

# APPRECIATION

## JOURNALING

by: Julie Cloninger, HFL Team



Prayer; the language between God and humans. It has been studied, talked about, practiced, ignored, and attempted for centuries. There are many types of prayers just as there are many types of people who pray. One of my favorite definitions comes from Dallas Willard, who says prayer is simply talking to God about what you are doing together.

I think this is actually an advanced form of prayer because until one surrenders to love and recognizes the reality of life hidden with Christ in his kingdom, she will not understand that she lives every day with God and together they can experience all that is necessary in this world. But I also think it is an elementary form of prayer because a relationship with God and talking to him about it retrains, reframes, and reforms us.

Jesus taught us to pray both in a model form and in actual language. I think we could pray Jesus' prayer every day for our whole lives and grow in the knowledge and grace of God. Within the gospel verses of Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:1-4, we read Jesus' teaching to his disciples when they asked him how to pray. I love our Lord's prayer. I love meditating on it and imagining myself praying it alongside Jesus and his friends. I believe I am formed even as I form the words in my mind and utter them with my mouth.

But today I am writing about another, specific kind of prayer that reforms our minds and hearts and increases our capacity to be present to ourselves, God, and others because it is interacting with Jesus. It will require a little time, imagination, and a pen and paper.

It's interactive journaling with Jesus which begins with a recalled moment of joy and all the senses that can be remembered with the focus being intentional appreciation to God. The Bible tells us that every good gift comes from above, so we can thank God when anything good happens to us- a family vacation, a new friend, a special time with a spouse, child, or friend, a fun activity, a new pair of shoes, a good night of sleep, a hard lesson learned and so on. The Bible also says in so many places to remember and to glorify God with rejoicing and thanksgiving.

It is incredible to me how easily we forget God's goodness! It's important to give God thanks even when we aren't happy because it shows that we have faith in him and we believe he is faithful to see us through no matter the outcome. Telling God how much we appreciate his blessings sets us up to think more about Him, where and who he is, and where and who we are in relation to him.

In order to appreciate, we have to first remember. Thinking, remembering, and appreciating helps us feel more joy and peace and helps us to make meaningful connections to God and others.



It can even help us settle down when we need calming and receive his rest. I encourage you to pray like this and notice your body's reactions. When you begin, you may feel anxious, distracted, lonely, and afraid. As you recall in full detail a moment of joy from the previous day, you will notice your breathing slow and your muscles relax. As you write about all that you saw, tasted, felt, smelled, and heard in the moment, you are engaging your full brain and retraining it on healthy, life-giving pathways.

*Give thanks in all circumstances; for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. 1 Thess. 5:18*

*Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Phil. 4:4-7*

*But they have conquered him with the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony. Rev. 12:11*

Saying and writing words of appreciation to God are also tools for us to stand firm in who we are and in what is good and true and right. We have an enemy in this world and he is out to destroy us. One of the primary ways he works in our day and age is to keep us so busy and distracted that we don't notice the good all around us. We breeze through life too busy to actually live. One of our weapons against him is our "testimony."

That means our story. So remembering and thanking God for how he has been present with us is a great tool! Honestly, when you first begin this practice, you may only recognize God's presence in the recollection. In other words, on the day you actually do the experiencing, you may not even connect with God.

However, the next day when you are reviewing the previous day in your mind and in God's presence with your words directed toward him, you may recall a conversation, an afternoon walk alone when you saw a hawk only 4 feet away, or a cup of hot tea shared with a friend. You may remember more than you were aware of on the actual day. In this way, you are training your brain to notice and soon you will discover more wonder and joy in the actual experiences of life. You will feel more attuned to yourself and your needs. You will feel more attuned to God's presence. You will feel more able to attune to others. It is very similar to the proverbial oxygen mask that you must first put on yourself so that you can aid another.

The process of keeping an appreciation journal helps us to remember and then write our appreciation to God.



## Appreciation Journaling Continued...



It also serves as a record or “proof” of God’s goodness when we may struggle with sadness or discouragement. We can take out our journal in those moments and remember those experiences we had with God.

The second part of the journal exercise I am encouraging you to begin requires you to listen to God to see what you think he might be saying to you. So often we talk and talk but never actually listen to God. This isn’t a relationship. What we want is a deep, abiding, interactive relationship with God. This will require your imagination and freedom to be wrong.

You may wonder how you can hear God. This is one of the questions I have heard so many people struggle with. They wonder if they are hearing God or just hearing themselves- or worse, if they are hearing the devil. You will develop your “listening ears” the more time you spend with God and practice.

It can seem weird to practice hearing God, but it isn’t. You can think of it more like a routine (a habit!!) and less of a try-and-fail experience. An artist has an art practice. An athlete has a training practice. Sure, they may make mistakes when they practice and that’s normal, but the practice is just a regular, habitual “doing” of the thing. Here are a few things to remember when you listen to God.

1. He wants to speak to you. He LOVES you! He doesn’t hold back from his children. Our whole Christian life is dependent on us having an interactive love relationship with God. That’s what the word “know” means in the Bible. An interactive relationship means a relationship that goes both ways and communication is key. How would a loving father expect his children to obey if he didn’t speak to them? He wouldn’t! Here’s what the Bible says: “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me.” John 10:27 and also “Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer; you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am... The LORD will guide you continually. (Isaiah 58:9,11) and just before he was killed, Jesus told his disciples he would come to them even when they couldn’t see him anymore and “my Father will love him, and we will come to him and make our home with him.”

2. The Bible is God’s word to us. Read it, memorize it, think about it. You will never be disappointed in a Bible reading practice. Even if you don’t understand it all, keep reading. As the words knock around in your mind, God will help you understand more and more. You will begin to recall words from Scripture at just the right time and situation. But truly, Jesus is the actual Word of God. He is what God wanted to say to us. So it is fine, even good, to focus on Jesus. What did he do? say? Many of his words were written down in the Bible, but John tells us that if they were to write everything Jesus said

and did, it would take books and books to hold them. All that to say, the words recorded in Scripture are not the only words of Jesus. He still speaks through his spirit directly to us.

*"Therefore, as the Holy Spirit says, 'Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts as in the rebellion. Heb. 3:7-8*

3. *"Never believe anything bad about God." (another Dallas Willard quote) God is love. God is light and there is no darkness in him. If something is bad and hard, talk to God about it. Ask him for clarity. Ask him to give you his perspective. But never allow yourself to believe anything bad about God.*

4. Hearing God is normal for those who believe him and put their trust in him. As you pursue God in your own prayers, reading the Bible, and thanking God, you will begin to recognize how he is speaking to you through Scripture, circumstances, convictions, and sometimes words from others.

5. God speaks to us in ways we can understand. He loves intimate "inside jokes"- things that friends share with one another but not everyone else thinks funny. So if you think you hear him say something and then you wonder if it is just you, remember he knows your heart. He has made his home in you.

*"Christ, however, was faithful over God's house as a son, and we are his house if we hold firm the confidence and the pride that belong to hope." Hebrews 3:6*

6. *You will hear God best when your whole life is in the will of God. In other words, when you are generally doing the things that Jesus did- loving people, praying, serving, studying Scripture, and being alone with God the Father, you are likely to hear his voice more clearly. This is simply because you are not divided but living as a whole, integrated person in God's presence.*

However, when we sin, he wants us to immediately go to him, tell him all about it, and ask for him to forgive our sin and help us to turn away from doing it again. He will not withhold from you because you sin, but you won't turn to him until you repent. That's just a "by definition" reality. Sin is not that complicated. It is anything that we turn away from God toward. So repenting is turning away from the attachments and back toward God. He assures us in the Bible through John that,

*"If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness." 1 John 1:9*



## Appreciation Journaling Continued

Here is an example from my Appreciation Journal:

**Dear God, I appreciate** the day at the beach yesterday. The sun was shining, but it was breezy and not too hot. The children, Curt, and I were all playing in the waves and having such a good time. I got out and rested on the blanket and watched the waves breaking and my family jumping up and down. I couldn't hear them anymore but what I saw was such a beautiful picture of joy and peace. The blues and greens of the sky and ocean were so beautiful it made me wish I were an artist and could capture the scene on a canvas.

**My dear child,** I am delighted that you took those moments to sit quietly on the blanket and watch the scene in front of you. **I can see you there** in the van driving home from Florida with the radio playing and James and Ruby talking and laughing in the backseat. **I know your thoughts.** You wonder if the children will have fond memories. You wonder if you will get home and have so much to do that you stop noticing your blessings. You are worried that you won't hold on to gratitude. **I understand your heart** because I made you and I'm a parent, too. It makes me so happy when my children enjoy my world and each other. I appreciate your gratitude. I'm so glad you had a good trip to the beach. I hope you will take some of the feelings of "the good life" back to your home and your work life. It is good to take moments to think, remember, and just enjoy. **Remember, I am always glad to be with you in all things,** whether on the beach or at home.

I encourage you to try this practice of writing an Interactive Appreciation Journal. You can start with once a week. It doesn't have to be long or fancy.

Note the components of my sample. I begin by expressing appreciation and I try to remember all the sensory details of the moment I am thankful for. Then I listen to God as he describes his senses in the current moment. ("**I see you where you are...**") Once God describes, he says, "**I know your thoughts...**" This is the time when God reveals my own mind to me. Often he tells me what I am anxious or worried about. Always he reveals what I'm preoccupied with. Sometimes it brings conviction and leads to repentance. At least it makes me more present to myself and helps me to make choices moving forward in my day. Then he says, "**I understand your heart...**" God gets to the heart of my heart! If I was worried about not getting something done in time, he may reveal that I am sinfully fearing what others think about me. Or if I am fretting over a task, he will remind me he is with me and will help me do it. He always ends the time with, "**Remember, I love to be with you wherever you are.**"

By the time I have finished writing, I am calm, close to God, and ready to serve him with everything I say and do. I am primed to be attentive to his activity around me, in me, and through me this day.

Although this is just one way of praying, I encourage you to try the Appreciation Journal. It is a very practical way of developing a relational connection with God which will increase your capacity to connect with him, yourself, and others and experience more joy, more love, and and more intimacy.

## **Appreciation Journal Prompts\***

What are you thankful for today? What made you smile? Pause for a moment and think about something you appreciate. What do you notice? Then write to God and write what you imagine he might be saying to you about that experience as if he was there and he's talking to you.

### **Dear God, I am thankful, appreciative, or grateful for...**

Journaling about the Appreciation Memory with the following prompts may be helpful:

A. Use "Who, What, Where and When" to develop your Appreciation Memory.

1. Who was with me?
2. What was happening?
3. Where was I?
4. When was this? What season?

B. Use your five senses to further expand your memory. What did I hear, smell, taste, and feel?

C. Look for words to describe how you felt both in your emotions and in your body.

From this point forward, write as if God is responding to you:

**My dear child.....**

**I can see you there where you are right now...**

**I hear your thoughts...**

**I understand (know) your heart because....**

**Remember, I love to be with you wherever you are...**

\*originally learned from [www.deeperwalkinternational.org](http://www.deeperwalkinternational.org)

***\*\*\*Note: Sometimes God will tell us something that we don't really want to hear. He is a good, loving, just God. He will always lead you towards him and all the virtues of his character: love, kindness, patience, humility, self-control, faithfulness, gentleness, mercy, slow to anger, etc. If we stray from his will, he will correct us. It's what a good father does! If he sees us headed toward selfishness and pride, he will redirect us. And he never speaks today in opposition to anything he said, which is recorded in our Holy Scriptures.***