

The Fifth Essential — Memorizing and Meditating on Scripture

Why should I memorize Scripture?

A) Your main goal as a disciple of Jesus Christ is to learn to think like He did. Memorizing Scripture is key part of achieving that goal. When you memorize and meditate on Scripture, it transforms the way you think—old patterns of thought are replaced with God’s thoughts, false beliefs give way to the truth and old values are exchanged for God’s principles.

B) Jesus, who is our example in all things, memorized and meditated on Scripture. This enabled Him to resist the temptations of the Devil (see Matthew 4:1–11). As His disciples, we follow His example.

C) We are commanded to memorize and meditate on God’s Word.

(1) “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you, with all wisdom teaching and admonishing one another with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, singing with thankfulness in your hearts to God” (Colossians 3:16, NASB).

(2) “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 success” (Joshua 1:8, NASB).

(3) “Your word I have treasured in my heart, That I may not sin against You. I will meditate on Your precepts And regard Your ways” (Psalm 119:11, 15, NASB).

(4) “These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates” (Deuteronomy 6:6–9, NASB).

D) There are many other reasons to memorize and meditate on God’s Word: it will strengthen your faith, it will help you to see life from God’s perspective, it will give you the words to say when you minister to others, and it will guard you against the lies of the enemy. It’s so important that you can think of it as the “fifth essential” to being a successful Christian.

I have a terrible memory! How will I ever memorize Scripture?

A) Many people believe they have a bad memory—but usually the problem is that their memory hasn't been properly trained. The system presented below will help you to memorize and retain even large portions of God's word.

B) The Memory Card System.

(1) This training regimen is based on 3x5 index cards. Buy 52 cards, one for each week of the year (plain white cards will do; use colored cards if white is too boring for you). Also purchase a card holder so that you can keep your cards organized and in a safe place (or you can buy a set of cards that are spiral-bound).

(2) Each card will contain one verse of Scripture. The front side will be the verse and the back side will be the reference. Be sure to put a number in the top right corner of the front side so you can keep them in order as you memorize.

(3) The first step in memorizing a verse is to write it down on the card. Do this yourself with a pen or pencil (don't print it out from your computer). The act of writing the verse by hand will begin the memory process.

(4) The next step is to read the verse and reference out loud to yourself. Do this at least four or five times. Hearing yourself speak the words is a large part of making sure the verse sticks in your memory.

(5) Now turn the card to the back side and try saying the verse out loud without looking at the front. Do this until you are sure that you can remember the words. Then flip the card over to the front and try saying the reference. Many people struggle to remember the numbers in a Scripture reference, so be sure to spend extra time on this. This is important—there is clarity and power in being able to say “God said in 1 John 2:2 that...” (rather than “there's a verse somewhere in the Bible that says...”).

(6) Once you have the verse and reference memorized, find a friend and ask them to test you. Give them the card and practice until you can say the verse and reference perfectly.

(7) Strive for perfection in your memory work. You will be tempted to settle for less, especially if you're having trouble with a particular verse. But when you don't know a verse word-for-word, you lose confidence in saying it to yourself and to others when witnessing or ministering.

C) Memorizing Scripture doesn't require large amounts of time. Each day, spend a few moments writing out the verse for the week on your 3x5 card. Then review the verse four times each day: at breakfast, lunch, dinner, and just before going to sleep at night.

D) Different people learn in different ways. Pay attention to whether you tend to see the words in your mind (a visual learner), hear the words in your mind (an auditory learner), or associate the words

with actions (a kinetic learner). Most of us learn best if all three elements are present when we memorize. When you write down the verse on your card, you involve the visual and kinetic centers of learning. Reading the verse and quoting it aloud involves the auditory center of learning.

- (1) If you are visually oriented, you may want to draw pictures or symbols on your card to reinforce the main idea of the verse.
- (2) If you are audibly oriented, say the verse out loud repeatedly. You may want to record the verse you are working on and listen to it throughout the day.
- (3) If you are kinetically oriented, try adding motions to express the various words in the verse. These motions will help you retain the words in the verse.

What should I memorize?

A) As a new convert, I encourage you to start small and build your memory muscles slowly until you're ready for larger portions of Scripture. I created a handout that will guide you in this process (see the "Memorizing Scripture Guide"). The handout is based on memorizing one verse each week. If you discover that you're doing well, challenge yourself and try memorizing two verses each week.

How can I retain what I memorize long-term?

A) The key to memory retention is review. Reviewing the verses you have already memorized is a key part of your daily memory work.

B) I recommend the following approach:

- (1) Sunday – begin memorizing the verse for the week.
- (2) Monday – continue working on the verse for the week.
- (3) Tuesday – review the verse for the week.
- (4) Wednesday – review the first five weeks (5 verses). If you are still in the first four weeks of the program, simply review the verses you already know.
- (5) Thursday – review the verse for the week.
- (6) Friday – review the second five weeks (5 verses). If you haven't reached the second five weeks, just review the previous weeks.
- (7) Saturday – review the verse for the week.

C) Wednesday and Friday will be your days to review past memory verses. Use these days to cycle through all the verses you have memorized. Once you have reviewed all your verses, start back at the

beginning and start through again. This way, you will be working on one new verse and reviewing ten old verses each week.

What translation should I use to memorize?

A) Since you are committing God’s Word to memory, I recommend using a Formal Equivalence (word-for-word) translation. The “Memorizing Scripture Guide” uses the New American Standard (NASB), but you can also use the English Standard Version (ESV) if you prefer.

What does it mean to meditate on Scripture?

A) When people hear the word “meditation” they often think of a Buddhist monk sitting in a yoga position chanting “Ohhhmm” over and over. Biblical meditation is nothing like that. Most worldly meditation systems encourage you to empty your mind of all thoughts. Meditating on Scripture is exactly the opposite—you fill your mind with God’s Word and spend time thinking about its meaning and application to your life.

B) Memorizing Scripture is the first step of a two step process in beginning to think like Jesus. The second step is meditation. We don’t memorize to impress others with all the verses we can quote. We memorize so God’s thoughts will sink into our minds and begin transforming us from the inside out. Memorizing without meditating is like eating without chewing.

C) As an exercise, let’s walk through what it means to meditate by using the first memory verse in the guide: “Remember Lot’s wife” (Luke 17:32).

(1) The first step in meditation is to understand the meaning of the text. Luke 17:32 mentions a person, Lot’s wife. Clearly you cannot understand Jesus’ warning unless you know more about Lot’s wife and what happened to her.

(a) Verse Background. If you have cross-references in your Bible, you will see that the background story to Luke 17:32 can be found in Genesis 19. In this chapter you learn that Lot’s wife disobeyed the command of the angel and looked back toward the destruction of Sodom. When she did, she became a pillar of salt (Genesis 19:26).

(b) Verse Context. The context of Luke 17:32 sheds even more light on the meaning of Jesus’ warning. In the preceding verses, Jesus talked about the destruction that will come as part of His Second Coming to earth. He told His disciples that if they tried to hold onto their worldly possessions, they would be swept up in the destruction.

(c) Verse Meaning. When you think about what happened to Lot’s wife, you realize that she had become very attached to the worldly possessions and relationships she had

developed over her many years in Sodom. When the time came to leave it all behind, including some of her own children, she was not able to resist the urge to turn back.

(2) The second step in meditation is to ask, What does this verse teach me about the way Jesus thinks? This verse teaches you at least two things about the way Jesus thinks: a) Jesus thinks that obeying God is more important than our possessions and even our children, and b) Jesus thinks that God is just to punish any disobedience, even as small as a look over your shoulder, with death. These two principles are examples of how Scripture teaches us to think like Jesus.

(3) The third step in meditation is to apply the verse to your own life. This can be done by asking yourself questions like:

- Are my values and beliefs in harmony with what this verse teaches?
- Do I need to adjust any of my attitudes or perspectives?
- Is there anything I need to stop doing based on the truth of this verse?
- Is there anything I need to start doing based on the truth of this verse?

The warning about what happened to Lot's wife is especially relevant to you as a new convert. In many ways the life you left behind when you became a Christian is like Sodom, a city that was given over to self and sin. God's destruction is coming upon all who live such lives. What will happen to you if you turn back and once again become entangled in the snares of Satan? (2 Peter 2:18–20; Hebrews 6:1–12)

(4) The fourth step in meditation is to ask God to impress the truth of the verse on your mind. Open your heart and allow the Holy Spirit to search your life and bring things to your attention that need to be corrected. Some of the verses you memorize can actually be prayed back to God as part of your normal fellowship with Him (Ephesians 1:17–19; Philippians 1:9–11).

Memorizing Scripture Guide

Starting Small (Weeks 1–8)

Each verse has no more than 7 words

1. Week 1 – “Remember Lot's wife” (Luke 17:32).
2. Week 2 – “Rejoice always” (1 Thessalonians 5:16).
3. Week 3 – “Pray without ceasing” (1 Thessalonians 5:17).
4. Week 4 – “Do not quench the Spirit” (1 Thessalonians 5:19).
5. Week 5 – “Abstain from every form of evil” (1 Thessalonians 5:22).
6. Week 6 – “Do all things without grumbling or disputing” (Philippians 2:14).
7. Week 7 – “Little children, guard yourselves from idols” (1 John 5:21).
8. Week 8 – “Give us this day our daily bread” (Matthew 6:11).

A Step Forward (Weeks 9–18)

Each verse has between 7 and 10 words

1. Week 9 – “Do not be deceived, bad company corrupts good morals” (1 Corinthians 15:33).
2. Week 10 – “I can do all things through Him who strengthens me” (Philippians 4:13).
3. Week 11 – “For we walk by faith, not by sight” (2 Corinthians 5:7).
4. Week 12 – “Therefore be imitators of God, as beloved children” (Ephesians 5:1).
5. Week 13 – “He heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds” (Psalm 147:3).
6. Week 14 – “My son, if sinners entice you, do not consent” (Proverbs 1:10).
7. Week 15 – “If you love Me, you will keep My commandments” (John 14:15).
8. Week 16 – “This I command you, that you love one another” (John 15:17).
9. Week 17 – “Let all that you do be done in love” (1 Corinthians 16:14).
10. Week 18 – “Do not be surprised, brethren, if the world hates you” (1 John 3:13).

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Medium-sized Verses (Weeks 19–34)

Each verse has between 10 and 15 words

- Week 19 – “Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials” (James 1:2).
- Week 20 – “Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus” (2 Timothy 2:3).
- Week 21 – “But examine everything carefully; hold fast to that which is good” (1 Thessalonians 5:21).
- Week 22 – “Husbands, love your wives and do not be embittered against them” (Colossians 3:19).
- Week 23 – “Wives, be subject to your own husbands, as to the Lord” (Ephesians 5:22).
- Week 24 – “Making the most of your time, because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:16).
- Week 25 – “Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good” (Romans 12:21).
- Week 26 – “Bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you” (Luke 6:28).
- Week 27 – “Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God” (Matthew 5:8).
- Week 28 – “The naive believes everything, But the sensible man considers his steps” (Proverbs 14:15).
- Week 29 – “Let everything that has breath praise the LORD. Praise the LORD!” (Psalm 150:6)
- Week 30 – “My help comes from the LORD, Who made heaven and earth” (Psalm 121:2).
- Week 31 – “When I am afraid, I will put my trust in You” (Psalm 56:3).
- Week 32 – “Make me know Your ways, O LORD; Teach me Your paths” (Psalm 25:4).
- Week 33 – “Keep your tongue from evil And your lips from speaking deceit” (Psalm 34:13).
- Week 34 – “Depart from evil and do good; Seek peace and pursue it” (Psalm 34:14).

Larger Verses (Weeks 35–52)

Each verse has between 16 and 25 words

- Week 35 – “Therefore if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creature; the old things passed away; behold, new things have come” (2 Corinthians 5:17).
- Week 36 – “If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness” (1 John 1:9).
- Week 37 – “Be of sober spirit, be on the alert. Your adversary, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, seeking someone to devour” (1 Peter 5:8).
- Week 38 – “Like newborn babies, long for the pure milk of the word, so that by it you may grow in respect to salvation” (1 Peter 2:2).
- Week 39 – “For consider Him who has endured such hostility by sinners against Himself, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart” (Hebrews 12:3).
- Week 40 – “Flee immorality. Every other sin that a man commits is outside the body, but the immoral man sins against his own body” (1 Corinthians 6:18).
- Week 41 – “He who loves his life loses it, and he who hates his life in this world will keep it to life eternal” (John 12:25).
- Week 42 – “The fear of the LORD is to hate evil; Pride and arrogance and the evil way And the perverted mouth, I hate” (Proverbs 8:13).
- Week 43 – “Be diligent to present yourself approved to God as a workman who does not need to be ashamed, accurately handling the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15).
- Week 44 – “Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father” (Colossians 3:17).
- Week 45 – “Let your speech always be with grace, as though seasoned with salt, so that you will know how you should respond to each person” (Colossians 4:6).
- Week 46 – “If you keep My commandments, you will abide in My love; just as I have kept My Father's commandments and abide in His love” (John 15:10).
- Week 47 – “I will bless the LORD at all times; His praise shall continually be in my mouth” (Psalm 34:1).
- Week 48 – “For the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord” (Romans 6:23).
- Week 49 – “And do not get drunk with wine, for that is dissipation, but be filled with the Spirit” (Ephesians 5:18).
- Week 50 – “Do you not know that you are a temple of God and that the Spirit of God dwells in you?” (1 Corinthians 3:16).
- Week 51 – “In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses, according to the riches of His grace” (Ephesians 1:7).
- Week 52 – “Do not love the world nor the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15).

Ideas for the Future

You began your memory work by memorizing individual verses. You are now ready to memorize small sections of Scripture and eventually whole chapters and books (yes, it can be done!). Here are some ideas for more advanced memory work:

1) 1 John 2:15–17 (3 verses).

2) Matthew 5:44–47 (4 verses).

3) Psalm 1 (6 verses).

4) Psalm 8 (9 verses).

5) 1 Corinthians 13 (13 verses).

6) Psalm 145 (21 verses).

7) Proverbs 31 (31 verses).

8) Titus (46 verses).

9) 2 Peter (61 verses).

10) 2 Timothy (83 verses).

11) Colossians (95 verses).

12) 1 John (105 verses).

13) Matthew 5–7 (111 verses).