

Contents

INTRODUCTION

The Long-Lost Spiritual Discipline 9

CHAPTER 1

Know His Voice 15

CHAPTER 2

You Can Memorize Scripture 31

CHAPTER 3

How and When to Memorize Scripture 45

CHAPTER 4

To Love Your God 61

CHAPTER 5

To Hate Your Sin 75

CHAPTER 6

To Remain Steadfast 89

CHAPTER 7

To Renew Your Mind 103

CHAPTER 8

To Encourage and Exhort 117

CHAPTER 9

For All of Life 131

Memorization Resources 145

Acknowledgments 151

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. For the law of the Spirit of life has set you free in Christ Jesus from the law of sin and death. For God has done what the law, weakened by the flesh, could not do. By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh, in order that the righteous requirement of the law might be fulfilled in us, who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit. For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of the Spirit. For to set the

chapter 1

Know His Voice

Oh how I love your law! It is my meditation all the day.

PSALM 119:97

I was sitting in the aisle seat on a flight to Florida when I noticed the woman next to me reading the Bible on her phone. Psalms, I decided, after a closer look at the screen (I wasn't *trying* to snoop, but we were wedged in pretty tightly on that plane). Once she finished reading and slid her phone into her purse, I closed my novel and asked if she read her Bible often. "Every day," she replied. She looked to be in her seventies, and she told me that she worked in hospice care.

"What's your favorite Bible passage?" I asked her. Without missing a beat, she responded: "Psalm 23. That's what most of my patients want to hear before they pass away." I nodded. That was

MEMORIZING SCRIPTURE

the first psalm I ever memorized and one I still call to mind when I'm dealing with fear or anxiety or insomnia (usually all three at once). It's a passage I'd want to be reminded of at the end of my life.

My seatmate told me that her Christian patients would often try to quote Psalm 23 with her as she read it, even if they hadn't spoken during the last days of their illness. The patients who didn't profess faith in Christ didn't seem to care whether or not she read Scripture, but she read it to them anyway. "The Christians, though," she told me, "know the Word and that's what gives them comfort before they die." I swallowed a knot in my throat as I pictured her dying patients quoting Psalm 23 with her. Christians know the Word because they know the One who spoke it. They know the Word Himself, and His voice comforts them in the valley of the shadow of death. And because they know His voice, they know that everything He has promised about eternity with Him will be true.

HIS VOICE, WRITTEN DOWN FOR US

Jesus talked about this vocal recognition in one of His parables. In John 10, He likened Himself to a shepherd and His people to sheep who follow Him because they know His voice. The sheep won't follow strangers whose voices they don't recognize. Jesus' parable teaches us that all who believe in Christ for salvation will recognize His voice. We know who our Good Shepherd is, and we do what He says because we know He is trustworthy.

The longer we walk with Christ, the more readily we'll recognize His voice. The more we listen to His voice, the more we'll trust it. And as we trust His Word, we'll be more confident to

stand firm on what we know to be true. Knowing His Word, recognizing His voice, exulting in our belonging to Christ helps us discern what is true in a world that calls everything “truth.” As Jesus prayed, God’s Word is truth. And by it we will be sanctified (see John 17:17).

Listening to the voice of our Good Shepherd involves regular exposure to His words. We have been given an unimaginable gift in the complete, inerrant, eternal Word of God. But more than just a book of words, the Bible is God’s voice, written down for us. Through His chosen means of revelation, we learn who He is, who we are, how we needed rescue from slavery to sin and the domain of darkness. We’re given the story of Jesus’ birth, life, death, and resurrection—how He offers light and life to all who believe in Him for the forgiveness of sins. We understand what it means to follow Him, to persevere in the faith, to take the gospel into the world, and to live as the body of Christ as we wait for His return. We have the full story of redemption, and though we are still living it, we know that God has written a very good ending. He has given us what we need in Scripture to keep listening to His voice until we see Him face-to-face. One day, we’ll hear it with all the glorious pitch, tenor, and tone that He intended—but until then, we hold fast to the written word that was once a mystery “but now revealed to his saints” (Col. 1:26). We’ll read it, study it, meditate on it, treasure it. We’ll memorize it because it is no empty word for us but *our very life* (see Deut. 32:47).

**We’ll memorize
Scripture because it is
no empty word for us
but *our very life*.**

WHATEVER IS TRUE

In his letter to the Philippian church, Paul exhorts the believers to fill their minds with whatever is true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and praiseworthy. He encourages them to continue holding fast to their faith in Christ by saturating their minds with true, good things. How do we know what is true? It's an age-old question, really. Philosophers have waxed eloquent and sometimes quite ridiculously about the origin of truth or whether it even exists. It seems that the longer human beings roam the earth, the more ludicrous our approaches to truth become.

In our twenty-first-century culture, whatever you believe can be “true” as long as you don't hold “your truth” over anyone else. As a

We must think on
God's truths and by
them measure all
that we see touted,
advertised, and
celebrated as true
from the world.

result, we live in a society of people with a million different definitions of truth that clash horribly and crumble immediately beneath the test of time. Jen Oshman writes, “Here in the 2000s, we've successfully thrown off the shackles of any institutionalized definition of truth or reality or right and wrong. We've triumphed freedom as our highest good. Individual freedom trumps all former societal norms and values. It is ultimate.”¹

American ideology these days touts that “*whatever* is true”—whatever you want to be true can be true *for you*.

1. Jen Oshman, *Enough about Me: Finding Lasting Joy in the Age of Self* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2020), 33.

But Paul didn't mean "whatever" as in "choose what you want to be true." Paul meant "fill your mind with what is true." We already know from Jesus that God's Word is truth. His Word is also honorable, just, pure, lovely, commendable, excellent, and praiseworthy. We can and must think on these truths—God's truths—and by them measure all that we see touted, advertised, and celebrated as true from the world. We will be able to discern what is truly true by meditating on what is eternally true. And by meditating, I don't mean emptying your mind—I mean filling it up to the very brim.

MUMBLE, MUTTER, MEDITATE

Perhaps you're ready for me to give you a verse in Scripture that commands "thou shalt memorize Bible verses." You won't find it written quite that way, but the Bible is full of exhortations to treasure God's Word and think about it often. We'll explore many of these in the coming chapters, but for now, let's examine a few that leave no doubt as to how we fill our minds with whatever is true.

When God brought Israel into the promised land, He commanded them to be "careful to do according to all the law that Moses my servant commanded you. Do not turn from it to the right hand or to the left, that you may have good success wherever you go. This Book of the Law shall not depart from your mouth, but you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do according to all that is written in it" (Josh. 1:7–8). As a generation that had grown up wandering in the wilderness, the Israelites needed the guidance of the law to instruct them how to

live as God's people in the land He would give them. Without the parameters of the law and the careful account of God's deliverance of their families from slavery in Egypt, Israel would run headlong into idolatrous worship like their pagan neighbors. Belonging to God meant living holy lives that reflected their Deliverer; thus, the people were to keep His words in mind at all times, meditating on them day and night so that they did not wander away from Him in disobedience. There was grave danger in departing from the commands of God, so the best way to hold fast was to keep His words ever before them.

We see similar language in Psalm 1 where the psalmist calls the happy, fruitful, blessed man one who delights in God's law, *meditating* on it day and night. The Hebrew word for "meditate" means to mumble or mutter aloud to oneself.² The way to delight in God's Word is to repeat it aloud to oneself, mumbling and reciting the words so that you believe them, live them, think them, practice them. In muttering the words of Scripture over and over again, we learn them, really *learn* them, because we think deeply on them in the mumbling repetition.

What protects the man in Psalm 1 from worldliness and sinful behavior? Meditating on God's Word day and night. What produces fruit in every season of life? Being rooted in God's Word, drawing nourishment from it at all times. This is more than daily Bible reading, though it is not less than that. It is an *extension* of Bible reading, really. Meditation plunges you deeper into the

2. "Lexicon :: Strong's H1897 - *hāgâ*," Blue Letter Bible, <https://www.blueletterbible.org/lexicon/h1897/esv/wlc/0-1/>.

verses and passages you're reading, saturating your heart with their meaning, one repeated word or phrase at a time.

In the New Testament, the idea of meditating on the Word of God is described as being immersed in Scripture. In Colossians 3:16, Paul tells the church in Colossae to “let the word of Christ dwell in you richly.” Tim Keller writes that “meditation on the Bible is more than just intense thinking. . . . When Paul talks about the Word of God ‘dwelling richly’ within us (Col. 3:16), he is clearly talking of something beyond mere assent to information.”³ More is going on here than simply digesting knowledge or information. Because God’s Word is powerful, it changes us as we think deeply about it. God’s Word “is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart” (Heb. 4:12).

I’ve had several surgeries to address a progressive disease that causes abnormal growths in my body, and I know how skillful a surgeon must be to remove what is diseased without compromising the organs. The scalpel must be sharp, the incisions and excisions

You’ll never achieve
any clarity or solid
understanding of truth
by emptying your mind
and closing it down.
Rather, you open up
your mind and make
it a house for God’s
words to live in.

3. Tim Keller, *Prayer: Experiencing Intimacy with God* (New York: Penguin Books, 2014), 150.

MEMORIZING SCRIPTURE

exact. There is no room for error. God's Word is like that razor-sharp scalpel, and His Spirit works it in our hearts with precision like the most knowledgeable and practiced surgeon. His Word reveals sin that grows insidiously in the secret, hidden parts of our hearts. The more we dwell on His words, the more apparent the disease, and the more decisive its removal. What's left is a healthier Christian who can continue to grow and flourish in godliness as the Word of God dwells in him or her richly.

When the words of the Lord live in your heart, they change your heart. How do we let them dwell in our hearts richly? By feasting on them regularly, thinking on them, reciting them—mumbling them over and over to ourselves. Christian meditation is different from the world's poor version of it. You'll never achieve any clarity or solid understanding of truth by emptying your mind and closing it down. Rather, you open up your mind and make it a house for God's words to live in, where your thoughts are fed, rested, dressed, and wisely parented.

Old or New Testament, the exhortation for the people of God is the same: meditate on the words of the Lord so that you know His voice and know you belong to Him, so that you avoid sin, so that you stay the course of faithfulness and encourage other believers to do the same, so that your mind is transformed, so that you know what is true.

MEDITATE YES, BUT WHY MEMORIZE?

No one in the history of the church has had as much access to Scripture as we do in the twenty-first-century Western world.

As I sit at my dining room table in southern Missouri, there are seven Bibles I could reach in ten steps or less. Additionally, there's a smartphone, tablet, and a laptop in front of me, any of which I could tap, swipe, or command with my voice to open a Bible app, locate a website with multiple translations, or even read the Bible aloud to me right now. It's an embarrassment of riches, really. I can open a Bible anytime, anywhere. If anyone in history has ever *not* had to rely on their memory for what the Scriptures say, it's us. But this hasn't always been the case for God's people.

The saints of old were constrained by the expense and availability of papyrus or scrolls and ink, so memorization of the Torah was paramount to their knowledge of and obedience to it. As the New Testament books were written and circulated, they were copied and shared over time, but still—the early church did not have the physical access to printed Scripture that we have today. Listening to the Word proclaimed in corporate worship would have been their primary access to Scripture. To “let the word of Christ dwell richly” in a Christian with no written Bible would require them to remember the words of Christ that were taught in the church setting. Memorization of both the Old Testament and the emerging New Testament would have been deeply important for Christians to remain steadfast.

Consider our brothers and sisters in Christ today in settings where Bibles are illegal or where there is still no written language. How will Christians grow in

**Why memorize now
when we have such
free access to the
written words of God?
Because God tells us
to meditate on His
Word *day and night*.**

MEMORIZING SCRIPTURE

the faith and remain steadfast under trial? The words must be memorized. I once read about incarcerated Chinese Christians who passed tiny strips of paper between their cells with verses of Scripture written on them. Once one prisoner had memorized the text, he would slip it to the person in the next cell.

In some countries where the gospel is being shared for the first time, the people group has no written language. Thus, missionaries must read the gospel story aloud often for the people to hear and remember until their language is developed in written form.

Or think back to the Reformation. One of the biggest problems in the Catholic Church of the sixteenth century was that the common person had no access to the Scriptures. The church had corrupted the Christian faith, requiring the purchase of indulgences for the forgiveness of sins, which the people would purchase in desperation, not knowing their money lined the pockets of the religious elite. Without access to the Scriptures, the people did not know what was true. They believed the lies of the leaders of the church because they did not know what God had actually said. They'd never heard His voice for themselves.

These examples might seem extreme. That's not us, right? We don't know what the future holds for us as far as religious liberty and our regular access to Scripture, but for now, we aren't held back from the Word by limited resources. Memorization might be important during times of illiteracy or oppression or poverty, but now? Why memorize now when we have such free access to the written words of God?

Lack of access isn't the only impetus for memorization. We memorize because God tells us to meditate on His Word *day and*

night. So, how do we meditate? We *memorize*. John Piper says, “Unless you memorize Scripture you will not meditate on it day and night.”⁴ It’s through memorization that we meditate, and it’s through meditation that we memorize.

Psalm 119 is entirely devoted to the value of meditating on Scripture. Consisting of 176 verses that praise the benefits of treasuring God’s Word at all times, each verse speaks of a specific blessing found in meditating on God’s words. The psalmist uses several terms interchangeably for Scripture: law, precepts, rules, statutes, word, commandments, testimonies. These words represent the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, which the average Israelite most likely would have known from memory since the acrostic structure of Psalm 119 encouraged memorization. Below are some of the benefits and blessings of meditation on God’s Word that the psalmist adulates in Psalm 119.

To endure suffering (vv. 25, 28, 50, 52, 54, 69, 71, 76, 92, 107, 114, 140, 147, 153, 165)

To avoid sin (vv. 11, 36, 101–102, 120, 128, 133, 176)

To seek holiness (vv. 9, 37, 80)

To remain steadfast (vv. 5, 33, 40, 149)

To know God (vv. 10, 12, 26, 68, 75, 137–38)

To have joy (vv. 14, 16, 35, 47, 56, 97, 111, 127, 143, 162, 174)

To gain understanding (vv. 18, 24, 27, 99–100, 104, 125, 130, 144, 169)

4. John Piper, “Meditate on the Word of the Lord Day and Night,” *Desiring God*, January 3, 1999, <https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/meditate-on-the-word-of-the-lord-day-and-night>.

MEMORIZING SCRIPTURE

To be satisfied (vv. 19, 57, 72, 81, 103, 123, 131)

To discern truth (vv. 29, 43, 73, 105, 160)

To be vindicated (vv. 21–22, 31–32, 39, 51, 53, 82–88, 134, 154)

To obey God (vv. 34, 44, 55, 59–60, 62, 66–67)

To share God's Word (vv. 46, 74, 78–79, 136)

I don't know about you, but those promises, gifts, and encouragements are blessings I want for my own life as I follow Jesus each day. I want to know how to endure suffering, remain steadfast, and avoid sin. I want to know God better than I do so that I can love Him more and better grasp His love for me. I want to find deep satisfaction in the Lord and to have untarnished joy in Him when life is hard. I want to be vindicated from those who do not love what I believe, and I want the courage to share the gospel with them anyway. I want to know how to obey and be led by the Spirit to do so. Psalm 119 promises those benefits when we fix our minds on Scripture day and night.

No matter what century we live in, which country, or the level of access we have to the written Word, the biblical exhortations to meditate on Scripture still ring true for us. We must meditate on God's Word day and night, and in so doing we will flourish and grow in godliness and joy. Whether an Israelite on the banks of the Jordan, a new Christian in Colossae, or a believer living in Missouri in the twenty-first century, God's people must meditate on God's Word. He has instructed us to do so, and we must submit ourselves to His commands. As with all His commands, meditation is for our good and our joy. We'll spend the rest of this book examining *how* good and how joyous.

A WARNING AND A WELCOME

Any spiritual discipline can be performed in a legalistic manner. *Performed* is the key word here. The goal of Scripture memorization is not to wow your friends with recitations at dinner parties or to show off how spiritual you are at Bible study. If you've been convinced to begin memorizing Scripture at this point (I'll tell you how in the next chapter), be on guard now against any form of legalism in your heart. Memorization, while a sweet gift to help you grow in godliness, does not make you more loved by God. It will not curry favor for you with God as though you could perform in order to gain His approval. No, we already have all the love and approval we could ever need from God in Christ. We pray, read our Bibles, fellowship with the church, share the gospel, fast, give, serve, and yes—memorize Scripture—because we are *already* loved by God. Our spiritual disciplines help us to grow in awareness of that love.

As you stand guard against legalistic thinking, keep in mind that our goal in this book is to use memorization to help us stand firm on truth, saturate our minds with truth, comfort our hearts with truth, share truth, exhort with truth. As stated earlier, recitation isn't the goal, exactly. Saturation is. Andrew Davis writes:

The point is not ultimately to be able to recite every verse perfectly, but to humbly and deeply saturate ourselves with the word of God. Regardless of what we eventually remember, the kind of meditation required for extended memorization will change us. That means no prayerful, meditative Scripture

MEMORIZING SCRIPTURE

memory is wasted, even if we seem to have forgotten it all (and you won't forget it all).⁵

Recitation might be a means by which we saturate, but it's the scriptural soaking that God uses to transform our hearts and renew our minds.

If you are a believer in Jesus, you already recognize His voice because you know Him. But now you can dwell on the sound and strength of His voice day and night through memorization. You don't have to finish this book before you begin. You can read chapters 2 and 3 for some practical tools that will help you get started with your first verse, chapter, or book. But stay with me as we look at how the practical parts of memorization begin to effect change in your daily life and conversations. It doesn't matter how old you are, how long you've been a Christian, how poor your memory, or how educated you might be. Scripture memorization is for every believer. You're welcome and encouraged to stand in a long line of saints who have beheld the treasure of Scripture and have spent their lives joyfully storing it in their hearts.

5. Andrew Davis, "Why I Memorize Books of the Bible," *Desiring God*, May 21, 2021, <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/why-i-memorize-books-of-the-bible>.

memorization tip

Many of the Scripture writers used imagery to explain their points. Jesus often used parables, the poets used word pictures, and Paul used metaphors like armor and olive trees to explain abstract concepts. Pay attention to the word pictures used in Scripture and let the imagery help you memorize. For example, picture the tree planted by a river in Psalm 1. As you memorize, let the imagery fill your mind: tree planted, streams of water, leaf that doesn't wither. Notice the progression of sin in verse 1: walking, standing, sitting. The images were meant to help us both grasp the point and remember it.

suggested verses to memorize

Short form: Psalm 1:1–2, Psalm 19:7–11, John 10:2–3,
Philippians 4:8

Long form: Psalm 1, Psalm 19, John 10, Philippians 4,
Colossians 3
