

GOOD GOD QUESTIONS

Volume 1 Study Guide

For The Leader

Thank you for agreeing to facilitate this video series, *Good God Questions Vol 1*. 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 the seven segments of *Good God Questions Vol 1*, 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, Fred Gaiser, Carol Miles, and Alan Padgett 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 3-9 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. 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: Why do bad things happen?

Your Story

What part of this discussion resonated with your own experience?

Scripture

Job 38:1 – 42:6

Job finally gets his wish for an “audience” with God, to find out why he has experienced so much loss and suffering. What do you make of this, in light of this session’s material? How do you feel about God’s answer?

Romans 8:18-39

Does this text provide any kind of help for this session’s questions?

Further Questions

- Some suffering, pain or grief is easier to accept than others. Why is that?
- Where’s justice, if God is “just,” when there’s tragedy? Or is life a “crapshoot?”
- Gaiser states that chaos is built into creation. Jacobson adds that it’s part of God’s love that builds “randomness” into creation. Is God’s love also “random?”
- Is it OK to be angry with God? Have you? When?
- Pain and death are a part of the created order. What is the good side of this? When do we question its goodness?
- If you had God’s power, how would you change the status quo? Would you?
- Sue Monk Kidd writes about “the kind of believing one does before immense suffering” (*The Mermaid Chair*). Does this apply to you?
- What’s the most compelling question from this session your group would like to ask of Luther Seminary professors?

Anecdote

“There is no loving without sorrow. But the greatest sorrow is to not have loved at all.”

Share what other sayings, or witness of people, have given you insight into these issues.

Further Reading

The Will of God, by Leslie D. Weatherhead

Prayer

Dear and gracious God, give us wisdom out of life’s struggles. Give us strength for life’s challenges. Give us grace with what we must endure. Give us patience while waiting for your redemption. And in all things, give us the peace and hope that comes through our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

SESSION II: What Are Bad Answers?

Your Story

Have you experienced “bad answers?” Share. What would have been better responses for you? As a group, list the “bad answers” you heard in this session, and add to the list the one’s you share with each other.

Scripture

John 9

The disciples look for a connection between a man’s blindness, someone’s sin and responsibility for his blindness, and God’s punishment of sin. What are the “bad answers” in this story? What wisdom does this text share regarding this session’s topic? What does this text say about God?

Matthew 5:43-45

Apply Jesus’ teaching to the “bad answers” you’ve listed.

Further Questions

- If you were called to the hospital to be with parents whose first child just died of SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome), what would you do and say? What are the wrong things to say? What would seem to be a right thing to say?
- In what kind of “partial answers” would those who grieve find comfort?
- Have you ever wondered if God is punishing you for something? (Or conversely, have you ever thought God was rewarding you for something?)
- What does it mean when we say “God has given us a blessing?” Does that also mean God gives a curse?
- What have you found most helpful in words spoken to you when life is hard?
- What’s the most compelling question from this session your group would like to ask of Luther Seminary professors?

Anecdote

In the movie version of *The Sound of Music*, Rogers and Hammerstein add a song that has the lyrics, “Nothing comes from nothing. Nothing ever could. So somewhere in my youth or childhood, I must have done something good.” It was their way of explaining falling in love. Sappy and romantic and bad theology was all wrapped into one moment. Perhaps you have other stories or illustrations from the culture that do the same.

Further Reading

The Wounded Healer, by Henri J.M. Nouwen

Prayer

Dear and gracious God, help us to not impose our answers to life’s questions on others. Help us to use gracious words of love as we reach out to those who are hurting. And when we do not know the words to use, help us be gracious as we reach out. Amen.

SESSION III: Your Own Partial Answers?

Your Story

What in your life story would you add if you were a part of the panel?

Scripture

Psalm 31, Psalm 77

“My life is spent with sorrow, and my years with sighing” These words capture the sense of “lament” in the Psalms. How are the “laments” comforting?

1 Corinthians 13

The King James translation used, for the word patience, “long suffering.” “Love is long suffering.” This famous chapter also uses the words, “For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face.” How do these words fit with your stories?

Further Questions

- Talk about the “Why not me?” question versus the “Why me?” question. Why might one be better than another? Where do these questions lead us?
- Do you pray for specific remedies for life situations? What does it mean to you if nothing happens or things get worse after praying for a solution?
- Have you had experiences where, in retrospect, you believed God was with you?
- What spiritual promises are helpful to you?
- What’s the most compelling question from this session your group would like to ask of Luther Seminary professors?

Anecdote

The mother of a race car driver who died in a qualifying run for the Indy 500 was quoted as saying, “My main prayers have always been for his safety. I’ve made novenas. Why haven’t my prayers been answered?” Some of our “why’s” are really laments. What are the laments you and your group might make for your life or for the world?

Further Reading

The Problem of Pain, by C.S. Lewis

Prayer

Dear and gracious God, we praise you for creation. We praise you for life. We praise you that we can reflect on your creation and our life. And when we do not understand your creation and our life, and when we suffer, we do not fear pouring out our laments to you – for you have made us your children, and we come to you, knowing you will not turn us away. Amen.

SESSION IV: Same God?

Your Story

Talk about family or friends or co-workers you have that are Jewish, Muslim, or other than Christian. Have you been able to share your different faith and perspectives with one another? What's made that possible? Or not possible?

Scripture

Acts 17:22-34

Paul is speaking in Athens at the Areopagus. He gets a mixed reaction to his proclamation about Jesus. In hindsight, if you were to craft this speech, would you have put things any differently? How might you have framed this proclamation?

Colossians 1:13-20

Paul declares Jesus to be the "image of the invisible God." On this point Jews and Muslims would differ. Does that mean we worship different Gods?

Further Questions

- The world has become smaller and more cosmopolitan. Our teenagers have friends of many non-Christian faiths – or with no faith. Because of their loyalty to and love of friends, they reject any notion of a faith that insists on it's belief system as necessary for salvation. What do you make of that?
- Why is it so hard for us to converse civilly about our different religious beliefs?
- Why has there been so much warfare between religions that profess peace and have strong laws against killing?
- Christianity and Islam are the only two major world religions that have teachings that call upon us to "win converts." What do you make of that? Should we reconsider what that means & how we pursue that?
- Do you share a similar story with Miles – taking a step back and considering the gamut of religious belief and returning to Christianity?
- What's the most compelling question from this session your group would like to ask of Luther Seminary professors?

Anecdote

Some think religions are like the blind people who each feel a different part of the same elephant and believe each is accurately describing the whole. Some think religions are all paths leading to the same mountain top. Are these images accurate? Do you have your own analogy or explanation for the multitude of religious belief?

Further Reading

A History of God, by Karen Armstrong

Prayer

Dear and gracious God, because you have made all people and claim all people as your children, help us to love one another as brothers and sisters. Take away the prejudices and suspicions that divide us one from the other. Help us to be advocates for equity and respect among all people. Amen.

SESSION V: Why Did God Have to Die?

Your Story

Has this been a question you've pondered? When? How did you resolve it (if you did)?

Scripture

Isaiah 53

This chapter states that "it was the will of God to bruise him." When we juxtapose this text with Jesus' parable of the prodigal son, or with his teaching in the next text, does that change the way we think about Isaiah 53 and the prophet's understanding of God?

Matthew 9:10-13

"I desire mercy and not sacrifice." Jesus may well have been referring to Isaiah 55:6. This text also has a lot to say about the nature of Jesus' purpose. Jesus' teaching informs and corrects the ways we talk about his death and about the nature of God. Talk about that.

Further Questions

- This session provides profound correctives on some common ways Jesus' death is characterized. First, a rejection of an "equation that theoretically requires suffering and death." Secondly, we are provided with giving blood as symbolic of being life-giving (Red Cross in our experience). And third the notion of the prophets rejecting death as necessary to appease an angry God. Talk about how each of these three correct statements about Jesus' death.
- It is God who initiates making things right between us. Is this true only if I believe?
- "The cross is our 'no' to God's love. But it's God's 'yes' to our salvation." How does that hit you? What are the implications for Padgett's family of origin?
- A confirmation student declares her belief that just as God told us to forgive our enemies (even when they don't ask for it), God will also forgive her friends who are non-believers, who do not ask God for forgiveness, and who will still be given salvation, therefore. What do you make of this line of thinking?
- What's the most compelling question from this session your group would like to ask of Luther Seminary professors?

Anecdote

A Jewish Midrash describes that when Moses safely led the Israelites across the sea and the trailing Egyptian army was drowned, a great cheer went up in the heavenly host who were watching from Heaven. But they were surprised when they say that God was crying. When asked why, God said, "the Egyptians are my children too." God incarnate in Jesus means we have a God who suffers in the midst of salvation. What do you make of that?

Further Reading

Jesus and Nonviolence: A Third Way, by Walter Wink

Prayer

Dear and gracious God, you do not distance yourself from us. You are part of every moment in every life. Just as Jesus' death brings us life, may we accept our mortality as part of your great design. May we expend our lives in Godly ways. Amen.

SESSION VI: How do I know God's will for my life?

Your Story

Have you ever wondered this – if God has a “plan” for your life? Did you find an answer? Is the answer still valid? Did it change?

Scripture

Romans 12

Paul provides some broad principles for our vocation, our “call” in life. What parts of this chapter are particularly relevant for your life?

Luke 10:25-37

Jesus gives “The Great Commandment,” that which frames the path for all people. How does this apply in your life? How does his parable apply in your life?

Further Questions

- There is wisdom in remembering what “not to do.” What are examples from your life that demonstrate this?
- Is the bracelet WWJD helpful (What Would Jesus Do)? (Or for Jews WWMD! Or for married couples, WWMSD!)
- Who are your consultants or mentors? If you don't have any, why not?
- What are times and ways where work or a circle friends put you at odds with your faith?
- Where do I “draw the line?”
- What key scripture texts and teachings do you live by?
- Who do you try to emulate?
- How do you hope your epitaph would read?
- What's the most compelling question from this session your group would like to ask of Luther Seminary professors?

Anecdote

Someone at church tells you they have a job offer. They think they should take it, because they believe they literally heard God's voice telling them to take the job. Is that possible? What do you say? Have you ever experienced something like it?

Further Reading

Let Your Life Speak: Listening for the Voice of Vocation, by Parker Palmer

Prayer

Dear and gracious God, as each day unfolds, may we each choose paths that are pleasing to you, living with love and grace, living with honesty and truth, and creating good memories for those around us. May we be honorable in our motives and deeds so that when the day ends, we have little to confess and much that gives us peaceful sleep. Amen.

SESSION VII: Forgiveness and/or Judgment?

Your Story

Is the paradox of God's forgiveness and judgment one you've ever wondered about or struggled with? Are there those you've forgiven and judged at the same time, yet still loved?

Scripture

Luke 1:46-55

In this study we are reminded that the issue of judgment is terrifying to those who stand in need of it, while it a prospect of hope for those who are oppressed. Mary's *Magnificat* expresses that feeling. What feeling does this paradox cause in you?

Hebrews 12:1-2

This text is similar to Padgett's opening statement. The preceding chapters reflect the "teeth" that Gaiser is looking for. Reflect on that.

Further Questions

- We are justified and sinful at the same time. We are forgiven and judged at the same time. What do make of that? What are you going to do with that?
- Reflect on how someone's grace was a motivator in your life.
- Redemption inspires sanctification. That is to say, "We love, because God first loved us." Does that ring true for you? Are you able to define your employment as a work of love?
- What are the "powers and principalities" that you would like to see held accountable for what they're doing? (Individuals, companies, governments, etc.)
- What's the most compelling question from this session your group would like to ask of Luther Seminary professors?

Anecdote

A person who had been a judge most of his career spoke of wanting a judgment when he died. He wanted to be held accountable for his life because it would be an indication that his life mattered in God's eyes. What do you make of this? Do you have other images that come to mind that hold together the paradox of forgiveness and judgment?

Further Reading

Manana: Christian Theology from a Hispanic Perspective, by Justo L. Gonzalez

Prayer

Dear and gracious God, thank you for caring deeply about each of us. It is beyond our understanding that the creator of the universe would bother with us at all. Yet, in Jesus, we dare to call upon you, believing that our lives matter to you. We dare to trust in your love, knowing that you judge us – delighting in our good, putting to death our sin, and raising us to new life through your forgiving love. Thank you. Amen.