

Joshua Choonmin Kang
Scripture by Heart: Devotional Practices for Memorizing God's Word.
Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2010.

You might think, looking at the title, that this book has a narrow scope: you're either interested in memorising scripture or you're not and if you're not, this book isn't for you. You might also think that memorising scripture is for someone else, maybe some whole demographic other than the one you're in.

Not so fast. Joshua Choonmin Kang is clearly a man of deep holiness and prayer and what he has to offer extends well beyond memorising Bible verses. Even if you had no inclination to memorise scripture, you might see a case for it after you read this book.

Let's begin with one of his simplest and most arresting statements: 'My main message: to memorize the Bible, you have to pray the Bible first' (11). If you don't think you want to memorise the Bible, would you be as quick to say you don't want to *pray* it? Kang's fundamental concern, as I read him, is not memorisation so as to defeat some hostile interlocutor with a triumphant 'Gotcha!', complete with chapter and verse. He mentions evangelisation, but it's not the focus of the book, not directly, at least. His first concern is that the Bible transform *you*, you who choose to engage with it in this sustained and serious way. Even if you don't want to memorise on the scale he envisages (whole chapters? mercy!), or have no inclination to memorise anything at all, *Scripture by Heart* invites you to take seriously the idea that a Christian should be soaked in Scripture, shaped, formed and sustained by what God has spoken to his disciples.

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So what role does memory have? It helps you to know God, to imitate Christ (12). Although Kang does not put it quite this bluntly, the content of our minds is also for the most part the content of our hearts. Kang does not cite Augustine of Hippo on this point, but I will: you cannot love what you do not know. Your knowledge is accordingly both the prerequisite and the prelude to love. So if you would love God, you must know God and if you would know God, where would you turn for knowledge, other than scripture and prayer? As Kang says, 'Learning Scripture by heart throws open the door to meditation' (17) and each word is a seed, a seed which when planted 'in your interior garden' will bear fruit (18).

You might ask, 'But why is it necessary to *memorise*? Why can't you just meditate with the page of the Bible open in front of you?'

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Kang's answer to this is perhaps a bit oblique, but essentially it boils down to the notion that memorising is a form of mental exercise, which develops the

perception of both mind and soul, trains thought processes and expands the imagination (33). It allows Scripture to *dwell* in us (99).

Kang also claims that memorising Scripture allows us to 'transform trials into opportunities' (108). Why is this the case? Having Scripture embedded in our hearts enables us to surmount pain. Suffering, he maintains, is God's will for us, because it provides opportunities for growth. Suffering teaches us (109). Looking up passages in the Bible that might be helpful in a time of crisis is not the same, he implies, as having Scripture written on your mind and heart. It is when the word 'dwells in us richly' that it can best shape us and our responses to the

world around us. This is the most important lesson of this book: 'When we meditate on God's Word . . . The Word becomes incarnate in us and literally lives through us' (107).

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We don't always have a Bible to hand, or even if we do, it may not be possible to pull it out and read. Memorisation allows us to meditate at all times, indeed, pray scripturally at all times, since Scripture memorisation helps Biblical prayer (103). It teaches self-discipline,

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an over-looked virtue urged by the writers of the New Testament. Ruling ourselves and our minds is 'incomparably more important than gaining the whole world' (45).

One respect in which Kang's book is a small and multipurpose gem is that he gives sets of questions for Bible study which effectively summarise many of the methods that larger tomes cover, though more briefly (106-7 and 116-117). The more extensive treatment of these approaches in books dedicated to Bible study proper doesn't necessarily offer much more than Kang gives: the real issue is not the nitty-gritty detail of *what* you do, but *that* you do. If every day, you applied these questions to a passage of the Bible you read according to a lectionary or one-year Bible plan or by following along in a daily devotional such as those produced by the Scripture Union or Bible Reading Fellowship, they would enrich your reading of the Bible immensely. Then, if you wanted to go more deeply or explore more imaginative forms of engagement, that option is always open, but *Scripture by Heart* offers an excellent place to start.

Perhaps the most important suggestion in Kang's book is that memorising and meditating on Scripture is a way of making the word 'available to the Holy Spirit to use in your life' (80). He points out that the Bible wasn't given to us to be preserved, in the way one might preserve an ancient scroll sheerly for its historical value. The Bible is meant to be 'lived, taught and proclaimed' (77). *Scripture by Heart* provides many strategies for doing just

that: studying the Bible, praying the Bible and living in the Bible throughout the day, because it is deeply rooted in your mind and heart. It may even encourage you to memorise it. Whether or not you do that, however, your spiritual life will be encouraged, informed and uplifted by this wise and gentle Christian soul's advice.

Highly Recommended.