

## 2CH Sunday at 7.30

Talks from the NSW Council of Churches

### Finishing well

Presented by Steve Cooper

Good morning!

Many people these days are living longer than folk used to live. Not long ago most Australians died before they were 80, but now a lot of people live into their 80s and beyond. There are all kinds of reasons for this, including advances in medical care.

One result of longer lives is that many older people have to live with the frailties and aches and pains of old age. It's hard, after a lifetime of good health, to suffer from increasing weakness and vulnerability. As a pastor I often visit people in retirement villages and nursing homes. I meet many who find the challenges of being an older person to be discouraging and daunting.

I often ask myself the question: 'Can an older person flourish and thrive?' For me it's a personal question, because as I grow older myself I want to be a person who finishes well.

This morning let's reflect on some passages from the Bible that give us wise insights, helping us grow old with a positive spirit. Stay tuned!

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This morning we're asking the question: 'Can an older person flourish and thrive?' I recently came across a poem entitled 'Let me not see old age'. The writer is afraid of becoming an older person. It goes:

Let me not see old age: Let me not hear  
 The proffered help, the mumbled sympathy,  
 The well-meant tactful sophistries that mock  
 Pathetic husks who once were strong and free,  
 And in youth's fickle triumph laughed and sang,  
 Loved and were foolish; and at the close have seen  
 The fruits of folly garnered, and that love,  
 Tamed and encaged, stale into grey routine.  
 Let me not see old age; I am content  
 With my few crowded years; laughter and strength  
 And song have lit the beacon of my life.  
 Let me not see it fade, but when the long  
 September shadows steal across the square,  
 Grant me this wish; they may not find me there.

The person who wrote that poem was clearly afraid of old age! The writer is scared of becoming weak, frail, restricted, bored with drab routine. My 17 year old daughter often says she hopes never to live long enough to reach that stage! Recently I led a funeral for a friend who died at age 67 – interestingly, she often told her children that she didn't want to live beyond 70! I guess part of the problem is older people themselves, many of whom do complain so much about their aches and pains that people dread ever growing old.

What a contrast to all this is the portrait of the older person in Psalm 92. The psalm expresses praise to the Lord for his love and faithfulness, his great deeds, his profound thoughts. The psalm ends by describing the person who loves and obeys the Lord when they grow old: ‘The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, “The Lord is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him.”’ (that’s Psalm 92, verses 12 to 15).

Here is the possibility for an older person to truly flourish and thrive. The psalm writer presents a vivid analogy - just as a healthy tree can live for many years and keep drawing nourishment from the soil, rain and sun, so the older person can draw from God the inner strength to stay fresh and green and fruitful. Here is a person who, after many years of trusting God and praising him, can say ‘The Lord is my Rock, he is always dependable and faithful.’ The key is to commit ourselves to God, in every season of life, including our old age.

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This morning we’re exploring how we can finish life well, so that if we grow old we can still flourish and thrive. I was talking recently to a woman who suddenly had to move from her house where she’d lived for 30 years, and moved into a small room in a lodge for older people. She found it hard to make the move, but she is a Christian and she’s trusting that God will show his goodness to her in this next stage of life. I thought to myself, ‘Here’s a person who will bloom where she’s planted.’ I was impressed with her positive approach. It reminded me of what Psalm 92 says about the older person who delights in God and his ways: ‘They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green’ (v.14).

The apostle Paul knew many hardships in his life, and he suffered from various troubles as he grew older. Yet he wrote these words: ‘Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.’ (2 Cor 4:16) It can be like that for the Christian who grows older. Our bodies may be declining and weakening, but if we focus on Christ and his love for us, our inward spirits and mental attitudes will be renewed and strengthened each day. The key is to stay close to God, and commit ourselves to him.

Let’s talk about some practical ways in which we can finish well as we grow old.

None of us like getting old – we can’t do everything we once did, and every morning seems to bring with it some new ache or pain – or worse. We don’t like the sense of loss we feel as more and more of our contemporaries become disabled or die. Nevertheless old age has its compensations. More than ever we can see each day as a gift of God – a gift we must not take for granted. It’s also a time to reflect back on God’s goodness over the years, and an opportunity to assure others that God truly is faithful to his promises. As the writer of Psalm 92 says, the older person who is godly can say ‘The Lord is upright, he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him’ (v.15). Most of all, older age is a time to rejoice in our hope of heaven.

Devote time to prayer also. A few weeks before his death a Christian man remarked that if he didn’t have the strength to pray aloud, he could still whisper, and if he couldn’t whisper, he could still move his lips, and if he couldn’t move his lips, he could still pray silently in his mind. I know many older Christians who have a list of missionaries they’ve known over the years, and every morning they pray for a certain number of them by name. Even as they grow older, they know they are having a part in the ministry of these missionaries.

Strengthen the relationships God has already given you - with your spouse, your children, your friends, your fellow believers. When we’re isolated or think we don’t need others, we become much more vulnerable to temptation and compromise. Godly relationships make us accountable to others and fill our lives with joy.

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When we grow older, it is possible to flourish and thrive? Can we finish the journey of life well? I'm impressed with a book written by Billy Graham about five years ago. Billy is still alive, aged 92, and at the time of writing he was in his late 80s. Billy comments on the compensations of growing older, and writes: 'I've discovered it's a time to take delight in life's little pleasures – even ones we may have overlooked before. On my doctor's recommendation I have started using a walker to help me keep my balance, and this means I'm constantly looking down at the ground around my feet. Suddenly I'm seeing things I never really noticed before – tiny insects and colourful bits of rock and miniature plants – all reminding me of the beauty and intricacy of God's creation. The Bible says, "Go to the ant ... consider its ways and be wise!" (Proverbs 6:6).' What an inspiration Billy Graham still is!

We must also be alert to the dangers and temptations of older age. Old age is Satan's last chance to blow us off course, and you can be sure he'll try. It's hard not to worry about our health or loneliness or financial situation or any number of other issues we may face as we grow older. It's hard, too, not to feel discouraged as our independence slips away or disabilities grow. We may even wonder if God has abandoned us.

But he hasn't. Jesus' promise is just as true now as at any other stage of life: 'I am with you always, to the very end of the age' (Matthew 28:20). Lean to commit every situation to God, and trust him for the outcome. God's love for you never changes, not matter what problems you face or how unsettled life becomes. Nothing takes him by surprise, and he can be trusted to do what's best. Instead of letting fear and anxiety paralyse you, lean to commit everything to God. The Bible says, 'Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord, the Lord, is the Rock eternal' (Isaiah 26:4).

It's possible, when you're an older person, to feel closer to God than at any other time of your life. You may not be able to do everything you once did – but you can do something, and God can still use you to bless others. Ask him to help you reflect Christ as you grow older, instead of turning sour or grumpy.

As the apostle Paul's life neared its end, he was left with almost nothing. Imprisoned in Rome because of his faith, he didn't even have a cloak to shield his frail body against the coming winter. His friends had abandoned him or gone elsewhere; only one – Luke – was still with him. Measured by the world's standards his life was a failure. But not by God's standards! Christ had called Paul to be his disciple, and Paul had been faithful to his calling. As he looked back over his life as a Christian, with all of its hardships and temptations, he could truthfully say, 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith' (2 Timothy 4:7). Paul finished well. Will you?

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None of us have a choice about whether we will reach old age. But if we do grow older, we certainly have choices about how we will approach our latter years. We can become inward and self-centred, focussed on our problems. Far better to choose to praise God and focus on the many blessings he gives us each day. Like the person portrayed in Psalm 92, we can flourish and thrive and bear fruit like healthy trees, even in old age. We can proclaim: 'The Lord is upright; he is my Rock' (v.15).

Let me pray. 'Merciful God, thank you for the rich provision you make for us in every stage of life. As we move into old age, may our latter years be the most fulfilling of our lives – as we commit our lives to you. Help us now to develop our relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ, so that we can stay the course and finish the journey of life well. We ask this for the glory and honour of Jesus. Amen.'