

What's your God story?



CANDIDATES
Canada & Bermuda



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Session 1. Introduction

We all come from God and will return to Him eventually, but that road in between is almost never clear. It's full of ups, downs, roadblocks and mountain tops, all part of your journey with God. This guide will help you figure out your God story by helping you identify these key moments when God has been present and how all these experiences, good and not so good, come together to make you who you are today.

So, what is a Spiritual autobiography and what meaning does it have for you?

It is the story of your own life and how God has been present in it. It's basically the story of your personal journey with God. It will help you learn three things.

1. How to examine your life to understand the ways in which God has been active.
2. How to notice the activity of God in your life and in the lives of those around you.
(The spiritual discipline of Noticing)
3. How to share with others what God has been doing in your life and your response to God's activity, the good, the bad and the ugly 😊

Writing your Spiritual Autobiography is an opportunity to identify specific experiences of God and to reflect on how these have impacted you. It is drawing the strands of our lives together in a way that points us to their meaning and encourages us to notice God moments.

As we notice, our lives are changed.

You might think that you don't have a lot to write about in this aspect but once you begin to take note of the things that have happened in your life, you will see how God has been with you on your journey so far. We can all probably recall one or two big moments when you have felt God's presence and guidance, but it doesn't have to be big, huge pivotal moments. It can be those small things, like a sunset, a call from a friend, a bible verse that stuck out to you.

God is alive and active in our every day, ordinary lives so taking the time to pray over and asking Him to reveal Himself in those past moments will help us see and hear Him more clearly than ever.

This can be a solo process but when we work on it together in community we can motivate each other through the exploration stage, encourage each other when we get discouraged and most importantly, be here to listen to each others' stories. Stories are important because we all have a story to tell. And our stories will encourage others, even if we think they aren't all that exciting. Believe me, your story will impact someone else in ways you might not ever realise.



Writing your spiritual autobiography will help you grow as a follower of Jesus in a few ways.

First, we develop the skill of noticing God at work in our lives.

Second, by seeing our stories, we can understand at a new level God's intention for us. We all have a role to play in growing God's kingdom and each role is different, unique to us.

Sometimes we can understand our role only when we see it in the bigger picture, we can see how all the pieces fit together and we can discern how seemingly unrelated elements fit together to prepare us for what God is calling us to.

Third, we grow by seeing that God has indeed been present and active in our lives. The security of God's presence and the encouragement of knowing we have a purpose energizes us to serve God in our unique ways.

Finally, we gain a sense of the direction our lives are pointing. In understanding the meaning of our past, we understand better the meaning of the present and we get a glimpse of what the future might hold. Sensing the meaning of our lives, we can make choices that are consistent with that meaning.

So where do you find the information necessary to write a spiritual autobiography?

Memory

Some people only need to right questions to unlock some deep memories. Either later today or tomorrow we are going to explore the various stages in your life to date and ask, where was God present during this time of your life? You will have the opportunity to take notes, writing things down as you recall them and be alert to what thoughts strike you.

Conversation

Significant events in your life may have taken place in the presence of others. Or you may have talked about an event with family or friends who might have a better recollection of those times, or even times that you might have forgotten. Definitely worth a few phone calls or conversations with the people you love and are close with.

Journals

If you are a journal keeper, this one is great source of information for a spiritual autobiography. We process our history through a grid that includes our key relationships, main activities, important ideas, physical experiences, all good and bad ones, and spiritual encounters.



Prayer

In the end it is the Holy Spirit who reveals to us what we need to know to put together our spiritual autobiography, spending time in prayer over this is so especially important. We ask the Spirit to show us what we need to know about our lives to understand them from a spiritual point of view. Then we listen. The Holy Spirit will lead us in various ways. Sometimes it is through our memory. If an incident pops into our heads, we do not dismiss it quickly. We think about it and write it down. At other times, the Spirit speaks to us through our awareness and observation. After asking for guidance, we are alert to guidance a chance remark from a friend, a phrase in a book, social media post, a bible passage, all ways that we can notice and hear from God about what it is He wants us to know.

Think about these questions.

1. Take time to identify the important people in your life story and write them down, these are a few examples:
 - Parents/guardians
 - Siblings
 - Relatives
 - Significant others (current or past)
 - Important friends
 - Mentors

2. Looking at this list, what made them important to you? What is the best thing about those relationships?

3. Have you ever had a spiritual friendship, one that centred around your shared faith and journey with God? If so, describe it. If not, what do you think a friendship like that should look like?



4. Looking back over your life, when were you first aware of God's entrance into your story?

5. In which of the following situations or environments have you experienced the presence of God or an awareness of the supernatural? Mark the ones you have encountered or add your own.
 - A conversion experience.
 - A dream with deep meaning
 - Reading a bible passage
 - An unusual or super connected worship experience
 - In nature
 - In a time of prayer
 - In music or art
 - The still, small inner voice
 - Through an event
 - In a relationship
 - By means of inconsolable longing
 - In conversation
 - Through a coincidence
 - In an encounter with a wise person or a child
 - Other

6. If you could ask God for one type of divine experience, what would it be? What do you want most from God?



Writing Exercise

As you write about the core of who you are and who you are in relationship to God and the world, you will be putting into words your spiritual autobiography. This is like speaking the language of the soul. This is not about data or fact, but about meaning and identity and about how the spirit is working in your life. Think about these questions as you write and write about yourself in words you would be willing to share with others, which reveal your true self.

List as many words as you can to describe who you are.

Where did you learn these words about yourself?

Going deeper

1. What are your hopes? Dreams?
2. What are your fears?
3. What are you great at? What gifts do you have?
4. What do you struggle with?
5. How do you share your gifts?



6. You get my best self when _____.

7. You get my worst self when _____.

8. How is God revealed to you?

9. How do you reveal God to others?

10. What is your image of God?

This project of writing a spiritual autobiography is going to be a super worthwhile experience for all of us and hopefully, the start or a continuation of a lifelong journey of noticing God in our lives.

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your path.” Proverbs 3: 5 and 6



Session 2 – What is Your God story?

Writing your God story (Adapted from Vinita Hampton Wright, Ignationspirituality.com)

These two exercises are adapted from Vinita Hampton Wright who created them for the Ignatian Spirituality Website.

St. Ignatius was a founding father of spiritual direction and wrote a book called *Spiritual Exercises*, one of the most influential books on the spiritual life ever written. With a small group of friends, Ignatius Loyola founded the Society of Jesus, or the Jesuits. Ignatius conceived the Jesuits as “contemplatives in action.” This also describes the many Christians who have been touched by Ignatian spirituality.

He understood the importance of reviewing one’s life when he built this practice into the Spiritual Exercises centuries ago. His emphasis was to help a person identify past sins and so to make a detailed confession during the First Week, which focuses on our recognition of sin and of God’s abundant mercy. Both Ignatius and today’s spiritual teachers understand the power of looking back at one’s life and reframing it in a healthy way.

The first exercise will concentrate on the shadow side of your life history—the difficulties, sins, and wounds that have played a part in forming you. And then we will address the more positive gifts, graces, and possibilities in the second exercise.

In the Gospel stories, Jesus’ first response to about every person he met was to heal. He would heal a person even before pronouncing that his or her sins were forgiven. He saw people’s woundedness and lostness and responded with care and compassion. I think he assumed that most people recognized their own sinfulness and misery—most people except those who considered themselves righteous and were therefore blind to their own needs and sins. Jesus knew our tendency to look at our past and see mainly our failures, problems, and wrongdoings. He came to us to show us that we need not be defined by those things.

Writing Exercise #1

Prayer time - Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your remembering.

Prayerfully consider your life by stages. Spend time allowing memories of early childhood to arise. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you the wound(s) you need to see. Do this with each life stage.

As you take notes on your memories, don’t worry so much about the literal facts, such as dates, sequence of events, exact places, and so forth. Memory is quite subjective and unreliable in the



most literal sense. Write more about how you perceived what happened. How do you remember the event? How did you feel then? How do you feel now?

Write down as many words and phrases as you can that describe your sin or wound *regret, betrayal, horribly disappointed, shocked, still angry, I wish I knew why, if only I had done something else*, and so on.

End with this prayer:

Holy Spirit, we have opened this painful part of my story. For the time being, I place all of this in your care. I won't worry over it or beat myself up about it but allow you to hold it and work with it. Help me let go for now until my next prayer time with it.



Writing Exercise #2

Part 1

Invite Jesus to sit with you as you review the notes you have written about the sins/wounds in your history. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your thoughts and perceptions as you talk with Jesus.

Choose a specific event, sin, or wound, and talk with Jesus about it. Here are some suggestions to start:

- Lord, I think this is what was going on with me when this happened...
- I wish things had gone differently, but I can't change the past. [If this is a sin on your part] I see the hurt I caused, and I see how I harmed myself and grieved you. I'm so sorry. Please forgive me. And help me receive your mercy and grace so that this memory does not get in the way of my growth now.
- I still don't understand why this happened, or who was really at fault, but it still hurts to remember this. In fact, I can see how my pain over this sometimes stands in the way of my moving forward now. Show me if I need to forgive someone and help me begin that process.
- Jesus, please tell me what you think about all this. Help me see my life—my past—as you see it.

Now, write about this part of your history again, only revised in light of your conversation with Jesus. End with thanksgiving for the forgiveness and healing that are ongoing.



Writing Exercise #2 Part 1 Notes



In terms of the Spiritual Exercises, one critical goal of writing a spiritual autobiography is to recognize God's action in our past: God's presence, grace, and gifts to us.

You have just looked at significant wounds and sins in your life story, and you have received mercy, forgiveness, help, and healing. These processes are ongoing—it can take a long time for healing to be complete—but at the least you have begun to see your past in light of God's healing and grace. This leaves you freer to embark on the exercises of Part 2.

Writing Exercise #2

Part 2

Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your remembering.

Prayerfully consider your life by stages. Spend time allowing memories of early childhood to arise. Ask the Holy Spirit to show you where God was present and at work: in happy events, loving relationships, talents you had, activities you enjoyed, and so forth. Do this with each life stage.

As you take notes on your memories, don't worry so much about the literal facts such as dates, sequence of events, exact places, and so forth. Memory is quite subjective and unreliable in the most literal sense. Write more about how you perceived what happened. How do you remember the event? How did you feel then? How do you feel now?

Write down as many words and phrases as you can that describe God's presence, gifts, and graces: *I was so at peace, gratitude, we had such a wonderful time that day, I still love to paint, that friendship kept me going*, and so on.

End with a prayer something like this: *Holy Spirit, we have opened this grace-filled part of my story. Help me remember vividly and truly celebrate these gifts. Help me see, also, how they continue to provide healthy resources for my life.*



Writing Exercise #2 Part 2 Notes



Writing Exercise #3

Invite Jesus to sit with you as you review the notes you have written about the gifts and graces in your history. Ask the Holy Spirit to guide your thoughts and perceptions as you talk with Jesus.

Choose a specific event, gift, or grace, and talk with Jesus about it. Here are some suggestions to start:

- Lord, I think this is what was going on with me when this happened...
- I didn't see at the time how fortunate I was and what a gift I'd been given. Thank you for this part of my story! Help me to draw from it even now as I continue my life. Show me the people I might thank who were involved in this graced time. And if there is any way I can continue this grace today [for instance, a talent or activity you can return to], guide me as I revive this gift. May the memory of this open my eyes to today's gifts.
- I still don't understand how or why God was present to me back then. I wish I had been more aware of it, but I know that you understand my process of growth and understanding. Thank you for accepting me back then for who I was, with what I was aware of. Help me now to accept who I was and where I was in my development. I look back and blame myself for not being more mature, but I was simply developing as you designed me to grow and learn.
- Jesus, please tell me what you think about all this. Help me see my life—my past—as you see it.

Now, write about this part of your history again, only revised in light of your conversation with Jesus.

End with thanksgiving for the gifts and graces you have received already—and for God's continuing generosity.



Writing Exercise #3 Notes



Summary

Look at all the notes you have taken over the past two sessions and see what you have learned to begin the process of writing out your spiritual autobiography.

Write as much as you want and in as much detail as you would like.

Every person is unique and therefore, every manuscript will look different. For some, it will take the form of a complete, edited manuscript of your entire story. For others, it will be in the form of bullet points and notes.

Most people tell their stories in chronological order, skipping over the less important periods and focussing more on critical events, people, and experiences. However, there are other ways to share your story.

- a. Thematically. You may have discovered a thread or a theme that describes who you are and what you have experienced. Examples of themes could be as follows:
 - Rescue: Being lost and being found, not once but many times
 - Grace: amazing experiences of God's work and presence in a variety of situations
 - Travel: in all the places you have lived something decisive has happened that has shaped your knowledge of God.
 - Relationships: Good, bad, or indifferent.
- b. Metaphorically. Rather than a theme, there might be a metaphor that speaks to your experiences with God such as the prodigal son.
- c. Through the eyes of another....it might be easier to write your story in the third person, through the eyes of someone else other than yourself.

You can also be creative; you don't have to stick to reading a manuscript or using a set of notes. What about trying the following ideas?

- a. Art. Are you an artist? Why not create a set of drawings, paintings or sculptures that tell your story, creating a description to go along with each.
- b. Create a collage of photographs or pictures that depict your story.
- c. Are you musical? Create a musical collage of songs that represent your story or write a song.
- d. With words. Why not create a poem, parable or story that shows where God was present in your life.



The idea behind all of this is not to be limited to what you think others want to hear. Tell your story your way and allow God to inspire you.

Summary



Session 3 – What is Your God story?

What may be next in your God story?

As you have spent time this week creating your spiritual autobiography, God has been speaking to you. He has a plan for you! Using what you have learned about yourself and your relationship with Him this week, complete this journal exercise on exploring your vocation/calling.

“The place God calls you is a place where your deep gladness and the world deep hunger meet” - Frederick Buechner

It can be hard to know where we are being called, because of the ways of God are so often unexplainable. Sometimes it might be good for us to take a step, and other times it might be good for us to be still. What may have seemed best at one point can quickly change due to job loss or a diagnosis. Life may change, but your purpose will not go away. Vocation, according to Parker Palmer, is not a goal that I pursue. It is a calling that I hear.

Here are some questions to help you listen to what you may be called too. Spend time in silence then when you feel settled, answer these questions.

Questions for discernment

1. Where/when have you felt the most alive or awake?

2. When do you feel the most like yourself?

3. What do you love to do?



9. What have you connected to that you were surprised at?

10. What do you notice in your answers? What shifts in your body do you notice?

Once you have worked through these questions, prayerfully consider where God may be calling you. Reach out to a trusted Christian mentor, could be your pastor/corps officer, youth leader, divisional candidates/youth secretary among others and talk to them about what you have learned. You can also reach out to us here in the THQ Candidates Department through the following methods:

www.facebook.com/sacandidates

www.instagram.com/sacandidates

www.sacandidates.com

or email us at thq.candidates@salvationarmy.ca

"Calling is a 'yes' to God that carries a 'no' to the chaos of modern demands. Calling is the key to tracing the story line of our lives and unriddling the meaning of our existence in a chaotic world."

— Os Guinness



Session 4 – What is Your God story?

Sharing your God story

Our stories are important and help each other learn. Why not gather a group of people together and spend time listening and sharing your God stories, our spiritual autobiographies?

As you share, please be respectful of each other and listen. Do not interrupt or try to explain, correct, suggest, or criticize.

Please give space for emotions and it's okay if there is emotion, this is an emotional experience, both sharing and listening.

Remember, this is to be a safe space and what is shared here is sacred. Please keep the stories shared confidential, not to be shared outside of the space you have created.

You are, of course, free to share your own story.

Listen with the following questions in mind:

1. What strikes you about this story? What is similar or different to your story?
2. What do you learn from this story? Any insights for yourself?
3. What is unique and special about the presenter?
4. If you had to make a God-inspired guess (i.e., you've asked Him) where might God be leading this presenter?
5. Is there anything you would like to understand better?

For discussion after

1. Affirmation: identify one element of the story you most appreciated
2. Using the questions above, what did you learn from the story shared?
3. Allow the presenter to respond.

Prayer time

1. Affirm each presenter (shared or not) – what do you appreciate about them?
2. Prayer of blessing over each person, laying hands if appropriate.



Source credit for this guide

www.ignationspirituality.com

www.wayzatacommunitychurch.org/spiritual-autobiography.pdf

Spiritual Autobiography – Discovering and Sharing your Spiritual Story, Richard Peace