

A DEVOTIONAL THOUGHT

A Firm Foundation

The God Who Fights, Gathers, Refines, and Refuses to Let Go

Zechariah 10:5–12 • How Firm a Foundation • Firm Foundation (He Won't)

“What more can He say than to you He hath said — to you who for refuge to Jesus have fled?”

THE AWAKENING

There are moments in history when a prophet, a hymn writer, and a worship songwriter — separated by centuries — all find themselves saying the same thing. Not because they borrowed from one another, but because they were all looking at the same God.

Zechariah stood among a people who had returned from exile but found the promised restoration still largely undelivered. The land was modest. The temple was a shadow of Solomon's. The surrounding nations still threatened. Into this gap between promise and experience, God begins to speak — and He refuses to speak in the third person. He does not say, 'God will fight for you.' He says, 'I will strengthen them.' He does not say, 'His grace is sufficient.' He says, 'I will bring them back.'

An anonymous hymn writer captured the same grammar in 1787. Stanzas 2–5 of “How Firm a Foundation” are presented as God's own direct speech — a daring literary choice that mirrors Zechariah's prophetic form precisely. And in 2021, Cody Carnes translated those same covenant pledges into contemporary doxological declaration: “He won't back down. He won't let me go. He won't forsake me.”

Three voices. Twenty-six centuries between the first and the last. One covenant. One God who keeps speaking in the first person because His name is staked on every word He has said.

THE FOUNDATIONAL TEXT

Zechariah 10:5–12 (BSB)

'5 The warriors of Judah will be like mighty men, trampling the foe in the mud of the streets in battle. They will fight because the LORD is with them, and the horsemen will be put to shame.

'6 “I will strengthen the house of Judah and save the house of Joseph. I will bring them back, because I have compassion on them, and they will be as though I had not rejected them; for I am the LORD their God, and I will answer them.

'8 I will signal for them and gather them in, for I have redeemed them, and they will be as numerous as before.

'9 Though I scatter them among the nations, yet in far countries they will remember Me; they will rear their children and return.

'10 I will bring them back from Egypt and gather them from Assyria; I will bring them to the land of Gilead and Lebanon until there is no more room for them.

'11 He will pass through the sea of trouble and strike down the waves of the sea, and all the depths of the Nile will dry up. The pride of Assyria will be brought down, and the scepter of Egypt will depart.

'12 And I will strengthen them in the LORD, and they will walk in His name,' declares the LORD.

How Firm a Foundation (c. 1787) — Selected Stanzas

Stanza 2

“Fear not, I am with thee, oh, be not dismayed, / For I am thy God, and will still give thee aid; / I’ll strengthen thee, help thee, and cause thee to stand, / Upheld by My gracious, omnipotent hand.”

Stanza 3

“When through the deep waters I call thee to go, / The rivers of sorrow shall not overflow; / For I will be with thee thy trouble to bless, / And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress.”

Stanza 4

“When through fiery trials thy pathway shall lie, / My grace, all-sufficient, shall be thy supply; / The flame shall not harm thee; I only design / Thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine.”

Stanza 5

“The soul that on Jesus doth lean for repose, / I will not, I will not, desert to his foes; / That soul, though all hell should endeavor to shake, / I’ll never, no never, no never forsake.”

Firm Foundation (He Won’t) — Cody Carnes, 2021 (Key Declarations)

“Christ is my firm foundation, the rock on which I stand. When everything around me is shaken, I’ve never been more glad that I put my faith in Jesus, ’cause He’s never let me down. He’s faithful through the ages, God forever, He won’t.”

“He won’t back down, He won’t let me go. He won’t forsake me, He is all I need. He won’t stop fighting — I am His and He is mine.”

WHAT THE TEXT REVEALS

1. The Nine “I Will” Statements: God’s Sworn Covenant Pledges

The heart of Zechariah 10 is not prophetic vision but divine speech. In verses 6–12, the LORD makes nine distinct first-person covenant pledges. These are not narrative descriptions of what God might do. They are sworn declarations from the LORD of Hosts — and their grammar matters.

Ref	Pledge	Significance
v.6	<i>"I will strengthen the house of Judah"</i>	Strength is not self-generated. It flows from divine initiative.
v.6	<i>"I will save the house of Joseph"</i>	Salvation precedes human effort; it originates in God’s action.
v.6	<i>"I will bring them back"</i>	The scattered are not abandoned to their exile. God initiates return.
v.6	<i>"I will answer them"</i>	Prayer is not cast into silence. God commits to responsiveness.
v.8	<i>"I will signal for them and gather them in"</i>	God is the Shepherd who whistles for His flock. The gathering is His work.
v.8	<i>"I have redeemed them" (perfective — irrevocable)</i>	The redemption is complete. The gathering flows from a purchase already made.
v.10	<i>"I will bring them back from Egypt ... gather them from Assyria"</i>	No geographic scattering is beyond reach. Egypt and Assyria represent the whole of the nations.
v.10	<i>"I will bring them to the land of Gilead and Lebanon"</i>	Restoration is specific and abundant — until there is no more room.
v.12	<i>"I will strengthen them in the LORD"</i>	The final word is strength — not the strength of warriors, but strength rooted in covenant relationship.

2. The Hymn Translates the First-Person Voice Across Centuries

The anonymous hymn writer of 1787 made a daring literary choice: stanzas 2–5 are presented entirely as God’s own direct speech. This mirrors Zechariah’s prophetic form. The congregation is not merely singing about a God who once made promises — they are repeating those promises back, in God’s own voice, to themselves. This is the pastoral genius of the hymn. The strength of the foundation is not the quality of the believer’s feeling. It is the character of the God who spoke.

The grammatical intensification of stanza 5 is particularly striking. The promise not to forsake moves through three degrees: “I will not desert” → “I will not, I will not, desert” → “I’ll never, no never, no never forsake.” The grammar is straining to express an absolute — which is precisely what Hebrews 13:5 does in the original Greek, where a triple negative construction (ou me se aniemi oude me se egkatalipo) communicates the same covenantal absolute.

3. The Contemporary Song Carries the Grammar into the Present Tense

Cody Carnes' "Firm Foundation (He Won't)" is not sentiment set to music. It is covenant theology translated into a contemporary doxological idiom. The refrain's "He won't" construction is a direct modern echo of the Hebrew covenant negative: the same God who declared "I will not reject them" in Zechariah 10:6 is now declared, three millennia later, as "He won't forsake me." The shift from first-person divine speech to third-person declaration is the voice of the worshipper testifying what God has said about Himself.

The closing line of the refrain — "I am His and He is mine" — is the covenant formula at its most compressed. It echoes the Song of Solomon's mutual possession language and applies it to the believer's relationship with Christ. Covenant identity is the ground of covenant security.

THE BIBLICAL ARCHITECTURE

The five movements of Zechariah 10:5–12 trace a complete theology of divine faithfulness across the full range of human need. Understanding their structure reveals why three sources separated by centuries all converge on the same confession.

Movement 1: The Unshakeable Foundation (v.12 / Stanza 1 / "Firm Foundation")

The entire prophecy concludes with "declares the LORD" — the speech-act formula that authenticates every word preceding it. This is the foundation beneath all other foundations. The hymn's opening question — "What more can He say than to you He hath said?" — is not rhetorical decoration. It is an epistemological claim: the word of God is categorically sufficient. The worship song opens at the same anchor: "Christ is my firm foundation, the rock on which I stand. When everything around me is shaken." The shaking of circumstances is assumed. What is not shakeable is the Word.

Movement 2: The Warrior God (vv.5–7, 12 / Stanza 2 / "He won't stop fighting")

Zechariah's God is viscerally present in battle — mighty men trampling foes in the mud of the streets. This is not a distant, managerial deity issuing orders from a safe distance. The cluster of "I will" statements in verse 6 catalogues divine war-fighting capabilities: strengthen, save, bring back, answer. The hymn captures the governing paradox precisely: "upheld by My gracious, omnipotent hand." Two adjectives, neither sufficient alone. Omnipotent power without grace becomes terrifying. Grace without omnipotence becomes wishful. The combination is what makes the promise trustworthy.

Movement 3: Through the Sea of Trouble (v.11 / Stanza 3 / "Peace that passes understanding")

Verse 11 is the strongest textual convergence in this study: "He will pass through the sea of trouble and strike down the waves." This is second-Exodus language. God is not redirecting Israel around the water — He is taking them through it. The hymn mirrors this with the verb 'call': "When through the deep waters I call thee to go." God is the one who summons His people into the difficult path. The rivers of sorrow are not accidents; they are appointments. And the promise is not prevention but presence: "I will be with thee thy trouble to bless, and sanctify to thee thy deepest distress." The most painful circumstances become the site of the most profound transformation.

Movement 4: The Refining Fire (v.9 / Stanza 4 / "Faithful through the ages")

Verse 9 contains a statement of remarkable theological density: "Though I scatter them among the nations, yet in far countries they will remember Me." God acknowledges His own role in the scattering. This was not a cosmic accident but a divine instrument — and the furnace of Babylon forged a memory of God that military success never had. The hymn's refinery theology distills this: "I only design thy dross to consume and thy gold to refine." The word 'only' is theologically loaded. It limits God's purpose in the trial to one thing: refinement. This is consistent with Malachi 3:3, where the refiner sits watching until the silver shows his own reflection.

Movement 5: The Covenant That Cannot Break (v.6 / Stanza 5 / “He won’t forsake me”)

Verse 6 contains one of the most extraordinary statements in all of prophetic literature: “They will be as though I had not rejected them.” This is not merely forgiveness — it is the erasure of the record of rejection from the account. God commits to treating restored Israel as if the covenant break had never occurred. The hymn builds to its rhetorical climax through graduated negation culminating in the triple “never.” The worship song closes with its refrain: “He won’t back down, He won’t let me go, He won’t forsake me” — the modern vernacular equivalent of a covenant sworn in blood.

Three Voices, One Covenant — Convergence Table

Theme	Zechariah 10	How Firm a Foundation	Firm Foundation (He Won’t)
Foundation	<i>v.12 — ‘declares the LORD’</i>	<i>Stanza 1 — ‘His excellent word’</i>	<i>Christ is my firm foundation</i>
Strength	<i>v.6, 12 — ‘I will strengthen’</i>	<i>Stanza 2 — ‘omnipotent hand’</i>	<i>He won’t stop fighting</i>
Deep Waters	<i>v.11 — ‘sea of trouble’</i>	<i>Stanza 3 — ‘through the deep waters’</i>	<i>Peace that passes understanding</i>
Refining	<i>v.9 — scatter / remember</i>	<i>Stanza 4 — ‘dross ... gold to refine’</i>	<i>Faithful through the ages</i>
No Forsaking	<i>v.6 — ‘as though not rejected’</i>	<i>Stanza 5 — ‘never, no never’</i>	<i>He won’t forsake me</i>

CORE THESIS

The God Who Speaks in First Person

The covenant promises of God are always personal — uttered in the first person singular by a God who has staked His name on their fulfillment. The grammar of Zechariah 10, the hymn, and the worship song converge on a single conclusion: our security does not rest on the stability of our circumstances, the depth of our feelings, or the constancy of our faith. It rests on the irreversible word of a God who says ‘I will’ and does not take it back.

THE QUESTION THAT MATTERS MOST

Which of God’s nine “I will” statements do you find hardest to believe in your current season — and what is it about your circumstances that makes His first-person word feel insufficient?

What would it cost you — emotionally and practically — to stop asking God to change the sea and instead trust Him to take you through it?

A PRAYER FROM THE AWAKENING

Father, You speak in the first person. You do not issue covenant promises through intermediaries who might miscommunicate them or delegates who might fail to follow through. You say ‘I will’ — and the weight of those words carries the full authority of Your character, Your name, and the blood of Your Son.

We confess that we have lived as though Your promises were aspirational rather than declarative. We have treated Your ‘I will’ as ‘He might,’ and allowed our circumstances to edit Your speech. Forgive us.

Teach us the grammar of covenant. Let us hear Zechariah’s nine pledges not as ancient history but as present tense: You are strengthening. You are gathering. You are bringing back. You are answering. You have already redeemed. You are passing through the sea with us, striking down the waves.

Let the hymn writer’s boldness become ours — to sing Your own words back to ourselves until the foundation holds not because we feel it holding, but because You said so.

We lean. We rest. We do not move. The soul that on Jesus doth lean for repose — that is us. I’ll never, no never, no never forsake. That is You. In the name of Jesus, the Word who became flesh and dwelt among us. Amen.

SCRIPTURE TREASURY

Category	Reference	Scripture
<i>Divine Warrior / Strength</i>	Isaiah 41:10	<i>“Fear not, for I am with you; be not dismayed, for I am your God; I will strengthen you, I will help you, I will uphold you with my righteous right hand.”</i>
<i>Divine Warrior / Strength</i>	Zechariah 10:6	<i>“I will strengthen the house of Judah and save the house of Joseph. I will bring them back, because I have compassion on them.”</i>
<i>Through the Waters</i>	Isaiah 43:2	<i>“When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned.”</i>
<i>Through the Waters</i>	Psalms 66:10–12	<i>“You have tested us; you have tried us as silver is tried ... we went through fire and through water; yet you have brought us out to a place of abundance.”</i>
<i>Refining Fire</i>	1 Peter 1:6–7	<i>“The tested genuineness of your faith — more precious than gold that perishes though it is tested by fire — may be found to result in praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”</i>
<i>Refining Fire</i>	Malachi 3:3	<i>“He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver.”</i>
<i>Covenant Presence</i>	Hebrews 13:5	<i>“I will never leave you nor forsake you.”</i>
<i>Covenant Presence</i>	Romans 8:38–39	<i>“Neither death nor life ... nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”</i>
<i>Unshakeable Foundation</i>	Matthew 7:24–25	<i>“Everyone who hears these words of mine and does them will be like a wise man who built his house on the rock ... it did not fall, because it had been founded on the rock.”</i>
<i>Unshakeable Foundation</i>	Psalms 18:2	<i>“The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, my God, my rock, in whom I take refuge, my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.”</i>