

## Chapter 18 – Inheritance in daily life - Hebrews 13

In this concluding chapter of the letter, the author shows that living in our inheritance depends on a life of faith demonstrated in everyday relationships; towards strangers, brothers and spouses; towards those with plenty and those in need and towards true and false teachers. Our inheritance is both a matter of following good examples and also setting a good example.

### Prayer

Try using the *thanksgiving, remembrance, confidence* model of prayer as you think over what you have learnt from Hebrews chapter 12 and look forward to studying chapter 13.

### Questions & Surprises

Let us start our study of chapter 13 by reading through and noting any questions or surprises. These are the things that strike me in chapter 13.

- V12-13 Why the reference to the camp rather than the city?
- V13 What is the meaning of going to Jesus *outside* the camp?
- V14 What is the significance of the city?
- V17 What account do leaders have to give?
- V18-19 Why does the author need to solicit prayer on his behalf?
- V21 How does God work in us?

We will try to address these issues as we examine the detail.

### Background

Before proceeding we should familiarise ourselves with Gen 18 (entertaining angels, v2), Gen 28:15, Josh 1:5 (v5), Ps 118:6 (v6), Hos 14:2 (fruit of lips, v15).

### Structure

My medium-brush structure for this chapter was: <sup>1</sup>

- 13:1-8 Live out your faith in practical ways.
- 13:9-17 Follow Christ who is outside the Jewish rituals.
- 13:18-25 Concluding personal requests, blessing and greetings.

Chapter 13 rounds up the letter with some more practical applications of the arguments he has presented along with brief arguments from the Hebrew Scriptures. The three areas of application previously given are revisited, namely, brotherly love, sexual purity and confidence in God's promises along with the continuing assertion that Christ takes us beyond the Law of Moses.

My fine-brush structure is:

- V1-3 Exhortation to love.
- V4-5 Exhortation to godliness.
- V6-8 Exhortation to faith.
- V9-14 Follow Christ who is outside the Jewish rituals.
- V15-17 Honour Christ with hope, thanksgiving, love and submission to leaders.

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<sup>1</sup> See chapter 4

V18-19 Personal prayer request

V20-21 Blessing

V22-25 Closing remarks.

## Argument

The final chapter of the letter is not a random selection of thoughts but a structured concluding application of what has come before. The application given in chapter 12 is repeated here: to love one another and to live sexually pure and godly lives. The exhortation to courage and confidence, which was given in chapter 10, is also briefly restated here. This is reinforced with another exhortation to imitate the faith of those who have inherited the promises (6:12), but this time their leaders are specifically held up as examples (v7). Jesus' unchanging faithfulness is given as another foundation for confidence.

The author then presents his final argument concerning Jesus as the fulfilment of the Law. Here we find the only specific warning in the letter against Judaisers and it is a brief, passing reference (v9). The application is an affirmation that our "altar" is beyond the scope of the Jewish rituals, at which we offer sacrifices of praise, thanksgiving and brotherly love.

One new application is introduced at the very end of the letter proper (before the blessing and greetings), which is to submit to their leaders. It was no doubt particularly appropriate to the original recipients of the letter, but is also very appropriate in view of the lessons the author draws from Israel's history and the overall structure of the letter. The opening statements concern God speaking to us, followed shortly by warnings to heed and to meet God's word with faith. For the Israelites in the desert, that meant obeying Moses. For us, it means willingly obeying our Spirit-anointed church leaders.

The closing blessing is crafted to encapsulate the work of Christ both *for* us and *in* us.

So here is my summary of the argument in chapter 13:

Live lives of faith in Christ and obedience to Him. He will thus fulfil His wonderful purposes in you – to inherit the promises.

## The Detail

We will now look more closely at the detail of chapter 13.

### Heb 13:1-3

<sup>(1)</sup> Keep on loving each other as brothers. <sup>(2)</sup> Do not forget to entertain strangers, for by so doing some people have entertained angels without knowing it. <sup>(3)</sup> Remember those in prison as if you were their fellow-prisoners, and those who are ill-treated as if you yourselves were suffering.

#### *The argument*

The author here expands his exhortation to love, made in chapter 10 ("spur one another to love and good deeds") and again in chapter 12 ("live in peace with all men"). Christ's love for us and in us should be made evident through our love of our fellow Christians, of strangers, prisoners and those who suffer in any way.

#### *Keep on... do not forget... remember...*

The author is clear that perseverance and faithfulness are essential ingredients to the Christian faith. It is all too easy to forget those we do not see regularly and to get absorbed in our own small worlds. Personally I find this an enormous challenge as I tend to focus completely on whatever I am

doing at the moment. I am comforted that Jesus knows what it's like to be a man and He sympathises with my weakness. But let us be watchful of our tendency to settle with comfortable relationships. We must keep ourselves open, loving and welcoming to those we do not know well, looking to draw others into the love of the church family, especially those who seem to be on their own. Hospitality is such an easy expression of love and acceptance and yet one which is often neglected. Having grown up in a fellowship where hospitality was strong, I have been quite shocked at the lack of hospitality in many other churches. Leaders, especially, are supposed to be hospitable (it being a qualification of an elder, 1 Ti 3:2; Tit 1:8). We all seem to live such busy lives that we have no time for relationships. This is not healthy and it is not godly. If we are too busy for relationships then we have got our priorities wrong and have got caught up in the world's lies. That is what Jesus taught us through Mary and Martha. Are our job-lists filled with things to be done or people to love? Perhaps we should develop a spiritual discipline of putting one or two people at the top of our priorities each day. Let us stir one another to love and good deeds.

### **Heb 13:4-5**

<sup>(4)</sup> Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. <sup>(5)</sup> Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, "Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you."

#### ***The argument***

Having previously said, "Without holiness no one will see the Lord", the author now touches on the principal areas of temptation which we face; that is sexual immorality, the love of money and covetousness. The promise we have from God, which strengthens us against temptation, is that He will never forsake us.

#### ***Keep your lives free...***

Temptation works by persuading us that we are better off with the sin in question than with righteousness. When we consider the logic of it, it seems utterly ridiculous that we should ever believe such an obvious lie. How could a temporary and illusory gain be better than God's promise to make all things work together for my good? How could the false promises of a liar be more attractive than the eternal assurances of the Light of the world? John Piper ably deals with this issue in his book "Future Grace". The strength of temptation often lies in that its reward is immediate and tangible, whereas the reward of righteousness is often in the future. This is why we need to "be transformed by the renewing of our minds."<sup>2</sup> We need to meditate on God's magnificent goodness and His beautiful purity; to nurture our desire to walk in joyful fellowship with the Spirit. Whereas covetousness, for instance, imagines a future made easy with wealth, we need to imagine a future walking in the fullness of God's power and love.

The reality is that sin entangles us (12:1). A person who, by God's grace, keeps their lives free from the entanglements of sexual immorality, enslavement to money, covetousness and other addictions, will be a much healthier and happier person. A clean conscience is worth more than anything else. If we do fall into sin, then through Christ's one sacrifice we are forgiven and cleansed and can go on to have a free and confident relationship with God.<sup>3</sup> But, as we have also seen, there may also be judgement and consequences (both temporal and eternal).

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<sup>2</sup> Rom 12:1-2

<sup>3</sup> 1 Jn 2:1-2 "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. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not only for ours but also for the sins of the whole world."

***be content ... “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”***

When we are going through times of great uncertainty or difficulty it may be very tempting to long for the security offered by the world – typically an ample supply of money. Many of God’s people struggle to provide for themselves, their families and others they are trying to care for. Perhaps they live in a country with a dysfunctional economy, or they cannot find employment, or they have been unfairly discriminated against. Sometimes God says to us, “Get up and go from here...” as He said to Abraham. This may entail leaving behind the security we have been enjoying and heading into unknown territory. Life with Jesus is an adventure of faith – it is supposed to be!

Whatever the reason we are facing uncertainty or challenge, we have a promise to strengthen our faith, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.” God wants us to be content with this promise rather than pursue the false promise of money. We are already in a covenant of blessing with God; He wants us to prosper and always have enough for every good work<sup>4</sup> and we should pursue these promises with faith. But our love and confidence must be centred on God and His promises, not on the love of money.

### **Heb 13:6-8**

<sup>(6)</sup> So we say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can man do to me?” <sup>(7)</sup> Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. <sup>(8)</sup> Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever.

#### ***The argument***

Because God said He will never forsake us we can have confidence in Him and be free from fear. This is what the recipients of the letter could witness in their leaders’ lives – they were confident in Christ’s unchanging faithfulness towards them.

#### ***Remember your leaders***

Christian leaders have a responsibility to lead in faith and confidence in Christ. *Faith* is the element in which leaders are called to lead – “without faith it is impossible to please God”. In the world, leadership is to do with vision, ideas, skills, charisma and so on, but leadership in Christ’s church is to do with love, servanthood, godliness and faith. These are the qualities we should look out for in others, and when we see them, we should try to emulate them. If we are involved in leadership selection or training we should be looking for those who demonstrate a deep trust in God, who break ground in faith. Faith is what makes us Kingdom people as opposed to just nice people. By faith we inherit the promises.

#### ***...the same yesterday and today and for ever***

This little phrase is slipped in here without comment and almost without context. Yet it summarises the whole letter. The Good News about Jesus is not some new and different teaching about God. The New Testament does not, as is popularly claimed, present us with a different view of God. The author has gone to great lengths to demonstrate that the Gospel is the same Gospel, of the same God, that was revealed to Abraham and Moses and the other Hebrew saints. The long promised New Covenant has always been God’s purpose; it is being worked out today and will continue forever. All this is encapsulated in Jesus Himself who is the same yesterday and today and for ever.

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<sup>4</sup> 2 Cor 9:8 “And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.”

## Heb 13:9-14

<sup>(9)</sup> Do not be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings. It is good for our hearts to be strengthened by grace, not by ceremonial foods, which are of no value to those who eat them. <sup>(10)</sup> We have an altar from which those who minister at the tabernacle have no right to eat. <sup>(11)</sup> The high priest carries the blood of animals into the Most Holy Place as a sin offering, but the bodies are burned outside the camp. <sup>(12)</sup> And so Jesus also suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. <sup>(13)</sup> Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore. <sup>(14)</sup> For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.

### *The argument*

Christ alone can give us atonement, righteousness, true life and strength. Since this is the case, we should not get distracted by false claims about the ongoing place of the Mosaic rituals.

This passage encapsulates one of the great purposes of the letter; to prepare Jewish Christians for life outside the Jewish community and especially to give a sense of belonging and continuity after the prophesied destruction of Jerusalem and its temple. The author is saying, “Look, our identity is found outside the tabernacle and outside Jerusalem.” Our tabernacle is the community of believers<sup>5</sup> and our City is the New Jerusalem.

### *Do not be carried away...*

Here we find the only reference in the letter to the Judaisers.<sup>6</sup> Although the letter directly addresses issues of concern to Judaisers, the lack of any previous reference to them suggests that they were not a major issue at that time and were not the prime reason for the letter. Faith to inherit the promises is the dominant theme and, the author warns, any distraction from this down blind alleys of obsolete religious ritual is to be avoided.

### *...strengthened by grace*

Ritual and ceremony can be comforting to us, because of its familiarity and unchangingness in a changing and uncertain world. But the comfort is illusory unless it is derived from God Himself. He has provided grace, not ritual or ceremonial foods, to strengthen us. It is clear the author was not thinking of literal eating (since we do not eat grace!) but of feeding our “hearts” with these things. Nevertheless, this warning should make us stop and think about our view of Christian ritual, especially the breaking of bread which involves the literal eating of ceremonial food. Is it God’s grace in Christ that we take comfort from when we eat the broken bread and drink the wine or do we think the ritual itself does us good?

I find great comfort and encouragement in sharing week by week in the liturgy and breaking bread at my village church. Each week I hear and read the (familiar) words as if for the first time. I find God continually speaks to me with correction and comfort through the carefully crafted service and the wisely chosen scriptures from which it is constructed. But whatever our regular church service is like, we need to take care that our hearts are strengthened by grace and not the comfort of familiarity.

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Cor 3:16 “Don’t you know that you yourselves are God’s temple and that God’s Spirit dwells in your midst?”

<sup>6</sup> This is the term used to describe those who believed Jesus was the Messiah, but also taught continued adherence to the Law of Moses, even for Gentile believers. They were a constant threat to the early church against whom Paul spoke very strongly, most notably in his letter to the Galatians.

### ***... no right to eat***

Christ is the Bread of life.<sup>7</sup> Those who cling to the Mosaic law have no right to share in Him. The Judaisers wanted a foot in both camps, but that is impossible. To continue with the sacrifices in the Temple is a denial of the finished work of Christ.

### ***We have an altar...***

It seems that the phrase “we have an altar” has been taken rather too literally by the Roman Catholic, Anglican and Orthodox church, not to mention many other churches. I have never understood why some churches have altars. Indeed, most churches seem to have a special table with a special cloth and various other special bits and pieces upon it. They may call it a communion table, but they often still treat it with reverence. Jesus did not say, wherever you meet, put aside a special table... He said whenever to eat this meal, remember me. The point the author makes is that our altar is Christ Himself.

### ***...outside the city gate***

The nearest thing Christians have to an altar is in fact the cross. That is where Christ’s sacrifice was made. He died in disgrace outside the city walls on a cross amongst the rubbish, not in the nicely controlled and lavishly decorated temple. An altar in a sanctuary is a relic of Moses tabernacle. A rough wooden cross outside the church building amongst the rubbish bins would surely be a much more fitting symbol of the New Covenant, reminding us that Christ died for a broken world, not just for nice church-goers.

### ***... the camp ... the city***

Throughout the letter the author has drawn on imagery from Moses tabernacle, rather than from the later temple. I presume this is to root his arguments in the most authentic expression of the Law of Moses rather than be subject to any dispute over later developments. For this reason, in speaking of the Law he refers to burning the carcasses outside the *camp*, but when speaking of Jesus he speaks of the *city* (Jerusalem) because that is where He suffered.

### ***Let us, then, go to him outside the camp...***

By the time this letter was written the synagogues were becoming increasingly hostile to believers in their midst. To identify with Christ meant disgrace for many Jewish believers within their own communities where the religious leaders claimed that Jesus was an impostor. This call to go to Jesus outside the camp, sharing His disgrace, is directed at Jewish believers, urging them to relocate their identity away from the Law of Moses and place it irreversibly in Jesus the Messiah. Jesus died outside Jerusalem, symbolising the fact that the New Covenant relationship is outside the old Law-bound Judaism. It is time to turn from the rejection directed at them by the non-Christian Jews and form their own communities of believers free from the divisive shackles of the Law.

For us, this exhortation can serve as a reminder that we too are called to go outside. Although our identity is rightly with the Body of Christ, the church, the focus of our Christian lives should not be in the comfort and security of “the camp” but outside the camp where the prisoners sit in darkness.<sup>8</sup> Although Jesus taught regularly in the synagogue, most of His recorded ministry took place outside in the community. A great challenge for churches and their leaders is to resist the strong pull of the safety and familiarity of the “camp” and instead follow Jesus outside the camp. Church programs

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<sup>7</sup> John 6:35 “I am the bread of life. He who comes to me will never go hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.”

<sup>8</sup> “For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost.” (Lu 19:10)

and relationships are so easily focussed on gathering in the church facilities rather than ministering in the community. Jesus has set us very challenging example to follow.

*... the city that is to come*

The readers can joyfully accept their expulsion from the “city” (representing the Jewish religious community) because they have been called to be part of a greater community – the eternal kingdom of God. However, this is not away in heaven when we die, but as Jesus taught us to pray, “Your Kingdom come ... on earth as it is in heaven.”

The immediate significance of this verse is contrasting Jerusalem, the physical city around which Jewish hopes centred, with the *New Jerusalem* of God’s world-wide Kingdom which is the Christian hope. This echoes the close of the previous chapter, speaking of a Kingdom that cannot be shaken. It reminds us that whatever “cities” we might build with our movements, denominations, church structures, training programs and so on, they are all temporary and should be treated as such. Transformed lives are eternal, churches are temporary.

**Heb 13:15-17**

<sup>(15)</sup> Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise—the fruit of lips that confess his name. <sup>(16)</sup> And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased. <sup>(17)</sup> Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.

*The argument*

Worship in the new community of God’s people is expressed in faith, love, care and godly relationships.

*... continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise*

Worship is not expressed through praise when things are going well and self-pity when things are tough; it is the sacrifice of continuous praise, through good times and hard times.

I have friends in Liberia whose homes, church and school were all flattened by bulldozers in a moment. They believed that they had legal ownership of the land and had laboured for years to build a community in this place. There was a dispute over ownership and the other party simply bulldozed the whole lot. I spoke with my friends as this was taking place, and although shocked and dismayed, they continued to offer the sacrifice of praise to God. God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”

Often the big challenges provoke us into rising in faith. Perhaps it is the minor irritations that are more of a challenge to our sacrifice of praise. Our lives are full of everyday challenges that can wear us down. We do well to practice the continual confession of our confidence in God and our covenant of blessing and grace.

*... do good*

It is of course our obedience to God and our actions that reflect His nature that constitute the meat of our worship. Without imitating God’s goodness in our actions towards others all our “worship” is empty and meaningless to God.

### ***Obey your leaders...***

God calls leaders to shepherd His people and to provide an example of faith for others to follow. Leaders are not to demand obedience<sup>9</sup> but godly leadership will inspire obedience which should be given willingly in gratitude to God's provision. Leadership is a difficult enough task at the best of times; so long as obedience is consistent with God's word and our conscience we should give willing obedience from our hearts.

### ***... they must give an account***

It is good to remember that we must all give an account to God for our behaviour; for how we have responded to our leaders and leaders for how they have led. Remembering this can help free us from the need to demand justification for every action our leaders take before we will follow.

Remembering this is also a sober warning to leaders that they will have to give an account for how they have "kept watch" over us. Leadership is not only challenging within the human context, it carries a weighty responsibility for the eternal well-being of those in our care.

### **Heb 13:18-19**

(18) Pray for us. We are sure that we have a clear conscience and desire to live honourably in every way.

(19) I particularly urge you to pray so that I may be restored to you soon."

### ***Pray for us...***

Having written at such length about God's love and provision for us, about our confidence in coming to God for help and the eternal intercession of Christ on our behalf, it is perhaps a little surprising to find this prayer request. Why on earth would this great saint be recruiting his readers to pray on his behalf? Indeed why do we need to pray at all if Jesus is already praying for us?

I am sure that until we see Jesus face to face, and perhaps even then, prayer will remain something of a mystery. Although many people have offered explanations, the Bible just assumes prayer rather than explaining it. I suspect that all we need to know is that prayer and intercession is part of the divine makeup. The Trinity is engaged in prayer with both Jesus and the Holy Spirit described as interceding before the Father. Their role is clearly not to try and get answers from the Father, but rather this internal prayer within the Godhead is simply how God "works". The remarkable thing is that we are allowed to take part in this mysterious process. We try to discern God's will so that we can join in prayer with Him to see it done. Where we do not know how to pray the Holy Spirit helps us to pray without words<sup>10</sup>.

We should never see prayer as a means of persuading God to act. Asking many people to pray for some great need is useless if we think that the more people we can get to pray, the more influence we have with God. That is a heathen idea. God is already interceding for our need, but He is looking for believers who will join with Him. This letter is about faith and confidence in God and prayer is one of the principal means of working that out. Let us not throw it all away with unbelieving pagan notions of a god who needs to be woken and persuaded to act on our behalf.

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<sup>9</sup> Mk 10:42-44 "Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all."

<sup>10</sup> Rom 8:26 "In the same way, the Spirit helps us in our weakness. We do not know what we ought to pray for, but the Spirit himself intercedes for us through wordless groans."



## Heb 13:20-21

<sup>(20)</sup> May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, <sup>(21)</sup> equip you with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen.

This closing blessing is another summary of the whole letter. It is about God equipping the saints for doing His will through the many and great promises He has given us. To see this letter as simply about Jewish believers needing to stand firm in looking to Jesus for their salvation is to completely miss the point. That was only the basics from which the readers are urged to progress. From beginning to end the author has been urging his readers to progress in inheriting the promises by which we establish God's Kingdom on earth through firm confidence in His promises.

## Heb 13:22-25

<sup>(22)</sup> Brothers, I urge you to bear with my word of exhortation, for I have written you only a short letter. <sup>(23)</sup> I want you to know that our brother Timothy has been released. If he arrives soon, I will come with him to see you. <sup>(24)</sup> Greet all your leaders and all God's people. Those from Italy send you their greetings. <sup>(25)</sup> Grace be with you all.

### *...bear with my word of exhortation*

The author's plea to his readers to bear with his "short letter" is a recognition that he has written about momentous things that require a lifetime of application. He has not written simply to inform the intellect or fill in some gaps in their understanding or to strengthen their resolve in a crisis. His words require deep study, lengthy consideration and much searching of the heart. The author feels that a much longer letter might have done a more thorough job, and indeed we may wish he had filled out some of the gaps for us. But there is a divine wisdom in leaving things unsaid, as we see in Jesus' use of parables. If we want to know what God has for us we need to search Him out. I pray that this book, which has attempted to fill out much that the original author might have wished to have added, will not short-circuit God's intention, but rather inspire you to deeper meditation on and application of these great truths.

Grace be with you...

## Review

### Questions for discussion and application in Hebrews 13

- V1-2    What can you do to give hospitality to strangers?  
How can you encourage the growth of your own hospitality and that of your church?
- V3      How can you support those who are persecuted for their faith in Christ?  
How can you support those in your community who are abused and neglected?
- V4      Are your sexual desires directed in a godly way?  
Do you need help in this area?
- V5-6    Are you content with what you have?  
Is God's love and commitment to you sufficient for you?
- V7-9    What aspects of your leaders' lives inspire your faith?  
Do you read Christian biographies and books on sound orthodox Christian doctrine? Do you carefully weigh new teaching and experiences against scripture?

- V10-13 In what ways do you practice your faith outside the safety of church?  
Do you offer to pray for work colleagues and share the love of Christ with them?
- V14-16 Does your worship have a balanced diet of hope for the future, thanksgiving for the present and generous giving of your money and your time in good works?
- V17-19 Are you a pleasure to lead?  
Do you pray for your leaders?
- V20-21 Do you welcome God's work and will in your life?  
Is there anything that alienates you from God?

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