

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!