

## What does it mean to ‘Finish Well?’

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That is the question posed by Sonny Newton, former VP of Strategic Planning at Chick-fil-A, during the July 8<sup>th</sup> BELIEVES session in Kenny Hall hosted at the Cathedral at Christ the King.

Originally from Columbia, South Carolina, Newton grew up playing sports and ultimately attended the University of South Carolina – but on a military scholarship.

As a freshman at the University of South Carolina, he earned a 1.2 GPA. When he shared this with a military recruiter, the recruiter told him that if his GPA didn’t rise, Newton would find himself in some Vietnam rice paddies before long.



Newton said, “That was all the motivation I needed,” though he still wound up serving in the military for six years after college.

Upon completion of his time in the military, Newton found employment with the Dillard Paper Company where he worked for 10 years as a 100% commission sales person. Chick-fil-A was one of his customers, and after 10 years with Dillard Paper, Chick-fil-A hired him as a Director of Strategic Planning. He would later rise to the position of VP of Strategic Planning for all of Chick-fil-A.

After a long career at Chick-fil-A, in 2004, Newton started having thoughts that he’d leave Chick-fil-A. The thoughts wouldn’t go away and they stayed in his heart. In 2008, he finally did leave Chick-fil-A, though he said it was more of a “reallocation of his time” than a “retirement.”

Newton shared with the attendees at BELIEVES, “Then and today, I consider myself to be a man under construction. I certainly am not done, and don’t have it all figured out.”

Newton then directly posed the seminal question of his talk to the audience – What does finishing well mean to you?

Attendees at each table spent time discussing it with those around them.

At one table, John Harris, Account Representative for the Paradigm Tax Group, shared that for him “finishing well” means “finishing what you said you’d do.”

Attorney Elizabeth Harris reflected on her recent completion of the Peachtree Road Race four days earlier and said for her it means “you keep going to the end.”

Margaret Piekarski, Director of Sales Training & Development at Given Imaging, added, “Sonny’s question makes me think of Mother Teresa when she said ‘when people interact with you, they should leave with a smile.’”

Andrew Schoppe, President of The Golden Rule Partners commented, “For me the words that come to mind are those that we would hope to hear God say – well done good and faithful servant.”

When Newton invited everyone to wrap up the discussion at their tables and share some of their thoughts, Mike Kirchner, MetLife Regional Market Account Executive, shared, “Right now my kids are at the age where they want to be around us, so finishing well is all about setting the right foundation and values for them, because in five years they will be focused elsewhere.”

Newton thanked Kirchner and others for their thoughts and then shared that for him personally, he tries to “finish well” every single moment of every single day.

“I’m not doing well, but it’s helping me to think about it and that helps,” he said. “For example, I find that now I don’t have as much road rage as I did before – but the other thing that helps with that is putting Bible tapes on in the car,” he said with a smile.

The main challenge, Newton said, is to live the last 24 hours now.

To illustrate, Newton shared that several years ago he looked at his calendar and his to-do list and started matching them up. On his calendar, his sister, Kathy, was nowhere to be found.

“When I realized this, I decided to do something about it,” Newton said. “Kathy’s birthday is March 12, so before it arrived I called her husband John and said, ‘we’d like to surprise Kathy on her birthday.’ John’s first words were, ‘What’s wrong?’”

On the day of Kathy’s birthday, my wife and I drove to Columbia, SC, to surprise Kathy and were singing happy birthday to her on the phone as we pulled into her driveway. When we knocked on the door to surprise her, the first words Kathy said were, ‘What’s wrong?’”

“This experience really had an impact on me,” Newton shared. “Now, I get a reminder two times each month to call my sister.”

Newton added that he does think it’s ultimately more important to ‘be’ who He wants, than to ‘do.’

“Nothing kills a bad product like bad marketing,” Newton said. “We need to ‘be’ before we ‘do.’”

“Growing up, we’re asked, ‘what do you want to be when you grow up?’” Newton recalled. “I wanted to be the second baseman of the NY Yankees, just like Bobby Richardson. How many of you have a ‘be’ list rather than a ‘to-do’ list?”

Taking it one step further, Newton asked everyone, “What’s more important in God’s eyes, what you do or who you are?”

Back at the tables, the attendees began to delve into this question among themselves.

Elizabeth Harris, once again commented, “Success and significance is tied to who you are.”

Brian Pilger, Co-owner and Director of Sales for Warfield Technologies, spoke up in contrast, “I don’t know if I agree. The scripture says ‘love without action doesn’t matter.’ That’s why I always love Peter in the Bible.”

John Harris, Account Representative for the Paradigm Tax Group, added, “We’ve all been given certain gifts. It’s whether we are using them for God’s purposes.”

After everyone pondered the question for a bit, Newton resumed the discussion sharing that over time in his reflections, he found peace to land on the following as a personal mission statement, “Fulfilling the purpose that God has given to me to be the person that He wants me to be that has eternal purpose and meaning until the day I die.”



Tying this to the comments about the importance of character and being, Newton said, ““You don’t ever retire from God’s purpose. It may change or get tweaked slightly, but it’s always constant and present.”

One book that Newton read which had a profound impact on his thinking about God’s purpose was Bob Buford’s book entitled “Halftime.”

In the book, Bob shares that in their home state of Texas, one day his son went swimming in the Rio Grande River and died. This profoundly affected Bob, and made him realize that the first half of his life up to that point he had been focused on “success.” For the second half of his life, he wanted it to be about “significance.”

For Newton, this got him thinking more deeply about the question of God’s purpose and significance in his life.

He then asked the attendees, “When should you start finishing well?”

Eric Maust, JP Morgan Chase Business Banking Relationship Manager, said, “With anything, finishing well involves discerning what to take on to have the spiritual life we’re called to have.”

Dean McDonald, Principal at Walden Businesses, added, "I feel it's important that we don't delay in finishing well. Whether we are in our 20s or 50s, it's important that we make a commitment and live with it."

Newton listened to the remarks shared, and then commented further that when he was first challenged with the question he posed to everyone, he sat down for months at the lake, looked at the last 24 hours, and started writing down what came to him. When he began this process, he found himself looking at minute details, but when he rose to the 10,000 foot view, it was all about relationships.

"This is when it hit me, as I have shared earlier, that in my last 24 hours, I'd want to spend time with my sister," Newton said. "If I could take the last 24 hours and do that in the next week or two that would be great."

"I suppose I really bought into the book 'Halftime.' I wrote down the date for half of my life – but how do we know when that is? It could be the final two-minute warning right now."

"When you all think about the last 24 hours of your life, how many put work at the top of the list?" Newton asked.

No one in the audience raised their hands.

"If God comes and taps you on the shoulder and says, 'The good news is, you're going to Heaven. The bad news is it's in 24 hours.' How would you spend your last 24 hours?"

Brian Pilger, once again spoke up and shared, "It's actually in my will to have a band at the wake. I am hoping that it would be a party filled with laughter and fellowship ... and probably a beer too.

Elizabeth Harris, also spoke up and said she'd want to be with family, be outdoors, and go to Mass.

John Harris, concurred fairly strongly saying, "First, I would want to go to confession. Then I would say good-bye to all the loved ones."

Newton thanked everyone for sharing their thoughts and questions and then left all with this final question to ponder, "If you die tomorrow, would there be evidence?"