

FINISHING WELL

Walking with the Lord is just what it implies: a walk, a trip with a specific destination, a journey mapped out by God and made by His obedient followers. Thus Paul could write with confidence and without boasting, “I have fought the good fight, finished the race, I have kept the faith” (2 Timothy 4:7). The implication is that God mapped out a specific course and Paul stayed true to the course and the signposts along the way. Doing that enabled Paul to not only live well but to also finish well, which is the aspect of our journey that we will examine in this article.

Does every believer have a course that is set out before them or is that only for those who are called to ministry, such as those who do great exploits like Billy Graham or other well-know servants of God? Is it possible to know this course and where it ends? Is that end heaven or does finishing well involve something else? Even though I don’t want to examine the term “finishing well” only to those in ministry, let’s look at three recent examples from the world of ministry as we begin our study.

1. There is a well-known ministry that was founded by a great man of God. Recently that man passed away at a ripe old age. After his passing, this vibrant, thriving ministry was thrown into turmoil. There was a squabble over who would lead the ministry after his death. The ongoing impact of this ministry was greatly diminished even though the leader lived well and had a significant message that touched millions of lives. There is no question that this man lived well. The question remains whether this man finished well or not.
2. There is another ministry that was once a thriving work that had a worldwide impact. Yet that man’s personal problems caused the ministry to shrink to the point where it is almost unheard of today. There is no doubt that this man’s inability to live well undermined any chance he had to finish well. Of course, there is still time for him to finish well, for he is still alive. His public impact, however, is limited and one seldom sees this man with any kind of regularity.
2. Finally, another ministry that is carrying on the work of its founder long after he has gone to his eternal reward. In fact, the work may be in better shape than when he was alive. The board of directors is clear about what this man taught and lived for. They have re-published his written works and continue his media ministry. I see more of this man’s work today than I did when he was alive.

The problem with the examples above is that they are all from the world of ministry, and that leads to another question. Can you know whether or not you have finished well if the extent of your Christian service was to attend church, raise your family and carry out your work with integrity and excellence?

As I get older (and I am 56 years old as I write), I am thinking more and more about finishing my life well. I’ve heard sermons preached on this topic but one always think that the end is for another day, somewhere in the distant future. For all I know, however,

my own end may be tomorrow. As the psalmist said, “My times are in your hands” (Psalm 31:15). So if I went home to be with the Lord tomorrow, how would anyone know if I finished well?

The final word whether anyone finishes well belongs to God and God alone. When we hopefully hear the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant,” (Matthew 21:25), I’m not sure anyone else will be around to hear them—certainly not those who are still living. With that in mind, let’s try to get some idea of what it means to finish well and how you and I can know if someone may have done so.

First of all, let’s look at some of the people in the Bible to determine how they finished. In fact, just for discussion sake, let’s assign each person a grade to evaluate how well they finished. After that, I will point out five things that should take place in your life for you to have a chance to finish well.

1. **Jesus** – **A+** -- Jesus did all things well while He was here (see Mark 7:37) and that includes the way He died. In John 19:4, Jesus stated, “I have brought you glory on earth by completing the work you gave me to do.” Jesus knew why He came and He 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 standard imaginable, Jesus finished well.
2. **The Apostle Paul** – **A** – Paul finished well and he knew it. We already looked at 2 Tim 4:7, but let’s also look at the next verse. “Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day — and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing” (2 Timothy 4:8). Perhaps Paul finished well because he knew it was possible not to finish well in spite of all his hard work for Jesus: He wrote, “No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize” (1 Corinthians 9:27). Paul lived a holy life and left a collection of inspired epistles that still guide God’s people today. Without a doubt, Paul finished well.
3. **Joseph** – **A** – Joseph was a great manager and leader who distinguished himself in service to Pharaoh. He was a man of faith who gave instructions that his remains were to be transported back to the Promised Land whenever Israel left Egypt (see Hebrews 11:22).. He positioned his sons to be blessed by his father Jacob and received a double blessing when his two sons, Manassah and Ephraim, each became the head of tribes along with their uncles, Joseph’s brothers.
4. **Moses** – **B+** – Moses was a faithful and meek man, a man to whom God spoke with 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 to do (see Numbers 20:10-11). He did, however, make sure there was a smooth transition of leadership to Joshua and Moses certainly left a written legacy of the Pentateuch that has impacted the world for millennia.

5. **David – B** – David lived a full life with many ups and downs, successes and failures. His end, however, was less than spectacular. While his servants were trying to make him comfortable in his last days, his sons almost tore the kingdom apart because David, 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 and Nathan and Bathsheba saved the day when they maneuvered to have Solomon installed as David had promised would happen. Of course, we still sing and recite David’s music and poetry today.
6. **Jacob – B** – Jacob died with a new name, Israel. Yet God is known throughout the Old Testament as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. In many ways, Jacob was more spiritual at the end of his life than he was during his life. We see that he leaned on his staff and worshipped when Joseph brought him before Pharaoh (see Genesis 47:31). Jacob also discerned that Joseph’s son Ephraim, even though younger than Manassah, was to receive the greater blessing. All in all, Jacob is one example of a man who finished better than he lived.
7. **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 ten 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 only gets an average grade.
8. **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. His life ended as he entertained the Philistines and consequently brought the house down when his strength returned. Because he ended his life, however with an act of faith, he is mentioned in Hebrews 11 as a hero of the faithful. Samson left no heirs, built nothing, and in many ways left a good example of how not to finish well.
9. **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 to see and study.
10. **The Pharisees and Sadducees – F** – Both movements that flourished at the time that Jesus lived finished poorly. Founded to protect God and His Law, they actually put Jesus to death to maintain the system that they had developed. They both continued their ways when they persecuted Jesus’ disciples in the book of Acts. Their poor leadership culminated in the destruction of Jerusalem and the Temple. This is a good example of how bad leadership can ruin a people, ministry or company.

(If you found this helpful, perhaps you would want to consider other people in the Bible such as Herod the Great, Daniel, Abraham, and Herod Agrippa in Acts 11, assigning them a grade on your own.)

What can we learn about finishing well from these examples? I think there are five guidelines you can follow that will give you a reasonable chance to finish our 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 insure that you become more like Jesus. That involves a commitment to prayer, fellowship and Bible study. And don't ignore something like anger, which caused Moses to miss entering the Promised Land. Make sure that you make every effort to live a holy and obedient life.
2. **Know your purpose.** Paul could say that he had run the race because he knew what his race entailed. Jesus finished the work the Father gave Him to do. Both knew their reason for being here and they 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. Do you know your purpose?
3. **Be true to your purpose.** Both Solomon and King Saul knew their purpose, but they got sidetracked by selfish ambition and personal pleasure. The Pharisees rejected God's purpose and it was the beginning of the end for their movement and way of life. "But the Pharisees and experts in the law rejected God's purpose for themselves, because they had not been baptized by John (Luke 7:30). Be careful not to reject your purpose. By doing so, you will neither live up to your potential nor do all that you could have done for the Lord. The best finishers, like Jesus, Paul and Joseph, were productive to the end.
4. **Leave some kind of legacy.** I don't think you have to leave a building or movement that is named after you to leave a spiritual legacy. In the list 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 spend some time thinking 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 remind people of the work that God has done in their life.
5. **Leave behind a good name.** Proverbs 10:7 says, "The memory of the righteous will be a blessing, but the name of the wicked will rot." That's quite a statement! What kind of name does King Saul have among Bible readers? Solomon? Paul? Samson? The Pharisee? Not many people are remembered by their family, church or community beyond one or two generations after their death. 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 was assassinated, not many people were happy with the job he was doing. Yet today there isn't a city in the United States that doesn'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 with favor, O my God, for all I have done for these people (Nehemiah 5:19).

Remember me for this, O my God, and do not blot out what I have so faithfully done for the house of my God and its services (Nehemiah 13:14).

If you are obedient to God's will for your life and stay holy, you will finish well if in no one else's eyes but His. In the end, however, that is all that is important—to please Him. So give some thought to finishing well, but then get back to work, fulfilling the purpose He has assigned for you. If you do that, then you will receive an "A" at the end, regardless of whether you were well known or not.