IN ALL SEASONS- EPISODE 4- Caregiving as a Way of Life

Welcome to **IN ALL SEASONS**. I am Beverly Flanagan, your host on this podcast, for women like me, in the second half of life.

In this episode, we return to our perpetual question: How does **LIVING WISELY, AGING WELL** relate to our purpose in life? As women? As Christian women?

Today **IN ALL SEASONS**, we are going to talk about **CAREGIVING AS A WAY OF LIFE**. Statistically women are very likely to be caregivers in their lifetime, to the younger generation, to the older generation, to those who are dying. We have tended to certain professions and trades, such as Nursing, Teaching, & Social Work. Is caregiving something we take on as needed, unprepared for, maybe reluctantly? Do we see its VALUE-- not just to those we care for, but for ourselves? Do we see it as a Spiritual Path?

Many caregivers are family members or loved ones who have unexpectedly assumed caregiving responsibilities without any training or preparation. The physical, emotional and financial toll on caregivers can be daunting and the lack of adequate support can lead to costly institutionalization of the person they are caring for as well as increased health care issues and costs for the caregiver. The reality is that the caregiver is critical to providing proper care and in order to reduce overall cost of care.

The role of caregiving can test one's patience and leave one exhausted. What possible value could it have for us, as Christians, as women, as Christian women? And what possible value is for those we care for, the infants & toddlers, children, teenagers, young adults, disabled people of all ages, the elderly, the ill, the infirm, and the dying?

When women are young, they may be married, and may become mothers. Parenting as a type of caregiving is stressful, tiring, and can be lonely, especially for the stay at home mom who may lack adult company and face constant demands from one or more children. The one thing about parenting that we can say, once we're past this phase, is that it feels like it will last forever, and that it doesn't. And that, even when this phase of parenting is over, parenting itself never ends. We

always hold our adult children in our hearts & minds. And then of course, there's grandparenthood.....

Regardless of what profession or trade a woman chooses, chances are great that at some point of her life, she will have to deal with parents or in-laws that are aging, chronically or terminally ill, and dying. Depending on the past of these relationships, how much importance we give our careers, how much we need to work to financially support ourselves or our families, and personality inclinations, many of us can be very reluctant caregivers. Add to that that we may not have the knowledge nor the skills to give personal care, to manage appointments & bills & the health & human service systems, we can want to run away, give up, cry, beg for help, or suffer in silence, depending on our personal style of coping, and this may be the hardest thing we have to face & to do in our lives up to this time.

That we are Christians, does not change that we are human. That we have had professional responsibilities, maybe some successes, become experienced with failures, that we know how to pray & believe in the Word of God with all our hearts, does not mean we can right away & every moment of every day for an undetermined length of time do everything right for as long as it takes, while things may slowly but surely be getting worse.

Does this sound like it's all bad news? I am sorry if it does. I have been a paid caregiver for years, had children, one of whom was special needs, been a reluctant caregiver myself, been with parents when they passed from this life to the next, and work with family caregivers now. I can assure you that in the midst of these challenges, there IS Good News!

God Cares

In the Bible God has many names. The names of God reveal His character. When God revealed Himself in the burning bush to Moses in the Old Testament of the Bible God said His name was “I AM.” “I AM what?” you may say. God as the great “I AM” means that God is everything any human heart might need. God is even everything the caregiver’s heart might long for and need.

Caregiving is often one of the most difficult challenges any individual can face in this life. Our God says He is with us in life’s trials and difficulties, however. He

says that He is the great “I AM.” So how is God the great “I AM” in the caregiver’s life? God says, “I AM the caregiver’s strength. I AM his or her source of guidance and wisdom in the many decisions that need to constantly be made in regards to his or her loved one’s health. I AM the Christian caregiver’s peace in all the chaos and discouragement of caregiving. I AM patient and forgiving, and I AM love personified. I AM the caregiver’s life, and I AM all he or she will ever need. I AM the caregiver’s salvation and righteousness. I AM the caregiver’s all in all.”

We must wonder if God had caregivers in mind when He created the world. ***"By the seventh day God completed His work that He had done, and He rested on the seventh day from all His work that He had done"*** (Gen. 2:2). God was not tired, of course, but He knew we would be. He created us to care for one another, but He also created a respite in the form of a Sabbath. God does not intend for us to serve out of pity and overlook our own needs. Rather, He wants us to recognize the importance of self-care so we can offer care to others.

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The Church Cares

Unfortunately, the church often does not know how to offer care as a ministry to caregivers. How many times have you seen the names of caregivers on prayer lists? We readily remember and pray for those who are ill, but we regularly fail to lift up those who are caring for them. Even if we remember to voice a quick prayer for the caregiver, we often fail to put feet to those prayers.

Why not host a "Caregiver's Day Out" ministry? Volunteers could stay with the patient once a week, allowing the caregiver some personal time, whether for a nap or running errands. Churches may benefit from observing volunteer services offered by hospices in their area. Because volunteer services are mandated for hospices, the professionals who direct those services have mastered the art of assisting caregivers.

Youth ministers often look for ministry opportunities for their young people. What about lawn care or helping with heavy jobs, such as flipping mattresses? Adopting a homebound person (or two or three) would not only offer much needed help for

the caregiver, it would also contribute to the spiritual maturity of young people as they learn to give of themselves.

Caregivers Must Care

Because God cares and the church cares, the caregiver must care. Nothing can replace self-care. Unfortunately, our world tends to pay attention to martyrs rather than applauding those who learn to pace themselves and extend their service time. The average length of caregiving is a little over four years. Caregivers who live in the same home as the care recipient spend over 39 hours per week caring for their loved one, while those who live nearby often commit over 20 hours each week. Either scenario quickly steals the caregiver's capacity to give.

Taking care of oneself is not selfish. Rather, it may be the best guarantee of continued care for the one who needs it. It is the most loving thing a caregiver can do. Asking for help is never a sign of weakness; it is a wise sign of strength. Making a list of errands others could run or a schedule of doctor's appointments for transportation help (or sitters while the caregiver goes to the doctor), are only starters. The hardest part is replacing pride with good sense and picking up the phone.

Practice the sabbath God created. I am saying this with a little "s." This is not a call for church attendance. Rather it is recognition that God designed our bodies for rest so we can work. Without rest, our bodies simply cannot function at full capacity. Neither will our brains or our spirits.

Caregivers must strategically locate periods in the day to pull away and examine their situation. They should ask, “What do I need? Do I need sleep or a walk? Or is it time to read a book, listen to music, work in the garden, or write in a journal?” Thirty-minute or hour breaks every day will enrich the time spent with the care recipient & extend the life of the caregiver. In the long run, both will be winners.

When God calls people to the task of caregiving He is calling them to a very important and significant task in this world. The challenges of caregiving can be overwhelming and often are not pleasant, but nonetheless caregiving is a holy calling from God Himself. Likewise when God spoke to the Old Testament Moses in the burning bush. He called Moses to another overwhelming but God ordained task. You can read about it in Exodus 3 in the Bible.

Moses did not want to undertake the task God had assigned him. Moses was afraid and filled with confusion. He felt overwhelmed by what God was asking of Him, and he felt he was not able to do what God had asked of him. God reminded Moses that He would be with him each step of the way. He reminded Moses that He was the great "I AM." God would be for Moses everything Moses needed. To complete the task that God had assigned him.

The Wise Caregiver

Caregiving is one of the most challenging endeavors an individual may have to face in life. This is especially true, if one's loved one for whom one is caring is either terminal or enduring a long-term illness. In such cases a grief process already begins to take place the day of diagnosis. I know it did for me. As a caregiver if I had not had a solid faith foundation, I would have folded under the emotional and physical pressure of caregiving.

That reminds me of the parable of the wise and foolish man in the Bible (Matthew 7:24-29). The wise man built his house on the rock. When the rains and winds came and the streams rose the wise man's house stood, because it was built on a solid foundation. The foolish man built his house in sand. When the rains and winds came and the streams rose the foolish man's house fell down flat.

This parable is so applicable to caregiving with all its heartaches, storms, and challenges. Wise caregivers will dig deeply into God's Word. They will hear, read, and obey God's Word. They will rest in God's promise that He will always be with them and never forsake them. They will believe the Lord their God when He tells them of His love for them. They will look for and trust God's guidance and strength in facing the discouragement and sometimes agonizing decisions of caregiving.

Wise caregivers will often experience difficult emotions and even spiritual storms, as they go through their caregiving experience. They sometimes feel as if they cannot hold up under the pressure of the whole caregiving experience for even one more day, but when that happens they once again look to God for strength to face

each moment of every day. The wise caregiver has learned that they cannot seek to be self-reliant, but must rely entirely on the Lord God. Their lives are based on the sure promises of the Bible and on the Lord God Himself, however. Hence, their lives are based on a sure foundation.

Dear caregiver, make sure you are not trying to persevere in the storms of caregiving alone. Perseverance is a good virtue, but sometimes we have to reach out to other people for help. We are not meant to live this life in the power of our own perceived resources. Most importantly, we have to make sure we are relying on the sure foundation of God's Word, the Bible, and on a saving faith in the Lord God. The storms of caregiving are often so intense. Hence, it is essential that we are standing on God's sure foundation instead of the unstable sands of our own feeble efforts.

Dear Christian Caregiver, the Lord God is also *your* great "I AM." He is your all and all. He will be with you each step of the way. Dear Christian Caregiver, rest in faith in your great "I AM."