

Understanding
the
8 Stages
of
Human
Life



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Understanding the 8 Stages of Human Life

*Listen to the words of an ancient wise man
as he verbalized his observations of human
life on earth ...*

Ecclesiastes 3:1-8

*“For everything there is a season, and a time for
every matter under heaven:*

a time to be born, and a time to die;

*a time to plant, and a time to pluck up what is
planted;*

...

a time to break down, and a time to build up;

a time to weep, and a time to laugh;

a time to mourn, and a time to dance;

*a time to throw away stones, and a time to gather
stones together;*

*a time to embrace, and a time to refrain from
embracing;*

a time to seek, and a time to lose;

a time to keep, and a time to throw away;

a time to tear, and a time to sew;

a time to keep silent, and a time to speak;

...

a time for war, and a time for peace.”

In a similar manner, let us observe and discuss the development of a person through his earthly life, generally of three score and ten years.

The Development of a Person through the 8 Stages of Human Life

The childhood developmental stages are adapted from the findings of psychological research from scientists such as Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson. As far as I can, I have tried to pick out those discoveries about the human being that are in accordance with OR not contradictory to biblical principles. I need to add that while God sees every view clearly, the science of psychology looks at people from a limited and tainted earthly view only. The latter is only part of the general revelation that God has given to us. Therefore, the latter view, if used wisely, is also a gift and tool from God to help us understand ourselves better. In case the reader rejects psychology, the scientific study of the mind, as unbiblical (at one extreme) or accepts anything that comes from such studies as the whole truth about man (the other extreme), please let me explain the difference between scientific and biblical principles.

Science, as a subject, is
“systematised knowledge derived from observation, study, and experimentation carried on in order to determine the nature or principles of what is being studied”

(Webster’s New World Dictionary).

Usually, an observation is first made of something that a scientist wishes to study. Then he collects more data in order to obtain a more valid picture of his discovery. After that, a hypothesis is made to summarise his findings in order for him to repeat certain steps in experiment in order to obtain more data. If the same results are obtainable by the same methods, then the hypothesis he started with has developed into a theory. If not, then he will have to modify his hypothesis and so on. When a theory has been discovered to be repeatedly consistent, a principle is drawn from it. A scientific principle, therefore, is dependent on what is repeatable and provable. It does not touch on what it cannot know through such honest scientific methods, such as whether a person is morally responsible for telling a lie or not. Scientific knowledge covers what is known through such observation and experiments.

Biblical principles, on the other hand, are derived from the knowledge of what God chooses to reveal to the world.

This includes scientific discovery as well as non-scientific discovery, such as the Scriptures, God's constant still small voice speaking to His people, gifts of knowledge, and of signs and wonders.

Example

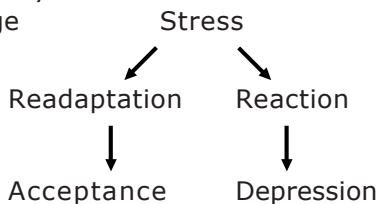
In a usual testimony of a man's conversion experience, he may describe in words what happened to him and how he felt when God touched him. He could have felt sad when convicted of personal sin and repented before the Saviour.

A scientist who is studying the same man's conversion experience, on the other hand, may attach electrodes to his brain and take his pulse rate and blood pressure regularly in order to find out how he physically responds to such an experience.

Both sets of knowledge may be valid to describe what happens at his conversion. But each is looking at it from a different angle, depending on what each is looking for. The scientist cannot tell whether the conversion is genuine or not because that is in the realm of the reality of faith in the invisible God who cannot be known unless He reveals Himself to man. The Christian, however, is not worried whether his pulse rate increased during the time of conviction of sin; he is only overwhelmed that the holy God could and would forgive him all his sins and make him His beloved child ¹.

Let us now consider the eight stages of a person's life on earth:

| STAGE | KEY WORD |
|--|---|
| I. Intra-uterine growth | Acceptance |
| II. Birth-1 year: Infancy | Security |
| III. 1-3 years: Early Childhood 3-6 years Early Childhood | Independence Initiative (Morality) |
| IV. 6-12 years: Late Childhood | Sublimation |
| V. 12-20 years: Adolescence | Upheaval |
| VI. 20-40 years: Young Adulthood | Search for a home |
| VII. 40-60 years: Middle-age | Peak-Plateau |
| VIII. Over 60 year: Old Age | |



Key words signify the most significant milestone for the particular stage of life that a person usually must reach before he is mature enough to handle the next stage of growth healthily. However, time moves on; whether we acquire that maturity for each stage or not, we still move on, but often with a sort of subconscious craving to get back to that stage in order to be more whole or more mature as a person.

This is where God, in His grace, shows us through Scriptures, the needed healing to those who come to Him for forgiveness of personal sins and removal of weaknesses in our inner being. A child of God who has experienced something of that renewing maturing work of the Holy Spirit cannot help but be ever conscious of His mercy to him.

If God should choose to touch an area of your life in this way, please allow Him to walk with you until you know His love and holiness in a deepening way. Sometimes we may have to forgive those who hurt us with or without evil intent, regardless of whether they know about their fault or not. We are not to find fault with others but to forgive and release the Lord's blessings on them. On the other hand, if we have sinned against anyone and this surfaces in our conscious memory, then we need to ask God for forgiveness too.

Whether we like it or not, parents or parent-figures need to be the models and initiators for their children to reach each milestone in their normal development.

I will focus more on the womb to adolescent stages as children are the most misunderstood people in life. They are just finding their way around the world, which starts at home. Yet, about 70%-80% of our personality has been formed by the time we reach 7 years of age ². Therefore, loving nurturing parents hold the future of tomorrow's world in their hands. This is God's ordained process whereby, through adults, children learn of and live by His truth and grace.

Stage 1 Intra-uterine Stage

ACCEPTANCE

We often consider a child as a person only after a living child is born because the survival of a foetus is physically dependent on his or her mother. The Scriptures, however, inform us in several passages that God acknowledges the existence of a person even while he or she is in the mother's womb (e.g. Psalm 139:13-16; Jeremiah 1:4-8; Luke 1:39-42). He also sometimes

chooses some people, before their birth, to perform a certain task for Him, as in the case of Jeremiah, John the Baptist and Jesus.

It is now also known through scientific knowledge (general revelation), that when a pregnant woman is depressed, certain chemical changes take place in her body. This change may be transferred to the unborn baby's body, affecting his physical and emotional constitution ³.

Therefore, the acceptance of a child in the mother's womb is necessary for the eventual health of the person for at least two reasons.

1. God reveals in the Bible that He has a plan and a purpose for every one He makes. So, if we reject the children He creates and makes within our bodies, then we are actually rejecting His call to us to be mothers or fathers.

2. As adults, we know that at various stages of our lives, we have felt keenly unaccepted by family members, friends, brethren, or casual acquaintances. To be unaccepted hurts. However, we often can find some way to overcome them e.g. by talking it out to a trusted friend, praying or going out and having fun.

Usually, these hurts do not cut deep or last long. Nevertheless, hurts linger and thus affect our confidence as human beings. If this is so with adults, how much worse it would be for a helpless child within his mother's womb. He senses life and communication with another being but feels ambiguously or totally rejected by that being (e.g. in attempted abortion or when the parents express that they are not 'ready' for the child or where the mother presses on her womb to try to expel the foetus in the very early stage of pregnancy).

Applications

i. Family Planning is a good servant but a bad master in our generation. It is good in that it often enriches family life by helping with the spacing and the number of children. In *Genesis 1:28*, a mandate was given to fill the earth by reproducing and the words in *John 1:13* imply that human beings are allowed to use their wills to decide to have children or not. As far as I know, ova and sperms have no human identity before conception.

However, often, when human methods seem to have failed to prevent conception, false guilt and/or disappointment are incurred on the

parents who could pass such feelings on to the newborn babe through the manner they treat their child.

I believe that God, in the original sequence of events in creation, ordained parents to reproduce joyfully and wholeheartedly for Him. But in our imperfect world, He allows family planning (not abortion), probably in order to restrain increasing effects of human selfishness in general. However, because children are created and given to us by God to nurture them for Him, no married couple should be made to feel guilty or ashamed when the wife becomes pregnant. It does not matter whether the most reliable or unreliable method has been used. They do not need to apologise for having another child, and need not label that conception '*an accident*'. In fact, parents may need to seek forgiveness from the Lord and the child, (if he is old enough to understand), for using the term '*accident*' on a child.

Children have been discovered, scientifically, to be able to listen while in the womb. We adults often forget that they may understand more than we assume they do when they are out of the womb ⁴.

ii. In our Asian cultures, where boys are often favoured over girls, we may need to guard against rejection of a baby assessed to be a girl while in the womb, irrespective of what others hint to us or demand from us. Commonly, daughters are not counted as beloved children by many traditional Chinese parents when asked how many children they have. Perhaps, there is a place for repentance when parents with such experiences become aware of their mistakes.

However, it is deeply comforting for women to know that God is not like many of our fellow human parents. In fact, He gives good gifts to both sons and daughter, for all are equally treasured by their Father in heaven (*Joel 2:28,29*)!

iii. When we are really unprepared for another child, let us talk out our fears, guilt feelings (e.g. conception before marriage) with someone who understands. Let us bring all these negative attitudes to the Lord in prayer and seek His release of confidence, joy and thankfulness for the child to be born! Recall Mary's submission to the will of the Lord regarding the coming of Jesus, His beloved Son, unprepared though she was.

All our children are beloved to our Father
in heaven because of what Jesus our
Saviour has prayed for us in
John 17:20,21,26.

*Below is a prayer suggested for those in
such situations:*

*“Dear Lord Jesus, we receive this child You
give to us with thanks, recognising Your
sovereignty in overruling all human efforts
to reproduce or withhold reproduction. You
are the all wise God and we affirm our trust
in Your goodness in entrusting us with this
child that we may be used to prepare
him\her for You.*

*Grant to us, O Lord, grace to grow to
accept our child and love him\her and
protect him\her till he\she directly knows
Your love and protection. Provide us with all
that is necessary - mentally, emotionally,
spiritually, physically and materially - even
the daily bread that we need ...
In Jesus Christ’s Name we pray,*

Amen.”

Stage 2

Birth to 1 Year Old

SECURITY

Certainty and predictability build up basic trust and stability in the child who is still almost totally dependent on the parents. If this milestone of feeling secure is reached, the child will better trust the parents and the surrounding world.

Comfort to a child in his first six months to one year of life, means food-water-warmth- cleanliness and the tender loving touch of preferably one constant person for most parts of the day. Gentleness and few changes in his environment are highly needed to repeatedly assure him that he is safe.

In the first six months, the child is more passive or parasitic. He cries to let others know that he is not comfortable. In the later six months, he usually becomes more active and aggressive in her demands for comfort. For example, he crawls or walks around to get what he feels he needs or attracts him.

Physically, the baby learns to retain images of objects not in his immediate visual field (thus memory is formed). This leads to a simple form of deductive logic

in using his memory. When mother is absent and he needs her, he cries for her. Her prompt appearance reassures him of mother's love and that his deduction is right, that is, that Mum will come if he cries. By and by, he will cry less because he has confidence that Mum is nearby anyway! Otherwise, basic trust of others may be delayed, sometimes prolonging into adult life e.g. if the mother dies or where the mother neglects the child and there is no good mother-substitute.

As the child grows, he begins to increase his level of tolerance, sometimes having to wait for someone whom he feels he emotionally needs at a particular time. If his parents, especially the mother, do not leave him alone or with someone else for too long, he learns to trust them more and more.

Hence the wonderful mother-child and/or father-child bonding is developed and on this footing he feels safe to explore the world around him. This does not exclude others, but he sorts out who he really needs most at this stage of his life. He does this without conscious reasoning but rather, by natural osmosis.

How may we know approximately when this basic trust or security has been achieved? The signal of achievement is

when the child is able to accept his mother's short absence without too much fuss or anxiety. But as he progresses towards that goal, he may become shy or anxious towards strangers (usually between 8-12 months) before he begins to befriend strangers more easily.

Applications

i. Try to provide a constant mother-figure in the first year of life as much as possible, especially after the first six months, when the infant's memory has developed with respect to Mum.

Food for thought

Do the current baby-sitting patterns in Malaysia meet this crucial need for security in our children?

ii. Avoid prolonged separation from the constant mother figure, that is, not more than a few hours a day, though it is not always possible (e.g. in poorer homes where mothers have to help provide for daily necessities, in extended family patterns, when baby or mother is hospitalised or when death of mother occurs). If prolonged separation has to take place, then make the extra effort to show her that she is much loved and wanted.

Note:

- Adoptive or foster parents may competently fulfill the role of biological parents as long as there is a commitment to tenderly nurture the child.

- Conversely, biological parents may not necessarily be the best nurturers if they are not really committed to the child.

Stage 3A

Early Childhood: 1-3 Year Toddler

INDEPENDENCE

The child now has increased mobility and control of bodily functions. He now has new tools with which to interact with his environment. At times, he may appear to have too much energy for our comfort. At this stage, most toddlers are also able to better control their bladder and bowel.

His hunger for experience and power brings him into clashes with parental ideas of behaviour. By trial and error, however, he soon learns what his parents like or dislike. He is able to choose between "yes or no".

Gradually, he learns to choose what his parents choose in order to prevent conflicts with parental expectations and demands.

The tension between firmness and permissiveness is constantly present.

As God's people, we trust that it is only by His restraining power that we do not overwhelm our children with excessive punishment or over-indulgence (e.g. by expecting them to be "seen but not heard" versus giving them whatever they want). Adults often come face to face with the fact of original sin when we have our own offspring.

Due to his physical and mental growth, the child is often ambivalent (unsure) about himself and others close to him. His curiosity may make him appear cruel at times (e.g. pulling a cat's tail to see what happens). He often behaves obstinately by insisting "*No, No...Don't want!*" when asked to obey his parents. He wishes to be independent (e.g. he wants to feed himself) but he soon realises that he is still very dependent on Papa's and Mama's hugs and kisses. Life still centres around Mum and Dad, especially if he is the eldest child with no other small children to play with.

By now, he is also able to feel shame when his parents object to certain action and, sometimes, resentment is harboured because of lack of understanding of why things do not happen his way, or when '*soft parents yoyo*' between conflicting sets of rules.

The ego or concept of self (often from a selfish angle) is also developed and he may refer to himself by his name "*Tern Tern*" instead of "me".

This early stage lays the foundation for discipline or indiscipline for most of us. A sign of achievement is when the child begins to modify his drive for independence in exchange for parental approval e.g. he eats what is set before him so that he will get his dessert.

Parents need wisdom to strike a balance between encouraging the child's free expression and setting acceptable limits for those expressions.

Sometimes, urinary incontinence occurs after bladder control has been achieved. This could often be due to excessive fluid intake near bedtime or to cooler weather. But if it comes on the heels of the arrival of a baby brother or sister who is getting more attention than him, then intentionally giving the toddler more positive attention may quickly alleviate his anxiety and thus remove the symptom of incontinence. To harp on the symptom may make it worse. Labeling them as trouble-makers (too common) will only hurt the child who does not understand what is happening to him. He may then live up to the labels given him.

If prolonged, medical advice is recommended as the child may have an infection in the urinary tract.

In the process of learning to respect others' boundaries, the child may overprotect his own to the point of selfishness. It may require repeated explanations and role modeling by those around him to encourage the child to strike a balance between sharing and taking care of his things.

If security has not been achieved by the end of this stage, even good disciplinary restraints may be subconsciously be misunderstood by the child as excessive punishment. This in turn may lead to more of a negative behaviour e.g. temper tantrums. Labeling him as a naughty child may just about encourage him to continue in his undesirable behaviour to get attention. Seeking the Lord for insight into his needs and reasons for such behaviour will usually enable the parents to help the child feel accepted and restful again.

At times, the spiritual dimension of behaviour has to be considered. Deliverance and healing prayer with fasting may be necessary.

Stage 3B
Early Childhood:
3-6 Year Pre-School Child

INITIATIVE

The child begins to initiate friendship-building and there is increasing self-responsibility. His environment is widening.

This is the stage when he is able to gradually understand that language, dreams and nightmares are symbols of real events or things. Therefore, he is able to draw or play games using pictures e.g. UNO, Happy Family, Donkey. His progress in thinking goes somewhat like this:

From animism - believes that physical objects can have souls, that dolls and animals can talk and feel like humans.

To concretism - thinks and believes that names are the same as the actual objects.

Example: Christmas = Christmas tree
Temperature = Thermometer

To abstract - names and words are thinking only symbols thinking of real objects. There is ability to differentiate between the real or intrinsic meaning of Christmas as opposed to what is made by man to represent the event. In this case, an evergreen tree may be used as a symbol of everlasting life.

The child is learning relatively more from his environmental influences (e.g. through peers, siblings, babysitters, the media e.g. Sesame Street cartoons) than from parental influences. The mother-child relationship, which is now secure, is being superceded by parents-child relationships.

The child is learning to take initiative in relating with people, sometimes appearing to be attacking a smaller child or conquering the other person or thing. This is especially obvious in boys

Children at this stage can also differentiate between the male and female gender. Boys usually like to be like their fathers, and girls, their mothers. Some boys will tell their Mums, and girls, their Dads, that they want to marry them.

The concept of time sequence - the past, present and future - are gradually grasped. Hence, consequences of actions are better understood as cause and effect are more easily visualised now.

By the end of this phase, a simple but clear sense of right and wrong is developed. In the first 6-7 years of a person's life, foundations for character and personality building have been laid.

Many busy Christian parents today, faced with this realisation, are acknowledging that the vocation of parenting can no longer be taken for granted. It needs intentional placement high up in one's list of options. I believe that it is time for Christian parents to prayerfully seek God's face as to what is best for our children and family. We need to decide who we want to co-bring up our young children.

Increasingly, many live as nuclear rather than extended families. Every family is different in its gifts as well as limitations. God will give us the wisdom we need for this task if we humbly ask it from Him (*James 1:5-8*).

Stage 4
Late Childhood:
6-12 Year Primary School Child

SUBLIMATION

Generally, this is a period when the primary school child learns to re-channel his energy to being productive and useful at home, in school, and, if he is a believer of the Lord Jesus, in church. The child grows through a period of abstract operations. He is now acquiring skills to perform mental operations in his mind rather than with his hands. For example,

- He is able to count mentally instead of use objects as aids. He stops using fingers and toes for arithmetic.
- He is able to classify things according to their characteristics
- He understands relationships between classes of objects or ideas.

The above development also means that he is able to cooperate with others in team work or play as he will be able to follow rules better.

External influences begin to increase rapidly compared to parental influence. Teachers' and schoolmates' views become more and more important in the child's eyes. Achievements are also gaining more

significance. This helps the individual to redirect his aggressive tendencies or frustrations into other areas of his life to mental functions. Therefore, if there is partial or complete failure or inability to disengage himself from the expectations of over-critical parents, he may develop a growing sense of inadequacy or inferiority even if he is highly intelligent and doing well in school.

However, passive parents may also induce a similar low self-esteem as the child may feel that he is not important enough for the parents to take a deeper personal interest in him. Some manage to learn other ways of coping with failures. They become detached, aloof, phobic or childish. Personality disorders gradually become ingrained (e.g. they may have an aggressive trait, do not volunteer in class or feel others are taking advantage of them). Some express their frustration by bullying other children. Probably, for some reason, they feel small at home. We need to remember, though, that original sin is as real in children as in adults. If deep inferior feelings persistent in adulthood, personal pride often perpetuates them. Really, if we are not really bothered about what others think of us, we would not feel small for long!

Applications

- i. Accept these children as our Father accepts all of us. This especially applies to those trying to behave like adults. We need to make concessions for them when necessary.

- ii. Encourage sublimation
 - at home e.g. through music lessons, outdoor games, creative art

 - at church e.g. church school, visitation of friends, helping those in need.

 - at school e.g. camping, team competitions, uniform groups.

Example

The Lord Jesus, when He was 12 years old, appeared to be careless and rebellious. Most likely, similar to boys and girls of His age group, He was simply so absorbed in what He liked to do that He forgot to first consult His parents about staying back at the temple. Looking at it from another angle, He was actually sublimating His human youthful energy by getting involved in adult activities; in His case, participating in open discussion with those much older than Him, and at the same time listening to His Father in heaven!

iii. Where rivalry or jealousy is intense, parents need to help disengage their children from such attitudes. They may have to work out their own inner needs first. They may have to ask themselves whether they have contributed to the fostering of such attitudes. A grandmother once told me that her intentionally encouraging competition between her children had enabled them to do well in school. She hoped that her grandchildren would be goaded that way too. But she failed to see the enmity that such rivalry had created in her adult children. God often uses our children's problems to help us see our own weaknesses and sins.

iv. Phobias may also require patient exploration for the causes so that healing may be dealt with appropriately. Some phobias just do not disappear. If they do not affect daily life, it may be better to leave them alone.

v. Children need their Dads just as much as their Mums at this stage. Their emotional well-being depends on the depth of parental communication in mutual love and acceptance.

Parents who "*agree to disagree agreeably*" will greatly bless their children.

vi. The spiritual training of the child is essential to his continuing life of faith. Some pointers of achievement are when he has learnt that:

- obeying parents pleases God.
- God is both loving and just in His character inspite of his parents' imperfection.
- submission to reasonable authority helps him to develop respect for God's commands.
- to develop honest and dependable habits at home (e.g. entrusted to lock doors, entrusted with secrets or money) is to be mature as a person.
- sin is real in him and he needs to accept the need for repentance and change in attitude and action where necessary.
- the value of the natural family lies in its being given by God.
- he needs to understand that the ability to work hard is one of God's gifts to mankind; a gift to be used for His purpose and glory, not to be used to earn a living so that he may store up earthly goods for himself or family. This understanding will probably determine much of his vocational choice a few years later ⁵.

Stage 5
Adolescence:
12-20 Year Secondary School-Early
College Students/Young Worker

UPHEAVAL:
Changes and Adjustments

Suffice it to mention in this small book that adolescence is a stage of drastic physical, emotional, social and mental changes. It can often be long and stormy! Hence, it needs a separate book to elaborate on it. Kindly refer to *Understanding the Adolescents* in the series ⁶.

Stage 6
The Young Adult
20-40 Year Man/Woman

PEAK

During this stage of development, assuming that identity has been established to some extent the young adult puts his whole heart into achieving two goals:

1. He wants to get on in his first career at whatever cost, to establish his position in the society he lives in so that he may be an independent and responsible human being.

2. He wants to search for a more settled lifestyle i.e. goes in search for a home he can call his own, to love and be loved. Therefore, when he has met the person of his choice, he makes plans for marriage and works out his priorities between home and other responsibilities. For those who remain single, the unmet need for companionship sometimes may just tip the emotional balance for one's wellbeing, especially if the earlier milestones have not yet been reached. Today, however, it is socially more acceptable than in the past for young adults to mix with one another. Hence, some of them prefer to enjoy their relatively freer lifestyle of a single person before they seriously look for a spouse.

In a modern society, singlehood may be a choice for some people ⁷. In Malaysia, where we are undergoing major social changes at a fast pace, this stage may span such a bewildering 10-20 years that even if all these goals have been achieved at 30 years old, the man or woman is often left exhausted. Some lose their vision to serve God with their whole lives. Others plod on with the outward signs of religion but without that first love for the Lord. Many also

"*drop-out*" in the overzealous pursuits of money, power and sex. Of course, these temptations are real to any adult though more so at the peak of one's earthly life. Our Lord was about thirty when He was tempted in the wilderness.

3. My observation is that around the mid to late thirties, a person suddenly wakes up to a feeling that time is catching up and he needs to do something about his state of emotional and/or spiritual poverty. This may come to those who are of good standing in the eyes of the world or those who have not "*made-it*". If the still small voice of the Lord is ignored, sometimes it will take them a much longer route before they will hear it again.

In fact, it may be easier for those who have failed in life to listen as they recognise their needs. Others may think that they are independent of God till they have all that this world can offer and then find out that there is still something missing - that emptiness in their lives - till they return to the One who alone can fill it.

Summary of Stresses

- personal hang-ups
- financial needs
- family changes - good and bad, including adjustments in marriage.
- vocational insecurities
- church responsibilities
- confused priorities

Many sincere believers still do not know what God's will for them is right through this stage of their lives. It could be because:

"I am ignorant about God having a specific purpose for me."

or

"God has not spoken to me"

or

"God has spoken but I am afraid to find out the details because I am afraid to obey Him at all cost...because I am not sure whether He will pull the carpet under my feet..."

No matter which of these applies to us, let us rest assured of this one thing:

Nothing can separate us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Romans 8:31-39)

If the Father did not leave His Son in a lurch (though Jesus thought so at the peak of His agony (*Mark 15:34*), He will never leave us in a lurch. Ask Him what He wants you to be and to do, be ready to be His devoted child and He will show Himself to you.

A brief discussion on the common stages of a married couple's life together from courtship till death is found in the original book, *Building a Love House is Hard Work* ⁸.

Stage 7
Middle-Age
40-60 Year Old Adult

PLATEAU...UNCERTAINTY...REDIRECTION

**Common characteristics of those at
this stage of life**

1. Having reached a peak, and done much of the good they want to do in society, the middle-aged may want their names to go down in history. Have you observed how many of those who have been honoured in society are in this age group?
2. They are concerned with the long-term welfare of family members e.g. teenage children and elderly parents.

Where one group needs them less, the other may need them more.

3. They have reached a plateau in many of their life relationships e.g. at home, in the local church, at work or in society. Physical weakness may be showing.

4. As they near 50, they may be thinking about retirement plans or changes in lifestyle. The empty-nest syndrome hits many women as a stark reality in these modern days of nuclear families. Sexual temptations can become suddenly real, especially if husband-wife relationships have not been constantly nurtured in the earlier years.

5. Some women face difficult menopausal changes in addition to the other common changes. Medical help is available these days though I often wonder how our mothers sailed through those hormonal changes without much fuss. Perhaps woman-to-woman relationships were much stronger then and mutual support was more easily available.

6. Men seem to be hit harder by post-retirement changes as they tend to receive their affirmation from outside the home rather than from inside. If their

security is basically dependent on others' affirmation, the sudden loss of a significant social position can be rather devastating. Some, foreseeing this problem, seek for a new job before retirement.

Dangers

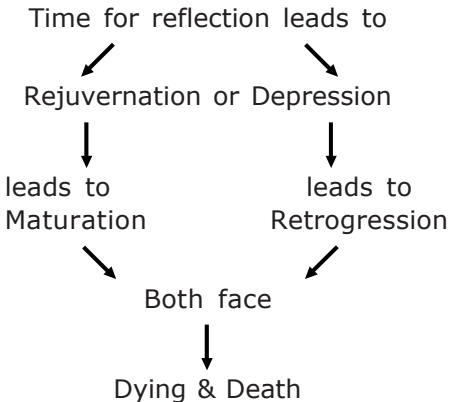
1. Pride of life
("I am a self-made man!")
2. Laying up treasures on earth
("There is no such thing as leisure or religious activity when there is still money out there to earn!")
3. Complacency *("It's time to enjoy myself no more worries left!")*

However, for believers, we can see the vast potential for Christian work for those planning for retirement. Their wisdom, skills and experience in life are assets to help their younger brothers and sisters in Christ - in pastoral counselling and care, in baby - sitting, in being foster parents and foster grandparents, in material sharing, etc. How beautiful will be the community of His children then!

Stage 8
Old Age
Beyond 60 Year Old Adult

REALISATION

Summary of Major Events



“With increasing industrialisation and urbanisation, the middle class family is mobile, tends to live in apartments or small houses, and both husband and wife often work. The nuclear family thus becomes separated from the parental generation, with the result that caring for our elderly relative becomes realistically difficult even if the desire to do so is present. Old people who cannot afford private home care thus tend to seek or be directed toward public institutional care.”⁹

Does the above description of the position of the elderly sound familiar? Is it taken from a page of a current issue of our Malaysian newspapers? No! It is quoted from one of my undergraduate medical textbooks written in the early 70's, for the American society. Yet, is it not as relevant for us who live in the 90's today, in Malaysia?

As part of the household of Jehovah Jireh, God our Provider, we need to think ahead of our responsibilities towards our aging parents. For some, it may be long-term caring. Our traditional Asian teaching about the family is still strong enough to hold us together. The pursuit of personal wealth can, however, do ruin to tradition. It may be a good servant, like fire, but always a bad master (*I Timothy 6:10*).

The test of our love for God is love for man. We need to realise that taking care of our elderly parents may be harder than taking care of our small children as they must be treated with extra tact and respect (especially if they are your spouse's relatives). Most elderly people would regard those about 20 years younger than they are as children. At times they may be over-demanding. However, Scriptures clearly state that obedience to God includes taking care of those in need, especially those in our natural and spiritual families.

At this period of our national and social progress, we already see that aging does not always mean a decline in emotional balance or mental alertness. Many take on new challenges in research or business after they retire from their first vocation. However, some do find the changing psycho-social, economic and physical changes a bit too much for them to continue at their earlier pace. For these dear ones, the cumulative effects of such stresses sometimes land them with some common signs and symptoms of the aging process.

Summary of Stresses for the Aging Adult

1. Physical e.g. osteoarthritis, decreased motor function, heart diseases, visual changes, skin changes. However, many perform well until some precipitating event is encountered e.g. a heart attack, operation or fracture is sustained.
2. Psycho-social Stresses
 - a. Decline of intelligence: This happens first in new situations or where abstract thinking is required.
 - b. Memory impairment: Recent events
 - c. Narrowing interests and increasing inability to accept new ideas posed to them may move them in the

direction of selfishness, over-attachment to tradition, quick onset irritability, and unmasking of self to express the real personality of the man or woman.

d. Common stress related changes are:

- threatening situations, e.g. sudden forced changes in environment as in eviction of squatters in the cities.
- emigration, as in the present rural-urban shift.
- loss of close relatives and friends through death or retirement, leaving them in silent grief because they feel the younger ones do not really understand them.
- fear of death, especially for those unassured of God's grace or who have not received His salvation yet.
- feeling of apparent loss of social status, prestige and respect, and frequent friction with others associated with a low self-esteem.

3. Financial Stress (if funds have not been budgeted for old age e.g. medical and housing needs.)

4. Retirement

The response to retirement varies from person to person and usually depends on certain factors, such as:

- a. the strength of identity of the man or woman.
- b. the willingness or the ability of the person to be flexible in adapting to environmental changes.
- c. the personality and earlier social status of the person

In some individuals, much preparation is needed to help them accept retirement with grace or they may become depressed while sliding rapidly in intellectual and physical health. In his book, *'The Fight'*¹⁰, Dr. John White urged Christians who are retiring to ask themselves:

“How am I going to spend more time in Bible Study, prayer and service for God?”

instead of

“How can I become wealthier and/or enjoy myself more?”

Problems of the Three D's

1. Dependency

The intolerance of becoming dependant on others may produce behaviour opposite to that of depression. The elderly person may be hyper-independent to the point of being too proud to receive help. Many are not happy to live with relatives if they have adequate incomes. I was told of an elderly wealthy man who spends six months of the year with his son's family in Britain and the other six months in a rented room in Kuala Lumpur. When he is in Malaysia, he happily eats at the hawker stalls.

Generally, if dependency needs have been unresolved since childhood (e.g. having to emotionally cope with overprotective parents by trying to get away from them during younger days), the elderly may experience more problems with increasing states of dependency. They may be reluctant to depend on others because they will then feel inferior or they are afraid of later rejection. At times they react by becoming over-dependant on others. Feelings of uselessness may lead to depression, apathy, anxiety and anger.

2. Depression

This is to be taken seriously (e.g. suicidal threats, even if mentioned casually) as the vicious cycle of emotional stresses could have been going on for some time. Such attitudes may be prevented through:

- Repenting of sins and forgiving others and self of the past. If we do so, we will no longer need to collect debts from those who have wronged us, we will no longer need to compete with them or try to live up to their expectations. (This may be in the subconscious.) Hence, when we err, we will be less likely to look down on ourselves or despise ourselves, thus preventing deeper depression. The release from grudges will break forth into a release of His joy and peace in the days following. We will be at peace with God, self and others because we have accepted ourselves as we are and not be too bothered by others' views of us since God approves of us.
- Renewal of faith, strength and purpose in Him.
- Seeing one's true worth as His child, not according to what one has achieved or failed to achieve. There is no such thing as being too late for a fresh start in life for those who are willing to receive His healing grace.

3. Dying and Death

The usual attitude to such words is one of fear and helplessness. Hence, if the person is healthy, rationalisation is often used as a major defence:

*“I am not going to die for a long time yet.
What is there to worry about?
I can take care of myself. Leave me alone to
do what I like!”*

If ill, denial is more common. Women, on the whole, have been observed to adapt to old age with its proximity to death more easily than men. Maybe it is because women have learnt to accept their vulnerability and mortality better than men. (Could this be due to the fact that women are regarded as the weaker gender and so accept their limitations easier?)

This leads us to ponder over our feelings at the prospect of meeting our Saviour Jesus face to face. As God’s children, do we see death as the gateway to that oneness with Him, where His maturity is passed on to us completely? Do we see the reality of being free from the natural physical degeneration which often poses as a threat to our well-being on this earth? Do we believe that:

- we have been saved from the guilt and penalty of sin
- we are being saved from the power of sin
- we will be saved from the very presence of sin? ¹¹

Applications

1. Write a review of your past life. It may be painful but it may also be therapeutic, according to whether you know God's power to forgive, cleanse, heal and renew. God is here to change everything into good for those who love Him and are called according to His purpose (*Romans 8:28*).
2. Seek God's re-commissioning for His work, e.g. as missionaries in own country, as social workers, as counsellors and elders in churches or organisations or through the home, as foster parents for young people with yet non-Christian parents or whose parents have passed away.
3. Prepare for the meeting with death by talking about it with good friends or family members. Take time to say good-bye to loved ones when the time to depart seems imminent, such as

in the case of terminal illness. This process may be dark and frightening unless one is resting in the assurance of a place in his Father's house.

(John 14:1-3).

A Prayer by the Younger Ones

Lord, grant us love for our elderly relatives and older brothers and sisters in Christ.

Forgive us when we view ourselves better than them.

Help us see them as precious in Your sight, needing as much tender loving care as the younger ones.

Teach us to pray for them by name.

Grant, dear Lord, that they will, by Your presence with them, accept the changes that may come with aging and entrust their lives to their faithful Creator.

Grant us also the humility to learn from them.

For those who are frail, Lord, give us grace to care for them for You, and, finally, to usher them joyfully into Your glorious Presence with victory in Jesus Christ our Lord!

Amen.

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