Pursuing Perfection
Hebrews 10:1-18

As we've said several times, the people the writer is writing to are at a crossroads. Life is hard for them and there's no indication it's going to get any easier. In fact the opposite is likely to be true. And far from their Christian faith offering them a free pass on suffering or a get-out-of-jail-free card, it's the very reason why they are facing the trouble they're facing. So some of them at least are considering leaving Christianity and going back to Judaism.

So the writer has been showing them how much greater Jesus is than anything Judaism has to offer. In fact, the whole central section of this letter has been about how much greater Jesus is than the Jewish priesthood and all the system of sacrifices and temple worship they are tempted to go back to: as he says in v1 these things were just 'a shadow of the good things to come'.

And yet, it's not just Judaism that Jesus is greater than. The writer's argument goes deeper than that, because, of course, the people he's writing to, living in Rome, would have been surrounded by pagan temples and priests offering to connect you with this god or that god. And whether it's Judaism or the ancient cults of Rome, or any religion ancient or modern, every religion has at its center this issue of connecting you to the divine, of bringing the worshipper to God.

I mean, just ask yourself the question, why do religions exist? What is it in the human heart that religions are tapping into? And sooner or later you'll come to the conclusion that they exist because people realize that somehow we need to commune with God and have relationship with him, and that religion offers us a way to build a bridge from us to God. Essentially religion is 'you want to get to God, well, here's how to do it.'

Now, of course in our increasingly secular western societies, you might think that concern with religion is at an all time low. And yet, I reckon that the vast majority of secular western people would probably agree that what they are searching for is happiness, ultimate happiness. Now, they're not seeking it in temples and church buildings but they are most definitely seeking it in the shopping centres or in relationships or in the perfect family, or in having it all. And that constant searching and desire for more tells you that they haven't arrived, that there is this inner hunger for something better, greater and more satisfying.

Which is where our writer comes in, because it's exactly that sense of having arrived, of completeness, of deep inner happiness, that he's talking about here. And he is saying you will only ever find that in intimate relationship with God, and you will only ever get that through Jesus.

Approaching the unapproachable.
So in v1 the writer says that the Law of Moses, with all its sacrifices and religious ritual, could never 'make perfect those who draw near.' Now, when he talks about drawing near, he's talking about drawing near to God, of approaching the unapproachable. You see, in our post-Christian world people think approaching God is easy, that he's desperate for us to come, that we have free access anytime

we want. But of course to the ancients, and to people who have never been influenced by the gospel, approaching God is anything but casual.

In fact for the Jew, the whole system of public worship was designed in such a way to bring home just how unapproachable God was. There were the various courts of the temple, and gentiles could only go so far, on pain of death, and then Jewish women could go a bit further, and Jewish men a bit further still, and then there was the temple itself and only priests could enter the first room, the Holy Place, and finally there was the Most Holy Place, where God dwelt, and only one man, the High Priest could go behind the curtain, and enter that room and that only once a year with the blood of the sacrifice to atone for sin.

Now, if I were to ask you, 'how do you feel about drawing near to God and approaching Him?', we'd probably have a range of responses depending on our experiences and our understanding. If you're a Christian you might respond to that prospect with joy. If you've been hurt and let down by religious people or the church you might feel anger. But for a Jew, coming near to God to worship him in the temple, whilst there most certainly would be joy, there would also be, lurking not far below the surface, both guilt and fear. Because he knew he wasn't perfect. And only the perfect could approach the unapproachable.

And that word perfect which the writer uses in v1 is an interesting word – it means to bring to completion, to reach the goal, to arrive. And so whether you're a Jew approaching God in the temple, or a follower of any other religion trying to connect with God, or a secular westerner in search of fulfillment, you know you don't have it, you know that you haven't arrived. You know that you are not perfect, you're not complete.

And the writer makes the point that religion will never get you there. It can never bring you to the place where you are fit for entering the presence of God. In v2 he asks the rhetorical question, 'would they [the temple sacrifices] not have ceased to be offered, since the worshippers, having once been cleansed, would no longer have any consciousness of sins?' I mean, if all the sacrifices and religious rituals could do it, if they could make people perfect, if they could cleanse from sin and deal with a guilty conscience, and make us right with God in any ultimate way and bring us to the point of knowing a deep inner sense of satisfaction and completeness, then why the need to go on offering the sacrifices?

But rather than making those who draw near to God perfect, these sacrifices – in fact all the efforts of man to bridge the gap, by trying harder, or living morally, simply remind us how far from God and how far from completeness and perfection we really are, how empty we are in ourselves: v3, for 'In these sacrifices there is a reminder of sins every year.' The very fact these sacrifices need to go on being made, the very fact that we continually fail to make the grade, tell us just how imperfect we are.

And the stuff of religion has no power to change that. In v4 the writer says that 'it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to take away sins.' Sure they symbolised the payment of sin, and of a substitute dying in the place of the

sinner, but they could never take the sin away. They could never lift the load of sin off the person's back, or cleanse the conscience, they could never leave the person with the assurance – I'm ok, I'm acceptable to God, I've arrived, I've come home, there is no further work to be done. Religion can never get you there, it only tells you how far away from that you are.

But then the writer tells us that what religion can never do, and what our secular consumerism has no power to do, Christ has done for us.

Complete in Christ

Now, running through the Old Testament, especially the prophets, is this theme, that rather than sacrifice what God desires from mankind is joyful, heart obedience. You see, you can offer a sacrifice, whether it's an animal or money or time, or be active in religion and it say nothing about your inner heart, like your loves or your motives. I mean, you can offer a sacrifice out of deep penitence and humility or you can offer it out of pride and attention seeking. And religion is like that, isn't it? It doesn't really say anything about the heart, and yet what God cares about is the heart. And rather than ritual he wants men and women who are faithful to live as he calls us to live, as an overflow of the heart.

Now you can respond to that in two ways. You can think, ok, I''ll try even harder to do what's right, I'll try even harder to live the way I should. But if you take that approach, it won't be long before you're staring failure in the face again; or, in your mind's eye you can see the pile of animal sacrifices of those who have tried before you and realize that trying harder and doing this out of your own abilities – trying to make yourself acceptable through religion or moral living, trying to save yourself, to get there on your own, is never going to work.

Instead in v5-7, the writer quotes from Psalm 40: "Sacrifices and offerings you have not desired, but a body have you prepared for me; in burnt offerings and sin offerings you have taken no pleasure. Then I said, 'Behold, I have come to do your will, O God.' And he says that Jesus – not you and me – but Jesus has fulfilled this: that God has sent his Son, as a man, to perfectly do what we have failed to do – to live the perfect life and to do all the will of God. To be the one man of whom it could be truly said, he's complete, he's ok in the fullest sense, he's acceptable to God, he's perfect.

But then the writer says in v10, 'And by that will we have been sanctified through the offering of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.' Now that word sanctified means to be made holy, and the writer's saying that through Jesus, the perfect man, giving his life as the ultimate sacrifice for sin at the cross, in our place, we can know not only forgiveness from sin, but the burden of sin lifted off. That we can be sanctified, counted as righteous and holy in God's sight, not because we have made the grade but because Jesus has. That what religion can never do for us, what we can never do for ourselves – Jesus has done for us. He has done everything that we needed for us to draw near, to have an intimate relationship with God as our father, to find what hungry hearts are looking for – to know that deep inner sense that we are accepted by Him, that everything is ok

with us, that we've arrived, that we are complete and perfect in him. Religion and consumerism will never give you that.

Now, you may think 'yeh, but how can the fact that Jesus was perfect mean I can be counted as perfect, how can he being complete, and the one who has reached the goal, and is acceptable to God mean that I am? I mean, isn't that just some kind of moral fudge?' Well, it might seem that way when we look at it from our individualistic, atomized western cultures. But not if you come from a more patriarchal or tribal culture. You see, in those kind of cultures, what is true of the leader, of the head of the family, or tribe or nation is true for his people. If he wins honour, they are honoured, if he is shamed, they are shamed, if he's victorious they're victorious. What is true for him is true for them. And Christ is the head of his family, of his nation. He is the representative man of his people, and so what is true for him is true for all those who side themselves with him in faith.

And that is more than God just looking at you through rose tinted spectacles. I mean Su looks at me and she still sees a handsome young man with a full head of hair. But you know that's not quite the truth. Her love has blinded her. But that's not what's going on here. When God declares you perfect and holy, he's looking at Jesus, the one you are joined to in faith, the one who has done it for you.

And because he lived the perfect life, that is counted to you, and because he died the death as our atoning sacrifice, that is counted to us. We are declared not guilty because Christ has paid the price for us. You are counted perfect and complete in Him, and you can know deep inside that you are accepted by God, that you have arrived, that you are ok, because He is.

Now, the priests, with all their sacrifices could never obtain that ultimate once and for all 'I accept you, not guilty' verdict from God – which is why the writer says in v11, 'and every priest stands daily at his service, offering repeatedly the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins.' There was never any risk of a Jewish priest being out of work, you'd never find a priest in the unemployment line at the Jerusalem Job Centre, because the sacrifices could never achieve that ultimate end of freeing the people from the burden of sin, so there were always more sacrifices to be made. But in stark contrast to the priests – always working, always having to offer sacrifices, one after another, never getting the chance to sit down, the writer says in v12 that 'when Christ had offered for all time a single sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God.' Job done, work completed. Not just in his life, but in your and my life as well.

But the writer also tells us that this isn't just about how God sees us, as if this is no more than an abstract theological concept. It isn't 'God sees you as complete and perfect in Jesus, he's made you acceptable, now off you go, and carry on as you are.' No – what Jesus has done for us inevitably changes us on the inside as well.

Works in Progress

The writer says in v14, 'For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.' Which means that through the grace of God, in Jesus dying for you in your place, you have been made perfect and complete in Him, but that is also going to result in ongoing transformation in your life – you are being sanctified, you are being made more holy, you are being made more like Jesus. As you put your trust in him, and allow his love and his grace to work on the inside, you are becoming more like who you are.

Now we have a standing joke in our family. If the girls are being pesky and loud and messing about too much and I'm getting annoyed, I'll say something like, 'o girls, you're behaving like children'. And they'll respond, 'dad, we are children, duh!' The point is, we behave true to who we are. And when it sinks in just how loved and accepted we are by God, how he sees us as complete and perfect in Christ, as his grace to us in Jesus sinks in, that will transform how we live. In the words of Paul to Titus – it is the grace of God that trains us, teaches us, to say no to ungodliness.

That's why the writer quotes again from Jeremiah 31, when he says in v16: 'this is the covenant that I will make with them after those days, declares the Lord: I will put my laws on their hearts, and write them on their minds.' This new thing that God is doing in Christ – what the Old Covenant with all its rituals and sacrifices could never do, is resulting in transformed hearts that want to live the way God wants. Which is why our vision statement as a church is 'rooted in the gospel, radical transformation.'

But it is a process. So don't be annoyed when children behave like children; don't get frustrated and angry when your husband or your wife or those around you aren't there yet – because they're not – each of us are works in progress. Rather, as you experience the grace of God for yourself, extend that same grace to those around you; as you realize he sacrificed himself for you when you were undeserving, that he forgave you when you were his enemy – allow that to transform the way you treat others.

And because it's a process there are going to be times when you fail, when you fall flat on your face, when you demonstrate – if you ever doubted it – that in yourself you still haven't arrived. And maybe you'll feel that most acutely when, to use the writer's words, you draw near. You come to worship or pray or read your bible, but you feel guilty and unworthy and slimed by sin, and the Holy Spirit is convicting you of this stuff. What do you do?

How do you respond when you become conscious of sin or failure? Do you withdraw and back off – and think 'I can't come, I'm not worthy'? Or do you try and pay off your debt to God by being especially nice, or trying to worship with more zeal, or making more effort at bible reading, or serving others? But what's interesting is that those are all attempts at making our own sacrifices to atone for our sins, aren't they?

Well, how you respond when you fail depends entirely on whose righteousness you are trusting in. If you think that your ability to draw near to God and to know

the deep inner sense of completeness and wholeness before God depends on you being perfect, you'll never know it. But if instead you are looking to Jesus and that it's him who makes you righteous, then you can confess your sins to God and know that the price has already been paid. That's why the writer can quote Jeremiah and say of God in v17: 'I will remember their sins and their lawless deeds no more' and v18: 'Where there is forgiveness of these, there is no longer any offering for sin.'

You see, when we wallow in guilt, or draw back, or try to atone for our sin, we are really saying that the cross is not enough, that God's grace is not enough, that I need to do something more to pay my debt, which is really unbelief. But when we confess our sin, and acknowledge our need of forgiveness and look to Jesus sat down at God's right hand, then we know that everything that needs to be done has been done and we can draw near because he has done it all. And then there is no further offering for sin needed.

But when his grace and his love for you dawns you, there is one sacrifice you'll offer: it's what the writer calls in 13:15. 'a sacrifice of praise to God'. That's the only sacrifice you and I get to make: to praise Him for his grace and his love and his mercy to us in Jesus, the only one in whom we can know forgiveness and acceptance and that deep inner sense of completeness.