

Journaling for Life

by Rowland Forman

Which sister do you most identify with in Luke's story about Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38-42)? Martha was distracted and anxious about all the preparations for a meal in honor of Jesus and his disciples. Mary sat reflectively at Jesus' feet, listening to his words. Do you have more of the Martha syndrome or the Mary approach in you? This cameo about Lazarus' sisters shows us that the Lord is not impressed with mere labor but with service that flows out of intimacy with him. Ultimately, we will not be asked how much activity we have packed into our short life but how intimately connected we are with God. We will not be quizzed on how much time we have spent at the office but the state of our heart.

Many Christians in the early 21st Century are more inclined to identify with Martha than Mary. They are more familiar with frantic activities than quiet reflection. If that is you, you might need help to slow down. Consider a spiritual discipline like journaling. Many who are caught up in a stream of activities need to find a way to experience what J. I. Packer calls the inner journey. Packer refers to the outer journey as learning to relate to people and the inward journey of deepening our intimacy with God. Most of us Westerners, Packer says,

“...are now unbalanced activists, conforming most unhappily in this respect to the world around us. Like the Pharisees, who were also great activists (see Matthew 23:15!), we are found to be harsh and legalistic, living busy, complacent lives of conforming to conventions and caring much more, as it seems, for programs than for people... Perhaps there are no truths about the Spirit that Christian people more urgently need to learn today than those that relate to the inner life of fellowship with God, that life which I call the inward journey (you could also call it the upward journey – that adjective would fit equally well) (J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit*, 80-81).

In 1990 I started journaling as a spiritual discipline—a way of “training myself for the purpose of godliness” (1 Timothy 4:7-8). I had at least eight prior attempts to keep a spiritual journal. Each attempt utilized the “Dear Diary” approach to journaling. My eight abortive attempts were usually triggered by an article I had just read or the influence of an ardent “journaler.” Upon reflection, my repeated sorties into the world of the spiritual journal floundered on the rocks of insufficient motivation and inadequate skills. I had not yet answered questions like “Why should I continue to journal as part of my commitment to life-change?” and “How can I maintain a spiritual journal that is more of a delight than a chore?” Now, after a decade of journaling, I would like to share some answers to those questions.

Before I address the possible motivations and skills required if journaling is to become a meaningful habit in your life, let me confess that I am a born legalist. I like routines and lists and programs. People say that I am a disciplined person but I know that my disciplines

can easily become a fleshly substitute for true godliness. Rigorous attention to spiritual disciplines like journaling, fasting, praying and memorizing Scripture can give others the impression that we are more spiritual than we really are.

About the time I started keeping a regular prayer journal, Jerry Bridges groundbreaking book, *Transforming Grace*, hit the stands. I have a ritual when I am feeling spiritually dry that goes like this: I ask God to bring a book across my pathway that will be his message to me at the time. Then I go to some Christian bookstores and hunt around. In 1991 I was in a relatively dry spiritual state when Bridges book *Transforming Grace* found me. These words leaped off the page:

“We declared temporary bankruptcy to get into his kingdom, so now we think we can and must pay our own way with God. We were saved by grace, but we are living by performance...

We are all legalistic by nature; that is, we innately think so much performance by us earns so much blessing from God” (Jerry Bridges, *Transforming Grace*, 17).

As I read these words I confessed freely that my tendency is to be “saved by grace but live by performance.” At the time of reading these words from Jerry Bridges—that were like the words of God to me—I was also developing journaling as a meaningful habit in my life. How could I avoid the discipline of journaling becoming yet another legalistic ploy?

Think Relationship, Not Requirement

I have discovered that one way to overcome my legalistic tendencies as it relates to journaling is to view this activity as a means to develop my relationship with God. I see journaling as a relationship-builder with a gracious God.

Stop and think about your relationship with your closest friend on earth. If the relationship is real, it will have a certain flow and flexibility about it. You probably don’t take a stopwatch out each time you have a conversation! You are unlikely to get overly nervous about missing a meeting with your friend once in a while. That is the way I have come to view and practice journaling. I see it as a flexible tool for enhancing my relationship with God. If I fail to write out any prayers in a given day, I know that God is not going to pull the plug on our friendship. Since his love is unfailing, I keep focusing on God’s grace while keeping a journal as a way of responding to God’s love in a relaxed and flexible way.

Now that I have got that confession out of the way, let me turn to the all-important matter of long-term motivation. I say long-term because, like a decision to start jogging, it is so easy to start journaling and to give up after twenty or thirty pages.

Rejuvenated Prayer Life

In my “dear diary” approaches to journaling I felt like I was talking to my journal. The turning point for me was when Fred Littauer, whom I heard at a seminar on Christian writing, spoke about the difference that writing out his prayers meant to him.

I have been liberated in my prayer life by writing out a variety of prayers in my journal. It has been very releasing to have a place to record my expressions of worship and my heart cries to God. I hasten to say, though, that this alone may not keep you consistent in journaling. Simply put, writing out your prayers and praises will not automatically produce consistency.

Spiritual journaling as an opportunity to record prayer is the means; the end you should have in mind is that of greater intimacy and honesty with God. Recording your worship, confession, thanksgiving and requests are the means. The goal of becoming a more thankful and worshipful person is the end result that you should be striving for at all times.

After a decade of journaling I can attest to the power of written prayers. Later in this chapter I will explain how I record my requests. For now, I will say that my favorite time to record is when I review answers to my prayers. In doing this, I sometimes feel like I am a walking answer to prayer! When I merely talk out loud to the Lord, I find it easy to forget my requests and pleas. But when I write out my requests and periodically review the answers, my thankfulness increases dramatically. Donald Whitney puts it this way:

“Many people think God has not blessed them with much until they have to move it all to a new address! In the same way, we tend to forget just how many times God has answered specific prayers, made timely provision, and done marvelous things in our lives. But having a place to collect all these memories prevents their being forgotten” (Donald Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, 201).

Greater Vulnerability

Journaling gives me an opportunity to unravel my thoughts. My journals have become safe places where I retreat to say what I really feel about people and circumstances.

Have you ever asked yourself, “To whom can I express all of my inner feelings?” If you are in leadership your answer might be “Not very many.” Since I started serious journaling, I have been released to express my innermost concerns to God. The effect is cathartic.

Upon reflection, that is what most of the Psalms are—expressions of the psalmist’s deepest feelings. In his book, *Answering Prayer*, Eugene Peterson argues for praying the psalms back to God when says,

“It is easy to be honest before God with our hallelujahs; it is somewhat more difficult to be honest in our hurts; it is nearly impossible to be honest before God in the dark emotions of our hate. So we commonly suppress our negative emotions (unless, neurotically, we advertise them). Or, when we do express them, we do it far from the presence, or what we think is the presence of God, ashamed or embarrassed to be seen in these curse-stained bib overalls...The way of prayer is not to cover our unlovely emotions so that they will appear respectable, but expose them so that they can be enlisted in the work of the kingdom. It is an act of profound faith to entrust one’s most precious hatred to God, knowing they will be taken seriously” (Eugene Peterson, *Answering God*, 100).

I know that complete honesty with God on the pages of a prayer journal poses some challenges. First there is the difficulty of being brutally honest. When you think about it, if God knows our thoughts even before we express them audibly (Psalm 139:3-4), it makes the utmost sense to be totally candid with him when we record our prayers. Second there is the matter of confidentiality. Will my children one day pick up one of my spiritual journals and discover the darker side of their dad? I have dealt with that concern believing that it would be good for my children to discover that their father was honest with God and less than perfect (Something they already know all too well!). Having said that, I would find it counter productive if I had to be writing my journal with an eye on posterity. The way I cope with the matter of transparency on the pages of my journal is to think about King David in his most famous penitential psalm—Psalm 51. My estimation of him after reading his confession is higher than if he were idealized. Practically, I have taken David’s penitential psalms as my template for honesty and vulnerability. I don’t write out all the lurid details of my life and thoughts, but I endeavor to bring the emotions of my soul to the surface.

It motivates me to know that in my journal I have somewhere to go, and more importantly, someone to go to, when the tidal waves of life hit my frail craft.

A Reflective Life

I mostly write in my prayer journal at the start of the day. It’s as if my journal is a tool to help me slow down and reflect on the important things that are happening in my life. I have

just reviewed some of my journals and noted that there is a mixture of reflections on major things and minor issues in my life. As I write, I am facing surgery to determine whether a growing tumor in my lungs is benign or not. A few days ago I received a letter from Lawrence Sumner, a friend of mine who underwent by-pass heart surgery a year ago. He invited me to read Psalm 116. As I read verse three: *The cords of death entangled me, the anguish of the grave came upon me; I was overcome by trouble and sorrow*, I reflected on two times in my life that God saved me from certain death and in the process read on to verse seven: *Be at rest once more, O my soul, for the LORD has been good to you*. As I wrote out my response to verse seven, it was as if a huge burden was lifted from my shoulders. And I have continued repeating this verse to myself when my mind begins to be troubled with thoughts about all the things that can go wrong in surgery.

Listening to God

Let me also confess to something else—I have not yet heard God speak to me in an audible way. Some of my friends claim they have, and you do read in the Bible about God speaking to men and women in time past, but not me. On the matter of listening to God, I prefer to be more reserved.

Recently, I have found my spiritual journal to be a place where I can hear God speak clearly over time. About a year ago, I hit the wall in my role as a Senior Pastor of our church. For the first time in ministry I experienced depression. It was as if, to borrow a line from Bill Hybels, “The way I was doing the work of God was destroying God’s work in me.” My fellow elders gave my wife Elaine and me a five-week sabbatical during which we read and slept and talked and prayed. One of the significant books I read during that time was Ken Gire’s *The Reflective Life*. In this book and its companion, *Reflections on Your Life*, Gire invites his readers to reflect on their lives by “Reading the Moment”, “Reflecting on the Moment” and “Responding to the Moment”. His thesis is that God is much more involved in our lives than we ever realize. What we need to do is to learn to listen to what he is saying in the various “moments” of life.

In the time of reflection and listening on our sabbatical, my journal was a tool that God used to help me in a time of difficulty and transition. I can testify that as I reflected and prayed on the pages of my journal, God spoke to me in a way that has changed my life forever.

The book of Ruth has an interesting phrase related to her work as a gleaner in the fields. It says, “As it turned out, she found herself working in a field belonging to Boaz who was from the clan of Elimelech” (Ruth 2:3). The phrase suggests that rather than a chance happening, Ruth had been brought to that field by divine providence. As you read this book you realize that God’s providential hand is evident everywhere.

A spiritual journal can be a tool to help you go on what David and Karen Mains call, “A God-Hunt.” That is a place where you look for and listen to God. The power of a journal as an instrument to listen to God is that it is done over time. I am still reluctant to say, “God told me this or that...” but when one thing after another “happens” and is recorded in my journal, I can say with confidence that this was God speaking to me.

Life Plans and Daily Plans

Another thing that motivates me to keep a spiritual journal is the opportunity it provides to bring my short and long term plans to God in prayer.

After reading Stephen Covey’s book, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, I wrote out my life mission and corresponding roles and goals. Since that time, on a monthly basis, I review them and turn them into written prayers. Doing so helps me to gain perspective—to see if my life is in harmony with God’s plan and purposes.

As I sort out my priorities each week, I have my personal mission, roles and goals in front of me, and using my journal, bring the week to God in prayer. Most days, I also look at my schedule and pray through that as well, asking the Holy Spirit to lead and empower me as I live for God. Lorne Sanny, past president of the Navigators, occasionally prays through the previous day backwards. He has found it helpful to work from the last thing that happened in that day to the first. Using my journal, this exercise often turns out to be a time of overwhelming thankfulness—a celebration of God’s work in my life.

By now you will have completed your Life Development Plan. You might find it helpful to paste the one-page summary of your Life Plan into your journal, and refer to it at the beginning of each week or each month when you are prayerfully mapping out your schedule.

Centerpiece of Spirituality

I am constantly drawn back to my spiritual journal. When I have heard an inspiring message I summarize it in my journal and write a brief response to the message in the form of a prayer. If I have had a meal with a close friend, I will often note the significant points of the conversation, making them, and my friend, the focal point of a prayer. If I hear a new song that inspires me, I try to get a photocopy of it and paste it into my journal. I do so in

the belief that that the things that happen have significance. Consequently, they are recorded, reflected upon and turned into prayers.

The means in this case is the recording of experiences, including sermons and conversations. The end is the assurance that I am learning from the things that I experience rather than taking life for granted.

Several Disciplines in One

A final motivating factor that keeps me on the journaling track is that it is an efficient way to practice several of the spiritual disciplines simultaneously. Rather than doing my Bible study in one place and recording my prayers in another, I use my spiritual journal as a homepage for my biblical reflections and prayers. Most books on the spiritual disciplines include things like fasting and solitude. Again, a spiritual journal is designed to enhance times of prayer and fasting and days of solitude. In *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, Donald Whitney says, “The Christian life is, by definition, a living thing. If we think of the Discipline of Bible-intake as its food, and prayer as its breath, many Christians have made journaling its heart. For them it pumps life-maintaining blood into every Discipline connected with it” (Whitney, 207). It certainly does that for me.

From Principle to Practice

In conclusion, I want to include some practical suggestions if you intend to embark on the journey of journaling.

- Start your daily entry with “Yesterday...” Bill Hybels in *Honest to God* recommends this practice. He reflects on the people he met, decisions he made and high and low points of the previous day.
- When writing out prayers of adoration or worship, use your daily Bible reading as a springboard to focus on who God is and what he has done.
- If your Bible passage for the day lends itself to a worship paraphrase, go ahead and do that. Take God’s words and make them your words of worship.
- Use a hymnbook or song book as a stimulus to your worship. Write out the words and sing them to God

- Use an acrostic like “ACTS” – Adoration, Confession, Thanksgiving, Supplication, as a reminder of some of the possible categories of prayer. Avoid using this acrostic slavishly. Some days you might choose to record only your thanksgiving.
- Make a chart in your journal with a column for requests and an adjacent column for answers. Record answers to prayer, together with their dates. When reviewing your answers in prayer, also note prayers that seem to be going unanswered.
- Occasionally develop columns for more extensive requests that you want to bring to God
- If you write out prayers of confession, be as specific as possible. Include wrong thoughts as well as wrong actions. For those who feel reserved about recording actual sins in their journal, you can give the sin its general name, then mention the sin out loud to God.
- Review God’s blessings under categories like, “Spiritual, Material, Relational, and Personal.”
- Acknowledge God’s sovereignty in every circumstance. Think of areas of your life like finance, family, friends, and feelings.
- Pray some of Paul’s prayers for the people on your list (e.g. Ephesians 3:14-21)
- Write out your daily program—the people you will meet and various activities. Bring each of the items to God in prayer.
- Write out a summary of the previous week’s sermon and take the key concepts to God in prayer
- Use your journal as a place to record useful quotes from books you are reading
- If someone writes you an impactful letter or note of encouragement, paste that into your journal.
- Record notes from key conversations with friends. Turn these into prayers.
- If you have a personal mission statement, paste it into your journal. Bathe your mission statement in prayer.

Donald Bloesch says, “That there is a crying need to the recovery of the devotional life cannot be denied. If anything characterizes modern Protestantism, it is the absence of spiritual disciplines or spiritual exercises. Yet such disciplines form the core of the life of

devotion. It is not an exaggeration to state that this is the lost dimension in modern Protestantism” (Donald Bloesch, *The Crisis of Piety*, 195). I would recommend the spiritual discipline of journaling to you, not as another legalistic exercise to glorify the flesh, but as a proven means of developing more intimacy with the Living Lord Jesus.

