
Study & Memorization

DAVE BAST

I have stored up Your Word in my heart that I might not sin against You. I will meditate on Your precepts and fix my eyes on Your ways. I will delight in Your statutes. I will not forget Your Word. Those verses are from Psalm 119, which could be described as a love song to a book; the Bible. In this, the last of our programs on the spiritual disciplines of the Christian life, we will look at how Christians use scripture; reading it, meditating on it, and even memorizing it. Stay tuned.

SCOTT HOEZEE

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is Groundwork, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DAVE BAST

And I am Dave Bast. We are doing a series on the spiritual disciplines that really help us grow in our relationship with God and our knowledge of the Lord Jesus, and in our obedience, in deepening our spiritual lives.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And as we have said all along, whether we have been talking about fasting or simplicity, study, meditation, as we are going to think about today. The point is, not doing these things for their own sake, but doing them so that we can grow closer to the heart of God. To help us, Dave, today we have a special guest with us.

DAVE BAST

Right. His name is Jonathan Brown, Reverend Jon Brown is the pastor of Pillar Church in Holland, Michigan, which is really a unique congregation, belonging both to the Reformed Church in America and the Christian Reformed Church in North America. Jon, welcome to our program; it is great to have you.

JON BROWN

Thank you very much. It is a privilege to be with you.

DAVE BAST

You have, really, a special discipline that you have undertaken now for many years in actually memorizing and reciting the Bible, or is it right to say, performing the Bible in worship.

JON BROWN

I was a junior in college, about to travel to Chiapas, Mexico, to visit with the believers there. I spent six weeks down there and found myself each morning memorizing the Bible as a way of engaging with God, and really have not stopped doing that since.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We are going to talk with you, Jon, about that throughout this program, as to why that is important; what it has done for you; what it has done for you as a preacher; what it has done for your congregation; what can it do for all of us as individual believers; but set the stage, just in this first segment. Why memorize scripture? Why memorize scripture instead of John Calvin or Augustine, or...

DAVE BAST

Or poetry or something like that. I mean, there is nothing wrong with that.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The reason, of course, is because the Bible for Christians is one of our main connections to God. We can just very quickly in this first part of this show talk about three important, classic characteristics of the Bible. We will just talk about them briefly, and then we will move on to our conversation with you, Jon. One of the first things we talk about is the sufficiency of scripture – these are little theological terms and we will explain it – but the sufficiency of scripture, meaning it is enough. The Bible is enough for us to come to faith and be nurtured in our faith.

DAVE BAST

And another phrase that we sometimes use in connection with that idea is, we call it our rule of faith and practice; and actually then we add some other descriptors to that. It is our *only* rule of faith and practice. It is our only *infallible* rule of faith and practice. It is the thing we go to to determine both what we believe and how we behave.

SCOTT HOEZEE

There is also the – if you are a Reformation person, coming out of the Reformation – the Protestant Reformation, you probably have heard a Latin phrase: *sola scriptura*, which means the Bible alone. We do not need – in fact, from the Belgic Confession, one of the great traditions of our church has this as a confession – that we would never consider human writings, no matter how holy their authors might have been, equal to divine writings, because we do believe that scripture is uniquely authored by God through the Spirit.

DAVE BAST

Here is another idea that we hold to with respect to scripture, and that is that it is necessary to have – it is not enough just to know God from nature, or have a general idea of God. The only way you can really come to know God is through His revelation in the Bible.

JON BROWN

Yes, absolutely; the beauty of creation – you look at Mount Baker and Mount Rainier – you see the waters of Puget Sound – you come to acknowledge the existence of something other. It is through scripture, though, that God chooses to reveal Himself to us personally, and we can come to know Him in that way.

DAVE BAST

And really, no other way than through scripture.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We talk about the sufficiency of scripture. It is enough. It is necessary, as well to know scripture to be a believer, and finally we talk about – the big term is *perspicuity*, but that is a big term that just means scripture is clear.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You can read scripture. You do not have to be sophisticated. You could be a child. You could be an older person. You could be educated or not. When you go to scripture, the message is clear – the message of the Gospel.

DAVE BAST

Which is not to say everything in it is clear...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Correct, yes.

DAVE BAST

Sure, there are depths that we cannot plumb; but again, this is what the Bible says about itself: Your Word – speaking of Psalm 119, which we used in the introduction to this program – Your Word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path.

JON BROWN

Yes, while people like me, pastors, are necessary and important in the life of a church, we do not hold the keys to unlock the scriptures for people. You can open the Bible and read it for yourself. It is clear.

DAVE BAST

But let's talk a little bit more about reading the Bible for yourself, and even doing more than read it. One of the interesting themes – again, going to scripture as it describes itself – there are several passages that suggest with imagery that we have to internalize this book and its words. I am thinking of a verse from Ezekiel, Ezekiel 3:1, where the Lord says to the prophet:

¹Son of man, eat whatever you find here; eat this scroll – or eat this book, which was a title, I think, that Eugene Peterson used.

JON BROWN

That is right, yes. Borrowing from the book of Revelation, where the angel says to the seer, “Eat the book. It will be like honey to your mouth, but bitter to your stomach.”

DAVE BAST

Yes, that is another fascinating statement. I would like to pursue that a little bit more, and we will do that next.

BREAK

SCOTT HOEZEE

I am Scott Hoezee, along with Dave Bast, and you are listening to Groundwork; and joining our conversation today about scripture is Reverend Jon Brown, pastor of Pillar Church in Holland, Michigan, and we are going to be talking together in this segment about a curious image that comes up more than once in scripture: The idea of the angel handing somebody a scroll or a book, which stood for the Word of God, and then the person was told, “Eat this; eat this scroll; eat this book.” What does that mean?

JON BROWN

It is not only in the book of Revelation, but also Psalm 1: Meditate on it day and night. The word for meditate is the same word used to describe what an animal is doing – the sounds that it makes as it is devouring its meal.

DAVE BAST

Chew your cud, and make it the Bible; just over and over.

JON BROWN

When the Bible talks about itself in terms of what we ought to do with it, more often than not, it invites us to take it in; to actually ingest it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I think, too, about Psalm 19; talking about the precepts and the commands of God, the psalmist says: They are more precious than gold; but then it says: They are sweeter than honey; than honey from the honeycomb. And so, again, that imagery of ingesting God's Word; which, when you eat something, you literally make it part of yourself. You metabolize it and it becomes part of who you are. Metaphorically speaking, of course, that is exactly the point of immersing yourself into scripture – taking it in – I know for you, Jon, and you mentioned this in the first segment – that has become a practice of memorizing. You mentioned going to Chiapas, Mexico, and beginning that practice. Talk a little bit more about that and how it has translated now into your ministry as a pastor.

JON BROWN

Yes; in Chiapas, it was basically an act of intimacy with God. I was a long way from home for the first time and was feeling quite insecure in a different culture and a different place, and I would open the Bible in the mornings and spend significant amounts of time, basically to engage God. Over time, though, the act of scripture memory has broadened in my life, and the reasons for it – first, for me, as I come to memorize the Bible, it is about obedience, as we are saying. When the Bible speaks of itself and what we ought to do with it, it speaks about internalizing it. Secondly, it is an act of imitation, to my way of seeing things. Jesus is in the wilderness for 40 days and Satan comes to Him and tempts Him and Jesus responds three times: As it is written, as it is written, as it is written. He did not grab the scroll or bring it with Him.

DAVE BAST

He did not have a pocket testament.

JON BROWN

No; He actually had ingested it – He had internalized it. Or Peter at Pentecost – the Spirit descends – people begin speaking other languages – some think: Well, they must be drunk; but Peter stands up and starts preaching. He borrows from the prophet, Joel. He borrows from Psalm 16. He borrows from Psalm 110. He did not run into the Temple real quick and grab these things. He had internalized the Word. He had memorized it. So, that is what Jesus did with the Word. That is what the early Apostles did with the Word. That is what I want to do with the Word as well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is such an interesting point, because today, frankly, doing significant scripture memorization is the exception not the rule. People are, Jon, when they hear you preach, or the time or two – I have not done it that often – but when I have memorized a passage that I am going to preach on instead of reading it, I perform it, that is unusual; but, you are reminding us that for a long time in Christian history, that was standard because you did not have – there was nothing in print – there were no books – and scrolls were rare and kept in temples; so, if you were going to know scripture at all, you had to have it in your heart and in your head because you could not look it up.

DAVE BAST

Yes, I think even of the Church fathers; so many of them in their writings would quote scripture extensively. Again, they probably often were not copying it down from a Bible; they were, just from memory, writing the words that they had internalized.

Let me just throw out this question: The average Christian probably struggles to find time and discipline just to read the Bible, let alone to meditate on it and chew it until they have it down from memory. How do you respond to that?

JON BROWN

Well, I think it is a legitimate concern. It is hard; it does take time; and there is absolutely no getting around that. It is interesting to me, at Pentecost when the Spirit descends, this wild, exotic, amazing Spirit movement – the winds from heaven blow – tongues of fire – people start speaking in other languages – the response of

those who were there – who became Christians – was to devote themselves to the Apostles' teaching and fellowship; to the breaking of bread and the prayers. They had to devote themselves because it did not come naturally. Devotion does not come naturally. That is why we devote ourselves. So, in a certain way, I just agree, yes, it is difficult, and so, you devote yourself to it.

SCOTT HOEZEE

This is a series on spiritual disciplines, so we are saying these are indeed like prayer and fasting and simplicity and the other things we have looked at in this series – these are disciplines. You have to be intentional about it. It does not come naturally. Finding the time to do it is not going to be a given in almost anybody's life – we are all so busy; but, I would just ask you another question, Jon. When you preach, and you have internalized your passage – your church is used to it by now – you were in the Pacific Northwest for a while and they probably got used to it – but when people experience that for the first time from a preacher, what kind of reactions have you gotten from people?

JON BROWN

I have gotten all kinds of reactions. At first, some people think: Wow, how did you do that? But, after a while, that just goes away. That is not anything I hear anymore. More often than not, and I am so grateful for this, I hear people say things like: I have never heard it like that before. The scriptures were alive to me today. That is when my heart thrills. When you memorize it and you recite it so that people can hear it well; hear it new; hear it fresh; have a living encounter with the risen Christ. So, when people say to me: I experienced it like I have never experienced it before. That is what thrills my heart.

DAVE BAST

Yes; in a sense, it is the drawback of literacy that we suffer from. Yes, we can read; yes, we all have Bibles; it is all there anytime. We can look it up; and even in church, often we are invited, or we are almost commanded to open the Bible and follow along as I read this story; but, that is a very different kind of exercise than listening to it or seeing it.

JON BROWN

Yes, and one of the things that has impressed me, is the number of little children, and their capacity to listen to the Bible being performed, being recited. It is staggering to me how many little children, who may not be able to read, are engaged on a level that they had not been before.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, I know – and you, Jon, have inspired me on this – there have been a few times, particularly at some worship conferences like the Symposium on Worship, where you have preached in the past as well, I have memorized. I have had extra time and so I have memorized and internalized passages like John 1, or Revelation 5, and a few other; Philippians 1; and people have said to me – now, of course, I do this, and then like you, I preach a sermon on it – but people have said to me afterwards: You know, that was so fresh the way you did John 1, you did not even need to preach after that. Well, okay, but I did have the sermon – anyway, I worked on this thing – but, that has always been an interesting reaction, that it was just so interesting to hear somebody internalize Paul from Philippians 1 talking about his experience in prison that it just opened it up for them; but the reason was because it was coming out of me; I was not just bouncing it off my eyeballs to their ears; it was coming out of me as I had been living with it, as you do; and it makes it all new.

JON BROWN

In a certain way, it is an embodied way of doing what we say to be true about the Bible. We use words like sufficient, necessary, clear, and then we do all sorts of things that might make you think it is actually not sufficient or it is not particularly clear...

DAVE BAST

Unless I give you my little interpretation...

JON BROWN

Yes, let me help you, here because you clearly could not get this. Again, it is understandable why we would preach; however, when you offer it up in a certain way, performed after being memorized, you, in a certain way, embody what we say we believe about the scripture.

DAVE BAST

And you bring about the beatitude – the blessing – that is promised in the opening words of John’s revelation; and when you hear the words of this prophecy, John says, “Blessed are those who hear it and take to heart what is there because the time is near.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

Well, we agree that studying scripture is good and memorizing it is so important to internalizing it, but there are a few obstacles people sometimes encounter, and questions, and we are going to look at some of those next.

BREAK

DAVE BAST

You are listening to Groundwork, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and today we are also joined by Reverend Jon Brown, and we are talking about internalizing, meditating upon, and memorizing the scripture as a spiritual discipline; and we want to address some of the common problems that people have, or objections even that they might make. It is a discipline, and like these other spiritual disciplines that we have discussed in this series, it takes real work and real commitment, and what about the most common, probably, objection of all, which is that people say: I just do not have a strong enough memory; I just cannot do this.

JON BROWN

Yes, I just cannot do it. To folks who say that to me I try to respond graciously, understanding, yes, it is actually hard, and that is why you have to commit yourself to it. That is why we call it a discipline. That is why Christians throughout the centuries have been devoting themselves to things. Yes, if you look at the person who is reciting these long scripture narratives and think, “Tomorrow morning I am going to do that,” it will be frustrating and it will feel like an exercise in futility, but if you start out like we do when we are children and begin small with John 3:16, and a year later you are doing Psalm 1, and two years later you are doing I Samuel 17, it is like a muscle. All of a sudden, you are able to do more than you were able to do originally, so you just keep at it and do not expect yourself to be where you want to end up when you start.

SCOTT HOEZEE

When you have had people say: Oh, I cannot do what you do; and then you have given them that advice and they have taken it, in addition to – I assume, most people will eventually say: Hey, you were right. I was able to get that going. What other testimonies have you heard from people, spiritually speaking, of what happens to them? Not just that, hey, look at me, I got Philippians down, the whole four chapters. It is not just an accomplishment to call attention to themselves, but what do people testify that the Spirit did once they started doing this?

JON BROWN

Several of the things that I hear – first of all, they just flat out see things they would not have seen otherwise. I was talking to a student at Western Seminary just yesterday, who was memorizing Matthew 4, and noticed in the third temptation Satan no longer refers to Jesus as, “if You are the Son of God;” now, why is that? What an interesting observation; and it meant for him to pursue a line of thinking.

DAVE BAST

Well, that probably is the meditating part. As you memorize, you cannot help but meditate on it, and unlike some religious forms of meditation, where you empty your mind and – that is kind of off-putting for

Christians, I think; or they might even fear it as something inappropriate...

SCOTT HOEZEE

or Eastern.

DAVE BAST

But in meditating on the scriptures, you are filling your mind more fully, and seeing things that were there that you did not notice when you just rush through it.

JON BROWN

Or as the Apostle Paul says, “Whatever is pure, whatever is right, whatever is just, whatever is pleasing; think about these things;” we take it in. Another observation I have noticed people making about scripture memorization is not only the things they see in the specific passage they are working on, but the echoes they hear from other places in scripture that then illuminate the very thing they were setting out to work on originally.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I heard somebody – Herbert O’Driscoll was his name – I heard him at a conference years ago saying that in the Bible, the words of scripture never sound – if you think of a piano keyboard – the words of scripture never sound individual notes; they always form chords with other parts of scripture; and I think that is what you begin to see as you immerse yourself into something more than just a quick five minutes with God – breakfast, a little reading, then off to work you go. You spend a month with Philippians or Philippians 2, or something; and then, all of a sudden, next week you are reading Psalm whatever, and it is like: Oh, that is forming a chord with what I have been working on in Philippians 2.

I wonder, too, Jon – I assume that for any given Sunday when you preach, you are ready to do that passage then, and you have worked on it, but if somebody had asked you on the spot: Oh, do the one from two months ago, it would be a little rustier; but what do you find long-term residue in yourself, even though, yes, at a moment’s notice, you cannot just do Revelation 5 from memory, but you could once. Long term, what does that do?

JON BROWN

Over time, if given time, any of these passages that I have memorized I am able to call back up in a fairly short amount of time. Yes, it is actually quite wonderful when these things come back to you. I had a friend saying to me the other day who is committed to scripture memory as well, something he had memorized months, even years before, came back to him in a specific moment as he was discerning something, and that has happened to me over and over and over again. Once it is in you, it stays in you. It begins to do its work in you.

DAVE BAST

A lamp to your feet and a light to your path – and there it is when you need it.

JON BROWN

Living and active. It does not go on the bookshelf of your soul. It works its work in you even as you are doing your work.

DAVE BAST

I think one of the things that I was struck by all that you have been sharing, Jon, was right at the beginning when you said you started doing this just because you wanted intimacy with God. To my mind, that is probably the key thing – yes, it is hard work and yes, it takes discipline; it is a spiritual discipline; you are going to have to stick to it, and most of us do not stick to our good intentions; but if you keep coming back, what is it that you really want out of life? Do you just want to be comfortable or do you really want a deeper relationship with the Living God? This is a way to get that.

JON BROWN

Yes, the God who spoke in the beginning, “Let there be,” and light happened; the God who took on flesh and the Word became flesh speaks to us still through the pages of the scriptures, and when we open them, the same One who spoke in the beginning and who became flesh in Jesus Christ comes to us by the Spirit still. It is an active relationship.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Some of the theology we talked about in the first segment of this program, if all of that is true, and if, as Evangelical believers, we really do believe this is a word from God – I mean, it came through human authors, but it is really ultimately from God – what else would we want to bubble up in us than the very Word of God? We memorize song lyrics; some people memorize whole movie scripts, but when you are faced with extreme circumstances – you are in the MRI tube and you are feeling claustrophobic and scared, what do you want to occur to you but the Word of God to comfort you? You are witnessing to somebody, what do you want to bring to them? The Word of God; again and again and again, what better could be bubbling up in us than that?

DAVE BAST

And that really brings us back to where we started with Psalm 119. I mentioned that it is a love song to a book, but it really is not that. It is only incidentally that. It is really a love song to the God who wrote the book, and whose words are written in the book. If we want to know Him and love Him and experience Him, we are going to love these words, too, and make them part of us.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Amen. Well, thanks for joining our Groundwork conversation. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Dave Bast, and today we have welcomed our guest, Reverend Jon Brown from Pillar Church in Holland, Michigan. So, we would like to know how we can help you continue digging deeper into scripture. Visit our website; it is groundworkonline.com; and tell us topics and passages you would like us to dig into next on Groundwork.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/study-memorization>

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