

Matthew 10:23

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Jesus tells the disciples to quickly move on to the next town if they face hostility, because even as it is there is not enough time to get the message that the Messiah is coming before He appears. Therefore they are not to waste time on those who do not wish to receive this message.

There is no obvious parallel for this teaching in the gospel accounts.

Jesus offers some seemingly straightforward advice. He tells His disciples, *But whenever they persecute you in one city, flee to the next.* As the disciples encounter hostile persecution *in one city*, they are to leave that town and go onto *the next* town. The word “pheugo” means to take flight and escape danger in a hurry. It is translated here as *flee*. This fleeing is not done out of cowardice or fear of death. Jesus calls His disciples to die for His sake. This fleeing is more in line with what He told the disciples earlier when He said they should “be shrewd as serpents” (Matthew 10:16), which included the notion of not taking unnecessary risks. We know that *flee* does not mean from fear of physical death or danger, because Jesus will tell them a few verses later that they should not fear those who kill the body but are unable to kill the “pusche,” or inner life (Matthew 10:28). What Jesus is saying is be shrewd and don’t linger *in one city* if *they persecute you* until it is too late.

But there is a second reason that the disciples should *flee to the next city* whenever they are facing persecution. There is not much time. “The harvest is plentiful, but the workers are few” (Matthew 9:37). Jesus assures them of this urgency, *for truly I say to you, that you will not finish going through the cities of Israel until the Son of Man comes.* *The Son of Man* is the Christ, and it is a clear messianic reference from Daniel 7:13. *The Son of Man* “coming” means that He will be revealed. Jesus tells the disciples that the kingdom *will* already be here before they have a chance to tell everyone in *Israel* of its approach. When John, the Baptizer and Jesus preached “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matthew 3:2, 4:17), they meant it.

Whenever one city persecutes the disciples for proclaiming the good news, they should not waste time throwing the pearls of the kingdom before the swine of those who cannot recognize the immense value being offered (Matthew 7:6). They should *flee* and hurry *to the next city* where the liberation news of the kingdom might be better received before the King, the Messiah, *the Son of Man comes.*

The disciples likely understood this much about what Jesus was saying in this passage. They were enthusiastic to live and die for the kingdom. They were eager in anticipation for it to appear. But they incorrectly assumed that this would mean the immediate political overthrow of Rome and the instant installment of the Messiah as King upon an earthly throne in Israel. They held onto some form of this incorrect assumption even after Jesus’s resurrection. In fact, the last thing they said to Jesus before He ascended into heaven was to ask “Lord, is it as this time You are restoring the kingdom to Israel?” (Acts 1:7). Further, after Jesus rose from the dead, the understanding the disciples gained from His teaching during the forty days Jesus taught them

“concerning the kingdom” (Acts 1:3) is reflected in the statement Peter made to fellow Jews when preaching to them after he healed a lame man:

“Therefore repent and return, so that your sins may be wiped away, in order that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord; and that He may send Jesus, the Christ appointed for you, whom heaven must receive until the period of restoration of all things about which God spoke by the mouth of His holy prophets from ancient time.”
(Acts 3:19-21)

This makes clear that even after Jesus ascended, Peter understood that He would return if that generation of Israelites had repented and turned to Jesus. Paul notes that this hardness of the Jews turned out to be an amazing benefit for the Gentiles (Romans 11:7-15).

What the disciples also did not realize at this moment, was that *the Son of Man* Himself would be arrested, beaten, crucified, and buried, before He *comes* back to life. They did not understand that until after Jesus rose, and “opened their minds to understand the Scriptures” (Luke 24:45).

When *the Son of Man comes* back to life, He *comes* as King of heaven and earth. At that time all authority on heaven and earth is given to Him as a reward for His faithfulness as a human (Matthew 28:18). And it is then that He will send these disciples out on the Great Commission of which this particular mission to the house of *Israel* is but the first step (Matthew 28:18-20).

Biblical Text

But whenever they persecute you in one city, flee to the next; for truly I say to you, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel until the Son of Man comes.