**Grace to You** :: *Unleashing God's Truth, One Verse at a Time*

**Sheep Among Wolves, Part 1**
Scripture: Matthew 10:16-23
Code: 2279

We come this morning, in our ongoing study of Matthew's gospel, to a very, very wonderful passage, chapter 10 - part of our Lord's instruction to the Twelve as He sent them out. It tells us yet more about our Christ, and gives us more to be grateful for, and I trust that the Spirit of God will use this study this morning as a preparation for our time at the Lord's Table.

I confess to you an ongoing frustration that verses 16-23, like so many other texts, are units of thought and really should be understood as units. But time is the enemy in so many ways, and we cannot cover all of verses 16-23 in one lesson. So, in order to understand the fullness of impact, you must wait until next time. It's kind of like the serials you used to see when you were little, leaving you in suspended animation until 'to be continued' came to pass.

This particular portion of Scripture is a tremendous portion. We're looking at Matthew 10:16 and following, and beginning today to introduce its truths. Let me read to you Matthew 10:16-23 so that in your mind, you'll have the setting.

Jesus says, "I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves; be ye, therefore, wise as serpents, and harmless as doves. But beware of men; for they will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues, and ye shall be brought before governors and kings for my sake, for a testimony against them and the Gentiles. But when they deliver you up, be not anxious how or what ye shall speak; for it shall be given you in that same hour what ye shall speak. For it is not ye that speak, but the Spirit of your Father who speaks in you. And the brother shall deliver up the brother to death, and the father the child; and the children shall rise up against their parents, and cause them to be put to death. And ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake, but he that endures to the end shall be saved. But when they persecute you in this city, flee into another; for verily I say unto you, Ye shall not have gone over the cities of Israel, till the Son of man be come."

We are in the tenth chapter of Matthew, looking, as it were, over the shoulder of our Lord as He instructs the Twelve on their first missionary venture. It is a part of their training. Before they are ultimately and finally sent out after the resurrection and ascension, they need to have some anticipation of what it will be like when they face a hostile, Christ-rejecting world. So the Lord sends them out ever so briefly, and not very far, but at least to give them a taste of what they will face. As He sends them, He gives them instructions.

I want to add, at this very point in the beginning of the message, that the instruction our Lord gives to the Twelve has some very specific reference to them. But beyond that, it telescopes beyond this, their first mission, to give them principles that will only be related to their full mission after the ascension. It goes beyond that to touch all who represent Christ in the church age, and it even goes into the period of the Great Tribulation. There is a telescoping effect.

If you'll look at verse 23, you'll notice that it ends with the coming of the Son of Man. That is an eschatological term used by Matthew to refer to the return of Christ. So what He teaches here has immediate import for the Twelve as they go out, such as the statement of verse 6, "Go only to the lost sheep of the house of Israel." That is a very dispensational statement related to a specific time in which they lived. But it begins from there to telescope, and it touches the time in which they will fully be sent, and it touches all of those who are ever sent by our Lord, even those who will be sent against the terrible opposition of the Great Tribulation prior to the return of Christ.

What we see here is a span and a sweep of all of the history of God's people from the time of Jesus' first coming to the time of His second coming. He sees the Twelve on this first mission, but with His marvelous, omniscient, prophetic eye, He sees the Twelve again in their full mission. Then He sees all those who represent Him, and then He finally sees them who will be in the great holocaust known as the Great Tribulation, and the terrible opposition they will face.

Remember, the first 15 verses of the chapter gave us insight into who the Twelve were and the fact that Jesus called them. Verses 5-15 gave us Christ's specific instructions to them. Verses 16-23 describe how the world will react to them, and how they are to react to the world. Finally, in verses 24 through the end of the chapter, we see the cost of discipleship. So we see who they are, what they are to do, how the world will react, and what the price is that must be paid for representing Christ.

So you see here, starting with the Twelve, this marvelous telescoping effect that encompasses everyone who represents Christ until the Second Coming. I say that now to let you know that we're here, we who represent Christ. There are some very specific things that related to the apostles. For example, it says in verse 8, "Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons."

You might want to know, interestingly enough, there is no indication in Scripture that they actually did raise the dead on this first, brief mission. But they would in their full and final sending after the resurrection when the Spirit came. It also says in verse 17, "They will deliver you up to the councils, and they will scourge you in their synagogues." That also did not happen on this, their first mission. They weren't persecuted at all until after the resurrection of Christ. So, you see, there are some specific things that fit then, such as, "Go now to the lost sheep of the house of Israel," some that fit later for them, such as, "Raise the dead," and, "You will be persecuted in the synagogues," and some general things that sweep through history for us. Some, perhaps, that are uniquely fulfilled by those

who will live in the Great Tribulation.

The reason I take the time to explain that to you is because people misunderstand this chapter, and particularly this section, wondering why the disciples didn't do all these things that were done, and wondering how and where these all apply. But that is a common biblical pattern. Many times in the Old Testament, the prophet will make an immediate prophecy that also has fulfillment in the future. David often spoke of some event coming to pass, or an attitude that he has, or something about himself, yet ultimately have in mind the Messiah. So there is this very common fulfillment.

For example, in Micah 5:2, it says that the Messiah will be born in Bethlehem. Verses 3-4 tell us He will reign as King of the earth. Micah is saying, "Soon, the baby will be born, and then He will reign." Yet he says nothing about the thousands of years between His birth and His kingdom. It is common in the prophetic literature for predictions to have both an immediate and future fulfillment, and that is what our Lord is doing. He is predicting the role and the place of the apostles, but also has in mind the ultimate sense that this will sweep clear through history up to the time of the Great Tribulation.

If you don't understand that, you will not understand this chapter; if you do, you will. Otherwise, you can't explain why the disciples didn't raise the dead and weren't thrown into the synagogues and beaten during their first mission. But if you understand that it is an unfolding all the way into the future, you have the right thought.

This, then, is our Lord's ordination of the Twelve and sending them out on their first internship, if you will. I want you to see this morning, and we'll just deal with the groundwork, the opening statement in verse 16, and what it means. "Behold, I send you forth as sheep in the midst of wolves."

That is a very interesting statement. In fact, I got so interested in that statement that I didn't get much past it. I am not an expert on sheep, and am less of an expert on wolves. But when I was in high school, I had the occasion to be in the desert for a few days herding a flock of sheep. In that brief experience, I was exposed to the helplessness, stupidity, dependency, and timidity of sheep.

In fact, sheep are so easily scared and panicked that even a jackrabbit jumping out from behind some brush is enough to cause a whole flock to stampede. They are extremely edgy animals, and it's a good thing, because when danger comes, they are utterly helpless. They are totally defenseless, with no weapons at all, and the only thing they can do is run, but they aren't built for speed. They have big fat bodies and four toothpicks for legs. Yet all kinds of dangers face sheep.

Phillip Keller's book, A Shepherd Looks at Psalm 23, has tremendous insights gained from his experience as a shepherd. He said that sheep need to be protected from poisonous weeds, so the shepherd has to go ahead of the flock and make sure there are no weeds. They are also vulnerable to weather, parasites (which attach themselves to the sheep's body), all kinds of diseases, and

especially insects.  In fact, there are certain flies that are so much a problem to sheep that sheep have commonly been known to beat their heads against rocks or trees until they are dead because of the annoyance of flies buzzing around their eyes and ears.  Very often, flies will land in their eyes and lay eggs there, and ultimately, it will cause blindness.  Sometimes, sheep will panic and stampede in an attempt to elude the flies, but in the stampede, ewes will loose their lambs and will become exhausted, lose weight, and some will even die.

Beyond all of these, the most severe enemy of sheep is the predator, the flesh-eating wild animal, the wolf.  There is record that two wild animals, wolves or wild dogs, that have been known to kill as many as 292 sheep in a single night.  Philip Keller writes, "Ewes, heavy with lamb, when chased by dogs or other predators, will slip their unborn lambs and lose them in abortions.  A shepherd's loss from such forays can be appalling.  One morning at dawn, I found nine of my choicest ewes, all soon to lamb, lying dead in the field.

"On several occasions, these cunning creatures came in among my sheep at night, working terrible havoc in the flock.  Some ewes were killed outright, their blood drained and livers eaten.  Others were torn open and badly clawed.  Some had huge patches of wool torn from their fleeces.  In their frightened stampede, some had stumbled and broken bones or rushed over rough ground, injuring legs and bodies.

"Yet despite the damage, despite the dead sheep, despite the injuries and fear instilled in the flock, I never once actually saw a predator on my range, so cunning and so skillful were their raids, they defy description."

If you had lived in Palestine in the Lord's time, you would have understood this.  You would have understood the severity of the task of the shepherd, who had to defend his sheep against all of these things.  And the shepherd didn't even own the sheep; he worked for the owner.  In fact, if a shepherd reported that a sheep had been killed, he had to show a piece of flesh from that sheep to prove that a wild animal had killed it, even if it meant pulling the evidence out of the wolf's mouth.  The shepherd might loose his own life if he didn't show proof because the sheep owners feared their sheep would be stolen unless they required evidence of a killing.

The conflict between sheep and wolves was familiar to the disciples.  So the Lord says to them, "I'm going to send you out.  To give you a perspective of how it will be, it will be like sheep in the midst of wolves.  Not sheep in fear of wolves arriving, but sheep among wolves that have already arrived." That is not exactly the most thrilling call to the ministry I've heard.

Sending them out as sheep is a wonderful thought; Christ is the Good Shepherd, He knows His sheep, He loves and cares for His sheep, they know His voice.  John 10 talks about all that wonderful stuff.  But the idea of them being among vicious, destructive, deadly wolves was the Lord's way of

graphically illustrating the helplessness and fearfulness of confronting a Christ-rejecting, God-hating world with the message of the Kingdom.

Sometimes the wolves are among us, friends. In case you haven't remembered, in Acts 20:29, Paul said to the elders of the Ephesian church, "I know this, that after my departing shall grievous wolves enter in among you, not sparing the flock." In Romans 8:36, Paul says, "We are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter." Some people just view Christians as sheep to be slaughtered. Sometimes the wolves are on the outside, but sometimes they are on the inside masquerading as sheep. Remember the wolf in sheep's clothing in Matthew 7:15? We'll get into that next week. "The wolves are out there," Jesus says, "And you're defenseless in and of yourselves." But that's how it will be; you'll be victims, in a sense.

Frankly, that would be enough to panic anyone: helpless, defenseless apostles going out among rapacious, vicious, wicked, God-hating men. Is it any wonder that the first word in verse 16 is 'behold?' That's a word of amazement, "You won't believe this! This is astounding!" You would think the Lord would say, "Men, we are going out as wolves among the sheep. Get 'em! Tear 'em up for the Gospel!"

After all, in Matthew 9:38, Jesus refers to the multitude as sheep without a shepherd. It would seem that they're the sheep and we're the wolves, and we have the power of God. But no, they're the wolves and we're the sheep. It doesn't mean that we're going to loose, it just means we don't have the resources in ourselves. That's why it's so wonderful when we read in John 10 that the Good Shepherd gives His life for the sheep; He will defend us.

Jesus' honesty is so refreshing to me. I don't believe He'd be at home in contemporary Christianity because there's not enough honesty in it. We are so concerned about getting people saved that we pretty well water down the Gospel. We don't talk about repentance or confession of sin or humbling oneself or hungering and thirsting for righteousness. We don't talk about the lordship of Christ, or obedience and the narrow way, or the cost and the price. Then, when someone becomes a believer, we don't talk about going out into the world as sheep among wolves. We say, "Let's go share." We've got nice little formulas that we use. We aren't as honest as Jesus was; we don't recruit people for evangelism and say, "There are some rapacious, wild wolves out there. Are any of you sheep who would like to volunteer?"

It isn't the world's way to win adherence; the world talks about ease, comfort, riches, advancement, and ambition. But Jesus offered hardship and death - such honesty. Listen, we might as well tell the truth, because if we are dishonest in our presentation of the Gospel and of what service to Christ is, people will come to Him on false pretenses and not the truth anyway. What have we gained? It just clouds the issue for them and everyone else. That's why it's so clear to me that we have so many on the broad road and so few on the narrow road. But so many on the broad think they're saved

because we have so watered down the reality of the Gospel.

When Jesus called people into His service, He initiated them by saying, "You're going to go out and get ripped to pieces. It isn't easy; they're going to cut you up out there. They don't agree with you or believe your message or want to hear your message."

Giuseppe Garibaldi, in 1849, after the siege of Rome, said this to his soldiers, "Men, all our efforts against superior forces have been unavailing. I have nothing to offer you but hunger, thirst, hardship, and death. But I call on all who love their country to join with me," and they came by the hundreds. After Dunkirk, Churchill said, "I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat." Similarly, our Lord offers blood, sweat, tears, hunger, thirst, and death. That's the way it is, and He never sends anyone out without telling them the full truth.

Life is tough on the mission field, but it's also tough to be a missionary at home. If you're not suffering much persecution, it could be the result of not being definitive about your faith. II Timothy 3:12 says, "All that will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution." God also may be gracious in giving you a time of respite. But somewhere in the world, at all times, the church is suffering persecution and being devoured. One day we may experience it here. We can thank God for this breath of fresh air, but in the midst of it, don't be under the illusion that there is no persecution.

A woman came to me Wednesday night and said, "I have a job where I counsel people with social problems. The only solution I've found for the people I counsel is Jesus Christ, so I've told them of Christ. But now, they've told me that I cannot speak of Christ to anyone. What do I do?" The answer is to ask them whether you ought to obey God or men; you have a mandate from God. She said, "I accept that even if I loose my job." And it may come to that, but that's how it is out in the world.

If we are definitive with our faith, there will always be a price to pay. You cannot confront a God-hating world without a reaction. So much of our Christianity is locked up inside church walls that I often wonder if the world even knows who we are.

Let's look at the passage and at least ask some basic questions. First of all, who are the wolves? The Twelve are told that they will be persecuted, and it didn't happen until after the crucifixion. Even when Peter cut off Malcus' ear, they didn't arrest him. The disciples didn't experience any persecution until after the Resurrection, but it is going to come, and it will come from the wolves.

We know who the sheep are; they are the apostles. "I send you forth as sheep." But who are the wolves? Verse 17 tells us. Men are the wolves, human beings. It's true that we wrestle, "Against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, against spiritual wickedness in high places." Yes, we wrestle against a demonic foe; yes, Satan, the prince of the power of the air, the ruler of the darkness of this world, is behind the system. Yes, it is supernatural,

yes it is hellish and demonic.  But its agents are human, and the enemy is men.

Throughout the years of God's people, it has been men who have slaughtered the saints, who have imprisoned, crucified, burned at the stake, and stoned the saints of God.  Men have snuffed their lives out, and still do it, even to this day, in places behind the Iron Curtain, and Ethiopia, and Uganda, and other parts of Africa.  Men are the enemy - men who talk about the milk of human kindness yet who are the dupes of Satan.

Matthew 5:10-11 says, "Blessed are they who are persecuted for righteousness' sake.  Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for My sake."  The assumption there is that men do those wicked things, that's why it's in italics - it's on the human level.  It had already begun coming down around our Lord, if not His disciples.

Go back into chapter 9, for example.  Once He forgave the sin of the paralyzed man, the Pharisees moved in.  In verse 11, they went to the disciples and said, "Why does your Master eat with tax collectors and sinners?"  They began to react against Him, the plot began to brew, and in verse 34, they said, "He casteth out demons through the prince of the demons, He is demon-possessed." There was a wolf even among the twelve disciples named Judas.  He was one of those like Paul spoke of, who arise from the midst.  He ultimately betrayed Jesus, delivering Him to be murdered.  He is responsible for the destruction from the physical, human side of our Lord, as well as others.

That's why verse 17 says to beware of men.  Keep your eye out for men; they're not your friends, in one sense.  This is not to jade you.  I don't want you to forget to reach people and love them as God does.  We are to, "Do good unto all men, especially unto them who are of the household of faith."  We need to keep a balance, but realize that the enemy will attack through human agencies.  Don't be shocked when you are criticized.  Don't be surprised when you are fired for articulating your faith. Don't be surprised when you're not invited to parties or certain activities, or when some girl or guy dumps you because of your faith.  Don't be surprised, because human agents represent the kingdom of darkness.

You say, "Is it very widespread?"  Look at verse 22. "Ye shall be hated of all men for my name's sake."  It isn't isolated, it's standard fare.

'All' doesn't refer to every human being who ever lived on the face of the earth.  Everyone doesn't hate me; they don't all know me. Maybe if they all knew me, it would be a different story.  It's not an 'all' in that sense any more than when it says, for example, in Jeremiah 3:6 that, "Israel played the harlot under every green tree."  Well, you understand that the author takes literary license; it doesn't mean they actually left no tree on the planet without an adulterous affair.  It's a generic, general, sweeping statement.

David said, "Every night I make my bed swim, I dissolve my couch with my tears." Give him a break, that's literary license. In a sense, you have it here. According to Mark 11:32, all men believed John the Baptist to be a prophet. That's obviously a general statement - all classes, races, nationalities, and cultures. What He's saying is, "I'm not just talking about the Jewish people being antagonizing, I'm talking about all kinds of people through all ages of history reacting negatively to the Gospel when it is lived and presented."

A question always comes up in my mind at this point, and I ask why we don't experience it. If I was preaching this sermon in Uganda, I wouldn't even need to illustrate it. I think some of it has to do with the sovereignty of God and the fact that He knows how much we can bear, and He shortens the length of trials for certain people in certain places, and He has His purposes. But I actually believe that part of the reason we don't experience more overt persecution is that we have so altered our message to accommodate rather than to confront men.

The Gospel begins with lostness, because you don't even know where the Gospel begins unless you understand that the first thing Paul says is, "The wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness." How would you like that for the next class in evangelism training? You go up to someone and what do you say first? "The wrath of God is revealed against you for your ungodliness. You know what is true of God by the creation around you, but you have turned the truth into a lie and worshiped the creature more than the Creator. God has given you up to your own lusts."

Then you could go on to point two after you pick yourself up of the floor. That is so different from the way we normally present the Gospel. But Jesus said, "When you preach repentance, and that the Kingdom is at hand, you are actually confronting people with their sinfulness; you are confronting the dupes and agents of Satan the world across, and through all of human history, and you can count on them to react."

It doesn't mean you are looking for this, and we'll see that next week as we see the proper response. But when we recruit for the ministry, people need to be reminded that they are going out as sheep among wolves. People will misunderstand you, misrepresent you, criticize you. You have to accept that as part of it. Sometimes I think the physical suffering would be easier to handle than the emotional and mental anguish.

Look for example at I Corinthians 4. This will give you the perspective of one of the apostles added to the Twelve, by the name of Paul, who was no less an apostle. In verse 9 he says, "I think that God hath set forth us, the apostles, last." He's saying, "Sometimes I get the idea that we're the bottom of the whole barrel." Then, he gives all kinds of interesting terms. "We were appointed to death; for we are made a spectacle. We are fools for Christ's sake, and are naked, and are buffeted. We are made as the filth of the world, and are the off scouring of all things."

How's that for recruiting? "All of you who would like to be appointed to death, made spectacles, fools, naked and buffeted, filth and off scouring, line up to the right. Welcome to the mission field, the ministry, the representation of Christ."

'Made a spectacle' is a very interesting term. When a Roman general won a battle over another nation or city, he was given the privilege of parading his army through the streets; this was called 'triumph.' He would parade his army, and they would have all the spoils, the wealth, and all of the fare that they had taken from the defeated foe. At the end of the parade followed a group of captives, tied together, being led to certain death in the arena. That is the term that is used here for spectacle. Moffat's reads, "God means us apostles to come in at the very end, like doomed gladiators in the arena." That's us; set for doom.

Then he says, "Appointed to death." Jesus told Peter he would die, and almost all, with a few exceptions, were martyred. Verse 10 says, "We are fools." The world thinks us fools; I Corinthians 1 says, "They think our message foolishness." Verse 11 says we will be 'buffeted,' a word which means 'to strike someone with your fist.' It was used of beating slaves with the fists.

It says we are 'filth,' and that is a word that means a dirty scab, and 'off scouring' is what would be wiped off a dirty dish; that's us. How's that for a call to the ministry? Paul says, "That's a good definition of an apostle." What is an apostle? He is a spectacle appointed unto death, the fool who is knocked around with people's fists, one who is considered filth and something to be scrubbed off a plate.

Who are the wolves? Men. Let me ask you a second question, looking back at Matthew 10. Why are they so vicious? Why are the wolves so vicious? It's very simple. Verse 18 says, "Ye shall be brought before governors and kings for My sake. Ye shall be hated of all men for My name's sake." They are vicious not because they really hate you, but because they hate Christ.

Look at verse 22 again. "You shall be hated of all for My name's sake." The concept of 'name' there refers to all that Christ is. 'In the name of Christ' is the sum of all that He is. It's because of who He is and what He's done that we are persecuted. Mark this: if we are persecuted because of who Christ is and what He has done, it has to be very obvious that we and Christ are doing together what we are doing. In other words, if Christ is not made manifest, no one will persecute Him in me. But when I am persecuted, it is because I represent Christ; it is because He is in me, living His life. It is because I reflect Christ in the world that I am persecuted.

In Galatians 6:17, Paul said, "I bear in my body the marks of the Lord Jesus." Visible on Paul's body were the marks and scars from the stonings, whippings, and beatings he endured. To him they were the marks of Christ; they weren't intended for him. People weren't angry with Paul - he wasn't that big

of an issue; they were upset at Christ. Since they couldn't strike Christ, they got to His emissary. Twice they actually took his life; once he came back. Finally they chopped his head off with an axe, but it wasn't because of him. It was because of who was living in him.

The same thing is in Colossians 1:24. Paul said, "I fill up that which is behind of the afflictions of Christ in my flesh." Paul took blows meant for Christ. I guess that's kind of an exciting thing; Paul wanted to know the fellowship of His sufferings. He prayed his highest prayer, "That I may know Him, and the power of His resurrection, and the fellowship of His sufferings." Paul really identified with being able to be punished, not for what he did, but for what Christ was doing through him, in confronting the world of darkness.

You can actually get excited; Peter said, "If ye be reproached for the name of Christ, happy are ye; for the Spirit of glory and of God rests upon you." When the Kingdom is built, Satan will cause people to react; they will rebel, ostracize, criticize, condemn, turn you away, and falsely accuse you. But it's OK for us to stand and take the blows meant for Him who took the blows meant for us. In fact, that's a joy.

The Apostle Paul really understood this principle. Look with me at an illustration in Acts 9. As Paul was on the road to Damascus, literally his breath was a breath of threat and slaughter as he killed Christians. So he comes along the road, and the Lord strikes him down and blinds him. He's on the ground, and verse 4 says, "A voice saying unto him, 'Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou Me?'" He might have said, "What do you mean 'you?' Have I persecuted you?" In effect, that's what he did say. "He said, 'Who art Thou, Lord?' And the Lord said, 'I am Jesus, whom thou persecutest.'"

Now Paul had never met Jesus, and Jesus was not on earth, He was in Heaven, so how was Paul persecuting Jesus? Because Christ was living His life through His people, and when Paul persecuted His people, he persecuted Him. Paul never forgot that. That thought stuck in his mind so that when he recited his testimony in Acts 22:7, he said, "I fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to me, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute Me?' and I answered, 'Who are you, Lord?' and He said to me, 'I am Jesus of Nazareth, whom you are persecuting.'" In Acts 26, when he was talking to Agrippa, he said, "I heard a voice saying in the Hebrew tongue, 'Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting Me?' and I said, 'Who are you, Lord?' and He said to me, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.'"

Beloved, we are sent into the world as were the Twelve, and as will be the people who come in the tribulation time, to represent Christ as sheep among wolves. The wolves are men, and the reason the wolves are so vicious is that they hate Christ. Jesus said, "He that is not with me is against me." There is no middle ground.

How do the wolves attack? I'll answer that next time, and I'll also answer the question, "What is our response?" I believe it is one of the most rich passages you'll ever see in the Bible about how we

react to a hostile world.  I believe it will become more hostile in our own country if we will be faithful to declare the truth with the same honesty our Lord and His disciples declared it.

Jesus gathered the Twelve and told them, "Men, I'm sending you out as sheep among wolves." Later, He told them, "I'll be with you.  I'll never leave or forsake you, and you'll win in the end, and the sheep will defeat the wolves."  It's a great promise.  Not in their own strength, but on the basis of Christ's power.

The disciples wanted to stay close to Jesus because they knew He was their resource; they never wanted to drift away.  They huddled around Him, hung onto Him.  When He said He was going to leave them, they panicked.  When He told them to go away, they said, "Where will we go?"  He was the source of their food - He fed them on the side of the hill.  He was the source of their tax money; on at least one occasion, He provided it from the mouth of a fish.  He was the source of their human need for love - He poured His love on them and cared for them.

He turned nature into one huge parable, so that every time they saw a field, a tree, a mountain, an animal, a leaf, a flower, or a piece of grain, they instantly thought of spiritual truth.  He taught them.  He was everything to them.  When He told them He was going to go away and leave them to the wolves, they panicked because they so longed for His fellowship.  But He also told them He would send His Spirit to dwell in them.  He would become their strength and power to overcome the world.  Through the resident Spirit in the life of a believer, he communes with the living Christ.

Jesus gave them a way to remember that in this, the Lord's Table.  He said, "Come to the table and remember Me, the Good Shepherd who gave His life for the sheep.  Every time you do this, remember that I died to save you from the wolves.  Someday, I'll come again, to take you to Myself." This becomes not only a table of remembrance, but a table of fellowship.  It says, "This is what Christ did in the past, and this is our living communion in the present until He comes again."  He said, "Someday, I'll come back and we'll do it together in My Kingdom," but until then, He communes with us here.

As close as we ever come as a family, as close as we ever come to each other, as close as we ever come to Christ, as intimate as we ever get with our Shepherd, we get at His Table, because here, we partake of His body and His blood in memory, in remembrance, and in living communion as He meets us here.  So, as we stand in our world, sheep among the wolves, we need His presence, and we need to come back for the cleansing, the reaffirmation of our faith, the reuniting of our fellowship to this Table.  Let's bow in prayer, preparing our hearts.

Father, thank You for meeting us in Your Word, in prayer, in the praises of Your people, and at Your Table.  Oh God, we pray that our hearts might truly be committed to You in this moment.  Lord Jesus, we know that we cannot come to this table with sin in our lives.  We pray that we might examine

ourselves, and if there be anything in us that stands between us and full communion with You and with the fellowship of believers, that we might confess it, put it away, see it cleansed.

Pardon all our sins, known and unknown, felt and unfelt, confessed and unconfessed, remembered and forgotten.  Make us clean.  Thank You that we can meet You here in a special way, commune with Your presence, come into the fold, as it were, for a moment of respite with the Good Shepherd before we go back among the wolves.  Infuse us with Your strength, cleanse us with Your power, blend us into one, give us courage to speak knowing that You have died for us and the victory is ours. Give us the boldness we need to confront the world.  As we take the bread, may we remember Your body, the incarnation that God became a man.  As we take the cup, Your blood, that You died, our substitute for sin.

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