

Can You Spot a Spiritual Wolf?

It's sad but true: Some people in today's church are preying on innocent Christians. Here's how you can avoid becoming a victim.

What would you do if you became aware that a wolf was stalking you or someone you love?

Imagine this nightmare scenario: You are washing clothes beside a rushing river in the unforgiving frontier of the untamed West. You think your only son is playing close by, but when you glance over to check on him, you don't see him. You call his name, but there is no reply. You rush to your cabin to look for him, but he's not there.

Desperate, you sprint outside and search frantically, calling his name. What you see next brings your whole world crashing down: Your son has been mercilessly mauled by a wild wolf. Devastated, you pick up his lifeless body and carry it home.

It's difficult to think about, isn't it? Yet this nightmare was a reality for one frontier woman who lived more than a century ago. The 19th century American abolitionist and preacher Henry Ward Beecher related this tragic story to a transfixed audience, remarking, "Oh, how that mother hated wolves!"

Spiritual Wolves

As believers, we face an equally ominous danger every day. On Paul's last day in Ephesus, he warned the leaders there to watch for it: "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28, NKJV). Paul knew that after his departure,

“savage wolves” would come stalking that would seek to prey upon the flock (see v. 29).

The same kinds of spiritual predators abound in our day, and the tragic reality is that our friends and family are being targeted. The Lord makes it clear that we will face the wolf, so we must watch: “‘I send you out as sheep in the midst of wolves. Therefore be wise as serpents and harmless as doves’” (Matt. 10:16).

Watching for the wolf requires us to keep a few things in mind as we probe the wild frontiers in our spiritual journey.

First, we must accept the truth that people are like sheep. The prophet declared, “All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned, every one, to his own way” (Is. 53:6). Peter explained, “You were like sheep going astray, but have now returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls” (1 Pet. 2:25).

Why are we compared to sheep? A friend of mine who grew up around sheep explained that our gentleness and inexperience leave us vulnerable to predators just as sheep are. Like sheep, we move in groups, become anxious in uncertain situations and are prone to wandering if we think the grass is greener somewhere else. Though it may be hard to admit, facing these tendencies in our own nature is the beginning of reducing our vulnerability to spiritual wolves.

Second, we have to realize that to reduce our risks against spiritual wolves, we must come into proper alignment with dedicated shepherds in the context of local churches. Though it’s true that the Lord is our Shepherd, God has given us pastors to equip us so that we will not be vulnerable to the spiritual dangers of our times (see Eph. 4:11,14).

Pastors have the awesome responsibility of protecting and feeding the people Jesus has added to the church. They care for the sheep and guide them when they are tempted to go

astray. They are a part of the healing process for the injured, and they train others to help with the shepherding as the fold grows.

Their responsibilities involve laying down their lives for the safety of the sheep. They must have pure motives, as they are commanded to “shepherd the flock of God ... serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly” (1 Pet. 5:2-3). For their efforts, shepherds are promised an eternal reward (see v. 4).

Spiritual predators target those who stray from the flock. They sniff out the wounded and the weak. When they come hunting, a true shepherd grabs his club or slingshot and springs into action, just as the shepherd-king David did (see 1 Sam. 17:36). Jesus viewed this protective response as the difference between a true shepherd and a mere hireling (see John 10:12).

The importance of our connection with the local church cannot be overemphasized. It is a place of divine protection. No church is perfect, but God uses a healthy church as a spiritual sheepfold.

In biblical times, a sheepfold was a kind of corral surrounded by a strong wall. Sheepfolds were usually near a water source and almost always had a watchtower for those who were watching for the wolf.

Are you a part of a local church? Do you have a shepherd?

Be aware that disappointments with the inevitable imperfections of a church can lead you to a cynicism and isolation that attracts the attention of the wolf. Don't stray from your place of protection. Instead, choose gratitude for God's awesome provision of safety within a healthy local church, seek to strengthen it for the sake of others, and pursue reconciliation if offenses arise.

Identifying the Danger

How do you spot a spiritual wolf? I have noticed several kinds of wolves prowling around the church. Like the frontier mother in Beecher's story, I have come to hate their menacing presence.

The financial wolf. This predator wants to get his paws on your provision. Jesus warned us of false prophets who camouflage themselves in sheep's clothing (see Matt. 7:15). He referred to them as "ravenous"—a word that is linked to financial extortion. Recently, some high-profile Christian businesspeople—preachers among them—have been exposed for bilking believers of millions of dollars in an elaborate Ponzi scheme disguised by prayers and promises.

All too often, financial wolves are garbed in the clothing of a minister. Nothing should anger us more than those whose "ministry" is to skillfully separate us from our money through pressurized offerings and manipulative schemes.

These experts in financial flimflam are among today's wildest predators. Their only concern is fleecing the sheep and lining their pockets by twisting Scripture. We need to drive them away from the sheepfold.

Financial wolves count on our greed and gullibility. Don't take their bait. If someone comes calling with an opportunity that promises quick gains, run.

Be patient and believe that God will provide for you as you obey biblical truth, get good advice and steer clear of the wolf. Remember the old saying, "A fool and his money are soon parted." If it seems too good to be true, it probably is.

The sexual wolf. This vicious scoundrel is determined to sink his teeth into the emotionally vulnerable. Drawn to the lonely, insecure and naive, the sexual wolf stalks his victims when he senses they will be easy pickings.

At first, he may limit his methods to flattery, attention and suggestive words. But eventually his lust drives him toward the kill. If his seduction is successful, the results are devastating.

Sexual wolves come into our churches and ministries burning with lust and intent on robbing the purity of men, women and even children. We need to watch as never before.

Sexual wolves fear being discovered more than anything. Every so often, a man will come through our church with a special burden to counsel and spend time with our young women. Each time our pastor will confront him and explain that our church is not a place where they can operate that way.

Invariably, they find the nearest exit and never return. A spiritual wolf desperately seeks a place where no one is watching.

The division wolf. This scoundrel comes to cut the sheep off from the safety of the fold. He smells the unhealed wounds of a believer's past, counting on a vulnerability to the bait of resentment and bitterness. His ploy offers struggling believers a misguided way to justify themselves through separation or to heal by finding fault in others.

Division wolves are determined to deceive. In Acts 20, Paul warned some would arise from within the church and "speak perverse things." He called them "savage," which means oppositional and determined to lead astray.

We must guard ourselves against those whose seductions lure us into bucking the system and moving toward elitist philosophies and spiritual smugness. It is a fatal mistake for anyone to allow a wolf to deceive him. Just ask Little Red Riding Hood!

The best way to deal with a division wolf is to send him packing. A man once attended our church and began making agitating statements to those around him while I preached.

Despite my warning, he continued his habit, so I invited him to find another church where he'd feel more satisfied. My people appreciated it.

Watching for the wolf means we must repel without apology those who endanger the flock.

If a spiritual wolf threatens you, what should you do to protect yourself? Again, Paul's speech to the Ephesian elders reveals the incredible protection the Lord has given us. The best defense believers have when confronted with a spiritual wolf involves three aspects: the Word, watching and warning.

The Word of God will keep you alert. Paul was moved to remind the Ephesians that his confidence was in God and "the word of His grace" (Acts 20:32). Knowing God and His Word will plant an automatic wolf-detection system deep in your Spirit. Like a spiritual Geiger counter, it will go off in the presence of predators.

The Word will build you up and give you an inheritance among God's people (see v. 32), so be careful when some suggest that shepherds and sheepfolds are unimportant. The Word of His grace will guard you against the errors that distract you from your inheritance.

Watching in prayer will keep you safe. Jesus told the disciples that watching was the key to avoiding the enemy's traps (see Mark 13:33; 14:38). Knowing this was a matter of spiritual life and death, Paul pled with the Ephesian elders to "take heed" and "be alert." For three years he "never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears" (Acts 20:31).

Whether we are leaders or followers, if our sheepfolds are going to remain secure, we must stay in our watchtowers. The renewed emphasis on watching among many prayer leaders in our nation needs to be heeded as we move forward into the wild frontiers of our future. Remember, the poor mother in

Beecher's story took her eyes off her son for only a moment.

Warning others will keep everyone informed. It takes more than simply discerning a wolf's presence to keep us all safe. We must be willing to lift up our voices and become a clear signal to those who are in peril and don't know it.

Watchmen need to cry out when there is a wolf, and leaders need to listen when the sheep sound unsettled. Paul was willing to name those he saw as a danger. We must make everyone aware when peril is present.

In times of both danger and opportunity, we can be grateful that God has placed His protection around us. Though the wolves are roaming, God has provided places of safety and victory for those He calls His own.

Jesus is the Chief Shepherd, and He is passionately committed to His sheep. He calls us to be alert, to watch over one another and to confidently align ourselves in the places He has assigned us to in the kingdom. Nothing can defeat us on the frontiers of faith if we are wise enough to watch for the wolf.

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