THE DAILY BREAD

The Acts of the Apostles



The Daily Examen

A FORMATION BOOK BY

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The Everyday Apostle

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Prayer, Beyond Listening

The Daily Examen

Finding God in the Day You Just Lived

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A Daily Bread Formation Book

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INTRODUCTION

The Prayer Men Actually Keep

There is a strange fact about the practice this book describes: it is the one prayer men tend to keep. A man will try many things in his spiritual life and abandon most of them. He will start reading the Bible and stop. He will attempt silent prayer and give up, convinced he is doing it wrong. He will resolve to pray the Rosary daily and lose the thread within a week. But when a man learns the Daily Examen, and actually gives it a fair trial, something different tends to happen. He keeps doing it. Years later he is still doing it. It has become the spine of his day.

Why? Because the Examen delivers something a man can feel almost immediately, and because it asks so little. It takes five to fifteen minutes. It requires no special conditions, no perfect silence, no elaborate setup. It can be done in a parked car, in bed before sleep, on a walk. And it produces, quickly, a result a man notices: he begins to see his own life differently. He begins to catch God at work in the ordinary hours, hours he had been sleepwalking through. The fog of the undifferentiated day begins to resolve into a pattern, and in that pattern, he starts to see the hand of God.

Search me, O God, and know my heart. Try me and know my thoughts. — Psalm 139:23

The Daily Examen comes from Saint Ignatius of Loyola, the sixteenth-century soldier turned mystic who founded the Jesuits and gave the Church one of its greatest schools of prayer. Ignatius considered the Examen so important that he told his men, if they ever had to drop everything else in their prayer life, this was the one thing they must never drop. That is a startling instruction from a man who prayed for hours a day. Of all the prayer he knew, the Examen was the one he would not let go. This book is about why, and about how to do it.

We should be clear at the outset about what the Examen is and is not, because it is widely misunderstood, even by devout Catholics. The Examen is not an examination of conscience. It is not a nightly inventory of your sins, a checklist of the ways you fell short before you go to sleep. There is a place for the examination of conscience, and this library contains resources for it, but that is a different practice with a different purpose, aimed at preparing for Confession. The Daily Examen is something larger and, frankly, more beautiful. It is a daily practice of reviewing your life with God in order to find him in it, to notice where he was present, how he was moving, and how you responded. Sin is part of

it, but sin is not the point. The point is God, and learning to see him in the fabric of an ordinary day.

The aim of this book is that you close it able to pray the Examen tonight, and that you become, over time, the kind of man who keeps it, until it becomes what it became for Ignatius: the one prayer you would never give up.

Because the distinction matters so much, hold it clearly from the start in a single contrast. The examination of conscience asks: what did I do wrong today that I need to confess? It looks for sins. The Daily Examen asks: where was God today, and how did I respond to him? It looks for God. The first is a moral inventory in preparation for the sacrament of mercy, and it is good and necessary. The second is a daily contemplative prayer of loving attention, in which noticing your sin is one small part of a much larger looking for God in the fabric of your life. A man might use the examination of conscience a dozen times a year before Confession, and pray the Examen every night of his life, and the two would strengthen each other without overlapping, because the nightly practice of finding God makes the occasional reckoning with sin far more honest and specific. Keep the contrast in mind as you read, because the single greatest way to misunderstand this book would be to reduce the Examen to a nightly hunt for your failures. It is the opposite. It is a nightly hunt for God.

CHAPTER ONE

The Problem the Examen Solves

The Unexamined Day

To understand why the Examen matters, you have to see the problem it addresses, and the problem is so pervasive that most men have stopped noticing it. The problem is that we sleepwalk through our own lives.

The Days That Blur

Ask a man on Friday what happened on Tuesday and he often cannot tell you. The days blur. They pass in a kind of fog, one bleeding into the next, consumed by tasks and screens and the low hum of distraction, and at the end of them a man can genuinely not say what he lived through. He was there, technically. His body moved through the hours. But he was not present to them. He was somewhere else, in his head, in the next thing, in the phone, and the day he was actually living slipped past unattended and unremembered. Multiply this across a life and the sum is frightening: a man can arrive at

the end of years having been physically present for all of them and truly present for almost none, having sleepwalked through the one life he was given.

This is not a small problem. It is, in a real sense, the modern spiritual problem, the condition the enemy of the soul most wants to cultivate, because a man who is not present to his life is not present to the God who is in it. God does not mostly speak in dramatic interventions. He speaks in the texture of ordinary days, in the movements of the heart, in the quiet promptings and the small consolations and the subtle pulls in one direction or another. And a man who sleepwalks through his days misses all of it. God is speaking, constantly, in the fabric of his life, and he is not there to hear it.

This is worth pressing on, because it corrects a false picture of how God communicates that keeps many men from ever expecting to hear him. Many men imagine that if God were going to speak, it would be dramatic: a voice, a vision, an unmistakable sign, the sky opening. And because that almost never happens to them, they conclude God does not speak to them at all. But this is to look for God in the one place he is least likely to be found. The Scriptures themselves correct the expectation. When the prophet Elijah waited for God on the mountain, God was not in the great wind that tore the rocks, nor in the earthquake, nor in the fire. He was in a still, small voice, a sound of sheer silence, a whisper. God's ordinary way of communicating is not the thunderclap but the whisper, the gentle movement of the heart, the quiet consolation, the subtle prompting, the peace that settles on the right path and the unease that warns off the wrong one. These are easy to miss, precisely because they are quiet, and a man barreling through his day at full speed will miss them every time. The Examen is the practice of slowing down enough, at the end of the day, to catch the whispers he was moving too fast to hear while they came.

And after the fire a still small voice. — 1 Kings 19:12

The Lord was in this place, and I did not know it. — Genesis 28:16

The Examen Wakes You Up

That verse is Jacob's, spoken after he woke from the dream of the ladder to heaven. The Lord was in this place, and I did not know it. It is the confession of a man who slept through an encounter with God and only realized afterward what he had been in the presence of. And it is the exact condition the Examen is designed to heal. The Examen is the practice of going back over the day you just lived and asking: where was God in this that I did not notice at the time? It is a daily waking up, a daily recovery of the presence you slept through while it was happening. You cannot be perfectly present to every moment as it passes; no one can. But you can go back, at the end of the day, and find the God who was there the whole time, and in finding him in yesterday, you slowly become

more able to notice him in today. The Examen trains presence. It takes the sleepwalking man and, night by night, wakes him up to the God who was in this place all along.

CHAPTER TWO

The Soldier Who Learned to Notice

Where the Examen Came From

The Examen did not come from a scholar in a library. It came from a soldier lying in a sickbed with a shattered leg, and knowing that story helps you understand what the practice actually is.

The Cannonball

Ignatius of Loyola was, in his youth, exactly the kind of man who would have had no interest in a book like this. He was a soldier, ambitious, vain, hungry for glory and for the admiration of women, a man whose imagination ran on dreams of military valor and romantic conquest. And then, in a battle, a cannonball shattered his leg, and he was carried home to a long and painful convalescence that would change the history of the Church. Bedridden for months, bored, he asked for the romantic adventure novels he loved. There were none in the house. The only books available were a life of Christ and a collection of lives of the saints. With nothing else to do, he read them.

The Discovery

And here Ignatius made the discovery that would become the foundation of his entire spiritual teaching, and the root of the Examen. As he lay there, his mind would wander in two directions. Sometimes he would daydream about the worldly glory he had always wanted, the battles he would win, the woman he would impress. And sometimes he would daydream about doing what the saints had done, about serving God with the same total dedication he had once given to his military ambitions. Both kinds of daydream were pleasant in the moment. But Ignatius, with nothing else to occupy him, began to notice something. After the daydreams of worldly glory, he felt, once they faded, dry and dissatisfied and empty. But after the daydreams of serving God, he felt, even after they faded, a lasting peace, a joy that stayed.

You will know them by their fruits. — Matthew 7:16

This was the discovery: that the movements of his interior life, the pulls and stirrings of his heart, were not random, and that they could be read. Some interior movements led

toward God and left a lasting peace in their wake; others led away from God and left emptiness. By paying attention to the fruit, to how he actually felt after, Ignatius learned to tell the difference. This is the birth of what he called the discernment of spirits, and the Examen is its daily practice. The whole thing began with a bored soldier noticing the aftertaste of his own daydreams. It is worth remembering, when the Examen feels too simple to matter, that the entire Ignatian tradition of discernment, which has guided the Church for five centuries, grew from one man paying honest attention to the movements of his own heart. That attention is exactly what the Examen trains, and it is available to you as it was to him.

From Soldier to Founder

What Ignatius did with that discovery is the reason we have the Examen at all. He recovered from his wound a changed man, gave up his military ambitions, and spent years in prayer, study, and the deepening of what he had begun to learn on his sickbed. Out of that came the Spiritual Exercises, a structured retreat that has formed saints and ordinary Christians for five hundred years, and out of it came the Society of Jesus, the Jesuits, an order that would reach around the world. At the center of the whole Ignatian way of prayer sits the Examen, the daily practice of the attention Ignatius first paid to his own daydreams. He built an entire spirituality on the conviction that God can be found in all things, in the whole texture of an ordinary life, and that a man can learn to find him there by paying attention to the movements of his heart. The Examen is the daily discipline of that finding. It is the practice by which the extraordinary claim, that God is present and speaking in your ordinary Tuesday, becomes a lived and tested reality rather than a pious sentiment. Ignatius staked his life on that claim, and the Examen is how he checked it, every day, and found it true.

CHAPTER THREE

The Five Movements

The Shape of the Prayer

The Examen has a classic five-part shape, drawn from Ignatius, and while there are many variations, this structure is the trunk from which they all branch. We will walk through all five here in overview, then give each its own fuller treatment in the chapters that follow. Do not be intimidated by five steps. The whole thing takes ten minutes and, once learned, flows naturally from one movement to the next. Here is the shape.

1. Presence

You begin by becoming aware that you are in the presence of God. Before reviewing anything, you remember who you are with. You are not conducting a private psychological review of your day. You are sitting down with God to look at the day together. This first movement, brief as it is, changes everything about what follows, because it means the entire review happens in his presence, with him, rather than alone in your own head.

2. Gratitude

You review the day looking first for what you are grateful for. Before anything else, before any examination of failure, you look back over the hours and notice the gifts, the good things, the graces, large and small. This is not incidental. Ignatius put gratitude first, before the examination of sin, deliberately, because gratitude is the soil in which everything else grows, and because a review that begins with what God gave you is a fundamentally different thing from a review that begins with what you did wrong.

3. Review

You walk back through the day, hour by hour or moment by moment, paying attention to the movements of your heart. Where did you feel drawn toward God, toward love, toward peace, toward life? Where did you feel pulled away, toward anxiety, toward selfishness, toward the things that leave you empty? You are not primarily cataloguing actions. You are noticing the interior movements, the pulls and stirrings, learning to read them the way Ignatius learned to read his daydreams.

4. Response

Out of the review, one thing usually rises as most significant, the moment that most needs your attention. It might be a failure you need to bring to God in sorrow. It might be a grace you need to thank him for. It might be a wound that needs healing or a pattern you are finally seeing. You respond to God about that one thing, honestly, in whatever way it calls for: sorrow, gratitude, petition, praise.

5. Tomorrow

Finally, you look ahead to the coming day. You ask God for what you will need, you resolve where you sense you are being called to grow, and you step into tomorrow with hope, having handed today back to God. The Examen ends not in the past but facing forward, into the day to come, carried by the God you have just spent time with.

Those are the five movements: Presence, Gratitude, Review, Response, Tomorrow. Learn them as a rhythm and they become second nature. Now let us go deeper into each, because the richness of the Examen is in how each movement is prayed.

Many Forms, One Prayer

It is worth knowing that the Examen is flexible, and that over five centuries it has taken many forms while keeping its essential shape. There is the classic five-movement Examen we have just outlined. There is a simpler two-question version, sometimes called the consciousness examen, that asks only: for what am I most grateful today, and for what am I least grateful? That single pair of questions, prayed honestly, contains the whole practice in miniature and is a fine way to begin. There are thematic Examens that review the day through a single lens, God's mercy, or one's use of time, or one's love of others. There is the relational Examen a couple can pray together, or a family, reviewing the day as a household. There are Examens shaped around a particular grace a man is seeking or a particular struggle he is fighting. All of these are the same prayer wearing different clothes. The five movements are the trunk; these are branches. Learn the trunk first, pray it until it is natural, and then, if you wish, adapt it to your own life and season. The Examen is not a rigid formula to execute but a living prayer to inhabit, and Ignatius himself expected men to adapt it. What matters is not which version you pray but that you pray it, faithfully, finding God in your days.

CHAPTER FOUR

Presence and Gratitude

The Two Movements That Change Everything

The first two movements, presence and gratitude, are the ones most often rushed or skipped, and they are the ones that make the difference between an Examen that is prayer and a review that is mere self-analysis. Give them their weight.

Beginning in His Presence

The Examen is prayer, which means it is done with God and not merely about your day. So you begin by turning to him. You take a breath, you settle, and you remember that you are not alone, that God is present, that he has been present all day, and that you are about to look back over the day with him, at his side, seeing it through his eyes as much as you can. Some men find it helps to ask the Holy Spirit for light here, to ask God to help them see the day truly, because our own view of our day is partial and often distorted,

and we need his light to see it as it really was. This first movement is short, a minute or less, but it is the hinge on which the whole prayer turns. Skip it, and you are just reviewing your day by yourself. Pray it, and God is in the room, looking back over the hours with you.

In your light do we see light. — Psalm 36:9

Why Gratitude Comes First

Then, before anything else, gratitude. This ordering is one of the most important and most overlooked features of the Examen. Ignatius did not begin with the examination of failure. He began with thanksgiving. You look back over the day and you notice, specifically, what there was to be grateful for. Not in a general way, not a vague acknowledgment that you are blessed, but specifically: this particular conversation, that moment of unexpected beauty, the meal, the work that went well, the kindness someone showed you, the small mercy you almost missed. You name the gifts of this actual day.

This matters for a reason that goes to the heart of the spiritual life. A man's default vision of his day, especially a tired man at the end of it, skews negative. He remembers the frustrations, the failures, the things that went wrong, the person who annoyed him. Left to itself, memory files the day under its irritations. Gratitude is the deliberate correction of this distortion. It forces the eye back over the day looking for the good, and the good is always there, always more abundant than the tired mind first recalls. And in naming the good, a man does two things at once: he thanks the God who gave it, and he trains himself to see his life as fundamentally gift rather than fundamentally burden. Over time, a man who begins each Examen with gratitude becomes a grateful man, and a grateful man is a fundamentally different creature from an ungrateful one, more joyful, more generous, more alive, more able to see God. This is why gratitude comes first. It is not a warm-up. It is a reorientation of the whole soul toward the truth that everything is gift.

Even on the Hard Days

On the hard days, the days that were genuinely difficult, gratitude is harder and more important. There will be days when little seems worth thanking God for, when the review of gifts feels forced. Do it anyway, and look harder, because even on the worst days there is something: that you were not alone, that a small kindness came, that you made it through, that God was present even in the difficulty. The gratitude practiced on the hard day is worth more than the gratitude of the easy day, because it is the deliberate act of trust that insists God is good and present even when the day did not feel like it. Do not skip gratitude on the hard days. Those are the days it does its deepest work.

Gratitude Makes a Different Man

It is worth dwelling on what the daily practice of gratitude does to a man over time, because it is one of the most underestimated forces in the spiritual life. A man's habitual disposition, the settled attitude he carries toward his own existence, is not fixed. It is formed, slowly, by what he repeatedly attends to. The man who attends daily to grievances becomes a grievance collector, a man whose default reading of his life is what he lacks and who has wronged him. The man who attends daily to gifts becomes a grateful man, whose default reading of his life is abundance and mercy. These are not just different moods. They are different men, living in what amount to different worlds, though the external facts of their lives may be identical. The Examen, by placing gratitude first every single night, is quietly and relentlessly forming the second kind of man. Night after night, it turns the attention to the gifts, until gratitude becomes not an exercise but a disposition, a way of seeing that a man carries into his days. And a grateful man is closer to God, because gratitude is the truest response to reality, which is that everything, every breath and every good thing, is gift. The daily gratitude of the Examen is, over years, one of the most powerful means of transformation available to a man, hiding in plain sight inside a ten-minute prayer.

CHAPTER FIVE

Reviewing the Day

Reading the Movements of the Heart

The central movement of the Examen is the review, and here is where the practice becomes something more than a nice habit of counting blessings. Here is where you learn to read your own interior life, and through it, to find God.

Not Actions, But Movements

The instinct, when you review your day, is to review your actions: what you did, what you accomplished, what you got wrong. But the Ignatian review goes deeper than actions to the movements underneath them, the interior stirrings, the pulls of the heart. As you walk back through the day, you are asking not mainly what did I do, but what was moving in me. Where did I feel drawn toward God, toward peace, toward love, toward generosity, toward life? These movements Ignatius called consolation, the interior pull toward God and the good. And where did I feel pulled the other way, toward anxiety, resentment, selfishness, the closing-in on myself, the things that promise satisfaction and leave emptiness? These he called desolation, the pull away from God. The review is the practice

of noticing these movements across the day, learning, like Ignatius on his sickbed, to feel the difference between the stirrings that lead toward God and those that lead away.

I have set before you life and death. Therefore choose life. — Deuteronomy 30:19

Walking Through the Hours

Practically, you walk back through the day in order, from waking to now, letting it replay. You do not have to reconstruct every minute; you let the day come back to you and you notice where the significant movements were. Here, in the morning, you felt a pull of anxiety, and you notice now how it colored the hours that followed. Here, at midday, an unexpected peace, a moment when something in you turned toward God, and you had rushed past it at the time. Here, in the afternoon, a flash of anger, and underneath it, you now see, a wounded pride. Here, in the evening, a genuine consolation, a moment of love or gratitude or rightness that you now recognize as God's presence. You are not judging yet, not fixing, just noticing, letting the day reveal its interior shape, learning where the currents were pulling you toward God and where away.

Where God Was Speaking

This is the heart of it, and the reason the Examen is not mere self-analysis but genuine prayer. As you learn to read these movements, you are learning to recognize how God speaks. Because God speaks through the movements of the heart. The consolations, the pulls toward love and peace and life, are, very often, God drawing you. The desolations, when you learn to read them, reveal where you were being pulled away from him, and by what. The man who reviews his days this way, night after night, is slowly learning the language in which God communicates with him, the subtle vocabulary of interior movement, and this learning is the foundation of all discernment. There is a companion book in this library on the discernment of spirits that develops this at length, the fuller art of telling God's movements from the enemy's. The Examen is the daily training ground for that art. Every night, in the review, you are practicing the recognition that discernment depends on, learning by daily repetition to feel the difference between the stirrings that come from God and those that do not. Do the Examen faithfully for a year and you will find you have become, without quite noticing it, a man who can read the movements of his own heart, which is to say, a man who can hear God.

A Worked Review

Let a single evening's review show how this actually goes. A man sits down at the end of an ordinary Tuesday. He settles, remembers God is with him, gives thanks for a few things, the good coffee, a text from his son, a problem at work that resolved. Then he

walks back through the day. He remembers the morning, and notices that he woke already anxious, reaching for his phone before he was even fully awake, and he sees now how that reaching set an anxious, scattered tone that followed him for hours. A movement away from God, though he had not named it at the time. He remembers a moment mid-morning when a colleague was struggling and he stopped to help, and he recalls a small warmth in it, a rightness; a movement toward God, unnoticed in the moment. He remembers snapping at someone after lunch, and underneath the irritation he now sees, in the light of prayer, a wounded pride, a need to be right that had been building all day. He remembers a few minutes in the late afternoon, walking to his car, when the light was low and gold and something in him quieted and lifted, a consolation he had rushed past, that he now recognizes as God's presence brushing against him. And he remembers the evening with his family, distracted, half-present, the phone in his hand again. As he reviews, a shape emerges: the phone, the anxious reaching, the scattered half-presence, a thread running through the whole day, pulling him out of the moment and away from the people in front of him. That is the one thing. He did not go looking for it; the review surfaced it. Now he knows what to bring to God. This is how the review works: not a grim audit, but an honest walk back through the hours with God, until the day reveals its own interior shape and shows him where God was and where he was being pulled away.

CHAPTER SIX

Response and Tomorrow

Where the Prayer Lands and Leans

The final two movements bring the Examen to its point. Having reviewed the day, you respond to what you found, and then you turn toward the day to come. These movements keep the Examen from being a mere retrospective and make it a living conversation that shapes the future.

Responding to the One Thing

Out of the review, something usually stands out, one moment or movement that carries the most weight, that God seems to be drawing your attention to. You do not have to respond to everything you noticed. You respond to the one thing that matters most today. And your response takes whatever form that one thing calls for. If it was a failure, a moment you turned away from God or wounded someone or gave in to what you knew was wrong, you bring it to God in honest sorrow, and you receive his mercy, and if it is

grave you resolve to bring it to Confession. This is where sin enters the Examen, and notice its place: not as the whole exercise, but as one possible response to one moment the review surfaced. If instead the one thing was a grace, a moment of unexpected consolation or gift, you respond in gratitude and let it deepen. If it was a wound, something that hurt you, you bring it to God for healing. If it was a pattern you are finally seeing, a recurring pull you had not noticed before, you name it to God and ask for help with it. The response is honest, personal, direct. You have looked at the day with God; now you speak to him about the part that mattered most.

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and renew a right spirit within me. — Psalm 51:10

Leaning Into Tomorrow

Then you turn forward. The Examen does not end in the past. It ends facing the day to come. You look ahead to tomorrow, or to the rest of today if you pray it at midday, and you ask God for what you will need. If the review surfaced a recurring struggle, you ask for grace against it tomorrow. If you see a challenge coming, a hard conversation, a temptation you know will arrive, a task you dread, you bring it to God now and ask for what you will need to meet it well. And you step into tomorrow with hope, not the anxious hope of a man relying on himself, but the settled hope of a man who has just spent time with God and is walking into the next day at his side. This forward-leaning close is part of why the Examen forms a man so effectively. Each night he not only reviews the day behind him but prepares the day ahead, handing it to God in advance, so that he walks into it already oriented toward God rather than sleepwalking into it as he might have before. The Examen ends where your life is actually lived: forward, in the day to come, with God.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Examen and the Big Decisions

How Daily Noticing Guides a Life

There is a fruit of the Examen that most men do not expect when they begin, and it is worth naming because it becomes, over time, one of the practice's greatest gifts. The daily habit of noticing the movements of the heart slowly makes a man able to discern the larger direction of his life, to sense where God is leading in the decisions that actually matter.

The Small Trains the Large

Consider what the Examen is training, night after night. It is training a man to notice, in the ordinary movements of an ordinary day, which stirrings lead him toward God and life and which lead him away toward emptiness. He learns the taste of consolation and the taste of desolation, the feel of the pull toward God and the pull away. This is exactly the skill that the big decisions of life require. When a man faces a genuine crossroads, a job, a move, a vocation, a major commitment, the question underneath it is always: which path leads toward God and the life he is calling me to, and which leads away? And the man who has spent years reading the small daily movements has developed precisely the sensitivity needed to read the larger ones. The Examen is discernment practiced in miniature every night, so that when the great discernments come, a man is not starting from scratch. He has been training for them, unknowingly, in the daily review, the way a musician who practices scales daily is ready when the concert comes.

I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go. — Psalm 32:8

Consolation and Desolation as Signposts

Ignatius taught that God tends to lead a man through consolation, the deep and lasting peace that accompanies movement in the right direction, while desolation, the persistent unease and emptiness, often marks movement away from God's call. This is not simplistic; a hard and holy path can be full of difficulty, and consolation is not the same as ease or pleasure. The consolation Ignatius meant is deeper, a settled rightness and peace at the core, even in the midst of difficulty, the kind of peace Ignatius himself felt after the daydreams of serving God, which stayed even after the daydream faded. And desolation is deeper than mere sadness; it is the dry, empty, restless pull away from God that lingers. The man who has learned through the Examen to distinguish these can bring them to his major decisions, noticing which option, prayed over and sat with, brings the deep peace that tends to mark God's leading, and which brings the persistent unease that often marks a wrong turn. This is the beginning of real discernment of God's will, and the companion book in this library on the discernment of spirits develops it fully. But it starts here, in the nightly Examen, in the daily practice of learning to read the movements that, in the great moments, will help a man find his way.

A Life That Can Be Read

Over years, something even larger happens. The man who reviews his days faithfully begins to see not only the shape of individual days but the shape of seasons, the longer patterns of where God has been leading him, the through-lines of grace across months and years. He can look back over a stretch of his life and see, as he could never see while sleepwalking through it, how God was at work, how the desolations were often leading

him away from dead ends and the consolations toward life, how the whole of it, even the hard parts, was being woven toward good. This is one of the deepest consolations available to a man of faith: to be able to read his own life, to see the hand of God in its unfolding, to trust that the God who has been leading all along is leading still. The Examen gives a man this. Night by night, it teaches him to read his days, until eventually he can read his life, and find God written through the whole of it.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Obstacles

What Stops Men, and What to Do

The Examen is simple, but simple is not the same as easy, and men run into predictable obstacles. Naming them in advance keeps you from quitting when they arrive.

Turning It Into a Guilt Session

The most common failure, by far, is the one we have been guarding against from the start: the Examen collapses into a nightly guilt session, a review of everything you did wrong, and a man ends each day feeling worse about himself. This is not the Examen. It is a distortion of it, and it is spiritually harmful, because it trains a man to end each day in self-condemnation, which is not from God. If you find your Examen has become a nightly indictment, return to the structure, and especially to gratitude. Remember that the review is about finding God, not primarily about finding fault, that sin is one part of the response and not the point of the whole, and that the God you are praying with looks on you with love, not with a prosecutor's eye. The Examen should leave you more aware of God's presence and mercy, not less. If it is consistently leaving you in despair, you are doing the enemy's work, not God's, and the fix is to recover the true shape of the prayer, which is soaked in gratitude and aimed at finding God.

There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus. — Romans 8:1

Forgetting to Do It

The second obstacle is simple forgetting. The Examen is easy to intend and easy to skip, because it has no fixed external trigger, no bell that rings. The solution is to attach it to something you already do without fail. Pray it in bed, as the last thing before sleep. Pray it in the car before you walk into the house. Pray it during your commute. Attach it to an

existing anchor in your day and it will survive; leave it floating, dependent on your remembering, and it will not. Many men pray it at night, which has the advantage of reviewing the whole day, though there is nothing wrong with a midday Examen reviewing the morning, and Ignatius actually recommended praying it twice a day. Find your anchor. The Examen kept imperfectly at a fixed time beats the Examen intended perfectly and never prayed.

The Blank Day

Sometimes you will sit down to review and the day will seem blank, featureless, nothing to notice. This is usually not because nothing happened but because you were absent for it, sleepwalking, which is precisely the condition the Examen exists to heal. When the day seems blank, slow down and walk through it more deliberately, hour by hour, and you will find that movements were there that you had filed away as nothing. The blank day is not a failure of the Examen; it is a diagnosis, revealing how absent you have been, and the very act of pushing through the blankness to find the movements underneath begins to cure the absence. Over weeks, the blank days grow fewer, because the daily review is teaching you to be more present as you live, so that there is more to find when you look back.

The Dry Stretch

And sometimes, as with all prayer, the Examen simply goes dry, and you keep at it feeling nothing, wondering if it is doing anything. Keep at it anyway. The Examen works below the level of feeling, forming your capacity for presence and discernment whether or not any given night feels fruitful. The formation is happening in the faithful repetition, not in the emotional payoff of any single session. The man who prays the Examen faithfully through the dry stretches is being formed exactly as much as the man who feels something every night, perhaps more, because he is learning to seek God rather than the consolations of God. Faithfulness, here as everywhere in prayer, is the foundation. Keep praying it, and let it do its slow work.

The Racing Mind at Night

A particular difficulty for many men is that they pray the Examen at night, in bed, exhausted, with a mind either racing with tomorrow's worries or sinking toward sleep. Both are real obstacles. If your mind races, the Examen can actually help, because giving the day a structured review and handing tomorrow to God is itself a way of quieting the churn; but if the racing is too strong, consider moving the Examen earlier, to the commute home or a few minutes before dinner, reviewing the day up to that point. If

instead you keep falling asleep mid-prayer, again, move it earlier, or sit up rather than lying down, or shorten it to the two-question version, grateful and least grateful, which can be prayed even in a fog of tiredness. Do not let the difficulty of the nighttime slot convince you the Examen is not for you. It is for you. You may simply need to find the hour and posture in which you can actually pray it. And if some nights you manage only a bleary word of thanks and a handing of tomorrow to God before sleep takes you, that is not nothing; it is a real, if minimal, Examen, and God receives it.

CHAPTER NINE

Praying It Tonight

The Practical Rule

Enough understanding. The Examen is meant to be prayed, not studied, and you know enough now to pray it tonight. Here is the practical shape, stripped to what you actually do.

The Simple Version

Tonight, before you sleep, take ten minutes. Settle, and remember you are in God's presence, and ask the Holy Spirit for light to see your day truly. Then look back over the day and name what you are grateful for, specifically, several things, and thank God for them. Then walk back through the day from waking to now, noticing where you felt drawn toward God and where you felt pulled away, not judging, just noticing the movements. Let one thing rise as most significant, and respond to God about it, in sorrow or gratitude or petition, whatever it calls for. Then look ahead to tomorrow, ask God for what you will need, and hand the coming day to him. Close with a simple prayer, an Our Father, or a few words of your own. That is the Examen. Presence, gratitude, review, response, tomorrow. Ten minutes. Pray it tonight.

Let us examine our ways and test them, and return to the Lord. — Lamentations 3:40

Making It Stick

To make it a lasting practice rather than a good intention, do three things. First, attach it to a fixed anchor in your day, bed or car or commute, so it is not left to memory. Second, keep it short, especially at the beginning; ten minutes faithfully is far better than thirty minutes attempted twice and abandoned. Third, be patient with the early weeks, when it may feel mechanical or unproductive, because the Examen reveals its fruit over months,

not days, as the daily practice slowly wakes you up to God's presence in your life. Give it a genuine trial, thirty days at least, praying it every night, and then judge it. Most men who give it that fair trial find they do not want to stop, because by then they have begun to taste what it offers: a life that is no longer a blur, days in which God is increasingly visible, a growing ability to hear him in the movements of the heart. That taste is what makes the Examen the prayer men keep.

The Written Examen

One variation worth trying, especially for the kind of man who thinks best with a pen in his hand, is to write the Examen rather than only pray it silently. A few lines in a notebook each night: what you were grateful for, what you noticed in the review, the one thing you brought to God, what you are asking for tomorrow. Writing slows the mind and deepens the attention, and it does something the silent Examen cannot: it creates a record. Over months, that record becomes a remarkable thing, a visible trail of God's movement through your life, a document of consolations and struggles and graces that you can look back over and read the longer patterns in. Many men who journal their Examen find that reviewing a month or a season of entries reveals the hand of God in ways no single night could show, the through-lines of grace becoming visible only across time. You do not have to write it; the Examen is complete prayed silently. But if you are a man who processes life through writing, the written Examen may be the form that makes the practice stick and deepen. Try it for a few weeks and see whether the pen helps you notice more than the silence did.

A Prayer for the Whole of Life

One last encouragement. The Examen is not only a nightly prayer; it is a way of living that the nightly prayer slowly builds. As you practice the evening review, you begin, during the day itself, to notice the movements as they happen, to catch the pull toward anxiety or the prompting toward good in the moment rather than only in retrospect. The nightly Examen trains a daytime awareness, until a man is increasingly present to God not just when he reviews his day but as he lives it. This is the deepest fruit, and it comes only with time: not just a prayer you pray, but a wakefulness you carry, a habitual attentiveness to the God who is always present and always speaking in the fabric of an ordinary life. That is what Ignatius found on his sickbed, and what he refused ever to give up, and what he most wanted to give the Church. It is available to you, ten minutes at a time, beginning tonight.

CONCLUSION

The God Who Was in This Place

Return to Jacob, waking from his dream at Bethel, stunned, saying the Lord was in this place and I did not know it. That is the condition the Examen heals, one day at a time. The Lord is in this place, in every place, in every ordinary day you live, present and moving and speaking in the texture of the hours. The only question is whether you will know it, or whether you will sleepwalk through it as Jacob nearly did, missing the ladder to heaven set up in the middle of your own life.

The Examen is the daily practice of knowing it. It is going back over the day you just lived and finding, again and again, that God was there the whole time: in the gift you almost missed, in the consolation you rushed past, in the quiet prompting you did not heed, in the mercy that met your failure. And in finding him in the day behind you, you slowly become the kind of man who can find him in the day ahead, until your whole life is no longer a blur you sleep through but a place you are awake in, alive to the God who fills it.

This is why it is the prayer men keep. Not because it is dramatic, but because it works, quietly and reliably, night after night, waking a man to his own life and to the God within it. Ignatius, who knew every kind of prayer, would give up all the rest before he gave up this one. Give it a fair trial and you will understand why.

Tonight, before you sleep, take ten minutes. Remember you are with God. Give thanks. Walk back through your day and notice where he was. Respond to the one thing that matters. Hand tomorrow to him. And discover, as men have discovered for five centuries, that the God who was in this place has been waiting, all day, to be noticed. He is, as always, present. The Examen is how you learn to see him. Begin tonight.

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