

Title: “Let us run the race that is set before us”

Key verse: Hebrews 12:1-2a (NASB) – “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith...”

Good morning, everyone. It’s good to see you all here today. The title of today’s message is “Let us run the race that is set before us.” The title comes from today’s theme verse:

Hebrews 12:1-2a (NASB) – “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us, let us also lay aside every encumbrance, and the sin which so easily entangles us, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith...”

In today’s passage, we have some of the basic features of how we should be living the Christian life. I would like to draw your attention to three main verbs in this passage. I call these my “three main imperatives,” but technically the third one is not stated as an imperative, a “Do this” type of command. Nevertheless, it is an action that we should be doing while we follow the first two commands. Here they are:

Let us ... Number 1: Lay aside ~ ... A and B.
 Number 2: Run ~
 Number 3: Fixing our eyes on ~

Now, I would like some audience participation. Verse 1 says we are to *lay aside* (or some English Bibles say: *throw off*) ... *lay aside* TWO things: A and B. What is the first thing we are to throw off? Can you tell me?

Yes, item A (the first thing) is “every encumbrance / every weight.” The King James Bible says “Lay aside every weight” ... everything that would weigh us down, that would hinder us as we live the Christian life.

And what is the second thing we should throw off: item B?

That’s right: “sin.”

What’s the difference between these two items? Well, you know what sin is (item B here). The Greek word for sin is *hamartia* – it means to “miss the mark,” to fall short of God’s righteous standard. We could list the sins – theft, murder, adultery, lying, going after false gods, etc. – the list could go on and on. All of us struggle with sin, and we are called to forsake it ... to repent (change our minds) and *turn away* from sin. The Greek word for “repentance” is *metanoia* – to alter one’s mind and think differently afterward: it’s a change of mind which leads to a change of direction in one’s life, forsaking sin.

Romans 3:23 (ESV) – “For all [of us] have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”

1st John 1:9 (ESV) – “If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.”

Jesus said to the woman who had been caught in adultery, John 8:11b (NASB) – “Go your way. From now on, sin no more.” “*From now on, sin no more.*” Now: we are forgiven. Now: as we live our lives, we should continue forsaking sin, turning away from it, throwing it off.

But that’s a challenge. These sins – look at the screen – these sins “*so easily entangle us.*” Yes, indeed – too easily, don’t they? But don’t be discouraged if sin keeps creeping up on you – there IS a way to escape from it. Actually, a way to escape *temptation*, which entices you into *sin*.

One of my favorite of verses – a verse that has really helped me – is 1st Corinthians 10:13 (NASB) – “No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man...” [it’s common!] “... and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, that you may be able to endure it.”

Wow. Do you see what Paul is saying here? Temptations are *common* – the one you may be facing at this moment is nothing unique. The one you face in *this* situation or in *that* situation is nothing unique. It’s common ... other people have faced it ... you’re not the only person who has had to deal with that particular temptation.

And our faithful God will do ... *what?* He will *not allow you* to be tempted beyond what you are able. Wow. He ... will not ... allow you ... to be tempted beyond what you are able to handle. That temptation might seem strong and it might seem like you’re inevitably going to succumb to the temptation and fall into sin. But it doesn’t *have to* happen.

In my younger days, I embraced these words and I stood on this marvelous thought: that no temptation that I might face is too much for me to handle. Not *that* temptation ... nor *that* one ... nor *that* one ... is too much for me to handle. I never, never, have to succumb to temptation and go into sin – it is never inevitable.

Young people, listen to me (and older people too): You might think that that temptation which you are facing right now is too strong to resist. But it isn’t. God *always* provides a way of escape.

And He is with you.

1st John 4:4 (NASB) – “You are from God, little children, and have overcome them; because greater is He who is in you than he who is in the world.” “He who is in you” is the Holy Spirit; “he who is in the world” is Satan. We have the Holy Spirit living in us, and by His power we can overcome anything.

In my 20’s, I stood on these promises. There is always a way of escape from temptation, and I can just walk away from it. With the help of the Holy Spirit, I have the power to do that.

So, I developed a habit to *just walk away* from temptation. Just walk away. Hebrews 12:1 says “Lay aside (throw off) the sin that so easily entangles” us.

Well, looking back at my little framework, laying aside sin is item B of my first point.

Item A is “Lay aside *every encumbrance*” ... every *weight*, anything that would *weigh us down*, anything that would *hinder us*. What exactly is this? Is this just another way to refer to *sin*? After all, sin does weigh us down and hinder us. Actually, some Bible commentators do say that both

of these items are saying the same thing, that these are two references to sin. However, other Bible commentators make a distinction between these two items. And actually, that is the way I have always read this verse. I see these as two different things.

Lay aside *every encumbrance*, everything that would weigh us down in running the race, in living the Christian life.

What are these “*encumbrances*”? I take this word to mean this: those activities that are not classified as sins, *per se*, but which nonetheless are a drag on your Christian life, seemingly harmless activities that weigh you down when you ought to be running the race at full speed.

What kind of activities would this refer to? Well, I’m reluctant to try to make a list of them – actually, the types of activities that would hinder a person would be different for each one of us. In my case, one such activity could be spending too much time in front of the TV. I especially like to watch action movies ... and documentaries (especially science and history documentaries). Now, I’m not saying TV is totally bad or wrong – it’s fine to relax for a while in the evening after work and it’s fine to enjoy a good movie or documentary occasionally. But for me, I often felt like my habit was a time-waster. A time-waster. And this is one example of an *encumbrance*, an unnecessary weight that is a drain on us as we run the Christian race.

Let me give you someone else’s comments on these encumbrances, these hindrances. I have an interesting quote on this topic from the great 20th century preacher A. W. Tozer. Here is what he said:

Hindrances – which are *not intrinsically sins*. The difference between a spiritual Christian and an average Christian is that a truly spiritual Christian knows that he is not only to be *delivered from sin* but he is to be *delivered from anything that would prevent him from winning... delivered from anything that would prevent him from winning...* We must run the race *free from impediments*.

A. W. Tozer goes right to the heart of the matter. The way he defines an encumbrance is this: *anything that would prevent you from winning*. Winning is the goal. And so we must run the race free from impediments. What are these hindrances? Although I gave you one example from my life, Pastor Tozer won’t name any of them. He says:

No, I shan’t name them for the reason that there is no fixed rule about it. Christians are not alike. They’re different from each other, and therefore what would be to one [person] *an amusement that hinders* would not hinder another. So, the rule must be: If they encumber me, [then] they will cause me to lose [the race]. And rather than lose, I will lay them aside...

Each one knows his secret heart... If it bothers you, get rid of it, brother, don’t waste your time. Because if it prevents you from winning the race of life, you had far, far better to give it up.

Well, let us go back to my framework.

Number 1: Lay aside every encumbrance and sin.

Number 2: Run with endurance the race set before us.

“The race that is set before us.” In this passage, the Christian life is pictured as a race. This doesn’t mean that you have to move fast in your life and do everything quickly. No. It means you’ve got to be disciplined and focused in the way you live your Christian life, striving to accomplish everything God desires you to do, with an eye on the finish line, the goal.

The Apostle Paul says in 1st Corinthians 9:24 (NASB) – “Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but only one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win.”

What does it mean to “win the race”? Well, it *doesn't* mean to *earn* salvation – we aren't *earning* salvation by *doing* these things. No. Our salvation is assured already – it's by faith in Christ. I think “winning the race” means *to complete the task* that God has given you to do. And there's a different task for each one of us. And when we run this race, we are not in competition with other Christians. No. We each have our own race to run. And each of us can be a winner, if you complete your task.

Paul said in Acts 20:24 (ESV) – “But I do not account my life of any value nor as precious to myself, if only I may finish my course and the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the gospel of the grace of God.”

Paul said the only thing he was interested in was to finish his course, to complete the ministry Jesus gave him, and to testify to the gospel. Each of us has a different call, a different ministry that we are to engage in and complete. Sometimes big, sometimes small. And we all have a testimony that we can share with other people.

1st Corinthians 12:27 (ESV) – “Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it.” Verses 4 to 7 – “Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; ⁵ and there are varieties of service, but the same Lord; ⁶ and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who empowers them all in everyone. ⁷ To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.”

Verse 11 – “All these [manifestations] are empowered by one and the same Spirit, who apportions to each one individually as he wills.”

We are the body of Christ, and each individual is an important member of that body. The Holy Spirit gives differing gifts, differing ministries and activities, empowering each one of us – each one of us at OIC – to accomplish our task. And that task is *for the common good*, for our local church and for the worldwide church.

Paul says at the end of his life in 2nd Timothy 4:7-8 (NASB) – “⁷ I have fought the good fight, I have finished the course, I have kept the faith; ⁸ in the future there is laid up for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day; and not only to me, but also to all who have loved His appearing.”

Paul knows that in the future, “on that day” (the day of judgment for believers), he will receive the reward that has been prepared for him: the crown of righteousness. And this crown is available to each one of us, each who is faithful and is looking forward to Christ's return.

That's the basic reward all faithful Christians will receive. But some New Testament passages indicate that there will also be varying levels of rewards according to what we have done with the varying responsibilities God has given to each of us.

In 1st Corinthians 3, Paul describes his work planting the new church in Corinth, and he mentions himself and his co-worker, Apollos. He says this:

Verses 6-8 (ESV) – “I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. ⁷ So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth. ⁸ He who plants and he who waters are one, and each will receive his wages according to his labor.”

Ah, here we see that there will be some differences when we receive our rewards on the Day of judgment. Verse 8 says: “...each [Christian] will receive his wages *according to his labor.*”

Again let me say – this is not the earning of salvation, that’s already settled. This refers to *rewards* in the future, given to us in accordance with how we lived our Christian lives.

Verse 10 (ESV) – “According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it.”

“Let each one take care how he builds upon it.” To my brothers and sisters assembled here today, let me admonish you: take care how you build on the foundation of your own Christian life, and how you build on the foundation of the worldwide church and also this local church. Whether you have been given a big task or a small task, be faithful in it and complete your work ... whether you are on the stage here, or up in the Sunday school classroom, or visiting someone in the hospital, or raising your kids to be good citizens and good Christians. Don’t slack off and get weighed down by one of those encumbrances or hindrances or sins that I mentioned earlier.

Verses 11-15 (ESV) – “For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. ¹² Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw – ¹³ each one’s work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it ...” [the Day will disclose it] “... because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done. ¹⁴ If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward. ¹⁵ If anyone’s work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.”

When we build on our Christian foundation, we are building with a variety of materials. These materials are of two basic types. We can be building with gold, silver, precious stones – on the one hand. Or: building with wood, hay, and straw – on the other hand. With *useful* works on the one hand, or with *useless* works on the other. Oh, my brothers and sisters, are you pursuing the useless works? On judgment day when your works go through the fire ... well, the wood, the hay, and the straw will just go Poof! Gone. Nothing. They counted for nothing. Verse 15 – you will still be saved, if you had put your faith in Christ. But – oh, you will suffer loss, you lost that prize that you were supposed to be running for. You lose. And the church loses. Please: Don’t make *that scenario* be what defines the end of your race. Please, use gold or silver or precious stones to build on that foundation – useful works, powered by the Holy Spirit.

Well, my outline has three verbs, three key actions we engage in: Lay aside encumbrances and sin ... Run the race ... and Number 3 is Fix your eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of faith. Keep your eyes on Him. Keep focused on Him. Forsake any distractions that may come your way. Fixing your eyes on Jesus will help you win the race. And that has benefits for you. Benefits for *you*, for *Christ*, and for *the church*.

Well, next I would like to backtrack a little bit and look at the opening phrase of Hebrews 12:1 – “Therefore, since we have so great a cloud of witnesses surrounding us ...”

What is this “great a cloud of witnesses”? What exactly are they doing when they are “surrounding us”? Because this verse pictures us in a race, a popular way to describe this cloud of witnesses is to see them like a group of spectators in a stadium cheering on the runners, the runners being Christians living out their Christian lives. However, many Bible commentators point out that this is not a correct idea. The cloud of witnesses are not cheering us on: they are people who are *bearing witness to what the life of faith is all about*. They are encouraging us by *their testimony* that it is worth it to run this race because they themselves once ran it and triumphed.

Do you see that word “Therefore”? Well, I’ve got a nice little slogan to share with you which I heard many years ago – it’s phrased in a rather cute way. Here is one principle of Bible study:

“When you read the word ‘Therefore,’ you should see what it is there for.”

I don’t know if this translates very well into Japanese. *“When you read the word ‘Therefore,’ you should see what it is there for.”*

For what purpose is that word there? Well, it is telling you that the current verse follows on from the previous section. So, we should look at the previous section and see how it connects to our verse here in Hebrews 12. That means we should have a look at Hebrews 11.

For those of you who know your Bible well, you know that Hebrews 11 is often referred to as “The Hall of Faith.” Now, in sports and in the arts, you have heard of the “Hall of Fame,” where the names of some of the greatest athletes or artists are listed and honored. Well, Hebrews 11 has been called “The Hall of Faith,” a listing of the great heroes of faith in the Old Testament. Let me quickly go through the chapter and name everyone we see there.

Hebrews 11:1-2 (ESV) – ¹ Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. ² For by it the people of old received their commendation.

Verses 4-5 – ⁴ By faith Abel offered to God a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain, through which he was commended as righteous, God commending him by accepting his gifts. And through his faith, though he died, he still speaks. ⁵ By faith Enoch was taken up so that he should not see death, and he was not found, because God had taken him. Now before he was taken he was commended as having pleased God.

Verses 7-11 – ⁷ By faith Noah, being warned by God concerning events as yet unseen, in reverent fear constructed an ark for the saving of his household. By this he condemned the world and became an heir of the righteousness that comes by faith.

⁸ By faith Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going. ⁹ By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise. ¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God.

¹¹ By faith Sarah herself received power to conceive, even when she was past the age, since she considered him faithful who had promised.

Verse 13 – ¹³ These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.

Verses 20-26 – ²⁰ By faith Isaac invoked future blessings on Jacob and Esau. ²¹ By faith Jacob, when dying, blessed each of the sons of Joseph, bowing in worship over the head of his staff. ²² By faith Joseph, at the end of his life, made mention of the exodus of the Israelites and gave directions concerning his bones.

²³ By faith Moses, when he was born, was hidden for three months by his parents, because they saw that the child was beautiful, and they were not afraid of the king's edict. ²⁴ By faith Moses, when he was grown up, refused to be called the son of Pharaoh's daughter, ²⁵ choosing rather to be mistreated with the people of God than to enjoy the fleeting pleasures of sin. ²⁶ He considered the reproach of Christ greater wealth than the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the reward.

Verses 29-35 – ²⁹ By faith the people crossed the Red Sea as on dry land, but the Egyptians, when they attempted to do the same, were drowned. ³⁰ By faith the walls of Jericho fell down after they had been encircled for seven days. ³¹ By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had given a friendly welcome to the spies.

³² And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— ³³ who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions, ³⁴ quenched the power of fire, escaped the edge of the sword, were made strong out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight.

³⁵ Women received back their dead by resurrection. Some were tortured, refusing to accept release, so that they might rise again to a better life.

Verse 37 – ³⁷ They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were killed with the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, afflicted, mistreated.

Verse 38a – ^{38a} of whom the world was not worthy...

Verse 38a again: “of whom the world was not worthy...” Wow. What a list. And only a partial list of all the faithful saints of the Old Testament. Different people facing different situations with different callings from God. And different endings to their lives. Some of them suffered persecution or loss, while others experienced wonderful deliverance and a long life. I told you a moment ago that the great cloud of witnesses encourage us *by their testimony* to run the race because they themselves once ran it and triumphed. Even a life cut short by martyrdom can be a triumph if you died faithful to the calling God has given you, bearing witness to Christ.

I have sometimes contemplated why some Christians suffer persecution or disease or even martyrdom, while other Christians enjoy a prosperous life, a blessed ministry, or a marvelous deliverance from a moment of crisis. Why such differences? I cannot comment on the mind of God and why He allows one thing to happen to some of His children while the opposite experience happens to another. But what I have seen in my readings of Christian history is parallel to what I see in this list of Old Testament saints in Hebrews 11. And I have come to understand that whether you suffer an extreme hardship or you get to experience smooth sailing in your life, *how we handle that situation* has a tremendous bearing on our *Christian testimony*. Remaining faithful through an extreme experience can bring God glory, just as a testimony of an abundant life with generous sharing of all God blessed you with likewise gives God glory. And what about those Christians who don’t maintain a life faithful to their calling? For example, a life of smooth sailing, but their life is squandered by indulging in useless pursuits. Or: a professed Christian who denies Christ during a time of hardship. In those cases, the situation reveals a life where you have *lost the race*. You might be a genuinely saved Christian, but if you squandered the blessing you had, then that’s a sad ending to your life – please don’t let that happen to you. Now, let me share something a little personal with you. I have suffered some periods of hardship myself – not the worst types of hardship, but they were very distressing nonetheless. I considered walking away from Christ. But after some soul-searching, I realized that there is no other place I would rather be than *inside* the Kingdom of God.

The “Hall of Faith” in Hebrews 11 teaches us that the most important thing in this race is *maintaining a testimony of faithfulness no matter what circumstances you face*.

This “cloud of witnesses” encourages us by their testimonies of faith, because it was by faith that they did mighty things and faced many challenges. They testify that the life of faith is worth it, for it is a life that looks forward to our ultimate reward, prizing that final reward more than they prize life on earth.

And so we run to win that race set before us. And it is winnable no matter what circumstances we must go through.

The last two verses of chapter 11 are intriguing to me. About all these heroes of faith, verses 39 and 40 (ESV) say, “And all these, though commended through their faith, did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.”

What? They did not receive what was promised? Ah, yes:

Verse 13 – “These all died in faith, not having received the things promised, but having seen them and greeted them from afar, and having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.”

Verse 16a – “But as it is, they desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one...”
Their reward is in heaven, just as it is for us.

Again, verses 39b and 40 (ESV): These saints “... did not receive what was promised, ⁴⁰ since God had provided something better for us, that apart from us they should not be made perfect.”

What does that mean (verse 40): “... since God had provided *something better for us*, that apart from us they should not be made perfect”?

I take this to mean that we continue this testimony of living lives of faith just as the Old Testament saints had done, and that their testimony (their part in the building of Christ’s work on earth) does not reach its full completion until our work is added to it, building upon their life and work. And thus together, we and they, are made complete. And somehow, it is *better for us* if they are not yet made perfect until we, too, are included in the working out of God’s program. And so this great cloud of witnesses encourages us to *live the life of faith* and to *play our part* in today’s chapter of God’s great plan.

But you’ve got to stay focused on the goal, throwing off sin and whatever hinders you ... you've got to *run to win*, and *be faithful in that calling* which Christ has called YOU to do in His church. If you slack off, you lose and the church loses. Oh, brothers and sisters, be a winner, run with endurance, and play your part in building the Kingdom of God.

Thank you. This is what I wanted to share with you today. God bless you.
Be a winner!