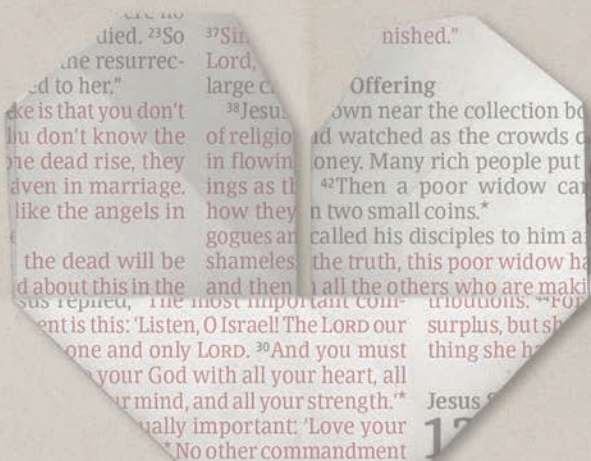


MEMORIZING  
SCRIPTURE  
FOR KINGDOM IMPACT



# hide this in your heart

MICHAEL FROST &  
GRAHAM JOSEPH HILL

Shortly after coming to faith, I was introduced to Scripture memory through The Navigators' Topical Memory System. This launched me on a passionate pursuit to continuously hide God's Word in my heart. Years later, I heard Michael Frost expound on the BELLS habits for living on mission (explained in his book *Surprise the World*). I love that *Hide This in Your Heart* combines the life-altering missional engagement of BELLS with the equally life-changing power of Scripture memory. Those who combine the discipline of Scripture memory with the practice of radically loving people will be deeply blessed—and will become a profound blessing to the people in their world.

AL ENGLER, mission director, The Navigators

What a timely book for us, as followers of Jesus, in this current landscape. So often memorizing Scripture and getting on mission are seen as opposed disciplines. However, the longer I join God at work and follow in his Son's footsteps, the more I realize that I need good rhythms in my life and that my own disciplines of prayer and reading are tied up in my understanding of God and his Kingdom. This book is a fantastic practical read for anyone wanting to grow healthy rhythms and fall in love with Scripture in fresh ways. I highly recommend it from two friends and colleagues whose lives have been lived out in these pages.

KIM HAMMOND, lead pastor, CityLife Church in Casey, Australia; coauthor of *Sentness: Six Postures of Missional Christians*

What a wonderful pairing of Frost and Hill, showing us how to ground our lives in the meditations, mantras, and truths of the Bible. To memorize Scripture is to be formed by the wisdom of God in Christ for the love of the world. This book is an essential guide for our time.

CHRISTIANA RICE, codirector, Parish Collective; coauthor of *To Alter Your World: Partnering with God to Rebirth Our Communities*



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*Hide This in Your Heart: Memorizing Scripture for Kingdom Impact*

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# introduction

## How Memorizing the Bible Empowers Us for Discipleship and Mission

*There is no standing still. Every gift, every increment of knowledge and insight I receive only drives me deeper into the word of God. . . . God has given us the Scripture, from which we are to discern God's will. The Scripture wants to be read and thought about, every day afresh.*

DIETRICH BONHOEFFER

In 2018, Baeble Music released its list of the top karaoke songs of all time. You don't have to particularly like any of these songs or even have been born in the era when they were hits to have some of the lyrics of every one of these songs buried in your brain somewhere. From the list:<sup>1</sup>

1. "Mr. Brightside"—The Killers
2. "You Oughta Know"—Alanis Morissette
3. "I Will Always Love You"—Whitney Houston
4. "Don't Stop Believin'"—Journey
5. "Cheerleader"—OMI
6. "Wonderwall"—Oasis
7. "Ain't No Mountain High Enough"—Marvin Gaye and Tammi Terrell
8. "(You Make Me Feel Like) A Natural Woman"—Aretha Franklin
9. "Under Pressure"—Queen and David Bowie
10. "Lose Yourself"—Eminem



Go on, admit it. You heard a strain of “Just a small town girl / Livin’ in a lonely world,” didn’t you? What about “And I wish to you joy and happiness / But above all this, I wish you love”? We might not know the whole song, and we might have even misheard or misremembered the lyrics, but a couple of lines like “Maybe, you’re gonna be the one that saves me / And after all, you’re my wonderwall”—well, they really stick, don’t they? They’re not called earworms for nothing.

What about lines from movies? We have friends who can quote whole scenes from *The Big Lebowski*. And everyone knows “I’ll have what she’s having,” from *When Harry Met Sally* . . . , or “You complete me,” from *Jerry Maguire*, or “I’m going to make him an offer he can’t refuse,” from *The Godfather*. It never ceases to amaze people what bits of useless dialogue they have rattling around in their brains. Jack Nicholson’s courtroom testimony in *A Few Good Men* or Al Pacino’s speech to the school board hearing in *Scent of a Woman*. Stupid gags from Ron Burgundy or Michael Scott. The esoteric musings of Dale Cooper. What’s the use of knowing all that stuff? Is our memory just a repository for random bits of pointless data?

And yet memorization used to be a central part of learning. I (Michael) am just old enough to remember, when I was a young student in Australia, being made to recite long swathes of poetry or learn multiplication tables by rote. We were forced to memorize the periodic table of elements, and (for some reason) we had to be able to recount every river that flows into the eastern seaboard of Australia from north to south, and the major towns on its banks! I hated it—mostly because we got hit with a ruler if we got it wrong; things have changed a lot since then, thank goodness.

Memorization has a bad rap these days. Mainly because we know that information learned by rote in school is soon forgotten when we have no other use for it, but also because we live in an age when impromptu expression is more highly valued than memorized screeds.

Note how today people think public prayer is more meaningful if it’s made up right there on the spot. We’re suspicious of memorized liturgies

because we assume they don't come from the heart. We prefer preachers who appear to be presenting extemporaneously to those who are either reading their notes or reciting them by rote. We don't trust politicians who are woodenly following a teleprompter. Our love of unrehearsed speech and our skepticism about memorized information have meant that no one commits anything to memory much anymore, except maybe PIN numbers.

And yet, in his treatise *On the Education of Children*, Plutarch claimed memory was a key component in the development of students:

Above all, the memory of children should be trained and exercised; for this is, as it were, a storehouse of learning; and it is for this reason that the mythologists have made Memory the mother of the Muses, thereby intimating by an allegory that there is nothing in the world like memory for creating and fostering.<sup>2</sup>

In other words, the brain is a muscle, and if you want it to be strong enough to be creative and intelligent, you have to exercise it. According to Plutarch, rote learning is like burpees for the brain. We might forget useless information we memorized, but the process of learning it was good for us.

So how come I can't recite those Australian rivers in geographical order anymore, but if I walk into a pub and someone is singing Billy Joel's *Piano Man*, I know every word?

Poet and novelist Brad Leithauser has some thoughts on that. Writing for the *New Yorker* on the memorization of poetry, he says,

The best argument for verse memorization may be that it provides us with knowledge of a qualitatively and physiologically different variety: you take the poem inside you, into your brain chemistry if not your blood, and you know it at a deeper, bodily level than if you simply read it off a screen.<sup>3</sup>

Whereas the recitation of poetry once achieved this, today it's pop music and dialogue from television and film that fill that role, conforming our hearts to the beat of their sometimes strange rhythm. So memory is important for the development of our brains, and poetry and pop songs are easier to memorize than Greek declensions or the periodic table (believe us!). But memorization is even more important than you might realize.

In her book *Heart Beats: Everyday Life and the Memorized Poem*, historian Catherine Robson explores how the memorization and recitation of poetry changed people from a previous era by changing the world in which they lived. It is a fascinating study of the history of rote learning and the public recitation of poetry, which was a mandatory teaching practice in England from around 1875 to the mid-1900s. She writes, "When we do not learn by heart, the heart does not feel the rhythms of poetry as echoes or variations of its own insistent beat."<sup>4</sup> Robson says there were a number of reasons for this focus on memorization:

- to foster a love of poetry and words;
- to boost a child's confidence through a mastery of elocution, while also purging the idioms and accents of lower-class speech;
- to exercise the brain, as Plutarch suggested; and
- to develop nationalistic zeal through the construction of a highly patriotic canon of poems that promote English values.

In other words, poetry recitation was used to make English kids properly English (as it was understood at the time). When Victorian-era children recited, "The boy stood on the burning deck . . ." they were doing more than exercising their brain. They were being *made* by the words.

Today we know that an insidious classist, nationalistic agenda inspired this British emphasis on memorization. Memorization in itself, then, isn't transformative. It's *what* you memorize that counts. A case could be (indeed *should* be) made that memorizing portions of the Bible can make Christian people properly Christian—not because the words are somehow magical, but because we're doing what Leithauser

described: taking the words inside us, into our brains and our blood, so that “you know it at a deeper, bodily level than if you simply read it off a screen.”

## Expanding Our Kingdom Vision

More than fifty years ago, The Navigators released the Topical Memory System (TMS). It offered a simple system for memorizing Bible verses that help you live a new life, proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, rely on God’s resources, be a disciple, and grow in Christlikeness. A sibling edition would focus on life issues: dealing with anger, sin, sex, money, suffering, and more. The verses chosen for memorization encouraged Christians to experience victory over sin, overcome fear and worry, enjoy boldness in witness, discover fresh depths of discipleship, and move from egotism to humility.

The TMS has a great story—decades of Christians whose faith lives have been enriched by its focus on divine love, transformed hearts, and foundational texts for an evangelical theology. But every tool has its limits, and we and others have observed that the verses included in the TMS don’t touch on the more communal, social, and missional implications of the gospel. It is possible, then, for someone to do the good work of memorizing Scripture through a system like the TMS and come out on the other end assuming the gospel to be entirely individualistic, even egocentric.

This is not to say that the verses commended by the TMS are unimportant—they are the Word of God, after all—but there are many sections of Scripture also worthy of memorization that the TMS doesn’t touch, and those sections can expand our Kingdom vision to include a life of justice and mercy, peacemaking and reconciliation.

Some people remain unconvinced that God calls us to a life of justice and reconciliation. Recently, I (Michael) tweeted something about God’s call to the church to enact justice, and someone replied, “Where in Holy Scriptures does it state social justice? Christ said go and proclaim the

gospel, not social justice. If Christ said proclaim social justice, I want Scripture to back it up” (actual tweet).

Fair enough. So I gave him some Scripture, to which he responded, “Okay. Just wanted clarity. So many people would not see that. Thank you” (also actual tweet).

As simple as that!

Rick Warren once said he immersed himself in the Bible and found two thousand verses on the poor. “How did I miss that? I went to Bible college, two seminaries, and I got a doctorate. How did I miss God’s compassion for the poor? I was not seeing all the purposes of God.”<sup>5</sup>

Memorizing Scripture shouldn’t just help us internalize the key themes of our faith or overcome personal difficulties. We need an approach to Bible memorization that helps us embrace a Kingdom and missional theology, that leads us to whole-of-life discipleship, and that aids the Jesus-reflecting and activist Christian life. This book offers such an approach to Bible memory. It immerses you in many of the great (but often forgotten or neglected) themes of Scripture. These include hospitality, reconciliation, justice, peacemaking, compassion, love of enemies, sentness, and more. As you memorize (and visualize) and learn (relationally and through practices) key verses related to these biblical themes, you are empowered to live a surprising, “questionable” life.

In *Surprise the World*, I (Michael) wrote, “The fact is that we all recognize the need to live generous, hospitable, Spirit-led, Christlike lives as missionaries to our own neighborhoods. We want to live our faith out in the open for all to see.”<sup>6</sup> That’s where the five habits in *Surprise the World* come in (Bless, Eat, Listen, Learn, Sent—BELLS), as well as this fresh approach to Bible memorization. Together, these habits and this new commitment to Bible memorization “equip believers to see themselves as ‘sent ones,’ to foster a series of missional habits that shape our lives and values, and to propel us into the world confidently and filled with hope.”<sup>7</sup>

This book offers an approach to Scripture memorization that helps us develop a radical Christian faith and an activist spirituality. Our

approach to Bible memorization uses the latest science about how the brain works, how relationships form us, and how habits and practices shape us. Our method moves us away from an individualistic and intellectual form of Bible memory to one that aids us to be agents of reconciliation, prophets of justice, people of peace, and disciples who join with Jesus in his mission. As a companion to *Surprise the World*, this Bible memory approach is shaped around those five habits: blessing others, eating with others, listening to the Holy Spirit, learning Christ through focused study in the Gospels, and being sent. Starting in chapter 4, we'll introduce our system for memorizing Scripture, with particular passages we commend for broadening your biblical vision to profess and demonstrate the inbreaking Kingdom of God.

Many cultures commit their sacred, foundational texts to memory. For centuries in China, for example, boys were required to memorize the Dao. How important it is, then, for Christians who believe their texts to be the very words of God to do the same! Our hope is that instead of being easily able to draw to mind lyrics like “Oh I think that I found myself a cheerleader / She is always right there when I need her,” you'll take verses like the following inside you, into your brain chemistry if not your blood, and know them at a deeper, bodily level:

Your love, LORD, reaches to the heavens,  
 your faithfulness to the skies.  
 Your righteousness is like the highest mountains,  
 your justice like the great deep.  
 You, LORD, preserve both people and animals.

PSALM 36:5-6



# the beauty of memorized truth

*When you read a hundred words a hundred times they get woven into your soul. . . . When we struggle with a text, it changes us. Why put things in memory? . . . We memorize to contemplate, not to show off.*

ANDREW KERN

The German Baptist Brethren is a sect of Anabaptists who arrived in the United States in the 1720s. Back in the day, when Americans gave church movements funny nicknames like the Quakers and the Shakers, they were tagged the Dunkers.

Then in 1848 a bunch of Dunkers split from the original movement and called themselves the Church of God (now known as Church of the Brethren). To distinguish themselves from the original church they adopted the moniker the *New* Dunkers.

We're pretty sure young people growing up in the Church of the Brethren in recent times are loathe to refer to themselves as the New Dunkers—that is, until their national youth convention in 2014. On that occasion, pastor-activist Jarrod McKenna addressed the gathering of young people and christened them with a new name. They weren't just Dunkers, he said. They were Dunker Punks.

A punk is a young, radically countercultural person driven by



nonconformity and committed to personal ideals rather than social norms. In short, a troublemaker. So, proclaimed McKenna, a Dunker Punk is a young member of the Church of the Brethren, but more specifically, of “a rebellious countercultural tradition that radically commits their life to living God’s Calvary-shaped love in the power of the Spirit, to the glory of the Father.”<sup>1</sup>

And what is the first order of business for a Dunker Punk, according to Jarrod McKenna? Mohawks? Safety pins through your nose? Inciting revolution? Spraying graffiti slogans around town? No, the first step in the Dunker Punk manual is to memorize the Sermon on the Mount. Yes, in that same address, having just renamed them, McKenna challenged them to learn three chapters of Scripture (Matthew 5–7) by heart.<sup>2</sup>

What?

Memorizing Scripture—letting it seep into your mind and soul—is standard procedure for those involved in justice-seeking, peacemaking, and reconciliation. Harriet Tubman did it. Sojourner Truth did it. Dorothy Day and Martin Luther King Jr. did it. In his journal from 1819, British parliamentarian and social reformer William Wilberforce made this entry: “Walked from Hyde Park Corner, repeating the 119th Psalm, in great comfort.”<sup>3</sup>

Psalm 119 is 176 verses long! The Sermon on the Mount is 111 verses! Why are so many social reformers in the habit of memorizing such huge sections of the Bible? Allow us to share four reasons briefly.

## 1. To Honor Our Radical History

Bible memorization isn’t just a Victorian-era religious practice akin to reciting “The Charge of the Light Brigade.” Neither did it only come into vogue with the publication of the *Topical Memory System*. Dozens of Bible verses speak to the long history of God’s people storing God’s Word in their hearts and putting it into practice. Here are just a few examples:

Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads.

DEUTERONOMY 11:18

Blessed is the one

    who does not walk in step with the wicked  
or stand in the way that sinners take  
    or sit in the company of mockers,  
but whose delight is in the law of the LORD,  
    and who meditates on his law day and night.  
That person is like a tree planted by streams of water,  
    which yields its fruit in season  
and whose leaf does not wither—  
    whatever they do prospers.

PSALM 1:1-3

I have hidden your word in my heart  
    that I might not sin against you.

PSALM 119:11

Keep my commands and you will live;  
    guard my teachings as the apple of your eye.  
Bind them on your fingers;  
    write them on the tablet of your heart.

PROVERBS 7:2-3

The ancient Hebrews emphasized the memorization of large sections of the *Torah* as a key feature in Jewish education. The focus was on oral teaching—which meant emphasizing repetition and memory as the cornerstones of education. This tradition was passed on to the early church and has stayed with us ever since.

The Gospels make it clear that Jesus memorized Scripture. The Gospels also show us that Jesus' astonishing, unconventional, weird,

wise, and prophetic insights and actions were in response to his Father's will as revealed to him in prayer and in the Scriptures. The Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), Jesus' temptation in the wilderness (Matthew 4:1-11), and his mission statement (Luke 4:18-19) are just a few examples of this.

Of course, the Bible reminds us that meditating on and memorizing Scripture isn't enough. Storing God's Word in our hearts must lead to practices that deepen our discipleship, revitalize the church, and renew the world. James makes this clear in James 1:22-25, and there are many other passages that make a similar point. Bible memorization is an aid to discipleship and service and creativity. Throughout the history of the church, "those who practiced the crafts of memory used them—as all crafts are used—to *make* new things: prayers, meditations, sermons, pictures, hymns, stories, and poems."<sup>4</sup> Just like Plutarch said.

## 2. To Protect the Radical Heart

If we want to share our faith and be missional, then we must spend a lot of our time outside the church. That's the nature of our calling. We join networks and groups that are advocating social change. We interact with a lot of people who might share some of our values but reject our faith. In my (Michael's) previous book *Surprise the World*, I talk about how imperative it is for missional people to guard their hearts against sin and temptation.

When I say "falling into sin," I don't necessarily mean getting drunk or running off with your neighbor's spouse (although of course we're never immune to making such choices). I'm referring to the much less dramatic but far more prevalent sins of fear and laziness . . . [which] are mission killers.<sup>5</sup>

Fear of persecution, fear of causing offense, fear of looking stupid . . . all these fears and more will kill your commitment to the cause of

Christ. Likewise, the kind of laziness that sees you retract into your safe world, losing interest in the struggle for social change, telling yourself you need to be taken care of first, will shut down your radical zeal. The perfect antidote is to immerse yourself in the words of Scripture, drawing on them in times of temptation, meditating on them when you feel weak. The psalmist writes, “How can a young person stay on the path of purity? By living according to your word” (Psalm 119:9).

German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer knew this only too well. “It is never sufficient,” he wrote, “simply to have read God’s Word. It must penetrate deep within us, dwell in us, like the Holy of Holies in the Sanctuary, so that we do not sin in thought, word, or deed.”<sup>6</sup>

Jesus resisted the tempter’s wiles by quoting memorized Scripture, all of it from the book of Deuteronomy. This story serves an important function in the Gospel. By resisting temptation and quoting the words of Moses, Jesus is revealed to be the new, improved liberator. Jesus does what Moses knew but could not do. He out-Moseses Moses. The words of Deuteronomy provide him with a reminder of his task. They are his North Star, focusing him afresh on his purpose and destiny, to be the liberator of humankind. Little wonder that he memorized it. He shows himself to have a head full of Scripture.

Learning and reciting the Bible is not some kind of magic spell that wards off bad thoughts. But the words of Scripture can do for us what they did for Jesus in the wilderness: articulate our identity and purpose. Learn the Bible, and bring to mind these shaping lines—the words given to us by God—that have brought us to life and propelled us into mission.

As we said in the introduction, the British school system promoted poetry memorization as a vehicle for shaping patriotic souls who spoke “the king’s English,” as it was termed. In a much more positive way, memorizing Scripture shapes our values and vision as followers of Christ and strengthens us in times of weakness and temptation.

### 3. To Shape the Radical Vision

The mission of God's people is to alert everyone everywhere to the universal reign of Christ, which includes both announcement and demonstration. We'll address this more in the next chapter. But while many younger Christians have embraced an understanding of Christian mission that includes both evangelism and social justice, they can be a little vague on the biblical basis for believing that.

John M. Perkins—community organizer, civil rights activist, and cofounder of the Christian Community Development Association (CCDA)—is a third-grade dropout. His mother died when he was a baby, and his father abandoned him to be raised by his grandmother and extended family, all of whom worked as sharecroppers in Mississippi. And yet Perkins has become one of the leading Christian voices in addressing issues like poverty, injustice, racism, and materialism. Through his example—as well as through his preaching, his writing, and his leadership institute—he has influenced countless people to become committed to the renewal and restoration of their communities. His secret? He memorizes the Bible. If you've heard John Perkins preach (or if, like us, you've had the opportunity to have a personal conversation with him), you'll know his speech is dripping with references from the Bible. In an interview with *Christianity Today*, Perkins spoke about how it began.

I began to read it. And what I was reading I began to understand. And it stuck there. You never heard me teach, but as I teach the Scriptures I can memorize the relevant Scriptures. I can just take a whole text and memorize it, not so much as you would think of memorize. I memorize it as I read it, if my brain comprehended it. . . . Those passages are still in my head and in my memory, in blocks. . . . So I have the Bible sort of in textual order in my head, and that makes it easy then to pull up and explain. That is no doubt a gift, but the brain also has great

capacity to absorb. Then of course I think once you give your life to God I think the Spirit is there, wooing you on.<sup>7</sup>

Scripture memorization helps to create a font of knowledge from which to draw during the difficult days in the field. My (Graham's) great-grandfather John McKittrick was born in Glasgow in 1903 and immigrated to Australia when he was twenty-one, coming to faith in Jesus Christ during the sea voyage to Sydney. He arrived in his new homeland resolved to serve God with all his strength. In 1933, he began working with Sydney City Mission, serving among Sydney's homeless and most vulnerable. The rest of his life would be spent among the destitute, alcoholics, sex workers, and ex-offenders. Passionate about evangelism and social justice, he personally led many thousands of people to Christ. I remember spending time in his home when I was a boy, which was often filled with the kind of people Jesus spent his life with: the addicted, the forgotten, the shunned, the feared, the exploited, the violent, the outcast. It was a warm, welcoming, and healing home for all people, no matter what life had thrown at them. Bible reading and memorization fueled John's passion for justice and for welcoming and serving the broken.

I vividly remember catching my great-grandfather early in the mornings on his knees before his Bible, praying and memorizing Scripture. He would say, "Every single day I go into God's Word and meet Jesus. Every day Jesus speaks to me and fills me with his love. His Word calls me to act justly and love mercy and walk humbly with my God. Jesus will never let you go! Follow him, share his love, and let Jesus and his Word transform your life!" I was only eight or nine at the time, but the witness of John McKittrick's Scripture-soaked and missional life has stayed with me ever since.

Bible reading and memorization energizes and galvanizes a life committed to proclaiming the gospel, caring for the poor, welcoming the outcast, reconciling enemies, and seeking a more just, equitable, and whole society. Memorizing Scripture empowers and aids missional churches and disciples.

#### 4. To Comfort the Radical Mind

Henry Martyn was a nineteenth-century missionary to India and Persia. A Cambridge graduate, he translated the whole of the New Testament into Urdu, Persian, and Judeo-Persian. He also translated the Psalms into Persian and the Book of Common Prayer into Urdu. But he was also a troubled soul. And the hardships of missionary life only made things worse. In his letters he regularly refers to being “full of anxiety” and “most dispirited” by “these melancholy effects upon my mind.”<sup>8</sup>

One of his recurring concerns was for the “unprofitableness” of his life. This is a common source of unease among missionaries and those serving Christ in the world. Because the results of our labors are so difficult to see or assess, we regularly ask ourselves, Is my work making any difference? Is it at all profitable? What’s the point of continuing this struggle?

Martyn’s primary source of comfort came from prayer and from reciting memorized Scripture. On January 8, 1804, he wrote, “The Psalms this evening were in entire unison with my feelings. I could have repeated those words many more times, ‘Why art thou so heavy, O my soul, why art thou so disquieted within me?’”<sup>9</sup> Earlier, on December 28, 1803, he recorded, “Found some devotion in learning a part of Psalm 119.”<sup>10</sup>

Memorized Scriptures can be like powerful time-release capsules. In the midst of depression or despondency they can be drawn to mind to ease a difficult situation. Many Christian leaders have testified to the life-changing power of memorizing the Bible. Dallas Willard, for example, says, “Bible memorization is absolutely fundamental to spiritual formation. If I had to choose between all the disciplines of the spiritual life, I would choose Bible memorization, because it is a fundamental way of filling our minds with what it needs.”<sup>11</sup>

In his memoir about the seven years he spent as a prisoner of war in North Vietnam, pilot Howard Rutledge described the dreadful conditions he and other American servicemen endured at the hands of the

Vietcong. As well as the unsanitary and uncomfortable surroundings, the meager diet, and the torture, Rutledge describes the battle to keep his mind alert, to not give in to despair. He desperately tried to recall passages of Scripture but couldn't.

It took prison to show me how empty life is without God, and so I had to go back in my memory to those Sunday-school days . . . in Tulsa, Oklahoma. If I couldn't have a Bible and hymnbook, I would try to rebuild them in my mind. . . . I tried desperately to recall snatches of Scripture, sermons, the gospel choruses from childhood, and the hymns we sang in church. . . . How I struggled to recall those Scriptures and hymns! I had spent my first eighteen years in . . . Sunday school, and I was amazed at how much I could recall; regrettably, I had not seen then the importance of memorizing verses from the Bible. . . . Now, when I needed them, it was too late. I never dreamed that I would spend almost seven years (five of them in solitary confinement) in a prison in North Vietnam or that thinking about one memorized verse could have made the whole day bearable. One portion of a verse I did remember was, "Thy word have I hid in my heart." How often I wished I had really worked to hide God's Word in my heart.<sup>12</sup>

We share Rutledge's experience not to prepare you for a time when you'll be deprived of a Bible but as a warning from one who wished his heart was more full of Scripture in times of extreme loneliness, depression, or stress. Brad Leithauser writes of memorization (in his case, poetry) as "a sort of larder, laid up against the hungers of an extended period of solitude":

My late colleague Joseph Brodsky . . . [had] been grateful for every scrap of poetry he had in his head during his enforced exile in the Arctic, banished there by a Soviet government



that did not know what to do with his genius and that, in a symbolic embrace of a national policy of brain drain, expelled him from the country in 1972.<sup>13</sup>

## Memorization and More

Before we give you the incorrect impression that Bible memorization is some silver bullet for discipleship and mission, allow us to sound some gentle warnings. There should be much more to your use of the Bible than being able to recite certain verses by heart.

In his book *Scripture and the Authority of God*, New Testament scholar N.T. Wright explores the role the Bible plays in the life of the church and makes a series of recommendations for how it should be read. We reiterate them here because we agree that Scripture memorization should be done alongside the following five ways of reading the Bible.

### 1. Read the Bible in Context

“When I first became a devout follower of Jesus,” Wright recalls, “my Christian friends strongly encouraged me to memorize certain passages of Scripture.”<sup>14</sup> He took to it with enthusiasm. But he notes that the verses he was encouraged to learn—verses such as “There is therefore no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus” (Romans 8:1, ESV); “Therefore, since we have been justified through faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ” (Romans 5:1); and “Therefore do not let sin reign in your mortal body” (Romans 6:12)—tended to present a narrow, individualistic faith focused on personal redemption.

These are fabulous verses. . . . Each text had a “therefore” in it. It never occurred to me at the time that the “therefore” was there for a reason. I was encouraged in what I knew and didn’t know what I didn’t know. All was well until I started reading the text in context.<sup>15</sup>

As he puts it, he needed to start memorizing the “therefores” as well. Every memorized verse or passage must be understood in its larger context (its chapter; its book; and its historical, cultural, and canonical setting). But Wright goes even further, saying that our own contexts as readers affect our understanding of Scripture, leading us to focus on some sections of the Bible while ignoring others. This has been proven throughout history. Wright says,

Such a contextual reading is in fact an incarnational reading of Scripture, paying attention to the full humanity both of the text and its readers. This must be undertaken in the prayer that the “divinity”—the “inspiration” of Scripture, and the Spirit’s power at work within the Bible-reading church—will thereby be discovered afresh.<sup>16</sup>

## 2. *Read the Bible in Church*

Wright, a former Anglican bishop, says that because “the primary place where the church hears Scripture is during corporate worship . . . we must work at making sure we read Scripture properly in public, with appropriate systems for choosing what to read and appropriate training to make sure those who read do so to best effect.”<sup>17</sup> Readers from a less liturgical tradition might take issue with that statement, but even Baptists and Pentecostals could acknowledge the value of the whole community gathering together to hear the Word of God read publicly.

## 3. *Read the Bible Studiously*

We all need to commit ourselves to the personal *study* of Scripture, not only the memorization of certain sections. In a powerful statement, Dr. Wright says, “For all of this to make the deep, life-changing, Kingdom-advancing sense it is supposed to, it is vital that ordinary Christians read, encounter, and study Scripture for themselves, in groups and individually.”<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. *Read the Bible with Scholars*

There's a difference between reading the Bible for pleasure and for insight, not unlike reading a novel or a newspaper, and studying Scripture in light of the latest scholarship. Wright insists we honor the original meaning of the Bible; in some cases doing so requires the insights of professional scholars. Not everything in the Bible is to be taken literally. Some of it is in the form of poetry, songs, acrostics, and apocalyptic imagery. He says, "Biblical scholarship is a great gift of God to the church, aiding it in its task of going ever deeper into the meaning of scripture and so being refreshed and energized for the tasks to which we are called in and for the world."<sup>19</sup>

#### 5. *Read the Bible with Pastors*

As a member of a local congregation, one that reads the Bible together on Sundays and throughout the week in small groups, you are learning under the pastoral direction of those set aside for that task. Your church's leaders are, it is hoped, qualified and experienced to shepherd you and the others in your community to keep the teachings of the Bible at the heart of the church's life.

With these recommendations in place, you can see the added value of memorization. Combining rote learning with Christian worship on Sundays, midweek Bible studies, and private research fulfills N. T. Wright's emphasis on both individual and corporate readings of Scripture and hopefully integrates Scripture into your daily life as you seek to be a disciple who is generous, hospitable, Spirit-led, Christlike, and missionary.