

5/25/08

Finishing Well

Psalm 71:17-18

Since my youth, O God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds. Even when I am old and gray do not forsake me O God, until I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to come.

Someone has said "Age is the result of experience plus deterioration." Experience is a good thing and we discover in the Bible that age is to be honored and respected. Leviticus says,

Leviticus 19:32

Rise in the presence of the aged. Show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the Lord.

In our society we worship youth, not age. I love reading the titles of the tabloids while waiting in line at the grocery store. The titles can be divided into five basic dysfunctional categories: So and so was seen with so and so; so and so has an addiction; so and so gains 100 pounds, Ways to Improve Your Sex Life, and New Discovery Reverses Aging Process. But the Bible comes along and have you noticed, it's really kind of pro-aging. The word "elder" is used 175 times and the Old Testament particularly speaks about how the older folks come alongside as a mentor, a guide, and cheer on those who are younger. Therefore elders in the community are to be prized.

You, like I, have probably been doing your light reading in Leviticus and recently I ran across this rather obscure passage in Leviticus 27.

Leviticus 27:1-3

¹ The LORD said to Moses, ² "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'If anyone makes a special vow to dedicate persons to the LORD by giving equivalent values,

(This is probably Tabernacle language here and it seems that if man wanted to dedicate someone in his family to the Lord, he could redeem him from the actual service, which actually restricted to

Levites, by giving money. This is probably a thanksgiving offering. A shekel refers to about 1 ½ lbs. Today silver is value at about \$18/oz. So a shekel of silver would be worth approximately \$432.)

³ set the value of a male between the ages of twenty and sixty at fifty shekels

(This is no small commitment; that would cost us \$21,600 today ...)

If it is a person sixty years or more, set they value at fifteen shekels.

The cost here is \$6,480. \$21,600 for a twenty year old; \$6,480 for sixty year old. I point this out because I think this may be where the idea of a Senior Adult Discount came into play. So the idea of a senior adult discount comes directly out of the Bible. Are you ever amazed at what you learn here? You know what I hate? I hate it when people assume that you qualify for the Senior Adult Discount and don't even ask you. They just look at your premature grey and make an assumption.

Now the Bible does not make a secret of people's ages. Old age is viewed as privileged thing. It says of Abraham

Genesis 25:8

Abraham died at a good old age, an old man, full of years.

The older people got the more respected they became. That's how the community of God worked. Rabbis taught on this. From an ancient commentary on the Book of Exodus. The Rabbi said, "How welcome is old age. The aged are beloved by God."

It is a biblical idea that as one ages he gains wisdom because of his experience. But the biblical presents something else to us. Because of the fall, the aging process involves a kind of deterioration. One of the most colorful passages on the aging process is found in the Book of Ecclesiastes, chapter 12. As we read and work our way through this passage I want to be thinking about ***Finishing Well***.

The first three verses give us a graphic description of our progressive

deterioration.

Ecclesiastes 12

**¹ Remember your Creator
in the days of your youth,
before the days of trouble come
and the years approach when you will say,
"I find no pleasure in them"-**

**² before the sun and the light
and the moon and the stars grow dark,
and the clouds return after the rain;**

(What do you usually expect after the rain? Sunshine. As Solomon gives us this allegory on aging he says, "Not so. Just more clouds." Clouds are emblematic of dreariness and depression.)

3 when the keepers of the house tremble,

(Solomon may be the using the metaphor "keepers of the house" as the arms and hands of the body. They begin to shake.)

and the strong men stoop,

(As we age we lose a little height and a lot of our strength. I want us to do a little experiment. If you don't mind let's have everyone stand up. Now if you made a noise when you stood you, you are aging. You don't do that when you're young. Okay please be seated. Now if you groaned or made some kind of noise on the way down that's an even stronger sign of aging because it a lot harder to get it up than it is to get it down.)

when the grinders cease because they are few,

(Now what are the grinders? Teeth. No dentists in those days, no dentures. So is you have a tooth problem you pulled it out—that's why "they are few.")

and those looking through the windows grow dim;

(What do you think the windows stand for? Your eyes. No laser surgeries, no contact lenses back then.)

**⁴ when the doors to the street are closed
and the sound of grinding fades;**

(He's losing his hearing.)

when men rise up at the sound of birds,

(He can't sleep anymore. My Dad use to relate how when he was a young man he looked forward to the day when he could stay in bed and sleep as long as he wanted to sleep. He said unfortunately that when he got to the age that it didn't matter what time he got up he couldn't sleep late. Little noises start waking you up and you start asking other people "How did you sleep?" Think about it. When you are a kid, no kid ever ask another kid, "How did you sleep last night?" Just doesn't happen.

(Now he points to an ironic feature of all of this I wake up an slightest noise, like birds that I can barely hear because my hearing has gone bad.)

but all their songs grow faint;

(He continues the metaphors in v. 5 by saying that in old age)

⁵ when men are afraid of heights

(When we lived in the Dallas/Ft.Worth area, we had a beautiful home that had a metal roof. As I had done for years I was up on our rood hanging Christmas lights. That metal roof was so slick that I found myself getting fearful and in my desperation I promised God that if He would just get me off the roof without falling, I would never get on the roof again. And I didn't.)

and of dangers in the streets;

(I spent some of my day last Friday driving around the Metroplex and was reminded that you really do take your life in your own hands.

The narrow streets of a Middle Eastern town with camels, donkeys, and bustling traders could be pretty intimidating to an elderly, slow-moving pedestrian.)

when the almond tree blossoms

(Want to guess what color almond blossoms are? White. The hair starts to go white. That's the stage after grey. I love this next one,)

and the grasshopper drags himself along

(There use to be a spring in step, but he ain't hopping any more. He's a grass dragger now.)

and desire no longer is stirred.

(No Viagra in those days. I'm sorry I shouldn't have said that. Please don't write me. I apologize. I REPENT!

(But before you get too offended let me defend myself. I have some grounds for saying the "V" word. See the word translated "desire" in verse 5. Well the translators are trying to help you out because the actual Hebrew word is the word *ab-ee-yo-naw'* which if literally translated is the word *caperberry* and some scholars believe the caperberry was well known to be an aphrodisiac, a sexual stimulant. The metaphor is like "Mabel I'm eating caperberries morning, noon, and night but there's just no desire, baby.")

Then man goes to his eternal home

(The common belief in Solomon's day was that when you died whether human or animal, whether righteous or wicked everyone went to Sheol. Sheol was thought to be down in the lowest parts of the earth. It was thought to be a place that was devoid of emotion, a place of darkness, a place where you remembered nothing, no praise of God, as a matter of fact there was no sounds at all in Sheol.)

and mourners go about the streets.

(This phrase is connected to the Sheol idea because it was thought that professional mourners inaugurated one's journey into Sheol. By the way there is progressive revelation about death and our eternal state as we move through the Old Testament.

(Think about this with me for a minute. We would probably date Solomon's writing of Ecclesiastes sometime around 950 to 930 B. C. Solomon's father, David, writing the generation prior to Solomon gives us a little more hopeful word.)

Psalm 16:8-11

**⁸ I have set the LORD always before me.
Because He is at my right hand,
I will not be shaken.**

**⁹ Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
my body also will rest secure,**

**¹⁰ because you will not abandon me to the grave,
nor will you let your Holy One see decay.**

**¹¹ You have made known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand. (11th Century B. C.)**

This Psalm, Psalm 16, is often referred to as a Messianic Psalm because there a hint of the resurrection of the Lord Jesus in verse 10 when He says "Holy One." You may remember that Peter writing in the New Testament quotes verse 8-11 that we just read and declares

Acts 2:29-31

²⁹"Brothers, I can tell you confidently that the patriarch David died and was buried, and his tomb is here to this day. ³⁰But he was a prophet and knew that God had promised him on oath that he would place one of his descendants on his throne. ³¹Seeing what was ahead, he spoke of the resurrection of the Christ, that he was not abandoned to the grave, nor did his body see decay.

A little later the Apostle Paul picks up on this and quotes David in Psalm 16:10

Acts 13:35

" 'You will not let your Holy One see decay.'

And then he explains,

Acts 13:36

³⁶"For when David had served God's purpose in his own generation, he fell asleep; he was buried with his fathers and his body decayed. ³⁷But the one whom God raised from the dead did not see decay.

The Sons of Korah wrote Psalm 49 probably about the time of David in the 11th century B. C.

Psalm 49:7-20

**⁷ No man can redeem the life of another
or give to God a ransom for him-**

**⁸ the ransom for a life is costly,
no payment is ever enough-**

**⁹ that he should live on forever
and not see decay.**

**¹⁰ For all can see that wise men die;
the foolish and the senseless alike perish
and leave their wealth to others.**

**¹¹ Their tombs will remain their houses forever,
their dwellings for endless generations,
though they had named lands after themselves.**

**¹² But man, despite his riches, does not endure;
he is like the beasts that perish.**

**¹³ This is the fate of those who trust in themselves,
and of their followers, who approve their sayings.
Selah**

¹⁴ Like sheep they are destined for the grave,

and death will feed on them.
 The upright will rule over them in the morning;
 their forms will decay in the grave, [Sheol]
 far from their princely mansions.

¹⁵ **But God will redeem my life from the grave [Sheol];
 He will surely take me to himself.
 Selah**

¹⁶ **Do not be overawed when a man grows rich,
 when the splendor of his house increases;**

¹⁷ **for he will take nothing with him when he dies,
 his splendor will not descend with him.**

¹⁸ **Though while he lived he counted himself blessed—
 and men praise you when you prosper—**

¹⁹ **he will join the generation of his fathers,
 who will never see the light of life .**

²⁰ **A man who has riches without understanding
 is like the beasts that perish. (11th century B. C.)**

God reveals through the prophet Isaiah in about 700 B.C. this little hint that there will be a resurrection of the dead (Isaiah 26:19).

Isaiah 26:19

**But your dead will live;
 their bodies will rise.
 You who dwell in the dust,
 wake up and shout for joy.
 Your dew is like the dew of the morning;
 the earth will give birth to her dead. (700 B. C.)**

Then Daniel writing in about 530 B. C. tells us

Daniel 12:2

Multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.

Now let's move back to Ecclesiastes 12. Solomon has just said that we get old, we die and then he says:

⁶ Remember Him...

(refers back to v. 1 **Remember your creator in the days of your youth.** That's an admonition by the elder to the young man saying *Remember your God*)

**—before the silver cord is severed,
or the golden bowl is broken;
before the pitcher is shattered at the spring,
or the wheel broken at the well,**

The silver cord may reference the nervous system in the spine, the golden bowl may refer to the head, the pitcher may refer to the heart and the wheel, the organs of digestion.

And before

**⁷ and the dust returns to the ground it came from,
and the spirit returns to God who gave it.**

And that is the day of trouble that's coming for every last one of us. We are all terminal cases. Some of us will just leave sooner than others.

The age of the body is a syndrome, one researcher says, of changes that are progressive, universal, and irreversible. That's a cheery thought, isn't it? You are fast moving toward a day in which your skin will sag, you will lose elasticity in it, you'll look at your hands and realize they're your parents' hands. Hair will start growing where you don't want it to grow and stop where you do. Weight will leave the poles and head toward the equator.

Some of you I know are young and vigorous and you are thinking that will never happen to me! And those of us who are older want you to know we understand and we love you, but it will happen to you. And we are kind of looking forward to it. In fact, it's already started. This is pretty amazing. I read this week:

When you are in the embryonic stage, the human brain, when it's in development mode in the embryo, you are actually creating—your body's creating 50,000 nerve cells per second.

The Psalmist says:

Psalm 139:14

We are fearfully and wonderfully made.

And we are. But then those cells start dying. Do you know how many of your brain cells have died? More than half of your brain cells died before you were ever born. When means you were getting dumber before you were ever arrived.

All of which raises the question, how do you age well? There's lots being written in our day about successful aging or optimal aging, but how do you age well from a biblical perspective?

If you don't mind, turn to the person next to you and guess back in Jesus' days, in the days of ancient Rome or ancient Greece, what do you think was the average lifespan of a human being? In ancient Rome? In ancient Greece? Turn to the person next to you. What was the average lifespan of a human being? The correct answer as best it can be ascertained, historian Martin Marty says, was 20 years old. Infant mortality rates were off the charts—20 years old.

Fast forward 1,000 years—medieval Europe—it was only 30 or 33, low 30s. As recently as 1800 in our country it was 36. Today in the U.S. it's 77, and higher than that for women. Throughout history people did not live that long. It's estimated that over 25%, maybe as high as one-third of every human being who has ever made it to 60 years or older, are alive today. Between a quarter, maybe a third of every human being that ever hits 60 is walking the planet right now.

So what do we need to age well from a biblical perspective? Our society tells us it's all about freedom, independence, security, and comfort, but from a biblical perspective we need three things to age well and finish well.

- **Keep a wholehearted faith**

I need the conviction that I can trust God with my tomorrow, not because tomorrow will be easy, but I can look forward to tomorrow because God is already there and He's waiting for me.

Some of you will remember the biblical character named Caleb. He was one of the 12 spies sent out by Moses to explore the Promised Land after Israel had left Egypt. When the scouts returned, 10 of them said,

Numbers 14:3-4

Let's go back to Egypt and be slaves. This assignment is impossible. We can't do it.

Only Caleb and Joshua trusted God and said,

Numbers 13:30

We can surely do it.

Because the people followed the majority and not the word of the Lord, Caleb had to endure forty years of wandering through the wilderness. He was forty when he had been a scout. By the time they crossed the Jordan River to go into the Promise Land, Caleb is eighty years old. Then another five years pass and in Joshua 14 we find Caleb speaking:

Joshua 14:7-8

I was forty when Moses sent me from Kadesh Barnea to explore the land. And I brought him back a report according to my convictions, but my brothers who went up with me made the hearts of the people melt with fear. I, however, followed the Lord my God wholeheartedly.

By the way, if you have a negative attitude and a small faith when you are 40, there's a good chance you will not have a negative attitude and a small faith when you are 85, because there's a good chance you won't ever be 85. There are a lot of studies on this. Psychologist Martin Seligman studied several hundred people in a religious community, divided them up into quartiles, most to least faith-filled

optimistic. He found 90% of the most optimistic faith-filled people were still alive at the age of 85. Only 34% of the most negative, pessimistic people made it to that age.

Another study, the largest of its kind, tracked over 2,000 adults over the age of 65 in the southwest United States. Optimistic people, faith-filled people, had better health habits, had lower blood pressure, had feistier immune systems and were half as likely to die as negative people. If you have a positive attitude, you are likely to live a decade longer than people with a negative attitude. How many of you are happy to hear that? And if you are not raising your hands, you are in serious trouble.

It's kind of interesting. There were 12 spies sent out. Joshua and Caleb had faith.

"We can do it. Let's go do it."

The other 10 said:

"It cannot be done. Let's go back and be slaves in Egypt."

Anybody want to guess what happened to the other 10 by now? They are all dead. None of them made it to Caleb's age. Faith is such an amazing, life-giver.

Does the name Paul Brand ring a bell with you? Paul Brand wrote some books in conjunction with Philip Yancy. One of which is *Fearfully and Wonderfully Made*. Paul Brand had a mother by the name of Evelyn Brand. When she was a young woman she felt called by God to go to India. She was a single woman. You can imagine how much faith that took back in that day—1909. She met a guy named Jessie. They got married and began a ministry to people in rural India—education, medical supplies, building roads, etc. Early in their ministry they went seven years without a single convert. Seven years without anyone coming to Jesus!

Then there was a priest of another religion who grew deathly ill and had a fever. Nobody else would go near him because it was so dangerous. Evelyn and Jessie nursed him as he was dying. He said:

“This God, Jesus, must be the true God because only Jessie and Evelyn will care for me in my dying.”

He gave his children to them to care for and that was kind of the spiritual breakthrough, because then people began to turn to Christ. They had 13 years of great ministry and then Jessie died. Evelyn is 50 years old. Everybody expects her to return back to her home in England, but she will not do it—this really is a feisty character. She stays another 20 years under that Mission Board. Her son, Paul, came over when she was 70 years old. This is what Paul Brand said about his mom, Paul Brand, this great leader. He said of his mom:

This is how to grow old. Allow everything else to fall away until those around you see only love.

That’s finishing well. This is wholehearted faith.

The second thing you need if you are going to finish well:

- **Stay challenged**

Keep dreaming and cooperate with God to fulfill the dream. Do you know what you need as grow older. You need problems. This is what Caleb said,

Joshua 14:10-12

So here I am today, 85 years old! I am still as strong today as the day Moses sent me out. I’m just as vigorous to go out to battle now as I was then. Now, give me this hill country that the Lord promised me that day. You yourself heard then that the Anakites were there and their cities were large and fortified. But, the Lord helping me, I will drive them out just as he said.

Question: What’s the toughest battle to win against an enemy—a battle of flat ground or against an enemy of fortified cities up in the hill country? The hill country. That’s what Caleb asked for—the hardest challenge. I love that. He wants to face the Anakites, Israel’s most formidable opponents. They were bad dudes. They’re the ones talked about back in Numbers 13 when the people said,

Numbers 13:33

We saw the descendant of Anakites there. We seem like grasshoppers next to them.

And Caleb wants a piece of those guys! He is eighty five years old. You think he would be wanting a nice condo at Shalom Acres. But, no, he wants the privilege of a really hard assignment. He wants one more chance to cross the Jordan. He wants one more shot. ‘God, give me the hill country!’”

This is so interesting. Marian Diamond is a researcher on aging at U.C. Berkeley. She is one of the world’s leading neuro-anatomists. One of the things she has found is:

“Deliberately induced problems, challenges, are required literally to keep your brain healthy and developing.”

She has done a lot of work with rats and in one experiment some of them were just given food, but another group had obstacles placed in front of their food dish. They had to find a way over, around, through, somehow past the obstacles. Rats that had to figure out how do they get around the obstacles, how do they solve a problem, develop a thicker cortex (outer covering of organs), more dendrites (extensions of a nerve cell that receives electrical signals and conduct those signals to the cell). They were able to navigate other mazes more quickly. They were able to solve problems more proficiently. They were less likely to spend time watching *Dancing With The Stars*. The fewer problems that a rat had, the faster its brain went downhill. If you love a rat, give it problems.

She writes:

“In terms of successful aging, she writes, it is not enough to continue activities in the same groove year after year with the same expenditure of mental and physical energy. The brain requires new challenges if it is to remain a healthy, functioning organ.”

‘Give me hill country, God.’ Listen, God has wired us up so that our bodies, our brains, our minds, our spirits require, not comfort, ease, security, but challenge. And then if I’m going to finish well, I’ve got to

- **Be in community.**

I've got to be connected. I've got to have relationships. My good friend Gary Staats who spends his days building retirement centers all over the country and his company manages them says "It's just a given. We know that when a person enters one of our retirement centers they have just added seven years to their life.

Caleb was one of two faithful scouts. Joshua was the other one. Joshua got to be the new leader when Moses departed. Joshua got to be the new Moses. Caleb didn't. He could have withdrawn, sulked, isolated himself. Instead His engagement, commitment to God's people, just keeps growing. He was immersed in the people of God. I never thought about this until this week.

Some of you know his story. Caleb's generation, the generation of those that left Egypt with him all died out. That means Caleb, as an older man, had to develop a whole new circle of friends. He had to become mentor, guide, cheerleader for an entirely new generation. All of his peers were gone. He did it to such an extent that they all said:

"When we go to the hill country, we want Caleb, 85 years old, to be the one to lead us." Why? Because community is life-giving. Isolation is terminal.

This Dr. Diamond that I mentioned wanted to see the effects of isolation in aging. She found that if 12 rats were in a cage together, a little community of rats, and given challenges, their brains developed more, thicker cortex and so on than if they were given a challenge but they lived all by themselves in isolation.

Then she wanted to see how this worked with older rats so she took rats that were 600 days or older. That's the equivalent, she said, of about a 60-year-old human being. Same results.

She was invited to present her findings in Germany. She went there, but she found that the rats that they were working with in Germany lived to be 800 days old and this troubled her, because her rats

started dying at 600 days old. So she said to her researchers:

“There’s one thing that we’ve not been giving our rats and we are going to start. We are going to give these rats love. We will have the same challenges and rich environment but after the challenge each researcher would have to pick up the rat and hold it in their hand and press it against their lab coat and pet it with a finger and speak kindly to it.”

You are one sweet rat—whatever you say to a rat. Here’s what happened. When they started loving those rats, not only did those rats break the 800 barrier; at 904 days they were not only still alive, they were still developing thicker cortexes, more developed brains in challenging conditions because community gives life and isolation destroys it. That’s part of God’s plan for His community.

We believe that’s a part of God’s plan for City View. A place that welcomes every age, every background, every ethnic group, a place for everyone. Listen it is so key to have older folks mentoring younger folks. (Community of Men—I challenge our ladies to do likewise—the only thing I’m reticent about in having the ladies do it is that you will do better than us) If you are in a small group and most of you are older, get a young person in there—adopt a student in their 20s to come talk to you about the challenges in their life, and then you cheer them on.

If you are in a group with younger folks, have an older person come.

Listen, God has a word for old heads this morning.

Isaiah 46:3-4

Listen to Me, O house of Jacob... Even to your old age and gray hairs I am He who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.

When you see somebody finishing like that and then investing in somebody younger, it doesn’t get any better than that.

Earlier I told you about Evelyn Brand. I want to finish the story now.

They called her “Granny Brand, little old lady.” She spent her life over in India, 20 years of widowhood over there. She is 70 years old and she gets word from the Home Mission Office in England. They are not going to give her another 5-year term. She is getting too old. She is kind of stubborn, kind of feisty. She always wanted to go to the mountains and they didn’t have the resources for that in India so the Mission Board said you are done now.

She had a party to celebrate her time in India and everybody there cheered her on and then they said:

“Have a good trip back home, Granny Brand.”

She said:

“I’ll tell you a little secret. I’m not going back home. I’m staying in India.”

She had had a little shack built with some resources that she had kind of smuggled in and then she got a pony. She still had to ride from village to village on horseback, 70-year-old woman, to tell people about Jesus. She did that for five years on her own. One day she fell off and broke her hip. She is 75 years old. Her son, Paul Brand, this eminent doctor, comes and says:

“Mom, you had a great run. God’s used you. It’s time to turn it over now. You go on back home.”

She said:

“I’m not going back home. God, give me the mountain, mountains of death. “

She was 75 at that point. She spent another 18 years traveling from one village to another on horseback— falls, concussions. Finally she hits 93 years old. She cannot ride horseback any more and for another two years the men in those villages, because they loved Granny Brand so much, they put her on a stretcher and they carried her from one village to another. She was 93 years old. God, give me the hill country.

See, that's finishing well! It is not about retiring comfortably. It is not about having a great 401K. It is not even about having a healthy body. It is not about security. It's about saying, "God, give me another mountain." It might look like Granny Brand, it might look like Isabelle, it might be a story that gets told— it may not. Nobody may know about it but you or God. It doesn't matter.

To finish well, to be a people that say:

"God, we don't care about comfort, we don't care about security, we just want to have another mountain and then we know there is this other generation coming along and, God, we are going to be a place where we will sacrifice our own comfort, our own taste, our own convenience, our own resources to pass that phase on to another generation. That's just the best."

That's who God made us to be.