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## GROWING OLD GOD'S WAY

Psalm 71

By

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Lesson 15: Psalms

## Growing Old God's Way Psalm 71

There is something which everybody wants and yet almost everyone fears: growing old. Old age has many frightening aspects: an aging body which is more susceptible to illness; declining strength; feelings of uselessness (especially after retirement); the loss of friends and loved ones through death; the reality of one's own death drawing nearer; loneliness; feelings of alienation from one's children and grandchildren, who are busy with other interests and pursuits; and, very often, financial concerns due to dwindling income.

Sadly, our American culture does not esteem the elderly. We are a self-centered, utilitarian society. The younger generation often views the elderly as a financial burden and, if they require our care, as an interference in the pursuit of pleasure and success. This was most outrageously stated a few years ago by then-Colorado governor, Richard Lamm. In a discussion of spiraling health care costs, he said that terminally ill elderly people have "a duty to die and get out of the way." Most would be more polite, but the underlying attitudes are there. Dr. Kevorkian is helping Governor Lamm's wish come true, by assisting the terminally ill in suicide.

It is interesting, by the way, that in China old age is still viewed as the most respected stage of life. In Shanghai, one of the five largest cities in the world, in the late 1970's there was only one home for the aged. Most of the elderly there are cared for in the family context.

But as you and I face the prospects of growing old in America, we need to ask ourselves, "What should I be doing now, however old I am, to prepare for old age?" The fact is, you will be then what you are becoming now. If you are not becoming a person of faith now, you will not be a person of faith then. If you are a negative, grumpy person now, you will not be a positive, cheerful person then. If you aren't developing a walk with God now, you won't have one then.

Psalm 71 is the psalm of an old man. He is an old man with many trials and problems, but he is obviously a joyful man who is able to put his focus on the Lord in the midst of these trials. The psalm shows us, to put it simply, that

God's way to grow old is to develop a walk with Him now.

The reason that the psalmist could handle his problems so well as an old man was that he had developed a walk with God in the years leading up to this time. He had a proven resource in the Lord which enabled him to be strong inside, even though his body was growing weaker and his enemies were powerful.

We don't know for sure who wrote Psalm 71. Some scholars think it was the prophet Jeremiah. But I agree with those who think that David wrote this psalm at the time of Absalom's rebellion, perhaps as he was quartered across the Jordan, awaiting the outcome of the battle. The psalm pieces together a number of elements from other Davidic psalms (22, 31, 35, 40, 109). The reference to praising God on the harp and lyre (71:22) sounds like David, and the reference to having his greatness increased (71:21) could refer to David's being restored to the throne. The circumstances in which the psalmist finds himself fit David at the time of Absalom's rebellion: "shame" (71:1); oppressed by evil men (71:4); enemies speaking against him and seeking to kill him (71:10, 11, 13, 24); a life of many troubles (71:7a, 20); he had trusted God from his youth (71:5, 17); now he was old and gray (71:9, 18). (David was in his early 60's; he died at 70.)

At any rate, there were three aspects of his walk with God which the author had developed over the years which stood him in good stead at this time of trial in his old age, which we need to develop:

1. We need to develop a deep knowledge of God.

The psalm is permeated with a deep personal understanding and practical knowledge of the Lord God. He had been taught of God even from his youth (71:17). The man knew God as his refuge (71:1; "strong refuge," 71:7) and his righteous Savior (71:2). John Calvin (*Commentary*, pp. 632, 633) argues that God's righteousness, frequently mentioned here (71:2, 15, 16, 19, 24), refers to His faithfulness to His own people in keeping His promises. He calls God

his rock of habitation, his rock and fortress (71:3); his hope and confidence (71:5).

He talks of God's mighty deeds (71:16), His strength and power (71:18), and the great things He has done (71:19). He realized that it was God who brought him into trouble and God who delivered and restored him (71:20). God was his source of comfort in this trial (71:21). God had redeemed his soul (71:23). As he exclaims, "O God, who is like You?" (71:19). He could testify that his mouth was filled with God's praise and glory and righteousness all day long (71:8, 22, 23, 24).

This man knew his God! It is obvious that he had known Him for years and had proved God's faithfulness in a number of previous difficult situations. So in this instance when he needs to trust in God, it is not a matter of, "God, if You exist, whoever You are, if You're out there I need your help!" He didn't need to take a blind leap of faith because he knew his God in a personal, practical, proven way.

May I ask: Do you know God like that? Are you growing in the process of developing such knowledge through His Word and through applying His Word to your experience? One of the most important things that each one of us can do to prepare for whatever crises we may have to face in the future is to be spending time now in God's Word, getting to know God. As you read His Word ask yourself, "What does this passage teach me about my God?" And then seek to apply it to your daily problems.

A number of years ago, our neighbor's two daughters, who were in grade school and junior high at the time, came running out of their house in a panic. Smoke came billowing out the door behind them. I discovered that there was a grease fire in their oven and their parents were not home. I ran into the kitchen and assumed that they must not have a fire extinguisher or they would have used it, so I tried to smother the fire with flour. That didn't work. Finally, in desperation, I asked, "Do you have a fire extinguisher by any chance?" It turned out that they had three of them! One of the girls gave me one and I had the fire out in seconds.

The fire extinguisher was an adequate resource for that crisis, but the girls didn't know how to use it or had no experience in us-

ing it, so it didn't do them any good. To benefit from the extinguisher, I needed to know what it could do and how to use it in that emergency. In the same way, we need to know our God and what He can do so that we can lay hold of the tremendous resources that belong to us as His children. If we're learning that now, then we will know Him as our confidence when the crises of old age come upon us.

2. We need to develop the godly habits of trust, praise, and hope.

A habit is developed by frequent repetition over a period of time. Once it's in place, a habit becomes almost involuntary. Our attitudes, how we respond mentally and emotionally to life's problems, tend to become habitual responses. Some people become habitual worriers; some become habitual complainers; some become habitually negative, pessimistic, and angry. Others become habitually cheerful and positive. The habits we develop in our younger years tend to take us further in that direction as we grow older.

A little Hebrew word repeated in verses 3, 6, and 14, translated "continually" (NASB; "always," "ever," NIV) tips us off to the habits the psalmist had developed. They are not habits we pick up naturally. They must be deliberately cultivated ("But as for me," 71:14, points to firm resolve). In fact, they stem from his knowledge of God. They are the habits of trust (71:3); praise (71:6); and hope (71:14).

- A. The habit of trust (71:3).

The whole psalm is an affirmation of the psalmist's trust in the Lord. Spurgeon calls it "the utterance of struggling, but unstag-gering, faith" (*Treasury of David*, [Baker], 3:294). He was struggling because he was in difficult circumstances, with many seeking his life; but he was unstag-gering in his faith because he knew whom he believed.

Such faith stems from a knowledge of God. True knowledge dispels doubt and fear. We fear and mistrust that which we do not know, whereas we are more inclined to trust that which we know well, assuming it is trustworthy. When I was in the Coast Guard, we had to go out on a search and rescue mission in a gale. The

waves were twenty to thirty feet high. We were taking green water over the bridge of our 81-foot boat. I was afraid that we would capsize and drown. But the skipper, while not relaxed, at least wasn't afraid. He had taken this boat through other such storms and he knew what it could handle. His knowledge dispelled his fear.

Because the psalmist knew God, he had learned to trust God through some other tough times (71:20), and he knew therefore that God would see him through this time.

Are you developing a habit of trusting God in the difficult times of your life? Or are you frequently filled with worry and doubt and fear? If you have trouble trusting, concentrate on getting to know God. Also, review what God has already done for you. There is a tremendous emphasis in the psalm on what God has done (71:5, 6, 15, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 23, 24). That strengthens faith! Has God ever preserved your life? Has He saved you from your sins? Has He sustained you this far? Then you can trust Him for your present problems and for any which arise in the future.

B. The habit of praise (71:6).

Praise is not a natural habit, at least not for me. I am a grumbler and complainer by nature. But God wants us to be people of praise. Even when difficult times come, God wants us to learn to praise Him. The psalmist had deliberately developed that habit. (See also, 71:8, 14, 22-24).

How can we learn to praise God when trials come? The answer is, "Learn to trust Him." Because just as trust stems from knowing God, so praise stems from trusting God.

This is true on the human plane as well as on the divine. You can't praise a person you don't trust. If you feel that there is something about a person that you can't trust, you won't sing his praises to others. It's the same way with God. If deep-down inside you doubt God's goodness or faithfulness for allowing some trial to come your way, then you don't trust Him. And not trusting Him, you cannot honestly praise Him.

If you are a complainer and have trouble developing a habit of praise, I would suggest the same two steps I mentioned under trust: First, concentrate on getting to know God and His ways. This

psalm emphasizes God's righteousness (71:2, 15, 16, 19, 24) because the psalmist was fearing unjust treatment at the hands of unrighteous men, and he wanted to affirm the righteousness of the God he trusted. He is good and faithful, even when He brings troubles and distresses (71:20) into our lives.

Second, review what God has already done for you. "Count your many blessings, name them one by one." We tend to forget His many benefits on our behalf (all undeserved), and thus we fail in praise.

### C. The habit of hope (71:14).

The psalmist had not only developed habits of trust and praise, but also of hope. We need to understand that there is a big difference between secular hope and biblical hope. Both forms of hope contain the idea of future expectations. But secular hope is uncertain because its object is uncertain, whereas biblical hope is sure because God is its object (71:5). When I say, "I hope that my investment will earn 10 percent," there is uncertainty because the object of my hope (the stock market) is unstable. But when I say, "I hope that Jesus Christ will return bodily," I'm expressing something certain, but not yet realized. Thus biblical hope is built upon trust in God and His faithfulness.

Believers should be people who have a habit of hope built on the promises of God. The great missionary pioneer, Adoniram Judson, was suffering from fever in a wretched prison in Burma. A friend sent him a letter, asking, "Judson, how's the outlook?" Judson replied, "The outlook is as bright as the promises of God." Unfortunately, many Christians have picked up the negative, hopeless spirit of the world because they focus on the problems instead of God and His promises. If you're developing that habit, it will make you bitter, not better, as you grow older. God's people should be people who hope in God.

Thus the psalmist was in good stead in his old age because he had developed a deep knowledge of God and he had developed the godly habits of trust, praise, and hope.

### 3. He had developed a lifestyle of ministry for God.

Although the psalmist was old (71:9, 18) and could have kicked back and said, "I deserve some rest," he did not. He still had

a concern for ministry, for testifying to others of God's faithfulness and power (71:8, 15-18, 24). As long as he had breath, he wanted to keep telling people about God's greatness and glory.

A worldly attitude has infiltrated the church. It goes like this: "I work all week, so my weekends are my free time to spend as I please." If we give God a couple of hours by going to church on Sunday, we feel like we've paid our dues. We don't want to be tied down with any kind of Christian service that would hinder us from taking off for the weekend when we feel like it.

I'm going to make a radical statement that might step on some toes. But check it out in the Bible to see if I'm right: *If you're not involved in some kind of Christian service, you're too self-centered.* I know that there are times in life when we're busier with family and job than at other times. But if all you're doing is coming to church to take in, if your focus is, "What can I get out of the church?" rather than "How can I serve the Lord through His church?" you're out of balance. There should be no such thing as a non-serving member of the body.

With regard to old age, I think we need to challenge the American idea of retirement. We tend to go with the cultural view that retirement is a time in life when we can do what we want to do. But as Christians, we never earn the right to do what we want to do with our time! We never have the right to live selfishly. All of life must be lived under the lordship of Christ. And where in the Bible do we find the magic number 65? If you're freed up from your job at 65 and you're healthy, why not view it as an opportunity to serve the Lord full time? I'd like to see more retired people going back to Bible college for some training and then heading out to serve on the mission field. If you live to be 80, you could have more than a decade of self-supported ministry!

The point is, the psalmist didn't want to be delivered from his problems so that he could play golf and go fishing every day. He wanted to be delivered so that he could proclaim God's power to the next generation (71:18). He had a vision to hand off the baton to the younger generation. He saw a longer life as an opportunity for extended ministry. And his ministry was built on his knowledge of God and his habits of trust, praise, and hope, so he had something worth handing off! How about you? Are you developing a

lifestyle of ministry now, built on your personal walk with God? It makes for a meaningful old age.

### Conclusion

Bishop John Reed of Sydney, Australia, was preaching in Christ Church Cathedral one Sunday when a 75-year-old woman named Ethel Hatfield got saved. Mrs. Hatfield had attended that Anglican church for decades, but the message had never gotten through to her until that day. The following day she came to see Bishop Reed and said, "I could hardly sleep last night I was so excited about what happened. I want to do something to serve God with the few years I have left. I was wondering if I could teach Sunday School."

Bishop Reed looked at this 75-year-old, white-haired lady and just couldn't picture her controlling the rambunctious third or fourth grade kids. So he said, "I'm sorry, but we don't have an opening in our Sunday School." Her face fell. Bishop Reed said, "You mean business, don't you? I don't know what kind of service God may have for you, but let's pray." So they prayed for God to reveal His will for her.

The next day Mrs. Hatfield was out in her yard tending her roses when a Chinese student from Taiwan walked by. He stopped and complimented her on her roses and they began to talk. She thought, "He seems like a decent chap; I'll invite him in for a spot of tea." So she did and she told him her testimony. He found it an interesting story, so when he had to leave he asked if he could come back and talk further. She said, "Yes, and please bring a friend."

He came back and brought a friend and she again shared how she had come to put her faith in Jesus Christ after all these years and how Christ had forgiven her sin and given her eternal life. These students came back and brought more friends, who brought even more. Within two weeks, Mrs. Hatfield was leading a weekly Bible study with 70 Chinese students in attendance! She led many of them to personal faith in Jesus Christ. That which seemed a hindrance to Mrs. Hatfield's serving the Lord--her age--God turned into the key to reaching a group of people who respect old age!

The September, 1993, "Global Prayer Digest" tells the story of Jonah, a 73-year-old Chinese evangelist, who, since 1976, has traveled around the People's Republic spreading the good news about Jesus Christ. "His days are full, and his energy unflagging. In one weekend Jonah may bicycle nine hours, spend 40 hours on a hard railway seat and eight hours on a bumpy bus just to bring the message of Jesus Christ to people in remote villages, or to urban churches with 5,000 members, or to young soldiers .... The schedule is grueling, but 73-year-old Jonah says, 'Rest is for the next world.'"

God's way for us to grow old is for us to develop a walk with Him now--a walk that involves a deep personal, experimental knowledge of God, a walk that includes the habits of trust, praise, and hope, and a walk that involves a lifestyle of ministry for God. Then, as long as we have life and breath, we can show and tell and sing of the greatness of our God to the next generation. What a way to go!

### Discussion Questions

1. The psalmist had served God all his life and now, in old age, was beset with problems. Didn't he deserve better treatment? Why wasn't he bitter?
2. In what ways have we Americans developed a worldly view of retirement?
3. Agree/disagree: A non-ministering Christian is too self-centered.
4. How can we develop genuine praise when we face overwhelming problems? Is praise a feeling or an act of obedience?

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