

## Session 2: What Faith Is (and Isn't)

*A study for seekers and the friends who walk with them*

### Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

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#### SESSION OVERVIEW

**Discovery Aim:** The group discovers that biblical faith is not belief without evidence but trust in a credible witness: the New Testament writers appeal to eyewitnesses, careful investigation, and recorded signs, and they praise those who check.

**Catholic Touchstone:** Believing is a genuinely human act, neither blind impulse nor contrary to reason; God provides motives of credibility, and there can never be any real discrepancy between faith and reason (CCC 154 to 156, 159).

#### HOSTING YOUR SEEKER FRIEND

Your seeker friend has almost certainly met the wishful thinking version of faith, and may have been told at some point to stop asking questions and just believe. Two commitments tonight:

- The phrase, you just have to have faith, is banned for the evening. Say so out loud at the start, with a smile. It sets the tone better than any argument.
- If your friend says faith is believing without evidence, do not correct them. That definition is the one the session is built to test; let the texts do the arguing.

#### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The objection tonight is the evidentialist one, stated classically in the nineteenth century: it is wrong, always and everywhere, to believe anything on insufficient evidence. On this view faith is not merely mistaken but a moral failure, a corruption of intellectual honesty. Present it with full force; many seekers hold it as a matter of integrity, and that integrity deserves respect.

The session's move is to put the definition on trial against the New Testament's own behavior. Luke opens his Gospel like a historian, describing eyewitness sources and careful investigation. John says plainly that the signs were written down as grounds for belief. The Bereans are praised, not scolded, for checking the Scriptures daily to see whether the preaching held up. And Peter commands believers to be ready to give a defense, an *apologia*, for their hope. Whatever biblical faith is, its own documents do not treat it as belief without grounds.

The positive account: faith is trust in a credible witness, the same kind of knowing that carries most of a human life. Nearly everything anyone knows about history, science, medicine, or the interior life of the people they love rests on testimony trusted with good reason. Faith directs that same act toward God, on the strength of the motives of credibility, and it remains free: evidence invites, it does not compel. Keep the hedge honest: the Church teaches that faith is reasonable and grounded, not that God's existence or the mysteries of faith are provable the way arithmetic is provable.

#### OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Hebrews 11 defines faith and then spends the chapter on Old Testament lives. Notice what the definition is attached to: not people who believed against evidence, but people who trusted a God who had already spoken and acted, and who reasoned from what they knew of him. Abraham, offered as the chapter's

centerpiece, “considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead” (Hebrews 11:19). The verb is a reasoning verb. Old Testament faith is covenant trust built on remembered deeds (the Exodus is cited constantly as evidence), and the New Testament presents the Resurrection the same way: a proclaimed and publicly witnessed event, attested and offered as ground for trust.

#### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN HENRY NEWMAN

St. John Henry Newman teaches, in substance, in his *Grammar of Assent* that human beings rightly reach certitude not by formal proof but by the convergence of many independent probabilities, the way a judge or a historian weighs evidence. Real assent, for Newman, engages the whole person, not just the reasoning faculty. Faith is not an exception to how we know; it is the fullest case of it.

#### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. THOMAS AQUINAS

St. Thomas teaches, in substance (*Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 2), that to believe is an act of the intellect assenting to divine truth at the command of a will moved by God's grace. Faith is therefore neither a feeling nor a leap in the dark: the intellect assents, the will freely commands, and grace carries both. And, as the Church teaches with the First Vatican Council (CCC 159), because the same God gives reason and gives revelation, the two cannot finally contradict.

#### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. ANSELM OF CANTERBURY

St. Anselm opens his *Proslogion* with the famous program: I believe in order to understand (*credo ut intelligam*). He is not saying, believe first and stop thinking. He is saying that trust opens the door to a kind of understanding that suspicion never reaches, the way trusting a person is the only way to come to know them. Faith, for St. Anselm, is understanding's beginning, not its rival.

### CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 150:** Faith is personal adherence to God and free assent to the whole truth God has revealed.
- **CCC 154 to 155:** Believing is an authentically human act, contrary neither to human freedom nor to human reason.
- **CCC 156:** God gives external proofs of his Revelation, motives of credibility such as miracles and prophecies, so that the assent of faith is by no means a blind impulse of the mind.
- **CCC 158 to 159:** Faith seeks understanding, and there can never be any real discrepancy between faith and reason.

### THREAD WATCH

The study's main thread, God has a pattern of speaking, develops quietly tonight: notice that every text discovered is about witnesses. In these texts, God's way of speaking to later generations runs through testimony he stands behind. Do not name the thread; let the pattern accumulate. The sealed envelopes return tonight; collect them visibly, say nothing about when they open.

### SESSION GOALS

1. Present the evidentialist objection at full strength and honor the integrity behind it.
2. Let the group discover that the New Testament appeals to investigation, eyewitnesses, and recorded signs.
3. Establish the positive definition: faith as reasoned trust in a credible witness, free and grounded.

4. Distinguish what the Church claims (faith is reasonable) from what she does not (that mysteries are provable like arithmetic).

**TIME NOTE**

Runs 75 to 90 minutes as written. If short: cut the Acts 17:11 discovery first, then fold Luke 1:1-4 into the John 20 answer. Do not cut Hebrews 11 or the 1 Peter 3:15 close.

## Part 2: Discussion Guide

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### OPENING PRAYER

*Leader prays:* God, you gave us minds, and we do not believe you are threatened by their use. Be with us as we ask what faith really is. If faith is trust, show us tonight that you are worth trusting. Amen.

### WIN

5. Who is the person you trust most, and how did they earn it? Was it a proof, or something slower?
6. Finish the sentence honestly: to me, faith means. No wrong answers tonight; we are going to test every definition in the room.

### BUILD

**Leader, present the objection at full strength.** Read slowly: It is wrong, always and everywhere, to believe anything on insufficient evidence. On this view, faith is not just a mistake. It is a failure of honesty, and honesty demands one rule: proportion every belief to the evidence that supports it.

- 3. What is right about this? Where have you seen belief without evidence do real damage?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

Concede real ground: credulity does do damage, and Scripture itself condemns false prophets and empty superstition. If this standard is aimed at gullibility, the Bible is on its side. The question the evening will press is whether Christian faith is, in fact, belief without grounds, and the surprise is that the New Testament refuses that definition on its own pages.

**Live discovery.** Find Luke 1:1-4, the opening of Luke's Gospel. Read it aloud.

- 4. What does Luke say he did before writing? What does he want Theophilus to have at the end?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

Luke describes sources handed down by eyewitnesses, says he has followed all things closely, and writes an orderly account *“that you may know the truth concerning the things of which you have been informed”* (Luke 1:4). The vocabulary is a historian's vocabulary. Whatever Luke thinks faith is, he thinks careful investigation serves it.

**Live discovery.** Find John 20:30-31. Read it aloud.

- 5. Why, according to John himself, were the signs written down?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

*“These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name”* (John 20:31). John presents recorded signs as grounds offered for belief. Belief without evidence is precisely what the fourth Gospel says it exists to prevent.

**Live discovery.** Find Acts 17:11, Paul's hearers in Beroea. Read it aloud.

- 6. What did the Beroeans do with Paul's preaching, and how does Scripture rate them for it?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

They received the word eagerly and examined the Scriptures daily to see whether these things were so, and the text calls them more noble for it. Checking is praised, inside the Bible: careful testing of

religious claims is commended here, and your seeker friend's checking has biblical company.

**Live discovery.** Find Hebrews 11:1, then skim down with the group to Hebrews 11:17-19, Abraham.

- 7. Hebrews defines faith as *“the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”* Then look at verse 19: what is Abraham doing with his mind?

**ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.**

Abraham *“considered that God was able to raise men even from the dead”* (Hebrews 11:19). The verb is a reasoning verb, and read in its setting, with the chapter's long memory of God's deeds, the natural inference is trust reasoning from known character. Things not seen does not mean things without grounds. It means realities known the way we know most important things: through trust built on evidence of character.

**Reason, then the text.** Offer the frame plainly: nearly everything anyone knows arrives by testimony. History, medicine, the age of the universe, what your own mother felt the day you were born: all of it is trusted witness, accepted with good reason but without personal proof. The question is never whether to live by trust; it is which witnesses have earned it. Human testimony is the analogy that makes faith intelligible; faith itself is that trust elevated by grace and directed to God who reveals.

- 8. What would it take for a witness to earn your trust about the biggest questions? Does anyone actually live by the rule, believe nothing without compelling proof?

**ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.**

Draw out: the standard itself is fair, and testimony can meet it; friendship, history, and science all run on witness trusted with good reason rather than personal proof. So the real question is whether the apostolic witnesses earned it, and tonight's texts have been the case that they did: investigated, checkable, and staked in public. Keep two hedges: the Church claims faith is grounded and reasonable, not that its mysteries are provable like arithmetic; and theological faith, though shaped like reasoned trust, is more than it, a supernatural gift in which grace enables intellect and will to assent on the authority of God who reveals (CCC 153-155). Evidence invites; it does not compel; the last step is free.

**DIG DEEPER**

If time allows: 1 Peter 3:15 commands believers to *“always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you,”* and to do it with gentleness and reverence. The Greek word is *apologia*, a reasoned case. And Mark 12:30 includes the mind in the greatest commandment: loving God with all the mind is not optional equipment.

**SEND**

7. Where in your life are you already living by trust in a witness? What would it mean to hold the question of God to the same standard, no stricter and no looser?
8. What is one claim from tonight you want to check for yourself this week, Berean style?

**LIVE IT THIS WEEK**

- Pick one Gospel passage and read it the way Luke wrote: asking, who saw this, and who is staking their name on it?

- Continue the daily honest sentence to God from last week. If you skipped days, no scorekeeping; start again.

#### **SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE**

*“Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.”* Hebrews 11:1

#### **CLOSING PRAYER**

*Leader prays:* God of Abraham, you have never asked anyone to stop thinking in order to find you. Give us the honesty of the Bereans and the reasoning trust of Abraham. And for every hope in this room that does not yet have a name, be gentle with it. Amen.

## Part 3: Leader Reference Card

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*Every passage used in Session 2, in order of appearance. All quotations RSV2CE.*

- **Luke 1:1-4** eyewitness sources, careful investigation (live discovery)
- **John 20:30-31** signs written that you may believe (live discovery)
- **Acts 17:11** Bereans examine the Scriptures daily (live discovery; first cut if short)
- **Hebrews 11:1, 17-19** faith defined, Abraham's reasoning trust (live discovery; memory verse; do not cut)
- **1 Peter 3:15** a defense, apologia, with gentleness (Dig Deeper)
- **Mark 12:30** love God with all your mind (Dig Deeper)

**Catechism:** CCC 150; 154 to 156; 158 to 159.

**Voices:** St. John Henry Newman, Grammar of Assent (summary); St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae II-II, q. 2 (summary); St. Anselm, Proslogion, ch. 1.