

Pressing on in Old Age

If ever there was a subject on which Berridge has something to say, something which is desperately needed today – and will become even more necessary with the rise in life expectancy – the believer in old age is that subject. But before I get into the substance of this chapter, let me address any young person reading this booklet. Yes, this chapter is about the aged believer, the inevitable decline that comes with age. But it also speaks of the possibility of continued, and even enhanced, spiritual life during those years of physical and mental decline. And you will not forget, will you, that Berridge was once young like you? Remember also, that, if the Lord spares you, you will yourself grow old. Moreover, that time will come sooner than you think! Well, then, if you would spend your final days on earth, blazing like autumn leaves for God's glory, live for Jesus *now* by the Spirit, and cultivate the spirituality of heart and mind which Berridge displayed, and you will have fewer regrets when your dying days come.

In a letter to Richard Woodgate, 21st April 1775, Berridge was blunt:

Elderly Christians are apt to grow lazy and lousy,¹ wise and foolish, and thus we bring many stripes on our back. More secret prayer and watchfulness would prevent a deal of physic.²

And how big a part 'physic' – usually tablets – plays in old age today!³

¹ 'Lousy' – sick or unwell?

² Pibworth: *Letters* p242.

³ 'How many a day are you on?' I wonder how often that is asked today.

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Writing to Mrs King, 11th April 1778, Berridge started by reference to his recent safe arrival back home after a journey, using it as an illustration of what he wanted to say. He wrote:

Through mercy I got home safe and well. But why did I say I got home? I am only arrived at my [earthly residence]⁴ – and the Lord be praised for that accommodation – but I am travelling still, travelling when I sit, and when I lie down – indeed, when I stand still – travelling apace to my long home [eternity].

Now that's a thought! Recognising the obvious fact that time was passing, he put the solemn truth to work to his profit:

Oh, that my heart may travel to Jesus fast as the minutes travel along.

Yet he had cause to grieve over what he felt to be his inadequate progressive sanctification, and longed to improve:

Every new year seems to travel faster, whilst I travel slower. Lord, quicken my tardy pace. I am weary and ashamed of myself: so near home, and so little dead to self and the world!

In particular, the thought of death struck him forcibly – not the fear of it, but his (as it seemed to him) lack of spirituality:

One foot in the grave, and so little still of the heavenly mind! In my sixty-third year,⁵ and the sickle [death] at hand, yet so little ripe for the harvest!

In saying this, he had hit the nail on the head for most of us. How poor is our spiritual attainment, and how easy it is to excuse ourselves. So much so:

⁴ Berridge wrote: 'Everton Inn'. He meant his home, the vicarage.

⁵ In the 18th century a great age, when life expectancy was about forty. See below, when he was about eighty years old.

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What need we have of alarms, yet how soon an alarm passes over, like a hurricane, and we nestle in the world again! Jesus says: ‘Watch’ [Matt. 26:38,41], but the carnal mind says: ‘A little more sleep’ [Prov. 6:10]. Jesus says: ‘Take up the cross’ [Matt. 16:24], but the carnal mind says: ‘Take your ease’ [Luke 12:19]. Alas, how little do I know of Christ’s self-denying doctrine!

And this, in turn, led him to expose a fault which clings to every preacher – hypocrisy; that is, the gap between our doctrine and our practice. Berridge knew he was not exempt, and he felt it:

I preach of the cross, but preach about it, and [preach] about it without taking it up. No! I think the taking up a cross was an easier matter some years ago [for me] than at present it seems. Then what have I been learning of late years, but the knowledge of doctrines? [that is,] learning how to think and talk, but not how to walk; receiving more light, and losing much love.

How searching! How easy it is to confine the spiritual life to the head, how pleasant the knowledge and discussion of doctrine! Oh to have a heart for Christ, full of the Saviour and warmed by the thought of his love and sense of his presence, even in old age! Berridge, of course, knew he was not alone in missing the mark, in having to admit to falling short of this living experience. And he had words of wisdom for all:

I think, and seem to see, too, that this is the case with many others besides myself. Aged Christians had need [to] be watchful and prayerful, else they quickly grow chaffy⁶ and stumpy.⁷ Instead of hungering for fresh manna, they [are] talking only of the food they ate ten years ago – a sad symptom of a present soul-famine.⁸

⁶ ‘Chaffy’ – worthless, like chaff. Or, perhaps, irritable or irritating, prickly, scratchy, like bits of chaff caught in clothing. Some husks are prickly.

⁷ ‘Stumpy’ – broken down, worn out?

⁸ Pibworth: *Letters* pp277-278.

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In a letter to John Thornton, 20th October 1780, Berridge wrote:

Old age, with its winter aspect, creeps on me apace. My mind waxes feeble as well as my limbs, my windows grow dark, my memory leaks, and my grinders [teeth] are few [Eccles. 12:3]. Much ashamed I am for loving the Lord so little, and doing so little for his name.⁹

Writing again to John Thornton on 27th October 1787, Berridge stated:

My health, through mercy, is rather better than in some years past, but my body grows tottering, my eyes dim, my ears deaf, my faculties feeble.

But this made him think of a better day and long for it:

However, I look for new eyes, new ears and new faculties when this vile [mortal] body is ground down in the grave. Thanks be to Jesus for this prospect, the fruit of his purchase and effect of his grace.¹⁰

Writing to Benjamin Mills, 9th October 1788, Berridge confessed:

Solomon's account of old age suits me well [Eccles. 12]. The windows are dark, the daughters of music are low, the grinders [teeth] cease, for all are gone, and the grasshopper is a burden. Well, thanks be to God through Jesus Christ for the prospect of a better world.¹¹

When he wrote a letter to two aristocratic sisters, Mrs B. Carteret and Mrs Anne Cavendish on 23rd November 1789, Berridge was now nearly eighty and seriously declining: 'crawling on towards Jesus, my mental faculties much decayed, and my animal spirits often low... my eyes are so weak, I can scarce see how I write'. He confessed:

⁹ Pibworth: *Letters* p299.

¹⁰ Pibworth: *Letters* p376.

¹¹ Pibworth: *Letters* p386.

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At times I feel, what you may feel, spiritual affections languid, prayers feeble, and faith weak, dropping into the embers, and not [no?] fire felt.

But, with increasing age, he had learned a valuable lesson in all this, especially how to overcome Satanic assaults:

Formerly, when frames [feelings] were gone, all seemed to be gone, but the Lord is now teaching me to live by faith upon his precious word. I tell him, when my faith is weak: ‘Lord, I do believe in you, for my whole trust is in your blood and righteousness, and you have said [that] whoever believes in you has everlasting life, and shall never come into condemnation’. ‘Pooh, pooh’, says Satan, ‘you are a dead soul, no life in you’. I won’t hearken to his lies, but tell him I have life, though it be feeble, for my heart is daily yearning after Christ, and mourning for an absent Christ is as sure a sign of spiritual life as rejoicing in a felt [experienced] Christ. What is dead has no mourning. A dead body cannot mourn for the world, nor can a dead soul mourn for Christ. ‘No’, says Satan, ‘you will be slain at last, notwithstanding all your fond hopes’. I tell him, though the Lord should seem about to slay me, I will keep on praying and believing [see Job 13:15], and, like Abraham, against hope believe in hope [Rom. 4:18].

He applied the thought to the sisters:

By thus holding up the shield of faith, you will quench the fiery darts of the wicked one. The conflict will be over when the body of sin is broken down,¹² and you will enter into peace, and see that Jesus, whom your soul loves, and be forever with him.

And this in turn moved him to glorious anticipation:

O blessed world! O precious Jesus, who will then fill our souls with everlasting love and joy, and we shall help to fill his heaven with everlasting praises. Come then, dear ladies, go forward, run, or walk, or crawl, as you can. Heaven’s gates are open to receive you, and

¹² I think Berridge means ‘when physical death comes’.

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crowns of glory ready for you, bought with Jesus' precious blood. Hallelujah!¹³

As the apostle declared:

For we know that if the tent that is our earthly home is destroyed, we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. For in this tent we groan, longing to put on our heavenly dwelling, if indeed by putting it on we may not be found naked. For while we are still in this tent, we groan, being burdened – not that we would be unclothed, but that we would be further clothed, so that what is mortal may be swallowed up by life. He who has prepared us for this very thing is God, who has given us the Spirit as a guarantee. So we are always of good courage. We know that while we are at home in the body we are away from the Lord, for we walk by faith, not by sight. Yes, we are of good courage, and we would rather be away from the body and at home with the Lord. So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil (2 Cor. 5:1-10).

On the 10th April 1790, Berridge wrote again to the sisters, and in the same vein as before, and offering them much solid comfort:

Well, then, my dear ladies, lift up your heads and rejoice, for your deliverance is nigh. A little more praying and trusting, a few more conflicts with sin and sorrow, and your wilderness trials are over. Jesus stands at his gate, crying out: 'Fear not, only believe. I am with you, and will not forsake you'. Disturb not [yourselves] about the manner of dying, but leave it to him to sweeten the passage... Again I say, fear not, only believe, for such as trust in him are never confounded. If a conflict should assault your faith, hope against hope [Rom. 4:18], and trust him in darkness, as well as in light, when you can see him, and when you cannot. In

¹³ Pibworth: *Letters* pp395-396.

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the meantime, give thanks daily for what he has done [in] calling you, and keeping you out of the world, and trust him for what is to come.¹⁴

In the words of Joseph Hart:

*How good is the God we adore,
Our faithful, unchangeable Friend!
His love is as great as his power,
And knows neither measure nor end!*

*'Tis Jesus the first and the last,
Whose Spirit shall guide us safe home,
We'll praise him for all that is past,
And trust him for all that's to come.*

In a letter to Miss L., 6th May 1792, Berridge wrote a highly spiritual letter, even though he was clearly reaching the end of his earthly pilgrimage:

Once more I am paying a corresponding visit to you, and others, expecting it to be my last on account of my eyes, which are growing so dim that I can read but little of what I love dearly – the precious word of God. I now lament the many years I spent at Cambridge in learning useless lumber, that wisdom of the world which is foolishness with God [1 Cor. 1:20]. I see nothing worth knowing but Jesus Christ, and him crucified [1 Cor. 2:2], for him to know is life eternal [John 17:3].

He spoke directly to his correspondent:

Follow him at all times, and let your heart dance after him, as David danced after the ark [2 Sam. 6:16]. And when he comes into your bosom, hold him fast, and turn all other company out. He loves to be alone with his bride. You may find him in the shop, or in the street, if you seek him there, and often whisper in his ear: 'Dear Jesus, come and bless me'. He sometimes surprises us with his visit, and comes unexpectedly, yet he loves to see the doors open, and the bosom waiting for him. Many kind visits are lost through a gadding heart [a heart wandering after pleasure or aimlessly]. Therefore

¹⁴ Pibworth: *Letters* p399.

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keep at home with the Lord, and let him hear much of your loving talk, and tell him all your wants, and all your grievances, and cast all your care upon him [1 Pet. 5:7], and hide nothing from him. Lean firmly upon him, and he will cheer your heart in every trying hour, and bring you safe at last to his eternal home, where sin and sorrow never come, but where joy and peace forever dwell. In this world, we must expect tribulation [John 16:33]. It is the Christian's fare, and comes because it is wanted [needed], and stays no longer than whilst it is wanted [needed]. Hereafter he will make us know, if not before, that he has done all things well [Mark 7:37].

As for himself, he was resigned to his Master's sovereign good pleasure:

I am very feeble in body, but as well as I should be, and must suffer my heavenly physician to prescribe for me.¹⁵

In a letter, probably from Mrs E.Elliott, Berridge had been asked after his health. On 2nd August 1792, he replied:

Eyes very dim, ears deaf, head much shattered, and spirits very low, yet much exempt from pain. Here my Jesus shows his tenderness. He knows his old horse can scarce carry his legs, and he will not overload him. I am apt to think the Lord may continue me here a year or two longer because he has sent me a supply [preacher] for that time.

In fact, he had only a few months to live – he would die the following January.

Berridge then spoke of the recent loss of two of his most faithful supporters, and the effect that this had had upon him. John Thornton had died in 1790, and the Countess of Huntingdon the following year, and this had made Berridge concerned for the future. But the Lord drew near to him and assured him:

¹⁵ Pibworth: *Letters* pp402-403.

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Having lost my benefactors, I was thinking what I must do. ‘Go on and trust’, was the word. When we are low, Satan will batter us with unbelief. I dare not argue with Satan, but cast myself at Jesus’ feet, committing soul and body to him, asking and expecting his assistance, and it is not long before it comes with a loving reproof: ‘O you of little of faith, why did you doubt?’ [Matt. 14:31].

And still he was doing all he could to serve his Lord, feeble though he had grown:

The last two Sundays, I was led to church and into the pulpit. My voice was feeble but hearable, and Christ was precious.

And this raised his thoughts – his heart – to heaven:

Oh, to see Jesus as he is, and surrounded with his ransomed people, hearts full of love pouring out hallelujahs, and filling heaven with his praise.

And so, in Hart’s words, Berridge praised Jesus for all that he had done for him, in him and with him, and trusted his Master for the rest of his earthly life, and then for eternity:

Thanks to my Jesus for putting me in the way of his kingdom, and for holding me on hitherto. Give me, dear Lord, a safe and honourable passage through the wilderness, and a joyful entrance into Canaan.

Berridge closed his letter with a final greeting:

The Lord bless you with great and endless blessings, and keep you under his care. Amen.¹⁶

And that, too, is a fitting conclusion for this small volume.

¹⁶ Pibworth: *Letters* pp405-406.