

Publishing Editor's column

AT THE beginning of the twentieth century the average life expectancy of a man was forty-eight years, that of a woman fifty-two. By the end of the century it had risen to seventy-five for a man and eighty for a woman. These figures are typical of the developed world, and are, of course, almost entirely due to advances in medical knowledge. Forecasts are that life expectancy will continue to improve. People expect as of right that treatment will be available for almost any condition, and the conquering of diseases hitherto difficult or impossible to cure is predicted.

In the suburb of Norwich where we live there are a lot of old people. Our neighbour is one such, a widow in her late seventies who comes from a large family. When we talk to her over the garden fence, or take her for her weekly shopping, her conversation is often to do with the ailments of either her brothers and sisters or people in the neighbourhood. For her, old age, and the ailments that generally come with it, are to be dreaded. Moreover, her mood is not improved by the world in which we live; computerisation confuses her, continual reports of crime and violence alarm her, news of war and bloodshed all over the world disturbs her. She comments on our strong faith, but all attempts to speak of the hope we have fall on deaf ears. Conversations with other elderly folk in the neighbourhood indicate that her attitude is not uncommon, especially amongst those living on their own.

All this illustrates that increased life expectancy is not an unmitigated blessing. For those with reasonable health, companionship and the ability to get about, life can still be enjoyable in old age; but many lack these blessings, and for them life becomes a burden. Truly, as the psalmist says, "The days of our years are threescore years and ten; and if by reason of strength they be fourscore years, yet is their strength labour and sorrow; for it is soon cut off, and we fly away" (Ps. 90:10), though there is, of course, considerable variance in how long individuals live and how much they suffer.

What a blessing it is, therefore, to have something to look forward to beyond this life! How different from the attitude of gloom and pessimism referred to above is that of the brother or sister who has truly embraced the gospel and knows that, whatever the troubles and pains of this life, there is something infinitely superior to come! Though it is distressing to know of the suffering and distress which is in the world, it is comforting to know that the Kingdom of God will put all things to right. Bodily infirmities and the problems of this life can make us all the more appreciative of God's mercy in giving us the hope of eternal life: "though our outward man perish, yet the inward man is renewed day by day. For our light affliction, which is but for a moment, worketh for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory [note the contrast]; while we look not at the things which are seen, but at the things which are not seen: for the things which are seen are temporal; but the things which are not seen are eternal" (2 Cor. 4:16-18).

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