

What Does
the Bible
Say About... ?

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NC
New City Press
Hyde Park, New York

Published by New City Press
202 Comforter Blvd.,
Hyde Park, NY 12538
www.newcitypress.com

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Cover design and layout by Miguel Tejerina

Some information in this book was originally published in much briefer form in “What the Bible Says About Growing Old,” St. Anthony Messenger 115:2 (2007): 34-38. The author is grateful to Franciscan Media (website: StAnthonyMessenger.org) for permission to reuse this material in an expanded format.

What does the Bible say about Old Age
ISBN: paperback: 978-1-56548-695-9
ISBN: e-book: 978-1-56548-696-6
ISBN: series: 978-1-56548-697-3

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019942349

Printed in the United States of America

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Series Preface

The Bible remains the world's number one best-seller of all time. Millions of copies in more than two thousand languages and dialects are sold every year, yet how many are opened and read on a regular basis? Despite the impression the Bible's popularity might give, its riches are not easy to mine. Its message is not self-evident and is sometimes hard to relate to our daily lives.

This series addresses the need for a reliable guide to reading the Bible profitably. Each volume is designed to unlock the Bible's mysteries for the interested reader who asks, "What does the Bible say about...?" Each book addresses a timely theme in contemporary culture, based upon questions people are asking today, and explaining how the Bible can speak to these questions as reflected in both Old and New Testaments.

Ideal for individual or group study, each volume consists of short, concise chapters on a biblical theme in non-technical language, and in a style accessible to all. The expert authors have been chosen for their knowledge of the Bible. While taking into account current scholarship, they know how to explain the Bible's teaching in simple language. They are also able to relate the biblical message to the challenges of today's Church and society while avoiding a simplistic use of the biblical text for trying to "prove" a point or defend a position, which is called

“prooftexting”—an improper use of the Bible. The focus in these books is on a religious perspective, explaining what the Bible says, or does not say, about each theme. Short discussion questions invite sharing and reflection.

So, take up your Bible with confidence, and with your guide explore “what the Bible says about OLD AGE.”

Introduction

Both of my parents lived to what we like to call “a ripe old age.” My father survived some months into his ninety-third year and was mentally alert and as sharp as ever almost until the day he died. In contrast, my mother, who died at age ninety-seven nearly fourteen years after my father’s death, had a difficult decline. The last six years of her life were particularly hard to watch. She suffered from Alzheimer’s disease—a frequent diagnosis these days. My siblings and I basically watched her lose not only her vitality but also her personality, her very identity. She did not, in the end, know who we were. But we knew who she was—the matriarch of the family.

This scenario is not unique. Since people live longer than ever in modern times, one notices differences in how people age. Some seem to enter old age gracefully. Like a delicious fruit that matures on a tree and develops a deeper, more intense flavor, so some people seem to flourish with age. They do not merely wither away. They develop more complexity, and, as we traditionally say, greater “wisdom.” There are, of course, others. We rail against “dirty old men” and “selfish old biddies.” We can become impatient as the elderly slow down, take up more room on sidewalks and in supermarket aisles, drive cars in annoying ways, repeat the same stories over and over again, are very fussy and hard to please, and take up more of our time and energy for

their care. On the other hand, we smile when we see old, wrinkled faces in nursing homes come alive with smiles and twinkling eyes in the presence of a baby, a kitten, or a puppy. Or perhaps when their face breaks into a smile as they recognize a loved one coming to visit them. One cannot consider old age without reflecting, to some degree, on the stages of life by which we arrive there.

Whatever we may think of it, old age is more and more a reality in modern life. By virtue of better nurture and health care in many parts of the world, people are living longer. Becoming a centenarian used to be a great milestone. You received a letter from the president, or perhaps an apostolic blessing from the pope. Nowadays centenarians are practically a dime a dozen. The oldest person in recorded recent history died at 116. And she was reputedly quite alert till the end.

Do you plan to grow old? Would you *like* to grow old? Do you think you have a choice? My Uncle John used to say, with a twinkle in his eye, “It sure beats the alternative!”

Many people fear old age. It is coupled with our natural fear of death, no doubt. But the reality of old age has been around, literally, for ages. The purpose of this little book is to put a biblical perspective on old age. What wisdom can we glean from the Bible that might help us better understand the mystery of growing old? It is not intended to be a comprehensive synthesis of biblical teaching. Rather, our approach will be to pick and choose sample texts from the Old Testament and the New Testament that

can help illustrate the way the biblical authors viewed the challenges of old age. These passages can still provide us guidance. There is surprising wisdom in these ancient texts that can shed light on our own modern reflections. Along the way, we will add insights from later texts that relate to the themes we touch upon. While it will be most helpful to keep a copy of your Bible handy, many of the biblical texts we will examine will be quoted in full. So, get ready to engage old age with the wisdom of the ages.

Chapter One

Recycled Teenagers

About fifteen years ago I went to my elderly parents' home for a holiday. We decided to go for a customary walk around town and proceeded to put on jackets and walking shoes. My father showed up sporting a new hat from his extensive collection. He had received most of these as gifts. What else do you give an old man who needs fewer and fewer material goods?

In any case, this cap proudly announced: "I'm not old. I'm a recycled teenager!" I had never seen the expression before. He explained that one of the grandchildren had found it in some tourist shop and given it to him as a gift. What was so surprising was that he was inordinately proud of it. All of us in the family knew that he complained considerably about growing old. He always felt cold; his food did not taste the same; he had trouble going up and down steps; he had to frequent bathrooms often, most vexingly in the middle of the night; and he had multiple small aches and pains. "Old age is hell," he would say. Others would add, "Old age is not for the weak!"

Yet here he was advertising that he was *not* old (despite appearances)—he was a recycled version of himself as an adolescent. He liked the idea of being a "recycled teenager."

In fact, despite his age and increasing health problems, my father remained remarkably spry, especially mentally. If his short-term memory was a bit rusty, his long-term memory was often in high gear. He could regale us with tales of his exploits as a young man, some of which were a little risqué for my mother. He could also still recite by heart a long poem that he had had to memorize in grade school.

We have all known people who seem to remain “young at heart” despite their chronological age. I never cease to admire them. Their response to being “time-challenged”—as I overheard one old-timer call it—appears to defy the rules of aging. Even if they no longer retain the same energy or swift reflexes, nevertheless they hold up well because their attitude is positive and they do not allow age to *define* them.

But what about the Bible, as regards old age? One person, upon hearing that I intended to write this book, simply responded: “Oh, it will be a mighty short book! All you have to say is that gray hair and wisdom are the marks of old age.” This opinion—which is quite prevalent, I think—is partially correct, but not totally. The Bible, in fact, has a broader teaching than that. It can help us reflect on old age in a deeper way than we might imagine.

Old Age in Biblical Times

One of the most evident truths of the biblical perspective on old age was that it was desirable. Old age was considered

a blessing from God, not a scourge. One finds this point of view already in the first book of the Bible, Genesis. The reader will likely remember the fantastic ages of some of the people in this book, which is devoted to the patriarchs and matriarchs of Israel from time immemorial. Just look at this list of ages.

Adam, the first human being, whose name means “earth being” because he was formed from the dust (Hebrew *'adam*) of the earth (Genesis 2:7), is said to have lived 930 years (5:5)! In fact, Genesis says he fathered a son, Seth, at the age of 130 (5:3) and then went on to live another 800 years. (That is some fortitude!) This same Seth is then said to have lived to the age of 912 and to have fathered a son when he was only 105 (5:7-8). Like father, like son, perhaps.

But these only begin the list of fantastic ages in Genesis chapter 5. It continues, with the following key figures:

Enosh = 905

Kenan = 910

Mahalalel = 895

Jared = 962

Enoch = 365 (the youngster of the bunch)

Lamech, the father of Noah = 777 (the lucky number!)

The “granddaddy” of them all, of course, was Methuselah. He is the source of the adage, “as old as Methuselah,” that we still use to speak of people in greatly advanced age. Here is what the biblical text says:

When Methuselah had lived one hundred eighty-seven years, he became the father of Lamech. Methuselah lived after the birth of Lamech seven hundred eighty-two years, and had other sons and daughters. Thus all the days of Methuselah were nine hundred sixty-nine years; and he died. (Genesis 5:25-27)

No wonder he is the stellar example of long life! I love the brevity of the text after recounting his incredible age: “and he died”! He must have been tired. He lived 969 years, dying in the year of the great flood, for which God tells Noah to build his ark (Genesis 6:14-22). Noah himself is said to have lived to the age of 950, having fathered his sons Shem, Ham, and Japheth when he was a mere 500 years old (5:32). And these are not the only ones mentioned in Genesis. The unbelievable list of extreme ages continues in Genesis 11:10-26 with Arpachshad (438 years), Shelah (433 years), Eber (464 years), Peleg (239 years), Reu (239 years), Seroug (230 years), Nahor (148 years), and Terah, the father of Abraham (205 years).

Notice that once we hit the list of patriarchs whose names are more familiar to us—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the three main patriarchs of the God of Israel—their ages start to decline considerably. Thus, Abraham is said to live to 175 (Genesis 25:7), Isaac to 180 (35:28-29), and Jacob to only 147 (47:28). Sarah is said to have died at 127 (23:1). More impressive is that Abraham’s call by God to abandon his home and set out for the promised land came at age seventy-five (12:4)!

What are we to make of these incredible ages? Did they know some secret recipe for delaying old age that has been lost over time?

Unless you are really a biblical fundamentalist and take the Bible in every respect in a literal fashion, you obviously recognize that such figures are not meant to be taken literally. They are symbolic. They represent an extreme respect for growing old. Old age was equated with God's blessing and living an upright life. We must keep in mind that Genesis is the literature of myth. *Myth* does not mean falsehood. On the contrary, it means wrestling with deep truths. But these truths are couched in the form of stories and fantastic tales meant to promote appreciation of the universe from a religious, not scientific or historical, perspective. Myth is a category of literature. It is a way of reflecting deeply on the mysteries of the cosmos and human existence that find expression in narratives. So, these fantastic ages listed in Genesis are a way of acknowledging some of the heroes of ages past. They point to a mythical time when things seemed more perfect, and people lived more in tune with God's design. Old age is one of those distinguishing characteristics of Israel's heroes.

Old age is equated with God's blessing. The Book of Proverbs, for example, offers a common judgment: "Gray hair is a crown of glory; / it is gained in a righteous life" (Proverbs 16:31). An older translation of the same proverb uses a more poetic expression: "A hoary head is a crown of glory." Having a "hoary" head meant having gray or white hair; it was an expression for extreme old age. The term

shows that such physical evidence is associated with having achieved something righteous in life and thus having been blessed by God. Old age counts for something.

Confirmation of this understanding (that exaggerating ages of important figures was a way of affirming age as venerable) is found in a comparable list of kings who ruled in Sumeria, a neighboring land in the ancient Near East. In a famous list of Sumerian kings they are said to have lived and ruled an even more fantastic number of years. For example, King Alulim ruled for 28,800 years; King Alalngar ruled for 36,000 years; King Enmenluana ruled for 43,200 years; and so on! By comparison, the distant patriarchs of Israel we listed above were quite short-lived.

A change in appreciation of old age, however, appears even in the Book of Genesis. After the earlier list of long-lived patriarchs, God seemingly decides to set a more reasonable time limit. “Then the LORD said, ‘My spirit shall not abide in mortals forever, for they are flesh; their days shall be one hundred twenty years’” (Genesis 6:3). One hundred twenty years. That’s still not a bad age limit. It’s as if, all of a sudden, God decides that 120 years is a more acceptable time frame for human beings. A later book, Second Chronicles, says that one of the Jewish high priests in Israel’s history, Jehoiada, lived to be 130, but again this is likely an exaggerated age to indicate the high esteem in which he was held. The author of Chronicles has a tendency to evaluate historical figures in simplistic terms of good and bad. In the case of this high priest, he is