

JEN WILKIN

DUST

TO

DUST

AGING WISELY IN AN

ANTI-AGING WORLD

“Jen Wilkin’s ministry is a gift to the entire church. In this book, she un-masks the anti-aging messaging we are flooded with in the modern world, inviting us instead to embrace a biblical vision for each different season of life. What this book reveals is surprisingly hopeful and desperately needed in our culture: that, in Christ, aging is not a loss to be feared but God’s appointed path toward fullness and life.”

Gavin Ortlund, President, Truth Unites; Theologian in Residence, Immanuel Nashville, Tennessee; Visiting Professor of Historical Theology, Phoenix Seminary

“In a culture that idolizes youth, Jen Wilkin’s *Dust to Dust: Aging Wisely in an Anti-Aging World* is a timely reminder that growing older is a gift to receive, not a problem to solve. With biblical clarity and theological wisdom, Wilkin reframes aging through the lens of Scripture, exposing the false narratives the world offers. This book will transform how you view the aging process and deepen your understanding of the sacred responsibility to care for the elderly.”

Melissa Kruger, author; Vice President of Discipleship Programming, The Gospel Coalition

“Our image-driven culture, abounding in selfies, filters, and anti-wrinkle serums, warns us to flee from aging lest we fade into insignificance. In *Dust to Dust*, Jen Wilkin offers a refreshing and direly needed counterpoint to such harmful messaging. Drawing from the chiasmic structure and parallelism fundamental to Hebrew poetry, she invites readers into a biblical exploration of God’s good and perfect design throughout the arc of life. Wilkin’s profound observations, keen engagement with Scripture, and practical wisdom promise to guide, enrich, and embolden readers of all ages, inspiring us all to devote every season to God’s glory.”

Kathryn Butler, MD, author of *Between Life and Death: A Gospel-Centered Guide to End-of-Life Medical Care*

“In *Dust to Dust*, Jen Wilkin presents a vision of aging so compelling, it makes me eager for the years ahead. So much of what we hear in culture is about hiding the visible realities of the years we have lived—but Jen offers a more biblical view: that aging is a rare gift to be honored, welcomed, and unconcealed. Yes, our days on this earth are numbered. But while the world trills about finding ways to live forever, Jen reminds us that, in Christ, we already will.”

Laura Wifler, writer, poet, author of *This Side of the Sky*, and coauthor of *Risen Motherhood*

“Jen’s exploration of what God’s word says about life, aging, and wisdom is a gift in the midst of all the pressures that surround us today. It’s a call to reframe our perspective, according to God’s word and his ways. I’m confident you will find *Dust to Dust* both encouraging and convicting, as I did.”

Ruth Chou Simons, *Wall Street Journal* bestselling author; artist; Founder, GraceLaced.com

“I cried while reading this book. That’s not normal for me. I won’t tell you where; you can find it for yourself. And you might cry more than once. We need this book. I did. We’re surrounded by anti-aging voices, and so familiar with their tune that we hardly give it any thought. How many of us have paused to ask, ‘What does God say about aging?’ Jen Wilkin’s insightful and distinctly Christian journey will open your eyes to the tragic restlessness around us. You won’t be able to unsee it. And that’s good.”

David Mathis, Senior Teacher, Desiring God; Pastor, Cities Church, Saint Paul, Minnesota; author, *Habits of Grace: Enjoying Jesus Through the Spiritual Disciplines*

“In *Dust to Dust*, Jen Wilkin offers the kind of clear-eyed biblical wisdom we have come to expect from her. With both honesty and hope, she helps us see aging not as a problem to solve but as a gift to steward. This book will challenge the assumptions of our youth-obsessed culture and encourage believers to embrace the beauty of growing older in Christ.”

Courtney Doctor, Director of Women's Initiatives, The Gospel Coalition; Bible teacher; author, *From Garden to Glory* and *In View of God's Mercies*; coauthor, *Behold and Believe*

Dust to Dust

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Dust to Dust

Aging Wisely in an Anti-Aging World

Jen Wilkin

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*In honor of my parents, Carol, Jim, and Debbie.
Thank you for the generational wealth of your wisdom.*

*And for my children, Matt, Mary Kate,
Makiah, Claire, and Calvin.
May God grant you length of days and heads of gray, and
lives of quiet consequence spent for the kingdom of heaven.*

*What a privilege to walk this life together and
to be entrusted with each other's care.*

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PART 1

THE TRUE STORY
OF AGING

A Tale of Two Stories

FROM THE MOMENT you are born until the moment you die, you are aging. Every second of every minute of every hour of every day of every month of every year, your life counts up to midlife and down to end of life. How does that make you feel? Does your chest tighten with anxiety? Maybe you feel pressure to accomplish something more or different with the time you have left. Or maybe you feel very little at all about the ticking away of your life's time clock.

Perhaps more importantly, how *should* thinking about the countdown of your life make you feel?

This is not a book about death or the afterlife. Nor is it a book about dying, per se. This is a book about *this life* and the unexpected path to living it to the full. We find that path through a right assessment of the aging process, one that is

distinctly Christian in its perspective. I believe that how we think about aging, and, relatedly, the aged themselves can alter the course of our lives either for the better or for the worse. More than that, I believe embracing and living from a Christian view of aging is one of the simplest ways believers can shine like stars in our current generation. And it all starts with a story.

The Power of Stories

The stories we believe about God, ourselves, and the world shape our feelings and govern the way we live. These stories may be true or false or a mix of truth and falsehood, but they are ubiquitous, humming along in our subconscious, moving us down one path or another. We inhabit stories for every aspect of our lives. We believe a particular narrative, and we live in light of it. The story we believe about money—whether it is plentiful or scarce, whether to spend or save—makes us feel excited, anxious, or disdainful about it and governs the way we use it. The story we believe about technology—whether it is safe or scary, whether it is helpful or a waste of time—makes us feel overwhelmed, worried, or hopeful and governs the way we use it as well. So, how do you feel about aging? Just as with money and technology and all the other areas of your life, the story you believe about aging dictates how you answer that question, and it governs the way you

navigate through each era of your life. Whether the thought of aging fills you with dread or with eagerness, or some mix of both, those feelings tell you something about the story you believe. The question we will explore in this book is: What is the true story of aging, and how can we inhabit it?¹

At the beginning of time, God gave humanity a story, the true and good story meant to shape our hearts and govern our actions. It's the story of who God is, who we are, and how we should treat one another. God made humanity to bring him glory and to enjoy his presence, to receive all we need from his hand. Humans were created to bear his image and help one another do the good work God has given: to make more image bearers and spread Eden's boundaries to the ends of the earth. But ever since Genesis 3, humanity has been wooed toward the lure of false stories and away from the one true, beautiful story. The sin of Eden was essentially a choice by Adam and Eve to reject God's true story and live in a false story. It's a false story about the character of God (God withholds what I need), the nature of image bearing (I should aspire to be like God in ways I am not meant to be), and the nature of our relationships with one another (I should invite others into the false story I have chosen).

1 I am indebted to my friend and colleague, J. T. English, for helping me to think in true story/false story categories.

It's not surprising that books, TV shows, and movies love the theme of a character living in a false story. Disney's adaptation of *Sleeping Beauty*, a story whose origins can be traced back to the fourteenth century, is one such example. Its main character discovers she is a princess after having believed herself to be a commoner her entire life. The 2023 *Barbie* movie follows the gradual awakening of Barbie to what it means to be truly human. Its theme song "What Was I Made For?" poignantly traces that awakening with such incisiveness and pathos that it swept the Best Original Song category at the Grammys, the Oscars, and the Golden Globes. Clearly, our post-Eden world hungers for the recovery of true stories that have become obscured by false ones. The reality TV show *Undercover CEO* invites those at the top of an organization to enter and live in the story of those at the bottom, with the inevitable outcome that they gain new perspective on the false elements of their own story. In all three of the examples I have given, those who awaken to having lived in a false story recognize that to do so is *consequential*. Both true stories and false stories yield consequences. Living in a false story produces harm and disorder. Living in a true story produces shalom.

Since Eden, the one big false story sold to Adam and Eve has proliferated into millions of smaller false stories, ones that touch every aspect of our lives. And like the one big false

story, these stories always yield negative consequences when we embrace them as true.

The world around us is eager to supply us with false stories from which to live, stories that follow the path of worldly wisdom instead of godly wisdom. It wants us to believe money can buy happiness and technology can solve every inconvenience. It also wants us to think about aging in a way that is false, in a way that does not align with the way the Bible speaks of it. I propose that the way we think about aging and the aged has been overtaken and subsumed by a false story, and a potent one at that. It's a false story that yields negative consequences for all who embrace it, a false story rooted in how we understand what we were made for and how we relate to time itself.

The False Story of Aging and Its Consequences

For generations, Christians have believed and affirmed the true story that life is a gift from God in all of its stages. Our whole-life pro-life commitment means we believe every person at every stage of life is made in the image of God. We make a conscious commitment to value all of human life, from beginning to end—or from dust to dust, as the centuries-old graveside liturgy expresses it.² But we inhabit a

2 The Episcopal Church, "The Burial of the Dead: Rite One," *The (Online) Book of Common Prayer*, accessed September 14, 2025, <https://www.bcponline.org/>.

world that is dead set on living in a false story of aging—one that values, at most, only the first half of life but does not value its second half of bodily decline.

The Christian whole-life pro-life commitment is beautiful on our lips, but it is more beautiful as it moves to our hands and feet. We assert that all of life is valuable in all of its stages, but do we prove we believe that story by living in a way that reflects this conviction? We will ask that question on repeat in the chapters to come. One of the simplest ways for the modern church to live counterculturally is to embrace, defend, and live as though we value all of life, including the latter parts. But to do so, we must grapple with—and, I believe, reject wholesale—the prevailing attitudes toward decline and death that make up a whopper of a false story.

What are those attitudes? In a word: *anti-aging*.

As I write this, I am in my mid-fifties. My social media ads want me to know that it's not too late for me. I can “age backwards” if I just use enough serums and supplements. If I lift heavy and eat more protein, I can have the bone density and muscle mass of someone half my age. I can purchase medical procedures to make my face and body appear younger than they are. What previous generations of women would have seen as natural signs of aging, I am

instructed to call “undesirable skin changes” or “avoidable collagen loss.”

Men, too, are invited to embrace anti-aging. NAD+ injections and creatine gummies can ensure the men in my life have a “biological age” lower than their chronological age. And the perfect gift for them is a military-designed weighted vest. For men, aging is presented as a game to win. But for women, it’s a hazard to be avoided. For women in particular, aging is not just undesirable; it is practically unmentionable. We would never ask another woman her age and, should we discover it, we quickly assure her she doesn’t look it. Because what higher compliment can I receive than that I don’t look my age? Aging is a topic to avoid and a process to be prevented, concealed, and denied.

And we are all willing to pay billions to stave it off. In 2025 the anti-aging industry in the United States was valued at more than seventy-seven billion dollars, an eye-popping number that is predicted to almost double by 2034.³ To put it mildly, there’s big money in vilifying the aging process. And money talks. What message does it shout about how the modern world feels toward aging?

Anti. Against. Hard pass.

3 “Anti-Aging Market Size, Share, and Trends 2025–2034,” Precedence Research, October 30, 2025, www.precedenceresearch.com/.

But is that altogether wrong? Isn't aging a part of dying and, therefore, against God's original design? If death is an enemy, isn't aging also an enemy that we should rail against with all our might? Is it possible that to be against aging is a form of longing for an afterlife in which we will no longer be subject to the ravages of age? To answer these questions, we need a brief theology of time. What exactly is the true story of the Bible regarding aging and the passage of time?

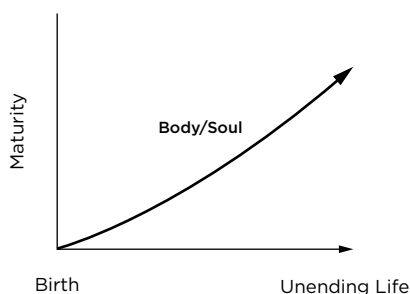
Aging from the Beginning

The creation account of Genesis 1 shows us that time was functioning from day one. We know this because of the repeated time stamp of "there was evening and there was morning," and because on the fourth day God created the sun, moon, and stars "for signs and for seasons, and for days and years" (Gen. 1:14). The celestial bodies were created for the express purpose of marking the passage of time. It follows that the humans formed from the dust on day six were time-bound, experiencing the passage of time and being impacted by it. But how? What would time's impact have been in a world before the fall of Genesis 3?

The fact that humans are charged to be fruitful and multiply—to birth and raise children—implies aging: growing older developmentally, physically, emotionally,

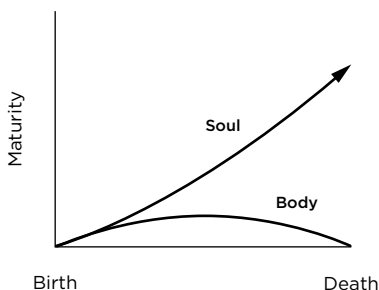
and spiritually. Though in Eden humans exist in time, time is not an adversary. It simply marks another day, month, or year of God's faithfulness to their flourishing. Every birthday is evidence of greater maturity, wisdom, skill, and fruitfulness. We don't know exactly what full development of a body that's both time-bound and uncorrupted would look like. What we do know is that Adam and Eve were taken from the dust, but to it they and their descendants would not have returned. Rather, the curve of human life in Eden would have simply arced up and to the right from the origin point, extending into eternity. Their bodies—uncorrupted by sin's corrosive effects—would have never suffered the decline and death with which we are all too familiar.

Figure 1 Aging Pre-Fall



But then comes Genesis 3: the serpent, the fruit, the fall. How does creation's relationship to time change after the sin of Adam and Eve? Time becomes an enemy. Pre-fall we had all the time in the world. Post-fall our days are numbered, and our bodies are implicated in that new math. Rather than arcing up and to the right from the origin point, our lives now map as an arc with an origin and a terminus: birth, growth, decline, death. Rather than grow unhindered in wisdom and knowledge with every passing year, enjoying, laboring, and serving others with an incorruptible body, humans experience in their flesh the effects of a creation subjected to futility.

Figure 2 Aging After the Fall



But remember: Aging existed before sin entered the world, and that means aging itself is not a penalty of sin. The

penalty of sin on the human body is not that it ages but that as it ages, it *declines toward death*. It suffers increasing physical and cognitive failure with each passing year on the downward slope of the curve. Before the fall, people simply developed; they became more able, mature, wise, loving, joyful, peaceful, patient, kind, and so on, with every year that passed. After the fall, people still have the capacity to develop spiritually and emotionally for all of life, but our bodies steadily decline toward death. Humans once formed from the dust know with absolute certainty that they will return to it.

Simply put, we were created to age but not to decline in our aging. We were created for eternal life uninterrupted by decline and death, and those united to Christ will one day look back on decline and death as rude interruptions on our journey toward eternity. But for the present, we have traded a curve up and to the right for an arc with a beginning point and an end point. We all know the shape of this curve. The expression “over the hill” reflects our awareness of it. And it’s the shape of that curve I want us to examine more closely in the pages of this book. The false story of anti-aging says we can thwart the curve, that we can have that pre-fall curve up and to the right indefinitely, or at least far beyond what previous generations ever imagined.

By contrast, the true story says not just that the curve is our reality, but that wisdom is discovered by learning that curve. Perhaps nowhere is the true story of aging captured more beautifully than Psalm 90. After reflecting on the eternal nature of God and the fleeting nature of human life, Moses asks of God in verse 12: “Teach us to number our days that we may get a heart of wisdom.”

What is the wisdom of numbering our days? It is to pay attention to the passage of time and to live as though each day, each season, each moment on the curve matters for eternity. It is trusting God to help us unlearn the original sin of self-reliance as the aging process gradually, even faithfully, reteaches us dependence. It is living in hope-filled submission to God, bearing witness to the world around us in our declining bodies that “my flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever” (Ps. 73:26). It’s the proof that we are living out of God’s true story. That wisdom is ours for the asking, according to James 1:5: “If any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask God, who gives generously to all without reproach, and it will be given him.”

This wisdom is necessary for faithful stewardship of the time we are given: “Look carefully then how you walk, not as unwise but as wise, making the best use of the time, because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:15–16).

Two Stories

The World's False Story	The Bible's True Story
The elderly are obsolete.	The elderly are invaluable.
Aging is a diminishment, a loss of identity.	Aging is a completion, a deepening of identity.
Aging is a disease.	Aging is a gift/opportunity/privilege.
Wisdom is found among the young.	Wisdom is found among the aged.
The elderly are a burden.	The elderly are a sacred charge.
Youthful beauty must be hoarded.	Youthful beauty is fleeting.
Age is just a number.	Our days are sovereignly numbered.
Aging is preventable and undesirable.	Aging is inevitable and desirable.
Aging is all about loss.	Aging involves both losses and gains.
We should emphasize outward preservation. This life is all we have.	We should emphasize inward transformation. Death is the beginning of resurrection life.

Competing Narratives

How does the Bible speak of aging? Is it *anti*? Is it *against*? Scripture's insights sound far distant from the way we speak of it today. Consider Proverbs 16:31: "Gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life." Or Job 12:12: "Wisdom is with the aged, and understanding in length of days."

Based on these two verses alone, the yawning chasm between the world's view of aging and the Bible's begins to open before our view. To the world, gray hair is a sign of impending irrelevance, and wisdom is found among the young.

But the gap gets bigger.

The Bible tells us that youthful beauty is fleeting (Prov. 31:30) but the world tells us it must be maintained at all costs. The Bible speaks of aging as a gift (3:1–2) but the world tells us it is a disease to be fought off. The Bible tells us that care for the elderly is a sacred charge (Ex. 20:12; Lev. 19:32), but the world tells us the elderly are a burden. The Bible says our days are numbered and are to be counted with care (Ps. 90:12). The world says age is just a number, and that you're only as old as you feel.

Don't miss the underlying motivators of these two narratives. The world's false story of anti-aging is motivated by fear: Don't get old. You'll be invisible, irrelevant, a has-been,

a burden. The Bible's true story of aging is motivated by joy: Embrace aging. You'll grow in wisdom, depth, and value. No one is a has-been in God's family.

How could the Bible and the modern world be so far apart in their assessments? What could account for two such radically different stories of aging?

Well, Satan. But also, statistics.

Living Longer

The false story of anti-aging has taken root in a generation that enjoys unprecedented length of years. At the turn of the twentieth century, average life expectancy in the United States stood at 47.3 years.⁴ As I write in 2025, it stands at 79.25 years.⁵ That's a 60 percent increase, an additional thirty-two years. Take a minute to absorb the significance of this increase. As recently as 125 years ago, *every previous generation of humans* would have expected life to be much shorter. And they would have encountered death up close much more frequently than we do. The generations to whom the words

4 "Table 4: Life Expectancy at Birth, Age 65, and Age 75, by Sex, Race, and Hispanic Origin: United States, Selected Years 1900–2018," National Center for Health Statistics, CDC, accessed September 14, 2025, <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/hestab/2019/004-508.pdf>.

5 "United States Life Expectancy," Macrotrends, accessed September 14, 2025, <https://www.macrotrends.net/>.

of Scripture were originally written lived in a world where “untimely” death interjected itself with regularity.

Consider the life expectancy rates during the time periods the Old and New Testaments were written. Estimates place the number at twenty-eight to thirty-eight years during the Bronze Age and at twenty to thirty-five years during the Greek and Roman Empires.⁶ These numbers do not mean no one lived into old age. They indicate the average age across a population. Infant and child mortality rates, as well as deaths due to childbirth, disease, and warfare, impacted populations at higher rates than in the modern world, driving the average life expectancy downward. In other words, if a male survived childhood in Rome, he might expect to live well into his fifties or sixties if he avoided illness, accidents, or military service. If a female survived childhood, she might expect the same if she survived illness, accidents, or childbirth.

But infant and child mortality rates exacted a brutal toll. In the Roman Empire, it is estimated that 25 percent of births did not survive the first year of life, and half did not survive past the age of ten.⁷ I have four children. How would these

6 Sharon Basaraba, “Life Expectancy Then and Now: 1800 vs. Today,” Verywell Health, August 8, 2025, <https://www.verywellhealth.com/>.

7 “The Roman Empire in the First Century,” PBS, accessed September 14, 2025, <https://www.pbs.org/>.

statistics have looked for me if I had lived during Bible times? Assuming I had survived all four of their births myself, I could have expected that one of my children would die before age one and another before age ten.

Why should these numbers matter to us? Because they help to explain the dramatic gap between the way the current culture thinks about aging and the way the Bible does. The people who received the Bible's wisdom on aging and the elderly inhabited a world in which length of days was a gift, and a rare one at that. For them, middle age was twenty-five, and gray hair was a novelty few lived to experience. They understood something our generation has forgotten: Aging is a privilege, and time is of the essence. How we feel about aging in this generation is in many ways shaped by the fact that we live much longer than our forebears.

But the true story of aging transcends any given generation, ancient or modern. Its truth is eternal. Each day of our lives, you and I will choose, consciously or unconsciously, between living in the true story of the Bible or among the many false stories offered to us by the world. The cross of Christ invites us back into the true story we abandoned. It reawakens us to truth, and by the Spirit we can walk in that story again. But as Joshua beckoned the Israelites, we must "choose this day whom [we] will serve" (Josh. 24:15).

Author Stephen Covey is known for the maxim that “anything less than a conscious commitment to the important is an unconscious commitment to the unimportant.”⁸ When it comes to the stories we inhabit, anything less than a conscious commitment to the one true story of the Bible is an unconscious commitment to a false one. And the longer we commit to a false story, the more natural it will feel—and the greater the consequences. How might we summarize the contrasting stories of aging to better assess their relative claims?

The false story of anti-aging says: *Outward decline signals loss of identity and fear of suffering and death. To age is to diminish.*

The true story of aging says: *Outward decline yields inward growth of spiritual and resurrection hope. To age is to deepen.*

Paul nods to the true story in 2 Corinthians 4:16: “Though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day.” Or, as I have heard it eloquently said, “Bodies decline, people develop.”

What story of aging will you live into? I propose we opt out of this generation’s false story of anti-aging and instead become students of the arc of our bodily decline, as well as

8 Stephen R. Covey, A. Roger Merrill, and Rebecca R. Merrill, *First Things First* (Simon and Shuster, 1994), 32.

the arc up and to the right of our interior lives. Both have much to teach us. From beginning to end, from dust to dust, we can live as those whose days are numbered. We can live lives of consequence, to the glory of God.

A Note About How to Get the Most from This Book

Sometimes books include questions at the end of each chapter as an optional exercise. That is not the case with this book.

As I explored the content for this book, I was struck again and again with the realization that Christians are not talking about aging. And we need to. Thinking about aging requires thinking theologically, and theology is done best in community. The questions for reflection at the end of each chapter are intended to help you internalize and apply what you are learning. They are also intended to help you discuss your learnings with others. Whether you read this book on your own or in a group, keeping a journal with your responses to these questions will complete the work I intend the book to do.

Questions for Reflection

1. Prior to picking up this book, how much time have you spent contemplating aging from a biblical perspective? What clarity are you most hoping to gain as you read?

2. What false stories have influenced you personally? What consequential harm did they cause? How did you come to recognize them as false?
3. Look back at the comparison chart on page 15. How have you seen the false story of anti-aging at play around you? What harm (if any) have you seen it cause to you or to others?
4. In your opinion, should the greater life expectancy of our modern age be seen as a gift or as a burden? Explain your answer.
5. How have you seen the principle that “bodies decline, people develop” to be true of yourself or of someone else? How might this principle reshape your understanding of the aging process?