

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Introduction | 4 |
| Meeting and Setting Goals..... | 6 |
| Week 1: The Great Human Questions..... | 9 |
| Week 2: Examining the Ways We Know..... | 15 |
| Week 3: The Christian Worldview..... | 24 |
| Appendix A: The Divine Sea | 26 |
| Appendix B: For Further Reading | 29 |

Introduction

Dear Leader,

You have been given a beautiful opportunity to explore the deepest questions of human existence with another person. No small task! Yet you have all that you need, for you are not alone. The Lord has promised to be with you (Is 41:10, Lk 21:1).

The goal of this study is to stimulate reflection and respectful dialogue around some theological themes, and to consider some of the most common reasons why and how people believe in God and Jesus. As you embark on this journey with a seeker, first reflect on the following quote from Pope Paul VI: “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 41).

This time is a gift to you, an opportunity to witness to your faith in Christ. Fundamental to effective witness is treating others as Christ did, with radical acceptance and love. Respect the dignity of freedom God gave each of us to explore truth at our own pace. One of the greatest services you can render others is to approach them with reverence. This means to honor their points of view, respect their life experiences, and recognize the complexity and legitimate diversity of how we perceive truth.

In the course of these discussions you will likely have several opportunities to share your own thoughts and experiences. Keep in mind the idea expressed in Paul VI’s words above. It is not in articulating perfectly constructed arguments or wowing people with your vast intellectual knowledge that you will offer the best witness. It is rather through an honest and heartfelt sharing of your own experience of God in Christ. Be careful not to exaggerate your witness so as to impress or move someone towards belief. Take St. Paul as your model, as he approached the Corinthians:

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, I did not come proclaiming the mystery of God to you in lofty words or wisdom. For I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and him crucified. And I came to you in weakness and in fear and in much trembling. My speech and my proclamation were not with plausible words of wisdom, but with a demonstration of the Spirit and of power, so that your faith might rest not on human wisdom but on the power of God. (1 Corinthians 2:1-5)

We know that Paul was no stranger to rigorous thought and sophisticated philosophy. He could

discuss the deepest of human questions with the brightest minds of his world. But he knew that ultimately it was not his eloquence that won people to Christ, but the power of God, which works mysteriously through human weakness when we surrender to Christ.

Please prepare diligently for these meetings by reading this study slowly and thoughtfully. Ask questions of the director if you have them. Look up cross-referenced texts. When the seeker asks you a question to which you do not know the answer, admit that you don't know, look into the matter on your own time and get back to him/her next week. Remember, though, never leave out the most crucial preparation of prayer. Ask God to guide you and give you the Spirit, so that you can truly show forth God's love through your attentive listening, engaging questions, and authentic witness. May this study aid you in the process, and may God richly bless you both as you "seek the face of God" (Psalm 27:8).

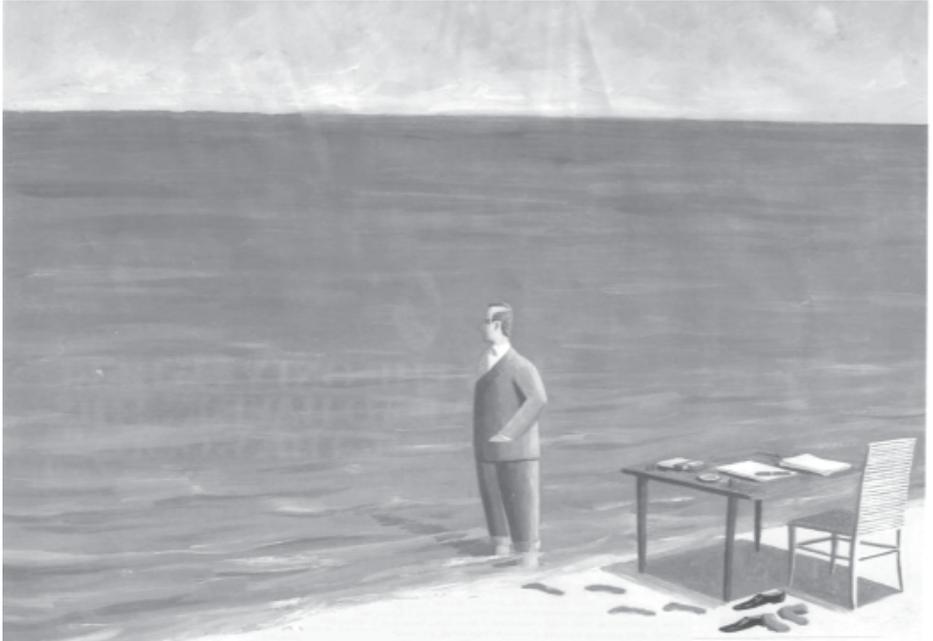
Week 2: Examining the Ways We Know

Introduction

Leader: please ask the seeker to read the following introduction aloud.

Last time we looked at the human propensity to pose questions about the meaning of existence, and began considering the question of God in this context. The question of God reveals humanity's natural desire to know beyond what we can see with our eyes. In this session we will explore more deeply the ways in which we come to know and/or believe in things which ultimately lie beyond our full comprehension.

Leader: Present the following in your own words: Study the following image for about 30 seconds in silence before looking at the questions below. This is an open-ended exercise. The number of possible responses is equal to the number of people looking at the picture. Have fun with this; ponder away!



Cover Art for The New Yorker, June 24, 1991

1. **What do you think is going on here? What might the man be thinking? Attempting? Pondering?**

2. **How does the picture represent different ways of knowing about the ocean?**

*Leader: **Theoretical and experiential knowledge:** Perhaps the writing on the paper was the man's attempt to describe the ocean or report on some scientific facts about it. The scribbles could represent theoretical knowledge of the ocean. This is contrasted with the man's decision to touch and enter the ocean for himself: experiential knowledge.*

***Right-brain, left-brain:** You may also find the neurological-scientific distinctions between left-brain and right-brain relevant here. You can ask if they are familiar with this, and if not, explain briefly the key distinctions. The left-brain is active when processing information in a more logical, sequential and analytical way, whereas the right hemisphere produces intuition, holistic synthesis, and subjective feeling. For example, calculating mathematical formulas is more of a left-brained activity, while marveling at a work of art engages more of the right-brain. With the ocean image, the left-brained understanding of the ocean might be represented by the words on the paper, while the decision to enter the water might have been motivated by the right-brain being captivated by the expansive mystery of the ocean. You can then ask if the seeker is typically more right or left-brained. You can share what you think you are. This can make for fun conversation, while enlightening about both the differences in people, and the differences in ways of knowing.*

3. **What is the difference between knowing someone and knowing about someone? How might the image point to this distinction?**

Leader: Example: Many people may know a lot about Bono, the lead singer of U2, but no one knows Bono like his wife of almost thirty years! Those who know about Bono are like those on the seashore with words on paper. Those who know him personally are like the man in the water. Perhaps no one is swimming more deeply in the 'ocean of Bono' than his wife and kids.

4. **What types of things must we do in order to get to know a person, and not just know about him or her?**

Leader: In terms applicable to the image: what are the ways we 'enter the ocean' of another person, as opposed to merely studying facts about that person? To know another includes activities such as: spending time together, talking and listening to one another, observing the

person interact with others, doing what he or she loves to do the most, etc.

5. If God is personal, and not just an impersonal life-force or energy field, what types of things might we do to come to know this God?

Leader: The point here is that knowledge or belief in God is more than abstract theories about the possibility of a creator of the universe existing. Studying philosophical and scientific reasons for God's existence is a great starting point for our search, but to know God is to experience God through prayer, silence, reflection, action, people and the world. It involves both hemispheres of the brain. Intuition and experience play a role in our knowing. Too often we reduce the God question to a strictly scientific, logical matter. This is akin to reducing the reality of our loved ones to statements that 'prove' the authenticity of their love for us. We know that our loved ones love us, regardless of whether we can prove it to a skeptic. Truth is bigger than what we can capture in words.

A note about 'proof': If the seeker seems held up by the idea of proving God's existence, the following thought exercise might help:

- 1. Think of a relationship in your life (parent, friend, sibling, significant other) that you would say is characterized by a genuine love. If someone asked you prove that the person loved you, how might you respond? What kinds of stories, examples, propositions would you choose to describe in order to convince this person of the love in your relationship?*
- 2. Even with all that you just mentioned, is it really possible to prove that the love in your relationship is genuine? How do you really know that this person is not just deceiving you, waiting for the right moment to do you in? After all, we have all seen the crazy mysteries on TV where the seemingly loving husband and father turns out to be a fake. Can you really know or prove that you're not being duped?*

Many things we say we know for certain (like the love in a relationship we experience), are not the types of truths we can prove conclusively to someone who has a skeptical attitude. The impossibility of proving certain propositions, though, does not mean they are necessarily false. God's existence is one of those important truths (like a spouse's love) that matters tremendously, yet cannot be proven beyond all possible doubt like $2+2=4$.

Optional Reading for Further Reflection

For further reflection on the analogy of an infinite ocean applied to God and the spiritual life, see the quotes from the Christian tradition in Appendix A.

Conclusion

With the help of the image of the man at the seashore, we have reflected on some of the different ways we know things. Words, arguments and logic can point us in the right direction, but often fall short of delivering the whole truth. The ocean is more than facts and statistics on a page. People are known best through relationships, not biographies. And if God exists, God is surely more than we can say or believe about him. The one who truly desires to know something of God must become open to seeking the experience of God.