

Reading Schedule for December 26, 2016 – January 1, 2017

I have been thinking about how we might end the year in God's Word. There are several strong exhortations in the Book of Hebrews, especially toward the end of the book. Starting in Hebrews 10, we read about perseverance. And then we have a long chapter about the amazing faith of so many that we might be inspired by their devotion to the Lord. Hebrews 12 will be the focus of my message on January 1, and we will conclude the year with the last chapter of Hebrews. These readings are a little longer, but I hope that you have a little more time to soak in God's Word and apply it to your life. I believe these exhortations will help you to anticipate the New Year with renewed zeal.

December 26 – Luke 2:21-52: "For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all nations: a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of your people Israel." (vv. 30-32) I've chosen these verses because my Christmas Eve message was on the fact that Jesus is a light for us and for the world. Simeon's song was inspiring to Mary and Joseph, and it is inspiring to me. It presents the prophetic word that Gentiles will have an opportunity to receive salvation. That includes you and me. In other words, Simeon said that Jesus was a gift from God, that he recognized Jesus as the Messiah who would be the light to the entire world. As a parent, you could imagine how exciting and confusing this might be just to hear these words about your child. But Mary and Joseph had already been told about the significance of Jesus, and now it was being affirmed. I wonder if they had a shred of doubt because Jesus was like a normal baby who was dependent, and had all the kind of needs a human baby would demand. This is our last reading about Christmas, and I wonder how God spoke to you.

December 27 – Hebrews 10:19-39: ". . . not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (v.25) There are several verses I could choose from this reading. There are very challenging, and meant for us to really be focused in our relationship with Christ. Like the words, "Let us hold unswervingly . . ." The verse I chose was about the connection we need with each other. Too many individualistic Christians are drifting in their determination to follow Christ. We are meant to share our faith together, and be strengthened one to another. The opposition mounts in our day, and we need each other even more. As we come to the close of this year, might you focus on your need for fellowship with other believers. How will you experience that? What is God saying to you through these challenging words?

December 28 – Hebrews 11:1-40: "And without faith it is impossible to please God, because anyone who comes to him must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who earnestly seek him." (v.6) In our relationship with God, faith is the most important ingredient. God will not settle for mere acknowledgment of his existence. He wants your faith to lead to a personal and dynamic relationship with him. I reference this verse often in my messages because the foundation of life with Christ is built on faith. We are saved through faith; we are sustained by faith; we continue to have hope as a result of our faith. There is example after example of people who had faith, and they are meant to inspire us. The last several verses of this chapter talk about those who had faith but did not receive the promise of deliverance, yet they remained faithful to God. These words are equally inspiring to me. Which aspect of faith stirs your heart? How is your faith these days?

December 29 – Hebrews 12:1-13: ". . . fixing our eyes on Jesus, the pioneer and

perfector of faith. For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." (v.2) The focal point of our faith is Jesus Christ. Everything revolves around him. When it uses the words, "fix your eyes," it means to have a riveted stare on the Lord. The story in the Gospel that reminds me of this truth is Peter as he walks on water. He is focused on Jesus and things are going amazingly well. But when he notices the waves and the turbulence, he begins to sink. To be a Christian is to be Christ-focused. Several years ago, pastors began to refer to Christians as followers of Christ. The word "Christian" had lost its significance, and this was a clearer description of people who called themselves Christians. To be a Christian is to be a follower of Christ. That means I need him, I want him and I will serve him. To live the Christian life, Jesus must be first. Is that true for you? How so?

December 30–Hebrews 12:14-29: "Therefore, since we are receiving a kingdom that cannot be shaken, let us be thankful, and so worship God acceptably with reverence and awe, for our 'God is a consuming fire.'" (vv. 28 & 29) The word "therefore" gets my attention because these words are very challenging. Everything seems to be vulnerable to disbelief and eventual destruction. But not so with you and me. Those who follow Christ are part of an unshakeable kingdom, and they will withstand the shaking, shifting and burning. When we feel unsure about the future, we can take confidence from these verses. No matter what happens here, our future is built on a solid foundation that cannot be destroyed. God will prevail. You can count on it. What stands out to you in these compelling verses? Why?

December 31 - Hebrews 13:1-25: "Now 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, 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." (vv. 20 & 21) I've always been attracted to benedictions. To me, it is offering a blessing that is deep and strengthening to my soul. God's people have expressed blessing to each other in deep and real ways. Oftentimes we greet people with, "Hi, how are you?" but we don't really mean it. I love this particular blessing because it has truth that I need to hear. I want this to happen in my life and in your life. I want us to be equipped to do God's will, and to be stronger in him. I want us to be faithful disciples. I believe that is what he wants too. What blesses you about this blessing? How do you respond to these concluding verses in the Book of Hebrews?

January 1 –Genesis 1:1-25: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." (v.1) I hadn't mentioned anything about reading the Book of Genesis to begin the New Year. The Bible begins in a very illuminating way as we read about the first man and woman, Adam and Eve, and their descendants. A few years ago we taught on the Book of Genesis through the first 11 chapters, which took several months. I want to return to this book and soak in the launch of God's creative power and his concern for those he created. You will learn much about yourself, and even more about God. The world we see around us is the expression of God and his power to create. How does that inspire you? What do you notice in these verses that gets your attention?

Prayers: Obviously, our prayers need to be about thankfulness for this past year and renewed commitment to Christ in the New Year. May God have his way in our lives as we launch into 2017.