

# Truth for Today

The Bible teaching radio programme

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## Be prepared: Preparing for Middle Age

"Phyllosan fortifies the over forties!" This was an slogan I heard many years ago. The advert as for a tonic promoted to energise those over forty years of age. As I considered the subject for today, "Preparing for Middle Age", I wondered whether I could summarise this with a slogan. We'll see. Today, we will examine several things simultaneously: firstly, what is meant by "Middle age" in the natural and spiritual senses; and, secondly, the ways in which we can prepare for those years. In the UK Census the range was less. This age range is selected also for its social and psychological factors where the developmental tasks of the young adult are continued to a maturity. In his book, *"Sunday School Ministry to Adults"*, John Sisemare outlined several sections in the range of middle age. They included: "Aspiring Adulthood", "Achieving Adulthood" and "Conserving Adulthood".

However, there is no age range specified for spiritual growth and development. The reasons for this are two-fold. First, people may not become Christians until they are quite old in the natural sense. So, although old naturally, they may be only babies spiritually. Second, spiritual growth depends upon the amount of zeal people have for the Christian faith. Their prayer life, Bible study, attendance of church meetings and service for their Lord all contribute to their speed of growth. The writer of the Hebrew epistle had to write to believers saying, "For when for the time ye ought to be teachers, ye have need that one teach you again which be the first principles of the oracles of God; and are become such as have need of milk, and not of strong meat" (Hebrews 5:12). Although rebuking these Hebrew believers for their lack of spiritual growth, the writer suggests that those who were mature spiritually were those who were able to teach others. This is confirmed by a later verse where he writes, "But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil." The term "full age" means "mature". Such Christians understand the more difficult teachings of the Bible – the "strong meat" of the verse mentioned before.

It is possible for the opposite to occur, where a young Christian has made considerable strides in the Christian faith and is mature in the spiritual sense. While the youth of such Christians must not be despised, they do have a particular limitation - a lack of experience in relationships and dealing with problems in the church. This may mean that their judgement may be more legalistic than wise. This is illustrated in the case with King Rehoboam in the Old Testament. He, after the death of Solomon, was advised by the old men to ease the heavy workload that his father had put upon the people (2 Chronicles 10:9). However, he forsook their advice and went on to accept that of the young men who suggested that he should say: "My little finger shall be thicker than my father's loins. For whereas my father put a heavy yoke upon you, I will put more to your yoke: my father chastised you with whips, but I will chastise you with scorpions" (2 Chronicles 10:10-11). The devastating result was a division of the kingdom of Israel.

This lends itself to a brief consideration of mental attitudes during middle age. Such adults find their mental powers and skills productive and challenging. Their judgment is more sound and dependable. In fact, their reasoning skills tend to dominate and, sometimes, lead towards inflexibility. A balance is needed between their wisdom and actions. Furthermore, there may be a slight decrease in the rate of learning, but a wide knowledge and self-confidence tend to offset this decrease. Overall, this is a period of great achievement in mental tasks. Middle-aged adults, therefore, should be encouraged to continue to learn. Many courses in further education provide opportunities for this. Of course, the Christians who are middle-aged in the faith have a priority to teach those who are younger in both practical and doctrinal matters. For example, the older sister may pastorally teach the younger sisters how to love their husbands. Also the deposit of sound doctrine must also be passed on. The local church and families should cater for this.

When we turn to 1 John 2:13-14, we find the age groups of Christians are spiritually limited to three sections, "I write unto you, fathers, because ye have known him that is from the beginning. I write unto you, young men, because ye have overcome the wicked one. I write unto you, little children, because ye have known the Father." Here we find the mature Christians called "fathers", the under forties in the "young men" (see Strong's concordance) and also "children" as those who are very young in the faith.

Returning to human development, people in middle adulthood find themselves more limited physically and, rather, move towards deepening relationships and experiences. It is a time of responsibility and achievement. This is certainly true for the spiritually mature. Christians deepen their experience and apprehension of Christ and seek to be more like

Him. It is at such an age that they appreciate the Lord Jesus as their chief love and yield their lives more and more to the Spirit of God. Along with this, they take on a greater leadership role in the local church. Here, they are able to use their experience and maturity in teaching and in planning and supervising activities.

It is essential to prepare oneself for the Lord's service in the local church, especially in the safety-conscious zone of the United Kingdom. It would be wise, as a young adult, to gain qualifications in basic First Aid and Life Saving for example. These need to be repeated over the years to maintain the qualification. Also, it would be useful to have qualifications in Child Care and in Counselling. Other qualifications or knowledge may need to be acquired by the elders in the church relating to the church and its legal responsibilities. Then again, qualifications would be needed for various activities that may be motivating in an outdoor situation such as in Abseiling, Archery or Canoeing. The list may be long but, in our day and age, it's legally advisable.

Humanly speaking, middle age means that adjustments have to be made in the family. Responsibilities towards the development and guidance of teenage children increase; while additional care is needed for their own ageing parents. So education in drugs, drink and sexual relationships may be required for parents besides the youngsters themselves. On the other hand, an awareness of benefits and the care of the aged should have been developed.

These are similar in the local church also. The spiritually middle aged should be engaged in youth work and work with the elderly. As Christian leaders, we often emphasise the needs of the young and provide for them; but how often do we consider the pastoral care of elderly Christians? They are just as important to the church community and have a good deal to offer. Just take time to consider the faithfulness of some of the older saints at the time of Christ's birth. Zacharias and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, were described as "...righteous before God, walking in all the commandments and ordinances of the Lord blameless" (Luke 1:6). Even in old age, Zacharias still served faithfully as a priest and, by the Spirit of God, was able to prophesy about his own son's purpose in the will of God. Then there was old Simeon who held the Christ-child in his arms and gave glory to God. He was described as being "... just and devout, waiting for the consolation of Israel: and the Holy Ghost was upon him" (Luke 2:25). Old Christians be encouraged. Do what you can for Christ! That's all we that we can take with us when we leave the earthly scene. However, there is a major problem in the local church that actually relates to the spiritually middle-aged themselves. As already hinted at, they still need time for their own spiritual development. In fact, their level of active service for the Lord requires that they continue to make spiritual progress. Yet, it is this age group that may be overlooked in the spiritual programmes of the local church. How essential, then, it is to have regular prayer meetings and Bible studies besides the usual Sunday services like the Lord's Supper and preaching the Gospel.

Other adjustments may need to be made concerning home-life. Loneliness and concern may develop as children leave the home to go to university or get married. Mothers are particularly affected. They may have thought the children were a burden when they were young, but concern for them becomes almost overwhelming as they see their children reaching maturity and leaving the home nest. The children need a great deal of care and financial support at this time. This should have been anticipated and financial arrangements secured to come to fruition at this time.

In the local church, there is also a problem at this time. Numbers of young adults may be leaving to go to university. This is a dangerous time for Christians, especially those who have been brought up in a sheltered Christian environment. They are suddenly confronted with a large measure of freedom, a great increase in activities, arguments that seek to ruin their faith and new relationships that could easily draw them away from Christianity and into the world. It is vitally important to arrange for their spiritual welfare before they go. This would fall to the "middle-aged" Christians in the home church and in that which is likely to receive the individual. It is a good thing to ensure that churches are available to the young Christians in the university towns or cities of our land. This may mean that new churches need to be established in such areas.

Also, in this situation, the naturally middle-aged husbands and wives need to learn to live alone again, especially if they tended to neglect each other with business while the children were at home. They may even have to learn to be romantic again as they focus on their own relationships. On the other hand, the spiritually middle-aged should be showing a lively and mature Christian love to one another. How often this message is a major encouragement in the New Testament! Love is the badge of discipleship. Jesus said, "A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another" (John 13:34-35). The measure of love is the same as that of Christ for us – and He gave Himself up to death for us! The hymn-writer puts it this way:

*Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all!*

Love is also a banner of witness! It is by our love for one another that the world recognises us as the disciples of Jesus.

Middle-aged adults may find themselves involved in giving increased attention to ageing parents as well as striving to prepare for their own retirement, both at the same time. Often they face the death of a parent or even a spouse and are forced to make unwelcome adjustments in life.

Furthermore, in the normal development of adulthood, middle age is a dangerous time for marriages. Statistics show that the average age for divorce in the UK is about 40-43 years. This may be due, partly, to physiological changes that affect the sex drive. During menopause, in the forties or early fifties, the woman loses her reproductive function and her sexual desire may reduce as a result; whereas, a man's decline in sexual power and desire is much slower and does not affect his reproductive ability. This may result in a sexual imbalance within a marriage. It is important for the Christian wife to realise this and to continue her marital duties. In relation to sexual intercourse within marriage, the Bible gives clear instruction in 1 Corinthians 7:5: "Defraud ye not one the other, except it be with consent for a time, that ye may give yourselves to fasting and prayer; and come together again, that Satan tempt you not for your incontinency."

King David was middle-aged when, from the king's house rooftop, he spied the beautiful Bathsheba bathing. His desire for her caused him to commit adultery while her husband, Uriah, was away. She became pregnant, so he arranged for the return of her husband in the hope he would sleep with her. He didn't. So David made arrangements for Uriah to be killed. This being accomplished, he married Bathsheba. Had David not repented when confronted with his sins by Nathan, a prophet of God, his life would have been taken from him. However, the Lord, in His governmental judgement, took the life of the child instead.

The emotions of middle-aged adults run deep and full and, while they tend to be resistant to change, they are prepared to bear the burdens of others more readily. They are prepared to listen and advise according to their own experience. This is especially true of those who are spiritually mature. The apostle Paul wrote to the Galatian Christians saying, "Bear ye one another's burdens, and so fulfil the law of Christ" (Galatians 6:2). Although all Christians have a responsibility to do this, those who have more Christian experience are able to call on resources the younger may not have. This would include a good knowledge of Scripture from which they may give advice to those who need comfort or guidance.

The emotions of the spiritually middle aged are often witnessed in their tears at the prayer meeting as they make fervent and effectual prayer for those in need, trial or trouble. They are also witnessed in the broken voices during the remembrance of the Lord Jesus during the service called "The Lord's Supper". However, when it comes to church discipline, there is a constant danger of being legalistic in the interpretation of the scriptures. For example, the lawyers in the days of Jesus would promote the letter of the Law of Moses rather than the spirit of that law. The Lord Jesus had to rebuke some of them with these words: "Woe unto you also, ye lawyers! for ye lade men with burdens grievous to be borne, and ye yourselves touch not the burdens with one of your fingers" (Luke 11:46). The Law of Moses was based in the love of God. That is, God seeking to bless men and giving rules that had men's best interests in view. Therefore, Christians should seek the best for their fellows. Many of the lawyers just sought the best for themselves.

A believer who is overtaken in a fault is an example of this: "Brethren, if a man be overtaken in a fault, ye which are spiritual, restore such an one in the spirit of meekness; considering thyself, lest thou also be tempted" (Galatians 6:1). The story is often told of two brethren who had been asked to go and restore another brother who was had been overtaken by a fault. As they travelled to the home of the burdened believer, one of them said to the other that he could never do such a thing. His fellow Christian was more spiritual. He stopped and said, "Then we cannot go to see him." When asked why, the mature brother answered, "Because we are all capable of falling as he has, and worse!" One brother was going in the spirit of meekness. This is acceptable to God. Unfortunately, the other was going in an attitude of spiritual pride. God cannot tolerate this!

During middle adulthood, people put time and energy in gaining social position in the community. Such adults have a desire to "belong" to a number of organisations claiming their attention, time, and money. They often occupy positions of authority and responsibility in society and administer and control its various institutions. In the local church, these aspects may be met through the work of a well-balanced fellowship in the community. By "well balanced fellowship", we mean one where the Lord's things have priority among His people. They worship, pray and learn together and then go out in witness.

The work in the community should be part of Christian witness for we are to do good to all men. Such witness not only includes the doing; but doing with an explanation as to what motivates you. 1 Peter 3:15 puts it this way, "But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear..." It involves talk as well as walk.

At the same time, we should be serving as the Lord in His will. That is to say, it is not what we think we can do for Him, but what He wants us to do (as well as where and when He wants us to serve). A hymn writer put it this way:

*There's a work, Lord Jesus, You would have me do,  
By Your Word and Spirit teach me to be true.  
Give me grace, Lord Jesus, to seek out Your will;  
And may the work I do, Your own plans fulfil.*

Summary.

Many believe middle age is the best time of life. It can be a wonderful period for the Christian. Though declining somewhat physically, the middle-aged adult generally enjoys good health and is in good physical condition if he gives proper care to his body. He is mentally productive with abilities and skills at their best. Learning is still an adventure. Socially the middle-aged adult finds renewed interest. The emotions run deep and full. Middle age should demonstrate true maturity. A well-balanced Christian adult education programme will help meet the spiritual needs of middle age successfully. This is important because the middle-aged adult is bearing the burden of two very important institutions - the church and the home. When a person is faithful to the Lord and Christian teaching, then he or she is classed as "a vessel unto honour, sanctified, and meet for the master's use, and prepared unto every good work." What a fruitful time middle-age can be for the Lord's people! Well might it be said: "Faith furnishes the over-forties!"

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