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FINISH *well!*



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Finish Well

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Chapter One

Running the Race

One afternoon a friend called me with a phrase he had been turning over in his mind. It was “Finish well.” He pointed out how important it is not to start off with a bang and end with a whimper, but rather to finish well. The wheels in my own mind began to turn because I knew that God wants us, as Christians, to finish well— to end our lives on this earth in success instead of failure; to finish with flying colors.

More than once the New Testament compares the Christian life to a race using words like *persevere* and *endurance*. These are not words that fall pleasantly on our ears. They require self-discipline and they imply that we keep going in spite of any difficulties we might meet.

Nevertheless, these words apply to the Christian life because it is a long distance run, not a fifty-yard dash. In high school, I could run the fifty-yard dash. It was probably all the junk food I ate. The nervous energy that was bottled up in me enabled me to run fairly fast for a short period of time. I was exhausted

afterward, but I could call up a burst of energy for that short race.

When I took part in a long distance run, I would start off running fast, and initially, leave everyone else in the dust! I would be running in first place. But soon I would drop back to second, then to third, and then to fourth. By the end of the race, I would be the last person to finish, barely dragging across the finish line.

In the beginning onlookers would think, "Look how well he's doing! He's ahead of everybody." *I failed to think about finishing, however*. I was not concerned with persevering. I did not plan for the duration. I just had a short-term burst of energy.

It makes no difference at all if you lead for the first twenty laps. If you drop out and fail to finish, the lead you have had up to that point is meaningless. You must finish the race:

> Beware, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief in departing from the living God; but exhort one another daily, while it is called "Today," lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we have become partakers of Christ if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast to the end. (Hebrews 3:12–14)

In our Christian life, we must be steadfast, we must finish well. The apostle Paul, speaking to the elders of the church at Ephesus, referred to the threat of imprisonment when he was preparing to leave them. He said,

> But none of these things move me; nor do I count my life dear to myself, so that I may finish my race with joy, and the ministry which I received from

the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God. (Acts 20:24)

What mattered to Paul was that he finished the race with joy.

Chapter Two

Not Everyone Runs to Win

The pages of Scripture are filled with accounts of men and women who did not finish well. They were men and women who had tremendous potential and started very well, but ended poorly. They are a warning to us. 1 Corinthians 10:11 says that these things were written as examples for us, "on whom the ends of the ages have come." These are examples of what *not* to do!

Saul: Israel's First King

First, let us look at King Saul. Here was a man who had tremendous potential. He was tall and strikingly handsome, the Bible says. We are also told that he was humble. More importantly, we know the Spirit of God came upon him and anointed him for the work that God called him to do. When the prophets were prophesying, Saul was prophesying along with them. God's Spirit spoke through him. Still, with all of his potential, all of this ability, after a time Saul began to disobey the Lord.

When God raised David up as a replacement, Saul was relentless in persecuting him. Saul's life was controlled by anger, hostility, paranoia, and jealousy. He ended his life in shame on the battlefield. Prior to his death, he had written his

own epitaph. He said, “I have played the fool and erred exceedingly” (1 Samuel 26:21). Saul had no one to blame but himself.

If we don’t make it in the Christian life, if we stumble and fall, if we throw in the towel and collapse, we have no one to blame but ourselves. Don’t blame the devil. Don’t blame people. Don’t blame temptation. Blame yourself!

It is true that the devil can tempt us, but he only wins if we yield to him. The Bible says, “Each one is tempted when he is drawn away by his own desires and enticed” (James 1:14). We are also told, “To whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one’s slaves whom you obey” (Romans 6:16). We make a choice every day as to whose servants we will be and what we will do with our lives. These are decisions with repercussions attached to them.

If you want to live a strong Christian life, you will. If you are not willing to pay the price, you won’t finish well. You don’t need to fear that the devil is going to take you down against your will because the wicked one cannot touch you or control you (1 John 5:18). Jesus says that you are the sheep in his hand and no one will be able to pluck you out (John 10:28). You will make it, if you want to, because He is the “author and finisher of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2). If you grow weary and do not finish, it is because you chose to quit. Saul made some bad decisions; he yielded to temptation; he did not finish well.

Samson: Israel's Strongman

Samson was known for his great strength. The Spirit of the Lord was upon him, so that he easily defeated his enemies in battle (Judges 15:14–15) and even killed a lion with his bare hands (Judges 14:5–6). Yet he squandered his potential when he failed to live according to God's commands, and brought about his own untimely death. He started well, but he did not finish well.

Gideon: God's Choice to Lead

Gideon was a man whom God called to leadership from obscurity. When the angel found him, he was threshing wheat in a hiding place instead of on top of a hill where the wind could blow away the chaff. He was terrified of his enemies, the Midianites.

The angel said, "Gideon! You mighty man of valor!" (see Judges 6:12). Gideon must have said to himself, "What is he talking about? Is he making fun of me?" Actually, God could see potential in him. God sees us for what we can become—not for what we are today!

We see our own shortcomings and failures and flaws; God sees what He can do with us. We see a blank canvas; God sees a finished painting. We see a lump of coal; God sees a diamond. We see a fisherman named Simon; God sees a powerful man called Peter. We see a cheater named Jacob; God sees a leader called Israel. We see failure and weakness in ourselves; God sees potential success and strength!

Gideon answered the angel's call and became a brave leader. His life was a tremendous example of great victories in battle, but he did not finish well. As we read about the end of Gideon's life, we find that he gave in to pride, arrogance, and immorality (see Judges 8:27). He did not finish with the same faith he had when he led the children of Israel into battle.

David: God's Dear Friend

David, too, was plucked from the obscurity of tending his father's sheep on a hill. He was not even considered when the prophet came to his father's home, looking for a king. When all his brothers were rejected and David was finally brought into the prophet, God's Spirit was poured out on this young man. He was the Lord's beloved. Even with his shortcomings, he was Israel's greatest king. He is the only man identified in the Bible as "a man after God's own heart" (1 Samuel 13:14). His victories were legendary and people still sing his psalms today.

His story is dramatic, but he did not finish well. He lowered his guard as he sat idle on his rooftop while his men went forth to battle. Instead of leading his men, David was relaxing at home when he caught sight of a beautiful woman bathing. We all know the story of his adultery and attempted cover-up. If it were not for the intervention of God himself, David would have destroyed his life completely. In a last minute reprieve, he came to his senses when God sent the prophet Nathan to him. Nathan pointed his finger in David's face and said, "You are the man" (2 Samuel 12:7). David repented, and he was forgiven

and restored as king.

According to the law, he should have been stoned for adultery and murder. Instead, he was forgiven. Nonetheless, he never fully recovered from the repercussions of his sin. As you read further in Scripture, you see that David's sins of adultery and murder were the sins his children committed as well. There are accounts of rape, immorality, and murder under David's own roof. He had not thought about that when he sinned.

Neither do we. We say to ourselves, "God will forgive me! All I have to do is repent and everything will be fine!" That is true, in a sense. God will forgive us but we may very well feel repercussions from our sin. Many children, now grown, are having trouble in their own marriages because their parents were divorced. This harmful example is often carried on to the next generation and to succeeding generations.

Perhaps we fail to think about the example that will be set for our children if we have an affair. We may not consider the damage our actions can cause to the witness we have had for God. But our sins reflect against the glory of God in the eyes of the people around us. God will forgive us; others may not. We will surely have to face the memory of what we have done, every single day. We would do well to think about that before we fall into sin. Yes, we will be forgiven, but we will pay a price for it. David was forgiven, but he jeopardized his opportunity to finish well.

Chapter Three

A Winning Attitude

Let's turn the coin over and talk about some people who did finish well. We can find many examples in the Bible of people who finished well.

Joseph: a Farsighted Man

Joseph was a young man who faced adversity after adversity. He had so much trouble that we almost could have understood if he had become bitter and angry with God. For Joseph, the way up was to go down—way down. He faced one betrayal after another. But Joseph hung in there! He kept his eyes on the Lord, and the Lord was with him (see Genesis 39:2). He ruled Egypt and he saved the Israelites from famine. He came to the end of his life, honoring God. He came through with flying colors. He finished very well, indeed.

Mary: an Understanding Woman

Mary, the mother of Jesus, watched her precious Son hanging on the cross. In that moment, she remembered the day in the temple when Simeon had blessed Him and said, "This Child is destined for the fall and rising of many in Israel . . . and a sword will pierce through your own soul" (Luke 2:34).

When Mary looked at her Son on the cross, pain beyond

anything she had ever known must have pierced her heart. She could have become angry and bitter, but instead, she looked beyond her pain and understood what Simeon had said. She knew what God was doing.

On the day of Pentecost, Mary was among those who received the Holy Spirit to help her serve the resurrected Son of God. She finished well.

Mary Magdalene: a Faithful Follower

Mary Magdalene's life was in ruins because she was possessed by seven demons. She was transformed by her encounter with Jesus, and she followed Him even to the cross. On the morning when Jesus rose from the dead, she was the first to reach the tomb. She also became the first missionary of the new church, when she ran to tell the disciples of His resurrection. She finished well.

Peter: a Diamond in the Rough

The apostle Peter had legendary lapses in his faith. We all know about his mistakes. But Peter loved the Lord, and he became a leader of the early church, a powerful preacher of the gospel. When the end came, Peter was crucified upside down, at his own request, because he felt unworthy to die in the same manner in which Jesus Christ had died. He finished well.

We could add many other names to the list of those who finished well: Daniel, Jeremiah, Esther, and Paul, who said, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race. I have

kept the faith. Finally there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness" (2 Timothy 4:7).

Chapter Four

Caleb Finished Well

Of all those who finished well, I can't think of a clearer example than a man named Caleb. This was a man who finished with flying colors. He is one of the unsung heroes of the Bible. He stands as a shining example of a man who never lost his spiritual edge. He was faithful to the end. Toward the end of his life, in his own words, he said,

> "I am as strong this day as on the day that Moses sent me; just as my strength was then, so now is my strength for war, both for going out and coming in." (Joshua 14:11)

Caleb made that statement at the ripe old age of eighty-five. Let's examine the source of Caleb's energy. We need to understand where he got the strength to be faithful through so many years of walking with God. How was he able to finish well?

In the parable of the sower Jesus talked about the seed that fell on rocky ground. It symbolizes those who hear the Word of God, receive it with joy, and shoot up new growth immediately. But because they do not have any roots, they are offended when persecution, difficulty, or trials come for the gospel's sake. Most of us have friends who received Christ about the same time we did, but they have fallen away—or at least they have slowed down. They are no longer moving with that same

urgency, that same passion. We might say they have left their first love (see Revelation 2:4). Caleb was not such a man. He was as strong at the end as he was in the beginning. He did not fall away; he did not lose his first love. He finished well.

Caleb's secret for stamina and longevity is found in the book of Joshua:

> Then the children of Judah came to Joshua in Gilgal. And Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite said to him: "You know the word which the Lord said to Moses the man of God concerning you and me in Kadesh Barnea. I was forty years old when Moses the servant of the Lord sent me from Kadesh Barnea to spy out the land, and I brought back word to him as it was in my heart. Nevertheless my brethren who went up with me made the heart of the people melt, but I wholly followed the Lord my God. So Moses swore on that day, saying, 'Surely the land where your foot has trodden shall be your inheritance and your children's forever, because you have wholly followed the Lord my God.' And now, behold, the Lord has kept me alive, as He said, these forty-five years, ever since the Lord spoke this word to Moses while Israel wandered in the wilderness; and now, here I am this day, eighty-five years old. As yet I am as strong this day as on the day that Moses sent me; just as my strength was then, so now is my strength for war, both for going out and for coming in. Now therefore, give me this mountain of which the Lord spoke in that day; for you heard in that day how the Anakim were there, and that the cities were great and fortified. It may be that the Lord will be with me, and I shall be able to drive them out as the Lord said." And Joshua blessed him, and gave Hebron to Caleb the son of Jephunneh as an inheritance. Hebron therefore became the inheritance of Caleb the son of Jephunneh the Kenizzite to this day, because he wholly followed the Lord God of Israel. (Joshua 14:6–14)

Here is a man who was faithful to the end. He finished well. At the age of eighty-five, he had as much spiritual strength as he had when he was only forty. What was the secret of his

vitality? It is repeated three times in the verses above. “He wholly followed the Lord.” That could also be translated “He followed God fully,” or “He followed the Lord wholeheartedly.” That means totally, completely, fully—not half-heartedly. He followed the Lord no matter what happened. If we can learn to follow the Lord as Caleb did, the result can be the same for us. Caleb’s God is our God. If we follow Him, we, too, can finish well.

Compromise Was Not Acceptable

It is important to notice that in verse 7 Caleb mentions Kadesh Barnea. Forty-five years earlier, Caleb, Moses and the children of Israel had come to the edge of the Promised Land. They reached the point of entry called Kadesh Barnea (see Numbers 13).

Some of us have never realized that the children of Israel did not leave Egypt and wander for forty years before they came to the Promised Land. They actually went directly from Egypt to the border of the Promised Land and were poised to enter when a wave of doubt spread over the leadership.

Twelve spies were sent in to assess the situation. When they came back, the men were divided. Ten of them, the majority, had a bad report while only Joshua and Caleb had a good report.

All twelve saw the same thing. They all said, “Things are big in Canaan.” Like Texas, everything was big there! The ten said,

“The walls are big; the people are big. There are giants in the land.” They didn’t mean there were giants like we read about in children’s stories; they just meant that the people were large. They were the size of basketball players. It only meant that they were formidable foes. But it appears that the ten exaggerated somewhat when they said, “We were like grasshoppers in their sight.” When we read the accounts of battles they fought later on, we find not one single real giant. We see nothing like that at all.

Joshua said, “We agree that things are big! Take a look at this cluster of grapes that Caleb and I brought back!” They had brought out a cluster of grapes so big that it took both of them to carry it. That has become the symbol of the ministry of tourism today in Israel. On everything from belt buckles to key chains, you can see the figures of Joshua and Caleb with the grape cluster hanging from a stick between them. It was true. Things in Canaan were big.

Joshua and Caleb, however, said, “If the Lord delights in us, then He will bring us into the land, and give it to us, a land which flows with milk and honey” (Numbers 14:8). But the ten were afraid and gave a bad report of the land. The people turned against Joshua and Caleb for speaking the truth. They even threatened to kill them! Caleb and Joshua stood their ground. It would have been easy for them to go along with the crowd. Yet, at the risk of being ostracized or even killed, Caleb stood his ground and was only concerned about what God thought. He believed God could take care of the situation at

hand. What was Caleb's secret of spiritual stamina? He wholly followed the Lord.

To "wholly follow" means to be more concerned with God's approval than with the approval of other people. We will not compromise; we will stand our ground. If we are going to "wholly follow the Lord," we, too, must stand our ground and be more concerned with the way God sees things than with popular opinion.

Confidence Was Reasonable

When God saw the attitude of these people, He said,

> "they certainly shall not see the land of which I swore to their fathers, nor shall any of those who rejected Me see it. But My servant Caleb, because he has a different spirit in him and has followed Me fully, I will bring into the land where he went, and his descendants shall inherit it." (Numbers 14:23–24)

Do you know how long it took for that promise to be fulfilled? For more than forty years Caleb wandered around with a bunch of griping people. He was there for all of it. He heard them complain about manna. He heard them whine for garlic and leeks. He listened to them long for meat. He watched God's plagues come upon them. He watched as Moses disobeyed God and was disqualified from leading Israel. He saw it all; and he put up with all of it because God had made a promise to him. Caleb waited for the promise of God for forty-five years. He could have doubted. He could have said, "Hello, up there! Didn't you make a promise to me? Isn't it getting a little late?

I'm in my eighties now! It would be nice if you would fulfill your word."

God has made promises to us as well and sometimes we think God is a little slow. "Lord, are you paying attention?" we mutter under our breath. But God is never slow. He is never early. He is always right on time.

We all cling to the promise Jesus made: "I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again and receive you to Myself" (John 14:2–3).

I remember saying to the Lord some years ago, "Okay, Lord, I've had it! Come back now!" But after looking at what God has done since then, I'm glad He answered my prayer with a solid "No." I'm glad for the sake of those who have come to trust Christ as Savior since then. I'm glad for those who are going to continue to come to Him.

A day is coming when it *will* all be over. The last person will come to Christ and we will leave this earth. Until that day, however, let's not become angry or impatient. God "is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance" (2 Peter 3:9).

Caleb held on to the promise of God, and we need to hold on to the promise of God too, even when doubts trouble us, even when difficulties arrive, even when hardships afflict us. God

expects us to hang in there and follow the example of Caleb, who in turn was following the example of Abraham:

> [Abraham] did not waver at the promise of God through unbelief, but was strengthened in faith, giving glory to God, and being fully convinced that what He had promised He was also able to perform. (Romans 4:20–21)

To "wholly follow the Lord" and to finish well requires that we take God at His Word and trust His promises to us.

Communion Was Essential

As we look at the end of Caleb's life, we hear him saying, "Now, it's time for my inheritance." The children of Israel had entered into the Promised Land and Caleb said, "I'm as strong today as I was then." Caleb's strength never faltered. His faith never failed because his inner man was being renewed. He had fire in his heart for God.

Caleb possessed a *first love* relationship with God that enabled him to maintain his first strength. The first love is the hub of the wheel. It's the foundation of everything that has to do with our faith. Without the first love for Christ burning passionately in our hearts, everything else will fall apart in time. That is the fuel that needs to be put on the fire. Even at eighty-five, Caleb maintained that passion, his first love.

Sadly, in our culture, we have an obsession with youth. We don't want to get old. We think the teenage years are the golden years are and once you are past those, it is all downhill. Listen! The teenage years are necessary, but they can be rocky. If you're a discouraged teenager, remember that things aren't

going to stay the same forever. Sometimes things seem worse than they really are. You may find it hard to deal with the pressures you face. You may look grown up without being very mature. You may think you have everything figured out and you are going to set the world straight.

As we get older and look back, we begin to understand that we really didn't know as much as we thought we did during the teenage years. Young people need to take advantage of the experience of those who have walked with the Lord for a long time, like Caleb, and learn from them. People who have known Christ over a period of years have wisdom that young people have not yet had the opportunity to acquire. We can benefit from that.

We don't have to fear getting older when we are Christians. We have this ridiculous notion that we must always try to stay young and, at the first sign of gray hair, we try to cover it up. We try to mask the effects of aging and sometimes we make ourselves look even older than we really are. It isn't necessary to dread the passage of time. In twenty years, we can be more like Christ! Let's welcome that! If we get to be as old as Caleb, we can be more mature spiritually. We're not just getting older; we're getting closer—closer to eternity! I hope that each one of us will finish well.

It's interesting that when Caleb asked for his portion of land he said, "Give me this land!" (see Joshua 14:12)I can just see this

tough old man saying, “Give me this mountain!” It seems unlikely that anyone would laugh. They just said, “Okay!” For one thing, they didn’t argue with him because no one wanted Caleb’s mountain. He picked the toughest area in the entire land. Hebron was a rugged mountainous area and was occupied by the most formidable people in the entire land. “Okay, Caleb, you take the mountain!” they said. Actually, they were probably happy that they weren’t called on to battle for that barren mountain.

Caleb took it. Not only did he take it, but Caleb was the only person who was entirely successful in driving all the enemies from his property. Everybody else struggled. Caleb simply drove them all out. Do you wonder why? The answer is the same as before: Caleb wholly followed the Lord.

There is an insight in the name Hebron, which will help us understand one more facet of Caleb’s character. Hebron means fellowship, love, and communion. It was at Hebron that God had spoken to Abraham and given him the promise of the land in the first place. For Caleb, Hebron symbolized fellowship and communion with God. That’s what he wanted more than anything else. While the children of Israel were longing for Egypt, Caleb was longing for Hebron. While the rest of them were looking back, Caleb was looking forward. While they wanted to please themselves, Caleb wanted to please God.

So what does it mean that Caleb “wholly followed the Lord?” For Caleb, it meant three essential principles:

1. *He would not compromise; he stood his ground desiring God's approval more than the approval of others.*

2. *He believed God's Word and lived by it.*

3. *He longed for fellowship and communion with God, which was the source of his strength to carry on and to finish well.*

None of us knows how much time we have left on earth. These may be the last moments before the Lord returns. It is important that we continue to give our best effort. In the final laps of the race, the temptation is to say, "I've run so long and so far! I'm going to rest for awhile." No, you have to finish—and you ought to finish well!

Chapter Five

Look to Jesus

We've looked at those who did not finish well: Saul, Samson, and Gideon. And we've seen those who did finish well: Joseph, Mary, Peter, Paul, and Caleb. The apostle Paul told us the secret of finishing well when he said:

> Therefore we also, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which so easily ensnares us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before Him endured the cross, despising the shame, and has sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. (Hebrews 12:1–2)

In early Olympic Games, the judge had a place visible to all who were competing. He stood at the end of the race, holding the garland in his hand that he would place on the head of the victor. As the runners came around the last turn, exhausted, they would see him standing there with the prize. That sight would give them the energy to finish what they had started. Paul drew from this vivid imagery, familiar to the people of his day. He said, "Look unto Jesus!"

Paul said, "There is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give to me on that Day" (2 Timothy 4:8). Paul was running to win. Some of us say, "I'll settle for honorable mention," but our hearts should long to finish on top. After all, we're doing this for God! Jesus has

done everything for me! I want to finish well—not by my strength, but through His strength.

For those of us in this race of faith, there are many disappointments. People may tell us that we are the greatest thing since sliced bread and then they turn around and tear us down. Don't run the race for people, you will be disappointed. If your circumstances overpower you, you can get discouraged. If your emotions are not in control, you can be overwhelmed. Look unto Jesus! He is the One who started us in this race; He is the One for whom we must finish it. He is the author and finisher.

I like the way Corrie Ten Boom put it. She had a lot of reasons to be discouraged. She was sent to the Nazi concentration camp Ravensbruck for taking care of Jewish people in her home. She said, "Look within and be depressed. Look without and be distressed. Look to Jesus and be at rest."

Look to Jesus and finish well!

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