



BECOMING SAGE

Cultivating Meaning, Purpose, and Spirituality in Midlife



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CHAPTER 4

WE HEART FAMILY

*The gifts and challenges of changing
family relationships*

Imagine with me that you're a time traveler who is zapped from the present to a time shortly after Joseph and his family were reunited in Egypt after more than a decade¹ of separation (Gen. 46). You join the family as they sit over a lingering meal retelling their family history. They speak of Abram's family in Ur, recount with a sense of worshipful wonder Abraham's call from God, and describe the details of his journeys with Sarai and his nephew Lot. They remember their miracle forebear Isaac and their half uncle, Esau.

The patriarch of the gathering, Jacob, regales you all with stories of his youth. You're struck with the honesty with which the family talks about the stresses and rivalries that tore them apart. Their conversation is marked with a palpable sense of

forgiveness and humility. Each one affirms with awe all the ways God has been at work in their imperfect family.

They ask you to tell them about what life is like in the future. After telling them a Savior for the whole world would be born from their line, you describe the new community, the church, that would be grafted into Israel's story.

"What does that new community look like?" Joseph asks you. The rest of the group falls silent, waiting to hear what you will say.

You try to summarize the exodus; the chosen people's journey back to the land of Israel; the Babylonian captivity; the journey of some of the chosen people back to the land of Israel; the birth, ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus; and two thousand years of church history as succinctly as possible. Then you explain that the church in your day and time has many different expressions throughout the earth.

You tell them about the coarseness of modern culture and describe some of the ways this culture seems to devalue family. Then you list all the books, seminars, camps, and sermons designed to show God followers how to create a God-honoring marriage and family. You explain that couples expect to feel a sense of romantic love (after explaining what that is, as the notion was not common in the Ancient Near East), have happy, well-adjusted children, and shine as perfect exemplars of Jesus the Messiah in a dark and difficult world.

There's a long pause. You've given them a lot to consider. Then Benjamin speaks at last, "Sounds like maybe a perfect family might be a little like an idol for some of your people."

Joseph smiles as he looks around the room, "I don't think our family would measure up to your standards." The rest nod and

laugh. He continues, “I cherish each one of you but could never make a god of a family like ours. After all, there’s only one true God, blessed be His name.”

WE ARE FAMILY

Playwright George Bernard Shaw said, “A happy family is but an earlier heaven.”² Those words capture a glimmer of the goodness of life in the garden of Eden. Building a family was essential to the way in which Adam and Eve were to honor God’s command to be fruitful and subdue the earth (Gen. 1:28). After the fall, Scripture continues to emphasize the way in which God uses family to pass on faith (Deut. 6:4–9) and provide care and shelter to its most vulnerable members (Ps. 68:6). There is a focus on the family in two of the Ten Commandments: the fifth commandment about honoring parents, and the seventh commandment prohibiting adultery, which sets a boundary around marriage.

Children are a gift from God (Ps. 127:3), yet Jesus calls us to love the Giver more than we love the gift:

“Anyone who loves their father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; anyone who loves their son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. Whoever does not take up their cross and follow me is not worthy of me. Whoever finds their life will lose it, and whoever loses their life for my sake will find it.” (Matt. 10:37–39)

We hold those words in tension with the words Jesus spoke while He Himself was on the cross. He used some of His last breaths to demonstrate a son’s tender care for his mother by



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creating a new family for Mary, inviting one of His closest disciples to take care of her (John 19:25–27).

That tension can serve as a guard against idolatry within ourselves as well as within the church. One common personal temptation is to compare your real life, imperfect marriage, or family to the idealized images

of marriage you may carry from either church or popular culture. A common temptation in the church is to hyper-focus on the nuclear family instead of embracing every member in every demographic as part of the family of God. There are more than one hundred and fifty “brother” or “brother and sister” references peppered throughout the New Testament epistles. Paul, Peter, and the other letter writers recognized that family was an essential way to describe our relationship with other believers.

Puritan-era preacher Jonathan Edwards offers some healthy perspective on family: “Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, or children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows; but the enjoyment of God is the substance. These are but scattered beams; but God is the sun. These are but streams; but God is the fountain.”³

When we’re in the midst of building a marriage and raising children, we may long to try to hold on to sunbeams and dam the swiftly rushing stream of time.

Midlife is characterized by transition, and those transitions

show themselves vividly against the backdrop of family life. Some changes, such as the birth of a grandchild, are joyous and welcome. Others, such as the death of a parent, are journeys into the valley of the shadow.

It is helpful to remember that transition is closely related to grief. All the markers that typically accompany grieving show themselves in times of transition: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance.⁴ Even a happy addition to the family tree means one chapter of life is ending and a new one is beginning.

What kind of changes might our families experience as we move into midlife, and how might they be forming us toward maturity? How can sages learn to discern how God might be at work in these changes?

CHANGE OF SEASON

I've lived in the Midwest most of my life. Though weather broadcasters sound shocked every year by the intensity of the temperature fluctuations and storms each spring and fall, I have learned to expect that one day the temperatures might be in the 70s, and the next, they might plummet into the 30s and we'll experience a freak blizzard in April.

The yearly weather roller coaster is a helpful picture to keep in mind as, during midlife, our families alter in ways that can feel as if we're doing loop-the-loops on an amusement park ride. Of course, a family is made up of always-changing human beings, so this life stage doesn't have a corner on the market when it comes to transition. However, many of the most challenging transitions

to family life may cluster during this time of our lives. Here's a quick look at some of the biggies:

Dividing family: Divorce

Kate* and Matt* were committed Christians who tried everything from marriage conferences to individual and couples counseling, hoping to bring some stability to their fractious, unhappy union, but nothing ever seemed to change between them. Within a year of their youngest child heading off to college, the couple divorced.

Kate and Matt are part of a growing trend. According to the National Center for Family and Marriage Research, the divorce rate among American adults over age 50 has doubled since the 1990s.⁵ Several studies have noted that the overall divorce rate among self-described evangelicals trends a bit higher than that of the general population, though some contest exactly how faith commitment in these studies was measured by researchers.⁶ No matter who is doing the tabulating, it is safe to say that more of us are divorcing at midlife than in generations before us. Psychologist Vivian Diller noted, "Marriage has changed more over the past several decades than it has in thousands of years. Religious and societal pressures no longer provide the kind of adhesive power they once did when marriages ran into trouble."⁷

Kate and Matt's divorce followed the familiar narrative about couples staying together until the nest emptied "for the sake of the children." Addiction issues and/or abuse leads to many other divorces among older adults. In addition, as we

begin to come to terms with the reality that our lives have a limited number of days and we've already lived a good number of them, some couples divorce as one or both parties decide they do not wish to live out the remainder of their years in an unhappy partnership.

Weary family: Marriage

When I talk with women who've been married for a couple of decades or more, I've rarely heard that midlife has been the easiest, most joyous period of many marriages. Though the newness of a "younger" marriage at midlife (by virtue of remarriage or marrying later) may temper somewhat the challenges those in long-term relationships face at this stage, stressors abound. Within the marriage, our sex lives may change as women head through perimenopause (more on this in chapter 6). Financial, family, and workplace pressures often pile on during these years. At some point—or, more likely, a bunch of points, lined up like an unending row of fenceposts leading into the future—marriage can feel like a hard slog.

Writer Belinda Luscombe describes it this way:

Everyone who just got married is psyched about it. It's a new adventure they're embarking on with their best friend forever. Everyone who has been married for 50 years or more is psyched about it. They're living with their oldest friend, it's been a trip, totally worth it.

But the people in the middle, they're, well—You know, they're *fine*. They perhaps didn't quite expect marriage to be as much work as it is. Not just the childcare and the housekeeping and the paying the bills, but the parts that are supposed to

be fun, the talking, the planning, the throwing a leg over. They had been led to believe it would feel easier, more natural. The thing about walking off into the sunset together is that then it gets dark and you're stumbling over each other.⁸

No family: Single

Aging without a network of support is a very real concern for many older singles.

At 51, Keisha* has never been married. "My twenties and thirties were marked by so much sorrow about my single state. I battled envy as I attended my friends' weddings, bought them baby gifts, and wrestled with my longing for God's gift of a mate and all I hoped would go with it: physical intimacy, companionship, spiritual partnership, and financial stability. As I moved into my forties, I came to terms with my singleness. (Well, most days, anyway!) I've poured my energy into building a good life and career for myself, spending time with friends, and developing my relationship with Christ. But now with both of my parents gone and my only sibling, a divorced brother, living across the country, I am staring down the prospect of aging alone, and it's more than a little concerning to me. I've never felt more single than I do right now."

Keisha's concern is shared by many of her divorced and widowed friends, particularly those who've never had children. According to senior advocacy organization AARP, one in five people over age 65 is an "elder orphan," someone aging alone without a family to oversee and advocate for their care. Twenty-three percent of boomers will be joining this group as they age,

and there is no reason to believe these numbers won't stay steady or increase as Gen X moves toward retirement.⁹

Assisting family: Caring for parents, children, or grandchildren

ThePerennialGen.com, a website I cofounded with writer and editor Amanda Cleary Eastep, highlights a mix of writing from a variety of authors on midlife-related monthly themes. When we put out the call for posts about caregiving, we were overwhelmed by the number of submissions we received about the topic. The financial, time, and physical stresses of these responsibilities, and parent-child role reversals, often come at the same time our own kids are launching from the nest or having children of their own. Writer Connie Gochenauer told us:

There is nothing unique about this season of mine as many women my age share these multiple roles. But when it is your own personal script, the emotions, changes, and role reversals are new, often heart-wrenching, and very complex. I sometimes wonder how the women before me have done this, and why I didn't pay better attention. The new roles can be somewhat confusing, and at times we find ourselves stepping on each other's lines.¹⁰

Caregiving concerns move in the opposite direction as well. There are over 2.6 million grandparents in this country raising their grandchildren.¹¹ And parents of some special needs children never face an empty nest. Instead, their daily life is very different from the daily life of peers their age. Their adult child may need a complex range of medical, social, vocational, or emotional support. These parents are navigating the challenges of each day

while also trying to plan for a future when they will no longer be there to provide love, care, and advocacy for their child.

Shrinking family: Illness or death

I buried both of my parents by the time I was 48. The grief of saying goodbye to both of them at relatively young ages (64 and 68) was one of the gateways that led me into writing and thinking about midlife. Though it had been a long time since my parents were actively involved in protecting me as they did (to the best of their ability) when I was a young child, I didn't expect to carry the sense that there was now no one in my family who would buffer me from death. There was no older generation to pass away before it would be my turn.

Though it is true that no one knows the hour of their death (Eccl. 9:12), the expected order of things is that parents die before their children. I've known many parents who've lost beloved children, and the one painful truth that stands in every case is the notion that parents should never have to bury their children.

But when parents die before their children, many of us find tucked within our grief the painful existential reality that we may well be next in our families, and our children and grandchildren look to us to buffer death somehow for them. It is not a sign of faithlessness that we may be sucker-punched by this reality as we grieve the passing of our parents, even those with whom we may not have had a vibrant relationship. Beginning to contemplate our own passing is one of the big tasks of midlife. For me, the deaths of my parents moved that contemplation from the theoretical to the real, and moved me to pray Moses's words over my

own life: “Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom” (Ps. 90:12).

At midlife, the decline in health of one (or both) partners in a marriage will also change the dynamics in a family. My long-time prayer partner Meg walked alongside her beloved husband Marty as he dealt with unpredictable waves of life-threatening health crises for several years. She served as medical appointment scheduler, wound dresser, prescription refiller, and primary support system. The caregiving responsibilities weighed heavily on her at times, but she balanced them with a grateful “At least he’s still here.”

And then one day, he wasn’t.

She was in her early sixties when she became a widow after more than four decades of marriage. In Marty’s absence, Meg is now living the reality of the words C. S. Lewis penned after the death of his wife Joy Davidman: “Her absence is like the sky, spread over everything.”¹² That sky envelops not only Meg, but her children and grandchildren and the extended family. They cannot go back to who they were when Marty was alive.

Stretching family: Relationships with adult children

Many of our children reach adulthood at the same time we hit middle age, though there are some of us having children well into our forties. (I became a grandmother the same year my sister-in-law, who is a year older than me, had her last child.)

But historically, midlife is the time during which our nest empties and we renegotiate our relationships with our young adult children. There is enough material in this category to be

an entirely different book. Even the nicest version of these transitional years isn't free of big emotions for parent and child alike.

Author Jamie Janosz gave these words of gentle coaching in a blog post for ThePerennialGen.com to other parents facing the launch of a young adult child: "You will feel—at moments—like you can't. But you can and will survive it by focusing on the end. And by remembering to breathe. This is what you have been preparing your child for—this is why you've studied hard and raised them right. And really . . . you don't want a 40-year-old hermit living in your basement, right?"¹³

However, these years are also full of unexpected surprises when it comes to our kids—and not all of them are joyful. They may make decisions we may not agree with. They may become involved in relationships we can't celebrate. And some discover our children are no longer interested in living the faith with which they were raised.

In his book *Generation Ex-Christian*, Drew Dyck lists several different categories of contemporary prodigals:

- Postmodern leavers—This group leaves because as they perceive the church, it has been enmeshed in conservative politics or displays a lack of compassion for the poor and marginalized.¹⁴
- Recoilers—This group moves away from faith because they've experienced spiritual or physical abuse from a church leader, group, or Christian family member.¹⁵
- Modern leavers—Like their postmodern kin, these leavers have tried Christianity and found it wanting, but their objections are connected intellectually to the popular atheism of Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris.¹⁶

- Neo-pagans—This group of prodigals embraces their “spiritual but not religious” identity with a mix of everything from wicca to New Age, sometimes with a splash of Christianity mixed in for good measure.¹⁷
- Rebels—These are the classic “younger brother” prodigals marked by hedonism in lifestyle. Some rebel in search of the next party, others because they’ve decided Christianity seems repressive.¹⁸
- Drifters—Dyck believes this group is the largest in number of all the prodigals: “These are the slow-motion leavers. They don’t exit in sudden spasms of skepticism or rebellion. Instead they leave gradually, almost imperceptibly.”¹⁹



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For some parents, a prodigal child is an introduction to Stage 4, the “dark night of the soul” of our own faith journey. For parents of leavers, learning to navigate the relational conflict emerging from our sadness, worry, or disappointment over a prodigal’s choices is a complex process that calls for growth in humility, love, and surrender to God.

Expanding family: Grandchildren and in-laws

Our family circle stretches at midlife as our adult children begin to create their own families. Even the most joyous of unions can be stressors as the children from two different

families begin a new life together. I knew one person who used a multi-year calendar that tracked when each of her children, their spouses, and their grandchildren would or wouldn't be attending Christmas and Thanksgiving gatherings at her home as each balanced time with the spouse's extended family.

A complicated calendar highlights the oft-complex nature of what it can mean to forge a new relationship, not only with a new son-in-law or daughter-in-law, but with our now married child. If those dynamics are difficult, they can be exponentially more so once children enter the picture. However, new babies bring with them much joy and a whole new set of lessons for grandparents.

Scripture tells us that grandchildren are a blessing that extends and enriches the family circle: "Children's children are a crown to the aged, and parents are the pride of their children" (Prov. 17:6). I became a grandmother in the midst of both of my own parents' deaths. Seeing the toothless smile of my newborn grandson beaming up at me as I cradled him in my arms made me recognize that standing on the top rung of the ladder of my family was weighted with a new kind of responsibility in prayer and legacy creation—as well as a new kind of joy.

FROM TEACHER TO LEARNER

When we're children, the family is a primary shaper of our identity. It is our first classroom as we learn to relate to God and others. As we move into adulthood and many of us form households and families of our own, we assume the mantle of responsibility

for training up our children in the way they should go in their own journeys with God (Prov. 22:6). That mantle is a weighty one, but it is not one we're meant to wear at midlife and beyond in the same way we did during the first half of our lives. In addition, our other family relationships—with our spouses, parents, the partners of our children, our grandchildren, and members of our local church—call for our transformation and growth as our families change shape through time.

As we move into our second adulthood, the shifts that happen in our families can be used by God to reintroduce us to the truth that we're first and foremost apprentices, not headmasters.

When I was a young parent, I assumed that the mandate God gave in Deuteronomy 6:4–9 to pass on my faith to the next generation had a uni-directional focus: the parent is the teacher of their child. However, most of the imperatives in the passage assume intergenerational learning. We're to live our apprenticeship together by talking about God's commands when we're at home and out in the world, when we rest and when we work, always seeking to weave every facet of our lives into His. Apprenticeship encompasses all of life, and the stresses and strengths of family life is a primary and always-changing classroom. Sages-in-training are students.

Apprenticeship in family can take on many different forms. A



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divorce can lead us to new ways of depending on God. Marriage at midlife requires us to recalibrate and reinvest in this primary relationship. Singlehood brings new questions and challenges as we begin to confront our own mortality. Caregiving asks us to renegotiate parent-child relationships. In addition, some find at midlife that their own long-dormant family-of-origin issues surface in the midst of the changes they're experiencing. It's not an accident.

Loss changes us. We find ourselves contemplating our own passing after parents die. The passing of a spouse disrupts dreams we may have shared about the way our final years would unfold in the company of a cherished companion. Launching our children requires us to learn to relinquish them, and ourselves, to the care of our heavenly Father. And as our children make their own choices, forge new relationships, or start families of their own, our family stretches into new shapes we may never have imagined.

God uses early family life to form us, and the shifts of midlife to re-form us. The apprenticeship custom designed for each of us by our heavenly Father is specific to our unique situation. The Holy Spirit—the Promised One whom Jesus described as our helper, companion, and guide (John 14:16–17, 26)—is an always-present tutor in our lives.

When we're disoriented by the changes in our family structure, two evergreen practices may help steady us:

The first is asking, "Please reveal to me what You want me to learn, Lord." He doesn't hand us His entire lesson plan for our lives in response, but the request positions us to recognize the ways in which He's at work and to respond to Him in obedience. The New Living Translation of Matthew 7:7 captures the

ongoing, persistent action for which Jesus called on the part of the seeker:²⁰ “Keep on asking, and you will receive what you ask for. Keep on seeking, and you will find. Keep on knocking, and the door will be opened to you.” Even if darkness, sorrow, or disorientation seems to muffle His answer, knocking and continuing to knock is an expression of hope in the One who has His hand on the doorknob and has promised to welcome us in.

The second practice is gratitude. Our Father has placed us in a physical family and guided us to a spiritual family. Those places of belonging may carry with them memories of significant loss or pain. It may not seem possible to thank God for those searing experiences, but committing to express gratitude for the good gifts He has given you is another orienting practice.

Dr. Harvey Simon of Harvard Medical School noted:

Gratitude helps people feel more positive emotions, relish good experiences, improve their health, deal with adversity, and build strong relationships. . . . They can apply it to the past (retrieving positive memories and being thankful for elements of childhood or past blessings), the present (not taking good fortune for granted as it comes), and the future (maintaining a hopeful and optimistic attitude).²¹

Gratitude is good for everyone, but for believers, it is more than just a positive mental health practice. There is a Giver who deserves our thanks. James 1:17 tells us, “Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows.”

During a time in our lives filled with family transitions that may feel like shape-shifting shadows, becoming sage may mean renewing and deepening the habits we likely learned in early

childhood—the practices of saying “please” and “thank you” to our heavenly Father.

Recognize that these practices won’t magically mute the discomfort of change. They won’t expedite the journey through the grief of saying goodbye to who our family once was . . . or even who we wish they’d become in the future. But both habits can steady us as we learn acceptance at midlife for who our family is here and now.

FOR INDIVIDUAL REFLECTION

1. Are there joyful ways in which your family is being reshaped during this period of your life? If so, what are they? Are there sorrowful ways your family is changing? Offer your responses to God in a prayer of thanksgiving and/or lament. If you're looking for inspiration, begin with Scripture. Examples of psalms of thanksgiving include Psalms 32, 100, and 136. Some psalms of lament include Psalms 44, 80, and 90.
2. What are your greatest fears when you think about your family? Confess those fears to God and ask for His help in moving from fear to love in those areas. What would it look like to be free of those fears?
3. Meditate on Psalm 145:4: "One generation commends your works to another; they tell of your mighty acts." To which works of God can you give testimony? How might you show and tell of God's works to a challenging family member?

FOR GROUP CONVERSATION

1. In what ways do you see "family as idol" normalized or celebrated in Christian culture? In your own local church?
2. How does your church provide spiritual or practical support for those facing changes in their family status due to:
 - Divorce?
 - Marriage?
 - Aging and dying parents?
 - Illness or death of a spouse?

- Changing relationships with adult children?
- The advent of grandchildren and/or in-laws?

If there are gaps, consider asking for input from those currently facing these changes, as well as those who've faced them in the past. What do they need most from your congregation?

3. Many midlife parents are dealing with adult children who have walked away from the faith. How can you make space to hear their stories and find ways to pray for them and their children on an ongoing basis? This might include a general prayer during a Sunday service, a regular time of prayer in a small group, or even gathering parents of prodigals for an evening of prayer where they can share one another's burdens.



Becoming sage happens as the relational shifts of midlife reshape our families and we move from the teacher to the learner role.

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