

Chapter-by-Chapter Bible Studies

How to Memorize the Bible



Bible Studies
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How to Memorize the Bible

Most of us know at least a few Bible verses by memory – either because we learned them in Sunday School as a child, or because we have sung them in church, without even knowing they were verses. Or...if you have no church background at all, you may have listened to that great piece of music, The Messiah, which is full of verses from scripture.

The 23rd Psalm is an example of that.

*The Lord is my shepherd,
I shall not want.
He makes me to lie down in green pastures,
he leads me beside the still waters
He restores my soul
He leads me in paths of righteousness, for His name's sake
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil, for though art with me,
Thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.
Thou preparest a table before me
in the presence of my enemies
Thou annointest my head with oil
My cup runneth over.
Surely, goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

As I sat here at my computer I typed that out from memory – so you will probably find at least a couple of mistakes in that passage – but the point is – I knew it by memory. It is there in my head if I ever need it someday – even if I don't have a Bible with me, I can be challenged or comforted by its sweet words.

For most of my life I have learned a Bible verse here and there - the same way I learned the 23rd Psalm when I was a child. But five years ago I decided I'd like to tackle a really big memorization project. I needed a little refreshing in my spiritual life, and I had never really concentrated on memorizing – and I was also wondering if there might not be a time in the future of our country when we would be persecuted for having Bibles, as many are in China and other repressed countries – so I decided to memorize a whole book of the Bible – and that could be my contribution to my group of Christian friends someday...sort of my piece of the jigsaw puzzle. If we ever were without Bibles, I could bring to any meeting of Christians at least one book of the Bible – maybe others could do the same – and we might, by putting our heads together, have a whole Bible.

How to Memorize the Bible

I chose the Book of Revelation! I didn't have a time schedule – I didn't even know if I could do it...but I started with the idea that if I did a little bit every day, and if God would give me the desire to keep at it...who knows? I might actually be able to contribute the 22 chapters of Revelation as my piece of the jigsaw puzzle. About 2 years later, I was amazed to find that my goal had been reached.

I learned a few things during that 2 years about why memorizing whole passages or chapters or books of the Bible is worth the time invested. Some of those things might be helpful to you.....

Why should I try to memorize the Bible?

1. To be able to give an answer.

In the book of I Peter in the New Testament, in chapter 3 and verse 15, God tells us: *“But sanctify the Lord God in your hearts: and be ready always to give an answer to every man that asketh you a reason of the hope that is in you with meekness and fear...”* If you know Jesus as your personal Savior, you actually have a responsibility to tell someone else why you believe what you believe. From scripture. Questions from non-believers can come at any time and at any place, and if the Words of God are already in your heart, they can just come out so easily. They may be on your lips before you even have time to think of what to say. And you can answer with *“meekness and fear”* – in other words, not with pride and arrogance – because they are God's Words, not your own.

If you are a parent of children still living at home, you should know, from Deuteronomy chapter 6, verses 4-9, that you, too, have a responsibility before God to speak the scriptures to your children: *“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord”* (this, by the way is the great *“Shema”* – the verse on which the Jewish faith stands – there is only one God. – so-named because the first word of the verse, *“Hear”*, is, in Hebrew, the word *“Shema”*) And then it goes on: *“And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might. And these words, which I command you this day, shall be in thine heart: And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up.”*

As you are driving them to gymnastics, as you are sitting together at the dinner table, as you are putting them to bed at night, as you are having those midnight discussions when your teens have been out with friends, as you are changing diapers...just simply, in the every-day things you do – talk to your children about God. Use His words to them and with them and for them. There is not better way to do that than with scriptures that are already in your head. If you have been working on a passage, memorizing it a little at a time, recite it back to your kids as you put them to bed. Tell them you need the practice. You do. Sing a little scripture to your baby as you calm him down...so many ways to do what God has asked us to do – and so important to do it!

2. To Supply Your Piece of the Jigsaw Puzzle

I've already mentioned the fact that memorizing a book of the Bible might make you a valuable part of a church or Christian gathering if someday we don't have Bibles. Did you know that there are countries right now, today, where it is a crime to own a Bible? I have heard that in China, in secret, underground churches where it is a crime to possess a Bible which is not "State-sanctioned", there are times when church members dismantle the one Bible they have as a group, and portion out different books of the Bible to various members, with the idea if one of their group is raided at home by the "Bible police", and their portion of scripture is confiscated, at least the entire group would still have most of the Bible to piece back together when they were able to meet again. So someone would take home "James", and someone else would take home "Genesis", and someone else would take home "Colossians" – and guard these precious books with great care, bringing them all to church with them when they assemble.

Why couldn't we do the same in our heads? I will contribute the book of Revelation – and I do carefully guard it – I review and review and review so as not to lose it...so as to maybe push it way down in my brain – all the way to my subconscious – so that as long as I am alive – maybe even if I develop Alzheimer's some day – it will be there for me and for other believers.

3. You learn it in context.

I find it impossible to memorize something without understanding it. Certain words may stay with me for hours or even days if they don't make sense, but they can't stay long if I don't understand how words relate to each other, what kind of a picture they are drawing, and how they relate to me.

Of course the same is true of scripture. As you begin to memorize a passage, you begin to ask yourself "learning" questions: Why is this person saying this? What happened right before this event? What is the Lord trying to teach here? How does this verse link to the verse right before it and right after it? Am I picturing this even correctly? Is there anything about the culture of that day which helps me understand the impact these words had on those who first heard them...or read them? When I read this phrase, what am I picturing in my life which would be similar?

So you begin to explore those answers as you memorize the verses, and suddenly the verses themselves come to you easier. As you go over and over and over them in your head you are not only memorizing a series of words, you are learning the Bible in the context in which it was written. You understand it better. You remember it better. You will be able to use it better when someday you are asked a question.

4. Running through you.

A really fun thing happens when you have scripture stored away in your brain. It just pops up on your “computer screen of life” at the most opportune moments. When you tempted to be angry, Proverbs 15:1 pops up. *“A gentle answer turns away wrath, but a harsh word stirs up anger.”* (NIV) And you stop and rethink what you were going to say and how you were going to say it.

This sort of compares to that wonderful device for diabetics...the insulin pump. For those with advanced diabetes, even getting insulin shots doesn't always keep sugar levels even enough in the blood. Testing the blood for sugar levels, and then determining when to administer insulin with respect to how much food has been eaten, how long it has been since the last meal, how long before the next meal...after awhile this doesn't work for some – and if they are fortunate they can get an insulin pump. Installed under the skin, the pump can administer insulin quickly & easily, and get the insulin into the blood stream based on what the need is – no guesswork..

In the same way, memorized scripture can be at the front of your consciousness even before you know you need it. It can be constantly ministering to your heart as you walk or run through your day. Helping you remember to make those little corrections which will mean a consistent walk with God, instead of a “I'm sorry for everything I did today” at the end of the day.

The Word of God hidden in your mind cleanses you, teaches you, motivates you, comforts and soothes you – especially in those times when you can't “look it up”.

5. In Case of Emergency. In times of Fear.

Did you know you can only think of one thing at a time? Sure, you can hop from thought to thought sometimes so fast it seems like you are thinking of a lot of things at once...but the reality is that only one thought at a time can be running through your head.

So what does that have to do with scripture memorization and emergencies? Memorized scripture gives you something to think about when you want to shove all other thoughts out of your head. Even when you read scripture from your Bible your mind tends to jump off into other thoughts. But something about the necessity of focus when going over memorized scripture helps you to stay focused at least until you finish the passage you are reviewing.

A few years ago I had to have a medical test which required me to lay very still with a large object passing over my head. No, this wasn't an MRI – not nearly as challenging as that - but I am very claustrophobic, and I wasn't at all sure I wanted this test – or that I could even go through with it. But I had just finished memorizing the book of

How to Memorize the Bible

Revelation, all 22 chapters, and I decided I would just close my eyes and concentrate on reciting (in my head) the whole book – and that if the test wasn't over after 22 chapters, I would just start again. I have never been so grateful as I was that day to have so much scripture in me. The test seemed to go very fast...and I was able to keep focusing on the task at hand – the claustrophobia never got control. There wasn't room in my brain for thoughts of fear and reciting scripture at the same time.

Or, let's say your husband or wife is in a car accident, and you are rushing to the hospital after hearing about it. You can spend that time in the car getting so upset that you will be no use at all once you get there. Or, you can spend that time quoting scripture to yourself (or to anyone else in the car with you) – letting God take care of what you can't do anything about – and letting His words calm you, direct you, give you strength.

6. When you don't have an answer.

There are times when there just isn't a verse to cover a need. Or times when just quoting a verse seems to be so inadequate.

I had a friend who had decided to divorce her husband because of abuse. And another friend who was struggling with an eating disorder. Both situations needed time to work through, and verses specific to those situations were hard to come by. But Words from God were definitely needed, and would be the answer to so many questions.

So in both cases we just spent time together once a week memorizing scripture together. Not specific verses to prove a point or change a mind. We just chose a book of the Bible and both promised to work on memorizing it, one verse at a time, during the week, and then get together once a week to recite to each other what we had accomplished. We went slow – speed wasn't the idea. It was just meeting a need to have the Words of God – any of the Words of God – beginning to help sort things out – see things clearly.

Sometimes you just don't have an answer to your problem, or someone else's. But God always does. He always knows how to lead step by step, minute by minute, day by day. Getting His Words into your heart and mind gives God that open door He wants to slowly walk us through whatever situation we encounter.

7. Because you want to teach it.

If you lead a Bible study, or teach a class on the Bible in church or in a small group – there is no more effective way to prepare for that lesson than memorizing the passage. You will be changed before you ever teach – the LORD's words will sniff out the places in your life which should first be affected by the truth. And then you will have clearness of thought as you present it, and you will connect with your audience on a different level. You will be anxious for your class to discover what you have discovered – not spewing out knowledge at them, but experiencing with them the grace of God. As you memorize

you will think of questions – and answers. And you will be reminded of other verses and other passages in the Word which will give strength to what you are presenting. I have taught Bible studies both ways – passages I have memorized, and passages I have not memorized...and I can say honestly from my own experience that memorizing a passage and then teaching it is one of the most rewarding things I have ever done. I don't even pretend to think I can teach how Jesus taught – but His own words do describe this best: *“For I did not speak of my own accord, but the Father who sent me commanded me what to say and how to say it. I know that his command leads to eternal life. So whatever I say is just what the Father has told me to say.” John 12: 49,50*

OK, I'm sold. How do I memorize the Bible?

As I see it, there are two ways to memorize scripture:

1. The scattergory method – a verse here and a verse there, perhaps by topic

This is the way most of us have memorized the Bible. You could choose a topic – something which interests you, or something you need an answer to.

For instance:

- Many High School students today are faced with the challenge of being able to understand and talk to their friends about the dangers of Wicca (Satan worship), or sorcery. I hear that this is pretty widespread on most High School campuses. By looking up “witchcraft” or “sorcery” in a topical Bible a high school student could come up with a list of verses which speak to that problem, and then memorize them, and then be able to use those verses in conversation with friends caught up in that form of evil.
- At Southside Bible, this year we are memorizing, together, 500 “Fighter Verses” – verses especially chosen to aid us in our “fight” to live for Christ and proclaim the Gospel in a dark world. We add a verse or two a week to our repertoire – I think it is supposed to take us 2 years to complete it. What an awesome thing that will be...to have 500 verses from the Bible firmly implanted in our minds and hearts.
- Obviously there is no end to the list of topics you could tackle in this way: Sex, health, purpose in life, evolution, verses to help you witness (the Four Spiritual Laws)...

Or another “one verse at a time”-thing you could do is memorize a “Life Verse”. I chose a verse to be my “Life Verse” when I was a fairly new Christian. It's Deuteronomy 30:19. That verse has truly helped me make some of the major decisions in my life.

When our kids were little we memorized many verses one year – complete with wall chart, stars & stickers. I still remember most of them.

2. *And then there is the whole book, chapter, or passage method.*

This is the method which really revolutionized my walk with the LORD. Here's what I would recommend if you choose this type of memorization:

Three very simple things will be your key to success:

a. It absolutely does not matter how long it takes. Don't give yourself a goal or a timeline. The value of what you are doing is not in how fast you can do it, or in who you can beat to the goal. The value is in the fact that the Words of God are beginning to find a place in the corners of your mind. Whether that is one verse or 10 chapters isn't the important thing.

b. One verse at a time. Put them together in a string. I know that sounds simplistic, but if you look at memorization in this way it will break down that great big barrier of "I couldn't possibly do that!". All you do is memorize one verse – the first one in a chapter. Say it over and over and over again as you read it...then over and over and over again as you attempt it without looking at your Bible. Take it a phrase at a time if it is giving you trouble. That's it. Take several days to do this, if you need to. When you can say that verse easily, without looking at your Bible, then it's time to go to the next verse in that chapter. Repeat the memorization process with that verse – and only that verse – until you are comfortable that you know it. Then, and only then, add the two verses together. Practice the two verses together until you are comfortable with them, and then move on to the next verse. When you get to the end of a chapter (whoopee! That is an event!), review that chapter for a few days...make sure you can easily and comfortably say the whole chapter, then move on to begin the next. Make each chapter a fresh start. By that I mean – don't add chapter 2, verse 1, to the last verse of chapter 1. Start fresh with chapter 2. When you get to the end of chapter 2, then add the two chapters together in a string, and practice those two together until you are comfortable with them.

c. This is an every-day thing. Yes, you could skip a day every now and again and it wouldn't hurt a thing. But having an intentional, predictable time each day to work on that verse, or those verses you are slowly stringing together, is a guarantee that you will finish.

And here's a few more things I learned along the way:

- **Daily time with God.** Before I started memorizing I had gotten into the habit of having a daily time with God. To pray, to read and study scripture, to listen to Him. When I started to work consistently on memorization I tried to add memorization to my list of daily things I did in that time with God. After not too long that got to be too much. I simply didn't have the time to read and study scripture, pray, and memorize, too. I couldn't retire from my job in order to accomplish it all, so I kept my daily time with God, but changed it a little. I made memorization the main thing I was doing – realizing that as I memorized I was,

indeed, reading and studying scripture. Of course I continued to pray and listen to Him – actually, I prayed even more, because His Words were seeping down more deeply into my soul.

- **Take a Walk.** This worked for me because I love to walk. My dog, Max, and I would leave the house at 6:00 every morning and follow our familiar paths through our neighborhood. I carried a little New Testament in my pocket. And as we walked, I reviewed what I had memorized so far, and if I got stuck I would whip out the New Testament, stop for a minute, read the verses which were giving me trouble, then walk on. If walking is not your thing, something else may work. Anything you do regularly which isn't requiring a lot of thinking about something else will do. Like ironing. I used to make a copy of the passage I was working on and tape it to the wall in front of the ironing board. Or riding an exercise bike. It's easy to plop your New Testament, or Bible, in front of you while you ride. Or vacuuming. Maybe while you cook...although that wouldn't work for me. Cooking takes too much concentration.
- **Review, Review, Review.** When you learn a new verse you attach it to the other verses from that chapter you have already learned, and then you review...all of them. When you get to the end of a chapter, you take the next few days to review the whole chapter. And when you get to the end of the second chapter in a book, then take a few days to review the 2 chapters together. Same thing with chapter 3, chapter 4...etc. By the time you get to chapters 4 or 5, your review time will be long. Don't worry – the review time is in some ways even more valuable than the initial learning time. Every time you review a passage you are stuffing the truth farther into your consciousness. It is going deeper, deeper, where it will be someday as easy to pull out as that memory of riding bicycles down the street in your childhood neighborhood.
- **Take off where you left off.** This is pretty self-explanatory. Every day pick up your memorizing where you left off the day before. If you did verse 8 yesterday, review up to that point today, and if you feel confident, then add verse 9. I guess the point here is – don't skip around. Don't jump to the part of the chapter which is easiest, or which you already are familiar with.
- **Practice on someone else.** Since review will be so much a part of what you are doing, you might enjoy grabbing a friend to walk with you through the mall as you recite your verses. Or call your Mom (mine's in California) and ask her to listen as you go as far as you can in your chapter or book. Ask your listener to follow along in their Bible so they can tell you the places you need to work on.
- **Or form a Group, or Get a Partner.** Ask someone else to memorize the same book with you. Each of you go at your own pace, but make the commitment that you will meet once a week to recite your verses, and also make the commitment that neither of you will go on to the next chapter until both of you have finished that chapter. That way no one will get discouraged and drop out. When one of

you finishes a chapter, just keep reviewing until your partner catches up. This is a really fun thing to do – my daughter and I memorized Philippians this way. I still think of her when I review Philippians. . It does help if you both are using the same version of the Bible. Hearing a passage recited in a version different than the one you are using is confusing

- **But...What if I forget?** Ummmm. You will! But, don't worry – every time you go back to a passage you have memorized and review it, it comes back easier. I just reviewed Philippians chapter 3 today. At first I couldn't even remember what verse 1 said...but after only reading through the passage once, and then a few minutes of going forward & backing up...it all came back to me. You don't really lose what you have memorized...you just have to call it up...and then when you review it again you stuff it down into a much better place in your brain – and it comes up easier the next time. Tape it on your mirror when you get ready in the morning. Sing it. Perform it. Your memorized passages will get dearer to you every time you recite them.

Either way you memorize the Bible, by scattergory, or by whole passages, you can't lose...but if you've never tried much Bible memorization, or tried and failed, or succeeded but now you can't remember much of what you have done in the past...try the second way first. I think you will be surprised at what you can do.

Only one thing left to do: Choose your passage.

First decide on a version of the Bible you like. I memorize in the King James. For some reason it sticks in my memory a little better than the more contemporary versions.

If you would ask me which book to memorize, I would suggest the following:

James
I Peter
Philippians
Philemon, or Titus (they are short)
Revelation (I know it's long...but its passages are very easy to commit to memory)

Or if you would like to tackle a whole passage, or chapter, here's what I would recommend:

Romans 8 (awesome)
Matthew 24 & 25 (the 2nd coming of Christ)
I Thessalonians 4 & 5 (the 2nd coming of Christ)
Hebrews 11 (the hall of faith)
John 13-17 (the Last Supper)

How to Memorize the Bible

John 17 (Jesus prays for us)

Proverbs 31 (the Uncommon Woman)

Acts 2:14-36 (first sermon)

Luke 2 (The Christmas story)

I Corinthians 13 (the Love Chapter)

Revelation 1, (powerful)

 or 19 (the return of Christ to the earth),

 or 21 & 22 (the New Heaven and the New Earth)

Matthew 6:9-13 (the Lord's Prayer)

Habakkuk 3:17-19 (some of the most beautiful verses in the Bible)

Start Today. It's an amazing journey.



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