

The following sermon was preached at Redemption Baptist Church on Sunday, 24 March 2024. We encourage you to look up the Scriptures that are referenced and see the context for yourself. May the Lord speak to your heart as you study His Word.

The Persecution of the King’s Messengers

Matthew 10:16-23

Not many years ago, there was an Israeli Arab girl named Amal who, at the age of 13, had come to a crisis point in her life. She had been brought up as a devout Muslim; yet, her heart was sad and unfulfilled. She had doubts as to whether Allah was the true God, because she felt no connection to Him, no matter how many religious rituals she went through. She began to wonder if the God of the Christians were the true God; and she shared this with one of her schoolteachers. The teacher warned her not to explore Christianity, or else she might end up getting killed; but Amal was so desperate for truth, that she couldn’t stop searching.¹ Finally, one night she prayed, “OK, God...I want to ask you if you are the god of Islam. Just tell me that you are, and I will wear the hijab...and do all the prayers that you want. But if you are the God of Christians, even if this will lead me to be killed, I will still believe in you.”²

Well, God answered her prayer. That night, she had a dream! She said that “In my dream, I woke up. There was so much light, I couldn’t look at it...The light, who I later realised was Jesus, told me to start walking. Every time I fell, he would grab my hand, pull me up, and continue walking. We reached an oasis. He asked me to grab a book out of the water. He said, ‘The answer you are looking for is inside that book.’ I read the verse where it says, ‘I am the way and the truth and the life.’”³ After Amal awoke, she was desperate to know where those words were found. Was it from the Koran, or the Bible? She couldn’t find it in the Koran; so she secretly obtained a copy of a Bible. There, in **John 14:6**, she found those wonderful words of Jesus: **“I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”** Amal repented of her sin and placed her faith in Jesus; and her life was filled with joy.⁴

However, Amal knew that she was now in real trouble—perhaps even in danger of her life. Nine times in the next three years, Amal’s mother burned the Bibles that she sneaked into the house.⁵ However, this wasn’t the worst of it: her brother also assaulted her. On one occasion, after she had returned from the hospital, where she had been visiting a Christian friend, her brother accused her of having been at church; and he grabbed her, and smashed her head into a window.⁶ About that time, her father returned home; and rather than intervene, he, too, began to beat her. Her brother grabbed her again, dragged her into her bedroom, and slapped her; and she fainted. Because of these beatings, her health deteriorated, until she finally had to be taken to the hospital. The medical workers suspected child abuse, and wanted to call the police; but Amal refused to turn in her dad and brother. Instead of hating her family, she loved them, and wanted them to have the same joy she had. Amal finally left home, and went to a Bible college, where she received training to serve the Lord. In time, she led three of her sisters, and her younger brother, to the Lord; and her parents (though they are still Muslim) now respect her decision to be a Christian. Amal is now busy discipling young Christians who have left Islam; and she is filled with joy!⁷

In most Muslim lands, being a Christian is extremely dangerous. However, this is nothing unique. For the past 2,000 years, true believers in Jesus Christ have been persecuted for their faith in Jesus (even in so-called “Christian” lands). We shouldn’t be surprised by this, because Jesus said it would be this way.

Jesus said, ***“In the world ye shall have tribulation.”*** This morning, we will read about the persecution that Jesus promised we would have. The title of this message is ***The Persecution of the King’s Messengers.***

I. The promise of persecution (vv. 16-23)

In last week’s message, our focus was on the instructions that Jesus gave to His twelve Apostles as He was commissioning them to go out and preach throughout the cities of Israel. First, He told them *to whom* they were to preach. They were to preach not to the Gentiles, nor to the Samaritans, but to ***“the lost sheep of the house of Israel.”*** The New Covenant, and the Kingdom of Messiah, had been promised to *Israel*; and thus, they were to take this message to the people of Israel. Secondly, He told them *what* they were to preach. They were to preach the message that ***“The kingdom of heaven is at hand.”*** He told them what provisions to take with them: namely, none! They were representatives of the King of Israel; and therefore, the people of Israel were expected to provide them with food and lodging as they travelled from city to city. He also instructed them how to respond when they were *received* by the people, and how to respond when they were *rejected*. If they were received, they were to give their blessing upon that house or city; but if they were rejected, they were to shake off the dust of their feet, as a testimony against them. With this in mind, we now come to **verses 16-23.**

Read Matthew 10:16-23.

As you can see, Christ was not finished with His instructions. He was now giving His Apostles a warning: and His warning was that they could expect to face persecution as they preached throughout the cities of Israel. He told them that He was sending them forth as ***“sheep in the midst of wolves”***; and He warned them that they would be delivered up to councils, and scourged in the synagogues. He even said that they would be betrayed by close family and friends; that they would be hated of all men; and that they would be put to death! Yet, there is just one puzzling thing about Jesus’ warning: *none of these things happened to the Apostles* during their preaching tour! Why, then, did Jesus say this? We realise, of course, that there would have been *opposition* toward the Apostles everywhere they went (especially from the scribes and Pharisees); but overall, there was at least a *surface* acceptance of the Apostles by the common people, and an excitement about their message (particularly, the part about the Kingdom’s being ***“at hand”***). In fact, at this stage in Jesus’ ministry, He was still at the *peak* of His popularity. There is no record in the Gospels that the Apostles were arrested or brought to trial before governors or kings during this preaching tour, nor that their family or friends betrayed them; and they certainly were not put to death. (They all lived to tell the story!)

At first glance, then, it appears that this is a prophecy that didn’t come true. Yet, if this were a false prophecy, then why would Matthew have *recorded* it in this Gospel, for his Jewish

audience to read? How could Matthew expect his Jewish brethren to believe that Jesus is the King of Israel if Jesus had made a false prophecy? The answer is simple: Jesus *didn't* make a false prophecy, because at this point, He was no longer addressing His Apostles! He was *speaking* to them; yet, He wasn't really addressing *them*. Jesus was giving this warning to *another* group of Jewish believers—believers who would live much farther in the future.

Folks, this is something that you often see in the Old Testament Scripture. Oftentimes, the prophets were writing about current events, and issues of their own day—when, all of a sudden, they began to write about events in the distant future. For example, in **Isaiah 7**, Isaiah was speaking with King Ahaz about the upcoming invasion of Judah by Syria and Northern Israel; and he assured Ahaz that these two foreign enemies would not succeed in dethroning him. But then, from out of nowhere, Isaiah delivered a prophecy about the virgin birth of the Messiah (which happened 740 years later)! Sometimes, the LORD delivered a prophecy about someone who would come along in the future, and do a certain thing; but then, in the middle of that prophecy, He began to prophesy about someone *else* who would come along even *farther* in the future, and who would do something very similar. For example, in **Daniel 11**, the LORD was telling Daniel about a Greco-Syrian king who would one day order the sacrifices in the Temple to be stopped, and then erect an image in the Temple, and demand that everyone worship him. We know, from history, that this man was **Antiochus Epiphanes**, and that he committed this heinous act (called “the Abomination of Desolation”) in 167 B.C. Yet, right in the middle of this prophecy about Antiochus Epiphanes, the LORD suddenly began to prophesy about someone else, who will do virtually same thing that Antiochus did, much farther in the future; and this man is known, in Scripture, as the **Antichrist!**

So, then, what future events was Jesus foretelling, here? Was He speaking of things that would happen to the Apostles farther in the future? Yes and no! There is a certain amount of *application* for the Apostles in this. After Jesus ascended back to Heaven, the Apostles *did* feel the sting of persecution. They *were* brought before councils, governors, and kings; and they *were* hated by most people. However, not all these prophecies fit the Apostles. Let's look again at **verse 22**. (**Read Matthew 10:22.**) Did *this* happen to the Apostles? Did any of the Apostles have parents, children, or close friends, that turned them in to the authorities, and had them put to death? Not as far as we know. Most of them did die martyr's deaths, many years later, in foreign lands—but not because they were betrayed by a close family member. Yet, even this is not the real clincher. There is one verse in this passage that clearly shows that Jesus was talking about events in the *distant* future. (**Read Matthew 10:23 again.**)

Do you see why Jesus could not have been speaking about the Apostles in these verses? First of all, the Apostles did *not* live to see the Second Coming of the Son of Man! They *might* have lived to see His Second Coming *if* Israel, as a nation, had repented and believed on Jesus within their lifetimes; but obviously, that didn't happen. Secondly, Jesus said that they would *not* finish preaching throughout the cities of Israel before the Son of Man had come. How

could *that* be true of the Apostles? After Christ ascended back to Heaven, the Apostles had *decades* to preach the Gospel throughout the cities of Israel! I think it safe to say, then, that the evangelization of the cities of Israel *was* completed within their lifetimes. Yet...Jesus did *not* come back before they'd finished the job.

So, if this prophecy was not fulfilled during the Apostles' lifetime, when *will* it be fulfilled? I believe we can find the answer in **Matthew 24**.

Read Matthew 24:1-31.

Are you getting the picture now, brethren? Many of the things that Jesus said in **Matthew 10** were repeated in **Matthew 24**—the part about being hated of all men, and being betrayed by loved ones, and about “enduring until the end.” He also talks about the Gospel’s being preached, not just in Israel, but “*in all the world*,” just before He returns. Clearly, Jesus is describing events that will happen during the Day of the LORD—the Tribulation period!

Now, those who don't believe in a Rapture and seven-year Tribulation would argue that this is simply a description of the church during the last 2,000 years. “After all,” they say, “Christians have always endured persecution, betrayal by friends and family, and so forth.” However, to say that this is talking about the church age, you'd have to ignore **verses 15 and forward**. Jesus said that these things will happen shortly before and after **the abomination of desolation** takes place. And just what *is* the “abomination of desolation”? Let's find out.

Read Daniel 9:24-27.

According to this prophecy, there would be 69 “weeks of years” (483 years) from the time of the decree to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, until *just before* the Messiah would be “cut off” (“killed”). We know, from history, that the decree to rebuild Jerusalem was made by King Artaxerxes on 2 April, 454 B.C.: and from that point, it was exactly 483 years until Sunday, 31 March, A.D. 30, when Jesus rode into Jerusalem (just a few days before He was “cut off”). *That* part of the prophecy—the 69 weeks of years—has been fulfilled already. However, right now, we are in the period of time between the 69th and 70th “week of years.” During this long period of time, several key prophecies have been fulfilled. First, the Messiah was “cut off” in A.D. 30. Secondly, the city of Jerusalem, and the “sanctuary” (the Temple) were destroyed in A.D. 70; and ever since then, Israel has gone through many desolations. However, that *seventieth* week—that last seven years—is yet to come. And what will happen during that “week”? Daniel says that “*the prince that shall come*” (the Antichrist) will make a treaty between Israel and many nations (which will include the *rebuilding* of the Temple); and “*in the midst of*” that seven years, the Antichrist will cause the offerings in the Temple to cease;

and he will erect an “*abomination*” in the Temple. We know, from **2 Thessalonians 2**, and from **Revelation 13**, that this “abomination” will be a speaking, moving image (perhaps an AI robot image of the Antichrist); and he will demand that *everyone* worship him as God! From this midpoint of the Tribulation until the end of the Tribulation, the Antichrist will launch genocide against the Jews, and especially against Jews who are followers of Jesus of Nazareth.

This raises a question, though: “Will there actually be *that many* Jewish believers in Jesus?” Yes, there will be! How could this be, when so few Jewish people believe that Jesus is their Messiah? Well, this is where Jesus’ prophecy in **Matthew 10** comes in! The Jewish people whom Jesus is addressing here in **Matthew 10** are the ones who will evangelise the cities of Israel during the first 3 ½ years of the Tribulation. Just as Jesus sent His twelve Apostles to evangelise the cities of Israel during the 3 ½ years of His ministry, so there will be a hearty band of Jewish believers who will evangelise their own people during the Tribulation! After we Christians are taken out of this world in the Rapture, God will raise up an army of 144,000 Jewish men to preach the Gospel throughout the world. These men will realise that Jesus really *is* their long-rejected Messiah; and they will personally repent of their sin, and believe on Him, and then go out into the world, and preach to both Jews and Gentiles that Jesus is the Messiah of Israel, and the Saviour of mankind! Multitudes of people, both Jew and Gentile, will believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and be saved! However, the price for being a believer in Jesus during the Tribulation will be *execution*.

Read Revelation 7:1-14 and 14:1-5.

Brethren, the persecution that we are reading about here in **Matthew 10** is the same persecution that Jesus warned about in **Matthew 24**. These things will happen to the 144,000 Jewish witnesses, and to those who are saved through their ministry, during the Tribulation. Within the first 3 ½ years of the Tribulation, a portion of these 144,000 will evangelise the cities of Israel. However, their time will be cut short by the Abomination of Desolation. As Jesus said, when the Abomination of Desolation is set up in the Holy Place of the Temple, *then* it will be time for all Jewish believers to flee out of the land of Israel—because then will begin a time of extermination against believers such as the world has never seen before! In the last 3 ½ years of the Tribulation, the Lord will prepare a place somewhere in the wilderness outside of Israel (possibly in modern-day Jordan), where God will supernaturally provide for them, and protect them, until the end of the seven years. When the seven years are up, Christ will return to earth with all His saints and angels, to set up the 1,000-year Kingdom.

Read Revelation 12:1-2, 13-17.

Now, at this juncture, you are probably wondering why we are taking so much time to focus on **Matthew 10:16-23**. After all, if we New Testament age saints won’t be around during the

Tribulation, how does all this apply to us? Is there *any* application for us in this passage? Yes, there is! Though we will not be here during the great Tribulation period, Jesus did guarantee that *all* His followers will experience some measure of “tribulation” in this life, until He returns. In **Psalm 44:22**, the psalmist wrote, “*Yea, for thy sake are we killed all the day long; we are counted as sheep for the slaughter.*” That which was true in King David’s day was also true in the Apostles’ day; and it is *still* true to this day. Those who place their faith in the true God, and in His Christ, have *always* been like “*sheep in the midst of wolves.*” In **Romans 8:35-36**, the Apostle Paul quoted **Psalm 44:22**, and told the believers in the churches of Rome that they should *expect* “tribulation, distress, persecution, famine, nakedness, peril, and sword.” Christians can also expect to be betrayed by family and friends during times of distress and persecution. Jesus said that “*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.*” Jesus repeated this same thing later in **Matthew 10**, except in more detail. He said, “*I am come to set a man at variance against his father, and the daughter against her mother, and the daughter in law against her mother in law. And a man's foes shall be they of his own household.*” This was a quote from the prophet Micah.

Read Micah 7:1-6.

My friends, what we just read is yet another description of the future Tribulation period. During the Tribulation, the “*good man*” will literally be “*perished out of the earth.*” That word “*perished*” is translated from the word *avad*, which often has the idea of “vanishing”! When the Rapture happens just before the start of the Tribulation, every saved person on earth will literally vanish; and the world will be plunged into unspeakable spiritual darkness. Many people will be saved during the Tribulation; but those who believe on Jesus can expect to be turned in to the authorities by their own spouses, parents, brothers, sisters, children, or other loved ones. Yet, what will be true during the Tribulation is true at this very hour, in many parts of the world. As we speak, Christians in the greater part of the world are having to hide from the authorities, for fear of being imprisoned or killed. By the way, lest you think that this sort of thing couldn’t happen here, you are sorely mistaken. *Real* persecution may be coming to us sooner than we think! Yet, if and when persecution come to us, Jesus promises that we can have real joy in the midst of it! Jesus said, “*Blessed are ye, when men shall revile you, and persecute you, and shall say all manner of evil against you falsely, for my sake. Rejoice, and be exceeding glad: for great is your reward in heaven.*”

II. The promise of prudence (vv. 16, 19-20)

Make no mistake about it: persecution (to one degree or another) is promised to every believer. Yet, Jesus gave another promise in this passage, which applies to every believer in every age. He promised to give us *wisdom* in our hour of trial. **(Read Matthew 10:16 again.)**

Jesus commands us to be “*wise as serpents, and harmless as doves.*” When our enemies attack us (whether verbally or physically), God calls us not to retaliate, but to be “*blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke.*” The Apostle Paul instructs us to “*Bless them which persecute you: bless, and curse not.*” Yet, at the same time that we are *blessing* our enemies, we can also have “*wisdom,*” like that of a serpent. God gives us wisdom to know when it is time to stand still and take a beating for Christ, and when it is time to flee. He gives us wisdom as to how to be “sneaky” without lying. He gives us wisdom as to how to conceal “illegal” activities (such as distributing Bibles, or conducting a church service in secret). He gives us wisdom as to how we can answer interrogators and torturers without betraying our brethren, or compromising their safety. He gives us wisdom as to when to use soft, kind words, and when to use words of rebuke, which pierce into the spirit like a sword. He gives us ideas as to how we can show acts of kindness and mercy to our enemies, and thus heap “coals of fire” upon their head. He brings to our memory Scriptures that we can use to convict our enemies’ hearts, so that they might be drawn to Christ. He also gives us wisdom as to what to say when we stand on trial for our faith. **(Read Matthew 10:19-20 again.)**

What, exactly, is Jesus promising, here? Is He promising that all believers of all ages will have the ability to speak divine, infallible words by inspiration of the Holy Spirit, as the Apostles did? Not at all! There have been times when I have shared the Gospel with someone who was very irate, and even threatening; and because I was nervous, I stumbled over my words, and even failed to quote verses perfectly. I *certainly* wasn’t speaking by divine inspiration! Yet, I found out later that that person was actually deeply convicted by what I had said. Why? Because the Holy Spirit of God had brought thoughts and Scriptures to my mind; and though those thoughts were imperfectly presented, God used my words, anyway! Here’s the thing, though: in order to have this kind of wisdom, we must meditate on God’s Word every day, so that we will have a vast store of godly words on the tip of our tongues.

Read 1 Peter 4:11.

The Bible says, “*Set your affection on things above, and not on things on the earth.*” As you read God’s Word, and meditate on it, and fill your heart with it, the words that come out of your mouth will be so Scripturally-based, that it will be almost *as though* you were speaking by divine “oracle,” or “revelation.” If the day should come when you and I have to stand trial for our faith, we won’t need to worry about what to say, because the Holy Spirit will help us, at that very hour, to speak “*as the oracles of God*”—*if* we are meditating on His Word!

III. The promise of preservation (vv. 22-23)

(Read Matthew 10:22-23 again.) God promises His followers that they will suffer persecution. He also promises to give us prudence (or wisdom) in our time of persecution. But that's not all. Jesus also promises to **preserve** His saints—both physically, and spiritually.

Now, again, we must keep in mind the *context* for this prophecy; and the context is the Tribulation period. Jesus is speaking specifically to Jewish believers who will be living during the Tribulation. These believers will be moving swiftly from city to city (just as the Apostles did) to preach the Gospel to as many people as possible, before the door of opportunity closes. Obviously, we are not in their situation. Yet, there *is* still application in this for us. For one thing, Christ's promise of **physical preservation** applies to us. **(Read verse 23 again.)**

Did Jesus promise that no one will die as they go out to spread the Gospel throughout the cities of Israel? Obviously not! Jesus had just said that many of them will be **“put to death.”** Yet, Jesus *did* promise to preserve a *remnant* of them until the time of His return—and not always by supernatural miracles, either. Usually, He will preserve them by simply helping them to *hide*. Jesus said that when they persecute you in one city, *flee to the next city!*

You see, Christ doesn't command us to be “martyrs on purpose.” He doesn't expect us to go to the police station and turn ourselves in, so that we can die a martyr's death. Sometimes God calls us to stay, and be bold, and suffer for His name, so that we can be a witness to our persecutors; but at other times, He calls us to flee, because He wants us to take the Gospel somewhere else. Take Paul, for example. When Paul was in Lystra, he stayed right where he was, in spite of the persecution: and he ended up being stoned to death. God then raised him back to life: and he got up, and went right back into Lystra! Yet, at other times, Paul fled. When the persecution was heating up in Damascus, he fled. When he was persecuted in Philippi, he fled to Thessalonica; and when he was persecuted in Thessalonica, he fled to Berea; and when he was persecuted in Berea, he fled to Athens; and in all these places, he started churches. Paul did often flee. Yet, no matter whether he stayed or fled, he was always bold to preach the Gospel. So should we be! Even if there should come a day, before the Rapture, when America and the West fall to communism, and freedom of religion is snuffed out globally, and the entire world becomes a brutal dictatorship where Christians are imprisoned and killed, the Gospel will *not* be snuffed out. God *will* preserve a remnant of us!

Now, before we close this morning, there is one more kind of preservation that Jesus promised, which we need to look at: and that is *spiritual* preservation. **(Read verse 22.)** What does Jesus mean when He says, **“He that endureth to the end shall be saved”**? Does He mean that we must continue to do good works in order to *earn* our salvation, or *keep* it? Not at all! What does He mean, then? To answer that question, let's look at one more Scripture.

Read Philippians 1:6.

Did you catch what Paul said? He said that *He who began a good work in us* (that's Christ!) will perform that good work in us until the day of Jesus Christ (the Resurrection Day). What Paul is saying is that it is not really us, but *Christ*, who performs His holy will through our lives, and completes it. Now, this doesn't mean that we are passive robots. We are co-labourers with Him; and every step of the way, we must surrender our will to Him, and let Him do His work through us. Sad to say, we often *fail* to surrender to Him as we should. Yet, even when we fail, He continues to chasten us, purge us, and lift us back up, so that He can continue to do His work through us: and He will do this *until the Resurrection Day*. What does this mean, then? It means that *endurance* for Christ is not a "good work" that saves us: it is simply the evidence that *Christ* has saved us, and that He is *preserving* us by His power!

Conclusion: My friend, do *you* belong to the Lord Jesus Christ? If you haven't placed your faith in Him, and you are weighing this decision in your heart, I am here to tell you that there *will* be some degree of persecution in your life if you choose Jesus. Your life may not be endangered; but you may well be rejected by family and friends. However, nothing surpasses the joy of having the God who created you in your heart! Please place your faith in Him today! If you already know Christ as Saviour, I would urge you to keep trusting His promises. He has promised to give you all the wisdom you need in times of trial; and he has promised to help you to endure until the end, no matter what the cost. Keep trusting in Him!

¹ Cole, Cheryl, and Jason, ex. editors of *The Voice of the Martyrs, i am n* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook Publishers, 2016), p. 105.

² *Ibid*, p. 106.

³ *Ibid*.

⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 105.

⁶ *Ibid*, pp. 106-107.

⁷ *Ibid*, pp. 107-108.