

## **SPIRITUAL SUPPORT FOR OLDER PEOPLE**

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We now have the largest generation of older people in history. It is probably also the most diverse. There are said to be three stages of old age; the young old, from 65 to 80, the middle stage up to 95, and then the 'oldest old'. Each stage has experienced different cultures in society. The biggest sector in this generation is that of the 'baby boomers', those born after 1945. They bring into this stage of their lives a nonconformist mindset that reflects, to an extent, the cultural changes they imposed in the early 1970s with global student rebellion and rejecting of traditional mores.

These 'young old's' were also responsible for the virulent ageism noted in 1969 by Prof R Butler, along with others, predicted fierce intergenerational warfare as resources became scarcer in times of financial constraint. Experts say that ageism narrows the definition of self among older people, lowers their expectations, and impairs their ambition.

But it is now being observed that the 'boomers' are challenging ageism themselves. Social observers and psychologists anticipate a resurgence of 'juvenescence', a lively, more involved attitude amongst older people.

Older people have considerably more life experience than younger. They have, in the vernacular, "been there and done that and got more T-shirts" than others. They often have closed mindsets that are resistant to persuasion. This can make them appear to be inflexible and stubborn, or slow-minded. But salvation is a work of the Holy Spirit. And more than with other generations, older people are best reached in a relational context.

### **WE BEGIN WITH THE SCRIPTURES.**

From the Scriptures we see that God has a high view of older people. When he put the sun and moon in place and created time, he designed old age. It can be argued that the Fall and sin has led to the vicissitudes of old age. Clearly, from the Scriptures we see that old age is a blessing from God.

- 'With a long life I will satisfy him and let him see My salvation.' Psalm 91:16
- '... if you walk in my ways, I will prolong your life.' 1 Kings 13:14
- 'you shall go to your fathers in peace; you will be buried at a good old age.' Genesis 15:15

*God designed old age on purpose, and older people have a distinct purpose.*

- They are to tell younger generations about him and his faithfulness.
- To radiate His graciousness and righteousness (Proverbs 4:18) to share experiences; to tell out His works (Psalm 78, 71)
- To ripen to maturity – and to stay fresh and green. Psalm 78, 71.

*Older people were revered in Old Testament Days.*

In Leviticus we are told to 'RISE in the presence of the aged'.

Looking back on his days of eminence as a civic leader, Job recalled, 'The young stepped aside when they saw me, **and even the aged rose in respect at my coming.**' Job 29:8.

Writing to Philemon for mercy for his servant, Onesimus, Paul appealed to his respect for older people – 'I, Paul, the aged ...' Not as a decrepit old man, but as a senior

God calls Himself the ancient of days

### ***Ageism has affected us all, to some extent***

Ageism is endemic in our society. We hear phrases such as, what do you expect at your age? Or, - 'I'm no use to anybody now', or - 'I don't want to be a burden', or 'I'm past it.' The secular life design concept is of childhood, adolescence, teenage, adulthood, and then the decline is to view of older people falling over the edge of the abyss into nothingness. Psychologists say that the pushing away of anything to do with old age is because of a deep-seated fear of death and lack of control.

### ***Lights shining on the path of righteousness***

In my book, 'What's Age Got To Do With It?', I quote examples of older people rejecting the ageist view and living purpose driven lives to the end. They are proof of God's purpose for old age.

### ***Opportune window for evangelism***

Our senior years are a time of introspection and reflection. It is a great opportunity, in relational settings, to share the good news of the meaning of life – Jesus Christ.

### ***Effective ministry with Seniors***

Older people do not engage with a 'top-down' approach. Relationships, empathy, honouring their experience, reframing griefs and disappointments in the light of eternity and giving a design perspective (rather than a secular) is more effective. And infusing conversation, gently, with Scripture, rather than heavily quoting is best.

### ***The power of the Scriptures***

Hebrews 4:12: For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart. Examples of this at work.

### ***What matters in the end***

The apostle Paul talks about our earthly tent decaying, and being transformed from one degree of glory to another. The Christian view of dying is different to the secular. Death for the Christian is a step to glory – a state better than we can ever imagine. (1 Corinthians 2:9) We don't talk about it enough because we don't talk about Heaven enough.

### ***Sharing with non-Christians***

Opportunities and constraints are unique to each context: must be sensitive to the Holy Spirit, Luke 23:42 was included for a reason, Dementia is no obstacle to the Holy Spirit and we know of many people who have come to faith with this condition.

### ***Finishing well***

The importance of spiritual growth and finishing well. Jeremiah 12:5:

‘Thank you, John Quincey Adams is very well in himself sir; but the house in which he lives is falling to pieces. Time and seasons have nearly destroyed it. The roof is well worn, the walls are shattered. It trembles with every gale. I think John Quincey Adams will soon have to move out. But he himself is very well, Sir.’

**Bible Verses:**

Jeremiah 12:5, Psalm 91:16; 1 Kings 13:14, Genesis 15:15, Psalm 78, 71, Leviticus 31:19, Job 29:8, Hebrews 4:12, 1 Corinthians 2:9, Proverbs 16:31, **1 Timothy 5:1**, **Corinthians 4:16-17**, Philemon 1:9, Psalm 92:14, Psalm 91:16, Deuteronomy 32:7, Job 32:7, **1 Timothy 5:1-2**, Genesis 15:15, Job 12:12,