

Seven Resolutions for Aging and Dying Well

by John Piper

This sermon emphasizes the importance of having a strong faith in God as we age and die, and the importance of sharing that faith with others.

Duration: 37:27

Scripture: Psalm 71:1-22

Topics: "Aging Faithfully", "Eternal Hope"

Description

This sermon reflects on the life of Verna, a woman who lived a humble and faithful life, spending much time in prayer and reading her Bible. It emphasizes the importance of praising God, finding refuge in Him, and maintaining hope and joy even in old age. The sermon encourages sharing God's salvation with others and resisting stereotypes of aging, focusing on the eternal perspective of being with God. It concludes with a reminder of God's grace and salvation through Jesus Christ, offering freedom and authenticity in Him.

Transcript

Father, underneath all of our stories, there's a mystery, and only you and Vernon knew it. She was a broken person in many ways, and what she did with her brokenness is amazing to us. Many people had no idea what to do around her, and her life was therefore often lonely.

What she did with that loneliness was amazing to us. It shamed me often. So I offer praise to the mystery of who she was that nobody really understood, nobody but you, and you were enough.

You were precious. My lovely Lord Jesus, she would say. So receive our praise in this service for your grace in her life, and continue now to help us honor you and to pay appropriate tribute to her.

We pray this in Jesus' name, amen. So when I was a pastor here, there were many, many times that I thought about Verna's funeral and what it would be like. I think there was a day, probably about 20 years ago, when if she had died, this room would almost have been full, because the longer we live, the longer we outlive those who know us.

The longer we live after a certain point, I think it's probably around 60. The longer you live after 60, the smaller your funeral gets. Up till 60, you're probably still known and loved and admired, and people feel responsibility, and then you begin to fade, and ultimately you fade into a nursing home, and then a few

amazing people show up.

When I stepped down from the pastorate, what, three years ago, four years ago now, I thought, well, maybe I won't do Verna's funeral. Maybe Jason will get to do that, and so when the phone call came from Keith, I jumped at it. I said, yes, of course, that's what I dreamed about doing.

I want to talk about this woman, I want to preach the Word of God for a few minutes over her memory, and you may wonder, why would that be? She was awkward. Why would you want to do that? Why was she so special? For 33 years, I served here, except for the staff, no one crossed my path in this church more than Verna. She was a moving fixture, as much as the wooden pillars here, and she moved around, but she didn't always move around.

More often, she would be in a corner, second floor corner on the cushy chairs over in that corner, and you know what she was doing. She stooped over, big, big, heavy Bible in her lap. You wondered how she could carry it, and she was reading, always reading her Bible.

More personal than that, I've done some computing. This may sound amazing to you, but I think it's accurate. In the last 36 years that I've known Verna--I came in 1980, she's already here--in the last 36 years that I've known Verna, no one, not staff, not family, have I spent more time praying with than Verna Erickson, but me and Verna more than anybody.

The reason for that is that for a long season of our church's life, there were, in my experience, five prayer meetings a week, 30 minutes each. There was one Tuesday morning, there was one Friday morning, there was one Wednesday night, and there was one Saturday night before the service, and there was one or two Sunday morning before the services. I was at all of them, and Verna was at most of them.

Other people came and went, and so there were lots of hours spent with you, but Verna was so present that nobody in my life have I spent more time praying with than Verna Erickson, which is an amazing statement for a pastor at 71 years old to make. Things happen inside you. They do, they happen.

You don't make them happen over 30 years of praying with somebody. You can finish your prayers, you know exactly what she's gonna pray. She's prayed it a thousand times.

It might be a little different turn of phrase here, a little different endearing word for Jesus. The order might change a little bit. It really didn't matter.

She was there, and she was in touch with the living God. You know, some people are wired, and not just Verna-type people, but other people who are more ordinary are wired that they find it more easy to speak their affections for Jesus while praying than looking you in the face. I never heard Verna praise Jesus to my face.

She never looked me in the eyes and said, isn't the Lord good, Pastor John? She couldn't do that. That was too normal. She wasn't normal, but when she bowed her head and started talking to him, I've never heard anyone at this church use language of greater affection for Jesus.

Isn't that remarkable? It's just the way we are. It's just different people are different in the way we can say what we feel to others or to the Lord. There were other reasons why I want to do this.

Verna loved my wife. Noelle's sitting over there. She loved Noelle.

I thought, why do you love my wife so much? She's not that special. I know my wife. Verna adored Noelle. She used off-the-charts glowing words for Noelle. It made me want to love my wife more. I don't know why that was.

Maybe what you're supposed to do with a first lady? I don't know, but she said it over and over. She said it to her face. She said it to me, and of course, like you've all said, she knew all five of my kids by name, and she would ask how they were.

We were gone for three years, came back from Tennessee, went over to see her, and she asked how they were doing by name. That's incredible. Nobody does that.

You know she did, and so there was that personal family dimension. Now here's something nobody's mentioned, because you don't have the nerve. Of course, you said she shows up every time there's a nice event.

Well, if there's food, she shows up, because Verna ate at the church. She didn't have much food over there across the parking lot. She ate here.

She got her food at wedding receptions and funeral receptions and Thursday nights, and she went into the kitchen and asked me to unlock the door so she could pilfer the milk and the carrots, and my sons thought she was a thief, and I texted them that she had passed away, and they all wrote back their Verna stories the last few days, and Barnabas was the one who remembered her taking carrots out of the kitchen, and he thought that was not good, so here's what I said to them. I said, look, I know a few things you don't know, and some of you know and some of you don't, but I know this. I know that more than once Verna handed me her entire paycheck when she was working as a cook, her entire paycheck endorsed to the church, all of it, not 10%, 100%, and said, would you make sure they get that, and she did it more than once, and finally the FPAs told me I shouldn't do that because I'd get in trouble being the middleman, and I said, okay, so she'd asked me to, she handed me, I said, Verna, I can't take that.

Give it to Joby upstairs. I think, I don't know if she thought this way, but I think in her mind, I give all my money, more or less, to the church. I'm gonna eat here.

I never, I never begrudged Verna. Kempton Turner reminded me of one other thing. You won't believe this.

I mean, would you have the nerve? I'm sure many of you did. We had her over for Thanksgiving dinner. We had her over for Christmas because we just lived, you know, nearby, and she had weird eating habits, and everybody expected her to not be able to do things normally, right? She's just there, kind of a wallflower, eats and stays quiet, and so we played charades and hymn titles, oh, for a thousand tongues to sing, and Verna played, and that's what Kempton remembers.

He was there, and the first meeting he had of Verna was playing hymn title charades at the Piper's house. Imagine what that would look like. She's not stupid.

She's brilliant. She made A's everywhere she took courses. She just needs to be given a chance.

She needs to be drawn out. Thank you, Lord, for giving her all the chance she needs right now, so those are some of the reasons, not all of them, why I wanted to be a part of this, and what I like to do for another

maybe 10 or 15 minutes is go to Psalm 71 and exhort the living who are about to pass through the season she just passed through. I know that some of you are younger, don't think about these things as often as 70-somethings do, but all of you, if you don't die suddenly, are gonna get old, and you're gonna walk through that last season, and this psalm is about an old man who's in it, in that season, and he's talking to us about what it's like, and I think Verna would approve if I didn't spend all my time talking about her, but rather talked about what she's just walked through, give a biblical perspective on it, and help those people who came to my funeral live and die well, okay? So that's my plan for the next little while, and the reason I thought of doing this is because as I read Psalm 71, Kempton quoted this in his email to me, and verse 8 of Psalm 71 says, "My mouth is filled with your praise and with your glory all the day.

Do not cast me off in time of old age. Forsake me not when my strength is spent." Or again, verse 17, "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 who are to come." Now, just another memory comes to my mind, I hadn't thought of this one, I'm reading that.

Verna had no social sensibilities about how to move gently into a conversation about Jesus, so we'd invite her to dinner and guests were there, and she just turned to him and said, are you born again? And I watched that, and I thought, God make me more like that. Just caught to the chase. There's truth to be dealt with here, there's heaven and hell at stake, the big things in life we never get to, let's just start there.

You born again, you know my Jesus. So even to old age and gray hairs, O God, do not forsake me until I proclaim at the Thanksgiving dinner table to Piper's guests the powers of God. Now, I know that I could take this time just talking about the glorious truths about Verna right now.

I'm not gonna do that, but I'm gonna list some of them, so I could spend time talking right now about she's more alive than any of us in this room right now, as I talk, she has no more pain, no more discomfort in those little gnarly fingers of hers, she has a wonderful song upon her lips, and she knows exactly how to carry herself now, she knows how to speak to everybody, she's not the least out of sync with heaven, she has completely ceased to sin, best of all, her attitude, her words, her deeds now are henceforth perfect, she will never blunder again, she'll never sin again, and perhaps best of all, she no longer sees through a glass darkly, but face to face in the Jesus she so fondly prayed over and whose word filled her mind is present. You know, I don't know what it was, I never heard her quote anything from the Apostle Paul. She always read the Gospels, she was fixated on Jesus and the stories of Jesus and the words of Jesus.

I'm sure she read the Pauline letters, the letters of Paul, but there was something about Jesus, the way she said it, the way she spoke of him, and the fact is, she knew the Gospel of John, she recited in that room out there, the Commons, she recited about nine chapters of the Gospel of John by heart one Sunday night. At a thing we call it, what we called it was an arts thing, they got poetry and music and what, and they invited her to come and say the whole Gospel of John, which they cut her off because it was gonna take too long. I think she probably could have done it, but that's no small thing.

So today she's in his presence, she's not just reading his book, she's in his presence. At the beginning of life, you know what it takes to be a success? Energy. If you're a lazy person who can't get out of bed and you just walk through life lethargic, it's hard to be a mom, it's hard to be a dad, it's hard to have a career, so energy at the front end of life is necessary for success.

At the back end of life, energy is not the great need. There comes a day when you're not gonna be able to get out of bed, and you can be a success. What it takes to be a success is not energy in the last years, but God's Word and God's grace on your life.

So let's take God's Word, God's grace from Psalm 71. I'm gonna just give you seven quick, very quick exhortations for us to learn from the Psalm and be as we age. Number one, let's resolve to take refuge in God rather than taking offense at our troubles.

Verse one, in you, O Lord, I take refuge. If you forget that you are safe in God, he's like a shield about you. If you forget that you are in a solid, unshakeable, God-filled refuge, you're gonna take offense at your troubles.

You're gonna be a complainer, and you don't want to get old complaining. No, you don't. It's not a good way to get ready for Jesus, it's not a good testimony on the earth.

It makes you miserable and everybody around you, and we're all prone to be complainers, and the way not to be a complainer, among other ways, is love having a refuge and feeling safe in Jesus. You know, Verna had many needs, but she wasn't a complainer in my presence anyway. She didn't go around complaining the way things were at this church.

Number two, let's resolve to remember with wonder and thanks the thousands of times we have leaned on God since our youth. Let's remember with wonder and thanks the thousands of times we have leaned on God from our youth. Verse 5, for you, O Lord, are my hope, my trust, O Lord.

From my youth upon you have I leaned from my birth. This psalmist said from his birth, his whole life has been a leaning on God, leaning on God. The more needy you feel, the more you're gonna have to do that.

Verna knew she was needy. Verse 17, O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. So we've leaned upon him, we've been taught by him from our youth.

Let's resolve to remember that. Let's resolve to remember the hundreds and thousands of times we have leaned on the Lord, and he has been there as a rock to lean on, and we've sought his counsel because we didn't know what to do in the horrible decisions we had to make, and he came through with teaching and counsel for our hearts. Number three, let's resolve to speak to God more and more about all his greatness until there's no room left in our mouth for murmuring.

So here's another way not to murmur. Fill your mouth up with his greatness. Verse 6, my praise is continually of you.

Verse 14, I will praise you yet more and more, which means the longer you live, the more you should praise, right? Know what it says? He's getting old. He says, I will praise you more and more, which is counterintuitive because the longer you live, the weaker you get, the more aches and pains you have, and the less fertile your mind is, and therefore your thought is, I will praise him less and less. Don't do that.

Praising is not hard. It can be done with your mind, and doesn't even have to make it to your mouth. So let's resolve to do verse 6 and to do verse 14.

I will praise you yet more and more. The people who praise more and more are the healthiest people, the happiest people, the most useful people, the people you want to be around even in their old age, and the

murmurs and the complainers, you just want to go the other direction, which is why they become lonely. Complainers become lonely people, and you don't want to be lonely when you're old.

You want people to show up. Number four, let's resolve to be people of rugged, undefeatable hope and not give in to despair, even in the nursing home and even if we outlive all our friends. Verse 14, I will hope continually.

That will not be easy. It never is easy. It wasn't easy for Verna.

It won't be easy for you or me because we are gonna get to the point where we feel useless, too weak to do anybody any good, and whole lives have been built on doing people good and them appreciating it, and it's all gonna go away, and the temptation to despair at the end will be huge, and life will feel like a big empty hole, and so I'm pleading with you. This psalmist was getting old, and he said in verse 14, I will hope continually. Peter said, having girded up the loins of your minds, hope fully in the grace that is coming to you at the revelation of Jesus.

Jesus said, always pray and do not lose heart. Paul knew exactly what I'm talking about because he said we don't lose heart though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day, for we look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen, for the things that are seen are temporary and things that are unseen are eternal, so we're not gonna lose heart, he said, in spite of all the wearing away and decay of this old man body. Number five, let's resolve to go out of our way to find people to tell about God's wonderful acts of salvation.

If it's a nursing home, they're there. If it's a neighborhood, they're there. If it's a work school, they're there.

These works of salvation never run out. They are innumerable. Look at verse 15.

My mouth will tell of your righteous acts, of your deeds of salvation all the day, for their number is past my knowledge. You can talk all day about God's deeds because there are so many you can't count them. Or verse 18, I will proclaim your might to the next generation.

I'm just pleading with you, don't think, oh my youth, when I was a more attractive and more articulate, more energetic, and more creative, then I felt some a little bit of boldness to tell somebody about the great works of God in my life, or in the Bible, or in history. Today, I'm slow, my words don't come as well, and I don't feel like I'm a very great example, and so you just retreat from the telling. He didn't, and you don't have to.

I asked my father one time, I've often written, my dad is the happiest man I've ever known. I've said that numerous times, and I asked him one time, I remember, I said, Daddy, what would you say, you know, in a word, is the key to a lifetime, like 50 years of ministry for you, a lifetime of happiness? He didn't even hesitate. He said, tell somebody about Jesus.

That's not what I expected, and you know that, you know that the few times that you've had that precious moment, when you can receive and overflow, receive and overflow, that's what you're made for. That's what this thing called a brain, and a mouth, and hands are made for, receiving untold graces from God, and then telling somebody about them. When that happens, the flow just invigorates, even if you're 84, and two days away from your death.

So yes, let's resolve to find somebody to tell. Do it with an email, do it with a phone call, do it with a note, do it with a friend. I'm not talking about anything big and elaborate and theological, I'm just saying, isn't God good? That would do, you know, over lunch you'd look somebody in the eye and you'd say, isn't God good? And they look at you and say, why do you say that? You say, I'm alive, or I could get out of bed this morning, or I had no aches and pains, or I can see you across this table, or my sins are forgiven, I escaped hell, God is not mad at me anymore, I'm going to heaven.

That doesn't take any education at all, this takes reality. So make yourself glad, make God glorious, find somebody to tell, no matter how old you are. Number six, let's remember that there are great things about God above our imagination, and soon enough, like Verna, we'll know these too.

So remember that there are things about God that are over your head, and someday, I mean just think of it, today Verna knows a thousand times more than you do about God. That's a wonderful thought to have. Verse 18, your power and your righteousness reach the high heavens.

Your power and your righteousness reach the high heavens. They are over our heads. We could never get our head up there into the third or seventh heaven where you are complete and full and known.

We are not God, let's be really happy about that. Let's let God be God and wait patiently for the day when we know even as we are not. Finally, number seven, let's resolve to resist all stuffy stereotypes of old people.

You know why old people are stuffy? Because people expect them to be. Let's resist all stuffy stereotypes of old people, and instead, as we get older, play and sing and shout with joy whether we look dignified or not. Verse 22, I will praise you with the harp, maybe substitute guitar, for your faithfulness, oh my God, I will sing praises to you with the lyre, oh holy one of Israel.

Verse 23, my lips will shout for joy when I sing praises. How many 80 year olds you've seen shout for joy? Not many, it's not dignified. Who cares, right? Let's resist stuffy stereotypes for what it means to get old.

When I came to Bethel in 1974, the dean's wife--what was the dean's name, Noelle? Olsen? First name? Virgil. Thank you, y'all know, you veterans know who Virgil Olsen was. So his wife was Carol, I believe.

Yes, she's naughty. We went to their house. Brand-new 28-year-old faculty member, dignified dean, and his wife--I don't know how old they were, 60s maybe--illustrated the point she was making by getting on her hands and knees and bark like a dog.

I looked at that, I said, I like these people. I like being in this place. There's a lot too much of--just too much of self, isn't there? Just so self-conscious about what it means to grow old.

What's expected of a 71-year-old pastor emeritus? What's expected? There won't be any phoniness in heaven. None. There'll only be complete authenticity through and through.

No Sam at all. And we're gonna discover, as Verna did a few days ago, we're gonna discover what true child likeness was meant to be the entire life. Because Jesus said, unless you turn and become like a child, you can't enter the kingdom of heaven.

Won't it be wonderful to meet Verna, who will be beautiful, inner prime--you know, people ask me often, let me get our new resurrection bodies. Which bodies are you gonna use? Like 30-year-old body, 80-year-old

body, 18-year-old body? I said, I don't know, optimal. Optimal body.

And then glorified. So optimal, wherever you thought your optimal body was, it probably wasn't that great, and then it gets glorified. So won't it be amazing? I mean, let this sink in.

I do this with the likes of John Teichman and the people that you know who just aren't quite right, and you can get frustrated with them, you wanna speak unkindly. Won't it be amazing to see her beautiful, inner prime, emotionally complete, authentic through and through, able to look you right in the eye, and with total maturity and thoughtfulness and joyfulness and sincerity, thank you for how patient you are with her. I have thought about it so long with people in this church who are hard to get along with, and I know they're saints, they're saints.

They're gonna be in heaven with me, and I don't like them. That's not good. Because when you face them, it's gonna be awesome.

I love the thought of standing face to face with a gorgeous, emotionally whole, intellectually acute, bright, articulate, authentic Verna Erickson, and have her say to me, thanks for letting me drink the milk, and not be the least awkward. And I'm sure she'll, if she's honest, say, that wasn't very nice of you to walk by without saying all the times that we didn't do what we ought to have done. We're gonna be free in that day, and it's very close for a lot of us, it's close for all of us, if you take the Bible seriously about how short life is, for freedom Christ has set you free, folks.

You got a few years left. Be free in Jesus, and here's the closing promise, why it's so possible. You say, but I'm just a jerk.

I'm such a sinner. I'm such a failure. Okay, join the club.

Here's the reason why, in spite of all our sinning, we can be free and authentic people with each other. It goes like this, for God did not destine you for wrath. Let that sink in.

God has not destined his people for wrath. Not angry anymore. You're not gonna meet wrath.

You're not gonna be angry. He has not destined you for wrath, but to obtain salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, who died for us, so that whether we wake or sleep, live or die, we will live with him. That's 1st Thessalonians 5, 9, and 10, and it is awesome, precious, underneath everything we dream for our few years left and for what Verna is now experiencing as a child, a glorified child of God.

So that's a good way to end service, isn't it? Singing children of the Heavenly Father, which I assume is in the bulletin because she liked it. So Chuck, come and help us close well with that song.

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