



How to Encounter God through Journaling

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*Editor's Note: The following is a report on the practical applications of **Helen Cepero's** new book, [Journaling as a Spiritual Practice: Encountering God through Attentive Writing](#), (InterVarsity Press, 2008).*

Writing has the power to help you see the beauty of God at work in your life experiences. When you express your thoughts and feelings in a journal, you'll be surprised by how much you discover about God in the process – and God will use your journal as a tool to transform you.

Here's how you can encounter God through journaling:

Begin with prayer. Invite God to use your journaling experiences to draw you closer to Him and help you grow as a person. Ask Him to use your journaling to help you discover more about both Him and yourself.

Get ready. Decide when and where you'll journal regularly. Choose any time or place that works best for you – from early morning journaling in a quiet room of your home, to late night journaling in a busy coffeehouse. Then buy a journal that appeals to you for writing your journal entries by hand, or set up a special file on your computer to type in your journal entries.

Give yourself freedom. Allow yourself to write or draw whatever comes to your mind. Don't criticize or censor your journal entries. Don't worry about trying to stick to grammar or spelling rules, trying to be logical, comparing yourself to others, or avoiding the expression of troubling thoughts or feelings. Simply write, to get what's on your mind out on paper or on the computer screen. Write what's true and real, keeping in mind that God loves you unconditionally.

Check your motivation. It's not enough to journal simply out of a sense that journaling is something that you ought to do, because guilt isn't an effective motivator. Make sure that you're journaling because you truly want to encounter God in the process. Your excitement about expecting to meet God when you journal will keep you motivated enough to make journaling a regular practice in your life.

Face your fears. Don't let a desire to avoid your fears keep you from journaling honestly about whatever you're thinking and feeling. Ask God to give you the courage to write about each of your fears openly, and expect that, as you do, God will meet you in the middle of them and help you grow. Instead of keeping your fears locked within you, let them pour out onto your journal's pages.

Write a letter to God. Use your journal to write to God, aiming to be truthful rather than nice. Tell Him where you are right now in your journey with Him, and wish you wish you were. Describe how you see God and how you see yourself at this point in your life's story.

Witness to the truth. List situations in your life where God is calling you to witness to biblical truth. Ask: "Where am I being asked to speak out and name a wrong being done to me or someone I know?", "Where am I being called to bring light to a situation that has been dimmed by the darkness of misunderstanding or sin?", "Where might I need to change everyday habits that make the environment within me and around me worse?", and "Where does the truth need to be named and lived?"

Pay attention. Spend a few minutes studying the place where you're journaling. Write for a while about what you *do* see; then write for a while about what you *don't* see. Finally, read your journal entries and write a response to what you did and didn't notice. Choose an object you've had for at least six months, describe it

in your journal, and tell its story. Then reflect on its story in the context of your own life. Choose a relationship you have with someone – your spouse or one of your kids, parents, siblings, friends, coworkers or neighbors. Think about the story you share with that person; not just who each of you are, but who you are together and what happens between you. Describe the story of your relationship. Remember a particular room that you spent time in as a child. Describe it in as much detail as you can, and include people if there are any in the room when you think of it. Then note whatever feelings came up as you wrote about the room.

Honor your story. Use your journal as a place to get to know more about yourself and befriend yourself, remembering that your identity is rooted in the fact that God made you and loves you. Reflect on your name by writing it across the top of a journal page and recording the memories, feelings, and stories connected to your name. Consider what names God might use to describe you, and journal a prayer to God responding to those names. Notice when you've thought negatively about yourself, and start to write positively about yourself in your journal. Learn how to bless yourself by describing yourself in positive ways.

Mine beneath the surface of your life. Go deeper than just recording events in your journal. Aim to express your reactions to the events you experience, writing meaningful thoughts and feelings you have rather than just what's happened lately in your life. Pray about the various parts of your life – your family and friends, your work, your health, etc. – and ask God to show you what He would like you to reflect on more deeply in your journal. Once you've chosen a topic, free write about it for a while. Then draw a map of that area of your life, with words or pictures representing your experiences related to that area and how you think and feel about it. Notice how you may have changed what you believe about that area of your life over time, and write about those changes. Consider what actions your journal entries are urging you to take in response to what you've written about this area of your life: Maybe you feel compelled to apologize to someone, seek help to solve a problem, or take some other kind of action. Accept God's invitation to listen to His prompting through your journal and act on it.

Bless your body. Try journaling soon after you do some form of physical exercise, and see if you come up with new insights when you exercise your mind after exercising your body. You may notice a spurt of creativity. Journal about how you might embody Christ's compassion to the people for whom you're praying, such as encouraging someone with a call or card, or speaking up for someone who's being mistreated. Think about a part of your body that you don't particularly like, and consider what this part of your body might say to you if you gave it a chance to speak through your journal. Write that down. Then write a prayer to God, asking Him to help you accept that part of your body as something beautiful because He made it. Tell your body's story, listing significant physical events in your life, such as giving birth to your children, struggling with an eating disorder, or learning to play a sport. Be sure to respond to what you've written, describing how you feel about your body's story.

Reflect on the past. Ask God to shed His light on your past to help you see it from His perspective. Avoid either romanticizing or demonizing your past; recognize that even though you've sinned in the past, God can redeem it all and continues to love you. List some things for which you're thankful, and write a prayer of gratitude to God. As you reflect on your past, pray for discernment about what you need to let go of and what you need to hold on to. Consider how well you have and haven't discerned God's voice guiding you in the past, and describe some of the ways God has led you to where you are now in your journey with Him.

Look forward. Use your journal to imagine your future. Make a list of 100 things you want to do or be before you die, and don't worry about the practicality of some of your desires. Then read through your list and notice what desires you've emphasized or repeated. Consider why those desires mean the most to you and what fears may be related to them. Ask God to help you consider what seeds you're planting in your own life and the lives of those around you – seeds that will produce good fruit, or seeds that will lead to bad results. Think of a particular concern you have, and write about your feelings as you're waiting to see how God will answer your prayers about it. Write down your questions for God and wait about a week, listening for any answers you might receive. Then, after the week is over, write down any new insights you now have about the situation. List some of the ways you've been disappointed lately and honestly record your feelings about them. Then describe some specific ways you can continue to live in hope, trusting in God's goodness despite your disappointments.

Orient yourself in the present. Create a personal compass in your journal by drawing a large circle and

dividing it into four sections: south, north, east, and west. In the center, draw a smaller circle, and leave this space open as your place to mentally stand and look in each direction. The south side of your compass represents creativity, imagination, spontaneity, and play. Ask yourself: “Where do I feel my creativity being called forth?”, “What do I really long to do or be?”, “How do I nurture myself?”, “What are the hobbies I’m passionate about?”. The north represents the stabilizing and guiding forces in your life. Ask yourself: “Who is that deeply loves me and guides me?”, “What are the images of God that nurture and sustain me?”, “Is there a grace story or [salvation](#) story from the Bible that animates me, or brings clarity to my life or my understanding of God?” and “Who are my spiritual guides and deepest friends?”. The east represents new beginnings. Ask yourself: “What light is just beginning to appear on my horizon?”, “What am I being asked to take hold in a new way?”, “Where am I being called to embrace something?” and “What areas in my life need change or transformation?”. The west represents endings and things you need to let go. Ask yourself: “What maps no longer work for my life?”, “What (or perhaps who) needs to be released and let go?”, “What beliefs or attitudes or patterns do I need to die to?”, “Where is deep healing needed?” and “What areas in my life need change or transformation?”. As you look at the empty space at the center of your compass, imagine yourself standing there and write a “yes” there to commit all directions of your life to God’s love if you’re able to trust Him to guide you in all areas of your life. If you’re struggling with following God in certain areas of your life, journal about your struggles honestly.

Engage in dialogues. Start a conversation with God by writing something to Him in your journal, then praying and listening for any response He might speak to your mind. Write down whatever you think you heard God say. Later, read the dialogue and test it against Scripture, your life experiences, and even the opinions of people you trust who know you well. Read a story from the Bible and imagine yourself in the scene, observing and listening. As you imagine the story unfolding, write down extra details that could have been part of what happened. Ask the people in the biblical account whatever questions you may have, and write down what you imagine their responses to be. If the story you’ve selected includes Jesus, pay special attention to what you’d like to ask Him. Then read what you’ve written and notice how you’ve come to understand the biblical story in a new light. Think about a longing you’ve had for a while, but that you’ve let go instead of pursuing – such as a desire to travel to a particular place or learn a new skill. Then imagine that you’re talking to this exiled longing in your journal. Allow your desire to find its own voice and explain why you let it go and why it hopes you’ll pursue it in the future.

Find your way through suffering. Remember a place of suffering in your own life, the life of someone you know, or in the world. Allow yourself to feel sorrow about it. Then list the words you associate with the suffering itself, and those that express your thoughts and feelings about it. Read one of the Gospel accounts of Jesus’ journey toward the cross. Imagine and describe what Jesus may have seen, heard, smelled, touched, and even tasted along the way. Write a prayer to Him in which you describe your own thoughts and feelings as you imagine His walk toward the crucifixion. Next, ponder Jesus’ resurrection, and consider some of the ways you’ve seen His resurrection power at work in your own life, especially during times of grief, sorrow, doubt, despair, fear, anxiety, or confusion. How did you experience His power, and how might it help you with whatever is troubling you now? List people who you can trust to be honest and real with you when you’re suffering. Who will ask you the hard questions you need to consider? Who will encourage and support you when you’re struggling? Look at the names you’ve written; then contact these people the next time you need their help.

Write for healing. Your journal is a safe place to identify and describe the ways you’ve been wounded and reflect on how you feel about what happened. For each wound you write about, notice its effect on your life and the places where you’ve experienced some healing, as well as the places where you feel stuck. Write about ways you can pursue the healing that God offers. Consider the various names for God, and write about how some of them are particularly meaningful for you in your relationship with Him. Bend over physically to pray about an outworn behavior, false belief, or mistaken attitude that no longer fits your reality. Reflect in your journal on how you can grow behind that behavior, belief, or attitude that has been weighing you down. Use your journal to move through your pain toward healing.

Notice the holy in the ordinary. Take a second look at a person who is close to you by carefully observing him or her and interviewing others about him or her. Then record what you learned in your journal, and notice how your perspective on that person may have changed. Walk through your neighborhood, praying for a particular concern or question. Afterward, write down any new insights you’ve received in your journal. Reread your past journal entries and notice what surprises you about what you’ve written. Pay attention to

unexpected ways you discover evidence of God at work in your everyday life. Write a prayer to God, thanking Him for His work in your life.

Consider sharing parts of your journal. While your journal is a private record, there are times when it may be helpful to share parts of it with others. If you'd like to do so, share what's appropriate with someone you trust as a gift to that person. Don't judge, criticize, or apologize for your writing or your writing experience. Remember that your journal is an important place of discovery for you and any others with whom you choose to share it.

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