

# SHOW US THE FATHER

*A Study for Seekers and the Friends Who Walk with Them*

*“Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied.” John 14:8*

Six core sessions and five stand-alone deep-dives

**CATHOLIC ARMORY**

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# Using This Guide

## THE SHAPE OF THE STUDY

Show Us the Father is built for a mixed room: Catholics hosting friends who are seeking, questioning, or politely skeptical. The six core sessions form one arc and should be run in order; they carry threads across the weeks, including a sealed envelope written in Session 1 and opened in Session 3, so do not reorder or skip them. The five deep-dives are fully stand-alone: run any of them, in any order, after the core, chosen by where your group's real questions live.

## EACH SESSION'S THREE PARTS

The Leader Preparation Guide is for hosts only, read before the evening: the aims, background, three Voices of the Church, Catechism connections, and a Hosting Your Seeker Friend box with the evening's specific pastoral commitments. The Discussion Guide is the evening itself: open Win questions, discoveries in which the group finds and reads the passages themselves, discussion questions with shaded ANSWER boxes for the leader to share only after the group has discussed, and Send questions with a practice for the week. The Leader Reference Card lists every passage used, with the pre-chosen cuts if the evening runs long.

## HOUSE RULES THAT MAKE IT WORK

- Objections are presented at full strength before any answer is attempted, on purpose. Do not soften them and do not rush past them; the study's credibility with your seeker friend depends on it.
- ANSWER boxes are shared after discussion, never before, and never read as a script. Live discovery beats delivered conclusions.
- Take-Home sheets are distributed after each session, never before, so nothing is spoiled. Take-Home 1 carries the sealed My Guess box; collect the sealed envelopes weekly and guard them; they open in Session 3.
- The seeker is a participant, never the subject. Believers answer the hard personal questions about themselves first, and no one is put on the spot.

## TEXT AND SOURCES

All Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version, Second Catholic Edition (RSV2CE). Voices of the Church are verified quotations or honestly labeled summaries of each figure's genuine teaching; where the Church has not defined a matter, the guides say so plainly rather than manufacturing certainty. Catechism references cite the paragraphs that actually contain the point.

## A WORD TO THE HOST BEFORE SESSION 1

Pray for your friend by name before each session. Trust the texts and the silence more than your own eloquence. And keep the study's founding conviction in view: the questions your friend brings are not obstacles to the Gospel; they are, on the record of Scripture itself, among its oldest entry points.

## Session 1: The Hiding God

*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 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

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### 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

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*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.

## 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.

## Session 3: Show Us the Father

*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 the demand behind this whole study, God should speak to us directly, is answered by Scripture from two directions: Sinai, where direct divine speech was offered and the people begged for mediation, and the Last Supper, where Philip asked the demand outright, in words strikingly close to the sealed sentences the group has been carrying. And they discover the answer Jesus gave.

**Catholic Touchstone:** In many and various ways God spoke of old by the prophets; in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son, and in giving us his Son, his one definitive Word, he has said everything at once (CCC 65).

#### HOSTING YOUR SEEKER FRIEND

Tonight the sealed envelopes open. Handle it with care:

- Each person opens and reads their own guess silently. No one shares aloud unless they volunteer, and do not go around the circle. The moment is between each person and the text they are about to meet.
- Do not oversell the reveal. Let John 14:8 be read cold and let the room notice on its own that Philip asked their question. If the silence gets long, let it.
- Your seeker friend may feel exposed tonight, in a good way or a hard way. Check in with them personally afterward, one on one, not in front of the group.

#### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

This is the hinge of the study. The objection it answers is the study's founding question: if the stakes are what Christians say they are, God should speak to us directly, and a two-thousand-year-old speaking can feel like no speaking at all. Tonight's texts complicate that demand from two directions, and then meet it.

First direction: humanity has heard something close to unmediated divine speech, once, at Sinai, and the recorded response is not satisfaction but terror. The people beg Moses to mediate: speak to us yourself, but do not let God speak to us. Session 1 planted this (the refusal of Moses's request as protection); tonight it becomes the people's own request. The demand for directness, granted, turned immediately into a plea for distance.

Second direction: the Incarnation is the Christian claim that God did what the objection demands, in the only register a human being can survive and understand: he spoke as one of us. Hebrews 1:1-2 frames all prior revelation as prologue to this, and John 14:8-9 records the demand in its purest form, from an apostle: show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied. Jesus's reply is the study's title turned around: he who has seen me has seen the Father. Whether to trust that reply is a further question (and the seeker's live question in its sharpest form, not whether God spoke directly to humanity but whether he has spoken to me, is the business of the rest of the study; do not pretend tonight closes it). But the demand itself cannot be said to have gone unanswered.

## OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

The Sinai theophany (Exodus 19-20) is the Old Testament's summit of direct divine speech: fire, cloud, trumpet, and the people trembling at a distance. Their plea for a mediator becomes, in the Old Testament's own arc, the office of prophet: Deuteronomy 18:15-18 promises a prophet like Moses, raised from among the people, into whose mouth God will put his words. The New Testament reads that arc as converging on Christ: the Word who was with God becomes flesh and dwells among us (John 1:1, 14), the image of the invisible God (Colossians 1:15). The hiddenness texts of Session 1 and the mediated speech of Sinai are not the story's end; they are its setup.

### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

Writing on the road to his martyrdom around the year 107, St. Ignatius teaches in his *Letter to the Magnesians* that there is one God, who manifested himself through Jesus Christ his Son. In the reading printed by the standard critical editions, St. Ignatius calls the Son God's Word proceeding from silence (leaders: the phrase carries an ancient textual variant, and some copies read the reverse; the manifestation teaching itself is undisputed). Taken in the critical text, the image is the session in one line: the silence the seeker complains of is real, and the Christian claim is that a Word came out of it, once, decisively, in the flesh.

### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. IRENAEUS OF LYONS

St. Irenaeus, in *Against Heresies* (Book IV.20.7), teaches that the glory of God is the living human being, and the life of the human being is the vision of God. For St. Irenaeus the Son is precisely how the invisible Father becomes seeable without destroying the seer: what Moses was denied at the cleft of the rock is given, humanly, in Christ.

### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. ATHANASIUS

St. Athanasius teaches, in substance, in *On the Incarnation* that the Word took a visible body so that those who could not lift their eyes to invisible things might know the Father through his works in the flesh. God stooped to the register we could read. The Incarnation, for St. Athanasius, is not God shouting louder; it is God translating himself.

## CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 65:** Christ, the Son of God made man, is the Father's one, perfect, and unsurpassable Word. The paragraph itself quotes St. John of the Cross: in giving us his Son, God spoke everything to us at once in this sole Word, and he has no more to say. Note for your own precision: the saying is St. John of the Cross (*Ascent of Mount Carmel*), quoted by the Catechism at this paragraph. It also closes a circle for your group: the saint who cried, where have you hidden, in Session 1 is the same saint the Church quotes on God having spoken everything.
- **CCC 73:** God has revealed himself fully by sending his own Son, in whom he has established his covenant for ever; the Son is his Father's definitive Word.
- **CCC 516:** Christ's whole earthly life, his words and deeds, his silences and sufferings, is Revelation of the Father.

## THREAD WATCH

The sealed guess resolves tonight: envelopes open just before the John 14 discovery, exactly as scripted in the Discussion Guide. The study's main thread, God has a pattern of speaking, takes its biggest step (creation, prophets, and now the Son) but does not resolve: the seeker's live question, how does a Word

spoken then reach me now, is named aloud tonight and deliberately left open. It resolves in Session 6. Do not resolve it early.

### **SESSION GOALS**

1. Let the group discover that divine speech without a human mediator was offered at Sinai and that the people themselves asked for mediation.
2. Open the sealed guesses and let John 14:8 land as the group's own question, already asked.
3. Present the Incarnation as God's direct speech in a human register, per Hebrews 1:1-2.
4. Name, without resolving, the remaining question: how that Word reaches us now.

### **TIME NOTE**

Runs 75 to 90 minutes as written. If short: cut the Colossians 1:15 discovery first, then reduce Win to a single question. Do not cut Sinai, the envelope opening, or John 14.

## Part 2: Discussion Guide

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### OPENING PRAYER

*Leader prays:* God, three weeks ago we told you, sealed in ink, what it would take. Tonight we ask only this: whatever you have already said, help us hear it as if for the first time. Amen.

### WIN

5. Have you ever known someone only through letters, messages, or someone else's stories, and then met them in person? What changed?
6. If you could ask God one question face to face, and had to survive the meeting, what would you ask?

### BUILD

**Leader, restate the founding objection at full strength.** This whole study began here: if heaven and hell are real, a loving God would not whisper through old books. He would speak directly. Tonight we test that demand against Sinai, where something like it was granted, and against the one time Scripture records it asked outright.

**Live discovery.** Find Exodus 20:18-19, just after the Ten Commandments are spoken. Read it aloud.

- 3. God is speaking as directly as he ever speaks in the Old Testament. What do the people ask for, in their own words?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

They ask for mediation: *"You speak to us, and we will hear; but let not God speak to us, lest we die"* (Exodus 20:19). The one time the demand for direct divine speech was granted, the hearers begged for distance. This is Session 1's discovery from the other side: there, God shields Moses for his protection; here, the people plead for the shield themselves. The demand for directness assumes directness would be bearable. Sinai is the Bible's evidence that it is not, for creatures like us, yet.

- 4. Honest question for everyone: when you imagine God speaking to you directly, are you imagining something comfortable? Should you be?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

Let this breathe; it is a heart question, not a trick. Draw out: most of us imagine direct divine speech as reassurance, but the great theophanies, Sinai, Isaiah in the temple, the Transfiguration, produce awe and fear before they produce comfort. Wanting God at full volume may be wanting something we could not stand.

**The envelopes.** Pause the study. Hand each person their sealed guess from Session 1. Each person opens it and rereads, silently, what they wrote: what would it take for you to believe? No sharing aloud unless someone volunteers. Then say only this: someone in Scripture asked a question strikingly close to yours, and we are about to read him.

**Live discovery.** Find John 14:8-9. Read it aloud, slowly.

- 5. What does Philip ask for? What does he say it would accomplish?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

*"Lord, show us the Father, and we shall be satisfied"* (John 14:8). Philip's request is this study's title and, for many in the room, a striking parallel to the sealed sentence they are holding: show us,

directly, and that will settle it. He is not a skeptic; he is an apostle, at the Last Supper, and Jesus receives the request even as he gently chides the not-yet-seeing: Have I been with you so long, and yet you do not know me, Philip?

- 6. And what is Jesus's answer?

**ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.**

*"He who has seen me has seen the Father"* (John 14:9). The claim is staggering: the direct sight Philip wants has been standing in front of him at the dinner table. Not a vision that kills, not fire on a mountain: a face, a voice, a friend. Whether to believe that claim is a real and further question; but notice what can no longer be said: that the demand went unheard. It was asked by an apostle and answered by Christ.

**Live discovery.** Find Hebrews 1:1-2. Read it aloud.

- 7. How does this text organize everything God has ever said?

**ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.**

*"In many and various ways God spoke of old to our fathers by the prophets; but in these last days he has spoken to us by a Son"* (Hebrews 1:1-2). Hebrews names the prophets; the Church reads all earlier revelation, including the creation-speech our sessions traced, as preparation fulfilled here. The Son is not one more message; he is the Speaker arriving in person, in the only register human beings can bear: a human life. The Incarnation is the Christian answer to, why does God not speak directly: he did, and the speech has a name.

**Name the live question, then leave it open.** Say plainly: the honest comeback is obvious, and some of you are thinking it: that was then. Philip got a face; I got a book. Notice the question has just sharpened into its final form: not, has God spoken directly to humanity, but, has he spoken to ME. How a Word spoken then reaches this person now is a real question, and this study is not going to rush the answer. Hold it in that exact form. It is precisely where we are headed.

**DIG DEEPER**

If time allows: John 1:14, *"And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth,"* with John 1:18 alongside it: no one has ever seen God, and the Son has made him known. And Colossians 1:15 names Christ *"the image of the invisible God."* The vocabulary of Session 1, invisible, unseen, hidden, is all still here; the claim is that it now has a face.

**SEND**

7. Reread your unsealed sentence one more time, privately. Does what you wrote look different on the far side of tonight, or the same? You do not have to say which.
8. If it were true that to see Jesus is to see the Father, what would be the first thing about God you would have to revise?

**LIVE IT THIS WEEK**

- Read one chapter of a Gospel this week, any chapter, with a single question in mind: if Jesus, the incarnate Son, perfectly reveals the Father, what is the Father like?

- Keep your unsealed guess somewhere you will see it. The study is not done with it, and neither, perhaps, is God.

#### **SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE**

*“He who has seen me has seen the Father.”* John 14:9

#### **CLOSING PRAYER**

*Leader prays:* Father, we asked you to show yourself, and the Church's answer is a name: Jesus. For those of us who believe it, make the seeing sharper. For those of us who cannot yet, honor the sentence they sealed, and meet them in the asking, as you met Philip. Amen.

### Part 3: Leader Reference Card

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*Every passage used in Session 3, in order of appearance. All quotations RSV2CE.*

- **Exodus 20:18-19** the people beg for mediation at Sinai (live discovery; do not cut)
- **John 14:8-9** Philip's request and Christ's answer (live discovery; envelopes open just before; memory verse; do not cut)
- **Hebrews 1:1-2** God has spoken by a Son (live discovery)
- **John 1:14, 18** the Word became flesh; the Son has made him known (Dig Deeper)
- **Colossians 1:15** the image of the invisible God (Dig Deeper; first cut if short)
- **Deuteronomy 18:15-18** the promised prophet like Moses (leader background, OT Roots)

**Catechism:** CCC 65 (quoting St. John of the Cross, Ascent of Mount Carmel); 73; 516.

**Voices:** St. Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Magnesians; St. Irenaeus, Against Heresies IV.20.7; St. Athanasius, On the Incarnation (summary).



## Session 4: Are the Stakes Fair?

*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 the judgment Scripture actually describes is not a quiz on belief but a rendering according to works, love, knowledge, and conscience, and that hell, in the Church's teaching, is not imposed on the honestly mistaken but chosen by definitive self-exclusion.

**Catholic Touchstone:** God predestines no one to hell; a willful turning away from God, persisted in until the end, is required, and at the evening of life we will be judged on our love (CCC 1021 to 1022, 1033, 1036 to 1037).

#### HOSTING YOUR SEEKER FRIEND

This is the session most likely to touch open wounds. Two cautions and one banned move:

- Someone in the room may be grieving a person who died outside the faith, and may not say so. If the room goes quiet in a heavy way, do not fill the silence with theology. Name gently that the Church entrusts every soul to a God more just and more merciful than we are, and move on without forcing resolution.
- Your seeker friend may raise a specific person: a good atheist friend, a grandparent. Do not adjudicate individuals, ever. The Church herself has never declared a single person damned.
- Banned move: do not soften tonight into everyone is fine. The texts end in real separation, and the seeker will smell it instantly if you flatten them. Fairness, not comfort, is tonight's promise.

#### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Tonight's objection is the one this study was born from, and it usually has two prongs. First, proportion: eternal consequences for a finite life's failures seems infinitely disproportionate. Second, grounds: if the decisive factor is belief, then honest mistake is punished like malice, and an honest seeker who dies unconvinced is damned for the crime of being unpersuaded. State both prongs at full strength; they are serious, and the second one rests on a premise this session will test, namely that Scripture describes judgment as a belief quiz.

What the texts show is different. Romans 2 says God renders to every one according to works, and that Gentiles without the law are judged by the law written on their hearts, their conscience bearing witness. Matthew 25 renders the last judgment as a judgment on concrete love, and the judged on both sides are surprised, which a belief quiz would not produce. Luke 12 scales accountability to knowledge: much given, much required. And John 3 locates condemnation not in God's eagerness but in a preference: light has come, and men loved darkness. Judgment, in Scripture's own account, is a rendering of what a person, knowing what they knew, loved and chose.

On hell, hold the Church's actual position with both hands. On one side: hell is real, its possibility is a defined and constant teaching, and Christ warns of it more than anyone in Scripture. On the other: the Church teaches that God predestines no one to hell, that mortal sin requires full knowledge and deliberate consent, and that a definitive self-exclusion persisted in until the end is what damnation is. She has never taught that the honestly mistaken are damned for honest mistake, and she has never

named one damned soul. What she has not defined, do not define for her: Scripture's warnings are real, the Church prays for the salvation of all, and presumption in either direction, universalism or a well-populated hell announced with confidence, goes beyond what is given. The question of those who never hear the Gospel at all is planted tonight (CCC 847) and has its own full evening in the deep-dive sessions.

### OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

The judgment according to deeds is not a New Testament innovation: Romans 2:6 directly echoes the Old Testament (Psalm 62:12, with Proverbs 24:12 a close parallel: God requites man according to his work). Ezekiel 18 spends a whole chapter dismantling the idea of inherited or arbitrary condemnation: the soul that sins shall die, each judged for their own way, and the chapter ends with God pleading that he has no pleasure in the death of anyone. The Judge of all the earth doing right is Abraham's own argument (Genesis 18:25). The New Testament sharpens all of it: the criterion is love (Matthew 25), the measure is knowledge (Luke 12), and the Judge is the same Christ who died for the judged.

#### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

St. Augustine's famous line from his *Sermons* (Sermon 169): God, who created you without you, will not justify you without you. Salvation is never imposed and damnation is never arbitrary: the God who needed no consent to make us awaits our consent to save us. The stakes are real precisely because the freedom is real.

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

In his *Letter to the Duke of Norfolk*, St. John Henry Newman calls conscience the aboriginal Vicar of Christ: a witness to God's law already present in every human heart, before any missionary arrives. Newman is equally insistent that conscience can err and so must be formed as well as obeyed; it is a voice that binds, not a license. This is Romans 2 in one phrase, and it matters for tonight: no one, on the Church's account, faces judgment as a stranger to the Judge.

#### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN OF THE CROSS

A saying of St. John of the Cross from his *Sayings of Light and Love*, quoted by the Catechism itself at CCC 1022: at the evening of life, we shall be judged on our love. The saint of Session 1's hiddenness returns with the session's whole point: the examination at the end is not a theology exam. It is an examination in love.

### CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 1021 to 1022:** The particular judgment renders each life its due in reference to Christ, and the paragraph quotes St. John of the Cross: at the evening of life, we shall be judged on our love.
- **CCC 1033:** Hell is the state of definitive self-exclusion from communion with God and the blessed. Self-exclusion is the Catechism's own word.
- **CCC 1036 to 1037:** The Church's warnings are a call to responsibility, and God predestines no one to go to hell; a willful turning away from God, persisted in until the end, is required.
- **CCC 1861:** Mortal sin requires grave matter, full knowledge, and complete consent; unintentional ignorance can diminish or remove culpability (CCC 1860), and God alone judges a person's knowledge and consent.

- **CCC 847:** Planted only, for the deep-dive: those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel, but seek God with a sincere heart and, moved by grace, strive to do his will as known through conscience, may achieve eternal salvation.

### **THREAD WATCH**

The main thread develops through Newman's conscience material: conscience joins creation, prophets, and the Son in the pattern of God's speaking (it is how the Judge has already addressed every person to be judged). Do not resolve; the pattern completes in Session 6. Plant the deep-dive pointer aloud when CCC 847 comes up: the question of those who never hear gets its own evening. The unsealed guesses from Session 3 are not used tonight; do not mention them.

### **SESSION GOALS**

1. State both prongs of the fairness objection, proportion and grounds, at full strength.
2. Let the group discover the biblical texture of judgment: works, love, knowledge, conscience, alongside the abiding necessity of faith and grace.
3. Present hell as definitive self-exclusion, never imposed on honest mistake, with the Church's real warnings intact.
4. Correct the framing the study began with: Catholic teaching has never been that a belief quiz determines heaven and hell, while keeping faith, grace, and repentance integral rather than optional.

### **TIME NOTE**

Runs 75 to 90 minutes as written. If short: cut the Luke 12:47-48 discovery first, folding its point (accountability scales to knowledge) into the Romans 2 answer; then move John 3:17-19 into the closing. Do not cut Matthew 25 or Romans 2.

## Part 2: Discussion Guide

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### OPENING PRAYER

*Leader prays:* Judge of all the earth, you will do right; that is Abraham's argument and tonight it is ours. Give us the nerve to look at judgment without flinching and without caricature, and the humility to let you be more just than our fears and more merciful than our verdicts. Amen.

### WIN

5. Tell us about a time you were judged by someone who did not know the whole story. What did the missing context change?
6. What would a judgment have to account for, for you to call it perfectly fair?

### BUILD

**Leader, present the objection at full strength, both prongs.** Read slowly: First, eternal consequences for one finite life seems infinitely out of proportion: no crime of seventy years deserves forever. Second, if belief is the deciding factor, then honest mistake is punished like malice, and the sincere seeker who dies unconvinced is damned for failing to be persuaded. A God who ran that system would not be just.

- 3. Sit with it before answering: which prong lands harder on you, proportion or grounds? Why?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

Honor both. Then name the premise the second prong rests on: it assumes judgment is a belief quiz. That assumption, not the seeker's sense of fairness, is what tonight's texts will put on trial. If Scripture describes a judgment that accounts for what each person knew, loved, and chose, the objection changes shape.

**Live discovery.** Find Romans 2:6-8, then keep a finger there and find Romans 2:14-16. Read both aloud.

- 4. According to verse 6, what does God render to every one according to? And in 14-16, on what basis are people who never received the law judged?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

According to works: "*For he will render to every man according to his works*" (Romans 2:6), and Paul is echoing Israel's own Scriptures (Psalm 62:12; cf. Proverbs 24:12). Gentiles without the law show its work written on their hearts, their conscience bearing witness. Two corrections to the objection land at once: the criterion is not bare belief, and no one comes to judgment as a stranger, because conscience already bears witness to God's law in every heart. Judgment, in Paul, is calibrated to what a person actually had.

**Live discovery.** Find Matthew 25:31-46, the last judgment. Read it aloud, all of it.

- 5. What is the criterion in Jesus' most extended direct depiction of the last judgment? And notice: what surprises both the sheep and the goats?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

Concrete love: food, drink, welcome, clothing, care, presence, and the King's staggering identification: "*as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me*" (Matthew 25:40). Both groups are surprised (Lord, when did we see you?), which no belief quiz could produce:

you cannot be surprised by whether you believed. Matthew paints people discovering they had met, or refused, Christ in the least of these; how far that reaches in any particular life, God alone judges. The judgment reads the love, not the quiz sheet.

**Live discovery.** Find Luke 12:47-48. Read it aloud.

- 6. How does Jesus scale accountability in this passage?

**ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.**

To knowledge: the servant who knew and did not act is dealt with more severely than the one who did not know, *“Every one to whom much is given, of him will much be required”* (Luke 12:48). Jesus himself teaches graded responsibility, accountability proportioned to knowledge. Pair it with the Church's precision (CCC 1860, 847) rather than stretching one verse into a theory of every case; but the honest seeker's fear, that sincere ignorance is simply billed at malice rates, finds no support in the Judge on record.

**Reason, then the Church's teaching.** Now put the pieces together with what the Church actually teaches. Hell is real, and Christ warns of it in earnest; this study will not sell you a heaven with no stakes. But the Catechism's own definition of hell is definitive self-exclusion from communion with God (CCC 1033), and the Church teaches flatly that God predestines no one to hell: a willful turning away, persisted in to the end, is required (CCC 1037). Losing God takes full knowledge and full consent (CCC 1861). And the Church has never once, in twenty centuries of canonizing saints, declared a single human being damned. One guardrail so the correction does not overcorrect: none of this makes faith optional. Where the Gospel is known, faith, repentance, and grace-borne charity remain integral to salvation (CCC 161, 1815); judgment according to works is not an alternative to faith but the test of its reality, faith working through love. What tonight's texts refute is the belief-quiz caricature, not the necessity of responding to Christ.

- 7. Self-exclusion is the Catechism's word. How does the fairness question change if hell is not a sentence imposed for wrong answers but a refusal ratified forever?

**ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.**

Draw out: the proportion prong assumed hell is external punishment for finite crimes; Catholic tradition has commonly understood hell's eternity as the eternity of a definitive choice rather than a sentence outrunning a crime; the Catechism's own word is self-exclusion (CCC 1033). And the grounds prong dissolves against the actual criteria: works, love, knowledge, conscience, consent. Keep two hedges honest. The Church has not defined who or how many are in hell, and she prays for the salvation of all; do not let the group settle into either confident universalism or a confidently populated hell. And the person who never hears the Gospel at all is a real question with a real answer in Church teaching (CCC 847): it gets its own full evening.

**DIG DEEPER**

If time allows: John 3:17-19. God's aim is stated flatly: not condemnation but salvation. And the judgment is located in a preference: *“the light has come into the world, and men loved darkness rather than light”* (John 3:19). Also Ezekiel 18, a whole Old Testament chapter against arbitrary condemnation, ending with God's plea that he has no pleasure in the death of anyone.

**SEND**

7. If the examination at the end is an examination in love, how does that change what preparing for it looks like, this week, for you?
8. Which picture of God did you walk in with tonight: eager to condemn, or, as John 3:17 has it, sent not to condemn? Which did the texts show you?

### **LIVE IT THIS WEEK**

- Do one deliberate, inconvenient act of Matthew 25 love this week: feed, visit, welcome, clothe, or show up. Do not announce it.
- Continue the daily honest sentence to God. If tonight raised a fear or a grief, that is this week's sentence.

### **SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE**

*“For God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him.” John 3:17*

### **CLOSING PRAYER**

*Leader prays:* Father, you sent your Son not to condemn the world. For every person we love whose faith we do not know, we entrust them to a justice better informed than ours and a mercy more determined than ours. Teach us to prepare for the evening of life the only way you have said it is graded: by love. Amen.

### Part 3: Leader Reference Card

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*Every passage used in Session 4, in order of appearance. All quotations RSV2CE.*

- **Romans 2:6-8, 14-16** rendered according to works; conscience bears witness (live discovery; do not cut)
- **Matthew 25:31-46** the last judgment as a judgment on love (live discovery; do not cut)
- **Luke 12:47-48** accountability scaled to knowledge (live discovery; first cut if short)
- **John 3:17-19** sent not to condemn; men loved darkness (Dig Deeper; memory verse from v. 17)
- **Psalms 62:12; Proverbs 24:12** the OT echo and parallel behind Romans 2:6 (leader background)
- **Ezekiel 18; Genesis 18:25** no arbitrary condemnation; the Judge will do right (leader background, Dig Deeper)

**Catechism:** CCC 1021 to 1022 (quoting St. John of the Cross, Sayings of Light and Love); 1033; 1036 to 1037; 1861; 847 (planted for the deep-dive).

**Voices:** St. Augustine, Sermon 169; St. John Henry Newman, Letter to the Duke of Norfolk; St. John of the Cross, Sayings of Light and Love (as quoted at CCC 1022).

## Session 5: Honest Doubt

*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 how Jesus actually treats doubters in the Gospels: with evidence, presence, and commissioning rather than scolding, and that Scripture commands mercy toward those who doubt.

**Catholic Touchstone:** Faith is certain because it rests on the word of God, yet revealed truth can seem obscure to human reason and experience; the Church distinguishes involuntary doubt, the honest difficulty in believing, from voluntary doubt, and treats the first with mercy (CCC 157, 164, 2088).

#### HOSTING YOUR SEEKER FRIEND

Tonight lives or dies on the believers in the room. Three commitments:

- Believers go first. Before the seeker is asked anything, at least one host confesses a real, current or past doubt of their own, specifically. Nothing in six weeks will build trust faster, and nothing will destroy it faster than performed certainty.
- Do not treat your friend's doubt as a problem to be solved tonight. The session's claim is that Jesus keeps company with doubters; keep company.
- If anyone's doubt is tangled with grief, depression, or a dark season, do not theologize it. Acknowledge it, leave silence, and afterward, privately, point toward real support: a priest, a counselor, a trusted friend. The Church has room for the dark; so should this group.

#### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The objection tonight comes in two voices. The skeptic's version: persistent doubt among believers is evidence against the whole thing; a real God would produce steady believers, and the wobble in the pews is data. The seeker's quieter version: my doubt proves faith is not for me; whatever this is, I am disqualified. Both versions assume that doubt and faith are opposites and that the tradition treats doubters as failures. Tonight's texts test that assumption against Jesus's recorded behavior.

The pattern in the texts is remarkably consistent. The father at the foot of the mountain confesses belief and unbelief in one breath, and Jesus heals his son anyway. John the Baptist, whom Jesus calls the greatest born of women, sends the searching question from prison, his own doubt or his disciples', interpreters differ, and Jesus answers with evidence and then praises him to the crowds. Thomas demands proof, and the risen Christ arrives with the proof requested, wounds first. At the Great Commission itself, Matthew records that some doubted, and Jesus commissions them anyway. Jude commands the community: convince some, who doubt. Engaging doubters is apostolic instruction. (Leaders: many translations of Jude 22 read, have mercy on some who doubt; the manuscripts vary, and both readings serve tonight.)

Hold the balance honestly. Jesus's word to Thomas ends in an exhortation, do not be faithless, but believing, and a beatitude for those who believe without seeing; the texts never celebrate doubt as a destination. The Church's precision helps here (CCC 2088): involuntary doubt, the hesitation and difficulty an honest person cannot simply switch off, is not sin, while voluntary doubt, the refusal to



hold what one knows, is another matter. Newman's distinction runs the same line: difficulties are not doubts, and ten thousand of the first need not add up to one of the second. Tonight's mercy is real; so is the direction of travel.

### OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

The prayer of struggle is an Old Testament genre. Roughly a third of the Psalter is lament; the psalmists interrogate God to his face and are canonized for it. Psalm 77, which the group read this week, models the turn: the psalmist doubts aloud (has his steadfast love for ever ceased?) and then deliberately remembers the deeds of the LORD, arguing himself back toward trust from evidence, exactly the movement Hebrews 11:19 attributed to Abraham. Job's book holds protest that God receives and corrects: the friends' tidy answers are rejected (42:7), Job himself is interrogated and humbled (42:6), and then restored. The New Testament doubters stand in this lineage, and Christ receives them the way the LORD received Job: with presence.

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

In his *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*, St. John Henry Newman writes that ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt, as he understood the subject. In this guide's gloss of his distinction: a difficulty is a question not yet resolved; a doubt is a verdict. For Newman, an honest mind can carry unresolved difficulties inside a settled trust, the way a good marriage carries unanswered questions without becoming an open question itself.

#### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. GREGORY THE GREAT

St. Gregory the Great teaches in his *Homilies on the Gospels* (Homily 26) that the disbelief of Thomas has done more for our faith than the belief of the other disciples: because Thomas touched and was convinced, every later generation's doubt finds its answer in his. In God's providence, St. Gregory says, the doubter's demand was allowed precisely so that the Church would forever hold the evidence he required.

#### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. TERESA OF CALCUTTA

St. Teresa of Calcutta's posthumously published letters (gathered in *Come Be My Light*) reveal that for roughly the last half century of her life she experienced a profound interior darkness, a felt absence of God, through which she continued to pray, serve, and believe. The Church, which reviews a candidate's writings in the canonization process, canonized her. Felt certainty, it turns out, is not the measure of real faith; fidelity in the dark is.

### CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 157:** Faith is certain, more certain than all human knowledge, because it is founded on the very word of God; yet revealed truths can seem obscure to human reason and experience.
- **CCC 164:** We walk by faith, not by sight; faith can be put to the test, and the experience of evil, suffering, and injustice can seem to contradict the Good News.
- **CCC 2088:** Voluntary doubt disregards or refuses to hold as true what God has revealed and the Church proposes for belief; involuntary doubt is hesitation in believing and difficulty in overcoming objections. The honest struggler and the refuser are not the same case.

### THREAD WATCH

The main thread develops one last time before resolution: notice that in every text tonight, Jesus meets doubt with evidence and presence, deeds reported to John, wounds offered to Thomas. God's pattern of speaking bends toward showing up. Next session it resolves; tonight, do not name it. Envelopes are not used tonight; do not mention them.

### **SESSION GOALS**

1. State both versions of the doubt objection, the skeptic's and the seeker's, at full strength.
2. Let the group discover Jesus's consistent treatment of doubters: mercy, evidence, presence, commissioning.
3. Establish the Church's distinction between involuntary and voluntary doubt, and Newman's between difficulty and doubt.
4. Have the believing hosts model confessed doubt before any seeker is asked to.

### **TIME NOTE**

Runs 75 to 90 minutes as written. If short: fold the Matthew 28:17 discovery into the Thomas answer, then cut the Jude 22 line from discussion (keep it in the leader's pocket). Do not cut Mark 9, Matthew 11, or John 20.

## Part 2: Discussion Guide

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### OPENING PRAYER

*Leader prays:* Lord, we believe; help our unbelief. That prayer is already in your book, so we know you take it. Tonight we bring you the sure and the unsure parts of every person here, and we ask you to treat us the way the Gospels show you treating people like us. Amen.

### WIN

5. Hosts first, and specifically: name a doubt you have actually carried, or carry, about God. Not a safe one. (Leader: do not move on until at least one believer has really answered.)
6. Where did you learn what doubt is supposed to mean about a person: that it is honest, or that it is shameful?

### BUILD

**Leader, present the objection at full strength, both voices.** Read slowly: The skeptic says, look at the believers: they wobble, they waver, they lie awake. A real God would produce steady conviction; all this doubt is evidence against him. And the quieter voice, maybe in this room, says: my doubt proves this is not for me. Whatever faith is, I am disqualified.

- 3. Both versions assume faith and doubt cannot live in the same person. Before we test that: has that assumption cost you, or someone you love, anything?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

Let stories surface; do not argue with them. Then frame the test: the only way to know how this tradition treats doubters is to watch its Founder do it, on the record, four times.

**Live discovery.** Find Mark 9:20-27, a father with an afflicted son. Read verses 22 to 24 aloud.

- 4. The father's prayer in verse 24 is a contradiction spoken in one breath. What is it, and what does Jesus do with it?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

*"I believe; help my unbelief!"* (Mark 9:24). Belief and unbelief, confessed together, by the same man, in the same sentence, and Jesus heals his son. Jesus receives the father's imperfect faith and heals, and note verse 23, all things are possible to him who believes: the passage invites the divided heart to come honestly AND calls it to grow; it does not certify certainty as the entry fee. This prayer has long been cherished and prayed in the Church.

**Live discovery.** Find Matthew 11:2-6, then keep a finger there and look at verse 11. Read 2 to 6 aloud.

- 5. Who is asking whether Jesus is really the one, and from where? How does Jesus answer, and then what does he say about the asker?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

John the Baptist, from prison, the man who baptized Jesus and pointed him out: *"Are you he who is to come, or shall we look for another?"* (Matthew 11:3). Jesus points the messengers to the messianic deeds they hear and see (in Luke's parallel, performed before their eyes, Luke 7:21), adds *"blessed is he who takes no offense at me"* (11:6), and then turns to the crowd and calls John the greatest born of women (11:11). Whether the question was John's own or carried for his disciples, it received

evidence, a warning against taking offense, and public honor, and no loss of standing. Note what Jesus's answer was made of: not a rebuke, evidence.

**Live discovery.** Find John 20:24-29, Thomas. Read it aloud, slowly.

- 6. Thomas sets conditions for belief: what are they? And when Jesus comes, what does he do about those conditions?

**ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.**

Thomas demands to see and touch the wounds, and the risen Christ arrives and offers exactly that: *"Put your finger here, and see my hands; and put out your hand, and place it in my side; do not be faithless, but believing"* (John 20:27). He meets the demand, and then points beyond it: *"Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe"* (20:29). Hold both halves. Mercy toward the doubter is total; and the exhortation is real: the texts keep company with doubt while still calling it toward trust. Doubt is met, not celebrated.

**Live discovery.** Find Matthew 28:16-20, the Great Commission. Read verse 17 carefully.

- 7. Verse 17 records something startling about the group receiving the Great Commission. What is it, and what does Jesus do next?

**ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.**

*"And when they saw him they worshiped him; but some doubted"* (Matthew 28:17). At the Resurrection appearance itself, some doubted, and the next verses are Jesus commissioning that exact group to make disciples of all nations. He entrusted the mission to a room that included doubters. The Church has never, from minute one, been a doubt-free zone, on the testimony of her own founding documents.

**Reason, then the Church's precision.** Offer Newman's distinction, in our own words: a difficulty is a question not yet resolved; a doubt is a verdict; his line from the Apologia is that ten thousand difficulties do not make one doubt. And the Catechism's (CCC 2088): involuntary doubt, the hesitation an honest person cannot switch off, is not sin; it is a condition Jesus is shown treating with evidence and patience. The direction of travel still matters, and no one tonight is being told doubt is the destination. But no one gets to say the doubter is disqualified. The record says otherwise.

- 8. Which have you been carrying: difficulties, or a verdict? Would the people around you know the difference?

**ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.**

A self-locating question; let it be personal and do not collect answers aloud unless offered. If it helps, name Jude 22, a one-line apostolic command: convince some, who doubt. Engaging doubters patiently is an instruction, not a concession.

**DIG DEEPER**

If time allows: Psalm 77, which the group read this week, models the movement from doubt to remembrance: the psalmist asks whether God's steadfast love has ceased for ever, then deliberately calls to mind the deeds of the LORD, reasoning from evidence back toward trust. The same movement as Abraham in Hebrews 11:19, and available to anyone this week.

## **SEND**

7. What would it change to bring your doubt to God instead of only holding it about him: to pray it, Mark 9:24 style, instead of just thinking it?
8. Who is one person who needs to hear from you that doubt did not disqualify Thomas, or John, or the eleven, and will not disqualify them?

## **LIVE IT THIS WEEK**

- Pray Mark 9:24 once a day, in those words, whatever your ratio of belief to unbelief currently is.
- Try Psalm 77's move once: when the doubt surfaces, deliberately list three things, evidence, experiences, people, that originally made God seem possible or real to you, and look at the list before you rule.

## **SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE**

*"I believe; help my unbelief!"* Mark 9:24

## **CLOSING PRAYER**

*Leader prays:* Lord Jesus, you answered a father's divided heart with healing, a prisoner's question with evidence, and a skeptic's conditions with your own wounds. Do with our doubts what you did with theirs. We believe; help our unbelief. Amen.

### Part 3: Leader Reference Card

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*Every passage used in Session 5, in order of appearance. All quotations RSV2CE.*

- **Mark 9:20-27** I believe; help my unbelief (live discovery; memory verse from v. 24; do not cut)
- **Matthew 11:2-6, 11** John the Baptist's question from prison; answered with evidence, then praised (live discovery; do not cut)
- **John 20:24-29** Thomas: conditions met, then the beatitude (live discovery; do not cut)
- **Matthew 28:16-20** some doubted; commissioned anyway (live discovery; first fold if short)
- **Jude 22** convince some, who doubt (leader's pocket; second cut)
- **Psalms 77** doubt turning to remembrance (Dig Deeper; ties to this week's reading)
- **Hebrews 11:19** Abraham's reasoning trust (callback to Session 2)

**Catechism:** CCC 157; 164; 2088.

**Voices:** St. John Henry Newman, *Apologia Pro Vita Sua*; St. Gregory the Great, *Homilies on the Gospels*, Homily 26; St. Teresa of Calcutta, letters published in *Come Be My Light*.

## Session 6: To Whom Shall We Go?

*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 where the question left open in Session 3 lands: how a Word spoken then reaches a person now. In the Emmaus account they find the pattern, Scripture opened and bread broken, and they discover that the pattern was promised, continued from the Church's first days, and still stands as a present-tense invitation.

**Catholic Touchstone:** Christ is present in his Church's liturgy: in his word, since it is he who speaks when Scripture is read, and most especially, truly, really, and substantially, under the Eucharistic species (CCC 1088, 1373 to 1374).

#### HOSTING YOUR SEEKER FRIEND

This is the send-off. Three commitments for hosts:

- No pressure for a decision tonight. The study ends in an invitation, not an altar call; the sealed guesses were between each person and God, and they stay that way.
- Make one concrete, no-strings invitation, personally, before the week is out: come to Mass with me once, sit with me, and afterward I will answer anything or nothing, your call. Specific beats general.
- Check in one on one with your friend within the week, and if they are open to more, walk them personally to the next step: another study, a conversation with the pastor, or simply a standing Sunday seat next to you. Do not let the last session be the last contact.

#### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Session 3 left a question deliberately open, and your seeker friend has been carrying it for three weeks: Philip got a face; I got a book. How does a Word spoken then reach me now? Tonight resolves the study's main thread by answering it, and the answer is a pattern the group will find rather than be told.

The Emmaus account is the resolution text. Two disciples walk with the risen Christ unrecognized; he opens the Scriptures to them and their hearts burn; he breaks bread and their eyes are opened; and the moment they recognize him, he vanishes from sight. Notice what the story does with hiddenness: recognition and veiling arrive together. Christ does not end his hiddenness at Emmaus; in the Church's long reading, it is carried from absence into sacrament. The shape of the encounter, Scripture opened, then bread broken, is the shape of the Mass, and the Church has long recognized her own Eucharistic gathering in it (many scholars read Luke as writing with that assembly in view). Acts 2:42 shows the first community already living that shape; St. Justin, describing Sunday worship around the year 155, shows the core pattern already clearly recognizable a century later; and it is what your parish will do next Sunday.

Two honesty notes. First, the final steelman (that this is circular, that liturgy only feels like divine speech to the already convinced) deserves its full weight; the answer is not a proof but an invitation with a structure: Revelation 3:20 describes a voice that must be heard and a door that must be opened, and the study's last move is, come and stand where the pattern happens, and listen. Taste and see is an

experiment the seeker is invited to run, not a syllogism. Second, be precise about Communion itself: a seeker attending Mass is warmly welcome at everything except receiving the Eucharist, which is communion in a faith they have not yet professed. Frame it truthfully and gently: the Church is not withholding a snack; she is refusing to let the most intimate act of union be casual. Tell your friend beforehand, never let them be surprised in the pew.

## OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

The whole study's Old Testament arc completes tonight. The God who hides (Isaiah 45:15, Session 1) fed his people with bread from heaven they did not recognize (*manna*, from the question, what is it?, Exodus 16:15), and promised his presence in a tent at the center of the camp. Psalm 34, this week's reading, issues the experimental invitation, O taste and see that the LORD is good, in exactly the register of Emmaus: a knowing that arrives through approach. The New Testament claims all of it converges: the Son by whom God has spoken (Hebrews 1:1-2; John 1:1) remains present under the consecrated appearance of bread, hidden and given at once. The hiddenness the study began with was never the story's problem; it was the story's manner.

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

The Eucharistic hymn *Adoro Te Devote*, attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas, adores what it calls the hidden Godhead, truly concealed beneath the appearances of bread and wine. Sight, touch, and taste, the hymn says, are deceived here; hearing alone, faith in what the Son has said, is the ground of trust. The hymn holds both movements: it adores the Christ truly hidden here, and its final stanza begs for the unveiled face. In this guide's reflection, that is the study's own arc: the Eucharistic hiding is real, bearable, and provisional, a veil with a promised lifting.

### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. JUSTIN MARTYR

Around the year 155, St. Justin Martyr described Christian Sunday worship for a pagan emperor in his *First Apology*: the memoirs of the apostles and the writings of the prophets are read, the presider exhorts, prayers are offered, and bread and wine over which thanksgiving has been spoken are received, not as common food, but as the flesh and blood of the incarnate Jesus. Scripture opened, bread broken: the Emmaus shape, a century on, already ordinary.

### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

St. Augustine opens his *Confessions* (Book I, chapter 1) with the line the whole study has been circling: God has made us for himself, and our heart is restless until it rests in him. The seeking this study honored in Session 1 was never, for St. Augustine, evidence of God's absence. It was evidence of the destination.

## CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 1088:** Christ is present in his Church's liturgy: in the sacrifice of the Mass, in the person of his minister, especially under the Eucharistic species, in the sacraments, in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy Scriptures are read in the Church, and when the Church prays and sings.
- **CCC 1373 to 1374:** Christ's presence under the Eucharistic species is unique: true, real, and substantial, the whole Christ. The Catechism's language here is the Church's most careful.
- **CCC 104:** In Sacred Scripture the Church constantly finds her nourishment and strength, for in it the Father who is in heaven comes lovingly to meet his children and talks with them. Present tense.



- **CCC 2567:** God tirelessly calls each person to the mysterious encounter of prayer: the bookend of Session 1's CCC 30. The call never stopped; the study has been six weeks of it.

### **THREAD WATCH**

The main thread resolves tonight, out loud, in the scripted moment after the Acts 2:42 discovery: name the whole pattern the study has traced. God speaks through creation and conscience (Sessions 1 and 4), through prophets and witnesses (Session 2), definitively in the Son (Session 3), meeting doubt with evidence and presence (Session 5), and the Son's speech did not stop: it continues where Scripture is opened and the bread is broken, and his presence remains, hidden and real, in the Eucharistic celebration, under the consecrated species. The hiddenness of Session 1 is not solved; it is transfigured: the God who hides himself now hides in order to be approached. The sealed guesses are not collected or discussed; if anyone volunteers theirs, receive it and move on.

### **SESSION GOALS**

1. Resolve Session 3's open question with the Emmaus pattern: Scripture opened, bread broken, presence recognized.
2. Show Christ's abiding presence promised (Matthew 28:20), the pattern practiced from the first days (Acts 2:42), and clearly recognizable in St. Justin, down to next Sunday.
3. Present the final steelman fairly and answer it with the invitation structure of Revelation 3:20 and Psalm 34.
4. End with a concrete, no-pressure invitation and a clear, kind explanation of what a seeker at Mass is and is not invited to do.

### **TIME NOTE**

Runs 75 to 90 minutes as written. If short: cut the Matthew 28:20 discovery, folding its promise into the thread resolution, and trim Win to one question. Do not cut Emmaus, John 6, or the closing invitation.

## Part 2: Discussion Guide

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### OPENING PRAYER

*Leader prays:* Lord Jesus, two of your friends once walked a whole road with you and did not know you until the bread broke. If any of us have been walking that road for six weeks, or for years, open our eyes tonight the way you opened theirs. Amen.

### WIN

5. Six weeks ago you sealed a sentence in an envelope. Without necessarily sharing it: has this study touched what you wrote, or missed it? Be honest; the study can take it.
6. Where in your life does presence reach you best: words, meals, silence, showing up? Why that one?

### BUILD

**Leader, restate the question we left open.** In Session 3 someone said it, or thought it: Philip got a face; I got a book. How does a Word spoken then reach me now? We promised the study was headed at that question. Tonight it arrives.

**Live discovery.** Find Luke 24:13-24, the road to Emmaus, and read it aloud. Then pause.

- 3. Two disciples are walking with the risen Jesus and do not recognize him. What are they doing instead, and what does that feel like from the inside of the story?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

They are rehearsing the whole story of Jesus, accurately, sadly, to his face, and concluding it is over: we had hoped. It is possible, the scene says, to know the facts, stand next to the presence, and still experience absence. Half the room may live there. Luke wrote the scene for them.

**Live discovery.** Now read Luke 24:25-35 aloud, slowly, and watch for two moments of contact.

- 4. What are the two things Jesus does, and what does each one produce in the disciples?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

He opens the Scriptures, and later they say, *“Did not our hearts burn within us while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?”* (Luke 24:32). Then he breaks the bread, and *“he was known to them in the breaking of the bread”* (24:35). Word, then bread; burning, then recognition. And the instant they recognize him, he vanishes from sight: recognition and hiddenness arrive together. He has not ended his hiddenness; in the Church's long reading of this scene, he has carried it into a place his friends can return to. The Church has recognized her own shape here from early times, for Scripture opened and bread broken is what her assembly does; so do we recognize it: it is the Mass.

**Live discovery.** Find Acts 2:42. Read it aloud.

- 5. Days after Pentecost, what four things does the first community devote itself to? Recognize any of them?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

*“And they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers”* (Acts 2:42). The Emmaus shape, institutionalized within weeks: teaching (the Word), the breaking of bread, the prayers, together. The pattern was not invented by later centuries. It is

the Church's first recorded habit.

**Resolve the thread, out loud.** Say it plainly: here is the pattern this study has been tracing for six weeks. God speaks through creation and through conscience. He spoke through prophets and through witnesses who staked their lives on what they saw. He spoke definitively in a Son, who met doubters with evidence and presence. And the speaking did not stop in the first century: he is present where the Scriptures are opened, because it is he who speaks when they are read, and present, hidden and real, in the Eucharistic celebration, under the consecrated species. The God who hides himself, our very first verse, turns out to hide the way a presence hides: close enough to approach. And the question in its sharpest form, has he spoken to ME, is answered in the same present tense: the Scriptures read aloud next Sunday are addressed to you; conscience has been his witness in you all along; and the knock of Revelation 3:20 is singular, if any one hears my voice and opens the door. No one in this room stands outside that sentence. Session 1's complaint was never wrong about the hiddenness. It was wrong about what the hiddenness meant.

**Leader, present the final objection at full strength.** Read slowly: This is circular. You have answered, God does not speak, with, attend our rituals, where he speaks. But the liturgy only feels like divine speech to people already convinced. From outside, it is readings and bread. You have not answered the seeker; you have redecorated the silence.

- 6. What is genuinely strong here? And find Revelation 3:20: what is the structure of the offer it describes?

**ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.**

Concede the real point: no one is claiming the Mass functions as a proof that compels from outside; Session 2 already established that God's evidence invites rather than compels. Then the text: *"Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me"* (Revelation 3:20). Present tense, singular, and it ends in a shared meal. The offer has a structure: a knock that can be heard, a door only the person inside can open, a table on the far side. Psalm 34 gives the method: taste and see. It is an experiment, honestly labeled: come stand where the pattern happens, for six Sundays, say the honest daily sentence, and see. That is not circularity; it is the only kind of test a free relationship allows.

**Live discovery.** Find John 6:66-69. Read it aloud.

- 7. Jesus has just said something so hard that many disciples quit. What is Peter's answer when Jesus asks the Twelve if they will leave too, and what kind of answer is it?

**ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.**

*"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life"* (John 6:68). Notice the context: the walkout happens at the Bread of Life discourse, the Eucharistic teaching itself; the hard saying and the leaving are already about tonight's subject. And notice what Peter's answer is not: it is not, I have resolved every difficulty. It is a comparative judgment, made with difficulties in hand, Session 5's whole lesson: weighed against every alternative, this is where the words of life are. That is the decision actually available to a human being. It is the one the study now hands to each person here.

**DIG DEEPER**

If time allows: Matthew 28:20, the Commission's last line: *"and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age."* The continuing presence is not the Church's later invention; it is the risen Christ's

parting promise. The verse names the presence, not the liturgy; the Church knows the liturgy as where that promise is kept.

#### **SEND**

7. Peter's question, made personal: to whom, currently, do you go, when the biggest questions come? Is it working?
8. What would opening the door look like for you, concretely, in the next month? Name something small and real.

**The invitation.** Hosts: make it now, personally, and mean the no-strings part. Come to Mass with me once. Sit with me. Watch for the shape you found tonight: Scriptures opened, bread broken. One kindness beforehand: a guest at Mass is welcome at everything except receiving Communion itself, which is the sign of a professed union the Church will not let anyone counterfeit, including her own members when unprepared. Nothing is being withheld from you that is not also guarded from us. When the time comes, the simplest thing is to remain in the pew; customs for coming forward for a blessing vary by parish, so follow your host and the parish's stated practice, and no one will think anything but that you were honest. Exceptional questions belong to the pastor.

#### **LIVE IT THIS WEEK**

- Accept the invitation, or make it: one Mass, together, watching for the Emmaus shape.
- Keep the daily honest sentence going beyond the study. It was never an exercise; it was the door handle.
- Reread the sentence you sealed in Session 1, one last time, and ask it back: what would it take, and what, in six weeks, has it already taken?

#### **SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE**

*"Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life."* John 6:68

#### **CLOSING PRAYER**

*Leader prays:* Lord, you stand at the door and knock. For every door in this room, however open, however closed, however creaking on its hinges: keep knocking. Thank you for six weeks of honest company. Stay with us, as you stayed at Emmaus, and be known to us in the breaking of the bread. Amen.

### Part 3: Leader Reference Card

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*Every passage used in Session 6, in order of appearance. All quotations RSV2CE.*

- **Luke 24:13-35** Emmaus: Scriptures opened, bread broken, known and vanished (live discovery, read in two parts; do not cut)
- **Acts 2:42** the first community's fourfold devotion (live discovery)
- **Revelation 3:20** the knock, the door, the meal (live discovery within the final steelman)
- **John 6:66-69** the walkout and Peter's answer (live discovery; memory verse from v. 68; do not cut)
- **Matthew 28:20** I am with you always (Dig Deeper; first cut, folded into thread resolution)
- **Psalms 34** O taste and see (this week's reading; cited in the steelman answer)
- **Exodus 16:15; Isaiah 45:15; Hebrews 1:1-2** leader background, OT Roots and thread resolution callbacks

**Catechism:** CCC 1088; 1373 to 1374; 104; 2567.

**Voices:** Adoro Te Devote, attributed to St. Thomas Aquinas; St. Justin Martyr, First Apology; St. Augustine, Confessions I.1.

## Deep-Dive: Why Suffering?

*A stand-alone session; usable in any order after the core study*

### Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

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#### SESSION OVERVIEW

**Discovery Aim:** The group discovers that Scripture's deepest answers to suffering are not explanations but presences: God answers Job with himself, enters suffering in Christ, prays the lament psalm from the Cross, and promises its abolition. The Catechism's own first word on the question is that no quick answer will suffice.

**Catholic Touchstone:** To the question of evil, as pressing as it is unavoidable and as painful as it is mysterious, no quick answer will suffice; only the whole of Christian faith is an answer, and God illuminates the mystery in his Son, who died and rose to vanquish evil (CCC 309, 324).

#### HOSTING YOUR SEEKER FRIEND

Someone in the room is carrying a live grief, whether you know it or not. Three commitments:

- No one's wound becomes a debate exhibit tonight. If a real loss surfaces, the philosophical thread stops and the group simply keeps company. You can return to the outline; you cannot return to a person you handled cheaply.
- Notice Job 2:13: his friends sat with him on the ground seven days and no one spoke a word. They were at their best in silence and at their worst once they started explaining. Order your evening accordingly.
- Never say, everything happens for a reason, and gently retire the phrase if someone else offers it. Romans 8:28 is a promise that God works in everything, not a claim that everything is secretly fine.

#### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

State the objection at full strength in both its forms. The classical logical form: if God is all-good he would want to prevent suffering, and if all-powerful he could; suffering exists; therefore no such God. And the stronger modern evidential form: the world holds suffering that appears gratuitous in scale and distribution, and apparent gratuitousness is evidence against a God with morally sufficient reasons, even granting we may not be positioned to see all such reasons. And know that for most people the argument is a wound wearing logic as clothing: they are not asking about the compossibility of divine attributes; they are asking about a diagnosis, a grave, a childhood. The session must answer both registers without confusing them.

On the intellectual register, be honest about what the Church claims and does not. She teaches that God is not evil's author, that moral evil entered a good creation through creaturely freedom, which God permits because he respects that freedom and knows how to bring good from it (CCC 311, quoting St. Augustine), while physical evil belongs to a creation still journeying toward its intended perfection (CCC 310); and that evil itself has no positive existence of its own but is a privation, a wound in the good. What she does not offer, and forbids us to counterfeit, is a tidy accounting of any particular suffering. CCC 309 says so in as many words: no quick answer will suffice; only the whole of the faith, taken together, answers.

On the personal register, the Christian claim is stranger and stronger than an explanation: God's fullest answer to suffering was to enter it. The eternal Son took a body that could be scourged, and from the Cross prayed the opening line of Psalm 22, Israel's own lament, my God, my God, why have you forsaken me. The complaint this study honored in Session 1 turns out to be a prayer God incarnate chose for himself. Christianity does not answer Job with a syllogism. It answers him with a fellow sufferer who is also the LORD who spoke from the whirlwind, and with an empty tomb, and with the promise that the wiping away of every tear is on the last page.

### OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Job is the Old Testament's masterwork on the question, and its structure is the lesson: chapter after chapter of protest that God finally declares more right than the friends' pious explanations (Job 42:7), even while interrogating and humbling Job himself, answered not with case-reasons but with the whirlwind speech, an overwhelming tour of a creation Job did not make and cannot fathom. Job's response is the hinge: I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you. The encounter, not the explanation, is what changes him. Joseph's summary of his own betrayal (you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good, Genesis 50:20) and the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 carry the arc forward: the New Testament reads both as converging on the Cross, where the worst evil ever done becomes the hinge of the greatest good ever given.

#### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

The Catechism itself quotes St. Augustine (*Enchiridion*) at CCC 311, in substance: almighty God, because he is supremely good, would never allow any evil whatsoever to exist in his works unless he were so all-powerful and good as to cause good to emerge from evil itself. St. Augustine also teaches, in substance, that evil is not a created thing but a privation, a corruption of good, which is why it can wound everything and explain nothing.

#### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN PAUL II

St. John Paul II teaches, in substance, in his apostolic letter *Salvifici Doloris* that human suffering, united to Christ's, is taken up into his redemptive work: the sufferer is not merely a victim of the mystery of evil but can become, in Christ, a participant in the mystery of redemption. Suffering is never good in itself; joined to the Cross, it is never wasted.

#### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. THÉRÈSE OF LISIEUX

In the final manuscript of *Story of a Soul*, St. Thérèse describes the trial of faith that filled her last eighteen months: a thick darkness in which the thought of heaven, once her joy, became a source of struggle, and she chose, as she put it in substance, to sit at the table of unbelievers and eat their bread of sorrow, offering the darkness for them. A Doctor of the Church spent her dying months inside the very night this session's seekers know, and turned it into intercession.

### CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 309:** To the question of evil, no quick answer will suffice; only Christian faith as a whole constitutes the answer. Memorize this paragraph's humility; it is your license to refuse tidy answers.
- **CCC 311:** God permits evil, mysteriously, because he can bring good from it; the paragraph quotes St. Augustine's *Enchiridion*.

- **CCC 312:** From the greatest moral evil ever committed, the murder of God's Son, God brought the greatest of goods; the paragraph cites Joseph's words in Genesis 50:20.
- **CCC 324:** God's permission of evil is a mystery that God illuminates by his Son, Jesus Christ, who died and rose to vanquish evil.
- **CCC 1505:** On the Cross, Christ took upon himself the whole weight of evil and took away the sin of the world, of which illness is only a consequence; he gives suffering a new meaning: it can configure us to him.

#### **SESSION GOALS**

1. State the problem of evil at full classical strength and honor its wound register as well as its logic register.
2. Let the group discover Job's structure: protest honored, explanation withheld, presence given.
3. Present the Cross as God's entry into suffering, praying the lament himself.
4. Hold CCC 309's honesty: no tidy accounting of particular sufferings, and no glib use of Romans 8:28.

#### **TIME NOTE**

Runs 75 to 90 minutes as written. If short: cut the Isaiah 53 discovery, folding it into the Cross discussion, then trim the Dig Deeper. Do not cut Job or Matthew 27:46. If a live grief opens mid-session, cut anything; the outline serves the room, not the reverse.



## Part 2: Discussion Guide

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### OPENING PRAYER

*Leader prays:* God, tonight's question has been prayed at you, shouted at you, and wept at you for as long as there have been people. You put the shouting in your own book, so we will not pretend to be calmer than the psalms. Be here, especially for whoever brought tonight's question in from their real life. Amen.

### WIN

5. Without needing details: has the problem of suffering ever been more than a philosophy question for you? What did the people around you do that helped, or made it worse?
6. When someone is hurting, what do you instinctively reach for: explanations, distractions, presence, or silence? Which have you been grateful to receive?

### BUILD

**Leader, present the objection at full strength.** Read slowly: If God is all-good, he would want to prevent suffering. If he is all-powerful, he could. Suffering exists, oceans of it, and much of it lands on the innocent. Therefore the all-good, all-powerful God does not exist. And its sharper modern edge: even if some suffering could serve purposes, so much of it looks gratuitous, pointless in amount and in where it lands, that the pointlessness itself is evidence. And for many people the argument has a face and a date attached.

- 3. Before any answer: what does this argument get right about goodness? What would we think of a human father with power to stop his child's agony who stood by?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

Concede the force fully; the argument's picture of goodness is drawn from something true. Then set the evening's method: Christianity's response is not a counter-syllogism, and the Catechism says so in its own voice: to this question, as pressing as it is unavoidable and as painful as it is mysterious, no quick answer will suffice (CCC 309). Tonight we watch what God actually does with the question when it is put to him, twice: once by Job, once on a cross.

**Live discovery.** Find Job 38:1-7, the beginning of God's answer, and then Job 42:1-6, Job's response. Read both aloud.

- 4. Job demanded an explanation chapter after chapter. What does God actually give him, and what does Job say it did?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

God gives no accounting of Job's case: he gives the whirlwind, a first-person revelation of wisdom and governance over a creation Job neither made nor comprehends, which is to say, he gives himself. And Job: *"I had heard of you by the hearing of the ear, but now my eye sees you"* (Job 42:5). The encounter does what no explanation did. Add the detail almost no one expects: at 42:7 God declares that Job, the protester, spoke rightly of him, unlike the friends with their tidy theology; and yet the same speeches interrogate and humble Job himself, who repents in dust and ashes (42:6). The Bible's longest treatment of suffering receives the honest protester, corrects him face to face, and rebukes the explainers: the complaint has a home, and it is not the last word.

**Live discovery.** Find Matthew 27:45-46. Read it aloud, and then find the line's source: Psalm 22:1.

- 5. What is Jesus doing with his dying breath, and where do his words come from?

**ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.**

*"My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"* (Matthew 27:46). He is praying, and the prayer is Psalm 22, Israel's great lament, prayed from inside the worst that evil does. The Christian claim is not that God watches suffering from a safe distance and has reasons. It is that God entered it: body, betrayal, injustice, agony, death. Whatever else is said tonight, this cannot be unsaid: the question, why have you forsaken me, has been prayed by Jesus, the eternal Son made man, to the Father, from inside real human suffering, on behalf of everyone who has ever prayed it since. Note also where Psalm 22 goes if you keep reading: from dereliction into vindication; Christians have long heard his citation in light of that turn.

**Reason, then the Church's teaching.** Now the intellectual register, honestly bounded. The Church teaches: God is not the author of evil; evil is not a thing he made but a privation, a wound in the good, entering through creaturely freedom. And the one sentence she offers about permission, she offers quoting St. Augustine (CCC 311): God would not allow any evil in his works unless he were so almighty and so good as to bring good even out of evil. Exhibit A is deliberate (CCC 312): from the murder of God's Son, the worst moral evil ever committed, came the redemption of the world. What the Church declines to provide is the line-item accounting: why this cancer, why that child; CCC 309's own words are that no quick answer will suffice, and the refusal of per-case accountings is the pastoral inference this guide draws from that humility. Any group member who has been handed a quick answer at a graveside knows the Catechism is right.

- 6. Genesis 50:20 gives Joseph's summary of his own betrayal: *"you meant evil against me; but God meant it for good."* Where is the line between trusting that, and saying the glib thing at the graveside? How would you keep the first without committing the second?

**ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.**

Draw out the difference of tense and speaker: Joseph says it years later, about his own suffering, from inside the rescue. It is testimony, not therapy imposed from outside on someone else's fresh wound. Romans 8:28 has the same shape: a promise that God is at work in everything for those who love him; not a claim that everything is fine or that the evil was secretly good. The good brought out of evil never makes the evil good. The Cross redeemed the world; it remains a murder.

**Live discovery.** Find Revelation 21:1-4. Read it aloud.

- 7. What does the last page of the Bible promise about tonight's subject, and who is doing the wiping?

**ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.**

*"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more, neither shall there be mourning nor crying nor pain any more"* (Revelation 21:4). Not, tears will evaporate: he will wipe them, the most parental gesture in Scripture, performed by God, individually. Christianity's final answer to suffering is not an explanation of it but the abolition of it, with the tears attended to personally on the way out. Suffering, on this account, is real, unexplained in its particulars, entered by God, and, for those redeemed in Christ, not ultimate: the new creation ends it. That is not everything a grieving heart wants. It is more than any other account on offer.

**DIG DEEPER**

If time allows: Isaiah 53, the Servant who was *"a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief,"* read by the Church as the Cross in prophecy, and Romans 8:31-39, Paul's crescendo that nothing in all

creation can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus, written by a man whose sufferings he lists elsewhere at length. He is not theorizing.

#### **SEND**

7. Who in your life is inside this question right now, and what would Job 2:13 presence, showing up and shutting up, look like from you this week?
8. If you have a grief you have only ever thought about God, what would it change to pray it at him instead, Psalm 22 style, with permission to be that honest?

#### **LIVE IT THIS WEEK**

- Do one act of silent presence for a sufferer this week: show up, bring food, sit, and do not explain anything.
- Pray Psalm 22 once, aloud, all the way through, and notice where it turns.

#### **SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE**

*"He will wipe away every tear from their eyes, and death shall be no more."* Revelation 21:4

#### **CLOSING PRAYER**

*Leader prays:* Father, your Son prayed the lament from the Cross, so we know the lament is allowed. For every unexplained suffering represented in this room, we do not ask you tonight for the accounting you have not given. We ask you for what you gave Job: yourself. And we hold you to the last page: every tear, your hand. Amen.

### Part 3: Leader Reference Card

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*Every passage used in this deep-dive, in order of appearance. All quotations RSV2CE.*

- **Job 38:1-7; 42:1-7** the whirlwind and Job's response; the protester declared right (live discovery; do not cut)
- **Matthew 27:45-46; Psalm 22** the lament prayed from the Cross (live discovery; do not cut)
- **Genesis 50:20** you meant evil; God meant it for good (discussion)
- **Romans 8:28** in everything God works for good with those who love him; handled against glib use (discussion)
- **Revelation 21:1-4** every tear wiped, by hand (live discovery; memory verse from v. 4)
- **Isaiah 53; Romans 8:31-39** the Man of Sorrows; nothing separates (Dig Deeper; first cut)
- **Job 2:13** seven days of silence (coach box and Send)

**Catechism:** CCC 309; 311 (quoting St. Augustine, Enchiridion); 312; 324; 1505.

**Voices:** St. Augustine, Enchiridion (as quoted at CCC 311); St. John Paul II, Salvifici Doloris (summary); St. Thérèse of Lisieux, Story of a Soul (summary).

## Deep-Dive: Wouldn't a Miracle Convince Me?

*A stand-alone session; usable in any order after the core study*

### Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

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#### SESSION OVERVIEW

**Discovery Aim:** The group discovers Scripture's own case study data on the demand for a convincing sign: a generation saturated in public miracles that still would not trust, a resurrection that produced a murder plot, and Jesus's flat verdict in the parable of the rich man: if they will not hear Moses and the prophets, a man back from the dead will not persuade them either.

**Catholic Touchstone:** Miracles are real motives of credibility, most certain signs of Revelation adapted to everyone's intelligence, so the assent of faith is no blind impulse; yet Christ's miracles invite belief and can also give offense, for they are not meant to satisfy curiosity or the desire for magic (CCC 156, 548).

#### HOSTING YOUR SEEKER FRIEND

Handle two tender spots:

- Your seeker friend may have once begged God for a sign, in a desperate season, and received silence. Tonight's texts are not a scolding of that prayer; Gideon asked for signs and got them, and Thomas asked and was answered. If that memory surfaces, receive it with care and without explaining it.
- Do not let the session curdle into, signs are useless. The Church stakes real weight on miracles, from the Resurrection to the medically vetted cures at Lourdes; the point tonight is what signs can and cannot do to a free will, not that they do nothing.

#### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The objection: one undeniable, public, filmable miracle would settle the question for everyone, so God's refusal to provide it is itself evidence of his absence. It sounds unanswerable because it assumes a psychology: that human beings are neutral evidence-processors, and that a big enough sign compels belief, and belief compels love. Scripture, which is full of miracles, is strikingly pessimistic about that psychology, and tonight the group reads its case files.

The Exodus generation is the controlled experiment: ten plagues, a parted sea, fire on the mountain, bread from the sky, daily. Weeks after Sinai they cast the golden calf, and God's own exasperated summary stands in Numbers 14:11: how long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs which I have wrought among them? Signs, at maximum dosage, did not produce durable trust. The New Testament repeats the result: the raising of Lazarus, a public sign with named witnesses (John records the four days at 11:39 and the emergence at 11:43-44), splits its audience, and the authorities respond by plotting to kill both Jesus and the man raised (John 11:45-53; 12:10). A raising from the dead produced a murder conspiracy. And Jesus's parable of the rich man ends with the verdict tonight is named for: neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead (Luke 16:31), a sentence with an obvious edge for readers who know how the Gospel ends.

The through-line, consistent with the core study: seeing involves the will. Evidence invites; it does not compel, because what God is after is not conceded assent but love, and love cannot be extracted by

spectacle. This is why Jesus refuses sign-on-demand (an evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign, Matthew 16:4) while freely working signs among the disposed. Keep the balance honest in both directions: the Church really does argue from miracles, the Resurrection above all, and really does vet modern claims with medical boards precisely because evidence matters; and Scripture really does show that even striking signs do not necessarily produce free faith. The problem the objection identifies is real. Its location is not.

### OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

The wilderness narrative (Exodus 16 through Numbers 14) is the Old Testament's sustained study of sign-saturated unbelief, and the Psalms preach it back to Israel for centuries (Psalm 78, Psalm 95: today, harden not your hearts, as at Meribah). Gideon's fleece (Judges 6) shows God's patience with an honest asker, a useful counterweight. The New Testament inherits both threads: patience with honest askers (Thomas, John the Baptist) and the verdict on sign-demanders (the sign of Jonah, Matthew 16:4, which the Church reads as the Resurrection itself: the one great sign, given, and still refusable).

#### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

St. Augustine teaches, in substance, in his *Tractates on the Gospel of John*, that the daily government of the universe is a greater miracle than the feeding of the five thousand, but familiarity has dulled our wonder: men marvel at the rare and sleep through the constant. The demand for one more sign, on this account, misreads the situation: we are already inside a standing miracle and have gone blind to it by habit.

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

St. Thomas teaches, in substance (*Summa Theologiae* II-II, q. 5), that the demons believe that God exists, compelled by the evidence available to their sharper minds, and theirs is an unformed faith, real assent without charity, no virtue and no salvation (ST II-II, q. 5, a. 2). Compelled assent is not the free, charity-formed faith that saves. What God seeks, assent commanded by a will moved by love, is precisely the thing that no spectacle, however large, can force.

#### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. IRENAEUS OF LYONS

St. Irenaeus teaches in *Against Heresies* (Book IV) that God made man free from the beginning, and that there is no coercion with God: he persuades, invites, and counsels, but does not compel, because compelled service is worthless to a God who wants sons rather than slaves. A sign engineered to extract love would be exactly the coercion St. Irenaeus says God refuses on principle; and a sign that merely extracts assent gains, as the demons show, nothing worth having.

### CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 156:** The miracles of Christ and the saints are among the motives of credibility, most certain signs of Revelation adapted to the intelligence of all, so that faith is by no means a blind impulse of the mind. The Church really does argue from miracles.
- **CCC 548:** Christ's miracles strengthen faith and bear witness that he is the Son of God, but they can also be occasions for offense, and they are not intended to satisfy people's curiosity or desire for magic. Both halves in one paragraph: tonight's whole session.
- **CCC 549:** Christ did not come to abolish all earthly evils here below by his signs, but to free men from the gravest slavery, sin. The signs point past themselves.

### **SESSION GOALS**

1. State the one-big-miracle objection at full strength, including the psychology it assumes.
2. Let the group discover the wilderness data: maximum signs, persistent unbelief, in God's own summary.
3. Let the group discover that the raising of Lazarus produced both faith and a murder plot, and hear Luke 16:31's verdict.
4. Hold the balance: miracles are real motives of credibility, and no sign is will-proof, because God refuses coercion.

### **TIME NOTE**

Runs 75 to 90 minutes as written. If short: cut the Matthew 16:1-4 discovery, folding the sign of Jonah into the Lazarus answer, then trim the Dig Deeper. Do not cut Numbers 14, John 11 to 12, or Luke 16.

## Part 2: Discussion Guide

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### OPENING PRAYER

*Leader prays:* Lord, you worked signs and wept over cities that watched them unmoved. Give us honesty tonight about what we are really asking for when we ask you for proof, and give us the eyes Augustine prayed for: awake to the standing miracle we live inside. Amen.

### WIN

5. What is the closest thing to a miracle you have ever witnessed or heard about firsthand? What did it change, and for how long?
6. Be honest: if something undeniable happened tonight, right here, what do you predict you would believe about it in five years?

### BUILD

**Leader, present the objection at full strength.** Read slowly: If God wanted the world to believe, one miracle would do it: public, undeniable, filmed from every angle. Every phone on earth, one sky, one voice. No one could doubt again. He has not done it. The silence where that sign should be is itself the evidence.

- 3. Before we test it: what does this objection assume about human beings and evidence? Spell out the psychology it needs to be true.

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

Draw it out: the objection assumes we are neutral processors, that a big enough sign compels belief, and that compelled belief becomes trust and love. Reasonable-sounding assumptions, and testable: Scripture happens to contain the experiment, run at full scale, twice. Tonight we read the lab results.

**Live discovery.** Find Numbers 14:11. For context, remind the group what this generation had personally witnessed: ten plagues, the parted sea, Sinai in fire, daily manna. Read the verse aloud.

- 4. This is God's own summary of the most sign-saturated generation in history. What does he say, and what does it do to the objection's psychology?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

*"How long will they not believe in me, in spite of all the signs which I have wrought among them?"* (Numbers 14:11). Maximum evidence, sustained daily, did not produce durable trust; the golden calf went up within weeks of Sinai itself (Exodus 32). Signs were seen, believed for an afternoon, and metabolized into the background. The objection's psychology fails its own historical test case: spectacle does not install trust, because trust was never only an evidence problem.

**Live discovery.** Find John 11:38-45, the raising of Lazarus, then 11:46-53, and then John 12:9-11. Read them aloud.

- 5. Lazarus is a public sign with witnesses: dead four days by the text's own count, called out alive before a crowd. What are the two recorded responses?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

Many believed; and the authorities convened a council and resolved to kill Jesus, and then to kill Lazarus too, because the evidence kept converting people (John 12:10). Sit with that: a man raised



from the dead produced a murder conspiracy against the living proof. When the will has reasons to refuse, evidence does not compel it; it gets treated as a threat. The undeniable public miracle the objection asks for already has a case file, and the file contains a plot to destroy the exhibit. (Note the Catholic precision: Lazarus was restored to mortal life; the Resurrection, Christ's glorified and definitive rising, is another order of event.)

**Live discovery.** Find Luke 16:27-31, the end of the parable of the rich man and Lazarus. Read it aloud.

- 6. The rich man proposes exactly tonight's objection: send someone back from the dead, that will convince my brothers. What is the answer he receives?

**ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.**

*"If they do not hear Moses and the prophets, neither will they be convinced if someone should rise from the dead"* (Luke 16:31). Jesus's verdict on sign-demand psychology, delivered in a parable; and Christians have always heard its post-Resurrection edge: someone did rise from the dead, and the world's mixed response gave the sentence its force. A heart closed to the speech God has already given is not opened by volume. The problem was never decibels.

**Reason, then the Church's balance.** Now hold both halves, because the Church holds both. She stakes real weight on miracles: the Resurrection is her central claim, CCC 156 calls miracles most certain signs of Revelation, and she still convenes medical boards at Lourdes because evidence genuinely matters. And she teaches, in the same breath (CCC 548), that Christ's signs invite belief, can give offense, and are not meant to satisfy curiosity or the desire for magic. The resolution is the one the core study established: God's evidence is a lover's evidence. It invites a free heart; it will not steamroll one, because, as St. Irenaeus put it, there is no coercion with God, and, as St. Thomas observed, even the demons believe, and without charity it saves them nothing. The sign engineered to make intellectual refusal impossible could still not produce a single act of love. It would produce a world of demons: correct, compelled, and cold.

- 7. If God's goal were merely your assent, spectacle would do. If his goal is your love, what kind of signs would you expect him to give instead? Do those match what you have actually encountered?

**ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.**

Draw out: signs legible to the seeking, deniable by the determined: a creation that whispers rather than shouts, a Resurrection attested by witnesses rather than broadcast from the sky, a Presence veiled in bread. Exactly the texture believers report and skeptics complain of, and exactly what a love-seeking God predicts. This does not prove the claim; it dissolves the objection's force, because the absence of a coercive sign is only evidence against a God who would coerce.

**DIG DEEPER**

If time allows: Matthew 16:1-4, where sign-demanders are refused everything except *"the sign of Jonah,"* read by Christians as prefiguring Christ's Resurrection: the great sign, given, and still refusable. And Judges 6:36-40, Gideon's fleece: an honest asker in a dark hour, answered twice with patience. Gideon himself calls it testing (6:39), and God bears with him; as a pastoral application, we might distinguish the trembling asker from the defiant demander, and deal gently with the first.

**SEND**

7. Which are you, honestly: the trembler who once begged for a sign, or the tester holding out for compulsion? What would each need to do next?
8. Augustine says we sleep inside a standing miracle. What is one constant thing, daylight, a heartbeat, a person, you could practice noticing this week as if for the first time?

#### **LIVE IT THIS WEEK**

- Once a day, name one ordinary standing miracle out loud or on paper: something constant you have stopped seeing. Wonder is a discipline before it is a feeling.
- If you have ever prayed for a sign and gotten silence, tell God, honestly, what that did to you. That conversation is overdue and he can bear it.

#### **SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE**

*“Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe.”* John 20:29

#### **CLOSING PRAYER**

*Leader prays:* Lord Jesus, you gave the sign of Jonah once for all, and you still refuse to compel a single heart. Wake us to the standing miracles, be patient with our fleeces, and when you knock quietly instead of thundering, give us the wit to know why. Amen.

### Part 3: Leader Reference Card

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*Every passage used in this deep-dive, in order of appearance. All quotations RSV2CE.*

- **Numbers 14:11** God's summary of sign-saturated unbelief (live discovery; do not cut); Exodus 32 context
- **John 11:38-45; 11:46-53; 12:9-11** Lazarus raised: belief and a murder plot against the living proof (live discovery; do not cut)
- **Luke 16:27-31** neither will they be convinced (live discovery; do not cut)
- **Matthew 16:1-4** the sign of Jonah (Dig Deeper; first cut, folded into Lazarus answer)
- **Judges 6:36-40** Gideon's fleece: patience with the honest asker (Dig Deeper)
- **John 20:29** memory verse; callback to the core study's Thomas session where applicable
- **Psalms 78; 95** Israel preaching the wilderness lesson to itself (leader background)

**Catechism:** CCC 156; 548; 549.

**Voices:** St. Augustine, Tractates on the Gospel of John (summary); St. Thomas Aquinas, Summa Theologiae II-II, q. 5 (summary); St. Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book IV (summary).

## Deep-Dive: Those Who Never Hear

*A stand-alone session; usable in any order after the core study*

### Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

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#### SESSION OVERVIEW

**Discovery Aim:** The group discovers what the Church actually teaches about people who never hear the Gospel through no fault of their own: that God desires all to be saved, has already addressed every heart through conscience and creation, is not bound by his own sacraments, and can lead the inculpably ignorant to salvation in ways known to himself, through Christ alone.

**Catholic Touchstone:** Those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who seek God with a sincere heart and, moved by grace, try to do his will as they know it through the dictates of conscience, may achieve eternal salvation (CCC 847).

#### HOSTING YOUR SEEKER FRIEND

Two things to watch:

- This question is almost never abstract. Your seeker friend is usually asking about someone: a grandmother of another religion, a good atheist friend, a child who died. Answer the person behind the question, and never adjudicate a named individual's soul; the Church herself refuses to.
- Watch the opposite ditch too: Catholics in the room may overcorrect into, so everyone is fine and religion is optional. CCC 848 pairs the hope with the missionary mandate in the same breath; keep the pairing.

#### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

State the objection at full strength: billions of human beings lived and died without ever hearing the name of Jesus, by accident of geography and century. If explicit faith in Christ is the sole gate, then salvation is a lottery of birthplace, and damnation falls on people for the crime of being born in the wrong valley. A God who ran that system would be monstrous, and the objection deserves to be said that plainly, because many seekers believe this is what the Church teaches.

It is not, and has not been. The session's work is to lay out the actual teaching, which holds four planks at once. First: God sincerely desires the salvation of all (1 Timothy 2:4), and Christ died for all. Second: God's call reaches every person through creation and conscience (Romans 2:14-16; Acts 17:26-27; CCC 27-30), a point the core study established from these very texts. Third: therefore those who, through no fault of their own, never hear the Gospel, but seek God sincerely and follow conscience under grace, may be saved (CCC 847), because God has bound salvation to Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments (CCC 1257). Fourth, and non-negotiable: whoever is saved this way is saved by Christ alone, through his Cross, applied in ways known to God, not by an alternative route; all salvation comes from Christ the Head through the Church which is his Body (CCC 846), and none of this dims the missionary mandate (CCC 848, 851), since the ordinary way remains the Gospel preached and the sacraments given, and the manner of God's grace beyond it is entrusted to him, not presumed.

Hedge with precision where the Church does: she teaches the real possibility, not the statistics, and she has not defined the mechanism; in ways known to himself is the Council's deliberate phrase. Refuse

both presumptions: the grim one that consigns the unreached, and the breezy one that cancels mission. Peter's discovery at Cornelius's house is the model posture: God shows no partiality, announced by the man then commanded to baptize the household anyway.

### OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

The Old Testament already shows Gentiles responding to God's action from outside covenant membership: Melchizedek, priest of God Most High before Abraham's line exists (Genesis 14:18); Jethro the Midianite priest blessing the LORD (Exodus 18); Ruth the Moabitess entering the Messiah's own genealogy; Naaman the Syrian healed; the sailors and the city of Nineveh in Jonah repenting ahead of the prophet's own obedience; and Malachi 1:11's startling vision of the LORD's name great among the nations. Israel's election was always for the nations, not against them (Genesis 12:3, the promise that through Abraham blessing reaches all the families of the earth). The New Testament reads the arc as fulfilled in Christ, the one mediator; and Jesus himself speaks of other sheep, not of this fold, whom he will gather into one flock (John 10:16), a gathering of the nations the Church reads with hope.

#### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. JUSTIN MARTYR

St. Justin Martyr teaches in his *First Apology* that the Word, the *Logos*, in whom the whole human race has a share, was sowing truth before the Incarnation, so that those who lived according to the Word, and he dares to name pagans such as Socrates, were in a real sense Christ's own even before Christ came. Writing within living memory of the apostles, the Church's first great apologist already refused the geographic lottery.

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

St. Thomas teaches, in substance (in his disputed questions *De Veritate*), that if someone were raised beyond all reach of the Gospel, in the wilderness or among wolves, and followed the guidance of natural reason in seeking good and shunning evil, God would most certainly provide what is necessary for salvation: revealing it by internal inspiration or sending a preacher. For St. Thomas it belongs to divine providence that no one perishes for lacking what they had no way to obtain.

#### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. JOHN PAUL II

St. John Paul II teaches, in substance, in his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, both halves at full strength: the salvation of Christ genuinely reaches, by grace, people outside the visible Church who do not know the Gospel through no fault of their own; and precisely because Christ is the one Savior of all, the Church's missionary mandate loses none of its urgency. Hope for the unreached and zeal to reach them are, for him, the same conviction twice.

### CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 846:** All salvation comes from Christ the Head through the Church which is his Body; the paragraph also explains what the ancient formula about salvation and the Church does and does not mean: it is aimed at those who know the Church is necessary and refuse, not at the inculpably ignorant.
- **CCC 847:** Those who through no fault of their own do not know the Gospel, but seek God sincerely and follow conscience under grace, may achieve eternal salvation. This is the Second Vatican Council's own teaching (Lumen Gentium 16; the following paragraph draws on Ad Gentes 7).

- **CCC 848:** God can lead those inculpably ignorant of the Gospel to the faith without which it is impossible to please him, in ways known to himself; and the Church still has the obligation and the sacred right to evangelize all men. Both halves, one paragraph.
- **CCC 1257:** God has bound salvation to the sacrament of Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments.
- **CCC 1260:** Every man who is ignorant of the Gospel of Christ and of his Church, but seeks the truth and does the will of God in accordance with his understanding of it, can be saved; it may be supposed that such a person would have desired Baptism explicitly had they known its necessity.

### **SESSION GOALS**

1. State the geographic lottery objection at full strength, including the caricature of Church teaching it usually rests on.
2. Let the group discover the scriptural planks: God's universal salvific will, and his prior address to every heart.
3. Lay out CCC 846 to 848, 1257, and 1260 accurately: real hope, Christ alone, mechanism undefined, mission intact.
4. Guard both ditches: no adjudicating individuals, and no collapse into indifferentism.

### **TIME NOTE**

Runs 75 to 90 minutes as written. If short: cut the John 10:16 discovery, folding it into the Acts 17 answer, then trim the Old Testament outsiders in the Dig Deeper to two examples. Do not cut Acts 17, 1 Timothy 2, or the Cornelius account.

## Part 2: Discussion Guide

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### OPENING PRAYER

*Leader prays:* God our Savior, you desire all to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. Tonight we bring you the biggest crowd any session of this study has held: everyone who ever lived without hearing your name. They were never strangers to you. Teach us what you have said about them, and no more than you have said. Amen.

### WIN

5. Who is this question really about, for you? You do not have to give a name; a relationship is enough.
6. What have you heard, or assumed, that Christianity teaches about people who never hear the Gospel? Where did you pick it up?

### BUILD

**Leader, present the objection at full strength.** Read slowly: Billions of people lived and died without ever hearing of Jesus: wrong continent, wrong century. If explicit faith in Christ is the only gate, salvation is a birthplace lottery, and people are damned for the accident of their address. A God who ran that system would not be worth worshipping, and if that is what the Church teaches, the seeker is right to walk away.

- 3. Before we check the teaching: why does this objection carry so much moral force? What healthy instinct is it running on?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

Name it: the instinct that guilt requires the possibility of doing otherwise, that no one should be condemned for the unchosen. Affirm it without reservation, and then land the evening's thesis: that instinct is not the objection's weapon against the Church. It is the Church's own teaching, and tonight we will read her saying so in her own words. The objection is aimed at a position she does not hold.

**Live discovery.** Find 1 Timothy 2:3-6. Read it aloud.

- 4. What is God's stated desire, for how many, and through whom?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

*"God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Timothy 2:3-4), through the one mediator, Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all. Two planks in one breath: the will is universal, and the way is Christ alone. Everything the Church teaches on tonight's question is the working out of those two clauses held together without dropping either.*

**Live discovery.** Find Acts 17:26-28, Paul in Athens speaking to pagans about their own history. Read it aloud.

- 5. According to Paul, why did God arrange the nations' times and boundaries as he did, and how far is God from any of them?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

So *"that they should seek God, in the hope that they might feel after him and find him. Yet he is not*

*far from each one of us” (Acts 17:27). Paul, facing an audience that never heard of Moses, does not tell them they were abandoned; he tells them their whole history was arranged for seeking, and that God was never far. Add the core study's plank from Romans 2:14-16: the law's work is written on hearts and conscience bears witness; with the Church's teaching on natural knowledge and conscience (CCC 27-30; 1776-1777), no one comes to God as a stranger unaddressed by him. The lottery premise fails at the root: God is not far from any one of us.*

**Reason, then the Church's actual teaching.** Now read her own words, slowly, because most people have never heard them. CCC 847: those who, through no fault of their own, do not know the Gospel of Christ or his Church, but who nevertheless seek God with a sincere heart, and, moved by grace, try in their actions to do his will as they know it through the dictates of their conscience, may achieve eternal salvation. CCC 1257: God has bound salvation to Baptism, but he himself is not bound by his sacraments. CCC 848: God can lead them to faith in ways known to himself. And the guardrail that keeps all of it Christian rather than vague: CCC 846, all salvation comes from Christ the Head. The unreached person who is saved is saved by the Cross, applied by grace in ways God has not disclosed, not by sincerity as such and not by an alternative ladder.

- 6. Which surprised you more: that this is the teaching, or that you had never heard it? What does in ways known to himself deliberately leave unsaid, and why might the Church leave it there?

**ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.**

Draw out the two-sided restraint: the Church refuses the grim presumption (the unreached are lost) and equally refuses the breezy one (so everyone is fine and mission is pointless). She defines the possibility and declines to publish statistics or mechanism, because she knows what she has been given and will not invent the rest, the same honest hedging this study has practiced throughout. And note what the teaching still is not: it is not that all religions are equally true, and not that hearing the Gospel is a matter of indifference. The ordinary way remains the Word preached and the sacraments given; the manner of God's grace beyond it is entrusted to him, not presumed.

**Live discovery.** Find Acts 10:34-35 and 10:44-48, Peter at the house of Cornelius, a pagan Roman officer described as one who feared God and prayed. Read both aloud.

- 7. What does Peter learn, and, just as important, what does he immediately do anyway?

**ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.**

*“Truly I perceive that God shows no partiality, but in every nation any one who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him” (Acts 10:34-35). God was at work in Cornelius before Peter arrived; the Spirit falls on the household; and Peter commands them to be baptized at once (10:48). There is tonight's whole balance in one house: real grace already operating beyond the visible boundary, and the Gospel and sacraments brought without delay, because acceptable is the beginning of the story, not its fullness. God's prior work in a person is never a reason to leave them where they are; it is the reason evangelization works.*

**DIG DEEPER**

If time allows: the Old Testament's Gentiles responding to God's action: Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18), Jethro (Exodus 18), Ruth, Naaman (2 Kings 5), Nineveh in Jonah; and Jesus's own word: *“And I have other sheep, that are not of this fold” (John 10:16).* The Shepherd gathers a flock wider than one fold, into one flock, with one shepherd.



## **SEND**

7. Return to the person this question was really about for you. What can you now honestly hope for them, and what does the Church's restraint keep you from claiming?
8. If God's prior work in a person is the reason evangelization works, not a reason to skip it: who is the Cornelius already in your life, and what is your next step toward their door?

## **LIVE IT THIS WEEK**

- Pray daily, by name if you have one, for someone who has never heard the Gospel or long ago stopped listening, entrusting them to the God who desires all to be saved.
- Take one concrete Peter-step toward your Cornelius: an invitation, a conversation, a kindness with your reason for it visible.

## **SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE**

*"God our Savior, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth."* 1 Timothy 2:3-4

## **CLOSING PRAYER**

*Leader prays:* Father, you have never been far from any one of us, in any nation, in any century. We entrust to you everyone who never heard your Son's name, certain of your desire, silent where you are silent. And since you have made us hearers, make us tellers, starting with the door you have already prepared. Amen.

### Part 3: Leader Reference Card

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*Every passage used in this deep-dive, in order of appearance. All quotations RSV2CE.*

- **1 Timothy 2:3-6** universal salvific will; one mediator (live discovery; memory verse from vv. 3-4; do not cut)
- **Acts 17:26-28** arranged for seeking; not far from each one (live discovery; do not cut)
- **Romans 2:14-16** conscience, the law on every heart (cited in the Acts 17 answer)
- **Acts 10:34-35, 44-48** Cornelius: no partiality, and baptized at once (live discovery; do not cut)
- **John 10:16** other sheep, not of this fold (Dig Deeper; first cut, folded into Acts 17)
- **Genesis 14:18; Exodus 18; Ruth; 2 Kings 5; Jonah; Malachi 1:11; Genesis 12:3** Gentiles responding to God's action; blessing for the nations (leader background, Dig Deeper)

**Catechism:** CCC 846; 847; 848; 1257; 1260 (Lumen Gentium 16 behind 847; Ad Gentes 7 behind 848).

**Voices:** St. Justin Martyr, First Apology (summary); St. Thomas Aquinas, De Veritate (summary); St. John Paul II, Redemptoris Missio (summary).

# Deep-Dive: Can I Trust the Bible and the Church?

*A stand-alone session; usable in any order after the core study*

## Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

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### SESSION OVERVIEW

**Discovery Aim:** The group discovers that the New Testament presents itself as checkable testimony from the eyewitness generation, that the earliest preaching invited verification while witnesses still lived, and that the alleged circularity (the Church vouches for the Bible which vouches for the Church) dissolves into a historical sequence: Christ founded a community, the community wrote, and the community recognized its own book.

**Catholic Touchstone:** The books of Scripture firmly, faithfully, and without error teach the truth God wished put into them for the sake of our salvation; the Church discerned the canon by the apostolic Tradition; and Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium are so connected that none stands without the others (CCC 107, 120, 95).

### HOSTING YOUR SEEKER FRIEND

Two commitments:

- Your seeker friend's objections may arrive in internet-video form: telephone games, Constantine inventing the canon, lost gospels. Do not mock the sources; take the strongest version of each claim seriously, because underneath the memes are real questions with real answers.
- Do not overclaim. Tonight offers grounds for reasonable trust, not a geometry proof; overclaiming loses a thoughtful seeker faster than any objection. Invite checking; the material survives it.

### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The objection comes in three linked forms. Telephone game: the texts were copied by hand for centuries, so the originals are unrecoverable. Winners' history: the Church edited the story and suppressed rivals. Circularity: you trust the Bible because the Church says so, and the Church because the Bible says so, which is no ground at all. State each at full strength.

On transmission, the honest headline: the New Testament writings enjoy exceptionally abundant and early manuscript evidence relative to other ancient works, with thousands of Greek manuscripts, fragments reaching back to within about a century of composition, and early translations and quotations so extensive that the text's transmission can be checked from multiple independent directions. Copying introduced variants, and scholars catalog them openly; the overwhelming majority are spelling and word-order trivia, and no article of faith rests on a disputed reading. This is public, checkable scholarship, not a claim the group must take on authority.

On earliness, the sharpest single exhibit is 1 Corinthians 15:3-8: Paul, writing within roughly a quarter century of the crucifixion, quotes a creed he says he himself received, which many scholars across a wide spectrum date very early, often within a few years of the events (precise dating is debated), and he appeals to more than five hundred witnesses, most of whom are still alive: an audit invitation, in print, while the witnesses could be interviewed. Early tradition like this sharply limits the time available for legendary development. On circularity, replace the loop with the sequence: first a person, Jesus; then a

community he founded and commissioned, decades before a line of the New Testament existed; then that community's members wrote; then the community, over time and in regional synods of the late fourth century (Hippo, Carthage), witnessed and ratified a broadly received recognition of the apostolic deposit, definitively defined for Catholics at Trent. Approach the documents first simply as historical sources (Luke invites exactly that), conclude to Christ and his commissioned community, and the community's book arrives with the community's credentials. The Bible is the Church's book in the plain historical sense that inspired authors within the apostolic Church wrote it, and the Church preserved and discerned it, God himself being its author (CCC 105); 1 Timothy 3:15 says as much from inside the text: the pillar and bulwark of the truth is the Church.

## OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Israel's Scriptures already model testimony culture: covenant deeds publicly witnessed, memorial stones and feasts commanded so children would ask and be told (Exodus 12:26-27; Joshua 4:6-7), and a legal standard of two or three witnesses (Deuteronomy 19:15) that the New Testament writers consciously invoke. The apostles present the Resurrection in that inherited register: not private illumination but attested public event, of which we are witnesses is Acts's refrain. The New Testament's manner of self-presentation is itself an Old Testament inheritance.

### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. IGNATIUS OF ANTIOCH

Writing around the year 107, within living memory of the apostles, St. Ignatius already describes in his *Letter to the Smyrnaeans* a Church ordered around its bishop, and gives us the earliest surviving use of the phrase the Catholic Church: wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. Strong early evidence that a structured, visible community is no late invention: it is on paper one lifetime from the Crucifixion, with legitimate development still to come, as in any living body.

### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. IRENAEUS OF LYONS

St. Irenaeus, in *Against Heresies* (Book III), argues against the secret-gospel sects of his own day with a public test: the apostolic tradition is manifest in the whole world, preserved in the churches the apostles founded, through successions of bishops anyone could name and check. His answer to conspiracy claims was transparency: the true tradition is the one with the paper trail.

### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

St. Augustine's famous sentence from *Against the Fundamental Letter of Mani*: I should not believe the Gospel, except as moved by the authority of the Catholic Church. He is not demeaning Scripture; he is naming the Catholic Church's authority as the motive that moved him to believe the Gospel: the community's credibility carries the book. The historical order of knowing, community before canon, runs the same way for the Church as a whole.

## CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 105 to 107:** God is the author of Sacred Scripture, which firmly, faithfully, and without error teaches the truth God wished put into it for the sake of our salvation. Note the careful scope: Scripture asserts without error what God wanted asserted through the sacred authors, read according to their literary forms and intention (Dei Verbum 11).
- **CCC 120:** It was by the apostolic Tradition that the Church discerned which writings belong to the canon. The table of contents is itself an act of the Church.

- **CCC 126:** The Gospels formed in three stages: the life and teaching of Jesus, the oral tradition, and the written Gospels, whose historicity the Church unhesitatingly affirms.
- **CCC 80 to 82:** Scripture and Tradition flow from the same divine wellspring: one deposit, two modes of transmission.
- **CCC 95:** Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterium are so linked and joined together that one cannot stand without the others.

#### **SESSION GOALS**

1. State all three objection forms, telephone, winners' history, and circularity, at full strength.
2. Let the group discover the New Testament's own self-presentation: investigated, eyewitness, checkable testimony.
3. Replace the circularity loop with the historical sequence: Christ, community, writings, canon.
4. Keep claims inside honest bounds: grounds for reasonable trust, invitations to check, no overclaiming.

#### **TIME NOTE**

Runs 75 to 90 minutes as written. If short: cut the 2 Thessalonians 2:15 discovery, folding tradition into the 1 Timothy 3:15 answer, then trim the Dig Deeper. Do not cut 1 Corinthians 15 or the sequence discussion.

## Part 2: Discussion Guide

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### OPENING PRAYER

*Leader prays:* God of truth, you are not afraid of our checking; you wrote the invitation to check into the book itself. Give us tonight the honesty of good historians and the humility to follow the evidence where it goes. Amen.

### WIN

5. What is the oldest piece of family history you trust: a story, a recipe, a photograph? How did it reach you, and why do you believe it?
6. When you hear, you can't trust the Bible, which version have you heard most: bad copying, church editing, or circular reasoning?

### BUILD

**Leader, present the objection at full strength, all three forms.** Read slowly: The texts were hand-copied for centuries; a two-thousand-year telephone game. What survived is what the winners chose to keep; the rivals were burned. And the whole thing rests on a circle: trust the Bible because the Church says so, trust the Church because the Bible says so. That is not a foundation; it is a loop.

- 3. Which of the three lands hardest for you, and what would count as a serious answer to it?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

Let each be owned by someone before answering any. Then set the method: the claims are historical, so the answers must be historical: manuscripts that can be counted, dates that can be checked, a sequence that can be reconstructed. Tonight nothing is asked on authority.

**Live discovery.** Find 1 Corinthians 15:3-8. Explain first: Paul is writing about twenty-five years after the crucifixion, and says he is passing on what he himself received, a formula many scholars date very early, often within a few years of the events. Read it aloud.

- 4. What is in this earliest layer of the message? And what does Paul do in verse 6 that a legend could never afford to do?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

The core is already complete: died for our sins, buried, raised on the third day, appeared, with a witness list. And verse 6: *"he appeared to more than five hundred brethren at one time, most of whom are still alive"* (1 Corinthians 15:6). That is an audit invitation published while the witnesses could be cross-examined: go ask them. Legendary growth is easiest once the eyewitness generation is gone; this creed circulated while the witnesses could be cross-examined, and invited exactly that. Whatever one concludes about the Resurrection, the claim is not a late accretion. It is the founding announcement.

**Live discovery.** Find Luke 1:1-4 and 2 Peter 1:16. Read both aloud.

- 5. How do these writers describe their own method and material?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

Luke: many prior accounts, eyewitness sources, careful investigation, an orderly account written so the reader may know the truth. Peter: *"we did not follow cleverly devised myths... but we were*

*eyewitnesses of his majesty*" (2 Peter 1:16). The documents claim the genre of testimony, not the genre of myth, and they invite the standards testimony invites. On transmission, give the honest headline: thousands of manuscripts, fragments within about a century of composition, variants openly cataloged, a few of them text-critically significant, none establishing or overturning doctrine. The telephone game had one line; this text survives in manuscripts from differing textual families and regions that can be compared against one another, copying relationships and all. Copying at scale, checkable across lines, is not corruption's friend; it is correction's.

**Reason: replace the loop with the sequence.** Now the circularity charge, which deserves its full weight, because the answer rewrote how converts think. Lay out the timeline: first, Jesus, a figure in history. Second, a community he gathered and commissioned, which existed, preached, baptized, and celebrated the Eucharist for decades before a line of the New Testament was written. Third, members of that community wrote: letters first, Gospels after. Fourth, over generations, the community recognized which writings carried the apostolic deposit, with regional synods of the late fourth century witnessing and ratifying a broadly received canon, definitively defined at Trent. There is no loop in that sequence. One can approach the documents purely as ancient historical sources, as any historian must, conclude to Jesus and the community he founded, and then receive the book on the credit of the community that wrote and preserved it. The Bible did not fall from the sky with a table of contents; the table of contents is the Church's handwriting.

- 6. Find 1 Timothy 3:15. What does the Bible itself call the pillar and bulwark of the truth, and what does that do to the loop?

**ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.**

*"the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth"* (1 Timothy 3:15). The text assigns the load-bearing role to the Church, which matches the historical order exactly: the community came first and carries the book. That is why the winners-wrote-history charge also inverts: the writings later styled rival gospels are, in general, later compositions without traceable apostolic communities, while the canonical four are earlier and were received and read publicly in the churches, a contrast that is documented rather than asserted. St. Irenaeus's answer still stands: the true tradition is the one with the public paper trail.

**DIG DEEPER**

If time allows: 2 Thessalonians 2:15, *"hold to the traditions which you were taught by us, either by word of mouth or by letter,"* the apostolic deposit already traveling in two modes, exactly as CCC 80 to 82 describes; and 1 Thessalonians 2:13, the earliest Christians receiving the preached message not as the word of men but as what it really is, the word of God, before most of the New Testament existed.

**SEND**

7. What is one claim from tonight you intend to check for yourself this month: a manuscript fact, the dating of the 1 Corinthians 15 creed, the canon's history? Name it aloud; checking is the biblical posture.
8. If the book reached you on the credit of a community: what would it look like to get to know the community, and not just the book?

**LIVE IT THIS WEEK**

- Actually run one check: look up how scholars date the creed in 1 Corinthians 15, from any serious source you choose, skeptical ones included.
- Read Luke 1:1-4 once more, slowly, and then read anything else in Luke this week as what it claims to be: an investigated account addressed to a person who wanted the truth.

#### **SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE**

*“For we did not follow cleverly devised myths... but we were eyewitnesses of his majesty.”* 2 Peter 1:16

#### **CLOSING PRAYER**

*Leader prays:* Lord, you entrusted your Gospel to witnesses and your book to a community, and you have never asked anyone to close their eyes to receive it. Bless every honest check anyone in this room runs this month, and let the evidence do what you built it to do: invite. Amen.



### Part 3: Leader Reference Card

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*Every passage used in this deep-dive, in order of appearance. All quotations RSV2CE.*

- **1 Corinthians 15:3-8** the earliest creed and the five hundred witnesses (live discovery; do not cut)
- **Luke 1:1-4** the historian's preface (live discovery)
- **2 Peter 1:16** not cleverly devised myths; eyewitnesses (live discovery; memory verse)
- **1 Timothy 3:15** the Church, pillar and bulwark of the truth (live discovery; do not cut)
- **2 Thessalonians 2:15** traditions by word of mouth or by letter (Dig Deeper; first cut)
- **1 Thessalonians 2:13** received as the word of God (Dig Deeper)
- **Exodus 12:26-27; Joshua 4:6-7; Deuteronomy 19:15** Israel's testimony culture (leader background)

**Catechism:** CCC 105 to 107; 120; 126; 80 to 82; 95.

**Voices:** St. Ignatius of Antioch, Letter to the Smyrnaeans; St. Irenaeus, Against Heresies, Book III (summary); St. Augustine, Against the Fundamental Letter of Mani.

## Deep-Dive: Does Prayer Do Anything?

*A stand-alone session; usable in any order after the core study*

### Part 1: Leader Preparation Guide

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#### SESSION OVERVIEW

**Discovery Aim:** The group discovers that Scripture never described the vending machine the objection refutes: the Father knows what we need before we ask, the two most famous unanswered prayers in the New Testament belong to Jesus and Paul, and what each received instead of the requested outcome, and what prayer is therefore actually for, is the session's discovery.

**Catholic Touchstone:** Prayer is the raising of the mind and heart to God, a gift received in humility, for man is a beggar before God; and when we ask why our prayer seems unheard, the Church answers by transforming the question: our Father wants to give us something greater while we cling to him in prayer (CCC 2559, 2735 to 2737).

#### HOSTING YOUR SEEKER FRIEND

Two commitments:

- Someone here has an unanswered prayer with a name and a date on it, prayed in a desperate season. Tonight's texts are not an audit of that prayer. If it surfaces, stop the outline and keep company; the theology can wait and the person cannot.
- Promise no outcomes. The session's honest claim is about what prayer is, not a technique for getting results; the seeker will trust the first and see through the second instantly.

#### WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

The objection, at full strength: prayers go unanswered constantly, controlled studies of intercessory prayer have not produced reliable, reproducible evidence of effects, and the felt benefits are what self-talk and meditation produce anyway. Prayer, the skeptic concludes, is a placebo with incense. Grant the data its due: if prayer is a vending machine, coins in and outcomes out, then the vending machine is falsified, by the studies and by every honest believer's own history.

The session's move: Scripture never sold the vending machine. Jesus himself teaches, before giving the Our Father, that your Father knows what you need before you ask him, which demolishes the information-transfer model in a sentence: asking cannot be for God's benefit. And the New Testament's two most prominent petitions not granted as asked belong to its two central pray-ers. In Gethsemane, Jesus asks conditionally for the cup to pass, and it does not pass; yet the prayer itself is heard, Hebrews 5:7 says exactly that, he was heard for his godly fear, and past the Cross the answer exceeds the ask. Paul begs three times for the thorn's removal and receives instead: my grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness. In both cases the petition is real, the no is real, and what is given is presence, grace, and transformation, which is what the tradition claims prayer is for: not managing God, but communion with him, in which the one praying is changed. Keep petition honest too: ask, seek, knock is a command, God wills real goods to be given through real asking, and the Church's saints stormed heaven shamelessly. The claim is not that petition is naive; it is that petition lives inside a relationship, and the relationship, not the outcome ledger, is the point. Romans 8:26 goes further: we do

not even know how to pray as we ought, and the Spirit himself intercedes within us. Prayer, at bottom, is not a human technology aimed at God; it is God's own life moving in a person who consents.

### OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Israel prayed with startling freedom: Abraham haggling over Sodom, Moses arguing God out of announced judgment, Hannah pouring out her soul until the priest thought her drunk, and a Psalter in which petition, complaint, thanksgiving, and silence all count as prayer. Psalm 62:8 gives the standing instruction: pour out your heart before him. The New Testament's Gethsemane is that tradition's summit: perfect trust and honest anguish in the same prayer, resolved not by the outcome requested but by the Father himself. The Old Testament never promised a vending machine either; it promised a God who could be spoken to like that.

#### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. AUGUSTINE OF HIPPO

St. Augustine teaches, in substance, in his *Letter to Proba*, a widow who asked him how to pray, that God does not need our asking in order to know our needs; he wills our asking in order to enlarge our desire, so that we become capable of receiving what he is preparing to give. Delay, for St. Augustine, need not be refusal; it can be the stretching of the vessel. The Catechism's own image (CCC 2559, quoting his sermons) sets the posture: man is a beggar before God.

#### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. TERESA OF AVILA

St. Teresa of Avila, Doctor of the Church, describing contemplative prayer in her *Life* (the passage the Catechism quotes at CCC 2709), calls it nothing else than an intimate sharing between friends, taking time frequently to be alone with him who we know loves us. Notice what the description does not mention: outcomes. For the Church's great teacher of prayer, its heart is friendship, not results.

#### VOICES OF THE CHURCH: ST. MONICA

St. Augustine tells his own mother's story in the *Confessions* (Book III): St. Monica prayed for her wandering son's conversion for many years, in tears, and a bishop told her that the son of those tears could not perish. Many years of apparently unanswered prayer ended with the son becoming St. Augustine. She had prayed for a conversion; she was given a Doctor of the Church. The years of not-yet were not the answer; in God's providence they proved the road to a larger one.

### CATECHISM CONNECTION

- **CCC 2559:** Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God, founded on humility: man is a beggar before God, in St. Augustine's words quoted by the paragraph.
- **CCC 2735 to 2737:** The Catechism asks our question in its own voice, why do we complain of not being heard, and answers by examining what we ask and how we ask, then quotes the counsel: do not be troubled if you do not immediately receive what you ask; he desires to do something even greater for you while you cling to him in prayer.
- **CCC 2738 to 2741:** Trust is the heart of filial prayer; Jesus himself prays in us and for us; and our petition is joined to his.
- **CCC 2725:** Prayer is a battle. The tradition never pretended otherwise, and the seeker deserves to hear the Church say so.

### SESSION GOALS

1. State the objection at full strength, studies included, and concede what it truly falsifies: the vending machine.
2. Let the group discover Matthew 6:8's demolition of the information-transfer model of asking.
3. Let the group discover the two great petitions not granted as asked, Gethsemane and the thorn, and what was given, and heard, instead.
4. Establish prayer as communion that changes the one praying, with petition kept real inside it.

**TIME NOTE**

Runs 75 to 90 minutes as written. If short: cut the Romans 8:26 discovery, folding the Spirit's intercession into the closing frame, then trim the Dig Deeper. Do not cut Matthew 6, Gethsemane, or 2 Corinthians 12.

## Part 2: Discussion Guide

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### OPENING PRAYER

*Leader prays:* Father, tonight we are asking you about asking. You already know what we need before a word of this is said, and you want the words anyway. So here we are. Teach us, while we are examining prayer, to accidentally be doing it. Amen.

### WIN

5. What did prayer look like in the house you grew up in, if it appeared at all? What did you conclude about it?
6. Without details unless you want them: do you carry an unanswered prayer? What has it done to your picture of God?

### BUILD

**Leader, present the objection at full strength.** Read slowly: Prayers go unanswered every day, over things that matter most. Controlled studies of intercessory prayer have not produced reliable, reproducible evidence of effects on outcomes. And the calm people report afterward is what meditation and journaling produce without any God attached. Prayer is self-talk with incense: comforting, maybe, but it does nothing.

- 3. What picture of prayer would have to be true for this objection to land in full? Describe the machine it is testing.

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

Draw the machine out loud: requests in, outcomes out, God as a cosmic dispenser whose performance can be benchmarked. Then concede honestly: that machine finds no support, in the research or in any praying person's own history. The evening's question is whether Scripture ever sold that machine. The first exhibit says no in one sentence.

**Live discovery.** Find Matthew 6:7-8, Jesus's instruction immediately before giving the Our Father. Read it aloud.

- 4. What does verse 8 say the Father already knows, and what does that do to the idea that asking is for God's information or persuasion?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

*"your Father knows what you need before you ask him"* (Matthew 6:8). Asking cannot be a data transfer or a lobbying campaign; God is not learning anything or being talked into anything. Yet the very next verse is: pray then like this. Jesus demolishes the vending machine and commands asking in the same breath, which means asking must be for something else, for the asker, and for the relationship. What that something is, the next two texts show from the inside.

**Live discovery.** Find Luke 22:41-44, Gethsemane. Read it aloud, slowly.

- 5. What does Jesus ask for, and does he receive it? What does the prayer arrive at instead?

#### ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.

He asks for the cup to pass: *"Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but yours, be done"* (Luke 22:42). The cup is not removed. The most perfect prayer ever prayed

did not receive its first clause as asked, and Hebrews 5:7 insists the prayer itself was heard, he was heard for his godly fear; together those forever end the theory that a request not granted means a defective or unheard prayer. What the prayer arrives at is the second clause: the Father's will, embraced; strengthening in the agony; and, on the far side of the Cross, an answer immeasurably larger than the ask: not a death avoided but death itself defeated. Anyone carrying an unanswered prayer tonight is in the best company that exists.

**Live discovery.** Find 2 Corinthians 12:7-9, Paul's thorn. Read it aloud.

- 6. How many times does Paul ask, and what is he given instead of removal?

**ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.**

Three times, and the thorn stays. The answer: *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness"* (2 Corinthians 12:9). Not the outcome requested: a presence, a grace, and a reframing Paul comes to treasure enough to boast of. Here is the pattern in both great refusals: the petition is honored as petition, the no is real, and what is given is God himself, doing something in the pray-er that the requested outcome would not have done. St. Augustine's counsel to Proba names a real possibility: God can use the asking, and even the waiting, to enlarge the desire until it can hold a greater gift. Delay can be the stretching of the vessel, though no one may pronounce that over another's particular petition.

**Reason, then the honest whole.** Now assemble it without flinching in either direction. Prayer is not a technology, and the studies that falsify the vending machine falsify nothing Scripture claimed. And petition remains commanded and real: ask, seek, knock; the saints begged shamelessly, St. Monica for many years; and the Church teaches that God wills genuine goods to be given through genuine asking. The resolution is the relationship: prayer is communion in which the one praying is changed, in which, per Romans 8:26, we do not even know how to pray as we ought and the Spirit himself intercedes within us with sighs too deep for words. On that account, the calm the skeptic attributes to placebo, the believer calls presence, and no lab can referee between them from outside: prayer is not a mechanism, and divine freedom is not a variable to control; and yet the Church means it when she says God freely grants real goods, temporal ones included, through petition (CCC 2633). The relationship is testable the only way friendship is testable: from inside, over time, honestly. Pour out your heart before him (Psalm 62:8) is not a technique. It is an address.

- 7. If prayer's real work is done in the one praying: looking back, has any season of asking changed you, regardless of the outcome? Would you have chosen the change?

**ANSWER. SHARE AFTER THE DISCUSSION.**

Let testimony carry this one; hosts should be ready with a true story of a prayer answered slant: the thing not given, and the thing given instead, named honestly. If no story comes, St. Monica's stands ready: many years of not-yet, and the son of those tears became St. Augustine.

**DIG DEEPER**

If time allows: Romans 8:26-27, prayer as the Spirit's own groaning within us, which quietly redefines the whole subject: the deepest prayer is not something we perform toward God but something God performs in us with our consent; and Hannah in 1 Samuel 1:12-17, pouring out her soul so rawly that Eli first misread and rebuked her, then blessed her once he heard her.

## **SEND**

7. What is the honest state of your asking: vending machine resentment, gone quiet, or friendship? What would one week of Psalm 62:8 honesty look like?
8. Is there a no in your life that might, from tonight's texts, be a not-this-but-more? You do not have to decide; only to let the question stand.

## **LIVE IT THIS WEEK**

- Pray one honest sentence to God each day this week, in your own words, Psalm 62:8 style; the Church's vocal prayers, the Our Father above all, remain fully commended, and this week's exercise is simply your own sentence. If you are unsure he is there, say that; it counts.
- Once this week, take your oldest unanswered prayer and pray it one more time, ending with Gethsemane's second clause, not my will, but yours, be done, and notice what saying that clause costs and gives.

## **SCRIPTURE MEMORY VERSE**

*"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* 2 Corinthians 12:9

## **CLOSING PRAYER**

*Leader prays:* Father, you knew every need in this room before we sat down, and you wanted the evening anyway. Take every unanswered prayer represented here and do with it what you did in the garden and with the thorn: give us yourself, and stretch us until we can hold what you are preparing. Not our will, but yours, be done. Amen.

### Part 3: Leader Reference Card

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*Every passage used in this deep-dive, in order of appearance. All quotations RSV2CE.*

- **Matthew 6:7-8** the Father knows before you ask (live discovery; do not cut)
- **Luke 22:41-44** Gethsemane: the cup not removed (live discovery; do not cut)
- **2 Corinthians 12:7-9** the thorn: grace instead of removal (live discovery; memory verse from v. 9; do not cut)
- **Romans 8:26-27** the Spirit intercedes with sighs too deep for words (discovery; first cut, folded into closing)
- **Psalms 62:8** pour out your heart before him (discussion and Send)
- **Matthew 7:7-11** ask, seek, knock; petition kept real (leader background)
- **1 Samuel 1:12-17** Hannah's poured-out soul (Dig Deeper)

**Catechism:** CCC 2559; 2725; 2735 to 2737; 2738 to 2741; 2709 (quoting St. Teresa of Avila).

**Voices:** St. Augustine, Letter to Proba (summary) and as quoted at CCC 2559; St. Teresa of Avila, Life (as quoted at CCC 2709); St. Monica, as told in St. Augustine's Confessions, Book III.