

January 2026

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
				1 NEW YEARS DAY!	2	3 1-4pm Baking Club
	OFFICE CLOSED – PASTOR YURI AND ELLY ON HOLIDAY					
4 10am Worship – Compassion Sunday Guest Speaker: Lamuel Enoch (Compassion Canada) 11:30am BBYOL	5	6 8am Men’s Prayer Meeting	7 6:30pm Bible Study: <i>Parables</i> 7:00pm Prayer Meeting	8 6:30pm College & Careers Bible Study	9 7pm Youth	10
11 10am Worship – Riley Hiebert 11:15am Faith Formation 12pm BBYOL	12	13 8am Men’s Prayer Meeting	14 6:30pm Bible Study: <i>Parables</i> 7:00pm Prayer Meeting	15 6:30pm College & Careers Bible Study	16 7pm Youth	17 7:30pm UGM
18 Communion Sunday 10am Worship – Pastor Yuri 11:15am Faith Formation 12pm BBYOL	19	20 8am Men’s Prayer Meeting	21 6:30pm Bible Study: <i>Parables</i> 7:00pm Prayer Meeting	22 6:30pm College & Careers Bible Study	23 7pm Youth: Art Evening	24
25 10am Worship – Pastor Yuri 11:15am Faith Formation 12pm BBYOL	26	27 8am Men’s Prayer Meeting	28 6:30pm Bible Study: <i>Parables</i> 7:00pm Prayer Meeting	29 6:30pm College & Careers Bible Study	30 7pm Youth	31 9am Men’s Prayer Fellowship



Bethesda Church
Newsletter

Congregational letter
January 2026
...do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing
of your mind...
–Romans 12:2

For Christmas, we make to do lists and grocery lists, lists of people to visit, parties and concerts to attend. Then there are the Gift Lists. Most challenging of all is coming up with your own personal Wish List. Ideally, this is a list “filled with grace and truth”: that is, filled with things you would actually like (but wouldn’t buy for yourself), tailored to fit a variety of budgets. If you do manage to produce one, you have blessed your loved ones with the priceless gift of not having to worry Whether-You-Will-Like-It. (You have probably also blessed Jeff Bezos, and done your duty to keep the economy humming.)

In the deepening cold approaching New Year’s, inboxes and platforms become encrusted with “listicles”: part list, part article. These posts (often masquerading as news items) are supposed to help you remember the year gone by. More often than not they serve to enlighten you about just how out of touch you really are. There are cultural artifacts that you never knew existed, predictably served up in top ten lists of movies, shows, songs, books, channels, or podcasts, or ... whatever. Then there are the marginal events that you never knew took place, the year’s most entertaining or most outrageous moments, dutifully recorded on a phone and packaged as short form video. Not listicles, exactly, but just as pernicious. What is a social media feed if not a bottomless list?

This brings us to Naughty and Nice Lists. These are traditionally associated with Christmas. But once you outgrow Santa Claus they mysteriously morph

into New Year’s Resolutions. (Call it Yule-chemy.) As my sermon today (Dec. 28) should make clear, examining yourself and identifying changes that will improve you or your experience is not a bad exercise. It is consistent with a Christian life well lived. Self-improvement is good (as far as it goes) and in 2026 I plan to eat better, exercise more, and start taking supplements. Honest.

You will probably have the impression by now that I’m not much of a list person. That impression would be correct. In admitting that, I do not wish to antagonize the many people who adore lists (especially since I am married to one of them!) I don’t have anything against lists and I don’t deny that they are helpful. Though it goes against my nature, I try to use lists as much as I can. Making lists makes me more productive, just like everyone else. But still, if your life becomes mostly about making and working through a bunch of lists, I feel like there must be something missing.

One way I’ve enjoyed looking back through the year is by flipping through the little notebooks I’ve kept over the past twelve months. There are many lists in them of course, but also research for sermons, Scripture passages I’ve jotted down, and little quotes from books and articles I’m reading, plus notes from meetings. There’s also the odd stray thought of my own, often interacting with something I’ve learned, or something that is happening around me, or something that is happening farther away. They’re not diaries: I don’t put anything in them that I would



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December is a month for lists and list making.

be embarrassed for anyone else to read. But they do serve as a kind of chronicle for my year, particularly of the ground I’ve covered in my devotional life.

The kinds of pressures we face out there in the world, the pressures that inspire us to make our many lists, are also the pressures that seek to conform us to it. They are usually not bad things in themselves. But the pressure to make the world’s priorities your own is relentless. We can only resist being shaped by the world if we are intentional about being shaped by God.

To be shaped by God you need to spend as much time with him as possible. That time—as we all know—centers around prayer and reading the Bible. I’ve spoken at length about both those things. But so far I haven’t talked much about another life changing discipline that is linked to them. To resist the world and its overwhelming lists, to be shaped by God, and to find joy in spending your whole day (and night) with him—that is, in prayer and in the Word—there is no better way than to

MEMORIZE THE BIBLE.

As a young man, I had a lot of trouble getting myself to read the Bible regularly. I wasn’t alone in that, of course. A lot of Christians struggle with it. But it bugged me because when I was a teenager, I read the Bible all the time. I put my trust in the Lord when I was very young, and when I was baptised at the age of twelve, my parents gifted me with a beautiful silver NIV Study Bible. It even had my name stamped on it. Although I didn’t read that Bible all the way through, I did read it a lot. It’s in my office here at the church. When I flip through it now I can see how well used it is, how many notes I scribbled in the margins, how many passages are highlighted and underlined (sometimes double and triple underlined!)

But I turned away from the Lord in university. While he graciously brought me back to himself in my mid-twenties, I always struggled to carve out devotional time with any regularity. When I felt motivated to read the Bible, I never knew where to start, and I would often abandon the effort after a couple of days or weeks. My familiarity with it was part of the problem. I knew a lot of the words well enough to feel bored with them, but not well enough to

understand why the Word of God is life-changing: “living and active”.

That all changed when I started to memorize Scripture passages. I had memorized a lot of the “biggies” as a kid (mostly for treats, prizes, or bragging rights) and I had an inkling I should start again. But I didn’t really know why, or what benefit it could possibly bring me. Like many people I thought, “What’s the point of memorizing if I have a Bible available to me all the time?” And of course, since you can get a Bible instantly on the screens that are all around us, memorizing the Bible seems even more pointless to many people today. But I was deeply moved by the courageous example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a pastor who was imprisoned (and eventually executed) by the Nazis. Although he and I have deep theological differences, it was obvious that his exhaustive knowledge of the Bible was a big part of what formed him.

That was what finally motivated me to get going with it. But I had no idea where to start, so I just thought I would try to memorize the first verse of the passage I happened to be reading that day: Romans 12. On the second day of memorizing, the light blinked on. I had gotten to verse 2: “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind...” Before, I had this idea that the purpose of memorizing the Bible was to develop a “treasure chest” of individual verses that you can just pull out when you need them. But what I discovered was that memorizing Scripture is much more about being shaped by the Word of God at all times. And for that memorizing long passages is much more effective. **When you memorize long passages of Scripture your mind is being transformed.**

It is being transformed at a cellular level:

Your brain is always changing. It is constantly rewiring itself to attend to what you think is important. That is, it is always being reshaped by the things that hold your attention. It adapts—conforms to—whatever you occupy yourself with the most. Depending on your habits, your brain will grow in some areas and shrink in others. Whenever you learn something new, neurological pathways are—quite literally—built from scratch. When you

review or practice that thing, those pathways are reinforced. It’s amazing to think that the very structure of your brain has the potential to take the shape of God’s truth!

By memorizing Scripture you are actually training the brain to incline towards thinking God’s thoughts instead of the many other things that constantly vie for your attention! It no longer scrabbles along caught inside the world’s hamster wheel. It stops running in circles. Thinking Scripture leads your mind down a path. It’s a discipline that can give you a clearer mind. In my case, it even led to better sleep.

You are also being transformed at a spiritual level:

This is the transformation we really want. The benefit of memorizing is much more than neurological. As we memorize his Word the Holy Spirit transforms our attitudes and, ultimately, our behaviour. Does this happen automatically? I think that if you are making the effort for Scripture to shape your brain because of an earnest and humble desire to think God’s thoughts after him, then the answer is yes! Our will has already started to become aligned with his. Our mind is much more open to the Holy Spirit’s leading. In such cases, transformation can happen very quickly. It did for me. Within a few months of starting to memorize Scripture my whole outlook on life—on my family, my career, my goals, my stuff—totally altered.

My devotional life was transformed as well. Whereas I once struggled to crack open my Bible, now I couldn’t tear myself away from it. The understanding of the passages I had memorized deepened, but I also found that as I memorized one passage it helped me understand other passages that I didn’t yet have memorized. I started to perceive their logic. The connections between the different sections of the Bible also stood out. I started eating, sleeping, praying—and living—God’s Word.

Once I thought it was my Christian duty to read the Bible, pray, and go to church. And I did. But it was in fits and starts, and grudging. Self-improvement is good as far as it goes. It just doesn’t go nearly far enough. When I started memorizing, not only did I finally manage to read through the whole Bible, I did so joyfully and with new freedom. The Holy Spirit

didn’t just open up the Scriptures, he opened a whole new life. My relationship with him took flight.

The biggest stumbling block for most people is knowing where to start and how to do it. So since we finished our Bible Reading Plan last month*, I thought I would use the occasion to rejig the newsletter’s format a little bit and make some additional space in the coming months to walk through a memorization plan together. I’ve chosen Jesus’ **Sermon on the Plain** since it’s the passage that I will be preaching on until the spring.

There is more than one way to memorize, of course. The plan I’m suggesting is one that I’ve geared toward people who are convinced that they are just no good at memorizing (that’s most people!) If you are a list person, this is a big list just begging to be checked off! Like the Bible reading plan, there are only 20 days of the month where you are actively learning new material. Also, each new portion is only part of a verse, usually just one phrase of a sentence. The key to memorizing anything is repetition. Also, repetition and review is where heart transformation takes place. So while this plan technically only takes a few minutes each day, the idea is that you come back to what you’ve memorized throughout the day and night: as you’re driving, as you’re waiting, as you do mindless chores, when you are going to sleep at night. You’ll soon find that times that used to be boring or tedious have become uplifting, and filled with prayer.

If this plan moves too slowly for you, or you already have a way that you prefer to memorize, feel free to adapt it to your pace and style. But however you do it, start memorizing!



**If you have gotten into the habit of reading through the Bible I definitely want you to keep it up! You can repeat the plan we just did, find a new plan, or use one of the Bible Reading Checklist cards that are on the back table in the church. (That’s become my preferred method of reading through the Bible.) If you get stuck, please come and ask me for advice!*

Thank you all for your prayers, cards, gifts & encouragement this Christmas. You make it a joy to serve the Lord among you! —Pastor Yuri, Michelle, Elly & Ari