

Finishing Well

By Pastor Alan Utting

'The longer I live, the more I see that finishing well is not a matter of skill or giftedness, but of character and endurance.'

Gordan MacDonald

In high school, I ran a yearly cross-country race on a rugged hillside at the outskirts of our city and aimed to do well. Mid-race, I found a boy with a serious foot injury from broken glass. I ran back half a kilometre to inform a teacher, who then went to help but didn't offer me a ride back. Annoyed but determined, I eventually crossed the finish line and ended up with the last group of runners. Though it looked unimpressive, I was pleased with my effort given the circumstances.

Ministry can be like that. People judge our achievements through what they see, which may be impressive or otherwise, but underneath it all God looks on our struggles, heart aches, faithfulness to the call along with joys and rewards us accordingly. 'The LORD does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart' (1 Samuel 16:7).

Bible Perspective

When Jesus said, 'it is finished' (John 19:30), the disciples were likewise disappointed, having expected him to establish a kingdom in Israel. Their loss was profound, but their perspective was mistaken just as ours can be when we judge our own efforts prematurely. Avoid judging the effectiveness of your work too quickly or harshly. On a different note, Paul made the comment, 'I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. 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 4:7,8). Well-done Paul.

Observation

1. If you remain longer than you should in your ministry, you may lose effectiveness altogether. Most Christians experience both seasons of fruitfulness and times that feel barren. Do your best not to step away during a valley of discouragement unless you have a clear sense of God's guidance or unmistakeable signs that it is time to move on.
2. Finishing well does not always mean leaving on a high. For instance, in one transitional ministry I had just before I concluded my time as senior pastor of a church, I had to stand down a close friend in ministry for the sake of the church's well-being. This was not because of sin. Although he had assured me beforehand that he was ready for this step whenever it was needed, he struggled deeply with the reality when it happened. I left with a heavy heart, grieving that my friend was hurting and that I could do little to ease his pain. Yet ministry is not about us, it is about God and His glory. That church has since continued to thrive under new leadership.
'Dying to self' is an essential part of every significant spiritual journey.
3. Don't cling too tightly to your ministry or position. Always be intentional about preparing and equipping a successor, even if they never step fully into the role. The investment you make in training and mentoring someone will never be wasted, for it

will shape their growth and strengthen the body of Christ.

4. When you leave, make sure you do step away—unless there is a clear and ongoing invitation to remain connected. However most major denominations have a policy on leaving. When I concluded my ministry in one church, the elders invited me to stay connected. However, it soon became clear that the new pastor preferred otherwise. With some disappointment, I chose to let that expectation go. If you face a similar situation, don't take it personally. It is both wise and usually necessary to keep your distance. Above all, resist any temptation to be controlling, even from afar.

5. Be prepared, as you move from one ministry or role to another, for the way you operate may need to be different. Your past experience will be an asset, but it must be applied with wisdom and adapted to the new context. In my own journey, I have usually found that each new opportunity allows me to build on what I have learned before, while also stretching me in fresh ways.

6. When leaving a ministry, graciously accept a farewell celebration if it is offered. It doesn't need to be elaborate. Use the occasion as an opportunity to bless the people and to honour those who have served alongside you. Remember, the way you finish one ministry will have a significant influence on how you begin the next.

7. If your personal identity is too closely tied to your ministry or job, don't be surprised if you experience a sense of identity crisis when you move on—especially if you suddenly find yourself with extra time on your hands. We must remember, however, that our true identity is not found in what we do but in who we are in Christ. Above all else, we are His beloved sons and daughters.

8. When you leave a ministry, God may not always open the next door straight away for a ministry or secular type job. This can feel like a wilderness experience—much like Moses, who spent forty years in the desert. Yet if God is leading you, such seasons are never wasted. Be careful not to panic, as haste can push you into the wrong role. Sometimes the delay simply means that your next ministry or position is not yet ready or available.

9. If you are nearing burnout, take the time to recover fully before stepping into another ministry.

10. Bigger and more spectacular ministries are not always God's will for us. Unlike the secular world, we do not climb a ladder of success for recognition or status. For example, we have a lady pastor friend in Sri Lanka who was once a prominent national Christian leader. When we visited her a few years ago, we found that she now lives in a remote town in the highlands, where her primary ministry is running a small house church among the very poor. Yet she is still deeply fulfilled in her work. How wonderful is that and to God alone be the glory!

Resources

Gordon MacDonald, *A resilient Life*
Marjory F Foyle, *Honourably Wounded*
Bob Buford, *Finishing Well*