

Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

For reply: Email: truthfortoday@aol.com

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Speaker: Mr. David Pulman

Conditions a Christian will face: Growing Old

The miracle of life and understanding how it all happens is a wonder to most people. The sperm from a man and the egg from a woman join together and then we have life and the beginning of a child. Within a short period of time, the now single living cell starts to grow, divide and multiply. In the normal progress of development a child will be born in approximately nine months. However, there is the saying "that the moment we are born we begin to die". Not a very cheerful thought but there are some merits to the saying.

For the majority, as we set out on the journey of life, the first part of our life is taken up with growth, development, learning, gaining knowledge and establishing relationships until we reach full growth and maturity in our physical and mental development. The middle years are often marked by the consolidation of achievements and, whether aware or not, we prepare for retirement and life after work.

Growing old is one of those topics which is very rarely mentioned. I suppose this is largely due to the implication that if a person is growing old then death is just around the corner. The thought of death approaching is very often a no go area for most people. But surely this is not true for the Christian!

The Christian and growing old

How should a Christian view growing old? As we grow old there are a number of physical changes which we will become aware of. Some of the very physical activities we once thought little about will start taking longer to complete. We may even start to moderate what we do. I can remember when in my forties I gave serious consideration to being less involved actively in youth camp work and planned for the moment when I would retire from that type of activity and hand over to those who were younger. During the period from my late forties to early fifties I gradually acquired reading glasses until eventually I need to wear glasses for breakfast if I want to eat cereal that is not blurred!

Spiritually things are very different. The Christian does not reach a plateau such as physical middle age and know that very soon everything will go downhill. Spiritually we should keep growing and consolidating what we have acquired.

New birth has parallels with actual birth. We have started something new, a new life with Christ. We are born of the Spirit of God. Growth and development start immediately with this new life. Some Christians are faster at growing than others but we should all grow.

Food for the New Life

The Lord Jesus Christ spoke of Himself as being "The bread of God is He who comes down from heaven and gives life to the world", John 6:33 He is both the initial food in order to receive life and the One on whom we depend for daily nourishment. This new food is found in God's own word, the Bible, an inexhaustible supply to meet our daily needs. Just as we need food regularly for our bodies to maintain physical fitness, so too our new life in Christ needs regular feeding. We will never reach the moment when we can stop feeding on God's word.

Deterioration of the natural man – The renewing of the spiritual man

Paul in 2 Corinthians 4:16 states, "Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day." Paul was no doubt finding the Christian pathway increasingly harder day by day and he recognised that the physical man was getting older or perishing. Those who are older will understand how we have more aches and pains than some years ago. This is why healthy advice is to stay active and take exercise of some kind in order to keep the body fit. However, Paul states quite clearly that the inward person who is in Christ is just the opposite. This new life is being renewed and Paul knew the secret of this new life. The force of the word "renewed" means that this new life is constantly being kept new. How is this achieved? It is having the right kind of feeding. The new person in Christ is not fed on the fiction novels of this world but needs the living word of God. Paul was growing old, but spiritually he was still growing and youthful. Paul would not reach maturity until with Christ in glory. Let us state clearly that there is no old age in heaven. Heaven is where Christians reach perfection and the fullness of maturity.

Peter the Apostle was still busy when he describes himself as one who is old. In 1 Peter 5:1 we read, "The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed". Here Peter is still teaching and he has not forgotten what he witnessed many years previously. But see where his hope is centred, "A partaker of the glory that will be revealed". Peter had his eyes focused on a coming glorious event – the glory that will be revealed.

For the Christian, old age does not bring retirement where we can sit back and put our feet up. I had the opportunity to retire early and I am busier now than when I worked full time in secular employment. This is the kind of life style for a Christian focused on Christ and working for Him. All retired Christians I know are busy living life to the full in service for Christ Jesus their Lord.

How do we view old age?

Going back to Paul we read again in 2 Corinthians 4:17 his assessment of old age, "For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory". Again we see the priority in Paul's life, what is important and how he views his aches and pains not to mention the thorn in the flesh. Many expositors of the scriptures believe the thorn in the flesh was a reference to eye damage which Paul sustained when he was stoned, see Acts 14:19. For Paul, it was a light affliction when compared to the "eternal weight of glory". Our life span here in this world is microscopic when compared to the duration of eternity.

Therefore, in 2 Corinthians 4:18 we read, "While we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal." Am I, are you, challenged by these words? Do we in our latter years consider eternity with the eyes of faith? Are the difficulties of old age considered to be "light affliction"? Are we contrasting the physical here and now with the "eternal weight of glory" that awaits us? Again it is in the sense of "redeeming the time". So much to do here for our Lord Jesus before we are moved out of this scene to heaven to that which is far better, as Paul states in Philippians 1:23, "Having a desire to depart and be with Christ, which is far better."

So in 2 Corinthians 5:1 we read, "For we know that if our earthly house, this tent, is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens." Christians do not hide from the reality that some day we may die. The difference is, however, we look forward to a new body made by God suitable for heaven.

John Quincy Adams, an early president of the United States, was once asked how he was. John replied in this vein, "Thank you. John Quincy Adams is very well himself, but the house in which he lives is falling to pieces; time and seasons have nearly destroyed it. The roof is well worn, the walls shattered. It trembles with every gale. I think John Quincy Adams will soon have to move out. But he himself is very well."

The brevity of life

In Psalm 90, credited to Moses who lived 120 years, he states the normal expectancy of life to be 70 to 80 years. In that same Psalm verse 12 we are told, "Teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom." Moses wanted to highlight the value of taking care how we live each day. It is only those who are in the third age, old age is now an out of fashion phrase, who can really value the brevity of life and the importance of making every day count. For the Christian this is especially so to ensure that we serve our risen Saviour fully even in our closing days of life. The wisdom of Christian years should mark us and the accumulation of biblical knowledge and applied experience should be made known to following generations of believers. As Paul encouraged Timothy to become involved in the promotion of the truth through the generations when he said, "the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" 2 Timothy 2:2.

How best to use our time

In Ephesians 5:16 we read, "Redeeming the time, because the days are evil." Paul, the apostle who wrote this particular letter to Ephesian Christians, was stressing the importance that time is short and therefore there was a need to take every opportunity. The whole presentation of my life day by day should be a living witness to my Lord and Saviour. People we come in contact with even in terms of just a passing acquaintance read our lives far better and more closely than they listen to our words.

There is no time to waste and every moment that passes is time that can never be reclaimed. Reclamation and recycling material are the "in words" today as western nations seek to find an answer to the mountains of rubbish we produce week by week. A tremendous amount of time and energy is put into tackling this problem. Time cannot be reclaimed and a missed opportunity is gone forever.

The last part of the above verse has to do with the reality of the world in which we live, "because the days are evil". The world, in which we live, dances to a different tune than that of a Christian. The Lord Jesus said in John 17, "the world has hated them". The Lord Jesus knew keenly the true state of the world and its reaction to those who believed in Him. In some countries we do not see the hatred, but it is there. There are many countries where hatred is open and violence is common towards Christians.

If we are to act wisely in regard to time in our old age then we need to develop the Christian life style as early as possible.

Old age remembers its youth

King Solomon in his old age wrote Ecclesiastes and it is largely a book in which he reviews his life and at the same time seeks to give instruction to his son, "Remember now your Creator in the days of your youth", Ecclesiastes 12:1.

There is a very sad statement in Ecclesiastes 4:13, "Better a poor and wise youth than an old and foolish king who will be admonished no more". Solomon, in his early days as king, was asked by God, "What do you want?" Solomon answered very wisely; he asked for wisdom to rule the nation of Israel. God granted his requested but also added much more in terms of greatness and wealth. Sadly, Solomon used his wisdom in teaching others but failed in applying wisdom to his own life especially as he grew older. After the death of Solomon, it became obvious that his son imitated his father's ways and took no notice of the wisdom in this book, see 1 Kings 12. Let us take note of the warning in this remarkable book and seek with determination not to be marked by failure in our old age!

Preparation for old age, memory failing

One of the difficulties we face as we grow older is the fact that memory, for some, becomes a problem. We have difficulty in retaining recent events and recalling past events. To this end our preparation should be to read and read again and again the scriptures. Let our minds become thoroughly saturated in God's word. When do we start this process? From the moment we accept the Lord Jesus as our Saviour. We are told in John 14:26 about some of the reasons for the Spirit of God coming and dwelling in every Christian, "He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all things". Now it is a well known fact that we cannot recall things we have never placed in our minds in the first instance. How important then to start seriously reading the scriptures.

Preparation for old age, reinforced life style

In the book of Ezra, we read, "For Ezra had prepared his heart to seek the Law of the LORD, and to do it, and to teach statutes and ordinances in Israel", Ezra 7:10. This verse speaks about Ezra in the past, what he had decided to do. Ezra had made three commitments: a heart prepared to seek and know God's word, to put into practice himself the things he learned, and, finally to pass on to others what he had proved in his own life. The steps Ezra took are common sense but to be truly effective there needs to be an early start on this type of committed life style. A godly life style needs to be established early, not something to be left until retirement.

Preparation for old age, mobility difficulties

There may come the time when we are no longer able to travel around as much as we used to. We need to adjust our horizon as to the sphere of service. Not that we should have neglected our immediate neighbours but there may be opportunities for greater involvement with those who are older like ourselves and near at hand. The local retirement home may prove to be a useful field for outreach. We may need to adjust to a different type of approach but the need is there. Coffee mornings are another opportunity to engage in informal conversations identifying needs that may provide opportunities to do good works and eventually speak about the Saviour or provide an appropriate Christian booklet. Often the first steps towards building an environment in which the Gospel can be talked about is simply being friendly towards people. Once a friendship has been established, then an opportunity to present the Gospel message may well become available.

Fellow Christians who are no longer able to leave their own homes would no doubt welcome an appropriate visit from time to time. Such visits are opportunities for encouragement. Also consider friendship as a means towards helping others when a need becomes known. There are so many believers who are in need of help and encouragement. If we find ourselves restricted to our home then there are other ways of reaching out beyond our four walls. One such way is by prayer. I remember an aged Christian woman who spent much time in her own home yet used the life line of prayer as a means of helping others.

The apostle Paul was a man of prayer. His letters are filled with references to prayer both for others and for himself. In Philippians 1:4, we read of Paul saying to the Philippians, "Always in every prayer of mine making request for you all with joy". From this verse we see Paul's constant concern for others and he states in every prayer he was praying for

them! Paul must have had a long prayer list when we consider those he knew as recorded in his letters. How many others who were known to Paul but not recorded for us in the scriptures? The attitude of constantly praying for others is expressed in 1 Thessalonians 5:17, "Pray without ceasing". Let me state that this is not an exhortation to spend 24 hours every day praying. It is an exhortation to be daily involved in praying.

Paul also valued prayer for himself. In 1 Thessalonians 5:25 we read, "Brethren, pray for us." Paul, although greatly used by God, knew the value of prayer and appreciated that if he was going to be sustained through his many trials then he needed others to be praying on his behalf.

In that wonderful chapter, John 17, we have the Lord Jesus Christ in prayer to His Father. The majority of the chapter is a prayer for us, from the disciples until our present time. The Lord knew that prayer was important. Remember he encouraged the disciples in prayer first, before work and service for God, see Matthew 17. Also the Lord was often all night in prayer. Let us encourage each other to be warriors in prayer. This work is not only for those confined to home but for all of us!

There are other means of communication, the telephone, letters and e-mail in order to keep in touch with other believers to give personal encouragement and the requesting of prayer lists or items for specific prayer.

Also being confined to home provides opportunities to become involved in written Christian ministry. There is a valuable and urgent need to pass on the accumulation of sound scriptural knowledge in order that following generations benefit from the experience of older believers.

Preparation for old age, failing eyesight

Failing eyesight is a problem for anyone. For the Christian it may hinder the reading of the scriptures and other enjoyable literature. Make preparations to have the scriptures on tape or CD. Acquire Christian ministry on tape and CD in order to still maintain a good library of Christian teaching but accessible through a different media. *Truth for Today* not only broadcasts teaching on the radio but provides the same messages free on tape and CD. In your local church there may be others in a similar situation. The establishment of a lending library of tapes and/or CD's would be a useful service to fellow believers.

To conclude

We have looked at what might be called preventative measures before we reach old age and then considered some of the afflictions that can come upon those who are growing old. The failing health and faculties that is common to this groaning creation however can be opportunities to reach out to those in need who likewise are growing old.

We have mentioned that though the body grows old and becomes subject to age restrictions the spiritual life is ever growing and needing to continue growing until we pass through the gateway of death into a better condition altogether. Asleep in Jesus is the happy state of those believers who die and they wait the moment of resurrection when all believers will be with Christ forever.

Even in old age, our spiritual growth should be seen to continue developing. An illustration of this is seen in Caleb, an Old Testament believer whose faithfulness did not fail. Both Caleb and Joshua were faithful in the matter of spying out the land and, because of their faithfulness, they did not perish in the wilderness as was true of all those who paled before the giants of the land. So it was that both Joshua and Caleb entered the land. Joshua became the new leader to conquer the nations of the Promised Land. But Caleb was given the challenge to live out his life as someone who was counted faithful for he had wholly followed the LORD his God. Now at 85 years of age he was not looking for retirement but to continue forward to claim what had been promised to him. Did he choose an easy option? No! Caleb was not that kind of person. Caleb was as strong then as he was at the beginning of the wilderness journey. "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." Caleb took the mountain from the enemy and it became his, see Joshua 14.

For Caleb it was a physical challenge, but for us it is illustrative of spiritual life. There is no giving up or retirement for the new life we have in Christ. Our sphere of operation may change over the years but we move from challenge to challenge in spiritual growth. Caleb's life of faith is a challenge which comes to all. Let us emulate that faith in our own lives. Let us take off our slippers and put on our mountaineering boots and, with the Lord's help, let us see what mountains He has for us to conquer.

In a similar way Paul gave a command to Timothy, "Take heed to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those who hear you", 1 Timothy 4:16. Paul's practical injunction to Timothy, the next generation, is to continue in the faith.

Let us pray. Lord, give us the renewed commitment and a life that is focused on Yourself to ever be active in whatever field of service You have placed us. No retirement or giving up due to growing old but to have the grace to search out new pastures in which to do Your will. Amen.

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