

Finishing Well: Faithful to the Very End

For nearly two decades, I have carried a growing concern about what it means to finish well. I suppose part of that comes with age. When we are young, much of life is about beginnings. We think about what God may have called us to do, where our lives are going, and what we might someday accomplish. As the years pass, another question begins to matter just as much:

How will I finish?

That question became personal much earlier.

When I was a young man, I attended a church led by a pastor I deeply respected. I looked up to him. Then he had an affair, divorced his wife, and left with a church secretary. His life and ministry were deeply affected, but what I remember most clearly is the wake his choices left behind. People who had trusted him were hurt and confused. Some seemed to lose their own bearings.

I began to understand that when a leader loses his way, the consequences rarely stop with him.

Success Can Test Us Too

I have seen the same truth revealed in less dramatic ways.

I once watched someone receive a promotion and become the boss. Almost immediately, something seemed to change. A person who had once related easily to others became increasingly controlling. The promotion may not have created what I was seeing, but it brought something within him to the surface.

Years later, I watched something similar happen to a pastor who was my friend. He was given a much more prominent position. I had known him as someone with an open heart toward God and people, but greater authority seemed to change the way he related to those around him. He became more controlling and less open to correction. It was painful to watch.

Those experiences 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.

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 able to say:

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

—2 Timothy 4:7 NIV

Paul did not finish without scars. He finished faithful.

Jesus gives us the perfect picture. He lived with enormous demands around Him, yet 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, He prayed 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 warning. 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. Judas lived in the presence of Jesus while keeping part of himself unsundered.

These stories are not given so we will become suspicious of others. They call us to pay attention to our own hearts. A strong beginning does not guarantee a faithful ending.

The Quiet Beauty of Faithfulness

I have also been given much happier examples.

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

When I look at him now, what moves me is not some enormous public accomplishment. It 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, invested in people, and disciplined others along the way. Most of the world will never know his name, and that does not matter very much.

After more than fifty years, he is still walking with God.

There is something beautiful about that.

Another dear friend and I were involved in ministry together nearly forty-five years ago. I watched him pass through some extremely difficult seasons, yet he remained faithful. In the later years of his life, he eventually pastored a very large church and experienced significant success.

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

Those two friends have helped me understand finishing well as much as anyone I know.

Finishing well does not necessarily mean finishing famously.

It means remaining faithful.

Practices That Help Us Finish Well

As I think about my own life, I have become convinced that there are several things we simply cannot afford to neglect.

We must protect our friendship with God. It is surprisingly easy to become busy doing things for Him and slowly lose the quiet life we once enjoyed with Him. Scripture, prayer, solitude, rest, worship, and Holy Communion are not merely religious obligations. They are ways of returning. They create room for God to search our hearts and help us see what we might otherwise miss.

Finishing well also requires faithfulness in the parts of life most people never see. It includes how we handle money and authority, and whether the people closest to us see the same character others admire.

We need people who know us well enough to tell us the truth. Leadership can become lonely, even when we are surrounded by

people. Every one of us needs a few friends who are unimpressed by our position and love us enough to ask a difficult question.

I sometimes think of these people as blood-stained allies. They have passed through enough of life with us to recognize when something is changing, and they have earned the right to say so.

We also need to remain teachable. One of the subtle dangers of experience is that we may eventually begin believing we no longer need much correction. I hope I never reach that place. I want to listen when someone sees something I do not see, apologize when I am wrong, and continue learning for as long as God gives me life.

I have also learned to pay attention to the condition of my soul. We are not at our wisest when we are exhausted, lonely, discouraged, or carrying unresolved hurt. Elijah discovered that after one of the greatest victories of his life. Before God addressed anything else, Elijah was allowed to sleep, eat, and recover. There is no virtue in pretending we are stronger than we are.

I also want to remember that my calling has never been the same thing as my position. Positions end. Careers end. Someone else eventually occupies the chair we once sat in. But a life with God does not end when a title does. In fact, 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 continue bearing fruit in old age. Our contribution may change as the years pass, but it does not have to end.

At this stage of my life, I find great joy in encouraging others, sharing what I have learned, and helping younger people become who God created them to be. 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.

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—staying close to God, telling the truth, receiving correction, and caring for the people He has placed near us.

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."

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 4:7–8).

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

- Is my friendship with Jesus deepening, or has activity begun to replace it?
- Who knows me well enough to tell me a truth I may not want to hear?
- Has success, authority, disappointment, or fatigue begun to change the way I treat people?
- Where am I most vulnerable to drifting?

- What am I giving away to those who will come after me?

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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