

Divine Perspective, Growing Old, and the Eight Stages of Life

sermon by
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I want to read a very special verse from the Psalms, chapter 37, verse 25. King David says, "I was young and now I am old, but I have never seen the righteous forsaken or his seed out begging for bread."

Old age has some advantages. Particularly if you are a Christian and a follower of Jesus Christ. One of these advantages is divine perspective. As you have walked with the Lord over the years, you have developed a perspective on life that many in our world do not have. David, having grown old, could look back at his long life and honestly say that he had never seen those who served the Lord abandoned or forsaken, nor had he ever witnessed their offspring begging by the side of the road or outside the city walls.

There are stages in life of growth and development. Some psychologists say that there are three stages of the way we develop in life, childhood, adulthood, and old age. Other psychologists tell us there are four, infancy, childhood, adolescence and adulthood. And there is a third group of psychologists who believe that there are actually eight stages of development. The first is infancy. The second is early childhood, from toddler on up, a time when children learn socialization and communication skills. The third stage is called middle-childhood. This is when we learn and make self-discoveries. We learn about things we do well, and things we need to improve on. The fourth stage is adolescence. We develop abstract thinking, self-confidence, but we can also make room for risky behavior during our adolescent years. The fifth stage is early adulthood, our twenties. These are considered the defining decades of life, a time when we make some of our life's most important decisions.

The sixth stage in life, according to this way of thinking, is middle adulthood, from the late 30's to the 60's. This is a time when the aging process becomes more noticeable. This is also the season of life when we develop a level of excellence and competence in what we do. This stage leads us into late adulthood, a time when we naturally become more reflective, and take time to look back at the experiences of life that have brought us to this seventh stage. The final stage, stage eight, is the time of dying and death. It's a stage we are not comfortable talking about. Is this the end, or what comes next?

As I've entered into the seventh stage of my life, I have come to realize more profoundly that the one thing I cannot waste is time. Time is not a renewable resource, and as I live life in this seventh stage I do so recognizing how valuable my time is and has been.

King David was in this seventh stage of life when he penned the words of his 37th Psalm. Looking back, he could count many amazing experiences and achievements, like the time he killed a lion and a bear when he was still a very young man, or when he had defeated Goliath the Philistine giant. The story of David vs Goliath is one that every young student of the Bible learns and remembers in detail. It is a story that has become synonymous with overcoming adversity for people of nearly every culture and faith. David was also a skilled musician, and whenever the Spirit of God would anoint him, he would play music that calmed and ministered to King Saul. He was a writer of songs of praise and confession as well, and these are contained in many of the Psalms we treasure today. But David also made some very bad decisions. David's shortcomings are thoroughly documented in all of their tragic detail in the first and second books of the prophet Samuel. Among David's serious lapses of judgement and moral failings we find everything from eating holy bread, like communion wafers, that was reserved for the temple priests to a highly visible extramarital affair and plotting murder!

When we read about David's life as the prophet Samuel recorded it, we discover many high points of faith and success and many dismal failures. Does David's story remind us in some ways of our own life? When we ask ourselves this question, let us first remember Saint Paul's declaration to the believers in Rome (Romans 3:23), "For all have sinned and fallen short of the glory, or holiness, of God."

If you start examining the stages of your life and come to the conclusion that you are a sinner and unworthy of God's glory, then you are in very good company, for all humankind has fallen short of God's holiness. Take heart! David may have paid a steep price for his rebellion and sin, but God was merciful, forgiving him when he repented, and restoring him to a place of leadership and to "a man after God's own heart." (1 Samuel 13:14) How thankful we are today, as we look back at our own lives and see how God's mercy and forgiveness has been extended to our lives as well. Like the prophet Jeremiah proclaims, we too can say today, "It is because of the Lord's mercies that we are not consumed, because His compassions never fail. They are made new to us every morning, for great is Thy faithfulness." (Lamentations 3:22-23)

The author of the first book of John describes Jesus standing at the right hand of God's throne as our advocate, arguing our case before His Father, and reminding Him of the forgiveness He has promised to all those who seek His mercy. What a wonderful thought!

The heart of this message is about divine perspective, one that comes to us when we reflect and look back at our lives, even as King David did when he was old. As a young boy he had cared for his father's herds of sheep. He was still only a young boy when he let the stone fly from his shepherd's sling and killed Goliath the Philistine giant. He was a young man when he became the chief musician in the palace and wrote many of our most memorable psalms or songs of praise. He was a young man when he became king of the nation of Israel. But time relentlessly passed, as it does for all of us, and before he might have realized it King David had to admit, "but now I am old."

David was growing old when the Philistines made another attempt to overthrow the nation of Israel. As the two armies met on the field of battle, David prepared himself for the bloody encounter. He was still endowed with a general's mind and warrior's spirit. But what David no longer possessed was the stamina and strength of his youth. Outside the city walls stood another Philistine giant, a man of extraordinary strength and size, like Goliath. With the unlikely name of Ishbi-Benob, he had come to kill the Israelite king. We read that his spear weighed seven pounds. He was as feared as the foe of David's youth. It was then that the younger men around David convinced him that it was their turn to engage in this kind of fighting, and a young hero named Abishai, the son of King David's younger sister, Zeruiah, stepped up. Abishai killed the giant Ishbi-Benob. Without his courage and action,

David's life might well have ended that day.

We learn a great deal from this story that is relevant to my message today. There are stages and seasons in life, and the battles of my youth must be, at a given and appointed time, handed over to the next generation. This is true in all of our lives as we grow old. The experiences and wisdom that God has given to each of us over the years must be rightly preserved to serve God and the people He has placed in our lives. As we enter the later stages of our life we are called to offer sound guidance and spiritual counsel. The flesh and bone battles of our youth are in the past, and a new kind of spiritual warfare that demands our leadership is in store. As elders, we are called to be a lamp to a younger generation, even as the prophet records in II Samuel 21:17: "Never again will you (David) go out with us into battle, so that the lamp of Israel will not be extinguished (before its' time)."

These young champions of Israel loved and treasured their king. To them, David had great value and they wanted him to lead and guide them for sure, but from behind the front lines. David too, was beginning to realize that the one battle he could not win was the one against time and growing old. The sweat and dangers of battle were meant for the younger generation and his value as a leader and king was too great to be spent in such mortal combat. Today, as I reflect on the idea of growing old, as I do so reflecting on one king's journey, I find myself also reflecting on these truths as an aging pastor.

As I read David's words, about reaching old age and never once having witnessed the righteous forsaken, I do so looking back at my own life with full agreement. I was still a teenager when I encountered the gospel more than fifty years ago. I was only a youth when I gave my heart to Christ and committed my life to ministry. Back then, I may not have fully understood what a call to ministry entailed, but as I sought God and read my copy of Good News for Modern Man, I believed with all of my heart that God was enlisting me to serve Him full time. It was during that critical moment in my life that I sought out a pastor friend. This man of God told me that I what I needed in order to fully answer God's call was the infilling of the Holy Spirit. And so it happened, that by grace, inside a somewhat dark and somber Presbyterian church auditorium on a Saturday night, I received a new experience of Holy Spirit power. I can vividly remember that night as if it was yesterday, not half a century ago, how that old Presbyterian church was filled with the presence of God's Spirit as if stadium lights had been switched on! Tears flowed from my eyes as I began to pray and worship in a new and unknown language. From that day, and ever since, my life has never been the same!

I was still a young man when I attended Bible college, and when I married my wife Dawn. Not many years later we went together as missionaries, first to Alaska and then to Africa. Later, I had the privilege to chair the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Saint Augustine College, and as an Executive Director of two dedicated, Christian nonprofits. These God-ordained experiences led me to becoming the senior pastor here at North Haven Church. Through it all, God has been faithful to His calling, and blessed all of these efforts, for which I am eternally grateful and give Him the glory. But, as many of my well-meaning friends have begun to remind me, I am no longer that young man who set off for the wilds of Alaska or the steppes of Africa. When you reach seventy years of age, as I did this past week, you are old, man; old enough to have eight grandchildren, and to have buried a father and mother, and last month, an eldest sister, old enough to have witnessed countless miracles of healing and God's work in the transformations of the lives of hundreds and thousands of souls. Reaching seventy, I'm old enough to have experienced God's answers to prayer more times than I can remember, and old enough to have known the exulting joys and success, as well as the sting of disappointment. When it's all been said and done, one formula stands out to me today, that life's successes are not final and life's failures are not fatal! When we succeed, we must never assume that this will always be the case, and when we stumble, we must also realize that our failures are not the end.

I was once young, and now I am old, but God has not forsaken me in my seventh-stage years. To everything there is a season, and it's imperative for us to know what season of life we are in. We should all ask ourselves this question today: Am I fulfilling my purpose in life according to the season I find myself in? When I look at my role as senior pastor at the North Haven Church in Raleigh, North Carolina, I know in my heart that, as much as I love this role God has gifted me with, it is a season that is drawing to a close.

As I consider the transition such a realization implies, I ask for three things only. I ask for prayer that God will guide and oversee whatever changes take place as I move on to where He is leading me in this seventh stage of my life. Secondly, I pray for loyalty, that we all be true to Christ and the Christian community we have been called to be part of and serve. We are called to one body not to one individual. Let us be loyal to the body of Christ and to the community of believers selflessly and with committed hearts. Lastly, let us demonstrate faith. I pray that our faith will always rest secure in God's plan, for He alone is the author and finisher of our Christian walk. His mercies extend to us faithfully through all of the chapters and stages of our lives, whether they be three or eight, He is faithful and His compassions never fail.

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