

A Theological Reflection on Ageing

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 document we will reflect upon ageing from a biblical perspective in order to consider this important topic for ourselves and those we serve.

The Salvation Army's Theological Statement on Ageing (2016) states: 'If we are to be whole people, old age cannot be separated off from who we are; it is part of who we will become. Throughout our lives we are creating the person we will become. Old age is not a "problem" to be "put right". We cannot and should not seek to "cure" it ... Everyone, at every stage of their life, is capable of giving and receiving love. Our intrinsic value as human beings at any age derives from God, in whose image we are made.'

The Bible is filled with stories of older people who were called by God for service in many different ways and had an impact on the lives of others. Therefore, the word of God is the best place to consider how God views the aged.

Luke 2:22-38 speaks of two older people, Anna and Simeon, who had faithfully waited in the Temple for many years to welcome Jesus. God used them to declare that Jesus is the Messiah. This passage of Scripture speaks of how valuable God sees old age, using the wisdom, willingness and faithfulness of two older people.

In the book of Ruth, we find a story of loyalty, love and service between a daughter-in-law and her older widowed mother-in-law. This story speaks about the importance of their relationship. When we consider growing older, we need to recognise that relationships are so important to the quality of our ageing and how we view not just one another but ourselves as we age.

'Old age is not a mistake in God's design. He planned old age to be a season of harvest for his older people, a time of accumulated wisdom and experience from a life spent with him. It is also a time of continuing growth.'

(Faith in Later Life
Biblical Perspective)

When we read these words we can see that God values ageing. Ageing brings wisdom and experience, and relationship is at the heart of ageing well. It is the relationship between God and his people that matters, no matter their age, and God's people together in this multigenerational Kingdom in which we live.



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Psalm 92:14 declares that the aged 'will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green'.

Therefore, if we recognise what the biblical narrative is declaring about older age, how do we match that with the reality of many older people who feel that they are discriminated against due to ageism?

Divine Tribute, Definite Testing and Distinct Triumph

Perhaps the answer lies in us changing our predisposed attitude towards growing older. If we consider a biblical perspective of ageing through the lens of theologian James Davies, this may help us to change our own perspective on this important theme.

Davies wrote this biblical perspective in 2008, published in a SAGE article where he highlights the biblical view that there are three distinct parts to ageing as seen in Scripture. He called these Divine Tribute, Definite Testing and Distinct Triumph:

1. **Divine Tribute** is about God's people respecting and revering older people and ageing. This is evident in both the Old and New Testaments. In the Old Testament, Moses speaks of showing respect for the aged with having reverence for God. 'Stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the Lord' (Leviticus 19:32). These words powerfully link God intimately to those who are older.

In the New Testament, Paul's letter to Timothy reminds the reader of God's divine tribute to those who are older and the responsibility to be in relationship with older people, showing care and concern.

'But if anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.' (1 Timothy 5:8 *ESV*)

2. **Definite Testing** is recognising that with age often comes a time of testing and difficulty. The Bible does not try to minimise the challenges of ageing. There are passages throughout that refer to the immense challenges people faced. We think back to Naomi, and her struggles as an older woman, a widow, both her sons having died, with no resources or home to call her own:



'The Almighty has dealt very bitterly with me. I went out full, and the Lord has brought me home again empty. Why do you call me Naomi, since the Lord has testified against me, and the Almighty has afflicted me?' (Ruth 1:20-21 *NKJV*).

Naomi laments at this point feeling abandoned by the Lord (some commentators suggest this prefigures Jesus lamenting about his Father forsaking him). However, what Naomi experiences in her testing time, as with Jesus, is that testing comes before Divine Triumph.

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3. **Divine Triumph** - Davies's final theological reflection on the relationship story of Ruth and Naomi ends with a grandson being born to Naomi. Ruth's child 'will renew your life and sustain you in your old age' (Ruth 4:15). Naomi will be taken care of for the rest of her days, and her name will always be linked to Ruth and thus to David, and then to Jesus. We can see the process of Naomi being respected by Ruth (Tribute), her experience through grief (Testing) and her story continuing with the care of family (Triumph).



As Christians we know that Jesus' death was not the final word – resurrection followed the cross. For those in later life who may be experiencing a time of testing, the Bible reminds us that we are 'being renewed daily' (2 Corinthians 4:16): 'Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day.'

As we and others grow older in our congregations, may we be mindful of the different stages ageing brings. Deeply understanding the need to have relationships with all ages and never forgetting the wisdom and understanding that comes with age needs to be central to the beating heart of our corps /churches and communities.

It is wonderful if we have hearts for young people in our churches, but we must remember that our older people were once those young people. Their hearts still beat with love and passion, their eyes have seen wonders some of us only dream of. May God help us to see older people through his eyes, and when we speak those words of Jesus from John's Gospel, may it never be tarnished with the sin of ageism but lived out complete and full for all ages.

'Love each other, just as
I have loved you'

(John 13:34 CEV).