



# Spiritual Growth in a Time of Change

Following God in midlife

**Tony Horsfall**

‘Midlife can be a tricky season. Not all make the transition well. Tony Horsfall draws extensively on the writings of others, and introduces us to concepts and resources for the journey. He offers us a clear, wise and practical guide to steer us through the various challenges and opportunities. It’s a great guide for anyone navigating the tricky waters of midlife. I’ll be using it myself, and recommending it to others.’

JAMES LAWRENCE, CPAS LEADERSHIP PRINCIPAL

‘This book reveals how our midlife experience, and the path through which the Holy Spirit seeks to form us, are in fact the same journey towards significant growth. Tony Horsfall brings together a great deal of wisdom from an impressive number of sources. Once again, he succeeds in exploring deep spiritual and psychological points in such a simple and authentic manner that you feel like you could share and recommend his words amongst a great many people; a rare gift.’

RICHARD HANN, FORMERLY PENHURST RETREAT CENTRE

‘Navigate the midlife transition well and our finest, most fruitful years lie ahead of us. That’s the message I’ve taken away from this gem of a book. Through biblical reflection, insights from the social sciences and wisdom drawn from his own personal and professional life, Tony Horsfall helps us understand the longings, tensions and questions of the midlife season while showing us how to utilise its inherent opportunities. *Spiritual Growth in a Time of Change* charts a course to new identity, purpose and fulfilment in God. I highly recommend it.’

SHERIDAN VOYSEY, WRITER, SPEAKER, BROADCASTER AND AUTHOR

‘Tony’s book is a user’s guide to our middle years. He helps us to recognise the landmarks of change and struggle, and to make the most of midlife’s potential for spiritual growth and maturity. It is practical and honest, opening up our common failures and temptations in middle age but inviting us on an inner journey to becoming more of our true selves as loved by God. Tony offers reflective questions and Bible character studies to make this a book that can be used to effect by small groups seeking accountability and growth.’

MARY TAYLOR, RETIRED BAPTIST MINISTER



Ministries

15 The Chambers, Vineyard  
Abingdon OX14 3FE  
**brf.org.uk**

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ISBN 978 1 80039 202 1  
First published 2016  
Reprinted 2019, 2022  
Second edition published 2024  
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0  
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Cover illustration by Ben Bloxham, from a photo by SenexDomum © iStockPhoto

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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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Ministries

To all who gave me permission to share something of their midlife journey, and to those who helped me with my writing of this book – you know who you are!

To Julia McGuinness and Mags Duggan,  
who first started me thinking about midlife  
and whose insights have shaped my understanding.

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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.



Sadly, there has always been some embarrassment in admitting to such feelings publicly, with any expression of concern about midlife often greeted by laughter and a bit of teasing. Such a response drives painful emotions underground and prevents the kind of honest dialogue which would be so healing. However, since the first edition of this book was published there has been a growing tendency to greater openness about mental and emotional well-being. Perhaps this came about in part as a result of the worldwide pandemic and the attendant awareness that we are all vulnerable and need to care for each other more. High profile people sharing their own inner struggles has also helped to create a climate in society where personal vulnerability is increasingly acceptable. This trend to authenticity is to be welcomed, although there is always the danger of unhealthy introspection and becoming self-absorbed.

Midlife for me coincided with the decade of my forties. 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 forties 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 roadmap 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 amongst 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 little 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 thirties 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 most benefit – 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.

*Tony Horsfall*

# 3

## Charting a course

How then shall we find our way through the choppy waters of midlife? Is there a chart that we can follow, or a compass with which to find and keep our bearings? This is indeed a dangerous journey, but the great temptation in wanting to help others navigate safely through this passage of life is that either we oversimplify things, or we formularise them in such a way that everyone's journey has to fit a predetermined structure. No two journeys are the same, and there is uniqueness about each one. In seeking to clarify the issues, we must not obscure the fact that there will always be a hint of mystery and unpredictability in the midlife experience.

Here I will not attempt to give a detailed map but a general overview of the process that is midlife. It is offered to give some guidance about what to expect but not in a rigid way that leaves no room for variety or exception. It is something that has come to me through my reading and study, but mostly through reflection upon my own journey. I want to set out before you what the road may look like in terms of three phases: early midlife, middle midlife and later midlife. I am putting no time frame on any of these phases, and I want to stress that there is a good deal of overlap, and also some toing and froing between them. Hopefully, it will be a helpful way of gathering together the various strands of midlife and provide a workable framework for our thinking.

## Early midlife

We have highlighted in the previous chapter some of the ‘trigger’ events that signal the onset of midlife. In many and various ways it dawns on us that we are now entering a new stage of life. In this phase the emphasis will be very much on our past, where we have come from and all that is behind us. The tasks of this period are:

- to find my past – to piece together what has happened in my life so far and to see how it has shaped and influenced me.
- to face my past – to come to terms with all that has gone on in my life, celebrating the good and finding freedom and forgiveness for what was not good
- to appraise my past – to make a realistic assessment of my life so far, looking at what has been achieved and what has not.
- to let go of the past – all transition requires a letting go of what has been so that we can move into that which has not yet been.

The goal of this part of the journey is to arrive at a place of acceptance, and we come to this by the discipline of honest reflection. What we need most at this time is realism, the courage to face up to things as they are.

## Middle midlife

This is perhaps the deepest part of the journey and the one that will require the most time and the most courage. During this period we will feel the need to draw inwards and allow the process of change to happen within us. It is a time for self-awareness and further healing of our woundedness. In this phase the emphasis is very much on the present, what is going on within us now.

The tasks of this phase are:

- to find my true identity as God's beloved child and to know true intimacy through my relationship with God.
- to grow in authenticity, becoming increasingly the person God intended me to be rather than the self I have constructed to get by in the world.
- to come to terms with aspects of who I am that I may have rejected (my shadow<sup>1</sup>) and know that God loves me in the totality of who I am.
- to make any necessary adjustments to my image of God and to process any questions and difficulties I may have in my faith.
- to reflect on how the midlife journey may have affected my relationships, whether I am married or single, and if I am a leader, how my leadership may be changing.

The goal of this part of the journey is transformation as a person, and we come to this through the practice of healthy self-examination. What we need most at this time is optimism (hope), the belief that the midlife journey is taking me somewhere new and better.

## Later midlife

The final part of the journey is the most exciting because now we are emerging into the light and can see the way ahead again. The emphasis here is on the future and stepping out into the will of God for the second half of life.

The tasks of this phase are:

- to discover my vocation, my God-given calling for this stage of life.
- to consider the legacy of my life and to nurture a new generation.

- to begin to learn how to work in partnership with God so that what I do flows increasingly out of who I am.
- to begin to look ahead to retirement and beyond.

The goal of this part of the journey is ministry, and we come to this through the process of discernment. What we need most at this time is God-inspired action, the faith to step out in obedience to what we sense is the call of God.

This outline will form the structure of the rest of the book, with the weight of material being focused on the middle midlife phase. Remember that it is there for guidance only. Life is never as simple or straightforward as schemes like this suggest. All it does is to help us see the wood from the trees and at least make some sense out of all that is going on in our lives during midlife.

Perhaps as you read the outline you can locate yourself somewhere in the process. Ann (55) is someone who places herself towards the end of her midlife journey and is beginning to move into the pre-retirement stage. Midlife for her began when she was approaching 40 and as a single person realised she would not have her own children. During this period she has discovered a lot about herself, especially her introversion. Her faith has undergone a deep change too; firstly, as she was made to question whether Christianity is true or not, and then, convinced that it was, as she began to discover her identity in Christ as God's precious daughter. Part of her midlife journey involved making the decision to change church from one where she was busily involved but exhausted, to one where she could take time to process her faith and find a new rhythm for her life.

With the menopause behind her, she is not as emotional as before but finds she has less energy now and needs to pace herself. She has already taken the decision to reduce her hours as a teacher and is looking forward to retirement, as long as she can make ends meet. She knows her identity is not in her role as a teacher, so feels she will be able to let it go, even after teaching for 30 years.



## EXERCISES

- How do you respond to this outline of the midlife journey?
- Where do you think you are at present: early midlife, middle midlife or late midlife? Or do you find yourself oscillating between the different phases?
- If you are looking back on midlife, do the phases suggested here resonate with you? Or would you suggest an alternative outline?

## NOTES

1. By 'shadow' we mean all the things about ourselves, both good and bad, that have been repressed within us. This term will be explained further in chapter 7.



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Our 40s and 50s can be times of change and turbulent emotional transitions as we encounter a range of challenging personal issues. They can also be some of the most important years of our lives in spiritual terms.

**Tony Horsfall** addresses a number of 'midlife' issues – from facing up to the past to renegotiating relationships – and 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 a freelance trainer and retreat leader, he has written a number of other books for BRF Ministries, including *Deep Calls to Deep*, *Rhythms of Grace* and *Mentoring for Spiritual Growth*. He also contributes to the *New Daylight* Bible reading notes.

'Accessible and an easy read. The exercises are practical and pose useful questions. *Spiritual Growth in a Time of Change* offers a straightforward introduction to the issues, and may provide some welcome lightbulb moments for anyone who is new to the concept of midlife.'

SARAH MEYRICK, CHURCH TIMES

