Will you be watching the Olympic Games this week, starting Friday? Every four years the best athletes in the world assemble to represent their countries, going for gold and glory. The world’s greatest sporting event will feature new faces like gymnast Simone Biles and swimmer Katie Ledecky, as well as old - sprinter Usain Bolt and the most decorated Olympian of all time - swimmer Michael Phelps. Whether it’s in the pool, on the track, or on a balance beam, one thing is for sure: history will be made. There are always fascinating stories that capture our attention.

With the Olympic Games in mind, let's look briefly this morning at Hebrews 12. Written primarily to a Jewish audience, the writer draws on an athletic metaphor that rang true with his first century readers.

**Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the founder and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God.** (Hebrews 12:1-2)

The letter to the Hebrews makes clear that Jesus Christ surpasses all other people, pursuits, objects, or hopes to which human beings offer allegiance. Hebrews pictures Jesus as better than the angels, as bringing better lives to humanity through the salvation He so freely offered, as presenting a better hope than the Mosaic Law could promise, as a better sacrifice for our sins than a bull or a goat, and as preparing a better inheritance in heaven for all who trust Him wholly.

This message of the superiority of Jesus would have been particularly important to Jewish Christians in Rome, who were struggling under Nero’s persecution and were considering moving back toward the Mosaic Law. The letter showed these Jewish Christian believers that, though they were faced with suffering, they were indeed following a better way ... so they should persevere.

Here in chapter 12, the big point is RUN! Believers are to run the race that God has set before us with endurance, stripping away every distraction, looking not toward the finish line, but to Jesus the Captain of our faith.

The writer says that as we run, we should listen to the roar of the crowd as they pull for us! Who are these spectators? Who makes up this huge crowd of witnesses? The answer is found in the previous chapter - Hebrews 11. There we find the stadium filled with past heroes of the faith - people like Abel and Enoch, Noah, Abraham and Sarah, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Samson, Samuel and David. It constitutes quite a list – Faith’s “hall of famers.”
These great champions of faith are pictured as cheering us on. If your struggling in your journey with Christ today, Listen to the roar of the crowd screaming your name. If we want to win the race that is set before us, if we want to obtain the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus, we do well to remember the witnesses. Read on about these devoted believers:

They shut the mouths of lions, quenched the flames of fire, and escaped death by the edge of the sword. Their weakness was turned to strength. They became strong in battle and put whole armies to flight. Women received their loved ones back again from death.

But others trusted God and were tortured, preferring to die rather than turn from God and be free. They placed their hope in the resurrection to a better life. Some were mocked, and their backs were cut open with whips. Others were chained in dungeons. Some died by stoning, and some were sawed in half; others were killed with the sword. Some went about in skins of sheep and goats, hungry and oppressed and mistreated. They were too good for this world. (Hebrews 11:33-38)

The “cloud of witnesses” are the Saints who have passed on to the Church Triumphant. They're with us in the stadium as we run the race of life. They fill the bleachers. They applaud us and cheer us on to victory. They have advice to give. For they have run on the very same track and have won the garland of victory. They offer us more than applause; they offer us evidence.

They can tell us how they ran the race and won, how they trained for it, how they maintained their strength. We are surrounded by these witnesses. The air is thick with them. They are like a cloud in their multitude. And every one of them has a story to tell, a story of grace and divine mercy, a story that is full of encouragement for the runners of today, if only we will listen to them. “We are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses"- not one of them silent or unconcerned; all of them eager to remind us of what God did for them, how they found Him, what grace they received.

He mentions Noah. I confess that patience is not one of my finer virtues. And every now and again, when events seem to be moving at a snail's pace, I'll whine, "Why is it taking so long?"

That's when I hear Noah shouting from the grandstand, "How long do you say you've been waiting? It took me 100 years to build the ark, and it was a struggle. I warned the people, but no one listened. But I kept the construction project going and when the rain came down and the floods came up, the ark was our salvation. You need to hang in there, too!"

The writer reminds us about Abraham (v. 8) who was called away from his home in Chaldea to a place where God would lead him; who in his old age was told that his wife, Sara, would bear a son; Abraham, who was told to take this precious son and kill him - to offer him as a sacrifice.

So when you feeling discouraged, hear Abraham from among the crowd screaming: "If you obey God, the world will think you’re crazy because God's ways are not our ways. But listen carefully to what He says and trust Him completely.

He also references Joseph (v. 22) who was sold into slavery by his brothers. He was accused of crimes he didn't commit, and locked up. This young man's life had gone down the toilet.
quickly! Yet in all those reversals he remained faithful to God. And as God's plan continued to unfold for him, he was elevated to Prime Minister of Egypt, with control of the treasury and granaries and a vast population. Whether Joseph was in the outhouse or the penthouse, he was still faithful to God.

So Joseph can be heard applauding from the heavenly bleachers, "It doesn't take great courage or faith to be patient and true when things are going your way. But when you've been kicked to the curb, and your world seems to be crumbling, keep trusting and obeying!"

The list goes on. There's Moses and Samson and Samuel and David and more besides. That's a great cloud of witnesses to cheer us on. They scream from the stands when we become discouraged, saying, "Don't lose heart! Don't give up. Don't quit, whatever you do."

Think of it—people “too good for this world” are cheering us on to persevere. If we want to reach for the prize, we'll remember them - reminding ourselves that even though it looks like nobody in our little world appears to be paying much attention to how we're doing spiritually, the fact is, there’s a huge coliseum full of spiritual “somebodies” riveted on what’s going on.

Will any of the athletes competing in Rio know what previous champions have done?

- Will swimmers know that Michael Phelps captured an unprecedented 8 gold medals in the Beijing Olympics? Sure they will!
- Does Simone Briles know about Mary Lou Retton’s perfect ten in vaulting at the ’84 Olympics in Los Angeles to capture the all-around gold? Naturally she does!
- Are track athletes aware of Jesse Owens, winner of multiple gold medals in the '36 Berlin games, who broke down racial barriers and destroyed the myth of Aryan supremacy? Certainly they do!

Olympic hopefuls know all about past performances in their events. They hold up these past champions as heroes and almost feel their presence as they participate.

The Bible says that believers who sport a “go for the gold” mindset will remember the witnesses. Yes, the whole world is watching what’s going on in Rio. But today, the whole unseen world is watching how you run your race, how you live out your life!

Why not try to get to know a spiritual hero from among that cloud? The Bible is full of them. Why not focus on one biblical character like Abraham, Joseph, or Daniel over the next few weeks and see how their faith and God's grace working in them might inspire you!

Or it might be someone from the last century like...

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Eric Liddell was known as "the man who wouldn’t run on Sunday" - about whom the Oscar winning movie Chariots of Fire was made. The "Flying Scotsman" was the first from his country to win Gold during the 1924 Paris Olympics. Carrying the hopes of Great Britain on his shoulders, Liddell refused to run a qualifying heat on Sunday and was forced to withdraw from the 100 meters - his best event. Instead, he entered the 400 meters event where little was expected of him. As he went to the starting
blocks for the race, an American masseuse slipped a piece of paper in his hand with "Those who honor me I will honor" (1 Sam. 2:30). Liddell ran with that piece of paper in his hand and not only won the race but broke the existing world record with a time of 47.6 seconds.

But Eric Liddell achieved a greater prize than Olympic Gold later on in life. After the Paris games, he returned to China to work as a missionary. His family, originally from Scotland, served in China during the Boxer Rebellion. Liddell worked as a teacher and later as an evangelist in Siao Chang.

In 1940, the Japanese invaded China and Liddell arranged for his wife and children to get to Canada where she could live with her parents. He stayed behind to continue his work, but was sent by the Japanese to an Internment Camp - where 1800 other internees were confined. It was reported that he worked tirelessly in the camp, doing anything that needed to be done, whether it was bible study, teaching children who were trying to keep up their studies, or organizing sports. In a prisoner exchange bargain, his freedom was arranged by Winston Churchill, but he gave it up and let a pregnant woman leave instead.

In 1944, he fell sick and doctors did not have the resources to diagnose the real nature of the problem. On February 21, 1945, he began coughing uncontrollably, and as friends came to his aid, he lay back and uttered the words “It is surrender.” He had finished his race, and had run well! An autopsy later revealed a large tumor on the left side of his brain. He had been totally committed to the cause of Christ. Though he had an opportunity to leave China, he chose to stay, pouring his life into the work of reaching the lost in China. He worked for a prize far greater than Olympic gold.

So get a book like Darlene Rose's Evidence of Things Not Seen or watch a movie like The End of the Spear. Maybe go back in the Protestant movement a few hundred years and discover Luther, Calvin, Zwingli, Knox, Hugh Latimer, and Thomas Cranmer. You may want to explore even earlier names like Polycarp, Jerome, Chrysostom, or Augustine. Raise the spiritual bar for yourself.

Listen - time wasted with Stephen Colbert or Bill Maher or Family Guy isn’t going to cut it. Hours squandered with them won’t make you think, “I really want to give my all for Jesus while there’s still time.”

Too many believers are unaware of anyone significant applauding from the stands. Many young people today run the race with only silence from the bleachers - and it's a lonely race. Grandparents are a thousand miles away, uncles and aunts scattered to both coasts and overseas, parents often busy with double jobs, harried by their own affluence, or casualties of the divorce courts. They haven’t any early heroes of the faith whose records make them want to do better as they run their race. As a result, their faith is weaker than it should be.

Will you do it? . . . or will you remain ignorant of past incredible performances turned in by believers from all ages, all around the world? Find a new hero of the faith. Believers with a “go for the gold” mindset remember the witnesses.

One thing that ties all these witnesses together - they were focused on Jesus, the ultimate super hero, the author and perfecter of the faith - the One who for the joy set before him, endured the cross, despised the shame, and is seated at the right hand of the throne of God!
As we look to the finish line, we too must look hard at Jesus. Yes we hear the roar of the crowd, and the cheers from the saints, but we are focusing our vision on Jesus who died and rose again and ever lives!