

Life Group Discussion Guide

The God of the Year

With 2023 drawing to a close, Pastor Brent began this week's message by challenging each of us to choose a "Word of the Year" for ourselves. He posed the question this way: "If I had only one word to describe myself in 2023, what word would I use?"

- Take time now to come up with your "Word of the Year" for 2023. Explain why you choose that word.
- If you asked the people in your life (family, friends, coworkers, neighbors, etc.) what word they would use to describe you in 2023, what would they say? Why?
- Finally, what word do you think God would use to describe you in 2023? Why?

"This last answer is the only one that truly matters. You and others may have subjective ideas of who you are—or be biased positively or negatively—but God truly knows you, even better than you know yourself."

To guide us in answering this important question, Pastor Brent led us to the biblical accounts of three different people, whose stories act like a mirror into our own lives. Let's take a look.

1. The Spiritual Person

"You know the type of person I'm referring to—what some would call the 'Super Christian.' They attended all the prayer meetings, led a Life Group, went on multiple mission trips, and never missed a weekend service. The Billy Graham's of the Christian faith, they preach with passion, counsel the broken, feed widows and orphans, and rescue kitties from trees."

For an example of the Spiritual Person, Pastor Brent took us to the Old Testament book of Zechariah, where we're introduced to a man named Joshua. Appointed as High Priest, Joshua had been set apart to represent Israel by offering sacrifices for the sins of the entire nation. He was the intermediary between sinful people and a Holy God. As such, he would have been seen as the holiest person in the world. With this context in mind, let's jump into our passage:

"Then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. The Lord said to Satan, 'The Lord rebuke you, Satan! The Lord, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you! Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire?' Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the angel. The angel said to those who were standing before him, 'Take off his filthy clothes.' Then he said to Joshua, 'See, I have taken away your sin, and I will put fine garments on you.' Then I said, 'Put a clean turban on his head.' So they put a clean turban on his head and clothed him, while the angel of the Lord stood by." Zechariah 3:1-5

This peek into Joshua’s life reveals that, before God, even the holiest man in the holiest nation in the world looks filthy. Yet, before Satan can even begin to slander Joshua, the Lord rebukes him. God declares that Joshua’s sins have been forgiven, and his shame is replaced with honor. This passage reveals an important truth about the Spiritual Person:

*“Joshua was filthy, yet God removed his sins and made him clean. **This was not due to Joshua’s goodness, but God’s excessive grace towards him.** For this reason, I believe Joshua’s word of the year would be **clean.**”*

- What does Zechariah’s vision reveal about our own goodness?
- What would it look like for you to give God the glory for any goodness you demonstrated in 2023?

2. The Suffering Person

For a glance at the Suffering Person, we turn to the book of Job. Here, we see a man who suffered the loss of everything he had. Without context, it would be easy to conclude that God was angry with Job. It turns out, the opposite was true.

In Job 1, we see that God highly values Job for his excellent character and devotion to the Lord. In fact, it’s because of his upright character that God allows this suffering to take place—to show that Job’s love for God was not superficial, but foundational to his character.

In the midst of unimaginable pain, we witness Job’s wrestling between questioning God and trusting Him. It’s during this working-out of Job’s faith that he declares the sovereignty and goodness of God, despite his suffering: “But he knows the way that I take; when he has tested me, I will come forth as gold.” (23:10)

*“So the question remains, what word would God have used to describe Job during this challenging year? Would it have been forgotten, abandoned, or forsaken? No. I think God’s word for Job that year would have been **treasured.**”*

- Reflect on a storm you weathered in 2023. How did it affect your view of God’s character?
- How will the account of Job shape your perspective of hardships to come?

3. The Sinful Person

The third character we’re visiting today is not named in Scripture, but known to us only as a “criminal” and a “rebel.” One of two men crucified alongside Jesus, he had earned himself the severest and most horrific death sentence in the Roman world. Knowing this, it would make sense to assume God’s word for him would not be flattering. But let’s see what Scripture says:

“One of the criminals who hung there hurled insults at [Jesus]: ‘Aren’t you the Messiah? Save yourself and us!’ But the other criminal rebuked him. ‘Don’t you fear God,’ he said, ‘since you are under the

same sentence? We are punished justly, for we are getting what our deeds deserve. But this man has done nothing wrong.’ Then he said, ‘Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.’ Luke 23: 39–42

At first blush, the request of the second criminal seems pretty ridiculous. He just admitted he deserves a death sentence, so he certainly doesn’t deserve to be with Jesus in His kingdom, right? Jesus could have been furious with the man, because the very reason Jesus was hanging on the cross in the first place was to atone for the sins that this man, along with the rest of us, have committed. But that’s not how Jesus responds.

“Jesus answered him, ‘Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in paradise.’” Luke 23:43

*“Instead of condemning or ridiculing this man, Jesus assured him he would receive an eternal reward for his belief—that he would be with Jesus forever in paradise. This man, who, to our knowledge, had done nothing good or upright, received undeserved grace. So what word would this sinner likely have received that year? I think God would choose **forgiven**.”*

- Have you allowed the sins of your past to trap you in self-condemnation, believing yourself unworthy to receive God’s forgiveness? Talk about it.
- What does the account of this criminal reveal about the grace of God?

Final Thoughts

At this point, we’ve seen all 3 of these people receive a favorable word from God, and yet none of them were faultless. Doesn’t it beg the question, “Why?”

The answer rests in the life and death of His Son, Jesus Christ. By giving His own Son to take the sins of the world upon Himself, God made the way for us to receive the very grace we don’t deserve.

“Regardless of how our past year went, this sacrifice trumps anything we have experienced—good or bad. You may have had a great 2023. It might have been a year full of grief, challenges, and frustrations. Maybe you can’t think of one thing you did right in 2023. Either way, what matters most is how God views you, and if you have put your faith in Jesus and you demonstrate a repentant heart, you will receive a favorable word. This is not based on your goodness, but God’s faithfulness.”

- After reflecting on these 3 biblical accounts, what word do you now think God would use to describe you in 2023?