

Special Section: Endurance

“Let Us Throw Off Everything That Hinders And The Sin That So Easily Entangles...”

You can't run with rocks in your pockets!

By Paul Thigpen



Illustration by John Clapp

When my father was a little boy, he and his favorite aunt, Lily, would often take long walks on the beach near his grandfather's summer cottage. According to Aunt Lily, on one of those walks one warm summer evening, Dad gathered such a great armload of stones from the shore that he tired himself out. So he asked her to carry him the rest of the way home.

“I'll gladly carry you,” she said, “but I won't carry all those heavy rocks! You'll have to get rid of them first.”

Dad's legs were aching, but he was reluctant to part with his newfound treasures. Suddenly he thought of a solution to his dilemma. “I know!” he said with a triumphant grin. “I'll just put ‘em in my pockets—then you won't have to carry ‘em!”



Illustration by Margaret Chodos-Irvine

I think of Dad when I read the biblical exhortation to the Hebrews: “Let us throw off everything that hinders” (Hebrews 12:1). Like the Apostle Paul, most of us pray that we “may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given” us (Acts 20:24). Like my father, however, we're loaded down with a variety of “rocks” that hinder us from getting home. In fact, like my father, we're so attached to some of those hindrances that when the Lord tells us to get rid of them, we find ways to rearrange them in the hope that we won't have to give them up altogether. If they're out of sight, we think, they won't weigh as much.

Nevertheless, the truth is clear: Rearranging won't help. We have a race to run. Those rocks have got to go.

Of course, sometimes the weights that hinder our spiritual race are so well hidden, tucked away in the little "pockets" of our lives, that we're hardly even aware of them. Typically, we focus on overcoming "the sin that so easily entangles" (Hebrews 12:1), and rightly so, because sin will drag us down. But even though every sin is a hindrance, not every hindrance is a sin. If we think only of our wrongdoing, we'll be ignoring some of the most common hindrances of all.

How do we identify those things in our lives that may not be sinful but still slow us down spiritually? A few simple questions can clarify the issues involved.



Illustration by Margaret Chodos-Irvine

Fear

What do you fear the most—especially, what are you most afraid of losing? It's no sin to be afraid. But fear can be paralyzing.

Imagine that the race you're running is cross-country, and the course takes you through wild and unfamiliar desert terrain. You've heard that the rocky ground is snake-infested—and you're terrified of snakes. How will your fear affect the race?

At best, you'll be slowed down as you timidly pick your way through the reptiles' home turf, anxious at every turn. More likely, you'll freeze and refuse to go any further. You may even decide that the race isn't worth the danger, and you'll turn back.

What are the "snakes" in your life that hold you back in the race? Are you most afraid of death? Disease? Pain? Poverty? Crime? Loneliness? Rejection? Failure? Do you fear losing a loved one? A job? Your personal freedom? Some particular material possession?

Answer honestly: How do these fears keep you from doing the will of God? Perhaps fear of rejection hinders you from sharing your faith with nonChristians. Fear of failure may keep you from launching out in a new area of ministry. Fear of losing your personal freedom may make you avoid committing yourself to other people.

There are no simple cures for fear, especially for the fears we feel most deeply. But the beginning of a cure is to remember that, in an ultimate sense, if we fear God aright, we don't have to fear anyone or anything else. The more we love Him, the more we realize that the very worst thing that could happen would be to let something come between Him and ourselves, to let something turn us back from our journey home to live with Him forever.

All that we fear other than God Himself will one day pass away. Disease and poverty, loneliness and pain, even death itself will all be swallowed up in eternal life, and all the terrors that today seem so paralyzingly frightful will vanish like smoke. "The LORD is the stronghold of my life—of whom shall I be afraid?" (Psalm 27:1).

Anger

What angers you the most and the most often? Like fear, anger isn't necessarily sinful in itself ("In your anger do not sin" [Ephes. 4:26]). But as Christians in the ancient Church often observed, anger is

“the irritant of the soul.”

Anger is like a grain of sand that gets into our spiritual eyes, blurring our vision of God, others, ourselves, and our circumstances. At the same time, the object of our anger tends to fill our field of vision and monopolize our attention. The more we allow sources of offense to preoccupy us, the less time and emotional energy we have left over to run the race.

If we tend to get angry easily and frequently, we’re like a runner kicking sand up into his or her own face: We won’t be able to see the course clearly, and we’re likely to get off track as we chase after one offender or another rather than pursuing God. The solution: We must learn to forgive quickly and go on with the race.

Ambitions

What are your ambitions, and what motivates your pursuit of them? What great objectives have you set out to accomplish, and why? Ambitions can be holy or otherwise, according to our motives, but even a goal that’s legitimate in itself may get us off course if we haven’t examined it in the light of our final destiny in God.

The term ambition comes from a Latin root that means “to walk around.” It originally referred to politicians who wandered among the people, soliciting votes to advance their own agendas for accumulating power and prestige. If our big goals in life don’t advance us toward the ultimate goal of winning the race, then we, too, will be walking around, forgetting the course, and forsaking an eternal crown to work desperately for a mere “perishable wreath” (1 Cor. 9:25, NASB).

Time

What gets the most of your time, energy, attention? Is it worth it? Though we won’t always admit it, there are limits to what we can accomplish. That means we have to practice a kind of spiritual triage—investing ourselves in those concerns that are genuinely most important rather than all the other daily matters that may scream for attention.

In the midst of so much busyness, we have to set priorities and focus on the steps of the race ahead rather than fussing so much with how spotless our track shoes are or whether our running shorts are the right color. One good exercise is to end each day with these questions: What did I accomplish today that was genuinely important in the big picture of things? What didn’t get done that truly needs to get done, and what got in the way of getting it done?

Addictions

What do you think you can’t get along without? We may condemn or pity the alcoholic and the drug abuser, but the truth is that we all tend to form addictions of some sort. How jealously do we guard certain little habits, so that we’re fit to be tied if the morning paper is late or the coffee can is empty? How bent out of shape do we get if the television goes on the blink . . . we misplace our favorite Bible . . .

the pastor makes major changes in the once-comfortable order of worship . . . a visitor at church sits in “our” pew? More seriously, what if our closest Christian friend moves to another town, or our beloved church home of 30 years suddenly splits apart over doctrinal disputes?

Life is untidy. Even though we understandably must depend on familiarity and regularity to maintain some kind of order in our world, we have to be flexible if we’re to persevere. Our little “dependencies” are actually crutches; how can we run a race hobbling along on them? Often the surprises of life, the unexpected fractures of our comfortable routine, are sent by God to teach us how to throw down the crutches so we can run, fast and free. “By ways . . . not known, along unfamiliar paths,” the Lord says, “I will guide” (Isaiah 42:16).

Important Issues

What important issues do you find unsettling? We can't run the race if we can't figure out the rules. What perplexing questions about the Christian life are keeping you from moving on? Are you puzzled about certain doctrinal issues? Moral issues? Social issues?

Often we push such questions, unresolved, to the back of our minds, hoping they will go away. Sometimes they do in fact go away; some new experience or insight unexpectedly brings an answer or renders the question irrelevant.

At other times, however, the unresolved issues, hidden from our immediate view, quietly unravel the hem of our heart. My spouse had an affair and divorced me; am I free to remarry? We're always financially strapped but we still tithe a full 10 percent of our income; are we giving too much? I have nagging doubts about some of the teachings of my denomination; should I look for another church? Such questions may hinder our spiritual progress until we identify them and address them.

Not all our questions, of course, will find a satisfactory resolution in this life. We simply have to let such uncertainties press us to a deeper sense of trust in the One who ultimately holds all the answers. "Now I know in part; then I shall know fully, even as I am fully known" (1 Cor. 13:12).

On the other hand, many of our questions can eventually be resolved if we exercise three classic Christian disciplines of wisdom: prayer, Scripture study, and counsel. "If any of you lacks wisdom, he should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to him" (James 1:5). "The holy Scriptures . . . are able to make you wise for salvation" (2 Tim. 3:15). "Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety" (Proverbs 11:14, NKJV). Helpful "counselors" can include not only mature, trusted Christian friends but also sound books by wise Christian teachers.

The Past

What part of your past do you need to release? We can never run a race if we're always retracing our steps. What ghosts from yesterday are haunting you, distracting you, weighing you down? Are there memories of an abusive childhood? Broken relationships of the past? Serious sins or unwise choices whose consequences can never be undone?

"If only I had . . . she had . . . he had. . ." Thoughts of bitterness or regret can crisscross our minds like steel cobwebs, trapping us, tripping us up, keeping us from moving on. We must cut through them with forgiveness—of others and of ourselves—fortified by faith in God's ability to "make all things new" (Rev. 21:5, NKJV). Then we must "put off [the] old self . . . and put on the new self" (Ephes. 4:22; Ephes. 4:24).

The Apostle Paul came to Christ with memories of a shameful past still vivid: The cries of tortured Christians suffering in prison no doubt echoed in his mind because he himself had dragged them there with self-righteous zeal. Yet through God's mercy Paul was able to find peace in a holy forgetfulness: "One thing I do," he insisted. "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Phil. 3:13–14).

Finishing the Race

Do you think you're the kind of person who can finish the race?

Moses sent men to spy out Canaan as part of the Israelites' preparation for possessing the Promised Land. When the men returned, they reported that it was an abundant country that "does flow with milk and honey" (Numbers 13:1–27). But the people nevertheless refused to enter Canaan because the spies also reported that its inhabitants were bigger and stronger than the Israelites. They concluded: "We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes" (Numbers 13:33).

In truth, the people could have succeeded in their God-given mission. Despite their size, the Lord was with them, and He could not fail to accomplish His purposes. The real problem, however, was in their perception of themselves: "We seemed like grasshoppers in our own eyes." As long as they saw

through to victory.

How can we possibly hope to run the race if we focus on our own inadequacies and see ourselves as losers? Once again, the Apostle Paul serves as our example. After telling the Philippians that he would press on toward the goal of Christ, he added: “I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Phil. 4:13). Even an apostle may sometimes have felt as weak as a grasshopper; but Paul knew he wasn’t serving a grasshopper God!

When we’re tempted to let a sense of our own failings drain us of hope, we need to remember that Christ in us is “the hope of glory” (Col. 1:27). He is our reason to have confidence that the race can be finished.

Entangling Sin

In all these ways, as we pursue the Lord, we may encounter hindrances that aren’t sins but can hold us back all the same. In fact, one reason we must bring these problems to the light and deal with them is that they can easily become occasions for sin.

Fear of rejection, for example, is not wrong in itself; but if we don’t overcome it, it can tempt us to disobey God for the sake of following the crowd and being accepted by our peers. Confusion over doctrinal or moral issues isn’t sin, but willful ignorance in such matters may well be. And even righteous anger becomes unrighteous if it corrodes into bitterness through failure to forgive. When we “throw off everything that hinders,” we are also avoiding some of “the sin that so easily entangles” (Hebrews 12:1).

Whatever it is that holds us back, we have to get rid of it if we hope to persevere. So look carefully in the little pockets of your life and dump out what you find there.

Rearranging won’t help. We have a race to run. Those rocks have got to go.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

PAUL THIGPEN, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of religious studies at Southwest Missouri State University in Springfield, Missouri. He and his son Elijah enjoy walking the beach on vacations. Just like his grandfather once did, Elijah loves to stuff his pockets with interesting rocks. When he’s tired, Paul will carry him—but not the rocks.