

**Developing Biblical, Community-Based Resources for Military Wives**  
**Entering the Empty Nest and Midlife Transition Period**

Cynthia L. Stumme

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts

Major: Professional Writing

Liberty University

English 690: Thesis Defense

Dr. Sarah Rice

September 9, 2022

## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my patient and encouraging husband, Jack Stumme, without whom I would be neither an empty nester nor a military wife. Thank you, Jack, for believing in my abilities, for finding me multiple opportunities to talk about my favorite topic (midlife), and for happily spending so many evenings alone while I researched and wrote. You always make me feel like the smartest and most capable woman in the world, and if I have successfully reinvented myself at midlife, it will be because of the time you spent listening to my fears and dreams. I would like to thank Cliff and April, Jake and Meghan, Rachel, and Titus Stumme for being the cheer squad during this endeavor. My prayer is that this project will make me a better mom to you, my beloved adult children. I would also like to acknowledge Dr. Sarah Rice, thesis chair, and Dr. Tess Martinus, first reader, for their emphasis on excellence and their engagement with my writing skills throughout my studies. Your careful perusal of my writings and insightful suggestions have given me confidence to use what you have taught me to reach my fellow midlife military wives with a message of hope.

### **Abstract**

Military wives approaching the onset of middle age and the empty nest should have access to resources that help them navigate the challenges of midlife within the context of the military lifestyle. The US military provides resources supporting successful family relationships for almost every other demographic except for military wives at the midlife and empty nest stage of life. While midlife is understudied as a life stage, the existing research does identify specific objectives for personal development and growth during middle age which lead to thriving in that stage and in old age. Using these objectives as a guide, this project proposes the creation of a website hosting two professionally written courses for military wives in midlife which can be accessed and utilized from any military location. The proposed resources will provide military wives with opportunities to explore the developmental tasks of midlife from a biblically sound perspective and build community to support their own development during this stage.

*Keywords:* military wife, empty nest, midlife, middle age, developmental tasks

## Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i> .....	<i>1</i>
<b>Changes, Challenges, and Choices</b> .....	<b>2</b>
<b>Military Wives at the Midlife Transition</b> .....	<b>4</b>
<b>Personal Motivation</b> .....	<b>6</b>
<b>The Scope of this Project</b> .....	<b>8</b>
<b>Definitions</b> .....	<b>9</b>
<i>Chapter One: Is Midlife a Crisis?</i> .....	<i>12</i>
<b>Midlife is a Pivotal Point</b> .....	<b>14</b>
<b>The Midlife Experience for Women</b> .....	<b>16</b>
<b>Developmental Tasks of Midlife from a Psychological Perspective</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>Psychological Tasks as Resource Objectives</b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b>Unique Challenges for Women at Midlife</b> .....	<b>24</b>
<b>Theological Tasks of Midlife</b> .....	<b>31</b>
<i>Chapter Two: Military Wives at Midlife</i> .....	<i>36</i>
<b>The Challenge of Frequent Relocation for Military Wives</b> .....	<b>37</b>
<b>The Challenge of Family Separation</b> .....	<b>41</b>
<b>The Challenge of Career Development</b> .....	<b>42</b>
<b>The Demands of the Military on Military Wives</b> .....	<b>45</b>

<i>Chapter Three: Existing Resources for Military Wives at Midlife</i> .....	51
<b>Books on Midlife</b> .....	52
<b>Websites on Midlife</b> .....	60
<i>Chapter Four: Recommendation for Resources for Military Wives at Midlife</i> .....	67
<b>Objective #1: Spiritual Transformation</b> .....	69
<b>Objective #2: Identity Reformation</b> .....	71
<b>Objective #3: Mission Identification</b> .....	73
<b>Proposed Media for Resources for Military Wives at Midlife</b> .....	77
<b>Development Plan</b> .....	78
<b>Proposed Contents for BacktoYouandMe.com.</b> .....	79
<i>Chapter Five: The Future of Resources for Military Wives in Midlife</i> .....	85
<b>Future Development</b> .....	85
<b>Future Research and Resources</b> .....	87
<b>The Completion of the Beginning</b> .....	89
<i>Bibliography</i> .....	91
<i>Appendix I: Resource List for Reading on Midlife Issues</i> .....	101
<i>Appendix II: Outline of Chapters for “Walking with God Through Midlife”</i> .....	105

## Introduction

Clothes, crumbs, and toys on the floor; dishes in the sink and empty cereal boxes abandoned by perpetually hungry kids; hours in the car transporting children to soccer, dance, and music lessons; first loves, tears, and growing bodies to guide them through—for us mothers, the days are full, and years fly past in a blur of activity until, one day, the children grow up. And they leave the nest. The experience of an emptying nest is often the first visible signpost marking a critical point in the life of a woman—a developmental and transformational stage in life.

Welcome to the midlife transition.

Women starting the midlife transition need to adjust to new experiences of daily living, learn new ways of relating to family members, forge new identities as the role of active parenting fades, and prepare themselves for fruitful and relevant contribution to the world as they journey ahead into the process of aging. However, the midlife transition is even more complicated for one unique community of women: military wives. This group not only faces the normative challenges of the midlife transition, but does so while dealing with deployments, frequent moves, military cultural expectations, distance from extended family, and lack of career opportunity. In addition, many of the women in this demographic are married to senior military leaders and face additional pressures and expectations from the military community. Yet, there are very few, if any, formal supportive materials or systems for these women to help them navigate middle age.

What follows is my recommendation for the development of web-hosted, research-backed, professional quality literature written from a Christian worldview perspective to support successful navigation of the midlife transition for military wives like me who desire to embody the legacy of a well-lived life for their communities and families. This recommendation is based upon a thorough study of the challenges of the midlife transition period with an emphasis on the

specific barriers to making a successful midlife transition as a military wife. Also included in this recommendation is a review of currently available literature and online resources which offer support for military wives in the midlife years. The results of the research are used to formulate a detailed plan for creating a website featuring biblically sound resources which will support military wives as they navigate the emptying nest and the other developmental tasks of midlife, while encouraging and equipping them to build community and supportive friendships around the experiences of middle age. In addition, recommendations are made for future development of resources and evaluation of resource effectiveness and for further research on military wives and their empty nest and midlife transition experiences.

The obvious question is whether such resources are necessary when there is already so much Christian literature created for women—a fair observation. But it is just as fair to ask if all stages of adult life are comparable. After reaching adulthood, do we as women simply stride smoothly to the end of life, or are there transitional points within adulthood accompanied by specific developmental tasks and challenges, as well as biological realities that must be navigated in order for us to fully thrive when we reach old age? One look at the long list of biblically-based resources for marriage and mothering demonstrates that there are at least two transition points—getting married and having children—that Christian writers believe should be supported and shaped by excellent teaching and supportive community. Like becoming an adult, a wife, or a mother, becoming middle-aged and an empty nester has its own physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual changes, challenges, and choices which deserve the attention of Christian teachers and authors. This project is a response to that need.

### **Changes, Challenges, and Choices**

In the midlife years we experience the natural changes that come with the passage of time

and the aging of our bodies. Our children grow up and out of the home. Our bodies grow older and start the process of menopause. Our parents begin to grow frail or even pass away. Our spouses start to show their age as well, and may experience andropause (Vermeulen, 2000). We may become mothers-in-law or even grandmothers. All of these—and more—are natural changes that begin to occur when we reach midlife.

And then there are the challenges, which seem to multiply more rapidly at the midlife point and come at us from all directions. We grapple with our children's crises, our parents' crises, and our own crises. Children boomerang back home, or—worse—fail to thrive in the adult world. We may find ourselves raising our grandchildren. Elderly parents may need intensive caregiving, and we may have to fight our own chronic or life-threatening disease. Gray divorce—the growing phenomenon of established marriages breaking down in midlife—or widowhood may knock on the door. We may find ourselves replaced in the workplace by a younger, cheaper, and more tech-savvy person, or we may have to decide whether or not to accept a career advancement that means more work and responsibility at a time when we are beginning to think of slowing down. We begin to lose friends and family members of our own age. The challenges of midlife just keep piling up.

And this is where midlife women have some choices to make which will largely determine their trajectories into old age. The first and most important choice to grapple with is how we will reconcile our unfulfilled dreams, unmet goals, and past failures with the reality of a diminishing future and a lengthening past. As one older friend said to me, “There is a lot more road to see in the rearview mirror than there is through the windshield.” What do we do with the shrinking road before us? Do we try to fulfill every dream, meet every goal, make up for every failing? Or do we work to let go of the past and redefine our purpose for the future? Christian

author Paul Tripp (2004) suggests that all people and especially followers of Christ must work through this question at the midlife point in order to navigate aging while allowing God to complete His work of maturation and refinement. Failing to grapple at midlife with the collision of our desires, our failures, and our finite timeline will lead to stunted spiritual growth and personal ineffectiveness.

The other choices of midlife flow out of how we answer the first question and help us to identify how we will spend the time we have. Some choices affect our future health: How will I prepare for old age physically? What changes will I make to my health habits? Others affect our relationships: How will I maintain or rehabilitate the relationships that are most important to me? How can I pursue a closer relationship with my spouse? Still others will determine our purpose and the legacy we leave behind: What is God calling me to do with this new season of life? How will I spend my time and my money? How do I expect to find fulfillment in life? The answers to these questions, whether made through a conscious process or by a failure to contemplate them at all, will shape the second half of life for each individual entering the midlife phase.

### **Military Wives at the Midlife Transition**

Successful navigation of the changes, challenges, and choices of midlife is more complicated for one particular group of people because of their unique lifestyle: military wives. While the results of this study—in the form of a plan for a website hosting community-enhancing, biblically sound literature for military wives in the midlife transition—may be applicable and helpful to a larger audience of empty nest and pre-empty nest men and women—including male military spouses—this project will focus directly on active duty military wives for several reasons.

First, women make up the vast majority of military spouses. Almost 91% of the military

spouse demographic—542,147 spouses—are women; men make up only 9.3% (Department of Defense, 2020). Secondly, male spouses are less likely to engage the formal and informal social support structures found in the military community such as spouses' clubs, military chapel religious education programs (many of which are targeted overtly at the female spouse demographic), and informal social gatherings for spouses. Male spouses are often reluctant to challenge the long-standing tradition of military spouse clubs and volunteer organizations being run and populated by females and venture out to join these groups. Even if they do, male spouses often find themselves to be the only male participants, especially on smaller military installations. Thirdly, the intimate nature of the female experience of empty nesting and physical aging and the higher incidence rate of empty nest struggles for females (Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009, p. 1658) suggests that female-centric resources will be more effective at addressing the empty nest and midlife transition within the military community.

Another consideration for the development of resources specifically designed for military wives in the empty nest and midlife transition is the lack of available programming and training literature offered by the military for that specific audience. The military has developed and published a wealth of training materials and resources for dating, marriage, and parenting younger children, and for weighty personal issues such as depression and suicide. There are transition programs for active duty service members leaving the military, and special events and support groups for single soldiers. But there are no books for military wives in midlife, and no support groups, training classes, or articles written for military spouses in the midlife transition period.

Military-focused media outlets such as [military.com](http://military.com) and [militaryspouse.com](http://militaryspouse.com) have a few articles about midlife issues such as retirement and empty-nesting, but none specifically written

for military wives. No discoverable military spouse blogs or podcasts currently concentrate on the empty nest or other midlife issues, either. In addition, the articles, blog posts, and podcast episodes that do exist are not generally focused on helping people thrive in midlife and beyond through Christian formation and community support, but tend to focus on health, wellness, and lifestyle. Subsequently, military wives must look for resources created for a more general audience. Those resources will be evaluated in this study for the ways in which they can support military wives during the empty nest and midlife transition and for the areas which they do not address that are critical for military wives.

### **Personal Motivation**

My own experience as a middle-aged military wife and empty nester informs both my desire to research this problem and my belief that the development of resources for this audience is a worthwhile endeavor. My husband and I have served the U.S. Army active duty community since June of 1996, he as a chaplain and I as a supportive spouse and perennial Army community volunteer. In the spring of 2019, we farewelled the last of our four children to leave the nest, and then we packed our own belongings and moved to a new post in Germany.

Like any empty nester, I felt the need to process the experience with others, and I began asking women in my community about their experiences and expectations. I was surprised by the descriptions of their own struggles and fears, and I found that the vast majority expressed a desire for some type of support or resource that could help them navigate the empty nest transition and the middle years of life. Many of us had left young adult children behind during a military move, and some of us—including me—had children serving in the military on the other side of the world, making regular contact a challenge due to distance and time zone differences. Most of us also live far from our aging parents, and we find it difficult to provide them assistance

and ensure that their living conditions are safe and appropriate for them. These military lifestyle realities add to the challenges of maintaining post-empty nest family ties and relationships, the number one concern I heard from empty nest and pre-empty nest military wives I encountered.

Thus, my primary reason for exploring developing biblically sound, community-enhancing resources for military wives is because my demographic needs them. However, more important than just helping my fellow military wives navigate the empty nest transition is the opportunity to help them develop a stronger relationship with Christ through an exploration of the midlife developmental period through a biblical and Christian lens. This outcome strengthens women individually and benefits the military community as a whole because women with a strong spiritual, Christian identity can better build and serve their communities, inspire resilience, and draw other women into a deeper relationship with God—an outcome I desire for myself as much as for the target audience.

My second reason for developing these resources is that they can effectively reach an even more niche audience with even less support available to them within the military community: wives of senior military leaders. These are women who are set apart from the rest of the women in their communities by the rank and responsibility of their husbands. Along with the isolation of their position comes incredible pressure to selflessly serve the needs of the military while simultaneously appearing perfectly polished and emotionally calm (Stuttaford, 2020).

In 2018, I had the opportunity to lead a Bible study for a group of senior leader wives using the book *The Second Half of Marriage* by Dave and Claudia Arp (1996), founders of Marriage Alive International and popular marriage and family Christian speakers. The Arps' book is intended as a guide for strengthening empty nest marriages for a great second half of life together and is written from a Christian perspective. More women attended when that topic was

introduced than attended the Bible study either before or after, and many women expressed how much they needed to learn and talk about the topics of midlife marriage and parenting covered in that book.

*The Second Half of Marriage* is not a rigorous Bible study and is not designed to present the reader with a comprehensive study of all the topics surrounding the empty nest and midlife transition. However, what *The Second Half of Marriage* study group did demonstrate was that connections with and between senior spouses can be effectively made using the topic of midlife as a foundation for a weekly Bible study. People who have the opportunity to connect with and minister to senior leader wives will be able to use the proposed resources outlined in this project within their community to give senior leader wives a forum to explore their own spiritual and psychological needs at midlife, enhance their experience of the midlife transition, and, perhaps, come to know Christ in a new and deeper way.

My final reason for presenting this study is that investigating the unique journey of military wives at the midlife transition benefits the academic community. Little research exists on military wives at the empty nest stage of life, and this research can add to the knowledge base by providing information about the military wife experience. In addition, this project will discover principles for writing and creating spiritual online resources for the midlife military wife audience which can accurately speak to the needs and desires of that community. These results can be used to create resources to support and educate military wives in multiple areas such as leadership, wellness, and resilience. This will benefit the military community as a whole and lead to improved resilience and access to community support for senior military wives.

### **The Scope of this Project**

The following chapters will demonstrate that the unique needs and lifestyles of active

duty military wives entering the empty nest and midlife transition can be addressed, and that personal flourishing for these women can be supported by the development of professional and publishable biblically sound online resources. Chapter two will provide a thorough review of available literature on the empty nest and midlife transition period of life with a view to healthy adjustment and development for the whole person physically, mentally, emotionally, relationally, and spiritually. Based on the literature review, I will recommend a set of specific developmental goals that will be used to define the content of the proposed resources. Chapter three will narrow down the focus on the target audience by analyzing the unique needs and experiences of the military wife at the midlife and empty nest transition point and the specific challenges of the military lifestyle which will need to be supported by the proposed resources. Chapter four will provide an analysis of available literature and community support opportunities for military women entering the midlife and empty nest transition period and present an evaluation of whether these resources are enough to meet the unique needs of the audience. Chapter five will put all the components together into a comprehensive recommendation for creating biblically-sound, community-enhancing resources for the target audience, and chapter six will conclude with recommendations for further research on the target audience and future development and maintenance of the resources.

### **Definitions**

For the purposes of clarity, the following terms and their definitions are offered here and will be used throughout this study.

1. Empty nest - a household made up of middle-aged adults whose children no longer live at home (Harkness, 2008). This is not a universal experience as some cultures maintain multigenerational households, and cultural and environmental factors can significantly

delay the age at which children leave their family of origin to establish their own households (Harkness, 2008).

2. Empty nest syndrome (ENS) - a clinical diagnosis identified in the 1970s and usually assigned to mothers who experienced depressive symptoms when their children left the home (Harkness, 2008). No longer considered a clinical diagnosis by today's mental health practitioners, the term may be used popularly to refer to the experience of struggle during the transition period before, during, and after children leave the family home, (Mayo, Tips for Coping, 2020).
3. Midlife transition period - the span of years between the ages of 45 and 60 during which women must adjust to various psychological, social, and physical changes (Thomas, Mitchell & Woods, 2018). This transitional time is characterized by its own set of developmental tasks, which, if successfully navigated, will make the next stage of life (old age) more satisfying (Valliant, 2002, p. 46).
4. Sandwich generation - a term describing the experiences of the middle-aged generation positioned between their aging parents and dependent or young adult children and grandchildren and the inherent stress brought to bear on them because of the demands placed upon them by both the younger and older generations (Miller, 1981).
5. Midlife crisis - a term popularized in the 1970s and used to describe out-of-character behavior, personality, and lifestyle changes which some middle-aged adults make when faced with the reality of aging (Vaillant, 2002, p. 282). There is no current scientific data that demonstrates that midlife crisis is specifically attached to the midlife period, as similar crises can and do occur at all ages (Freund & Ritter, 2009).
6. Developmental task - a unique social, physical, mental, or psychological skill or

adjustment that is required of an individual at a certain stage of development, and without which further personal growth and maturity are hindered (APA, 2022).

7. Senior spouse - a term used in military circles to identify the spouses of senior military leaders such as unit commanders and command sergeants major and flag officers (generals and admirals). Within the military culture, senior spouses experience additional pressures, stressors and expectations to contribute to the military's mission through volunteerism, philanthropy, hospitality, and activism (McGowan, 2008).

## Chapter One: Is Midlife a Crisis?

When I was twenty-one and working in the front office of a small manufacturing plant in the Midwest, the general manager, a man in his late 40s, began behaving erratically. He broke his hand punching a wall, separated from his wife, bought a new red corvette, and started a torrid affair with one of the female employees from his own manufacturing line. Shortly thereafter, he was fired. My fellow front office employees and I—all of us in our 20s and 30s—watched this implosion with wide-eyed wonder and chalked it up to a midlife crisis.

Were we right? Should we all be anticipating a midlife crisis when we reach the age of forty? Not exactly. Recent studies indicate that only 10% of Americans will experience a midlife crisis (cited in Wethington, 2000), but no one has informed the popular culture of this important fact. Midlife and its accompanying challenges have been historically under-studied by sociologists and psychologists in favor of infancy, childhood, and old age (Lachman, 2015), so American cultural expectations have filled the gap in the information. We overwhelmingly believe the midlife crisis narrative (Wethington, 2000). This crisis looms over us as we approach the midlife years of forty to sixty (Lachman et al., 2015), giving us either a false sense of fear or a plausible excuse for poor life decisions (Lachman, 2015). In reality, though the empty nest transition and the middle years of life do present us with a set of challenges unique to that time period, it is perfectly normal and completely possible for us to navigate the midlife years successfully and purposefully. A midlife crisis is not required.

Another pseudo-diagnosis is common in American culture for those approaching middle age. In my conversations with military wives, I have found that many experience children leaving the family home as the first indicator that they are getting older and are approaching a significant life change. In fact, the initial concern about midlife that many of my fellow military

wives express is figuring out how to navigate living without their children being co-located, something they often refer to as “empty nest syndrome.”

In actuality, the idea of a mental health syndrome associated with children leaving home and establishing their own residence is another misinformed cultural stereotype (Clay, 2003). “Empty nest syndrome” is a term coined by author Dorothy Canfield in 1914 which caught the public imagination in the 1970s when it became a clinical diagnosis typically assigned to mothers who experienced depressive symptoms when their children left the family home (Harkness, 2008). However, current scholarship has shown that very few parents report (after the fact) that they have suffered a case of empty nest syndrome (Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009). In recent years, “Empty Nest Syndrome” has been removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (Idumonyi, 2019), and the transition to the empty nest is now viewed by mental health professionals as just one of the many midlife challenges which are part of the pivotal midlife developmental stage, and which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Rather than thinking about midlife as a crisis in the offing or the onset of empty nest syndrome, it is much better to anticipate midlife as a developmental stage. Babies and children go through developmental stages with specific tasks requiring mastery before new tasks and skills can be mastered, and so do adults. Many of us understand the concepts of childhood and adolescent development from the experiences we have had raising our own children or interacting with children in our communities, though most likely we haven’t thought of developmental stages in association with middle-aged people. But middle-aged people have a need for continued growth and development just as much as children and young adults do!

The goal of this project is to help military wives entering the empty nest transition and midlife period to have a clear and accurate understanding of the spiritual, physical,

psychological, and social processes that accompany the midlife stage, and to equip this audience with the necessary spiritual focus, life skills, and mindset to successfully complete the developmental tasks of midlife and mitigate any crises. Women who are able to complete these developmental tasks appropriately will experience benefits not only during the midlife years but also into old age; the choices and experiences of midlife have far-reaching impacts on each of us as we become elderly (Lachman, 2015). To that end, a thorough review of the available literature on the empty nest and midlife transition for women in general is presented as a guide for development of resources for military wives in that life stage.

In the following literature review, we will explore the unique time period of midlife along with its accompanying stressors and their impact on healthy aging and the midlife transition in the lives of women. In addition, we will discuss Erik Erikson's stages of adult development and the social and familial challenges that confront most of us in middle age and explore what it means to complete those tasks successfully. Then, we will turn our attention to the theological tasks of midlife as posited by several Christian authors and clearly define what healthy spiritual development looks like at middle age. As we discuss the unique features of the empty nest and midlife transition, I will identify the key developmental tasks that must be supported by biblically sound, community-enhancing online resources for military wives at the midlife transition for well-being at midlife and beyond.

### **Midlife is a Pivotal Point**

Midlife researcher Margie Lachman considers the empty nest and midlife period to be pivotal in the life course of an adult and has been a strong advocate for study of this developmental stage (2004) in order to address the misconceptions and stereotypes that accompany popular thought on middle age (2015). If we simply accept the stereotypes of midlife

as fact—such as empty nest syndrome and midlife crises—they may function as excuses for poor decision-making (2015) and apathy toward the future.

An accurate view of the midlife and empty nest transition period, however, gives each person an opportunity to achieve the development that this stage demands and arrive in old age with better health, resilience, and quality of life (Infurna, et al., 2021). While the facts of midlife are still being uncovered, researchers have already discovered that this developmental stage has serious implications not just for the individuals going through the midlife transition but also for those who need their support and contribution, such as family members, co-workers, and community members (Lachman, Teshale, & Agrigoroaei, 2015).

Lachman et al. (2015) describes the midlife period as a pivotal crossroads where we must find our balance while experiencing simultaneous growth and decline. Some of our capabilities are increasing while others are decreasing. Our sense of control over ourselves and our lives is challenged at this critical point. Lachman et al. (2015) found that people in middle age continue to gain control through lived experiences and accumulated knowledge and wisdom, but simultaneously lose control due to decreases in cognitive and physical functioning and productivity as the result of aging. Unexpected losses such as personal health challenges and the death of loved ones can create even more imbalance (Lachman, et al., 2015). In order to maintain balance, we must learn to identify and offset losses in capability and quality of life with our personal resources of experience, wisdom, and resilience (Lachman et al., 2015).

In light of the midlife contrast between growth and decline, research-backed and biblically sound resources for military wives at this life stage will need to support the development of balance between our personal assets and deficits and help to reinforce a sense of personal agency. Personal agency, or the belief that our choices have a direct effect on outcomes,

is integral to successful aging (Kahana et al., 2012). Therefore, the proposed resources must help military wives develop a mindset of agency and empowerment toward the challenges of midlife.

Midlife also exists at the crossroads of our past and our future. It is the point at which we consider how our adolescent and young adult goals have fared and evaluate the possibility of achieving them in light of our shrinking time horizons (Freund & Ritter, 2009). In many cases we have to discard our old goals and develop new ones that account for the realities of time and capability in our futures. The existential crisis caused by discarding old goals and creating new, more reasonable goals can be very stressful (Freund & Ritter, 2009), but developing a meaningful sense of life purpose is ultimately rewarding in the later years (Purpose in life, 2021).

Helping women develop the ability to let go of the past and embrace a different or uncertain future is another of the objectives for the proposed resources for military wives in midlife. Especially for military wives, as will be explained in the third chapter, life rarely turns out as expected. There are many unknowns in military life, ranging from surprise moves to dangerous deployments to unanticipated career paths. The skill of releasing the past and accepting an unforeseen future with faith in a sovereign God is essential to thriving as a military wife.

### **The Midlife Experience for Women**

The image of the empty nest and midlife transition as a pivotal crossroads describes the experiences of both men and women in middle age. But it will be helpful here to examine the unique experiences of women entering midlife, especially in light of the changing roles and accompanying societal pressures women are currently experiencing (McFadden & Rawson Swan, 2012). While chronological age still determines that midlife occurs between forty and sixty years of age, women are now experiencing life events at midlife which have traditionally

occurred at younger ages for women: birthing a first child, starting a college education, and getting married for the first time, to name a few. Women can no longer count on their midlife experience to mirror that of preceding generations (Degges-White & Myers, 2006). We are charting new territory for ourselves.

As part of a longitudinal study of women's health, Thomas et al. (2018) identified a key encircling theme of women's middle age experience: "Searching for balance in the midst of multiple co-occurring stressors while coping with losses and transitions, for some in a context of limited resources" (p. 4). This search for balance was carried out while the women were navigating changing relationships with family members, improving work-life balance, reinventing and discovering their middle-aged selves, and (in some cases) attempting to improve their access to financial resources (Thomas et al., 2018). Two important concepts emerge from this study that are significant for the development of resources for military wives entering the empty nest and midlife transition stage: the experience of "multiple co-occurring stressors" at midlife and the need for rediscovery of identity and personal meaning.

Midlife is full of simultaneous stressful events. Many of the challenging events identified as stressors in midlife occur during many other stages of life (losses, career pressure, financial stress, family changes, etc.), but the difference is the intensity and sheer volume of stresses in the life of a middle-aged woman who is concurrently beginning to feel the effects of aging on her physical and mental capabilities (Infurna et al., 2021).

The physical and mental effects of aging are not minor multipliers in the stressor equation. Menopause alone is related to myriad physical and mental health changes: depression and anxiety increase while cognitive performance declines, sleep becomes more difficult, lean mass decreases, fat increases, and metabolic syndrome and cardiovascular disease begin to affect

overall health, just to name a few (Khoudary et al., 2019). In terms of mental health, the multiple stressors and losses of midlife are accumulative, and the combined pressure of these events can trigger depression, anxiety, or other mental disorders in women at midlife (American Psychological Association, n.d.), leading to significant struggles. Curtin et al. found that suicide rates for women in midlife increased 60% between 2000 and 2016 (in Degges-White & Kopic 2020). And the damage is not just psychological: The multiplicity of challenges for women in midlife results in increased allostatic load (Thomas et al., 2018), and women may experience gradually accumulated physical damage due to the demands of a life lived under prolonged stress during midlife.

The second theme relevant to this project which emerges from the research on midlife women is the need for the rediscovery of personal meaning and identity during the pivotal midlife period. Thomas et al. (2018) found that women at midlife felt the need to make meaning out of the various aspects of their lives which were in flux due to the challenges of midlife, to include health, self-esteem, purpose in life, education, and changes in their personal lives and relationships. Degges-White and Myers (2006) noted that women in midlife often reported an increase in introspection, and Freund and Ritter (2009) describe midlife as a period where our progress on our goals must be evaluated.

Bob Buford (2015), founder of the Halftime Institute, describes this process of evaluation as a “move from success to significance” (p. 83). He posits that we spend the first half of our lives looking for security—a steady paycheck, a home, a stable family—but then at midlife, or “halftime” as he calls it, we begin to want more out of life than the accolades and accumulation that accompanies success. We want meaning. And we want it to permeate and pour out of every part of our lives and selves for the time we have left (p. 139).

These two themes of midlife—dealing effectively with multiple co-occurring stressors and redefining our unique purpose for the rest of life (Thomas et al., 2018)—represent the environment in which we must accomplish the developmental tasks of midlife. Dealing with multiple stressors while navigating the midlife transition is not an easy task as the research will demonstrate in the pages to follow. But the driving supposition behind this project is that we can overcome the stressors and find purpose and meaning at midlife. The proposed resources for military wives must address both the stressors and the search for meaning by giving military wives spiritual tools with which to mitigate and navigate stress and biblically sound support with which they can define their purpose through the calling of God on their lives. These tools will enable women to thrive during middle age and beyond. With appropriate resources and support, all of us will be able to someday view our midlife struggles as worthwhile.

Studies of midlife bear out that assertion. Middle age is survivable, and most people come out on the other side with an improved outlook and higher levels of satisfaction (Blanchflower & Oswald, 2008), especially if the key developmental tasks of midlife are accomplished. For instance, women who accomplished the task of developing generativity (which will be discussed later in this chapter) developed a strong and confident sense of agency post-midlife, along with a sense of satisfaction with their lives (Peterson & Duncan, 2007).

Midlife and its demands will pass, and easier days are ahead for those who rise to the challenges and work through the tasks with an eye to the future. Thus, in the paragraphs to come, the key developmental tasks of midlife are identified and defined so that the resources created for military wives entering the midlife and empty nest transition can specifically, wisely, and biblically support the accomplishment of these tasks, leading to improved well-being and flourishing for military wives.

## Developmental Tasks of Midlife from a Psychological Perspective

The key developmental tasks of midlife fall across the spectrum of our nature as humans: They are psychological, physical, social, and theological, and many fall into more than one realm. But all have a distinct impact on well-being in later life. In the following pages, we will categorize and define these tasks and identify the critical tasks that can be adequately supported by Biblically sound, community-enhancing resources for military wives experiencing the midlife and empty nest transition. To begin with, we will explore midlife development from a psychological perspective.

One of the first scientists to study late adult development was the Danish psychoanalyst Erik Erikson. His approach was unique in that he was one of the first researchers to see aging as development with an upward trajectory rather than as a period of decline toward disability and death (Vaillant, 2002). Erikson defined adult development as a series of four achievements—or failures—which built on one another throughout the adult lifetime: *Identity vs. Confusion* (age 12-18), *Intimacy vs. Isolation* (age 18-40), *Generativity vs. Stagnation* (age 40-65), and *Integrity vs. Despair* (age 65 to death) (Sutton, 2020). While some stages may typically occur at certain times in life as indicated by the general age ranges, Erikson's stages can also be accomplished later in life or even revisited during times of transition. Thus, for the purposes of this project, Erikson's *Identity*, *Intimacy*, and *Generativity* stages will be designated as key developmental tasks which need to be supported by resources created for military wives in the empty nest and midlife transition.

Before discussing these three psychological developmental tasks, however, there is one other task to be added to the list. This task has been identified by psychologist and researcher George Vaillant who has spent over thirty-five years focusing on the psychological processes of

aging as the director of Harvard's Study of Adult Development. He posits an additional task for the middle years that is relevant to this project: *Career Consolidation* (Vaillant, 2002, p. 43).

Thus, women in the midlife transition have a total of four tasks to accomplish during middle age from the perspective of psychology, the first being *Identity*.

The developmental stage of *Identity* takes place during late adolescence as we begin to define our own unique identity, and if we are successful, we develop a strong sense of self: who we are and our guiding values and goals (Sutton, 2020). This sense of self carries us through our early adult years, but as noted above, the midlife transition usually requires another look at identity and self-discovery in light of how far we have come and how much time we have left (Thomas et al., 2018). Apter (1995) posited that the question of identity is the most difficult challenge for women, who may struggle to integrate their initial identity at adolescence with who they find themselves to be at midlife (as cited in Degges-White & Myers, 2006). Interestingly, this question of "Who am I?" flows over into the spiritual developmental tasks of midlife as well, especially for Christian women who desire to ground their sense of identity in Christ throughout their lives. Thus, the task of forming one's identity must be supported both from a psychological and spiritual perspective by resources for military wives at the midlife and empty nest transition period.

The second developmental task of adulthood is *Intimacy*, which Vaillant (2002) defines as the ability to build a long-lasting relationship with a life partner that is based on reciprocity rather than narcissism (p. 43). While accomplishment of this task typically occurs prior to midlife, the challenges and changes of midlife often require us to learn to connect in new ways. For instance, the emptying nest can reveal dormant conflicts in a marriage relationship (Grover & Dang, 2013) which must be addressed in order for a couple to enjoy intimacy throughout

midlife and old age. In addition, many women at midlife experience divorce and remarriage and even widowhood. Biblically based resources for middle aged military wives must address both the need for and the development of intimacy within a marriage relationship.

The third developmental task of adulthood that is revisited at midlife is one identified by Vaillant (2002) and added to Erikson's original list based on Vaillant's thirty-five years of research on aging: *Career Consolidation*. Vaillant defines this as “. . . expanding one's personal identity to assume a social identity within the world of work” (p. 45). The “world of work” for Vaillant is defined expansively as that which we do in the world, including major life roles such as mother or father, and—for the military wife—perennial volunteer. Establishing ourselves and our identity in the world in a way which satisfies and completes us along with accomplishing the tasks of *Identity* and *Intimacy*, are the prerequisites to the fourth and most satisfying developmental task of midlife: *Generativity*.

Erikson defined *Generativity* as caring for the next generation (Vaillant, 2002). Another way to define it would be the development and transmission of a legacy, or the building of something that will outlast one's own lifetime (Sutton, 2020). Author Michael Gurian (2013) in his book *The Wonder of Aging* describes generativity as “eldering”: “‘To elder’ is now a verb for us, an accumulation of character, actions of being, and spiritual quest that distinguishes us from younger people, especially if we actively connect with those younger people” (loc. 1292). Vaillant's (2002) definition of generativity includes community and relationship building where one relinquishes authority, and instead acts as an empathetic mentor or coach.

Those middle-aged adults who can make this significant switch in thought and behavior experience a deeper sense of meaning and personal flourishing. An and Cooney (2006) found that middle-aged parents who reported generativity had higher levels of well-being, regardless of

whether the generativity was focused on their own children or on society in general. Vaillant's (2002) research in the Harvard Study of Adult Development showed that those who mastered the task of generativity had a three times greater chance of joy in their seventies than those who did not. Generativity not only gives meaning and purpose in midlife but continues to significantly affect how we experience life in old age. Military wives will need to adopt and maintain a lifestyle of generativity as they journey through the midlife and empty nest transition period and into old age.

### **Psychological Tasks as Resource Objectives**

Using Erikson's and Vaillant's psychological tasks as a guide, we can now identify several key psychological objectives which will need to be addressed and supported by the proposed resources for military wives in middle age. First, the materials must help military wives understand their own identity, and, in many cases, help them redefine their sense of identity during the challenges and changes of midlife. The goal of supporting identity formation is to allow military wives to develop a sense of personal meaning that connects their past with their future and gives them a reason to keep working toward fulfillment of God's distinct purpose for them as individuals.

The second objective that can be gleaned from Erikson's and Vaillant's work is that the resources must support the sustainment and growth of the marriage relationships between the audience and their husbands. An emphasis on intimacy in marriage at midlife not only promotes thriving in middle age and beyond but also helps to build marriage relationships that reflect the love of Christ through commitment, sacrificial love, and joy.

The third objective the proposed resources must support is a sense of social purpose for each military wife evidenced by a confident knowledge of what God has called her to do in her

community. This is, of course, a highly individual objective—no two military wives will have the same calling. Therefore, the resources must help women unpack their own calling through exploration of their relationship with God, their selves, their skills, their community, and their experiences.

The final objective for the proposed resources based on Erikson's and Vaillant's work is that they must support the formation of a generative mindset. As discussed previously, a lifestyle of generativity is correlated with higher levels of life satisfaction (An & Cooney, 2006; Vaillant, 2002). But beyond the personal satisfaction and joy that comes with generative contributions to one's family and community, generativity reflects biblical principles of service and mentorship. We cannot fulfill God's purpose for our lives without being generative, nor can we leave a lasting legacy for our family and community without investing in them with our time and mature wisdom.

Biblically sound, community-enhancing resources for military wives navigating the empty nest and midlife transition must prioritize scaffolding the achievement of the four key psychological developmental tasks of midlife. These resources should present midlife as its own developmental stage of growth rather than a continuation of post-adolescent adulthood and should seek to apply biblical teaching to the specific tasks which women must achieve in order to thrive. A learning model of this nature both acknowledges the challenges that women face at midlife and assures them that they can build rewarding middle age lives on the principles of God's Word.

### **Unique Challenges for Women at Midlife**

In May of 2022, I had the opportunity to sit down with eight military wives in the midlife demographic and discuss the challenges of midlife. Their contributions were insightful. One said

that she struggled to relate to her husband now that the children were out of the house. Their pre-empty nest conversations were all about the kids. Now, without the daily responsibilities of child-raising, both of them found it hard to identify their commonalities. Another mentioned that she was finding it difficult to make friends in the empty nest stage as most of the socializing she was used to doing was centered around children's activities. She no longer had a group of soccer moms, swim moms, or dance moms to chat with regularly.

On the same topic, another wife added that most of the military community activities were geared toward families with younger children and that it seemed like there were few outlets for women in midlife. One wife shared concerns about her husband's health, and yet another had the same concerns about her parents. The challenges these women identified from their own lives are not outliers for middle-aged women. They are the pressures and the worries most of us face when entering the empty nest and midlife transition.

Midlife researchers have identified some unique challenges for women at midlife. These challenges reflect the changing family, community, and societal roles of middle-aged women as well as changes in physical health and function during the menopause transition. As we respond to these new challenges and roles, we are actively adjusting our outlook on life and our personal sense of balance and calibrating our personal relationships and physical selves in ways that better prepare us for old age (Lachman, et al., 2015). As we reach a level of mastery of these changes and challenges, we are better able to provide invaluable support and encouragement to those around us. For this project, we will focus on five specific midlife challenge that need to be supported by biblically sound, community-enhancing materials for military wives: adjusting to the empty nest, maintaining family bonds during changes in family makeup, navigating the aging and death of parents, meeting the physical challenges of menopause and aging, and maturing and

sustaining supportive friendships.

### ***Living in the Empty Nest***

The launching of children and the transition period surrounding the emptying nest was the impetus for this project. While my research has led me to believe that the fear of the emptying nest is just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to midlife challenges, it is nonetheless a significant event. The experience covers a range of emotions and concerns, including depression, feelings of loneliness and loss, excessive worry about the well-being of absent children, loss of a sense of personal identity, and marriage relationship struggles (Empty Nest Syndrome, 2019). These feelings are normal responses to a significant life change and not evidence of a mental disorder or syndrome. While it may take time and effort, the majority of parental couples do make the transition to the empty nest successfully (Mitchell & Lovegreen, 2009), but not without adapting to a new reality and finding ways to navigate new challenges.

Recent studies have suggested that there are some barriers to adaptation during the empty nest transition. One is the change in relationship dynamics between parents and children which occurs when children leave home. Mitchell and Lovegreen (2009) found that some parents feel their close relationship with their child is broken when the child leaves the family home, and they may struggle to find balance between their need for emotional closeness to their child and the child's growing sense of autonomy. Women in general seem to struggle more with adapting to the empty nest than fathers do (Mitchell, 2009), suggesting that mothers may be more at risk for struggles at the empty nest life stage. Raup and Myers (1989) found that women whose main role is motherhood can experience a greater loss of identity at the empty nest transition when they are no longer actively parenting their children.

A second barrier related to relationship dynamics is the change in the marriage

relationship due to the emptying nest. King and Theiss (2016) found that couples experienced an increase in stress during the empty nest transition as they began to focus more on their marriage relationship. Unhealthy communication techniques and conflict behaviors in the couples in the study caused higher levels of cortisol which King and Theiss theorized could eventually lead to physical symptoms and damage. The empty nest transition can also trigger dormant conflicts between spouses when marital issues are sidelined during child-rearing years (Grover & Dang, 2013).

A third barrier to empty nest adaptation which needs to be addressed by resources for military wives is the prevalence of “boomerang” children in American culture. As of August 2021—and after the COVID-19 pandemic surge of children moving back in with parents had receded—46.61% of US adults between the ages of 18 and 29 lived with one or both parents. This percentage is similar to that of the three years preceding the pandemic (Widra & Luduvic, 2021), although the percentage of children boomeranging back to their parents’ homes has been increasing consistently over the last 20 years (Tosi, 2020). Boomeranging elongates the emptying nest process, and Tosi (2020) found that levels of parental depression increased with the return of children to the family home. In addition, women over 55 whose children still lived at home reported lower levels of self-esteem and satisfaction with life (McFadden & Rawson Swan, 2012).

A key objective for resources for military wives in the empty nest and midlife transition must be supporting women as they experience changing parent-child relationships and as they seek to reimagine their marriages without children in the home. In addition, these resources must help with the reformation of personal identity for women who may be struggling with role loss. Biblical principles and community support can help military wives navigate the exit of children

from the family home and the accompanying shakeup of family relationships that comes with it.

### ***Maintaining Family Bonds in Changing Circumstances***

Midlife can bring with it significant changes in family structure (Lazarra, 2020). Children leave the nest, but also bring new members into the family—significant others, spouses, and grandchildren. Elderly parents of middle-aged women may need more care and move into the empty nest home, and they may die. Midlife women may find themselves raising their own grandchildren or providing substantial amounts of childcare for them. Sometimes, sadly, midlife parents experience estrangement from family members. They may experience divorce or death of a spouse, and their children may as well. Women in midlife are faced with the daunting task of maintaining relationships with family members even while the family dynamic changes dramatically (Thomas et al., 2018). As will be discussed in chapter two, these difficulties are only compounded by the military lifestyle.

The relationship dynamic is further complicated by the need of children to establish their own identity. Late-adolescent children leaving the nest are just beginning their journey toward differentiation from their parents and a unique identity of their own (Sutton, 2020). At the same time, midlife women are typically struggling to reconstruct their own identity and sense of personal meaning (Thomas et al., 2018). When both parents and children are potentially experiencing “identity crises” and are struggling to adjust to a changing family relationship, there is both a need for biblically sound resources focused on the empty nest transition and an opportunity for Christian community that reinforces or even introduces the principles of finding our identity in Christ and the Gospel.

Women in midlife are squarely in the “sandwich generation.” The current societal trends of later births, delayed launching of adult children, and increased longevity of parents

complicates the issue (Wiemers & Bianchi, 2015) as midlife women have a limited amount of time and energy for family care-giving which must be allotted across the generations. Miller (1981) identified the source of sandwich generation stress as the inequity in giving and receiving of emotional, physical, and material resources between the generations at a point in life where midlife women are anticipating some degree of relaxation and enjoyment. We are ready to enjoy ourselves and live the “good life,” but our children may not be completely mature, and our parents may be moving toward greater dependence on us (p. 419).

Compounding the issue, those whose parents did not meet their emotional needs in childhood tend to struggle even more with the burden of care for parents (Miller, 1981). The sandwich generation often ends up giving more than they receive back from their family relationships. This all adds up to stress for women as they attempt to establish a balance between their own marriage, their parents’ needs, relationships with children and their families, and appropriate self-care.

Midlife presents us with a pivotal season of responsibility as we are the bridge between the old and young generations—usually our children and our parents—who both need us in unique ways (Lachman et al., 2015). We find ourselves sandwiched between two generations with essential roles to play toward each one. But this also invites us into a unique season of leadership and fruitfulness in our family relationships. More than ever, we matter at midlife to our family members (Infurna et al., 2021). Support and wisdom for those seeking to strengthen their relationships with aging parents, children, children-in-law, and grandchildren will be an essential objective included in the creation of resources for military wives in the midlife and empty nest transition.

### *Preparing for Physical Challenges at Midlife and Beyond*

As if the previous challenges were not enough, midlife also brings with it the challenge of menopause and physical aging. Menopause on average arrives on the doorstep when we are in our 40s (Ceylon & Özerdoğan, 2015) and brings with it a lower perceived quality of life for the majority of women (Blumel et al., 2000). This may be because menopausal symptoms are not limited to the reproductive system: Menopause can cause hot flashes, night sweats, sleep disruptions, depression, anxiety, temporary drops in cognitive performance, urinary incontinence, and impaired sexual function (El Khoudary, 2019). At the same time as the onset of menopause, many women also experience the onset of chronic health conditions (Infurna, 2020) such as diabetes and arthritis. The good news is that perceived quality of life can be improved during midlife. Women who increased their physical activity and maintained a stable body weight increased their perceived quality of life in a study conducted by Moilanen et al. (2012). Even more fascinating, Pimenta et al. (2014) found that women with higher levels of regular spiritual practice experienced less severe menopausal symptoms.

Because physical challenges at menopause are not inevitable and can be addressed by proper self-care and spiritual practices, resources for military wives at the midlife transition must address the topic of physical health and well-being. As will be discussed in the next section, a proper theological perspective on our physical bodies is also a key component of our belief in God, and the way we treat our bodies should be the result of that belief system. One of the guiding principles behind my exploration of the topic of midlife is that the choices made in midlife directly determine our experiences of old age (Kahana et al., 2012). Nowhere is this more visibly evident than in the choices we make in regards our physical bodies. And the state of our health has a direct impact on our ability to complete the tasks and meet the challenges of midlife.

Therefore, understanding of the physical aspects of midlife must be a key objective of any resources developed for midlife military wives.

### ***Building Supportive Friendships***

Midlife offers us no shortage of challenges! One of the key resources for successfully navigating midlife is friendship. Vaillant's (2002) work on the Harvard Study of Adult Development showed that maintaining old friendships and making new ones was one of six characteristics of people who grow old gracefully (p. 310). Maintaining close personal friendships is essential to satisfaction in midlife for women (Degges-White & Kepic, 2020), and women in general experience higher levels of well-being from relationships with friends than from relatives (McFadden & Rawson Swan, 2012). Resources that enhance the experience of Christian community for military wives in the midlife transition period will provide opportunities to build supportive friendships with other women experiencing the same challenges, and ultimately improve their ability to sustain close friendships throughout midlife and beyond.

The literature on midlife discussed thus far in this chapter provides a broad analysis of the experiences of midlife and its accompanying developmental tasks and challenges. It is an overwhelming list: multiple stressors, questions of identity, intimacy, career consolidation, generativity, empty nest adjustment, maintaining family relationships through significant changes, physical transitions, and the need for supportive friendships. Where should we start? The premise of this project is that we start with God, and that we surrender the problems and challenges of midlife to the power of the Gospel. In order to do that, we must first study and then accomplish the spiritual developmental tasks of midlife.

### **Theological Tasks of Midlife**

To that end, a discussion of the current literature on biblical principles related to the

midlife period is in order. The goal of this exploration will not be limited to techniques for achieving well-being in midlife. Instead, it will take a holistic perspective that addresses thriving through the empty nest and midlife transition period and beyond by developing a clear understanding of who God is and who we are in relationship to Him and His word, as revealed to us in the scriptures.

If midlife is indeed the pivotal crossroads of growth and decline (Lachman et al., 2015) and a collision between the past and the future (Freund & Ritter, 2009), then midlife is also the perfect opportunity to consider the contrast—and possibly conflict—between our claimed Christian theological belief system and our faith and practice lived out in real, day-to-day life. Pastor and author Paul Tripp says that “Midlife exposes what a person has really been living for and where a person has tried to find meaning and purpose. It has the power to reveal the significant gap between a person’s confessional theology and their functional theology” (p. 51). At midlife, we must “mind the gap” between what we say—or even think—we believe and how we live out those beliefs in our day-to-day lives.

Thus, the first and most essential theological task of midlife to be supported in the proposed resources for military wives is the honest evaluation of what we truly believe and the submission of our beliefs to the authority of God’s truth as revealed in His Word (Tripp, p. 51). There is simply no way to completely accomplish the other theological tasks of midlife—nor the psychological and family/societal/community tasks—without a clear picture of who God is, who we are, and what God can and wants to do in us and through us. Our relationship with God is the foundation upon which all other tasks must rest so that we can accomplish them through God’s empowerment.

Second is the theological task of relinquishment of our own desires and disappointments.

Tripp (2011) and David and Claudia Arp (1996) identify dealing with unmet expectations and unfulfilled desires as a theological starting place for beginning to address the challenges of life in the middle years. Arp and Arp suggest that disappointments move to the forefront of our minds when children are no longer around to distract us. Ultimately, says Tripp, our problem is ourselves. We demand too much of a world scarred by sin, of ourselves as sinful beings, of our relationships, and of God. Author and spiritual director Alice Fryling (2021) in her recent book on aging suggests that the response to these disappointments is to “. . . lose ourselves, to die to ourselves, and to experience new life” (p. 67). In other words, we must give up our demands on God and on this world and instead accept where we are in holy submission to God’s sovereignty in our lives in order to live out our latter years with grace and joy. We must repent and make peace with the past as we trust God and move forward in faith.

If we can accomplish the task of relinquishment and repentance, we can move forward into the third theological task of midlife: seeking a renewed and recalibrated calling for the future. The ultimate goal of our efforts to recalibrate ourselves at the midlife point, according to Fryling (2021), is to experience fruitfulness (p. 9). In our younger years, we focus on output and productivity, we maintain busy schedules, and say “no” rarely. But with midlife comes the realization that we cannot keep up the pace forever. Fryling suggests that with God’s guidance we can better choose our points of effort for maximum impact on our families and communities.

Christian author, speaker, and missionary Elizabeth Elliot (1989) recommended Titus 2:3-4 as a starting point for women in deciding what our role should be from midlife and beyond: “Older women likewise are to be reverent in their behavior, not malicious gossips or enslaved to much wine, teaching what is good, so that they may encourage the young women to love their husbands, to love their children . . .” (NASB). This idea of the older generation serving and

strengthening the younger generation in faith and practice, then, will be a primary goal of biblical resources discussing the midlife and empty nest transition.

The final theological developmental task which will be supported by resources for military wives in the midlife transition will be the development of a theology of embodiment that can sustain women through the unique challenges of physical aging. We have the opportunity to choose how we respond to the indignities of growing old. Do we hang on desperately to our youthful physicality through surgeries, cosmetics, and extreme lifestyle choices? Or do we give up and surrender to the entropy of deterioration without a fight? A biblical theology of embodiment broadens our perspective and takes us past the pressing questions about our looks and our health to the heart of the issue: How do we glorify God with the bodies He has given us (Allberry, 2021, p. 103). Ultimately, a correct theology of the body will include an understanding of the needs, limitations, and care of the physical body alongside a commitment to offer up our bodies for God's use as an act of spiritual worship (Allberry, 2021; Romans 12:1).

Together these four theological tasks will form a guiding creed for military wives seeking biblically sound, research-informed teaching and community from the proposed resources for the midlife transition. Each of these theological tasks creates a spiritual foundation from which to launch into the psychological tasks of reforming identity, building intimacy, establishing our career (or purpose), and living generatively and the family, societal, and community tasks of launching children, maturing and sustaining relationships, and caring for aging parents. They are the starting points, the boundaries, and the endstates—the other tasks are the practical applications of our true theological foundations.

Midlife is much more than a continuation of life as usual. The recent emphasis on the importance of midlife research and support is encouraging (Lachman, 2015), and the changing

experiences of women in midlife are likely a driving factor for this emphasis. The current generation of women in middle age not only have to contend with the normative developmental tasks of midlife, but they also experience additional pressures related to emerging social trends such as later onset of parenting, the increase in midlife divorce, the increase in boomerang children, and increase in parents' longevity and their extended need for support (Infurna et al., 2020).

In the following chapter, we will explore how the military lifestyle compounds an already challenging transition at midlife. But the good news is that none of these challenges are insurmountable: Midlife is not an inevitable crisis, nor is the empty nest a syndrome. With appropriate support and a commitment to completing the developmental tasks of midlife, women can and will thrive at the midlife stage and beyond. Professional, biblically sound, community - enhancing resources for military wives in the midlife transition will ensure that military wives have access to the support and encouragement which will lead to flourishing in the second half of life.

## Chapter Two: Military Wives at Midlife

Monica stepped into the Monday morning prayer group I hosted in my military quarters in Germany, and hesitantly took a seat at my dining room table. I started the usual circuit around the table, asking each woman what was on her heart. When it was Monica's turn, her eyes filled with tears as she shared, "I just need to see God show up in my life." Her husband, a senior officer, had not received an expected promotion and was potentially facing the end of his military career, and her oldest child, a sophomore college student attending university an ocean away in the US, was grappling with a life-changing decision. Monica told us her life was veering off course into uncharted territory and she felt powerless. Monica is an active duty military spouse in her late 40s living in the crosshairs of the challenging midlife transition period.

According to the 2020 US military demographics report issued by the Department of Defense, the broad category of "active duty military spouse" covers a demographic of 597,736 men and women married to active duty US service members. Almost 91% of those spouses are female (p. 120). The audience for this project represents about 14% of all military spouses—those who are 41 years of age or older. In this age range, military wives are split evenly between officer and enlisted spouses (p. 121). This demographic information indicates that the intended audience for the proposed resources is quite limited in size to approximately 80,000 women. But the impact that these women have on the military culture is substantial. They are the wives of senior military leaders, they are leaders themselves, and they set the tone for the military's spouse and family culture. At the same time that they are leading other spouses, creating military community culture, and navigating the challenges of the military lifestyle, they must also tackle the challenges of midlife. However, there is very little research available on the experiences of these key women.

Military spouses, both male and female, have been the subject of multiple studies measuring mental and physical health, career progression (or lack thereof), resilience, and coping ability. However, less research has been conducted on the older population of military spouses facing the intersection of the empty nest, physical aging, and, in a majority of cases, additional pressures brought to bear by the active duty spouse's advancing or declining career expectations. Even less research has been focused specifically on military wives at the midlife transition. Thus, the following audience analysis will use existing research about military spouses in general and discuss the implications of that research for military wives entering middle age. A thorough examination of these topics is essential to the development of comprehensive and effective biblically sound and community-enhancing resources for military wives as they navigate midlife.

The preceding literature review introduced the themes of “multiple co-occurring stressors” and the need for rediscovery of self that overshadow much of midlife, and it discussed how high levels of sustained stress result in increased allostatic load (Thomas et al., 2018). While this is a challenge for all women at midlife, the unique demands of the military lifestyle often add to the load of stress on military wives entering the midlife transition period. In the following pages, we will consider five aspects of military lifestyle and culture which intensify the stresses of midlife for military wives: frequent relocations, family separations, career development challenges, and the often unreasonable demands the military makes on spouses (Sinclair et al., 2019; McGowan, 2008; Blue Star Families, 2021; Dimiceli et al., 2010; Stuttaford, 2020).

### **The Challenge of Frequent Relocation for Military Wives**

Every two to three years, the Army decides my husband needs a new challenge and issues permanent change of station (PCS) orders requiring us to pack up our belongings and move to a new Army post. We sort through our stuff to make sure our household goods stay within the

weight guidelines, then we monitor the shipping company employees as they pack our home into boxes and load it into trucks. After waving goodbye to our earthly goods, we make our way across the country or the ocean to our next Army home and wait for our shipment to arrive. In due time, the boxes flood our new dwelling, and within a few weeks we make the home functional and start figuring out what life will be like in this latest location. Relocation is a lifestyle reality for all military families: We move a lot.

Frequent PCS orders are one of the perks of military life—“join the Army, see the world!” as the saying goes—and most military wives have experienced a broad range of local cultures by the time they reach the midlife transition point. Military families in general move twice or even three times as often as civilian families (Dimicelli et al., 2010), so it is no surprise that relocation is one of the top five stressors for active duty military spouses according to the *2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey* (Blue Star Families, 2021). Those frequent PCS orders can compound the stress at midlife: They affect our sense of identity, our sense of control over our lives (Cole et al., 2021), and the strengths of our friendships.

### ***The Impact of Frequent Relocation on Identity***

Personal identity is a significant issue for military wives at midlife. One military wife of nearly 20 years expressed it this way to me: “Every time we move, I feel like I have to reinvent myself in order to fit into my new community and find my new role. At this point, I’ve reinvented myself so many times, I don’t even know what I actually like! I couldn’t tell you who I really am anymore” (Nicole, personal communication).

She is not alone. Amy Page (2018), a fellow military wife, wrote her doctoral dissertation on the coping strategies of 201 active duty or former active duty female spouses. In her study, she found that many of these wives reported a sense of loss of identity due to the transient nature

of military life. One of Page's (2018) respondents, a 42-year-old, shared, "I am an Army Wife not myself anymore. I follow the need[s] of my husband whatever they are" (p. 145). Another said, "Feeling disconnected and like life is not my own... like everything I want to do takes backseat to all the things he HAS to do" (p. 45).

In total, only 42% of Page's (2018) study sample reported having a settled sense of personal identity (p. 223). While Page theorizes that holding one's identity loosely may help in navigating all the sudden changes of military life (p. 218), the lack of firm identity still presents a challenge at the midlife transition, especially when a military wife feels a pull to re-explore the identity question and make meaning out of her experiences at the pivotal point of middle age (Thomas et al., 2018). This question of identity formation within a fluid lifestyle will need to be addressed by the proposed resources for military wives at midlife.

### ***The Impact of Frequent Relocation on the Sense of Control***

The second issue frequent relocation causes in the lives of military wives is a lack of a sense of control. In a recent study of military wives from the Army, Navy, Air Force, and Coast Guard, Cole et al. (2021) found that unpredictable moves made these women feel as though they had no control over their own lives—they were living at the mercy of the military. This lack of control was also identified by the study participants as a risk factor for military spouse suicide. One spouse shared, ". . . you're always worried about what's coming next and what you can plan for and what you can't plan for" (p. 208). This lack of control can extend beyond frequent relocation to all aspects of a midlife military wife's life: where we live, when we can take vacations, how far we are from family members and how often we can see them, where we worship and find fellowship and support with other Christian military wives, and even what we can do to further our education and develop our careers.

A low sense of control is negatively related to developing a sense of personal agency, an essential component of dealing successfully with stress (Sebastian, 2013). Yet midlife is exactly the life stage where stressors are often at their highest levels for all women (Thomas et al., 2018), and the military lifestyle adds additional stressors to military wives (Dimiceli et al, 2013). Military wives at middle age will need to regain a sense of control and personal agency in order to thrive; biblically sound resources for them must address this issue from both a theological and practical standpoint.

### ***The Impact of Frequent Relocation on Long-term Friendships***

Frequent relocations also take a toll on long-term friendships and the support those friendships provide when enduring the stresses of military life (Cole et al., 2021). Little time is available between moves to really build the kinds of lasting, supportive friendships which are essential for women to thrive (McGowan, 2008; Shaffer & Harrison, 2001), and there is never a guarantee that a woman will find a compatible friend at her new location (Mailey et al., 2018). Instead, military spouses report that they sometimes prefer to form surface relationships to mitigate personality, rank, and value differences and to prevent additional pain when saying goodbye when one of the friends moves (Mailey et al.) In the words of one of my midlife Army wife friends, what we are left with is “. . . many fragmented relationships but no deep ties from doing life together, having a ‘history,’ or working through tough issues and conflict” (Nicole, personal communication).

The resources proposed in this project must address the creation of supportive, Christ-centered community for women in the midlife stage of life, and ideally this community needs to be easy to access for women just moving to a new military post. There is simply no time to waste when the military requires us to move every two to three years. In addition, resources must

support the formation of long-term relationships that extend beyond a few years of living together in the same geographical location. Military wives need friendships that last for the duration of military life and beyond, especially because of the pressures inherent in another of the military lifestyle's unique stressors: living far from family members.

### **The Challenge of Family Separation**

Family separation is a way of life for most midlife military wives. According to the *2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey* (Blue Star Families), "time away from family" is the top military family concern (p. 2). For younger families, this often indicates the challenges of having the service member deployed or temporarily assigned to duty away from the family home. But for older military wives, this can also mean separation from young adult children and elderly parents.

Many older military families have children scattered around the U.S. and the world as a result of the transient lifestyle, the lack of rootedness to a geographical location often experienced by military children, and the impact of the generational nature of military service, demonstrated by the fact that 25% of military members grew up in military family units (Thompson, 2016). Indeed, two of my four children are currently serving on active duty status with the U.S. Army on the Atlantic Coast, and the other two children live in the Midwest and the Southwest. My one living parent is in still another state, while my husband's parents live in the Midwest near one of our children. My husband and I currently live in Germany. If we were to visit all of our family members in one trip, we would have to fly to five separate locations. How is it possible for military wives at midlife to create and maintain strong relationships with family when distance can separate them so profoundly?

The military lifestyle reality of family separation adds to the challenges of maintaining

post-empty nest family ties and relationships, and this issue is the number one concern I hear from the empty nest and pre-empty nest military wives I encounter. We worry about being able to reach our children in time if there is an emergency, we worry about the difficulty of being physically together as a family, and we worry about what our children are doing and the decisions they are making when we are so very far away. Resources for military wives at the empty nest and midlife transition must address the social needs of these women and also support their efforts to build healthy relationships with family members who live far away and provide comfort for them when the distance is overwhelming.

### **The Challenge of Career Development**

Frequent relocations and separation from family members often create an insurmountable obstacle to military wives who wish to create a career for themselves. Relocation prevents the military wife from gaining any traction in a career field between job changes. Family separation, whether through deployment of the service member or distance from extended family members who could provide support, means that the majority of house and family care falls on the military wife, leaving less time available to pursue a career. The *2021 Military Family Lifestyle Survey* (Blue Star Families, 2021) reported that spouse employment was the number one concern for active duty military families. Spouse unemployment rates are consistently four to six times higher than the US national average (p. 11), and wives of service members overall participate less in the labor force (72% participation) than does the general female population in the US.

Lack of employment among military wives has a surprising effect on military base culture. According to Navy wife and author Rachel Starnes: “A lot of military wives don’t work, and there is this subculture on the bases that, as many people comment, ‘feels very 1950s.’ When some people say it, it is meant to be nice; they like the traditional setup. But other times I’ve

heard it more like, ‘yeah... gosh... it feels like the ‘50s.’ I’m making dinner tonight. I take care of the house, the moves, the children—it’s all me. My husband always needs to be ready to step out at a moment’s notice, and he often does” (qtd. in Strauss, 2016). For women in the midst of motherhood, a career can seem like an impossible dream when they are struggling with frequent relocations and deployments.

But career difficulties continue to plague empty nester military wives, even if they do have the time available to go to work. Not only are many just beginning their career paths at a late stage in life, but some who have been able to pursue higher education and gain work experience struggle to find appropriate employment in their fields. Fully 63% of active duty military spouses in the labor force report at least one incident of underemployment (Blue Star, 2021, p. 66).

One midlife spouse I encountered shared her story about trying to get hired by the pharmacy attached to the military health clinic on the base where her husband was assigned. As a registered pharmacist with advanced pharmacy degrees, she was told she was overqualified for the available pharmacist position and would not be approved for employment. “However,” the hiring manager added helpfully, “we do have a volunteer pharmacist position in the clinic that you would qualify for perfectly!” Ultimately, the spouse accepted the volunteer position and worked in the pharmacy for over a year with no pay just to prevent a gap in employment on her resume (Carla, personal communication, 2022). This spouse is not alone in her frustration. Almost two-thirds of military spouses believe that the military has had a negative impact on their careers (Castaneda & Harrell, 2008, in Meadows et al, 2016).

Heba Abdelaal, the 2022 Armed Forces Insurance Air Force Spouse of the year, is a passionate advocate for military spouse employment. In her 2022 white paper for the National

Military Spouse Network, Abdelaal discusses the effectiveness of military spouse employment programs and reaches the conclusion that aside from anecdotal evidence, there is hardly any data on the programs' effectiveness. In addition, many of these programs are more focused on getting military spouses employed than helping military spouses develop solid careers. What can be said with certainty about the situation, however, is that the military spouse unemployment rate has not improved significantly in response to the multiple programs offered by numerous departments of government over the last decade. Military spouse careers remain a complex problem with no clear answers. Abdelaal's recommendations largely center around additional research and quantitative measurements of program effectiveness in order to determine why programs are not helping. It seems that the solutions to military spouse unemployment are largely undiscovered despite a decade of efforts to address the problem.

Yet, as discussed in the chapter two, the psychological developmental task of career consolidation is integral to thriving at midlife. A well-developed career can help the midlife military wife answer the key questions of identity and purpose as well. Vaillant (2002) identifies family roles and volunteer roles in one's community as possible sources of career consolidation, but the challenges of frequent relocation and separation from family members makes it difficult for military wives to consistently serve in a specific role which they choose for themselves. Instead, they must choose their role based on what is available at the time they arrive at a new military posting.

Resources for military wives dealing with the midlife questions of identity, purpose, and career must support them as they navigate the challenges of defining and refining their sense of career and role identity through ever-changing circumstances, even if that means that they must understand their role identity outside of a successful career experience. The struggle for career

development is a difficult reality for many military wives and must be addressed sensitively and wisely in the proposed resources.

### **The Demands of the Military on Military Wives**

Segal (1986) described the military as a “greedy institution” in the 1980s and the description still works. The military is tasked with protecting the nation and it does not have the flexibility to always prioritize the needs of military families. So, families must move, spend time apart, make personal sacrifices, and sacrifice for the needs of the mission. Soldiers and families both know that the mission comes first. What may be less well-known is that the mission often can’t succeed without the family members’ help. The military needs spouses to maintain a stable home environment for the families of service members. Just the title of a recent Department of Defense article claims that “Military Spouses Enable Mission by Maintaining the Homefront” (2021). According to Col. Deydre S. Teyhen, the commander of the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, the strength of military families has a direct impact on the readiness of the force. “A healthy family and a happy family create a more ready soldier who can focus on the mission,” was her assertion at a recent forum discussing the needs and the importance of strong Army families (Dock, 2018). This burden of maintaining family health and stability falls disproportionately on the military spouse, as does the burden of military community care.

### ***Additional Demands on Senior Military Wives***

No one is more aware of this fact than senior military wives, women who are typically middle-aged and whose husbands have reached mid- or senior-level leadership in either the enlisted or officer branches of the military. These women experience the pressures of additional demands from the military on their time and talents. Written materials for military wives at the middle and empty nest transition will need to acknowledge this extra burden of responsibility

and support these women as they either accept these additional tasks or, when needed, navigate the process of declining them while still maintaining healthy ties with their military community.

One of the unique burdens placed on many older military wives is the expectation of volunteerism. Stuttaford (2020) conducted research with a group of senior military officer wives to explore the hidden costs of the volunteer culture in the military. Stuttaford found that volunteerism—or “unpaid work”—for more senior military wives consists of public volunteer work in community programs, informal work in the form of “pastoral” care to others in the military community, domestic private informal work such as diplomacy and entertaining in the home and representing the military organization at official events, and informal influence work such as smoothing relationships, networking, and advocating. The military wives performing these unpaid duties all felt that their contributions supported the military but also reported that they felt the military did not always fully comprehend the value of their contributions (Stuttaford).

Stuttaford (2020) also found that the wives in the study reported little or no formal training or support for their efforts but also felt that community needs would go unmet if they chose not to volunteer, and so they took up the burden anyway. While this is true for many military wives, there are certain circumstances where spouses are offered leadership training opportunities: The Army, Navy, and Air Force conduct spouse leadership training courses for spouses of commanders, general officers, and command-level non-commissioned officers. These courses are offered to those spouses who will encounter more pressure to serve at higher levels of responsibility, and whose behavioral choices and interaction styles can profoundly impact the culture and tone of the organizations their service members are leading. Whether or not these spouses take an active role in leadership within their service members’ unit, they will still be

highly visible, and their daily behavior and lifestyle choices will be noticed and critiqued (McGowan, 2008). These additional pressures of leadership and visibility must be addressed by the proposed resources for military wives in midlife, and there is a significant opportunity to support them by helping them strengthen their faith in and relationship with God and Christian community.

***When the Military Demands More or Says, "No Thank You!"***

Military wives in midlife can find it very challenging to deal with the demands of the military in the form of expectations for family care and volunteerism, frequent relocations, and the impact military life has on their own careers. But theirs are not the only career issues that cause stress. They are also impacted by their husbands' career trajectories, and like many aspects of military life, career trajectories can appear to be completely beyond their control. This lifestyle factor must also be addressed by resources for the midlife and empty nest military wife.

The military is an "up-or-out" system. Soldiers must continue to make progress through the ranks in order to continue serving. For all the armed services, retention control points (RCPs) govern how long an enlisted soldier can continue to serve at each rank. For instance, as of 23 June 2022, the Army will only allow those who achieve the rank of first sergeant and sergeant major to serve for a full 30 years and receive the maximum benefits for retirement (Retention Control Point, 2022). Military officers can serve for 30 years only if they reach the rank of colonel or higher, and failure to be selected in a timely manner for the ranks of captain, major, and lieutenant colonel means that the officer must separate from the military within a year. If those service members have not reached 20 years of service, they will receive no retirement (DOD Instruction, 2017).

Military wives at middle age can and do experience high levels of stress when their

service member does not get selected for the next rank. We believe in our husbands and their commitment to the mission and capability to serve at the highest levels, and it is devastating when the military does not see our husbands' value like we do. This type of disappointment and the fear of the future it generates must be supported by resources for military wives at midlife.

On the other side of this difficult issue, military wives at midlife can also experience stress when their husbands are extraordinarily successful. When a service member is selected for command of a unit or is appointed to the rank of general officer or senior non-commissioned officer, the spouse also experiences higher levels of expectations and responsibilities. Henrietta McGowen, the wife of a rear admiral and a doctoral student in psychology wrote a fascinating dissertation in 2008 detailing the military experience from the perspective of general officers' wives. She found that women whose husbands were awarded the position of general (or admiral for the Navy) reported that their military lifestyle changed significantly because of this rank advancement. All of the women in the study reported that their lives became characterized by a sense of responsibility and awareness of expectation from the military as well as additional pressure from their own expectations for themselves (p. 78).

Most senior spouses face these demands without enough support from friends: At that level of responsibility, it is often difficult to find a trusted confidant (McGowen). One astute spouse even added that all of these challenges take place in the context of dealing with the onset of menopause, making everything just that much more difficult (p. 89). Again, the stressors seem to pile up at midlife, especially for military wives.

While the women in McGowen's (2008) study all rose to the demands of their husband's positions, it was not without personal cost. In one woman's words, "One of the things about being a military spouse and being a more senior military spouse is, I feel the longer we stay in,

the less control we have. I know I have expectations for myself . . . so I do a lot . . . and there are times that I feel like I have no control over what I want to do . . .” (p. 88-89). The strains that senior military wives experience, whether self-imposed or imposed by the military, need to be addressed sensitively by biblically-sound, community enhancing resources for military wives in the midlife transition.

Stress at midlife is a universal experience for women (Infurna et al., 2021; McFadden & Swan, 2012; Thomas et al., 2018). The military lifestyle with its inherent stressors and challenges (Sinclair et al., 2019; McGowan, 2008; Blue Star Families, 2021; Dimiceli et al., 2010; Stuttaford, 2020) complicates the experience of the empty nest and midlife transition for military wives. While the audience may seem to be small—only 80,000 women—every year more military wives reach this milestone and can draw from resources which are designed just for them at this unique and pivotal stage of life. The benefits they will receive from exploring the tasks of midlife in community with each other will exceed simple stress reduction and improvement in quality of life. These precious and indispensable women will have the opportunity to move into deeper discipleship and a greater knowledge of the God who made them, loves them, and called them to serve as military wives.

The following chapter examines a representative selection of resources that are available to military wives who wish to find support during the midlife and empty nest transition. I will evaluate each resource for how well it meets the specific needs of military wives and for how it might model what professional, relevant resources for midlife military wives should look like. The needs of military wives are unique at any stage of life, and midlife is no exception. The military lifestyle demands a higher level of resilience and strength from women in midlife, and resources for these women must address the additional stressors caused by frequent relocation,

distance from family, career challenges, and the demands of the military. The following chapter will demonstrate that a resource that comprehensively addresses these topics for military wives is yet to be developed.

### **Chapter Three: Existing Resources for Military Wives at Midlife**

I recently spent an hour on a live chat with MilitaryOneSource.mil, asking for resources for military service members or their spouses who are going through the empty nest and midlife transition. Military OneSource is the Department of Defense's flagship website for getting military families the help they need to thrive. "Turn to Military OneSource for tax services, spouse employment help, webinars and online training, relocation and deployment tools, and much more" is the description the website has for its services (About Military OneSource, 2022). I knew that if there were resources for military spouses navigating midlife, the experts at Military OneSource would know how to find them.

The result? There are none. Myriad resources exist for assisting military wives as they transition into the military, navigate deployments and military moves, and integrate their children into the military lifestyle. But Military OneSource does not provide information on navigating midlife.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, some senior spouses are given additional training and professional development which supports them in their leadership roles as spouses of unit commanders and general officers or senior non-commissioned officers, but these training programs do not focus on the issues these spouses are experiencing due to their age and life stage (Hanson, 2020). Yet the assertion of this project is that such resources are essential to the thriving of military wives. Specifically, I am proposing community-enhancing, biblically-sound resources for military wives in the midlife and empty nest transition. Are materials that meet this description available either on the internet or in book format? In order to answer that question, I will first review in general terms what such resources should address and how.

Resources for military wives in midlife must start by helping women form a framework

of functional theology from which they can relinquish the past with its disappointments and expectations and surrender to God's purpose for the future, including His design for our aging bodies. From within that framework, the resources must support the development of midlife identity, marital intimacy, career consolidation, and a commitment to a lifestyle of generativity.

At the same time, the resources must support women through the challenges of adjusting to the empty nest, maintaining family relationships, developing supportive friendships with other women, and preparing physically for the challenges of aging. All of this must be addressed with an awareness of and specific recommendations for navigating the unique circumstances faced by the military wife audience: frequent moves, distance from family members, the challenges of developing personal careers or career identities, and the demands of the military. Finally, the resources must meet the definition of "biblically sound" in that they point women toward the application of biblical principles as the best practice for meeting the challenges of midlife.

### **Books on Midlife**

My search for resources took me to the corners of the internet and elicited pleas from my husband to stop buying books. I networked with friends and experts in military family life, read blogs, listened to books on Audible, completed Bible studies I found on Amazon.com and Christianbook.com, and read voraciously. I have found several excellent resources about midlife and empty nesting, some average ones, and some that are not very useful at all, but I have not found a single resource that ticks the majority of the benchmarks for what military spouses at midlife need as outlined in this project.

What follows is a brief review of four representative books and three representative websites with my assessment of how they could be used to support the midlife and empty nest transition for military wives. For a complete list of the resources I reviewed, Appendix I provides

a list of resources with an indication of which midlife developmental benchmarks are addressed by each one. I will start with the best biblically focused resource I found, and the one I drew on most for developing the theological tasks of midlife for military wives: *Lost in the Middle* by Paul Tripp (2004).

### ***Lost in the Middle***

Tripp (2004) does a masterful job of both describing the challenges of midlife and suggesting biblical answers in *Lost in the Middle*. He acknowledges the pivotal aspects of midlife and also presents midlife as a crossroads of growth and decline, past and future, paralleling the work of researcher Margie Lachman and her fellow midlife researchers (2004; 2005; Lachman et al., 2015), although there is no indication that Tripp used any research sources in developing his book. In fact, Tripp regularly uses the term “midlife crisis” to describe the painful realities of the midlife transition, a misuse that perpetuates the incorrect cultural narrative surrounding that term. Semantics aside, Tripp does a fantastic job of explicating the theological underpinnings of the struggles that occur at midlife and discussing how a proper view of God can help us meet those challenges successfully. Essentially, he says, we must surrender to the grace, sovereignty, and will of God in order to thrive in midlife. Tripp illustrates his assertions with scripture and grounds them in excellent theological principles which are also practical and practicable.

What Tripp’s book does not provide for military wives is, first, a community-enhancing experience. There are no discussion questions provided for the reader and no suggestions for turning the book into a community-building experience that can be shared by a group of military wives. There is no doubt that a group discussion format could be developed by a skilled leader, but the book is not constructed for group study.

Another shortfall of Tripp's book for the purposes of this project is its lack of emphasis on renewing marriage and family relationships, supporting physical health via a proper theology of embodiment (although this is mentioned), and developing a supportive group of like-minded friends—all key tasks of midlife. In addition, the book does not directly address the pressures of the military lifestyle at midlife, although the functional and practical theological teaching Tripp gives is certainly the foundational mindset for dealing with such pressures. Again, while a skilled and informed discussion leader could use the book to support these key challenges of midlife for military wives, the book itself does not speak directly to them. From that standpoint, I would list this book as an excellent reference book for midlife discussion group leaders, but it likely does not have enough practical application for women who are looking for answers to questions of daily practice and wisdom during the midlife transition.

### ***Life Reimagined***

Easily the best book I found from a secular perspective was the entertaining, relevant, and beautifully written *Life Reimagined: The Science, Art, and Opportunity of Midlife* by Barbara Bradley Hagerty (2016), an award-winning journalist and former NPR correspondent. While some books (like Tripp's in places) encourage us to hang on by our fingertips and endure the crises of midlife, Hagerty explores the endless midlife possibilities armed with thorough research and a sense of adventure. Her three themes of midlife are key interpretive touch points as she guides the reader through the multiple challenges of midlife: "Engage with verve," "Choose purpose over happiness," and "Your thinking is your experience." Through these lenses, the reader encounters the physical, mental, social, emotional, vocational, and marital realities of midlife along with empowering suggestions for navigating them.

*Life Reimagined* can provide military spouses with motivation for preparing for midlife

and old age in practical ways, especially in the area of building resilience, something Hagerty relates to her theme of “Your thinking is your experience.” Resilience is already a key topic in military circles: The US Army has devoted an entire directorate to analyzing and developing policies and resources for enhancing the characteristic of resilience in soldiers and Army leaders. Since 2008, the military as a whole has prioritized the development of resilience as a response to rising suicide numbers (Simmons & Yoder, 2013). Military wives are well-versed in the importance of resilience.

*Life Reimagined* explores how resilience to the certain future experiences of aging can be built into midlife by changing our thinking. Hagerty says we can do this by viewing midlife as a temporary passage where the experience of multiple stressors—such as needy adult children and aging parents, too many volunteer obligations, or increased responsibilities at work—actually indicate a life full of rich relationships and opportunities. She also found that we can actually physically change our thinking and improve our brain function by staying engaged in our families and communities and taking advantage of new learning opportunities. These principles for building resilience very much reflect the needs of military wives at midlife.

However, midlife military wives may not find Hagerty’s book to be completely practical. Inspirational, yes, but Hagerty’s purpose is not to offer practical suggestions to the specific problems of midlife. She just wants us to know that we can make it through middle age and emerge with satisfaction on the other side if we prepare ourselves appropriately. Hagerty’s approach is empowering and encouraging for individuals seeking to increase their personal resilience during the challenges of midlife, but my research indicates that midlife military wives can also benefit from discussing specific coping strategies for family relationships, marriage, identity, and physical aging (Frisvold et al., 2012). *Life Reimagined* boosts our outlook, but it

doesn't give specific suggestions for completing the essential tasks of midlife.

### ***Becoming Sage***

Michelle Van Loon, an author, speaker and seasoned midlife blogger at ThePerennialGen.com, recently published *Becoming Sage: Cultivating Meaning, Purpose, and Spirituality in Midlife* (2020), a title I came across during one of my many internet searches. *Becoming Sage* is Van Loon's exploration of mature spiritual formation at midlife, with an emphasis on how that can be both supported within the local church and lived out in fruitfulness. Van Loon's definition of spiritual maturity borrows heavily from the works of James Fowler, Janet Hagberg, and Robert Guelich, who proposed stages of spiritual development that are similar in construction to Erikson's stages of psychosocial development discussed in chapter two. While these stages are not explicitly biblical, Van Loon's description of them does help her readers envision what mature discipleship might look like and why the church needs to do more to promote and support that level of discipleship.

After defining mature spiritual formation, *Becoming Sage* offers the reader practical applications of discipleship to some key challenges of midlife: church, family, and friend relationships; aging bodies; finances; emotional health; vocation; and generativity. The topic of financial discipleship in Van Loon's book is unique to the Christian resources I found in my research. Many mention trusting God with finances or practicing traditional Christian financial disciplines, but Van Loon investigates the financial challenges of midlife with much more nuance. Her premise is provocative: Why should we assume that being an American and a Christian means we will enjoy the American retirement dream if we follow all the financial success rules taught by the church? Van Loon exposes an implicit bias within the church with this line of reasoning. Who should we really submit our finances to: Dave Ramsey and the

Financial Peace University or the sovereign will of God?

Van Loon's refusal to accept and pass on to the reader the basic assumptions of entry-level discipleship combined with pop culture ethics is refreshing to say the least. She even challenges the cultural assumption that sex should be great at age 60 and beyond—if necessary, through prescription drugs—and questions the wisdom of adding that kind of pressure to all the other stressors of midlife. Van Loon does an excellent job throughout the book of questioning cultural assumptions—especially those that have made their way into the church's definition of thriving—and helping us to reconstruct our view midlife through a biblical lens.

The weakness of Van Loon's *Becoming Sage* for the midlife military wife is primarily its emphasis on reforming the church's support for midlife discipleship. Each chapter has two or three personal reflection questions which help the reader work through application of Van Loon's material; these are meaningful, sensitive, and appropriate for military wives in midlife. But each chapter also has several group discussion questions, and these center around the reader's local church culture. These questions are a reasonable and helpful exploration of what local church leaders and influencers can do to support discipleship growth for those in middle age and beyond, but they are largely irrelevant for military wives. We simply do not stay in one place long enough to significantly impact our local church or military chapel ministries or paradigms of discipleship.

In addition, my research on the midlife challenges of military wives suggests that more emphasis should be placed on the struggle for identity at midlife. Van Loon refers to this struggle obliquely through her descriptions of the spiritual "Wall," another concept developed by Fowler, Hagberg, and Guelich. She describes "The Wall" as "an existential sense of loss or disorientation" that can occur during a significant life transition or significant loss (p. 33). Her

answer to this struggle is perseverance in faith, and she is absolutely correct. But midlife military wives would benefit from a deeper exploration of their own loss of identity at midlife along with specific exercises and supportive activities which can help them move through the crisis to a new identity formation that will sustain them in later life.

Like *Lost in the Middle* (Tripp, 2002), Van Loon's book is an excellent resource for exploring many of the topics of midlife, and she covers the major challenges most women will encounter during the midlife transition. *Becoming Sage* is a valuable resource for military wives at the midlife transition, but it does not speak directly to all of the specific questions and concerns of that audience. However, Van Loon's engaging and thoughtful style does make *Becoming Sage* an example of artful Christian literature and a guidebook for future research on how the church—and military chapels—could make discipleship training more relevant and accessible to people in middle age and beyond.

### ***Women at Midlife***

Surprisingly, I found very few group Bible study materials created for women at the empty nest and midlife transition, at least studies that focus on interpreting passages of scripture and applying them specifically to the issues of midlife. Van Loon in *Becoming Sage* (2020) suggests that the reason there are not more discipleship training materials for middle age is because the evangelical church tends to focus on beginner-level discipleship that speaks more to early marriage and parenting young children. One resource that defies this trend is *Women at Midlife: Embracing the Challenges*, a 61-page Bible study booklet by Jeanie Miley. Miley has exactly the focused biblical approach that military wives need, and the book is designed to be completed at home and then discussed with friends at regular meetings.

Miley starts each chapter (or study session) with a brief introduction to a midlife topic,

then directs the reader to specific passages of scripture to read. The reading portion is followed by various observation, interpretation, and application questions where the study participant can explore how scripture applies directly to the challenges of midlife. Miley covers many of the topics identified as essential for military wives in the midlife transition: identity formation, relinquishment of expectations, formation of a renewed calling, development of authentically practiced theology, and generativity.

*Women at Midlife* meets many of the benchmarks identified by my research for biblically sound, community-enhancing resources for military wives at midlife. Miley has created a logical progression of topics starting with the importance of our identity being grounded in our relationship with God and His promise of care for us throughout the twists and turns of life. Then she helps us identify with Christ and His suffering by considering our own sufferings and losses in light of His sacrifice. She encourages us to seek forgiveness where needed move ahead in life with assurance. Miley concludes by encouraging us to develop a lifestyle of generativity, and she does all of this beautifully and naturally through the use of scripture.

Miley's work would be very appropriate for a small group Bible study made up of midlife military wives who wanted to explore some of what scripture has to say about the issues of middle age. But Miley misses a few key opportunities to explain the *why* behind the topics she has chosen. In fact, each of the eight Bible study sessions only devotes a few sentences to discussing the importance of the designated topic. Instead, each topic is mentioned obliquely through a brief anecdote about a woman's midlife experience or a summary of a biblical passage. Without a more focused emphasis on the importance of the midlife topics Miley has chosen, women may not prioritize her very excellent advice. In addition, little is said about marriage, family relationships, physical aging, or the need for a supportive circle of friends. Because this

book is targeted at a general audience of women, there is also no emphasis on the unique needs of military women. But what this book does accomplish for the purposes of this project is to show how the challenges and developmental tasks of midlife can be addressed in a Bible study format that is appropriate for both individual and group study.

The books reviewed above are all excellent starting points for military wives seeking support for the challenges of the midlife transition. It is even possible to develop a quite comprehensive view of midlife from reading a variety of books such as these, but from a practical standpoint, this is unlikely to happen for most military wives. Our demanding lifestyle tends to keep us busy, and, like any modern woman, we want answers immediately. Why read a book when you can just Google? The internet provides an instant response to our most pressing questions. But does it provide the best answers?

### **Websites on Midlife**

Websites abound on the topic of life after 40. From empty nest memoirs to over-50 style blogs, from midlife travel adventures to helping kids pack for college, the choices are endless. A quick Google search on *midlife* will return a page full of references to *midlife crisis*, demonstrating how ubiquitous that assumption still is in American culture. While many of the articles may offer sound advice, this method of learning about midlife still requires the military wife to spend a good deal of time gathering and reading resources on her own. This project proposes that a website hosting biblically sound, research-informed, and community-enhancing resources is the best solution for supporting military wives at midlife. Can this model be found in existing websites?

Active websites dedicated to helping women accomplish some of the developmental tasks of midlife from a Christian perspective do exist. The two examples discussed below

represent the best quality websites I was able to find, and, interestingly, that was not an easy task as Google searches seem to prioritize lifestyle websites. A website dedicated to helping military wives accomplish the developmental tasks of midlife simply does not exist. Thus, the websites for military wives reviewed below were chosen as a model for what web-hosted resources for military wives in the midlife transition should offer.

***ChristianEmptyNestMoms.com and PamelaHenkelman.com***

One of the more interesting results of my search for online resources designed for women in the midlife transition was that the most spiritually and emotionally supportive resources I found came under the heading of *empty nest* rather than *middle age* or *midlife*. This may be because, as I found in my conversations with other midlife women, the presenting concern—or “wake up call”—for women approaching the midlife transition seems to be children leaving the family home. Searches for *midlife* and *women* on Google, DuckDuckGo, and Pinterest tended to result in websites about fashion and lifestyle for the middle-aged woman.

Under a Google search incorporating *empty nest* and *Christian*, I was able to find two quality online resources offering biblically sound counsel through blog entries, online courses, printables, podcasts, videos, Facebook communities, and virtual life-coaching appointments: PamelaHenkelman.com and ChristianEmptyNestMoms.com. Both websites are focused on helping women make the transition to empty nest mothering styles that improve family relationships and point adult children toward God, and both are beautifully designed, advertisement-free environments that welcome readers to relax and contemplate for a while.

Pamela Henkelman is a pastor’s wife and mother of five grown kids, and the content creator for PamelaHenkelman.com. It appears that she made the switch to discussing empty nest issues in August of 2021. Before that, her blog covered spiritual growth topics for women, but

now her empty nest resources include blog entries, a podcast, a private Facebook group, and an Instagram account. Henkelman is also a certified life coach through the Biblical Coaching Alliance, and the website offers mothers in the throes of the empty nest adjustment the opportunity to purchase coaching sessions with Henkelman where she will help them work through the spiritual and relational struggles caused by changing relationships with children.

Military wives in the empty nest transition will find quite a bit of helpful advice and support in Henkelman's resources. Her approach is solidly biblical and focuses on changing the heart of the empty nest mom so that she can take a spiritually mature approach to the challenges of mothering adult children. She emphasizes communication styles, and this might be especially helpful to military wives who are far from their children: So much can be miscommunicated when we interact through texting, phone calls, and social media. Henkelman's advice can encourage military wives to evaluate their communication styles. The resulting increase in self-awareness will benefit military wives as they build healthier relationships with their adult children, especially adult children who are currently struggling and may be causing worry and concern on the part of their mothers.

Certified life coach Jenny Good is the content creator for [ChristianEmptyNestMoms.com](http://ChristianEmptyNestMoms.com) and a fellow empty nest mom who has experienced both estrangement from an adult child and the death of a child. Her resources are a direct response to the pain she has lived through and her desire to redeem her experiences and use them to encourage other moms. Similar to Henkelman, Good creates content in the form of podcasts, blog entries, and Instagram posts, and provides community through a Facebook group for Christian mothers in the empty nest. While most of her content is similar to Henkelman's in that it supports moms in forming and strengthening relationships with adult children, Good does have a blog post on identity formation and

discovery of purpose (Good, 2022). This insightful entry provides the reader—or listener, as Good has also produced a podcast on the topic—with five biblical principles for self-discovery at the empty nest transition: spending time in prayer and Bible study, strengthening our trust in God, keeping a positive mindset, seeking out wise counsel, and serving others to find our niche. While Good’s insights are not customized for military wives, her advice is sound and helpful for helping any woman find her purpose and identity at midlife.

Both PamelaHenkelman.com and ChristianEmptyNestMoms.com are excellent examples of biblically-sound, web-hosted resources for women in the empty nest transition. Although both websites are fairly new, if the creators continue to provide the same kinds of relevant resources, they will definitely fill a void for women in the empty nest searching for support in their relationships with their adult children, and that audience can include military wives. However, Henkelman and Good do not address all of the needs and challenges of women in the midlife transition, nor do they speak to the additional challenges brought on by the military lifestyle. A resource designed for military wives in midlife should also include content supporting the development of face-to-face friendships and management of the various stresses of the military lifestyle at midlife, two of the key objectives identified by the research presented in previous chapters.

### ***Homefront Heroes***

One website I found stands out as an admirable example of what web-hosted resources for military wives should look like. Homefront Heroes (homeFrontHeroes.org) is the result of a military wives’ deployment support group formed in 2016 at an Army post. This support group initially took the form of a Bible study offering biblically informed mentorship for military wives struggling with managing the home front while their husbands were deployed. By 2019, the

ministry model for Homefront Heroes had expanded to include biblical support and encouragement for the challenges faced by young US military wives all over the world, and the website was born. While Homefront Heroes does not offer any resources on the topic of midlife, the mission of the organization and the construction of their website and social media presence reflect what I am proposing should be developed for military wives in midlife.

Homefront Heroes is focused on supporting women associated with the military, and the model they want to use to do this is community groups. Their website actively recruits local community group leaders and offers to provide them training and teaching materials so that they can create in-person groups of military wives who meet regularly to strengthen and grow in their Christian faith. This model of ministry pushes community down to a local level rather than attempting to meet community needs online. While this may not give Homefront Heroes as much visibility as they might get by hosting web-based classes, this model does speak to the direct need for face-to-face community and the development of relationships that are supportive in practical ways. A military wife in a local Homefront Heroes community group can ask another community group member for help when her husband is deployed and she needs to take a sick child to the emergency room in the middle of the night, something that just cannot be done with a virtual community group.

Homefront Heroes' model is to facilitate ministry and community on a local level, but they market this through a beautifully designed website and blog, a twice monthly podcast, and competent, regular use of social media platforms Facebook and Instagram. The website has a clean black and white design with deep-toned photos, attractive fonts, and no advertising. The site offers access to information about the ministry, the blog, prayer resources, and contact pages for booking a speaker from the ministry or becoming a community group leader, ministry

partner, or content contributor. The ministry's Hope on the Homefront podcast and social media accounts are linked in each blog entry on the website, but it seems the ministry has transitioned to a podcast and social media content model—the most recent blog entries are almost a year old. The Facebook page and Instagram account, however, are very active with almost daily posts for their 1,222 Instagram followers and 13,885 Facebook followers. Engagement numbers for Homefront Heroes' social media are not available, but their social media presence gives the appearance of a thriving community based on the number and quality of comments on the ministry's posts.

Homefront Heroes' paradigm of online presence plus emphasis on local community models clearly what could be done with resources for military wives in the midlife and empty nest transition. A website can be optimized for visibility on a Google search, it can host written, video, and audio content, and it can then drive traffic back to a social media community, a podcast, or a YouTube channel in order to promote engagement in resources and improve reach to the desired audience. In turn, social media posts can refer the audience back to the website for more specific information and access to resources. Homefront Heroes Ministries has done an excellent job of leveraging their online presence on multiple platforms, and their model will be very influential in my proposal for publishing resources for military wives at midlife.

There is no shortage of resources addressing the changes and challenges that occur at midlife—some of them more useful than others—but most of them address only a selection of the essential topics. And none of them address the changes and challenges of midlife from the perspective of a military wife audience. While it is entirely possible for a military wife of a certain age to glean from existing resources enough information and encouragement to help her successfully navigate that time of life, it would require a good bit of effort to both find the

resources and then synthesize the information into a cohesive vision for flourishing at midlife within the military lifestyle.

Although the potential audience is small, comprising only 80,000 women who are married to active duty military members, these women have made substantial sacrifices to support their husbands' service to our nation. As military wives enter the midlife transition, there is an opportunity to substantially improve their level of flourishing by providing them with appropriate resources, hosted in one easy-to-access location, which will address the challenges of midlife. But these resources must be backed by research that defines best practices for thriving in midlife and beyond. The following chapter presents a comprehensive plan for developing such resources by using the preceding research on the midlife experience, the challenges of the military wife lifestyle, and the existing online and print resources addressing middle age.

#### **Chapter Four: Recommendation for Resources for Military Wives at Midlife**

I took a deep breath and launched into my elevator pitch. Brandy, the spouses' club president at my installation, listened while filling her plate with goodies from the buffet. "I would like to lead a group for spouses who are struggling with the empty nest and all the other issues of the midlife transition. At this point of life, a lot of us feel the need to redefine who we are and what we like and what our purpose is. All of the moves and instability of military life can really rob us of a sense of self, especially after the children leave home." A woman picking out her favorite cookies on the other side of the buffet table looked at me with her eyebrows raised and leaned closer. I continued to describe my idea for an activity group I wanted to lead for the spouses' club: "I envision a monthly event where we experience a novel activity together and then spend some time discussing how we felt about it and how it might inform our midlife identity. We could also discuss adjustment to the empty nest and finding meaning and purpose in the second half of life." "I need this!" said the woman across the table. "We both do!" said Brandy.

Military wives at the empty nest and midlife transition stand in the crosshairs of multiple challenges which impact their identity, sense of meaning, physical health, social connections, marriages, and family relationships. The demands of the military must be balanced against the needs of family and friends and our responsibility to care for ourselves. At the same time, the military lifestyle challenges our sense of personal agency as we struggle to fulfill all those obligations. Resources that educate and undergird military wives as they navigate the pivotal middle age developmental stage are an effective way to support them as they fulfill their critical roles in their families and in support of the military mission. But ultimately, such resources can create opportunities to share the love of God and the hope of the Gospel with military wives and

to help them thrive as disciples of Jesus Christ.

The preceding literature review and audience analysis investigated the developmental stage of midlife, its particular effects on women, and how the lived experiences of a military wife can amplify those effects. The goal of those efforts was to synthesize learning objectives for the proposed resources that acknowledge the actual difficulties of midlife and can provide workable guidance for navigating that life stage. From the very beginning of this project, my vision has been to put the midlife experience into the language of the Gospel: to communicate our need for God at this point in life and the redemption He offers as a means of restoring us and renewing us in this season. Researcher Margie Lachman uses the term “crossroads” to describe the midlife experience (2015; Lachman et al., 2015); theologian and pastor Paul Tripp describes midlife as a collision between our perceptions of the life we have lived and the reality of that life (2004, p. 34). The events of midlife can expose problems in faith and practice that were glossed over while we were so busy building our lives and families. When this exposure occurs, it is nothing short of a holy invitation from God to allow Him to redeem our lived experiences up to this point and transform them into something holy and fruitful and meaningful as we head toward the finish line.

The holy invitation at midlife beckons us to turn to God in faith and allow Him to change us, to teach us, and to send us out to a world that needs us and the message of faith that we bring. The pivotal midlife transition, when directed by God, is a direct reflection of the Gospel, a reflection of our own conversion stories, and an opportunity to experience our faith in a new and meaningful way. Thus, in the following learning model, I am proposing that at midlife we need to experience transformation in three key ways: We must be spiritually transformed, we must be disciplined into new ways of seeing and understanding who we are, and we must respond with new

practices for serving others and thriving in the future. Following is what I believe to be the key learning tasks and tools that military wives need to meet the challenges of midlife, work through them, and prepare themselves for successful Christian living beyond middle age.

### **Objective #1: Spiritual Transformation**

Spiritual transformation is the foundational learning objective for the proposed resources. Without maturity in a loving relationship with God, we cannot hope to accomplish the tasks of understanding who we truly are at midlife and beyond, nor can we properly and fully serve those who need us at this stage in life—our spouses, families, and our communities. Indeed, spiritual transformation may be the only essential task for many of us because thoughts and actions can then flow out of who we are becoming in Christ.

And the idea of *becoming* is key because the task of spiritual transformation is one that is never complete during our lifetime on earth. However, the approach to continued spiritual growth may change throughout the years depending on the life stage we find ourselves in. During middle age, appropriate spiritual maturity will provide for us a wealth of resources from which to draw as we navigate the challenges of the midlife transition. Van Loon (2020) suggests that this level of maturity is characterized more by a focus on the depth of our relationship with God than on constant activity for God (p. 34). It is the richness of our communion with God that gives us the strength, faith, and patience to persevere through midlife and its challenges. Thus, the following characteristics of spiritual transformation will be the key objectives of the proposed resources and will undergird the other tasks of knowing ourselves and serving others.

#### ***Authentic Theology***

The first task of spiritual transformation at midlife to be supported by the proposed resources is the development of an authentic theology that informs daily practice. As proposed

by Tripp (2004), one of the problems midlife exposes is “the significant gap between a person’s confessional theology and their functional theology” (p. 49). As Christians, we may say we believe in God’s sovereign control over our lives, but we act as though we are the ones who can solve our problems. Within the military culture, there is even more of an emphasis on self-reliance, and this impacts military wives significantly. In order to survive a husband’s deployment, a military wife must learn to solve problems herself. Whether it is a flat tire, a broken dishwasher, or dropping a child off at college without her husband, a military wife has to be prepared to handle challenges on her own.

While some level of self-reliance is healthy, it may lead to lack of reliance on God even though we claim to trust Him for our lives and futures. We may say we believe in prayer, but we forget to pray; we may say our faith is a priority, but we cannot find the time to practice spiritual disciplines amid the demands of the military lifestyle. The list is endless. Because midlife reveals the gaps between faith and practice, it is an ideal time to allow God to draw us back into the truths of His Word and help us to begin fill in the gaps between what we say we believe and how we actually function on a daily basis.

### ***Surrender of the Past and the Future***

The second task of spiritual transformation is to surrender our experiences up to the point of midlife and our expectations for life beyond to God and to allow Him to reform them. Our limited time horizon at midlife means that we have too little time left to complete everything we thought we could accomplish. And our own sin nature means that the past did not turn out as well as we had hoped. Added to these burdens is the uncertainty inherent in the military lifestyle. Military wives must be prepared for sudden moves, unexpected retirement, or a significant promotion into more responsibility and expectation. In order to live free of regret and fear of

failure or the future at midlife, we must allow God to shoulder the burden of redeeming the past and guiding us into all of our tomorrows. Only He is capable of using both past and future to disciple us and to bring glory to Himself.

### ***Renewed Calling to Service***

The third and final task of spiritual transformation to be supported in the proposed resources is the formation of a renewed calling to serve God. This is not just a spiritual calling, but a calling that echoes the concepts of career consolidation and generativity proposed by both Erikson and Vaillant (Vaillant, 2002) and the experience of seeking significance over success at midlife described by Buford (2015). In other words, the impact of spiritual transformation in a person's life is not limited to spiritual practices. A true transformation informs our life holistically and impacts the people around us in multiple positive ways. Knowing God truly and deeply means knowing that He has a specific calling and design for our individual lives that we are invited to fulfill. At midlife, we have the opportunity to evaluate that calling and sharpen our focus on what God would have us do to bring Him glory with the years we have left.

### **Objective #2: Identity Reformation**

Nothing helps us understand who we are better than knowing who God is and allowing His truth to transform our lives from the inside out. As we become more like Christ, we see ourselves in a new light and can begin to structure our own identity around God's work in us. This type of identity formation (or *re*-formation at the midlife point), guided by our relationship with God, gives us the truest possible picture of who we really are and is a key developmental task of midlife as we balance all the changes we are experiencing in mind, body, heart, and life with who we have always believed ourselves to be (Vaillant, 2002; Thomas et al., 2018; Lachman, 2015).

The formation of a biblically informed, based-in-reality personal identity which will carry us successfully into midlife is the second key objective for the proposed resources. It is impossible to define precisely what midlife identity should look like for every military wife as a result of using the proposed resources, but there are several characteristics that will be emphasized for their key importance to successful Christian discipleship in the later years of life. The first characteristic is an identity that is based in Christ and His salvational, transformational work in our lives, rather than an identity that tries to achieve the demands of the culture.

### ***An Identity of Discipleship***

When our identity is founded in Christ, we see ourselves first of all as His disciples. Our status as Christians is not something that is part of our lives, but the one thing that defines our lives—all else is secondary and subject to God’s direction. This level of Christian identity formation is potentially life-changing and freedom-giving for military wives who may be struggling to forge their own sense of identity in midlife. We may even feel that the military lifestyle with all of its inherent challenges has stunted our personal growth and accomplishment. Yet, when we view our own life stories through the lens of God’s sovereignty, we can begin to understand that all of our experiences, frustrations, and even unmet expectations have been used by God to mold us into the likeness of Christ.

### ***An Identity of Personal Agency***

This is not to say that military wives should be passive passengers as God pilots us through to the conclusion of our lives. Instead, a full understanding of God’s sovereignty leads to confidence that the decisions we make and the actions we take are used by God to bring His kingdom to fruition. Instead of paralyzed, we are empowered. The paradox of God’s sovereignty and our free will cannot be fully understood, but the characteristic of personal agency in the

identity formation of a Christian is a sign of mature discipleship: Our daily decisions and actions make a difference in a world that needs to know the power of the Gospel.

### ***An Identity of Trust in God***

Finally, our identity must be formed around an awareness of our finiteness and a complete trust in the love of God as we face an unknown and unknowable future as military wives. This characteristic of mature discipleship is what enables us to face the multiple challenges of midlife as military wives as well as the pain of eventual aging and death. Midlife is the beginning of an awareness of our own mortality, and that reality will continue to press into our consciousness as we age. Instead of reacting with fear or denial, the midlife reformation of personal identity is an opportunity to press into the goodness and trustworthiness of God as we prepare to face our own decline and the decline of those we love. If our identity is secure in the knowledge of the love of God, we can be assured that we will continue to walk into the future with Him. This is the only way to fight the good fight, finish the race, and receive the crown of righteousness (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

### **Objective #3: Mission Identification**

No list of objectives for military wives would ever be complete without identifying the primary mission. Military wives understand that there is a greater purpose, and we are always ready to take action. Similarly, the proposed resources for military spouses in the empty nest and midlife transition period must help each woman identify the mission God has laid out for her and the means He has provided for her to accomplish it. In the proposed resources, the mission identification objective will help military women understand God's call to action in five key areas of our lives: our marriages, our families, our friendships, our bodies, and our legacy.

### ***Renewed Intimacy***

One of the unique opportunities of midlife is the chance to rebuild intimacy with our spouses. We have more time together and fewer distractions as children leave the home, and the suspension of the regular rhythms of life provide a unique moment in time where we can refocus on each other. However, some military wives may experience even more time apart as their servicemember husband advances to roles of more responsibility and experiences increasing demand on his time. Couples in this situation will need to put even more effort into renewing their intimacy and strengthening their marriages. Since marriage is an embodiment of the Gospel message, this task is especially important for Christian couples who wish to embody a message of hope and live it out through their marriage relationship. Throughout the proposed resources, a specific emphasis will be placed on developing and sustaining intimacy in marriage in midlife and beyond.

### ***Relational Leadership in the Changing Family Circle***

Caring for family—children, grandchildren, and aging parents—is another clearly biblical mandate that will need to be supported by these resources. Not only do we fulfill our most basic missional calling in the lives of our family, but we also will need them someday to care for and support us. At midlife, our position as family leaders means that we are the mature mentors who still have the energy and means to provide physical, emotional, and spiritual support for those both younger and older than us. Midlife also means that we have limited time left to build into their lives, and, in some cases, to rebuild broken relationships and establish stronger ties going forward. Achieving relational leadership in our families requires wisdom, tact, and prayer, especially for military wives who may be far away from their families and have fewer in-person opportunities to be with family. The proposed resources will provide military

wives an excellent opportunity to develop the wisdom needed through application of biblical teaching and the practice of praying together for each other's family relationships, as well as the opportunity to talk about their relationships and receive comfort and encouragement.

### ***Friendships at Midlife***

A proposal for community-enhancing resources must emphasize friendship and the development of strong faith communities, in part because these relationships can be a stand-in for family who live far away. In addition, friendships, especially with friends with whom we meet face-to-face, are one of the factors that help women thrive in midlife (Degges-White & Kepic, 2020). But more than that, we know friendship and community is essential to thriving in our Christian lives. The Bible instructs us to meet together, to pray together, to study God's Word together, and to encourage each other to live missionally (Hebrews 10:25, James 5:16, Acts 2:42, Colossians 3:16). The proposed resources are designed to be used within a community of military wives who have agreed to meet with one another on a regular basis. Within the resources, women will find encouragement and instruction for developing close, supportive friendships with each other and for loving each other well through the challenges of midlife.

### ***Stewarding Our Physical Resources***

Midlife has a significant physical component, especially for women who must go through a physical change every bit as profound as adolescence: menopause. No resources for military wives entering the empty nest and midlife transition would be complete without acknowledging the realities of physical aging and helping women form a practical theological approach to caring for, honoring, and living in their own declining bodies. Too often, we military wives live as though it is noble to deny the needs of our own bodies in order to meet the needs of our communities. But in midlife, many of us have an opportunity to develop a better relationship

with our own bodies and devote more time and energy to their care.

However, honoring our bodies through proper care and feeding is just one aspect of a practical theology of embodiment, and the proposed resources will also help military wives develop a biblical response to sickness, disability, and body shame. Sickness and disability are realities of aging, and shame is a particularly damaging response to the aging process, since there is little we can do to mitigate it. Van Loon (2020) suggests that a mature and biblical view of physical aging is a countercultural viewpoint from which we see physical deterioration as a means of growing into the person God has created us to be (p. 94). The beauty of our spirits can be revealed in spite of the wrinkles and will someday be revealed physically when we reach eternity and enjoy the full benefits of Christ's work of redemption.

### *A Legacy Mindset*

One day, our earthly lives will end and our mission on earth will be finished, but the investments we have made into the lives of others will outlast us. The proposed resources will assist military wives in identifying where God wants them to invest during the midlife transition and beyond. The presentation of this learning objective will be different for military wives than for a general audience of women, as most military wives are already in the habit of "giving back" and volunteering for a wide variety of community ministries and helping organizations. Rather, the emphasis for the purposes of the proposed resources will be on narrowing down the areas in which military wives serve so that we are expending our energy primarily in ways that reflect our own unique callings and giftings. In other words, at midlife we must begin to fulfill God's specific calling on our lives and acknowledge that we are no longer capable of responding to each and every need we see. Instead, we trust Him to guide us toward the needs He has particularly designed us to meet.

These three objectives—spiritual transformation, identity reformation, and mission identification—will be supported directly through the proposed resources. Detailed study guides for reading scripture or other resources and reflective questions designed to foster spiritual maturity and deeper communion with God will help participants identify gaps between belief and practice. Suggestions for further reading and for spiritual exercises—such as journaling, deep conversation, meditation, and prayer—will give military wives encouragement to practice and solidify their faith. The proposed resources will also utilize scripture application, personal prayer tasks, journaling prompts, and group discussion questions to help them define their identity. And finally, group activities and discussions and personal assessment questions will support military wives as they define and refine their mission at midlife.

### **Proposed Media for Resources for Military Wives at Midlife**

To help military wives meet the identified objectives for thriving at midlife and to make the resources they need easily accessible, I am proposing the development of a website to host resources to address the key challenges of the midlife and empty nest transition from within the context of the military lifestyle. Modeled on the example of HomeFrontHeroes.com, this website will eventually allow multiple resources to be presented in various media such as blog-style entries, downloadable courses, podcasts, videos, and social media posts to make them more accessible and easily found by busy military wives. Since military wives are spread around the globe, a website is the best choice for disseminating resources quickly and making them instantly available for all who need them.

Of course, the drawback with any online format is that it often discourages face-to-face community rather than building it. To mitigate this challenge, the proposed resources will be presented on the website as an opportunity for women in a specific location to form their own

small group of midlife military wives and explore the experiences of midlife together. And that is exactly the process I am planning to use myself as I develop the resources.

### **Development Plan**

One of the surprising findings from my research efforts was that midlife is significantly under-researched, and military wives at midlife are even more so. Given the lack of research into the specific audience, I am proposing that creation of the resources be carried out in the context of additional research into a specific group of military wives who are living at the same military installation as I am. To that end, I have arranged for two venues in which to interact regularly with midlife military wives as I write the resources: a secular group connected with a local club of military wives, and a small group Bible study for midlife women offered to my local military neighborhood.

The reason for this additional effort at research is two-fold. First, immersing myself in the audience provides an excellent opportunity to hear more about military wives' midlife experiences, leading to a broader, more comprehensive viewpoint from which to write. My research has shown that the experiences of midlife can be varied, thus, to write resources with only my viewpoint or set of experiences in mind could easily lead to them being helpful only to military wives who experience midlife in ways similar to me. Secondly, since I will be leading these two groups and will be using the resources I develop to do so, I can reduce confirmation bias by getting immediate feedback on the effectiveness of the resources. The feedback will guide me in making appropriate adjustments, and this opportunity for an immersive writing experience will help to ensure that, when finished, the proposed resources are more effective for the target audience.

### **Proposed Contents for BacktoYouandMe.com.**

While the resources are being developed, I will oversee development of the website by a website designer while starting the writing process. In the spirit of my anecdotal research showing that women tend to worry first about empty nest issues rather than the other challenges of midlife, I have chosen the name “BacktoYouandMe.com,” and have purchased the domain. In order to effectively organize and host the resources, I will divide the website initially into two content sections so that military wives can choose which is most useful for themselves and their local community.

#### ***Walking with God through Midlife***

The first content area to be featured on BacktoYouandMe.com will invite women to engage the questions of midlife with solid biblical teaching and a supportive group of Christian friends. Titled “Walking with God through Midlife,” this content area will offer a twelve session Bible study that will help military wives develop biblical principles for thriving in midlife.

Having twelve lessons will allow the resources to offer flexibility to military wives in several ways. First, the typical length of a semester in women’s Bible studies sponsored by military chapels and the chapel auxiliary organization Protestant Women of the Chapel (PWOC) is twelve sessions. PWOC chapters can be found on nearly every Army and Air Force installation around the world, serving women connected to the military by teaching them God’s Word in small group formats. PWOC will likely play an important role in spreading the word about the availability of the proposed resources. Secondly, having twelve lessons allows an independent group of women to commit to meeting once a month and completing the material in a calendar year, a doable model for a military wife who already has a significant burden of commitments. Finally, a study group can create two 6-week sessions out of a twelve-session

curriculum. Due to the busy nature of the military lifestyle, some military wives find a six-week commitment to be less intimidating than the longer commitment required by a PWOC Bible study, thus an informal neighborhood group should be able to boost participation by offering two 6-week sessions, one in the fall and one in the spring, with both sessions avoiding major holiday seasons and peak travel or moving periods.

There is no better biblical text to select as the basis for these proposed resources than the book of Philippians. The themes of Philippians mirror the stated learning objectives, and the book will offer military wives hope as they navigate the challenges of midlife. Paul's objective in writing to the Philippian people was to show them how to have joy in trying circumstances.

The key to joy in Paul's letter is focusing on the Gospel by anchoring ourselves to it through our faith, through true Christian community, and through letting God use us to share it with a world in need. Notice how some of the first few verses of Philippians parallel the first theological learning task, developing an authentic theology: "And this I pray, that your love may abound still more and more in real knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve the things that are excellent, in order to be sincere and blameless until the day of Christ . . ." (Philippians 1:9-10, NASB).

The second theological task, letting God reform our expectations and redeem our past mistakes, is reflected in chapter three: "But whatever things were gain to me, those things I have counted as loss for the sake of Christ. More than that, I count all things to be loss in view of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whom I have suffered the loss of all things, and count them but rubbish so that I may gain Christ . . ." (verses 7 & 8, NASB). The third task, a renewed and refined calling to serve God, is also a major theme of Philippians: "Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the

form of God did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant. . .” (Philippians 2:5-7a, NASB) and “. . . but one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and reaching forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 3:13b-14, NASB). Philippians is also perfectly suited to support the objectives of identity reformation and mission identification with its themes of finding our identity in the work of Christ in our lives (Philippians 1:6), building a strong Christian community (Philippians 2:1-4), living with contentment in all circumstances (Philippians 4:6-8, 11-13), and demonstrating the efficacy of God’s grace to those around us (Philippians 2:12-16, 4:4-5).

The proposed Bible study will allow military wives to interrogate the book of Philippians with the crucial questions of midlife, and the biblical text will point them to the answer: the truth of the Gospel. At midlife, God can take what we offer Him in the form of our lives up to this point, whether they be successes or failures, and transform them through the power of the Holy Spirit into a renewed and re-envisioned future of fruitfulness and purpose. Philippians can guide military wives to that conclusion as they bring their questions and concerns to the text and let it speak to their deepest needs.

### ***Embracing the Empty Nest***

The second content area will be titled “Embracing the Empty Nest” and will host content appropriate for a secular support group for military wives. The goal of this content will be to help women answer the questions of personal identity and purpose at midlife. The seven sessions presented in this section of the website will be freely available to any military spouse who wishes to use them to create a midlife exploration club in her own location.

As the research shows, midlife challenges can raise questions of identity and purpose,

and these questions need to be addressed in order for women to thrive at the midlife transition and beyond (Vaillant, 2002). However, because of the sheer number of events and stressors that occur at this period of life (Thomas et al., 2018), it is likely that many military wives have failed to take time out to really deal with the question of who they are and what their own individual mission in life could be. This is even more likely for senior military wives who are dealing with multiple expectations placed upon them by virtue of their husband's rank and responsibility (McGowan, 2008).

“Embracing the Empty Nest” will consist of seven sessions designed to help midlife military wives think about who they are at midlife and what kind of meaning they want to build into the rest of their lives. The number of sessions reflects the typical yearly schedule for a military spouses' club where special interest “subclubs” meet monthly from October to April. Each session will contain a short essay on a topic that supports identity and purpose formation, followed by a series of discussion questions appropriate for a group setting. In addition, I will provide a menu of suggested activities for the group to do together prior to beginning the discussion portion of their meeting.

The addition of an activity is an important aspect of the content and is based on the data reported by military spouse Amy Page in her study of military wife identity and its impact on coping behavior. Page (2018) found that 42% of military spouses did not have a settled sense of identity. Incorporating meaningful activities such as volunteer opportunities, art classes, exercise or movement classes, professional development, visits to historically significant locations, tours of interesting industries, and cross-cultural engagements will give women an opportunity to consider and identify their own unique interests, talents, passions, and purposes in light of the activity they have just experienced. Using their personal experience of the activity as a

springboard, women can begin to delve deeper into the questions of who they are and what their purpose might be and explore that within the discussion portion of the meeting.

The discussion question portion will be key to the usefulness and success of this proposed resource. It will be imperative to connect the discussion questions first to what the literature on midlife shows to be the key challenges and tasks of midlife. The questions must also acknowledge the challenges of the military lifestyle for the participants, and they must connect the activity portion of the meeting to the formation of identity and purpose within the military lifestyle context. And finally, the discussion questions must help the participants connect with one another within a supportive environment, leading to mutual encouragement and belonging within the group.

The proposed curriculum for a secular support group will foster supportive friendships and give women a safe place to express their concerns about the midlife and empty nest transition. But even more importantly, these sessions will support the objectives of identity formation and mission formation for those military wives who participate. Simply taking the time to meet monthly and discuss the issues of midlife will result in women feeling more confident, focused, and empowered to handle the challenges of the midlife transition, and this curriculum will facilitate that outcome not only locally, but wherever military wives decide to use the proposed resources.

Midlife is both under-researched and surrounded by cultural myths. The proposed website, [BacktoYouandMe.com](http://BacktoYouandMe.com), has the potential to develop into a destination for those seeking biblically sound, research-backed, community-enhancing resources for military wives at midlife. Eventually, as the website grows and more people come to know about it, the audience may expand to include women and men from other backgrounds with their own unique sets of

challenges. The mission of the website, however, will not change: to point people in the midlife transition toward a closer walk with God and a clearer picture of themselves and their unique calling in life.

## **Chapter Five: The Future of Resources for Military Wives in Midlife**

Military wives in the empty nest and midlife transition need the support, encouragement, and community that the biblically-sound resources proposed in this project can provide. Not only do these women experience the expected stresses of midlife, but they do so in the context of a military lifestyle which adds additional strain and pressure to an already challenging life passage. The premise of this project is that midlife military wives can benefit in middle age and beyond when they address the challenges of the midlife transition through resources that guide them into a deeper relationship with God and with each other. Legendary actress and singer Doris Day once quipped, “The really frightening thing about middle age is the knowledge that you’ll grow out of it” (Williams, 2019). How military wives handle the midlife transition directly impacts their flourishing in the future when they “grow out” of middle age and take their place as elders in their families and communities. The resources I have proposed will provide crucial support for midlife military wives as they navigate the pivotal midlife transition.

### **Future Development**

In the previous chapter I laid out a plan to build a website to house two proposed resources for military wives who find themselves dealing with midlife matters: “Walking with God through Midlife” and “Embracing the Empty Nest.” These resources will provide initial support opportunities for military wives, but more is needed. Future additions to BacktoYouandMe.com will broaden my approach to helping military wives in midlife as well as optimize the visibility of the website so that more people can find it.

One of the first additions I will make to the website in the future is another course titled “Compass Check for Couples.” This offering will feature a study series of ten sessions for midlife couples, designed to be delivered in informal group settings such as homes or military

chapels. Ten sessions will allow study leaders to spread the studies out over a year-long period and accommodate busy military schedules by hosting the studies during fall, winter, and spring. In addition, each session will be designed to stand alone so that couples can join the study at any time and still benefit from the material. Each session will include a brief teaching on a midlife topic of interest for couples, grounded in a passage of scripture. Each weekly session will also include group discussion questions, ideas for ice breakers, and suggested scripture readings and prayer prompts for each couple to use at home. This portion of the website will be developed in partnership with Jack Stumme, my husband and a US Army chaplain of 28 years.

The next content section identified for future development will add a human-interest element to BacktoYouandMe.com: “Real-Life Empty Nesters” will feature autobiographical stories about empty nesting experiences. Based loosely on the model of “Humans of New York” (Stanton, n.d.), this section will share, in their own words, the joys and sorrows of people who have lived the midlife and empty nest transition and will give them an opportunity for generativity as they pass down the life lessons they have learned to the next generation approaching middle age.

A third future content section will feature a blog where guest authors and I can share thoughts on thriving at midlife through essays, poems, and stories. This section will also include a specifically male-perspective column written by my husband Jack, initially, and expanded to include the thoughts of other male authors who would like to contribute. The purpose of the blog section is not to create memoir-like entries, but rather to serve as a discussion of real-life midlife issues from a biblical perspective for readers who may not be able to join a Bible study or support group in person. Each entry will feature a comments section where the author can interact with readers and readers can support and encourage each other. In addition to providing

virtual community, the comments sections will in all probability reveal topics for further research and development.

Finally, I will develop two collections of devotional readings, one for midlife couples and one for empty nest moms, targeted at a more general audience rather than solely the military family demographic. These collections will be published on Substack and will be accessible via paid subscriptions. The income generated from these resources will be used to support the further development of the website and its resources and to further my own research into the nature of the military wife's experience of midlife.

### **Future Research and Resources**

This project has made use of existing research on women in middle age and on the general experiences of military wives to develop a clearer picture of what military wives experience in midlife and what can be done to support their success in completing the developmental tasks of middle age. Nevertheless, research on military wives in middle age is quite rare. While the demographic is small, approximately 80,000 in number, these women are key leaders in the military community. Future research should examine identity formation, career development, and successful navigation of the midlife transition among this cohort in order to identify specific interventions which will support thriving.

In addition to research, the military itself should provide training and support for women at midlife. As discussed in the introduction, the military offers no formal resources for women in the midlife transition, nor are there resources provided by military-focused media outlets. But there are organizations within the military that provide support for military families, and these organizations could provide an excellent starting point for spreading information about resources for women associated with the military when they reach midlife. I have already discussed two

organizations briefly—PWOC and military spouses' clubs—and both can be avenues for promoting awareness of the needs of women in midlife. But there are two other military organizations that can effectively raise awareness and meet needs of military wives for support at midlife.

The first type of organization is the military-sanctioned family support service for each branch of the military. For instance, the Army has Army Community Service (ACS). ACS became an official part of the US Army in 1965 and was designed to promote the stability of social support programs for military families which had been previously run solely by volunteers (Army Community Service, 2021). Similarly, the Navy has Navy Fleet and Family, and the Air Force has its Key Spouses Program. For the Army, the largest of the US military branches, ACS provides extensive training for child-rearing, marriage, resilience, and the military lifestyle, and is a logical choice for hosting resources and training for women at midlife. Resources and training programs developed for military wives by ACS can be shared with similar organizations in the other branches of the military.

The other key military organizations which should develop training classes and resources for supporting women in midlife are the Army, Navy, and Air Force military chaplaincies. Military chaplaincies provide worship services, religious support, and religious education to service members and their families around the world. The chaplaincies have the opportunity to either develop their own resources or utilize existing resources to provide support to military families in the empty nest and midlife transition. With the goal of encouraging chapels and chaplains to do so, I will be presenting a class on the topic of midlife and military life at the United States Army Europe and Africa command chaplain's 2023 Operational Religious Support Leaders Training (ORSLT), a week-long conference for all Army chaplains stationed in Europe

and Africa, their enlisted counterparts, and civilian staff members. I anticipate that my presentation will generate interest in the resources I create, but more importantly, the presentation will generate opportunities to talk with attendees about how the needs of military wives in midlife can be addressed in their own local chapels. Efforts to address the needs of military wives will result in more stable military families and communities, as well as more confident and stable military children who profit from their mothers' success in navigating the empty nest and midlife transition.

### **The Completion of the Beginning**

From its inception, this project has not been theoretical but practical, born from my own experiences and questions. I have lived the midlife changes, challenges, and choices as a military wife and continue to make my way through that pivotal transition. Yet, while practical, the materials presented in this work are not reflective of my personal experience alone. They are solidly grounded in the scientific literature on the pivotal midlife period and the military spouse experience as well as the biblical perspectives of well-respected and experienced Christian authors. This level of research and analysis was appropriate for the complex needs of the future audience for the proposed resources: military wives in the empty nest and midlife transition period. Thus, while my research and analysis are nearing completion, this project is only beginning.

My next step is to start creating the proposed resources while building relationships with the audience: real women like me, who live next door and across the street, women whom I see on a daily basis as we go about our lives as midlife military wives. Right now, we are largely an invisible group with no distinct identity or personalized resources which can speak directly to our challenges at midlife. My hope is, through the development plan laid out in this thesis, that

military wives will soon have access to biblically sound and community-enhancing resources that can support them through the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual changes, challenges, and choices of the midlife and empty nest transition.

## Bibliography

- Abdelaal, H. (2022). The military spouse employment dilemma: The multi-million dollar question that no one is asking . . . until now. [White paper]. National Military Spouse Network. Retrieved 28 June 2022 from [https://www.nationalmilitaryspousenetwork.org/public/images/2022\\_White\\_Paper\\_NMSN.pdf](https://www.nationalmilitaryspousenetwork.org/public/images/2022_White_Paper_NMSN.pdf)
- About military onesource support services • military onesource*. Military OneSource. (2022, June 6). Retrieved July 16, 2022, from <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/about-us/>
- Allberry, Sam. (2021). *What God has to say about our bodies: How the Gospel is good news for our physical selves*. [Kindle]. Crossway. Retrieved from Amazon.com
- American Psychological Association. (2022). *APA Dictionary of Psychology*. American Psychological Association. Retrieved June 11, 2022, from <https://dictionary.apa.org/developmental-task>
- American Psychological Association. (n.d.). *Guidelines for psychological practice with older adults*. American Psychological Association. Retrieved June 11, 2022, from <https://www.apa.org/practice/guidelines/older-adults>
- An, J. S., & Cooney, T. M. (2006). Psychological well-being in mid to late life: The role of generativity development and parent–child relationships across the lifespan. *International Journal of Behavioral Development*, 30(5), 410–421. DOI: 10.1177/0165025406071489
- Army Community Service*. Army MWR. (2021, December 28). Retrieved August 7, 2022, from <https://www.armymwr.com/programs-and-services/personal-assistance/army-community-service>
- Arp, D., & Arp, C. (1996). *The second half of marriage: Facing the eight challenges of the empty nest years*. [Kindle]. Zondervan. Retrieved from Amazon.com

- Blanchflower, D. G., & Oswald, A. J. (2008). Is well-being U-shaped over the life cycle? *Social Science & Medicine*, 66. DOI: 10.1015/j.socscimed.2008.01.030
- Blue Star Families. (2021). 2021 military family lifestyle survey comprehensive report: Executive summary. Retrieved 30 June 2022 from <https://bluestarfam.org/survey/>
- Blue Star Families. (2021). 2021 military family lifestyle survey comprehensive report. Retrieved 20 June 2022 from <https://bluestarfam.org/survey/>
- Blumel, J. E., Castelo-Branco, C., Binfa, L., Gramengna, G., Tacla, X., Aracena, B., Cumsille, M. A., & Sanjuan, A. (2000). Quality of life after the menopause: A population study. *Maturitas*, 34(1), 17-23. DOI: 10.1016/S0378-5122(99)00081-X
- Buford, B. (2015). *Halftime*. Zondervan.
- Clay, R. A. (2003, April). *An empty nest can promote freedom, improved relationships*. apa.org. Retrieved June 10, 2022, from <https://www.apa.org/monitor/apr03/plus.html>
- Cole, R. F., Cowan, R. G., Dunn, H., & Lincoln, T. (2021). Military spouses' perceptions of suicide in the military spouse community. *The Professional Counselor*, 11(2), 203-217. DOI: 10.15241/rfc.11.2.203
- Degges-White, S., & Myers, J. E. (2006). Transitions, Wellness, and Life Satisfaction: Implications for Counseling Midlife Women. *Journal of Mental Health Counseling*, 28(2), 133-150. <http://ezproxy.liberty.edu/login?qurl=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.proquest.com%2Fscholarly-journals%2Ftransitions-wellness-life-satisfaction%2Fdocview%2F198785165%2Fse-2%3Faccountid%3D12085>
- Department of Defense. (2020). 2020 demographics: Profile of the military community. Retrieved February 7, 2022, from <https://demographics.militaryonesource.mil>

- Dimiceli, E. E., Steinhardt, M. A., & Smith, S. E. (2010). Stressful Experiences, Coping Strategies, and Predictors of Health-related Outcomes among Wives of Deployed Military Servicemen. *Armed Forces & Society*, 36(2), 351–373. DOI: 10.1177/0095327X08324765
- Dock, C. (2018, October 10). *Military families are a key to the overall readiness of the Force*. www.army.mil. Retrieved July 17, 2022, from [https://www.army.mil/article/212249/military\\_families\\_are\\_a\\_key\\_to\\_the\\_overall\\_readiness\\_of\\_the\\_force](https://www.army.mil/article/212249/military_families_are_a_key_to_the_overall_readiness_of_the_force)
- DOD instruction 132008: *Continuation of commissioned officers on active duty and on the reserve active-duty status list*. (2017, updated 2020). Department of Defense. Retrieved 15 July 2022 from <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/issuances/dodi/132008p.pdf?ver=2020-08-28-154900-367>
- El Khoudary, S. , Greendale, G. , Crawford, S. , Avis, N. , Brooks, M. , Thurston, R. , Karvonen-Gutierrez, C. , Waetjen, L. & Matthews, K. (2019). The menopause transition and women's health at midlife: a progress report from the Study of Women's Health Across the Nation (SWAN). *Menopause*, 26 (10), 1213-1227. DOI: 10.1097/GME.00000000000001424.
- Elliot, E. (1989). A call to older women. *The Elisabeth Elliot Newsletter* (Sept./Oct. 1989). Retrieved 09 August 2022 from [https://cdn.elisabethelliott.org/newsletters/EENews\\_1989\\_09\\_10.pdf](https://cdn.elisabethelliott.org/newsletters/EENews_1989_09_10.pdf)
- Empty nest syndrome*. Psychology Today. (2019, February 26). Retrieved February 7, 2022, from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/conditions/empty-nest-syndrome>
- Freund, A. M., & Ritter, J. O. (2009). Midlife crisis: a debate. *Gerontology*, 55(5), 582–591. DOI: 10.1159/000227322

- Frisvold, M. H., Lindquist, R., & McAlpine, C. P. (2012). Living Life in the Balance at Midlife: Lessons Learned From Mindfulness. *Western Journal of Nursing Research*, 34(2), 265–278. DOI: 10.1177/0193945911424171
- Fryling, A. (2021). *Aging faithfully: The holy invitation of growing older*. [Kindle]. NavPress, Colorado Springs. Retrieved from Amazon.com.
- Grover, N. & Dang, P. (2013). Empty nest syndrome vs. empty nest trigger: Psychotherapy formulation based on systemic approach—A descriptive case study. *Psychological Studies*, 58(3), 285-288. DOI: 10.1007/s12646-013-0207-9.
- Gurian, M. (2013). *The wonder of aging: A new approach to embracing life after fifty*. [Kindle]. Atria. Retrieved from Amazon.com
- Hagerty, B. B. (2016). *Life reimagined: The science, art, and opportunity of midlife*. [Kindle]. Riverhead Books. Retrieved from Amazon.com
- Hanson, P. (2020). Brigade command team spouse development program (CTSDPBDE): Course syllabus FY 2020. [PDF file]. Retrieved from <https://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/documents/cace/CGSC/SCP/BDE-CTSDP-Syllabus%20-%202020.pdf>
- Harkness, S. (2008). Empty Nest Syndrome. In: Loue, S.J., & Sajatovic M. (eds.) *Encyclopedia of Aging and Public Health*. DOI: 10.1007/978-0-387-33754-8\_156
- Idumonyi, J. (2019, October 29). *What is empty nest syndrome? A useful guide to this phenomenon*. Health, Brain and Neuroscience. Retrieved June 10, 2022, from <https://yourbrain.health/empty-nest-syndrome/>
- Infurna, F. J., Gerstorf, D. and Lachman, M. E. (2021). Midlife in the 2020s: Opportunities and challenges. *Am Psychol*. 75(4). 470-485. DOI: 10.1037/amp0000591.

- Kahana, E., Kelley-Moore, J., & Kahana, B. (2012). Proactive aging: A longitudinal study of stress, resources, agency, and well-being in late life. *Aging & Mental Health, 16*(4), 438-451. DOI: 10.1080/13607863.2011.644519
- King, M. E., & Theiss, J. A. (2016). The communicative and physiological manifestations of relational turbulence during the empty-nest phase of marital relationships. *Communication Quarterly, 64*(5), 495-517. DOI: 10.1080/01463373.2015.1129353
- Lachman, M. E. (2004). Development in midlife. *Annual Review of Psychology, 55*(1), 305-331.
- Lachman M. E. (2015). Mind the Gap in the Middle: A Call to Study Midlife. *Research in human development, 12*(3-4), 327–334. DOI: 10.1080/15427609.2015.1068048
- Lachman, M. E., Teshale, S., & Agrigoroaei, S. (2015). Midlife as a pivotal period in the life course: Balancing growth and decline at the crossroads of youth and old age. *International Journal of Behavioral Development, 39*(1), 20-31. DOI: 10.1177/0165025414533223.
- Lazarra, J. (2020). *Lifespan development*. Maricopa Community Colleges. <https://open.maricopa.edu/devpsych/chapter/chapter-10-adulthood/>. Accessed 24 April 2020.
- Mailey, E. L., Mershon, C., Joyce, J., & Irwin, B. C. (2018). "Everything else comes first": a mixed-methods analysis of barriers to health behaviors among military spouses. *BMC public health, 18*(1), 1013. DOI: 10.1186/s12889-018-5938-z
- Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. (2020, April 14). *Tips for coping with empty nest syndrome*. Mayo Clinic. Retrieved February 7, 2022, from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-lifestyle/adult-health/in-depth/empty-nest-syndrome/art-20047165>

- Mayo Foundation for Medical Education and Research. (2020, October 14). *Menopause*. Mayo Clinic. Retrieved February 7, 2022, from <https://www.mayoclinic.org/diseases-conditions/menopause/symptoms-causes/syc-20353397>
- McFadden, J. R., & Rawson Swan, K. T. (2012). Women during midlife: Is it transition or crisis? *Family & Consumer Sciences Research Journal*, *40*(3), 313-325. DOI: 10.1111/j.1552-3934.2011.02113.x
- McGowan, H. C. (2008). The military experience: Perceptions from senior military officers' wives. [Doctoral dissertation, Capella University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Open. Retrieved from <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/military-experience-perceptions-senior-officers/docview/89135499/se-2>.
- Meadows, S. O., Griffin, B. A., Karney, B. R., & Pollak, J. (2016). Employment Gaps Between Military Spouses and Matched Civilians. *Armed Forces & Society*, *42*(3), 542–561. DOI: 10.1177/0095327X15607810
- Miller, D. A. (1981). The “sandwich” generation: adult children of the aging. *Social Work*, *26*(5), 419–423. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23712207>
- Miley, J. (1998). *Women at Midlife*. [Kindle edition]. WaterBrook Press. Retrieved from Amazon.com
- Mitchell, B. A., & Lovegreen, L. D. (2009). The empty nest syndrome in midlife families: A multimethod exploration of parental gender differences and cultural dynamics. *Journal of Family Issues*, *30*(12), 1651-1670. DOI:10.1177/0192513X09339020
- Moilanen, J. M., Aalto, A. M., Raitanen, J., Hemminki, E., Aro, A. R., & Luoto, R. (2012). Physical activity and change in quality of life during menopause--an 8-year follow-up study. *Health and quality of life outcomes*, *10*, 8. DOI: 10.1186/1477-7525-10-8

- Page, A. P. (2018). A mixed-methods examination of the relationship between the self and adaptive coping in military wives. [Doctoral Dissertation] Retrieved from [https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1124&context=edissertations\\_sp2](https://repository.upenn.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1124&context=edissertations_sp2)
- Peterson, B. E., & Duncan, L. E. (2007). Midlife women's generativity and authoritarianism: Marriage, motherhood and 10 years of aging. *Psychology and Aging, 22*(3), 411-419. DOI: 10.1037/0882-7974.22.3.411
- Pimenta, F., Maroco, J., Ramos, C., & Leal, I. (2014). Menopausal Symptoms: Is Spirituality Associated with the Severity of Symptoms? *Journal of Religion and Health, 53*(4), 1013-24. DOI: 10.1007/s10943-013-9696-z
- Rainey, B. & Yates, S. (2017). Barbara and Susan's guide to the empty nest. [Kindle version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com.
- Raup, J. L., & Myers, J. E. (1989). The empty nest syndrome: Myth or Reality? *Journal of Counseling & Development, 68*(2), 180. DOI: 10.1002/j.1556-6676.1989.tb01353.x
- Retention control point (RCP)*. Army Reenlistment. (2022, June 24). Retrieved July 16, 2022, from <https://armyreenlistment.com/site/retention-control-point/>
- Sebastian, V. (2013). A theoretical approach to stress and self-efficacy. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 78*, 556-561. DOI: 10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.04.350
- Segal, M. W. (1986). The military and the family as greedy institutions. *Armed Forces & Society, 13*(1), 9-38. DOI: 10.1177/0095327X8601300101
- Shaffer, M. A., & Harrison, D. A. (2001). Forgotten partners of international assignments: Development and test of a model of spouse adjustment. *Journal of Applied Psychology, 86*(2), 238-254. DOI: 10.1037/0021-9010.86.2.238

- Simmons, A., & Yoder, L. (2013). Military resilience: A concept analysis. *Nursing Forum*, 48(1), 17-25. DOI: 10.1111/nuf.12007
- Sinclair, R. R., Paulson, A. L., & Riviere, L. A. (2019). The resilient spouse: Understanding factors associated with dispositional resilience among military spouses. *Military Behavioral Health*, 7(4), 376-390. DOI: 10.1080/21635781.2019.1608876
- Sparman, B. B. (2018). A view from an empty nest. [Kindle version]. Retrieved from Amazon.com
- Stanton, B. (n.d.). *About*. Humans of New York. Retrieved August 10, 2022, from <https://www.humansofnewyork.com/about>
- Strauss, E. (2016, July 18). *The life of a military wife: High pressure, loneliness, and constant uncertainty*. Slate Magazine. Retrieved July 16, 2022, from <https://slate.com/human-interest/2016/07/the-lonely-and-high-pressure-life-of-a-military-wife.html>
- Stuttaford, M. (2020). Unpaid public work is not cost free: Military spouses performing emotional labor. *Military Behavioral Health*, 8(2), 139-147. DOI: 10.1080/21635781.2020.1734511
- Sutton, J. (2020, August 5). *Erik Erikson's stages of Psychosocial Development explained*. PositivePsychology.com. Retrieved June 21, 2022, from <https://positivepsychology.com/erikson-stages/>
- Thomas, A. J., Mitchell, E. S., & Woods, N. F. (2018). The challenges of midlife women: Themes from the Seattle midlife women's health study. *Women's Midlife Health*, 4(8). DOI: 10.1186/s40695-018-0039-9
- Thompson, M. (2016, March 10). *Here's why the U.S. military is a family business*. Time. <https://time.com/4254696/military-family-business/>

- Tosi, M. (2020). Boomerang kids and parents' well-being: Adaptation, stressors, and social norms. *European Sociological Review*, 36(3), 460-473. DOI: 10.1093/esr/jcz068
- Tripp, P. D. (2004). *Lost in the middle: Midlife and the grace of God*. [Kindle edition]. Shepherd Press. Retrieved from Amazon.com.
- US Department of Defense. (2021, May 7). *Military spouses enable mission by maintaining the Home Front*. Retrieved July 16, 2022, from <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2600076/military-spouses-enable-mission-by-maintaining-the-home-front/>
- Vaillant, G. E. (2002). *Aging well: Surprising guideposts to a happier life from the landmark study of adult development*. [Kindle edition]. Hachette Book Group. Retrieved from Amazon.com.
- Van Loon, M. (2020). *Becoming sage: Cultivating meaning, purpose, and spirituality in midlife*. [Kindle edition]. Moody Publishers. Retrieved from Amazon.com.
- Wethington, E. (2000). Expecting Stress: Americans and the "Midlife Crisis". *Motivation and Emotion*, 24(2), 85-103. DOI: 10.1023/A:1005611230993
- Widra, R., & Luduvic, A. D. V. (2021). Boomerang kids in the pandemic: How high-income families are their own safety net. *Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland*. DOI: 10.26509/frbc-ec-202121
- Wiemers, E. E., & Bianchi, S. M. (2015). Competing demands from aging parents and adult children in two cohorts of American women. *Population and Development Review* 41(1). 127-146. DOI: 10.1111/j.1728-4457.2015.00029.x

- Williams, J. (2019, May 13). *"If I can do it, you can do it, anybody can": Remembering Doris Day's life in quotes*. Newsweek. Retrieved August 19, 2022, from <https://www.newsweek.com/doris-day-death-age-quotes-1423665>
- Willis, S. L., & Reid, J. D. (1999). Life in the middle: Psychological and social development in middle age. [PDF]. *Academic Press*. DOI: 10.1016/B978-012757230-7/50018-3
- Wilson, N. (2016). *The silver lining*. [Kindle edition]. Retrieved from Amazon.com. Hachette Book Group.

Appendix I: Resource List for Reading on Midlife Issues

Category	Title & Author	Format	Author's Perspective		Midlife Developmental Benchmarks Emphasized in the Resource											
			Christian	Secular	Authentic Theology	Surrender of the Past and Future	Renewed Calling	Discipleship Identity	Personal Agency	Identity of Trust in God	Renewed Intimacy	Relational Leadership	Midlife Friendships	Stewardship of the Body	Legacy Mindset	
The Midlife Transition	<b>Becoming Sage: Cultivating Meaning, Purpose, and Spirituality in Midlife</b> Michelle Van Loon	Kindle Print Audible	■		■	■	■	■	■	■	■		■	■	■	■
	<b>Halftime: Moving from Success to Significance</b> Bob Buford	Kindle Print Audible	■				■		■	■						■
	<b>Life Reimagined: The Science, Art and Opportunity of Midlife</b> Barbara Bradley Hagerty	Kindle Print Audible		■						■		■	■	■	■	■
	<b>Lost in the Middle: Midlife and the Grace of God</b> Paul Trip	Kindle Print	■		■	■	■	■	■	■	■					■
	<b>Women at Midlife: Embracing the Challenges</b> Jean Miley	Kindle Print	■		■	■	■	■	■		■				■	■

Category	Title & Author	Format	Author's Perspective		Midlife Developmental Benchmarks Emphasized in the Resource											
			Christian	Secular	Authentic Theology	Surrender of the Past and Future	Renewed Calling	Discipleship Identity	Personal Agency	Identity of Trust in God	Renewed Intimacy	Relational Leadership	Midlife Friendships	Stewardship of the Body	Legacy Mindset	
The Empty Nest	<b>A View from an Empty Nest</b> Bonnie Sparrman	Kindle Print	■						■		■		■			■
	<b>... And So We Pray</b> Maribeth Harper	Kindle Print	■		■	■	■	■	■	■	■		■			■
	<b>Barbara and Susan's Guide to the Empty Nest: Discovering New Purpose, Passion, and Your Next Great Adventure</b> Susan Yates & Barbara Rainey	Kindle Print	■			■	■			■		■	■			■
	<b>Empty Nest, Full Life: Discovering God's Best for Your Next</b> Jill Savage	Kindle Print Audible	■			■	■			■		■	■	■		■
	<b>Grown &amp; Flown: How to Support Your Teen, Stay Close as a Family, and Raise Independent Adults</b> Lisa Heffernan & Mary Dell Harrington	Kindle Print Audible		■							■		■	■		■

Category	Title & Author	Format	Author's Perspective		Midlife Developmental Benchmarks Emphasized in the Resource												
			Christian	Secular	Authentic Theology	Surrender of the Past and Future	Renewed Calling	Discipleship Identity	Personal Agency	Identity of Trust in God	Renewed Intimacy	Relational Leadership	Midlife Friendships	Stewardship of the Body	Legacy Mindset		
Midlife Issues	<b>Doing Life with Your Adult Children: Keep Your Mouth Shut and the Welcome Mat Out</b> Jim Burns	Kindle Print Audible	■			■				■	■			■			■
	<b>The Mother-in-Law Dance: Can Two Women Love the Same Man and Still Get Along?</b> Annie Chapman	Kindle Print Audible	■						■	■	■			■			■
	<b>Organic Mentoring: A Mentor's Guide to Relationships with Next Generation Women</b> Sue Edwards & Barbara Neumann	Print	■					■		■	■			■			■
	<b>The Power of Praying for Your Adult Children Book of Prayers</b> Stormie Omartian	Kindle Print	■		■	■					■			■			■
	<b>The Second Half of Marriage</b> David & Claudia Arp	Kindle Print Audible	■			■	■	■				■	■				■

Category	Title & Author	Format	Author's Perspective		Midlife Developmental Benchmarks Emphasized in the Resource											
			Christian	Secular	Authentic Theology	Surrender of the Past and Future	Renewed Calling	Discipleship Identity	Personal Agency	Identity of Trust in God	Renewed Intimacy	Relational Leadership	Midlife Friendships	Stewardship of the Body	Legacy Mindset	
Aging and End of Life	<b>Aging Faithfully: The Holy Invitation of Growing Older</b> Alice Fryling	Kindle Audible Print	■		■	■	■	■	■	■	■					■
	<b>Aging Well: Surprising Guideposts to a Happier Life from the Landmark Study of Adult Development</b> George Vaillant, MD	Kindle Audible Print		■								■	■	■	■	■
	<b>The Christian Handbook on Aging</b> Howard Eyrich & Judy Dabler	Print	■		■		■	■	■	■	■		■			■
	<b>Finishing Well for the Glory of God: Strategies from a Christian Physician</b> John Dunlop, MD	Kindle Print	■		■	■	■	■	■	■	■				■	■
	<b>The Wonder of Aging: A New Approach to Embracing Life after Fifty</b> Michael Gurian	Kindle Audible Print		■		■						■	■	■	■	■
	<b>Growing Older &amp; Wiser</b> Dale Larsen & Sandy Larsen	Print	■		■	■	■	■	■		■					■

## **Appendix II: Outline of Chapters for “Walking with God Through Midlife”**

The following is my proposal for twelve study sessions in Philippians focusing on the changes, challenges, and choices of midlife. The study is designed to be used by a military chapel sponsored Bible study over the course of one semester. It can also be used as a neighborhood study split into two parts of six sessions each, where each part can be a stand-alone study. This organizational format gives the material a flexibility of use that will help busy military wives find the time to commit to the study.

### **Session One: The “Good Work” of God in Midlife — Philippians 1:1-11**

**Learning Objectives:** authentic theology, surrender of experiences and expectations, renewed calling, discipleship identity, legacy mindset.

Philippians 1:1-8 contains Paul’s prayer for the Christians at Philippi, and this prayer is no less powerful for military wives at the midlife transition today. We need to know that midlife and all of its challenges is being used by God to complete the good work He started in us (verse 6). The completion of that work is described in Paul’s prayer in verses 9-11: we should be abounding in love, in knowledge of God, and in discernment so that we know what is excellent and can pursue those things. Our growing love and knowledge will help us to live with sincerity and purity and to be fruitful through the power of Christ in our lives. Reflective questions on this passage will encourage participants to consider the role of the Gospel in their lives and how they view the importance of knowing God, giving them an opportunity to evaluate the authenticity of their belief in Christ and whether they truly live out their theology and their holy calling to fruitfulness.

**Session Two: The Tensions of Midlife in the Context of the Gospel — Philippians 1:12-26**

**Learning Objectives:** authentic theology, surrender of experiences and expectations, renewed calling, discipleship identity, stewardship of the physical body

This second passage in Philippians 1 teaches us that God uses all types of struggles to spread the good news of His provision through Christ. As Christians, we can expect that God will allow us to experience the challenges of midlife in ways that make it possible to bring Him glory and give us opportunities to talk about the Gospel. Ultimately, Paul reminds us, the most important thing we live for is not staying alive: It is Christ. Reflective questions on this passage will encourage participants to think about the reality of trials and challenges in life—including bodily suffering and persecution like Paul experienced—and consider ways to reframe those experiences as opportunities for personal sanctification and for sharing the Gospel.

**Session Three: Defining our Identity in Midlife — Philippians 1:27-30**

**Learning Objectives:** Surrender of experiences and expectations, renewed calling, discipleship identity, personal agency, relational leadership in our families.

In this passage of scripture, Paul calls upon believers to see themselves as citizens of heaven and live out that identity in their daily lives regardless of the results. We are to pay special attention to our behavior to ensure that it is worthy of the Gospel, and this effort will lead to unity of mind and spirit between believers as we live out the truths of the gospel together (verse 27). The study of this passage raises excellent questions about how we see ourselves. Reflective questions in this session will allow participants to consider their own identity formation as citizens of heaven and the impact that sense of identity has on how they approach the challenges of midlife. In addition, the passage begins to introduce some concepts that will be helpful in developing relational leadership skills. Paul gives some excellent principles for dealing

with conflict, especially conflict around principles of Godly living.

#### **Session Four: A Model for Midlife Relationships — Philippians 2:1-4**

**Learning Objectives:** renewed intimacy, relational leadership in our families, midlife friendships.

In the first four verses of Philippians 2, Paul begins to draw for the reader a model of what true Christian community should look like, and his principles can be applied to marriage, families, and friendships. Paul encourages his readers to seek unity in love and purpose, and to exercise humility in working hard to further the interests of others as much as we further our own interests. Military wives in midlife may already feel as if their own interests are receiving less attention than the interests of the military or their community, therefore the reflection questions for this section will explore that issue and discuss ways midlife military women can support and serve each other in meaningful ways that lead to thriving marriages, families, and friendships.

#### **Session Five: Christ as our Model of Midlife Discipleship — Philippians 2:5-11**

**Learning Objectives:** authentic theology, surrender of experiences and expectations, renewed calling, discipleship identity, personal agency, stewardship of the physical body, renewed intimacy, relational leadership, midlife friendships.

Paul's comprehensive description of the humility, selflessness, and submission of Christ in this passage provide the perfect opportunity for each participant to ask what midlife would look like for her if she imitated the qualities of Christ in her everyday life. Indeed, there is application to be found in these verses for every possible circumstance of life. The passage also provides an excellent opportunity to allow each participant to continue to formulate her view of who Christ is and why that matters, a key component of creating an authentic and sustainable theology for life.

**Session Six: Shining as Midlife Lights in a Dark World — Philippians 2:12-16**

**Learning Objectives:** renewed calling, personal agency, renewed intimacy, relational leadership, midlife friendships, legacy mindset.

In the previous session there was an opportunity to imagine midlife lived out with the mindset of Christ. In this session, we will study what Paul says that looks like in our spheres of influence so that we, too, can be shining lights in a “crooked and perverse generation” (verse 14). Paul promises that living life this way will result in glory when we see Christ (verse 16). Because this may be a stopping point for some discussion groups using the study, reflective questions for this session will concentrate on evaluating the kinds of legacies we want to leave through the practice of generativity and through our faith lived out in our families and marriages.

**Session Seven: Friendships at Midlife — Philippians 2:19-30**

**Learning Objectives:** renewed calling, midlife friendships, legacy mindset.

This passage in Philippians reminds us of the importance of building strong, supportive relationships with other believers who are also passionate about their spiritual walk with Christ. Paul presents Timothy as an example of someone who is “of kindred spirit who will genuinely be concerned for your welfare” (verse 20). Sadly, this type of person is not the norm. Paul describes other Christians in less glowing terms: “For they all seek after their own interests, not those of Christ Jesus” (verse 21). Flourishing at midlife requires that we both have and be friends like Timothy and Epahroditus, who is mentioned later in the passage. Reflective questions will give participants the opportunity to evaluate their own circle of friends, their commitment to those friends, and the legacies they are building through those friendships.

**Session Eight: The Proper Perspective of Self at Midlife — Philippians 3:1-14**

**Learning Objectives:** authentic theology, surrender, personal agency, identity of trust in

God, stewardship of the physical body, legacy mindset.

Paul puts the whole of life into perspective in the first fourteen verses of Philippians chapter three. No matter what we have accomplished in the past or will accomplish in the future, no matter what our physical bodies can or cannot do, our identity and security must be firmly rooted in our relationship with Christ. When we encounter suffering in life, we can be assured that it will help us to become more like Christ (verse 10). This session will provide women with the opportunity to reflect on where they put their confidence: in God or in themselves. Reflective questions will guide each woman toward recommitting herself to pressing onward toward the call of Christ on her life.

### **Session Nine: Mature Discipleship at Midlife – Philippians 3:15-21**

**Learning Objectives:** authentic theology, discipleship identity, personal agency, relational leadership, stewardship of the physical body, legacy mindset.

In this passage, Paul describes mature discipleship as the sure and steady walk of a believer who is moving toward the goal Christ has set for her. At midlife, we can demonstrate spiritual maturity by steadily following the pattern of Paul's life and the lives of other mature believers (verses 15-17) and by looking forward with hope to the transformation of our bodies and hearts (verse 21). In this session, women will be encouraged to reflect on their spiritual journey and its objective and, if necessary, to make appropriate course corrections.

### **Session Ten: Living at Peace during Midlife – Philippians 4: 1-9**

**Learning Objectives:** authentic theology, surrender, discipleship identity, personal agency, identity of trust, relational leadership, legacy mindset

Paul's description of the spiritually mature Christian living in the first nine verses of Philippians chapter four draws an enticing picture of a healthy midlife lifestyle: peace between

friends, peace within our communities, peace of mind, and the peace of God keeping our hearts and minds steadily focused on Christ. What might that look like in the life of a middle-aged military wife? Reflective questions for this session will allow women to formulate a vision for their own lives and share their insights in a group discussion.

### **Session Eleven: Contentment at Midlife – Philippians 4:10-13**

**Learning Objectives:** authentic theology, surrender, discipleship identity, personal agency, identity of trust.

The challenges of midlife are many, but this passage teaches that no matter what happens, we can find contentment. Paul's secret to contentment is simple: the strength Christ imparts to us as we walk in fellowship with Him. In this session, women will have the opportunity to evaluate their level of contentment amid the stressors of the midlife transition and discuss together how to access the strength of Christ when experiencing discontent.

### **Session Twelve: Giving and Receiving at Midlife – Philippians 4:14-23**

**Learning Objectives:** renewed calling, personal agency, identity of trust, renewed intimacy, relational leadership, legacy mindset.

In this last passage of Philippians, Paul teaches about the importance of mutual giving and receiving within the body of Christ. Whether we are the givers or receivers, however, we are reminded that all of our needs are ultimately met through the provision of God (verse 19). This session will allow women to evaluate their attitudes toward giving and receiving, their level of trust in God's provision, and their use of personal finances in light of God's unlimited resources and gracious provision for all of our needs.