



SERMON TITLE: (Mis)understanding God

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SCRIPTURE: John 12:9-19

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"These things are written that you might believe that Jesus is the Christ" (John 20:31). This is how John concludes his own biography of Jesus. He wanted the young, the old, the sick, the well, the despairing, the hopeful, the skeptics, the faithful, and whoever reads his account of Jesus to believe and trust him more fully. But what did John want them to believe? He wanted them to believe that Jesus alone brought eternal life into the present, broken world. And for all who enter this eternal life with God right now, we—like John—are exiles. For all who enter a relationship with Jesus, we will very likely be marginalized and dismissed because we follow him. So, what does it mean to believe? And how do we mature in believing? What does it mean to remain faithful to God when the pressure is on? These are the things that John will help us explore by showing us the glory and beauty of Jesus.

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The famous Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard wrote, "Life can only be understood backward, but it must be lived forwards." It sounds like he's on to something. When you look back on your life, it sure feels like you can understand things more clearly. Past relationships, business deals, family decisions, and even unspoken feelings are seen in a greater light, helping you have a stronger sense of meaning. And Kierkegaard's proverb is not simply the same as the modern adage, "Hindsight is 20/20." It seems like he's wrestling with how 20/20 hindsight relates to the fact that 20/20 foresight appears so elusive. If turned into a question, it's like he's asking, "Is there a way to live *forward* with understanding?" Is that even possible? Can I learn from my mistakes before they happen? And these questions are especially important for followers of Jesus.

How often do I misunderstand God? Have I wrongly interpreted his character or his will for my life? Paul tells the Ephesians to "understand what the will of the Lord is." It's a command. What happens if I miss it? And just like Kierkegaard's principle, it's easier to see what God was doing when we look back in our lives, but is there a way to have confidence in what he is up to *before* or *as* it's happening rather than after the fact? There's an often misunderstood story from the life of Jesus that can help us out, the supposed triumphal entry in John 12.

Jesus has just healed Lazarus, and now the religious leaders not only want to kill Jesus but also want to kill Lazarus because he represents the Jesus-movement that's starting to grow. And, as Jesus heads from Bethany (where Lazarus was from) into Jerusalem, we get a glimpse of how many people are starting to pay attention to Jesus. Thousands line the street as Jesus enters Jerusalem. They have palm branches in their hands. These palms were a symbol of hope, a symbol of God's provision, and they were even used to welcome home heroes from battle. And as the crowds wave their branches, they're crying out, "Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" The people are touting Jesus as their King. "Hosanna" means "Grant salvation," and even Jesus' name means "God is salvation." The whole scene is deeply joyful and moving. But...

These people aren't rightly recognizing what God is up to. They're not as off as the religious leaders who want to kill Jesus. But they still don't get it, and here's how: Yes, Jesus is God's great provision and the Hero of God's people. He's the Messiah. But the likelihood is that most of these people think Jesus is going to be their Hero by overthrowing Rome as a political liberator, and that's why they're cheering so hard.

In seeming response to this, John says that Jesus found a young donkey to ride into the city. And Jesus knew what was going on. There's a reason he's riding a donkey. Shane Claiborne writes, "Scholars call this the anti-triumphal entry into Jerusalem. Imagine the president riding a unicycle in a Fourth of July parade. Kings did not ride donkeys. They rode mighty warhorses accompanied by an entourage of soldiers. And here, Jesus is making a spectacle of that." So, yes, Jesus is the king, but his kingdom might not look like we think it should. And while this scene is powerful, this also makes it sad.

Somebody has to be understanding this *as* it's happening, right? The Pharisees totally missed it. The crowds got the big idea, but missed how it works. What about the disciples? Surely, they'll get it. They've been walking closely with Jesus for a few years now. Verse 16, "His disciples did not understand." They're cheering along with everyone else on the streets that day. I'm sure that, because they had followed Jesus, their understanding was mingled with a lot of questions, but still, they didn't rightly understand how God was working in the moment. And in one way, this adds to the fragility and the sadness of the scene. But in another way, it's a comfort. We're in good company. And the implication of this is wonderful. This means...

God's plan and love for you isn't activated by your perfect understanding of how he's at work.

He is not waiting for you to get to 75% understanding of his sovereign, eternal will so he can then show you love. Isn't that great? This is where we can pause and breathe. This is grace. This is such a relief to know that, if you're a follower of Jesus, God's grace and kindness to you isn't waiting with bated breath for you to finally fathom the mechanics of mercy in order to then receive it. There is freedom here. But there's more...

Understanding the will of the Lord is still a command in Ephesians 5. And while his love isn't contingent upon our grasping how it works, there is an experiential beauty on the other side of understanding. There is intimacy with God to be had. That's what he's inviting us into. It's not about whether he loves us, but about sensing his love pulsing through our lives. That's what understanding can lead to. And so yes, we can understand what God is up to *before* and *as* it happens rather than after it happens, but how? That's what we're after.

Well, verse 16 continues, "His disciples did not understand at first, but when Jesus was glorified then they remembered," and this remembering includes an understanding. So, what does John mean by "when Jesus was glorified"? According to 12.23, Jesus' being glorified is about his death and resurrection. Meaning, only after he was raised did they truly understand what happened on that Hosanna-day, and it was his crucifixion and resurrection that made things clear. Through these events, they started to reinterpret everything. And if the gospel of Jesus crucified and resurrected was the gateway to clarity for the disciples, the same is true for us:

In the gospel, God's character and God's will can't be misunderstood.

You can't live in misunderstanding if you're always focused on Jesus. At the cross, God's not distant and upset with you, he's gracious and near. The cross is how he is merciful and just at the same time. The cross is Jesus doing Ephesians 5, and understanding what the will of the Father is, and doing it. And the resurrection is that even if we don't get it, hope still wins. It gets the last word.

So, there IS a way to live forward with understanding! We must consider what's before us by first considering what's behind us, and what's behind is a crucified and risen Jesus who has undone the power of sin, death, and hell. And if he is what's on your mind every morning when you rise, and every night when you fade, then all of your decisions have to submit to God's perfect will in Christ. This leaves no room for your preference, your opinion, or your will to be done. Think about it...

Only in the gospel can you learn from your mistakes before they happen because Jesus forgave them all at the cross 2,000 years ago.

Isn't that the most liberating and happy and humbling truth? That by grace through faith in Jesus there is a way that we can learn from experience before it arrives. We don't have to be like the Pharisees or the crowds in this passage, simply reacting to divine activity based on what we feel in the moment. Rather, just like we see with the disciples, if the cross and resurrection became the means of correctly understanding what God was doing in the world, then we should likewise hold tightly to these things. And doing so can cause us to face the future with hindsight wisdom. Only the gospel has this kind of power.

So, how do we understand what God is up to *before* and *as* it happens? God, by his Spirit, wants to conform us into the image of Jesus. In your dating and in your disagreements, in your finances and in your families, in your habits and in your hobbies, his supreme care is that you become an instrument of sacrificial love and light in all of these things – just like Jesus. And *before* and *as* you face pressure or temptation, what God wants from you is trust, like Jesus in Gethsemane, "Not my will, but yours be done." Remember, this is *why* John writes, to bolster our faith in Jesus. So, when we're curious, tired, or on-edge, the Father wants us to learn to rely on him in all things. And this trust is the first step into understanding.

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Discussion Starters:

1. What's a way in your past that you have misunderstood God or his will in your life?
2. In our passage, how did the crowds wrongly assess what God was doing?
3. Who is someone you know who regularly has a humble sense of what God is up to?
4. How and when did the disciples reinterpret the events of the "Hosanna-day"?
5. Personally, what stood out to you most about this passage or message?
6. How can the death and resurrection of Jesus give us clarity about how God is working before and as it happens?