



## Thoughts on turning 50

It's time to look forward and cooperate with God's plan

It's not death I fear—although I've thought about it a lot as I approached my 50th birthday. Rather it's the possibility of growing old without purpose which frightens me.

Death is nothing, but to live without creating, without contributing, is to die daily.

My mother, who is 83, called me early that fateful day. She reminded me I woke her at 5 a.m. 50 years ago. She was re-turning the call.

I suggested we were both at the age we needed to look forward—not backward.

Then I told her I felt God had spoken plainly to me, saying He would give me another 50 years if I but cooperated with Him.

Yet simply living many years is not enough. The day I turned 50 I read the final draft of my friend John Sherrill's upcoming book, *Mother's Song*. It is a simple, moving story—the kind you read at one sitting with misty eyes—of how his aged mother chose to die rather than live beyond her time to create. And how he, her son, allowed her to do so.

If the years of our lives cannot be years of service, of creativity, death has already set in.

F. Scott Fitzgerald, writing of his own tragic life which ended in alcoholism, said: "Since I could no longer fulfill the obligations that life had set for me or that I had set for myself, why not slay the empty shell? I must continue to be the writer because that was my way of life, but I would cease to be a person."

I go on record here saying I refuse that route. I am determined to cooperate with God, claim my next 50 years, and be even more the person.

Caleb was 85 when he looked toward Hebron, with its walled city, and said, "Give me that mountain."

Joshua was 110 when he challenged the entire nation to follow his example. "As for me and my household, we will serve the Lord."

And Moses, we are told, not only had perfect eyesight but could still perform sexually when he was 120.

By that standard I'm still batting .500—and I'm believing God to help me with my eyesight, too.

But it is the quality of years which count—not the quantity. Jesus and the apostles, many of whom died young, proved this. Yet to achieve quality, one needs a blueprint—a design.

Early in my life I wrongly thought life should be lived by setting goals. Now I realize the futility of that. Life for the Christian should not be lived by goals, but by design. We set the framework in which we choose to live; then God accomplishes his goals through us.

So, what have I learned as I cross the half-century mark? Many things, but only one I share with you. I have learned it is just as foolish to try to do ten things with your

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one talent as it is to bury it in the ground and do nothing with it.

If I had but one year left, I might be justified in hurrying to finish my design. But God has told me to slow down. Not because I am weary, but because I am growing wise.

The trouble, Theodore Parker once wrote, is that God is never in a hurry—and I am.

Over the last 15 years I have written an average of two books a year—plus innumerable articles and columns. No writer can do that and consistently produce anything lasting. His words become like spit in the wind—a fine spray which doesn't even last long enough to hit the ground.

I used to say I would rather burn out than rust out. That was always good for a few "Amens" from rusty folks who liked seeing a man burn out. But it wasn't good for my soul.

Now, as I turn 50, I am saying to my soul—as did Oliver Wendell Holmes—

"build thee more stately mansions . . . and as the swift seasons roll, leave each new temple nobler than the last."

Thus I have learned the folly of lusting beyond my limits. That does not mean I have become impotent—only selective.

I used to weep that my writing lacked the literary style of a C. S. Lewis. I would read Shakespeare, Kipling, and Mark Twain; chuckle with Thurber; and wish I could write a sentence like Steinbeck.

Then a friend reminded me that gifts vary. Had C. S. Lewis been raised on an orange grove in Florida, smoked behind the barn, parked with his girlfriend on the golf course, and been kicked around by the religious scribes as I had—he would probably have written like me, rather than as the product of Victorian England.

That helped. So many writers are like pedigreed dogs in the ring. Their writing "prances." It marches across the page with head held high, tail erect, the words of each foot hitting the page with preciseness.

Others write from the heart. They will never win the blue ribbons given by the sophisticated editorial judges. Instead of prancing, they nuzzle. They are the mongrel breeds who like to have their ears scratched, wag their tails when you come home, and sleep at the edge of your bed licking your hand during the night.

They are not the kind you brush and groom. They are soft and fuzzy, with languid eyes and lolling tongue.

They are the mongrel writers.

Such writers may never capture the gift of metaphor, master the simile, or write the theological tomes which cause the scholars to nod profoundly.

They do not write to impress—but to minister.

What have I learned? I have learned it's okay for me to be lazy in the sunshine, to lick hands, and to wag my tail when I get excited over what God is doing. I am glad for those who get the blue ribbons. But look for me beside the fireplace—or digging furiously in the backyard out of sheer curiosity.

And be content with me. After all, I'm going to be around another 50 years. ↵