

GROWING IN FAITH THROUGH THE THIRD THIRD OF LIFE

The development of faith is a lifelong process. As long as we live on this earth, our faith will continue to grow, or at least that's the plan. Paul writes in Philippians 1:9, "This is my prayer: that your love may abound more and more in knowledge and depth of insight."

In this booklet, you'll find 10 ways to help your faith continue to grow as the Holy Spirit keeps working to transform you more into the likeness of Jesus. Some suggestions you might find helpful, while some might not be right for you. Whatever the case, our faith doesn't need to stall out as we enter the third third of life. Our faith can, and should, be growing until our faith is fully developed, when "we shall be like [Jesus], for we shall see him as he is." (1 John 3:2).

1. Use Your Gifts for Other Reasons than a Paycheck

For years, you've used your gifts both as an expression of the abilities God has given to you, but also to put food on the table and keep a roof over your head.

Now, you get to use your gifts and abilities and hard-earned experience for one reason, to bring glory to God. There are hundreds of ways to share your abilities with people who will be deeply grateful for your generosity. If you still enjoy doing what you've done for a career, find a non-profit that can't afford to pay for your services. If you want to do something different, shop around and see what kinds of work organizations might need. Talk to your pastor or other church leaders who can help you find the right place to use your gifts.

2. Mentoring Younger People

Related to this, you have what a lot of people want...experience and a wider perspective. And believe it or not, younger people want to spend time with you. This is different for generations that are younger than us. We're from the generations that didn't trust people over 30. In our experience, younger people didn't want to spend time with older people. So now, we think that younger people don't want to spend time with us.

But that's not true, generally speaking, for millennials and Generation Z. They know the value of learning from people who have more experience, and they want to listen and learn. With one condition. They will listen to us, as long as we will listen to them. They are looking for a mutual relationship, where there's give and take, where learn from one another. Look around, notice those who are younger than you, and ask if they want to grab lunch sometime and just talk about your experiences.

3. Praise through memory

C.S. Lewis wrote:

“A pleasure is full grown only when it is remembered”

Sometimes, we think of growing older only in terms of what we are losing. But growing older means that our store of memories is growing larger and deeper. I think this is why we might have problems remembering things right now, because we have so many memories all packed in to these heads of ours.

So, celebrate these memories. Journal about your experiences. Use the following 4 questions to get you started and then begin to write down a narrative of what you've done, what you've seen, people you've known, etc.

1. Write/record how you've seen God work in your life, giving a bird's eye perspective on life?
2. What have you learned in each decade of adulthood?
3. How are you more like Jesus now than you were in your twenties?
4. How are you becoming more "heavenly-minded"? How is your perspective becoming more eternal?

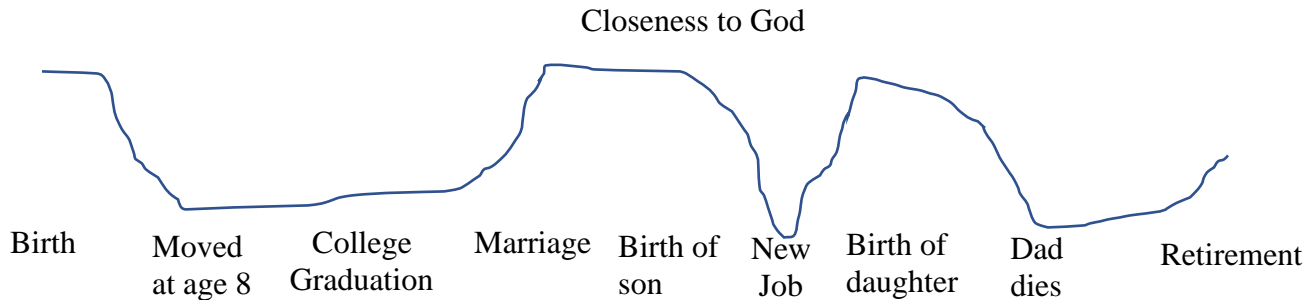
4. Confess sins that are particular to aging

Sometimes, people get the idea that we outgrow the power of temptation and sin, that we're somehow "too old" to have to worry about sin. Hopefully, our faith has grown stronger so we respond to temptation with more confidence and experience, but aging can change the way sin affects us. Aging brings with it its own unique types of sin. Consider how the following sins might be keeping you from a life of freedom and joy:

1. As we age, we can find pride from our experiences, that we know better than those younger folks. Confess the tendency to think better of ourselves and ask God to create a new spirit of humility in you.
2. Sometimes, with age, we grow stubborn and resistant to change. Most of the time this is out of fear, but it can be an expression of pride as well. Ask God to keep you open to other options, to be as willing to listen to others as you want them to listen to you.
3. Not everyone ages in the same way, and we certainly have all lived very different lives. As we look back on our lives, it is possible to become envious or jealous of the accomplishments of others, to wish that we could point to as many achievements as "those other people." Ask God to give you a spirit of contentment, allowing you to be satisfied with whatever God has done with your own life.
4. Out of pride or stubbornness or envy or jealousy can come the sin of anger, which is usually a cover-up for fear or embarrassment. We don't like ourselves as much now as we did 20 or 30 years ago. We have so many regrets, and we can lash out at others as a way to protect ourselves. Instead, look at yourself the way God sees you, as His perfect child in Jesus Christ. Let God worry about the mistakes of the past and peacefully enjoy His unfailing love
5. Laziness can be particularly tempting when we reach a certain age. We just don't feel like trying new things. We don't feel like going places. We don't feel like getting to know new people. And this sin of laziness can trap us in isolation, cutting us off from many new and exciting gifts that God wants us to enjoy. Confess the sin of laziness and try something new!
6. Contrary to popular belief, lust can still be alive and well in the minds and hearts of older people. The sexual expression of marriage can change with age, and without clear communication we can become open to sexual temptation. Consider whether the sexual part of your life matches God's expectations and confess anything that doesn't fit with His will.
7. After decades of working to please others, retirement can be seen as the time of life when you get to do whatever you want to do, which can easily lead to gluttony, whether we are living to eat or to play or to go on vacation. A life that is focused on meeting our own needs becomes a heavy and unsatisfying life after a while. Confess any areas of gluttony you might recognize and spend some of your time using your gifts for the good of others.

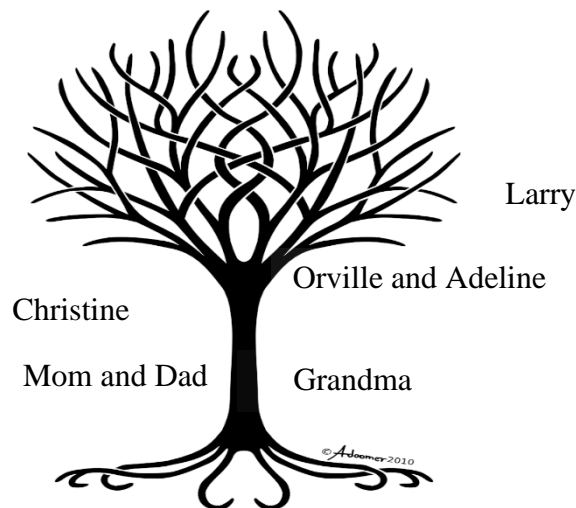
5. Life-map

Your life up to this point is made up of hundreds of significant moments and events that mark God's presence in your life. Make a timeline to mark the significant events in your life that marked God at work (baptism, joining church, marriage, graduations, funerals, etc.) One suggestion would be to make the horizontal axis your timeline, and the vertical axis your closeness to God. Sometimes, we know that God is close, and sometimes He seems far away. Mark the moments, no matter how distant God seemed to be. Be as creative as you want. Here's a very simple example:



6. Spiritual Family Tree

Similar to a Life-map, create a spiritual family tree, noting and picturing the people that have helped you to develop in your faith. Think of your biological family members (parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, brothers and sisters, etc.), as well as spiritual family members (coaches, school teachers, pastors, Sunday School teachers, club leaders, friends, etc.). Here's an example:



7. Experiment with Faith

In the third third of life, it's easy to get stuck in a rut, to do things the way we've always done them and avoid trying anything new. This can happen in our spiritual life as well and leave us stuck in the development of our faith.

To resist this tendency, try exploring a new faith practice you've never tried before. Each year, try something new and see what God does through it. Ask what other people are doing and try it for yourself. If it doesn't work for you, that's fine, but give it some time to really see if you like it or not. Here's some examples:

- Spend time praying with your eyes open
- Pray the Hours
- Lectio Divina
- Meditation
- Solitude and Silence
- Read through the Bible in a year
- Use the Examen A simplified Examen looks like this: First, pray that God will give you insight. Then ask yourself two questions: "What was I most grateful for today?" and "What was I least grateful for today?" Close in prayer, thanking God for the blessings of the day, and asking God's help with your shortcomings.

8. Observe Sabbath

Violet, the Dowager Countess in the television show "Downton Abby", is famously known to have asked, "What is a weekend?" Through the transition of retirement, without the daily obligations of family and a job, the days can sometimes seem to blend together, not much different from one another.

But one day remains distinctly different from the others, from the time of creation right down to the present. In the beginning, God set apart one day as a holy day of rest, and this Sabbath day set the pattern for the rest of the week. By observing the Sabbath, we were reminded to rely on God on each of the other six days, we were trained to listen for His voice and to watch for instances where we saw Him at work. Regular sabbath can bring order to the rest of the days of the week.

While retirement might feel like perpetual Sabbath, set aside some time to specifically focus on God. Sabbath can be practiced more frequently than once a week. Set aside an hour each day to talk with God and read His word, the Bible. Set aside time each week to worship with others on Sunday. Set aside one day per month where the whole day is spent in meditation and reading and worship. You can even celebrate Sabbath annually, by designating a week to volunteer on a service project.

9. Surrender

One of the most difficult aspects of aging is the loss that we all experience as we get older. This is the time when we say good-bye to parents, to good friends, to a job, to health, to our home, and to our dreams. We have less time ahead of us than behind us, at least here on earth. This letting go make us anxious and afraid. We don't want to let go to these precious people, these parts of our lives.

But the journey of faith, for all ages, is all about learning to let go, to surrender anything on which we have hung our hopes and become more completely dependent on the faithful love of

God. The third third of life just gives us more opportunity, sometimes without any options, to allow God to do whatever He wants with whatever part of our life that He wishes.

This can be scary, until we begin to realize that whatever we are surrendering is worth losing in exchange for the faithful love of God. The love of God is enough. The love of God is more powerful and satisfying than anything else in our lives.

Surrender is something that tends to happen in a cycle, where we let go of something precious and receive the love of God, which motivates us to let go of something else and receive more of God's love. This happens again and again until we surrender the very last thing we possess, our last breath on earth. And as we surrender completely, that's when we experience the full power and glory of God's love, as we come into heaven.

So, we can lose grudgingly, or we can lose by surrendering to God. We resist letting go, or we can let go willingly. The former will leave us afraid and resentful. The latter will leave us secure and at peace.

What are you still needing to surrender? You can tell when something has too much importance by the level of anxiety you feel at the prospect of losing this item. Whatever you can't imagine doing without is probably something that is getting in the way of experiencing the full love of God and needs to be surrendered.

What "treasures" become more precious with age, and more difficult to release? What parts of your life are you still trying to control, and what parts have you told God, "You can do whatever You want?"

10. Finding Your True Purpose

For years, many of us have found purpose in productivity. We found our worth in receiving the paycheck, earning a promotion, and being validated by our supervisor. And then, all of that stops, there's a vacuum of feedback that can make us question our purpose in life. So, then we find other things to do that will give us purpose: volunteering, playing golf, taking vacations, spending time with family, and other things provide feedback and affirmation.

Until we begin to lose our ability to volunteer and play golf, travel is more difficult, we're just not able to do what we use to be able to do. We even come to the point where we can't take care of our own needs. Maybe we are no longer able to drive, or prepare meals for ourselves, or even wash up.

Now, where do we find purpose and meaning in life? When we're not able to do anything, what is the point of living?

God teaches us the meaning for our existence in His word, the Bible, and this meaning is made up of two parts, the beginning and the end, the reason we were created in the first place and the purpose that makes every day complete.

First, we exist in the first place to be loved. The reason God created us is because He loves us. 1 John 4:9 says, “This is how God showed his love among us: He sent his one and only Son into the world that we might live through him.” Commenting on this verse, the theologian John Calvin wrote, “If it be asked, why the world has been created, why we have been placed in it to possess the dominion of the earth, why we are preserved in life to enjoy innumerable blessings, why we are endued with light and understanding, no other reason can be adduced, except the gratuitous love of God.”

The purpose for your life, first of all, is to be loved by God, to wake up in the morning and experience His love. To go through each day with regular reminders of how much He is loving you, and to go to sleep at night under the warmth and comfort of His unfailing love. Everything else that you do is in addition to this purpose. You were created to be loved.

Which leads to the completion of our purpose, to give glory to God. Isaiah 43:7 talks about “...everyone who is called by my name, whom I created for my glory, whom I formed and made.”

Understand. God didn't create us just so He could hear us tell Him how great He is. He doesn't need us to tell Him that He's doing a great job. Out of His infinite love, He created us to find completion and purpose in our amazement of Him, because He knows that's the best way to live. To go through life being “wowed” by God. You know the joy of seeing a beautiful sunset, or the grandeur of a mountain, or the miracle of a baby. You know that feeling when you recognize the power and glory and love of God. That's a good feeling.

And that's our purpose in life, to be loved and to be amazed by God. And that we can do regardless of whether we are able to drive, or cook, or clean ourselves up, or do anything productive.

There's a catch: the only way that we will find this purpose when we are NOT able to be productive is to practice this while we ARE productive. It doesn't work to place our worth and value on productivity right up until the moment when we are incapable.

Now is the time to begin to find our true purpose in life where it's meant to be found: in being loved by God, in being amazed at who He is.

Our bodies might not be growing any longer, at least not in healthy ways. In fact, we may be experiencing more weakness in our bodies as we experience this time of life. But our faith can and should be growing stronger. We've known Jesus longer, that should have an effect. These 10 suggestions may not have been helpful, but there's something you can do to come closer to Jesus, to experience more of His life in you, to know the joy and peace of the Spirit living in you.

If you want to explore further, talk to your pastor. If you don't have a church, shop around. Find a community of believers in Jesus who can encourage and support you as you walk with Jesus through this stage of life.