

Finishing Strong

By Steve Farrar

Chapter 1

One Out of Ten

Truth is heavy, so few men carry it – Jewish Proverb

The year 1945 was a remarkable year. 1945 was an absolutely unbelievable year for rookie evangelists. In that year, twenty-seven-year-old Billy Graham came storming out of seemingly nowhere to fill auditoriums across America, speaking to as many as thirty thousand people a night. Graham was hired as the first full-time evangelist for Youth for Christ, and his reputation as a uniquely gifted preacher roared across America like a prairie fire. The rest, of course, is history

You've heard of Billy Graham. But what about Chuck Templeton or Bron Clifford? Have you ever heard of them?

Billy Graham wasn't the only young preacher packing auditoriums in 1945. Chuck Templeton and Bron Clifford were accomplishing the same thing—and more. All three young men were in their mid-twenties. One seminary president, after hearing Chuck Templeton preach one evening to an audience of thousands, called him "the most gifted and talented young man in America today for preaching."¹

Templeton and Graham were friends. Both ministered for Youth for Christ. Both were extraordinary preachers. Yet in those early years, "most observers would probably have put their money on Templeton." As a matter of fact, in 1946, the National Association of Evangelicals published an article on men who were "best used of God" in that organizations five-year existence. The article highlighted the ministry of Chuck Templeton. Billy Graham was never mentioned. Templeton, many felt, would be the next great evangelist like Charles Wesley.

Bron Clifford was yet another gifted, twenty-five-year-old fireball. In 1945, many believed Clifford the most gifted and powerful preacher the church had seen in centuries. In that same year, Clifford preached to an auditorium of thousands in Miami, Florida. People lined up ten and twelve deep outside the auditorium trying to get in. Later that same year, when Clifford was preaching in the chapel at a University, the president ordered class bells turned off so that the young man could minister without interruption to the student body. For two hours and fifteen minutes, he kept those students on the edge of their seats as he preached on the subject, "Christ and the Philosopher's Stone."

At the age of twenty-five young Clifford touched more lives, influenced more leaders, and set more attendance records than any other clergyman his age in American history. National leaders vied for his attention. He was tall, handsome, intelligent, and eloquent. Hollywood invited him to audition for the part of Marcellus in "The Robe." It seemed as if he had everything.⁴

Graham, Templeton, and Clifford.

In 1945, all three came shooting out of the starting blocks like rockets. You've heard of Billy Graham. So how come you've never heard of Chuck Templeton or Bron Clifford? Especially when they came out of the chutes so strong in '45.

Just five years later, Templeton left the ministry to pursue a career as a radio and television commentator and newspaper columnist. Templeton had decided he was no longer a believer in Christ in the orthodox sense of the term. By 1950, this future Charles Wesley wasn't even in the game and no longer believed in the validity of the claims of Jesus Christ.

What about Clifford? By 1954, Clifford had lost his family, his ministry, his health, and then...his life. Alcohol and financial irresponsibility had done him in. He wound up leaving his wife and their two Down's syndrome children. At just thirty-five years of age, this once great preacher died from cirrhosis of the liver in a run-down motel on the edge of Amarillo, Texas. His last job was selling used cars in northern Texas. He died, as John Haggai put it, "unwept, unhonored, and unsung." Some pastors took up a collection among themselves in order to purchase a casket so that his body could be shipped back East for decent burial in a cemetery for the poor.

In 1945, three young men with extraordinary gifts were preaching the gospel to multiple thousands across America. Within ten years, only one of them was still on track for Christ. In the Christian life, it's not how you start that matters. It's how you finish.

John Bisagno has been pasturing First Baptist of Houston, Texas for a number of years. When John was just about to finish college, he was having dinner over at his fiancée's house one night. After supper, he was talking with his future father-in-law, Dr. Paul Beck, out on the porch. Dr. Beck had been in ministry for years, and that was inevitably the subject toward which the conversation turned.

"John, as you get ready to enter the ministry, I want to give you some advice," Dr. Beck told the younger man. "Stay true to Jesus! Make sure that you keep your heart close to Jesus every day. It's a long way from here to where you're going to go, and Satan's in no hurry to get you."

The older man continued. "It has been my observation that just one out of ten who start out in full-time service for the Lord at age twenty-one are still on track by the age of sixty-five. They're shot down morally, they're shot down with discouragement, they're shot down with liberal theology, they get obsessed with making money. . .but for one reason or another nine out of ten fall out."

The twenty-year-old Bisagno was shocked.

"I just can't believe that!" he said. "That's impossible! That just can't be true."

Bisagno told how he went home, took one of those blank pages in the back of his Study Bible and wrote down the names of twenty-four young men who were his peers and contemporaries. These were young men in their twenties who were sold out for Jesus Christ. They were trained for ministry and burning in their desire to be used by the Lord. These were the committed young preachers who would make an impact for the Lord in their generation.

Bisagno relates the following with a sigh: "I am now fifty-three years old. From time to time as the years have gone by, I've had to turn back to that page in my Bible and cross out a name. I wrote down those twenty-four names when I was just twenty years of age. Thirty-three years later, there are only *three names* remaining of the original twenty-four."

In the Christian life, it's not how you start that matters. It's how you finish.

Preaching several years ago in Scotland, John MacArthur Jr. was approached by a man after the service.

"Is your father named Jack MacArthur?" the man asked.

MacArthur said yes.

"Your father came to Ireland over thirty years ago with two other men to hold a revival in Belfast and in other parts of the country. I went to hear your father speak, and at that meeting I received Jesus Christ and dedicated my life to the ministry. I am a pastor because the Lord used your father to minister to me. Would you tell him that when you see him?"

MacArthur indicated that he would, and then the man asked another question.

"Where is your father now?"

MacArthur told him that his father was preaching and pastoring.

The man then asked, "Is he still faithful to the Word?"

"Yes, he is still faithful and still standing."

"What happened to the other two men who were ministering with your father?"

MacArthur replied, "I'm sorry to report that one has denied the faith and the other died an alcoholic."

There it is again. Three relatively young men, completely committed to Christ, make their way to Ireland to preach the gospel. They see God do great things. But thirty years later when the dust had settled, only one out of the three was still standing.

In the Christian life, it's not how you start that matters. It's how you finish.

Graham made it; Templeton and Clifford didn't. Bisagno and two of his buddies are all that's left out of twenty-four young men who thirty-some years ago were ready to die, if necessary, for Jesus Christ. Jack MacArthur and his two friends were greatly used by God. But thirty years later only Jack is standing strong.

Are these stories exceptions to the rule? I only wish they were.

Dr. Howard Hendricks, professor at Dallas Theological Seminary in Dallas, Texas, recently conducted a study of 246 men in full-time ministry who experienced personal moral failure within a two-year period. In other words, Hendricks was able to find nearly 250 men who derailed within twenty-four months of each other. That's roughly ten a month for two years. Ten guys a month in moral failure. That's two, almost three, guys a week. And each of them started strong.

In the Christian life, it's not how you start that matters. It's how you finish. You may be thinking, "Those are interesting stories, but they really don't relate to me. I'm not in full-time ministry." I'm sorry to rock your boat, but if you are a Christian, and if you are serious about following Christ, then you surely are in the ministry Full-time. Are you a husband? Do you have kids? If the answer is yes, then you're implicated! Christian husbands and fathers *are* in the ministry full-time. *The enemy just doesn't want you to realize it.*

You may not collect your paycheck from a church each week, but according to Ephesians 4:11-13 and Colossians 3:23, that's not the issue. I don't care if you're a driver, a director of a company, or a factory worker. Whatever your profession, if you know Jesus Christ as your Lord and Savior, then ultimately you work for Him.

Jesus said that *you* are the light of the world. Jesus said that *you* are the salt of the earth. And He didn't mention anything about "part-time."

John Bisagno's father-in-law stated that from his experience only one out of ten men who start strong in their twenties will still be on track with Christ at sixty-five. Now here's my question to you, and I want you to think about it carefully

What makes you think that you will be the one man out of ten who finishes strong?

What makes you think that you won't be one of the nine who fall short of the mark? The man who finishes strong, after all, is the exception. Why? Because *when it comes to finishing*

strong, the odds are against you. Finishing strong is not impossible. It is, however, improbable. It's going to take some tough choices and an experience or two of personal brokenness in order to have a strong finishing kick when you hit the tape at age sixty-five, seventy-five, eighty-five, or whenever it is that God calls you home.

- It is the rare man who finishes strong.
- It is the exceptional man who finishes strong.
- It is the teachable man who finishes strong.

So here's the question. What *exceptional measures* are you taking in your life to ensure that you will be the one out of ten?

God is looking for some *finishers*. That's what this book is about. It's about finishing. Finishing strong. It's about being the one out of ten. But the chances are that you won't be. If you coast, my friend, you can count on being in the nine out of ten rather than the one out of ten.

Maybe someone is reading this and musing to himself, "Those are some thought-provoking illustrations, but what is your scriptural basis for 'one-out-of-ten'? Is there a specific verse that teaches that principle?"

No, there isn't a specific verse. But as we observe life and the fact that so many who start out strong in the Christian life get derailed by one thing or another, that "one out of ten" number seems right on the mark. Maybe I can't prove one out of ten directly from the Scriptures.

But how about two out of twelve?

Then the LORD spoke to Moses saying, "Send out for yourself men so that they may spy out the land of Canaan, which I am going to give to the sons of Israel; you shall send a man from each of their fathers' tribes, every one a leader among them." (Numbers 13:1-2)

You know the story. God is ready to hand over the keys to the Promised Land to the newly liberated nation of Israel. Under the leadership of Moses, He has brought them out of Egypt after four hundred years of slavery. The two million plus people left Egypt with the gold and riches of Egypt in their possession. And now they are poised to enter the rich and prosperous land that will be their new home.

God specifically instructs Moses to pick out twelve men, one from each tribe. But He is even more specific than that. He tells him to pick twelve *leaders*. And that's what Moses did. He picked men from each tribe who had already proven themselves as leaders—Israel's best and brightest. They weren't rookies; they were salty veterans. These were the men with proven track records and vision for the future. Let's put it this way: Moses wasn't going to pick wannabees or has-beens to go check out the land. For a mission like that you don't send the third string—you send in your starters. Your main men. Twelve of them to be specific.

And out of those twelve, only two finished strong. You may question the one out of ten, but if you take the Scriptures seriously, there is no questioning the two out of twelve. Israel waited for forty years to enter the land because ten guys who had started strong—ten guys who had seen God send the plagues to Egypt...ten guys who had seen God open the Red Sea for them and their families, and then close it on Pharaoh's army...ten guys who had seen God work time and time again on their behalf—freaked out because the land contained some very powerful tribes and fortified cities. In other words, the ten had a greater fear of man than they did of God. And this was after all the mind-boggling miracles God had performed before their very eyes! It was E. Stanley Jones who said, "Fear is the sand in the machinery of life." And it brought these ten leaders to a lurching, staggering halt.

These ten leaders had a great start. They just couldn't finish. And they delayed Israel's realization of the Promised Land for forty weary years. A whole generation perished in the bleak sands of the Sinai because these guys got sand in their gears.

This book is about being a Joshua and a Caleb—and not being a Sham-mua, Shaphat, Igal, Palti, Gaddiel, Gaddi, Ammiel, Sethur, Nahbi, or Geuel. These were names of the twelve spies. Of the original twelve, ten derailed. Only Joshua and Caleb had taken the time to develop their moral and spiritual character so that they had the faith and endurance to trust in God when the chips were down. Christians around the world still name their boys Joshua today. And we name them Caleb. But I don't know of any couples who want to name their sons Shaphat or Palti. Those are names that have been forgotten—and so have the men who wore them.

There must have been some very good reasons why these ten men were chosen to scope out the Promised Land. At least there were some good external reasons. The problem is, no one but God can look into a man's heart.

You can bet that each of these ten guys, if he were around today, would be at church faithfully every Sunday morning and Sunday night. He'd be there for Wednesday night service. He'd show up for choir practice and teach Sunday school. He would be a tither and serve as a deacon. Externally, all of these guys looked like dynamite. But when push came to shove, only two out of ten had what it took. And the difference was all on the inside.

You see, it's *endurance* that separates the men from the boys. It's *endurance* that determines whether or not a man will finish strong. And endurance is the fruit of godly character. The Christian life isn't a hundred-yard dash. It's a marathon. It's a long race, and long races don't require speed. They require grit, determination, and finishing power.

As Scripture says:

Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus. (Hebrews 12:1-2)

You may be reading this and thinking that it's too late for you to finish strong. You've made some mistakes. Some big mistakes. You may think you could *never* finish strong because:

- you've been through a divorce—and it was pretty much your fault;
- you got involved in a sexual affair and violated your vows to your wife and to your God;
- you've made some very serious ethical and moral choices that have caused you to lose credibility with your family, friends, and associates.

Listen, my friend, it's never too late to begin doing what's right. As long as you're breathing, it's never too late to confess your sin to the Lord in genuine repentance and receive His forgiveness. You may have messed up and messed up big-time, but unless I miss my guess, you're still probably a long way from the finish line. Thanks to the grace of God, you've got time to make up a lot of ground. Just because you've fallen down doesn't mean that you can't get up and finish strong.

David Flood was a Swede who committed his life to Jesus Christ in his youth. He married a young woman named Svea who shared his commitment to Christ. They felt called to serve the Lord in Africa and arrived on those distant shores in 1921. With all their hearts, they wanted to work among people who had never heard the gospel. As it turned out, the work was hard, the

conditions horrible, and the people hostile and unresponsive. Their lives were constantly in danger.

The Floods had two children in those conditions. Shortly after the second child was born, Svea died. David, already consumed by doubts and discouraged by a lack of results, was devastated. All he had to show for his efforts was just one convert...one young boy. He had sacrificed his wife and the best years of his life. For what? For *one* kid?

He had been a fool for bringing Svea to this hostile and cruel situation. He was eaten by guilt and despair. And it was under that cloud of defeat and failure that he decided to leave Africa. He took his young son with him, yet had to leave his infant daughter behind in Africa since she was too ill to travel.

A missionary couple took her in and when they subsequently died, she was passed on to another missionary couple, who later raised her in America. In the meantime, David, who was living in Sweden, turned his back on the faith. After his second marriage dissolved, he began living with a mistress. He thought little of the daughter whom he had not seen since infancy.

His daughter, Aggie, however, thought about him often. She had learned about the work he and her mother had begun in Africa, and she desperately wanted to talk with him about it. Aggie later married and together with her husband lived in America. But with all her heart she wanted to find her father.

Years later she was able to arrange the trip to Sweden. She found her seventy-three-year-old, bedridden father living in a shabby apartment littered with liquor bottles. She went to her father and told him she still loved him...and that God did, too.

And then she told him about his one convert.

That little boy had grown up to be a gifted leader and minister of the gospel. That one little boy eventually led thousands of others to Christ and helped to establish the church of Jesus Christ in that section of Africa. Upon hearing what God had done, David threw himself on the mercy of God. He asked God to forgive his rebellion and wasted years. And God did. David didn't know that he had just six months to live. But those six months were months of productivity and restoring broken relationships.

After nearly forty years of falling on his face, David Flood got up and finished the race. And believe it or not, he actually finished strong.

If the Lord can do that for someone like David Flood, then He can do it for you. It's never too late to get back on course and pursue Christ with your whole heart.

Finishing strong does not mean finishing unblemished. Finishing strong does not mean finishing perfect. That is impossible.

Standards of life-style and conduct for those in the Christian ministry are rooted in the Old Testament patriarchs, leaders, and prophets. They were approved by God for the way they lived. That did not mean they were perfect. The Bible is absolutely honest about their sins and failure. It records these, sometimes in embarrassing detail, so that we may learn from them and avoid their failures (Romans 15:4).

Many of those lives recorded in Scripture contain some surprises. As a matter of fact

- some who finished strong were previously involved in sexual immorality;
- some who finished strong waited until late in life to surrender to their Creator and Savior;
- some who finished strong were considered at mid-life to be utter failures;

- some who finished strong found themselves stuck in bitter circumstances, frustrated, and disappointed by situations not of their own making;
- some who finished strong overcame personal failure and major setbacks by embracing the grace of God.

If you're interested in being one of the guys who finishes strong—*no matter what your past*—then I can make you a promise. This book will help you to understand the process that God must take you through. Trust me. It is a tough course. But it is well worth the effort. God has been taking His men through this training for thousands of years. There will be days when it gets so tough you may wonder if God has abandoned you. There will certainly be days when you will seriously question if He really loves you.

But there will be other days when you will experience the favor and blessing of God beyond anything that you could ask or think. There will be days when His grace will genuinely overwhelm you and you will wonder if you can take any more of His blessing without bursting at the seams.

Finishing strong is tough. It's not for everyone because it's not easy. I admit to you that it is hard. But there is another way that is much harder. The Scriptures say that "the way of the transgressor is hard."

If you are interested in what Eugene Peterson calls "a long obedience in the same direction," then read on.

If you are interested in being the one out of ten, then read on.

If you are interested in being the man who is the exception to the rule, then read on.

Quite frankly, if you've gotten this far and you're still reading, then you *are* the exception. Too many guys are willing to do just enough to get by. Too many guys are ready to bail out of the race at the first twinge of sideache.

- Is your marriage on rough water right now? Don't quit.
- Is that secretary who is craving more of your attention starting to look more and more attractive? Don't even think about it.
- Have you gone so long without apparently seeing God say yes to one of your prayers that you're about ready to chuck this Christian thing? That would be a serious mistake.

The enemy would like to sucker us into thinking that the "easy" way is the best way. But it never is.

Will I be the one in ten? How can I make sure that I'm the one in ten?

My only caution: Don't paint it in terms of some he-man effort in the flesh, because we all know that won't cut it. Strong men fall. Weak men who find their strength in Another don't fall. We won't be the one in ten because of our own strength or wisdom or courage or perseverance or any other human quality. If we finish strong, it will only be because we have tapped _____ into _____ Ultimate Strength, Limitless Wisdom, the Fount of Courage, the Source of Perseverance. HE will get us across the finish line. The very gates of hell cannot make us stumble unless we choose to remove ourselves from His protection and power. I'd like to see a little hope and encouragement here that we can indeed be one of the one in ten guys who finish strong. And that's because "His divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness."

"The very gates of hell cannot make us stumble unless we choose to remove ourselves from His protection and power"?

Men who don't hit the finish line strong have *chosen* to remove themselves from the Lord's protection and power. This book is an attempt to help us understand the steps we can take to stay under His protection and power. And if we do that, guys, by His grace we're going to hit that tape and hit it hard.

By the way, where is that finish line? Well, it's different for each one of us. The finish line that I have in mind is when we go to be with the Lord. You might have forty years before you die, or you might have six months. That's the interesting thing about this race. No one knows where the finish line is. And that makes this race just that much tougher.

Runners will tell you that they want to know where the finish line is. It doesn't matter if they're running one hundred yards or a marathon, they must know where the finish line is. And when they get that finish line in sight, they block out everything else and concentrate fully and completely on the tape. That concentration on the finish, that keeping their eye on the mark, that's what enables them to blot out the pain and exhaustion and finish strong.

Not every competition allows the competitors to actually see the finish line. A friend of mine used to row in the Oxford crew. You've seen those long, sleek, beautiful shells, filled with sweating and straining men, whose movements are so amazingly synchronized as they pull those long oars through the water.

Those men have their *backs* to the finish line! So how can they possibly finish strong? How do they pace themselves and how do they know when to sprint? If they can't see the finish line and focus upon it, then how in the world can they row an effective race? The answer is that they focus on the coxswain. He's the guy with the megaphone sitting at the end of the boat facing the crew. He's the only one who knows where the finish line is. So the men at the oars look to him, listen to him, obey his commands, and count on him to coach them to the finish. He paces them, he encourages them, and they trust him implicitly to get them across the finish line in the strongest possible way. They are counting on the coxswain to enable them to finish strong.

That's the Christian life, guys. How do we finish strong? We don't finish strong by focusing on the finish line because we don't know where the finish line is.

We finish strong by fixing our eyes on Jesus.

That's what the twelve guys who hung around with Jesus did. They were known as the disciples. And they had a much better success ratio than the guys that went into the Promised Land. Out of the first twelve, only Joshua and Caleb finished strong. But when we look at the latter twelve, all of them finished strong...with one notable exception. And why didn't he finish strong? He never did submit his life to Christ. He didn't have his eyes on Jesus—he had his eyes on the money. But the other eleven guys kept their eyes on Jesus.

No, they weren't perfect. In fact, they all fell away from the Lord for a brief time. And that was a major failure. But as Elbert Hubbard observed, "A failure is a person who has blundered but not been able to cash in on the experience." The disciples blundered, but they also cashed in on the expedience...and got back on track. And even through the crucible of incredible persecution and hardship, every single one of them finished strong. And just as they finished strong, so we can finish strong. They were in the boat with Jesus, and now we are in the boat with Jesus.

In this boat, Jesus is the coxswain. And each of us is rowing. We're rowing daily and we're rowing diligently. And as we fix our gaze upon Him, He will pace us, He will encourage us,

and He will instruct us. And then one day—in an instant—the race will be over! We'll cross the finish line, and life on earth will be over. And because we have listened to Him, because we have obeyed Him, we will realize that we didn't just finish.

We finished *strong*.