

“THE OLDEST OF THESE, AGING IN GRACE.”

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First Christian Reformed Church

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Scripture Texts: Psalm 71:8-9, 17-20; II Corinthians 4:16-18

Prayer: Father, we come in weakness to receive your superior strength. We come in ignorance to receive you superior wisdom. We come in need to receive your all-sufficient help. Open our hearts to this treasure above all treasures. For the sake of Jesus, Amen.

Introduction.

How many of you are growing older? Wow, pastor, that’s two sermons in a row where you have started off with a dumb question. Last week was how many of you have ever forgotten something? Now how many of us are growing older?

Those of you who lurk about Facebook know a few weeks ago someone started a 10 Year Photo Challenge. You’re supposed to post two pictures of yourself side by side, one from 10 years ago and one from now. I know, you are thinking, why would anyone do that on purpose?

Lots of celebrities and famous people are doing it to show off how great they still look. Others are owning up to the realities of what age does to our faces and bodies.

So why am I talking about this topic this morning.

Last week we considered the least of these, the little ones in their mother’s wombs. This morning I want to consider the other end of life, the oldest of these, the senior saints. Next week I will speak to a topic that will land in the middle, parents and the challenges of navigating the technology driven culture we are immersed in, or maybe submerged in. Pray for me as we tackle technology and smartphones and social media.

The Puritan Edmund Barker said, “Every Christian hath two great works to do in the world, to live well, and to die well.” Dying well was something they prepared for by living well.

So my goal this morning is to pass on some wisdom from God concerning the number of our days and how to age with grace or as the Puritans would say how to finish well and die well.

To do that I am going to use some insights gather from another puritan, Archibald Alexander, *Aging in Grace: Letters to Those in the Autumn of Life*.

Die well, with the assurance of faith.

Death is unavoidable, inescapable and approaching fast. I feel its presence. I am much closer to the end than I am to my beginning.

Death is certain. It is right that we feel some trepidation, death after all is an intruder, an unwelcome guest, an enemy, the final result of sin. It is the work of the Devil. Death is something to be defeated, which Christ has done, and one day it will be no more.

But as terrible as death is, we can face it and we can die well. For the believer in Jesus, death is gain, we gain heaven as our hearts true home, and perfect fellowship with our Savior and Lord.

We don't fear it because through it we have the richest reward.

How do you die well?

Start by praying Moses' prayer: "teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom."

First, fight the good fight of faith.

II Timothy 4:7 I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.

As our bodies weaken and fail, while our outer selves waste away, our inner selves can be renewed and grow stronger in faith and hope.

The wrinkles and gray hair and dimming eyes and aches and pains are external, but they point to what God is doing internally, to spiritual renewal as we put trust not in ourselves but in Him and as we look more to what is unseen than what is seen.

As we loss strength and health and vitality, we loosen our grip on this world and what is transient, we become weaned from this fleeting life, and look more to eternal weight of glory that is beyond all comparison.

Picture two lines on a graph, as one descends the other ascends.

To paraphrase Jesus' words, don't fear what happens to our bodies, they are temporal and fleeting, fear what happens to our souls, they are eternal. So give more attention of your soul. Physical exercise is good, but spiritual exercise is most important.

I Timothy 4:8 For while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.

The problem with the 10 Year Challenge photo is it looks at the wrong thing. It shows how our faces and bodies have declined and decayed, it doesn't show how our hearts have changed, it doesn't show the effects of God's grace.

It doesn't show the internal beauty of loving Jesus, worshiping Him, growing in knowledge of Him and His Word. It doesn't show God's faithfulness and the triumph of grace in our lives.

With age come so many losses, strength, health, quickness, memory, and perhaps hardest of all dear loved ones, spouses, children, life long friends, fellow companions on this journey.

With age come regrets of sins committed, time wasted, duties neglected, and opportunities for doing good missed. We don't really want to go back and do it all over again, but we wish we had done it different.

Fight against despondency, depression, despair, guilt and shame, regrets and remorse. Bring it all to the cross and leave it there. Trust in God and His promise, "I will never leave you or forsake you." Though you lose everything valued or cherished in this life remember His promise.

I Peter 1:3b-4 He has caused us to be born again to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, 4 to an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you.

Death can't touch what we possess in Christ. Death can take away everything we have, but it can't take away Jesus.

By faith triumphantly says with the prophet:

Habakkuk 3:17-19 Though the fig tree should not blossom, nor fruit be on the vines,
the produce of the olive fail and the fields yield no food,
the flock be cut off from the fold and there be no herd in the stalls,
18 yet I will rejoice in the Lord; I will take joy in the God of my salvation.
19 God, the Lord, is my strength.

Fight the fight with continued repentance.

A long life means a long life of sinning and repenting. And so we must continue all our days. One thing this does is deepen our understanding and appreciation of the faithfulness and loving kindness of our God and the power of the blood of Jesus.

Second, continue to be useful, with the faith and strength God gives you.

Don't equate retiring from your earthly career with retiring from the Lord's work. As long as we have breath our work is not ended. Don't ever cease from the Lord's work, from doing good.

As long as we have breath there is opportunity to do good. Even if our back is bent and our hands don't work and our eyes and ears are failing, there is good to be done, wisdom, experience and encouragement to be shared, prayers to be offered up for saints and for the church. As you once glorified God with your hands, now glorify Him with your words and your heart.

Don't complain about what you can't do, ask God to show you what He now wants you to do.

Christ did His greatest work out of weakness. He did more by His death than by His living.

Don't despise your weaknesses.

We can still worship and that is the best work.

We can still pray and that is the greatest work.

We can still speak wisdom and a testimony concerning Jesus and that is holy work.

Rather than feeling useless and unworthy and tossed off and passed by, turn to God in faith and with patience for what He now has in store.

Don't look at what all the younger people are doing. God doesn't need their work, He most of all wants our hearts, our trust, our obedience in whatever circumstance. He gives us what He requires of us. When we rely on Him, He works in us according to His good pleasure.

“Older men, be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness” (Titus 2:2).

“Older women, be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. Teach what is good, and train the young women” (Titus 2:3–4).

Prayer.

We are so used to doing. We work hard all our lives and then the time comes when our strength fails us and we can't do all we once did. This is unsettling, this is hard, it is a hard adjustment.

Young Joshua was on the battlefield doing battle with the Amalekites, being strong and brave, doing what young men do. And it was glorious. Where was old Moses?

Moses in his old age (81) couldn't fight the battle but he could pray. But notice, of the fighting and the praying, praying was more important and won the day.

You can't preach but you can pray for the one who does.

You can't run around with the youth or do Serve projects but you can pray for those who do.

You can't take mission trips or go to the mission field, but you can follow those who go with your prayers.

Your life is not in vain as long as you have access to the throne of God's grace in heaven.

Remember Simeon and Anna in the temple. They were old, God preserved their lives so that they would be in the temple praying for the incarnation of the Christ. That was the reason God gave them long life, to pray. God lengthened her days so she could see the consolation of Israel.

Could it be that God is lengthening some of our days so we can see some answer to some prayer? What prayer would you pray that you desire to see answered more than anything else?

Would you like to be a witness to the rise and glory of Christ in His church? Would you like to see those who are being saved added to Christ's body? What blessing would you like to see poured out?

As long as you have breath, will not God hear those who cry out to Him day and night?

Third, prepare for eternity.

II Corinthians 4:18 17 For this light momentary affliction is *preparing* for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

As Jesus is preparing a place for us, so He is preparing us for that place and so we should be preparing for that place.

In this life tune your instrument for the symphony we will join in heaven.

Is your faith as strong as it could be?

Is there any unfinished business?

Is your heart warm with love for God and others?

Are there any besetting sins still to be overcome by God's Spirit and grace?

Have you set an example and left clear footprints for those who follow behind you?

Is there someone in the next generation you can share the hope of Christ with?

Are you weaned from the visible and looking more toward the invisible?

As we get nearer to heaven, do your thoughts turn more to heaven?

Make worship more of a priority than ever, both corporate and individual.

Make a study of heaven, reflect on it, get to know God, the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit better. If you forget everything else, may you never forget Him.

What our mind loves the most and treasures the most is what stays in our minds the longest.

Read *Knowing God* by J.I. Packer; subscribe to Tabletalk. Memorize more Scripture.

Make preparation by weaning yourself from the world and worldly things and wealth gathered. We all know we can't take it with us, so make use of what God has given you.

Don't leave what He has given you to be disposed of by those who might not use it for God's glory or to advance Christ's kingdom and work on earth. Do good with the means He has given.

Leave instructions. Write down hymns and Scriptures you want sung and read at your memorial. Tell someone what you want to happen in the room in your last days.

I have said as little morphine as possible, and preferably none at all.

No TV, Christian music, keep me warm.

Push out the world and bring in the sounds of heaven, Scripture in song and word.

John Knox, the great Scottish Reformer and founder of the Presbyterian Church, asked for Scripture to be read to him. Isaiah 53, I Corinthians 15 and John 17. Sweet promises that give sweet comfort. Anchors for the soul.

We can prepare to die well by thinking often about death and the life to come.

Our Lord Jesus, in his dying hours was setting an example for us by meditating on Scripture (see Matt. 27:46; cf. Ps. 22:1), by forgiving his enemies (see Luke 23:34), by sharing the gospel (see Luke 23:39-43), by caring for his family (see John 19:26-27), and by entrusting his body and his soul to his Father in heaven (see Luke 23:46).

Dying well is dying with full assurance of faith in our faithful God and confident of our salvation.

It's wise to reflect on death, to consider the promises of God in His Word, and to pray for grace and strength to face the day of our departure well.

So forget about the 10 Year Challenge, and forget about what you see in your mirror, it's full of lies. It only sees the outside. Don't look at what is seen, look at what is unseen. In our hearts, and in heaven. Make Christ your focus and serve Him with whatever strength you have, and if no strength, then with whatever breath you have in prayer.

And as far as what you see in the mirror, well talk back and say,

II Corinthians 4:16–18 So we do not lose heart. Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day. 17 For this light momentary affliction is preparing for us an eternal weight of glory beyond all comparison, 18 as we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen. For the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are eternal.

Prayer: Holy, Sovereign and good God, we acknowledge you as our creator and maker and you have every right to do with us and our bodies as you please and that will be most to your glory.

Father of all compassion, do not cast us off in the time of old age or forsake us when our strength is gone. By your sufficient grace enable us to continue to bear fruit that glorifies you to the end of our days. Deliver us from despair or depression or dementia; grant us to bear our declining years with patience, peace and complete submission to your will, whatever that will may be.

May we always rejoice in our salvation and look forward to the hope of glory and long for the appearing of our Savior and Lord Jesus Christ. Prepare us in every way for our day. Remove any fear and if it would please you grant us an easy passage from this world to the next. While we journey in this valley of the shadow of death, remove all fear of evil or the evil one.

Enable us to leave a testimony to the very end, pointing always to the worth and faithfulness of Jesus. Let us leave an example for others to follow.

On our day, Jesus, receive us to yourself. Grant that though we have the lowest rank in heaven, that we can always behold your glory.