waste their time talking to her, and that she has nothing to offer. She's too old to be useful now. But it's not true. She is wrong. Every young family at those conferences knew that this older lady cared for them and often prays for them. We all benefited from her years of accumulated Biblical wisdom in some form or other in conversations. Everyone appreciated that she was there and learnt a lot from her. So it saddened me to know that she feels like she is just taking up space and couldn't be a help to anyone. Recently in our local church Bible studies, we've been going through some of the Psalms. A few weeks ago, we read Psalm 92. Listen to these interesting words in verses 12 to 15 (NKJV):

"The righteous shall flourish like a palm tree, He shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Those who are planted in the house of the LORD shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bear fruit in old age; They shall be fresh and flourishing, To declare that the LORD is upright; He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him."

Those verses seemed to me to be a good description of growing old well! Believers who are planted in the house of the LORD, flourishing, bearing fruit in old age, and being fresh, telling everyone around them that, "The LORD is upright; he is my rock."

So as I was thinking about our topic for today, "The best is yet to come," I started to wonder whether we could expand our definition. What if, to use the language of 1 Timothy 4 that we've been considering together, the best is yet to come, both now on earth **and** in the life to come in heaven. Now the Bible never promises our best lives now. It never promises that things will go well for believers in our lives. But what if our old age characterised by a very real sense of Psalm 92? What if we were fresh and flourishing in old age?

At the end of the book of Ruth, God is described as a "restorer of life and a nourisher of your old age" to Naomi. What if that was the experience of each of us? What if our older years were characterised by a real sense of being nourished by God?

In Psalm 71:9 (NKJV), the psalmist prays:

"Do not cast me off in the time of old age, do not forsake me when my strength fails."

What if that was our prayer, and the Lord answered it, and we each knew the Lord's closeness to us in old age?

In Isaiah's prophecy, at the end of chapter 45 (NKJV), we're reminded of the unique greatness of God when He says:

"There is no other God besides Me, A just God and a Saviour; There is none besides Me. "Look to Me, and be saved, all you ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other."

Then at the start of the next chapter, God has something interesting to say to His people (NIV):

"Listen to me, you descendants of Jacob, all the remnant of the people of Israel, you whom I have upheld since your birth, and have carried since you were born. Even to your old age and grey hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you."

The same God, who had cared for the Israelites since the day they were born, was able to sustain them in old age. And isn't that true today? Wouldn't it be good if we appreciated it more? God hasn't changed. He's able to sustain you, nourish you, and use you just as much today as He could when you were younger. Of course there may be physical limitations. We know God knows that! The tasks and the methods may change, but is God any less able to use you for blessing today than He was when you were 25? Surely not!

So the lady I mentioned before wasn't useless in her old age. In fact, she was a blessing to many people, a bit like Anna in Luke 2. Could that be you? What is the key to this freshness in old age? I think we had it in the Psalm we read. They were "planted in the house of the LORD." They spent regular time in the Lord's presence. That's where their roots were. If you want to be fresh and flourishing in old age, that's where your roots will need to be too. That's where you'll need to prioritise your time and energy. The phrase in Psalm 92 reminded me of the first half of Psalm 1 (NIV):

"Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stands in the path of sinners, nor sits in the seat of the scornful; But his delight is in the law of the LORD, And in His law he meditates day and night. He shall be like a tree planted by the rivers of water, that brings forth its fruit in its season, whose leaf also shall not wither; And whatever he does shall prosper."

Here I think we get another clue to the secret of freshness. This person delighted in God's word and thought about it day and night. It's only as we get closer to God that we'll be useful to others around us. My prayer for any older listeners today, is that you would never feel like the lady I was telling you about. Don't ever think you have nothing to offer and that the Lord cannot use you. He surely can. Don't waste your old age solely pursuing hobbies or retreating into your own home. Use it for the Lord. Use it to encourage His people. Use it to tell people you know about the gospel. Don't waste old age!

Those of us who are younger certainly need the encouragement, advice, and wisdom, of those who are older. Perhaps, as we all look at the remaining years of our lives, we'll determine to use them wisely for the Lord. We won't give up. And we'll make it our aim that the years we have left will genuinely be the best years, the most useful to the Lord. Think of the good that could come from that! May the Lord help us to do so!

But of course, 'The best is yet to come' doesn't really refer to the rest of our lives here on earth. That's not even close to being the best we have to look forward to. So let's spend the rest of our

time thinking about what awaits us. If we're Christians, there is coming a day when we'll be forever with the Lord in heaven. Surely, we thank the Lord that this is true! So, let's spend the rest of our time today just thinking over a few of the New Testament verses that fill us with anticipation for heaven and which assure us that it really is true that the best is yet to come.

Let's first go to Ephesians chapter 5. Listen to what Paul says in verses 25-27 (NKJV):

"Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish."

These verses tell us that one day the Lord will present us in heaven, "without spot or wrinkle", but also, "holy and without blemish." That's remarkable! It certainly doesn't characterise us now, at least not in our eyes. We're all too aware of failures and sins in our own lives, aren't we? But such is the love that the Lord has for His church that He will present us without any blemish. How can He do that? Only because He died for us. He loved us and gave Himself for us. By doing so, He bore the judgment my sins deserved and so Christ will be able to present me one day without blemish. Isn't that remarkable? Doesn't it fill us with wonder? There will be a day when our pride, and our greed, and our sin of whatever form, will all be gone. It will be done away with forever. The Lord won't see it any more. We won't see it any more. We'll be with the Lord who loved us! But what will happen in heaven? What will we do? I have to say that the Bible doesn't tell us an awful lot that answers that question. But listen to what Paul does write in Ephesians 2, verses 4-7 (NKJV):

"But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved), and raised us up together, and made us sit together in the heavenly places in Christ Jesus, that in the ages to come He might show the exceeding riches of His grace in His kindness toward us in Christ Jesus."

We might not know much about what will happen in heaven, but we do know from these verses that the God who is rich in mercy, and who loves us with a great love, will show us the exceeding riches of His grace for all the ages to come. Picture that! We can't! Can we? But for all eternity God will over and over again show us kindness and the riches of His grace. He will lavishly show kindness to us for all eternity. I can't completely understand what that will be like. But it excites me to know that it's true. God will go on and on being kind and gracious to us. We know something of that grace shown to us now if we trust the Lord. But surely the best is still to come!

Paul writes to the Philippian believers to remind them of something else to come. Listen to his words in chapter 3 verses 20-21 (NKJV):

"For our citizenship is in heaven, from which we also eagerly wait for the Saviour, the Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our lowly body that it may be conformed to His glorious body, according to the working by which He is able even to subdue all things to Himself."

When we go to be with the Lord, He'll change us. We won't have lowly bodies any more, but the Lord will transform them and make them like His own glorious body. We won't be characterised by the aches and pains and frailty that increasingly come with age. Jesus will take them away and give us new transformed bodies. Whether we've aged well or not, the best is still to come!

When John wrote his first letter, he thought a little bit about what heaven would be like. He concluded that we don't really know, but we do know we'll be like Jesus and that will be wonderful. Listen to 1 John 3:1-3 (NKJV):

“Behold what manner of love the Father has bestowed on us, that we should be called children of God! Therefore the world does not know us, because it did not know Him. Beloved, now we are children of God; and it has not yet been revealed what we shall be, but we know that when He is revealed, we shall be like Him, for we shall see Him as He is. And everyone who has this hope in Him purifies himself, just as He is pure.”

Paul writes similarly to the Corinthian Christians in 1 Corinthians 13 where he says in verse 12 (NKJV):

“For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then face to face. Now I know in part, but then I shall know just as I also am known.”

As it turns out, we maybe don't know much about what heaven will be like. But the hints we do get are glorious. And I want to finish off with the Lord's own prayer in John 17. Listen to the words in verse 24 (NKJV):

“Father, I desire that they also whom You gave Me may be with Me where I am, that they may behold My glory which You have given Me; for You loved Me before the foundation of the world.”

We might not know much about what heaven will be like. But we do know that we'll be with Jesus, where He is. And we do know that He wants us to be there! It's His desire for us to be with Him – to behold His glory. And He will bring it about in His own good time. Isn't that amazing!?

“I'm so old I'm no use any more!” That was the feeling of the lady I was telling you about earlier. But was it true? No! Maybe the best **is** yet to come, first for the rest of this life upon earth, and then in the life to come in heaven. What if we took up Paul's advice to Timothy and exercise ourselves towards godliness and seek to be profitably used in God's service now, whilst we wait for the best that is yet to come?

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