HOW TO AGE WITHOUT GETTING OLD

THE STEPS YOU CAN TAKE TODAY TO STAY YOUNG FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE

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CHAPTER 1

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE, PART 1

There’s a beauty and wisdom to experience that cannot be faked.

Amy Grant

If I were to ask you to share your life experiences with me, how would the conversation unfold? Would you tell me stories of a happy childhood, recount your dreams and disappointments, or show me photos of your family? Would you reminisce about the challenges you’ve overcome and the lessons you’ve learned? Would I hear you speak about your life with gratitude for all that God has done for you? Would I perceive fear or anxiety about the days to come, or would I hear peace, faith, and positivity in your attitude toward the future? Everyone’s life experience is different, and God can use it all. In this chapter and the next one, I’d like to share some of the experiences that have led me to write this book.
A LONG JOURNEY BEGINS

I was abused sexually by my father on a regular basis throughout my childhood and teenage years. I am sure that the stress of that experience stole a lot of my energy before I ever had a chance to use it properly. For years, I thought that my being strong and determined got me through those terrible years of abuse, but I now realize it was God who gave me the strength to keep going.

I can remember not feeling well at different times throughout my life, beginning at about age eighteen. I left home as soon as I was legally old enough to do so, and I married at age eighteen—interestingly, the same year I began facing challenges with my health. There’s no way to characterize my first marriage except to say that it was bad and extremely stressful. On two occasions, my husband abandoned me. I also had to deal with his many extramarital affairs, his lack of employment, and his habit of stealing.

I soon found myself going to doctors, asking why I did not feel well so much of the time. They tried to tell me that my physical symptoms were stress related, but I refused to accept “stress” as a real diagnosis. The reason that any mention of stress, nerves, or an emotional connection to the way I felt physically was unacceptable to me is that my mother had trouble with anxiety throughout her life and finally experienced a nervous breakdown. I thought being susceptible to stress meant that I was weak and could not handle life, and I did not want anyone to view me that way.

I now suspect that excessive stress is the culprit behind
many health problems. I have personally experienced stress-related health conditions and have known other people who have experienced them, too. I will elaborate on the connection between stress and health throughout this book, but for now, let me simply say that the symptoms of many illnesses are real, but their root cause—or at least a strong contributor to many of them—is stress.

After getting a divorce at the age of twenty-two, I was alone in the world with my first child. With no one to turn to for help, I lived in a constant state of low-level fear and worry. I could ask my father for help, but I knew that would mean suffering more abuse, so I avoided it as long as I possibly could. I finally did have to move back home for a short period of time, during which I met and married Dave. He was and always has been a patient and loving man, but I was so dysfunctional and my soul was so wounded because of my past that I didn’t know how to enjoy Dave or anything else in life. I didn’t realize that all the stress I had been through had taken a toll on my body. Yet because I was still young and had the energy that young people enjoy, I pressed on, despite dealing with increasing physical issues.

BUSIER AND BUSIER

When Dave and I married, he adopted my son, David, and we quickly had two more babies, both girls. Within a few
years, we had three children all under six years old, lived in a small apartment that consisted of three rooms, and had barely enough money to get by. When we decided we wanted to buy our first home, I had to get a job to make the purchase possible, so I added the stress of working full-time on top of trying to do everything else the life of a young wife and mother required. I drank way too much coffee, smoked a pack of cigarettes a day, slept about six hours a night, and was upset about something most of the time. Although I didn’t know it at the time, I also had a birth defect in my right hip. My hip joint was oblong instead of round, so it didn’t fit properly and caused me back problems that started when I was a teenager. Thankfully, that was eventually taken care of through a hip replacement, but not until 2017. From my teenage years until my early seventies, I had back pain and was constantly going to the chiropractor for adjustments.

Although I had believed in Jesus since I was a child, I lacked a real relationship with Him for many years. But in 1976, when I was thirty-three years old, this began to change. God drew me to Himself and gave me a love and passion for studying His Word. As a result, I began to realize that I needed a lot of change in my life in order to solve the problems with which I struggled. Over a period of many years, while I received a lot of healing from Him in my soul and aspects of my life got better, I still didn’t know how to rest. I could barely speak the words I can’t. I had deep insecurities, and I thought my worth and value came from what I produced through hard work, so most of the time I worked.

By the time I was thirty-six, Dave and I had our fourth
child, and God had called us into ministry. Starting anything new is usually a lot of hard work, and ministry is no different. We started with nothing, and over a forty-year period, by God’s grace, we have built an international ministry that reaches around the world via television, other media, books, conferences, and speaking engagements.

As both my family and the ministry grew, I constantly worked not only physically but also internally, by worrying, planning, thinking, reasoning, and pondering the teachings I prepared. Most of us can live that way for a period of time, but sooner or later it catches up with us, and life gets harder and harder. I recall the first time I got really sick. I had no energy for anything, but through eating healthily and making a few changes in my lifestyle, I recovered fairly quickly. However, I didn’t learn anything from the experience, so I simply kept doing what I had always done and eventually got sick again. We cannot keep doing the same thing over and over and expect to get different results.

**HEADACHES AND HORMONES**

When I was in my forties, I began having migraine headaches associated with hormonal changes, and they lasted for about ten years. Some experts say that unbalanced hormones cause stress, and others say that stress causes unbalanced
hormones. Either way, stress is something we must recognize and deal with. In my opinion, excessive stress is a cause of unbalanced hormones—or if it is not the cause, at the very least it magnifies the problem.

It is very important for a woman to be in good health when she enters into the change of life. For most women, this happens between the ages of forty-five and fifty-five, but it begins in some women as early as their thirties or forties and in some as late as sixty. I have noticed just from watching my friends that some women have no problems at all with the change. They simply stop having their periods and go on with life. But others have many problems. Hot flashes, weight gain, night sweats, sleep disturbances, mood changes, irritability, headaches, and simply not feeling well are all common symptoms. Why do some go through the change so easily while others suffer quite a bit? I think part of the reason lies in the condition of their general health when the change of life hits and how much stress they live under.

I had a very difficult time with the change of life because I was already depleted of energy and nutrition when it began. I was also under a lot of stress from my past and the hard work required in beginning the ministry. I have an adrenal adenoma or adrenal dysplasia (the adrenal glands control the hormones in our bodies). This means I have a small, noncancerous growth on my left adrenal gland. Doctors have advised me not to have it removed because of the danger of doing
so. I have read that some physicians say an adrenal adenoma causes no problems at all, but my doctor believes that it does affect the release of hormones in my body and has caused some of the problems I have experienced.

I have a strong personality and lots of determination, so although I didn’t always feel good, I pressed on. One doctor told me that my mind was stronger than my body, meaning that no matter how bad I felt or how tired I was, I had the ability just to keep going.

The only way I know to describe how I felt during those years is that I couldn’t relax, I struggled often with those terrible headaches, and I was exhausted. Once again, the doctor said it was stress, but I refused to take any medicine that might help me. After all, I was strong in the Lord and believed in His healing power, so I kept pushing.

**TWO HEALTH CRISES WITHIN FIVE YEARS**

In 1980, I had a hysterectomy because of excessive bleeding and pain. In approximately 1985, I had a regular breast checkup as part of an annual doctor’s visit, and to my utter surprise I found out I had a cancerous tumor. Thankfully, the mass was small. However, it was a fast-growing, estrogen-dependent tumor, so I needed a mastectomy because surgery was the preferred treatment at the time. Because my lymph nodes were clear, I didn’t have to have radiation or
chemotherapy, for which I was and am still extremely thankful. Each year when I hear that my mammogram is clear, I am very grateful. More than thirty years have passed since that particular health challenge, and I thank God for every one of them.

The hysterectomy caused me to enter the change of life early. Due to the breast cancer, I could not take hormones to help with the discomfort of menopause, and I had a very difficult time with it. But during these health challenges, I never stopped long enough to let my body rest or heal properly. I tried to relax when I wasn’t doing conferences, but even when I sat in a chair or lay down to rest, I stayed busy internally. I never allowed my soul (my mind, will, and emotions) to rest. I was always thinking, planning, worrying, and trying to make decisions.

By that time, the ministry had grown larger, and we had even opened offices in several countries outside the United States because of our broad television outreach. We employed approximately nine hundred people, who needed and expected paychecks, and I saw no option but to keep going because our income depended on my speaking schedule. At least I thought it did. My schedule during that season was so full that I was rarely home for more than a few days. I had waited so long for opportunities to teach God’s Word that I viewed each one as a door God had opened for me.

While it is true that God does open doors of opportunity
for us, it is also true that every door that opens isn’t necessarily one that He wants us to walk through. We are to use wisdom regarding what we agree to do or choose not to do. In my book *In Search of Wisdom*, I mention a specific way one of my friends uses wisdom concerning her commitments:

I once asked a friend in ministry how she decided which speaking invitations to accept and which to decline. She told me that before she responded to an invitation, she thought through every detail of what it would take for her to do it. She thought about matters such as how long she would be away from home, what kind of preparation time she would need to invest, and how far she would have to travel. Although these are all logistical questions and not ministry-related ones, she was wise to ask them. If we do not ask wise questions, we may agree to do something and then later complain about it and dread doing it because we did not consider the details involved in it. It is always better to pray and think about a commitment before giving an answer.

I wish I had known what my friend knew during those days when my schedule was so packed. I stayed extremely busy—too busy, in fact—because I had not yet learned to

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say no. People who cannot say no when needed will usually end up with overloaded calendars and experience the effects of stress. The main reason many people overcommit is that they want to please others, but we must be God-pleasers, not people-pleasers.

During those years, I didn’t feel bad all the time, but certainly more than I should have. I loved teaching God’s Word, and I still do. I was full of dreams and visions for the future and very passionate about everything I did. When we are passionate about something, that passion gives us the determination to do whatever needs to be done in order to accomplish it. My joy in being able to teach God’s Word and help people was greater than any physical discomfort, so I generally ignored the way I felt.

Maybe you can relate to my story in many ways. I am sharing openly with you about my life behind the scenes so that, if you feel the same, you will know that you are not alone and that you too can find answers and live an enjoyable, fruitful life.
“I would encourage younger people to remember these things as they age:

- Make time with God a daily priority.
- Take good care of your body and love yourself the way God made you.
- Learn to laugh at yourself.
- Pray always, turning things over to God and trusting Him.
- Slow down and take time for the little things, because the days pass quickly.
- Make dinner or mealtime special as your family sits down together and shares their day.
- Try to keep up with technology and use it to your advantage.
- You may have aches and pains, but don’t dwell on them or burden others by complaining. They come with age!”

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S.C.H.