

How to Finish the Christian Life: Following Jesus in the Second Half

by Donald W. Sweeting & George Sweeting, Moody Press, Chicago, IL: 2012

(35 Quotes selected by Doug Nichols)

1. Life Expectancy Worldwide

One never knows how long the second half will be. If you live in the United States, the life expectancy figure for 2011 was 78.3 years, although the United States is not at the top of the world life expectancy list. Monaco leads the list at 89.7 years. On the other end is Angola, at 38.7 years. According to the UN, the average life expectancy for the world is 67.2 years. (Page 9)

2. The Christian Life is a Marathon

In the New Testament, several writers speak of the Christian as a special kind of journey—a race. In Philippians 3:13-14, Paul writes, “Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.” In 2 Timothy 4:7, writing the end of his life, he says, “I have finished the race.”

The writer of Hebrews says, “Let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us” (Hebrews 12:1). He is thinking of a certain kind of race—not a spirit but a distance event.

The Christian life is not a hundred-yard dash . . . but more like a marathon! (Page 16-17)

3. The Hero of the 1968 Mexico Olympics

During the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City, runner John Stephen Akhwari of Tanzania competed with seventy-four other world-class runners. Akhwari did not win the race. Actually, he came in last. But he is remembered for *how* he ran the race.

Halfway through the marathon, Akhwari fell and badly injured his leg, dislocating a joint. After a few minutes on the ground, John Akhwari did what most runners would never do.

He picked himself up off the ground, strapped up his leg, and continued to run. About an hour after the winner had crossed the finish line, and only a few thousand spectators left in the stadium, word got out about what had happened to Akhwari. He was still running. When he finally entered the stadium, his leg was bloody and bandaged. Every step caused him to wince. But the remaining crowd began to clap. He turned the curve, and the crowd grew louder. As he approached the finish line and hobbled across, they cheered wildly as if he had won the race. They were stunned by his endurance.

Afterward, when the press asked him why he ran through the pain, despite the fact he could not win, Akhwari looked perplex. “I don’t think you understand,” he said. “My country did not send me seven thousand miles to start the race. “They sent me seven thousand miles to *finish the race*. (Page 17-18)

4. High School Graduation Lower Than 50 Percent in Big Cities

High school graduation rates in America are also trending downward. Rates peaked in 1969, at 77 percent, but are now at 68 percent. This means 32 percent of high school student do not finish. A recent report said that seventeen of the nation’s fifty largest cities had high school graduations rates lower then 50 percent! (Page 19)

5. An Example from the Early Church

One of the great examples of enduring faithfulness in the early church was a man named Polycarp of Smyrna. A prominent city pastor of a church in Asia Minor (now Turkey), he was martyred in AD 155.

Polycarp was born about AD 69, around the time of Paul’s martyrdom in Rome. His church may actually have been established by Paul. Polycarp was even disciple by the apostle John! Early church leader Irenaeus says that Polycarp had talked to many who had seen Christ.

We have a detailed account of Polycarp’s death in the writings of Eusebius, the early church historian. He was executed under the reign of the Roman emperor Antonius Pius during a wave of persecution.

When Christians were being feed to wild beasts in the arena, a crowd began to chant, “Away with the atheists! Find Polycarp!” (Pagans sometimes called Christians atheists because Christians refused to believe in the gods.)

At this time, Polycarp was an old man. When the authorities search for and found the elderly pastor, they arrested him and brought him to the arena. First they tried to persuade him to curse Christ and confess Caesar as Lord in order to save him.

At the judgment seat, the governor said, “Curse Christ and I will release you. Have respect for your old age. Say. “Away with the atheists!”

The old bishop replied, “Eighty-six years I have served Christ and He has done me no wrong. How then can I blaspheme my king who has saved me?”

That’s long-distance Christianity.

They threatened Polycarp with wild beasts, but he would not be dissuaded. The proconsul then threatened to burn him alive.

Polycarp replied, “You threaten fire that burns for an hour and is over. But the judgment on the ungodly is forever.”

The fire was then prepared, Polycarp lifted his eyes to heaven and prayed: “Father I bless You that You deemed me worthy of this day and hour, that I might take a portion of the martyrs in the cup of Christ... Among these may I today be welcome before Thy face as a rich and acceptable sacrifice.”

The flames then engulfed him, and he was burned alive!

Not all those who confess Christ as Savior in the early church were that steadfast. Some gave in to the pressure to preserve their lives. Some burned incense to Caesar, cursed Christ, and fell away. Rather than finish the race, they quit when it got hard. That’s always the way it has been. (Page 21-22)

6. A Baptism to a Life in Christ

A number of years ago I (Don) observed a baptism service in England at an Anglican church. New believers were being baptized. After baptizing each individual, the minister signed each person with the sign of the cross and said, “I sign you with the cross, the sign of Christ. Do not be ashamed to confess your faith in Christ crucified. Fight valiantly under the banner of Christ against sin, the world, and the Devil, and *continue* as His faithful soldier and servant to the end of your life. (Page 25)

7. The Gospel For the Second Half of Life

Consider what happens to you after age 30. Your bones have stopped growing and started becoming thinner and weaker as you move into midlife. We hit maximum muscle mass at age 30; after that, muscles begin to reduce in size. Along with that, your joints become less flexible, and vertebral discs may begin to deteriorate.

Between ages 30 and 70, your brain will decrease about 10 percent in size as it loses neurons and memory gets less sharp. In your 40s and 50s, your heart becomes less efficient, blood vessels lose elasticity, and fatty deposits may begin to clog your arteries. Besides that, your arteries are less flexible and your blood pressure starts to go up.

In that same time, the volume of your lungs decreases and becomes less efficient. After 30 your intestines slow down, along with your metabolism. The more it slows, the easier it is to gain weight. In your 40s, as they say, “shift happens,” and that weight starts to settle in new places. Your kidneys lose efficiency. Your retinas will thin, and lenses will get cloudy. Your hearing will grow weaker. It’s payback for all that loud music you listened to as a teen.

In your 50s your legs will probably start to resemble road maps. Some of us will start to develop what we call “turkey neck.” And if that doesn’t happen, your chin will have twins. This is also the era when those early fillings fall out of your teeth and you begin to talk about crowns and root canals.

Besides changing color, your hair gets thinner, if it does not disappear altogether. Some time after your hair disappears, it's the revenge of all bad childhood sunburns. Wrinkles and blotches appear! It's amazing how that happens. And this is just a partial list. Need I say more? The truth of the matter is, in the second half of life we are all wearing out.

And the bad news is not just for the over-thirty crowd! Whether you are young or old, old or. . . "mature and holding." all of us have to reckon with the effects of aging. We begin to notice the deterioration in late childhood. That's when we start getting fillings and wearing glasses. That's when, from all our sports dedication, ankles begin to sprain, hamstrings rupture, knees get blown, groins get pulled, tears show up in the Achilles tendon, and carpal tunnel syndrome develops. The wear from sports and exercise come back to haunt us in the form of "overuse" injuries.

All this bad body news should puncture the baby boomers balloon. Yet we keep telling ourselves we will be the first to defy the drag of aging. Despite the mounting evidence, many continue in a state of blissful denial. (Page 27-28)

8. Slowing Down and Live

There's lots of stuff written now about how to be 100. It will help if we:

- Exercise regularly—both aerobically and with weights. If nothing else, walk or swim.
- Don't smoke and avoid substance abuse of all kinds.
- Get regular physicals, blood tests (men, prostate; women, breast), and dental checkups.
- Watch what you eat, limit dietary fats, take in fewer calories, and eat fewer processed or refined foods. Instead, consume plenty of fruit and vegetables.
- Wear your seat belt or helmets when you ride.
- Keep your mind active, and don't stop learning. It is good for the brain.
- Avoid social isolation. Have a best friend or a pet, and do things with people. This also extends life.
- Avoid too much sun and use sunscreen with good UV protection.
- Get enough sleep.
- Have faith—people of faith live longer. Many studies now show that being part of a church or community of faith actually extends life.

(Page 29)

9. Every Thing Hurts in Old Age

It is a biblical truth that "our outer nature is wasting away." Don was recently complaining about a knee injury. I told him to quit whining. "Son, when you get to my age, it's not just your knee that hurts. Everything hurts! I have a long list of things I

could tell you that hurts. In fact, at my age, if it ain't hurtin', it probably ain't workin'!" The older you get, the more your body groans with the rest of creation! (Page 30)

10. What Is The Gospel That We Hold?

Let's be clear about we mean by the gospel. The gospel is the best news on earth. It is the message about God's saving grace in Jesus Christ to a lost humanity. It tells us how God rescues us from sin, death, and hell. It is good news from God (Romans 1:1). It is about a plan conceived by the Trinity in eternity past that brought to fulfillment His ancient promise to bless the nations of the earth.

The gospel is centered in the person and achievement of Jesus—His incarnation as the infinite, eternal God man, His righteousness as the new Adam, His atoning death as the Lamb who takes away the sin of the world, and His bodily resurrection as the firstborn of the new creation. The gospel concerns what was achieved by the great saving act—that righteousness was fulfilled, sin was paid for, and the perfect guilt offering satisfied the righteous demands of God's justice. Because of all this, death fell apart and the grave could not hold Jesus.

The gospel is about how by grace through faith you and I can be pardoned of all our sins and accepted by him—that is justified! It is about how we can be declared "not guilty" of our sins and then adopted into God's family. It is about how we can be delivered from the power of evil through Christ who is stronger.

But that is not all. The gospel is also about Christ's exaltation as Lord to the right hand of the Father, where He was given a place of universal authority. It is about the victory and presence of His kingdom. It is about His return as judge of all the earth when He will visibly bring all things under His rule in a new heaven and earth.

Yet there is more. It is about how He saved me for Himself, that I might be reconciled to heaven so I can know God, enjoy Him, serve Him, and find my true satisfaction in Him.

The gospel is the most important news in the world. It is what the world needs more than anything else. It is as simple as John 3:16, as deep as the book of Romans, and as broad as the story of the whole Bible. (Pages 31-33)

11. The Division of Age in Different Ways

Age can be divided in different ways. Some do it this way. There's infancy, childhood, preadolescence, adolescence, early adulthood (20-39), middle adulthood (40-59), and late adulthood (60+). Late adulthood can be divided as well. Some speak of the young old (65-74), middle old (75-84), and the oldest old (85+).

But age can also be divided by decade. If you are in your 50s you are a quinquagenarian; if you are in your 60s, you are a sexagenarian; if you are in your 70s,

you are a septuagenarian; if you are in your 80s, you are an octogenarian. If you make it to the 90s, you will be a nonagenarian. If you hit 100 you will be a centenarian. Those 110 and older are called supercentenarians! (Page 40)

12. Three Phases of Life

Retired auto executive Lee Iacocca wrote that there are three phases of life: “learn, earn, and return.” He said the first third of your life is the “learn” phrase. Much of it is devoted to education. The second phase is the “earn” phase; you build a career and make a living. Then comes the final third, devoted to giving back and returning in gratitude. (Page 43)

13. A Way to Keep From Worrying

Now I worry differently. I wonder: Will I have my wits to the end? What if my money runs out? How will I ultimately die?

Then I go to passages like Proverbs 3:5-6 and break them down into four parts and apply it personally. I meditate on the first phrase: “Trust in the Lord with all your heart.” Then I go to the next phrase: “and lean not on your understanding.” Then I focus on the words “in all your ways acknowledge him.” *All* your ways! Then I rest in that final phrase: “and he will make your paths straight.”

This is my SOS verse for the middle of the night when I can’t sleep. I keep quoting it so I don’t get trapped by false worries. I recite it until I fall back to sleep. (Page 46)

14. What Every Christian Needs to Finish Well

Some years ago, I (George) remember hearing the extraordinary Dallas Seminary Bible teacher Howard Hendricks speak at a Moody Pastors’ Conference. He said to finish well, every Christian needs a Paul, a Barnabas, and a Timothy. He said we all need a Paul—someone older who can mentor us and show us the way. We all need a Barnabas—someone running alongside to encourage us. And we need a Timothy—someone younger, an emerging leader in whom we invest our lives. (Page 65-66)

15. Chose the Employment That You are the Most Valuable to God

Puritan Richard Baxter said, “Chose that employment or calling (so far as you have your choice) in which you may be most serviceable to God. Chose not that which you may be most rich or honorable in the world, but that in which you may do the most good, and best escape sinning.” (Page 83)

16. Be Your Own CEO

Business writer Tom Peters puts it starkly when he says that in today’s economy you have to “be your own brand” or “be your own CEO.” Because more people are freelancing, you have to figure out how to distinguish yourself from others and create a

distinctive role for yourself. Now more than ever, workers need to learn, improve, and build up their skills.

One does not have to adopt Tom Peter's excessive individualism to benefit from his point. You must diversify and deepen your skill set so you can keep going and extend your shelf life and impact in today's marketplace. (Page 86)

17. Sally Robbins Quite the Race

Sally Robbins was a member of Australia's rowing team in the 2004 Olympics. But something went terribly wrong for her team as they competed in the women's eight final. With 400 meters left in the race, the 23-year-old suddenly stopped rowing! She slumped over and her oar sunk into the water, breaking the synchronized stride needed to win a race. Australia dropped from third to last place in the event. Said Robbins, "I just rowed my guts out in the first 1,500 and didn't have anything left, and that's all I could have done for today." Her teammates were not impressed and neither were the Melbourne newspapers. When Robbins quit the race, she cost the team their medal. (Page 88-89)

18. Giving While You're Living

"Do you're giving while you're living . . . because then you're knowing where it's going! (Page 107)

19. A Generous Spirit

I (George) often recall my Scottish mother telling me as a boy, in her lilting brogue, "Son, seldom repress a generous impulse." She tried to encourage a generous spirit in her children because of the generous attitude of the Lord. (Page 108)

20. A Teachable Spirit through Life

A fourth characteristic of those who finish well is that they have a *teachable spirit* through life. "Teachable" means that they maintain a humble posture and are open to receive midcourse correction. Those who finish well never stop doing this. They are lifelong learners. They learn from reading, from watching and listening to others, and from life itself. This keeps them from plateauing. Paul was like this. At the very end of his life, in the closing request of his last letter, he says to Timothy, "When you come . . . also bring my books" (2 Timothy 4:13 NLT). He was still learning and teachable, right to the very end. Amazing. (Page 152)

21. The Elderly Are Dying More Slowly

Now it more common for death to advance more slowly. Chronic illnesses mean that dying often takes longer. Physicians speak of "gradual dying." The leading causes of death progress more slowly. According to a Rand Health white paper, most elderly Americans are diagnosed with a disease three years before dying. Thirty-five percent of

the elderly will die in nursing homes. Dying like this is not in anyone's plans, yet it happens more often than we realize, (Page 160)

22. Ronald Reagan's Fatal Disease—Alzheimer's Disease

Some time ago, I (Don) was with an elderly relative. When I would ask him how he was doing, he would usually complain and moan. There was always a deep cynicism in his words. One time he looked at me and said, "It is hell to be 93." But for him, it was "hell" to be 90, 91, and 92. He was cynical about everything.

By contrast, many of us never forget former president Ronald Reagan in his postpresidential years (1989-2004). Reagan was not only the oldest elected president (at age 69), but he was also one of the oldest living ex-presidents (at age 93).

I August 1994, when he was 83, he was diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. Rather than deny it or hid it, he went public and informed the nation in a letter what was happening to him. He wrote:

I have recently been told that I am one of the millions of American who will be affected with Alzheimer's disease . . . At the moment I feel just fine. I intend to live the remainder of the years God gives me on this earth doing the things I have always have done . . . Now I begin the journey that will lead me into the sunset of my life. I know that for America there will always be a bright dawn ahead. Thank you, my friends. May God always bless you.

His actions and words not only showed humility (here was one who had been the most powerful man in the world now willing to let go), but it also showed enormous courage. His attitude encouraged many others to face their own difficult seasons with this incurable neurological disorder. (Page 162-163)

23. The End of Earthly Life, Plans & Provisions

Here are some other questions you will want to talk about as a family. We encourage you to get input from your doctor, your family, and from your pastor.

- Do you have a will?
- How do you want your assets to be distributed?
- Are there life insurance policies?
- How and where do you want to live when independence is no longer possible?
- If you lose your independence, what are your financial and family resources to support an assisted-living arrangement?
- What are your end-of-life wishes?
- Are there living wills or advanced directives?
- What do you want your last days to look like? Do you want to die in a hospital or at home in a comfortable and familiar place?
- What medical directives do you want in place for your last days?

- What principles do you want to guide the people who are caring for you?

With this information in hand, it is good if wise family members can put together a family care plan. Family members will have to ask themselves: How can we prolong our parents' independence? And when our parents lose their independence, then what? What are the resources available from all sources, and what are our options?

Once a family care plan is agreed upon, the actual "caring through presence" takes place. You just need to be there or have someone who cares be there. They need to be checked up on, called, and included in events as much as possible. They will need to be helped in the things they can no longer do for themselves—in cooking, cleaning, taking care of personal hygiene, even using the bathroom. That is what it means to love a dying parent or friend.

This all might sound early and hard, and it is. Nevertheless, behind it all is a biblical mandate of care for family reflected not only in God's Ten Commandments but also in passages like 1 Timothy 5:8, where Paul says, "If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for members of his household, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever" (ESV). Strong words, but relevant to our circumstances. (Page 166-167)

24. —A Puritan Prayer

Prepare me for death, that I may not die after long affliction or suddenly, but after short illness, with no confusion or disorder, and a quit discharge in peace, with adieu to brethren. (Page 170)

25. To Die Well, Consciously & Alert

Christians of the reform era, and Puritans after them, talked frequently about dying well. They experienced much persecution, losing many creature comforts because of their faith. They thought a lot about the transitory nature of this life. This life, many of them believed, is a preparation for the next life. Calvin said it is nothing but a lobby or a front entrance, a vestibule, for the next life. The Puritan vision of dying well was to die consciously and alert. They would listen to and often record their loved ones' words as they moved toward heaven. They prayed, not for a "long affliction" or a "sudden death" but rather for a fully alert death surrounded by close friends. (Page 171)

26. How Wesley Would Spend His Last 24 Hours of Life

When Wesley was asked by a friend, "Suppose you knew that you were to die by midnight tomorrow, John. How would you spend your time until then?"

Wesley replied, "I would spend it exactly as I expect spend it now. I would preach tonight in Gloucester. I would get up early tomorrow and proceed to Tewkesbury, where I would preach in the afternoon. Then I would go to Martins' house in the evening, since they are expecting me. I would talk with Mr. Martin and pray with the

family. Upon retiring to my room at ten o'clock, I would put myself in the Father's care, go to sleep, and wake up in glory. (Page 172-173)

27. God Is Sovereign over Death

Death is also a calling—a sacred calling, if you will. According to Ecclesiastes 3:1-3, “There is a time for everything, and a season for every activity under heaven.” This includes both “a time to be born and a time to die.” This passage suggests a divinely ordained time—that our times really are in His hands (Psalm 31:15). Hebrews 9:27 echoes this in telling us it is “appointed” or “destined” for men to die. Some say God has nothing to do with death. But they forget that Christ holds the keys of death (Revelation 1:17-18) and that the God who has numbered our days is sovereign over death. (Page 174)

28. Luther's Sermon - “A Sermon on Preparing to Die”

In Luther's sermon on “A Sermon on Preparing to Die,” he said, “Just as an infant is born with peril and pain from the small abode of the mother's womb into this immense heaven and earth . . . so man departs this life through the narrow gate of death . . . Therefore the death of a dear saints is called a new birth, and their feast day is known in Latin as *natale*, that is the day of their birth!

(Page 175)

29. There Are Two Ways for the Believer to go to Heaven

You could say there are two ways that He will come again. “He will come again in glory to judge the quick and the dead” as the Apostles' Creed says. And we would like to live until He does.

But if He doesn't come for us corporately in our lifetime, He will come for us individually, just as He did for Stephen in Acts 7:59 when, as they were stoning him, he cried out, “Lord Jesus, receive my spirit.”

So which is it? When is death's true face? Is death an enemy or a friend? Is it a curse or a blessing? The paradox of death is that for the believer it has two faces. While it remains our enemy, by grace through faith, the curse becomes a blessing through CHRIST. So then, for the believer there is such a thing as a good death. It is possible to die we well. (Page 176)

30. To Die Well You Must Live Well

The real secret of good death is a good life! People who die well keep going as long as they can, thankful for each day but with a resolve to make every one count. They preserve in faith. They are aware of death but consumed by it. They are awake to the Lord, and to the people around them, and they seek to be a channel of His blessing. Whether by martyrdom or normal service, they are focused on serving Christ to the end of their days being a faithful witness and a faithful presence for Him. So many of the

heroes of faith we have described in this book, the pacesetters, have modeled this kind of life. That's why we believe that the real of dying well is found in looking at each day as a gift from God—and resolve to live it to the fullest for His glory. (Page 177)

31. In Christ the Best is Yet to Come!

When John Owen, the great Puritan theologian and church leader, lay on his deathbed, his secretary wrote in his name to a friend. “I am still in the land of the living. “Stop”, said Owen. Change that to say, “I am yet in the land of the dying, but I hope soon to be in the land of the living.” *Pulpit Digest*. (Page 184)

32. Our Fatherland is Heaven

The blessed reside in heaven. It is, as Calvin said, “our father land.” Compared to that, he said, “What else is this world but a grave” because we live in the land of the dying. C. S. Lewis's writings often picture heaven as our true home as well; it is the land we have been searching for our whole lives. Meanwhile we live in the shadowlands. (Page 188)

33. Jesus Believed in Hell, So Do All Christians

The reason Christians have believed in hell as much as we believe in heaven is primarily because Jesus did. In his preaching He consistently and repeatedly used the most graphic images to warn people about hell's awful reality (Matthew 8:11-12; 13:42-42, Mark 9:42-48; Luke 16:22-24).

The reason Christians believe in hell is not because we are vindictive but because God is just and holy—as well as loving. His love does not swallow up His justice and righteousness. Or as Paul put it, the kindness of God does not negate the severity of God (Romans 11:22). We are to leave room in our theology for God's wrath as well as His love, because it is the Lord who says, “It is mine to avenge; I will repay” (Romans 12:19). (Page 190)

34. A Final Word: “Give ‘em Heaven!”

What is your only comfort in life and in death? That I am not my own, but belong—body and soul, in life and in death—to my faithful Savior Jesus Christ. He has fully paid for all my sins with his precious blood, and has set me free from the tyranny of the Devil. He also watches over me in such a way that nor a hair can fall from my head without the will of my Father in heaven: in fact, all things must work together for my salvation. Because I belong to Him, Christ, by His Holy Spirit, assures me of eternal life and makes me wholeheartedly willing and ready from now on to live for Him. *The Heidelberg Catechism* (Page 195)

35. Heavenly Minded, the Most Earthly Good

It was something said in the past that Christians were so “heavenly minded that they were no earthly good.” The story of church history has actually proven the opposite. It

is only when we have perspective, when we have the big story in mind, that we are so heavenly minded that we are the most earthly good! Why? Because we know what value stand at the center of the universe and what really matters to God. (Page 196)