

## A Bottle in the Smoke

*Psalm 119:83*

If you live long enough, you may see a colony of humans living on the moon. If you live long enough, you may see a medical breakthrough in the treatment of cancer and other previously incurable illnesses. If you live long enough, you may see the day when abortion is once again considered murder by the courts.

If you live long enough, you're going to get older. It is a fact of life none can avoid. Some people accept the truth gracefully and adjust very well to the process of aging, while others fight it every step of the way. There's nothing wrong with staying in good physical shape, but there are few things more pathetic than to see an older man or woman who is trying to be thirty or forty years younger. Gloria Pitzer said once that "about the only thing that comes to us without effort is old age." It's been observed that "each day a day goes by" (Carlo Goldoni), while someone else has remarked that "aging seems to be the only available way to live a long time" (Daniel Francois Auber).

Once I collected a few quotations about getting older. In each of them there is a hint of humor wrapped around a whole lot of truth. For example:

Forty is the age when you begin to realize how much fun you had when you were twenty.

Youth looks ahead, old age looks back, and middle age looks tired.

It may be true that life begins at forty, but everything else starts to wear out, fall out, or spread out.

Life not only begins at forty—it begins to show.

I'm not that old! I demand a recount!

Lying about my age is easier now because I sometimes forget what it is.

You know you're getting old when you look forward to a dull evening.

And Bob Hope once quipped, "You know you've reached middle age when your weight-lifting consists of merely standing up."

From a church newsletter I once clipped this poem entitled, "*A Senior Citizen's Lament*":

*Thought I'd let my doctor check me 'cause I didn't feel quite right;*

*All my aches and pains annoyed me and I couldn't sleep at night.*

*He could find no real disorder, but he wouldn't let it rest,  
'Cause with Medicare and Blue Cross, it wouldn't hurt to do some tests.  
To the hospital he sent me, though I didn't feel **that** bad,  
But he arranged for them to give me every test that could be had.  
I was flouroscope'd and cystoscope'd and my aging frame displayed,  
Stripped upon an ice-cold table where still more x-rays were made.  
I was checked for worms and parasites, for fungus and the crud,  
While they pierced me with long needles, taking samples of my blood;  
More doctors came to check me over, probed and pushed and poked  
around—  
Then to make sure I was still living, they wired me for sound.  
They have finally concluded (their results have filled a page)  
What I have will someday kill me;  
My affliction is OLD AGE!*

A friend included this in an email just this week: Senior citizens are constantly being criticized for every conceivable deficiency of the modern world, real or imaginary. We take responsibility for all we have done and do not blame others. HOWEVER, upon reflection, we would like to point out that it was NOT the senior citizens who took:

The melody out of music,  
The pride out of appearance,  
The courtesy out of driving,  
The romance out of love,  
The commitment out of marriage,  
The responsibility out of parenthood,  
The togetherness out of the family,  
The learning out of education,  
The service out of patriotism,  
The Golden Rule from rulers,  
The nativity scene out of cities,  
The civility out of behavior,  
The refinement out of language,  
The dedication out of employment,  
The prudence out of spending,  
The ambition out of achievement or

God out of government and school.

YES, I'M A SENIOR CITIZEN!

I'm the life of the party..... even if it lasts until 8 p.m.

I'm very good at opening childproof caps.... with a hammer.

I'm awake many hours... before my body allows me to get up.

I'm smiling all the time... because I can't hear a thing you're saying.

I'm sure everything I can't find is in a safe secure place, ... somewhere.

I'm wrinkled, saggy, lumpy, and that's just my left leg.

I'm beginning to realize that aging is not for wimps.

No, it's not for wimps. The Scriptures point out that the process of aging is common to all, and that one is wise to make adequate preparation for old age even while still very young. The writer of Ecclesiastes summed it up this way (and I like the way it is translated in the *Today's English Version*):

*Young people, enjoy your youth. Be happy while you are still young... You aren't going to be young very long. So remember your Creator while you are still young, because those dismal days and years come when you will say "I don't enjoy life." That is when the light of the sun, the moon, and the stars will grow dim for you, and the rain clouds will never pass away. Then your arms, that have protected you, will tremble, and your legs, now strong, will grow weak. Your teeth will be too few to chew your food, and your eyes too dim to see clearly. Your ears will be deaf to the noise in the street. You will barely be able to hear the mill as it grinds or music as it plays, but even the song of a bird will wake you from sleep. You will be afraid of high places, and walking will be dangerous. Your hair will turn white; you will hardly be able to drag yourself along, and all desire will be gone. We are all going to our final resting place, and then there will be mourning in the streets. The silver chain will snap, and the golden lamp will fall and break; the rope at the well will break and the water jar will be shattered. Our bodies will return to the dust of the earth, and the breath of life will go back to God, who gave it to us (Ecclesiastes 11:9a, 10b, 12:1-7, TEV).*

We believe that King Solomon wrote that description of one who is very old from his own personal experience, in a day when the lack of medical advances and

improvements in diet and lifestyle aged a person much quicker than in our day. Neither wealth nor station in life could prevent even Solomon from aging.

Some people get wiser as they get older, and others just get old. I read in *Reader's Digest* of a man who had just turned sixty, planting his spring garden, with the help of his 91-year-old father. The older man began to set up the bean poles in straight lines, but his son protested that arranging them teepee-style was better. They argued for several minutes over which method was best. Finally, the son said, "Dad, this is my garden, and I want to use the teepees!" The father threw down his hoe and stomped off toward the house, snorting as he went, "You kids! Turn sixty and you think you know everything!"

Solomon did know just about everything. And even though he was the wisest man who ever lived, still he could not figure out how to keep from aging. In the days when our Lord Jesus walked the earth, the average life expectancy was only about 26 or 27 years of age. As recently as 1900, the average American life expectancy was 48 years. These long years later, we have figured out how to dress up the outside of our bodies very well so that we might not look old, and we have even learned how to slow down the aging process. So now the average American can expect to live in the neighborhood of 75-80 years. You folks who are older than that, don't let that scare you! A number of scientists, working with the genes that control aging, envision that within a generation or two mankind's maximum life span of 120 years will be extended by decades, possibly by centuries.

But we've overlooked two very important things. The first is that if you are old, there's nothing shameful about "looking" old. In fact, the Scripture says that "*Gray hair is a crown of splendor; it is attained by a righteous life*" (Proverbs 16:31, KJV). It also says "*The glory of young men is their strength, but the beauty of old men is their gray hair*" (Proverbs 20:29, RSV). If we can develop a Biblical understanding and good attitudes about ourselves as we grow older, we'll find life to be growing richer and sweeter with each day and year that passes.

Dr. Chester Swor was one who had a very good attitude about his age. When he turned 70, Dr. Swor wrote the following "*Soliloquy at Seventy*":

*How in the world can I seventy be,  
When down in my heart I'm just twenty-one?*

*It's time for the game to be fading, you see,  
But, really, seems to be it's only begun.  
BUT...  
I look in the mirror and what do I see?  
Is that Father Time, or do I see me?  
The hair, once so black, is now very white;  
The once dancing eyes are now not so bright.  
The lines in my forehead grow deeper each year;  
Am stopping a bit of times now I fear.  
Once I could spring up and speed here and there;  
More slowly these days do I rise from my chair.  
The stairs seem steeper, the blocks longer still;  
What once was an incline is now a high hill.  
SO...  
I'm obliged to admit what these factors impart  
Belies the young feeling I have in my heart.  
But, what if at seventy, I looked twenty-one;  
Debonair, flashy and ever so young?  
People would be whisperin', "He's sure been redone  
By some plastic surgeon. I wonder which one."  
So here's what my thought at this age haps to be:  
I'll just look my age and live fancy free,  
Remembering my chassis is getting antique,  
And once in a while will just have to squeak.  
I'll laugh at the jokes 'bout the aged they tell,  
But, laughing, I'll cherish this thought very well:  
"It's great to look seventy in physical ways,  
If your heart's twenty-one on down through the days!"*

The second important thing we've overlooked is that whether we like it or not, the process of aging begins at conception. We are all getting older every day. One man realized this suddenly in a restaurant one day. He remarked to a friend of his, "I'm at the age where every time I see a girl I used to know, it's her daughter."

Well, I can do one better than that. I kept thinking that I knew the receptionist at Sharon's chiropractor, and it puzzled me because she looked so familiar to me. But

I didn't want to appear to be staring at her, especially since she was so much younger, so I would just glance every once in a while and try to figure out how I knew her. I finally just decided she was someone who shopped at LifeWay a good bit and left it at that. A few weeks later I overheard a conversation between her and someone else, and discovered that she was a graduate of Forest Hill High School, which is my alma mater.

And not only that, I discovered she was, not the daughter of someone I knew, but the granddaughter of a lady who attended my home church! She looked so much like her grandmother that that is why I thought I knew her. So I'm at the age where every time I see a girl I used to know, it's her *granddaughter*!

This truth was emphasized to me a few years ago as I was shocked into reality: I know others are getting older, but hey! I'm getting older, too. I was preaching a revival at my home church. In the congregation one evening was a married couple I had known a very long time who are approximately my age. After the service the man came up to me and asked me what my secret was for looking so young. He probably wouldn't ask me that question today, but did that comment make me feel good!

A couple of days later I visited over at Forest Hill High School. I had heard that the choral director was still teaching there and I wanted to see her and hear the high school choir in rehearsal. As I took a seat in the back of the room, Mrs. Miller introduced me to the class, told them why I was in town, and then asked me what year I graduated from that school. When I told them, one of the girls on the front row, a senior, suddenly turned around and exclaimed, "Why, that's the year I was born!" What a shock that was!

Not so very long ago, the common philosophy of young people was "trust no one over thirty," without realizing that one day soon they would be over thirty themselves. Now, an overwhelming majority of the population of the United States is over the age of thirty. There has been an amazing increase in this country in the number of centenarians, those who are 100 years of age or older. In 1986 an estimated 25,000 Americans were centenarians, but the Census Bureau estimates that there are currently 71,000 Americans aged 100 and older. To be sure, all of us are getting older.

Some of us here have already lived past the half-way point of our lives, which means that we have more years behind us than we have in front of us. How do we deal with this fact of life? I shared with an older pastor once several years ago that the following Sunday I was going to be preaching on “The Faith of the Senior Adult.” He laughed, right out loud! He said, “I could preach that sermon from personal experience, but yours is only theory!” He was right, but I’ve been working on that every day since. And while I am not as young as I used to be, I hope I’m not as old as I’m going to be!

But I can point to a wonderful truth in the Scriptures in our text for today. The King James Version of Psalm 119:83 reads, “*For I am become like a bottle in the smoke; yet I do not forget thy statutes.*” If you look at this verse in other versions of the Bible, you will discover that the “bottle” here was a wineskin. Wineskins in that day were usually made from whole goat hides, with the neck and the feet being tied so the hide could hold the wine. Because of the gasses given off through the process of fermentation, it was important that the wineskin should be supple enough to expand. If it was hung too close to the fire, the heat could cause the hide of the wineskin to become brittle, so that it could no longer be used for wine.

But the smoke from the fire would cause that wineskin to wrinkle, and that was the metaphor David used for himself: “I look at myself and see that I have become like a wineskin in the smoke, wrinkled and brittle. My flesh is not nearly as supple, nor my complexion as rosy as it once was. I’ve grown old.”

There’s really nothing new about what he discovered, is there? His reaction to getting older what we focus on today: “*Yet I do not forget thy statutes.*” In other words, “I’m getting older, to be sure. My body is wearing out, slowly but surely. Through all the years which have passed, Your Word, O God, has been a comfort and an inspiration to me. It has convicted me and encouraged me. Even now, when I am wrinkled and gray, I do not forget Your Word.”

There may be nothing you and I can do to stop the process of aging, and I’m not sure it would be a good idea anyway. Some of us may be having the time of our lives as we grow older, and wouldn’t be younger again for anything in the world. Others of us have not quite become used to the idea. Yet there is one thing we can

do all through all the aches and pains, through the wrinkles and gray hair, through the sadness of losing friends and family members one by one to death, through coping with the steady march of our own feet toward our own graves—that is to remain faithful to the Lord and to His Holy Word.

In fact, every birthday which rolls around should call us to be even more faithful to Him in the time we have left.

Senior Adult, are you as faithful to Christ as you were twenty, thirty, or forty years ago? Middle-aged adult, and young adult, are you preparing for your own senior years spiritually even as you prepare financially? Are you right now striving to be faithful to His Word? Young person, time may seem to move slowly for you right now, but suddenly you will find yourself wishing it wouldn't move so quickly. What kind of foundation for your life are you building right now? The challenge to us all—regardless of age—is to be more faithful to Him through all the long years.

Will you accept the challenge, or will you simply grow old?