

**Finishing Strong:
Going the Distance for Your Family
By Steve Farrar
Discussion Summary
By Mark R. Elliott***

For years God has put on my heart the reality that if I was going to be able to finish well, then I needed to be a “life-long learner.” While driving to a meeting with a friend who is about my age (70), the discussion of finishing well surfaced. He talked about a book he had read entitled *Finishing Strong*. When I got back to my office the following Monday, I ordered it and quickly read it. It is now on my list of “must read” recommendations for pastors—not ahead of the Bible of course, but extremely insightful.

The book is divided into three sections, and as is required by many of us they do alliterate:

Part I: The section entitled “Priority of Finishing Strong” points out the little acknowledged fact that only a minority of pastors and ministry leaders finish well. It also gives some basic suggestions based on the all too common causes for ministry failure.

Part II: The “Perils of Finishing Strong” section addresses major pitfalls (perils) that we all have and will encounter.

Part III: The four chapters in the section titled “Prototypes of Finishing Strong” illustrate with Biblical and historical examples, principles we can apply as we seek to finish strong.

My only caution is that at times the author pushes it a little too far when he tries to bring humor to a difficult topic, attempts to create catchy phrases, and stretches the limits of illustrations. In other words, he does what we occasionally do with our sermons.

Question (Q): What are qualities you believe are necessary for you to finish strong?

Q: List some people you know who have finished strong. What are some of the attributes you admire in them?

Q: What are some things you are currently doing for the express purpose of finishing strong?

Part I: The Priority of Finishing Strong

Chapter One—One Out of Ten

He fills this opening chapter with powerful illustrations from history, scripture, and the sports world of individuals who did not finish well.

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.’

Templeton and Graham were friends. Both ministered with Youth for Christ. Both were extraordinary preachers. Yet in those early years, “most observers would probably have put their money on Templeton.” 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 1945, all three came shooting out of the starting blocks like rockets. 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 Babe Ruth 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. 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. (Pages 14-15)

You might argue, “Yeah, but that’s the exception and not the norm. Those were evangelists who can get hyper-emotional. I’m a pastor.” If you keep reading you quickly hear about the failure rate among pastors as the author relates the experience of John Bisagno. John heard from his future father-in-law, who was an experienced pastor, the following:

It has been my observation that just one out of ten who start out in full-time service for the Lord at 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.

John’s reaction was the same as ours would have been, “I just can’t believe that! That’s impossible! That just can’t be true.” Bisagno relates how he wrote the names of twenty-four of his peers in the back of his Bible. At the age of fifty-three there were only three men who had remained faithful to their calling. (Page 16)

The author continues by pointing to a study done by Dr. Howard Hendricks of 246 men in full-time ministry who experienced personal moral failure within a two-year period of each other. Stop and think about it. Hendricks was able to find that many over such a short period of time. That’s ten men a month! That’s two or three guys a week!

The Biblical illustration he uses is of the twelve spies whom Moses sent out. Only two of the twelve finished well. Actually, if we do the math, they were the only two of their entire generation who came out of Egypt and entered the Promised Land. Even Moses forfeited that right. (Pages 19-21)

But just before you get too discouraged, the author reminds us that “Finishing strong does not mean finishing unblemished. Finishing strong does not mean finishing perfect. That is impossible.” He then extends the following challenges:

- 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. (Pages 26-27)

He closes the chapter by pointing us in the right direction.

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.

We finish strong by fixing our eyes on Jesus. That’s what the twelve guys who hung around Jesus did. 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. He didn’t have his eyes on Jesus—he had his eyes on the money. (Pages 28-30)

Q: If this chapter doesn’t grab your attention then nothing will. What was your reaction to the reality that a significant minority of pastors and ministers finish strong?

Activity: Read and prayerfully reflect upon Psalm 139:23-24. As you do, ask God to shine His spotlight of truth upon your heart asking Him to reveal the areas where you are vulnerable.

*Search me, O God, and know my heart;
Try me, and know my anxieties;
And see if there is any wicked way in me,
And lead me in the way everlasting.*

Activity: Read and prayerfully reflect upon Isaiah 1:12-15. As you do, ask Him how you have made serving Him about doing things that we think will please Him rather than doing things His way because of our overwhelming gratitude for His unmerited love.

“When you come to appear before Me, Who has required this from your hand, To trample My courts?

Bring no more futile sacrifices; Incense is an abomination to Me. The New Moons, the Sabbaths, and the calling of assemblies—I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting.

Your New Moons and your appointed feasts My soul hates; They are a trouble to Me, I am weary of bearing them.

When you spread out your hands, I will hide My eyes from you; Even though you make many prayers, I will not hear. Your hands are full of blood.

Chapter Two—Finishing So-So

The chapter opens with a quote attributed to Charles Haddon Spurgeon: “Beware of no man more than yourself; we carry our worst enemies within us.”

The extensive research of Dr. Robert Clinton is then highlighted and four different kinds of finishes are mentioned. He specifically referred to Biblical leaders.

1. Cut off early—means they were taken out of leadership (assassinations, killed in battle, prophetically denounced, overthrown). Mentioned were Abimelech, Samson, Absalom, Ahab, Josiah, John the Baptist, and James.
2. Finished poorly—means they were going down-hill in the latter part of their lives. This might mean in terms of their personal relationship with God or in terms of competency...or both. Men like Gideon, Eli, Saul, and Solomon.
3. Finished so-so—means they did not do what they could have done or should have done. This might mean that there were some negative ramifications (from their past) which lingered on even though they were walking with God personally at the end of their lives. David, Jehosophat, and Hezekiah were examples.
4. Finishing well—means that they were walking with God personally at the end of their lives. They were strong in the faith and close to the Lord. Abraham, Job, Joseph, Joshua, Caleb, Samuel, Elijah, Jeremiah, Daniel, John, Paul, and Peter are some examples.

In the balance of the chapter he highlights three major areas of vulnerability: another woman, money, and neglected family.

Farrar mentions two major items in the section on avoiding “another woman.” One is the example of Billy Graham. Here he included comments from one of the secretaries who served the Graham organization for over forty years.

I have always appreciated, from a moral point of view, how the men have been in their attitude toward the secretaries. The doors are always left open. There is a high regard for the lack of any kind of privacy where a boss and his secretary are involved. At times, I thought they were going a little too far, that it wasn't necessary, but I'm glad they did it, especially today. –Millie Dienert (Page 41-42)

Q: What are your policies and practices as it relates to working with a woman who is not your wife?

Farrar returns to the research done by Dr. Hendricks he mentioned in the previous chapter. Through interviews with each of the 246 men who had moral failures, Hendricks identified the following four common issues:

1. None were involved in any kind of personal accountability group.

2. Each had ceased to invest in a daily personal time of prayer, scripture reading, and worship.
3. Over 80% of them became sexually involved with another woman as the result of counseling the woman. In other words, they were spending significant portions of their schedules with women other than their wives.
4. Without exception, each of the 246 had been convinced that moral failure “will never happen to me.” (Page 40)

Q: Are there at least one or two men in your life with whom you have built a friendship based on trust, confidentiality, and accountability? (YES is the right answer!) If your answer was no, ask God to give you the names of two men and contact them today!

Q: Do you spend personal time with the Lord in prayer and reading scripture at least three times a week? (Yes is the right answer!) When was the last time you “really connected” with God?

Q: Are you currently spending significant time with any attractive woman other than your wife? (The answer should be NO!)

Q: Are you absolutely sure that you will finish strong? (The answer should be a humble NO!)

In the section on money, the author points to the story of Ananias and Sapphira found in Acts 5. In summarizing the story he states, “Two things come to mind here. First of all, Ananias and Sapphira were more interested in *looking* good than in doing good. The second is a question. Do you think this event was the first time that this couple had ever lied about something related to their finances? As he closes this section he states, “If you make money your god, it will plague you like the devil.” (Page 45)

Q: As a minister, do you regularly have more month than money? In other words, does your current income support your current life-style, or does your money run out before you flip the page on your calendar?

Q: If that is true, what are you doing about it? Are you seeking sound Christian financial advice or are you trying shortcuts that WILL end up costing you your ministry in the long run?

Farrar closes the chapter by discussing the issue of neglecting our family. He begins this section by reflecting on a concern he had as a college student, even before he was married. A friend asked him, “Steve, what’s your greatest fear about going into ministry? His prompt answer was, “Being successful in ministry and losing my family.” He goes onto explain the reason for his concern. “Every pastor that I had known to that point—except for one—had seen his kids tube their faith once they got out of the house.” (Page 46)

While doing research for the book, he ran onto three biographies sitting side-by-side on a seminary library shelf. They were of men who had been very successful in reaching hundreds of thousands for Christ, but who had lost their own families.

- One spent an average of ten months away from home each year for fifteen years. He led thousands to Christ, but his oldest daughter committed suicide, and his marriage ended in divorce.
- One of the men was famous for his preaching ability and he traveled constantly all over the United States, accepting invitations. One of his sons grew up to become one of the first public figures to unashamedly declare his homosexuality and rejection of Christianity.
- One of the men was an incredibly gifted evangelist who faithfully preached the gospel to his dying day. His wife was the administrative genius who organized his citywide meetings across America. They had four young children who were raised by a nanny since their mother was on the road with their father and not available to them the vast majority of the time. One of this man's dying regrets was that his sons would have nothing to do with his parents' Christianity. (Pages 47-48)

One of the important qualities for a pastor listed in I Timothy 5 is that he “provide for his family.” It implies that a man is only to be given a public ministry after he has first proven his leadership abilities with his own family. Some might say, “He’s having family problems, but the man is so gifted!” Farrar’s response is, “Yes, but the qualification for having a public ministry is not *giftedness*. The qualification for ministry is *proven character*.” (Page 51)

Q: What is your current life stage: single, young married, married with young children, married with teens, empty nester, grandparent, widow or widower, etc.? As you honestly evaluate your immediate family, can you say that you are managing your household well?

Q: If there is any question in your heart about your answer to the previous question, are you willing to work on this critical area of life? Who can help you identify what needs to change? Who is going to hold you accountable as you make those changes?

Chapter Three—Staying the Course

The chapter opens with an often used illustration from *City Slickers*. It’s the scene where the seasoned cowboy played by Jack Palance asks the city slicker (Billy Crystal), “Do you know what the secret of life is?” Then Palance holds up his index finger and says, “Just one thing. You stick to that and nothing else matters.” Farrar then discusses our need to have a Personal Mission Statement. (Pages 56-61)

In my years of working with pastors and church leaders, one of the issues I see so often is our lack of self-awareness. It is generally manifested in our desire “to be” someone other than who God has created us to be. Contentment and fruitfulness in ministry will come only when we are letting God use us the way He created us serve Him. There are multiple resources for a deeper study of this topic and many of them build off the foundation laid by leadership development guru Dr. Robert Clinton who was quoted in the previous chapter. Although this is somewhat of a side issue for this book, in my opinion it is an essential ingredient and worthy of further study.

Moving from his illustration of “one thing,” Farrar lists twenty-four character issues he found in Thomas Watson’s 1666 book *The Godly Man’s Picture*. Then he closes the chapter with his list of four things he is striving to do to finish strong:

- Stay in Scripture—“Thy word have I hid in my heart that I might not sin against Thee.” Psalm 119:11
- Stay Close to a Friend—Friends with whom we can share failure as well as success. Friends who are there when times are good and when times are bad. Friends who care about us enough to tell us when we’re on track and when we’re screwing up.
- Stay away from Other Women—Here he points out the base nature of our human sexuality.
- Stay Alert to the Tactics of the Enemy—We must stay alert to the schemes of the enemy. We are at war. And our foe is smarter and wiser than we are. (Pages 64-75)

Q: What are some personal commitments you have made related to finishing strong?

Part II: The Perils of Finishing Strong

Chapter Four—Dry Shipwreck

This chapter provides an overview of King David’s life: Although he started well; he did not finish well. Farrar uses parallels from the fatal maiden voyage of the Titanic to make three major points:

1. Sin will take you farther than you wanted to go—David had only planned on one night of adulterous pleasure with Bathsheba, yet within weeks he was guilty of betrayal, murder, and a heinous attempted cover up. A winding road he had not intended to travel. (Pages 90-93)

Q: What are some “minor sins” you are permitting to linger in your life? Take them one at a time to God and ask Him to free you from their temptations and ultimate consequences.

2. Sin will keep you longer than you wanted to stay—About a year after Uriah’s murder, the prophet Nathan showed up and told David of a heartless crime that had been committed in his kingdom. The Word of God is like a mirror. And when Nathan had drawn the unwitting and indignant king completely into his little trap, the king suddenly recognized himself in the mirror. He had just passed judgment on himself. God had been trying to get his attention for twelve months, but David would not listen. (Pages 93-95)

Q: Look back at the list of minor sins you listed under question one. Which one of them has been around the longest? Why is it particularly hard for you to confess and conquer?

3. Sin will cost you more than you wanted to pay—David ultimately confessed and repented of his great sin. But there are painful consequences that follow even our confessed sin. Some of David's were:
- His infant son died.
 - His oldest son, Amnon, raped his half-sister and David's daughter, Tamar.
 - His son Absalom killed his brother Amnon to avenge the rape of Tamar.
 - His trusted friend and counselor, Ahithophel, assisted young Absalom in a plot to overthrow David. (Pages 95-97)

Q: Stop and think about a relationship you have lost because of a sinful attitude or action. Was the momentary pleasure worth the ultimate price you paid?

Chapter Five—The Status Brothers and Their Not-Quite-Right First Cousin Pride

In this chapter, the life of King Uzziah is examined. And as the title of the chapter suggests, his issues were success at an early age and the pride that came with it. The chapter opens with a variety of definitions for success.

- Success is a shining city. A pot at the end of the rainbow.
- Success is attaining cultural goals that are sure to elevate one's perceived importance in that culture.
- When people are successful (by the world's standards), they experience elevation in at least three areas:
 - Power—having commands obeyed and wishes granted.
 - Privilege—enjoying special rights or favors.
 - Wealth—accumulating financial reserves and securities. (Pages 99-102)

Q: What is your definition of success?

Q: Is it biblical, does it involve making disciples, and does it glorify God by seeing lives being genuinely transformed?

Uzziah was sixteen years old when he began to reign and he was king for fifty-two years. His fame spread afar, for he was marvelously helped by God *until he was strong*. That's when things began to unravel. Farrar suggests three primary reasons for Uzziah's fall:

- He began to spend more time and attention on the external rather than the eternal. He had been "marvelously helped" by God to become all he had become and do all he had done, but he began to forget just Who had helped him.
- His character did not keep pace with his accomplishments. Ultimately, we cannot impart that which we do not possess.
- He was tripped up by his own success. Success is like ice: it's beautiful, it's smooth, it looks clean and cool. But there aren't many men who can walk on ice without falling flat on their faces or flat on their duffs. (Pages 103-111)

Q: If the day-to-day pressures of ministry has your spiritual life on thin ice, what are you doing to find balance and perspective?

Two statements summarized the section for me. One, a Warren Wiersbe quote: “If God puts something in my hand without first doing something to my heart, my character will lag behind my achievements and that is the way to ruin.” The other came as the author pointed to Uzziah’s unauthorized attempt to burn incense in the temple. “Sometimes Satan waits forty years to spring a trap like this, but he’s patient. If it takes waiting, he’ll wait.” (Pages 112-113)

Q: Which of the two quotes resonates with you today, and why?

In a section he titles “Symptoms of Pride,” Farrar mentions arrogance and aversion to accountability. And in a later section he identifies four consequences of Uzziah’s prideful action:

1. He was struck with the loathsome disease of leprosy.
2. For the rest of his life, he was quarantined.
3. He was cut off from the temple.
4. He was buried near the other kings, but not with them. (Pages 115-119)

He closes the chapter with “Two Lessons to Ponder.” The first is to recognize that external accomplishments can be false indicators of success. The second is that we should beware of spiritual indifference. (Pages 119-121)

Q: Like Uzziah, our slide into spiritual dryness, arrogance, and sin happens slowly and over time. What are you doing to make sure you stay connected with God and with other men who can speak truth into your life?

Chapter Six—Unteachable, Unaccountable, and Unacceptable

A close look at Diotrephes, who is mentioned only in III John 9-10, forms the basis for this chapter. Farrar returns to a seminary assignment where he was asked to write a sermon on someone in the Bible he’d never heard of.

I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. Therefore, if I come, I will call to mind his deeds which he does, prating against us with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church. (NKJV)

Farrar highlights five negative qualities of someone who thinks he is a leader, but is not.

1. An UnLeader is an UnServant—Jesus said, “If anyone wants to be first, he shall be last of all, and servant of all” in Mark 9:35. And in Matthew 18:4 He said, “Whoever then humbles himself as this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.” Also He said,

“Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you, shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many” in Matthew 20:26-28. (Pages 128-131)

Activity: Discuss with your spouse or a close friend your leadership style. Is it that of a servant or are you more of a general leading your troops into battle?

2. An UnLeader is UnTeachable—John said of Diotrephes, “I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say.” (Pages 131-134)

Activity: Describe the last time you were told you were wrong and had to admit it.

3. An UnLeader is UnJust—Again we read in III John, “for this reason, if I come, I will call attention to his deeds which he does, unjustly accusing us with wicked words.” (Pages 134-136)

Activity: While you’re discussing your leadership style with your spouse or a close friend, ask them if there has been a time recently when you acted unjustly towards someone else.

4. An UnLeader is UnHospitable—“And not satisfied with this, neither does [Diotrephes] himself receive the brethren, and he forbids those who desire to do so, and puts them out of the church.” (Page 136-139)

Activity: Describe your normal pattern of showing hospitality towards others: church leaders, church members, people difficult to love, people far from God, etc.

5. An UnLeader has an UnHappy family—here Farrar writes, “Scripture doesn’t tell us if he was married or not. Let’s just assume for a minute that he was. You’ve got to believe that a person with those sorts of UnServantlike character qualities is going to have a miserably UnHappy family.” (Pages 139-141)

Activity: If you haven’t asked your spouse recently, ask them, “What is one thing I can do or stop doing that would make your life better?”

Part III: The Prototypes of Finishing Strong

Chapter Seven—Lousy Start, Strong Finish

This chapter is specifically written for those of us who believe our past sins have made it impossible for us to finish strong. The biblical example he uses is that of King Manasseh. Manasseh came to the throne at the age of twelve and reigned fifty-five years in Jerusalem. In the

eighteen verses that describe Manasseh's reign in II Kings 2, there is not a single positive word. It comes to a crescendo in verse eleven where we read, "He has done more evil than the Amorites who preceded him and has led Judah into sin with his idols."

When we hear about Manasseh in II Chronicles 33 verse eleven introduces us to additional information. There we read about judgment, consequences, humility, contriteness, confession, forgiveness, and a new beginning.

So the Lord brought against them the army commanders of the king of Assyria, who took Manasseh prisoner, put a hook in his nose, bound him with bronze shackles and took him to Babylon. In his distress, he sought the favor of the Lord his God and humbled himself greatly before the God of his ancestors. And when he prayed to him, the Lord was moved by his entreaty and listened to his plea; so he brought him back to Jerusalem and to his kingdom. Then Manasseh knew that the Lord is God. (II Chronicles 33:11-13)

Farrar points to two principles that can be gleaned from Manasseh's life:

1. Genuine Repentance Unlocks the Door of God's Mercy—The author points out that Manasseh brought forth fruit in keeping with his repentance. (Pages 156-157)

Q: What is one major change that you have made in your life in the last six months? What prompted that change and is your commitment being manifested in a genuine change of behavior?

Q: If you have not made any major change in the last six months, what is one that you are considering and why, or what is one you know you definitely need to make but are unwilling to do so and why?

2. My Past Life Does Not Exclude Me from Present Service—Here the author used the fruitful ministry of his brother's church as an example. Called Higher Power, the ministry reached into the street culture and is seeing lives being radically transformed.

Q: Think through men and women you have known who have experienced deep and genuine change. If God has helped them change, what is keeping you from letting Him make needed changes in your life?

The chapter closes as he uses the emergency tool called the Jaws of Life to illustrate areas that will guide us as we seek to finish strong.

- We need the Jaws of Life to cut us free from biblical ignorance—many Christians don't understand what Scripture teaches about forgiveness.
- We need the Jaws of Life to cut us free from unbelief. Sometimes our problem isn't ignorance, but plain old unbelief. (Pages 161-166)

Q: What has you trapped as you struggle in your spiritual journey to finish strong: biblical ignorance or the need to believe?

Chapter Eight—Failure that Equips You to Finish

A quote attributed to Herman Melville opens the chapter: “He who has never failed cannot be great. Failure is the true test of greatness.” The chapter then uses the life of Moses as an example of someone whose failures were used by God to strengthen him for one of the greatest leadership challenges in history. In bullet point fashion, here is Moses’ early life:

- He was adopted into the wealthiest family in Egypt.
- He was educated in “all the wisdom of the Egyptians.” He went to the very best schools and had the equivalent of an M.B.A. and PhD.
- He was a highly decorated military leader—Jewish historian Josephus writes of this.
- By virtue of his military leadership and his membership in the house of Pharaoh, he was a logical choice to perhaps one day be Pharaoh himself.

For his first forty years, Moses was an unqualified success. During his middle forty years he was an undisputed failure. Over his final forty years, he was finally fit for the Master’s use. Farrar states, “Moses needed to get an M.C.A.” (Masters in Character Acquisition). At the age of forty, Moses’ experienced a mid-life crisis. He went:

- From the palace to the pasture.
- From success to failure.
- From wealth to poverty.
- From significance to insignificance.
- From privilege to persecution.
- From freedom to felon.
- From a purpose in life to no purpose whatsoever.
- From a great future to a grim future. (Pages 167-174)

Q: What are some life experiences that have helped you to “develop your character?”

Q: What is one challenge you are experiencing today where God is again trying to shape your character?

Continuing with his M.C.A. analogy, the author suggests four prerequisite courses that Moses needed to complete.

1. Unemployment 101—Moses found himself herding his father-in-law’s livestock on the back side of the wilderness.
2. Advanced Obscurity—Moses’ middle forty years merits all of seven verses: Exodus 2:16-22
3. Remedial Waiting—This is an area that our culture definitely does not appreciate. We are used to instant gratification and our affluence generally permits us to get what we want

when we want it. *But those who wait on the LORD shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles, They shall run and not be weary, They shall walk and not faint* Isaiah 40:31.

4. Intermediate Loneliness—Permit me a personal side-bar. Farrar lists four research projects that speak to the negative physical impact that prolonged loneliness causes. As you read them, think about the long-term impact that COVID isolation in 2020 will have upon millions of people—including yourself and your family.
- At Ohio State University College of Medicine, scientists found that patients who scored above average in loneliness had significantly poorer functioning of their immune system.
 - In Sweden, a ten-year study of 150 middle-aged men found that social isolation was one of the best predictors of mortality.
 - A report published in the journal *Science* said that social isolation is as significant to mortality rates as smoking, high blood pressure, high cholesterol, obesity, and lack of physical exercise. In fact, when age is adjusted for, social isolation is as great or greater a mortality risk than smoking.
 - At Stanford University School of Medicine, Dr. David Spiegel conducted research in which patients with metastatic breast cancer were randomly divided into two groups. One group received the usual medical care, while the other received the usual care plus weekly ninety-minute support group meetings for one year. Although he planned the study expecting there would be no difference in life span between the two groups, five years later he found that the patients who attended the weekly group support meetings had twice the survival rate of the other group. (Pages 177-185)

Q: In which of the above M.C.A. courses are you currently enrolled? What are some of the things God might be trying to teach you?

The chapter closes with a section entitled Bottom Line which includes the following statements:

- There is only one way to earn a Masters of Character Acquisition, and that is through hardship.
- Many believers are simply frantic over the fact of failure in their lives, and they will go to all lengths in trying to hide it, ignore it, or rationalize about it. And all the time they are resisting the main instrument in the Father's hand for conforming us to the image of His Son!
- Everyone fails. But the true failure is the one who doesn't *learn* from his setbacks.
- Our society is intoxicated with the idea of success. That's why we are too afraid of failure. But if you know Jesus Christ, you should know that failure, as Erwin Lutzer described it, can be the back door of success. The fact of the matter is this: God uses our failure to equip us for future success. (Pages 185-188)

Q: Which of the four statements above grabbed your attention the most? Why do you think it jumped out at you?

Chapter Nine—156 Buck-Naked Miles to Bighorn

The story of John Colter's escape from a band of Blackfoot Indians is used as an analogy for the life of Joseph, son of Jacob. Colter who was on Lewis and Clark's Corps of Discovery, had become a fur trapper, and is credited with being the first European to view Yellowstone. Colter and a fellow Lewis and Clark explorer, John Potts, encountered a band of hostile Indians. Potts was killed and Colter was given the opportunity to literally run for his life. Seven days later, naked and bleeding, Colter walked into a trading post on the Missouri near the mouth of the Big Horn River which was 150 plus miles from his Blackfoot encounter—thus the title to the chapter. (Pages 189-193)

The chapter relates the tragic story of Joseph being sold into slavery by his brothers, thrown into prison by the false accusations of Potiphar's wife, and forgotten by a man he had helped. Joseph had to put away the thought of trading his purity for his position as he rejected the affections of Potiphar's wife. Joseph also had to put away the thought of turning his brother's betrayal into bitterness. As he discusses the latter, Farrar quotes Chuck Swindoll who wrote:

No one who does a serious study of Joseph's life would deny that he was a great man. And yet he never accomplished any of the things we normally associate with biblical greatness. He never slew a giant. He never wrote a line of Scripture or made any vast prophetic predictions like Daniel. Come to think of it, Joseph never performed a single miracle. He was just your typical guy next door. Who grew up in a very troubled family.

So what made Joseph great? Why does God devote more space in Genesis to his story than to any other individual? *Because of Joseph's attitude, how he responded to difficult circumstances.* That was the most remarkable thing about him.

American author Elbert Hubbard once wrote, "The final proof of greatness lies in being able to endure (contemptuous treatment) without resentment." Joseph spent a good deal of his life enduring harsh, hateful treatment, and his attitude during those years offers indisputable proof of his greatness. (Pages 204-205)

Activity: Describe the three most difficult "seasons" you have faced in your life. What were some common items in all three? What changes did they "force upon" your life? What is at least one major lesson that each "season" taught you?

Few men have withstood the adversity that Joseph went through as a result of being betrayed. But far fewer have refused to take revenge upon their enemies once they were in a position of power to do so. He closes with the illustration of one of them, Oswald Chambers the author of *My Utmost for His Highest*. As a young pastor he was developing a strong ministry in a small English village. That was until a young woman falsely accused him of inappropriate behavior. Bitterness just about overwhelmed him. The betrayal was too much. He couldn't bear it and he couldn't undo it. But with God's help, he refused to allow that bitterness to take root in his heart. God enabled him to conquer the bitterness just as Joseph had conquered it. The falsely accused young man thought that he would never again be used by God. But there are millions of people

who can vouch for the fact that Oswald Chambers was greatly used by God through a book he wrote that is still a best seller in Christian book stores. (Pages 208-209)

Activity: If you have never used journaling as a spiritual discipline, let me encourage you over the next couple of weeks to journal daily about a major challenge you are currently facing. Take time to really reflect on your thoughts and emotions. Take time to pray daily for the issue. At the end of your experience, take time to read back through the journal to see how God used the time to help you grow spiritually.

Chapter Ten—A Vision for the Finish Line

The closing chapter begins with the illustration of two young men who met in army basic training. One named Walt and the other named Ray. Both were men of vision. They were Walt Disney and Ray Kroc (in case you don't know him—the genius behind McDonald's). Farrar challenges us that we must develop the kind of vision that led to the Walt Disney Studios and McDonald's Corporation success stories.

It takes vision to finish strong! Farrar asks, “What do you want your life to look like in ten years? How about twenty years? Let me ask you another question. What do you want your children's lives to look like in ten years? To put it bluntly, the quality of life that your kids enjoy ten years from now will, to a great degree, depend upon the choices you will make in that ten year period of time. And the same goes for twenty.

It's time to wise up, gentlemen. We're not going to finish strong by luck. We're not going to finish strong by taking life as it comes. In order to finish strong, we must have vision. Vision for what is really important, vision for what our kids really need, and the vision to steel ourselves against the strategies of the enemy to destroy everything near and dear to our hearts. It's that kind of vision that helps us to make choices with our heads and not our sex organs. It's that kind of vision that will enable us to leave a legacy to our children that most of the kids in America can only dream about. This book has been about vision. The vision to finish strong.

Vision will enable you to keep your daily focus.

Vision will enable you to be faithful each day.

Vision will enable you to fix your eyes on Jesus. (Pages 211-218)

Activity: Look at your calendar and mark off at least a half a day in the next few weeks to more deeply process the biblical truths set forth in this book. Take time to honestly and humbly set in writing your vision for finish strong. What are some specific things you already know you will have to change and some areas where you already know you will have to guard your heart because they are areas of personal temptation? Then set your notes in a place where you will review them at least every three months.

May God give you the discipline and strength to finishing strong!

*Mark R. Elliott served as a Director of Missions (Associational Mission Strategist) in western Iowa and eastern Nebraska assisting local pastors and churches for almost three decades. He is a

strong advocate for obedience and Biblically-based disciple making. As such, he knows that making healthy disciples requires Christian leaders to be constantly pursuing spiritual maturity—be lifelong learners. Because of the time constraints of ministry, most pastors focus their reading list on resources that assist them in teaching and preaching the Word of God. As such, books focusing on church health, leadership development, and church growth tend to find their way to the bottom of the stack. With that reality in mind, Mark has written discussion summaries on several books that have helped him to personally grow in Christ and that pastors have mentioned a desire to read, but lack the time to do it. Many pastors have found them to be helpful as they are able to more quickly process great insights from other pastors and authors.