



Counseling Families with Aging Relatives

Paul counsels us to “... be patient with them all” as we admonish, encourage, and help (I Thes. 5:14). He also describes love in I Cor. 13:4 as “patient and kind.” Exemplifying this kind of patience is a call to every believer including those with aging relatives whose choices seem unreasonable and without logic. This breakout session will apply biblical principles and wisdom in practical ways to our current context of ministry in an aging population.

Dynamics of Aging Families in an Aging Culture

Assessing the Situation

Population changes: The 65+ demographic is increasing at a healthy (pun intended!) rate (7% by 2045) while those 18 – 64 will decrease by an equal percentage. The disparity will have profound effects on the economy. This economic impact is not only medical but also impacts productivity as a nation. (statistics from the US Census Bureau, 8/14/2008).

Those 90 and older are now the fastest growing age demographic in the United States. The Census Bureau estimates that this group in 1980 represented 2.8 percent of the population, 4.7 percent in 2011, and will represent 10 percent by 2050. The disability and poverty rates climb significantly at the 90 threshold when compared to those in the 65 – 89 category. It is also no surprise that they are mostly widows or widowers (and mostly widowers!).

Can you think of some of the implications of these population changes?

Cultural Changes:

- High divorce rates
- Immorality
- Smaller families, fewer children, aging children
- Grandparents raising grandchildren
- Utilitarian view of people (instead of a “created in God’s image” view)
- Abandonment of Judeo Christian “guard rails” for moral foundations
- Less freedom and more dependence on government programs



- Ageism – no longer are the aged treated with respect (this is “pan” cultural)
- Increasing exploitation of the aging

Can you think of some of the implications of these changes?

Church Culture Changes:

- Inclined toward age segregated ministries (what are the implications of this?)
- Often older church buildings are not accommodating to those with disabilities in general and specifically for the aging
- Demographic targeting of younger families often comes with a lack of intentional ministry to the aging
- If there are senior’s ministries they often are shaped after cultural models of finding meaning and purpose in trivial things
“Your Best Life Now”

Some additional thoughts...

Your aging relatives have probably lived through the *best* years of US History.

The values predominant in the culture of your aging relatives are laced with the poisonous deceit of the Adversary.

Materialism: how many have heard statements like the following ...

“I just want you to be happy”

“At least they have their health”

“I just want you to have it easier or better than I had it”

Man-centered living (instead of a focus on God our creator’s glory)

“Denial of aging” products on every shelf (“you will not surely die!”)



Effects of Naturalistic thinking on Aging

Calvinism and Reformation theology guided early American thinking regarding aging. It was a time that emphasized God’s providence and God’s grace (for those who believed). The span of your life was not a matter of man’s control or science but of God’s perfect plan. Viewed man as a sinner in need of grace. The Victorian Age and Arminian theology controlled much of this era’s perspective on aging. Long life or good quality long life was a matter of your adherence to God’s law. Short life or long life with a poor quality of living was the result of a lack of self-control and sinful living. Culture now views man as a sinner in need of better performance – heaped on guilt for those who failed to live long and well!

The Victorian Age was an easy step to Darwinism, Naturalism, Reason, and Science which left God out of the equation. Long life was a matter of science and medical advances. Early in the 20th century many studies were begun to understand our bodies at the cellular level. The hope was that through these studies man could become immortal. This period also led to such evil as Eugenics leading to the atrocities of Hitler and others. God was now out of the picture!

Today we find the trend is toward “spirituality.” The era of science did not provide immortality nor did it provide answers to the deeper questions of life. Trends in geriatrics today include a longing for a “higher being” as part of the equation for meeting the needs of today’s aging population. Yoga and Zen Buddhism in elderly care facilities to Christian based hospice care all provide ample evidence that this is so.

So what is your story... (your dynamics!)

Trends and statistics are generic – they don’t describe your situation precisely.

What are you experiencing with aging relatives?

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Some of the Heat Your Aging Relatives May be Facing

Increasing awareness of mortality

Onset of debilitating disease, terminal diseases, diseases that affect the mind, lingering diseases

Loneliness – singleness, death of a spouse

Regrets amplified by diminishing time to resolve problems

Multiplied losses (“60’s is a decade of losses” John Piper)

- Loss of income (especially for those 90+)

- Loss of acuity of senses (hearing, sight, feeling, taste, smell)

- Strength & Abilities

- Mobility

- Continence

- Independence

Changes... (with a desire to return to an unreal idealized past)

- In Culture

- In church – music, service times, casual dress

Family ... “[Aging folks face] grieving or exasperation over problems with their extended family, especially adult children and grandchildren.” Art Langdon

Fears

- What will happen if I get Alzheimer’s or dementia (“will I remain sweet?”)

- Lost loved ones die without Christ

- Will I have to endure suffering for a long time?

Ageism

Others...



Biblical Wisdom: Theology of Aging, Your Biblically Defined Roles, Honoring your Relatives

Psalm 71 (ESV) An Aging Psalmist

In you, O LORD, do I take refuge;
let me never be put to shame!
2 In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me;
incline your ear to me, and save me!
3 Be to me a rock of refuge,
to which I may continually come;
you have given the command to save me,
for you are my rock and my fortress.
4 Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked,
from the grasp of the unjust and cruel man.
5 For you, O Lord, are my hope,
my trust, O LORD, from my youth.
6 Upon you I have leaned from before my birth;
you are he who took me from my mother's womb.
My praise is continually of you.
7 I have been as a portent to many,
but you are my strong refuge.
8 My mouth is filled with your praise,
and with your glory all the day.
9 Do not cast me off in the time of old age;
forsake me not when my strength is spent.
10 For my enemies speak concerning me;
those who watch for my life consult together
11 and say, "God has forsaken him;
pursue and seize him,
for there is none to deliver him."
12 O God, be not far from me;
O my God, make haste to help me!
13 May my accusers be put to shame and consumed;
with scorn and disgrace may they be covered
who seek my hurt.
14 But I will hope continually
and will praise you yet more and more.
15 My mouth will tell of your righteous acts,
of your deeds of salvation all the day,
for their number is past my knowledge.
16 With the mighty deeds of the Lord GOD I will come;
I will remind them of your righteousness, yours alone.
17 O God, from my youth you have taught me,

***God is
Trustworthy***

***Confidence and
Trust in God is
Best Begun in
Youth***

***Faithfulness is
Seen Over a
Lifetime***

***Confidence and
Trust in God is
Best Begun in
Youth***



and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.

18 So even to old age and gray hairs,
O God, do not forsake me,

until I proclaim your might to another generation,
your power to all those to come.

19 Your righteousness, O God,
reaches the high heavens.

You who have done great things,
O God, who is like you?

20 You who have made me see many troubles and calamities
will revive me again;
from the depths of the earth
you will bring me up again.

21 You will increase my greatness
and comfort me again.

22 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.

23 My lips will shout for joy,
when I sing praises to you;
my soul also, which you have redeemed.

24 And my tongue will talk of your righteous help all the day long,
for they have been put to shame and disappointed
who sought to do me hurt.



*Life's Trials are
not Outside of
God's
Sovereign Plan*

**Vss. 17 –
21
There is a
Harvest
Coming**



Psalm 92:12-15 (ESV) Living Long for Worship

The righteous flourish like the palm tree

and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.

13 They are planted in the house of the LORD;
they flourish in the courts of our God.

14 **They still bear fruit in old age;**
they are ever full of sap and green,

15 **to declare that the LORD is upright;**
he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.

A picture of vitality and life that expands beyond youthfulness and even beyond old age into an eternity of life – a life which bears fruit.



*Purpose of
bearing fruit in
old age!*

Ecclesiastes 11:5 -12:8 (ESV) Remember your Creator in your Youth – Evil Days are Coming!

In the morning sow your seed, and at evening withhold not your hand, for you do not know which will prosper, this or that, or whether both alike will be good.

7 Light is sweet, and it is pleasant for the eyes to see the sun.

8 So if a person lives many years, let him rejoice in them all; but let him remember that the days of darkness will be many. All that comes is vanity.

9 Rejoice, O young man, in your youth, and let your heart cheer you in the days of your youth. Walk in the ways of your heart and the sight of your eyes. But know that for all these things God will bring you into judgment.

10 Remove vexation from your heart, and put away pain from your body, for youth and the dawn of life are vanity.

12:1 Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, "I have no pleasure in them";
2 before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened and the clouds return after the rain, 3 in the day when the keepers of the house tremble, and the strong men are bent, and the grinders cease because they are few, and those who look through the windows are dimmed, 4 and the doors on the street are shut—when the sound of the grinding is low, and one rises up at the sound of a bird, and all the daughters of song are brought low— 5 they are afraid also of what is high, and terrors are in the way; the almond tree blossoms, the grasshopper drags itself along, and desire fails, because man is going to his eternal home, and the mourners go about the streets— 6 before the silver cord is snapped, or the golden bowl is broken, or the



pitcher is shattered at the fountain, or the wheel broken at the cistern, 7 and the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. 8 Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher; all is vanity.

Live with Your Mortality in View (vss. 7 – 10)

Remember God while you Are Young! (vs. 12:1)

Why...

Evil Days Are Coming – *the results of bodily deterioration*(vss. 2 – 8)

Verse 2 – a darkening – marching toward the darkness of death

Verse 3 & 4 – physical faculties begin to fail

Keepers of the house – perhaps arms

Strong men are bent – loss of strength, particularly in the legs

Grinders cease and are few – teeth!

Windows – eyes

Doors – mouths that are closed, less able to get out, no one to talk to.

Rises at the sound of the bird – can't sleep

Daughters of song brought low – ability to sing and ability to hear diminished

Fearful – of heights, of what is in the way

Almond Tree blossoms? First to blossom, all white Like gray hair – demonstrates the brevity and speed of life

Dragging along like a grasshopper

Desire fails – sexually, and appetite for eating

Why – headed toward death which is pictured in verses 6 – 8

Verses 6 – 8

Silver cord & Golden Bowl

Silver cord – spinal cord? At least we can say that it is somehow representative of life and when snapped – it is snuffed out.

Golden Bowl – head, mind? Not sure – but it is broken



Pitcher, cistern wheel broken – water life giving, death without it.

Result – dryness, dust.

Spirit – ruah – breath

- Full life cycle – from first breath to final breath
- God’s image bearer returns to the earth from which he was created
- Notice it is God who gave us breath

Therein lies the answer – acknowledge him. Those who do can with joy remember the psalmist who says...

Precious in the sight of the LORD
is the death of his saints.

(Psalm 116:15 ESV)

A Few More Passages To Consider...

Proverbs 10:27; 16:3; 20:29

Titus 2:2 – 5

Why go through these passages?

1. Your aging relatives need the truth. God’s grace means that *it is not true* that you cannot teach an old dog new tricks!
2. Your aging relatives need children who know the truth who can minister to them guided by a biblical understanding of how the gospel relates to those suffering with the heat of old age.

What are Your Roles and Responsibilities Before God?

Spouse – Genesis 2:24

What are your God given assignments as a...

Ephesians 5:22 – 31; Col. 3:18 – 19

I Peter 3:1 – 7

Husband

Wife



Parent – Deut. 6:4ff; Eph. 6: 1 – 4; Col. 3:21

Adult Child – Honor (Exodus 20:12).

When you leave your relatives as adults, while it is wise to listen and give attention to their counsel, you no longer are under their authority.

Husband/Wife Relationship is *Permanent*.

Parent/Child relationship as a relationship of a child toward an authority is *Temporary*.

These roles defined by Scripture MUST govern our decision making with and about our aging relatives.

If you don't – the gospel will be distorted

If you do – you will honor God and your relatives

Honoring your relatives starts with honoring God and is not mutually exclusive.

Scenario 1

Your mom Nancy is 85 (a Christian) and increasingly is dependent on the care of others. Your father is long gone. She absolutely does not want to do 2 things: 1) move into any assisted living situation or nursing home, 2) she doesn't want to move in with you and your wife even though there is room and you have both as a couple offered this as an option. She can't stand your wife!

- What principles need to guide you and your wife?
- How will you honor your mom even in her defiance?
- What truths does your mom need to embrace?
- What wrong thinking does she need to put off?



Scenario 2

Your father has recently been diagnosed with Alzheimer's. It is further advanced than you and your siblings even realized (mom's been working hard to cover it up). He has recently had some episodes of violence expressed toward your mother specifically. Neither are believers (nor are your siblings) but you are and have shared the gospel sporadically over the years.

Scenario 3 – Your Scenario

Finding Hope in the Increasingly Common Case of Alzheimers

The number one cause of Alzheimer's is... old age! In fact it is estimated that 47% of those over 85 have some kind of dementia such as Alzheimer's Disease.

The life span is generally 8 years with a steady decline. My observation (anecdotal not scientific) is that most folks don't die from Alzheimer's but typically die from the complicating factors that come with Alzheimer's.

Relax... forgetfulness is not necessarily a sign of Alzheimer's. It may be a sign of aging but if you still have the ability to logically reason through your forgetfulness (lost keys, why you got up to go to the other room) you most likely don't have Alzheimer's.

Here are some genuine signs of Alzheimer's (from the "Alzheimer's Association"). Go to <http://www.alz.org> for full descriptions

1. Memory changes that disrupt daily life.
2. Challenges in planning or solving problems.



3. Difficulty completing familiar tasks at home, at work or at leisure.
4. Confusion with time or place.
5. Trouble understanding visual images and spatial relationships.
6. New problems with words in speaking or writing.
7. Misplacing things and losing the ability to retrace steps.
8. Decreased or poor judgment.
9. Withdrawal from work or social activities.
10. Changes in mood and personality.

Things to Do...

Encourage your relatives to make their wishes for advanced care, guided by biblical principles (Phil. 1:21 is helpful here), known while they are of sound mind.

Encourage your relatives to stay active mentally. For instance the mental skills to put a puzzle together have been found to be especially beneficial in maintaining brain function in the elderly.

Talk openly and honestly about death and their fears early.

Share the Gospel if they are not believers.

Resolve what's unresolved soon.

Let them know of your love and specifically how they have impacted you and ministered to you.

Ask yourself the question "what is the experience like for my parent?"

Adjust your expectations appropriately and be merciful.

Often there is internal logic to the Alzheimer's patient which may not be apparent to you – i.e. running out of the bathroom when the shower comes on thinking the roof is caving in (hears the rush of water and confuses it with the ceiling crumbling).



Help them Avoid Sinful Responses

- Minimize Noise

- Avoid flooding them with too many stimulating factors

Involve the body of Christ...

- Involve them early – counsel your relative to accept this help with humility

- To give you a break from caring for them (and you may no choice in the near future)

- To provide appropriate interaction with the one suffering from Alzheimers

Keep your other relatives (spouses are especially vulnerable) safe.

Pray for them and with them regularly.

Read Scriptures to them regularly.