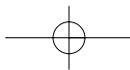


The
Afternoon
of
Life

FINDING PURPOSE AND
JOY IN MIDLIFE



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FINDING PURPOSE AND
JOY IN MIDLIFE

ELYSE FITZPATRICK

R&R
P U B L I S H I N G
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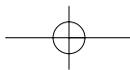
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Dedication

To my darlings:
Wesley David, Hayden Dexter,
Eowyn Elyse, and Alexandria Louise—
thank you for the joy you've brought to
this afternoon woman's heart.





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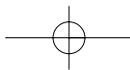
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Introduction

The “afternoon of life” is a phrase that I first used in Women Helping Women.¹ In America, the average woman’s life expectancy is seventy-nine years.

If you divide these years into equal fifteen-year segments and link those segments to the times of a day, it looks something like this:

0–15 DAWN,
16–30 MORNING UNTIL NOON,
31–45 MIDDAY,
46–60 AFTERNOON UNTIL TWILIGHT,
61–75 EVENING,
76+ NIGHTFALL.

’m a woman who is in full afternoon bloom, and I’m learning to love it. I admit that it hasn’t always been this way for me, though. I recall the incredulous concern that accompanied the first

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hot flash and the tearful rending of my heart at long-awaited-for graduations. I remember when it was that I learned to make enough food for only two. Some parts of this experience have been harder than others, and I understand that because you may be in the middle of one of those harder times, you might think that some of the humor I'll employ in what follows seems unsympathetic or unkind. Please don't misinterpret what I'm saying or the way I'm saying it. I've walked through some of these difficult times, and I'm looking back on them now, seeing them not only in their darkness, confusion, and despair but also in light and faith—and for me, that engenders humor. Perhaps you aren't able to laugh along now, but it also may be that a good laugh is just what you need. In any case, please don't feel misunderstood or unloved. The one whose love and understanding you need is there with you today, as he has always been, and he weeps and smiles with you.

It may also be that some of the chapters in this book won't apply directly to you. Perhaps you've never had children or worried terribly about those new wrinkles. I trust that the truths in each of these chapters will speak to your heart, however, even if it's only that you'll be able to help your sisters in their struggles. I don't mean to imply that women don't suffer through the throes of afternoon living if they don't have a husband, children, or grandchildren; these are the arenas where my blood has been spilled, and these are the fields that I've plowed.

Little Brown Traitors

Sitting here at my keyboard, as I have been doing a great deal of the time these past several years, my eye happens to land on my hands . . . and I'm reminded again.

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It's been a lovely summer, and I've spent numerous delightful days at the beach, playing in the surf, laughing with friends. The blonde highlights in my hair have become more noticeable, and my freckles have been having a heyday, jumping up and screaming, "It's summer, and we're back! Let's have some fun!"

My hands have gotten browner too, but there's something else noticeable there, crowding out those friendly little harbingers of long days, salt spray, and warm sand. The tiny spots that used to pepper my skin pretty evenly are clumping together now in big brown blobs that remind me of my grandmother. My little freckly friends have turned on me and conspired to become age spots! Yes, it's true. No matter how I fight against it or try to ignore it, I'm getting older, and these superficial signposts aren't the only way that I can tell.

Habitat Alterations

In the last few years, my children have moved out . . . and so has my uterus, their first home. The grandchildren come for visits now, but they go home at the end of the day, and as happy as I am to see them come, I'm also exhausted when they go. *How did we used to do this?* my husband, Phil, and I wonder as we pick up the toys, groaning with each bend of the back and knee.

I have a new darling . . . my pillow. It has become my new best friend. When I can't be with my pillow, I dream about it, especially while I doze on the couch in the early evening, snoozing there because it's too early to go to bed. Phil and I watch the clock at night, yawning and waiting until we can finally lie down (9 P.M. is the Blissful Hour of Relief). Once we do finally acquiesce to our pillows' siren song, I find myself up at 3:30 A.M., reciting the books of the Bible and praying and wonder-

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ing what happened to the days when I used to be able to sleep soundly through the night.

Standing in line behind my pillow is another new friend—I think he’s Turkish. His name is Ottoman. I love that word—ottoman. *I just need to put my feet up for a little while* has become my newest mantra. Why don’t they make Lazy Boy desk chairs and computers that hang from the ceiling so that I could be comfortable while I write? Ah, comfort, dear, sweet, comfort.

Senior Moments

We eat dinner at 4:30. When we go to a restaurant now, we’re on time for the early bird senior special, and we’re the youngest people there, or at least that’s what we think. I’ve heard myself saying, “I can’t eat late in the evening, because if I do, I’ll be awake all night, taking antacid.” When did I start saying that? What happened to the days when we used to be able to power down a double-double cheeseburger with fries and a chocolate shake at 10:15 P.M. without a second thought or a second taste?

Our eating has changed in other ways too, aside from the fact that we’re usually done by 5:10 P.M. It’s rather embarrassing but true: all sorts of funny things have been going on with my digestive system. The list of foods that I can’t eat has been growing exponentially, and at a time when our culture is crying out for more and more tolerance, I’ve become progressively more intolerant. I carry Bean-O with me now, as well as Lactaid (what my family humorously calls Milk-O), because I’ve become lactose and all other yummy, healthy, filling-food intolerant.

I’ve become caffeine-intolerant too. I can remember a time when I could drink coffee all day and even at night and snicker

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at older women who said that they couldn't have it after noon or they would be awake all night. Now I'm the one who lies awake at 2:45 A.M. wondering what Starbucks demon possessed me to order just one little shot of espresso in the early hours of my day, so that I would have the energy to complete all my projects.

I've been asked if I want the senior discount at the movies by a smooth-faced, gum-chewing little nincompoop (I mean teenager) who wouldn't recognize a senior if his short, meaningless little life depended on it! (Just kidding!) Waitresses, now known gender-nonspecifically as servers, call me ma'am. Flight attendants (p.c. moniker for stewards and stewardesses) ask me if I want help putting my luggage in the overhead compartment. This summer a little four-year-old asked me if I was okay as I rolled around in the water by the shore. What was he thinking? Didn't I look okay? Wasn't it typical for a grandmother to take advantage of nature's free exfoliation and seaweed wrap?

Last year my husband received his invitation to join AARP in the mail. I thought that was hilarious until I got mine. *I'll show them*, I thought, as I tossed it into the trash.

**Memories, Nothing More Than . . . Um,
What Were We Talking About?**

Speaking of the movies (we were speaking of the movies, weren't we?), I have a friend whose mother keeps a list of the movies she's seen because she can't remember if she's seen them or not. That used to strike me as humorous.

My children tell me stories that start out, "Remember when we . . . and then you . . ." and I say, "No, but I'm sure you're telling the truth. That sounds like fun. Did I enjoy myself?" My youngest son, Joel, and I were talking one day,

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and I asked him a question (about something, I can't recall just what now) and he answered, "Mom, the answer to that question is the same as it was an hour ago."

"Please tell me just one more time, and I promise I'll try to remember," I whined.

I'll admit that I was pretty skeptical about Hillary Clinton's inability to remember the facts surrounding the White-water land debacle, but now I'm not so sure. How old was she when she was subpoenaed to give testimony?

Sometime in the past, I'm not quite sure exactly when, my daughter, Jessica, remarked that every time she came over to my house I was ordering prescription drugs from my local drug store. Which reminds me . . .

I wear prescription glasses now and even have bifocal contacts. That's a relief, because I think I could have written another book in the time that I've wasted looking for my glasses during the last five years since I started wearing them.

I'm taller than my mother now—for the first time in my life—and I have the body of my paternal grandmother. I'm developing jowls and cellulite and wrinkles, and what's surprising is that I don't think I care anymore. My grandchildren love for me to snuggle them—I'm sure that I feel warm and squishy and soft and comfortable to them, just like she did to me. For some reason, even though I've spent years sweating at the gym, my eldest grandson, Wesley, hasn't yet bestowed the desired compliment, "Gee, Mimi, you're buff," and now I know that he probably never will. Oh well, where did that ottoman get to?

Well, you get the picture, don't you? I could go on and on (and I will) about the changes that women face in the afternoon of their lives. These decades are fraught with change, and just when we were finally getting comfortable with the way

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things are, everything is turned on its head. This book is about those changes, but that's not all that it's about.

A Comforting Meditation

The most comforting thought that I've been clinging to as I've experienced these changes over the last few years isn't a memory of those golden days of pleasure when my babies were little and my body was young. The sweetest comfort that I know comes to me in the form of a theological proposition: *God is my Father, he is sovereign, and he is good.* Throughout this book, I'll continually refer to the changes that we're going through as part of a sovereign Father's wise and loving plan, a plan in which God works out his ultimate design to glorify himself and change me into his image. Don't skip over that last sentence, because it's the key to joyfully embracing this, and every, time of life. God's supreme purpose in bringing me through all these changes is to glorify him and sanctify me.

We've all heard others speak of God glorifying himself, haven't we? I know that God is already glorious, but I also recognize that he seeks to glorify himself specifically through certain means in our lives.

What would God's glory look like in your life? It seems to me that God is glorified when I embrace this one joy above all others: *knowing him.* When my life shouts to everyone around me, *Knowing God is the best, most sweet, most satisfying aspect of life!* he's being glorified and exalted by me. When I face the ostensibly never-ending changes with grace and gladness, becoming like my valiant sister in Proverbs 31 who "smiles at the future" (Prov. 31:25), my family and friends know that God can be trusted, even though life is some-

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times more like a uncertain roller coaster than a predictable merry-go-round.

How does the Lord create that kind of God-exalting praise in my heart? By teaching me that those facets of my life that I would tend to love and lean on (like a good memory, good eyesight, natural strength for the tasks at hand, or restful nights of sound sleep), can't support the weight of real life through eternity. They aren't the source of real joy, peace, or blessing. So, he removes familiar temporal joys, lovingly drawing my attention up to him, where I find fullness of joy and eternal pleasures (Ps. 16:11).

Romans 8:28–30 is a passage that most of us could quote. Paul wrote,

And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose. For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren; and these whom He predestined, He also called; and these whom He called, He also justified; and these whom He justified, He also glorified.

Let's take Paul's teaching and paraphrase it with the present time in our lives in mind:

We can know and be assured that God causes everything you and I are going through, especially the painful changes in our bodies and our homes, to work profitably for our ultimate good; this is a good that will be enjoyed and embraced by those who love him and have

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adopted and adapted to his purpose in their lives. This good doesn't consist in the maintenance of the status quo or in the continuation of life as we have come to know and love it. Rather, it is worked out in our lives as we are remade, day by day, into the image of the Son, who said, "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" (Matt. 8:20); and "If anyone wishes to come after Me, he must deny himself, and take up his cross daily and follow Me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake, he is the one who will save it. For what is a man profited if he gains the whole world, and loses or forfeits himself?" (Luke 9:23–25)

Just what is the Lord up to in our lives? Is he intrinsically involved in every change and has he mercifully arranged our lives so that we are forced to go through them? In the following pages, we'll examine how we experience some of those changes; we'll send up red flags when there's danger approaching; and we'll try to see, when we can, the lighter side. The truth is, though, that we don't need someone who will just sit and rock with us on the porch during these afternoon hours; instead we need help to envision them through the right bifocals—through God's plan, glory, and purpose.

Other valiant afternoon women are going to join in our discussion. You can find out more about them in the About the Contributors section at the back of this book. Each one of them is a friend of mine, and I've watched their lives as they've walked through the challenges of the afternoon years. I commend them and recommend that you drink deeply of their wisdom.

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Are you ready to forge ahead into the unknown future? Are you smiling? Are you prepared to embrace all that God has laid in your path, knowing that his purpose and goals are good? If so, then let's pour ourselves a cup of tea (caffeine-free, herbal, if you please), put our feet up on good ol' Mr. Ottoman, and learn to appreciate the treasure that's being spread before us in this long afternoon journey.

one *D*

To Everything There Is a Time

*There is an appointed time for everything.
And there is a time for every event under heaven.
(Eccl. 3:1)*

God's creation is filled with variation and dissimilarity. The ocean, the woods, the desert, the stars are each a different canvas for his handiwork. Gaze at a leaf and ponder the variety of his palette: emerald virescent leaves suffused with life fade into saffron, then transform into ochre vellum, swirling as they fall barrenly to the ground.

Have you ever wondered why leaves change? I don't mean to ask, "What are the scientific causes and effects that occur so that some trees are evergreens and others are deciduous?" I mean to ask whether you've ever pondered *Why?* What was God saying about himself to us when he created them to be that

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way? What does this change teach us? “God made the two great lights, the greater light to govern the day, and the lesser light to govern the night; He made the stars also. God placed them in the expanse of the heavens to give light on the earth, and to govern the day and the night, and to separate the light from the darkness; and God saw that it was good” (Gen. 1:16-18).

Why did God divide the day into day and night? Why did he bestow two “great lights” upon us instead of only one? Why is the sun fiery and violent and the moon alabaster and bleak? Why does the sky transform from azure to tangerine in the evening or spend one day obscuring its elegance in shrouds of gray flannel only to joyously throw off its cloak in exuberant glory the next?

The Nature of Creation, the Nature of Creation’s King

It seems to me that God loves change. In all of his creation there isn’t anything that stays precisely static. In fact, even atoms are subject to variation, winding down as they are, seeking disorder rather than order. What in all creation doesn’t change? Only God, the one who stands over the creation. Ponder with me his testimony about his consistent nature and our inconsistent world:

Of old You founded the earth,
 And the heavens are the work of Your hands.
 Even they will perish, but You endure;
 And all of them will wear out like a garment;
 Like clothing You will change them and they will be
 changed.

But You are the same,
 And Your years will not come to an end.

(Ps. 102:25–27)

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He who made the Pleiades and Orion
And changes deep darkness into morning,
Who also darkens day into night,
Who calls for the waters of the sea
And pours them out on the surface of the earth,
The LORD is His name. (Amos 5:8)

God sovereignly rules over all the day-to-day changes that we experience, and yet he never changes. “For I, the LORD, do not change,” he states in Malachi 3:6. James speaks of this truth eloquently when he refers to God as “the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow” (James 1:17). God reigns over the two great lights, the sun and the moon, but he stands above them. The moon phases in and out of fullness. The sun explodes violently in solar storms; its effect on us is lengthened and shortened as the earth turns on its axis through the seasons or is befogged by mist or gloom. But with God there is no “variation or shifting shadow.”

There is nothing of this kind with God; he is never affected by the changes and chances to which mortal things are exposed. He occupies no one place in the universe; he fills the heavens and the earth, is everywhere present, sees all, pervades all, and shines upon all.¹

Why has the Lord so arranged the universe, from smallest molecule to the full course of our lives, so that we’re constantly faced with change? Because he wants us to observe and to learn. To learn that we are finite, dependent, weak, in need of daily sustaining. And to learn that he’s unlike us.

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The Truth about Our Condition

About a year ago I noticed an odd bump on a joint of my ring finger. *What's that?* I wondered. I felt it and tried to move it about and fussed with it, all the while trying to ascertain what it was. Then, at a conference I was attending I spoke with a rheumatologist.

“What’s this funny little bump thing on my finger?” I asked.

He took one moment to feel it and then said, “It’s a Heberden node. Just part of aging; nothing more than a calcified spur of the joint cartilage.”

“Ah, just a part of aging.” Was that supposed to make me feel better?

The truth about our condition is that we’re all aging—even though you may not have been graced with any funny little bumps yet. Not only are we aging, we’re sprinting toward an eternity that will commence with a transformation that we can only guess about.

During my research for one of the chapters in *Women Helping Women*, I stumbled upon these astonishing sentences, “I am writing this book about death for an intensely personal reason. I have a terminal illness. You are invited to read it for the same reason. You too have a terminal illness. . . . Life is always fatal.”²

Do you think much about this truth? Do you know that your life is winding down and that a day is hastening toward you with ever-increasing speed in which everything you know will be changed? All the illusions will be stripped away; all the falsehoods exposed; truth will become visible.

If you’re like me, it’s easy to forget these truths—until something happens that reminds us. My memory doesn’t work,

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my children turn thirty, or I receive unwelcome news of a parent's illness, and the realities that used to dance around the corners of my consciousness are brought into focus, center stage. Life will not always be what it is today. I'm finite, I'm frail, I'm dependent.

Have you ever considered the recklessness of the young? I watch the young people in my neighborhood skateboarding and shake my head in wonder; they're young, and they feel invincible. They don't feel the ache and stiffness that is part of my morning, and the facts about the future seem no more real to them than that there'll come a day when skateboarding will no longer hold an allure. They take foolish risks because they don't know the truth that my little Heberden node has taught me: life is short, life is precious, and I'm vulnerable.

Finding Blessings in Little Bumps

Isn't God good? He could have left us without these changes and kept our ultimate fate from our eyes, until we would discover one day that everything had come to an end. Instead, he's set up signposts all along the way. Like the self-styled prophet on the street corner with his prognostication, "The End Is Near!" the Lord has placed within each of us a living handbill: "Think about what you're doing! Prepare for eternity!" The psalmist prayed that the Lord should "teach us to number our days, that we may present to You a heart of wisdom" (Ps. 90:12). It is interesting, isn't it, that it takes divine wisdom to know about the length of our days. John Calvin commented,

Even he who is most skillful in arithmetic, and who can precisely and accurately understand and investi-

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gate millions of millions, is nevertheless unable to count eighty years in his own life. . . . Men can measure all distances without themselves . . . they know how many feet the moon is distant from the center of the earth, what space there is between the different planets; and, in short, they can measure all the dimensions both of heaven and earth; while yet they cannot number seventy years in their own case.³

In several parables, Jesus lovingly warned us about the foolishness of not comprehending the brevity of life. In one he cautioned that we should always be dressed and ready for his return. In another, he warned the rich householder who was saying to himself, “I’m financially secure and can take my ease,” that his soul would be required of him when he least expected it. The parable of the rich man who lived selfishly but later suffered torment while Lazarus basked in the pleasures he never knew also serves to teach the wise: Look at the Word! Observe the world! Read the headlines broadcast by the changes in your body!

The apostle Paul also admonished his readers, “Therefore be careful how you walk, not as unwise men but as wise, making the most of your time, because the days are evil. So then do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is” (Eph. 5:15–17).

Are you detecting a theme here? The truth about eternity and our fast approach toward it sifts the heart of each person. It reveals either a heart of foolishness or a heart of wisdom. Without the intervention of the Holy Spirit and because of the sacrifice of Christ, all that will ever be revealed about us will be foolishness. But with God’s help, we can take to heart the notices he’s placed along the way and become

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wise. How will we know this wisdom? It expresses itself in words like David's:

“LORD, make me to know my end
And what is the extent of my days;
Let me know how transient I am.
Behold, you have made my days as handbreadths,
And my lifetime as nothing in Your sight;
Surely every man at his best is a mere breath. Selah.
Surely every man walks about as a phantom;
Surely they make an uproar for nothing;
He amasses riches and does not know who will gather
them.
And now, Lord, for what do I wait?
My hope is in You” (Ps. 39:4–7).

This heart of wisdom that we're after embraces several important facts.

You and I need God's help to gain the wisdom that Jesus, Paul, and David speak of. There is a deficiency in our understanding: not just a lack of knowledge but a willful reluctance to grasp the true state of our affairs. We need him to humble our hearts and cause us to be willing to love the truth.

There will be an end to our days here on earth. Even the most foolish among us give that truth tacit recognition. *Yes, yes, we think, I know my life will end someday . . . but just not this day.* This kind of foolishness is played out in hundreds of ways in our everyday lives. Do you need an example? Do you have a will? Seventy percent of us don't.

The life that we're now living is fleeting—at best it's a mere breath. The Holy Spirit inspired James, who called it a “vapor that appears for a little while and then vanishes away.”

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The next time you're getting out of the shower, look at the mirror. Then open a window and watch the fog clear away and ask God to grant you wisdom. Think, *That's what the length of my days is like.*

All the trappings of the world about which I am presently exercised are futility. Think about the last time that you were upset, angry, or worried. How important would these problems appear in heaven? Will it really matter if the paint on your dining room wall is too yellow or the certificates of deposit fell one-quarter of a point? As Mother Teresa said, "From heaven, the most miserable life on earth will look like one bad night in an inconvenient motel."⁴

Only our relationship with our heavenly Father through Christ will last. The truths about the impermanence of our lives and present relationships would cause us to despair if there were not one relationship that will endure through all time. In fact, our relationship with God through Christ was in existence in the Father's heart even before we were born, even before the foundation of the world (Eph. 1:4), and it's that relationship that will continue throughout all time.

This Is My Home . . . but Not Really

I love parties. For the last two years, I've tried to see how many people I can cram into my house (and spilling out the front and back doors) on Labor Day. This year we set up an Astro-Jump and kiddie pool in the front yard and pools in the back yard. We told the parents to furnish their children with water pistols. Adults and children were running amok through the house—some adults even got into a water fight with the hose! Can you believe it?

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On at least two occasions during the day women came to me and said, “Why do you do this? Aren’t you afraid your house will get messed up?”

“Ah,” I replied, “it doesn’t really matter, does it? It’s all going to burn anyway.”

This story may sound spiritual and noble. I did mean what I said at the time, but the following day, when I discovered that one of my picture frames in my office had been broken, I had a different view. It is true that this is all going to go away (2 Peter 3:10–12) and that my house, as nice as it is, isn’t my home, but living that out when my picture frame is messed up is something different.

Just like everyone else, I have a tendency to love my things. You know what kind of things I’m talking about: my house, my car, my clothes, my books . . . my stuff. I love them, and though I might know the wise way to think about them, I have to struggle with putting off foolishness and putting on wisdom.

It’s so easy to think that my little nest here is really what life is all about. My kids, my grandkids, vacations on the lake, soccer games, baby showers, grocery shopping: it’s all so familiar and oh, so comfortable.

Aliens and Sojourners

One point of the changes that you’re enduring is that you’ll learn about Abraham’s faith. Reflect on the words that describe his journey, “By faith Abraham . . . obeyed . . . ; and he went out, not knowing where he was going. . . . He lived as an alien in the land of promise, dwelling in tents . . . ; for he was looking for the city whose architect and builder is God” (Heb. 11:8–10).

the afternoon of life

Are you looking for *that* city? Are you seeking a “better country, that is, a heavenly one” (Heb. 11:16)? God has been kind to us by force-feeding us with change: change of home, change of job, change of family situation. He’s been kind in that he’s reminding us that this really isn’t our home, that we’re supposed to be looking for a different one. Think about these questions as you ponder his admonition, “Don’t store up your treasure anywhere but in heaven.”

Is your treasure in your home? Your Savior warns against the foolishness that would store up valuables in a place that is susceptible to damage. Do you know that it will all burn? Have you been able to appreciate what you have without investing your heart in it? How do you feel when something gets broken, stolen, or lost? It’s right to be a good steward, but it isn’t right to be a good idolater.

Is your treasure in your family? You are to love your family and cherish the time that God may be allowing you, but you’re not to build your existence around them. Your existence is to be built on God, his kingdom, his righteousness. That way, when the kids go off to college and start a new life, your heart will be protected in heaven, where it belongs. If you’re married, your husband is probably your closest earthly friend. You’ve been called to be a companion and helper to him, but you’ve not been called to make him your god. What would happen to your faith if the Lord took him home or if he fell into sin and left you? Is your heart safe with your Savior?

Is your treasure in your beauty? How do you feel when you see a new laugh line? Will life be worth living when you look like your grandmother? If you’ve spent your life trying to look good, then you’ll be tempted to invest more and more time and money into your appearance in order to counteract

to everything there is a time

the ravages of gravity, time, and our environment. I'm not saying that you shouldn't try to look acceptable, but the porcelain vase that's your face is too fragile to bear the weight of your heart.

Is your treasure in your health? What might the Lord teach you through feet that ache and hands that puff up like doughnuts? Would you be willing to serve him if to do so was uncomfortable, even painful? Again, I'm not saying that you shouldn't try to be as healthy as you can for as long as you can. I'm saying that no matter how many trips to the gym you make, how many reps you can do with free weights, and how many vitamins, minerals, and supplements you consume, you're getting older. God is freeing you from the pride and foolishness that the seemingly invincible youth embrace. The clock is ticking—live wisely!

He's the Director and the Playwright

Here's one more thought about why God loves for us to go through these changes: *His glory is so great that it is impossible for it to be displayed in a one-act play.* We might prefer for our lives to continue on, repeating the same pleasant scenes over and over, but he's interested in displaying his glory. He wants us to see how glorious he is in our youth—full of strength, wonder, energy. He desires that we learn how he is known in the years of our early adulthood—years filled with excitement, challenge, and new vistas. He wants us to learn what it means to be faithful a long time in one direction and how wisdom is more desirable than beauty, strength, or wealth. These are lessons about his perfections that we'll never learn until we've walked through them.

the afternoon of life

Take heart, dear sister. The changes that we're experiencing, although uncomfortable at times, are weaving a beautiful tapestry. This tapestry isn't about our beauty or how we've become so wise and wonderful. They're about his beauty and the excellence of his eternal plan. Instead of fleeing at break-neck speed in the opposite direction, why don't you take time now to look deeply into his design for you during these years, and pray, *Teach me, dear Lord, to number the days that I have left. I long to present to you and for your glory a heart that's filled with the wisdom that longs for heaven, that holds lovingly but loosely those you've gifted me with here, and that helps other women long to enter your kingdom and work, while we may, in your fields with joy.*

becoming a woman of wisdom

1. What are the changes you're going through right now? You can break them up into categories such as Changes in Myself; Changes in My Home; Changes in My Future.
2. What are the joys that are particularly attendant to the time of life that you're in?
3. What would "presenting a heart of wisdom" look like in each of these areas?
4. What have you already learned because of the changes you've experienced?
5. Read Deuteronomy 32:29, Ecclesiastes 9:10, and John 9:4. What do these verses teach us about wisdom? What changes do you think you need to make to begin to make better use of the time you have left?
6. Write out Ecclesiastes 3:1–8. What wisdom can you draw from these verses? Counselor and author Jay Adams writes about these verses: "The[se] examples show the utter undependability of anything (other than the process of change itself) in the present world. When Solomon speaks of every course of events being *appropriate for their time*, he is thinking of how appropriately God (not man) brings about the changes (or need for them) as He providentially changes the course of history. This plainly implies that we should not cling too tightly to things in the here and now."⁵
7. Summarize what you've learned in this chapter in three or four sentences.