

Old Age

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[0 : 00] Amen.

The Western world is secretly ageist, I think. We love youth, we love the fresh, we love the new, we love the contemporary, don't we?

We panic about the growth of what we call an ageing population in this country. And older people maybe look at the young and ask, does anyone know that I used to be someone once?

The Bible's view of older people is really different from that. And I want us to look at a couple of Proverbs tonight and a few other passages which speak about older age.

In the last of this little series that we've been doing on Sunday evenings. Because it turns out that the older people, especially in the church, have an important role.

[1 : 19] We see two things tonight. Older people. First of all, God's people need to see your splendour. God's people need to see your splendour.

Just turn with me to the book of Proverbs. And Proverbs chapter 20 to start off with. If you want to just listen, that's fine. It's on page 543.

Proverbs 20, 29. The glory of young men is their strength, but the splendour of old men is their grey hair. Turn back a page to Proverbs 16, verse 31.

1. Grey hair is a crown of glory or splendour. It's gained in a righteous life. Those Proverbs speak, don't they, about the physical signs of ageing and of old age of grey hair.

Some people get a full head of grey hair by the time they're 40, don't they? It's not necessarily the case that you might be old. But it's a general idea, isn't it?

[2 : 32] This is a person with a head full of silver or grey hair. And the Proverbs tell us that that person in the life of God's people is splendid and glorious.

But we don't believe that, do we? How so? Because as soon as the grey hairs appear, what do we do with them?

We pluck them out. We try and change the colour. It's what happens, isn't it, when you haven't seen someone in quite a few years, and you know they're not young, and you say, my word, you've not changed a bit.

You look amazing. And then ten years later you see them again, and they still haven't changed. And it's because they're dyeing their hair, isn't it? And they're covering over the ageing process.

I don't want to make you feel bad about that, if you're dyeing your hair. But it just shows, doesn't it, that culturally we are greyest. No, Bible, grey hair is not splendid.

[3 : 41] It's bad. And it's bad because old age is bad, we think. We don't think old age is an age of splendour and glory, do we?

Grey hair isn't the crown on a great and glorious life, but it's an embarrassing sign of a lesser life. But these proverbs are saying something very different. They are saying that in older age there is a unique splendour and glory, and God's people need to see this splendour and realise it.

And older people tonight, you are a kind of display to the rest of us. And what we need to see here is that an old age has a moral glory to it.

It's got a kind of moral display going on. Proverbs 16.31, that's the main proverb I want us to look at. Grey hair, the crown of glory, is gained in a righteous life.

It's not easy to translate the original Hebrew on that verse, but reading it basically we're told that grey hair is like a trophy, it's like a badge of honour that's kind of on the display cabinet.

[4 : 57] It's something to show off for a life lived well, lived rightly, lived righteously. I want to say this evening that there is a real connection in Scripture between old age and the blessings of living rightly in God's sight.

It is related to wise life lived well under God. We get the phrase in the Old Testament, don't we, of a person who has lived well under the Lord.

Often it's a leader or a prophet. And when they die, there's a little obituary. He or she was buried in good old age, it often says.

It's exactly what God promised Abraham in his life of faith. He would go down to his fathers in peace and be buried in good old age.

Genesis 15. There is a connection between the blessings of God and living till you're old and living rightly before God and living under his grace.

[6 : 07] Now of course we've got to be really careful, haven't we? Because as we read the Proverbs, often they are general principles, they're not cast-iron guarantees.

And of course, not everybody who is old has lived a righteous life under God. Obviously, in many ways, any idiot can live a long life, can't they?

And many who do live trusting in God righteously don't live till they're old. I don't know this for sure, but I doubt that the Lord Jesus Christ was grave at 33 when he was crucified.

Maybe I'm wrong. It's an interesting thought, isn't it? Of course, many godly people are taken to be with the Lord in their youth. Sometimes in a very self-sacrificial and amazing way.

It's not an absolute rule. But it is a general principle. Ecclesiastes 7 says, Be not overly wicked, neither be a fool.

[7 : 13] Why should you die before your time? And the assumption there is, isn't it, that in the world, the way it normally goes, is that our behaviour has a bearing on our age at the time of death.

Apparently, the oldest person in the world right now is a Japanese lady. She's 116. She was asked, What is the secret to your old age?

She said, Well, I eat three eggs a day. Makes you wonder how much longer she could live if she only ate one egg a day, doesn't it? It is a general rule. Live like a fool.

Live unrighteously and foolishly. And at the very least, you certainly won't add years to your life, will you? And this proverb is true, isn't it, for God's people particularly, the audience of proverbs.

Because older life signifies something pleasing to God morally. When we've lost the value of grey hair, when it's an embarrassment to be recoloured, we should see here that it's God's way of signifying a life that has been lived in faith and trust.

[8 : 33] A life blessed by God. Certainly when a Christian walks in the room with grey hair, there should be a kind of slight sense of awe. And great thanksgiving for this life that God has led them on and brought them to this point in their older age.

There should be a sense of great thanksgiving, shouldn't there, for this crown that's been given. This person has lived well.

They are sinners, of course, like anybody. But the Lord has crowned them and given them life until old age. They have lived well. Their grey hair is a sign of God's grace and kindness over the years. Of course it's possible to have grey hair and not have lived a righteous life. But the glory of it on a person who has clearly lived their life in faith, under God's grace, is clear to be seen, isn't it?

When you see a person who has, like Paul, run the race and got to the finish line, the grey is the crown on an old man or woman who has lived all their life knowing what their life is about and where they are heading, lived for the Lord.

[9 : 52] And the one whose grey hairs shine, best of all, are the ones who know where they're going. There's a glory about that, isn't there?

About somebody like that. There's an attractiveness about an older person who knows that and who's confident in the Lord. There's a beauty about that. It shines in a church to have old people who know where they're going.

You think of some very old people, and I think it's not an absolute rule, of course, but there is, I think there is a manifest connection with their age and the lives that they've lived.

Just think of the old rector of St. Helens, Dick Lucas. He's 94. Or Richard Bewes. He was 84 when he died a couple of weeks ago.

Godly people. We can quite easily, can't we, bring to mind, really easily, right now, people in this very room whose older age is a kind of endorsement of their lives to us.

[11 : 02] Their silver hair in this room, it lights the room up. Their older age adorns the blessing of a godly life with dignity and authority and beauty.

I probably should. I'm not going to name names, but maybe have that person in mind now. God speaks to us through their grey hair.

Grey hair is part of general revelation, I want to say. Their hair speaks and it says, this is how I want you to live your life, under me.

You need to see the splendour of a long life lived for me in faith, of people who've always known where they're going. And it's really clear when they get old.

They've lived a life of self-control and moderation and faith and prayer. A general principle, grey hair gained in a righteous life. Old age as a display of a certain kind of splendour, of a splendid life lived for the Lord.

[12 : 05] And it shines, doesn't it? God's people need to see that splendour and be thankful and honour it. Second point tonight, older people, the church needs to see your splendour.

Secondly, God's people need your support. Older people, God's people need your support. The Bible is realistic.

It doesn't dodge the obvious problems of older age, does it? It doesn't just spiritualise away the very real difficulties. To be infirm and to be vulnerable physically and mentally.

The book of Ecclesiastes, part of the wisdom literature, it ends with that really famous picture, doesn't it, where an old person is sort of figured like a house falling apart.

It speaks poetically and powerfully about the frustrations and the pain and the demise of physical strength and mental agility. Being realistic, being older means that you can do less things than you used to be able to do.

[13 : 19] And if that is you, you've just got to be honest about that. It is no good trying to get away from that by lying to yourself.

We've got to accept our limitations, haven't we? Perhaps we might have to give up some activity that we once enjoyed. Maybe we've got to finally hand in our driving licence.

We find ourselves needing to rely on other people a lot more. And you are a fool if you pretend that you're always going to be and feel young.

But that is really painful, isn't it? And with that feeling of loss and weakness, there is a feeling, isn't there? Am I still useful?

Does anyone know who I once was? It's that typical comedy image of grandpa. Do you know the comedy show Only Fools and Horses? If you're from the US, you can switch off for two minutes.

[14 : 25] You won't have a clue. But Only Fools and Horses. There's the character Grandpa, isn't it? And his catchphrase is during the war. He always wants to talk about during the war.

During the war this, during the war that. Always wanting to talk about the time that he felt useful, and he felt important. And the young lads, they just say, shut up Grandpa, don't they?

Should that be the case for older people in the church? These proverbs are telling us that it's not right that we think that peak status and usefulness in the church is between the ages of 30 and 50. Or peak status is for people who've got children. Or people who are in full-time employment. And outside those groups, your status just plummets.

And you're not really useful to anyone. These proverbs push against that. We're supposed to see the glory and the splendour of older age.

[15 : 31] And there is a pattern, I think, looking more widely in Scripture, where older people form an essential support base for the younger people.

Just looking more widely, I think there's a case for saying, isn't there, that not everybody in the church is going to be on the front line of the church's work. There are limitations that not all of us have.

But there are others that are needed to form the support for those that are. There's a really interesting story that I remembered this week in 1 Samuel.

1 Samuel chapter 30. Maybe you want to turn there just really quickly. 1 Samuel chapter 30. It is on page 251 and 252.

In this section, King David wins a battle against the Amalekites. We're not going to read the whole thing to save time. Go and look at it later.

[16 : 36] 1 Samuel 30. There's a battle and some of the soldiers are too physically tired to be on the front line. So they are left in the camp to watch over the equipment.

The front line soldiers, they win the battle and they come back to the camp and then there's this argument that breaks out. We're told that some of the soldiers were wicked and they start

complaining, saying, you know, those people who stayed behind, they don't deserve as much of a reward as we do.

We were on the front line. They shouldn't have the same reward. Well, look at 1 Samuel 30 verse 23. This is how David responds. You shall not do so, my brothers, with what the Lord has given us. He has preserved us and given into our hand the band that came against us. For as his share is who goes down into the battle, so shall his share be who stays by the baggage.

He's saying there, isn't he, in the Lord's work, and everyone gets a fair share, those who support the work are just as valuable as those who execute it on the front line.

[17 : 57] And there may be some of us tonight, it might not be to do with old age, it might be other things that are going on. But for whatever reason, we cannot be on the front line of church work.

Those soldiers were physically exhausted, that was the problem for them. They'd been there in past battles, hadn't they? They'd been on the front line before. But now they've stayed behind, watching over the baggage.

They were physically limited, so they formed the support group. And it's neither the ones who are in the prominent places, nor the ones who are in the background supporting the work, who have a greater reward.

They're rewarded equally. Since after all, David makes it clear, the Lord is the one who won the victory for us. And at times, it might feel like you just can't get so involved in the excitement of front line church activity like you used to be able to.

And it just feels like you're watching the baggage. If you're housebound, or if you're infirm, or you're struggling with mental illness, it just feels like you're a bag carrier.

[19 : 17] But because the battle is the Lord's, the battle is yours. And God uses the means of what you can do. Prayer, giving, encouragement.

He uses what the support group do to buttress the work of the others. Do you remember in Exodus 17, Israel faces another enemy in a battle.

And Moses stands on top of the hill, doesn't he, with his arms outstretched. The old man with his arms out. And the young men, her and Aaron, stand either side holding his arms up, don't they? But the moment the old man's arms drop, what happens? The young in the battle are completely overwhelmed. The young on the front line lose the battle and it's like a pendulum swinging, isn't it? The young needed the support of the old man. It is striking, isn't it, that the support group for the young Jesus Christ, the infant, the little boy, the incarnate son of God, were mainly older people, as far as I can make out.

[20 : 31] Simeon, Anna, Elizabeth, and Zechariah. Jesus Christ was supported and prayed for by a bunch of pensioners, wasn't he? And it's just not what we expect.

We think that the important people in the church are the young people. when we think of the Apostle Paul and his band of his posse going around preaching, well, whether they're young or they're old, the thing is, who do we imagine them to be?

We think that they're the young guys, don't we? We don't think of them as a bunch of old blokes with bald heads and pot bellies. But do you know what?

We are a Presbyterian church. Do you know what the word Presbyterian means? It comes from a Greek word, Presbyteros.

It means elders. Old people. Old men, actually. That word, it's in our name, isn't it? Because it's about how Jesus rules and runs his church through elders.

[21 : 35] That doesn't mean that all old people should be office bearers of the church. Just because you're old, it doesn't make that automatic, isn't it? As the old saying goes, there is no fool like an old fool.

Nor does it mean that young men can't be office bearers as elders either. But the young man, Timothy, and Titus, are to appoint elders, Presbyteros, old men, for the stability of the church. There is, at least there, a recognition, isn't it, that the health and order of the church comes by means of men and women elsewhere in the New Testament who have the characteristics of old men and women.

The ordained elders shouldn't be too young in the faith, Paul says. They should have experience and a spiritual maturity. And I think that principle kind of works itself out in the membership of the church too.

Where older members have a duty and a privilege of being the support group. Of older men raising their arms in prayer.

[22 : 50] Of older women teaching younger women of praying and of supporting. understanding of undergirding the young. The book of Job tells us wisdom is with the aged and understanding in length of days.

And so in a Presbyterian church that the clue is in the name isn't it, it's part of our DNA that this church should have a high regard for spiritual maturity which often does go with older age in a Christian.

As well as the elders then, this Presbyterian church needs the elderly. And the church needs your support. The baggage needs watching.

Without your prayers and without your money and without your wisdom and your support the young of this church who seem to be doing everything really really well do you know what will happen? They will flounder. The young of this church they will be overwhelmed without your prayers. The young will be in disarray in the battle. Older people the young are watching you in your splendour to shine and they are waiting for your support.

[24 : 07] How does the world say that you should cope with older age? Well the world would deny its value wouldn't it? Dylan Thomas he writes in that often quoted poem don't go gentle into the good night.

old age what should it do? It should burn and rave at close of day. Rage against the dying of the light he says. And that's what some people do isn't it as they get older and older the older you get the grumpier you get the more you rage the more intolerant you are.

And that is because in the world the view of old age is pretty hopeless really. And the tendency is to cover the grey and to try and go back in time to rage against the dying of the light.

Not to look forwards but to look backwards all the time. During the war do you know who I once was? In the passage that we read earlier Paul is ready isn't he?

The time of his departure has almost come. Paul by now he's in prison and do you know what? He's merely watching the baggage as the young Timothy takes on the leadership of the church and he pens those words in 2 Timothy as an old man and he knows it.

[25 : 26] He knows that. He's not lying to himself. He's not pretending. He's not embarrassed. He charges Timothy at this crucial time. Child, preach and be ready.

He charges the young Timothy towards the front line where Timothy needs the support of this old man. And so the young of this church need the older folk to let them, you to let them be in the battle and take on leadership and all of those things.

But we certainly don't need you to just slip off into the shadows and think that you're not useful. The Timothys need the Pauls, don't they? They need the Loises and the Eunices.

The Apollises need the Priscilla's and Aquila's. And Paul can do this. Paul can let go. Paul is content to watch the baggage and hand over to Timothy because he knows where he's going. And as he writes, there is this wonderful anticipation of future glory. He may have a crown of grey hair but he's looking forward to an even better crown, isn't he? The crown of righteousness, he says, given to all who loved his appearing.

[26 : 51] So as an older person, he can focus supporting the young. And he's fine with that because he's looking forward. Just as I close, John Chapman, he was an Australian preacher and in his seventies, he worked on a new book, it was kind of like his last project, called Making the Most of the Rest of Your Life.

It's amazing, he started it in his seventies and he writes in his introduction, I've already had my seventy-sixth birthday and I live in a retirement village on the outskirts of Sydney.

Each year I seem to collect another specialist. They put the ailing parts back together again. Life in the retirement village has been a new experience for me.

The paper comes every morning at 4.30, the ambulance comes every morning at 9.30. Your mortality presses in. He says, you may think it's strange that I'm thinking about making the most of the rest of my life.

The average male in Australia lives for 79 years. Doesn't leave me much time. On the other hand, if there is life after death, if eternity really is eternity, then I have the greater bulk of my life to look forward to.

[28 : 12] And that makes all the difference. John Chapman died in 2012. He was 82. Imagine him saying to Jesus as Jesus places the crown of righteousness on his head, do you know who I once was, Jesus?

Jesus would say, I know, and I've still let you in, haven't he? You don't have to rage. You don't have to keep looking back.

You can look forward. And you can shine. You can let your silver hair shine. Let it speak of the kindness of God to you over many years.

Because the young are watching you in your splendour. and they're waiting for your support. Let's pray.