

Reading Schedule for December 19-25, 2016

I had mentioned the anticipation of reading Matthew and Luke's birth accounts of Jesus. I think that is a marvelous way to spend the week before Christmas in God's Word. These will be familiar stories to you, but I am sure that the Holy Spirit will speak to you in a fresh way. Let me encourage you to ask him to open his Word to you so that he can speak to your heart about the marvel of God becoming a man.

December 19 – Matthew 1:1-25: "She will give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus, because he will save his people from their sins." (v.21) Many of you probably know that the word Jesus is the Greek translation for the Hebrew name Joshua. The meaning of the word is "the Lord saves." That's why Matthew says that Jesus would save his people from their sins. A marvelous title for Jesus is Savior. But the facts are that the name Jesus was not a unique name in that day. It might be like naming your child Jacob or David in our day. Literally, Jesus is a perfect name because means to save, but it was also common for the everyday person. Jesus entrance into this world would be very unique and almost overlooked. Anyone who has ever felt overlooked is included in the plan of salvation as they trust in Jesus the Savior. How do you respond to this first chapter of Matthew?

December 20 – Matthew 2:1-12: "... and asked, 'Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.'" (v.2) The star has always fascinated me. I recently watched "The Nativity Story" and loved how they depict the Magi, who were studying the celestial planets and stars in the sky. They were sure that the connection between Jupiter, Saturn and Mars was on purpose and would be a special sign for the coming king. They were convinced because they would travel about 1,000 miles searching for the new king. Have you watched The Nativity Story as a part of your Christmas preparation? It is actually a marvelous depiction of the first Christmas – the best that I think has ever been done. Obviously, I am drawn to the prophecy about Bethlehem being such a small village. I wonder if it is the star, or the character of the Magi, or the uniqueness of Bethlehem, or the marvelous gifts that were shared that might stir your heart. There is a marvelous message here, and I know that God wants to speak to you. What is God saying to you.

December 21 – Matthew 2:13-23: "When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi." (v.16) This is a very upsetting verse, and it shows how evil this man Herod was, and how insecure a human being he would become when threatened by someone greater than himself. I had you read that because it said that he was concerned about all the children 2 years old and younger, which gives affirmation that the Magi did visit Jesus sometime after his birth. In yesterday's reading they visited him in a house (2:11), and now we have sometime later Herod horrifically giving orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem. Herod would be forever judged and punished for his evil act. But nothing would get in the way of God's plan, and he would warn Joseph in a dream again. They would return to Nazareth because that would be the fulfillment of the prophecy that the Messiah would come from the land of Zebulun and Naphtali, which were territories of the Northern Kingdom, where the village of Nazareth is located. That is from Isaiah 9:1, which is an Advent reading we have already looked at. How does God's concern over Joseph, Mary and Jesus help you?

December 22 – Luke 1:1-25: "Zechariah asked the angel, 'How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.'" (v.18) If you are like me, you cannot help but compare how Zechariah responds to the angel versus Mary just a few verses later, which

will be the focus of our reading tomorrow. But you don't want to be too hard on Zechariah because it makes perfect sense to question the message from the angel, even though he is in the presence of the supernatural. It's as if Gabriel has to say to him, "Do you know who you are talking with? I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to tell you this message, and you are doubting me?!" I actually empathize with Zechariah because I know at different times in my life I have had those same kind of doubts. It is really a marvelous story and Zechariah learns something very deep about God, even at an old age. No matter what age you are, you can still learn more about the Lord and what it means to trust him. Let Zechariah be your example. How do you respond to this man? What stands out to you in this reading about the coming of John the Baptist, who would prepare the way for the Lord?

December 23 – Luke 1:26-56: "And Mary said: 'My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.'" (vv. 46-49) These verses summarize Mary's relationship with God, and her acceptance of his plan for her life. No one around her would understand. Even Joseph would question this at first. I love that they quote this in the movie "The Nativity Story" because it is so central to Mary's heart. She has already responded by saying, "May it be to me as you have said," and now she expresses her worship to God and the fact that God uplifts the humble. There was nothing in Mary's life except the condition of her heart to make her attractive and God's choice for the mother of Jesus. But that's the key point. Mary had the right heart. That is what God cares about. We know that from David when it says that man looks at the outward appearance, but God looks at the heart. This is so true of Mary. It challenges us to examine our hearts. Are we grateful? Do we say yes to the Lord? Do we worship him in response to his goodness to us? There is much to respond to in this reading today. What stands out to you?

December 24 – Luke 1:57-80: "He asked for a writing tablet, and to everyone's astonishment he wrote, 'His name is John.'" (v.63) Zechariah's heart had been prepared. The Lord had gotten his attention. You see Zechariah's response as he praises God for the plan the Lord has for his own son to be a prophet of the Most High. A side note to realize from the story is it appears that Zechariah was not only speechless, but he couldn't even hear. That would add to the challenge and deepen God's impact on Zechariah's heart. The question that I have is, why did Elizabeth want to name the boy "John?" There are parts of the story that I don't understand, nor will we know for sure until we are in heaven and can ask Zechariah and Elizabeth. This song of praise to the Lord is very hopeful and most likely will speak to your heart. How so?

December 25 – Luke 2:1-20: Merry Christmas! "Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace to those on whom his favor rests." (v.14) A promise of peace with God is given here by the multitude of angel. Just think of a thousand angels in the sky proclaiming the opportunity to have a relationship with God that lasts forever. This is the promise provided by the One born in Bethlehem. The most recent translations grant peace to those who respond to the favor of the Lord. There are many verses in this familiar reading that stand out. But I think of worship, because God is worthy; and I think of the promise of having eternal peace provided through the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ. May your hearts be full this Christmas as you appreciate who Christ is and what he means to you. How do you respond to the Lord on this Christmas Day?

Prayers: Pray for our connections with family and friends during Christmas, that we might shine the light of Jesus Christ, and it might illumine the hearts and souls of people around us who don't know him.