

CHAPTER 6 – MEMORIZING SCRIPTURE

Memorization of Scripture is one way of “taking charge” of the contents of our conscious thoughts, and of the feelings, beliefs and actions that depend on them.

Dallas Willard

It never fails. I always get the same reaction when I introduce the topic of memorizing Scripture. Some of those listening inevitably say, “Oh, I can’t memorize stuff. My brain just won’t do it!” I usually don’t buy it. Here again I have the opportunity to suggest a way to love God with our minds that can lead to intimacy with God and transformed living. It takes work, but you can do it if you put your *mind* to it. You will also discover that the benefits are far beyond your imagining. You want to love God with all your mind? Memorize His Word.

WHY WE DON’T

Let’s begin by exploring some barriers that often prevent us from memorizing Scripture. As mentioned above, many people don’t believe their brain will do it. Perhaps that’s true in some cases. More often, the truth is we don’t have faulty memories. We have lazy or untrained ones. Memorizing something is just plain good for your brain. There is plenty of science to prove that exercising our brain through crossword puzzles, Sudoku, math problems, or games that require logic and strategy is good for our brain’s health. Memorizing Scripture produces a similar benefit while strengthening your soul as well.

You can memorize more than you think! You just don’t require yourself to do it much, especially in this technological age when your smart phone will store all you need to know and more. I like the Bible apps on my smart phone. I have several, and

I use them often. But memorizing causes us to engage with Scripture on a whole different level than reading does. Reading Scripture is *good*, of course. We've already explored those benefits in a previous chapter. But since we are mining the depths of what it means to love God with our minds, the habit of Scripture memory can't be left out.

Another reason people tend to avoid Scripture memory is because it takes time they don't think they have. It does take time, but we tend to find the time for things we think are important or bring benefit. Besides, if you set it up right, you can work on Scripture memory during the "cracks" of your day. I work on Scripture memory when I'm waiting in line or sitting in a waiting room. I work on it when I'm cooling down from a workout. I work on it when I wake up, even before I get out of bed. I work on it to ease my mind into peaceful sleep at night. We make time for what we need or enjoy.

Perhaps you have given up on Scripture memory because, when you tried it, it felt too laborious and slow. You didn't feel successful with it so you quit. None of us like to fail. None of us like to waste time. But if you will start small and use some tools and suggestions provided here, you can be successful.

Pam is a friend of mine at church. She came up to me after hearing me teach on Scripture memory and said, "OK, I'm going to do this. But I need an accountability partner. I need someone who will ask me about it, maybe even memorize something with me." Now she was calling me out! I told her I was all in. I encouraged her to think and pray about what passage she wanted to work on first. She chose Psalm 103 and away we went. She struggled with such a long Psalm and I wondered at

times if I should have encouraged her to start with something shorter. But Pam persevered and discovered she *could* do it.

It's been about eight years since Pam and I memorized Psalm 103. I asked her recently if she still remembers it. She does! This is because she reviewed it every day for several months. The most beautiful thing is that the Spirit still brings it to her mind for use in a conversation or to encourage her own spirit. Her soul is doubly refreshed because she knows it by heart.

WHY WE SHOULD

We've explored some barriers. Now let's motivate. No habit, spiritual or otherwise, is maintained unless we have a compelling vision for why we are doing it. We may not always be conscious of it, but we are motivated by something. If you lose sight of the vision or goal when it comes to a spiritual habits, they become a legalistic duty or a way to "check the box" on spiritual superiority. This can wreck your soul. I've been acquainted with a few people who have lots of Scripture memorized, but they are not very nice people. They launch their quotations of Scripture like bullets with the intent to shame and wound. So don't forget what has already been mentioned about the motivation for all spiritual habits: they are meant to create space for God – space to know Him and to love Him, space to be transformed into the likeness of His Son. Remember, you can practice a good habit for the wrong reasons and never experience the transforming work of God.

Scripture itself has something to say about why we should meditate on it, even memorize it. The passage that might come to your mind immediately is the one I learned in Vacation Bible School as a kid: "I have hidden your word in my heart that

I might not sin against you.” (Psalm 119:11) Memorizing Scripture forms our minds so that when split-second decisions have to be made in the face of temptation, we have clear instruction. God’s Word teaches us how to live and the better we know it, the better we can apply it.

Of course, obedience to what we know, even have memorized, is another step altogether. But I have found, and many experts in spiritual formation seem to agree, that if I make a constant habit of submitting my heart and mind to the transforming work of God through these habits, He changes me from the inside out. That is, my desires change. The transformation of my mind changes the desires of my heart. More and more, I become a good person, not just a person who does good things.

Psalm 1 is one of my favorites. (Yes, I’ve memorized it!) It speaks beautifully to the idea of being changed from the inside out. Verse 2 says “blessed” or “happy” is the one whose “delight is in the law of the Lord, and on His law he meditates day night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers.” (Ps. 1:2-3 NIV) The promises for being “planted” in God’s Word are beautifully motivating. A tree planted by water has a root system that provides stability and nutrients. The tree doesn’t have to *try* to bear fruit. It happens naturally.

Joshua 1:8 is more direct. “Keep this book of the law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful.” The people of Israel were about to embark upon the adventure of a lifetime. They were about to conquer the land God was giving them and establish their own nation. What is God’s directive? “Memorize the

book I gave you. Live by it. Don't forget it. It is the foundation for your success." The same is true for us as God's people today.

Another reason why we should take up this habit of memorizing Scripture is because it forces our minds to slow down, concentrate and reflect. Scripture memory requires focus. It causes us to notice things we might not normally see. I mentioned this same benefit when discussing the reading of Scripture and the practice of *lectio divina* in a previous chapter. If you are like me, everything in you resists slowing, resists repetition, resists staying with something for a long while. Concentration is hard work. But slowing down and meticulously memorizing a passage will cause you to plumb its depths in ways that you would not do otherwise.

I remember when I started to memorize Colossians 3. The first verse in the NIV is, "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ, set your hearts on things above." I had a tendency to concentrate on the directive "set your hearts on things above." But after I had been working with the verse for a while, it was amazing how my mind eventually concentrated on "Since, then, you have been raised with Christ." There is some powerful theology in those words. This phrase gives the motivation for everything that follows in that chapter and beyond. I took that one phrase and mulled it over again and again, chewing on it, praying through it, thanking God for it. I am working on the whole letter of Colossians now, and this phrase, which I tended to overlook at first, is a lynch pin for the whole book. Let Scripture memory *slow your mind down* and show you the depths of God's Word.

Another obvious benefit of memorizing Scripture is that it sets you free to access His Word when the written text is not readily at hand. It empowers you to share

these ancient and beautiful truths with others naturally and authentically. You will be surprised by how the Spirit will bring those passages to mind and use you to encourage, teach, and strengthen others.

I have also found that the Spirit uses the passages I have memorized as a bridge for more intimate understanding and communication with God. Knowing His Word helps me know and understand His mind and heart. Like any intimate relationship, such knowledge brings a depth and ease to the relationship that decreases misunderstanding and fosters a meaningful partnership. Memorizing Scripture creates a knowing, an intimacy with God that is difficult to put into words.

I believe this is the kind of experience Paul was speaking of in Romans 12:1-2. Scripture memory is one way to “offer your bodies as a living sacrifice.” It is one pathway toward being “transformed by the renewing of your mind.” What is the promise that follows? “Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.” This goes far beyond the idea of just knowing the will of God, what’s right or wrong. My will and his will become entwined. I am empowered little by little to love what He loves, to see people and circumstances as He sees them, and to participate with Him in the building of *His* Kingdom, not my own.

With all this said, I readily admit it’s far too easy to get sidetracked. We tend to fall back into the habits of our culture and environment. We concentrate on the task and forget its purpose. We strive to achieve instead of striving to be transformed. I had lost sight of this at one point in my practice of Scripture memory. A sweet conversation with a friend and mentor, Dallas Willard, put me back on track.

About six years ago, I enjoyed the privilege of listening to Dallas Willard teach while I was part of a spiritual formation cohort near San Francisco. I listened to him teach for two solid weeks on how we can experience life with God. This man was the “real deal.” I had never been in the presence of someone who so resembled Jesus. Though I had to get on my “intellectual tippy toes” to stay with him at times, I was impressed and inspired by his ability to quote Scripture naturally as he taught. He used Scripture like Jesus did. It was obvious that the Word flowed through the depths of his mind and heart, and he had an understanding of Scripture I could only yearn for. Yet he made it clear and accessible.

I finally gathered up the courage one afternoon to ask him about his habits with Scripture memorization. I wanted to know his “secret to success.” I just knew I could get some tips from this spiritual giant that would turn my mind into a vault of Scripture overnight.

In his ever gentle and humble manner, Dallas said, “Well, I generally memorize Scripture when I am travelling, such as when I’m on an airplane. I meditate on a passage for a while and . . . you know, if you meditate on it long enough you will memorize it.”

Yes, yes, I thought, never mind the meditation part, get to the good stuff – the tips that will help me memorize hundreds of verses and never forget them. I nodded my head, excited to hear what would come next, but his next sentence stunned me. “You know, you’re going to forget it.” Huh? What was he talking about? Isn’t the whole point *not* to forget? He went on, “You’re going to forget the passage eventually unless you are very diligent with reviewing it. But that’s OK.” No. Not OK, I thought

to myself. Why go to all that trouble? Surely he was kidding. If I forget it, doesn't that mean I've wasted my time?

Dallas continued, "It's OK because the whole reason for memorizing Scripture is the meditation it affords. As you meditate on the Word, it sinks deep into your mind and heart and changes you if you will let it." He grinned that wonderful grin of his. "So it's OK if you forget it eventually. That just means you get to meditate on it again sometime."

I nodded my head like I knew exactly what he meant and fully agreed with him while on the inside I was more than a tad disappointed. The more I thought about what he said, however, the more I realized his wisdom and my foolishness. I had taken my eye off the real prize – to create space for God to speak to me and to change me from the inside out. I had made the habit the end in itself, not the means to an end. I haven't forgotten the lesson.

SOME TIPS:

- Just do it. Start! Pick one verse and begin. The Chinese proverb is true, "The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step." Write your verse on 3x5 cards. If you are a techie, use a Scripture memory app. I highly recommend *Scripture Typer* (see recommended resources below).
- Start small. Don't pick a book of the Bible to memorize just yet! Start with a short passage and learn by experience how you best memorize something. It's better to start small and experience some successes before you move on to longer passages.

- Don't be surprised if your progress is slow at first. You will have to figure out the methods that work best for you. Any new habit develops slowly at first. Be patient with yourself but don't quit.
- Choose a translation and then stick to it for that particular passage. Memorization is hard enough without adding the confusion of switching texts. Do a little research, pick the translation you believe will be best for you, and then don't change while working on that particular passage. I have utilized several different translations so some of my passages are in NIV, others in ESV or NASB. The key is not to start until you have decided for sure which one you want to use for that particular passage.
- Choose a verse or passage that really speaks to you right now. Perhaps it speaks to your life circumstances or it communicates a truth you really need to trust and believe. Ask the Spirit to help you choose. You will be more motivated and thus more likely successful than if you pick from a list someone else has created.
- That being said, most of us are not going to memorize the whole Bible. So I encourage you to eventually choose some passages that seem to include the whole Gospel in a nutshell. Some suggestions would be Colossians 3, Ephesians 4, or Romans 5 or 8. You get the idea. I'm not opposed to learning individual verses on a certain topic. But I would also strongly encourage you to eventually work on longer passages. These have the benefit of one author and one context completing an entire thought.

- Get it perfect, not just “close enough.” Translations are very careful with their words and you should be, too. Get it exactly right. The app I recommend, *Scripture Typer*, allows you to set the percentage of accuracy required when you review. Set it to 95% or higher. The work that is required for such accuracy will cause it to stick in your long-term memory better.
- Review is certainly the key to working it into your long-term memory as well. I have found that if I review a verse daily or close to it for 3 months, it sticks. Everyone is a little different, so experiment. One of the strengths of *Scripture Typer* is its system for review.
- You will get to the point that you can review in your head and you may not look at your card or app. But do go back every now and then and check against the written source. We can tend to adjust or change something slightly over time. It’s good to make these tiny corrections regularly.
- When you are working with a longer passage, break it up into small pieces. Don’t try to learn more than one or two verses at a time. But as I mentioned before, I do highly recommend memorizing longer passages such as an entire Psalm or a good portion of a chapter in a Gospel or one of Paul’s letters when you are ready. Such passages lead to a whole different level of meditation on God’s Word that is meaningful and fruitful.
- As you begin to put together a longer passage from the shorter segments you have learned, a new level of memorization will begin because now you have to remember the order of those segments. Whether you are using an electronic app or handwritten cards, begin to link the end of one passage

with the start of the next. (This is where *Scripture Typer* is great because it will let you work on segments alone and combined.)

- I recommend having an accountability partner. I know from experience one is not always easy to find. It is most helpful when both of you are memorizing together. At the least, it needs to be someone who won't become intimidated or resentful, someone who won't think you are weird or trying to show off. (And make sure you *aren't* trying to show off!)

A WORD OF CAUTION: Scripture memory is not about achievement. If you find yourself getting competitive or braggadocios or able to recite long passages without thinking about the truth within and how it should change you, STOP. Chances are you have become a very annoying person. This particular spiritual habit has the easy potential to impress people and the desire to impress can become a strong temptation. Don't go there. Guard your heart. Watch your motives.

REMEMBER WHY YOU ARE DOING THIS: Scripture memory offers the opportunity to meditate on the life-giving words of God. Memorizing it takes you to a whole different level of meditation. Receive the living and active Word of God and invite Him to transform your mind.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

- Joshua Choonmin Kang, *Scripture by Heart*, IVP, 2010. This is a lovely book with 30 meditations on memorizing Scripture. It is a combination of inspiration and practical suggestions.
- *Scripture Typer* is an app created for both Android and Apple devices. This is the best app for Scripture memory on the market right now, in my opinion. (It's a little pricey but worth it!) It makes setting up verse cards easy; the

drills are fun and helpful; the review process is what makes it really strong. It will remind you when you need to review a passage and it determines how often you need to review a passage depending on how many mistakes you make while reviewing it. *Scripture Typer* is great for one verse or long passage memorization. It has helpful features and yet isn't complicated to use. I highly recommend it for those who use a smart phone or tablet. It has increased my own consistency exponentially!

- Navigator's Scripture Memory Course called *Topical Memory System* (NavPress) is an excellent tool. The kit includes a workbook on memorizing Scripture as well as memory verse cards and a wallet to store them for easy access in a pocket, purse or backpack. The cards are divided by topic and there are several translations to choose from. Since it is a study course, it is great to use in a small group and your accountability is built right in.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

1. What are the barriers that keep you from memorizing Scripture?
2. What motivates you most to make Scripture memory a habit?
3. If you are already in the habit of memorizing Scripture, share a tip that has been most helpful to you in your practice.
4. What should you be cautious of when making Scripture memory a habit?
5. What is the goal of Scripture memory? Why practice it?