

The Wonder Years is a great resource for women's book clubs, Sunday School classes, small group studies and online book clubs. In our youth-addled world, age is one of the last taboos, seldom spoken of in public, even in our churches. (I know. I'm the one who lied about my age on Facebook. For a month.) But finally, we have an honest, beautiful theologically rich resource to guide our conversations about this passage through the middle and later decades of our lives. So---for the many who have asked for a study guide, here it is!

Here's how it works. Since the book is divided into three sections: Firsts, Lasts and Always, the study guide here is designed as a 6 week series, so you'll spend two weeks per section. Or, to say it another way, each week you'll consider half of the essays in each section. That's moving at a pretty fast clip, so those of you who want to slow down to squeeze out ALL the juice, I hope you'll do exactly that, and move at your own pace.

For those of you doing an online study, feel free to pick and choose among these questions. Whatever you choose and however you do it, I know you'll have rich, raw, cathartic challenging fun as you think and speak your way through these essays with a community of like-minded and like-hearted women. Here we go!

SESSION ONE

1. In the Introduction I reference Tirah Harpaz's landmark essay in Salon.com entitled "Women Over 50 Are Invisible."

https://www.salon.com/2013/04/05/wanna_know_what_its_like_to_disappear_try_being_a_woman_over_50_partner/

Do you agree with her thesis? When do you feel most invisible---and why?

2. On the other side of this question: how important is visibility? What about the biblical emphasis on humility? Christ says he came "not to be served, but to serve." John the Baptist was eager to fade into the background when Christ appeared, saying, "he must increase; I must decrease." How do we navigate this tension between being seen as a 40, 50, 60, 70-something woman, and yet retaining the humility and servanthood Christ calls us to?
3. Who are some older women you admire? What is it about them that garners your attention and admiration?
4. Do you ever reveal your age in public, or is it a closely guarded secret? What are some of the reasons you might choose to conceal your age? And if you're open about it, what advantages and disadvantages have you seen?

5. In the Introduction, I write, “It takes courage to stop and take stock of who we are, where we’ve been, and where we’re going. It takes strength to keep our hearts open. It takes fearlessness to keep questing after the good, the beautiful, the true.” Proverbs voices a plea that perhaps should be ours as well: “Teach us to number our days that we may apply our hearts to wisdom.” Lauren Winner, on turning 40, sets her mind to living in her new decade more thoughtfully, more intentionally. What are some of the forces and voices that lead us away from this kind of open-hearted and clear-minded reckoning of ourselves and the stage we’re at in life?

6. In Titus 2:3–5, the apostle Paul encourages “older women” to “teach what is good” to “younger women.” It took me a long time to finally recognize that I was now the “older woman” and therefore I had a responsibility to those behind me. At what point do you think we become “older women”? How can we fulfill Paul’s words more effectively in our churches?

FIRSTS

So, we're ready now to launch off into some new directions. What is possible for us now in the middle and older years? Let's see what others have done!

7. In Jennifer Dukes Lee's gorgeous essay, "Cupped Hands," she figures out how to teach a nursing calf to drink from pooled water. It ends with these words:

"I dip both my hands into the tepid water. If they won't come to the water, then I can bring the water to them. I lift my cupped hands, filled with water, like a chalice. I inch forward on my knees, with those hands held out as an invitation, and then I slip water under the wet nose of one still-thirsty calf. And right then—from cupped hands stretched out on an early morning, in this common place where God's glory slides like gold across the water's surface—it happens. A baby learns to drink."

Before she accomplishes this breakthrough, she's harassed by negative voices reminding her of her past failures. Does this ever happen to you? Describe one or two of the times this happens most in your own life.

How does Jennifer overcome these voices and insecurities?

8. Brene Brown writes about falling into the "comparison mandate," saying that "comparison is the thief of happiness." She offers a brilliant antidote to this thief: creativity. How does exercising our own creativity de-fang the demon of comparison? What creative pursuit have you begun in the last few years and what has it added to your life?

9. In “Of Bodies and Birds,” Michelle Novak describes the onset of dystonia and its paralyzing force in her body and life. She loses much of her athleticism and mobility, yet she gains a new perspective on life:

“Many nights I study about them. And since my disorder requires me to sit for hours at a time every day, I’ve learned to observe them in their own space through a disciplined, almost athletic stillness, a great accomplishment for someone whose muscles are still yanking, twitching, and spasming. Now, every day a world of creatures alight in my flawed garden to be tended by a wracked body. I know what I look like. I move like someone twenty years older. But the creatures come. They stay. I’m charmed and I feel deep affection for what I never noticed when I could see straight ahead.”

As time has passed, have you lost any abilities you once had? Are there ways in which these losses have brought a fresh perspective on some part of life?

10. In “Turning,” Jill Kandel tells the story of her writing. She took up writing in her forties and didn’t publish her first book until age 59. For all those years of invisibility, she wondered if she was hearing God correctly. What Biblical characters gave her hope? How does her story encourage us to persevere?

11. Laura Lynn Brown did something extraordinary for her “first.” In “Where Have All the Hearing Aids Gone” she tells of moving to another city to care for her ailing great aunt, who was in her 90’s and alone. In her last sentence she writes, “What once was lost has now been found.” She’s writing about finding the hearing aid, but of course, about much more. What did the sacrifice of this move “find” for Laura? Have you experienced the same: that in giving something up (your freedom, your time, etc.) you gained more in return? Explain?

12. In her essay, “Rowing into the Wild,” Luci Shaw tells of embarking on a 10 day wilderness canoeing adventure at the age of 71. She writes, “As a writer- photographer I know the need for a clean ‘lens,’ for a view unobstructed by old habit and the everyday.”

13. We can’t all go on a long wilderness adventure, but what are some smaller ways we too can gain a clean “lens” on our lives?

SESSION TWO

New relationships, new creatures, new bodies, and maybe even a new bra!

Welcome back, women! You've already read the essays in the second half of the "Firsts" section. We're romping over all kinds of new ground here. Each essay contains more than we can tackle and articulate in a single session, but here are the questions and thoughts that come to me as I re-read these marvelous pieces.

1. What was your favorite essay out of the last half of this section? Did you underline any lines or sections? Share some of your favorite passages and lines with your group.
2. Amy Buckley's "first" is not one that anyone would choose. Her Prince Charming suddenly divorces her---casting her into the messy pool of online dating. She does eventually re-marry, gaining a new husband and two step-daughters. But she confesses that "merging branches" isn't easy or simple. In our mid-lives and older, it seems our family status does anything but remain static. What are some major family changes---good and hard----that you've experienced in the last few years? What are some of the ways you've attempted to keep your family stable and growing in a positive direction, despite the difficulty of some of these changes?

3. Charity Singleton Craig writes about marriage as well; she marries for the first time at age 42, and muses thoughtfully and beautifully on how marriage changes the way she views her body and her new husband's. What passage or paragraph especially spoke to you?

4. Amy K. Sorrells writes about the body as well, but from a different perspective. She describes her journey from a hopeless unhealthy "before" to a healthier, energetic "after." What motivated her from God's word to make these changes? Even though our bodies are changing and showing the marks of age, is there something you've discovered that's helping you live healthier and stronger?

5. In "A Whole New World of Horses," Heather McClaren Johnson finds herself, at nearly 50, astride a horse winning second place in an equestrian event. This thoroughly suburban woman and her suburban husband made a drastic change in their mid-lives: "We became country folks and I began climbing the steepest learning curve of my life." It's a momentous change in Heather's family's life, but it happens one small step at a time. Are you in the midst of something new? Do you see God working to lead you into a new area of work or ministry?

6. Here's our second animal story! Elisa Morgan did not discover horses: she discovered dogs. This woman, once fearful of dogs, ends up owning two massive dogs who take HER out on walks each day. She writes, "The fear of being devoured seems the very soil where love has dug in a new root of meaning. Of relationship. Of belonging. Somehow God knew this." As we consider Heather's and Elisa's essays, it may seem trivial to overcome fear and inexperience to embrace these new creatures, yet both stories recount a serious transformation through them. Have you seen God work in your life through animals—or some other similar awakening?
7. In "Awakened to Adventure," Sheila Wise Rowe embarks on another kind of adventure: she and her husband move their family to South Africa to become full time missionaries. In the crucible of the next 11 years, her sacrifices were often met with disappointment. Despite our need for control and happy endings, she learns "that maturity involves living with unmet needs and unanswered questions." We often think we'll get older and wiser and we'll finally figure Life out. But maybe not? Is Sheila right about this? Do you find this encouraging or discouraging?

8. And finally---the padded bra! In this final essay in the Firsts section, I (Leslie) critique this strange paradoxical messages we get from the media. There's the "You go, girl!" cheers from women's magazines and movies, encouraging empowerment no matter our age. But then the pages and screens are filled with photoshopped images of models and celebrities who are, of course, drop-dead gorgeous. Still. Is this supposed to help? What other critiques do you have of Hollywood and the media's treatment of female aging?

9. At the end of my essay, I serve up my confession: "My vanity still props me against the mirror every morning, massaging high- promise creams into the latest creases and lines. I'm always trying to lose ten pounds. I wear shocking red lipstick, splurge occasionally on a froufrou coat, fret about my varicose veins. I still want to feel and look good. But more than that— and more than ever—I want to *be* good. " Go ahead with your own confessions of vanity---if you're as superficial as I am! And beyond this, what kind of old woman do you want to become?"

Session Three

“Lasts”

Welcome back! Here we go, into a new section entirely. We’re enlarging our lives with new adventures and experiences, yes. But in order to do this, we’re making room by letting go of what we no longer need. We’re wiser and we’re more honest. We’re ready to follow the apostle Paul’s words in Hebrews 12:

“Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, ***let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles.*** And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, ² fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”

This, then, is the “let-it-go” section!

1. And we’re kicking off the “Lasts” with a bang and a laugh thanks to Shelly Wildman’s “Never Again---Period!” She lifts the lid on menopause, which is a word I’m sure I’ve never even spoken aloud in church. How about you? Let’s start here:

“ Whatever your feelings are about your monthly cycle, I’d venture to guess that we all would agree that hitting this stage of life—“the change” as the old ladies in my church called it with a blush and a giggle—takes its toll, both physically and emotionally. Whether we fall into the “elated” category or the “all torn up” camp, we’ve got some feelings.”

What are your feelings about this part of menopause? Are you in the cheering squad or the mourning crowd---or are you doing both?

2. How does Shelly finally reconcile her various feelings?
3. Next, we take a deep leap into hard stuff in Julie Owen's "Leaving the Night Behind." As she recounts her life with her abusive husband, and then her subsequent career educating others on domestic abuse, were there any parts of this story that resonated with you personally?
4. Perhaps the most troubling part of her story is her experience with "hundreds of women over forty who are living in the hell of domestic violence." Those who are Christians, she says, are usually urged to "pray and stay" and often even to "obey." Julie counsels them from God's word, saying that "when a husband abuses his wife, he has broken the marriage covenant and she is free to divorce. I tell them they are not obligated to stay and suffer; they are free to pursue safety, justice, and peace."

What is your church and pastor's position on this issue? Is there more that can be done? I hope that even through this one essay, we can all become advocates for the many women and families in our churches who are silently suffering abuse.

5. In the next essay, “I Renounce Snap Judgements---Again” Jeanne Murray Walker writes cleverly and beautifully of the tension between “reading the world,” and yet staying open to the world. She recalls Jesus’ warning in [Matthew 7:1-3](#) ¹“Do not judge, or you too will be judged. ²For in the same way you **judge** others, you will be judged, and with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.” Jeanne Murray Walker gives us another reason for this warning: “he warned us not to judge others because we never know the whole story and we are never impartial.” .” Can you recall a time when you made a “snap judgment” about someone that later proved totally wrong?

6. In the next essay, “Make No Mistake,” by Shannon Ethridge, she tells of getting unexpectedly “fired” from a ministry position, but wondrously, that pink slip led to Shannon’s next ministry, which has proved fruitful indeed. Her message?

“If you need to let go of something good to make room for something better, let this chapter be your pink slip. Make no mistake about your own identity or your purpose. You are God’s creation, girlfriend—put on the planet at this particular time for a particular purpose. And don’t let any perceived “failure” hinder that identity or purpose. Failures are often God- orchestrated opportunities to sharpen your spiritual focus and to prune your life so that you can be far more fruitful in the long run.”

We all experience these kind of “failures.” They can be hard to let go of sometimes. Would you share one particular “failure” that God redeemed in some way?

7. Letting go of freedom and independence is not usually something we celebrate---unless you're Amy F. Davis Abdallah! In "The Fetters and Freedom of Family" Amy, at age forty-two, trades in her glamorous life of work and travel for a husband and babies. She writes, "I choose these family fetters every day." And "Every choice is a renunciation." As the decades pass, we often make choices about family: that we'll care for our elderly parent. That we'll help raise a grandchild. That we'll house and help support our just divorced daughter. What have your experiences been with this tug between independence and the sometimes necessary joys of caring for others?

8. Andrea Stephens helps us let go of something we're all guilty of--- comparison! In "No More Comparing," she tells the story of her long term struggle with infertility. She finally began to realize that her jealousy "kept me focused on what I did not have instead of what I did have. The growing jealousy kept me from fully recognizing and embracing what God was doing in my life." (Are you feeling as convicted by this as I am?) Many of us compare ourselves with others in accomplishments, jean size (right?) physical appearance, spouses, etc. How did Andrea find her way out of this toxic thievery of joy?

9. The last essay we'll consider in Session Three is Michelle Van Loon's "The Gift of Regret." It shows and tells the cost of regret as Michelle comes to terms with her hasty decision in her twenties for a tubal ligation. She affirms Mary Shelley's words that regret causes us to become "cannibals of our own hearts."

Has this been your experience as well? Can you name at least one regret that has plagued you for some time?

10. Michelle lingers and wallows in regret for many years, but she finally surrenders to God and allows “remorse to begin its work in me.” She turned to 2 Corinthians 7:10 to understand how godly sorrow works: “Distress that drives us to God does that. It turns us around. It gets us back in the way of salvation. We never regret that kind of pain. But those who let distress drive them away from God are full of regrets, end up on a deathbed of regrets.” (The Message). Oddly, but wonderfully, she recognizes her breakdown in the fast food restaurant was actually “a gift at midlife from the One who was waiting to redeem my regrets for my good and his glory.”

Imagine now God removing this regret entirely from your life---not as if the event never happened, but as if you were freed from the weight of that regret. What would that feel and look like?

Go make yourself a huge cuppa something hot and sweet! (That’s what I’m doing right now after writing this.) ‘Cause you---we--- did it: worked and thought and imagined and prayed our way through half of the “Lasts.” Next time--More great stuff to come!

SESSION FOUR

“Lasts”

We’re going to finish the second half of the “Lasts” essays. Because there’s definitely more we need to shed as we move through the years, and nearer to Christ-likeness.

1. Luci Swindoll starts us off with “Learn When to Stop.” I love this short essay, written when she was 73. I love the admission that, “There is no definitive answer” to the question of when to stop working, to stop being so busy. She relates the lives of Julia Child and Grandma Moses (who at 100 gave herself a birthday party and danced a jig!). Who are a few of your elderly heroines who lived fully right until the end of their lives?
2. Who wants to talk about bathing suits? Margot Starbuck does in “Skin Blotches and Jiggly Thighs.” Here is a brave and beautiful woman who vows “come sun damage or unwieldy gravity or jiggly thighs, I will never . . . ever . . . swear off swimming.” What’s her secret? To borrow Tim Keller’s words it’s “The freedom of self-forgetfulness” where he says, “The essence of gospel- humility is not thinking more of myself or thinking less of myself, it is thinking of myself less.” What’s one way you can release self-focus and embrace self-forgetfulness today?

3. In “Life in High Def” Nancy hilariously tells on herself: not liking the cavernous line between her brows, she got botox treatment to host a show on natural living! She discusses the choices we all face as aging women---from expensive anti-aging creams to the use of botox, fillers, and lasers all the way to surgeries. This is another topic I’ve never heard even whispered about in church or in women’s groups. Nancy and Margot Starbuck make compelling cases to simply accept our aging on the outside since what God is doing on our inside is eternal and far more beautiful. Perhaps we should share ideas together on this topic. Is it okay/biblical/acceptable/sinful to engage in anti-aging procedures? (But wherever we land on this topic, let’s exercise full grace with one another!)

4. My essay is next: “I Lay Down My Doubts, I Take Up My Pen.” In this rambling essay, I take you through a local production of Tarzan, a trip to El Salvador and a mass shooting in Manchester, England. What is the “last” that I’m getting rid of? Impotence and doubt. In a dangerous violent world, what good are stories, essays and books? Will my art, (my writing) stop bullets? I finally decide that it might. If our creativity and art can foster empathy for the “other,” we may be able to stop bullets. We can for sure at least, help all of us remember the fallen.

Do you ever experience doubts about the value of your own work, your own “art”? What are some ways that your art, whatever it is, might indeed bring good to your neighborhood and maybe even to the world?

5. By midlife and older, most of us have a bit more time and energy to turn outward. Jennifer Grant, in “Pay Attention to What Makes You Cry” helps us discern ways we too can contribute to healing wounds in the world around us. “We can begin again, in midlife, to stand with oil in our lamps, ready to change our communities and world, ready to participate more fully in what some call the “work of the kingdom.” And for you and for me, it may all begin when we notice what makes us cry.” What particular issue has cracked your heart recently? What might be some possible ways to contribute to this need?

6. As we think on the last two essays and questions, we’re still likely to be bombarded with complaints that “I’m not good enough.” Suanne Camfield, in “Enough of Not Enough” attacks this ubiquitous claim head-on. After a public humiliation, she lands here:

“Embracing good enough has become less about changing my outward behavior and more about transforming my inner narrative. I believe that I can fail and still be worthy. . . I can accept, without embarrassment or shame, that I am truly both qualified and unqualified.” How are we unqualified and yet still fully qualified for whatever God has called us to?

7. I've ended the "Lasts" section with the best "last" of all: Win Couchman's "The Grace to Be Diminished." Win, writing in her early 80's reveals the giving up of cherished freedoms: balcony seats at church, cooking, her driver's license. Yet rather than mourn those losses, she and her husband compensate by "taking advantage of every opportunity available to be enlarged to balance that which is shrinking."

This essay brings tears to my eyes. In the several years it took to complete this book, Win passed. She is now living "that new life," that appeared nearer and nearer as she aged. How does her story give you hope and encouragement for the years ahead?

Session Five

ALWAYS

So, we've begun new adventures. Older and wiser, we've let go of the old idols and regrets that cling to our hearts and legs. And now, what will remain? What will keep us alive, vital, and prospering as the years go by? No matter what age and time take, here is what these fourteen women cling to most tightly and most joyfully. And as we read, let us consider too, who we want to be to our very last days.

1. Lynne Hybels essay "What Do You Love to Do?" ends with such beauty and wisdom. She quotes C.S. Lewis, "Joy is the serious business of Heaven." But the essay uncovers a common Christian misconception, that pleasure in God's good gifts is "frivolous." If you've had this experience as well, what are some other things that were considered frivolous? How did you overcome this mindset?
2. For some people, joy is also found in purposeful work! Patricia Raybon, in her 70's, is clearly one who takes enormous pleasure in the exercise of her gifts. And she has no plans to stop. In "Answer the Phone," she cites a long line of men and women who God called at advanced ages: Moses, Aaron, Abraham, Sarah, Zechariah, Elizabeth, etc. For some, this may sound like bad news. What? We don't ever get to retire? But Patricia has some stupendous good news about this. What is it? How does she say we're able (and willing) to keep "moving mountains" for God, no matter our age?

And---how have you experienced this empowering?

3. But---what if you're a paraplegic? Surely then you don't have to work for the kingdom of God? Ummm, yes. In Joni Eareckson Tada's "Always," she reveals her own deep pleasure in her work as well. But it's difficult. Her essay, "Three Turns of the Ramp" brings tears every time I read it. Some of you understand at least a portion of Joni's physical pain and struggle. Would you return to the verses on each landing of the ramp? Read those words aloud, or write them in your prayer journal. What is it about these verses that give Joni enough hope for each day, despite her pain? Perhaps it's enough for us as well.

4. Ann Voskamp is next. She turns 40 in her essay, "How Can I Not Keep Reaching Out?" Things are not going well. Her cousin's son decides he's an atheist. A neighbor's newborn daughter has a fatal disease, And her close friend, forty-something, is dying. Ann asks herself, and all of us, what do we do, then? How do we keep living in a world so shattered and broken? She finds her answer less in deep theology and more through action. What does Ann do? How might we learn from Ann's actions and responses?

5. Elizabeth Elliot in “Make Me a Cake,” gives us a glimpse into the difficult death of her second husband. How then shall she endure a second widowhood? Elizabeth’s piece echoes Ann’s: What do we do with our great griefs and losses? Elizabeth encourages us to do what the widow of Zarepheth was asked to do: “Offer it up.” Even when all we have to offer is our pain. Her understanding of sacrifice has changed:

“The emphasis now is not on loss, privation, or a price to be paid. I see it as an act of intelligent worship, and as a gift God has given me to give back to Him in order that He may make something of it.”

Have you seen this at work in your life, that the pain you offer to God has been “made” into something else, something good, something that matters? Can you give us a small glimpse into this experience?

6. In “Messy Edges,” Vina Mogg is caring for her mother with Alzheimer’s. She tries to control the process, control herself, control the outcome, but finally she releases it and learns to live in the moment. And in so doing, she learns to see as her mother sees. Even if we’re not caring for someone, how can Vina’s insight help us all live calmer lives?

7. The last few days, when I've needed a laugh, I've thought of Kay Warren's grandmother who had a somewhat musical walk. Remember her retort? "I am eighty years old, and if I want to toot when I walk, I will! Here I come: Toot- toot- toot!" She also tells the story of her wig flying on the wind, leaving her bald in the parking lot, laughing uproariously. I for one could use a bit more laughter in my life. Would you share one small story that makes you laugh?

8. We're on a happiness tear now in this "Always" section. Kendra Smiley, the fun-meister of her family, reveals what motivates her joyful ways now: the misery of her mother who could never rise above her circumstances, specifically the man she married. Kendra ends with this:

"Until the day I die, no matter my circumstances, I want to speak and write and pray and live with the contagious joy of the Lord as my strength."

What are some things that hold us back from living out "the contagious joy of the Lord"?

SESSION SIX

We're in the final stretch, finishing the last half of the "Always" section. Just to recap and remember, we're looking at the qualities, the practices and beliefs that we'll cling to no matter what time and age take from us. This is who we want to be and what we want to keep doing, no matter what!

1. Paula Huston starts us out with "The Good Earth." She vows, "Even if someone has to wheel me out the door or carry me like an infant or push my bed to the window and take off the screen and help me lay my face against the sill so I can feel the sun on my eyelids, I will always, every day, get myself outdoors till the moment there's no need anymore, thanks to the good black earth that will by then be cradling me."

We don't speak a lot about the place of nature/creation in our lives. Are we perhaps too focused on the world to come rather than the world that is? What part of Paula's essay resonates with or challenges you?

2. We don't talk about divorce much in the church, yet many have suffered through difficult marriages and difficult divorces. K. Martha Levitt in "Building a Stone Wall" doesn't shy away from the grief she experiences from a traumatic marriage and its aftermath. Martha comes to this realization as she surveys the crumbling ground around her:

"The life we build is not essentially in the houses and farms or the careers and products of our hands. The life we build is implanted within us. We carry its truths like nourishment, like life-giving water. This is the promise and mystery of all of the Scriptures—God, always before his people, beside them, and behind them, until he finally walks among them and lives within them. This heart-carrying, this sheltering, has always been the way to make a place of permanence, to create home."

Have you lost homes? Have your stone walls crumbled as well? Where, these days, do you find yourself most at "home"?

3. Madeleine L'Engle, in "The Flesh is to Be Honored," returns us to the body, to flesh, to the things of this world as she sits in a rocking chair with a naked baby against her chest. But such moments reveal the truth about time: there are two kinds of Time---Kairos and Chronos. We are caught in "chronos," and so our bodies wear out. But kairos is something else indeed. How and when do you experience Kairos moments?

4. Gina Ochsner, friend and courageous wanderer, writes of a pilgrimage she took to Eastern Europe. I know Gina, and she travels often to the most out-of-the-way places. On this trip, something happens----nothing. Gina finds herself surprised:

“I did not expect time to work this way in me. I thought as I approached fifty, I would grow content in my understanding of who God is and who I am meant to be; I thought I would grow content to sit. I thought as I grew older I would want to walk less, explore less, settle down. But the opposite has happened. I don’t know where these rocky paths will lead as I press onward. It’s not a smooth commute, this sojourn. The rocks will puncture my soles. I will stumble, and I will fall. And I will thank God every day for it. An amateur, an imposter—maybe. But mostly, still a pilgrim.”

Where are you on this road? Are you a grateful homesteader or a grateful pilgrim---or something in between?

5. Gina was surprised to see she was still a pilgrim as she neared 50. As you consider your life and where you are right now, are you surprised? Are you different than you thought you would be at this age?

6. When Jen Pollock turns forty in “This is Forty” she ends up bent over in wracking sobs. She writes,

“I appreciated, in some new way, that life’s goodness was episodic and fitful. That it was all going so quickly, and I couldn’t save any of it. To be human, living post–Genesis 3, is to suffer life’s fragility. There is nothing forever about twenty- one or forty- one or eighty- one. Time indeed runs out.”

I don’t think we allow ourselves to feel and acknowledge this enough. The scriptures are full of death and dying. And our movies often depict and explore death and dying. But it seems our churches are not comfortable with this topic. Is this true for your community? If so, why do we seem to avoid this reality?

7. In “Naked I Came” Jill Kandel, in her early 60’s, tells the story of her father-in-law, A Dutch pastor, who ends his own life by euthanasia. She learns this stunning truth from a researcher: “To have a good death, you have to be willing to not hide yourself. To be vulnerable and open. Our suffering has a purpose; it helps us let go; it helps us soften and give ourselves away. Death humbles us.” Jill concludes:

“The very thing we are afraid of is that which sets us free. We must stand naked and vulnerable before death. We must be humble. We must let it have its way, not rip the shell away.”

We all fear death in some way. What are we most afraid of?

In a time when euthanasia will become increasingly common, how can we truly embrace the humility of death?

8. In the epilogue, I turn to Ecclesiastes, which is a book not unlike The Wonder Years itself: a book that asks, as we have asked: “As the sun rises and sets from decade to decade, what is it all for? What is it good for us to do all our days under the sun?”

The forty women in this book have so many answers, don't we? And here, at the close of this study, at the close of this book, we return to this glorious promise from God himself: “Even to your old age and gray hairs I am he, I am he who will sustain you. I have made you and I will carry you; I will sustain you and I will rescue you” (Isaiah 46:4).

Amen. Now only one question remains. The only question that counts: will you believe God's words? Will you work and rest and trust and laugh knowing that He WILL sustain and carry and rescue you all your livelong days, all the way through your wonder years to your old age and your death?