



Growing Golden Gracefully

Being intentional about living a gracious,
generous, and grateful life.

by Sylvia Schroeder

“Are we going to be like *that* when we get old?” I asked my husband as we headed back toward the car from the nursing home. I disliked ministry visits to the crotchety elderly people.

“I hope not.”

While the senior citizen center grew smaller in the rearview mirror, we rehashed the visit.

“But how do we know what we’ll be like?” I insisted, worried our golden years may become a tarnished yellow. “How do I know what I’ll be like in another ten years, fifteen, or even twenty?”

After another uncomfortable hour of hearing about the bad food, the less than adequate housing, the inept medical care, and delinquent family members who didn’t come often enough, we left the facility shaking our heads.

“Maybe some turn to fine wine while others to raisins,” I said to my husband after listening to a particularly unhappy 85-year-old member of my church grumble about everything from the music to the message.

I’ve mulled over how to grow old. Of course I want to end well; who doesn’t?

Perhaps with people living longer today, the war between living a Spirit-filled life and a life of self-service can leave one defeated. Perhaps there isn’t enough energy left to make the effort to recharge the “be-good” battery. I don’t know, but in spite of the difficulties from declining health, I don’t want to end up that way.

Aging critics of the millennial generation’s sense of entitlement may be guilty of the same fault by expecting to be served by both government and family. How is it that some seniors grow sweeter with age, while others (the very ones who taught a younger generation to follow God, work hard, and respect one another) find those same values challenging in the home stretch?

When the blurry line from young to old is crossed, in order to end well, a battle still must be waged. Does it become more difficult to exemplify the attributes of Christ in one's deteriorating health? No doubt. Are there maladies that can make one act out of character that simply cannot be helped? Yes.

The Psalmist Asaph in Psalm 73 contrasts the apparent life of ease of the godless and the difficulties of the righteous through the long course of life and death. He acknowledges that bodies deteriorate, but claims God as anchor through it all. "My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever" (Ps. 73:26).

Satan is no gentleman nor does he honor age. It is all-too-easy to find examples within the pages of Scripture of people whose spiritual strength weakened with their physical strength. The enemy of our souls continues his relentless pursuit of attack to the very end of our lives. In fact, it is in those final years that the test becomes most cruel and strenuous. Men and women of God in the throes of diminishing health fight bitterness, complaint, and self-focus. Scriptural directives, however, do not have an age limit.

My point is not to pick on the grumpy old lady in the rest home; rather it is to say to myself, "Self, don't become lax in your later years to the truths of Scripture. You haven't arrived until you have arrived, and until then, it is still your mandate to follow Christ, to serve Him and others, and obey His teachings even though you may be weary. Keep fighting the good fight. Don't quit."

So, I'm setting my goals to grow old grateful, generous, and gracious:

I want to live a life of praise. I don't want to live a life of complaining. A critical spirit negates God's sovereignty over my situation. He knows. He sees.

- I want my faith to flourish, and although fear may be strong, I want to trust God.
- I don't want to become a miser in finances, praise, or faith. I want to live financially responsible. I want my heart to be generous to others.
- I want to reflect Christ in my attitudes and actions. I don't want to be discourteous. It may take twice the effort, but I want to be gracious to others, realizing that my age doesn't entitle selfishness or unkindness.

From birth to death, marriage to raising children, each generation seeks to improve on the one before, yet is mired in the same mud of experiences.

So, how can I presume to grow old any differently? How can I possibly hope to evade the quicksand of aches, pains, and dependency?

I can't.

But this I can do now. Today I can hone the principles that I want to be part of the fabric in my future. Today I can practice rejecting a critical spirit and embracing intentional thankfulness. I can be generous with praise.

Although I may not appreciate giving up my home and independence one day, I can learn now to trust in the good intentions of others. My spirit now can train to exude the sort of sweetness and belief that spurs those around to raise their own bar, and return actions that are honorable.

I can grow in my relationship with Christ, and encourage those ahead of me to continue to grow and persevere in Christlikeness. I can tell them how much my generation needs to see gratefulness, generosity, and graciousness modeled so that we can end well.

I can observe those saints of God transitioning well, and learn from them, like Gloria whose daily care of her husband is similar to caring for a child.

"He doesn't speak much anymore," Gloria told me. "Between feeding him and cleaning him, I don't get much else done."

Gloria puts him to bed each night after a rigorous preparation that is far too strenuous for a woman of her age, but when she settles next to him she speaks into the quiet.

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"I love you, John."

She waits in the dark room until she hears back, "I love you," and when she hears it, she thanks God. Gloria smiles, pauses, and looks into my eyes, as hers are rimmed with tears.

"Little things like that, I cherish, they keep me going."

Like ragged remains of a picture ripped apart, MaryAnne stands alone. Her face shadows the grief that bends thin shoulders inward. She is bowed forward as though doubled in pain. It is still that raw. She and her husband of 50 years not only loved one another well, but splashed that love onto everyone else. I've never heard her complain even though the fact of Keith being gone is still illusory, as if she has to remind herself.

"Keith would love it."

"That would make Keith laugh."

"He would be so proud."

She chooses to remember the joys in spite of tears. Saints like Gloria and MaryAnne are a joy to visit. Their lives challenge me to model Christlikeness in the process of long and tough transitions in the end-of-life years.

I can choose to follow the path of those who look for God's finger within the tight grip of life's miseries. I can do it now for then.

How will I be when I grow old?

Today I will act on what I hope to be when I grow up. I will not let what I don't have drown what I have. I will not allow bitterness and hurt from ministry to suffocate the greater privilege of being called to serve Christ.

For a life that ends well returns the glory to the One who created life. ☩

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