

SLIDE 1. Series: Gospel People

Sermon Title: *Lighten the Load*

Date: Sunday August 13, 2023

Text: Hebrews 12:1

Who has helped you in your life as a disciple of Jesus Christ? Who has led the way?
Who has inspired you to be a faithful Christian?

There have been so many people for me...

Sonya Newson. She worked with me at Summer Centers Day Camps in Guelph, ON. when I was the Camps Director. She stood out. She was kind. She didn't say mean things about other people. She smiled. She worked hard and she did things well (we might say – *as if working for the Lord* – to borrow a phrase f. the apostle Paul).

She talked to me about Jesus and faith.

And a girl named Jackie.

Pastor Doug Irwin. He was the Youth and Young Adult Pastor at Calvary Baptist Church in Guelph, ON – before me. He took me under his wing to disciple me in my infant faith. He was kind and patient and encouraging and knowledgeable about the Word of God. He was consistent and reliable. Some might say: a man of good cheer!

Pastor Wally Mills. He was my Lead Pastor! He was the one who I listened to sermon after sermon, Sunday after Sunday: The Saskatchewan boy with the speech impediment – made a preacher-boy by the God who can do anything. Wally was the same man on the street as he was in the pulpit: quick to laugh, humble and gentle in spirit, a willing servant. Always ready to help. And playful. He was that guy who threw candies into your door and ran away – like a kind of reverse Halloween!

My father-in-law, Jack Harrison. Jack was my earthly, spiritual father. He prayed and read and sang in the King James. He had a countenance of mirth and joy. He always wore a tie – whether he was welcoming people at church or shingling his roof. He was a proper Brit. – who loved to tease, loved to pratfall, and loved to flash his denture-white smile as often as he could! He was, as Jackie likes to say, a version of Dick Van Dyke.

My mother-in-law, Gladys Harrison. I loved it when she'd smile her knowing smile at me and say to me, "That's right, brother!" She loved the Word of God – was in it every morning – went to bible study after bible study. Learning and learning and learning. She had a beautiful and generous and patient heart. She let me tease her – and made me believe that she loved being teased. She would have been my earthly, spiritual mother.

And she loved to pray.

I'll never forget the day that I asked Jack and Gladys' permission to marry Jackie...

We had a lovely visit, marked by great joy.

They walked me to their front door, we exchanged hugs, and then Gladys exclaimed, "O Jack, we forgot to pray! How could we forget to pray on such a day?"

And so, we went back into their living room to pray.

Please open your bibles with me to the Book of Hebrews – Chp 12.

SLIDE 2. *Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us (Heb. 12:1).*

On your mark. Get set. Go!

We are on a starting blocks of sorts – day in and day out – in the everyday life of being a Christian. We are in a race: the same race ran by those who have gone before us – the race to be faithful to our faith and our faithful Lord.

The writer of the book of Hebrews names 18 famous former runners of faith: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and so on...

They are part of the great *cloud of witnesses* described here – as are those of faith who have gone before us and remain with us these days. Like the ones I mentioned just now – and like the ones you imagined earlier.

This "cloud" – a common Greek expression for "a great number of persons or things" – doesn't necessarily witness *us* as we go about our lives, but instead – they are witnesses *to* us of faith and endurance – in all they lived and experienced.

They aren't spectators. They're inspiring examples. The Greek word here for "witnesses" is our English word for "martyrs" – meaning – "testifiers."

They testify to the power of faith and to the faithfulness of God!

Their faithfulness is a constant encouragement to us.

We are not the first to struggle with the problems we face. Others have run the race and won, and their witness gives us hope and inspires us to live faithful Christian lives.

Which we will need – because the word "race" here is the ancient Greek word *agona* – meaning: conflict or struggle – or in the English – as you may have guessed – *agony*.

This is a tough race. It requires perseverance.

The Christian life – here – is pictured as a long-distance race rather than a short-distance sprint. Some Hebrew Christians – at the time – were tempted to drop out of the race because they were being persecuted for their faith.

Staying faithful to the person and the way of Jesus Christ – today - conflicts with the culture – which leads to hurt and division and isolation and struggles and sometimes – agony.

So – it will be useful for us to keep this “cloud of witnesses” in mind – both biblical and personal – to remember that we are not alone – that we are surrounded - and to remember that – though this is a tough race – we can say, “If they were able to keep the faith – so can I! Though I am different – we are all the same: flesh and blood – living in a word of trials and tribulations.”

Running this long-distance race, however, is made even more difficult *by the things that hinder us* and the *sin that entangles us*.

SLIDE 3. *So - Let us throw off everything that hinders... (v. 1b).*

Imagine trying to run a long-distance race while carrying a bunch of excess weight.

Imagine that you are stretching and shaking out your muscles at the starting block – in heavy jeans, a parka, weights velcroed to your ankles, and dumbbells in your hands.

How well are you going to get out of that starting block and run the race?

We know we can't go quick or far in a race if we are carrying things that aren't helpful for running the race.

How does this analogy compare to our Christian walk – or “run” – as the case may be?

What burdens do we carry? What weights are weighing us down? What is slowing us down in our faith race?

SLIDE 3. Maybe it's church. Maybe you've been hurt by a church – maybe even this one. Maybe something someone said or did to you. Maybe you've felt like or told yourself that you don't ever hear from anybody in the church until they need something from you. Maybe you've been here for years and don't really feel connected. Maybe you were left too long leading a ministry and burned out. Maybe you felt frustrated and stepped away from leading a ministry because it just wasn't going anywhere – like you were spinning your wheels – and you had better things to do with your time. Maybe you weren't visited when you were sick. Maybe you feel like a pastor, or the pastors of our church didn't do enough to engage you or your family.

This is a burden you carry that keeps you from running the race with perseverance.

I will only say this at this time: churches are filled with imperfect people. There is no doubt, then, that we will hurt each other. For me and my part – I am sorry if I have hurt you. Please let me know if I have – so that I can understand and apologize. And though I can't speak for everyone – I think I can safely say that none of us *wants* to hurt others.

All this to say – what will you do with this burden? Will you continue to hold it or will you throw it off? Will you continue to use it as an excuse for diving deeper into the life of the church or will you put it in perspective? Will you forgive as you've been forgiven? Will you give people the benefit of the doubt? Will you approach those who have hurt you to process forgiveness – if you can?

SLIDE 3. Maybe its stuff. Maybe you are weighed down by all the stuff in your life – all the stuff that you buy and accumulate and store. What does it say about us, for instance, that STORAGE facilities are one of the fastest growing businesses in North America? Maybe your stuff is a distraction in your faith race. When is enough, enough and too much, too much?

I suppose we should at least ask, "How does my stuff help me in my faith?"

We are asking ourselves this question as leaders here – about the stuff that we have bought and accumulated and stored as a church?

Does it help or hurt us in our journey of faith as a church to have rooms full of stuff that can't be used for anything but storage? Since we are trying to be a church who sees this building as a gift to us from God to be shared as a gift with our community – how does our stuff help us towards that end?

We have been asking, "How can we create more and more spaces within this building to be used for ministry and for rentals?"

The answer seems to be, "We need to reduce and reorganize the spaces and stuff we have to make room!"

So – Pastor Bryan and Dawnelle and our interns, Davin and Elijah will be working into the first week of September to reduce the stuffs stored on our second floor, reorganize the spaces such as they are, to create spaces for ministry and rentals.

Specifically, we will reduce the Children's Ministry storage rooms from 3 rooms to 2 rooms – so that we will have 3 rooms available for ministry and rentals instead of 2. We will reduce the stuffs accumulated in our Youth and Young Adults rooms and reorganize that side of the hallway to become 1 fantastic games room – including board games and billiards and ping pong and foosball and crokinole and air hockey and 2 video game stations – to be used by any one of our ministries at any time AND to be made available to our community to rent for birthday parties and such.

Now – some of you might be thinking, "But so-and-so built that some such thing!" OR "Maybe I'd like to have that something that is scheduled to be given away, thrown away (or – we might say – in the context of today's text – "thrown off"), or sold away" OR some of you might be saying, "How can I help?"

Well – let me say this...

I recognize that some of the things that we are sorting might be nostalgic for you and have sentimental value. So – to honor that – our goal – once we have sorted spaces and things - is to make those things available to you for you to take with you – if you'd like. Stay tuned for details.

If you'd like to help sort and move things – please contact Dawnelle. She and Davin would be happy for the help.

Stuffs we buy and accumulate, and store can sometimes be the weight we carry in our faith race – even as a church. Let's run lightly.

SLIDE 3. Maybe it's thinking. Maybe it's the ways we think about faith and the faithfulness of God that slows us down in our faith race. Maybe we blame God for the bad things that happen in our lives but rarely thank him for the good things that happen in our lives. Maybe we tell ourselves that God is about punishment and behavior correction - not that he is for us not against us.

Maybe it's how we think about ministry at SLC. Maybe we've become consumerist in our thinking: thinking that church is for me – to meet my needs and preferences – without remembering that the church is the only organization on the planet that exists for its non-members – that a growing faith includes a pathway of discipleship as gospel people who reach out to others as if they are the hands and feet and voice of Jesus – that we aren't just supposed to *be* disciples but that we would be people who *make* disciples.

Our thinking can slow us down in this race of faith.

But let me encourage you – as a church.

Our thinking is changing. RIDE FOR DOUG added a SHOW and SHINE piece this year to our annual fundraiser for Doug and Muscular Dystrophy Canada. It expanded our reach. RIDE FOR DOUG raised more than \$25,000 this past June!

Our thinking is changing. Many of us resisted dismantling our *portable* stage – because it would make it hard for us to see the music team and the preacher on Sunday mornings. I totally get that.

The ideal situation would be for us to have a stage that could easily be put in place and taken down, or to have one come out from the storage behind me on rollers (like a drawer), or to have a stage attached to the wall on a hinge with pulleys that we could pull up and down like a drawbridge. Or something else! Put on your thinking-caps!

Here's the point: We would not have been able to host 2 camps this summer if we didn't take the stage down: our first-time-ever partnership with Athletes in Action to run a Multi-Sport *Day* Camp – see the pictures in the hallway – and – this past week – our first-time-ever Pickleball Camp – for people who had never held a paddle before – and for people who are learning the sport – pictures to come.

And – as a bonus – we are discovering that having no stage is not as bad as we thought!

It's as we are saying as leaders here at SLC, "Let's run the experiment!"

And we did. And we sold-out our day camp. Campers made decisions for Christ – and others want to know more about Jesus. And we had 11 of a possible 16 people sign up for Pickleball Camp. That's 68.75% of capacity. That's amazing for a first-time-ever camp.

Our thinking is changing. We are beginning to see this space as something given to us by God to enjoy but also to share with our community. So, we are making it ready!

Now, some may wonder, "Why don't we just wait to see who might come our way – and *then* reduce stuffs in storage and reorganize space to meet their needs?"

And that's a fair question.

Here's what I'd say. I don't necessarily believe - IF WE BUILD IT THEY WILL COME. That's not biblical. That's a line from the movie *Field of Dreams*.

But I do believe that we need to be ready for who God will send us.

And God is bringing us people from our community.

I'll give you 2 examples.

1. Athletes in Action has asked us to consider hosting a Basketball Club here at SLC. This would be a fantastic opportunity for us to serve our basketball-crazy community. They saw our space. We're ready because we're flexible.

2. A before and after school organization has approached us to see if they might lease some space from us (that we could also use when they aren't using it). It would be a fabulous fit alongside our current Sonshine St. ministry. They saw our space – and it's not quite ready – but it will be when Pastor Bryan, Dawnelle, Davin and Elijah finish their work.

A friend of mine reminded me of this helpful visual: it's like the story of Elisha and the widow's oil. A widow and her 2 sons were left with debts they could not pay. The creditor decided to take the 2 sons as slaves in payment of the debt. When the widow begged for Elisha's help – the Lord provided them with enough oil to sell and pay off the debt.

But the widow and her sons had to get ready – they had to collect as many jars as they could (as Elisha instructed them to do) – for the Lord to fill those jars with oil.

Similarly, we are trying to make our church building ready (and hopefully our own hearts and minds as gospel people) for those who God would send our way.

Let us throw off everything that hinders us in our faith race.

SLIDE 4. Including *the sin that so easily entangles* (v. 1c).

I think we would agree that this is obvious: that our attachment to sin impairs our ability to run the race of faith. And by that, I mean this: that the sins we commit day to day weigh us down and trip us up from running well.

We can't hold them *and* run with Jesus.

We need to throw them off. We need to drop our sin and turn from it. Leave it behind. We need to repent. We need to turn to God. We need to confess our sin (agree with Him that it is sin). We need to thank Him for His forgiveness – one/won and done through Jesus.

And we need to do this whenever we sin.

Because we aren't perfect – but we are forgiven.

We need to lighten the load as we run the race. We need to trust that we are forgiven and not continue to carry false guilt and debilitating shame for what God has forgiven us. We need to say to ourselves and the devil – out loud, "I am forgiven."

SLIDE 5. And then – *run with perseverance the race marked out for us* (v. 1d).

The course as marked out by Jesus.

The race as run by those who inspire our faith.

This is a tough race. It requires perseverance.

Be inspired by those who have already run the race and those who are running it now. Throw off hindrances and cast off sin.

It's easier to run without the weight!