

Zechariah 8:9-13

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The LORD encourages the remnant of the post-exilic community of Judah to be strong as they rebuild the temple because He will give them peace from their adversaries and bless them beyond measure.

In Zechariah 8:1–8, the prophet told the returned exiles of Judah that God would one day reside amid Jerusalem. He promised that He would rescue His people from their adversaries and be their God in truth and righteousness. This reassured His people that they are His people, and He will never forsake them (Deuteronomy 7:7-8).

Now in the present passage, Zechariah moves from the distant future to the immediate, and urges the people to be strong to complete the temple's rebuilding. He again introduces the message with the formula *Thus says the LORD of hosts* (v 9) to assure them that his words represent God speaking directly to His people.

The Hebrew term translated as *LORD* is Yahweh, the self-existent and eternal God who revealed Himself to Moses from the burning bush (Exodus 3:14). Yahweh is His covenant name. It describes His relationship with His people. That name comes from the Hebrew verb “to be.” That is why God instructed Moses to say to the Israelites, “I AM has sent you” (Exodus 3:14). In Zechariah, the everlasting God is called *the LORD of hosts*, which means “LORD of armies.”

The term translated as *host* is “*sabaoth*” in the Hebrew language. It means “armies” and often refers to the angelic armies of heaven (1 Samuel 1:3). Thus, the phrase *the LORD of hosts*, which occurs throughout the prophetic books, often describes God's power as a warrior leading His angelic army to defeat His foes (Amos 5:16, 9:5; Habakkuk 2:17). Here in Zechariah, the phrase demonstrates God's power as the supreme warrior who has complete control over all human affairs. Indeed, *the LORD* is the all-powerful God. He is “highly to be praised, and His greatness is unsearchable” (Psalm 145:3).

However, although God is the ultimate in strength, His desire is for His people to do the work of rebuilding the temple. He thus commanded His people, saying, *Let your hands be strong!* (v 9). God made humans in His image (Genesis 1:26). As God is strong and courageous, He urges His people to be strong and courageous. As God is a builder and creator, He encourages His people to build and create.

The verb *be strong* in this context refers to bodily strength. The term is used similarly of Joshua, who still felt *strong* despite his advanced age (Joshua 14:11). Similarly, someone who is ill can recover and regain his strength (Isaiah 39:1). But the verb can also refer to enthusiasm or determination (Deuteronomy 31:6). Thus, the idiom *let your hands be strong* is an encouragement not only to exert the physical effort required to build the temple, but also to continue to strive (Judges 7:11, 2 Samuel 7:2). It means undertaking challenging tasks and persevering until everything is accomplished. God desires for His people to set goals then strive

to achieve them. Specifically, God urges His people to strive to win the great prize of life through being a faithful witness by living in His ways (Philippians 3:14).

The LORD urged the Judeans to be courageous as they *listened in these days to these words from the mouth of the prophets* (v 9). God does not want them to merely hear the words being spoken, but to understand and act upon them. This is a common refrain throughout scripture, to hear, understand, then act upon God's Word. A couple of notable examples follow:

“For this commandment which I command you today is not too difficult for you, nor is it out of reach. But the word is very near you, in your mouth and in your heart, that you may observe it.” (Deuteronomy 30:11, 14)

“Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.” (Revelation 1:3)

The term *prophet* [“nābî” in Hebrew] means “proclaimer” or “forth-teller.” It describes someone who served as God's emissary. The *prophet* had a particular calling to receive the divine message, live it out, and proclaim it to the people roundabout. He was to discern what God thought about a specific situation to know what He wanted His people to do.

While *the prophets* were responsible for proclaiming the divine revelation, the people were to understand and obey *the prophets* because they were God's ambassadors. The peoples' assigned responsibility under their covenant with God was to serve as a priestly nation, showing a better way to live to the surrounding nations (Exodus 19:6).

In Zechariah's day, the returning exiles were to obey *the prophets, those who spoke in the day that the foundation of the house of the LORD of hosts was laid, to the end that the temple might be built* (v 9). This admonition emphasizes that the current prophets were speaking God's words and should be heeded. These were the same prophets who were speaking *in the day that the foundation of the restored temple was laid*.

The *house of the LORD* refers to the temple in Jerusalem, which the Babylonians had destroyed in 586 BC, causing the Judeans to spend about 70 years in exile in Babylonia (2 Kings 25:8-12). The prophets ministering during the laying of the foundation were Haggai and Zechariah (Ezra 5:1, 6:14; Haggai 1:1-2).

In Zechariah's day, some Judeans had already returned to their homeland. Under the governance of Zerubbabel and with the permission of the Persian King, they returned to Judah in 538 BC and began laying the temple's foundation in 536 BC (Ezra 3:8-13). They planned to complete the project but stopped working on it for about sixteen years because of the hostile intrigues of their foes. In 520 BC, the LORD raised Haggai and Zechariah as His messengers to encourage the people *to the end that the temple might be built* (Ezra 5:1-2; Haggai 1:1-2).

The LORD then explained why the Judeans were to *be strong* to complete the rebuilding project. He did so by contrasting the present time with the former days. He declared, *before those days*,

there was no wage for man or any wage for animal (v 10). The prepositional phrase *before those days* refers to the time before the returning exiles began to rebuild the temple earnestly in 520 BC (Haggai 1:15). That *there was no wage* indicates that there was no money for anything other than survival. People did not have sufficient income to pay a *wage* either for a *man* or an *animal*. It was a struggle to merely survive.

Before Haggai came on the scene in September 520 BC, life was hard for the Judeans. The people of Judah worked hard to cultivate the land. They planted many crops but reaped but few of them at harvest time. They experienced hunger due to a shortage of food supply and had little wine to drink. Although some could earn money, their expenses far exceeded their income (Haggai 1:6). Worse yet, *for him who went out or came in, there was no peace because of his enemies* (v 10).

The lack of *peace* likely includes a presence of violence. When there is violence, people allocate substantial resources to protection. Pouring resources into producing economic output just creates more for people to take by force; so people rather vest their productive energy into protecting what little they have.

The lack of *peace* would also indicate an absence of trust, which leads to an absence of commerce. Without a free exchange of goods, the community loses benefit of the efficiencies of dividing labor among those with special skills. The natural consequence of violence is poverty.

The Hebrew translated *peace* is the Hebrew word “shalom.” It is a comprehensive word that points to a harmony of life, where all things work according to God’s (good) design.

According to Ezra:

“The people of the land discouraged the people of Judah, and frightened them from building, and hired counselors against them to frustrate their counsel all the days of Cyrus king of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.”
(Ezra 4:4–5)

The “people of the land” molested the Jews, discouraged their work, and thwarted their building of the temple.

In addition, God caused an internal conflict in the post-exilic community of Judah. As He stated, *I set all men one against another*. He did so because the people had misplaced their priorities. While they left God’s temple desolate, they enjoyed building paneled homes. Therefore, God disciplined them through hardships to get their attention (Haggai 1:1–11).

Nevertheless, the bad days had elapsed, and hope was forthcoming. God introduced this turning point with the phrase *But now* and said, *I will not treat the remnant of this people as in the former days* (v 11). The prophet then inserted the formula *declares the LORD of hosts* to remind his audience that God was the primary author of the message. In so doing, he added more weight to the revelation.

The *remnant of this people* refers to the Judean exiles who returned to their homeland in Jerusalem after many years of captivity in Babylonia (Haggai 1:12, 14). The LORD reassured them that things would be different because they had “obeyed the voice of the LORD and the words of Haggai the prophet” (Haggai 1:12). Obedience to God always produces rewards. As Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it” (Luke 11:28).

The LORD further spells out two special blessings His people would receive. The first pertains to land productivity. In the former days, there was crop failure (Haggai 1:6) But now, *there will be peace for the seed* (v 12). The Hebrew term for *peace* is “shalom.” Shalom is a large concept that includes all things working in harmony with God’s (good) design. In our passage, it probably means the land would be fertile. God’s initial design was for the land to produce abundantly, it was only made to produce thorns and thistles as a result of the Fall of Man, when humans chose the path of death instead of the path of life (Genesis 3:17-19).

In other words, the Judeans will plant crops and reap them successfully. All plants would grow: *the vine will yield its fruit, the land will yield its produce and the heavens will give their dew* (v 12). God would cause this new blessing to be the new reality for the Judeans.

The term *vine* refers to grapes used to make wine. That the *vine* is yielding *its fruit* indicates peace and productivity. The term *dew* refers to moisture condensed from the warm air by the cold ground. Much of the moisture for vegetation in Israel and Judah comes from dew, from moist winds blowing in from the Mediterranean Sea. God is sending the *dew* to create the prosperity of cultivated crops and natural vegetation, especially in the dry season (April to October).

The *dew* is a source of the water on which life depends (Genesis 27:28). In Haggai’s day, the LORD caused an absence of *dew* in the land of Judah. As a result, “the earth has withheld its produce” (Haggai 1:10). But since God’s discipline was over, He would release the *dew*, allowing the land (the earth) to produce abundant crops for His people. As He stated, *I will cause the remnant of this people to inherit all these things* (v 12).

The verb *inherit* is “nāḥal” in Hebrew. It means that a joint heir has received his portion by succession. In the ancient world, a father would determine how to divide his property before his death (Deuteronomy 21:16). The firstborn son would enjoy the privilege of having “a double portion” (Deuteronomy 21:17). This double portion likely emphasized the succession of heading the family.

According to Proverbs, an inheritance was a gift of “a good man” to his children (Proverbs 13:22). In our passage, God is the good father, who provided good agricultural products for Israel and Judah. God greatly rewards those who love Him and keep His commands (1 Corinthians 2:2:9). God speaks of the land of Israel as an inheritance, meaning that Israel would rule over the land (Deuteronomy 4:38). The New Testament speaks of a reward of inheritance, and states that those who are faithful in following in obedience to God will share Christ’s reign of the earth (Colossians 3:23; Revelation 3:21).

In our passage, it is stated that *this people* will *inherit all these things*. The *these things* that are referred to would include the blessings articulated in the surrounding verses:

- Economic abundance in place of poverty (vv 10-12)
- Political power among neighboring nations in place of weakness and submission (vv 13-14).
- Good instead of harm (vv 14-15).

Just as God would reward His people with abundant crops, so would He restore their identity by removing their shame and curse. He stated, *It will come about that just as you were a curse among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so I will save you that you may become a blessing* (v 13).

The *house of Judah* refers to the southern kingdom, while the *house of Israel* stands for the northern kingdom. These kingdoms split during the reign of Solomon's son Rehoboam (1 Kings 12:16-17). By naming each kingdom separately, the LORD confirmed that He would reunify them (Hosea 1:11).

God would also elevate the status of Israel among the nations. They will no longer be a *curse*. It could be that the Israelites and Judahites were denigrated because of their shameful and despised condition. But one day, they will become an object of *blessing*. They will regain their dignity and social status among the nations. Therefore, the LORD commanded them, saying, *Do not fear*.

Fear is a prime motivator for human action. In fact, scripture asserts that the beginning of wisdom is to fear the Lord (Psalms 111:10; Proverbs 9:10). At Mount Sinai, when the people feared death from hearing God's voice, God encouraged them to instead fear sinning against Him, as that brought much worse consequences (Exodus 20:19-20).

Similar to the children of Israel at Sinai, Adam and Eve feared God's presence when they blatantly spurned His command and ate the forbidden fruit in the garden of Eden (Genesis 3:8-10). And they received severe negative consequences as a result of their disobedience (Genesis 3:16-19). This again supports the basic lesson that God leads us to fear Him, seeking to avoid the negative consequences of sin rather than consequences created by men.

In our passage, God promises to remove from Israel the fear of surrounding nations, just as Israel was delivered from fearing the Egyptians. When the Israelites were about to cross the Red Sea, they were afraid as Pharaoh and the Egyptian army drew near (Exodus 14:10). But God delivered them through the sea (Exodus 14:29).

Here in Zechariah, God encouraged His people not to *fear* any enemy because He would pave the way for them and protect them. He then repeated the encouraging words with which He began this section: *let your hands be strong* (v 13). There is no reason to panic when God is on our side. When we fear God, we believe His promises. That allows us to set aside other fears and follow Him.

Biblical Text

⁹“Thus says the LORD of hosts, ‘Let your hands be strong, you who are listening in these days to these words from the mouth of the prophets, *those who spoke* in the day that the foundation of the house of the LORD of hosts was laid, to the end that the temple might be built. ¹⁰ For before those days there was no wage for man or any wage for animal; and for him who went out or came in there was no peace because of his enemies, and I set all men one against another. ¹¹ But now I will not treat the remnant of this people as in the former days,’ declares the LORD of hosts. ¹² ‘For *there will be* peace for the seed: the vine will yield its fruit, the land will yield its produce and the heavens will give their dew; and I will cause the remnant of this people to inherit all these *things*. ¹³ It will come about that just as you were a curse among the nations, O house of Judah and house of Israel, so I will save you that you may become a blessing. Do not fear; let your hands be strong.’