

## Scripture Teaching 04:

# Memorize

### Intro hook:

- This morning I woke up, rolled over on my back, took a few deep breaths, and began to let Psalm 23 roll through my mind: “The Lord is my shepherd, I lack nothing ...”
- This micro-ritual of praying a Psalm when my head is still on the pillow is just my attempt to make God my first conscious thought of the day.
- Then I put my feet on the floor and pick up my Bible off my bedside table.
- Once I have my coffee, I sit down in my living room, and after a time of quiet before God, I open the Scriptures.
- I’ve done this for as long as I can remember.
- I resonate with Paul’s words to Timothy:
  - “From infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.” —2 Timothy 3v15
- In my home growing up, we had a rule: “No Bible, no breakfast,” which was my parents’ version of Bonhoeffer’s Rule of Life: “Before our daily bread should be our daily Word.”<sup>1</sup>
- Call it legalistic if you want, but I’m the eldest of four children, and decades later we all start our day in Scripture.
- The church I grew up in also ran a Scripture memorization program for children. My mom and I would spend hours writing Scriptures on flashcards and working on them every day.
- You may be brand new to following Jesus, but I say that because many of us think of Scripture memorization as what you do as a child.
- In my case, as I grew older, I continued to read Scripture daily, but I gave up this practice of memorization.
- I came of age with Google. Why put in all that work?

- But in recent years I have come full circle to realize what the wise ones of the Way of Jesus have *long* said: This practice, of storing the truth of Scripture deep in your body, isn't one you mature beyond or one that you can hack with an app or website.
- If anything, it becomes more important as we make progress in our spiritual journey.

**Turn:** And you see this in the life of Jesus. Turn with me in your Bibles to Matthew 27.

- Let's read what — in Matthew's version — were Jesus' final words before his death.

### **Matthew 27v45-46, 50**

#### **Pick up in verse 45:**

From noon until three in the afternoon darkness came over all the land. About three in the afternoon Jesus cried out in a loud voice, "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani?" (which means "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?").

#### **My God, my God:**

- You may not know this, but Jesus' final words — "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" — are a quote from Psalm 22.
- Some people misread this line to mean Jesus is doubting God, or denying his faith.
- Not at all.
- As you know, Jesus and the New Testament writers constantly quote, allude to, and hyperlink back to the Hebrew Bible.
- As a general rule, whenever you're reading the New Testament and you see a quote from the Old, if you have time, pause, put your finger down, and go back to read the quote in its full context.

**Turn:** Let's do that now; turn to Psalm 22.

- Psalm 22 is what scholars call a "Messianic Psalm," meaning, at one level, it was written by King David a thousand years before Jesus, to name his felt experience of being rejected by King Saul and the Jewish leaders, but at another level — it becomes clear as you read it — that David is prophesying about a *future* king who will go through far, far worse in order to bring about God's *final* rule and reign, not only over Israel, but over the earth.
- Look at verse one:

## Psalm 22

My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?

Why are you so far from saving me,  
so far from my cries of anguish?

- Look at verses 7 and 8:

All who see me mock me;  
they hurl insults, shaking their heads.  
“He trusts in the Lord,” they say,  
“let the Lord rescue him.  
Let him deliver him,  
since he delights in him.”

- Sound familiar? In Matthew’s narrative, they mock Jesus like this as he’s dying. Now to Psalm 22v16.

Dogs surround me,  
a pack of villains encircles me;  
they pierce my hands and my feet.

- Ring a bell? Verse 18:

They divide my clothes among them  
and cast lots for my garment.

- This is exactly what happens to Jesus on the cross, the soldiers cast lots for his robe.
- But then David’s prophecy of the Messianic king shifts gears in verse 23:

You who fear the Lord, praise him!  
All you descendants of Jacob, honor him!  
Revere him, all you descendants of Israel!  
For he has not despised or scorned  
the suffering of the afflicted one;  
he has not hidden his face from him  
but has listened to his cry for help.

### Remez:

- Do you see the parallels between this prophecy and Jesus’ story? The soldiers casting lots, the people hurling insults, the feeling of being abandoned by God, and yet the promise that God’s Messiah will come through death and out the other side in the Resurrection.

- All this rich, poetic imagination was *in* Jesus' mind as he was dying.
- But his quotation of Psalm 22 wasn't just for him, it was also for his disciples.
- His quote of Psalm 22 was a Hebrew practice called a *remez*, where a Rabbi would quote the first line of a well-known passage, and expect his listeners to call the entire passage to mind from their memories.
- Keep in mind: This was an oral culture.
- People did not have Bibles to carry around and open up at church.
- Most people had *memorized* vast swaths of the Hebrew Bible — certainly the Psalms, which were sung and therefore easier to remember.
- Even today, we do not live in an oral culture. Our brains are not trained for this, but if I said to you;
- “A long time ago in a galaxy ...” What are you thinking? “... far, far away ...” And you see the yellow scroll from Star Wars in your mind.
- Or if I said: “I’ll tell you what I want ...” What comes to mind? “What I really, really want ...”
- This is what Jesus is doing. He is drawing to mind Psalm 22, this thousand-year-old prophecy of the coming Messiah’s death, and gaining strength from its literary power for himself *and* his followers to stand and face the cross and come out the other side.

### **Memorization:**

- This practice of absorbing key passages of Scripture so deeply into our bodies that they begin to take up residence in our inner woman or man is called “memorization.”
- And it is a key aspect of meditation.
- Remember: The word “meditate” is *hagah* in Hebrew, which literally means “to murmur,” because ancient readers would read at a low whisper under their breath *because* it’s an aid to memorization.
- Neuroscientists tell us that we process words — even words on a page — through our auditory system, which is why if we read out loud, it’s easier to remember what we read.
- This discipline of memorization was a rich part of Jesus’ Jewish heritage, and by extension, of our own.

**Sticky line:** And if Jesus needed to put Scripture to memory, *how much more so do you and I?*

### Willard and the inner library:

- The philosopher Dallas Willard said the single most important spiritual discipline in his life was Scripture memorization.
- He even went so far as to say:
  - “Memorizing Scripture is even more important than a daily quiet time, for as we fill our minds with great passages and have them readily available for our meditation, ‘quiet time’ takes over the entirety of our lives.”<sup>2</sup>
- He was *not* saying, “*Don’t have a quiet time.*” I’ve been to his house. There’s still an imprint on the couch in his office from where he would read Scripture and pray every morning.
- He was saying, “It’s *crucial* to keep Scripture in your mind and heart, not just for twenty or thirty minutes every morning, but *all day long.*”
- My friend Ken Shigematsu from Vancouver, BC writes about building an “inner library” of key passages we’ve put to memory that we can draw on in our time of need.
- Scholars estimate that Jesus quoted Scripture 180 times across the four gospels. That’s quite an inner library.
- In John 16, Jesus promised his apprentices that the Holy Spirit would remind them of his words. But to do that, we have to *have* Jesus’ words in our memories!
- God’s part is to bring the right Scripture to our minds at the right time, but *our part* is to build an inner library of key passages for the Holy Spirit to access day and night.

**Hinge:** And if you’re thinking, “That sounds like a lot of work,” and again, “I have Google,” let me just name a few examples of what memorization can do, that digital tools *cannot*.

### It’s a way to:

#### 1. Hear God’s voice.

- So many people I know *wish* God would speak to them ...
- But they do not realize that one of the main ways God “speaks” to us is by bringing Scriptures to our minds.
- Just this morning, I was in prayer and I was listening for God’s voice of direction over an area of my life where I don’t know what to do. As I was waiting, I had a paragraph from James 5 come to mind where he writes about being patient.

- And I felt the Spirit clearly impress on my heart that I was to keep waiting for his will to unfold and not make a decision right now.
- The Holy Spirit was able to access James 5 from my memory bank and use it to guide the path of my life.
- But that would not have happened if, many years ago, I had not put it to memory.
- Secondly, it's a way to:

## 2. Renew our minds.

- What we think about is so incredibly important.
- Willard once said:
  - “The most important thing about us is our mind ... and the most important thing about our mind is what it is fixed upon.”<sup>3</sup>
- The problem is, left to their own devices, our minds are often a chaotic mess.
- The Hungarian psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, who was a world-renowned expert on consciousness, famously said the default state of the human mind is what he called “psychic entropy.”<sup>4</sup>
- One writer summarized his work by saying, “The undirected mind tends toward chaos.”
- Meaning, without something good, beautiful, and true to direct our minds toward, we default to negative rumination — we rehearse our mistakes (“I wish I had not said that.”), or our wounds (“I can’t believe she ...”), we play out our fears in doomsday scenarios, we fume with anger or hurt.
- We need what Paul in Romans 12 called “the renewal of the mind.”
- One of the great gifts of modern science is its insight into “neuroplasticity”: the ability of the mind — of what we think about — to rewire the neural pathways in our *brain* and change who we *are*.
- There’s a rule of thumb in neuroscience called Hebb’s law: “Neurons that fire together, wire together,” which is a way of saying that every time you think a thought, it makes it easier to think that same thought again, and again, and again, and simultaneously, *harder* to *not* think that thought!
- For better or worse!
- I think of it like ruts in a dirt road.

- We used to go camping on this ranch in Eastern Oregon every summer. When you first make a road, it's smooth, but every time you drive on a dirt road, you impact the dirt just a little. Then, repeatedly driving on it forms ruts in the road and *eventually* the ruts get so deep that you have to drive in them.
- This is why what we set our minds on will determine the kind of people we become.
- As Hwee Hwee Tan from Singapore put it: "You are what your mind thinks about; You are what you contemplate."<sup>5</sup>
- Put another way: You become like what you meditate on.
- I think of Paul's letter to the Philippians:
  - Do not be anxious about anything ...
    - Translation: Don't let psychic entropy colonize your brain! Instead ...
  - ... whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable — if anything is excellent or praiseworthy — think about such things ...
    - Other translations have "*meditate* on such things."
  - ... and the God of peace will be with you."
- And I know of no better way to fill your mind with what is true, noble, right, and pure than to memorize Scripture.
- When we do this, we partner with God to make our minds a beautiful place to live.
- Third, it's a way to:

### 3. Resist temptation.

- Think of when Jesus was in the wilderness. When he was tempted by the devil, what did he do?
- He quoted Scripture.
- "Man shall not live by bread alone."<sup>6</sup>
- The Desert Fathers and Mothers took this story very seriously, and they pointed out that Jesus didn't really engage much with the devil. He just calmly quoted Scriptures that replaced the devil's lies with the truth of God, and he moved on.
- They called this practice *antirrhēsis*, which can be translated "talking back" or "counter-speaking."
  - One fourth-century Desert Father named Evagrius the Solitary wrote a book called

*Talking Back: A Monastic Handbook for Combating Demons.*

- Best subtitle ever!
- But it's less a book and more of a manual where he just bullet points lies and temptations from the devil and then writes out a corresponding truth from Scripture.
- The monks used it to memorize the long list of Scriptures, and whenever that particular lie or temptation would come to mind, like Jesus, they would just calmly counter it with a truth from Scripture.
- Talking back.
- Finally, it's a way to:

**4. Draw on God's strength in seasons of pain and suffering.**

- A friend of mine is Dr. Gerald Sittser. In his book *A Grace Disguised*, he tells the tragic story of how he was driving with his family and they were hit head-on by a drunk driver, and in a moment, he lost his mother, his wife, and his daughter — three generations — they literally died in his arms on the side of the road.
- He instantly became a widower with three young kids.
- During that season, he was so traumatized he could barely even pray.
- But before the accident, he had memorized thirty Psalms.
- And he told me, they kicked in *in the ambulance* on the way to the hospital. He didn't even have to will it. They were just there. In his mind. A part of him.
- Then he told me something provocative. He said, "The problem with a shallow Christian faith, is, when trauma comes, people have no neural pathways to deal with it, so they just play the music of the culture — rage, blame, fear, and despair."
- It's hard to comfort yourself well during suffering in real-time; you need to have it *in you beforehand*.
- You see this in Jesus on the cross. When he was under pressure, when he was squeezed, what came out of him?
- Scripture.
- I don't know about you, but when I'm squeezed, what comes out of me is often *not* Scripture — it's cursing, or grumbling, or catastrophizing.
- But Jesus was able to draw on his inner library to face the cross with joy.



**Point:** Do you see why memorization is such an important tool in our spiritual formation?

- Is it any wonder some scholars argue the most common command in all of Scripture is “Remember”?
- All of us are prone to spiritual amnesia — to forget what we need to hear again and again.
- God has spoken his Word of life to us.
- That’s his part.
- Our part is to *remember*.

**Hinge:** I hope that over the last four sessions, it’s become clear to you: Scripture isn’t just a book or a library, it’s a key mechanism of how we are formed.

- The Anglican scholar N.T. Wright said it this way:
  - “The Bible isn’t simply a repository of true information about God, Jesus, and the hope of the world. It is, rather, part of the means by which, in the power of the Spirit, the living God rescues his people and his world, and takes them forward on the journey toward his new creation, and makes us agents of that new creation even as we travel.”<sup>7</sup>

**Recap:** This is why:

- We *read* Scripture.
- And *meditate* on Scripture.
- And *study* Scripture.
- And *memorize* Scripture.

**Seam:** As we come to the end of this Practice ...

**Ending:**

- Our prayer for you as we conclude is not just that you get a better grasp of the literary nature of the Bible and play around with a few different ways of engaging with it ...
- But that you make the regular reading of Scripture, morning by morning, an anchor for your life with God.

**And as you practice, know ...**

- Short-term, most days it's just daily bread. You likely don't remember what you ate three days ago. Yet it's why you are still alive.
- But long-term, the goal is that through the "renewal of the mind" our "psychic entropy" is transformed into the "mind of Christ."
- We begin not just to think *about* Scripture, but *to think* Scripture or to *think Scripturally*.
- The goal is for God's thoughts to imprint so deeply on the neural pathways of our brains that when we are squeezed or when all is well we just naturally think the way God thinks and feel the way God feels, we see the world through his eyes, and we live with and *in* God, like Jesus.

### **But this may take a very long time ...**

As a therapist said to me recently, "It's gonna take a minute."

Taking on the mind of Christ inside the psychic entropy of our brains is the lifelong process of discipleship to Jesus.

As we daily immerse our minds in Scripture and draw near to God, slowly but surely, over years, and decades, inch by inch, Christ himself is formed in us.

So tomorrow morning as you rise, may you "go to the one your soul loves," and may you meet Jesus on every page.

---

### **Notes**

1. Bonhoeffer, D. (1986). *Meditating on the Word*. Cowley Publications.
2. Willard, D. (2018). *Life Without Lack: Living in the Fullness of Psalm 23*. Thomas Nelson.
3. Willard, D. (2018). *Life Without Lack*.
4. Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1990). *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*. HarperCollins.
5. Tan, Hwee Hwee (2001). *In Search of the Lotus Land*. Quarterly Literary Review Singapore. Vol. 1 No. 1.
6. Deuteronomy 8v3 (ESV)
7. Wright, N.T. (2006). *Simply Christian: Why Christianity Makes Sense*. HarperCollins.

# Cutting Room Floor Research

For each Practice, we commission freelance researchers to explore key questions related to the Practice content. Their findings help shape our resources and ensure they are accurate and informative. However, due to video length constraints, we often have to omit some great material. [This document](#) features some of the omitted research related to the Scripture Practice.