

Finishing Well—Six Characteristics

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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.¹

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.² 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.

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

¹ 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.

² 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.

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*.