



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

- 📖 Aging with Hope and Wonder
(*Aging*, pp. 65-69)

Suggested Articles:

- 📖 Aging from the Perspective of the Cross
(*Aging*, pp. 18-25)
- 📖 The Gift of Years in Christian Art
(*Aging*, pp. 48-54)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to:
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Christian Reflection

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“Old and Full of Years”

If contemporary society continues to keep people alive and at the same time tell them that they no longer serve any purpose, then dying “in a good old age, old and full of years” in the biblical sense will be a thing of the past.

Prayer

Scripture Readings: Genesis 18:1-15 and 25:7b-11

Reading†

Grow old along with me!
The best is yet to be,
The last of life, for which the first was made:
Our times are in His Hand
Who saith “A whole I planned,
Youth shows but half; trust God, see all, nor be afraid!”

Reflection

“Though today, television, radio, and print media champion the young as models of vision, vigor, and imagination, as if these were the only people worthy of notice, the Bible portrays quite another story,” notes Terry Thomas Primer. “Many key characters, chosen by God to move forward the divine-human story, were senior citizens, many years past their prime, even according to our standards.”

Abraham and Sarah were already “old, advanced in age” — one hundred years old and ninety years old, respectively — when God visited them in the form of three mysterious men. Abraham’s hospitality was spontaneous and lavish: he and Sarah prepared a great meal and Abraham waited upon the guests as their servant. Then the focus shifts to Sarah, who has been out of view in the tent. “Then one said, ‘I will surely return to you in due season, and your wife Sarah shall have a son’ (Genesis 18:10). It was a calling, a vocation, but such a strange one! Sarah stifled a laugh.

Primer, who is a nursing home chaplain, has shared this story with the residents she serves. “Would you like to be pregnant?” she asked them. “You should have heard the giggles. The women all looked at themselves and then at one another. In their faces you could see memories of pregnancy, childbirth, and two-year-olds running wild. Then, as they looked at themselves in wheelchairs and with walkers, they laughed deep throaty chuckles of relief. Not a single one of them volunteered to become a mother again.”

God’s invitation required Abraham and Sarah to respond with faith. Their baby’s name, Isaac, means “laughter,” recalling Sarah’s giggles in this story and Abraham’s deep belly laughter earlier when God promised them a son (Genesis 17:17). “In my mind’s eye I can see them, old beyond their years, getting undressed for the night as the stars begin to twinkle,” Primer muses. “Slipping into bed, they kiss, holding each other tightly — and I bet they laughed, hoping against hope that the heavenly visitors are right, that there is nothing too difficult for God.”



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This remarkable story reminds us that God appears in unexpected places and comes to us at any age. A fitting conclusion is found in the report that seventy-five years later “Abraham breathed his last and died in a good old age, an old man and full of years” (Genesis 25:8).

In this scripture old age is a highly desirable goal. Stephen Sapp suggests that a person “full of years” is like a container full of liquid: “it can hold no more and has fulfilled its purpose by containing all that it was designed to hold. Similarly, to die ‘full of years’ is to be satisfied, completed, indeed, ‘full-filled’ in a most literal sense, having lived all the years one was intended to live.” The biblical goal is not merely a longer life, but a life filled with purpose—with God’s call and our faithful response.

Study Questions

1. Do you know older people who, like Abraham and Sarah, make rich contributions to the lives of those around them? How do they hear and respond to God’s call?
2. Comment on Stephen Sapp’s statement: “One concrete way in which older people can avoid the trap of an empty old age that modern society seems to have laid for them is to be more careful about the ways they choose to fill their later years. In contemporary American society old age is often a period of role and status attrition.... How much more purpose might be found for the sometimes seemingly endless time if the lost responsibilities of job and children are replaced, not exclusively with self-oriented recreational pastimes, but with activities that contribute to the welfare of others?” (*Aging*, pp. 23-24)
3. “The present situation of many people, old and young alike, is a disease of the imagination,” warns Kathleen Fischer (quoted in *Aging*, p. 70). “We have accepted the negative images of old age. The task of a spirituality of aging is to convert the imaginations of both old and young to a new vision of the human. And this can only happen if the old themselves refuse to let society define them, and instead internalize new images of the later years. Large numbers of older people who refuse to be seduced by our current value system could be an unprecedented prophetic force in the world.” What new, positive images might we glean from the story of Abraham and Sarah?
4. What positive values of aging does Michelangelo depict in his sculpture *Moses* (*Aging*, pp. 50-51)? What positive values are captured in Roger Medearis’ painting of his grandmother, *Godly Susan* (*Aging*, pp. 48-49)?
5. What positive images of aging are celebrated in Terry York’s hymn, “Then Dawns the Light”?

Departing Hymn: “Then Dawns the Light”

†The opening stanza of Robert Browning, “Rabbi Ben Ezra.”

“Old and Full of Years”

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Reading	Reading
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 2	Questions (selected)
Departing Hymn	Departing Hymn

Teaching Goals

1. To interpret and apply the story of Abraham and Sarah’s gracious welcome of God’s purpose for their old age.
2. To reflect on today’s obstacles to living to be “full of years” in the biblical sense.
3. To appreciate the role of biblical stories and Christian art in restoring our imaginations and guiding us to positive values of old age.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Aging (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and the suggested articles before the group meeting.

Begin with a Story

Read the story of Lillian on p. 66 of *Aging*. It begins, “I am convinced that Lillian may never retire.” Consider how Lillian illustrates the biblical ideal of being “old and full of years.”

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude with thanksgiving to God for those older persons whose lives continue to provide models for faithful discipleship.

Scripture Reading

Ask two group members to read Genesis 18:1-15 and 25:7b-11 from a modern translation.

Reading

Ask a group member to read this poem.

Reflection

Ask for members’ initial reaction to the opening statement, “If contemporary society continues to keep people alive and at the same time tell them that they no longer serve any purpose, then dying ‘in a good old age, old and full of years’ in the biblical sense will be a thing of the past.” Stephen Sapp develops this observation in his article: “Perhaps people are living beyond the point at which they are ‘full of years.’ Medical technology has become quite adept at keeping the bodily vessel around (and even in relatively good shape). Without an expansion of its capacity, of the purpose it exists to accomplish, however, the vessel cannot help ceasing to function as it should. Consequently it fails to be ‘full-filled’” (*Aging*, p. 23).

The Bible gives us a very different image of old age—that it can be a time of unexpected opportunity to serve God. This lesson interprets and celebrates this image in the biblical story of Abraham and Sarah, and in Christian art. Of course, older people should not feel guilty when they cannot contribute to their families, congregations, and communities as much as they desire. The biblical image of God’s calling in old age, however, should encourage them to escape the false values in our culture which would limit

their contribution. The next lesson, “What’s Retirement For?” will help us apply this biblical perspective to our own retirement.

Follow Terry Thomas Primer’s delightful retelling of the story in Genesis 18:1-15 in order to focus on: (1) Abraham and Sarah’s unexpected call from God to have a child in their very advanced age, and (2) their gracious welcome of this new ‘assignment.’ (See *Aging*, pp. 66-69.)

Conclude the discussion by explaining the “old and full of years” metaphor as a positive image of “full-filled” living, a life filled with purpose.

Study Questions

1. Encourage members to share stories about older people in their families, the congregation, or in the local community, as well as mentioning people about whom they know indirectly through news reports, biographies, biblical stories, and the like.
2. Sapp is not opposed to enjoying increased recreational opportunities during our later years, but he believes that recreational pastimes, by themselves, cannot fill our lives with purpose. He also believes that the lowered social status of retired people is connected to their focusing on self-oriented recreation instead of making purposeful contributions. Do members agree about this? Invite them to describe the sorts of contributions to their families, congregations, and communities that they would *hope* and *prefer* to make when they retire.
3. Abraham and Sarah see themselves as able to support and encourage a new generation. (Members may know older people who are doing this through the lives of their grandchildren or other young people.) They are able to “shift direction” and commit to an important project that draws upon their talents and abilities. (Members might compare this to older people who have new careers in work or in volunteerism.) They continue to draw strength from one another and to partner in their work. (Do members know older people whose marriage grows stronger?) Abraham and Sarah are not perfect people, but are faithful to God’s call. (Older people can be open to new ministries today.)
4. Michelangelo portrays Moses as both physically powerful and spiritually determined. Members may notice his rippling muscles and ready-for-action posture. He is prepared for new challenges. *Godly Susan* shows Susan Medearis in a thoughtful, peaceful moment. She exhibits another kind of strength, for she has endured the limitations that result from a stroke. She is surrounded by beautiful farmlands and a church that may reflect her lifetime of contributions to family and friends. The rocker and comforter which she enjoys would indicate comfort and rest. (I cannot help but think that she is savoring the fact that her adoring, respectful grandson is painting her portrait.) The words of the master in Jesus’ parable come to mind: “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:23, KJV).
5. The first verse celebrates the “life bestowing wisdom” that comes only through rich experience over the years, “through tears of sorrow, tears of joy, [as] each day made its impression.” This does not make us busybodies who feel superior to younger people, for “We also sense that what we’ve heard demands of us we listen.” Verse three suggests that with time we may gain perspective to “see beyond what life presents.” This ability to weigh and value events from the perspective of age’s wisdom can benefit others: “Our lives enriched, we can enrich; now seasoned, we can season.” Thus the hymn points toward the contributions we can make in old age, and provides an answer to our “troubling thoughts that we may live beyond our contribution” to our families, congregations, and communities.

Departing Hymn

“Then Dawns the Light” is on pp. 55-57 of *Aging*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison, or silently and meditatively as a prayer.