

## Memorization and VerseLocker

One of the ways in which a Bible translation sends ripples through life is when people memorize it. God's Word should be read, studied, meditated upon, and memorized, so that it is hidden in our hearts for use whenever we need it (Ps 119:11). Memorization is one important way in which we hide the Word in our heart.

When the Word is stored in our heart, we can call upon it, whenever we need it:

- in a moment of temptation;
- whenever we have a chance to share the gospel;
- when we have a chance to witness to a specific teaching of Scripture,
- in countless other situations.

Finally, as our death draws near and many other memories have been lost, the Bible treasures we have hidden in our heart will still be stored there, and we will bring them out for the last time.

The blessings of memorization run from the beginning of life to the end.

Recently *Scripture Memory Fellowship* (SMF) asked us for permission to include the EHV in its widely used Bible memorization app *VerseLocker*. We were happy to grant them permission since we invite people to make free use on the EHV in applications such as memory programs, catechisms, commentaries, lectionaries and so on. In fact, it is not even necessary to ask for permission unless a work uses more than 1000 verses.

*Scripture Memory Fellowship* is an organization which promotes memorization of the Bible as its main mission. Its programs are used by very many people throughout the world. In addition to the free VerseLocker app, *Scripture Memory Fellowship* sells many Bible memorization assistance plans. It offers memorization programs for all age groups, with varying degrees of difficulty and time commitment. It would probably be fair to call SMF, among other things, a publishing house of Bible memorization programs. People can use the free VerseLocker app on their own as individuals, but they can also organize into groups to memorize the Bible together, as a sort of Bible memorization club or class. VerseLocker is a program of Scripture Memorization Fellowship. The EHV simply gave SMF a license to use the EHV in its program. We believe that SMF asked to use the EHV because one of our educators who uses the EHV asked SMF to include the EHV in its free app. As its name implies, VerseLocker is a place for you to store your own Bible memorization list, and it provides a variety of tools to help you master your list. You can use VerseLocker as your Bible memory program or along with other programs.

Scripture Memory Fellowship offers users a lot of advice about how to develop your Bible Memorization plan. Some of this is collected in the 60-page book *Remember the Words: Why and How to Make Scripture Memory a Way of Life* by Dakota Lynch. Among the topics the book discusses are: common myths people use as excuses not to be in a Bible memorization program; the what, when, and who of a memory program; finding the memorization style best

suiting to you; memorization for children; and dealing with memorization fatigue. We will not make any attempt to summarize SMF's ideas here, since I believe you will receive an offer for a free copy of the book if you download VerseLocker.

*Remember the Words* is not prescriptive. It instead offers many options and the opportunity to design your own plan. The first sentence, however, is not quite true. The one place where the book is very prescriptive is when it stresses the urgency of having a Bible memorization program with some degree of structure and accountability.

### **Memoirs of Memorization**

The request from Scripture Memory Fellowship prompted us to think about Bible memorization. The result is the following article which reflects on the importance, the methods, and the practicality of Bible memorization. This part of this article is thus not directly about VerseLocker, but it supports Scripture Memory Fellowship's emphasis on the importance and feasibility of everyone having a memory plan with structure and accountability.

Why are we emphasizing this claim so much? It always has been true, but it is more urgent to emphasize this today when the discipline of memorization seems to be declining in our society, even in the church. This section of this article is called "memoirs of memorization," because I have been self-enrolled in a program of Bible memorization for 81 years (though perhaps it was a few years before I realized it). This article collects some of my memories of memorization from those 81 years. These memories reflect my own opinion, not necessarily those of SMF, but I will occasionally connect some of these memories to points that were mentioned in *Remember the Words*. I will arrange the memories more or less chronologically from age 0 to 81.

Memory programs like those offered by *Scripture Memory Fellowship* can be a great tool in giving structure and accountability to your memorization plan, but my belief based on my experience is that the two most important factors in creating a life-long Bible memory program are a child's parents and Christian schools.

#### **Infancy and early childhood**

The statement that Bible memorization begins at age zero might raise some skepticism, but it reminded me of an old story. A mother went to her pastor and asked, "At what age should I start teaching my son the Bible." The pastor asked, "How old is he?" The mother answered, "Three." The pastor exclaimed, "Madam, rush home immediately. You've missed the three most important years."

It might be a slight exaggeration to say that Bible memorization begins at age zero, but not much of one. (It seems babies are beginning to learn to recognize and respond to sounds already before birth.) In the first years, the memorization is by absorption, not by formal structured exercises. In most cases, the first things Christian children memorize will be the bedtime and mealtime prayers they hear their parents repeat every meal and every bedtime. When infants join their parents in folding their hands when the family is saying the meal

prayer, they seem to understand that something special is going on even before they have figured out what it is. When you are trying to teach your child to repeat full sentences, make some of those sentences Bible passages. Biblical materials can be used to teach the same skills as Sesame Street does.

Experience proves that the little child's capacity to memorize is huge. Parents who regularly read one of their child's favorite books right before their bedtime prayers and songs have seen proof of this. When the bedtime has gotten delayed and the parent is trying to speed up the pre-lights-out routine by skipping parts of the story, the child will interrupt, "Hey, you are doing it wrong. You skipped the part that says "an exact quote of the skipped words."

The same process continues throughout the years before kindergarten, as pre-school children learn Bible passages and songs which they present to the congregation in special services. While I was growing up, all the way through the eighth grade, the memorization highlight of the year was the Christmas Eve Service, which was devoted to the children reciting and singing the things they had memorized. As pre-school memory pieces the Christmas Story and the Lord's Prayer lead the way.

Little children can memorize and recite, but do they understand? If the passages are learned from a clear translation and if everything that is memorized has received an age-appropriate explanation, little children understand much more than adults think they can. In my first congregation, the kindergarten students were taught a Bible story each week and also had a small piece of memory work. One week the story was David and Goliath, and the memory work was the Fifth Commandment. At the end of class, a little David in the class was called on to recite his memory work. One could almost sense his puzzlement as in his young mind he compared the Bible story he had just heard and his memory work. His recitation, however, showed that he had a clear understanding of both. He confidently recited: "The Fifth Commandment: Thou shalt not kill, except for bad giants." Don't sell little children short. Theirs is the kingdom of God.

### Grades 1 Through 8

The same routine continued through grades one through eight—the child was fed a steady diet of Bible passages, parts of Luther's Catechism, and hymns to memorize—all of which had to be recited to the teacher or to classmates or written out at the beginning of class.

This in-school accountability was bolstered by in-family accountability. For many Sunday School students, Saturday's work was not finished until they had recited their next day's memory work to their parents. When I was in the later grades of elementary school, my main recitation day for Bible passages at school was Thursday. My favorite TV Western to watch on our new 12-inch black and white TV ran on Wednesday. I can still remember reclining on the bed in my parents' bedroom next to our living room (there were no TV rooms in those days) rushing through my memory work so I would not miss my show. After 70 years I still remember the basic rule: memory work first, TV second. The day to recite the hymn of the week was Friday so Thursday night was a rerun.

Since I attended a Lutheran school, one more strong incentive to lifelong memorization was added in seventh and eighth grade. Till then the students' memory work had come from their home room teacher. Now they attended weekly classes with the pastor, and memory work was a big part of them. Faithful students already had accumulated a locker full of memory work. They were supposed to already know the chief parts of Luther's Catechism as well as an array of passages before they got to Confirmation Class. Now they had to maintain these and add others. On the Sunday before Confirmation Day, which is the Sunday on which the children became communicant members of the church, there was a practice called Examination. It was not a test to pass, but a chance to share what they had learned with the congregation and their families and friends. The degree to which the questions were rehearsed varied from pastor to pastor, and the pastor, of course, knew which students could respond to the most challenging questions. Still, many students felt a little angst about the public recital of their memory work. My wife was from a small rural congregation which had a strong program of memorization in its Sunday School. She was a member of a class that had only three students to carry the full weight of the examination. The pastor's practice was to ask a student what the biblical teaching on a certain point was. The follow-up was inevitably, "Prove it," which meant, "Recite a Bible passage that demonstrates this truth." Talk about accountability in a memory program!

### High School and College

I am going to pretty much pass over this period since it is often a time when maintaining what you already have in your locker is in itself a pretty full program. I attended a Lutheran high school and college designed for those who wanted to serve in the ministry of the church. New memorization was tied to specific classes, and it included memorization in other languages. I would guess that for most teens who are not in such schools, this phase of life would be the time that they most need their own memory maintenance program. The teen years perhaps are also the years when it is more likely that there will be memorization resistance since they might feel, "That's grade school stuff."

### The Ministry of a Pastor and Professor

There is a certain amount of logic to the arrangement of this article since it begins with the simplest plan, the absorption of passages by a baby, and it ends with a fifty-year plan for a pastor/theology professor. I will pass over my time as a seminary student since I will refer to aspects of that time from my time as a professor. During my seminary years, the classes themselves required enough memorization to keep the student's memorization calendar full. During my last year at the seminary, I developed the memory calendar that would be the core of my Bible memorization for fifty years. I still use it today in retirement. A form of it is attached to this newsletter.

For a pastor there are two memory programs that are essential. One is a locker of passages of the kind we have been talking about. During my ministry my "locker" was a couple of drawers of 3x5 note cards with a passage written on one side and the reason for that passage on the other side. (As a seminary teacher I suggested that each student have the same kind of system of cards as the structure of their program. Accountability was provided by systematic review (aka tests). Every year I made a systematic review of my cards, sometimes going from the

passage to the reason, and sometimes working from the reason to the passage. Naturally the process gets easier and faster as the years go by—till the end when it gets tougher.

Those stacks of cards bring us to a point made in *Remember the Words*: Lynch says that you should use one translation for your memorization. My problem was that I used the King James for the first 32 years of my life, and my drawers of cards were mostly from the King James. For the next 37 years including all my teaching years, I used NIV 84. For the last 12 years my go-to translation has been the EHV. Naturally, when I am trying to recall a certain passage, some King-James-ish language creeps in. The same problem arises with new hymnals and new catechisms.

In recent years our hymnal has offered a new translation of the Lord's Prayer. Many prefer the King-James-ish "Old Lord's Prayer," and the question is often asked, "Which version, old or new?" The last thing my wife and I do each day is say the Lord's Prayer. I do not think either of us has ever asked "Which one?" When we are operating on autopilot, it is the King James. What is planted in your youth is deeply rooted. Many older Christians who are very comfortable with a new translation hope to hear the King James Christmas Story on Christmas Eve and to have the King James Psalm 23 at their funeral.

In his book, Lynch expresses his uneasiness with using a modern translation for memorization because they change their wording too often. Even worse, in 2011 a very popular translation not only changed wording but took away users' right to continue to use the old translation in new editions of their works. This is the main reason the EHV promises users that even if we someday publish a new edition, we will not take away their right to continue to use the old EHV in their programs.

There is, however, another Bible memory program that is, in my opinion, even more important for a pastor than his locker of memorized passages. That is a plan to systematically read the whole Bible every year to become familiar the flow of thought of the whole Bible. The plan should also include the reading of the most important eight or nine books more than once. Matthew and Romans are read 3 or 4 chapters per day the first time; one chapter per day the second time. Psalms is read 2 to 4 psalms a day the first time, one psalm a day the second time. The main purpose of this is that the pastor be able to summarize the flow of whole Bible. Before reading a given book he tries to recite in his head what every chapter of the book is about, and he repeats the process when he comes to the end of the book. He can read the books in his study Bible but the memorization aspect should be done in a well-marked-up print Bible with lots of headings, marginal notes, and circled words. These marks provide a road map for scanning through each book. This Bible also can substitute for his memory locker because there is a large M and a star next to each memory passage. The pastor should never skip days of his calendar without planning ahead for his absences or making them up. (Lay people can use this plan too.)

Obviously this takes a fair amount of time each day. On some very busy days the user has to go over things lightly. On some freer days, he can take a closer look at some of the trees in the forest. His more intense study and meditation will have to be done during his preparation of texts for sermons and classes and in his devotional reading. The line between the two types is

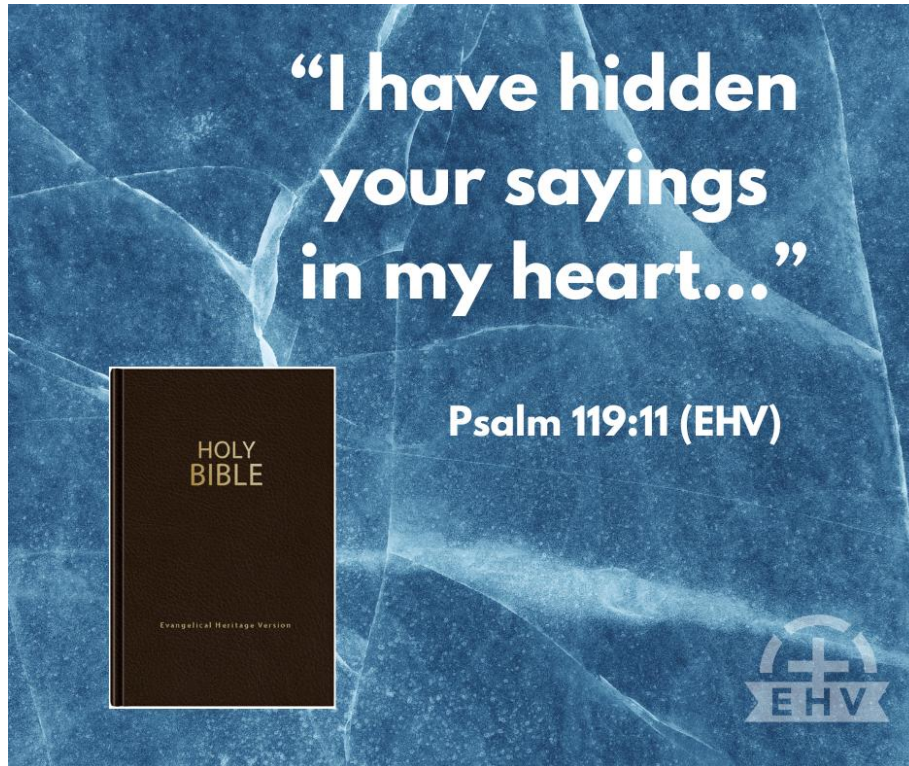
hazy because all his devotional reading is also professional, and all his “professional” reading always personal. And the pastor has many other areas he must constantly review. His intense reading of the Bible is the most important element for equipping him for his ministry. The key planning item for a pastor is finding the right balance between time filling himself up through study and prayer and the time spent in pouring out what he has learned to people. This depends on many factors such as his gifts, his personality, and his calling, and other obligations such as his family responsibilities, and the ebb and flow of his schedule, but each person must find the right balance for him. Either extreme, too much filling up and not enough pouring out, or too much pouring out without enough filling up is detrimental to ministry. Billy Graham once was asked if he had any regrets about his ministry. He said, “Yes, that I did not study more.”

Each person must try to find the right balance for his ministry and personality. Some have to push themselves to get away from too much desk and office time. Others must chain themselves to their desk more often. Each must search for what is best for him and the needs of the day. He should not compare himself to others or burden his conscience with unrealistic expectations. One of my professors, even as he was spurring us on to greater efforts, regularly reminded us, *Ultra posse nemo obligatur*—no one has a duty to do the impossible.

## Encouraging Bible Memorization

### The Theme

I have hidden your sayings in my heart <sup>1</sup>



### The Result

He said to them, "Therefore every expert in the law who has been trained as a disciple in the kingdom of heaven is like the owner of a house who brings out of his treasure both new things and old things. (Matthew 13:52)

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<sup>1</sup> Psalm 119:11. Read 119:9-16. Note that this section is addressed especially to the young.

**Your words are a lamp for my feet  
and a light for my path.**

Psalm 119:105 (EHV)



How sweet are your sayings to my taste,  
sweeter than honey to my mouth!

Psalm 119:103 (EHV)

