

Ministry to the Aging

• Lesson Three •

Opportunities for Gospel Ministry

1. Loss of independence
2. Loss of companionship

Worship

Read Psalm 34:1-8

A: I will extol the LORD at all times; his praise will always be on my lips.

B My soul will boast in the LORD; let the afflicted hear and rejoice

A Glorify the LORD with me; let us exalt his name together.

B: I sought the LORD, and he answered me; he delivered me from all my fears

A: Those who look to him are radiant; their faces are never covered with shame.

B: This poor man called, and the LORD heard him; he saved him out of all his troubles.

A: The angel of the LORD encamps around those who fear him, and he delivers them.

B Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in him.

Prayer: Lord Jesus, you gave yourself freely and fully to secure our salvation. Open our eyes to see opportunities to share the gospel and move us to seize them. Lead us to serve you fully and freely. Amen.

Introduction

Did you know that hearing begins to deteriorate at age 10! At age 30 a person averages 245 taste buds; at 75 the average is only 88! These facts and others like them bring to mind the lines from *Abide with Me*, “Change and decay in all around I see; O thou who changes not, abide with me!” (CW 588). This is why some have described aging as a process of loss. We know that since the fall into sin this world in its present form is passing away as Paul says in Romans. That includes us.

The losses the aging may encounter can burden them physically, emotionally, and spiritually. As Christians who are called to “carry each other’s burdens” these difficulties present us with the opportunity to minister with the gospel. Instead of merely commiserating with those who are burdened, we have the privilege and joy of pointing them to God’s promises. Today we will look at some of these opportunities.

Studying God's Word

Loss of independence

In many instances the aging are no longer able to do what they once may have taken for granted. Whether it is loss of strength, loss of hearing, loss of vision, or loss of mental abilities, our ability to do things independently may be compromised as we age. The loss of independence can be another burden some of the aging may carry. Let's consider ways to do help carry this burden.

Psalm 71:9

Do not cast me away when I am old; do not forsake me when my strength is gone.

1. What is one of the losses that may come with old age that the psalmist speaks of in this verse?
2. Why would this lead him to feel as though he might be "cast away"?
3. What emotional and spiritual challenges may come with the loss of independence brought about by physical problems?

2 Corinthians 4:16-18

Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are wasting away, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. ¹⁷For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. ¹⁸So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.

1. What physical problems that can lead to a loss of independence does Paul mention?
2. Give examples (other than what was discussed above) of what the aging may encounter. What spiritual problems may these challenges bring?
3. What does Paul say happens to him inwardly? What is the only message that does this?
4. What implication does verse 18 have for our ministry to the aging?

2 Corinthians 12:7-9

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. ⁸Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. ⁹But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me.

1. What did Paul ask the Lord to do? What was God's answer?
2. Why did Paul rejoice in this answer?
3. How can the loss of physical ability and independence end up being "for the good of those who love God"?

Romans 8:26

In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us with groans that words cannot express.

1. What does God promise that he will do for his people?
2. This verse is a great comfort for all, but how might you apply this verse to comfort and encourage a family member of someone who has advanced dementia or Alzheimer's disease?

These passages only begin to bring us God's gospel promises to encourage and strengthen the aging. Think of the passages you find most comforting and reflect on how they could be a comfort to those who lose their independence. Also, keep an eye out for other passages you encounter in public worship or private devotions that you can use in your ministry to the aging.

For Discussion

As a Christian we desire to “do good to all people” as God commands us. But this is not always easy. What are some of things in the aging that may make it difficult to help those who have lost some of their independence through the loss of physical ability?

What are some of the things in us that may make it difficult?

How can we overcome these obstacles?

The loss of independence which may result from the loss of physical ability can be overwhelming, but it does not have to be. As we focus on the strength we have in God we will be blessed. As we bring God's gospel promises to the aging and act in Christian love to help them, all will be blessed.

Loss of companionship

Before the fall into sin God said, “it is not good for the man to be alone.” Companionship is a blessing God gave to his perfect world. Yet since the fall it is a sad truth that spouses and friends die. The loss of companionship and the resulting loneliness can be a burden some of the aging may carry. God calls us to “carry each other's burdens.” Let's consider ways to do this.

Psalm 88:18

You have taken my companions and loved ones from me; the darkness is my closest friend.

Psalm 142:4

Look to my right and see; no one is concerned for me. I have no refuge; no one cares for my life.

1. What loss that the aging may face do these passages describe?
2. What emotional and spiritual challenge do these verses point to that the aging may face? Can you think of any other challenges that may come with the loss of companionship?

Isaiah 46:4

Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.

Hebrews 13:5b-6

God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you." ⁶So we say with confidence, "The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?"

1. What promise does God make to the aging and all his people in these verses?
2. Why can we be confident God will keep these promises?
3. In these passages and also in Matthew 28:20 ("I am with you always, to the very end of the age.") God repeats himself for emphasis. Why does he do this? What does this mean for our ministry to the aging?

Psalms 68:6a

God sets the lonely in families.

Psalms 34:18

The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit.

1. How does God set the lonely in families?
2. What does the Lord use to be close and strengthen the brokenhearted? Who does he use to do this?

For Discussion

"God sets the lonely in families." This verse immediately brings to mind the scriptural description of believers as "brothers and sisters" in Christ. What makes a congregation a natural place for the lonely to find companionship?

How well are we doing in befriending the lonely in our congregation both informally (individuals) and formally (work of the congregation)?

God has given companionship to mankind as a tremendous blessing. The loss of the companionship of a spouse or the loss of many of our friends can leave a void within us. As Christians who seek to love one another at all times we seek to be the "family" in which God "sets the lonely." We can never replace those who go before the aging. But we can remind those we minister to of God's abiding presence and love.

Obviously not all of the aging will experience the losses we have discussed. At the same time, we have only scratched the surface on the challenges the aging may face. Our purpose is to look at why and when we may be able to minister to the spiritual needs of God's aging people. As we keep our eyes and ears open in Christian love the Lord will reveal to us many opportunities to bring the comfort of his gospel to his elder saints who face physical, emotional and spiritual challenges. We do not have to limit ourselves to grieving with them over what is gone. We can point them to the love of God in Christ that will always remain!

