

“Meeting God in the Stages of Life: The Mid-Life Years”
(Part 2)

We are continuing in this series of messages, looking at the different stages of life, and the part that faith in the Lord can play. Last week we talked about “middle age” – defining “middle age” as somewhere around ages 35-60. I want to spend another message talking about just some of the many issues faced during this time of life.

The mid-life years are a time when there are a number of exits from and entries into the family. For those who have children, many of the exits and entries have to do with what’s happening with our children. Perhaps they are getting married (or moving in with their boyfriend or girlfriend). So, you lose a child, but gain a son-in-law, or a daughter-in-law (or a live-in partner). Maybe they come with children from a previous marriage.

In some instances, you just love this new member of your family. But...sometimes these new entries into your family aren’t welcomed with open arms! Here’s this guy your daughter picked up. She wants to spend the rest of her life with him! And you ask, “Why? What in the world does she see in him?” Or you look at your son’s new girl friend or wife, and murmur, “She just doesn’t have much of a personality – at least with us.” So, a big question is: *How open or closed is our family system to welcoming outsiders?*

Then, for many in middle age, it’s a time when we become grandparents. Oh yes, there’s that old joke of now having to sleep with a grandmother...or a grandfather! Usually, we welcome grandchildren into our family with great delight! There are pictures of our grandchildren in our house, our wallet. Or we have a license plate or bumper sticker that says: “Happiness is being a grandparent”, or some other goofy thing! *But, being a grandparent isn’t always smooth road.*

Today, some grandparents are thrust into childcare responsibilities. Perhaps both of the child’s parents are working. Rather than put the child in day care, grand-mom or grand-dad steps in. Perhaps there is a divorce, and the grandparents are helping out the single parent. In some instances this can work well. But it can also be difficult – for the grandparents and everybody involved. Maybe deep in their heart the grandparent is thinking: “I raised my kids. I don’t want to be expected to raise my grandkids too”. Or, we come to the place in life when finally we are better off financially, but now your grown child needs some of your money just to survive.

A few years back in a church I was serving we tried to develop a support group for grandparents who were raising their grandchildren fulltime. It was a great idea, but it never really got off the ground. We did have some meetings, and in one of those meetings a grandmother came who was raising her grandchildren because her daughter was into drugs, and messed up her life. The stress on this older grandmother, the sheer exhaustion she felt, was so evident. There is a real need here for support to those in this life situation. In one of the towns I served there was a neighboring pastor who was part of our clergy group that met monthly. His daughter was into drugs, and he and his wife were raising her daughter’s children. (In fact, I think they adopted them). Keith told how early on when they began to assume care for their grandchildren, he and his wife were arguing, mainly because they were thrust into this new responsibility. He said at one point in the heated discussion they both broke down and cried, they hugged each other, and

from that moment made a commitment to stick to it and do the best they could to raise these youngsters. He had a very positive attitude about it, and saw them as a blessing from God for their lives.

Another thing that can happen if you're a grandparent is that you may not be happy with the way your children are raising your grandchildren. They are too lenient, or too strict. You don't agree with some of the things they do, or don't do, as parents. Perhaps they don't take their kids to church. This can create tension and hard feelings.

What do you do, as a grandparent? Some rules of thumb I'd suggest are these. First, remember the primary responsibility of parenting belongs to the *parents*, not *grandparents*. Grandparents trying to take charge can be intrusive and anger the parents, and even confuse the grandchild. Also, grandparents to have a right to express their views – hopefully in a manner where they don't come on too strong, or try to dictate how the mother or father should raise the children. And thirdly, if the grandchildren are getting no religious training from the parents, grandparents can share their own faith with grandchildren and try to influence them for the Lord. However, if this doesn't sit well with the parents (your son or daughter), sometimes the best you can do is *keep on loving your son or daughter*, and *pray* that God will bring them to Christ, and give them a concern for the spiritual welfare of their children (we well as for themselves).

In the last sermon I talked about remarriage and stepfamilies – this certainly involves exits from and entries into the family. If any of your children are divorced, you no longer have the same relationship with your ex-son-in-law or ex-daughter-in-law, and his or her family. Our son Kraig, unfortunately, went through a divorce perhaps 8 or 9 years ago. While we didn't have a great relationship with his wife, we liked her father and mother. Not only did we not see Tracy anymore, but we also missed the fun we had with her parents. Then we heard she remarried. All of this generated circumstances and feelings we had never had to deal with before.

If your divorced child gets married again, this means welcoming a new person into your family, perhaps their children if they have children. Depending on the circumstances and the personalities of the people involved *this is not always instant love on either side!*

The Bible does not give specific directions to “middle aged adults”, and how middle age people are to work through these exits from the family, and new people coming in! But there are Scriptures that tell us to *welcome strangers*. In Jesus' parable of the sheep and the goats, the parable of the Last Judgment, where He said I was sick and you visited me, hungry and you fed me, etc., remember He also said, “I was a *stranger*, and you welcomed me” (Matthew 25:35). The “stranger” we welcome or refuse to welcome can be our new son-in-law or daughter-in-law, or the partner our son or daughter decides to move in with. Not always easy!

And the Bible says something else that's pertinent: it ***says we are to love one another.*** We are to care about people. We are to seek their good – even the people we find it hard to like. We are to love with a love that forgives, and is willing to overlook others' faults.

There are so many Scriptures about love, but look at 1 Corinthians 13. As we read verses 4-7, think how these words from the Bible apply to showing love for our son or daughter's present or future spouse whom we're just not thrilled about, or the step-sister or step-brother or step-child or step-parent who isn't one of *your* family, or the son or daughter living a lifestyle and raising their children in a way that makes you sad or angry. "Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (1 Corinthians 13:4-7).

So, the mid-life years are a period when some are moving out of the family, others into the family system. *Healthy families are flexible enough to adapt to these transitions.*

One of the changes that can take place in the middle years has to do with what's happening to our parents. Many of us lose a father or mother during this period of life. I was 43 when my dad died. When *both parents* are gone, this can be one of those important "markers" in life: we move up a notch to become the oldest in the family. When my wife Nancy lost her father, after losing her mother some years before, she said "I feel like an orphan."

Others of us have parents who are still living, but their health is failing. Perhaps they have dementia. or they are becoming more dependent. We may have to try to convince them to give up driving, or to go into a life-care facility, and they're resisting. Over the last year or so we have had quite an adventure with my mother – having her move into the personal care section of her life care facility, dealing with her failing health and several trips to the hospital. My mom is 97 years old, soon to be 98.

Adults in the mid-life year can become a member of the so-called "*sandwich generation*" – caught in the middle of their responsibilities to their children, and also needing to take care of their parents. Sometimes there can be tension among siblings if one or more of the siblings feels that the other brothers or sisters aren't pulling their share of the load with mom or dad.

But it's during these mid-life years when we may too begin to notice that we are starting to show signs of aging! Physiological changes are taking place in us! We may have thought we were done growing long ago, but we're surprised by another growth spurt – horizontally, not vertically! "Middle age spread". Strange things begin to happen to our body. It may be a little more difficult to get out of bed after we've spent the previous day weeding the flower bed or mowing the lawn or housecleaning. We become better acquainted with those guys called "Arthur-itis" and Mr. "Ben Gay". We may find that we have less stamina than when we were younger. Some parts of our body begin to sag (we won't go there!). Our hair has a way of turning a different color (think it's called "gray") – unless our hairdresser works his or her magic. I'm still in shock each time I get a haircut and there is all this gray dropping down onto the covering. Some hair disappears. Actually, I think it just loses its way, and starts appearing in weird places instead of where it's supposed to be. I imagine if let our nose hairs and ear hairs grow long enough that we could fluff it over top of our head, and nobody would recognize that we are bald. This can also be the time in life when guys day put a nose hair trimmer on their

Christmas gift list!

Sexually, changes are taking place. While sexual *desire* may still be strong, there be some changes in the *physical* part of lovemaking. For instance, men may find it more difficult to get an erection once they hit their 50's. So guys pay more attention to those Viagra or Levitra commercials. However, the quality of a couples' sex life in middle age depends on many more factors than just the physical or biological ones. Some couples are able to learn new ways to be physically intimate.

The slow diminishing of physical strength and stamina are reminders that *time is moving on, the clock is ticking, and we will not live on earth forever. As a result, one of the things that can happen is what we might call the loss of the "dream", and our trying to find meaning in life.*

Most of us, early in life, develop a "dream". It may include getting married and having children, having a happy family, achieving success in a job or career, making enough money that we can be comfortable and enjoy the extra things in life. When we're young, there are lots of doors that can open to allow this to happen. But as we get older, the reality of *our own limitations*, and of *life's limitations* hits home. Our older son graduated from college with a criminal justice degree. While a student, he was impressed with one of his instructors, who painted a promising picture of the opportunities for criminal degree graduates. They sky is the limit in that field our son believed. Well, he graduated and got a job in a hospital in Philadelphia, working as a security guard on the night shift. At the time there were cutbacks in that area, and he saw little chance for advancement. It left him depressed and disillusioned. That's what can happen when our goals and dreams touch down on the runway of real life! And the older we get, the more we may realize we have fewer options left.

So, the mid-life years can be a time when we grieve the "lost dream": we are single, and our hopes of getting married and having a family diminish as the clock ticks away; we did get married, but the quality of our marriage isn't that great; we wanted children, but were unable to bear children; or we did have children, and they didn't turn out as we had hoped. We are in the mid-life years, and we realize we will never get to be a boss or supervisor, or even advance any higher in our job; and on the spiritual front, our prayer life or walk with God isn't any better than they were years ago.

It's at this point that many people really question the meaning of life. *Is this all there is? What's my purpose in life?* And actually, some people *do achieve* their life goals, they get to the top, but they wind up asking the same questions: *Is this all there is? What is the purpose of my life?*

In the 90th Psalm, the psalm writer is longing for meaning. He comments on how brief life is: "The days of our life are seventy years, or perhaps eighty, if we are strong; even then their span is only toil and trouble: they are soon gone, and we fly away" (Psalm 90:10). Then he goes on: "So teach us to count our days that we may gain a wise heart...let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and prosper for us the work of our hands – O prosper the work of our hands!"

(Psalm 90:12, 17). The psalm writer is longing to God to bless what he does; he wants meaning and purpose in his life.

Let me say just a couple of things about this. First, ***the mid-life years can be a time when dreams are reborn!*** How many people have launched a new career or started a new adventure in middle age! We've all probably seen news stories like that of a mother graduating from college at the same time as her daughter. Or of people who raised their children, then went back to school! I've heard of several stories of older women who took flying lessons and fulfilled a lifelong dream of learning to fly. Wasn't it Colonel Sanders who started the Kentucky Fried Chicken enterprise after he retired from another job. Many people today are entering the ordained ministry as second career people!

You're in the middle age years? So what – *you're not dead yet!* If we love the Lord and trust the Lord, and our dreams are wholesome and in line with His will, nothing is impossible! The mid-life years can be a time when dreams are reborn and we accomplish amazing things!

And this too: Life's meaning can only be found in the spiritual realities. Ultimate meaning in life is not found in having a great job, or accumulating a lot of things. It is in having a relationship with God, and loving relationships with people. I had a pastor friend, Dave Unangst, who went through a bout with colon cancer. He went through surgery, plus chemotherapy and radiation therapy. He could have died, but he survived. Soon afterwards I asked him, "Dave, what have you learned from your illness?" His answer was this, "Things aren't important. Relationships are." Faith in Jesus brings us into a relationship with God. Having a relationship with God, plus focusing our life on building loving relationships with people - not accumulating things - helps us find meaning in life.

I want to close this message by looking at a couple of verses from Titus, chapter 2. The writer of these passages is giving instructions for "older men" and "older women". Since the life expectancy then was shorter, probably the "older men and women" of that time would be comparable to middle aged people today. Titus 2:2 says, "Tell the older men to be temperate, serious, prudent, and sound in faith, in love, and in endurance." The first 3 words – temperate, serious, prudent - describe one who is self-controlled, who realizes that all of life is lived in the light of eternity and before God.

Next, older men are to be sound "in faith, in love, and in endurance." In other words, by the middle age years, we should have moved beyond the recklessness and instability that may characterize younger people – and have a wisdom and a spiritual maturity. The next verse, Titus 2:3 says this: "Likewise, tell the older women to be reverent in behavior, not to be slanderers or slaves to drink; they are to teach what is good."

Can we get the point here? Older men and women (our middle age women and men) are challenged to have ***strong, positive character traits, and to be spiritually mature. It's not what we have that's important; it's what we are!***

