

# GOOD GOD QUESTIONS

## Volume 2 Study Guide

### For The Leader

Thank you for agreeing to facilitate this video series, *Good God Questions Vol 2*. Whether you are sharing leadership in this study, or it is the responsibility of one person, you are participating in something important and meaningful. Thankfully, the discussion belongs to the whole group, and does not rest solely upon your shoulders. Your job is simply to initiate conversation, inviting others fully into the discussion. Keep in mind that people participate in groups in different ways. Some may be more quiet, while others like to speak up. Help facilitate as you see best, welcoming each person to the group, and their contributions. You may need to keep in mind time considerations, helping to keep the group focused and on-track.

You will be in charge of making sure there are all the appropriate materials that the group will need for that session, including photocopies of the study guide sheets and some bibles, if desired. Occasionally, a chalkboard, whiteboard or large easel might be helpful in recording the group's responses, but a piece of paper and a person to record will do.

You might want to give some attention to the place where you will be meeting, setting up the DVD player and monitor ahead of time, along with arranging chairs and any tables. Begin and end each session with prayer. This helps center and focus the group. After watching the DVD, there may be questions or issues that your group wants to discuss that evolve naturally. Go with these if they seem appropriate! Otherwise, follow-up questions are provided to help facilitate discussion.

### Introduction

Rainer Maria Rilke wrote in *Letters to a Young Poet*, "Try to love the questions themselves... At present you need to live the question. Perhaps you will gradually, without even noticing it, find yourself experiencing the answer, some distant day."

In this second installment *Good God Questions*, four Luther Seminary professors share their thoughts on questions arising from the complexities of life and faith. You are invited into their dialogue. Rolf Jacobson, Lois Malcolm, Janet Ramsey and Walter Sundberg share the wisdom of their faith and life experience. In a few instances you will sense answers that resonate with yours. Throughout the study you will find affirmation in the necessity of living with questions and finding a path to resolution of some of those questions.

Our Christian faith affirms the wisdom of wrestling with questions and discovering paths between ourselves and God. Luke writes in Acts 17, "God made from one every nation of people to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their habitation, that they should seek God in the hope that they might feel after God and find God." As frustrating as living with life's perplexities can be, or as difficult as experiencing undeserved suffering without adequate explanation can be, we still join Luke or Rilke in acknowledging the necessity of living with questions. We must "feel after God" and in so doing discover as did Luke, that "God is not far from each one of us, for 'In him we live and move and have our being.'

### What you need

- TV, monitor or video projector
- DVD player
- Bibles, if desired
- Paper and pencil/pen for jotting notes

### Photocopying

Feel free to photocopy pages 3-7 of this study guide to use as handouts.

### Credits

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## FOR THE LEADER

### **For Individuals**

Those who watch this DVD individually might find most benefit by taking one's time. Watch one segment at a time. Meditate, listening to your heart and for God's presence in your thoughts. Journal your own life experiences and questions that have been of a similar nature. Reflect on the evolution of your thoughts around these questions. Then pray without words, picturing your questions being given to God.

### **For Group Discussion**

Some basic guidelines to enhance good group dynamics:

- Discussion is best when groups are at least five, but no larger than 9 in size.
- Have an agreed upon end time for each session.
- A facilitator for each group can be helpful in being sure good sharing takes place.
- As Rolf Jacobson states in the DVD, we can't give other people answers. A group will function best when accepting this, with everyone feeling affirmed for their questions and the partial answers they've experienced.
- Each group might take advantage of Luther Seminary's offer on this DVD to send in additional questions. As a group, agree on one question with each session to send in via e-mail: [luthpro@luthersem.edu](mailto:luthpro@luthersem.edu). Please type "Good God Questions" in the subject line.
- Close each session with prayer.

While there's plenty of subject matter within each session for discussion, this study guide gives additional structure, questions, and resources.

## SESSION I: What is the Trinity?

### Your Story

Do you recall times when you were being taught ideas about God as “trinity?” What questions did you have? Are they still your questions? Have you tried to share the concept of the trinity with non-Christians?

### Scripture

*John 1:1-18*

The last of the four Gospels to be written gives insight into some of the first Trinitarian imagery developing in the church. Later in John’s Gospel, Jesus “breathed on them” and said “Receive the Holy Spirit.” Consider the many biblical stories and current images of the presence of God’s Spirit.

### Further Questions

- I am a child, parent and friend. Three roles and one person. Describe the trinity using *relational* terms.
- How would you describe the trinity in terms of the *function* or *action* that you experience of each aspect of God?
- Sundberg and Ramsey each had images to describe the trinity. Do you have your own images?
- Many Christians and different Christian communities will have differing strengths of feeling for each aspect of the trinity, and this may change depending on life’s circumstances. Is this the case for you?
- It is common for us to struggle to put into words our experiences of faith and to build those into theological concepts. What’s the most difficult aspect for you in speaking about God as trinity?
- What’s the most compelling question from this session your group would like to ask of Luther Seminary professors?

### Anecdote

Doubt is not the antithesis of faith, but rather a necessary companion of faith. Christians accept the importance of wrestling with God questions while at the same time affirming aspects of faith that seem more certain. We even declare this outlook as we sing a hymn, “Lord, I believe. Help thou my unbelief.”

### Further Reading

The Apostles’, Nicene, and Athanasian Creeds (can be found in *The Lutheran Book of Worship*). These three major creeds of the Christian church bear witness to the evolution of the church’s understanding of the trinity. Compare the three to sense the issues that were being settled for the whole church.

Revisit Martin Luther’s *Small Catechism* and his explanation to the Apostles’ Creed.

### Prayer

Dear and gracious God, you give us faith to sense your presence in our lives. Help us to daily trust in you, that we might richly experience the blessings of your creation, the affirmation of your love, and the strength of your presence. Amen.

## SESSION II: Baptized, but doesn't believe

### Your Story

Do you have stories about or memories of your own baptism? As you heard the primary question of this session, in what ways do you identify with the parent or with the child?

### Scripture

*Galatians 3:23-29*

What does Paul's statement have to say to this session's question?

*Luke 15:11-32*

How does Jesus' parable parallel the situation in this session's question? If the mother were to put herself in God's shoes, how would she answer her own question?

### Further Questions

- If you were the pastor to whom this session's question had been asked, how would you respond?
- Our faculty spoke about baptism as a "proclamation." They said baptism is *not* a "talismán," an "emotional experience," nor is it "dependent on cognitive awareness." What would you say that it is? What do you think is *proclaimed* with baptism?
- The converse of the opening question: "If I believe but am not baptized, will I be saved?" If I don't participate in either sacrament, what's my status vis-à-vis God? Without baptism or Holy Communion, can I be saved? If not, why? If so, why?
- We proclaim salvation where there is faith. What do we say when there's no faith? Will God save the unbelieving? How about those who are non-Christian?
- A pastor is called into the hospital to be with young parents whose six month old son has died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome. They want the child baptized. Would you? Why or why not?
- What's the most compelling question from this session your group would like to ask of Luther Seminary professors?

### Anecdote

Because Michael and Gloria won't baptize their child, Archie Bunker in the 1970s TV show *All in the Family* secretly takes his grandchild to be baptized. The priest refuses, so Archie does it himself as he's leaving the church. It is very common for churches to be asked to baptize children because grandparents want it, even though the parents are disconnected from the church. How should the church handle these requests?

### Further Reading

*The Dance of the Dissident Daughter*, by Sue Monk Kidd

### Prayer

Dear and gracious God, you not only give us life, you give us your word to love us as your children. Even when we turn our backs on you, you do not leave us. Even when we are far from you, you hold us to yourself in love. Thank you for never letting us go and for never giving up on us. Amen.

## SESSION III: What happens after we die?

### Your Story

As you've experienced the death of family members or friends, what images have been comforting to you with regards to what happens after we die? Have these notions changed over the course of your life?

### Scripture

*1 Corinthians 15*

Paul's declarations regarding the hope of resurrection for all people were extremely powerful for the Greek and Roman people who had a bleak image of a "nether-world" across the River Styx, from which very few ever escaped. Read this chapter with that in mind.

*Hebrews 12:1-2*

"We are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses." When and how does this image enter your experience?

### Further Questions

- Our faculty gave two images for resurrection: The resurrection of the body at some future time, and the notion of *today* feasting in paradise. While recognizing that we "see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face," and that therefore there are a variety of notions for what happens after death, what image or images are you inclined to live with? What's your hope for what happens after death?
- We use four words to describe the essence of a human: body, mind, heart, and soul. What's your image of what happens to each of these when we die?
- Have you had any kind of first-hand experience of sensing someone's presence who has died? Share it.
- Some Christian traditions routinely pray to the saints. While we affirm Jesus' invitation to pray directly to God and therefore don't need the saints to "intercede" on our behalf, nonetheless do you find yourself communicating with anyone who is now a part of the "great cloud of witnesses?"
- Do you have any thoughts about other cultures' and other religions' notions of the afterlife?
- What's the most compelling question from this session your group would like to ask of Luther Seminary professors?

### Anecdote

J.B. Phillips wrote in *The Ring of Truth* his experience of encountering his friend C.S. Lewis *after* Lewis' death. At a difficult point in his life, Phillips woke to find Lewis sitting in his bedroom, looking "healthier than ever." Their conversation was particularly helpful to Phillips. Phillips included this story in this book, which was about how his work of translating the New Testament helped him come to faith, and with this anecdote, how he came to affirm Paul's declarations about life after death in 1 Corinthians 15.

### Further Reading

*The Great Divorce*, by C.S. Lewis

### Prayer

Dear and gracious God, we treasure the life you have given us on this earth. With all its ups and downs, it is precious to us. Thank you for promising that this life is but a journey to our home with you, and that you walk with us to that homecoming. Amen.

## SESSION IV: Disturbing Biblical Passages

### Your Story

List the parts of the Bible that you (and your group) have found disturbing.

### Scripture

*Genesis 22:1-19 and 50:15-21*

Those who serve abused children find the Abraham and Isaac story deeply troubling. How does their perspective challenge our reading of scripture?

Joseph says God intended what happened for good. Does that mean God made it happen? Would it have been better had Joseph said, “God can help us make good things happen out of bad situations?”

*Matthew 22:34-40*

Jesus gives us the command to love as the foundation upon which all scripture (the Law and the Prophets) is built. How does this help, challenge, or change the ways we read our “disturbing biblical passages?”

### Further Questions

- What do you have to say about the “disturbing” passages you or your group has identified?
- What are examples of times when you’ve experienced the Bible being quoted or used in disturbing ways?
- We live with paradoxes. One of them is stated with three sentences: 1) God is good. 2) God is all-powerful. 3) Terrible things happen. Any two of these statements can be held together logically. Yet Christians hold all three together. Talk about this paradox.
- What do you make of Abraham Lincoln’s thought that God was judging *both* the North and the South in the Civil War? And what do you think about his “therefore, with malice towards none...” ?
- A confirmation student in your class stumbles onto Matthew 21:18-22, in which Jesus “zaps” a fig tree because he’s hungry and it doesn’t have any fruit. The student thinks this is terrible. Then on top of it, the student notices in this text that Jesus says if you have enough faith and you pray for it, it will happen. The student wonders why their prayer to put their parent’s cancer into remission isn’t happening. What do you say to these two concerns?
- What’s the most compelling question from this session your group would like to ask of Luther Seminary professors?

### Anecdote

One of the blessings of Martin Luther was his ability to have certain parts of scripture “define” other parts—salvation through faith alone is a primary example of this legacy. His approach to scripture also gives us a precedent of being able to say, “All scripture is inspired, but not all scripture is equal.” What do you make of that?

### Further Reading

*In Defense of Doubt*, by Val Webb

### Prayer

Dear and gracious God, we are grateful for the heritage of faith that has been preserved in the Bible. Above all, we are grateful that you came to life in the person of Jesus, and that in his ministry and teaching, in his life, death and resurrection as told to us in the Bible, that in this we can see your great heart of love for us and for all creation. Amen.

## SESSION V: Is the Holy Spirit active?

### Your Story

In what way have you or do you sense God's spirit active in your life?

### Scripture

*1 Corinthians 13 and 14*

Paul's great chapter on "love" becomes the guide for handling contentious issues in a Christian community – which is what "speaking in tongues" had become. What are contentious issues in your Christian community and how does love dictate resolutions?

*Philippians 2:1-13*

We are called to be of the "same mind" as Christ Jesus. We are made in the image of God and Paul's writing calls us to live this out in our daily lives.

### Further Questions

- Our faculty reflects that God's spirit was most active and most deeply felt at times of adversity. How does their story resonate with yours?
- In the explanation to the Apostle Creed's third article, Martin Luther identifies the activity of the Holy Spirit in this way: 1) called me through the Gospel, 2) enlightened me with his gifts, 3) made me holy, and 4) kept me in the true faith. Do these apply to your life experience? How would you put it?
- God gives us "will" and thus "choice." God's spirit can be active by working through us. How do you see God's spirit working through your choices?
- Sometimes we don't realize God's spirit is active at the moment, but only in retrospect. Are there occasions that come to mind where this has been true for you?
- What's the most compelling question from this session your group would like to ask of Luther Seminary professors?

### Anecdote

One small group exercise asks each person to fold a blank piece of paper (the "hot dog way"). Using the fold as a life-line, from birth to present, each person is asked to draw a solid line that represents the "ups and downs" of each one's life. Then folks are asked to draw a second line, a dotted line, that represents how close or distant each one has felt to God through the years of their life. The correlation between the two is often revealing, as a way of seeing when God's spirit has seemed most active.

### Further Reading

*Traveling Mercies*, by Anne Lamott

### Prayer

Dear and gracious God, you move in all things at all times. Your spirit surrounds us and moves in us. Your spirit calls us to follow your path of service and love. Help us to give ourselves to the mind and heart of Christ Jesus, that like him, we might live with faith, hope and love. Amen.