

Finishing What

by John Piper

This sermon emphasizes the importance of finishing well for the glory of God, drawing insights from the books of Numbers, Habakkuk, and Hebrews. It highlights the need to fight the good fight, not drift, and pursue the magnifying of God's glory while finding satisfaction in Him. The message stresses that finishing well requires God's equipping and working through individuals to bring Him glory.

Scripture: Numbers 14:20, Habakkuk 2:14, Acts 20:22, Hebrews 2:1, Hebrews 4:11

Topics: "Finishing Well", "Pursuing God's Glory"

Description

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Transcript

I'd like to begin by directing your attention to a passage of scripture in the book of Numbers, chapter 14, and then one in the book of Habakkuk, and then I'd like to pray one more time just for my own help and for your heart too. Numbers 14, verses 20 to 22. Then the Lord said, I have pardoned according to your word, but truly as I live and as the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord, no one of the men who have seen my glory and my signs which I wrought in Egypt and in the wilderness and yet have put me to the proof these ten times and have not hearkened to my voice shall see the land which I swore to give to their fathers.

I want you to see in verse 21 those two phrases that he puts back to back. As I live and as all the earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord, none of those who've seen this glory and tested me will enter my land. It is as certain as the being of God that the earth will be filled with the glory of the Lord.

As I live and as this earth shall be filled with the glory of the Lord. Those two are parallel, equally certain realities. If God is, this earth will be one day filled with the glory of the Lord.

Habakkuk, chapter 2, verse 14. May be a little harder to find for you. Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, that helps.

Habakkuk chapter 2, maybe starting at verse 12. Woe to him who builds a town with blood and founds a city on iniquity. Behold, it is not from the Lord of hosts that people's labor only for fire and nations wear themselves for naught.

For the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. There is coming a day so much different from today. So much different from today.

Where the earth will be covered with the knowledge and the love and the savoring and the worshipping and the loving and the delighting in of the glory of the Lord to a depth and a weight and a pervasiveness and a saturation as the waters cover the sea. If you want to finish well, you must join God in this purpose. He's going to finish this.

This is what will be finished. This will be finished. You may either join it or miss it.

And I mean everlastingly miss it. Because there is a reality outside the earth that will be filled with the glory of the Lord where all the wicked and all the unbelieving and all who have heard of the glory of the Lord and have not responded but tested Him these ten times over will be abandoned. And you don't want to be there.

You want to be here. On the new heavens and the new earth that will be filled with the glory of the Lord. This will be finished.

This is what God will finish. The question is, will we join Him in His passion for His glory? So let me pray one more time that God would help us see these things and join. Oh Father in heaven, there is a great inadequacy in my life to say what I want and need to say here.

So I ask that you be my adequacy. That you would fill me now with your Holy Spirit and give me an anointing for this work. A sacred anointing.

And Lord I know that the hearing of it is also a gift. And I ask for ears to hear and eyes to see and spiritual noses to perceive the fragrance of the glory of Christ. And I pray for hearts who have been numbed by trifling these many decades.

And have scarcely tasted the weight of the glory of God because they've been in trifling fellowships. Who play games with God or have wasted their lives doodling instead of meditating. Lord we are a doodling culture.

We diddle, we play, we trifle with the greatest things in the world. And I just pray that you'd come. Because if we're going to reap the harvest, some will die of brain tumors at age 36.

And the children must have been taught well enough to say the Lord gave and the Lord has taken away. Blessed be the name of the Lord. Let's keep harvesting.

And I just pray oh God that you would be so weighty upon these boomers that they wouldn't quit. And that one falls the other would keep going. That when the children abandon the faith they'll keep going.

And when the joints get so stiff they'll keep going. Oh God show us your glory. If we don't have a bigger heart than is prevalent among us for the glory of God.

We will trifle in Malawi and nothing will change. I ask for your help now in Jesus name. Amen.

I want to begin with three pictures. Vignettes. And these pictures are meant to lead into the book of Hebrews.

Where I'm going to be lingering for these three messages. And particularly to lead us into some insights from the book of Hebrews. About what's involved in finishing well for the glory of God.

So picture number one. And I'll just paint it for you. You're familiar with these pictures.

At least two of them. It's on a beach in Miletus. A little south of Ephesus.

Paul is on his way to Jerusalem. And he wants to say goodbye to the elders that he had spent two and a half, three years with. Planted a church.

Loves them dearly. They will kiss his neck. They will weep over him for saying goodbye.

Just like we've wept over this saying goodbye here. As they say farewell for the last time. And he wants to say a few things.

And among the things that he says in Acts 20, verses 22 to 24, is this. I am going up to Jerusalem. And I do not know what will befall me there.

Only that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that afflictions and imprisonment await me. But I do not count my life of any value if only I might finish my course and testify to the grace of the gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. Finishing well for Paul was more important than life.

I account my life as of no value if only I might finish well. And for Paul, finishing well meant testifying every day in the face of affliction and assured imprisonment to the grace of God in the gospel. Which means he would have found all of our excuses for not going incomprehensible.

Especially the excuses of the so-called closed countries. What is a closed country? It's a country where the Holy Spirit testifies to you that imprisonment and affliction awaits you if you testify to the grace of God. Incomprehensible that we do not go.

I will reveal to you one of my aims in being here. I am out to see to it that there be martyrs in this room. And I mean that with all my heart.

I am on a crusade to recruit martyrs. Not mainly people looking for a significant second half. My biblical warrant for that is not only the apostolic vision that the Holy Spirit testifies to him that affliction and imprisonment await him in every city but Revelation 6, verse 11 where the martyrs who have already died in the cause of Christ are under the altar waiting and crying out, how long, how long, oh Lord, until you vindicate our blood and demonstrate to this world the value of your glory and the rightness of our decision to go to the impossible place.

How long? And the answer comes back astonishingly with these words. They were told to rest a little while longer until the number of their fellow servants and their brethren shall be complete or finished who were to be killed as they themselves had been. Now let me paraphrase that for you because there is so much in our heart that does not want to believe certain scriptures that we can manage not to hear them and to distort them beyond recognition.

What that text says is that God looked in great pity and patience and love upon the martyrs whom he had received into his fellowship after excruciating suffering. We could document the horrors of the torture which does throw our surroundings here into a little strange light, doesn't it? A finishers conference in a western hotel. Isn't that odd? I suppose in America you don't have too many choices, but it should feel odd.

It really should feel odd to us all. I'm sure it does to Rod and Nelson. He said, rest a little while until this is the precondition of the vindication that comes with the climax of the age.

This is what must happen first. Until the number of your fellow servants is complete who are to be killed as you have been killed. There's a number.

And I'm here to get you in it. Some of you. I mean that.

We will not finish without fatalities. Shall you bequeath that to your children? Not me. My children.

Really? Some parents we are. It must be. It must be.

So, well, what will be the legacy? Karsten? Benjamin? Abraham? Barnabas? Talitha? You do it! I don't take risks. I'm working on my retirement plan anyway, and it's not quite big enough. That's picture number one.

If not us, who? What kind of metal are we made of? What kind of posh, trifling, soft people are we? Well, we're not. You didn't come to this conference because you dream soft dreams. I hope not.

You're the kind of people I want to talk to. You're ripe. You're martyr material.

Here's picture number two. Not from the Bible this time, but from Reader's Digest. February 1998.

Here it is. Bob and Penny Stifler took early retirement from their jobs in the Northeast five years ago when he was 59 and she was 51. Now they live in Punta Gorda, Florida where they cruise on their 30-foot trawler, play softball, and collect shells.

If I was Monda Cope, I'd go... It's unbelievable! Where is Bob Dylan when we need him? I can hear the lyrics. The death now as we collect the shell. The way to hell, collect the shell.

Or something better, I'm sure. Can you believe it? I think this is meant to be attractive. I really do.

I think, though I gasp, that this paragraph at the beginning of this article is meant to be attractive to us. What planet does that person live on? This one. Well, how did they get there? These folks who were riding in their trawler and playing softball and collecting shells.

Collecting shells for the last 20 years. How did they get there? Well, if I hadn't thrown my article down there, I'd read you another paragraph. Somebody want to hand it to me? Here's how they did it.

We saved as much as we could, Penny says. We participated in every retirement savings plan at work. And if there was any money left, at the end of the year, we put it into our regular investment account.

And then the rest of the article is about 401ks and IRAs and Keeg plans. To which I say, in the words of that great baby boomer translation of the Bible that we all cut our teeth on in the 1960s, Phillips translation. Raise your hand if you ever read Phillips translation.

To quote Phillips in Acts 8.20, into the face of Simon the sorcerer, to hell with you and your money. That's a good translation. Every other translation softens it down to your money and you perish with it.

Well, that's the way I think we need to stand up and talk even to some Christian folks who for all kinds of good reasons try to get us to think a lot about money. Our money. So let me contrast these two pictures for you.

I do not count my life of any value nor as precious to myself if only I might finish my course and the ministry that Christ has given me to bear witness to the gospel of His grace in the face of continual affliction and imprisonment. Picture number one. Picture number two.

Floating on your trawler, playing softball, and collecting shells. Now, I think the question that Linda Cope was posing for us last night is how do you beget and sustain the first picture and overcome the temptations to the second picture which have left American evangelism and its transportation overseas powerless? Everybody pursuing the retirement dream in Phoenix instead of Saudi Arabia. Well, I'm not quite ready to give you the answer to that yet.

No, I think I have seen an answer and we'll try to make it plain in these three messages. And therefore, I hope render some account of how we should respond to her just indictments last night. Here's picture number three.

Paul is at the end of his life. He's in prison now. Finally, the last time in Rome.

He's writing his last letter, 2 Timothy 4, verses 6-8. And he says, I'm already on the point of being sacrificed. The time of my departure has come.

I have fought the good fight. I have finished my course. I have kept the faith.

Henceforth, there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award me on that day. And not only to me, but to all who have loved His appearing. And I add, more than life.

There will be no finishing without a fight. No finishing without fatalities. And no finishing without a fight.

I have fought the good fight. And now I have finished my course. Brothers and sisters, the opposite of fighting is drifting, coasting.

And that takes us now to the book of Hebrews, which is the biggest, strongest, most powerful indictment of drifting and coasting in all the Bible. It is a devastating book for lukewarm, careless, non-vigilant, non-running, non-fighting, non-laboring Christians. So what I want to do first to bathe you in Hebrews is to just summarize with a dozen or so texts, like bullets, the focus of the book of Hebrews on fighting.

I have fought the good fight. So I'm just going to list these verses. You won't have time to look them up.

If you want to jot them down, that's fine. Chapter 2, verse 1. Pay close attention to what you have heard and do not drift. Chapter 2, verse 3. How shall we escape if we neglect so great a salvation? Chapter 3, verse 12.

Take heed lest there be in any of you an evil, unbelieving heart leading you to fall away from the living God. Exhort one another every day that you not be hardened by the deceitfulness of sin. Take heed.

Exhort. Don't drift. Don't neglect.

Chapter 4, verse 11. Strive to enter God's rest that no one fall by the same sort of disobedience. Chapter 6, verse 11 and 12.

Realize the full assurance of hope to the end that you may not be sluggish, but imitators of those who through faith and patience inherit the promise, don't be sluggish. Don't get up in the morning and turn on the television. Don't brood over the variety section of the newspaper without having bled over your Bible.

Don't be that way. It breeds weak, powerless churches. Chapter 10, verse 22.

Draw near with a true heart full of assurance. Hold fast to the confession of your hope without wavering. Chapter 10, verse 35.

Don't throw away your confidence which has great reward, for you have need of endurance. Chapter 10, verse 39. We're not among those who shrink back and are destroyed, but those who have faith and inherit the promises.

Chapter 12, verse 1. Let us lay aside every weight and sin. Let me pause over this. It said in the brochure that most of our kids are grown.

I've got a three-year-old. We decided to start over so we could empathize with those who in their thirties are doing it. That's not the only reason, is it, Noelle? I also have a 15-year-old, an 18-year-old, a 23-year-old, and a 26-year-old.

When they say, listening to a particular kind of music that I don't like, or going to a movie that I disapprove of, when they say, oh, what's wrong with it? I always respond the same. Wrong question! Don't ask minimalist Christian questions in this house. They are still following the Lord.

Believe it or not. With tears, and I could tell you stories of hard times. Nobody's raised teenagers without tears.

Don't ask minimalist Christian questions. Ask maximalist Christian questions in this house. Don't ask, what's wrong with something? Who cares about that question? Ask, does it set me on fire? Does it make me pray harder, love my Bible, fall in love with Jesus, lay down my life, be courageous in witness? I want to know that about this movie.

I want to know that about this rock music. You come out of that aflame for love with Jesus, lay aside every weight and sin. I don't care if it's a sin! Wrong question! Does it help you run, son? Does it help you run for Jesus to the hard places and the hard people of the neighborhood? That plays, folks.

That plays with teenagers. Exers, busters, boomers, human beings want maximalist questions. Force them to ask the right questions.

Chapter 12, verse 3, Consider Him who endured from sinners such hostility against Himself, so that you may not grow weary or faint-hearted. You have not yet resisted unto blood. Chapter 12, verse 12, Lift your drooping knees, your drooping hands.

Strengthen your weak knees. Make straight paths for your feet. Don't be put out of joint.

Get yourself healed. You've got a race. Lastly, chapter 12, verse 15, And I've left out many.

See to it that no one fail to obtain the grace of God. Summary, there is no finishing well without a fight. I don't know what your breed or brand of Christianity is, but there are many fightless brands.

Oh, the false security abroad in America. Oh, the false security in many churches. Many will say to me in that day, Lord, Lord.

And He will say to them, I never knew you. Though you profess the deity of my Son. For there was no pursuit.

Chapter 12, verse 14, Pursue the holiness without which you will not see the Lord. Oh, the false security in many churches. There will be no finishing at all without a fight.

Now we're close to the answer that I heard asked for last night. If you've got these two pictures of Reader's Digest on the one side and collecting shells on the way to the judgment, and you've got Paul on the other side counting his life of no value if only he might finish well his course of testifying to the gospel of the grace of God in the face of affliction and imprisonment. If you've got those two pictures and this is the one that if you became that way, it would change the world.

How do you become that way? And how do you sustain that? There are two parts to the answer that I'm moving into. One is, you must see that the fight is a fight for the magnifying of the glory of God. And you must see that the fight is a fight for the satisfying of your soul.

And you must see that they're not different fights. I'll say it again. And I'll be spending the next two sessions unpacking this sentence.

In order to become the kind of person in Acts 20-24, you must see that the fight you are called to is a fight for the magnifying of the glory of God among the nations. And you must see that it is a fight for the satisfying of your own soul in that glory. And you must see that the first fight and the second fight are one fight.

And so in the last five minutes or so that we have, if you have a Bible, you might want to look at Hebrews 13, 20 and 21. Here you have, I think, an answer to the question that might be rising in some of your minds. After that litany from the book of Hebrews on my striving, my fighting, my not drifting, my not neglecting, my taking heed, my exhorting, my seizing, my not throwing away, my running.

Why shouldn't I get the glory and not God? And the answer is given in these two verses. Now may the God of peace... This is Hebrews 13, 20 and 21. May the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the Great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you... This is God acting now.

This is God acting. May God... All you boomers, may God equip you with everything good that you may do His will. So there's one statement that the equipping of you to do His will is from Him.

Now here's an even stronger one. Working in you, may God work... May the God of hope work in you that which is pleasing in His sight through Jesus Christ to whom therefore will be the glory forever and ever. You won't get the glory if you finish well because you will only finish well if God finishes through you.

God is the great finisher. In fact, I would say, risking overstatement, He is the only finisher. And we will finish well if we recognize that what He aims to finish, we must join Him in finishing.

And more than that, from the text, verse 21, if we are to finish it joining Him in His goal to fill the earth with the knowledge of the glory of God like the waters cover the sea, we must finish recognizing that it is He who works in us which is pleasing in His sight through Jesus so that Jesus gets the glory. Do you see the theological connection there? God is doing it. You wonder, how do I run? How do I strengthen my knees? How do I lift my drooping hands? How do I not drift? The answer is, God does it in you and through you through Jesus Christ.

Why through Jesus Christ? To whom be glory forever. The giver gets the glory. The doer gets the glory.

The finisher gets the glory. And God means for Jesus to get the glory. And therefore, if you finish, Jesus finishes through you.

You will not finish on your own. There's a text back in chapter 13, verses 5 and 6 that relates to money. It says, be content with what you have.

You can resign right now. Be content with what you have. For God has said, I will never leave you.

I will never forsake you. So that we can confidently say, the Lord is my Helper. I will not fear what can man, Muslim, Hindu, Animist, Atheist, do to me.

Only kill me. That's all. And Jesus said, do not fear Him who can kill the body.

And after that has nothing that He can do. Fear not. You can only be killed if you're going to finish well.

It will be joining God in His purposes to glorify His name. And it will be joining Him in the strength that He Himself for the rest of your days till your dying day in or out of prison supplies. Because the Giver and the Finisher will get the glory.

Father, I pray with all my heart that You get glory in these 660 people. Get glory here. This universe exists, O God, for You.

We want to magnify You. We want our little lives to count for You. O God, we have just begun.

Show us Your glory. Just like Moses, we say, we're not going up if You won't go with us. We're not going to that country if You won't go with us.

And we hear You say, I'll never leave you. I will never forsake you because if I did, you might get some glory. And I mean to have it all.

Receive it. In the name of Your glorious Son, we pray.

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