

[Introduction to free article.](#)

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Three Articles About Finishing Well

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Finishing Well—Six Characteristics

Introduction to Research on Finishing Well

In 1989 in an article entitled, Listen Up Leaders! Forewarned is Forearmed! I summarized my research on Biblical leaders with the following opening comments.

A repeated reading of the Bible with a focus on leadership reveals four crucial observations fraught with leadership implications:

- Observation 1. Few leaders finish well.²
- Observation 2. Leadership is difficult.
- Observation 3. God's enabling presence is the essential ingredient of successful leadership.
- Observation 4. Spiritual leadership can make a difference.

And what is true of Biblical leaders is equally true of historical and contemporary leaders.³ It is the first observation to which this article speaks. Identifying the fact that few leaders finish well was a breakthrough warning for me. This led to further study. Why do few leaders finish well? What stops them? What helps them? What does it mean to finish well? This article identifies six characteristics of those finishing well.

Six Characteristics

Comparative study of effective leaders who finished well has identified six characteristics. While there may be other characteristics that I have not seen, certainly these are important ones. Not all six always appear but at least several of them do in leaders who finish well. Frequently, effective leaders who finish well will have four or five of them seen in their lives. And some, like Daniel in the O.T. and Paul in the N.T. demonstrate all of them. What are these six characteristics of those finishing well.

¹ Two different versions using these three articles have been given as plenary talks at conferences. *The Mantle of the Mentor* (1993) by Dr. J. Robert Clinton was given at a plenary address spoken at the International Foursquare Convention in Lexington, Kentucky. Emphasizes finishing well. Three case studies set the stage for the presentation of six barriers to finishing well and five enhancements to finishing well. Few leaders finish well. The thrust of this address is to warn and motivate many more to finish well. (PDF version available). *Finishing Well* (1994) by Dr. J. Robert Clinton. A second plenary address was spoken at The Leadership Forum Conference at Estes Park, Co. sponsored by Interest Ministries of Wheaton, Il. Four case studies set the stage for presentation of six barriers to finishing well and five enhancements to finishing well. The thrust of this address was to warn and motivate many more to finish well. These Two Finishing Well Talks, can be ordered from the purchase section of this website as TwoFinishingWellTalks.pdf.

² There are around 800 or so leaders mentioned in the Bible. There are about 100 who have data that helps you interpret their leadership. About 50 of these have enough data for evaluation of their finish. About 1 in 3 finished well. Anecdotal evidence from today indicates that this ratio is probably generous. Probably less than 1 in 3 are finishing well today.

³ At the time of this article I have studied nearly 1300 cases with about 50 Bible leaders, perhaps 100 historical leaders and the rest contemporary leaders. The findings for enhancements and barriers generally hold true.

Characteristic 1.

They maintain a personal vibrant relationship with God right up to the end.

Example: Daniel is the classic O.T. leader who exemplifies this. In the N.T., Peter, Paul and John all demonstrate this. See their last writings—the tone, the touch with God, the revelation from God, their trust in enabling grace for their lives.

Characteristic 2.

They maintain a learning posture and can learn from various kinds of sources—life especially.

This characteristic is also one of the enhancement factors for finishing well.

Example: Daniel is the classic O.T. leader who exemplifies this. See Daniel chapter nine for a late in life illustration of one who continues to study and learn from the Scriptures. Paul and Peter are the classic N.T. leaders with a learning posture (see 2Pe 3:18 and 2Ti 4:13).

Characteristic 3.

They manifest Christ-likeness in character as evidenced by the fruit of the Spirit in their lives.

Example: Daniel is the classic O.T. leader who exemplifies godliness (See the summary references to him in Eze 14:14,20). In the N.T. note the evidence of character transformation in Paul’s life (2Ti 2:24 and an illustration of it—the book of Phm). These were men who over a lifetime moved from strong personalities with roughness in their leadership styles to strong personalities with gentleness in their leadership styles.

Characteristic 4.

Truth is lived out in their lives so that convictions and promises of God are seen to be real.

Example: Joshua’s statement about God’s promises never having failed him in his closing speech demonstrate this characteristic of someone believing God and staking his life on God’s truth (Jos 23:14). See the many aside truth statements that Paul weaves into his two letters to Timothy. See his famous stirring convictions echoed in Ac 27:22-25.

Characteristic 5.

They leave behind one or more ultimate contributions.

In a study on legacies left behind by effective leaders who finished well I have identified the following categories:

Table 1. Categories of Lasting Legacies

Category	Explanation
saint	a model life that others want to emulate
stylistic practitioners	a ministry model that others want to emulate
mentors	extensive personal ministry; end product changed lives
public rhetoricians	extensive public ministry; end product changed lives

pioneers	start new works for God; end product is new churches, new movements, new works for God
crusaders	those who correct wrongs, end product, changed institutions, societies, etc. which reflect justice, fairness, etc.
artists	those who introduce creative ways of doing things; end products— whatever is created— as well as a model for how to do things differently
founder	a special category of pioneer who starts a new Christian organization; end product, the organization
stabilizers	those who can work in churches, movements, and other organizations to improve them and keep them alive and consistent; end product the organization revitalized and efficient
researchers	those who find out why things happen the way they do in Christian endeavor; end product an, understanding of the dynamics of things that can help others in Christian work
writers	those who can capture ideas in writing in order to help others in Christian work; end product, the writing produced
promoters	those who can motivate others and inspire them to use ideation, to join movements, etc.; end product people committing themselves to new ventures

Examples: Daniel’s ultimate contributions include: saint, (mentor), writer, stabilizer. Paul’s ultimate contributions include: saint, mentor, pioneer, crusader, writer, promoter.

Of course, in addition to these standard categories there are also unique legacies that leaders also leave behind. These have to be described individually for each leader.

Characteristic 6.

They walk with a growing awareness of a sense of destiny and see some or all of it fulfilled.

Definition A sense of destiny is an inner conviction arising from an experience or a series of experiences in which there is a growing sense of awareness that God has His hand on a leader in a special way for special purposes.

Over a lifetime a leader is prepared by God for a destiny, receives guidance toward that destiny, and increasingly completes that destiny. No Biblical leader who accomplished much for God failed to have a sense of destiny, one that usually grew over his/her lifetime.

Examples: Joseph’s dreams and his saving of the embryonic nation; Moses’ saving of the nation; Paul’s vision to take the Gospel to the Gentiles.

Conclusion

The classic example in the O.T. of a good finish is Daniel who manifests all six characteristics. The classic example in the N.T. other than Christ is Paul. There are gradations of finishing well. Some finish well but not quite having all six or lesser intensity on one or the other major characteristics. This list of characteristics is probably not complete. Others may not agree totally with them. In that case, they should at least provide an alternate list. But these are certainly evident in many leaders who have finished well.

See **Article**, *Leaving Behind a Legacy*.

Finishing Well—Six Major Barriers Identified

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Six Barriers To Finishing Well

Comparative study of effective leaders who finished well has identified six barriers that hindered leaders from finishing well. It only takes one of them to torpedo a leader. But frequently a leader who fails in one area will also fail in others. What are these barriers? We can learn from those who didn't finish well. We can be alerted to these barriers. We can avoid them in our own lives. Pr 22:3 tells us that,

Sensible people will see trouble coming and avoid it, but an unthinking person will walk right into it and regret it later. Pr 22:3

Let me share with you six barriers to finishing well that I have identified. We need to look ahead in our lives and not walk right into these barriers. We need to avoid being entrapped by them.

Barrier 1. Finances—their Use And Abuse

Leaders, particularly those who have power positions and make important decisions concerning finances, tend to use practices which may encourage incorrect handling of finances and eventually wrong use. A character trait of greed often is rooted deep and eventually will cause impropriety with regard to finances. Numerous leaders have fallen due to some issue related to money.

Biblical Examples: O.T.: Gideon's golden ephod. N.T.: Ananias and Sapphira.

Barrier 2. Power—its Abuse

Leaders who are effective in ministry must use various power bases in order to accomplish their ministry. With power so available and being used almost daily, there is a tendency to abuse it. Leaders who rise to the top in a hierarchical system tend to assume privileges with their perceived status. Frequently, these privileges include abuse of power. And they usually have no counter balancing accountability.

Biblical Example: Uzziah's usurping of priestly privilege.

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Barrier 3. Pride--which Leads To Downfall

Pride (inappropriate and self-centered) can lead to a downfall of a leader. As a leader there is a dynamic tension that must be maintained. We must have a healthy respect for our selves, and yet we must recognize that we have nothing that was not given us by God and He is the one who really enables ministry.

Biblical Example: David's numbering.

Barrier 4. Sex--illicit Relationships

Illicit sexual relationships have been a major downfall both in the Bible and in western cultures.⁵ Joseph's classic integrity check with respect to sexual sin is the ideal model that should be in leaders minds.

Biblical Example: David's sin with Bathsheba was a pivotal point from which his leadership never fully recovered. It was all downhill from there on.

Barrier 5. FAMILY--Critical Issues

Problems between spouses or between parents and children or between siblings can destroy a leader's ministry. What is needed are Biblical values lived out with regard to husband-wife relationships, parent-children, and sibling relationships. Of growing importance in our day is the social base profiles for singles in ministry and for married couples.

Biblical Example: David's family. Ammon and Tamar. Absalom's revenge.

Barrier 6. Plateauing.

Leaders who are competent tend to plateau. Their very strength becomes a weakness. They can continue to minister at a level without there being a reality or Spirit empowered renewing effect. Most leaders will plateau several times in their life times of development. Some of the five enhancement factors for a good finish will counteract this tendency (perspective, learning posture, mentor, disciplines). There again is a dynamic tension that must be maintained between leveling off for good reasons, (consolidating one's growth and/or reaching the level of potential for which God has made you) and plateauing because of sinfulness or loss of vision.

Biblical Example: David in the latter part of his reign just before Absalom's revolt.

Forewarned is forearmed. There are many other reasons why leaders don't finish well—usually all related to sin in some form. But at least the six categories are major ones that have trapped many leaders and taken them out of the race. Leaders who want to finish well, Take heed!

See **Articles:** *Finishing Well—Six Characteristics; Finishing Well—Six Enhancements.*

⁵ This is probably true in other cultures as well though I do not have a data base to prove this.

Finishing Well—Five Factors That Enhance It

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Five Enhancements

Comparative study of effective leaders who finished well has identified five commonalities. Not all five always appear in leaders who finish well but at least several of them do. Frequently, effective leaders who finish well will have four or five of them seen in their lives. What are these enhancements?

Enhancement 1. Perspective.

We need to have a lifetime perspective on ministry. Effective leaders view present ministry in terms of a lifetime perspective.⁷ We gain that perspective by studying lives of leaders as commanded in Hebrews 13:7,8. I have been doing intensive study of leaders' lives over the past 13 years. Leadership emergence theory is the result of that research. Its many concepts can help us understand more fully just how God does shape a leader over a lifetime.⁸

Enhancement 2. Renewal.

Special moments of intimacy with God, challenges from God, new vision from God and affirmation from God both for personhood and ministry will occur repeatedly to a growing leader. These destiny experiences will be needed, appreciated, and will make the difference in persevering in a ministry. All leaders should expectantly look for these repeated times of renewal. Some can be initiated by the leader (usually extended times of spiritual disciples). But some come sovereignly from God. We can seek them, of course, and be ready for them.

Most leaders who have been effective over a lifetime have needed and welcomed renewal experiences from time to time in their lives. Some times are more crucial in terms of renewal than others. Apparently in western society the mid-thirty's and early forty's and mid-fifty's are crucial times in which renewal is frequently needed in a leader's life. Frequently during these critical periods discipline slacks, there is a tendency to plateau and rely on one's past experience and skills, and a sense of confusion concerning achievement and new direction prevail. Unusual renewal experiences with God can overcome these tendencies and redirect a leader. An openness for them, a willingness to take steps to receive them, and a knowledge of their importance for a whole life can be vital factors in profiting from **enhancement 2** for finishing well. Sometimes these renewal experiences are divinely originated by God and we must be sensitive to his invitation. At other times we must initiate the renewal efforts.

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⁷ This is one of seven major leadership lessons derived from comparative studies. See **Article**, *Seven Major Leadership Lessons*.

⁸ My findings are available in two books, **The Making of A Leader**, published by Nav Press in 1988 and a lengthy detailed self-study manual, **Leadership Emergence Theory**, that I privately publish for use in classes and workshops. In addition, my latest research is available in position papers published by Barnabas Publishers. See **For Further Study Bibliography** for full listings of these books.

Enhancement 3. Disciplines.

Leaders need discipline of all kinds. Especially is this true of spiritual disciplines. A strong surge toward spirituality now exists in Catholic and Protestant circles. This movement combined with an increasingly felt need due to the large number of failures is propelling leaders to hunger for intimacy. The spiritual disciplines are one mediating means for getting this intimacy. Such authors as Eugene Peterson, Dallas Willard, and Richard Foster are making headway with Protestants concerning spirituality.⁹ Leaders without these leadership tools are prone to failure via sin as well as plateauing.

I concur with Paul's admonitions to discipline as a means of insuring perseverance in the ministry. When Paul was around 50 years of age he wrote to the Corinthian church what appears to be both an exhortation to the Corinthians and an explanation of a major leadership value in his own life. We need to keep in mind that he had been in ministry for about 21 years. He was still advocating strong discipline. I paraphrase it in my own words.

I am serious about finishing well in my Christian ministry. I discipline myself for fear that after challenging others into the Christian life I myself might become a casualty. 1Co 9:24-27

Lack of physical discipline is often an indicator of laxity in the spiritual life as well. Toward the end of his life, Paul is probably between 65 and 70, he is still advocating discipline. This time he writes to Timothy, who is probably between 30 and 35 years old.

...Instead exercise your mind in godly things. 8 For physical exercise is advantageous somewhat but exercising in godliness has long term implications both for today and for that which will come. (1Ti 4:7b,8)

Leaders should from time to time assess their state of discipline. I recommend in addition to standard word disciplines involving the devotional life and study of the Bible other disciplines such as solitude, silence, fasting, frugality, chastity, secrecy. My studies of Foster and Willard have helped me identify a number of disciplines which can habitually shape character and increase the probability of a good finish.

Enhancement 4. Learning Posture.

The single most important antidote to plateauing is a well developed learning posture. Such a posture is also one of the major ways through which God gives vision. I will describe more about how to do this in the commentary which follows.

Another of the seven major leadership lessons is *Effective leaders maintain a learning posture all their lives*. It sounds simple enough but many leaders don't heed it. Two Biblical leaders who certainly were learners all their lives and exemplified this principle were Daniel and Paul. Note how Daniel observed this principle. In Da 9 when he is quite old we find that he was still studying his Bible and still learning new things from it. And he was alert to what God wanted to do through what he was learning. Consequently, Daniel was able to intercede for his people and become a recipient of one of the great messianic revelations. Paul's closing remarks to Timothy show he was still learning. "And when you come don't forget the books Timothy!" (2Ti 4:13).

There are many non-formal training events available such as workshops, seminars, and conferences covering a variety of learning skills. Take advantage of them. A good learning posture is insurance against plateauing and a helpful prod along the way to persevere in leadership. An inflexible spirit with regards to learning is almost a sure precursor to finishing so-so or poorly.

Enhancement 5. Mentoring.

Comparative study of many leaders lives indicates the frequency with which other people were significant in challenging them into leadership and in giving timely advice and help so as to keep them there. Leaders who are effective and finish well will have from 10 to 15 significant people who came

⁹ See also my section on spiritual guides and the appendix on the disciplines in **The Mentor Handbook**, available through Barnabas Publishers. See **Article**, *Spiritual Disciplines and On-Going Leadership*.

alongside at one time or another to help them. Mentoring is also a growing movement in Christian circles as well as secular.

The general notion of mentoring involves a relational empowerment process in which someone who knows something (the mentor) passes on something (wisdom, advice, information, emotional support, protection, linking to resources) to someone who needs it (the mentoree, protégé) at a sensitive time so that it impacts the person's development. The basic dynamics of mentoring include attraction, relationship, response, accountability and empowerment. My observations on mentoring suggest that most likely, any leader will need a mentor at all times over a lifetime of leadership. Mentoring is available if one looks for specific functions and people who can do them (rather than an ideal mentor who can do all). God will provide a mentor in a specific area of need for you if you trust Him for one and you are willing to submit and accept responsibility.

Simply stated a final suggestion for enabling a good finish is find a mentor who will hold you accountable in your spiritual life and ministry and who can warn and advise so as to enable you to avoid pitfalls and to grow throughout your lifetime of ministry.

Conclusion

A leader ought to want to finish well. I never give this warning, few leaders finish well, and this challenge, do you want to finish well?, without an overwhelming response. Yes, I do. Then heed these five factors. Proactively take steps to get these factors working in your life. Finish well!!!

See **Articles:** *Six Characteristics of a Good Finish; Leadership Lessons—Seven Major Lessons Identified.*