

Zero Your Weapon

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome (or understood) it. ~ *John 1:5 (NIV)*

Keep reminding God's people of these things. Warn them before God against quarreling about words; it is of no value, and only ruins those who listen. Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth.

~ 2 *Timothy 2:14-15 (NIV)*

We are the light of God on earth. We are not warring against flesh and blood, but against principalities, strongholds, imaginations, and high things that exalt themselves against God. Our adversary, the darkness, has no new tricks, only new faces. We are the light, and one of our greatest weapons is praying the Word of God — finding a Scripture and taking that Scripture back to the Lord for Him to act in, on, or for the situation here on earth.

Zeroing means to prepare the sight of one's physical weapon to "hit the target" precisely when fired. Just as someone using a physical weapon must take the time to zero their weapon before firing it (to protect themselves and/or their families), we must prepare ourselves for the battle that lies ahead. We do this by using the Word of God as the basis for our prayers and fasting.

The fullness of Scripture is ours when we apply it to our lives and to our situations in prayer. But — and this is so important — we must study the Word to know the Scripture to be able to apply it — zeroing the Scripture in on the life situations we face.

Blessings come from praying the Word over our lives. Prayer opens our hearts to submission to the relationship and to accepting that the Holy Spirit dwells within us — we are the light on earth. And as the light, the darkness cannot overcome any part of who we are. The battle is already won by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Dear God, hear our prayer. We come before you asking that our light may shine before others, that they may see our good deeds and glorify you, Father, who art in heaven. Guide our steps and keep us as we go out today and every day to share your Word through prayer and supplication.

Pastor Kellie Heisler
Florence, South Carolina

God's Handiwork

For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God — not by works, so that no one can boast. For we are God's handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do. ~ *Ephesians 2:8-10 (NIV)*

I'm methodical in my sewing. First, I wash and dry the new fabric to get out the “sizing,” which is the stiffening chemical (e.g., formaldehyde) used in fabrics. Next I give the fabric a quick press with the iron. Then it's ready to be cut and worked with.

My latest project was window valances. After washing, drying, and ironing the fabric, I still had a lot of measuring and marking to do, then ironing the turned-up edges, and finally, sewing the seams. As a seam was finished, I snipped the small leftover thread ends to make the job neater. As I worked, sometimes the bobbin thread ran out and needed to be filled up with new thread so I could get back to sewing the valance. Finally, I pressed the finished piece again and put it on the curtain rod.

I couldn't help but make connections between sewing and our relationship with the Lord. When we ask Jesus to be our Lord, we are washed as He rids us of our “sizing,” that is, our stiff and tainted heart. We are clean and ready to be used. We become God's fabric!

Some of our bad habits may be cut or pressed flat when we first meet Jesus, but we often need to keep being pressed, since our edges keep turning up as we live out daily life. That is, we keep returning to bad habits and sin. God has to keep working on us, just like you have to keep pressing fabric when sewing.

God may also have to snip our loose threads from time to time to help us get rid of our bad habits and to make us more like Him. And just like the bobbin needed to be refilled so I could complete my valance, as God works on us, we need to be refilled through prayer, Bible study, fellowship, and other spiritual disciplines. These help keep us on track as we become more like God.

How are you being God's fabric? What is He creating you to be? We need to allow God to wash us, press us, snip our threads, and refill us so that we can be His handiwork.

Lord, may I become what you have created me to be. Please tailor my life to be pleasing and useful to you.

Claudia Cuddy
Evangelical United Methodist Church

The Words of Jesus

Then Jesus told him, “Because you have seen me, you have believed; blessed are those who have not seen and yet have believed.” ~ *John 20:29 (NIV)*

I can remember the first time I read this Scripture. I was grieving the loss of my husband. It was 12 years ago, and I was new to reading the Bible. When I read this, it was like a lightbulb went on inside me, and then I closed my eyes and imagined Jesus was speaking this personally to me.

I was so moved because I was reading something that Jesus said thousands of years ago, and it was like He was speaking just to me, today, in the moment of my pain.

All of a sudden, these weren't just words on the page, but words for my broken heart, to comfort me and give me peace. I felt that thousands of years ago, Jesus wanted me to know that He was thinking of me and all those people who wouldn't get to see Him physically.

What love He has for me. What love He has for us.

His words still speak to me thousands of years later, and they can still comfort me.

I say this to myself every day, and it still comforts me, but now I also think of what Jesus went through before He said those words — the pain, the agony, and the cross. He came down from heaven and endured the pain for me, for us, because He loves me. He loves us.

Heavenly Father, during this Lenten season, help us to remember the words of Jesus and why He came, and what He went through. For me. For us. What love! Thank you for your amazing love.

Michelle Levesque
Bethlehem Lutheran Church

True Freedom

Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. ~ *Matthew 22:37-40 (NIV)*

While leading a Bible study on the Gospel of Matthew, I was struck by the amount and intensity of Jesus' conflicts with the Pharisees, scribes, and other leaders. As events were spiraling toward His arrest, crucifixion, and resulting resurrection, I wondered exactly what it was that created so much conflict.

There seem to be many reasons Jesus could have been frustrated with them, including that the leaders failed to see and understand that it was He, Jesus of Nazareth, who was the promised Messiah, standing right before them. Jesus was the one who had been performing so many amazing miracles, but instead of recognizing Him, they were plotting His death!

Perhaps, though, Jesus' frustration was mostly rooted in the leaders' inability to look past all of their rules and regulations and Old Testament laws. They had been piling up rules upon rules of their own making for centuries, which is often referred to as *legalism*. As a result, this was only making life harder for the ones they were supposed to be serving. The leaders were so focused on rules that they weren't loving others — and they missed God's Messiah.

Are we sometimes guilty of the same thing today? Can we get stuck on the rules and regulations of whichever denomination we adhere to? We hear so much about freedom these days, but Jesus died to free us from the bondage of our own sin and, therefore, of legalism.

I believe Jesus was freeing us to see the big picture by telling us that all the rules and laws are now summarized into two: (1) Love God with all your heart, mind, and soul, and (2) Love your neighbor as yourself.

Therefore, we can now be focused upon what is in our hearts. Isn't that what God is ultimately looking for — where our hearts truly are? That's true freedom for us to rejoice about in this Lenten season and beyond!

Dear Father, we praise and thank you this season for sending your Son to die upon a cross to free us from the bondage of our sins. And, dear Jesus, we praise and thank you for all you went through to accomplish this for us. We also thank you for refocusing us onto loving you and your Father with all that we have, and then truly loving and serving one another.

Scott Martin

Pitman United Methodist Church

Decluttering

Better to have one handful with quietness than two handfuls with hard work and chasing the wind. ~ *Ecclesiastes 4:6 (NLT)*

We made the decision to make our retirement move. This would be our last address. We knew this would be our gift to our children. They would not have to think about caring for us as we aged and might potentially need home health type of services. They would not have to worry about where we would go if we eventually needed personal care or skilled nursing care.

But with that decision came the task of decluttering. We started four years before we made our move. We started giving away furniture, family photos, art work, and decorative pottery and china. We pared down our books and clothes.

Along with all the physical decluttering, I realized that we were also simplifying our lives. Were we making a change in our lives in order to embrace something new? I know that God wants us to let go of the material aspects of our lives in order to make room for His Word and become closer to Him. As we accomplished our move, our hearts were fully open to a new community experience.

Now that the initial unpacking and organizational aspects of the move are over, we find ourselves slowing down. This change was worrisome and maybe a little troubling at times, but we feel we are in a new season. We are seekers looking for a new church home. We are meeting new people, exploring a different part of our country, and learning new things, like mahjong!

We have simplified our lives and definitely believe we are in a phase of spiritual renewal — of finding a new path on which we can worship and glorify God using the blessings He has bestowed upon us. “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here” (2 Corinthians 5:17 NIV).

Thank you, God, for giving us the wisdom to discern your will in our lives as we made a life change. We pray that our hearts continue to be open to your guidance and grace.

Brenda Freitag
Manheim, PA

The Pecking Order

So the last will be first, and the first will be last. ~ *Matthew 20:16 (NIV)*

Each year as an educator, I watch third grade students (especially the girls) establish a “pecking order,” deciding who is the top hen and which poor soul lands at the very bottom of the line. The order in the middle can change from day to day, but typically, the very top and the very bottom do not change. After reading about how chickens truly do maintain a “pecking order” by physically irritating the chicken just below them in the order, I am amazed at how similar third grade behavior is when it comes to safeguarding their place in line!

This past year, the student who landed at the end of the pecking order was by far the smartest and most creative student in the bunch, and she was the light that shined the brightest. The other girls did not like that about her and needled her every day. The little girl put up with it somehow ... until she didn't. She got tired of putting up with the nonsense, and by January, she started to lash out. What I wanted to tell her was — Don't worry! You are last now, but someday you will be first. Someday, these silly girls will work for you! You have strengths they cannot see or appreciate! I kept thinking about the song “Nobody But Jesus” by Casting Crowns:

Why You ever chose me
Has always been a mystery
All my life I've been told I belong
At the end of the line
With all the other Not-Quites
With all the Never-Get-It-Rights
But it turns out they're the ones
You've been looking for all this time
Moses had stage fright
And David brought a rock to a sword fight
You picked 12 outsiders nobody would've chosen
And You changed the world

Some of us feel that the world is pecking at us all day. However, God uses those of us at the end of the line to change the world. Someday, the last will be first, when it matters most.

Lord, please help me to remember that while I am still in this world, I want to bring a rock to a sword fight because I am secure in knowing that I have strength that is not of this world. I have Jesus. Thank you for the precious gift of your son.

Erica Salmon

First United Methodist Church of Glassboro

Hang on Tight! It'll Be All Right!

I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me. ~ *Philippians 4:13 (NIV)*

For he guards the course of the just and protects the ways of his faithful ones.
~ *Proverbs 2:8 (NIV)*

I was having a difficult time with getting my dryer vented outside. The company I was using was causing me a lot of aggravation with bad communication and delays. I was feeling frustrated and defeated. I just wanted to get the job done. The job finally did get done, but it took a lot longer than I expected and many phone calls to get the right person to do it.

Several less experienced plumbers came to my house to attempt to do the dryer venting. Apparently it was more difficult than anticipated. However, it was only when the master plumber came with his skill and knowledge that the proper repair path was taken and the outside venting was accomplished.

I thought about how we look to Jesus, our Master, for the right path to follow. “Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways submit to him and he will make your paths straight” (Proverbs 3:5-6).

During this time I received a card from my friend, Charmaine. It said on the front, *Hang on tight!* On the inside it said, *It'll be all right!* That gave me a lot of encouragement. Even though I was going through this trial, all I needed to do was to hang on tight to Jesus and lean on Him to see me through. He would give me the strength to deal with this problem. What a comfort to have Jesus to hang onto with the assurance of His wisdom and guidance to help me persevere.

During this Easter season as we celebrate the resurrection of our Lord and Savior, I am reminded to hang on tight to the cross. He hung on the cross for the pardon of my sins so that I could receive forgiveness, salvation, and eternal life with Him, the Master.

Lord, thank you for going to the cross and setting me free from sin. With you I can do all things and be strong. Because of you I can hang on tight and know one day it will be all right when I see you in heaven. It will be better than all right — it will be perfect!

Sharon Constantine
Clayton Baptist Church