

142: Daily Examen

Life is lived forward but understood backward. (Soren Kierkegaard, *Early Polemical Writings, Volume One*)

We understand things rightly and well when we understand them over time. (attributed to Henry David Thoreau)

A DETOUR TO ESTABLISH SOME PERSPECTIVE

I want to take a short detour before I talk about the Prayer of Examen.

I have a fondness (I have to use that word) for Kierkegaard's delightful and profound observation, "*Life is lived forward but understood backward.*" It was more than twenty years ago that I was introduced to this Kierkegaardian insight. In the moment and on the spot, we rarely understand the depth or significance of what is happening in and around us. It is only later, with the retrospective backward look, that we move into a deeper understanding. That is just so true . . . and so helpful! I am now quite comfortable with the reality that in the moment, I am really not going to understand things the way God wants me to. Time is needed to gain experience and perspective. Then, some years later, I came across this little gem from Thoreau that affirms and develops Kierkegaard's thought. "*We understand things rightly and well when we understand them over time.*" (Note: I no longer have the source of this quote. As I have searched for it, I believe it is a paraphrase/collation of several thoughts from Thoreau and not an actual quote.)

Any moment is only part of an experience. When any event happens, the event is not complete. Reality is always unfolding and developing. Becoming . . . is the nature of existence. Therefore, when anything happens, it is only the beginning, or the next advancing of something much greater, much bigger and ultimately beautifully integrated into the purposes of God. God is always doing new things. He is always planting seeds that will grow as the time is right. There is always more to come, more that is coming your way, more that is "be-coming." This is truly exciting.

So, something happens. Something has been estab-

lished and launched. Now it must continue. It will have repercussions, implications and manifestations. You will react, respond and interact with what has happened. As you do this, the thing that has happened advances, it changes, it is impacted by your response. Life, existence is not a static thing. It is fluid, dynamic, evolving, growing . . . and you are a part of this.

When my son was young, he enjoyed reading the series of stories by Lemony Snicket titled, *A Series of Unfortunate Events*. It turns out that all sorts of unfortunate events happened to the Baudelaire children after their parents died in an arson created fire. It turns out that everything is connected – somehow. There is an interconnectedness that ties everything together. When something happens, it starts something else in motion. The children are a part of this series of events.

This is life and this is your life. Everything is connected. Nothing is finished. Process is always at work. And the further you move into the future, then, with a careful backward look, you are able to make greater sense and find deeper meaning concerning the events and experiences of life. This is exactly what happened in the life of Joseph (Genesis 37-50). His life seems to be a constant series of unfortunate events. Yet, in Genesis 50:19-20, Joseph has come to a profound perspective. He says about all the evil that was done to him and all the suffering he endured, "*You intended to harm me, but God intended it for good to accomplish what is now being done, the saving of many lives.*"

Joseph has spent decades living forward and now understands the meaning of his life as he looks backward over those long years. He has come to understand things rightly and well because of the perspective of time marching on and deep reflection as the years have gone by. Above all, he has come to understand the

purposes of God that were always unfolding, even if, in many moments, they could not be discerned. And, he has responded with loving obedience to the ways of God, even when they didn't make sense. Now they do!

A RUMMAGING AROUND KIND OF PRAYER

An Examen is for the purpose of slowing down, reflecting, assessing, discovering and discerning meaning. Life happens. It happens on a daily basis. A lot of life happens quickly and speeds on and we are too busy and distracted to live in those moments. The reality is that our lives / days are busy, noisy, fast paced, frequently interrupted and during that time we often miss what God is doing in all those moments. We miss the fact that God is with us, working, loving, speaking, guiding, empowering and changing the world according to his ultimate purpose.

But . . . we don't experience the Presence, Work and Word of God that was with us in those moments. We don't rightly and well understand what is going on. We don't even recognize much of what is going on. There is just too much going on and we are too distracted.

An Examen is a time to "rummage" back through one's day (or week or longer), looking for the signs of God's full engagement with our lives. It is a backward look at, retrospective rummaging, a reflective ruminating over our experiences, our emotions and affections and our responses to it all. And then to ask – God where were you in these things, what were you doing, what were you saying and what response are you asking of me?

As we do this rummaging, ruminating, reflecting work over time, we begin to understand rightly and experience well the life God has for us.

THE PRAYER ITSELF

The Daily Examen is a prayer approach that was around before Ignatius, but Ignatius made it a central approach in his *Spiritual Exercises*. The Daily Examen is virtually associated with his name. There is some discussion (debate) as how to best interpret the Ignatian Examen. Ignatius gives rather complete instruction on how to do this examination in Annotations #24 – 43. What is significant in this form of prayer is how Ignatius begins his focus on dealing with sin (Week One). Ignatius calls

it *Daily Particular Examination of Conscience* (#24) and applies it carefully to recognizing sin, resisting sin and repenting from sin. He recommends it to be practiced three times during the day (#24-26).

He then goes on to explain what he calls General Examination of Conscience (#32). "The purpose of this examination of conscience is to purify the soul and to aid us to improve our confessions." As he continues to explain this examination, it is quite clear that the focus is on personal sinfulness and a growing awareness of one's sin, so one may then move into the appropriate spiritual responses of confession and repentance for the purifying of your life.

Ignatius concludes his discussion with a final Annotation #43 which he calls, *Method of Making the General Examination of Conscience*. Here he provides a five-step process, which is briefly described. It is this five-step process that is the essence of the Daily Examen in most discussions. The question is to refer to it as an examination of conscience, which Ignatius clearly does since the focus is heavily on sin in Annotations #24 – 42; or to call it an examination of consciousness (the larger awareness of all that is going on in one's life and experience) which is what Annotation #43 teaches?

I certainly pay close attention to the emphasis Ignatius has on self-awareness about personal sin and this is included in the five-step process, but the Examen is also much broader and encompassing than sin. It truly is a general examination, a searching out, a noticing of all that is going on in your life. It is a prayer that is designed to help you pay attention to the daily presence, work and Word of God that is with you at all times.

The Examen is above all, an end of day prayer that seeks to create and instill awareness of presence, work and Word, after the fact. In other words, it is a Kierkegaardian backward look – every day. As you continue to practice the Prayer of Examen, you accumulate awareness, perspective and insight about the presence, work and Word of God in your life. Here is a slightly modified form of Examen.

Focused Prayer. Begin with a few minutes of focusing prayer to center on God. Draw close to him, long for him.

Gratitude. Now review the day and recognize the “gifts” God gave to you during the day. Be grateful, thankful, appreciative (large hearted) toward God for his grace and generosity, for his providential care. Rejoice and be glad. I will often jot down the things for which I am grateful. I just make a list and put on it all sorts of things that I normally take for granted.

Examination and Reflection. Now you move into the major rummaging around for presence, work and Word. What was God doing, where was God at work, what was God saying during and through all the many events, episodes, conversations, activities, relational encounters, etc. of your day. Every day has hundreds of such “episodes.” You go rummaging through them, paying attention to ones that seem more important. You think about each one that you identify as important and in prayer reflect on how God was there, how God was working and what he wants to say to you NOW about THEN. I will often make a list of my rummaging discoveries. It may have five things or twenty-five items on it. Then, I begin to think about certain items. I reflect and pray as I am led about these things. I write as much as I desire. Sometimes I write a lot, other times not at all.

Confession. Some of what is discovered during the rummaging is what has gone wrong in my life. Now is the time for confession and repentance. This is the time of longing for grace and forgiveness.

Decision and Response. Finally, in your Examen you make decisions to amend things for tomorrow. This is the time of quiet and sincere resolve to be with God tomorrow in love and obedience. This is also your hopeful anticipation of the next day the Lord will give you.

All this is done in the spirit of prayer. The entire Examen is a prayer.

First: Give thanks to God for favors received from him.
Second: Ask for the grace necessary to know sin and to be rid of them.
Third: Do a complete account of your soul (heart) for all that has transpired during the day.
Fourth: Ask forgiveness from God.
Fifth: Resolve and make amends for tomorrow, all by God’s grace.

Figure #22: The Ignatian Examen (Annotation #43)

SOME PRACTICAL SUGGESIONS

Usually an Examen is done at the end of the day. Depending on one’s daily rhythms, some people do their Examen early in the morning, about the previous day.

Ignatius counseled a mid-day Examen as well as an end of day Examen. The mid-day Examen was to help the Jesuits become more skilled in paying attention to God’s presence, work and Word – in the moment and on the spot.

One of the great benefits of doing an Examen regularly is that at some point you realize that you are now noticing and discerning the presence, work and Word of God in the moment and on the spot and you are able to respond more promptly. This is what Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection referred to as “practicing the presence of God.” It is the immediate and constant awareness and attentiveness to God who is with you. It helps you move into a God-saturated way of life. This is a God soaked world and we are invited to discover and find him everywhere. He is not an occasional visitor to his planet.

It is also useful to do Examens that cover a longer period of time. Some people do an end of the week Examen, taking a longer time to reflect back over an entire week.

Some people do Examens after a special amount of time. I almost always do an Examen on the plane ride back from an overseas trip. During those overseas trips, I find that I am often out of my normal rhythms and may miss what God is doing. So I go rummaging and searching, pondering and discerning about the entire trip during my Plane Ride Examen. I will often journal for a few hours during this time.

I usually do a brief Examen very early morning on the days I meet with my spiritual friends. I do this in preparation for my time of sharing with them.

I also do an "End-of-Year" Examen. This is actually a bigger project for me. I do an assessment of the entire

year. I do this in light of my plans and dreams for the past year. I do this in preparation for envisioning the new year just ahead and what my desires and plans are for the new year. I've always done this kind of assessment, but now it takes on a much more spiritual, prayerful flavor.

There is certainly real benefit from these "bigger picture" Examens. What is most important is that you find some forms and times that work for you. As time goes by, you will be understanding, through the retrospective look, the life you are living. You will understand life rightly and well as you understand them over time. You will be able to rejoice knowing that God is causing all things to work together for your good (Romans 8:28). You will be able to fully align your ways with the plans of God.



Reflection Pause

The need is to practice the Daily Examen. I recommend that you spend the next week, as many days as you can, doing an end of the day Examen. Set aside 10-15 minutes of time later in the evening. Do it before you are too sleepy. Then, following the suggested guideline, just practice the prayer. I do encourage you to use a journal initially, so you can stay focused and pay more attention to the prayer and to your experience of this prayer.

Be intentional about frequent practice for a week or so. Then you will have to determine if this is a spiritual formation pathway God is inviting you to use on a regular basis.

❖ My Take-Away Is...