

May 11, 2019

Ecclesiastes 12:1-8

Ockenga Fellows Retreat 3: Aging

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Today I'm continuing to reflect on what I'm learning at the **Gordon-Conwell Ockenga Fellows** retreats. Last time I talked about death and dying, but today I want to talk about **aging**, about **growing old**. Now obviously I have **more years** than some of you and **less** than others. So I'll do the best I can to **teach** what the Bible has to say about aging. I'm also going to share some of what others who know better than I have to say about it as well as a few personal experiences.

What counts as old or elderly? We don't like being called "old" because it's seen as a **negative**. NPR reports the preferred phrase is "elderly" or "older adults" or just call people by their **names**.¹ I define older adults or the elderly as anyone over the age of 70. Now if you're over 70 and you don't like that, I'm sorry! My **parents** who usually listen to my sermons might have something to say about my definition when they listen to it. The Psalms do say we **typically** get **70** years or **80** if we're strong (Psalm 90:10) so I think it's fair.

But today I'm not really talking to the older or elderly. I actually want to **primarily address** anyone in their **youth**, so teenagers, those in their **20s** or **30s** or anyone who considers themselves to be **youthful**. I'll even include those who call themselves "**young at heart**." I'm including myself here too. Today's message is for us because **today's passage** is for those in their youth. Here's how the first verse goes.

Ecclesiastes 12:1

Remember your Creator
 in the days of your youth,
before the days of trouble come
 and the years approach when you will say,
 "I find no pleasure in them" —

The **book of Ecclesiastes** addresses us in our youthful years. The author, **King Solomon**, wrote Ecclesiastes to be a book of **wisdom** from a more **cynical perspective**. In this book he challenges young people to **remember** their Creator **before they grow old** (aka. "...before the days of trouble come"). Now if you're a **teenager** or in your **20s** or **30s**, growing old is probably the last thing on your mind. If you're 15, you have another **55 more years** before you turn **70**. That's a long time! But **what better time** is there than now to start preparing for old age? You'll be **so ready** (Lord willing) when old age **arrives**.

Today I want to talk about three things **1)** what it's like to grow old (biologically, mentally, emotionally); **2)** how we should treat the elderly (should we respect them or brush them aside?); and **3)** how we should live today knowing one day (Lord willing) we'll grow old. So first...

1) What's it like to grow old?

Now starting in verse 2 Solomon uses **metaphors** (that is **figures of speech, non-literal word pictures**) to describe what the body experiences as it ages.

Ecclesiastes 12:2-8

2 before the sun and the light
 and the moon and the stars grow dark,
 and the clouds return after the rain;

What's he describing here? He's describing a **loss of sight**. Many of us have either heard of or personally experienced **cataracts**, which is a **clouding** of vision. According to the **National Eye Institute (NEI)**, "Most cataracts are related to **aging**. Cataracts are **very common** in **older people**. By **age 80**, more than **half** of all Americans either have a cataract or have had cataract surgery."²

3 when the keepers of the house tremble,
and the strong men stoop,
when the grinders cease because they are few,
and those looking through the windows grow dim;

As you get older your **hands** begin to **tremble** (tremors), and your back begins to **hunch over**. What are your **grinders**? Your **teeth**. Your **gums recede**, your teeth look **longer**, and your teeth even **fall out**. Did you know "By the age of **sixty**, people in an industrialized country like the United States have lost, on average, **a third** of their teeth. After **eighty-five**, almost **40 percent** have no teeth at all." *Being Mortal* (pp. 29-30).³

4 when the doors to the street are closed
and the sound of grinding fades;
when people rise up at the sound of birds,
but all their songs grow faint;

This is talking about a **loss of hearing** (sound fades) and **trouble sleeping** (rise at sound of birds). In **college** I lived with an **older couple**, **Ernest** and **Evelyn**. I think they were in their 80s at the time. Ernest had to wear a hearing aid or he had a lot of trouble hearing. That's pretty typical for many older adults. Likewise, he was always up before me. Many elderly go to **bed later** and **wake up earlier** than most teenagers.

5 when people are afraid of heights (afraid of falling over)
and of dangers in the streets;
when the almond tree blossoms (sometimes they turn white, so maybe this is speaking of hair; but the blossoms can also turn pink - some elderly people do die their hair pink)
and the grasshopper drags itself along (trouble walking)
and desire no longer is stirred. (I think that's talking about a lack of sexual desire)
Then people go to their eternal home
and mourners go about the streets. (That's talking about death and dying)

Have you ever heard an **elderly person** talk about more and more of their **friends dying**? The next two verses, **verses 6-7**, really talk about how **life is poured out** the older you get. Life is coming to an **end**. It can be really **mentally** and **emotionally discouraging**.

6 Remember him—before the silver cord is severed,
and the golden bowl is broken;
before the pitcher is shattered at the spring,
and the wheel broken at the well,
7 and the dust returns to the ground it came from,
and the spirit returns to God who gave it.

Verse 7 is talking about **death**. We **come from dust** and we will return to it (Gen 3:19; Eccle 3:20). So **how might we feel** about all of this, Solomon asks, **especially** if you **don't know the Lord**?

8 "Meaningless! Meaningless!" says the Teacher.
"Everything is meaningless!"

Although I'm not there yet the **sense** we get from the Scriptures and those **we watch** aging around us is that growing old can be **really hard**. Life can feel like it went too fast and what was the point of it all? Is it meaningless? *What's it like to grow old? It's not easy.*

As part of the Ockenga program I read a book by an author named Atul Gawande. His parents are from India. He's a surgeon in Boston and teaches at **Harvard**. In his book *Being Mortal* he describes **what happens** to the body as it ages into these later years. It **doesn't sound pleasant**. He writes (page 30):

Even as our bones and teeth soften, the rest of our body hardens. Blood vessels, joints, the muscle and valves of the heart, and even the lungs pick up substantial deposits of calcium and turn stiff. Under a microscope, the vessels and soft tissues display the same form of calcium that you find in bone. When you reach inside an elderly patient during surgery, the aorta and other major vessels can feel crunchy under your fingers. Research has found that loss of bone density may be an even better predictor of death from atherosclerotic disease than cholesterol levels. As we age, it's as if the calcium seeps out of our skeletons and into our tissues.

To maintain the same volume of blood flow through our narrowed and stiffened blood vessels, the heart has to generate increased pressure. As a result, more than half of us develop hypertension by the age of sixty-five. The heart becomes thicker-walled from having to pump against the pressure, and less able to respond to the demands of exertion. The peak output of the heart therefore decreases steadily from the age of thirty. People become gradually less able to run as far or as fast as they used to or to climb a flight of stairs without becoming short of breath.

As the heart muscle thickens, muscle elsewhere thins. Around age forty, one begins to lose muscle mass and power. By age eighty, one has lost between a quarter and a half of one's muscle weight.⁴

What's it like to grow old? It's not easy. It's hard on our **biology** and also **mentally** and **emotionally**. So **how should we treat** people who are much older than us? Should we **cart** them off to **nursing homes**? Ernest and Evelyn didn't have **smart phones**. Should we **ignore** them because they're **irrelevant**?

2) How should we treat the elderly?

The **Bible** is **very clear** that we are to treat **older adults** with **respect** and **honor**. The **fifth commandment** tells us to honor our **parents**, our **moms** and **dads**. Not just when they're young but elderly too.

Exodus 20:12

"Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you. (NIV)

The **book of Proverbs**, another book full of **God's wisdom for everyday life**, says there's something special about the elderly—that there's **a kind of glory** about them.

Proverbs 16:31

Gray hair is a crown of splendor;
it is attained in the way of righteousness. (NIV)

That **doesn't mean** that everyone who has gray hair is **good** but that gray or white hair **may be a sign** of a life of **wisdom** and **obedience to God**. Another book **full of wisdom** born out of **trial** is from the man Job.

Job 12:12

Is not wisdom found among the aged?
Does not long life bring understanding? (NIV)

Job is saying that those who have seen a lot of years, and made it through, have something to offer us, **wisdom** (Deut 32:7). He's saying they deserve our attention. One way we can respect the elderly is by **listening** to their **stories** and **advice**. This is one of the reasons I've gotten coaching from some **older guys**. **The more gray hair the better**. I want your **years of experience** and **input** so that I don't have to make the same mistakes you've made.

This also means just caring about what they have to offer. There's three women—**Barb, Mary, and G'ma Joyce**—who are in their 80s and 90s back in my **hometown** of **Estes Park Colorado** that I still send **email prayer requests** to. When I was considering joining the **military** out of college I asked them to **pray** for me and they did and I didn't end up joining. They've continued to pray for me and encourage me.

I also go to my parents for their wisdom. They have a lot of it to offer. One of the ways we can show respect to our elders and embrace the concept of aging is by **celebrating age**. When you turn 50, celebrate 50, not 29. It's a **major accomplishment**. When we pretend to not grow older we **imply** that aging is **bad**, but it's not. The side-effects may be bad but age itself is **something to celebrate**.

How might God be calling you personally to be in relationship with the Elderly? When I lived with **Ernest** and **Evelyn** it gave me a chance to be in relationship with them. I mowed their **lawn, vacuumed**, and got **free rent**, but I also ate **dinner** with them sometimes and **talked** with them. Again during seminary I lived with another older lady named Jane. But sometimes we can **fail to honor** the elderly like we should. Jane had an **allergy** to **perfumes** and **scents**. I wasn't supposed to have **scented deodorant** or **shampoo**, and you know what, **I didn't listen. I didn't take her seriously**. Was it because she was old? It was so serious she had her **doctor** write me a note about her **sensitivities**. **I wasn't as thoughtful** as I should have been. We need to listen to the elderly, we need to care what they think. **Jane** loved me too. I performed a **funeral** for her **cat** but I could have done a **better job respecting her**. **If you're Elderly**, how might God be calling you to **be in relationship** with **teenagers** and those **younger** than you? How can you show them respect?

How might God be calling us corporately to be in relationship with the Elderly? If we've been ignoring them so we could focus on others I think it's time for us to **repent** of this and begin to treat them as the **valuable** and **worthwhile** people they are. Both the young and the old are equally made in the image of God.

God does seem to be doing something at Cornerstone to reach out to the elderly. When I came back from this **Ockenga retreat** on **healthcare** and **aging** I interviewed the director of the **Housing Authority** and out of that we put up **Rides for Residents** posters at their facilities to give a ride to church to anyone who wants one. We **haven't** had any **takers** yet but God still seems to be working. Not long after this my wife Monica's previous boss before Bradford Christian Academy, a **non-profit called Bridges Together**, called Monica and asked her if she would be willing to **apply** for a **grant** to **run an intergenerational program connecting older adults with kids**, a program that she's familiar with and has run before. Maybe just maybe we can have some of our church kids get to know some of the older adults at the Housing Authority and some of us who have a few years can come help too. Or maybe we can run **Christianity Explored** there or the Lord will give us some other opportunity.

God has given us **such a gift** through the **elderly**. They're just as valuable as anyone else. **How should we treat the elderly? With respect, care, and by being in relationship with them**. And finally...

3) How should we live today knowing one day (Lord willing) we'll grow old?

I actually want to go back to the **first verse**.

Ecclesiastes 12:1a

Remember your Creator

in the days of your youth... (NIV)

God **invites** us to be in **relationship** with **him** because if he's **our Creator** he knows how to **walk** through **every part** of life the right way, even aging. This doesn't mean it will be **easy**. When God originally created **humankind** (**Adam and Eve** in the garden) he didn't make it so that **we'd fall apart** like we do today. **People disobeyed God** by **choosing a piece of fruit** instead of him and that **messed** everything up. Now aging feels more like a **curse** than a **blessing**. That's not how it's supposed to be. **We are supposed to grow old** without our **teeth** falling out and **veins** hardening. That's a result of the **fall**, a **consequence** of our sin.

God has **solved** the problem of **dying** from **old age**. He did it by sending his son **Christ Jesus** into this world to **take on our sin**. But in order to **redeem** our lives his life was **cut short**. **He died young so that** you and I can **live forever with God**. He **gave up his old age** so that you and I won't be **stopped** by our old age.

But the good news is that **death only stopped him briefly**. We just celebrated Christ's resurrection at **Easter** —that he **rose from the grave conquering sin and death** and any who **repent of their sins** and **believe in Jesus** will **receive eternal life**. That means that one day although we may feel the affects of sin and growing old, and we may even die from it, **death won't have the last word**. *How should we live today knowing that one day (Lord willing) we'll grow old? Have a relationship with Christ Jesus. He has conquered death and freely offers you eternal life.*

When I was **in college my roommate died**. M roommate was in her **late 70s** and had **dementia**. After a year of living with Ernest and Evelyn, at the beginning of my **senior year**, **Evelyn died**. **Her old age killed her**. I was one of the **pole bearers carrying her casket** to her grave. But **she knew Jesus Christ**. That means **death isn't the end of her story**. That means **old age and dementia won't have the final word**. She **remembered** her **Creator** in the days of her **youth**, but also in her **mid-life**, and in her **elder years**, and **now she's with Jesus**, and **one day she'll be resurrected from the grave** and **given her old body back**, but it will be **brand new**, as good as ever. Ernest **just died** a couple months ago and although I couldn't be there **I wrote the eulogy for his funeral** which his grandson read. I look forward to one day being in relationship with them both either in **heaven** or at the **resurrection**. Until then I'm grateful I got to be **in relationship** with them, to **love them**, and **respect them**, and I want to **challenge** us **all** and **as a church to go out and find our Ernests and our Evelyns and go and love them and be in relationship with them**. Let me pray.

Pastor Jonathan Romig preached this message at Cornerstone Congregational Church. You can download a PDF copy of this sermon above, which includes further endnotes and references. Click to listen to [sermons](#) or to read [our story](#).⁵

¹ Times Have Changed; What Should We Call 'Old People' ? NPR Radio. Published 2/6/2019. <https://www.npr.org/2016/02/06/465819152/times-have-changed-what-should-we-call-old-people> Accessed 5/7/2019.

² Facts About Cataract. National Eye Institute (NEI). Last reviewed September 2015. https://nei.nih.gov/health/cataract/cataract_facts Accessed May 9th, 2019.

³ Gawande, Atul. Being Mortal (pp. 29-30). Henry Holt and Co.. Kindle Edition.

⁴ Gawande, Atul. Being Mortal (p. 30). Henry Holt and Co.. Kindle Edition.

⁵ All Scriptures are quoted from the New International Version (NIV®) unless otherwise noted.