

The Value of Spiritual Journaling

Psalms 86

This morning we are going to talk about one of my favorite practices for seeking God and growing deeper with him, and that is spiritual journaling. Spiritual journaling is something I took up when I was in my 30's as a way to help me connect with God and it quickly became a tremendous blessing. I heard someone on the radio describing the struggles they were having in their daily quiet time and it sounded exactly like what I was going through, and they said that spiritual journaling had made a huge difference. So I tried it and found that it made a huge difference for me as well. I did it for many years on a consistent basis – almost every day. And I still do it regularly now, though not every day. I want to talk about what it is and the value it can bring to your journey of spiritual growth and seeking more of God.

What is spiritual journaling? Unlike the other practices we've looked at, spiritual journaling is not something you are going to find written about directly in the Bible, though I do believe there are examples of things very similar – and we'll look at one of them later this morning. Paper, pens, and pencils were not available during Bible times because the process of making them wasn't invented yet. They used things like parchment and papyrus along with ancient ink pens, and they were hard to come by. Illiteracy was also an issue in many communities. So writing in a personal spiritual journal wasn't really an option, nor was it practiced or written about in the Bible.

It's something that started early in church history once writing materials were more available and has been widely practiced since then. As I was studying this week I ran across several well-known Christian leaders who kept some kind of spiritual journal and we are actually able to read them today. People like Augustine, Jonathan Edwards, David Brainerd, Brother Lawrence, George Muller, Charles Spurgeon, Jim Elliot, and many, many more. This leads me to believe that if spiritual journaling would have been an option during Bible times, it probably would have been practiced by many as well.

Spiritual journaling is writing or typing many different things related to your relationship with God and spiritual growth. Keeping a general diary of your thoughts and experiences is not a spiritual journal. Keeping a journal of

details regarding weather or daily life on the farm or at college or in the city is not a spiritual journal. Spiritual journaling is writing about things related to your spiritual growth and relationship with the Lord.

Common things people write about in a spiritual journal:

1. Prayers and answers to prayer
2. Expressions to God: Groanings, frustrations, needs, concerns, praises, provisions, gratitude, confession of sin
3. Questions for God along with your thoughts and God's answers
4. Stories of God's protection and provision
5. Insight and ideas about Scripture passages you're studying or other biblical ideas you may be wrestling with
6. Spiritual insight related to situations you're going through or struggling with.
7. Spiritual goals and resolutions

All of these things are related to your spiritual growth and relationship with God and can be part of spiritual journaling. I think I've written about all of them in my own spiritual journaling over the years.

The role of spiritual journaling in seeking God and drawing near to him is unique compared to the other practices we've talked about. I would say that most of those practices are primary and non-negotiable whereas spiritual journaling is more secondary, supportive, and optional.

I recently learned about something in the world of farming that I think is a good illustration of the role of spiritual journaling in our lives. If you're a farmer or a serious food-plotter, you've learned the value of something called a surfactant. One of the biggest problems you have when you're planting a field or food plot is weed competition. The number of weeds that grows in every field is really quite astonishing. If left unhindered, they will completely take over and choke out whatever crop you're trying to grow.

So to combat the weeds, one of the things most farmers and food-planters do is to spray some kind of herbicide. There are many different kinds of herbicides – some can be applied before the weeds and crops emerge and others are applied after. For post-emergent herbicides, you spray after the

weeds and crops have started to grow because they're designed to kill the weeds, but not the crops. But in order to make the herbicide more effective, farmers will add something to it called a surfactant. A surfactant is an additive that helps the herbicide stick to the leaves of the weeds you're trying to kill. Without it the spray can run off and not kill the weeds. So the surfactant supports the herbicide and makes it more effective.

And that's the way I see the role of spiritual journaling. If meditating on God's Word, prayer, and worship are like herbicides, spiritual journaling is the surfactant. People who want to grow deeper with God often use it to make the other practices more effective in their lives. That's why I've found it to be so valuable in my relationship with God. I can meditate on God's Word, pray, and worship without journaling, but when I add journaling into the mix it makes all of them much more effective for me.

I was at a time in my life when I was getting up early to spend time with God, but I was having a really hard time concentrating, staying focused, and even staying awake. But then I started spiritual journaling and it made all the difference in the world. I was able to stay much more focused and go deeper in the thoughts I was having, I was able to stay tuned in and focused, and I was able to stay awake and alert. I went from being frustrated to having hope and a much more enriching experience.

Can you grow deeper in your relationship with God without it? Absolutely. Some people don't do it at all and are very spiritually deep and mature. But I have found it to be extremely helpful and valuable in my life and many others have too. So I think it's something for you to seriously consider.

What are the benefits of spiritual journaling? I want to first share how spiritual journaling can help make the other practices more effective and then mention some additional benefits.

When it comes to meditating on God's Word, spiritual journaling allows you to write down your questions, thoughts and insights on Scripture and what God is teaching you. When you do this, it helps you to organize your thoughts and process what you're learning. When you write things down it helps you to remember much more than just reading and studying. It also gives you the

opportunity to look back at what you wrote rather than trying to recall what you were thinking about, which is something we all are very limited in. You can write down what you believe God is teaching you to do in response to his Word and keep track of how you're doing.

When it comes to prayer, spiritual journaling is a huge benefit in staying awake and alert and focused. This is one of the biggest blessings I've experienced in my years of journaling – something I desperately needed and still need oftentimes today. Spiritual journaling also helps you to be more specific and go deeper in prayer. It forces you to slow down and think when you pray because you're not praying to cover as much ground as you can, you're praying to connect with God, hear from him, and experience him. Sometimes it really helps to write out your groanings, concerns and even complaints. It helps just as much to write out your praises and gratitude and keep a record of how he's answered and what you've learned. By writing out your prayer it gives you time to pray rightly and biblically according to God's will. Your prayers become deeper and more intentional. Writing in a prayer journal helps you process your thoughts and brings clarity to what you pray for and how you pray.

When it comes to worship, the benefits of spiritual journaling are similar to the other practices – it helps with alertness, focus, clarity, and intentionality. Furthermore it allows you to preserve and then recount the stories of God's faithfulness. You can go back and read earlier entries about God's protection and provision in your life and as you remember the details you can praise him in worship.

Some other benefits include:

1. Leaving a heritage for future generations – a journal that is specific for this purpose can be passed on to your children or grandchildren, so that even after you're gone, they can learn of God's faithfulness in your life.
2. Recording spiritual progress – you can go back and read past journal entries to see how God has faithfully worked in your life and grown you in spiritual maturity.

There are all kinds of benefits of spiritual journaling when your ultimate goal is growing deeper in your relationship with God and becoming more like Jesus and hopefully these things help you see how that's possible.

I want to share one example from the Psalms that is very similar to spiritual journaling. David wasn't writing for that reason; he was writing a song that was meant for worship but in it he shares personally about what he was thinking and feeling in his relationship with God.

Read Psalm 86.

Incline your ear, O Lord, and answer me,
for I am poor and needy.

² Preserve my life, for I am godly;
save your servant, who trusts in you—you are my God.

³ Be gracious to me, O Lord,
for to you do I cry all the day.

⁴ Gladden the soul of your servant,
for to you, O Lord, do I lift up my soul.

⁵ For you, O Lord, are good and forgiving,
abounding in steadfast love to all who call upon you.

⁶ Give ear, O Lord, to my prayer;
listen to my plea for grace.

⁷ In the day of my trouble I call upon you,
for you answer me.

⁸ There is none like you among the gods, O Lord,
nor are there any works like yours.

⁹ All the nations you have made shall come
and worship before you, O Lord,
and shall glorify your name.

¹⁰ For you are great and do wondrous things;
you alone are God.

¹¹ Teach me your way, O Lord,
that I may walk in your truth;
unite my heart to fear your name.

¹² I give thanks to you, O Lord my God, with my whole heart,
and I will glorify your name forever.

¹³ For great is your steadfast love toward me;
you have delivered my soul from the depths of Sheol.
¹⁴ O God, insolent men have risen up against me;
a band of ruthless men seeks my life,
and they do not set you before them.
¹⁵ But you, O Lord, are a God merciful and gracious,
slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness.
¹⁶ Turn to me and be gracious to me;
give your strength to your servant,
and save the son of your maidservant.
¹⁷ Show me a sign of your favor,
that those who hate me may see and be put to shame
because you, Lord, have helped me and comforted me.

David is basically writing out a prayer – something that is very common in spiritual journaling. And in it, he does all kinds of things related to his relationship with God:

- He cries out for help and admits his need for God (1-4)
- He declares the truth about God's character, protection and provision (5-10)
- He asks for spiritual growth (11)
- He gives thanks (12-13)
- He expresses the problem he's facing and his faith in how God will answer (14-15)
- He shares his dependence on God and how he will wait on him (16-17)

These are the same kinds of things any of us could write in a spiritual journal and by doing so it would help give us clarity and remind us of what is true. It would help us pray according to God's will and rest on his promises. In the future we could go back and look at what we wrote and be encouraged as we see God's provision and faithfulness.

How can we incorporate this practice into our lives? I'm beginning to sound like a broken record, but here again I believe we should incorporate this with our other practices of seeking God in a daily quiet time. The reasons are obvious in what I've already shared about how this is such a great support for the other things. At the beginning of this series when I gave a simple method

for meditation on God's Word, I purposefully included bringing a journal, and here you can see why. So this is really very simple to incorporate if you're already doing the other things. Just bring a notebook and a pen and take the time to write some things down.

You don't have to write down everything, just the things that are going to be helpful for you. If you plan to keep your journals for future reflection or to pass on to future generations, that will effect what you write and you'll have to find a place to hang on to them. I have no restrictions for what I write in my journals and I haven't had the desire to go back and look at earlier entries, so I simply destroy them when I reach the end and start a new one.

There is no right or wrong way to do this as long as your focus is on deepening your relationship with God and growing in spiritual maturity. Do what is helpful for you, and I believe you will find this practice to be very beneficial.