

CHAPTER 6

HOW TO MEMORISE AND MEDITATE ON SCRIPTURE AND WHY YOU SHOULD DO BOTH

“And Isaac went out to meditate in the field toward evening.....”
Genesis 26:63(a)(ESV)

⁸ *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. For then you will make your way prosperous, and then you will have good success.*

Joshua 1:8 (ESV)

²⁶ *But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, he will teach you all things and bring to your remembrance all that I have said to you.*

John 14:26 (ESV)

¹¹ *I will remember the deeds of the Lord;
yes, I will remember your wonders of old.*

¹² *I will ponder all your work,
and meditate on your mighty deeds.*
Psalm 77:11-12 (ESV)

*I will meditate on your precepts
and fix my eyes on your ways.*
Psalm 119:15 (ESV)

⁵ *I remember the days of old;
I meditate on all that you have done;
I ponder the work of your hands.*
Psalm 143:5 (ESV)

The importance of memorizing passages of Scripture

Our generation has lost the art of memorizing anything, whether Scripture, or poetry, or otherwise. It seems like too much effort, and we don't see others doing it, so most of us don't bother. It's quite rare even to hear of memorization being suggested today. That wasn't always the case. Past generations saw the value of it and they made the effort.

Even at school, our grandparents were required to memorise vast amounts of poetry, plus other facts and figures, which schools today wouldn't even attempt to get children to learn. Teachers assume now that it is asking too much of children. However, it isn't too difficult, and it really is worth the effort. If we can memorise individual verses, but better still longer passages, we will benefit greatly from it. Therefore the Bible urges us to do so. The Psalmist speaks of this:

*I have laid up thy word in my heart,
that I might not sin against thee.*
Psalm 119:11 (RSV)

*I will delight in thy statutes;
I will not forget thy word.*
Psalm 119:16 (RSV)

When we memorize Scripture it becomes part of us. It influences our thinking far more than when we merely hear it or read it, even if we know the gist of it quite well. There is a profound difference between merely being *aware* of a passage and having it fully memorized. When we have learned a passage word-perfect, and can quote it accurately whenever we wish to, then that passage has sunk into us and become part of our 'software'.

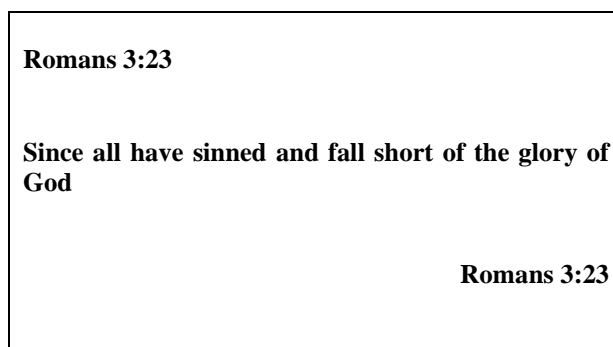
It then ceases to be something we have merely heard of, or are aware of, and becomes something we really know. That is far deeper and more significant. We are changed by verses that we have memorized far more than by those with which we are merely familiar. If you now set yourself the objective of starting to memorise Scripture, you will not regret it, however much effort it requires. It is no exaggeration to say that it will change your life.

The people I have most admired over the years have tended to be those who could accurately quote the Bible, word perfect, in every situation. The classic example would be the late Dave Hunt. He was brought up by godly parents and teachers who instilled in him the habit of Scripture memory, and from an early age. So, when Dave Hunt took part in debates, as he often did, he was far more effective than his opponent.

He had the Word of God at his fingertips and could quote it confidently whenever he needed to. It gave great authority to everything he had to say when he was debating with other Christians, who had not spent a lifetime memorizing Scripture. The difference really showed and I found Dave Hunt to be an inspiration. Jesus had the same approach. He quoted regularly from the Old Testament. So did Apostle Paul.

How to memorise Scripture

The only effective way to memorize Scripture is slowly and steadily. It can't be done in a hurry. The best method is to get some blank cards about the same size as business cards and to write out on them the verses that you wish to memorise. Or you can write them on the back of actual business cards. That is what I do. Put the reference at the beginning and again at the end. For example, this is how you might show a short verse like Romans 3:23:



The reason to include the reference as well as the verse is that you need to be able to remember exactly where it comes from, not just what it says. Then you can immediately refer to it, and point to where it comes from. That is particularly helpful if you are sharing the Gospel with an unsaved person. It enables you to turn to the right passage in the Bible with no delay or difficulty.

The reason for quoting the reference twice, i.e. at the beginning and the end, is that it helps to fix it in your mind much better. It is a tried and tested method and it really works. So, you choose appropriate verses and then write them out and begin to memorize them at the rate of perhaps one or two a week or, at most, three or four per week. If you try to do any more than that it is likely to fall apart after a few weeks.

The best method it is to learn the passages "by mouth", as the Jewish people say. That means to say the verses *out loud*, not just silently in your head. That fixes it far more solidly in your memory. However, it is not always possible to speak out loud. If so, then whisper the verses very quietly so that only you can hear. Even that is much better than doing it silently, entirely within your head.

When I was a new believer, in 1981, I got a job in Paris for the summer, working in a shop. That involved me travelling on the Metro for nearly two hours per day, because I had to make two return trips. I used that travel time for Scripture memory work and memorized 60 separate passages during that summer. I couldn't speak out loud on the Metro, but I could mouth the words quietly to myself.

The physical movement of the mouth and tongue really helps to fix the words in your memory and also helps when you later wish to quote the verse out loud. Your tongue itself becomes familiar with the words and rhythm and helps you to remember the passage. It is very like the concept of "finger memory" when one is playing the piano.

It works best if you devote one week to learning the new verse in a concentrated way. After that you merely review it to reinforce it and keep it in your memory. So, in week one you should speak the verse perhaps 20 times a day, making a total of 140 repetitions. That should basically get it into your memory.

However, it won't be word-perfect yet. To achieve that you need ongoing review and repetition of the verses you already know. In week one you will only have one or two passages to learn, so it will seem quite easy. However the problem is that, as the weeks go by, the numbers build up, because of the need to review verses from previous weeks.

From week two onwards, for say six to ten weeks, repeat the verse out loud about 3-5 times per day. That is perhaps another 200-300 repetitions in total, and will help to reinforce it and make it permanent. After that, you can go down to reviewing your previous passages only about once a month. That will keep your memory topped up.

It is also important to say the verses in the same way each time with the same rhythm and pauses and the same expression and emphasis on particular words or syllables. You will find that that approach makes it far easier to speak out a verse from memory. Your tongue will carry you along once you get started because it has become so familiar with the rhythm as well as the words.

It is very important to get the passages absolutely word-perfect, without any stumbling or hesitating. Getting them 90%, or even 99% accurate, is not good enough. If you've only got to that level of accuracy you haven't learned them well enough. You are probably going too quickly. It is much better to go slowly and do it properly than to go quickly and do a shoddy job of it.

A good selection of verses to begin memorizing might be the ones set out in Appendix Two at the end of the *online* version of this book, which is on our website: www.realchristianity.com Please look this up on there. I have put lots of verses into little boxes, which are about the size of business cards. If you wish, you could print off some or all of them, preferably using a fairly thick card, and then cut them up and use them to memorize.

Please note that all of the verses on the cards in Appendix Two on our website are from the *English Standard Version* (ESV). Details of this version can be found in chapter 11 below. It is a good and accurate translation and is becoming more widely used. Moreover, it should be around for the long term.

Moving on to memorizing whole chapters, or even whole books, of the Bible

Once you have got used to the idea of memorizing short passages of Scripture, it is time to consider learning longer passages such as whole chapters or even entire books or letters. You might imagine

that this would be incredibly difficult or even impossible. I thought so myself at one time. However, it is nothing like as hard as you might think, provided you are willing to be diligent and patient.

In fact, learning whole chapters can, in some ways, be easier than learning lots of separate short passages. A whole chapter or book holds together as a structure. Therefore, once you have memorized it, you will find that it flows easily. Each verse leads you into the next as if they were all chained to each other, like the carriages of a train.

Moreover, you will find that even if, with your mind, you are sometimes unsure what the next line is going to be, your *mouth* knows it. So, as with 'finger memory' with the piano, your mouth knows what the next line is and says it automatically. You get that benefit of 'mouth memory' far more strongly when memorizing whole chapters than with single verses or even short passages. That is because each of the verses in the chapter are hooked together.

So the ending of one verse prompts you, or at least your mouth, to know what the next word is. Then, that word leads you on and you flow automatically into the next verse or section. Let me now give a few tips, from my own experience, about how best to memorize whole chapters and series of chapters. Begin by choosing a chapter, or a whole letter or book, that particularly interests you, and which you are eager to learn. That will help with motivation.

Then go on to the internet to a website called *Bible Gateway* on **www.biblegateway.com** and get the Bible translation that you wish to use up on screen. Then print off the chapter that you want onto sheets of A4 paper. Use a very large font size, so that the words are easy to read, even from a distance. That is important, because you may want to learn the verses while doing something else, such as cooking or going on the exercise treadmill etc. If so, you will need to be able to see the text from some distance away.

Also, make sure you print off a number of copies of each chapter, so that you can put them in different rooms, ready for whenever you go in there. I recommend that you use these loose sheets of paper, rather than the whole Bible, as they are much easier to carry around with you. Plus you will find that the process of learning will eventually wear out the sheets, because you will need to take them around the house with you into the kitchen, bathroom, garage etc.

You may even choose to take them outdoors, such as when you walk the dog, work in the garden, travel by train or bus, or even drive your car. I keep spare copies available so that they can be used in all those places. For example, I will clip a sheet or sheets up by the mirror in the bathroom or on the outside of the shower. Then I can refer to the sheets when reciting the chapter. So, if I get stuck, I can immediately get re-started and can also avoid reinforcing errors.

It is essential to have the sheets in front of you when you are first starting to learn a brand new section. You have to keep them in view so that you can read the verses as you recite the new section. If not you will make mistakes and those errors will start to get ingrained into your memory. So it is important to have the sheet to hand at all times when you first start to memorize a passage in order to avoid remembering any of it wrongly to begin with. Such errors, once embedded in your memory, can be very hard to unlearn later on.

If I am driving I will keep sheets on the passenger seat so that I can pick them up and refer to them as and when necessary i.e. when the traffic stops for a red light, or where there is a queue. If I am walking the dog I keep sheets in my hand or pocket. Even if I run on the treadmill, I clip sheets to the display stand and I recite while running. Memorizing while you are already doing something else means that it doesn't use up any extra time, because you were already travelling, gardening, cooking, showering, walking the dog etc anyway.

It is also important before printing them off, to break up the chapter(s) into short sections of about 2-4 verses rather than leave them as one long continuous block. Dividing it up into little blocks makes it

so much easier. So a chapter of say 30 verses might be split, on average, into about 10 sections, each of 2-4 verses, depending on the length of the verses and where the natural breaks or changes of subject occur within that chapter.

The point is that each section of 2-4 verses is quite easy to memorise and it breaks the overall task down into about ten manageable parts. It also enables you to set little targets for yourself and it aids motivation. So, you begin with the first section and start to memorize just that, and nothing more, at this stage. This is how I go about it. Even within that section, I will take the first verse by itself and say it, *while reading it*, about 20-25 times.

If it is a very long verse of say 3 or 4 lines, you may find it helpful to split that verse into two parts so that the series of words you are trying to learn is not too long to remember in one go. If you try to memorize too much in one go, it will actually slow you down. Also, don't try to do it from memory at this very early stage, without looking at the sheet, because you haven't yet learned it.

If you do, you are likely to make little errors which you would then need to 'unlearn'. Therefore keep the sheet nearby or in your hand to read from until you are confident that you can say it unaided. That first verse is then sufficiently familiar to enable you to recite it without looking at the sheet. Then recite it without the sheet, say another 15-20 times, until you are really fluent.

By this point you have reached the *first* stage of memorizing. That is you know it well enough to recite it without the sheet. But you still have much farther to go to get it really ingrained into your memory. So, you can't just stop there. As you do all this, you should initially try different ways of saying the words and emphasize or stress different words or syllables until you settle upon what seems to you be the right rhythm and have decided where to lay the emphasis/stress.

You want it to read well and sound natural, with feeling, as a good reader would speak it out. Don't say it in a lifeless, monotonous tone of voice. That liveliness of tone and rhythm is actually important. It is necessary in order to convey the meaning in the best way, but it also helps you to memorize. The rhythm and lilt of your voice, and the choices you make as to the particular words or syllables to stress, all combine to hold the entire verse together.

They also help to link it to the verses around it. The rhythm and emphasis etc become an integral part of the memorizing process. They help to 'glue' the words to each other and to fix them in your memory, in particular your '*mouth memory*', more so than in your mind. It is very much like the way that a tune helps you to memorise the words of a song. The way you pronounce and express the words as you speak becomes almost a form of spoken tune.

I try to express the words as I imagine the writer, for example apostle Paul, may have spoken them when he was dictating them out loud, or as an actor might say them if speaking on stage. It makes the verse much more meaningful and vivid but, above all, it helps you to memorize it. So, once you are reasonably fluent with the first verse, then, likewise, do the second verse *on its own* about 20-25 times, *while reading it*, as with the first verse.

Then, once you are fluent and error-free, say it about 20 times while not reading it, i.e. from memory alone. Then do the same for the third and perhaps the fourth verse in that section. Once you have got familiar with each verse *on its own*. You can begin to learn that whole section, reciting all 2-4 verses, together in a continuous flow.

It is very important that you break the process up in this way and learn the verses on their own first, because each section has to hold together as a short passage by itself if you are to learn the whole chapter or book. It is much easier to put the verses of each section together to make a whole section if each verse is already familiar on its own.

It prevents you from fizzling out and getting stuck in the second or third verse and thus being unable to complete the whole section. It also prevents you from giving excessive or disproportionate attention to the first verse in each section, which is what you would do if you tried to learn all 2-4 verses as a whole in one go rather than one verse at a time.

Quite soon you will be able to say that first 2-4 verse section all together, as a whole. At that point, practice reciting all of the 2-4 verses repeatedly, maybe 20-25 times or more. That will cement those verses to each other as a section. When you eventually reach the point where you can recite the section flawlessly, you are ready to learn the second section. Do that in the very same way, on its own, just as set out above.

What I mean is don't, at this stage, recite the second section together with the first section, i.e. don't recite the first section and then follow on into the second one. Do the second one *by itself*, as a stand-alone passage, just as you learned the first one. That way you will ensure that you give it the same amount of time and attention as you gave to the first section. Otherwise, the sections at the start of a chapter will get too much attention and those at or near the end will get too little.

Then, when you have properly learned the second section, start to recite the two sections together, i.e. with the first one continuing on into the second, so you are speaking perhaps 4-8 verses out loud in one go. Once that has been achieved, so that you can fluently recite the first two sections together, you are then ready to start to learn the third section.

However, that too must be learned on its own first, not in conjunction with the ones you have already learned. Then you can add that third section, as above, until you can recite the first three sections all together, one after the other.

That is how you build up, stage by stage, and 'assemble' the whole chapter. It is as if you were constructing a building using pre-fabricated sections of concrete which are each built on their own and then put together. The advantage of this system is that you give equal weight to each section and thoroughly learn each one.

That would not occur if you always began reciting at verse one every time. The later verses in the middle and end of a chapter would inevitably be neglected, or at least given less attention by comparison with the earlier ones. If you did that you might learn the beginning extremely well, but you would be unable to get right to the end without losing your way in the middle or end of the chapter and getting stuck.

Once I have learned a few sections, what I also do, to equalize the attention I give to each section, and also to help me to link them together, is to begin by reciting the last line, or the last few words, of the *previous* section before launching into reciting the one I am currently learning. Then it means that the end of one section and the start of the next one are firmly cemented together in your mind. Moreover, each one becomes hooked to the next one.

So, as you finish one section, the first word of the next section will spring automatically into your mind. For example, it might look like this, taking two sections of Romans chapter eight. Imagine you split the start of that chapter into sections consisting of verses 1-4 then 5-8 and then 9-11. The second section therefore ends with verse 8, which reads "*and those who are in the flesh cannot please God*".

Then, verse 9, which starts the next section, reads "*But you are not in the flesh, you are in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells in you.*" Then it continues for three more verses. The point is that if you are currently learning the section consisting of verses 9-11 then it helps if you *lead into that* by reciting the final verse of the previous section, i.e. verse 8, or even the last few words, if it happens to be a very long verse.

The lead up then creates a link in your memory between verse 8 and verse 9 and joins them together like two railway carriages. Then, later on when you are reciting the whole chapter, or a whole book, the end of each section and the start of the next will be connected in your mind. Therefore you won't grind to a halt at the end of one section, having no idea of what comes next.

That can easily occur, even if you have memorized each of them well, if you haven't taken the trouble to link the sections together. Indeed, I often also recite just the last verse of one section and the first verse of the next, just by themselves, to really underline and strengthen that link.

When you get to the end of a chapter it is also essential to say the name of the next chapter before you begin to recite from it. So, actually say out loud "*Romans Chapter Four*" before you press on and begin to recite that chapter. That will help you in future to be able to begin reciting from any chapter in a book, rather than always feeling you have to start at chapter one.

You can also use the very same device referred to above for linking sections together in order to link *chapters* together. That is you can recite the final verse or phrase of the previous chapter before then saying "Romans Chapter Four" and continuing. That helps to prevent you from getting a mental blockage at the end of any chapter. You will always know what comes next and can then flow naturally into the next chapter.

When choosing which version of the Bible to use for memory work, you mainly need to consider which gives the most accurate rendering of the verse. Refer to chapter 11 below which addresses that question. You would also be wise to use a version which is likely to remain in use long term, rather than one which may only be a temporary fashion, and might no longer be in print in 20 years. So, you may be best to use versions like the NASB, or King James, because they are tried and tested and are here to stay.

Before you memorize a passage, it may be a good idea to read it in different versions and choose the one which is the clearest. You need not necessarily choose the same version for all your memory work, though it is probably best to use one version most of the time. You may also want to consider buying sets of cards with passages of Scripture already printed on them.

These are produced by an evangelical group called '*The Navigators*'. Their cards are useful and make it a lot easier for you, because the passages they choose are set out in sensible groupings. You can get these cards from Christian bookshops or from the internet at www.navigators.org/us

What it means to 'meditate' on a passage of Scripture

The word '*meditate*' conjures up impressions of Eastern religions and sounds a bit weird. However, what the Bible means by meditating on Scripture has got nothing to do with the false practices one sees within Buddhism, yoga etc. What they mean by meditating has to do with *emptying* one's mind, but what the Bible speaks of is the very *opposite*. It is to *focus* one's mind on a passage of Scripture, and to consider it, study it and reflect on it at length:

***but his delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law he meditates day and night.***

Psalm 1:2 (RSV)

I remember an alarming incident which occurred when our son was 7 years old and at primary school. One day, without our knowledge, or any warning, the teacher got the children to do some yoga, which is an occult practice. She said to the children "*empty your minds of all thoughts*". We had not warned our son of such things, because we hadn't even imagined that it would ever arise as an issue for him. We asked him what he had done, fearing that he may have taken part in it.

However, God had obviously stepped in to protect him, because he said: “*I didn’t do it. When Mrs..... said “empty your minds”, I just decided to think about Jesus instead*”. That had not come from us. Clearly, God had spoken directly to our seven year old to protect him from doing wrong and from being harmed.

Meditation, in the biblical sense, has got nothing to do with the occultic practices of yoga or Buddhism. It means focusing on a passage of Scripture and '*ruminating*' on it, rather like a cow does when it chews its cud. The way a cow digests grass is to chew it and then swallow it and then to bring it back up again two or more times, so as to chew it again, repeatedly. That way it can break the grass up more and get extra nutrients from it.

So, with a passage of Scripture, if we meditate or ruminate on it, it means we keep going back to it and reflecting on it, seeking to gain more insights from it, and additional ways of applying it. The point is that, even in a single verse, there can be so much meaning, and so many potential insights and angles from which to view it, that it cannot always be picked up in one reading.

A good idea is to practise the discipline of repeating the verse or passage, but emphasising a different word each time. It is surprising how many more nuances will emerge as a result of doing that. Also, ask yourself questions and even write down your questions as they occur to you. One of the ways God guides us, and illuminates the Scriptures to us, is to help us to think of the right questions to ask, i.e. those which open up the passage and are most probing and insightful.

How to meditate on a passage of Scripture

In practical terms, if you wanted to meditate (or ruminate) on a particular passage, you could go about it as follows:

- a) Write it out by hand onto a card or sheet, or print off the section you need from the internet, using the Bible Gateway website, as set out earlier.
- b) Get it out and read it out loud at various times of the day, or at least once or twice. This element of repetition, i.e. going back to think about it again and again, is the key. That is how further insights are gained. Thus, you could keep referring back to it throughout the day or over a series of days as the Psalmist did:

*O how I love Your law!
It is my meditation all the day.
Psalm 119:97 (NASB)*

- c) Ask God to reveal more of the meaning of the passage to you and to put into your mind relevant and insightful questions about it.
- d) Consider the scene or the circumstances being described in the passage and reflect on how each of the characters in the passage may have felt. For example, if you were to meditate on the passage about the prodigal son, you could ponder on how the father felt, and then how the prodigal son and the elder brother must have felt. Imagine how the position may have seemed to each of them as events progressed. In doing this, thoughts will occur to you which may assist you to understand the passage more fully. However, not all the thoughts you have will be worthwhile or valid. It depends whether they are consistent with Scripture. If not, then discard them.
- e) You may even wish to look at some commentaries on the passage in question and see what various commentators in the past have said. Each one will inevitably put forward some insights that have not occurred to you, or even to other commentators.

You can buy commentaries in Christian bookshops or via the internet. But be careful. They are not all equally good. Some are very wrong or misguided. They may be written by liberals or sceptics or by people who adopt the allegorical approach. Or it could even be by someone whose interest in the Bible is purely academic and who has no genuine faith at all. Any of these types of writers could easily confuse your own thinking and undermine your faith, especially if you are not aware that they have these various forms of unbelief.

- f) If you go further and memorise the passage it will make it even easier for you to keep bringing it to mind, so as to reflect on it. You will be able to do so even when you do not have a Bible to refer to. For example, you could recite verses out loud while driving, doing the washing up, or walking the dog etc. That will provide you with many more opportunities to reflect on the meaning of the passage.
- g) Write down the thoughts or insights you have in a journal so that you don't forget them.