

Lessons on Scripture Memory From “Mr. and Mrs. Tentmaker”

Paul and Margaret Hensley interviewed pioneer missionaries to Afghanistan, Christy and Betty Wilson, at Gordon-Conwell Seminary in 1995.

How did you get started in systematic Scripture memory?

Dr. Stacey Woods invited Dawson Trotman to come to the InterVarsity staff conference in Canada. Dawson said he'd come on one condition—that everyone on the staff, including Dr. Woods—would sign up for the Topical Memory System. It was a tremendous experience for me. I was able to go through the whole set of verses.

Each year I try to go through the Bible studying a different thing. A couple of years ago I went through

and picked the key verse of every chapter of the Bible. By memorizing the key verse of every chapter you can get the key verses of every book—1,100 verses. Then you have a wonderful way to get the context. When you learn a verse you know what is around it and that way you can master the Bible. I'm calling this “Stepping Stones Through the Scriptures,” because each key verse of each chapter is a stepping stone as you go through the Scriptures.

How did you keep up Scripture memory during language study?

Betty and I were in Afghanistan for 22 years. One of the best ways to learn another language is to do it through the New Testament because you already know the words in English.

Therefore, you don't have to waste time looking up words in a dictionary or lexicon.

When I went to Princeton University, I learned Arabic. Then I went to seminary and learned Hebrew and Greek. Then I worked with InterVarsity for five years and then I went to the British Isles. Since my papers showed that I already had Arabic, I was put into an advanced Arabic class in Cambridge University!

Well, by then I'd even forgotten the alphabet. I had a terrible time. These other graduate students were reading and then they'd come to me and I'd have to try to figure out the letters. I was so embarrassed. So I got a Gospel of John

in Arabic. By the time I finished, I could read faster than any of the other students in the class. So my

professor, A. J. Arberry, who had translated the Qur'an, said, “What happened to you?” Because I had not only embarrassed myself. I had embarrassed him. I had embarrassed the whole class.

When Betty and I went back to Afghanistan five years ago, I read through the whole New Testament in the Dari language in preparation. Now the best way to learn the language is by listening and repeating, but the best way to learn to read a language is by reading the New Testament.

When you know verses in English, it helps you in other languages to understand the meaning. And you can learn another language much quicker if you already know the verses in English. You don't even have to look into

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the English Bible, you can just go right along and you can know what the verse is going to be about. Scripture Memory helped me tremendously in the work in Dari, the main language of Afghanistan.

On the mission field, there are so many things that come up that often it's hard to get time to memorize Scripture. But Betty and I get up early and spend that time with the Lord. You usually don't have people knocking at your door at five o'clock in the morning unless there's an emergency. Therefore, we would do our praying and our study of the Scripture and our memorizing at that time. Also I find that reading over verses before going to bed helps a lot because your subconscious mind deals with them.

How Scripture Memory has helped you in evangelism?

I tell my students it is important for them to open the Bible with someone to whom they are witnessing, so the person can see the words and the Holy Spirit then uses that as well. But they need to know the verse by heart in order to be able to explain the meaning. They need to know where the verse is. You don't have to say, "Oh, well, there's a wonderful verse in Isaiah. I don't know where it is, but it says something like this..." No. You need to know just where it is in Isaiah and be able to turn to it and also know the verse and not only have the person read the verse visually but also be able to explain it.

Furthermore, if you don't have the Scriptures with you, and you're in a conversation with someone on the airplane, or wherever, the Holy Spirit, if you have verses in your heart, can bring them to mind, and I'm even sometimes amazed because it's something I haven't even thought of. The Holy Spirit reveals a truth right on the spot through his Word. That's why it's so important to know the Scriptures in order to lead people to Christ and also in order

to be able to disciple them so they'll grow in grace and in their knowledge of the Lord.

In relation to how many verses I've memorized, I really don't know. I hope to memorize many more before I go to be with the Lord, the way Dawson did.

Are you having any trouble keeping up with your back review?

Dawson Trotman said that repetition is the secret. Even studying the Scriptures over and over, studying for messages, why you come across verses. That's the way to keep it up. As I mentioned I didn't even remember the alphabet in Arabic because I hadn't been repeating it. But if you keep in the Scriptures every day, that will help you remember the verses.

Betty: We found an opportunity when we were traveling in Afghanistan, that driving in the car was a wonderful opportunity to say Scripture together—especially the Psalms—and talk about the Lord. And we used songs that had Scripture in them as well. So that was a great opportunity to use the Scripture and repeat it together as a family.

Tell about how it was when you were raising children.

We just had to be up early in the morning to read the Bible ourselves and to memorize, otherwise the day was just too full to get it in. But doing it first thing in the morning, it does certainly set the tone for the day. The same here, in this apartment. The best time is the morning, otherwise the day is gone and I'm not as faithful at memorizing Scriptures as Christy has been. But I'm really making an attempt now to get back, and I've just found the verses. The more I repeat them day by day, the more they get into your hearts and they are just such a blessing. I'm going to try to memorize these verses in Christy's courses too because I know how they come to your heart through the day

even as you've memorized them and think of them. God brings them to mind over and over.

Christy: If I could just add to what you've said in relation to the way we used to quote Scripture, especially we used to call it the "journey Psalm." "Lift up mine eyes unto the hills..." Ps. 121.

And it ends "And the Lord will preserve your going out and your coming in." And on a journey that's what you do, you go out, and you come in. The Lord will preserve your going out and your coming in from this time forth. And even forever more.

Another thing that we found in Afghanistan, the people there have a tradition that when Satan was cast out of heaven he fell to earth in Kabul, Afghanistan. His power is very great there. Therefore, just as Moses prayed when the pillar of fire was lifted and the children of Israel moved in

the wilderness
(Numbers 14)
so we would

pray before we would drive and ask God's protection as it says in Psalm 34, "The angel of the Lord encamps round about those who fear him and delivers them."

Three times we were in such a hurry, we forgot to pray before we drove. And those three times we had accidents. So now, our children who are in the States and have children of their own, they pray every time before they start out driving, just the way we pray when we eat thanking the Lord for the food. In the same way they pray asking God's protection. And I think if more Christians did that, we'd have a lot fewer accidents. But, along with prayer, it's so important to quote Scripture because that's out of God's Word. It has God's authority to it.

As Betty mentioned, another wonderful way to memorize Scripture is through singing it and I'm thrilled with a lot of Scripture songs that we have now. In fact, one person, when he

found out that I was picking the key verses of every chapter of the Bible, said that he would like to write music for every one of the verses because he found his children could learn Scripture so much more quickly when he put them to music. His children entered a contest, I think they had to memorize 100 verses to get a free scholarship to camp, so he put all the verses to music and they learned them very quickly. And we found this in Afghanistan that by teaching Afghan children Scripture songs in their own language, then they sing them and other people hear them and they go all over the country because Muslims have no singing in their worship.

The closest to music is the sing-song way they call the prayer, *Allahhu akbar*, and that, or read the Qur'an. But they look on music as being sinful and so they don't have music in their worship. But when they come to Christ, they

When Satan was cast out of heaven he fell to earth in Kabul

love to sing God's praise, because it's natural as it says in Psalm 150 "Let

everything that has breath (I think it means everything that has sound, because sound goes through the air), let everything that has sound glorify the Lord." It is wonderful to use music for God's glory and also music is a wonderful way to remember Scripture. That's why I like the [Handel's] Messiah so much because it has Scripture in it.

Betty: I think memorizing Scripture is a wonderful means for prayer. To be able to pray those verses for others. I've just found to be such a blessing, especially for different ones on the mission field. If God gives me a verse that's especially meaningful. That's a wonderful way to memorize it right there, just repeating it for all these different ones that you're concerned about and want prayer for. I've found that to be a great blessing.

Christy: Furthermore, one year I went to the Scriptures and marked every promise of the

Bible and found over 30,000 promises in the Scripture. These are promises of God, but the problem is that we usually don't inherit them or claim them because we don't think of them, we don't know them. And that's another reason that memorizing the promises can help us so much in relation to claiming what God has for us. He wants to give it to us, that's why He's promised. But "we have not because we ask not," as the Bible says.

One other thing I have found that Scripture helps you with is deliverance ministry because when someone is oppressed with demons, the demons will have to listen to Scripture. You not only quote Scripture to them, order them out in the name of Christ, but also you claim the authority the Lord has given us with his name.

As we quote verses such as Rev. 12:11 "And they overcame him by the blood of the Lamb, and by the word of their testimony; and they loved not their lives unto the death..." and 1 John 4:4 "Greater is he who is you than he who is in the world." It is amazing the power they have with demons.

I think this is why Satan quoted Scripture, because he realized how much power it had. But he misquoted it when he was tempting Jesus to jump off the pinnacle of the temple. It's interesting that the verse he misapplied was talking about God who has promised that his angels will bear you up in their arms lest you dash your foot against the stone.

I'm sure this verse had needled Satan, because time after time he had tried to get at God's people, and God's angels had defended them. So he used that verse in the wrong way wanting Christ, I believe, to commit suicide, to jump off the pinnacle of the temple. Because Satan comes to "kill, to steal and to destroy." Yet Christ corrected him and said, "It is written, thou shalt not test the Lord your God." There again, Satan tried to quote Scripture, but he misquoted it and misapplied

it. This shows how much he and the demons recognize the power that the Word of God has and our Lord in every one of his three temptations that Satan brought to him answered through Scripture.

Now if Christ had said "Well, now I..." I think in here is the idea that if Christ had had to get a Bible and look up a reference, he wouldn't have had time. Or if he'd said "Well, I think it says something about that somewhere..." it would not have had the same power.

Now if you get a Bible and turn and read the reference to Satan. Jesus knew it, by heart. He therefore quoted, and overcame the temptation. That's the way we can do too when Satan tempts us, if we know what God's Word says, we can quote God's Word to Satan. And as I've mentioned, demons take note of what God's Word says. It's not our word, but it's God Word and therefore they have to obey and that's another reason it's so important to know the Scriptures in order to be able to command these demons and He, God, delivers them. The apostle Paul, from all indications, knew the whole Old Testament by heart. The amazing thing is that even Peter, who was a fisherman, had been so trained that at Pentecost he quoted Joel, chapter 2, verse 28 and following. Our Lord when he called the disciples said "Follow me and I will make you to become fishers of men." It's a generic term, men and women. And that's what he did. They did it through quoting the Scriptures. You read their sermons in Acts and they're quoting the Scriptures over and over again from various parts. They not only had Jesus teaching them, but also they had memorized Scripture.

Christy and Betty Wilson pioneered the concept of "tentmaking" while living in Afghanistan. He was principal of a government high school and taught English. Together they founded the School for the Blind in Kabul. Christy passed away in 1999 and Betty has since remarried.