

STAY AWAKE THE EXAMEN

Living in God's Presence

The Prayer of Examen

*"The examen of the past pulls us
like a magnet into the open arms
of a loving God who becomes
more and more real to us
in our endless string of present moments."
—Daniel Wolpert, *Creating a Life with God**

As you seek to grow closer to God through prayer and Bible study, as you choose to act on your beliefs, and as you answer the call to teach others of God's love, God will be with you. Yet learning to see God in the midst of everyday life takes practice. Looking back and noticing where God has been at work in the past can help you learn to recognize God in the present.

Looking Back

Imagine a young soldier, wounded in battle, lying in a makeshift hospital, considering his future. His thoughts move back and forth between revenge and forgiveness. He considers pursuing a life of wealth far away from the battlefield; then he imagines serving others who have been wounded in battle. In 1521, Iñigo de Loyola lay in a hospital bed considering these options. He found that thoughts of worldly glory left him restless while thoughts of following Christ left him peaceful and content. As he noticed the rise and fall of his feelings, he came to believe that God was trying to get his attention; yet with the swirl of thoughts in his head, he could not hear what God was saying.

While recuperating from his wounds, Iñigo read about the life of Jesus and the lives of the saints. He changed his name to Ignatius in honor of Saint Ignatius of Antioch and dedicated his life to converting non-Christians in the Holy Land. After he had spent years in study, prayer, and solitude, other people began coming to Ignatius for spiritual direction.

Calling on his own experience and convinced that God designed human beings to be able to sense God's presence in moments of indecision, Ignatius developed several meditations and methods of prayer, which he called The Spiritual Exercises. One of these practices, the Prayer of Examen, is a way to look back at our experiences to determine if they move us closer to or farther away from God.

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Preparing to Pray

Step 1: Proper Intention

Remember that you were created “for the praise of God our Lord and for the salvation of [your] soul” (Spiritual Exercises, 55). You are not seeking your own will and desires, but only God’s will.

Step 2: Arriving at a state of “indifference to all created things” (Spiritual Exercises, 12)

Do not assume that what you like and want is from God and what you don’t like is not from God. You may find God is calling you through people and activities that you do not like.

The Prayer of Examen

1. Choose a period of time to examine in prayer. This may be a day, a week, or a specific event.

2. Allow your mind to wander through that period of time. Reflect on one or more of these questions:

- > During this time, for what am I most grateful? least grateful?
- > When did I feel a sense of love, peace, joy, or life?
- > When did I feel exhausted, dead, drained, angry, or mean?
- > What specific events, thoughts, or experiences draw my attention?
- > What parts of this time do I want to forget?
- > What moments capture the things I desire most?
- > What feels out of place or boring?

3. Ask yourself these questions:

- > When did I notice God during this time?
- > When did I feel that God was absent?

4. As answers to these questions arise, notice what they tell you about the future.

- > How is God calling me to act?
- > What is God calling me to do?

Repeat the prayer of examen regularly. Notice the patterns that emerge in your life, and record these in your journal. With practice, you will begin to sense which experiences move you closer to God and which ones separate you from God’s loving presence.

You might also want to try this prayer practice with a group of friends or with your youth group after you have participated in a worship service, retreat, or event together. Follow the same steps, but allow people to name aloud where they noticed God’s presence or absence and what they feel God is calling them to do or to be. (For more info, see pages 84–87 and 180–181 in *Creating a Life with God*. To order the book, call 1-800-972-0433 or visit www.upperroom.org/bookstore.)

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Dig Deeper

During the next month, use the Prayer of Examen at bedtime to examine your day and to open yourself to God's presence in the day to come.

Keep a journal of the ways you notice God throughout each day.

A month from now, reflect on the ways this prayer has shaped your life.

Learn more about [Ignatius of Loyola](#).

Pray the Examen [online](#).



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Asking the Questions, Examining Your Day

Robert Roth

*Our family called them the birthday questions:
What's the best thing that happened to you in the past year?
What's the worst thing that happened?
What do you hope for in the year ahead?*

We first heard these questions from our friends Tom and Lynn, who heard them from Dick and Anita. We ask the birthday questions because they remind us that each year is full of meaning and potential. God was with us last year, and God will be with us next year.

Friends at **devozine** recently gave me a little book called *Sleeping with Bread* (Paulist Press). I discovered that the birthday questions didn't begin with Tom and Lynn or even with Dick and Anita. They began in the 1500s with "The Spiritual Exercises" of St. Ignatius.

Ignatius' questions ask us to consider how we really are and what God is saying to us. They are questions like these: What has made me happy? sad? What went right? wrong? When did I feel love? no love? What made me feel more alive? less alive?

We can ask Ignatius' questions every month, every week, or even every day. The questions are called the *examen*, and they help us to examine our days. Asking them at night lets us consider the day to find out when and how God was involved in the good times as well as in the sadness and pain of our daily lives.

Consolation and Desolation

Ignatius called those times when we feel lots of love and life (the first birthday question) "consolation." He called experiences that seem to drain us of love and life (the second birthday question) "desolation." We can discover more about who we are and about what we need by examining our deepest experiences—both the consolations and the desolations—because it is then that we listen to both God and ourselves.

Though Ignatius came up with the *examen* when he was alone, for centuries Christians have discussed the questions with trusted friends. Examining our lives together helps us to be disciplined about practicing the *examen* and about searching our lives for God's presence and guidance.

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Why Ask?

Christians have examined their lives for a couple of reasons. First, God wants us to give and receive as much life and love as possible. Second, we will not only help others but also find our own true path in life when we are aware of ourselves and are open to God's leading.

The third birthday question is this: What do you hope for in the year ahead? In the *examen*, the third question is a little different: How can I thank God for the things for which I feel most grateful and least grateful?

To find God in today is to wait for God's presence and direction tomorrow. If we truly look at ourselves and at God today, what an amazing day tomorrow will be!

Dig Deeper

Examine your day by yourself or with a friend or family member.

Light a candle. **Read Ephesians 2:4-5.**

Consider:

Today, when did I feel most loved and alive?

When did I feel least loved and alive?

How can I give thanks for God's presence in all of these moments?