

'Pause is helpful, realistic, reassuring, encouraging, and uplifting all at once. It is a wonderful reminder that God still has work for us to do. Full of hope. Thank you, Sarah.'

Carolyn and Christopher Ash, Tyndale House, Cambridge, UK.

'This gem of a book is like sitting down for a refreshing cup of tea with a wise friend. As Sarah walks through some of the challenges that greet women in midlife, she winsomely and compassionately holds out Christ as the one to treasure and trust through it all. It's a book that will grow your understanding and empathy, but most of all, it's a book that will gently lead you to hold onto Christ for yourself, and hold out Christ to others.'

Sarah Dargue, author of *Bumps, Babies and the Gospel* and co-host of *Two Sisters and a Cup of Tea* Podcast.

'I'm so glad Sarah wrote this book! Getting older is not for the faint-hearted and hormonal issues are real, but books on these topics are rare. Sarah gives practical advice saturated in the gospel with plenty of real-life illustrations. She helps us remember that our ultimate hope is not in staying young forever but in an eternity with our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.'

Keri Folmar, author of *The Good Portion: Scripture* and co-host of *Priscilla Talk* Podcast.

'You just turned 45! You're feeling trapped and tempted to make choices that will devastate your life. What can you do? *Pause* wisely relates these signs of midlife to a choice we all have – to grow or self-destruct. With humor, transparency, and biblical wisdom, Sarah Allen reveals truth we may never know on our own. God designs a glorious purpose for us in this awkward time of life – to grow!'

Barbara Reaoch, former Director, Bible Study Fellowship International, Children's Division. Author of *A Jesus Christmas* and *A Jesus Easter*.

'Midlife and the menopause are not experiences beyond the transforming power of the gospel. Sarah Allen shows how women can find comfort and joy even in the toughest parts of this phase of life. This is a great read, not only for women but for husbands and pastors to help the women they care about.'

**Revd Dr Michael Reeves, President and Professor of Theology,  
Union School of Theology.**



# Pause

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*How to enjoy God,  
find hope & bear fruit  
through midlife  
and the menopause*

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ALLEN

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## Introduction



## My Story



A few years ago I found a dress half-price in a sale. The colour was just right, I really liked the style and what a price! I had a wedding coming up and this floral number would be perfect. Once home, I tried it on and it fitted perfectly, slipping smoothly over my figure. Then I glanced in the mirror. Looking back at me was my mother. There were her narrow shoulders and her – how could I put it? – substantial arms. There was the furrow between the eyes and even, could it be possible, a tilt to one side. My dear old mum was almost 80, but in that truth-telling reflection I suddenly saw I was heading fast in the same direction.

No one likes owning up to being middle-aged. No amount of cheery ‘Life begins at 40!’ or ‘50 is the new [supply preferred age]’ greeting cards can cover up the fact that midlife provides a whole host of challenges. Trying not to look like your mother is the least of them.

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When I hit my mid-40s, embarrassing brain fog descended. I not only forgot names, but key words in the middle of meetings. My kids rolled their eyes and thought it was funny. But I wasn't just ashamed, I was actually worried. Could I keep on doing my job when words escaped my mind mid-sentence, and my characteristic forgetfulness ramped up into missing appointments? Were 20 more years teaching English even realistic? Perhaps I should change direction?

Then, just before I turned 50, hot flushes began. Many days I had 15 or maybe 20. My scarf came off, then my cardigan, then I'd quickly put my hair up in a clip, all to relieve the fire that started in my tummy and rose until my face was a tomato. A couple of minutes later back on went the cardigan and the scarf. An hour or so later, it happened all over again. I became an expert in layered dressing. Here was something else for the family to smile at.

Night times were worse, though keeping the window open and having a light-weight duvet helped. Even that would get tossed back a couple of times a night so I could dangle my feet outside the bed, and sometimes I would have to get up to douse myself in cold water. Getting back to sleep after that wasn't always easy. At least my periods had stopped after a few years of not knowing when they would come or how long they would last. Freedom from tampons and sanitary towels, and from cramps and PMT was definitely a blessing, even if the price was a new kind of tiredness.

### **Time to take control?**

For women, ageing is not always gradual and mostly it isn't graceful, as my experience demonstrates. There are times of shock and surprise, and long stretches in which we get used to a new reality, only for it all to change again. The hormones which have kept us aware of time passing each month from puberty onwards, drop off significantly as we hit middle age. Oestrogen levels swing up and down as perimenopause begins and progesterone drops, leading to the menopause – the twelve-month point after the final menstrual period – when both hormones flatline. After this, we're described as post-menopausal, a label which then sticks to the end of our days.

Those medical terms can seem severe, and what they describe might seem scary, but we need to remember that 'the change', as the menopause used to be called, is a regular part of life. My experience is probably typical, but some women barely notice a thing and a significant minority have much more severe symptoms or difficulties which can last for more than a decade. Menopause can be particularly hard to bear when it comes prematurely or suddenly because of medical intervention. It's interesting that the physical and emotional experience also differs culture by culture, though we don't know why that is. But all of us – married or not, mothers or not, career women or not – will be altered in body and mind by these shifts in hormone production.<sup>1</sup>

If you read many of the current, popular books about midlife, you'll notice that they major on serious symptoms

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and medical treatments. Perimenopause and menopause are hot topics linked as they are to the current cultural conversation on identity and well-being, and they are key issues in a push for true gender equality. The menopause has been called an ‘injustice’, which needs fixing *now!*<sup>2</sup>

Popular titles include Mariella Frostrup’s *Cracking the Menopause: While Keeping Yourself Together*.<sup>3</sup> Midlife is a problem to be solved, or even an enemy to be fought. The implication is that a woman’s body must be controlled, look great and kept young. As Davina McCall claims on the dust jacket of her best-selling book, *Menopausal*, it’s ‘time to take control of our bodies and our lives ... This is your body. You owe it to yourself to arm it with the information it needs to navigate this part of your life.’<sup>4</sup>

Taking control and keeping it all together sounds attractive if you’re struggling with difficult midlife issues and you’ll find these books give out some useful medical information and common-sense advice. Running through most is the proposed solution of Hormone Replacement Therapy (HRT), which replaces the hormones you naturally run out of, reducing symptoms and aspects of female ageing such as decreased bone density.

What these secular books don’t do, however, is consider what God has got to do with menopause and midlife. Most don’t even discuss how the physical aspects of this stage are related to the work and family changes which often appear around this time. And so, that’s what *Pause* is all about. We’re going to take some time to step back and



## My Story

think about the bigger picture of female middle age. We'll be asking why we experience this strange stage of life, and how Christian women can live well through it all; family responsibilities, career pressure, ambitions and changing emotions included.

### **A good starting point**

There are many different stages along the journey through midlife. You might be right in the middle of bewildering and painful changes. Alternatively, you could be wondering what all the fuss is about; you're half-way through and doing fine. I'm guessing that quite a few readers will be in their early 40s or even late 30s, curious and perhaps fearful about what is ahead. I hope, too, that there might be some husbands or brothers or pastors who have picked up the book wanting to know how they can help the women they care about.

It's good news then, that Christians, no matter their experience, share a fixed orientation point: the truth that God is good and he is in control. We can say that he is the Lord of all – not just of what seems spiritual – but of our bodies and our moods, our hormones and all our changes. We can confess, with relief, 'all my times are in your hands' (see Ps. 31:15) and know not only that God governs what is going on, but that he cares about it all. The times of loss and the times of gain all belong to him. And his hands which made all the minutes, hours and months, guide our experiences and can redeem them too.

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So, throughout *Pause*, I hope you'll see a realism about the problems of midlife, but also real hope that it can be a time of fruitfulness and joy. You'll find God's truth applies to our concerns about ageing looks, regrets over the past, the demands to care for others and our fears for the future. And together we'll explore the temptations we face to check-out spiritually, judge others and follow idols of comfort.

Trying to make time stand still or our bodies stop changing is foolish. But pausing to understand how God's eternal wisdom relates to our changing seasons is invaluable for navigating the hard yards of our middle years. When we take a step back to think biblically, God's Spirit can lead us to enjoy a greater security in our faith, peace in our identity and usefulness in our ever-changing world.

## Chapter 1



# What's the Problem with Time Passing?



*Understanding why change hurts*

Rachel runs her life with a minutely calibrated schedule, timetables stuck to her fridge and a watch that pings incessantly with reminders and alarms. Her job in the health service, church involvement and large family (a five-year-old as well as three teenagers) mean that home life, from folding the laundry to phone calls with her mum, must work by the clock. Her discipline is genuinely impressive, but even that can't guarantee productivity. Stuff happens. Frustration very often rules. Today, the train was delayed, and she missed a meeting. Then, as she rushed to the supermarket, her period arrived. Work trousers spoilt, she had to go home to change – and with no food for tea.

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Rachel feels very keenly that time is passing moment by moment, and that she's running to keep up, often literally. And it's not only long to do lists causing this pressure; her body and brain are changing, making it harder to go at the pace she used to. She's 45 and her previously predictable periods have gone haywire: her bleeding is heavier and she never quite knows when they'll come. She should go to the doctor, but that's more disruption and more time away from tasks.

Rachel's also becoming conscious that time is passing in a different way. These changes in her body seem to have caught her unaware. She's not only losing minutes when things go wrong, she feels she's losing her identity as she moves forwards into another stage of life. She feels the same inside as she did at 25, or just about, and yet now she can't get by without reading glasses and running for the bus leaves her knee joints protesting. Time seems to be taking the old Rachel away.

### Time plays tricks

Think about the way we talk about time in English. We buy a new device so that we can '*save time*', we decide to '*invest time*' in people or projects, and sometimes we confess guiltily that we have '*wasted time*'. You might even make decisions on how to '*spend time*' by reflecting that '*time is money*'. In all these expressions, time is a precious commodity, a limited resource, which belongs to us and is for us to conserve or use as we see fit.

## What's the Problem with Time Passing?

Yet, as Rachel is experiencing, and as we have always known deep down, time is something we can never quite keep hold of. If our moments should be conserved or only spent wisely, then it's no wonder we feel great disappointment when we see them ticking away, the evidence etched on our faces and marked in our bodily cycles. And for those who live by the clock, like Rachel, our powerlessness to stop or slow down its moving minutes can even make us panic.

Many of us get to midlife and say to ourselves: How on earth did *that* happen? The answer is obvious: time passes and so we age. But the experience of living in time doesn't quite fit with the neatly marked days and weeks on the calendars. Time doesn't seem to progress steadily or feel measured at all. In one season, time stands still, then in another it rushes on crazily, and while we're engrossed in the present moment, the future is upon us. Virginia Woolf described this very vividly at the beginning of the last century:

*Why, if one wants to compare life to anything, one must liken it to being blown through the Tube [the London Underground] at fifty miles an hour, landing at the other end without a single hairpin in one's hair! Shot out at the feet of God entirely naked! ... With one's hair flying back like the tail of a race-horse. Yes, that seems to express the rapidity of life, the perpetual waste and repair; all so casual, all so haphazard.<sup>1</sup>*

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We may feel foolish for being surprised when we see lines on our faces, after all, we know logically we should expect them. But like Virginia Woolf's character here, we can feel powerless and even 'naked' in the face of such a blind force and the apparently chaotic rush of life.

### God makes time

The hard truth is that time doesn't belong to us at all. It has never been a human possession. In Colossians 1:16, Paul makes it clear that all time is Christ's. We learn that 'in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities'. Time, that invisible, powerful force, was created by him.

Remember back in Genesis 1, as God makes light; he calls the light 'day' and the darkness 'night'. That's Christ, the Word of God, making time. And when we read Jesus 'is before all things' (Col. 1:17), Paul's telling us not only that Christ existed before creation (which of course he did), but also that he is beyond it. Theologians have described God as being in 'the now that stands still', an eternal present, totally apart from our kind of time. And because he is beyond, or above, our ever-passing time, he is able to rule over it.

This means that, rather than time blowing us along in a 'casual, haphazard' manner, Christ is ordering time. He holds the reins of the minutes and the hours because 'in him all things hold together' (Col. 1:17). He makes sure

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that time doesn't run away or slow down to nothing; time is steady in his good hands and moves forwards 'for him' (Col. 1:16).

So, though Rachel feels as if time is playing unkind tricks on her, furrowing lines in her forehead and upending her regular cycles, she can remember that time is not in charge, Christ is. God is working out his great and good purposes in time in every tick of the clock and turn of the calendar page.

Back in Genesis 1, we get a glimpse of what God's purposes are. Through Jesus, he establishes a world not only separated into different spaces but also structured in terms of time. Created on the fourth day, the sun, moon and stars 'serve as signs to mark sacred times, and days and years' (Gen. 1:14). All living things are bound into these cycles of day and night, weeks, months and years. In the rhythms of his time, trees 'bear fruit' (Gen. 1:11) and birds 'increase in number' (Gen. 1:22), while humanity is called to 'be fruitful and increase in number; [to] fill the earth and subdue it' (Gen. 1:28).

So time is not a mechanical force, still less a trickster. Its regular rhythms are created by the good, personal God and experienced in the minds, bodies and souls of the people he has made. Still, we're not totally off the mark when we think of time as a precious resource, nor are we wrong to connect time to productivity. Time is God's gift for the joyous multiplication and cultivation of all good things. And all this abundant increase is for one even greater purpose: Christ's own glory.