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Introduction

Children have a lesson adults should learn, to not be ashamed of failing, but to get up and try again. Most of us adults are so afraid, so cautious, so “safe,” and therefore so shrinking and rigid and afraid that it is why so many humans fail. Most middle-aged adults have resigned themselves to failure.

—Malcolm X, in *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*,
by Alex Haley

Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold. . . .
—William Butler Yeats, “The Second Coming”

It feels like it happened quickly: first seminary, then marriage and babies, pastoring a church, and the stuff of life in between. I was married in 1981, graduated from Princeton Theological Seminary and became a father in 1982, and was leading a church by 1983. I also had become the patriarch of my extended family with my father’s death at age fifty-three, and I was just twenty-six. Well-seasoned, I certainly was at a young age. So something always filled the empty spaces of my life—the voices of my children, the highs and lows of ministry, and daily parish life. Then I blinked, and our three daughters had grown up and left the safety of our home for college and marriage and to make uniquely blessed lives of their own. Things quieted, and I

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struggled with the new mathematical configuration of my family home, reduced now to two—my wife and I. That's when my physical health began to feel the impact of my expanding waistline and a sometimes uncooperative maturing and aching body. When I think about that period of time now, though, maybe things really did not happen in a flash or in rapid-fire succession—the way it actually felt. Perhaps it was more like a steady and persistent march, a not-too-distant drumbeat, an upward climb to what I was obviously becoming—a middle-aged preacher.

Middle age. For some, those two simple words can instill fear. Pastor or parishioner, each of us has the same worries—about longevity, past mistakes, transitions in marriage and parenting, and obvious changes in libido—as well as a nagging longing for what was and what has been. All of us have heard stories from friends about someone in the midst of midlife and the shiny new sports car—the search for the new and elusive something that accompanies the phase. Most of us know what that looks like, for we have counseled friends in the depth of theirs or watched from the sidelines as one struggled through. As I evaluated my own life and ministry, I found it sobering that God, in God's infinite mercy, allowed me to reach this particular place, at this particular time. Many of my family members and childhood friends never made it to midlife, their lives having been cut short by disease, circumstance, and lifestyle choices. So I am grateful and thankful to claim where I am today and to have a modicum of understanding of what it took to get here and to be present.

Why? Because getting to this point has been a journey. And because of my personal experience, I wanted to help other men of faith with their midlife passage, especially fellow

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ministers, to give them a voice to speak about issues from which most shy away. In my work in the church and with those who bring souls to Christ, I have found that midlife struggles are not necessarily triggered by one particular psychological concern but are caused by various transitions and circumstances from one phase of life to another.

While I am not an expert on the issue, I do know as a pastor and as a man what I have been through, how it has shaped my life, and how it is affecting my future. As I talked to my colleagues in ministry and lay leaders around the country about their own midlife experiences, how they coped, and the solutions they employed, I saw similarities in our struggles. To be honest, I was just glad that I was not alone. Throughout most of our ministries as pastors, preachers, theologians, and lay leaders, we have been striving to reach new heights, build new churches, and bring new committed souls to Christ. Regrettably, however, while empire building we are rarely constructing personal relationships that are fruitful and life-affirming. We are giving ourselves to others constantly and consistently, often trying to be more to our flocks and our friends than God ever intended. So in trying to be faithful to the calling of Christ, many of us neglect our selves and our souls.

I readily admit that my entry into midlife caused confusion, not just for me, but also for those I loved. I had little clue what was happening, so I had no immediate and emotional capacity to fix my particular situation. I felt like I was losing my “swagger,” the confident way I believed I moved through the world, that difficult-to-define thing that always had been a part of me. I thought I was losing my “mojo,” theologically and otherwise. (Feel free to allow your holy imaginations to interpret that both literally and figuratively!)

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So I went to see my personal physician, who talked to me about the dreaded diseases that plague some of us as we approach and pass the half-century mark—hypertension, diabetes, heart disease, and depression, mixed with a detailed conversation about a myriad of emotional, relational, and vocational transitions. Then he drops the big bomb, the one that universally makes all men weep and cringe. He matter-of-factly explains how middle-aged men experience a dramatic drop in testosterone levels during middle age, which may cause changes in sexual performance. Lord, I was not ready for that one. Oh, the joy that “*failed* my soul.”

For better or for worse, I was in the middle of a midlife mess. Hopefully, now I am more mature and a little wiser for having gone through a process, with therapy and prayer. In some ways, I am still in transition, and there are still mountains to climb. But for most preachers, midlife can be especially difficult; it is more like the blade of a double-edged sword. Over the past several years, the detailed indiscretions of some popular clergy have made fodder of the personal lives of preachers in the public square. I wonder, though, if there had been someone to whom they could have gone in confidence and laid bare their burdens, would the lives of those men have gone off their charted courses?

The questions before many others and me who try to walk this particular ministerial path are quite simple, though the answers and solutions may be a bit more challenging. To whom does the preacher facing the crises of midlife manhood go to unburden himself about the pains of his marriage, his ministry, or his secret addictions without worrying about losing his congregation, his personal relationship with God, the respect of the greater church

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community, and the foundation on which he has shaped his calling and his faith?

In an effort to write this book and have it truly speak to the needs of the reader, I interviewed a number of faith leaders throughout the country who were willing to share their midlife stories with me on condition of anonymity (when referring to them in the book, I use pseudonyms). You will not see their names or the churches they represent, or even their church affiliations. They opened their souls and took tremendous leaps of faith that I would treat what they shared with fairness, understanding, and confidentiality. They talked to me for hours about issues affecting their lives and ministries, including their emotional and physical health, the state of their marriages, retirement concerns, addictions to pornography, alcohol, and drugs, the death of parents and birth of grandchildren, self-esteem concerns, infidelity and other sexual temptations, preacher-peer relationships, and changing church politics. They shed their invisible, clerical robes and were bold and brave in their confessions; ultimately, they were transparent in their humanity—mere flesh and blood.

I did not ask the ministers interviewed questions for prurient and sensationalistic reasons. I wanted to get to the heart of their hurt in order to help someone else, for their stories really are not new. They are as ancient as the biblical prophets of old, like the story of David and Bathsheba—sin and condemnation, grace and restoration. Their stories have value and their struggles have merit because all of us can learn from their experiences to develop solutions to better manage our own lives and our own ministries. There is hope, and there is healing. So read the book with an open mind, a receptive heart, and without

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judgment. Read their stories, relate to their experiences, and reflect upon the wisdom they (and I) have gleaned.

Psalm 51 (NIV)

A psalm of David.

When the prophet Nathan came to him after David had committed adultery with Bathsheba.

Have mercy on me, O God,
 according to your unfailing love;
according to your great compassion
 blot out my transgressions.
Wash away all my iniquity
 and cleanse me from my sin.
For I know my transgressions,
 and my sin is always before me.
Against you, you only, have I sinned
 and done what is evil in your sight;
so you are right in your verdict
 and justified when you judge.
Surely I was sinful at birth,
 sinful from the time my mother conceived me.
Yet you desired faithfulness even in the womb;
 you taught me wisdom in that secret place.
Cleanse me with hyssop, and I will be clean;
 wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.
Let me hear joy and gladness;
 let the bones you have crushed rejoice.
Hide your face from my sins
 and blot out all my iniquity.
Create in me a pure heart, O God,
 and renew a steadfast spirit within me.

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Do not cast me from your presence
or take your Holy Spirit from me.
Restore to me the joy of your salvation
and grant me a willing spirit, to sustain me.
Then I will teach transgressors your ways,
so that sinners will turn back to you.
Deliver me from bloodguilt, O God,
you who are God my Savior,
and my tongue will sing of your righteousness.
Open my lips, Lord,
and my mouth will declare your praise.
You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it;
you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings.
My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit;
a broken and contrite heart you,
O God, will not despise.
May it please you to prosper Zion,
to build up the walls of Jerusalem.
Then you will delight in the sacrifices of the righteous,
in burnt offerings offered whole;
then bulls will be offered on your altar.