

GOD’S MODEL FOR OLD AGE

Luke 2:36–38

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It’s a short text and a short sermon: verses 36 through 38. I’m always amazed at how the Lord brings texts at the right time for special situations. I know when I began preaching through Luke, earlier this fall, we at that time had not set the date for a Senior Citizens Recognition Sunday. But would you believe that we’ve arrived now at Senior Citizen Recognition Sunday, and the text we arrive at gives us God’s model for old age: Anna.

“There was also a prophetess, Anna, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old. She had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage and then was a widow until she was eighty-four.” An alternate reading is “She was a widow for eighty-four years.” There’s a certain question about her age: whether she was eighty-four or had been a widow for eighty-four years. “She never left the temple, but worshipped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them, at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Israel” (Luke 2:36–38, NIV).

Luke’s Gospel has been called “the Gospel the little folk will always love best.” It’s not hard to understand that statement, since Luke gives us the story of the shepherds and the manger and the star of Bethlehem and the angels singing. But Luke is also the Gospel that tells us most about elderly people. It gives us stories and vignettes of the elderly.

Right away, at the beginning of Luke, we’ve been seeing that. For example, Zechariah and Elizabeth, who are past the age of bearing children. Yet God has visited them and gave them the joy of being the parents of John the Baptist. This man, Simeon, who we looked at last week, a man who had been promised that he would not die until he had seen the Messiah. And now,

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another beautiful elderly person named Anna. She was either eighty-four or had been a widow eighty-four years. It's not certain, when you read the Greek text, which one Luke is intending to say. If she had been a widow for eighty-four years, then you can kind of figure out what her age would have been. We know that she was married for seven years. So you add seven to eighty-four and come up with ninety-one. The average girl would probably have begun marrying at about the age of fourteen. So, if she got married at fourteen, add seven and add eighty-four, it means that she would have been a hundred and five. Now, all the teenager girls in here, this is not permission for you to follow Anna's footsteps and get married when you're fourteen. My daughter turned eighteen yesterday and she is, of course, waiting until she is twenty-five, and then she is letting me pick the guy. So guys, you can get the applications right here.

But Anna may have been a hundred and five. That's my own personal preference as I read the text, because Luke is saying she is very old. Notice verse 36, "She was very old." Eighty-four is old but a hundred and five is very old. I think in looking at Anna's life, you'll find her to be the kind of senior citizen that is a model for what any age should shoot for in terms of personality characteristics. If you're going to be a model senior citizen, the best time to start is whatever age you're at right now, because you make the kind of choices today that are determining the kind of person you and I will be tomorrow and in the long run.

As I look at Anna's life, God's model for old age, I find three characteristics in her that I want for a model for old age and for any age. They are:

I. She had obviously known sorrow, but she had not grown bitter.

She had known sorrow. She had either been a widow for sixty years or for eighty-four years. For certain, she would have been widowed when she was in her twenties. It's one thing to go through the sorrow of being a widow. It's quite another thing to live with that sorrow, decade after

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decade after decade, as she had done. All through her twenties, all through her thirties, other friends her age, by the time she was in her late forties, had borne children. They were becoming grandmothers. She'd missed out on all that. As far as we know, she was alone. She had to deal with the continual sorrow that had visited her life.

Some people, I think very few people, manage to get through life without ever having a major trauma, a major loss, a major disaster of any kind. Most of us, however, suffer at least one thing that is so large in its impact that it could derail us, destroy us, and embitter us. If I were to ask this crowd, this morning, to raise your hand if you have had a severe tragedy or loss or trauma in your life, I would suspect most of the hands in this auditorium would be raised.

Anna, therefore, is our kind of a person. The effects of her trauma, of losing her husband, were long-term. They stretched out over years. I heard Dr. Gordon Fee ministering this week at a retreat, and he talked about a friend of his who had written a book on discipleship. He had called the book *The Long Obedience*. I thought, "How fitting a phrase for following the Lord." It is the long obedience. It's not being made a microwave Christian, suddenly things happen and you are, overnight, everything that God ever wanted you to be. But it is a long obedience. Anna had that. Anna found that you cannot reverse those traumas once they happen in your life. You cannot reverse the loss of a husband. When we look at the traumas that we may have experienced at any age in our life, we can't reverse that trauma either. The only thing you can change is your perception of the trauma and how you go on living from there.

Anna could have become bitter and could have spent her life in bitterness. If you spend your life in bitterness or spend any day in bitterness, there are some unpleasant consequences that occur. Bitterness, for example, will not change what has happened. Bitterness of Anna toward God or anyone else over the death of her husband would not change that situation, that loss. Bitterness

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will never change anything. Bitterness will only destroy relationships and corrode your own spirit, that's the only thing bitterness can do. If you let bitterness well up inside, it turns you in on yourself, it destroys you, and ultimately, it spills out and affects your relationships. That is why, probably, there is nothing more difficult to get along with than a crabby, mean-spirited senior citizen who's had years and years and years to nurse the bitterness until it has come out in full invective. I thank the Lord we don't have anybody like that in our church. Every one of our senior citizens in this church is either a sweetheart or a godly Christian gentleman.

We know that Anna was able to withstand that bitterness. The text tells us that she gave thanks to God. People who are giving thanks are not bitter people.

That's a beautiful trait in her life. She had known sorrow, but had not grown bitter. We have to ask, then, about ourselves. How about me? How about you?

II. The second quality in her that is admirable is the fact that she did not withdraw into herself, but she reached out to God and to others.

Sometimes, when we go through a trauma, one of the things that happens is we begin to pull our world back in on us and don't trust people again or don't commit ourselves to relationships again. We just go inside a shell. I know I've talked to people, at various times in my life, who maybe have gotten a raw deal, in the body of Christ even, and have said, "I'll never trust again, I'll never serve again." It's hard to go through those wrenching times and recover a sense of service and equilibrium and balance.

But we know that Anna did not withdraw into herself. We know that because she was a prophetess. And a prophetess is not a person who can withdraw. A prophetess, like a prophet, has a ministry of the Word of God to people that is for their encouragement, for their strengthening and for their consolation. In order to have an effective ministry, they must be in the Word

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themselves. I suspect if you visited Anna's utility apartment somewhere on the temple grounds, you'd find some scrolls of the Old Testament Scriptures. You would have found them yellowed with age, reflecting the fact that she had let the Word become a living entity in her life. That Word had helped to bring her out of herself to God and to others. She loved God's Word and she loved God's people.

As I was preparing this message, my mind went to a person I know that had a very severe setback, they perceived it as that and withdrew into self and, to my knowledge, never came out of that to effectively serve God in their life. A young person, when I was the campus pastor at Evangel College, ran for student body president. He was very well-qualified, a good kid, a good leader. I really thought he should have won, but he lost. I can understand exactly that feeling because once when I had been a student at that same college, I had run for the student body presidency, and lost. I felt like my world had collapsed on me. I thought everybody was my friend and, to have to get up the next day, and walk down the hall, and say hi to people that had probably voted against me sneakily, was a hard thing for me.

The big things in our life, when we're going through them, gradually diminish as we get older. It doesn't seem nearly as important now as it did back then. But I knew that my young friend was going through a severe, wrenching loss and I knew from instinct where I might find him. I found him and spent that evening praying with him, encouraging him, saying to him, "Don't let this experience embitter you." "But I prayed for it! I told God if He would let me have it, I would serve Him. I don't understand. I was the most qualified person. I don't understand why God doesn't answer prayer. I can't figure out what's happened to me." In spite of my best efforts to assure him he could make it, and look at the good that this would produce in his life; it produced good in me, because it helped me re-evaluate my priorities and the like. Ultimately, he came out

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of that experience an embittered young man. It was one of the great heart-wrenching experiences of my time at that college as campus pastor. To see that next year that young man retreated more and more into his own shell and out of the person he had been becoming. He had a loss and he withdrew into himself; instead of reaching out to God and to others.

It's a tragedy to see that happening, and yet it's a normal tendency. When we're hurting, the tendency is to withdraw into self. The Lord gives us a better solution than withdrawing into self. He says, "Draw nigh unto Me," and if you'll draw nigh unto God, you'll avoid that terrible temptation of retreating unto self.

It is evident that this woman, Anna, was a woman of the Word, a prophetess and a woman of worship. There are many people like Anna in this world. I think we may sometimes easily discount them. Perhaps you've seen pictures of the Russian church. Practically any picture of the church that comes out of Russia generally shows that the audience is heavily populated by elderly ladies wearing black shawls.

Maybe the tendency is to look at that and say, where are the young people? And, will the church survive? We use the phrase in the West Coast "the little ladies from Pasadena in tennis shoes." But it's those little old ladies in those churches of Russia that are keeping that church alive for another generation; because, while they may seem like nothing in the world, they're pretty mighty with God. It's those little old ladies who intercede for the church in prayer. Don't ever discount a godly little old lady.

I say that with all these beautiful young citizens sitting here on the first three rows. It's your prayers that sustain me, that sustain this church. Thank God our value is always is measured by God in the body of Christ, in a totally different way than the world measures value and worth.

It's the Anna's that keep the work of God alive. And God has a high opinion of them and He lets

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us know His opinion of them by telling us about an Anna in Scripture. She might have been an unknown to everybody on that temple ground—except a handful who knew her as the faithful woman of prayer and worship—but her name is big to God. God even has her genealogy and family tree. Her prayers and the prayers of little old ladies are holding back the darkness.

III. A third marvelous thing about Anna as God's model: She had come to the end of her years, but not to the end of her hope.

When Jesus came, she spoke about Him to all who were looking for the redemption for Jerusalem and the salvation of God's people. She still believed that there was a future. She believed in the future. And she believed that God was Lord over the future, so she was still speaking about it. She had not gone into herself at the end of her years but kept looking forward in hope.

There are really three kind of hope.

A. There's a kind of hope that doesn't have a prayer of ever coming to pass. That's Charlie Brown's kind of hope, who gets out in the pumpkin patch every Halloween and waits for the Great Pumpkin in the sky to appear. He hopes every Halloween, but it ain't ever going to come to pass, it is a hope that is rooted in fiction and it can never be.

B. A second kind of hope is the hope that looks at something desirable and doesn't know for sure whether it's going to come to pass or not, but sees it as something that would really be enjoyable. A young person might say, "I hope someday to be married." Or maybe, "I hope someday to have a successful career." Or, "I hope someday to be a missionary." Or, "I hope someday to become a millionaire and give all of it to the church!" I hope. It may or may not come to pass, but it's a hope.

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C. The third kind of hope is the hope that is a reality. If I said, “I hope that the sun will rise tomorrow,” friends, there ain’t much chance of the sun staying down. Now LA smog and fog may keep it from view, but the sun is coming up. That’s Christian hope. Christians say, “I hope in the return of the Lord.” That’s not the first kind of hope, of not having a prayer coming to pass. It’s not the second kind of hope, which may or may not occur. It’s the third kind of hope that is sure, it’s final, it’s fixed. It’s reality. It is coming.

And that’s Anna’s kind of hope. She knew that, because God had promised it, He would redeem His people and so she looked forward in hope. She did not let old age become a reduction to simple concerns about “Am I going to stay healthy?” for her. “Can I keep going on minimum income?” “Am I going to be able to survive the grief of having outlived my friends?” She did not become fixated on death. She did not become locked in on these concerns, which can pull you down. She was locked in on what God was doing and what He was about to do.

When, like Anna, we place our hope, not in our years and not in our physical age, but in God, that’s a certain kind of hope. And that’s the only way to live.

So Anna models these three things for us, for old age and for any age: knowing sorrow but not becoming bitter, being a person who instead of going into self went into God and therefore to others, and, although she had come to the end of her years, she never came to the end of her hope. May those words describe each one of us as well.

Closing Prayer

Our Father, we unite our hearts in this moment of prayer. There are some in this service literally feeling at the end of their hope. We have, here today, the Word of the Lord which says “Hope thou in God.” I pray for those in this service who have a sense of hopelessness about them, who become confused and bewildered by the wrenching traumas that they have experienced. I pray,

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Lord Jesus, that, like Anna, they will find that special grace that comes from You. And that really is the secret, Lord. That's the meaning of Anna's name: grace. The ability to get through those kinds of times and keep hope because we get a hold of You. And we go unto You and find You are a constant help to us in times of trouble. I pray for those today who have come with bitterness in their life. I pray that Anna would be a mirror by which we could all look at ourselves and realize that, if we chose to remain bitter about a circumstance, it can only destroy us. And that only praise and forgiveness and love can free us. Do Your freeing work in our lives today, that we may take our losses and say "Nevertheless, God is working it for the good." Let us draw near to You. Let none of us retreat into ourselves and into our own worlds. Let us come out of self into You and find the healing that only You can provide. You are our very present help in time of need. In Jesus' name. Amen.