

LOST
IN THE
MIDDLE

Midlife and the Grace of God

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To Dave and Ed

You have been my teachers, friends, and partners in ministry for 20 years. I am grateful for all the ways you have helped me to see, to think, and to hear. Most of all I am thankful for how you have helped me grow in love and appreciation for my Lord.

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Preface: A New Awareness

I don't believe one grows older. I think that what happens early on in life is that at a certain age one stands still and stagnates. —T. S. ELIOT

There is still no cure for the common birthday.

—JOHN GLENN



I like to be busy. I don't like to analyze everything, because it gets in the way of doing. For me, one day of frenetic activity layers over another, day after day, until days have become weeks, weeks have become months, and months have become years. I try to spend most of my time looking forward, living expectantly. But recently, in one powerful moment, life thundered in on me with a power I was unprepared for. It wasn't a dramatic moment. No one in the room even noticed.

It was Christmas, a time of year I love. We had decorated the house, wrapped many gifts, and prepared more food than any one family should eat (though we tried). We had just finished our wonderful Christmas day feast and were all sitting around the table engaged in a gaggle of random, interweaving conversations, when for no reason I got quiet and looked across the table. To my surprise I saw two men sitting across from me discussing their careers, one in marketing and the other in design. My immediate thought was, *Where did these men come*

from? What right do they have intruding on our family Christmas? As I listened further I realized these men weren't interlopers; they were my sons! Men, not boys! Why weren't they discussing skateboarding or arguing over who gets to do his wash first?

It didn't seem possible that they could be my sons. *I'm not that old! There simply haven't been enough years. There are things I wanted to do with them. This whole thing just is not possible,* I said to myself. I was alone in my head, and no one around me had a clue that all of a sudden my eyes had been opened. Things would never again be the same.

I now have to look up to speak to my youngest child, who is in college. The old proverbial nest is, in fact, empty. I am no longer a newly married man. I am no longer a young pastor. I am no longer the father of four young children, or even a bunch of teenagers. I am not about to celebrate my tenth anniversary or the purchase of our first home. I am not facing the excitement and fear of a new place of ministry. I am not embarking on the first grand family vacation. I am not in the midst of studying for an advanced degree.

Most of my family firsts are behind me. I am not making the first breakfast in bed for my wife. Our children have all spoken their first words, taken their first steps, had their first day at school, finished their first music lesson, and survived their first overnight stay with a friend. They have all attempted their first sport, graduated from their first school, had their first job, and survived their first romance.

There have been scores of report cards and progress reports. There have been countless teacher's conferences, athletic events, camps, and proms. There have been more day-trips, weekends away, and vacations than I am able to recount. There have been endless moments of discipline, correction, and instruction. We have purchased mountains of clothes, truckloads of food, and enough notebook paper to reforest the Amazon!

Luella and I have talked and prayed, discussed and wept. We have escaped to an endless number of restaurants just to be

together. We have gone on many weekend mini-vacations to catch our breath and renew our love. We have left behind a parking lot of used-up vehicles, a warehouse of out-grown clothes, and mounds of broken glasses, dishes, and decorations—the artifacts of a family civilization gone by.

Yet, it all passed by with blinding speed and went largely unnoticed—until that watershed Christmas day. It was a moment of profound personal awareness. I finally saw it: I am not young anymore! I have a huge chunk of my life behind me. I have more life behind me than ahead of me, and if you are reading this book, there is a good possibility you do, too.

The next day, things were different. As I got out of bed, I was more aware of aches and pains than I had been before. The face I shaved seemed older, and I had more gray hair than I had noticed before. I found myself, in the quiet moments, musing about the past more than I ever had before. My eyes were open, and I couldn't shut them anymore.

It is hard to make sense out of your own story while you're living in the middle of it. But God hasn't left us to wander through the hallways of our own dramas. He has given us a bigger story, the story of redemption that fills Scripture's pages. This grand story enables us not only to exegete the internal and external realities of our own stories, but more importantly, to come to know him in new and glorious ways.

The Bible never discusses midlife, just like it never discusses teenagers. Yet the Bible is able to unpack any of life's experiences because it was written by the One who made them all. You do not have to be lost in the middle of your own story. You do not have to be paralyzed by regret, defeated by aging, and discouraged by the passing of your dreams. You do not have to make greater trouble out of the trouble you are already experiencing. This time of life, which can seem like the end of many things, can actually welcome you to a brand new way of living. As is so often the case in your walk with the Lord, this moment of pain is also a moment of grace. Because of him, there is hope for you on the other side.

Life on this side of glory is hard. This world *is* a broken place. You will face things that beat at the borders of your faith. Because of this, all of us need to occasionally step back, slow down, and stop, look, and listen. My hope is that *Lost in the Middle* will help you to do just that.

One final word: Although this book is targeted at those who are struggling with the issues of midlife, it has a much broader net than that. *Lost in the Middle* can help all who are struggling with life in this broken world and have lost their way. The Bible speaks with power and practicality to everything you are facing, thinking, and feeling. The God who seems so distant to you in this moment is actually near and active. *Lost in the Middle* is written to give you eyes to see him, to see yourself more clearly, and to find the functional hope you need to carry on.

Paul David Tripp
March 2004

Introduction: The Bible and Midlife

*Why do you say, O Jacob,
and complain, O Israel,
“My way is hidden from the LORD;
my cause is disregarded by my God”?
Do you not know?
Have you not heard?
The LORD is the everlasting God,
the Creator of the ends of the earth.
He will not grow tired or weary,
and his understanding no one can fathom.
He gives strength to the weary
and increases the power of the weak.
Even youths grow tired and weary,
and young men stumble and fall;
but those who hope in the LORD
will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.*

—ISAIAH



Let me present you with two seemingly contradictory statements and then connect them for you:

- ◆ The Bible has nothing whatsoever to say about midlife crisis.
- ◆ The Bible tells you everything you need to know about midlife crisis.

Let's consider the first statement. If you go to Scripture looking for midlife crisis as a topic, you will not find anything. Of course, this is true with many topics. As a result, many Christians unwittingly adopt a "Bible-for-the-religious-part-of-my-life" perspective on Scripture. They tend to seek the Bible's help only where it has spoken clearly about certain topics. As a result they will tend to look elsewhere for the wisdom they need in the vast areas of life that are not *directly* addressed within the pages of Scripture.

Or they may fall into another subtle error. If they are Christians, they know that the Bible is a book filled with stunning wisdom revealed by the God who is the source of all wisdom. They will be hungry to know his mind in every area of their lives. Driven by this zeal, they may bend, twist, and stretch Scripture to provide the information that they are seeking.

Now, both groups of people have made the same mistake. Both view the Bible as God's great encyclopedia, a topical index of human problems and divine solutions. The one person is a bit sad that the Bible doesn't speak to more of life. The other person is growingly convinced that the Bible speaks to more topics than he first thought. Both have missed the genius, the core of what the Bible is really about.

Because the Bible is not an encyclopedia, it is right to say that the Bible has nothing whatsoever to say about midlife crisis. In this book we are not going to cull through the history, poetry, prophecy, and teachings of Scripture hunting for the embedded midlife material. We're not going to wonder if David's sin with Bathsheba was a midlife crisis, or if Moses was having a midlife moment when he wrongly whacked the rock for water. We won't look at the Gospels for any evidence that Jesus struggled with midlife temptation. This is simply not

what the Bible is, or how it has been organized. Yet we will not go elsewhere for the truth and wisdom that we need.

The Bible is a narrative, and because it is a narrative, it tells us everything we need to know about midlife concerns. The Bible is the great story of redemption that encompasses the stories of every human life. It is *the* overarching “everything” story. It is comprehensive in scope without being exhaustive in content. It gives us wisdom for everything without directly discussing every particular thing.

The great narrative of the Word of God gives me everything I need to know about God, about myself, about the purpose and meaning of life, and about what is true, good, and beautiful. The Bible is the lens through which I look at all of life. In it I find the truths, values, goals, and hopes that are meant to give shape and direction to my life. All of these things are cords woven into the fabric of one grand and amazing story. It is God’s story. He is the principal actor and the grand hero. Without his story, the doctrines, principles, commands, and promises make no sense whatsoever.

In light of this story, every passage of Scripture reveals things about God, about people, about life in this fallen world, about redemption and eternity, which helps me understand whatever I am considering at the moment. For example, most of what the Bible has to say about marriage is not found in the passages that explicitly discuss marriage. Psalm 73 is a passage on marriage because it exegetes one kind of struggle that every person living in the fallen world will experience. 1 Peter 1 is a passage on marriage because it lays out what God is doing in the period of time between our salvation and his coming—the period of time in which every marriage exists. Revelation 5 is a passage on marriage because it allows us to eavesdrop on eternity and thus to clarify the values that must structure every Christian marriage.

So, even though the Bible never directly discusses the experience of midlife crisis, it is a rich resource for understanding it and for learning how to respond to it. But before we exam-

ine the particular experiences of midlife, it is important to examine how four biblical perspectives exegete or interpret the deepest issues of every human experience.

The Bible Presents Us with a Real World

You cannot read very long before encountering the shocking honesty of the Bible. Living in the fallen world isn't minimized or sugar coated. As early as the fourth chapter of Genesis, you encounter a sibling homicide—the kind of account that would cause you to shiver if you read it in your morning newspaper. From domestic violence to war, plagues, and diseases; from vicious animals and sexual perversity to corrupt government; Scripture unflinchingly depicts the daily drama of real life. It is a world of broken promises, failed expectations, and dashed dreams. It is a world where bad people seem to prosper and good people find themselves suffering. It is a world where good things go bad, where fresh things decay, where young things grow old, and strong things grow weak. It is a familiar world because it is the same world we live in.

The Bible is also honest about *why* the world is the way it is. Why does Cain kill Abel? Why is a global flood necessary? Why are spouses ever unfaithful? Why does David need to run from his own son Absalom? Why do people tell lies? Why does Judas betray the Messiah? Why do children rebel against their parents? Why is debauchery ever attractive? Why is there any philosophy that competes with the truth? The Bible rises boldly to answer these questions that capture the experience of every person.

The explanation Scripture gives may seem simple, yet it is the only perspective that is extensive enough to span the vast range of what is wrong, from dark inner personal motivations to wide cultural, historical, and environmental maladies. We live in a world that has been bent and twisted by a force so fundamental, so powerful, that it literally impacts every human thought, every human intention, every situation, every expe-

rience of society and every moment of history. This force is the inescapable pathology of the created universe. It is sin. One syllable, three letters in English, yet a concept without which it is impossible to ever understand your life or mine.

This foundational issue is powerfully unfolded in Romans 8:20–22:

For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the glorious freedom of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

What a powerful description! Three phrases in this short passage capture real life in the fallen world. First, the creation was *subjected to frustration*. Things simply don't work the way that they were ordained to work. Next, Paul says that the world is in *bondage to decay*. The mournful fact is that everything is in the process of dying. Finally, he says that the creation *groans as in pains of childbirth*. The world we live in writhes in pain so acute that it cannot be ignored.

All of these realities find concrete expression in the pages of Scripture. From the drama of wars between nations (Joshua) to the dark tunnel of personal despair (Psalm 88), from the joys of a long-awaited infant's birth (Luke 1) to the mourners at a dead man's tomb (John 11), the Bible captures what real life is about with a profound familiarity and clarity.

So how does the Bible help us deal with a topic like midlife? By providing us with *context*—an honest and expansive portrayal of the real world. Many people are lost simply because they do not understand the context in which they live, work, play, and worship. They are constantly surprised and unprepared because they have not benefited from the functional wisdom that the Bible affords.

The Bible Introduces Us to Real People

The characters of the Bible are not wax figures in a museum of human nobility. Nor are they cartoon characters with saccharine smiles and melodic voices. We recognize the people of the Bible because they are just like us. Adam and Eve are skillful blame-shifters. King Saul is paranoid and duplicitous. Peter is inexplicably proud. When we gaze into the pages of Scripture we encounter people in familiar relationships: they're sons and daughters, husbands and wives, preachers and poets. We see crowds of onlookers, needy beggars on the street, political leaders caught between two agendas, people of diverse ethnicities and social classes, teachers and students, craftsmen and artisans, lawyers and judges, the elderly and the very young. A rich display of the variegated colors of humanity dyes almost every page of Scripture.

God's Word also carefully displays the full range of human passion. We see joy and rejoicing, grief and mourning, fear and timidity, contentment and delight, jealousy and greed, faith and doubt, patience and perseverance. We see rage, discouragement, hatred, self-sacrificing love, lust, obsession, and selfishness. We are able to witness how human beings respond to the situations and people around them. And we are ushered into the hallways of human hearts to examine their thoughts, inspect their desires, and understand their choices. In the process we ourselves are exposed and confronted.

Even the Bible's commands and principles depict real flesh-and-blood humanity, addressing the same mundane issues that every human being experiences. These commands speak to the eyes, the tongue, the hands, and the mind. They tell you how to respond to mistreatment, how to plan for the future, how to view your government, how to reconcile a relationship, how to instruct and correct a child, how to lead a church, how to love your husband or wife, how to treat the elderly, and how to live with your neighbor.

There is no better means of self-knowledge and self-exposure than the mirror of Scripture. As I examine myself in its

light, I learn fundamental things about myself that have practical implications for everything I encounter in this broken world. The Bible exposes us for who we really are.

Scripture never allows us to believe in a neutral, undirected, or unmotivated humanity. It requires us to admit that behind everything we do or say, we are pursuing *something*—some hope or dream or thing that we refuse to live without. There are things we value so much that we will willingly sacrifice other good things to get them. We will debase our humanity in order to deify the creation. The very things we seek to possess begin to possess us. We live for shadow glories and forget the only Glory that is worth living for.

In its masterful portraiture of humanity, the Bible requires us to make one painfully humbling admission—the one confession we work so hard to avoid: *that our deepest, most pervasive, and most abiding problem is us!* If you can humbly make this admission, your life will never be the same.

Once again, see how this connects to midlife. Why is it that so many people in Western culture tend to lose their way during this time of life? Because all the labyrinthine pathways of human existence on which Scripture takes us lead to one place. They lead to *us*. Only here will we ever understand the true nature of our need and the true magnitude of God's provision.

The Bible Calls Us to the Worship of a Real God

The God of Scripture is not the hero of myth. He is not the projection of weak minds who simply need something more to depend on than themselves. He, the creator, sustainer, and ruler of all that is, is the only being in the universe worthy of worship. The light of his glory shines on every page of Scripture. His voice is heard first, he scripts the end of the drama, and every scene in between is dominated by his presence.

He exists without a beginning and has no need of sustenance. He is the ultimate in wisdom yet has never had a single teacher. He made everything that exists but had no raw mate-

rials with which to work. He has never failed and has no personal flaw. Every word he has spoken is true, and every promise he has ever made comes true. He is never confused, dismayed, or overwhelmed. He is never wrongfully jealous, demanding, or enraged. He is present everywhere all at once. There is no circumstance that is not under his control. All things continue to work because he holds everything together by the power of his will.

He has the power to damn but delights to forgive. He can move mountains but is tender, gentle, and kind. His wisdom and knowledge are beyond our imagination, yet he speaks in simple words that anyone can understand. He is the source of all true justice, yet he is abundant in mercy. He is distant in his glory yet ever present and ever near. He demands our allegiance but gives us the power to obey. He calls us to follow but patiently allows us to learn and grow. Every day he gives us what we have not achieved and could not earn.

Yet this grand and glorious God, for the purpose of redemption, becomes a man. The untraversable line between Creator and creature is crossed. The Word becomes flesh. The feet of God touch earth! The voice of God is heard on earth! The LORD comes as the Second Adam, the Word of Life, the Final Priest, and the Sacrificial Lamb. He satisfies God's requirements, he atones for God's anger, and he defeats death.

This meeting of glory and humanity reveals all other gods to be the counterfeits that they actually are, figments of man's imagination and images made by man's hand. It is only the God of ultimate glory and incarnating grace who offers what is needed in the face of the horrible personal and environmental ravages of sin. He who created it all has faced what we have faced. He who is pure and holy paid the ultimate price for sin. He who is the creator of life walked away from death. He can help!

How does all of this help us as we approach the experience of midlife? The revelation of God in Scripture is the only place to find real hope. He is the only one who is at once completely

above everything that we face yet is intimately familiar with all of it by personal experience. We run to him because he is Lord over it all and has the power to help.

The Bible Welcomes Us to Real Redemption

The world is full of false systems of redemption. Government, education, philosophy, sociology, and psychology all promise redemption, yet none can deliver, because human systems can never redeem. If they could have dealt with the comprehensive and devastating results of sin, Jesus would have never come. He came to earth to suffer and die, because that was precisely what was needed. The Bible invites me to the hope that can only be found in a Redeemer. I need more than help; I need rescue. I need someone to do for me what I could not do for myself. What I grapple with most is not the evil outside of me, but the evil inside of me. If there is no help and hope for what is *inside* of me, there is no way that I will ever properly deal with what is *outside* of me.

Two biblical passages illustrate the need for real redemption. The first passage, Genesis 6:5, is devastating in its portrayal of the comprehensive and internal nature of our struggle with sin. “The LORD saw how great man’s wickedness on the earth had become, and that every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time.” Wow! Let these words sink in. Sin is about something more foundational than doing what is wrong or failing to do what is right. Sin dyes every cell of the heart and twists everything we do toward evil. We want to believe that we are better than that. We want to hold on to the fantasy of the pure and untainted intention. We want to think that our gossip was really a prayer request. We want to think that it was not ugly self-absorption but physical tiredness that made us irritable. We want to believe that it was zeal for truth not self-righteous impatience that caused us to speak loudly and sharply. Proverbs 16:2 says, “All a man’s ways seem innocent to him, but motives are weighed by the LORD.”

Genesis 6 rips open our hearts and reveals the sin at the depths of our every thought and every intention. If this is true, then you cannot educate me out of it. You cannot exercise enough power over me to squelch its effects. You cannot provide practical techniques for rising above it. Without divine help I am riddled with the cancer of sin, and my prognosis is death. Anything that cannot eradicate this cancer within is powerless to help me.

But there is a second passage that must be placed alongside of Genesis 6.

The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.

(Hebrews 1:3)

With three words, “*he sat down*,” the writer of Hebrews captures the completeness of Christ’s work. Jesus did everything that was needed to deal with every one of sin’s effects. He was able to do what the Old Testament priests could never do: to stop.

The Old Testament priests were called to sacrifice for the ongoing sins of God’s people. Exhausted and knee-deep in blood, they offered sacrifice after sacrifice, day after day. If we viewed the scene, we would find it nauseating. It wasn’t just the daily offerings but dozens of daily, weekly, and seasonal sacrifices offered according to the religious calendar. Thousands of animals would be slaughtered every year. Yet it was never enough. Before one layer of blood dried, more was sprinkled. The stench of burning flesh never abated. This sacrificial labor was never permitted to stop, because the power of sin was never broken and the penalty for sin never fully paid for. So it is an amazing thing to read that after Jesus did his work, *he sat down!* The only reason he could have possibly sat down is that he had done everything that needed to be done to deal

with every aspect of sin. Full and complete redemption had been provided.

Put the following two Bible phrases together and you will begin to understand the magnitude and practicality of the redemption that could only be supplied by Christ Jesus: “Every inclination of the thoughts of his heart was only evil all the time,” and “After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down.” In Scripture’s redemption story, the sadness of the totality of our depravity kisses the celebration of the totality of Christ’s provision. God is satisfied, Christ has sat down, and there is hope for us—a practical hope stretching from now to the ends of eternity. As a result, we come to every topic of our lives as the saddest and the most celebrant people on earth. This functional tension between sadness and celebration results in the kind of practical wisdom that the Bible alone affords. Midlife must be viewed from these two redemptive perspectives.

Boiling It All Down

These four biblical perspectives (Real World, Real People, Real God, Real Redemption) give us essential wisdom for anything we will ever face in human life. Only when we see the world exegeted as it really is, ourselves as we really are, God in all his glory, and the completeness of the Redeemer’s work, can we have a balanced and functionally worthwhile perspective on anything.

Let me detail what these four perspectives provide for us as we approach a topic like midlife.

1. *A comprehensive worldview that addresses everything that is.* Scripture is not exhaustive in that it directly addresses every subject, but it is comprehensive in that it gives information for understanding all aspects of reality.

2. *Practical perspectives on every human problem.* The Bible has something to say about everything that is important for human life. It gives us an essential understanding of these things and how we should respond to them.

3. *Life before death.* The Bible doesn't simply promise that some day in distant eternity we will know life. The Bible calls us to embrace a quality of life *now* that would otherwise be impossible without the person and work of the Lord Jesus.

4. *Real hope of self-knowledge.* You do not have to be trapped in the prison of personal spiritual blindness. You can see, know, and understand yourself, even to the thoughts and motives of your own heart. This is possible because the Bible functions as the ultimate mirror. When you gaze into it, you see yourself as you really are.

5. *Practical help for the deepest issues of the human experience.* In the Bible I find the Creator who made me and therefore knows everything about me. I find a Savior who walked on earth in my shoes and understands everything about my experience. The Bible faces the deepest issues of the human experience head-on, with bright hope and functional wisdom.

6. *Real hope for lasting personal change.* Because Christ has come, change is really possible. The Bible, in all of its shocking honesty, is also shockingly positive and hopeful. There is not a cynical page in all of Scripture. There is no hint of giving up. The promise of radical and lasting personal change brightens every dark corner of sin that is found in Scripture.

7. *Real comfort.* The more you read the Bible, the more you realize that no human experience is outside of the scope of the Gospel. God understands it all, and his Son has covered it all. Every day we can allow ourselves to be comforted with the amazing biblical reality that provision has been made for everything we will face.

As we begin a journey of biblical and personal discovery, we must recognize the personal challenge that these seven benefits of a biblical perspective lay before us. Too often, even in our celebration of the wisdom of Scripture, we hold it separate from the situations and relationships of our daily lives. Ask yourself, right now, where you have allowed yourself to respond to the push and pull of life in this fallen world in less than biblical ways. Where have you failed to observe scrip-

ture's honest depiction of humanity and reserved its wisdom for the "religious" part of your life? Where have you sought insight into particular life challenges from every source *except* the Bible? Where have you ignored the internal source of your problems and relentlessly sought to place blame outside of yourself? Where have you reduced Christ's work to forgiveness of sins and lost hope in the total renovation of your heart, your relationships, and your world?

It is easy to pursue a religion of the mind; it is another thing to surrender your heart, and therefore every aspect of your life, to God. The hope of this book is nothing short of changed hearts leading to radically transformed lives. We cannot settle for expanding knowledge and enhanced understanding. We cannot because God will not. God demands all of us. He will not settle for a portion of who we are. Accordingly, as we begin our examination of the crisis that often breaks out in midlife, I urge you to make the following commitments:

1. I will carefully examine and unpack this important period of my life.
2. I will seek to understand all that I unpack from the vantage point of Scripture.
3. I will look at myself in the always-accurate mirror of the Word of God.
4. I will personally identify and own the areas in which change is needed.
5. I will resolve to act on the basis of the hope and help that is found in the Lord Jesus Christ.

Will you make these commitments as we take this journey?

C h a p t e r 1

Midlife: A Portrait

I think age is a very high price to pay for maturity.

—TOM STOPPARD

I suppose real old age begins when one looks backward rather than forward.

—MAY SARTON



They were in their late forties, yet that first morning they seemed much older. She slumped into my office as if she really did have the weight of the world on her shoulders. He seemed irritated from the get-go. They had come to talk about their marriage, but whatever problems they were experiencing were the result of something bigger, something unexpected, for which neither of them had been prepared.

They had married right out of college. Bill soon landed a very good job and Tammy got pregnant in their first few months of marriage. They were both delighted with how their lives had turned out. The purchase of their one and only house was soon to follow. Tammy thought she was living everyone's dream: a great husband with a good job, the house of her

dreams, and a family on the way. They talked much about the years to come, looking forward to building their family, adding on to their house, and the career advancement that was surely in Bill's future. It all seemed too good to be true.

They found a good church to attend and began to meet couples their age. It seemed like the final piece of the puzzle was in place. Tammy's pregnancy flew by quickly until the last month when she began to experience complications and was sent to bed for the remainder of her pregnancy. It was a violent and painful delivery, followed by the devastating news that she could not get pregnant again. Bill and Tammy were surprised and saddened, but it was soon overshadowed by the joy they felt as they held little Lori in their arms. She was perfectly healthy, right down to ten chubby fingers and ten symmetrical little toes.

Tammy decided that if this was all the family she was going to have, she was going to do it right. She threw her heart and soul into her precious little girl. No job was too arduous or no expense too great. From early morning to late at night, Lori was the center of Tammy's attention. She didn't forget that Bill existed, but she saw Lori as the central focus of her job description. Bill didn't mind. He was very thankful for the amazing gift of this little girl, and he doted on her any way he could.

Soon Lori was in school. Tammy was involved in every way she could with Lori's education. She initiated a volunteer mother's program and worked as a classroom aid. Bill and Tammy enrolled Lori in ballet classes, piano lessons, and gymnastics. Each weeknight was dedicated to Lori's homework, with either mom or dad at her side at all times. Bill and Tammy attended a myriad of performances, recitals, sporting events, and award banquets. They took Lori on every kind of vacation a child would love and sent her to all the best camps. They made sure that she was involved with their church's children's program and then with the youth group.

Eventually Lori was ready to graduate from high school. In all the celebration of her accomplishments, Tammy was dread-

ing the moment when Lori would be out of the house and no longer at the top of her personal job description. So when Lori was awarded a scholarship to a local university, Tammy was greatly relieved. Although Lori lived in a dorm, she was home every weekend and at least one night per week for supper. And because she was still in town, Bill and Tammy were able to participate in many of her activities.

Then in September of her senior year in college, Lori met the man of her dreams. Tammy knew that she should be delighted for her daughter, but she was not. A sense of dread followed her throughout her days. She joyfully participated in all of the wedding planning, determined that Lori would have the most perfect wedding that she could pull off. Yet she was often sad and tearful during the process. Just before the wedding, Lori's fiancé surprised her with the news that he had been given an unexpected job offer in Seattle. They flew out for the weekend and soon concluded that it was an offer they could not refuse. Three days before the wedding, Lori broke the news to her mom and dad; she would be moving three thousand miles away.

Tammy wanted to be happy for Lori, but it felt like she had been told she had cancer, like something inside of her had died. She cried herself to sleep that night and was teary-eyed right through the wedding. Lori and her husband visited Bill and Tammy for one weekend after their honeymoon and then began the long drive to Seattle.

Bill was concerned for Tammy those first few weeks after Lori and her husband left, but he thought she would rebound. She was constantly emotional and strangely silent. It was bad enough that the empty house and the lack of activity made Bill feel old, but he was frustrated by Tammy. He tried getting her away for the weekend, but they came home early because Tammy "didn't feel well." He tried having people over, but Tammy saw it as more of a duty than a delight. He tried getting them enrolled in activities together as a couple, but she showed little interest.

Things didn't get better. There were days when Tammy would spend hours in bed. She barely cooked and seldom did the kind of cleaning that once kept their house looking immaculate. Bill grew more and more irritated with it all. Although he still worked, he had looked forward to the freedom that they would enjoy once their parenting days were over. He had researched places to go and things to do, but Tammy wasn't even interested in going out to eat. Bill's irritation soon became bitterness. "Is this what I worked for?" he thought. "Is this what I get for doing what is right?"

Soon Bill was feeling like he had missed out, like life had passed him by. He was envious of the young families around him. He couldn't help regretting decisions that he and Tammy had made. He began losing interest in his job, and more importantly, entertained subtle doubts about his faith. He was increasingly bitter, angry, and discouraged. It drove him crazy that the only time Tammy seemed to brighten up was when Lori called or visited. He thought maybe he should get a hobby, like restoring a car or buying a motorcycle. After all, he and Tammy did very little together and seldom had an extended conversation.

It was about three years after Lori's departure that Bill realized something was wrong and that it was time for them to seek help. His eyes were opened by their family physician, who had taken Bill aside and told him that Tammy's problems were not physical and did not require medication. She suggested that they needed to talk to someone who could help. That was when they called me.

Although Bill and Tammy's story is unique in its specific details, their struggle is quite typical. We all tend to fall into believing that what is, will always be. We tend to ignore the fact that everything, this side of God, is always changing and that all of creation is in a state of decay. We get lulled to sleep by our frenetic busyness, one day lapping upon another until huge chunks of time have passed. In the meantime we have not noticed how much we, and the things around us, have changed.

Then suddenly, something shocks us into the startling realization that we are way older than we thought and life has changed much more than we had noticed. This realization and the disorientation that flows from it is what our culture calls a midlife crisis. So many people from 35 to 55 go through this experience that in recent years it has received almost as much press as adolescence.

Does everyone have a midlife crisis? Not necessarily. Just as many teenagers never have a tumultuously rebellious adolescence. Yet attending to the potential difficulties and dangers of the teen years has helped both teenagers and parents to be more prepared for it. My hope is that this book will do the same for the hordes of people who are now in, or approaching, the midyears of their adult lives.

A Problem of Interpretation

One of the most important biblical perspectives about people is that human beings think. There is a way in which we never leave our lives alone. We are always picking up our story in our hands, turning it over, and trying to make sense of it all. When doing menial or repetitive tasks, we quickly descend into the caverns of our own minds. We go to sleep, tossing our lives around in our heads, falling asleep without figuring it all out.

Two things are true of every middle-aged person. First, we are aware that *our lives have not worked according to our plan*. You and I could not have written our own stories. We couldn't even have written the story of last week! Our lives have taken twists and turns that we could have never imagined. Some of those turns have left us amazed and thankful while others caused profound pain and loss. In all of our planning and our careful decision making, we are still caught up short, surprised by the details of our own existence.

Two recent experiences powerfully demonstrated that my life is not working out according to my plan. The first took place at the end of a normal day at The Christian Counseling

and Educational Foundation. It was 5:30 pm and I was just about to leave when I got a call from my brother, Tedd. Tedd is a very level person. If plan A doesn't work, he is always able to conceive plan B and C all the way to triple Z. He seldom seems distressed or out of sorts. Yet this call was different. The minute I heard his voice, I knew something was very wrong.

What broke that day would forever change us, our family, and everything about it. One conversation, and life had forever changed. We were all shocked. It was a turn in the story that we did not see coming and were ill-prepared to face. Powerful emotions hit fast and hard. Racing thoughts and intense and searching conversations were the order of the day. In an instant it seemed like I had not only lost my family history, but I had lost my identity as well. I was hurt, angry, and at sea. I had been to seminary, but I had never taken the course to prepare me for this. I could not escape it, because, confusing and distressing as it was, it was *my* story.

My second unforeseen experience came in Seoul, South Korea. I was sitting on the platform of the largest Presbyterian church in the world (35,000 members), getting ready to preach in a Sunday afternoon service. I looked out over that sea of Korean faces while listening to familiar hymns being sung in a foreign tongue. In an instant I was overwhelmed. It seemed impossible that Paul Tripp could possibly be invited to sit on this platform, let alone speak! In that moment I was so amazed by my own story that I began to weep. How could it be that I was here? How could it be that this was my life calling? How could it be that I actually get paid to expound the Gospel day after day? How did I get from 3437 North Detroit Avenue, in Toledo, Ohio, to this massive church in the middle of Seoul, South Korea? The more I took it all in, the greater my sense of gratitude and wonder, and the more I wept. I simply couldn't get control of myself. My translator looked over at me with a look of concern that said, "Paul, I'm quite prepared to function as your interpreter, but I haven't prepared my own sermon. You need to get yourself together or

this is never going to work!” By God’s grace, my tears abated and I stood to preach in the throes of my own amazement at my own story.

Life never works according to our plan because our individual stories are all part of a greater story. The central character of the STORY is sovereign over each detail of our stories. So we will always live with the recognition that there are twists and turns that were never part of our plan for our lives.

But a second thing is also true of every middle-aged person. *We are always trying to figure our lives out.* From the incessant questions of the all-too-curious toddler to the dying queries of the old man, we all are our own private investigators. We sort through the details of our existence every day. Sometimes we are archeologists, sifting through the pottery shards of personal civilizations gone by. Sometimes we are detectives looking for that one clue that will make it all make sense. Sometimes we are philosophers and theologians, bringing the profound questions of life to the detail of our own stories. Sometimes we are diagnosticians, examining the personal symptoms to discover what is wrong. Sometimes we are historians, examining the past for wisdom as we face today. We play all of these roles at one point or another. Yet, our thinking is so constant and so instinctual that we don’t realize how incessant and influential it really is.

These two points—that our lives never work according to our plans and that we are always trying to figure out our lives—effectively define and explain the “crisis” of midlife. The disorientation of midlife is the result of the collision of a *powerful personal awareness* and a *powerful personal interpretation*. Now, that should not surprise us, because we do not live by the facts of our experiences, but by the ways that our interpretations have shaped those facts for us. The difficult disorientation of midlife is not because the passage itself is disorienting. Whatever trouble midlife brings to us is essentially caused by the wrong thinking we bring to it. Suddenly we see things about ourselves that have been developing for years but went by unnoticed. We don’t respond to our new awareness

based on the facts of our age or place in life but based on the meanings we attach to them. These meanings will form and determine how we respond to midlife.

The two elements of *powerful personal awareness* and *powerful personal interpretation* must always be included in whatever we do to understand and deal with the realities of midlife. Think of Bill and Tammy. Lori's departure suddenly opened their eyes to changes in their age and status that had been developing for years but had gone largely unnoticed. The difficulty they experienced was not created by their situation but by a very important interpretive grid which set an agenda for their response.

Sloppy Categories

One of the ways that we make sense out of life is by organizing it into categories. We say God is a Spirit, Sally is a girl, and Fido is a dog. We talk of things being big or small, important or unimportant, trash or treasure, healthy or unhealthy, true or false, and valuable or cheap. We divide things into categories like biological, mechanical, artistic, philosophical, and emotional. We think of things as being Eastern or Western, feminine or masculine, cultured or barbaric, and legal or illegal. Instinctively, we organize things into the little boxes that we carry around in our brains. Sometimes we are wise enough to see that our boxes are too little or too few, but often we are quite skilled at squeezing our story into whatever boxes we happen to be carrying around in our minds. In doing so, we fail to recognize how important and influential this interpretive function is. Life will always look like the categories that you bring to it, and what you do will always be determined by the way you have organized your understanding of your own story.

One of the interpretive problems that gets us into trouble in midlife is that our typical cultural categories for organizing human life are woefully inadequate. We tend to organize the

full range of human development into only four categories: child (0-12), youth (13-20), adult (21-65), elderly (65+). When you examine these categories it doesn't take long to uncover their inadequacy. The categories of child, youth, and elderly are relatively brief spans of time, while the category of adult encompasses forty-five years! Consider for a moment the massive differences between a man twenty-one and a man who is sixty-four. Or, let's narrow the scope. Consider the remarkable difference in maturity between a person who is twenty-two and a person who is thirty-five. Emotionally, physically, spiritually, relationally, economically, and socially these two people are in very different places. To say that a person is an adult is to make an observation of such wide generality that it almost means nothing.

The overgeneralized category of adult tends to ignore the fact that as human beings we are always in some kind of process of change. One of the stark differences between the Creator and the creation is that everything on this side of the line is always in some state of change while God is constant in his unchangeableness. The Bible presents all of life as ever changing. Rulers rise up and are cast down. The grass fades and the flowers wither. People grow and mature. Young men become old men. People spiritually pass from death into life. Generations give way to generations. Fools become wise. All that has been created will be different in some way tomorrow. Anticipating change and committing to change is an essential part of a productive Christian life. But we get caught up short. Parents are continually surprised that their baby has suddenly become a teenager. Sons and daughters seem shocked that mom and dad have suddenly become old. Mom can't believe that somehow she woke up to a new title, grandmother. We seem unwilling to accept the fact that we can't do things that we were once capable of doing—a dynamic that keeps emergency rooms busy on the weekends!

We need more robust ways of thinking about human life, growth, and change than broad, age-oriented categories.

Although the Bible does think of people in terms of their age, it has much richer ways of locating and understanding human beings. Let me suggest just one.

It's All about Relationships

Scripture in a very natural way understands people by locating them in four fundamental relationships. The first and most foundational relationship is *my relationship to God*. Everything I am and everything I do is shaped by the health and vitality of this relationship. No matter where you are (location), what is going on around you (situation), and how you are responding to it (behavior), the most important way of understanding yourself is to examine your relationship with God. For example, Adam and Eve were quite unified as husband and wife when they consumed the prohibited fruit. But they were in rebellion against God. In the same way, like every other period of life, midlife powerfully exposes the true condition of our relationship with God.

The second relationship is *my relationship to others*. The Bible always sees people in some kind of community with one another. Even in his saving grace, God is not just giving spiritual birth to a mass of isolated saved individuals, but as Paul says in Titus, “a people for his own possession” (NASB). I am a child or a parent. I am a husband or a wife. I am a neighbor or a friend. I am a citizen of the kingdom of God. I am a covenant child, a member of the body of Christ and a stone in the temple in which God dwells. From Genesis 2 on, the Bible always looks at people from the vantage point of the communities to which they have been called. Human life is about relationships, and relationships define human life. I am never okay, no matter what I seem to be achieving and no matter how happy and satisfied I am, if I am not living properly in the primary relationships in which God has placed me.

Paul communicates this with thunderous clarity in Galatians 5:14: “The entire law is summed up in a single command.”

Wouldn't you now expect him to say, "Love God above all else"? But he doesn't. Instead he says, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Since we were created by God to be social beings and are invested by God with a moral responsibility to our neighbor, our calling to live in community is a primary way of understanding who we are and what we have been called to do. There is help for us here as well as we seek to understand the issues and struggles of midlife. Those struggles do not exist apart from the principal relationships of human life; rather, they are interwoven together with them. The struggles of midlife expose the true health and character of the relationships to which God has called me.

The third relationship is *my relationship to myself*. Now, this may seem odd to you, but there is a real way in which we all are relating to ourselves. The Psalmist records a conversation with himself, "Why are you downcast, O my soul?" (Psa. 42:5). Think about this: there is no voice more influential in your life than your own, because no one talks to you more than you do. You've had regular conversations with yourself today, most of the time not even being aware of it. This relationship has to do with the way we think about our *identity* and our *responsibility*. Everything we do is somehow shaped by who we think we are and what we think we have been called to do. Peter, for example, says that people's lives are "ineffective and unproductive" because they have forgotten who they are (See 2 Peter 1:8–9). We all live with some sense of moral responsibility, whether accurate or misshapen, and we all either hold to our responsibilities or in some way take ourselves off the hook. Once more, there is real help here for understanding the disorientation of the midlife years. Midlife crisis *is* a struggle of identity and responsibility, and it exposes weaknesses in these areas that have existed for a long time but are laid bare during this passage of life.

The fourth relationship is *my relationship to the rest of creation*. As a human being made in the image of God, I am also called to a responsible interaction with the physical world. This

relationship gets at two very important dimensions of human life: my life of labor, and the way I view and relate to the world of material things. We live in a culture that tends to view work as the painful price you have to pay to afford the pleasure that you're actually living for. Our culture tends to see one's material body and material possessions as essential to any true happiness and satisfaction. So Western culture tends to be averse to work and obsessed with things.

The Bible, on the other hand, doesn't say that the body and possessions are unimportant but calls me to moral responsibility in each area. How I view and use my body is biblically very important. (See 1 Cor. 6:12–20, for example.) How I relate to the created world and how I view and hold my possessions are also presented in Scripture as being of great importance. (See Luke 12:13–21.) The Bible presents work, not as a curse, but as a principal part of God's ordained plan for all of humanity since it existed before the fall. Living as God ordained is not a matter of begrudgingly working in order to experience the excitement of pleasure but finding pleasure in the various spheres of labor to which God has called me. I am designed to be a laborer, and my labor is part of an agenda much greater than the acquisition of momentary material pleasures. Once again, this final relationship exegetes the struggles of midlife. Those struggles have to do with the physical body, they have to do with where we seek to find pleasure, and they have to do with how we tend to view the world of material things.

So, having these four relationships always in focus provides better preparation for midlife than the typical ways our culture tends to organize and categorize life. (We will examine these categories in future chapters.)

Midlife Crisis: a Portrait

We have said that the struggles of midlife result from a collision of powerful personal awareness and powerful personal interpretations, but what does the actual "crisis" of midlife

look like? Here are some characteristics of a person in the throes of midlife confusion and struggle.

1. *Dissatisfaction with life.* Suddenly you begin to look around and you don't like your life. You may struggle with your job or your marriage in ways that you never have before. You may look at your life in general and it seems purposeless, routine, and dull. You may experience a rather consistent boredom, restlessness, discontent, or disillusionment. The bottom line is that you are not happy with your story. The lives of others around you seem interesting and attractive in ways that they have not before. This dissatisfaction is not necessarily about a particular thing but a general feeling of discontent.

2. *Disorientation.* There are times when each of us loses our way for a moment, when we get lost in our own stories. The disorientation of midlife has to do with identity and function. During this time of life, many of the ways a person has thought about himself don't apply anymore. Many of the principal duties that occupied him are not necessary anymore. When this happens, people often experience a loss of identity. This identity loss is not philosophical in that it results from not being able to answer the profound questions of life; rather, it is functional; *I thought I knew who I was and what I was supposed to be doing, but now I am not so sure.*

3. *Discouragement.* At some point you begin to realize that you have lost the expectancy, vibrancy, hopefulness, and courage of your youth. When you are young, it is easy to hold onto your potentials as possibilities, but the older you get, the harder it is. There is an old proverb that says, "The young man if he is not liberal has no heart and the old man if he is not conservative has no brain." Whether you completely agree with the proverb or not, it surely does point to the differences in the way the young person and the older person look at life. Youth is a time of boundless possibility. Young people are visionaries and dreamers. It is crushing to wake up to the fact that you long ago put away your satchel of dreams. It's hard to face the fact that you are more cynical than you are expectant.

4. *Dread.* Not many people in Western culture look forward to old age. With the high value we put on physical beauty and physical youth and with the constant emphasis that is placed on physical health, it is hard to be positive about aging. When you are young, you live with functional feelings of invincibility. I happened to be observing my seventeen year old son's diet recently. What he eats would either leave me weighing seven hundred pounds or dead! It became clear that the thought of being careful with what he eats never enters his mind. He doesn't think about his veins, his heart, or his waistline. Death is a remote concept to him. Not so for the person in midlife. Things like tiredness, weight gain, aches and pains, and high cholesterol begin to remind me that I am not young anymore, that my physical clock is ticking every day. Often this results in generalized worry or dread about aging and death.

5. *Disappointment.* Two realizations can hit you very powerfully in midlife. The first is regret. You assess your life and realize that there were things you wanted to accomplish that you never seemed able to pull off. Perhaps you look back and say, "I always wanted to have a daily time of worship with my children, but I was never able to do it consistently." Or, "I wanted to have regular date nights with my wife, but things always got in the way." Or, "I wanted to be more involved in the ministries of my church, but it never quite happened." Or, "I had always hoped I could deal with my weight, but I never seemed to be successful over the long run." We all have our own personal regrets.

The second realization has to do with dashed dreams. We all have entertained our personal dreams. Maybe it was to do well in your career so that you could retire early and give yourself to a more active ministry. Maybe it was that you always wanted to buy a small farm or have more children. Perhaps you always dreamed of going back to school and getting out of the occupation that has never really stimulated you. When you are young, you are still able to tell yourself that you have

time to realize your dreams, but the older you get the harder it is to do.

6. *Disinterest.* Here I begin to realize that I am no longer interested in the things that once excited me. In fact, I find it hard to motivate myself to do the things that I once found stimulating and attractive. I may have once enjoyed certain relationships, but now, if I'm honest, I really don't care if I see those people again. Or maybe it is my job. I find it hard to go to work in the morning and hard to give myself fully when I am there. Or maybe my husband or wife, whom I once found very physically attractive, is no longer attractive to me in that way. Or perhaps it is spiritual disinterest. My pursuit of God becomes joyless, personal devotions basically fade away, and active ministry participation is rare. I have lost interest in my own life.

7. *Distance.* In all of my disorientation, lostness, and inability to find motivation for the things that once excited me, it is hard not to withdraw. And I don't want people to pursue me. I don't want people to ask me how I am doing. I don't want to have to explain why I no longer participate the way I once did. I just want to be left alone. I don't feel comfortable with your knowing how lost I actually am and I don't want to try to explain things that I myself don't understand.

8. *Distraction.* With all of this swirling around inside of me, I am in a place of real vulnerability to temptation. Every sinner's tendency is to deal with inner struggles by feeding the outer man. Some of us overeat when we are upset. Some of us deal with disappointment by acquiring things that we think will satisfy us. Some of us numb ourselves with excessive pursuit of leisure or pleasure. When I am disappointed with myself and discouraged with my life, it is tempting to give way to the lust of the flesh. It is tempting to deal with the absence of true contentment by pursuing the fleeting, but potentially enslaving, physical pleasures that are all around me. I am always in danger when I am functionally exchanging the glory of walk-

ing with, trusting, and serving God for the shadow glories of the created world.

So What is Really Wrong?

Several themes that subtly run throughout this list must be recognized for what they are. They get at the heart of what the midlife struggle is all about because they get to the heart of our struggle as sinners living in a fallen world. We will be unpacking these themes for the remainder of this book. They are simple, yet profound. They are personal but at the same time the general struggle of every human being. They are deeply theological but live in the most mundane moments of our daily lives. They tend to hide behind the masks of people who on the surface seem like they are doing quite well. They run deeper than our choices and behavior, yet they influence everything we do.

Perhaps the best way to unpack these themes is by examining the lives of three people. Look for these themes as you read.

Phil seemed to have it all; forty years old, a beautiful wife, three healthy children, and a great job. He had started at the bottom of his firm as a draftsman, doing details for engineering projects. Over the years he had slowly advanced through the ranks. Now he was the managing engineer for a 250-person design team with one of the most influential firms in the world. He loved the power and prestige that came along with his position. He loved the dynamic and creative environment that he got to participate in every day. He loved the fact that they designed projects that mattered. He couldn't believe that he was actually getting paid to do what he had always wanted to do, and he loved the many benefits his family enjoyed that resulted from his job. Phil was a happy man, and he was fully engaged in his home and in his church.

It was while listening to the news one evening that Phil first heard that his firm was involved in a massive lawsuit because of injuries that had resulted from one of their designs. He was

concerned, but he thought that surely the firm had insurance for that kind of thing. It wasn't long before clients began to back out of their contracts, having lost confidence in the ability of Phil's firm to do their work well. Phil was told that he would have to lay off half of his department. It was hard for him, but Phil was a team player and knew it was necessary. It wasn't until Phil had only five people left working under him that he saw the handwriting on the wall. Phil was laid off a month later.

At first Phil seemed like he was doing quite well. He talked about God's sovereignty and faithfulness. He seemed quite confident that, with his resume and experience, he would soon be back to work. He got his resume out and anticipated quick responses. Phil was shocked when the first batch of mailings didn't even get one response. After a month of the same, his confidence began to flag.

Phil's wife Sarah noticed it first. He was spending hours alone in his office at home. He was increasingly short tempered and irritable. There were outbursts of anger that she had never experienced before. Phil became more sullen and depressed as the months dragged on. Yet he angrily refused to look for any other kind of work. He was getting to the end of his severance pay, and unemployment funds would not fund the needs of his family.

Many mornings Phil would not even attempt to get out of bed. He would wander down to the kitchen sometime in the afternoon and get violently angry at any question about how he was living. Phil had resigned his positions at church and could barely get himself to the services on Sunday. Sarah began to notice that Phil was spending long periods of time away from their home. He had never done this before, and it alarmed her. He would make a variety of excuses, but none really provided a real explanation for his many absences. It wasn't long before Sarah discovered that her husband had been having an affair with another woman for several months. When she confronted Phil, he at first denied his unfaithfulness but eventu-

ally admitted what he had done. Sadly, Phil didn't seem repentant. Rather, he began to be more vocal about his doubt of God and his questions about the truths of the Bible.

He couldn't believe that a good God would let this happen to him. He couldn't believe that after years of obeying God, this is what he got. He felt like everything he had ever worked for had been taken away from him. How could he ever compete with guys half his age who would require half his salary? He saw life as unfair and unjust and God as distant and uncaring. Bitter and cynical, Phil not only forsook his family; he forsook his faith as well.

What is going on with Phil? Why did he so completely lose his way? It is not unusual for midlife struggles to be triggered by something like the loss of a job and the inability to find commensurate employment. But there is more going on here. Yes, it's hard to have the career rug pulled out from under you. It's hard to watch the impact it has on your lifestyle and on your family. Yet it is clear that what he subsequently experienced was not the result of his job loss, but the heart that he brought to it.

Dean had always been very physically active. He loved sports and the outdoors. He loved the fact that he could share these interests with his three sons. Reared in a nominally Catholic home, Dean and his wife came to know the Lord soon after they were married and experienced a radical turnaround in their lives. Their relationship with God, the truths of his word, and the work of his kingdom became the central focus of their lives. Whether it was their marriage, their parenting, or Dean's work, he and Emma looked at each area of their lives from the perspective of their identity as children of God.

Dean was also very thankful for his work. He had been promoted to an upper management position and saw it as a golden opportunity to be salt and light in an environment where there was much corruption and darkness. He had regular opportunities to either stand for right or to share his faith at work.

Often the person Dean was discipling was someone who had come to Christ through Dean's witness.

At about forty-six, Dean noticed three things that concerned him, although he did not tell Emma at first. He began to experience an unusual amount of fatigue, nagging pains, and what seemed like a loss of physical coordination on his left side. Dean found himself dropping things or tripping when walking. When he finally went to the doctor, he was given a battery of tests and was shocked to learn that he had had a series of strokes and was at risk for even more. It was the kind of thing you hear, and immediately your life passes before you. He wondered how soon he would be completely incapacitated or even die. When he got over the initial shock, Dean began to do some research and realized he hadn't yet been given a death sentence.

Dean learned that he could do better with a combination of physical therapy and powerful medications. He did do better and was able to return to work but not without difficulty. Yet, despite all the medications, he had another minor stroke, his condition worsened, and it became clear that Dean was going to have to go on permanent disability.

Dean had been a very active man, and not getting up to go to work to support his family was a huge thing for him. He would not be able to go fishing or play catch with his boys. The days of long bike trips with the family were over. He wondered how he was ever going to serve the Lord if he spent most of his time locked up in his own house.

Dean was very discouraged to be on disability at such a young age. He had lost his physical capabilities so early in life that he could not imagine what the years to come were going to bring. It was hard at first for Dean to see the families of his healthy friends. He hated sitting on the sidelines at picnics and family outings. He felt guilty for taking early retirement and was tempted to conclude that he had strayed out of the will of the Lord. But Dean was firm in his belief that God is good, and he was humble enough to recognize that he did not deserve

anything that had been taken from him. He also realized that every day he still received from the hand of the Lord everything he needed to do what God had called for him to do.

Dean began to see disability as an opportunity and the fact that he had many years ahead of him as a real benefit. He could do things that many people yearn to do but are never able. Dean had been able to put his job behind him at a very young age and turn his focus to active kingdom ministry. He realized that there were many local ministries that could benefit greatly from his experience and gifts. Dean refused to give in to the discouragement that he so powerfully felt or the doubts that had hit his heart with the force of a sledgehammer. He began to embrace the truth that God's grace is most powerful in our moments of greatest weakness. In the middle of weakness and fear, he experienced the joys of God's kingdom work. Although living with a chronic disease was very hard, Dean lived each day with joy and expectancy, busy at the work that God had given him to do.

What is going on with Dean? How could he face this devastating disease and have his life totally turned upside down without losing his way? Where did Dean and Phil differ? Why is it that Dean seemed more prepared than Phil to face the unwanted and unexpected? Let's consider one more person's story.

Sally had always been a hard worker. She had done very well in school and was awarded a full scholarship to an Ivy League university. In college she did stellar academic work, graduated with honors, and had a host of job offers from major corporations. It wasn't long before she got a great job, found a good church, and purchased a condominium in a downtown high-rise. The church she joined had a wonderful singles ministry which Sally participated in fully and enjoyed very much. It was there that she found a circle of girlfriends that became her primary source of friendship and fellowship.

Sally's job was creative, challenging, demanding, and frenetic—what she as a high achiever loved. There was plenty of

room for advancement, and Sally soon advanced. There always seemed to be more responsibility, more authority, and more money coming her way. The years flew by, almost without Sally's notice.

Meanwhile Sally had really bonded with her circle of Christian friends. She loved their informal Chinese takeout and Bible study group on Tuesdays. They shared this powerful commonality of belief coupled with an ability to talk honestly about almost anything. They even took many vacations together, always watching old videos and laughing late into the night.

When she began her job and moved into her condominium, Sally had silently hoped to meet a man she could share her life with, but it wasn't a burning need. She had a very busy and full work life, and with church and friendship activities, her schedule was pretty full. At one point she concluded that her relationship with her cat, Franco, was all she could handle. She did date quite regularly, but none of the relationships went anywhere, and it was hard to pursue a friendship with a man since the demands of work always seemed to get in the way.

Over the years Sally had attended so many weddings that she dreaded it whenever she got an invitation. She had thrown showers for many of her friends and had participated in many bachelorette parties. Still, her life was full.

One Thursday evening Sally came home after a very long day. She dropped her briefcase at the door, threw her trench coat on the couch and called for Franco. She thought that it was strange that he hadn't run down the entrance hallway and hopped up on the bench, like he had done for years. Sally found him lying on her bed. She stood at the door and looked at him and thought, "He must be the most beautiful Angora God ever made." He looked regal lying there. Sally walked over, extended her hand to caress him and was shocked as she touched his cold body. She burst into tears and cried frequently over the next few days.

It was Monday of the following week when it all came thundering down upon her. She opened the door after a long and

challenging day, but there was no feline friend on the bench to greet her. She dropped some things in the bedroom and went to the bathroom. Standing in front of the mirror, it hit her that she was thirty-nine! The person she saw seemed too old to be her. Where had the time gone? Why hadn't she paid more attention? Could it be that life had passed her by, and she was simply too busy to see it?

That night Sally's condo seemed unbelievably empty and claustrophobic, so much so that Sally had to get out. She spent much of that evening walking the downtown streets. She felt old and alone. Her Tuesday group had long since disbanded. Most of its members had moved on or gotten married. Her job was more demanding than ever, and often Sally felt like they simply wanted too much from her. She still loved the Sunday service at her church, but she couldn't take the singles gatherings. She just didn't feel that she had anything in common with those people anymore.

As the days passed, Sally drew more and more inward. Her life consisted of work and the Sunday morning worship service. She spent hours in her condo alone, curled up on the couch, numbing her heart with the remote. The TV was simply background noise, electronic company that made the empty condo a bit more bearable. Each night Sally replayed the video of her life, scene after scene, decision after decision. Every replaying filled her with more remorse and regret. Why had she let her job so control her? Why hadn't she made more time for other things? How could she watch so many friends move on and get married and not "get it"? Why would God say he loved her and yet leave her so completely alone? She felt tired, but it was a kind of exhaustion that was more than physical.

On Mondays, Sally found it increasingly difficult to work up enough internal motivation to go to her job. There were many days when she rehearsed her resignation speech as she walked to work, never getting around to giving it when she arrived. She found less and less joy in those Sunday worship services that once delighted her, and it had been a long time

since she'd had her evening personal times of worship. She increasingly found it hard to give herself to anything (church, work, her appearance, her condo) because none of them seemed to make any difference. She had no life, and there seemed to be nothing that could change that.

What would you say to Sally? How would you help her unweave the fabric of her cynicism and discouragement? What is wrong with her? How should Sally deal with the things that she is now facing?

Recognizing the Themes

To properly understand Phil, Dean, and Sally, you have to see the themes that run through each of their experiences. These powerful, life-altering themes can create a struggle so unsettling that our culture has coined the term “midlife crisis” to capture it. If we are going to bring the stunning wisdom of Scripture to this troubling time, it is important to understand the dynamics of what is actually going on and to identify these universal themes.

1. *An unexpected event.* There is a way in which we don't live our life, but our life lives us. We just get carried along by its locations, relationships, situations, responsibilities, opportunities and activities without stopping very long to look, listen, and consider. Huge chunks of time can pass virtually unnoticed. Clearly this is what happened with Phil, Dean, and Sally. Then each of them hit the same thing. They all experience some unexpected event that suddenly opens their eyes. People who study these things call them *trigger events*. For Phil it was the loss of his job, for Dean it was a physical disease, and for Sally it was the death of Franco, her cat. For each of them, the event provided a window into their life that they had not looked through before.

2. *A new awareness.* Because the trigger event opens their eyes, Phil, Dean, and Sally begin to see and feel things that were probably already there but in the busyness of life got no

attention. They suddenly realize how much time has passed and how much they have failed to accomplish. They become aware of their physical health and the realities of aging. They recognize how several important decisions along the way have set the course of their lives. They perceive great differences between their lives and the lives of others around them.

3. *Powerful personal interpretations.* Midlife crisis is about more than an unexpected event followed by powerful new awareness. The crisis is really rooted in the way people interpret the things that they see. In fact, it is more powerful than that. Their interpretations actually *determine* what they see and how they see it. As sinners, the problem with our interpretations is that they tend to be narrow and selective. Remember, sin not only affects what we do; it also affects what we think and how we see. In ways that we often don't notice, sin reduces all of us to fools. The way that seems right to us can lead to death, and the way that makes no sense to us is often the way of life and wisdom.

That is why we all need the wise perspectives of God's Word. Midlife crisis is powerfully theological. It all balances on the fundamental ways we make sense out of life. It is all about how our functional systems of belief shape the way we respond to whatever God puts on our plate. This explains why Dean responds to his diagnosis very differently than Phil does after he loses his job and Sally does after the death of Franco.

4. *Exposed ruling desires.* Midlife struggles very pointedly reveal the heart. The interpretations a person brings to the events and new awareness of midlife are not the result of objectively held abstract theology. No, the functional theology that shapes the way a person responds during this period is rooted in the values, treasures, and cravings of the person's heart. Midlife crisis in its most basic form is not an event crisis, an awareness crisis, or a crisis of aging. It is a crisis of the heart. Midlife exposes what a person has really been living for and where a person has tried to find meaning and purpose. It has the power to reveal the significant gap between a person's con-

fessional theology and their functional theology. What we say we are living for on Sunday may not, in fact, be the thing that has actually taken daily rulership over our hearts. And when these things that rule us are taken out of our hands, we tend to become angry, fearful, bitter, or discouraged. We will experience a loss of identity and a flagging of meaning and purpose. We will look at this area much more extensively in chapters to come, but it is important to understand that midlife crisis is a crisis of desire.

5. *Reflexive responses.* This is where the person in midlife gets himself into trouble. Reflex responses may seem logical, but they are only the twisted logic of desire. The person is actually trapped in the cul-de-sac of the thoughts and motives of his heart. His responses to his new awareness will only change to the degree that he addresses the underlying issues of his heart. Phil's regrettable actions are propelled by the distorted thoughts and inordinate desires of his heart. Sally ends up as a depressed recluse not as a result of Franco's death, but because of the thoughts and motives that she brought to it. Dean faces devastating things, but he doesn't throw his life away because he brought a different heart to this scary and painful moment in his life. Like Phil and Sally, Dean's true treasures are revealed in this moment, and like them, his actions are not forced by the circumstances, but formed by the thought and motives of his heart.

These five themes tend to run like cords through the fabric of the typical midlife crisis. They need to be unpacked and understood biblically. In doing so, we will not only come to know ourselves better but also come to know our Lord more fully. Only in such moments of humble, honest self-examination are we able to grasp how wide, how deep, how full, and how complete the love of God is for us. It is here that we will really begin to understand that Scripture not only lays before us the wonderful promise of eternity, but it also understands the deepest issues we experience before we get there. In the

narrative of God's Word we find an eloquent and practical wisdom that speaks directly to these pressing issues.

So we need constantly to carry two commitments with us wherever we go. First, we need to commit to be persistent and teachable students of God's Word. We were never designed to figure out life on our own. Only as we submit to the wisdom of the Wonderful Counselor will we escape the hold of our own foolishness. Second, we need to be committed to a habit of ongoing self-examination. You and I need to get used to standing before the mirror of the Word of God, so that we can see ourselves as we really are. Healthy Christianity is found at the intersection of accurate self-knowledge and the true knowledge of God.

What about you? Perhaps you are reading this book because you have lost your way. Or maybe you're reading it because you are in a relationship with, or minister to, someone who is in the throes of some kind of midlife struggle. Or maybe you are simply interested in how the Gospel practically applies to the daily issues of human life. Whatever your reason for picking up this book, I invite you to examine your own heart, so that you too, will not lose your way.

What keeps you going?

What makes your life worthwhile?

What dreams have tended to capture your heart?

Right now, how are you making sense of your life?

What are you convinced you cannot live without?

Where do you seek to find identity?

Why do you call one day good and another bad?

What, in life, do you crave most?

Be honest—Why do you really do the things you do?

As you make choices and decisions, what are you hoping to get out of them?

May God expose our hearts, so that in really seeing ourselves, we may hunger all the more deeply for him!