



Recognizing God's Action

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Mark 6:1-13

I am often asked about God's will and purpose. I often hear phrases like "That's God's will," "There is a reason for everything," or "God has a plan." Yet often the very people making those comments are the ones struggling so hard to grasp at the very notion of identifying God's will. Is everything that happens around us God's will? If so, there would be little point of trying so hard to find it. We might do better to identify the character of God's actions, such that we might recognize God's will as it takes effect in and around us. Seeing it for what it is can help us direct our own steps in the paths of God's purposes.

Ezekiel was called to become a vessel of God's communication. The words we read in Ezekiel 2:1-5 are emblematic of so much of the Old Testament witness to God's take on Israel. They were disobedient to God's will, looking more like the nations than a people called to belong to Yahweh God of Israel. They were not fulfilling God's will. That they were yet a chosen nation was due to God's grace and mercy. The words of the prophet declared clearly that their forefathers had not been faithful in fulfilling God's will, either. God's plans and purposes did not look like the realities seen in Israel. Not everything that happens is of God, nor is it part of the plan.

Paul spoke of a man whose experience transported him before the throne of God.¹ Paul accepted the experience as real, yet as no reason for gloating. The gospel and will of God for Paul were not about ecstatic experiences, hidden mysteries, or revelations that made the recipient something special. Rather, God's revelation should point to God. More to the point, Paul spoke of his own weakness and suffering as a reminder from God of our need to depend on grace instead of our abilities, strength, and self-worth. Weaknesses should point our attention to God, by focusing attention away from ourselves. Pride is little more than misdirection from God's will, plan, and purpose. God's actions point to God's sufficiency.

Interestingly enough, Jesus' ministry reflects this very same character of pointing to God. Oh, we may accept that Jesus is indeed God in human flesh, but his contemporaries did not understand that, nor did Jesus dwell on it in the example he set. The character of his actions pointed away from himself in a manner the disciples might later emulate.

He came into Nazareth, a town that knew him all too well. Arriving with his entourage, the local boy gone big time and coming home, the people came out to see their locally grown phenomenon. They couldn't get over who they knew him to be. They could not figure out where Jesus had come to his understanding of God's will, purpose, word, and revelation. He certainly had not learned it from them!

On hearing his words and seeing his actions, they should have shifted their attention to God. They should have recognized that the local boy had come into something they had not experienced. He spoke of God from a standpoint and perspective beyond Nazareth and the local heritage. They should have sought divine confirmation of Jesus message and ministry. The problem was, they could not get over the identity they assumed for Jesus as the local handyman's son. They were stuck. Because they were looking so hard at Jesus, they failed to seek God.

In their case, a little distance would have helped create objectivity. The too familiar becomes the too obvious. All too easily we fail to pay enough attention to the how God would reveal something beyond the assumptions hidden by our expectations. We fail to see, because we stop looking. Our prejudgment makes us blind to the reality before our eyes.

¹ 2 Corinthians 12:2.
<http://www.fbc-h.org/>

Jesus had power. Jesus had authority. Jesus had a fresh word which effected freedom, grace, and release for many. His was not that power seeking to control people through coercion. It was rather the power to effect change, offering hope and a new lease on life. Already at this beginning junction of his ministry, Jesus was making a difference in the lives of many. He already had a reputation, and it had made its way back to Nazareth ahead of him. The news reported his power and the impact of his ministry, but the implications the news had of his identity as more than the homegrown handyman's kid did not quite filter into their understanding of Jesus.

They were looking at a known messenger. They were assessing their preconceived notions of Jesus' identity. They were not looking to assess the possibility of God's action and identity behind Jesus' words, deeds, and new-found reputation. They "knew too much" about him to take him too seriously. In the process, they missed out on recognizing what God was doing in their very midst.

Expectations kept them from being surprised. They unwittingly shut God into a box, simply because they did not expect God to interrupt their comfortable patterns of life and call them to something more. They forgot that God was wont to surprise people and bring about unexpected transformation. They were not looking for God in the midst of what they considered a known quantity.

The outsiders did not have quite the same issues, as Jesus came to them as an unknown quantity. They did not look upon him like the spider web in the corner, the scratch on the wall, the beggar who always sat on the corner, the dog they were accustomed to stepping around. They saw him with fresh eyes, simply because he was unknown. They heard his words with less prejudice and took the time to wonder if he could possibly have a true word from God.

He called on them to turn their lives to God. They questioned how far they were from God. When he called on them to love their enemies, they made the effort to wonder if this was a reflection of how God had acted toward Israel and reflected anew on the message of Jonah. When he called on them to seek God's presence in full confidence, they turned to the stories of Gideon and Moses to see if God had not already invited them to live intimately with the Glory of Israel. They heard Jesus' words, assessed his deeds, and listened to his critiques of life and worship in Israel. Then they turned to seek confirmation as to whether the message which troubled them was consistent with what they knew of God.

God's message had never come simply to comfort the nation in its status quo. The character of God's revelation had always sounded a cry for transformation, commitment, and a return to faithfulness. God had always called them to lay aside concerns for making their own way, trusting their own efforts, for following the direction and practices of their neighbors. God forever called them to trust God to provide for them as they came to depend upon God's provision. God was always calling them out of a comfortable pattern into a life of trust.

God wanted them willing to step into the unknown, uncharted, unseen future of dependence upon a God who would walk before them, making a path into the wilderness. God wanted them to lay aside revenge, anger, violence, greed, and passion as the driving force of their lives. Instead, they were to offer grace, love, mercy, and forgiveness, even as God had dealt with them over the generations.

They looked at Jesus' deeds and questioned them according to the revealed character and identity of God. They looked to the aims of God's promises to grant peace, provision, and presence for all. Then they measured Jesus against the character of God. That's how they recognized God's action in his life and ministry. That's how the disciples could be willing to leave behind so much to depend only upon God as they accepted Jesus' direction for their ministry.

Are we ready to assess how God would reshape our lives, habits, and assumptions to bring us into accord with His will? We have to be willing to look beyond our assumptions and question what trusting God into the unknown really looks like. If we stop at the limits of our comfort, we will remain blind.

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