

Mortal fears: Determined to show God's strength

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [June 17, 2008](#) issue

In my earlier years, my mother would often say to me, “Someday when I am old and gray . . .” I later used the phrase with my children in what they rightly described as guilt peddling. No doubt at times my mother evoked the phrase for that purpose. Recently, however, I realized that “old and gray” had a much deeper resonance for her. Her worldview was so steeped in biblical imagery that I should have known her comment came from the Bible, and more specifically from Psalm 71:18: “Now also when I am old and grayheaded, O God, forsake me not.”

The writer of Psalm 71 did not use the phrase “old and grayheaded” to warn others of his eventual demise. When he pleaded, “Forsake me not,” it was not in a self-centered longing for solace, but as a request for added strength in his declining years.

Our sixth president, John Quincy Adams, notes in his journal that he too found solace in the verse. Here it is in context:

I will go in the strength of the Lord God: I will make mention of thy righteousness, even of thine only. O God, thou hast taught me from my youth: and hitherto have I declared thy wondrous works. Now also when I am old and grayheaded, O God, forsake me not; until I have shewed thy strength unto this generation, and thy power to every one that is to come. Thy righteousness also, O God, is very high, who hast done great things: O God, who is like unto thee (Ps. 71:16-19).

After viewing *John Adams*, the superb seven-part HBO miniseries, I decided to read Paul C. Nagel's *John Quincy Adams: A Public Life, A Private Life* (Knopf). The series focuses on John Adams, our second president and John Quincy Adams's father, but John Quincy appears in it briefly as a reluctant diplomat who resented his father's pushing him into foreign service as ambassador to Russia. In Nagel's book, a more complex man emerges.

A deeply religious man possessed of a hunger for knowledge, John Quincy Adams experienced a rich public life in which he exuded confidence, eloquence and, in moments of frustration, a violent temper. During one intense period he lamented to a friend, "Oh for a curb upon my temper." He wondered if he would ever be able to respond to his enemies with "calmness and composure."

His public career was outstanding: ambassador to the Netherlands and Russia, six years as secretary of state under President James Monroe (Adams was largely responsible for the Monroe Doctrine), and president from 1825 through 1829.

Defeated in a bid for a second term, Adams retreated to his home in Massachusetts to spend his remaining years in "a life of scholarship," but a year later he agreed to run for a seat in the House of Representatives. He won and was elated to be back in public life.

In private, Adams lived in mortal fear that he would fail to grow, learn and serve God. Prone to severe bouts of depression, Adams was driven by a conviction that every day that passed without a worthy accomplishment was a day wasted. In his final years, he suffered a minor stroke and found it difficult to write in his journal.

Adams wondered "how far my own sins have to answer before Heaven" for bringing about his "involuntary shaking." This led him to reread Psalm 71:18, after which he confided to his journal, "For I believe there is a god who heareth prayer, and that honest prayers to him will not be in vain."

During his eight years in Congress, Adams was an adamant opponent of slavery. He insisted that in any civil war between the states the president could abolish slavery by using his war powers, an argument used by Abraham Lincoln in his Emancipation Proclamation of 1863.

At the age of 81 Adams collapsed on the floor of the House. He had suffered a stroke and was carried to the Speaker's Room inside the Capitol building. Two days later he died there.

A few years earlier, when friends had implored Adams to give up his activities and retire from Congress, he responded, "The world will retire from me before I retire from the world." He was determined to show God's strength "unto this generation, and [his] power to every one that is to come."