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SPIRITUAL

DISCIPLINES

FOR THE

CHRISTIAN

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DONALD S. WHITNEY



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CHAPTER ELEVEN

JOURNALING... FOR THE PURPOSE OF GODLINESS



That there is a crying need for 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

More than almost any other Discipline, journaling has a fascinating appeal with nearly all who hear about it. One reason is the way journaling blends biblical doctrine and daily living, like the confluence of two great rivers, into one. And since each believer's journey down life's river involves bends and hazards previously unexplored by them on the way to the Celestial City, something about journaling this journey appeals to the adventuresome spirit of Christian growth.

Although the practice of journaling is not commanded in Scripture, it is modeled. And God has blessed the use of journals since Bible times.

EXPLANATION OF JOURNALING

A *journal* (a word usually synonymous with *diary*) is a book in which a person writes down various things. As a Christian, your journal is a place to record the works and ways of God in your life. Your journal also can include an account of daily events, a diary of personal relationships, a notebook of insights into Scripture, and a list of prayer requests. It is where spontaneous devotional thoughts or lengthy theological musings can be preserved. A journal is one of the best places for charting your progress in the other Spiritual Disciplines and for holding yourself accountable to your goals.

Woven throughout this fabric of entries and events are the colorful strands of your reflections and feelings about them. How you respond to these matters, and how you interpret them from your own spiritual perspective, are also at the heart of journaling.

The Bible itself contains many examples of God-inspired journals. Many psalms are records of David's personal spiritual journey with the Lord. We call the journal of Jeremiah's feelings about the fall of Jerusalem the book of Lamentations.

As you read this chapter, think prayerfully about joining these and others of God's people who have taken up the penned Discipline of journaling "for the purpose of godliness." Remember, the goal of becoming more like Jesus should be the main reason for beginning any Spiritual Discipline, including this one. With that fresh in your mind, consider the words of the United Kingdom's Maurice Roberts about journaling.

The logic of this practice is inevitable once men have felt the urge to become moulded in heart and life to the pattern of Christ. No one will keep a record of his inward groans, fears, sins, experiences, providences and aspirations unless he is convinced of the value of the practice for his own spiritual progress. It was this very conviction which made it a commonplace practice in earlier times. We suggest the practice should be revived and something needs to be said in its defence.¹

VALUE OF JOURNALING

Using a journal not only promotes spiritual growth by means of its own virtues, but it's a valuable aid to many other aspects of the spiritual life as well.

Help in Self-Understanding and Evaluation

In Romans 12:3 we're encouraged to have a balanced self-image: "Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment." Journaling is certainly no guarantee against either conceit or self-abasement. But the simple discipline of recording the events of the day and noting my reactions to them causes me to examine myself much more thoroughly than I would otherwise.

This is no minor point or small need in our lives. A more God-centered theologian never lived than John Calvin, yet even he wrote on

the first page of his monumental *Institutes*: "Without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God."² Through the knowledge of ourselves and our condition, he explained, we are aroused to seek God. A journal can be the means by which the Holy Spirit shows us areas of sin or weakness, the emptiness of a path we have chosen, insight into our motives, or other things that can transform the journal page into an altar of seeking God.

At an 1803 meeting of the "Eclectic Society," where evangelical ministers of London met each week to sharpen their minds and deepen their fellowship by discussing theological issues, Josiah Pratt noted the value of a journal in self-examination.

The practice of keeping a diary would promote vigilance. The lives of many are spent at a sort of hazard. They fall into certain religious habits: and are perhaps under no strong temptations. They are regular at church and sacrament, and in their families. They read the Bible and pray daily in secret. But here it ends. They know little of the progress or decline of the inner man. They are Christians, therefore, of very low attainments. The workings of sin are not noticed, as they should be, and therefore grace is not sought against them: and the genial emotions of grace are not noticed, and therefore not fostered and cultivated. Now, a diary would have a tendency to raise the standard to such persons by exciting vigilance.³

One of the ways the "progress or decline of the inner man" can be noted through journaling is by the observation of patterns in your life you've not seen before. When I review my journal entries for a month, six months, a year, I see myself and events more objectively. I can analyze my thoughts and actions apart from the feelings I had at the time. From that perspective it's easier to observe whether I've made spiritual progress or have backslidden in a particular area.

Journaling is not a time for navel gazing, however. Nor is it an excuse for becoming self-centered at the expense of a needy world. Writing on the Puritans and their relationship to society, Edmund S. Morgan cites an entry from the journal of a Godly young man during an illness from which he died in the late 1600s. In it the young man evaluates whether he had shown sufficient love to others. Then says Morgan,

The fact that many Puritans kept diaries of this kind helps to explain their pursuit of social virtue: diaries were the reckoning books in which they checked the assets and liabilities of their souls in faith. When they opened these books, they set down lapses of morality with appropriate expressions of repentance and balanced them against the evidences of faith. Cotton Mather made a point of having at least one good action to set down in his diary on every day of the week.⁴

Used appropriately, instead of drawing us more into ourselves, a journal can actually become a means of propelling us into action for others.

The journal can be a mirror in the hands of the Holy Spirit in which He reveals His perspective on our attitudes, thoughts, words, and actions. Since we will be held accountable for each of these at the Judgment, evaluating them by *any* means is wisdom.

Help in Meditation

It seems as though more Christians are interested in biblical meditation (cf. Joshua 1:8, Psalm 1:1-3) than ever before. However, meaningful meditation requires a concentration not often developed in our fast-paced, media-distracted society.

I read the tale of a New England man convinced that nowhere in the world was fog any thicker than at his coastal home. Once while roofing his house, he claimed to be in a cloud so dense that he unknowingly continued on past the edge of the roof, "shingling off into the fog." Without pen in hand, I can get so distracted in meditation that I begin tacking one unrelated thought to another until I'm shingling off into the fog of daydreams instead of thinking in the light of Scripture. The discipline of writing down my meditations in my journal helps me concentrate.

Sitting with pen and paper also heightens my expectation of hearing from God as I think on Him and His words in the passage before me. I always listened better in school when I was taking notes. I'm the same way with hearing a sermon; I listen more attentively when I'm writing down the more significant thoughts of the message. The same principle transfers to journaling. When I record in a journal my meditations on a passage of Scripture, I can follow more closely the still, small voice of God as He speaks through the text.

Help in Expressing Thoughts and Feelings to the Lord

No matter how close the friendship or how intimate the marriage, we can't always tell others what we think. And yet sometimes our feelings are so strong and our thoughts so dominant that we *must* find some way to give them expression. Our Father is always available and willing to listen. "Pour out your hearts to him," says Psalm 62:8.

A journal is a place where we can give expression to the fountain of our heart, where we can unreservedly pour out our passion before the Lord.

Since human thoughts and emotions range between the extremes of exhilaration and despondency, we can expect to find both within the pages of our journal. That's true in all the well-known journals of church history. Notice the depths in which David Brainerd found himself in this entry:

Lord's Day, December 16, 1744. Was so overwhelmed with dejection that I knew not how to live. I longed for death exceedingly; my soul was sunk into deep waters and the floods were ready to drown me. I was so much oppressed that my soul was in a kind of horror. I could not keep my thoughts fixed in prayer for the space of one minute, without fluttering and distraction. It made me exceedingly ashamed that I did not live to God. I had no distressing doubt about my own state, but I would have cheerfully ventured (as far as I could possibly know) into eternity. While I was going to preach to the Indians, my soul was in anguish. I was so overborne with discouragement that I despaired of doing any good, and was driven to my wit's end. I knew nothing what to say, nor what course to take.⁵

A short time later, on the other hand, his journal reveals this profound expression of joy:

Lord's Day, February 17, 1745. I think, I was scarce ever enabled to offer the free grace of God to perishing sinners with more freedom and plainness in my life. Afterwards, I was enabled earnestly to invite the children of God to come renewedly and drink of this fountain of water of life, from whence they have heretofore derived unspeakable satisfaction. It was a

very comfortable time to me. There were many tears in the assembly and I doubt not but that the Spirit of God was there, convincing poor sinners of their need of Christ. In the evening I felt composed and comfortable, though much tired. I had some sweet sense of the excellency and glory of God; and my soul rejoiced that He was "God over all, blessed forever"; but was too much crowded with company and conversation and longed to be more alone with God. Oh, that I could forever bless God for the mercy of this day, who "answered me in the joy of my heart."⁶

Perhaps you read Brainerd's words with the same sense of distance from your own experience as I do. Was he odd? Did he live on some higher spiritual plane inaccessible to Christians like myself? Can the difference between his experiences with God and mine be explained exclusively by the difference in our times? Because I am unable to express in writing the kinds of emotions toward God that he did, am I the one who is strange?

I think it is possible for every child of God to experience more of what Brainerd expresses here, and a journal can help make the difference. Maurice Roberts explains,

A spiritual diary will tend to deepen and sanctify the emotional life of a child of God. There is great value to us of becoming more deeply emotional over the great issues of our faith. Our age is not deep enough in feelings. Biblical men are depicted as weeping copious tears, as sighing and groaning, as on occasion rejoicing with ecstasy. They were ravished by the very idea of God. They had a passion for Jesus Christ—His person, offices, names, titles, words and works. It is our shame to be so cold, unfeeling and emotional in spite of all that God has done to us and for us in Christ. . . . The keeping of a diary might help to put us right in this respect also.⁷

By slowing us down and prompting us to *think* more deeply about God, journaling helps us *feel* more deeply (and biblically) about God. It provides an opportunity for the intangible grays of mindwork and heartwork to distill clearly into black and white. Then we're better able to talk to God with both mind and spirit.

Help in Remembering the Lord's Works

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.

A journal helps us to be like Asaph in Psalm 77:11-12, who said, "I will remember the deeds of the LORD; yes, I will remember your miracles of long ago. I will meditate on all your works and consider all your mighty deeds." Even the kings of Israel were required by the Lord to write for themselves a copy of the Law of Moses to help them remember what God had said and done in the lives of the Patriarchs (Deuteronomy 17:18).

The testimony of Luci Shaw, widow of the late Christian publisher Harold Shaw, illustrates how a journal is not only helpful but *essential* when remembering that the works of the Lord are important to you.

All my life long I've thought I should keep a journal. But I never did until a few years ago, when the discovery that my husband, Harold, had cancer suddenly plunged us into the middle of an intense learning experience, facing things we'd never faced before. Confronted with agonizing decisions, we would cry out to the Lord, "Where are you in the middle of this?" It suddenly occurred to me that unless I made a record of what was going on, I would forget. The events, details, and people of those painful days could easily become a blur. So I started to write it all down.⁸

Francis Bacon put it bluntly, "If a man write little, he had need have a great memory."⁹

One of the greatest benefits of keeping a record of the works of the Lord is the encouragement it can be to faith and prayer. C. H. Spurgeon, the lionhearted British Baptist preacher in the last half of the 1800s, said, "I have sometimes said, when I have become the prey of doubting thoughts, 'Well, now, I dare not doubt whether there be a God, for I can look back in my Diary, and say, On such a day, in the depths of trouble, I bent my knee to God, and or ever I had risen from my knees, the answer was given me.'"¹⁰

"How worthy it is to remember former benefits," said Stephen

Charnock, author of the classic *The Existence and Attributes of God*, "when we come to beg for new."¹¹ A journal is one of the best ways to keep fresh the memory of the Lord's "former benefits."

Help in Creating and Preserving a Spiritual Heritage

Journaling is an effective way of teaching the things of God to our children and transmitting our faith into the future (cf. Deuteronomy 6:4-7, 2 Timothy 1:5).

We may never know the future spiritual impact of something we write today. My dad died suddenly on August 20, 1985. He was the manager of a small-town radio station. Each morning he hosted a thirty-minute program of music and local news. On his desk I found the devotional material he had used to begin his final broadcast. He had read the words to William Cowper's hymn, "God Moves in a Mysterious Way." Finding his initials and "8/19/85" written beside these lines of faith has given me more comfort and spiritual strength than anything said to me by anyone else. After his death his old guitar became one of my most cherished possessions. His early days as an announcer came during the time when almost everything on radio was broadcast live. He had a popular show of his own in which he played this guitar and sang. On my first Thanksgiving Day without a dad I was rummaging around in the guitar case. In it I found more than a dozen old letters postmarked within a few days after my birth. Every one of them was from his listeners writing to rejoice with him that my mother and I had survived a difficult birth. They noted that it was obvious he was very proud of me and referred to remarks he had made on the air about his gratitude to the Lord for my safe arrival. I sat in the floor by the open case with these scraps of my heritage and wept tears of thanksgiving to the Lord for this remnant of his life. How precious it would be if only more of his walk with God were recorded for me in a journal.

Never underestimate the power of a written record of faith acting as a spiritual time capsule. The writer of Psalm 102:18 recognized it when he said of his experience with God: "Let this be written for a future generation, that a people not yet created may praise the LORD."

Help in Clarifying and Articulating Insights and Impressions

An old adage says that thoughts disentangle themselves when passed through the lips and across the fingertips. While reading makes a full man, and dialogue a ready man, according to Francis Bacon, *writing*

makes an *exact* man. I've discovered that if I write down the meditations of my quiet time with the Lord, those impressions stay with me much longer. Without journaling, by day's end I usually can remember little from my devotional time.

The great champion of prayer and faith, George Muller, used his journal to articulate insights into Scripture and spiritual impressions.

July 22, 1838. This evening I was walking in our little garden, meditating on Hebrews 13:8, "Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today, and forever." Whilst meditating on His unchangeable love, power and wisdom, and turning all as I went into prayer respecting myself; and whilst applying also His unchangeable love, power, and wisdom both to my present spiritual and temporal circumstances—all at once the present need of the orphan houses was brought to my mind. Immediately I was led to say to myself, "Jesus in His love and power has hitherto supplied me with what I have needed for the orphans, and in the same unchangeable love and power He will provide me with what I may need for the future." A flow of joy came into my soul whilst realising thus the unchangeableness of our adorable Lord. About one minute after, a letter was brought me enclosing a cheque for twenty pounds. In it was written: "Will you apply the amount of the enclosed cheque to the objects of your Scriptural Knowledge Society, or of your Orphan Establishment, or in the work and cause of our Master in any way that He Himself, on your application to Him, may point out to you. It is not a great sum, but it is a sufficient provision for the exigency of today; and it is for *today's* exigencies that ordinarily the Lord provides. Tomorrow, as it brings its demands, will find its supply."¹²

When insights from my quiet time are clearly fixed in my mind through journaling, I've also found them ready to use later in conversation, counseling, encouraging, and witnessing (see 1 Peter 3:15).

Help in Monitoring Goals and Priorities

A journal is a good way to keep before us the things we want to do and emphasize. Some put a list of goals and priorities in their journal and review it every day. I draw a small rectangle at the beginning of each journal entry. With one horizontal line and two vertical ones I divide

the box into six tiny squares. Each square represents a particular spiritual accomplishment I want to do every day, such as encouraging at least one person. Before I make a journal entry for a day, I turn to the entry for the previous day and color in the appropriate squares for the daily goals I accomplished. Some may see this as legalism. For me it's a way of reminding myself to do some things I want to do as part of pressing on toward the goal of Christlikeness (Philippians 3:12-16).

The resolutions made by young Jonathan Edwards are still well known to many Christians today. They included the resolve of his soul concerning the use of time, temperance in eating, growth in grace, duty, self-denial, and other matters dealt with in seventy resolutions. These were much more than today's halfhearted New Year's resolutions. They became Edwards's lifelong spiritual goals and priorities. What isn't so well known is how he evaluated his conduct daily by these resolutions and recorded the results in his journal. On Christmas Eve, 1722, he wrote, "Higher thoughts than usual of the excellency of Christ and his kingdom. Concluded to observe, at the end of every month, the number of breaches of resolutions, to see whether they increase or diminish, to begin from this day, and to compute from that the weekly account my monthly increase, and out of the whole, my yearly increase, beginning from new-year days."¹³ An example of this use of his journal is found in the entry of the following January 5: "A little redeemed from a long, dreadful dullness, about reading the Scriptures. This week, have been unhappily low in the weekly account:—and what are the reasons of it?—abundance of listlessness and sloth; and, if this should continue much longer, I perceive that other sins will begin to discover themselves."¹⁴

The ocean-hopping evangelist of the Great Awakening, George Whitefield, is best remembered for his inimitable, passionate preaching. Like his contemporary Edwards, Whitefield's *Diary* reveals that his spirituality was at least as deep as his influence was wide. The book begins with a list of criteria that he used each night as a basis of self-examination.

Have I,

1. Been fervent in prayer?
2. Used stated hours of prayer?
3. Used ejaculatory prayer each hour?
4. After or before every deliberate conversation or action, considered how it might tend to God's glory?

5. After any pleasure, immediately given thanks?
6. Planned business for the day?
7. Been simple and recollected in everything?
8. Been zealous in undertaking and active in doing what good I could?
9. Been meek, cheerful, affable in everything I said or did?
10. Been proud, vain, unchaste, or envious of others?
11. Recollected in eating and drinking? Thankful? Temperate in sleep?
12. Taken time for giving thanks according to (William) Law's rules?
13. Been diligent in studies?
14. Thought or spoken unkindly of anyone?
15. Confessed all sins?¹⁵

Each day's entry in Whitefield's *Diary* is in two parts, one page per part. On the first page he would list the specific activities of his day, then evaluate each on the basis of his fifteen questions. On the second page, according to his biographer, Arnold Dallimore, "He records any unusual activity throughout the day, but above all, gives expression to his inner self. The longings of his soul, a searching of his motives, severe self-reproach for the slightest wrong and bursts of praise to God, are all recorded without inhibition."¹⁶

How did men like Edwards and Whitefield become so unusually conformed to the image of Christ? Part of their secret was their use of the Spiritual Discipline of journaling to maintain self-accountability for their spiritual goals and priorities. Before we give all the reasons why we cannot be the kind of disciples they were, let us try doing what they did.

Help in Maintaining the Other Spiritual Disciplines

My journal is the place where I record my progress with all the Spiritual Disciplines. For instance, I also use some of these small squares to keep myself accountable with Disciplines like Scripture memory. It's very easy for me to become lazy and slip away from memorizing God's Word, which the Bible says is so essential to holiness (Psalm 119:11). Once I return to the habit of *not* memorizing Scripture, momentum keeps me there. However, when I have a daily prompter such as my journal, where I find a reminder to "discipline myself for the purpose of godliness," I can more easily reverse the momentum.

The flesh, our natural inclination toward sin, does not contribute to our spiritual growth. Unless we *labor* to put to death the misdeeds of the body (Romans 8:13), our progress in Godliness will be very slow. Unless we find *practical* ways to cooperate with the Holy Spirit against our congenital tendency toward spiritual sloth, we will not build ourselves up in the faith (Jude 20); we will drift toward spiritual entropy instead.

This fact was affirmed by Maurice Roberts in an article, "Where Have the Saints Gone?"

There will be no marked growth in Christian holiness if we do not labor to overcome our natural disinclination towards secret spiritual exercises. Our forefathers kept honest diaries where the soul's battles were recorded. Thomas Shepherd, Pilgrim Father and founder of Harvard, wrote in his private papers, "It is sometimes so with me that I will rather die than pray." So is it with us all. But this honesty is not commonplace. Such men climbed high only as they labored with sweat and tears to cultivate the soul. We, too, must "exercise ourselves unto godliness" (1 Timothy 4:7).¹⁷

Missionary Jim Elliot used his now-famous journal to irrigate the practice of the Disciplines in his life when the tide of zeal for them ran low. On November 20, 1955, less than two months before he was killed by Auca Indians in Ecuador, he wrote,

Also read parts of *Behind the Ranges* and am resolute to do something about it in my private devotional and prayer life. In studying Spanish I left off English Bible reading, and my devotional reading pattern was broken. I have never restored it. Translation and preparation for daily Bible lessons is not sufficient to empower my soul. Prayer as a single man was difficult, I remember, because my mind always reverted to Betty. Now it's too hard to get out of bed in the morning. I have made resolutions on this score before now but not followed them up. Tomorrow it's to be—dressed by 6:00 a.m. and study in the Epistles before breakfast. So help me, God.¹⁸

Apparently the desire to revitalize his devotional life had surged through Elliot's mind and emotions many times before. Transferring

that desire to paper, however, seemed to channel it like water into a turbine, so that what was once mere fluid desire began producing power.

Recording the joys and freedom I experience through the Spiritual Disciplines is another way journaling helps maintain my involvement with them. When I review my journal and read in my own handwriting of my inexpressible delight in sharing the gospel with elderly people in the bush of Kenya who have never heard of Jesus, or of preaching and seeing Brazilian teenagers repent of involvement in spiritism, I am resolved to maintain the Discipline of evangelism in overseas missions projects regardless of the cost. Reviewing the sense of victory I recorded during a day of fasting creates in me a hunger for another such day of spiritual feasting.

The Christian life is, by definition, a living thing. If we can 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.

WAYS OF JOURNALING

How is it done? "Your way of keeping a journal is the right way. . . . There are no rules for keeping a journal!"¹⁹

Today I was in a local Christian bookstore and noticed at least a dozen books to be used as journals. There were cloth-covered volumes and paperbacks. Some had devotional thoughts or inspirational quotes on each page. Others simply provided blank pages with headings like "Prayer Requests" and "Insights from Scripture" at the top. Numerous bookstores sell beautifully bound, gilt-edged books of empty pages, which work well as journals.

Many Christians find that the most practical approach is to use everyday notebook paper. While some prefer a spiral-bound notebook, I find loose-leaf pages more workable. Besides being less expensive, using plain paper also does not force you to confine your entries to the designated space of a preprinted journal book. On the other hand, some find that writing in an attractive book gives their journaling a special appeal that stimulates their faithfulness in the Discipline. (This motivation backfires on some people when they feel as though their entries are rather mundane for such a fine depository. They begin writing less frequently and soon stop altogether.)

Another reason I prefer the loose-leaf format is convenience.

Although it is handy to carry around a book or spiral-bound notebook to journal in, it's even handier to carry only a few pages of paper. My journal pages are eight-and-a-half by five-and-a-half inches and fit easily into my Bible, briefcase, a book, or almost anything I take with me. In fact, I keep packages of journal paper in my briefcase, my study at home, and my study at church as well. That way I can record any sudden flash of insight, impression, conversation, quotation, etc., I've come across as soon as it happens. I usually let the pages accumulate for about a month. Around the beginning of a new month, I take the collection and put them in a ring binder, which is kept at home. This leads to two other advantages over the book or spiral notebook method: (1) if I ever lose my current journal, I never lose more than a month's worth, and (2) I can easily go back and insert new pages, photocopies, etc., if they pertain to previous entries. But having said that, I return to this maxim: "Your way of keeping a journal is the right way." Use the method that works best for you.

The means you use to actually put the words on paper will also affect the format you choose. I like to make my journal entries on a word processor. That's because I can type faster than I can write, and also because it looks neater when it's printed. Frequently, however, my journaling time occurs when I'm at my church study rather than at home, so I journal on a typewriter. Still other times require that I write by hand. Some feel strongly about only journaling by hand, that it's more spontaneous and expressive. That's not true in my case. I find that the speed of the word processor or the typewriter actually allows me more freedom of expression than does writing script.

With the rise of technology will likely come the increase of using its capabilities for journaling. A *Chicago Tribune* article reported that there is now a Japanese company that uses technology to help busy people with their journaling. For those who feel too busy to write their entries at the end of a day, they simply dial a number and say what they want to enter into their journal. This is tape-recorded. At the end of each month, the customer is sent a printed copy of his or her journal in an attractive binder. Perhaps this will work for those who only want to record the facts and events of the day. But it seems a bit too impersonal to use as a means of interaction with the Lord and of significant spiritual growth. I still find it difficult to imagine expressing my deepest thoughts and feelings to the Lord over the phone, much less doing so as the bill gets higher by the minute! This doesn't even take into account

the fact that someone must transcribe the intimacies of your journal from the tape recorder to printed form. Despite technological advances, there will always be a place in journaling for the simple tools of pen and paper.

For those using a medium other than pen and paper, be careful not to confine your journaling only to the times when you have access to your computer or typewriter. Many of the best journal entries are made in times of solitude away from typical circumstances. Many of my most memorable entries are made when I'm traveling and can only write them by hand. These aren't as neat as my typed entries, but I can overlook the variety in the appearance of the pages for the value of what's on them. The general warning is: Don't be bound to only one method of making entries.

As a starting entry for each day, try listing the one verse or idea from your Bible reading that impressed you most. Meditate on that for a few minutes, then record your insights and impressions. From there consider adding recent events in your life and your feelings and responses to them, brief prayers, joys, successes, failures, quotations, etc.

Don't think that "official journaling" (there is no such thing!) means you have to write a certain number of lines every day, or even that you have to write every day. I try to write in my journal daily, but if I don't, I refuse to feel guilty about it. Whenever I seem to be content with needlessly long lapses in making entries, I discipline myself to write at least one sentence per day. Inevitably, that one sentence turns willingly into a paragraph or a page.

MORE APPLICATION

As with all the Disciplines, journaling can be fruitful at any level of involvement with it. Journaling is profitable regardless of how well you think you write, compose, or spell. Whether or not you write every day, whether you write much or little, whether your soul soars like a psalmist's or plods from thought to thought, journaling will help you grow in grace.

As with all the Disciplines, journaling requires persistence through the dry times. The novelty of journaling soon wears off. There will be days when you will have a spiritual version of "writer's block." At other times you just won't have any insights from the Scriptures or your experience with God which seem noteworthy. While it's okay to

write little or nothing on a given day or during a longer stretch of time, remember that you must eventually push through this barrier in order to enjoy the long-term benefits of journaling. In other words, don't quit the Discipline entirely just because the excitement of the first day eventually erodes. That will happen. Plan on it. But also plan for persistence.

As with all the Disciplines, you must start journaling before you can experience its value. Irishman Thomas Houston was pastor of a Presbyterian church in Knockbracken, County Down (near modern Belfast), for fifty-four years during the 1800s. At the beginning of his ministry there he began keeping a journal, which he called "A Diary of God's Dealings and Providences with a Most Unworthy Sinner." In his entry for April 8, 1828, he reveals the inward struggle that ultimately resulted in the birth of his Spiritual Discipline of journaling:

For a considerable period I have been resolved on keeping a register of the dealings and providences of my Heavenly Father towards me, but, what through want of what I considered a fit opportunity, and through what was, I fear, a greater cause, spiritual sloth, I have hitherto neglected it. When I first began to think of this subject, various objections appeared to me to lie against diary writing altogether. It would give room for spiritual pride; it led persons to measure themselves by themselves; and as it is not easy to determine between the motions of the spirit and the natural outworkings of the unrenewed conscience or the artifices of the Deceiver, there is a danger of forming incorrect judgments. These and other reasons kept me a length of time from determining for the thing. Of late I have got over these objections entirely, and am now of the opinion that such a record may be of much service to an individual to furnish him with matter for prayer and self-examination, and to be a monument to God's faithfulness.²⁰

Perhaps you can identify with Houston's struggle. As millions want to begin walking, jogging, biking, or some other form of exercise but never do, so there are many who have wanted to begin the spiritual exercise of journaling but have never done it. It sounds interesting, and you are convinced of its value, but the words never find their way to the paper. There just never seems to be the time, a "fit opportunity" as Houston called it. But in our heart of hearts we know that the "greater

cause" is probably the same "spiritual sloth" that clung drowsily to the will of this Irish pastor. Consider journaling, not only "for the purpose of godliness," but also as a way to raise up a "monument of God's faithfulness" in your life.

NOTES

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4. Edmund S. Morgan, *The Puritan Family* (New York: Harper and Row, 1966), page 5.
5. Jonathan Edwards, ed., *The Life and Diary of David Brainerd*, revised edition ed. by Philip E. Howard, Jr. (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1949), page 186.
6. Edwards, page 193.
7. Roberts, page 6.
8. LaVonne Neff, et al., ed., *Practical Christianity* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House, 1987), page 310.
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11. Stephen Charnock, *The Existence and Attributes of God* (Robert Carter and Brothers, 1853; reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), vol. 1, page 277.
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13. Jonathan Edwards, *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, rev. Edward Hickman (1834; reprint, Edinburgh, Scotland: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1974), vol. 1, page xxiv.
14. Edwards, page xxiv.
15. Arnold Dallimore, *George Whitefield: The Life and Times of the Great Evangelist of the Eighteenth-Century Revival* (Westchester, IL: Crossway Books, 1979), vol. 1, page 80.
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18. Elisabeth Elliot, ed., *The Journals of Jim Elliot* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1978), page 474.
19. Ronald Klug, *How to Keep a Spiritual Journal* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1982), page 58.
20. Edward Donnelly, ed., "The Diary of Thomas Houston of Knockbracken," *The Banner of Truth*, August-September 1989, pages 11-12.