

Old Age Is Usually Accompanied by Physical Decline

This is the first fact that we have to recognise as we begin to examine the biblical teaching concerning advanced age and the child of God. Generally there is some physical decline in old age, even for the Christian. While there are cases of old people who seem to show no signs of their age, the general rule is that age does show itself in a physical way: ‘Moses was a hundred and twenty years old when he died, yet his eyes were not dim nor his natural vigour abated’ (Deuteronomy 34:7). Caleb could say: ‘Here I am this day, eighty five years old! I am as strong this day as I was on the day that Moses sent me; as my strength was then, so now is my strength for war’ (Joshua 14:10-11).

However these are exceptions. The usual case is that old age brings with it a corresponding physical decline. Eyesight may become weak and fail. Isaac, Jacob, Eli and Ahijah all had failing sight as a result of age (Genesis 27:1; 48:10; 1 Samuel 3:2; 4:15; 1 Kings 14:4). Another sign of old age may be a stoop (2 Chronicles 36:17, AV). The elderly person might need a stick (Zechariah 8:4). The bushy black locks of youth might give way to grey hairs (1 Samuel 12:2; Job 15:10). The sense of taste might begin to fail and hearing grow weak (2 Samuel 19:35). Such an aged person as Sarah might feel that their days of usefulness have passed them by; they are now too old (Genesis 18:11). Old people often feel the cold (1 Kings 1:1). Retirement age comes (Numbers 8:25). Strength will diminish (Psalm 71:9). Old people can feel ‘full of days’ or ‘weighed down with years’ (Jeremiah 6:11). Age shows itself in the withering of flesh; its marks are evident on the skin (Lamentations 3:4). Feebleness can accompany the passing of the years; Jesus used the fact in John 21:18.

Thus the Bible makes it very clear that old age generally brings with it a marked physical decline. The elderly cannot do what once they did. They cannot always do the things they would like to do. Memory fades. Eyes fail. It might well get more and more difficult to read and concentrate. It gets increasingly difficult to get to the meetings of the local church. Wintry weather is a problem. The need for rest and early nights can hinder attendance at evening meetings. The aged Christian might come to use the language of Psalm 42:4: 'I remember... how I used to go with the multitude... to the house of God'. And this can be a real source of sadness to the elderly Christian as it was to the Psalmist (Psalm 42:5).

There can be further grounds of loneliness for the elderly. Friends die all around; bereavements grow. Old age can bring sickness and disappointment. Once-valued possessions get destroyed, once-prized ties get broken. Jacob's anxiety at the prospect of losing another son made him cry: 'You would bring my grey hair with sorrow to the grave' (Genesis 42:38). All this can make old age a sad time, and in itself contribute to physical decline. See also Psalm 90:10. What a depressing picture all this is!

Not a bit of it! These things are not recorded in the Bible so that we might get depressed over them. Nor have I listed them for that purpose. What is the purpose of noting such things?

There are two reasons for looking at such things. First, it is to the *comfort* of the aged Christian. Secondly, it is a *challenge* to the aged Christian.

(a) The comfort of it

God has recorded these facts about old age to comfort us. A Christian growing old, and noticing the steady decline of his physical faculties, might well be tempted to think that his difficulty with reading the Bible stemmed from a decline in his spiritual desire. (Of course, it is possible for an elderly Christian to backslide; age does not bring with it immunity

from spiritual decline). But the Bible shows us that the decline as years advance may well have nothing at all to do with spiritual things. An elderly Christian's difficulty with reading might simply be a case of physical decline. And that is all. Thus the Bible record of godly men who had such a decline in their advanced years is a comfort.

Christians must learn to expect this decline and not doubt their spirituality when they see it. Satan, who is ever willing to accuse them, will try to use their difficulties in old age. He will try to rob the aged Christian of his peace and sense of assurance. God's word can and must be a source of comfort at this point. The Christian must not confuse the physical and the spiritual. A man can decline in his body, while his soul is still strong and healthy.

Again, an aged Christian might feel the loneliness of old age. He might go on to think that even God himself was absent from him now that he is old. Such a confusion would prove to be of immense harm to the soul. Once again, the biblical explanation and warning that Christians are to expect trials in their latter years is a great comfort to them. They will not be surprised at the fiery trial which might come upon them (1 Peter 4:12).

(b) The challenge of it

While the Bible faithfully records the physical decline that generally accompanies old age, it does not allow us to make that an excuse for a corresponding decline in spiritual life. In the world of nature, autumn is the time of falling leaves. But that season is, in some respects, the most glorious of the entire year. Even as the leaves are dropping off the branches, the trees are all ablaze with their vivid colours. The elderly Christian might well have grey hairs, but those grey hairs can be a glory: 'Grey hair is the splendour of the old' (Proverbs 16:31). It is only right that Christians should be comforted by the biblical knowledge that they can expect some physical decline in their old age, and that they should learn not to confuse the physical with the spiritual. Nevertheless, we must

face the challenge of the word of God on this very point. It will not do for men to take the comfort of God's word and neglect the challenge of it.

What is the challenge of God's word on this matter? The physical part of a Christian might well decline in old age. The spiritual must not. The testimony of every child of God must be: 'We do not lose heart. Even though our outward man is perishing, yet the inward man is being renewed day by day' (2 Corinthians 4:16). Every Christian must go on in his spiritual experience, throughout the whole of his life: 'The path of the just is like the shining sun, that shines ever brighter till the full light of day' (Proverbs 4:18). Spiritual exercises must be kept up. There is no reason for Christians to relax spiritually as they grow old. Although the body may not be able to perform what the spirit would, nevertheless, the spirit must still desire to press on with God. The Christian must still have spiritual desire, even in advanced years. Of old age it might well be said: 'The spirit indeed is willing, but the flesh is weak' (Matthew 26:41). The challenge of which I write, comes at this point.

God promises his gracious help and strength in the physical weakness of old age: 'The LORD... gives power to the weak, and to those who have no might, he increases strength... those that wait on the LORD shall renew their strength. They will mount up with wings like eagles; they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint' (Isaiah 40:28-31). 'Seeing then that we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession. For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathise with our weaknesses, but who was in all points tempted, as we are – yet without sin. Let us therefore come boldly to the throne of grace, that we may obtain mercy and find grace to help in time of need' (Hebrews 4:14-16).

Physical weakness must not be allowed to become an excuse for spiritual decline. God's grace is specially provided to prevent such a thing. He has said: 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my strength is made perfect in weakness' (2

Corinthians 12:9). The Christian's response must be: 'Therefore most gladly I will rather boast in my infirmities, that the power of Christ may rest upon me. Therefore I take pleasure in infirmities... in needs... in persecutions... in distresses for Christ's sake. For when I am weak, then am I strong' (2 Corinthians 12:9-10). The word of God challenges Christians not to decline spiritually as they grow old. More, it challenges elderly Christians to prove God's grace even more in their advanced years. An aged Christian might well be much changed physically, compared with his youth. But God has not: 'I am the LORD, I do not change' (Malachi 3:6). God does not change like shifting shadows (James 1:17). 'Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today and forever' (Hebrews 13:8). Trials might be intensified in old age. Physical decline, illness and loneliness might prove to be sources of intense affliction. But they are, also, a grand means to demonstrate the grace of God. The aged Christian can adorn the gospel by a life of patience, courage, cheerfulness and submission in the physical decline of old age. 'For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, is working for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory, while we do not look at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen. For the things which are seen are temporary, but the things which are not seen are eternal' (2 Corinthians 4:17-18).

Application to an elderly Christian

Are you prepared to receive the instruction of the word of God on this matter of your decline in your old age? Are you prepared to draw the comfort God offers you in his word? Can you distinguish between the physical and the spiritual in your life? Or have you confused them and been depressed as a result? Will you face the challenge of the word of God and maintain your spiritual life? Will you go further and seek an increase of spirituality in your advanced years? Will you refuse every excuse to pamper your flesh to the harm of your soul? Do you use the language of 2 Corinthians 4:18? Do you make your physical weakness an excuse for declining

spiritual desire? Or can you truly say that your spirit is willing, still? Have you ‘switched off’, spiritually speaking? Are you coasting along? Are you using physical weakness to excuse spiritual backsliding? Or are you maintaining, even increasing, spiritual desire by the daily renewal of your inner man?

Application to a Christian of younger years

Do you realise that older Christians experience physical decline and weakness as the years pass? Do you allow for it in your dealings with aged Christians? Do you confuse their physical decline with spiritual decline? Do you realise that old age can bring special problems to the saints? Do you pray for elderly Christians? Do you visit them? Do you realise that perhaps they wish they could do more than they are able? Do you do all you can to help them maintain their spiritual walk, and even improve it, in spite of their limitations brought on by advanced years?