

The Prayer of Examen

LIFE with Jesus in Worship

INTRODUCTION

The Prayer of *Examen*

Jesus lives a God-aware life.

He says, “Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can only do what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does,” John 5:19-20.

Jesus is always watching for the movements of his Father so that he can join him in what he is doing.

Jesus then gives his followers an astonishing and gracious promise: “As the Father has loved me,” he says, “so have I loved you.” And through his Holy Spirit he promises to “be with us always” and to “guide us into all truth.”¹

In other words, Jesus makes a way for God to be with us as he is with Jesus, and we can learn to live a God-aware life as well. We can watch for the movements of God and learn to keep in step with him just as Jesus did.

Christians through the centuries have practiced a form of prayer to help us cultivate this God-awareness: *The Prayer of Examen*.

THE PRACTICE: The Prayer of Examen

The word *examen* is related to our word “examine.” It comes from Latin and “conveys the idea of an accurate assessment of the true situation.”² The *Prayer of Examen*, then, is a way to invite God to help us see clearly—both His presence in our lives and the condition of our soul.

The Examen of Consciousness (or Presence)

Because we can rush through our days and miss what God is doing around and in us, in this method of prayer we invite the Holy Spirit to help us go back over a recently-passed period of time—the last day or the last week—and to show us where God was moving. This is the *examen of consciousness*³—where and how does the Holy Spirit help us become conscious of God?

Was he speaking to us in the beauty of the sunrise we barely noticed as we walked the dog? Was that him speaking in the depth of our heart when we had an insight into a problem? Did he bring a scripture verse to our awareness at a meaningful time? Did he give us the gift of a special mercy, or a call from a friend, or an opportunity? Was he appearing to us in the presence of a person in need? As we walk with him prayerfully

¹ Matthew 28:20; John 14:16
Richard, Foster, *Prayer*, p. 27

³ Richard Foster, *Prayer*, p. 28

through the day that has passed, we might discover he was at work, shaping our life, in myriad ways. It can be helpful to jot down a list of the ways we become aware of his presence.

The Examen of Conscience

The second facet of the prayer of examen is that we ask for God's help to see any ways we have resisted him or sinned against him in the same period of time. This is the *examen of conscience*—how is God inviting us to repent? How does he want to shape our life and transform us so we are more like him?

Were we short with a family member in the morning? Did we harbor bitter thoughts toward a co-worker? Did we neglect to tip a service worker? Did we brush off someone the Lord brought to our attention?

Because we ask our Father to help us look into our heart and see our sin and failings, we trust him not to allow us to justify ourselves and remain blind to our sin. But also, because our loving Father is with us as we look at our sin, we also trust him to protect us from self-hatred or scrupulosity. He does not shame or condemn us. Unexpectedly, it is this prayer of our conscience that helps us to know God's forgiving love in a deeper way. We can stop feeling vaguely guilty and can have an honest conversation with God about what troubles him about our lives. Then we can go forward with a clean conscience and pure heart.

In summary, the prayer of examen trains the "eyes of our heart" to see God, and it gives God space to show us the ways he is inviting us to grow: to overcome our sin nature and to produce the fruit of his Spirit in our hearts—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control.⁴ To attempt this practice, please find a quiet space where you will have at least ten minutes of uninterrupted solitude. Take a breath and exhale, turning your thoughts to God who is with you. When you are ready, please follow the following pattern in your prayers.

A Prayer of Examen

WELCOME

"He is not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being.'"
(Acts 17:28)

Father, thank you for this day that you have made and that I am alive in it with you. Thank you for these quite moments. I am grateful that you are always with me, and I welcome your presence. Please enlighten the eyes of my heart that I may see where and how you have been with me and how you want to shape me.

THANK YOU

"Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights," (James 1:17)

Father, please go with me as I review the past day (or week). What gifts from you did I receive? Where did you show me your goodness, beauty, or mercy? When did you speak to me—In my heart? Through your word? Through another person? What are you inviting me to?

Take time to thank God for each of these ways he has helped you to discern his presence.

⁴ Gal 5:22

Father, you are, “the love behind all love, the joy behind all joy, the beauty behind all beauty.”⁵ Thank you for helping me to see and perceive you. I love you.

PLEASE FORGIVE ME

“Wash me, and I shall be whiter than snow,” (Psalm 51:7).

Father, thank you that you love me too much to let me continue in paths of sin. Please show me, in the last period of time, when did I ignore you, shut you out, or fail to love you or my neighbor?

If you have noticed any ways that you were closed off to or even working against the goodness and presence of God, please take a few moments now to ask for his forgiveness.

Consider, is there something you feel prompted to repair or commit to do differently in light of what you have seen?

Father, thank you that you are gracious and kind, overflowing with steadfast love and mercy. Thank you that if we confess our sins, you are faithful to forgive us. (1 John 1:9). I trust you have forgiven me, and I am so thankful. I love you. Please change me from the inside out to be more like you.

BE WITH ME

“Give us this day our daily bread,” (Matt 6:11).

Look ahead at your coming day (or week). What do you anticipate?

Ask the Lord to be with you in all that this day holds for you—each meeting, chore, trip, etc.

Father, please help me to stay in step with you in this coming day. Please be in me and all around me and help me to be aware of your nearness. You are my Lord and my life, and I love you. Amen.

HELPFUL VERSES

Matthew 28:20

“I am with you always, to the end of the age.”

Psalms 139:23-24

“Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. Point out anything that offends you, and lead me along the path of everlasting life.”

Psalms 51:7

“Purify me from my sins, and I will be clean; wash me, and I will be whiter than snow.”

James 1:17

“Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights.”

2 Timothy 2:22

⁵ Michael Reeves, *Delighting in the Trinity*, p. 62.

“Flee youthful passions and pursue righteousness, faith, love, and peace, along with those who call upon the Lord from a pure heart.”

2 Corinthians 3:18

“And we all, with unveiled faces, beholding the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from one degree of glory to another.”

Matthew 6:22-23, MSG

“Your eyes are windows into your body. If you open your eyes in wonder and belief, your body fill us up with light. If you live squinty-eyed in greed and distrust, your body is a musty cellar. If you pull the blinds on your windows, what a dark life you will have!”

INTERESTING QUOTES

“Prayer is the inner bath of love into which the soul plunges itself.” — St John Vianney

“The triune God is the love behind all love, the life behind all life, the music behind all music, the beauty behind all beauty and the joy behind all joy. In other words, in the triune God is a God we can heartily enjoy—and enjoy in an through his creation.” — Michael Reeves

“Earth’s crammed with heaven,
And every common bush afire with God;
But only he who sees, takes off his shoes—
The rest sit round it and pluck blackberries.”
—Elizabeth Barrett Browning

“The prayer of examine produces in us the priceless grace of self-knowledge,” Richard Foster.
“An unexamined life is not worth living.” —Socrates

“Your prayer must be turned inwards, not towards a God of Heaven nor towards a God far off, but towards God who is closer to you than you are aware.” —Anthony Bloom

SMALL GROUP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Before you try this practice:

1. Have you ever tried to pray the prayer of examen before? If so, how did you find it?
2. If you have any rhythms of confession, what is most helpful to you?
3. If you have any practices of gratitude, how do they help you?
4. What intrigues you about this practice?
5. What do you think you might find challenging about this practice?
6. Ask someone pray for your group as you head out to give this practice a try. Try to find time to do the prayer of *examen* three times a week until you meet again.

After you have tried this practice:

1. What were your experiences with this practice?
1. What did you discover about God's presence in your life?
2. What did you discover about the practice of confession?
3. What did you enjoy and what did you find challenging about this practice?
4. How do you think you might engage this practice going forward?