Theme sentence: In this race of life, lay aside all that hinders, and fix your eyes on Jesus.

Aim sentence: If you want to remain faithful to the end you’re going to have to stay focused on Jesus.

What are your goals for 2017?

Most of us look ahead to a New Year with some sort of ambition – Hopes and dreams for the year ahead.

“In 2017 I’m going to have more people around at my house.”

“I’m going to find a new hobby.”

“I’m going to learn to love my neighbours better.”

“I’m going to read through the Bible.”

“I’m going to find a prayer partner.”

“I’m going to work more effectively.”

At the beginning of a new year there will be some here who are super excited – there will be others who are apprehensive – there will be a few who are daunted or fearful about the unknown of the year ahead.
The passage we are looking at today gives us wonderful instruction for this New Year.

It should set a vision for us about what we should focus on in the days and weeks and months that lie ahead.

Today’s passage pictures the Christian life as a race – a marathon.

If you are a Christian then you are running this race.

If you are not yet a Christian, we are so glad to have you with us today – hopefully today will give you an idea of what the Christian life is like.

To start with, you need to know one important thing – The Christian life is not easy – The writer says we need to run with perseverance.

There are things that are going to try and slow us down or trip us up along the way.

It is going to be hard – but it is so worth enduring.

As Christians we are given the key that will help us to run. The key is found in the one who this book of Hebrews makes so much about – the key to running well – the key to making to the end – is Jesus.
As this year begins, the writer of Hebrews is urging you and me to fix our eyes more fully on Jesus.

In this race Jesus is not just at the finish line – Jesus is the finish line.

We are longing to be with Him – to receive the inheritance that He died to secure for us. As we increasingly behold Him – as His magnificence fills our eyes – with joy and wonder we run – we run with perseverance this race of faith.

Throughout this letter of Hebrews the writer has been working hard to encourage his readers. They have been facing opposition that has been so fierce that it has driven some of them to turn away from their professed faith in Jesus and to turn back to their Jewish roots – with tragic results.

To try and prevent any more people from making this same, terrible error – and perhaps to call back some who had already drifted away, the writer of Hebrews wrote the letter we now have in our hands.

If you take a bird’s-eye view of this letter you will
see arguments showing how Jesus was both superior to, and the fulfilment of, everything that the Old Testament was looking forward to. He is the reality God’s people were waiting for.

In chapter 11 we see some of the most well-known figures from the Old Testament and how they all, in their own way, exercised the same persevering faith that the writer of Hebrews is encouraging his readers to have.

And then we get to our verses, in chapter 12, where the writer, offers even more encouragements to his readers.

The writer tells his original readers, and us, to run with perseverance in this race of faith that God himself has marked out for us.

Let’s have a look at this race.

**Run with perseverance**

Look at the second half of verse 1, “Let us RUN” – that is the main verb in this whole paragraph – this is the key thing the writer is urging us to do.

He wants us to “**Run** with perseverance this race marked out for us.”

Our life of faith is pictured as a marathon.
God Himself has marked the course out for us. And all Christians are called to run – to run with perseverance – with endurance – to keep going. What images jump into your mind when you hear these words – Persevere – Endure?

I get pictures of hard work – in sport – or the workplace – or any other area where you may struggle at times. You only persevere through something that is hard.

The writer doesn’t want to paint a rosy picture for us of this Christian life – he wants us to know that it is hard – we’re going to need to persevere.

I’m not much of a runner. I’m a bit knock kneed. I’ll run to keep fit, but it isn’t beautiful to behold David running.

I enjoy cycling though – and I’ve taken part in a few long races.

In those races, perseverance is necessary. There are multiple times when you feel like quitting – but you need to endure if you want to finish.

That is what the Christian life is like.

One of the things I love about the Cape Argus
Cycle tour is the crowds – on all the toughest hills – and particularly at the end there are crowds of supporters cheering you on – they help you to persevere.

Without those crowds I’m pretty sure I would have quit that race – but I always made it to the end.

I remember one year – as I got to the bottom of the notorious Suikerbossie hill – I gave one big push to get going up the hill and both my calf muscles went into spasm.

As I lay on the side of the road with a team of medics massaging out my calves – I could hear the crowds at the top of the hill – and I just had to get there.

A few minutes later I was back on my bike – being drawn up the hill by the energy of the spectators.

Being surrounded by those crowds kept me going.

And wonderfully, towards the end of the race you start seeing people in cycling gear standing in the crowd – cheering you on.

People who have finished the race – medals
around their necks – now urging you to keep going.
The fact that they are there makes it clear that the end is in sight.
Now in this race of faith, the writer starts chapter 12 by getting us to picture a crowd who are urging us on.
Look at verse 1, “Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses.”
That word “therefore” is forcing us to look back at chapter 11.
Chapter 11 is a list of Old Testament heroes of the faith.
People like Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Rahab and others – men and women who ran this race of faith ahead of us.
The idea is not so much that these people are watching us as we run – rather, as we read about the way they persevered, it encourages us.
If God could help them to keep living by faith – then God can see us through – He can strengthen us to make it to the end.
That is one of the reasons it is so important for
us to read the Old Testament.
As we read about these Old Testament heroes, they embolden us – reminding us that God can and will strengthen us to keep running.
And so we run with perseverance.
Look again how verse 1 ends, “Let us run with perseverance this race marked out for us.”
The course has been set – God Himself tells us what life this side of heaven must look like for those who follow Him.
Our sinful selves will constantly try to mark out a new course for our lives.
This is another important reason for us to be reading God’s Word – It is God’s Word that sets the course of our lives.
If you are a Christian, you are in this race of faith.
It is a joy to have brothers and sisters in Christ running alongside us – at times cheering us on as they run next to us.
At times putting an arm around your waist and throwing your arm over their shoulder to help you through a difficult patch.
God promises to meet our every need as we run
this race – and many times he meets our needs through another believer – another fellow runner. So in this year ahead – God has marked out a course for us to run – at times it is going to be hard – but we know that others have run and finished this race – their faithful endurance spurs us on.

Don’t give up – Don’t drop out the race – Keep running.

Thankfully the writer gives us even more help in these verses – as he tell us how to run well.

The first piece of running advice is – Throw off everything that hinders.

**Throw off all that hinders**

Last year many of us enjoyed watching the Olympics.

Perhaps you saw the South African Team walking out in their tracksuits – being led by Wayde van Niekerk.

Wayde went on to set a new World record in the 400m sprint.

Imagine though, that on the day of the 400m, Wayde lined up to run still wearing his tracksuit.
Everyone else there in their running gear – and there is Wayde with his baggy tracksuit and tackies.

He would have had no chance of winning that race – let alone setting a world record if he didn’t take that tracksuit off.

That is the image the writer to the Hebrews is going for in the middle of verse 1. Have a look – in order to run you need to, “throw off everything that hinders.”

Or as the ESV translates it, “lay aside every weight.”

Get rid of everything that is going to slow you down.

Get rid of everything that is going to make running this race harder.

As I look at our society – as I observe people – and speak to those around me – there is almost always one key observation.

In this year ahead I know that this thing – this obsession – is the thing that is going to hinder most of us in this race of faith.

This ‘thing’ is the modern curse of busyness.
Our world is busy – our lives are busy – our Facebook feeds are busy – even the moments of possible quiet are filled with the busyness of social media – and Television – and sports – and hobbies – and ... the list just goes on. Wow, my job is just crazy busy – I’m super stressed.

There is all this stuff I need to do around the house – it is keeping me really busy.

Parenting is busy – lifting – homework – sports – playdates. My extended family and friends are so demanding – all these get togethers keep me really BUSY!

Busyness, for most of us, is something that easily hinders this race of faith that we have been called to run. The solution is not to sit wishing away the busyness – that isn’t going to happen.

Our world is busy – and our lives are going to be busy – but we need to keep this busyness in check.

That is why at the beginning of the year it is vital
to sit and prioritise.

How can I ensure that I run this race of faith well in the year ahead?

Are there things in my busy schedule that I could cut? Things that are hindering me?

Are their activities that I want to join, or I want my kids to join that are perhaps unnecessary?

If I say “Yes” to this, what am I saying “No” to?

How can I realign the things I am already doing – so that they help – rather than hinder me – in this race of faith?

I think busyness is one of the devil’s cleverest modern inventions.

We are so often busy with really good – important – helpful – society changing things – but those things sometimes hinder us from running this race of faith well.

They slow us down – they shift our focus.

Only you can figure out for yourself – for your family – how to streamline your busy schedule.

But if you want to run well this year – you’re going to have to figure out how to throw off at least part of your busyness.
Resolve to not watch as much sport – or drop that extra activity – set aside one night of the week when you will watch your favourite series, rather than watching practically every night.

Take a social media sabbatical.

This race of faith is hard – it is going to take discipline to run well – to endure through the pain – all the busyness could easily hinder you as you run.

We are called to throw of all that hinders us.

We have loads of young kids here at Waterkloof – they are growing up in this always connected – always busy world.

Our greatest desire for them should be that they will run this race of faith alongside us.

How will this happen? It won’t happen by chance – the ultimate answer is that they will join this race by God’s grace alone.

But one of God’s greatest instruments of grace in our children’s lives is us.

Us, helping them from a very young age to start running this race of faith well.

Us, highlighted for them what they should
prioritise.
Us, pointed out things that could hinder them in this race.
It is my prayer that all of the CCW kids will run this race with greater faith than we have run so far.
Let’s pray that God will help all of us to be instruments of grace in their lives – helping them to set off on this race well.
So in this race – this marathon of faith – we’re going to need to endure – and we’re going to have to shed some weigh – some things that slow us down – things that hinder us.
Verse 1 goes on, “throw off everything that hinders AND the sin that so easily entangles.”
The ESV translates this as, ‘the sin that clings so closely.”
Have you ever been walking through a bushy path and you walk through a spider’s web?
You know that feeling of it clinging to you – It’s hard to get rid of.
You move it from one area and it sticks to the next.
Picture the marathon race again. You are running along and all of a sudden you run through a massive cobweb.

It wraps across your face – in your hair – around your body – and worst of all it clings tightly around both your legs – and actually trips you up. This is a serious cobweb!

That is the picture that we’re given here.

Sin is like a sticky spider’s web – it is hard to get rid of – and in a race, if it entangles you, it could trip you up and cause you to stop running.

In this race of faith, sin must be thrown off – or it will stick close – entangle you – and perhaps trip you up.

When I rode Die Burger cycle tour here in Stellenbosch – about halfway into the race I was with a group approaching Paarl on a lovely downhill section and a young lady came wobbling past me and her handle bars tipped my handle bars and both of us went down.

Up till that point I had been having great fun – from that point on the rest of the race was a battle.
I had a bleeding knee – a bleeding elbow – and a big roasty on my thigh which was throbbing.

Coming short along the route didn’t stop me from finishing – but it made the race a whole lot harder.

Sin is going to be a constant struggle for us in this race of faith.

If we don’t strive to throw it off – to lay it aside – it is going to make this race a whole lot harder.

If you want to run this race of faith well – if you want to actually finish this race – get rid of sin.

Don’t dabble with it – don’t minimise it – deal with it – get rid of it – kill it.

Sin wants to entangle you – it wants to cling to you – it wants to stop you from running.

Sin wants to shift you off the course that God has set – and onto a course you set for yourself – or a course set by society.

Sin needs to be thrown off!

Think for yourself, “What sin do you struggle with most?” “What is that key sin that would love to own you – control you – derail your race of faith?”
Can you think of something?
Try and pin-point the sin you struggle most with – and then figure out how you are going to deal with it.
If God tells us in this verse to throw sin off – that means that it is possible – He will be able to help you throw it off.
Also don’t struggle against this sin alone – Find a Christian friend who will meet with you.
Share your struggle with them – ask them to pray with you and for you – ask them to keep you accountable and to help you in your battle to throw that sin off.
Don’t let sin linger – throw it off.
So far God has urged us though His Word – to run with perseverance the race of faith that HE has marked out for us.
He has made it clear that this race is hard – there are things that will be trying to hinder us – and trip us up.
And then in verse 2 he gives us key running
advice.
The thing that will ultimately keep us running this year is having the right focus.
We need to fix our eyes on Jesus.

**Fix our eyes on Jesus**
Look at verse 2 with me, “fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and **sat down** at the right hand of the throne of God. **Consider him** who endured such opposition from sinners, **so that** you will not grow weary and lose heart.”

If we want to keep going on this race of faith without growing weary and without losing heart – the key is for us to fix our eyes on Jesus.

As we look at Jesus’ life of faith – as we look at all He did to secure us – to save us – that strengthens us to endure.

The more we reflect on His beauty and grace – the less all the other things that hinder us will appeal to us.

Verse 3 says, “Consider **Him.**” The original is actually much stronger – It says, “BY ALL MEANS consider Him.”
Don’t stop considering Jesus. Don’t stop meditating on who He is and what He has done. We look to Jesus – the one who is fully God and fully man.

We see His obedience, His suffering and death, His work of atonement and redemption. We see Him exalted to the right hand of the Father. And as we increasingly behold Him – as His magnificence fills our eyes – with joy and wonder we run – we run with perseverance this race of faith – not just because Jesus is at the finish line – but because Jesus is the finish line.

Fixing our eyes on Jesus will make it increasingly clear to us what we need to throw off.

Anything that diverts my gaze from Jesus – those things need to be laid aside.

Think about busyness.

How often do we get into the busyness cycle – and before we know it our eyes have been diverted.

All the things that cram our schedules keep us so busy that it is hard to squeeze Jesus in.

Or if you think about the sin you struggle with
most.
When you find yourself getting entangled in it – it can become all consuming – and as you fall your eyes are diverted from looking in wonder at Jesus.

We should pray every morning, “Heavenly Father, thank you for marking out the race I must run today – like every day, help me to fix my eyes on Jesus – may nothing hinder me – strengthen me so that no sin will trip me up. Please loving Father, give me the strength to run with perseverance this race today, in the name of the one on whom my eyes are fixed, Amen.”

Now what?
So are you ready to keep running?
Perhaps you are sitting here and you realise that you have never gotten going on this race of faith. Maybe you have realised today that you need to start running.
Find someone here today and tell them – we would love to run alongside you – and help you to fix your eyes on Jesus this year.
For all of us, in this week ahead – as many of you
go back to work – as schools start up again – as the gears of the normal routine engine start to grind again – perhaps it is worth pausing – and considering.

How am I going to run well this year?
God has marked out the path – Jesus has blazed the trail ahead of us.

How am I going to fix my eyes on Him?
What do I need to throw off that is going to stop me running well?

There will be things that happen this year that will cause you to grow weary – and will tempt you to lose heart.

And so more than anything else we need to fix our eyes on Jesus.
We need to pray that as we behold Jesus, that His magnificence will fill our eyes with joy and wonder – so that we will run with perseverance – not just because Jesus is at the finish line, but because Jesus IS the finish line.

As you fix your eyes on Him – be ruthless – throw of everything that diverts your gaze from Him.

Go home and pray that God would help you to
see the things that are hindering you – ask God to forgive you for the sin that is entangling you. And ask God to strengthen you this year to run well.

In 2017 let us run with perseverance this race of faith, as together we fix our eyes on Jesus!