

AGING IN GRACE

LETTER 1 - STRUGGLE IN THE AUTUMN OF LIFE

The autumn of our life has actually arrived. The scenes of our youth have fled forever; and the feelings and hopes of that period have passed away also, or are greatly changed. When we take a retrospect of the past, several weighty reflections cannot but press upon our minds and sadden our hearts. How true do we now find that trite remark, that the longest life in the retrospect appears exceedingly short, though in prospect, the same period appeared almost interminable! Old age has come upon us (though its approaches were very gradual) by surprise; and even now, except when feeling something of the infirmities of age, or when viewing our altered image in the mirror, we are prone to forget that we are old; and often are impelled to undertake labors to which our strength is no longer competent. Truly our life of three-score, or more, appears like a dream, when we awake from sleep. And as the past years have passed so quickly, the few that remain will not be less rapid in their flight. Indeed, to the aged, except when they are suffering protracted pain, time appears shorter than it did when they were young. Thus at least it seems to the writer: the year, when its days and weeks and months are numbered, is as long as ever, but to our sense, it seems to grow shorter.

We are less absorbed and interested in passing scenes than the young. Life has with us become a sober reality. The enchanting visions of a youthful imagination have now entirely vanished. But it brings a solemn and tenderly melancholy feeling over the minds of the aged to inquire for the friends and companions of their youth. How few of these can we now find upon earth? The ministers whose labors were made useful to us, and the very sound of whose voice was sweeter than the richest music, are now lying beneath the clods of the valley. The beloved friends with whom we were wont to take sweet counsel, and to whom we could confidingly open our whole hearts, have been torn from our side. Many dear relatives, loved it may be as our own life, have slept the sleep of death. Time may have healed the painful wounds made by such bereavements, but their loss often leaves a chasm which can

never be supplied; and, at any rate, a scar which we shall carry to the grave.

There is one reflection connected with this subject still more sad; it is, that some in whom we once delighted, and in whom we reposed strong confidence, have turned aside from the ways of truth and righteousness in which they appeared to be walking, and though they may be still walking up and down upon the earth, are dead to us, and to all those interests, which once seemed to be common to them and us. And as to those who remain steadfast, and have continued their pilgrimage without turning aside into crooked ways, what a sad change has time made upon their persons! Where is the bloom of youth, the robust strength of manhood, the eye sparkling with intelligence, and the countenance beaming with animation? Alas! they are fled; and in their place we see the decrepit body, the sunken eye, the withered countenance, and the tottering gait. All are not equally changed by the ravages of time. Indeed, to some the access of gray hairs and old age brings an addition of comeliness. There is something peculiarly lovely, as well as venerable, in the silvery locks and placid countenance of a good old man. There is in his countenance a chastened expression of benignity and sobriety, which long experience alone can produce.

But the bitterest of all reflections to the aged is that of sins committed, duties omitted, time wasted, and opportunities of doing good neglected. Reflections of this kind, at certain times, become insufferably painful. And although we could not wish to go a second time through such a pilgrimage; yet we cannot but wish often that with our present views, and with the aids of experience, we could enjoy again the opportunities of usefulness, even in these painful regrets and this bitter repentance which were suffered to pass without improvement. But our deceitful hearts often impose upon us; and we give ourselves more credit for present good feelings than we deserve. For let us only ask ourselves, whether we now avail ourselves of all the advantages of our situation to do good. Are we not now guilty of as gross neglects, as when younger? The probability is, therefore, yea, the certainty, that if left to ourselves as much as we were, we should do no better, if we were permitted to live over our unprofitable lives a second time.

But while we should lay aside all fruitless wishes, we ought certainly to reflect upon our sins and shortcomings, until our godly sorrow is so enkindled

within us, as to work a repentance not to be repented of. We cannot atone for our sins by tears of penitence; for this we must have recourse to another fountain, even the blood of Christ, which cleanseth from all unrighteousness; but the flow of ingenuous, godly sorrow has a tendency to soften and purify the heart; and our iniquities are rendered by this means odious; so that, while we are penetrated with unfeigned gratitude to God for pardoning mercy, we are rendered more watchful against our besetting sins, and made to walk more tenderly and circumspectly; and more humbly too; for I have thought, that the reason why a covenant-keeping God sometimes permits his children to fall into shameful acts of transgression, is because nothing else but such a sight of themselves as these falls exhibit, would sufficiently humble their proud hearts. The recollection of such sins serves all their life long to convince them that they ought to place themselves among the “chief of sinners” and “the least of saints.” And this view of our exceeding depravity of heart, serves to show us the faithfulness and loving kindness of God in the strongest light. According to that which he speaks in Ezekiel 16:62-63, “And I will establish my covenant with thee; and thou shalt know that I am the Lord: that thou mayest remember and be confounded, and never open thy mouth anymore, because of thy shame, when I am pacified toward thee for all that thou hast done, saith the Lord God.”

My aged friends, permit me to counsel you not to give way to despondency, and unprofitable repining at the course of past events. Trust in the Lord, and encourage your hearts to hope in his mercy and faithfulness. Your afflictions may have been many and sore, and your present circumstances may be embarrassing, and your prospects for the future, gloomy. Providence may seem to have set you up as a mark for the arrows of adversity. Stroke upon stroke has been experienced. Billow after billow has gone over you, and almost overwhelmed you. Truly the time has come, when you can say, “My joys are gone.” But though friends have been snatched from you, or have proved unfaithful – though children, once your hope and joy are numbered with the dead, or what is far worse, profligate or ungrateful; though your property has wasted away, or your riches suddenly taken wings and flown like the eagle to heaven; though bodily diseases and pain distress you; still trust in the divine promise, “I will never leave thee, nor forsake thee.” Though friends die, God

forever liveth. Though your earthly comforts and supports are gone, you are heir to an inheritance “incorruptible, undefiled, and that never fadeth away.” Take for your example the prophet Habakkuk, who triumphantly declares, “Although the fig tree shall not blossom, neither shall fruit be in the vines; the labor of the olive shall fail, and the fields shall yield no meat; the flock shall be cut off from the fold, and there shall be no herd in the stalls; yet I will rejoice in the Lord, I will joy in the God of my salvation.” Learn to live by faith: no class of people need the supports of faith and hope more than the aged.

And not only believe, but act. “Work while it is called today.” “To do good, and communicate, forget not, for with such sacrifices, God is well pleased.” Your work is never ended while you are in the body. It is a sad mistake for aged persons to relinquish their usual pursuits, and resign everything into the hands of their children. Many have dated their distressing melancholy from such a false step. The mind long accustomed to activity is miserable in a state of stagnation; or rather having lost its usual nutriment, it turns and preys upon itself. Lighten your burdens, but do not give up business or study, or whatever you have been accustomed to pursue. Imbecility and dotage are also prevented or postponed, or mitigated, by constant exercise of the mind. Keep also as much of your property if you have any, in your own hand, as is necessary for your own support, and make not yourselves dependent on the most affectionate and obedient children. They will be more affectionate and more respectful when you are not dependent. Dismiss corroding cares and anxieties about what you shall do to get a living. How strange it is, that the nearer men come to the end of their journey, the greater concern they feel as to the means of future subsistence. God’s hand will provide, His command to us is, “Be careful for nothing; but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known unto God.”

“And the peace of God, which passeth all understanding, shall keep your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.”