



# Journaling as a Spiritual Discipline

*Writing our thoughts and concerns on paper may be helpful to our faith in a number of ways.*

## Introduction

Some years ago I heard various people speak of their daily experience of journaling. They talked about how much it helped them grow spiritually, but they never spoke of how they went about it. I silently listened. I thought I'd like to try journaling, but I didn't want to sound ignorant by asking them how to do it. They seemed to think everyone knew about journaling. I bought a notebook and began recording the happenings of my day. This became a time-consuming job with very little reward. I knew there must be more to spiritual journaling than this if it helped people grow closer to God. There was a "discipline" (or order) in taking the time to write down my daily activities, but this was not truly a "spiritual discipline."

At the same time I often jotted down my thoughts about various things that went on around me during my day. I was working in the resource room of our high school, mainly doing "crowd control." I got to know some of the teens and often reflected on what was going on in their lives. My coworker and I got together for coffee after we got off work and shared our thoughts. We began writing our thoughts in a notebook, sometimes in simple sentences and sometimes in some form of poetry. This habit of writing my thoughts spread over into my home life, and I dashed them off on miscellaneous slips of paper and threw them into a file, seldom looking at them again. There were times when I remembered having written something and knew it was in that bottomless file, but I did not take the time to rummage through the papers to find it.

At the time I didn't realize that I was actually journaling spiritually as I wrote down my thoughts. By working through my thoughts on paper, I began to think through just who I was in relationship to my family, to the teens I worked with at school, and to God. Finally I began to put the two activities (the diary and the note-taking) together, and my journal became a recording of my thoughts; my prayers; as well as my understanding of God, the Bible, and God's people. After I left the school job, I set aside a special time each day to journal and talk with God. In my journal I wrote down experiences that affected my soul in a particular way and then reflected on those experiences. I realized that a journal differs from a diary. The diary simply records happenings of the day and can become a time-consuming drudgery. A journal may or may not be used every day, but my special time set aside to be with God needed to be a discipline if I was to grow spiritually. The journal was a tool to help me during those times.



Have you ever carried on a conversation with yourself? Often we ask ourselves, "Now, why did I do that?" Journaling is a way of digging inside and answering some of those questions. In a diary I might write, "Today I picked up my granddaughters and took them to their dance class." That would be the end of the entry in the diary. In my journal I might say, "Today I picked up my granddaughters. As we drove to the dance class they

## WHY JOURNAL?

Journaling is a way of thinking things through in your soul.

Journaling is a way of talking to God.

Journaling preserves some of your thoughts for future reference.

Journaling frees you to explore the hidden parts of your heart, giving meaning to your life.

chattered excitedly about their day at school. I remember when I was excited over learning. Why don't I get excited about learning now? Is my life too rushed to take the time to revel in the joy of a new idea? How can I slow down and appreciate the brain power that God gave me?"

By writing such "conversations" down I make my thinking mind and my feeling heart tangible. I put ink on paper or letters on a computer screen. This helps me clarify just who I am. I begin to look at how I might be growing spiritually or at least making some small change for the better. God actively works in our lives, and journaling is one way to recognize those times and thereby develop a discipline that helps us bring that recognition about more often.

## How to Journal

You can find many books on journaling, even some that give you specific steps. Still, no one book or person can tell you the way that is best for you. I can share with you the process I've finally found most helpful, but you will find your own way. Some people strictly use Scripture to journal. Others will use a book, perhaps a devotional book or one by a theologian. Some people even journal with their dreams, piecing them together and writing them down in order to try to understand conversations that their subconscious minds might be having with God. Some who journal simply review their daily lives and reflect on places they have seen God in action; or they reflect on times when they have been too rushed to notice. Sometimes we don't even recognize just how God has acted in our day until we take time to sit silently and reflect. Some people may simply sit in silence and wait for God to place thoughts in their minds. I've found that it's helpful for me to sometimes

use one form of journaling and sometimes another. This spiritual discipline frees you, because there is no set rule of how you should journal.

I've found the easiest way to begin my journaling time is to have a place where I routinely sit. In the summer it's usually on my porch where I can see God's world, because I've found that nature is one of the best spiritual stimulants for me. Some people may find that music, pictures, icons, candles, colored fabric, or symbols help. I keep a basket with my Bible, a devotional book, my journal, and a pen nearby. (I tried journaling with the computer and found that the atmosphere was too much like work.)

Before I begin my meditation/journal time I prepare a cup of tea or a refreshing drink. I also keep a pad of paper nearby to write down when I think of any obligations for the day that I should not forget. Jotting it down releases it from my mind and sets me free to continue my journaling.

As I begin, I repeat a simple verse or prayer, or I may sing a song. I also spend some time simply breathing slowly several times. I may repeat a breath prayer of one or two phrases as I breathe in and out. This might be something like, "Give me a clear mind, O God."

I then consciously open myself to God. I connect with the part of me that feels love or sadness or joy, and I invite God to come into that part of me. Then I spend some time just enjoying the presence of God. I feel God's peace and calm enfold me.

After some time basking in the presence of God, I may open my journal and simply record some of my feelings. Or I may begin to review my day and journal about times I saw God in action. Or I may use the Bible or some devotional materials to help direct my thoughts.

Later in this handout you will find more detail about the notebook that I use for my journaling so that I can easily find my thoughts when I would like to read specific things.

## Journaling in the Bible

The Bible is not a historical record in the manner that today's historians record history. It contains historical events, but they are embedded in the record of how we, as humans, grew in our understanding of God. Likewise, the Bible is not simply a set of rules for all time.

Even within the various books of the Bible the rules sometimes change according to the situations in which the people find themselves. The Bible sets down the record of our movement to monotheism and our progress in understanding the way that God wants us to live out the kingdom of God on earth.

In the Bible we find many places where people used writing to journal, to think through their understanding of God, and to express their feelings to God. We recognize the book of Job as a prose tale, but might it have begun as a form of journaling that the author used, reflecting on the question of why good people suffer? The book of Proverbs may be a culmination of thoughts of many people. Whether they wrote these thoughts down in journal form or just verbalized them, the thinking process was akin to journaling.

The book of Psalms definitely has examples of journaling, or thinking through life situations by using words. For example, in the first part of Psalm 73 the psalmist thinks through what is happening in the surrounding life, and after “journaling” through thoughts, the psalmist affirms a trust in God. Psalm 98 may have been written as the psalmist reflected on God’s involvement in nature.

If journaling helped our spiritual ancestors, it can certainly help us grow spiritually in today’s world.

## Journaling with the Bible

When we read the Bible we need to reflect on how God speaks to us about our everyday life through the Bible. The closing of the canon of the Bible did not mean that God quit talking to people. God talks to us today through our everyday lives as well as through the Bible.

This is where journaling helps. This is how journaling partners with the Bible in our spiritual disciplines. Your goal in reading the Bible through the process of journaling is enacting a transformation of yourself toward all that God has already placed inside you. Don’t read for content, but rather for ways it speaks to you!

Think through these questions as you read the Scripture passage:

- Under what circumstances did the author of this Scripture write?
- What was the author of this Scripture trying to say to the people then?

## EXPERIMENT WITH PSALM 6

Read through the psalm and then write the theme of the psalm in one sentence.

Try one of these:

- Paraphrase the psalm or some of the verses to make it more personal to you.
- Write down some fear you may have, and then write your own affirmation of God’s power in those events. For example, a tornado, harm to your children, old age, and illness.
- Try making line drawings of some verses.
- Write down images that came to you while reading the psalm, or new images that came to you today that you’ve missed other times you may have read the psalm.

- How does the author of this Scripture speak to me today?
- How does the reading of this Scripture help me understand God?
- What difference will my reading this Scripture make in my life?

One easy way to make your Scripture journal accessible for future reference is to use loose leaf paper organized in a binder. Title the pages with the title of the book from the Bible that you are reading. Then mark your writing with the chapter and verses that you reflect on. Future journaling thoughts can then be added to the pages of the specific book of the Bible.

## Journaling through the Day

Although a journal is not a record of daily activities, many events in our lives can give us opportunity to grow spiritually, especially if we reflect on them in the conscious presence of God. This type of journaling can help us recognize that any experience can be a religious experience when we recognize God’s presence in it. Dating your entries will be useful if you want to go back and read your reflections.

It becomes overwhelming if you try to think through every event of the day. Instead, ask yourself: Does one moment stand out? Perhaps something influenced you

and made a difference in your life. You might write down some way that you did or didn't see or feel God's presence in your life at a specific time during the day. Or you might write down how someone involved in an incident brought Christ's spirit to your attention. You might record some new insight that a happening brought about for you. You may even write down something you would say to God about an experience. Writing clarifies any issue. You may have what seems to be an unsolvable problem, and during the process of journaling you'll see a path that leads to the solution.

If no particular event or problem comes to mind, try using these questions to begin reflection:

- What is my inner voice saying to me today?
- What outside of myself speaks to me today?
- What are others saying today that helps me know God better?
- What have I seen in nature today that reminds me of God?
- Where do I hear God talking to me today?
- How are the events of today going to make a difference in my actions tomorrow?
- If God has spoken to me today—through events, emotions, persons, and thoughts—then what is God saying to me today? What did God try to say to me yesterday?

## Using Journal Entries in the Future

You may never reread your journals or you may reference them in the future. Your spiritual growth comes as you journal. You may go back and read sections in order to see just how you have grown over the years. You may also find that you remember writing your thoughts about something in the past and want to go back and review those thoughts in preparation for a Bible study or even

for some speech or written undertaking. In order to easily find these I devised a method of cross-reference.

I use loose leaf paper, secured in a binder, with three tab dividers labeled: daily journal, Scripture, and subject.

1. *Daily Journal*. I may not write in the daily journal each day, but when I reflect on times in my day, I use this section and date the entry.
2. *Scripture*. The pages in the Scripture section are labeled at the top with the name of the book, and as I begin each separate entry, I note the chapter and verses I am reading. I arrange the pages in the same order as in the Bible.
3. *Subject*. The subject section has pages with the subject label in the top right corner, arranged alphabetically. Some of my pages include: anger, baptism, birth, conflict, conversion, creation, faith, gardening, God, grace, grandparenting, Holy Spirit, Jesus, kingdom of God, sin, and vocation. I create new subject pages as I need them.

As I write in one section or another I keep myself conscious of how I might cross-reference those thoughts for easy retrieval. When I journal with Scripture I may think, "These thoughts on this Scripture really talk about anger." Then I turn to the page on anger in the subject section and write, "See Numbers 14:18a." This cross-references it so that I can find my thoughts under either the scripture or the subject. I do the same in my daily journal and subject sections, cross-referencing as I go along. In this manner, I've saved myself many an hour of searching my journals for a specific thought.

No matter how you set up your journal and your journaling time, you will find that this discipline centers your life on God and gives you the necessary time to develop that relationship.

## About the Writer

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