

Growing Old – The Christian Life How to Serve God in Restricted Circumstances

*[Please note : sections in blue type are not broadcast on every radio station.
The New King James Version of the Scriptures used unless otherwise stated.]*

Introduction

As I record this, I am just a few days away from fully retiring from work. I'm a couple of years off sixty yet, so I'm retiring early, but I can certainly no longer claim to be a young man! This has at least two implications for today's topic: one, I am getting old, possibly there already by some measures; and two, I can vouch for the fact that this is not all bad! I've been semi-retired for 12 months and I am relishing taking the final step. Growing old has its upsides!

Let's be honest though; nobody relishes growing old. Since I started work 39 years ago, I've got, slower, greyer, lost hair, become less agile and ache in a few more places! On the plus side, I have acquired a wife, two children, a great deal of experience, a little wisdom, and heaps of happy memories. I would not let any of them go to become young again. The simple truth is that things change, and we change. Some of that change is good, and some of it is bad. Only God never changes since He can become neither better nor worse.

Today we are focussing on 'restricted circumstances', a phrase which has negative overtones. Who would choose to be restricted if they could be completely free? In fact, many of us do choose to do exactly that. I guess I chose to give up certain freedoms when I became a married man, but there are joys and contentment that only marriage can provide. I have 'restricted' myself, for my entire life, to living within 15 miles or so of where I was born. I'm sure I have passed up many opportunities and experiences by doing so, but I am perfectly content with the choices I have made, and, while living a globe-trotting life may suit some, certain things must be sacrificed to allow it. You might say that choosing to follow Christ is to accept enormous restrictions. I don't mean that we have a giant series of 'dos' and 'don'ts' to follow, but that we commit ourselves, in theory at least (!), to allowing Him to lead and direct us, and to choosing His will before our own. In short, we commit ourselves to being restricted to whatever He chooses for us – believing of course that He will choose what is wisest and best.

Things feel more restrictive when we are not doing the choosing ourselves, and the limits are being imposed on us. That's why the 'restricted circumstances' of old age are so intimidating; we don't get to make the selection, and we worry that we will hate the limitations imposed on us.

We will use five questions, or pairs of alternatives, to help us work through the challenges which our topic presents. They are:

1. **Perishing or renewing?**
2. **Fighting or embracing?**
3. **Looking back or looking forward?**
4. **Fear or anticipation?**
5. **Struggling or submitting?**

Perishing or renewing?

If this phrase is familiar, it is because I have borrowed it, from 2 Corinthians 4:16 which says,

“Therefore we do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day.”

The ‘outward man’ in this verse is the human body. Our bodies wear out. Paul, who wrote these words, was wearing his body out faster than most with the punishing missionary journeys he undertook! The inward man is the soul, or spiritual life. Can you claim that your inward man is being renewed day by day? Certainly, that is meant to be the experience of Christians.

The perishing outward man finds things increasingly reduced. The following list is, regrettably, far from exhaustive.

Reduced:

Reduced physical energy. When people talk about old age, they sometimes quote the following text from Joshua chapter 14:10-12. In these verses, Caleb is describing what has happened to him since he was sent by Moses, at the age of 40, to be one of the twelve spies searching out Canaan for the Israelites.

“And now, behold, the Lord has kept me alive, as He said, these forty-five years... and now, here I am this day eighty-five years old. As yet I am as strong this day as on the day that Moses sent me... Now therefore, give me this mountain.”

We would all like to be like Caleb, with as much energy at eighty-five as we had when we were forty, and the enthusiasm to capture cities in the mountains! Unfortunately for us, Caleb is an exception. What we can aspire to is the vision and passion to still be exploring new ground and making it our own. Physical energy and spiritual energy don't have to follow the same trajectory.

Reduced physical mobility. It's likely that John outran Peter in getting to Jesus' tomb after the resurrection (John 20:4) simply because John was quite a few years younger. Our running tends to get slower, then we are reduced to walking, then we need a stick, or worse. Not much to look forward to is it? But physical prowess is not everything. I'm writing and recording this in the lead up to Christmas, and two of the important characters in the Christmas story were in the later stages of their lives. We meet Anna and Simeon in Luke chapter two. Anna was “of a great age” and, for reasons unknown, was restricted to living within the confines of the temple. But she “served God... night and day” and spoke about Jesus to everybody who was looking for the coming Messiah. Simeon seems to have been coming towards the end of his life, but he has enough strength to lift the baby Jesus in his arms and his words of thanksgiving are on record forever.

Reduced sphere of service. I have known Christians who have served the Lord faithfully and effectively for decades, start to become depressed and dispirited when they are no longer able to continue with the service they have given their lives to. It's not my place to criticise them, but I do need to ask myself whether I am defining myself and my spiritual life by my service. It is possible to subtly drift from loving the Lord and being thankful to be able to do something for Him, to investing all my self-worth in what I do and even feeling that He has let me down if He takes that service away.

Reduced hearing, sight and other senses. There was an old man called Barzillai who assisted King David when he was running away from his rebel son Absalom. When the rebellion had been crushed, David wanted to take Barzillai back to Jerusalem, to the royal palace, by way of reward. The account is in 2 Samuel chapter 19. Barzillai responds,

“I am today eighty years old. Can I discern between the good and the bad? Can your servant taste what I eat or what I drink? Can I hear any longer the voice of singing men and singing women?... Please let your servant turn back again, that I may die in my own city... Here is your servant Chimham; let him cross over with my lord the king” (vv.35-37).

First, notice that Barzillai was five years younger than Caleb, but considerably more restricted. God gives each of His servants different experiences. Barzillai isn't so much lamenting the reduction in his five senses, as explaining why the king's proposed rewards aren't of much value to him. He would rather be quietly at home in his own house. He asks David to transfer the offered benefits to a younger man named Chimham instead. I get no sense of Barzillai being cynical or bitter. He just had a different set of priorities than a younger man has.

Reduced control over my own body. I must confess, I find this to be one of the scarier prospects of old age. Later in his life, you can find the record at the start of 1 Kings, King David is no longer well enough to maintain his own body temperature. You might have thought the poor old man was past it and no further use to anybody; but soon afterwards we find David helping to establish the glorious reign of his son Solomon, and giving Solomon a list of tasks to complete on David's behalf. Pretty important achievements for a man well past his prime!

That's enough of things reducing for now! Let's turn to the things of the inward man that can be steadily increased, even in old age.

Increased:

Increased experience. At one level, experience is just what you live through, the events that happen in your life. But in the spiritual realm,

“Tribulation worketh patience; and patience, experience; and experience, hope” (Romans 5:3-4, KJV).

The NKJV uses the word character rather than experience. It takes time, tribulation, and patience (or perseverance) to produce the spiritual character that can also be called experience. It isn't bought cheaply, or quickly, but it is worth acquiring.

Increased wisdom. Wisdom also takes time to obtain; although some never seem to acquire it no matter how much time they have! King Rehoboam, Solomon's son, was given wise advice from the elders his father left behind. He chose to reject it and, instead, follow the foolish suggestions of the young men who grew up with him. You can read all about it in 1 Kings chapter 12. Not all the young are foolish, and not all the old are wise; but every extra year gives you more opportunities to grow in wisdom. Just don't expect your wise counsel to be always well received, or followed!

Increased time. The restrictions of older age can release more time. Retirement, having fewer other responsibilities, and a reduction in travel, etc. means we can have time for those who tend to be neglected by the uber-busy. I'm not a granddad yet, but I can see this is one of the roles grandparents often play for their grandchildren. When we are very active our time and focus tend to be spread out, so that we do more things and see more people; but sometimes only superficially. Doing less and seeing fewer people can be a good thing if we spend more time on the activities and relationships that matter most.

Increased horizons. Naturally, our horizons reduce as we age, as we have already noted, but this doesn't need to be the case in every way. According to Exodus 7:7, Moses was just starting out on his life's work at 80! I'm not suggesting we should all start leading a nation of two million people in our old age, but we can find ways to keep widening our horizons. The COVID pandemic of the last couple of years has been tough and restrictive in many ways, but it has also shown us how technologies like Zoom can widen our horizons. Some of us have been able to listen in to missionary updates from around the world from our own homes. Activities like this should also broaden and deepen our prayer lives as we support these people, and those they minister to, before God.

God's work has always needed 'prayer warriors' to support the front-line troops, and the 'front-line' includes new parents, young children, struggling couples and many others, as well as missionaries. Are you ready to grow your prayer life as you grow older?

Increased readiness to work with, and rely on, others. Some of us struggle with accepting our dependence on other people. The account of a battle between Israel and the people of Amalek in Exodus 17 is instructive. Israel prevailed while Moses kept his arms lifted up, but they struggled when he grew tired, and his arms fell to his side. Realising what was happening, and the importance of the battle, Aaron and Hur, sat Moses down on a stone, and each of them stood on one side of Moses and held his arms up. Imagine if Moses had refused the indignity of sitting on a rock all day, or insisted that he was quite capable of holding his own arms up. It takes grace to accept help and acknowledge dependence. One more reason to pray for more grace as we age!

Fighting or embracing change?

Often in life, our attitude is as important as our actual circumstances. As we get older, some things are going to change, however much we might fight against it. Jacob is the great biblical example of a man fighting to do things, and get things, on his own terms, and in his own time. It took him a lifetime to start learning to trust God and hand over control to Him. Jonah is another clear example of someone at war with God over His plans and instructions, and, like Jacob, it cost Jonah a great deal of grief. Whatever our age, we need to learn to embrace all the different phases of life. We too often rush on towards the next phase, or try and cling on to the previous one, instead of accepting the place God has put us right now, and asking Him for the strength and grace to enjoy walking with Him in it, even if it does sometimes involve reduced circumstances.

Looking back or looking forward?

If you drive a car, you will know that things go much better if you spend most of your time looking forward at the road ahead! A regular glance in the rear-view mirror is essential, but driving for any length of time while gazing intently in the mirrors is not going to end well! Some of us struggle to apply that lesson to our everyday lives. We tend to look back for one of two reasons:

1. The past seems to have contained more happy days than the present does, so we are tempted to try and live there. Or...
2. Our past is full of missed opportunities that will never come back, and we can't keep from brooding over them.

The people of Israel spent a lot of the forty years they wandered through the desert looking back longingly to the things they had left behind in Egypt. They neither got into the promised land, nor got back to Egypt, so they are not a great example to follow! More positively, Hebrews 11:15-16 says of those who died in faith,

“Truly if they had called to mind that country from which they had come out, they would have had opportunity to return. But now they desire a better, that is, a heavenly country.”

Both the thief on the cross (see Luke 23) and king Manasseh, at the end of his wicked life (see 2 Chronicles 33), can teach us a lesson about looking back in sadness or frustration. Both had lived lives that were, at best, wasted. Manasseh was the most wicked king Judah ever had, so his life was not just wasted, it was full of terrible crimes, and all kinds of evil. But we don't read anything about either of them focussing on the rear-view mirror. The thief had only a short time left, and the Lord Jesus focussed him on the future in heaven. Manasseh spent his last few years acknowledging God and putting right a few of the things he had destroyed in the nation he ruled over.

Let's be prepared to learn from mistakes in our past and take strength from happy memories of the Lord's blessings, but let's focus most of our attention on the future and the present, whatever the present feels like.

Fear or anticipation?

When you are contemplating old age, is it with fear or with anticipation?

It might be:

Fear of loss of self-esteem and importance. If our area of service, or the prominence of that service, is reduced we might find ourselves like Elijah in 1 Kings 19, discouraged and depressed. He had won a great victory at Mount Carmel, but now he was being persecuted, and seems to have grown tired of having to stand alone so often. He tells God, quite frankly, that he has had enough, and is ready to go to heaven. But although Elijah might think his work is over, God hasn't finished with him yet! In fact, Elijah still has much to accomplish for God, including handing over to the next generation in Elisha, but that was the topic for last week's talk! A big part of Elijah's problem was that he had started to focus on himself: his weariness, his persecution, his loneliness. They were all real problems, but they had temporarily made Elijah lose focus on the God who was much bigger than Elijah, Elijah's problems, king Ahab, Jezebel, or anything else for that matter. God's work and God's power are never reduced, whatever our circumstances might be.

Fear of being irrelevant. Perhaps we are just afraid that as old age reduces what we can do we will simply become irrelevant. The question should be, irrelevant to whom? Both Mark and Luke give us the story of a widow who put two very low value coins into the temple collection. Jesus tells His disciples that this widow has given more than anybody else, even the wealthy who have thrown in large amounts. As far as we know, the widow didn't hear what Jesus said, and just went quietly on her way. Was what she did irrelevant because it would make almost no difference to the total collected for the temple, and since nobody else noticed? No, it wasn't! The Lord noticed and approved. You couldn't get much more reduced in circumstances in those days, than a widow woman with almost no money, yet her service was very relevant indeed to Jesus, and highly valued by Him.

Perhaps the Lord Jesus Himself is the best example, although in His earlier, rather than later life. For the majority of His life Jesus lived unseen at home, or working as a carpenter, or builder, in a quiet village, miles from any where of any significance. Can we object to living a life as obscure as the Master Himself?

Fear of physical decay. This might take the form of illness, disability, or death. All those three are pretty scary to me! They would certainly restrict my ability to serve; but I'm not so much thinking about the things themselves here, as the fear of them. Fear itself is debilitating. "Fear not" is an expression we find in many places in our Bibles, including on the lips of the Lord Jesus in Luke 12:32 (KJV). 2 Timothy 1:7 tells us,

"God has not given us a spirit of fear."

And 1 John 4:18 assures us,

"There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear."

Perhaps God might allow disease or disability into our lives in the future. If He does, He will then give us all we need to serve Him in those circumstances. Let's not allow fear and doubt to rob us of the strength to serve Him in the circumstances we actually have today.

Anticipation is much more productive than fear.

Some of the things we can anticipate are:

Anticipate new opportunities. Apparently, it was Alexander Graham Bell, famous for inventing the telephone, who said, "When one door closes, another opens.", but the sentiment is a biblical one. Paul, who knew quite a bit about God opening some doors and closing others, tells us, in 2 Corinthians 12:9,10;

"[Jesus] said to me. 'My grace is sufficient for you, for My strength is made perfect in weakness.' Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities, in reproaches, in needs, in persecutions, in distresses, for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

Paul didn't just see new opportunities in the restrictions placed on him, he took pleasure in them. I confess, I haven't reached that level of Christian maturity yet. To Paul it was obvious: if God is pleased to show His strength most through my weakness, then I will happily accept getting weaker.

Put Paul in a prison cell, and he preached to prisoners and the jailor. Put him under long term house arrest, and he wrote letters that form the largest part of the New Testament today. Stop him visiting Christians, and he prayed for them daily and sent other believers to teach and encourage them. There really was no way of keeping that man down! What about you and me?

Anticipate new relationships and new fields of service. Joni Eareckson Tada didn't experience restricted circumstances from old age, she became a quadriplegic at the age of seventeen due to a swimming accident. There is no way she would ever have chosen to accept those limitations, but it has given her worldwide opportunities for witness and service. We are unlikely to gain Joni's levels of international recognition, but God might just allow some restrictions in our lives that we would never choose, so that we can relate to others with similar difficulties, or strike up a relationship with someone that we would not otherwise have come across.

Struggling or submitting?

Finally, we need to consider who is the master, and 'chief chooser', in our life. Is it to be me, or Christ? That brings us back to Jacob and his lifelong struggle to submit to God. The writer of Hebrews, having the whole of Jacob's long life to choose from for examples of faith, decided to home in on Jacob's final few hours. In Hebrews 11:21 we read,

"By faith Jacob, when he was dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, and worshipped, leaning on the top of his staff."

In Genesis chapters forty-eight and forty-nine we discover that Jacob was in his bed, evidently bed ridden when this occurred. At the end of these events Jacob, "drew his feet up into the bed", and died. So, at the very end of his life, like so many others down the years, this man of God, who has struggled with, Laban, Esau, even God Himself, and travelled many hundreds of miles, often sleeping out under the stars, has become confined to a bed in just one room. But Jacob isn't bitter and frustrated. He is finally submitting to God and finding the rest that this brings. He speaks about events for his family for many years to come with even some hints of the coming Messiah. Finally, according to Hebrews, Jacob worships. Being allowed to serve God in any capacity and in any circumstances should be counted as a privilege. Being allowed to worship Him, is an even greater one. So, as we all grow older, let us aspire to the renewing of our inward man, to embracing change, looking forward with anticipation, submitting to the Lordship of Christ and worshipping the Father and the Son.

Lord Jesus, although You never lived into old age in this world, You promised to walk alongside us while we do. We confess that there are many things about this journey that we find distasteful and distressing. We would not want to walk that way by ourselves; but any journey is possible, even pleasurable, when You offer to go with us. We remember how John the Baptist said, "[You] must

increase, but I must decrease”, then he struggled when the ‘decreasing’ actually happened and he was locked in prison. Please send us the grace, not just to survive our own ‘prisons’, but to serve you from there, and to learn to enjoy Your company with us all the way through, Amen.

Thank you for listening to this truth for today talk on Growing Old - How to serve God in restricted circumstances, talk number T1241.

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