

Finishing Well

By Brian Bailey

The Apostle Paul compares the Christian life to being like a race. He exhorted, “*..let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God,*” Heb.12:1-2. In a race, what counts is how we end.

These words became very real to me through an experience I had as a young pastor. Due to many pressures that I was enduring, I had asked the Lord to end my life and take me to heaven. In answer to my prayer, one night an angel came and woke me up around 3 am. He stood a little above my bed and I came out of my body and stood by him.

Looking down at my body, I realized that my life was over and I could no longer serve the Lord upon this earth. A certain sadness came into my heart, and then the angel turned and we began a very speedy journey towards heaven past the moon and the stars. The gates to eternity became clearer and clearer as we traveled, faster than the speed of light. But the nearer we approached, the heavier my heart became.

When we stopped before those golden gates, my life was shown to me in a series of pictures from birth to death. Some pictures were blank because I had asked the Lord for forgiveness for those offences. There was absolutely no record of those failures. Praise the Lord!

But then I was shown God’s plan for my life, which had been decided before the foundation of the world. I saw that I was dying before my time, and my heart was overcome with sadness. I cried out in agony that I might be permitted to return to earth to fulfill His plan. This was apparently granted, for although I heard no voice, the angel at my side turned with me, and we went speeding back to earth and arrived at my bed. There was my body, lying next to my sleeping wife. The angel touched me and I went back into my body.

Later when I asked the Lord why I had that experience, He told me that I was to warn His people what it is like to stand at the judgment seat of Christ. Not only will we answer for those deeds done on earth, but we will also be judged as to whether or not we have fulfilled the Lord’s purposes for our lives. To run a good race and complete God’s plans for our lives we must consider three areas: the *character* we develop, the *ministry* that we gain, and also the *fruit* of that ministry.

CHARACTER

The most essential aspect of life is our character, for that can decide whether we enter the gates of heaven or not. It is of further importance for a minister, because upon the foundation of his character the work of God entrusted to him will stand or fall. I have known many seemingly great ministries and churches that have collapsed because the minister fell into serious sin. We should therefore be constantly thinking of how we can become further conformed to His matchless purity in all love and wisdom. A good name is worth more than all the treasures of this universe.

In the Song of Songs 1:6 the Shulamite says, “*They made me the keeper of the vineyards; but my own vineyard I have neglected.*” Here she is aware that although she had diligently cared for the spiritual state of others, her own vineyard (meaning her own spiritual state) she had not kept. Our heart should be filled with the fruit of the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22-23) and with diligence we should ensure that the weeds and thorns

(the works of the flesh in Galatians 5:19-21) are not permitted to take root. We are told to pursue holiness, without which no man shall see the Lord, Heb.12:14.

Some people say, "Christ has already paid it all and there is nothing more that we can do. We do not have to live a holy life." They think that He understands their ways and their problems, and He also understands why they cannot obey Him. We must be very careful, because God has given us grace to overcome every sin in our lives. The Apostle Paul declares that we are to be "*more than conquerors through him that loved us,*" Rom.8:37. In other words, there is absolutely nothing in our lives that we can use as an excuse for why we cannot obey God, for "*where sin abounded, grace did much more abound*" (Rom. 5:20).

Developing proper character also depends very much on our making the right decisions. Before we make decisions we should ask, "Lord, what is the end of this matter?" We do not want to enter into a path or career that is going to fail or become a dead end later on.

When I was a young minister in Switzerland, I was considering taking further courses in theology at Oxford and Cambridge. As I was contemplating this God graciously gave me a vision of two angels. The angels looked so similar, I could not discern the difference between them. They were both beautiful (see 2 Cor.11:14). They stood before me, and behind each one was a path. The path behind one angel led through those universities, and I saw that in those universities the teachers were anointed by demons. Then I saw the path disappear. I realized that if I continued my studies in that direction I would end up a spiritual wreck.

The other angel who was standing before me had a very straight path of righteousness that got brighter and brighter "*unto the perfect day,*" Prov.4:18. The Lord said, "Trust Me. I will lead you, guide you, instruct you, and give you revelation from my Word. I will show you truth. You do not need Greek, but grace." Mercifully, God gave me the grace to trust Him. The problem so often is that we think with our natural minds that something would be a good idea; but God knows the end of the matter.

Billy Graham had a friend named Charles Templeton. At the beginning of their ministries he had greater meetings than Billy Graham with crowds of around 40,000 people. Then he decided to get more education; so he went to Yale University, and lost his faith. He ended up writing several best sellers on his belief that God did not exist. Near the end of his life he was asked how he felt about Jesus. This is what he said Strobel's book *The Case For Faith*: when Strobel asked him to evaluate the life of Jesus, Templeton began by praising Jesus as a great moral genius and "the most important human being who has ever existed." "And if I may put it this way," Templeton added as his voice began to crack, "*I...miss...him!*" With that, tears flooded his eyes, he raised his left hand to shield his face, and his shoulders bobbed as he wept.

We certainly do not want to have that testimony at the end of our life. If Charles Templeton had only asked God what the end of his studies would have been, his life might have been very different. The most important thing is how we complete and end the race of life. Ecclesiastes 11:3 tells us, "*..In the place where the tree falls, there it will lie.*" Solomon is saying that the spiritual condition of someone at death is how he or she will remain for all eternity. Oh, may we have an abundant entrance (or rich welcome) into the kingdom of heaven, as is mentioned in Second Peter 1:11.

MINISTRY

As we consider these things, it is not just sufficient to have the character of Christ worked out in us. There is also a purpose for our lives to fulfill here on earth. Only if we accomplish our ministry will we gain all the eternal rewards that God has planned for us. We need to participate in God's works, not just be a spectator. Those who watch a sporting event may shout and thoroughly enjoy watching the game, but they do not accomplish anything. They see others collect the prizes. As Christ said in Revelation 3:11, "*Let no man take your crown.*" So it is in the Christian life - just to be a church member and even develop good Christian

character is not enough. We must also participate in God's works and develop our own areas of service and ministry.

We should constantly pray, "Lord, what are the good works that you have ordained for me to fulfill?" Then as we walk in obedience day by day, the revelation of God's purposes for our lives will unfold.

We should seek to take every opportunity to see that our ministry matures. This happens through prayer, study, and heeding the wise counsel of others who are in the process of achieving their own God-given goals. I recommend learning from the saints of old who finished their courses triumphantly, and also learning from the mistakes that others have made so that we may keep ourselves from those same errors.

In heaven, God is running a kingdom. Everyone has a function or ministry. To prepare for heaven, you have to begin entering into that function here on earth. Find the good works and ministries that God has appointed for you, for your position in heaven will depend upon what you do here on earth. Please do not come short. It is good to begin your race well, but it is all-important that you finish well! Finish the work that God has ordained for your life.

FRUIT

As we develop and then use our ministries, their purpose is to bring forth good fruit - fruit that will remain for eternity, Jn.15:16. The more we develop and use our abilities and talents, the greater will be our fruitfulness.

In John 15:8 our Lord said, "*By this my Father is glorified, that you bear much fruit and so prove to be my disciples.*" God is glorified when we bear much fruit. How does a tree glorify the orchard keeper? By bearing much fruit.

I once lived in an area with many fruit trees, and our friends would take us through their orchards. They were so proud of certain trees that bore much fruit. When we neared some of those trees, they would say, "Look at the fruit this one has produced!" This is the same joy that the Heavenly Father has when He looks at mankind. When He considers our lives may He say, "This son glorifies Me; look at all the fruit he is producing! This daughter glorifies Me; look at all the fruit she is bearing!"

The Lord is looking for the quantity of our fruitfulness. He spoke about this in the parable of the seed falling upon good ground. This seed brought forth thirty-fold, sixty-fold and one hundred-fold fruitfulness. Thirty-fold is seventy-fold short of the mark. Likewise, sixty-fold is forty-fold short of the mark. We should seek, by His grace, to bring forth one hundred-fold fruit to perfection, as Isaac did, Gen.26:12.

There is an all-important question which we will be asked in heaven: "What have you done with your life?" What did we do with the opportunities that we were given on earth? We are all given 24 hours a day; what do we do with those 24 hours? Some spend their time watching television. That is wasted time. Others play sports or video games. There will be tears in heaven when it is pointed out to us what we could have done in those hours that we wasted. What are we doing with the opportunities given to us? Are we becoming fully fruitful Christians?

Yet along with the *quantity* of our fruit, the Lord is also particular about the *quality* of our fruit, Mt.7:19-20. The Lord made a promise to our spiritual father Abraham in Genesis 22:17, where He said "*...in multiplying I will multiply your seed like the stars of the sky and the sands of the seashore.*" Our God is a God of multiplication. Towards the end of our lives, we should experience multiplication, not just addition. Yet the important question we should ask ourselves is, "What is the *quality* of that which God will multiply?" In

Abraham's life the Lord not only multiplied the descendants of the promised son, Isaac, into the 12 tribes of Israel. He also multiplied the 12 sons of Ishmael. Their descendants in the Middle East now number in the millions, and most of them are the determined enemies of Israel.

Let me give a modern example. When I was in a certain church many years ago, the Lord gave me a word that He was going to multiply this church. However, with this word came a warning. I saw two apples – one was a lovely Golden Delicious apple, and the other was a crab apple, which is sour and inedible. God was going to multiply this church, but they needed to be careful about what kind of fruit would be multiplied. Would it be fruit that could be likened to desirable Golden Delicious apples, or those that would be compared to crab apples? Years later this church has grown to have many thousands of members, but there has also been immorality among the leadership and many other problems. Regretfully, when I recently visited this church the Lord spoke to me that it was, indeed, a crab apple church. Yet if we will seek to develop both the *quantity* and the *quality* of our spiritual fruit, our efforts can be very productive. As we finish well in these areas of our lives, we can receive Christ's commendation, "*Well done, good and faithful servant...enter into the joy of your lord,*" Mt.25:23.

WHEN WE DIE

When we die, the Lord Himself or His angels will come and take us directly to heaven. I witnessed a demonstration of this with a 22 year old French girl named Madeline. She was a student at the Bible school we had in Switzerland. For six months before her severe illness she had been getting up very early in the mornings and seeking God. When she was later lying on her deathbed, I had a vision of the gates of heaven, and a beautiful white path of intense purity came down from those gates to Madeline's bed. The Lord Himself walked down that path and touched her. She came out of her body, clothed in a beautiful white garment. When the Lord offered her His right arm, she slipped her arm through His, and they walked up that path together.

At Madeline's funeral, as we laid her to rest in that Swiss village cemetery, we had a tombstone placed over her grave. The French words engraved thereon were those of Revelation 19:7, "*And His bride has made herself ready.*" Beloved, are we preparing as Madeline? Are we making ourselves ready? Our goal must be to faithfully seek Him, obey His will, and be ready for that allotted time when we are to finish our race.

Our place in heaven is given according to our development here on earth. The saints in heaven will differ in rank and responsibility. This is proven by many scriptures. Moses and Elijah are called the anointed ones that stand before the God of the earth, Rev.11:4, Zech.4:12-14. Daniel has his appointed lot, Dan. 12:13. Teachers of righteousness are called great if they are faithful and live what they teach, Mt.5:19. John the Baptist has a pre-eminent position, as shown to us by Christ when He said, "*Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist,*" Mt.11:11. The humble man is also given an elevated position as is seen in Matthew 18:4, "*Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.*"

I knew a pastor who has gone on to be with the Lord. One of the members of his congregation had a vision of what it was like when he went into heaven. An angel met him and took him to a large room with hundreds of people. Then these people began to greet the pastor. They welcomed him to heaven and said, "Thank you for that prophecy" or, "Thank you for that message; it did so much for me." Others continued, "Thank you for that pat on the back; it meant so much to me," or, "Thank you for that encouragement you gave me." Each of these would be called a small thing here on earth, but they were well remembered in heaven. The angel standing there placed a precious stone in the crown of this pastor for every one of these events in which he had blessed his church members.

Sadly, there are many others who do not finish their race well. And just as there are different levels of positions and glory in heaven, so there are different levels of punishment and torment in hell. The Lord made that very clear when He said in Matthew 11:23-24, *“And you, Capernaum, who are exalted to heaven, shall be brought down to hell. For if the mighty works which have been done in you had been done in Sodom, it would have remained until this day. But I say to you, it shall be more tolerable for the land of Sodom in the day of judgment than for you.”*

The eternity of those who have known the truth and turned aside is far worse than of those who had never known the truth. This fact is illustrated by the testimony of a youth who was taken by the Lord into hell, as recorded by the ministry, Light for the Nations: “...we came to the most terrible section of hell, where the worse torments happen – the center of hell. There we saw the most concentrated forms of torment; such torments that a human being could never express them. The only people here were those who had known Jesus and had known the Word of God. There were pastors, evangelists, missionaries, and all types of people who had once accepted Jesus and known the truth, but then had lived a double life. There were also other backsliders; and their suffering was a thousand times worse than any one else. They were shouting and begging the Lord for mercy, but the Word of the Lord says in the book of Hebrews 10:26-27, *‘If we deliberately keep on sinning after we have received the knowledge of the truth, no sacrifice for sins is left, but only a fearful expectation of judgment and of raging fire that will devour those who oppose God.’*”

“Those souls were there because they had preached, fasted, sung, and lifted their hands in the church, but outside the church they were committing immorality, lying, or robbery. We cannot successfully lie to God. In Luke 12:47-48 the Lord said, *‘That servant who knows his lord’s will and does not get ready or does not do what his master wants will be beaten with many blows. But the one who does not know and does things deserving punishment will be beaten with few blows. From everyone who has been given much, much will be required; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked.’*”

As I contemplate the many years of my life, I have seen so many fall by the wayside, some even after walking uprightly for many years. Ezekiel 33:13 says, *“If I tell the righteous man that he will surely live, but then he trusts in his righteousness and does evil, none of the righteous things he has done will be remembered; he will die for the evil he has done.”* What is most important is how we *end* the race of life. May we end our life well, by the favor and grace of God.

LOOKING TO JESUS

Hebrews 12:2 tells us that while we run our race, we are to be *“Looking to Jesus the author and finisher of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”* Here is the key to victory. How did the Captain of our salvation win the battle? He triumphed because He saw into heavenly places. He beheld the eternal joy that was awaiting Him there. It is very important to have a revelation of eternity and become heavenly minded.

Jesus had a work to accomplish—the cross. He knew what His race was, but how did He have the strength to succeed? He endured because He had a glimpse of eternity. As He went to the cross and redeemed millions of His followers, He saw the eternal joy that would be His. This enabled Christ to overcome the cross. We need to see, as the Apostle Paul also did, that *“the sufferings of this present life are not worthy to be compared with the coming glory,”* Rom.8:18.

After the cross, Christ *“sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”* How we need a glimpse of what is ahead for us. I have seen in visions some of the thrones of the overcomers (see Revelation 20:4) and it is well worth every difficulty in life to attain to that which God has planned for us.

Oh, what eternal joy! Oh, to see His wonderful face, to see that lovely smile and hear those words, “*Well done, good and faithful servant! Enter into the joy of your Lord!*” It will be worth it all when we see Jesus. Therefore, we should constantly look to Christ, the One who started His race and who also finished it triumphantly.

My prayer is that this article may fill you with zeal to live a holy life and to finish well the race that God has ordained for your life. Let us ever press on for God’s highest, not settling for second best. We want to be able to say with the Apostle Paul at the end of our lives, “*I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith,*” 2 Tim.4:11. May we all become runners that win the race and gain the prize.

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