

The Task of Our Later Years Is Testimony

(Psalm 71:18 NIV)

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August 22, 2010

Preaching about old age is a little like preaching about drinking at a Baptist church. No one who hears the sermon is going to admit the sermon is for him. I was at the emergency room with one of my church members who didn't want to tell the nurse her age. "Thirty nine and holding," she said. The nurse asked, "How old would you be if you let go?"

An older woman was filling out an application to move into a retirement village. She was a little nervous answering all the questions about her health for fear they might not let her in. Finally she finished the form, signed it at the bottom and filled out the section where it asked for her current address. When she came to the blank that said ZIP she printed firmly, "Normal for my age."

We all joke about aging, but we know it's no joke. Psalm 71 is the prayer of an old man who is facing difficulty. People are taking advantage of him because he is not as strong as he once was, and he is fighting a fear of being abandoned. He says (verse 5), "You have been my hope, O Sovereign LORD, my confidence since my youth"... "Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone" (v.9). But he keeps coming back to faith and hope in God. Listen to verses 14-17 (NIV): "But as for me, I will always have hope; I will praise you more and more. My mouth will tell of your righteousness, of your salvation all day long... I will come and proclaim your mighty acts, O Sovereign LORD; I will proclaim your righteousness, yours alone. Since my youth, O God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds." That moves me – to hear an old person who knows his strength is gone, who's having a hard time, still talking about how good God is. You know people like that. You know how powerful it is. And that's just the point of this psalm.

I want to focus your attention on verse 18: "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." At this point, when I am old and gray, here is what I pray for, the psalmist says. I don't just ask that you preserve my life, because I know this life is not meant to last forever. I ask for you to stay with me long enough to allow me to give a testimony. Allow me to live long enough to leave a legacy to the next generation, a legacy of faith and hope. I want you to help me, God, but I want you to help me so that I can declare your power to the next generation. I want you to save me, not because I deserve saving, but so I can tell about your might to all who are to come. The psalmist understood that this is the main task of the last part of life: testimony to the faithfulness of God.

Psychologists and psychiatrists have written about developmental tasks we have at various stages of life. Erik Erikson's list is the most famous. He wrote that the task babies face is to learn to trust. Toddlers' job one is autonomy. Preschoolers have to learn initiative and grade-schoolers have to learn industry. The big task of adolescence is identity, while the challenge of young adulthood is to achieve intimacy. In later adulthood, the task is to develop integrity. Erikson said that the choice we face in the last stage of life is between wisdom and despair. That's amazing to me that the alternative to wisdom is not foolishness but despair. The opposite of wisdom is giving up. The task is to find that wisdom you can really believe in, wisdom which will hold your life together as a whole – integrated. You could find a lot of support in the Bible for the idea that the developmental task of adulthood is to choose wisdom as the foundation for integrity.

But it seems to me that there is a developmental task beyond that. Erikson was not yet old when he developed his scheme. What is the task of old age? The Bible suggests that the task of old age is testimony. The work we have left to do when our strength is gone is to bear witness to God's faithfulness to the next generation. Sometimes we try to get our senior adults in church to do work which is better left to younger people. But there is work that no one else can do. It is the work of telling younger people that God can be trusted through all of life. "Jesus led me all the way." Psalm 92:14-15 (NKJV) says, "They shall still bear fruit in old age; they shall be fresh and flourishing, to declare that the LORD is upright; He is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in Him." In Psalm 71 what the old man is concerned with testifying about is the greatness of God. He believes that God is still in charge of this world. He wants young people to understand God's power and might, because young people are prone to thinking either that power is in their own hands or that power is in the hands of the evil. Not so! Thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever. That is the testimony we give in the later years of life. God is our rock and our refuge, a very present help in trouble. No one knows that like an old person. No one else's testimony has as much credibility.

In my fifties, I've been a little irritated by the Robert Browning couplet people quote – "Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be." It sounds awfully Polyanna-ish. Make the rounds with me at the hospital and tell me that the best is yet to be. I can see what is coming. But I went back and read the whole poem. You may remember that these are supposed to be the words of Rabbi Ben Ezra. You may not remember that the rabbi's logic is not based on the idea that the golden years are fun; his logic is that the last of life is good because we can trust the God who made all of life. Listen to it again:

*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 his hand,
Who saith, "A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God:
See all, nor be afraid!"*

Only a senior adult can convincingly tell me to trust God. When some kid tells me to trust God, I can't help but think, "What does he know? Has he suffered enough to know anything? Has he had enough losses to have any wisdom? Has he been wrong enough times to gain any humility? What does he know about frailty and death?" But when a saint in the last chapter of life, with a face that has some character to it, tells me that I can trust God through life's journey, I believe it.

When I was in seminary I didn't know squat. I took a class on death and dying, because I knew I didn't know about death. Most students in the class had never even been to a funeral. One of the assignments was to go to a nursing home and visit with a patient who knew she was dying. I was paired with a very old Polish Catholic lady. I came armed with all my counseling techniques and all my anxiety about death – the most basic anxiety there is. I thought my job was to get this lady to talk about her fear of death, so I could comfort her. I kept trying to prompt her to express her terror. I was an idiot. I discovered she had no fear of death. She was perfectly ready to see Christ face to face. She knew that God is good and his mercy endures forever. My *real* job was to listen to her testimony so that she could comfort *me*. Thankfully, that old lady understood *her* job. *The* task of old age is testimony.

I've learned a lot since then. I've been with so many wonderful believers in their later years. I have to admit that they do not all give testimony; some are full of complaints and bitterness. But most of them are full instead of thankfulness and praise

Several years ago I drove to Nashville to see my mother in the hospital. They had found tumors on both kidneys. One was large and causing her to lose a lot of blood in her urine. They would have to remove the kidney. My mother was 83 and had been suffering from Alzheimer's for the last few years. But something strange had happened – she regained her ability to read and write, and to follow stories. During the days I was with her in the hospital she showed almost no signs of Alzheimer's at all. I don't know how to explain it. My siblings and I had the same thought: that God in his grace must be giving us this little window of clarity just before the end.

On Monday I was alone with my mother in the hospital room. She coughed and woke up, and called me over. "I just want to say 'To God be the glory.' Even if things don't turn out the way we all hope, it will be all right. All will be well. I'll be with the Lord, and it won't be too long before Ernest and I will be together again. I don't want you to be sad. To God be the glory." A little later a doctor came in to check on her. The doctor asked, "How are you feeling?" My mother answered, "I feel fine. I'm not afraid. God gave his only Son so that we wouldn't have to be afraid."

That night my older brother Bill was with me, and Mom decided to give us a sermon. It went on for almost ten minutes, but the gist of it was this: "When I was back in the nursing home I was getting pretty discouraged. I told God I needed something to hold onto. I asked him, 'Please give me a scripture to help me hold on. I'm getting pretty low here. Give me something.' I opened my Bible, and you know what I saw? 'Trust in the Lord with all thine heart and lean not on thine own understanding' (Proverbs 3:5-6 NKJV). See, we're not *supposed* to understand it! We're supposed to trust him. 'In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths.' That's what I want to say to my children now: Trust in the Lord with all your heart. I'm so glad my children all know God. We don't know how this is going to turn out, but if I go to be with the Lord I won't be sad. I just don't want my children to grieve. Everything comes from God's hand, and whatever he gives is good. He's been so good to me. He's always been good to me. He has kept all his promises. He's given Ernest and me more than sixty years together. I can trust that whatever he does next is going to be good."

Mind you, this was a woman who had lived with migraines and depression for decades, who had to give up her missionary calling and start her life over with nothing in her forties, who was placed in a mental hospital for shock treatments, who had a half-dozen miscarriages, who had countless surgeries for ulcers and all manner of problems, and had been living with Alzheimer's for years– and was about to have a kidney removed. But she said, "God has always been good to me." It made me think of the words of Joshua just before he died: (Joshua 23:14 NIV) "Now I am about to go the way of all the earth. You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the LORD your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed."

Later that evening, my younger brother Mark came for a visit. After a while, when there was only light conversation, I said, "Mom, don't you want to give Mark the sermon, too?" And she did! It was like she pushed a button and the tape began to roll, in a condensed version. When Mark and I left the hospital together – this is my brother who was away from the Lord for 20 years and came back (well, he's an Episcopalian, which I guess more or less counts as coming back to the Lord, but I was a little worried about how he'd take all of this) – Mark said to me, "I'm glad you made Mom give me the sermon!" We all need somebody to remind us that God is faithful. We all need somebody who's been through the worst, who is bleeding right before our eyes, who can say, "The Lord is good. His love endures forever. His faithfulness continues through all generations."