

17 May 2026 – A Sheep Amongst Wolves

Introduction

25 June 2025

A bomb struck Saint Elias Church in Damascus. An attacker opened fire.

Thirty people were killed and 54 were injured.

The Syrian minister said Islamic State was responsible for the suicide attack.

This was the first suicide bombing since the fall of the Assad regime.

Many now live in fear that attending church could cost them their lives.

Listen to the words of Father Bashar:

“We still believe that the Lord is the one who builds the house – He is the protector of this city. Unless the Lord builds the house and protects the city, its builders labour in vain.”

“Our faith is that each phase and each temptation and distress will make us stronger. If a grain of wheat doesn’t die, it won’t live and bear fruit.”

“The early church experienced wars, persecution and martyrdom; that’s why the Christian people, despite everything, are still resilient and steadfast.”

This is the faith of the remnant—not the absence of fear, but faith in the midst of it and a refusal to surrender to it. Like Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, who did not know whether God would deliver them from the fire yet stepped forward anyway, those who remain in Syria stay not because it is safe, but because they trust God’s power to deliver.

And even if He does not, they still choose to serve Him in that land.

“Regardless of the hostile parties and enemies we are facing, we remain steadfast in this land.”

What will sustain a follower of Jesus when persecution comes for the sake of the gospel—when Jesus sends you among those hostile to Him?

Read with me.

Historical Background

In this passage, Jesus prepares His disciples for the road ahead—a road marked by danger, hostility, and suffering, yet sustained by divine help and enduring hope.

Passage

Matthew 10:16–23 LSB

Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves.

But beware of men, for they will deliver you over to the courts and flog you in their synagogues;

and you will even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles.

But when they deliver you over, do not worry about how or what you are to say; for it will be given to you in that hour what you are to say.

²⁰ *“For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.*

And brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death.

And you will be hated by all because of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved.

But whenever they persecute you in this 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.

Proposition

Jesus gives five truths you must know to remain faithful when persecution comes.

1. Jesus tells them who sent them (v. 16).
2. Jesus warns them about religious and political persecution (vv. 17–18).
3. Jesus addresses their anxiety (vv. 19–20).
4. Jesus warns of persecution from family and others (vv. 21–22a).
5. Jesus gives hope (vv. 22b–23).

1. Jesus tells them who sent them (v. 16)

Matthew 10:16 LSB

Behold, I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves; so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves.

Behold, I send you out...

The grammar places / in the emphatic position.

The disciples were not self-appointed messengers; they were sent by the Messiah Himself.

That changes everything.

You can walk into dangerous places when you know who sent you.

When you serve Jesus, remember whose name you bear, whose message you carry, and whose authority stands behind you.

The word *send* (apostellō) means to send someone on a mission for a specific purpose.

He had already given them:

- the authority
- the message
- the instructions

Remind your disciple who you represent, whose authority stands behind you, who sent you, and whose message you bear.

Jesus then described the nature of the mission.

...as sheep in the midst of wolves.

Jesus does not describe His disciples as lions among lambs, but as sheep among wolves.

Earlier, Jesus used sheep as a metaphor for the unbelieving crowds.

He called them sheep without a shepherd (Matt. 9:36).

Now, instead of calling His disciples lions or wolves, He describes them as sheep among wolves.

- Sheep are grazing animals.
 - They form herds.
 - They were often emblems of meekness, patience, and submission.
- Sheep are defenceless and needed constant supervision.
 - They are vulnerable to weather, poisonous weeds, cuts, parasites, insects, and many other dangers.
- They are easily panicked.
- Their only course of action against danger was to run.

But the wolf (lukon/lukos) is different.

It has acute hearing and sight and relies heavily on scent to catch its prey.

It has a reputation for boldness, fierceness and voracity.

It often killed more than it could eat.

It was known for greed.

Wolves are restless animals, always on the move, constantly searching for new hunting grounds.

Often in spring and fall wolves ran in pairs, but in winter these pairs formed larger packs—sometimes up to 30—that often travelled at night.

In this context, wolves picture those hostile to Christ and false teachers.
Jesus' delegated authority to the apostles did not make them invincible.
His divine enablement did not keep them from suffering at the hands of men.
There is a paradox here: the disciples were supernaturally enabled, yet still deeply vulnerable.
Looking again at the imagery.
A sheep's greatest enemy in Palestine would have been the wolf.
Normally, shepherds protect the flock from wolves.
But here Jesus sends His sheep—His disciples—into the midst of wolves.
The mission Jesus gives His disciples is dangerous.
Jesus had already warned about false prophets who looked like sheep but were really wolves.

Matthew 7:15–16 LSB

“Beware of the false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly are ravenous wolves.

You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorn bushes or figs from thistles?

He is saying: not only must you identify them; I am sending you among them.

... so be shrewd as serpents and innocent as doves.

Because the field is full of wolves, Jesus calls His disciples to display two qualities:

1. Be Shrewd
2. Be innocent

Shrewd:

To be shrewd is to be prudent, sensible, and thoughtful—to use wisdom well.

Serpent:

In ancient symbolism, serpents were often associated with caution and wisdom.

They were considered shrewd, clever, cautious creatures.

So, think carefully, with wisdom and caution.

When religious leaders tried to trap Jesus over paying taxes, He said:

Matthew 22:21 LSB

They said to Him, “Caesar’s.” Then He said to them, “Therefore, render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s; and to God the things that are God’s.

He did not attack the Roman government, nor did He disregard Moses' law.

2nd characteristic

Innocent

Innocent (akeraios) means unmixed with deceit or defilement—pure, harmless, and morally clean.

Doves represented harmless, gentle animals.

Jesus' point is that His disciples must be wise, yet also pure and innocent.

Being true to God's Word never requires you to be abrasive, coarse, inconsiderate, or blunt.

Application

As a disciple of Jesus know that you have been sent out by Jesus.

You need to think through what and who you will be meeting with.

Use wisdom.

Make sure you are also walking in holiness.

Consider how this applies in difficult ministry contexts.

2. Jesus warns them about religious and political persecution (vv. 17–18)

Matthew 10:17–18 LSB

*But beware of men, for they will deliver you over to the courts and flog you in their synagogues;
and you will even be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles.*

But beware of men,

Jesus gave this as a command to obey as a way of life.

Do not place your trust in people, trust God.

Beware (prosechō) means to be alert, watchful, and ready.

Be on your guard and stay watchful.

Matthew had already recorded Jesus' blessing on those persecuted for His sake.

Matthew 5:10–11 LSB

Blessed are those who have been persecuted for the sake of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Blessed are you when people insult you and persecute you, and falsely say all kinds of evil against you because of Me.

Here Jesus adds detail about the persecution they would face.

He also gives the reason for it.

In essence, Jesus describes the nature of the wolves.

The first would be **religious persecution**.

...for they will deliver you over to the courts and flog you in their synagogues.

We have no record of the disciples in these early mission trips facing this kind of persecution.

Opposition to Jesus and His disciples was not yet intense.

This only happened later on in the ministry of Christ.

The grammar shifts from present to future—from a lifestyle of vigilance to a prediction of what would come.

Jesus was speaking about what his disciples would face in the future.

The language reflects the kind of punishment Jewish courts would mete out against heretical Jews.

Jews settled disputes among themselves.

For this they developed a system of courts.

Every sizable Jewish village had a synagogue.

Jews would convict and punish fellow Jews.

Those accused of breaking the Mosaic law or rabbinic tradition were brought before judges who rendered a verdict, set the sentence, and carried out the punishment, including scourging.

The Jewish court system included the Great Sanhedrin; a body of 71 judges seated in Jerusalem for the most serious cases.

Here Jesus likely refers to the lesser Sanhedrin, with 23 judges serving larger communities.

They administered flogging—up to 39 lashes—as allowed by the Mosaic law.

Deuteronomy 25:3 LSB

He may strike him forty times but no more, lest he strike him with many more stripes than these and your brother be dishonoured in your eyes.

Flog (mastigoō) means to beat or scourge severely with a whip.

Jesus' words would later be fulfilled.

Paul confessed how he used to imprison disciples of Jesus and beat them.

Acts 22:19 LSB

And I said, 'Lord, they themselves understand that in one synagogue after another I used to imprison and beat those who believed in You.'

Paul himself later said he was flogged five times.

*2 Corinthians 11:24 LSB
Five times I received from the Jews forty lashes less one.*

Until 70 AD all persecution of the Christians was Jewish.

History teaches you that the greatest religious persecution often came from within Christendom.

The pinnacle of this kind of persecution still awaits in the future tribulation.

The second area of persecution may come from civil authorities.

...and you will even be brought before governors and kings for My sake,

History shows how Jesus and His apostles faced governors such as Pilate, Felix, Festus, and Herod Agrippa.

Jesus revealed the reason they would be brought before these men.

For My sake means on account of Jesus Himself.

You face persecution not merely because you are sheep, but because you belong to the Shepherd.

The world hates Christians because it hates Jesus.

The more we display Jesus in our lives, the more the wrath of the world will come upon you.

*John 15:18–21 LSB
If the world hates you, know that it has hated Me before it hated you.
If you were of the world, the world would love its own; but because you are not of the world, but I chose you out of the world, because of this the world hates you.
Remember the word that I said to you, ‘A slave is not greater than his master.’ If they persecuted Me, they will also persecute you; if they kept My word, they will keep yours also.
But all these things they will do to you for My name’s sake, because they do not know the One who sent Me.*

Throughout history, various governments have persecuted Christians.

In Roman times Christians were accused of:

- cannibalism, because they spoke of eating Christ’s body and drinking His blood in the Lord’s Supper.
- immorality because of their love feasts.
- promoting revolution by preaching Christ’s return to establish His earthly kingdom.

Many were martyred.

Even during modern times, communistic governments have slaughtered millions of Christians.

Even today, North Korea may impose the death penalty for owning a Bible.

But there is also a ministry purpose for this kind of persecution.

...as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles.

1. As a testimony means as a witness.

Here we find the term Martyr.

Persecution has a ministry purpose.

History shows that persecution often strengthens the church.

In ancient times many believers were killed in the colosseum, which provided audiences who heard both the proclamation of the gospel and saw the manner that these Christians died.

They were composed, calm, courageous.

Many pagans converted when they witnessed the execution of Christian martyrs.

Tertullian, a second-century church leader, said that the blood of the saints is the seed of the church.

The early church understood martyrdom not as defeat but rather as participating in the suffering of Christ.

Philippians 3:10 LSB

*that I may know Him and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of His sufferings,
being conformed to His death,*

1 Peter 4:13 LSB

*But to the degree you are sharing the sufferings of Christ, keep on rejoicing, so that also at
the revelation of His glory you may rejoice with exultation.*

Romans 8:17 LSB

*...and if children, also heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ, if indeed we suffer
with Him so that we may also be glorified with Him.*

Application

As believers you must understand why you will face persecution.

As you become more like Christ, your life and actions will draw increasing opposition.

2 Timothy 3:12 LSB

Indeed, all who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be persecuted.

But realize too that in those moments you are given a divine opportunity to witness for Jesus.

But you may ask, “What will I say if I face persecution?”

That question can create real anxiety.

3. Jesus addresses their anxiety (vv. 19–20)

Matthew 10:19–20 LSB

*But when they deliver you over, do not worry about how or what you are to say; for it will
be given to you in that hour what you are to say.*

For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.

But when they deliver you over, do not worry about how or what you are to say.

The thought of being handed over to Gentile rulers would have terrified Jews more than facing the Jewish Sanhedrin.

Jesus also addresses the anxiety that comes with this kind of persecution.

Being arrested, imprisoned, and beaten is traumatic, and it is easy to become anxious.

Worry (merimnaō) refers to anxious, troubled concern.

When you are accused of wrongdoing, it is natural to defend yourself and argue your innocence.

But what do you say when the charge is that you preached the gospel?

But when you are persecuted because of Jesus, He promises something more.

Those suffering for Christ would be upheld by Christ.

Through the Holy Spirit, He would give them words that testified to Christ.

for it will be given to you in that hour what you are to say. 20 “For it is not you who speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you.”

In that moment, the Holy Spirit will give you what to say.

Some of the greatest testimonies in history came from martyrs just before death.

Acts 6:8–7:60 records the martyrdom of Stephen and preserves the powerful testimony he gave.

Application

Some have wrongly used this passage to excuse failing to prepare when teaching or preaching God's Word.

That would twist its meaning.

This promise is for those facing persecution and even life-threatening danger for Jesus' sake. You can rest knowing that Jesus understands and will give wisdom for how to answer your persecutors. Even today many believers have faced religious extremists and been martyred for their faith.

Are you ready to be a martyr for Jesus?

Is Jesus for you so important that you would be willing to die for Him?

If not, you need to grow in your love and reverence for Jesus and meditate more deeply on the truths of the gospel.

Perhaps the hardest persecution to face is within one's own family.

4. Jesus warns them about persecution from family and others (vv. 21–22a)

Matthew 10:21–22 LSB

And brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death.

And you will be hated by all because of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved.

And brother will betray brother to death, and a father his child; and children will rise up against parents and cause them to be put to death.

Jesus then predicts persecution from family members.

Here we see three future statements.

- Brother will betray brother.
- Father will betray child.

The grammar moves from singular in the first two statements to plural and no longer remains gender specific.

This implies a general pattern.

And instead of being betrayed or handed over, the action word changes to rise up against.

- Children will rise against parents and will put them to death.
Rise up against (epanistēmi) means to oppose with force and hostility.

It echoes Micah 7.

Its literary context describes a situation in which:

- vs 2 The holy ones had perished from the land,
 - there were no upright people.
 - people were skilled in doing evil.
- There is bribery and corruption.
 - it was a time when no one could be trusted.

Then Micah describes the family situation:

Micah 7:6 (LSB)

For son treats father as a wicked fool; Daughter rises up against her mother, Daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law; A man's enemies are the men of his own household.

What is it that you do when this is your life?
The prophet provided counsel on how to think:

Micah 7:7 LSB

*But as for me, I will watch expectantly for Yahweh; I will wait for the God of my salvation.
My God will hear me.*

In those situations, keep your focus on God.
Wait for Him.
Trust Him as your saviour.
Pray to Him.
Remember those who have gone before us.

Hebrews 11:37–40 LSB

*They were stoned, they were sawn in two, they were tempted, they were put to death with
the sword. They went about in sheepskins, in goatskins, being destitute, afflicted,
mistreated
(of whom the world was not worthy), wandering in desolate places and mountains and
caves and holes in the ground.
And all these, having gained approval through their faith, did not receive what was
promised,
because God had provided something better for us, so that apart from us they would not
be made perfect.*

Remember God has promised something better for us.
At the end of the day, He will deliver you.
That deliverance may come through death, but in the end, God will deliver you.
Brothers and sisters in this life expect persecution even from those closest to you:
It may come through betrayal.
It may come through hostility and rebellion.

Some can testify to children who, by their lifestyle, have betrayed God and rejected all authority.
These situations hurt deeply.
That is why Jesus warns us, so that we can prepare our hearts to trust Him and wait for Him.
Jesus then repeats again the cause for the persecution, He had mentioned in vs 18.

22 “And you will be hated by all because of My name,

You will not only be persecuted.
You will also experience hatred.
Hatred (miseō) refers to deep aversion expressed in words and conduct.
Why will you be persecuted?
Why will you be hated?
Because of Jesus’ name.
In Semitic culture, a name referred to a person’s reputation.
The name was bound up with the person himself.

Application

When sharing the gospel becomes difficult, church gatherings become inconvenient, obedience becomes uncomfortable, and persecution comes, will you endure and persevere?

Remember Jesus’ words:

Luke 9:23 LSB

*And He was saying to them all, “If anyone wishes to come after Me, let him deny himself,
and take up his cross daily and follow Me.*

5. Jesus gives hope (vv. 22b–23)

Matthew 10:22–23 LSB

And you will be hated by all because of My name, but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved.

But whenever they persecute you in this 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.

The last phrase of verse 22 offers counsel that will comfort and strengthen even tribulation saints in the future.

... but it is the one who has endured to the end who will be saved.”

The tribulation period will be the pinnacle of persecution for disciples of Jesus.

The Antichrist will rule.

Many tribulation saints will be killed for following Jesus.

Government and religious powers will persecute believers.

Revelation 13:5–10 LSB

And there was given to him a mouth speaking great boasts and blasphemies, and authority to act for forty-two months was given to him.

And he opened his mouth in blasphemies against God, to blaspheme His name and His tabernacle, that is, those who dwell in heaven.

And it was also given to him to make war with the saints and to overcome them, and authority over every tribe and people and tongue and nation was given to him.

And all who dwell on the earth will worship him, everyone whose name has not been written from the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who has been slain.

If anyone has an ear, let him hear.

If anyone is destined for captivity, to captivity he goes; if anyone kills with the sword, with the sword he must be killed. Here is the perseverance and the faith of the saints.

In those moments you must endure (hypomenō): remain under pressure, stand your ground, and refuse to turn back.

What marks a true believer is endurance.

Jesus gives hope.

Those who endure will be saved.

This cannot refer to spiritual salvation, as though endurance earns redemption, which would contradict passages such as Ephesians 2:8–9.

Endurance does not produce salvation; it proves it.

So how is the one who endures saved?

If you endure faithfully, even to death, that endurance will end in deliverance.

True believers endure.

True believers need not fear death.

Listen to Paul's words:

Philippians 1:21–23 LSB

For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.

But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labour for me; and I do not know what I will choose.

But I am hard-pressed between the two, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better,

2 Corinthians 5:6–8 LSB

Therefore, being always of good courage, and knowing that while we are at home in the body, we are absent from the Lord—

for we walk by faith, not by sight—

we are of good courage and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.

For the believer, death is release from this sin-ravaged body and broken world into eternal joy, rest, freedom, and fellowship with Jesus.
Jesus also gives practical counsel for tribulation saints.

But whenever they persecute you in this city, flee to the next.

Faced with persecution in one city, flee to the next.
Do not linger.
Move on but keep witnessing.
God will use persecution to move His people and spread gospel proclamation.

Acts 8:1 LSB

*Now Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. **And** on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.*

Listen to what these people did.

Acts 8:4 LSB

Therefore, those who had been scattered went about, proclaiming the good news of the word.

The tribulation will not only lead to millions dying, but also millions being saved.
Revelation 7 shows how many will be saved.

Jesus went on to say.

...for truly I say to you, you will not finish going through the cities of Israel until the Son of Man comes.

During the tribulation, as the 144,000-bear witness under persecution, they will not finish fleeing through every city before Jesus returns in His second coming.
The believer is never obligated to stay in a place until he is killed.
When persecution became so severe that Paul could no longer minister effectively, he moved on.
He was not afraid of persecution; he endured it, yet he also moved for the sake of ministry.
He moved on when his ministry could no longer be effective there.
Jesus warned His disciples then—and warns His disciples now and in the future—that He sends them among wolves.
He promised to be with His disciples.
He promised His Holy Spirit.
If they persecuted Jesus, they will persecute you.
And some will actually think they are serving God when they do so.
In closing, listen to the words of Jesus:

John 16:1–4 LSB

*These things I have spoken to you so that you may be kept from stumbling.
They will put you out of the synagogue, but an hour is coming for everyone who kills you to think that he is offering service to God.*

*These things they will do because they did not know the Father or Me.
But these things I have spoken to you, so that when their hour comes, you may remember that I told you of them. These things I did not say to you at the beginning, because I was with you.*