

A Theological Reflection on Retirement

The Salvation Army's missional statement is to 'Love God and Love Others'. Therefore there will be times when we are called to help and protect those in our care. In this reflection we will consider scriptural truths that helps us navigate one of the first great transitions in later life, that is retirement.

What does the Bible say about Retirement?

Retirement is often depicted as an idyllic life of leisure filled with contentment and joy. You might envision long walks on the beach, worldwide travel, quality time with family, or turning your memoirs into a best-selling book. But retirement is a significant transition in our later life that needs to have thoughtful planning and some biblical reflection. This could not be clearer than from the psalmist's special and unique news for our later years:

'The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming "The Lord is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him".'
(Psalm 92:12-15)



The psalmist is talking about how we grew and flourished, not just physically and mentally, but also spiritually. Though our hair colour may change, our spiritual life is not to be a never-ending spiral of decline. If you don't believe that, come back again and again to these remarkable verses where God says we are to 'flourish like a palm tree'.

The word 'retirement' is not found in the Bible. In the ancient world, people worked as long as they were physically able. There were no retirement plans or pension schemes to help people in their later years. In addition, many people worked for themselves as farmers or fishermen or artisans, and they had to keep working as long as possible in order to survive (as is still true in many parts of the world). If they were unable to work, they usually depended on their families to care for them. However, sometimes that wasn't always possible, which is why the Bible commands us to have special concern for those who lack family support – widows, orphans, and people with disabilities.

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The Bible appears to reference our understanding of retirement only once, and is limited in scope when compared to the choices, opportunities and challenges faced by many of today's retirees. *'The Lord said to Moses ... "Men twenty-five years old or more shall come to take part in the work at the tent of meeting, but at the age of fifty, they must retire from their usual duties and work no longer. They may assist their brothers in performing their duties at the tent of meeting, but they themselves must not do the work. This, then, is how you are to assign the responsibilities of the Levites."'* (Numbers 8:23-26).

Bible verses like these can get taken out of perspective and end up being applied out of context. On the surface, it would appear that this passage leaves the topic of retirement fairly open to interpretation. The reason isn't given, but presumably it was to minimise the danger (through physical weakness) of accidentally dropping something used in worship and thus damaging it or making it ceremonially unclean. It may also have been to give a new generation of Levites the opportunity to assume their responsibilities.



In the New Testament, Anna and Simeon were part of a group of people earnestly waiting the coming of the Messiah – the One whom God had promised would secure eternal salvation for all God's people.

'When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: "Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you may now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel" ... Anna ... never left the temple but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to [Joseph, Mary, and baby Jesus] at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.' (Luke 2:27-38).

God used two people who were in later life to publicly confirm that the Saviour had come. Older people had something important to say then – and they still do!

The biblical concept of the Sabbath has its roots in two biblical commands. The first is for people to stop work on the seventh day, keeping it as *'a sabbath to the Lord your God'* (Exodus 20:10). The second is for the land to rest every seventh year before resuming productivity (Leviticus 25). When this concept is applied to retirement, it means beginning with a period of deep sabbath rest and using it to end toil, renew and re-evaluate. This principle is at the heart of Jeff Haanen's thoughts in his book *An Uncommon Guide to Retirement*.

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How can we encourage our people in our corps/churches/centres to retire in a way that is God-honouring, purpose-filled, restful, and truly biblical, but that at the same time recognises that older Christians have a significant contribution to make to our understanding of God? At times it may be difficult for other age groups to hear this wisdom. The biblical mission of The Salvation Army is found in John 10:10 considering 'life in all its fullness'. It is a new call for God-centred people with their full-time work behind them and years of opportunity ahead. Those retiring today have the time, energy and resources to make waves for a good few years yet.

Ageing brings a range of challenges too – starting important conversations, inspiring ideas, faith and faithfulness, and sharing best insights. Everything from making the retirement transition, to maximising new opportunities – from health to volunteering, using life experience for others, to enriching your own life. From grandparenting to singleness.



A biblical approach to ageing is being faced by the wider Church and our communities as the largest-ever generation in history moves into retirement. As followers of Christ we must confront and challenge the common thinking that older people are more of a burden to the Church than a gift. We must not lose the wisdom, guidance and nurture that older people can bring to others.