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Chapter One

GRANDPA Can't Jump

Helping aging parents face
the truth about their limitations

Alyssa's Dad—On the B-ball Court

It was a sticky summer evening, and my cousin was hosting a cookout. The teens were playing basketball on the driveway as we waited for the coals to cook our dogs and burgers. The women were chatting while setting out plates and salads. Seated on a cluster of deck chairs, the older guys were trading fish stories. Little kids were digging cities in a sandbox and tossing handfuls of dusty grains.

I saw Dad amble away from his group and toward the front drive. I followed at a distance. He stood and watched the teens shoot hoops. Finally, the athlete in him could stand it no longer. He asked for the ball. The guys stared for a minute, then, in deference to his age, tossed it to him gently. He bounced it twice, getting a look of pure joy. I could almost hear his thoughts: I'll show these guys how to really shoot a basket. I was shooting baskets before they could hold a ball.

He crouched his knees, bent his elbow, and anticipated liftoff. Anticipated. But never delivered. No matter how he tried, he couldn't get his feet

to lift a fraction of an inch off the ground—and the rusty spring in his forearm couldn't loft the ball to within two feet of the basket.

I remember thinking, Well, here's a news flash! Seventy-year-old men with heart issues can't jump. Then I looked at his face. Where a moment before he'd been, in his mind, a strapping middle-aged man—now he saw himself as aging. You could read it in his eyes. One of the kids patted him on the back as another retrieved the ball and resumed play. I saw him smile weakly. But I felt something inside me sink as I ducked into the shadows so he wouldn't realize I'd seen him. Daddy's not getting any younger—and now, even he knows it.

DURING CHOIR PRACTICE several weeks ago, we formed prayer circles. Of the six altos in my circle, one requested prayer for her decision to place her mother in long-term care. A second said her mother-in-law is in the midstages of Alzheimer's disease and has moved in with her, her husband, and their teenaged children. Mom and I added our requests for the ongoing care of my ninety-year-old grandmother and for my dad, who is recovering from a year of four surgeries. A fifth commiserated because she (a nurse) had cared for her ailing father in her home for a decade before his death. The sixth, a forty-something wife and mom, sat silently weeping. "I'm listening," she said, "because although I'm not facing this today, I expect to have these issues soon."

Together, we six women prayed for our elder parents' health and welfare. More powerfully, we carried each other to God's throne—seeking for our sisters in faith God's wisdom, strength, and courage. Because as much as the elders are facing painful issues of aging, so we adult children—as primary caregivers—are dealing with our own grieving, denial, or challenges related to our parents' persistent marches into their elder years.

You need no convincing as to the breadth of need for support. You're here, too. Or, at least, you're anticipating a journey to this land. My prayer is that by reading on you'll realize that although you may

be the sole caregiver in your home or family setting, you are by no means alone.

God's Hints

Barbara, sister to my fellow alto who moved her mother into long-term care, looks back on her father's later years to realize God was working in small ways to prepare her for challenges that would come with his death and her mother's increasing dependency. Barbara recalls,

On my parents' sixtieth wedding anniversary my sister and I decided to do something special. We went to the church where they worshiped and used the sanctuary for an old-fashioned sing-along, with Dad leading the singing, like old times. My sister was on the organ, and I was videotaping, so we all could re-live it later.

I had a hard time finding a location for the camera because of glare from stained glass windows behind the stage. I kept moving from one location to another, always finding that glare a distraction.

When we viewed the tape later, we noticed all the faces were clear—except Dad's. The light from behind him became like a halo, obscuring his face, and giving him an angelic look as he sang.

I didn't want to think about it then, but today that moment gives me a glimpse into eternity—seeing him singing and worshipping, happy and healthy in God's presence. It's something to hold on to. I see it as God graciously preparing me for what He knew would be coming.

As Barbara was soon to learn, we can't change the fact that on our own midlife and aging journeys, we'll come face to face with an eventuality we'd hoped would never arrive: our parents aren't as

young as they used to be. Neither are our in-laws. And sooner than any of us thought, we'll need to do something about it.

For Barbara and her sister, *doing something about it* meant being with their father through months of chemotherapy, only to see disease take his life. It meant being available to their mother while she was living in her own home. And it meant taking a phone call that drained all the humor out of the TV commercial catchphrase "I've fallen, and I can't get up." Their mother had fallen in her own home and suffered severe injuries.

Barbara says facing the tough decisions becomes a little easier because she can cling to the hope resulting from her lifetime of faith. Not a crutch or a cop-out, she finds her relationship with God through Jesus Christ—and the assurance that her parents shared the same relationship—to be a lifeline.

Facing What You Don't Want to Face

Like Barbara's videotaping incident and Alyssa's experience with her dad's attempt to launch a basketball, many of us choose to look away when we see signs of aging in our parents. We don't want to embarrass them. We don't want to take away their independence or damage their self-image. We don't want to acknowledge the inevitable regression of change—because by nature we resist change. (Try taking away your parents' driving privileges and see how much *they* resist change.)

Lulling sameness rocks us into a sedated stupor; we relish it. So when aging wheedles into our lives, we ignore or resist or fight it. We've never known a world without our parents, and we don't want to imagine what it would be like. It's an emotional time for parent and child—yet it's an unavoidable life passage.

Over time our parents' needs become harder to ignore. While subtle at first—helping with groceries, shuttling to routine medical visits, running errands to the pharmacy or bank—at a moment's

notice they may rocket into emergency medical decisions, financial and legal obligations, personal household disruption, in-patient care, or end-of-life decisions.

Nurse Meghan cared for her mother-in-law in her home for two years, as the elder woman outlived medical forecasts. Meghan cautions that ignoring the issue won't make it go away. She counsels caregivers to face questions head-on. Ask parents their wishes. Talk openly about medical, financial, and legal decisions before they reach a crisis crescendo. (These are issues we'll address in future chapters, to help equip and prepare you for these difficult conversations.)

Meghan also says, "Don't jump ahead too far and worry about every possibility when you see the first signs. God doesn't intend for us to go twenty steps ahead. Remember, Jesus said, 'Don't worry about tomorrow . . . each day has enough trouble of its own.' But He can teach our families wonderful, rich lessons at *this* stage, if we are honest about it with ourselves and our households."

Adjusting to a Shifting Role

As if we needed a little more steam added to our pressure-cooker lives, we may feel ill-equipped (perhaps even ill-inclined) to meet our aging parents' needs for special attention and time-sapping care. U.S. Surgeon General Carmona estimates that "forty-six million Americans are providing uncompensated care for an adult family member or loved one who is chronically ill or disabled, often sacrificing career advancement, personal pleasures and their own health and well-being out of a combined sense of love and duty."¹

So if the first step along this continuum is to look squarely at what we don't want to face, the second is to acknowledge it's not easy to assume responsibility for another adult—especially one with whom we have a close relationship, one with whom we share a history, one who knows the quickest ways to rile us up.

Meghan says when she was faced with the decision to take her

ailing mother-in-law into her home, all her nursing training went “swoop, right out the window. You're never prepared. When it's in your household, in your family, you need as much good counsel, support, and wisdom as someone with no medical training.”

Associations and alliances are popping up to assist us in finding whatever skills and information we lack. According to Gail Gibson Hunt, president of the National Alliance for Caregiving, “Timely information and ongoing support are essential to reduce the terrible stress so many caregivers experience.” In this age of global information, much of that counsel, wisdom, and support is a few clicks away.

What Does It Mean to Honor?

For the believer in Christ, this season of change in a family carries added weight because of a desire to *honor* our parents. In childhood, *honor* usually meant *obey*. In young adulthood, it meant *respect*. But now as they age, how are we to *honor* them while balancing their needs with our other obligations?

We can take a cue from the verb's synonyms: to prize, to value, to hold precious, to revere. A car enthusiast, when given the opportunity to purchase a classic vehicle in need of repair, will pour thousands of hours (and dollars) into restoring his prized possession. How much more, if we hold our parents as precious (despite their foibles), will we find ways to invest our limited emotional, physical, and financial resources in their care?

Intriguingly, Jesus uses the Greek word for *honor* numerous times during His ministry—sometimes to encourage us to honor our parents (Matthew 19:19), sometimes to encourage us to honor *His* Father (John 5:23), and once to tell us our obedience to Him will cause our heavenly Father to honor us (John 12:26).

Super, you say, *I value my parents because Jesus said to. But this is real life! What if they're not lovable? What if I'm struggling with my issues? What if I don't have the resources to help them?*

Women have asked these questions for generations. When we think God's Word might be out of touch, we can look in its pages and we find examples of real people who, despite their own issues, looked out for the needs of aging relatives—with great reward. Consider the young widow Ruth. In light of our current life issues, let's dissect her story to glean from it challenge and encouragement in our circumstances. We'll revisit it later, but for now let's see if we can discover how it can work in an imperfect world.

Ruth is grieving her husband and brother-in-law; her father-in-law had apparently died some years before. Then her mother-in-law starts talking about a journey to a land where the people didn't care for Moabites. She and her sister-in-law expect to go with Naomi—and both begin the journey. But reality sets in. Naomi sinks into depression, fueled by grief, disappointment, and shame in having wandered outside God's will. Naomi describes herself as bitter and “too old” (Ruth 1:20, 12).

This isn't the best time for anyone to be close to her. Reluctantly, Orpah returns to her parents' home—but Ruth, in a courageous surge of love, stays with the elder woman—to see to her care alone. Both women are so poor that Ruth will have to work tirelessly to glean a few morsels of food left for the destitute. Yet her commitment doesn't waver. In fact, the *Women's Study Bible* notes, “A foundation of purposeful love and the outworking of devoted deeds set Ruth's commitment apart from verbal clichés and the whim of momentary emotions.” Ruth spoke boldly of faith and commitment (1:16–17), and spent her energies putting feet to those words.

Hindsight Is 20/20

In these early stages of caregiving, it may be helpful for us to commit to Ruth's pattern, which I call the three C's of caregiving: calmness, comfort, and compassion. From an eternal perspective, these traits will remain after bandages are changed, medications administered, legal

matters resolved. We see it in Ruth's words that offer salve to grief-stricken Naomi. She is calm and measured, not rash to acquiesce to the whim of a sorrowing heart. She offers comfort by her companionship. And she is compassionate, not chastising Naomi but offering friendship as a reason to press on despite an uncertain future.

Offering those three C's to our parents and parents-in-law, beginning today and continuing through all the decisions that come, could be the most parent-honoring—and God-honoring—gift we could give. When we look at this season of life in hindsight, we will have nothing to regret.

Adult daughter Ann, whose energetic ninety-one-year-old mother Beatrice lives in a custom-built apartment in the lower level of the house Ann shares with her husband, says, "Mom is a worrier, but I am not. She feels like she would be too big a burden if she were to get sick. But I am not going to let that fear ruin our 'now.' We'll worry later." This well-reasoned choice is giving Ann's family a "now" to remember and celebrate. And it's an approach my family of worriers may try to apply to our situation as we recognize the signs of aging.



Closing Prayer

God, my parents are moving too quickly toward the day they'll step out of this world. I want to make these times with them meaningful and rich. I want to do all I can to meet their needs, but I'll need You to equip me. Show me my next step, and keep me willing to serve You by serving them—in calmness, comfort, and compassion.

Take Action

1. Initiate a compassionate, honest conversation with your parent(s) about health, wishes, and dreams. Visit websites on caregiving such as: www.strengthforcaring.com or www.medicalnewstoday.com for suggestions on how to initiate this conversation.
2. Locate Bible passages that strengthen your resolve and keep you encouraged.
3. Talk to friends about their experiences in caregiving.
4. Create an informal support network of caregivers (in person or in cyberspace) who are willing to pray for each other.