

Bible readings for
special times



Facing Midlife

Tony Horsfall

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The Bible Reading Fellowship
15 The Chambers, Vineyard
Abingdon OX14 3FE
brf.org.uk

The Bible Reading Fellowship (BRF) is a Registered Charity (233280)

ISBN 978 0 85746 581 8
First published 2017
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0
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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Printed and bound by CPI Group (UK) Ltd, Croydon CR0 4YY

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Introduction

I am passionate about helping people on their journey through midlife because I know that, although it can be a tricky period to navigate well, it also provides a great opportunity for significant spiritual growth.

Over the years that I have been leading retreats and spending time with individuals, I have seen time and again the importance of midlife. Many issues seem to coalesce in our 40s and 50s and it is hard for us to deal with them on our own. That is why people instinctively seek outside help, from wise friends and respected advisors, as well as from books like this one. We have a need to understand, to explore our thoughts and feelings and to talk over what we are experiencing in a safe and accepting context.

I also know from my own experience how crucial midlife can be. For me, it coincided with the decade of my 40s and was a period of inner turmoil. I faced many challenges in my work as a church leader, but also struggled with issues within myself. I sought help, but could find very little. At times, I felt alone and vulnerable. That I got through midlife relatively unscathed is down to the grace of God. I know I could have made some bad choices and easily taken a wrong path.

At the same time, midlife became a significant turning point for me. For most of my adult life I had been engaged in Christian ministry, firstly in mission work overseas and local church ministry, then in a training ministry. My life was full of activity and most of the time I felt exhausted. Something inside me said, 'There must be a better way to live than this.' About that time, I attended my first silent retreat, and it turned me upside down. I discovered the power of stillness and silence, and the joy of a more contemplative approach to life and faith. More significantly, I entered into the reality of my identity as a deeply loved child of God and discovered the joy of intimacy with God.

I was impacted deeply by this and, about two years later, began to sense that God wanted me to take a step of faith and to launch out into a ministry of my own, aiming to help others experience a life of intimacy with God. Since our children had grown up and left home, and we were ready to downsize, we sold our large family home, paid off the mortgage and bought a smaller, more manageable house. This gave me confidence to follow a new calling for the second half of my life.

Fifteen years later, I can only stand amazed at how God has provided for us, opened doors of opportunity and used me to encourage others. I could never have imagined all that he would do in me and through me. The post-midlife years have been the best years of my life. It feels as if everything that came before, while valuable in itself, was a preparation for this period. Even the period of turmoil proved, with hindsight, to have been particularly formative.

That is why I am delighted to write this series of devotions on the midlife journey. My hope is that, as you read these notes on a daily basis, you will have time to ponder and reflect on what the Bible has to say, consider where you are in life, understand what God is doing in you and find a sense of where God may be leading you in the future.

I wish you a safe passage!

Numbering our days

Our days may come to seventy years, or eighty, if our strength endures; yet the best of them are but trouble and sorrow, for they quickly pass, and we fly away. If only we knew the power of your anger! Your wrath is as great as the fear that is your due. Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom.

Wise people are those who recognise their days are limited. We each have a finite amount of time to live, which means we should value every day as a gift and make the most of the opportunities we are given.

When we are young, and our whole lives lie ahead of us, we think we have all the time in the world and we cannot imagine life ever coming to an end. As we grow older and we recognise how quickly time passes, we begin to appreciate how precious life is. We feel the need to manage our days more carefully.

When does this change in outlook take place? During what we call midlife, a period that begins when we first realise there are probably more days behind us than there are ahead of us. This is a sobering thought that usually occurs when people are in their 40s – which is right on schedule according to the timetable of this psalm. This realisation helps to focus our thinking and invites us to take stock of our lives.

It makes good sense to pause and think about the way we are living and what we might do in the future – to reflect, evaluate and appraise. By the time we have reached our 40s, we will have learned a good many things about ourselves, about God, about other people and about life itself. Things may not have worked out exactly as we thought they would, and we may feel the need to stop and ask ourselves, ‘What do I want to do with the rest of my life? Will it be more of the same, or something different?’

Lord, sometimes it feels like I am at a fork in the road, and uncertain which way to take. Guide me, I pray, so I may do your will. Amen

I was young and now I am old

The Lord makes firm the steps of the one who delights in him; though he may stumble, he will not fall, for the Lord upholds him with his hand. I was young and now I am old, yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken or their children begging bread. They are always generous and lend freely; their children will be a blessing.

Midlife is the transition between the first half of life and the second, that movement from when we were considered 'young' to when we begin to be described as 'old'. For most, this is an unwelcome change which may be met with denial and disbelief, or even with a sense of panic. We may try our best to stave off the ageing process: to keep fit, dress fashionably, stay up to date and so on, but that is only to postpone the inevitable. Wise people accept that changes are taking place – physically, psychologically, emotionally, spiritually – and realise they have to adjust accordingly.

The midlife transition may well be spread out over a period of time, even as long as a decade. It does not always involve a crisis, although it may well be a time when we are tested and tried in a number of ways as we adjust to a new reality. For many, the midlife journey is more like a series of bumps in the road, with challenges that we have to negotiate every now and then. These challenges are part of the normal maturation process we go through as human beings, and while they bring with them a certain danger (of making poor choices), they also bring a great opportunity (of making good choices).

From a faith perspective, midlife is often one of our most formative periods when profound changes take place that enable significant spiritual growth. It is not to be feared. Along with the psalmist, we can be sure of God's faithfulness and that, when we entrust our way to him, he will bring us safely through. What may help in this transition is to share the journey with others who have walked the way before – either a mentor, spiritual director or peer group. There is no need to be alone.

Lord, make my steps firm and my pathway straight. Amen

Midlife angst

The words of the Teacher, son of David, king in Jerusalem: ‘Meaningless! Meaningless!’ says the Teacher. ‘Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.’ What do people gain from all their labours at which they toil under the sun? Generations come and generations go, but the earth remains forever.

One characteristic of midlife is a certain amount of soul-searching. This may not always plumb the depths of despair as totally as we see in today’s reading, but often midlife throws up a degree of *angst*, of wondering if it has all been worthwhile.

Some may look back over their lives with a feeling of satisfaction, having reached their goals and made a success of life so far. Even such people, however, may experience what has been called ‘success panic’ and wonder if they can sustain their achievement into the future. Others may look back on broken dreams and hopes that have been shattered. Faced with the stark realisation that they may never achieve the ambitions of their youth, they may live with a quiet despair.

In midlife, it is common for deep existential questions to arise within us. We may ask, ‘Is that it?’ Having worked hard and achieved our goals, we may question if it was worth all the effort and sacrifice. Success does not always bring the fulfilment we expect. We may wonder, ‘Is this as good as it gets?’ Having lived life to the full, we may be left feeling empty and searching for an inner satisfaction that seems elusive.

We may feel, ‘There must be a better way to live than this.’ In the first half of life we have often worked hard and long, and we arrive at midlife feeling exhausted and worn-out. The prospect of nothing but more of the same leaves us frustrated and disillusioned.

Such questions are our friends, not our enemies. We should not be afraid of them, for they set us on a journey to find true meaning and purpose, to discover that which makes life worth living. They take us deeper into God, and may lead us to the discovery that he has something better in store for us.

Lord, you know my questions. May they lead me closer to you rather than drive me away. Amen

God knows and understands our struggles

As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. The life of mortals is like grass, they flourish like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more.

For those who are believers, the midlife journey is lived out in the context of their relationship with God. While some may begin to question their faith and doubt previously firmly held convictions, others may well discover that their faith finds a much deeper expression than before.

One reassuring truth we can hold on to is that God knows and understands us, and has compassion on us. Although we may be surprised at the turmoil we experience in midlife, God is neither shocked nor troubled by the twists and turns of our human journey. The God who made us understands us better than we understand ourselves, and is actually at work in all that is happening to us.

Midlife can be a time of great disorientation. Someone described it as like losing your way in a dark wood, fearing you may never find the way out again. It can feel like we have lost our bearings, as if the compass we have relied upon is no longer accurate, and we don't know which way to turn. We don't understand ourselves, those around us don't understand us, and we are left adrift and at sea.

If you feel this way, take heart. There is no need to blame yourself for your inner turmoil; it is par for the course when passing through midlife. God has not abandoned you, nor will he ever forsake you. Your heavenly Father is watching over you even as you process so many different emotions and unfamiliar thoughts. He will see you through and you will come out the other side stronger, wiser and more compassionate than ever. What is needed now is to trust, to take the hand of God and know that you are in the grip of his grace.

Father, sometimes I feel lost, confused, lonely and afraid. I believe you are with me though, and will see me safely through. Amen

God's ultimate purpose

And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters.

It is easy in life to make the mistake of thinking that what matters most is *what we do*, when in reality God is more concerned with *who we are*. Indeed, in the first half of life the emphasis is likely to be on building a career, achieving our goals and making our dreams come true. Then, in midlife, we begin to realise that God's agenda for us is somewhat different. He is concerned about who we are becoming and the formation of our character.

The story of Joseph is an example. Sold out of hatred by his brothers to Midianite traders, he found himself transported down to Egypt. There, he was unjustly imprisoned until eventually he was released into Pharaoh's service. God prospered him and he became second only to the king himself in authority. When famine came and his brothers arrived seeking help, Joseph was in a position to help them. Having been humbled by God through his suffering, he was able to forgive them; and having been raised up to prominence by God, he was able to meet their need.

Joseph explained to his brothers: 'Do not be distressed and do not be angry with yourselves for selling me here, because it was to save lives that God sent me ahead of you... It was not you who sent me here, but God... You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives' (Genesis 45:5, 8; 50:20).

God used adversity to shape Joseph's character and to bring him to the place where he could serve God's purpose. Midlife is a time to look back over your life and see how God has been at work in your circumstances, working all things together for your ultimate good.

*Lord, as I look back, help me to see your guiding hand in the ups and downs of my life.
Amen*



A book of undated biblical reflections, *Facing Midlife* is a unique devotional guide to one of the most spiritually important transitions in life. Midlife brings with it both difficulty and opportunity, and the scriptures show us how to handle these challenges wisely so that in the second half of life we reach our full potential and find our unique God-given vocation. Tony Horsfall shows that God is involved in the midlife transition, using it to shape and form us into the likeness of Christ, and to prepare us for the exciting calling he still has for us. Rather than something to be avoided or ignored, the midlife transition is one to be embraced confidently in the knowledge that God is at work in all the circumstances of our lives.

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 an important book on the subject of midlife, *Spiritual Growth in a Time of Change* (2016). Other titles include *Deep Calls to Deep* (2015), *Rhythms of Grace* (2012) and *Working from a Place of Rest* (2010). He also contributes to *New Daylight* Bible reading notes.



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