

THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Kingdom: A Study of Matthew 8–13

STUDY EIGHT

Sheep among Wolves: What to Expect

Matthew 10:11–31

What can we expect? The same treatment as the disciples, so don't be surprised by persecution. What must we remember? Don't be afraid. The same promises that were given to them are ours to apply.

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

FROM the inception of His ministry, Jesus determined to invest Himself in others so they could carry on His work after Him. Of all His followers, Jesus chose twelve individuals to be His most trusted disciples, the ones into whom He would pour His life and vision.

Jesus taught these handpicked students not in a classroom but in the context of a close relationship. They walked with Him, ate with Him, endured hardship with Him, laughed with Him, and sat by the crackling fire to talk life with Him. They marveled at His miracles and hung on His words. Then, at the right time, Jesus sent them out to do what He had trained them to do.

Through modeling and mentoring, Jesus transformed *followers* into *leaders* who would train others. These new disciples would do the same for others and then others in an ever-expanding circle of believers.

In this grassroots way, Christianity grew from few to millions. But the growth didn't come easy. The apostles and all who came after them endured blistering winds of persecution which Jesus warned about in the passage we'll focus on in this study.



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

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PREPARE YOUR HEART

Persecution. What comes to mind? Perhaps Christians thrown to the lions in the Roman colosseum or soldiers in faraway places burning down churches. But persecution can come in less extreme forms too, such as rejection, criticism, and slander. Invite the Lord to strengthen you through His Word to faithfully endure whatever hardships you might face for His name's sake.

Father, because You love me, You tell me about the persecution that might await me and my family because we follow Your Son. Show me the heart of Christ as I read His warnings, and fill me with His courage and calm, in His name, amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

As you read [Matthew 10:11–31](#), recall the context. After selecting the Twelve, Jesus “gave them authority to cast out evil spirits and to heal every kind of disease and illness” (Matthew 10:1). Then He commissioned them as apostles to announce the kingdom of heaven with miraculous signs to validate the message (10:6–8).

Jesus instructed them to travel light and depend on the hospitality of kind-hearted people wherever they went (10:9–10). Our previous study stopped at this instruction, but Jesus continued.

If townspeople rejected them, what were the apostles to do? Jesus said to leave that town and “shake its dust from [their] feet” (10:14). God would settle accounts on the day of judgment (10:15). In the next section, Jesus elaborated on the subject of hostility, specifying what sorts of persecution they could expect and how to respond.



Observation: Warnings and Reassurances

When we observe the passage, we look for figures of speech, repeated phrases, contrasts, cause and effect, and commands.¹ In this passage, Jesus' commands form the general structure. The first main command is “Beware!” (Matthew 10:17), and the future tense verbs that follow describe the *dangers ahead*. The second main command is repeated three times: “Don't be afraid” (10:26, 28, 31), as Jesus reveals our *future hope*.



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Dangers Ahead—Matthew 10:16–25

What analogies did Jesus make in *Matthew 10:16*? What did the Shepherd tell His “sheep” that would have surprised them, and how do you think they felt?

We’ll examine what it means to “be as shrewd as snakes and harmless as doves” in the interpretation section. For now, feel the distress in Jesus’ flock upon hearing His words. And Jesus had even more hard things to say.

First, what persecution would they suffer from their own *religious leaders* (*Matthew 10:17*)?

Second, what persecution would they endure from *governmental authorities* (*10:18–20*)? Notice Jesus said, “When you are arrested,” not “If you are arrested.” He never sugarcoated the reality of what lay ahead. However, what opportunities for the gospel would their persecution bring?



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Third, perhaps the harshest of all, what persecution *at home and abroad* did Jesus say His followers would face (*Matthew 10:21–22*)?

Jesus then rephrased what He said earlier. He already told them if they visit a town whose citizens won't listen to the gospel, the disciples are to “shake its dust from [their] feet as [they] leave” (10:14). He later added, “When you are persecuted in one town, flee to the next” (10:23). What reason did Jesus give for not wasting time with unreceptive people (10:23)?

As Jesus wrapped up this section of warnings, He told them the real reason people would reject them. What did He say, according to 10:24–25. (See also *John 15:18–21*.)

These warnings were fulfilled in the days of the apostles and in various times throughout Christian history. And we are living to see the fulfillment of them right now. This isn't paranoia. This is the fulfillment of prophetic teaching. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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Future Hope—Matthew 10:26–31

And yet, rays of hope beamed through the stormy clouds. Why did Jesus say His followers should not be afraid of those who threaten them (*Matthew 10:26–27*)? What coming *freedom* did Jesus describe?

Why did Jesus say His followers should not be afraid of those who want to kill them (*10:28–31*)? What hopeful *promise* did Jesus offer?

Before moving on, let these reassuring words from the Lord settle into your soul, particularly if you've been suffering persecution lately. Bask in the warmth of your value to God and take a moment to thank Him for knowing you intimately and caring for you deeply.



Interpretation: Shrewd as Snakes, Harmless as Doves

This passage raises a few interpretive issues, such as the meaning of Jesus' saying, "So be as shrewd as snakes and harmless as doves" (*Matthew 10:16*). Jesus was giving the apostles some practical counsel for what to do when surrounded by "wolves." What did His advice mean?



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To find the answer, read pages 194–195 in Pastor Chuck Swindoll's commentary, *Insights on Matthew 1–15*. Or for an online resource, consult *Constable's Notes* at netbible.org. What do you discover?

Jesus didn't intend His warnings to encourage a "martyr complex." We don't have to stay with hurtful people who hate us and our Lord. He told His followers to leave, even flee, hostility so they could find people who *want to hear* about Christ. Why? Because the "Son of Man will return" soon, and many more need to receive Him before He comes (Matthew 10:23).

Through centuries of persecution, believers have fearlessly faced torture and even death because of Jesus' reassuring words in *10:26–31*. How do we interpret Jesus' teaching? Pastor Chuck offers three reasons why Christ's followers need not fear persecution.

First, God wants His message revealed not concealed (10:26–27). Therefore, He would see to it that they were protected and that His word would be proclaimed. Second, even if the enemies of the gospel succeeded at putting His witnesses to death, they would continue on to eternal life (10:28). . . . Third, God never ceases to love and care for His disciples even in the midst of great trials and tribulations.²

As you reflect on Jesus' reassurances in this passage, write down in your own words what you understand Jesus to mean so that you can endure persecution unafraid.

"Do not fear." This is the most common command given in the New Testament. "Fear not, fear not!" —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



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Correlation: Prophetic Passages on Persecution

The authors of the New Testament wrote frequently about persecution to encourage their readers who were suffering terribly. How do the following verses mirror Jesus' original teaching about persecution?

Romans 8:35–37

2 Thessalonians 1:5–8

2 Timothy 3:1–3, 12–14

Even today, Christ still sends out His sheep among wolves, and we can't ignore the howls in our anti-Christian culture growing louder and louder. How do we respond?



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Application: Principles for Today

Pastor Chuck gives us two guidelines from this study's passage.

First, *we can expect ill-treatment for declaring the message of Christ*. And yet, according to Jesus, persecution can become a platform for the gospel. When the apostles were ever arrested for their faith, Jesus said, “This will be your opportunity to tell the rulers and other unbelievers about me” (Matthew 10:18). He also assured them that “the Spirit of your Father” would be with them and speak through them (10:20). And we can apply that same promise.

If you are facing hostility, how does thinking about persecution as an “opportunity” and relying on the Spirit to empower you in the moment give you courage?

Second, *we don't have to be afraid*. Amid persecution, we can sing the song of the psalmist:

*The LORD is for me, so I will have no fear.
What can mere people do to me? (Psalm 118:6)*

Hateful people may attack us like wolves, but their threats have no teeth because our souls are safe with God. How does this promise give you hope to endure hostility and keep on sharing Christ?

Only God can soften a hostile person's heart. We simply declare His message. So be shrewd but innocent, aware of danger but unafraid, always secure in our precious value to God.



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A FINAL PRAYER

Father, give me the ability to be discerning without being paranoid, to be courageous but not belligerent, to be snake-like in my awareness but dove-like in my attitude. Thank You for the promise that no one can truly harm me because my soul is safe with You. Make me strong but keep me gracious as I declare the message of Christ in an increasingly hostile world. In His name, amen.

ENDNOTES

1. To learn about Pastor Chuck Swindoll's *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the Web page, "[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#)."
2. Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll's Living Insights New Testament Commentary: Insights on Matthew 1–15*, vol. 1A (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2020), 199.

