

Outline

Christmas Last! Celebration

What a year it has been. 2008 will go down as a banner year for humanity. There is much to celebrate and much to be proud of both in the world and among this great body, Ni River Community Church! As I think back on this year, I know that it will rank as one of my favorite. I know, I know, it has not been great on the financial front, but who knows that God is not trying to get our attention to help us set our priorities back in the proper perspective and that is not really a bad thing. It seems any time that God wants to get our attention in life, he does it in the one place that we really pay attention to – our wallets. As a matter of fact even just this week in the *One Year Bible*, God repeatedly talked about how He controls our financial destinies for good and for ill:

Then Haggai said, 'So it is with this people and this nation in my sight,' declares the LORD. 'Whatever they do and whatever they offer there is defiled.' Haggai 2:14 NIV

'Now give careful thought to this from this day on—consider how things were before one stone was laid on another in the LORD's temple. When anyone came to a heap of twenty measures, there were only ten. When anyone went to a wine vat to draw fifty measures, there were only twenty. I struck all the work of your hands with blight, mildew and hail, yet you did not turn to me,' declares the LORD. Haggai 2:15-17 NIV

From this day on, from this twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, give careful thought to the day when the foundation of the LORD's temple was laid. Give careful thought: Is there yet any seed left in the barn? Until now, the vine and the fig tree, the pomegranate and the olive tree have not borne fruit. From this day on I will bless you. Haggai 2:18,19 NIV

Sound a lot like our present financial crisis? There is no truer explanation for it than the explanation that God truly controls the markets of the world. Well, that is a message for another day, as a matter of fact for next Sunday as we look to see what the Bible has to say about surviving in a Recession/Depression world.

But today we concentrate on Celebration. There have been many great victories in this great year. For the first time in the history of this great nation, **Martin Luther King's Dream came to fruition** and our nation set aside its emphasis on racial differences and overwhelmingly elected our first African American President. No matter what our politics are, this must be viewed as a fantastic achievement among mankind. Only a few short decades ago, black men and women were still viewed as property without the rights that are God-given to all humanity. And yet in this great year, America, though still having much to achieve on the racial front, scored a beautiful victory in setting aside its differences to vote for a human with no sense of the color of skin! I am confident that God smiled on that day.

A great victory for humanity was also won as the **doors to China were opened allowing all nations of the world to enter its country in freedom to celebrate humanity and the human spirit as China hosted the only globally supported event, the Olympics.** Though not without minor controversy, freedom of the individual and the world was celebrated for two outstanding weeks; all nations, creeds, colors, cultures, came together to celebrate global achievement and unity of purpose among all peoples. God surely smiled as His Creation united to achieve a common goal. And if you ask my daughter, it was awesome because the bare chested Michael Phelps won many golds and did many interviews on camera – sigh! For these and several other great reasons that I hope to point toward, 2008 is a year that should be celebrated as we bid it "Good-bye!"

God also chose to bless Ni River Community Church this year! As we have already celebrated this morning, the year began with over 250 people of all ages within the congregation of Ni River committing to attempting to read the Bible in one year! Over 300 One Year Bibles were given away to many who desired to make the Word of God a consistent part of their spiritual diet! That in and of itself is well worth celebrating! But it does not stop there; many continued through and chose to read part or all of the Word of God in 2008. Today is a day we must celebrate the fact that we chose to influence our character and

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build our spirits by the Spirit of God through reading the Word of God! And God promises us that His Word will not be wasted. He promises us that as we listen to Him and obey what we hear from Him, we will mature and we will be blessed:

God's Natural Principles mirror His Spiritual Principles

As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it. Isaiah 55:10,11 NIV

Knowing and Obeying God's Word Brings Spiritual Prosperity

You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands. Isaiah 55:12 NIV

Knowing and Obeying God's Word Brings Physical Prosperity

Instead of the thorn bush will grow the pine tree, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow. This will be for the LORD's renown, for an everlasting sign, which will not be destroyed. Isaiah 55:13 NIV

Which is why it is essential that the AmazinG Race must never have a finish line in our lives. As Jerry has said all year long, "Every day is a new starting line." And with that in mind, I want to challenge you to continue the race or to pick up the race. However, I want to put a different twist to it in 2009. Truly, I want you to obey what God is telling you, and if He is leading you to read the whole Bible again, go for it. However, I would like to simplify for many of us. I have a gift for all of you and I hope you will accept it as well as my challenge for you this year. It is easier. Ushers...if you will. I have a *One Year New Testament* for each of you. As you will notice there is a reading for every day of the year; however, it is only from the New Testament. Let's conquer the New Testament this year and seek to apply its very practical principles to our lives. These are the words and teachings and principles of Jesus as He lived them out Himself and desires for us to live them. I pray that you will take the challenge and seek to achieve God's blessing in your life through reading and applying His Word to your life in 2009. It will not return void or be a waste. To help with the understanding of this Scripture this year, the back page of each Sunday Program will have a day by day guide to praying through the daily New Testament reading. Use it as a helpful tool to understanding your reading.

We also, as you saw the video earlier, have been living out Jesus' philosophy throughout this year in Ni River. I was just thinking a few days ago how proud I was as I read the Free Lance Star and every day read a new story of great Christmas giving and assistance in our great community. Then I got to thinking a little bit more and realized that at

Ni River our ministry to our Community is not a Christmas thing. As a matter of fact, we are not doing anything different in December than we do in every other month of the year. We even coined a term for it this year – "Communitry" – Living in Community to minister to the Community with the Community." And did we minister this year – partnering with the Homeless Shelter, Rappahannock Area Agency on Aging, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, many of the area public schools, Rappahannock Regional Jail, and others. We have been living out exactly what Jesus told us true Religion is:

Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.

Then the righteous will answer him, 'Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?' The King will reply, 'I tell you the truth, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers of mine, you did for me.' Matthew 25:34-40 NIV

2009 will be even bigger than 2008 as our MMT has built a great foundation and our philosophy of Communitry only invented in 2008, will have 2009 to truly advance it. That is worth celebrating and

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continuing to be committed to in 2009!

Finally, we ended 2008 with a great Experiment. For Christmas season, we have all been trying to live a Christmas Last! Perspective in our lives. We have chosen to live this Christmas under an imaginary philosophy of Christmas Last! How would you change your life if you knew that you would be given just a few more days to live? Would you shift your priorities? Would you do some things you have been putting off? Would you make right some relationships that you have wronged or who have wronged you? It has been amazing in many of our lives some of the changes that have happened! Let's celebrate some of these Christmas Last! stories. Would you share some of your Christmas Last! stories with us? We have two people with mics out in the audience. Let's finish today by celebrating some of your experiences living out Christmas Last!

Then let's worship the God who has given us a great opportunity to make 2009 even better than 2008. Let's figure out how a Christmas Last! Perspective will allow us to live that way all year long! Let's ask God to allow us to live out a 2009 Last! Perspective this next year!

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