

Daily View

“But exhort one another every day, as long as it is called ‘today’” Hebrews 3:13

September 10, 2020

“Soft in the Middle”

Where can we find strength for the middle of life?

[This article is ridiculously long. The article appeared first in 1999, in *Focus Magazine*, the publication I was editing and publishing at the time. I was experiencing some of what I talk about here – a little burnout, mental fatigue, etc. – nothing very serious, but writing the article was a catharsis for me.

After the article appeared in the magazine, I was asked to preach on the topic a few times. I was neither qualified nor had a desire to be an expert on “mid-life crisis,” but I agreed to pare this down to a 45 minute lecture and I presented it in a few churches. You’re getting the longer version here.

As I said before about the Daily View, you won’t hurt my feelings if you don’t read a line of what I write. That’s especially true of this one, since it’s so long. I’m reprinting it because 2020 has been a trying time, to say the least, which may be accelerating some of the issues discussed here, even in men and women much younger than “middle age.” If this is you, perhaps knowing that even stellar biblical figures suffered in the same way will help.]

I am convinced that several Bible characters went through a “mid-life crises.” Moses, Jacob, Jonah, and David are just a few examples. Moses was in the middle of a crisis when God called him at the burning bush (even though he was 80, he was still in “mid-life” since he lived to be 120). He had lost the fire of his youth and was whittling away the rest of his life in Midian, tending sheep.

Jacob had deceived his brother twice and was on the run when he wrestled with a Man (Gen. 32). He desperately wanted a blessing that he did not have to cheat someone to get. And Jonah’s whole career as a fire and brimstone preacher seemed to go down the tubes when God saved Ninevah: “Therefore now, O LORD, please take my life from me, for death is better to me than life” (Jonah 4:3).

Then there’s David. The shepherd king, the boy who killed the giant Goliath with a slingshot, the epitome of faith. Yet he was pursued by a jealous king and even found himself on the hit list of his own spoiled son, Absalom. Then there’s that time on the rooftop, when he should have been leading his men in battle. Instead, he lingered in Jerusalem and got caught up in an affair with Bathsheba. He even killed her husband. Mid-life crisis? How about mid-life *chaos*.

Mid-life crises are common for both men and women. This does not excuse them, but it does suggest that it is a common problem. Does God have a word of encouragement for us today? Look at David’s Psalm 55, and see if you recognize anyone.

Give ear to my prayer, O God,
and hide not yourself from my plea for mercy!
Attend to me, and answer me;
I am restless in my complaint and I moan,
because of the noise of the enemy,
because of the oppression of the wicked.

For they drop trouble upon me,
and in anger they bear a grudge against me.
My heart is in anguish within me;
the terrors of death have fallen upon me.
Fear and trembling come upon me,
and horror overwhelms me.
And I say, “Oh, that I had wings like a dove!
I would fly away and be at rest;
yes, I would wander far away;
I would lodge in the wilderness;
I would hurry to find a shelter
from the raging wind and tempest.”

We’ll come back to the psalm later. But this issue got me to thinking about myself. There are times when you lose the “music” in your life. I used to write poetry. I’m not kidding. Listen to these lines from a poem I wrote while in Hawaii in 1969 (on the beach at Waikiki, no less). I wrote it shortly after I met Christie (please hold your laughter until all the lines are introduced):

Gray and white clouds blow swiftly by,
I’d jump on one, if they weren’t so high, if I could!
I’d nail my love to that cloud, if I could,
But I have no nails, and that cloud’s not wood.

Now why would I expose my ego like this and risk your muffled chuckles (or even lol’s)? Simply to point out something that you may be able to identify with... I used to be “inspired” to write poetry. I even sent it to my fiancée to read. I haven’t written a line of poetry in almost 30 years, with two exceptions and they were most emotional of times in the past few years: our son’s wedding and when Angie left home. But other than that, no poesy from Posey [2020 update: I wrote one for our 50th anniversary; but I’m not “middle-aged” anymore either].

What happens to the music, to the poetry? Someone well said, “*a child dies and the corpse is called an adult.*” Ouch! That’s a sobering thought. But Jesus said something more important and that is that we need to receive the kingdom *as children* if we expect to please God (Matthew 18:1-4). But the music fades as we get older. Where does it go, and why?

For many, it vanishes when we hit that mysterious period of every person’s life – “middle age.” Millions are exposed to this disease — especially “baby boomers.” We’re called that because we are part of the population explosion that occurred just after WWII ended. And, now, we are the great *ignored* generation. Look at our preaching. How many times have you heard a preacher say, “to those of you in the middle time of life, let me offer this word of hope...” (2020 note: today

some insensitive youth have called the coronavirus “the boomer remover”). Messages to and about the young abound – the preacher drones on about their dreams and hopes and how they have their lives ahead of them and how they are the “future of the church.” Then there are sermons directed to the elderly, thanking them for their many years of service and their good example, and to point them to the beauty and hope of heaven which is drawing ever nearer.

But what about us boomers? Why are words of encouragement so scarce? I guess they figure we’ve got it made: set in our jobs and doing well; we’ve got the house with the big, green yard, two SUVs, a real bank account, a 401(k) and stock options: *the American Dream has come true! Say Amen!* Not only that, but our personal lives couldn’t be better. We’ve settled nicely into our marriages and everything is going smoothly: 25, 30 years of bliss. Our kids are either grown and gone or close to it and we’ve got the house to ourselves. Finally, we can look back on the joys of parenting, and know that it really was worth it: even the teenage years (though not one of us wants to do it again). Some of us are even GRANDPARENTS, for crying out loud! In addition, God has blessed us with less than perfect recall to make our memories that much sweeter.

If you’re reading this and saying, “moi?” you’re not alone. For many, middle age is hardly all peaches and cream, sweet memories and smooth sailing. C. S. Lewis put it this way: “the long dull, monotonous years of middle-aged prosperity or middle-aged adversity are excellent campaigning weather for the devil.” Where do you think the term “middle-age crisis” came from? It came from the 75% of men and women who hit 35-50 years old and go a little nuts.

That’s right. Folks who have done studies on this sort of thing say that at least 75% of men and women will go through a moderate to severe middle-age crisis. Think about it: if you have four middle-aged friends, three of them are on the verge of crazy! Researcher Jim Conway says “escaping a mid-life crisis is about as likely as a young person escaping adolescence.”

What are the signs?

Howell Raines says “Typically it begins with mild twinges of dread, disappointment and restlessness that tiptoe in on little cat feet. Then, in some cases, the cat feet turn to elephant feet.” Fortunately, for some, the cat feet stay cat feet. Instead of a mid-life crisis, it’s just a mid-life “transition.” Nicer word, right? What’s the difference between “transition” and “crisis”? I have a feeling it’s more than not writing poems. Conway confirms,

A transition means moving from one stage of life to another. If several stress factors converge at the same time the mid-life transition is taking place, a crisis can be produced. Most people can handle one or two stresses. If you are healthy, you should be able to manage a normal mid-life transition. However, if your children are having trouble; you’re having a difficult career adjustment; your spouse is going through mid-life crisis and wants to resign from work, divorce you, and run off with someone else; then your father dies suddenly, you are likely to have a mid-life crisis.

I guess so. There are charts that assign “stress points” to certain events in life. 150-plus stress points can lead to a major health issue (see the *Holmes-Rate Life Stress Inventory* on page 3).

Signs of an impending crisis

At middle age, both men and women tend to become increasingly aware of their aging bodies. Paul Simon reflects on this problem when he wonders in his song *You Can Call Me Al*, “why am I getting so soft in the middle?” Feelings of being less than satisfied with what they’ve accomplished, being unfulfilled in marriage and worried about their disposability in society are also characteristic of mid-life change. There are also some differences in the way men and women process this mid-life change: Conway says,

Career – The mid-life man is asking, “Why should I work?”

The mid-life woman asks, “When can I start to work?”

Intimacy – A mid-life man longs to regain his relationship with his children and wife, which he has neglected during his career. The mid-life woman often trades intimacy for accomplishing new goals.

Assertiveness – The mid-life man is ready to kick back. The woman is ready to take steps to make new things happen.

View of death – Because of the sharp increase in men’s deaths from mid-life on, a man is rudely confronted with his own mortality. The mid-life woman, however, does not think much about death because heart attacks and other diseases usually don’t happen until after menopause.

Conway says if one or two of these situations are happening in your life, it’s the beginning of stress overload. If several are happening, you on the edge of a crisis. Here are some symptoms:

- Decision-making becomes difficult.
- Excessive daydreaming or fantasizing about “getting away from it all.” (See Psalm 55)
- Thoughts trail off while speaking or writing.
- Excessive worrying about even trivial things.
- Sudden outbursts of temper and hostility.
- Paranoid ideas and mistrust of friends and family.
- Forgetfulness about appointments, deadlines, dates.
- Frequent spells of brooding and feelings of inadequacy.

Crisis means that there has been a breakdown of the system, such as depression, involvement with alcohol, an affair, or an inability to concentrate. Abrupt life change indicates a stress overload and that your personality is trying to compensate. A mid-life crisis can be a positive way to force you to rethink your life and direction.

Psalm 55

Let’s get back to Psalm 55 and see if it can help. Clearly, David is describing some serious trouble and is in mid-crisis. He is “restless” and “distracted” (v. 2). He is stressed out, specifically because he has been betrayed by friends (vv. 3, 13). Promises have been broken; he’s even been “stabbed in the back” a few times (v. 21). Statements in the Psalm, especially at vv. 13-14, suggests several possible precipitating events in David’s life, such as his pursuit by King Saul, his son Absalom’s betrayal, even his own treachery in the case of Uriah and Bathsheba. The latter holds the germ of an important truth: *much of our middle-aged misery is caused by our own foolish choices.*

Whatever the source, the hurt goes deep (vv. 4-5). Anyone who has ever experienced panic attacks knows exactly what David is talking about. You lie awake at night and feel you may not see the morning; you experience real pain (though it is psychosomatic). Fear and dread overtake you and feel all alone, even if your spouse is lying next to you.

When the stress is caused by particular people, the temptation is to strike out and seek revenge (v. 15). In any

case, all you can do is complain and murmur, day-in, day-out (v. 17); you have no energy for anything else. You may go through the motions in your marriage, on your job, in church, but your heart is not in it, not even a little bit.

As the pressure mounts and you fear the loss of self in the pit of your anxieties, you begin to fantasize. It begins harmlessly enough – you dream of a nice vacation somewhere or more intimate friends or a more rewarding job. But as those dreams turn to dust one by one, the day-dreaming becomes more pronounced. Finally, with David you say, “Oh that I had wings like a dove... I would fly away and be at rest... away from...” – pressures, deadlines, debts and crushing responsibility!!

But what happens when you run away from responsibility? It has an odd way of catching up to you. And eventually you have to take on new ones, because that’s life. Those who keep running away usually end up in a gutter someplace, either literally or figuratively. Their lives have been reduced to begging change so they can swill more Ripple. One of my uncles, when I was a kid, was funny, full of life. He was an elder in a church. But then he got tired of his perfectly good wife and got rid of her; he left the church, he left behind unpaid bills, and spent his “golden years” running around with women. Now he’s dead. What a terrible, terrible waste.

Those who run away ironically become the people they despised: they break every promise they’ve ever made. They form new enemies and “iniquity and mischief are in their midst.” Without putting too fine a point on it, they become class A fools, and are fit only to be tossed on the fool heap when life is over. Then, for all their trouble, they get to go to hell for eternity! *What a deal!*

Back to reality

Getting real means getting to the truth. We all know that living comes with responsibility. A life of quality is built by responsible people who take their promises seriously. But they do something else, and it’s a crucial “something else;” in fact, it is the secret of their success. It involves giving up something, instead of taking control. What they do has the power to replace all the anxiety and worry so typical of middle-aged madness. It brings peace to the soul, unlike anything else can. What is this magic potion?

Look at Psalm 55 again, v. 22, “Cast your burden upon the LORD and He will sustain you; He will never allow the righteous to be shaken.” Cast – throw it on God! He will sustain you. Do you know what “sustain” means? “To supply with necessities or nourishment; to provide for; to support from below; keep from falling or sinking.” When you allow God to take your troubles, you don’t have them anymore! Now you can float to the top and God will hold you up.

Look at that last line: “He will never” – *how many times is never?* – “allow the righteous to be shaken.” That means you are steadfast, firm, grounded. You trust God and no one can take that away from you. You are not cowering, fearful, anxious, wondering when the next shoe will drop. *You are tough, in God.* Your theme: “*In God I’m tough.*”

There are too many Christians who have joined the

“victimhood parade” these days. The only parties they attend are pity parties. Why? They are weighted down with troubles and sorrow because they do not trust God enough to hand off their troubles to Him. That’s a lack of faith and at any age, and a lack of faith is fatal to our relationship with God: “for without faith it is impossible to please Him...” (Hebrews 11:6).

Put the music back in your life. Write a poem! More importantly, give God a chance to resurrect your child-like spirit. I used an illustration once comparing children to adults. Children look out a window, see other kids playing and they long to join the fun. Adults look at the window, see the smudges and smears and run off to find the Windex. Our lives are like that sometimes.

Regardless of your age, take a fresh look at your God and He will infuse your life with new purpose and direction. Paul put it like this: “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (II Corinthians 5:17).

The Holmes-Rahe Life Stress Inventory

The Social Readjustment Rating Scale

INSTRUCTIONS: Mark down the point value of each of these life events that has happened to you during the previous year. Total these associated points.

LIFE EVENT	MEAN VALUE
1. Death of spouse	100
2. Divorce	73
3. Marital Separation from mate	65
4. Detention in jail or other institution	63
5. Death of a close family member	63
6. Major personal injury or illness	53
7. Marriage	50
8. Being fired at work	47
9. Marital reconciliation with mate	45
10. Retirement from work	45
11. Major change in the health or behavior of a family member	44
12. Pregnancy	40
13. Sexual Difficulties	39
14. Gaining a new family member (i.e. ... birth, adoption, older adult moving in, etc.)	39
15. Major business readjustment	39
16. Major change in financial state (i.e. ... a lot worse or better off than usual)	38
17. Death of a close friend	37
18. Changing to a different line of work	36
19. Major change in the number of arguments w/spouse (i.e. ... either a lot more or a lot less than usual regarding child rearing, personal habits, etc.)	35
20. Taking on a mortgage (for home, business, etc. ...)	31
21. Foreclosure on a mortgage or loan	30
22. Major change in responsibilities at work (i.e. promotion, demotion, etc.)	29
23. Son or daughter leaving home (marriage, attending college, joined mil.)	29
24. In-law troubles	29
25. Outstanding personal achievement	28
26. Spouse beginning or ceasing work outside the home	26
27. Beginning or ceasing formal schooling	26
28. Major change in living condition (new home, remodeling, deterioration of neighborhood or home etc.)	25
29. Revision of personal habits (dress manners, associations, quitting smoking)	24
30. Troubles with the boss	23
31. Major changes in working hours or conditions	20
32. Changes in residence	20
33. Changing to a new school	20
34. Major change in usual type and/or amount of recreation	19
35. Major change in church activity (i.e. ... a lot more or less than usual)	19
36. Major change in social activities (clubs, movies, visiting, etc.)	18
37. Taking on a loan (car, tv, freezer, etc.)	17
38. Major change in sleeping habits (a lot more or a lot less than usual)	16
39. Major change in number of family get-togethers (**)	15
40. Major change in eating habits (a lot more or less food intake, or very different meal hours or surroundings)	15
41. Vacation	13
42. Major holidays	12
43. Minor violations of the law (traffic tickets, jaywalking, disturbing the peace, etc.)	11

Now, add up all the points you have to find your score **TOTAL**

150pts or less means a relatively low amount of life change and a low susceptibility to stress-induced health breakdown.
150 to 300 pts implies about a 50% chance of a major health breakdown in the next 2 years.
300pts or more raises the odds to about 80%, according to the Holmes-Rahe statistical prediction model.