

Scripture Memorization

How much value do we place on memorization in learning? I fear that less emphasis is put on it today than in the past. Our youth rely on computers and are acquainted with computer hardware and programs. We no longer employ mental arithmetic to add, subtract or multiply a few figures. We use a pocket calculator. When I attended elementary school, memory work was considered important. Each Monday morning we had to take turns reciting - in front of the whole class - a stanza of the psalm assigned for memorization. In Catechism the Lord's Days had to be committed to memory. In the days of the Reformation, Martin Luther and John Calvin required from the youth in their churches the memorization of their rather lengthy catechism.

For us an oral message seems less trustworthy than a written one. We rely on our notepads beside the telephone and on our daily planner. But in ancient times people relied on their memory. The ancients passed on their traditions and history by word of mouth. There is an ancient myth of the Egyptian god Theuth who had invented letters. The story goes that Theuth said to Thamus, the king of Egypt, "This invention will make the Egyptians wiser and will improve their memories; for it is an elixir of memory and wisdom that I have discovered." But Thamus replied, "Most ingenious Theuth.... this invention will produce forgetfulness in the minds of those who learn to use it, because they will not practice their memory. Their trust in writing, produced by external characters which are no part of themselves, will discourage the use of their own memory within them." History has proven the correctness of Thamus's observation.

When you are young, you don't always appreciate homework assignments. Soccer, hockey or other sport activities seem much more important. But in later years you begin to understand the value of what you have learned in your youth. In one of the churches where we served, an elderly man lost his eyesight. He was also stricken with cancer. He suffered for many months. During his illness, the psalms he had learned in his youth comforted him. He couldn't read the Bible anymore, but he was able to recite complete psalms. I have visited many patients in the hospital who derived their strength and encouragement from Lord's Day 1, which they had memorized in catechism.

Because of the abundance of reading materials and the modern emphasis on visual aids in teaching, memorization no longer receives the emphasis it once had in instructing youth. Ronald Jager, a former professor of philosophy at Yale University who grew up on a farm in Lower Michigan in the 1930's and 40's writes about his spiritual upbringing in a Christian Reformed home. He tells how in Sunday School he memorized for recitation a verse of a hymn and a verse from the Bible each week; in catechism classes he memorized the questions and answers of the Heidelberg Catechism. I recall from my own youth in Holland the recitation of a verse of a psalm at school.

Many concentration camp survivors testify that they were sustained in their faith, and throughout their trials, through Bible passages and the catechism learned in their youth. The Nazis confiscated all Bibles upon entry into the camp. Few were able to hide their precious possession.

Rev.J.Overduin, who spent some time in Nazi concentration camps, testified how he and other pastors, were able to minister to fellow prisoners, though their Bibles had been taken from them. They had enough Scripture memorized to give spiritual comfort. And I have met many elderly Christians, unable to read due to failing eye sight, who could recite psalms they had learned in their youth.

Just before the UN deadline for Iraq to withdraw from Kuwait, these words came to me, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble" (Ps. 46:1). This Word from the Lord greatly encouraged me.

The Word of God is no trifle. Our spiritual life begins by the Word of God (James 1:18). We cannot live without the Scriptures (Mat. 4:4). But to live by the Word, we must know it. When you are young, memorization comes much easier than when you are an adult. Why not memorize Bible texts? You'll be blessed by it. John Piper aptly said, "Let us labour to memorize the Word of God--for worship and for warfare. If we do not carry it in our heads, we cannot serve it in our hearts or wield it in the Spirit" (*Desiring God, Meditations of a Christian Hedonist*).

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