

HIDING GOD’S WORD IN THEIR HEARTS: AN APOLOGETIC FOR SCRIPTURE MEMORY IN THE UPPER SCHOOL

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*“Fix these words of mine in your hearts and minds; tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Teach them to your children, talking about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up.”
(Deuteronomy 11:18-19)*

THE COMMAND

This passage is arguably the most well known and oft quoted with respect to the education of our children. One day we as parents will stand before the Lord and answer for the responsibility given to us in training our children in the way they should go.¹ As educators in Christian schools we have agreed to partner with parents in the educational aspect of such training, and, to an extent, in the formation of their character. There are many verses that exhort us to train children in the knowledge of Scripture. There are few that provide instructions on how to accomplish this task. Within these verses from Deuteronomy we receive a two-fold

command that not only gives an exhortation, but also provides instruction for how we should carry out training in Scripture.

1. Embed Scripture within the hearts and minds of our children. Learn the Scriptures; know them; love them. Make sure that Scripture is bound to our children and even to ourselves such that it will be with them wherever they go, guiding minds and directing actions.
2. Talk about what has been learned. Be watchful for teachable moments throughout the day and allow a scriptural lens to provide a better focus on the view of all that is around us, whether sitting at home or out along the road.

In these verses we read two instructions given by God in tandem, intended to be woven together throughout the many years of raising our children.

The second instruction comes to us rather naturally. If we ourselves possess a biblical worldview, we can address situations and questions that arise by not just asking, “What do you think Jesus would do?” but rather, “What does Scripture say?” Sometimes we have those verses ready on our tongue. At other times we sit with

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our children searching our open Bible (or iPhone). This second instruction cannot, however, be well accomplished without the first. We must fix God's words in our hearts and minds. We must know it such that it is with us always. Yes, we are blessed in this modern age with printing presses and search engines that far surpass what Guttenberg and his co-laborers could ever have envisioned. Yet, apart from a ready knowledge of what Scripture says we are in danger of speculating on what God might say. When anxiety arises, when conflict challenges, when the serpent hisses, "What did God actually say?"² will they be ready with the sword of the Spirit?³ If they are to be ever ready with God's word, having the hilt of this sword within easy grasp, then we must hide His words in their hearts, fix them in their minds through the steady discipline of memory.⁴

Certainly, no one among us would disagree with the value of memorizing Scripture. Most of us would readily agree with the importance and even the necessity of memorizing some Scripture. This exercise seems to be emphasized particularly within the grammar school as our dear little sponges readily and eagerly soak up any data to be memorized from grammar chants to math facts to short poems, often using delightful ditties to ease the labor. However, the suggestion of asking older students to commit whole books of the Bible to memory might be considered daunting to say the least. Why? Perhaps because of the time commitment that we know this must take in addition to all the other things we *must* accomplish in school, work, duties to home and family, and social obligations. Perhaps also our culture is more comfortable with goals that can be accomplished rather quickly. The search engine is fast; memorizing takes time. We prefer the microwave to the Dutch oven, especially when hungry. Truly the biggest obstacle may be that in this postmodern era we have no cultural precedent for such a discipline of memory. This is a discipline so far removed from what we have learned that our frame of reference feels inadequate. How can

it be done? Yet a reading of the New Testament must quickly reassure us that it can be accomplished.

THE PRECEDENT

Consider the numerous times in which Jesus readily cites the writings of the Law and the Prophets. He has a command of Scripture that goes beyond familiarity into an intimate understanding of these writings. Of course, one might argue, He was and is the Son of God, in existence before all things were made and all things were written. Christ is indeed fully God, but He also walked during His ministry on earth as fully man. He had to undergo the same discipline and training as His fellow Hebrews. Nonetheless, if His lofty example seems beyond our grasp, then let us look also at Paul. Paul too quoted the Old Testament with ready ease. He makes frequent references to the stories of Abraham (21 times) and Isaac (3 times). By name he cites Moses (13), King David (8), and Isaiah (6). Altogether Paul quotes the Old Testament approximately one hundred times, and gives another one hundred allusions.⁵ Paul was a mere mortal, like us. Paul was a sinner, like us. However, he had the same education as Jesus of Nazareth.

Memory was the foundation of Jewish education in the ancient and classical period. Young Jewish boys (and sometimes girls) would begin attending school about age six. They attended a Jewish school built as an annex alongside the local synagogue. They called this school Beth Ha-Sepher (House of the Book) for its primary purpose was to teach children the Torah.⁶ The Torah formed the center of their education as they used Scripture to learn to read and write Hebrew. Jewish boys in areas such as Tarsus and Galilee would have also read from the Septuagint⁷ as they learned Greek. The education of the common Jewish boy far exceeds what most moderns would have expected for ancient blue-collar workers such as fishermen, carpenters, and tent-makers. Much of the Mediterranean world,

including Judea, valued an education that would prepare the mind and shape the character of every citizen as valued by that civilization. Thus, the Jewish children attending Beth Ha-Sepher would not only read, but also memorize the Torah. This came through constant repetition for approximately four years until the young pupils could recite the Torah with great fluency. While various mnemonic devices were used, the primary method for memorization was repetition. He “who learns the Torah without repetition is like one who sows, but does not reap.”⁸

The cultivation of memory was not unique to Judea. Memorization and oral tradition were central elements of education throughout the Mediterranean world. In Greece there was an emphasis on memorizing the great epic traditions of Homer. In Book VI of his *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* Julius Caesar notes that the Celts wrote nothing of great importance down. Their laws and their religious traditions were all committed to memory. Caesar thought one of the reasons the Celts held so tightly to this practice was that they believed once they started relying on the written word, they would lose their diligence in learning important things thoroughly and would weaken the discipline of memory.⁹ Roman orators such as Cato, Cicero, and Seneca were well trained in the art of memory. As students they were required to memorize and deliver famous orations from their predecessors. As orators themselves they regularly gave speeches from memory of two hours in length. Lest we think this memorization might have been by topic and not by words, we read this advice from Cicero in his work on rhetoric titled *Ad Herennium*.¹⁰

“Now, lest you should perchance regard the memorizing of words either as too difficult or as of too little use, and so rest content with the memorizing of matter, as being easier and more useful, I must advise you why I do not disapprove of memorizing words. I believe that they who wish to do easy things without trouble and toil must previously have been trained in

more difficult things.” (Cicero)

To this day memory is considered one of the five canons of rhetoric, the art of speaking. Before memory are listed invention, arrangement, and style. The final canon, often listed after memory, is delivery. The training of young orators often required the memorization of excellent orations from famous predecessors. Aspiring young Romans often looked to Demosthenes and others of the Greeks. They studied the techniques of art and invention by learning their work thoroughly. Having memorized their speeches, they then practiced the art of delivery. Seneca the Elder recounts in his later years, even as his memory waned, that he could still recite parts of one hundred practice speeches from his early studies of rhetoric.¹¹ Our modern rhetoric classes tend to focus more on the art of writing than the art of speaking. We still practice invention and arrangement. We still look to the ancient orators as to muses. Yet the exercise of memory seems to have escaped our attention in our own schools of rhetoric. Perhaps this is a skill which we should seek to retain. The God-inspired words of Scripture would surely be a most excellent means of doing so.

MODERN DAY RESPONSE

In part to better train our memory as per the education of the ancient Mediterranean world, and in greater part to answer the commands given to us in Deuteronomy, Grace Academy has developed a Scripture Memory Program for students in kindergarten through 12th grade. Since our earliest days our grammar students have memorized passages of increasing length such as Psalms 101, Hebrews 11, and James 3. These are regularly delivered in choral recitation before fellow students, teachers, and proud parents. Several years ago we recognized the need, based on the reasons provided above, to expand this program into our schools of logic and rhetoric. We wanted to see our student’s knowledge

of Scripture expanded in a meaningful way. We desired their skills of memory likewise to be strengthened. Most of all we wanted to see them equipped for every good work the Lord should have for them.¹²

Students in the schools of logic and rhetoric memorize whole books of the Bible or lengthy passages so as to better learn Scripture in the context in which it was written. The habits and formation of such memorization must necessarily change from the grammar school days to reflect the stages of learning and maturity of older students. Scripture memory in the upper school ceases to be limited to grade-level homeroom classes. Instead this becomes a corporate study intended to build unity through study and worship among students of various grade levels, but within the same sub school. The students within the schools of logic and rhetoric are divided into eight devotional groups (four for each school respectively). The logic school groups are assigned one book. The rhetoric school is assigned another. These devotional groups meet three mornings each week to read, discuss, and memorize the assigned Scripture for the year. Works for memorization have thus far included James, Philippians, Colossians, 1 John, and Matthew 5–7 (The Sermon on the Mount).

The groups need not give choral recitations as they were accustomed to do in the grammar school, but may choose instead to interpret the assigned Scripture through creative dramatic performances so long as the Scripture itself is not altered.¹³ When the goal has been accomplished the students recite not only for parents and the school body, but at times they recite for local churches. When they do, they never fail to receive a standing ovation. For it is truly an amazing blessing to see our young people speak the Word of God with passion!

THE FRUIT

Five years into this program we have graduates who have memorized the Sermon on the Mount plus multiple books of the New Testament along with a collection of Psalms. We do not expect that they will for the remainder of their adult lives be able to recite all of these wonderful verses at a moment's notice. We do expect that these words will remain hidden within their hearts and minds, ready to be called upon when needed. We hope that having gained a confidence from this exercise, they will continue to study God's Word, reviewing familiar passages and committing new ones to memory, for the rest of their lives. The fruit that has been born thus far is sweet. One graduate shared that memorizing James (his first such endeavor) "gave me a huge sense of accomplishment that helped me believe in myself . . . Reciting all of it individually in one take showed me what the mind was capable of with hard work and consistency." A fellow graduate marvels at how easily he is still able to call upon all he has memorized. "God has used it to speak to me when I need it, and to speak through me to others."¹⁴ We pray this discipline will continue to equip these young men and our many other graduates for whatever calling God has placed upon their lives in the same manner in which Paul so praised Timothy.

"But as for you, continue in what you have learned and have firmly believed, knowing from whom you learned it and how from childhood you have been acquainted with the sacred writings, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2Timothy 3:14-17).

NOTES:

1. Proverbs 22:6
2. Genesis 3:1
3. Ephesians 6:17
4. Psalm 119:11
5. Roy Zuck, *Teaching as Paul Taught* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1998), p. 50–52.

6. The first five books of the Old Testament: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

7. The Septuagint is the Old Testament translated into Greek from Hebrew by a group of approximately 70 Jewish scholars in Alexandria, Egypt c. 200 B.C. Some Jews grew up only speaking Greek and this translation was created in order to allow them to read the Old Testament. In areas such as Galilee, children grew up speaking both Hebrew and Greek. It was not uncommon for them to read their religious documents in both before the spread of Christianity. Septuaginta means 70 in Latin and was the name given to their work.

8. *Essays on Jewish Life and Thought, The Letters of Benammi*, Second Series, 54, cited in Zuck, *Teaching as Paul Taught*, *ibid*.

9. Julius Caesar, *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* VI.14. Caesar specifically identifies the Druid priest class as those responsible for committing to memory “a great number of verses” regarding laws, traditions, and the religious beliefs of the Celtic tribes.

10. Cicero, *Ad Herennium* III.16 is the oldest surviving Latin treatise on the art of rhetoric. Authorship, though uncertain, is largely attributed to Cicero and believed to have been written c. 80 BC. This text is used widely in rhetoric courses today whether in secondary schools or at the collegiate level.

11. Seneca, *Controversiae* 1. Pref. 2, 19. See also Chris Keener, “The Historical Reliability of the Gospels,” in *Come Let Us Reason: New Essays in Christian Apologetics*, ed. Paul Copan and William Lane Craig (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2012), p. 105-106.

12. 2 Timothy 3:17

13. Parts of this section are taken from the outline of the Grace Academy Scripture Memory Program, also written by Karen Moore.

14. Quotations are from 2016 Grace Academy Graduates Ben Hobbs and Michael Moore respectively.