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Matthew 7:15, English Standard Version.

¹⁵ *“Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.*

Isaiah 11:1–5, English Standard Version.

- 11** *There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.*
- ² *And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him,
the Spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and might,
the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.*
- ³ *And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide disputes by what his ears hear,*
- ⁴ *but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.*
- ⁵ *Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist,
and faithfulness the belt of his loins.*
- ⁶ *The wolf shall dwell with the lamb.*

With the wolf.

When our kids were little, I used to tease them all the time. I liked to tell them things that weren’t true, convince them that these things were true, and then let them know I had fooled them. I did things like tell them that we were going to buy

a flying car, or we that were going to move the fifty-foot-tall tree in the front yard to the backyard. Sometimes it was funny, but the truth is that I overdid it. They began to not believe me when I told them things that really were true. Once, we took the kids out for ice cream. They had never had ice cream in a cone. I handed Martina's to her. She clutched it in her tiny hands. I told her that she could eat the ice cream, as well as the container it came in. She shook her head. I said, no, it's true. You can eat the cone. She shook her head and said that I wasn't going to fool her this time. Nobody is going to eat the cardboard container that holds the ice cream. She began to eat the ice cream. When she got down to the cone, I repeated that she could eat it. She handed the cone to me to throw away. She absolutely refused to try it.

This very true story is a variation of an ancient fictional story. The story of the boy who cried wolf is one of Aesop's fables. They were written in about 600 BC. Aesop was a Greek slave who wrote 725 fables. They were written explicitly for the purpose of conveying moral lessons. The Boy Who Cried Wolf is perhaps the most famous. Americans, because of our agricultural and ranching heritage, can relate to this tale. Largely to amuse himself, there was a shepherd boy who would be out in the pasture. He would cry "Wolf!" and the villagers would come running to help drive the wolf away. He did it one too many times, and when he

cried wolf for real, no one came. Sheep in his flock were killed and the rest of the flock was scattered. The boy was devastated. The lesson is that nobody believes a liar – even when he is telling the truth.

The wolf plays an important role in other literary realms, in particular in the mythology of ancient Rome. According to Roman mythology, the city's twin founding brothers, Romulus and Remus, were abandoned on the banks of the Tiber River as infants. A female wolf came along and nursed them, saving their lives. The image of this miracle became the symbol of Rome. The wolf appeared on coins in the third century B.C. To this day, the wolf is on lampposts in Rome.

As it turns out, Aesop's fables were well known to the Romans and Greeks, and to the people of the ancient world in general. The story of the boy who cried wolf was probably particularly meaningful, given the fact that Roman, Greek, and Israelite people raised sheep. And of course, Rome was seen as an evil predator – and the Empire used the wolf as a symbol. So, perhaps, the legend of the boy who cried wolf, along with the myth of the founders of Rome suckling on a wolf as infants, led to the abstract biblical symbol of the wolf as the essence of evil.

That's why our passage for today has two meanings. ¹⁵ *"Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing but inwardly are ravenous wolves.* This is from the end of Matthew's sermon on the Mount. He's warning the faithful to

beware of teachers who seem to have strong credentials, but they are teaching false theology. The goal of this message, as well as that of the surrounding text, is to get people to think about the way they live. We must resist the temptation to believe false prophets – wolves in sheep’s clothing – when they tell us that it’s okay to live in immoral ways. Like much of what we see in the Book of Revelation, this passage was probably intended to be read on two levels; on one level, the passage refers to all false prophets, and on another level, it refers to representatives of the Roman Empire. In the first case, evil people who try to manipulate us are being compared to wolves who disguise themselves. Second, the Roman Empire was strongly associated with the wolf, and so yes, some of the vilest people were leaders of the Roman Empire; they tried to keep believers from following the one true God and emulating the life of Jesus.

There are many references to wolves in both the Old and New Testaments. If you understand the powerful symbolism of the wolf in the Bible, you can appreciate this verse from Chapter 11 of the Book of Isaiah:

*⁶The wolf shall dwell with the lamb,
and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat,
and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together;
and a little child shall lead them.*

Before we get to this verse, keep in mind that Isaiah spoke for God, and often did so in oracles. These oracles were majestic declarations, where Isaiah was often trying to scare people to come back to God. The history surrounding this part of Isaiah, where our quote comes from, has the Assyrians expanding their empire and threatening Israel. Isaiah gives a series of oracles where he predicts that since the people are not living the way God wants them to live, God will use the Assyrian army to bring destruction to Jerusalem and the surrounding area. Isaiah is preparing the people for repentance. But with the stick comes a carrot: God will eventually destroy the enemies of Israel and a Messiah will come as a king to bring in a new, blessed empire on Earth. That is the context of our quote; it tells of the promise that awaits those who remain loyal to God.

In this passage, Isaiah is telling his people that a beautiful day will come, when the Messiah will arrive, bringing salvation for all. He says that the Messiah will come from the line of King David. That's where this first verse in today's passage comes from: **11** *There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.* Jesse was the father of King David. Rather than making superficial decisions based on personal biases, like most humans do, the Messiah will rule wisely, with wisdom and understanding. The judgements of this new king will always be righteous, and he will champion the

poor and those who are the lowest in society. Those who do evil will be struck down by the Messiah. Everyone will live with righteousness and faithfulness.

Next, verse 6 tells us that the Messiah will bring forth an astounding world where the wolf will no longer seek to destroy the lamb, and in fact, *the wolf shall dwell with the lamb*. So, the wolf, the symbol of pure evil and of the nightmarish dominance of the colonial empire of Rome, will become gentle and caring. Just imagine a future like that, Isaiah is telling the people of God. This makes a promise on two very different levels. Remember that to the people of Israel, they lived in hope of a kingdom of God on Earth, where a human ruler would come as a Messiah, a savior who would rule as a regular king. This was a very concrete prediction of a kingdom run by a wise and gracious ruler who will bring peace and prosperity to his people. That's who this messianic king is, a human – not a God - in the line of David who will come one day and free the people of Israel and bring about a beautiful kingdom here on Earth. But Isaiah is promising more than just a human kingdom here. On another level, Isaiah is telling us that when wolves can live peacefully alongside lambs, everything will be different for all of eternity. He is saying that a day will come when evil will no longer be a threat to God's people – that is, us. The destruction of evil, the taming of the biblical wolf, isn't just a

promise of a peaceful kingdom they can live in here and now; it is a promise of a world without evil.

Chapter 11 of Isaiah is often seen as a prediction of the coming of Jesus. But there is a problem with this. Jesus did not bring a kingdom on Earth; he didn't fulfill the first level of Isaiah's oracle. It would seem that Isaiah's oracle was only half right: evil would be killed, not on Earth, however, and only in the afterlife. This is where the Book of Revelation comes in, where many people believe that it extends the story of Jesus as told in the Gospels. In the Gospels, Jesus does not bring about an earthly empire. When Jesus rode into Jerusalem, people yelled out Hosana! This means "save us now". It didn't happen. Many have said that the Book of Revelation doesn't just condemn the corrupt empire of Rome and promise the destruction of evil in general – as we have discussed before – but it also describes the earthly kingdom of total righteousness that Isaiah promised in his oracle in Chapter 11 of his book. Is it true that Isaiah was indeed predicting both an earthly and a heavenly kingdom, and that Jesus will indeed bring both, that the people of Jerusalem were just wrong about the timing of this new empire? Was Isaiah predicting both the Jesus of the Gospels and the Jesus of the Book of Revelation, and telling us that the Messiah he speaks of will fill both these roles? He motivated his people – and yes, the Israelites were preoccupied with

God blessing them here and now - with promises of God's salvation here on Earth.

But Isaiah did indeed have another layer of understanding in mind. There is strong evidence in the Old Testament that the people of God did believe in an afterlife, just not in as strong a way as Christians do. Consider this from Psalm

73:²⁴ You guide me with your counsel, and afterward you will receive me to glory.

²⁵ Whom have I in heaven but you? And there is nothing on earth that I desire

besides you. ²⁶ My flesh and my heart may fail, but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever.

Eventually, I did get Martina to eat the ice cream cone. She was convinced that as soon as she sunk her teeth into it, I would burst out laughing. I had to end the standoff by taking her cone from her and eating a chunk of it myself. I learned a lesson: I stopped crying wolf. I realized that it is important for a child to trust their father, to see their Pops as someone who always tells the truth.

That's what we do when it comes to the Bible. We trust what we read. Even if it is wild and crazy, the Bible is the truth. We do believe that God will one day send the wolf to lie among us – and we will have nothing to fear. In truth, there is much in the Bible that is hard to understand in concrete terms. Much of it is abstract or written in surreal language. We do our best to interpret it. But that is what we are doing: interpreting the Bible by using our minds. The full

impact and meaning of Scripture might not be revealed to us during our lifetimes, but someday, we will indeed understand all of it in a detailed, specific, and totally correct fashion. I can't promise to do that for you up here. I'll try to tell you the truth and interpret the Bible as best as I can. For the full story, you'll have to wait. But I do want to leave you with a final, powerful vision: As Americans, we tend to be very jaded, even jaundiced. Seemingly, nothing can be done about political corruption, street crime, pervasive anger, war, and entire populations of people on the move, escaping oppressive regimes and human-caused poverty. It will end however when the wolf comes to dwell with us. The issue, however, is that God doesn't want us to wait for God to get the job done. We are expected to do our share. At least we can know, though, that it is not a hopeless task. We will, with God's huge help, get the job done. Please pray briefly with me.

God, when we look at the wolf in Old Testament terms, we see a predator, and in fact, a predator that has been anthropomorphized. We await the day when the wolf will dwell with us, and we will have no fear. We know, although we don't know exactly how it will happen, that you will one day turn all that is evil into pure goodness. We await that day, and we rest confident in that promise. We are also willing to live each day knowing that we must stand against all forms of evil, even the ones that profit us in earthly ways. Amen.