The Biblical Role of Grandparents

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In American society there is great confusion surrounding the meaning and purpose of old age. Grandparents are told by our culture to use the final third of their lives indulging themselves and living independent lives from their family. The Bible instructs grandparents to orient the final third of life toward others by focusing on transferring faith to younger generations (Titus 2; Psalm 78:1-8).

The one word that describes the totality of a grandparent’s biblical role is “heritage.” Grandparents have inherited a faith they are to pass on to their children (Ephesians 6:1-4; Deuteronomy 6:4-9) and their grandchildren (Psalm 71:16-18; Deuteronomy 12:28). The word heritage in Scripture refers to a legacy or inheritance. The grandparent’s role is to leave a godly legacy and build a rich heritage in the Lord.

How do grandparents build a godly heritage? To begin, grandparents must adopt a biblical vision for their family. Psalm 78:6-7 provides that vision, “that the next generation might know them, the children yet unborn, and arise and tell them to their children, so that they should set their hope in God and not forget the works of God, but keep his commandments.” Grandparents are told to plan for a multi-generational impact to at least four generations and are instructed to diligently work towards three goals: (1) Seeing future generations set their hope in God (this is salvation language), (2) faithfully walking with God all their day, and (3) obeying the Lord.

Psalm 78 not only tells grandparents what to aim for, but how to accomplish this God-sized vision. Grandparents are to busy themselves with three activities: teaching, telling, and treasuring. In Psalm 78:5 we read, “He established a testimony in Jacob and appointed a law in Israel, which he commanded our fathers (read “forefathers” or “grandfathers”) to teach their children.”

The First Role - Teaching

The primary role of grandparents is to teach the coming generations the glory of the Lord (Psalm 78:4). To teach is to instruct or guide. Deuteronomy 4:9 tells grandparents to “make them (the
commands of God) known to your children and your children’s children.” Grandparents are to instruct their grandchildren to walk obediently before the Lord and to fear him all the days of their life (Deuteronomy 4:10; 14). Grandparents have a vital role in a grandchild’s faith development. To suggest that it is only a parent’s job to raise a child in the nurture and admonition of the Lord fails to take into account passages of Scripture such as Deuteronomy 4:9 and 6:1-2. God has given grandparents a critical role in the spiritual training of young people.

One grandparent, who is worthy of closer examination, is Lois. Lois was the grandmother to Timothy and played an important role in his life spiritually (2 Timothy 1:5). The apostle Paul suggests that Lois taught Timothy the Scriptures from an early age, which became foundational to his following Christ (2 Timothy 3:14-15). Lois’ example, while not prescriptive for every grandparent, is a godly example worthy of imitation. Grandparents might consider five principles for teaching grandchildren:

1. Early instruction (2 Timothy 1:5; 3:15)
2. Plain instruction (1 Corinthians 15:3-4)
3. Frequent instruction (2 Timothy 3:14)
4. Patient instruction (1 Thessalonians 2:9-12; Col. 1:28-2:1)

Grandparents teach for the purpose of seeing their grandchildren mature in Christ. The apostle Paul said, “Him we proclaim, warning everyone and teaching everyone with all wisdom, that we may present everyone mature in Christ. For this I toil, struggling with all his energy that he powerfully works within me” (Colossians 1:28-29).

The Second Role - Telling

The second role of grandparenthood is to tell grandchildren about God. Psalm 78:4 says, “We will not hide them from their children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders he has done.” Telling is different from teaching in that telling focuses on describing the work of God and his nature. Telling recounts, sometimes in story form, what God has done and who God is.

A prime example is found in Psalm 145:4-12 and provides a glimpse into what grandparents should talk about when they tell their grandchildren about God, “One generation shall commend your works to another, and shall declare your mighty acts. On the glorious splendor of your majesty, and on your wondrous works, I will meditate. They shall speak of the might of your awesome deeds, and I will declare your greatness. They shall pour forth the fame of your abundant goodness and shall sing aloud of your righteousness…They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom and tell of your power, to make known to the children of man your mighty deeds and the glorious splendor of your kingdom” (Also see Joel 1:2-3; Exodus 10:1-2).

Psalm 71:15-18 says, “My mouth will tell of your righteous acts, of your deeds of salvation all the day, for their number is past my knowledge. With the mighty deeds of the Lord God I will come; I will remind them of your righteousness, yours alone. O God, from my youth you have taught me, and I still proclaim your wondrous deeds. So even to old age and gray hairs, O God,
do not forsake me, until I proclaim your might to another generation, your power to all those to come” (Also see Psalm 22:30-31; Psalm 40:5; 9-10; 48:13).

The Third Role - Treasuring

A third role of grandparents in Scripture is that of treasuring Christ. Grandparents, as with every other member of the family, are called to love the Lord Jesus Christ with their whole heart (Mark 12:30-31), deny themselves, follow Christ (Matthew 16:24), and forsake all that prevents them from taking hold of Christ (Matthew 13:44-46). The Scriptures sound a loud warning to the elderly when it says “their fathers forgot my name” and “have not obeyed my words” (Jeremiah 23:27; 25:8). Grandparents do not want to be included with this group. To all Christians, grandparents included, are the words of Romans 6:12, “Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body” as well as Colossians 1:10, “walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him.”

The Psalmist teaches that righteousness in old age results in the continued production of spiritual fruit. The Psalmist uses the picture of a palm and cedar tree to make his point; “The righteous will flourish like a palm tree, they will grow like a cedar of Lebanon; planted in the house of the Lord, they will flourish in the courts of our Lord. They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green, to declare that the Lord is upright; he is my rock, and there is no unrighteousness in him” (Psalm 92:12-14). Date palm trees bear hundreds of pounds of fruit well past 150 years of age. The principle is that age does not impair fruit-bearing capabilities. It enhances them. This passage speaks against the American ethos of retirement and is a reminder that God expects grandparents to be actively involved in the faith formation of future generations until their dying day.

Grandparents are called to model godliness before grandchildren. Older Christians can model how to live for Christ in a sinful world, how to respond to suffering, and how to die well. “Numbering our days” (Psalm 90:12) helps younger Christians determine to live out their days wisely. Older adults can model a vibrant walk with the Lord before younger generations through prayer, praise, and lifelong service.

When your life comes to its end, what will be your heritage? Will your grandchildren be able to say with the Psalmist, “We have heard with our ears, our fathers (read “forefathers” or “grandfathers”) have told us, what deeds you performed in their days, in the days of old” (Psalm 44:1). Grandparents have a multifaceted and important role in the transfer of faith from one generation to the next. When parents and grandparents neglect to teach, tell and treasure the Lord, Judges 2:10 is the result, “And all that generation also were gathered to their fathers. And there arose another generation after them who did not know the Lord or the work that he had done for Israel.” The greatest heritage, according to the Bible, is not money or material possessions, although these are not insignificant (see Proverbs 13:22). The greatest heritage is faith in and obedience to Jesus Christ for generations to come. May you use the final third of your life toward this end.

Further Reading