

A Sermon  
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Grace Baptist Church  
Bryans Road, Maryland  
February 24, 2019

## **A Lifetime of Praise**

### Psalm 71

It's good to look out at our congregation and see individuals of different ages gathered together. True, most of us in this sanctuary are in our middle aged or senior adult years. But there are children and youth and young adults in our church family as well. And what unites us, especially on Sundays, isn't our stage of life, but our common vocation of worship. From the toddler in the nursery to the octogenarian in the pew, we're all called to respond with praise to God for his faithfulness and righteousness. No matter what the age gap between you and those seated around you this morning, you're all here to offer thanks for what God has done for us through Jesus Christ.

In today's text, the psalmist declares, "For you have been my hope, O Sovereign Lord, my confidence since my youth. From birth I have relied on you; you brought me forth from my mother's womb. I will ever praise you" (vv. 5-6). This is praise across the life span, which means that as the years go by, there will be experiences and circumstances where praise is hard. It won't always be easy to give thanks for God's faithfulness and to declare his sovereign love. The realities of life will push back against the call to worship.

Keep in mind that Psalm 71 is basically a prayer for help. The psalmist is going through some experience of distress and opposition, though we're not exactly sure what. He could be seeking asylum from accusers or persecutors. He could be the victim of some type of injustice or cruelty. He could be ill, or perhaps suffering the setbacks of old age. Whatever the specific threat or form of suffering, the psalmist doesn't hesitate to pour out his complaint to God and to petition God for help. He looks to God for refuge, for deliverance, for salvation.

The reason the psalmist looks to God and appeals to God is because he's confident of God's righteousness. He believes that God governs the world, and that God can be relied on to bring about justice. So the psalmist faces trials and tribulations with the assurance that God can be counted on to put things right, according to his sovereign will and purpose. This bedrock conviction about the righteousness of God is what sustains the psalmist's hope and energizes his praise.

One of the ways the psalmist is able to live a life of sustained praise is by looking back and reflecting on the Lord's faithfulness. The affirmations and declarations in today's text aren't the words of someone just starting out in life. No, these are the words of someone who has grown old, someone who's drawing upon years of experience in order to face current trials. Not simply to hang in there or to hold their own, but to make further progress in praise, and to anticipate new things. Lots of time may have passed, but there are still more opportunities to serve and to declare the righteousness of God.

Today, as we listen to the witness of the psalmist, I want to direct my words especially to those of you who are already in, or are nearing, that phase of life that we call "retirement." Now some of you, upon hearing that word, may be tempted to think that you can tune out

the rest of today's message. If you're an adolescent or a young adult, retirement may not even be on your radar. Your primary encounter with the subject is that quick glance you take at the FICA withholding on your paycheck, or the quarterly statement from the company that manages your 401(k) plan. But you have friends or family members who are retired. And you have lots of folks here around you this morning who are retired. So though I want to speak especially to retirees and to those contemplating retirement, we can all gain insight from the wisdom of the psalmist.

One thing to note up front is that retirement isn't "biblical" in the sense of being an idea or pattern explicitly taught in the Scriptures. True, the Levites, who were responsible for hauling around the furniture of the tabernacle, were instructed to retire from their regular service at the age of fifty (Numbers 8:25). And there's plenty in the Bible about Sabbath patterns and practices as a way of both resting and honoring God. But for the most part, retirement is more of a modern construct. As the late Ralph Winter put it, "Most men don't die of old age, they die of retirement. . . . Where in the Bible do they see [retirement]? Did Moses retire? Did Paul retire? Peter? John? Do military officers retire in the middle of a war?"<sup>1</sup>

As Winter indicates, if you were to ask any of the Bible's notable men or women, or anyone in the Scriptures, "When are you planning to draw Social Security?", you would get a really puzzled look from them. "Social Security? What's that?" I also suspect that Moses, Paul, Peter, and John, who never got to enjoy AARP discounts, would be puzzled by the fact that someone like myself, who stands up here and preaches sermons based on the things that they wrote, would have a congregational budget that includes monthly contributions to a retirement plan. Things have certainly come a long way since biblical times.

One issue of a popular clergy magazine included a cartoon in which the church's governing body is meeting with the pastor. The board admits: "We don't have a retirement plan. No one ever wanted to be our pastor that long."<sup>2</sup> That's a lighthearted depiction that reflects what was, and is, a very serious situation for many clergy. That's why our church contributes monthly to "Mission:Dignity," a program that helps meet the basic needs of many retired ministers and their widows, particularly individuals who served in small, rural churches that paid only modest salaries and couldn't afford to contribute to a pastor's retirement. This is just one example of how our lives, individually and together, participate in the concept and practice of retirement.

It's also a good example of how the hardships and challenges of retirement shape the way that people live this portion of their lives. As one author has pointed out, we sometimes picture retirement as a "never-ending vacation." Do a Google search of the word *retirement*, he says, and what you'll get are "images of gray-haired couples blissfully holding hands, walking white-sanded beaches. The message: Save enough and you too can have paradise."<sup>3</sup> But the reality of retirement often falls far short of paradise. A reduction in income, and inadequate savings, can create financial struggles. Leaving the work force can mean losing relationships and a sense of productivity and purposefulness. Declining health, and the effects of aging, can consume more time, energy, and financial resources.

I'm not trying to paint an overly negative picture of retirement. It's true that in many respects, the "golden years" are far from golden. But there are also many benefits and advantages to retiring. Freedom from the constraints of full-time work. Extra time to invest in relationships with family and friends. Opportunities to travel. More free time to take up new activities and explore long-standing interests. Retirement creates more space for things that might otherwise be more limited or impossible to do.

Plus there's the basic benefit of being able to rest after decades of labor. We're mortals, created by and dependent upon the God who, as the psalmist says, brings us forth from our mother's womb (v. 6). We're not designed for nonstop work. Years of labor take their toll on our bodies. So sheer fatigue is often a factor in the decision to retire. It's no great surprise that when asked how they feel about retirement, many people from various occupations will acknowledge that they're "sick of working," hate "the pressure," have paid their dues," or "want to get out of the rat race."<sup>4</sup>

One preacher tells the story of Porris Wittel, a dock worker in Gillingham, England, who for 47 years hated his alarm clock:

For 47 years, early, in the dark, every morning that thing jangled him awake. For 47 years he longed to ignore it, to shut it off. And for 47 years he submitted to the pressure of that time, that clock. But on the day of his retirement he got his revenge. He took his alarm clock to work and he flattened it in an eighty-ton hydraulic press. He said, "It was a lovely feeling."<sup>5</sup>

Many of you here today don't miss those days when you had to set your alarm clock for work. But that doesn't mean that you're not rising up each day and devoting your energy to important and meaningful tasks. It may not be full-time work, and you may not be getting paid for it. But it's still important work, purposeful work, work that exhibits the sovereign love of God. Caring for an aging parent or a sick spouse. Helping with your grandchildren. Volunteering at the local school. Driving a friend to a doctor's appointment. Delivering food for Meals on Wheels. Repairing a neighbor's house. Visiting at the nursing home. These are just some of the ways that you're devoting this season of your life to loving God and serving others. You may have retired from your occupation, but you haven't retired from your vocation of proclaiming and practicing the reign of God.

A pastor tells about the Sunday when he announced and explained to the congregation his decision to retire. He told them, "I wear two hearing aids; I wear tri-focal glasses; I have a partial plate; and I sometimes walk with a cane." "It seems to me," he concluded, "that the Lord is telling me it's time to retire." But after the service, an elderly lady came to him and said, "Reverend, you have misinterpreted what the Lord has been saying to you about retirement. He's not telling you it's time to retire; he's telling you that if you keep going he'll keep you patched up."<sup>6</sup>

As I said at the beginning of today's sermon, we're all called to worship. We're all, no matter what our age, summoned to respond with gratitude and praise to God for his saving work in Jesus Christ. It's just that as time passes and we move further along in that call, some of us need more patching up than others, to help us keep going. Maybe you're one of those who has been at this business of telling of God's righteousness longer than others. You did it during your years of working full-time, and now you're doing it during your retirement. That's because worshiping God, bearing witness to his sovereignty, and practicing his righteousness is a lifelong calling.

You never retire from labor for the kingdom of God. True, the form may change, but the command to love God and love your neighbor does not. Most of us will live out that command somewhere in between the extremes of "retirement as paradise" and "work 'til you drop." Some navigate that middle ground by working part-time. Some by volunteering. Some by taking on challenges and tasks that they never considered or had time for. But if you're in retirement, if you're nearing it, or if you're seriously considering it, let me challenge you especially to consider how, in this season of your life, you can serve the Lord through the life of the church.

This is the community called together to remember God's faithfulness and to declare what God has done through Jesus Christ to forgive and recreate a world that has turned away from him. That's our congregation's vocation. And in the phase of life called retirement, you have unique opportunities to take your accumulated experience, wisdom, skills, gifts, relationships, and resources, and use them in the life and mission of God's people, in ways that have influence and impact, both now and for years to come. As the psalmist says: "Since my youth, O God, you have taught me, and to this day I declare your marvelous deeds. Even when I am old and gray, do not forsake me, O God, till I declare your power to the next generation, your might to all who are to come" (vv. 17-18).

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Jeff Haanen, "Saving Retirement." Christianity Today website. February 15, 2019. Accessed February 20, 2019 < <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2019/march/cover-story-saving-retirement.html>>.

<sup>2</sup> Cartoonist Artemis Cole, in *Leadership* (Vol. 14, No. 3).

<sup>3</sup> Haanen, "Saving Retirement."

<sup>4</sup> Haanen, citing research by Robert Bellah, in his book, *Habits of the Heart*.

<sup>5</sup> As told by Roger Thompson, "The Good News Is: The Bad News Is Wrong," Preaching Today, Tape No. 55.

<sup>6</sup> Ivan P. Downing, *Christian Reader*, "Light Fare."