

A New Year Benediction

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[0 : 00] Our scripture reading this morning is taken from Hebrews chapter 13. Don't have any announcements or notices this morning, just to say that we gather on Sunday morning! at half past 10 for morning worship, no evening service this week at St. Columbus.

Our reading, Hebrews 13. We're going to read the whole of the chapter. Well, really the first 21 verses of the chapter. And our focus will be on verses 20 and 21. So, I'm not going to treat the whole of Hebrews 13 this morning.

You'll be glad to know. But let's read that passage together. Hebrews 13 from verse 1. The writer says this, Let brotherly love continue. Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares. Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them, and those who are mistreated, since you also are in the body.

Let marriage be held in honor among all, and let the marriage bed be undefiled, for God will judge the sexually immoral and adulterous. Keep your life free from the love of money. Be content with what you have. For he has said, I will never leave you nor forsake you. So we can confidently say, The Lord is my helper. I will not fear. What can man do to me?

Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the Word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever.

[1 : 48] Do not be led away by diverse and strange teachings, for it is good for the heart to be strengthened by grace, not by foods which have not benefited those devoted to them.

We have an altar from which those who serve the tent have no right to eat. For the bodies of those animals whose blood is brought into the holy places by the high priest as a sacrifice for sin are burned outside the camp.

So Jesus also suffered outside the gate in order to sanctify the people through his own blood. Therefore, let us go to him outside the camp and bear the reproach he endured.

For here we have no lasting city, but we seek the city that is to come. Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God.

That is the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.

[2 : 59] Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. Pray for us, for we are sure that we have a clear conscience, desiring to act honorably in all things.

I urge you the more earnestly to do this, in order that I may be restored to you the sooner. Now may the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

Well, I'd like to begin this new year with a benediction. Normally, of course, when we think of a benediction, we think of it coming at the end of a worship service.

The Westminster Directory of Public Worship says this, let the minister dismiss the congregation with a solemn blessing. And that is, in effect, what a benediction is.

Yes, the benediction at the close of worship is not just a kind of thoughtless add-on to signal the end of the service, that it's time for a coffee and a ginger snap or a time for us to go home.

[4 : 19] It's really a powerful statement or declaration of blessing upon the people of God. It's the announcement of the blessing of God on the people of God from the Word of God.

And here in these closing verses of the letter to the Hebrews, we discover a magnificent benediction of God, pronounced over the people of God by the writer.

May the God of peace, who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep by the blood of the eternal covenant, equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in us that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen.

And I think those words seem appropriate for us to consider on a day like today, as we stand on the threshold of a new year. They are designed to get us to lift our eyes to our great and sovereign Lord.

A reminder that he is the one who is the source of all blessing. And he is the one who is promised to lead, guide, and protect his people. The letter to the Hebrews is really, I'm going to try and sum it up in just about two or three words, an exposition or revelation of Jesus Christ and all the glory of his person and work.

[5 : 44] If we were to sum up the burden of this great letter, it would be this. If you really know the wonder and glory of Jesus, you will never want to leave him.

No matter how difficult and how challenging things may be, you will never want to be disloyal to this great and wonderful Savior. And so here at the close of the letter, the writer prays and asks for God to continue to bless and equip his people that they might persevere in the way of faith and bring glory to God.

And that, I think, is precisely what we need as we look forward into a new year. We all stand in need of God's help and presence to carry us forward in faith.

Without his benediction upon our lives and left to ourselves, to our own devices, we are doomed only to fail. And you'll notice here how the writer roots his request in the character of God.

Now may, he says, the God of peace. That's the title he uses here. It's an important, significant way of speaking about God. We find that used elsewhere in the New Testament.

[7 : 02] Paul, for example, uses it in Romans. Romans 15, 33, he says, Now may the God of peace be with you all. And in chapter 16, verse 20, The God of peace will soon crush Satan under your feet.

He tells the Philippians 4, 9, The God of peace will be with you. And over the season of Advent here at St. Columbus, we've been thinking a little bit about what it means to have peace with God and to enjoy the peace of God.

Because God is the one who gives or brings peace. He bestows peace upon our troubled and disordered hearts. He is the great peacemaker.

And the message of the gospel itself is one of reconciliation and peace. We live in a world that does not know peace. We live in a fractured world. Discord, disharmony, broken relationships.

A world often enmeshed in hostility and all manner of conflict. We have no peace among the nations. No peace between peoples. No peace in many communities.

[8 : 09] No peace sometimes in our families. No peace sometimes even in our own hearts and in our own lives. And so the writer here wants us to look away from ourselves and to the only one in whom real peace can be found.

The only one who can bring us peace. The only one who can establish that peace that passes all understanding. So notice with me briefly this morning what this benediction tells us about the God of peace.

Let me highlight three things from our text. The first is this. He is mighty to save. He is mighty to save. Now may the God of peace who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus, the great shepherd of the sheep, by the blood of the eternal covenant.

One of the features of this letter, Hebrews, is the way in which it frequently references the exodus and the journey taken by God's people out of Egypt towards the promised land under the leadership of Moses.

And if you recall, that was not a trouble-free journey. People were often tempted to go back to Egypt, to the slavery of their former way of life. But nonetheless, Moses led them as God's appointed shepherd.

[9 : 27] He renounced Egypt. He looked to the future with God. He considered, the writer of the Hebrew says, the reproach of Christ, greater wealth than all the treasures of Egypt, for he was looking to the rewards.

And so, likewise, these Hebrew Christians were tempted, being tempted to go back, back to a former way of life, back to slavery, back to Judaism, back to Egypt.

And we too may know something of that same pressure in our own day and to, you know, that pressure to return to old patterns of living, living or to the ways of this world.

But to press on in the way of faith, to make progress in the Christian life, these Hebrew Christians needed to have their eyes fixed, not upon Moses, but upon Jesus.

Because he is the shepherd that they needed to look to and follow. They are to look to Jesus, the author and finisher of faith. They look to Jesus, who's bringing many sons to glory.

[10 : 30] And look what the writer says here about Jesus, our mighty Savior. He's the risen Lord, he says. He led out from the dead our Lord Jesus.

By virtue of his resurrection, he has sucked the fear and the terror out of death. He's conquered death and drawn its sting. Jesus has been led out from the realm of the dead.

And it's no surprise that the resurrection of Jesus has lain at the very heart of the Christian message from the earliest days. And there's much in this life that we can evade and avoid, but we cannot evade and avoid death.

We can't outrun it, we cannot defeat it. But the good news is this. The God of peace has led out our Lord Jesus from death. He has triumphed over death.

He is its victor, its conqueror, its king. And because Jesus has been raised, so then all those joined to him by faith will also be raised up.

[11 : 36] As he has been led out from death, so we who are joined to him will also be led out. Robert Murray McShane saw the peace of God in his dying brother's face, and that led him to seek Christ.

He marked each and every anniversary of his brother's death. And 11 years later, he wrote this. This day, 11 years ago, I lost my loved and loving brother and began to seek a brother who cannot die.

And that is what we have in Jesus Christ. We have a brother who cannot die. A brother through whom and in whom we too shall not die.

Because Jesus Christ sets his people free from that fear of death that so profoundly grips the hearts of men and women. He's the risen Lord. Secondly, he's the great shepherd of the sheep.

It's a tender imagery here. He's not just the good shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep. He's the great shepherd who is always with his flock. He's the shepherd who leads and guides his people through all the varied topography of life.

[12 : 54] With us in the green pastures, beside the still waters, in the dark valleys. He's with us when we're besieged by enemies. His mercy and steadfast love are with us all the days of our lives.

Because Jesus Christ is a great shepherd. He's not a weakling. His muscles are flexed. He's ready to defend his flock. No one, says the apostle John, can snatch his sheep out of his hand.

The shepherd does not carry a club for nothing. He's able to deal with all that the valley may throw at us. He can handle anything.

There's an old hymn that puts it like this. I was lost, but Jesus found me, found the sheep that went astray, threw his loving arms around me, drew me back into his way.

Days of darkness still come over me. Sorrows path I often tread, but his presence still is with me. By his guiding hand I'm led.

[14 : 00] He's the great shepherd. He's the risen Lord. And he's also the sacrifice who saves. His is the blood, says the writer here, of the eternal covenant.

So one place in the letter where the covenant is described as eternal. There is no possibility of this covenant being superseded, becoming obsolete. It is a forever covenant.

We know that the sacrificial system of the Old Testament, the old Mosaic covenant, perpetual round of activity, offering of sacrifices went on and on and on. The ritual, the ceremony never ceased.

The atonement they symbolized, never complete, never finished. The high priest always on his feet. Sin never decisively dealt with.

But now you see the blood of the eternal covenant has been shed. Jesus has accomplished by sacrificing himself on the altar of Calvary. And that is why he sits down, has sat down at the right hand of God.

[15 : 03] That's language indicating that his work is finished. It's complete. He's done it all. Sometimes Christians are full of anxieties that besiege by doubts and fears.

Have I done enough? Am I good enough? Am I holy enough? Am I moral enough? Often weighed down by feelings of sin and guilt. Friends, we need to be reminded at the beginning of this new year that the gospel tells us that all our sin and guilt has been taken care of by Jesus Christ.

It has been atoned for by the blood of the eternal covenant. He has wrought for us a peace with God that can never be taken from us.

And isn't that good news? On this first day of a new year, it isn't good to be reminded of this wonderful truth. If you're a Christian believer this morning, then God is reminding you that your guilt has all been paid for completely and comprehensively.

In Jesus Christ, in our mighty Savior, in that fountain filled with blood, we lose all, not just some, all our guilty stains.

[16 : 28] He is mighty to save. Secondly, He's ready to equip. May the God of peace equip you with everything good that you may do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight through Jesus Christ.

not only is He the God who redeems His people, He's also the God who resources His people. And the power of God revealed in His mighty acts of salvation is the same power that is at work within us.

He supplies and equips all that we need for this journey of faith. He provides us with everything good that we may do His will. And you'll notice there, it matters here, what matters here is that we do the will of God.

Not enough just to know it, we must do it. Now, what is the will of God? Well, in the context of this letter, God's will for His people is that they cling by faith to Jesus and never give Him up.

No matter the opposition, no matter the trials, no matter the pressure, they are to continue to have their eyes fixed on Jesus. He doesn't want them to be ashamed and to walk away from the Lord.

[17 : 45] It's God's will that they endure and persevere in the way of faith. Earlier on in the letter, chapter 10, verse 36, he says this, For you have need of endurance so that when you have done the will of God, you may receive what is promised.

God's will is that they continue in faithful obedience to Jesus Christ. And that's God's will for our lives also. This is God's will for you in 2026.

And doing the will of God means living for Jesus, come what may. Living for Him maybe when nobody else is looking. Living for Him when things are tough.

Living for Him when nobody around us is interested. Living for Him when we're tempted to throw in the towel. In the army, when soldiers are sent on a particular mission or exercise, they might be sent to the quartermaster to receive the necessary equipment.

Now, you wouldn't expect a soldier presented with a particular uniform or battle dress to say to the quartermaster, well, you know, haven't you got something else?

[19 : 00] Kaki really isn't my color, you know? Don't you have anything in powder blue? The soldier is given what he needs for the task or mission in hand.

He's given what he needs and not what he wants. And I think that's the sense here. God promises to provide what we need not what we want. He will give us everything good that we require.

And the word equip here is a word that's used elsewhere in the New Testament to describe the disciples mending their nets. Used in Ephesians where Paul speaks of equipping the saints for the work of ministry.

Literally, it means to put something together so that it can be used effectively. And the idea is that God will supply what is missing. He will correct what is wrong. He'll repair what is defective.

He will restore what is broken. He will make us his effective servants. We cannot do the will of God on our own. We need God's provision. We need his help. We need him to correct us and restore us and equip us.

[20 : 05] Here is the God who supplies all that we need in and through the Lord Jesus Christ. He's worked within us in the power of the Holy Spirit. And he works in us to do what is pleasing in his sight.

In other words, he's doing in us what pleases him, not what pleases us. He's at work in our lives to shape us and to mold us that our lives become pleasing to God.

And that's a somewhat scary thought. Who knows what God might do in us and through us in this coming year. Nonetheless, he calls us.

He calls you to yield yourself completely to him and to hold nothing back from him. Sometimes it is in like the Hebrews of old.

in the crucible of trial and testing that he works out his good purpose. And we need to know that however mysterious and sore sometimes our circumstances can be, they are being woven for our good and for God's glory.

[21 : 12] He's using these things to equip our lives that we might please him. Our effectiveness as Christians is not about whether things are going well in our lives.

It's not about our health or our wealth. It's about the God who is at work within us shaping us to be more like Jesus Christ.

Are we looking to do what is pleasing in his sight? Are we living to please him? If we are, then that's a sign that the God of peace is already at work in our lives.

He's mighty to save. He's ready to equip. Thirdly and finally, he's worthy of praise. That's the third thing. Through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever.

Amen. The God who redeems his people is the God who resources his people is also the God who receives the praise of his people. He is worthy of all glory.

[22 : 14] That's a statement of fact. We're to live for the praise of his glory. glory. Now, we can't be sure here whether this glory refers to the God of peace or to Jesus Christ.

It can be read both ways. It's perhaps most likely, I think, it is a reference to Jesus who's just been mentioned. It's through Jesus that God is mighty to save, through Jesus that God equips us as his saints, and it's through Jesus that he receives all the praise and the glory.

Glory belongs to Jesus. So, one of the great features of the New Testament is the way both the Father and the Son are deemed worthy of praise and glory. It's the basis of our doctrine of the Trinity.

In the New Testament, a person's glory is their good reputation. It's that about them that is praiseworthy. And, in a sense, glory is not something that we can give to God.

He already possesses that. We can't make him more glorious than he already is. So, when the Bible ascribes glory to God, it's not suggesting that we can in any way add glory to him.

[23 : 22] It simply means that we are to recognize it, acknowledge it, and declare the worth and the glory that is already there. And here, it's as if the mention of Jesus' name sets off the writer's praise instinct.

Most of us will be aware, perhaps in our families or amongst our friends, how just the mention of a certain name can set off a kind of immediate and very predictable response.

You know, if you drop a certain person's name into the conversation, it's almost, you know, we're lighting the blue touch paper, and you want to stand well back. You know, you stand back and you watch them go off in one.

You need to mention, you know, Keir Starmer or Donald Trump or Nicola Sturgeon, whoever it is, it doesn't matter. But you only need to make mention of the name.

And whoosh, people are cannot help themselves, often launching into a well-worn diatribe.

[24 : 33] Now, I wonder if there's something of that going on here. It's just the mention of the name of Jesus Christ. And immediately the writer goes off in praise and adoration.

Jesus' name calls forth an ascription of glory. Actually, this is something we see right throughout the New Testament. It's a kind of praise instinct. You know, they just cannot help themselves.

I wonder if you have that kind of praise instinct when Jesus' name is mentioned. We're to glorify the God who redeems and resources us, not only by going to church or reading the Bible or praying or sharing the gospel or praising His name.

Of course, all these things are good and glorify Him. But God calls us to glorify Him in the simple things of everyday life. And drinking a glass of water, eating a sandwich at work, at recreation, at leisure, all these and more are included.

There is no division of life into that which is religious and spiritual and that which is not. For God in Christ has redeemed all of our lives.

[25 : 46] Our whole lives are to be given over to doing His will and to doing what is pleasing in His sight. And that's what the writer of Hebrews wanted his readers to understand.

The God who raised Jesus from the dead is well able to keep them and hold them fast in troubled times. He'll resource them so that they can live for His glory. That's a vital message for us as we enter this new year.

The future lies unknown before us. Who knows what trials and troubles may come our way? Who knows what temptations we will face? Who knows the challenges we're going to encounter. Bereavement, loss, sickness, death, opposition, trial.

Sometimes we wonder if we have what it takes to make it through another year. We question if we have what it takes to endure. We're weak, fragile human beings.

How can we make it? How can we make it to heaven? How can we keep going in the way of faith? Friends, the answer is that God will keep us by His power.

[26 : 52] He will guard us. Paul says to the Philippians, I'm sure of this, that he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ.

There's an apocryphal story of a Scotsman traveling across the Atlantic, I think, by ship. and in order to save money, he was a kind of archetypal Scotsman.

He liked to hold on to his pennies. He had resolved on this journey only to eat cheese and biscuits. And so morning, noon, and night, he had only some biscuits and some cheese.

However, by the third day into the journey, his resolve started to weaken. The cheese was hard, the biscuits were soft, and he looked through the window into the dining salon.

He saw all the people there eating. And so he approached the steward and asked them, how much, you know, how much would it be for one meal? How much would it cost?

[28 : 02] And the steward looked at him with a quizzical expression before explaining to him that all the meals were included in his ticket. Friends, we're to rest in the assurance that God's power will keep us and preserve us for heaven.

It's all included in the passage. It's all part of that great salvation won for us by Jesus Christ. We may not have what it takes, but Jesus Christ does.

Remember on this New Year's Day that he is your risen Lord. Lord, he is your good shepherd. He is your great Savior, mighty to save, ready to equip, worthy of our praise.

And as you step into this new year, may you, by faith, receive this great benediction of God. Let's pray together.

Lord, we are weak and frail human beings. We look away from ourselves.

[29 : 18] We look to you, the living God, the God of peace. We look to our Lord Jesus Christ, the great shepherd of the sheep, the one who has shed the blood of the eternal covenant, the one who has risen from the dead.

God, and we rest our faith in him. And we pray that as we step into the rest of 2026, we would draw from you all the resources that we need to live for you and to live for your glory.

We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen.