

We all learned the alphabet when we were young. But here Derek Prime suggests there is another alphabet we need to learn if we are to enjoy A Good Old Age. With characteristic clarity and grace, he spells out an A to Z of biblical wisdom for the elderly. But the value of these pages goes far beyond encouraging senior citizens. There is also something here for families, church leaders, and young people too. A great reminder that the starting place for A Good Old Age is long before it begins!

Sinclair B. Ferguson, Preacher and Author

There are gems of Christlike wisdom on every page of this lovely book, written by an older believer and pastor with a godly sweetness and earthy directness. I have loved reading it and look forward to reading it again, slowly, and probably more than once, if the Lord spares me into older and older age. I shall buy copies for ageing contemporaries, who need to read it too!

Christopher Ash, Writer-in-Residence at
Tyndale House, and Ministry Trainer at
St. Andrew the Great Church

Like vintage wine, A Good Old Age is the exquisite fruit of a lifetime of Christian ministry and leadership that aims to particularly help elderly Christians navigate the final years

of the journey of faith. It charts the 'A to Z' of Christian discipleship in an immensely practical, warm and honest way, in short, insightful reflections on each letter of the Alphabet of Christian Living. It's so good it shouldn't be kept to the 'Oldies' - it will be a great aid to discipleship to a Christian of any age. I can't recommend it highly enough.

Trevor Archer, FIEC London Director

Drawing on a lifetime immersed in God's Word, Derek Prime gives us a roadmap for pursuing godliness in our later years. The value of this book lies in its specific application of the Scriptures to the challenges and opportunities of old age. Honest, insightful and full of grace, this book is a goldmine of wisdom for older believers.

Colin S. Smith, Senior Pastor, The Orchard and
President, Unlocking the Bible

Here is practical and pastoral wisdom from a man who has soaked his life in the Scriptures. Younger pastors will be helped to understand the challenges that face our older brothers and sisters as well as getting some advanced preparation for what is ahead. In truth, the lessons here are good for every generation and I warmly commend this book.

Paul Rees, Lead Pastor, Charlotte Chapel

A GOOD OLD AGE

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AN A TO Z
OF LOVING AND FOLLOWING
THE LORD JESUS IN LATER YEARS

DEREK PRIME

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A SUGGESTION TO THE READER

This is probably not a book best read in one go, but rather read a chapter a day for one month, and then repeated over other months if it is found helpful. You may probably wonder why I make this suggestion. Each chapter tries to establish a Christian imperative, that is to say an urgent and important priority for every day of our life as an old person. But the truth is that we cannot helpfully try to take on board twenty-six priorities all at once!

I have found that each of these priorities needs to be quietly considered and pondered one at a time, and then, hopefully, prayed about and increasingly made part of my Christian life. But each chapter may be thought of as being like condensed milk or undiluted orange squash – you shouldn't attempt to absorb it in that concentrated format! So my

suggestion is to read a chapter a day and then add the water of your own prayers and thoughts to make it easier to digest.

INTRODUCTION

Old age may alarm us. It can bring humiliating experiences. Some of its limitations may take away our natural dignity. Worse still is the daunting possibility of dementia, even to the point where we may not remember our own name.

But, while there may be bad old age, when we feel ‘weighed down with years’ (Jer. 6:11), there is ‘a good old age’ (Gen. 25:8) to which we may aspire. Every period of life has its appointed benefits and excellence (Prov. 20:29).

The problems we encounter in old age are not new. I may become frail and stooped and have an increasing number of wrinkles. My skin may become thin, translucent and vulnerable. My ankles may swell and throb, and my legs experience frightening cramp in the night. I may have to depend upon a walking frame to get about my home. My brittle bones may make me afraid of falling. Ecclesiastes 12 tells a similar story. But while reaching seventy is a

good life span, our years will never be without their troubles: 'their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away' (Ps. 90:10).

Perils to avoid

When we reach old age, we are in danger of making several mistakes:

Pretending old age is not creeping up on us.

When a son described his mother as entering upon the evening of her life, she interjected, 'Not evening, early afternoon!'

Always comparing the present with the past.

As the Bible advises us, 'Do not say, "Why were the old days better than these?" For it is not wise to ask such questions' (Ecc. 7:10).

Mistrust. This raises its ugly head when we become suspicious of the motives of those who care for us, or sadly distrust our children or close relatives.

Pessimism. The subjects of pessimism are countless: our government, the state of the

Church – and perhaps sometimes our local church fellowship – and world events in general.

Self-pity. This is the saddest peril, for it is difficult for friends and relatives to cope with us when we are sorry for ourselves and only pour out our troubles every time we see them. Wallowing in self-pity indicates we have taken our eyes off God and His goodness to us.

Wonderful potential to embrace

In fact, old age can be the most fruitful period of our life (Ps. 92:14; 103:5). An important part of that fruitfulness is the ability to give **good and wise counsel**, not presuming to say, ‘I know all the answers,’ but rather, ‘I know God-honouring principles that have best guided me in life.’ Younger people are able to apply the principles we share in a way that is appropriate for them.

To the end of our life we may discover the **good works** God has prepared for us to do in whatever circumstances we find ourselves, both expected and unexpected. How sad it is if we so regret not doing what we have so much enjoyed doing *in the past* that we fail to see what God has for us to do *in the present*.

One area of good works in old age is becoming spiritual baggage-minders. Let me explain. David established the principle that his front-line soldiers and their baggage-minders were of equal value: ‘The share of the man who stayed with the supplies is to be the same as that of him who went down to the battle. All shall share alike’ (1 Sam. 30:24). We need to hold on to this truth in our old age. Younger Christians living out their faith may be considered the front-line fighters, but older people at home should be their spiritual baggage-minders. Every pastor, teacher, elder, deacon, evangelist, Sunday-school teacher, youth worker, missionary and Christian employee needs the support, encouragement and prayers of older believers who have already run the same race.

Old age is also a unique opportunity for **intercession**. We have more time to pray than before, and we have trodden many of the paths of those for whom we pray.

All these aspects mean that in old age we may even be identified as vital members of the body of Christ: ‘those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable’ (1 Cor. 12:22).

Truths to hold on to in old age

How, then, can we ensure that we grasp the positive possibilities of old age, rather than succumb to dwelling on its limitations? I suggest we remind ourselves of the following great biblical truths.

First is the amazing **forgiveness** that is ours in the Lord Jesus. Satan, the great enemy of souls, has the power to stir up the memory of old sins of which we are thoroughly ashamed. We should have a greater appreciation of our sinfulness in old age (John 8:7–9). At the age I am, I reflect much upon the past and the way God has helped, guided and blessed me, but at the same time I remember some of the stupid and sinful things I did when I was young. The wonder of God's grace is that He says to us, 'I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions, for my own sake, and remembers your sins no more' (Is. 43:25).

Second is the glorious truth of **God's Fatherhood** and His promises to His children. We are assured: 'even the very hairs of your head are all numbered' (Matt. 10:30). David understood this well: 'My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for ever' (Ps. 73:26). Yet the enemy of souls endeavours to rob us of such assurances.

Third is our wonderful hope of **heaven**. While our old age prompts occasional or even frequent groans, never forget what should accompany them: our longing for heaven (2 Cor. 5:1–5). In old age the body becomes like an old car to which we may be very attached. But there comes a time, no matter how well serviced it may be, when some things go wrong – at first small concerns and then larger. The benefit of this is that it makes us long even more for the model that will never go wrong – our resurrection bodies (1 Cor. 15:35–58)!

A spiritual priority for old age!

In addition to remembering these key truths, we would be wise to **focus our thoughts daily upon our Lord Jesus Christ**. Remember He is the Father's delight, and He should be ours too. He 'is the same yesterday and today and for ever' (Heb. 13:8). The enemy of souls will try to distract us from this essential exercise of faith for he knows that it will unfailingly deliver us from spiritual dangers. Meditate especially upon the cross and all that our Saviour accomplished there so that you never lose your sense of infinite indebtedness to Him.

Practical priorities in old age

With these spiritual realities firmly in mind, it is nevertheless right to take into account practical considerations:

Delegation. It is a stage of life to hand over your responsibilities while you are still able to do so competently and can offer initial support to those taking charge.

Down-sizing. This, should it be necessary, has to be done while we are fit enough to cope with it, otherwise we will leave it too late.

Setting our affairs in order. It is right to give this consideration (see Is. 38:1). Give a trusted person or persons – ideally a member or members of your family – the power of attorney. To do it now may prove more important than you anticipate. Make sure you have made your will and that it is up to date. Write down your wishes for the funeral and thanksgiving service at your death. It may be helpful to leave a note as to whom you would like to have your personal treasures. But whatever you do, do not worry about your

assets when you die. Your best possessions as a Christian have already gone before you!

A PRAYER

Heavenly Father, whatever may be happening to me because of my increasing age, help me to forget the things behind me that I ought to forget and instead strain towards what is ahead, pressing on towards the goal to win the prize for which You have called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus. For His Name's sake. Amen.

A IS FOR ACCEPTANCE

Barzillai proved himself a special friend of David. He provided shelter and safety for him (2 Sam. 17:27–29) when David’s third son, Absalom, initiated a rebellion against his rule. David wept at the news of his rebellious son’s death. But this also meant David no longer needed Barzillai’s protective hospitality. What would happen next?

Let’s take up the story:

Now Barzillai was a very old man, eighty years of age. He had provided for the king during his stay ... for he was a very wealthy man. The king said to Barzillai, ‘Cross over with me and stay with me in Jerusalem, and I will provide for you.’

But Barzillai answered the king, ‘How many more years shall I live, that I should go up to Jerusalem

with the king? I am now eighty years old. Can I tell the difference between what is good and what is not? Can your servant taste what he eats and drinks? Can I still hear the voices of men and women singers? Why should your servant be an added burden to my lord the king? Your servant will cross over the Jordan with the king for a short distance, but why should the king reward me in this way? Let your servant return, that I may die in my own town near the tomb of my father and mother' (2 Sam. 19:32–37).

This passage shows us six truths Barzillai accepted because of his age:

1. His wealth was no protection against old age (v. 32).
2. His evaluation about what was enjoyable and what was not was now uncertain (v. 35).
3. His sense of taste had gone (v. 35).
4. His hearing was not what it had been (v. 35).
5. His travelling days were done (v. 37).
6. He did not want his age to be a burden to others (v. 35).

Post the flood, 'three score years and ten' is a

reasonable time to live. Our bodies don't live as long since the flood no matter what the wonders of medical science may achieve. 'The length of our days is seventy years – or eighty, if we have the strength; yet their span is but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away' (Ps. 90:10), and often they finish 'with a moan' (Ps. 90:9).

Accepting the onset of old age

A key attitude towards the onset of old age is therefore acceptance that this is a natural part of human life. We need to accept it in all its facets.

Accept the inescapable indignities and embarrassments of old age

I remember how I suddenly felt embarrassingly old when a young doctor, whom I had not met before, put me on a weekly appointment for six weeks at an assessment clinic in an Edinburgh hospital geared to the care of the elderly.

Accept the gradual loss of independence in some areas of life

Most of us are naturally independent. For example, it is hard to give up our driving licence, making

us dependent on lifts by our friends with cars. Inevitably we have to accept practical help and support, especially from our family and friends. I never want to be a burden to my family and friends and I strive after independence. But I have now learned to accept that one day I may be dependent upon them, if only for them to be the best judge in deciding what kind of care I may need, a decision I may then be incapable of making myself. I would much prefer that the Lord would bring forward my 'exodus' or departure from this life before that time, but that is in His hands alone.

Accept that increasing age brings more frustrations

Chief of these are tiredness, limited energy and the length of time it takes to do things that we once did quickly. We also find it difficult to think of going away for a holiday. Like Moses, who at a great age was contemplating travel, we are 'no longer able' as once we were (Deut. 31:2). But acceptance means looking back, remembering our enjoyment of our holidays and energetic enjoyments, and spending time thanking God for them. Why not take time today to take out those old photos or look at those mementos you treasure to stir your mind with thankfulness?

I am slowly learning to give myself ‘a good talking to’! Thank God that it is only in later life I have known such frustrations. My level of experiencing them is an indication of how much I have been able to do in the past, not realising how blessed I have been. We need to beware of negativity if we are to be genuinely accepting of our circumstances and needs.

We must also not be surprised that younger people may not understand the frustrations and physical challenges old age presents. Looking back, I recognise my own lack of understanding of old age, especially of the loneliness it may bring.

If we have children, they may vary in their attentiveness or sensitivity towards us. But pause for a moment and remember how busy you were at their age and perhaps your own insensitivity to your parents or elderly folk. The same is true of those in our church fellowship or in the social and medical services.

Accepting the changing of times

This is perhaps the greatest test of acceptance we face. Do we honestly take on board the truth that times change and that it is unhelpful to talk of the

past as ‘the good old days’? Not only has society changed with the development of technology, but church life has changed. We sing different hymns and songs, while some old ones we love are now unknown. Instead of using a hymn book, we may sing from a screen. The organ may be replaced by a band. I find myself wanting to wear a tie to church although it is no longer the norm.

When I begin to hang on to such things so that I begrudge their absence, I must say to myself, ‘Beware.’ Sadly church fellowships may be torn apart through the non-acceptance of change, and tragically the older generation may be cut off from the rising generation.

If you will allow me, providing you are old enough, I want to invite you to free membership of the Barzillai Club!

PRAYERS FOR A MORE ACCEPTING ATTITUDE

Lord, enable me to accept that all my circumstances are ordained by You for my good.

O Lord Jesus Christ, who has created and redeemed me, You know what You would do with me. Do with me, according to Your will, for Your mercy's sake. Amen (King Henry IV).

