

NORTHERN LIGHT

Digest

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For Older Christians: The Age of Influence Begins

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One of my journalistic colleagues, the late John Halford, used to say, "When you retire, you lose corporate power but gain in influence."

I thought: what a typical way for the effervescent John Halford to look at aging.

But of course, he was right. The Age Wave is a major trend of our time. Stats Can reports that more Canadians are aged 65-plus right now than are under 15. We are the fastest growing

group. Other agencies opine that citizens aged 100 years or more will triple by 2031. That's impact!

These emerging realities affect our churches and how we do church. Like the Canadian winters, preparation is the key. The Bible itself gives us two snapshots of realistic preparation for aging.

In 2 Samuel 21:15-18, David the warrior king is near the end of his life. He is leading the troops into battle one last time. "David went down with his men to fight against the Philistines, and he became exhausted. And Ishbi-Benob, whose bronze spearhead weighed three hundred shekels (7½ lbs) said he would kill David. But Abishai son of Zeruiah came to David's rescue... Then David's men swore to him, saying, 'Never again will you go out with us to battle, so that the lamp of Israel will not be extinguished.'"

Here are indications that:

- 1.) It's all right to retire should you feel moved to do so and,
- 2.) There are ways to serve appropriate to changing realities. David apparently found this out, writing up one of the great "legacy poems" in the Bible, 2 Samuel 22, and no doubt collecting together his greatest gift to humanity, the Book of Psalms.

Snapshot Two: In the letter to Philemon we see the "influence principle" at work very clearly. Here St. Paul is urging one of his younger elders (Philemon) to take back an escaped slave in recognition of the young man's outstanding service.



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Christians owning household servants was a delicate matter, so Paul has to play the "age card." He wants Philemon to do the right thing, but to do it voluntarily. The letter is a masterpiece of psychology as Paul states: "Therefore, although in Christ I could be bold and order you to do what you ought to do, yet I appeal to you on the basis of love. I then, as Paul—an old man and now also a prisoner of Jesus Christ—appeal to you for my son Onesimus, who became my son while I was in chains" (Philemon 8-9).

This appeal was bound to penetrate hardened defenses. The promise of having influence in old age comes into play forcefully if we have lived our lives under God's grace and guidance. For then we have something of value to pass on.

It is from that position that we are able to exert real influence on the generations below us. A track record has been created, the art of timing has been learned and younger people know we are not in competition with them. Nothing is worse than meddling old people, but a good word in due season, ah, how sweet it is! A good example is even better (Titus 2:2-15).

This gentle reminder is God's empathetic declaration that he has a purpose in all stages of our life. The Creator ordained the life cycle for many things and one of them was that as our physical prowess fades we may turn more naturally to him. Psalm 103:14 says, "He knows our frame; he remembers that we are dust." For godly men and women, the petition of Psalm 71:9 is pertinent, "Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone." Then the hopeful confidence of Psalm 92, "The righteous will flourish like a palm tree... They will bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, The Lord is upright" (verses 12,14-15).

A Treatise on Aging

It is comforting to know that the Bible has been way ahead of us on this subject. The Book of Ecclesiastes is almost a treatise on later life and looking back. Remember the elegant pen portrait in Ecclesiastes 12:

"Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the time of trouble comes (how honest!) and the years draw near when you will say, 'I see no purpose in them.' Remember him before the sun and light give way to darkness, before the moon and the stars grow dim (vision problems), and the clouds return with the rain (memory loss)—when the guardians of the house tremble (the arms) and the strong men stoop (the legs) when the grinders cease because they are few...when the noise of the mill is low, when the chirping of the sparrow grows faint (hearing declines) and the songbirds fall silent; when men are afraid of a steep place, and the street is full of terrors (a walker is needed), when the blossom whitens on the almond tree and the grasshopper is a burden and desire fails" (verses 1-5 NEB and NAV).

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Yes, God is with us in our senior years, though like King David, we will have to make adjustments. Here are some themes for senior Christians to maximize their age of influence.

Leverage the Past

First, try to leverage the past. This means drawing upon the experiences of Early Life to live usefully in the present. This is vital for a noted writer has stated that "the strongest factor in living long is having a level of daily social activity that provides *physical and mental stimulation*." The cliché is "stay involved" and like most clichés this is very true. We've all seen this at work. There are seniors in our congregations I knew who have been Olympic figure skaters yet delightedly taught nervous church kids to step on the ice. Others delivered meals-on-wheels to people in their local community *who were older than them*.

As seniors we have the power to inspire. In my gym class, there is a couple both nearing age 90, who show up to work out, and I stop what I'm doing. I'm in awe—and I tell them. My wife and I routinely play softball with a former teacher who was aged 85 last time we coaxed her age out of her. Of course, we can't all be this heroic, but we can let other people prod us to keep moving, a key to longevity at any age.

A Hopeful Future

Next, we need to stay open to the future, to tap into that wonderful Christian virtue of hope! Aged Simeon was like that. As a retired priest in the first century Jewish temple, he had been divinely promised that he would bless his people's Messiah before he died. When Joseph and Mary showed up with infant Jesus in Jerusalem that special day, Simeon wasted no time. "He took him up in his arms and blessed God and said, 'Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation'" (Luke 2:28-30).

"To depart in peace." What a blessing. The Christian counselor Henri Nouwen wrote years ago, that "it belongs to the greatness of men and women that the meaning of their existence escapes the power of calculations and predictions." Yes, there are dread statistics out there about Alzheimer's and Dementia and TV commercials can scare us silly but the Simeons don't let fear predominate. Simeon himself reflected the sober determination of the prophet Habakkuk, "I will take my stand at my watch post and station myself on the tower and look out to see what he will say to me" (Habakkuk 2:1).

It's a faith-inducing question: *What else might God have in store?* Like Simeon and Habakkuk we can pray for courage and search out Bible verses that show us what God has promised us. In so doing we can find what Nouwen calls "a new recreating vision."

Outflanking the Arch-Fear

Of course, there is no getting around the reality of death and dying, what Robert Browning called "the Arch Fear." Even here Bible promises act like an antidote. "The righteous finds refuge in his death" it says in Proverbs 14:32. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of those faithful to him" Psalm 116:15 assures us, showing God does not forget us in our most personal struggles. The Bible almost ends with a capstone verse on death in Revelation 14:13, "Write: *Blessed are the dead who die in the Lord*

Two Seniors On Aging

NL Digest: What has surprised you about aging?

*I have been surprised that as I reach my 89th year, I am as healthy and mobile as I am. I do most things that I have always done. I still play piano, drive my car, do my own housework and my own baking. But after my husband died there were many times I felt out of place because there were always “couples” and then just me. After many years of being part of a couple I wasn’t prepared for that. I didn’t realize how many things I hadn’t done for myself and now was forced to. It was a surprise to me that I wasn’t as “self sufficient” as I thought. **Trudy from SK***

*One of the things I have experienced about aging is that as long as I had the energy and good health to continue to live life without any major adjustments in lifestyle then my chronological age (75) had little relevance to my self image of being “old.” There was no sense or concept of “being old.” In the past, I have found myself surprised at my actual chronological age since I didn’t “feel old.” Although I was always aware of my mortality, there seemed little emotional investment in that reality. However, having a heart attack—that could have ended my life—and also becoming increasingly aware of a lessening of energy and the need to pace myself, impresses on me the reality that my body is aging and I am mortal. **Roy from BC***

NL Digest: How has your faith made a difference as you age?

*My faith has helped me a lot. I often talk to God. Without that help and hope, I would be lost because my life can be very lonely at times. **Trudy from SK***

*The greatest appreciation I have is that I was brought to faith at a relatively early age (18). I cannot begin to imagine living my life without the knowledge of the Gospel. To have the empowering support of the love of God as revealed in Jesus—especially in times of trial and difficulties—has been the source of sustaining strength. I thank God daily for his faithfulness and that we can put our trust in him, whatever our circumstances. **Roy from BC***

from now on. ‘Yes,’ says the Spirit, ‘they will rest from their labour, for their deeds follow them.’”

Since Jesus’ resurrection and ascension, death has been defeated though it still exerts power over us. But God is with us in even those dark valleys, *especially* in the dark times. My dear aunt Blanche was slowly dying of a wasting disease and confessed to her devout Methodist husband, “I am afraid to die.” He responded wisely with, “My dear, when it comes, you may not even be aware of it.” And so it happened. This gentle lady passed into a quiet coma and then into peaceful sleep, but she was *sleeping in Jesus*, and that makes all the difference in the world (1 Thessalonians 4:14).

“Burning the Tapes”

God’s promises are like gold at this stage of life. The story goes that when the Christian theologian Augustine lay dying he had had written on the walls of his room all of the Penitential Psalms. These are Psalms 6, 32, 51, 102, 130, 143. Skim them and you’ll see why. Augustine had been a wild and promiscuous youth and his conscience dogged him all through his life. But he had learned with God’s help to “burn the tapes,” to stop replaying in his mind the bad deeds and decisions that had almost ruined his life earlier.

That is something we can all “relate to,” as we say today.

No one has lived a perfect life or even come close. But God has antidotes to these debilitating fears, tears and regrets that can undermine our age of influence. The only way to get air out of a bottle is to pour something else in, and the best way to get bad thoughts out is to pour in the healing balm of God’s word. Seniors know all about late night regrets and 4 am guilt feelings. King David certainly had more than his share of misdeeds to haunt him. But often we find him in the Psalms, searching the scripture, reinforcing his sense of God’s forgiveness “through the watches of the night” (Psalm 63:6).

Some of God’s greatest servants had lots on their plate to feel guilty about. Think of the patriarch Jacob, for example, who messed up his twelve sons really badly and for which God was angry (Hosea 12:2-6). But thanks to God’s mercy and forbearance and

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Jacob's "hanging in there" the patriarch got to see and bless his grandchildren after a sad separation. "All's well that ends well." Again, in the book called Second Peter, we see the chief apostle Simon Peter writing eloquently about God's "great and precious promises" in his farewell address. As some writers say, Peter must have been haunted by a rooster's crow his whole life through (Luke 22:61-62). Yet here he is writing confidently about his own decease (2 Peter 1:15) and ending with that clarion call to all Christians in chapter 3:18 to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ."

"Age is Opportunity"

We never stop learning and growing. The poet Longfellow wrote that "age is opportunity," and the Christian poet T.S. Eliot said, "Old men should be explorers."

So, with fears and regrets to one side, we set out on the age of influence. Marj, a college classmate from the 1960s, writes that with the death of her parents she suddenly saw herself as "an ancestor figure" ready to pass on the story of "her tribe," as elders always did until today's present obsession with youth (now fading). So Marj posts eloquent and moving tributes to her father's accomplishments in World War Two and her mother's wisdom on Facebook. These vignettes make inspiring reading.

Marj's Christian faith encourages her in this labour of love. Yes, God has ordained the human life cycle and all its phases. That includes the age of influence that many of us reading this never expected to have to pass through. But we can take heart—the same Faith that inspired us at conversion can help us make a success of this stage of life as well. It's a promise!

Neil Earle