

Christ, Priest, Pioneer and Perfection

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Date: 23 September 2018

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[0 : 00] Well this evening I want to turn again with you to the subject of faith as it is explained to us in the letter to the Hebrews looking I suppose particularly at chapters 11 and 12. We looked at chapter 11 the last time I preached here which was during the summer holidays and chapter 12 but I also want to range more widely through the entire epistle. The last time I preached here as I say we looked at the nature of faith as it is described for us in Hebrews chapter 11. You remember the definition that that chapter gives of faith. What is faith? Well for the purposes of the author's argument he says that faith is the assurance of things hoped for. The conviction of things not seen. Perhaps in a future sermon if called upon we'll have an opportunity to look at the great call that comes then in chapter 12 to those who have this kind of faith to run with endurance the race that is set before us. But before we come to that consideration

I think we have to look at a most important phrase which is found in Hebrews chapter 12 verse 2. A phrase that qualifies and governs and describes how it is we are to run this race. The spirit in which we are to run this race and the direction in which we are to be looking. And so our text for this evening is found in the opening words of Hebrews chapter 12 verse 2. Looking to Jesus the founder and perfecter of our faith. This is the secret of running with endurance. The person to whom we are to keep running.

The faith which is commended in chapter 11 of Hebrews is set firmly within the context of the person and the work of our Lord Jesus Christ our Savior. Remember the context too, the historical context. How these Jewish Christians were wavering in their faith. Remember how they were becoming discouraged. Some had stopped coming to the meetings. They had drifted away from the body of believers. They were being tempted to give up their faith. They were being persecuted. Their families were being given a difficult time. The work of the gospel wasn't prospering or so it seemed. And they were beginning to wonder, is it worthwhile continuing this hard struggle of being Christians in this world? And so the writer in this letter is trying to turn them back to their faith. And so the theme of this letter is none other than the Lord Jesus Christ himself. Christ is the subject matter of the whole letter. The writer's argument is quite simply this. Christ is better. Christ is better than the angels. Christ is better than Moses. Christ is better than the Jewish priesthood of old. Christ brings us a better covenant. He leads us into a better sanctuary. He has a better ministry. Indeed Christ is better in every possible way. These readers of the letter to the Hebrews were failing in their their courage and in their faith because they had an inadequate understanding of Jesus Christ. And the writer's argument is basically this.

If they keep looking to Jesus Christ and reminding themselves of his glory and of his majesty and of his magnificence, they will be strengthened in their faith. And they won't fall away. My friends, how often our own problems in the Christian life arise because we have lost sight of the glory and the beauty and the wonder and the power of our Savior.

We've taken our eyes off Jesus. He has become dim and we do not see him as he truly is. And all the problems of our lives, and we have many, don't we? They loom large in our sight and they start to get us down. We become depressed and worried and worried and anxious. Here is the answer that the inspired author of the letter to the Hebrews gives us.

[5 : 47] Looking to Jesus. Looking to Jesus. Now there is an exceptionally full doctrine of Jesus Christ in the letter to the Hebrews.

Someone has said that if you want a good series of sermons, you could do no better than preach on Hebrews, what Hebrews teaches us about the person of the Lord Jesus Christ. Let me whet your appetite briefly.

Hebrews speaks of Christ's pre-existence. How Jesus Christ existed before the creation of the world. It tells us that Christ is the creator of the world.

It speaks of Christ becoming man, of his atoning death, of his resurrection, and of his return to judgment. And then Hebrews has so many names and titles for Jesus. Have you ever noted these? He is the heir. He is the firstborn. He is the sanctifier. He is the apostle. He is the builder of the house.

[6 : 58] He is the author of salvation. He is the forerunner. He is the guarantee or guarantor of the covenant. He is the master of the sanctuary.

He is the mediator. He is the great shepherd of the sheep. He is the master of the covenant. He is the master of the covenant. He is the master of the covenant. We could go on and on. One commentator has said, this book is ablaze with Christ's glory. And surely there is a tremendous lesson for us in simply noting this straightforward fact. We profess to be believers in Jesus.

But how often is our faith rather vague and imprecise and lacking in focus? How often do we take these titles of Jesus, these descriptions, these wonderful names, just take one of them and sit down and meditate upon it and think about it and let the truth of that name, that title, that description sink into our souls.

Let our souls, as it were, soak in the truth of it until it begins to really influence the way we think and the way we feel.

[8 : 21] What a wonderful study it would be to plunder the whole of the Bible, the Old Testament as well as the New Testament, and say to yourself, I'm going to find and I'm going to write down and I'm going to think about every description of my Savior, every title, every name, every metaphor, every word picture, every parable, and I'm going to memorize them and I'm going to learn them and I'm going to ask myself, what does this mean for me?

That He is the light of the world, that He is the good shepherd, that He is the door, and so on. To learn more of the riches of our Savior and the glory of our Savior, that's what this writer really wants for his first readers and for us today.

looking to Jesus or fix your eyes on Jesus.

So let's look at some of the more specific descriptions of our Lord that this letter provides for us. I want to begin with a most important one.

I want us to think of Jesus the priest. Jesus the priest. Did you know that Hebrews is the only book in the New Testament where our Savior is specifically described as a priest?

[9 : 55] There are, of course, very strong hints elsewhere in the New Testament. He himself, after all, said that he came to give his life as a ransom for many and that sounds to me very much like the work of a priest.

Paul also says that Christ has given Himself for us an offering and a sacrifice to God. Christ makes intercession for us, as he teaches.

Do you remember how the Apostle Peter calls believers in Jesus a royal priesthood? The implication being that Jesus is a priest and His people share in that priesthood.

John says that Christ has made us kings and priests to serve our God. These are all very strong hints that Christ Himself is a priest, but it is only stated clearly in Hebrews many, many times, over and over again.

He is a priest. He is a priest. Now, from where did this writer of Hebrews develop this insight into Christ the priest?

[11 : 14] Well, he developed it from his favourite Old Testament passage of Scripture. The favourite psalm of the early church, the most popular psalm, the one quoted more often in the New Testament than any other, is Psalm 110.

And the early Christians were captivated by verse 1 of that great psalm that says, The Lord said to my Lord, Sit at my right hand till I make your enemies your footstool.

Those early Christians saw the risen Christ in that psalm. Jesus Himself, you remember, preached from it in Mark 12 to show that the Messiah was David's Lord, not just David's son.

The Lord, Jehovah, said to my, my Lord, Sit at my right hand. You remember Peter preached from it on the day of Pentecost.

Paul referred to it when he was writing to the Corinthians. And this writer has already referred to Psalm 110, verse 1 in the first chapter of his letter to show that Jesus is superior to the angels because to which of the angels did God ever say, Sit at my right hand?

[12 : 36] One commentator says, The book of Hebrews is largely a working out of the implications of Psalm 110. But you know, it's not verse 1 that is the writer's favorite.

There's another verse. It is his favorite Old Testament text because he quotes it three times in this letter and he refers to it another eight times.

It is a verse from the Old Testament that has gripped and mastered and dominated this man's thinking and which has shaped the whole of his doctrine of Christ.

It's the fourth verse of Psalm 110. The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind, you are a priest forever according to the order of Melchizedek.

That is the verse that has gripped the imagination of this writer. That God the Father said to God the Son with a solemn, mighty, unbreakable oath, You are a priest forever.

[13 : 48] Forever. Forever. Here he sees Christ as a priest and a king. This was unknown in Old Testament Israel apart from that mysterious incident with Melchizedek and Abraham.

In the Old Testament law it was forbidden for a priest to serve as a king or a king to serve as a priest and some kings who tried to do that were chastised and disciplined strictly by God for doing so.

But here in this psalm there is someone sitting on a throne who is both a king and a priest. And you notice he is not from the family of Levi.

He is not from the regular family of priests. He is outside that old covenant system. He is directly appointed by God.

He is superior to the Levitical priesthood. He is a permanent priest without beginning of days or end of years. He is ever living.

[15 : 05] Never has to lay down his priestly responsibilities because of old age or pass it on to someone else because of death. He is a priest confirmed by God's unbreakable oath.

And the writer sees all of this fulfilled in the person and the work of Jesus Christ.

And so when he says in Hebrews 12 verse 2 looking to Jesus it's particularly Jesus as the priest that these people are to look.

Jesus the priest Jesus our great high priest. Here is where we are to fix the gaze of faith.

And then to add to this picture of the priest he adds two additional ideas and it is to these that I want to turn your attention now. There is not only Jesus the priest but Jesus the pioneer.

[16 : 20] The pioneer. I use that word because it's really a more accurate translation than our version which reads the founder of our faith.

Looking onto Jesus the founder really it should be the pioneer of our faith. Now Jesus of course is the founder or author of our faith because he gives faith he evokes faith faith comes from him it is his gift through the Holy Spirit faith is the gift of God it is not something we innately have or something that we can work up naturally from ourselves he is the founder or author of faith but the writer is saying something more than that he is the pioneer of faith a pioneer is someone who leads the way someone who goes first for other people to follow after one of the great cultural facts from the island that I come from was the emigrantship almost everybody in Ireland has relations all over the world and one of the great features of Irish folk memory is standing on the dockside waving to members of your family who were setting sail for North

America or Australia or some other far-flung part of the world and these members of the family went to other sides of the world and they went there as pioneers typically one member of the family would go and they would travel to the frontiers of America or Canada and they would build a house and farm the land and when they got established they would then write back and tell other members of the family to come and join them the pioneer went first he blazed the trail the pioneer opened up the way so that others might follow in his path the writer is saying Jesus is the pioneer of faith in other words he himself exercised this faith and he did so as a real human being the faith that you and I are meant to exercise the faith which believes in things hoped for and is convinced of things not seen this is the faith that

Jesus our pioneer exercised Jesus was assured of things hoped for Jesus was convinced of things not seen Jesus himself believed he himself as a human being trod this path before us and he has opened up the way for you and for me to follow when we walk the path of faith there are footsteps in front of us and we can say someone has been this way before our saviour has been there and our saviour has wrestled and he's carried the cross and he's cried out to God in the darkness and he has sought God's help in difficult times and he has exercised this faith he is the pioneer of faith that

is why Hebrews lays such enormous emphasis on Christ's identification with us it's one of the chief letters in the New

Testament to stress the humanity of Christ that Christ was a full true human being he was not some kind of super man he was not some mysterious divine figure who came down to earth for a few moments no no he was a real person the author of this letter has a favourite name for his saviour and it's not Christ or Lord but it is Jesus Jesus he uses Jesus far more often than any other name in fact outside the gospels book the letter the New Testament book that's because the writer loves to describe him not just as the Lord not just as the Christ but as Jesus Jesus he says in look at chapter 5 verse 7 that he offered up prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears this is our [21 : 21] Jesus who prayed who supplicated his father's throne and who did so with loud cries and with tears supermen don't shed tears but the incarnate son of God cried and wept Jesus wept now can we not identify with that we are shown a savior who is sobbing who is weeping in his anguish who is crying out loud cries and tears to him who is able to save him from death or think of what it says in chapter 2 verse 14 since therefore the children share in flesh and blood he himself likewise partook of the same things flesh and blood very earthly words aren't they carnal words almost crude words flesh and blood the meat of the human body

Jesus had the meat of the human body flesh think of chapter 2 verse 11 it says for he who sanctifies and those who are sanctified all have one origin that is why he is not ashamed to call them brothers speaking about his very real humanity his closeness to us his oneness with us he's of the same origin as us his identification with you and me is unmistakable and friends this links perfectly with his priesthood if we could make a bit of an oversimplification we could say that a prophet had to be close to God and a priest had to be close to human beings now that is an oversimplification because they both had to be close to God and they had to be close to human beings but

I think there is some helpful truth in the statement nevertheless in chapter one the author speaks of the Lord as a prophet and he describes him in such wonderful terms as the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of God's nature talk about close to God you can't get closer than that that is God and so in chapter one he stresses the divinity and the awesomeness of Christ's person the majesty of his person as a prophet God has spoken to us by this mighty son of his but then when he talks about his priesthood it's his humanity that he stresses chapter two verse 17 therefore he had to be made like his brothers in every way why why did he have to be made like his brothers in every way here's the reason that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service of God you see he couldn't be a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God unless he was made like his brothers in every way unless he was close to us unless he knew us for chapter five verse one tells us that every high priest chosen from among men chosen from among men to

God to God with us our priest is like us he's close to us he's one with us he's chosen from amongst us my dear friends we surely want to persevere in faith and God's word says we are to look to Jesus the pioneer of faith the one who is just like ourselves the one close to us the one who has lived a human life the one who has been tested and tried and troubled the one who knows what it is to struggle the one who has wept the one who knows dark hours the one who has been assaulted by the devil the one who has been bereaved the one who has been hurt and lied about and injured the one who knows what it is to believe and this letter tells us that we should appreciate his understanding and his sympathy and his help chapter 4 verse 15 for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with us in our weaknesses but one we have who in every respect has been tempted as we are yet without sin have you ever felt that there is no one who really understands either you or what you're going through not your family not your wife not your parents not the elders not the pastor no one understands but the bible says that

Jesus understands you can be sure very sure that Jesus understands he understands you and he understands what you're going through for we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with us we have one that can sympathize everything you feel everything you need every struggle every difficulty he can sympathize with you in it chapter 2 verse 18 another great text of Hebrews for because he himself has suffered when tempted he is able to help those who are being tempted how often do pastors come away from house visits thinking

[28 : 48] I was of absolutely no use I couldn't help get into their car and they drive home and they're praying Lord forgive me I couldn't help that person but though I couldn't help you can you can because you yourself suffered when you were tempted and you are able to help those who are

being tempted looking to Jesus why because he understands he's the one who sympathizes he's the one who can help you who can really help you in your life and in your situation he can help you do you believe that my friend do you believe that he can help you do you believe that you will never be in a situation where he will not be able to help you where he would have to hold up his hands and say

I'm sorry I'm really truly sorry because I don't understand you I don't understand your situation I can't sympathize with you in this and I've got no help for you there will never be a situation in which Jesus will ever ever say that we have in Jesus a pioneer of faith he knows what it's like Jesus the priest Jesus the pioneer and then thirdly we have Jesus the perfecter Jesus the perfecter it's good to have a pioneer but we've got to ask ourselves where does this pioneer of faith lead to does he lead to victory or does he lead to disaster you know some people were pioneers in the olden days and they led people to unmitigated disaster it has to be said they got people to travel all the way to America or to Australia and then went out with great hope and expectation they were going into a wilderness and they got sick their crops failed and they starved to death not a few of them became disillusioned and heart broken and so it's alright to have someone to lead us but where is he going to lead us and where is he taking us and so our text says that Jesus is not only the pioneer of faith but he is the perfecter of faith or the finisher of faith and that word finisher is used here in the old sense of the word think of a person who has the skill to restore antique furniture such a person talks about you know finishing a table or something like that now what does he mean by that does he mean that he takes a sledgehammer to the table and smashes it the smithereens and that when he is finished the table is well and truly finished now what he means is that he would use all his skill to bring the table up to a perfect polish to a state of perfection so that it as perfect as when it first left the factory workshop for the first time and went on sale in some swanky shop and that's the idea here

Jesus brings our faith to perfect finish to maturity to perfection he brings us to our proper destination he's not only the pioneer but he is the finisher the perfecter of our faith he does not start you off on a road to faith that is going to end in the wilderness or in disaster no he is the finisher the perfecter of your faith he will bring your faith to a triumphant wonderful mature glorious perfect conclusion he's the perfecter of my faith and he's the perfecter of your faith so when we get to heaven we're not going to be like some half made piece of furniture we're going to be the finished article we're going to be perfect nothing will need to be added and that is why this writer prefers not just to call Jesus the priest but the high priest do you notice that but why was he the high priest what was it that distinguished the high priest from all the other priests well some of you will know the answer it goes back into the old testament on the great day of atonement it was the unique privilege of the high priest to take the blood of the sacrifice on the day of atonement and to go in behind the curtain into the most holy place where the ark of the covenant was and the very presence of almighty god and there in the most holy place he stood before god with the supreme yearly offering of atonement for sin and he made atonement for the sin of the people and he prayed for the people that was the great moment of the israelite year when the high priest entered the most holy place with the blood of the sacrifice of atonement for the sins of all the people that was his privilege and yet the letter to the hebrews again and again tells us that magnificent and wonderful though that was that great event was only a shadow of the reality to come hebrews 10 verse 1 for since the law has but a shadow of the good things to come instead of the true form of these realities it can never by the same sacrifices that are continually offered every year make perfect those who draw near they can't make perfect the same

Greek word that's used it can never finish them it can never bring God's people to maturity to perfection it's not possible that the blood of bulls and goats will take away sin but now we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens into a better sanctuary now the high priest has come the ultimate the last high priest the one to whom all other priests pointed and this great high priest has entered into the very presence of the father in heaven Hebrews 9 11 and 12 says but when Christ appeared as high priest of the good things that have come then through the greater and more perfect tent or tabernacle not made with hands that is not of this creation he entered once for all into the holy places not by means of the blood of goats and calves but by means of his own blood so going into that better tabernacle with this infinitely better and richer and more precious blood he secures an eternal redemption at

[37 : 32] Calvary Jesus didn't bring the blood of animals he brought his own precious blood the blood of the lamb of God he did not enter once a year he entered once for all he did not come to make a partial temporary forgiveness he came to secure eternal redemption and it is even more wonderful than that my friends because he didn't just stay in the most holy place for a few moments as the Jewish high priest used to do catching just a glimpse of the throne through the incense we read in Hebrews 7 verse 25 that Jesus is still in that most holy place you think of that for 2000 years Jesus has been in the most holy place staying there to make intercession for us and he's still there in God's presence praying and pleading for you for his people and it's even more wonderful than that because our text goes on to say that he endured the cross despising the shame and perhaps this doesn't really have the shock factor to us as it would have had to a first century

Jew but just imagine you are a Jew and you're listening to these words for the first time and you read that he is seated at the right hand of the throne of God seated not standing but seated never never in his craziest fantasies did any Jewish high priest ever think of sitting down in the holy of holies he would have been struck dead on the spot because it was the most sacred place of all and yet this high priest our high priest our Jesus has come in and he is still there and he is seated in the most holy place as if he belongs there as indeed he does as if he has a right to sit there as indeed he has as if he is equal to

God almighty as indeed he is truly he is the perfecter of faith the finisher of faith here is faith's triumphant conclusion the ultimate destiny sitting down at the right hand of the throne of God let me ask you as we close how does this truth help us to run the race with perseverance let me suggest a couple of ways it encourages us to reflect on the fact that at this very moment our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ is interceding for us in his father's presence believe that for yourself and it will help you to persevere

Christ is praying for you praying for you evermore praying for you every day Hebrews 9 24 tells us Christ has entered not into holy places made with hands which are copies of the true things but into heaven itself now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf how assured we may be of the certainty of forgiveness us we may face our face accuser and tell him not only that Christ has died for our sins but that Christ even now is pleading our cause before the father if you were to remind yourself of this if you were to believe this for yourself every day as you get up out of bed and put your feet into your slippers church and say to yourself

Jesus is before the father pleading for me praying for me that will give you the strength to go through whatever that day may hold for you remind yourself of it especially when you feel your guilt and your sin remind yourself of it when you feel your fear and your need Jesus your sympathetic high priest and brother is interceding for you he is praying for you and young people when you face some terrible temptation to sin against God against your parents the way you have been brought up remember this my savior is praying for me think of what Jesus said to Simon

[43 : 28] Peter before he was tempted in the courtyard of the high priest Jesus said to him I have prayed for you that your faith may not fail and Jesus says the same thing to all of us I have prayed for you and I am praying for you that your faith may not fail it's a wonderful thing to know the Lord Jesus as our priest as our pioneer and as the one who perfects our faith and brings it to fulfillment and completion and perfection do you know this Lord Jesus Christ as your savior you need a priest you need a priest you need someone to intercede with

God for you for you you're sinful and you're guilty and your sin and your guilt will sink you lower than the grave it will sink you into the depths of hell you need someone to offer a sacrifice that's going to be acceptable in the sight of God that will turn aside God's wrath because of your sin and that will remove or expiate your sin and take it away and the only sacrifice that can do that is the one that Jesus the priest the great high priest offered at the cross I need no other sacrifice I need no other plea it is enough that Jesus died that he died for me can you say that being being able to say that because you believe it will you believe it and put it into practice every day of your life so that you will persevere in faith because day and daily you look you fix your eyes on Jesus

Jesus the priest Jesus the pioneer Jesus the perfecter of our faith let us pray our heavenly father we thank you for our great high priest the lord Jesus Christ and we confess we would be lost and undone without him we thank you that he offered himself a sacrifice to satisfy all the claims of divine justice and to reconcile us to God and we praise and bless you that he ever lives to make intercession for us receive our thanks for Jesus Christ and help us all to put our trust in him amen we're going to sing in closing the words of psalm 43 in the Scottish Psalter on page 264 and we'll

sing from verse 3 to the end of the psalm oh send thy light forth and thy truth let them be guides to
me and bring me to thine holy hill in where thy dwellings be then will I to
God's altar go to God my chiefest joy yea God my God thy name to praise my harp I will employ