

The pioneer and perfecter of faith

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[0 : 00] So Hebrews chapter 10, starting at verse 19. Therefore, brothers and sisters, since we have confidence to enter the most holy place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain that is his body, and since we have a great priest over the house of God, let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that faith brings, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience, and having our bodies washed with pure water, let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess, for he who promised is faithful.

And let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the day approaching.

And then on to chapter 12, starting at the beginning of the chapter, Hebrews chapter 12 from verse 1. 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, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

For the joy that was 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.

Amen. Okay, folks, would you like one single piece of advice that is helpful and applicable to almost every possible situation?

[2 : 08] One piece of advice that is always useful. Here it is. Look to Jesus. Look to the example that he has set for us.

Consider Jesus. Consider what he has done for you, what he has done for us, the salvation that he has wrought. Fix your eyes on Jesus.

Fix your eyes on the pioneer and perfecter of faith. Now, of course, there are but few situations where that is the only helpful advice.

There is almost always more to be said. There is room for nuance. There is value in specificity. But is it not almost always useful advice?

I was trying to think of potential exceptions. I think maybe there is a 44-ton Arctic barreling towards me. What should I do? At that point, maybe look to Jesus isn't the most possibly helpful thing to say.

[3 : 13] You know, look for somewhere else to put your car might be a more useful advice in that precise moment. But as the lorry does bear down, if you are not going to avoid it, you know what?

Look to Jesus is then the only useful advice there is. Look to Jesus. Fix your eyes on Jesus. We live, I think, we live, all of us, in an endlessly distracted age.

Probably even during the service this morning, you know, in your handbag, your phone has been buzzing away with different notifications, the emails, the text messages, the Facebook posts.

We live in an age of distraction. In our day-to-day, countless things are clamoring for our attention, that the adverts that we see in the midst of TV programs, the adverts that we see as we walk down the street, the phone calls, the friends, the family, that it adds up and it adds up, and we live in this distracted age.

Now, I suppose there have always been numerous things clamoring for people's attention, but there are certainly not fewer today in 2021 than there were decades or centuries ago.

[4 : 27] Maybe you remember, in March last year, a number of blogs at that point, and so on, they noticed the kind of unexpected silver lining of our curtailed opportunities for activities last year.

Suddenly, people found that they had time to breathe. Suddenly, families were no longer rushing between three different activities in one evening, but instead were sitting down and eating a meal

together.

Many people suddenly had more free time than they knew what to do with. And yet, yet for most of that time, just the same as in our relative flexibility now, for most of us, the distractions of those days might have been different, but we were still distracted, weren't we?

We were still flitting from one thing to the next. We were still frittering away our time. We were still focused on all sorts of different things, moment by moment. I listen quite regularly to a podcast that's called Focused, and their contention in this podcast is that the ability to focus is, quote, the new superpower.

The ability to focus is the new superpower. In a distracted age, that ability to focus means you actually get something done, unlike your peers. And so they discuss on this podcast ways to avoid distraction, you know, limiting those notifications on your phone and all those different demands for your attention.

[5 : 46] And more broadly, what they advocate is, is doing in any given moment, doing what you intend to do. Do what you intend to do.

It sounds simple, doesn't it? It sounds basic, almost, you know, well, what's the alternative? You know, what else would I do other than what I intend to be doing? Surely what I am doing is always what I mean to do.

I'm just, you know, when I do it, because I want to do it. But if we scratch below the surface a little bit, we know often, actually, we aren't really doing what we really want to do, are we?

We're not doing what we really intend. Maybe in that precise moment, I intend to read, you know, what people have to say on Twitter. But do I really intend to do that at 2 a.m.?

No. Not in my more rational moments, anyway. Or when I sit down to write, and six things are swirling around in my head of all the other things that I need to get done today. And I keep running off distracted into, well, how am I going to do that thing later on instead of the task that's actually before me?

[6 : 47] Well, as I'm distracted into it, that's what I intend to think about. But it's not really what I intended to intend, if you like. It's not what I want to be focused on.

The ability to focus on what you intend to do matters greatly if we are to be effective people. But the problem, where this podcast falls profoundly short, is they're not interested in what you're focused on.

In fact, they said in one episode, if what you intend to do with the afternoon is watch Netflix for three hours, then to do precisely that is in fact being productive. Now, at that point, our definitions of productivity clearly differ greatly.

It seems to me that even more important than the question of how well we focus, even more important than how well we're focused, is what we are focused on. It's valuable to be focused only so far as what you're focusing on is valuable.

So, where do we focus? In his book of Advent devotions from the book of Hebrews, which is the inspiration for this sermon series, Tim Chester, he asked this question, how can we avoid the distractions of our culture, especially at Christmas, when the trivial comes at us thick and fast?

[8 : 04] How can we free ourselves from the entanglements of sin? How can we persevere as Christians when life is tough or people around us are hostile? Well, the writer of the book of Hebrews has an answer to those questions, and it's one that might surprise you.

Not a set of rigorous spiritual disciplines, not a three-month discipleship program. It doesn't involve going to Bible college. It doesn't involve locking yourself away in a monastery. His answer is simple. Fix your eyes on Jesus. Hebrews 12, verse 1. 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, fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

For the joy that was 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.

Fix your eyes on Jesus. The writer to the Hebrews says, if you want to be like the heroes of the faith, like the cloud of witnesses that are described in chapter 11 and then referred to here in the first verse, if you want to be like them, if you want to do great things for God, frankly, even if you just want to barely survive as a Christian in an increasingly hostile culture, if you want to honour and glorify God, if you want to run the race with perseverance, if you want to reach the finish line at all,

fix your eyes on Jesus.

[9 : 44] So folks, this is our new morning sermon series. It's going to run through to Boxing Day. So we've got eight weeks in Hebrews. You may have imagined from the fact that we started in chapters 10 and 12, this isn't going to be quite an ordinary progression through from chapter 1, verse 1 through to 13, 25.

Instead, we're going to kind of dip in to various places. And each of those places that we dip in, I pray, is going to help and encourage us to fix our eyes on Jesus, to focus on him in an age of distraction.

John Owen, the Puritan writer, he wrote seven big volumes on the book of Hebrews. You could spend years carefully working through this book in our Bibles and it would be profitable to do so. Maybe one day I'll do that, maybe we'll do it together, but this is not that series. This is dipping in for little bits to encourage us as we head towards Christmas, encourage us to focus in the right place, to fix our eyes on Jesus.

And with that goal of having our eyes fixed on Jesus, I suppose there's kind of two broad ways that we could try and achieve that goal. One way to try and achieve focus on Jesus is to kind of slap our hands every time we get distracted, to say, no, no, don't go over there, to bemoan our failings, to talk about how awful distractions are.

[11 : 07] That's one option and there is merit in it. It can be effective. It is good to be warned and God's word does that at times. It does rebuke us and there's some of that going on in Hebrews, some warnings and rebukes and we might touch on that at points.

But my intention is not to focus on that option but rather option number two, if you like. The second possibility if we want to focus on Jesus, the second way to achieve that is to remind ourselves over and over again just how amazing he is.

The more we see that Jesus is greater than any other, the more we recognize that he has already given us all that we need, the more that we focus on his loveliness, well, the more we will naturally incline to fix our eyes on him.

If you've got a racehorse and you want it to focus only on what's ahead, well, you put on the blinkers for the racehorse, don't you? You remove the possibility of distraction, you deny it the opportunity to look from side to side.

The racehorse has to have the distraction forcibly removed, not so a human runner. A human runner benefits from some awareness of his surroundings. The competitor in his peripheral vision, well, it's more likely to spur him on than to distract him.

[12 : 24] But what he does need is to have the goal firmly in mind. He can be aware of his surroundings, but he cannot be distracted by them. And so my intention in this series, even though we're jumping around, my intention is to focus on the finish line, to focus on Jesus, to fix our eyes on him.

And my prayer is that that will be an encouragement to us in our weariness, and that it will be that encouragement even more than it will be a spur to us in our apathy.

The writer to the Hebrews, as he goes through this letter that is basically a single sermon, as he goes through, he spends the bulk of his time comparing Jesus to different things, saying, well, Jesus is better.

Over and over again, Jesus is better. Jesus is a better revelation than the Old Testament writings. Jesus is greater than the angels. Jesus is a better priest than any other.

Jesus is greater than the law of Moses. Jesus is a better sacrifice. Indeed, Jesus is the only sufficient sacrifice once for all time. Wherever else you are tempted to look, whatever else you think might produce success, whatever else you think will produce growth in your life, whatever else you think will produce holiness, whatever else you think will drive success, wherever else you're tempted to focus, Jesus is better than all of these things.

[13 : 54] Time and again, the writer to the Hebrews says Jesus is better than any alternative. And so, my friends, let us hold unswervingly to the hope we profess.

For he who promised is faithful. Let us consider how we may spur one another on towards love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another and all the more as you see the day approaching.

How do we press on? How do we spur one another on towards love and good deeds? How do we do it? Well, returning to chapter 12, we throw off that which hinders and we fix our eyes on Jesus.

And when he calls us to fix our eyes on Jesus, how does the writer to the Hebrews describe him? He is the pioneer and perfecter of faith.

Now, when we say that Jesus is the pioneer, that means he stands at the beginning. He stands as the one who kindles faith, as the one who starts it all off. He's the alpha and the omega.

[15:00] Other translations refer to him as the author, the founder. And this word also conveys alongside that kind of kicking it off, getting it started idea, it also conveys kind of the sense of leadership, driving things forward, showing the way.

And so pioneer is an excellent translation, isn't it? Because that conveys both this sense of breaking new ground, but also the expectation that others will follow. You don't call someone a pioneer if nobody else goes that way after them.

Jesus is the pioneer of faith. There's no point looking at anyone else. Folks, Jesus is the one who began your faith. The path that we're called to tread is the path that he has already trodden.

If you want to keep the athletic metaphor of running the race, well, he's the forerunner. He's the example we're called to imitate. He leads the way down the path that we are meant to follow.

And that path isn't going to be easy. We know this by now, don't we? It's not an easy path. It's not straightforward. Commentators are agreed that the recipients of this letter, they're facing severe persecution.

[16:10] Their lives aren't easy, but they're called to follow the one who endured the cross, scorning its shame. Verse 3 here is clear. The objective of considering Jesus.

Why consider Jesus? Why fix your eyes on the one who endured such opposition? Why? Verse 3 said that you will not grow weary and lose heart. If you are on the edge of weariness, if you have crossed that line, if you are losing heart, well, fix your eyes on Jesus.

That's precisely the situation this is written for. That's exactly what the writer to Hebrews is talking about, as we are tempted to lose heart. So how did Jesus do this?

How did Jesus persevere? How did he endure the cross, scorning its shame? Why did he pay that price? Why did he lower himself so far? Why did he endure such humiliation?

Why did he accept such shame? For the joy set before him. Here in the middle of verse 2, Jesus did all of this. He endured it all for the sake of joy.

[17:26] The worst pain imaginable. Not just physical, but psychological, emotional, spiritual, Tommy. He endured it all for the sake of joy. It seems bizarre, doesn't it, to think about joy in the midst of that.

But that's what we're told. For the sake of joy. What is the nature of that joy? Well, it isn't less than the end of verse 2. He sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.

He gets to sit down. His work complete. Sat in the place of honor. But it's not just that it's complete. It's not just that he's toughed it out to the end.

His joy also lies in what has been achieved by completing that work. What he has accomplished.

Chapter 1, verse 3 tells us it was after he had provided purification for sins that he then sat down at the right hand of the majesty.

So when we're told in the chapter 12 here about him sitting down, it's with that already in mind. To sit down implies that he has achieved purification for sins.

[18:41] That is the nature, the source of his joy. To know what he has achieved for you and for me and for countless millions and billions. Jesus knew what joy would be his as he opened up, as he pioneered this path down which you and I may walk.

He's the trailblazer. He hacks his way through that jungle to pioneer a way into God's own throne room. So my brothers and sisters, do not grow weary because Jesus, your pioneer, endured such opposition from sinners as we can barely imagine.

And he endured opposition beyond what you and I will ever endure. So do not lose heart because he is the pioneer of faith. He is the pioneer of faith and he is also the perfecter.

He is the one who brings your faith to its end. He who began a good work in you will carry it on to completion. Jesus is the founder and the finisher.

He's the pioneer and the perfecter. Not just completion again, not just in the sense of making it to the end, but perfection. The goal is achieved.

[19:53] The objective is accomplished. You can reach the end perfect. You might reach that end in the midst of great opposition. You might reach that end feeling like you are belly crawling through the mud.

You might not feel like you're sprinting across a beautiful meadow. and yet as we slog along in those paths of righteousness in the midst of it, indeed not only in the midst of that struggle but by means of that struggle, he is perfecting you.

He is the perfecter of faith. Please, please, please note here that he is the perfecter. I imagine that for most of us in this room, I imagine that the idea that he is the author of faith, the pioneer of faith, I imagine is relatively uncontroversial.

But what I think we can easily drift into is thinking that he having begun that work, having shown the way, that he then leaves it to us to get on with it thereafter, to walk along in that path under our own steam, to continue the process that he began.

We drift into thinking that that is how things are. He kicks it off and we continue. Jesus saved us by dying on the cross. Now we get on with sanctification, improving ourselves day by day.

[21 : 19] No. Verse 2 is perfectly clear. It is he who is the perfecter of faith. You are not the perfecter of faith.

You are not responsible for the perfection of your own faith. Not anything we do. He produces completion. He will accomplish perfection.

Ray Brown says he makes it all perfect and he alone. Yes friends, our moral integrity is essential but it cannot bring our faith to completion. Our devoted service of God is valuable but it cannot perfect our faith.

Our spiritual experiences may be inspiring, may be illuminating but Jesus is faith's only consumator. Believers rely completely on him because he ran the greatest race to its finish and we come to fullness of life only only in him.

Again, again in that faith coming to completion and perfection in that too we are following in his footsteps. Notice verse 2 at least in the new NIV it says perfecter of faith.

[22 : 30] It does not say of our faith and this is an accurate translation. Now it probably is primarily our faith that's in view. It makes sense that other translations like the ESV that they put in the hour there to clarify that primary focus for us.

But I think the writer deliberately omits the pronoun because Jesus is the perfecter of faith. In other words he's the supreme and perfect example of faith.

Before perfecting our faith he first perfected his own faith. He's the perfect example of faith to which you and I are called.

He comes to exalted glory by way of faithful obedience. He sits down at the right hand of the Father having perfectly demonstrated in an utterly unprecedented way demonstrated the nature of true faith.

faith. And so finally as well as the perfect pioneer of faith as well as the perfect exemplar of faith the perfecter of faith as well as these things finally he is also the object of our faith.

[23 : 43] He is the one in whom we have faith. So if you like having already run the race that we now run he now stands there at the finish line.

He stands there waiting for us stands there as our goal stands there as the one towards whom we run. We run with perseverance with our eyes on the prize with our eyes fixed on Jesus we want to know him more we want to be with him we want to join him where he is we want to share the blessings that he was and so we run fixedly towards him striving to that end looking to the one whom we love let's pray Lord this is our desire that our eyes might be fixed on Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith forgive us where we have been distracted guard us against future distractions fill our minds with the glory of our savior may he increase in our sights to the point where he excludes all else where we are utterly devoted striving to meet him striving to be where he is knowing that we do that in and through his work in us as the pioneer and perfecter of faith in whose name we pray amen