

“A Psalm for Growing Older”
Psalm 71 (NRSV)

Robert Browning, the famous Victorian English poet, probably wrote the following lines when he was in his early 50s, just a year or so after his beloved wife, also a gifted poet, Elizabeth Barrett Browning, had died, in her mid 50s.

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in [God’s] hand
Who [says], ‘A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God: see all, nor be afraid!’
(Rabbi Ben Ezra, i)

One wonders how he could have written such lines after his bereavement. Commentators suggest Browning was writing these lines on behalf of Abraham Ben Ezra, a distinguished twelfth-century Jewish scholar; he was describing things “as he wished them to be,” rather than as he was personally experiencing them. That’s remarkable; I sense Browning was a believer.

Because it’s tough growing older. I’m sure you’ve heard it said that “Growing old is not for sissies”? Most of us know that, in many cases, **advancing age brings all kinds of losses and increasing disabilities.** Often the senior years aren’t all that “golden,” after all; they’re a time when we find out that in many ways we are wearing out and rusting out.

How do we make the most of the advancing years? How should we finish our life’s journey? F. B. Meyer, a British Bible teacher of an earlier century, once wrote, **“I hope my Lord will let the river of my life go flowing fully until the finish.”** Then he added, **“I don’t want it to end in a swamp!”** I like that. Essentially, I think it’s true, no matter what happens to us, that we want to make the best of every year we have. Even as we age, we want to live life to the fullest.

This psalm was written by a saint who wanted life to end well. He realized that advancing age presented its own special dangers and demands, even in the life of a believer.

He knew that **the mature years of life not only created problems, but also revealed them** – problems that are hidden in the heart of everyone during his/her life. The writer is aware that he has been blessed with a godly childhood and youth (71:5-6, 17), so he has an excellent foundation for old age; but he takes nothing for granted.

Translators differ in their approach to this psalm. Some translate verses 9 and 18 as though the writer were **already in his “declining years.”** But our NRSV translates verse 9 as a prayer for God’s presence in old age; and verse 18 as a further plea, “So even to old age and gray hairs, O God do not forsake me.” I think we can safely say, this psalm was written by a believer in middle age, contemplating his future old age. So **it’s actually a psalm for everyone.** Perhaps the psalmist was going through a **“mid-life crisis” as he faced his retirement years down the road.** Many people have shared this same experience, so any encouragement he gives us will certainly be appreciated! This much is true: the crises of life, even of old age, do not make us; they show us of what we are already made.

You will also have noted that three times in Psalm 71 the writer used the phrase, **“all day long”** (71:8, 15, 24). One thing we have to do, whether we are young or old, is to **learn to live one day at a time**, to depend upon our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ the entire day: morning, noon and night. If we try to carry the mistakes of yesterday or the worries of tomorrow into today, we will only turn today into defeat. “So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today” (Matt. 7:34). “As your days [go], so is your strength” (Deut. 33:25).

It is also worth noting that **this phrase, “all day long,” divides the psalm into three stanzas;** and in each of the stanzas, the writer shares a wonderful assurance about God that should encourage us in our old age.

1. God will protect us (71:1-8).

Whether we like it or not, for most people, **the “mature years” are years of growing helplessness.** This doesn’t mean that everyone suddenly falls apart! We are all “fearfully and wonderfully made” (Ps. 139:14), but we are all different. Some of God’s **“senior saints”** are remarkably strong and seem to suffer no physical or mental decline. I think of my 92 and a half year old mother, or Nell Haagen, who is 99 today.

But for the most part, each of us slowly begins to discover that **the demands are greater than the supply**. A friend told me that he had reached **the metallic age**: “I have silver in my hair, gold in my teeth, iron in my vitamin pills, and lead in my shoes!”

As we grow older, we have many fears. Will we have sufficient funds to pay all our bills? Who will take care of us if we have a fall or become seriously ill? Is it safe to live alone? What if we have to go to a long-term care facility? Though some of **our “enemies”** are imaginary, older age does bring with it some serious problems that cannot be avoided.

Although in a different culture and context, these might not have been the exact fears of the psalmist, certainly, **he knew that in the vulnerable position of old age he could be “put to shame”** (71:1). That was his greatest concern. **He wanted to finish well**. He wanted to end out his days to the glory of God. I heard one believer pray, “Lord deliver me from being a mean old so-and-so.” That’s a good prayer. Someone else has appropriately prayed, “As I grow into old age, Lord, I want to become mellow, not rotten; sweet, not sour.”

The psalmist knew he could never depend upon his own righteousness. He knew he needed **God’s righteousness** to “deliver” him and to “rescue” him (71:2). Therefore he prayed that God would protect him and be to him “a rock of refuge, a strong fortress” (71:3) to save him. That doesn’t mean that he wanted to run and hide and escape life. Rather, he needed God to keep strong; he needed God as his “refuge and strength” (Ps. 46:1), God as his salvation, so that he might be able to face whatever life brought him, courageously, as he sought to glorify God in all that he did.

Further, **the psalmist was well aware that “wicked,” “unjust” and “cruel” people could take advantage of him** (71:4). So he needed **God’s – and other people’s -- protection** in a very real way. I loved the story in the local newspaper this past week about an Abbotsford citizen who followed a purse-snatcher who shoved an old lady to the ground to take her purse, keeping the police informed with his cell-phone, so that the jerk was finally caught. God is on the side of the defenceless (Ps. 59:1; 82:3).

Mind you, the assurance of God’s protection is not something that we automatically know and believe. **The writer of this psalm got an early start when it came to putting his trust in God**.

For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord, from my youth.
 Upon you I have leaned from my birth; it was you who took me from
 my mother's womb. (71:6a)

Where did he learn such faith, I wonder? No doubt from his mother, at home. Like Timothy, the writer of this psalm was privileged to be born into **a home where God was honoured and his Word was taught and trusted** (2 Tim. 1:5). We don't usually lay the foundations of our faith in our later years; we must learn them in childhood and youth. This doesn't mean that an older person cannot come to faith. It is never too late to come to know and serve God. But the time to start sowing the seed for a "late harvest" of blessing is when we are in our younger years. I'm sure I've reminded you before that when we get older **it is long-term memory that stays with us the longest**. So work on memorizing Scripture now!

Because the psalmist continually resorted to the Lord (71:1-5), he was able to practice **continual praise** (71:6b). Truth be told, there is a tendency for some older people to become critical and to spend a great deal of time complaining. But **this psalm is saturated with praise** (71:6, 8, 14-16, 22). And this isn't occasional, intermittent praise; it is continual praise.

My mouth is filled with your praise, and with your glory all day long.
 (71:8)

As we abide in Christ Jesus, trust him, and depend upon his grace, we will always have **something to sing about**. Even if all the old familiar hymns and songs have to be adapted a little with such phrases as:

"Just a slower walk with Thee"
 "It is well with my soul, but my knees hurt"
 "Nobody knows the trouble I have seeing"
 "Precious Lord, take my hand and help me up"
 "Count your many birthdays, count them one by one"
 "Go tell it on the mountain but speak up"

As we enter into our mature years, we need not fear because God will protect us. He will be our shelter in the storms of life, our fortress in the battles of life. As we continually abide in him, he will strengthen us and enable us to praise him. The "wicked," "unjust" and "cruel" may accuse, threaten and attack us, but God will surround us and sustain us. He will not

always prevent trouble, but he will protect us in trouble and eventually bring us out better than when we went in.

2. **God will be with us** (71:9-15).

Loneliness is a major problem for many in their “golden years.”

Knowing Jesus Christ and experiencing his presence will help.

As we grow older, friends and family either move away or die, and sometimes we, too, must relocate, and that means pulling up roots and being transplanted. Sometimes those who ought to care the most pay the least attention to us. Not everybody can afford to live in a classy retirement home where staff experts and volunteers plan interesting activities where residents can get to know other people. Not everybody is social after their loved ones have gone.

The burden of the psalmist’s prayer is **that God would stay with him** during his declining years. “Do not cast me off in the time of old age; do not forsake me when my strength is spent” (71:9). I know that many older people do sometimes feel like **cast-offs**. I am glad that we mitigate against that by providing a number of opportunities for older people to gather together and make friends. Further, I know that our ministry of visiting in the long-term care facilities of our city is a blessing to many.

It’s when we feel lonely and left out that we are most susceptible to the attacks of the adversary, the enemy of our souls. We start to feel sorry for ourselves, and this only makes us more critical of others (who may or may not be thinking of us.) **Self pity** is a terrible weapon in the hand of Satan.

We don’t know who **the specific enemies of the psalmist** were. They were certainly a discouraging lot, saying, “Pursue and seize that person whom God has forsaken, for there is no one to deliver” (71:11). Perhaps they wanted him to “shuffle off this mortal coil” as soon as possible so that they could get at his possessions (71:4). We get the impression that they were spreading lies about the psalmist, trying to bring him to disgrace (71:1, 13a). They were full of accusation and, clearly, trying to hurt the psalmist (71:13).

He was too weak to fight them himself – he admitted his “strength [was] spent” (71:9), so he turns them over to the Lord. **He knows God will be with him**, no matter what they might bring against him. However, one of the problems of old age is **impatience**. The older we get, the more difficult

it is to wait, so his prayer is desperate: “O God, do not be far from me; O my God, make haste to help me!” (71:12b). That is, “Help me, but do it now!” Nevertheless, as a believer, **he not only continues to praise God (71:6), but he also continues to hope in God (71:14)**. He places his trust in God, despite some delay and disappointment in obtaining help. He is sure God will meet his needs. That’s the stance of a believer.

So as you face each day alone, say aloud, **“Jesus, I know you are here.”** Tell him what’s happening during your day. And, at night, stretch out your hand in the darkness, and say, “Jesus I know you are with me. Good night.”

At Christmas 1939, when all of Europe faced the dark days of the winter and the Second World War, **King George VI**, Queen Elizabeth II’s father, resurrected a tradition his father had launched: a Christmas message to all the inhabitants of the Empire. The first speech would go on to become famous. For King George VI, not usually a compelling speaker, inspired and reassured his people by quoting a poem (mind you, without credit to its author, **Minnie Louise Haskins**): “I said to the man at the gate of the year, ‘Give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.’ And he replied, ‘Go out into the darkness, and put your hand into the hand of God. That shall be better than light, and safer than a known way.’”

So far the two assurances we have discussed in this psalm center on our needs and feelings. Yet if we aren’t careful, attention to these two will leave us quite self-centered. That’s why the psalmist added a third, assurance.

3. **God will uses us to encourage others (71:16-24).**

The emphasis in this section is on **the “blessed assurance” believers have in their faith and their desire and ability to share it with others**. The psalmist is very concerned to make sure that the next generation will know and experience what he knows. God doesn’t simply bless us that we might enjoy his goodness; he blesses us so that, in turn, we may be a blessing to others. That is what God told Abraham long ago – “I will bless you ... and you shall be a blessing to others” (Gen. 12:2) -- and that is what God still expects of believers today.

So the psalmist boldly declares:

O God, from my youth you have taught me,

and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.
 So even to old age and gray hairs do not forsake me,
 until I proclaim your might to all the generations to come.
 (71:17-18a)

There is no talk here, as some oldsters are wont to do, **“I’ve done my share; now let somebody else do the job.”** No, there is always something more to learn and to share. True, older folks need to make room for younger leaders in church. But seniors saints can also make amazing contributions to their church and community. Just think of what many passionate oldsters in the Old Testament, like Abraham, Moses and Caleb, did to inspire their people. When “the elders of the land” glorify God in their lives, there is tremendous encouragement to the church and the community.

So the psalmist celebrates God’s accomplishments of the past: “Your power and your righteousness, O God reach to the high heavens. You who have done great things, O God who is like you?” (71:18b-19). He declares that **God has revived him during past “troubles and calamities,”** and will do so again (71:20). He acknowledges that **God will “increase [his] honour, and comfort [him] once again”** (71:21).

Notice also his **emphasis on God’s “righteousness”** (71:16, 19, 24). The longer we walk with God, the clearer we will see his ways and understand his heart. God loves us. God is for us. God saves us. God is with us. A young Christian may be prone to question God and wonder if the Father is really doing the right thing. But a mature senior believer will know that “the Judge of all the earth [will] do what is right (Gen. 18:25). He/she is certain that there are no mistakes in God’s plans.

We encourage others by our walk and witness: “I will come praising the mighty deeds of the Lord God, I will praise your righteousness, yours alone” (71:16). We also encourage others by the way we have come through tough times (71:20-21).

The psalm ends on a **high note of praise and song:**

I will also praise you with the harp for your faithfulness, O my God;
 I will sing praises to you with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel.
 My lips will shout for joy when I sing to you;
 my soul also which you have rescued. (71:22-23)

The psalmist uses his God-given talents to give witness to his faith in God “all day long” (71:24a). His positive take on life will ultimately put those who have tried to harm him to shame and disgrace (71:24b). So, too, you and I can also use whatever gifts we have been given to give testimony to God’s greatness, grace and redemption. That certainly is better than sitting around carping and complaining!

Amen

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