

# Retired and inspired

MAKING THE MOST OF  
OUR LATTER YEARS

WENDY BILLINGTON



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**WENDY BILLINGTON**



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 God.  
They will still bear fruit in old age,  
they will stay fresh and green,  
proclaiming, 'The Lord is upright;  
he is my Rock, and there is no wickedness in him.'

PSALM 92:12-15

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# Introduction

Retirement is a phenomenon of western culture, a time of withdrawal from paid work with the opportunity to do what one chooses. Those retiring in their 60s could have over a quarter of their lives left!

Attitudes to retirement vary. Some people I know are fearful and apprehensive about their future years. They may be keen to make the most of them but concerned that the decisions they make may not work out or that declining health might affect their quality of life. Then other people I know have made no plans, still enjoy their current work and want to stay working for as long as is appropriate and practical. For some, that finishing day can't come soon enough. They are just worn out and look it!

All that said, how should a Christian view retirement? If we believe that life is a gift from God, should we not see retirement as part of an integrated whole and our latter years as part of God's plan? He doesn't necessarily expect us to work as hard as we may have done in earlier years; he has other ways in which we can serve. We are just as much members of Christ's body and there remains a part for us to play. Each member is to be valued and respected for who they are. Sadly, this does not always happen: retired people can be patronised, considered as inferior and even made to feel as though they are throwaways – no longer of much use and an encumbrance to society and others.

## Who this book is for

This book is intended for individuals preparing for retirement or in their retirement years, as well as their families, friends, befrienders,

carers and professionals. I have especially in mind professing Christians and those sympathetic to the Christian faith. However, there may be others of different faiths or none for whom this book could be of value and interest.

Each chapter ends with questions for group discussion, and others are provided specifically for one-to-one discussion with an older person. A meditative thought for the day then follows. Woven into the book is the story of Jim and his experiences of life following the sudden death of his wife. He is a fictitious figure but very real to me.

This book is in two parts: 'Clearing the weeds' and 'Sowing the seeds'.

## Clearing the weeds

Weeds are obstacles that stunt the growth of seeds. In discussing these obstacles I draw on my own experience in pastoral work as well as on what I have learned on my personal journey through life.

In the first chapter we are introduced to Jim and the stumbling blocks that have the potential to impede his future quality of living unless they are addressed. As his older years and story evolve, he pops up from time to time throughout the book.

## Sowing the seeds

The second part of this book is its core. With the weeds cleared the seeds can be sown, nurtured and freed to bear fruit. For so many, hidden behind the mask of lost identity and purpose is a wealth of experience, knowledge and skills that should not be left idle or wasted but should be offered and passed on to the younger generations. This part of the book identifies what specifically can be offered and suggests practical ways in which this can be done

for the benefit of others. No longer a ‘has-been’, the older person thus acquires a new dimension to life and feels valued, fulfilled and inspired to enjoy it and live it to the full. The idea that one is ‘doing well for one’s age’, with its undercurrent of comparison, can evoke in some a feeling of despondency. But it is *how we are* and not our birth age that matters. An attitude of acceptance towards our bodies and minds as they weaken requires us to set our own goals, sometimes with the help of others, so we can be spurred on to offer our best for God.

There is only one story in the Bible that specifically refers to retirement, which is in Numbers 8:23–26. Retirement simply wasn’t expected in the culture of biblical times and it isn’t expected in the cultures of most non-western countries today. God’s followers are urged to be integrated into families and society and to carry on serving in appropriate ways until they die. Both Simeon and Anna are clear and gracious examples in the New Testament of this (Luke 2:25–38). In retirement we may have new ways of working, but we continue to be members of the body of Christ and have opportunities to grow and play our part in making a difference in the lives of others.

# Clearing the weeds



## 1

# Identifying the obstacles

**And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.**

ROMANS 8:28

**One of the secrets of life is to make stepping stones out of stumbling blocks.**

Jack Penn

Jim is 78, a journalist by profession and still writing. He has developed somewhat wizened features and a slight stoop and looks as if he is well into his pensionable years. He would say he feels the same as he did in his 50s and is still determined to make the most of his life. Others would say that if he were to die tomorrow he would have had a worthwhile, enjoyable and productive time following his retirement from his professional career.

Much of his zest for life springs from his deep Christian faith and he is often heard to say that God still has work for him and his wife to do. He has been happily married for 49 years and is soon to celebrate his golden wedding anniversary. He owes much to his wife Ann – nine years his junior – for her love and support. They come across both within and outside the church as a genuine and godly couple. They seem to have time for anyone who crosses their paths, often offering appropriate words of encouragement. In the right context they are also able to share their Christian faith sensitively, which is so meaningful to them and a part of who they are. Jim is a people person, plays an active part both in his church and within

the community, and is in great demand to write articles for local publications, with which he is in his element. He is much valued by the younger generation and offers himself as a mentor. Ann is his encourager, spurring him on.

## Jim's story (1)

Jim and Ann were just days away from their golden wedding, and they were delighted that their daughter had been able to fly back from New Zealand to be with them for their celebrations. Soon after her arrival, as the three of them were having supper, Ann, who normally enjoyed good health, suffered a sudden and severe stroke, and she died the next day. Jim and Ann had often talked about Ann's future after Jim died, never expecting it would be she who would go first. Jim was ill-prepared and devastated by his loss.

The cremation and then the thanksgiving service seemed like a dream. He valued the company and support he received from his daughter in those early days of his bereavement. In the weeks following her return home, friends rallied round to give Jim support, bringing meals and dropping in for a chat. He appreciated all this, but it was short-lived.

Reality gradually began to dawn on him and he saw his life ahead as a great chasm of aloneness which he knew wouldn't be easy to negotiate. No one was there to share the 'this and that' of everyday life and to laugh with him; no one was there just for him. More than ever before, he realised the privilege it had been to spend the last 50 years of his life with Ann at his side. Her physical presence was gone forever. As he considered a future without her, he became aware of his dependence on her, not least in the encouragement she gave him in his Christian life. Now his normal, innate zest for life and his deep desire to serve God through serving others had left him. God had taken Ann, and her inspiring presence had disappeared.

Jim had had a very personal and meaningful relationship with God. When their younger daughter had died at the age of nine from a brain tumour, God was truly then their 'refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble' (Psalm 46:1). Here he was facing a further tragic death in his life, but now he was on his own and felt as if he wouldn't be able to cope. He cried a lot and at times this crying seemed uncontrollable; through the tears he would cry aloud to God, 'Where are you? Why have you forsaken me?' Never had he felt so alone and abandoned.

In those early days, Peter, the pastor from his church, would visit him regularly. Jim appreciated these times, which were just for him and gave him a sense of love and security. Through the tears he was able to share something of his sorrow, and the visits communicated hope and comfort in the troubled and confused state in which he now found himself. He loved Peter to pray for him and gradually, through the prayers, he received assurance that God was still there for him, even though in that dark cloud of loss there appeared to be a veil separating them.

Over those early weeks, Peter was aware that Jim was becoming withdrawn, and it was obvious that Jim was reluctant to socialise. Because he knew that he had other sheep in his flock to pastor, his visits became spasmodic. He started to explore ways in which he might be able to integrate Jim back into church life and encourage him to mix with folk of a similar age who had also been widowed.

Peter then felt the need to relieve Jim of some of his responsibilities, which he thought were likely to give him too much stress, not least the editing of the church magazine, which he had undertaken so faithfully and admirably since he retired from full-time journalism. Younger people came to mind who, although busy, could probably take over the work from Jim.

Jim took the news graciously but with some sadness. He felt that his skills were no longer needed and even had doubts as to how a

younger person with no journalistic experience would fit into his shoes. He began to wonder whether perhaps the time had come to retire to his armchair by the fire and acknowledge that his days of usefulness were perhaps over. Prior to his bereavement, he and Ann had been considering together the changes they could make in their lives and how God might use each of them in the coming years. No conclusions had been reached, and Jim saw the present time as inopportune.

Jim's normally healthy and positive confidence now seemed to be collapsing, and there were signs that depression was beginning to creep in. He wasn't sleeping well and then found it difficult to crawl out of bed in the morning, unable to face the world. He wasn't eating well and began to live off unappetising ready-meals. In desperation he visited his doctor to ask for sleeping pills, but was instead prescribed antidepressants, which he was reluctant to take.

As he sat alone each evening recalling with nostalgia the evenings with Ann, the age-old questions crept into his mind: why is it that God allows suffering, and why was he (Jim) becoming a doubting Thomas?

Peter made arrangements for Jim to go along to Autumn Leaves, a church group of some 50 people mostly in their 70s and 80s. They met weekly for lunch, to which an outside speaker was invited to talk about a subject of common interest. Someone offered to pick Jim up and take him to the next gathering. The gesture was thoughtful and kind, and Jim graciously accepted it, but it proved to be unhelpful. He considered himself a good driver and loved the independence driving gave him.

He recalled that just twelve months ago he had himself been a speaker at the lunch and had felt so much at his ease. He spoke well about his career in journalism and he felt accepted. Now as a guest it was different; he was on the other side of the table. At the lunch he sat next to two widows, each of whom seemed to be absorbed in

her own health issues and hospital appointments. He acknowledged that these are often a central topic of conversation with older people, and he would normally have been able to find something positive and witty to contribute, but now he just sat there pretending he was understanding. He listened to what was being said but his mind was full of his own needs. A few of those who knew of his recent bereavement sensitively offered their condolences, but he didn't find the venue conducive to sharing openly about himself and his loss; he didn't know the people well and thought they were unlikely to be interested.

Becoming a stereotype of old age and conforming to the image of what was expected of him was not for Jim.

## Fears and barriers

One of the worst fears about ageing is that the world seems to gradually communicate that you are no longer wanted or valued. In the same way one's rich experiences of life appear to go out of the window and count for nothing. This impression, with its built-in misconceptions and prejudices, can seriously affect the self-esteem of older people.

Inspiration to continue to live a fruitful and enjoyable life in older years, as far as circumstances allow, is to be prized. For some people there may well be obstacles to confront; in Jim's case it was the loss of his wife. This had the potential to become an ongoing stumbling block that affected his quality of life and caused him to waste his latter years in discontent.

Stemming from Jim's major problem, his loss of Ann, was the loss of any meaningful identity and self-confidence. It seemed as if he was about to be put on the scrap heap. Even God, who had previously been central to his life, now seemed to be absent.

This story highlights some of the barriers that prevent Jim and many others who are retired from living fulfilling, enjoyable and fruitful lives. As we prepare for and enter our retirement years, there will be trials to face, as there are at every stage of life. We are vulnerable to uncertainties and imponderables: health issues and fears, dementia and loss. Enveloped in all of this is the ultimate unknown: how long we have to live. Those in early retirement could still have a quarter of their lives to live.

If we want to make the most of our latter years, we need to sit back and reflect for a while on whether some weeds need first to be cleared. Once this is done we will have the best possible chance for seeds to be sown and to grow into a good and fulfilling life. Some people may have much work to do before the seeds can be sown. Patience, one of the fruit of the Spirit listed in Paul's letter to the Galatians (Galatians 5:22–23), can be something we need to work hard to develop.

Most retirees say that, on retiring, they valued the opportunity to have a break and not launch immediately into something new. They appreciate having a period of adjustment when they did very little, just *being* and savouring the here and now with the opportunity to consider how they wanted to structure their changed life. Under less pressure and after a hard slog over many years, a genuine feeling of relief and freedom to enjoy life may emerge. But then a real sense of bereavement may follow – a loss of purpose, status and identity as well as the loss of the company that work colleagues provided over the years. This is a time of reflection on the past with its pleasures and regrets, and then on the future with its hopes and aspirations.

## What role can the church play?

Through the ups and downs of life Christians look to the church and its fellowship of believers for love, care and support as well as for spiritual food and refreshment.

Jim had been a member of his church for many years, but he appeared not to have been put in touch with people who could come alongside him to give the ongoing and meaningful support that he desperately needed. Many people who are widowed are able to graciously accept their situation and carry on with their lives while needing very little support. Others who are further into their retirement years may choose to move away from the familiarity of their home environment to be near and cared for by their families. Like many others, Jim needed to come to terms with his situation and to battle with the threat of becoming a premature stereotype of old age. How could the church help him to take up the strands of life again? We have a God who wants us to be able to live our lives in all their fullness and is with us to help clear the encumbrances. He wants us to call on him to help us clear the weeds, and he wants members of his church to become aware of the needs of those around them and endeavour to meet them.

Once stumbling blocks – the weeds – are cleared it will then be time to gather up the tools needed to sow the seeds towards fruitfulness. Among these will be our wealth of life experience. It may prove exciting to identify and retrieve the gifts we have been given, some of which may have been lying dormant within us for a long time.

When we face difficult situations, it can make all the difference and be amazingly therapeutic for a loving person to draw alongside us and to give of their time, understanding and empathy by offering a listening ear. The sad reality is that relatively few people are available and, despite their willingness, they are often shy and feel inadequately equipped with the skills required. We will be addressing the importance of listening and ways in which basic listening skills may be learned and used later in the book.

Jim would profit from having a mature and wise Christian from within or outside his church with whom he could talk through his spiritual concerns and who would help him re-establish his relationship with his heavenly Father. Concerns such as loss of faith

are not unusual in situations of loss and trauma. Hopefully, in most of our churches there are mature Christians who would be able to step in to help and fulfil this role. Approaching a recognised spiritual adviser could be considered and explored.

Leaving a legacy within the kingdom of God and in the lives of others should be the desire and goal of every Christian. Let us reflect on the words of Paul as he writes to the Christians of Philippi:

But one thing I do: forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead, I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus. All of us, then, who are mature should take such a view of things.

PHILIPPIANS 3:13-15

Whether we are in retirement or preparing for it, a carer or relative of an older person, a Christian or not, we must recognise that the closing years of life given to us are to be treasured, enjoyed and used for the common good, however long they may be.

## For group discussion

- As you look towards your remaining years, identify the issues in your present and past life that could be problematic to the quality of your life in the future.
- Discuss and reflect on ways you might address and work through these.

## For one-to-one or personal reflection

- As we read about Jim's bereavement, it becomes evident that he needs a supportive, understanding and confidential friend with

whom he could share. If you need to offload a concern in your own life, to whom would you turn for help?

## Thought for the day: peace

‘Peace’ is a breathtaking word and communicates not just an absence of conflict but a deep sense of serenity and stillness – an inner peace yearned for by many yet rarely found.

While writing this book, I had an amazing taste of peace when I sought refuge from the distractions of normal home life by staying in a cottage within a retreat centre in the depths of rural France. I needed inspiration to work on this book. During the first couple of days I switched off and lay back to bask in the warmth of the sun and marvel at God’s creation in the peace of my surroundings. There was no shop, cafe or public transport for miles and I had no car, so I was devoid of distractions and able to concentrate on the job in hand. My host and hostess lovingly provided me with meals, which were my luxury.

So that is where I stayed for the next fortnight. I would go for a short walk each morning after breakfast along country lanes deserted of traffic, occasionally visiting the nearby village with its sprinkling of residents; it sported a small village green, a church and (believe it or not) a local mayor. All this gave me the opportunity to become detached from the cares of the world and just to *be*. Then it was down to work, but the peaceful atmosphere spurred me on to write. As I beavered away on the computer, I was very conscious of God’s presence with me and of his peace.

In the Old Testament we read that God is the creator of peace just as he is of light and darkness (Isaiah 45:7). He created us to live in peace with him, our neighbours, the world and even with ourselves. However, we live now in a world broken by sin and evil, and our experience of peace is spasmodic, coming and going like the tide.

In the New Testament the Greek word for peace is *eirene*, a more defined and distinctive word than its English equivalent. *Eirene*, from whom the name Irene is derived, was the goddess of peace in Greek mythology, one of the three deities of the seasons and keepers of the gates of heaven. Her sisters were Eunomia (Good Order) and Dike (Justice). In ancient Greece spring was the traditional battle season, the time when peace was most at risk. *Eirene* also stands for the Hebrew word 'shalom', which is still used today by Jews as a greeting in the same way as we say 'hello'. In my hallway I have a tapestry that was lovingly embroidered with the word 'shalom' many years ago by a friend. I hope that those who drop into my home may find through it a measure of God's peace.

In his letter to the Galatians, Paul sets out a list of the evil characteristics of human nature, and then lists the lovely things found in human nature, which he calls 'the fruit of the Spirit'; they are 'love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control' (Galatians 5:22–23). This fruit, freely given to believers, is a natural, living product of the Holy Spirit, to be valued, enjoyed and reflected in our lives and bringing with it harmonious living and unity between people.

Jesus bequeathed the legacy of peace to his disciples shortly before he died. 'Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid' (John 14:27). What comfort, reassurance and encouragement these words must have been to his fearful, confused and doubting friends. This peace is rooted in our Christian faith and our hope of heaven. It is not dependent on circumstances and is irrespective of personal or global distractions such as illness or war. It is there in abundance for each of us to receive and to use for the good of all.

The serenity I found in rural France almost gave me a desire to withdraw to a more ascetic lifestyle, so desperate was I not to lose it! Such a lifestyle was not for me and I know too it isn't God's calling for

me. However, I am acutely aware of the need to withdraw from time to time from the busyness and distractions of my life for personal reflection and prayer so that I can recapture that inner peace that is beyond human understanding.

So when my fortnight in France was over, I was ready to return home into the hustle and bustle and enjoyment of everyday life. Nevertheless, I was both clutching and treasuring that cushion of peace God had given me during my time away.

I have been reminded, through a recent sermon, of some familiar words of Jesus: 'What good is it for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?' (Mark 8:36). What do these familiar words mean to you and to me? For my part, I see my life in a clearer perspective because my days here on earth are numbered. We can become too easily caught up with the material things of life; they are to be enjoyed but we tend to forget that they are only transitory; we can't take our possessions with us, but we can leave them as a meaningful legacy for future generations. I see nothing wrong with gaining money, fame, success and even power provided they are within God's will for us. He wants every believer to gain blessings here on earth. However, God does not want to see believers forsaking him for the sake of secular gain and success.

It is when we are fulfilling God's purposes that we can find this inner peace that the world does not give us; through it we can be truly blessed and become a blessing to others. The world looks to Christians to be different and to show Christlikeness in the way we conduct ourselves. That inner tranquillity of heart that peace gives will help us to live in harmony with our families, friends and neighbours.

The gift of the 'fruit' of the Spirit is a singular and unified whole. It can be seen as a fruit salad consisting of a variety of fruit, each with its independent flavours and characteristics, yet blending into a unified whole.

In succeeding chapters of this book, we will be focusing on other fruit that the Spirit freely gives us to help us along the pathway to Christlikeness.

## For personal reflection

*Lord, make me an instrument of your peace.*

*Where there is hatred let me sow love;*

*Where there is injury, pardon;*

*Where there is doubt, faith;*

*Where there is despair, hope;*

*Where there is darkness, light;*

*And where there is sadness, joy.*

Prayer of St Francis (Traditional)



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