

# From Youth to Old Age

by Rev. Dr. John C. Tittle



## Prayer of Illumination

Eternal God, your love for us is everlasting.  
You alone can turn the shadow of death  
into the brightness of the morning light.  
Help us to turn to you with believing hearts.  
In the stillness of this hour,  
Speak to us of eternal things,  
So that, hearing the promises of Scripture,  
We may have hope and be lifted above our distress  
into the peace of your presence;  
Through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
Amen.

## Background

Psalm 71 is a psalm of Old Age. It's also a psalm about passing the baton to the New Generation. Youth and experience coming together. The psalmist fondly quotes favorite prayers he's prayed through the decades. Prayers that have gotten him through the joys and sorrows,

valleys and mountaintops, victories and defeats, peace and adversity. The psalmist commits to bequeath the wealth of his experience and the testimony of his praise to future generations.

*So let's hear the word of the Lord to us from ...*

**Scripture: Psalm 71:14-24 (NRSV)**

- <sup>14</sup> But I will hope continually,  
and will praise you yet more and more.
- <sup>15</sup> My mouth will tell of your righteous acts,  
of your deeds of salvation all day long,  
though their number is past my knowledge.
- <sup>16</sup> I will come praising the mighty deeds of the Lord God,  
I will praise your righteousness, yours alone.
- <sup>17</sup> O God, from my youth you have taught me,  
and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds.
- <sup>18</sup> So even to old age and gray hairs,  
O God, do not forsake me,  
until I proclaim your might  
to all the generations to come.  
Your power <sup>19</sup> and your righteousness, O God,  
reach the high heavens.  
You who have done great things,  
O God, who is like you?
- <sup>20</sup> You who have made me see many troubles and calamities  
will revive me again;  
from the depths of the earth  
you will bring me up again.
- <sup>21</sup> You will increase my honor,  
and comfort me once again.
- <sup>22</sup> I will also praise you with the harp  
for your faithfulness, O my God;  
praises to you with the lyre,  
O Holy One of Israel.
- <sup>23</sup> My lips will shout for joy  
when I sing praises to you;  
my soul also, which you have rescued.
- <sup>24</sup> All day long my tongue will talk of your righteous help,  
for those who tried to do me harm  
have been put to shame and disgraced.

***The grass withers and the flower fades,  
but the Word of God endures forever.***

## SERMON – “*From Youth to Old Age*”

I’m in a new place. It’s a familiar road, yet one that’s entirely strange, even surreal.

Over the years, I’ve had the privilege of walking with a number of you and your families through the valley of the shadow of death. And one thing I’ve learned early on is that old age isn’t for sissies. But being a part of the dying process is totally different when it’s your dad. I’ve been preparing myself for this, but it’s still foreign terrain. My dad just went into home hospice.

In many ways, I’m personally following the guidance I’ve offered others from my training and pastoral experience. But now, I’m walking this path, not just as a pastor, but as a son. The other day, our family was gathered together with the hospice social worker and chaplain. My mom and dad were in their chairs, side by side, just like the last 64 years. Their children, in-laws, and grandchildren were in the living room too. And as the social worker shared about power of attorney, my dad and I happened to catch eyes. He looked at me, smiled... and then winked. He winked! I felt him saying inaudibly in that moment, “I love you John and I’m going to be okay, and you’re going to be okay. It’ll be tough, but let’s enjoy this last bit of the journey together.” I told Sarah about it later. “Sarah, did you know Dad winked at me?” “Oh yeah—he winked at Grace (his granddaughter) and me too.” I haven’t checked yet with the rest of the family, but I bet Dad has winked at each and every one of them. I want to stay young like my eight-nine-year-old dad.

Rabbi and author Jonathan Sacks served as the Chief Rabbi of the United Hebrew Congregations in the Commonwealth for nearly 25 years. He died of cancer in 2020 when he was 72. In the last chapter of his book “*Lessons in Leadership*” he shares some secrets in the Jewish Bible about staying young at heart, even when you’re advanced in years. He tells a story of a woman he once visited in an assisted living home—Florence was her name. Florence happened to be 103 years old going on 104 yet had an air of a young woman. She was bright, eager, and full of life. Her eyes shown with a delight in being alive. The young rabbi asked her to reveal her secret of eternal youth. Florence replied: “*Never be afraid to learn something new.*”

If you stay open and willing to learn and grow, there’s the distinct possibility you can be quite young, even if you’re considerably old. And if you’re convinced that you can’t learn something new, you can be twenty-three and a grumpy old man in your mindset.

Think of another keenager. This one in the Bible—Moses. Deuteronomy describes Moses this way,

*“He was one hundred and twenty years old when he died, his eyes were undimmed and his vigor unabated.”*

What I think the passage is saying is that even though Moses’ body slowed down and wore down with time, he never lost his vision or his passion for God and his people. That burning bush was still blazing in his heart all those years later.

He was the Burning Man, on fire, but never consumed. As long as that vision remained in his eyes, heart, and mind, Moses remained full of energy, even when he was wiped out.

It was similar for the prophet Jeremiah who famously said:

*But if I say, "I will not mention his word  
or speak anymore in his name,"  
his word is in my heart like a fire,  
a fire shut up in my bones.  
I am weary of holding it in;  
indeed, I cannot.*

Moses knew how to not only grow old, but how to grow young. To be a perpetual learner. A seasoned beginner, not an expert. Or as the psalm says, "O God, you've taught me from my childhood." Those who stay young, stay teachable. They stay open, rather than closed. The Greek philosopher Epictetus put it this way:

*"It's impossible to learn that which you think you already know."*

Moses was also described as the meekest man on the earth. Like Moses, those that stay young are meek, not arrogant. Meek isn't weak. Meek means you have a controlled strength. An awareness of your gifts and a cognizance of your shortcomings. Whether strong or weak, young or old, the psalmist leaned on God—continually. At all times, all day, again and again—from the beginning. Were there times of doubt, desperation, and dread? Absolutely.

*"Be near me God... Don't cast me off, make haste to help me."*

But even desperate prayers are a statement of faith because there's the continual hope of deliverance. One person that made it into the triple digits put it this way:

*"My secret now is to NOT take it day by day.  
At my age—day by day is too long.  
I take it day by night."*

With faith, your strength can be waning, and your motor skills diminishing, but when you're weak, he is strong. Or as our psalm says, "I will go in the strength of the Lord."

A seasoned faith has resolve, an unremitting and unrelenting decision to praise God more and more, *no matter what*, come heaven or high water. Even if I'm stuck in my recliner—or waiting in ER yet again, I will come praising. As long as my memory allows, *"I will call to mind your righteousness."*

Immanuel, the good news is this: You have a future, no matter your age, whether you're five or a hundred and five. The highest calling of any human being is to praise God. To worship God and enjoy him forever—whether on earth or in heaven. We can have it both ways.

I'd like to invite you right now to check your pulse. Or try this breathing lesson taught to us by hospice: breathe in slowly with your nose, like smelling the roses. Breathe out slowly from your

mouth, like you're blowing out your birthday cake. Smelling the roses... blowing out your birthday cake. Now for some of us, that birthday cake is just a few flickering flames... While for others of us, it's a raging wildfire of wax trees! But no matter your age, if you have a pulse, if you have breath, you have a calling to praise the Lord:

Beginning with Psalm 8:2–

*"Out of the mouth of babes and nursing infants You have ordained strength."*

And concluding with Psalm 92–

*"The righteous... will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, 'The Lord is upright... and there is no wickedness in him.'"*

I also like how Psalm 71 phrases it–

*"Since my youth, God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds."*

God loves to hear the praises of every tribe, tongue, nation... and generation. Truly our faith is a cross-generational faith! As long as you have breath, tell stories of redemption, not stories of contamination. Pass your redemption story to the next generation... or as the great hymn puts it:

*"This is my story, this is my song,  
Praising my Savior all the day long."*

No matter your age, commit to praising, not pouting. Resolve to praise God through the pain, the sorrow, and the hardship—and you'll be spiritually spry, even on your walker, wheelchair, or sickbed. This is how you finish strong when you're weak.

Think about it. Moses could've viewed his life as a failure. He killed a man. He wandered in the desert for eighty years—forty years after fleeing Egypt. And then forty years after crossing the Red Sea. And in his forty years of leadership, he never reached the Promised Land. His people broke the laws he gave them. He performed miracles, yet his people still grumbled.

The same thing happens to us: We hit roadblocks and detours. Our plans and dreams get derailed. We don't get the accolades we think we deserve. We blame others for our failures and shortcomings. We rake ourselves over the coals, thinking we could've done better. We retreat into ourselves and our fortress of solitude.

But don't go there. If we give up, we stop growing. Don't raise the white flag to despair or defeat. There are sins of youthful indiscretions and sins of old age. Don't succumb to bitterness and cynicism. Accept your limitations, but don't be resigned to them. We're all growing older, one day at a time.

Don't stop growing young either... or as Sacks wrote, *"Moses died, but his words did not die."* Moses kept learning, growing, teaching, leading, and following God. He never gave up. And he encourages us to never give up. His example doesn't die. Your example doesn't either—it lives on in those you pour your life into. And you live on in eternity.

Our morning psalm reminds us of another important lesson in growing young, no matter our age: Don't think only of your own generation.

- Seasoned believers: invest in the next generation.
- Young people: respect the older generation. Don't write off anyone older than you as "a Boomer."

Trust me, in a blink of an eye, future generations will have not so nice nicknames for you. It doesn't take long to get old.

I remember not long ago talking about the graying of the Presbyterian denomination as if it were some very distant, remote demographic. That's me now!!!

Senior citizens of Immanuel,

- Don't forget the coming generation!
- Don't dismiss them either.
- Keep investing in them, thinking of them, praying for them.
- Keep celebrating their very different ways of expressing faith and worship—it won't necessarily be like yours.

I think of the once twenty-four-year-old Neil Young (*who is now seventy-four years old*) who sang in his classic song "Old Man":

*Old man, take a look at my life,  
I'm a lot like you were ...  
I need someone to love me the whole day through  
Ah, one look in my eyes and you can tell that's true.*

This generation needs the older generation to look them in the eye, with a glimmer, even maybe a wink, saying:

*"God loves you and I love you too, just as you are."*

And finally, when your body aches or your soul aches, cry out the words of our psalm:

Lord you're my trust, my rock, my fortress, and my hope. Who is like you? You, who have made me see many troubles and calamities, will revive me again; from the depths of the earth, you will bring me up again.

This is a foreshadowing, a glimmer of the hope of the resurrection. This is our future with hope, our destiny, moving from crucifixion to resurrection—all through our crucified, risen, and reigning Lord, who is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

Amen

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