



Making Good Return

Kathleen B.
Nielson

Biblical Wisdom on
Honoring Aging Parents

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A Scripture quotation from the New Testament uses the ESV's alternate, footnoted translation of *adelphoi* ("brothers and sisters").

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

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With thanksgiving for my parents,
John and LaVon Buswell

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Introduction

It is dangerous to write a book about something you're still in the middle of. For several years after conceiving the idea of this book, I kept putting off the writing. When my dear mother had gone to heaven and my care for my parents was complete, I thought, then would be the perfect time to write—when I had learned all the lessons I could learn. We see better in hindsight. When my mother turned ninety-six, however, I suddenly realized that I was fast getting older as well . . . and the writing began.

In the process, I've confronted the magnitude of the subject and concluded it was good to go ahead and write, for there is no end to the lessons we caregivers can learn; in any case, one book can cover only a bit. It was good to begin writing also because, as I'm still taking care of Mom, I have live empathy for those who, like me, are in the process of being schooled by God in the art of caring for aging loved ones.

I have not counted the number of people who have commented to me on the need to address this topic, but it's been overwhelming—and the comments have come with a definite urgency. Many adult children like me (averaging fifty- or sixty-something years old) are being called up to parent-care duty and feel the need for advice and help, especially as a similar call from children and grandchildren often pulls from the other side.

This situation will only intensify in coming years, as we baby boomers begin to crowd the ranks of the elderly. The need to help and

encourage caregivers is urgent indeed, not only in the general public but specifically in the church, for the Bible speaks strongly to the subject of God's care and our care for the elderly ones in our midst.

This is a book written from a Christian perspective, acknowledging the God-breathed truths of the Old and New Testaments concerning human beings created by God in the beginning and headed to meet God face-to-face in the end. At the center of these biblical truths is the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God who came to earth to save us through his death on the cross, bearing our sins, and his resurrection from the dead.

The redemptive story of God's calling out a people for himself through Jesus Christ is not just the context of a Christian's thinking about care for the aging; it is at the very heart of the matter—as is the case with all parts of life. As I have written I have been continually aware of the many people, including many friends, whose aging loved ones are not believers in the Lord Jesus; I have aimed to write with acknowledgment of our many different contexts and situations, as well as with wisdom concerning care for the elderly that takes eternity into account.

This is not a “how-to” book that covers topics like writing wills and choosing long-term care facilities. Many practical details are indeed addressed, but those details come mainly in the process of exploring biblical principles and their real-life implications. In considering how to put this book together, I searched the Bible with an eye to this theme of caring for aging parents and the elderly among us—and I was amazed by the volume and the richness of what I found.

The book's structure, then, grew from what the Scriptures have to say regarding this topic, and it is organized into what I've called five “big biblical truths” about the process of aging and elder care. Each of the five truths comes with a related response. The chapters are ordered in pairs, with the first of the pair presenting the biblical truth and the second fleshing out the related response to that truth.

Many people helped me write this book. In the early stages, I requested thoughts and stories from a group of friends who have firsthand experience in caring for aging parents. They responded with a host of wise, thoughtful suggestions and ideas—and moving accounts of their own experiences, many of which are very different from mine. These friends are not named as their contributions are folded into the chapters, but I thank each of them for making the book much more rich and true than it would have been without their help. I thank my family for living out the realities of this book as we have together watched over aging parents and grandparents. This book’s topic involves not just individuals but also families. As always, my husband, Niel, is my most loved and true critic, in the best sense of the word.

The book’s title comes from Paul’s first epistle to Timothy, a letter in which the older apostle is guiding his younger coworker in wise and godly church leadership. In his instructions regarding various segments of the congregation, Paul writes that widows are to be honored and cared for not first by the church but by their own children and grandchildren, who are “to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God” (1 Tim. 5:4). This book asks how we grown children can “make return” to our aging parents in a way that is pleasing in God’s sight.

It’s an urgent question. I’m certainly not finished learning how to answer it. Even in the middle of trying to figure it out, though, we can pause, look up, look into the Bible, and better understand how to please God as we care for our aging loved ones. By God’s grace, we can make progress in making good return to our parents. That is what this book aims to help us do.

1

God Sovereignly Ordains Our Aging

As the sun sets, I pull up to the front of the retirement community in which my mother has lived for several years now. It has been a full day, the contours of which I know well, as I make the monthly trip to visit Mom: catch the early flight from Chicago, rejoice when the rental car is waiting for me in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, then navigate the highway and finally the winding roads through rich farmland and Amish homesteads with black and white clothes hanging out on the line no matter the season. I know and like knowing how the Lancaster County farms and fields look in the different seasons, from dead-looking brown stubby stretches and huddled, muddy cattle to swaying, tall green corn and cows with calves scattered on gentle hills.

Before I go in (where I will be confronted immediately with at least a dozen urgent needs that Mom has been waiting for me to help with), I stop, take a breath, gather my thoughts, and say a prayer.

This book is an extension of that moment of preparation. Before we walk in to the dwelling places of the elderly, before we make aged parents the objects of our care and the subjects of our conversation, let's stop, consider, and above all look up to the eternal Lord God, who oversees us human creatures from the beginning

to the end of our days on this earth. Let's try to see what he sees. And then let's go in.

The Foundation of God's Word

But how can we survey the landscape of a human life the way God does? In this book, we will peer into a certain part of this landscape—the part farthest away, where clear lines gradually blur into the distance ahead. To those of us who are not yet there, it's the part where the figures and the action seem to get smaller. If we're going to care for the ones who inhabit that portion of the landscape, we need to understand what life there is like. The ones who are there don't always have words to explain it to us, and we do not always have ears to hear. How shall we gain a true perspective on the experience of aging and on the best ways of reaching out to those who are walking on ahead through the territory of old age?

The Bible gives us words we can trust—God's inspired words of truth concerning the human beings he created. There is no other place to start than the foundation of God's Word. What do the Scriptures reveal concerning those later years of life, when a person has lived “seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty” years (Ps. 90:10)—or, in the case of a growing number today, ninety years?

Only the eternal Lord God who created the universe (and each of us) truly sees the whole span of a human life. In one sense, he is so big and powerful that we humans are like grasshoppers, says the prophet Isaiah, to the one “who sits above the circle of the earth” (Isa. 40:22). Isaiah uses vivid pictures—we are not just grasshoppers but *grass*: “All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field” (40:6). We are so small and so quickly here and gone.

Part of Isaiah's point, however, is that the Creator God does see us little fleeting creatures. Only the greatest can see the smallest. We must not think that God does not see us, from birth to death and down to every particle of our skin and bones and blood and

organs—and soul. Isaiah asks why God’s people say that their way is hidden from the Lord:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable. (40:28)

This is where we must start, in order to get God’s view: with *him*, in all his unsearchable understanding. He sees and sovereignly rules over the ends of the earth he made.

It is humbling and comforting to find that this great Lord God pays a good deal of attention, in his written revelation, to old age; he speaks clearly into this part of our human experience. God’s Word on aging shows us a tender and merciful aspect of his heart for the human creatures he made. As we listen, we are blessed and instructed—not only in learning to care well for aging loved ones but also in preparing ourselves, by God’s grace, to live as godly residents in the territory of the elderly. Most of us will move in there, far away as it seems while we inhabit the earlier stages of life. It will be best to have staked out the territory.

Aging Occurs under God’s Sovereign Rule

Of our five big biblical truths about old age, first and foremost we must consider this one: *aging occurs under God’s sovereign rule*. Of course it does, a Christian might say: the Scriptures reveal a sovereign Lord God who created us and who eternally rules over all his creation. The Bible encourages us to consider God’s sovereignty in all things—in nature, for example, as he orders the seasons, the planets, the rain; in the rise and fall of kings and nations; and in the measure of a human life from beginning to end.

We know that the Lord orders our beginnings, from Adam and Eve through every one of their descendants, each of whom he knits together in their mother's womb (see Ps. 139:13). We also know the Lord orders the end of our days in these present mortal bodies; each day of our lives has already been written in God's book (see Ps. 139:16). The spans of our little lives are part of God's big story. It follows that, in order to grasp the significance of our own beginnings and endings, we must pay attention to the beginning and ending of the big story of the Bible. Our stories have full meaning only when understood in light of God's story.

We cannot imagine how the days in the garden of Eden might have unfolded had Adam and Eve not sinned and brought God's declared punishment of death on themselves and consequently on the entire human race (see Gen. 2:17; Rom. 5:12). What would "aging" have meant without sin and all its consequences? What would have been the experience through time of God's people living perfectly under God's rule?

But that's not how God's story goes. The first book of the Bible quickly tells us how sin broke into God's perfect creation, bringing with it death, both physical and spiritual—alienation on every level from our holy Creator. It tells us more, however. As early as Genesis 3:15, God makes a promise that points to the defeat of sin and death: the evil Serpent will be crushed by the offspring of the woman. God's sovereign plan for his people to live under his rule would not be thwarted but would come about through a Redeemer who would conquer death. From the foundation of the world, God willed to create a people who would live with him forever through the work of Jesus Christ his Son, who became flesh and died, bearing the full punishment of sin in the place of sinners (see Eph. 1:3–10).

The big story of the Bible unfolds according to God's promises. The plan of salvation was accomplished victoriously; in Christ, death was defeated at the cross and the empty tomb. But the story is not over. We human beings remain in this fallen world, in these

dying bodies, awaiting the completion of redemptive history when Jesus Christ comes again to claim his people, from Adam and Eve down through the last believer to be born. In that great day of resurrection, all dead bodies will rise from the grave, “some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Dan. 12:2; see also John 5:28–29). At the final judgment, death itself will be thrown into the lake of fire (see Rev. 20:14). The prophet Isaiah tells us that the Lord “will swallow up death forever” (25:8). There will be a new heaven and a new earth, and new resurrected bodies for the people of God who live there with him: God’s plan will not be thwarted. The very end of the story is good, and it reaches out into eternity.

We embodied human beings are taking part in a huge story of redemption, a story sovereignly decreed by the Lord God for his glory alone. The Bible reveals this sovereign God to be just and merciful, ordering the span of each life and all lives as part of his great redemptive plan, with Jesus Christ at its center. The bodily beginning—and end—of each human life is necessarily linked to God’s larger story, which is moving inexorably toward the glorious conclusion he has sovereignly set in place.

Focusing In: Aging and Death within the Story

The point here is to ask how we view the earthly endings of our little stories in light of the big story. By “endings” I mean to include not just death but also the aging process that leads to death. Perhaps that is the first admission we need to make about aging as we know it: it is the precursor of death. It is linked to death. Recently, I heard a woman claim that aging is a good thing, a beautiful thing, part of the “flow of nature.” Now, we will talk about how the Lord means to make the aging process beautiful—and he does. He redeems everything. But in itself the aging process is essentially the decay of the body that leads to death.

My husband and I are together enjoying the white hairs of old age. My mother has the most beautiful head of pure white hair; she dyed her hair for years, but now she takes a certain pleasure in the whiteness of her fluffy bob. As Proverbs says, “Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life” (16:31). But we should be careful to distinguish between the whiteness that symbolically points to the dignity and value of a wise older person, on the one hand, and the whiteness that literally indicates a decline in the pigment of our hair follicles, on the other. Our pigment cells die, so that as we get older we have less and less of the living stuff that gave our hair its color. The autumn leaves that turn brilliant shades and fall to the ground have dried up and died.

Aging leads to death, and death is a result of the fall. Aging, then, is not good in itself; rather, it is a consequence of sin in this fallen world. It is given to us by a sovereign God who kept his word to Adam: death would result from disobedience. We must understand the process of aging as part of the Bible’s big story—a story directed not by a beneficent, neutral, or even random natural force, but by the Lord God. It is a story that comes not in a steady unending flow or in happy cycles but in the archetypal shape that shows itself in stories of all places and times: a distinct beginning (creation), a clear crisis (the fall), a shining climax (the cross and the resurrection), and a perfectly resolved denouement (the return of Christ).

As we believers live in our part of the story, looking ahead to the resolution of our Savior’s return, God’s Word enables us to hold the whole biblical framework in our minds. We can move with hope toward the very end because of the victory over sin and death accomplished by Jesus our Redeemer. The promise of the big story’s end is magnificent because he will make new all the wonders of creation we glimpse in the story’s beginning.

But waiting for that end is difficult because of the effects of the fall. To grapple with the reality of aging is to acknowledge that part of the story. This acknowledgment is a crucial starting point

as we approach the subject of aging. We will hear voices around us assuming many unbiblical starting points—one of them being that aging and death are natural and good. Another is the assumption that we human beings are in control of the aging process.

Usurping God’s Sovereignty

We human beings desperately want to write our own stories, including the later chapters. We desire sovereignty over the endings of our lives in these mortal bodies. God has put in us a strong instinct to live; we most often try to avoid death at all costs because we fear death as the enemy it is, a fierce foe that would take away everything we have. Much of the advertising that bombards us today plays to these desires and fears: if we can just protect ourselves with the best available exercise routines, safety measures, medical care, beauty products, and retirement plans, we can almost expect never to face the horror of death.

Almost. These protections can (sometimes) dramatically extend our days, but they do not ultimately succeed. The most obtrusive and unavoidable giveaway to this truth is the process of aging. No beauty cream can erase all the wrinkles. No amount of exercise or surgery can keep a ninety-something-year-old body as strong as it was in the prime of life (whatever that is). We age. Everyone knows it. And we age under the sovereign hand of a God who has judged this sinful world with the punishment of death. Aging is one sign of the futility and corruption to which the whole creation was subjected by God (see Rom. 8:20–21). The denial of these biblical truths most often involves denying sin, and it ultimately involves denying God.

The attempt to establish our own sovereignty over death takes many forms: we can call it our enemy and try to defeat it, but we can also call it our friend and invite it in. To treat aging and death as “natural” is perhaps a first step in the latter direction. But such steps lead us to call evil good in all kinds of ways. To understand

the extreme danger inherent in this view, all we have to do is listen to the way practices like abortion and euthanasia are lauded in the public sphere as good ways to increase human self-determination and happiness. We fool ourselves in the most deadly way when we dress up death as our ally, our comforter, our friend—rather than acknowledging death as God’s punishment for our sin.

I sat with friends in Switzerland not long ago as they discussed the increasingly common practice of “exiting,” that is, choosing (legally) to end one’s life. All one needs is a letter from a medical professional, and those letters are easy to obtain. Those who exit are seeking peace as they embrace death. In refusing to accept God’s sovereign gift of life, however, they are rejecting the sovereign God himself, who made a way for us to know peace with him forever, through his Son.

Until the Lord comes, we will all experience the moment of death, when our physical eyes close and our spiritual eyes are opened to the realities of the spiritual world. On this side of the great divide, the quiet of a dead body doesn’t tell the story; we cannot see and know what that person sees and knows. God has revealed the story in the Scriptures and ultimately in his Son, who took on a body to die and save us from death. We cannot see him yet, either, in his glorious resurrected body, but we can believe the Bible and the true story of human history it tells. In that story, death is a grievous and ugly enemy that has been defeated by our beautiful Savior and eternal Friend. In the end, every eye will see the Lord Jesus (see Rev. 1:7).

Responding Humbly to a Sovereign God

These truths are both somber and glorious—and they are good. We are not writing our own little stories, including the final chapters, thank God. According to Scripture, a good and merciful God numbers our days as he directs human history for his redemptive purposes.

We know that human beings once lived much longer than we do today: Adam lived 930 years—and Methuselah a record 969 (see Gen. 5:5, 27). As evil multiplied on the earth, God limited the human life span, declaring, “My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years” (Gen. 6:3). After that declaration, some people still lived long lives: Noah was 600 at the time of the flood and lived 350 years afterward (see Gen. 7:6; 9:28). But the numbers gradually decreased: Abraham lived 175 years, Moses 120 years, David 70 years (see Gen. 25:7; Deut. 34:7; 2 Sam. 5:4; 1 Kings 2:10–11). The almighty Lord has numbered our days in this sinful world; that limitation is surely meant to turn us to him in humility as we sense the brevity of our lives under the hand of a sovereign and eternal Maker and Judge.

I was reminded of an episode in the life of King David as I read through a lovely, wise book by Derek Prime.¹ In Prime’s alphabet of wisdom on aging, *A* is for *acceptance*, as illustrated by the story of Barzillai the Gileadite, a wealthy friend of David’s who brings David and his men shelter and provision in the wilderness during Absalom’s rebellion. When peace is restored, David invites the elderly Barzillai to return to Jerusalem with him and enjoy his kindly provision. We can learn much from Barzillai’s response:

How many years have I still to live, that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem? I am this day eighty years old. Can I discern what is pleasant and what is not? Can your servant taste what he eats or what he drinks? Can I still listen to the voice of singing men and singing women? Why then should your servant be an added burden to my lord the king? Your servant will go a little way over the Jordan with the king. Why should the king

1. Derek Prime, *A Good Old Age: An A to Z of Loving and Following the Lord Jesus in Later Years* (2017; repr., Leyland, UK: 10Publishing, 2021). See pages 15–21 for Prime’s discussion of the story of David and Barzillai.

repay me with such a reward? Please let your servant return, that I may die in my own city near the grave of my father and my mother. (2 Sam. 19:34–37)

Barzillai then offers for one of his men to go with David in his place, and David accepts, kisses and blesses his friend, and leaves him. It's all told matter-of-factly. Barzillai (and David, apparently) accepted his lot—not with bitterness but with a realism that acknowledged the truth of his condition: he was eighty, and his taste and vision and hearing were failing. He was still actively helping others, but he understood that he would die relatively soon. And he knew that his own home would be the best place for him. We have to admire his humble, honest acceptance of his condition.

Then there is King Hezekiah, who wasn't so accepting. At one point in his reign as king of Judah, he became sick and “was at the point of death”; the prophet Isaiah even came and told him to set his house in order, for he was to die (Isa. 38:1). But Hezekiah wept and pleaded with the Lord, and God sent an answer, again through Isaiah: God said he would heal Hezekiah and add fifteen years to his life—and also deliver him and the city of Jerusalem from the attacking Assyrian army (see Isa. 38:4–6).

Think of the lessons Hezekiah learned of God's mercy and God's sovereignty during the end of his life (as well as God's care for the line of David and the city of Jerusalem). Think too of what it would be like to be told by God that you had exactly fifteen more years to live. But then think about the fact that God has indeed numbered your years just as exactly. Not one of us knows our number, but we can and must trust in the sovereign Ruler of the universe whom Scripture reveals.

At the start of a book that will take us into the territory of old age, how right to remember that our lives on this earth are like a fleeting dream or like grass that flourishes in the morning and withers in the evening (see Ps. 90:5–6)—all of which is divinely determined by the

one who is God from everlasting to everlasting and who, according to his will, returns man to dust (see Ps. 90:1–3). We must approach this subject humbly, praying with the psalmist, “Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom” (Ps. 90:12). Humility exalts not ourselves but our sovereign Lord God, acknowledging that we depend on him for every moment of life.

With this first great truth in place—the truth of our sovereign God who rules over every part of our human story, including our aging and death—we are ready to enter the rooms where our elderly loved ones live. We will go humbly indeed, knowing that we are seeing God’s hand of judgment in a fallen world. We will certainly hate sin more, around us and in ourselves, as we witness its devastating effects. We will encounter the great enemy—death—as its hand reaches into various parts of weakening bodies. We will struggle against this enemy. And we will know that, even though we can help the weak, we cannot defeat death ourselves.

But as believers, we will know that Christ has done it. We know the big story. Jesus Christ the Son of God has already defeated this enemy. “It is finished,” Jesus said from the cross as he paid the full price of death for our sin (John 19:30). And now the risen Christ reigns in heaven, until that day when he comes again to judge all and to make all things new. In the meantime, we live in this fallen world, trusting in God’s sovereign redemptive plan, walking humbly to the end.

2

Responding with Humility

I need to go in. Mom is waiting. The biblical truths we celebrate must shape the experiences of our ordinary days, as we're looking to the end of not just the big story but—in the meantime—each little story. What I believe about my sovereign God must determine the way I interact with my mother today.

In the first chapter, we grappled with the first and foremost truth about aging: that our sovereign God rules over the process as he accomplishes his redemptive plan in human history. The aging process is linked to death, the enemy that rages in our world as a result of sin and according to the decree of our holy God. We looked at the big biblical story, in which we see that Christ on the cross defeated death—and we found our place in that story as believers, redeemed but still waiting for the final resolution.

We also said that the primary response to God's sovereignty over aging must be one of humility. This aging process is ordained by God as part of his story of redemption, and we must accept it from his hand, rather than deny it or complain about it or think we can fix it ourselves. We saw that King David's aged friend Barzillai understood this.

The missionary author Elisabeth Elliot famously and repeatedly said, "In acceptance lieth peace." Those words come from the

final line of a poem by one whose life and work greatly influenced Elliot: the missionary Amy Carmichael.¹ If we read anything about the lives of these two strong godly women, both of whom faced immense suffering and loss in the midst of faithful service to the Lord, we quickly discover that the “acceptance” they taught was no passive giving up. It was humility in the act of receiving obediently what God put before them. Carmichael wrote that poem as she grieved the death of loved ones around her in the orphanage in India where she served, but she finally came to humbly accept the

. . . breaking sorrow
Which God tomorrow
Will to His son explain.

How do we humbly accept the aging process from God’s hand—as we deal with it in older generations, and, of course, as we prepare for it ourselves? First, our humble acceptance requires the honest acknowledgement that we cannot fix aging or make it go away.

Let’s Speak Truth

The world around us is indeed good at pretending we can avoid old age. Those who have actually reached it know that we cannot.

1. The last line of the poem also serves as the title, “In Acceptance Lieth Peace,” in *Mountain Breezes: The Collected Poems of Amy Carmichael* (Fort Washington, PA: Christian Literature Crusade, 1999), 293. Carmichael’s biography is masterfully written by Elisabeth Elliot in *A Chance to Die: The Life and Legacy of Amy Carmichael* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1987). Elliot tells her own story of the martyrdom of her husband Jim in *Through Gates of Splendor* (New York: Harper, 1957). Elliot knew well the importance of this topic of caring for aging loved ones: she wrote of caring for her own elderly mother, who suffered dementia (even as she herself would, years later), in a long out-of-print book titled *Forget Me Not: Loving God’s Aging Children* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publications, 1990).

A ninety-something-year-old person with ninety-something-year-old skin knows the truth about those well-marketed skin creams that help only a little and for a little while. The advertisers for the store Forever 21 have a limited marketing audience. One of the best gifts we can give our elderly loved ones is the gift of speaking truth with them about aging—that is, the truth that aging happens under God’s sovereign rule, and that our role is to see aging and deal with it for what it is.

My mother’s ophthalmologist is a good example of a truth-speaker. Mom has age-related macular degeneration; she’s blind in one eye and sees a wee bit out of the other. Her doctor is a specialist in this disease. Perhaps because he knows so much, he is careful not to promise too much. In spite of a great deal of ongoing research into this kind of macular degeneration, there is as of yet no known cure, and my mother’s doctor is straightforward about that fact. He does not offer any hope that she will get better.

He tests her eyes with amazing machines that map out the spread of the damaged areas, and the pictures look like lunar landscapes covered with shadows. He is happy that the shadows have not quite covered her eyes, and he says that, at this point, there is a good chance they will now stay where they are, so that she will not be completely blind. In the meantime, various supplements can help slow the process. He is interested in her case and her experience, and he takes time to listen to her descriptions of what things look like to her. He sends her to a specialist in eyeglasses and various aids for the vision-impaired. He is kind. Somehow my mother always leaves encouraged by him, even though he can’t heal her disease and tells her so.

I appreciate this doctor and have learned from him about the goodness of honesty when dealing with aging. Now, honesty can perhaps go too far: I thought that was the case when, several years ago, my ailing father was sent to his medical association’s “Heart Failure Clinic” for regular treatment . . . certainly they could have

come up with a better name! And yet it was a true name—and it turned out to identify accurately what would take the life of my father within a few months.

I think it was around that time that my husband and I discussed with my parents what it means to create a “living will”: a legal document that clarifies a person’s preferences regarding medical treatment in the event that that person is unable to make his or her own decisions. Discussing this document together is good and helpful: not only does the living will protect a patient when the time comes to use it, but also the very process of creating it puts the realities of the end of life on the table as a necessary and profitable subject of conversation.²

A good doctor can be a helpful part of this discussion. There is a humility required of doctors, who are trained to fix our bodies but who, in the end, cannot fix everything. The best doctors have learned this humility; the worst will keep on fixing and promising to fix, well beyond the point when they actually can. We can learn much from the best doctors, the ones who have learned to face the ultimate reality of death and who are willing to help their patients live as well as possible in light of death.

This truth is clearly and movingly expressed in a book by surgeon Atul Gawande. Dr. Gawande tells the honest truth about his experiences with aging and dying patients, family, and friends. He discovered that his most meaningful interactions arose “from helping others deal with what medicine cannot do as well as what it can.”³ In his life and practice, Dr. Gawande was confronted with the basic human needs for honesty and mercy. In fact, in the book,

2. An excellent resource for thinking biblically and wisely about such matters is Bill Davis’s *Departing in Peace: Biblical Decision-Making at the End of Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2017).

3. Atul Gawande, *Being Mortal: Medicine and What Matters in the End* (New York: Picador, 2017), 260. I highly recommend this book full of Dr. Gawande’s wise insights and moving stories.

he time and time again brushes close to what a Christian recognizes as gospel truth—sadly, that truth he does not know or tell.

The examples of my mother's eye doctor and Dr. Gawande show us the basic goodness of truth-telling when it comes to old age and death—among any and all people, Christians or not. Readers of this book will include those who care for believers and nonbelievers; the need for truth applies to us all.

For our unbelieving parents, the need for truth certainly spreads to the realm of the spiritual: if we ourselves are followers of Christ our Savior, then we know above all that our parents need to know the Savior. Their greatest need is faith in Jesus Christ, who died on the cross to save sinners. We can pray for the right moments to speak this truth to them clearly. We can bring believers into their presence who can share the love of Christ—and, if possible, take our loved ones into the fellowship and preaching of the church. We can share what we've been reading in the Bible, or give them books and recordings that communicate Christian truth, if they will read and listen.

Above all, we can pray (and ask others to pray with us) that, by God's Spirit, their hearts will be softened to believe the truth that gives them eternal life in Christ. *And* we can speak truth to them in *all* matters of life and death. The truth about aging and dying may help them confront the need for their salvation.

For those with believing parents, it is just as important to tell the truth. That we are Christians does not mean we should avoid talking about old age and dying and death; it means we can discuss these things without fear—and with hope, trusting in the plan of redemption ordained by our sovereign God. My parents' generation was and is not especially comfortable sharing their thoughts and feelings about such matters. Interestingly enough, however, if they have been Christians for a while, they probably know a lot of songs about heaven!

My father was a pastor, and my parents often sang duets in church together; the words of these old hymns of the church laid

out a great avenue into discussions of all that a Christian looks forward to after death. My father was quite a reserved person, but when he used to lead the hymn sing for the elderly men and women in their retirement community, his face would beam. He would tell the gathered group, with their assorted walkers and wheelchairs and white heads, about the various hymn writers and their stories. He loved the many older hymns about the hope of heaven—they all did. “When we all get to heaven,” they would sing out, “what a day of rejoicing that will be! When we all see Jesus, we’ll sing and shout the victory.”⁴

One way or another, we need to talk about aging and death, and we need to tell the truth. We are called humbly to accept what comes from God’s sovereign hand. My mother’s arthritis is almost surely not going to get better, and I’m not going to tell her that it will. We don’t want to pretend. As we tell the truth, however, we can humbly call our aging loved ones to look outward, not inward.

Let’s Lift Up Their Eyes

As we discussed in the first chapter of this book, the truth is bigger than one little part of the story. We are called humbly to accept the truth not just of sin and fallenness and death but of creation and redemption and the new creation to come. God’s sovereign plan is large and beautiful. We need to tell the *whole* truth.

It’s easy for me to talk about focusing on the big story. I took a lovely walk outside today, I interacted with neighbors, I watered my plants with a granddaughter, and I’m sitting here typing in my study with books scattered all around me. Tonight, I’m going to hear my grandchildren perform in a school orchestra concert.

My mother, however, isn’t strong enough to go outside for a walk. She can’t see to read or write, she has a sore hip, and she’s

4. E. E. Hewitt, “Sing the Wondrous Love of Jesus,” 1898.

worried about running out of her protein drinks before I get there next week. One of the threats of old age many observe is that, as our bodies develop all sorts of issues, our minds are drawn to focus obsessively on those issues. Our field of vision narrows as our bodies and their needs become consuming. The great sovereign Creator Redeemer God is often the last thing on our minds. As human beings at any age, we know this temptation: to become so focused on our bodies, our appearances, our health, and our comfort that we forget to look outside ourselves. But with the elderly these pressures are multiplied—more than we younger ones can imagine.

I have talked with numerous friends about the process of supervising medications for our aging parents, who often have many different pills to keep track of, both prescription medications and supplements. Perhaps you have handled those pillboxes with all the different compartments; perhaps you have tried to explain the compartments to an elderly person who can't see them very well, or who regularly turns them sideways, or upside down. Trying to manage this in a phone call is the worst possible scenario. I may have raised my voice multiple times while talking about pills over the phone, before Mom moved from her independent-living apartment to an assisted-living apartment in the retirement community where she lives—and where her pills are supervised and given to her.

It is amazing how consuming the medication process can be: as our bodies develop more and more needs, we depend more and more on various regularly timed pills. Not only do we make sure to take that blood pressure pill or that cholesterol pill, but we also seek out the latest supplements, hoping to get a clearer brain, or a better digestive system, or softer skin, and on and on—and all these pills become our daily manna, so to speak. We wouldn't dream of missing them (maybe more than we wouldn't dream of missing our Bible reading). Many of them we should not miss, of course. But how is it that they can take up so much of our time and energy and focus?

I like to wake up in the morning and think first about the Lord. But these days, I must first be sure to take a certain pill that requires time to digest before I can eat or drink anything else. I recall how an elderly friend who had severe arthritis described her morning routine: when she awoke, she spent about thirty minutes lying there, simply moving and stretching one part of her body, and then another, just so she could sit up and get out of bed. They humble us, these bodies.

Three Questions

How can we help our aged loved ones grapple with this growing and consuming focus on our needy bodies? How can we help lift their eyes outward and upward to the sovereign God who is directing a story much bigger than us and our small part?

Let me suggest three ways, by asking three basic questions.

First, *Is my loved one receiving adequate care?* I realize that question echoes with waves of implications and complications. Each situation is different. A person whose parent has Alzheimer's so often struggles to know just when that parent needs more daily help than their immediate family can give—or more help than a certain level of outside care can give. But there are some clear markers. Is my loved one in any evident danger without further care?

My mother came to the point where she was in danger of mis-managing her own medications; she needed daily help. (She also needed fewer of the supplements than she thought she did.) It became clear that she was in danger as well when she began to fall in the middle of the night; she needed to have someone right there to supervise and help, and that someone had to be capable of lifting and aiding her. I wish that my husband and I could have taken her into our home at some point. That is often a wonderful way to manage the later years, and it is the way many families and cultures have done it for centuries. In many cases, of course, those with elderly

loved ones at home come to need more help. The basic question is, Does my loved one have adequate care? It can be humbling, both for caregivers and for those cared for, to admit that they need more help.

Adult children have been dealing with the changing and urgent needs of their parents for centuries. The Old Testament book of 1 Samuel tells us of David's care for his aged parents during the years when King Saul was chasing David through the wilderness to kill him—and David's family was in danger as well. For a time, David hid in the cave of Adullam, gathering to himself there about four hundred people, including those in distress, in debt, bitter in heart—and “his brothers and all his father's house” (1 Sam. 22:1). But David realized that he could not care adequately for his parents in the wilderness; it was probably too harsh a life for them. So, he took them to stay in Moab, the ancestral home of Ruth (the grandmother of Jesse, David's father). David went right to the king of Moab and arranged for the very best assisted-living accommodation:

“Please let my father and my mother stay with you, till I know what God will do for me.” And he left them with the king of Moab, and they stayed with him all the time that David was in the stronghold. (1 Sam. 22:3–4)

What a striking glimpse into how God's anointed king—through whose line would come the greater David, the King of Kings—cared for the poor and needy, including his own parents.

Once the need for adequate care is acknowledged and dealt with (for a time, at least . . . this question must be asked again and again), it is easier to work on the outward focus. These days, I don't spend nearly as much time with my mother discussing medications and other physical issues. Now that she has regular help and supervision, we can more often talk about other things, both on the phone and when I am with her. The most urgent physical needs are met, and I am thankful. She still measures out her days by the pills brought

to her at various times, but she doesn't worry or obsess over them, and neither do I.

Here is one of the benefits of a higher level of care, when that level is possible: basic needs do not dominate our interaction with our parents. This means that I can and must give more time to discussing other things with my mother: what Sunday's sermon was about, how her good friend Peg is doing, how the grandchildren (great-grandchildren for her!) did in the school orchestra concert, and so on.

I must admit, sometimes it is easier just to manage the urgent physical needs. It takes patience and effort to discuss the sermon, or the music from the concert. In the end, of course, the question of whether my loved one is receiving adequate care must address my loved one's inner self—is she receiving adequate care of her whole being? Am *I* paying attention to the whole big story of God's redemption as I care for my mother, who is living out her chapters of that story? We will return to this.

Here is the second question we ought to ask: *Is my loved one receiving appropriate care?* With all the attention paid to needy bodies in the later years, it would be possible to keep doing things to them right up to the moment of their passing away. Doctors, and everybody else, love to fix things.

My dearly loved mother-in-law was diagnosed with breast cancer in her late eighties, in the course of a routine health check. Should she have undergone radiation or chemo? She had a doctor and family members who were happy for her to choose not to undergo cancer treatment—which might have extended her life but which certainly would have made it much more painful and, perhaps as a result, more inward-focused. As it turned out, the cancer seemed not to affect her during the several years she happily lived after the diagnosis, teaching piano lessons and enjoying friends and family until the very day she died of a heart attack at ninety-one. She was one of the most outward-focused people I've ever known, to the end. That was her

story; other stories are different, and we must respect the differences in situations and decisions in such matters.

More and more, however, people seem to be embracing the wisdom of restraint when it comes to quick and aggressive medical intervention for people of advanced age (as in close to ninety years old). This is part of the thrust of Atul Gawande's *Being Mortal*, as he shares his experience of learning to discern when to rush to surgery and when to wait, depending on the human situation of the patient. It is a matter of deciding if and when the medical care is appropriate for the whole needs of the whole human being.

Most would agree that ongoing medicine and treatment to increase the stability of one's life (heart pressure meds, pain meds, physical therapy, and so on) are usually appropriate. Sometimes surgery is unavoidable—as in the case of my mother at age ninety-six, when her artificial hip of more than two decades basically fell apart, causing immobility and unbearable pain. Even then, though, should the old hip be replaced with a new one? Or should the disintegrating parts simply be replaced? How extensive a surgery should she be asked to handle? How long would the new or repaired hip need to hold?

I thank God for a wise and humble surgeon who did his best to put my mother through the smallest possible ordeal—although it was still a grueling process for her, leaving her much weakened. She did well trying to hold on to an outward focus during those weeks, although it took most of her energy to manage her basic bodily functions while wearing a hard plastic and steel body brace day and night in the skilled care unit. It seemed like a terrible humbling: to be regularly turned and lifted and cleaned and dressed by strong, younger nursing staff who usually try to understand but who really can't.

In discussing the first two questions that help us redirect the focus from needy bodies outward and upward, the third question has been unavoidable. Along with asking about adequate and appropriate care, we must keep asking about heart care. I'm using

heart here in the biblical sense, meaning the very center of a person's invisible being, including thoughts and desires and emotions. It's the part of us that God sees and we can't: "Man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Sam. 16:7). The necessary third question is this: *Is my loved one receiving heart care?* Aside from all the consuming questions about physical and medical care, is my mother being loved and ministered to in a way that pulls her heart toward God?

We caretakers cannot do this all by ourselves; admitting this is part of the humility required to be good caretakers. We need other people, including the church body, to help care for our aging loved ones—particularly for their hearts. It is a shame that so many of the aged members of an average local congregation today are not known in the flesh by the younger members. Especially with the onset of COVID, older members disappeared. They were in the process of disappearing before that, with an increasing number of aging men and women living in nursing homes or retirement communities, often separated from families and local churches—and often not able to attend church gatherings regularly. Many continue to drive for a while, but at some point they don't, and then a church member must take the time and energy to go get an older person, help him or her into a car, perhaps load the walker or wheelchair, take him or her to church and watch over him or her there, and then make the return trip. I know some church members who do this, and I know both the bother and the blessing involved. But it happens less and less. May it happen more and more. May the elderly humbly receive help, and may members of Christ's body value and celebrate the humble service of all who bother themselves to give it.⁵

Pam Benton, mentor and teacher of many alongside her pastor husband, writes poignantly, "As Alzheimer's is stealing my

5. Bill Davis offers a helpful discussion of Christians' need to "embrace the Bible's valuing of the dependent and the caregivers" in *Departing in Peace*, 85–86.

husband's memory and his needs grow greater and my strength weakens, the body of Christ grows more precious. Friends take him to Bible study, hiking, and out to lunch and breakfast, and they are available to help me. As they come alongside Wilson and me, I am enabled to help other women flourish.”⁶

For housebound aging loved ones, we can visit, and we can invite others to visit. We can make sure their minds receive stimulation, through human interaction and through well-chosen books or recordings. I find that biographies, especially missionary biographies, are often encouraging for an older person; there is great benefit in getting out of my own little life and into the life story of another in a different time and place. In the case of a person with impaired eyesight like my mom, recordings of some kind are especially important. My mother never learned to manage technology; she left it to Dad, and now she is in many ways unable to handle it, as she cannot discern words or figures on screens. For several years, she enjoyed listening to books on CDs; now she most often listens to a small audio Bible that she has painstakingly learned to charge and manage. I'm grateful for that Bible, and so is she.

Above all, we need to take in the very Word of God, which reminds us over and over of the real story, the big story, written by God's sovereign hand from beginning to end. The Bible tells us the truth, the whole truth. I loved it when, the other day, my mother called me and said, “Well, I just listened to the whole book of Romans, and I want to ask you about those chapters that talk about Jacob and Esau . . .”

And then there is television—which we all know can be like a pacifier, no matter our age. Living with the TV on, constantly

6. Sharon W. Betters and Susan Hunt, *Aging with Grace: Flourishing in an Anti-Aging Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), Kindle. The authors share many testimonies of both aging ones and caregivers who have found strength from generous fellow believers.

numbing our brains, is a fierce temptation for older men and women who spend a lot of time sitting or reclining, often alone. My mom, whose hearing has declined as well, has a pair of what I call her rabbit ears, a little headset she wears that gives her the TV audio directly. When she's wearing her headset she sort of disappears, most often into the world of cable news. But she knows to come out regularly.

It's not a bad thing for Mom to keep track of what's going on in the larger world. (And it's a wonderful thing for her to have television access to the various chapel and vesper services held there in her retirement community.) We just don't want those TV voices to numb our loved ones' hearts, so that they lose the habit of looking outward and upward, to the real story of what God is doing in this world—and in us.

We have to be there, in the flesh, to ask these questions. We need to look old age in the face—literally. To judge adequate care, and appropriate care, and heart care, we do well, if at all possible, to spend extended time in the bodily presence of our aging loved ones. We need to hear their voices, watch them get up from a chair, see how much they eat and with what kind of appetite, pray with them, ask them questions, and look in their eyes as they talk.

This kind of time spent, in little things and little spaces, may make us caregivers feel that we've been pulled out of the big story's main action. In fact, strangely enough, we've been pulled in to the center. To live in God's big story is to live in human bodies that we must deal with, from beginning to end. We make our way through God's sovereign plan of redemption as embodied creatures; he made us this way. The journey becomes more and more humbling as bodies become more and more needy with age. But we have a remarkable opportunity to help our aging loved ones humbly accept what God brings—and to learn to do the same ourselves.

After all, God came down to us in a body. He doesn't just sit up there above the circle of the earth, watching us grasshoppers from

a distance as he stretches out the heavens and directs the course of human history. The Son of God came down. That's the turning point of the big story. And that turning point shapes all our little stories as well. We little creatures make our appearance, grow, and then weaken and die. But the sovereign God sees us all, always. He planned salvation for us. He came himself to save us. He is coming again. We can look to him, humbly, in faith, to the end.

Caring for our aging parents—whether we take them into our homes or support them from a distance—is a beautiful opportunity for us to honor them. It can also be an intensely demanding process in which we discover things about them, about ourselves, and about the difficulties of old age that stretch and challenge us.

Addressing the endeavor with grace and clarity, Kathleen Nielson offers five rich scriptural truths to guide our thinking: God sovereignly ordains our aging, calls us to honor our elders, sees the sufferings of age, helps us to the end, and reveals what is to come. Learn how, in light of these truths, we are empowered to respond to our parents and other loved ones with humility, respect, compassion, faith, and hope.

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—**Jonny Gibson**, *Associate Professor of Old Testament,
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