
FINISHING WELL

BY MICHAEL CARD

If life is really the race the Bible tells us it in fact is, then there lies ahead for each one of us a finish line. This we tend to forget or ignore or even deny until someone we love crosses it for themselves and we are forced to see that our own feet are placed in the middle of the track. Unlike a real life race where often the runners do not last as far as the tape, we must all, of necessity, cross the finish line of the race of life, which is of course death.

The question John Eaves poses, as he finds the finish line within sight in his own experience, is how do we finish well? How do we cross the line as champions and not as hopeless and disheartened losers? How is it that death can be transformed into the victory our faith tells us it is?

We were together at Western Kentucky University, studying under William Lane. At first, I knew him only by reputation, by the repeated references that Dr. Lane would make concerning him. John, I learned, had been the first white member of the African American church that later became my home, Cecelia Memorial Presbyterian Church. John had already established a presence in the community as a person who personified the gospel loved out. He had sacrificed a promising career in the oil business in Kentucky in order to be obedient to the call of Jesus on his life. Later he would leave for the mission field to serve in the Philippines. Later he would return home and discover a new and more effective way to reach out to the world though working with international students at places like Harvard, Boston College and finally Vanderbilt University.

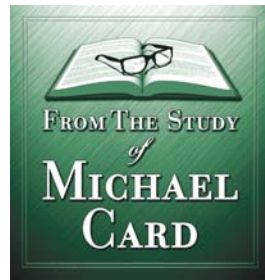
All along in the race, John was always way out ahead of me and for this I was glad. I was happy to cheer him on, out of breath, from the back of the pack for he had become for me a sort of “faith-hero,” a friend, though for most of those years a distant one.

When he and his wife Kay finally moved back to Tennessee, we would be able to spend more time together, usually in the context of ministering together with his beloved international students. In time, when our mentor William Lane moved to Franklin, John and I spent every spare moment we could find at Bill’s side until he crossed the finish line on March 7, 1999. Bill had come, in his own words, to “show us how a Christian man dies.” On the night of his death, John and I were there together at his bedside.

I had thought that during our last eighteen months together with Dr. Lane that I had learned all I needed to know about crossing that final finish line, that I was ready now to finish well. After all, Bill had crossed the line a champion. But I would come to understand that John was looking more closely and listening more intently to the final poem of Bill’s life than I could imagine.

When, several months ago, John and Kay received the abrupt news that, without chemo-therapy, he had only four months to live, my response seemed to reveal that I had learned virtually nothing from my time with Bill. All of the same angry questions resurfaced. “Why John?” I fumed at God, who I knew had the power to heal him in an instant.

John’s response couldn’t have been more different, as different as night to day. In his illness he discovered a new boldness. I am in the “Cancer Club,” he says with a smile. People who would never listen to me before are open to hearing



the gospel. And so he “cruises” the Oncology ward where he receives chemo, talking to anyone who will listen about his faith and his God, the same God with whom I still struggle in frustration and anger; an anger through which I believe He has invited me into the ring to wrestle Him in and through. Believe me, I know, after all, Who is going to win! Nevertheless I sense His loving invitation to the ring. I am beginning to wonder if this struggle is not a part of what He knows I need to experience before I can finish well. Perhaps you too need to take off the gloves and get into this same arena. Perhaps some of us need to wrestle before we can run!

In the meantime, John speaks at churches and other groups about his victory over cancer and what finishing well is supposed to look like. He answers difficult questions with his own unique sense of humor and irony, always substantiating his words with the Word of God.

John will sometimes invite the audience to give a victors shout (ala Mel Gibson’s *Braveheart*) in the face of fallen-ness, sickness and death. John’s life has become such a roar. As he draws near his own finish line, he shouts in defiance, in joy, in a victory that he will tell you was won by Someone else who crossed the line with such a shout on His lips.

From the very beginning, on first having heard of his cancer, John started communicating with his friends and partners in ministry via e-mail. The beneficiaries of his ministry from all over the world started responding with countless “cancer cures” and pledges for prayer support. John likened his prayer supporters to the friends of the crippled man who tore the hole through Peter’s roof and lowered him down in front of Jesus for healing. John reminded us all that it was precisely the friends whom Jesus commended and not the man who was healed. We, who promised to pray, had become John’s “litter bearers.” Our calling was to tear a hole in the roof of heaven with our persistent prayers and help carry John to the presence of Jesus. If and when John is healed, we would be the ones who might receive the commendation of Jesus. In this scenario, our faith was as important as John’s. And so we prayed.

At first the chemo had a beneficial effect, as the doctors had indicated it might. We all thanked God and wondered if this could be the precursor to the complete healing for which we were all asking. Could God be moving John’s finish line farther down the course?

Just yesterday we talked long distance. “I’ve begun wasting,” John whispered. By his own acknowledgement, John sees his finish line coming closer. That is where we are as of today.

I can only describe our experience thus far together in this struggle as “incarnational.” By that I mean that something is being “fleshed out” through this experience that I’m not sure any of us can learn any other way. Because of, in and through John’s disease, suffering and faithful response, something of Jesus is becoming more real to all of us. I have begun to faintly understand, as if it were being whispered from another room, that there is a purpose in suffering that outweighs the pain. Even as I write those words, I cringe, fully knowing that it ill behooves me, in the midst of my health and currently painless position in life to make conclusions as if I were understanding things from John’s place in the midst of his suffering. But, having said that, I *do* understand more now than before. I *do* hope more and I have come to realize that I will never face the prospect of suffering and death the same after this.

I have actually begun to hope that as I cross the finish line (which will happen sooner rather than later) the same shout of triumph I have heard forming on John’s lips might come from mine. It is the same call I hear echoing across the valley from the hill of Calvary. *✠*

John Eaves went home to with the Lord on Sunday, February 22, the week after Michael wrote this column which was intended to serve as the foreword of John’s as-of-yet unpublished book about his battle with cancer titled Finishing Well.