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## *Some General Points from the Biblical Teaching on the Subject of the Aged*

### ***(a) The aged must be shown respect***

When a society shows disrespect for the aged, it is a sure sign that it is under the curse of God (Deuteronomy 28:50; 2 Chronicles 36:17; Isaiah 3:5). God has linked respect for the elderly with the respect due to his name, so high a value has he placed upon it. 'You shall rise up before the grey-headed and honour the presence of an old man, and fear your God' (Leviticus 19:32). When Paul appealed to Philemon, he used his age as an argument to secure his obedience (Philemon 9). David treated the aged Barzillai with gentle consideration (2 Samuel 19:31-39). It is a Christian duty to respect the aged. It is a sin to despise parents when they get old (Proverbs 23:22). Even the heathen Pharaoh respected Jacob's age (Genesis 47:7-8).

### ***(b) The aged must maintain a careful watch over their spiritual state***

A fine testimony of a Christian can easily be marred in old age. Samuel, for example, made bad mistakes of judgement when he grew old: 'When Samuel was old he made his sons judges over Israel but his sons did not walk in his ways; they turned aside after dishonest gain, took bribes and perverted justice' (1 Samuel 8:1,3). Solomon, also, marred his testimony in his old age: 'As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not loyal to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been' (1 Kings 11:4). Wisdom should be a characteristic of the elderly but it is not always so: 'Better is a poor and wise

youth than an old and foolish king who will be admonished no more' (Ecclesiastes 4:13). There are such things as 'old wives tales' (1 Timothy 4:7). Old age is a special time of spiritual danger. Christians have to avoid foolishness, superstition and spiritual declension as they reach the end of their days. True it is that 'grey hair [is] the splendour of the old' (Proverbs 20:29) – but only 'if it be found in the way of righteousness' (Proverbs 16:31).

God has given direct instruction to his elderly people so that they might maintain their spiritual self-watch: 'The older men [must] be sober, reverent, temperate, sound in faith, in love, in patience. The older women likewise, that they be reverent in behaviour, not slanderers, not given to much wine, teachers of good things' (Titus 2:2-3). The Scripture teaches that aged Christian men must exercise a sound, balanced judgement, not clouded by alcohol. They are to avoid frivolity and instead they must cultivate a grave, serious life worthy of the respect that God demands for them. They are to be self-controlled. They must make sure that they are, indeed, true Christians, well-grounded in the faith. They must show true spiritual love and a persevering spirit. Aged Christian women, likewise, must show a dignified seriousness in their way of life. This must extend to their manner of dress and their entire bearing. They must be careful in what they say – especially avoiding gossip and silly talk. Old people, especially women, can do great harm by spreading foolish, superstitious and malicious tales. They, too, must avoid the snare of alcohol. On the positive side, they must seek to help younger Christian housewives in the practical affairs of running a home to the glory of God. They must teach them from the word of God, enforcing their instruction by their own experience.

If elderly Christians obey this teaching of the Bible they will, indeed, keep a good watch over their spiritual state in their old age.

***(c) The aged must continue to hope in the promises of God***

God has given great encouragements to his aged people in his word. They must continue to look for the fulfilment of those promises in their life. There are three parts to this:

*First*, they must trust God's promises to them as individuals.

*Secondly*, they must trust God's promises to the church at large.

*Thirdly*, they must pray for the fulfilment of the promises of God.

God has promised special grace to the aged Christian, and so an aged Christian must trust God for the fulfilment of his word. God will never forsake any of his people; no, not even when they are old and weak: 'Even to your old age I am he, and even to grey hairs I will carry you! I have made you and I will bear you: I will sustain you and I will deliver you' (Isaiah 46:4). God has promised his people spiritual prosperity – even when they are old: 'They shall still bear fruit in old age, they shall be fresh and flourishing' (Psalm 92:14). The elderly Christian should pray that God will perform his promise to him in particular. So did the Psalmist: 'Even when I am old and grey, O God, do not forsake me' (Psalm 71:18). Simeon, as he came near to death, was looking for the fulfilment of God's promise to him (Luke 2:25-35). Anna who 'was of a great age... gave thanks to the Lord and spoke of him [Jesus] to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem' (Luke 2:36-38). Even in her great age she was still rejoicing in God who was fulfilling his promises to his people.

The elderly must continue to exercise a strong faith in God. They must look to him that he will not only bless them but that he will prosper the church. Unbelief is a great sin at any age. The elderly are no exception. Zechariah's case is a warning of the possibility of unbelief in advanced years (Luke 1:18-20). Every Christian must aim to have the testimony of Hebrews 11:13: 'All these died in faith, not having received the promises but having seen them afar off,

they were assured of them'. If the old-covenant saints had this assurance, not having received the promises, we as believers, who have received the promises, must be assured of them.

***(d) The aged must still seek to be useful***

Aged Christians can feel that they have little use left in them. That is all wrong. As the people of God get near to the end of their earthly life they must seek to be useful Christians still: 'Even when I am old and grey, O God, do not forsake me'. Why did the Psalmist pray like that? Did he wish just to prove God's gracious love for him in his time of weakness? Certainly not! Listen to him! 'Even when I am old and grey, O God, do not forsake me, until I declare your power to this generation, your power to all that are to come' (Psalm 71:18). He wanted to leave behind him a glorious testimony to God and his power. Look at the extent of his vision. Did he think in terms of influencing a few people, a mere handful? No. He wanted to influence 'this generation', and indeed, 'all who are to come'. He certainly was not thinking that he would be useless in his last years. In some senses, perhaps, his life's greatest work had to be accomplished then. Anna who 'was of a great age... spoke... to all' about Christ (Luke 2:36-38). God's elderly still have a work to do for him. 'They shall still bear fruit in old age, they shall be fresh and flourishing, to declare that "the LORD is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him"' (Psalm 92:14-15).

***(e) The aged must prepare for death***

Aged Christians are obviously near to death and there is an inevitable fear of it. After all, it is the enemy of men. Only Christ can free men from its slavery (Hebrews 2:14-15). But it is 'the last enemy to be destroyed' (1 Corinthians 15:26). Christians still have to pass the way of it and it can bring fear to them. But Christ has drawn its sting and God has given wonderful promises to his people to comfort them in this, their last trial: 'Death is swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your sting? Where, O grave, is your victory? The

sting of death is sin, and the strength of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ' (1 Corinthians 15:54-57). He still says to all his people: 'I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me, even though he dies, he shall live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?' (John 11:25-26). 'Let not your heart be troubled; you believe in God, believe also in me. In my Father's house are many mansions, if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to myself; that where I am, there you may be also' (John 14:1-3). An elderly Christian should comfort his heart much by the meditation of heaven which will so soon be his home. Paul did as he neared death: 'The time of my departure is at hand. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Finally there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me, but also to all who have loved his appearing' (2 Timothy 4:6-8). 'For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain... I desire to depart and be with Christ, which is better by far' (Philippians 1:21-23). An aged Christian, especially, since he is so near his entrance into heaven, should think about his approaching death and prepare for it. He may take the precious comfort of God to give him strength in his last days. God has special grace for the dying day. Joshua was 'old and advanced in years' when he gathered the people before him and spoke of God's works and how he had kept his promises. He encouraged them to go on with the LORD and warned them against disobedience: 'Now I am about to go the way of all the earth... not one thing has failed of all the good things which the Lord your God spoke concerning you', he said (Joshua 23:14). Yes, the aged Christian must prepare for death.

***(f) The aged must not waste themselves in useless regrets***

An elderly person might come under conviction of sin by the power of the Holy Spirit. And it might dawn upon him that

he has practically wasted his life. Such a person must not waste time regretting the wasted years away from Christ. He must get on now! He must seek the Lord while he still has the time and opportunity. It is no use sitting around grieving over what might have been. God will be found by all who seek him. Even in old age a sinner can be brought to salvation. God will hear and answer the prayer: 'Even when I am old and grey, O God, do not forsake me' (Psalm 71:18). 'You will seek the LORD your God, you will find him if you seek for him with all your heart and with all your soul. When you are in distress and all these things come upon you in the latter days, you will turn to the LORD your God and obey him' (Deuteronomy 4:29-31). 'Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near... let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon' (Isaiah 55:6-7).

But not only must an aged unconverted sinner not waste time in useless regrets, neither must an aged Christian. It is a temptation for the elderly child of God to waste his time, his precious time, in grieving over the past. There are three things involved in this regret for past failures:

(i) *It is an almost universal grief.* In some senses, it ought to be. No one, surely, has ever lived his life so as to be free of regrets? However, some of God's children are especially prone to this worry. Perhaps there have been long periods of wasted years, backsliding and drifting in spiritual experience. Such neglect, and so many missed opportunities, lie heavy on the soul. Old age can be a sorrowful time for the people of God. Wasted years bring anguish of heart.

(ii) *It is a useless grief.* The explanation of this is simple, in the extreme. What good will it do to sit grieving over the past? Spilled milk never was put back into the bottle by grieving about it. The years have been wasted, perhaps. Grieving about them will never bring back the opportunities. No aged Christian should allow the devil to gain an advantage over him by causing needless grief in this way. It is a master stroke – the devil kills two birds with one stone.

He produces sorrow over the past and paralyses the Christian for the present. Thus, he is helping the aged Christian to waste even more years! Christians should not waste their time in living in regret over the wasted years of the past. They should get on and live better lives now. They must not waste the future and the present by living in the past.

*(iii) It is a grief that has an answer.* God completely understands the fears of his children. He knows that they can all look back upon waste in their spiritual lives. He knows and he has done something about it. He has given a wonderful promise. What is more, he keeps it. God has promised to make up for the wasted years! 'I will restore to you the years that the locust has eaten' (Joel 2:25). An aged Christian can experience a glorious spiritual reviving in his closing years. God has promised that what he can do in a physical way he can do, also, in a spiritual way: 'At evening time, it shall happen, that it will be light' (Zechariah 14:7).

Christians experience bereavement and sorrow. But a Christian must not 'sorrow as others, who have no hope' (1 Thessalonians 4:13). Christ has comfort for those who mourn about sin (Matthew 5:4). An aged Christian must guard against the danger of worldly sorrow in his loneliness. He must not waste time in useless grief. He must show to a watching world that Christ has given him the answer.

***(g) The aged must realise and accept their limitations***

As we have seen, increasing age brings increasing limitations. The aged Christian must recognise this and accept it. He must not try to act as though he was still in his youthful prime. He must live in a manner becoming his age and maturity (Titus 2:2-5). Also, he must allow for the fact that his decline in old age can be a source of difficulty for his family and friends, as well as for himself. An aged Christian must show a sensible, a spiritual, attitude to this. He must try to ease the difficulties his decline causes others.

The aged Barzillai had been good to king David in the past and David wished to honour him. But Barzillai knew that he would only be a burden to the king because his age prevented him from enjoying the life-style David offered him. He declined to impose himself upon the king (2 Samuel 19:31-39). When age brings its decline, the godly must allow for it. Certain things cannot be done. Certain burdens have to be laid down. Place has to be given to younger men. 'Know thyself' is a good dictum for the aged, as well as for all others.

Abraham showed many of these aspects of true spirituality in his old age. When he was 'old and well advanced in years', he still trusted God's promises; he was still mindful of his duty and responsibilities; he still took thought for the future, his descendants, *etc*; he still lived an orderly, careful life in a serious manner. See Genesis 24:1-9.

### ***Application to an elderly Christian***

God demands people show respect for you. Do you live worthy of such respect? Do you live so as to commend the name of God to others? Do you live worthily in the light of Leviticus 19:32, in a conscious way? Do you watch over your soul? Are you careful and prayerful that you might maintain a strong, vital spiritual experience, right to the end of your life? Are you jealous, lest anything should mar your testimony now, at the end of your life? Do you consciously apply Titus 2:2-3? Do you rest in the promises of God? Do you pray for their fulfilment in your life? Do you pray for the prosperity of the church? Do you try to do good? Are you useful? Are you ready to die? Is your house in order, so that when the day comes you only have to die? Are you consciously resting on Christ and the promises of God as you approach death? Do you speak of Christ and recommend him to all you can?

Do you sit around grieving over the past? Do you wring your hands and your heart over what 'might have been'? Can you not see the wiles of the devil in this? Will you not trust in the



plain promise of God, that he will make up for the losses? Trust in the blood of Christ to rid you of all sin and then press on. Can you not catch the vision that your best, most spiritual and useful years may be ahead of you? Don't live in the past. Live now and think ahead. Pray that you might live to see the raising of Zion to be a praise in the earth, even yet.

### *Application to a Christian of younger years*

Do you show the respect to the aged that you ought? Do you realise that it is not merely a social custom, a sign of 'good manners', but that it is a Christian duty? God has commanded respect for the aged, even linking it to his own name (Leviticus 19:32) – do you consciously link obedience to that command with obedience to the first three of the ten commandments? Do you seek to help aged Christians maintain their spiritual experience? Do you pray for those aged Christians you know, that they might grow in grace and in the knowledge of Christ? Do you remind them of the promises of God when you see them cast down? Do you accept their help and advice? Or do you dismiss them as old-fashioned and outdated? Do you value their spiritual maturity? Do you benefit as much as you might from them? Or as much as you ought?

What is more, if the aged should prepare for death, so should you. If you are to have no regrets when you get old, live now with that end in mind. Are you wasting your youth? Are you wasting your opportunities for spiritual growth? 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' (Ecclesiastes 12:1). 'Be careful, then, how you live – not as unwise but as wise, redeeming the time, [making the most of every opportunity], because the days are evil' (Ephesians 5:15-16; Colossians 4:5). Do not put off spiritual growth until tomorrow. Do not wait until you have finished this and that. Start now. If you do not want to grieve over the years that the locust has eaten, do not let spiritual locusts eat any. Clear, isn't it? But by God's grace it

is possible. Pray now: ‘Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom’ (Psalm 90:12). ‘Lord make me to know my end, and what is the measure of my days, that I may know how frail I am’ (Psalm 39:4). Live now so that you will ‘dread the grave as little as your bed’. If you would have Christ say to you: ‘Well done, good and faithful servant’, be a good and faithful servant, now. Are you ‘fighting the good fight and keeping the faith’, now? What steps are you taking to ensure that you can echo the words of Paul in 2 Timothy 4:6-8?