

The Practice of Examen

The practice of examen has numbered among many spiritual disciplines for centuries but is relatively new to those in the protestant or reformed traditions. It is a discipline which, when practiced on a regular basis, can deepen one's faith and relationship with God and help one discern the presence of God.

Marjorie Thompson in her book entitled *Soul Feast* encourages the practice of examen as a two step process in which the participant asks probing questions about the day just experienced. The process may be done meditatively, through journaling, with a friend or partner, in a family or intimate small group setting. Reflecting on the probing questions may lead to insight about oneself, God, creation, and/or others. It can be transformative leading to a deeper capacity to live in faithful relationship with God and God's creation. It is helpful to allow about fifteen minutes each day (or less) for this reflection. As one asks these questions, one is to be attentive to the presence of God in the reflection time. Note: Longer periods of time may be set aside to examine longer parts on one's life.

Step One: Consolation affirms God's love for us (M. Thompson) and that God's love is alive and at work in our lives. Note that this beginning point is affirming. The consolation question to ask is: When did I sense the presence of God today? Other ways of asking this question are:

- For what moments am I most grateful?
- When did I feel most alive?
- When was I the happiest?
- What was the high point?
- When was I most energized?
- When did I feel the presence of love?

As you reflect and respond to these questions, you are invited to accept the responses as the goodness of God in your life and affirm God's presence in your day. Be honest and stay with this reflection before moving too quickly to the second part. Example of my consolation: Today I received the good news of a friend's successful heart transplant, of a lost child being found after months of absence, of a man on death row being spared for now. It was stirring to connect with so much goodness in one otherwise challenging day.

Step 2: Desolation speaks to our human weakness and our brokenness in relation to God. This may be confessional in nature. The desolation question is: When did I feel most cut off from God or when did I shut God out? Other ways of asking this question are:

- For what moments am I least grateful?
- When was I the saddest?
- What was the low point?
- When did I feel energy draining out of me?
- When was I anxious?

Reflect on these questions and try to sort things out. Look for learnings, connects, “aha” awarenesses. You may wish to ponder how you might do things differently in the future. Example of my desolation: Today I got anxious about the issue of money. I felt the absence of God in the talk of war. I am sorry for having offended a friend quite unintentionally. And I let these things cause me to lose focus on the loving presence of God even when things get difficult. I invite and encourage you to take the time to practice the discipline of examen. I think we so want to experience God in our lives but get too busy to take the time to acknowledge this presence on a daily basis. This may be a time to “Let go and let God.” This may also be a time for us to claim the words of the song for ourselves: “Let there be peace on earth, and let it begin with me.”

Resources helpful in the practice of the spiritual discipline of examen:

Marjorie Thompson, *Soul Feast*

Dorothy C. Bass, *Practicing the Faith*

Richard Foster, *Prayer*