

Finishing Well

By Clark Blanchard

- *What does it mean to finish well?*
- *What prevents Christians from finishing well?*
- *What helps Christians to finish well?*

Late in the Apostle Paul's life he gathered the Ephesian elders and opened his heart to them. *But I do not consider my life of any account as dear to myself, so that I may finish my course and the ministry which I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify solemnly of the gospel of the grace of God* (Acts 20:24, emphasis mine). Finishing the course and his ministry well was the utmost priority for Paul. Later he echoed this same theme to Timothy. *I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith ...* (2 Timothy 4:7, emphasis mine).

In the Christian life, it's not how you start that matters, it's finishing well that counts.

Finishing well means walking with God daily in growth, obedience, and service throughout life right up until death, which can be at any time.

Examples

The Bible has numerous examples of those who finished well. They include Abraham, Job, Joseph, Joshua, Caleb, Samuel, David, Elijah, Jeremiah, Daniel, John, Luke, Mary, Paul, and Peter. Unfortunately, there are also those who started okay but did not finish well, such as Gideon, Eli, Saul, Solomon, Judas, and Demas. A study of these lives is highly instructive regarding finishing well.

Not only does the Bible have numerous examples of different kinds of finishers, but so do we today. For example, several years ago Dr. Howard Hendricks of Dallas Theological Seminary conducted a study of 246 men in full-time ministry who experienced personal moral failure, all within just a two-year period of each other. That's almost three per week who, after starting their Christian ministries strong, didn't even come close to finishing well (Farrar, *Finishing Well*, pp. 7, 27).

When John Bisagno, Pastor of First Baptist Church in Houston, began his ministry, his father-in-law, Dr. Paul Beck, warned him about the high "mortality rate" in Christian service. Dr. Beck said, "It has been my observation that just 1 out of 10 who start out in full-time service for the Lord at 21 are still on track by the age of 65." Shocked by this claim, Bisagno wrote the names in his Bible of 24 peers who were starting out in Christian service. Each time one of these men would fall by the wayside, Bisagno would cross out the name. Thirty-three years later, only three names remained (*Ibid.*, p. 6).

These examples are ones in which gross and obvious failures occurred. How many more failures are hidden from public view? Only the Lord knows. Further, these examples are all regarding fulltime "professional" Christians. Again, only God knows what the reality is in the pew where finishing poorly or not at all is much easier to hide.

Finishing well was a top priority for Paul, and it must be for us, too. Therefore, we need to know where the pitfalls lie and what we must do to avoid them. Farrar identifies three areas which he calls "ambushes" (*Ibid.*, p. 26). They are:

- The ambush of another woman
- The ambush of money
- The ambush of a neglected family

I would add a fourth—

- The ambush of false doctrine

The Ambush of Another Woman

(Let's make it general case—the opposite sex)

This ambush almost always begins with a “legitimate” close working relationship with a person of the opposite sex. In some cases it is employment related, especially if business travel is involved. The other scenario is when men such as pastors or women counselors attempt to provide spiritual counseling to the opposite sex. The core of the ambush is the close working relationship. It need not be physical, initially. It usually begins with a fascination about the personality of the other person that seems innocent, yet intriguing.

When Dr. Hendricks interviewed each of the 246 derailed Christian men, he found two common points of failure. First 80% became sexually involved as a result of spending significant time counseling a woman. Second, 100% were initially convinced that moral failure would never happen to them (1 Corinthians 10:12) [*Ibid.*, pp. 27-28].

The Ambush of Money

This ambush always begins with **discontent**, which in our culture is wide-ranging and relentless. Every advertisement in every newspaper, magazine, radio show, TV program, telemarket call, and billboard is designed to create **discontent**. It's everywhere. **Discontent**, in turn, is directly linked to money, its acquisition, and spending. The battle lays with **contentment**.

But godliness actually is a means of great gain, when accompanied by contentment. For we have brought nothing into the world, so we cannot take anything out of it either. And if we have food and covering, with these we shall be content. But those who want to get rich fall into temptation and a snare and many foolish and harmful desires which plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all sorts of evil, and some by longing for it have wandered away from the faith, and pierced themselves with many a pang (1 Timothy 6:6-10, emphasis mine; see also Hebrews 13:5 and Philippians 4:11-13).

This discontent is not only personal but can readily spread into our ministries. We feel that to be more effective for God we must have more resources. We become materially discontent and turn to alternate schemes for financing as though God were poor or ignorant. Televangelism has become a disgraceful wasteland of Christians who have been ambushed by money through discontent. The Word of God plainly states, *No servant can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one, and love the other, or else he will hold to one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon (Luke 16:13).*

The Ambush of a Neglected Family

This ambush can be a secondary effect caused by either of the other two prior ambushes. In many cases, however, it simply happens to the conscientious Christian who is pursuing a ministry for God. There are only so many hours in the day and the extra time for ministry must come from somewhere, so increasingly it comes out of family time. School, with all its extra activities, robs from our family time. So does the church and ministry, much of which occurs in evenings and on weekends. Many Christian families today seldom eat a meal together. Communication is lost, the family is neglected, and eventually the family itself can be lost, too. Malachi 4:6 says one of the roles of John the Baptist was *to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the hearts of the children to their fathers ...* (see also Luke 1:17b).

The Ambush of False Doctrine

This ambush can happen through various means, such as following personalities, compromising for unity, pressure for numerical success, tolerance of other views, the influence of those close to us, social or political correctness, lack of biblical study, or simply poor hermeneutics. While there may always be minor issues of doctrinal disagreement, these will not prevent our finishing well. But errors in major biblical doctrines can have a profound negative effect on how we finish. That's why much of the New Testament is taken up with correction of false doctrine (2 Timothy 3:16 -17).

Principles for Finishing Well

- Finishing well does not mean finishing unblemished or perfect. That's impossible (1 John 1:8, 10).
- It's possible to stumble and by God's grace get up again to finish well. Study David (2 Samuel 12:1-24; Psalm 51).

- Avoid any close personal relationship with the opposite sex other than your spouse (1 Corinthians 10:13).
- Maintain a few close and quality Christian friends. Don't get spiritually isolated (Hebrews 3:12 -13; 10:21 -25).
- Maintain a daily quiet time of Bible reading, prayer, and meditation (Romans 15:4; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Hebrews 4:16).
- Maintain a weekly time for personal in-depth Bible study (2 Timothy 2:15).
- Maintain a ministry of outreach, evangelism, and discipleship (2 Timothy 2:2-4).
- Cultivate friends who have contented financial outlooks (Hebrews 13:5; Philippians 4:10-13).
- Cultivate regular quality family time and activities (Proverbs 22:6; Mark 6:31-32).
- Remember, ... *let him who thinks he stands take heed lest he fall* (1 Corinthians 10:12; see also 2 Peter 2:9).

Questions and Answers

Q: *What does it mean to finish well?*

A: Finishing well means walking with God daily in growth, obedience, and service throughout life, right up until death, which can be any time.

Q: *What prevents Christians from finishing well?*

A: Numerous things can, but primarily:

- The ambush of the opposite sex
- The ambush of money
- The ambush of a neglected family
- The ambush of false doctrine

Q: *What helps Christians to finish well?*

A: See the last section—Principles for Finishing Well.