John 5:39-40

Searching Scripture and finding Christ

I. It is evident that the failure of many men to find Christ is not from any deficiency in the means of discovering Him. It is this which our Lord so emphatically marks in the case of the Jews. They had the Scriptures, and they searched them. They had the mine, and they dug in that mine in quest of the eternal riches. They not only venerated, but almost worshipped, the sacred volume. With privileges far less than the mass of professing Christians have now, they improved them far more. Yet, after all, they failed; multitudes of those who thus searched the Scriptures failed in finding Christ; or, if they found Him, found Him only to reject Him.

II. The failure in question does not arise wholly from a want of intelligence—right understanding in the use of the means. Observe the case of the Jews, We have seen how they searched the oracles of Divine truth, and let us now observe the views with which they searched them. "Ye search the Scriptures," said Christ, "because in them ye think ye have eternal life." They thus sought the right thing, as well as sought it in the right place. How many Bible readers now-a-days are there of whom even this much can be said? Surely we may ask if the Pharisees and Scribes of those degenerate and unhappy days were not nearer the kingdom of heaven than many of ourselves?

III. Now, then, the true reason for the failure of these men. The evil lay in the will. "Ye are not willing," says Christ, "to come to Me, that ye might have life." It is thus a moral perversity, not an intellectual defect; not a want of light, but a want of love. The reason of this unwillingness is twofold:—(1) The natural carnality of the heart. By nature and by habit we live immersed in the things of sense. At home, among things outward, material, tangible, we with difficulty rise to any conception and contemplation of things spiritual and unseen. (2) The love of sin. They instinctively feel that they cannot come to Jesus and live in His Divine and holy fellowship and yet live in sin. They feel that there is a natural and eternal incompatibility between the two things. They may come to Jesus just as they are, but they cannot abide with Jesus just as they are. Therefore He and they remain strangers for ever. Learn, in conclusion (a) The preciousness of the Bible as a means of leading us to Jesus. (b) The worthlessness of the Bible if it leads us not to Christ.

J. Burns, Select Remains, p. 18.

John 5:39

Search the Scriptures,.... The writings of Moses, and the prophets, which were of divine inspiration and authority, and are often appealed unto by Christ, and his apostles, for the truth of what they delivered; and were the standard of faith, and the test of doctrines; and therefore to be searched diligently into, for finding divine knowledge and improvement in it, and for the trial of doctrines. The words may be rendered in the indicative, as an assertion, "ye do search the Scriptures": the Jews had the sacred oracles committed to them, and these they read, not only their kings, princes, and judges, but the common people, who brought up their children to the reading of them, and instructed them in them: and besides this, these writings were read, and expounded publicly in their synagogues every sabbath day; and at this time especially these records were examined, and particularly those of them which respected the Messiah, since there was now a general expectation of him: and certain it is, that the chief priests, Scribes, and elders, or the sanhedrim, were very much versed in the Scriptures, and could readily refer to those which concerned the Messiah; see an instance of this in Mat\_2:4;

for in them ye think ye have eternal life; not the doctrine of eternal life, nor the promises of it, nor the way to it; though all these are contained in them, and pointed out by them: for though life and immortality are brought to light by the Gospel, and the promise of eternal life belongs to the covenant of grace, and the way of life and righteousness by Christ is manifested without the law, and not by it; yet there is much of the Gospel, and an exhibition of the covenant of grace, and its promises, and Christ, the way of life, is directed to typically by the tree of life, and the brazen serpent, and other things in those writings. But the meaning here is, that they imagined, by having these writings in their hands, and by their reading them, and hearing them expounded every sabbath day, they should obtain and inherit everlasting life: hence they call (r) the law eternal life, and say (s) concerning the reading of it, that

"he that begins to read in the book of the law is obliged to bless after this manner: blessed be he that has chosen us above all nations, and hath given us his law.--And he that finishes blesses after him in this manner: blessed is he who hath given us his law, the law of truth, and has planted "eternal life" in the midst of us.''

This was an opinion of theirs: so the Persic version reads, "for such is your opinion"; and though this was a very vain one, yet it shows what a very high opinion they had of the Scriptures: and now to these our Lord appeals as witnesses for him, and against which they could not object, upon their own principles:

and they are they which testify of me; as they do of his proper deity and divine sonship, calling him Jehovah, God, the mighty God, and the Son of God; and of his offices as prophet, priest, and King; and of his incarnation of a virgin; and of the tribe, family, and place of his birth; of the miracles which he should work; of the treatment he should meet with from men; of his sufferings and death; of the circumstances leading on to them, and attending them; as his riding on an ass into Jerusalem, the betraying him by one of his familiar acquaintance, the selling him for thirty pieces of silver, the spitting upon, and scourging him, giving him gall for his meat, and vinegar for his drink, and parting his garments, and casting lots for his vesture, and the crucifixion of him, and that between two thieves; and of his burial, resurrection from the dead, ascension to heaven, and session at the right hand of God, and of his future coming to judgment.

(r) Zohar in Gen. fol. 100. 3. (s) Maimon. in Misn. Megilla, c. 4. sect. 1.

John 5:40

And ye will not come to me (kai ou thelete elthein pros me). “And yet” (kai) as often in John. “This is the tragedy of the rejection of Messiah by the Messianic race” (Bernard). See Joh\_1:11; Mat\_23:37 (kai ouk ēthelēsate, and ye would not). Men loved darkness rather than light (Joh\_3:19).

That ye may have life (hina zōēn echēte). Life in its simplest form as in Joh\_3:36 (cf. Joh\_3:16). This is the purpose of John in writing the Fourth Gospel (Joh\_20:31). There is life only in Christ Jesus.

John 5:39

Search the Scriptures - Ερευνατε τας γραφας. This should be translated, not in the imperative, but in the indicative mood - thus, Ye search the Scriptures diligently. That these words are commonly read in the imperative mood is sufficiently known; but this reading can never accord well with the following verse, nor can the force and energy of the words be perceived by this version.

The rabbins strongly recommend the study of the Scriptures. The Talmud, Tract. Shabbath, fol. 30, brings in God thus addressing David: “I am better pleased with one day in which thou sittest and studiest the law, than I shall be with a thousand sacrifices which thy son Solomon shall offer upon my altar.”

Perhaps the Scriptures were never more diligently searched than at that very time: first, because they were in expectation of the immediate appearing of the Messiah; secondly, because they wished to find out allegories in them; (see Philo); and, thirdly, because they found these scriptures to contain the promise of an eternal life. He, said they, who studies daily in the law, is worthy to have a portion in the world to come, Sohar. Genes. fol. 31. Hence we may infer:

1st. That the Jews had the knowledge of a future state before the coming of Christ; and

2ndly. That they got that knowledge from the Old Testament Scriptures.

The word ερευνατε, which might be translated, Ye search diligently, is very expressive. Homer, Il. xviii. l. 321, applies it to a lion deprived of his whelps, who “scours the plains, and traces the footsteps of the man.” And in Odyss. xix. l. 436, to dogs tracing their game by the scent of the foot.

In the Septuagint, the verb ερευναω answers to the Hebrew חפש chapash, to search by uncovering; to חקר chakar, to search minutely, to explore; to חשף chashaph, to strip, make bare; and to משש mashash, to feel, search by feeling. It is compounded of ερεω, I seek, and ευνη, a bed; “and is,” says St. Chrysostom, “a metaphor taken from those who dig deep, and search for metals in the bowels of the earth. They look for the bed where the metal lies, and break every clod, and sift and examine the whole, in order to discover the ore.” Those who read the verse in the imperative mood consider it an exhortation to the diligent study of the Sacred Writings. Search; that is, shake and sift them, as the word also signifies: search narrowly, till the true force and meaning of every sentence, yea, of every word and syllable, nay, of every letter and yod therein, be known and understood. Confer place with place; the scope of one place with that of another; things going before with things coming after: compare word with word, letter with letter, and search the whole thoroughly. See Parkhurst, Mintert, and Leigh.

Leaving every translation of the present passage out of the question, this is the proper method of reading and examining the Scriptures, so as to become wise unto salvation through them.

John 5:40

And ye will not come to me - Though ye thus search the Scriptures, in hopes of finding the Messiah and eternal life in them, yet ye will not come unto me, believe in me, and be my disciples, though so clearly pointed out by them, that ye may have that eternal life which can only come through me.

John 5:39

Search the scriptures - The word translated “search” here means to “search diligently” or “search anxiously.” It was applied to miners, who search for precious metals - who look anxiously for the “bed” of the ore with an intensity or anxiety proportionate to “their sense” of the value of the metal. Compare the notes at Job\_28:3. It is applied by Homer to a lioness robbed of her whelps, and who “searches” the plain to “trace out” the footsteps of the man who has robbed her. It is also applied by him to dogs tracing their game by searching them out by the scent of the foot. It means a diligent, faithful, anxious investigation The word may be either in the indicative or imperative mood. In our translation it is in the imperative, as if Jesus commanded them to search the Scriptures. Cyril, Erasmus, Beza, Bengel, Kuinoel, Tholuck, DeWette, and others, give it as in the indicative: Chrysostom, Augustine, Luther, Calvin, Wetstein, Stier, Alford, and others, regard it as in the imperative, or as a command. It is impossible to determine which is the true interpretation. Either of them makes good sense, and it is proper to use the passage in either signification. There is abundant evidence that the Jews did search the books of the Old Testament. It is equally clear that all people ought to do it.

The scriptures - The writings or books of the Old Testament, for those were all the books of revelation that they then possessed.

In them ye think ye have eternal life - The meaning of this is: “Ye think that by studying the Scriptures you will obtain eternal life. You suppose that they teach the way to future blessedness, and that by diligently studying them you will attain it.” We see by this:

1. That the Jews in the time of Jesus were expecting a future state.

2. The Scriptures teach the way of life, and it is our duty to study them.

The Bereans are commended for searching the Scriptures Act\_17:11; and Timothy is said from a child to have “known the holy scriptures, which are able to make us wise unto salvation,” 2Ti\_3:15. Early life is the proper time to search the Bible, for they who seek the Lord early shall find him.

They are they ... - They bear witness to the Messiah. They predict his coming, and the manner of his life and death, Isa\_53:1-12; Dan\_9:26-27, etc. See the notes at Luk\_24:27.

John 5:40

And ye will not come ... - Though the Old Testament bears evidence that I am the Messiah; though you professedly search it to learn the way to life, and though my works prove it, yet you will not come to me to obtain life. From this we may learn:

1. that life is to be obtained in Christ. He is the way, the truth, and the life, and he only can save us.

2. that, in order to do that, we must “come to him” - that is, must come in the way appointed, as lost sinners, and be willing to be saved by him alone.

3. that the reason why sinners are not saved lies in the will. “The only reason why sinners die is because ‘they will not come’ to Christ for life and happiness: it is not because they ‘cannot,’ but because they ‘will not’” (Henry).

4. Sinners have a particular opposition to going to “Jesus Christ” for eternal life. They would prefer any other way, and it is commonly not until all other means are tried that they are willing to submit to him.