

**FAMILYBASE**

# **FROM GENERATION TO GENERATION**

LOOKING AT OLD AGE

**4 BIBLE STUDIES**

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The Jubilee Centre is a Christian research and campaigning centre seeking to apply biblical principles to social and economic issues of relevance today. After more than two years research the Centre has launched an initiative to encourage people to address the question of support for carers through the publication of a major book entitled 'From Generation to Generation' and an educational video.

"Even when I am old and grey,  
do not forsake me, O God,  
till I declare your power to the next generation,  
your might to all who are to come."

Psalm 71 v. 18

## **INTRODUCTION**

These Bible studies are designed with small group study particularly in mind. They can also, however, form the basis of personal study or provide the foundations for sermon preparation. With this in mind a brief background is provided with each study to point the way.

The background information is not, however, designed to provide either a full theology or a note on all possible interpretations of the passage under discussion, or other relevant passages. If, however, the studies are used in group discussion, making each person aware of the material in the notes will aid the progress and understanding of the study. The studies are produced in a form which does not preclude the provision of one booklet for each group member.

For the student who wishes to delve deeper we would suggest a good set of commentaries. Additional resources are not however essential for you to grasp the basic points of the studies.

These four studies are designed to address the question of our view of the elderly. They seek to build a positive view of growing old which is very much at variance with today's culture. The positive contribution and intrinsic worth of the elderly in our society and in our families is considered.

The first study considers how we are all made in the image of God and what this means for the elderly. The second study discusses God's plan for caring in society. The third study looks at the example of Ruth and her dedication to her mother-in-law through her old age. The final study looks at the example of Jesus and which aspects of this can bring real hope and comfort to the elderly.

It is our hope that through studying God's Word Christians will be challenged to grow in their understanding and in their actions. With respect to the elderly this will depend on their circumstances - but nobody is immune. Those who have elderly relatives need to consider what God is saying to them. Those in communities or churches with elderly people who are lonely or in need should be challenged to care. All of us should support and care for the already large army of carers who sacrifice much in their care for the elderly.

# **Made in the image of God**

## **Genesis 1:26-28**

### **BACKGROUND**

Ageism is becoming almost as emotive a word today as sexism or racism. Along with the poverty lobby and the feminist campaigners, the voice of organisations caring for the elderly is becoming heard more and more. The problem has always been that, despite the growing number of elderly people in our society, because they have no 'economic worth' in terms of production or even 'consumer power' their voice is rarely listened to.

Political power and influence for the elderly is, however, neither our starting point nor our goal. Rather we should seek to learn what the Bible has to say. Then with that knowledge we should seek to redress the balance, bringing the full benefits of integrating the elderly more fully into society and thus giving both fulfilment to the elderly and enrichment to society.

We start with the belief that God has made mankind in His own image. This means that each person, irrespective of age, has the following likenesses to God.

**Dignity:** Mankind is set apart from the animal kingdom, he is completely different. No human being should be treated as anything less than reflecting the uniqueness of God.

**Worth:** Each individual has intrinsic worth, not related to productivity, vitality or any other measure of achievement.

**Creativity and Work:** Work is not necessarily paid employment and creativity is not necessarily expressed with the hands.

**Righteousness:** God created us with a desire to live in companionship with each other; husband and wife or platonic friendship.

**Fellowship with God:** Each person is made to enjoy fellowship with God.

## QUESTIONS

- 1 How widely should we interpret God's command to rule over creation and subdue it.

Is it just a job for those with a real gift for that sort of thing?

- 2 How do we apply the principle of dignity to an elderly relative who has senile dementia?
- 3 Discuss the ways in which we measure the worth of an elderly relative, e.g. frequency of babysitting sessions, speed of knitting jumpers, even the size of their estate!
- 4 What creative abilities do the elderly have which are retained or improved with age?
- 5 After the props of youth and vigour have gone, how should the elderly be encouraged to view their spiritual growth?
- 6 What opportunities to develop a wide range of relationships do you provide for the elderly (a) in your church and (b) in your family?

## **God's call to be a caring society**

**Exodus 20:12**

**Leviticus 19:3,32**

### BACKGROUND

We turn now to the way in which God views a society with respect to its caring for the elderly. We start with God's command but will also deal with His reaction to our failure and the nature of His promises to Israel. Throughout this study we will also do well to remember that, although God is dealing with His covenant people, our attitude to the elderly is rooted in our being made in the image of God. This knows no boundary of race or nation.

Whilst in Leviticus 19:32 the command is to show respect to or to 'honour' the elderly (as also in Exodus 20:12), in Leviticus 19:3 the word used is much stronger - to respect or 'to fear' (AV). This is used elsewhere of reverence to God.

The reaction of God to our failure in these responsibilities is important. In Ezekiel 22, God condemns Jerusalem for her sins which include treating parents with contempt (v7). Similarly, in Micah 7:6 the lack of honour shown to father, mother and even mother-in-law (!) is listed in a catalogue of sins against Israel.

This condemnation is repeated many times over in the Old Testament prophets. However, it does not stop there. In 1 Timothy 5:8 and Mark 7:9-13 is a particularly strong New Testament condemnation of those who do not fulfil their responsibilities towards their family.

The promise of God to the nation of Israel during the time of Zechariah (c. 520 BC.) was one of great optimism. A small number of Jews had returned from exile and were starting to rebuild the temple. Part of Zechariah's vision of the glorious days ahead were put in the context of a harmonious and peaceful city in which "Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with a cane in hand because of his age. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there" (Zechariah 8:4-5).

## QUESTIONS

### The command

- 1 What is the difference between honouring your parents and showing respect for the elderly in general? (Lev 19:3,32)
- 2 In what ways are our respect for the elderly and reverence for God linked?
- 3 Is it at all possible to enshrine such commands in current day laws?

### The sin

- 4 Why should disrespect for the elderly be linked with national judgement in such a strong way? (Ezekiel 22:7 & Micah 7:6)
- 5 In what ways are we guilty today (a) as a nation, (b) as a church and (c) as individuals of showing disrespect for the elderly ?

### The promise

- 6 Why do you think the elderly and children are part of Zechariah's vision of the Kingdom of God when everything will be restored?

## Fulfilling our obligations to care

### Ruth 1:11-19; 4:13-17

#### BACKGROUND

The story of Ruth has its historical setting within about 50 years of Israel's return to the land of Canaan. Therefore the law of God and the social structures and responsibilities laid down in Exodus, Leviticus and Deuteronomy would have been fresh in the minds and alive in the practices of the people. It also meant however that following a great difficulty and often disobedient occupation of the land of Canaan, as witnessed by the book of Judges, the people were left vulnerable to hard times.

Elimelech and Naomi lived in Bethlehem with their two sons Mahlon and Kilion. Due to famine they left to go to Moab, a highly organised kingdom east of the Dead Sea with good agricultural and pastoral pursuits. The journey would not have been too arduous or irreversible. Moab was at most 60 or 70 miles away. This probably indicates both the strong ties of kinship which they hoped would bring them back one day, but also their plight in times of famine which left them with no short-term alternative.

Whilst in Moab, Mahlon and Kilion both marry Moabite women. Then, without producing further offspring, all three men die. Naomi is left with Orpah and Ruth. After hearing that things at home are better they all set off to return. It is whilst on the journey that the first scene in our study takes place.

At the root of Naomi's pleadings with Orpah and Ruth was therefore a sense of destitution. As one commentator has put it, "For Naomi there was no prospect other than a lonely old age, embittered by the thought that *the Lord's hand has gone out against me*", a phrase normally used for an army going out against a foe!

#### Note

To preserve the family line and therefore possession of land and livelihood in Israel, Levirate marriage ensured that in normal circumstances the brother of a man who died childless married the widow to raise up an heir for the deceased. Naomi, however, was too old to bear children and presumably Elimelech left no brother.



## QUESTIONS ON THE PASSAGE

- 1 Discuss the respective ties that were pulling on Orpah and Ruth i.e. the ties of their native land versus their loyalty to their mother-in-law. Which do you think would have been strongest for you in that situation?
- 2 What do you think is revealed by Ruth's statement 1:16-17?
- 3 Why do you think that Boaz is described as kinsman-redeemer to Naomi rather than to Ruth (4:14)?
- 4 Discuss Naomi's feelings as reflected in the comments of the women of the village in 4:14-17.

## QUESTIONS FOR APPLICATION TODAY

- 5 In what circumstances would you leave your own neighbourhood, friends and family to be with your mother-in-law or other elderly relation who would otherwise be left on her/his own?
- 6 What can we learn for today from Naomi's role subsequent to Boaz and Ruth having a child?

## **The example of Jesus**

### **Philippians 2:5-11**

We return now to the concept discussed in the first study, i.e. being made in the image of God. But now we have a complete and perfect example in Jesus. Just as there were aspects of the image of God that were applicable to the subject of the elderly, so there are aspects of the example of Jesus which are of particular relevance.

The passage in Philippians is perhaps the best known exhortation to follow the example of Jesus. We will however refer to other passages to illuminate points. The needs of the elderly are special. Jesus shows us the best way to deal with each:

**Security:** Security is linked amongst other things, to personal identity and physical surroundings. Loss of a spouse or moving from the family home are therefore both times of great potential insecurity for the elderly. Jesus also underwent constant insecurity leaving heaven and then with no home to call his own during his public ministry. This was followed by the desertion of his closest friends. Jesus' actions and life of servanthood, exemplified by his washing of the disciples' feet in John 13, revealed His source of security to lie not in his physical and personal domain but rather in God His Father (see esp. John 13:1-2).

**Dependence:** Dependence is inevitable particularly when old age is accompanied by increasing frailty. Jesus knew about dependence throughout His life but particularly during his infancy and his passion. In the former (i.e. His mother at His conception) He became dependent on an unmarried girl. In the latter, once Judas had betrayed Jesus, He was swept along by circumstances, totally dependent on others, as they pursued Him to the cross and to death.

**Loss of status:** In our western culture, status is so often linked with paid employment. Retirement removes this. Jesus however willingly let go all claims to status (Phil. 2:6-7).

**Loneliness:** This is perhaps the most common complaint of old age. There are half a million lonely people over the age of 75. Jesus also felt this sense of loneliness but in a far more extreme form than we could ever imagine. On the cross Jesus was totally alone. Even God His Father had seemingly abandoned Him (Matt. 27:46).

Suffering and death: The meaning of old age is not found solely in preparation for death. These four studies should have convinced us that this is not the biblical teaching on old age. However, death and often the suffering associated with death, are inevitable until the return of Jesus. The death and resurrection of Jesus will clearly be a crucial source of comfort at this time. Paul, when writing to the Philippians, speaks of his ambition towards the end of his life:

*I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*  
(Phil. 3:10-11 NIV)

## QUESTIONS

- 1 How can Jesus, who died before even reaching middle age, be an example to us all in dealing with the particular difficulties of old age (start with Phil 2:5-1 1)?
- 2 What circumstances can you think of which would add to an elderly person's sense of insecurity (compare John 13:1-2)?
- 3 Are there direct ways in which we as individuals or a church can relieve the insecurity felt by many elderly people?
- 4 In all our support and caring for the elderly, how do we maintain the balance so that their individual dignity and identity is respected?
- 5 Apart from the loss of paid employment, what other circumstances lead to a loss of status for the elderly in our society? What should we do to honour the elderly and give them back a true sense of status?
- 6 How can Jesus' death and resurrection comfort an elderly person facing their final days of this life (compare Matt. 27:46)?
- 7 Apart from direct ways in which we can help the elderly, how can we support those who do care and often sacrifice a great deal of their own independence in so doing?