

Introduction

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Preacher: Jon Hueni

[0:00] We're beginning a new study today, and it's called Growing Old Gracefully. Maybe some of you are thinking you took a wrong turn and you got in the wrong class.

You won't offend me if you want to go down to the end of the hall and be a part of the parenting class. That's going on right now. I think there were some requirements for that class.

I don't know all of them, but I think you need to have a child under 10 years of age, or you need to be married and hoping one day to have children or have a college and career age.

We don't have any requirements in this class except that you're growing old. So if that's you, you're in the right class. All ages, whatever age you are today, are growing old.

Some are just a bit further along the process than others. But this is something that we all face. And so whatever your age, this is a pertinent study for you.

[1:04] We're not only considering growing old, but our aim is to do so gracefully or full of God's grace. We'll find all the grace that we need for growing old in the Lord Jesus.

And we want to think through some of the issues of old age. We want to think of some of the peculiar problems of old age, some of the peculiar fears of old age.

What are the sins of old age, the challenges, the unique opportunities of old age? And the Bible teaches us to consider specific needs of the elderly.

You're familiar with that chapter in Titus, Titus chapter 2, where Paul is telling Titus what he's to be teaching the congregation. He's to teach what's in accord with sound doctrine.

And then he's told specifically what to teach the older man. There's a specific word for the older man because they have specific needs. And then there's a specific word for what he's to teach older women.

[2:07] And then there's a word for the younger women. And for the younger men, there are peculiar needs for each age group. So we're simply following Paul's example by honing in on specific issues that are pertinent to older people.

We'll be drawing on many different resources. We'll quote them as we come upon them. But the challenge I want to leave with us all today is to finish well.

To finish well. Many races are lost in the last five yards in swimming. From the flags in, a race can be lost. The very last touch, as Michael Phelps showed us this year at the Olympics.

Many basketball games are lost in the last seconds. Baseball games lost in the last inning. And any athlete worth his salt must be a finisher.

And that's why you often hear coaches in swimming or in track and field shouting, Finish! Finish!

There's something beautiful about seeing an athlete running their fastest when they hit the tape.

[3:20] And seeing that they had something left in the tank and gave it their all. And that's how we want to exit this life. We want to hit the tape full out. Talking spiritually here, not physically.

Physically, we may be going the slowest that we've ever done in our lives. But spiritually, we want to be going the fastest. And so if life could be compared to a hundred-yard dash, we're talking about as we come into those last 10, 20 yards, you need to hear the challenge of God's Word to finish the race and to finish well.

In other words, old age is not a time to coast into the finish line. In fact, some of the most difficult challenges that we face in the whole of our lives are the ones that we will face when we grow old, when we're drawing near to the end, when we're at our weakest physically and perhaps even mentally.

Now, old people share many of the same challenges and problems that all people in the world face. We share them commonly. But there are specific additional problems that old people face because they are old and because they are growing old.

Hmm. Did you hear that in the back? Watching the world deteriorate and grow worse and worse? Just the pain of seeing our world crumbling and sitting here and seeing that?

[12:12] Ed? Ed? Ed? To go along with that point, growing bitter. Thinking that in the good old days, living in days that passed, but those days are gone, and the world continues to change, but you don't want to change.

So you grow bitter. Hmm. Okay. Sharon? Sharon? Becoming a burden.

You don't want to become a burden to your family, your spouse. All right. Good. Des? We regret the sins of our youth.

We regret misspent lives and opportunities along the way. And very often we have to live with the consequences of that as we're growing older. And we see the consequences of our sins.

And it can be another burden as we grow old. Lou? On the positive side. We're only taking the difficulties and problems.

[13:48] We want to get you feeling real low this morning. And then we're going to have the positive side. But I am about ready to be done. Man, this is getting depressing. You guys. I had about six things and you've got 26 here.

So do you have anything else, Lou? On the positive side, we have to understand the problems of God. Yeah. Now, the positive side, we understand the grace of mercy is half the way. We make sure you take care of every day.

We make sure you take care of every day. Amen. That's great. Amen. Amen. All right. We're going to get there and camp on those very themes in another lesson.

Anything else before we've... Yes, Dave. Whether or not you retire and you'll have enough money. There we go. Anybody ever thought about whether you'd have enough money to make it to the end? Well, you've all...

Like I said, you've had so many here. But as I think of growing old, perhaps one of the biggest ones is dealing with death itself. It's not a small thing to die.

[14:55] And old age is a time when we have to face that reality as our near neighbor. And so add that to the list. We see that there are...

These are no little trials that come upon us in our old age. So old age is not a time to coast spiritually. We can't afford, as Bill said, just to slack off and think, I don't need to read my Bible anymore.

These trials of the elderly require great grace and ongoing growth in grace to the very end. You can't pick up enough speed by living a strong Christian life that will carry you just to coast into the finish line.

The spiritual terrain is sharply uphill at the end of your life. And the coast only lasts about 0.5 seconds. In other words, biking in old age is not like biking in earlier days.

And when we were in Switzerland, I saw gears on a bicycle that I've never seen before. But as guys were riding up mountains, you'd see their feet just spinning.

[16:09] And yet they were just barely crawling up the mountain. Here in Indiana, when you quit pedaling, you can coast for a quarter of a mile. There, if you quit pedaling, about 0.5 seconds, and you'd be going down the mountain backwards.

And I say that's a picture of old age, that the spiritual terrain of old age is steep. And that's why we must, especially in old age, not grow weary in doing good.

There are many things that will tempt you to grow weary, to quit, to give up, to coast, but we can't. So apply yourself vigorously to the means of grace all the way to the end, to the Bible reading, the memory of Scripture, the meditation of Scripture, the prayers, private, public, worship, preaching of the Word, singing of hymns, Lord's Supper, fellowship of the saints.

These things are not just needed for the younger. They're not things we graduate out of as we become older. Well, I needed that as a young disciple in Christ. No, we need it as an old disciple of Jesus as well.

So, 2 Timothy chapter 4, we find Paul in old age. He's not only old, he's also in prison.

[17:27] And he's waiting execution. He knows he's coming down to the end of his life. And he says, only Luke is with me. He's experiencing some loneliness.

Everybody else had deserted him or was elsewhere. And he wants Timothy to come and to bring Mark. He's hungry for fellowship. That's a good sign in the old age, to be hungry for fellowship.

But he also wants him to bring something along. Verse 13. When you come, bring the cloak that I left with Carpus at Troas and my scrolls, especially the parchments. Perhaps his circulation was getting poor in old age and he's in a prison and he's cold and he wants a coat. But he also wants his scrolls and especially the parchments. What these are, we don't know for sure. Possibly a Greek copy of the Old Testament scriptures. Possibly collections of the Lord's sayings. [18:33] But what is sure is that Paul, at the very end of his life, is still reading and studying. He's not coasting intellectually.

He's not coasting in his intake of the Word of God. So old age is not a time to slack off in these means of grace. You are burning more calories of grace under the peculiar challenges and trials and temptations of old age. You need to replenish more often, not less. When we were in Papillion, an older couple took me out to eat one day. And Larry, he's a retired man. I don't know exactly how old he is, probably around 70. And he told me that one day his pastor said, how do you know that I'm not just pulling your leg up here? How do you know that what I'm telling you is the truth? This was nine years ago and it hit him. [19:36] And the challenge was you better be reading your Bible. You better be reading it from cover to cover so that you know that what you're hearing is the Word of God. And so Larry, nine years ago, started reading through his Bible.

It's the first time. As an old man, he started the practice of reading the Scripture. And he shared with me that he's been through the Bible nine times now in the last nine years. That was an encouragement to me to see, here's a man who realizes I need, at the end of my life, the Word of God. Yes, our children down here in their classrooms need to be learning the Word of God.

They need it at that end of life, but we need it at this end as well. Some of you remember John and Audrey Ladick. And I think how positive an example and model we had in them of the means of grace in old age.

When they were old and weak, they still hungered and thirsted for the preaching, the singing of hymns, the fellowship of the believers. Can any of you remember seeing old white-haired John limping up the long ramp to the music room where we used to worship over here at the high school? [20:48] That's emblazoned on my mind. And it's a testimony. Here's a man. I'll bet you he had some stiffness in that leg and maybe even some soreness once in a while that could have said, you know, I'm old and I deserve to stay home today.

But there he is. And every week we saw him limping up that ramp. That speaks volumes to the younger and often shames us for our lack of hunger and thirst.

And even when John was gone and Audrey suffered handicap from the stroke, we saw that she was able to lay hold of sons to bring her to worship. And she wanted to be here. She wanted the means of grace.

Let that never be something we slacken on. And so here in 2 Timothy chapter 4, Paul is an old man now and he says in verse 6, For I am already being poured out like a drink offering and the time has come for my departure.

I have fought the good fight. I have finished the race. I have kept the faith. And so he looks forward to that crown of righteousness that the Lord would give him at that day and to all who love is appearing.

[22:03] So as we get older, our concern must be to finish the race. We can't go back and rerun the first leg of the race. It's done. We regret some things we did and all the rest.

We can't rerun it. But we've got this last leg of the race. So we want to focus on finishing at an all-out sprint. We want to make certain we keep fighting the good fight until the final bell. And we want to keep the faith that was handed down to us until our expiring breath, that trust in our Savior and the word that he gave us.

So here we have the example of Paul running the race to the end. Now the Bible gives us pictures of other old people who didn't run so well at the end.

I want you to turn to 2 Chronicles where we meet a king of Judah named Asa. And we have three chapters given to this good king. He was a good king. And as you know by reading the kings and the chronicles, these were precious things in Israel and in Judah to have a good king.

[23:15] Well, here is a good king. 2 Chronicles chapter 14. We have a summary given to us of the reign of Asa.

Verse 2. Asa did what was good and right in the eyes of the Lord his God. He removed the foreign altars and the high places, smashed the sacred stones, and cut down the Asherah poles.

He commanded Judah to seek the Lord, the God of their fathers, and to obey his laws and commands. He removed the high places and incense altars in every town in Judah, and the kingdom was at peace under him.

He built up the fortified cities of Judah since the land was at peace. No one was at war with him during those years, for the Lord gave him rest.

So, he's a good king. He did what was right and good in the eyes of the Lord his God. Now, he has a test of his faith given in verses 9 and 10.

[24:18] And Zerah the Cushite marched out against them with a vast army and 300 chariots and came as far as Mereshah. Asa went out to meet him and they took up battle positions in the valley of Zephathah near Mereshah.

There's the test. He's far outnumbered. He's outpowered by this Cushite vast army armed with chariots and all. The test of his faith. What will he do as he is up against trouble?

Well, he passes the test. Verse 11. Then Asa called to the Lord his God and said, Lord, there is no one like you to help the powerless against the mighty.

Help us, O Lord our God, for we rely on you. And in your name we have come against this vast army. O Lord, you are our God. Do not let man prevail against you.

You see how he turns to the Lord in his troubles and he relies on the Lord, who he is, his covenant relation with Israel. Lord, if they're fighting us, they're fighting you. So don't let men prevail against you.

[25:26] And he casts himself helpless upon the Almighty. And verse 12 tells us that the Lord struck down the Cushites before King Asa and Judah and he gave them a wonderful victory with great plunder.

Chapter 15 is taken up with his reforms. Reforms. Reforms that were sparked by the prophets encouraging words in verses 2 and 3 where he says that the Lord is with you when you are with him.

If you seek him, he will be found by you. But if you forsake him, he will forsake you. And so Asa took courage from these words and he set out to reform the nation.

Verse 8 tells us that he removed the detestable idols from the whole land and he repaired the altar of the Lord in the temple.

So things were under tremendous spiritual disarray and he sets out to reform the whole land. And he gathered the people together and led them into a covenant to seek the Lord with all their heart and soul.

[26:33] And anyone who would not enter into that covenant was put to death. These were the people of God and they must be confessedly such. Then in verse 15, we read, And all Judah rejoiced about the oath because they had sworn it wholeheartedly.

They sought God eagerly and he was found by them. So the Lord gave them rest on every side. So he leads the whole nation into offering themselves afresh to God to serve and obey him.

And verse 16 tells us he deposed his own great-grandmother from her position as queen mother. You're gone. You're out of my cabinet. You are no longer given that position of honor.

Why not? Because she had made a repulsive Asherah pole. Idolatry. So he cut it down, he broke it and burned it. But what do we see in this Asa? He ruled without favoritism. He regarded the loyalty to God as more precious than loyalty to family.

That's the kind of king that Israel had or that Judah had. And he was a good king. He lived a wonderful life of relying on the Lord, of seeking him in his trouble, finding his strength and help in delivering him from enemies and enabling him to serve faithfully.

[27:51] Now, we could wish that his life ended there. He got hit by a rolling stone and died and went on to glory in that blaze of living for God.

But his story doesn't end there. There's one more chapter to his life. It's chapter 16. And notice, even as the NIV has it, these are not inspired words, it just says it's devoted to his last years.

Okay? So we've seen him in his prelude to his last years. Now, we're going to look at the chapter written on his last years. Because it will be in his old age that his faith will be sorely tested again. And we find him failing the test this time. Now, two specific tests are given to us that are illustrative of his final years. There were more than these two things that happened in his final years. But these two are given because they give us a flavor of what his final years were like. And he was tested militarily and he was tested physically.

[28:55] Militarily, first, chapter 16, 1 to 6. In the 36th year of Asa's reign, Basha, king of Israel, the northern kingdom, went up against Judah and fortified Ramah to prevent anyone from leaving or entering the territory of Asa, king of Judah.

Asa then took the silver and gold out of the treasuries of the Lord's temple and of his own palace and sent it to Ben-Hadad, king of Aram, even further to the north, who was ruling in Damascus. Let there be a treaty between me and you, he said, as there was between my father and your father. See, I am sending you silver and gold. Now break your treaty with Basha, king of Israel, so that he will withdraw from me.

Then Hadad agreed with king Asa and sent the commanders of his forces against the towns of Israel. They conquered Ijon, Dan, Abel, Maim, and all the store cities of Naphtali.

When Basha heard this, he's the king of Israel, the northern kingdom, he stopped building Ramah and abandoned his work. Then king Asa brought all the men of Judah, the southern kingdom, and they carried away from Ramah the stones and timber that Basha had been using.

[30:07] With them, he built up Geba and Mizpah, his own cities in the southern kingdom. Now, to read this, we may not see anything wrong with this. There's the challenge politically. There's the challenge of the northern kingdom starting to threaten the southern kingdom.

And he uses his diplomatic expertise and he goes to this northern kingdom of Aram and he says, break your treaty with the northern kingdom.

And he agrees for silver and gold. And so he's, the northern kingdom withdraws from its pursuit down into the territory of the southern kingdom.

Success, we say. But there was a problem here. And God sends his prophet Hanani to tell him what God thinks of this.

At that time, verse 7, Hanani, the seer, the prophet, came to Asa, king of Judah, and said to him, because you relied on the king of Aram and not on the Lord your God.

[31:12] The army of the king of Aram has escaped from your hand. Were not the Cushites and Libyans a mighty army with great numbers of chariots and horsemen? Those are the ones we just read about in chapter 14.

Yet when you relied on the Lord, he delivered them into your hand. For the eyes of the Lord ranged throughout the earth to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him.

You have done a foolish thing, and from now on, you will be at war. May the Lord spare us from doing foolish things in our old age.

That was Asa. He had relied on the Lord, and now he's doing a foolish thing. We could wish that we read of his brokenness and repentance in old age, but instead we read of a stubborn and hard-hearted old man who grew angry and refused to be corrected.

Verse 10. Asa was angry with the seer because of this. He was so enraged that he put him in prison. At the same time, Asa brutally oppressed some of the people.

[32:20] Anger because things weren't going his way. We talked about being frustrated in old age about things not going our way. This is the way it was for this king. It wasn't going his way.

He's going to have war the rest of his days. Didn't like that. Common response in old age to frustration can be anger.

And so he takes it out on others. First, the prophet himself, who he rages against, but then it also says that he treated others harshly and demandingly.

In old age, people can become very bitter even toward those around them, even innocent people around. I'm not talking about the effects of Alzheimer's and deterioration of the brain.

Rather, this is an expression of the flesh that comes out in old age. And we see it here recorded in Asa. Now, this reliance upon someone other than the Lord is not an isolated incident.

[33:31] He relied on the king of Aram to be the one to help him. Another occasion is mentioned. It's another test of faith. This time, the test is physically. And again, I say, how true to life is that for an old man to be tested with physical problems?

You might have to be a king to appreciate the first test of military tests, but you don't have to be a king to relate to this.

He's tested physically. Verse 11, the events of Asa's reign from beginning to end are written in the book of the kings of Judah and Israel. In the 39th year of his reign, Asa was afflicted with a disease in his feet.

Though his disease was severe, even in his illness, he did not seek help from the Lord, but only from the physicians. Then in the 41st year of his reign, Asa died and rested with his fathers.

They buried him in the tomb that he had cut out for himself in the city of David. They laid him on a bier covered with spices and various blended perfumes, and they made a huge fire in his honor.

[34 : 38] And so ends the life of a good king, but who did not finish well. You see, the commonality in these tests was that he didn't rely on the Lord in his time of need.

He had done so earlier, but now he looked to other nations, and now he looked to the physicians alone. He becomes forgetful of the first great cause of all things, and he looks to the second causes, other kings, other doctors.

He leans on created things. That's where his lean is instead of the creator, the gifts of God, physicians, instead of the giver himself.

And so his whole focus, you see, has shifted from God to doctors to treatments to medicines, and he forgets that God holds him and his life and every little atom in his body in his hand.

And instead, he goes looking and putting faith in the doctors. Now, we're right to make use of doctors and medicine and treatments, but we're wrong to lean on them, and that's what this account of Asa shows us.

[35 : 58] We're wrong to rely on them. We're wrong to say, ah, I've got the best doctor in the area. I now feel good. No, we have the great physician, and so we can rest in peace.

Where is our resting point? It must be in our God. So we see a man who in earlier years relied on the Lord in the midst of great troubles, but now at the end of his life finds himself falling.

I'm talking about shaming your profession. Past victories don't keep us from present defeats. You might have had a trial of faith that's the very same in your early days and past it, and then you come into your old age and you fail the same trial that you passed with flying colors.

Our faith has a short shelf life, if you know what I mean, and it must be constantly renewed, reinvigorated, and strengthened by the grace of God. So yesterday's faith will not suffice for today's trials.

All of this came to him in his last years, and it's a sad thing to see someone running so well and then to stumble so badly the last ten yards of the race.

[37 : 18] He tarnished his name and the legacy that he left to his family. He tarnished the office of King of Judah, and he tarnished the name of the Lord is God.

He was a representative of the Lord. So let's finish well, that we lose not what we've worked for, that we don't tear down and undo in old age what we have built up in 75 years or whatever it's been.

Let's be careful that we don't disgrace the name of Christ, our Savior, but finish well to his glory.

There are many other examples in scriptures of men and women who didn't finish well.

There are many other examples of men and women who did finish well. We have old Simeon and Anna in the temple, old people. When Christ was born, they were finishing well, still holding on to the hope of God's salvation and speaking to others about him.

When you see the finish line in a race, it often gives you strength to dig deep and to run faster.

[38 : 27] Well, the older we get, the closer we're getting to the finish line. Let it be an urge, a goad in our sides to run our fastest at the end of the race.

We didn't get a chance to look. We'll have to begin next week with some of the encouragements to do so. We've seen the negative example. We'll see some of the positive reasons why we can expect to find grace in Jesus to help us run fastest at the end of our lives for the last five yards to be run the fastest spiritually than any other time that we've run in our lives.

Well, our time is up. Any questions or comments before we dismiss? Thank you for sharing the challenges.

I'm hoping to return to these that we have in the weeks ahead that we might look at them each in the eye, the challenges, and find what help we find in Christ to meet them.

Thank you.