

Making Good Return

Biblical Wisdom on
Honoring Aging Parents

Kathleen B. Nielson



P U B L I S H I N G
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A Scripture quotation from the New Testament uses the ESV's alternate, footnoted translation of *adelphoi* ("brothers and sisters").

Italics within Scripture quotations indicate emphasis added.

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With thanksgiving for my parents,
John and LaVon Buswell

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Introduction

It is dangerous to write a book about something you're still in the middle of. For several years after conceiving the idea of this book, I kept putting off the writing. When my dear mother had gone to heaven and my care for my parents was complete, I thought, then would be the perfect time to write—when I had learned all the lessons I could learn. We see better in hindsight. When my mother turned ninety-six, however, I suddenly realized that I was fast getting older as well . . . and the writing began.

In the process, I've confronted the magnitude of the subject and concluded it was good to go ahead and write, for there is no end to the lessons we caregivers can learn; in any case, one book can cover only a bit. It was good to begin writing also because, as I'm still taking care of Mom, I have live empathy for those who, like me, are in the process of being schooled by God in the art of caring for aging loved ones.

I have not counted the number of people who have commented to me on the need to address this topic, but it's been overwhelming—and the comments have come with a definite urgency. Many adult children like me (averaging fifty- or sixty-something years old) are being called up to parent-care duty and feel the need for advice and help, especially as a similar call from children and grandchildren often pulls from the other side.

This situation will only intensify in coming years, as we baby boomers begin to crowd the ranks of the elderly. The need to help and

encourage caregivers is urgent indeed, not only in the general public but specifically in the church, for the Bible speaks strongly to the subject of God's care and our care for the elderly ones in our midst.

This is a book written from a Christian perspective, acknowledging the God-breathed truths of the Old and New Testaments concerning human beings created by God in the beginning and headed to meet God face-to-face in the end. At the center of these biblical truths is the Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God who came to earth to save us through his death on the cross, bearing our sins, and his resurrection from the dead.

The redemptive story of God's calling out a people for himself through Jesus Christ is not just the context of a Christian's thinking about care for the aging; it is at the very heart of the matter—as is the case with all parts of life. As I have written I have been continually aware of the many people, including many friends, whose aging loved ones are not believers in the Lord Jesus; I have aimed to write with acknowledgment of our many different contexts and situations, as well as with wisdom concerning care for the elderly that takes eternity into account.

This is not a “how-to” book that covers topics like writing wills and choosing long-term care facilities. Many practical details are indeed addressed, but those details come mainly in the process of exploring biblical principles and their real-life implications. In considering how to put this book together, I searched the Bible with an eye to this theme of caring for aging parents and the elderly among us—and I was amazed by the volume and the richness of what I found.

The book's structure, then, grew from what the Scriptures have to say regarding this topic, and it is organized into what I've called five “big biblical truths” about the process of aging and elder care. Each of the five truths comes with a related response. The chapters are ordered in pairs, with the first of the pair presenting the biblical truth and the second fleshing out the related response to that truth.

Many people helped me write this book. In the early stages, I requested thoughts and stories from a group of friends who have firsthand experience in caring for aging parents. They responded with a host of wise, thoughtful suggestions and ideas—and moving accounts of their own experiences, many of which are very different from mine. These friends are not named as their contributions are folded into the chapters, but I thank each of them for making the book much more rich and true than it would have been without their help. I thank my family for living out the realities of this book as we have together watched over aging parents and grandparents. This book's topic involves not just individuals but also families. As always, my husband, Niel, is my most loved and true critic, in the best sense of the word.

The book's title comes from Paul's first epistle to Timothy, a letter in which the older apostle is guiding his younger coworker in wise and godly church leadership. In his instructions regarding various segments of the congregation, Paul writes that widows are to be honored and cared for not first by the church but by their own children and grandchildren, who are "to show godliness to their own household and to make some return to their parents, for this is pleasing in the sight of God" (1 Tim. 5:4). This book asks how we grown children can "make return" to our aging parents in a way that is pleasing in God's sight.

It's an urgent question. I'm certainly not finished learning how to answer it. Even in the middle of trying to figure it out, though, we can pause, look up, look into the Bible, and better understand how to please God as we care for our aging loved ones. By God's grace, we can make progress in making good return to our parents. That is what this book aims to help us do.

1

God Sovereignly Ordains Our Aging

As the sun sets, I pull up to the front of the retirement community in which my mother has lived for several years now. It has been a full day, the contours of which I know well, as I make the monthly trip to visit Mom: catch the early flight from Chicago, rejoice when the rental car is waiting for me in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, then navigate the highway and finally the winding roads through rich farmland and Amish homesteads with black and white clothes hanging out on the line no matter the season. I know and like knowing how the Lancaster County farms and fields look in the different seasons, from dead-looking brown stubby stretches and huddled, muddy cattle to swaying, tall green corn and cows with calves scattered on gentle hills.

Before I go in (where I will be confronted immediately with at least a dozen urgent needs that Mom has been waiting for me to help with), I stop, take a breath, gather my thoughts, and say a prayer.

This book is an extension of that moment of preparation. Before we walk in to the dwelling places of the elderly, before we make aged parents the objects of our care and the subjects of our conversation, let's stop, consider, and above all look up to the eternal Lord God, who oversees us human creatures from the beginning

to the end of our days on this earth. Let's try to see what he sees. And then let's go in.

The Foundation of God's Word

But how can we survey the landscape of a human life the way God does? In this book, we will peer into a certain part of this landscape—the part farthest away, where clear lines gradually blur into the distance ahead. To those of us who are not yet there, it's the part where the figures and the action seem to get smaller. If we're going to care for the ones who inhabit that portion of the landscape, we need to understand what life there is like. The ones who are there don't always have words to explain it to us, and we do not always have ears to hear. How shall we gain a true perspective on the experience of aging and on the best ways of reaching out to those who are walking on ahead through the territory of old age?

The Bible gives us words we can trust—God's inspired words of truth concerning the human beings he created. There is no other place to start than the foundation of God's Word. What do the Scriptures reveal concerning those later years of life, when a person has lived “seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty” years (Ps. 90:10)—or, in the case of a growing number today, ninety years?

Only the eternal Lord God who created the universe (and each of us) truly sees the whole span of a human life. In one sense, he is so big and powerful that we humans are like grasshoppers, says the prophet Isaiah, to the one “who sits above the circle of the earth” (Isa. 40:22). Isaiah uses vivid pictures—we are not just grasshoppers but *grass*: “All flesh is grass, and all its beauty is like the flower of the field” (40:6). We are so small and so quickly here and gone.

Part of Isaiah's point, however, is that the Creator God does see us little fleeting creatures. Only the greatest can see the smallest. We must not think that God does not see us, from birth to death and down to every particle of our skin and bones and blood and

organs—and soul. Isaiah asks why God’s people say that their way is hidden from the Lord:

Have you not known? Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He does not faint or grow weary;
his understanding is unsearchable. (40:28)

This is where we must start, in order to get God’s view: with *him*, in all his unsearchable understanding. He sees and sovereignly rules over the ends of the earth he made.

It is humbling and comforting to find that this great Lord God pays a good deal of attention, in his written revelation, to old age; he speaks clearly into this part of our human experience. God’s Word on aging shows us a tender and merciful aspect of his heart for the human creatures he made. As we listen, we are blessed and instructed—not only in learning to care well for aging loved ones but also in preparing ourselves, by God’s grace, to live as godly residents in the territory of the elderly. Most of us will move in there, far away as it seems while we inhabit the earlier stages of life. It will be best to have staked out the territory.

Aging Occurs under God’s Sovereign Rule

Of our five big biblical truths about old age, first and foremost we must consider this one: *aging occurs under God’s sovereign rule*. Of course it does, a Christian might say: the Scriptures reveal a sovereign Lord God who created us and who eternally rules over all his creation. The Bible encourages us to consider God’s sovereignty in all things—in nature, for example, as he orders the seasons, the planets, the rain; in the rise and fall of kings and nations; and in the measure of a human life from beginning to end.

We know that the Lord orders our beginnings, from Adam and Eve through every one of their descendants, each of whom he knits together in their mother's womb (see Ps. 139:13). We also know the Lord orders the end of our days in these present mortal bodies; each day of our lives has already been written in God's book (see Ps. 139:16). The spans of our little lives are part of God's big story. It follows that, in order to grasp the significance of our own beginnings and endings, we must pay attention to the beginning and ending of the big story of the Bible. Our stories have full meaning only when understood in light of God's story.

We cannot imagine how the days in the garden of Eden might have unfolded had Adam and Eve not sinned and brought God's declared punishment of death on themselves and consequently on the entire human race (see Gen. 2:17; Rom. 5:12). What would "aging" have meant without sin and all its consequences? What would have been the experience through time of God's people living perfectly under God's rule?

But that's not how God's story goes. The first book of the Bible quickly tells us how sin broke into God's perfect creation, bringing with it death, both physical and spiritual—alienation on every level from our holy Creator. It tells us more, however. As early as Genesis 3:15, God makes a promise that points to the defeat of sin and death: the evil Serpent will be crushed by the offspring of the woman. God's sovereign plan for his people to live under his rule would not be thwarted but would come about through a Redeemer who would conquer death. From the foundation of the world, God willed to create a people who would live with him forever through the work of Jesus Christ his Son, who became flesh and died, bearing the full punishment of sin in the place of sinners (see Eph. 1:3–10).

The big story of the Bible unfolds according to God's promises. The plan of salvation was accomplished victoriously; in Christ, death was defeated at the cross and the empty tomb. But the story is not over. We human beings remain in this fallen world, in these

dying bodies, awaiting the completion of redemptive history when Jesus Christ comes again to claim his people, from Adam and Eve down through the last believer to be born. In that great day of resurrection, all dead bodies will rise from the grave, “some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt” (Dan. 12:2; see also John 5:28–29). At the final judgment, death itself will be thrown into the lake of fire (see Rev. 20:14). The prophet Isaiah tells us that the Lord “will swallow up death forever” (25:8). There will be a new heaven and a new earth, and new resurrected bodies for the people of God who live there with him: God’s plan will not be thwarted. The very end of the story is good, and it reaches out into eternity.

We embodied human beings are taking part in a huge story of redemption, a story sovereignly decreed by the Lord God for his glory alone. The Bible reveals this sovereign God to be just and merciful, ordering the span of each life and all lives as part of his great redemptive plan, with Jesus Christ at its center. The bodily beginning—and end—of each human life is necessarily linked to God’s larger story, which is moving inexorably toward the glorious conclusion he has sovereignly set in place.

Focusing In: Aging and Death within the Story

The point here is to ask how we view the earthly endings of our little stories in light of the big story. By “endings” I mean to include not just death but also the aging process that leads to death. Perhaps that is the first admission we need to make about aging as we know it: it is the precursor of death. It is linked to death. Recently, I heard a woman claim that aging is a good thing, a beautiful thing, part of the “flow of nature.” Now, we will talk about how the Lord means to make the aging process beautiful—and he does. He redeems everything. But in itself the aging process is essentially the decay of the body that leads to death.

My husband and I are together enjoying the white hairs of old age. My mother has the most beautiful head of pure white hair; she dyed her hair for years, but now she takes a certain pleasure in the whiteness of her fluffy bob. As Proverbs says, “Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life” (16:31). But we should be careful to distinguish between the whiteness that symbolically points to the dignity and value of a wise older person, on the one hand, and the whiteness that literally indicates a decline in the pigment of our hair follicles, on the other. Our pigment cells die, so that as we get older we have less and less of the living stuff that gave our hair its color. The autumn leaves that turn brilliant shades and fall to the ground have dried up and died.

Aging leads to death, and death is a result of the fall. Aging, then, is not good in itself; rather, it is a consequence of sin in this fallen world. It is given to us by a sovereign God who kept his word to Adam: death would result from disobedience. We must understand the process of aging as part of the Bible’s big story—a story directed not by a beneficent, neutral, or even random natural force, but by the Lord God. It is a story that comes not in a steady unending flow or in happy cycles but in the archetypal shape that shows itself in stories of all places and times: a distinct beginning (creation), a clear crisis (the fall), a shining climax (the cross and the resurrection), and a perfectly resolved denouement (the return of Christ).

As we believers live in our part of the story, looking ahead to the resolution of our Savior’s return, God’s Word enables us to hold the whole biblical framework in our minds. We can move with hope toward the very end because of the victory over sin and death accomplished by Jesus our Redeemer. The promise of the big story’s end is magnificent because he will make new all the wonders of creation we glimpse in the story’s beginning.

But waiting for that end is difficult because of the effects of the fall. To grapple with the reality of aging is to acknowledge that part of the story. This acknowledgment is a crucial starting point

as we approach the subject of aging. We will hear voices around us assuming many unbiblical starting points—one of them being that aging and death are natural and good. Another is the assumption that we human beings are in control of the aging process.

Usurping God’s Sovereignty

We human beings desperately want to write our own stories, including the later chapters. We desire sovereignty over the endings of our lives in these mortal bodies. God has put in us a strong instinct to live; we most often try to avoid death at all costs because we fear death as the enemy it is, a fierce foe that would take away everything we have. Much of the advertising that bombards us today plays to these desires and fears: if we can just protect ourselves with the best available exercise routines, safety measures, medical care, beauty products, and retirement plans, we can almost expect never to face the horror of death.

Almost. These protections can (sometimes) dramatically extend our days, but they do not ultimately succeed. The most obtrusive and unavoidable giveaway to this truth is the process of aging. No beauty cream can erase all the wrinkles. No amount of exercise or surgery can keep a ninety-something-year-old body as strong as it was in the prime of life (whatever that is). We age. Everyone knows it. And we age under the sovereign hand of a God who has judged this sinful world with the punishment of death. Aging is one sign of the futility and corruption to which the whole creation was subjected by God (see Rom. 8:20–21). The denial of these biblical truths most often involves denying sin, and it ultimately involves denying God.

The attempt to establish our own sovereignty over death takes many forms: we can call it our enemy and try to defeat it, but we can also call it our friend and invite it in. To treat aging and death as “natural” is perhaps a first step in the latter direction. But such steps lead us to call evil good in all kinds of ways. To understand

the extreme danger inherent in this view, all we have to do is listen to the way practices like abortion and euthanasia are lauded in the public sphere as good ways to increase human self-determination and happiness. We fool ourselves in the most deadly way when we dress up death as our ally, our comforter, our friend—rather than acknowledging death as God’s punishment for our sin.

I sat with friends in Switzerland not long ago as they discussed the increasingly common practice of “exiting,” that is, choosing (legally) to end one’s life. All one needs is a letter from a medical professional, and those letters are easy to obtain. Those who exit are seeking peace as they embrace death. In refusing to accept God’s sovereign gift of life, however, they are rejecting the sovereign God himself, who made a way for us to know peace with him forever, through his Son.

Until the Lord comes, we will all experience the moment of death, when our physical eyes close and our spiritual eyes are opened to the realities of the spiritual world. On this side of the great divide, the quiet of a dead body doesn’t tell the story; we cannot see and know what that person sees and knows. God has revealed the story in the Scriptures and ultimately in his Son, who took on a body to die and save us from death. We cannot see him yet, either, in his glorious resurrected body, but we can believe the Bible and the true story of human history it tells. In that story, death is a grievous and ugly enemy that has been defeated by our beautiful Savior and eternal Friend. In the end, every eye will see the Lord Jesus (see Rev. 1:7).

Responding Humbly to a Sovereign God

These truths are both somber and glorious—and they are good. We are not writing our own little stories, including the final chapters, thank God. According to Scripture, a good and merciful God numbers our days as he directs human history for his redemptive purposes.

We know that human beings once lived much longer than we do today: Adam lived 930 years—and Methuselah a record 969 (see Gen. 5:5, 27). As evil multiplied on the earth, God limited the human life span, declaring, “My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years” (Gen. 6:3). After that declaration, some people still lived long lives: Noah was 600 at the time of the flood and lived 350 years afterward (see Gen. 7:6; 9:28). But the numbers gradually decreased: Abraham lived 175 years, Moses 120 years, David 70 years (see Gen. 25:7; Deut. 34:7; 2 Sam. 5:4; 1 Kings 2:10–11). The almighty Lord has numbered our days in this sinful world; that limitation is surely meant to turn us to him in humility as we sense the brevity of our lives under the hand of a sovereign and eternal Maker and Judge.

I was reminded of an episode in the life of King David as I read through a lovely, wise book by Derek Prime.¹ In Prime’s alphabet of wisdom on aging, *A* is for *acceptance*, as illustrated by the story of Barzillai the Gileadite, a wealthy friend of David’s who brings David and his men shelter and provision in the wilderness during Absalom’s rebellion. When peace is restored, David invites the elderly Barzillai to return to Jerusalem with him and enjoy his kindly provision. We can learn much from Barzillai’s response:

How many years have I still to live, that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem? I am this day eighty years old. Can I discern what is pleasant and what is not? Can your servant taste what he eats or what he drinks? Can I still listen to the voice of singing men and singing women? Why then should your servant be an added burden to my lord the king? Your servant will go a little way over the Jordan with the king. Why should the king

1. Derek Prime, *A Good Old Age: An A to Z of Loving and Following the Lord Jesus in Later Years* (2017; repr., Leyland, UK: 10Publishing, 2021). See pages 15–21 for Prime’s discussion of the story of David and Barzillai.

repay me with such a reward? Please let your servant return, that I may die in my own city near the grave of my father and my mother. (2 Sam. 19:34–37)

Barzillai then offers for one of his men to go with David in his place, and David accepts, kisses and blesses his friend, and leaves him. It's all told matter-of-factly. Barzillai (and David, apparently) accepted his lot—not with bitterness but with a realism that acknowledged the truth of his condition: he was eighty, and his taste and vision and hearing were failing. He was still actively helping others, but he understood that he would die relatively soon. And he knew that his own home would be the best place for him. We have to admire his humble, honest acceptance of his condition.

Then there is King Hezekiah, who wasn't so accepting. At one point in his reign as king of Judah, he became sick and “was at the point of death”; the prophet Isaiah even came and told him to set his house in order, for he was to die (Isa. 38:1). But Hezekiah wept and pleaded with the Lord, and God sent an answer, again through Isaiah: God said he would heal Hezekiah and add fifteen years to his life—and also deliver him and the city of Jerusalem from the attacking Assyrian army (see Isa. 38:4–6).

Think of the lessons Hezekiah learned of God's mercy and God's sovereignty during the end of his life (as well as God's care for the line of David and the city of Jerusalem). Think too of what it would be like to be told by God that you had exactly fifteen more years to live. But then think about the fact that God has indeed numbered your years just as exactly. Not one of us knows our number, but we can and must trust in the sovereign Ruler of the universe whom Scripture reveals.

At the start of a book that will take us into the territory of old age, how right to remember that our lives on this earth are like a fleeting dream or like grass that flourishes in the morning and withers in the evening (see Ps. 90:5–6)—all of which is divinely determined by the

one who is God from everlasting to everlasting and who, according to his will, returns man to dust (see Ps. 90:1–3). We must approach this subject humbly, praying with the psalmist, “Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom” (Ps. 90:12). Humility exalts not ourselves but our sovereign Lord God, acknowledging that we depend on him for every moment of life.

With this first great truth in place—the truth of our sovereign God who rules over every part of our human story, including our aging and death—we are ready to enter the rooms where our elderly loved ones live. We will go humbly indeed, knowing that we are seeing God’s hand of judgment in a fallen world. We will certainly hate sin more, around us and in ourselves, as we witness its devastating effects. We will encounter the great enemy—death—as its hand reaches into various parts of weakening bodies. We will struggle against this enemy. And we will know that, even though we can help the weak, we cannot defeat death ourselves.

But as believers, we will know that Christ has done it. We know the big story. Jesus Christ the Son of God has already defeated this enemy. “It is finished,” Jesus said from the cross as he paid the full price of death for our sin (John 19:30). And now the risen Christ reigns in heaven, until that day when he comes again to judge all and to make all things new. In the meantime, we live in this fallen world, trusting in God’s sovereign redemptive plan, walking humbly to the end.