Some have said, “Growing old is not so bad when you consider the alternative.” In truth, our feelings about growing older may be ambivalent. Jonathan Swift said, “Every man desires to live long, but no man would be old.”

Nevertheless, if you live long enough, whether you like it or not, you will grow old and be susceptible to the problems faced by the elderly. What will you do then? To answer that question, you need to know some facts about aging, what the Bible says about being old, and what you can do when you face the challenges of old age.

**FACTS ABOUT AGING**

**“Senior Citizens”** are a growing part of the population

The first fact to understand about old people is that the world has a growing number of them. James L. Knapp wrote in 2003 that “for the first time in the history of [the US], there are more senior citizens than teenagers.”

Why are there so many older people today compared to earlier times? (1) Because of increasing life expectancy. In A.D. 1000, people did not have to worry about retirement; they just died. Most people lived only to the age of 40 or 50. In the last century, the average life expectancy has increased by nearly 30 years. (2) The aging of those born during the post-war baby boom. The estimated 450 million children born in the eighteenth years following World

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2A “senior citizen” is “a person of or over the age of retirement” (*The American Heritage Dictionary*, 4th ed., s.v. “senior citizen”).


4Knapp said that the average life span increased in the twentieth century from 47 to 75. (Knapp, 12.) Jim Hughes noted that improvement in infant survival rates, better care for mothers, and the control of infectious diseases were largely responsible for this increase in life expectancy. (Jim Hughes, *Good Grief and How to Experience It*, Class Notes, Ministries with Senior Adults, Abilene Christian University, 9–13 January 2006.) In addition to better medical care, other scientific and technological advances have enabled people to live longer. (Knapp, 12–13.)
War II are now beginning to turn 65, resulting in a “senior citizen” boom. \(^5\) (3) Because of a “birth dearth” in recent years. People are having fewer children; therefore, seniors make up a larger portion of the population. \(^6\)

“Senior Citizens” Are Not What We Think They Are

Much of what we tend to think about older people is wrong.

(1) Not all are poor. We may assume that the elderly are poor. However, many older people are doing well financially; among the wealthiest people in America today, half are over 65. \(^7\)

(2) They are not necessarily sickly. When we think of older people, we may picture them as being sickly and unable to function well; but most older people in America are relatively healthy.

(3) Not all are dependent on others. We may also think that most older people need caretakers; however, many are leading productive, independent lives.

(4) They are not too old to learn. Older adults are often viewed as incapable of learning, but most people can continue to learn all their lives.

(5) They are not living in idleness. In addition, we may think of older adults as being retired and not working, when in reality many who have reached retirement age continue to work. Frequently, they work by choice, and not out of necessity. Employers have discovered that older adults are often better, more dependable workers than the young. Many business owners, farmers, and professionals—doctors, lawyers, and college teachers—continue in their jobs long after the usual retirement age of 65.

“Senior Citizens” Are Survivors

Many members of older generations have survived terrible physical illnesses. They have endured emotional losses beyond our comprehension. More than that, they have survived financial hard times—especially the Great Dep-ression. When an elderly Christian woman has buried her husband, lost several of her grown children, and has suffered from life-threatening disease but still remains cheerful and encourages others, she is to be greatly admired. In fact, the only word that seems appropriate to describe the myriads of such seniors is “heroic.”

The Problems Connected With Growing Older

Of course, many older people have problems. Among them are health problems. The elderly are likely to experience more than their share of sickness. In addition, older people may struggle with loneliness, disillusionment, worry, bitterness, and self-pity. \(^8\) Other problems of aging include (a) physical and mental deterioration, (b) added responsibilities (since many older people have two or three other generations to look after), (c) financial problems, (d) a lack of respect, (e) a feeling of uselessness, (f) a loss of self-esteem, and (g) the fear of death. \(^9\) Some experience “ageism”—a prejudice against the aged in a youth-oriented society. Sometimes older people may be discriminated against even in the church!

Before we consider how older people can manage these problems, let us see what the Bible teaches about being old.

BIBLICAL TEACHING ABOUT OLD AGE

Attaining old age should be regarded as a blessing from God. \(^10\) He promised that Abraham would “be buried at a good old age” (Genesis 15:15), and He granted Moses a long and vigorous life (Deuteronomy 34:7). He also promised to prolong Solomon’s days (1 Kings 3:11–14). \(^11\) The psalmist wrote, “With a long life I will satisfy him and let him see My salvation” (Psalm 91:16). \(^12\) In Prov-

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\(^3\)This statement was adapted from Hughes. The estimated figure was taken from the International Registry of Baby Boomers (http://www.babyboomboomers.com/; Internet; accessed 2 February 2011).

\(^4\)Hughes.

\(^5\)Ibid.


\(^8\)Old age in the Old Testament was also seen as the reward of a righteous life. The New Testament does not promise a long life to all who obey God.

\(^9\)The promises to Solomon were conditional.

\(^10\)This is the last of a long list of blessings that come to the one who “dwells in the shelter of the Most High” (Psalm 91:1).
erbs 3:1, 2, we read, “My son, do not forget my teaching, but let your heart keep my commandments; for length of days and years of life and peace they will add to you” (see also Proverbs 3:13–16; 9:10, 11; 10:27).

Although long life is a blessing, old age is frequently accompanied by disability and sickness. Ecclesiastes 12:1–8 describes some of those infirmities. Jacob’s feelings were typical of many old people. He said, “The years of my sojourning are one hundred and thirty; few and unpleasant have been the years of my life, nor have they attained the years that my fathers lived during the days of their sojourning” (Genesis 47:9; for a similar complaint, see Psalm 90:9, 10).13

Elders should be respected. God commanded His people, “Honor your father and mother” (Ephesians 6:2a; see Exodus 20:12). The law of Moses taught, “You shall rise up before the gray-headed and honor the aged, and you shall revere your God; I am the Lord” (Leviticus 19:32; see also 1 Peter 5:5; 1 Timothy 5:1, 2).

Those who have attained old age should be wiser than the young.14 Job 12:12 says, “Wisdom is with aged men, with long life is understanding.” Consequently, a younger person should listen to what an older one has to say. However, old age does not necessarily guarantee that one’s views are always right. In the Book of Job, the young man Elihu listened to three older, wiser men but was dissatisfied with their answers (Job 32:1–10). Although they were older, their views were wrong (Job 42:7).

People who live to an old age are not immune from sinning, and they have special responsibilities. In the Old Testament, an old prophet lied and brought about the death of a young prophet (1 Kings 13:25). In the New Testament, we read, “Older men are to be temperate, dignified, sensible, sound in faith, in love, in perseverance. Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips nor enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good” (Titus 2:2, 3).

Old age can be seen as a time for accepting new challenges. When he was eighty years old, Moses was called to lead Israel out of Egypt. At eighty-five, Caleb said, “Give me this hill country” (Joshua 14:12).16 According to Psalm 92:14, the righteous “still yield fruit in old age; they shall be full of sap and very green.”

Old age is a good time to get right with God. Any time is a good time to be saved; but as people approach the “eleventh hour” (Matthew 25:6), they may begin to think more about death and eternity. The person who is converted late in life is just as saved as one who becomes a Christian in his youth, although he will surely regret that he did not begin his service to God earlier.

### GROWING OLD UNDER GOD’S GUIDANCE

How can these biblical standards be applied in your life? Batsell Barrett Baxter gave the following suggestions on preparing for old age:

- Consider life a “sowing and reaping” process.
- Develop a proper attitude toward service.
- Retain your self-respect during your older years.
- Listen to other people rather than giving them advice they may not want.
- Accept physical and mental limitations gracefully.
- Communicate with other people.
- Place high value on time.
- Laugh: Cultivate a sense of humor.
- Grow spiritually.17

These guidelines are also important for older people: (1) Follow biblical instructions. (2) Take care of yourself. (3) Recognize your usefulness. (4) Accept your responsibilities—do not give in

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13Infirmities accompanying old age are evident in the stories of David and Barzillai (1 Samuel 9:35), of Jacob’s blindness (Genesis 48:10), and of the circumstances of Eli’s death (1 Samuel 4:18). See also Ecclesiastes 6:3–6.

14The New Testament specifies that local churches are to be led by men who are older (“elders”), who have proved their wisdom and faithfulness in the Lord’s service (see 1 Timothy 3:6; Acts 20:28).

15The story of Rehoboam contrasts the foolishness of young counselors with the wisdom of older men (1 Kings 12:6–15).

16Of course, since Moses lived to be 120 years old and Joshua died at 110, their ages are not exactly comparable to the same ages today. Simeon and Anna were old when they gave thanks for the coming of the Christ at the time the baby Jesus was presented at the temple (Luke 2:25–38). When Paul wrote Romans, he was probably over 55; yet he was planning another mission trip (Romans 15:23, 24). See also Joshua 13:1.

17Baxter, 87–89.
to the temptation to become inactive, to live for pleasure, or to be unloving. (5) See old age as an opportunity. (6) Develop a Christian understanding of death. (7) Rejoice anyway! Even if you have many problems, you still have reasons to rejoice (see Philippians 4:4; 1 Thessalonians 5:18a).  

Five additional suggestions should be emphasized:

1. Though you cannot prevent getting old, you should prepare for a happy, successful old age. You can prepare financially; but even more, you need to prepare physically, emotionally, socially, and spiritually.

2. Avoid the sins of old age:
   a. hedonism—living for pleasure;
   b. cynicism—believing and expecting the worst;
   c. materialism—wasting time spending accumulated wealth or being envious of others’ wealth;
   d. selfishness, self-centeredness—believing that the world should revolve around oneself, showing little interest in anyone else;
   e. self-pity—feeling sorry for oneself;
   f. bitterness—resentment over real or imagined wrongs suffered.

3. Keep active; try to learn new skills and accomplish new tasks.

4. Always be faithful to the Lord; as a Christian, you cannot retire from your responsibility to Christ and His church.

5. Make sure you are prepared for death. The elderly can be sure that death is relatively near. Be sure you are ready to face God in judgment!

**CONCLUSION**

Older people have enjoyed remarkable achievements. When A. R. Holton and his wife reached the age of seventy, they went to Korea as missionaries. When my father, Dave H. Roper, was about 85, he began to write personal essays which were published weekly in a local paper; later he published these essays and other stories in a book. When my wife’s mother, June Shannon, was almost 83, she published a book of poetry.

What will you do with your senior years? Whether you spend those years wallowing in self-pity or energetically using your talents to help others and glorify God is largely up to you!

Coy Roper

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An Aging Population

According to the United Nations (UN), “Population ageing is unprecedented, without parallel in human history—and the twenty-first century will witness even more rapid ageing than did the century just past.”

World Population Ageing: 1950–2050

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