

Hebrews 13

The writer continues his summing up of all that he has written. It may be useful for us to cast our minds back, look over the whole letter again and see how our understanding has been enlarged as the Holy Spirit has made specific facts clearer to us in our study and sharing together.

This last chapter has a definite air of practical application as well as some more shafts of light. One favourite for me is **13:8**, the first verse I ever learned: “*Jesus Christ, the same yesterday and today and for ever.*” Literally, as often in the New Testament, the words translated ‘for ever’ are actually ‘into the ages’. The same meaning, but somehow less vague and more specific. For me, I can more easily look forward to living ‘into the ages’ than living ‘for ever’.

But back to **13:1-6**, which looks a bit like a list of ‘dos and don’ts’. Actually, it is a continuation from the previous chapter, and perhaps especially from **12:28-29**, a response of gratitude for being included in this new kingdom which cannot be shaken . . .

13:1 ‘Brotherly love’ (*philadelphia*). He hasn’t mentioned this anywhere else in the letter, but here is an encouragement to good ‘horizontal’ relationships which **result** from our new ‘vertical’ relationship with the Father through the eternal Son – probably the main theme of the whole letter.¹

13:2 Hospitality to strangers, not only to those we know. The Greek literally says “do not let it escape your notice to befriend strangers”. The obvious examples are Abraham and Lot in **Genesis 18 & 19**, and it certainly escaped their notice that they were actually angels, though Abraham eventually recognised who **one of them** was!

13:3 Remembering prisoners. I think this will be particularly fellow-believers, “*as though in bonds with them*”. Similarly those who are ill-treated. It may not hit the headlines, but there are many countries and regimes where Christian believers still suffer for their faith.

13:4 Literally, ‘Marriage in honour among all’ – no verb! Not something to **do** so much as a way to **be**. Very practical! How many times have we heard of Christian leaders who have been caught in sexual sin? Forgiveness is always there for those who genuinely confess and repent, but God’s judgment remains for those who persist!

13:5-6 Again literally, ‘Character free from the love of silver, being content with what you have’ – and then he gives the backup reassurance of the Lord’s promises, first to the whole people of Israel in **Deuteronomy 31:6** and then specifically to Joshua in **Deuteronomy 31:8 & Joshua 1:5**. And we can confidently echo these promises, with the psalmist in **Psalms 118:6**. What CAN man do to us? All the promises of God are ‘Yes’ in Jesus! (**2 Corinthians 1:20**).

More practical advice (13:7-8)

13:7 Good advice! He doesn’t say ‘imitate their actions’ – just copying what they did, but ‘imitate their faith’, their inner motivation which led to the outcomes of their lives. For me, that has always been the greatest value of reading Christian biography – to see the inner workings of God with the person and learn from that. Certainly not trying to copy everything they may have done!

13:8 . . . and here is the confirmation WHY we benefit from that: Jesus has not changed (and will not change ‘into the ages’) and he will work in our lives just as he has done in those who led us.

And then a **warning** in **13:9**, which leads on to more reassurance in **13:10-14**:

Just as there were people ready to pounce on the believers in Galatia, trying to get them back into legalism and the Jewish Law, so the original readers of this letter (probably mainly believing Jews) will be facing constant pressure to go back into all the detail of the Law, with all the rules about what they should and shouldn’t eat. Basically, the writer is saying ‘Food

¹ Peter writes in **2 Peter 1:7** about brotherly love leading on to deliberate sacrificial love, *agapē*.

rules are of no benefit; what strengthens your heart is the grace of God.'

. . . which leads him into a reminder of what we have in Jesus but those who follow the Jewish Law do NOT have, participation in the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus on the cross.¹ Some of the sacrifices and offerings in the Old Covenant became food for the priests, but the body of the animal whose blood was used for the sin offering was completely destroyed by fire, outside the camp, and they were not allowed to eat any of it (**Exodus 29:14** and many more passages). He finds another parallel here: The animal's body was burned outside the camp: Jesus suffered and died outside the gate.

He seems to be saying that Jesus' sacrifice was outside the gates of Jerusalem, outside the old setup, so let's go out and join him there. We don't belong to the old Jerusalem, which will not last, we are looking to the new Jerusalem which is yet to come. Reminds me of what Paul wrote in **Galatians 4:21-31**, and especially **4:25 & 26**: ". . . *this Hagar is Mount Sinai in Arabia and corresponds to the present Jerusalem, for she is in slavery with her children. But the Jerusalem above is free; she is our mother.*"

13:15 As an outcome of this, then, he writes, let us offer up a different sort of sacrifice – praise to God continually (literally, 'through everything') – the fruit of lips that confess his name.

13:16 Two more sacrifices that delight the heart of God: doing good and sharing – the same word that is usually translated as 'fellowship' = 'having things in common' – material and spiritual!

13:17 Literally, 'be persuaded by those who lead, guide and govern you'. This is not a command to blindly follow everything that any leader may tell us to do! The sort of leaders by whom we **can** be persuaded are those who genuinely 'watch over your souls as those who will give an account'. And the result? '. . . **in order that** they may do this with joy and not with groaning' – that would not benefit anyone! Good and effective leadership condensed into one verse! These are probably the leaders already referred to in **13:7** – good examples!

13:18-19 A request from the writer(s) for some sharing with him/them! This is the first time in the whole letter that we have anything directly personal from the writer(s). Seems like there may be a team at work here, just as was often the case with Paul's letters. They are persuaded that they have a good conscience and their will and intention is to behave well in all respects, but they still request prayer support. However, it still looks like one person is the main writer, as the desired result of the prayer support is that 'I' will soon be restored to them. Sounds like a prisoner who hopes to be released soon, maybe supported by others around him who may not be prisoners. Similar to Paul's situation.

13:20-21 Now he prays for his readers, that 'the God of peace' will equip them 'in every good thing to do his will' and – here is the key – 'working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom the glory into the ages of the ages'. A prayer to echo, for ourselves and others!

13:22-24 Closing comments: This is supposedly a brief (!) word of encouragement (called alongside to help) and he hopes that his readers will 'bear with him' (same word in **Ephesians 4:2**). He seems to realise that there is a lot in what he has written, even if he thinks it is brief! Timothy has been released from prison and if Timothy comes to him soon (and if the writer **is** released), they will both come to visit the readers. No prizes for guessing where he is writing from – he is in Italy and apparently in prison – a Roman jail!

Greetings specifically to all of their leaders and also to all the other believers.

13:25 "Grace be with you all". Signing off in similar style to Paul . . .

Dave Taylor November 2025

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¹ I wonder whether this could also be a reference to taking part in the Lord's Supper?