

Losing Our Sense of Purpose

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[0:00] Last week we learned from Edward Treske that old age can be more difficult to deal with than being a prisoner of war in a Japanese torture camp during World War II.

! Old age can leave us struggling with a lack of purpose, we saw. Why am I here? He said, I should have been killed that day. Today, referring back to his military service as he came to the end of his life and his wife was in a nursing home and he had lost his driving privileges.

But a lack of purpose and usefulness in old age is more often brought on by a misuse of retirement rather than old age itself.

The American dream, as we saw last week, calls us to pursue leisure and entertainment for the last 15 to 20 years of our life. And it is this inactivity and this self-centeredness that leaves many without a sense of purpose because to live for self at any age is a puny thing.

And it little provides any sense of importance and purpose in life to serve ourselves. We were made for God.

[1:19] We were made to serve him. And to serve him all the days of their life. There's no retirement from God's service. There's only graduation into heaven.

And so to our dying breath, we have this breathtaking purpose in life to glorify God, to be enjoying him, serving him, loving him, living for him in all that we do.

There's nothing bigger going on in the world today than that. And so we pray, your kingdom come, your will be done. And you and I have a vital part in this amazing work of God in the world.

So that gives us purpose. I want to encourage you this morning with some examples of people and some texts, people both in Scripture and out of Scripture, who have captured that sense that if I'm alive, I have purpose today.

And so may we all, older, older, catch that vision this morning. John Piper says in a message that he preached on glorifying God in old age, when I heard J. Oswald Sanders at the Trinity Evangelical Divinity School Chapel speaking at the age of 89 and say that he had written a book a year for Christ since he was 70, He goes on to say how it won't be long before we'll all be standing around the throne.

[3:13] And it's sooner than you think that you will be there. May we so live for him that we may hear him say, well done, good and faithful servant. Charles Simeon was the pastor of Trinity Church in Cambridge.

The Hoskins just returned from a trip where they visited Cambridge, and there Charles Simeon labored 200 years ago. And he learned a very painful lesson about God's attitude toward his so-called retirement.

In 1807, after 25 years of ministry at Trinity Church, his health broke when he was 47. He became very weak and he had to take an extended leave from his labors there.

And Handley Moore recounts the fascinating story of what God was doing in Simeon's life. His broken condition lasted with varying severity for 13 years till he was just 60.

And then it passed away quite suddenly and without any evident physical cause. He was on his last visit to Scotland in 1819, and he found himself, even to his own great surprise, just as he crossed the border, quote, He said that he had been promising himself before he began to break down a very active life up to 60, and then a Sabbath evening, a retirement.

[4:46] And that now he seemed to hear his master saying, I laid you aside because you entertained with satisfaction the thought of resting from your labor. But now you have arrived at the very period when you had promised yourself that satisfaction and have determined instead to spend your strength for me in the latest hour of your life.

I have doubled, trebled, quadrupled your strength that you may execute your design on a more extended plan. So, the Lord is pleased to see us expending our strength to the very end in his cause.

What will we do with our last years? Now, we've talked then about peculiar challenges as older people, but you know as older people you have peculiar advantages as well.

What are some? Now, come on, we spent 15 minutes singing the blues about all the disadvantages. What are the advantages of old age?

Luann? Wisdom. All right, good. We see that with old age often comes wisdom. There are old fools, to be sure, but there is wisdom in old age, the Bible tells us.

[6:03] Yes, Billy? Patience. Patience. Somebody that's been made to endure so much has learned a fair amount of patience. Again, there's crotchety, irritable old people, but there can be, by the grace of God, a great degree of patience as well.

Time. Why so? Why is it that an older person has time? Okay, so they're perhaps retired from their job, the children are grown, out of the house, and is that not true, that old age can present one with much more time to give to kingdom causes than what, at least different ways to serve, than what an active young mother raising children.

Her service is bringing up those children, and she's doing that to the glory of God. But there is more time for other activities and ways of service. When I was at the Arbka General Assembly just a month or two ago, it was a retired meteorologist from the Air Force that he and his retired school wife picked me up at my hotel and took me to the church.

They were my taxi for the Lord's Day. And then fed me. And they were able to give themselves that week. And other retirees were able to give themselves to caring for the nursery, the young children of pastors and their wives that attended, and were able to be useful in preparing food and serving food.

We saw them locking in on the opportunities that they had, while the rest of the church, for the most part the younger ones, were busy in their callings yet, they were busy in their own ways.

[7:59] I also heard of other works of service that they were doing in their retirement, taking cookies to any first-time visitor. If you're a good cook, we want good cooks taking cookies to first-time visitors.

But there was a way that they could keep busy in old age, driving sometimes up to an hour away to deliver a plate of cookies and some materials of the church and to give a welcome to return.

Well, every church would be richer by far if the seniors would consider their extra time as given to them, at least in part, in order to minister more to the church.

It could become a service core that would serve the church and contribute to the overall church life. Remember Zechariah, Luke chapter 1.

We read in Luke 1 and verse 5, In the time of Herod, king of Judah, there was a priest named Zechariah who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah, and his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron.

[9:08] Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children because Elizabeth was barren, and they were both well along in years.

Now, that's a kind way of saying they were old. And they were busy. He was still serving as priest in old age. Noah was building an ark when he was over 500 years.

You say, well, yeah, but they lived longer back then. Well, this was the latter end of his years on earth, and he was busy. Moses led Israel right up to his death.

Thomas Scott, in England, at an age when most men quit all serious work, took on the challenge of learning the Arabic language so that he might be able to give instruction to missionaries going to the east.

So he's a minister of the gospel, and when most were just kind of being put out to pasture, he says, let me try something really hard.

[10:14] Let me learn Arabic. And he did it that he might serve the kingdom of Christ and encouraging men going to the mission field. Let that be a goad in our sides when we find it difficult to memorize Scripture.

Think of memorizing Arabic grammar in your old age. There's vacation Bible school coming this week. There are many opportunities for those who can't lead the games outside, running around to

do other things.

And if it's nothing more than bringing treats in, those kinds of things, there are ways to serve. Turn to Titus chapter 2.

We have this example of ministry in old age. Remember in Paul's letter to Titus, he's giving instructions to Titus for all ages in his congregation.

There's a word for the old men. There's a word for the old ladies. There's a word for the young men. There's a word for the young ladies. And let's dip into his word to the older ladies in the congregation.

[11:31] Verses 4, well, verse 3. We'll just start there at verse 3. Titus 2, verse 3. Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good.

Then they can train the younger women to love their husbands and children, to be self-controlled and pure, to be busy at home, to be kind, and to be subject to their husbands, so that no one will malign the word of God.

According to the Apostle Paul, older women have a strategic part in church life, a part that will cause Christ's name to smell good in the community.

It will not become a reproach, a stench in the nostrils of the community. It will not cause people to curse God's name when they think about that church where these older women are.

How do they do it? Well, they do it by teaching and training the younger women. And there's a lot to train them in.

[12:52] There's to train them to love their husbands and to love their children and how to keep up a good home, how to be a good wife subject to their husbands, how to be self-controlled, how to be kind and pure, all these things.

Be careful of the selfish sentiment that looks at the younger women of the church and says, you know, my years of raising children are over. And you just sit back and watch them squirm as they raise theirs.

That's not the spirit of the Apostle, is it? It's not the spirit of Christ. It's you get in there and help them raise their children. You get in there and train them to bring up their children, be involved in their life.

How can you do that practically? I mean, you could do it holding a class for younger women, but beyond that, not all of you will be called to hold a class and to train younger women.

But all the older women of the church are to be doing this. This is a general word to all older women in the church. What are some of the different ways that you can be doing this? Luann? All right, who wants to go to the other end of the building and tell those young ladies to be willing to listen to you all?

[14:11] That's a good point. And what it does is it makes your job more difficult, but it doesn't get you off the hook, Luann. The word is still, older women train the younger. That means that for every teacher there's got to be an open ear, doesn't it?

For every mouth, there's got to be an open ear. But it also reminds us that the mouth isn't the only way that you teach younger women, is it? How else could you teach younger women these very things?

By example, exactly. You have a husband, perhaps. Are you submissive to him? Are you showing in the way that you love him? Do you have folks into your home so that a younger woman can see you loving your husband and loving your children?

So they can see that example. So that's an excellent point that you may not have all their interest, as you said, and lecture them, but they're watching you.

And there's something attractive about godliness, isn't there? Christ-likeness. And as they see that in your life, they're learning.

[15:15] They're learning. Tracy? Good. Somebody else had a comment. Dale? That's a good point, Raj.

You can share the failures that they need to watch out for that you stumbled into, brother. That's wisdom, isn't it? It's not, I have arrived. Let me tell you about a ditch I fell into with my teenage son. Let me just caution you, brother, not to do what I did. That's wisdom. It's humility, wisdom dressed in the garb of humility that it's supposed to be in.

And they'll learn as much from that as more than that than if you stand up as the perfect parent and say, let me tell you how to do it. So you're not off the hook, brother.

If you failed a lot, you've got a lot to teach the younger men. Why should they have to go through the same problem? Why do they have to fall in the same ditch? If they've got an older brother that's been down the road before them and said, watch out, the road's washed out over here.

[16:18] I fell in it. You stay on the other side here. So this is the one anothering in the body, and Paul means for it to be one anothering between old and younger couples. And that's what I like about Dale, that he's saying there needs to be a conscious endeavor.

Do the older and younger couples ever get together? Do they ever see you in your home and in different activities?

So that's a challenge. I'm not saying it's easy, but we're two divided. We have the old and we've got the young. These two need each other. Clara? Good.

Have substance to what you share in your times together. Go ahead. Hmm. Well, that's fine as long as we realize that the Bible was written for Western society as well as for Eastern society.

It's from Eastern. Okay. That's the difference because there's some saying that there's a different message for both. Well, we don't want to buy into that. Mentor.

[17:27] Yeah. Well, that's the kind of thing that we're talking about here that has been suggested, that we draw near to a couple. You know, our society might present certain difficulties in this, but I suppose if you offered to babysit for some mother's children so that she could get out and shop or go to a Bible study or go out in the evening with her husband, you wouldn't be turned down.

Maybe if you offered to bring in a meal, you offered to come and do some house cleaning for them. What busy young mother wouldn't jump at some of these? Now, maybe some would be more welcome than others, but I think there are ways into the younger women who may not, you know, be ready for you just to sit down with your open Bible and instruct them in these things.

There are ways for you to get into their homes and lives and begin to show them with your example, your concern for them, and that's when the questions start to flow and opportunity for giving practical instruction in a host of things.

A lot of women aren't prepared to cook. I don't know if they don't teach it in school anymore or they don't teach it at home, but there's a lot of women that don't know how to cook and they enter into marriage.

That's, I believe, part of what Paul envisioned when he says that you're to be training the younger women to be busy at home. What were they to be busy at home doing? That's what you're to be training them.

[18:58] And so, these things are very practical. Tell her, what can I be praying for you? I want to make you my special prayer person to pray for you and your family.

Ask them how you might help. And in that context, you can be not a busy body, but someone who is in sharing wisdom and example to your younger sisters.

I had a younger woman come to me and tell me how much she's longing for an older woman to mentor her. She's in this church. And so, granted, they're all not breaking the door down to tell me that.

There are some, though, that are ready to listen, that are longing for such a relationship. Will you pray about that and seek out a younger woman and see me if you want further direction in trying to bring this about.

But may God stir us up, older women and men, to do this. Often, younger men as well could use a helping hand on a project around the yard on Saturdays or in the evenings and opportunities to draw alongside and pray and serve and instruct.

[20:20] So we have this time. What will we be doing with it? What would you have me to do, Lord? Ought to be a prayer on our lips from our first day of conversion to the very last day as the Apostle Paul learned to pray when he was saved.

Man wasn't made to be idle and old people are not exempt from the passage, go to the aunt, you sluggard. Old people can be sluggardly, sinfully so.

And so those passages are for us. As well in our old age, granted, God understands our limited abilities and adjusts his expectations accordingly.

He does that perfectly. There's no human being, there's no human master that does that so well. He knows exactly what your limitations are and he adjusts his expectations of you exactly to your

limitation so that he says to the Corinthians that he wants them, Paul says, that he wants them to be ready to give their finances but he says, but if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.

God does not expect you to give what you do not have. He expects according to your abilities. 2 Corinthians 5, 12. Johnny Faris is 53 years old and he's 100% bedridden.

[21 : 45] He didn't ask for this life but he was born with spinal muscular atrophy, a genetic disease related to muscular dystrophy. It's a deficiency of a protein that leaves the nerve cells to die because they're starved.

They don't have what they need to live and so these nerve cells die and it's the nerve cells that control the muscles and with no signal telling the muscles to move, the muscle just is idle and so it can't function and what happens to a muscle that's left idle?

It atrophies. Its lack of use causes the muscle to waste away. Well, that's happened with Johnny and he's to the point now where he's paralyzed in both arms and legs.

He's been unable to sit up for over 10 years. He spends every day, all day, confined to his bed. He's lost the use now of his throat muscles, the ones that are working well in you so that they enable you to swallow your spit.

He can't do that anymore. The muscles are gone. So he's got to have his spit sucked out every so often with a machine. He needs another machine to breathe for him.

[22 : 57] Those muscles in the diaphragm are gone. And he's got a tube into his stomach to feed him. And I say, if anybody had an excuse from not doing anything, it would be Johnny.

He's got a website and at the top he says it's his duty to let his light shine for the glory of God. And at the bottom of his website and on all of his emails that he sends out, he's got this.

And it's a good thing for me to see constantly and to remember. And it's especially pungent coming from Johnny. I am only one, but I am one.

I cannot do everything, but I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do.

What I can do, I should do. And what I should do, by the grace of God, I will do. End quote. James says, anyone then who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it sins.

[24 : 04] Johnny says, there is something I can do and since I can do it, I should do it. And if I don't do it, I sin. A sin of omission. And so, by the grace of God, I will do something.

So, yes, in your old age, you can't do what you used to do. You can't do what you used to physically, mentally, in whatever way, but you can do something and that's what we need to be encouraged to do.

To do our something with all of our heart is unto the Lord. Here's the something that Johnny does for the Lord. He uses a speech recognition computer system and he communicates with others his hope in Jesus Christ.

He serves the body of Christ by sending out missionary prayer letters and church letters to stir up prayer for each other. All over the world they go.

He maintains a directory of Reformed Baptist churches all over the world. If you're considering going on vacation or considering taking a job somewhere, you can first of all go and see if there is a Reformed Baptist church in that town.

[25 : 11] He carries on a ministry to handicapped people and again, we might think that if anybody should feel why am I alive it'd be Johnny. There's hardly anything he can do but he doesn't think that way.

He has a keen sense of purpose not in spite of his handicap but precisely because of his handicap. He sees that this handicap has opened up an avenue for me to serve and this is the something I can do and he throws himself into it with all of his heart.

You know what it does for this lazy complaining pastor? It lights a fire under me. It shuts my mouth from complaining. It stirs me. It rebukes me.

It spurs me on. It fills my mouth with thanksgiving. I've never met Johnny personally. I get letters or emails from him all the time but his life is far from being without purpose and so if in old age you should be reduced to where you can hardly do anything there's still something.

If you have breath in you you have a part in this glorious purpose of serving and glorifying God. Let us not become weary in doing good.

[26 : 29] That's a good word for older people isn't it? As well as for younger. Not become weary in doing good for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up. Therefore as we have opportunity let us do good to all people especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

So there will be a time when you will need to curtail some of your more active labors perhaps be bedridden for months and years but even then your opportunities to serve and glorify God are not over.

Archibald Alexander speaking from the 19th century speaks of ministers who must step down from their active labors and he says this even because I think this is applicable to more than preachers even when by reason of bodily infirmities the servants of God are obliged to desist from public labors they do not cease from serving their master their lives are not useless his name is as much honored by patient submission and cheerful resignation as by public zealous exertion and cheerful resignation in your old age to whatever it is God's got on the calendar for you that day as much glorified by that as by your most public zealous exertion so that means cheerful resignation to the driver's license being suspended taken away to the death of a spouse a friend in old age all these things are ways to glorify

God in old age we've got to remember there's more than one way to glorify God it's not just by our strength physical strength mental strength there's a host of other ways that God intends for people to glorify him else why would he keep them on the planet in a weakened state for so long we need to remember that Alexander goes on and says the greatest and most effectual work which can be performed by any on earth they can perform anybody have an idea what that is somebody said it prayer I mean the greatest and most effectual work which can be performed by any on earth they can perform older person you stand shoulder to shoulder with the youngest healthiest robust man you can do what he does in this regard I mean the offering of prayer and intercessions day and night at the throne of grace let not the infirm and aged say they can now do nothing for God they can do much and for aught they can tell they can do more than they ever did in the days of their vigor it is a beautiful sight to see men laden with fruit in old age so he says to elderly pastors if you cannot preach you can you can by prayer hold up the hands of those who do remember

Andy Hamilton used to say that prayer will be found in heaven to be our most enduring work so yes you've had strength for 50 60 70 years and now your strength is waning you have the opportunity to do your most enduring work not that you haven't been doing any of that as you've been younger but it's still there to lay hold of it's not some second rate form of service well I can't do this so I guess I'm just left on the shelf to pray no you're able to do the most important thing isn't that what Anna was doing Luke chapter 2 and she was doing it in her old age Luke chapter 2 and verse 36 there was also a prophetess Anna the daughter of Thaniel of the tribe of Asher she was very old and had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage and then was a widow until she was 84 she never left the temple but worshipped night and day fasting and praying and so here's a woman getting in on that most precious of works as a widow of 84

[30 : 32] Daniel's around age 90 and what's he doing three times a day with his face toward the east he's down on his knees praying isn't he so when your feet can no longer take you places your prayers can take you all over the world you can follow our missionaries into France Switzerland the Philippines and you can go there you can get there on your knees because your prayers reach the throne that rules over every place in the world and so your prayers can touch people on the other side of the earth from a sick and infirm condition in bed you can get there from your bed of affliction so Archibald Alexander concludes by saying it is not in vain for you to live while you have access to a throne of grace pray for your missionaries every day use that mission prayer focus that we hand out once a month you pray for one missionary a day use the flip charts that tell you of the needs of the missionaries that we have pray over the requests that are given on

Wednesday night take that sheet home don't just make that prayer for Wednesday but take that and pray over it every day pray through the church directory family by family maybe it's in the context of doing that that your heart will be drawn to a certain family to try to draw near to and to especially give yourself to what surprises are in store at the day of judgment when God gives out reward for faithful service to his people and those whose names have never been in print and never been recognized as a leader in any sort of public ministry in the church will be given some of the highest honors from Jesus Christ and some bystander might say who are these and Jesus will say well these are they who laid hold of the throne of grace in their old age and they too will have their reward these prayer warriors who labored hard and long in obscurity and old age but did more for

the kingdom of Christ on their knees than most do on their feet they moved mountains they conquered hearts of stones they built churches they healed divisions they filled fields with workers and pulpits with preachers they comforted the needy and all on their knees so Alexander says let them be active as long as they can and when bodily strength fails let them wield the pen or if unable to write for the edification of the church let them exhibit consistent and shining example of the Christian temper in kindness and goodwill to all in uncomplaining patience in contented poverty in cheerful submission to painful providences and in mute resignation to the loss of their dearest friends and when death comes let them not be afraid or dismayed then will be the time to honor God by implicitly and confidently trusting in his promises Lord willing we're coming to that how to glorify God the very last day of our life as we look further into this question of growing old gracefully any closing questions or words for us let's be encouraged then as long as we have breath to breathe it for the Lord and to lay hold of the opportunities of today we're dismissed