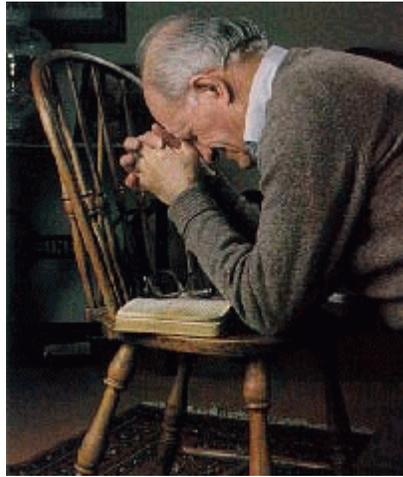


## Special Section: Aging: What Are You Becoming?

### Staying Faithful Through The Years

How can you keep walking with God throughout your life?

By Jerry Bridges



Photograph by Jim Whitmer

The Christian life is not a sprint—it’s a marathon, as the familiar saying goes. It’s not enough just to *begin* well. To be faithful in the Christian life requires *finishing* well—usually after a long, sometimes grueling race of some twenty, forty, or even sixty years.

Many Christians do finish well. But, sad to say, many do not. Some bail out after only a few years, simply giving up on the Christian life. Others continue to go through the motions—all the while bogging down in a swamp of spiritual stagnation.

What does it take to run the race for the long haul?

#### **Enoch: A Marathon Runner**

One of my favorite Bible characters is a little-known man named Enoch. Enoch rates only seven verses in the entire Bible, yet he merits a spot in “Faith’s Hall of Fame” in Hebrews 11. You might say Enoch lived an unusual life: He and Elijah are the only ones in the history of humanity to escape the experience of death.

Inclusion among the heroes of faith and a direct transport to the presence of God—surely this is evidence that Enoch was a man who finished well. He must have stayed faithful to God through the years. We could say that he’s an example of a marathon runner in the Christian faith.

I will soon celebrate my forty-second spiritual birthday, having trusted Christ when I was eighteen years old. I’m heading into the so-called senior years, and so the issue of finishing well seems especially critical to me right now. But we do not suddenly become something in our sixties that we have not been moving toward throughout our lifetimes. *All of us are going to be tomorrow what we are becoming today.* To stay faithful through the years means that we are staying on track today and will continue to do so tomorrow . . . and next week . . . and in the months and years ahead. We must set our

sights now on endurance.

What can we learn from Scripture's brief description of Enoch's life? What was the secret of this unusual man's perseverance? How did he hang in there for the long haul?

Three characteristics of Enoch's life stand out—in fact, they are the only things we know about him! (1) He walked with God. (2) He pleased God. (3) He served God.

## WALKING WITH GOD

Enoch walked with God (Genesis 5:21–24). This is without doubt the most basic and fundamental characteristic necessary to remain faithful through the years.

To walk with God means that we live consistently in the awareness of God's presence and that we fellowship with Him through His Word and through prayer. David is an example of someone who lived in a constant awareness of God's presence. He said to God, "You know when I sit and when I rise; you perceive my thoughts from afar" (Psalm 139:2). David was mindful that his every action—yes, even his every thought—was known by God.

But it's not enough just to be aware that we live in the presence of God. We must cultivate a consistent fellowship with Him through meditation on His word and through prayer. Psalm 1 speaks of two classes of people: those who are being drawn progressively into the web of sin, and those who are becoming more spiritually prosperous. The dividing line is our attitude toward the Word of God. Only those who delight in it and meditate on it cultivate their spiritual lives.

Psalm 1 tells us to think about God's word "day and night." Paul tells us to "pray continually" (1 Thes. 5:17). Together these two instructions describe the essentials of fellowship with God: listening to Him speak to us through His Word, and responding from our hearts to Him through prayer.

The foundation of fellowship with God is our daily quiet time. This is time set aside to commune with God apart from the distraction of our daily living and responsibilities. It is a time for prolonged reflection on some portion of God's Word (even fifteen or twenty minutes is "prolonged" compared to the brief snatches of time during the day). It is as well a time to pour out our hearts to Him, acknowledging our dependence upon Him, seeking His intervention in the lives of loved ones and friends and the extension of His Kingdom and His glory in this world.

Fellowship with God must not be limited, however, to the quiet time. To walk with God means fellowship with Him all day long. Again, the ingredients of this fellowship are prayer and meditation, or reflection, upon His Word. The statements from Psalm 1:2; and 1 Thes. 5:17 do not mean we should do nothing but think about the Bible and pray. Rather, they mean our lives should be permeated by reflection and prayer throughout the day.

When you let your thoughts wander, what do you think about? If you will cultivate the habit of thinking about God and His Word and prayerfully expressing your thoughts to Him, you will find that the most ordinary activities of your life are permeated by the presence of God. You will discover how His Word is relevant to your actions, your decisions, your problems.

If you're set on running with endurance, then focus on walking with God.

## PLEASING GOD

Enoch pleased God (Hebrews 11:5). How do we please God? We know that "without faith it is impossible to please God" (Hebrews 11:6). But this statement does not mean that faith without any other virtues pleases God. As James tells us, faith by itself is dead (Hebrews 2:17).

I think a key path to pleasing God over the long haul is obedience. The dangerous pitfalls of disobedience can cause any of us to turn aside if we give in to them.

**Resist Bitterness.** After almost forty-two years as a Christian, I've concluded that the three greatest temptations to quitting the race are bitterness, defiance of God, and pride. Bitterness is resentment toward God or another person. It starts with a perceived or real injustice. If allowed to, it festers until it develops into a deep rancor and hostility.

Bitterness has probably sidetracked more people than any other cause. Sometimes we become bitter

at God because of a tragic event: the death of a child, the unfaithfulness of a spouse, the failure of a business or career. Sometimes we become bitter at a person who has wronged us in some way.

All of us suffer tragic events of some degree, and all of us are treated unfairly at different times in our lives. Each time something like this occurs, bitterness is a pitfall we must avoid.

We can learn how to deal with the temptation of bitterness from Joseph. His own brothers sold him into slavery. Talk about injustice! But Joseph avoided the malignancy of bitterness through his trust in God. He did not deny the heinousness of his brothers' sin but saw beyond it to the sovereignty of God. He believed, in the words of Paul, that even though he was the victim of someone else's sin, God was at work in it for his good (Genesis 45:8; Romans 8:28).

Joseph could have become bitter toward God for allowing him to be unjustly thrown into prison—he was punished, in effect, for his moral obedience! (See Genesis 39:7–20.) He could have said, “God, I obeyed You when Potiphar's wife tried to seduce me. And now I end up in prison for my obedience! What kind of a deal is this?” But it is obvious from the biblical account of Joseph's time in prison that he did not become bitter. He didn't enjoy his circumstances, but he accepted them from God. Joseph's faith in God's sovereign love enabled him to run with long-distance obedience.

**Avoid Disobedience.** Defiance of God means engaging in direct, willful disobedience. King Solomon is a vivid example of one who fell into this snare.

Solomon began well and was exceptionally blessed by God. He was the wisest and wealthiest man of his time, the inspired author of three books of the Bible. His practical, godly wisdom has instructed God's people over the centuries. Early on, Solomon sought neither long life nor wealth but only discernment for administering justice. God was pleased with him.

Yet Solomon's life ended tragically. He deliberately and willfully disobeyed God in a key area of his life. He loved many foreign women—specifically, women God had warned the Israelites to stay away from: “You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods” (1 Kings 11:2). Solomon willfully ignored God's command, and his wives did indeed lead him astray: “As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God” (1 Kings 11:4). Then “the LORD became angry with Solomon” (1 Kings 11:9). The man who began so well, and who probably had the greatest potential to finish well, ended his life under the judgment of God.

This is a sobering lesson for us all. Exceptional gifting, or the unusual blessing of God upon our lives or ministries, does not guarantee that we will remain faithful to the end.

I have seen some of the most capable Christians turn aside—who, in some cases, had experienced an unusual blessing from God upon their ministries. But at some point they knowingly and deliberately acted in direct disobedience to God. For some, it was indulging in extramarital dalliances. They knew these actions were wrong but felt they could get away with them, until eventually they were sucked into an immoral relationship.

Whether it is the temptation to immorality, or the many snares in the love of money, or some other area of disobedience, none of us is immune to the temptation to direct disobedience. This is where walking with God can help us. We are less likely to defy God if we consciously live in His presence; if we strive to bring every plan and action under the scrutiny of His word; if we pray over all aspects of our lives.

**Banish Pride.** Pride, in essence, is believing that we don't need God. This was the problem of King Uzziah: another tragic example of someone who began well and was unusually blessed of God, but who did not end well.

2 Chron. 26:5 says Uzziah sought God and feared God. Then a temptation drew him out of the race: “But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall” (2 Chron. 26:16). Uzziah died a leper, isolated from his family and estranged from God.

Pride often accompanies success, whether in business, athletics, scholarship, or Christian ministry. I have seen gifted young men sidetracked even in their twenties because of pride. More often, though, it seems to come a little later in life, with achievement of some measure of personal or professional

success. Like Uzziah, we can become resistant to reproof or counsel. We think we know it all. Eventually we turn aside altogether, or perhaps God’s hand of blessing is removed. We do not finish well, even though we may think we are staying faithful to God. We cease to be fruitful in His Kingdom.

## SERVING GOD

Enoch served God. Enoch did not walk with God in a cloistered environment; he was a spokesman for God in the ungodly marketplace of his day (Jude 14–15). The Bible doesn’t tell us how long Enoch did this, but from the Genesis and Hebrews passages, we can safely infer that Enoch served God right up to the day God took him.

It seems to me that as Christians approach the so-called senior years, many of them stagnate because they retire not only from their secular work, but from the Lord’s work as well. I hear statements such as, “I’ve paid my dues,” or “I’ve done my share: now it’s time for the younger folks to take over.” True, as we grow older we do lose some of the physical stamina of our earlier years. Even God made provision for the priests serving at the tabernacle to retire at age fifty from the more physically demanding work connected with the sacrificial system. But they were not to retire from their walk with God, and they could continue to assist the younger priests.

“[The righteous] will still bear fruit in old age,” declares the psalmist, “they will stay fresh and green” (Psalm 92:14). I think of an older friend of mine, now in her eighties, who is still bearing fruit. She is limited in her physical mobility, but in her prayer life she ranges all over the globe, praying for Christian works and workers worldwide. She is not turning aside from God’s work, nor is she stagnating in her inner spiritual life. She will stay fruitful to the end because she will continue to serve God to the end.

None of us will ever finish “doing our share.” We can never repay the debt of love we owe to Christ. If we are running for the long haul we must determine never to quit His service. If we want to run with endurance we must keep asking as long as we live, “Lord, what do you want me to do?” Only in that way can we expect to stay faithful to the end and be greeted at the finish by our Lord’s voice saying, “Well done, good and faithful servant!”

“Let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.”

Hebrews 12:1

» **See Also:** *On Your Own: Finishing Well*

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

JERRY BRIDGES, vice president for corporate affairs for The Navigators, is the author of *Trusting God*, *The Pursuit of Holiness*, and *The Practice of Godliness* (NavPress, 1988, 1978, 1983).

## On Your Own Finishing Well

1. Read about the lives of these kings of Judah, then complete the following chart:

KING	PASSAGE	FINISHED LIFE		POSSIBLE REASONS
		Well	Poorly	
Asa	2 Chron. 14–16			
Jehoshaphat	2 Chron. 17–20			
Joash	2 Chron 24			
Amaziah	2 Chron 25			
Uzziah	2 Chron 26			
Josiah	2 Chron 34			

2. Joseph was treated severely, yet finished life well. Solomon had everything going his way but ended poorly. Comment on the differences between these two men.

3. Do you know anyone personally who has fallen away from the faith? What factors may have contributed to this person's downfall?