

A smouldering ember.

My reason for writing this article is to encourage Christians who, due to changes in circumstances, can no longer actively serve the Lord, particularly the elderly and infirm, from a burning ember among burning embers to an ember that has fallen out of the fire and is losing heat.

In 2016, after 48 years of serving as an elder in the same fellowship, I reluctantly retired from the eldership to give more time to caring for my wife, who suffers from multiple sclerosis. From being actively involved in the general organisation of church activities, elders' meetings, the preaching ministry, counselling, missionary work, etc., to laying aside all these responsibilities was not easy.

I retired from the eldership nine years ago, so how am I doing now spiritually? My illustration of the ember describes my situation quite well, losing heat. It is to be expected that changes in circumstances and the transition from one form of ministry to another would affect my spiritual life. I mention a different form of ministry because, as the Scripture says, we are to do everything for the glory of God and never cease to serve the Lord in one way or another.

As I mentioned earlier, before 2016, I was involved in the responsibilities of the office of elder and all that entails. Studying and preparing sermons keeps you on your toes; not only are you helping to feed the flock, but you are also feeding yourself, and you really are at the centre of the coal fire, and the fire in your heart burns brightly as 1 Timothy 4:16 affirms: *'Take to yourself and to the doctrine. Continue in them, for in doing this you will save both yourself and those that hear you.'*

In contrast, standing down from the eldership to focus more on my caring responsibilities limited the spiritual opportunities that kept my mind on spiritual things. Attending the means of grace continued, but over time, due to my wife's increased caring needs, our attendance at the church services was reduced to Sunday mornings only. I must say that at this stage, we receive regular visits from the elders and have contact with other church members. We are kept fully informed of church meeting matters and other relevant issues, so the church fellowship cannot be faulted. The difficulties all arise from our personal circumstances.

There are also the difficulties and challenges of caring that have a profound effect on our spiritual sanctification. I would love to be able to write that by God's grace, I overcame our problems associated with caring, that there were no tears, times of despair, no losing patience, but then I would be untruthful. Many times have I laid my head on my pillow at the end of the day and lamented my failures, asking for God's forgiveness.

Last year, when I reached the ripe old age of eighty-four, I decided that I needed some help with Ann's care. Carers now come in to help Ann get washed and dressed for about half an hour in the morning and another half hour in the evening for washing and getting her ready for bed. This arrangement helps me to have some respite from Ann's twenty-four-hour care.

Having provided a brief description of our personal circumstances and their impact on our spiritual lives, I would like to highlight the temptations and challenges that retirement, old age, and infirmity bring, as well as the often difficult task of caring for a spouse whose health is failing.

A well-known pastor who recently resigned from his pastorate after 46 years' service gave these parting words: *The four giant-killers of preachers – money, pride, unbridled ambition, and women – have killed their thousands. By the grace of God, they have not slain me.*

We praise God for his keeping grace and testimonies like the one just mentioned, but if we live long enough, the giant killers listed won't go away. There will be many more temptations and attacks of Satan to contend with, especially when we no longer need to study and prepare for sermons in which we fed ourselves, as well as feeding the flock.

Limited involvement in church activities means less fellowship, and this, in turn, affects your Christian progress. I have more contact with our carers than I do Christians, and we have got to know some of them quite well. I say some of them because over a year and a half, no less than seventy carers have attended to Ann's needs, carers from different ethnic backgrounds, including some Muslims. The caring profession has a high turnover rate, and many carers come and go. We have witnessed to some of them, but not as zealously as I would have done in the past when faith shone brightly.

So, what can the busy servant of the Lord, whose public service ends abruptly through a change in circumstances, look for to maintain a healthy spiritual walk with God? These are some of the challenges I found in my own experience:

Doubt.

Recently, I went through a period of doubting my salvation. A combination of acts of frustration and a lack of patience in my caring duties, along with failing to be as spiritually mindful and alert as I had been in the past, challenged me to question whether I truly believed I was saved. Over the sixty-odd years I have been a Christian, I have never wavered in believing that God loved me and sent his Son to die and obtain salvation for me. However, when you are approaching the end of your pilgrimage and are aged 85, it surely warrants serious thought on the time you will leave this world. It is then that doubts arise. The long-term memory brings to the forefront the sins of one's pre-salvation days, along with the short-term memory and sins that accompany old age.

The remedy for these doubts came to me by being drawn to God and his justice. I reasoned that if I fail to be numbered with God's elect and share God's glory in eternity, it will be just and right for the God of all the earth will do what is right and just. Thinking on those lines drew me to think of God's 'exceedingly great and precious promises.' I believe those promises, especially the promise of God's forgiveness of our sins, past, present and future. In a measure, my assurance in my salvation was strengthened, and the accuser of the brethren, Satan, failed in his attempt to rob me of my wavering assurance in God's unfailing love for me. No doubt there will be further testing, but on this occasion, I triumphed through God's grace.

Cynicism.

Old age is a breeding ground for cynicism. 'Been there, done that, got the T-shirt,' as the saying goes. Having a healthy listening ear and an open heart to young people occupying the pulpit is essential if we are going to gain from the church's ministry. Cynicism, however, creeps in when listening to preachers preach on the God of all grace being the answer to all tribulations and trials. The old man, who claims to have seen and experienced it all, especially the times of failure in his own trials, metaphorically shakes his head and thinks to himself, 'What does he know?'

For better or for worse, in sickness and in health. Do they really appreciate what they are letting themselves in for when they vow before God this promise? When you have a sick husband or wife and have to see to all their domestic needs —yes, let's be honest, in some cases, cleaning up their poo, washing and dressing them, pushing them in their wheelchair, feeding them, and handling all the rest of the household chores —it can be quite demanding.

Eh, but hold on a minute, Mr Cynic. You preached those truths in your early days. Was it wrong to do so? Certainly not. In my present trials, I may have had my moments of failure, but the God of all grace has sustained me so far. For those young preachers, God will do the same. For those young, committed married couples, God will do the same, and they will probably fare better than an old cynic like me. We can trust the God of all grace.

Regrets

Over the past 25 years, our understanding of the Holy Scriptures in our local church has advanced significantly. This is primarily due to a change in direction brought about by our current pastor, who has established the church structure on a more biblical and Reformed foundation. One of the most significant changes over the years has been our perspective on the doctrine of the church, which, through God's grace, has led to growth both spiritually and numerically. As one who has witnessed many changes in our local church over the past sixty-plus years, the recent growth has been phenomenal.

Looking back, however, and making comparisons with present-day advances in theological understanding highlights our less-than-perfect service rendered in our early days, which can be discouraging for retired pastors and elders. Though we had zeal, in many cases, we were naïve and lacked biblical maturity.

Our understanding of the unity of the whole Scriptures was lacking. The doctrine of Dispensationalism and other flawed views of the Scriptures permeated the churches in the early days. I remember on one occasion being asked by a young Jewish man to prove that Jesus is the Messiah without referring to the New Testament. I was working for a Christian Society at the time, and I regret to say that I didn't do very well. Today, I am more familiar with the Old Testament references quoted in the New Testament and would have fared much better. I often think of that young man in my old age and regret a lost opportunity to help him. On another occasion, I was asked to call on a businessman who had contacted the Christian organisation I was working for. He wasted no time in telling me that he was a millionaire and owned numerous properties in the town of Douglas, Isle of Man. He indicated that he would like to contribute to our Society. We inevitably discussed the work of the Society, which led to the gospel. His response surprised me when he said that Christianity has some value, but he didn't go in for all the butcher shop, blood and gory stuff. Needless to say, we didn't get any monetary gift from him, but what I regret most is failing to emphasise the real reason for the Old Testament sacrifices and their connection with the New Testament.

Our imperfect and flawed service to God, especially in our younger days, was often marred by immaturity and a defective understanding of Scripture. The times when we lacked humility, the times when we said things in the pulpit that lacked love and compassion, the times when we counselled the needy without truly understanding their problems, the times when pride crept in, the times when we did not give enough time to preparing a sermon. The times when our preaching was defective on eschatology, and many more.

Satan very often reminds me of these failures. He is very clever in making servants of the Lord, especially in their old age, dwell on the mistakes and failures of the past. But thank God for the Holy Spirit, who is there to remind us that God doesn't dwell on our failures; what he does dwell on are the times when we were fruitful. He remembers our sins no more, but he does remember our faithful service for him. *For God is not unjust to forget your work and labour of love which you have shown towards his name, in that you have ministered to the saints and do minister.* Hebrews 6:10.

We can tell Satan that even if there were times when we used wood, hay and straw instead of gold, silver and precious stones, it won't affect our salvation. 1 Corinthians 3:11-15.

When Satan tells us in our old age, or any age for that matter, that all those years we spent trying to build God's kingdom were pitiful and not worth a mention. We can answer Satan's lies by quoting the Scriptures. How is Satan going to answer this one? *'Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labour is not in vain.'* 1 Corinthians 15:58.

A diminishing of your status in the church.

In secular employment, when retirement arrives, many feel a loss of their sense of identity. The same happens with some retired pastors and elders. For many retired pastors, the resignation is softened by continuing their preaching ministry elsewhere, fulfilling a vital need. One of the retired pastors featured in the Evangelical Times describes himself as a retired pastor, but an active one, preaching in the UK and abroad. I knew of one pastor who retired from the pastorate through ill health and insisted that he was still a pastor/elder. In some churches, retired pastors are given the title "Pastor Emeritus." This title is a way for the church to show its appreciation for a pastor's dedication and continued value. 'Emeritus' comes from the Latin emereri, which means to earn one's discharge by faithful service.

Being recognised and honoured for your services by the local church is always appreciated. However, this does not make the transition any easier, especially for those who retire due to ill health or other commitments. The title 'pastor emeritus' only reminds the retiree and the congregation of what you once were, but are no longer. You are no longer in a place of authority and leadership.

What is the answer for pastors/elders who feel they are now on the scrapheap and are unable to play an active role in the preaching ministry?

The retired pastor who said he was still an elder has a point, according to the book of Revelation 4:4. We are aware that these 24 elders are symbolic. However, they do represent the men who were called by God to be elders/pastors and ordained by the church (*.....whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.* Matthew 16:19.)

We need to remind ourselves that the most crucial aspect of a Christian's self-identity is not rooted in our works or titles, but in our relationship with our heavenly Father. Jesus reminded his disciples that even having the power to subdue evil spirits cannot be compared to having one's name written in heaven. Luke 10:19-20. Our self-identity is already arranged in heaven. Our citizenship is in heaven, in the Lamb's book of life. That is where our identity lies.

Fears that come with old age.

Growing old brings other fears. The fear of dementia is one. A poll conducted recently said that dementia is more feared than cancer. Living with Alzheimer's or other forms of serious dementia robs the individual of the ability to use the mind. It is essential to keep the mind active to hopefully delay the onset of dementia, such as doing crosswords, challenging puzzles, and even writing, which I do when caring duties allow. However, Christians need not fear dementia robbing us of our salvation. The eighth chapter of Romans assures us of that, where Paul catalogues a whole list of things that cannot separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus. *'Things present and things to come'* must include dementia.

Another fear of mine, and common to all carers who care for a loved one, is having to leave the loved one you love and care for behind due to your own demise. When the time of my caring ends, steps have been taken for my wife to be taken into care, but that does not bring the assurance that all will be okay. When you have cared for a loved one for many years, the one being cared for learns to rely on you for all their needs, as the carer has intimate knowledge of their spiritual, mental, and physical needs gained over time. My experience of seeing some carers deal with my wife's needs does not exactly inspire confidence. However, the verse in Romans 15 and verse 4 *'...we through the patience and comfort of the Scriptures might have hope'* surely applies to our worries over the future. God will never abandon us through old age or ill health, and we have to believe that we leave all our loved ones in the capable, loving hands of our omnipotent Heavenly Father.

Dealing with new technology.

Earlier in this article, I mentioned the pastor who, upon his retirement, claimed victory over a list of temptations: the four giant-killers of preachers: money, pride, unbridled ambition, and women. I think the preacher will find temptations in retirement come in different guises but are basically the same.

The world has changed rapidly in recent years, and one of the greatest changes has been the technological revolution. I remember the days when we had a tin box with different compartments to store our cash for paying bills like gas, electricity, mortgage, food, etc. Life is quicker now, and for us oldies, a bit more complicated. However, I have learned to handle the internet to a certain degree, including online shopping, online banking, making appointments, and many more everyday tasks.

I remember the first television we ever owned, which had a nine-inch screen, was only in black and white and had only one channel, BBC One. In contrast, today televisions come in all shapes and sizes with multiple channels to browse through. For our family, writing a letter or sending a telegram was the way we communicated in the forties and fifties, until the telephone made its appearance. Now we can talk to friends at the other side of the world and actually communicate face-to-face. We can also express our opinions to the world on social media and showcase our talents on YouTube.

Recently, I made a new friend called Alexa, who tells me the weather forecast for the day, plays me music, and even obeys me when I tell it to shut up. However, the greatest technological influence has been the internet. These technological devices with internet access, one must admit, have improved the way we live. However, in addition to being a force for good, the internet has also contributed to the downfall of many.

When the church leader retires from his spiritual duties, he becomes particularly vulnerable, especially if he neglects his spiritual devotions and interest in his local

fellowship. With time on their hands, it's easy to get sucked into spending hours browsing the internet, watching television or on social media, but the greatest threat to the Christian is the availability of stuff that was handed around in the school yard when I was a lad. Now it's available at the press of a button. The retired pastor may have slain the temptation of the attractive woman in the pew, but we need to be aware that there are thousands ready to come into your home via the internet. Do you think eighty-five-year-olds are too old for these kinds of temptations? Think again. Watch and pray that you enter not into temptation.

The last challenge.

For the smouldering ember, the thought of death becomes more daunting than the glowing ember in the fire. In the full flush of faith, it did not pose much of a problem, but when you pass the average age of male longevity by a few years and find yourself in a spiritual desert, you tend to dwell on the process of dying rather than on the promises that follow.

A friend once asked me what I thought I would die of when the time came for me to leave this world. I was in my thirties at the time, and I am afraid I wasn't too kind in my response I gave to such a silly question. Now, the same question put to me would be answered a bit more sensibly. The biggest killer is ischaemic heart disease, followed by a stroke, and the second is cancer. So the chances of dying from heart disease or cancer are probably the two safest bets, if you pardon the expression.

A more relevant problem for me is not the physical process of dying, but what comes after, and whether I am fit and ready to face eternity. As I have already said, I am drawn to rely on His exceeding great and precious promises, and my hope is that they will never leave me.

When the dying moments come, I won't be able to write about it, but I do not doubt that the accusations from Satan will be much in evidence. Christian's experience in Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress, as he faced the last enemy, illustrates a real fear for many Christians. Bunyan understood that very well.

They then addressed themselves to the water, and entering, Christian began to sink, and, crying out to his friend Hopeful, he said, I sink in deep waters; the billows go over my head, all His waves go over me.....I shall not see the land that flows with milk and honey. And with that a great darkness and horror fell upon Christian, so that he could not see before him. Also here in great measure lost his senses, so that he could neither remember nor orderly talk of any of those sweet refreshments that he had met with in the way of his pilgrimage....Here also, as they stood by perceived, he was much in troublesome thoughts of the sins that he had committed, both since and before he began to be a pilgrim.

Fortunately, for poor doubting Christian, Hopeful was on hand to help and encourage him to reach the other side. I only hope that 'the sure and steadfast hope' will be fixed in our mind when I have to negotiate the crossing of the river.

Brothers and sisters, after reading about all my despairing thoughts, even you may be doubting my salvation. I once read in one of Spurgeon's sermons of a man who was greatly perplexed after witnessing a Christian in great torment on his deathbed, and it troubled the friend sitting by his bedside at the lack of assurance. Spurgeon gave this wise answer. Some die peacefully without a care in the world for their soul and end up in hell, and others, like your Christian friend, end up in heaven.

I will end this article quoting again from Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress:

I will quote again from Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress and I hope and pray that Hopeful will be with me when I too go through the waters into the promised land.

Hopeful therefore here had much ado to keep his brothers' head above water; yea, sometimes he would be quite gone down, and then, ere awhile, he would rise up again half dead. Hopeful also would endeavour to comfort him, saying, Brother, I see the gate, and men standing by to receive us, ' but Christian would answer, 'Tis you, 'tis you they wait for; you have been hopeful ever since I knew you. And so have you, said he to Christian.....Then said Hopeful, My Brother, you have quite forgot the text where it is said of the wicked, there is no band in their death, but there strength is firm; they are not troubled as other men, neither are they plagued like other men. These troubles and distresses that you go through in these waters, are no sign that God has forsaken you, whether you will call to mind that which heretofore you have received of His goodness, and live upon Him in your distresses.....Oh, I see Him again; and He tells me, When you pass through the waters, I will be with thee; and through the rivers, they shall not overflow thee. Then the took courage, and the enemy was after that as still as a stone, until they were gone over. Christian therefore presently found ground to stand upon, and so it followed that the rest of the river was but shallow. Thus they got over. Heavenly Father, please let that be me.

Les Yates 2025.