



PILGRIMS'
FRIEND
SOCIETY

God's
Purposes
in Older Age

by Louise Morse

Living with purpose in older age



God has a purpose and a plan for you at every stage of your life.

Reflecting on how God had planned his life before he was born, King David wrote in Psalm 139:16 that, “all the days ordained for me were written in your book before there was one of them.”

Ephesians 2:10 says, “For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” There is no ‘use-by’ date. God has a plan for your life and at each stage He has different things for you to do.

God has so designed life that the longer people live the more they learn through experience and the more wisdom they accumulate. “Wisdom belongs to the aged, and understanding to the old,” observed Job (Job 12:12),

and eminent Christian psychologist **James Hillman** wrote “...let us entertain the idea that character requires the additional years and that the long last of life is forced upon us neither by genes nor by conservational medicine nor by societal collusion. The last years conform and fulfil character.”

Solomon had been given extraordinary wisdom by God (1 Kings 4:29), yet he sought the expertise of older men who helped him make important decisions about the kingdom of Israel. Our latter years are designed to give us the qualities, the wisdom, and the character that can help others, and our increasing lifespan is giving us even more time and opportunities for doing it.

The *changing* view of old age

We’re having to adjust to a new way of thinking about old age. We are used to seeing life in three stages, from infancy to late adulthood and retirement, but now longevity adds two new significant stages: those 80-plus years where we are still largely active and involved, and the final few years before we are called Home.

But they can also bring challenges. Famous Christian leaders Billy Graham and John Stott both said that they had been taught about death but not about how to be old. Psychologists say there are two main reasons for this: one is that we have no experience of our own old age so can’t ‘see’ ourselves as old, and the other is that many of us push the notion of old age away from us because we have absorbed negative views about it. But the Scriptures tell us that that God intends it to be a time of blessing others and telling of His goodness.

An example of this flowering and growth was a lady called Jean who, at the age of 96 came to live in a flat in our Pilgrims’ Friend Society housing in Yorkshire, Royd Court. She was frail and confined to a wheelchair, but she loved Jesus, and she loved people, and her flat was rarely empty. At the age of 100, when it looked that she was dying, the District Nurse came to discuss end-of-life medications with her. Jean asked her, “Tell me dear, do you know where you are going when you die?” Then she continued, “I know where I’m going – I’m going to live with Jesus. You do need to know. Go to a good church and find out about it!”

Jean is just one example of how God has a plan and a purpose for us for the whole of our life, including those latter years.

Points to ponder:

Thinking of Ephesians 2:10, write down the talents God has given you. Perhaps you are good at gardening, or cooking, or at encouraging others. Take time and don’t be shy! These are God given gifts to be blessed by. A 96-year-old told me recently that her gift was talking to others - yours might be listening!

Write down the things you would like to do in your older age. It could be joining a local voluntary work, such as helping children to learn to read, or visiting a care home to encourage those living there.

Crucial to God's Plan



Older age brings experience and wisdom to benefit the younger generations

God sets His own imprimatur on the value of older people. He instructed the people of Israel, "you must rise in the presence of an old person and respect the elderly. You must fear your God; I am the Lord." (Leviticus 19:31 – 32).

In the cultures of both the Old and the New Testament older people were venerated. Sitting on the garbage tip outside town and remembering when he was the leading figure in the community, Job recalls, "When I went out to the gate of the city, when I took my seat [as a city father] in the square, the young men saw me and hid themselves, the aged arose and stood [respectfully]" (Job 29:7). That the most honoured in society, the elders, stood respectfully for him told Job that he was very highly regarded by them.

"The glory of the young is their strength; the grey hair of experience is the splendour of the old," says Proverbs 20:29 (NLT). Older people and younger benefit from each other's company. World leading expert on ageing, Professor Laura Carstensen, Director of the Stanford Center for Longevity **reports** that, "Contrary to widespread beliefs that older populations consume resources that would otherwise go to youth, there is growing reason to think that older people may be just the resource children need." And when troubled pupils in a failing school were **befriended by pensioners** both they and the school were transformed.

But that is far from the view most of our society takes today. In the UK more adults have experienced **prejudice based on their age** than on any other characteristic. Many companies have recognised the damage it causes and have initiated anti-ageist policies. Sometimes these policies reveal hidden, individual ageism rather than corporate. Alison, a training officer at Capita, a business consultancy, said, "In my 21 years at **Capita**, I haven't experienced any age discrimination, but my own self-limiting beliefs around age have been a barrier at times."

Unlike other prejudices, **ageism is unique** in targeting our future selves. We will not fulfil God's purpose in old age unless we deal with this. We can ask God to show us if we harbour hidden negative beliefs about old age. Ageism was not a challenge to Israel's King David, but he wanted to be sure that his thinking was healthy and pleasing to God. Writing Psalm 139, Israel's King David pleaded, "Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me and lead me in the way everlasting".

To live a purpose-filled life in older age we must align our thinking with God's: to recognise that older people are part of His plan, not some evolutionary failing. God planned our latter years to be a time of ripeness and harvest, of accumulated wisdom and experience of a life spent with Him. Older people are meant to be the elders of society, protecting and encouraging the younger.

An example of this was Sam Hailes, the editor of Premier Christianity magazine. In an editorial one month he wrote that he owed his faith today to the older people in his church. As a teenager, a turbulent time in life when some turned away, he said it was the love of the unofficial aunties and uncles and grandparents in his church that held him in his faith. Sam believes strongly that there should be more coming together of young and older generations in our churches, and in life in general.

Another example is David, a carer in Luff House, our home in Essex. He told us about Constance, an 89-year-old living in the home. Constance was the widow of a famous evangelist and had sacrificed much to support him. David had come to faith through attending, in his own time, the Bible studies she held in the home, and he had come to faith through her love and clear understanding of the Scriptures.

Points to ponder:

Ask God to search you, and see if there is anything offensive, or hurtful in your thinking, especially about His older saints.

Reflect on your own life, and write down experiences you have had, including the sense of God's presence at the time.

Write how these experiences have affected you, for example, have you become more patient, more discerning, less judgemental?

If you could go back to a teenage you, what would you tell him/her? What to warn against, and what encouragement would you give?

Older age can be the best time of your life



A time to share, to enrich others' lives

'Grow old along with me!

The best is yet to be,

*The last of life, for which
the first was made:*

Our times are in His hand

*Who saith "A whole I
planned,*

*Youth shows but half; trust
God: see all, nor be afraid!'*

(From Rabbi ben Ezra,
by Robert Browning.)

Robert Browning was right: God designed 'a whole' of life, including old age. He planned a life where we would live in relationship with Him, growing in grace to mature and bless others. Eminent psychologist **James Hillman** echoes God's plan when he writes, "Let us entertain the idea that character requires the additional years and that the long last of life is forced upon us neither by genes nor by conservational medicine nor by societal collusion. The last years conform and fulfil character."

Sometimes this "fulfilled character" is recognised and applied. In 2007, more than 700,000 Zimbabweans were traumatised when their homes were bulldozed for voting for the opposition party. There were only six psychiatrists in the whole country, but one of them saw the attributes needed in grandmothers and he had thousands trained quickly in rudimentary cognitive behavioural therapy. Dr Dixon Chibanda encouraged them to wait on "friendship benches" in health centres and community centres, offering counselling help to anyone suffering from anxiety or depression. A 2015 report found that 86 percent of those they helped had recovered. Dr Chibanda continues to **develop the concept**.

What is meant by "good works"?

Let's look again at Ephesians 2:10. What does it mean by "good works"? The grandmothers' friendship benches are an example, and there are the obvious things that we tend to think of first, like belonging to a good church fellowship, and encouraging others to faith. But it's more than that: the good works the Scriptures describe are essentially about relationships, first to God and then to one another. We are told, "Therefore encourage one another and build each other up, just as in fact you are doing," 1 Thessalonians 4:11; "not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching," Hebrews 10:25.

Sometimes the most important "good work" on Sunday is to collect people and take them to church. There are many opportunities for voluntary work within churches and the community, for example, at your local foodbank. And there's also the vital work of supporting in prayer those who volunteer: could you commit to praying for a group or an individual, and perhaps calling them to see how things are going and giving them encouragement?

Very often it's the little things that make a big difference. It's so easy to under-estimate the effect of a word of encouragement, or a helping hand in a difficult time. Could you be a mentor in your church? Could you commit to praying for a younger person, or their family? If you are able, consider becoming a volunteer for a charitable work. We are grateful for the church volunteers who befriend residents in our care homes and it's difficult to say who is the most blessed. There is deep gladness in doing what God has called you to do, even in a difficult situation.

In many ways, older people are God's proof of principle. Older believers have many stories to share of all that God has done in their lives, and they are instructed to tell them to younger generations (Psalm 78). Usually, you've grown past the inhibitions of your younger self, and it becomes easier to share the gospel in your latter years. And remember, God will bring opportunities to you.

"And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things and at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work." (2 Corinthians 9:8)

Points to ponder:

Meditate on your life and recall those times you have had to thank Him for, especially for the times when others encouraged you.

Remember times when you were able to encourage someone.

Ask God for unforced opportunities to share Jesus.

Think of voluntary work, such as food banks and church outreaches, and the people involved that you could pray for.