

“The Journey of Life: Older Adults”

Ephesians 3:14-21 ¹

Children born in this country in 1900 could expect to live an average of 47 years. Children born this year have an average life expectancy of 81 years.² According to the Census Bureau, the cohort of Americans 65 years old or older increased from 35.1 million persons in 2000 to 41.4 million persons in 2011, an increase of 18 percent. Did you get that? **Eighteen percent in eleven years.**³

If you haven't noticed—but I'll bet you have—gerontology has become BIG BUSINESS, not only here, but all around the world. And, contrary to what you might imagine, most persons in this country over the age of 65 are both mobile and self-sufficient. Only about 5% of older persons are in long-term care, and most of those are over 85 years old.⁴

This morning, as we conclude our quick journey through the five twenty-year age cohorts in the human life-cycle, we turn our attention to “older adulthood,” which encompasses most of the last two cohorts, from 65 to a hundred years old . . . and beyond.⁵ And you might be interested to know that in the 2010 Census, there were 53,364 persons in the U.S. who were over 100 years old!⁶

Given these statistics, when we turn our thoughts to a consideration of older adulthood, we're talking about a long, vibrant, meaningful, and productive season of life. If we turn our attention to the template we've been using to consider the various phases of life, the **positive polarity** of older adulthood is **integrity**, a character quality with two foci.

The first focus of the integrity of older adulthood is an acceptance of our lives as they are, which includes acceptance of the people who have been significant in our lives, for good or ill. To say this means that now, if we've not done so before, we finally release our parents from any responsibility for us, recognizing that we ourselves are responsible for the persons that we have become.⁷

The second focus of this integrity has to do with our participation in the succession of generations upon the earth, as we choose to place our lives in the context of the larger human story and God's Eternal Story. Whereas the task of adolescence was to *create* a sense of Self, the task of maturity is to *endorse* and *bless* the Self that we have now become.

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, Maryland, on April 6, 2014. Much of the developmental information in this sermon comes from one or more of the following sources: Donald Capps, *Deadly Sins and Saving Virtues* (Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1987); Donald Capps, *Life-Cycle Theory and Pastoral Care*, Theology & Pastoral Care Series, ed. Don. S. Browning (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1983); Erik Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1959, reprinted 1980); James Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1981); Robert Havighurst, *Developmental Tasks and Education*, 3rd ed. (New York: David McKay Co., 1972); James E. Hightower, Jr., ed., *Caring for Folks from Birth to Death* (Nashville: Broadman, 1985); and Lewis Sherrill, *The Struggle of the Soul* (New York: Macmillan, 1951).

² www.ssa.gov/OACT/STATS/table4c6.html

³ www.census.gov/population/age/data/2010comp.html. See also www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/lifexpec.htm; www.ssa.gov/planners/lifeexpectancy.htm; www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hus/hus12.pdf#018.

⁴ Albert L. Meiburg, “Senior Adulthood: Twilight or Dawn?” in Hightower, *Caring for Folks from Birth to Death*.

⁵ Studies show that in those families and in those cultures where age is honored, older adults tend to thrive and to live longer, healthier lives.

⁶ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Centenarian>.

⁷ Capps, *Deadly Sins*, p. 64.

On the other hand, persons who reach maturity without this integrity, whose developmental path has been poorly tended, come to the end of the journey to discover the **negative polarity** of older adulthood, which is **despair**. These are those persons who say bitterly as the years accumulate, *“when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun”* (Ecclesiastes 2:11).

Such despair both leads to and grows out of the **deadly sin** of older adulthood, which is **melancholy**. This sin, building on the sloth of middle adulthood, calls attention to the demoralizing effects of Sin on the human spirit. God doesn't want us to avoid Sin so that we'll become good at keeping a set of rules and guidelines. God doesn't want us to Sin because Sin kills us. Melancholy leaves its victims contemptuous of life, and wishing they were as dead in body as they are in spirit.

On a happier note, for those who have lived well, the **saving virtue** of the last chapters of life is **wisdom**. To have wisdom is to know what to do and when to do it and what to say and when to say it; and to have wisdom is also to know what *not* to do and when not to do it, and what *not* to say and when not to say it.

I was talking last year with a cousin who is an interventional cardiologist, and I asked him whether it's true that younger physicians are more adept at manipulating robotic and other instruments as a result of their long exposure to video games. “Yes,” he said, “they are better at that than I am as I near retirement. But their problem is that they don't have the wisdom to know what to do when. That's really what makes the difference in outcome.”

Older persons who have the virtue of wisdom continue to give vigorous thought to human problems and their solutions, even while knowing that they themselves are not likely to live long enough to personally profit from this work. Wise adults continue to care about the world. Persons who have attained the pinnacle of age with wisdom encourage those who follow after them to believe that the race of life is well worth the running.

As wisdom and integrity develop and flourish in our lives, by God's grace, older adults experience five transformations in the life of faith that are crucial for finishing well. Each of these is worthy of more consideration than I can give here, but let me at least tell you what they are.

ANGER. By the time we reach retirement, even those who have led the most charmed lives have accumulated enough pain to become bitter and angry persons should they choose to allow that to happen. But by God's grace, older adulthood can also see this pain and this anger transformed from destruction into redemption and love.

ANXIETY. We tend to spend the first half of our lives in anxious pursuit of various kinds of socially-valued achievement. As one quip put it, “We spend our health to gather wealth, and then we spend our wealth to regain our health.” If we become wise enough soon enough, we can avoid that trap; but in any event, in older adulthood, God's grace is able to cause the anxiety of achieving to be transformed into the grace of receiving, both from God and from others.

GRIEF. Older adulthood is a season inevitably colored by many griefs, griefs that tend to grow both more numerous and more significant as the years go by. We can experience these losses as tragic—as another opportunity for bitterness—or we can allow our losses to be transformed as we surrender all that we have and are, and all those whom we love and cherish, to the trustworthy care of our loving God.

GUILT. By the time we reach retirement, even the most righteous among us have accumulated enough guilt to “sink a battleship”; yet God’s grace continues to be at work, transforming our many failures into forgiveness—forgiveness both for ourselves and for those who have harmed us along the way.

FEAR. For those who are paying attention, there is much in the world and much about life itself that can stir a spirit of fear in our hearts. As we grow older, our many fears tend to become focused on fear of dying in this life and fear of judgment in the next. But once again, God’s love continues its grace-full work, transforming our fear into Hope: “*For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord*” (Romans 6:23; cp. 5:1-5).

Well, there’s much more that could be said, and I’ll post some additional information online with this sermon this afternoon, but I want to look briefly at the three chapters of older adulthood and their characteristics.⁸ These three chapters are the “Young Old,” the “Middle Old,” and the “Old Old.”

The Young Old (65-74). The Young Old are newly-retired, still in the prime of life, and generally are still vigorous and active. Primary issues for this stage have to do with how well the previous stages have been completed and whether or not retirement has been adequately prepared for.

While biological changes are fairly predictable, good health continues to be a blessing for many, and retirement brings increased ability to travel and to enjoy life. This is a season in which there are many avenues for usefulness and service, such as short-term mission work both at home and abroad, and virtually limitless opportunities for meaningful mentoring and volunteer work. There may also be opportunities for productive part-time employment, such as consulting in one’s areas of expertise.

If we haven’t done it yet, it becomes crucial in this stage to prepare “final documents” such as wills and powers of attorney and to begin the lengthy process of downsizing and “cleaning house.” These activities provide many opportunities for “life review” and for planning how to “finish well.”

The Middle Old (75-84). By our 75th year, we’ve typically phased out of many of our former activities, but we may very well continue to be self-sufficient and reasonably healthy. While health and financial concerns may increase, the major tasks of this stage are to continue the process of simplifying our lives while also continuing to be meaningfully involved in the nurture and encouragement of the generations following. Our lives begin to accumulate many kinds of loss and grief, though as noted above, these losses can be transformed by grace and Hope.

The Old Old (85+). Those of us who make it to 85 and beyond have phased out of most of our former activities. We’ve now experienced multiple losses of friends and family, and health and mobility issues have become more significant. We’ve most likely yielded our driver’s licenses and may have added a cane or a walker to our daily accoutrements.

Persons 85 and older make up most of the persons in long-term care, and psychospiritual issues such as isolation and suffering become more important in this season, no matter what our living arrangements are. Although challenges increase, this, too, can be a beautiful season of satisfaction and of gratitude, as integrity, wisdom, and faith cause us to lean more and more into the life to come.

⁸ What I’ll post has to do with another look at the developmental needs of older adults.

As the “leaves fall from the trees,” we can see Home more clearly, and we begin to see the faces of our loved ones at the gate. The pursuits that have guided the entire journey—“**A Life that Matters**” and “**Relationships that Last**”—now take on renewed and more robust meaning as our transformation draws nigh.⁹

Bob Buford has written a fascinating book about the trajectories of our lives called *Finishing Well*. The book contains interviews with more than a hundred persons who are nearing the end of life’s race with great spiritual power. As Bob interviewed Baptist philosopher Dallas Willard, the two of them agreed that there are four stages in a life of faithfulness that has spiritual power. These stages are “**struggle**,” “**success**,” “**surrender**,” and “**significance**.”¹⁰

It’s not too difficult to surrender all that we are and have to God when we’re twenty years old and don’t have anything. It’s a lot harder to surrender all that we have and are to God when we’re much older and success has brought us a great deal. My friend, if you’re an older adult, has it happened that “*the cares of this life, the lure of wealth, and the desire for nice things*” have caused the spiritual building of your life to stand half-finished?¹¹ Does the need for a renewed surrender stand between you and a life that is truly significant?

As *The Lord of the Rings*¹² reminded us, stories are never passed down from generation to generation about those who chose the easy way, the known way, the safe way. That’s why Paul, intrepid adventurer that he was, cautioned us to “*Be very careful, then, how you live—not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord’s will is*” (Ephesians 5:15-17).

Jackrabbit starts may look good in a race, but the deciding issue isn’t how we start—it’s how we finish. Our real challenge is in learning the skills, developing the discipline and maintaining the steadfast commitment required to keep on keeping on when the rush of the exciting beginning fades into the fatiguing complexities of life. The important thing is finishing well.

We’re pilgrims on the journey of the narrow road
And those who’ve gone before us line the way,
Cheering on the faithful, encouraging the weary,
Their lives a stirring testament to God's sustaining grace.

Surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses,
Let us run the race not only for the prize,
But as those who’ve gone before us, let us leave to those behind us
The heritage of faithfulness passed on through godly lives.

After all our hopes and dreams have come and gone
And our children sift through all we’ve left behind,
May the clues that they discover and the memories they uncover
Become the light that leads them to the road we each must find.

*Oh may all who come behind us find us faithful!
May the fire of our devotion light their way.*

⁹ If you want a real blessing of gratitude, watch Louie Schwartzberg’s TEDxSF talk: www.youtube.com/embed/gXDMoiEkyuQ

¹⁰ Bob Buford, *Finishing Well: What People Who REALLY Live Do Differently!* (Nashville: Integrity, 2004), p. 14.

¹¹ See Mark 4:16-19.

¹² J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings* (New York: Ballantine, 1965); films directed by Peter Jackson.

*May the footprints that we leave lead them to believe,
And the lives we live inspire them to obey.
Oh may all who come behind us find us faithful!*¹³

And so we end as we began, with Paul's beautiful prayer for the Ephesians:

*I pray that out of his glorious riches [God] may strengthen you with power through his **Spirit** in your inner being, so that **Christ** may dwell in your hearts through faith. And I pray that you, being rooted and established in love, may have power, together with all the Lord's holy people, to grasp how wide and long and high and deep is the love of Christ, and to know this love that surpasses knowledge—that you may be filled to the measure of all the fullness of God (Ephesians 3:16-19).*

¹³ *Find Us Faithful*, words and music by Steve Green.