

Mark Dance

# START TO FINISH

*The Pastor's Guide to Leading  
a Resilient Life and Ministry*

FOREWORD BY DR. HANCE DILBECK



**START**  
**TO**  
**FINISH**



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a Resilient Life and Ministry*

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To my parents Ken and Bobbie Dance for showing  
me how to love Jesus and His Bride, as well as my own.  
This book is an extension of your legacy.

All of the author's royalties and proceeds from this book go to the support of Mission:Dignity, a ministry of GuideStone that enables retirement aged ministers and spouses to live out their days with dignity and security. Mission:Dignity helps more than 2,500 individuals each year with extra money needed for housing, food, and vital medications.

"It reminds them their Southern Baptist family has not forgotten their service to the Lord and His people," GuideStone President Hance Dilbeck said.

To give, to apply for assistance, or to refer someone in need, visit [MissionDignity.org](http://MissionDignity.org) or call 877-888-9409. One hundred percent of all gifts to Mission:Dignity assist retirement-aged ministers and/or widows.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Early in this project, I recruited the help of Dr. Philip Nation. He is an accomplished pastor, writer, and close friend who shares my ambitious goal of helping ministry leaders start and finish well. Philip's encouraging heart and academic mind made this book so much better than it would have been without his help.

Finally, I want to thank Drs. Hance Dilbeck and David Ferguson. Thank you for entrusting me with your legacy ministries at GuideStone and Care4Pastors.





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## FOREWORD

The biathlon fascinates me. Every four years, when the winter Olympics roll around, I love watching those amazing athletes compete. The men ski 20 kilometers (12-plus miles) and the women 15 kilometers (9-plus miles), each while carrying a 7-pound rifle. They stop twenty times to shoot at a 2-inch target half a football field away. I am fascinated by the combination of skill, accuracy, and endurance. It is not enough to hit the targets, nor is it sufficient to win the race. They must hit the targets *and* finish the race.

The biathlon is an apt metaphor for the life of a Christian minister. We live under daily demands to be on-target. We live under pressure to be right and to do right in every circumstance and occasion, in season and out of season. In fact, the concentric circles of a target remind us of the ever-present demands—right with God, right with self, right with family, right with church, right with neighbors. We must hit spiritual health, physical

health, and mental health targets; not to mention financial, emotional, relational, and vocational targets.

Like the biathlete, the pastor must be on-target over the long haul. We might hit the targets through most of the race, but if we grow too exhausted to finish, it's just target practice. DNF—Did Not Finish—is the fear of everyone who begins the competition. Even worse would be disqualification!

We must be on target over the long haul.

The balance of the biathlon is on display in Paul's admonition to Timothy. "Pay close attention to your life and your teaching; persevere in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourself and your hearers" (1 Tim. 4:16). We must be on target and we must persevere to the finish. This is indeed a high calling.

When the Lord opened the door for me to serve at GuideStone Financial Resources, I understood it as an opportunity to help pastors, missionaries, and ministers Finish Well. We enhance financial security and resilience for those who serve the Lord so that every servant of Christ might finish well. Financial wellness is one part of the whole. To serve well we must be well. Wellness is spiritual, physical, emotional, relational, financial, and vocational. The elements are woven together like a fabric. A flaw in one part will damage the whole.

I asked Mark Dance to come and help me because he has a passion to help ministers be well and serve well. Pastoral wellness is his life's work. He is uniquely prepared to write this book.

*Start to Finish*—I love that title. It speaks to Intent. One does not finish well on accident. We do not stumble to the finish line; we stride toward it. In kingdom ministry, we must build boundaries, set priorities, keep patterns, establish rhythms that will allow us to “persevere in these things.” To finish well, we must start well, serve well, and stay well.

This is a book about intentionality and authenticity.

Mark Dance has accurately concluded that a minister might fake it for a season, but eventually his heart will show. “Guard your heart above all else, for it is the source of life” (Prov. 4:23). The Great Commandment is the foundation for our ministries, as well as our lives. It might not be easy, but it is simple, wonderfully simple. Love the Lord with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. One cannot hope to build a sound ministry if he does not live a healthy life. Eventually, your heart shows. I believe that is not just a warning but a promise.

If you have picked up this book, you want to finish well. I have a good word for you.

“Now may the God of peace, who brought up from the dead our Lord Jesus—the great Shepherd of the sheep—through the blood of the everlasting covenant, equip you with everything good to do his will, working in us what is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen” (Heb. 13:20–21).

Dr. Hance Dilbeck

President/CEO, GuideStone Financial Resources





## INTRODUCTION

I will never forget the day when my friend Craig Miller and I drove all day through the hot Jordanian desert at 95 miles per hour to deliver cash and encouragement to embedded SBC missionaries in Baghdad. These heroic missionaries were working alongside the equally heroic U.S. military to replace water pumps in the immediate aftermath of the Iraqi War.

But the war wasn't over. Not even close.

Craig and I only heard the part of President George W. Bush's speech that we wanted to hear a couple of weeks before. "In the battle of Iraq, the major phase of combat is over. The United States and our allies have prevailed," Bush said while standing on the enormous flight deck of the USS *Abraham Lincoln*. He landed on that battleship in an S-3 Viking jet, wearing a flight suit. That was May 2, 2003. I think our country needed President Bush's Texas swagger at that time in our nation's history.



If we had listened carefully to the rest of his speech, Craig and I would have heard Bush say there is still “difficult work to do. Parts of that country remain dangerous . . . there are still Iraqi leaders who must be brought to justice like Saddam Hussein. The al-Qaida terrorist organization is wounded, not destroyed.”<sup>1</sup>

Once we arrived, it became obvious that Baghdad was still a very active war zone. Craig and I saw firefights almost every day; the most active one was on our last day in the United Nations building, which was destroyed soon after by a suicide bomber. In a separate attack in traffic, three of the brave IMB missionaries we worked with were killed a few months later.

Pastors, missionaries, and other ministry leaders live and fight daily in an active war zone that is just as real as what we experienced in Baghdad.

In some ways pastors are dealing with even more insidious enemies because their battle, for the most part, is invisible. The world, Satan, and our own flesh conspire against us every day, making it harder and harder to win.

Although our ultimate victory has already been won through Jesus’s finished work on the cross, our wounded enemy is shrewdly taking aim at the commissioned officers of the church. Jesus warned us of our enemies’ schemes:

“Tonight all of you will fall away because of me, for it is written: ‘I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.’” (Matt. 26:31)

Sometimes our worst enemy is the person in the mirror. No right-minded minister ever woke up thinking, *How can I blow up my ministry today?* Yet the recent epidemic of messy exits ranges from slow-fading burnouts to epic moral failures.

Sadly, in the three churches I have pastored over the last three decades, I have yet to witness an immediate predecessor or successor finish well. All were terminated, most of them for moral failures. Even the two interim pastorates I have led came on the heels of terminations. It is sad for me to write that fact, and I'm sure it is hard for you to read it.

God has a much better plan for our lives and ministries! He has called us to both start well and finish well: "I am sure of this, that he who started a good work in you will carry it on to completion until the day of Christ Jesus" (Phil. 1:6).

The apostle Paul was a strong finisher. On his last ministry lap, he shared his resolve with his ministry team from Ephesus, "My purpose is to finish my course and the ministry I received from the Lord Jesus" (Acts 20:24). His follow-up letter from death row to Timothy was a legacy statement: "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Tim. 4:7).

Our legacy will be determined more by how we finish our race than how we started it, although both are important and connected. **The primary purpose of this book is to help pastors and ministry leaders both start and finish well.** Your war is not yet over, and your race is not yet complete, so thank you

for letting me help you press on all the way to the finish line. The fact that you're even reading this book is evidence that you are refusing to coast in casually.

Don't get me wrong—most pastors are not quitters. Our tribe is tough! You can ignore the scary stats we have all heard for years like this: *1,700 pastors leave the ministry every month.*<sup>2</sup> That annoying myth originated in a seminary straw poll that was taken when Roger Staubach was still throwing spirals for the Dallas Cowboys in the '70s.

In September 2015, a groundbreaking Lifeway Research survey of evangelical pastors found that only 1.3 percent abandon the pulpit each year (250, not 1,700). Many of those exits were healthy transitions to other ministries or retirement.<sup>3</sup>

Some pundits predicted that pastors would bail on ministry during the pandemic in 2020–21, but Lifeway's follow-up study in 2022 found the attrition rate had hardly changed at all (1.5%). Although 63 percent said they were overwhelmed by the pandemic, there was no indication that they were bailing on their people.<sup>4</sup>

Most of us who start in ministry will finish in ministry, but is that bar high enough? What if we set the trajectory of our lives, families, and ministries to finish sprinting instead of merely limping across the finish line? When we win, others in our family and ministry win. When we lose, the collateral damage is often bigger than we will ever see in our lifetimes.

Pay close attention to your life and your teaching; persevere in these things, for in doing this you will save both yourselves and your hearers.  
(1 Tim. 4:16)

I wrote this book from the perspective of a pastor to other pastors, although I realize that many men and women who read this will never use that title. Some of you are pursuing your high calling as an elder, missionary, deacon, teacher, or ministry spouse, which is no less sacred or important. This book is for you as well. You want to finish your ministry stronger than you started it and to do that you must be a resilient, Great Commandment leader.

Some of you are future ministry leaders who will use this book as a discipleship tool. As of this writing, a draft of it is being used as a mentoring manual in more than 100 Ministry Pipeline cohorts throughout Oklahoma for young men and women who have said “yes” to God’s call to the ministry. Every discipler needs to be discipled, which does not happen in solitude. So, consider reading it along with at least one other person who has or will assume a ministry leadership role.

Thank you for taking this journey with me.

Lead on!

Mark Dance, DMin

Dallas, Texas



## THE MAIN THING

Perhaps the most common church axiom of the 1980s was, “We need to keep the main thing the main thing.” I originally liked the ring of it, but apparently so did everyone else, so it became overused and now just comes across as cheesy. I heard it again four days ago at an event that I was speaking at. Make it stop!

Over the years I have noticed that “the main thing” is not always the same thing for each speaker. This created a dilemma for me as a young pastor because some boldly declared that evangelism was the main thing, while others insisted it was preaching, discipleship, fellowship, worship, or some ministry project.

The mystery was solved for me about a decade ago when I stumbled across a very familiar passage of Scripture. You may remember when a well-meaning scribe bluntly asked Jesus what

the main thing was. Jesus's answer was both refreshingly simple and eternally profound.

One of the scribes approached. When he heard them debating and saw that Jesus answered them well, he asked him, "Which command is the most important of all?"

Jesus answered, "The most important is 'Listen, Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is, 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other command greater than these." (Mark 12:28–31)

This scribe already knew the answer to his own question. I assume most of you also recognize the significance of the Shema (Deut. 6:4–9). Moses instructed faithful Jews 3,500 years ago to write it on their gates and doorposts, and even quote it at the beginning and end of each day. Still today, some orthodox Jews bind a tiny wooden box on their foreheads that contains a written copy of the Shema (Great Commandment) so they will not forget its preeminence.

Jesus said the Shema is the most important text in the Bible (Mark 12:29), which means there is no debate or confusion over what "the main thing" really is for any believer, much less any pastor, missionary, or church leader.

These two “most important” commandments in the Bible are the primary focus of this book because Jesus taught that the whole Bible hangs on the Great Commandments (Matt. 22:40), as do our lives and ministries.

**In this book we will unwrap the implications of a Great Commandment life, which is intrinsically connected to a Great Commission ministry.**

To pastors and ministry leaders, this is really no secret at all. There are no secrets or shortcuts to pastoral health and resilience. We have all witnessed stellar examples of those who have started and finished well, and we all have friends who have disqualified themselves from ministry.

This book is a summary of my ministry goal to help you start well, serve well, and finish well. A strong finish won't happen tomorrow unless you are willing to own your decisions today. I will be sharing some of my bad decisions in this book, all of which I had to own before I fixed.

Great Commandment leaders have learned to lead themselves first (1 Tim. 4:16) and consequently are leading (*managing*) their families and ministries well.

Please do not blow past the Great Commandments because they're familiar. Allow me to show you how your life and ministry can be strengthened, or even saved, by these two simple, radical old-school precepts. This book is divided into two sections based on each Great Commandment.



## LOVING GOD

We will start by focusing on Jesus's first command to love God because he is our "first" love (a.k.a. our "main thing"). Our Lord makes it crystal clear that there is not a more important thing we can do in our day or our whole life than love him with all our heart, soul, mind, and strength. His preeminence in our lives and ministries is a consistent theme throughout Scripture. You will see how this looks for the twenty-first-century Christian pastor. Without him we can do nothing, and through him we can discover the ultimate contentment in his ministry assignments (John 15:5; Phil. 4:13).

## LOVING OTHERS

The second half of the book focuses on the command to love our neighbors—those whom God has placed in our lives. The term *neighbor* gives us a hint where to start because it means "nearest one." My nearest one is my wife, Janet.

***The Great Commandments not only show us how to love best, but who to love most.***

Everyone is equal in God's sight, but as you know, we are not God. My prayer for this section is that you will see God's divine order for your life so that you can boldly protect it.

## A CLOSER LOOK

This nameless scribe mentioned earlier was a Pharisee and a member of the Sanhedrin. He was sent to get evidence of heresy to use later at Jesus's trial (Matt. 22:35). Mark's version, however, reveals his personal motives to be genuine when he asked Jesus what the main thing in Scripture was.

The religious elite in Jerusalem made up extra laws instead of following the actual Scripture, then subcategorized them into affirmative and negative groups (248 affirmative laws, 365 negative laws). These rules were also subdivided into heavy and light. The heavy ones were absolutely binding, and the light ones less binding.

Before we can fully understand and apply the first and greatest commandment, there are five key terms in it, which we need to explore and clarify: *Lord*, *first*, *greatest*, *love*, and *all*. Each term speaks to our relationship priorities.

### **"Lord" (Yahweh)**

There are so many wonderful names for God in the Bible, but only one covenant name—Yahweh/Jehovah. Ancient Hebrew had no vowels, so a more accurate English translation would be *YHWH*. Out of respect for the personal name of God, it remained unpronounced for centuries, so we will not really know how to accurately pronounce it on this side of heaven.

The proper name of the one true God means “self-existent or eternal; the existing one.” Jesus’s name in Hebrew was Joshua (y’shua), which means “Yahweh is salvation.”

I love that we cannot say Jesus’s name without also saying Yahweh!

It is very important to God, and should be to us, that we not take His name in vain. It is the third of the Ten Commandments, only preceded by commands forbidding other gods or graven images. These first three commands are like a no-compete clause in our covenant. God insists on being our “main thing.” This is why getting his name right is so important.

### ***“most important,” or “first” (protos)***

The scribe asked, “Which command is the most important of all?” (Mark 12:28). The Greek word *protos* is typically translated as “most important.” The KJV, though, translates it as “first.” One thing I like about the use of “first” is that it speaks to the priority of loving God. Also, Jesus used “second” to refer to the other great commandment: *Love your neighbor as yourself*. The closer I look at Scripture, the more I see an emerging pecking order for our lives and ministries.

My life and ministry have never been the same since God seared into my heart the powerful simplicity of making Jesus my first love. This truth made a great impact on me as a pastor after I reluctantly admitted to myself that my first love was no longer my first priority.

Many Bible translations use “most important” because it more accurately captures the weight of the scribe’s question. The expert in the law wanted to know the priority of the commands, not merely the sequence of them. If we miss the first command (loving God completely) and fulfill the second command (loving our neighbor), then we are left with mere humanism. Our neighbors are vitally important, but they are not equally important as Jesus.

Christ reminds us that *the most important* thing we will do today, or any day of our lives, is to love him.

We know intuitively that God is more important than anyone or anything else in creation. *Shema* is Hebrew for “hear,” since the Shema begins with, “Hear [listen], O Israel” (Deut. 6:4 ESV).

This clear covenant commitment to God reinforces the first two of the Ten Commandments, which forbid other gods and idols. You don’t have to be a numerologist to see how the Bible repeatedly affirms there is only **one** God, and he demands the first and most important place in our lives.

God did not leave room for anyone or anything else on his throne. The terms of God’s covenant are for Jesus to be our *only* Lord. He is the Savior and the primary hero of human history—and of his church. Pastor, you don’t have to be the hero; that job belongs to Christ.

### **“greatest” (megas)**

After Jesus answered the scribe’s initial question, he reinforced his answer with an even stronger term: *greatest*. Jesus said, “There is no other command **greater** than these” (Mark 12:31, emphasis mine). Both terms are also used in Matthew’s version of this conversation. It reads, “‘Love the Lord your God. . . .’ This is the **greatest** [*megas*] and most important [*protos*] command” (Matt. 22:37–38, emphasis mine).

God used the combined strength of these two terms—*protos* and *megas*—to grab my attention in an intensely personal way in 2006. I had been fasting and praying for several days in a quiet mountain cabin in Jasper, Arkansas. I do not enjoy fasting, but it is one of the best ways to cure my spiritual attention deficit disorder. After almost two decades of pastoring, I was ripe for a fresh encounter with the Lord.

I look at this experience as my “face mask moment” with God. When I was a teenager, my football coaches would sometimes grab our helmet face masks to get our undivided attention. It always worked! Although God was gentler than my football coaches, I left that cabin knowing what my game plan was going to be for the rest of my life and ministry. It was in that Ozark Mountain cabin that the Great Commandment was freshly seared into my mind, and I pray you will have a similar experience as you read this book. I hope it will help sharpen the focus of those who are preparing for a lifetime of ministry, as well as those who are striving to finish their ministry well.

No ministry leader who strives to start or finish well will ignore or neglect the top two priorities that God commanded, Moses authored, and Jesus reinforced.

### **“love” (agapaō)**

In 2003, Campus Crusade for Christ founder Bill Bright hosted a breakfast in his Orlando home for a few of my Arkansas pastor friends, which included Rick Bezet and Bill Elliff. You cannot imagine how excited I was about the opportunity to meet this ministry titan in his own home!

His lovely wife, Vonette, served us breakfast while Dr. Bright encouraged us greatly in the Lord. His breaths were measured because he was connected to oxygen tubes, with the tank behind his wheelchair. Before we left, Dr. Bright gave us an autographed copy of his book *First Love: Renewing Your Passion for God*. In it he says this about the Great Commandment: “I do not believe there is any issue more crucial for you and me to consider in this life.”<sup>2</sup> This would be his last book. Dr. Bright finished his earthly race a few short months later. His love for the Great Commission and the Great Commandments lives on through pastors and leaders like you and me.

The title of Dr. Bright’s book, *First Love*, came from a passage of Scripture addressed to a young church in Ephesus. This church had many things going for them like solid doctrine, discipline, and endurance. But at the end of the day, Jesus called them

out for neglecting and abandoning their first love. Jesus wrote a letter to them saying,

“You have abandoned the love you had at first. Remember then how far you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first.” (Rev. 2:4–5a)

As a ministry leader, you are likely already familiar with the Greek word for *love* used here: *agapaō*. Jesus used this same term in the Great Commandments. *Agapaō* describes a covenant love that is based on grace, not performance. It is a love that distinguishes Christianity from all other world religions because of its one-sidedness. Jesus paid for a freedom that we did not earn or deserve. We committed the crime, and he paid the penalty. His *agapaō* love is an extension of God’s mercy and grace through his work of redemption.

There is no other religion with those terms. To experience this divine love is to experience the pinnacle of all relationships. *Agapaō* is what makes the Great Commandment great. This love is central to our most important command. The love of Jesus is free and unconditional, yet it is expensive and evokes a radical response. It is at once personal and universal.

When I attempt to explain the love of God, my words seem to fall short and shallow. But I know that it is Christ’s love that compels us to engage in ministry (2 Cor. 5:14). It is the very source for our new life and our calling. Nothing fuels us more

than knowing God's love. Every other motivation is short-lived and comparatively empty.

I am praying for your experience with this book to be more than a mere academic exercise. I want you to do more than understand this great love. I am praying for you to “know Christ's love that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God” (Eph. 3:19).

Pastor, I want to invite you into the deepest part of the faith pool. My hope is that your growing love for Jesus will overflow into the other priority relationships we will explore in the second section of this book.

### **“all” (holos)**

The first hockey game I ever attended was in 2016. The game was only a few blocks from the Lifeway office I had at that time in downtown Nashville. I had an opportunity to get a ticket for half-price, so I went for it, although I honestly had no idea what I was getting into.

My first game was not only a professional NHL game, but it was also a first-round playoff game! The Nashville Predators were playing the Anaheim Ducks, and I got sucked into the series as well as the sport. The Preds lost that game but won the series and went to the seventh game in the second-round divisional playoffs before getting knocked out by the San Jose Sharks, who eventually won the Stanley Cup that year. The next year the Preds played in their first Stanley Cup, and I took my son and



son-in-law to one of those playoff games. I am now officially a hockey fan!

“Fan” is short for “fanatic,” which implies that you are behind your team 100 percent, or all-in. The Shema is basically asking if we are *all-in* for God:

“Love the Lord your God with *all* your heart, with *all* your soul, with *all* your mind, and with *all* your strength.” (Mark 12:30, emphasis mine)

Athletes and fans are not hesitant about going all-in. Neither are people who love their hobbies, politics, or careers. Should Jesus expect anything less from the leaders of his church?

Jesus, our first love, desires and even requires *all* from us. He reciprocates generously, so don't be afraid of jumping into the deep end of his unconditional love. Jesus is asking for all your life, all your love, and all your priorities to be set on him.

Dr. David Ferguson said it well in his landmark book *The Great Commandment Principle*: “The Great Commission is what we do, but the Great Commandment embodies who we are. We cannot effectively do what we have been called to do unless we embrace who we have been called to be.”<sup>3</sup>

The scribe whose question prompted Jesus to quote the Great Commandment was himself an expert on the Old Testament Scriptures. An academic assistant to the power players, he was also an attorney, a professor, and parliamentarian. His question was preceded by several salty attempts to discredit Jesus by the

Pharisees, Sadducees, and Herodians, yet this scribe was sincerely seeking truth.

Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, teacher. You have correctly said that he is one, and there is no one else except him. And to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself, is far more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And no one dared to question him any longer. (Mark 12:32–34)

The crowd of skeptics was silenced by the truth Jesus stated and by the scribe’s response. It is an interaction that we need repeated in our own lives. Pastor, you likely don’t have a crowd waiting for you to give such an answer, but you do have the God of heaven waiting to see where you will place your allegiance. You have a community of people waiting to see how you will prioritize your life and ministry.

The bottom line is that healthy churches are led by healthy pastors who love God with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength. I want to invite you to spend the next few minutes asking God to help you love him first. Then spend a few more

minutes in worship loving him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength. There is nothing more important you will do today.

“It’s not so important who starts the game but who finishes it.”<sup>4</sup>