

A photograph of a stone path leading into the ocean. The path is made of large, flat, rectangular stones, some of which are covered in moss. The water is a deep blue, and the sky is not visible. The path leads from the foreground towards the horizon, creating a sense of journey and direction.

TONY HORSFALL

Spiritual Growth in a Time of Change

Following God in midlife

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Introduction

Midlife is the transition between the first and second half of life. The Psalmist wrote, 'I was young and now I am old' (Psalm 37:25). It is this passage, from being young (the first half) to being old (the second half), that we will be thinking about. Of all the stages we pass through in life, this is probably the most challenging and the most spiritually significant. It is a time of profound change when we are likely to ask ourselves fundamental questions about the meaning and purpose of life.

For a few, midlife passes relatively unnoticed without much turmoil or angst. Others are too busy to pay attention to their innermost thoughts and feelings, and they muddle through without ever thinking deeply about life or how they are living it. But, for a growing number of people, midlife proves to be a critical period when they feel a deep-seated need to stop and review their life and the direction it is taking.

Midlife is not always about crisis but for some it may feel that way—as if their life is being taken apart and they are left wondering if it will ever be put back together again. Deep feelings are stirred within them. Existential questions about who they are and what their life amounts to suddenly surface, often with great force, and taking them by surprise. These questions beg to be answered and refuse to be ignored. Such turmoil can last for several years, sometimes experienced in moments of great intensity, but more often than not as an ever present low-level disquiet.

Midlife for me coincided with the decade of my 40s. Now with hindsight I can understand it, but at the time I was not so

clear about what was happening inside me. I certainly had no one to help me make sense of my inner turmoil. Outwardly I continued to function in local church ministry as normal, but every now and then I would find myself gripped by uncertainty, plagued by doubts, and troubled by deep-seated longings that unnerved me. There was no particular moment of crisis for me, more like a series of ‘bumps in the road’ that I had never experienced before. I was tried, tested and tempted, and I wondered at times if my faith would survive.

I remember searching for material to help me understand what was happening, but in the early 1990s there seemed to be little written about the midlife transition. I managed to buy one book but it didn’t help at all, and I attended a seminar at a large Christian event but the speaker had little to say. In fact, soon afterwards I heard his marriage had fallen apart and he had left the ministry—he had clearly been struggling with his own midlife crisis!

So I did what most people do. I muddled along, generally living life as normal and hoping that my inner anxieties would disappear of their own accord. It never occurred to me that this midlife journey was a well-worn path that many others had trodden before me, or that it would become such a spiritually significant turning point in my life. I felt alone and isolated. I never thought of finding someone to talk to about what I was thinking and feeling. It seemed too personal, too unspiritual, and anyway, who was there to turn to? I certainly had no inkling that this turmoil was part of my spiritual formation and that it was actually God who was at work within me. It felt like these struggles were the result of my own fallen nature and I blamed myself for being in such a state.

That I came through this period relatively unscathed is purely down to the grace of God, for I could so easily

have lost my way. Somehow the grip of grace held firm. Whichever way I turned, God was already there, and his right hand held me fast (Psalm 139:7–10). My deliverance came about gradually and almost without my realising what was happening. I began to encounter contemplative spirituality. The more I read about the inner life, the hungrier I became for intimacy with God. This spiritual longing took me to my first experience of retreat and there, in the stillness and the silence, and with the help of an experienced spiritual director, I began to find what I had been looking for without knowing it—a deeper relationship with God and the awareness of my identity as God’s deeply loved child. That which had been head knowledge before (the fact of God’s unconditional love for me) now burst into my consciousness with liberating power and healing joy. The God-shaped vacuum within me began to be filled and the inner needs that had troubled me began to lose their power. In time I found myself ready to move on into a new phase of life and ministry.

I had little realisation at the time just how much this new discovery of intimacy with God would shape the second half of my life, but it did. As time went on I began to feel the call of God to leave my job as a missions trainer and launch out into a ministry of my own, focused on helping others to know God more deeply. Gifts latent within me began to surface. I started to write, and people seemed to benefit from what they read. I began to feel as if this was what I was made for, and that the whole of my life had been a preparation for it. I was the same as before and yet different. More humble, more relaxed, more open-minded. I became less dogmatic, less judgemental, less needing to be in control. Above all, I was more dependent on God.

Much later I attended some training about the midlife

transition and the pieces of the jigsaw fell into place. What I could not make sense of when I was passing through my 40s now made perfect sense. I could see how God had been at work in me all along. Since that time a great deal has been written about the spiritual dimension of the midlife transition and its importance in spiritual formation. This connection is something that resonates deeply within me and is confirmed in my own experience.

I have had the privilege of offering spiritual accompaniment to many people over the last ten years and my repeated observation is that many of the issues for which people seek help are actually to do with navigating midlife. That is not to reduce everything to a midlife problem but simply to recognise that in midlife people are more likely to seek outside help. It is also to recognise that people are now more aware of midlife and in particular of its importance to the Christian life and our relationship with God. This means they are more willing to talk about their experience and to seek help in finding their way through midlife.

My motivation for writing stems from my own experience. I do not want anyone to have to find their way through the tangles of midlife alone and without some form of practical help. If I can assist in that journey by providing a simple road map, I shall be delighted. Furthermore, being convinced now that this transition is key to our spiritual growth and vital in helping us to find God's will in the second half of life, I want to do all I can to help steer people in the right direction. Those who discover their identity in God, and who understand what it is he wants them to do with their later years, will be among the most fruitful and productive members of God's kingdom. And, finally, if this book can help someone avoid the pitfalls and potential dangers of midlife, I shall be well satisfied.

I am hoping this book will find its way into the hands of some who are presently working their way through a midlife transition and that it will make their journey a little smoother. It might also be a help to those already on the other side of midlife, but who want to reflect on their experience and appreciate in retrospect what God was doing in their life. It could be a help for younger people in their 30s in preparing them for the challenge of midlife, on the basis that to be forewarned is to be forearmed. Hopefully, counsellors, spiritual directors and pastoral workers may use it as a resource in their work with individuals.

I have included some exercises with each chapter to help in the process of reflection. This can be done alone or with the help of another person. They could also make the basis for a small group discussion, a form of peer mentoring. I use the word ‘exercise’ deliberately. Many people in midlife turn to physical exercise as a way of staying healthy and keeping the ageing process at bay, so why not some spiritual exercise to keep us in tune with God? You may choose simply to think through the questions I have given or—to get more benefit from them—you could write down your responses in a journal.

Interspersed among the chapters are a series of five short Bible reflections. The Bible does not address the question of midlife directly, but in the lives of many of its leading figures we can see the same principles of spiritual formation at work that we experience in midlife. I love the Bible for its honesty and insight in telling the stories of those who long since walked with God. They have an abiding relevance for those who want to live godly lives today and offer us ‘windows’ into the ways of God.

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Partnership

We hope that, as we move on in life, we begin to discover our vocation for the second half. This, together with a new-found desire to help and encourage a younger generation, gives us a new lease of life for what many feel are the most significant years of their life, the 50s and 60s. We find a fresh motivation and a new sense of direction, and the path ahead of us looks inviting and exciting. Yet herein lies a danger: that we may inadvertently live the second half of life in the same way as we did the first half, that is, in our own strength.

One of the common factors in midlife-awakening is the feeling that ‘there must be a better way to live than this’. The constant striving to achieve in order to bolster our fragile sense of self-worth, and the incessant clamouring after the affirmation of others left many of us worn out and empty. For some, exhaustion—or even burnout—came as a welcome relief. It demanded that we stop and consider how we were living. It brought with it the possibility of choosing to live differently, and caused us to begin to look inwards and to take better care of our soul. We began to recognise the need to *live from the inside out*. However, in our enthusiasm to get on with the task, we may forget all this and return to old ways of striving to achieve in our own strength. There remains a need to consolidate our understanding of how to live and work for God in a way that is sustainable and effective.

The new way of living boils down to this: we are to work *with* God not *for* God. There is a world of difference between

the two. When we work *for* God the onus is with us to make things happen and to achieve things on behalf of God. He is at best an onlooker or supporter from a distance, but the responsibility really lies with us. That is a real burden to carry, one for which we were not designed. It seldom works. When we work *with* God, however, we recognise that we are in partnership with him and that he is the Senior Partner. He dictates what we are to do, and how and when we will do it. We simply respond to his leadership in faith and obedience, but the responsibility is always with him. This is why we can work from a place of rest.

This new way is beautifully described for us in the words of Jesus in Matthew 11:28–30 in *THE MESSAGE*:

Are you tired? Worn out? Burned out on religion? Come to me. Get away with me and you'll recover your life. I'll show you how to take a real rest. Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace. I won't lay anything heavy or ill-fitting on you. Keep company with me and you'll learn to live freely and lightly.

I know that when I discovered these words during my own midlife journey they spoke life and healing to me. I know, too, that they have done the same for many others because they capture exactly how it is we can live and work in a way that is both enjoyable and bearable.

What we notice, first, are the diagnostic questions asked by the great Physician.

Are you tired? Yes, almost all the time. Tiredness is my constant companion.

Are you weary? Yes, often. I'm drained and exhausted, and I fear I have nothing left to give.

Burned out on religion? Yes, it feels like I'm on a treadmill,

overwhelmed by duties and responsibilities. I know I can't keep this up.

Jesus knows and understands the human condition and is aware of our needs and limitations. He knows that human effort unaided cannot do the work of God. It is not enough to be dedicated and try our best, for we will still fail; but there is a better way, one to which Jesus calls us with a series of five invitations.

1. Come to me—this is always the starting point. It is not a new strategy or a new technique we need but a deeper relationship with him.
2. Get away with me—just as he invited the first disciples to leave their busyness and spend time alone with him (Mark 6:30–31), so he invites us to do the same. His call is to discover the rest that comes as we learn to wait on him (Isaiah 40:27–31).
3. Watch how I do it—in the Gospels we can see Jesus at work, and we notice that he worked in partnership with his Father, living in dependency upon him (John 5:19; 8:28; 12:49; 14:10). He is our example, our pattern. We are called to live in a corresponding dependency on Jesus.
4. Keep company with me—here is the idea of partnership, of being yoked together with him (to use the vocabulary of older versions). This involves walking with him, living at a gentle, measured pace; and working with him, joining in what he is doing, sharing his purpose. No longer living independently, but happily surrendered to his will.
5. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace—grace is a power at work in us, enabling us to do what we could never do by

ourselves (2 Corinthians 12:9), but grace has a rhythm. It is about taking in and then giving out; about stopping to pause and listen to God and then moving in response to what we hear. It is about enjoying sabbath rest and times for spiritual refreshment as well as seasons of busy activity.

We have to learn how to build these life-giving rhythms into our lives and practice them, not in a legalistic way (which would be forced) but in a natural way (which is unforced) that fits with who we are.

What is the outcome of this life in partnership with Jesus? We begin to live freely and lightly. Freely, because this is not a way of life weighed down by rule-keeping but a life empowered by grace and the Holy Spirit; lightly, because Jesus does not ask of us more than we can give, or to do what he has not equipped us to do. I don't know how you respond to these words. I do know that when I heard them, something inside me said, 'Yes, that's how I want to live!' And this is the good news. We can learn to live this way, and the second half of life is when for most of us it starts to become reality.

The life we are describing here could be considered to be a more contemplative life. Having lived what we might call the exhausted life before, we now seek the abundant life that Jesus promised (John 10:10), which, strangely, is not found by doing more but by doing less. Contemplative spiritually begins when we allow ourselves to be loved by God and act to centre our lives in him. The spiritual disciplines of stillness, silence and solitude may be unfamiliar to us but they quickly become our friends as we seek to know God more deeply. Likewise, the regular practice of sabbath helps to ensure that we are rested and not overstretched. By sabbath I am not

thinking of a particular day of the week but of the God-given principle of ensuring that we make regular time for rest, reflection and time with God.

It is out of this place of physical and spiritual rest that our life can now flow. We do not work into rest (seeing rest as a reward when we have done enough), but we work out of rest (seeing rest as the foundation for healthy living and spiritual effectiveness). Our frantic world has no time for sabbath interruptions that break the cycle of productivity, but in God's economy, where less is more, we become more effective because we take time to rest and become centred in him. Sabbath reminds us that the work is God's and that we can rest because he is in control.

This contemplative life is, in fact, the life of abiding that Jesus speaks of in John 15 through the allegory of the vine and the branches. The secret of living a fruitful life is to abide in him just as a branch abides in the vine. Jesus says, 'I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing' (John 15:5). We abide in him by living in dependency upon him, a dependency that is expressed by the spiritual disciplines such as prayer, worship, Bible meditation and so on. When we live in a close relationship with Jesus, his life is able to flow into and through us, and we bear spiritual fruit in increasing measure. Our lives naturally begin to impact others for their good.

In the first half of life we live what I would call a productive life. We are busy and active in lots of different ways as we seek to build a successful life and career. We work with the energy and enthusiasm of youth to carve out for ourselves a future and to achieve our goals and dreams. This may or may not come true, but either way in midlife as our energy

starts to decrease we wonder if it is sustainable anyway. This is where midlife can be a turning point for us. We can, if we wish, choose to live a different way, and become more contemplative as I have outlined above. This leads us to a fruitful life. At first sight it looks exactly the same, but it is quite different. Before we were doing things for God; now it is God working through us. Before we had a tendency to operate in our own strength; now the source is Christ's power within us. Before we were making a career; now we are living a vocation. Before it was mostly about me; now it is more about Christ and others.

One of the benefits of this stage is that, in the words of Joyce Rupp, 'we become less frantic and work-oriented and more at ease with just "being"'.⁵² It is this relaxedness that characterises those who are making a good transition. They are at ease with themselves, with God and with what they are called to do—at least most of the time! Three key words are important here: being, doing and becoming.

We have already seen that the contemplative tradition calls us to a greater awareness that we are human beings not human doings. It gives us permission simply to be. We do not always have to be on the go, in a rush or energetically living our purpose-driven life. We can take time and space to stop and be still and to 'know that [he] is God' (Psalm 46:10). This sense of calmness and interior peace draws others to us and is a factor in our ability to mentor another generation. It is also the basis for our doing, and the more we are at peace with ourselves, the more effective our doing becomes. We may end up doing slightly less, but what we do is more fruitful and more easily sustained. The third word, however, is the one that is often neglected: becoming.

God is as concerned about who we are becoming as about

what we are doing. Indeed, we could say that the main work of God is to form the likeness of his Son within us and that this is his chief concern (Romans 8:29; Colossians 1:28; Galatians 4:19). The church has a tendency to value gifting before character, but with God it is the other way round. Character comes first. Our attitudes, speech, behaviour and activity are all important and in these areas we are to become Christ-like. That is not to say that we are perfect, but that we are changing, even if progress is slow. We are beginning to walk in the ways of Jesus and to become like him (1 John 2:6).

This means that we must be allowing God to mould us and shape us. Much will have been done in the crucible of midlife but the work is never finished and we must be sure to take time for our own character development. We are to keep looking at Jesus and considering him, with an openness to change and a dependency on the Spirit: 'And we all, who with unveiled faces contemplate the Lord's glory, are being transformed into his image with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit' (2 Corinthians 3:18). Worship, prayer, reflection and learning about one's self from others will all be part of this process.

Emerging from midlife into the second half of life sets before us the possibility of another 15 to 20 years of active life and work. In my observation during the course of a lifetime we have several 'thrusts'—periods of eight to ten years when we can focus on fulfilling a particular task before moving on to something new. This means that post-midlife we will probably have only two more significant opportunities to make our life count. I found this thought particularly sobering myself and it made me stop and think carefully about what I wanted to do with the remaining

years of my life. Hopefully the ‘what next?’ question will be answered by finding something that brings us a sense of vocation and gives us the chance to help a new generation as well. When we do manage to find the right calling, we begin to enter into what are potentially our most productive and enjoyable years.

Once we turn 60 most of us will begin to be even more aware of health issues than ever before. In Britain one’s 60th birthday is marked almost immediately by an invitation to take part in a screening for bowel cancer, a not so subtle reminder of our human frailty. From this age onwards one in three women will have breast cancer, and for men the risk of prostate cancer increases significantly. There will be a sense that not only are our bodies ageing but they are wearing out, and will not last for ever. Therefore, we must take care of ourselves and not allow ourselves to become so busy that we ignore our health. It is a particular temptation for Christian people to ignore the needs of the body, thinking it will take care of itself and feeling that we have more important things to do. This may in some measure be a reaction to the narcissistic approach to keeping fit so prevalent in Western societies where exercise and fitness are more for appearance sake than for one’s health, but it is a dangerous path to tread. The body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19–20) and we honour God by honouring the body. If we are to make the most of the time we have left, we will need to look after our body as well as our soul.

It is important also to keep an eye on the future for, as we get older, time seems to go more quickly than ever before. We need to think ahead and anticipate the challenges of later life. In particular, we will need to think about retirement. I know there are many Christians who say, ‘There’s no retirement

in God's service', but I don't subscribe to that philosophy myself. We do need to think through, though, exactly what we understand by this concept, and what retirement might look like for us personally. We may still want to be active in lots of ways, but it is also legitimate to slow down and to do some of the things we have always longed to do, health and resources permitting. We will need to consider at what age it will be best to retire, how we will use our retirement, and importantly, how we will cope financially.

In his book *The Making of a Leader*, Robert Clinton offers what he calls a generalised timeline in leadership development which I think is applicable to all who consider themselves to be disciples of Christ. His final two phases are called 'convergence' and 'afterglow' and these are the two words that sum up the period post-midlife and beyond. About convergence he says, 'God moves the leader into a role that matches his or her gift-mix and experience so that ministry is maximised.' By afterglow he means the time when 'the fruit of a lifetime of ministry and growth culminates in an era of recognition and indirect influence at broad levels'.⁵³

This seems to sum up where our journey is taking us, and with God's grace we will find ourselves at the place where we can look back on our lives with a sense of satisfaction for all that he has done in us and through us. As we near the finishing line, we can aspire to say with the apostle Paul, 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day' (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

EXERCISES

- Do you notice within yourself the tendency to slip back into operating in your own strength rather than in dependency upon God? Why do you think this is? How can you learn to work *with* God rather than *for* God? It may help to consider these scriptures: 1 Corinthians 3:9; 15:10; Philippians 2:13; Colossians 1:29; 1 Thessalonians 5:24 and Hebrews 13:20–21.
- Take some time to meditate on the words of Jesus from Matthew 11:28–30 in *THE MESSAGE*. Answer his questions for yourself, and respond to his invitations.
- How might you become more contemplative in your spirituality? How can you practice sabbath?
- Reflect on the words being, doing and becoming in the context of your own life.
- How might you answer the ‘what next?’ question? How might you prepare for old age?

BIBLE WINDOW 5: Jonah (Jonah 2:1–10)

Jonah's experience inside the great fish is often used as a metaphor for midlife. Allowing Jonah to be cast into the sea and then swallowed by the great fish was God's rather unorthodox way of bringing Jonah to the place he wanted him to be, in this case Nineveh. It reminds us that, although God is not the author of everything that happens to us, he does utilise our circumstances to achieve his purpose for us. Certainly, in midlife we may feel that God is hemming us in on every side. He does so, not because we have done something wrong, but so he can have our full attention.

Inside the fish is a place of deep darkness where Jonah feels alone, overwhelmed and abandoned. It is not a pleasant place to be, but darkness seems to be an essential ingredient in spiritual formation. Here is time to think, to re-evaluate and to sort out one's thoughts. Experiences like this take us either one way or the other—they bring us closer to God, or they drive us away. Jonah chooses to cry out to God for help rather than turning away in anger, and as a result is brought closer to God: 'In my distress I called to the Lord, and he answered me' (v. 2).

In this place of sorting out Jonah is free to recognise that 'those who cling to worthless idols turn away from God's love for them' (v. 8). An idol is anything that takes the place of God in our lives, and midlife often reveals to us where our trust actually lies. When the pressure is on, we seem to gain a new clarity about what is really important, and are more prepared to acknowledge and discard our God-substitutes. Our ideas of God are stretched too. Jonah's thinking about God and his grace was limited to Israel and the covenant people. He has to learn that there is a wideness in God's

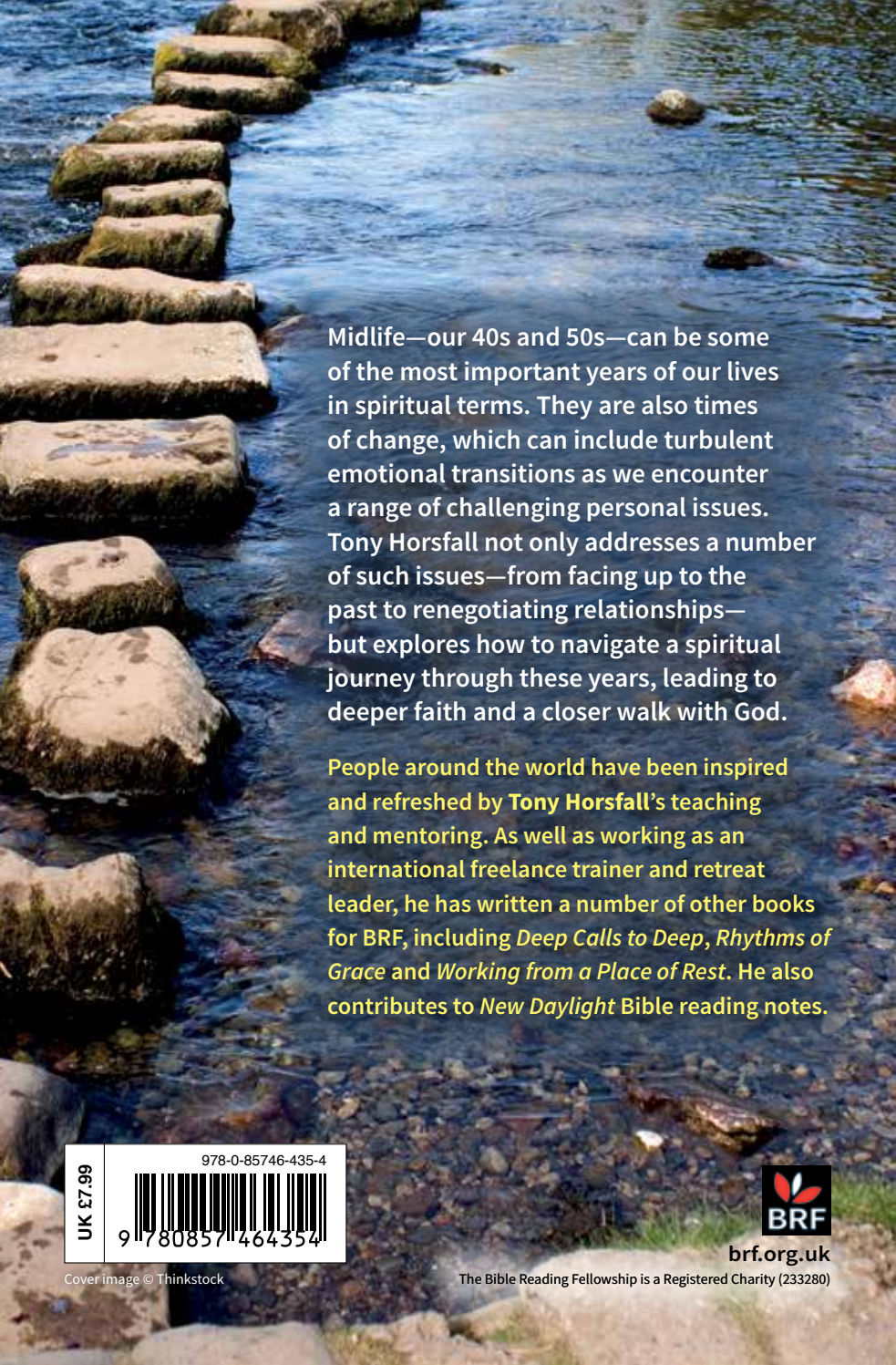
mercy that extends even to the Ninevites. Part of the midlife journey involves developing a larger view of God and his love for all people that makes us more tolerant and less judgemental.

The inside of the fish also feels to Jonah like a place of death. He refers to it as ‘the grave’ or ‘sheol’ (v. 2). He has been forced to die to his own rebellious ways and stubborn will. We know that dying to self is integral to spiritual formation and to discipleship as a follower of Jesus (Mark 8:34–35). One of the key questions for us in midlife is whether or not we are willing to die to anything that would prevent us from pursuing the will of God in the second half. It seems necessary for there to be a letting go of any hindrance before we can move forward. This choosing is often painful and involves a kind of death. We have to choose again to follow the Master.

The story of Jonah, however, is also a story of resurrection and therefore one that gives hope to us in the midst of the turmoil of midlife. There is a way through the darkness, and death inevitably leads to life. Jonah describes what happened in these words: ‘To the roots of the mountains I sank down; the earth beneath barred me in for ever. But you, Lord my God, brought my life up from the pit’ (v. 6). Jesus identified Jonah’s experience in terms of his own death and resurrection, and described it as a sign (Matthew 12:40). One way in which Jonah’s story is a sign is that it gives hope to all who pass through periods of darkness. We can remain optimistic even when we feel trapped in the darkness because we know that eventually things will change. We believe in resurrection.

Jonah’s experience teaches us that God will often take us to a deep place so that we may know him in a deep way

(Psalm 42:7). Few of us would choose to go there unbidden, but sometimes we find ourselves there and it is reassuring to know that in the most extreme of circumstances, when we feel most out of control, God is still in control. More than that, we know that, although in the darkness we may not feel we are getting anywhere, we are in fact carried forward to the place where God wants us to be. Eventually our feet will touch dry land again: 'And the Lord commanded the fish, and it vomited Jonah onto dry land' (v. 10).



Midlife—our 40s and 50s—can be some of the most important years of our lives in spiritual terms. They are also times of change, which can include turbulent emotional transitions as we encounter a range of challenging personal issues. Tony Horsfall not only addresses a number of such issues—from facing up to the past to renegotiating relationships—but explores how to navigate a spiritual journey through these years, leading to deeper faith and a closer walk with God.

People around the world have been inspired and refreshed by Tony Horsfall's teaching and mentoring. As well as working as an international freelance trainer and retreat leader, he has written a number of other books for BRF, including *Deep Calls to Deep*, *Rhythms of Grace* and *Working from a Place of Rest*. He also contributes to *New Daylight* Bible reading notes.

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