



J . I . P A C K E R

Guidance from God

for Engaging with Our Aging

F I N I S H I N G

O U R C O U R S E

W I T H J O Y

“I wish I had thought more about growing older when I was younger. If I had, perhaps I wouldn’t need wisdom from J. I. Packer. But I didn’t, and therefore I do! And what wonderful wisdom it is, the sort that challenges us, redirects our energy, and equips us with biblical truth to face our latter years. I’m at that stage in life where ‘engaging’ with my ‘aging’ has become increasingly more urgent. And I can’t think of anyone who can provide more helpful and encouraging insight than J. I. Packer. Don’t wait until you’re sixty or seventy to read this book. Start now and finish well.”

Sam Storms, Senior Pastor, Bridgeway Church,
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

“J. I. Packer is his usual wise self as he gives his counsel herein for older people to pursue their aging with ‘zeal’! He urges us to serve God and his church however we can, while we can. This is devout and inspiring motivation.”

Marva J. Dawn, theologian; speaker; author,
Being Well When We’re Ill; In the Beginning, GOD;
and *Talking the Walk*

“Experts say that the proportion of the elderly population in the United States will grow by 80 percent in the decades to come. It is more important than ever to have a biblical mind about how we spend our latter years for God’s glory. We want to finish well (2 Tim. 4:7), and good pastors care to prepare their people to do precisely this. *Finishing Our Course with Joy* comes as wise, true, timely, and edifying biblical reflection and pastoral counsel on this significant subject. Dr. Packer’s book speaks to senior adults, those who love and care for them, those who will become them, and those who pastor them. As one who has had the privilege of knowing J. I. Packer since my teen years, reading these words—written from his own personal experience, communion with God, and knowledge of the Word—is poignant for me, to say the least. But that only makes the truth go in deeper. And that is good.”

J. Ligon Duncan III, Chancellor and
John E. Richards Professor of Systematic
and Historical Theology, Reformed Theological
Seminary, Jackson, Mississippi

Finishing Our Course with Joy: Guidance from God for Engaging with Our Aging

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We Grow Old

Four days in June 2012 were set apart for celebrating the diamond jubilee of Europe's veteran monarch, Her Britannic Majesty Elizabeth II, Queen of the United Kingdom and the British Commonwealth. I, who am British by birth and Canadian by choice, resonated with the celebration and on day four, began to pen this book.

It addresses those who, like myself, are well into aging. Nowadays, we elderlies (as I have heard us called) are classified as younger olds (65–75), medium olds (75–85),

and oldest olds (85 plus). Queen Elizabeth, like her husband, is an oldest old; she is 87, he is 92.

The Queen is a very remarkable person. Tirelessly, it seems, she goes on doing what she has been doing for six decades and more: waving in shy friendliness to the crowds past whom she is transported, and greeting with a smile one and another, children particularly, whom she meets in her walkabouts. It is more than sixty years since she publicly committed herself before God to serve Commonwealth citizens all her life. She has done it devotedly up to now, and will undoubtedly continue doing it as long as she physically can. So we may expect to see more of the porkpie hats and hear more of the clear, easy voice as her reign continues. She is a Christian lady resolved to live out her vow till she drops. She merits unbounded admiration from us all.

As myself a Christian, a Commonwealth citizen, and an oldest old with my own life-time commitment to God, I aim to follow her example of unflagging faithfulness, and I write these pages in hope of persuading others to do the same.

As I write, I am aware that some of my peers will not be fully with me at this point; not because their Christian commitment is less strong than mine, but because they are now limited in what they can think and do by reason of their physical health breaking down or, more sadly, some form of dementia, that is, impaired working of the mind due to malfunction of the brain. For us in the oldest-old class, these things are usually irreversible.

It is true that modern medicine and surgery keep our bodies going longer, and some think it will be possible to extend ordinary people's bodily lives to something like 120 years. Yet who would choose that prospect

if they thought that for up to half a century, certainly more than a third of their extended life, they would be victims of dementia? This is a possibility that can hardly be ruled out, for already one in four of us oldest old experience dementia in some form, and clearly the odds will shorten the longer our lives last.

Be that as it may, these pages address those who, by God's grace, still have their faculties more or less intact; who recognize that, as is often and truly said, aging is not for wimps; and who want to learn, in a straightforward way, how we may continue living to God's glory as we get older.

DECLINE

How should we view the onset of old age? The common assumption is that it is mainly a process of loss, whereby strength is drained from both mind and body and the capacity to look forward and move forward in life's

various departments is reduced to nothing. More than four centuries ago, Shakespeare put this assessment into the mouth of the melancholy Jaques in *As You Like It*. Surveying the seven ages of man on the world stage, Jaques comes to this:

Last scene of all
That ends this strange eventful history
Is second childishness and mere
oblivion;
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans
everything.

(act 2, scene 7)

And in the Bible, two thousand years or more before Shakespeare, Ecclesiastes, the preacher-teacher-philosopher-wiseacre-pundit, not so much a pessimist as a realist who depicts everything as it appears “under the sun” to the thoughtful observer, urges the young to “remember . . . your Creator in the days of your youth, before the evil

days come . . . ; before the sun and the light and the moon and the stars are darkened” (joy in being alive fades), “and the clouds return after the rain” (troubles recur), “in the day when the keepers of the house tremble” (arms weaken, hands shake), “and the strong men” (legs) “are bent, and the grinders” (teeth) “cease because they are few” (they drop out), “and those who look through the windows” (eyes) “are dimmed, and the doors on the street are shut” (deafness develops)—“when the sound of the grinders is low” (chewing becomes an effort), “and one rises up at the sound of a bird” (sudden small noises, however sweet, upset one), “and all the daughters of song are brought low” (music, from being a delight, becomes a bore)—“they are afraid also of what is high” (balance goes, dizziness comes), “and terrors are in the way” (one frequently feels frightened); “the almond tree blossoms” (hair turns white), “the grasshopper drags itself

along” (one’s walking grows erratic and unsteady), “and desire fails” (emotional numbness sets in) . . . (Eccles. 12:1–5).

The picture is of loss, weakness, and apathy, leading to death. That is Ecclesiastes’s story about aging.

RIPENESS

But neither in the Bible nor in life is this the whole story. Listen again to Shakespeare. In his tragedy *King Lear*, one of the world’s classics on dysfunctional families, a dispossessed son who refuses to be embittered by the way he has been treated comments thus on his blinded father’s loss of the will to live:

Men must endure
Their going hence, even as their coming
hither;
Ripeness is all.

(act 5, scene 2)

“Ripeness”—what does that mean? The word carries the very positive meaning of maturity, corresponding to the ripeness of fruit. We know the difference between ripe and unripe fruit: the latter is sharp, acid, hard, without much flavor, and sets teeth on edge; the former is relatively soft and sweet, juicy, mellow, flavorful, leaving a pleasant aftertaste in the mouth.

Between human beings in and beyond middle age a comparable difference appears. Some grow old gracefully, meaning, fully in the grip of the grace of God. Increasingly they display a well-developed understanding with a well-formed character: firm, resilient, and unyielding, with an unflinching sense of proportion and abundant resources for upholding and mentoring others. In Shakespeare’s play, however, “Ripeness is all” should be said with a certain gloominess, for the thought being expressed is that this personal ripeness will again and again be all

that one has at the end of life, though one expected, and had a right to expect, much more.

But here the Bible breaks in, highlighting the further thought that spiritual ripeness is worth far more than material wealth in any form, and that spiritual ripeness should continue to increase as one gets older.

The Bible's view is that aging, under God and by grace, will bring wisdom, that is, an enlarged capacity for discerning, choosing, and encouraging. In Proverbs 1–7 an evidently elderly father teaches realistic moral and spiritual wisdom to his adult but immature son. In Psalm 71 an elderly preacher who has given the best years of his life to teaching the truth about God in the face of much opposition prays as follows:

You, O LORD, are my hope,
my trust, O LORD, from my youth. . . .

FINISHING OUR COURSE WITH JOY

Do not cast me off in the time of
old age;
forsake me not when my strength is
spent. . . .

But I will hope continually
and will praise you yet more and
more.

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.
(Ps. 71:5, 9, 14–18)

And Psalm 92:12 and 14 declare:

The righteous flourish like the palm tree
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon. . . .
They still bear fruit in old age;
they are ever full of sap and green.

LAST LAP

This biblical expectation and, indeed, promise of ripeness growing and service of others continuing as we age with God is the substance of the last-lap image of our closing years, in which we finish our course. Runners in a distance race, like jockeys in a horse race, always try to keep something in reserve for a final sprint. And my contention is going to be that, so far as our bodily health allows, we should aim to be found

running the last lap of the race of our Christian life, as we would say, flat out. The final sprint, so I urge, should be a sprint indeed.

“Live each day as if thy last” is a wise word from a hymn written in 1674 by Thomas Ken. The older we get, the more needful its wisdom becomes, and if we have not already taken it to heart, we should do so now. When we unpack Ken’s admonition, three thoughts emerge.

First, *live for God one day at a time*. Whatever long-term plans we may have, we need to get into the habit of planning each day’s business in advance, either first thing each morning or (better, I think) the day before. Glorifying God should be our constant goal, and to that end we need to acquire the further habit of reviewing before God as each day closes how far we have done as we planned, or whether and why and how far we changed the plan to fit new circumstances and fresh insights,

and in any case how far we did the best we could for our God, and how far we fell short of doing that. Surely it is increasingly important that we be doing this as we approach the end of life and the prospect of giving an account of ourselves to God.

Second, *live in the present moment*. Get into the way of practicing God's presence—more specifically, Christ's presence, according to his promise to be with us always (Matt. 28:20)—and cultivate the divine companionship. This, too, is an important and, I suspect, widely neglected spiritual discipline nowadays, and its importance also would seem to grow as we near life's end.

Daydreaming and indulgence of nostalgia are unhappy habits, making for unrealism and discontent. Like all bad habits, they tighten their grip on us until we set ourselves against them and, with God's help, break them. Elderly retirees are prone to

find that a disciplined breaking of them is an increasingly necessary task in life's last lap, in which steady looking ahead in each present moment becomes a bigger and bigger factor in inner spiritual health.

Third, *live ready to go when Christ comes for you*. Jesus's words to the faithful eleven are in fact a promise to all his faithful disciples in every age:

In my Father's house are many rooms. If it were not so, would I have told you that I go to prepare a place for you? And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and will take you to myself, that where I am you may be also. (John 14:2-3)

The experience of dying varies from one to another. Some of us will be conscious and relatively alert right up to the moment of our going; some will sink into unconscious-

ness as our bodies progressively close down; some will die in a coma, or while asleep, or in a sudden accident or attack on our person, or from heart stoppage; and we cannot foresee how it will be for us. So the way of wisdom is to be ready for whatever comes, whenever it comes.

What does this involve? More than merely making a will, giving directions for one's funeral, and arranging for the disposal of one's property. First and foremost, it involves direct, sober dealing with the Lord Jesus Christ himself, who is not only the one who will come as our courier to take us through our transition from this world to the next, but also the one who at some point in that world will be our Judge. "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil" (2 Cor. 5:10). More about that later; here, I would only stress

FINISHING OUR COURSE WITH JOY

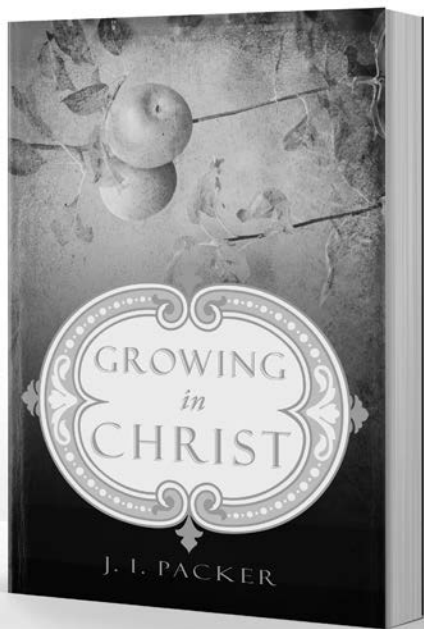
the urgency of entering, here and now, by faith, into a personal relation of discipleship to Christ, the invisibly present Savior and Lord, as in and through the gospel he himself invites everyone to do. This will banish all fears about our future.

A British professor of theology once described to me the world to which believers will go as “an unknown country with a well-known inhabitant.” When Jesus Christ the courier has already become well known to us through the Gospels and Pastoral Letters of the New Testament, the prospect of transitioning with him into a world in which we shall see him as he is and be constantly in his company will be something we find alluring rather than alarming.

WRONG WAY

But now we must face the fact that all forms of this ideal of ripeness and increased focus in life in our old age stand in direct contrast

Living the Essentials of the Christian Faith

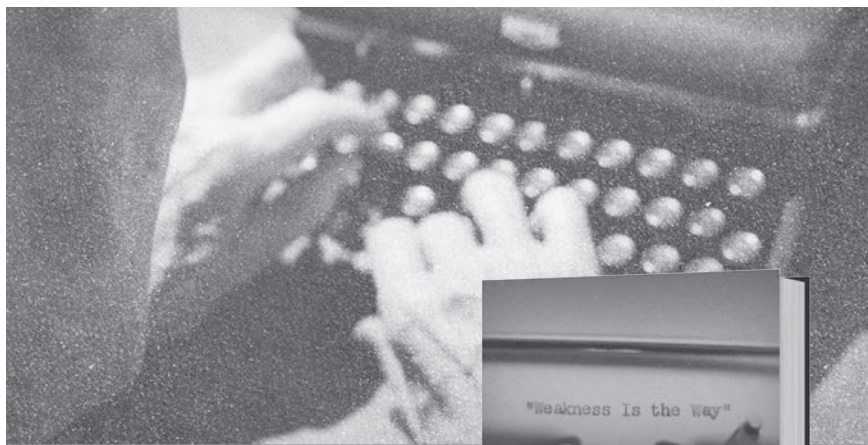


People mature spiritually by learning and living the essentials of the Christian faith. These essentials—so beautifully summarized in the Apostles' Creed, the Lord's Prayer, and the Ten Commandments—provide the heart of this great resource by J. I. Packer that is a must-read for all believers.

For the Christian,

*weakness
is a way of life.*

Yet most of us try desperately to be strong on our own.

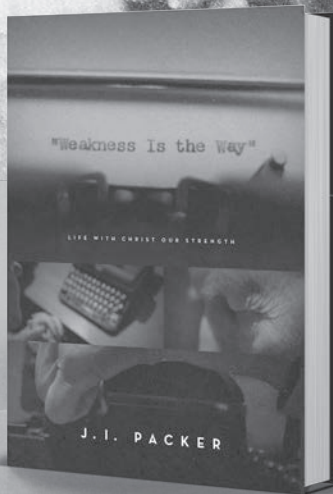


Renowned theologian and teacher

J. I. PACKER

teaches us how to embrace our
frailty and find freedom in light
of our all-sufficient God.

For more information, visit crossway.org.



Thinning hair, failing eyesight, and arthritic hands reveal an inescapable truth: *we're only getting older.*

But that doesn't mean we should simply sit back and take it easy. In *Finishing Our Course with Joy*, renowned theologian and author J. I. Packer challenges us to embrace old age as an opportunity for continued learning, careful planning, and heartfelt discipleship. Packer's pastoral words and personal stories encourage us to press on toward the upward call of God with endurance and grace—that we might continue to glorify God in our aging and finish our lives with joy.

"I'm at that stage in life where 'engaging' with my 'aging' has become increasingly more urgent. And I can't think of anyone who can provide more helpful and encouraging insight than J. I. Packer. Don't wait until you're sixty or seventy to read this book. Start now and finish well."

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J. LIGON DUNCAN III, Chancellor and John E. Richards Professor of Systematic and Historical Theology, Reformed Theological Seminary

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RELIGION / CHRISTIAN LIFE

