

Session 1: The Hiding God

A study for seekers and the friends who walk with them

Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim: The group discovers that Scripture itself names the hiddenness of God, honors the complaint against it, and ties finding God not to spectacle but to seeking with the whole heart.

Catholic Touchstone: God can be known with certainty from created things by the natural light of reason, yet in our present condition we meet real difficulties in doing so, and God never ceases to call every person to seek him (CCC 30, 35 to 37).

HOSTING YOUR SEEKER FRIEND

This is the session where your seeker friend decides whether this group is safe. Three commitments for hosts:

- Do not rush to defend God. When Isaiah 45:15 is read, let it sit in silence. The session is designed so that Scripture raises the objection before your friend has to.
- Thank your friend for every honest objection, out loud. An objection spoken here is a gift to the group, not a problem to be managed.
- Your friend is a participant, never the subject. Ask the same questions of everyone. Believers in the room should answer the seeking questions about themselves, honestly, first.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The objection this session takes seriously is usually called the problem of divine hiddenness. In its strongest form it runs: if a perfectly loving God existed, no one open to relationship with him would fail to believe; yet there are nonresistant nonbelievers, people not set against God, some seeking hard and some who would welcome him but never knew to seek; therefore a perfectly loving God does not exist. Do not weaken this argument when you present it. Its force is real, and people in your group may have lived it.

The session then makes a move your seeker friend will not expect: Scripture agrees with the experience behind the first premise. The prophets, the psalms, and Job all testify that God hides. What Scripture disputes is what the hiddenness means. Blaise Pascal, writing for the seekers of his own day in the notes gathered as his *Pensées*, argued in substance that God gives enough light for those who desire to see and enough obscurity for those of a contrary disposition. The evidence God offers, we might say, is the kind a lover gives, meant to win a heart, not the kind a geometry proof gives, meant to force a conclusion; the image is ours, but it is faithful to his argument. Whether Pascal is right is exactly what the group will test against the texts.

Be careful to keep the hedge honest: the Church has not defined why God permits the degree of hiddenness he does, and do not lean the whole answer on freedom, since knowing God exists does not by itself compel love. What the Church does teach is that God can be known, that he calls every person, and that he is found by those who seek him with the whole heart. Stay inside that.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Every text discovered tonight is Old Testament, and that is deliberate: the people closest to God complained loudest about his hiddenness. Moses, who spoke with God, is refused the direct sight of his face (Exodus 33). Job, the righteous sufferer, cannot find him in any direction (Job 23). The psalmist prays to a God who hides his face (Psalm 13). Yet the same Scriptures carry a promise: whoever seeks with all the heart will find (Deuteronomy 4:29, Jeremiah 29:13). Where this trajectory leads, the group should not yet be told. It bends toward a mountain where the pure in heart see God (Matthew 5:8) and, beyond this session, toward a face that can be seen without dying. That is for later in the study.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

In his *Confessions* (Book X, chapter 27), St. Augustine looks back on his years of searching and confesses that he had been looking for God everywhere except the one place God was waiting: within him. God was inside, Augustine says, and he was outside, chasing the beautiful things God had made while their Maker remained with him all along. In St. Augustine's own confession, God was with him; it was he who was not with God. The absence had been on his side.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

In the *Summa Theologiae* (I, q. 2, a. 1), St. Thomas teaches that the proposition that God exists is self-evident in itself, since God's essence is his existence, but it is not self-evident to us, because we do not see God's essence. Our minds must travel to God from his effects: we might say, as one reasons from a work of art back to the artist. Hiddenness, for St. Thomas, is partly a fact about the limits of our present way of knowing, not only a fact about God's distance.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

The *Spiritual Canticle* of St. John of the Cross, a Doctor of the Church and one of its greatest mystics, opens with the soul's cry: where have you hidden, Beloved? Even the saints who knew God most intimately began, and often continued, in the experience of his hiddenness. St. John teaches, in substance, that this hiding is not rejection: the Beloved is hidden within the soul itself, and his hiddenness sets the soul searching and draws it deeper.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 30:** Man may forget or reject God, but God never ceases to call every man to seek him.
- **CCC 35 to 37:** Human reason can know God with certainty from his works, yet in the present condition of the human race we meet many difficulties in coming to this knowledge, which is why man needs to be enlightened by revelation.
- **CCC 2566 to 2567:** Man is in search of God, and God tirelessly calls each person first; prayer is the meeting of those two thirsts.

THREAD WATCH

Two threads are planted tonight. First, the thread this study will spend six sessions resolving: God has a pattern of speaking, and hiddenness is not silence. It surfaces tonight only as a hint in the Dig Deeper box (creation as speech). Do not resolve it. Second, the sealed guess: at the close of the Send section, every participant writes one sentence answering the question, what would it take for you to believe, seals it in the envelope on the Take-Home sheet, and brings it back each week. Do not tell the group when it will be opened.

SESSION GOALS

1. Present the hiddenness objection at full strength, without caricature, before any answer is attempted.
2. Let the group discover that Scripture names and honors the experience of God's hiddenness.
3. Surface the biblical condition for finding: seeking with the whole heart, not waiting for spectacle.
4. Seal each participant's written guess for later in the study.

TIME NOTE

Runs 75 to 90 minutes as written. If you are short: cut the Dig Deeper box first, then the Job 23 discovery (fold its point into Psalm 13). Do not cut the Exodus 33 discovery or the sealing of the guess.

Part 2: Discussion Guide

OPENING PRAYER

Leader prays: God, if you are here, and we believe you are, be here for every person in this room tonight, the sure and the unsure alike. Give us honesty with each other and with you. We ask this trusting that no honest question offends you. Amen.

WIN

5. Tell us about a time you searched hard for something, or someone, that stayed out of reach. What did the searching do to you?
6. When you hear the sentence, God is hidden, what is your gut reaction: complaint, comfort, excuse, or mystery? Why that one?

BUILD

Leader, present the objection at full strength. Read slowly: If a perfectly loving God existed, no one open to him would fail to find him. But there are people open to God, maybe in this room, who have not found him: some searching hard, some who never even knew to search. So it seems there is no perfectly loving God.

- 3. Before anyone answers it: what is the *strongest* thing about this argument? Where does it feel right?

ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

Affirm its force sincerely. The premise rests on something true about love: lovers want to be found. If anyone in the group has lived this argument, honor that. Then set the hook for the evening: the surprise is that the Bible is going to agree with more of this argument than anyone expects.

Live discovery. Ask the group to find Isaiah 45:15 and have someone read it aloud: *“Truly, you are a God who hides himself, O God of Israel, the Savior.”*

- 4. Who is speaking here, a skeptic or a prophet? What does it change that this sentence is *inside* the Bible?

ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

A prophet, Isaiah, speaking under inspiration. Scripture itself canonizes the observation that God hides. The hiddenness of God is not a discovery modern atheism made against the Bible; it is a confession the Bible made first. Notice the same verse calls this hidden God the Savior. Hiddenness and salvation sit in one sentence.

Live discovery. Find Psalm 13:1-2 and Job 23:3, 8-9. Read both aloud.

- 5. These are prayers of a psalmist and the speech of a man the Bible calls blameless. How does Scripture treat the complaint that God cannot be found?

ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

It gives the complaint words and makes them prayer. Psalm 13 asks God how long he will hide his face; Job says he goes forward and backward and cannot perceive him. The Bible does not scold this experience. It inspires it, records it, and hands it to every generation to pray. Your seeker friend's complaint has a home inside the tradition, not outside it.

Live discovery. Find Exodus 33:18-23, Moses asking to see God's glory. Read it aloud.

- 6. Moses is the man who speaks with God. When he asks for direct sight, what does God answer, and what reason does he give?

ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

God says: “*you cannot see my face; for man shall not see me and live*” (Exodus 33:20), and then shields Moses in the rock and lets him see only his back. The refusal is not coldness; it is protection. Direct, unveiled exposure to God is not something our present condition survives. This turns the objection partly on its head: some of the distance may be mercy. Hedge honestly here: this does not answer everything, and the Church has not defined why God permits all the hiddenness he does. But it complicates the assumption that more directness would simply be better for us.

Reason, then the text. Offer Pascal's frame in your own words: perhaps God gives enough light for those who desire to see, and enough obscurity for those who do not, because the assent he wants is love, and love cannot be compelled. A geometry proof forces the mind and leaves the heart untouched. A lover persuades differently.

- 7. What kind of evidence does a lover give? What would be lost if God's existence were as undeniable as arithmetic?

ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

Draw out: a lover gives signs, presence, invitation, and room to respond, because the goal is a freely returned love, not a conceded conclusion. Keep the proposal inside honest bounds: certainty that God exists would not by itself produce loving communion, and Scripture shows evidence-saturated hearts still refusing him, so preserving freedom cannot be the whole explanation of hiddenness, and the Church has not revealed why God gives each person the measure of light he does. What Christianity claims is narrower and stronger: genuine grounds given, definitive revelation in Christ, every person addressed through creation, conscience, and grace, and judgment according to the light actually received. Pascal's frame is a proposal, not a proof. The next discovery tests whether Scripture talks this way.

Live discovery. Find Deuteronomy 4:29 and Jeremiah 29:13. Read both aloud.

- 8. According to these texts, what is the stated condition for finding God? What is *not* the condition?

ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

The whole heart. “*You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you*” (Jeremiah 29:13-14). Both texts are covenant promises to Israel, the second written to exiles, so never turn them into a diagnosis of any individual's nonbelief; what they establish is the direction of the promise: not intelligence, credentials, or a sign from the sky, but a heart whose seeking God's own grace enables (CCC 2567). Hidden from spectators, found by seekers is either an evasion or the exact behavior of the lover Pascal described. Let the group argue about which.

DIG DEEPER

If time allows: Wisdom 13:1-5 and Romans 1:19-20 claim that creation itself is a kind of speech about its Maker, so that the hidden God has never been wholly silent. And Matthew 5:8: “*Blessed are the pure in heart, for they shall see God.*” Sight of God is promised, and the organ of that sight is the

heart. Keep this brief; the study will return to it.

SEND

7. If it turned out that God were more interested in your heart than in your assent, what would he be doing in your life right now?
8. For everyone, believer and seeker alike: what would it take for you to believe? And if you already believe, what did it actually take?

The sealed guess. Hand out the Take-Home sheets. Each person writes one honest sentence in the My Guess box answering: what would it take for you to believe? Fold it, seal it, write your name on the outside, and bring it back every week. Do not tell the group when the envelopes will be opened.

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

- Each day this week, say one honest sentence to God, out loud or written. If you are unsure he is there, honesty still counts: even, if you are there, I want to know, is a prayer this study's texts would recognize.
- Once this week, reread Psalm 13 slowly and notice where it ends compared to where it begins.

SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE

"You will seek me and find me; when you seek me with all your heart, I will be found by you." Jeremiah 29:13-14

CLOSING PRAYER

Leader prays: God of Israel, Savior, you have hidden yourself, and your own prophets said so. We hold you to your own promise: that those who seek you with all their heart will find you. Every sealed sentence in this room is now in your hands. Meet each of us this week in whatever way you know we can bear. Amen.

Part 3: Leader Reference Card

Every passage used in Session 1, in order of appearance. All quotations RSV2CE.

- **Isaiah 45:15** the God who hides himself, named Savior (live discovery)
- **Psalms 13:1-2** how long will you hide your face (live discovery)
- **Job 23:3, 8-9** forward and backward, and cannot perceive him (live discovery; first cut if short on time is folded here)
- **Exodus 33:18-23** Moses refused the direct sight of the face (live discovery, do not cut)
- **Deuteronomy 4:29** seek with all your heart and soul (live discovery)
- **Jeremiah 29:13** you will seek me and find me (live discovery; memory verse)
- **Wisdom 13:1-5** creation speaks of its Maker (Dig Deeper)
- **Romans 1:19-20** invisible nature perceived in things made (Dig Deeper)
- **Matthew 5:8** the pure in heart shall see God (Dig Deeper)

Catechism: CCC 30; 35 to 37; 2566 to 2567.

Voices: St. Augustine, Confessions X.27; St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae I, q. 2, a. 1; St. John of the Cross, Spiritual Canticle, stanza 1.