

Faith Pulpit

Preparing for Life's Final Transition: God's Expectations to Honor Aging Parents

My wife, Tricia, and I have been in an interesting and important phase of our lives for the last few years—caring for aging parents. In 2020, Tricia's parents, Larry and Nancy, moved in with us, and we became their primary care providers. Just over five short months after they moved in with us, Nancy unexpectedly passed away. Larry, who struggled with Parkinson-like symptoms, stayed with us through the next year, but eventually his health and care needs reached a point where we needed to transition him to a care center. Larry entered glory in October 2021. My parents were on a similar path. My dad had Parkinson's and my mom had Alzheimer's. Though they lived on their own for the last few years with lots of assistance from family, friends, and care givers, they eventually had to move into a care center for round-the-clock care in 2023. Their care center sojourns proved to be short, as they went home to glory within seven months of each other.

On one hand, this end-of-life care is fairly straightforward: elderly parents need loving care, and we were glad to honor God and honor our parents by helping. On the other hand, this process is very complicated and involves way more than what we initially understood. Our experience of caring for our parents has been filled with paradoxes. Caring for parents involves a lot of hard, tiring work, but is it also incredibly rewarding. At times it is full of sorrow and tears, but it also has given us irreplaceable memories of joy and love. Providing long-term care can be stressful and confusing, but it has taught us and our children invaluable lessons about sacrifice and selfless love.

Let's consider care for elderly parents biblically. First, we know that because of sin and the fall all people will die (Rom 5:12). In Psalm 90, Moses observed that while people live typically seventy to eighty years, life is full of labor and sorrow until "we fly away" (Psalm 90:10). Though death is our enemy (1 Cor 15:54, 55), it is inevitable for us all. Second, as we grow older, we lose our strength and eventually need care. In Psalm 71, the psalmist pled, "Cast me not off in the time of old age; forsake

me not when my strength faileth” (Psalm 71:10, cf. v.18). Paul explained the reality that our bodies waste away as we age (2 Cor 4:16) and called our earthly bodies vile, mortal, and corruptible (Phil 3:21; 1 Cor 15:53, 54). Facing the realities of our body’s decline as we age is perhaps the hardest transition we will ever face. Third, God expects families to care and provide for their elderly parents. Caring for one’s parents is an essential aspect of honoring one’s father and mother (Exodus 20:12). Jesus condemned the traditions of the Pharisees that allowed Jews to avoid honoring their parents by giving an offering instead (Mark 7:9-13). Paul echoed this expectation in his teaching concerning widows in 1 Timothy 5. Children (and even grandchildren) were expected to honor their widowed mother by providing for them (v. 5). Paul warned, “But if any provide not for his own, and specially for those of his own house, he hath denied the faith, and is worse than an infidel” (1 Tim 5:8). In Psalm 127, Solomon called children “an heritage from the LORD” and “his reward”

(v. 3). He compared the blessing of children to having a quiver full of arrows—a wartime picture of children defending their parents: “Happy is the man that hath his quiver full of them: they shall not be ashamed, but they shall speak with the enemies in the gate” (Psalm 127:5). This last verse no doubt applies especially to elderly parents who are very vulnerable. The roles of provision and protection are flipped between parents and children. The biblical pattern that emerges in Scripture is clear. As parents age and face their inevitable decline, they should never face it alone. Thankfully believers can walk through this final transition with the strength and comfort of the Lord. He is the Good Shepherd who calms the fears of those walking through the valley of the shadow of death (Psalm 23:4). But parents should also face their final transition with the love, support, and protection of their children. Part of this support may very well include long term care, whether it is at home or in a care center. God is pleased when children honor their parents in this way.

If you are a parent who is approaching the transition to end-of-life circumstances, I want to provide some advice for you to prepare for your final transition. If you address these areas before you start to decline, you will create a tremendous blessing for your family.

1. Take care of financial matters and legal matters. Plan your estate. Check all the beneficiaries on all your accounts to make sure they are accurate and up to date. Make sure your will is current or create a trust. Take care of legal matters such as appointing someone as your Power of Attorney and Executor of your estate. A few meetings with a lawyer to establish a POA and plan your estate can save your family time, expense, and lots of headaches down the road.

2. Plan for the transfer of property and possessions. There are two values for everything: monetary and sentimental, and most people value things differently. Try to pass on the most important family possessions before it is too late. Reducing your material possessions may be a tremendous blessing to your family as they attempt to deal with sorting, storing, or dividing parental possessions.

3. Plan for end-of-life care. Complete health directives and a healthcare proxy so your loved ones know how you want to be cared for. Appoint a Medical Power of Attorney who can make decisions if you are incapacitated. Work with your children to decide what kind of care will work in the event that long-term care is needed. Long-term care insurance or social services play a huge role in these decisions, but so does each family member.

4. Plan your funeral and prepay for funeral and burial expenses. These types of plans will be a tremendous blessing for your children as they grieve and try to handle the stress of your homegoing. The expenses for a funeral, casket, burial plot, and memorial stone really add up. Prepaying these expenses and expressing your wishes will alleviate the burden of finances and decision making for your family.

5. Communicate with all your children about your plans. Many families experience division and strife as they care for their parents and handle end-of-life circumstances. Parents can greatly reduce conflict by preparing their children for the tough questions. Making your intentions known is very important.

If your parents are facing long-term care circumstances, I would like to give you some advice that may help you think through how to care for your parents.

1. Prioritize your parents' welfare. Making important decisions can be difficult, especially under the weight of urgent, critical health issues. Keeping your parents' health and welfare as a guiding principle through the decision-making process is key. Honoring your parents will help you to honor God.

2. Consider all the options. Before we moved Tricia's parents in with us, we did a lot of research into what options were available. In addition, we consulted with other families who had provided similar care for their families. Consult with local care centers, social workers, insurance providers, and spiritual leaders. Above all, pray and seek wisdom from God.

3. Consider finances and facilities. Caring for parents long-term demands considerable resources. Before Larry and Nancy moved in with us, we had to move locally into a house that could accommodate both their needs and our family's needs. Creating a friendly living space for elderly needs can take time and money. Realize that if your parents need to move to a care center the expenses are very high.

4. Seek the help of others. Caring for elderly parents can be very demanding and exhausting. We found that we needed help to provide the right care and get enough rest to stay healthy ourselves. Everyone has limits. Church members, friends, and family all pitched in to help carry the load and provide us with needed breaks. Recognizing your own limits is important in this process.

5. Communicate with your parents and family. Notice communication is on both lists. Keeping open lines of communication is important to healthy relationships. Both Tricia's siblings and my siblings

regularly have respective group chats to keep everyone updated and on the same page. We have found that it is critical to work together to provide the best care for parents. Caring for parents is a divinely appointed interruption to our busy lives and agendas. I am sure that many look at such care as an overwhelming burden. On the contrary, Tricia and I considered it a wonderful blessing to care for our parents. It is both a great responsibility and great privilege. May God grant you wisdom and strength as you honor your parents.

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