



# FINISHING WELL

A God's-eye View  
of Ageing

by Ian Knox



## Finishing Well by Ian Knox – Extracts – Part 1:

### ‘I’m Glad I’m Not Young’

This booklet is an extract from the forthcoming book, ‘Finishing Well: A God’s-eye View of Ageing’ by Ian Knox, to be published by SPCK in May 2020. This booklet is taken from a part of the wider book, and focuses on God’s promises and purposes for us, and in doing so enables the reader to reflect on how God speaks into older age and shapes us in later life.

The purposes of the book are to aide reflection on matters relating to later life and following Christ; and to stimulate theological thought on the issues the book covers. Written by Ian Knox and in collaboration with the London Seminary, this book provides theological reflection but is also written in a style that makes it accessible to all.

The complete book covers a variety of subjects and areas, including usefulness in life; church and community; dementia and cognitive impairment, and; caring and being cared for.

As you read this booklet, and the complete book, when published, we hope you will find it useful, enjoyable and encouraging.

This booklet is an extract from Finishing Well: A God’s-eye View of Ageing by Ian Knox, to be published by SPCK in conjunction with Faith in Later Life in May 2020, ISBN 978 0 281 08349 7. Used by agreement.’

Maurice Chevalier, who always gave the appearance of a happy, if somewhat elderly, French gentleman in his jauntily-worn boater, once remarked, “Old age isn’t so bad when you consider the alternative.” On a first hearing this is slightly amusing, although, on second thoughts, it is a poor reflection both on being old and on dying. As if to contradict himself or, perhaps, confuse himself, Chevalier then sang “I’m glad that I’m not young anymore” in his endearing performance in the film ‘Gigi’. He even confesses, in the song, that “Methuselah is my patron saint”!

Chevalier seems to have been confused by his experience. He reacts negatively to ageing in his personal comment, but more positively in his song. Getting older is confusing. It obviously raises the question, ‘What is old?’ This is basic to everything in this book, but I do not want to answer it until I have looked at something even more fundamental: what is God’s attitude to our ageing? His approach will colour our own view and, perhaps, help us to react as Chevalier did in his song, rather than in his more bleak personal comments.

It was the Psalmist, David, who said of himself, “I was young and now I am old” (Psalm 37:25). Was he happy about this? In the context of these words, it would seem he was. Speaking of the older person’s problem of walking, literally as well as metaphorically, David has just said:

**“If the Lord delights in a man’s way, he makes his steps firm; though he stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand.” (vs 23-24).**

Immediately after these words comes “I was young, and now I am old,” followed by

**“Yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging for bread. They are always generous and lend freely; their children will be blessed.”**

For David, growing old was a good thing. Can it be the same for us? Here are three big positives from God as we begin to look at our own ageing.

## God's Saving Presence

In my own growing old, I am hugely encouraged by God's outstanding promise in Isaiah 46:4

**“Even to your old age and grey 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.”**

For a person who started to turn grey in his late thirties and is now “a whiter shade of pale” (as the sixties group Procol Harum sang), this has been good news for a long time. I understand the need for some to keep a more youthful colour, but I rest content in the words of Proverbs 20:29 –

**“The glory of young men is their strength, grey hair is the splendour of the old.”**

I would like to feel the previous words of that book were true of me, but I have my doubts that Proverbs 16:31 is completely correct in my case:

**“Grey hair is a crown of splendour, it is attained by a righteous life.”**

Whether I got my white hair from being good or not, I bask in the promises from God given in those verses from Isaiah. I am increasingly conscious of my personal need of God's ‘rescue’. The

famous, possibly apocryphal, story of the bishop on a train being accosted by an enthusiastic youngster with the question, “Are you saved?” which elicited the answer, “That all depends on what you mean by ‘saved’, would find an echo in me. The bishop continued, “I have been saved, I am being saved and I will be saved.”

I was privileged to trust Christ with my life when only a boy, so, in that sense, ‘I have been saved’. Yet every day I feel the deep need for the ‘rescue’ Isaiah speaks of to enable me to be being saved. I await the final dénouement of history, when ‘I will be saved’. The promises of Psalm 91 are vital for my life, quoting from verses 1 and 2 and then verses 14 to 16:

**“He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, ‘He is my refuge and fortress, my God in whom I trust.”**

**‘Because he loves me’, says the Lord, ‘I will rescue him, for he acknowledges my name. He will call upon me and I will answer him; I will be with him in trouble, I will deliver him and honour him. With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation.”**

I have never believed that to be “saved” was only a one-off. I cannot, indeed must not, rely on an experience decades ago for my present relationship with God. We will see later in the book how it is still possible for those in later life to come into this ‘salvation’ for the first time, so do not despair if this includes you. But what a joy to know that the promise of salvation is for those who have “a long life”, and that this is a life which will “satisfy”. This satisfaction takes us right into our eternal future, as Paul reminds us:

**“Since we have now been justified by his [Christ's] blood, how much more shall we be saved from God's wrath through him! For if, when we were God's enemies, we were reconciled to him through the death of his Son, how much more, having been reconciled, shall we be saved through his life!” (Romans 5:9-10).**

Reverting to the thought that this is an ongoing 'rescue' rather than a once-in-a-lifetime experience, our well-being depends on a continuing and continuous relationship with God, as he carries us and we trust him, as the writer of Proverbs enjoins us in Proverbs 3:1-4 :

**"My son, do not forget my teaching, but keep my commands in your heart, for they will prolong your life many years and bring you prosperity. Let love and faithfulness never leave you; bind them round your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart. Then you will win favour and a good name in the sight of God and man."**

This has always been the way we should live, as we enjoy God's presence. Right back during the exodus, Moses commands the people of Israel, in Deuteronomy 5:33 :

**"Walk in all the way that the Lord your God has commanded you, so that you may live and prosper and prolong your days in the land that you will possess."**

As we 'prolong' our own days, the advice from the very recent book 'The 100-Year Life' is for each of us: "Regardless of whether you are 20, 40, or 60 you need to adjust to make the most of the gift of a longer life." As that is a wholly secular book, I would want to add the crucial caveat: we need to make sure we make the necessary adjustments with God's presence in our hearts.

One of the most brilliant works I have ever read is the book 'Wind, Sand and Stars' by the French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, at the end of which he tells of travelling on a train which is crammed full of hundreds of Polish workman being sent home from France. He says how he makes his way through the carriages, full of confused people, and finds a man and a woman with a child snuggled between them, fast asleep. He muses as to what this child could have become if he had been born in different circumstances, maybe growing to be a 'Mozart'. Alas, he explains, "This little Mozart is condemned"; as he "will be shaped by the common stamping machine." Having told his story, Saint-Exupéry

concludes his whole remarkable book with these poignant words: "Only the Spirit, if he breathe upon the clay, can create Man."<sup>4</sup>

How much I need to let God's Holy Spirit continually

**"Breathe on me, breath of God  
Fill me with life anew"<sup>5</sup>**

**"Even to your old age and grey hairs ... I will carry you ...  
I will sustain you... I will rescue you."**

Lord, make it true for me.

## God's Purpose

I know a man who has recently retired from being a Police Officer. Despite having an interesting and varied job, he could not wait to get out. He counted down the months, then the days, then the hours until he finally left. He was free! I met him a few weeks later. "I have nothing to do, I am so bored. I think I'll write a book." I did not have the heart to tell him what that would mean.... Getting older is more than sitting around doing nothing, as he is discovering:

**"I just don't know what to do with myself  
Don't know just what to do with myself,"**

we all sang along with Dusty Springfield in the Swingin' Sixties, when we all had plenty to do. We seemed to have boundless energy and there were never enough hours in the day – or the night. We were going to change the world, in the days when 'the times, they were a-changin', or so Bob Dylan told us. What happened? Maybe we did change a few things. We dared to do things with and for God, some of us, and many of our memories are good. Is that all we have now – memories? Are we to be like the retired policeman, bored and without purpose?

The answer is a resounding "No!" The Psalmist has some special and unique news for our later years (Psalm 92:12-15):

**“The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming ‘The Lord is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him!’”**

There will be a complete chapter on the “what’s” of living our later years, but it is vital that, before we consider the ‘can-dos’, we realise this vital point: God is not finished with us. In our later years we are not only to be blessed but to be a blessing and bring a blessing. Life is no downward trend with God. He renews our life within us: **“So that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s”** (Psalm 103:5). This does not mean we have to be young all over again. That really would not be a good idea.

Tom Hanks’ delightful film ‘Big’, has Hanks playing Josh, who wishes to be big and to his amazement, suddenly becomes an ‘adult’. His new life involves Susan, with whom he becomes romantically involved. The dénouement of the film is when (don’t read this if you intend to watch the film!) Josh realises he wants to be back home with his Mom and his old friend Billy. He invites Susan to come back with him and be a child again. Oh no, she says, she has been through all that once and could not face growing up again. Almost all of us would echo that. What then does it mean to have our youth renewed like an Eagle’s?

Consider the words of Psalm 92. In our youth we were **‘fresh and green’**. Sometimes that was in the wrong way, à la Cleopatra, speaking of

“My salad days  
When I was green in judgement, cold in blood,  
To say as I said then!”

We did make mistakes. I go along with those who say, “When I was young and foolish, I was young and foolish.” We were ‘green’ in a negative way. But that is not what the Psalmist means. He is talking about how we grew and flourished, not just physically and mentally, but spiritually. We lived in the Springtime. Is it now

Autumn, going into a desolate, leafless Winter? Is our spiritual life on a never-ending spiral of decline? If you believe that, come back again and again to these remarkable verses and see what God says.

The Psalm says we are to **“flourish like a palm tree”**. I am frequently in very hot countries in equatorial Africa, where I see the different varieties of palms, enjoying the burning heat which attacks them, swaying in the tropical storms which batter them, yet producing delicious fruit. That is how the ‘righteous’ are to be in their later lives. They are to stand tall like the mighty cedars of Lebanon. In our lives we can do that, in our inmost beings, even when age bends our backs double. We can do this because we are **“planted in the house of the Lord”** and we **“flourish in the courts of our God.”** Stick in close with God the Father, through the presence in your life of Jesus Christ the Son and in the power of the Holy Spirit, and you will be fresh and green!

Some of the loveliest people I meet are well advanced in years and yet they are clearly bearing **“fruit in old age”**. The words of Paul in Galatians 5:22-23 are so well known and quoted regularly, but they are singularly appropriate to give a New Testament explanation of what it means to **“bear fruit in old age”**. Paul speaks of the **“fruit of the Spirit”** as comprising **“love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control”** and says that **“Against such things there is no law.”** The law of ageing is a law – and that law has no claim on our lives when God’s Spirit is at work within us.

Louise Morse, in her book ‘What’s Age Got To Do With It?’ writing on these verses, heads that section ‘You are here on purpose, by divine design’<sup>11</sup>. We are to let God make us into beautiful older people. The world seems full of hatred: we show God’s love. I have made it a practice to say ‘I love you’ to my children (all grown men) and my grandchildren. We do not have to go far to witness hatred; it is there on the television, when we go to a sports match, when we drive and get something slightly wrong and the fist is raised from the car driver we offended. My children face this continually – they need me to exhibit the fruit of love towards them. I should do so all the time by my actions and by my words frequently. My

grandchildren often have a hard time at school: I should be the one with the hug of love.

Around is great sorrow and heartache: we are to demonstrate the Spirit's joy. I don't mean we should be forever grinning, although a gentle smile can lift a drooping heart. But we have God's help in our lives and have a way of coping in the sorrows everyone faces. David puts it like this:

**"The Lord is my strength and my shield: my heart trusts in him, and I am helped. My heart leaps for joy and I will give thanks to him in song" (Psalm 28:7).**

Linked to this is the antidote to the war, violence and discord we see everywhere, as the Holy Spirit produces the fruit of peace in us. We can proclaim peace through the 'Prince of Peace' (Isaiah 9:6) and can be, ourselves, "the peacemakers" (Matthew 5:9). Who will pour 'oil on troubled waters' if not us, with the oil of God's Spirit?

We will put up with life's problems with "patience". This is not one of my strengths, I confess! Too often I fail to see the stupidity of getting uptight and angry in a long queue at the check-out, or with a seemingly interminable traffic jam. But the fruit of the Spirit is "patience". I am glad that is followed by "kindness" and "goodness: in a seemingly uncaring and sinful world, these are such assets, traits of character which the Spirit alone can create in us.

With our partners and family and friends we exercise "faithfulness"; and in all our dealings there will be "gentleness and self-control". An impossible dream? No, says the Psalmist, "They will still bear fruit in old age" – the verb 'will' is a strong word.

The expression 'old wrinklies' is not particularly pleasant! By contrast, the 'oldies' of Psalm 92 "stay fresh and green". When the storms of life buffet, we can go well. Indeed, sometimes a good old battering can bring the best out of us. As Richard Ford says in his book 'Let Me be Frank with You':

"There's something to be said for a good no-nonsense hurricane, to bully life back into perspective."<sup>11</sup>

Perhaps you are bedridden as you read this: take comfort from Joel 2:28, and be one of those included there, where "Your old men (and women) will dream dreams" and bless us as you tell of what you dreamt. There are those who would point out that Joel is referring specifically to prophetic dreams, which may not be for all of us. Whether this be so or not, we can all take heart from the words of Psalm 63:6 :

**"On my bed I remember you; I think of you through the watches of the night."**

Here is our opportunity to do what the Psalmist says we are to do, as we go about "Proclaiming,

**"The Lord is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him!" (Psalm 92:15).**

In the previous section, about God's saving presence, I looked at some verses from Proverbs to speak of my white hair and how God's presence is with me now I am older. But those verses (Proverbs 16:31 and 20:29), as well as Psalm 92, say something just as important about God's purpose for us. As we get older, part of the fruit is that we give a powerful testimony:

**"They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, proclaiming, 'The Lord is upright; he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him'" (Psalm 92:14-15).**

That is the impact of these verses from Proverbs:

**"Grey hair is a crown of splendour; it is attained by a righteous life" (Proverbs 20:29).**

**"The glory of young men is their strength, grey hair is the splendour of the old! (Proverbs 20:29).**

Our older lives are to show that God gives us a wisdom from himself as we age. Job 12:12 asks,

**“Is not wisdom found among the aged?  
Does not long life bring understanding?”**

God’s purpose for us is to show, as we get older, that he gives us his strength and, through our experiences of him, his wisdom. ‘Grey hair’ should mean that we have this wisdom through the experience of life. One of the laws given to the people of Israel puts it strongly:

**“Rise in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the Lord”  
(Leviticus 19:32).**

In other words, we older people really do matter, hence the call for respect. We are there, both to bear fruit and also to use our wisdom to give counsel and leadership, perhaps not in the formal way of church leaders, but by our loving and caring advice and encouragement. We are to declare God’s power “to the next generation”: Psalm 71:18. Psalm 71 is written by an old man, as verse eighteen shows. The psalmist says how he declares God’s “splendour all day long” (v.8); tells of God’s righteousness and salvation (v.15); proclaims his “mighty acts” (v.16); praises God (v.22); and speaks out God’s good news (vs. 23-24). What a lot of things we can do: from praise to evangelism, from counsel to encouragement. **“We will tell the next generation (Psalm 78:4).**

There is a simple question, which Gratton and Scott present when introducing their book, which suggests that coming generations will live to be at least 100 years old. “How will you make the most of this gift?” They go on to say:

“A long life is a gift, not a curse. It is full of possibilities, and the gift is the gift of time. How you choose to use and structure that time is at the heart of the response to living longer.”

God has a purpose for each one of us, whatever our age. There is no moment in our lives when he draws a line and says, “That’s it. You have no purpose here any more.” Except that, one day, he will call ‘Time’ for each of us: but that is for the next section, so let’s get there.

As Abraham grows old, God makes a beautiful promise to him. He shares with Abraham that future generations will have many troubles, but gives this assurance to his ‘friend’, as he is described in James 2:23:

**“You, however, will go to your fathers in peace  
and be buried at a good old age.”**

These lovely words, in Genesis 15:15, are for us, too. I am looking at the impending deaths of each of us in chapter 11, but, as I have already said, it is so important to get the principle stated right at the outset. Death has been beaten. Jesus has done it. Here are stirring words from Paul in 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. For our light and monetary troubles are  
achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them  
all. So 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.”**

When Jesus rose from the dead, it was as if God, at the moment of the resurrection, looked in to the tomb of his dead Son and called out, “You have beaten sin! You have beaten death! You have beaten hell! Come back from the dead and live for ever!” The disciples feared for the worst, so the very first word Jesus spoke to them was “Peace” (Luke 24:36). He had already promised this to them before he died. In John 14:27 he told them:

**“Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not  
give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be  
troubled and do not be afraid.”**

We need to appropriate the words of Jesus for ourselves, taking on board the magnificent words of Paul. It will save us from the danger

of always harking back to 'the good old days', as if our lives will never be so good now, causing us to lose our peace:

**"Do not say, 'Why were the old days better than these?' For it is not wise to ask such questions" (Ecclesiastes 7:10).**

We can, with Paul, say **"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances"** (Philippians 4:11). And this peace can transform us as we approach our own death.

I had a most gentle uncle, my father's younger brother, who was also my godfather. Uncle Douglas was one of life's encouragers. He had trusted Christ when a relatively young man and he and my Aunt Daphne were the embodiment of the enjoiner to **'practice hospitality'** (Romans 12:13). In his late eighties Douglas was found to have an aortic aneurism which, because of his age and position, was inoperable. One Saturday afternoon I was called by my cousin Stephen from Doncaster. "Dad's dying", he said. "He wanted to see you before he goes – can you come, please?" "How soon shall I be needed?" "Oh, tomorrow's fine."

I put the phone down and looked at my wise, Christian wife. "Go now", was all she said. As I was on the one hundred and fifty mile journey, unknown to me, Stephen called again, asking whether I could come any earlier. Ruth told him I would be already half way there and Stephen relayed this to his father. I arrived and was ushered straight in to the hospital room. After brief greetings, I went over to my uncle's bed. I held his hand, asked him if he could hear me and received a reassuring squeeze.

"Douglas", I said, "I know you are ready to die, but I would like to pray a blessing on you. Do you follow me?" Again, my hand was gripped. It was the greatest privilege to place my other hand gently on his head and then pray the great priestly blessing from Numbers 6:24-26:

**"The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace."**

Douglas squeezed my hand one last time and I bent and kissed him. I slipped quietly from the room, leaving his own immediate family with him. He died within ten minutes. He had waited for the blessing of peace and was able to die in the complete certainty that all was well. I do miss this dear man, but I saw what God promised to Abraham be true for my Uncle Douglas, and he had his funeral in 'a good old age.'

He, as others who have died trusting in Jesus Christ, proved for himself the truth of Paul's words, which follow directly after the ones quotes above:

**"Now we know that if the earthly tent we live in is destroyed, we have a building from God, an eternal house in heaven, not built by human hands." (2 Corinthians 5:1)**

I will expand on this later, but it is vital for our wellbeing that we ask God for this to be an assurance deep in our hearts. My mother was a Williams from Holyhead, an island adjoining Anglesey in North Wales. I am therefore somewhat biased towards the hymns of William Williams, the most famous of which is 'Guide me, O Thou great Jehovah', written in Welsh in 1745 and translated into English by Peter Williams. In most versions the third and final verse says this:

"When I tread the verge of Jordan,  
Bid my anxious fears subside;  
Death of deaths, and hell's destruction,  
Land me safe on Canaan's side,  
Songs of praises, songs of praises,  
I will ever give to Thee,  
I will ever give to Thee"

Magnificent hymns, with last lines repeated again and again, are one thing, their experience in our lives is another. The first Earl Cairns (1819 to 1885) was an Irish statesman, a leading lawyer and Lord Chancellor in 1868 and from 1874 to 1880. With all his fame, one thing marked his life more than anything else. When he was a small

boy, someone said to him, "God claims you." He asked his mother about this, and she, in return asked him, "What are you going to do about the claim?" His response was to change his life: "I shall own it, and give myself to him."

In the same way, we must claim God's promises for ourselves. As Charles Wesley wrote in his hymn 'And can it be':

"No condemnation now I dread;  
Jesus and all in Him, is mine!  
Alive in Him, my living Head,  
And clothed in righteousness Divine.  
Bold I approach the eternal throne,  
And claim the crown, through Christ my own."

If we are to live well and then die well, then, like Wesley celebrating his conversion in 1738 with that hymn, or like Earl Cairns, we need to 'own the claim'. We must say for ourselves, with the Psalmist,

**"Even when I am old and grey, do not forsake me,  
O God." (Psalm 71:18).**

As a final word of encouragement to conclude this chapter, consider this:

## God is not old

Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci have a lot to answer for. Their depictions of God, in the case of Michelangelo and Jesus by da Vinci, are the most replicated religious pictures of all time and have had a profound influence on the way we visualise God the Father and God the Son.

The phenomenal fresco 'The Last Supper' by Leonardo da Vinci covers a complete wall at one end of the refectory in the Convent of Santa Maria delle Grazie in Milan. It really is a 'must see', deeply moving and inspiring, measuring fifteen by twenty nine feet and painstakingly restored. Even in a somewhat crumbling condition

when I saw it some years ago, it was magnificent. However, it is one man's interpretation of the Last Supper. Countless artists have imitated this style in which Jesus is pictured, which may or may not be a good thing, because he may or may not have looked anything like da Vinci saw him.

I have also gazed at the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel in the Apostolic Palace in Vatican City. The entire ceiling is one huge and continuous painting by Michelangelo. Necks are craned, voices raised (only to be shushed by over-zealous attendants) and illicit photos secretly taken of a range of biblical scenes, dominated by the story of creation from the book of Genesis. Although only the fourth of the creation panels, the one which stands out above all others is the creation of Man, where God touches with his outstretched fingers the similarly outstretched fingers of Adam, giving him life: which creates, not just life, but an enormous problem.

Why has Michelangelo painted the two figures as he has? Was Man as young, muscular and fair as that? More vital than that, is God an old man with white hair, a white beard and a flowing white tunic? It is not just the contrast which is so apparent, it is the 'oldness' of God which has been copied ever since, as if God is an old man. Right down to today, this image continues. When a famous entertainer died on 18<sup>th</sup> August 2017, several newspapers, not least The Times, carried cartoons depicting God, complete with flowing white hair and beard and sitting on a fluffy white cloud, greeting the entertainer with the latter's catchphrase, "Nice to see you, to see you nice": the farewell to Sir Bruce Forsyth.

Leonardo da Vinci and Michelangelo: wonderful artists, but causes of misconceptions as to what the Deity is really like. For **"No one has ever seen God" (John 1:18)** and even though that verse continues, "God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known", no one knows what Jesus looks like either. I do like the story of the little girl at school, in class painting a picture and asked by the teacher what she was producing. "It's going to be God", the girl said. "But no-one knows what God looks like", came the reply, which evoked the delightful response, "I haven't finished my picture yet!"

All this leads me to the salient point: the Bible makes it clear that God is not an old person getting older. It is true he is described as having white hair in the dramatic vision of Daniel (Daniel 7:9):

**“The Ancient of Days took his seat. His clothing was as white as snow, the hair of his head was white like wool. His throne was flaming with fire and its wheels were all ablaze.”**

The similarity with John’s vision of Jesus in the first chapter of Revelation is obvious, where Jesus is described as having **“a robe reaching down to his feet...his head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like a blazing fire” (Revelation 1:13-14)**. The point of both visions is the purity and power of God, not his longevity.

However, calling God ‘the Ancient of Days’ must say something significant in the words used. God must clearly have designed ageing and he honours the aged. Time does pass, from the very creation of day and night (Genesis 1:5) and, therefore, everything ages. God is not old as we understand ‘old’, but he is venerable, and his title here validates age as something of great worth and significance. We should reflect this, both in society and in the church.

Having said that, God is not ageing as we and our world get older. **“I the Lord do not change”** is his own statement in Malachi 3:6. **“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever”**, Hebrews 13:8 proclaims. This means that the God of Creation had not been old then and is getting older, but is the same as he has always been. That leads to the stupendous news that he is always there, always reliable, not fading slowly away as we are. When he promises **“Never will I leave you, never will I forsake you,”** in Hebrews 13:5, it makes him different from everyone we know and different from us ourselves. One of these days our nearest and dearest will die – or we will. They, or we, will not always be around. But God will. He will always be our helper. Commenting on this verse, Louise Morse and Revd Roger Hitchings say this:

“Christ... has promised that he will never leave us. Our older folk have a good deal of life experience, and have gone through the ‘deep waters’ and one of the joys of talking with them is hearing how God has made Himself felt in all their circumstances, large and small.”

This everlastingness of God, his changelessness, means that we who age can know there is one on whom we can rely totally who is outside the restraints of space and time. Others may let us down or leave us. As for God, Lamentations 3:22-23 gives us this assurance about him:

**“His compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness.”**

The hymn writer Henry Francis Lyle lay dying from tuberculosis in 1847. He read the request of two disciples to Jesus on the road to Emmaus, “Stay with us, for it is nearly evening” (Luke 24:29) and penned his hymn, ‘Abide with me, fast falls the eventide’,<sup>18</sup> the second verse saying this:

“Swift to its close ebbs out life’s little day;  
Earth’s joys grow dim; its glories pass away;  
Change and decay in all around I see;  
O Thou who changest not, abide with me.”

Lyle went on in his hymn to say what a difference this made, as he feared no foe, no bitterness of tears, and that death had lost its sting (a reference to 1 Corinthians 15:55). Growing older and facing death itself can be a good experience, because we have a changeless God who loves us and cares for us. Perhaps we will even dare to enjoy the fact that we may actually be ‘old’, as the next chapter will explore.



This booklet is an extract from *Finishing Well: A God's-eye View of Ageing* by Ian Knox, to be published by SPCK in conjunction with *Faith in Later Life* in May 2020, ISBN 978 0 281 08349 7. Used by agreement.'

