

THE PRAYER OF EXAMEN

Psalms 139:1 says, “*Lord, you examine me and know me.*” King David declared, “*The LORD searches every mind, and understands every plan and thought*” (1 Chron. 28:9). The Apostle Paul reminds us that “*the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God*” (1 Cor. 2:10). These folks knew of the *examen* of God, and they experienced it not as a dreadful thing but as something of immeasurable strength and empowerment.

What is the Prayer of Examen?

It has two basic aspects, like the two sides of a door. The first is the *examen of consciousness* (awareness) through which we discover how God has been present to us throughout the day and how we have responded to his loving presence. The second aspect is an *examen of conscience* in which we uncover those areas that need cleansing, purifying, and healing. Let’s look at the two aspects separately.

The Remembrance of Love

In the examen of consciousness we prayerfully reflect on the thoughts, feelings, and actions of our days to see how God has been at work among us and how we responded. For example, we consider whether the obnoxious neighbor was more than a rude interruption of a quiet evening. Maybe he was the voice of God urging us to be attentive to the pain and loneliness of those around us. Perhaps in the beautiful sunrise God was shouting out his love of beauty and inviting us to share in it, but we were too sleepy or distracted to participate. Maybe we responded to the Divine Whisper to write a message or make a call to a friend, and the results of our simple obedience were nothing short of startling.

The examen of consciousness is the means God uses to make us more aware of our surroundings. It isn’t complicated or unusual in the least. God wants us to be present where we are. He invites us to see and hear what is around us and, through it all, to discern the footprints of His Presence.

The Scrutiny of Love

In the examen of conscience we are inviting the Lord to search our hearts to the depths. Far from being dreadful, this is a scrutiny of love. We boldly speak the words “*Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.*” (Psalms 139:23-24).

Without apology and without defense we ask to see what is truly in us. It is for our own sake that we ask these things. It is for our good, for our healing, for our happiness. It is important that God joins us in this examination journey, because often we either seek to justify ourselves and are defensive or we are too self-critical and deem ourselves unredeemable. But with God alongside us, we are protected and comforted.

The Priceless Grace

The Prayer of Examen produces within us the priceless grace of self-knowledge. Too often we think of self-knowledge as the search for personal peace and prosperity. But the purpose of the Spirit is to lead us to become more Christlike and the abundant life that Jesus offers. This is what Paul meant by us

working out our salvation with fear and trembling (Philippians 2:12). We must not deny or ignore the depth of our evil or sinfulness, because there is no need to repress or suppress any of God's truth about ourselves. God loves us not in spite of our evil, but in the very midst of it. Through faith, self-knowledge leads me to a self-acceptance and self-love that draw their life from God's acceptance and love for me.

Personal Memorials

Developing the Prayer of Examen as a regular spiritual rhythm leads to inward transformation. Below are a few suggestions on how regularly practice the prayer of examen, but also establish memorials of your growth of self-knowledge and awareness of God's presence.

- Journal keeping is a highly intentional reflection on the events of our days.
- Establish a regular physical routine that incorporates reflection. (i.e. shooting baskets, hitting golf balls, neighborhood walk or jog, yardwork, gardening, etc.)
- Regular and prayerful meditation on the Ten Commandments or the Lord's Prayer as a means of holding our lives before a moral standard.
- Regular personal retreats to review life.