Chapter 17
Finishing Well

Life is a test, life is a trust and life is a temporary assignment.[1]
—Rick Warren

If our worship can be seen as a journey, then it could be said that life is a marathon. After all, the idea of life being like a race is a biblical metaphor. We are told to " … Run in such a way as to get the prize" (1 Cor 9:24). We are encouraged to " … run with perseverance the race marked out for us" (Heb 12:1). Maybe racing's really not your thing and running doesn't appeal at all so the metaphor loses its power, but stick with us, will you?

In this long race I've seen some amazing sights, and it has been a mix of lush green valleys, panoramic mountain top sites and a lot of steep hills. I've been exhilarated and exhausted, both dazzled and dismayed by the route I've taken. I have a lot of friends who've "bitten the dust." They have lost their marriages, lost their desire for God, and lost their way. Like a marathon, the side of the road is littered with people who have quit because of injury, distraction or discouragement. But for me, as I look forward to the last thirty or so years of my life, I want to keep running the race until the end.

William Carey (1761-1834), a missionary to India, is often called "the father of modern missions." Near the end of his life, when one of his supporters wanted to write his biography, Carey said this:

> If one should think it worth his while to write my life, I will give you a criterion by which you may judge of its correctness. If he gives me credit for being a plodder, he will describe me justly. Anything beyond this will be too much. *I can plod. I can persevere in any definite pursuit*. To this I owe everything[2] (italics emphasis added).

The race of faith is less about sprinting, and more about staying in the race, even if it's at a plodding pace. In a sermon series on endurance, John Piper shared with his congregation: "I pleaded with them to be "coronary Christians,"—the sort who keep going for the long haul because their heart is filled with life, hope and purpose—and not "adrenal Christians"—who wear out after a brief push of industrious serving … Not that adrenaline is bad … it gets me through a lot of Sundays. But it lets you down on Mondays … "[3]

As I watch my parents enter the wintertime of their lives, the eventual end of my own earthly life becomes more real to me. The psalmist who complained of a grievous sickness said, "My times are in your hands" (Ps 31:15). God is sovereign over the length of our lives: "Man's days are determined; you have decreed the number of his months and have set limits he cannot exceed" (Job 14:5).

Wise Investors

Whether we are facing a seemingly endless stretch of track or aware of the finish line looming up, there is a question that we all must answer: what are we going to do with the time God gives us?

I have some friends who faced that question well when they were in their fifties. While their peers were thinking about retirement options, vacation homes and a lot of golf, these friends had a big God-vision that meant there were more than leisure pursuits on the horizon, for the last decades of their lives.

Randy Butler has been a friend of mine for around twenty years. We are around the same age, and were both worship leader-songwriters in the Vineyard Church movement beginning in the late 1980's. Randy has planted and pastored churches and except for a three-year period of full-time pastoral ministry, he has worked as a building contractor to support his ministry. He now runs a small family-powered building company along with three of his kids.

In 2009 during the U.S. economic meltdown, their work slowed down to nothing. Randy explains, "there was no work and no check for three months. After the slowdown there was zilch. We were depleted down to nothing." To make ends meet, they began to sell their possessions. They sold their tractor, his piano, his Martin D-18 guitar [ouch!], and other things. They couldn't make their property payments for a few months. After fifteen years of running a building business, "it felt horrible" to get so far behind. They were "squeezing the last little bit out of every toothpaste tube."

The situation looked very bleak. Finally, the work began to roll in. Just a few months after this period of recovery from near bankruptcy, Randy went to Haiti with "Mercy Response" for three weeks last summer. He led a team of around thirty builders who helped construct living quarters for serving teams from North America. All of this is to support the long range rebuilding effort after the devastating earthquake in Haiti.

Randy's tenuous financial situation didn't keep him from investing his life in helping the poor. He didn't let fear of another economic slow-down keep him from generously giving his time and talents. He left his son, Ian, to run the family business in their busiest time of the year. It may not have been good "business sense" but it is good "kingdom sense."

Our family visited Randy's family on July 4th of this year and saw their rural property. It's five acres of northwest forested land that they cleared themselves. It's a peaceful place. They are living in a small camper-trailer while his mother and two youngest children live in a small home on the same property.

The trips to Haiti and other mission fields are only a small part of the overall picture of the Butlers' life. Several years ago, he and his wife Marlys heard a sermon series by Archibald Hart on "Finishing Well." These talks really stimulated them and immediately they started discussing what they were going to do together for the rest of their lives. Hearing those messages sparked a vision to use their rural acreage as a retreat center to care for all kinds of people—writers, pastors, and kids who have suffered from human trafficking. They've already started this ministry even though they really don't have the facilities for it. While living in the tiny little trailer they unselfishly invite people to stay in the more comfortable main house. It's the start of a working ranch where people can come to take a respite, connect with an agrarian lifestyle and get rejuvenated.

Paul wrote to Timothy, "Be sure to use the abilities God has given you … Put these abilities to work" (1 Tim 4:14-15 Living Bible). This is simply what the Butlers are doing. Randy acquired the skill of carpentry from his father and today he is simply using what God gave him to bless others. Randy and Marlys also have the gift of hospitality. It's their joy to take care of people; I've felt it when I'm around them. Nobody is pressuring them to invite people to stay; they're just doing what God created them to do and loving it. They are following the maxim from Romans: " … since we find ourselves fashioned into all these excellently formed and marvelously functioning parts in Christ's body, let's just go ahead and be what we were made to be … " (Rom 12:5 *The Message*).

Like Abraham, Randy and Marlys don't mind living in a tent or a trailer for a while. They are excited about the "second half" of their earthly sojourn. Their sights are set on a permanent heavenly dwelling and they're storing up for themselves treasure in heaven.

Mac and Louise Jardine

Mac and Louise Jardine are another couple who are investing wisely. We were on the same church pastoral staff in the early 1990's in Surrey, British Columbia and I've known few people who love to worship more than Mac and Louise. In 1992, the Jardines and I were in Hong Kong, for an equipping conference led by John Wimber. While Mac was sitting in the front row he had an open-eyed vision of Jesus in the guise of Uncle Sam. "Uncle Sam" was pointing his finger at Mac and saying "I want you here" (in Hong Kong). It looked to Mac like a US army recruiting poster.

Louise wasn't the least bit interested in moving to Hong Kong but God has a way of getting his message across to people who truly want to obey him. Within a few years they were living in Hong Kong, ministering to street people and drug addicts. They moved with their two youngest children from a comfortable townhouse in Surrey to a tiny room at "Hang Fook Camp" in Hong Kong.

For a short time they oversaw a small discipleship school made up of teens and people in their twenties, from Canada, and then they joined the staff of St. Stephen's Society, a ministry with a focus on helping the poor. For the next ten years, they served the poor

and experienced God like never before. Louise talks about "seeing Jesus in the face of the poor." As she would kneel down to give a rice box to a granny who was sleeping on the street, she would see Jesus. As she prayed for a former drug addict who was abused by his parents and thrown out on the street, she would see Jesus.

They stayed in this ministry role, both in Hong Kong and in the Philippines, for the next ten years. Because Mac and Louise were intimately connected to God as worshipers, they learned to love the things Jesus loves and do the things Jesus does. Now in their late sixties, they live in Canada most of the year, ministering to church leaders. The rest of the time they help with church plants in Bangkok, Thailand and other locations in Asia.

When I talk to Mac and Louise about ministering in a Vineyard church in the slums of Bangkok, their faces light up as they tell stories of homeless people finding Jesus as well as a loving community. They tell stories of the abused receiving healing. At an age when most people are thinking about retirement, Mac and Louise are still pressing on. For Mac, the word “retire” is “the R-word”—it’s like a swear word. Mac wants to die with his boots on. Mac and Louise may not be “sprinting” anymore, but they are definitely in the race, slowly moving towards the finish line.

Mac and Louise are great examples of people who are not engrossed in the things of this world. They know that our “stuff” isn’t important; it’s not going to last. They live in a small apartment that is loaned to them by a good friend. They see the shortness of this life and live by heaven’s economy. They are a living embodiment of the scripture that says, “ … the time is short. From now on … those who buy something, [should live] as if it were *not theirs to keep*; those who use the things of the world, as if *not engrossed in them*. For this world in its present form is passing away. I would like you to be free from concern … ” (1 Cor 7:29-32, emphasis added).

Keys to Persevering to the End

In the long, hard marathon of life we need to persevere: “We want each of you to show this same diligence to the very end, in order to make your hope sure. We do not want you to become lazy, but to imitate those who through *faith and patience* inherit what has been promised … You need to *persevere* so that when you have done the will of God, you will receive what he has promised” (Heb 6:11-12; 10:36, emphasis added).

If there’s one thing that helps me persevere, it is knowing that I’ll be rewarded. I like to get paid for my efforts, whether in money or friendship or eternal currency. Jesus promised that *in this life* we will be well rewarded. "I tell you the truth," Jesus replied,

> … no one who has left home or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for me and the gospel will fail to receive a hundred times as much in this present age (homes, brothers, sisters, mothers, children and fields—and with them, persecutions) and in the age to come, eternal life” (Mark 10:29-30).

I haven't gone to deepest darkest Africa as a missionary but I've left a lot of friends and family behind in my many relocations. And God has rewarded me richly. I've made some sacrifices but they don't feel like sacrifices. That sentiment is echoed by many missionaries. I don't pick up a sense of regret or remorse when I talk to Jackie Pullinger about her choice to leave behind her life in England to be a missionary in Hong Kong. She is full of joy.

Another key to being diligent to the very end is joyfulness. Joyfulness in the midst of hardship energizes us. Reflect on the words of David Livingstone, Scottish missionary to Africa in the mid-nineteenth century:

"In response to people's extravagant praise and comments to him during his 'selfless' life, he wrote in his journal, 'People talk of the sacrifice I've made in spending so much of my life in Africa. Can that be called a sacrifice which is simply paying back a small part of the great debt owing to our God, which we can never repay? Is that a sacrifice which brings its own blessed reward in healthful activity, the consciousness of doing good, peace of mind and a bright hope of glorious destiny hereafter? Away with the word in such a view and with such a thought! It is emphatically no sacrifice. Say rather it is a privilege.'"[4] There's not a shred of regret or self-pity here. Livingstone received a reward *in the doing* of his work.

For Livingstone missionary work brought "it's own blessed reward in healthful activity." His life had a purpose that gave him a good reason to get up every morning. He enjoyed "the consciousness of doing good" and "peace of mind." He didn't think of his work in Africa as a sacrifice, though there were tremendous hardships and dangers he faced. For him, it was a privilege. Joy flows from knowing we are in the center of God's will. Joy is central to endurance.

Motivated by the Promise of Eternal Reward

Jesus said: " … store up for yourselves treasures in heaven … " (Matt 6:20). His words suggest that we can actually invest our life in a way that creates heavenly treasure. It's true; I am motivated to invest wisely because *I will benefit in eternity.* Hasn't God designed us to work for rewards? In employment, we work for the reward of money. In marriage and family life, we work for the reward of loving, being loved and seeing children mature. In *all* of life, we're working *for God*, who rewards us in eternity.

"For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad" (2 Cor 5:10). This is good news because the ball is in our court—*we* take the actions that store up heavenly treasure.

One of my favorite people in the Bible is Abraham. He left his home country when he was seventy-five years old to begin a journey of faith. He wandered around for twenty-five years before he received the promised child, Isaac. He had the guts to try something new at an advanced age. He went for years at a time without hearing anything from God about his promised inheritance, but he stayed in the race.

And he was motivated by the vision of a heavenly reward. "By faith he made his home in the promised land like a stranger in a foreign country; he lived in tents … For he was looking forward to the city with foundations, whose architect and builder is God" (Heb 11:9-10). Abe was *looking forward to the reward of heaven.*

Abraham's pace must have felt tortoise-like for much of the time. He was a plodder. He had to deal with family conflict and a land-grabbing nephew named Lot. Though Abraham was the leader of the expedition out of Haran and the elder deserving of "first dibs" on new land, he graciously let young Lot take his pick of pasture-land. As a citizen of heaven who was looking forward to "a better city" and "a better country," Abe could hold loosely his worldly goods, securing peace in his earthly family and treasure above. Abe was a wise investor and a race-winning tortoise.

Climbing the Mountain

On Father's Day, June 20, 2010, during a Sunday morning family worship, discussion and prayer time, Linda had this word for me as our children were gathered around me in prayer:

> I saw you as a mountain climber, climbing up a very high mountain. You were dressed in heavy climbing gear (ropes, etc.), and there was snow on this beautiful high mountain peak. I had an impression of you as a strong man (the meaning of your name, Andrew is "strong"). You were tired as you were nearing the top and the oxygen was thinning. The Lord is going to be your oxygen. The Lord was saying, "you're almost to the top, and *the view is going to be really beautiful."*

Linda continued, "As a 'mountain climber' in life, you see and value something that not everyone sees and you're willing to make a long climb to get there. When people climb Mount Everest, they pass dead bodies and take a big risk to go to the top."

The imagery of "the top of the mountain" in Linda's word means two things to me. First, it means finishing this particular season of life with its unique challenges. Second, it means finishing my *entire* life. After the short term "climb" I'll be able to rest a bit and "enjoy the view." All the while, seeing a kingdom and Lord who are *invisible* energizes me. This is how Moses kept right on going: "It was by faith that Moses left the land of Egypt. He was not afraid of the king. Moses *kept right on going* because he kept his eyes on the one who is *invisible*" (Heb 11:27 NLT, emphasis added).

Life is a long, hard climb but the view at the top will be out of this world. It will be worth waiting for and working for. " … No eye has seen, no ear has heard, and no mind has imagined what God has prepared for those who love him." (1 Cor 2:9). Sometimes we feel like giving up, but we know there's only one right choice; to keep on marching. "So let's not get tired of doing what is good. At just the right time we will reap a harvest of blessing if we don't give up." (Gal 6:9 NLT).

As we climb, God will be our oxygen. He will be our source, our sustenance and our strength. Like any mountaineer who attempts Everest, we need to be constantly breathing in God's air. We must never try to shortcut his word or his love, and none of us win prizes for going it alone and pushing God aside.

Think of the thousands who have stood on top of the world's tallest mountain. Surely they must have felt like they had achieved something truly noteworthy, something that would be spoken about. But we only remember the names of a handful. Yet our reward is eternal. Athletes and mountain climbers pursue their goals " … for a gold medal that tarnishes and fades. You're after one that's gold eternally" (1 Cor 9:25 *The Message*)

Are you like Abraham? Do you see things that not everyone else notices? Do you see a holy city waiting? Are you motivated by invisible things? That's the worshiper's heart. Are you like a mountain climber who gets a crazy notion to climb a treacherous mountain because you're filled with faith and vision? That's the worshiper's heart. Are you ready to risk when those around you are looking to relax? That's the worshipper's heart.

God's Instruments

In the 1600s Antonio Stradivari lived in the small Italian town of Cremona. His innovations in the design and building of stringed instruments resulted in a unique sound that is world famous to this day. His three hundred year-old Stradivarius instruments are still played by some of the best musicians of our time. Ivry Gitlis is one of them. He says, "I have a violin that was born in 1713. It was alive long before … I don't consider it as my violin. Rather, I am perhaps its violinist, I am passing through its life."[5]

We are like those instruments; created by a timeless master, from each of us comes a unique and beautiful song. We are like the musician too; we do not own what is in our hands, we are merely passing through. Whichever view you take, the Great Conductor calls us all together, drawing us in to play our part in God's symphony.

A Closing Prayer

Lord, play your tunes through us. Breathe your breath through us. Fashion us, change us, and let the music of our lives bring hope and joy and healing. Don't let us be distracted by the beautiful earthly sounds all around us; help us enjoy them and see them as pointers to heaven. Help us not to devote our lives to things that will end when we die. Let the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts and the work of our hands be

pleasing to you, that we will be able to say when we reach the top of the mountain, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim 4:7).

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a huge crowd of witnesses to the life of faith, let us strip off every weight that slows us down, especially the sin that so easily trips us up. And let us run with endurance the race God has set before us" (Heb 12:1 NLT).

"By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back. So let's keep focused on that goal, those of us who want everything God has for us." (Phil 3:14-15 *The Message*).

May you know what it is to feel the worshipper's heart beating within you. May you grow in confidence to take risks, to give freely and scan the horizon for the pillar of cloud that guides your steps. May you love the Lord with all your heart, soul and strength, displaying the results in a million different mosaic patterns. May you sweat, cry, rage, mourn, rejoice and march clearly ahead all because of what you sense the Lord is whispering to you. May you care less about self-promotion or self-advancement, but instead grow to love this adventure for what it is—a journey to the very heart of God.

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1. Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life,* 42.
2. George Smith, *Life of William Carey, Shoemaker and Missionary,* (London: John Murray, 1909, reprinted 1913. Public Domain) vi.
3. John Piper, *The Roots of Endurance* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2002), 11.
4. Guillebaud, *For What It's Worth*, 204. A quote from David Livingstone.
5. Ivry Gitlis, "The Art of Violin (DVD)," Quoted by Ivry Gitlis.