

Stay Close
[Mark 10:35-45](#)
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There's a saying in business that you should always underpromise and overdeliver. The idea is that if you deliberately downplay what you're going to do for your customers, and then do more than what you promised, they'll be surprised and impressed and end up more satisfied than they would have been if you had just given them exactly what they expected to get. Most of the time, we experience the opposite – most advertisements tend to overpromise and underdeliver – they tell you that this product will change your life, this beer will make you irresistible to the opposite sex, this car will make your life a James Bond movie, this cleaning product will make your whole house sparkle and glimmer and gleam. And then you buy them, and they're just OK, but you would've been fine with just OK if the advertisements hadn't promised you the moon. During an election campaign, politicians promise the people everything they've ever wanted, but once the votes are counted, things usually get a bit more realistic. When your expectations get raised so high, it's really, really hard for someone to deliver on those promises, to fulfill the lofty standards they've set for themselves.

And I kind of wish someone had told this to the writer of our Psalm this morning, because this Psalm makes some pretty big promises. It starts out strong – “those who live in the shelter of the most high will find rest, The Lord is my refuge, my safe place, I trust in God” - and then it really gets

going. God will rescue you from every trap, protect you from deadly disease. Don't be afraid of anything, day or night, don't dread disaster or plague. Even if thousands upon ten thousands are dying all around you, evil will not touch you. No evil will conquer you, no plague will come near your home. You will have a personal contingent of heavenly Secret Service, protecting you 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, so you won't even stub your baby toe or break a fingernail. You can personally start picking fights with lions and cobras, get on in there and wrestle a great white shark, and you will be victorious, 100% guaranteed. Those are the promises the Psalmist makes on behalf of the Lord God, and it is a lot. The Psalmist is really laying it on thick here, promising that anyone who trusts in God will basically become invincible, this plague-proof, lion-trampling superman. And that all sounds great – it's a beautiful psalm, very lovely and poetic, but there's just one little problem. I know lots of people who are faithful followers of Jesus Christ, who put all their trust and hope in God, who make the Lord their refuge and the Most High their shelter, but they still have trouble. They still get sick. They still suffer. They're not out there, beating up polar bears and warding off disease with the power of their mind. They're not invincible. So if I read this psalm, and I have trouble, then I might start to wonder if maybe I'm just not faithful enough, maybe I'm just not trusting enough, maybe I haven't been praying hard enough or going to church often enough, and if I just did something more, tried harder, made myself holier somehow, maybe then the angelic protection will kick in and I can head down to the aquarium to show those sea lions who's boss. If the Psalmist promises that God's followers will never have trouble, and then we have trouble, then we start to think there's

something wrong with us, or else, there's something wrong with God – either God can't help us, or won't help us, but either way, we start thinking we're out here alone, right in the middle of the trouble with no way out and no help in sight.

And so if we're going to figure this Psalm out, let's put it aside for a second and take a look at the story we read from the Gospel of Mark. Here we see two of Jesus' disciples, James and John, and they come to Jesus and ask him for a little favour. All they want is that when Jesus sits on his glorious throne as King in Jerusalem, they want to have the best seats in the house. One on his right, one on the left, so that everyone in the world can see how important they are, so that they can have all the comforts and power and prestige that Jesus will have when he takes over the kingdom. Whatever Jesus is going to get, all the perks of kingship, the choicest meats, the cushy seats, James and John want the same. They want to stay close to Jesus, so that whatever he gets, they'll get it too. They've clearly got the same ideas about following God as that psalmist did – they think that if you follow, if you trust and obey, if you play your cards right, you'll get all the blessings and comforts you can imagine, you'll get protection, you'll get power, you'll be invincible. They think that Jesus is going to get all of that, and they want it too. They want to stay close to Jesus so that whatever he gets, they'll get it too. What they don't understand, what Jesus has been trying to tell them, is that what Jesus is going to get is trouble. Pain. Suffering. Death. Instead of a glorious throne, Jesus gets a cross. Instead of a crown of gold, he gets a crown of thorns. And if the disciples stay close to him, that's what they'll get

too. Following Jesus means following him into trouble, into pain, into death. Staying close to Jesus means you get what Jesus gets, not power and prestige and comforts like the rulers of this world, but the life of a servant, a life spent rescuing others, seeking and saving the lost, giving yourself as a ransom for many. That's where Jesus is headed, and if the disciples stay close to Jesus, if they keep walking with Jesus, that's where they're headed too. Not away from trouble, but into it, not to become invincible, but to become vulnerable, not to be first, but to be last.

And that's a hard thing to hear, and it still makes you wonder about that psalm – if Jesus promises his disciples trouble, and suffering, and pain, then why all those other promises, all that stuff about victory and power and protection? Well, let's take another look at that psalm. You might have noticed that the first part, the part I quoted earlier, that's the Psalmist speaking about God, making all these promises about what God will do for God's people, but at the very end of the Psalm, after all these brash and bold claims from the Psalmist, the Lord speaks, and what the Lord says sounds a little different from what the Psalmist says. The Lord says, "I will rescue those who love me. I will protect those who trust in my name. When they call on me, I will answer. I will be with them in trouble." Did you see the difference there? When the Psalmist speaks he promises no trouble, no problems, just victory after victory, easy life after easy life. But when God speaks, God promises that we will have trouble. We will have pain. We will suffer, and we will face death. But God promises that in the midst of that trouble, we will not be alone. We will not face that pain alone. We will not

suffer alone, for right there and then, God will be with us. God will stay close to us. Yes, God will rescue us, lift us up, restore us and bless us and give us salvation. But first, God meets us in the trouble, in the pain, and shares that pain with us, takes it and feels it with us. And that is true because of Jesus Christ. In Jesus, God comes to us as a suffering servant, as a man of sorrows, so that when we suffer, we know we're not alone. Jesus enters into the trouble of this world to share it with us, to carry our burdens, to show us that we are never alone as long as God is at our side and in our heart. And when you know that God is with you, staying close beside you, then you know you can handle whatever comes your way, pain and disease and danger and death, lions and cobras, the terror of the night and the arrow that flies by day, none of those things can hurt you because God is with you.

So often as Christians, we start thinking about our faith like James and John did, we think that following Jesus will bring us nothing but good times, comfortable seats in high places, power and prestige and wealth, and then when we don't get it, we wonder what we're doing wrong. But the promise we have from Jesus Christ is that when we stay close to him, when we walk closer and closer with our savior and King, we will face trouble. We will experience pain. We will come face to face with death. But we will never be alone. When we walk with Jesus Christ, we know we are walking with his strength for when we're weak, his forgiveness when we fail, his love at each and every moment of our lives, and nothing can change that. Nothing can threaten that. No amount of trouble can keep us away from the love of God we encounter in Jesus Christ. All we have to do is stay close to Jesus, walk

with him closer and closer each and every day, meet with him in the troubled places of this world, in the people we seek to serve as Jesus served, each and every day. When we set aside our dreams of invincibility, of wealth and power, of being greatest and first, and we share the trouble and pain of our brothers and sisters we meet in this world, that's when we meet Jesus Christ, that's how we live in the shelter of the Most High and rest in the shadow of Almighty God. In Jesus Christ, God is our refuge, our safety, our armour and protection, from every kind of trouble, now and forevermore. In the name of Jesus Christ, Amen.