

Finishing Well: Faithful to the Very End

For nearly two decades, I have carried a growing concern about what it means to finish well.

When I was young, much of life seemed to be about beginnings. I thought about what God might be calling me to do, where my life was going, and what I might someday accomplish.

As the years passed, another question began to matter just as much to me:

How will I finish?

Some of that concern grew out of watching respected Christian leaders make choices that seriously damaged trust. I do not need to retell the details. What stayed with me was how far the consequences traveled. Families, friends, and congregations were affected, and some people who had trusted those leaders became disoriented themselves.

I began to understand that a leader's choices rarely affect that person alone. The consequences can reach people who had no part in making those choices.

Finishing Well Requires Intention

I do not believe finishing well happens automatically. Years of faithfulness do not guarantee how we will respond tomorrow.

Finishing well requires intention. We must continue paying attention to our hearts, our relationships, and the choices we make along the way.

Most people do not suddenly decide to abandon everything they value. More often, the change begins quietly.

A hurt is never resolved. A disappointment begins changing what we believe about God. A compromise seems small enough to excuse. Success makes us less willing to listen. Weariness causes us to withdraw from people who might help us.

Over time, one choice leads to another, and we may find ourselves farther from God and others than we ever intended to be.

What Can Pull Us Away

Success Can Test Us Too

I have also watched greater responsibility bring unhealthy tendencies closer to the surface. Increased authority can make correction easier to resist and self-protection easier to justify. A person may gradually become more controlling without recognizing how much the responsibility is changing the way he or she relates to others.

Those observations taught me something I have never forgotten: hardship is not the only test of a life. Success can be an even greater one.

We tend to prepare ourselves for adversity. We know difficult seasons will test our faith. But success may touch places in us that hardship never reaches. What happens when our authority grows? What happens when fewer people are willing to tell us no?

Sometimes success reveals what has been quietly growing in the heart.

Hurt Can Harden Us

We can also lose our way through the things other people do to us.

Someone may betray us, overlook us, speak falsely about us, or make a decision that deeply affects our lives. Our pain may be completely understandable. The danger comes when we allow that pain to begin determining who we become.

Offense can slowly wall off part of the heart. We begin protecting ourselves. We pull away from people who might help us. We replay what happened until the offense begins shaping the way we see ourselves, other people, and even God.

Forgiveness does not mean pretending that nothing happened. It does not require us to ignore continuing harm or restore trust before it has been rebuilt. Sometimes love requires clear boundaries and an honest conversation.

But I do not want another person's choices to have the final word over my heart. I do not want what someone did to me to determine what I become.

Difficulty Can Cause Us to Lose Heart

Some people do not lose their way because of success or an obvious moral failure. They simply become discouraged.

A prolonged illness, unanswered prayer, financial loss, family conflict, betrayal, or disappointment can leave us tired and confused. We may begin wondering whether God sees us or whether He really cares.

If we are not careful, disappointment can become distance. We stop expecting God to meet us. We withdraw from other people. We quietly give up on parts of our calling because we no longer believe anything will change.

Difficult seasons are not proof that God has abandoned us. But when we are hurting, we often need time and the help of trusted people to recognize what He may be doing.

I have learned not to interpret God's character through the difficulty of the moment. I may not understand what He is doing, but I can return to what I know about who He is.

Compromise Can Grow

The dangers of losing our way are not mysterious.

Scripture speaks of the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life (1 John 2:16). In every generation and every part of the

world, the enemy has used these same areas to draw people away from the life God intended for them.

We have all seen good people lose their way through sexual compromise, financial impropriety, the misuse of authority, or any number of other things. In many cases, it begins with a compromise that seems small and innocent. It remains hidden, then continues to grow.

A long history of faithfulness does not make us immune.

What Scripture Shows Us

That is one reason the stories of Scripture mean so much to me. They are remarkably honest about the long journey of a life.

Joseph suffered terribly as a young man. He was betrayed, falsely accused, and forgotten. Yet suffering did not make him bitter. What may be even more remarkable is that success did not ruin him. When he finally possessed enormous power, he used it to preserve life rather than settle old scores. Joseph passed both tests.

Daniel shows us another kind of faithfulness. By the time he faced the lions' den, he had been walking with God for many years. When prayer became dangerous, he continued praying as he always had. The crisis did not suddenly make Daniel faithful. It revealed the life he had already been living.

Paul endured extraordinary hardship and still came near the end of his life confident that he had remained faithful through it all. Paul did not finish without scars, but he finished faithful.

Jesus gives us the perfect picture. He lived with enormous demands around Him, yet He repeatedly withdrew to be with the Father. He never allowed the expectations of the crowd to determine who He was or what He should do. Near the end of His earthly life, Jesus said that He had brought glory to the Father by finishing the work He had been given to do (John 17:4).

Scripture also gives us warnings. King Saul began with promise but became consumed with approval and position. Solomon possessed extraordinary wisdom but allowed his heart to become divided. Samson had remarkable gifts without the character to carry them safely.

I don't think these stories are in the Bible so that we will become suspicious of other people. I believe they are there to help us pay attention to our own hearts.

A strong beginning does not guarantee a faithful ending.

We Need One Another

Finishing well is not something we accomplish alone.

I remember when a prominent Christian leader fell. My mentor, Paul Stanley, and I sat down together afterward. What had happened led both of us to take a closer look at our own lives.

We gave each other permission to speak candidly. Neither of us wanted to leave some hidden sin or unguarded place that could grow and eventually bring heartbreak to the people we loved.

That conversation has stayed with me.

Hebrews tells us to “consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds” (Hebrews 10:24 NIV). That requires more than occasionally being in the same room. It means knowing one another well enough to encourage what is good and speak honestly when something begins to change.

We all need people who know us well enough and can speak truth into our lives. We need people who will remain near when we are discouraged, help us work through offense, and remind us of what is true when disappointment begins affecting the way we see God.

We were never intended to finish alone.

I have one friend I have walked with for more than fifty years. We were young in the Lord when we met. We have grown older, stayed connected, and passed through many seasons of life together.

He has never achieved some enormous public accomplishment. What impresses me is the quiet consistency of his life. He has loved his wife well and continued walking closely with God. He has cared for his family and invested in people along the way. Most of the world will never know his name, and that does not matter very much.

More than fifty years later, he is still walking with God.

There is something beautiful about that.

I have another friend with whom I was involved in ministry nearly forty-five years ago. He passed through some extremely difficult seasons, but he remained faithful. Later in life, he pastored a very large church and experienced significant success.

What brings me the greatest joy is not the size of the church. It is that he still loves God. We can look back across almost half a century and see God's faithfulness woven through his life.

Both of these friends are living life well.

Finishing well does not necessarily mean finishing famously.

It means remaining faithful.

Practices That Help Us Remain Faithful

When I think about what helps me remain faithful, a few things come to mind.

First, I must protect my friendship with God. It is surprisingly easy to become busy doing things for Him and slowly lose the quiet life I once enjoyed with Him.

Scripture, prayer, rest, worship, and Holy Communion help bring me back. They create room for God to search my heart and help me see what I might otherwise miss.

I also need to be honest about the parts of my life most people never see. That includes how I handle relationships, money, and authority. I want the people closest to me to see the same character that others may admire.

Honest relationships matter too. I need people who can ask me direct questions and know that I will answer truthfully.

We owe that kind of honesty to the people we love and whose lives are touched by ours.

Teachability matters as well. Experience can make us wiser, but it can also make us less willing to listen.

I do not want to reach the place where I believe I no longer need correction. I want to listen when someone sees something I do not see. I want to apologize when I am wrong and keep learning.

I have also learned to pay attention to the condition of my soul. I do not see clearly when I am exhausted, lonely, discouraged, or carrying unresolved hurt.

Elijah learned that after one of the greatest victories of his life. Before God addressed anything else, Elijah slept, ate, and recovered.

Sometimes we need to admit that we are tired and need help. There is no virtue in pretending we are stronger than we are.

When I recognize that I have begun to drift, I can return. I can bring what is happening into the light, receive God's grace, and take the next faithful step.

Still Bearing Fruit

Our calling is larger than any position we hold.

Positions end. Careers end. Someone else eventually occupies the chair we once sat in. But our life with God does not end when a title does. Some of the richest years may come when we have less to prove and more to give away.

Psalm 92 offers a beautiful picture of people who remain rooted in God throughout their lives. The psalmist says, “They will still bear fruit in old age, they will stay fresh and green” (Psalm 92:14 NIV).

That promise means more to me now than it did when I was younger. It reminds me that growing older does not mean God has finished with us.

I am encouraged by the people God continued to use late in life. Moses was eighty when God sent him back to Egypt. Caleb was eighty-five when he asked for the hill country. Anna gave her later years to worship, fasting, and prayer, and she was there when the infant Jesus was brought to the temple.

Their contributions were very different, but their lives still belonged to God.

As I grow older, the seasons change. I have stopped doing some things I once did. My strength changes, and some responsibilities need to be released to others. There may come a time when I can no longer carry the same load or serve in the same ways.

But I can still pray. I can encourage someone who is weary. I can listen to a younger person and share something God has taught me.

Some of the most meaningful things I can offer now may come through an ordinary conversation, a thoughtful question, a prayer, or simply being present when someone needs a faithful friend.

Perhaps that, too, is part of finishing well.

We stop measuring life only by what we have accomplished and begin asking what we can leave within other people.

My prayer is that I will remain close to God and keep bearing fruit for as long as He gives me life.

I no longer believe finishing well happens because of one heroic decision made near the end. It takes shape through ordinary faithfulness over a lifetime.

We will wander at times, but we can return. When we fall, grace helps us rise. When a season ends, we can release it and trust God with what comes next.

That is the life I want. Not a perfect life, because mine certainly has not been one, but a faithful life.

I want to grow older with a softer heart rather than a harder one. I hope the people closest to me know that they were loved. I want to keep learning and giving away whatever God has entrusted to me.

Most of all, I want my friendship with Jesus to be deeper at the end than it was at the beginning.

Paul's words have become a prayer for my own life:

"I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith."

2 Timothy 4:7 NIV

His hope did not end at the finish line. He looked beyond it to the crown of righteousness the Lord would give him, and to all who long for His appearing (2 Timothy 4:8).

When my own race is finished, by the grace of God, I hope to hear the words that have become the longing of my heart:

"Well done, good and faithful servant."

Matthew 25:21 NIV

That, to me, is finishing well.

For Reflection

These questions are not meant to create fear. They offer a place to pause, become honest with God, and consider what may need our attention.

1. Is my friendship with Jesus deepening, or has activity begun to replace it?
2. Is there an offense I am continuing to carry?
3. Has disappointment begun changing what I believe about God?
4. Is there any part of my life involving relationships, money, authority, or private habits that I am keeping out of the light?
5. Where am I most vulnerable to drifting?
6. Who knows me well enough to speak truth into my life?
7. What intentional choice would help me remain faithful in this season?
8. What am I giving away to those who will come after me?

Companion Resources

Watch *The Power of Community* for a fuller reflection on why we need one another and how life together helps people grow.

When Relationships Are Wounded considers offense, forgiveness, reconciliation, boundaries, and how we keep hurt from determining who we become.

Four Invitations of the Heart explores woundedness, self-protection, and the places where part of the heart may have closed.

The Freedom of Enough considers money, desire, contentment, and the things our hearts may begin trusting.

For Further Reading

- J. Robert Clinton, *The Making of a Leader*
- Gordon MacDonald, *Ordering Your Private World*
- Ruth Haley Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership*

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