

NEARING HOME

Life, Faith, and Finishing Well

Billy Graham



THOMAS NELSON
Since 1798

NASHVILLE DALLAS MEXICO CITY RIO DE JANEIRO

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INTRODUCTION

I never thought I would live to be this old.

All my life I was taught how to die as a Christian, but no one ever taught me how I ought to live in the years before I die. I wish they had because I am an old man now, and believe me, it's not easy.

Whoever first said it was right: old age is not for sissies. Get any group of older people together, and I can almost guarantee what their favorite topic of conversation will be: their latest aches and pains.

I will soon celebrate my ninety-third birthday, and I know it won't be long before God calls me home to Heaven. More than ever I look forward to that day—not just because of the wonders I know Heaven holds in store for me and for every believer but because I know that finally all the burdens and sorrows that

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press down upon me at this stage of my life will be over. During the last year the physical ailments common to old age really have taken their toll on me. I also look forward to that day because I will be reunited with Ruth, my beloved wife and best friend for almost sixty-four years, who went home in 2007 to be with the Lord she loved and served so faithfully. Although I rejoice that her struggles with weakness and pain have all come to an end, I still feel as if a part of me has been ripped out, and I miss her far more than I ever could have imagined.

No, old age is not for sissies.

But that isn't the whole story, nor did God intend for it to be. While the Bible doesn't gloss over the problems we face as we grow older, neither does it paint old age as a time to be despised or a burden to be endured with gritted teeth (if we still have any). Nor does it picture us in our latter years as useless and ineffective, condemned to spend our last days in endless boredom or meaningless activity until God finally takes us home.

Instead the Bible says that God has a reason for keeping us here; if He didn't, He would take us to Heaven far sooner. But what is His purpose for these years, and how can we align our lives with it? How can we not only learn to cope with the fears and struggles and growing limitations we face but also actually grow stronger inwardly in the midst of these difficulties? How can we face the future with hope instead of despair? These are some of the questions I have been forced to deal with as I have grown older; perhaps the same is true of you as well.

This book, however, isn't written just for old people. It is written for people at every stage of life—even those who never

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have thought much about growing older. The reason is simple: the best way to meet the challenges of old age is to prepare for them now, *before* they arrive. I invite you to explore with me not only the realities of life as we grow older but also the hope and fulfillment—and even joy—that can be ours once we learn to look at these years from God’s point of view and discover His strength to sustain us every day.

Someday our life’s journey will be over. In a sense we *all* are nearing home. As we do so, I pray that you and I may not only learn what it means to grow older but, with God’s help, also learn to grow older with grace and find the guidance needed to finish well.

—BILLY GRAHAM

I RUNNING TOWARD HOME

Teach us to number our days,
that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

—PSALM 90:12

Remember that as a faithful child of God you await
promotion.

—VANCE HAVNER

Growing old has been the greatest surprise of my life. The young live for the here and now. Thinking ahead seems to be in the form of dreams that promise fairy-tale endings. Though I am nearing ninety-three, it doesn't seem so long ago that I was one of those dreamers, filled with great expectation, planning a life that would satisfy my every desire. Since there were few things in life that I loved more than baseball, as a young man I dedicated

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myself to the sport and hoped that my passion for the game would lead me straight to the major leagues. My goal was simple: stand at home plate, with bat in hand, immersed in an important game. I often pictured myself hitting a big-league grand slam into the stadium seats and hearing the crowd roar with thunder as I ran the bases—*nearing home*.

I never would have guessed what lay in store. After giving my heart to the Lord Jesus Christ—repenting of my sin and putting my entire life into His hands—I laid down my dreams, along with my bat, and fully embraced God’s plan by faith, trusting that He would lead me all the way. He did, He is, and He will.

As I look back, I see how God’s hand guided me. I sense His Spirit with me today, and most comforting is the knowledge that He will not forsake me during this last stretch as I am nearing home. If that doesn’t give me a sense of hope, nothing else will.

MAJOR LEAGUER FOR GOD

I have remained a baseball fan, not necessarily of one team over another but of the game itself—the teamwork, the strategy, and the challenge of defeating the opponent. But baseball was not God’s plan for me. Nevertheless, He taught me how to integrate these important components into service for Him. The Lord has blessed me with a loyal team of men and women whose hearts are united with mine—set on leading others to an eternal home with Christ. Our team strategy has been to fulfill the Lord’s command to go into the whole world and preach Christ for the purpose of defeating the opponent—Satan.

When I started preaching, it was never my intention to preach inside a baseball stadium or any other stadium for that matter. I was accustomed to preaching in churches when I was pastoring and in auditoriums when I was traveling with Youth for Christ (YFC). At the close of the war in 1945, several of us on the YFC team had the privilege of preaching at Soldier Field in Chicago.

The details are sketchy now, but I recall the first time I stood in an outdoor arena to preach the Gospel. I had been invited to hold an evangelistic citywide meeting in Shreveport, Louisiana. When the local auditorium could not hold the crowds, the organizers had no choice but to move the event outside. Uncertain as to how people would feel about attending an evangelistic rally in a large arena, I was rather nervous. Then I thought about my boyhood dreams. Instead of bat in hand at home plate, I had what I now know is a much greater privilege: to stand behind a pulpit, with Bible in hand, immersed in the power of the Holy Spirit. I was not performing before fan-filled bleachers but pronouncing the Word of God to sin-filled hearts searching for truth.

Life, indeed, is full of surprises.

Now, all these years later, I still enjoy watching a batter successfully cross home plate, but nothing thrills me more than seeing the Holy Spirit at work in hearts as the Gospel is carried into stadiums, across the airwaves, and around the world. A baseball may be driven into the farthest corner of the largest stadium, but the Word of God travels to the farthest corners of the earth, proclaiming the Good News of salvation. It still excites me just to think about the impact.

Jesus Christ did conquer death, and by His resurrection He

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was victorious. Before He left earth, He imparted to His followers the greatest of all strategies: go into the world and preach the Gospel. After listening to His words, they looked up to see their Savior *nearing home*.

I wonder. What home are you preparing for? Some people spend their lives building ultimate dream homes so they can enjoy their twilight years. Some find themselves exchanging their bank accounts for residence within the gates of a retirement center. Others spend their last days in nursing homes. For those of you who do not know Him, choosing your eternal home is the most important decision you will ever make. For the Christian the last mile of the way is a testimony to God's faithfulness, for He said, "I go to prepare a place for you" (John 14:2 NKJV).

Regardless of where you lay your head at night, I hope your thoughts are about nearing home, and I'd like to explore those thoughts with you in the pages ahead.

Someone once said, "The gift of old age is remembrance." Although I have had to curtail most of my travel, life itself still keeps me motivated as I watch God's hand at work, not only in my own life but also in the lives of those around me and throughout the world. These last few years have brought the gift of observation and reflection. While that may sound dreadful to some, reflection is biblical:

Remember all the way which the LORD your God has led.
(Deuteronomy 8:2 NASB)

Remember . . . hold it fast. (Revelation 3:3)

Remember and do all My commandments. (Numbers 15:40 NKJV)

Remember the word . . . of the LORD. (Joshua 1:13 NKJV)

Remember His marvelous works which He has done. (1 Chronicles 16:12 NKJV)

These are remembrances worth recalling time and again.

I often hear people younger than me talk about their sleepless nights. There are times I experience the same. But then I remember those marvelous works He has done, and I recall what the psalmist poetically penned:

When I remember You on my bed,
I meditate on You in the night watches.
Because You have been my help,
Therefore in the shadow of Your wings I will rejoice.
My soul follows close behind You;
Your right hand upholds me. (Psalm 63:6–8 NKJV)

There is great comfort available, even to the aged, when we remember Him.

Not only does the Lord instruct us to remember, but the Bible reveals what the Lord Himself remembers—and what He chooses not to remember. “He remembers that we are dust” (Psalm 103:14 NKJV); and to those who are repentant He says, “Their sin I will remember no more” (Jeremiah 31:34 NKJV). I am so glad I can remember that promise. Because I have repented of

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my sin, God chooses to forget my sin. This is a glimpse into the heart of our Savior.

The Old Testament is filled with such remembrances. It even says, “Remember the former things of old” (Isaiah 46:9 NKJV). Society today may not like the word *old*, yet young people pay a small fortune for jeans that look old. Collectors put the highest value on antiques because they are . . . old! Others buy old clunkers, restore them, and then proudly drive down the highway showing off . . . the old.

The days when the aged were admired, looked up to, and respected are gone. Growing up, I was taught to look up to my elders, but there were only a few whom I considered to be ancient. I didn’t really know my grandparents (except for a grandmother who died while I was in elementary school), so I had little opportunity to observe any close relatives who were well along in years. Perhaps the oldest person in our family I can remember seeing regularly was an uncle who often came to our house for Sunday dinner. As I recall, he was a janitor at the county courthouse in Charlotte, and I always looked forward to his visits because he usually had some interesting stories to tell about local politics and other happenings around the courthouse. To me he seemed old (although he couldn’t have been much more than sixty since he was still working), so if someone had asked me then if I thought I would ever be as old as my uncle, I probably would have said, “No way.”

As far as I know, few members of my extended family lived much beyond seventy; my father passed away at the age of seventy-four after suffering a series of debilitating strokes. Following our

1957 crusade in New York City—a demanding sixteen-week marathon of meetings that left me physically drained—I told some of my associates that because of the intense, nonstop pace of our work I didn't expect to live beyond fifty (I was thirty-eight at the time). Repeated physical problems in the years that followed—some minor, but others more serious—also made me doubt if I would live a normal life span. The added problems of middle age only seemed to support my theory.

And yet God in His goodness had other plans for me.

I am not sure exactly when it happened, but as the years passed, it gradually dawned on me that I was growing older. Middle age—I had to admit—was fading into the distance, and I was rapidly approaching what we politely call the *mature* years. Sometimes my age showed itself in small (even humorous) ways: the occasional embarrassment of forgetting a good friend's name, the reluctant awareness that most of the people I saw on an airplane or passed in the street were looking extremely young, the experience of having a server in a restaurant give me the senior discount before asking if I qualified. But it also revealed itself in larger, more serious ways: a slow but inexorable decline in energy, illnesses that easily could have ended in disability or even death, the obvious aging—and even death—of people I had known most of my life, my wife Ruth's brave but difficult struggles as the years passed and she grew increasingly frail.

I began relating to stories I heard from others. “Most of my middle-aged patients are in denial,” a doctor said to one of my associates. “They think they'll always be able to play strenuous sports or travel anywhere they want or continue working twelve

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hours a day. They just assume if something goes wrong, I'll be able to fix it. But one day they're going to wake up and discover they can't do everything they once did. Someday they'll be old, and they won't like it because they aren't emotionally prepared for it."

I can't truthfully say that I have liked growing older. At times I wish I could still do everything I once did—but I can't. I wish I didn't have to face the infirmities and uncertainties that seem to be part of this stage of life—but I do. "Don't get old!" I've said with tongue in cheek to more than one person in recent years. But of course that is not an option; old age is inevitable if we live long enough. And old age definitely has its downsides; it would be dishonest to say otherwise.

The Bible doesn't hide the negative side of getting older—nor should we. One of the most poetic (and yet candid) descriptions in all literature of the infirmities of old age comes from the pen of the writer of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament. After surveying the futility of life without God, he urges his readers to commit their lives to Him while they are still young. The reason? Not only would God give meaning and joy to their lives right now, but if they delay too long, it will be too late to enjoy God's good gifts. Turn to God now, he urges,

before the days of trouble come
and the years approach when you will say,
"I find no pleasure in them"—
before the sun and the light
and the moon and the stars grow dark,
and the clouds return after the rain;

when the keepers of the house tremble,
 and the strong men stoop,
 when the grinders cease because they are few,
 and those looking through the windows grow dim . . .
 the sound of grinding fades; . . .
 [and] men are afraid of heights
 and of dangers in the streets. (Ecclesiastes 12:1–5)

Behind his poetic expressions lies the reality of age's toll on our minds and bodies: declining strength . . . failing vision . . . trembling hands . . . arthritic joints . . . forgetfulness . . . loss of hearing . . . loneliness . . . fear of increasing frailty . . . the list seems almost endless. "Nothing works very well anymore," a friend said to me with a sigh not long ago, and I can sympathize with him.

But is this all there is to growing older? Is old age only a cruel burden that grows heavier and heavier as the years go by, with nothing to look forward to but death? Or can it be something more?

AGING GRACEFULLY

Even if you are familiar with the Bible, you may not recall a man in the Old Testament named Barzillai; our only glimpse of him comes from just a dozen verses (2 Samuel 17:27–29; 19:31–39). He was eighty years old, and no one would have blamed him if he had chosen to spend his remaining days letting others shoulder the responsibilities he had once carried. But he didn't.

Late in his reign King David was forced to flee for his life from Jerusalem because of a revolt led by his rebellious and arrogant

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son, Absalom. His desperate flight took him east, into the barren desert regions beyond the Jordan River. Exhausted and almost out of food, he and his loyal band of followers eventually reached an isolated village called Mahanaim. There Barzillai—at great sacrifice and life-threatening risk—provided food and shelter for King David and his men. Without Barzillai’s assistance David and his men might well have perished.

After Absalom was killed and the revolt collapsed, David—out of gratitude for Barzillai’s hospitality—invited him to return with the king and the army to Jerusalem, promising to take care of him the rest of his life. Think of it: an invitation to spend the remainder of his days in the comfort of the king’s palace—and as a friend of the king!

But Barzillai refused. His reason? He said he was simply too old to make such a drastic change: “‘No,’ he replied, ‘I am far too old to go with the king to Jerusalem. I am eighty years old today, and I can no longer enjoy anything. Food and wine are no longer tasty, and I cannot hear the singers as they sing’” (2 Samuel 19:34–35 NLT). Old, feeble, and deaf, even the invitation to join the king in Jerusalem—an opportunity he doubtless would have jumped at a decade or so sooner—held no attraction for him. Old age had taken its toll.

Why does the Bible record this brief incident from the life of one obscure old man? It isn’t just to remind us of the ravages of old age or even the brevity of life. Instead the Bible recounts it to tell us a significant fact: Barzillai’s greatest service to God and His people—the one deed from his entire life that was worthy of being recorded in the Bible—took place when he was an old man.

When King David and his fleeing band of men approached, Barzillai easily could have said to himself, “I’m too old to get involved in this. Let the younger men help if they want to—they have all the energy. And anyway, I’d be a fool to take what I’ve saved for my old age and spend it helping King David and his men. Absalom might attack us and plunder our village if we assist David. Why bother? Why take the risk? At my age I have enough to worry about.”

Instead Barzillai took the lead in organizing help for the beleaguered king. The Bible says Barzillai and his friends “brought bedding and bowls and articles of pottery. They also brought wheat and barley, flour and roasted grain, beans and lentils, honey and curds, sheep, and cheese from cows’ milk for David and his people to eat” (2 Samuel 17:28–29). Think of all the organization and sacrifice that must have gone into this effort! Barzillai saw a need, and he did everything he could to meet it in spite of his age and infirmities. If he had failed or if he had refused to help, David and his men might well have perished in the inhospitable desert beyond the Dead Sea—and the subsequent history of God’s people would have been vastly different. But he didn’t fail, and King David’s life was spared.

The point is this: as an old man Barzillai couldn’t do everything he once did—but he did what he could, and God used his efforts. The same can be true of us as we grow older.

That Great Cloud of Witnesses

Barzillai is not the only person in the Bible who made his greatest contribution in his latter years. In fact, Scripture is filled

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with examples of men and women whom God used late in life, often with great impact.

In the centuries before Noah and the flood, the Bible tells us, God gave great longevity to His servants. Adam lived a total of 930 years; Methuselah—the oldest person in the Bible and the grandfather of Noah—died at the age of 969. All of his life Methuselah’s father, Enoch, had been a remarkable example to his son of what it meant to have a close relationship with God; the Bible says, “Enoch lived 365 years, walking in close fellowship with God. Then one day he disappeared, because God took him” (Genesis 5:23–24 NLT).

Enoch’s godly example influenced not only his son but also his descendants long after his lifetime. Few greater examples of faith can be found in the Bible than that of Enoch’s great-grandson, Noah. In the midst of a generation that scorned God and gave themselves over to every sin imaginable, the Bible says that “Noah was a righteous man, blameless among the people of his time, and he walked with God” (Genesis 6:9). When God commanded him to begin building his ark, Noah was more than five hundred years old.

After the flood (through which God brought judgment on the rebellious world and provided the means by which life could start again), God chose another old man, Abram (or Abraham, as he would later be known), to carry on His purposes. Abram was called by God to be the founder of the nation through whom the Messiah would come, the Savior of the human race. He was seventy-five years old when God first called him, and it wasn’t until he was one hundred that his son Isaac was born, “in his old age, at the very time God had promised him” (Genesis 21:2).

The Bible is dotted with other examples of individuals whom God used in their latter years—men and women who refused to use old age as an excuse to ignore what God wanted them to do. Moses was eighty when God called him to leave the Sinai desert and return to Egypt to lead the Jewish people out of slavery; he remained their leader until his death forty years later. Joshua, his successor, was around eighty when God gave him the responsibility of leading the people into the promised land, and Joshua continued serving until his death at 110. Although Jeremiah was a young man when God first called him to be a prophet, he stayed faithful to his calling until his death (probably in his nineties), in spite of opposition and war.

The New Testament likewise gives numerous examples of men and women who were used of God in their old age. When God announced to Zechariah that his wife, Elizabeth, would give birth to John the Baptist, the forerunner of the Messiah, he didn't believe it at first. The reason, he said, was that "I am an old man and my wife is well along in years" (Luke 1:18). But God used both of them anyway, in spite of his doubts. Anna, who joyously recognized the infant Jesus as the promised Messiah when Mary and Joseph brought Him into the Temple to be dedicated to God, was "very old . . . a widow until she was eighty-four" (Luke 2:36–37). The apostle John wrote the book of Revelation while imprisoned for his faith on the isolated island of Patmos; at the time he was probably in his nineties. Paul, writing from jail after many years of sacrificial missionary service, described himself as "an old man"—but also expressed the hope that he would be released so he could continue preaching Christ (Philemon vv. 9, 22). Numerous other

examples could be given of people whom God used in their latter years, not only from the Bible but also from the pages of history.

Joining the Witnesses

But perhaps you are saying to yourself, “Well, that may have been true for them, but it won’t be for me. Someday I’ll be old, and when it happens my usefulness will be over. And besides that, I want to take it easy when I retire.” You may even be convinced those days have already arrived for you.

These men and women were not unique, however, nor were they necessarily the kinds of extraordinary, superhuman individuals who come along only once in a great while. For the most part they were ordinary men and women, and as such they have lessons to teach us. The first is this: old age may have its limitations and challenges, but in spite of them our latter years can be some of the most rewarding and fulfilling of our lives. It was for them, and it can be for us.

They were prepared—mentally, physically, emotionally, and most of all spiritually—for whatever old age would bring their way. That made all the difference. They were able to do what they did because long before old age came upon them, they were already prepared for its challenges. Old age didn’t take them by surprise; they knew that if God gave them a long life, then He still would be with them, and He would have a reason for keeping them here. For them, growing older was not something to be denied or dreaded; it was to be embraced as part of God’s plan for their lives. They were ordinary individuals—but men and women of extraordinary faith.

How did they prepare for the unexpected twists and turns of growing older? And how can we prepare for those latter years, no

matter how young or old we are right now? To put it another way, how can we build our lives on a solid and unshakable foundation—one that will undergird us the rest of our days? God has given us the answers we need, if we will only discover them and apply them to our lives.



NEARING HOME WITH TRIUMPHANT EXPECTATIONS

While growing old has been the greatest surprise of my life, the greatest triumph is yet to come: experiencing victory over death that will usher me into the eternal presence of my Savior, the Lord Jesus Christ.

While society may not believe that growing old is a respectable phase of life, my prayer is that believers in Jesus Christ will walk the last mile of the way triumphantly, as Moses did when he died at age 120: “Then Moses climbed Mount Nebo. . . . There the LORD showed him the whole land. . . . And Moses the servant of the LORD died there. . . . Since then, no prophet has risen in Israel like Moses, whom the LORD knew face to face” (Deuteronomy 34:1, 5, 10).

This is a remarkable passage. While Moses was prevented from entering the land because of his earlier disobedience, God allowed him to behold the land of promise in his old age. I often wonder if God, in His sovereignty, allows the eyesight of the aged to cast a dim view of the here and now so that we may focus our spiritual eyes on the ever after.

God’s Word records that Moses’ successor, Joshua, “was filled

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with the spirit of wisdom because Moses had laid his hands on him . . . and [Joshua] did what the LORD had commanded Moses” (Deuteronomy 34:9). Even after his death, the impact of Moses’ life lived on in Joshua, the great military commander for God’s people.

What testimony are you passing on to others following you? Remembering what God has done for you will invigorate you in old age. Others are watching your actions and attitudes. Don’t diminish the impact you can make; pass on foundational truths of God’s Word so that younger generations will be as Joshua, “filled with the spirit of wisdom.”