

Chapter 12 – Inheritance required a new Priesthood - Hebrews 7

The author now resumes (from chapter 5) his lengthy proof of the inadequacy of the Mosaic law with its sacrificial system and the necessity and superiority of Christ. His accomplishments and ongoing ministry as our High Priest are essential for inheriting God's promises. Although of particular interest to Jewish believers in Christ there are matters here of significance for all of us.

Prayer

Try using the *thanksgiving, remembrance, confidence* model of prayer as you think over what you have learnt from Hebrews chapter 6 and look forward to studying chapter 7.

Surprises

Let us start our study of chapter 7 by reading through and noting any surprises. These are the surprises that strike me in chapter 7.

- V1-3 What does the OT tell us about Melchizedek?
- V8 Where is Melchizedek declared to be living?
- V12 What is the basis for claiming a change in priesthood?
- V19 What exactly is this hope?
- V22 What exactly is this better covenant?
- V25 Why does he say Jesus saves us "completely"?
- V27 Who is included in "all"? Does it include atheists?

Background

Before proceeding we should familiarise ourselves with Gen 14:8-24 and Ps 110 which are referred to in this chapter. Additional background is found at Num 18:21-26, Gen 49:8-10 and Lev 9:7.

Structure

My medium-brush structure for this chapter was "We have a new High Priest, Christ, who is superior to the Levitical priesthood."¹

Chapter 7 continues the discussion about Jesus as a Melchizedek priest which started in chapter 5 but was interrupted by chapter 6.

My fine-brush structure is:

- V1-3 Outline of the known facts about Melchizedek.
- V4-10 Comparison of Levitical priesthood with Melchizedek.
- V11-19 The need for a new priesthood
- V20-28 The superiority of Jesus' priesthood over the Levitical priesthood.

Argument

The author has been preparing for a detailed discussion of Jesus as the new Melchizedek high priest from the very beginning of his letter. At the outset he established Jesus' superiority to the angels and to Moses. He first introduced Jesus as our high priest in Chapter 2:17 and continues with

¹ See chapter 4

regular references to His high priestly role through chapters 3, 4 and 5. In the middle of chapter 5, the author first associates this role with Melchizedek, saying that there is much to explain, but that his readers are slow to learn. But before discussing Melchizedek further, the author concludes (at least for the moment) his concerns about his readers inheriting God's promises. Having done that, the author now resumes his explanation of Jesus as the new Melchizedek high priest.

The argument flows from the statement, made at the end of the previous chapter, that Jesus is our high priest forever, in the order of Melchizedek. The author argues for Melchizedek's superiority, first to Abraham and then to the Levitical priesthood which descended from Abraham. From there he argues that Jesus is a Melchizedek high priest and as such replaces the Levitical priesthood. He concludes with the superiority of Christ's ministry over the Levitical priesthood. The last verse is a key verse, pointing to the content of this chapter, and also much of the letter:

"For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect for ever."

So here is my summary of the argument in chapter 7:

Melchizedek is shown to be superior to Abraham, and therefore also to the Levitical priesthood. Jesus, with His once-for-all sacrifice, has, by God's oath, become our High Priest in the order of Melchizedek, completely replacing the Levitical priesthood.

The Detail

We will now look more closely at the detail of chapter 7.

Heb 7:1-3

⁽¹⁾ This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, ⁽²⁾ and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. First, his name means "king of righteousness"; then also, "king of Salem" means "king of peace". ⁽³⁾ Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, like the Son of God he remains a priest for ever.

This Melchizedek...

Melchizedek is mentioned only twice in the whole of the Old Testament. All we know about him is contained in these four verses:

Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand." Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything. (Ge 14:18-20)

The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: "You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek." (Ps 110:4)

...king of Salem and priest of God Most High.

Melchizedek, like Jesus, was both a priest and a king. This had never been the case in Israel. The kings and priests came from separate tribes, but from the outset these two roles have been ascribed to Jesus. I think we can see in his devotion to worship that David, who prophesied about a future priest-king like Melchizedek, would have loved to have been one himself.

... and blessed him...

The Levitical priests took offerings from the people with which to make a sacrifice for sins and also for their own consumption. This contrasts starkly with Melchizedek whose only recorded action

was that of blessing. He refreshed Abram with bread and wine and then blessed Abram and gave thanks to God.² This is so much like God, who “did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?” (Ro 8:32)

Blessing is a hallmark of Jesus’ ministry. He came to pronounce God’s blessing upon all who follow Him. He pronounced blessing on the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake. He pronounced God’s blessing on those who believe without seeing, on those who hear the word of God and keep it, on those who care for the poor, on those who lead through serving, on those who fulfil God’s calling on their lives and on those who watch for His coming. He blessed the children, the sick and all those who attended His ascension.

God sent Jesus to bless the whole world in fulfilment of His promise to Abraham and He pronounces blessing upon all who believe in Christ. Paul ministered in “the fullness of the blessing of Christ” (Rom 15:28) knowing that he would share in the blessings of the gospel (1Cor 9:23). The breaking of bread is a celebration of and sharing in God’s blessing, the cup is the cup of blessing (1Cor 10:16).

God blesses us through answered prayer (2Cor 1:11) and with abundance in everything (2Cor 9:8) so that we can be abundant in our blessing others. He has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places (Eph 1:3) as we await our blessed hope (Tit 2:13). Those who die “in the Lord” are blessed (Rev 14:13) for they are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.

I wonder how well this ministry of blessing is reflected in our churches. Many non-church people see churches as places where money is collected from the public for fixing the leaking roof. In many parts of the world, church leadership is competed for as a route to power and wealth. Many sermons consist of chivvying the congregation to do more, serve more, give more, attend more meetings and get more involved. Many others urge more devotion, more bible reading, more prayer, more evangelism, more holiness.

I wonder if, in our appropriate desire to be more effective and fruitful, we have lost faith in the power of blessing people. When people leave our services feeling inadequate because they fail to live up to the standard expected of them, they feel they have little to offer their unbelieving friends. They live with heavy hearts under a cloud of condemnation and feel disinclined to invite their happy unbelieving friends to join them! On the other hand, people who leave our services refreshed in their spirit and confident in God’s blessing over them will go into the world with a smile on their faces eager to share their riches with others. Melchizedek gave refreshing and blessing, demanding nothing in return. Abram freely gave a tenth of his plunder and both went on their way rejoicing.

Abraham gave him a tenth of everything.

Abraham’s offering to Melchizedek is the first mention of a tithe in the scriptures and is used by the author to demonstrate Melchizedek’s superiority to Abram. This incident is sometimes used to argue the pre-law basis for tithing under the new covenant. I believe this reasoning to be flawed on several counts. First, this is not an instruction to tithe but a one-off free will offering with no indication that it was repeated. Secondly, the Mosaic commandment to tithe is not tied in any way to this incident in the OT. Thirdly, this was a tithe of the spoils of war – a thing never again required or done in the OT. And lastly, pre-law acts do not automatically become New Covenant principles.

Nevertheless there are some interesting things to note. In the blessing, God is proclaimed as the creator, and therefore also possessor, of all wealth; God is acknowledged as the one who caused the wealth to come into Abraham’s hands; and Abraham’s response to God’s blessing was to give back

² This is the first mention of sharing bread and wine in the OT;

to Him. Furthermore, the people are said to have given to Melchizedek through giving to the Levites. In the same way, we give to Jesus through our giving to others. This is a healthy context for our giving and should help inspire us in our generosity.

... his name means...

Salem, meaning *peace*, was believed by the Jews to be the old name for Jerusalem, as indicated in Psalm 76:2. Jesus is both king of righteousness and of peace. What a wonderful King to have reigning in our lives!

Without father or mother...

Any Jew who could not prove his genealogy was said to be *without father or mother*.³ The Levitical priests had to be able to prove their descent through their father to Aaron and that their mothers were pure Israelites. This contrasts with Melchizedek who was appointed by God without regard to ancestry. The lack of any recorded genealogy for Melchizedek lends him a sense of timelessness which makes him a fitting type for Christ – neither have beginning or end.

...like the Son of God

We note that Melchizedek is “like the Son of God” and not the other way round. The opening argument concerns the appropriateness of Melchizedek as a type for Christ as opposed to presenting Christ as being like Melchizedek.

... a priest for ever.

The claim for Melchizedek’s eternal priesthood is based upon Psalm 110, quoted later in the chapter. The author does not mean to suggest that Melchizedek never had a father or mother and was never born nor ever died, but that the lack on any mention of these things makes him a suitable type for Christ who has no beginning or end. It is the Melchizedek *order* that remains forever and is fulfilled in Christ’s ministry.

Heb 7:4-10

(4) Just think how great he was: Even the patriarch Abraham gave him a tenth of the plunder! (5) Now the law requires the descendants of Levi who become priests to collect a tenth from the people⁴—that is, their brothers—even though their brothers are descended from Abraham. (6) This man, however, did not trace his descent from Levi, yet he collected a tenth from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. (7) And without doubt the lesser person is blessed by the greater. (8) In the one case, the tenth is collected by men who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living. (9) One might even say that Levi, who collects the tenth, paid the tenth through Abraham, (10) because when Melchizedek met Abraham, Levi was still in the body of his ancestor.

...the patriarch Abraham...

Having reviewed the story of Abram’s encounter with Melchizedek, the author now shows how great this ancient priest was. He emphasises the fact that *even* Israel’s *patriarch*, their founding father, gave Melchizedek a tenth of the plunder!

³ See Adam Clarke’s commentary for references.

⁴ The Priests had to be descendants of Aaron (a Levite) and they collected a tithe from the rest of the Levites. The Levites acted as servants in the temple and collected tithes from the rest of the people.

...the descendants of Levi...

The Law recognises a hierarchy of status in the descendants of Abraham descending through Priests (descendants through Aaron. See v 11) to Levites to the rest of Israel. Melchizedek is placed above Abraham in status.

...him who had the promises.

Abraham was the one to whom God had given the promises through which all the world would be blessed. Yet he still honoured Melchizedek's superiority through his tithe. Here is a model of humility in a supremely anointed man, demonstrated again later in his offering the choice of land to Lot.

...declared to be living.

The basis of this claim that Melchizedek is declared to be living seems to be based on the silence of Genesis on the death of Melchizedek. It is perhaps also based upon the oath of Psalm 110:4. To our minds this may not be a very satisfactory line of argument, but throughout the author is really thinking about Jesus who lives forever and for whom Melchizedek is a type.

Heb 7:11-19

⁽¹¹⁾ If perfection could have been attained through the Levitical priesthood (for on the basis of it the law was given to the people), why was there still need for another priest to come—one in the order of Melchizedek, not in the order of Aaron? ⁽¹²⁾ For when there is a change of the priesthood, there must also be a change of the law. ⁽¹³⁾ He of whom these things are said belonged to a different tribe, and no-one from that tribe has ever served at the altar. ⁽¹⁴⁾ For it is clear that our Lord descended from Judah, and in regard to that tribe Moses said nothing about priests. ⁽¹⁵⁾ And what we have said is even more clear if another priest like Melchizedek appears, ⁽¹⁶⁾ one who has become a priest not on the basis of a regulation as to his ancestry but on the basis of the power of an indestructible life. ⁽¹⁷⁾ For it is declared: "You are a priest for ever, in the order of Melchizedek." ⁽¹⁸⁾ The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless ⁽¹⁹⁾ (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God.

If perfection could have been attained...

Having established that Melchizedek was superior to the Levitical priesthood and that Jesus has been declared by God a priest in his line, the author now examines the reasons for and consequences of this fact. The reason is that perfection, that is enduring restoration of fellowship with God, was unattainable through the Levitical priesthood.

As mentioned before,⁵ the biblical word translated *perfection* is used to describe something fully accomplishing its intended purpose. It does not mean it is perfect in every way. Thus the Law is described as perfect, even though it cannot make us perfect:

"The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul. The statutes of the Lord are trustworthy, making wise the simple." (Ps 19:7)

"So then, the law is holy, and the commandment is holy, righteous and good. (Ro 7:12)

Later (v18), the author describes this same Law as "weak and useless." The point is that in itself it the Law is perfect, it fully accomplishes the purpose for which God gave it. But as regards our standing with God it is weak and useless. It cannot make *us* fulfil *our* God given purpose. We

⁵ See in Chapter 6 the section "Jesus made perfect through suffering" commenting on Hebrews 2:10

cannot be made *perfect* by the Law. But it is not that the Law has been discovered, after hundreds of years, to have failed in its purpose. Far from it!

“We know that the law is good if one uses it properly.” (1Ti 1:8)

The Law’s purpose is to bring us to Christ who alone can bring us into unbroken fellowship with God. In that purpose it is perfect, but having accomplished its purpose it is of no further use.

... a change of the law.

Jesus was from the tribe of Judah. The Law says the priests must be descendants of Aaron; there is no provision in the Law for a Judean to become a priest. Thus for God to appoint Jesus a priest there must be a change in the Law. This was, of course, a radical claim to make. It is what got the Christians into so much trouble with the Jews.

The idea of atonement through the suffering of a perfect and innocent victim was not at all strange or offensive to the Jews. There is no hint in the New Testament that Jews found the idea of a suffering Messiah offensive or even surprising. The fact that Christ was crucified did not prevent the Jewish authorities considering the possibility that His claims might be true (Acts 5:39). Preaching about resurrection only offended the Sadducees (they didn’t believe in the resurrection of the dead - see Acts 4:1-2).

The gospel basics were compatible with the Law and could be preached among the Jews without causing serious upset. Indeed, the claims of Christ were readily accepted by many Jewish leaders. But the apostles insisted on going further. They taught that the Law of Moses was fulfilled and set aside by Christ. This caused great offence and stirred up the hostility that led to Stephen’s murder (see Acts 6:11,13-14). The preaching that “Jesus will change the customs which Moses delivered to us” was terribly offensive to the Jews.

It is understandable that Paul, in his ministry to the Gentiles, should insist on the replacement of the Law, but for the author to make this a central part of his letter to Jewish believers is a bold and significant act. It is a matter to which the author gives detailed attention in this and the following chapters.

...even more clear...

A change in the priestly line is not foreseen in the law, which stated “Only you and your sons may serve as priests in connection with everything at the altar and inside the curtain. Anyone else who comes near the sanctuary must be put to death.” (Num 18:7)

So when someone of the stature of Melchizedek arises who is appointed by God, then clearly the Law must be changed.

...an indestructible life...

The significance of the new priesthood is not simply in an unending succession protected by a law, but in the unending life of the priest who has arisen in that new line.

...weak and useless...

The author does not shrink back from saying that the Law, given by God to Moses, is useless! Paul also goes to great lengths to make the same point, particularly in Romans, Galatians and Colossians. This should surely give us pause to wonder why the Law of Moses still receives such attention as a means of sanctification in many churches. It is not just the priesthood that is set aside but the whole Law, since “the law made nothing perfect.”

...a better hope is introduced...

The Levitical priesthood offered forgiveness of unintentional sins only and could not deal with the rebellion in the hearts of fallen men. Jesus' priesthood has brought us renewed hearts and enduring peace with God – a matter explored further in the following chapters. It has allowed us to draw near to God, a thing pointed to and yet forever prohibited in the Law.

Throughout this letter, the author is at pains to draw attention to the superiority of Christ and His gospel and he frequently uses the word “better”. In Christ we have better revelation (1:1-4), hope of better things (6:9), a better hope (7:19), a better covenant (7:22), a better priesthood (7:28), better promises (8:6), better sacrifices (9:23), better possessions (10:34), a better country (11:16), a better resurrection (11:35), a better inheritance (11:40) and a better word (12:24).

Jesus has brought a better hope of restoring our relationship with God. The Levitical priests brought temporary and partial forgiveness of sins, whereas Jesus brings us eternal and total salvation.

Heb 7:20-28

⁽²⁰⁾ And it was not without an oath! Others became priests without any oath, ⁽²¹⁾ but he became a priest with an oath when God said to him: “The Lord has sworn and will not change his mind: ‘You are a priest for ever.’” ⁽²²⁾ Because of this oath, Jesus has become the guarantee of a better covenant. ⁽²³⁾ Now there have been many of those priests, since death prevented them from continuing in office; ⁽²⁴⁾ but because Jesus lives for ever, he has a permanent priesthood. ⁽²⁵⁾ Therefore he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them. ⁽²⁶⁾ Such a high priest meets our need—one who is holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners, exalted above the heavens. ⁽²⁷⁾ Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself. ⁽²⁸⁾ For the law appoints as high priests men who are weak; but the oath, which came after the law, appointed the Son, who has been made perfect for ever.”

...not without an oath!

Here, we encounter yet another of God's oaths. This time concerning Jesus. As before, the author points out the unchangeableness of the oath. Clearly a priesthood appointed by God's oath supersedes a priesthood established without an oath.

...the guarantee of a better covenant.

The Temple and its continuous daily sacrifices was central to the Old Covenant and was at the heart of Israel's identity. The loss of home and livelihood during the exile was traumatic enough for them, but it was the loss of the temple that really shook them up. Ezekiel's vision of the throne of God on those huge living wheels was God's assurance to them that He was going with them into their exile – God's throne had become mobile! Since their return from exile they had continued to live under occupation and lived with the constant fear of losing the temple again.⁶ Hosea had prophesied, “For the Israelites will live for many days without king or prince, without sacrifice or sacred stones, without ephod or idol. Afterwards the Israelites will return and seek the LORD their God and David their king. They will come trembling to the LORD and to his blessings in the last days.” (Hos 3:4-5)

It is almost certain that Hebrews was written before the Romans destroyed the temple but Jesus had prophesied its destruction. The Levitical priesthood could not function without the temple and the Old Covenant depended upon it. In establishing a permanent priesthood in Jesus based upon

⁶ You can read the books of the Maccabees in the apocrypha for vivid descriptions of the fight to maintain the temple sacrifices during the inter-testament period.

ministry in heaven rather than in an earthly temple, God had established a far better covenant with uninterrupted service and eternal accomplishments.

In every conceivable way, the Covenant of Jesus' priesthood is better than the Mosaic covenant it replaces.

...a permanent priesthood.

The first major improvement in the priesthood is that Jesus lives forever. This is not a temporary provision whilst waiting for the promised Messiah. It is the real deal. There are no more symbols and types and shadows of realities yet to come. Christ's priesthood is the eternal fulfilment of all that has been prepared for and hoped for through generations of Levitical priests. The torch, passed from priest to priest down through the generations, has now been replaced by the Sun of Righteousness. In His blazing light the shadows have vanished and the torches have been extinguished. The temporary has been replaced by the permanent.

...he is able to save completely...

The second major improvement in the priesthood is that Jesus is able to save us completely because of His unending intercession.

Under the Law, atonement for sin was so dependant upon a frail provision. It only dealt with unintentional sin and was often rendered useless by idolatrous priests and kings. A good priest might be followed by evil sons, as in the case of Eli. For long periods the Law was completely forgotten. The ministry of sacrifices and intercession was flawed and sporadic. In contrast, Jesus is able to save us completely.

This is an important statement in relation to our eternal security. His priestly role is not limited to our initial salvation. He is able to save us completely. He deals with both our past and future sins, continuing to act on our behalf to ensure our complete and eternal salvation. The assurance of our eternal salvation is a truth the author wishes to emphasise:

"he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him" (Heb 5:9)

"he is able to save completely those who come to God through him" (Heb 7:25)

"he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption." (Heb 9:12)

"by one sacrifice he has made perfect for ever those who are being made holy." (Heb 10:14)

His intercession is unending and his saving power complete.

...he always lives to intercede for them.

Jesus interceded for his disciples and for all who would believe through their witness before He went to the cross. He forever continues that ministry from His place before the Father in heaven:

"Christ Jesus, who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us." (Rom 8:34)

"My dear children, I write this to you so that you will not sin. But if anybody does sin, we have one who speaks to the Father in our defence—Jesus Christ, the Righteous One." (1Jn 2:1)

Paul often spoke of his prayers for the people he loved and we should not hesitate to do the same. It is wonderfully encouraging to know that a friend is praying for you. But how much more uplifting it is to know that Jesus is forever interceding for us! "He is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them."

However much we feel we have fallen short of our calling, however often we stumble in sin, however much we fail to sustain the spiritual disciplines, however much our zeal has faded... Jesus

is able to save us completely because he always intercedes for us. If we are not assured of this fact we will easily become disheartened and give up.

When the Israelites were in the desert they were troubled by the Amalekites, so Moses commanded Joshua to go and fight them whilst he stood on a mountain and interceded for them. When Moses stood firm Joshua prevailed, but when his arms drooped in weariness Joshua was beaten back.⁷ This is the power of Godly intercession. We face enemies more fearsome and evil than the Amalekites as Satan seeks to wreck our faith. But Jesus intercedes for us with unwearying compassion. Since He is for us, who can prevail against us?

I find it curious and rather frustrating that the author of this letter does not spell out exactly what he means by “entering God’s rest” and “inheriting the promises”. We had to do a lot of hard work researching the background to these ideas to get some sort of handle on what he had in mind. I think the Holy Spirit intended this to be the case, in the same way that Jesus taught in parables so that “those who have ears to hear can hear.” The meaning of the parables has to be sought out by those who realise that Jesus has the words of eternal life. The same, I think, is true of this letter. Those who are dull of hearing will not persevere in seeking out its message and they will not go on to maturity. But for those who carefully search the scriptures and take them to heart, to those who grapple with the difficulties because they see the glimmer of treasure within, they will begin to experience the Holy Spirit revealing the glorious truths of Christ to them.

Here, I believe is just such a truth. The promised land of rest is the place of ultimate peace and fruitfulness. It is a place of complete assurance and security in the saving grace and power of Christ. It is the place where we know and experience the blessings of God poured out upon us day by day. But as we look over the border into this land of promise, we see the threatening giants of fleshly passions, disappointing failures, difficult relationships, frustrated hopes and all the cares and temptations of the world. We are tempted to side with the Israelites and say, “we cannot enter the land. We cannot overcome the giants.” But there is One who is interceding for us. There is One who is able to save us completely. There is One in whom we can place our confidence to carry us forward into all God has for us. He does not grow weary nor ever take rest from His ministry on our behalf. Will we neglect so great a salvation? Will we allow our hearts to be hardened by unbelief? Will we fall short in our faith and fail to enter the promised rest? Not if we remain confident in Jesus’ ministry of intercession. Let us lay hold of the anchor of our hope firmly to the very end.

Such a high priest meets our need ...

Earlier in the letter the author has spoken about Jesus’ qualification for priesthood in terms of His humanity:

“For this reason he had to be made like his brothers in every way, in order that he might become a merciful and faithful high priest in service to God, and that he might make atonement for the sins of the people.” (Heb 2:17)

“For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathise with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin.” (Heb 4:15)

But now the author speaks of His qualifications in terms of His deity. He is completely pure and exalted in His glory:

“The Son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven.” (Heb 1:3)

“Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess.” (Heb 4:14)

⁷ See Numbers 17

As well as the compassion derived from His humanity, He has the effectiveness assured by His purity and status. He is able to completely meet our needs for a high priest.

He sacrificed for their sins once for all...

Another favourite phrase for the author is “once for all”. This signifies the end of the Levitical sacrifices which were performed many times for the benefit of a few.

“He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself.” (Heb 7:27)

“He did not enter by means of the blood of goats and calves; but he entered the Most Holy Place once for all by his own blood, having obtained eternal redemption.” (Heb 9:12)

“But now he has appeared once for all at the end of the ages to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself.” (Heb 9:26)

“Christ was sacrificed once to take away the sins of many people; and he will appear a second time, not to bear sin, but to bring salvation to those who are waiting for him.” (Heb 9:28)

“If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshippers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins.” (Heb 10:2)

“And by that will, we have been made holy through the sacrifice of the body of Jesus Christ once for all.” (Heb 10:10)

In the present passage, the author contrasts the constant need for sacrifices under the Law with the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. The old sacrifices only dealt with past sins and therefore had to be renewed day by day, but Jesus’ sacrifice of Himself dealt with all our sins, both past and future. This is quite radical and counter intuitive. When I sin I naturally feel guilty until either “sufficient” time has passed, or I confess my sin before God. But, the author says, feeling guilty for ones sins is a characteristic of people under the Law (10:2)! The truth is I am already forgiven for the sins I commit each day. They are already dealt with, so that I do not, indeed should not, feel guilty. I should feel sorrowful at my weakness and mourn the shame I bring upon Christ and the disregard I show for God’s wonderful truth and light. And I should feel deeply grateful for the grace and mercy of God. But I should not feel guilty. I should not feel a sense of God’s rejection or fear His punishment. I should not think that I need to do something to restore my fellowship with God. Christ has already done it, once for all. I can now approach the throne of grace boldly to find help for my weakness and needs.

He offered himself

Another contrast with the Levitical priesthood is that Jesus offered Himself as the sacrifice. The death of an animal could never deal satisfactorily with the penalty for sin. Sin corrupts us and makes us unfitting for fellowship with God. The only completely satisfactory penalty for sin is the death of the sinner. This, God did in Christ:

“For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, ⁴ in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit.” (Ro 8:3-4)

Our sin became His sin and His death was our death. But whereas for us, our death for sin would have been followed by eternal damnation, for the sinless Christ death was followed by justification, resurrection and glorification. The penalty for our sin has now been paid, “therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death” (Rom 8:1-2).

...the Son has been made perfect for ever.

Christ has been made a perfect high priest for ever. He is able to fully accomplish the role of a high priest in bringing “many sons to glory” (2:10). The sacrifice of Himself did not make Jesus *perfect* in the sense of sinlessness for He was already so, but it made Him perfect in fulfilling His purpose to save sinful men for friendship with God.

A look at the surprises

There is one surprise we have not already considered. That concerns the meaning of “all” in “He sacrificed for their sins once for all.” This question concerns the doctrine of the atonement which, not surprisingly, is a subject that has received massive attention down through the centuries. The detailed arguments behind the various theories of the atonement are too lengthy to deal with here, but you will find a fuller discussion in Appendix 3. Today the debate is broadly divided between *universalism*, *universal atonement* and *limited atonement*.

Universalism

Universalism⁸ is the belief that through Christ’s death, the entire human race is saved. This view was prominent in the early centuries of the church but was rebuffed by Augustine. These days the view is held mostly by Roman Catholics, Greek and Russian Orthodox churches and liberal Protestants.

Universal Atonement

The theory of universal atonement states that Jesus died for *all* people for *all* time, whether they ever believe in Him or not. His death on the cross was necessary to make it *possible* for any man to turn to Christ and come to saving faith. Thus His death does not *obtain* salvation for all, but brings it within reach of all. It is the faith of a repentant sinner that obtains the salvation which Jesus’ death made available to him. Some of the most compelling scriptures supporting this view are:

“John saw Jesus ... and said, ‘Look, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!’” (Joh 1:29)

“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” (Joh 3:16)

And he died for all, that those who live should no longer live for themselves but for him who died for them and was raised again.” (2Co 5:14-15)

“... God, who is the Saviour of all men, and especially of those who believe.” (1Ti 4:10)

“For the grace of God that brings salvation has appeared to all men.” (Tit 2:11)

“He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world.” (1Jn 2:2)

Limited Atonement

The theory of limited atonement states that Jesus died only for those who are eventually saved. His death *obtains* salvation for those chosen by God before the foundation of the earth to be saved. *Only* the elect can come to faith, *only* the elect can be saved, *only* the elect obtain any benefit from the death of Christ. Thus Christ did not die for all individuals but for all the elect. The theory is the result of a chain of logical arguments developed by Calvin in the 1500’s. One part of the argument is that if God knows who He has chosen to be saved and everyone else is already condemned, in what way can Jesus be said to have died for them? Another argument is that if Jesus has taken the

⁸ Strictly, Christian Universalism, as opposed to the universalism of all faiths having equal validity as a means of salvation.

punishment for the sins of the damned and then they suffer eternal punishment after their death, then their sins have been paid for twice!

My view

I reject *universalism* on the grounds that it makes nonsense of the distinction made in the New Testament between those who are saved and those who will suffer the wrath to come.⁹ I reject *limited atonement* because there are no scriptures that I know of which give direct support to the theory and I am not convinced that we should give much weight to a theory which depends entirely upon logical deduction when so many scriptures seem to contradict it. I prefer to question the *logic* rather seek alternative interpretations of texts which seem quite clear. I take it that Christ did indeed die once for all and that He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world (1Jn 2:2). But only those who respond to this gift of God, by repentance and faith, will receive the salvation it makes available.

Conclusion

The argument through this section is quite simple and its conclusion quite plain:

Jesus has been sworn by God into an eternal priesthood which surpasses and replaces the Levitical priesthood and the Law upon which it is based. He perfectly meets our need.

Questions for discussion and application in Hebrews 7

- V1 What place does blessing take in your relationships?
 How can you grow in being a blessing to all those you encounter?
- V2 How generous are you with the things God gives you?
 How can you combat the world's constant message of get, get, get?
 What possessions do you have which you could get rid of to give yourself a simpler, less cluttered and less stressful life?
 What things or money could you give to others that would bless them?
- V4 What people or organisations do you admire for the work they do? Are you giving them all the financial and prayer support you can?
- V7 Have you asked for prayer, encouragement and discipling from those whom you admire and wish to emulate?
- V18 Are you convinced that the Law of Moses has been set aside for believers?
 Is there any aspect of your faith or practice that is still based on Law?
- V19 Can you explain how the New Covenant deals with temptation and sins for a believer?
- V25 Are you confident in the reality and effectiveness of Jesus' unfaltering intercession for you?
- V26 Do you have any needs that you feel Jesus is not meeting? Share these with friends who can encourage and pray for you.
- V27 Are you confident that all your past and future sins have been completely dealt with by Jesus? Is there anything you feel guilty about? Do you need to repent, or to ask God for the grace to want to repent?

Is there a verse you could memorise from this chapter that would encourage you?

⁹ Matt 3:7, 1Thess 1:10