

How to Finish Strong

Success in the Christian life is not measured by how you start. What's most important is whether you are standing at the end of the race.

Before he died, the apostle Paul wrote with confidence about his life, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7, NKJV). He wasn't boasting. He was saying that he had remained true to the course God had laid out for him. He had not only lived well but also finished well.

I believe that every Christian has a course set out before him—whether, like Paul, he is in full-time ministry or not—and that he will be judged based on how successfully he finishes it. We all are called to both begin and end well—and to live well in between.

As I age, I think more and more about finishing my life well. Like most people I've always tended to think that the end is far away, somewhere in the distant future.

Scripture confirms, however, that we have no guarantee of tomorrow. As the psalmist wrote, "My times are in Your hand" (Ps. 31:15). I have to ask myself: If I went home to be with the Lord tomorrow, how would anyone know whether I finished well?

The final word on whether a person finishes well belongs to God and God alone. I'm not sure anyone else will be around to hear His "Well done, good and faithful servant" (see Matt. 25:21), if He should say that to us—certainly not those who are still living.

But we can get some idea of what it means to finish well by evaluating the success or failure of various Bible characters. Just for discussion's sake, let's assign each person a grade

to evaluate how well he finished.

Jesus (A+). Jesus did all things well while on the earth (see Mark 7:37), including dying on the cross in accordance with God's will. In John 17:4, Jesus prayed to His Father, "'I have glorified You on the earth. I have finished the work which You have given Me to do.'" Jesus knew why He came and stayed true to His purpose.

He finished His work, entrusted Himself to the Father and died on the cross, a seeming failure to those closest to Him, but a beloved Son to His heavenly Father. There is no hint of failure in anything He did. By every heavenly standard imaginable, Jesus finished well.

The apostle Paul (A). Paul finished well, and as we already determined from his comment in 2 Timothy 4:7, he knew it. In verse 8 he goes on to say, "Finally, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day, and not to me only but also to all who have loved His appearing."

He knew it was possible not to finish well in spite of all his hard work for Jesus. But he had a safeguard. He wrote, "But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection, lest, when I have preached to others, I myself should become disqualified" (1 Cor. 9:27). Paul lived a holy life and left a collection of inspired epistles that still guide God's people today.

Joseph (A). Joseph was a great manager and leader who distinguished himself in service to Pharaoh and saved the Israelites from starvation. He positioned his sons to be blessed by his father, Jacob, and received a double blessing when his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, each became the head of a tribe along with their uncles, Joseph's brothers.

Moses (B+). Moses was a faithful and meek man with whom God spoke face to face. Yet Moses' anger cost him a chance to finish well. He was not permitted to enter the Promised Land

because he misrepresented God by striking the rock instead of speaking to it as God had commanded him to do (see Num. 20:10-12). He did, however, make sure there was a smooth transition of leadership to Joshua, and he left a written legacy—the Pentateuch—that has influenced the world for millennia.

David (B). David lived a full life with many successes and failures. His end, however, was less than laudable. While his servants were trying to make him comfortable in his last days, his sons almost tore the kingdom apart because their father had not put in place his successor (see 1 Kings 1). It seems that David never could control his sons, and that caused problems for Israel after he was gone. Yet he was a man after God's own heart, the Bible tells us, and we still sing and recite his music and poetry today.

Jacob (B). In many ways, Jacob was more spiritual at the end of his life than he was during his early years. He blessed Pharaoh when Joseph brought him before the ruler (see Gen. 47:7). And he discerned that Joseph's son Ephraim, younger than his brother Manasseh, was to receive the greater blessing. Jacob is an example of a man who finished better than he started.

Solomon (C). Solomon left a wonderful collection of proverbs and ruled with wisdom. But he was such a hard taskmaster that upon his death the people petitioned his son to have their taxation and workload reduced. Rehoboam refused and promised even harsher conditions (see 1 Kings 12). The people rebelled, and 10 tribes broke away from Israel and formed their own nation with their own king. Solomon didn't learn from the fact that his father, David, almost missed his chance to install Solomon as king. Because Israel split apart right after his death, Solomon gets only an average grade.

Samson (D). Samson would probably get a D grade for his life in general. He betrayed the secret of his strength and was

taken prisoner, having his eyes gouged out in the process. He died pushing down the supporting columns of the house in which numerous enemies of the Israelites (the Philistines) were being entertained. The house collapsed, killing them all. Because he ended his life with this act, he is mentioned in Hebrews 11 as a hero of the faith. Samson left no heirs, built nothing, and in many ways left a good example of how not to finish well.

King Saul (F). Saul's saga is one of the saddest in the Bible. He started out head and shoulders above his peers. He ended a defeated, desperate man who lost his throne, his son and his legacy. His name today is synonymous with poor leadership because he hunted and persecuted his God-chosen successor, his own son-in-law David. Saul did not even come close to finishing well, and his failure has been well-chronicled for posterity.

The Pharisees and Sadducees (F). The members of both religious movements that flourished in Jesus' day finished poorly. They were so threatened by Jesus' teachings that they put Jesus to death to maintain the systems they had developed. They continued their ways by persecuting Jesus' disciples after Jesus' resurrection. Their poor leadership culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple.

What can you learn from these examples? I believe there are five guidelines you can follow that will help you finish your walk with the Lord well.

1. Maintain holy living. There is no greater obstacle to finishing well than sin. It tarnishes the best of records and intentions. You must always allow the Holy Spirit to work in you to ensure that you become more like Jesus.

This involves a commitment to prayer, fellowship and Bible study. And don't ignore issues such as anger, which caused Moses to miss entering the Promised Land. Make every effort to

live a holy and obedient life.

2. Know your purpose. Paul could say that he had finished the race because he knew what his race entailed. Jesus finished the work the Father gave Him to do. Both knew their reasons for being here and stayed true to their work. In re-examining the list, it is obvious that the most successful finishers knew their purpose and stayed true to it to the end.

3. Be true to your purpose. Both Solomon and King Saul knew their purposes, but they got sidetracked by selfish ambition and personal pleasure. The Pharisees rejected God's purpose, and that marked the beginning of the end for their movement and way of life (see Luke 7:30). The best finishers, such as Jesus, Paul and Joseph, were productive to the end.

4. Leave some kind of legacy. I don't think you have to construct a building or start a movement named after you to leave a spiritual legacy. Of the characters we studied, some wrote, others had family who carried on their name or work, still others left a body of work that could be emulated.

Finishing well requires that you think through what you will leave behind that has the potential to bless others after you're gone. There is no guarantee that will happen, for only God can provide that kind of impact. But those who finish well think about what they have the power to produce that can pass on to people the work God has done in their lives.

5. Leave behind a good name. Proverbs 10:7 says, "The memory of the righteous is blessed, but the name of the wicked will rot" (NKJV). That's quite a statement!

What kind of name does King Saul have among Bible readers? What about Solomon? Paul? Samson? The Pharisees?

Not many people are remembered beyond one or two generations after their deaths. So if nothing else, you can finish well by leaving behind a good name that your children and

grandchildren can remember.

If you don't have children, then you can leave a good name among those who knew you best, whether friends or associates. For that to happen, you will have to spend some time being a blessing to others, using your time and gifts to serve their needs.

Ultimately, it is most important to finish well in God's eyes. When Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated, not many people were happy with the job he was doing. Yet today there aren't too many cities in the United States that don't have some memorial to his work and name.

Perhaps we should remember Nehemiah's prayers as we consider our lives and our desire to finish well. On two separate occasions, Nehemiah prayed that God would remember him for the work he had done: "Remember me, my God, for good, according to all that I have done for this people" (Neh. 5:19); "Remember me, O my God, concerning this, and do not wipe out my good deeds that I have done for the house of my God, and for its services!" (Neh. 13:14).

If you are obedient to God's will for your life and walk in holiness, you will finish well in His eyes. And that is all that is important—to please God. So give some thought to finishing well, and then get back to work, fulfilling the purpose He has assigned for you. If you do that, you will receive an A in His book!

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