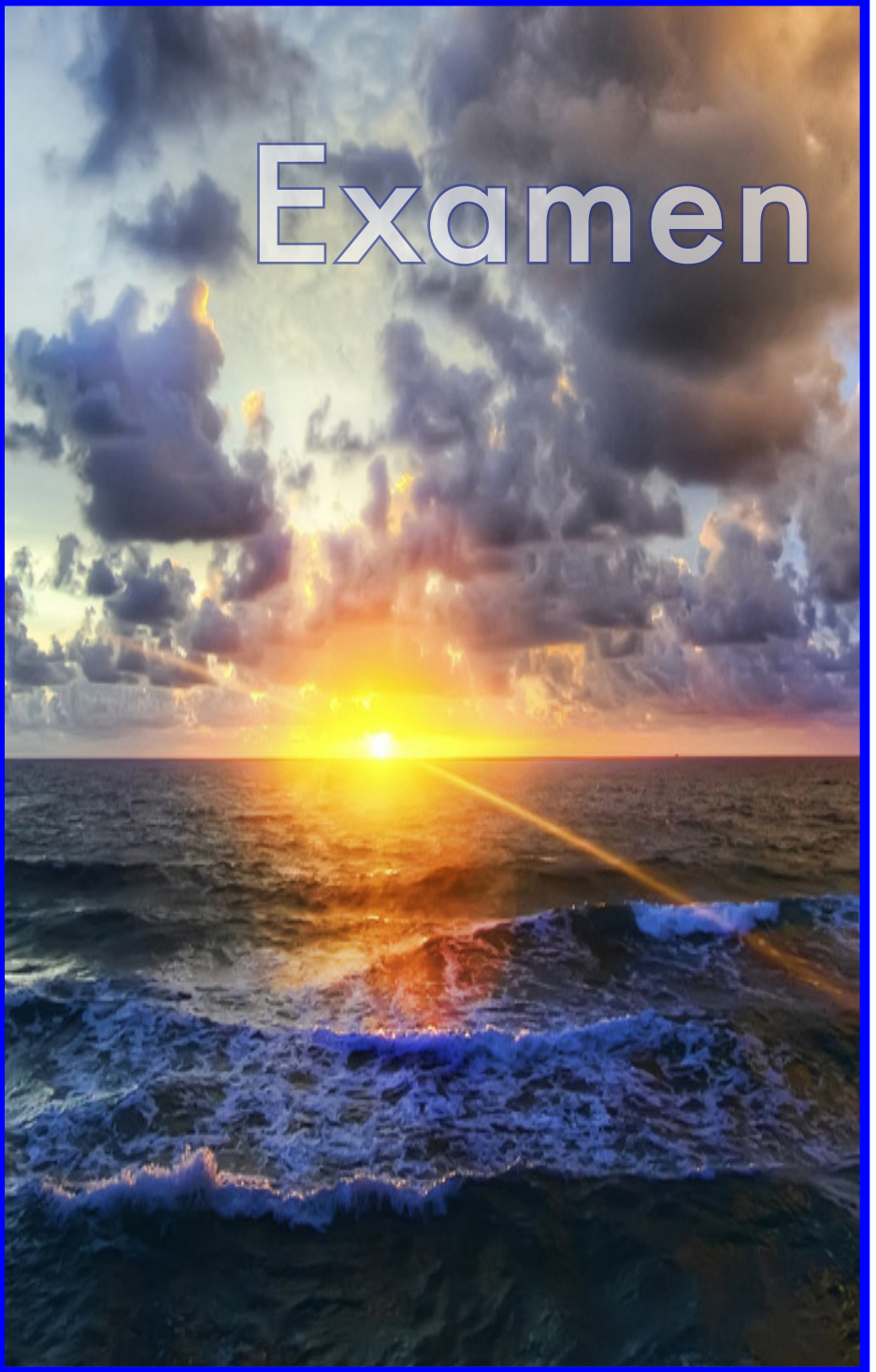


Examen



— Examen —

*Let us examine our ways and test them
and let us return to the LORD.*

— Lamentations 3:40 (NIV) —

*When you are on your beds, search your hearts and be silent.
Offer the sacrifices of the righteous and trust in the Lord.*

Psalms 4:4-5 (NIV) —

Examine and see how good the LORD is.

— Psalm 34:8 (NCV) —

Examine all things; hold fast to what is good.

— 1 Thessalonians 5:21 (NET) —

Examine yourselves

to see whether you are in the faith; test yourselves.

— 2 Corinthians 13:5 (NIV) —

You have already examined and seen how good the Lord is.

— 1 Peter 2:3 (NCV) —

For centuries people of faith have sharpened their spiritual life direction with a practice called “Examen” — a way of praying backwards through our day. Developed by Ignatius Loyola (1491-1556), Examen is a short spiritual exercise often practiced at the end of the day.

By taking a few deliberate minutes to calmly, but carefully, think back over the day, the Examen can help us see where God has been showing up in places we overlooked in the busyness of our day. Taking the time for a brief look back, we try to notice what we otherwise might have easily missed.

THE PURPOSE OF EXAMEN:

Think of the Examen as a tool for looking back on your day to find the places when you felt most alive, most grateful, most aware of God’s grace and the fruit of his Spirit. But it can also be an important confrontational tool to reveal moments in your day when you felt fear, despair, entitlement, distraction, and selfishness. The Examen invites our attention to both the highs and lows of the day. It acts as an invitation for us to pause, ponder, pray, and then make a decision or a course correction.

Some use the Examen twice a day — first at lunchtime to look back on the morning and forward to the afternoon, and then again in the evening, to review the afternoon and pray and plan for tomorrow. Others will use the Examen once per day, in the evening looking back on the entire day.

THE PRACTICE OF EXAMEN:

The Examen asks us to focus our attention on a very small and very recent time span — the past day. At first this might seem like a simple task until we realize how much of our day runs on autopilot. For many the goal is to keep our eyes forward and simply move through the day, with no assessments made, no lessons learned, and no changes brought to our lives. Simply reaching the end of the day is thought of as a successful undertaking.

The Examen challenges and changes this way of thinking. It is a tool to prevent our day from being lost and forgotten. And paying attention, noticing, and remembering are what make the Examen work. The Bible is filled with examples of remembering: Remember God's covenant with Abraham. Remember God rescuing his people from Egypt. Remember God's Law given at Sinai. Remember the night Jesus took bread and wine and said, "*remember.*" Remember the many faithful followers (Hebrews 11). As Richard Peace has written:

Examen is about noticing: noticing the good gifts God gives us, noticing the presence of God in our lives, and noticing the ways we fail God. When we notice, we become more conscious. When we become more conscious, we grow. ¹

As you practice the Examen you might find it helpful to ask two kinds of questions as you look back on the day: questions to help identify moments of comfort and support (consolations) and questions to identify moments of sadness and emptiness (desolations). ²

Looking back on my day — what were my *CONSOLATIONS*?

1. When did I live in faith, hope, and love?
2. What gave me life?
3. When did I give and receive love?
4. When did I feel free?
5. What filled me with gratitude?
6. When was I most thoughtful (full of thought) and aware?
7. When was I living out of my relationship with God?

Looking back on my day — what were my *DESOLATIONS*?

1. When did I live with fear, doubt, despair, and discouragement?
2. What was life-draining?
3. When was I not living in love?
4. When did I feel restricted or trapped?
5. When was I thankless and unpleasant?
6. When was I inattentive and distracted?
7. When did I live selfishly?

FIVE MOVEMENTS OF EXAMEN:

Begin with a few moments of quiet to calm your spirit ...then spend 2-3 minutes on each of these 5 steps. ³

1. **RELISH** — Ask God to remind you of all the gifts and graces he has placed before you through the day, from the major gifts (love, purpose, meaning, life, safety) to the smaller gifts (an enjoyable meal, a good night's sleep, a finished project). As you recall each gift, spend some time giving God thanks and praise.
2. **REQUEST** — Knowing it will take courage and will be difficult to face and understand your darker side, ask God to help you see it from his side of the relationship — mercy and love. Ask him to lead you through this time of personal petition as you think through the highs and lows of your day.
3. **REVIEW** — Go backwards through your day, hour by hour. Think through each important moment of your day. Pause and ponder over the important moments, and quickly move past the minor ones.
4. **REPENT** — As you look back, thanking God for all the positive moments you find scattered through your day, also pause to review those difficult moments — when you had a bad thought, or when you said or did something opposed to your faith calling. Perhaps it was a refusal to serve or share, or it might have been a missed opportunity to learn and grow. But whatever the occasion, when it's clear that you were not the person God called you to be, stop and ask his forgiveness. Don't rush. Instead, take enough time to face your deficiency and to sense God's kindness and compassion working inside, working to make you fresh, clean, and whole.

5. **RESOLVE** — Finally, think about what you have learned about yourself, both the encouraging and the uncomfortable observations. Ask God to show you specifically how he wants you to respond — What does he want you to do? How does he want you to change? Who does he want you to be? And with the strength that God provides, resolve to act, to change, and to be that person tomorrow.

End your Examen with a few moments of restful quiet ...

WHAT TO EXAMINE DURING MY EXAMEN:

There are several ways to prayerfully review your day. In fact, in his book Reimagining the Ignatian Examen, Mark Thibodeaux presents a very creative expansion on the traditional experience which includes 34 different ways to practice the Examen.

After becoming more familiar with the basic Examen idea and practice here are 5 options to consider as you develop your own style.

1. **TIME** — One way to review your day is to go back moment by moment. Use the framework of time, hour by hour, to think back through the day, reviewing and inspecting the moments when you were most or least aware of God's presence. You might discover patterns in your time, moments during the day when you are more vulnerable to selfishness, waste, and evil than at other times. In the same way you might find that your heart, soul, mind, and strength are most open to God in the morning, or the evening, or at some other time.
2. **PLACE** — Another way to practice the Examen is think back through all the places you have visited through the day — workplace, shopping center, restaurant, your own home, and other places. Did any of them especially provide you the opportunity to see, hear, and feel God's amazing creation? Were there places that were beautiful and inspiring? Were there other places that felt dark and corrupt? Did those dark places tempt you with prejudice, arrogance, or fear? Were they evil places to "flee" from (Ps 1:1) or were they "dark valleys" (Ps 23:4) to be led through by God? What did God teach you as you passed through today's places?
3. **THINGS** — You could also review the physical things in your life — clothes, automobile, phone, laptop, books, collectibles, entertainment trappings, furniture, food, games, tools, etc. Going back through your day, which of these things brought you closer to God? Pause and thank God for this blessing. Did anything come between you and

God or lead you away from God? Are you too attached to this or that thing? Are you spending too much time with it? Pause and ask for God's forgiveness and help to put away the things that work against your faith.

4. **ACTIVITIES** — Now think back through the actions of your day. What did you actually do? Working, playing, talking, exercising, eating, walking in the neighborhood, sleeping, reading, preparing a meal, praying, watching TV, scrolling through social media. Which activity made you more spiritually healthy? Which brought God to mind? Which made you more aware of your need for God? Pause and praise God for these activities. Were there other activities that moved you away from God? Did any compromise your commitment to God or cancel your plans to be with God or God's people? Ask yourself if you are addicted to any of these activities? Are they stepping into God's place? There are hundreds of activities throughout your day but pause and consider the major ones and ask for God's forgiveness and healing.

5. **RELATIONSHIPS** — Think about the people you encountered through the day — family, friends, co-workers, clients, strangers. Of the dozens of people think about the most significant relationships, the most important conversations, or encounters. Who led you closer to God? Think through how it happened. Review the conversation. What did you say? What did they say? Thank God for this relationship. Was there a relationship today where God used you to represent Him in love and service. Rehearse the encounter. Humbly thank God for the opportunity and give Him the glory. But also ask yourself, were there people today that were not healthy for my faith? Was there someone tempting you to sin? Ask God for strength and wisdom to know how to respond, what to say, and how to resist the dark side of relationships. It may be a relationship you need to avoid (Ps 10:2; 26:4) or God may use you to bring leaven and light into this person's life (Mt 5:9-10). Seek God's advice. Ask Him to give you the love He shows to an ungrateful humanity each day.

1 Richard Peace, Meditative Prayer (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 1998), p. 57.

2 David Benner, Desiring God's Will: Aligning Our Hearts with the Heart of God (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2005), p. 115; Margaret Silf, Inner Compass (Chicago, IL: Loyola Press, 1999), pgs. 70-71.

3 Adapted from Mark E. Thibodeaux, SJ, Reimagining the Ignatian Examen (Chicago: Loyola Press, 2015), pgs. 3-4.

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