What Did God Mean?

"They read from the book, from the Law of God, clearly, and they gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading." Nehemiah 8:8 (ESV)

My father wrote a prayer in the front of his Bible:

"Come Holy Spirit and read this precious Word with me. Be thou my teacher and my guide, that I may obey its' precepts and do the will of my Father,"

That prayer expresses how we should approach Scripture. He asked for a Teacher and Guide, and he stated why: "that I may obey."

Understanding was to lead to obedience.

In Nehemiah's day, the people needed more than the sound of the words. Those helping them "gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading."

So do we.

It is possible to repeat the words of Scripture without understanding what they mean. We may recognize a verse, remember its language, and quote it confidently. Yet familiarity can cause us to hear what we have always assumed it says without examining whether our understanding is faithful.

One question often asked about a passage is, "What does this mean to you?" That may begin a useful conversation about application. But there is a question that must come first.

"What did God mean?"

Scripture does not receive its meaning from the reader. We come to discover what God has communicated. Our preferences cannot determine what His words are allowed to say.

That requires humility.

We all bring experiences, traditions, disappointments, and hopes to the page. Sometimes Scripture confirms what we believe. Sometimes it challenges something we have accepted for years.

We must be willing to receive both.

A verse belongs to a passage. That passage belongs to a book. The book belongs to the whole testimony of Scripture. Before asking how a verse applies to us, we should ask what it is saying where God placed it.

Who is speaking? To whom? What subject is being addressed? What comes before and after? Is this a command, a promise, a prayer, or a description of something that happened?

These questions help us listen carefully.

If someone lifted a sentence from your conversation and used it to claim you meant something you never intended, you would insist that your words be understood in context.

We should handle God's words with that same care.

Careful reading belongs alongside prayerful dependence. My father's request, "Be thou my teacher and my guide," acknowledged his need for help. We need that help whenever we open our Bibles, even when the passage seems familiar.

We should pray, study attentively, and receive help from faithful teachers. We should also remain willing to have our understanding corrected. A strong feeling about a verse does not establish that we have understood it accurately.

The question remains, "What did God mean?"

Then comes the purpose my father expressed: "that I may obey its' precepts and do the will of my Father."

We can explain a command without obeying it. We can describe a promise without trusting it. We can recognize a rebuke without repenting.

But when we understand what God has said, we are responsible to respond.

Perhaps today's reading will comfort you. Perhaps it will expose an attitude you have defended or a duty you have neglected. Receive it with the humility of someone who needs both instruction and grace.

My father's prayer is a fitting place to begin.

"Come Holy Spirit and read this precious Word with me."

Open the Bible with that dependence. Attend carefully to what God has said. Seek to understand what He meant.

Then ask whether you are willing to obey.

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