

# The Duty of searching the Scriptures

By George Whitefield

*John 5:39, "Search the Scriptures."*

When the Sadducees came to our blessed Lord, and put to him the question, "whose wife that woman should be in the next life, who had seven husbands in this," he told them "they erred, not knowing the scriptures." And if we would know whence all the errors, that have over-spread the church of Christ, first arose, we should find that, in a great measure, they flowed from the same fountain, ignorance of the word of God.

Our blessed Lord, though he was the eternal God, yet as man, he made the scriptures his constant rule and guide. And therefore, when he was asked by the lawyer, which was the great commandment of the law, he referred him to his Bible for an answer, "What do you read?" And thus, when led by the Spirit to be tempted by the devil, he repelled all his assaults, with "it is written."

A sufficient confutation this, of their opinion, who say, "the Spirit only, and not the Spirit by the Word, is to be our rule of action." If so, our Savior, who had the Spirit without measure, needed not always have referred to the written word.

But how few copy after the example of Christ? How many are there who do not regard the word of God at all, but throw the sacred oracles aside, as an antiquated book, fit only for illiterate men?

Such do greatly err, not knowing what the scriptures are, I shall, therefore,

FIRST, Show, that it is every one's duty to search them.

And SECONDLY, Lay down some directions for you to search them with advantage.

I. I am to show, that it is every person's duty to search the Scriptures.

By the Scriptures, I understand the law and the prophets, and those books which have in all ages that have been accounted canonical, and which make up that volume commonly called the Bible.

These are emphatically instilled the Scriptures, and, in one place, the "Scriptures of Truth," as though no other books deserved the name of true writings or scripture in comparison to them.

They are not of any private interpretation, authority, or invention, but holy men of old wrote them, as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.

The fountain of God's revealing himself thus to man-kind, was our fall in Adam, and the necessity of our new birth in Christ Jesus. And if we search the scriptures as we ought, we shall find the sum and substance, the Alpha and Omega, the beginning and end of them, is to lead us to a knowledge of these two great truths.

All the threats, promises and precepts, all the exhortations and doctrines contained therein, all the rites, ceremonies and sacrifices appointed under the Jewish law; nay, almost all the historical parts of holy scripture, suppose our being fallen in Adam, and either point out to us a Mediator to come, or speak of him as already come in the flesh.

Had man continued in a state of innocence, he would not have needed an outward revelation, because the law of God was so deeply written in the tables of his heart. But having eaten the forbidden fruit, he incurred the displeasure of God, and lost the divine image, and, therefore, without an external revelation, could never tell how God would be reconciled unto him, or how he should be saved from the misery and darkness of his fallen nature.

That these truths are so, I need not refer you to any other book, than your own hearts.

For unless we are fallen creatures, whence those abominable corruptions which daily arise in our hearts? We could not come thus corrupt out of the hands of our Maker, because he being goodness itself could make nothing but what is like himself, holy, just, and good. And that we want to be delivered from these disorders of our nature, is evident, because we find an unwillingness within ourselves to own we are thus depraved, and are always striving to appear to others of a quite different frame and temper of mind than what we are.

I appeal to the experience of the most learned disputer against divine revelation, whether he does not find in himself, that he is naturally proud, angry, revengeful, and full of other passions contrary to the purity, holiness, and long suffering of God. And is not this a demonstration that some way or other he is fallen from God? And I appeal also, whether at the same time that he finds these hurtful lusts in his heart, he does not strive to seem amiable, courteous, kind and affable [friendly, good-natured, easy-going]; and is not this a manifest proof, that he is sensible he is miserable, and wants, he knows not how, to be redeemed or delivered from it?

Here then, God by his word steps in, and opens to his view such a scene of divine love, and infinite goodness in the holy scriptures, that none but men, of such corrupt and reprobate minds as our modern deists, would shut their eyes against it.

What does God in his written word do more or less, than show you, O man, how you art fallen into that blindness, darkness, and misery, of which you feel and complain? And, at the same time, he points out the way to what you desire, even how you may be redeemed out of it by believing in, and copying after the Son of his love.

As I told you before, so I tell you again, upon these two truths rest all divine revelation. It being given us for no other end, but to show our misery, and our happiness; our fall and recovery; or, in one word, after what manner we died in Adam, and how in Christ we may again be made alive.

Hence, then arises the necessity of searching the scriptures: for since they are nothing else but the grand charter of our salvation, the revelation of a covenant made by God with men in Christ, and a light to guide us into the way of peace; it follows, that all are obliged to read and search them, because all are equally fallen from God, all equally stand in need of being informed how they must be restored to, and again united with him.

How foolishly then do the disputing infidels of this generation act, who are continually either calling for signs from heaven, or seeking for outward evidence to prove the truth of divine revelation? Whereas, what they so earnestly seek for is nigh unto, nay, within them. For let them but consult their own hearts, they cannot but feel what they want. Let them but consult the lively oracles of God, and they cannot but see a remedy revealed for all their wants, and that the written word does as exactly answer the wants and desires of their hearts, as face answers to face in the water. Where then is the scribe, where is the wise, where is the solidity of the reasoning of the disputers of this world? Has not God revealed himself unto them, as plain as their own hearts could wish? And yet they require a sign: but there shall no other sign be given them. For if they believe not a revelation which is every way so suited to their wants, neither will they be persuaded though one should rise from the dead.

But this discourse is not designed so much for them that believe not, as for them, who both know and believe that the scriptures contain a revelation which came from God, and that it is their duty, as being chief parties concerned, not only to read but search them also.

I pass on, therefore, in the SECOND place, to lay down some directions, how you may search them with advantage.

FIRST, Have always in view, the end for which the scriptures were written, even to show us the way of salvation, by Jesus Christ.

"Search the scriptures," says our blessed Lord, "for they are they that testify of me." Look, therefore, always for Christ in the scripture. He is the treasure hid in the field, both of the Old and New Testament. In the Old, you will find him under prophesies, types,

sacrifices, and shadows; in the New, manifested in the flesh, to become a propitiation for our sins as a Priest, and as a Prophet to reveal the whole will of his heavenly Father.

Have Christ, then, always in view when you are reading the word of God, and this, like the star in the east, will guide you to the Messiah, will serve as a key to everything that is obscure, and unlock to you the wisdom and riches of all the mysteries of the kingdom of God.

SECONDLY, Search the scriptures with an humble child-like disposition.

For whosoever does not read them with this temper, shall in no wise enter into the knowledge of the things contained in them. For God hides the sense of them, from those that are wise and prudent in their own eyes, and reveals them only to babes in Christ: who think they know nothing yet as they ought to know; who hunger and thirst after righteousness, and humbly desire to be fed with the sincere milk of the word, that they may grow thereby.

Fancy yourselves, therefore, when you are searching the scriptures, especially when you are reading the New Testament, to be with Mary sitting at the feet of the holy Jesus; and be as willing to learn what God shall teach you, as Samuel was, when he said, "Speak, Lord, for your servant hears."

O that the unbelievers would pull down every high thought and imagination that exalts itself against the revealed will of God! O that they would, like new-born babes, desire to be fed with the pure milk of the word! Then we should have them no longer scoffing at Divine revelation, nor would they read the Bible any more with the same intend the Philistines brought our Samson, to make sport at it; but they would see the divine image and superscription written upon every line. They would hear God speaking unto their souls by it, and, consequently, be built up in the knowledge and fear of him, who is the Author thereof.

THIRDLY, Search the scriptures, with a sincere intention to put in practice what you read.

A desire to do the will of God is the only way to know it; if any man will do my will, says Jesus Christ, "He shall know of my doctrine, whether it be of God, or whether I speak of myself." As he also speaks in another place to his disciples, "To you, (who are willing to practice your duty) it is given to know the mysteries of the kingdom of God, but to those that are without (who only want to raise cavils against my doctrine) all these things are spoken in parables, that seeing they may see and not understand, and hearing they may hear and not perceive."

For it is but just in God to send those strong delusions, that they may believe a lie, and to conceal the knowledge of himself from all such as do not seek him with a single intention.

Jesus Christ is the same now, as formerly, to those who desire to know from his word, who he is that they may believe on, and live by; and to him he will reveal himself as clearly as he did to the woman of Samaria, when he said, "I that speak to you am he," or as he did to the man that was born blind, whom the Jews had cast out for his name's sake,

"He that talks with you, is he." But to those who consult his word with a desire neither to know him, nor keep his commandments, but either merely for their entertainment, or to scoff at the simplicity of the manner in which he is revealed, to those, I say, he never will reveal himself, though they should search the scriptures to all eternity. As he never would tell those whether he was the Messiah or not, who put that question to him either out of curiosity, or that they might have whereof to accuse him.

FOURTHLY, In order to search the scriptures still more effectually, make an application of everything you read to your own hearts.

For whatever was written in the book of God, was written for our learning. And what Christ said unto those aforetime, we must look upon as spoken to us also: for since the holy scriptures are nothing but a revelation from God, how fallen man is to be restored by Jesus Christ: all the precepts, threats, and promises, belong to us and to our children, as well as to those, to whom they were immediately made known.

Thus the Apostle, when he tells us that he lived by the faith of the Son of God, adds, "who died and gave himself for me." It is this application of Jesus Christ to our hearts, that makes his redemption effectual to each of us.

And it is this application of all the doctrinal and historical parts of scripture, when we are reading them over, that must render them profitable to us, as they were designed for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, and to make every child of God perfect, thoroughly furnished to every good work.

I dare appeal to the experience of every spiritual reader of holy writ, whether or not, if he consulted the word of God in this manner, he was not at all times and at all seasons, as plainly directed how to act, as though he had consulted the Urim and Thummim, which was upon the high-priest's breast. For this is the way God now reveals himself to man: not by making new revelations, but by applying general things that are revealed already to every sincere reader's heart.

And this, by the way, answers an objection made by those who say, "The word of God is not a perfect rule of action, because it cannot direct us how to act or how to determine in

particular cases, or what place to go to, when we are in doubt, and therefore, the Spirit, and not the word, is to be our rule of action."

But this I deny, and affirm on the contrary, that God at all times, circumstances, and places, though never so minute, never so particular, will, if we diligently seek the assistance of his Holy Spirit, apply general things to our hearts, and thereby, to use the words of the holy Jesus, will lead us into all truth, and give us the particular assistance we want.

But this leads me to a FIFTH direction how to search the scriptures with profit: Labor to attain that Spirit by which they were written.

For the natural man discerns not the words of the Spirit of God, because they are spiritually discerned; the words that Christ has spoken, they are spirit, and they are life, and can be no more understood as to the true sense and meaning of them, by the mere natural man, than a person who never had learned a language can understand another speaking in it. The scriptures, therefore, have not unfitly been compared, by some, to the cloud which went before the Israelites, they are dark and hard to be understood by the natural man, as the cloud appeared dark to the Egyptians; but they are light, they are life to Christians indeed, as that same cloud which seemed dark to Pharaoh and his house, appeared bright and altogether glorious to the Israel of God.

It was the want of the assistance of this Spirit, that made Nicodemus, a teacher of Israel, and a ruler of the Jews, so utterly ignorant in the doctrine of regeneration: for being only a natural man, he could not tell how that thing could be; it was the want of this Spirit that made our Savior's disciples, though he so frequently conversed with them, daily mistake the nature of the doctrines he delivered; and it is because the natural veil is not taken off from their hearts, that so many who now pretend to search the scriptures, yet see no farther than into the bare letter of them, and continue entire strangers to the spiritual meaning couched under every parable, and contained in almost all the precepts of the book of God.

Indeed, how should it be otherwise, for God being a spirit, he cannot communicate himself any otherwise than in a spiritual manner to the hearts of men; and consequently if we are strangers to his Spirit, we must continue strangers to his word, because it is altogether like himself, spiritual. Labor, therefore, earnestly for to attain this blessed Spirit; otherwise, your understandings will never be opened to understand the scriptures aright: and remember, prayer is one of the most immediate means to get this Holy Spirit.

Therefore, SIXTHLY, Let me advise you, before you read the scriptures, to pray, that Christ, according to his promise, would send his Spirit to guide you into all truth; intersperse short ejaculations while you are engaged in reading; pray over every word and verse, if possible; and when you close up the book, most earnestly beseech God, that the

words which you have read, may be inwardly engrafted into your hearts, and bring forth in you the fruits of a good life.

Do this, and you will, with a holy violence, draw down God's Holy Spirit into your hearts; you will experience his gracious influence, and feel him enlightening, quickening, and inflaming your souls by the word of God; you will then not only read, but mark, learn, and inwardly digest what you read: and the word of God will be meat indeed, and drink indeed unto your souls; you then will be as Apollos was, powerful in the scriptures; be scribes ready instructed to the kingdom of God, and bring out of the good treasures of your heart, things both from the Old and New Testament, to entertain all you converse with.

One direction more, which shall be the last, SEVENTHLY, Read the scripture constantly, or, to use our Savior's expression in the text, "search the scriptures;" dig in them as for hid treasure; for here is a manifest allusion to those who dig in mines; and our Savior would thereby teach us, that we must take as much pains in constantly reading his word, if we would grow wise thereby, as those who dig for gold and silver. The scriptures contain the deep things of God, and therefore, can never be sufficiently searched into by a careless, superficial, cursory way of reading them, but by an industrious, close, and humble application.

The Psalmist makes it the characteristic of a good man, that he "meditates on God's law day and night." And "this book of the law, (says God to Joshua) shall not go out of your mouth, but you shall meditate therein day and night;" for then you shall make your way prosperous, and you shall have good success. Search, therefore, the scriptures, not only devoutly but daily, for in them are the words of eternal life; wait constantly at wisdom's gate, and she will then, and not till then, display and lay open to you her heavenly treasures. You that are rich, are without excuse if you do not; and you that are poor, ought to take heed and improve that little time you have: for by the scriptures you are to be acquitted, and by the scriptures you are to be condemned at the last day.

But perhaps you have no taste for this despised book; perhaps plays, romances, and books of polite entertainment, suit your taste better: if this be your case, give me leave to tell you, your taste is vitiated [corrupted, depraved], and unless corrected by the Spirit and word of God, you shall never enter into his heavenly kingdom: for unless you delight in God here, how will you be made meet to dwell with him hereafter. Is it a sin then, you will say, to read useless impertinent books; I answer, Yes. And that for the same reason, as it is a sin to indulge useless conversation, because both immediately tend to grieve and quench that Spirit, by which alone we can be sealed to the day of redemption. You may reply, How shall we know this? Why, put in practice the precept in the text; search the scripture in the manner that has been recommended, and then you will be convinced of the danger, sinfulness, and unsatisfactoriness of reading any others than the book of God, or such as are wrote in the same spirit. You will then say, when I was a child, and

ignorant of the excellency of the word of God, I read what the world calls harmless books, as other children in knowledge, though old in years, have done, and still do; but now I have tasted the good word of life, and am come to a more perfect knowledge of Christ Jesus my Lord, I put away these childish, trifling things, and am determined to read no other books but what lead me to a knowledge of myself and of Christ Jesus.

Search, therefore, the scriptures, my dear brethren; taste and see how good the word of God is, and then you will never leave that heavenly manna, that angel's food, to feed on dry husks, that light bread, those trifling, sinful compositions, in which men of false taste delight themselves. No, you will then disdain such poor entertainment, and blush that yourselves once were fond of it. The word of God will then be sweeter to you than honey, and the honey-comb, and dearer than gold and silver; your souls by reading it, will be filled as it were, with marrow and fatness, and your hearts insensibly molded into the spirit of its blessed Author. In short, you will be guided by God's wisdom here, and conducted by the light of his divine word into glory hereafter.