

“Wise, warm and insightful”

Alistair Begg

Not Old, *not young,* Not Done.

—————→ **Following Jesus
in Your 50s & 60s**

Christopher Ash

“The period of time between middle age and old age has not yet been given a name, but with characteristic wisdom, warmth and insight, Christopher Ash has provided us with a navigational map to chart our progress. The unique privileges, challenges and opportunities of this era are to be enjoyed rather than endured as we follow Jesus and seek to make a difference for his kingdom.”

Alistair Begg, Bible Teacher, Truth For Life;
Senior Pastor, Parkside Church, Cleveland, OH

“In our fifties and sixties it can be so easy, so comfortable, to step back from serving in the church, stop getting involved in the lives of needy people, and simply settle into a comfortable spirituality that lacks passion for prayer and for new discoveries in the Bible. In this book, Christopher Ash kindly nudges us out of complacency, encouraging us to steward this particular season of life for the kingdom of God.”

Nancy Guthrie, Sixty-something Author and Bible Teacher

“This book is a lifebuoy to lift you out of the ‘Sea of Disappointment’ and put you on the ‘Path of Contentment’ as you navigate your fifties and sixties. But whatever your age, you will be steadied and strengthened by this pastoral gem from Christopher Ash. I found myself face to face with familiar griefs but also such comforting remedies. The lies we breathe are destabilising us—here is real stabilising truth and love.”

Simon Manchester, Retired Minister,
St Thomas’ North Sydney, Australia

“I wasn’t aware that I needed this, but Christopher has written a profoundly helpful challenge to take up the cross of Christ in our fifties and sixties rather than settle into a duvet of comfort or drift into a pattern of complaint. It’s all delivered with the warmth of a friend—typical of Christopher’s writing—and did me much good.”

Matt Fuller, Senior Minister,
Christ Church Mayfair, London, UK

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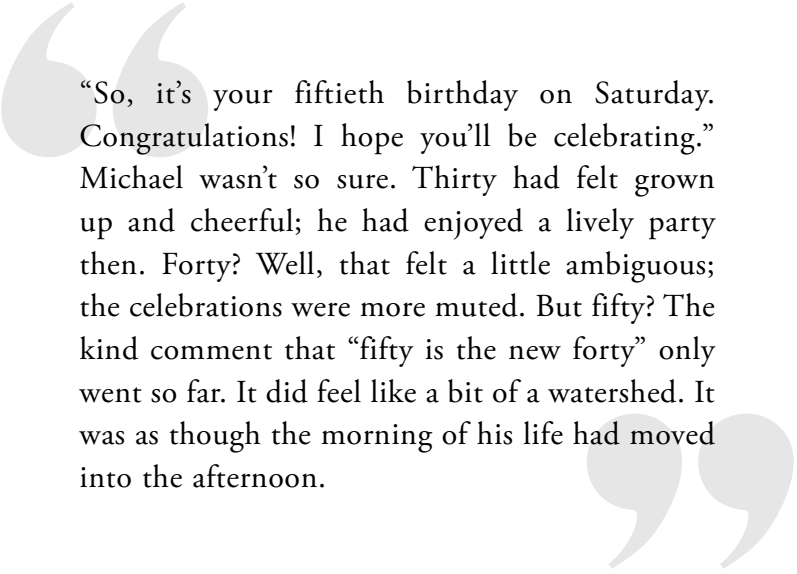
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“So, it’s your fiftieth birthday on Saturday. Congratulations! I hope you’ll be celebrating.” Michael wasn’t so sure. Thirty had felt grown up and cheerful; he had enjoyed a lively party then. Forty? Well, that felt a little ambiguous; the celebrations were more muted. But fifty? The kind comment that “fifty is the new forty” only went so far. It did feel like a bit of a watershed. It was as though the morning of his life had moved into the afternoon.

Introduction

The Afternoon of Life

*When the days drew near for [Jesus] to be taken up,
he set his face to go to Jerusalem. ...*

*Yet another said, "I will follow you, Lord, but ..."
Jesus said to him, "No one who puts his hand to the
plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of God."*

Luke 9:51, 61-62

However you feel about having turned fifty and however many years have passed since, I write to wish you a good afternoon of your life.

Let me explain what I mean. Very roughly, by "the afternoon of life" I mean your fifties and sixties—two decades when you might sense that you are entering or have entered a new season. I want to encourage you who have put your hand to the plough in the service of

Jesus not to look back but to walk on faithfully through this window of your life. As you follow the Lord Jesus, may you be one who sets your face to finish the course the Father has set before you. May God bless you in the afternoon of your life and make you a faithful follower of Jesus.

Not Old, Not Young...

I began this little book shortly before I turned seventy. (And that's another milestone—perhaps a story for a future day.) I can't remember exactly when a friend suggested jotting down some pastoral thoughts about our fifties and sixties. But anyway, just as I leave that window of life behind, here are those thoughts. In most of the world today and for the larger part of human history, your fifties and sixties would be the evening of life. You would not be surprised to die during those decades. But largely, in prosperous, Western societies with nourishing diets, good health care and long life-expectancy, the evening is often postponed until our seventies, or perhaps even our eighties or nineties.

What we are left with is this fascinatingly ambiguous time in between younger middle age and old age. You are not old, but you are not young. For simplicity I call this our fifties and sixties although, of course, you may perhaps feel that it began earlier or, more likely, that it is lasting longer (as people like me in our early seventies rather like to hope).

What I have in mind is some mix of the following characteristics. Here are six markers for “the afternoon

of life”. I realise that for every characteristic I propose there will be a hundred exceptions. Each of our lives is different from every other. And yet I think the picture I am about to paint is recognisable.

MARKER 1: CHILDREN LEAVING HOME

My first marker is that your children are beginning to leave home. If you have children, that is. But, even if you don't, this is a stage of life in which your married contemporaries with children are seeing them begin perhaps to start an apprenticeship, to go to college or university, to get a job, to leave home. The days of nappies and diapers are long past. Memories of pre-school or kindergarten are distant. The years of waiting at the end of the day at the school gate have ended. The routine of the youngster taking the bus to high school is no longer a part of family life. You are in new territory. Of course, social trends towards later marriage and sometimes much later childbearing may change significantly the age at which this happens—and housing costs may mean that we have adult children living with us well into their 20s. But the time comes when children are no longer at home, or at least no longer under our authority.

MARKER 2: CARE FOR ELDERLY PARENTS

Along with children leaving home comes—for many—a growing responsibility to care for one or more ageing parents. The days when your parents were net givers to the ecology of your life are fading. They used to have energy, money and perhaps time to help. But they are

growing older. Instead of tripping up, they now speak of “having a fall”. Grievous medical diagnoses become more common. Bereavement strikes. Rather than looking after you, they need more and more care. Perhaps a significant burden of this falls upon you. You may belong, as the saying goes, to “the sandwich generation”, squeezed between care for the older generation and responsibilities towards younger ones.

MARKER 3: AN EASING OF MONEY WORRIES

My third marker is a lessening of money worries. Not for all, of course, for there are a hundred and one reasons why many experience financial pressure as never before in the afternoon of life. But for many of us, as the expense of raising children comes to an end, there is some easing of concerns about money. For some, the death of a parent brings a significant inheritance which places this third marker on steroids.

MARKER 4: FAMILIARITY WITH OUR JOBS

My fourth marker is that stage of employment in which we are generally familiar with our work. These can be years in which we are generally confident that we can do our jobs, and do them pretty well. We may even be at the top of our game. We have been engaged in our occupations for more than a couple of decades and have developed a certain level of skill. We may even be quite senior in our fields. The prospect of retirement comes into view and perhaps the possibility of taking early retirement. At the very least, we begin to think about these things.

Once again, there are many exceptions. For some, this is a stage of disappointment, boredom and disillusion with a working life that feels frustrating or wasted. But, at the very least, many of us have got used to what we have been doing.

MARKER 5: GOOD HEALTH

Along with all this, there may be a continuation of generally robust health. Even to say this will cause pain to those for whom the opposite is true and for whom the evening has come early—perhaps much earlier than we expected or hoped. For some, this stage of life coincides with a terrible medical diagnosis or the onset of a progressive disease that slows life almost to a halt. And of course, some will die long before there is anything that can be thought of as a quiet evening of life.

But many of us—at least for some years—still enjoy steady good health. Perhaps, as our afternoon continues, we find ourselves with a little less energy and a few more niggles. Yet we can still exercise, play sport, travel, enjoy the delights of intimacy in marriage and be thankful for many of the physical blessings of this life.

MARKER 6: MORE TIME

My final marker is that many of us have more time at our disposal. It may not feel like it in our frenetic and distracted cultures. But the truth is that the incessant demands of a young family are over and the stresses of proving ourselves in a new job are a thing of the past. We may still be wildly busy—and even pride ourselves

on being so—and yet we have more choices in our use of time.

Not Done

I hope this gives a feel for what I mean by “the afternoon of life”. There are other markers I might have developed. We begin to be targeted by ads for holidays for more senior people, with models who try to make us think we are much younger than we are. People try to sell us better reading lights, more sophisticated hearing aids, and many other things we perhaps think we are not yet ready for!

I have been prompted to write this book because I am not aware of very much Christian writing that addresses this in-between time of life. There are some excellent and enormously wise and helpful books about old age, and I warmly commend these.¹ There are resources for teenagers, young singles, older singles, young marrieds, and parents of young children and teenagers. But, unless I am mistaken, there is not much that speaks to these in-between years, which are for many of us a distinctive period both of spiritual danger and spiritual opportunity. A pastor friend of mine says that this point in our lives is often a fork in the road of discipleship; it may lead to decades of exceptional fruitfulness or develop into sadly wasted years. If he is right, it is important to choose carefully. So, if you recognise yourself in at least some of my six markers, this book may be for you.

1 I have particularly appreciated Derek Prime, *A Good Old Age* and J.I.Packer, *Finishing our Course with Joy* (each printed in a reassuringly large font!).

It is worth saying that—as I leave behind this stage of life and the evening beckons—I am not here describing all the things I have done. Far from it. More often than not, I have written the book I wish someone had given me before my fiftieth birthday. Perhaps it might have saved me from some of my many failures and mistakes had I been humble enough to read it. I hope it will do you good.

One of the challenges of writing a pastoral book like this is knowing how much to dig deep into practical questions. Because our lives and circumstances are so wildly different, I have tended to err on the side of speaking to the heart rather than seeking to offer practical counsel.

At a stage of life in which positives and negatives, joys and challenges, jostle with one another in what can feel like a confusing jumble, I write to help you think things out in the light of God's truth. I write to wish you God's blessing, God's keeping, God's face shining on you, God being gracious to you, God giving you peace in this window of your life. If God is your Father through Jesus, then you may say with David that every one of your days were written in God's book before one of them dawned (Psalm 139:16). I want to wish you rich blessings in each one of those days. I hope to think with you about what that means and what it is to be a glad disciple of Jesus in these particular days. You are not old, not young, and most certainly *not done* in your service of, and growth in, the Lord. I hope you will be a man or woman who knows through these years the joy, the

peace, the purpose and the contentment that Jesus offers to his followers. That you will hear on the last day those wonderful words: “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21).

Questions and Responses

1. Does this “afternoon” idea in any way fit you at your stage of life? Which, if any, of these six markers describe you?
2. Are there any ways in which you are conscious of being in days of important choices, facing a fork in the road of your life?