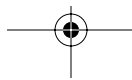
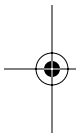
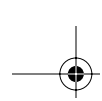


Preface

In many ways this book emerged from dozens of conversations, spread over a decade, with people between 35 and 55. Sometimes I imagine sitting in a giant room full of all the people who talked to me about their experiences at midlife. In my imaginary room, fascinating conversations about this life stage swirl around me. One person talks about the loss of her parents, and another builds on her comments, mentioning the huge transition and sense of emptiness he experienced when his kids entered their teens and then left home. One man describes his deepening prayer life, and another person recounts the freedom she feels now that she has received more healing from God for childhood abuse.

I have been deeply privileged to listen to a wealth of stories about the great challenges and rich growth that happen in the midlife years. Sometimes I feel frustrated that our culture and our churches do so little to validate this stage in life. Children, youth, young adults and seniors are all served by specialized programs and ministries, and we are aware of their unique needs. But midlife is also a rich stage in the life cycle, with developmental tasks to be accomplished and significant growth to be embraced.





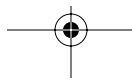
We often think that the middle years of adulthood are like a level plain after the tumult and exciting discoveries of early adulthood and before the adjustments and decline of retirement and old age. Instead, in the stories I listened to, I heard a variety of intense emotions in response to unanticipated losses and surprising new discoveries. I heard about intense reflection on the meaning of life. I heard about finding God in new and unexpected places. In most people's experience, midlife is far from a static, placid stage of life.

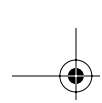
Fundamental to our Christian identity is a call to growth. If we are followers of Christ, we are being transformed into his likeness from "one degree of glory to another" (1 Cor 3:18). We are disciples of a master teacher who is calling us to learn and grow and change. We can expect that God will use all the ups and downs of every stage of our lives in his work of transforming us. This transformation will change us inwardly as we grow in drawing near to God. We will also be shaped in new ways for service and ministry; our renewed love for God will flow into renewed love and care for the people around us.

My own midlife journey began a decade ago when I was in my late thirties. After ten years of mothering two children and attending seminary part time, I finished my Master of Divinity degree. My sons were approaching their teen years, and I could see their growing independence and their decreasing need of my constant attention. I knew I wanted to find meaningful work by the time they entered adolescence.

I found myself full of questions. What could I offer the world? For what purpose had God designed me? What did I want from life? What did I value, desire and care about? Who was I, and why was I here?

All my questions did not add up to anything close to a midlife crisis. The questioning did, however, mark a transition. I knew my life would change as I moved into the working world. I would no longer be a part-time student and stay-at-home mom. For the first time in many years, I would have coworkers and earn money. I would be





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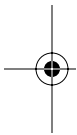
viewed in some settings as having a new kind of authority because I had earned a master's degree. I would have to think about practical things like sack lunches and "professional" clothes.

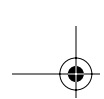
I entered the work force at 38 by taking on several different part-time jobs. At the same time that I was adjusting to life in the working world, I noticed I was also branching out in new areas totally unconnected to my work. Learning contemplative prayer and beginning to write fiction stand out as hugely transforming events for me, deepening my faith in nonverbal and profound ways, giving me new windows through which to look at life and filling my heart with rich and unexpected joy.

I was 45 when I was ordained to serve as an associate pastor in a congregation. The same year I got my first book contract. Many of my questions of purpose and life direction have been answered—for the present! Yet as I have navigated my forties, I have experienced painful losses that came out of the blue, some of which are still perplexing and haunting.

Observers of adult life stages notice that most adults experience a significant transition roughly every seven to ten years. Even for those of us who don't have a midlife crisis, the transitions between 35 and 55 still carry significant weight. Decisions are more complex than they were in early adulthood. We may be weighed down by a mortgage, kids' needs, unexpected health issues or the demands of caring for aging parents. We may have been engaged in one line of work long enough to have our identity and our monthly budget pretty firmly rooted in our career, making change difficult.

Some of us will experience a true midlife crisis, an intense experience of questioning and self-doubt. A MacArthur Foundation study released in 1999 showed that approximately 10 percent of adults experience a midlife crisis. That fits with my anecdotal evidence. I have talked with over a hundred people about their midlife experiences, and only about a dozen talked about a profound and debilitat-





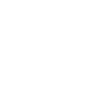
ing midlife crisis. Most of the people I interviewed who had experienced a midlife crisis came through it with the same kind of growth and sense of discovery experienced by those of us whose midlife experiences were less intense.

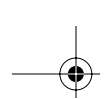
When I listened to people talk about midlife, I was struck by the common themes that lay behind the diverse individual stories. The themes paralleled my own experience. People talked about the variety of losses that pile up during the midlife years. Each loss carries pain of its own, but it's the accumulation of the losses between 35 and 55 that makes them so challenging. I also heard about the discoveries of midlife: new hobbies, new joys, new and fruitful spiritual disciplines, new freedom from "shoulds" and "oughts," and an increased ability to live in the moment and receive grace from God.

You have just heard a little of my midlife story, and you will hear more bits and pieces of it in the chapters to come. You will also be hearing the stories of many more people at midlife. I have changed all the names and some of the identifying details. Occasionally, one of the stories is a composite of two or three people.

If you're one of those midlife folks who feels alone in your experiences, I think you will enjoy hearing the voices of others at midlife. It is fascinating to note the great variety in the individual midlife experiences, coupled with the consistency of the overarching themes.

In the first two chapters of this book, I have tried to present an overview of the kinds of losses and discoveries that I heard people talk about in my interviews. The remaining chapters present specific spiritual disciplines and practices that are helpful at midlife. Some of these practices were very common themes in my interviews. A huge percentage of the people I interviewed talked about their newfound joy in experiencing God's presence in nature. A good number talked about the significance of contemplative prayer, Sabbath-keeping, embracing mystery, relating to God with the heart and visiting Benedictine monasteries.





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The chapter on Celtic Christian spirituality comes from my own experience. As I have watched the growing enthusiasm for Celtic music, poetry and spirituality in our culture, and as I have studied the themes of Celtic Christianity, I have become convinced of its relevance for people at midlife and its profound connection to the issues of midlife.

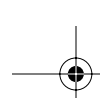
You will notice in this book that when I need to use a pronoun for God, I use “he” or “him.” I want to clarify that I do not believe that God is male. The Bible teaches clearly that God is neither male nor female; God is the Lord of gender and cannot be limited to being either male or female. I am also aware that for women who have been abused, the use of a male pronoun for God raises all kinds of difficult issues.

Despite my concern for theological accuracy and pastoral sensitivity, I continue to use male pronouns for God because I care so deeply that we understand God calls us to a personal, intimate relationship. I prefer to speak naturally about God as if he is a vibrant person close to me, and for me that means using the same pronouns I would use for any person I want to be close to. I do want you to know that lots of careful consideration lies behind this decision.

One helpful metaphor for midlife is half time. We are called to pause sometime in the years between 35 and 55 to evaluate the way we have spent the first half of our lives and to prepare for the second half. For cable TV executive Bob Buford, writing in *Half Time: Changing Your Game Plan from Success to Significance*,¹ the years before 35 were all about financial and business success. Then God called him to stop and consider how to live the second half of his life focused more on significance.

In our frantic culture, how can we pause for half time? How can we take time to evaluate the meaning of our lives? How can we find purpose and significance? The people of God have pondered these questions throughout the centuries, and through the spiritual disci-





plines presented in this book you can find structure to help you pause and seek God's voice.

My prayer for each reader is that, having read this book, you will feel more confident that God is at work in and through the circumstances that characterize your midlife journey. I pray that you will be encouraged to try new spiritual disciplines, and that some of the things you try will give you new enthusiasm for drawing near to God. May these new spiritual disciplines nurture and ground you as you walk fresh paths in the second half of life.

