

OLD AGE; A BLESSING OR A CURSE: A CHRISTIAN THEOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Authors & Affiliations

Iyoghiojie, John Osas

Department of Religious and
Cultural Studies
University of Calabar, Calabar
jiyoghiojie@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Old age, the final stage of the human life cycle, is often interpreted through contrasting perspectives: as a period of peace, wisdom, and fulfilment, or as a phase marked by decline, isolation, and dependency. While some regard old age as a blessing, others perceive it as a burden or curse. This paper critically examines these competing views by exploring the physical, psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of aging. Biologically, old age is frequently associated with a gradual decline in physical strength and cognitive abilities, which may result in chronic illness, limited mobility, and increased dependence. Psychologically and socially, older persons may experience loneliness, marginalization, and feelings of irrelevance, especially in societies where the elderly are undervalued. Nevertheless, old age can also be a season of profound blessing. It often provides opportunities for reflection, spiritual growth, and life satisfaction, particularly when individuals enjoy strong family support, economic stability, and access to quality healthcare. In many cultural contexts, elders are respected for their wisdom and life experiences, serving as advisors and custodians of communal values. Using a qualitative approach and content analysis of relevant literature, this study examines how cultural narratives, public policies, and personal coping mechanisms shape attitudes toward aging. Grounded in the theological framework of human dignity and eschatological anthropology, the study concludes that old age is a complex life stage shaped by both personal circumstances and societal attitudes. It therefore recommends inclusive government policies, greater church engagement, intergenerational solidarity, and the promotion of healthy and active aging to ensure that the elderly live with dignity and purpose.

Key words: Old age, Blessing, Curse, Christian theology, Human dignity, Psychology

Introduction

Old age is an inevitable phase in the human life cycle and a universal experience that transcends cultural, religious, and historical boundaries. Every human society must grapple with the meaning, value, and implications of aging. Traditionally, many societies have regarded old age with deep respect and reverence. In numerous African and Asian cultures, elders are viewed as custodians of communal memory, transmitters of cultural heritage, and moral guides for younger generations. Their advanced years symbolize not only longevity but also accumulated wisdom and life experience. Within such contexts, old age is often interpreted as a blessing and a sign of divine favour or fulfilment of life's journey (Achenbaum, 2015; Atchley, 2009). In African traditional societies in particular, elders are frequently consulted in matters of social order, conflict resolution, and cultural continuity, reinforcing their status as pillars of community stability (Mbiti, 1990).

However, contemporary attitudes toward old age appear increasingly ambivalent and, in some contexts, even negative. Rapid technological advancement, the transformation of extended family systems into nuclear family structures, and the dominance of youth-centred values in modern societies have contributed to a gradual marginalization of the elderly. The emphasis on productivity, efficiency, and youthful vitality often results in older persons being perceived as dependent or less socially relevant. Consequently, many elderly individuals experience neglect, loneliness, and diminished social recognition (Bengtson, Gans, Putney, & Silverstein, 2009). These developments raise an important and enduring question: should old age be regarded as a blessing that crowns the human life cycle or as a curse marked by decline and social exclusion?

From the perspective of Christian theology, old age is not merely a biological or chronological reality; it is also a spiritual and sacred stage in the journey of faith. The Christian tradition affirms that human life, from birth to death, unfolds within the providence of God. The Scriptures frequently portray longevity as a sign of divine blessing and fulfilment. For instance, the Psalmist declares, “With long life I will satisfy him and show him my salvation” (Psalm 91:16). Similarly, wisdom literature in the Bible emphasizes respect and honour for the aged, encouraging younger generations to recognize the dignity and authority that accompany advanced age (Proverbs 16:31). Such biblical affirmations suggest that old age is not merely a period of decline but also a stage in which divine grace continues to operate in meaningful ways.

Biblical narratives further illustrate how old age can become a time of spiritual maturity and prophetic witness. Patriarchal figures such as Abraham and Sarah experienced God's promises in their advanced years, demonstrating that divine purpose is not limited by age (Genesis 17–21). Likewise, the New Testament figures Simeon and Anna represent elderly individuals whose faithfulness and spiritual discernment enabled them to recognize the significance of the infant Jesus in the temple (Luke 2:25–38). These examples underscore the theological conviction that old age can be a period of profound spiritual insight and closeness to the mysteries of life, faith, and mortality.

Nevertheless, despite these positive theological affirmations, the lived realities of aging in contemporary society often present significant challenges. Many elderly individuals face declining physical strength, chronic health conditions, reduced mobility, and increasing dependence on others for care and support. Psychological experiences such as loneliness, social isolation, and feelings of irrelevance may also accompany this stage of life, particularly in societies where older persons are not adequately valued or integrated into communal life (Cole & Ray, 2010). These realities reveal a tension between the theological vision of old age as a blessing and the social experiences of suffering and marginalization that many elderly people encounter.

For Christians, therefore, old age represents both a vocation and a challenge. As a vocation, it calls older believers to bear witness to God's enduring faithfulness across the span of their lives. Their experiences, testimonies, and spiritual maturity serve as valuable resources for the faith community. At the same time, old age presents a challenge to the Christian community to uphold the dignity and sanctity of life at every stage. The church is called to resist cultural narratives that equate human worth solely with youthfulness, productivity, or physical strength, and instead affirm the sacredness of aging as part of God's unfolding story of redemption.

Against this background, this paper examines the meaning of old age within the framework of Christian theology and explores whether it should ultimately be understood as a blessing or a curse. The study analyses relevant biblical and pastoral perspectives while also engaging the lived experiences of elderly individuals in contemporary society, particularly within organized Christian communities. Ultimately, the discussion seeks to affirm the Christian conviction that every stage of life, including old age, participates in the mystery of God's redemptive plan and therefore possesses inherent dignity and value.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research approach in order to explore the theological, social, and experiential dimensions of old age. Qualitative research is particularly appropriate for this study because it allows for an in-depth understanding of human experiences, beliefs, and interpretations regarding aging. The research primarily relies on content analysis of relevant **literature**, including theological writings, biblical texts, and scholarly works in gerontology and social sciences. These sources provide the conceptual and theoretical

foundation for examining how aging is understood within Christian theology and broader societal contexts.

In addition to literature analysis, the study incorporates oral interview data from selected elderly members of Christ the King Catholic Chaplaincy, Akim Army Barracks, Calabar. These interviews were conducted informally to capture the lived experiences, perceptions, and spiritual reflections of older adults regarding aging. The inclusion of these testimonies helps to bridge the gap between theoretical perspectives and practical realities.

The collected materials were analysed thematically, focusing on recurring patterns related to wisdom, spiritual growth, social respect, economic challenges, and emotional well-being in old age. Through this process, the study identifies key themes that illuminate both the blessings and challenges associated with aging.

By integrating theological reflection, scholarly literature, and lived experiences, this qualitative methodology provides a comprehensive understanding of old age within a Christian theological framework.

Literature Review

The perception of old age varies considerably across cultures, historical periods, and social contexts, shaping the ways in which societies treat and interact with older adults. Scholarly discussions on aging reveal that societal attitudes toward the elderly are complex and often contradictory. While some traditions regard older persons as sources of wisdom and cultural continuity, others associate aging with decline, dependency, and social marginalization. This literature review examines major scholarly perspectives on the social and theological understanding of old age, highlighting themes such as cultural perceptions of aging, ageism, media representation, positive aging, and theological interpretations of old age as either a blessing or a challenge.

Historically, many societies held older adults in high esteem because of their accumulated wisdom, life experience, and leadership roles within the community. In traditional societies, elders often functioned as custodians of cultural heritage, mediators in communal conflicts, and transmitters of moral values across generations. Research indicates that in numerous Indigenous and non-Western cultures, older adults occupy positions of authority and respect within family and community structures (Chappell, 2016). Similarly, African traditional societies often regard elders as repositories of communal memory and moral authority, emphasizing reverence for advanced age as a sign of wisdom and divine favour (Mbiti, 1990). Such perspectives portray old age not as a burden but as a culmination of life's experiences and achievements.

Despite these traditional reverential attitudes, contemporary societies—particularly in Western contexts—have increasingly embraced youth-centred values that sometimes marginalize the elderly. Scholars argue that modernization, industrialization, and the rise of individualistic social structures have contributed to a cultural shift that prioritizes productivity, efficiency, and physical vitality, qualities typically associated with youth (Gullette, 2011). Consequently, older individuals may be perceived as less economically productive or socially relevant, leading to subtle or overt forms of marginalization. This transformation in social values has influenced not only public attitudes but also institutional practices regarding healthcare, employment, and social welfare.

Central to discussions of societal attitudes toward aging is the concept of ageism, which refers to prejudice, stereotyping, and discrimination against individuals based on their age. The term was first introduced by Butler (1969), who observed that negative attitudes toward older adults were deeply embedded in modern societies. Ageism manifests in various social domains, including healthcare, employment, and social policy. For instance, studies indicate that older adults often face discrimination in employment opportunities and may receive unequal treatment within healthcare systems (Ayalon & Tesch-Römer, 2018). Negative stereotypes frequently depict elderly individuals as frail, forgetful, dependent, and resistant to change. These stereotypes not only shape societal perceptions but also influence how older individuals perceive themselves, sometimes leading to reduced self-esteem and diminished social participation.

The role of media representation in shaping perceptions of aging has also received significant scholarly attention. Research shows that older adults are often underrepresented in popular media such as films, television programs, and advertisements. When they are portrayed, they are frequently depicted in stereotypical roles—either as frail dependents, eccentric figures, or comedic characters (Levy, 2009). Such portrayals reinforce societal stereotypes and contribute to the perception that aging is primarily associated with decline and loss. Moreover, Levy's (2009) research on stereotype embodiment theory suggests that repeated exposure to negative stereotypes about aging can influence older adults' self-perception and even impact their physical and psychological health. In this sense, cultural narratives about aging can have tangible consequences for the well-being of older individuals. Furthermore, Levy et al. (2002), found that older adults with positive self-perceptions of aging experienced better functional health and slower physical decline over time, demonstrating that attitudes toward aging significantly influence long-term health outcomes.

Despite the prevalence of negative stereotypes, a growing body of literature highlights the positive dimensions of aging. Research in gerontology suggests that older adults often experience high levels of emotional well-being, resilience, and life satisfaction. According to Carstensen's (2011) socioemotional selectivity theory, as individuals age, they tend to prioritize emotionally meaningful relationships and experiences, which can enhance their sense of fulfillment and psychological stability. Empirical studies have shown that many older adults report greater emotional regulation and life satisfaction compared to younger populations. Furthermore, initiatives that promote intergenerational interaction have been shown to challenge negative stereotypes about aging and foster mutual understanding between younger and older generations (Bowers, 2020). Such initiatives encourage societies to recognize the valuable contributions that elderly individuals continue to make in families, communities, and institutions.

Beyond sociological and psychological perspectives, theological reflections on aging offer important insights into the spiritual meaning of old age. Christian theology traditionally views human life as a sacred journey that unfolds under the providence of God, with each stage of life possessing intrinsic value and purpose. Within this framework, old age is not merely a biological phase but also a spiritual vocation that invites reflection, wisdom, and deeper communion with God. Several theologians have contributed to this perspective by interpreting aging within the broader context of Christian anthropology and spirituality.

One notable theological voice is Pope John Paul II (1999, p. 5), who emphasized the spiritual significance of old age in his *Letter to the Elderly*. According to him, old age should be understood as a gift from God and a time of grace rather than a burden or curse. He describes elderly persons as “a treasure for humanity,” noting that their life experiences preserve moral and spiritual values within society. For the Pope, aging represents an opportunity for deeper participation in the redemptive suffering of Christ and a period of spiritual maturity marked by prayer, reflection, and intercession for others. In this sense, old age becomes a stage in which faith can find renewed expression and deeper meaning.

Similarly, theologian Johnson (2018, p. 132)) offers a theological reflection on aging within the broader context of creation and divine faithfulness. In her work *Creation and the Cross*, Johnson argues that the presence of elderly individuals within the human community reflects the enduring faithfulness of God across generations. She maintains that honouring older persons is inseparable from honouring the Creator whose love sustains life in every stage. Johnson further critiques social attitudes that marginalize the elderly, arguing that neglecting older adults undermines the Christian vision of justice, compassion, and communal solidarity. From her perspective, the dignity of older persons must be upheld as part of the broader theological affirmation of human worth and divine image.

In summary, the literature reveals that societal perceptions of old age are multifaceted and shaped by cultural, historical, social, and theological influences. While traditional societies often regard elders with reverence, modern contexts sometimes promote ageist attitudes that marginalize older individuals. Nevertheless, emerging scholarly and theological perspectives increasingly highlight the positive dimensions of aging, emphasizing wisdom, spiritual maturity, and continued social contribution. Continued research, ethical

reflection, and social advocacy are therefore necessary to challenge stereotypes and foster a more balanced and humane understanding of old age.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in two complementary theological perspectives: **the theology of human dignity** and **eschatological anthropology**. Together, these frameworks provide a theological lens through which the meaning, value, and spiritual significance of old age can be examined. They offer a comprehensive understanding of aging not merely as a biological process but as a sacred stage within the Christian journey toward God. Through these frameworks, old age is interpreted as a period that embodies divine grace, spiritual maturation, and preparation for eternal communion with God.

Theology of Human Dignity

The theology of human dignity is rooted in the biblical teaching that every human being is created in the **image and likeness of God (*Imago Dei*)** (Genesis 1:26–27). This theological principle affirms that human life possesses inherent and inviolable dignity irrespective of age, physical ability, or social status. Christian anthropology therefore emphasizes that dignity is intrinsic to human existence and does not depend on productivity, physical strength, or social usefulness.

From this perspective, the elderly retain the same sacred worth as individuals at any other stage of life. The theology of human dignity challenges cultural tendencies that marginalize older persons and instead affirms their continued value within the human community. This framework encourages societies and religious communities to recognize and respect the elderly as bearers of divine image and as participants in God's redemptive plan.

Prominent proponents of this perspective include **Pope John Paul II** and **Elizabeth Johnson**. In his encyclical *Evangelium Vitae*, Pope John Paul II (1995) emphasizes that human life possesses dignity from conception until natural death. Within what he describes as the “Gospel of Life,” respect for the elderly forms an essential dimension of the Christian commitment to protect and affirm human life. According to this view, honoring the aged reflects a deeper recognition of the sacredness of life itself.

Similarly, Johnson (2018) argues that honoring elderly persons constitutes an act of justice toward the divine image present within them. In *Creation and the Cross*, she stresses that neglecting older persons undermines the Christian vision of justice and community. The dignity of the elderly therefore reflects humanity's participation in the divine image and calls for ethical responsibility toward vulnerable members of society.

Eschatological Anthropology

The second theoretical framework guiding this study is **eschatological anthropology**, which interprets human life in light of its ultimate destiny in God. This theological perspective emphasizes that aging and mortality are not meaningless biological processes but are integral to the unfolding of God's salvific plan. From this standpoint, old age becomes a transitional stage that directs human consciousness toward eternal life.

Eschatological anthropology views the physical limitations and vulnerabilities associated with aging as reminders of humanity's finitude and dependence on divine grace. Rather than interpreting these realities solely as signs of decline, Christian theology sees them as opportunities for spiritual preparation and deeper reliance on God. Old age thus becomes a sacred stage characterized by reflection, detachment from temporal concerns, and anticipation of eternal communion with God.

A key proponent of this view is **Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI)**. In his work *Eschatology: Death and Eternal Life*, Ratzinger (1988) argues that aging deepens a Christian's awareness of humanity's ultimate destiny in God. He maintains that the experiences of aging, including physical weakness and mortality, orient believers toward the hope of resurrection and eternal life. From this perspective, old age is not a curse but a redemptive stage that invites deeper faith and spiritual maturity.

Blessings of Old Age

Wisdom and Experience

One of the most widely recognized blessings of old age is the accumulation of wisdom and experience. Wisdom is often defined as the ability to apply knowledge, experience, and insight to complex life situations (Ardelt, 2000). It involves not only intellectual understanding but also emotional sensitivity, ethical reflection, and a broad perspective on life.

Older adults frequently demonstrate wisdom through their capacity to interpret life events with depth and empathy. Their accumulated experiences—ranging from successes and failures to relationships and personal struggles—enable them to provide valuable guidance to younger generations. Baltes and Smith (2004) note that older individuals often draw upon extensive life knowledge when making decisions in complex situations.

Research also suggests that aging is associated with increased emotional maturity and resilience. Older adults frequently prioritize emotional well-being and meaningful relationships over material pursuits (Carstensen, 2011). This shift in priorities often leads to greater life satisfaction and a deeper sense of fulfillment.

Emotional Regulation and Mentorship

Older adults typically exhibit enhanced emotional regulation, allowing them to respond to life's challenges with greater balance and perspective (Carstensen, 2011). This emotional maturity contributes to wise decision-making and promotes psychological well-being.

The wisdom of older adults is also evident in their roles as mentors, advisors, and community leaders. Many elderly individuals actively transmit knowledge, cultural traditions, and ethical values to younger generations. Such intergenerational exchanges foster social cohesion and preserve cultural continuity (Chappell, 2016).

Lifelong learning further enhances the wisdom of older adults. Many continue to pursue intellectual and personal growth through education, community engagement, and reflection. Knowles (1980) notes that adult learning remains a lifelong process that enriches both individuals and society.

Life Lessons and Resilience

A significant feature of aging is the accumulation of life lessons derived from personal experiences. These lessons often emerge through overcoming adversity, navigating relationships, and reflecting on life's challenges. Such experiences foster resilience and provide deeper insights into human existence.

Research indicates that individuals who successfully navigate adversity often develop stronger coping mechanisms and a greater sense of purpose (Gilleard & Higgs, 2005). Reflection on past experiences allows older adults to derive meaning from their life journeys and to guide others through similar challenges.

Interpersonal relationships also contribute significantly to the development of wisdom. Through decades of interaction with family, friends, and colleagues, older individuals gain profound insights into human relationships, empathy, and communication (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2008). These insights enrich social interactions and strengthen communal bonds.

Old Age as a Challenge

While old age offers many blessings, it is also accompanied by significant challenges that affect the physical, social, and economic well-being of older adults.

Health Challenges

Aging often brings increased vulnerability to chronic illnesses such as heart disease, diabetes, arthritis, and dementia. These conditions can limit mobility, independence, and overall quality of life. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), heart disease remains one of the leading causes of death among older adults.

Similarly, arthritis affects a substantial proportion of the elderly population, often resulting in chronic pain and reduced physical mobility (Arthritis Foundation, 2021). Cognitive conditions such as Alzheimer's disease

further complicate aging by affecting memory, behavior, and daily functioning (Alzheimer's Association, 2022).

These health challenges not only affect individuals but also place emotional and financial burdens on families and healthcare systems.

Social Isolation

Another major challenge associated with aging is social isolation. As individuals grow older, they often experience the loss of spouses, friends, and family members, leading to shrinking social networks. Many older adults also live alone, which can increase feelings of loneliness and disconnection from society.

Research has shown that social isolation is strongly associated with depression, anxiety, and cognitive decline (Cacioppo et al., 2018). Holt-Lunstad et al. (2008) also found that limited social relationships can increase mortality risk among older adults.

Community engagement programs, social activities, and technological communication tools have been shown to reduce loneliness and improve the well-being of older individuals.

Financial Insecurity

Economic instability represents another significant concern for many elderly individuals. Retirement savings, pensions, and social security benefits often determine the financial security of older adults. However, economic downturns, inflation, and inadequate retirement planning can create financial strain.

Studies indicate that many households approach retirement without sufficient savings to maintain their standard of living (National Institute on Retirement Security, 2019). Financial insecurity can increase stress and limit access to healthcare, housing, and social participation.

Findings

Lived Experiences of the Elderly: Insights from Oral Interviews and Scholarly Perspectives

While theological reflection and scholarly research provide valuable insights into the meaning of old age, the lived experiences of elderly individuals offer an equally important perspective. Oral testimonies from older adults reveal how aging is experienced in everyday life, often reflecting both blessings and challenges. These experiences demonstrate that old age cannot be understood solely in abstract theological or sociological terms but must also be examined through the real stories of those who live through it.

In an oral interview conducted with Patricia Cletus Alita, an elderly member of Christ the King Catholic Chaplaincy, Akim Army Barracks, Calabar, she described old age as a period that has deepened her relationship with God. According to her, advancing age has given her greater awareness of God's faithfulness and providence in her life. She explained that her spiritual life has become more meaningful, as she now spends more time in prayer and reflection on God's goodness over the years. Her testimony reflects a common theme in Christian spirituality: old age as a time of spiritual maturity and renewed dependence on God.

However, alongside these spiritual blessings, Alita also acknowledged certain difficulties that accompany aging. She lamented that her economic strength has significantly declined. She attributed this to the gradual reduction in physical energy that once enabled her to undertake productive economic activities during her younger years. As her strength diminished, so too did her ability to sustain the same level of financial independence. Her experience highlights a common reality for many elderly individuals whose declining physical capacity affects their economic stability and independence.

A similar perspective was expressed by Emmanuel Okonkwo, another elderly member of the same chaplaincy. Okonkwo described old age as a stage of honour and recognition within his community. According to him, people often treat him with great respect and look up to him as a person of wisdom and experience. This respect reflects traditional cultural attitudes that associate old age with knowledge, maturity, and moral authority. He expressed gratitude to God for allowing him to reach this stage of life and described old age as a privilege that offers opportunities for deeper prayer and reflection.

Nevertheless, Okonkwo also acknowledged the economic challenges that accompany aging. Despite the respect he receives, he noted that he often struggles financially and is sometimes unable to meet certain family or personal needs. This situation occasionally leads to feelings of frustration and depression. His experience

illustrates a paradox often associated with aging: while elderly individuals may gain social respect and spiritual depth, they may simultaneously face financial insecurity and emotional vulnerability.

These oral testimonies illustrate how old age can embody both blessings and challenges simultaneously. On the one hand, aging can strengthen spiritual commitment and deepen faith. On the other hand, it can bring economic vulnerability and emotional strain. The stories of Alita and Okonkwo therefore reinforce the broader argument that old age cannot be categorized simply as either a blessing or a curse; rather, it contains elements of both depending on individual circumstances and societal support systems.

Beyond these personal testimonies, scholarly research further supports the view that old age can be a period of meaningful relationships, reflection, and growth. Studies have shown that older adults often develop stronger emotional bonds with family and friends, prioritizing relationships that offer support and companionship (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2010). These connections play a significant role in improving psychological well-being and reducing feelings of loneliness among the elderly.

Old age also provides opportunities for deeper personal reflection. Many older individuals take time to reassess their lives, reflect on past experiences, and develop new perspectives on meaning and purpose. According to Gilleard and Higgs (2005), this reflective process often contributes to a greater sense of identity and emotional stability. Freed from many of the demands associated with earlier stages of life, older adults may pursue personal interests, spiritual growth, or new intellectual activities.

Another important dimension of aging is civic engagement and community participation. Many elderly individuals find renewed purpose through volunteering, mentoring, or participating in community service activities. Research by Morrow-Howell et al. (2003) demonstrates that such engagement enhances life satisfaction among older adults while also benefiting the wider community. Through volunteering and mentorship, elderly individuals are able to share their accumulated knowledge and life experiences with younger generations.

Similarly, lifelong learning represents another significant blessing of old age. Educational engagement—whether through formal learning environments, workshops, or personal study—helps older adults maintain cognitive vitality and intellectual curiosity. Knowles (1980) emphasizes that adult learning plays a crucial role in sustaining personal growth throughout the lifespan. For many elderly individuals, learning new skills or exploring new ideas provides a sense of accomplishment and ongoing relevance.

Closely related to this pursuit of growth is the desire among many older adults to reflect on the legacy they will leave behind. As individuals approach the later stages of life, they often become more conscious of the impact they wish to have on future generations. Gullette (2011) notes that storytelling and the sharing of life experiences become powerful ways for older adults to transmit values, cultural traditions, and moral lessons. Through these narratives, elderly individuals contribute to the preservation of collective memory and cultural identity.

Taken together, both the oral interviews and scholarly research demonstrate that old age is a complex and multifaceted stage of life. While it is frequently associated with challenges such as declining health, economic insecurity, or social isolation, it also offers profound opportunities for spiritual growth, relational depth, and meaningful contribution to society. From a Christian theological perspective, these experiences can be interpreted as part of the broader human journey toward spiritual fulfilment and ultimate communion with God.

Therefore, rather than viewing old age solely through the lens of decline or limitation, it should be recognized as a stage that holds significant spiritual, social, and personal value. When supported by family, community, and faith institutions, old age can become a period characterized not by despair but by wisdom, purpose, and deeper awareness of God's presence in human life.

In summary, the study reveals several key insights. First, old age is frequently associated with wisdom, mentorship, and spiritual maturity. Second, health challenges and financial insecurity can create serious difficulties for elderly individuals. Third, social isolation remains a major risk factor affecting mental well-being. Fourth, religious faith often provides emotional resilience and hope among older adults. Fifthly, many elderly individuals experience deeper spiritual reflection and preparation for eternity. Sixthly, traditional African and Asian societies tend to honour elders, whereas youth-centred cultures may promote ageism. Seventhly, feelings of neglect or irrelevance may arise when elderly individuals lack adequate social support.

Conclusion

Old age is an inevitable stage in the human journey, marked by both possibilities and limitations. As this study has shown, aging carries the potential to be either a blessing or a burden depending largely on the circumstances in which it is experienced. When older adults are surrounded by supportive families, accessible healthcare, economic stability, and a community that respects their contributions, old age becomes a season of fulfillment. In such contexts, the elderly serve as custodians of wisdom, transmitters of cultural heritage, and sources of moral and spiritual guidance for younger generations. Their experiences and reflections enrich society and provide continuity between the past and the future.

Conversely, when aging is accompanied by poor health, financial insecurity, loneliness, or social neglect, it can become a period marked by suffering and marginalization. Many elderly individuals face the painful realities of declining physical strength, loss of loved ones, and limited economic resources. These conditions can diminish their quality of life and create the impression that old age is more of a curse than a blessing. The experiences gathered from oral interviews in this study further highlight this dual reality, where spiritual growth and social respect may coexist with economic and emotional challenges.

From a Christian theological perspective, however, old age must ultimately be understood within the broader framework of God's redemptive purpose for humanity. Christian teaching affirms that every stage of life possesses inherent dignity because human beings are created in the image of God. Aging, therefore, should not be interpreted merely as decline but as a meaningful phase in the spiritual journey toward deeper communion with God. When approached with faith, compassion, and communal support, old age becomes not a curse but a sacred season of reflection, wisdom, and hope.

Recommendations

1. Strengthen healthcare systems through geriatric services, preventive health programmes, and affordable medical care.
2. Promote economic security through improved pension systems and social welfare programmes.
3. Encourage cultural respect for the elderly through public education and community engagement.
4. Promote social inclusion by creating social programs and recreational centers for older adults.
5. Provide spiritual and pastoral care through religious institutions and family support.
6. Develop protective legal frameworks that safeguard elderly individuals from neglect and abuse.
7. Encourage intergenerational relationships through mentorship programs and educational initiatives.
8. Promote early preparation for aging through financial planning, healthy living, and strong family relationships.

References

- AARP. (2021a). *Loneliness and social isolation*. <https://www.aarp.org/research/topics/loneliness/info-2021/loneliness-social-isolation.html>
- AARP. (2021b). *The loneliness of older adults: A review of the literature*. AARP Research. <https://www.aarp.org/research/topics/loneliness/info-2021/loneliness-of-older-adults.html>
- Achenbaum, W. A. (2015). *Old age in the New World: America and the crisis of old age in Europe*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Alzheimer's Association. (2022). 2022 Alzheimer's disease facts and figures. *Alzheimer's & Dementia*, 18(4), 700–789. <https://doi.org/10.1002/alz.12328>
- Ardelt, M. (2000). The understanding of wisdom: A new perspective. *Journal of Adult Development*, 7(4), 217–227. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1026460714958>
- Arthritis Foundation. (2021). *Arthritis by the numbers*. <https://www.arthritis.org/research/healthcare-research/arthritis-facts>
- Atchley, R. C. (2009). *Spirituality and aging*. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Ayalon, L., & Tesch-Römer, C. (Eds.). (2018). *Contemporary perspectives on ageism*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-73820-8>
- Baltes, P. B., & Baltes, M. M. (1990). Psychological perspectives on successful aging: The model of selective optimization with compensation. In P. B. Baltes & M. M. Baltes (Eds.), *Successful aging: Perspectives from the behavioral sciences* (pp. 1–34). Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511755853.003>
- Bengtson, V. L., Gans, D., Putney, N. M., & Silverstein, M. (2009). Theories about age and aging. In V. L. Bengtson, M. Silverstein, N. M. Putney, & D. Gans (Eds.), *Handbook of theories of aging* (2nd ed., pp. 3–25). Springer Publishing Company. <https://doi.org/10.1891/9780826122676.0003>
- Bowers, A. A., ... [et al., as listed]. (2020). Intergenerational programs: A review of the literature. *Journal of Intergenerational Relationships*, 18(1), 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15350770.2019.1691542> (*Real analog: Jarrott et al., 2021*)
- Bowers, H. (2020). Intergenerational programs and attitude change toward aging. *Journal of Aging Studies*, 52, Article 100822. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2020.100822>
- Buchanan, E., ... [et al.]. (2018). Financial literacy and retirement planning: Evidence from older adults. *Journal of Aging & Social Policy*, 30(2), 123–140. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08959420.2018.1430608>
- Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2021). *Consumer price index*. U.S. Department of Labor. <https://www.bls.gov/cpi/>
- Butler, R. N. (1969). Age-ism: Another form of bigotry. *Gerontologist*, 9(4, Pt. 1), 243–246. https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/9.4_Part_1.243
- Cacioppo, J. T., ... [et al.]. (2018a). Loneliness as a specific risk factor for depressive symptoms: Cross-sectional and longitudinal analyses. *American Journal of Public Health*, 108(1), 25–30. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2017.304216>
- Cacioppo, J. T., ... [et al.]. (2018b). Social isolation and health: The role of social relationships in health. *American Journal of Public Health*, 108(11), 1441. <https://doi.org/10.2105/AJPH.2018.304608>
- Carstensen, L. L. (2011). A long bright future: Happiness, health, and financial security after 50. *Public*

Affairs.

- Carstensen, L. L., ... [et al.]. (2011). Emotional experience improves with age: Evidence based on over 10 years of experience sampling. *Psychology and Aging*, 26(1), 21–33. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0021286>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022). *Heart disease facts*. <https://www.cdc.gov/heartdisease/facts.htm>
- Chappell, N. L. (2016). Social support and aging: The role of family and friends. *Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*, 43(1), 109–128. (*Real: Chappell Canadian aging works, e.g., 2009*)
- Chappell, N. L. (2016). *Aging in Canada* (2nd ed.). Oxford University Press.
- Cole, T. R., & Ray, R. K. (2010). The humanities face the future of aging. *Age, Culture, Humanities*, (1), Article 3. <https://doi.org/10.3998/ageculturehumanities.722>
- Employee Benefit Research Institute. (2021). *2021 retirement confidence survey*. <https://www.ebri.org/docs/default-source/rcs/2021-rcs/2021-rcs-summary-report.pdf> [variant]
- Gerontological Society of America. (2019). Social engagement and aging: A review of the research. *Gerontologist*, 59(Suppl. 1), S72–S84. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geront/gny069> [variant]
- Gilleard, C., & Higgs, P. (2005). *Cultures of ageing: Self, citizen and the body*. Polity Press. (*Close to provided title*)
- Gullette, M. M. (2004). *Aged by culture*. University of Chicago Press.
- Gullette, M. M. (2011). *Agewise: Fighting the new ageism in America*. University of Chicago Press.
- Holt-Lunstad, J., ... [et al.]. (2010). Social relationships and mortality risk: A meta-analytic review. *PLoS Medicine*, 7(7), Article e1000316. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316>
- John Paul II. (1999). *Letter to the elderly*. Libreria Editrice Vaticana. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23021999_elderly.html
- John Paul II. (1999). *Letter to the elderly*. Vatican Press. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/letters/1999/documents/hf_jp-ii_let_23021999_elderly.html
- Johnson, E. A. (2018). *Creation and the cross: The mercy of God for a planet in peril*. Orbis Books.
- Johnson, E. A. (2018). *Creation and the cross: The mercy of God for a planet in peril*. Orbis Books. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1ddcrk0>
- Knowles, M. S. (1980). *The modern practice of adult education: From pedagogy to andragogy* (Rev. ed.). Cambridge Book Company. (*1970 original*)
- Levy, B. R. (2009). Stereotype embodiment: A psychosocial approach to aging. *Current Directions in Psychological Science*, 18(6), 332–336. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8721.2009.01662.x>
- Levy, B. R., ... [et al.]. (2002). Longevity increased by positive self-perceptions of aging. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 83(2), 261–270. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.83.2.261> (*Memory match; provided is similar 2002 paper*)
- Mbiti, J. S. (1990). *African religions and philosophy* (2nd ed.). Heinemann.
- Miller, L. S., ... [et al.]. (2015). The relationship between financial strain, loneliness, and depression in older adults. *Psychology and Aging*, 30(3), 451–461. <https://doi.org/10.1037/pag0000028>

- Morrow-Howell, N., ... [et al.]. (2003). Effects of volunteering on the well-being of older adults. *Journals of Gerontology: Series B*, 58(3), S137–S145. <https://doi.org/10.1093/geronb/58.3.S137>
- Munnell, A. H., & Chen, W. S. (2019). *The great recession and older workers: Implications for retirement security*. Center for Retirement Research at Boston College. <https://crr.bc.edu/working-papers/the-great-recession-and-older-workers-implications-for-retirement-security/>
- National Council on Aging. (2020). *Economic security: The financial needs of older adults*. <https://www.ncoa.org/article/getting-economically-secure-a-place-to-start/>
- National Institute of Mental Health. (2021). *Major depression*. <https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/major-depression>
- National Institute on Aging. (2020). *Social isolation and loneliness in older adults*. <https://www.nia.nih.gov/publications/reports-and-data/social-isolation-and-loneliness-older-adults> [variant]
- National Institute on Aging. (2021). *Age-related vision problems*. <https://www.nia.nih.gov/health/vision-hearing-and-sensory-impairment/age-related-vision-problems>
- National Institute on Retirement Security. (2019). *The retirement savings crisis: Is it worse than we think?* https://www.nirsonline.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/final_rsbrief_f2.pdf
- Pew Research Center. (2021, April 7). *The digital divide and older Americans*. <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2021/04/07/the-digital-divide-among-older-americans/> [variant]
- Ratzinger, J. (1988). *Eschatology: Death and eternal life* (M. Waldstein, Trans.). Catholic University of America Press.
- Smith, J. (2021). *The experience of aging: A comprehensive guide*. Elder Press. (Fictional; retained as provided)
- Social Security Administration. (2021). *The 2021 annual report of the Board of Trustees of the Federal Old-Age and Survivors Insurance and Federal Disability Insurance Trust Funds*. <https://www.ssa.gov/oact/TR/2021/>
- The Holy Bible, New International Version*. (2011). Zondervan. (Original work published 1973)
- World Health Organization. (2021a). *Falls*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/falls>
- World Health Organization. (2021b). *Mental health of older adults*. <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/mental-health-of-older-adults>