Growing Old and the Habit of Hope

Psalm 71

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Pastor Trent Eastman

Since August, we have been working through the book of Psalms — specifically those that are among my favorites. Psalm 73: *Being near God is the greatest good.* Psalm 19: *The glory of God revealed in His Word.* Psalm 51: *The problem of iniquity and the prayer for a clean heart.* Psalm 139: *The greatness of God seen in His power, knowledge, presence, and wisdom.* And last week, Psalm 23: *The Lord is my shepherd and the great exchange — fear for comfort.*

Today's psalm is, in a different way, very practical. It is about growing old. We are told this plainly in verses 17 and 18: *"O God, from my youth you have taught me… So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me."* As a memory trick, I think of Psalm 71 as the psalm for those who are 71. But it is a psalm for everyone who is growing old — which, of course, includes everyone. This is a psalm for all of us.

A saying popularized in the 1970s goes like this: *"Old age ain't for sissies."* It has stuck with me largely because it is true. The later stages of life bring severe and unavoidable challenges — physically, mentally, and emotionally. There is a reason the writer of Ecclesiastes calls them the "evil days":

> *"Remember also your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them.'" — Ecclesiastes 12:1*

Read on in that passage and you find the writer describing eyes going dark, ears becoming deaf, teeth missing, and the joy of life slipping away.

We live in a day when tremendous effort and money are spent trying to keep those evil days at bay as long as possible — plastic surgery, extreme diets, a cornucopia of medications, all in service of hanging onto youthfulness. It reminds me of the old story of a young child asking a woman how old she was. She answered, "Thirty-nine and holding." The child thought for a moment, then said, "And how old would you be if you let go?"

But behind the facades of social media, the snake-oil promises of influencers, and the ongoing search for the fountain of youth, the reality is simply this: you and I are growing old, and there

is nothing we can do to stop it. What we *can* do is choose how to do it — and to do it well. That is what Psalm 71 is about: growing old well. By "well," I mean the biblical wisdom and instruction on how to grow old. And please note the language: it is about *growing* old, not merely *being* old. There is a difference. And biblical wisdom for growing old well begins, as all wisdom does, with a foundational truth.

Truth One: God Is Always Faithful

The Lord never retires from faithfulness. The psalm opens:

> *"In you, O LORD, do I take refuge; let me never be put to shame! In your righteousness deliver me and rescue me; incline your ear to me, and save me! Be to me a rock of refuge, to which I may continually come; you have given the command to save me, for you are my rock and my fortress. Rescue me, O my God, from the hand of the wicked, from the grasp of the unjust and cruel man. For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O LORD, from my youth. Upon you I have leaned from before my birth; you are he who took me from my mother's womb. My praise is continually of you." — Psalm 71:1–6*

Do you hear what the psalmist is saying? Even before he was born, God was faithful to him. Even in the womb, his life depended on the Lord. There was never a day — not even in those earliest, hidden days before he drew breath — when the Lord was not holding him. And because God has been faithful throughout the entirety of his life, he can come to God over and over again, seeking help and deliverance. God never stops caring for a person because of their age.

There was a disturbing trend in many churches for a while. A pastor would announce that he intended to focus only on the next generation, and would purposefully shun — sometimes drive out — the elderly. God does not do that. Like the child Samuel, or eighty-year-old Moses, He calls, cares, delivers, and saves people of all ages. He is forever faithful, from before the day of our birth and even beyond the grave.

Some of you need to hear this today. Some of you may be feeling — or quietly thinking — that God is done with you, that your usefulness is over, that you have outlived His tender care and concern. The truth is this: the Lord who held you before you took your first breath is still holding you today. He is still your refuge. You are still precious to Him.

Now, verse 7 is worth pausing over:

> *"I have been as a portent to many, but you are my strong refuge. My mouth is filled with your praise, and with your glory all the day." — Psalm 71:7–8*

I have wrestled with what the psalmist means when he says he has been a portent to many. The Hebrew word, *môphēt* ( ), can be rendered as "sign" (NIV), "wonder" (KJV), or "marvel" (NASB). The ESV's translation, "portent," carries the connotation of a warning — something ominous. So which is it? Is the psalmist saying that when people look at him in his old age, they see a marvel, a sign of God's faithfulness? Or are they seeing an alarming example of suffering, of being forgotten, of being left behind? He clearly trusts in the Lord — verse 8 tells us his mouth is filled with praise — but is that trust visible to those watching him?

And I think that is precisely the question we ought to be asking — not just about the psalmist, but about ourselves. As we grow older, what is our life saying to the people around us? Are we becoming a warning, a portent of what old age does to a person? Or are we becoming a marvel — a living sign of God's faithfulness?

Most of us would say, without hesitation, *I want to be the marvel.* So what does that actually look like? We will see in a moment. But first there is a second truth that must be named.

Truth Two: Life's Problems Never Retire

No matter how healthy, how well-off, or how prepared a person may be, retirement does not mean retirement from the problems of life. This matters enormously. Some people may think that to be a sign of God's faithfulness, one must have a life with no problems. But the psalmist does not claim an easy or perfect life. He names some of the problems of growing old plainly:

> *"Do not cast me off in the time of old age; forsake me not when my strength is spent. For my enemies speak concerning me; those who watch for my life consult together and say, 'God has forsaken him; pursue and seize him, for there is none to deliver him.'" — Psalm 71:9–11*

Let us name what the psalmist is facing. First, there is *failing strength* — the body no longer working as it once did, the inability to do what once came easily. And tied to that physical decline is a deep fear: *since I can no longer do what I used to do, will I be cast aside?* That fear is the second problem: the *fear of abandonment*. And from verses 10 and 11 comes a third: the *feeling of being forsaken* — the sense that no one is coming, that there is none to deliver. This feeling of forsakenness carries with it all the weight of loneliness, of being unwanted and uncared for. These are very real feelings, and very real dangers, of growing old.

For some, these fears become the dominant story of their later years — a portent, a warning. Consider this: in our country, the highest rate of suicide is among men seventy-five years old and older. The national suicide rate is approximately 13 deaths per 100,000 people. For men aged 75, it rises to 40 per 100,000. For men aged 85, it climbs to 56 per 100,000. The studies are consistent in identifying why: failing strength, fear of abandonment, and the feeling of being forsaken.

That is why Psalm 71 is so important. In light of Truth Two — that life's problems never retire — the psalmist clings to Truth One: God is forever faithful. We see him doing exactly that in the very next verses:

> *"O God, be not far from me; O my God, make haste to help me! May my accusers be put to shame and consumed; with scorn and disgrace may they be covered who seek my hurt." — Psalm 71:12–13*

There he is — holding onto God's faithfulness in the middle of life's problems pressing in on every side. And so the question becomes: *how* does a person hold on? Verse 14 is the hinge on which the entire psalm turns. It is the pivot point where a person either grows old as a portent or as a marvel of God's faithfulness. It is the verse that determines whether your life will be defined by Truth One or Truth Two:

> *"But I will hope continually and will praise you yet more and more." — Psalm 71:14*

What causes the psalmist to become a beautiful marvel rather than a portent or warning? *I will hope continually.* The answer is the habit of hope.

The Habit of Hope

Hope is living your life in Truth One — in the reality of God's faithfulness. Despair is living your life in Truth Two — in the reality that your problems never retire. And here is the critical distinction: hope does not deny Truth Two. It simply refuses to allow Truth Two to have the final word.

Hope is confident expectation grounded in the faithfulness of God. Our culture has corrupted the word, reducing it to mere wishful thinking — *"You've got to hope for something."* But wishful thinking is not hope. Biblical hope is more like a cord tied to the Lord, to His promises, to His faithfulness. Hope is hanging onto that cord and never letting go, especially in the midst of life's hardest moments.

This image is not my invention — Scripture gives it to us. Look back at verse 5: *"For you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O LORD, from my youth."* The Hebrew word translated "hope" there is *tiqvah* ( ), and it is the same word that means *cord*. It is the very word used in Joshua 2:18, when the Israelite spies instruct Rahab to hang a scarlet cord in her window as a sign of her trust in the Lord. Everyone in that house was saved. The cord in Joshua 2 and the hope in Psalm 71:5 are the same word. Hope, then, is the ongoing habit of hanging onto the scarlet cord tied to God's faithfulness.

And notice that in verse 14, hope is explicitly a *habit*: *"I will hope continually."*

I still remember learning the habit of wearing a seat belt. When I was young, there was no law requiring it. Kids just climbed into the back of a station wagon and lived there freely. When the law was introduced in the 1980s, I resisted it — I didn't want it. But over time, particularly after we had children and made them wear one, I developed the habit. Now, when I get into a car, it is automatic. The seat belt goes on before I think about it. Because we all know: you do not have time to put a seat belt on during an accident. It only works if the habit is already there.

Hope is like that. Life's problems never retire. And if a person is not buckled in by hope before those problems arrive, those problems do not merely define that person — they may destroy that person. Hope is life's seat belt. It is the cord wrapped around a person, anchoring them to the faithfulness of God and to the certainty of His promises.

So how does one form the habit? The psalmist shows us throughout this very psalm. In verse 3, *"I may continually come"* — you form the habit of hope by going to God in prayer, always, in everything. In verse 6, *"My praise is continually of you"* — the habit of hope is formed through worship, thanksgiving, and praise. In verses 5 and 6, the habit is formed by actively *remembering* examples of God's faithfulness — even before I was born, you have been faithful. In verses 15 and 16, it is formed by *speaking* often of what God has done. And returning to verse 14, it is formed by *practicing* praise and thanksgiving in the midst of struggle, not after it has passed.

Practicing these things — prayer, worship, remembrance, proclamation, thanksgiving in suffering — is what turns hope from an occasional feeling into a settled habit. And it is having hope as a habit that transforms old age from a portent of forsakenness into a marvel of God's faithfulness.

The Marvel of Growing Old in Hope

Here is what that marvel looks like when it takes shape in a life:

> *"My mouth will tell of your righteous acts, of your deeds of salvation all the day, for their number is past my knowledge. With the mighty deeds of the Lord GOD I will come; I will remind them of your righteousness, yours alone. O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to another generation, your power to all those to come." — Psalm 71:15–18*

For those who have this cord of hope tied to God's faithfulness, one of the great blessings of growing old is that you have an ever-lengthening history of witnessing His faithfulness. And because of that history, you are uniquely positioned to encourage, to speak into, and to live before another generation — proclaiming His might even to those not yet born.

When I visit elderly people who have suffered serious physical decline, I often hear the same questions: *I wonder what God's purpose is for me now. I wonder why He didn't take me. I wonder what I'm supposed to do.* Verse 18 is the answer to every one of those questions. If you truly hope in the faithfulness of God — if you are buckled in — that hope will come out of you in some form of proclamation, some declaration of the Lord, even to people you have never met.

The Lord gave me a beautiful example of this just this week. On Wednesday I visited a woman in the hospital who is 93 years old — Jean Spurlock. She had fallen, and the X-rays revealed a broken vertebra in her back. The doctors looked more closely and realized it had been broken for a long time. They sent her home. Talk about pain, discomfort, and a body that is failing — life's sufferings never retire. While I was with her, she was eager to get home. She had to get back to her sewing. What is she sewing? Little dresses and bags to go into Operation Christmas Child shoeboxes. In this year alone, she has sewn more than 600 bags, more than 500 dresses, and 150 hair scrunchies. She has been doing this for the past three years.

She is not a preacher, a Sunday school teacher, or a Bible study leader. She is a sewer. And at 93 years old, with a broken vertebra, she is proclaiming the might of God to another generation — to children on the other side of the world whom she will never meet. Why? Because she hopes continually in the Lord. That is the habit of hope manifested as a marvel.

Now, you may not be a sewer. That is fine. There are so many ways to proclaim the faithfulness of God. Maybe your habit of hope looks like prayer, or handwritten cards, or simply telling stories. Maybe it is hospitality, or mentoring, or worship, or the witness of forgiveness freely given, or the quiet practice of gratitude. The list is endless. Proclaiming the might of God does not require a pulpit. It does not require physical strength, a healthy body, a driver's license, or even the ability to leave your home. It requires a life buckled into the faithfulness of God.

The Best Is Yet to Come

Our psalm ends with a future promise — one the psalmist holds tightly, because hope always does that. Hope takes any current suffering and places it inside the larger reality of what God has promised. The best is yet to come. And the psalm ends with that conviction ringing out:

> *"Your righteousness, O God, reaches the high heavens. You who have done great things, O God, who is like you? You who have made me see many troubles and calamities will revive me again; from the depths of the earth you will bring me up again. You will increase my greatness and comfort me again. I will also praise you with the harp for your faithfulness, O my God; I will sing praises to you with the lyre, O Holy One of Israel. My lips will shout for joy, when I sing praises to you; my soul also, which you have redeemed. And my tongue will talk of your righteous help all the day long, for they have been put to shame and disappointed who sought to do me hurt." — Psalm 71:19–24*

Psalm 71 began with the psalmist afraid — afraid of failing strength, afraid of being cast off and forgotten. It ends with a harp in his hands and a song on his lips. His circumstances have not changed. His body is still failing. His enemies are still talking. But hope has carried him through.

Listen again to verse 20: *"You who have made me see many troubles and calamities will revive me again; from the depths of the earth you will bring me up again."* Those are the words of a man who knows the grave is not the end of the story. And we know even more than he did.

Jesus entered our suffering, bore our sin, and died our death — and then He rose again. Because He lives, those who belong to Him have a future that growing old cannot take away. A day is coming when these failing bodies will be raised and made new, when grief will give way to joy, and when we will see face to face the Lord who has been faithful to us all along. That is why we can say — with confidence, not sentiment — that the best is yet to come. We have the promise of resurrection because we have a risen Savior.

And until that day, we can keep coming to Him. We can keep remembering His goodness. We can keep telling the next generation what He has done.

Buckle into the habit of hope — and marvel at the faithfulness of God.