

The Omega Course



A six-session course designed to help older people to reflect on the challenges, and blessings, of ageing. With Bible-based teaching and questions to encourage debate and discussion.

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On behalf of St. Paul's Church, Kingston Hill.

Free to use.

INTRODUCTION: The aims of the course (for course leaders).

People are living longer. This fact presents social, economic and political challenges to both society and government.

What about the Church? How do we support older people in the church family? How can we help them face the many issues that longevity brings? What part can they play in serving the church? Are they an under-used resource?

What about people who are not practicing Christians? How do they approach old age and dying? How do we share the good news of Jesus with them?

We recognise the invaluable work done by Evergreens* and the way the church seeks to accept and empower its Senior Citizens in many ways. But some are looking for more teaching and discussion on this matter so that they can live well and, when the time comes, die well!

The Alpha Course has been inspirational in bringing many to the beginning of a walk of faith. Because of Alpha, millions world-wide have begun to follow Jesus. But we want to explore, through the Omega Course, ways to help people end their lives in a faith-filled way. A course for both Christians and non-believers.

The Bible raises the issue of old age. In John 21:18 (NLT) Jesus says to Peter: *I tell you the truth, when you were young, you were able to do as you liked; you dressed yourself and went wherever you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will dress you and take you where you don't want to go.*

We want the Omega course to address the questions raised by the reality of old age and offer the participants a chance to ask them in an informal and non-judgemental environment. We want the course to give an opportunity for people to share their wisdom, their concerns and their experiences, and to deepen their relationship with God.

The aim of the course is therefore to be practical rather than theoretical – a learning for life experience. We want to emphasise the value of our experiences of old age and our ability to add value to other peoples' lives.

Ideally this would mean a small group of older people meeting in the relaxed atmosphere of someone's home, or in the church for about an hour and a half. Each meeting would include time for worship, teaching, discussion and prayer support, as well as refreshments, of course.

Each session is introduced with some background material, which is followed by a selection of relevant Bible verses. All Bible verses are taken from the New Living Translation. Material has been produced in such a way that Bible verses for each session are printed on separate sheets so that they may be photocopied and distributed to group members for discussion. These are followed by some pointers for discussion.

Session 1: Old age – a blessing or a curse?

Session 2: Knowing what the Bible says about old age.

Session 3: Facing the challenges of retirement.

Session 4: Living with illness and disability.

Session 5: Coping with loss.

Session 6: Death – the final frontier.

A popular slogan claims that 'Life is a journey, not a destination' but life does have an end. The Omega Course is for those who want their faith to work in the final years of their lives or for those who want to find faith before they die.

As singer/songwriter Matt Redman writes:

*And on that day when my strength is failing
the end draws near and my time has come.
Still my soul will sing your praise unending
10,000 years and then forever more.*

*Evergreens is a group that welcomes over 55s in the Kingston community to meet together at St. Paul's Church on the first Tuesday of each month from 1.45pm to 3.45pm.

SESSION 1: Old age – a blessing or a curse?

Marcus Tullius Cicero, a Roman politician and lawyer, noted that everyone hopes to live through to old age, but then complains about it when it arrives. We have to face the fact that old age brings limitations. The best choice is to accept them and work around them, but that is not always easy!

Cicero also said that each stage of life has its own appropriate qualities – weakness in childhood, boldness in youth, seriousness in middle age, and maturity in old age. These are fruits that should be harvested in due season.

Old age often means that joints stiffen, memories fade, visits to the toilet increase, life-long friends and colleagues die and contemporary music is too loud! We feel our age. We have more yesterdays than tomorrows. There are more doors closing behind us than opening in front of us.

We face an important choice – we can either see old age as a blessing or as a curse. Do we live out our lives watching television all day or involve ourselves in family, church and community?

For the Christian, old age should be a blessing from the Lord. We should not be afraid of ageing: there are many advantages to ageing that we vouch for. We have life experiences that can help others on their walk of faith. We have learned from making wrong decisions, endured physical and emotional hardships and gained wisdom along the way. We can be a resource to younger generations and we need to make ourselves available. Old age can bring economic benefits through pension schemes, tax benefits and discounts available to older people. There is more time for loved ones and leisure, and the opportunity to volunteer and pursue our dreams.

But it should be acknowledged that many of these advantages are dependent upon good health and lack of poverty, as old age can also bring a decline in our income, our senses, a loss of mobility and a loss of independence as our health declines.

Not only can we help others, we can also look for new opportunities to enrich ourselves. CS Lewis wrote: “You are never too old to set a new goal or dream a new dream.”

Bible verses:

Leviticus 19:32

Stand up in the presence of the elderly, and show respect for the aged. Fear your God. I am the LORD.

Deuteronomy 32:7

Remember the days of long ago; think about the generations past. Ask your father, and he will inform you. Inquire of your elders, and they will tell you.

Psalm 71:18

Now that I am old and grey, do not abandon me, O God. Let me proclaim your power to this new generation, your mighty miracles to all who come after me.

Psalm 92:14

Even in old age they will still produce fruit; they will remain vital and green.

Job 12:12

Wisdom belongs to the aged and understanding to the old.

Job 32:7

I thought, 'Those who are older should speak, for wisdom comes with age.'

Titus 2:2-3

Teach the older men to exercise self-control, to be worthy of respect, and to live wisely. They must have sound faith and be filled with love and patience.

Similarly, teach the older women to live in a way that honours God. They must not slander others or be heavy drinkers. Instead, they should teach others what is good.

Acts 2:17

'In the last days,' God says, 'I will pour out my Spirit upon all people. Your sons and daughters will prophesy. Your young men will see visions, and your old men will dream dreams.'

Discussion pointers:

How do you feel about the reality of old age?

Should you accept the limitations of growing old or what?

Can you regard old age as a blessing?

How could you help younger generations?

What dreams for the future do you have?

SESSION 2: Knowing what the Bible says about old age:

In the Bible, God reveals himself to mankind, intervenes in human history and gives us an authoritative basis for Christian doctrine and behaviour. Men were inspired by God to write the scriptures and in doing so gave us what we call 'The Word of God'.

Bible verses for session 2: Knowing what the Bible says about old age.

1. Why consider this?

2 Timothy 3: 16-17

All Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to teach us what is true and to make us realise what is wrong in our lives. It corrects us when we are wrong and teaches us to do what is right. God uses it to prepare and equip his people to do every good work.

2 Peter 1:20-21

Above all, you must realise that no prophecy in Scripture ever came from the prophet's own understanding, or from human initiative. No, those prophets were moved by the Holy Spirit, and they spoke from God.

2. Old age is a reality.

John 21:18

I tell you the truth, when you were young, you were able to do as you liked; you dressed yourself and went where you wanted to go. But when you are old, you will stretch out your hands, and others will dress you and take you where you don't want to go.

3. We are not ready for the scrap heap.

Psalm 71:9

And now, in my old age, don't set me aside. Don't abandon me when my strength is failing.

4. God promises to be with us.

Isaiah 46:4

I will be your God throughout your lifetime – until your hair is white with age. I made you, and I will care for you. I will carry you along and save you.

5. We can still be fruitful, no matter our age.

Psalm 92:14

Even in old age they will still produce fruit; they will remain vital and green.

6. We can invest in the younger generation.

Job 12:12

Wisdom belongs to the aged, and understanding to the old.

Proverbs 20:29

The glory of the young is their strength; the grey hair of experience is the splendour of the old.

Psalm 71:18

Let me proclaim your power to this new generation, your mighty miracles to all who come after me.

Discussion pointers:

Over the years we have acquired wisdom and experience. This can be a resource for others in the church. Our encounters with God and the things He has done in our lives should testify to younger generations.

How seriously do you take what the Bible says?

How can we counter the myth that old-age means the scrap-heap?

Does God seem close or distant?

What fruit are you growing?

How can we invest in younger generations?

SESSION 3: Facing the challenges of retirement

Retirement. The word can conjure up visions of being on permanent holiday. Sleeping late. Taking trips. Finally having enough time to indulge in whatever hobby or interest you want to.

But retirement means change and change can be difficult. We may have planned ahead, chosen our moment and made provision for our retirement. Or been forced to retire early through illness or other circumstances. Both ways, the transition from regular employment, salary, and a structured way of life to retirement can be tricky.

Some retirees feel bored and unproductive. Others experience anxiety and even depression, especially if there are financial or health concerns. It can be a challenge to make the post-work reality match the retirement dream.

However, there are many positives in retirement. You can use the skills you already have or learn new ones to enable you to make a meaningful and lasting contribution to your family, society and in the church.

God has promised to be with us in this time of transition and change.

A new purpose in retirement could come through volunteering or mentoring. You could volunteer at the church or charities in the local community. As well as meeting real needs you will be keeping active. Studies suggest that volunteering increases self-confidence, combats depression and decreases anxiety (source: SAGA). Volunteering is usually flexible and easy to fit in.

Mentoring takes place when you come alongside other people and help them. Befriending others who may be vulnerable is a vital ministry. You don't need special training – just use the experiences and the resources that you have gained from life and your walk with God.

By giving back in this way you can use the new retirement rhythm in your life and the new opportunities this brings to become a valuable resource.

“It's about asking yourself what makes your life worthwhile. Where do you get your sense of recognition from and who gives you a pat on the back and says you've done a good job. Wherever we are and whatever stage in our life, we have potential inside us.” Anthony Hughes (The University of the Third Age).

Bible verses for session 3: Facing the challenges of retirement.

1. Retirement is directly mentioned only once.

Numbers 8:23-26

The Lord also instructed Moses, "This is the rule the Levites must follow: They must begin serving in the Tabernacle at the age of 25, and they must retire at the age of 50. After retirement, they may assist their fellow Levites by serving as guards at the Tabernacle, but they may not officiate in the service. This is how you must assign duties to the Levites."

2. We never retire from serving God.

Luke 2:36-37

Anna, a prophet, was also in the Temple. She was the daughter of Phanuel from the tribe of Asher, and she was very old. Her husband died when they had been married only seven years. Then she lived as a widow to the age of 84. She never left the Temple but stayed there day and night, worshipping God with fasting and prayer.

3. Retirement is not solely for the pursuit of pleasure.

1 Tim 5:5-6

Now a true widow, a woman who is truly alone in this world, has placed her hope in God. She prays night and day, asking God for his help. But the widow who lives only for pleasure is spiritually dead even while she lives.

4. We should provide for our children.

Proverbs 13:22

Good people leave an inheritance to their grandchildren, but the sinner's wealth passes to the godly.

2 Cor 12:14

Children don't provide for their parents. Rather, parents provide for their children.

5. God promises to be with us.

Isaiah 41:10

Don't be afraid, for I am with you. Don't be discouraged, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you.

6. God promises to do something new in our lives.

Isaiah 43:19

For I am about to do something new. See, I have already begun! Do you not see it? I will make a pathway through the wilderness. I will create rivers in the dry wasteland.

“Old age has its challenges and is not for wimps, but God wants us to embrace it as part of his plan for our lives, and to look for the Lord’s purpose in every circumstance and in every face or voice we encounter daily.

God doesn’t want us to waste our latter years or spend them in superficial, meaningless pursuits. Instead, he wants us to use them in whatever ways he can to influence those who will come after us. He wants us to finish well, and one of the ways we do this is by passing on our values and our faith to those who will follow us”. Billy Graham.

Discussion pointers:

How have you managed the changes brought about by retirement?

What new thing is God doing in your life?

Where do you (or could you) volunteer?

Have you ever considered mentoring others?

What makes your life worthwhile?

SESSION 4: Living with illness and disability

Illness and disability can strike at any time. However, as we grow older and our natural physical strength declines we are more likely to face the reality of life-changing illnesses. Some conditions are obvious but others are 'invisible'.

Either way they can impact our quality of life and ability to function. This includes loss of hearing, eyesight, movement, dexterity, memory recall and the ability to concentrate.

But living with illness and disability involves more than the physical limitations created by the condition. They may also contribute to financial, relational, emotional and spiritual challenges as well. Individuals may experience loneliness, embarrassment, fear and concerns about dependency. It often takes times to adjust and to accept the realities of a long-term disabling illness.

It's important to understand that God cares about our physical and mental concerns. He created the human body, rejoices in our health and vitality but also has compassion in times of sickness and pain.

Jesus came into the world to confront disease and identify with suffering and death. He willingly suffered and died. But he also ordained his followers to demonstrate empathy and care towards the sick and to pray for healing and restoration. This is the Kingdom of God in action!

God still heals people in ways that defy medical knowledge – although we do not reject the treatments available through medicine and doctors! We should pray for healing, either for ourselves or others. But healing does not always occur, even to the most loving, Christ-centred people. Why not? We don't know. However, the Bible does promise us that if we are not healed in this life, there is something greater awaiting us afterward.

Every person who has ever been healed has died. Even Lazarus, the friend Jesus raised from the dead, died again. The Bible makes no promise that our present bodies, whatever their condition, will stay healthy or last forever. In fact, the Bible promises something much more – a new body, like our present one but different, a body made for eternity!

Bible Verses for session 4: Living with illness and disability.

1. God is Jehovah Rapha – the God who heals.

Exodus 15:26

He said, "If you will listen carefully to the voice of the Lord your God and do what is right in his sight, obeying his commands and keeping all his decrees, then I will not make you suffer any of the diseases I sent on the Egyptians; for I am the Lord who heals you."

2. Our suffering can be emotional, physical or spiritual.

Psalm 6:2-3

Have compassion on me, Lord, for I am weak. Heal me, Lord, for my bones are in agony. I am sick at heart. How long, O Lord, until you restore me?

3. Physical healing.

Psalm 30:2

O Lord my God, I cried to you for help, and you restored my health.

Jeremiah 30:17

I will give you back your health and heal your wounds," says the Lord.

2 Kings 20:5-6

Go back to Hezekiah, the leader of my people. Tell him, 'This is what the Lord, the God of your ancestor David, says: I have heard your prayer and seen your tears. I will heal you, and three days from now you will get out of bed and go to the Temple of the Lord. I will add fifteen years to your life, and I will rescue you and this city from the king of Assyria.'

4. Emotional healing.

Psalm 147:3

He heals the broken-hearted and bandages their wounds.

5. Spiritual healing.

1 Peter 2:24

He personally carried our sins in his body on the cross so that we can be dead to sin and live for what is right. By his wounds you are healed.

6. Attitudes to illness.

Suffering produces intimacy with God.

Job 42:5

I had only heard about you before, but now I have seen you with my own eyes.

Suffering equips us to comfort others.

2 Corinthians 1:3-4

All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort. He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.

Suffering produces growth and maturity.

Isaiah 48:10

I have refined you, but not as silver is refined. Rather, I have refined you in the furnace of suffering.

7. We should pray for healing.

Luke 4:40

As the sun went down that evening, people throughout the village brought sick family members to Jesus. No matter what their diseases were, the touch of his hand healed everyone.

Matt 10:1

Jesus called his twelve disciples together and gave them authority to cast out unclean spirits and to heal every kind of disease and illness.

James 5:13-16

Are any of you suffering hardships? You should pray. Are any of you happy? You should sing praises. Are any of you sick? You should call for the elders of the church to come and pray over you, anointing you with oil in the name of the Lord. Such a prayer offered in faith will heal the sick, and the Lord will make you well. And if you have committed any sins, you will be forgiven.

8. Our heavenly bodies.

2 Cor 5:1-4

For we know that when this earthly tent we live in is taken down (that is, when we die and leave this earthly body), we will have a house in heaven, an eternal body made for us by God himself and not by human hands. We grow weary in our present bodies, and we long to put on our heavenly bodies like new clothing. For we will put on heavenly bodies; we will not be spirits without bodies. While we live in these earthly bodies, we groan and sigh, but it's not that we want to die and get rid of these bodies that clothe us. Rather, we want to put on our new bodies so that these dying bodies will be swallowed up by life.

Discussion pointers:

Is illness impacting your quality of life?

What pressures and concerns do you have?

How does having a relationship with God affect your illness?

Do you believe that God can heal you?

Can you believe for a future 'new body'?

Seven Christ Centred principles in dealing with chronic illness from Jo Rohrbough: www.faithandhealthconnection.org

1. Seek God's Kingdom before everything else. Matt 6:33
2. Focus on today – don't be anxious about tomorrow. Matt 6:34
3. Know that God causes all things to work for good. Romans 8:28
4. Always have hope in God. Romans 5:3-5
5. Pray and receive prayers from other believers. James 5:16
6. Depend on God's grace moment by moment. 2 Cor 12:9
7. Be thankful for God's good gifts in managing the disease. James 1:17

SESSION 5: Coping with loss:

When people talk about loss and bereavement they are usually referring to the death of a friend or family member. But the same emotions can be experienced from loss due to retirement, illness and disability.

Partially losing vision, hearing, physical strength, mobility, focus and memory recall can produce feelings of loss as powerful as the death of a loved one. We mourn the loss of things we once could do. Everyday things like handwriting, speech, dressing and eating can be affected.

The effects of experiencing loss can be physical, psychological or behavioural. You might recognise some of these signs:

Physical: headaches, chest and stomach pains, shortness of breath, muscular weakness and fatigue, reduced immunity, stress.

Psychological: sadness, anger, guilt, disbelief, despair, anxiety, relief, numbness, confusion.

Behavioural: sleep disturbances, loss of appetite, forgetfulness, social withdrawal, restlessness, crying, searching, apathy, recklessness.

Grieving over such losses is a painful but necessary part of learning to cope. In 1969, psychiatrist Elisabeth Kubler-Ross introduced the 'five stages of grief':

1. DENIAL – 'This can't be happening to me'
2. ANGER – 'Why is this happening? Who is to blame?'
3. BARGAINING – 'Make this not happen, and in return I will....'
4. DEPRESSION – 'I'm too sad to do anything'
5. ACCEPTANCE – 'I'm at peace with what has happened'

These are common responses to loss but there is no structure or timetable for the process. These stages are not a road map, but a bumpy road with potholes, curves, detours and delays.

Bible verses for session 5: Coping with loss

Joshua 1:9

This is my command—be strong and courageous! Do not be afraid or discouraged. For the LORD your God is with you wherever you go.

Psalm 34:18

The LORD is close to the broken hearted; he rescues those whose spirits are crushed.

Psalm 73:26

My health may fail, and my spirit may grow weak, but God remains the strength of my heart; he is mine forever.

Psalm 147:3

He heals the broken hearted and bandages their wounds.

Matthew 5:4

God blesses those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

John 14:1

Don't let your hearts be troubled. Trust in God, and trust also in me.

John 14:18

No, I will not abandon you as orphans – I will come to you.

Romans 8:28

And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to his purpose for them.

Revelation 21:4

He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.

Practical ways to cope with loss:

Face the reality of your situation. Confront your loss and don't pretend that things are better than they are.

Express your feelings. Let the grief out. Confide in your trusted friends and be willing to ask for help. Turn to God and seek his comfort and strength.

Avoid compassionless people. Some people are quick to judge. Their advice is often limited to 'pull yourself together' or 'I know how you are feeling'. They usually don't!

But don't grieve alone. Welcome support offered by family, friends and neighbours.

Don't 'nurse and rehearse'. Rehearsing the issues that impact us as we grow older only add to the sense of loss. Find legitimate tasks and activities to distract you.

Above all, give yourself time. Coping with loss has no quick fix solution. Live one day at a time and remember that our faith gives us a foundation from which to rebuild our lives. It gives meaning to our suffering, offers us comfort and support, and gives us hope that we shall one day be reunited with those we love, and be given a new perfect body.

Discussion pointers:

Are you willing to admit that the ageing process inevitably means some loss?

What sort of losses have you experienced?

Have you experienced any of the 'five stages of grief'?

Do you find any help in what the Bible says?

What practical things have helped you to cope?

SESSION 6: Death – the final frontier

In 1789 Benjamin Franklin wrote, 'Nothing in this world can be said to be certain, except death and taxes'. Many today seek to avoid paying tax and some even try to evade it altogether but death cannot be avoided or evaded. How we deal with the reality and inevitability of death will determine how well we will actually die.

Death and dying are everywhere in our world, but how often do we reflect on our own death? As we grow older, what can help us face death gracefully? Who can inspire and support us? Where is God in our death and dying? How can we share with people who are not Christians the reality of life after death?

We all know that we will die but we don't have a full understanding of what happens when we do. Many books are written about death but often they fail to equip us for the actual experience. For some there are fears about facing mortality and many find it hard to talk about the subject. Despite our technological ability to communicate worldwide at any hour, dying is a lonely experience.

However, the Christian faith is founded on a death - the death of Jesus! He confronted death and overcame it. All is not lost. Jesus was outstretched, outcast and outlived, but not outdone! Martin Luther King said, 'Death is a comma, not a full stop.'

Bible verses for session 6: Death – the final frontier.

We have reason to hold on to hope.

Romans 8:38-39

And I am convinced that nothing can ever separate us from God's love. Neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither our fears for today nor our worries about tomorrow—not even the powers of hell can separate us from God's love. No power in the sky above or in the earth below—indeed, nothing in all creation will ever be able to separate us from the love of God that is revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord.

John 3:16

For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.

God promises to be with us as we die:

Psalms 23:4

Even when I walk through the dark valley of death, I will not be afraid, for you are close beside me. Your rod and staff protect and comfort me.

Death could not hold him:

Luke 24: 5-6

The women were terrified and bowed with their faces to the ground. Then the men asked, why are you looking among the dead for someone who is alive? He isn't here! He is risen from the dead!

Jesus is the resurrection and the life:

John 11:25-26

Jesus told her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Anyone who believes in me will live, even after dying. Everyone who lives in me and believes in me will never ever die.

Jesus has broken the fear of death:

1 Corinthians 15:51-57

But let me reveal to you a wonderful secret. We will not all die, but we will all be transformed! It will happen in a moment, in the blink of an eye, when the last trumpet is blown. For when the trumpet sounds, those who have died will be raised to live forever. And we who are living will also be transformed. For our dying bodies must be transformed into bodies that will never die; our mortal bodies must be transformed into immortal bodies. Then, when our dying bodies have been transformed into bodies that will never die, this Scripture will be fulfilled: "Death is swallowed up in victory. O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?"

Hebrews 2:14-15

Because God's children are human beings – made of flesh and blood – the Son also became flesh and blood. For only as a human being could he die, and only by dying could he break the power of the devil, who had the power of death. Only in this way could he set free all who have lived their lives as slaves to the fear of dying.

Romans 14:7-9

For we don't live for ourselves or die for ourselves. If we live, it's to honour the Lord. And if we die, it's to honour the Lord. So whether we live or die, we belong to the Lord. Christ died and rose again for this very purpose—to be Lord both of the living and of the dead.

No more death...

Revelation 21:4

He will wipe every tear from their eyes, and there will be no more death or sorrow or crying or pain. All these things are gone forever.

Discussion pointers:

Can we accept the reality of our death and dying?

What does it mean if we do, what does it mean if we don't?

Are we ready to die?

What remains unsaid and undone?

How do we see God in our death and our dying?