

Where Is God?



Session 1



Psalm 19:1-4a; Acts 17:22-31

Session Objective

Where is God? When we ask that question, we're also asking a lot of other questions. How do we find God? And how do we know when we've found God? Or, does God find us? In this session, we'll explore some of these basic questions about God, see how they've been answered by Christians through the years, and examine how those answers stack up today.

Faith Statement

Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence, do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave humans inexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of God's will, which is necessary unto salvation; therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in divers manners, to reveal God's self, and to declare that God's will unto God's Church; and . . . to commit the same wholly unto writing; which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary . . .

— *Westminster Confession of Faith*
(6.001)

Session Overview

 Enter	Big Questions and Name Catch
 Engage	Option A: Resting with the Question
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 Explore	Option A: Bible and Faith Statement Study
	Option B: Small-Group Study
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 Express	Option A: Stained-Glass Art
	Option B: <i>Lectio Divina</i>
	Option C: Musical Devotion with U2 Song
 Exit	Prayer Circle



Enhancements

Family Connections
Experiencing God
in Nature
Mission Connections



For instructions to download Web Resources and the coffeehouse version, see page 1.

Spiritual Reflection for Leaders

Take a few moments to read Psalm 19, which celebrates the glory of God, and to reflect on it.

- What words and phrases would you use if someone asked you to describe God?
- When have you felt closest to God? Farthest away from God?
- How can you help your group members connect with God in this session?

Pray for your group and for the time that you will have together with them. Pray that your group will see your passion for Jesus Christ as you lead them in exploring God's Word.



Understanding the Scripture

"The heavens are telling the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1). Have you felt what the psalmist expresses in this verse? Perhaps while witnessing an amazing sunset or when camping out under the stars on a sharp, clear night? Throughout history, many philosophers, theologians, and scientists have sensed the presence of God in the wonders of nature. The mystery at the heart of this way of sensing God's presence is that it's expressed in a language that has no words (Psalm 19:3)! While we're right to be inspired by such wonders and to seek God in the natural world, we find that our own observations can take us only so far.

Paul recognizes this in his speech to the people of Athens, who were avid seekers of knowledge. As the writer of Acts comments wryly, they "would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new" (Acts 17:21). As Paul observes, they also did their best to seek after gods, but when they couldn't find or identify the gods on their own, they were left to worship "unknown" gods. Paul compliments the Athenians on their piety and earnest devotion, but he also tells it like it is: "What . . . you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands . . ." (Acts 17:23–24).

The "unknown god" worshiped by the Athenians, Paul asserts, is in fact the one true God—the Athenians just don't know it yet! The people of Athens, like all of God's children, "search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him" (v. 27), but people cannot truly and fully find God on their own. Rather, they must recognize that God has always been present, has sought them out, and indeed has acted decisively to come to them in flesh in the person of Jesus Christ, this "man whom God has appointed" to judge the world (v. 31).

Paul's words, and indeed all of Scripture, bring God's good news to all of us. It is right and good for us to seek God in nature, but we humans have fully *found* God only when God has in fact found us: by walking among us in the person of Jesus Christ and by revealing God's self to us in the Spirit-infused words of Scripture.



Understanding the Faith Statement

The *Westminster Confession of Faith*, commissioned by the English Parliament in the mid-seventeenth century and a pillar of American Presbyterianism for nearly three hundred years, begins as we begin this course: “with God’s self-revelation in Scripture.”¹ In fact, it recognizes two ways that God reveals God’s self to us: (1) in nature and reason (what has come to be known as “general revelation”) and (2) through Scripture (“special revelation”).

Though the confession recognizes both forms of revelation, it contends that they are not equals: while “the light of nature” does indeed reveal much about God, such knowledge as we gain from nature is insufficient. Fortunately, God chose “to reveal God’s self” more fully to us “at sundry times, and in divers[e] manners” —not the least of which was when God took flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. Finally, the confession tells us, “it pleased the Lord” to commit a record of all of these revelations to writing, in the form of “Holy Scripture”: the Bible.²



Teaching Today’s Question

Teenagers are actively searching for meaning in their lives. They should be encouraged to do so, and especially to seek after God—but also to recognize that they can never fully find or know God on their own. This session points students toward the realization that seeking God requires asking not only, “Where is God?” but also, “Am I in a place where God can find me?”

Recognize that the youth may actually feel frustrated that God is revealed most fully in the person of Jesus Christ and in the words of Scripture, because this means it is difficult to really know God directly. The Bible can be seen as just words on a page, after all, and Jesus hasn’t walked the earth for two thousand years! Remember, then, that even in Paul’s day, Jesus was no longer humanly present—Paul proclaimed Christ crucified and risen, but he never met the man Jesus. Paul and his fellow followers of Jesus established the model by which we today are able to have that personal relationship with God that we—and our youth—crave: through the fellowship, worship, and spiritual practices of the church.

1. *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 2007), p. 120.

2. Quotations taken from the *Westminster Confession of Faith* (6.001), in *The Book of Confessions* (Louisville: Office of the General Assembly, Presbyterian Church [U.S.A.], 2007), p. 121.



Enter

Big Questions and Name Catch

- Printout of “Big Questions Posters” (Web Resource 1a) or newsprint and markers, index cards, pens, foam ball or other soft object that can be tossed, music player, appropriate music

Post the questions below around the meeting space. Either print out the questions using “Big Questions Posters” (Web Resource 1a) or write each question on a separate sheet of newsprint.

- Why is there so much sin and evil in the world?
- Why do bad things happen to good people?
- Where can I find God?
- Is God in control?
- What is God like?
- Does God know what will happen before it happens?
- How do we know that God exists?

Welcome the young people as they arrive and give each person a pen and an index card. Invite the participants to circulate around the room, reading and reflecting on the posted questions. Instruct them to write their initials beside any of the questions that they have ever asked or wondered about. In addition, ask them to write on their index cards the one question that jumps out the most at them. They may also use the index cards to write any of their own “big questions” that come to mind during the activity.

Gather the participants in a circle and play Name Catch. Then discuss the posted questions and students’ reactions to them, using some or all of the following questions:

- Which question(s) do you think about most often?
- Which question(s) had you never before thought of?
- Which question(s) can you answer? Which can you not answer?
- What other “big questions” do you wonder about?

Name Catch

- With the group seated or standing in a circle, play the music and invite the group members to pass the ball from person to person around the circle.
- Stop the music. The player holding the ball must call out his or her name. Start the music again.
- Continue stopping and starting the music and having the student caught holding the ball call out his or her name when the music stops.

- When a player is caught holding the ball a second time, he or she calls out the name of the person to his or her right in addition to his or her own name. The third time, he or she adds the name of the person to his or her left. The fourth time, he or she adds the name of a person across the circle.



Engage

Option A: Resting with the Question

- Candle or oil lamp, matches, music player, recording of "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" performed by U2

Consider setting the mood by dimming the lights, lighting a candle or oil lamp, and listening to "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For." Gather the group in a comfortable space and explore the following questions with the young people.



- How would you respond to someone who tells you that God doesn't exist?
- How would you respond if someone asked you, "Where is God?"
- Have you experienced God's presence in your life? If so, when? If not, do you think you will ever experience God?
- Is it OK to have times of doubt and to question God's existence? Why or why not?

Opening Prayer

God of mystery, we look around this world you've made, and sometimes we see signs of you everywhere: in the stars on a clear night, in the miracle of life, even in those hard places where we do the right thing because it's the right thing to do. Other times, we stumble around in darkness, searching for you, but find only our fears, our selfish desires, our failures. Open our eyes and ears, we pray, to the reality that if we want to find you, we must be still and know that you've found us first! In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Pray the opening prayer.

Option B: Praying Together

- Copy of "Where Are You, God?" (Web Resource 1b) for each student, candle or oil lamp, matches, music player, recording of "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For" performed by U2

With the group seated in a circle, distribute copies of "Where Are You, God?" (Web Resource 1b) and play the song "I Still Haven't Found What I'm Looking For." After the song, invite participants to join you in the responsive litany and prayer printed on "Where Are You, God?"



Explore

Option A: Bible and Faith Statement Study

- Bibles, copy of “Can We Find God?” (Web Resource 1c), copy of “Does God Find Us?” (Web Resource 1d), pens, newsprint, markers

Post two sheets of newsprint in a visible location. Write *How We Find God* on one sheet and *How God Finds Us* on the other sheet. Use “Can We Find God?” (Web Resource 1c) and “Does God Find Us?” (Web Resource 1d) to explore Psalm 19 and Acts 17 with your class. Note that both Web Resources end with a discussion about the same faith statement. As the young people respond to the questions, keep a running list of ways we find God and ways God finds us on the appropriate sheets of newsprint. Help the entire class work together to rewrite the excerpt from the *Westminster Confession of Faith* in contemporary language. Record the rewritten version on a sheet of newsprint.

Option B: Small-Group Study

- Bibles, copies of “Can We Find God?” (Web Resource 1c) for half of the students and copies of “Does God Find Us?” (Web Resource 1d) for the other half of the students, pens, newsprint, markers

Explain that this study is designed to help the students explore the question “Where is God?”—and specifically to explore how God is revealed to people. Divide the class into two or more small groups. Give each student in half of the groups a copy of “Can We Find God?” (Web Resource 1c) and give each student in the other half of the groups a copy of “Does God Find Us?” (Web Resource 1d). Ask each group to follow the instructions on their Web Resource.

Post two sheets of newsprint in a visible location. Write *How We Find God* on one sheet and *How God Finds Us* on the other sheet. When the groups have finished exploring the questions on the resource pages, invite each group to share some of the highlights of their conversation. As the groups share, keep a running list of ways we find God and ways God finds us on the appropriate sheets of newsprint.

After all of the groups have shared, help the entire class work together to rewrite the excerpt from the *Westminster Confession of Faith* found on the Web Resources in contemporary language. Record the rewritten version on a sheet of newsprint.

Option C: Debate and Discussion

- Bibles, copies of “We Know God Naturally” (Web Resource 1e) for half of the students and copies of “We Know God Because God Wants Us To” (Web Resource 1f) for the other half of the students, collection of natural objects (plants, leaves, a rock, a feather, and so on), cross, stopwatch or clock with a second hand, pens

Make sure each group member has a Bible and ask each person to look up Acts 17:16–21. Invite a volunteer to read the passage out loud to the class. Explain the following to the students:

This Scripture passage portrays the apostle Paul arguing about matters of faith and God with various people of Athens, including Jews, pagan philosophers, and other devout persons. The passage also describes the Athenians' intense enjoyment of such arguments. Today, in the spirit of the Athenians, we are going to have a debate about how people discover and come to know God.

Divide the class into two equal groups, giving copies of "We Know God Naturally" (Web Resource 1e) to one group and copies of "We Know God Because God Wants Us To" (Web Resource 1f) to the other group. Explain that these resources are designed to help each group prepare for the debate. Move the groups to separate areas of the meeting space and give them ten minutes to prepare for the debate. While the groups are meeting, arrange the collection of natural objects, the cross, and a Bible in the center of the meeting space.

When the preparation time is over, have the groups come together in the middle of the meeting space and face each other. Welcome the groups to the debate, explaining that you will serve as moderator and will ask a series of questions, to which each group will have forty-five seconds to respond. Flip a coin to decide which group goes first and then have the groups take turns responding first to each of the debate prompts.

Debate Prompts:

1. State your group's position on the question "How do we discover and come to know God?" and why you believe your group's position to be the correct one.
2. (*Point out the natural objects in the center of the meeting space.*)
What, if anything, can we discover about God in these objects?
3. Consider this scenario: Your friend, who sits beside you in math class, is struggling with questions on a test. When the teacher isn't looking, your friend passes you a note asking for the answers to several of the questions. You believe that cheating is wrong, and you refuse to do so. Are your actions proof of the existence of God? Why or why not?
4. (*Point out the cross in the center of the meeting space.*)
What, if anything, can we discover about God in this cross?
5. (*Point out the Bible in the center of the meeting space.*)
What, if anything, can we discover about God in the Bible?
6. Make a final statement supporting your group's position, using a passage of Scripture.

Thank the groups for their participation in the debate, and review their experiences. Ask whether anyone had to argue a position with which he or she didn't agree, and how he or she felt about that. Point out that both positions are valid, and both are necessary, but that the knowledge of God that we gain by our own powers of observation can never be as full as the knowledge that comes *from God to us*, as God reveals God's self in the person of Jesus Christ and in the words of Scripture.



Express

Option A: Stained-Glass Art

- Black poster board, colored construction paper (eight to ten colors if possible), craft glue for paper

This project provides an opportunity for students to create an artistic response to the abstract concept of God's revelation to humanity. Cut the black poster board to 18 inches wide by 16 inches high. Explain that the group will work together to create a replica of stained-glass art to express how they find, see, and know God in the world. Share the following instructions:

1. Take time to brainstorm. During this time, tear some of the construction paper into quarter- to half-dollar-sized pieces.
2. Working together, arrange the torn, colored pieces of construction paper into an image that reflects (either abstractly or concretely) how you find, see, and know God in the world.
3. When you have decided on an image that the group likes and agrees on, glue the small pieces of construction paper to the black poster board.

 If you use this activity in all six sessions, consider displaying each session's replica of a stained-glass pane on the window frame described in "Stained-Glass Art" (Web Resource 1g).

Option B: *Lectio Divina*

- Bible, "*Lectio Divina* Guidelines" (Web Resource 1h), candle or oil lamp, matches, music player, recording of "Bless the Lord" (instrumental) performed by the Taizé Community (or other suitable contemplative, instrumental music)

Ask the group to sit in a circle and place the candle or lamp in the middle of the circle. Play "Bless the Lord" or other suitable music (repeating if possible) at low volume. While the music plays, use the information found on "*Lectio Divina* Guidelines" (Web Resource 1h) to lead the group in a *lectio divina* reading of Colossians 1:15–20. Explain to the class that this Scripture passage expresses and celebrates God's ultimate revelation in the person of Jesus Christ. If time

allows, help students compare what they learned from this passage with what they learned from the Scripture passages in Explore.

Option C: Musical Devotion with U2 Song

- Music player and recording of “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” performed by U2

Play “I Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For” and use some or all of the questions to guide a conversation that connects the song with this session’s question, “Where is God?”

- What are your first impressions of the song?
- What is the song about? What else is the song about?
- What biblical references do you recognize in the song?
- What does the song have to say about God? About people? About the world?
- How does the song influence your way of seeing God, others, and the world?
- How does the song reflect or address the question of how we find and know God?



Exit

Prayer Circle

- Newsprint and markers

Invite the youth to generate a list of as many things as possible that all members have in common, noting that they should include only nonphysical traits (for example, “speak French” counts, but “wear glasses” does not). Record these common qualities on newsprint. Close the discussion by observing that, in this session and the sessions to come, the youth also have in common one of the marks of membership in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.):

“A faithful member accepts Christ’s call to be involved responsibly in the ministry of [Christ’s] Church. Such involvement includes . . . praying and studying Scripture and the faith of the Christian Church.”

—Book of Order (G-5.0102 and G-5.0102c)

Close the session with prayer.

Closing Prayer

O God, you know us better than we’ll ever know ourselves. You know us better than we can even dream of knowing you. But like the psalmist, we’ll keep looking for you, and glimpsing your glory, in the sunset and in the stars. And like Paul, we’ll keep trusting that the only way to really know you is to open our eyes and ears to the reality that you come to us, and are with us, in your Word and in your Son, our Savior, Jesus Christ. It’s in his name that we pray. Amen.



Enhancements

Other Ways to Connect with the Session

Family Connections

"Family Connections" (Web Resource) has a set of discussion questions for each of the six sessions in this course that families can talk about after class. Provide each family with a copy of this resource.

Experiencing God in Nature

Since many people experience God through nature, organize an outdoor experience with your group. For example, find a place for a picnic, a hike, or a campfire. Make time during the experience for the group members to revisit Psalm 19 and to continue their conversation about "Where is God?" Use the questions in Engage, Option A, to get a good conversation started.

Mission Connections

Find a local park or camp where your group can do some work taking care of God's creation. Or consider taking a group of children from a local community center to play at a park or camp.



ON GOD'S WINDSHIELD.

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