

Zephaniah 3:16

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not: and to Zion, Let not thine hands be slack.

Analysis

In that day it shall be said to Jerusalem, Fear thou not—"in that day" (bayom hahu, בַּיּוֹם הַהוּא) continues the eschatological restoration scene. "It shall be said" (ye'amer, יֹאמֶר) uses passive voice—either God speaks, or the prophetic community announces God's word. "Fear thou not" (al-tir'i, אֲלֵל-תִּירְאִ) commands cessation of fear, anxiety, and terror. This echoes throughout Scripture's salvation announcements: to Abraham (Genesis 15:1), Moses (Exodus 14:13), Joshua (Joshua 8:1), Gideon (Judges 6:23), Mary (Luke 1:30), the disciples (Matthew 28:10), and the church (Revelation 1:17). When God acts in salvation, "fear not" is the appropriate response.

And to Zion, Let not thine hands be slack—le-Tsiyyon al-yirpu yadayikh (לְצִיּוֹן אֶל-יִרְפּוּ יָדָיךְ) uses raphah (רָפָה) meaning to sink, relax, become weak or discouraged. "Hands slack" depicts loss of strength, dropping arms in exhaustion or defeat—giving up. The command forbids discouragement, calling for persistent faithfulness and energetic service. This contrasts with fearful paralysis or despairing inactivity. The verse's two commands work together: "fear not" addresses emotional/spiritual fear; "let not thine hands be slack" addresses behavioral response—don't let fear produce inactivity or abandonment of responsibility.

The combination appears elsewhere in Scripture. Moses commanded Israel at the Red Sea: "Fear ye not, stand still, and see the salvation of the LORD" (Exodus 14:13). David encouraged Solomon in temple-building: "Fear not, nor be dismayed...the LORD God, even my God, will be with thee; he will not fail thee" (1

Chronicles 28:20). Haggai commanded the post-exilic community: "Be strong...and work: for I am with you, saith the LORD of hosts" (Haggai 2:4). The pattern remains: God's presence and promises remove fear and provide motivation for faithful, energetic obedience. Faith produces courage; courage produces faithfulness; faithfulness demonstrates genuine faith (Hebrews 11).

Historical Context

This verse directly addresses the post-exilic community's discouragement. When Jews returned from Babylon to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple (538 BC onward), they faced overwhelming obstacles: opposition from surrounding peoples (Ezra 4), economic hardship, modest resources, and the stark contrast between their weakness and former glory. Haggai describes their discouragement: "Who is left among you that saw this house in her first glory? and how do ye see it now? is it not in your eyes in comparison of it as nothing?" (Haggai 2:3).

The people's hands literally became "slack." Ezra records: "Then ceased the work of the house of God" (Ezra 4:24). Discouragement produced paralysis—they stopped building, stopped obeying, stopped trusting God's promises. Both Haggai and Zechariah ministered during this crisis, calling the people to renewed courage and faithful work. Haggai declared: "Be strong...and work: for I am with you" (Haggai 2:4). Zechariah encouraged: "Let your hands be strong" (Zechariah 8:9, 13). The people responded, completing the temple (516 BC) despite obstacles.

The pattern repeats throughout redemptive history and individual experience. Circumstances tempt believers toward fear and slack-handed inactivity: persecution, cultural opposition, apparent failure, resource limitations, overwhelming obstacles. God's word consistently responds: "Fear not"—God's presence, promises, and power remove legitimate grounds for paralyzing fear. "Let not hands be slack"—maintain faithful obedience and energetic service regardless of circumstances. Faith produces courage; courage produces faithful action; faithful action glorifies God and advances His purposes (1 Corinthians 15:58).

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Romans 10:9 – Confession and belief for salvation

Study Questions

1. What circumstances or obstacles currently tempt you toward fear or slack-handed discouragement in Christian living and service?
2. How does remembering God's presence "in the midst" (verse 15) provide foundation for obeying the commands "fear not" and "let not hands be slack"?
3. What does it look like practically to maintain strong hands and faithful work when circumstances appear overwhelming or discouraging?

Interlinear Text

תִּירְאֵי אֵל לִירוּשָׁלָם יִאָמֶר בְּהָ וְאַבְּיָ זָמָן	H1931	it shall be said	to Jerusalem	H408	Fear
In that day	H3117		H559	H3389	H3372

לֹא	רֹאשׁ	צַדְקָה	תְּהִלָּה
thou not and to Zion	H408	be slack	Let not thine hands
H6726	H7503		H3027

Additional Cross-References

Hebrews 12:12 (Parallel theme): Wherefore lift up the hands which hang down, and the feeble knees;

Galatians 6:9 (Parallel theme): And let us not be weary in well doing: for in due season we shall reap, if we faint not.

Revelation 2:3 (Parallel theme): And hast borne, and hast patience, and for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted.

Isaiah 44:2 (Parallel theme): Thus saith the LORD that made thee, and formed thee from the womb, which will help thee; Fear not, O Jacob, my servant; and thou, Jesurun, whom I have chosen.

Isaiah 41:10 (Parallel theme): Fear thou not; for I am with thee: be not dismayed; for I am thy God: I will strengthen thee; yea, I will help thee; yea, I will uphold thee with the right hand of my righteousness.

Isaiah 40:9 (References Jerusalem): O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God!

Ephesians 3:13 (Parallel theme): Wherefore I desire that ye faint not at my tribulations for you, which is your glory.

Isaiah 54:4 (Parallel theme): Fear not; for thou shalt not be ashamed: neither be thou confounded; for thou shalt not be put to shame: for thou shalt forget the shame of thy youth, and shalt not remember the reproach of thy widowhood any more.

Job 4:3 (Parallel theme): Behold, thou hast instructed many, and thou hast strengthened the weak hands.

Zechariah 8:15 (References Jerusalem): So again have I thought in these days to do well unto Jerusalem and to the house of Judah: fear ye not.