



'In the Time of Old Age'

There are problems and cares which relate specially to the Christian *'in the time of old age'* (Ps. 71:9); consequently, there are prayers and promises in God's Word which are specially given to help the believer as he approaches the end of his pilgrimage. The Bible is a handbook for saints and sinners at all stages of life. It is designed by God to be of comfort and help to us from the cradle to the grave. There is no situation for which the Bible offers no advice or brings no guidance. The people of God therefore need to live by faith in God's Word as much at the end of life as in youth and middle-age.

It is clear at a glance that Psalm 71 is one of the passages addressed to ageing saints. It has indeed been called *'The Old Man's Psalm'*. The expressions found in Psalm 71 are those of a saint nearing his end in this world: *'Thou art my trust from my youth'* (v. 5); *'by thee have I been holden up from the womb'* (v. 6); *'cast me not off in the time of old age'* (v. 9); *'now also when I am old and grey-headed, O God, forsake me not; until I have skewed thy strength unto this generation'* (v. 18). All such references in this Psalm indicate that it is designed to be of special help to the Lord's people when they near the age of seventy – or else have passed it.

There is a need for us to minister in these days to ageing saints. It is all too possible for them to be overlooked because of the emphasis upon youth in modern society.

In most churches (at least in Britain today) there are old Christians who need to be helped and cared for with more than ordinary compassion. For one thing, old Christians are often rather confused and bewildered by all the changes which have occurred in society during their life-time. The twentieth century saw more changes than probably any century in human history, at least since the Flood. The tempo of life at the beginning of the century was much as it had been for centuries: horses and carts, a simple life-style and clearly understood codes for conduct, work, social standing and dress.

But by the 1960s and onward, all earlier conventions were thrown to the four winds. In family, church and state, in the work-place and in the home, society was propelled into a whirlwind of new values. The tempo of life has changed, probably for ever, in the last fifty years. With change has come revolt against all that is 'old'. The 'old' are hardly wanted in the work-place any longer. Indeed, many of them are evidently not wanted in their own family circle any more. It is not therefore surprising that they can even feel unwanted in the very church where they have been worshippers for over half a life-time.

The elderly Christian may be neglected by the new, young minister quite unintentionally. It is understandable that he should have an eye to the good of the congregation in years to come. 'We must get young people in.' Every minister understands this problem today, when young people are generally everywhere else, but not in God's house. However, in a church climate where concern for 'youth' is always kept at fever-pitch, it is understandable that many of the best and most faithful church members feel like second-class citizens because they are now elderly, and overlooked.

If we could for a month or two become the proverbial fly on the wall of our evangelical churches throughout the nation, we strongly suspect that we should become conscious of a disproportionate interest in 'youth' work. At least, we would come to see more clearly that we have a pastoral duty to the elderly as well as to the young. It ought not, of course, to be either/or but both/and. Let zeal to evangelise the young go hand-in-hand with affectionate care for the mature saints. To neglect their good advice is to repeat the folly of Rehoboam, whose headstrong conduct brought tragic division

among God's people (1 Kings 12). This cautionary example has not always been sufficiently heeded.

If we are to begin to minister to God's people 'in the time of old age' we must attempt to understand their special needs. For one thing, we must appreciate the excellent qualities of older Christians. Many of them have borne a quiet and steady testimony to Christ for half a century and more.

They prayed for the nation when Churchill called for national effort amid '*blood, toil, tears and sweat*'. They prayed and trusted while Hitler's planes flew overhead and his rockets ruined our historic landmarks. They were in arms in the Middle East, in North Africa, in France when the Allied forces marched northwards to victory. They have painful memories which the young have scarcely dreamed of; they have gone through experiences in their youth which modern youth know only from history books. The elderly deserve our respect, love and gratitude not least for the sacrifices which they made to give us our modern peace and plenty. This gratitude is not always sufficiently visible, even among those who go to God's house.

Any preacher who goes round the churches in our land must soon become aware that it is often older Christians who are bearing the burden of God's work. It is they who do the lion's share of the practical service needed in many congregations. It is they who are conspicuously present each week at the Prayer Meeting. It is they who visit the hospital and the Old People's Home. Their lives are often the most consistently devoted to Christ. No doubt too their prayers are one of the great reasons why the judgment of God has not yet fallen upon our land so much as we deserve. Woe betide this country when their prayers and their persons are gone!

Our argument here, of course, is not that less be done for the young but that care be exercised in case our best and most spiritual people should be unintentionally overlooked. In practice this must mean that all changes in the conduct of worship and in the character of congregational life should consult the needs of the elderly as well as those of others.

What are the special fears and cares of old saints 'in the time of old age'? Some fear lest they be '*cast off*' and '*forsaken by God*' (Ps. 71:9). Strange as it may seem, old saints, perhaps because of the decay of their physical powers, may be troubled with fears that God will at last reject them. It should help us to minister the more tenderly to them in this infirmity when we recall that we too may, in old age, be similarly tempted. As we preach to and visit them, let us remind them of the rich promises of God to all who persevere.

'Hearken unto me, O house of Jacob, and all the remnant of the house of Israel, which are borne by me from the belly, which are carried from the womb: And even to your old age I am he; and even to hoar hairs will I carry you: I have made, and I will bear; even I will carry, and will deliver you.'

(Isa. 46:3-4)

A common fear of old Christians is that they are a 'nuisance' to others, needing to be offered a helping hand wherever they go and requiring a 'lift' by car from someone. Their sense of being a burden to others is increased by the fact that they are probably hard of hearing and need to have things repeated to them. Elderly persons are usually sensitive to the fact that others must 'put up' with their many infirmities. The danger is that they develop a death-wish which others do not appreciate. It is good to desire to 'depart and be with Christ', but we must not allow the elderly to wish to 'go' because they think we do not understand them or because we appear to have no time to show them a little extra patience.

It is scarcely needing to be said that the elderly Christian's thoughts are frequently of the past. His weakening constitution tells him that before too long his Master will summon him to quit his present 'house' and appear in another abode. The old saint has a full book of memories. The photographs on the sideboard and above the hearth are a poignant reminder to him of loved ones now 'gone'. The young do not yet know the thoughts that arise in their mind at the sight of an empty chair, or at the silence of an empty house where once were heard the lively shouts and tears of children now grown and gone away.

Let not one suppose the elderly have no foes to fear. It is one of the surprises of this 'Old Man's Psalm' that David (as we suppose the author to be) had still his 'enemies'. It seems strange that an old king should need to pray, *'Deliver me, O my God, out of the hand of the wicked, out of the hand of the unrighteous and cruel man'* (Ps. 71:4). Strange too that he still needs to cry, *'Mine enemies speak against me; and they that lay wait for my soul take counsel together'* (v. 10).

In old age David still had an Absalom to vex him. And many an aged pilgrim of Christ has to pray still for 'deliverance' from 'foes', perhaps 'those of his own household', who do not share his or her love of the Saviour. Not a few ministers of the gospel have to visit elderly patients who are martyrs to the noisy, insensitive programmes listened to and watched by the family in the very room where the elderly must seek grace to bear what to a spiritual soul must be almost unbearable.

We must not forget that the elderly believer has a shadow over his mind which younger believers may not begin to realise: the seriousness of dying and facing God. It is true that the believer need fear no hurt in death. But only a fool forgets that death is still an 'enemy'. Death is a most serious event and must be prepared for. At the end the devil may put forth more power to darken the believer's mind and cloud his hope. It has happened to the best of saints. Their last days have included hours of conflict with dark fears, doubt and the dread that 'they were never truly converted'. Let those who question the accuracy of this reach for the great biographies on their bookshelf.

Younger Christians, especially in the ministry, would be sinning against Christ if they were to neglect the souls of elderly believers who look to them for some words of occasional encouragement, and receive none. It is not the advice of trained counsellors that old saints need but the gracious promises of Christ, read to them from the old Book by a loving friend. This ministry is a simple one. But it is sublime because done to Christ's veterans, and therefore, in His reckoning, done to Him. This is a ministry that no Christian ought to shun.

At every stage of a Christian's life there is God's promise of sufficient grace. At the closing stage of life, when our powers fail and even *'the grasshopper becomes a burden'* (Eccles. 12:5) the child of God wants to hear talk only about one thing: a Saviour's love and rich mercy to sinners. No saint dies comfortably because he has done this or that for Christ. Our comfort in dying is that mercy is offered to *'the chief of sinners'* (1 Tim. 1:15). Hypocrites may float along the stream towards the cataract of death with vain expectations of having 'merited' a bright future beyond the grave. But real Christians, even the very best, approach death with no merit in their eye except that of a blessed Saviour. When we feel the grip of our 'last enemy' laid on our arm we must find strength nowhere but in the agony and blood of the Son of God. True saints know this. At the end they want to have it said to them a hundred times over by all who visit their sick-bed: *'The blood of Jesus Christ, God's Son, cleanseth us from all sin'* (1 John 1:7).

'In the time of old age' the believer completes his service to God and puts the lid on the treasure which he has laid up in heaven. Now he can say: *'I have fought a good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith'* (1 Tim. 4:7). It is his joy now to be near to his everlasting rest. Soon he will put off his armour and put on robes of light. He will shortly sup with his Master in the beatific presence of God the Father and in the company of saints and angels. He leaves a world of curses and cares to enter a world of blessing, glory and love. The day of his death is better than that of his birth (Eccles. 7:1). The aged saint will shortly be discharged from the ranks of the church militant, in order to enjoy the company of the church triumphant who *'walk with Christ in white'* (Rev. 3:4).

God grant us to be among them at the last!

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