

Growing Old How not to do it!

*[Please note: sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Sophocles is reputed to have said, “No one longs to live more than someone growing old.”

This presents a rather pessimistic view of existence. The best that we can hope for is that we have at least one more day – death is to be avoided at all costs. This was certainly not the view of the apostle Paul who, in Philippians 1: v.21 wrote,

“For to me, to live is Christ, and to die is gain.”

He presents to us a far more positive view on living and certainly one that challenges me and my attitude to the recent pandemic. Have I loosely read this verse to mean “For to me, to live is everything, and to die is to be avoided at all costs?” Billy Graham gives us an interesting insight into how we are to approach our advancing years when he said,

“When granted many years of life, growing old in age is natural, but growing old with grace is a choice. Growing older with grace is possible for all who set their hearts and minds on the Giver of grace, the Lord Jesus Christ.”

As we continue our series on growing old, we have already considered some of the lessons from the Bible on how we should, like Billy Graham encourages, grow old with grace. Numerous men and women of the Bible illustrate this for us – Caleb, Anna, Moses, and Joshua. However, today, I want to consider three examples of men who did not grow old well and see some of the lessons that we can learn from them. Hopefully, this will enable us to avoid repeating their mistakes!

The historical books of the Bible are so useful to us in that they contain characters who in real life can teach us so much – for good or bad. Therefore, I want to think about three of the kings of Israel / Judah to learn where it all went so badly wrong for them as they grew old. Firstly, we will think of Solomon – the wisest of men. Then we will think of Uzziah who was marvellously helped. Lastly, we will consider Hezekiah, of whom it is said there was none like him before or after! (2 Kings 18: vv. 3-7).

To set the scene for our consideration of Solomon we need to read together Deuteronomy 17: vv. 14-17:

“When you come to the land which the LORD your God is giving you, and possess it and dwell in it, and say, ‘I will set a king over me like all the nations that are around me,’ you shall surely set a king over you whom the LORD your God chooses; one from among your brethren you shall set as king over you; you may not set a foreigner over you, who is not your brother. But he shall not multiply horses for himself, nor cause the people to return to

Egypt to multiply horses, for the LORD has said to you, 'You shall not return that way again.' Neither shall he multiply wives for himself, lest his heart is turned away; nor shall he greatly multiply silver and gold for himself."

I wonder if we ever think that the first five books of the Bible are a bit heavy going and don't have much in them to encourage us. Perhaps Solomon thought like that. In a rather obscure corner of Deuteronomy, we get God's view of how the nation of Israel would be governed in the future. Of course, they would have been far better allowing God to rule and no other. But God recognised the fact that they would one day ask for a king and so gave warning as to how kings were to behave. They were not to multiply for themselves gold and silver which speaks of self-sufficiency. They were not to multiply horses, which speaks of self-serving. Nor were they to have many wives, which speaks of self-satisfaction.

Solomon had started so well! In 1 Kings 3: vv.7-14 we read:

"Now, O LORD my God, You have made Your servant king instead of my father David, but I am a little child; I do not know how to go out or come in. And Your servant is in the midst of Your people whom You have chosen, a great people, too numerous to be numbered or counted. Therefore give to Your servant an understanding heart to judge Your people, that I may discern between good and evil. For who is able to judge this great people of Yours?"

The speech pleased the LORD, that Solomon had asked this thing. Then God said to him: "Because you have asked this thing, and have not asked long life for yourself, nor have asked riches for yourself, nor have asked the life of your enemies, but have asked for yourself understanding to discern justice, behold, I have done according to your words; see, I have given you a wise and understanding heart, so that there has not been anyone like you before you, nor shall any like you arise after you. And I have also given you what you have not asked: both riches and honour, so that there shall not be anyone like you among the kings all your days. So, if you walk in My ways, to keep My statutes and My commandments, as your father David walked, then I will lengthen your days."

God had promised Solomon riches and a long life if only he would keep God's commands. But a good start to life, or even a great middle age are no guarantees of success. And so, we read in 1 Kings vv. 10:14 – 11:4:

"The weight of gold that came to Solomon yearly was six hundred and sixty-six talents of gold, [7:30 besides that from the travelling merchants, from the income of traders, from all the kings of Arabia, and from the governors of the country..... Moreover the king made a great throne of ivory, and overlaid it with pure gold. The throne had six steps, and the top of the throne was round at the back; there were armrests on either side of the place of the seat, and two lions stood beside the armrests. Twelve lions stood there, one on each side of the six steps; nothing like this had been made for any other kingdom..... So, King Solomon surpassed all the kings of the earth in riches and wisdom.](#)" [08:10](#)

And Solomon gathered chariots and horsemen; he had one thousand four hundred chariots and twelve thousand horsemen, whom he stationed in the chariot cities and with the king at Jerusalem. The king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones, and he made cedar trees as abundant as the sycamores which are in the lowland. Also, Solomon had horses imported

from Egypt and Keveh; the king's merchants bought them in Keveh at the current price.....

But King Solomon loved many foreign women, as well as the daughter of Pharaoh: women of the Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians, and Hittites—from the nations of whom the LORD had said to the children of Israel, “You shall not intermarry with them, nor they with you. Surely they will turn away your hearts after their gods.” [9:06 Solomon clung to these in love. And he had seven hundred wives, princesses, and three hundred concubines; and his wives turned away his heart. For it was so, when Solomon was old, that his wives turned his heart after other gods; and his heart was not loyal to the LORD his God, as was the heart of his father David.](#)09:30

God could not have been clearer in his three warnings and yet, in later life, Solomon disregarded each one. Imagine living in a society where silver was like pebbles on the ground such was the abundance of this precious metal. It is difficult to comprehend! We need to remember too that because of his early faithfulness God had promised to give Solomon riches as well as the wisdom he had asked for. So how do we reconcile these two things. On the one hand God gave him riches and on the other warned him of the danger of being rich? Well, we do so in the same way as we would do today. Instead of hoarding it to enrich himself, Solomon should have used his vast wealth to benefit his people and to give back to God.

There is no shame in working hard or becoming rich but there is a grave danger in greed and self-sufficiency. Often, in later life we do tend to have more disposable income and fewer responsibilities financially. Do we take this opportunity to splash the cash on ourselves or to increase our bank balances? That pathway leads to spiritual danger. We need to become generous givers and financially support the Lord's work over and above what we may have done in earlier life. How shameful that His work is hampered by lack of funds when so many of us have money sitting in accounts that we have not touched for years! It is good to make sensible provision in our wills so that our finances continue to support His people after our deaths. It is better, so far as we are able, to give away our money now, whilst we are living.

Solomon also built up a vast army – cavalry and men. Again, God had warned against this. Who had delivered the Israelites from Egypt? God had. Who had defeated Jericho? God had. Who had killed the giant Goliath? God had, through the arm of a young lad. Yet here was Solomon handing God His P45 as He was no longer required. Solomon and his army were quite able to extend the realm and protect it. There is a real danger that as I grow older, I learn from my experiences and depend on them, rather than on God for each day. I now might think I know how to be a good husband, father, brother in church, so why bother asking God for help here?

Lastly, Solomon married many foreign wives. I don't suppose he woke up one morning and decided on a mass wedding. I suspect rather he woke up and wondered how he had accumulated so many wives. And that is probably how he viewed his wives – as another of his possessions. Each one led him away from God. Solomon would allow God to be in His Temple but alongside that Solomon would also worship the gods of the nations. One amongst many is never a position that God will accept. Now it is unlikely that we will have many spouses, but anything that claims our affections – career, hobbies, position can all act in the same way as Solomon's wives did and take us away from putting God alone first in our lives.

[13:25 The story is told of a young girl who went to the sweet shop with her mother. She had one penny to spend and so looked at all the jars over and over again. Frustrated and impatient, her mother scolded her to hurry up as she only had one penny to spend. “That is the problem”, the girl cried, “I only have one penny to spend!”](#)

Each of us only have one life to spend. As we grow old let us not waste it on materialistic possessions, position and things that claim our hearts affections at the expense of God.

We must move on to look at King Uzziah. We read in 2 Chronicles chapter 26:vv. 1 – 5:

“Now all the people of Judah took Uzziah, who was sixteen years old, and made him king instead of his father Amaziah. He built Elath and restored it to Judah, after the king rested with his fathers. Uzziah was sixteen years old when he became king, and he reigned fifty-two years in Jerusalem. His mother’s name was Jeholiah of Jerusalem. And he did what was right in the sight of the LORD, according to all that his father Amaziah had done. He sought God in the days of Zechariah, who had understanding in the visions of God; and as long as he sought the LORD, God made him prosper.”

Uzziah was another young man who started well. He was active in the service of God and strengthened the nation of Israel – God’s people – against their enemies. The religious leader of the day, Zechariah, obviously had a positive effect on the king and served as a good role model for him. Not only was Uzziah a great warrior king, he was also a man of science, farming and technology. Verse 15 of the chapter tells us that he was marvellously helped until he became strong. In the early days, he could see problems and enemies all around, and the positive influence of others anchored Uzziah spiritually. However, as he won victory after victory and his achievements stacked up, Uzziah made the fatal mistake of thinking that his successes were the result of his endeavours.

I wonder how many of us are like that. There is a world of difference between the architect and the sub-contractor. We all have our part to play in the work of God but we must never forget that it is His work and He alone is the One that must have credit for anything that is accomplished. Sadly, we read in verse 16:

“But when he was strong his heart was lifted up, to his destruction, for he transgressed against the LORD his God by entering the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense.”

God has only ever intended the Priesthood and the Kingship to be held by one man – the Messiah, Jesus Christ. By taking on both of these roles, Uzziah was presenting himself as that man, and God could never stand for that. Uzziah’s end was tragic and painful.

Pride in what we have accomplished, even for God, can so easily take us away from God and cause us to depend on ourselves. Uzziah’s downfall was not from some outwardly gross evil. We may on the outside appear to be so respectable, spiritual even, and yet we may be rotten to the core inwardly, and this is particularly a danger the older we get. We may think we know better than everyone else. We have seen so much of life and feel we have so much wisdom and experience to offer. However, pride can so easily destroy our testimony, so easily and certainly destroy our relationship with the Lord.

Lastly, let us look at the life of Hezekiah. He became king when he was 25 and reigned well. So, 2 Kings 18: vv. 5 – 7 tells us:

“He trusted in the LORD God of Israel, so that after him was none like him among all the kings of Judah, nor who were before him. For he held fast to the LORD; he did not depart from following Him, but kept His commandments, which the LORD had commanded Moses. The LORD was with him; he prospered wherever he went.”

Things were catastrophic for Judah when Hezekiah became king and yet through his dependence upon God, he turned the nation back to following Him, re-establishing Temple worship and removing so many of the idolatrous practices from the nation.

Perhaps, we get a clue, however, that all was not right in 2 Kings 19: v.4 when he sought the prayers of the great prophet Isaiah. Twice there he refers to the LORD as your God, rather than our God. Like the Church at Ephesus in Revelation chapter 2, had Hezekiah left his first love? Was his greatest desire no longer the glory of God but his own peace? After a lifetime of struggle, he just wanted tranquillity and calm days, rather than the stresses and strains of striving for God's best. I know that this certainly sounds a familiar echo in my heart!

Later, when Hezekiah became ill, he approached Isaiah again who tells him that he is about to die. This prompts a deep repentance on the part of Hezekiah and so Isaiah tells him that he will recover and reign for a further period of 15 years. The coming judgement of God upon the nation would not come in his lifetime but would fall on his descendants instead. So, in 2 Kings 20:19 we read:

“So Hezekiah said to Isaiah, “The word of the LORD which you have spoken is good!” For he said, “Will there not be peace and truth at least in my days?””

There are three simple lessons I want us to learn from this late episode in Hezekiah's life, things that occurred to one of Judah's greatest kings. Firstly, it is probable that his son Manasseh was born after his illness. Now Manasseh was a truly awful king. Imagine shedding so much innocent blood that it filled one end of Jerusalem to the other! Had Hezekiah lived to see his son reign, I wonder whether he would have regretted those recovery years. In a way, it is possible to live too long. Longevity is to be celebrated, but only if it is filled with that which is worth celebrating. I remember at work when one long-standing colleague retired after 35 years. Others bemoaned the fact that all this experience was not being replaced. However, one perceptive individual commented that perhaps losing 35 years of doing something the wrong way was not an altogether bad thing! Respect must be earned; it is never a right just because of an age number or having lived during a certain period of history.

Secondly, during those 15 years Hezekiah made a foolish treaty with the Babylonians. To prevent a current national disaster, he invited an altogether greater one that would fall during the time of his descendants. What kind of spiritual inheritance are we leaving the next generation. Not many generations leave the world a better place and not many generations of believers leave the church a stronger, less divided body. Hezekiah took short term decisions that benefited both himself and the nation but left it much weaker in the long term. If only he had trusted in God for present help, the future might not have been so bleak. Proverbs 13: v.22 tells us that:

“A good man leaves an inheritance to his children's children.”

Now I am not talking about a financial legacy here, nor even only about biological relatives. What does concern me is that each of us leave a spiritual legacy behind us that will be of lasting benefit to the church of tomorrow. One obvious way this has been done is in the books people have written and are still of use. But not all of us are called to be authors. Perhaps it may be in the godly example we set to others. I still smile when I remember my first granddaughter after the service at church had finished going to sit in my mum's chair and, having put on her hat and gloves, loudly proclaiming, “I'm Great Grandma!” I hope that others will want to imitate me – long after I am gone!

Lastly, taken at face value, the words of Hezekiah display an awful attitude. I realise that they might be interpreted in a more favourable way. But on the surface of things he seems to suggest that he is not all that bothered about the impending judgement of God as it will not be in his own lifetime! Even if this was not Hezekiah's intent, it is certainly an attitude that we may fall into. So

long as things carry on at my church just the way I like them for my lifetime then all is well. The fact that this may be driving the next generation away does not seem to register. As I look around at the church in the UK at the start of the 21st Century I find it difficult to say that it is morally any better than the nation of Israel was all those years ago. Can we really expect to avoid the discipline of God?

Even if this is so, we do have a choice as to how we respond. We could just carry on and hope that it does not impact us too much in our own lifetime, ignoring the spiritual needs of our children and grandchildren. Or we could accept the challenge of leaving our comfort zone and being a generation that was truly faithful to God. Today, we need believers who study their Bibles more than our parents' generation. Today, we need believers who are less attached to the things of this life, and who have exchanged them for the glories of the world to come, than our parents' generation. Today, we need believers who are more ready to share the gospel in a relevant way than our parents' generation.

There is hope, for we believe in a faithful God who will not deny Himself, even in the midst of an unfaithful generation. This is the challenge for those of us who are growing old – which is all of us! May we, by learning from the mistakes of those who have gone before, resolve to avoid repeating them, for His name's sake. Amen.

Thank you for listening to the Truth for Today talk in the series on Growing Old – How not to do it! Talk number 1243.

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