

AGING IN THE *Grace* OF GOD

LEADER'S GUIDE

Help, I'm Growing Old

This is the beginning of a new adventure.

This study will encourage us to attack aging head on. In a culture that considers aging a curse and denies it at every opportunity, Christians are encouraged to accept aging as a vital and positive stage of our spiritual journey—a time in which God continues to fit us for his kingdom and develops within us the character of his Son. This is not a time to merely exist, but a time to grow and bloom, aging in grace.

Lesson #1

Scripture:

Psalm 71; Romans 8:28–29, 35–39



I N T E R N A T I O N A L

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PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

Note to leader: Provide for each person the Participant's Guide included at the end of this study.

Ours is the first generation to live a significant number of years after our retirement from paid work. What are we to do with these added years? Our culture holds out two major avenues. The first is to spend our time in leisure pursuits—travel, shopping, golf, club activities, grandparenting, and “good works”—all at our own discretion. It tells us that we have worked hard and deserve to treat ourselves well. Even bumper stickers declare, “we are spending our children’s inheritance.” And the busier the calendar the more validated we feel.

The second is the role of the patient. Our culture tells us that whatever physical complaints we suffer can and ought to be cured or prevented by diligent care of our bodies, visits to the doctor, and proper medication. At the first sign of discomfort, we rush to find the cause and cure. We spend hours and precious resources trying to maintain physical wellness. When we still feel the effects of aging, we feel cheated and defeated. When we undergo suffering or limitations hit us, we often feel we are on the downhill slide to nothingness—waiting out the days to an uncertain end.

However, Scripture tells us that God knows the length of our days. And being a wonderfully creative God who wastes nothing, he has plans for each day of our lives. “I know the plans I have for you,” declares the Lord, “plans to prosper you, plans to give you a hope and a future” (Jeremiah 29:11). He does not change his goal simply because we are “over the hill.” Each day is meant to be filled with growth and hope.

Think of this illustration of aging: An artist was creating a bust of a famous person. First he made a plaster cast of the head. Carefully cutting the plaster cast in half, he lifted it off and glued the two halves together. He began to fill it with precious metal, allowing each ladleful to cool and set before adding the next. The plaster cast disintegrated little by little. Toward the end, it looked unbelievably shabby. The inner beauty was hidden, although random areas were visible to the outside. When finished, the plaster cast was roughly pulled away to show the awesome beauty of the artist’s creation.

God is at work in each one of us. Often, if we have submitted to his careful work, our beauty shows through the rough spots, but he is not finished with us yet. In these elder years he continues to love, to teach, to fill, and to create. The adventure is in participating in the creation of his masterpiece.

How do we do that? It takes work. It takes willingness to set aside time to process the past and carefully consider the future. It takes openness and times of contemplation to listen to God. Ask him what he wants to accomplish and find ways of being a coworker with him in his creation. It takes a willingness to be obedient to the things that he shows us about our lives and futures. The payoff for this is immense. We end up with a peace and quietness of spirit. We improve our relationships with God and others, and we find purpose for the last third of our lives. Admittedly, these lessons are not for sissies or the faint of heart. But God



has promised to provide us with all that we need for the journey. God rewards those who diligently seek him.

Discussion starters:

- [Q] When you hear the words “aging” or “growing old,” what do you think of? As a group, brainstorm a list of words that you associate with aging.
- [Q] In what ways do the media discourage us from positively owning our aging?
- [Q] Think of the people you know who are aged 60–80. How do these people spend their time? What are their attitudes toward aging?
- [Q] Do you think Scripture supports retirement? Why or why not?

Optional Activity

Provide the group with a variety of pictures of people you believe have aged well. It may include family members, acquaintances, or celebrities. Ask the group why they think this person's aging is to be admired. Be sure to include people who are well into the aging process, not just those who have maintained their youth.

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

Teaching point one: God is our refuge.

Read Psalm 71, which was written by someone who knew of God from the cradle and experienced God's faithfulness in hard times. He makes a statement of faith in God, praising him and acknowledging his splendor. He affirms that God has been his rock, his refuge in life. But now the writer is growing old. It appears that he has some insecurity about what will happen as he ages. Will God still be with him when he can no longer produce? When strength is gone? When his enemies, seeing his vulnerability, gather to mock and overcome (or ignore) him?

We may not have armies outside our door waiting to overtake us, but many of us will encounter these “enemies”: loss, grief, diminishment, vulnerability, and disease. The writer of the Psalm (beginning in verse 14) reasserts his hope in God and promises to continue to sing his praises. He knows deep within that God is not just his hope, but his *only* hope.

[Q] Briefly tell the group of your spiritual journey to date. Describe two events in your earlier life when God was there for you in a special way.

Leader's Note: You may have to encourage the discussion to move along if one member is taking too long, so that everyone gets a chance to tell their story.



[Q] What are some of the things that are causing the psalmist concern?

- What do you dread about growing old?
- How has fear of what might happen caused you to be self-protective?
- What might help you to live with more courage?

[Q] What are some of the things about God that the psalmist recalls?

- How does remembering what God has done and affirming God's greatness move us from fear to joy?

Teaching point two: God is fulfilling his purpose.

Read Romans 8:28–29, 35–39.

We often hear Roman 8:28 quoted as “All things work together for good.” We would like to feel that this is an unconditional promise that applies to everything. But if we carefully read this Scripture, we realize that there is a condition placed on the promise. It is for those who love God and who are called according to *his* purpose. It is important as we age to realize that “all things working together for good” is based on our commitment to God, and to understand what it is that our loving God is trying to accomplish in us. If we start with the assumption that God's purpose is to give us everything we want, or to make us happy according to our own desires, we are in trouble. As we read further, we see that God's purpose is that we be conformed to the likeness of his Son. A real tug of war can occur if we think that God owes us certain things (good health, absence of loss, etc.) because we have been religious all our lives.

God never stops working in our lives. He is preparing us for life in his kingdom. Some of his most important work is done in the aging process. The challenges of aging may help to shape our character. Many of the challenges help us to detach from worldly goods and goals, and draw us into a closer relationship with God. As the Spirit works through us, others see less of us and more of Christ.

As a group, write a mission statement that describes God's purpose for humanity.

[Q] Using the mission statement you created as a group, discuss how his purpose is being worked out in your church, your family, and your own life.

- Describe an incident when God used a life-experience to conform you to the “image of Christ.”
- Describe someone who impresses you as being Christ-like. How did they get that way?

[Q] Why is it important to know that nothing can separate us from the love of Christ?

- What are some of the aspects of being frail and elderly that might give you concern about being connected to God's love?



- [Q] How does knowing that God is working out his purpose in your life make it easier to accept the indignities of aging?
- How does his love cover the rough spots?

Teaching point three: God gives us work to do.

Read Psalm 71:18.

As we begin to deal with the challenges of aging, it's easy to become self-focused—to be concerned with every little change in our bodies, every lack of attention given to us, everything we are losing. But our psalmist underscores that we have a hefty job to do, even if it may not involve physical exertion or worldwide impact. The psalmist reminds us that it is our job to declare the goodness of God to the next generation. We must faithfully model his work in our lives. We must tell our stories. We must shout out God's goodness, especially in the most difficult of circumstances. Those who fail to do this will not only be miserable themselves, but will leave a negative impact on those who follow. If God is not sufficient for our old age, how can we believe that he is sufficient for any other time? A person of faith knows better. We know that God's love never fails. We know that the discomforts of life are only temporary. We must shout out with joy, "God is good!"

- [Q] Without using a name, describe someone you know who, while in the midst of difficulty, is saying with their words or behavior that God is good. What does that do for you?
- [Q] What are the elements of faith that the next generation most needs to hear, in your opinion?
- Who in your family could you make a special effort to connect with?

PART 3

Aging Is a Wonderful Time of Spiritual Growth

To dismiss aging as being the "downhill time of life" is to overlook a period when God is completing us as his children. If we do not live lives that are aware and intentional, we could miss the opportunities he has in store for us. If we become self-focused and depressed, we fail to experience the joy of his presence and the hope of the future he has promised. If we fail to model how to age gracefully in Christ, we leave our families without an example of faithful aging. If we fail to tell our God stories, we miss the opportunity to strengthen our children's faith. It is impossible to deny the challenges of aging, but our Romans passage tells us that we are more than conquerors through Christ Jesus.

Action Points:

-During this next week, seek opportunities to model God's goodness, tell your stories, and show appreciation to those who are modeling graceful aging for you.



-Find an item or picture that is connected with a God-story in your life. Briefly write the story down in simple language and give it to a child, grandchild, or other child that you know. Maybe the child would like to illustrate and make his or her own book of your story for you to read together.

-Think through what you can do to model and declare your faith to the next generation.

-Write down your personal faith stories for future generations.

—Sandy Escontrias is the director of *Autumn Saints*, a Christ-centered organization whose mission is to provide written and web-based resources on later-life spirituality. These Bible-based materials are designed for use in safe and supportive small groups.

Additional Resources



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-[Making Retirement Meaningful](#)
-[The Joys and Trials of Grandparenting](#)



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Aging as a Spiritual Journey, Eugene C. Bianchi (Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982; ISBN: 978-0824506223)



Winter Grace: Spirituality and Aging, Kathleen Fischer (Upper Room Books, 1998; ISBN: 978-0834808507)



Passages through Midlife: A Spiritual Journey to Wholeness, Paul Robb (Ave Maria Press, 2005; ISBN: 978-1594710513)



The Art of Growing Old, A Guide to Faithful Aging, Carroll Saussy (Augsburg Press, 1989; ISBN: 978-0806636177)



Summoned at Every Age: Finding God in Our Later Years, Peter G. Van Breemen (Ave Maria Press, 2005; ISBN: 978-1594710360)



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PARTICIPANT'S GUIDE

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Teaching point two: God is fulfilling his purpose.

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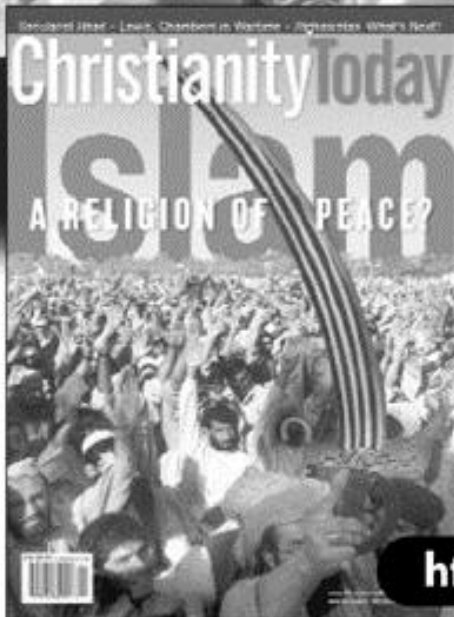
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