



WORD of the YEAR

A 7-day Plan



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a 7-day reading plan

Looking for a fresh start to the new year? What if you invited God to guide you personally and specifically in the year ahead, listening to his heart for you? Through these seven days, we invite you to consider the year behind you, and explore a theme with God for your upcoming year. You'll want to have a journal ready as you explore the prompts along the journey!

Day 1: Reflecting on the Past Year

Scripture:

- Joshua 4:4-7 So Joshua called together the twelve men he had appointed from the Israelites, one from each tribe, and said to them, "Go over before the ark of the Lord your God into the middle of the Jordan. Each of you is to take up a stone on his shoulder, according to the number of the tribes of the Israelites, to serve as a sign among you. In the future, when your children ask you, 'What do these stones mean?' tell them that the flow of the Jordan was cut off before the ark of the covenant of the Lord. When it crossed the Jordan, the waters of the Jordan were cut off. These stones are to be a memorial to the people of Israel forever."
- 1 Chronicles 16:12 Remember the wonders he has done,
- Psalm 77:11 I will remember the deeds of the Lord; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago.
- Psalm 143:5 I remember the days of long ago; I meditate on all your works and consider what your hands have done.

Devotional:

How have you experienced the presence and the goodness of God this year? Like the people of Israel of long ago, we too, so easily forget. We lose track of the mountains and hills we have climbed and the valleys we have traversed as soon as the next summit looms before us. Today, let's stand right where we are in life and turn around for a few moments to take in the view of the trail behind us these last twelve months. Let's trace our steps back and ask the Spirit to remind us and reveal to us where he has been present in our moments this past year.

Over and over in the Old Testament, God encourages his people to remember, to look back on the days of old, and call to mind what he has done. He knows that we so easily forget. As the people of Israel crossed the Jordan River on miraculous dry ground, Joshua instructed a man from each tribe to carry a large stone from the center of the river. Twelve men dug hands into wet clay and mud and heaved mini boulders to their shoulders, precariously balancing them and grunting their way to camp.

Why would Joshua insist on this? In the coming days and months and years and generations, he wanted them to be able to mark that moment when God exposed the belly of the Jordan River to welcome them home. Their pile of rocks might have looked unremarkable to any passersby, but they were miraculous. Without God's intervention drying up the river for the crossing that day, they would still be at the bottom of the river, not piled in a dry heap for remembrance. As families traveled past the memorial stones, fathers and mothers recounted to their children the wonders God did for them that day.

Crack open a journal, find a clean sheet of paper, or open a new note on your phone or document on your computer to record your own remembering. Take this first step of remembering what happened last year. Write down the name of each month and name a memory or significant event from that month. Keep it brief, just words or phrases. A tip for those months when it's hard to bring memories to mind: look back through your camera roll or calendar from last year. When you have recorded a few memories for each month, take a few moments to have a conversation with God about the year before. The following questions may be helpful.

As you ponder all this with God today, consider asking Him:

- *Father, would you help me see overarching themes or emotions weaved through the last year?*
- *Jesus, what might you entitle the last year of my life, what name might you give it?*
- *Spirit, open the eyes of my heart and mind to see where you were at work in the last twelve months. Would you show me what specific places you were palpably with me and at work in the details of my life?*

Day 2: Longings in the Stillness

Scripture:

- Psalm 38:9 All my longings lie open before you, Lord; my sighing is not hidden from you.
- Psalm 37:7 Be still before the Lord and wait patiently for him.
- Psalm 103:2,4 Praise the Lord, my soul, and forget not all his benefits...who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.
- Jeremiah 29:11 "For I know the plans I have for you," declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

Devotional:

Yesterday we looked back and remembered. Today we slowly turn to what lies ahead. In this new beginning, do you feel the urge to run ahead and jump right in? Or do you feel like shrinking, the need to brace for this year? Or perhaps something else? What if today is a day to be still, breathe in deeply, and exhale fully? Pause. Stillness. Quiet. And begin to listen to your heart. Take the temperature of your heart, mind, soul, and body at this place and time, at this beginning. What is coming up for you as you sit and pause? How does it feel in your body (chest, belly, neck)? What emotions stir in your heart? What comes to mind as you turn your gaze to the year ahead.

You are not alone today as you stand here on the precipice of the future. God is our Emmanuel, our God With Us. The psalmists speak of how God knows our longings and that he satisfies our desires with good things. Sometimes we don't know what we deeply long for. We may know we want a certain job or home or relationship, but what lies under the surface of that? Often we silence our desires and sequester them away, naming them unholy.

What if it's not our desires that are unholy, but where we take them that is unhealthy, and not what we were made for? Our amazing Trinity God knit his holy desires in our heart - we desire love, safety, joy, and belonging in relationships. We long to bring our glory and goodness to our place in the world, to our work - in what makes us come alive, making a genuine difference. We long to be known, seen, valued for who we are.

Let's get somewhere comfortable to continue being still with God and ask him to shine a light on those deep desires and longings that we wonderfully bring into this year. May he help us see our hearts and minds as they are, right here, what they have endured and what we feel deeply as we gaze into the fog that may obscure the path forward.

Are you aware of your deep longings, desires, hopes, and dreams? As you journal today, consider various realms of your life: your physical, emotional, and mental health, your relationships - with family, friends, with God and with others, your work, and other areas - writing down all that comes to mind.

As you ponder all this with God today, consider asking Him:

- *Father, what desires have you sown deep in my heart? What makes me really come alive?*
- *Jesus, would you highlight some of my hopes and dreams for this coming year?*
- *Spirit, what deep longings have long been dormant in my story? Where have I shut down longings or dreams?*

Day 3: Choosing Five Themes

Scripture:

- Psalm 119:105 Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.
- Psalm 139:5 You hem me in behind and before, you lay your hand upon me.
- Psalm 23:3 He refreshes my soul. He guides me along the right paths for his name's sake.

Devotional:

Each year, I ask God to guide me to a theme word or phrase for the year ahead. The process varies with each year, but generally, I take time reflecting like we have the last two days - remembering, considering, journaling, and praying about the year behind and the year ahead. As I do, themes rise to the surface, words that connect to where I am in life. The last few years, I mulled over a long list of words and circled those that jumped out at me and slowly narrowed them down.

One year, I had been asking God to bring the theme to mind for a week or so. I was out on my small moss-covered patio when a song from my youth group days (from more than 20 years prior) popped into my mind. *"You've turned my mourning into dancing again, you've lifted my sorrows. I can't stay silent. I must sing for your joy has come"* And just like that - I knew that year, my word would be Joy!

That year I began digging into the Bible with my theme. I realized then that joy and sorrow are connected. Throughout Scripture, joy and sorrow hang out in the same verses, as unlikely siblings, connected despite seeming so opposite of each other. That year my dad died in April. These two words intermingled every day. The joys of watching our young dog pounce and prance and play made brighter in contrast to the sorrow that weighed me down. I was thankful that before my dad passed, the Lord gently illuminated the relationship of joy and sorrow. Then I could see joy and sorrow not as "good or bad" but two sides of the same coin, each making the other more poignant.

Today, let's narrow down our potential words for this year to three to five potential themes. If you are struggling to know where to even start, do an internet image search of "word of the year lists." Before you read through the list, ask God to guide your heart and mind. Whether you read through a list of words that leap off the page or words and themes well up from your heart and mind, I encourage you to land on three to five words/themes that resonate deeply right now.

In your journal, prayerfully dig into each word/theme. Here are a few questions to guide you:

- What does this word make you think of?
- How does this word relate to a struggle or hope you have right now?
- How have you experienced this theme in your life lately?
- What emotions rise up in you when you think of this word?

As you ponder all this with God today, consider asking Him:

- *Father, what theme(s) are you inviting me to focus on this year?*
- *Jesus, how do these words and ideas connect to my life and heart and soul these days?*
- *Spirit, how do these words/themes express my deep longing and desire?*

Day 4: Your One Word

Scripture:

- Isaiah 30:21 Whether you turn to the right or to the left, your ears will hear a voice behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it."
- Proverbs 3:5-6 Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways, acknowledge him, and he will make your paths straight.
- Psalm 32:8 I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.
- Psalm 143:8 Let the morning bring me word of your unfailing love, for I have put my trust in you. Show me the way I should go, for to you I entrust my life.

Devotional:

It's time to choose one word for this year. This process may take some time of praying and reflecting and processing and more praying, so do not feel like you need to rush this step.

A prayer for guidance:

Loving God, you are with and for me, would you open my heart, mind, and soul to hear from you in this? I long to move into the coming year partnering with you for my hopes, dreams, and plans. May your will be done in my life! Lord, would you make clear to me which word YOU are inviting me to focus on for this coming year?

Has a single word risen above the others? Let's explore more. What does your word really mean? I'm surprised sometimes how I take a word for granted. Look up your word in a dictionary and a thesaurus. Write out the definition of your word, words that are related to it, synonyms and antonyms. These definitions and words will help us tomorrow as we look into Scripture with our theme words.

Why do you think this is your word for the year ahead? In our time alone with God questions, we ponder and ask God to make the connections between this word and this place in our stories.

As you ponder all this with God today, consider asking Him:

- *Father, how is this word/theme meant for me in next season?*
- *Jesus, would you show me how this word/theme might guide me in the year ahead?*
- *Spirit, would you open my mind and heart to all that this word means to you?*

Day 5: Your Word in The Word

Scripture:

- John 10:10 I have come that they may have life and have it to the full.
- 2 Timothy 3:16-17 All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

Devotional:

Today, let's explore the Bible, inviting the God-breathed words of the Lord to wash over you: awakening, deepening, training, and filling you as you move into this day and new year acknowledging Trinity God is right here with you. As you gather verses related to your word, may the Spirit begin to paint the picture of this word, expanding the theme, inviting you into what he sees. Allow his words to wash over you like the Jordan River ran over those twelve stones that we read about on the first day of this plan. May his words gently soothe and smooth the rough places, making you more like him, eroding all that is not part of the full and glorious life he has for you.

Depending on your word of the year, it may be easy to find hundreds of related verses in the Bible, or none at all! Don't lose hope.

Here are some ways to find your theme in Scripture:

1. On The Bible App. Tap on the magnifying glass (Discover) and type in your theme word (or related words). Then choose "see all" next to the "Bible" heading. Do not write down every single verse. Read over them, looking for ones that relate to the word in the way that holds the most meaning to you, ones that resonate with your heart, or ones that make you wonder or ask questions of God.
2. You can look up your word on Biblegateway.com as well. (This is the most comprehensive way to find verses related to your word).
3. Head to google and/or Pinterest. Search "Bible verses about..." or "Bible verses related to..."
4. If you still are struggling to find verses about your word, you could reach out to a friend or pastor and ask if they know any verses related to your theme.

Last year my theme was "Deeply Rooted." Ironically, it felt challenging to find reference verses for this theme, after my year with the word "joy" that had many verses to choose from. I looked up trees, branches, roots, rooted, streams, shallow, and deep in order to find a handful of verses. My years with "joy" and "hope" I had so many verses the effort was in narrowing the list.

As you find verses related to your theme, write them down or copy and paste them into a document. Today is all about exploring and collecting verses. Tomorrow, we will explore them more deeply.

As you ponder all this with God today, consider asking Him:

- *Father, which verse(s) would you like to explore with me? Why?*
- *Jesus, would you open my heart to places where this theme touches your heart and experience in your years walking on Earth?*
- *Spirit, as I read the verses related to my word, will you open my heart and mind to what you desire to speak to me in this theme?*

Day 6: Looking for Patterns

Scripture:

- Psalm 30:11 You turned my wailing into dancing
- Psalm 32:8 I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go; I will counsel you with my loving eye on you.
- Hebrews 4:12 For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Devotional:

Remember on Day 3 I shared about my “joy” year? On the surface, that year was in fact a year of sorrow, exhaustion, and brokenness; yet God saw a larger story on that December day. He sang JOY over me in the mourning-to-dancing song on my patio with our new puppy. With the word “joy” in my heart, I headed to the Bible, asking God to open me to his vision of joy. Of the multitude of verses to choose from, I narrowed my list down and wrote about 15-20 passages that resonated with my heart.

Where were the patterns in these verses that were speaking to my heart? It was in this process of pouring over my list of verses that I noticed how many times sorrow and grief are mentioned in the exact same sentence as joy. One verse was Psalm 30:11. The mourning-to-dancing worship song that came to mind on my patio is actually based on this verse. “You turned my mourning into dancing.” God began singing his fuller story over my heart in those early days and weeks of my “joy” year. He was gently preparing me to navigate the grief and mourning with my Comforter by my side with every step. I experienced being held and guided even as I tasted the smallest surprises of joy that year. Puppies, snowscapes, eagles, waves, and even the characters in books put smiles on my face that year, surprises of joy poured out by a Father who carried me in months of mourning.

Today is your invitation to see the patterns in the verses before you. Here are a few questions to help you begin:

- What patterns do you see?
- Are there other words that are commonly mentioned with your word?
- To what broader themes does your word connect?
- Do the Old Testament and New Testament differ in their way of approaching your theme?
- During my “hope” year, I noticed a pattern with the word “in” following hope. I made a list from my verses of what God guides us to hope “in” and what he doesn't desire for us to hope “in”. How can you learn from the patterns of connecting words in your verses?

As you ponder all this with God today, consider asking Him:

- *Father, what pattern(s) do you long for my eyes to see today? How does this pattern in my theme connect to places in my story?*
- *Jesus, thank you for your love of words and storytelling. Would you open my heart to how you might be speaking or feel about my theme word?*
- *Spirit, would you awaken my heart to the larger story you are writing in my life this year? What specific concept within this theme connects to the story you are authoring? Please reveal what you long for me to discover!*

Day 7: Choosing a Verse of the Year

Scripture:

- Song of Songs 2:4 Let him lead me to the banquet hall, and let his banner over me be love.
- Zephaniah 3:17 The Lord your God is with you, the Mighty Warrior who saves. He will take great delight in you; in his love he will no longer rebuke you, but will rejoice over you with singing.

Devotional:

What if God has a banner, an anthem to sing over your heart this year? When my kids were young, I would sing songs to them as they fell asleep. Over their early years, certain songs became their own personal anthems - ones they chose over and over or ones that welled up in my heart in the closing moments of the day. Imagine God singing the verse you land on today over you as you move throughout this year. May it become a sweet song of his particular kindness for your heart over this mile marker in your story.

Our God knows what lies ahead of you this year. Let's ask him to guide us to the anthem he is singing over us. At this point, move through your collection of verses, paying attention to your heart. Which verse moves you and stirs your heart? Does one seem to relate more to what you are facing right now? Wait and see how the Spirit prompts you as you peruse your list. This may not be a twenty-minute exploration. You may need to sit with these verses for days or perhaps weeks before you feel a sense of clarity. Take the time you need. When you have your verse, write it in your journal.

Next, paraphrase your verse into your own words. This is a practice of understanding and creative exploration. If we can paraphrase a concept, we comprehend it enough to put words around it. I am not asking you to become a Bible translator. Instead, put your own words around the concepts of your verse. Here is an example from my "deeply rooted" verse of the year:

"They will be like a tree planted by the water that sends out its roots by the stream. It does not fear when heat comes; its leaves are always green. It has no worries in a year of drought and never fails to bear fruit." Jeremiah 17:15 NIV

The one who trusts in God is like a tree growing by a river. She sends the roots of her heart, the places she looks to for nourishment toward the river of Life, God himself. She does not fear when the hot weather hits. Her leaves remain full of life. She does not fear the difficult dry seasons and continues to be fruitful. Jeremiah 17:15 My Paraphrasing

Even as you pen your paraphrase, ask the Spirit to open your eyes and mind to see and consider beauty and wonders in how his Word intersects with your life.

Lastly, write a prayer with your verse. For example, if Psalm 30:11 were my verse for this year, I could turn “You turned my wailing into dancing” into this prayer: “Loving God, would you meet me in the grief-stricken places in my heart and bring joyful surprises?”

This is our last day together in this plan. As you ponder all we have explored with God this week, consider asking Him:

- *Father, what one idea do you most want me to see and understand and process from this week?*
- *Jesus, what place in my story did my word and verse touch most? What is your invitation to me in that?*
- *Spirit, would you allow me to hear the anthem you are singing over my life? Would you awaken all my senses to be aware of what and how you are singing? Would you show me how to keep the word of this year and the verse you have given me on my mind, in my heart, and walking out in my life this year? What reminders might help me to keep your anthem in my heart?*

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