

## Beautiful Old Age

J.R. Miller:

This may scarcely seem a fitting theme to introduce in a book meant chiefly for the young, and yet a moment's reflection will show its appropriateness and practicalness.

Old age is the harvest of all the years that have gone before. It is the barn into which all the sheaves are gathered. It is the sea into which all the rills and rivers of life flow from their springs in the hills and valleys of youth and manhood. We are each, in all our earlier years, building the house in which we shall have to live when we grow old. And we may make it a prison or a palace. We may make it very beautiful, adorning it with taste and filling it with objects which shall minister to our pleasure, comfort, and power. We may cover the walls with lovely pictures. We may spread luxurious couches of ease on which to rest. We may lay up in store great supplies of provision upon which to feed in the days of hunger and feebleness. We may gather and pile away large bundles of wood to keep the fires blazing brightly in the long winter days and nights of old age.

Or we may make our house very gloomy. We may hang the chamber-walls with horrid pictures, covering them with ghastly spectres which shall look down upon us and haunt us, filling our souls with terror when we sit in the gathering darkness of life's nightfall. We may make beds of thorns to rest upon. We may lay up nothing to feed upon in the hunger and craving of declining years. We may have no fuel ready for the winter fires.

We may plant roses to bloom about our doors and fragrant gardens to pour their perfumes about us, or we may sow weeds and briars to flaunt themselves in our faces as we sit in our doorways in the gloaming.

All old age is not beautiful. All old people are not happy. Some are very wretched, with hollow, sepulchral lives. Many an ancient palace was built over a dark dungeon. There were the marble walls that shone with dazzling splendor in the sunlight. There were the wide gilded chambers with their magnificent frescoes and their splendid adornments, the gaiety, the music, and the revelry. But deep down beneath all this luxurious splendor and dazzling display was the dungeon filled with its unhappy victims, and up through the iron gratings came the sad groans and moanings of despair, echoing and reverberating through the gilded halls and ceiled chambers; and in this I see a picture of many an old age. It may have abundant comforts and much that tells of prosperity in an outward sense—wealth, honors, friends, the pomp and circumstance of greatness—but it is only a palace built over a gloomy dungeon of memory, up from whose deep and dark recesses come evermore voices of remorse and despair to sadden or embitter every hour and to cast shadows over every lovely picture and every bright scene.

It is possible so to live as to make old age very sad, and then it is possible so to live as to make it very beautiful. In going my rounds in the crowded city I came one day to a door where my ears were greeted with a great chorus of bird-songs. There were birds everywhere—in parlour, in dining-room, in bedchamber, in hall—and the whole house was filled with their joyful music. So may old age be. So it is for those who have lived aright. It is full of music. Every memory is a little snatch of song. The sweet bird-notes of heavenly peace sing everywhere, and the last days of life are its happiest days—

"Rich in experience that angels might covet,  
Rich in a faith that has grown with the years."

The important practical question is, How can we so live that our old age, when it comes, shall be beautiful and happy? It will not do to adjourn this question until the evening shadows are upon us. It will be too late then to consider it. Consciously or unconsciously, we are every day helping to settle the question whether our old age shall be sweet and peaceful or bitter and wretched. It is worth our while, then, to think a little how to make sure of a happy old age.

We must live a useful life. Nothing good ever comes out of idleness or out of selfishness. The standing water stagnates and breeds decay and death. It is the running stream that keeps pure and sweet. The fruit of an idle life is never joy and peace. Years lived selfishly never become garden-spots in the field of memory. Happiness comes out of self-denial for the good of others. Sweet always are the memories of good deeds done and sacrifices made. Their incense, like heavenly perfume, comes floating up from the fields of toil and fills old age with holy fragrance. When one has lived to bless others, one has many grateful, loving friends whose affection proves a wondrous source of joy when the days of feebleness come. Bread cast upon the waters is found again after many days.

I see some people who do not seem to want to make friends. They are unsocial, unsympathetic, cold, distant, disobliging, selfish. Others, again, make no effort to retain their friends. They cast them away for the slightest

cause. But they are robbing their later years of joys they cannot afford to lose. If we would walk in the warmth of friendship's beams in the late evening-time, we must seek to make to ourselves loyal and faithful friends in the busy hours that come before. This we can do by a ministry of kindness and self-forgetfulness. This was part at least of what our Lord meant in that counsel which falls so strangely on our ears until we understand it: "Make to yourselves friends of the mammon of unrighteousness, that when you fail, they may receive you into everlasting habitations."

Again, we must live a pure and holy life. Every one carries in himself the sources of his own happiness or wretchedness. Circumstances have really very little to do with our inner experiences. It matters little in the determination of one's degree of enjoyment whether he live in a cottage or a palace. It is self, after all, that in largest measure gives the color to our skies and the tone to the music we hear. A happy heart sees rainbows and brilliance everywhere, even in darkest clouds, and hears sweet strains of song even amid the loudest wailings of the storm; and a sad heart, unhappy and discontented, sees spots in the sun, specks in the rarest fruits, and something with which to find fault in the most perfect of God's works, and hears discords and jarring notes in the heavenliest music. So it comes about that this whole question must be settled from within. The fountains rise in the heart itself. The old man, like the snail, carries his house on his back. He may change neighbors or homes or scenes or companions, but he cannot get away from himself and his own past. Sinful years put thorns in the pillow on which the head of old age rests. Lives of passion and evil store away bitter fountains from which the old man has to drink.

Sin may seem pleasant to us now, but we must not forget how it will appear when we get past it and turn to look back upon it; especially must we keep in mind how it will seem from a dying pillow. Nothing brings such pure peace and quiet joy at the close as a well-lived past. We are every day laying up the food on which we must feed in the closing years. We are hanging up pictures about the walls of our hearts that we shall have to look at when we sit in the shadows. How important that we live pure and holy lives! Even forgiven sins will mar the peace of old age, for the ugly scars will remain.

Summing all up in one word, only Christ can make any life, young or old, truly beautiful or truly happy. Only He can cure the heart's restless fever and give quietness and calmness. Only He can purify that sinful fountain within us, our corrupt nature, and make us holy. To have a peaceful and blessed ending to life, we must live it with Christ. Such a life grows brighter even to its close. Its last days are the sunniest and the sweetest. The more earth's joys fail, the nearer and the more satisfying do the comforts become. The nests over which the wing of God droops, which in the bright summer days of prosperous strength lay hidden among the leaves, stand out uncovered in the days of decay and feebleness when winter has stripped the branches bare. And for such a life death has no terrors. The tokens of its approach are but "the land-birds lighting on the shrouds, telling the weary mariner that he is nearing the haven." The end is but the touching of the weather-beaten keel on the shore of glory.