Paul pled the case for a wandering slave named Onesimus who fled Philemon’s home and found Paul in Rome. Onesimus met Jesus while in Rome, so Paul sent him back to this rich fellowship to receive grace and mercy and to begin his life of ministry as a member of the congregation. Peter, too, wrote about wanderers, those who followed Christ and had to flee persecution throughout the Roman Empire. As with Onesimus, he prayed they, too, would experience grace and peace (1:2).

Unlike Onesimus, these wanderers would likely not be able to go back to places they had once known. They were suffering and needed a reminder of the living hope Jesus represented. Wherever they were, He was with them. Whatever they experienced, He endured with them. They could, as a result, live holy lives, different from the world for His glory alone.

Pray for fellowship which strengthens faith and produces holiness.

Saturday, December 16, 2017—1 Peter 3-5

Adults often joke about the behavior of children during the Christmas season. Because they believe Santa measures their gift-worthiness on their actions, they tend to be more polite and compliant as Christmas approaches. Many wonder how they will act on December 26.

Peter called on his readers to consider the example of Jesus for their own behavior. He suffered insults. He bore our sin so His followers might dies to sin and live for righteousness (see 2:24). With that in mind, Peter urged them to submit to His leadership and design. Husbands and wives would find new joy and enrichment by submitting to one another. Believers would discover harmony through compassion and humility. Suffering was inevitable, but humility, submission, and peace were a choice.

The world will not understand this willing submission and will find it strange when believers do not join them in their sinful practices (4:4), but Peter reminded them the end was near, so they would do well to focus on Christ and His glory rather than personal sin and pleasure. They needed one another for encouragement and endurance, so Peter urged them to practice hospitality and to use their gifts to build others up.

God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (5:5), so the way for Christians is one of self-control and alertness, keeping a check on ego and an awareness of the schemes of the enemy. God makes Himself ever-present, so believers can lay their anxieties on Him so He can replace those cares with strength.

Pray for a life marked by His ways, His peace, and His strength.

*Read the Bible Through 2017*

Week 50

Sunday, December 10, 2017—Colossians 1-4

While Saint Nicholas was a real, merciful bishop in Myra, his legend has made him a larger-than-life, behavior-watching, gift-giving resident of the North Pole. “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town” urges the listener to be good because Santa sees them when they’re sleeping and awake and knows when they’ve been bad or good. Good behavior matters.

Paul knew the gospel was good news because its truth was quite opposite. No one was good enough to earn the salvation of Christ. Paul prayed the Colossians would know Christ more fully and that they would be “giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified you to share in the inheritance of the saints in the kingdom of light” (1:12). God sees us when we’re sleeping and awake. He knows our sin. Only Christ makes us holy.

Christ, dwelling in every believer, is the hope of glory (1:27). Paul labored to make this known, and he urged the Colossians to walk in this truth so they wouldn’t be taken captive by false teaching, especially those that urged them to behave in certain ways to secure blessing or maintain salvation. To be sure, Paul did want them to behave like Christ, setting their minds on things above (3:1-2). This was not to earn salvation or keep it but to live in it the way God designed it. He had transferred them to a new Kingdom, and they were to live as if He truly were the King of their lives.

Praise God for the work of Christ, bringing salvation and holiness.

Monday, December 11, 2017—Hebrews 1-4

The hustle and bustle of Christmas can, ironically, make Jesus, the Christ, a minor figure. Other things take precedence. Other people demand attention, and the season comes and goes with little laud given to Him.

Hebrews speaks to a similar danger. God had spoken in the past through angels and prophets, but in the last days He had spoken through His very Son, the radiance of God’s glory and exact representation of His being (1:1-3). The people were right to honor prophets and angels, but none of them deserved attention and certainly not worship. Jesus did.

The people were facing great difficulty, and Hebrews wanted them to endure, remaining faithful to Jesus. They could not, therefore, neglect the great work He had done and the rich salvation He provided (2:1). They were tempted to renounce faith altogether or slide back into old Jewish ritual, but neither of these were true or fulfilling. That’s why they had come to Jesus. They could not deceive themselves and now choose either.

Jesus Himself was made perfect through suffering (2:10), so they could expect hard times and, in fact, embrace them as part of the sanctification process. His struggles disciplined His flesh and made Him a merciful and faithful high priest (2:17). They could trust Him to sustain them in their hardships. Old religion and faithfulness would not help.

God cannot honor those who don’t have faith in His grace’s working in the future as He has done in the past (3:7-19). This requires daily obedience (4:1-11) fueled by the powerful word and faithful High Priest.

Tuesday, December 12, 2017—Hebrews 5-7

While Christmas is a vitally important day for Christians (and for some their favorite day of the year), the most spiritually significant day for the Jewish world is Yom Kippur, the Day of Atonement. On that day, the high priest entered the Holy of Holies and made atonement not only for the nation but for himself as well. Though called by God, he was flawed.

Hebrews marvels, therefore, at what God has done for His people through Christ. He has given a high priest who, because He is human, can identify with His people in every way and can suffer with them as they face temptation, yet He is without sin. He needs no atonement of His own. He learned obedience to the Father as they did (5:8). What a gift He is!

There is so much to explore with this truth, yet Hebrews grieves because the people are lax in their discipleship. Rather than growing in the depth and breadth of Christ, they continue to circle back to elementary truths, wandering like their ancestors did in the desert, existing rather than thriving. He urged them on so they would not face the same fate as their predecessors and wander in mediocrity (6:1-11). Faith requires obedience, so God will not bless laziness or hopelessness.

Hebrews celebrated the work Jesus did as a priest in the order of Melchizedek. Rather than falling in the line of Aaron, as the Law required, He was a priest from a new line, one that provided perfection, something the Law could not do (7:18-19). Praise God today for perfection in Jesus!

Wednesday, December 13, 2017—Hebrews 8-10

Throughout the Christmas seasons, “Santa” makes appearances in a variety of places—shopping malls, Christmas parties, parades, and more. Discerning youngsters ask how Santa can be in two places at once or why Santa looks different at the mall than the parade. “Santas” copy the original.

Hebrews says Moses built the tabernacle to be a copy and a shadow of the original, what is in heaven. The priests, therefore, were serving as copies and shadows of Jesus Himself, the great High Priest who served in the very presence of God the Father. The Law described holiness, and Jesus provided it. God had to give a new covenant through Jesus because the first covenant became obsolete. The covenant written on stone was a shadow of what God would write on their hearts.

The priests performed tabernacle and Temple practices every day, offerings gifts and sacrifices on behalf of the people. Once each year, the high priest would enter the Most Holy Place and offer blood on his behalf and that of the people. This showed, year after year, that the conscience of the people could not be cleared until there was a new order in place (9:10). When Jesus offered His own, pure blood, He provided for eternal cleansing in the presence of God Himself. He did this once, and it was finished!

Thank God for the finished, one-of-a-kind work of Jesus. Pray for a boldness in faith and for a commitment to growth with others.

Thursday, December 14, 2017—Hebrews 11-13

Hebrews was concerned for the ones who would read his letter. They were suffering for being Christians, so they were considering reverting to their Jewish roots and practicing what they earlier abandoned in order to follow Jesus. Hebrews spent the first 10 chapters making a compelling case for the supremacy and uniqueness of Jesus. There was no logical or spiritual reason for walking away from Jesus.

The pivotal point, then, was faith. Based on who Jesus was, what He had done, and what He had promised, would those who called themselves Christians walk forward in obedient faith, despite the consequences? Jesus was worthy of their obedience. He would sustain them in their suffering. Did they believe He would extend the same grace in the future He had displayed in the past? This is true faith.

Hebrews 11 moves from the case for Christ to the case for faith. Countless predecessors had shown how faith was the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen. They pleased God with their loving obedience, many never seeing the promised results. They were witnesses, testifying that the readers of Hebrews could do the same.

Jesus was the example. God would use hardship to make them more like Jesus and produce a harvest of righteousness and peace (12:11). To walk away from this faith would be walking away from the only true hope they had, an unshakeable Kingdom. Hebrews trembled for them at this thought because God is a consuming fire.

Pray for faith which gladly endures suffering for Jesus’ sake.

Friday, December 15, 2017—Philemon, 1 Peter 1-2

Christmas celebrates the birth of Christ and its impact on history and eternity. Celebration can happen individually but is far more enjoyable and impacting when shared with others. Community is irreplaceable.

Paul wrote to his dear friend Philemon and greeted the church that met in his home. He prayed their fellowship, spending time together and sharing the joy of their faith, would give them a full understanding of all the good things they had in Christ. Food and laughter are good, but telling stories of His grace and mercy and meeting important needs can kindle fresh faith and rekindle the peace and joy only He can bring.