

CHRISTIAN HOME AND FAMILY LIVING

by

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CHAPTER FOURTEEN

THE OLDER WOMAN

I Timothy 5:1-16; Titus 2:3-5

The hoary head is a crown of glory, if it be found in the way of righteousness (Proverbs 16:31)

Amazing things have been happening in our world during the last half century. It has been a most interesting and exciting time in which to live, for possibilities beyond the wildest imagination have become realities. Serious events, problems and accomplishments of all kinds have drawn our attention: horrible wars and uneasy peace, great scientific discoveries, marvelous inventions, radical social changes, and the alarming problems of youth have been holding the world in throbbing tension. We have been worrying about Hitler, Stalin, Dunkirk and Korea, about depression, inflation and price controls, about keeping up financially and physically with the high cost of modern living; about atoms, morals, crime and the specific needs of the youth of America.

What has been happening in these years to the older people, sometimes called the "lost generation"? It is only in recent years, notably the last ten, that interest has begun to be focused on the senior citizen. For the first time in human history, people over sixty-five years of age constitute a significant proportion of the population. While the population as a whole barely doubled in the last half century, the group of people over sixty-five increased almost four times. Today fifteen million, or ten per cent, of the people in the United States are sixty-five years old or over, and it is estimated that by 1975 there will be twenty-one million over sixty-five, and three-fifths of them will be women; by 1980 there will be as many people over sixty-five as there will be children under fifteen years of age.

During these years the average life span has climbed about twenty years. A century ago a person might reasonably have hoped to reach forty years of age; fifty years ago the average age had risen to forty-eight; today it is sixty-eight instead of forty-eight, and more and more people live beyond their allotted threescore and ten. Dr. Edward Botz, former President of the American Medical Association, says, "Man still has not nearly approached the optimum of his possible life span. A man, mature at twenty-five, should be able to count on one hundred and fifty years."

Because of longevity a whole new branch of medicine has arisen, called geriatrics, the science of the medical care of the aged; and gerontology, which treats of the decline of life. Research on retirement problems, social relations and activities of the aged is a new phase of social science. Social service centers, counseling services and golden age clubs are being established in many cities. The purpose of all of these is to “add more life to the years, and more years to the life.”

The foundation for health in old age is being laid in youth. “**Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth**” (from the passage in Ecclesiastes 12:1-7, which describes, in a figurative way, the decline of life) may point to the need of respect for the body. We owe it to our Creator to curb all appetites and avoid all fads which may cause ill health or early deterioration of the body and its faculties, for, beginning in youth and throughout all of life, we are told to “**glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God’s**” (Psalm 128:1,6; Romans 6:12; I Corinthians 6:20). There is unavoidable change and decay in the cycle of life, but we also know that sensible living, happiness, and a sense of being needed and useful all play a great part in the state of health of an older person.

Another obvious need of the aged person is money. With the retirement age set at sixty-five (sixty-two for women), many years may be left to live with limited financial resources. In the middle thirties this problem was seriously considered and legislation was enacted in the form of the Federal Social Security Act for the benefit of the aged, disabled and needy. Today between eleven and twelve million citizens over sixty-five are receiving benefits of some kind from the government. The government has been borrowing billions of dollars, has a bigger debt than ever before in its history, and an ever greater share of it is being spent for welfare or social benefits.

Must the government carry the whole load? Whose responsibility is the care of the aged in our midst? These questions trouble Christian people. The “take what you can” philosophy has caught on, but is it the right solution? The burden for the care of both the young and the older people falls necessarily on the middle group—the fathers and mothers who are struggling to live as well as they can, many of them living beyond their incomes in the effort. Often the changing patterns of life also make children less desirous of helping their parents today, and parents less willing to be helped. Yet few aged get by without at least partial help of some kind.

“What must we do with father—or with mother?” is an almost inevitable question. There are some five hundred thousand new widows alone who come to an abrupt turn in the road of life each year. The Lord has never let His people forget that they have a responsibility toward them: “**Honor thy father and thy mother, as the Lord thy God hath commanded thee; that thy days may be prolonged, and that it may go well with thee . . .**” (Deuteronomy 5:16). It is clear from Mark 7:9-13 that to honor the father and mother also means support, if they need it. Often the lack of respect and care given to parents comes home to roost in later years.

The church has ever been mindful of the care of the poor and the widow (Deuteronomy 14:28, 29; 24:19-22; Psalm 146: 9; Zechariah 7:8-14; Acts 6:1-6). It appears from the discourse on the welfare of widows in I Timothy 5:1-16 that the care of the whole church for the widows, which began in the first church in Jerusalem (Acts 6:1-8), was continued by all the churches (Ephesians 6:1-3; James 1:27; 2:15-17), and until this day the diligent care of the poor is a mark of the true church.

However, it is basically a personal responsibility. When Paul was an old man he wrote from Rome to Timothy, who was the bishop of the church at Ephesus. Apparently Paul had heard of the Ephesian disposition of children to throw the whole burden of the support of the aged on the church. He sternly pointed out that it is the duty of children and grandchildren to love and care for their needy parents, as they themselves were loved and nourished in childhood (I Timothy 5:4).

There are some who have no family to care for them, and they are desolate indeed, and for such the church must provide (vv. 3, 5, 9, 10). However, he adds, “**let not the church be charged**” with them, either, if there is anyone in the congregation who, having no needy in the family, and the necessary ability or means, can take over the support of such a desolate one (v. 16). The care of the aged is a great spiritual privilege and can bring unusual blessings into a home. It is too bad that many are so entangled in material pressures today that care for parents, relatives or other needy is a physical impossibility. Yet, love will and can find a way, for the Word still stands: “But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel” (v. 8). God’s Word shall stand and endure beyond every social security program, good and effective as those may be, and beyond the day a great spending program may break the financial back of a generous public.

Our society puts a merciless premium on youth, wealth, speed, efficiency and success, and it tends to give the aging a pessimistic view of life. Our whole economy is geared to replacing the outmoded, worn and slow as soon as possible. Much of our prosperity hinges on how many things can be made passé in how short a time. The implications are that age is a calamity, and women are urged to stay young and beautiful as long as possible. In our youth-conscious culture the “**hoary head**” is no crown of glory, nor is the beauty of old people their gray hair (Proverbs 16:31; 20:29). “**With the ancient is wisdom; and in length of days understanding,**” yet, like Rehoboam, experiment is preferred to experience, and elders are not honored nor their counsel followed (Leviticus 19:32; II Chronicles 10:8; Job 12:12; 32:6-20). Many older women react by spending much of their time and energy rebelling against the process of aging, with depressing results. How much better for them to respect and to exploit the potentialities of the older years, and try to make them gloriously rewarding instead.

Age cannot affect the fundamental dignity of a human being. The whole of life, from the cradle to the grave, has its own kind of beauty, strength, usefulness and divine purpose. Each time of life has its values and patterns of growth. The child grows in body and mind and the youth toward personal independence. The mature adult grows into social participation and responsibility; the years that are left are for growing into a mature soul soon to be moved to his “long home” (Ecclesiastes 12:3-7; II Corinthians 5:1-4). These years are also for the blossoming of spiritual qualities and latent talent and usefulness which in the press of life have been neglected. Old Christian soldiers do not just fade away but grow to new spiritual dimensions. As the years go by things become unimportant and the unseen realities become the only ones worth striving for. It is ideal when the faith, patience, humility and love of the older generation become the climate in which youth can be nurtured. We are old before we know it. The first twenty years are spent learning from parents and teachers, the next twenty-five, perhaps, in bringing our own family to maturity.

All of a sudden the children are grown and gone —how could the years have gone so fast? We can't believe that we have already come to the middle years when a major shift must be made in a woman's role. If our sole interest has been our children, it calls for a drastic change in our whole routine. With a longer life span the average parents live for twenty years after their children marry and make homes of their own. These years are worth planning for, and some do prepare ahead to make these years a full and rich experience. Others feel left out, useless, and just wait for something interesting to happen. Some simply plan on grandmotherhood. They long deeply for the happiness of their married children, but grandmotherhood is not a vocation; some may make of it an avocation, but it can better be called a delightful art. Grandmothers can, and should, stand by as the "active reserves," and they do have a special kind of love to give their grandchildren, who thrive on it; but it is the duty of parents to bring up their children, and they do it best without too much interference.

However, it is a mistaken kindness in children to retire mother or father to doing nothing but passing the time. Older people themselves are apt to mistake the leisure years for the time of rest. We were not born to take it easy, but to work and struggle as long as health and strength allow it. Idleness is the devil's workshop at any age. We learn from Titus 2:3, 4 that, whereas old age has no active employment, it often has an active memory and a busy tongue. Paul observed a weakness of older women to be over-talkativeness, which easily leads to the critical, avenging, bitter and slanderous sins of the tongue. The body tires and wears down, but "**the tongue can no man tame**" (James 3:5-8).

Because gossip is a malicious leveling attempt which is prompted by envy of others and dissatisfaction with self, it can well be one of the besetting sins of the old. Paul does not mean to say that silence is golden, for man is inherently a social being, but he admonishes older women to live so close to the Lord in meditation, prayer and the study of the Scriptures that their behavior will be that of holy women "earnestly desiring to be clothed upon with our house which is from heaven" (II Corinthians 5:2). They will then teach discretion, chastity, goodness, obedience and love by their own exemplary behavior. There are endless "good things" the aged woman can teach her children and grandchildren if she deserves their respect.

The secret of longevity is to keep active both mentally and physically. The older woman who hopes for useful and rewarding golden years will have to find another interest besides visiting. It is not true that we become too old to learn new things and new ways. "The end of labor," said Aristotle, "is to gain leisure," but the Greek word for leisure meant school, and the Greeks were interested in educating the mature. People can, and do, continue to learn at all ages. We are told that, while the body ages, the decrease of mental ability is so gradual that at eighty we still have the mental ability of a twelve-year-old. The ability is there, but not always the willingness to read and learn. One of the greatest obstacles to learning is self-satisfaction, or, sometimes, a depreciation of self, neither of which is becoming to a Christian.

It is best never to interrupt the learning process, but even if most of our years have been given to ordinary household affairs, there is no reason for thinking that intellectual achievements are not possible anymore; they can be begun or renewed at any time.

When we once discover that our intellectual powers are a huge, untapped reservoir of usefulness and pleasure, retirement will not only be from something, but can be to something—to a whole new, wonderful way of life. In the “last of life for which the first was made” we will have hours and hours of time in which to search the Scriptures, that precious Book of books which we have neglected in the press of life. It will mean more to us because of life’s experiences, and will bring a peace to us in the quiet of evening years that we never found in the morning or noon of life. We will find time to do the interesting things which we have been wanting to do for a long time: they may be traveling, photography, ceramics, gardening, or going back to school; it may be only finding out if we really do have a flair for art or making hats. Perhaps we can go back to teaching, all the more qualified because we have learned patience, understanding and love. Many past fifty have learned new skills in keeping with their physical strength, and have found happiness and health because they were useful and wanted.

It is in the field of Christian service that the mature Christian comes into her own. In Paul’s day there were many older women whose lives were especially consecrated to the service of God and His church. They belonged to the roll of the widows, they continued “**in supplications and prayers night and day**” and devoted their lives to works of charity (I Timothy 5:5, 9, 10). The story of Anna the prophetess, who was a widow of over eighty, proves that age is no barrier to Christian service (Luke 2:36-38). It is surmised that deaconesses were frequently chosen from the roll of the widows. They were the helpers of the apostles, teaching and assisting the poor and the sick among the women of the church. Phebe was a deaconess of the church at Cenchrea, and it appears that Paul entrusted her with an important mission to Rome (Romans 16:1, 2). It seems probable that Tryphena, Tryphosa and Persis, whom Paul commends for their labor in the Lord, were also deaconesses (v. 12). Elsewhere we read of the mother of John Mark, of Priscilla, Lydia and Dorcas, who studied their Bibles, welcomed church services into their fine homes, and “**diligently followed every good work**” (I Timothy 5:10; Acts 9:39; 12:12; 16:14, 15, 40; 18:26; Romans 16: 3-6).

There is need for every talent and every loving heart today. It has been estimated that one person out of every ten in the average church is over sixty-five years of age, and the Lord has a place and service for each one. Where are the prayer and Bible study groups of older women? In most churches the older women who meet regularly for Bible study are few—five, at the most, ten — of the faithful ones “hang on”; the others have lost interest.

There are almost no Annas or Priscillas on the roll. Church societies are not only good and necessary for young people; they can fill a real need for the social and spiritual life of older women also. Besides, youth can only look up to those whose faith is of great dimension, and the “**hoary head**” is still a crown of glory, “**if it be found in the way of righteousness.**” The field of Christian service is the world, beginning at one’s door. The older woman can love her neighbor as herself until the roll is finally called for higher service. Relief and cheer for the afflicted, blind and bedridden in nursing homes, hospitals or little lonely apartments, are things a Christian woman can bring better than anyone else.

She only has to ask her minister, or the family or social service bureau in her own community, to find out where volunteers are needed. Perhaps she is interested in some small political service, or in helping out in an understaffed office of a charitable organization, or in a school project.

She need not fear her inadequacy, for if she is eager to help and willing to learn, there will surely be a volunteer training program for her benefit. The testimony of Paul, "I can do all things through Christ which strengtheneth me," can be the experience of all who accept the challenge of the older age with faith in God. To keep the mind, heart and hands busy in loving service will insure rewarding years for the older woman, and an abundant entrance into the Kingdom of our Lord and Saviour, who once said, "**And whosoever shall give to drink unto one of these little ones a cup of cold water in the name of a disciple, verily I say unto you, he shall in no wise lose his reward.**"

To walk life-long in step with the beautiful Saviour and eternal Lord toward the golden sunset and into fadeless day, "Oh, that will be glory, be glory for me."

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Tell what dignity, respect and usefulness were given to older people in the following passages: Leviticus 19:32; Deuteronomy 5:16; Ruth 3:5; 4:1-12, 16, 17; Ezra 6:7; Job 32:6, 7; Lamentations 4:16; I Timothy 5:1-4.
2. When is middle age? What is the challenge of the middle years?
3. What can a grandmother contribute to her grandchildren?
4. How is it that mothers-in-law often feel uncomfortable with their married children? Does Titus 2:3-5 apply to them? If so, does this mean that they may interfere in the lives of their married children?
5. Why is "**behavior as becometh holiness**" so important for the aged?
6. Homes for the aged usually have long waiting lists. Under what conditions do you think the aged should be admitted?
7. Do you think that it is wise for a widow to make an early decision in regard to her home or future plans? Why or why not? Does I Timothy 5:11 give any help?
8. How important is it for older people to stay in their own homes as long as possible?
9. Is it more important to live close to one of the children, or in close proximity to the church, library or other educational and social facilities? Why?
10. How important is Christian fellowship to older women? Bible study groups? Do you think that the church is doing enough for the older woman? The older woman for the church?
11. How do you think such things as reading good books; finding an avocation; enjoying a good hobby; reading modern books on child care; or community usefulness, will affect the older woman's relationship with her children and grandchildren?
12. Do you think that Christian people are generally fulfilling their duty toward their parents in old age? Explain.
13. A suggestion for your reading: *Your Rewarding Years*, by Mrs. Clarence H. Hamilton. This book can be obtained from your public library.

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