

Losing our Sense of Purpose

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Date: 31 May 2009

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[0:00] Well, we're looking at the unique trials that come to us in old age. And we're finding that they're not only many, but they're also very powerful trials. And also then looking at how to handle them.

And we're interested in doing more than coping with them, I trust. It's one thing to cope. It's another thing to be more than conquerors over our trials.

And that's what we're after in here. That's what Paul says, that in all of our afflictions and difficulties and distresses, we are more than conquerors through him who loves us. And that's to be true of our difficulties in old age, too, that we're to do more than just cope and just be a coping Christian.

We're to learn to conquer even in these trials. So far, we've looked at financial concerns that meet us in old age. And then the last time we looked at the matter of losing our independence.

Now, today we want to look at the loss that goes along with losing independence. It's a loss of a sense of usefulness and purpose in life. When we have been used to working with our hands and our minds to a certain degree and accomplishing certain things, it's very easy for us to think in terms of our worth, in terms of our productivity and what we've been able to accomplish.

[1:25] And then when we're put out to pasture in our jobs, if that's where our identity and worth is, then we suddenly have no sense of usefulness, no sense of purpose in life.

I mean, the reason I lived was to do this and to do that, and now I can't do this and do that. So why am I here? So we're dealing with that question of when we are older and lose many of our use of our faculties to the strength that we used them before, how do we not lose a sense of usefulness and purpose in life?

Last Monday was Memorial Day, and the May 23rd issue of World Magazine carried an amazing account of a World War II veteran. Army 2nd Lieutenant Edward Treske served in the Philippines where he was fighting.

And after six months of fighting, he was captured by the Japanese. He was imprisoned and tortured for two years, three months, and 15 days. I thought only a POW would recount it in that way, not just years, about two and a quarter years, but he had it down to the day.

And at age 23, Treske, who normally weighed 175 pounds, was down to 85 pounds. Toward the end, the Japanese crammed 750 of these POWs into the hull of a ship and then covered it over with a tarp and just let them swelter in there in Philippine heat for 14 days.

[3:06] He said, I thought we'd die through that experience. There was a hole at one end, and the guards used a rope to lower a five-gallon bucket of water and peelings of rotten vegetables for the 750 Americans.

Well, on September 7, 1944, Treske escaped in a most unusual way. They had been transferred down into the hull of another ship where they were hiding them and keeping them.

And just hours later, the hull was ripped open by a direct hit from a torpedo of a U.S. sub. The guard panicked. He stuck his rifle down in the hull and emptied it on his prisoners.

He then threw a grenade into the sea of flesh below. Treske was knocked out by the explosion. And when he came to, dead bodies were floating everywhere, and the ship was sinking, and the only way of escape was the very hole that had been blasted open by the torpedo.

Well, when he made his way over to that hole, what he saw, he says, we would never forget.

Japanese guards had so arranged their life rafts around these swimming Americans. In a semi-circle.

[4:20] And as they struggled to get their breath and just to swim and keep their heads above water, the Japanese would use their sabers to cut off their heads and just to stab them with their bayonets or shoot them if they couldn't reach them.

And so this group of Americans are swimming for their lives, and these Japanese on their lifeboats are slaughtering them.

If he hadn't been knocked unconscious, he'd have been out that hole early with them and would have been in that same watery massacre. But because he was late and waking up later, by the time he came there, they were swimming and moving off, and so he swam around the other side of the ship and headed for shore some three miles away.

He says, I was swimming and praying, swimming and praying, swimming and praying. And as he approached land, the Japanese on another ship mounted machine guns and started shooting at him and the others that were swimming.

On the beach, he took a bullet that went clear through his ankle and he managed to get into a cornfield where he hid and was later rescued. Out of the 750 American prisoners on the ship that day, only 82 survived the carnage.

[5:39] They were nicknamed the Swimmers. That was the day that he would never forget. Well, this article in World Magazine was written by his grandson, who was honoring his grandpa and this group of American soldiers who had survived these unimaginable horrors of war.

And he begins the article this way, and this immediately caught my eye. See if it does say something to you as well. The grandson of this man says, Last January, while chauffeuring around my 87-year-old grandfather, this is 2nd Lieutenant Edward Treske, he struck me speechless when frustrated over losing his driving privileges and heartbroken that his wife of 63 years now lived in a nursing home, he blurted, I have no idea why I'm still alive.

I should have died that day. That day was that day of his escape. And it's a telling comment that he found that he could cope better with the grisly ordeal of that day in 1944 than he could at the moment, at least, with the peculiar problems that were meeting him at the end of his life when without driving privileges and with his wife of 63 years in a nursing home, he had lost a sense of purpose.

Why am I alive? I have no idea. I should have died that day. Now, he had purpose as a soldier. He writes, records in the article that when things were at their worst, he kept going because he needed to get back home to wipe away the tears that his mother cried when at 18 years old, he asked her permission to join the service.

So when things got at its worst, he kept reminding himself, I need to get home to comfort my mother. And it kept him from giving up. But here at the end of his life, he struggled with finding a purpose for life and living on.

[7:45] So you're that grandson and you're behind the wheel. What do you say to your grandpa at just such a time? What will you say to yourself when such circumstances find you out?

Why am I alive? A rhetorical question. Think about it. Let's kick it around.

There? Okay. That's good. You're going to leave a legacy behind of your last years and how to grow old.

And we're going to remember that. Boy, there's a purpose to give a man. What else do you say to a man like that, Luet? Hmm. All right.

So good. So you're directing the older person's attention to the fact that here's a purpose for you to be teaching your own children to be caring for you and to be teaching them to serve and teaching them to give.

[8:49] All right. What else? Dave? Hmm. Amen. We'll look more at that specific way of glorifying God next time, Lord willing. But we ask, what is the greatest end?

What is your great end in life? Your great purpose in life? It's to glorify God and enjoy Him forever. Is that except for old people? No. So we need to keep reminding ourselves of that.

My great end today as an old person is one without driver's privileges, without strength and is to glorify God. And then the question becomes, now how do I do that with my limited abilities?

And we'll get more into that next time, even when we're reduced to nothing. Raj? Hmm. Very good. It reminds me of Habakkuk, who was learning to enjoy God when everything was bleak, when there's no cattle in the stalls and no sheep in the pens and no grapes in the vines, that I will rejoice in you.

[9:50] I'll find my joy and enjoyment in you. And so, that's what you're saying, that when there is nothing else, it's then that we can enjoy God and in the enjoyment of Him, be glorifying Him.

Good. Yes, Linda? Yeah. That's excellent. We'll see that more next time, too, as we look more at the particulars of how we as old people can do that.

But there is no no higher calling than talking to the Lord in prayer. Yeah, Dave? Good. Yeah.

Pointing them to what God has accomplished in their lives just by sparing them and the purposes of God that have been fulfilled.

And he did just that. He said that much of this material came during commercials, during watching the Atlanta Braves games together. and Grandpa would start telling a story. He says he would have it timed perfectly just to end before the next pitch, you know.

And he would always say, do you want to hear more? And he says, yes, I want to hear more. Tell me more. All right? Raj? We'll talk more about that next time.

[11:00] That's excellent. All right. Well, the idea is that our purpose in life does not change. If the Lord Jesus, knowing him, serving him, glorifying him, has been our purpose in life, that doesn't change whatever our circumstances.

The way we do it changes to some extent, but not our purpose in life. So we need some important truths to stand on.

We need to tell Grandpa God is sovereign. We need to remind him that God is absolutely sovereign. Whatever my God ordains is right. He ordained your life and that we might have known all these blessings since then.

And he has purposes for you today just as he did in sparing your life then. I don't understand, but I can know that if I am still alive that there's a purpose for me to serve on the earth today.

How do I know that? Because I know God is the one who gives me my life. And if I was without purpose, he would take my breath away and I would go home to be with him. So if he's given me life, it is always with purpose that I might glorify him.

[12:16] So it may not be easy, it may not be fun, it may not be understood, but I trust him and seek his glory. Turn to Acts chapter 27 and we want to just dip into the journal of the Apostle Paul toward the end of his life and catch a phrase of his that I think speaks to this issue of purpose in life.

Acts 27. And Paul is no spring check. He is down to the last four or five years of his life and I want you to notice what he's doing.

You know the chapter 27 or even notice what he's not doing. He's not found playing shuffleboard for hours a day at some retirement community. He's a prisoner for Christ.

He's shipwrecked at sea, but he's still serving as Lord. Notice Paul's view of himself in his latter years. Verse 23.

He says to these in the midst of this storm, Last night, an angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve stood beside me and said, Do not be afraid, Paul.

[13:34] You must stand trial before Caesar and God has graciously given you the lives of all who sail with you. So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me.

Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island. So God had a purpose in Paul's life and no storm was going to keep him from it. He must stand trial before Caesar because there he must give a testimony for his Savior before the Caesar.

But notice how he thinks of himself, his own identity, his self-conscious identity. An angel of the God whose I am and whom I serve.

So here's Paul and at the end of his life, he knows whose he is. He's God's. I don't belong to myself. I belong to him. And I'm one of his sheep. I'm one that he cares for. The Heidelberg Catechism says there's no greater comfort in life or in death or we could say in old age than knowing that.

[14:50] That in body and soul, life and in death, I belong to my faithful Savior, Jesus Christ. With the cost of his own blood, freely purchase my salvation and so on.

But that idea that there's this great comfort in life and in death, that I belong to him. He claims me as his own. He says of John Heaney, he is mine and that is the comfort.

Well, here's Paul and in whatever trials that hit him in his old age, he says, Paul is one of God's.

The God whose I am. That's his identity.

Not merely in something he does, but in who he is. He has his identity in God, in Christ. I'm a child of the living God. And then he knows why he's alive.

Ask Paul, why are you alive? Why weren't you killed when they stoned you and left you for dead? Why are you alive today? Why hasn't this ship sunk to the bottom of the ocean and killed you?

[15:56] He says, I'm alive to serve the Lord. You see that. Whose I am and whom I serve. He can't think of himself. He can't think of God without thinking of this relationship.

I am his servant. I belong to him. I am his. And I am his servant. I'm here to serve him. And so he has a purpose to get him out of bed every morning.

I am alive today to serve the Lord. It keeps him active. It keeps him zealous. It gives him a purpose, a reason to live each moment of every day.

There is a God to serve. There's a kingdom of Christ to advance. There is a church of Christ to build. And so his life is consumed with the most important thing that any human being can have. The most important thing that's happening in the world today is that God is building his kingdom. Christ is building his church. And I have a part of that. There's no lacking of purpose at all in life, even if it's nothing more, and I should say, nothing less than praying for the coming of his kingdom. [17:07] So Paul finds purpose in serving the Lord whose he is. So Paul can't think of himself and his life without thinking in terms of belonging to God and serving God.

Do you think of your life that way? Do you think of yourself that way? I am a servant of the living God. The temptation to inactivity and ease in old age is great in our culture.

The American dream has as its closing chapters a retirement life of ease and selfish indulgence. And we'll see more about that kind of lifestyle in James chapter 5 this morning.

But it's in such a context that it's no wonder that people often suffer a lack of purpose in living. Because to live for oneself is a pitifully small, a puny reason to live.

If your life is revolving around yourself, I can see why you're having an identity crisis about purpose in life. What's the use? It holds little in the way of significance and purpose.

[18:14] John Piper wrote a book, *Don't Waste Your Life*, and there's a special warning to elderly people in it. Let me read it to you. He talks about two missionaries, Ruby and Laura, who were killed in Cameroon, West Africa, in April of 2000.

Ruby was 80 and still serving the Lord there. Laura was a widow, a medical doctor, pushing 80 years of age herself. And their brakes failed, the car went over a cliff, and they were both killed instantly.

And Piper says, I asked my congregation, was that a tragedy? Two lives driven by one great passion, namely to be spent in unheralded service to the perishing poor for the glory of Jesus Christ, even two decades after most of their American counterparts had retired to throw away their lives on trifles.

No, that's not a tragedy. That's a glory. These lives were not wasted, and these lives were not lost. Whoever loses his life for my sake and the Gospels will save it, Jesus says.

I will tell you what a tragedy is. I will show you how to waste your life. Consider a story from the February 98 edition of *Reader's Digest*, which tells about a couple who took early retirement, now he's quoting the *Digest* article, who took early retirement from their jobs in the Northeast five years ago when he was 59 and she was 51.

[19:41] Now they live in Punta Gorda, Florida, where they cruise on their 30-foot trawler, play softball and collect shells. At first, when I read it, I thought it might be a joke, a spoof on the American dream, but it wasn't.

Tragically, this was the dream. Come to the end of your life, your one and only precious, God-given life, and let the last great work of your life before you give an account to your creator be this, playing softball and collecting shells.

Picture them before Christ at the great day of judgment. Look, Lord, see my shells? That is a tragedy, and people today are spending billions of dollars to persuade you to embrace that tragic dream.

Over against that, I put my protest. Don't buy it. Don't waste your life. So Piper. Now, there's nothing wrong with shell collections.

I understand that Brian and Nessie Ellis have a wonderful shell collection. Have you seen it, Dennis and Clara? Have you seen some of their shells? They probably number into the hundreds.

[20:57] Exquisite and rare shells, but I'll tell you that Brian and Nessie have not found those shells in a life of ease and luxury, but it's been in the midst of a ministry of pouring themselves out for eternal values, of building the kingdom of Christ, that they have collected these shells.

I don't know of anyone more busy than Brian Ellis and Nessie Ellis. Brian's over 65, and I think Nessie's pushing 80, and they put me to shame.

So it's not the shell collection. You get that, but they're living for a grand purpose, far bigger than themselves, an eternal purpose that gives significance to every day of their lives.

And so, you see, we were made for something bigger than ourselves, weren't we? That's the whole story of the Bible, that we were made for God. We were made to have our lives orbit this grand center of Him, Himself, glorifying Him, enjoying Him, serving Him.

and not to have our life orbiting around serving ourselves. We're made for something bigger than shells. We're made to serve the maker of shells.

[22 : 20] Piper quotes from an article called The Retirement Booby Trap. And in the article, it says, most men don't die of old age, they die of retirement. I read somewhere that half the men retiring in the state of New York die within two years.

Save your life and you'll lose it. Just like other drugs, other psychological addictions, retirement is a virulent disease, not a blessing. Where in the Bible do they see that?

Did Moses retire? Did Paul retire? Peter? John? Do military officers retire in the middle of a war? Well, that's present-day authors.

Let me go back to 1844, a century and a half ago, Archibald Alexander, a Princeton scholar and pastor.

In his letters to the ages, he says, as an aged man, I would say to my fellow pilgrims who are also in this advanced stage of the journey of life, endeavor to be useful as long as you are continued on the earth.

[23 : 29] And then he quotes the words of Jesus in John 11, work while it is cold today. The night is coming when no man can work. Your work is never ended while you are in the body.

You might argue some conditions that would reason otherwise, but we'll touch more on that next week. Your work is never ended while you are in the body.

And then he talks about depression in language that could be in a pamphlet that you read in your doctor's office. Depression is often the result of much inactivity at the end of life.

Many have dated their distressing melancholy from such a false step. The mind long accustomed to activity is miserable in a state of stagnation. Or rather, having lost its usual nutrition, it turns and prays upon itself.

Lighten your burdens, but do not give up business or study or whatever you've been accustomed to pursue. Imbecility and dotage, I don't know, those are two old words, we'd probably have other words for them, but imbecility and dotage are also prevented or postponed or mitigated by constant exercise of the mind.

[24 : 50] Isn't that what you read? That older people are to keep their minds active, keep thinking, keep doing, do something new. It sounds like cutting edge counsel. It comes from 1844, an older man with letters to the aged.

Somebody recently told me that he had heard that John Piper was preaching against retirement. He said he obviously doesn't work for my employer or he'd be for it.

Well, it's not retirement as such, is it, that Piper is preaching against. It's rather that self absorbed, self indulgent life of ease, of puttering, pursuing, trivial pursuits.

A life out of touch with eternity, doing little more than playing. Well, what was the average lifespan of man on this planet during the days of Noah?

I'm sorry, not of Noah, of Moses? I think Moses or Noah built the ark around age five, six hundred, so lifespan was older than before the flood.

[26 : 01] But let's come up to Moses. No, it wasn't that. All right, where do you get that, Tom?

All right, know which one? All right, Psalm 90. Let's turn it up.

It's one of the psalms, a rare psalm, because it has Moses for its author. And we have this interesting comment on the average lifespan of man in the days of Moses.

Psalm 90 and verse 10. Somebody read it for us, please. Okay.

The length of our days, the length of a man's life on earth is 70. 70 years or 80 even, he says. Some people even make it to 80.

[27 : 19] Do you know what the average age of mankind is on the planet today? 75? It's about 80.

70 to 80. Indeed, it depends on how you calculate it. Women outlive men by about five years, but the average age of men is about 77 and women about 82.

So, it's interesting, isn't it, that the average age of man has not changed since Moses' time. So, if that's true, what does Moses tell us to do with that calculation of 70 or 80 years?

Look at verse 12. Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain the heart of wisdom. And, as you know, in Scripture, wisdom is not just intellect, it's knowing how to live.

So, teach us to number our days aright so that we'll live right, is what Moses is saying in his prayer to God. And the inference is clear, we don't live wisely as we ought unless we're realizing the shortness of our lives down to the days, the brevity of time that's left to us here.

[28 : 35] Do the math, Moses is saying, okay? If the average time on earth is 70 or 80 years, how much time do you have? Do the math. Teach us to number our days aright.

Some of you are on borrowed time, maybe. You say, whoa, well, that ought to affect the way you live. Some of you only got five years left as the average goes.

Some of you got ten years. What are you going to do with the last ten, fifteen, twenty years of your life? God, if that's how long you live. Moses says, do the math.

We don't live as we ought unless we are keeping this in sight. We'll just go on living as if we're never going to die. So this sharpens our focus in life.

Someone recently shared with me this passage and says, you know, I've used that so that when I'm buying things, I just keep that in mind. Okay, if I'm going to live to be seventy or eighty then I need a lawnmower.

[29 : 36] I don't need one that's going to last for a hundred years. I need one that will last about ten, fifteen years. Maybe you shouldn't buy your cars that way, but recently we needed shingles and they now offer them for thirty or forty years.

And I asked the fellow, I said, well, are they that much better? Go forty years and thirty, what do you suggest? He says, how long are you going to live? I said, well, only God knows that.

Give me the thirty. Because I figured by the time that thirty years up, I should be in a better place where there aren't any shingles. And let the next person shingle it.

Roger? Everything we buy is a lifetime guarantee. Pardon? Everything we buy is a lifetime guarantee. You lost me, I'm sorry. Everything that you purchase is a lifetime guarantee.

Sure, because you're only going to live for two more years, it's a lifetime guarantee. There's a reason for joy as you get up. Everything you buy is a lifetime guarantee.

[30 : 43] feed. Teach us to number our days aright. Think about it, guys. You have another birthday, do the math and live in the light of it.

So if we live to be about 80 years, it means we usually, Piper argues that we have about 15 or 20 years after retirement of some kind of life. He says, what a strange reward for a Christian to set his sights on.

20 years of leisure while living in the midst of the last days of infinite consequence for millions of people who need Christ. What a tragic way to finish the last mile before entering the presence of the king who finished his last mile so differently.

So if we would finish well, we must make good use of our last years on earth. Just one other passage, Ephesians chapter five. Not all these verses have old age written in them, but neither does it exclude old age, and that's why we turn to some of these passages.

They apply as much to old age as to any other age. But I think this is a passage especially fitting for the elderly, Ephesians five, 16 and 17.

[32 : 09] be very careful then how you live. Not as unwise, but as wise. Making the most of every opportunity because the days are evil.

And we might add, and because they're also few, as we've just seen in Psalm 90. so make the most of what you have.

Every opportunity. Redeem the time. Buy up the opportunities. The elderly have the least amount of time left to you, so use it profitably.

This season of life has many opportunities. Lay hold of them. You're only old once. Live this life unto God. God. Now, it's interesting.

Archibald Alexander says this isn't something that we naturally do as we get older, that we become more careful in our use of time. I wonder if you found that to be true yourself.

[33 : 11] You would think, okay, I've only got so much time left, I'm going to be very careful with every minute, every hour of my day. it's not automatic that old people redeem time.

Old people can be the worst wasters of time, puttering at trivial pursuits that have no relation to eternity. Archibald Alexander says, old age does not bring with it an awareness of the reality and importance of eternal things.

The truth is that nothing but an increase of faith by the operation of the Holy Spirit will be effectual to prepare us for that change which we know is rapidly approaching.

So we need the Word of God, we need faith to stir us up, the Holy Spirit to remind us that day is coming, that we will be preparing for it even as we grow closer to it.

Now we need to break because our time is up. Any final question or observation before we're going to carry this lesson on into next week? Jim? Well, learn from that, Jim, that those are the kind of battles you're going to find increasing as you head into older age.

[34 : 27] There will be other things that will bring you to those same things. And if you learn from this lesson, it will help to prepare you for the next trial that's around the corner. So bless God that there is a testimony of God ministering in the midst of these things.

Yes. It reminds me of Paul at the end of his life in prison, just days to live. Bring the parchment, I'm cold.

Bring the books, or bring the cloak, bring the parchment and the books. Bring my Bible, that's what he's saying. Perhaps scraps of scripture, commentary.

To hear I have a man that's just got a few days on this life, perhaps saying, I want to memorize the book of Acts. Why waste your time doing that? You're going to be dead in a year, perhaps.

Well, I believe everybody here knows the reason why. Yeah, Dennis. That's a lesson or two on its own, brother, but thank you.

[35 : 29] We're coming to that, the very issue of our last breath. Well, may the Lord help us then. You see it all, what's your purpose in life?

Well, if you're locked in on it today, tomorrow, the next day, every day, then you're training yourself that even in old age, your purpose is still the same.

Go on, glorifying God with each breath. We're dismissed.