

Focus Text

“Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles. When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you. Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes. “A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.”

(Matthew 10:16–25, ESV)

1. Staying Steadfast and Shrewd

“Behold, I am sending you out as sheep in the midst of wolves, so be wise as serpents and innocent as doves. Beware of men, for they will deliver you over to courts and flog you in their synagogues, and you will be dragged before governors and kings for my sake, to bear witness before them and the Gentiles.” **(Matthew 10:16–18, ESV)**

The world is not as it should be. In Isaiah, the image of the perfect world is of the wolf and the sheep living together in peace and harmony. Jesus prepares His followers for the world they are being sent into: it will not be a utopia; instead, they will face hardship and pain. They should prepare themselves to be both wise and innocent as they face these hardships. Wisdom in the Old Testament is known as Sophia, and it encompasses observing the logical order and understanding how to operate in the world. The dove is the purity and innocence that the Christian should have. They are not shady or rebellious; they carry themselves with honor at all times. Jesus displays this character to its fullest extent as He is arrested and allows Himself to be at the mercy of His captors. Wisdom and Purity are two of the features that make Christians Holy in the world, as we stand out from the crowd, and the disciples need to be prepared in all circumstances because some seek to harm. Why? Because the Kingdom has come in part, but not in its fullness,

and until the wolf and lamb walk together in peace, the world is not as God intended it to be.

“In Old Testament and Jewish tradition sheep and wolves often appear together in descriptions of Israel’s situation among the nations.²³ Now for Jesus or the earliest church to describe the situation of the disciples in Israel this way is to change the image so that it shocks and prepares for vv. 18–23”¹

“The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them.” **(Isaiah 11:6, ESV)**

“Submission to the Jewish authority was a choice (but a necessary concomitant of membership in the Jewish community); submission to the Roman authority was mandatory. More severe penalties, including the death penalty, were available through Roman justice than through the Jewish legal system.⁵⁸ So the stakes are now raised.”²

“Jesus uses a compelling metaphor, describing his disciples as sheep sent into the midst of wolves, and instructing them to be “wise as serpents and innocent as doves”[1][2]. This saying primarily represents the serpent as symbolizing wisdom, cunning, and prudence, while the dove signifies innocence, fidelity, and simplicity[3]. The instruction means disciples should not be naive about opposition, but also should not resort to violence. This approach was exemplified by movements like the civil rights movement, which was strategically effective while remaining nonviolent[2]. Essentially, Jesus is providing a principle for kingdom work: be wise in avoiding potential traps, while serving the Lord blamelessly. This wisdom does not mean being dishonest, and innocence does not mean being gullible[4]. As followers of Christ are sent into a potentially hostile world, they need both wisdom to

¹ 23 Herbert Preisker and Siegfried Schulz, “πρόβατον κτλ,” TDNT 6 (1968) 690; sheep in contrast to wolves: 1 Enoch 89.55; 4 Ezra 5:18*; Tanch. 32b = Str-B 1. 574; Esth. Rab. 10.11 on 9:2* (the sheep that is preserved among 70 wolves).

Luz, Ulrich. 2001. *Matthew: A Commentary*. Edited by Helmut Koester. Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg.

² 58 Client kings ruling with the approval of the Roman emperor did not exactly dispense Roman justice, but they produced something closer to Roman justice than to Jewish justice.

Nolland, John. 2005. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

navigate complexities and innocence to maintain their witness, relying on the Holy Spirit for discernment[1].”³

“In the Old Testament, Wisdom (Sophia) is a profound and multifaceted concept. Wisdom theology posits that God establishes certain orders and structures in creation, and wise individuals are those who observe and accommodate these patterns. Those who fail to learn wisdom are considered fools, and all people are invited to seek and learn wisdom through experience and keen observation.[1]

In Proverbs, Wisdom is personified as a female figure who calls out to people, offering guidance and promising knowledge, love, riches, honor, righteousness, justice, security, and life.[1] She speaks almost like a goddess, described as a “spotless mirror of the working of God” who was present with God before creation, served as God’s agent in making everything, holds all things together, orders all things well, and reconciles people to God.[2]

Wisdom encompasses the realm of human knowledge up to its terrestrial limits, where revelation takes over. In early Jewish interpretation, “Wisdom” was idiomatic for a type of religious writing comparable to the Torah and Prophets, with Solomon being closely linked to the canonical wisdom books. [3]

Scholars debate the nature of this personification, with some suggesting it evolved from beliefs in a Hebrew goddess, while others interpret it through the lens of Greco-Roman philosophical concepts of divine rationality.[2]”⁴

³ [1] Lilley, Jen. 2025. *Wake Up Your Faith: 365 Daily Encounters with Jesus*. BroadStreet Publishing Group, LLC.

[2] Long, Thomas G. 1997. *Matthew*. Edited by Patrick D. Miller and David L. Bartlett. Westminster Bible Companion. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press.

[3] Charlesworth, James H. 2010. *The Good and Evil Serpent: How a Universal Symbol Became Christianized*. New Haven: Yale University Press.

[4] Got Questions Ministries. 2014–2021. *Got Questions? Bible Questions Answered*. Vol. 2. Bellingham, WA: Faithlife.

⁴ [1] Achtemeier, Elizabeth. 1998. *Preaching Hard Texts of the Old Testament*. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers.

[2] Powell, Mark Allan. 2011. “Sophia.” In *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary (Revised and Updated)*, edited by Mark Allan Powell, Third Edition, 985–86. New York: HarperCollins.

[3] Jeffrey, David L. 1992. In *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature*. Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans.

2. Spirit-Led Speech

“When they deliver you over, do not be anxious how you are to speak or what you are to say, for what you are to say will be given to you in that hour. For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father speaking through you.”

(Matthew 10:19–20, ESV)

Strangely, Jesus doesn’t see the persecution as a problem but a blessing. If you are going to be arrested, then they will have to listen to the message you share because they will be chained to you. Jesus informs them that the Holy Spirit (notice the Trinity reference) will give you the words that you need to speak. These simple laborers would feel intimidated by the more highly educated persecutors. Yet, the disciples have nothing to fear because God the Holy Spirit will empower them to speak correctly in their time of need. It’s a tough pill to swallow, but Jesus uses bad situations for His glory, and the Christian is a powerful force because God Himself guides them in the third person of the Trinity.

“Jesus views this persecution positively as an opportunity for the disciples to be “witnesses” to the truths of the gospel (cf. Phil 1:12–18).²⁴ Interrogation need not terrify Christians, even when their lives may be on the line. Relatively uneducated Christians would naturally have felt most inadequate when pitted against the professional prosecutors known for their rhetorical skill (cf. Tertullus in Acts 24:1–8). Jesus promises that the Holy Spirit will give these believers the right words and enable them to proclaim his word boldly (vv. 19–20)—closely parallel to the ministry of the Paraclete promised in John 14:15–31; 15:26–16:13 and illustrated by the regular testimony of the disciples when they are “filled with the Spirit” throughout Acts (see comments under Matt 3:11).”⁵

⁵ 24 Cf. G. T. Montague, *Companion God: A Cross-Cultural Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (New York: Paulist, 1989), 130: “In countries today where Christianity is outlawed, more people learn about the gospel in the courtroom than on the street.”

3. Faith Despite Fractures

“Brother will deliver brother over to death, and the father his child, and children will rise against parents and have them put to death, and you will be hated by all for my name’s sake. But the one who endures to the end will be saved. When they persecute you in one town, flee to the next, for truly, I say to you, you will not have gone through all the towns of Israel before the Son of Man comes.” **(Matthew 10:21–23, ESV)**

“Can it get any worse? Yeah, sorry!” Jesus depicts that the situation will escalate from the legal system to the familial systems. Their hardships will follow them into the home, and it will be pandemonium. In Jesus’ time, seniority was considered a virtue to be respected, and even then, children would rebel against their parents. This is a reminder that the world isn’t in proper order, and Jesus prepares His followers that the dysfunction of sin and rebellion will affect their ministry both publicly and privately.

Now Jesus offers a word of encouragement and challenge: if you can endure to the end, you will be saved from this hardship. This implies that some will lose even their lives for the sake of the Kingdom, and this sending will be a treacherous endeavor. However, the timeline Jesus uses is eternal. Life extends beyond the grave for those who endure the hardship, and they will see Jesus’ Kingdom in its fullness. “I just felt like running.” (Tom Hanks as Forest Gump) The disciples will be hustling from one village to another as persecution follows them around the Sea of Galilee. They will be run out of every town in Israel before Jesus returns in the fullness of His glory. This foreshadows the Jewish scattering in 68 A.D., revealing that the disciples will not remain in their small communities for long and that God will send Jesus’ Followers all over the world before He returns for the final judgment.

“This verse expands on the theme introduced in v. 17 and represents an intensification: among those who will seek to use the legal system to stop the missionary witness will be members of one’s own family; and the legal redress will go all the way to capital punishment.⁶⁵ An echo of Mi. 7:6 is likely, which may be intended to point to the prophetic pattern of increasing wickedness as a precursor to the intervention of the Lord with his judgment and salvation (see Mi. 7:2–7). Brother against brother and father against child are treated together, while the case of the younger generation against the older is treated separately: it moves to the plural, it stops being as gender specific

(actually father against child is a mediating form here), and it speaks of rising up against rather than handing over.”⁶

4. Following the Master's Path

“A disciple is not above his teacher, nor a servant above his master. It is enough for the disciple to be like his teacher, and the servant like his master. If they have called the master of the house Beelzebul, how much more will they malign those of his household.” **(Matthew 10:24–25, ESV)**

The final word from Jesus is complex; it's both a warning and a hope. They have called Jesus the Prince of Demons for the amazing exorcisms that He performs. The disciples have been promised that they will do greater miracles than even Jesus in their ministry. Yet, if Jesus were accused of being Satan in the flesh, then the disciples would have even greater slander for the wondrous works they would do in the name of Jesus. Tertullian, a Christian scholar, wrote, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.” When the world tries to kill the Christian Church, she grows more vibrant and compelling in her mission to make the good news of Jesus known. Jesus foretells this pain and reminds Christians across time and location that He was hated and called Satan, and we as Christians should be prepared to have the same, or worse, accusations thrown our direction.

“In the tradition the Beelzebul accusation belongs together with the exorcisms of Jesus (12:22–27*). The disciples also had been charged to perform exorcisms (10:1*, 8*). Thus the members of the church experienced and expected the same accusations as their Lord.”⁷

“Tertullian (160-215 AD) is credited with the famous quote “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church,” which means that even harsh persecution has a way of causing the gospel message to spread[1][2]. While the Bible itself does not have a direct aphorism matching this quote, the concept is rooted in biblical imagery, particularly in the book of Revelation, where the saints’ sacrificial witness is highlighted[3]. This principle was observed throughout early Christian history, where despite the Roman Empire’s immense power

⁶ 65 θανατώσουσιν could mean ‘put to death’, but in the context it will be causative: ‘have [them] put to death’.

Nolland, John. 2005. *The Gospel of Matthew: A Commentary on the Greek Text*. New International Greek Testament Commentary. Grand Rapids, MI; Carlisle: W.B. Eerdmans; Paternoster Press.

⁷ Luz, Ulrich. 2001. *Matthew: A Commentary*. Edited by Helmut Koester. *Hermeneia—a Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*. Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg.

and efforts to suppress Christianity, persecution often resulted in the church’s growth. The church was likened to a palm tree that grows stronger under pressure[4]. Historical examples abound, such as the martyrdom of Bishops Latimer and Ridley during the Reformation, which inspired further gospel preaching, and the deaths of five Wheaton College missionaries in Ecuador, which sparked a wave of missionary zeal[5]. The underlying message suggests that sacrifice is necessary for the gospel to spread, and loving people often comes at a cost that may involve dying to oneself or, in some cases, actual physical death[2].”⁸

Application

- I. Prepare: Christianity is sprouting new life among Gen Z. While this is exciting, the warning of Christ looms in the background that opposition will ensue. Pray with your family, cornerman, and whoever else that the Holy Spirit will prepare you in your words and actions to be wise and innocent should the Church in North America begin to see Jesus’ warning come to life.
- II. Please pray for the persecuted Church around the world. The most connected ministry here is “The Voice of the Martyrs,” and you can read about countries facing great persecution here at (www.persecution.com). Please commit to praying for at least one country on this website this week, because they understand these challenges more deeply than American Christians do. Amen.

⁸ [1] Detzler, Wayne A. 1986. *New Testament Words in Today’s Language*. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.

[2] Forrest, Andrew. 2025. *Love Goes First: Reaching Others in an Age of Anxiety and Division*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan.

[3] Ryken, Leland, Jim Wilhoit, Tremper Longman, Colin Duriez, Douglas Penney, and Daniel G. Reid. 2000. In *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, electronic ed., 540. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

[4] Edwards, Jonathan. 2016. “Preface.” In *2000 Years of Christ’s Power: The Age of the Early Church Fathers*, Newly revised edition, 1:11. Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus.

[5] Strain, David T. A. 2019. *Philippians*. Edited by Joel R. Beeke and Jon D. Payne. The Lectio Continua Expository Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids, MI: Reformation Heritage Books.