



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

J.I. Packer

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

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

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

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From Reader Review Finishing Our Course with Joy: Guidance from God for Engaging with Our Aging for online ebook

Andy Anderson says

Great reminder about our responsibility as we get into the retirement age. Don't quit. Use your influence and maturity to reach the next generation. Don't slow down, pick up the pace and move faster.....

Ivan says

For those getting older and who desire to finish well, this is a concise and encouraging read. I plan on incorporating some of these lessons as I serve residents two nursing homes here in Louisville.

Ajith Fernando says

For my airplane reading on a trip to the US one of the books I read was a small but powerful book by J. I. Packer, *Finishing Our Course with Joy: Guidance from God for Engaging with our Aging* (Crossway, 2014). It seeks to debunk some of the myths connected with aging. One myth is that now our work time is over and we must enjoy our retirement with travel and other earthly pleasures (what a boing life that would make!). Another myth is “the world’s winding-down ethos that this book urges Christians of all ages to repudiate.” Instead he speaks of how zeal, learning, involvement in ministry and leadership can be key factors in our lives in spite of our advanced years.

Packer will soon be 88 years old. I was involved with him in the drafting committee at the Amsterdam 2000 Conference for Evangelists when he was 74 years old. I was amazed at his astuteness and how he could summarise a discussion of half an hour into one succinct sentence! He, like John Stott and Carl Henry, visited Sri Lanka when the evangelicals were a small and despised group in the church who were considered to have committed intellectual suicide. These three encouraged us younger folks (yes, there was a time when we were young) to pursue the life of the mind and argue for a credible witness to biblical Christianity. Drs Packer and Henry stayed in my parents’ home! Dr Packer’s book *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, read in the early seventies when I was a student as Asbury Seminary was a watershed in my own reflection on the inspiration of the Bible.

Guy Yeomans says

Good biblical common sense on being a 'senior' disciple but nothing profoundly new or insightful. A short but easy to read book.

Jan Donegani says

Good large print version written by J I Packer in his 80s. This is a challenging read and one easier to hear than to do. The one thing I would like to have read more on is the vital ministry of prayer, which often is outstanding amongst older people.

He writes for younger olds (65-75), medium olds (75-85) and oldest olds (85+) and those who will become these.

Against a backdrop of our culture which encourages older people to a life of idleness, self-indulgence and irresponsibility which inevitably results in a life felt to be burdensome and insignificant, the Bible says much to encourage us to grow in spiritual ripeness as we age. Ripe fruit is relatively soft and sweet, mellow, flavourful and leaves a pleasant aftertaste (compared to the unripe sharp, acidic, flavourless and hard fruit which has not yet ripened). Ageing under God and by grace, will bring wisdom – an enlarged capacity for discerning, choosing, and encouraging. Packer says that as far as our bodily health allows, we should aim to be found running flat out, the last lap of the Christian race, living each day as if it is our last: living one day at a time with a goal of glorifying God each day mindful of our imminent judgement; living in the presence of God in the present moment rather than wasting time indulging in nostalgia; and living ready to go when Christ comes for us (John 14:2-3).

The temptations that ‘oldsters’ face are twofold.

The first is not to face up to the fact that physical decline is happening due to pride which wants to keep control and dominate (tyranny is often transferred to family and friends once retirement from a successful career happens)

The second is to conform to the culture around and go with the flow of bodily decline and waning physical desires and allow our discipleship to Christ and our zeal for seeking, displaying and advancing the Kingdom of God to cool.

Christian ‘oldsters’ need to resist this and to continue lifelong learning (devotionally and in study of the Bible) and in influence of those they are close to. They should find, feed and use their gifts – or they will atrophy with disuse (not with age). They need to be available to give as much mature wisdom as their families (and those over whom they have influence) are willing to receive, showing themselves to be affectionate, equable and unsnubbable.

Running the last lap – there is a need to cultivate the maximum zeal (priority, passion and effort) for this closing phase. But ‘oldsters’ often have the following useful resources.

1. Time

2. Maturity – “Spiritual maturity is a deep, well tested relationship to our triune God through our Lord Jesus Christ, and a quality that is identifiable only in relationships; one that all pastoral ministry requires; and one that should... mark out Christian seniors, equipping them for ongoing usefulness in care-centred , outreach-oriented congregations.”

3. Humility “is the product of ongoing repentance as one decides against, turns from, and by watching and praying seeks to steer clear of pride in all its forms. And as the battle against pride in the heart is lifelong, so

humility should become an ever more deeply seated attitude of living at the disposal of God and others—an attitude that veteran Christians should increasingly display. Real spiritual growth is always growth downward, so to speak, into profounder humility, which in healthy souls will become more and more apparent as they age.”

4. Zeal. “Maintaining zeal Godward as our bodies wear out is the special discipline to which we aging Christians are called. Realism requires us to remember that memory, particularly short-term memory, will weaken; logical tightness of speech will loosen; powers of concentration will diminish; physical exhaustion will overtake us sooner or later, and energy levels will keep going lower. Zeal, however, should be unflagging every day, all day, and all the way. But if this is to happen, zeal must be fed by hope.” Hope verses - (1 Pe 1:3-9, 2 Co: 4,5). Over time, a conscious focus on hope of glory should grow sharper and meditations on it grow more joyful and sustained. As this happens, passion to continue being of use to God and his people, in holiness, love and neighbourliness, should and will intensify to the end.

Finally Packer lists a few examples of possible ministries most of which are instigated by the older person in an informal way: - Caring for the needy; being a friend and encouraging the lonely and depressed; being a companion of those wounded and weakened by bitterness, anger and hurt; being a helper of those caring for others eg with dementia; sharing godly wisdom with younger people in a different life stage and maybe struggling with various crises.

Katerina says

"Finishing Our Course with Joy" is written to longtime Christians who are now 65 or older although it is helpful for those of us younger than that as well. It is a quick, encouraging book.

It acknowledges that as we grow older our bodies decline, and it asks us to acknowledge that decline. (While it doesn't mention this, I can think of seniors who need to give up their privilege to drive. I hope I have the wisdom and courage to do that when the time comes.) However, it also reminds us that we have a future heavenly hope: a new body, an enriched life, a closer relationship with Jesus, and, possibly, rewards tied to this life. As a result, we should continue to live with zeal for God's glory. We should continue learning and leading. This means living life one day at a time yet with a plan for each day's business. Keep the goal of glorifying God in focus and maintain the effort. Live each day with an awareness of Christ's presence. Set aside daydreaming and nostalgia. Finally, live ready to go when Christ comes for you.

While this summarizes the main points, there are many interesting, thoughtful tidbits tucked into this short book. It is worth picking up if you or someone you know fits the book's intended audience.

Dkovlak says

This book is very practical and Biblical. It is a short book, but it is a good reminder that as long as the elderly are physically able, they should help younger people in their Christian growth.

There is no such thing as a retired Christian. It gives good practical steps that older Christians can do as long as their bodies allow it.

Will Pareja says

14 point font!

This is the hutzpah of Piper, Strachan and Platt for the aging saint.

Pastors should somehow fold this into his visitation or discipleship strategy for the aging of his congregation.

Packer takes on the popular understanding of "retirement": "I think it is one of the huge follies of our time, about which some frank speaking is in order and indeed overdue" (p. 29). And that he does with an irenic tone and gospel courage.

Without using the cliché "It's hard to teach an old dog new tricks", Packer surely challenges the notion by saying that senior saints can indeed grow in holiness, knowledge, leadership/influence, gratitude, humility, joy and zeal. "Maintaining zeal Godward as our bodies wear out IS the special discipline to which we aging Christians are called" (p. 76).

This small but powerful book appropriately ends with a call for the aging saints of the church to amp it up and "so far as our bodily health allows, we should aim to be found running the last lap if the race of our Christian life, as we would say, flat out. The final sprint, so I urge, should be a sprint indeed."

Barbara says

At 99 pages, J. I. Packer's *Finishing Our Course with Joy: Guidance from God for Engaging with Our Aging* is not a total treatise on aging. Its main thrust is that modern society tends to put older people on the shelf for a life of indulgence and idleness, but Christians should continue growing in our relationship with God as well as our ministry to others. Our ministry may look different from what it did in our youth, but God still has a purpose for us being here. He acknowledges that one fourth of the "oldest old" (over 85) will have some degree of dementia, but:

These pages address those who, by God's grace, still have their faculties intact; who recognize that, as is often and truly said, aging is not for wimps; and who want to learn, in a straightforward way, how we may continue living for God's glory (p. 14).

He says that for years, people have viewed older age as a state of decline, but we should view it as what he calls "ripeness" or maturity.

We know the difference between ripe and unripe fruit: the latter is sharp, acid, hard, without much flavor, and sets teeth on edge; the former is relatively soft and sweet, juicy, mellow, flavorful, leaving a pleasant taste in the mouth" (p. 18).

The Bible's view is that aging, under God and by grace, will bring wisdom, that is, an enlarged capacity for discerning, choosing, and encouraging (p. 19).

[Racers] always try to keep something in reserve for a final sprint...so far as our bodily health allows, we should aim to be found running the last lap of our Christian life, as we would say, flat out. The final sprint, so I urge, should be a sprint indeed (pp. 21-22).

He discusses various ways to do that, living one day at a time as if it truly might be our last, with glorifying God as our “constant goal,” avoiding excessive daydreaming and nostalgia, ready to go whenever God calls us home.

The fact that one is no longer under any pressure to use one’s mind in learning things, solving problems, or strategizing for benefits either to oneself or to anybody else, will allow intelligence to lie permanently fallow, and this, so they tell us, may very well hasten the onset of dementia. The agenda as a whole turns out to be a recipe for isolating oneself and trivializing one’s life, with apathetic boredom becoming one’s default mood day after day (p. 30).

He discusses some of the temptations of old age, such as “going with the flow” of everything declining, even spiritually, or not acknowledging any decline due to pride and becoming “tyrannical” with family and friends after having to leave one’s sphere of work (pp 45-46).

He discusses how the church’s view too often mimics the world’s views of retirement:

Yet the common expectation, undiscussed but unchallenged, is that retirees will not continue the learning and leading that were big in their lives while they were at work. The most that the church will expect of them now is that they will continue to support from the sidelines, as it were, the modes of ministry in which others engage (pp. 62-63).

By moving us to think this way, however, Satan undermines, diminishes, and deflates our discipleship, reducing us from laborers in Christ’s kingdom to sympathetic spectators... (p. 63).

Still taking their cue from the world around, modern Western churches organize occupations, trips, parties, and so forth for their seniors and make pastoral provision for the shut-ins, but they no longer look to these folks as they do to the rest of the congregation to find, feed, and use their spiritual gifts. In this they behave as though spiritual gifts and ministry skills whither with age. But they don’t; what happens, rather, is that they atrophy with disuse (pp 63-64).

He encourages churches to balance acknowledging that there is bodily decline and ministering as needed to seniors with seeking to “cherish and continue to harness the ministering capacities” of older saints (p. 64). “And elderly Christian themselves should press on in the worship and service of God and in pastoral care for others, up to the limit of what they can still handle...” (p. 64).

“The challenge that faces us is not to let that fact [that our bodies are slowing down] slow us down spiritually, but to cultivate the maximum zeal for the closing phase of our earthly lives” (p. 72). He then spends several pages discussing zeal and quotes J. C. Ryle as saying that “Zeal in religion is a burning desire to do his will, and to advance his glory in every possible way”

(pp. 74-75).

He urges balance in families as well, encouraging seniors not to be “dictatorial” or “invade family circles unasked,” remembering that “loyalty to one’s spouse should trump the claims of parents,” and encouraging families not to “ignore mature wisdom that is available...in [their] older relatives and friends” (p. 97).

He also discusses nurturing the hope of heaven, letting that be a guide and inspiration as well as a testimony, and remembering that we will give account at the judgment seat of Christ that Christians will face (different from the judgment that unbelievers face).

There is a lot packed in this short little book, and it’s encouraging to be reminded that God still has things for us to do for His glory as we age.

Linda says

A short book, but one I will probably read again. There's so much wisdom here that runs counter to the prevailing views of contemporary culture.

Dennis Thurman says

As one who has arrived in the age of senior citizen discounts and letters from funeral homes about prearrangement, I found this book helpful and hopeful. Every seasoned saint could profit from it. All could benefit, however, as we will ultimately reach the homestretch of life and need to finish well. This book will energize you for the final kick!

Marcus Goncalves says

Very good work for those of us who are getting on in years. The fact that we (we'll, some of us) are no longer young does not mean that it's time for younger people to pick up the mantle and let us live out our lives in peace. The authors remind that these are our best years and why this is so. Great and inspiring book.

Kim says

The only thing I wished was different about this book was that it was longer. As always, Packer writes with insight, wisdom, and humility. In this short book, he exhorts the senior members of the body of Christ to shun the worldly attitude that says retirement is a time for inactivity. He encourages the senior Christian to maintain their zeal for Christ to the best of their physical limitations. He points out that seniors have benefits such as opportunity, maturity, humility, and intensity. They can offer the church a great deal. I am not as old as the audience Packer had in mind for this book, but these are truths we all ought to ponder, because no one is getting any younger.

Christa Bergquist says

Excellent little book about aging well as a Christian. I recommend it to young people for two reasons: 1) it provides insight into the lives of our elderly brothers and sisters in Christ so that we might better serve them and 2) it holds up a picture of how to "run the race" to the very end, and the process of finishing well starts now.

Bob says

Summary: A meditation on aging that combines coming to terms with the physical changes in our bodies while pressing on to complete our course of actively serving the Lord.

J. I. Packer was a middle-aged scholar when his book *Knowing God* found its way to me as a college student. I had a chance to hear him speak on revival in Ann Arbor in his mid-fifties. Now I have passed that milestone, while Packer is still an active scholar and writer at age 91. I personally can't think of a person I'd rather listen to teach about aging and finishing well in Christ.

This pithy little book of meditations on aging is worth its weight in gold. It opens with a remarkable tribute, from a Commonwealth citizen to Queen Elizabeth II (who is a few months older than Packer, also 91 at this writing):

"The Queen is a very remarkable person. Tirelessly, it seems, she goes on doing what she has been doing for six decades and more: waving in shy friendliness to the crowds past whom she is transported, and greeting with a smile one and another; children particularly, whom she meets in her walkabouts. It is more than sixty years since she publicly committed herself before God to serve Commonwealth citizens all her life. She has done it devotedly up to now, and will undoubtedly continue doing it as long as she physically can. So we may expect to see more of the porkpie hats and hear more of the clear, easy voice as her reign continues. She is a Christian lady resolved to live out her vow till she drops. She merits unbounded admiration from us all" (p. 12).

This quote should give you a sense of the theme of this book. In his first chapter on "We Grow Old" he discusses facing honestly our physical decline, but also talks about ripeness as a positive image of old age, and commends three ideas:

- First, live for God one day at a time.
- Second, live in the present moment.
- Third, live ready to go when Christ comes for you.

Packer thinks that the wrong way to pursue this is to kick back and take our ease and follow the typical retiree life of leisure activities.

In "Soul and Body" Packer talks about what it means for us to be embodied persons and explores the opposite temptation of aging leaders who refuse to relinquish power, or do so reluctantly and take it out on their families. Pride and insecurity may prevent us to recognizing when our advancing age suggests that it is

time to hand off to rising leaders.

“Keeping Going” begins to fill in Packer’s vision of avoiding the perils of leisured retirement, and the stubborn and fearful refusal to let go of formal leadership roles. Packer proposes a life where we continue to be learners rooted in a mentally engaged study of scripture that seeks growth as thoughtful, discerning, and vibrant disciples. And while we may step aside from formal leadership roles, we should be open to the ways we might exercise influence leadership through our relationships, particularly intergenerationally. He commends Paul’s statement that he has finished his race (2 Timothy 4:6-8), and sees this as a call to clear goals, purposeful planning, resolute concentration, and supreme effort so that we might finish well our own races.

“We Look Forward” builds on this and the future hope toward which we run, beyond the finish line. He reflects on the marvelous “upgrade” that our resurrection bodies represent, the hope of being with the Lord, and the reckoning we will face that determines, not our salvation, but the opportunities we will enjoy in those new bodies, connected to how we’ve lived in these. And so he concludes with the opportunities we have now, even in advancing years. We may have five, ten, or twenty years or more where we will be able to serve in some ways to advance the Lord’s kingdom. Will we do this with a maturity, humility, and zeal that encourages others to press on in their own races, their own life course?

How grateful I am for this word from one three decades ahead of me who is still running his race with joy. I need his warnings against the temptation to take our ease, and finish before we’ve finished in terms of our lives of discipleship and service. He challenges me in my own work of leadership to be diligent in preparing to pass the baton to others while preparing for new roles of service that steward the gifts and lessons of life to bless others in the church. He challenges me to growing and learning in Christ. The followers of Christ who I’ve seen end their lives best have lived like this. By God’s grace, I want to be one of them.
