

A Place of Safety? (Part 3)

Fleeing and the Man of Sin

John W. Ritenbaugh

Given 15-Aug-92; Tape #034

At the beginning of this sermon, I want to recall the purpose of the last two sermons. In the one two weeks ago, [we saw] that we are approaching a time unique in the history of man. What matters—in regard to protection during these horrendous times—is not what God is capable of doing, but what He purposes to do. In the sermon of last week, [we saw] that fleeing persecution is not cowardly of and by itself.

Now there are some who will, in a cowardly way, flee from persecution. But that doesn't mean that every time a person flees some kind of persecution, it is the wrong thing to do. God shows very clearly that [fleeing] might be the very height of wisdom depending upon the circumstances. I also showed you that quite a number of great men and women of faith, including Jesus, have fled persecution.

I got about 90% of the way through an explanation—showing that God fully intends separating part of His end time church (removing them to a place of safety), while another part must face the travails of the tribulation. I've shown that the place of protection was described as being a wilderness—a place of rocks, [perhaps] in the modern nation of Jordan—at the time when the Lord goes forth as a mighty warrior.

We're going to pick up right there and go to Isaiah 33:14-19, because I feel that I need to finish that thought, before beginning to go on to something that is related.

Isaiah 33:14-19 The sinners in Zion are afraid; fearfulness has seized the hypocrites. Who among us shall dwell with the devouring fire? Who among us shall dwell with everlasting burnings? He who walks righteously, and speaks uprightly; who despises the gain of oppressions, who gestured with his hands refusing bribes, who stops his ears from hearing of bloodshed, and shuts his eyes from seeing evil. He will dwell on high: his place of defence will be the fortress of rocks: bread will be given him; his water shall be sure. Your eyes [and it seems to me that the intent is that those who are in this place (this place of protection)] will see the king in his beauty: they will see the land that is very far off. Your heart shall meditate on terror. Where is the scribe? Where is he who weighs? Where is he who counts the towers? You will not see a fierce people, a people of obscure speech beyond perception of a stammering tongue, that you cannot understand.

This prophecy, beginning in verse 14, falls during a part of a prophecy of judgment against Assyria. The sinners and hypocrites in Zion can be one of two things. It can certainly apply to

the land of Israel—Zion being a part of Jerusalem, the part where the temple was built—and so he is alluding to the fact that there are hypocrites among the people of Israel. It can also (in a sense) be dual and refer to the church, because I think that you understand that very frequently God symbolizes the church by the name "Zion." There can be, among those who are part of the Church of God, sinners and hypocrites.

Now these people are responding to the harshness of the prophecies that had gone before this time—those that were aimed at Assyria—and they are wondering, who can ever survive this? God then, through the prophet, gives an answer as to who will be able to survive what is coming. So the answer is: "He who walks righteously and speaks uprightly, who despises the gain of oppression, who gestured with his hands refusing bribes, who stopped his ear from hearing of blood shed and shuts his eyes from seeing evil." If a person does rightly, if he lives righteously, God extends protection [to them] so that they won't have to go through the terrible times that are coming.

Now where can this be? Where will this protection be? He says at a "fortress of rocks." Now the stronghold of rock is going to be a place where it's going to be necessary for food to be provided, for water to be provided. It is such a wilderness, it is so desolate that something is going to have to be provided and the implication is that it is going to be provided miraculously by God. Because the place is so desolate, so forsaken, such a wilderness that it seemingly will not support life. Certainly it is dry and maybe only gets two or three inches of rain a year; it's not going to grow anything, it is not going to support life.

The comments regarding the scribe: "where is he who weighs, where is he who counts the towers?" are indications of military personnel, army personalities. One translation says the scribe is "*the general who comes*," the enlisted, and that has to be tied to verse 19 because the people in this place of protection—those who have lived uprightly—are not going to see the army that is going to be coming against Israel.

Here we begin to see very clearly a turn in the scriptures (that I have been giving you regarding this place). There are admonishments, there are encouragements, for people to make an effort to try to be there; to turn their life aright, to [produce] qualities that God is going to look for in the people who are going to receive His protection from what is coming.

Now with that thought in mind, let's leave Isaiah and go to Zephaniah (a number of books back, a small book that we don't use very frequently). God says through Zephaniah:

Zephaniah 2:1-2 Gather yourselves together, yes, gather together, O undesirable nation; before the decree is issued, before the day passes like chaff, before the Lord's fierce anger comes upon you!

Can you see how he is setting the stage here? He is beginning to say, "*Prepare yourself, before the decree to conquer goes forth from God, before the day passes like chaff—the destruction is just blown away.*"

Zephaniah 2:2-3 Before the Lord's fierce anger comes upon you, before the day of the Lord's anger comes upon you! Seek the Lord, all

you meek of the earth, you have upheld his justice. [Notice these admonishments] Seek righteousness, seek humility. [Doesn't this sound like Isaiah 33?] It may be that you will be hidden in the day of the Lord's anger.

Again, if we were going to look at this in the light of the larger context in chapter one, God prophecies judgment; only not just on Assyria, but this time it is judgment on the *whole world*. With this thought in mind, chapter two opens with an appeal to God's people to gather together. This is not merely [an appeal] to congregate—that may indeed be implied. But, that is not the main thrust of the advise that is given here.

Rather, it is to gather one's thoughts, to meditate, pull things together in your mind, think about their consequences on this nation, think about their consequences on you personally, think about their consequences on your loved ones. He wants us to consider these things as the first step toward repentance, and so he says *Change direction, turn to righteousness and perhaps you will be hidden during His anger.*"

Now the "perhaps" might throw you into a bit of discouragement, a bit of doubt, but the "perhaps" does not mean that God is playing with our emotions. The measure of doubt expressed [concerns] whether men will repent. We must never forget that God is a God of salvation. God is a God of deliverance. It is His desire to deliver. It is His desire to protect, and God is never without means to save.

Nothing is too hard for Him, if we give Him a chance, and that's why it says, "*Seek the Lord now, before the destruction comes*". The warning is there. He is saying to us, "*Watch, but don't just stand there passively watching, gather your thoughts together, think about the implications of this. Where is it leading?*" He is appealing to people *to respond*.

We're going to turn to a book that we very rarely go into. It's the book of the Song of Solomon, or the "Song of Songs" as some like to call it. Before we begin to read, I need to preface this with something that I hope will jog something in your memory and help you to gather thoughts of things that you know very clearly and forcefully maybe (a part of your mind).

I want you to think about Matthew the 25th chapter. What's at the beginning of Matthew the 25th chapter? Can anybody remember... especially what the first parable is about? It's about the 10 virgins. Think about that in the light of what the 25th chapter follows. It follows the 24th chapter of Matthew, which is the Olivet prophecy—Jesus' prophecy about the time of the end and what it is going to be like when He comes.

Then comes a series of parables in which He gives us instruction on how to be prepared for Matthew 24 when it begins to unfold in all of its awful reality. He does that as a loving gesture to you and me because He doesn't want us to have to go through it. He wants us to be prepared —prepared just like Zephaniah 2 says, prepared just like Isaiah 33 says.

God's hand is not short, He wants to deliver, He wants to save, but He's not going to do it willy nilly and if it is going to be better for us to go through the tribulation brethren, we're going to go through the tribulation and we are going to love God for it. Now it's not pleasant to think on,

but God holds out to us the opportunity that we *can* escape by using our time and life aright now.

Now there's a second thing I want you to think on here and that is Revelation 3: 14-22 — the message to the Laodicean church. I want you to think about these two scriptures, Matthew 25: 1-13 and Revelation 3: 14-22. I just want you to think about them in general, because I feel certain that when Jesus inspired those sections of the bible, He was thinking about Song of Solomon, chapter 5.

Song of Solomon 5:1-9 I have come to my garden, my sister, my spouse; [Interesting!] I have gathered my myrrh with my spice; I have eaten my honeycomb with my honey; I have drunk my wine with my milk: Eat, O friends! drink, yes, drink deeply, O beloved ones! [The scene shifts to the woman, the Shulamite] I sleep, but my heart is awake; it is the voice of my beloved! He knocks saying, "Open for me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one: for my head is covered with dew, my locks with the drops of the night." [The woman speaks] I have taken off my robe; how can I put it on again? I have washed my feet; how can I defile them? My beloved put his hand by the latch of the door, and my heart yearned for him. I arose to open for my beloved; and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, on the handles of the lock I opened for my beloved; but my beloved had turned away and was gone. My heart went out to him when he spoke. I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer. The watchmen that went about the city found me. They struck me, they wounded me; the keepers of the walls took my veil away from me. I charge you, O daughters of Jerusalem, if you find my beloved, that you tell him that I am lovesick. What is your beloved more than another beloved, O fairest among women? What is your beloved more than another beloved, that you so charge us?

We won't read any further. But I want now to review what we have just read. I want you to think of this also in the light (or in the terms of) what is happening in the Church of God during this period of time that we are living in. I want you to think about your friends and what their responses have been to what is happening within the church.

When we get to verse 2, what we are looking at there is a dream sequence—the woman is not really sure what is happening. Is it really happening? You've all experienced things like that, where you were in bed and you were dreaming, but the dream was so real, that you wondered whether it was reality.

What is real when you are asleep or half asleep? Half awake and yet your mind is still fogged by a state of sleep. The mind simply is not focused, and I believe that it is presented this way because many times with reality—that is when we are fully alert (I want you to think of yourself in this) and your focus is on what you are doing—there is much of what you are or what you think about, that is restrained or covered. But then when you go to sleep, your mind begins to

release those things that, by your will, you have kept covered when you are awake and alert and your mind was focused. That is, the subconscious begins to express itself, when there is nothing there to restrain it.

Now that is what's happening with this young lady here. What she is finding is that her love is not as deep and true as it needs to be in order for there to be a successful marriage. In verse 2, "I sleep, but my heart is awake" and she hears the voice of her beloved, and he knocks, "Open for me, my sister, my love, my dove, my perfect one." [She responds] "I have taken off my robe; how can I put it on again? I have washed my feet; how can I defile them?"

Let's look at her first. She lies unclothed on her bed. Can you think of a verse in Revelation 3... "...wretched, miserable, poor, blind and naked." Her feet are washed; the work is over isn't it? But she will not stir herself to do what is disagreeable to her at this most inconvenient time. Now her lover is standing at the door, knocking (Revelation 3 again) and speaking. *"Is this really happening to me?"* That's what she telling herself. *"Or am I in a dream?"* You think people are not like that in the Church of God today? They wonder if what is happening is really happening?

She finally begins to respond, positively I mean. Verse 5 "I rose to open for my beloved and my hands dripped with myrrh, my fingers with liquid myrrh, on the handles of the lock. I opened for my beloved; but my beloved had turned away and was gone." Too late. Does that remind you of the ten virgins?

The cry of the bridegroom went out, but she didn't have enough oil, and she responded too late to the voice of her lover, the bridegroom. I think it's so interesting that oil of myrrh is mentioned and that it is *also* mentioned in Matthew 25. Now verse 6 again, "My heart went out to him when he spoke. I sought him, but I could not find him; I called him, but he gave me no answer." She's beginning to be struck with guilt and with remorse for not having responded to his offer of love. Now she begins calling out for him and seeking to find him.

The watchmen goes out into the city you see (which represents the world). What's going on when she goes out into the city, out into the world? The tribulation is going on. "The watchmen that went about the city found me. They struck me, and they wounded me: the keepers of the walls took my veil away from me." The symbol of being shamed.

You have to understand that these watchmen are worldly people. They see only with their eyes, and thus they cannot see the deep and earnest repentance and yearning that is now within her. They do not see her as the bride, but as a woman—a common woman of the streets. That's why they beat her. They see her as a prostitute. So without even bothering to find out who she is, they persecute her, tearing some of her clothing from her and it is good to remember what clothing symbolizes in the bible.

As we proceed on through in verse 8, she turns away from the people that are persecuting her—represented by the watchmen. She turns to the daughters of Jerusalem, from whom she would expect to receive sympathy [hoping] that somehow or another they might relate to what she is going through. She asks them in her agony to try to help her to find her love—Christ—and we know that He is going to be gone for 3½ years. The daughters of Jerusalem respond with a question, *What is he like? Tell us about him, we don't know who he is, tell us what he is like.* "What is your beloved more than another beloved, O fairest among

women? What is your beloved more than another beloved, that so you charge us?"

Then she begins in verse 10 to describe him. What she is doing of course is making her witness before the world. The Protestant Evangelical churches would say that she is giving her testimony of her beloved, of what he is like. She describes him in the most glowing of terms and of course it has to be done here in physical terms. But we are to understand, that he is not just physically attractive. She also describes what he is spiritually to these people. She is complementing the preaching of the two witnesses, through her own personal witness, while she is in tribulation.

Brethren, the point of all this is that it is going to be this way for some, but it doesn't have to be this way for anyone. If she had given of herself to him when he was courting her, this would never have happened. And whether you understand it or not, we are being courted by Jesus Christ right now. We are being lead toward a marriage—the marriage of the Lamb—to the Church of God.

If she had really been working on yielding to him—developing her relationship with him—she would have known his love for her and she would have made *any* sacrifice for him, no matter how inconvenient it was. That's the very thing that Jesus Christ is getting at in that series of parables beginning in Matthew 24 after the Olivet prophecy.

I believe that God shows that He is going to spare a group of people in a wilderness, where there are rocks, in the mountains, in modern Jordan. Still, in spite of all of that, we have to approach the subject understanding that specifically being protected *in Petra* is not absolutely provable by the scripture; only very strong implications are made. If there's any place, in scripture, pointed out as a "place of safety," then it is Petra. So we tentatively bank on the fact that there is protection, and that Petra is strongly implied. The bible does not say that he who endures till Petra will be saved.

If we *are* taken to this place, it will probably be the greatest trial of our lives. Ancient Israel spent a great deal of time there and they were a nation of slaves. They were tough, physically—they were accustomed to enduring hardships. They were a people who all of their lives had been under the rigor of hard and strenuous work. Yet, when this stress (this pressure) was put on them, of enduring a wilderness, they failed miserably. They failed because they lacked the spiritual resources, the contact, and the relationship with God.

Petra is not impregnable to modern weaponry. It is inhospitable; it is similar to southwest Arizona. It has temperatures in the daytime of 115 degrees and drops at night down to 50 degrees. There is no water, no toilets, and no showers. It might be 3½ years without a shower, without a decent bath, without a comfortable bed, without a modern kitchen. The caves are littered with the filth a millennia of animal and human waste. Hardly any of us like to rough it; it is going to be very inconvenient. Some of us might like to camp, but we like to do it at a KOA campground, in a RV with all the amenities of home.

There will be little personal privacy and we must live in peace for 3½ years. We are going to have to literally live by, "give us this day our daily bread." There is every indication that we will have to depend upon God for every day's supply of food. Now we'll be safe from Satan, but we won't be safe from human nature—we'll take that there with us. That's what killed ancient

Israel. They took their slave mentality right with them wherever they went, and though they were free of a literal slavery, they took slave thinking with them, and their bodies were strewed in the wilderness for 40 years from Egypt to the Promised land.

Can you begin to understand why after the Olivet prophecy, there is so much given by our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, about being prepared—mentally, spiritually—being tough, tough enough to endure what the place of safety is going to be like? There is one glorious and wonderful thing; as bad and as hard and as difficult as Petra might be, it's going to be a lot better than the tribulation. A lot better than what the Shulamite pictured in very simple language there in Song of Solomon, chapter 5 had to go through.

Our focus has to be, "*let's not get the cart before the horse.*" So what is most important for us now is to be prepared for the return of Jesus Christ. If our focus is on the right goal, the one that we are striving to accomplish—the Kingdom of God (not Petra)—then perhaps God will also give us the added blessing of being among those who don't have to suffer the tribulation.

Much depends on how we respond to the signs that are given. Remember the Shulamite, "Oh, there's the voice of my love, O, there he is knocking at the door." She didn't respond. We have to respond to the voice, to the word of our Savior, our Creator. He is knocking at the door, but He wants us to get up and to do what needs to be done in order to really meet Him when the cry goes out.

God has given us all kinds of clues; signs to look for that we might be motivated and be prepared and they're contained in prophecies and the teachings of His apostles. I do not know how much Paul understood about specific end-time events, but we know that as time went by, his perception of the return of Jesus Christ underwent a change because they obviously expected Christ to return very quickly after His resurrection.

As time went on, they began to reformulate their ideas and conceptions in the light of prophecies that were given in the Old Testament. They began to see things that they had not previously seen, and God was undoubtedly leading them to see that it was going to be quite a long period of time before He would return. But I have no idea whether they ever believed it would be as long as it's been—over 1900 years since the time of the apostle Paul—and Jesus Christ still is not here.

When the apostle did write about things, he often wrote them in general terms in regard to the return of Christ. He did not directly write about fleeing, even though Jesus' Olivet prophecy contained implications and information of people being taken to a place of safety. Maybe God just didn't open up their eyes to it...I don't know.

We're going to look at two signs that God gave us through the apostle Paul. Now these signs appear well in advance of Christ's return so that we'll have plenty of time to get prepared. I've specifically chosen these two to go through (as a topic tied to these sermons on fleeing) because one man is making so much of this in his ministry. Let's go to II Thessalonians 2: 1. We're going to read the first nine verses right on through without stopping.

II Thessalonians 2:1-9 Now brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of our gathering together to him, we ask you,

not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word, or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. Let no one deceive you by any means; for that day will not come unless the falling away comes first and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition, who opposes and exalts himself above all that is called God, or that is worshipped, so that he sits as God in the temple of God, showing himself that he is God. Do you not remember that when I was still with you I told you these things? And now you know what is restraining, that he may be revealed in his own time. For the mystery of lawlessness is already at work; only he who now restrains will do so until he is taken out of the way. And then the lawless one will be revealed, whom the Lord will consume with the breath of His mouth, and destroy with the brightness of His coming: The coming of the lawless one is according to the working of Satan with all power, signs, and lying wonders,

As I mentioned, nineteen hundred and forty (or so) years have gone by since the apostle Paul wrote these things. But don't let anybody deceive you, prophecy can be fulfilled very quickly and God is laying the groundwork for the fulfillment of these end-time prophecies. When everything is in place, it will happen very quickly. God has to maneuver all of these things [so they will] be in place. If we are not watching carefully, the events that form the groundwork can slip right by us and Christ can return as a thief in the night (as this same apostle said in I Thessalonians 5).

One after another of the truths that we received, when we came into the Church of God, are systematically being replaced with doctrines that cannot be proved from within the bible. Indications are, from scuttlebutt that one hears, that there are many more that are going to be changed. They appear to be changing doctrines as rapidly as people will accept them, without disturbing the membership into leaving the church, and losing the income.

Let's look at II Thessalonians 2:1-3 a little bit more closely. I want to go through this in some detail because it is not exceptionally clear, in pinpointing when Christ will return. Rather, because it is highly generalized and because this certain individual has been wrongly using these scriptures as a keystone of the very existence of his work. This person makes no bones about whom he believes the man of sin is.

II Thessalonians 2:1-3 Now brethren, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, and of our gathering together of him, we ask you, not to be soon shaken. [we need to take note of this] not to be soon shaken in mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word, or by letter, as if from us, as though the day of Christ had come. Let no one deceive you by any means; for that day will not come unless the falling away comes first and the man of sin is revealed, the son of perdition.

It is natural to be curious about prophecy, because we all want to know about Christ's coming. But people have been wrongly speculating about Christ's return ever since He left. That was practically the first thing that the apostles asked. It's not for us to know the time or season, that's in God's hand. We are to watch as we begin to see prophecies fulfilled.

A wrong speculation has led some people (in this context right in I and II Thessalonians) to quit working, and they became really nothing more than physical and spiritual deadbeats—all excited about the return of Christ at the wrong time. That was the problem. We *should* be enthusiastic; we *should* be excited about the return of Christ, but not in this way—the misled, foolish way—that these people were.

Paul gives two signs: a falling away and a son of perdition arising. The first concept I want us to think about is whether we are examining events that are confined to a small church (the true church)? Or are we looking at events that are *worldwide* in their scope, even though those in the church may be the only ones who catch the true significance of them? Remember that, are we looking at something that is happening to a small true church, or are we looking at something that is worldwide in its effect?

The second item I want us to think about is: what does Paul mean by "gathering together?" It's very easy to jump to the conclusion that he means Christ's return, but Paul is giving signs so that the people of God will be protected from what is occurring. Now in that case, the "gathering together" would have to be *before* the tribulation, in a place of safety; otherwise you're in it [the tribulation]. What good would the signs do you? No good at all. For the sign to be of any value—that is so the people can be escaping from what is coming, called here generally the day of the Lord—it has to be something that occurs *before* the day of the Lord comes. Then there is a possibility that when Paul talks about "gathering together," it has to do *with* a place of safety, NOT a resurrection.

Let's look a little bit closer at the falling away. Translated from the Greek *apostasia*, which is transliterated into the English "apostasy," it means *defection* or *revolt*. Those two are pretty widely separated really—defection and revolt. But it is translated that way because of the context in which it appears. Most Greeks using the word *apostasia* would think of it in terms of a political revolt, rather than a falling away from religious truth. That's the way an unconverted Greek would look at it.

Modern translators tend to translate that word as "rebellion" or "revolt" because in the larger context of the whole book and in other prophecies (in other books in the bible), they feel they see political revolt, more than a departure or defection from spiritual truth. In other words, what they see in this is a very pronounced worldwide break down of the political system.

I do not see, at this point, that this is correct because that would imply to me, that the rebellion that they see *is* the tribulation. If that were so then, the sign that Paul is giving them would not be of any value, because by the time they saw it, they would be in it. I mean by the time they saw the signs, they would be in the tribulation—the revolt would have occurred. Now if they mean a very pronounced worldwide break down of law and order that eventually becomes the tribulation, then there is a distinct possibility they *are* correct in their translation. It could then be a sign to those in the church and we would be very fully aware of it.

The *King James* version and the *New King James* version both have "falling away"—indicating a departure from true faith. Let's explain this. This departure, this defection, or this forsaking does not necessarily mean a departure from the church, but a departure from truth, *while* remaining in the church. If *that* is the sign, it would be something only true church members would be aware of, and it would be on a very small scale—in terms of other worldwide events occurring at the same time.

The second sign—the man of sin, the son of perdition... Consider this, do these scriptures stand alone; are they the only ones that mention this person? If they do, there is far more likelihood the man of sin would be confined to a small event; off in one corner of the world and noted by only a small number of people—the church. But if he can be identified as appearing in other prophecies, then there is far more likelihood that the effects of this mans deeds are worldwide and not directly associated with the small number of people in the church.

Each of these titles identify him with something—man of sin, son of perdition. The first is with sin, law breaking, lawlessness. Crime is breaking man's law, and sin is breaking God's laws. Therefore to earn this title from God, this person must