



DECLARING GOD'S FAITHFULNESS ACROSS THE GENERATIONS

Text: Ecclesiastes 12:1-8; Psalm 71

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Date: 27th November, 2016

Watch any sport and you will see that it's the young and fit who play the game. But it's the older men and women, the players and heroes of the past who are the coaches. It is their experience over many years and their wisdom about the game that is so important to mentor and train the young players. As Proverbs says (20:29) "*The glory of the young is their strength; the grey hair of experience is the splendour of the old.*" Now this is important to think about. Too often, even in churches, the words 'older person' have the connotation of 'someone who is past it', 'someone who is no longer with it'. And maybe with the latest technologies there is some truth in that. I am sure Jarrod thinks I am a dinosaur with the help I sometimes ask with my computer. But when it comes to life experience the 'older person' can certainly provide wise insights for the young. And this morning we are going to do precisely that. We will listen to a couple of old coaches in the Bible as well as five of our older women. They will share from their experiences about how God has been faithful over many years. This long term view is very important. When as a young person you go through your first 'crisis' you can think it's the worst thing ever. And where is God in this?! But if you can look back over decades of life you see that 'crisis' in a different light. It's not as drastic as you thought. And you see later how God in his faithfulness turned it too your good.

This notion of the older person teaching the young is seen in Psalm 71:18 "*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.*" In the two passages, Ecclesiastes 12 and Psalm 71, I want to introduce you to two old men, two old coaches. The first seems like a sour old man, who sees things negatively. The second is a joyous and optimistic old fellow, even though his problems are many and his life is threatened. Both in their different ways want the young to know God and live under his care and guidance. The

first is the old 'professor'. He has studied all of life from the perspective of assuming there is no God. Taken from that angle his research concluded it's all "*meaningless*". His book 'Ecclesiastes' is very negative. But the affect of his message is extremely powerful. When we are young we can think we are invincible and don't need God. But when all the youthful ideals add up to a "*meaningless*" life, that emptiness begs us to ask 'is this all there is'? That emptiness of life puts them on a search for God. In Ecclesiastes 12:1 the professor challenges young people "*Remember your creator in the days of your youth, before the days of trouble come and the years approach when you will say, 'I find no pleasure in them'.*" The old professor knows the mind of the young. They are young and fit. They are carefree and have a feeling of 'immortality'. Nothing will happen to them. They can handle what life brings. So who needs God?! To this naivety of the young the professor says 'you had better acknowledge God now, while you are young.' Life can give you some hard knocks. You can't live life to its full meaning without God. Everyone will find that out. If you are not struck down in life by illness or accident, well we all grow old. You can't avoid it. And then you will realise, all too painfully, that you are not immortal. Your own body will fail you. The professor's description of old age is very poetic. He says in old age our senses no longer function as they used to. And so we "*...lose our pleasure*" in things we used to enjoy. Our hearing goes and we do not enjoy the music we used to love. (:4) "*Like when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades; when men rise up at the sound of birds but all their songs grow faint.*" Young people love to sleep in. The elderly often get insomnia and wake up early. So they are awake with the birds. Trouble is they are too deaf to hear them sing. Young people love to go out. But the elderly no longer enjoy that so much because their sight is failing and their strengthen and footing are going. "*...those looking through the windows grow dim...the keepers of the house tremble and the strong men stoop...when men are afraid of heights and dangers in the street...[and like] the grasshopper drags himself along...*" In old age there is no longer joy in their own good looks. For they are like "*...the almond tree that blossoms...*" Its flower turns white and eventually falls out. In other words they become white haired- and bald. When we are in those "*days of trouble*" we can't look forward to better days. For they will not improve. "*...the sun and the light and the moon and the stars grow dark and the clouds return after the rain.*" Normally after the rain the clouds go and the sun comes out. But for the very old their health and strength will not go back to what it was when they were young. The sun will not come out from behind the clouds. It will continue to be dark.

The picture the old professor paints is not to give a bad view of aging. It is to take his own very real life experience and all he has learned and challenge the young. 'Look and learn from the generation that goes before you. Your youth will not continue forever. You are not somehow different, smarter, better than the previous generation. We all end up the same'. Which is that life comes to an end and you will face God. Whether we accept there is a God or not all of us will be judged. "*Remember [your creator] before the silver cord is severed, or the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, or the wheel broken at the well and the dust returns to the ground it came from and the spirit returns to God who gave it.*" At the end of our life how will we appear at the judgement? That depends on whether we know God and have trusted him over the duration of our life. That's why this old professor sends out this challenge. He wants the young to know their creator. For the younger person is more open to change and to accept Jesus as their Saviour and Lord. The stats show that most people come to faith by their late teens or early twenties. The elderly are often very set in their ways. Especially if they have been unbelievers all their long life. That's why this old coach is mentoring across the generations. He is challenging the younger folk. 'Get to know God now. Enjoy his faithfulness over all your years. Otherwise everything is 'meaningless'. It's all lost, even your youth and vigour, if you don't know God'.

But if we do know God, then it is a very different story. That is the ringing joy that sounds forth from Psalm 71. The contrast between what these two old coaches have to say is striking. But their intentions are both the same. To get us to see God and know him. To know him from our youth and enjoy his faithful care all our lives. Psalm 71 was written, we will assume by David, when he was an old man. But we see he is full of joy and optimism. Not in an idealistic fantasy way. Young people are often idealistic but naive. What he says reveals the realism of the elderly. Life has been tough, and it still is. Yet through that stuff shines the joy of one who has lived life with God. David is struggling in his old age. He says he has his "*enemies, accusers*" who "*wait to kill*" him. That would refer to his son Absalom chasing after him. It is not at all easy to cope with this. Not now that he is old. As he calls out to God (:9) "*Do not cast me away when I am old. Do not forsake me when my strength is gone.*" But despite his difficulties he knows God has always been faithful in caring for him. So he prays "*Be my rock of refuge, to which I can always go; give the command to save me, for you are my rock*

and fortress." This is not 'pie in the sky' fanciful hope. This has been his life experience. As this old man looks back over his life he sees God has always been there to help. (:5) *"...you have been my hope, O sovereign Lord, my confidence since my youth."* Yes, looking back over his many years he sees that God has been faithful to him all along. It was his relationship with God that gave his life joy and meaning. God's faithfulness kept him steady.

That is what is so striking as we listen to the video Jarrod and Ineke have put together from their interviews with Fay, Colleen, Caroline, Dinny and Mary. Listen as these five older coaches share something from their life stories.

Did you pick up on what each of them said? Isn't it encouraging to hear them reflect over their lives and see how God has been there. To see the faithfulness of God. To realise that some of the tough things they went through God was with them. And God used those things to bring them back to God, to draw them closer to him. As David wrote in Psalm 71 *"...though you made me see troubles, many and bitter, you will restore my life again, from the depths of the earth you will again bring me up..."* (:20) It is interesting that young people often want a joyous experience of God, an exuberant worship time. But the older folk know that often the experience of God comes in the tough times when they cling to God in hope. As David says *"But as for me, I will always have hope"*. Indeed that is what God promises. As he says in Isaiah (46:4) *"I will be carrying you when you are old. Your hair will turn grey and I will still carry you. I made you and I will carry you to safety."*

David does not explain how it is that we can have great hope. Or why it is that God is always faithful and will always carry his own. But then we note that this Psalm 71 is actually made up of quotes from other Psalms. Particularly Psalm 22 and 35. Psalm 22 is prophetic of the suffering of Jesus on the cross. It is through his suffering of hell as he cried out *"why have you forsaken me"* (Psalm 22:1) that Jesus dealt with the penalty for our sin. It is through his resurrection from the dead that Jesus has defeated our final enemy. So we can have a future and great hope even if we come to the point we see we are not immortal. The old man in Psalm 71 did not know all this in his time. He even acknowledges *"...my mouth will tell of your righteousness, of your salvation...though I know not its measure."* He knew enough to from his life experience, his long walk with God, that God is faithful and would always give him hope. Our five

older member coaches have encouraged us with sharing some of their life journey with God. They have told of God's faithfulness. May that be an encouragement for all of us to get to know God in our youth. That way we too can inspire the next generation with the grace and faithfulness of God.

QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

These questions can be followed up personally, with a Christian friend, in your small groups, or in discussion after the service. Reflection is important because too often we hear a good sermon and soon forget it without actually growing spiritually or changing in attitude or what we do. The reflection questions are meant to be challenging, because our spiritual growth and the salvation of others is so important.

- How does the 'negative' approach of the 'coach' in Ecclesiastes drive the young to know God? How meaningful are you finding life at the moment?
- Why can the old 'coach' in Psalm 71 remain full of hope despite his perilous situation? What has been his life experience of God?
- With the five senior members sharing their story of how they saw God's faithfulness in their lives, what spoke to you the most? Why was that?