

Lecture 18
"Old Age and Mortality"
Psalms 39, 49, 71, 90

I'd like to ask you a question and have a show of hands. **How many of you honestly think Jesus Christ will return in your lifetime?** I had just been invited to my first Bible study as a new Christian back in the late 1970's when I heard that question asked for the first time. My neighbor, Doris, raised her hand with conviction. I was surprised because, frankly, His Second Coming did not seem very real or near to me at all.

Two things are very clear: First, if He is indeed coming within our lifetime, we're running out of time to evangelize and witness. (That thought should create a sense of urgency in each one who raised their hand.) Second, if the Lord tarries . . . we will all face the prospect of old age and physical death.

God has given me considerable experience in the last 35 plus years concerning old age and mortality. In fact when we did this series back in 1986 it was my own personal year of "Job's trials" when it seemed everything that could happen — did happen that year to our family . . . cancer and its treatments, surgeries, birth, death, suicide attempts, mental illness, divorce, marriage, blended families, homosexuality revealed, robbery, eviction, tax audits, settling estates . . . and a great deal of the fallout fell on my shoulders. I tell you true that without God's faithfulness and mercy and the help of my brothers and sisters in Christ here at Eastside, I would not have made it.

Pat Merold was doing the teaching then, and my primary responsibility was writing these lessons, but then I was asked to do this particular lecture. It was a personal practical lecture then and it will be again . . . because I speak from my own experiences with aging and death. Let me share a little bit about that.

My own mother died when I was ten. My Dad, Al, was left with two small girls and married hastily then divorced. He was remarried to Thelma who was my stepmother for thirty years. They used to work here at Eastside constantly. Daddy was the handyman/fix-all person at the church, and Thelma worked in the nursery taking care of the little babies.

Thelma died from cancer and four months later my Dad married Lucille, a lifetime friend who had been widowed. Lucille saw Daddy through more than 20 operations including two amputations before he died in 1999. Lucille passed away three years later.

Thelma had a friend, Mabel, who was 75 and needed assistance with paperwork for government assistance, etc. She was the one I had to keep from being evicted. She died a year after Thelma. Chuck's mother was widowed at age 55. She died when her husband died although her body lived on another twenty years — mostly in poor health and lost in past memories of years ago. Chuck's sister, Beverly, entered institutional care when she was 37 and I took care of her and her affairs for 30 years until she died in 2005. Chuck's brother died at age 62. My nephew was found dead at age 30 and two weeks later my sister's husband suffered a stroke and paralysis. He was in a wheelchair the rest of his life. And many of you know that my dear friend, Dick,

developed Alzheimer's disease and I've been taking care of him and attending to his affairs for the past five years. He died at age 81 this past Christmas Eve.

I tell you this so you will appreciate that I know about problems that face the aged and about mortality . . . death.

We all know God has a plan for our lives and aging is a part of God's design. Long life is a gift from God, full of opportunity, growth and joy for those who have the eyes to see it from God's perspective. Aging is not a problem to be solved . . . although too many of us (especially care-givers) think of it with a problem-solving mentality – wanting to know about finances, nursing homes, home health care, etc. But God is able to show us the way in those matters. **Old age is meant to bring glory to God.**

Even David in Psalm 71:18 of today's lesson says, "Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, O God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to come." One of the purposes in the aging process is to enable one to properly revise his system of values. How different are the priorities of youth and age. In youth – self is usually the center reflected in possessions, family, and pleasures. The purpose of the passing years, with their joys and sorrows, is to wean one from the self-centeredness. Getting older is not getting better unless it is delivering one from self-love. Growing older is intended to make one more gentle, more thoughtful, more considerate, more gracious and sympathetic, less childish and demanding.

Aging, therefore, is not just something to be endured as an unfortunate but unavoidable evil. When properly accepted, it may constitute God's finishing school for character education and enrichment before entering eternity. As has often been pointed out, the best way to be a sweet old person is to be a sweet young person. We need to develop our attitudes and character now – whatever age we are.

Traditionally, age 65 and above has been defined as elderly. (Since I turn 70 on Sunday, that I'm sure that's much too young.) Anyway, today the politically correct term is "senior." In 2010, 40 million Americans will fit that category (about 13.8% of the population). And of the 40 million, 5.7 million will be 85 plus.

Did you know that 70% of all voters are over 65 and 77% of the country's assets are held by people over 55? Some people think almost all elderly people live in retirement or nursing homes. However, 63% live in families, 31% live alone and only 6% live in care facilities.

There is no denying that there are problems associated with advancing age.

1. Women live longer than men statistically and there are many widows in America.
2. Many individuals are forced to live on reduced incomes.
3. There are psychological problems: loss of self-esteem; loss of memory; narrowing of interests; physical weakness; loss of physical attractiveness; loss of friends and relatives and often fear of approaching death.
4. There are physical problems: decreased vision, hearing, strength; increase in arthritis and decline in the function of internal organs.
5. There are mental problems: depression, senility, drug dependency.

Recently one of my favorite actresses, Jean Simmons, passed away. Years ago I saw her in a program on KCET. It was a story of a widowed lady who went to visit her bedridden aunt and decided to stay on and care for her. The older woman was quiet and seemingly unresponsive. After a while she confessed that if she was too active or talkative, the former nurse would give her pills to quiet her. So to avoid being forced to take these drugs, she just kept quiet. With time, however, the aunt responded to Jean Simmons love and got out of bed, dressed and began to live again.

This points out another problem area and that's abuse of the elderly. It's something we do not like to think even exists, but it happens more often than we'd like to admit.

I had a book in my library by Pat Moore titled Disguised. Pat Moore was a 26-year-old woman studying gerontology who disguised herself with the help of elaborate professional makeup to look like an 85-year-old woman. She made several observations as she was in costume:

- 1) People immediately began to yell at her assuming that because she was old, she was deaf.
- 2) People were reluctant to engage her in conversation displaying a fear that she "might be too much trouble" to become involved with.
- 3) She was often treated rudely in public. She was walking with a cane and was often bumped with no apology or acknowledgment. Clerks were impatient when she fumbled with her coin purse; people cut in front of her in a line (after all, old people have plenty of time, right?); she was even shortchanged on purpose by a clerk counting on failing eyesight.
- 4) She experienced a general loss of self-esteem. Many treated her like a non-person. She had more than one old woman disguise. Perhaps, not surprisingly, she was given considerably more respect when she dressed as a wealthy woman than when she dressed as a "bag lady."

Not all of Pat Moore's book was on the negative side. These are two of the positive statements she had to make:

"There is only one variable which in my experience is a reliable predictor of how one might treat his or her aging neighbor and it is that deeply religious people tend to be more aware and caring of the needs of older people."

"I was immediately impressed by the network of mutual support which I found among the elderly people I met."

I had a delightful great-aunt Cloe who lived to be 98. She was vibrant – alive – a real kick! She wanted to go to Hawaii before she died and was looking for someone to go with her. Sadly, she commented, "It's too bad no one wants to go . . . I'm a lot of fun! They don't know what they're missing." Well, things didn't work out to take her to Hawaii, but Chuck and I did take her with us one year to a family reunion in Kansas. We flew – stayed a week – and had a blast! She made another comment that really touched my heart. She said, "I just want somebody to love me." I want to remind you of a concept that should be really important to all of us as Christians . . . the concept of being a stretcher-bearer.

Remember the story in Mark 2:1-12 where four friends let the man on the stretcher down through the roof to Jesus' feet? The healing took place not primarily because of the man on the stretcher, nor because Jesus had the power to heal, but the healing took place because of the faith, encouragement and support of the man's friends.

"Is anyone really listening? Does anyone really care for me?" Many seniors are asking that question today. They need a stretcher-bearer. Today many Christians refuse to reach out **for** help and surround themselves with guilt concerning their degree of faith. We know that with God we should be able to handle anything. But God chooses to work through people. But more tragic is the voice of those who do cry out and no one answers.

There is great need in aging but also great opportunity. Author Werner Granendorf thinks there are two approaches to aging . . . the TIC and TAC approaches.

TIC - The Inactive Calendar of all zeros and the TAC approach - The Active Calendar full of x's marking things to do and places to go.

There is no need to rehearse the deeds done by those in God's spiritual hall of fame in Hebrews 11 – over half were done by people over 65. Age is not an excuse to stop being involved in life and producing in the kingdom of God. Individuals need purpose and activity. The mature years provide excellent opportunity to get to know God more fully through Bible study and personal prayer and to volunteer. Our lives should witness to our children and our grandchildren about the love of Jesus Christ. We should serve in church; help others in any way we can think of and be real prayer warriors to advance the kingdom of God. Younger Christians truly are encouraged and motivated by older Christians who finish well.

Do you have an older person in your life right now? I'd like to share a few practical suggestions with you:

- 1) They often complain "no one asks me anything anymore." Ask! What a treasure of wisdom there is to tap. If you've been in this Bible study very long, you really appreciate the wisdom in not segregating our groups by age. Those older need the encouragement and enthusiasm of the younger members, and the younger need the wisdom contributed by those older that help our spiritual growth.
- 2) In conversation, remembering is great, but falling into the trap of living in the past is too easy. Encourage current events, future plans, group activities, having a positive outlook. Having the TAC approach – The Totally Active Calendar.
- 3) Can you help them with insurance or medical or tax forms? I spent hours at Social Security and Medicare offices trying to help Mabel and Beverly with their deserved benefits, and hours filling out insurance forms for Thelma and Lucille. It drove me nuts trying to untangle regulations and forms. What a blessing to a senior if you could help out! Have they ever been to a financial planning seminar?
- 4) On gift occasions – give something really useful . . . stamps, boxes of cards (birthday, all occasion), gift-wrap, certificates to restaurants / movies, grocery stores, the video store, the car wash or beauty shop.

Speaking of shopping that's one chore sometimes hard on older people. Could you volunteer to do some gift shopping for them so they don't always have to just "put

money in a card.” You might even offer to wrap it and take it to the post office. Ever thought of helping address Christmas cards?

5) When you call (and do call), let the phone ring extra long to allow plenty of time for them to move. Do they need an extension?

6) Can you help with doctor appointments or prescription refills?

7) Beverly liked to have her nails painted but her hands were too shaky to do them herself. I have a friend, Connie Jones. She went to the hospital on several occasions to cut my dad’s hair and Beverly’s hair when they were in for extended periods of time. I really appreciated that.

Obviously there are many more ways to express a servant’s heart. Aging can be a painful process . . . it can be a beautiful one. Maybe you could keep these five thoughts in mind:

1) Live realistically 2) Give generously 3) Adapt willingly 4) Trust fearlessly 5) Rejoice daily. There is no rule like the golden rule . . . do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

Well, before we leave the subject of the aging process, I want to declare to you that even though I’m bucking being considered “aged,” maybe the following little poem is all too true for me:

Some may call me obsolete
I don’t blog and I don’t tweet
I prefer to read my news
Over pastry and some juice
If you Google, you won’t find me
My wild oats were sown behind me
I don’t want to learn new stuff
Getting old is hard enough.

Of course, for some of you maybe this one is better:

I mail, I text, I tweet, I blog
I build a Facebook for my dog,
I speak no words, I shake no hands
I am at last a modern man.

Of our four psalms today, only Psalm 71 was actually about aging with David vowing to declare God’s righteousness with praise until the end of his days. Psalms 39, 49 and 90 deal more with the subject of mortality.



Many of us feel uncomfortable with the subject of death and yet like life itself, it is under God’s control. We can’t rewrite the rules of life. For every entrance there is an exit. It’s like when we go to the airport to see our friend go . . . someone on the other end is happy they’re coming.

God instituted the inevitable, regular process of death. Now when a man dies, he goes the “way of all flesh” (Joshua 23:14). Death is understood as having a painful impact on people, yet in addition to death’s negative qualities, Scripture associates

many positive qualities in eternity such as joy, relief from misery and reunion, for example.

Concerning what happens at death, the Bible teaches that God allows two destinies for people – heaven or hell. There is no biblical support for a single destiny for the human race. There is also no biblical support for a three-way middle ground destiny where people are offered a second chance to purge their wrongs and ascend to heaven. It is only through genuine faith in the atoning sacrifice of Christ's blood as payment for our sin, that we secure the much needed forgiveness that permits us to spend eternity with God in heaven.

John 5:24 Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, whoever hears My words and believed Him who sent me has eternal life and will not be condemned; he has crossed over from death to life."

Romans 6:23 "For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Romans 10:9 "If you confess with your mouth Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved."

When you accept Jesus as Lord and Savior, eternal life begins. While it's true this physical body will die, at death our spirits go into the very presence of God. "To be absent from the body is to be at home with the Lord," wrote Paul in 2 Corinthians 5:8. When Christ comes again according to 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18 "the dead in Christ will rise first. After that we who are alive will be caught up with them in the clouds to meet the Lord in the air and so will be with the Lord forevermore." That's called the Rapture – instant change without death.

In heaven, we will be given resurrection bodies to fit us for living in eternity. 1 Corinthians 15:42 "The body that is sown perishable is raised imperishable; sown in dishonor and weakness is raised in glory and power; sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body."

Woody Allen has a famous comment, "I'm not afraid to die. I just don't want to be there when it happens." To a certain extent that's the part we're fearful of, isn't it? Even Jesus resisted it in His last hours in Gethsemane. A Gethsemane experience is something personal for each of us. It is what I must face in life alone. As a Christian you can be alone physically, but you are never alone spiritually. The Spirit of God lives in you (1 Corinthians 3:16) and is your Comforter (John 14:26) now and at the time of death.

Knowing what we do about life and heaven, most of us do not fear death as much as we fear dying. It is the dying that hurts and humiliates and separates and destroys. It's dying that makes it hard to talk about death. Nevertheless, our loving God has promised us grace for every circumstance in life, which means He promises us dying grace . . . and when we need it, that's just what we'll have.

I sincerely believe what disheartens people when going through a Gethsemane place is wondering if anyone cares.

Does anyone care that someone dear to me is ill or dying or that I myself have a terminal illness? I want to urge you to become the stretcher-bearer we spoke of earlier. All of us experience the death of someone dear . . . a spouse, a child, a parent,

grandparents, friends. Any of these events puts us flat on the stretcher and we definitely need supportive people around us. There will be those moments in our lives when each one of us is on the stretcher, other times we can carry a handle for someone else.

One of the most common reactions we feel when confronted with death or dying is "I don't know what to say" at times like that. Lauren Briggs had a book titled What You Can Say When You Don't Know What to Say. Here are just a few of her suggestions:

1. Respond quickly with a call, a card or a visit.
2. Offer simple understanding statements such as, "I feel for you during this difficult time." "I share your feeling of loss." "This must be very hard for you." "I wish I could take the hurt away." Comments like this let the person know you acknowledge their pain and it's okay for them to feel that way.
3. Give spiritual encouragement from your heart and if you can maybe include Bible verses that have comforted you at a difficult time.
4. Carefully consider what you can and would like to do. Use your gifts and talents to help. Your willing spirit will minister to those who hurt.
5. Indicate your love by saying, "I really feel awkward because I'm not sure what to say, what you need, or how to help you, but I want you to know I love you. I'm praying for you and I'm available."

Miss Briggs book also had some things not to say like, "He's so much better off now." "I know someone who had--or I had the same thing." (focusing on your story) "You were lucky to have him as long as you did." Or, "It must be such a relief now that it's over." **Lord, instruct our tongues to be sensitive when people are hurting!**

There is so much that can be said about suffering, the seeming injustice of sudden death by accident, homicide, etc. I can't answer all the "why's" we all have. We just have to accept the fact that God is in control and death is not the end.

Our greatest comfort concerning death comes in knowing that Jesus Christ has experienced death already and will be with us when we die. We may shrink at first from fear of the unknown, but we can have ultimate confidence that Christ has gone before us. He knows the way. . . He Is the Way . . . and He will accompany us through the valley of the shadow of death into the light of eternity.

Every time you study Scripture you see something new. This is what I learned from the Scriptures in this week's lesson:

Psalm 39:4 "Show me, O Lord, my life's end and the number of my days; let me know how fleeting is my life."

●Each day is a gift from God—Thank Him for it and glorify Him in it.

Psalm 49:15 "But God will redeem my soul from the grave; he will surely take me to himself."

●Each promise from God is true—Thank Him for it and glorify Him because of it.

Psalm 71:15 *"My mouth will tell of your righteousness, of your salvation all day long, though I know not its measure."*

•Each day God makes opportunities—Thank Him for them and glorify Him with faithful witness.

Psalm 90:12 *"Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."*

•Each life has a purpose designed by God—Thank Him for it and use the wisdom He gives every day of our life to bring glory to Him.

Let's pray. Father, You've given us the gift of life and the promise of eternal life. We do thank You and praise You and ask that you bless us with joy and grace and courage as we live out our days. In Jesus' name. Amen