



THE GOD ANTHOLOGY: EXPLORING THE DEPTHS OF GOD

LEADER HELPS

SESSION 1 — MYSTERY

IN RETROSPECT

What first comes to mind when you think about God? List two or three characteristics that you most associate with Him.

Answers to this question could range from some of the more popular attributes we find in Scripture to more personal reflections that people have gleaned from specific situations in their lives. While there are certainly right and wrong perceptions and understandings of God's character and nature, there is no right or wrong answer to this question. The goal of this question is to help people establish a baseline for the rest of the study.

What are some of the characteristics of God that are most confusing, frightening, or unsettling to you?

God is big enough and secure enough to handle our doubts, questions, and fears. Encourage people to be honest with this question. It's OK (and probably even normal) to find attributes like wrath and jealousy frightening or the Trinity confusing. It might be worth mentioning that this study won't necessarily remove some of those emotions and tensions, but it will help group members navigate them and learn how to study them in Scripture. If we could completely understand Him and package His character neatly into our logic, He would not be God.

FRAMING THE STORY

If you could ask God any question, what would you ask?

This question is meant to be a fun opportunity to break the ice. For some people, the question might be whimsical (why would You create mosquitoes?) while for others it could be intensely personal (why did You allow my parents to divorce?). Questions all across the spectrum should be encouraged.

What are some of the places in Scripture or moments in your life when God seemed most mysterious to you?

For some, this question may overlap with the previous questions. Again, answers could range from an intellectual crisis to a moment of unexpected and unexplained blessing to a time when God seemed absent.

List two words you would use to describe yourself—words that define who you are now.

If the participants in your group don't know one another well, you can leverage this as an opportunity for connection. This question will also provide an opportunity for participants to consider their current character and likely even how they would like to grow—things they would like to see become core to their own character.

SMALL-GROUP DIALOGUE

Paul contrasts human wisdom with the mystery of God. How should human wisdom be used?

This question gives group members an opportunity to examine 1 Corinthians 2:1-10 more closely and see that Paul was not a weak and fearful man when it came to public speaking. But he was fearful of relying on human wisdom when he spoke. Paul did not come to Corinth arguing in the wisdom of man. And what the Corinthian Church received from Paul were words of power spoken in the Spirit of God. The next step we hope this question will prompt would be for group members to better understand that they don't simply want to be convinced of, or talked into, a religious faith based on human wisdom. But instead an experience that reveals the wisdom of God for their lives—a wisdom that "eye did not see and ear did not hear, and what never entered the human mind" (1 Corinthians 2:9).

Paul also speaks about the role of the Holy Spirit in helping us grasp the mysteries of God. Why do you think it is important to know that the Spirit "searches everything, even the depths of God"? What do you think this has to do with our relationship with God?

This passage and question really speak into the mystery of God and our limited ability to understand some things. Paul has spoken before about the depths to which the Spirit goes to bring out the things in us that are too deep for words, the sighs and moans that make up our innermost wants and desires and needs. Discussion that springs from this question will help group members refocus their thoughts on the fact that we believe in and trust the Holy Spirit because He is God. And a part of that is trusting in that which we may never fully understand but yet still know to be true.

What questions would you put in a Deuteronomy 29:29 file?

Answers will vary. These are the questions group members have for God, the theological tensions or philosophical conundrums they wrestle with.



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SESSION 2 — HOLINESS

IN RETROSPECT

From your devotional time last week, how did you answer the question: Reflect on a time when God invaded the reality of your life and completely turned your reality upside down. How did that experience change you?

Answers to this question will come from their devotional reading in the previous week. It's an opportunity for participants to share with one another the way that God shows up in our lives. Remind the group that when we share the work of God in our lives with others, it's an opportunity to encourage one another and build one another's faith.

Where has the mystery of God appeared in your life over the past week?

We often miss the wonderful mystery of God simply because we are not looking for it. If we train ourselves to be aware of His presence and His work, we will notice His mystery even in the mundane of the day to day. Albert Einstein acknowledged that there were two ways to live life. One as though nothing was a miracle. The other as though everything was a miracle. When God is in the equation, miracles abound and surround.

FRAMING THE STORY

Merriam-Webster defines holy as "exalted or worthy of complete devotion as one perfect in goodness and righteousness." Is this definition sufficient or is there something you would add or subtract?

This is a good definition. It might be worth pointing out, however, that God is also wholly "other." In other words, God is not simply a bigger, better version of us. He's not the idealized or perfected human being. He is God—both transcendent and imminent. Both spirit and personal.

What people, places, or objects were designated as holy in Scripture?

This might be a good opportunity to teach your group how to use a concordance or word study on an online search tool like *Biblegateway.com*. Have group members look up the word *holy* and make a list of what is described as holy. The word *holy* shows up over 560 times in Scripture. Examples could include, but are not limited to, the seventh day of

creation, the tabernacle and its furnishings, the community of God, days of fasting, God's ways, His mountain, His city, and, of course, God Himself. It might also be worth noting how many times articles are described as "holy" in the Book of Leviticus and the role it plays in foreshadowing redemption through sacrifice, the role of the High Priest, and the Day of Atonement.

Jesus says, "Be holy, because I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16). Do you think this command is possible or impossible? Why?

This question will likely be met with a variety of answers. Is it an impossible challenge that Jesus gives? Or one that He expects us to meet? If it were impossible for us to be holy like Jesus, why would He give us that command?

SMALL-GROUP DIALOGUE

What picture of Jesus is dominant in your mind?

This question gives participants another opportunity to share the images of Jesus that they carry around in their minds. Is their picture of Jesus the Son different from their picture of God the Father? If so, why is that?

As you read this description of God's throne, how does it compare with the mental image you have of heaven?

This question will engage the participants in their views of heaven. By hearing the descriptions of others, group members will be able to consider things they may not have ever considered and strengthen and expand their own views of heaven.

What do these passages teach you about worship?

Worship is continual and a normal part of heaven.

How might we engage in continual worship through the way we live our lives?

As we seek to grow closer to God, we learn more about His character. Every time we learn something new about His character, we have a reason to worship. There is more to God than we will ever be able to learn on this side of eternity, so there is always an opportunity to learn something new about God. God is always giving fresh revelation of Who He is if we will only look for it.



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SESSION 3 — INCOMPARABILITY

IN RETROSPECT

In what ways have you engaged worship differently since our discussion on holiness last week?

If this study is successful, it will lead to more worship. We don't learn about the character of God simply to increase our knowledge base. As we learn more about God, it should lead us to worship Him more and live more like Him. This is an opportunity to remind your group members of these goals and to give them opportunities to share ideas and spur one another on to greater experiences with God.

How can our view of God's holiness practically impact our lives on a daily basis?

Answers to this question will vary from person to person. A view of God's holiness causes us to view sin differently, to view others differently, and to view our circumstances differently.

FRAMING THE STORY

What are some ways you have made God in your own image?

Answers to this self-revelation question will vary from person to person. Some will share attitudes that they assume God shares with them. Others may share how their views of their earthly father or other authority figures have shaped their view of God.

What is the biggest way God has revealed Himself in your life or in the life of someone close to you?

This question allows participants to share how God has shown up in real and unmistakable ways in their own lives. The power of "testimony" is so critical to our faith (Revelation 12:11). Questions like this help participants realize that their testimony is not just the story of how they turned their lives over to the lordship of Christ; rather, it's about the ongoing work of God in their lives and wills.

SMALL-GROUP DIALOGUE

What does Paul pray for the members of the church in Ephesus and what does this possibly reveal about his presupposition of these members?

This is an observation question to help group participants recognize the specifics of Paul's prayer. Sometimes it is easy to read right over certain passages of Scripture and miss important truths, insights, and applications. Specifically Paul prays for

wisdom, revelation, knowledge; for enlightened minds so that we would know the hope of His calling, the riches He has promised us, and His immeasurable greatness. As a leader, pray similar prayers for your group participants.

During what circumstances or seasons of life have you sensed God changing your perception of His character and capabilities?

God changes our perception of His character and abilities through the study of His Word, the way He answers our prayers, and through the unique circumstances of our lives. This question allows group members to connect the dots between their perception of God and the roots of those perceptions.

Consider the problems in your life right now that seem bigger than God. How can you change that perception?

You can either let participants answer this quietly, in a private, introspective way or allow them to share the problems they are facing. In order for our perceptions of God to be right, they must be aligned with Scripture and shaped in prayer. Scripture study and memorization are helpful disciplines. Keeping a gratitude journal helps realign our hearts and minds. Worship puts us in a posture to see that God is bigger than our problems.

Considering last week's discussion on holiness, what is now the dominant image that comes to your mind when you think about Jesus?

Once again, participants have an opportunity to share their dominant image of Jesus. Last week we discussed that Jesus is wholly other and perfectly good. As we study God's incomparable nature this week, is that still the image? Or is there another image that comes to mind? As Mark mentioned in the video teaching, an image we should have of Jesus is of Him seated on the throne.

Paul mentions the authority we have because we are in Christ. Scripture is ripe with promises of this authority and pictures of faithful people operating in that authority. What instances can you recall from Scripture that remind you of the victory we have in Christ?

This observation/interpretation question challenges participants to go to other places of Scripture to answer. The Book of Ephesians is replete with statements about who we are in Christ and what we have been given because of Christ's sacrifice. Consider challenging your group to go through the Book of Ephesians and note every time the text uses the phrase



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SESSION 4 — MERCY

IN RETROSPECT

How is your image of God developing over the course of this study?

We keep coming back to this question because it is the whole point of the study. The way we are wrestling with God's character and coming to new insights and revelations should cause changes in the way we view Him, worship Him, and seek to look more like Him.

What are some big, impossible prayers you are praying that you could share with the group?

This question meshes with the content of the previous week and also provides an opportunity, at this halfway mark of the study, for a deeper level of community, connection, and shared prayer.

FRAMING THE STORY

Describe a time when someone showed mercy to you or you showed mercy to someone else.

Answers to this question could range from benign examples from childhood to more serious examples.

When you see a picture of the cross, do you associate Jesus' sacrifice with wrath or mercy? Explain.

This interpretation-oriented question is likely to spark an interesting discussion on the oft-ignored attribute of God's wrath and His more palatable attribute of mercy. The goal is to see how the two work together. It's OK to leave some tension in this question.

SMALL-GROUP DIALOGUE

Sometimes truth is found in the tension of opposites. How do you think God's mercy and judgment work together?

Looking through Scripture, we see a number of places where God's mercy and judgment work together—God's response to Adam and Eve after the fall, Abraham and Isaac and the provision of the ram, the Passover, etc. Participants may also share examples from their own lives or the lives of others that demonstrate God's mercy and judgment working together.

Which character do you identify with most in this story: the woman or the Pharisees? Why?

This self-revelation question allows participants to recognize there is a little bit of the adulterous woman and Pharisees in all of us. And that most of us tend to lean in one direction or the other.

Consider what you know about Jesus. What do you think He was scribbling in the sand?

This interpretation question is entirely left to personal opinion. While scholars posit and debate, we really don't know. Perhaps He was writing out the sins of her accusers or writing Scriptures that related to the situation; maybe He was making His to-do list for the day or just doodling in the sand. This question gives an opportunity for group participants to consider the humanity of Christ and consider the way He related to people in everyday situations.

Death was the rightful punishment for adultery according to Old Testament law. Furthermore, God hates adultery because it tears relationships apart and rips the fabric of God's image as displayed through the marriage relationship. Yet Jesus shows mercy. What limits the extent of God's mercy?

This is an interpretation question related to the outer limits of God's mercy. Is there anyone or anything that lies beyond the reach of God's mercy? Encourage group participants to really wrestle with this scenario.

What three responses does the Lord require of us? What do you think makes such a simple command so difficult?

Act justly, love mercy, walk humbly. Encouraging participants to specifically make these observations about the text will drive home the force of what is being challenged.

What do the traits of justice, mercy, and humility have in common?

This question helps group members wrestle with how these three attitudes and actions, which on the surface may seem unrelated or even opposite, can work together. Challenge them to think of both scriptural and real-life examples where this is the case.



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SESSION 5 — JEALOUSY

IN RETROSPECT

One outcome of studying the character of God should be that we begin to look more like Him. How did last week's study on mercy affect the way you look at and relate to other people—especially those who least deserve and expect love?

We've been reminding participants that the goal of this study is not simply to gain more information about God; it's to worship Him more and look more like Him. This self-revelation question prompts participants to think in terms of how they are looking more like Christ specifically in the area of mercy.

Share your response to the devotional activity: Imagine that you headed into a situation in which you expect to be a slave only to learn that you are being adopted. Describe your reaction.

Participants will have answered this question in their devotional reading from the previous week. When we recognize that we are sons and daughters of the King, it should change everything. For those who did not have good relationships with their earthly fathers, there may still be some wounds, baggage, and wrong perspectives on which to shine the light of Scripture.

FRAMING THE STORY

Consider the statement, God is jealous. What kind of emotions or reactions do you have to that idea?

We typically think of jealousy as a vice and not a virtue; that's why it's hard for us to think in terms of God being jealous. Or we wonder why God is so insecure or full of Himself that He gets jealous. It's OK for participants to have these kinds of visceral and immediate reactions; we want this study to be an honest look at the character of God. And in order to have a right understanding of God, we first have to be honest about our current understandings.

Is there such a thing as unselfish and pure jealousy? If so, how is that different from jealousy as we typically understand it?

Participants may answer this question using either biblical passages to support the perfect and rightful jealousy of God or examples from real life in which jealousy is displayed in a good manner (for instance, in marriage a husband or wife should be jealous for the uncompromised love of the other).

SMALL-GROUP DIALOGUE

In what ways do you think we are simply more sophisticated sinners?

For most of us, idolatry will not look like carved statues. And often, the idolatry will not look as primitive, ridiculous, or pagan. We've just discovered more "socially acceptable" idols to worship. It might even be helpful to push your group members to think in terms of idolatry that we have spiritualized.

Where do we find the equivalent of the Canaanite goddess of fertility in our culture today?

Sex is worshiped now just as much as it was thousands of years ago. Music, television, movies, advertising—all point us to worship the Canaanite goddess of fertility.

What other idols are prevalent in our culture today?

Answers to this could include money, career, success, possessions, other people's opinions, approval, fame, praise, food, etc.

Looking at Ezekiel 8:7-13, who were the people engaged in idolatrous practices in the hidden room?

The leaders of Israel. This observation question ensures that participants realize it was the leaders who fell prey to idolatry.

When God points out a hidden room in our lives, what should be our response?

Confession, prayer, accountability, etc. Encourage group members to think in terms of action steps that are specific and measurable.

Do you think hidden rooms can be completely abolished in our lives or do we just have to lock the door, ignore them, and never go in again? Explain.

This question provokes group members to wrestle with the idea that God offers us sanctification and healing, but we often live in the land of the now and the not yet. Some sin patterns in our lives may be abolished instantaneously when we confess and hand them over to God. The grip of others sins may lessen over time as we allow the Spirit to work inside of us. Other temptations may plague us our entire lives in order that we



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SESSION 6 — SOVEREIGNTY

IN RETROSPECT

How do you think about jealousy and idolatry differently after last week's study?

Hopefully participants will recognize that God's jealousy is for their good and that idolatry is still prevalent in our lives and culture.

After completing the study on jealousy, what idols did you notice in our culture?

Encourage participants to share the idols they have observed.

FRAMING THE STORY

Do you think that God cares and governs over the smallest and most minute details in the universe? Is there anything He does not care about? Explain.

This question is certain to provoke differences of opinion. As Mark said in his video message, God is great not only because nothing is too big for Him, but also because nothing is too small. But are there details that God doesn't care about? Or doesn't care about as much as others? Does He care about where we live or who we marry? Does He care which team wins the Super Bowl? Does He care if we eat salad or steak for dinner tonight?

Does God's sovereignty interact or clash with the free will of mankind? Why?

Have fun with this one! This debate has been raging for years. Scripture teaches that God is sovereign; Scripture also teaches that God has granted man the ability to choose. What happens when those two truths stand opposed to one another? Or do they? Give group members some freedom to wrestle through that question and grace to land on different sides.

SMALL-GROUP DIALOGUE

What are some of the small details of your life that you are currently concerned about?

This self-revelation question is meant to give participants the opportunity to name their concerns within an awareness that God cares about them.

With the recognition that God cares about those details, how can you practically involve God in your thoughts, conversations, and actions related to those details?

This action-oriented question will help participants bring God into these areas of their lives. Prayer, fasting, Bible study, community and counsel, worship, gratitude, etc., are all possible answers.

Because God is concerned about details that may escape our notice, take a moment to consider how He is active in your life. Write down 2-3 ways that you can be more aware of and thankful for His involvement in your life.

Allow a few moments for group members to reflect on their own lives and record some moments where God has been actively involved in ways they might otherwise miss.

What does this passage tell us about the tension between the sovereignty of God and the free will of man?

Observation question—both man's free will and God's sovereignty are involved.

When the sovereignty of God clashes with the free will of man, which one wins?

This interpretation question returns the group to a similar question they considered in "framing the story." Now that the group has had some time to process the idea of sovereignty, did it affect their responses at all?

How do you respond to moments in life when you feel that your free will might conflict with God's sovereignty?

Some in the group may be troubled by the fact that God's sovereignty could interfere with their free will while others may be relieved that His sovereignty could interfere with their mistake-prone free will. Meanwhile, there might be a portion of the group who believe God's sovereignty always works in concert with our free will so that there is no conflict.

Identify a time when God's response to a bad circumstance in your life was intervention and a time when His response was redemption.

All of us have likely seen both God's intervention and His redemption, but it might take group members a little time to think through this one. We have no real idea about the times He has prevented something. It could be helpful to unpack this idea of prevention, intervention, and redemption a little more to really help people make sense of how God seems to work or not work in their circumstances.

