

Russell Kelfer

Late-Life Leprosy

1102-A

**Series: Why Do You Run When I'm Crying
(The Caring Church in a Hurting World)**

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INTO HIS LIKENESS RADIO

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I- LATE-LIFE LEPROSY

They were, in general, considered to be outcasts not because they had committed a crime, but rather because they were feared. They were called “lepers” and no one dared touch them or befriend them or fellowship with them. When they would pass by, they would shout, “Unclean! Unclean!” and the crowds would fan out away from them as though they were fleeing a nuclear explosion.

They were the “untouchables” of their day much like those who are feared to have AIDS in our society. But in their hearts they were crying; and as they cried, the world ran the other way. They, too, must have wept as they whispered, “Why do you run when I’m crying?” They simply could not understand.

This is not a lesson about lepers. It is, however, a lesson about some people in our world, who for no good reason, have become the lepers of our day. They have done nothing wrong. In fact, they hold in their hands and in their hearts the wisdom we need. They have, for the most part, no communicable disease from which we should run or shelter our loved ones. Their only sin is that they have lived long enough to need something from us and we don’t always want to be bothered.

Many of them are the reason we are here. They held the banner of the Gospel high enough for a nation to be touched by it, and they sent it out to the whole world from here. They were the strength of a generation that is now dissolving into the history books, a generation that, for the most part, held to higher standards and more honorable morals than we do. And yet today, they have been often forgotten, and often cast into the back rooms of oblivion, in hopes that they would not become too dependent or require too much attention. I am referring to the elderly, of course. They are the generation that is patiently waiting for eternity while this computerized, lightning-like age we live in whizzes by totally unmindful of their existence.

You can find them in nursing homes all over this land. You will find them in hospitals and in relatives’ homes as well. Some

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are confined to wheel chairs, some to their beds, and some only to the stigma of being old. Some are more fortunate. They still are able to be independent, mobile, and alert. But even they find that society is, for the most part, simply tolerating them, giving them an extra discount or two in hopes of pacifying their need to be accepted.

In many ways, we do treat the elderly of our day like lepers. Think about it. There were six basic characteristics of a leper. See if we haven't, in many cases, duplicated this travesty.

1- They were separated, whenever possible, from society at large. They were placed by themselves with one another rather than be allowed to become a nuisance or contaminate the mainstream of life.

2- There was no desire to touch them. Their minds and hearts may have been pure and wise, but no one went near them and hugged them or held them because the bodies they lived in were decaying into something that was less than pleasant to hold.

3- They were deprived of the two things they needed most: love and respect. They may have once been men and women of prominence and importance, but that was in days gone by. Now they had outlived their usefulness, and instead of being productive, they cost something to maintain.

4- These three things left them with three main characteristics. The first was, they were lonely. Relatives may have contacted them for special feasts or occasions, but for the most part, they were left to themselves, and had to make friends only of those who suffered the same lot of loneliness they did.

5- They lost their sense of self-worth. They no longer believed they were worth saving. Not being allowed to be productive, they lost their reason for being.

6- Finally, they were characterized by hopelessness. They were life's "incurables". There was no known solution for them but eventual death.

This lesson is about "Late-life Leprosy". In fact, that is the title. It is about the elderly of our day who, simply because they are old, have often been separated, treated as untouchable, devoid of love and respect. As a result they live out the last of their days like lepers, lonely, hopeless, and without self-esteem.

And the saddest footnote to the whole story is that oftentimes

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we as Christians treat them no differently than the world does. Oftentimes the church, with its frenzied programs and youth-oriented activities, pass them by with an occasional handout and an announcement in the bulletin about the time of their funeral. This is such a drastic departure from the commandments of God concerning the elderly, that there is no way in this world we can justify our lack of concern. No wonder they can be heard to say: "Why do you run when I'm crying?" Because they are crying and, so often, we do run the other way.

Our outline for today's study will be in four parts:

I- Late-life Leprosy

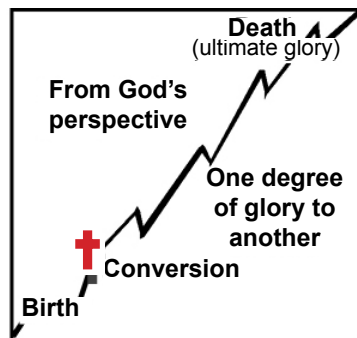
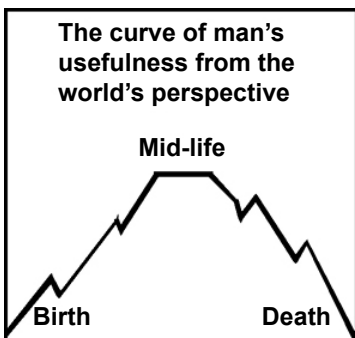
II- Old Age: Curse? Or Crown?

III- A Word to the Wise

IV- A Word to the Church

II- OLD AGE: CURSE? OR CROWN?

I would like for us to begin this study of old-age from a Biblical perspective, by reminding ourselves that the ways of God are as much higher than the ways of man as the heavens are above the earth, as we read in Isaiah 55:8,9. As a result, the principles of God always run at crosscurrents with those of the world. One good example is the relationship between the flesh and the spirit. Man looks to what the flesh can do on this earth as his barometer of whether or not he is useful. God looks at what a person lets Him do in the Spirit that is eternal. Because of that, the usefulness of man in God's eyes grows greater the older he gets. The reason is that the older he gets, the more his spirit has been exposed to the Spirit of God, and the wiser he ought to be. Look at the world's "usefulness curve" alongside God's and see the divine difference. God gives old age the recognition it deserves:



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You can, I trust, see the difference. And I trust you can, by overlaying the one on the other, see both the cause and the cure for what is commonly being called a “mid-life crisis”.

To the world, man’s usefulness is relative to his ability to succeed mentally and physically. From the time his education begins and his physical growth begins to be apparent, man is told he has the capacity to become what he wants to become. But at some time in life, we each wake up only to find that though it is time to get up in the morning, the body doesn’t want to. Though it would be good to run a mile that day, the legs won’t go. Though it would be good to have maximum mental agility to make that key decision today, the mind no longer remembers as much or thinks as fast. Often either depression sets in or the person involved begins to do something to prove that he is still a man, or that she is still a woman. The result is almost always catastrophic. Then once reality sets in, the rest of life is lived either fighting disease and staving off death, or giving up and waiting for the end. Neither is productive. But because success is considered to be dependent on either strength or intellect, the minute either or both of those begin to wane, life begins to be over. The poor soul sees the cycle of life swing downward and the world begins to reject him because people perceive that his usefulness is declining.

What a difference there is in God’s perspective. The Christian accepts the fact that the body is in the process of dying, but refuses to become useless, rather becoming increasingly useful, for as Paul wrote in II Corinthians 4:16:

That is why we never give up. Though our bodies are dying, our inner strength in the Lord is growing every day. These troubles and sufferings of ours, are after all, quite small and won’t last very long. Yet this short time of distress will result in God’s richest blessing upon us forever and ever.

(II Corinthians 4:16 The Living Bible)

The Christian’s view of aging is the reverse of the world. For even though his body is in the process of dying, the inner man, that part of him that is eternal, is growing stronger day by day. So instead of dreading an ultimate death, the believer excitedly awaits the day of his ultimate glory. This is the day he gets his new body which will be free from pain and suffering. This is the day he will begin to reap in heaven the rewards for the years of patient obedience he has spent on planet earth. That’s why the

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Christian can pray the psalmist's prayer of Psalm 71:8,9:

All day long I'll praise and honor you, O God for all that you have done for me.

And now, in my old age, don't set me aside. Don't forsake me now when my strength is failing. (Psalm 71:8,9 TLB)

Again, the Psalmist wrote, in verses 17 and 18:

O God you have helped me from my earliest childhood—and I have constantly testified to others of the wonderful things you do.

And now that I am old and gray, don't forsake me. Give me time to tell this new generation (and their children, too) about your mighty miracles. (Psalm 71:17,18 TLB)

For the Christian, old-age is a crown, not a curse. Listen to the promise God gave in Psalm 92:

The righteous shall thrive like the palm tree; he shall become mighty like the cedar of Lebanon.

Those who have been transplanted into the LORD's household, they shall flourish in the courtyards of our God.

In old age, they shall still be bearing fruit. They shall be full of life and vitality.

Thus testifying that the LORD is upright, my Rock, in whom there is no unrighteousness.

(Psalm 92:12-15 Modern Language Bible)

Don't you see, Beloved? The older a believer gets, the more valuable he becomes to the kingdom. And though the flesh may be decaying and dying, the inner man is growing stronger, and the wisdom in his or her life is like a crown of jewels that becomes worth more with each day that passes. So for the Christian, old age is a blessing. He is closer each day to seeing Jesus. He is closer each day to his ultimate reward and he is gaining more and more insight into God's word and into God's plan. So he is, (if the church will only recognize it) more valuable to the kingdom with each day that passes.

III- A WORD TO THE WISE

The Scriptures address the issue of age clearly. It addresses the reality of old age. It issues promises to the aged who follow God's plan, and it issues priorities to the aged so that they understand their role in the scheme of the greater Body of Christ.

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To begin with, the Bible makes it clear that God knows and understands that this body we live in is in the process of going downhill. He has given us doctors and medicine to help slow the process; but the process will go on, and the process does ultimately lead to death. We need not kid ourselves. God doesn't want us to live in a vacuum. With all due respect to cosmetic companies and vitamin companies and exercise machine companies, you can cover it up, or prolong it slightly, or huff and puff yourself into oblivion with a healthier heart, and none of that is bad. But, Beloved, the truth is, at some point in time, if we live long enough, the hair turns gray or falls out, the skin wrinkles, the memory fades, the energy wanes, and the eyesight fails. At some stage in life, you open the mail and instead of a invitation to join the racquetball club, its a free subscription to Modern Maturity or your group discount card from the American Associated of Retired Persons. I got mine this year, and was personally insulted that they would send one to a youngster like me.

And the Bible knew it would. I love how candid the Bible is. Listen to Solomon in Ecclesiastes 12 as he warned the young men what getting old would be like. I feel like he read my mail:

Don't let the excitement of being young cause you to forget about your Creator. Honor Him in your youth before the evil years come—when you'll no longer enjoy living.

It will be too late then to try to remember Him when the sun and light and moon and stars are dim to your old eyes, and there is no silver lining left among your clouds.

For there will come a time when your limbs will tremble with age, and your strong legs will become weak, and your teeth will be too few to do their work, and there will be blindness, too.

Then let your lips be tightly closed while eating, when your teeth are gone! And you will waken at dawn with the first note of the birds; but you yourself will be deaf and tuneless, with quavering voice.

You will be afraid of heights and of falling—a white-haired withered old man dragging himself along; without desire, standing at death's door, and nearing his everlasting home as the mourners go along the streets.

Yes, remember your Creator now while you are young, before the silver cord of life snaps, and the golden bowl is broken, and the pitcher is broken at the fountain, and the wheel is

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broken at the cistern.

And the dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to God who gave it. (Ecclesiastes 12:1-7 TLB)

The Bible doesn't minimize the realities of old age. It simply reminds us that though the body is decaying, the spirit is being renewed day by day. And it reminds us that this life is simply not where it's at!

The second thing the Bible does is give the elderly clear hope. I love Isaiah 46:3-5 in the Living Bible. It says this:

Listen to me, all Israel who are left; I have created you and cared for you since you were born.

I will be your God through all your lifetime, yes, even when your hair is white with age. I made you and I will care for you. I will carry you along and be your Savior.

(Isaiah 46:3-5 TLB)

The third thing the Bible speaks clearly to the aged about is their responsibility to remain a sound testimony to the flock. And it minces no words. Titus 2:2-5 admonishes the church to do this:

Teach the older men to be serious and unruffled; they must be sensible, knowing and believing the truth and doing everything with love and patience.

Teach the older women to be quiet and respectful in everything they do. They must not go around speaking evil of others and must not be heavy drinkers, but they should be teachers of goodness.

These older women must train the younger women to live quietly, to love their husbands and their children,

and to be sensible and clean minded, spending their time in their own homes, being kind and obedient to their husbands, so that the Christian faith can't be spoken against by those who know them. (Titus 2:2-5 TLB)

The elderly in the body of Christ not only have the promises of God but also the priorities of God if they are to maintain the respect and understanding of the church. They are to be moderate, discreet, discerning, sensible, and orderly. The testimony of the church is at stake. For if the elderly lose heart and lose direction, what kind of picture does that paint of God's faithfulness? I beg you, those of you who may feel that you are reaching the Golden Age of social security, meditate this week on that passage. It is

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your passport to respect in the church of Jesus Christ, and it is your responsibility if you are to maintain the kind of testimony your God intends you to have.

IV - A WORD TO THE CHURCH

But I believe the greater message in the Scriptures concerning age was not written to the aged, nor to warn those who were about to enter that select circle. The greatest message is to the church. God evidently foresaw the problem of late-life leprosy and He lovingly wove into the Scriptures passages to warn us of its consequences. Passages like I Peter 5:5 are good examples. There Peter said this:

You younger men, follow the leadership of those who are older. And all of you serve each other with humble spirits, for God gives special blessings to those who are humble, but sets himself against those who are proud.

(I Peter 5:5 TLB)

I'm not at all sure what happened to the day when the youth were filled with awe and respect for the very wisdom that accompanied age itself. I'm not sure what happened to the times when the greatest lessons young men could learn were learned sitting at the feet of their elders. I'm not sure, but it somehow went the way of the very concept of respect for authority. Today, children not only don't stand when adults enter the room, they don't even look. And they aren't filled with awe; they're sometimes filled with ridicule. Youngsters don't long to hear from their grandparents the stories of days gone by. Mom and Dad sneer at it and, thus, so do the kids. The Bible says that's sin. The Scriptures clearly paint for us that the reason we don't do it is rooted in the problem of pride itself. "Humble spirits" are the missing ingredients.

Not only that, but the Bible gives the church clear guidelines for behaving in the presence of their elders, and specific outlines of their responsibilities to care for them when the terrors of age begin to overtake them. Listen to I Timothy 5:1-8:

Never speak sharply to an older man, but plead with him respectfully just as though he were your own father. Talk to the younger men as you would to much-loved brothers.

Treat the older women as mothers, and the girls as your sisters, thinking only pure thoughts about them.

The church should take loving care of women whose

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husbands have died, if they don't have anyone else to help them.

But if they have children or grandchildren, these are the ones who should take the responsibility, for kindness should begin at home, supporting needy parents. This is something that pleases God very much.

The church should care for widows who are poor and alone in the world, if they are looking to God for His help and spending much time in prayer.

But not if they are spending their time running around gossiping, seeking only pleasure and thus ruining their souls.

This should be your church rule so that the Christians will know and do what is right.

But anyone who won't care for his own relatives when they need help, especially those living in his own family, has no right to say he's a Christian. Such a person is worse than the heathen.

(I Timothy 5:1-8 TLB)

The Christian's responsibilities are clearly outlined:

1- Younger believers are personally responsible for the care of their parents and elderly relatives. They need either to see to it, or do it. If they refuse, they are worse than infidels.

2- The church assumes that responsibility when there is no one else to do so and must not do it grudgingly, but cheerfully.

3- In either case, there are basic guidelines of behavior, "etiquette for the elderly," that must not be violated. We are not to speak sharply or harshly to them, simply out of respect for their years. We are not to treat the elderly women with disdain or disrespect. They are the "mothers" in the body of Christ, and must be treated with the same respect we would give to our own. To violate these principles is to violate the plan of order that God designed for His people. He will not tolerate it.

In the application portion of this lesson I have given you a list of practical things you can do this week and next and the next and the next to demonstrate to the shut-ins and the shut-outs that because of Jesus, you care. I beg you to pray through that list to see if God would not move you to minister in some way to this select group of special people in the kingdom. They are not useless lepers, quarantined from the rest of us while they await the call of death. They are the quality of the body. They are the

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epitome of wisdom. They are the breath of experience.

Yes, their memory may lapse and their steps may be uncertain. Their eyes may have grown dim as the terrors of age have pressed upon them. But, Beloved, locked up in the deep recesses of their often-broken hearts lies a treasure chest of experience and knowledge. There is a fountain of wisdom waiting to quench the thirst of the searching saint who is patient enough and gentle enough and caring enough to sit at their feet and drink of it and grow.

Some of them live like lepers, separated, rejected, and alone. They more than any, perhaps, have the most to give. It is locked up in the delicate recesses of often-wounded hearts, but it is there. And even more than what we have to gain, what we have to give is of utmost importance. They are crying. Oh, so many of them, like lepers, are weeping. We know what they are saying, don't we? They are saying, "Why do you run when I'm crying?" I believe God is asking us the same question. From the scrolls of Leviticus 19:32, He utters these unmistakably clear words:

You shall give due honor and respect to the elderly, in the fear of God. I AM Jehovah. (TLB)

That's what God said.

And all the people said, "Amen!"

Let's pray.

Our Father, we pray that Thou would grant a renewed love in our hearts for those who are older than we, for those in the sunset years of life, for those whose bodies have stopped working as they once did and whose minds have grown dim with age, whose eyes have begun to be covered over with clouds, and yet whose hearts still long to be loved and accepted, and needed and cared for, and held.

May we not leave this place simply reminded intellectually of our commitment to them, but may we leave this place involved in the weeks to come in our relationships with them.

To the Glory and to the Honor of Jesus Christ, the One Who cares,

Amen.

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For Application

Considering the plan of God for the body of Christ to care for and care about the elderly, make plans in the days to come to do one or more of the following, beginning with those who belong to your own family. Then work outward to the shut-ins in your congregation, and on into the recesses of those nursing homes and hospitals where people are who rightfully feel that nobody cares.

1- Write a letter of love and gratitude to someone who is older who has deeply influenced your life. Don't wait until their funeral to say nice things about them to their relatives and others. They need the encouragement now that their lives have touched the lives of others.

2- Purpose to touch and hug the elderly you meet who need to know you care. They aren't lepers. Inside those aching bodies are real hearts longing to be loved.

3- Frame a series of questions to have with you the next time you visit someone who is elderly or a shut-in. Ask about them, about their experiences and about their walk with God. They may ramble and stutter a bit, but listen closely. You will be hearing the voice of God speak to you through lips of a life that has already been lived.

4- Keep a birthday list of the elderly you know and write them notes and send them cards on special occasions. So many of them receive less and less mail as their own peers go on to be with the Lord.

5- As a family, if your children's grandparents are gone or not near, adopt someone older and let the children spend time at their feet. It will change the course of their lives.

6- Pray without ceasing for extra grace for those who live in the twilight years of their lives, that God will energize them to feel that they have not lived in vain.

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