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*the  
daily  
examen*

A SPIRITUAL RHYTHM FOR YOUR JOURNEY INTO CHRIST

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## *about the author*

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His books include *A Well-Worn Path: 31 Daily Devotionals for the Worshipping Life* (David C. Cook), *Perspectives on Worship: Five Views* (Broadman Holman), and *Songs are a Place We Go* (Wild Pear).

Dan is a husband, father, author, and artist, and is passionate about disciples of Jesus growing a sustainable faith – for a lifetime of wonder in worship and life, and for passing on a legacy of hope to generations to come.

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## *little rituals*

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*“You have made known to me the path of life; you will fill me with joy in your presence, with eternal pleasures at your right hand.” (Psalm 16:11)*

Every day, up to nine times a day, I silently perform a 1-3 minute spiritual ritual that is – quite literally – changing me. Now in my early 50s, I have decided it is the single most vital personal habit I have formed to date. According to my wife, I am becoming a different man.

Spiritually igniting, robust yet simple, the habit that is changing me is called the “Daily Examen.”

The Daily Examen is a daily prayer exercise that is integral to the *Spiritual*

*Exercises* created by Ignatius of Loyola – the founder of the Jesuits (the current Pope Francis is a Jesuit).

The Daily Examen is just one example of Ignatian spirituality and, in particular, the riches that are within his *Spiritual Exercises*. The Examen is...

*“...A technique of prayerful reflection on the events of the day in order to detect God’s presence and discern his direction for us. The Examen is an ancient practice in the Church that can help us see God’s hand at work in our whole experience.” (From [www.ignatianspirituality.com](http://www.ignatianspirituality.com)).*

## *distraction as enemy*

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I suffer from what I call EBN – *Excessive Brain Noise*. At any given moment, a plethora of ideas, impression, intuitions, conversations, projects, tasks, and images are running through my mind.

The waters of my soul, in accord with this, are always stirring and sometimes – in a froth and a frenzy – *splashing*.

Quietude, awareness of the presence of God, self-awareness of my shifting emotions, attention to the influence of my strengths and weaknesses on my decisions and actions, are often out of my reach.

Over my lifetime, I have discovered and rediscovered some very helpful tools that work for my ongoing reorientation, with the *Daily Office* (not to be confused with the Daily Examen) leading the pack.

However, it took the Daily Examen of Ignatius to bring me to my knees in thanks for a moment-by-moment deliverance from a main enemy of sustainable faith in our time – rampant, unchecked, *distraction*.

Much of my work and life centers around screens – my laptop, my phone, and my apps. The varied and flexing levels of daily distraction can cause me

to miss hours and hours of personal reflection as emotions layer on emotions, distractions feeding small-story thoughts that pull me from Christ, slowly but surely.

Distraction poses a problem because of one main issue it precipitates – we are unable to be fully present to the moment, or the person, or the need when our mind is more than one place at once. As neuroscience and studies on the brain continue to reveal, our high levels of distraction and dopamine hit addiction fed by our phones and video game culture are, quite literally, changing our brains.

The mindfulness industry has mushroomed as people feel more frenzied, more pre-occupied, and less at peace with themselves and the world around them. When angst enters the system through cultural forces like pandemics and politics, our systems are on cortisol overload – and we struggle to cope.

How has this impacted Christians? Without a study in hand, one could say that we are as impacted as the rest of society as we continue to normalize the lack of ability to be psychologically present-and-accounted-for to those around us.

Our days pass by us quickly, filled with activities, decisions, and processes, and then, in the gaps, instead of reflecting on what is occurring, how we are feeling, and most of all, what God may be doing in and through our circumstances – we pull out our phones and keep the dopamine hits coming.

By the end of each day, our heads hit the pillow with a blur of memories swirling in our mind – most gulped and few savored. And when we don't savor the gifts and the goodness of God in our day, we tend to only remember the challenges and difficulties that came our way. We slowly become less thankful, and more whiny about every little thing that God "could have done better for us."

While there are many tools that seek to address our need for mindfulness today, few, in my experience, can hold a candle to a simple pattern of prayer in the Spiritual Exercises of Ignatius of Loyola, written in the 1500s – the *Daily Examen*.

Ignatius was born in 1491 in a castle in Spain. He was raised in wealth and privilege, and was a bit of a fancy boy, dancer, and womanizer to all those who knew him. Then, wounded in the leg during a battle with France, by a cannonball, Ignatius found himself and his disfigured leg lying in a hospital bed with nothing to entertain but his imagination and a few books brought to him by his sister-in-law.

One of the books was titled *The Life of Christ*, and had a profound impact on Ignatius. His imagination would be harnessed by the Holy Spirit into the service of Jesus, and he became one of the most important spiritual influencers of the past 500 years.

As a consummate spiritual director, Ignatius wrote the Spiritual Exercises, and in these, we find the Daily Examen. Ignatius believed the Examen was a powerful way to reorient the Christian and to develop both God and self-awareness – and I do, too.

## *the daily examen*

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**The Daily Examen** is my go-to remedy for that disorientation. I follow the 5-step process offered below, (modified a bit for my own use) that I have now memorized. I can scale it from being a 1 minute exercise to a 15 minute, 60 minute, or even day long exercise (I do one of the steps every few hours).

It is a portable liturgy, a reorienting rhythm, that I do in my bed as I drift off to sleep, as I wake in the morning (before I touch my phone), drive in my truck, and walk in my office in between projects and emails.

I carry it with me in my heart on airplanes, into meetings, and on walks. It is renewing in times of rest, stabilizing in times of crisis, and focusing in times of ministry.

While I first learned the Daily Examen during my Masters studies, it has only been in the last number of years that I began to use it with regularity. Now, it has literally become a spiritual lifeline.

Here is the Daily Examen, adapted from Ignatius' spiritual exercises and personally re-written in simple form.

Ignatius wanted his Jesuits, the Company of Jesus, to practice it twice every day – during the noon hour and at the end of the day.

Personally, I do a 1-3 minute version of it at least 5-9 times a day. I would encourage you to memorize it, and begin to use it at least twice a day for one month to build the habit. If you can do it more, then do it.

Here are the 5 steps, ready to memorize:

### **1. Be Still – *become aware of the presence of God.***

Become aware of the presence of God, with you and in you. Use a breath prayer (Richard Foster, Eastern Orthodox tradition), if it helps you, praying as you breathe in, "You are here, Lord" and as you breathe out, "And I am with You."

### **2. Give Thanks – *review the past hours with thankfulness.***

Review the past 3 hours (or the space between this examen and the last) and give thanks for every detail you can think of. "That kind word," "That answered prayer," "That painful exchange that gives me another opportunity to trust You," "The taste of that coffee," "The provision to get gas this morning," "That dream that showed me

where my heart is truly at,” “That music I listened to,” “That physical pain that is awakening me to my need to stretch more.” Get good at identifying the details, and the gift within them. Nothing is too small to be grateful for. Find God, as Ignatius encouraged his Jesuits, in *everything*.

### **3. Reflect – become aware of your emotions.**

Ask, “How am I coming to this moment?” Name the emotion you are feeling, or the various ones you felt over the past hours. Then, give each one to the Lord. Invite Him into those emotions, and welcome Him to turn them toward His ends. You can also ask yourself here, “Did I choose Jesus’ way in that situation?” If you did choose Jesus’ way in a situation, rejoice. If not, examine your heart for sin, and choose to make amends and course corrections as needed.

### **4. Pray – choose one feature of the day so far, and pray.**

Turn your heart toward choosing one joy, one sorrow, or one area to pray about. Give it to the Lord completely. Leave it in His capable hands. Learn the art of letting go when you take this moment to converse with the Lord about what concerns you.

### **5. Hope – look toward the next hours with expectation.**

Tell the Lord that you hope in Him for the next hours ahead. See the next tasks with expectation that God will be good, that you will notice His work in the coming hours, and that His will *will* be done. Pray “Let Your Kingdom come, let Your will be done.” End with trust. Reorient to trust. Look forward with Hope in Jesus.

## *the results*

There is no *hocus pocus* to this – many other patterns of attentiveness to God’s presence and work may function quite well for others. For me, however, this simple 5 step pattern is enabling me to slowly acquire a number of spiritual life attributes I’ve desired for decades (in no particular order):

**Intimacy with Christ is sweeter;** all day long we are in loving conversation. The Daily Examen is deepening my greatest desire – to linger in intimacy with God all through the day – and satisfying it at the same time.

**Days are not passing in a blur;** I’m remembering the details as I’m constantly re-approaching them with gratefulness every few hours. I’m becoming more mindful and aware of what treasures God has been sending my way. I would have missed these before.

**I’m becoming more self-aware;** my emotions are not layering one upon another until I get to the end of a day and don’t understand why I’m in the mood I’m in (or my body is feeling the way it feels).

My wife and family especially appreciate this change in me. Emotions are being offloaded as they come, rather than building up behind the scenes.

**I’m looking forward** to the next moment with God; I’m actually craving the reorientation moments, and I’m not waiting for moments of euphoria or

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achievement to make my day worth living.

**Worry is less common for me;** trust is being revisited every few hours, and I’m not forgetting how to be a real Christian.

**Discernment seems higher,** quicker, and more fluid; I’m aware of God’s presence, and sensing Christ leading me to say this, do this, contact this person, make this decision.

**Scattered movement** from thought to task is minimized; I’m living a quieter inner life that is less frenetic. I’m also less distracted and distractible; being present to God, to others, and to my own state of heart and mind is becoming a new normal.

**Companionship with Jesus** feels more real and substantial; the reality of Christ’s nearness and indwelling is richer and more manifest to my mind and heart.

**It helps me go to sleep** as my mind focuses; I often drift off while giving thanks for the details of the day (what a great way to go to sleep).

**I’m not reacting as emotionally** to my circumstances; as a high “feeler” (INFP on the Myers-Briggs), this is a big deal for me.



## *it will change you*

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There are many other fruits I (and others) have experienced using the Daily Examen, including the probability that my brain is changing as gratefulness becomes my psychological center and the lens through which I'm perceiving my daily life.

The science behind neuroplasticity tells us that our mental habits can literally change our brain's physiology – and there are signs that is happening to some degree for me.

Perhaps my neural dopamine triggers and pituitary endorphin releases are quietly changing in obedience to Christ – compelled by the Spirit working through a new, holy habit?

What I do know is this – old “go-to” thoughts (I've battled severe depression and anxiety much of my life) are slowly dissipating as new “go-to” thoughts take their place. In essence, I may be developing the virtue of gratefulness, and that would be a dream.

Jesus is preparing a Church to lead and love from the place of intimacy, passion, hope, self-awareness, a renewed heart and mind, heroism, ingenuity, love, and wisdom in a rapidly evolving world.

I believe that, both personally and corporately, formative habits like the Daily Examen will help us both lead ourselves – and then lead others – into new tomorrows of God's good design.



# The daily examen

1

## *Be Still*

**Become aware of the presence of God.**

Become aware of the presence of God, with you and in you. Use a breath prayer (Richard Foster, Eastern Orthodox tradition), if it helps you, praying as you breathe in, "You are here, Lord" and as you breathe out, "And I am with You."

3

## *Reflect*

**Become aware of your emotions.**

Ask, "How am I coming to this moment?" Name the emotion you are feeling, or the various ones you felt over the past hours. Then, give each one to the Lord. Invite Him into those emotions, and welcome Him to turn them toward His ends. You can also ask yourself here, "Did I choose Jesus' way in that situation?" If you did choose Jesus' way in a situation, rejoice. If not, examine your heart for sin, and choose to make amends.

5

## *Hope*

**Look toward the next hours with expectation.**

Tell the Lord that you hope in Him for the next hours ahead. See the next tasks with expectation that God will be good, that you will notice His work in the situation, and that His will – will be done. Pray "Let Your Kingdom come, let Your will be done." End with trust. Reorient to trust.

2

## *Give Thanks*

**Review the past hours with thankfulness.**

Review the past 3 hours (or the space between this examen and the last) and give thanks for every detail you can think of. "That kind word," "That answered prayer," "That painful email that gives me another opportunity to trust You," "The taste of that coffee," "The provision to get gas this morning," "That dream that showed me where my heart is at," "That music I listened to," "That physical pain that is awakening me to my need to stretch more." Get good at identifying the details, and the gift within them. Nothing is too small to be grateful for.

4

## *Pray*

**Choose one feature of the day so far, and pray.**

Turn your heart toward choosing one joy, one sorrow, or one area to pray about. Give it to the Lord completely. Leave it in His capable hands. Learn the art of letting go when you take this moment to converse with the Lord about what concerns you.

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AUTHOR, SPEAKER, & SPIRITUAL FORMATION EDUCATOR

# DAN WILT

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