

Scripture in Memory: Jesus as a Model for Spiritual Formation

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One of the many things that captured the interest of Christ's disciples was His fervent and consistent devotional life. The Gospels, especially Luke, illuminate the importance of prayer for Jesus. His followers were inspired by the spiritual power they had come to associate with His words and works. While His life in the Spirit stemmed from several sources, it also included His intent to store Scripture in memory. This ingredient in Christ's spiritual life is not as explicitly described as His life of prayer, but is evident in the record of his earthly ministry. Our study will trace this practice through the Gospels so that we might be inspired by Jesus' example and see its relevance for God's people living in the time of the end.

It has been observed that the Gospels (particularly Matthew) describe Christ as the perfect representative of Israel who repeats the history of the Old Testament covenant people.¹ God called both Israel and Christ—as the embodiment of Israel—His “servant” (Isa 42–53). Both similarly received the designation of God's “Son” (Exod 4:22; Isa 42:1; Matt 3:17). Like Israel of old, Jesus found refuge in Egypt for His own survival. The first chapters of Matthew's Gospel represent Jesus as retracing the steps of Israel, experiencing a “new Exodus” from Egypt after a death decree (Matt 2:14–15). Christ then makes a spiritual journey, crossing a figurative Red Sea at the time of His baptism (cf. 1 Cor 10:1–2; Matt 3). As the pillar of cloud went before Israel to lead them in the desert, so Jesus was “led up of the spirit into the wilderness” (Matt 4:1), dwelling among “wild beasts” (Mark 1:3). There He resided forty days in the desert, paralleling the forty years Israel wandered in the wilderness. As Moses proclaimed the law of God's kingdom on Mount Sinai, so did Jesus, the great Law Giver, proclaim His spiritual kingdom on the Mount of Blessings (Matt 5). Jesus later selected twelve disciples as the counterpart of the twelve tribes of Israel.

¹ See, for example, O. Palmer Robertson, *The Israel of God: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow*, (Phillipsburg, NJ; P & R, 2000), 101–103.

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Notice that Jesus faced the same temptations in the desert (Matt 4:4, 6, 7, 21) as Israel did during their time of wandering. Temptation came to Jesus in the three areas of “appetite,” “love of the world,” and “presumption.” Where Adam failed, Christ was victorious and became an example to His followers.² It’s significant that Christ recognized that passages quoted by Satan were out of their immediate context and only partially quoted (cf. Matt 4:6–7 and Ps 91:11). He overcame all of these temptations by quoting passages from memory out of the book of Deuteronomy. The precepts in this book, many written in the desert, had also been available to Israel in the wilderness as they struggled with temptation. (Deut 8:3; 6:16; 6:13).³ In other words, Jesus used the very same weapon available to Israel as they battled temptation. Christ had evidently, through years of careful application and study, fortified His memory in preparation for this intense battle with the adversary.

The Gospels exalt many facets of the life of the Messiah as an example for those who are following His example. The Gospels record no less than forty-three occasions when Jesus quoted or alluded to Scripture from memory. His purpose for quoting the Scriptures seems to fall into three categories: 1) as an aid in His battle with sin,⁴ 2) to clarify a doctrinal question for His hearers,⁵ and 3) as a confirmation or clarification of His mission as the Messiah.⁶

² Ellen G. White, *Testimonies for the Church* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1948), 4:372.

³ Regarding the role of Scripture in resisting temptation, Ellen White says: “In the wilderness, armed with the weapon, ‘It is written,’ he met and overcame the strongest temptations that the enemy could bring against him. He proved the power of the Word. It is God’s people who have failed. That his Word has not the power on hearts that it ought to have is shown by the present condition of the world. But it is because men have chosen to disobey, not because the Word has less power.” “An Appeal for the Colored Race,” *Advent Review and Sabbath Herald* (October 27, 1904): 8.

⁴ Matt 4:4/Luke 4:4 (Deut 8:3); Matt 4:7 (Deut 6:7); Matt 4:10/Luke 4:12 (Deut 6:13). Although this category includes the least number of quotations recorded in the Gospels, they provide a window into the spiritual life of Christ and the secret of the victorious faith that characterized His entire ministry.

⁵ Matt 5:21 (Exod 20:13); Matt 5:27 (Exod 20:14); Matt 5:31 (Deut 24:1); Matt 5:33 (Lev 19:12); Matt 5:38 (Exod 21:24; Lev 24:20; Deut 19:21); Matt 5:43 (Lev 19:18); Matt 12:7 (Hos 6:6); Matt 19:4/Mark 10:6 (Gen 1:27 or Gen 5:2); Matt 19:5/Mark 10:7–8 (Gen 2:24); Matt 19:18–19/Mark 10:19/Luke 18:20 (Exod 20:12–16; Deut 5:16–20; Lev 19:18); Matt 21:13/Mark 11:17/Luke 19:46 (Isa 56:7; Jer 7:11); Matt 21:16 (Ps 8:3 LXX); Matt 22:37 (Deut 6:5); Mark 12:29–30 (Deut 6:4–5); Mark 7:6 (Isa 29:13 LXX); Luke 23:30 (Hos 10:8); John 6:45 (Isa 54:13).

⁶ Matt 9:13 (Hos 6:6); Matt 10:36 (Mic 7:6); Matt 11:10/Luke 7:27 (Mal 3:1); Matt 11:29 (Jer 6:16); Matt 13:14–15/Luke 8:10 (Isa 6:9–10); Matt 15:4/Mark 7:10 (Exod 20:12 or Deut 5:16); Matt 15:4/Mark 7:10 (Exod 21:17); Matt 15:8–9/Mark 7:6 (Isa 29:13; LXX); Matt 18:16 (Deut 19:15); Matt 21:42/Mark 12:10–11/Luke 20:17 (Ps 118:22–23); Matt 22:32/Mark 12:26/Luke 20:37 (Exod 3:6; 15); Matt 22:39/Mark 12:31 (Lev 19:18); Matt 22:44/Mark 12:36/Luke 20:42–43 (Ps 110:1); Matt 23:39/Luke 13:35 (Ps 118:26); Matt 24:30/Mark 13:26/Luke 21:27 (Dan 7:13); Matt 26:31/Mark 14:27 (Zech 13:7); Matt 26:64/Mark 14:62/Luke 22:69 (Ps 110:1; Dan 7:13); Matt 27:46/Mark 15:34 (Ps 22:1); Luke 23:46 (Ps 31:5); John 10:34 (Ps 82:6); John 13:18 (Ps 41:9); John 15:25 (Ps 35:19); John 19:30 (Ps 22:31).

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The Scriptures sustained Jesus during the trying ordeal at the closing hours of His life. Of the “seven last words” of Jesus on the cross, three were texts of Scripture from memory. The three passages quoted by Jesus during the closing hours of His betrayal and crucifixion were: Ps 22:1 (Matt 27:46/Mark 15:34); Ps 31:5 (Luke 23:46); and Ps 22:31 (John 19:30). A fourth statement, “I thirst” (John 19:28), though not a direct quote, is contextually parallel with events described in Pss 22:15 and 69:21. In the midst of His terrible suffering, under the weight of the sins of the world, He uttered the prayer, “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?” (Matt 27:46/Mark 15:34, quoting Ps 22:1).⁷ Even the last spoken words of Jesus before He died, “It is finished,” were words of Scripture that He had committed to memory (John 19:30, quoting Ps 22:31).⁸

Jesus understood, from His meditation on Scripture revealing His Messianic work, that He was the new antitypical David, repeating in His life the experience of the first David.⁹

All three OT texts quoted by Jesus on the cross came from the Psalms of David. It is appropriate that Jesus would identify himself with David, who had hidden the Word in his heart (Ps 119:11). Probably no other OT character declared a stronger devotion to the words of the Lord.¹⁰ It was David who said, “I will delight myself in thy statutes: I will not forget thy word” (Ps 119:16). This resolve Jesus had also made, and it sustained Him in His final hours. As the Davidic Messiah, it is no wonder that Jesus armed Himself with the words of Ps 22 and other relevant verses from the Psalter. He gained encouragement as He witnessed how the events described in the Psalm so closely paralleled events happening before His eyes.

The Gospel narratives contain additional parallels with the experience of David in the Psalms: They mocked Christ on the cross (Ps 22:7; cf. Matt 27:39/Mark 15:29). The tormentors tempted Him to deliver Himself (Ps 22:8; cf. Matt 27:43/Luke 23:35). Christ suffered great thirst on the cross (Ps 22:15; cf.

⁷ Jacques Doukhan points out that Daniel makes an additional connection between the Messiah and the experiences described in Ps 22. In Dan 9:26, the angel Gabriel refers to the Messiah’s death with the expression “he has no . . .” (*ên lô*), a contracted form of “he has no help” (*ên ’ôzer lô*) of Dan 11:45. These words allude to the abbreviated phrase “no help” (*ên ’ôzer*) of Ps 22:11. For his complete treatment of this connection, see Jacques Doukhan, “The Seventy Weeks of Dan 9: An Exegetical Study,” *AUSS*, 17 (1979): 18–19. For a further discussion of the NT Messianic fulfillment of Ps 22, see Hans LaRondelle, *Deliverance in the Psalms* (Berrien Springs, MI: First Impressions, 1983), 53–60.

⁸ This word *asah*, in the Qal perfect (3rd sing. masc.), can be translated as an “impersonal passive.” W. Gesenius and E. Kautzsch, *Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar*, 2d English ed., rev. A. E. Cowley (London/New York: Oxford UP, 1910 [15th printing, 1980]), 387 (¶121a). Therefore, the translation of the final words of this Psalm mean either “He has done [it]” or “It is done!” The latter translation means that Jesus died with the closing words of this Psalm on His lips (John 19:30). Ps 22 and the similar narrative in the Gospels indicate that the second phrase is the best translation.

⁹ Jer 23:5; Ezek 34:23; 37:24; Isa 9:6–7; 11:1–5; Hos 3:5; Amos 9:11; Zech 8:3; John 13:18–27, etc.

¹⁰ Ps 119:11, 16, 25, 28, 50, 97, 105, 113, 140, 161, 163, 165, etc.

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John 19:28). His hands and feet were pierced (Ps 22:16; Matt 27:35/Mark 15:24/Luke 23:33/John 19:18). His garments were parted and taken by casting lots (Ps 22:18; Matt 27:35/Mark 15:24/Luke 23:34). The Savior's naked faith, hanging on the words of Scripture, energized Him with courage to face the crisis before Him.

In the same manner, the people of God, before the day of the Lord, will be "like David" (Zech 12:8). Like the Davidic Messiah, they will draw upon the storehouse of Scripture during earth's final conflict. The end-time generation will face a similar trial and will use the same means to overcome through the Word of God.¹¹

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¹¹ The closing days of Jesus' betrayal, trial, and passion are thematically parallel to the betrayal, deception, and hardship that the Gospels prophesy will come upon the final remnant. (Matt 10:16–18, 22–25, 40; 24:9–10 etc.). Ellen White declares: "Today men are choosing Barabbas, and saying, Crucify Christ. They will do this in the person of His saints. They will go over the same ground as the Jewish priests and rulers did in their treatment of Christ." Ellen G. White, *Testimonies to Ministers and Gospel Workers* (Mountain View, CA: Pacific Press, 1962), 131.