



Profiting from Old Age

"The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the LORD, they will flourish in the courts of our God. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green..."

Psalm 92:12-14

One matter of continual concern in our society is the aging of our population. It is not only that the birth rate is so low that there are more and more older people. It is also because of medical advances that people live longer. And so the percentage of older people in the general population continues to increase.

Now we may be thankful that in our churches the birth rate has not dropped as drastically as in the rest of our society. Many babies continue to be born in a number of our congregations. Nevertheless, our congregations do see also more and more older people. Is this a blessing or is this a concern? Does it mean more work and require more pastoral care by deacons, elders, and pastors? Or do older people prove to be fruitful to the rest of our congregations?

If you may believe some observers, then having more older people is not very helpful to a congregation. The experience in some church circles apparently is that people retire from church work roughly at age 55. After that, do not come to them to serve in consistory, or teach catechism, Sunday school, Bible study, etc. They want to be free at 55, not tied down by regular church work, free to travel, free to go south for the winter; basically free to do as they please, especially when they are retired.

In Old Age the Righteous shall be like a Palm Tree

But when that is the case, then that goes contrary to what God's Word calls for. For we are told in Psalm 92:12-14, that *"The righteous shall flourish like the palm tree: he shall grow like a cedar in Lebanon. Those that be planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God. They shall still bring forth fruit in old age; they shall be fat and flourishing."* The righteous believer is here compared to a palm tree.

There are hundreds of different kinds of palm trees. But the one meant here is the date palm, which over the first 35 years of its life grows to a height of about 100 feet, and begins to bear fruit at that age, often 200 to 300 pounds of dates yearly. And it continues to do so at least until it is 100 years old.

That is quite a weight to hold 100 feet above ground, especially when it is stormy. That is why people will try to strengthen such trees by laying weights in its crown from a young age onwards, in order to strengthen the fibres of the trunk, and the roots also, so that the tree will perfectly balance itself when storms come while heavily laden with fruit.

This tells us that preparation for a long and fruitful life of the date palm begins early in its life. When these palm trees manage to survive in the desert, it is because a main root is able to go deep and reach an underground water source. Thus it is possible to find these stately trees in areas where nothing else can at first survive. But when a number of these palms trees are there and shelter the ground with their crowns of leaves on top, other vegetation gets a chance to survive also.

Now it should be clear to us that the application of the life and productivity of the palm tree to the righteous is not difficult. Any farmer will tell you that corn that sprouts and begins to grow under very favourable circumstances is ill prepared to withstand a period of drought. But if early on in life the young plants are forced to sink down their root systems deep in search for water, they are well prepared for tough times further on. This is true also for the believer. And so when a young believer is confronted with some difficult times, then it only serves to strengthen his life of faith and the relationship with the Lord.

Some weight of adversity that presses a young believer down only strengthens the cords of faith. A period of dryness forces the roots of faith to go deeper. And all this is in preparation for the time in life that the believer is called upon to bring forth spiritual fruit for the good of his future family and congregation.

In Old Age the Righteous Shall Flourish in God's Church

There is a tremendous promise in the words of our text verses, namely that these palm trees, planted that way in the house of the LORD, shall flourish in the courts of our God. That flourishing shall not only happen when a believer is in the strength of his or her life. Yes, then also. But, we are told, *"they shall still bring forth fruit in old age,"* like the date palms that at 100 years of age or older, bring forth much fruit.

The last part of verse 14 declares that in old age they shall be *"fat and flourishing"* (KJV), which the Holman Bible translates with *"healthy and green."* What else is the message here, but that believers, when they age, may still be productive in the churches.

It is no doubt tempting to keep busy in retirement with this hobby or that interest. But what a challenge to be engaged with work that builds up the congregation and edifies believers, and also covenant children. What a challenge, to be busy in the kingdom of God *"all the days of our lives,"* instead of eating our bread in sorrow.

The Wicked are like Grass

Psalms 92 also speaks of people who are not righteous by faith in the LORD God. It does that in verse 7, *"When the wicked spring as the grass, and when all the workers of iniquity do flourish, it is that they shall be destroyed for ever more."* We know grass today is green while tomorrow it is thrown into the oven and its place is found no more.

What a contrast between the grass of the field and a date palm. What a contrast between trying to keep yourself busy with going to the mall, or spending your time with something that does not really bear fruit, compared with building up your faith and being engaged in the building up of the kingdom of God.

Our churches have a lot of aged people who are still able to flourish like the palm tree, and who are able to bear much fruit with which to nourish the younger generations.

A Lesson for Youth

But we must not think that these words are only directed to the older generation. For in order to be able to still bear fruit in old age it is necessary that the preparations for that are laid during the whole life time of the palm tree. Today, children and young people are encouraged to spend much time preparing themselves for life and to educate or train themselves for a position or a trade. That work for a living comes to an end, usually some time before our lives end.

But the work in God's kingdom goes on as long as we live and there is always a shortage of workers. The more we prepare ourselves for that work, the longer we are able to bear fruit. The Lord Jesus challenges all believers to do just that: *"Herein is My Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be My disciples"* (John 15:8).

Let this be the prayerful desire of all of us, regardless of our age, that we may bring forth fruit in old age, and continue to have a healthy and green life of faith.

Harvest Time

There is, however, one more word for the younger generations in our churches in connection with these words of Psalm 92, even though it is not mentioned directly. It is that the fruit of these aged palm trees has to be harvested.

That was done in two ways. One way was to beat the trunk with rods, so that the vibration would loosen the dates, which then were caught in nets strung out above ground. The other way was to climb the tree and pick them up above.

The second way is gentler for the older palm trees in the courts of our congregations. But that means that those in charge of the kingdom work in our congregations must find ways by which they can involve the older members in sharing their wisdom and experience of faith, which they have gathered over the years.

We read that around November 11 War Veterans of the Canadian Legion visit schools and speak to the children about their experiences. We also read about people who have been addicted to alcohol and drugs but who are now free of substance abuse, and are invited to speak to the youth. Perhaps there are some ideas here how we may make use of the fruits of our older members.

Would it not be sad if the righteous in our midst would go to glory while still full of unharvested fruit?

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