

soul shaper

Becoming the Person God Wants You to Be

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To my wife, Sharon, who practices these disciplines
better than anyone I know.



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preface

You have a soul. In some ways, you are a soul. You are more than flesh, bones, and electrical signals between your brain's synapses. There is—inside you—a real you. It is gone when your body dies. Christians call this a soul (or sometimes the heart). Your soul is more than material “stuff,” but it affects what you do in the flesh. The shape of your soul inclines you to sin or obedience, revenge or forgiveness, pride or humility. But the good news is your soul can change!

This book is about the spiritual disciplines, but they are not soul shapers. There is only one soul shaper and it is not a spiritual discipline; God is the soul shaper. Spiritual disciplines are not rungs on a ladder leading you to godliness. Treating the disciplines like that is a tower of Babel. Jesus himself struck down the

self-righteous clambering for godliness—the Pharisees. God is the soul shaper, not these practices.

So if God is the shaper of your soul, what is left for you to do? Should you relax in your sin and wait for God to change you in his own good time? No, because you have a part in God's work, even though he is the one who does it. You can hinder God's shaping work with denial and resistance, but you can help God with surrender and obedience.

This is where the spiritual disciplines come in. Or we might call them the “means of grace.” These disciplines are practices we can do that put us in the channel of God's changing grace. In solitude, confession, restitution, or peacemaking, God chooses to change us. The disciplines are channels of God's grace to get under.



7. journaling

Write down the revelation and make it plain on tablets.

—Habakkuk 2:2

Journaling is communing and communicating with God through writing. It is turning our thoughts into words and putting them down so we can face them squarely. It is talking with and listening to God without speaking. When journaling, we can pray, listen, study, worship, and confess. Journaling is a discipline that provides perspective on life and helps us adjust our priorities. Journaling is a path away from the emotional doldrums and depression that come from relying on feelings. Journaling moves our spiritual lives from the inner ear (where we hear God's quiet voice) through our hands (with which we write) to our eyes (with which we see). It makes communication with God more tangible. When God seems distant, it is time to journal, for this discipline brings our communication with him nearer.

the heritage of journaling

Journaling is a recent discipline though it has ancient roots. In the distant past, writing was reserved for the elite who had the time and money to pay for expensive ink, pens, and handmade paper. Average people did not write through most of history, so the discipline of journaling did not flourish until writing materials became inexpensive and the ability to write became common. For centuries the verbal disciplines of prayer, confession, and the recitation of Scripture formed the backbone of the spiritual life, along with other disciplines of action such as hospitality, charity, and penance. However, once writing became common, journaling flourished, even among secular people, and it emerged as a spiritual discipline. Perhaps we should say that it reemerged.

Journaling is in fact an ancient practice. When we read the book of Psalms, we are peeking into the personal journals of ancient followers of God. They complained to God, confessed their sins, grumbled about life, and cried out for deliverance. So while journaling is in some sense a recent discipline, it has ancient roots. When we read these ancient psalms, we yearn for similarly open and honest relationships with God. Perhaps we'll find that when we, too, start to journal. We might begin with the psalms themselves. After a preface on God's law at the beginning of the book, Psalms 3–7 illustrate how to journal prayers, praise, cries for deliverance, confession, and complaints to God. Then after a short break for two worship-journal psalms, we get four more wonderful examples of journaling in Psalms 10–13. If we would simply copy the first thirteen psalms, we would learn what it means to be honest with God in our own journaling. And

we would still have 137 psalms left before having to write our own words!

time journaling

Perhaps the easiest point of entry into this discipline is keeping record of daily activities, time journals in which we record where we went and what we did. This accounting method of journaling simply chronicles our use of time in the same way that receipts track the money we have spent. Indeed, the practice of accounting itself is at the root of this style of journaling. We will one day be required to give an account to God for how we spent our time. By keeping time journals, we can review the past week's expenditures of time and adjust our plans for the coming week based on our priorities. What could be more natural than beginning a week with a daily planner? When we see before us the amount of time we actually spent the previous week in prayer, with our children, or serving others, we may discover that our priorities are out of whack. We can then adjust the coming week's schedule. Many busy people already keep time journals in the form of daily planners or electronic devices. But merely recording our use of time is not difficult; it is *reviewing* our time and modifying the coming week's schedule that takes discipline. It is easy to dismiss such journaling as elementary, yet John Wesley, one of the greatest journal keepers in modern times, kept what was like a time journal and allowed many rabbit-trail ideas to develop from it. There is another benefit to such a review. When we're feeling defeated and think we're not getting anything done, a review of the last week's time journal can be encouraging. We may realize that we've done plenty, that we've

done some good things, and (considering the week's obligations) we've done pretty well. Reflecting on a time journal each week often brings us to praise God and thank him for his guidance and deliverance in the previous week. This sort of review prompts personal worship. Time journaling is the easiest way to start journaling. Many who practice this discipline reflect each Sunday or at the beginning of each month.

being honest with God

Journaling enables us to be honest with God by confessing who we really are. In journaling, we bring into the light our sins and desires—our deepest cravings, impure attitudes, darkest thoughts, and angry complaints against God. This is one reason many of the psalms take a sharp turn at the end. Once things are brought into the light, we get God's perspective on them. Journaling is a means of confession, being totally honest with God. Can we do that in our heads or under our breath? Sure. Such whispered confessions work just as well with God, but not with us. A written confession is so much more serious; it becomes more real to us than a mental confession does. So when we journal, we confess; we hide nothing from God. Of course, honestly confessing to God in writing means we have to keep our journals private. While God is not shocked at our deepest thoughts, others certainly would be.

being honest with ourselves

In a journal we come clean not only with God, but also with ourselves. We listen in on our own confessions. A journaled confession ends denial. It has a cleansing effect. It is freeing.

Journaling a confession leads not only to spiritual health, but also to psychological health. Honestly admitting to ourselves who we really are and what we are really thinking brings continuity to the soul; we become a more “together” person.

Coming clean with ourselves improves our relationships with others too. Consider a husband who confesses in his journal how he really feels about his wife’s endless chatter each evening, in which she tells him every tiny detail of her day. In his journal, he confesses how bored he is, how he pretends to listen but doesn’t hear a word, how tiresome it all is, and how he wishes she’d just let him sit and watch TV. But in confessing these things before God in absolute honesty, he discovers a new perspective—God’s perspective. As he continues to write his complaint, he begins to shift direction. He reflects on how tired he is and how he’s just trying to survive each day. Soon he is writing about how self-centered he can be. Before long, he admits that he ought to be interested at least in a brief report of his wife’s day. By the time he has finished a second page in his journal, he is promising himself that he will turn off the TV and listen intently to her debriefing for ten minutes each day. Just ten minutes—no more, but it’s a start. For this husband, journaling provided an occasion to be honest with himself, then see God’s perspective. The journaling then influenced his relationships with others. (I suppose that the wife in the above story might make some discoveries in her journaling as well.)

journaling prayer

We can journal our prayers. Praying can be done silently in our heads or aloud in an audible voice. We can also pray in writing.

When we write our prayers, we give greater attention to the words. Journalled prayers often avoid the repetition that plagues verbal prayers. They are more to the point and more clearly defined. Journalled prayers can be replayed over time, and they can be copied and sent to others for whom we are praying. And when they are answered, written prayers give us a chance to record and remember the victory. For most of us, journaling our prayers would be a doorway to a deeper and more powerful prayer life.

journaling Scripture

Scripture is another means of grace that combines well with journaling. The entry-level practice for journaling Scripture is simply to copy Scripture word-for-word into a journal. Even this simple act can be a powerful means of grace. When we copy Scripture, it goes through our minds in a different way than when we just read it. In the simple act of copying a passage, we often discover new insights. In copying the Psalms, we come to experience the feelings of the original writer. This recopying of another's journal can sometimes express our own thoughts even better than if we were to write them ourselves. But we can go further than copying Scriptures, though that is a good way to start. We can seek God's word *for us* from Scripture. This is called *devotional reading* of the Bible, searching for God's word to us today from a passage. When we do that, God speaks, usually by nudging us toward the personal application of the passage at hand. If we are journaling, we can write down that inner impression. By writing our thoughts, we can examine them more carefully to discern whether or not they truly are from

God. The written word is more easily scrutinized. Sometimes we cross out our first draft of what we thought God might be saying. When the guidance we receive from God is written down and carefully examined, it takes on far greater authority. If we feel sure that the words before us are truly God's words *to* us, they are hard to dismiss or ignore.

remembering and rejoicing

The greatest value of keeping a journal is the creation of a written record that we can use to remember what God has done. We humans easily forget past victories and answers to prayer. We can also forget the temptations we faced years ago and lose sympathy with others who are facing them today. We can come to believe that we have always been as good as we are right now and develop attitudes of pride and conceit. The Bible often calls God's children to *remember*, and journaling enables us to do that by providing a written record of God's work in our lives. The act of remembering was central to Jewish worship. The annual Passover celebration was a remembrance of the first Passover in Egypt. Most other feasts and fasts commemorated God's mighty acts in the past. When the Jews remembered God's faithfulness in the past, it increased their faith in him in the present and future. Likewise, the early Christians worshiped by remembering the resurrection—God's mightiest deed in history—and it brought them hope for the present and future. Hope for the future is rooted in the past. As we add to our journals year after year, we collect a potent testimony to God's mighty acts in our own lives. As we review each month, year, and decade what God has done, we can easily rejoice at his faithfulness. By doing so, we build

our faith for the present and our hope for the future. Perhaps this is why people who journal seem so peaceful. They see today as a tiny slice of what God is doing over many generations, so they know from their own experience that God is faithful. They remember it because they have recorded it in their journals.

how to begin practicing journaling

decide how you will journal

Will you write by hand in a blank notebook, or will you keep a journal on your computer or in some other way? Which method would best fit your lifestyle? Some people journal sequentially, keeping a spiritual diary of sorts. Others journal by topic and organize their thoughts for reconsideration and later development. This is especially easy with computer journaling. Pick a method of journaling that best fits your style.

develop other journaling traditions

Consider developing a family Christmas journal in which each member publicly reflects (to the family) on the past year and sets goals for the coming year. Some churches journal, too, especially new ones. Often they rotate the responsibility for keeping the journal each week or month among the members, then review the journal as a group at a New Year's gathering or other service, rejoicing in God's work.

settle security issues

Never let another person have free access to your journal. Your honesty in your journal will be proportional to its security.

You can read aloud or copy sections for others, but never turn your journal loose for others to scan. If you use a blank book, find a place to store it that is completely secure. If you write your journal on a computer, protect the file by password. If you do an anonymous online blog, make sure you password protect it from others. Some great Christians of the past invented their own codes to encrypt their journals. Today, people can use free Internet programs to scramble their journals so they can be deciphered only with a keyword. John Wesley developed such an elaborate code for his private journals that it took two hundred years to break! However you do it, take care of security issues so you can be completely honest with God and yourself.

begin by copying Scripture

If you complain, “I’m not creative” or “I can’t write,” then start by simply copying Scripture, especially the book of Psalms. You may never move on—Psalms and other Scriptures may express everything you want to say in your journal. Why reinvent the wheel?

forget perfectionism

If you are the sort of person who frets over grammar, spelling, and neatness, determine to break that habit. God does not take off points for spelling errors.

doodle, draw, and diagram

Sometimes a picture is worth a thousand words. And a diagram can often clarify things better than text can. Leaving some open spaces on journal pages allows for later fill-in writing,

after the thought has marinated for a few weeks. Women are more inclined to journal than are men because it is like keeping a diary. However, some men are better at visualizing ideas with drawings, charts, or pictures. These men can look at the visual items ten years later and still sort out the meaning. If you are a man, try journaling with drawings, sketches, and doodles to start.

avoid becoming spiritually morbid

If you are overly sensitive and too easily berate yourself for your shortcomings, make a rule that you will not write more than one negative thing per day in your journal. Journaling is intended to be a means of grace not a means of guilt. On the other hand, if you seldom feel guilty about anything at all, you might make a rule that you'll write at least one confession of weakness per journaling session. Journaling should be balanced.

vary the approach

Over time, develop a varied approach to the journaling methods outlined in this book. Try time journaling, confession journaling, prayer journaling, and Scripture journaling. Add other approaches as you think of them. Let your journal reflect who you are and who you are becoming. It is just between you and God.

decide where your journals go upon your death

Will you destroy your journals at some point in the future, or will you pass them on as a family heritage? Some people seal them up for a generation and release them to their grandchildren. Others make arrangements with a spouse to destroy or pass them

on after their own death. You don't have to decide these matters immediately. But, like making a will, if you wait until you need to, it may be too late.

schedule periodic reflection times

When and how often would you schedule your reflecting times? Weekly? Monthly? Quarterly? Annually? Some Christians who journal take an annual retreat—a weekend alone with God—during which they review all their journals to date and celebrate God's great grace so far in their lives. When and where would you do such a thing?

what about you?

What are your specific plans to practice the discipline of journaling this week?