

AIMEE JOSEPH

MIDLIFE PLOT TWIST*



Trusting God Through the Turbulence of

**perimenopause*

“Christian women have been waiting for someone to write a book on perimenopause, and not only has Aimee answered the call; she has done so in her typical style: with truth-filled humor bathed in grace. Chapter by chapter, she helps middle-aged women understand how God uses our physical limitations, emotional ups and downs, and spiritual struggles to deepen our faith and our reliance on Christ. *Midlife Plot Twist* is an answer to prayer. It fills a long-overlooked gap in gospel-centered resources for a sensitive season of life. Buy a stack for the women in your life—they may not need a copy yet, but they will, and they’ll thank you!”

SHARONDA COOPER, Content Coordinator of
Women’s Initiatives at The Gospel Coalition;
Author of *Wisdom for Parenting*

“Perimenopause brings much change—in body, mind, circumstances, outlook, relationships, emotions, confidence, and thought. Aimee Joseph writes candidly about these challenges that women know so well, whether single, married, having had children or not. Warmly and wisely, with humour and practical, personal and pastoral insight, Aimee encourages us to look to our unchanging Lord, to value what he values, and, in prayerful dependence on Christ, to allow the glory of the gospel to shine through our own jar of clay so that the fulness of life in Christ fills our emptiness. This a wonderful book providing clarity through the brain fog and giving hope when despair threatens to take grip.”

ELINOR MAGOWAN, Director for Women’s Ministry
at FIEC, UK (Fellowship of Independent Evangelical
Churches)

"In *Midlife Plot Twist*, Aimee Joseph offers both honest diagnosis and helpful remedy. While the liminal years of perimenopause usher in unwanted changes (and a consumer industry sells us on promises to "fix" aging women), Joseph's hope is firmly anchored. She boldly reminds her readers of the lush, evergreen truths of the gospel: that God is working good purposes in every season of our lives, including seasons of limitation. Read this book to be disciplined into an ever-deepening trust in Christ, who knows the frailties—and glory—of being human."

JEN POLLOCK MICHEL, Author of *A Rule for the Rest of Us*
and *In Good Time*

"Deeply relatable and powerfully encouraging, *Midlife Plot Twist* explores the embarrassing, confusing, and surprising elements of midlife that we experience as women and helps us process them with gospel hope and a touch of humor. I finished Aimee's book feeling both seen and encouraged."

GLENNA MARSHALL, Author of *Memorizing Scripture*,
Known & Loved, and *Praying in Pain*

AIMEE JOSEPH

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**perimenopause*

the goodbook
COMPANY

Midlife Plot Twist:
Trusting God Through the Turbulence of Perimenopause

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*To the generations of holy women
who hoped in God,
walking through perimenopause long before
language or medicine caught up
while modeling lives of expectancy and endurance.*

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Introduction

If you picked up this book, you are likely a middle-aged woman or suddenly find yourself in the throes of perimenopause. If you are anything like me, these middle years of womanhood crept up on you quietly then suddenly hit you like a freight train. Life likely felt like it was moving along according to some semblance of a plan until you hit a surprising midlife plot twist. The unexpected changes to your body, your mind, and your relationships have you feeling slightly off kilter.

You may be wearing a weighted vest to increase bone density. You may or may not be trying to walk a billion steps a day to get rid of an unwanted “cortisol belly.” You might be thinking about investing in a personal fan to carry with you everywhere to help with dreaded hot flashes (which my friends from other countries call hot flushes—a name I much prefer as we would all like to flush them far away from us!). You’ve probably spent some serious money on products to help manage symptoms or push back the aging process. As such,

I am grateful this little book has found its way onto your nightstand for such a time as this. We can learn to embrace our perimenopausal plot twists together.

If I am honest with you, I didn't even hear the word perimenopause until a few years ago. If I am even more honest, I only recently began to understand what it means.

Etymologically, perimenopause is a straightforward term: *peri* means around, and *menopause* means the cessation of monthly cycles. Thus, perimenopause is a term referring to the years surrounding menopause, a massive shift in a woman's reproductive life. While it was coined in 1821 by a French physician named Charles-Pierre-Louis de Gardanne (French names put ours to shame, don't they?), the term has recently become mainstream.¹

Suddenly our newsfeeds are flooded with products promising to ease common symptoms. Life coaches and nutritionists are boldly telling us what to do (and not do) as we prepare for a significant drop in estrogen and other hormones to which our bodies have long been accustomed. While the term may be clear etymologically, the years termed perimenopause are rather twisty experientially.

God's Good Design

I find it helpful to remember that the reality of perimenopause pre-existed the term. Women were experiencing these middle years long before an entire

consumer market popped up. If we go back to the beginning, we find the good intentions and gracious care of an intentional Creator. Our triune God wired our bodies well, creating the complex hormonal and biological systems into which modern science is now beginning to probe more deeply.

Even those who don't know God appreciate the complexity of the female reproductive system. According to a doctor who specializes in ob-gyn...

when it comes to biological brilliance, few things compare to the female reproductive system ... Even twenty-five years after committing to the specialty of ob-gyn, I still marvel at its profound complexity, innate intelligence, and ability to perform seemingly superhuman feats of strength and endurance.²

The complex female reproductive system features two key hormonal players, estrogen and progesterone, which wax and wane in a delicate monthly dance during a woman's reproductive years. The more we know about estrogen, the more we realize how instrumental it is. In addition to making a womb a habitable home for a developing fetus, estrogen plays a widespread protective role in a woman's body: it keeps havoc-wreaking stress hormones like cortisol in check; it lowers inflammation; it helps the neurons in our brains to fire efficiently and effectively.³ Thus, the rapid decrease of estrogen during the years surrounding menopause has an equally pervasive effect, which explains the weight gain, the brittle

bones, the brain fog, and the emotional roller coasters of perimenopause.

Yet, marveling at God's good creation does not require a medical decree. When God created man and woman—distinct from the rest of creation as his image-bearers—he invited them to join him in bringing forth human life (Genesis 1:26-28). He wired the female reproductive system to sustain and support growing babies. Now that we are privy to the complex hormonal feedback mechanisms that enable such a feat, we have even more fuel for worship and awe. As the apostle Paul said, “In him we live and move and have our being” (Acts 17:28).

Body, Mind, & Soul

We have reason to be grateful for the uptick in awareness and language around this season of life, which has often been considered unmentionable; however, I fear that we are approaching the middle years of motherhood in a largely one-dimensional way. By focusing almost exclusively on the physical aspects of this pivotal period, we are robbing ourselves of the rich stability offered to us in the word of God. As those sovereignly knit together—body, mind, and soul—we would do well to take a more holistic approach to perimenopause.

Walking through the long and winding hallways of perimenopause as we approach the threshold of actual menopause, women experience so much more than just physical symptoms. For those who couldn't have physical children, the loss can often feel amplified. For those who wanted more children, the demarcation

triggers regret and grief. The changes in our bodies have a rippling effect on our emotions and relationships. These years often expose how much stock we have wrongfully put into our physical appearance, our weight, and even our ability to emotionally regulate. For many who are biological mothers, our homes and our wombs are emptying at the same time, leaving us relationally exposed and physically exhausted.

These years that begin with significant physiological changes are also accompanied by great emotional, relational, and spiritual shifts. In a season marked by massive changes, anchoring our souls to Jesus Christ, who is the same “yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8), is of utmost importance. As our bodies begin to lose estrogen, we must not let our souls lose heart. We must fight to remember that “though our outer self is wasting away, our inner self is being renewed day by day” (2 Corinthians 4:16). For those of us who are mothers, as our schedules may begin to slow down and our homes empty, we must redouble our efforts to live as those filled with Christ and entrusted with eternal purpose (Colossians 2:9-10). For others who are experiencing different kinds of emptiness, the same offer of fullness from Christ stands: he will satisfy the empty with himself (Psalm 107:9; John 6:35).

I’m writing this book for myself as I am presently navigating this stormy season. I don’t write as an expert but as a fellow companion on an unfolding journey. I don’t stand on statistics, though I’ve done my research. I don’t stand on personal experience, though I will

share vulnerably as we journey together. I stand on the authority of the living and active words of God. I don't have all the answers (neither do the people who claim to be experts on social media), but I know the one who created all things and holds all things together with the power of his word (Colossians 1:17; Hebrews 1:3). If anyone has a commitment to his daughters making it through a difficult pass, it is "the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies and God of all comfort" (2 Corinthians 1:3).

So, put on your weighted vest and get ready to walk with me through some even weightier truths for women in these middle years. In each chapter, we will explore a common perimenopausal experience, seeking to set that reality in a broader theological framework by studying a pertinent passage of Scripture. We will learn to count our days as we count our steps by studying Psalm 90. We will explore our changing bodies as we consider our unchanging God by digging into 2 Corinthians 4. We will talk honestly about our short fuses and marvel at our longsuffering Savior (Hebrews 4:14-16). We will address the emptiness of these years in view of the fullness of Christ expressed in Colossians. We will see the way Christ meets us in our shame spirals through Jesus' interaction with the bleeding woman. And we will talk about God's wise pairing of powerlessness with prayerfulness (2 Corinthians 10:3-5). Then, we will move from brain fog to renewed minds with the apostle Paul in Romans 12:1-2. We will admit our disappointments and remember the hope that does not disappoint (Romans 5:1-5). Finally, we will set our eyes

(crows' feet included) on leaving a legacy as we walk through Psalm 145.

We may have to pause for some hot flashes or protein snacks, but God has great good in store for us as we seek his face together. Our Messiah walks with us through these middle years, so we can trust that even these midlife plot twists are part of God's incredible story of redemption.

CHAPTER 1

Numbered Steps and Numbered Days



I'm a late adopter. I finally began watching *American Idol* when it was in its tenth season. I didn't start shopping online until about four years ago. So, it's no surprise that I lived most of my adult life without a step-tracking device. Looking back, it was ignorant bliss—this complete unawareness of how many steps these two feet of mine were taking. Unfortunately, while on vacation recently, my mother alerted me to the fact that my smartphone has been tracking my steps all along. It was the beginning of the end. Now I am not only seeking to exceed my ten thousand steps a day, but I am also wearing a weighted vest while doing so. I have become the official step-counter to her majesty, my perimenopause.

If I were only keeping track of steps, I might not feel quite so overwhelmed. But women hitting the middle years are also expected to track macros, hormone levels,

and protein intake. Our culture loves measurables. A panoply of products promise to help us decrease the numbers on our scales and the wrinkles on our foreheads. We are being told that “Forty is the new thirty,” and being sold “beauty hacks” that promise to mask our age. The multibillion-dollar anti-aging industry is propelled by the lie that these middle-age years are a battle to be fought rather than a new season to be welcomed.

There is nothing wrong with increasing our intentional habits to stay healthy as we age. Yet, I fear that we might miss an incredible invitation to let a new set of challenges and changes lead us more deeply to the ancient truths of God, which are the anchor we need in the turbulence of this season. In a culture largely obsessed with the first half of life, the middle years are an invitation to grow in wisdom and maturity as we model right priorities to a watching world.

While ads bid us dye our gray hair, the Proverbs reminds us that “gray hair is a crown of glory; it is gained in a righteous life” (Proverbs 16:31). Rather than investing in a cabinet of creams promising to erase our wrinkles, we should hear God’s invitation—his command even—to older generations to invest in the younger, passing along the hard-won, worn-in wisdom that accompanies those very wrinkles (Psalm 145:4; Titus 2:1-5). In a culture proliferating supplements and vitamins to support our changing bodies, the Scriptures urge us to also supplement our faith with virtue that leads to godliness and love

(2 Peter 1:5-8). As we enter the newly discovered territory of perimenopause, we do so with the guidance of God and his promises to work all things—even hot flashes—for our good (Romans 8:28).

The Velveteen Years

As someone who regularly mentors bright young women, I often feel my lack of shininess. The high schoolers and college students I invest in seem to have endless possibilities stretching before them and peak-performance bodies to match. In comparison to their adventurous lives, mine seems limited and boring. I know I am not alone in this struggle with comparison. I've sat through enough coffee-shop conversations with peers to know how shabby middle-aged women feel in a culture that glorifies the glossy.

Even as a forty-something woman, I think of my favorite book as a four-year-old, *The Velveteen Rabbit*. In an endearing conversation between an older toy, the Skin Horse, and a younger stuffed rabbit, we learn about the process of becoming:

“It doesn't happen all at once,” said the Skin Horse. “You become. It takes a long time ... Generally, by the time you are Real, most of your hair has been loved off, and your eyes drop and you get loose in the joints and very shabby. But these things don't matter at all, because once you are Real you can't be ugly, except to people who don't understand.”⁴

As daughters of the living God, we are becoming so much more than real; we are becoming more and more like Christ. Sure, our skin may be a bit flabbier, and our hair may be thinning or graying, but God is doing a deep work in us through the middle years.

While our lives may not look as shiny as those of younger generations, we know that our worn-in look can come from being poured out in obedience to God. Our joints may ache, and our skin may gather loosely at every joint, but those can be marks of having served our Maker with both our bodies and our souls. Just like taking ten thousand steps a day doesn't immediately change our metabolism, becoming more like Jesus is a gradual, almost imperceptible process. Underneath what we perceive as ordinariness, God is doing an extraordinary work on our souls. Through the dailiness of life, God is conforming us increasingly to his image, one tiny degree of glory to one degree of glory (2 Corinthians 3:18). We are being loved into realness. We are becoming velveteen.

The Middle Years in Midian

Part of this aging and growing process is the maturity to turn to Scripture when the unexpected or unwanted comes, so we will begin in one of the oldest songs found in the Scriptures: Psalm 90. Moses, who wrote this well-known psalm when he was well past middle age, will be our guide. I understand that studying words written by an elderly man seems a strange choice for a group of middle-aged women. Just bear with me.

Usually, people think of Moses as an infant being left by his mother to float down the Nile in a basket or like Charlton Heston in the 1956 classic movie, staff-in-hand, leading God's people miraculously through the Red Sea out of Egyptian bondage. We rarely think of the forty years Moses spent in Midian before the Exodus. But that's the kind of season we need to consider, so let's slow down to peer into those liminal years. The term *liminal* comes from the Latin root meaning threshold and conveys a transition between two boundaries. So, liminal years are transitions: the kind of season you likely find yourself in now.

The Bible doesn't fill in the details of Moses's middle years in Midian, but we can imagine that they were marked by the normal monotony of shepherding and starting a family. It used to bother me that we weren't privy to the daily details of those middle years (or what Jesus' life was like from ages three to thirty, but I digress), but sometimes God's word speaks volumes in silence. God does some of his very best work as we faithfully follow him in the ordinary rounds of the day: buying groceries, working to provide for families, or building relationships with neighbors. God used those ordinary years to prepare the heart of Moses, rounding out his rough edges, refining his character, and instilling in him the curiosity that compelled him to turn aside to meet God in the strangely burning bush (Exodus 3:1-6; Acts 7:30-34). Before Moses could shepherd God's people, he needed to shepherd sheep in Midian. The middle years aren't a waste of time; they are the fields of God's preparatory grace for the good works that still lie before us.

Number Your Days

Now that we know our guide better, we are ready to unpack the gifts of wisdom Moses offers us in Psalm 90. Moses' prayer, "So teach us to number our days that we might get a heart of wisdom," might sound strange to modern ears, but we need the advice more than we realize (v 12). The aged Moses identifies that our lifespans are short when set against eternity.

Get ready to walk into ancient wisdom—no step tracking necessary. Before we jump in, pause to read through Psalm 90 in its entirety.

So, like Moses, we can learn to number our days by finding our sense of permanence in God amid changing seasons and within changing bodies. We number our days by trusting in his salvation rather than our own paltry plans for self-improvement. We number our days by keeping an eye on eternity and satisfying ourselves with God's presence. Numbered steps help us meet our physical goals, but numbered days train us to hit the target of a life faithfully lived with and for God.

Find Permanence in God

If we have centered our lives on upward mobility at work, we may suddenly find ourselves hitting an invisible ceiling as we age. If we have been (even inadvertently) building our lives around our children, we suddenly find them needing us less and less. If we have been finding security in our savings account, our confidence falls with our revenue. The middle years expose us and leave us vulnerable, but Moses begins

Psalm 90 by anchoring us into a permanence that no hormonal changes or relational shifts can shake: “Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. Before the mountains were brought forth, or ever you had formed the earth and the world, from everlasting to everlasting you are God” (v 1-2). Despite our frailty and weakness, our God remains strong and unshaken, sturdier than even the mountains he made or our legs after months of walking 10,000 steps a day.

Trust in God’s Salvation

As our emotions twist and turn, perimenopause makes us more aware of our need for a Savior. Unlike modern-day influencers prone to flatter us and proudly telling us, “You are enough,” Moses shoots us straight. He doesn’t mince words about the consequences of our sin when he writes, “For we are brought to an end by your anger; by your wrath we are dismayed. You have set our iniquities before you, our secret sins in the light of your presence” (v 7-8).

As one who wandered with God’s complaining people through the wilderness for forty years, Moses had a front-row seat to see the devastating effects of sin, both his own and those of his people. In fact, Moses wrote this psalm before dying on Mount Nebo while facing the consequence of his sin—he would not enter the promised land of Canaan (Deuteronomy 34:4-5). But we have a better Moses: Jesus, who perfectly led his people out of their slavery to sin and into the freedom of a relationship with God. Christ drank to the dregs

the cup of the wrath of God so that those who trust in him only know God's favor (Psalm 75:8; Isaiah 51:22; Mark 14:36).

As our days on earth stack up, so do our sins. In the middle years, we see even more clearly the muddle we keep making for ourselves in our sin and self-reliance. We feel the effects of long-ingrained sin patterns and process the generational sins we have inherited and may be passing along to others. The increasing awareness of our sins and the sins of those around us ought to lead us to a deepening dependence upon and appreciation of our Savior. Our days aren't spent under the wrath of God; they are lived under his favor!

Live with Eternal Perspective

Walking across the stage after receiving my college diploma, I remember feeling like my life was an open field of possibilities. I thought I had all the time in the world. But as I've entered the perimenopausal years, I'm constantly reminded that my days are numbered.

For all our days pass away under your wrath;
we bring our years to an end like a sigh. The
years of our life are seventy, or even by reason
of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and
trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away.

(Psalm 90:9-10)

Scarcity creates value. Diamonds are precious and valuable because they are rare; the same is true regarding the remaining days of our lives. Rather than

driving us to depression, the fleeting nature of our days can teach us to live prioritized lives. We cannot do everything, and we do not know everything. Thus, we find ourselves humbly begging God for the wisdom that James assures the church God loves to give generously (James 1:5).

While you don't know the exact number of days allotted to you, you serve a God who does. The God who numbers and names the stars also numbers the hairs on your head and names you his own (Psalm 147:4; Matthew 10:30). God is transcendent, meaning there is no one like him; yet, incredibly, God is also immanent, meaning he is near to you through his Spirit. You don't know the future, but you know the God who does—and he cares deeply for his children.

Be Satisfied by God

If you had told me in college how many times per day I'd hear (or think) the word “protein” as an adult, I'd have laughed in your face. Even if I were to eat bacon-wrapped steaks for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, I still don't think I would hit my protein count.

Most conversations about perimenopause revolve around satisfying our body's increasing needs as we age. Taking excellent care of our bodies as we age honors God, but as you eat your protein bars, don't neglect your spiritual nourishment. Moses prayed, “Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love, that we may rejoice and be glad all our days” (Psalm 90:14). So, just as you feed your body with clean food, nourish your soul with

God's living word (Deuteronomy 8:3; Luke 4:4). As the Proverbs capture so succinctly, "One who is full loathes honey, but to one who is hungry, everything bitter is sweet" (Proverbs 27:7). When our souls are happy in the Lord, we won't be as tempted by the world's cotton-candy offerings.

Pray for Permanence

Moses begins Psalm 90 by remembering the permanence of God and ends it with a prayer for permanence: "Let the favor of the Lord our God be upon us, and establish the work of our hands upon us; yes, establish the work of our hands" (v 17). In our thirties and forties, our greatest efforts and accomplishments begin to feel insufficient. Our savings accounts seem too small to sustain us. Our energy and motivation dwindle even as we realize we are likely only half-way home. Such realities will lead us in one of two directions: despair or dependence. Moses models the latter, teaching us to cry out from our feebleness for a permanence and legacy that could only come from our merciful God. Solomon, in the rare psalm attributed to him, shared similar sentiments:

Unless the LORD builds the house, those who
build it labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches
over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain.
It is in vain that you rise up early and go late to
rest, eating the bread of anxious toil; for he gives
to his beloved sleep. (Psalm 127:1-2)

When both Solomon and Moses agree on something,

we ought to listen up! This wise pair realized that our strivings are in vain unless God establishes the works of our feeble, frail hands.

You can count reps and track your macros every day, but your health and hope, your longevity and legacy, come from God alone.

So, count all the numbers, but do so as one who worships the God who counts our days and the very hairs on our heads. Work hard at being healthy, but do so as one motivated to glorify the Lord. Apart from vital connection to him, all is in vain. We are debtors to his mercy for every breath that we breathe and every step that we take from our early years through the long wilderness of middle adulthood until our very last days.



Pause for a Moment

In this season of perimenopause, it is all too easy to get mired in the morass of internal processing. We must learn to pause for a moment and lift our gazes upward and outward. This space at the end of each chapter is intended to help you take a few intentional moments to look out and around you.

- Listen carefully to what the world is telling you about the perimenopausal years. What lies lurk beneath the surface of the shiny solutions it proffers? What biblical truths counteract those lies?
- Note the places you tend to run to when you lack wisdom (an influencer, a website, a book,

a friend). Write out the areas where you lack wisdom. Ask God to give the wisdom he gladly gives to his children (James 1:5).

- Invite an older or younger friend into your struggles regarding these middle years. Share honestly about your fears and concerns. Ask your friends to pray for God to give you a heart of wisdom (Psalm 90:12).
- Seek to speak with both authenticity and hope when peers talk about their latest perimenopausal struggles. Share honestly but also seek to lead them to the source of your hope (1 Peter 3:15).