

An Approach to Extended Memorization

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The Value of Scripture Memorization

There are numerous spiritual benefits to the memorization of Scripture. A proper assessment of these benefits begins with understanding the role of the written word of God in our spiritual development. Jesus Christ openly stated that our spiritual existence depends upon the word of God: "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Matthew 4:4) The words of God are written in only one place: the Bible. Also, according to the Apostle Peter one of our ongoing responsibilities is to "grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus Christ," (2 Peter 3:18) and that we are to "make every effort to add to our faith goodness, and to goodness knowledge..." (2 Peter 1:5). But how are we to grow? Growth in the Lord is called "sanctification," the process by which we become more and more like Jesus Christ and more and more separated from the world. Jesus Christ says that happens by the Word of God: "Sanctify them by the truth; your word is truth." (John 17:17) However, the Word of God must enter us through our MIND—through our understanding—in order to change our hearts. Thus we are to meditate deeply on Scripture in order to understand it better, so that our hearts may be changed. And we are to meditate on "every word that comes from the mouth of God." There is no more useful discipline to this careful process of verse by verse meditation than memorization. Memorization is not the same as meditation, but it is almost impossible for someone to memorize a passage of Scripture without somewhat deepening his/her understanding of those verses. Plus, once the passage is memorized, a lifetime of reflection is now available through ongoing review... while driving on long trips, while walking on beaches, while conversing with friends, memorized verses can flow from you and cause a deepening of understanding.

Furthermore, these verses also sanctify us by causing us to hate sin and to determine to fight it vigorously. Through memorization, we are able to stand in the moment of temptation through the "sword of the Spirit, which is the Word of God." (Ephesians 6:17) Therefore did the Psalmist say, "How can a young man keep his way pure? By living according to your word. I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you." (Psalm 119:9,11)

In addition, the word sanctifies us by transforming our entire worldview from secular to heavenly: "Do not be conformed any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will." (Romans 12:2) The "renewing of your minds" happens by the flow of Scripture through them like a pure river. As this river flows through your mind constantly, you will see things more and more the way

God does, if you are a child of God... for "we have the mind of Christ." (1 Corinthians 2:16) This gives us more and more wisdom to deal with this world.

However, this benefit does not merely bless US in our own growth and development, but it becomes a treasure trove for the growth of the church as well. The Scripture memorizer will be used mightily by God to teach and encourage other Christians, with an apt word from the perfect Word of God: "Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom..." (Colossians 3:16) How better can you obey Colossians 3:16 than by Scripture memorization? The "word of Christ" will indeed "dwell in you richly" as you memorize it, and then work it over in your mind through meditation. Then you will most certainly be useful to God to "teach and admonish" another brother or sister. Scripture builds the Church to its final doctrinal and practical maturity (Ephesians 4:13-16), and God uses those who memorize it to do this building in a powerful and eternally fruitful way.

Finally, the memorization of Scripture enables us to bless lost people with a powerful and vivid presentation of the gospel of salvation. "Faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word of Christ." (Romans 10:17) Those who memorize Scripture obey Peter's command in this regard: "Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give a reason for the hope that you have." (1 Peter 3:15) The "preparation" Peter had in mind is best done by memorizing Scripture. Remember that it is Scripture which is "able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus." (2 Timothy 3:15) The evangelist who stores up Scripture on the life of Christ, for example, can vividly retell the miracle stories to a generation which is Biblically illiterate, which knows very little about the life of Christ. That person can also give the theology of salvation from Paul's epistles, if they have memorized those books. In short, Scripture memorization makes one a much more powerful and effective evangelist.

There are other benefits... comfort during trials and bereavement, power and wisdom for counseling, the development of heavenly-mindedness, the manifestation of the fruit of the Spirit, conviction over indwelling sin, fruitful passage of time while waiting for delayed plane flights, etc. Suffice it to say that this is well worth our time.

When Judgment Day comes, we will regret the waste of a single moment not used for the glory of Christ. We will, however, not regret one moment we spent diligently studying God's Word and hiding it in our heart. We will only wish we'd spent more moments doing this.

Memorizing Books Is Better Than Memorizing Individual Verses

Jesus said, "Man does not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God." (Matthew 4:4) Paul said "All Scripture is God-breathed, and is useful for teaching rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness..." (2 Timothy 3:16) Paul told the Ephesian elders in Acts 20:27, "I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God." Memorizing individual verses tends to miss intervening verses that the individual does not feel are as significant. If we continue to focus only on our "favorite"

passages of Scripture, we may well miss something new that God wants to say to the church through a neglected portion of His Word. God does not speak any word in vain, and there are no wasted passages of Scripture.

This approach also aids in the proper teaching of the Word. The best mode of teaching and preaching is expository—setting forth in good order what God says. Preaching topically, while necessary from time to time, is not the best standard mode of ministry, for the pastor/teacher will tend to say no more than what he already has understood from those "favorite" verses. But a teacher who goes through the entire passage will undoubtedly open up a new world to his hearers, exciting them with observations they are not likely to have seen before. Thus, memorizing books leads to a constant discovery of new insights, which keeps love for the Word vibrant and thrilling.

Also, since most of Scripture is written to make a case, there is a flow of argumentation that is missed if individual verses are memorized. But memorizing entire books verse by verse enables the person to go easily from the "trees to the forest" and back again. This person will be able to tell you the overall flow of the book of Galatians, for example, as well as how each paragraph fits into this flow, and how each verse contributes to each paragraph. Thus, there is far less likelihood of taking verses out of context when entire books are memorized. But those who memorize individual verses are particularly prone to taking verses out of context.

Making the Commitment Before God

Go to the Lord in prayer and ask Him if He wants you to invest time in Scripture memorization. Listen to Him, confident that He will guide you. Once you have that sense from God, ask Him humbly for help from the Holy Spirit. Ask Him to protect you from spiritual pride... God HATES pride in every form (see Isaiah 2:6-22 and Luke 18:9-14), and while knowledge of the Bible is absolutely essential to spiritual maturity, yet Biblical knowledge without love for God and neighbor "puffs up" a person (1 Cor. 8:2) and is useless to God and actually harmful to the church. God is well able to take away your ability to memorize if you use it for your own glory. Then, humbly make the commitment before God that you will invest time in scripture memorization. Later, after you choose your book to memorize, you will have the opportunity to make a written covenant before God concerning your commitment.

Choosing Your First Book

Once you have sensed God's leadership and have made the commitment before God that you will memorize a whole book of the Bible, the next step is to choose the book. This, too, should be done with prayer and a sense of the leadership of the Holy Spirit. Some practical concerns should guide your choice as well:

1) Not too long (or too short?): Your first book should not be too long, lest you get discouraged in the way and give up. The greatest obstacle to lasting achievement in this arena is lack of perseverance... just giving up. We give up usually because the way seems too long and we feel we lack the strength for the rest of the journey. Just as one who someday wants to finish a marathon does not begin simply by running 26.2 miles but must rather work up to that level, so it is also with extended Scripture memorization. You must get the discipline deeply rooted in your daily habits and you must develop your memory skills before you can attempt a really long book. Start with one around 90-160 verses long. There are shorter books of the Bible, but 2 John or 3 John may not have the same impact on your life as one of the longer epistles. However, all Scripture is God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16), and therefore God may call you to start with 2 John.

2) One that stirs your passions: Choose a book that God has used in the past to minister to you, and that you think would be most useful in your personal walk with Christ and in your ministry to others. You should also choose a book that still has some mysteries to you (as all Scripture should and does!), and that you see as an adventure in learning.

After you have assessed your options, bring various options before the Lord in prayer and listen to His voice. Ask Him to guide you, and He will direct your choice.

Surveying the Terrain

The next step is to survey the entire book for length, and decide how quickly you feel you can memorize it. Perhaps you can start at one verse per day, six days per week. I always recommend taking one day off per week so you don't get burned out, or to take up the slack for days in which you are sick or exceptionally busy.

The way you survey the terrain is this:

- 1) Count the number of verses in the entire book.
- 2) Divide that number by the number of verses you will memorize per week. This is how many weeks the book should take you.
- 3) Look at a calendar and determine a tentative finish date.
- 4) Add 10% so as to not feel under tremendous pressure until you get used to this lifestyle (i.e. If you are doing Ephesians—155 verses—at the rate of 6 verses per week, it will take you 26 weeks, or exactly 6 months; add 10%--3 weeks—for a total of 29 weeks).
- 5) Make a covenant before the Lord that, with his help, you will memorize this book by this date:

"Lord, having sought you in prayer, I believe that you have led me to memorize (name of the book) . I now dedicate myself to begin this task with your help and for your glory. I commit myself to memorizing this by (date) ."

Sign and date the covenant, and put it in a place where you can get to it regularly when the times get tough. The purpose of surveying the terrain is to mark out a reasonable pace which will make achievement of your goal a probability. It will teach you how much you need to do every day, and when you should finish. The survey leads to a covenant that helps you keep persevering.

Daily Procedures

Priority of reviewing old verses: Always give priority in your mind to the retaining of old verses even over the learning of new ones. What's the point in going on to new ones if you don't hold onto the old? This doesn't mean you should re-memorize the old ones... just that you should begin every day's work with review of old verses. Look on that as what you need to do to earn the privilege of acquiring some precious new verses. (Work before play!)

Repetition over time: Saying a verse 100 times in one day is not as helpful as saying it every day for 100 days. The absolute key to successful Scripture memorization is repetition over a long time period. This is how you retain old verses while learning new ones.

Memorizing the verse numbers: An important note is that it is well-worth the extra effort to memorize the verse numbers as if they were part of each verse. This will help prevent you from dropping out verses or even whole paragraphs when you're reciting the book all the way through. It will also help you in being able to pick individual verses out to quote to someone for ministry or evangelistic purposes. Finally, it will help you to be able to recall the verses as you are reading Christian books that cite them... you won't have to look them up! Ephesians 1:1-3's verse numbers would be said like this: "One-one. Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus; One-two Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. One-three Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ..." etc. Longer verse numbers are no different... Ephesians 6:11 would be "Six-eleven. Put on the full armor of God so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes." Acts 27:25-26 would be "Twenty-seven twenty-five. So keep up your courage, men, for I have faith in God that it will happen just as he told me. Twenty-seven twenty-six., Nevertheless, we must run aground on some island." DON'T SHORT-CUT THIS DISCIPLINE!! It actually makes memorization easier in the long run!

Photographing the verses with your eyes: Memorization is partly visual. This is not to say that blind people can't memorize the Bible, but just that the memorization process is connected very closely to the eye. Read each new verse ten times, covering each words as though photographing it with your eyes. I can still remember where some particular

verses were on the page of the Bible I first used to memorize them. Burn each verse into your brain with your eyes.

Say it out loud: Another help in memorizing is to say the verse out loud to yourself. The additional sensory input to your brain helps the memorization process. It doesn't have to be very loud, just loud enough so you can hear it. Also, try putting some feeling and interpretation into reciting the verses... this is actually a form of meditation on the verses as you are learning them.

Sample daily procedure: The following is an example of how someone could go about memorizing Ephesians at the rate of one verse per day:

- 1) Day one: Read Ephesians 1:1 out loud ten times, looking at each word as if photographing it with your eyes. Be sure to include the verse number. Then cover the page and recite it ten times. You're done for the day.

- 2) Day two: Yesterday's verse first!! Recite yesterday's verse, Ephesians 1:1 ten times, being sure to include the verse number. Look in the Bible if you need to, just to refresh your memory. Now, do your new verse. Read Ephesians 1:2 out loud ten times, looking at each word as if photographing it with your eyes. Be sure to include the verse number. Then cover the page and recite it ten times. You're done for the day.

- 3) Day three: Yesterday's verse first!! Recite yesterday's verse, Ephesians 1:2 ten times, being sure to include the verse number. Again, you should look in the Bible if you need to, just to refresh your memory. Old verses next, altogether: Recite Ephesians 1:1-2 together once, being sure to include the verse numbers. Now, do your new verse. Read Ephesians 1:3 out loud ten times, looking at each word as if photographing it with your eyes. Be sure to include the verse number. Then cover the page and recite it ten times. You're done for the day.

- 4) Day four: Yesterday's verse first!! Recite yesterday's verse, Ephesians 1:3 ten times, being sure to include the verse number. Again, you should look in the Bible if you need to, just to refresh your memory. Old verses next, altogether: Recite Ephesians 1:1-3 together once, being sure to include the verse numbers. Now, do your new verse. Read Ephesians 1:4 out loud ten times, looking at each word as if photographing it with your eyes. Be sure to include the verse number. Then cover the page and recite it ten times. You're done for the day.

This cycle would continue through the entire book. Obviously, the "old verses altogether" stage will soon swell to take the most time of all. That's exactly the way it should be. The entire book of Ephesians can be read at a reasonable rate in less than fifteen minutes. Therefore, the "old verses altogether" stage of your review should not take longer than that on any given day. Do it with the Bible ready at hand, in case you draw a blank or get stuck... there's no shame in looking, and it actually helps to nail down troublesome verses so they will never be trouble again. Therefore, your 60th day should look like this:

60) Day sixty: (eight days off in that span means you're on your 52nd new verse, which would be Ephesians 3:7) Yesterday's verse first!! Recite yesterday's verse, Ephesians 3:6 ten times, being sure to include the verse number. Again, you should look in the Bible if you need to, just to refresh your memory. Old verses next, altogether: Recite Ephesians 1:1-3:6 together once, being sure to include the verse numbers. LOOK IN THE BIBLE IF YOU NEED TO, SO THIS PROCESS WON'T TAKE TOO LONG!!! Now, do your new verse. Read Ephesians 3:7 out loud ten times, looking at each word as if photographing it with your eyes. Be sure to include the verse number. Then cover the page and recite it ten times. You're done for the day.

Long-Term Retention

Assuming you continue this procedure in Ephesians with no missed days (other than your one day off per week), you should be done with the whole book in 26 weeks. When you have learned Ephesians 6:24, "Six twenty-four. Grace to all who love our Lord Jesus Christ with an undying love." you should stop to celebrate!!! Get on your knees and give thanks to God for His goodness to you.

But after your celebration is done, you need to get back to work. If you have done the "old verses altogether" stage faithfully, this next stage should not be overly burdensome, even though it may seem like it will. RECITE THE ENTIRE BOOK FROM MEMORY FOR 100 CONSECUTIVE DAYS. If you have done your work well, after about the second week you probably won't even need the Bible anywhere near you while you do this. Thus, you can do this step while in the shower, while driving, while washing dishes, while walking down the road, while exercising... IT WILL ADD NO EXTRA TIME TO YOUR BUSY SCHEDULE!! What is more, it is in this stage that you begin to see the scope of the entire book of Ephesians (or whatever book you have memorized). You will see large themes that unite chapters together, you will see the flow of the argument, you will discover new things that you never knew before.

Be tough with yourself... 100 days without missing a single one! You can do it, and you'll be glad you did.

When that is over, then stick the book in a slot (Monday morning, let's say), and recite on Monday morning for the rest of your life. You will never forget it. However, don't forget to weed the garden... as I will describe now:

"Weeding the garden": As you recite a book over a long period of time without looking at the Bible, you will gradually begin to make little mistakes or leave verses out. Again, this is why memorizing verse numbers is so essential!!! However, to "weed the garden," simply take one of your Monday morning times after the 100 days (perhaps every other month) and just read the book by sight all the way through. This will correct errors... this will "weed the garden."

Now, you are ready to memorize your next book!!!

Memorizing Long Books & Memorizing Faster

After you've taken six months with Ephesians at the rate of one verse per day, you may feel that you're ready to memorize a longer book. If, for example, you memorized Romans, you would be looking at 432 verses. At the rate of one verse per day, that's close to a year and a half (with a 10% fudge factor in there). That may be too long for you... you're ready to pick up the pace. When I memorized the Gospel of Matthew, I did it at the rate of 36 verse per week... six per day, six days per week. It took me about 9 months, since I didn't maintain that pace the whole time... but Matthew is 1068 verses long... a verse a day would have been much too slow. Let's look at how to do multiple verses in a single day:

1) Day one: Read Matthew 1:1 out loud ten times, looking at each word as if photographing it with your eyes. Be sure to include the verse number. Then cover the page and recite it ten times. Repeat for verses 2 through 6, being sure to include the verse numbers. Then, recite the whole six verse section, Matthew 1:1-6, ten times. You're done for the day.

2) Day two: Yesterday's verses first!! Recite yesterday's verses, Matthew 1:1-6, ten times, being sure to include the verse numbers. Look in the Bible if you need to, just to refresh your memory. Now, do your new verses. Read Matthew 1:7 out loud ten times, looking at each word as if photographing it with your eyes. Be sure to include the verse number. Then cover the page and recite it ten times. Repeat for Matthew 1:8-12. Then, recite the whole new six verse section, Matthew 1:7-12, ten times. You're done for the day.

3) Day three: Yesterday's verses first!! Recite yesterday's verses, Matthew 1:7-12, ten times, being sure to include the verse number. Again, you should look in the Bible if you need to, just to refresh your memory. Old verses next, altogether: Recite Matthew 1:1-12 together once, being sure to include the verse numbers. Now, do your new verses. Read Matthew 1:13 out loud ten times, looking at each word as if photographing it with your eyes. Be sure to include the verse number. Then cover the page and recite it ten times. Repeat for Matthew 1:14-18. Then, recite the whole new six verse section, Matthew 1:13-18, ten times. You're done for the day.

4) Day four: Yesterday's verses first!! Recite yesterday's verses, Matthew 1:13-18, ten times, being sure to include the verse number. Again, you should look in the Bible if you need to, just to refresh your memory. Old verses next, altogether: Recite Matthew 1:1-18 together once, being sure to include the verse numbers. Now, do your new verses. Read Matthew 1:19 out loud ten times, looking at each word as if photographing it with your eyes. Be sure to include the verse number. Then cover the page and recite it ten times.

Repeat for Matthew 1:20-24. Then, recite the whole new six verse section, Matthew 1:19-24, ten times. You're done for the day.

The ongoing review (the "old verses altogether" stage) will get unwieldy once you're at chapter 7 or 8. At that point, start leaving off chapter 1, then chapter 2, then chapter 3 etc. as you continue to move through the book. Limit the amount of time you spend on the "old verses altogether" stage to fifteen or twenty minutes. Review the chapters you leave off (chapter 1, then 2, then 3) once per week. By the time you get to Matthew 28:20, you will have to divide your long-term review into reasonable portions. This is the "High School Method" of long-term review:

The High School Method of Long-Term Review (using The Gospel of Matthew as an example):

1) Read Matthew with a stop watch, and time out ten minutes of verses, reading at a normal rate. This may be Matthew 1-5, depending on your normal reading rate. Let's take that as an example. (I average about 125 verses for 10 minutes). NOTE: Stop at major chapter divisions... don't do Matthew 1:1 thru 5:37 for example. Dig deep and get to the end of the nearest chapter, even if it's 11 minutes of reading for you.

2) Recite Matthew 1-5 every day for 25 days. After about 15 days, you should be able to do it without the Bible, if you did your work well the first time you memorized these verses. Then just do it in the shower or while driving, etc. This shouldn't add anything extra to your day.

3) On the 26th day, add the next "ten minutes" of Matthew. Let's say this is Matthew 6-8. Recite Matthew 6-8 every day for 25 days, while continuing Matthew 1-5 for this time. At the end of this period, you will have done Matthew 1-5 for 50 straight days, and Matthew 6-8 for 25 straight days.

4) On the 51st day, add the next "ten minutes" (i.e. 125 verse or so) of Matthew. Let's say this is Matthew 9-12. Do these chapters for 25 days, while continuing Matthew 1-5 and 6-8. At the end of this period, you will have done Matthew 1-5 for 75 days, Matthew 6-8 for 50 days, and Matthew 9-12 for 25 days.

5) On the 76th day, add the next section... perhaps Matthew 13-15. Do these chapters for 25 days, while continuing Matthew 1-5, 6-8, and 9-12. At the end of this period, you will have done Matthew 1-5 for 100 days, Matthew 6-8 for 75 days, and Matthew 9-12 for 50 days, and Matthew 13-15 for 25 days. As in a high school, Matthew 1-5 is your "senior class", Matthew 6-8 your "junior class," Matthew 9-12 your "sophomore class," and Matthew 13-15 your "freshman class." The entire reciting process should take no more than 45 minutes, if you've done your timing right. ALSO NOTE... by this time, you should be able to recite Matthew 1-12 at least with no Bible at all... thus, it can be done while you do other things... thus, you will be sitting and doing nothing but memorization for no more than 15-20 minutes at most.

6) On the 101st day, you can "graduate" Matthew 1-5, and stick it into a "Monday slot" to do it for the rest of your life... you have done it so many times at this point, you could recite it in your sleep! (Perhaps you do!) Simply recite it every Monday, in addition to the ongoing work you're doing... or, of that's too much, just review it once a month to keep it fresh.

Now, add the next "ten minutes" of Matthew, to replace the "senior class" that just graduated... perhaps its Matthew 16-19. Keep on going with Matthew 6-8 (your new "senior class"), Matthew 9-12 ("junior class"), and Matthew 13-15 ("sophomore class"). At the end of this next period, you will have done Matthew 6-8 for 100 days, Matthew 9-12 for 75 days, Matthew 13-15 for 50 days, and Matthew 16-19 for 25 days.

7) On the 126th day, "graduate" Matthew 6-8, add Matthew 20-22, and continue. At the end of this next period, you will have done Matthew 9-12 for 100 days, Matthew 13-15 for 75 days, Matthew 16-19 for 50 days, and Matthew 20-22 for 25 days.

8) On the 151st day, "graduate" Matthew 9-12, add Matthew 23-25, and continue. At the end of this next period, you will have done Matthew 13-15 for 100 days, Matthew 16-19 for 75 days, Matthew 20-22 for 50 days, and Matthew 23-25 for 25 days.

9) On the 176th day, "graduate" Matthew 13-15, add Matthew 26-27, and continue. At the end of this next period, you will have done Matthew 16-19 for 100 days, Matthew 20-22 for 75 days, Matthew 23-25 for 50 days, and Matthew 26-27 for 25 days.

10) On the 201st day, you can "graduate" Matthew 16-19, and finally add Matthew 28 to your review cycle. Continue on, but add no new verses. Go until you have finished your 100 days on Matthew 28 (the 300th day!!). After about 25 days of doing Matthew 28, you should be able to recite the entire Gospel of Matthew at a good rate of accuracy, totally from memory. At that point, you can fall on your knees and give thanks to God for His goodness to you. But keep doing your work until you've finished your 100 days for all verses.

11) Review each section one a week or once a month as you feel the need, in order to keep it fresh.

It is my prayer that God will raise up a generation of people who do this labor, thus presenting themselves to God as those approved, workmen who do not need to be ashamed, and who correctly handle the Word of Truth. (cf. 2 Timothy 2:15) The lost in our nation and the weak and immature churches which have so proliferated are in deep need of the meat of the Word and those qualified to give it to them. May God bless your diligence and hard work!