

Barzillai

By David Smitherman (edited)

In an era when many worship at the shrine of youth, those who are aged and those who will be someday unless death gets us first (i.e., everyone) need a role model to instruct us in proper attitudes and conduct as we get older. We have such in a brief encounter with Barzillai.

2 Sam.19:31-39

31 Now Barzillai the Gileadite had come down from Rogelim, and he went on with the king to the Jordan, to escort him over the Jordan. 32 Barzillai was a very aged man, eighty years old. He had provided the king with food while he stayed at Mahanaim, for he was a very wealthy man. 33 And the king said to Barzillai, "Come over with me, and I will provide for you with me in Jerusalem." 34 But Barzillai said to the king, "How many years have I still to live, that I should go up with the king to Jerusalem? 35 I am this day eighty years old. Can I discern what is pleasant and what is not? Can your servant taste what he eats or what he drinks? Can I still listen to the voice of singing men and singing women? Why then should your servant be an added burden to my lord the king? 36 Your servant will go a little way over the Jordan with the king. Why should the king repay me with such a reward? 37 Please let your servant return, that I may die in my own city near the grave of my father and my mother. But here is your servant Chimham. Let him go over with my lord the king, and do for him whatever seems good to you." 38 And the king answered, "Chimham shall go over with me, and I will do for him whatever seems good to you, and all that you desire of me I will do for you." 39 Then all the people went over the Jordan, and the king went over. And the king kissed Barzillai and blessed him, and he returned to his own home. 40 The king went on to Gilgal, and Chimham went on with him. All the people of Judah, and also half the people of Israel, brought the king on his way.

In a chapter filled with quarreling Israelites and the likes of Shimei, this old man (term used respectfully), Barzillai, is a refreshing change and teaches us many lessons:

- 1) **Old age is nothing to be ashamed of**, and the frailties of old age should be freely admitted. The text plainly tells us: "*Now Barzillai was very old, being eighty years old,*" and Barzillai himself said quite frankly, "*Can I distinguish between good and bad? Or can your servant taste what I eat or what I drink? Or can I hear any more the voice of singing men and women?*" (**vs.35a**). He was in the "*evil days*" (**Eccl. 12:1-ff**) when bodily appetites and functions change – and not for the better. In a day when the elderly and those headed in that direction try – literally, sometimes – to cover up the "hoary head" and other signs of advanced years and avoid all discussions of death, we need to heed this good man's example: he did neither, but instead spoke freely of both.
- 2) **He faced old age gracefully**. There is no hint of bitterness in any of this good man's statements about his advanced years, nor any wistfulness for "the good old days" of youth. He knew he could not turn back the hands of time and that he had but a few more steps in life's journey (**vss. 34, 37**). Instead of a tone of regret, there was eager anticipation (see **Phil. 1:21-23**). The loss of those things which were once so dear

should lead to a longing for that land in which *"God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death..."* (**Rev. 21:4**).

- 3) **He didn't want to burden others (vs. 35b)**. While David considerately and rightfully offered to care for his aged benefactor, there was no "you owe it to me...look at all I've done for you" attitude on the part of the venerable Barzillai; he had a concern for others, realizing he could do little to help and, perhaps, much to hinder.
- 4) **He spent his last days helping others**, sustaining David in Mahanaim and then escorting him as far as the Jordan as he returned home (**17:27-29, 31-32**). The word "retirement" was not in Barzillai's vocabulary. How sad to see those with so much they could and should offer (**Job 32:7; Ps. 71:18; 92:12-15; Tit 2:4**) either get "on the road again" or sit down and turn the Lord's work over to the younger and less mature. Barzillai's example should shame such into renewed activity.
- 5) **He gave to others what he could have saved for his own**. Barzillai evidently understood the joy that comes from giving to others while we are alive and can see and enjoy the use of what we have to share. How preferable is this rather than leaving material things to family members who may not appreciate them and may misuse them.

Let us keep alive the story of Barzillai the Gileadite – on our tongues and in our lives – and *"yield fruit in old age"* (**Ps. 92:14**).