

FAITHFUL TO THE END OF OUR DAYS

Luke 2:36-38

(ESV) "And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin,³⁷ and then as a widow until she was eighty-four. She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day.³⁸ And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of Him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem."

INTRODUCTION

We use different names to describe people in the United States who have achieved retirement age: "senior citizen, old-timer, mature adult, graybeard, golden-ager, geezer, elderly," and "old fogey" are among the most common names, which reveal the mixture of respect and disrespect we show the most aged among us. God tells us plainly that when we honor the elderly, we honor Him: "You shall rise up before the grayheaded and honor the aged, and you shall revere your God; I am the LORD" (**Leviticus 19:32**). If we are privileged to attain the status of "senior citizens," our bodies give us increasing notice they won't last forever, which is God's way of reminding us we are not to live as though this Earth is our everlasting home. Henry Addington (1757-1844), served as the British Prime Minister from 1801-1804 and lived to be 77. He noticed that, "In youth the absence of pleasure is pain; in old age, the absence of pain is pleasure."

Let's take a few moments for a humorous look at living in bodies that are giving us early warning signs to get ready for Heaven. This is borrowed from pastor and author Chuck Swindoll, among others. It's tailored for men, but generally applies to us whether we are men or women. *How to Know You're Getting Older*: "The only gleam in your eyes these days is from the sun hitting your glasses. Your little black book contains only names ending in 'M.D.' When you watch a pretty girl go by, your pacemaker makes the garage door go up! You feel like you've been out all night and you haven't been anywhere! Your knees buckle and your belt won't! Your children look middle-aged. You finally reach the top of the ladder, only to find it leaning against the wrong wall. You join a health club and don't go. You decide to procrastinate, but then you never get around to it. Your mind makes contracts your body cannot meet. You know all the answers, but nobody asks you the questions. You look forward to a dull evening. Your back goes out more than you do. You walk with your head held high, but it's too get used to your trifocals. Your favorite part of the newspaper is '25 Years Ago Today.' A fortune teller offers to read your face! The little gray haired lady you help across the street is your wife! You sink your teeth into a steak, and they stay there!"

Forty days after **Jesus'** birth, **Luke 2:22-27** tells us Joseph and Mary brought Him to the Temple in Jerusalem for the first time, "to perform for Him what was customary under the law" (**vs. 27**). They were duty-bound to "to present Him to the Lord (just as it is written in the law of the Lord: Every firstborn male will be dedicated to the Lord)" (**vss. 22-23**). God spared Israel's firstborn sons the night He sent His "destroyer" of judgment through Egypt to liberate the Israelites from Egyptian slavery to be His own special people. From then on, God insisted Israel's firstborn sons were to be devoted to His service. But when presenting their firstborn sons to the LORD, parents could "redeem" them from priestly service by the purchase price God set of "five shekels" (approximately \$150 today; **Numbers 3:40-51; 18:14-16**). Two weeks ago, we read of a "righteous and devout" man named "Simeon," whom God favored by being among the first of the godly in Jerusalem to celebrate the birth of the Christ Child. Today we focus upon aged Anna, privileged by God to add her testimony to Simeon's of the arrival of the long-awaited Messiah-Savior. Our Outline points are Aging in Bitterness toward God and Aging in Betterness toward God.

I. AGING IN BITTERNESS TOWARD GOD

Anne Graham Lotz, second daughter of evangelist Billy Graham, turns 70 in May of 2018. She gained respect in her own right as a Bible teacher and prayer warrior beginning in her late 20s, by leading a Bible

Study Fellowship class in Raleigh, NC. In the late 1990s, as she approached 50 years of age, her personal life turned exceedingly stressful. Within two years, Hurricane Fran devastated their property and home, her husband's dental office burned to the ground, their son was diagnosed with cancer and went through major surgery and radiation, all three of their children married within an eight-month period, and the health of her mother, Ruth Bell Graham, failed, requiring multiple hospitalizations. Anne Lotz soon realized that glaring questions about *why* our loving Heavenly Father would allow such trials to assault us can threaten our happiness or even shake our faith in God. She immersed herself in a deeper study of the Bible to keep the storms in her life from casting her into despair. *Just Give Me Jesus*, a Bible study based upon the **Gospel of John** that Anne published in 2000, testifies of the spiritual renewal she experienced that drew her into a closer walk with our Savior. She shares these words of caution: "If we don't figure out how to process the whys of life, we'll end up cynical, resulting in a catastrophic loss of faith. If we don't answer correctly, we'll grow bitter, resulting in a darkened personality. In Christ 'are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge' [**Colossians 2:3**, NIV]. We believe He has the capacity of 'working all things for the good to those who love Him' [**Romans 8:28**]. We know He works all things according to the ultimate purposes of His counsel. We [therefore] consider 'all is right that seems most wrong if it be His sweet will.'"

"And there was a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was advanced in years, having lived with her husband seven years from when she was a virgin,³⁷ and then as a widow until she was eighty-four." Luke devotes more text to Simeon's encounter with the Christ Child and His parents than Anna's, but Luke reveals more information about her personal life than Simeon's. As an Israelite "of the tribe of Asher," Anna descended from one of the 10 so-called "lost tribes" of Israel. They were so scattered and decimated by the Assyrians who conquered Israel's northern kingdom in 722 B.C. that these 10 tribes largely disappeared from the face of the Earth! Anna was thus a commoner among the Jews, without the notable family connections of Joseph and Mary, who could both trace their lineage back to King David. Yet, Anna's confirmation of Christ's identity testified all Israel anticipated His arrival!

It's safe to assume she was about 14 when she married, the age Jewish parents traditionally arranged for their daughters to marry due to the generally shorter lifespan of that era. Yet, her husband died after just seven brief years, leaving her a widow. In Biblical times, widows were often among those most powerless and exploited, despite God's strong commands for their protection (**Exodus 22:22-24**). As was true of women divorced by their husbands, widows were often compelled to remarry just to secure food, clothing, and a safe roof over their head (**Matthew 5:32**). It seems likely Anna's husband was prosperous enough to leave her financially secure, a rarity in those days. It was even rarer for a widow of 21, her age at the time of her husband's death, never to remarry. She may have believed she could never love another. Deep sorrow had come early to Anna. The American landscape is littered today with people who bitterly abandoned their faith in God's existence, or the existence of a good God, when they suffered at a young age the painful loss of a spouse, a child, a sibling, or a parent. It's of some interest that Thomas Jefferson, in a less self-centered age than ours, witnessed the death of his father at age 14, and children who died at the ages of 3, 1, a few days, a fifth child at age 1, and a sixth at age 2. His wife, Martha, then died after but 10 years of marriage. Despite how much these tragic losses personally devastated Jefferson, he never once lost faith as an adult in God's existence or in His goodness. Americans during our Founding Era generally believed God's mind and purposes were so vastly superior to our understanding that we owe our Creator trust even when we least understand His ways. Warren Wiersbe, an American pastor and Bible teacher who is nearly 89 years of age, reminds us, "We live by God's promises, not by God's explanations."

At the time Anna encountered **Jesus** in the Temple, she'd lived to be at least "84" or possibly 105. The Greek text makes either option possible. Her continued high level of activity, "She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day" makes age 84 more probable. We should understand this language to mean Anna "never missed a service," for there were no quarters at the Temple for anyone but priests. Luke emphasizes Anna lived a long life, with some severe grief, and many years alone.

Comedian Bob Hope lived to be 100 (1903-2003). In his senior years, he'd say, "My ankles creak, my knees crack, my ears ring, and my stomach gurgles. I'm not getting older, I'm getting noisier." An unknown person said, "Old age comes at a bad time." And another stated, "Old age is no place for sissies." Anna could have used the excuse of her early widowhood and her lengthy years of loneliness to turn from God. She could have used her financial resources to indulge or pamper herself with little thought of aiding God's work. She could have used the excuses of the aches and pains, or declining physical stamina, associated with her extreme age, to be rarely present at public worship or of little service to the Lord. People who Age in Bitterness toward God often respond in some or all of these ways. Did Anna? No!

II. AGING IN BETTERNESS TOWARD GOD

Anna spent decades as a widow worshiping God daily in the Temple. She would have echoed what one aged man of God said: "I am on the bright side of seventy; the bright side, because nearer to God's everlasting glory." Even at the age of "eighty-four," "She did not depart from the temple, worshiping with fasting and prayer night and day." Anna devoted her adult life to being a prayer warrior for her spiritually and politically oppressed people. We could summarize her prayer life as being (1) A Priority. Nothing could keep her from fulfilling her commitment to intercede for her nation, with even food meaning little to her when God placed special prayer burdens on her heart; (2) Passionate. Tom Wilson (1931-2011), the creator of the comic strip, *Ziggy*, quipped, "I try not to worry about the future, so I take each day just one anxiety attack at a time." An "anxiety attack" over *anyone's* needs adds passion to our prayers. Anna's anxiety over the desperate needs of her nation and of the people she knew living in spiritual darkness stirred her to passionate prayer; and (3) Persistent. Anna knew God was the answer to her needs and the needs of those around her. She prayed with confident, persistent faith, fully believing God would answer.

The quality of Anna's nearness to the LORD vaulted this otherwise average woman into the precious status of "a prophetess." The Old Testament period covering more than 2,000 years recognizes but seven women as a "prophetess." It appears Anna had no children, adding to her grief over her husband's loss. She turned her pain into prayer, making it an offering to God that drew her closer to Him rather than driving her away from Him. She may have prayed these words of **Psalm 34:18** (NIV) to God: "The LORD is close to the brokenhearted and saves those who are crushed in spirit."

"And coming up at that very hour she began to give thanks to God and to speak of Him to all who were waiting for the redemption of Jerusalem." "Jerusalem" often appears in the Old Testament as Biblical shorthand for "Israel" as a nation. God privileged Anna with a front-row seat to witness the beginning of the Messiah's work in behalf of Israel and the entire human race!

Are we Aging in Bitterness toward God today, or Aging in Betterness toward the Lord? To encourage us, here's an edited version of an article in *Our Daily Bread* of a few years ago: "Old age is dreaded by almost everyone because it usually means loneliness, physical decline, and a retreat to inactivity. Some people tend to lose their enthusiasm for life and spend too much time in fruitless reminiscing and self-pity. They feel like 'Old Jimmy', an elderly gentleman George Mueller often told about. When this man was asked what he did all day since he had retired, he replied, 'I just sit and think, and sit and think, . . . and sometimes I just sit!' That's getting old in the worst way—ceasing to live before we die. History records that many people made some of their greatest contributions to society after the age of 65. The Earl of Halsbury (1823-1921), for example, began publishing a 20-volume revision of English law at age 84 and did not complete this task until age 94. Anna Mary Robertson Moses (1860–1961), better known as "Grandma Moses," developed arthritis at age 76 that led her to switch her artistic ability from embroidery to painting full-time. Before her death at age 101, she'd generated over 1,500 paintings, one of which sold for \$1.2 million in 2006. God never intends for us to retire from spiritual activity. The Bible says we can "still bear fruit in old age" (**Psalms 92:14**). You may be sure God wouldn't keep you on this earth if He didn't have a worthwhile ministry for you to accomplish. So keep on serving the Lord!"

CONCLUSION

A man named C. D. Frey, of Tennessee, updated a beloved hymn so it can apply to us as fully in the closing years of our lives as at the beginning of our days: "Jesus loves me, this I know, Though my hair is white as snow; Though my sight is growing dim, Still He bids me trust in Him. Yes, Jesus loves me, Yes Jesus loves me, Yes, Jesus loves me, The Bible tells me so. Though my steps are, oh, so slow / With my hand in His I'll go / On through life; let come what may, He'll be there to lead the way. When the nights are dark and long, In my heart He puts a song, Telling me in words so clear, 'Have no fear for I am near.' When my work on earth is done / And life's victories are won / He will take me home above / To the fullness of His love. Yes, Jesus loves me, Yes Jesus loves me, Yes, Jesus loves me, The Bible tells me so."