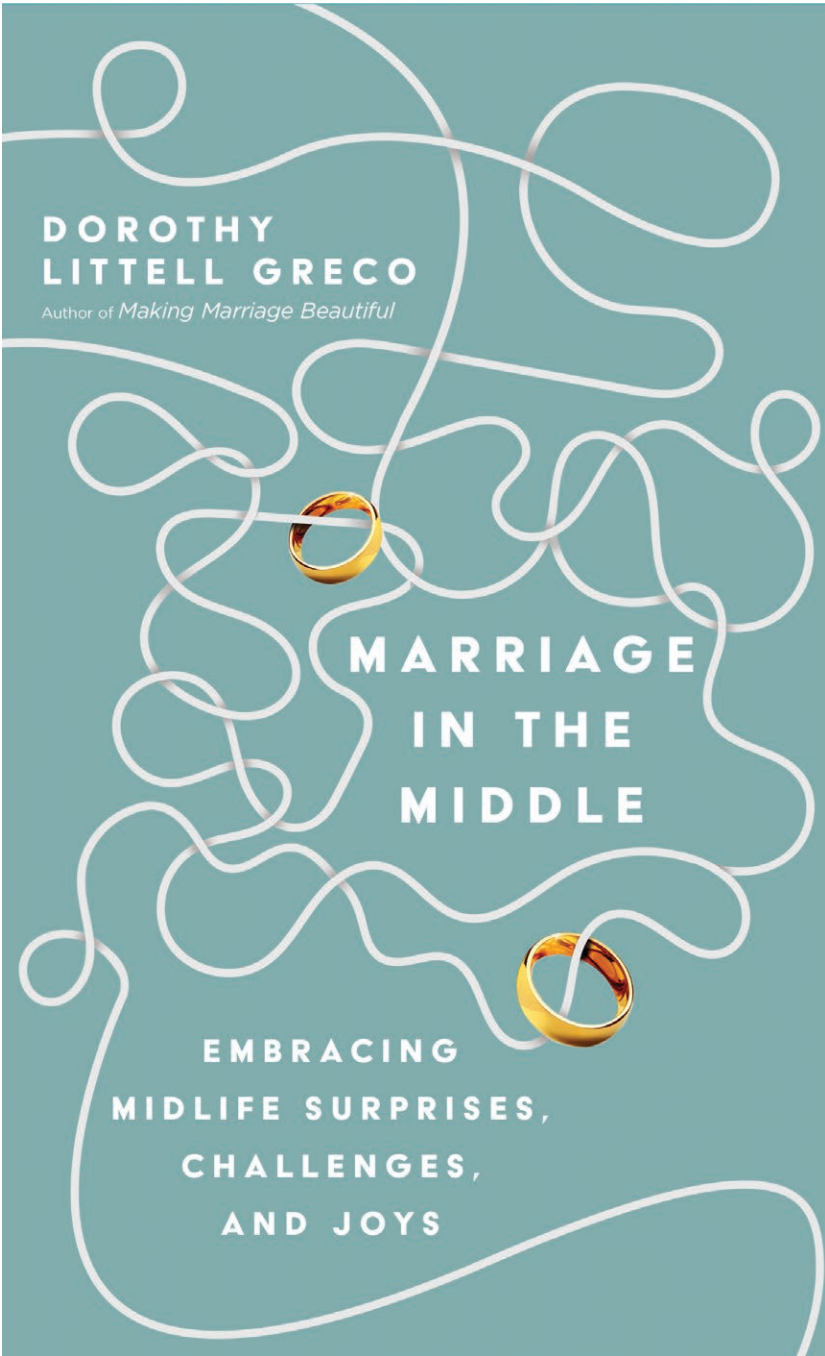


**DOROTHY
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**MARRIAGE
IN THE
MIDDLE**

**EMBRACING
MIDLIFE SURPRISES,
CHALLENGES,
AND JOYS**



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CHAPTER ONE

THE PARADOX OF MIDLIFE MARRIAGE

Crisis or Opportunity?

Without even trying, my husband, Christopher, and I confronted almost every major midlife challenge in an extremely compressed period of time. When we dropped off our eldest son for his first year of college, we naively assumed that we were entering midlife's sweet spot. In reality, we were saying goodbye to life as we knew it—and not in a way we would have chosen.

After settling him into his dorm, we drove east for seven hours. As we pulled into the hotel parking lot, an inebriated woman staggered out the front doors slurring, “Run! Get outta here.” We thought she was talking to an imaginary friend, but in retrospect she was warning us. While packing up the next morning, a small, moving object caught my eye. I instinctively grabbed it, popped it in an empty Ziplock bag, and typed *bedbug* into my handheld. My heart sank as the photos appeared.

The hotel manager assured us that putting our belongings in commercial clothes dryers would kill the bugs. He was wrong, but it took several weeks to figure that out. We piled into the minivan completely oblivious to how much collateral damage his ignorance would cost.

Upon crossing the New York-Massachusetts border, my husband's sister called to inform us that their mom had been admitted to the hospital. We debated going back but decided that it was probably nothing serious and continued on our way to Boston.

Within an hour of arriving home, I went to the laundromat and dried all of our clothes to a crisp. All for naught. Two weeks later, we woke up with bites on our legs.

We then hired a bedbug-sniffing beagle who unceremoniously sat down in three separate places, confirming what we suspected. The pest removal specialist arrived shortly thereafter with massive portable heaters to bake each room. It looked like the Drug Enforcement Agency had come through: mattresses were pushed off the beds, chairs were turned upside down, and the contents of our closets and dressers were strewn across the room so they could be evenly cooked. The price tag exceeded two mortgage payments, and the hotel refused to share the fee.

Meanwhile, my mother-in-law's health steadily worsened. Doctors initially thought she was suffering from kidney stones. Then pancreatitis. Finally, she was diagnosed with advanced pancreatic cancer. She never made it home from the hospital.

Next up, our youngest son took a shot to the neck while playing football, resulting in a concussion and a peculiar throat injury. We spent several weeks going back and forth to specialists exploring whether or not he'd need corrective surgery. He didn't, but the injury ended his football career.

If you can believe it, things got worse.

For fifteen years Christopher had been on staff with an amazing, dynamic church. Though we both loved partnering with and serving these faith-filled men and women, we had been sensing that this chapter was coming to a close. The same week we returned from burying his mother, it became clear we needed to leave. Two months later, Christopher resigned with no next job lined up. Though I work

full-time, my annual income could only cover our living expenses if we moved someplace significantly less expensive. Like a campground. In Florida.

All of this took place over three short months.

In the midst of this unraveling, I had a dream in which the two of us were hanging onto the edge of a cliff. I looked over at him and said, “I hope you’re doing okay because I can’t do anything to help you.” It was not uncommon for us to experience four of the five stages of grief—denial, anger, bargaining, and depression—in one week. Though we prayed, talking with God did not free us from anxiety or fear. Some days, keeping the faith meant choosing not to quit.

Prior to these events, we felt competent and stable. As often happens during a crisis, the tremors exposed preexisting fault lines. Christopher began to experience the natural insecurities that come from a sudden, midcareer job loss. Doubts about his capacity and worth—things he thought he had laid to rest in his twenties—came roaring back. Those feelings propelled him into anxious activism that crowded out the boys and me. His concerns were not unfounded; there was a lot on the line. Because I deemed Christopher’s experiences more consequential—and because I felt so overwhelmed—I shut down emotionally and marched resolutely through my days.

It was the most traumatic, destabilizing year we had gone through as a married couple. And yet this experience birthed deep transformation. Our crisis revealed itself as an opportunity to evaluate our life and make significant changes. My hunch is that we’re not outliers. There is much wisdom to be gleaned from tumult.

REFRAMING MIDLIFE CRISIS

Even though the years between forty and sixty-five do not represent the true middle of our lives—few of us will live to one hundred or beyond—midlife is a very real thing. There’s something essential going on that’s worth exploring, particularly as it relates to marriage.

This is a time of multidimensional change. As these shifts alter the landscapes of our lives, it can be disturbing and raise more questions than answers. Our disorientation gets exacerbated if strategies and coping mechanisms that previously served us no longer seem to work. When what's familiar fails, we may find ourselves withdrawing, blaming, or fixating on relational dynamics that we previously overlooked. If any of this resonates with you, rest assured, you're not alone.

Psychologist Elliott Jaques introduced the term *midlife crisis* in 1965. It's no surprise that his discoveries about the inner turmoil that results from confronting one's mortality coincided with the external turmoil of the 1960s, which included racial unrest, political corruption, the Vietnam War, and multiple assassinations. More than fifty years later the concept has taken on a life of its own. Culture has come to accept this much ballyhooed term as an unavoidable reality that lurks in the shadows, waiting for an opportune moment to sabotage our lives. But is that an accurate description of midlife, or is it unhelpfully fatalistic and passive?

Journalist Barbara Bradley Hagerty sees midlife through a far more hopeful frame of renewal: "This is a time when you shift gears—a temporary pause, yes, but not a prolonged stall. In fact, you are moving forward to a new place in life. This moment can be exhilarating rather than terrifying, informed by the experiences of your past and shaped by the promise of your future."

As Christopher and I discovered, the crises that we encounter in midlife don't have to result in unhappiness, dissatisfaction, or isolation. They can help us and our marriages to grow stronger.

Psychologist and author Mary Pipher identifies the "challenges and joys" of this stage as "catalytic." She believes the seeming contradictions of this season create "a portal for expanding our souls." The divergent experiences that we're being thrust into can stimulate

the kind of character development necessary to prevent us and our marriages from getting stuck or disintegrating. To get the most benefit from these soul-expanding experiences, we have to be willing to acknowledge those places where our marriages are currently fragile or even failing. And of course, an acknowledgment is not enough. We have to address those vulnerabilities with purpose and commitment.

THREE ESSENTIAL TRAITS

As we embark on this work, three qualities become imperative: malleability, resilience, and engagement. These three are not the only attributes that we need to navigate marriage in the middle of life, but they helped Christopher and me to make it through our year from hell.

Malleability fosters transformation. In the physical world a metal's malleability is directly related to how much pressure it can withstand without snapping. Midlife is an extended season of pressure. If we're malleable, the sustained stress will result in something new and good. If we resist change, we're in danger of relational and spiritual rigidity.

We become increasingly malleable as we flex and adapt in the face of health scares, financial dilemmas, professional disappointments, family conflicts, etc. Malleability should help us to learn how far we can stretch and what happens when we overextend.

Whereas malleability is the willingness to be stretched and changed, resilience determines how quickly we'll bounce back after something difficult or trying has happened. Facebook executive Sheryl Sandberg defines *resilience* as "the strength and speed of our response to adversity." The Japanese have a proverb that explains resilience: *Nana korobi Ya oki*, which means "fall down seven times but get up eight." In other words, persevere. Don't quit.

Resilience is one measure of maturity. Children learn to be resilient when they have nurturing, caring parents (or caregivers) who

teach them how to rebound after they've made mistakes or suffered losses. Even if we lacked those necessary ingredients when we were growing up, we can still become resilient by cultivating supportive relationships, choosing hope, and refusing to see ourselves as powerless victims.

Whether it's the death of our parents, infertility, or loss of employment, we will all have the wind knocked out of us. But there's no stopping the clock or taking time-outs in midlife. Our world might be shaken and our ego deeply bruised. We might even forget all the things we've done well. But after we've had a good cry (or a good sulk) and caught our breath, we have to get up and get back in the game because our spouses and our families need us.

Malleability and resilience presuppose that we're engaged. Engagement means paying attention and remaining actively involved. The antithesis of engagement is passivity, withdrawal, or apathy—none of which work well in a high-stakes season like midlife.

The challenges of this time frame require us to be present in every sphere. If we're parents, our children don't need less of us as they get older; they need us in different capacities. After needing us peripherally or perhaps not at all for most of their lives, our mothers and fathers will increasingly look to us for emotional, practical, and spiritual support. Because of the chaotic nature of midlife, our spouses will continue to need comfort and reassurance.

Becoming more malleable, resilient, and engaged won't simply help us to be better people: these attributes may actually prevent marital failure.

A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

In the course of that one disastrous year, Christopher and I had to navigate what felt like a decade's worth of loss and disappointment. Though the events shook us to the core, they also presented us with opportunities to trust God more deeply. Each time the bottom fell

out, we had a sense of God's presence. Sometimes he held our hands during the free fall and sometimes he met us at the bottom, but he was always there and always helped us to heal and reconnect. Thanks to his abiding presence, we found our way through the losses and emerged more in love and more certain that choosing to marry each other was one of the best decisions we'd ever made.

The two of us have had to work hard for the marriage we now enjoy. Before we got married, Christopher and I had so much conflict that friends predicted a tumultuous first year. For the record, that first year exceeded our expectations. It was year ten that nearly sunk us. We're both chronically opinionated and strong willed, which has its benefits and drawbacks. We've raised our voices, shamed each other, and withheld affection in the worst possible moments. In other words, we're normal people who often fail.

Yet here we are in our late fifties, still appreciating each other's company, still discovering new things, still having great sex, and still excited about following Jesus together. Christopher and I have spent enough time counseling and pastoring other couples to know that not all marriages land where we have. Couples dig in their heels. Instead of acknowledging their contribution to the problems, they blame each other and either endlessly cycle around the same conflicts or lose their will to fight.

There's no simple explanation for why we've made it and why other couples haven't because we're all under unique stress during this time period. That does not mean we will inevitably spin out or land in despair. One of the gifts of midlife is learning to recognize our own limitations and then extending grace to ourselves—and others. Especially our spouse. In fact, by choosing to accept and fully embrace our limited spouse, we can actually experience greater intimacy (both emotional and physical), deeper trust, and more fulfilling friendship.

It's true that the disruptive nature of midlife can leave us longing for peace and stability. That said, perhaps the opposite of crisis is

neither peace nor stability. Maybe it's discovery. And maybe the key for us is to use the crises as impetus to grow. My hope is that all of us will not only make it through this season with our marriages intact, but experience profound transformation and joy in the midst of it. This book is an invitation to join me on that journey.

GOING DEEPER

1. What's surprised you about midlife? What's been harder than you anticipated? What's been easier or welcome?
2. How have the challenges of midlife invited you to change?
3. What is it like to realize that you're at the halfway point of your life or even beyond? Are you energized? Discouraged? Hopeful? What are you looking forward to in the second half of your life? What are you fearing or even dreading?
4. If malleability, resilience, and engagement are key to thriving in midlife, how are you doing in each of these areas? Where would you like to grow? What might that growth look like?

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