

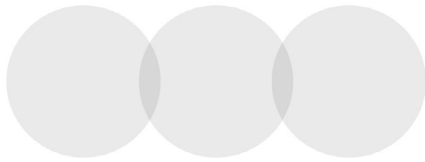


LECTURE SUMMARIES  
AND RESOURCES

# FLOURISHING

IN THE THIRD THIRD OF LIFE  
COURSE

 FULLER  
DE PREE CENTER



**LECTURE SUMMARIES  
AND RESOURCES**

# **FLOURISHING**

**IN THE THIRD THIRD OF LIFE  
COURSE**

Copyright © 2023 Fuller Theological Seminary. All rights reserved.

This license allows the owner to download one (1) copy of the PDF which may be printed once.

Lectures and study materials written by Dr. Mark D. Roberts

Cover Design, Original Photography by Justin P. Heap

Project Support by Dr. Meryl Herr, Paul Matsushima, and Chelsea Logan

Unless otherwise noted, all Bible verses are taken from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright © 1989 National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Fuller Theological Seminary  
c/o Max De Pree Center for Leadership  
135 N. Oakland Ave.  
Pasadena, CA 91182  
[connect@depree.org](mailto:connect@depree.org)  
[www.depree.org](http://www.depree.org)

# About This Resource

## *Lecture Summaries and Resources*

The *Flourishing in the Third Third of Life* course is a six-session, video-based course, rooted in Scripture and enriched by science. It's designed to help you understand how people can flourish in the third third of life. But this course isn't just about dispensing interesting and invaluable information. Its purpose is more practical and personal. We want to help you flourish in the third third of your life. We want to equip you to live fully as you experience abundant life and to live fruitfully as you make a difference in the world.

Your workbook contains several resources that will help you engage in the course sessions. These lecture summaries and resources are meant to supplement the workbook. In this guide you'll find one summary and a list of additional resources per session.

Grace and Peace,



**Dr. Mark D. Roberts**

Senior Strategist  
Max De Pree Center for Leadership

# Flourishing:

## God's Promise for Your Third Third

### *Session 1*

#### **Introduction**

This course is called "Flourishing in the Third Third of Life." But what does this mean? What is the third third of life? What is flourishing? Once we've answered these questions, we wonder, "Is flourishing *really* possible in the third third of life? Or is this just wishful thinking?"

The first session of this course sets the stage for what follows by defining basic terms, such as "third third" and "flourishing." It examines Scripture for clues as to the possibility of third third flourishing.

## Session 1 Summary

**Note:** *We recommend that you use this summary either after the lecture to remind you of the main points and references, or before the lecture if you want to prepare in advance. We do not recommend using this summary during the lecture itself since it is a shortened version of the talk, not a transcript. The references and links are listed at the end of the summary.*

### Main Point

You can *flourish* in the third third of life, that is, you can *live fully* as you experience abundant life and *fruitfully* as you make a difference in the world.

### Introduction

God has planted within us a desire to flourish, to live with meaning and joy.

Flourishing is possible even in the third third of life. We see this in individual lives, academic research, scientific studies, and, most of all in Scripture. God intends for us to flourish throughout our lives, including the third third.

### What is the Third Third?

The third third of life comes after the earlier phases of life: growing up and getting educated, building a career, raising a family, and establishing core relationships. The third third is often referred to as older adulthood, retirement, encore or third phase.

Technically, given current U.S. life expectancy of 79.05 years, the average person enters the third third at 52.7 years. But the transitions associated with the third third often begin around 60.

“The truth of this matter is that we have no idea when we enter the third third or when we will leave it. But we do have choices. Who do I intend to be? Will I finish well?” – Max De Pree, in Walter C. Wright Jr.’s, *The Third Third of Life: Preparing for Your Future*.

### 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.”

According to Dr. Tyler VanderWeele, director of the Human Flourishing Program at Harvard, “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 flourishing, including: *shalom* (peace), *ashre* (blessedness), and *tamim* (wholeness) (see Jonathan Pennington, "A Biblical Theology of Human Flourishing"). The Apostle Paul speaks of the "life that really is life" (1 Tim 6:19). Jesus came so that people might "have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10).

The verb "to flourish" appears many times in the Old Testament, often translating the Hebrew verb *parach*, which means "to bud, sprout" (see Isa 35:1-2, Song 6:11). It can be used figuratively, as in Prov 11:28: "Those who trust in riches will wither, but the righteous will flourish [*parach*] like green leaves."

### Is Flourishing Possible in the Third Third of Life?

Scripture promises a life of flourishing, but is this relevant to those in the third third of life?

Popular negative narratives of aging would say "No." These narratives include:

*Negative Narrative #1 – The third third of life is a time when it's all about you.* You might be able to enjoy a self-centered pleasurable life, but you won't be living fruitfully, making a difference that matters.

*Negative Narrative #2 – The third third of life is a time for dependency and damage.* Older adults, because of their dependency, are damaging the common good. They constitute the "Gray Wave" or "Silver Tsunami" that threatens our way of life.

*Negative Narrative #3 – The third third of life is a time of disability vs. capability.* Older adults are past their prime, past their time to contribute. As Mark Zuckerberg said, "Young people are just smarter." Folks in the third third have liabilities and disabilities, not capabilities.

The pervasiveness of these and other negative narratives might make us doubt that flourishing is possible in the third third of life.

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.

## Flourishing and the Promise of Scripture

Scripture offers the promise of flourishing throughout all seasons of life, including the third third.

God created us in God's own image, calling us to be fruitful (Gen 1:27-28). Jesus came to offer abundant life (John 10:10). Jesus 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 third third flourishing clearly in Psalm 92:12-15, where it says,

*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 that the LORD is upright;  
he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.*

## Flourishing, Fruitfulness, and Righteousness

According to Psalm 92, fruitfulness comes as a result of being righteous, that is, 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). This is like 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).

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.



## Resources and References

You can find many additional resources related to third third flourishing at the De Pree Center website: <https://depree.org/third-third/>

“Provisional Life Expectancy Estimates for 2020,” Centers for Disease Control (July 2021). (<https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr015-508.pdf>)

Walter C. Wright, Jr., *The Third Third of Life: Preparing for Your Future* (IVP Books, 2021). (<https://www.amazon.com/Third-Life-Preparing-Your-Future/dp/0830837965>)

Palash Ghosh, “A Third Of Seniors Seek To Work Well Past Retirement Age, Or Won’t Retire At All, Poll Finds,” *Forbes* (May 2021). (<https://www.forbes.com/sites/palashghosh/2021/05/06/a-third-of-seniors-seek-to-work-well-past-retirement-age-or-wont-retire-at-all-poll-finds/?sh=5c3b334c6b95>)

Martin Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being* (Atria Paperback, 2011). (<https://www.amazon.com/Flourish-Visionary-Understanding-Happiness-Well-being/dp/1439190763/>)

Human Flourishing Program, Harvard University’s Institute for Quantitative Social Science. (<https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/>)

Tyler J. VanderWeele, “On the promotion of human flourishing,” *PNAS* (July 13, 2017). (<https://www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.1702996114>)

Jonathan Pennington, “A Biblical Theology of Human Flourishing,” Institute for Faith, Work, & Economics (March 4, 2015). (<https://tifwe.org/resource/a-biblical-theology-of-human-flourishing-2/>)

Eduardo Porter, “The Economy is Not Aging Gracefully,” *New York Times*, (June 15, 2019). (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/15/sunday-review/work-age-economy.html>)

“How the Aging Brain Affects Thinking,” National Institute on Aging. (<https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/how-aging-brain-affects-thinking>)

John Medina, *Brain Rules for Aging Well: 10 Principles for Staying Vital, Happy, and Sharp* (Pear Press, Oct 2017). (<https://www.amazon.com/Brain-Rules-Aging-Well-Principles/dp/0996032673/>)

Gene D. Cohen, *The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain* (Basic Books, 2006). (<https://www.amazon.com/Mature-Mind-Positive-Power-Aging/dp/0465012035/>)

The Human Flourishing Program of Harvard University offers a wide variety of resources related to flourishing. You can find their Human Flourishing Measure at

this website: <https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/measuring-flourishing>.

Among the Christian ministries focused on third third flourishing, Re-Ignite (<https://re-ignite.net/>) is especially strong. Richard and Leona Bergstrom do excellent work in this field.

# Relationships!

## Relationships! Relationships!

### *Session 2*

#### **Introduction**

In Session 1 of this *Flourishing in the Third Third of Life* course, we clarified the meaning of key terms, such as “flourishing” and “third third.” We considered negative narratives that might keep us from flourishing, but concluded with the stirring promise of Psalm 92: “The righteous flourish like the palm tree . . . . In old age they still produce fruit; they are always green and full of sap” (92:12, 14).

If flourishing in the third third of life is possible, if it’s something promised to us in Scripture, we want to ask an obvious question: How? How can we flourish as we get older? What should we do . . . and not do? Where should we invest our time, energy, and love?

Session 2 of this course begins to answer the “How?” question. We’ll explore the importance of relationships for third third flourishing, guided by serious scholarship and God’s Word.

## Session 2 Summary

### Main Point

Scripture teaches us and science shows us that relationships are essential for third third flourishing. If you want to live fully and fruitfully in the third third of life, nurture deep, loving, lasting, and generative relationships.

### Introduction

Last time, in Session 1, I clarified the meaning of key terms, such as “flourishing” and “third third.” I presented three negative narratives that might keep us from flourishing but concluded with the stirring promise of Psalm 92.

*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. (Psalm 92:12-14)*

### How Can We Flourish in the Third Third of Life?

#### Wisdom from Psalm 92 and Ephesians

We will flourish when we are “planted in the house of the LORD” (Ps 92:12-13). The roots of our lives must grow down into the soil of God’s presence. Ephesians 2:19-22 reveals that Christians are built together into “a holy temple in the Lord . . . a dwelling place for God.” Thus, we will flourish if we are planted in the “temple” of Christian community. Relationships have everything to do with flourishing in all seasons of life, especially the third third.

#### Relationships and the Harvard Study of Adult Development

The Harvard Study of Adult Development, a longitudinal study spanning more than 80 years, sought to answer the question of what helps people to live well, especially in their older years. The study’s answer was unexpected. What matters most, according to George Vaillant, former director of the study: “Relationships! Relationships! Relationships!” (See also the TED talk, “What makes a good life?” by Robert Waldinger, current director of the Harvard Study.)

#### Relationships and Brain Science

The findings of the Harvard Study on the importance of relationships are confirmed by current research on the brain as summarized in John Medina’s fascinating book, *Brain Rules for Aging Well*.

According to Medina, a molecular biologist and brain scientist, “The more social relationships you maintain, the bigger the gray matter volume in specific regions

of your frontal lobe. Which means that relationships are to the frontal lobe what milkshakes are to your waistline” (p. 21).

Medina adds, “It’s best to have friends of all ages—including kids. That notion may transcend our culture’s perspective, but not our culture’s data. The more intergenerational relationships older people form, the higher the brain benefit turns out to be, especially when seniors interact with elementary-age children. It reduces stress, decreases rates of affective disorders such as anxiety and depression, and even lowers mortality rates” (p. 24).

So, from developmental psychology and neuroscience we get the same conclusion: *If you want to flourish in the third third of life, focus on relationships.* In fact, relationships matter more than just about anything else.

### Relationships in Scripture

The importance of relationships for flourishing comes as no surprise to those of us who know the Bible. Scripture emphasizes the importance of relationships from the first chapter of Genesis to the last chapter of Revelation (see Gen 1:27-28; Rev 22:1-2).

Sin disrupts and corrupts relationships, beginning with our relationship with God, and including our relationships with each other (Gen 3).

Through God’s grace in Christ, we are saved from the power and damage of sin. Our salvation includes restored and renewed relationships with God and people (Eph 2:1-22). We will be flourishing in life when we live in right-relationship with God and others, thus bearing fruit (John 15) and walking in the good works God has prepared for us (Eph 2:10). Scripture teaches us how to nurture healthy, productive, loving relationships (Eph 4-5).

### Relationships in Ephesians

According to Ephesians 2, God’s grace in Jesus Christ brings us into a loving relationship with God. When we are saved by grace through faith, we are created anew in Christ Jesus (Eph 2:8-10). God has a whole new way of living for us, a life of good works. We are not saved by good works, but for good works. Salvation by grace leads to a life of fruitfulness.

The second half of Ephesians 2 reveals that the death of Christ on the cross not only saves individuals from sin and death, but also brings peace between divided peoples (2:14-16). Through the cross of Christ, God reconciles people who once were enemies. He redeems and restores broken relationships. Thus, to the Gentile readers of Ephesians the Apostle Paul writes:

*So then you [meaning, you Gentiles who have accepted God's grace in Christ, you] are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone; in him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. (Ephesians 2:19-22)*

God joins together all of God's people in unity. Broken relationships are mended. Injustice is overcome. Reconciliation is secured through the saving death of Christ. Together, we become a temple, a dwelling place for God.

## Key Relationships for Third Third Flourishing

All relationships matter, but certain kinds of relationships are particularly important for third third flourishing.

*Close, Committed, Loving (Peer) Relationships* – Strong, positive family relationships, especially marriage, are vital for third third flourishing. But recent research shows that friendships are also essential for thriving, especially for older adults. (See “To Age Well, You Need Friends” in *Psychology Today*.) As Christians, we are sisters and brothers in God's family, a family in which all people can experience the benefits of close, committed, loving relationships.

*Intergenerational Relationships* – Relationships between people of different generations are crucial for those in the third third of life as well as those who are younger. Older adults have a passion for generativity, that is, for seeking the wellbeing of younger generations. For a compelling case for the importance of relationships between older and younger people, see Marc Freedman's wonderful book, *How to Live Forever*. Grandparenting is one common and beloved experience of intergenerational relationships.

*Mentoring* – Mentoring is a significant kind of intergenerational relationship, in which an older person (usually) joins a younger person (usually) in a relationship of learning and growth. Mentoring relationships are primarily for the benefit of the mentee, but also enrich the life of the mentor. For a moving example of mentoring, see the relationship of Clark Terry and Justin Kauflin, portrayed in the documentary film, *Keep On Keepin' On*.

## Conclusion

The bottom line is simple, if you want to flourish in the third third of life, focus on “Relationships! Relationships! Relationships!”

1. Scripture teaches us and science shows us that relationships are essential for third third flourishing.
2. Build and nurture close, committed, loving relationships, such as those you

- share with family and friends (peers).
3. Build and nurture intergenerational relationships.
  4. Be open to mentoring younger folks.

## Resources and References

You can find many additional resources related to third third flourishing at the De Pree Center website: <https://depree.org/third-third/>.

George Vaillant, *Triumphs of Experience: The Men of the Harvard Grant Study* (Harvard/Belknap: May 2015). (<https://www.amazon.com/Triumphs-Experience-Harvard-Grant-Study/dp/0674503813/>)

George Vaillant, *Aging Well: Surprising Guideposts to a Happier Life from the Landmark Study of Adult Development*. (<https://www.amazon.com/Aging-Well-Surprising-Guideposts-Development/dp/0316090077/>)

Liz Mineo, "Good genes are nice, but joy is better," *The Harvard Gazette* (April 2017). (<https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2017/04/over-nearly-80-years-harvard-study-has-been-showing-how-to-live-a-healthy-and-happy-life/>)

Robert Waldinger, "What makes a good life? Lessons from the longest study on happiness," TEDxBeaconStreet (November 2015). ([https://www.ted.com/talks/robert\\_waldinger\\_what\\_makes\\_a\\_good\\_life\\_lessons\\_from\\_the\\_longest\\_study\\_on\\_happiness?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_waldinger_what_makes_a_good_life_lessons_from_the_longest_study_on_happiness?language=en))

John Medina, *Brain Rules for Aging Well: 10 Principles for Staying Vital, Happy, and Sharp* (Pear Press, Oct 2017). (<https://www.amazon.com/Brain-Rules-Aging-Well-Principles/dp/0996032673/>)

Temma Ehrenfeld, "To Age Well, You Need Friends," *Psychology Today* (June 2017). (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/open-gently/201706/age-well-you-need-friends>)

Rosemary Blieszner, and others, "Friendship in Later Life: A Research Agenda," *Innovation in Aging*, 3:1 (January 2019). (<https://academic.oup.com/innovateage/article/3/1/igz005/5423647>)

William J. Chopik, "Associations among relational values, support, health, and well-being across the adult lifespan," *Personal Relationships* 24:2 (June 2017). (<https://doi.org/10.1111/pere.12187>)

Erik Erikson, *Childhood and Society* (Norton, 1993). (<https://www.amazon.com/Childhood-Society-Erik-H-Erikson/dp/039331068X/>)

Walter C. Wright, *Mentoring: The Promise of Relational Leadership* (Wipf and Stock, 2013). (<https://www.amazon.com/Mentoring-Relational-Leadership-Walter-Wright/dp/1625645171/>)

Marc Freedman, *How to Live Forever: The Enduring Power of Connecting the Generations* (PublicAffairs, 2018). (<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07B8LL4WJ/>)



*Keep on Keepin' On*, documentary on Clark Terry and Justin Kauflin (2014). (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2674040/>)

The Harvard Study of Adult Development website:  
<https://www.adultdevelopmentstudy.org/>

You can learn more about the Harvard Study of Adult Development by watching Robert Waldinger's TED talk: "What makes a good life?" ([https://www.ted.com/talks/robert\\_waldinger\\_what\\_makes\\_a\\_good\\_life\\_lessons\\_from\\_the\\_longest\\_study\\_on\\_happiness?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/robert_waldinger_what_makes_a_good_life_lessons_from_the_longest_study_on_happiness?language=en))

To learn more about brain science, relationships, and the third third of life, check out *Brain Rules for Aging Well* (<https://www.amazon.com/Brain-Rules-Aging-Well-Principles/dp/0996032673/>), by John Medina.

You might also want to read *How to Live Forever* (<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07B8LL4WJ/>) by Marc Freedman or *Growing Young* (<https://www.amazon.com/Growing-Young-Essential-Strategies-Discover/dp/0801072972/>) by the folks at Fuller Youth Institute.

De Pree Center resources on mentoring: <https://depree.org/mentoring>.

# Health:

## Stewarding the Gift of Your Body

### *Session 3*

#### **Introduction**

You could spend every minute of your life digesting tips on how you should manage your body as you get older. A recent Google search on “healthy aging” came up with 8,750,000,000 results. If you’re going to read them all, you’d better get going!

You would do well to listen attentively to trustworthy experts on matters of health and aging. But, as a Christian, you need to learn how to think about your body from a biblical perspective. For example, from Scripture you learn that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit and a means by which you worship God through what you do each day.

Therefore, if you are to flourish in the third third of life, if you want to live fully and fruitfully, you should steward well the gift of your body, through which you can glorify God. Part of this stewardship involves paying close attention to those who can help you take good care of your body, including your brain.

## Session 3 Summary

### Main Point

Your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit and a means by which you worship God through what you do each day. If you are to flourish in the third third of life, you should steward well the gift of your body, through which you can glorify God.

### Introduction

According to the Harvard Human Flourishing Program, one crucial aspect of human flourishing is health, both mental and physical.

Because the topic of health is very personal, and because we often have strong feelings about this topic, we need to address it with grace, grace for ourselves and grace for others.

### Some Common Narratives of Aging Bodies

#### The Disease and Decline Narrative

The Disease and Decline Narrative accentuates the physical and mental losses that come with aging. As we get older, our bodies lose strength and cannot do what they once did. That's true for all human beings. Of course, some folks in the third third have major mental and/or physical health challenges. For these and their families we must share loving concern and offer practical care.

But the fact that some older adults struggle with major health challenges does not mean everyone does. The majority of third third folk are relatively healthy in body and mind.

#### The Superman or Wonder Woman Narrative

There is an alternative to the Disease and Decline narrative that shows up fairly often in popular media. It's the "Superman or Wonder Woman" narrative. It focuses on the physical accomplishments of some pretty amazing older adults. The problem is that this narrative, though true for some, isn't relevant to most folks in the third third of life. Thus, we need a narrative based on serious science and, most of all, on Scripture.

### A Biblical Narrative of Bodies and Aging

Human bodies were an essential part of God's good creation. They were a means by which human beings could do the work God delegated to us: to be fruitful and multiply, fill the earth, and subdue it (Gen 1:27-28). But sin distorted and damaged the goodness of creation, including our bodies (Gen 3). Because of sin, we

experience pain, frailty, and death. Genesis 3 says we are dust, and to dust we will return (3:16-19).

Scripture acknowledges the physical limitations and losses of aging. The writer of Psalm 71 urges God, “do not forsake me when my strength is spent” (71:9). Ecclesiastes 12 offers a painful and poetic picture of aging and its hardships (12:1-8). The Bible helps us acknowledge honestly the difficulties that come as our bodies get older. Flourishing in the third third of life is not a matter of denial, pretending, or wishful thinking. It’s about dealing wisely with the reality of our lives.

Though acknowledging the difficulties of aging, the Bible also celebrates older people and aging. For example, Proverbs 16:31 says “Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life.” (See also Prov 20:29.) God often uses older adults for crucial tasks. Examples include: Abraham and Sarah (Gen 12:4, 17:17); Caleb (Josh 14:6-15); Elizabeth and Zechariah (Luke 1:5-79).

Nevertheless, in today’s world, we join all creation in “groaning in travail” as we wait for “the redemption of our bodies” (Rom 8:23). Christians have confident hope that in God’s future our bodies will be raised and transformed (Rom 8:24-25; 1 Cor 15:50-57). “So,” as Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 4:16-17, “we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure.” Our hope for the future energizes us to live productively and meaningfully today because we know that “in the Lord [our] labor is not in vain” (1 Cor 15:58).

Moreover, Scripture teaches that your body is a “temple of the Holy Spirit.” You belong to God and should “glorify God in [your] body” (1 Cor 6:19-20). Romans 12:1 urges you and all believers “to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.” Jesus, echoing Old Testament revelation, says you should love the Lord “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength” (Mark 12:30), that is, with your body.

As Christians, we are not looking for the elixir of life. We are not trying to live forever in our mortal bodies (1 Cor 15:51-53). But we do strive to honor the temple of our bodies so that we might live for God’s glory in this age, offering our bodies to God as worship in all that we do. Thus, we are motivated by our love for God to learn how to steward well the bodies God has given us, for his glory and for our flourishing.

So, what is the biblical narrative of bodies and aging? It begins with the created goodness of our bodies. That goodness is corrupted by sin, which brings about frailty and physical death. Scripture acknowledges that growing old can be physically debilitating. In this age, our bodies join all creation by groaning in travail. We ache for the time when our bodies will be redeemed. Nevertheless,

throughout the Bible we see God using older people in amazing ways. *In all seasons of life, our bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, a means by which we glorify God. Therefore, we should steward our bodies well so that we might use them wisely for God's purposes.*

## Practical Suggestions for Stewarding Your Body

There is a vast amount of information available, much of it through the internet, concerning physical and mental health for older adults. I have read dozens of research studies, several books, and the contents of countless websites in search of reliable advice on stewarding your body in the third third of life. The following suggestions reflect the consensus of trustworthy sources, including: the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC), National Institute of Aging (NIA, part of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), Harvard Health Publishing (the consumer health education division of Harvard Medical School; some material free, much requiring a subscription), Johns Hopkins Medicine, *New York Times*, *Brain Rules for Aging Well* by John Medina, *Aging Well* by George Vaillant, and National Council on Aging (NCOA).

I should be clear that I am not an expert in medical science or gerontology. My Ph.D. is in New Testament. That's where my expertise lies. But I have tried to read widely and curate wisely from all that I have read. Nevertheless, in matters of physical health, I urge you to talk with your doctor about what's best for you. Also, not every suggestion will be relevant to you, and that's fine. Pay attention to whatever jumps out at you as worthwhile.

### 1. Be physically active.

This is the most common advice for healthy aging, along with #2 below. Effective exercise does not have to be extensive or intensive. Walking is highly recommended, as is other forms of exercise adding up to 150 minutes a week. Research shows it's never too late to start benefiting from exercise. Even those who begin exercising in their 80s experience improvement in health. Pay attention to what helps you to be active: time of day, activities you enjoy, alone and/or with others, use a trainer, at home or gym or outside. See NCOA web page "Exercise and Fitness for Older Adults."

### 2. Practice healthy eating.

Eat plenty of vegetables, fruits, whole grains, and healthy proteins. Limit unhealthy sugars, processed foods, unhealthy fats, and sugared drinks. Get adequate fiber and water. Eat plentiful amounts of healthy food you actually like.

Watch trustworthy sources for new research findings related to diet, such as: "Long-term Dietary Flavonoid Intake and Subjective Cognitive Decline in US Men and Women" *Neurology*, (July 2021). This study showed that higher flavonoid intake helps to maintain cognitive functioning in older adults. Flavonoids are

found in colorful fruits and vegetables such as strawberries, spinach, peppers, blueberries, etc.

### **3. Maintain a healthy weight.**

This follows naturally from 1 and 2. For people over 80, healthy weight often means “packing extra pounds.”

### **4. Don't smoke.**

If you don't smoke, don't start. If you do, get help to quit. Quitting at any age brings positive health results.

### **5. If you drink alcohol, exercise moderation.**

Researchers have mixed opinions about whether moderate drinking (especially of red wine) has health benefits, but all trustworthy advisors warn against excessive use of alcohol (which is usually defined as more than two drinks daily for men or one drink daily for women). George Vaillant, former director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development, writes in his book *Aging Well*, “Alcohol abuse . . . consistently predicted unsuccessful aging” (p. 13).

### **6. Get enough sleep.**

Consensus is that older adults, like younger people, need 7 to 9 hours each night. But it's often hard for us to get enough sleep and decent sleep as we age. Experts recommend things like: regular bedtime, avoiding screens before bed, avoiding big meals, caffeine, or alcohol late in day, exercise but not late in day, nap but not too much, dark room, comfortable temperature. If you have regular trouble sleeping, talk with your doctor.

### **7. Exercise your brain.**

There is much neuroscience-informed wisdom in John Medina's *Brain Rules for Aging Well*. He strongly recommends lifelong learning: “Enroll in a class. Pick up a new language. Read until you can't see anything anymore. An aging brain is fully capable of learning new things” (p. 101). Medina is especially enthusiastic about learning how to dance because dancing has such a positive impact on the brain (pp. 33-35).

According to an article from Harvard Health Publishing, so-called “super-agers” embrace mental challenges that stretch and challenge them. “Research suggests that moving out of your comfort zone is the key to staying mentally and physically young.”

### **8. See your doctor(s) regularly.**

The Centers for Disease Control put it this way: “*Get Regular Checkups*. Visit your doctor for preventive services, not just when you're sick. This can prevent disease or find it early, when treatment is more effective.” Many older adults are hesitant

to go to the doctor for a variety of reasons (embarrassment, overweight, stigma, shame, fear). If this describes you, talk with a wise friend, a pastor, or a counselor for help.

### 9. Develop and nurture core relationships.

As we saw last week, the quality of your relationships has everything to do with your health – yes, your physical health – as you age. Focus on core relationships with family and friends.

### 10. Laugh!

This final suggestion does not show up regularly among suggestions for successful aging. But it does reflect a wide variety of scientific studies from many different countries and cultures. Sven Svebak, professor emeritus at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology, who has studied the health impact of humor for 50 years, said, “A friendly sense of humor will bless you with better social relations as well as coping skills, and the reduced risk of dying early.” How to laugh? Enjoy TV shows that you find funny. Spend time with friends. Play with grandchildren and other young people. Watch your favorite comedy films again and again.

## How Being a Christian Helps You to Steward Your Body Wisely

The ten suggestions listed above are not distinctively Christian, but Christian faith does help us to follow them:

### 1. Our faith teaches us to see stewarding our bodies as essential to honoring God.

In our bodies we flourish as we live for God’s glory. Our bodies are not just for us. They are for God’s purposes. Through our bodies we bear fruit that grows on the vine of Jesus Christ.

**2. If we’re going to steward our bodies wisely, we need God’s grace.** Many of us feel shame when it comes to how we are living (and not living) in matters of physical and mental health. Maybe we’re doing things we know aren’t the best or we’re not doing things we know we should be doing. *No matter the details of our individual situation, we need God’s grace to free us, embrace us, and empower us to live well.*

**3. If we’re going to steward our bodies wisely, we need each other.** Trying to steward our bodies by ourselves is difficult if not impossible, especially in a culture that often works against us. *We who are sisters and brothers in the family of God can help each other to care for and use our bodies well.* How? We can listen sensitively to each other, sharing in both joys and sorrows. We can offer support, prayer, accountability, grace, and Christ-like love. We can make plans to walk together or play pickleball. We can drive each other to doctor’s appointments. We can pray for each other concerning our physical health.

May God help you to live in community with other followers of Jesus so that

## Resources and References

Harvard University's Human Flourishing Program, <https://hfh.fas.harvard.edu/measuring-flourishing>

Sarah Lorge Butler, "Harriette Thompson, Oldest Woman to Finish a Marathon, Dies at 94." (<https://www.runnersworld.com/news/a20862554/harriette-thompson-oldest-woman-to-finish-a-marathon-dies-at-94/>)

U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://www.cdc.gov/>

National Institute of Aging, <https://www.nia.nih.gov/>

Harvard Health Publishing, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/>

Johns Hopkins Medicine, <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/>

"Physical Inactivity – Ages 65+", [https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/senior/measure/physical\\_inactivity\\_sr/state/ALL](https://www.americashealthrankings.org/explore/senior/measure/physical_inactivity_sr/state/ALL)

"Walking, other exercise helps seniors stay mobile, independent," Harvard Health Publishing, <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/walking-exercise-helps-seniors-stay-mobile-independent-201405287173>

"Exercise and Fitness for Older Adults," <https://www.ncoa.org/older-adults/health/exercise-fitness>

"Healthy Eating," <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/healthy-eating>

"Diet and Nutrition for Older Adults," <https://www.ncoa.org/older-adults/health/diet-nutrition>

"Want to Avoid Dementia? Add Some Color to Your Plate," *US News*, July 29, 2021. (<https://www.usnews.com/news/health-news/articles/2021-07-29/want-to-avoid-dementia-add-some-color-to-your-plate>)

"Long-term Dietary Flavonoid Intake and Subjective Cognitive Decline in US Men and Women," *Neurology*, July, 28, 2021. (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34321362/>)

"When Thinner Isn't Better," <https://www.aarp.org/health/healthy-living/info-2019/weight-concerns-after-80.html>

"Achieving a Healthy Weight: Your Options After 60," <https://www.ncoa.org/article/achieving-a-healthy-weight-your-options-after-60>

"Quitting Smoking for Older Adults," <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/quitting-smoking-older-adults>

George Vaillant, *Aging Well: Surprising Guideposts to a Happier Life from the*



*Landmark Study of Adult Development* (Little, Brown, Spark: 2003). (<https://www.amazon.com/Agging-Well-Surprising-Guideposts-Development/dp/0316090077/>)

“Facts About Aging and Alcohol,” <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/facts-about-aging-and-alcohol>

“A Good Night’s Sleep,” <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/good-nights-sleep>

John Medina, *Brain Rules for Aging Well: 10 Principles for Staying Vital, Happy, and Sharp* (Pear Press, Oct 2017). (<https://www.amazon.com/Brain-Rules-Aging-Well-Principles/dp/0996032673/>)

“What does it take to be a super-ager?” <https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthy-aging/what-does-it-take-to-be-a-super-ager>

6 Tips for Healthy Aging, <https://www.cdc.gov/chronicdisease/resources/infographic/healthy-aging.htm>

“Therapeutic Benefits of Laughter in Mental Health: A Theoretical Review,” in *The Tohoku Journal of Experimental Medicine*, 2016. ([https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/tjem/239/3/239\\_243/\\_pdf](https://www.jstage.jst.go.jp/article/tjem/239/3/239_243/_pdf))

“Laughter really is the best medicine? In many ways, that’s no joke,” in *The Washington Post*, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/laughter-really-is-the-best-medicine-in-many-ways-thats-no-joke/2019/06/14/9f159208-8955-11e9-98c1-e945ae5db8fb\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/laughter-really-is-the-best-medicine-in-many-ways-thats-no-joke/2019/06/14/9f159208-8955-11e9-98c1-e945ae5db8fb_story.html)

“Stress relief from laughter? It’s no joke”, <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/stress-management/in-depth/stress-relief/art-20044456>

Once again, you might want to read John Medina’s *Brain Rules for Aging Well* (<https://www.amazon.com/Brain-Rules-Aging-Well-Principles/dp/0996032673/>).

Neuroscientist Daniel J. Levitin goes into greater technical detail than Medina in his fascinating book, *Successful Aging* (<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07S2N5DDQ/>).

If you’re looking for trustworthy information on health and aging, you might start here:

- “Health for Older Adults” from National Council on Aging. <https://www.ncoa.org/older-adults/health>
- “Health Information” from National Institute of Aging. <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health>

# Remembering and Gratitude:

## Renewing Mind and Body

### *Session 4*

#### **Introduction**

As we get older, our brains often do strange things. They forget simple, everyday things like where we put our phones or the name of an acquaintance. But, then, sometimes our brains churn up old memories as if from nowhere. Nostalgic remembrance happens commonly as people age. Is this bad? Or is it good? Is it relevant at all to the question of how we flourish in the third third of life?

When we remember good things from our past, we feel grateful. Often, we share our thanks with God in prayer. Feeling and expressing gratitude seem like good things, to be sure. But do they have even greater power than we might think to help us live fully and fruitfully as we get older?

The fourth session of this course, *Flourishing in the Third Third of Life*, explores some surprising ways in which both remembering and gratitude can indeed contribute to our flourishing.

## Session 4 Summary

### Main Point

Both remembering and gratitude help us flourish in the third third of life. Therefore, we should develop practices that will encourage both recollection and thanksgiving.

### The Oddities of Third Third Memory

Many people in the third third of life find that their memories do strange things. On the one hand, they often forget things they once would have easily remembered, like where they put their phone or the name of a familiar acquaintance. On the other hand, older adults often recollect things from their past, things they may not have thought of for decades. Clear memories from youth and young adulthood come flooding back as if out of thin air.

### The Nostalgia Factory

Dutch professor and psychologist Douwe Draaisma is a world-renowned scholar of human memory. In his book, *The Nostalgia Factory*, Draaisma writes, "This return of old memories, which psychologists call the 'reminiscence effect', is a mysterious phenomenon. . . . Oddly, the reminiscence effect increases at an age when the memory as a faculty is starting to decline." Thus, as a person's brain gets older, it becomes a "nostalgia factory."

What are we to make of this? Is it okay to have memories like this and savor them? Or is this sort of nostalgia bad for us? The Swiss doctor who invented the term "nostalgia" in the 17th century considered it a disease of the brain and something to be avoided. That view has been widely held by psychologists in succeeding centuries. Nostalgia has been thought of as living in the past and therefore unhealthy.

Christians sometimes echo the psychologists' negative judgment on nostalgic remembering. They might quote Isaiah 43:18, "Do not remember the former things" or Philippians 3:13, "forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead" as biblical support for this judgment. Some Christians suggest that we're better off if we don't think about the past at all.

So, how should we regard remembering our past experiences? Should we avoid this kind of nostalgia? Or could remembering actually contribute to flourishing in the third third of life?

## Remembering in the Bible

A few verses in Scripture discourage a certain kind of remembering that keeps us anchored in the past and resistant to the new things God is doing (Isa 43:18; Phil 3:13). But, in fact, the Bible repeatedly urges us to remember what happened in the past.

For example:

*O give thanks to the LORD; call on his name;  
make known his deeds among the peoples.  
Sing to him, sing praises to him;  
tell of all his wonderful works. . . .  
Remember the wonderful works he has done,  
his miracles and the judgments he uttered. (Psalm 105:1-2, 5)*

A very significant Jewish holiday is Passover, which focuses on remembering what God did in the past when setting the Israelites free from slavery in Egypt (Exod 13:3). Similarly, when Christians celebrate Communion, we do so “in remembrance of” Jesus (1 Cor 11:24-25). Therefore, remembering the past is not always wrong. In fact, it can be quite right and beneficial. Why? Because God is revealed to us through God’s actions in the past. Remembering what God did in history and in our lives helps us to know, trust, and love God in all seasons of life, including the third third.

## Remembering and Flourishing

Remembering helps us flourish, not only when we call to mind the big things God has done, but also when we recall small, even apparently insignificant events and people from our past. The “nostalgia factory” aspect of our brains can contribute to our living fully and fruitfully, contrary to what was once assumed by doctors and psychologists.

What is nostalgia? According to Professor Krystine Batcho, “Nostalgia is a bittersweet yearning for the past. It’s sweet because it allows us to momentarily relive good times; it’s bitter because we recognize that those times can never return. Longing for our own past is referred to as personal nostalgia, and preferring a distant era is termed historical nostalgia.” Historical nostalgia, wishing we were still in “the good ol’ days,” can keep us from flourishing now. Personal nostalgia, on the contrary, can contribute to our flourishing, even though it has a bittersweet flavor. (The bittersweet quality of remembering can be found in Scripture, for example: Ps 42:4-6; 77:4-7; 137:1-6).

The Nostalgia Group from the University of Southampton in England has studied nostalgia extensively. They summarize some of the benefits of nostalgia in this way: “Importantly, nostalgia, once evoked, re-establishes psychological

equanimity. It elevates mood, self-esteem, and a sense of social connectedness; it fosters perceptions of continuity between past and present; it increases meaning in life; and it ‘fights off’ death cognitions.” Nostalgia, it turns out, also helps people focus on their most important goal in life.

One of the most surprising examples of the benefits of nostalgia is chronicled in the book *Counterclockwise* by Harvard psychology professor Ellen Langer. She reports on an experiment with eight frail, older men who were immersed in an intensive nostalgic experience. They emerged astoundingly stronger in body and mind.

We can enjoy personal nostalgia, not by living in the past, but rather by letting the memories from our past live beneficially in us. John Medina, in *Brain Rules for Aging Well*, encourages us to savor memories from our past for the sake of our brain’s health, especially memories from the time of our late teens and early twenties (pp. 233-240). So, go ahead and listen to the music you loved when you were younger. Just don’t get stuck trying to live in the past.

Reminiscing is also something we can do with lifelong friends, which can nurture relationships that contribute to mutual flourishing.

## Gratitude and Flourishing

But remembering the past isn’t an end in itself. It is also a gateway into another activity that helps us flourish in the third third of life: gratitude.

The Bible frequently connects remembering and gratitude. Psalm 105, for example, begins with “O give thanks to the LORD, call on his name” and moves quickly to “Remember the wonderful works he has done, his miracles, and the judgments he uttered” (105:1, 5). Remembering can stir up gratitude, as in Ephesians 1:16, “I do not cease to give thanks for you as I remember you in my prayers.”

Like remembering, gratitude enriches and vitalizes our relationship with the Lord. When we thank God for his grace to us, our hearts are warmed and our spirits rejoice. We see this at the beginning of Psalm 92, for example: “It is good to give thanks to the LORD, to sing praises to your name, O Most High . . . . For you, O LORD, have made me glad by your work; at the works of your hands I sing for joy” (92:1, 4).

Recent psychological studies confirm the benefits of gratitude. Dr. Martin Seligman, in his book *Authentic Happiness*, describes an experiment called “the gratitude visit.” Those who intentionally expressed gratitude to someone who had made a difference in their lives experienced a measurable increase in their own well-being.

One of the world’s leading researchers on gratitude, Dr. Robert Emmons, is the co-editor of the impressive 384-page tome, *The Psychology of Gratitude*, published by Oxford University. The *Harvard Health* newsletter, reporting on Emmons’s research in a recent article called “Giving thanks can make you happier,” notes

that people who, in a study done by Emmons, wrote down things for which they were grateful “were more optimistic and felt better about their lives. Surprisingly, they also exercised more and had fewer visits to physicians than those who focused on sources of aggravation.”

Gratitude is good for people of any age, but it is especially valuable for folks in the third third of life. We learn this from a variety of research studies, which I’ll summarize briefly. Grateful older adults in the Netherlands experienced less loneliness; in China, less fear of death; in the United States, studies found that gratitude toward God helps older adults deal with stressful situations, such as physical illness or the death of a loved one. Being thankful also helped third third folk have better attitudes toward aging and live an integrated and joyful life.

### Why Be Grateful?

1. Being grateful will help you flourish, though it would seem odd to practice gratitude primarily for your own benefit. Authentic gratitude is other directed.
2. Scripture calls us to be grateful (see Psalms 92, 105, 107; Colossians 3:15).
3. Letting others know of your gratitude can encourage them and nurture your relationship with them.

### Conclusions

1. Enjoy your “nostalgia factory.”
2. Remember the big things and the little things.
3. Share your gratitude with others.
4. Experiment with a reminiscence and gratitude exercise. (See the Personal Study Guide section below for details.)

Mark concludes: “I hope this talk encourages you to try some new things when it comes to remembering and gratitude. As you do, by God’s grace, you’ll find that you are flourishing in new and unexpected ways.”

## Resources and References

Douwe Draaisma, *The Nostalgia Factory* (<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B00EZ22C64/>)

Kristine Batchko, "The psychological benefits – and trappings – of nostalgia" (<https://theconversation.com/the-psychological-benefits-and-trappings-of-nostalgia-77766>)

Nostalgia Group from University of Southampton (<https://www.southampton.ac.uk/nostalgia/index.page>)

Constantine Sedikides and Tim Wildschut, "Finding Meaning in Nostalgia" (<https://doi.org/10.1037/gpr0000109>)

Ellen Langer, *Counterclockwise* (<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0028M9EZK/>)

John Medina, *Brain Rules for Aging Well* (<https://www.amazon.com/Brain-Rules-Ageing-Well-Principles/dp/1925322904/>)

Martin Seligman, *Authentic Happiness* (<https://www.amazon.com/Authentic-Happiness-Psychology-Potential-Fulfillment/dp/0743222989/>)

Robert Emmons and Michael McCullough, editors, *The Psychology of Gratitude* (<https://www.amazon.com/Psychology-Gratitude-Affective-Science/dp/0195150104>)

Roberts Emmons, "Why Gratitude is Good" ([https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why\\_gratitude\\_is\\_good](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/why_gratitude_is_good))

"Giving thanks can make you happier," in the *Harvard Health* newsletter (<https://www.health.harvard.edu/healthbeat/giving-thanks-can-make-you-happier>)

The following articles summarize some of the academic research on gratitude, with links to the original sources:

- Mark D. Roberts, "Gratitude and Lifelong Flourishing" (<https://depre.org/gratitude-and-lifelong-fourishing/>)
- Mark D. Roberts, "Gratitude and Third Third Flourishing: New Studies and Striking Implications" (<https://depre.org/gratitude-and-third-third-flourishing-new-studies-and-striking-implications/>)

Martin Seligman, *Authentic Happiness: Using the New Positive Psychology to Realize Your Potential for Lasting Fulfillment* (<https://www.amazon.com/Authentic-Happiness-Psychology-Potential-Fulfillment/dp/0743222989/>)

Martin Seligman, *Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-Being* (<https://www.amazon.com/Flourish-Visionary-Understanding-Happiness-Well-being-ebook/dp/B0043RSK90>)

Martin Seligman, Three Good Things Exercise (<https://youtu.be/ZOGAp9dw8Ac>)

Kristine Batchko, “The psychological benefits – and trappings – of nostalgia” (<https://theconversation.com/the-psychological-benefits-and-trappings-of-nostalgia-77766>)

You might also enjoy this 4-minute TED talk from Clay Routledge, an expert on nostalgia: Clay Routledge, “Why do we feel nostalgia?” ([https://www.ted.com/talks/clay\\_routledge\\_why\\_do\\_we\\_feel\\_nostalgia?language=en](https://www.ted.com/talks/clay_routledge_why_do_we_feel_nostalgia?language=en))

Robert Emmons, expert on gratitude who is also a thoughtful Christian, gave an insightful hour-long lecture at Biola University: “Gratitude Works!: The Science and Practice of Saying Thanks” ([https://youtu.be/BF7xS\\_nPbZ0](https://youtu.be/BF7xS_nPbZ0)).



# Purpose and Calling:

## Living beyond Yourself

### *Session 5*

#### **Introduction**

Do you have a strong sense of purpose in life?

Some people in the third third of life do have a strong sense of purpose, something that gets them up in the morning and motivates them throughout the day. But that's not true for all. Other third third folk once believed they had plenty of future-oriented purpose when they retired, but what they thought would fulfill them just hasn't worked out as they expected. Still others once had clarity about their purpose – to build a career, to nurture a family, to live productively and meaningfully – but they feel rather purposeless as they get older. They're yearning for more: more significance, more passion, more purpose. They're experiencing a bedrock truth of the third third of life: *Purpose matters for flourishing.*

So, if we are going to live fully and fruitfully in the third third of life, we need to live with purpose. But it is often hard for older adults to have a clear sense of purpose. What can we do about this?

As Christians, our purpose reflects God's purpose for creation and for our lives. God calls us into relationship with him and to engage in the work that supports his purpose. Our calling or, perhaps, our "callings" help us to live with purpose so that we might flourish in the third third of life.

## Session 5 Summary

### Main Point

If we are to flourish in the third third of life, we need to live with purpose. But it is often hard for older adults to have a clear sense of purpose. As Christians, our purpose reflects God's purpose and comes to us through God's calling lived in diverse callings.

### Introduction

Some folks in the third third of life have a strong sense of purpose, something that gets them up in the morning and motivates them throughout the day. But that's not true for all. Other third third folk once thought they had plenty of future-oriented purpose when they retired, but what they believed would fulfill them just hasn't worked out as they expected. Still others once had clarity about their purpose – to build a career, to nurture a family, to live productively and meaningfully – but they feel rather purposeless as they get older. They're yearning for more: more significance, more passion, more purpose. They're experiencing a bedrock truth of the third third of life: *Purpose matters for flourishing*. We need purpose if we're going to live fully and fruitfully.

### What is Purpose?

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, "purpose" means: "that which a person sets out to do or attain; an object in view; a determined intention or aim; the reason for which something is done or made, or for which it exists." The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* offers these options: "the reason why something is done or used; the aim or goal of a person: what a person is trying to do, become, etc."

These definitions help us understand why purpose matters so much. Purpose matters because it gives us direction. It defines our aim or goal. It's also important because it can supply the reason for our actions, even for our very existence. Purpose supplies the "why" of life that both gives meaning and clarifies our "what" and "how." It helps us know what we are trying to do or, perhaps even more importantly, who we are trying to become.

Having a strong sense of purpose also motivates us. It helps to get us up in the morning. Purpose can discipline us, giving us focus and showing us what we should not do as well as what we should do. Therefore, purpose is essential to our fruitfulness.

### Purpose and Flourishing

Yet the benefits of purpose go beyond helping us to be productive in meaningful

ways. There is a growing body of research that shows how important purpose is for flourishing in the third third of life. We'll examine a few examples here.

*Purpose Helps Older Adults in Physical Functioning* – A 2017 study from Harvard's T.H. Chan School of Public Health examined evidence from the Health and Retirement study of 4,500 older adults. The study measured two things that usually decline with age: grip strength and walking speed. Then the same measurements were taken four years later. The study found the following: "Purpose in life was prospectively associated with a decreased risk of developing weak grip strength and slow walking speed, although the findings were more robust for walking speed than for grip strength. These findings suggest that a sense of purpose in life, a modifiable factor, may play an important role in maintaining physical function among older adults." Those who had purpose in life also had an average walking speed of people 2.5 years younger than their chronological age. In other words, purpose improves our physical health as we age.

*Purpose Contributes to Health and Longevity* – An article in the January 3, 2021 edition of the *Washington Post* had this headline: "Boosting our sense of meaning in life is an often overlooked longevity ingredient." Writer Marta Zaraska explains: "Research has shown that people who have high levels of purpose in life spend fewer nights in hospitals, have lower odds of developing diabetes, and over two times lower risk of dying from heart conditions than do others."

*Impressive List of Health Benefits Related to Purpose* – In 2017, an article in *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development* reported on 31 studies of purpose and aging. These studies provided a long and impressive list of health benefits: "Physical benefits included better health and functional status maintenance, greater cognitive function, increased physical activity and positive health behaviors, enhanced stress recovery, and longevity. Purpose is also associated with a lower incidence of AD [Alzheimer's Disease] and mild cognitive impairment and reduced risk for cardiovascular chronic health conditions. Psychosocial correlates in the review include greater life satisfaction, lower death anxiety, and reduced depression severity or incidence."

## **Purpose Tends to Decline in Older Adults**

There is ample scientific evidence linking purpose and flourishing in the third third of life. This would seem to be good news. But there's a problem: As we get older, our sense of purpose in life usually declines. An article in *Psychology Today* bears this unsettling title, "The Pernicious Decline in Purpose in Life with Old Age." A more academic demonstration of this "pernicious decline" is found in a scholarly article in *Ageing International*. The writer, Martin Pinquart, a psychology professor in Germany, surveyed 70 academic articles on purpose and aging. He writes, "In the meta-analysis, we found empirical evidence for an age-associated decline of purpose in life, which became stronger in old age."

We are left with pressing questions: How are we going to have purpose for our third third lives? Where will we get this purpose? What will sustain it?

## God's Purpose and Your Purpose

Your primary purpose is first and foremost to live according to God's purpose for everything, including your life. You play a crucial role in the grand story of God's work in the world.

One way of talking about God's purpose for us is found in Ephesians.

*In Christ we have also obtained an inheritance, having been destined according to the purpose of him who accomplishes all things according to his counsel and will, so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ, might live for the praise of his glory. (Eph 1:11-12)*

We have been destined according to God's purpose so that we might live for the praise of God's glory in every part of life. You are to live for a purpose far beyond yourself.

Ephesians 2:8-10 continues the story:

*For by grace you have been saved through faith, and this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God— not the result of works, so that no one may boast. For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life.*

You have been saved for – not by, but for – good works. Your purpose is to walk in the good works God has planned for you. These are not just “churchy” works, by the way. Rather, the good works God has for you touch all of your life (see also Rom 12:1-2).

## Purpose and Calling

Ephesians 4:1 says:

*I therefore, the prisoner in the Lord, beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called.*

God has called you to live a certain kind of life. This is your purpose. You are to walk worthy of your calling, a calling determined and shaped by the purpose of God.

In Scripture, purpose and calling go hand in hand.

*We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose. (Rom 8:28)*

*[God] saved us and called us with a holy calling, not according to our works but according to his own purpose and grace. (2 Tim 1:9)*

Your calling is not the same thing as your job, career, family, or passion, though calling can touch all of this. Calling is not just for pastors, missionaries, and nonprofit workers. Scripture teaches that every Christian has a calling:

*To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints, together with all those who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours. (1 Cor 1:2, italics added)*

You are called, first of all, to be a saint, to be set apart for relationship with God and for God's purpose. This primary calling is expressed in secondary, particular *callings*, that is, in contexts, activities, or roles in which you live out your primary calling. Your primary calling is something you share with all other Christians. Your secondary, particular callings are unique, reflecting who you are and the good works God has planned for you.

## How Can I Discern My Particular Callings?

*How can we move from clarity about our general calling to clarity about our particular callings?* This can be especially challenging in seasons of transition, such as retirement, loss of a spouse, moving from one area to another, and other experiences common to the third third of life. Whereas we once had clarity about our purpose and callings – raise godly children, be a faithful and successful worker, provide for my family, etc. – now things are much foggier.

There isn't a magic formula for discerning your callings, nor are there "seven secrets" to discovering your purpose. Clarity about callings and purpose comes as we engage meaningfully with God and God's people. I'd like to suggest eight specific actions you might take in order to identify your purpose and callings. These aren't a guaranteed roadmap to certainty, but I believe they can be helpful to you.

**Suggestion #1: Be committed to God's purpose for all things, including your life.**

You might regularly ask yourself these questions:

- Am I seeking to live for the praise of God's glory in all that I do? In my work? In my relationships? In my free time? With my money? With my talents and skills?
- Am I walking each day in the good works God has prepared for me?
- Do my relationships with my brothers and sisters in Christ reflect the reconciling work of the cross?
- Am I walking worthy of God's calling?

**Suggestion #2: Seek the Lord in prayer and surrender to his will.**

To be sure, you can ask the Lord to guide you, to show you more clearly his purpose for your life. But I would also encourage you to offer yourself to God as you pray, surrendering your life to his gracious purpose.

Each morning, I find it helpful to say a prayer of surrender known as the “Suscipe.” *Suscipe* is a Latin word meaning “receive or take,” and is the first word in this prayer by St. Ignatius as it appears in Latin. The *Suscipe* goes like this:

*Take, Lord, and receive all my liberty, my memory, my understanding, and my entire will. All I have and call my own. You have given all to me. To you, Lord, I return it. Everything is yours; do with it what you will. Give me only your love and your grace. That is enough for me.*

**Suggestion # 3: Pay attention to how God has made and gifted you.**

God has given you distinctive talents, skills, strengths, and gifts. As you transition into the third third of your life, you’ll be able to use many of these, though perhaps in new ways. For example, in your full-time work life you may have been the supervisor of younger workers. Now, if you’re retired, you might use some of those same skills to mentor younger folk in the workplace, in the church, or in underserved schools in your city.

If you’re not sure about your talents, skills, strengths, and gifts, I’d urge you to ask people who know you well. You might also find it helpful to use the CliftonStrengths assessment (formerly called StrengthsFinder).

**Suggestion #4: Pay attention to what God is putting on your heart.**

This isn’t the same thing as discovering your passion, though sometimes our personal passions line up with God’s stirring within us. When we offer ourselves fully to God, God may awaken in us new and unexpected longings or delights.

**Suggestion #5: Pay attention to where you are bearing fruit.**

One crucial way to determine the specifics of God’s callings is by seeing where God is using you right now. Even if you anticipate retiring from your current job sometime soon, it’s possible that God will use you in similar contexts in the future.

**Suggestion #6: Look for continuity but be open to surprises.**

It’s likely that your callings in the third third of life will be continuous with what you have done previously. But it’s also possible that God will surprise you with new opportunities and responsibilities. Be open to the new things God might have for you to do.

### **Suggestion #7: Discover and discern your callings in community with other Christians.**

There are times when God calls people to specific things when they are alone. But, especially since the outpouring of the Holy Spirit on all believers, the discovery and discernment of callings usually happens in community: in small groups, friendships, mentoring relationships, spiritual direction, families, work groups, and other settings.

You'll recall that earlier in this lecture I referred to the work of the German psychology professor Martin Pinguat. In his article entitled "Creating and Maintaining Purpose in Life in Old Age: A Meta-Analysis," Pinguat also points to the way in which our relationships can help us live with purpose in the third third of life. After examining 70 studies of aging and purpose, Pinguat notes, "[W]e analyzed which factors may promote the maintenance of high levels of purpose in life in older adults . . . . We found that social integration, and in particular a high quality of social contacts, showed the strongest association with purpose in life." He goes on to say, "we conclude that developing close social ties and building up a large social network is an important way of preventing declines of purpose in life."

So, what encourages us to live with purpose as we get older? What prevents declines in purpose as we age? The answer sounds familiar: "Relationships! Relationships! Relationships!" (quoting George Vaillant).

### **Suggestion #8: Experiment your way forward.**

You don't need to fully figure out your purpose and callings before you begin to live into them. In fact, it's often better to try different possibilities or prototypes on the way to clarifying your callings. Dave Evans, co-author of the bestselling book *Designing Your Life* says, "life design is an iterative [that is, frequently repetitive] process of prototypes and experimentation" (p. 25).

### **What About Retirement?**

Increasingly, folks in the third third of life are not retiring in the "usual way." They're not working to 65 and then stopping work altogether. In fact, adults age 65 and older are twice as likely to be working today compared with 1985. A recent article in *Forbes* bore this headline, "A Third Of Seniors Seek To Work Well Past Retirement Age, Or Won't Retire At All, Poll Finds." Some plan to keep working because they need the income. But many are choosing to work for a sense of meaning and purpose. These days, according to the Kaufmann Foundation, the country's premier observer and champion of entrepreneurship, more people in the third third of life are starting new businesses in the U.S. than people in any other age bracket.

It's important to think about retirement and to make plans if you're going to do it. And not just financial plans. The majority of folks who retire haven't really thought

much about what they're going to do with their lives in retirement. For followers of Jesus, wise retirement planning will be centered in the very things we're talking about today: purpose and calling.

## Conclusion

I want to circle back to a crucial biblical passage having to do with purpose and calling. It's Romans 8:28, which reads, "We know that all things work together for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose." This verse affirms that we are people who have been called according to God's purpose. This gives us our fundamental "why" for all of life. The purpose of God underlies all seasons of our lives, including the third third.

Notice, it's not that all things somehow magically work together for good. Rather, God is working in all things for good. The God who created all things, the God who is redeeming all things, the God who saved you by his grace, the God who has prepared good works for you to walk in, the God whose love will never let you go, that God is working in all things for God's good and for your good.

This truth sets us free from having to get it all right. This truth frees us from anxiety, from inertia, and from fear. It releases us from the need to perfectly define our purpose before we begin to live into it. God's working in all things for good gives us the confidence to try new things, to experiment, to embrace challenges and opportunities in our third third. Why? Because no matter what happens, God is working for good in all things for those who are called according to his purpose.

Therefore, if you want to live with purpose, if you want to flourish in the third third of life, if you want to live fully, fruitfully, and freely, then you need to be in a deep, growing relationship with God. I'll talk more about this relationship in the next lecture.



## Resources and References

“Association Between Purpose in Life and Objective Measures of Physical Function in Older Adults” in *JAMA* [Journal of the American Medical Association] Psychiatry, October 2017. (<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapsychiatry/fullarticle/2648692>)

“Boosting our sense of meaning in life is an often overlooked longevity ingredient,” by Marta Zaraska, *Washington Post*, Jan 3, 2021. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/boosting-our-sense-of-meaning-in-life-is-an-often-overlooked-longevity-ingredient/2020/12/31/84871d32-29d4-11eb-8fa2-06e7cbb145c0\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/boosting-our-sense-of-meaning-in-life-is-an-often-overlooked-longevity-ingredient/2020/12/31/84871d32-29d4-11eb-8fa2-06e7cbb145c0_story.html))

“Effect of purpose in life on the relation between Alzheimer disease pathologic changes on cognitive function in advanced age” in *Archives of General Psychiatry*, May 2012. (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22566582/>)

“Aging With Purpose: Systematic Search and Review of Literature Pertaining to Older Adults and Purpose” in *The International Journal of Aging and Human Development* 2017, Vol. 85(4) 403–437. (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/28391702/>)

“The Pernicious Decline in Purpose in Life with Old Age,” by Maclen Stanley, *Psychology Today*, April 15, 2014. (<https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/making-sense-chaos/201404/the-pernicious-decline-in-purpose-in-life-old-age>)

“Creating and Maintaining Purpose in Life in Old Age: a Meta-Analysis” by Martin Pinquart, *Ageing International* (27:2). ([https://www.researchgate.net/publication/226111244\\_Creating\\_and\\_Maintaining\\_Purpose\\_in\\_Life\\_in\\_Old\\_Age\\_a\\_Meta-Analysis](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/226111244_Creating_and_Maintaining_Purpose_in_Life_in_Old_Age_a_Meta-Analysis))

“Suscipe, the Radical Prayer,” by Amy Welborn. (<https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/prayers-by-st-ignatius-and-others/suscipe-the-radical-prayer/>)

*Designing Your Life* by Bill Burnett and Dave Evans. (<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B01BJSRSEC/>)

CliftonStrengths webpage: <https://www.gallup.com/cliftonstrengths/en/252137/home.aspx>

Mark D. Roberts, “Purpose is Key to Third Third Flourishing.” (<https://depre.org/purpose-is-key-to-third-third-flourishing/>)

Mark D. Roberts, “The Paradox of Purpose in the Third Third of Life.” (<https://depre.org/the-paradox-of-purpose-in-the-third-third-of-life/>)

Mark D. Roberts, “Clarifying Your Purpose in the Third Third of Life, Part 1.” (<https://>)

[depree.org/clarifying-your-purpose-in-the-third-third-of-life-part-1/](https://depree.org/clarifying-your-purpose-in-the-third-third-of-life-part-1/))

Mark D. Roberts, "Clarifying Your Purpose in the Third Third of Life, Part 2." (<https://depree.org/clarifying-your-purpose-in-the-third-third-of-life-part-2/>)

A webinar featuring Marc Belton: "Purposeful Retirement: Live Well as You Make a Difference that Matters." (<https://depree.org/webinar-purposeful-retirement>)

You might also appreciate this podcast featuring Dave Evans, co-author of *Designing Your Life*. Check out "Design Your Life and Get Unstuck." (<https://designingyour.life/design-your-life-and-get-unstuck-the-retirement-wisdom-podcast/>)

Os Guinness, *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life*. (<https://www.amazon.com/CALL-PB/dp/B007CZBFOQ/>)

Jeff Haanen, *An Uncommon Guide to Retirement: Finding God's Purpose for the Next Season of Life*. (<https://www.amazon.com/Uncommon-Guide-Retirement-Finding-Purpose/dp/0802418929/>)

Andy Raub, *The Encore Curve: Retire with a Life Plan that Excites You*. (<https://www.amazon.com/Encore-Curve-Retire-Life-Excites/dp/1612548938/>)

Bruce Bruinsma, *The Retirement Reformation: Finding Freedom with Faith...a Better Way to Experience the Final (And Best) Decades of Your Life*. (<https://www.amazon.com/Retirement-Reformation-Finding-Freedom-Experience/dp/197366173X/>)

Bruce Bruinsma, *A Fruitful Retirement: Reaping the Benefits Aging Brings*. (<https://www.amazon.com/Fruitful-Retirement-Reaping-Benefits-Brings/dp/B09RLRHS2Y/>)

The De Pree Center's *Life for Leaders* daily devotional. (<https://depree.org/life-for-leaders/>)

The De Pree Center's Flourishing in the Third Third of Life Initiative. (<https://depree.org/third-third/>)

"Effect of purpose in life on the relation between Alzheimer disease pathologic changes on cognitive function in advanced age" in *Archives of General Psychiatry*. (<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/22566582/>)

"Purpose in Life and Its Relationship to All-Cause Mortality and Cardiovascular Events: A Meta-Analysis" in *Psychosomatic Medicine*. (<https://www.smartretirement.co.nz/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Purpose-in-Life-and-Its-Relationship-to-All-Cause.pdf>)

"Boosting our sense of meaning in life is an often overlooked longevity ingredient" by Marta Zaraska in the *Washington Post*. (<https://www.washingtonpost.com/health/boosting-our-sense-of-meaning-in-life-is-an-often-overlooked-longevity->

[ingredient/2020/12/31/84871d32-29d4-11eb-8fa2-06e7cbb145c0\\_story.html](https://www.ingredient/2020/12/31/84871d32-29d4-11eb-8fa2-06e7cbb145c0_story.html))

“Purpose in life and use of preventive health care services” in *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. (<https://www.pnas.org/content/pnas/111/46/16331.full.pdf>)

# New Narratives

## for Third Third Flourishing

### *Session 6*

#### **Introduction**

We begin this session with a brief recap of where we began in Session 1. There, we saw that popular cultural narratives can keep us from flourishing in the third third of life. As you may recall, these negative narratives include: “It’s All About You”; “Dependency and Damage”; and “Disability vs. Capability.” But Scripture offers a different promise, the promise of flourishing “even in old age” (Psalm 92:12-15). We can live fully and fruitfully in the third third of life when we are in a right-relationship with God and God’s people.

In Session 6 we’ll return to several foundational biblical passages, including Psalm 92. From these texts, we’ll be reminded of what is essential if we’re going to flourish in the third third of life. Then, in response to the negative narratives, we’ll consider new, life-giving narratives based on what we have learned in this course from Scripture and science. These narratives will reflect the fact that as the people of God together, we can live fully and fruitfully in the third third of life.

## Session 6 Summary

### Main Point

Scripture, with support from science, affirms the promise of flourishing in the third third of life. Given the negative narratives of aging in our culture, however, if we're going to flourish, we need new narratives, truthful narratives that free and empower us. These narratives will help us to flourish in community together as we live fully and fruitfully for God's purposes and glory.

### Introduction

We begin with a brief recap of where we began in our first session. After defining the terms "third third" and "flourishing," I wondered if flourishing is possible in the third third of life. Popular cultural narratives would say "No." These negative narratives include: "It's All About You," "Dependency and Damage," and "Disability vs. Capability." But Scripture offers a different promise, the promise of flourishing "even in old age" (Psalm 92:12-15). We can live fully and fruitfully in the third third of life when we are in a right-relationship with God through Jesus Christ.

In this lecture, we'll return to several foundational biblical passages, including Psalm 92. From these texts, we'll be reminded of what is essential if we're going to flourish in the third third of life. Then, in response to the negative narratives, we'll consider new, life-giving narratives based on what we have learned in this course from Scripture and science. These narratives will reflect the fact that as the people of God together, we can live fully and fruitfully in the third third of life.

### The Promise and Premise of Psalm 92

Psalm 92:12-15 proclaims:

*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 that the LORD is upright;  
he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.*

This passage from Psalm 92 underscores several key truths:

1. "The righteous flourish . . ." Living fully and fruitfully is a result of being righteous, that is, living in a right-relationship with God and people.

2. We flourish when we are “planted in the house of the LORD,” which is when we are deeply rooted in God and God’s people.
3. Those who are right with God and people flourish even “in old age.”
4. Flourishing, from a biblical perspective, includes fruitfulness. It involves making a difference in the world.
5. Our flourishing shows “that the LORD is upright.” It bears witness to the character of God, who is both righteous and utterly reliable.

Reading this psalm as Christians, we understand that our righteousness comes from God through Jesus Christ. As it says in 2 Corinthians 5:21, “For our sake [God] made [Christ] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.” That’s a solid biblical promise and we are standing firmly upon it.

In the Gospel of John, Jesus reaffirms what we learn from Psalm 92, though using the image of a vine and branches rather than a tree and fruit. He says in John 15,

*Abide in me as I abide in you. . . . I am the vine, you are the branches. Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit, because apart from me you can do nothing. . . . My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples. (15:4-5, 8)*

We will live fruitfully when we abide in Christ, when we draw sustenance from the One who gives us life. Abiding leads to bearing “much fruit,” which glorifies God.

### **Rootedness and the Fourth Third of Life**

For most of us, the third third of life begins sometime in our 50s and extends into our 70s and 80s, perhaps even 90s or more. Yes, maybe even more than 90s. The United Nations estimates that there are now over a half-million centenarians in the world today, that is, people 100 years or older.

Being rooted in God is essential to our flourishing in the third third of life whether we’re 55 or 105. But our relationship with God is not only for this mortal life. *An intimate relationship with God through Christ is essential preparation for what I call the “fourth third” of life, that is, life beyond this life, the life of the age to come, or what we usually refer to as heaven.*

The third third of life ends in death for all human beings. No matter how fully and fruitfully we are living, our time on earth in this age will come to an end. Yet that does not mean our lives come to an end. By God’s grace in Christ, we will live past our physical death, experiencing fullness and fruitfulness beyond anything we can imagine. Being rooted in God not only prepares us for this amazing future, but it also helps us deal with the losses and limitations that come, especially in

the latter years of the third third. Thus, abiding in Christ not only enables *us to live fruitfully, but also helps us to endure the pains of dusty humanness while preparing us for the glory of the age to come* (2 Cor 5:7-18). Intimacy with God through Christ equips us to fulfill one of the key tasks of the third third of life, namely, getting ready for the fourth third.

## Negative Narratives Once More

As you may recall, popular negative narratives of aging permeate our culture and squash our flourishing. These narratives include:

*Negative Narrative #1 – The third third of life is a time when it’s all about you.* You had to care for others before, now, in retirement, it’s all about you. You will be able to enjoy a pleasurable life, but you won’t be living fruitfully, making a difference that matters, and that’s just fine because life is all about you now.

*Negative Narrative #2 – The third third of life is a time for dependency and damage.* Older adults, because of their dependency on others, are damaging the common good. They constitute the “Gray Wave” or “Silver Tsunami” that threatens our way of life, especially our economic prosperity.

*Negative Narrative #3 – The third third of life is a time of disability vs. capability.* Older adults are past their prime, past their time to contribute. As Mark Zuckerberg said, “Young people are just smarter.” Folks in the third third have liabilities and disabilities, not abilities and capabilities.

Such pervasive and popular negative narratives limit our potential for living fully and fruitfully when they are imposed upon us and when we allow them to shape our minds, hearts, and lives. These narratives are not consistent with biblical truth or with the findings of serious scholarly research in gerontology, psychology, sociology, medicine, and other disciplines.

## New Narratives for Third Third Flourishing

If we’re going to flourish in the third third of life, and if we’re going to help the world be a place where older adults are encouraged and enabled to live fully and fruitfully, then we need new narratives. The following narratives emerge from this course. They oppose the negative narratives with positive stories based on Scripture and science.

As we consider the new narratives, we’re reminded of the fact that aging inevitably involves losses and limitations (see Ecclesiastes 12:1-8, for example). We’re not pretending that we can live without challenges or even eventual death.

It’s also crucial to understand that *older adults have widely different personal stories and experiences*. The American Psychological Association website observes, “Many assume that older adults are all alike. However, as this age group

includes five decades of individuals, the differences among older adults are great – actually greater than those seen in other age groups.” Dr. Manfred Diehl, director of the Adult Development and Aging Project at Colorado State University observes, “Older adults are actually the most diverse age group, but they are often seen as unilaterally frail, vulnerable, or even expendable.”

The following narratives are correlated with the six sessions of this course. Then, I’ll add one additional narrative that lays out a broad vision of third third flourishing.

### **New Narrative #1 – The third third of life is a time to live fully and fruitfully.**

Based on Scripture passages such as Psalm 92:12-15, and reflecting relevant academic research, the “Full and Fruitful Living” narrative rejects popular negative narratives. It affirms that older adults can flourish both in terms of personal well-being and fruitfulness, that is, making a difference that matters in the world. Different people will have different experiences, given their particular situation, but the promise of full and fruitful living applies to all in the third third of life.

We may wonder: Is happiness possible for people in the third third? It turns out that it’s not only possible but likely. Dr. Laura Carstensen is one of the world’s top experts on aging as a professor of psychology and director of the Stanford Center on Longevity. In 2011, Dr. Carstensen presented the findings of her research in a TEDx talk entitled, “Older people are happier.”

### **New Narrative #2 – The third third of life is a time to experience generative relationships.**

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines “generativity” as “a need to nurture and guide younger people and contribute to the next generation.” We live out our generativity through generative relationships with people from younger generations. The significance of generativity as we age was first emphasized by developmental psychologist Erik Erikson (see *The Life Cycle Completed*, p. 64).

This “grand-generative function” is found in Scripture. In Psalm 71, for example, the psalm writer prays,

*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 all the generations to come. (71:17-18)*



### **New Narrative #3 – The third third of life is a time to live for God's glory in your body, a temple of the Holy Spirit.**

According to 1 Corinthians 6:19, your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit. The very Spirit of God dwells within you! Moreover, because you were bought with the price of Christ's bodily death, you should "therefore glorify God in your body" (1 Cor 6:20). Paul makes a similar point in Romans 12:1, though using different imagery: "I appeal to you therefore, brothers and sisters, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." When we take seriously this biblical vision of our bodies as temples and living sacrifices, we will be inspired to steward our bodies well so they might be used for God's glorious purposes. We will worship God through how we care for and employ our bodies to live for the praise of God's glory (Eph 1:11-14). Because our bodies are so special to God, we will pay particular attention to matters of physical health and well-being, but not with obsession or shame. Rather, we will take care of and use our bodies well in response to God's grace.

Though we will experience physical decline as we get older, we are not helpless. If we care well for our bodies we will be more likely to flourish.

### **New Narrative #4 – The third third of life is a time to remember and be grateful.**

As your brain ages, you become a "nostalgia factory," remembering experiences and people from decades ago. Personal nostalgia can be good for your brain, helping you connect and integrate the different seasons of your life. Remembering good things from the past can also inspire gratitude, and gratitude is an essential element of third third flourishing. We offer thanks to God because God deserves it and Scripture commands it, but also because it helps us to flourish and makes us ready to receive even more of God's blessings.

Gratitude is possible, perhaps even deepened, by the losses we experience in the third third of life.

### **New Narrative #5 – The third third of life is a time to respond to God's call to purposeful living.**

Scripture reveals that God calls us based on God's purpose for the whole creation as well as for our lives (Rom 8:28). When God calls us, we are called to a life of purpose. We are called to participate in God's work in the world. God's purpose becomes our primary purpose because of God's calling.

If we're going to flourish in the third third of life, we need to live with purpose greater than our own personal pleasure. In fact, third third flourishing is not "all about you." Full and fruitful living is all about God's purposes for creation and for your life. We discover God's purposes in Scripture and are called to these

by God himself. Our primary calling is to know and serve God, to love God and our neighbor. This calling will be expressed in a variety of secondary “callings” through which we respond to God’s call and live with transcendent purpose.

### **New Narrative #6 – The third third of life is a time to grow deeply in God so that you might bear much fruit.**

The righteous person flourishes in the third third of life when his or her roots grow deeply into the soil of God’s presence and people (Psalm 92:12-15). Or, as Jesus puts it, we will bear “much fruit” when we abide in him, thus glorifying God (John 15:4-8). If we want to live fully and fruitfully, we must live in right-relationship with God and grow in this relationship day by day.

Being rooted in God not only helps us flourish in the third third of life, but also prepares us for the fourth third, that is, for life beyond this life, life in the age to come, life in heaven. Since an essential task in the third third is getting ready for the fourth third, abiding in Christ is doubly essential and doubly fruitful.

### **New Narrative #7 – The third third of life is a time to live fully and fruitfully in fellowship together as brothers and sisters in the family of God.**

Living fully, or as Jesus would say, abundantly (John 10:10), is a matter of taking hold of “the life that really is life,” to quote the Apostle Paul (1 Tim 6:19). Living fruitfully is walking in the good works God has prepared for us (Eph 2:10). It’s what happens, according to Jesus, when we abide in him (John 15:4-8). Flourishing, therefore, from a biblical perspective, is living well and living productively.

Scripture is clear that this kind of living is *not something we do in isolation*. Rather, we will flourish as members of the body of Christ, as brothers and sisters in God’s family. You’ll remember the unforgettable statement of Dr. George Vaillant, former director of the Harvard Study of Adult Development. “The key to healthy aging,” Vaillant said, “is *relationships, relationships, relationships*.”

I am emphasizing the importance of relationships because they matter so much to your flourishing. Scripture says so. Science says so. But I’m making this point strongly for another reason as well. You see, it’s quite common for older adults to experience increasing isolation and loneliness, that is, to have fewer close relationships as we age.

### **Conclusion**

My friends, this course was created to help you flourish in the third third of your life. Imagine the impact upon your families, friends, neighborhoods, churches, and cities if you and your peers were living fully and fruitfully for God and his glory.

Today in the United States, approximately 10,000 people turn 65. Most of them have no idea of the things we've talked about in this course. Many are saddled with the negative narratives that will keep them from flourishing. Many have little hope that the next 20 years of their lives could be filled with meaning, purpose, productivity, generativity, friendship, and joy. Our third third comrades desperately need to know that God has a purpose for them and that their living into this purpose will allow them to live a full and meaningful life in the third third, even as they are getting ready for the fourth third.

Let's return to the passage of Scripture upon which this course is built. In the first lecture we examined Psalm 92:12-15. I can think of no better way to end this course than by reading that wonderful passage once again:

*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 that the LORD is upright;  
he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him.*

Thanks be to God!

## Resources and References

“Population Dynamics,” United Nations. (<https://population.un.org/wpp/Download/Standard/Population/>)

“Older Adults: Health and age-related changes,” *American Psychological Association*. (<https://www.apa.org/pi/aging/resources/guides/older>)

Adult Development and Aging Project at Colorado State University. (<https://www.chhs.colostate.edu/hdfs/research/research-labs/adult-development-and-aging-project/>)

Zara Abrams, “Older adults have more control over their aging than they think,” *American Psychological Association*, July 13, 2020. (<https://www.apa.org/monitor/2020/10/adults-control-aging>)

Laura Carstensen, “Older people are happier,” TEDxWomen 2011. ([https://www.ted.com/talks/laura\\_carstensen\\_older\\_people\\_are\\_happier](https://www.ted.com/talks/laura_carstensen_older_people_are_happier))

Erik H. Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed*. (<https://www.amazon.com/Life-Cycle-Completed-Extended-Version/dp/0393317722/>)

Douwe Draaisma, *The Nostalgia Factory: Memory, Time and Aging*. (<https://www.amazon.com/Nostalgia-Factory-Memory-Time-Ageing-dp-0300205392/dp/0300205392/>)

*Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults*, from National Academies. (<https://nap.nationalacademies.org/read/25663/chapter/1>)

If you’d like to keep up to date on the third third resources produced by the De Pree Center, you can sign up for their monthly newsletter (<https://depree.org/third-third/>), which also takes you to their Third Third Initiative page. You’ll find lots of helpful resources there.

In particular, you may wish to peruse their Third Third Journal (<https://depree.org/third-third-journal/>).

Mark has written a ten-part devotional and/or small group guide: *Calling in the Third Third of Life* (<https://depree.org/products/calling-in-the-third-third-of-life/>). If you’re interested in this guide, you can download it for \$9.99 per person. (If you want to use this guide for a group larger than ten, there is a discounted price. Please contact the De Pree Center: [connect@depree.org](mailto:connect@depree.org)).

Mark mentioned many resources during his six lectures. As you know, he often refers to *Brain Rules for Aging Well* (<https://www.amazon.com/Brain-Rules-Aging-Well-Principles/dp/0996032673/>), by John Medina. In addition to this book, there are several others that address the third third of life with biblical wisdom. These include:

Walter C. Wright, *The Third Third of Life: Preparing for Your Future* (<https://www.amazon.com/Third-Life-Preparing-Your-Future/dp/0830837965/>).

Richard and Leona Bergstrom, *Third Calling: What are you doing the rest of your life?* (<https://www.amazon.com/Third-Calling-What-doing-rest/dp/0970555210/>)

Andy Raub, *The Encore Curve: Retire with a Life Plan that Excites You* (<https://www.amazon.com/Encore-Curve-Retire-Life-Excites/dp/1612543561/>).

Jeff Haanen, *An Uncommon Guide to Retirement: Finding God's Purpose for the Next Season of Life* (<https://www.amazon.com/Uncommon-Guide-Retirement-Finding-Purpose/dp/0802418929/>).

Bruce Bruinsma, *The Retirement Reformation* (<https://www.amazon.com/Retirement-Reformation-Finding-Freedom-Experience-ebook/dp/B07T35NSXV/>).

R. Paul Stevens, *Aging Matters: Finding Your Calling for the Rest of Your Life* (<https://www.amazon.com/Aging-Matters-Finding-Your-Calling/dp/0802872336/>).

William Willimon, *Aging: Growing Old in the Church* (<https://www.amazon.com/Aging-Pastoring-Life-Theological-Ministering-ebook/dp/B07VPL36Q7/>).

Alice Fryling, *Aging Faithfully: The Holy Invitation of Growing Older* (<https://a.co/d/4AJfxMu>).