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HEBREWS

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ISBN 08910-92722

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Printed in the United States of America

13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 / 99 98 97

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CONTENTS

How to Use This Study	5
One—The Book of Hebrews (Overview)	9
Outline of Hebrews	20
Two—Christ Superior to Prophets (1:1-4)	21
Three—Christ Superior to Angels (1:5-2:18)	29
Four—Christ Superior to Moses (3:1-6)	43
Five—Warning Against Unbelief (3:7-19)	51
Six—Unbelief: Consequences and Cure (4:1-16)	59
Seven—Superior Priestly Qualifications (5:1-10)	67
Eight—Spiritual Degeneration (5:11-6:12)	77
Nine—God's Promise Certain (6:13-20)	87
Ten—A Superior Priestly Order (7:1-28)	95
Eleven—The New Covenant (8:1-13)	105
Twelve—The Earthly Tabernacle (9:1-10)	113
Thirteen—A Superior Sacrifice (9:11-28)	121
Fourteen—Once For All (10:1-18)	129
Fifteen—Perseverance (10:19-39)	137
Sixteen—By Faith (11:1-40)	147
Seventeen—Discipline and Commitment (12:1-29)	157
Eighteen—Exhortations (13:1-25)	167
Nineteen—Looking Back (Review)	175
Study Aids	181

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The LIFECHANGE series has been produced through the coordinated efforts of a team of Navigator Bible study developers and NavPress editorial staff, along with a nationwide network of fieldtesters.

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HOW TO USE THIS STUDY

Objectives

Most guides in the LIFECHANGE series of Bible studies cover one book of the Bible. Although the LIFECHANGE guides vary with the books they explore, they share some common goals:

1. To provide you with a firm foundation of understanding and a thirst to return to the book;
2. To teach you by example how to study a book of the Bible without structured guides;
3. To give you all the historical background, word definitions, and explanatory notes you need, so that your only other reference is the Bible;
4. To help you grasp the message of the book as a whole;
5. To teach you how to let God's Word transform you into Christ's image.

Each lesson in this study is designed to take 60 to 90 minutes to complete on your own. The guide is based on the assumption that you are completing one lesson per week, but if time is limited you can do half a lesson per week or whatever amount allows you to be thorough.

Flexibility

LIFECHANGE guides are flexible, allowing you to adjust the quantity and depth of your study to meet your individual needs. The guide offers many optional questions in addition to the regular numbered questions. The optional questions, which appear in the margins of the study pages, include the following:

Optional Application. Nearly all application questions are optional; we hope you will do as many as you can without overcommitting yourself.

For Thought and Discussion. Beginning Bible students should be able to handle these, but even advanced students need to think about them. These questions frequently deal with ethical issues and other biblical principles. They often offer cross-references to spark thought, but the references do not give

obvious answers. They are good for group discussions.

For Further Study. These include: a) cross-references that shed light on a topic the book discusses, and b) questions that delve deeper into the passage. You can omit them to shorten a lesson without missing a major point of the passage.

If you are meeting in a group, decide together which optional questions to prepare for each lesson, and how much of the lesson you will cover at the next meeting. Normally, the group leader should make this decision, but you might let each member choose his or her own application questions.

As you grow in your walk with God, you will find the LIFECHANGE guide growing with you—a helpful reference on a topic, a continuing challenge for application, a source of questions for many levels of growth.

Overview and Details

The study begins with an overview of Hebrews. The key to interpretation is context—what is the whole passage or book *about*?—and the key to context is purpose—what is the author’s *aim* for the whole work? In lesson one you will lay the foundation for your study of Hebrews by asking yourself, “Why did the author (and God) write the book? What did they want to accomplish? What is the book about?”

In lessons two through eighteen you will analyze successive passages of Hebrews in detail. Thinking about how a paragraph fits into the overall goal of the book will help you to see its purpose. Its purpose will help you see its meaning. Frequently reviewing a chart or outline of the book will enable you to make these connections.

In lesson nineteen you will review Hebrews, returning to the big picture to see whether your view of it has changed after closer study. Review will also strengthen your grasp of major issues and give you an idea of how you have grown from your study.

Kinds of Questions

Bible study on your own—without a structured guide—follows a progression. First you observe: What does the passage *say*? Then you interpret: What does the passage *mean*? Lastly you apply: How does this truth *affect* my life?

Some of the “how” and “why” questions will take some creative thinking, even prayer, to answer. Some are opinion questions without clearcut right answers; these will lend themselves to discussions and side studies.

Don’t let your study become an exercise of knowledge alone. Treat the passage as God’s Word, and stay in dialogue with Him as you study. Pray, “Lord, what do You want me to see here?” “Father, why is this true?” “Lord, how does this apply to my life?”

It is important that you write down your answers. The act of writing clarifies your thinking and helps you to remember.

Study Aids

A list of reference materials, including a few notes of explanation to help you make good use of them, begins on page 181. This guide is designed to include enough background to let you interpret with just your Bible and the guide. Still, if you want more information on a subject or want to study a book on your own, try the references listed.

Scripture Versions

Unless otherwise indicated, the Bible quotations in this guide are from the New International Version of the Bible. Other versions cited are the Revised Standard Version (RSV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), and the King James Version (KJV).

Use any translation you like for study, preferably more than one. A paraphrase such as The Living Bible is not accurate enough for study, but it can be helpful for comparison or devotional reading.

Memorizing and Meditating

A psalmist wrote, “I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you” (Psalm 119:11). If you write down a verse or passage that challenges or encourages you, and reflect on it often for a week or more, you will find it beginning to affect your motives and actions. We forget quickly what we read once; we remember what we ponder.

When you find a significant verse or passage, you might copy it onto a card to keep with you. Set aside five minutes during each day just to think about what the passage might mean in your life. Recite it over to yourself, exploring its meaning. Then, return to your passage as often as you can during your day, for a brief review. You will soon find it coming to mind spontaneously.

For Group Study

A group of four to ten people allows the richest discussions, but you can adapt this guide for other sized groups. It will suit a wide range of group types, such as home Bible studies, growth groups, youth groups, and businessmen’s studies. Both new and experienced Bible students, and new and mature Christians, will benefit from the guide. You can omit or leave for later years any questions you find too easy or too hard.

The guide is intended to lead a group through one lesson per week. However, feel free to split lessons if you want to discuss them more thoroughly. Or, omit some questions in a lesson if preparation or discussion time is limited. You can always return to this guide for personal study later. You will be able to discuss only a few questions at length, so choose some for discussion and others for background. Make time at each discussion for members to ask about anything

they didn't understand.

Each lesson in the guide ends with a section called "For the group." These sections give advice on how to focus a discussion, how you might apply the lesson in your group, how you might shorten a lesson, and so on. The group leader should read each "For the group" section at least a week ahead so that he or she can tell the group how to prepare for the next lesson.

Each member should prepare for a meeting by writing answers for all of the background and discussion questions to be covered. If the group decides not to take an hour per week for private preparation, then expect to take at least two meetings per lesson to work through the questions. Application will be very difficult, however, without private thought and prayer.

Two reasons for studying in a group are accountability and support. When each member commits in front of the rest to seek growth in an area of life, you can pray with one another, listen jointly for God's guidance, help one another to resist temptation, assure each other that the other's growth matters to you, use the group to practice spiritual principles, and so on. Pray about one another's commitments and needs at most meetings. Spend the first few minutes of each meeting sharing any results from applications prompted by previous lessons. Then discuss new applications toward the end of the meeting. Follow such sharing with prayer for these and other needs.

If you write down each other's applications and prayer requests, you are more likely to remember to pray for them during the week, ask about them at the next meeting, and notice answered prayers. You might want to get a notebook for prayer requests and discussion notes.

Notes taken during discussion will help you to remember, follow up on ideas, stay on the subject, and clarify a total view of an issue. But don't let note-taking keep you from participating. Some groups choose one member at each meeting to take notes. Then someone copies the notes and distributes them at the next meeting. Rotating these tasks can help include more people. Some groups have someone take notes on a large pad of paper or erasable marker board (preformed shower wallboard works well), so that everyone can see what has been recorded.

Pages 184 lists some good sources of counsel for leading group studies.

LESSON ONE

OVERVIEW

The Book of Hebrews

"To read it is to breathe the atmosphere of heaven itself. To study it is to partake of strong spiritual meat. To abide in its teachings is to be led from immaturity to maturity in the knowledge of Christian truth and of Christ Himself. It is to 'go on unto perfection.'"¹

The Epistle to the Hebrews reigns unchallenged as the best New Testament commentary on the Old Testament and its relationship to Jesus Christ. It makes clear that the sacrifices and other priestly activities were but shadows pointing forward to Christ, the once-for-all sacrifice for sin, the true Priest, the one mediator between God and man. Indeed, Hebrews may be considered a grand portrait of Christ with the Old Testament as its background.

First Impressions

If you are like most people, when you receive an important letter you probably read it straight through first to see what the writer has to say in general. After that, you may go back to examine particular sections more closely. This is just the way to study a biblical letter. In this lesson, you'll take a broad look at Hebrews to lay the groundwork for detailed study in future lessons.

Start by reading the letter through from beginning to end in one sitting. Try reading parts of it aloud, such as 12:1-3, 18-29. Get a general impression of what the author is getting at. Think about questions 1 and 2 as you read.

1. Repetition is a clue to the ideas and concepts a writer considers most important to his message. What words and concepts occur over and over in this letter?
-
-

2. What seems to be the author's attitude toward his readers? How does he feel about them? (Angry? Thrilled? Frustrated? Impersonal? Compassionate?)

3. How does he refer to his letter in 13:22?

4. What do your answers to questions 1 through 3 imply about the author's reasons or aims in writing this letter?

Contrasts

Study Skill—Patterns and Outlines

The first step in an overview is to get some first impressions of the book. Repeated words, the overall mood or tone, the author's attitude toward his readers and his topic—these are all helpful first impressions.

After that, make a broad tentative outline of the book. Start by giving a title to each chapter or main section, and look for patterns that run from section to section. Questions 5 and 8 below point out two such patterns in Hebrews.

5. Briefly scan through the letter once again, this time paying attention to the contrasts the author uses in supporting his main theme.

(1:1-4) Revelation through prophets contrasted with _____

(1:5-2:18) Angels contrasted with _____

(3:1-6) Moses contrasted with _____

(3:12-4:10) Canaan rest contrasted with _____

(4:14-5:10) Aaron's priesthood contrasted with _____

(5:11-14) Spiritual infancy contrasted with _____

(6:1-20) Apostasy contrasted with _____

(7:1-28) Aaron's priesthood contrasted with _____

(8:1-13) The old covenant contrasted with _____

(9:11-28) Sacrificial blood of animals contrasted with _____

(10:1-18) Repeated Levitical sacrifices contrasted with _____

(10:19-39) Perseverance contrasted with _____

(11:1-40) Faith contrasted with _____

6. What do these contrasts suggest to you about the author's goal in this letter?

7. In ancient manuscripts, this letter is entitled, *Pros Hebraious*, "To Hebrews." This probably refers to a group of Hebrew Christians. Why do you think the approach you observed in questions 5 and 6 would have been effective with first-century Jewish Christians?

Doctrinal and practical

8. Throughout Hebrews, the author gives theological teaching and then says, "Therefore. . . ." Below, summarize the theological points he makes in each doctrinal section, then summarize the practical "therefore" that should result from the doctrine.

doctrine (1:1-14) _____

therefore (2:1) _____

doctrine (2:5-18) _____

therefore (3:1) _____

doctrine (3:7-19) _____

therefore (4:1) _____

doctrine (4:6-10) _____

therefore (4:11) _____

doctrine (5:11-14) _____

therefore (6:1) _____

doctrine (7:1-10:18) _____

therefore (10:19-22) _____

doctrine (11:1-40) _____

therefore (12:1) _____

doctrine (12:7-11) _____

therefore (12:12) _____

doctrine (12:14-27) _____

therefore (12:28) _____

doctrine (13:11-14) _____

therefore (13:15) _____

Theme and purpose

Study Skill—Themes and Purposes

The point of taking an overview of a book is to start your study with some idea of the message of the book as a whole. Repeated words, the author's mood and feelings about his readers, his own statements about his purposes, and outlines are all clues to the overall message.

You can approach the overall message in two ways. One is to

(continued on page 14)

(continued from page 13)

draw out the book's *themes*—main ideas and topics that run through the book. The other is to ask yourself what the author's *purpose* was for writing this letter. Your reasons for studying it might be different than the author's original aims, but you will find it enormously helpful to think about what the Holy Spirit was trying to accomplish with this specific book for its specific first readers. Was He teaching doctrine? Refuting error? Motivating to some particular action? Rebuking some particular sin? Thinking about the author's original purpose will help you get out of a book what the Holy Spirit intends you to get out of it.

When we talk about the author's purpose, we often speak for convenience of the human author. We take for granted that his purpose is in harmony with the Holy Spirit's. If you prefer, you can think of the Holy Spirit instead of the human author. The important thing at this stage is to focus on the letter's purpose for its *original readers*. Later on, this will be a clue to how God wants us to apply the book to ourselves.

9. Based on what you have learned so far, what do you think the author of Hebrews was trying to accomplish with his readers?

10. How would you summarize the main theme(s) of this letter in a sentence?

Study Skill—Background

Once you've made some tentative observations about the themes and aims of a book, you will probably find it helpful to see what others who have studied it extensively think. Commentaries and Bible handbooks (see pages 181-183) offer this information and other helpful background. Below is a summary of such introductory material.

Who wrote it?

As valuable as Hebrews is, little is known with certainty about its occasion, background, and author. Many authors have been suggested through the centuries; the three most worthy of mention are Paul, Apollos, and Barnabas. Paul is well-known as the founder of a dozen key churches and the writer of thirteen other New Testament letters. Apollos was a Jew from Egypt, who became a great Christian teacher and whom Paul mentioned as an equal (Acts 18:24-28; 1 Corinthians 3:5-6; 4:1,6). Barnabas, another Jewish Christian leader, was Paul's senior partner in ministry until Paul grew into a mature apostle (Acts 4:36-37, 11:25-26, 13:1-3, 15:36-41; 1 Corinthians 9:6). Any of these men had the stature to pen a letter with the Holy Spirit's stamp of authority.

All we know for certain about the author is that he was thoroughly familiar with the Jewish religious system, that he and his readers knew each other (6:9; 13:18,19,23-24), and that Paul's aide Timothy was known to both (13:23). Whoever he was, the author was a superb writer as well as an inspired thinker; his Greek is the most elegant in the New Testament. "We may compare it [Hebrews] to a painting of perfect beauty, which has been regarded as a work of Raphael. If it should be proved that it was not painted by Raphael, we have thereby not lost a classical piece of art, but gained another master of first rank."²

Who received it?

Whatever is known today of the original readers is derived from the epistle itself. The earliest manuscripts have the simple title "To Hebrews." This group was apparently a single congregation of Hebrew Christians living somewhere in the Roman world (5:11-12, 6:9-10, 13:23-24). Precisely where? Suggestions include Jerusalem, Alexandria, Caesarea, Ephesus, Rome, and Syrian Antioch, but no one knows for certain.

In the final analysis, the precise destination is no more important than the author's identity. "Regardless of who wrote it, or where it was first sent, the Christian church has rightly regarded it down through the ages as a powerfully relevant message from God, who has definitively spoken in His Son."³

The situation

The writer makes it clear that this group of Jewish believers was going through severe persecution (10:32-34), probably on religious grounds, by non-Christian Jews.

For a first-century Jew to become a believer in Jesus Christ required a great sacrifice. He was immediately branded as an apostate and a blemish to the Jewish nation. He was considered "unclean" in the strongest possible sense. Defecting Jews were immediately expelled from the synagogue; their

children were denied the privilege of attending the synagogue school; they lost their jobs in geographical areas controlled by the Jews; in short, they lost everything of earthly value to them. Furthermore, the Jewish high priest had the authority in Judea, and to some extent in other provinces, to throw troublesome Jews in jail (compare 10:33-34). It was circumstances such as these that apparently caused many of these Hebrew believers to wane in their commitment to Christ.

At first, these Hebrew Christians joyfully accepted persecution (10:34). But after a while, it apparently became too much for them to bear and their endurance weakened (10:35-36). The warning passages in the letter suggest that these believers were degenerating in faith. While they never considered actually renouncing Jesus Christ, they nevertheless contemplated drifting back into the outward observances of Judaism (including rituals, ceremonies, and sacrifices—see 2:1, 4:14, 7:11, 10:1, 13:9-14). They apparently reasoned that if they took part in such rites, the Jewish leaders might be satisfied and leave them alone.

The writer set out to warn them about the futility of such reasoning. If they lapsed from Christianity back into Judaism—as they had already begun to do to some extent—they would be identifying themselves with an obsolete system and a Christ-rejecting nation that was under judgment. The writer accordingly pointed them to a better way. His argument was revolutionary: Because of Christ, everything is new. Everything is better. The old has passed away, so hold onto your faith and commitment. Don't retrogress. Instead, patiently endure your present circumstances. Your faith will be generously rewarded. This is certain, for God's promise cannot fail.

Your response

11. What are some of the questions that you would like to have answered as you delve more deeply into Hebrews? (Your questions can serve as personal objectives for your study.)

Study Skill—Application

James 1:22 says, "Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says." In other words, application is an essential part of Bible study. Every lesson of this study contains both "Optional Applications" in the margins and at least one open-ended application question after the interpretation questions. Application will often require some time for thought, prayer, planning, and action. You may want to discuss the passage with someone else to help you decide how to apply it. You'll be looking for specific ways to do what God's Word says.

Some questions to ask yourself are, "What difference should this passage make to my life? How should it make me want to think or act?" At times, you may find it most productive to concentrate on one application, giving it careful thought, prayer, and effort during the week. At other times, you may want to list many implications a passage has for your life, plan to memorize and meditate on the passage during the week, and look for ways to apply it. Choose whatever strategy is most fruitful.

Don't neglect prayer. As John 15:1-5 points out, you can't do what the Word says unless you are living intimately with Christ and drawing on His power. Go to God for guidance about what to apply and how, for strength to do what He says, for forgiveness when you fail, and for thanksgiving when you succeed.

12. Did your overview of Hebrews suggest any areas of your life that you want to work on during this study? If so, jot them down, along with any plans you already have to deal with them. Take each one to God in prayer, asking Him to show you His priorities for your application and to give you His strength to become what He desires. If anything in the book has convicted you, confess your failings to God.

For the group

This "For the group" section and the ones in later lessons suggest ways of structuring your discussions. Feel free to select what suits your group and ignore the rest. The main goals of this lesson are to get to know Hebrews as a whole and the people with whom you are going to study it.

Worship. Some groups like to begin with prayer and/or singing. Some share requests for prayer at the beginning, but leave the actual prayer until after the study. Others prefer just to chat for awhile and then move to the study, leaving worship until the end. It is a good idea to start with at least a brief prayer for the Holy Spirit's guidance and some silence to help everyone change focus from the day's busyness to the Scripture.

Warm-up. The beginning of a new study is a good time to lay a foundation for honest sharing of ideas, to get comfortable with each other, and to encourage a sense of common purpose. One way to establish common ground is to talk about what each group member hopes to get out of your group—out of your study of Hebrews, and out of any prayer, singing, sharing, outreach, or anything else you might do together. Why do you want to study the Bible, and Hebrews in particular? If you have someone write down each member's hopes and expectations, then you can look back at these goals later to see if they are being met. Allow about fifteen minutes for this discussion so that it does not degenerate into vague chatting.

How to use this study. If the group has never used a LIFECHANGE study guide before, you might take a whole meeting to get acquainted, discuss your goals, and go over the "How to Use This Study" section on pages 5-8. Then you can take a second meeting to discuss the overview. This will assure that everyone understands the study and will give you more time to read all of Hebrews and answer the overview questions.

Go over the parts of the "How to Use This Study" section that you think the group should especially notice. For example, point out the optional questions in the margins. These are available as questions for group discussion, ideas for application, and suggestions for further study. It is unlikely that anyone will have the time or desire to answer all the optional questions. A person might do one "Optional Application" for any given lesson. You might choose one or two "For Thought and Discussions" for your group discussion, or you might spend all your time on the numbered questions. If someone wants to write answers to the optional questions, suggest that he use a separate notebook. It will also be helpful for discussion notes, prayer requests, answers to prayers, application plans, and so on.

Invite everyone to ask questions about how to use the study guide and how your discussions will go.

Reading. It is often helpful to refresh everyone's memory by reading the passage aloud before discussing the questions. Reading all of Hebrews is probably unreasonable, so choose a couple of passages that evoke the book's flavor, such as 1:1-4 and 12:18-29. Try to make the letter sound like a living person talking.

First impressions. Ask group members to share their answers to questions 1, 2, and 3. Questions 4, 6, and 7 probably don't need discussing. To avoid making question 5 tedious, go around the room taking turns stating each contrast. Likewise for question 8, go around the room taking turns stating a doctrine and its "therefore." Then invite answers to questions 9 and 10.

Questions. Give everyone a chance to share questions about the historical background (in this lesson) and the letter. It is good to clear up any confusion as early as possible. However, don't answer any questions that deal with specific passages. Write those down and let the group answer them when you get to the passages.

Some people dislike giving any attention to the human author of inspired Scripture because this seems to denigrate its divine authority. If necessary, explain that this series takes the view that just as Jesus was fully God and fully Man, so the books of the Bible are eternal messages from the Spirit of God and messages from particular men in particular times and places. Just as Jesus' humanity and divinity are both essential to His mission and nature, so the humanity and divinity of the biblical books are both important. When we refer to the human writer of this letter, we are in no way denying divine inspiration.

Application. If application is new to some group members, you might make up some sample applications together. Choose a paragraph or verse and think of how it is relevant to you and some specific things you could each do about it. Share your answers to question 12.

Wrap-up. The group leader should have read lesson two and its "For the group" section. At this point, he or she might give a short summary of what members can expect in that lesson and the coming meeting. This is a chance to whet everyone's appetite, assign any optional questions, omit any numbered questions, or forewarn members of possible difficulties.

Encourage any members who found the overview especially difficult. Some people are better at seeing the big picture than others. Some are best at analyzing a particular verse or paragraph, while others are strongest at seeing how a passage applies to their lives. Urge members to give thanks for their own and others' strengths, and to give and request help when needed. The group is a place to learn from each other. Later lessons will draw on the gifts of close analyzers as well as overviews and appliers, practical as well as theoretical thinkers.

Worship. Many groups like to end with singing and/or prayer. This can include songs and prayers that respond to what you've learned in Hebrews or prayers for specific needs of group members. Some people are shy about sharing personal needs or praying aloud in groups, especially before they know the other people well. If this is true of your group, then a song and/or some silent prayer, and a short closing prayer spoken by the leader, might be an appropriate end. You could also share requests and pray in pairs.

1. E. Schuyler English, *Studies in the Epistle to the Hebrews* (Neptune, New Jersey: Louzeaux Brothers, 1976), page 11.
2. Thiersch, cited by English, page 26.
3. Zane C. Hodges, "Hebrews," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (Wheaton: Victor Books, 1983), page 780.

Outline of Hebrews

You can find a variety of helpful outlines of Hebrews in commentaries and Bible handbooks. Here is one possibility.

Theme: Since Christ is supreme, God's people must look only to Him.

I. THE SUPERIORITY OF CHRIST

Christ is superior to all Old Testament characters and institutions.

- A. (1:1-4) Christ is superior to the prophets.
- B. (1:5-2:18) Christ is superior to the angels.
- C. (3:1-6) Christ is superior to Moses.
- D. (3:7-19) Therefore, avoid unbelief.
- E. (4:1-16) The consequences and cure for unbelief.
- F. (5:1-10) Christ has superior priestly qualifications.
- G. (5:11-6:12) Warning: don't fall away.
- H. (6:13-20) God is worthy of trust, for His promise is certain.
- I. (7:1-28) Christ's priestly order is superior to Aaron's.
- J. (8:1-13) Christ is the priest of a new and superior covenant.
- K. (9:1-10:18) Christ's sanctuary and sacrifice are superior.

II. PERSEVERING IN FAITH

Patiently endure.

- A. (10:19-39) Persevere.
- B. (11:1-40) Maintain faith in Christ.
- C. (12:1-29) Accept God's discipline and remain committed to Him.
- D. (13:1-21) Exercise love.
- E. (13:22-25) Closing remarks.