

Flourishing: God's Promise for Your Third Third

Introduction

I'd like to welcome you to the first presentation in the video-based course, *Flourishing in the Third Third of Life*. My name is Mark Roberts, and I'm delighted to be your teacher and host for this course. I believe that what I'll be talking about can, indeed, help you flourish in the third third of life. It can equip you to live fully and fruitfully as a follower of Jesus.

To begin, I'd like to explain briefly how I got into this work. For six years I was the Executive Director of the Max DePree De Pree Center for Leadership, the part of Fuller Seminary that focuses on helping marketplace leaders respond to God's callings. During my tenure as Executive Director, I talked with dozens and dozens of leaders in business, education, and non-profit work. I'd ask them how we might serve them, usually hearing about their desire to connect God with their daily work.

But often I'd hear something else, especially from leaders in their late 50s or early 60s. For example, one man in the Bay Area said to me, "I love my work in the company. But I know I'm going to have to retire in a few years. I've been mentoring younger leaders and I need to get out of their way. Yet I'm not done making a difference with my life. And I don't even know how to think about retirement. My church isn't helping me here. You folks should do something with this!" I'd respond to comments like this with interest, hoping that at some point the De Pree Center would have the resources to take on this crucial work.

Finally, in 2019, the generosity of a couple of donors gave us some the seed money we needed to start "doing something about this." We began our Flourishing in the Third Third of Life Initiative, launching officially in June 2020. The video course you're watching is central to that initiative. Of course, you might have guessed as much, given that this course bears the same name as the initiative, *Flourishing in the Third Third of Life*.

This six-section course is based on Scripture and science. It will help you understand how you can flourish in the third third of life. But let me be clear. This course isn't just about dispensing interesting information. I certainly hope to do that. But the purpose of this course is more practical and personal. **I want to help you flourish in the third third of your life. I want to equip you to live fully and fruitfully in this season of your life.**

The first presentation of this course is entitled: *Flourishing: God's Promise for Your Third Third*. In this message, I'll be laying the groundwork for the whole course by answering basic questions such as "What is the third third?", "What is flourishing?" and "Is flourishing possible in the third third of life?"

I believe God has planted within each one of us a desire to flourish, that is, to live well, to live with meaning and joy. We want our lives to matter, not just in our early and middle years, but all the way to our later years. I know this is true from many conversations I've had with folks in or entering the third third of life and, I might add, from my own experience as one who is solidly in the third third (unless I live to a hundred, in which case I'm at the tail end of my second third. But I'm not counting on such longevity!).

Let me say at the outset that while I believe flourishing is possible as we get older, there isn't a one-size-fits-all way to flourish. Each one of us is unique, and each one of us will flourish in unique ways. Each of us will also face unique challenges, our distinctive version of the challenges that come with aging. *But in this season of life each one of us has the potential to live fully and fruitfully.* We see this in the lives of older adults we know. We see this in academic research and scientific studies. And, most significantly, we see the promise of third third flourishing clearly and compellingly in Scripture. Flourishing in every season of life is central to God's intentions for us and is one of God's gracious gifts to us.

With that introduction, I'd like to think with you about a couple of basic questions:

First, what is the third third?

Second, what is flourishing?

What is the third third?

So, what is the third third of life?

The third third comes after the earlier phases of life: growing up and getting educated, building a career, establishing core relationships, and/or raising a family. You could think of those as the first two-thirds of life. The third third comes in later adulthood. It is referred to in various ways, as older adulthood, retirement, maturity, encore, or third phase.

[Technically](#), given the current U.S. life expectancy of 79.05 years, the average person enters the third third at 52 years and 7 months. If you live to 100, however, your third third doesn't start until 66 years and 7 months. But in the United States in general, the transitions associated with the third third of life often begin around age 60. By the way, according to [the latest CDC statistics](#), if you're 60 years old today, your life expectancy jumps to 82.6 years, 84.1 if you're a woman. That means it's likely that you'll have over 20 years in your third third.

The De Pree Center inherited the phrase "third third" from Walter C. Wright, Jr., a former Executive Director of the center. In 2012 Walt published a book called, [The Third Third of Life: Preparing for Your Future](#). He used "third third" as a neutral and broad way to talk about this season of life, without specifying precise ages or assuming one particular retirement narrative. But, in the introduction to Walt's book, Max De Pree wrote, "The truth of this matter is that *we have no idea when we enter the third third or when we will leave it*. Be we do have choices. *Who do I intend to be? Will I finish well?*" Great questions for this season of life! Who do I intend to be, not just to do, but to be? And will I finish well? Will I live fully and fruitfully to the end of my days?

It's common to think of the third third of life in terms of retirement. This is surely a central third third experience for many. But, interestingly enough, [18% of adults 65 and over](#) in the U.S. are in the workforce today. Moreover, the [65 plus crowd is projected to be the fastest-growing segment](#) of workers in the U.S. in the years to come. The headline of a

recent *Forbes* magazine story got my attention: [“A Third Of Seniors Seek To Work Well Past Retirement Age, Or Won’t Retire At All, Poll Finds.”](#)

Wow! Like I said earlier, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to third third flourishing. Each of us needs to discover the unique future God has for us, whether we retire in our 50s or work until our last day on earth.

What is Flourishing?

Having established the meaning of “third third,” let’s move to the next question: *What is flourishing?*

The word “flourish” comes to us from the Latin *florere* meaning “to flower or bloom.” *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines “flourish” as “to grow luxuriantly, thrive, achieve success, or prosper.”ⁱ

“Flourish” shows up commonly with various meanings. All of the following are recent examples:

- A piece in the *Sun Patriot* newspaper in Minnesota had this title, [“Group offers environment for writers to flourish.”](#)
- The *New York Post* article had this headline, [“Injured Carl Lawson ‘envious’ watching Jets defense line flourish.”](#)
- And my least favorite headline came from the *Washington Post*: [“Climate change lets mosquitoes flourish – and feast – in Los Angeles.”](#) Yes, in Los Angeles County, including my back yard! Until recently, Southern California had very few mosquitoes. Now they are flourishing! Thanks in part to my blood donation! The more they flourish, the less I flourish.

What does it mean for human beings to flourish? Scholars trace this language all the way back to Aristotle, who saw the goal of human life as what classical scholars would now call “human flourishing” (translating the Greek word *eudaimonia*). In 2011 Dr. Martin Seligman from the University of Pennsylvania published a book called *Flourish*. Seligman proposed the PERMA model of human flourishing:

P – Positive emotions

E – Engagement
R – Relationships
M – Meaning
A – Accomplishments

More recently, Dr. Tyler VanderWeele, director of the [Human Flourishing Program at Harvard University](#), has written: “*Flourishing itself might be understood as a state in which all aspects of a person’s life are good. We might also refer to such a state as complete human well-being, which is again arguably a broader concept than psychological well-being*” (“[On the promotion of human flourishing](#)”). According to VanderWeele, flourishing includes:

1. Happiness and Life Satisfaction
2. Mental and Physical Health
3. Meaning and Purpose
4. Character and Virtue
5. Close Social Relationships
6. Financial and Material Stability (for “secure flourishing”).

The Bible offers a variety of ways to think about human flourishing, including *shalom* (peace), *’ashre* (blessedness), and *tamim* (wholeness) (see Jonathan Pennington, “[A Biblical Theology of Human Flourishing](#)”). The Apostle Paul commends what he calls the “life that really is life” (2 Tim 6:19). Jesus says he came so that people might “have life, and have it abundantly” (John 10:10). Real life, abundant life, a life of peace, blessedness, and wholeness . . . that’s what we’re talking about when it comes to flourishing. And that’s what God promises to us through Scripture.

The verb “to flourish” appears many times in the Old Testament, often translating the Hebrew verb *parach*, which means “to bud, sprout.” In Isaiah 35:1-2, for example, we read, “The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and *blossom* [*parach*]; like the crocus it shall *blossom* [*parach*] abundantly and rejoice with joy and singing.” *Parach* can also be used figuratively, as in Proverbs 11:28, “Those who trust in riches will wither, but the righteous will flourish [*parach*] like green leaves.”

Flourishing in Scripture is not just living well, but flowering, being fruitful. Thus, I often speak of flourishing as living fully – what Jesus calls the abundant life – and living fruitfully.

Is Flourishing Possible in the Third Third of Life?

Scripture promises a life of flourishing, *but is this actually possible for those of us in the third third of life?* Or does living fully and fruitfully generally come earlier in life, in the first and especially the second thirds?

If you pay attention to our cultural conversations, common negative narratives of aging would say “No. Flourishing is not possible in the third third. Or at best it’s rare.” If you begin to look for these narratives, you don’t have to look very hard. You can find them in news sources, social media, and all over the internet. You can hear them in casual conversations, workplace deliberations, and popular jokes.ⁱⁱ

The pervasiveness of negative cultural narratives for older adulthood can diminish, discourage, and disparage the potential of third thirders to flourish in their personal lives and contribute to the common good. The more those of us in the third third hear and absorb these narratives, the more we will minimize our potential for flourishing. And the more these narratives live in our communities and institutions – like churches, for example – the more this minimization will dominate our lives.

Let me summarize three of the most common negative narratives. I expect you’ll find them sadly familiar.

Negative Narrative #1 – The third third of life is a time when it’s all about you.

If you search the internet for websites focusing on the third third of life, especially those talking about retirement, you’ll find numerous examples of the “It’s All About You” narrative. For example, one website reads, “Retire and make this stage of life *all about you*. After all these years it’s been about taking care of your job, your employer, and your family. No

doubt you stressed about how to juggle time and make everything work. Now it's time to finally *put yourself first* in retirement."

In calling this a negative narrative, I'm not suggesting it's wrong to enjoy life after you retire. I'm not passing judgment on those who play golf or pickleball, binge-watch their favorite TV shows, spend quiet evenings with good friends, or enjoy new freedom to travel. But if you approach the third third of life with the assumption that it is *all* about you, then you are choosing a self-centered, self-absorbed life. And since today's average 65-year-old will live almost 20 years, that's an awful lot of time devoted to your own pleasure. Plus, as we'll see later in this course, plenty of research shows that people who live a self-centered third third life do not do as well as those who live for something beyond themselves.

Moreover, if you're a Christian, it's impossible to find support for the "All About You" narrative in Scripture. Remember, Jesus invited those who wanted to follow him to "*deny themselves* and take up their cross daily and follow" him (Luke 9:23). In another place, Jesus said, "My Father is glorified by this, that you *bear much fruit* and become my disciples" (John 15:8). We are to *seek God's kingdom above all*, certainly above our own enjoyment (Matt 6:33). So, for a follower of Jesus, the "All About You" narrative stands in the way of living as a faithful and fruitful disciple of Jesus. Thus, it's a negative narrative that will keep you from authentic flourishing.

Negative Narrative #2 – The third third of life is a time for dependency and damage.

According to this common narrative, older adults are mainly and perniciously dependent on younger people, both in personal relationships and in the society as a whole. This widespread dependence, or so goes the narrative, damages the common good, especially the economy. The coming damage done by older adults is often called the "Gray Wave" or "Silver Tsunami." Those of us with gray or silver hair are seen as a tidal wave poised to wipe out civilization as we know it.

For example, not long ago the *New York Times* ran a piece with the title, "[This Economy is Not Aging Gracefully](#)." The author laid out several facts

that deserve to be taken seriously. But his language reflected and amplified the “Dependency and Damage” narrative. For example, here is a zinger: “The American population is getting older, and that has *devastating consequences for the economy*. . . . Many of our most *intractable economic ills* can be traced to some degree to this ineluctable fact: America is getting old.”

If that article were just one outlier, I wouldn’t be too concerned. But you can find this sort of narrative all over the place. When it shows up, it almost always assumes that older adults, though the main part of the problem, are not at all part of the solution. Why not? Because older people have aged out of their productive lives. We can’t contribute to a thriving economy. We can only drag it down. This points to the third negative narrative.

Negative Narrative #3 – The third third of life is a time of disability vs. capability.

This narrative assumes that older adults are well past their prime, past their time of capability and contribution. This sort of ageism was exemplified by Mark Zuckerberg, founder of Facebook. Back in 2007 at an event hosted by Stanford University, Zuckerberg told the audience: “I want to stress the importance of being young and technical. *Young people are just smarter.*” I wonder if, fifteen years later, Zuckerberg still agrees with himself. Nevertheless, what he said expressed a common assumption that older adults have limited capabilities and increasing disabilities.

If Zuckerberg had done his homework, he’d at least have said something more nuanced. It’s true, in general, that younger brains are better at certain tasks than older brains. An [article from the National Institute of Aging](#) observes, “Some changes in thinking are common as people get older. For example, older adults may:

- Be slower to find words and recall names
- Find they have more problems with multitasking
- Experience mild decreases in the ability to pay attention.”

I can own up to those three, and a few more, like losing my phone or arriving in the kitchen without remembering what I was going to do in there.

Yet the reality of mental losses owing to aging is not the whole story. The National Institute of Aging article continues, “Aging may also bring positive cognitive changes. For example, many studies have shown that older adults have more extensive vocabularies and greater knowledge of the depth of meaning of words than younger adults. Older adults may also have learned from a lifetime of accumulated knowledge and experiences.” (If you’re interested in recent research about the aging brain, I’d point you to [*Brain Rules for Aging Well*](#), by John Medina, and [*The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain*](#), by Gene D. Cohen. Both Medina and Cohen are serious scientists, by the way, but they write for a popular audience. You can find information on these books in Section 1 of the workbook.)

Now, let me be clear, I’m not assuming that older adults do not experience the loss of certain capabilities. Minds do change and bodies do age. I used to hike much faster than my son. He had to struggle to keep up. Now he has to slow down just so I can stay with him. So, I admit I’m slower. But, on a good day, I can still do 15 miles in the High Sierra and hope to keep this up for many years, even if it takes me longer than it once did. (Plus, I’m grateful for a patient son!)

The problem with the “Disability vs. Capability” narrative is that it overestimates the disabilities of most older adults while minimizing their capabilities. It assumes that “Young people are just smarter” in every way, without taking into account ways in which older people are often smarter. I may not have the energy or spunk of the young business leader whom I’m mentoring these days, but I do have some wisdom to offer him. At least that’s what he tells me.

If we’re going to flourish in the third third of life, we need new narratives, narratives about living, narratives about aging, narratives based on solid research, not on ageist prejudices. Most of all, we need narratives based on Scripture, on God’s vision for human life, and God’s promise of lifelong flourishing.

Later in this course, we'll consider some newer and better narratives. Now I'd like to wrap up this talk by focusing our attention on the biblical foundations for these truer stories.

Flourishing and the Promise of Scripture

Scripture offers the promise of flourishing throughout all seasons of life, including the third third. The Bible shows us that fruitfulness isn't something reserved for the young. It's not extra credit for those who choose to make a difference. Rather, living fully and fruitfully is essential to our spiritual and human DNA.

Genesis 1 shows that God created us in God's own image. Then God blessed us and called us to "be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it, and have dominion . . ." (Gen 1:28). Jesus revealed himself to be the good shepherd who has come so that his "sheep" "may have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Jesus also said that those who abide in him "bear much fruit" (John 15:5). "My Father is glorified by this," he added, "that you bear much fruit and become my disciples" (John 15:8). God intends for human beings to flourish, to live fully and fruitfully.

We see the promise of flourishing clearly in Psalm 92. Verses 12-13 read:

The righteous flourish like the palm tree,
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.
They are planted in the house of the LORD;
they flourish in the courts of our God.

Those who are righteous, which is to say, those who live in right relationship with God, and through God in right relationship with people, will "flourish like the palm tree," excelling in beauty and productivity. They will also "grow like a cedar in Lebanon," exemplifying both strength and usefulness. When our roots go down deep into God, we "flourish in the courts of our God."

That sounds wonderful, doesn't it? But we may quietly wonder if this kind of flourishing is available to older adults. Or is it only for the young? The

answer to this question comes as we read on in Psalm 92. Let me repeat verses 12 and 13, now adding verse 14:

The righteous flourish like the palm tree,
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.
They are planted in the house of the LORD;
they flourish in the courts of our God.
*In old age they still produce fruit;
they are always green and full of sap, . . .*(12-14).

Did you catch that? “The *righteous flourish . . . In old age they still produce fruit*; they are *always green* and full of sap.” Yes, flourishing is for folks in the third third of life.

I need to share with you one of my favorite parts of Psalm 92. No, it’s not the “full of sap” part, though I do love the irony of that phrase. Rather, my favorite part of Psalm 92 is the line, “In old age they still produce fruit.” That translation gets the sense correctly. But, literally, the Hebrew original reads, “They bear fruit even *with gray hair* [sebah].” As one whose remaining hair is gray, or white, to be completely honest, I’m glad for the promise of fruitfulness “in old age,” that is, “with gray hair.”

Flourishing, Fruitfulness, and Righteousness

In the biblical understanding of flourishing, both fruitfulness and righteous are essential.

According to Psalm 92, fruitfulness comes as a result of being righteous, that is, of living in right relationship with God and through God with people. *Our relationship with God is the most essential prerequisite for flourishing.* Notice that fruitfulness in old age, according to Psalm 92, comes from being “planted in the house of the LORD” (92:13). I’m reminded of a passage from Jeremiah where those who trust in the Lord are “like a tree planted by water . . . in the year of drought it is not anxious, and it *does not cease to bear fruit*” (Jer 17:7-8). Thus, in Psalm 92, after seeing that the righteous bear fruit even in old age, we read in verse 15 “showing that the Lord is upright.” Our fruitfulness shows God’s

righteousness. God is the source of human flourishing. God gets the glory when we flourish in all seasons of life.

You've noticed that I've defined righteousness in terms of right relationship with God and therefore with others. The relational dynamic of righteousness is crucial to biblical revelation. It's not just a matter of doing the right things. It's doing the right things in the context of right relationships. This truth will become even more significant in Section 2 of this course.

As Christians, when we read Psalm 92, we understand that our righteousness has everything to do with our relationship with God through Jesus Christ. 2 Corinthians 5:21 shows us that in his amazing grace, God had Christ bear our sin "so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."

Being righteous in Christ doesn't lead only to salvation after we die. It also leads to a life of flourishing, a full and fruitful life. For example, the Apostle Paul prays for the Christians in Philippi, asking that they might "determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ [they] may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God" (Phil 1:10-11). Through Jesus Christ, we can live fully and fruitfully, abundantly and productively. In the end, our lives will have produced not just a small bowl of fruit, but "the harvest of righteousness" that comes through Christ. This harvest comes in the first third, the second third, and the third third of life, by the grace of God. (Plus, in a way you might say that our harvest of righteousness really comes in the fourth third, beyond this life. I'll have more to say about the fourth third later on in this course.)

Conclusion and Invitation

In this first lecture of our course, I've set the stage for what will follow. In the next section, we'll dig more deeply into the relational dynamics of third third flourishing.

If you want to examine more thoroughly what I've taught today, let me point you to the workbook for this course. There you'll find:

- A lecture outline (with references and links)
- A personal study guide (that includes questions for reflection and a collection of additional resources for study and inspiration).
- Two devotions (that will help you take what you're learning and work it into your heart, your daily life, and your relationship with God).
- Small group questions.

These questions are provided for small groups that can happen in a variety of settings. You may break out into small groups right after I finish this lecture. Or you may gather at a separate time for conversation. It all depends on how you're using this course. No matter when you meet for discussion, however, let me encourage you to talk with others about what you're learning. Such conversations will help you go deeper in your understanding and experience of third third flourishing. Plus, dialogue of this sort is a way to grow in relationships that will contribute to flourishing.

As I prepare to sign off, I'd like to point, once again, to the promising truth found in Psalm 92. Let this truth guide and inspired you as we go through this course together:

The righteous flourish like the palm tree,
 and grow like a cedar in Lebanon.
 They are planted in the house of the LORD;
 they flourish in the courts of our God.
 In old age they still produce fruit;
 they are always green and full of sap.
 showing the the LORD is upright;
 he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.
 - Psalm 92:12-15

The *Oxford English Dictionary* has “to blossom, thrive, prosper, or do well.”

ii (The widespread presence and acceptance of ageism is demonstrated in a recent book, [*Ageism Unmasked: Exploring Age Bias and How to End It*](#), by Tracey Gendron, Ph.D.)