



Coming of Age

Growing older with grace

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Welcome to our BRICK course entitled 'Coming of Age'. If you think there is a certain ambiguity in that title – you're right and it is deliberate.

We are going to be looking at something that affects all of us – the physical process of getting older and asking questions about our biblical understanding of this fact of life.

Course outline

- Session 1 – ‘Full of years’
 - What does the bible say about growing older?
- Session 2 – ‘The Lord gives and the Lord takes away’
 - The experience of loss
- Session 3 – ‘To die is gain’
 - Approaching death
- Session 4 – ‘How should we then live’
 - Feedback / discussion / practical outworking

The course covers 4 sessions. In the first session we will look specifically at what the bible says about growing older.

In the second session we will look at one of the common, and indeed biblical, experiences of growing older – that of loss.

In the third session we will consider the remarkable statement of St Paul that at the end of this process to die is gain

Session 4 is envisaged as an interactive session that picks up on the first 3 sessions and allows us as a group to consider the relevance of this course to our own lives.

That is not to say there will not be practical points in the first 3 sessions but we intend to focus them more on studying what the Christian understanding of this subject looks like. To help us with session 4 each week there will be paper and pens on the table to allow you to write down, comments questions or issues for us to consider in week 4 (if they are not addressed before) – so please make use of this. In the 4th session we are proposing to spend some time sharing together on our own thoughts and experiences covered in each of the first three sessions. We are thinking of offering the opportunity to do that in groups – just to let you know in advance. If however you don't like being in a group there will be the option to write down your thoughts without being in a group –so there will be some flexibility. Although I am the mouthpiece if you like for the course I have had lots of help in developing the ideas that we are looking at. In fact this began life as a project for our housegroup, so I would particularly like to thank them – Gerald and Geraldine Richards, Owen and Alison Mayes, Dave Worthington, Suzanne Wood and my wife Sue, without whom this course would not have been possible. At least the risk of anyone standing near me over coffee after the 9.15 service hearing Gerald come up to me and say ‘I've got some books on death for you’ will be removed.

Full of Years

- **Genesis 25:8**
- *Then Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and **full of years**; and he was gathered to his people.*
- *Realities of life:*
 - *Growing older*
 - *Loss*
 - *Approaching death*
 - *Dying*

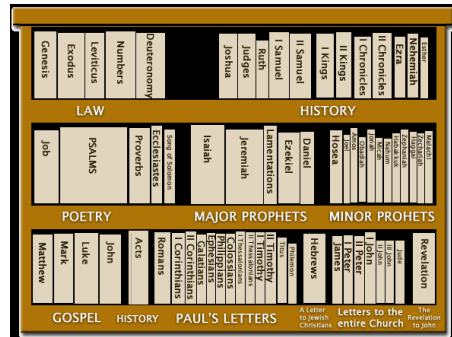
So lets begin. Each of the first 3 sessions takes it title from a verse and our session this week, called 'Full of Years' comes from Genesis 25 v 8. In many ways this verse on its own could epitomise the idea of growing older with grace. The expression 'full of years' seems to suggest completeness and with that lovely expression of being gathered to his people, almost has a harvest feel to it. The picture of death being of God gathering someone to Himself is a wonderful one.

However as you know the Bible is unflinching in describing the realities of life which are: (as listed)

While the bible describes the experience of life and of growing older, what meaning does it put on it?

Worldviews on growing older?

- Underlying Western worldview
- "Keep Young And Beautiful if you want to be loved"
- Biblical worldview



Those of you who attended the last BRICK course will be familiar with the term 'worldview'. In short this is the set of lenses through which we look at the world. It is the way, often without thinking, we ascribe meaning to what is going on around us. There are two relevant worldviews in this course for the subject of growing older. Here is a characterisation of the one I believe to be prevalent in our society – Keep Young and beautiful if you want to be loved. In this view youth is the ideal state and growing older is undesirable and to be avoided. It is a view that says 'young, fit, active, mentally and physically alert and contributing to society as well as paying your taxes is good' The often unspoken corollary is growing older, becoming frail, losing out mental acuity and being a 'burden on society' is bad. It is not politically correct to say that out loud but the messages both overt and subliminal, projected by our culture are not too far from the worldview of 'keep young and beautiful if you want to be loved'. Does anyone know when that song was written? "Keep Young and Beautiful" is a song by Al Dubin (lyrics) and Harry Warren (music), performed by Eddie Cantor and a chorus in the 1933 film Roman Scandals. Then there is the biblical world view – and you are all expecting me to say it is radically different from the Western Worldview....don't be too sure of that! Consider this passage from the book of Ecclesiastes, written by Solomon

Ecclesiastes 12:1-7

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"— 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; when the doors to the street are closed and the sound of grinding fades; when people rise up at the sound of birds, but all their songs grow faint; when people are afraid of heights and of dangers in the streets; when the almond tree blossoms and the grasshopper drags itself along and desire no longer is stirred. Then people go to their eternal home and mourners go about the streets. Remember him—before the silver cord is severed, and the golden bowl is broken; before the pitcher is shattered at the spring, and 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.

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The imagery in this passage depicting the decline and fall of human beings as they become old is devastating. Anyone reading this would absolutely want to stay young – who wants to be compared to a grasshopper who drags himself along. Growing older is a time with ‘no pleasure’ according to Solomon. How can this be in the bible? Well it is a commentary on the observation of the experience of life – but why is life like that – what meaning does the bible give to it?



Genesis 1 v31: And God saw everything that He had made, and behold, it was very good (suitable, pleasant) *and* He approved it completely. And there was evening and there was morning, a sixth day.

Creation wholly good – no indication of mortality

Genesis 2 v16-17 And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; But of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil and blessing and calamity you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die.

Risk of death

Genesis 3 v19 In the sweat of your face shall you eat bread until you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; for dust you are and to dust you shall return.

Decay and ultimately death resulting from the fall

Genesis 6 v3 Then the LORD said, “My Spirit will not contend with humans forever, for they are mortal ; their days will be a hundred and twenty years.”

Human lifespan limited

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Let me say at this point that I know people interpret the opening chapters of Genesis differently. Some see it as literal and some as figurative. In quoting Genesis as I am about to I am not promoting either view but saying whichever way you approach the text what does it tell us about our study of growing older.

SLIDE

Genesis is clear that however He did it God’s original creation was ‘good’. There is no indication of mortality in Genesis chapter 1.

Built into creation however there was an element of risk – departing from God’s creation intention would result in human beings experiencing something less than perfect, something that would cause life to become less than totally satisfactory.

Of course, again without being specific about it, human beings demonstrably do not live in accordance with God’s good creation and therefore there are consequences.

The creation has fallen from its original created condition. Genesis is clear – life is not going to be one long enjoyable holiday – life is tough, life is unsatisfying, life is subject to decline and decay, with the ultimate physical end being death. The bible throughout does not gloss over this.

Finally there is a clear indication that human lifespan is limited.

Paul summarises this in a section of his letter to the Romans.

Romans 8 v 20-23

For the creation (nature) was subjected to frailty (to futility, condemned to frustration), not because of some intentional fault on its part, but by the will of Him Who so subjected it—[yet] with the hope that nature (creation) itself will be set free from its bondage to decay and corruption [and gain an entrance] into the glorious freedom of God’s children. We know that the whole creation [of irrational creatures] has been moaning together in the pains of labour until now. And not only the creation, but we ourselves too, who have and enjoy the first fruits of the [Holy] Spirit [a foretaste of the blissful things to come] groan inwardly as we wait for the redemption of our bodies [from sensuality and the grave, which will reveal] our adoption (our manifestation as God’s sons).

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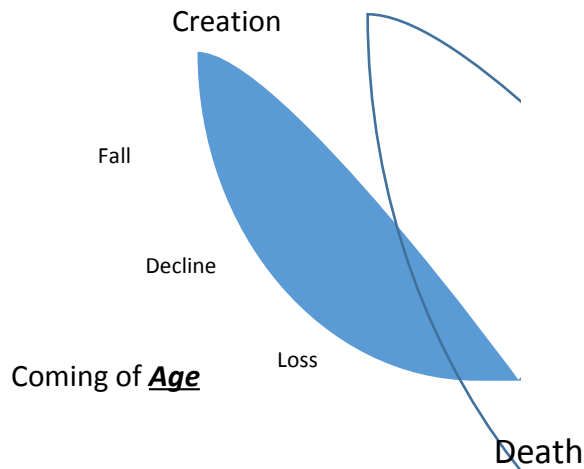
This is our life experience says Paul and not only that it is God’s intention – note that the creation and we ourselves are subjected to frailty by the will of God.

I suspect it would take another whole BRICK course to discuss the ‘will of God’. For our purposes we need to acknowledge that the God given nature of human and animal life now explicitly contains within it decay, decline and death. As a result of falling away from grace life now contains elements that are contrary to what God intended, but are a consequence of our falling that He permits us to experience. Putting it bluntly ‘dementia’ for example is a blasphemy before the God of love and life, but a blasphemy he permits. This terrible contradiction is of course most clearly seen on the cross where the Lord of Life itself, dies.

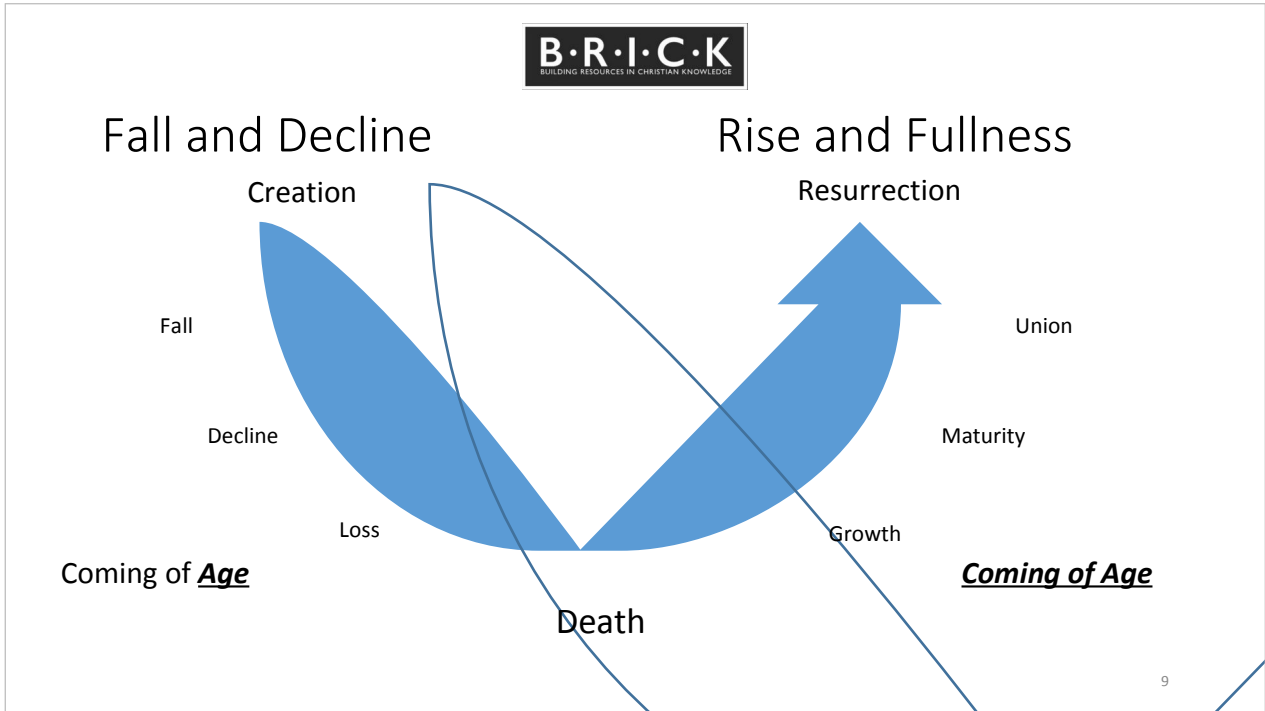
I like diagrams, so I have chosen to summarise this in a diagram, I appreciate not everyone likes that but it seems like a concise picture to me.

So putting what we have looked at so far together we get this:

Fall and Decline



If this was the totality of the biblical position on growing older then the world view it presents would be very similar to the view of our culture. We need to recognise that this view does form part of the biblical narrative – but not the whole of it. The rest of this course will unfold in the light of the full picture of the biblical narrative which is revealed in the next diagram.



Someone once said that without the fall the bible would be a pamphlet with Genesis 1 and 2 and maybe a bit of Revelation. The biblical narrative in its fullness, the Christian world view if you like, has always been about the 'Big Story'. All our life experience and our Christian faith must take account of the big story if we are to have a worldview that more closely reflects the one presented to us in the bible. We must give equal weight to both sides of the story if you will – to only focus on the Rise will be to ignore the reality that everyone is living through and will open Christians to accusations that we have a religion which is too heavenly minded to be of any earthly use. I suspect this is the lesser danger. Since our life experience and the culture around us is so fixated on the Fall we are in danger of not recognising or giving sufficient weight to the fullness that exists within the experiences of life, including, and perhaps especially, growing older. It's not as if God hasn't given us huge examples of the necessary balance – the sun sets, to rise again, where would Spring and Summer be without Autumn and Winter, isn't the seed of the new crop within the old crop? Don't we experience the 'small death' of sleep to awake the next day?

Of course others have put this more eloquently than me:

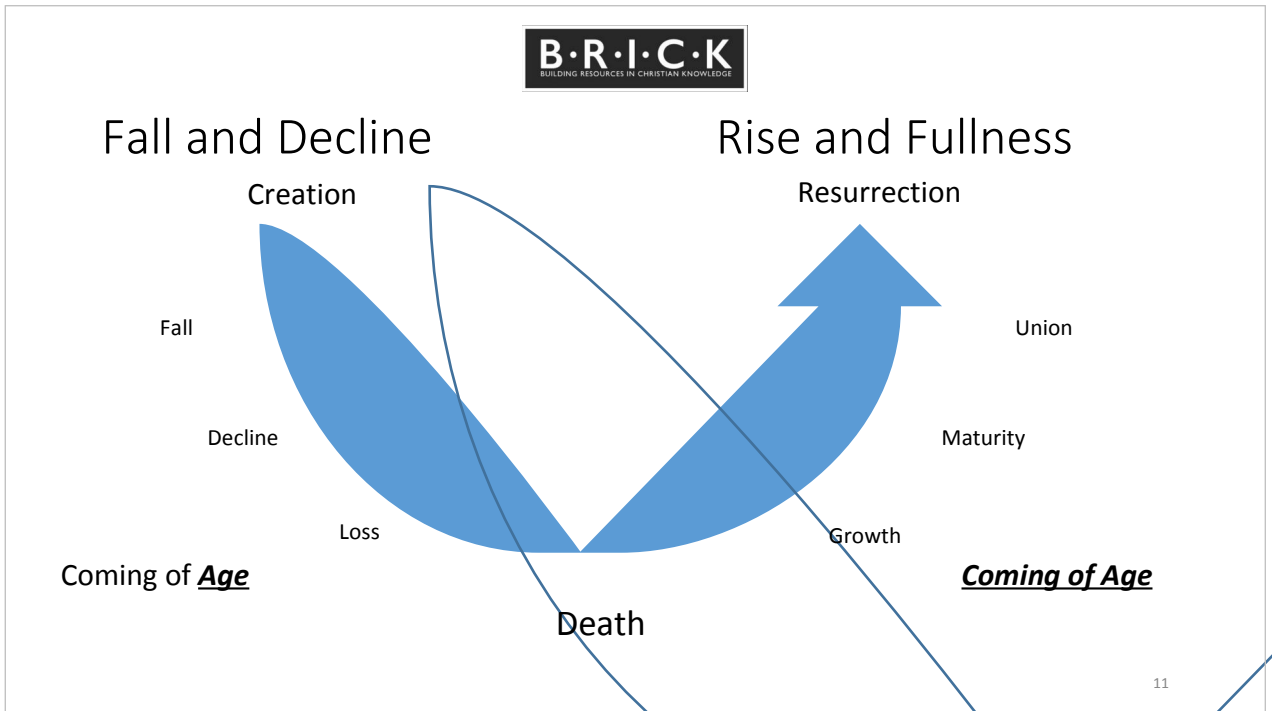


‘First there is the fall, and then we recover from the fall. Both are the mercy of God.’

Lady Julian of Norwich

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‘Both are the mercy of God.’



The bible presents this picture as all happening at the same time. It is not a chronological diagram. Death is the low point, not the end point. It is not that we grow older and reach death, then all the resurrection side happens after.

Just as the fall side is seen in our experience of living, so should the Rise side be. It is also not chronological in another way.

Put simply – we all know of young people who demonstrate considerable maturity as we all know older people who seem to have never grown up.

The bible says there will be a coming of age that is a natural growing older – in the natural order we will all experience it.

There is a also a ‘coming of age’ – a growing into maturity in Christ.

You might even say that the only difference is that people who have lived longer have had more time to formed by this.

Just as we looked at some biblical statemetns on the fall side of the diagram we will now look at some on the rise side – these are by no means exhaustive -

John 12 v 24. [Jesus said] 'I assure you and most solemnly say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone [just one grain, never more]. But if it dies, it produces much grain and yields a harvest.

Loss is turned into gain

2 Corinthians 3 v18. And we all, with unveiled face, continually seeing as in a mirror the glory of the Lord, are progressively being transformed into His image from one degree of glory to even more glory, which comes from the Lord, [who is] the Spirit

Our journey towards death is concurrent with our journey towards resurrection

Ephesians 4 v 13. ...until we all reach oneness in the faith and in the knowledge of God, [growing spiritually] to become a mature believer, reaching to the measure of the fullness of Christ [manifesting His spiritual completeness and exercising our spiritual gifts in unity]

It's not about how old you are...but how mature you are

John 17 v 21 [Jesus prayed for all who believe in Him]...'that they all may be one; just as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be one in Us, so that the world may believe [without any doubt] that You sent Me.'Made in His Image....restored in His Image

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There could have been a number of passages that we might have looked at that convey this biblical understanding that loss is turned into gain. We will be considering this in more detail next week, where we will use the Book of Job as our starting point.

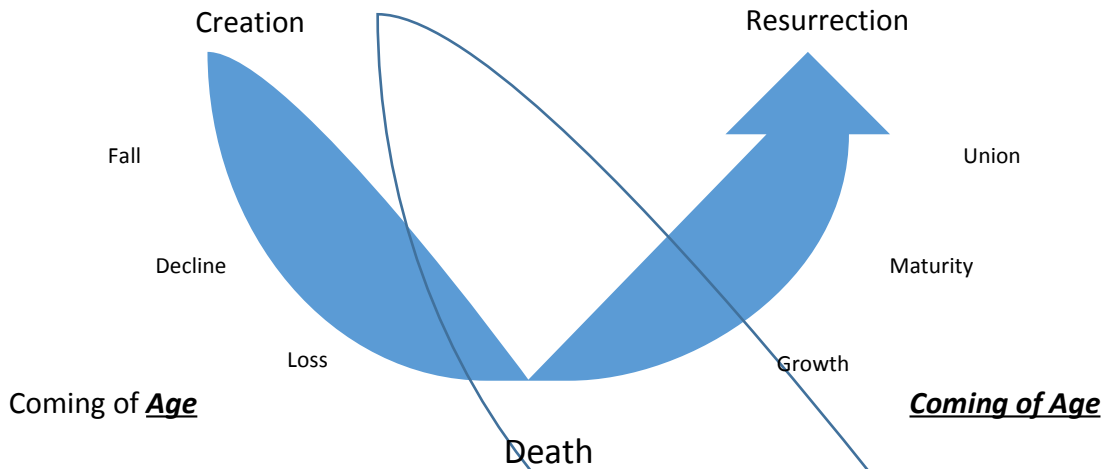
Just as Paul has made it clear in Romans that the decline is a reality he also asserts that the growth is a concurrent reality. The amplified bible emphasises that we are progressively being transformed – so growth is happening in the midst of decline.

Paul expects increasing maturity to be the outcome of the life experience of Christians. Peter talks about moving on from spiritual milk to meat. Luke remarkably talks of the boy Jesus growing in wisdom and favour. The underlying assumption that just as physically we grow from babies until we are adults and then somehow plateau and then decline as we grow older so we do the same in terms of character formations is completely foreign to the biblical narrative. While maturity is not necessarily a consequence of age Paul expects it to be more likely that the older members of the church will be the more mature. Why else would the leaders be given the title 'Elders'.

The Big Story has always been about restoration. Jesus says that the two greatest commandments are loving God and loving your neighbour, and prays for all believers for unity with God and each other. The picture that is presented to us in Genesis 1 and 2 and in Revelation.

Fall and Decline

Rise and Fullness



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So this is a picture of everyday life all happening at the same time.

On the same day we are becoming more like Jesus we may be experiencing loss.
On the same day our health is declining we have opportunity to grow as a Christian

Where is the big story leading.....

Revelation 21 v 3-4

See the Tabernacle of God is among men, and He will live among them, and they will be His people, and God Himself will be with them [as their God] and He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and there will no longer be death; there will no longer be sorrow and anguish, or crying, or pain; for the former order of things has passed away

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The bible effectively says 'It started well and it will end well'
In between you are on a journey which involves growing older and the specific life challenges that brings, but this is both a Coming of Age and a 'Coming of Age'

The bible is unsparingly realistic about life experience but also powerfully clear on the underlying and larger reality.

We need to see current events and experience in the light of eternity.

Before we look at some specific passages about growing older perhaps we should let Solomon have a further say;



Ecclesiastes 3:11

He [God] has made everything beautiful and appropriate in its time. He has also planted eternity [a sense of divine purpose] in the human heart [a mysterious longing which nothing under the sun can satisfy except God] – yet man cannot find out [comprehend, grasp] what God has done [His overall plan] from the beginning to the end.

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Hopefully we may have a glimpse of that overall plan.

We've looked briefly at the big picture which the bible narrative presents but it also says some specific things in respect of growing older and presents us with some striking examples of growing older with grace.

We will begin with 4 exhortations to those growing older and 1 reassurance before moving on to the exhortations to those who are younger.

Exhortation to the old 1 - Age is no barrier

- Abraham and Sarah
 - Called to leave their homeland, journey to the promised land and be the father and mother of God's people when Sarah was beyond the age of child bearing
- Moses
 - Called to set the Israelites free from slavery in Egypt – estimated to be around 80 at the time
- Anna
 - Prophetised over the baby Jesus when she was 84
- Simeon
 - We do not know his age but we know he was promised he would not see death until he had seen the Messiah

Just four examples of people in the bible who despite being old in years were fully engaged with Him and His purposes.



Exhortation to the old 2 – the gifts of the spirit are for all ages

It shall come about after this that I shall pour out My Spirit on all mankind:

And your sons and your daughters will prophesy

Your old men will dream dreams,

Your young men will see visions.

Even on the male and female servants

I will pour out My Spirit in those days

Joel 2 v28,29

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This passage from Joel is of course taken by Peter on the day of Pentecost to explain the coming of the Holy Spirit

The gifts of the Spirit are for young and old alike and for male and female alike.



Exhortation to the old 3 – the fruits of the spirit should be growing

The **Fruit of the Holy Spirit** is a biblical term that sums up nine attributes of a person or community living in accord with the **Holy Spirit**, according to chapter 5 of the Epistle to the Galatians: "But the **fruit** of the **Spirit** is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.

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While the gifts of the Spirit seem to be given to all the expectation of Paul is that the fruit of the Spirit will be growing in all.

That this is expected to happen as we grow older follows naturally from Paul's metaphor of fruit.

Gifts are given and received
Fruit grows

Exhortation to the old 4 – share wisdom

- **Proverbs 2:1-5**

- My son, if you will receive my words and treasure up my commandments within you,
- ² Making your ear attentive to skilful *and* godly Wisdom *and* inclining and directing your heart *and* mind to understanding [applying all your powers to the quest for it];
- ³ Yes, if you cry out for insight and raise your voice for understanding,
- ⁴ If you seek [Wisdom] as for silver and search for skilful *and* godly Wisdom as for hidden treasures,
- ⁵ Then you will understand the reverent *and* worshipful fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of [our omniscient] God.

Explicit in the old testament is the understanding that a life well lived will result in increased wisdom and knowledge of God. This is a view that seems foreign to our Western culture but is not the case in many other cultures where growing older is desirable for the very reason that it leads to increased wisdom. These cultures reflect more of the old testament view than ours.

The responsibility that lies with those who in growing older are growing in their life experience of God is to share that wisdom with the next generation. Deuteronomy puts that clearly.



Growing older – sharing wisdom

- **Deuteronomy 32:7**

- Remember the days of old; consider the generations long past. Ask your father and he will tell you, your elders, and they will explain to you.

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This view was obviously the background to the formation of the early Jewish Christian congregations and Paul's choice of the title 'Elder' for those entrusted with church leadership.

That we can be exhorted to demonstrate the growth into Christian maturity at the same time as experiencing the aging process is built on a central theme of the bible.

Reassurance for old (and young) - God is faithful

- **Isaiah 46:4**

- Even to your old age and grey hairs I am He, I am He who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you.

- **Matthew 28: 20**

- [Jesus said] Lo I am with you always [remaining with you perpetually – regardless of circumstance, and on every occasion] even to the end of the age

- **Hebrews 13: 5**

- For God has said 'I will never [under any circumstances] desert you [nor give you up nor leave you without support, nor will I in any degree leave you helpless] nor will I forsake or let you down or relax my hold on you [assuredly not]'

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Our life's work is to know God and one of the great characteristics of His relationship with us is His faithfulness.

Isaiah 46 is an explicit statement of God's faithfulness even to our physical old age, but it is a theme throughout the bible as referenced in the words of Jesus himself and in the words from the letter to the Hebrews

This is one of the time related factors that arises from the biblical narrative – put simply you cannot have experienced 40 years of God's faithfulness when you are 20.

A major role of those who are growing older with grace is to testify to the faithfulness of God throughout the circumstances of life experience to build the faith of those who are younger and to become living examples of the big story. The lives of older Christians should create in younger disciples not a desire to stay young and beautiful but to aspire to be like their elders.

But what does the bible have to say to those who are at an earlier stage in growing older with grace.

Exhortations to the young 1 – Respect

- **Exodus 20:12 Honour**

- “Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you.’

- **Leviticus 19:32 Respect**

- Stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the LORD.

Bearing in mind that these days we can be younger than people even if we ourselves are more mature in years, these words from scripture are not just addressed to those who have yet to hit their mid-life crisis!

Honouring parents is actually one of the ten commandments – this does not mean that parents are always right or even that their example is necessarily to be followed – it does mean that biblically an attitude of respect is expected in recognition of the biblical narrative of respect for those older than ourselves. We will come on in session 2 to consider how challenging this can be in the face of the biblical narrative of decline in old age. But there is no biblical suggestion that our attitude of respect should change - how that is worked out in practice is something that increasingly faces each generation as the previous generation lives longer.

Leviticus underlines this. Showing respect for the older members of our community or congregation is part of showing respect to the Lord.

Paul addresses this requirement in typical Paul bluntness in his instruction to Timothy about the generational responsibilities within the church.

Exhortation to the young 2 – practical action

- **1 Timothy 5: 1-4, 8**

- Do not sharply censure *or* rebuke an older man, but entreat *and* plead with him as [you would with] a father. Treat younger men like brothers;
- [Treat] older women like mothers [and] younger women like sisters, in all purity.
- [Always] treat with great consideration *and* give aid to those who are truly widowed (solitary and without support).
- But if a widow has children or grandchildren, see to it that these are first made to understand that it is their religious duty [to defray their natural obligation to those] at home, and make return to their parents *or* grandparents [for all their care by contributing to their maintenance], for this is acceptable in the sight of God.
- Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith [by disregarding its precepts] and is worse than an unbeliever [who fulfils his obligations in these matters].

This is hard line stuff from Paul – who, coming from his background in the old testament, sees it as fundamental that the church is a place where the older members are treated with respect.

But there is a mutuality to these responsibilities as we can see:



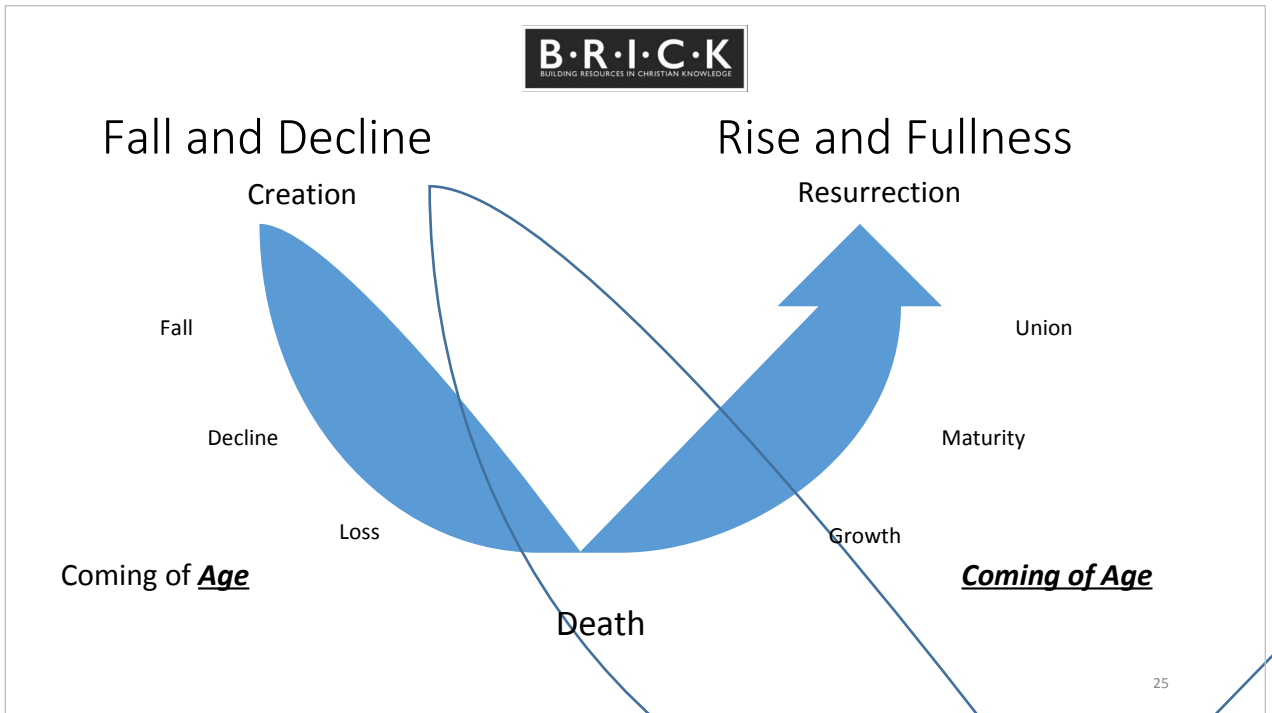
Mutual responsibilities

- On us as we grow older
 - Grow old graciously
 - Grow in wisdom
 - Grow in our experience of God's faithfulness
 - Share our wisdom and faith
- On us when we are the 'young ones'
 - Show respect in our attitude
 - Support practically
 - Seek to learn from the wisdom of age
 - Prepare in advance to grow old with grace

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As we can see there is a mutual responsibility and interaction – and of course a challenge because depending who we are relating to we can be in both columns.

Finally let's return to the overview which is our summary



This is the biblical narrative that describes our growing older with grace journey.

It is relevant to Christians of all ages, in fact there is a case to be made that this course is really for the younger members of our congregation because it bears a striking similarity to messages about investing in a pension!

If you don't invest enough in the first half of your life journey in what you will need in the second half, the journey will be harder.

If we don't recognise that we need to invest in the resurrection narrative, in growth in Christian character and closeness to God throughout the part of our life when we are at our physical and mental peak, we will find the journey much harder as we enter the second half of life where those attributes are often in decline.

It is easier to grow older gracelessly than it is to grow older with grace. We need to take hold of this biblical worldview of growing older – that coming of AGE should be part of COMING OF AGE.

In the next two sessions we will explore how this view of Fall and Resurrection, to be lived concurrently, can challenge our western worldview of loss and approaching death....and maybe our own view of those issues.

Firstly however some homework.



Homework

- If possible read Job Chapter 1 and Chapters 38-42

Thank you for listening – it would be particularly fun to hear any comments and questions.