

Why flee to the mountains?

by Douglas E. Cox

Jesus said, "when you see the abomination of desolation spoken of by Daniel the prophet, stand in the holy place . . . Then let them which be in Judaea flee into the mountains." Many people are puzzled by this. Who are those in Judaea? Which mountains? Why the need to flee?

Then Jesus said: "Let him which is on the housetop not come down to take any thing out of his house: Neither let him which is in the field return back to take his clothes." [Matthew 24:17-18]

These statements also cause many to wonder what or who he was referring to.

In the Sermon on the Mount Jesus described those who do his teachings as wise, like a man who built his house upon a rock.

Matthew 7:24-25

Therefore whosoever heareth these sayings of mine, and doeth them, I will liken him unto a wise man, which built his house upon a rock: And the rain descended, and the floods came, and the winds blew, and beat upon that house; and it fell not: for it was founded upon a rock.

Everyone builds his "house" on something. The teachings of Jesus are a rock-solid foundation for life. Paul listed some materials that we may use for construction of our house: gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, stubble. Some are durable, and fire-resistant, some not. The house we are building, which represents our works, will be tried with fire. [1 Corinthians 3:12-13]

In Luke's parallel account of the Olivet Discourse, the warning to "him which is on the housetop" is tied to the story of Lot's wife, who looked back when Sodom was being destroyed, and was turned into a pillar of salt.

Luke 17:31-33

In that day, he which shall be upon the housetop, and his stuff in the house, let him not come down to take it away: and he that is in the field, let him likewise not return back. Remember Lot's wife. Whosoever shall seek to save his life shall lose it; and whosoever shall lose his life shall preserve it.

Luke's account deepens the mystery about what Jesus meant. Matthew's account seems to say that one must flee with much haste, but Luke shows that Jesus' prophecy could not refer to self-preservation.

Regardless, most readers dismiss Luke, and assume that Jesus gave instructions for preserving one's life during a period of trouble. Yet Jesus warned that he who seeks to save his life will lose it.

If his warning to flee to the mountains was not intended for safety, and self-preservation, what could he have meant?

To understand, we need to consider the meaning of each of the symbols. The reference to a person on a housetop is related to preaching the gospel. Jesus said:

Matthew 10:27

What I tell you in darkness, that speak ye in light: and what ye hear in the ear, that preach ye upon the housetops.

Those on the housetops are those who communicate the message of the gospel to others.

Similarly, those who are in the field represent labourers for the gospel. [Matthew 9:37-38; Luke 10:2]

The "mountains" to which Jesus said to flee are symbolic of spiritual, invisible things promised to the saints. The promised land that the Israelites possessed under Joshua was a type of the "rest" promised to the saints. [Hebrews 4:9] Mountains are prominent parts of the promised land, and so they represent revelations, and promises of God. This is why Jesus warned not to return for our clothes. Clothing is symbolic too. Old garments must be discarded, when Jesus provides new clothing for his bride, the church. [Revelation 19:8]

Paul said:

Ephesians 6:14

Stand therefore, having your loins girt about with truth, and having on the breastplate of righteousness.

Understanding, and truth, are represented by clothing, while ignorance, or being deceived, is like being unclothed, or naked. Jesus said: "Behold, I come as a thief. Blessed is he that watcheth, and keepeth his garments, lest he walk naked, and they see his shame." [Revelation 16:15] Obviously, he did not mean literal garments!

In the parable of the wedding feast the invited guests made excuses, and declined the invitation. When the king heard that they had refused to come, others were brought in to take their place. But one man was discovered, who was not wearing a wedding garment:

Matthew 22:10-13

So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good: and the wedding was furnished with guests. And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment: And he saith unto him, 'Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then said the king to the servants, 'Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness, there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Those attending the wedding feast will need wedding garments, that Christ provides.

The mountains in Matthew 24:16 are symbolic of righteousness. David said, "Thy righteousness is like the great mountains." [Psalm 36:6] Righteousness, and truth, are examples of the "mountains" we should flee to. Jesus was not talking about self-preservation.