

**“Disciples Not Knowing What They Are Asking”**  
**Mark 10:35-45; Psalm 91:9-16**

**Psalm 91:9-16**

<sup>9</sup>Because you have made the LORD your refuge,  
the Most High your dwelling place,

<sup>10</sup>no evil shall befall you,  
no scourge come near your tent.

<sup>11</sup>For he will command his angels concerning you  
to guard you in all your ways.

<sup>12</sup>On their hands they will bear you up,  
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone.

<sup>13</sup>You will tread on the lion and the adder,  
the young lion and the serpent you will trample under foot.

<sup>14</sup>Those who love me, I will deliver;  
I will protect those who know my name.

<sup>15</sup>When they call to me, I will answer them;  
I will be with them in trouble,  
I will rescue them and honor them.

<sup>16</sup>With long life I will satisfy them,  
and show them my salvation.

**Mark 10:35-45**

<sup>35</sup>James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came forward to him and said to him, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” <sup>36</sup>And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?”

<sup>37</sup>And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.”

<sup>38</sup>But Jesus said to them, “You do not know what you are asking.

“Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”

<sup>39</sup>They replied, “We are able.”

Then Jesus said to them,

“The cup that I drink, you will drink;  
and with the baptism with which I am baptized,  
you will be baptized;

<sup>40</sup>but to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant,  
but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”

<sup>41</sup>When the ten heard this, they began to be angry with James and John.

<sup>42</sup>So Jesus called them and said to them, “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them.

<sup>43</sup>“But it is not so among you;  
but whoever wishes to become great among you  
must be your servant,  
<sup>44</sup>and whoever wishes to be first among you  
must be slave of all.

<sup>45</sup>For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve,  
and to give his life a ransom for many.”

## **The Sermon**

Throughout the gospels, Jesus encourages his followers to pray, and to ask for what they need. But when James and John came to Jesus to ask him for something they clearly had already talked through between themselves, he said, “You don’t know what you are asking for.”

There’s an old saying that goes, “Be careful what you wish for.” You might get exactly what you wanted, and it may end up asking more of you than you ever could have imagined.

James and John went all the way back to the beginning with Jesus. He had emerged at the time of John the Baptist's ministry, to be baptized and then sent into the wilderness, where he survived 40 days of temptation among the wild beasts, waited on by angels.

After John the Baptist was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, continuing the ministry of the good news John had foretold. From the local fishing industry at the Sea of Galilee, he called his first four followers, according to Mark: the brothers Simon and Andrew, and two other brothers: James and John.

They left everything they had, everything they had known, and went with him.

They heard him preach. They saw miraculous healings.

They saw how he would go out to deserted places, and pray.

They saw massive crowds beginning to surround Jesus.

They heard people—important people of high achievement and station—questioning Jesus and his motives, and they heard how he responded.

They were there to see strange scenes of unclean spirits recognizing Jesus and falling down before him.<sup>i</sup> And they saw how Jesus would, in no uncertain terms, order those unclean spirits not to make him known. Meanwhile, people were now swarming him like a rock star.

At one point, he went up a mountain, choosing a handful of people to go with him, and there, on that day, he officially appointed the twelve as apostles, licensed them to preach, and authorized them to cast out demons. The first three of those twelve were Simon, James, and John.<sup>ii</sup>

Simon, he began to call Peter, meaning Rock; and James and John, he called “Sons of Thunder.”

He taught amazing things, sometimes baffling things, about the kingdom of God and the faith of believers. He spoke publicly in parables, but later, out of earshot of the general public—and Mark, and you and me—he’d explain everything to the disciples privately.<sup>iii</sup>

One time, they were all together out in a boat on the Sea of Galilee, when Jesus called them all out, all these faithful disciples, calling them cowards, questioning their faith,

because moments earlier a terrifying storm had arisen that was about to swamp the whole boat, while Jesus slept—so, to add to their terror, on top of thinking they were dying, they also thought he didn’t even care.

When it was all over, it was hard to know what was the *most* devastating thing about what they had just been through: the horrific storm, or his accusation of cowardice on their part, or the fact that with a word, he had made the wind and the sea obey him. And again they found themselves looking at each other in awe, saying, “Who is this?”

They continued on with him as he cast out more demons; as he was rejected in his hometown; as he healed women and men and girls and boys and told people that their faith had made them well.

And then, he started sending them out on their own, in pairs.

While they were out, they heard about the appalling execution in custody of John the Baptist.

When they came back from their missions, they regrouped around Jesus, and the ministry only became more grueling; they barely had time to eat.

In one of the most touching moments in the whole ministry, having heard from all the apostles about the amazing mission journeys each of them had undertaken,

and now seeing how there was literally no time whatsoever even for a moment's rest, he said, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while."

And they went away in a boat, to go to a deserted place, by themselves.

But the paparazzi already had them staked out, so as their boat pulled up to the shore, the people were there waiting for them.

And instead of telling all those people to get out of there and leave them alone for a little bit, Jesus "had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd."<sup>iv</sup>

And the disciples assisted Jesus as he miraculously fed those desperate thousands on five loaves and two fish.

As soon as everyone had had their fill, Jesus made his disciples hurry back into the boat and head to the other side, while he took care of dismissing the crowd and saying farewell to them.

That whole passage is so full of tangible compassion—for his disciples, who needed to serve, but also desperately needed rest, and for all those people who came out in the thousands to be near him, who needed a shepherd to give them spiritual care, but more immediately needed actual food.

And Jesus lovingly, I want to say motheringly, took care of them all, carried the extra burden, and then went up on the mountain, by himself, to pray.

That night, in the small hours, they were still in the boat that Jesus had sent them off in, “straining at the oars against an adverse wind,” and he could see them from where he was standing, alone on the land.<sup>v</sup> And he walked across the water. And they thought it was a ghost, and again, on that lonely, vulnerable boat out on the surface of the deep, they were terrified.

But this time, instead of rebuking them for their cowardice and questioning their faith, he said, “Take heart; it is I; don’t be afraid.”<sup>vi</sup>

And he got into the boat with them, and the wind ceased, and as morning dawned, they found themselves feeling courage and strength.

He continued the journey, healing, teaching, dealing with Pharisees and scribes and crowds. He kept curing, and feeding, and giving sight to the blind.

And one day he began to speak in terms of how he would have to undergo great suffering, and would be killed.

Peter rejected the whole concept, and Jesus put him back in his place.

Not long after that, he took three—Peter, James, and John—and went up a mountain: just them, the inner circle of the inner circle. And they saw Jesus transfigured, so that his clothes became a dazzling white, and suddenly, there was Elijah, the most legendary prophet from Israel’s long past; and there was Moses, arguably the central human figure of the history of the People of God, talking with Jesus.

And then, it was over; and they went down the mountain, and Jesus told them not to tell anybody about what they had just seen until after his resurrection.

When they left there, Jesus again brought up the fact that he would be betrayed, and killed, and then rise again. “But,” according to Mark, “they didn’t understand what he was saying, and were afraid to ask.”<sup>vii</sup>

During that same walk, the twelve got into an argument over who among them was the greatest. And when they got to their destination for the night, Jesus said, “Whoever wants to be first has to be last of all; has to be servant of all.”<sup>viii</sup>

In the following days, there was more teaching, and Jesus said, “It’s easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than it is for a rich person to get into the Kingdom of God,” and when they asked who can get in, Jesus said, “For mortals, it is not possible. But with God, all things are possible.”

And Peter finally said, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.”

This time, Jesus’ response was not so much a rebuke as a reassurance.

“I’m not saying that those who have left everything to follow me won’t get back a hundredfold in this life, and eternal life in the age to come. But I *am* saying that many who are first—and that includes a whole lot of rich people—will be last.

“And the last *will* be first.”

Then they were on the road to Jerusalem, and for the third time, he told them what was going to happen to him when they got there.

Why is it that three times he talked about this, and after the first time Peter tried to say, “That cannot happen;”

and the second time, the twelve chose that as the moment to argue about which of them was the greatest;

and now this third time, on the way to Jerusalem, these two, the inner circle of the inner circle, come forward to where Jesus is walking and say: Once you are established in your glory, we, the Sons of Thunder, want to have the places of honor?

Jesus looked at these two, and I wonder if his mind went back and reviewed all that they had been through together,

all the way back to his first days of his ministry, when they were standing there in the boat with their father, Zebedee, and he called them from the life they had had without Jesus, and they dropped everything, walked away from the annual economic crap shoot that was their family business, and went with him into the astonishing unknown.

At that point, they were like the Pioneer or Voyager spacecraft that NASA sent out to do some snooping around our own solar system before sailing off into a cosmos that no human mind has ever known.

James and John were real and tangible and physical people, as Jesus was, leaving everything they knew as home to go off into the realities of the physical world.

But it was also a cosmic journey, astronomical in its importance and meaning, touching and sometimes penetrating the fabric of the universe.

When you come to church, when you pray, when you give, when you share your resources, when you love your enemy, when you kneel at the cross, when you attend a baptism, when you offer a prayer of confession, when you take communion, when you make a casserole for somebody who needs a break, when you forgive somebody, or at least try to, you undertake a cosmic journey into the physical realities of a world of hurting humanity.

Or you take faltering, human, physical steps into the unfathomable depth of the Kingdom of God, the metaphysical world that can only *start* to be articulated by Gregorian chant, or a baby’s cry, and maybe a didgeridoo, but not much else.

After the third time Jesus talked about the cross that awaited him, James and John, who at least on the surface seem to be oblivious, went to Jesus and said, “When you’re in your glory, we want you to put us first: one of us at each of your hands.”

Maybe he was imagining what his hands would look like after hours on the cross when he said, “You don’t know—you have no idea what you’re asking.”

What do these guys really want? “To sit at your right hand in glory”? What do they think they mean, and what are they really asking for?

Some decades ago, I heard Mark Ramsey deliver a sermon in which he mentioned having been on a long flight, and when the evening meal was distributed, the guy next to him received his tray and said, “I’m sorry—I ordered the special meal.”

The flight attendant said, “Yes, sir. Well, it turns out that our food service ended up providing everybody with that same meal, so the dinner you ordered is the one you have, it’s just that everyone else is having the same thing.”

“And he said: ‘But I ordered a SPECIAL meal.’

And she said: ‘That IS the special meal.’

‘But everybody else has this!’

“And she said: ‘That's what we're serving today.’

AND, with profanity he said:

‘I will never ride this airline again!!’<sup>ix</sup>

Sometimes there's a difference "between what we want, and what we *really* want."<sup>x</sup>

What's on the mind of a couple of brothers who had only known two things about what their lives were going to hold for them: the labor of fishing, and the inevitable burden of the family business?

What's on the mind of two people who have grown up immersed in twin narratives of who they are?

Said one way, they are God's Chosen People. Great!

But these are a beaten, oppressed people, often reviled, always under threat; subject to corrupt leadership and the imperialist ambitions of a merciless Roman state.

Their lives before Jesus were filled with certainties and inevitabilities that would have them forever fearful, always vulnerable, without a safety net, always laboring, working harder than would be sustainable for any kind of abundant life, and always with an eye on the horizon and an ear to the ground for the next national catastrophe that might cost them and their people everything.

And then, they had followed him, and found that for every amazement, there was also sputtering or stultifying bafflement;

that triumphant miracles of healing and feeding people who had nothing brought death threats from people in power;

that the daily joys of helping and learning and growing became a blur of endless work and hazardous travel.

When James and John come to Jesus to request the special meal, what do they really want? What are they asking for?

After all that they had been through with Jesus, after all they had walked away from, after having signed up on Day One, when nobody knew if this guy was really the Son of God or just another in the bewildering series of messianic claimants at that pivotal juncture in the history of Judaism—what did they feel they had earned?

What do you or I want? What have you earned? You've worked very, very hard and been very loyal.

What do you come from, that shapes your fears, your hopes, your ambitions, your dreams for yourself and your family and your loved ones, not to mention your nation and your community and your associations—congregation, political party, civic organization?

So he looked at John and James, and I wonder what his eyes or the expression on his face may have conveyed.

And he said, “You don't know what you're asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?”

And remembering all they had seen and done in the past three years, they said, “Well, yes. Yes, we are.”

And then, was it that compassion for his disciples that we had seen before, when Jesus knowingly said to them: “The cup that I drink, you will drink; and with the baptism with which I am baptized, you will be baptized”?

Jesus said to all the disciples gathered around him—these beautiful, flawed, but basically good and decent, generous and hard working people—“Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

There's an old saying that goes, “Be careful what you wish for.”

We might also do well to be careful how we judge the wishes and prayers of others. As Miller Williams wrote, “You do not know what wars are going on / down there where the spirit meets the bone.”<sup>xi</sup>

But above all, maybe more important than being *careful* what you wish for is to try as hard as we can to be *faithful* in what we wish for.

Because even if all the loyalty in the world is precious to God, but can never be enough to elevate me over others, God’s love is still more than enough to elevate all of us together.

And even if our ceaseless, uncompromising, hard work on behalf of all humanity is commanded by Jesus, but can’t buy our salvation, Jesus is still more than enough to bring salvation to the whole world.

And even if learning every teaching there is, and living by it, would still not be enough for me to declare myself holier than thou, The Holy Spirit is still more than enough to saturate this world in holy mystery and in the boundless, divine love of God.

“For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve,  
and to give his life a ransom for many.”

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<sup>i</sup> e.g. Mark 3:11ff.

<sup>ii</sup> Mark 3:13-17

<sup>iii</sup> Mark 4:34

<sup>iv</sup> Mark 6:34

<sup>v</sup> Mark 6:47-48

<sup>vi</sup> Mark 6:50

<sup>vii</sup> Mark 9:32

<sup>viii</sup> Mark 9:35

<sup>ix</sup> Mark Ramsey, “Rejoicing in Presence and Absence.” Ordination of Susan Baller-Shepard Second Presbyterian Church, Bloomington, Illinois, 20 October 1991.

<sup>x</sup> One of two sermons that made me rethink what effective preaching is—after growing up being nourished weekly by the outstanding preaching of Philip D. Queen, highlighted by “He Comes to Us as One Unknown” (c. 1990)—I would choose this one. The other sermon that changed the trajectory of my ministry, not to mention my whole life, was Fred Craddock preaching “Hope When Cynicism is Easier” at APCE in Atlanta in February 1995.

<sup>xi</sup> Miller Williams, “Compassion,” in Williams, *The Ways We Touch: Poems* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1997)