

READING AND DISCUSSION GUIDE FOR

The Sin of Certainty:

Why God Desires Our Trust More Than Our “Correct” Beliefs

by
Peter Enns

CHAPTER 1: I DON'T KNOW WHAT I BELIEVE ANYMORE

1. Peter Enns writes, “I had never openly explored my thinking about God because I was taught that questioning too much was not safe Christian conduct” (p. 4). Were you, like Enns, taught to think this way? Has that changed at all as you’ve matured in your faith? Why or why not?

2. Enns believes that many Christians have experienced “uh-oh” moments when something casts doubt, insecurity, or questions on the faith they felt was solid (p. 7). Have you ever experienced one of these “uh-oh” moments? What prompted it and how did it make you feel? When you came out the other side, did your faith feel stronger or weaker?
3. “The need for certainty is sin because it works off of fear and limits God to our mental images” (p. 19). How does this claim that the need for certainty is sin strike you?
4. “We have misunderstood faith as a *what* word rather than a *who* word—as primarily *beliefs about* rather than primarily as *trust in*” (p. 22). How do you define faith? Which of these options—*belief about* versus *trust in*—resonates more with how you think about faith?

CHAPTER 2: HOW WE GOT INTO THIS MESS

1. For most of Enns’s life, the faith modeled for him was “largely faith as an intellectual exercise, a series of information sessions, diagrams, handouts, and overheads so you could be certain about what you know you believe” (p. 31). Has this been your experience with the Christian faith? What are the strengths and weaknesses of this approach to Christianity?
2. Enns describes the “four rapid punches” (p. 35) that the Bible received over the course of roughly thirty years in

the nineteenth century. Had you heard of these “punches” before reading this chapter? In your opinion, which poses the greatest challenge to Christianity?

3. This chapter tells the story of how we came to view the Bible the way we do today. Does knowing more about this story help illuminate any aspects of the way you were taught to view the Bible? If so, how?
4. “I believe that the Bible does not model a faith that depends on certainty based on the simple fact that the Bible does not provide that kind of certainty” (p. 53). What distinction is Enns drawing here? What is at stake in this claim?

CHAPTER 3: “YOU ABANDONED ME, GOD; YOU LIED” (AND OTHER BIBLE LESSONS)

1. “Feeling like God is far away, disinterested, or dead to you is part of our Bible and can’t be brushed aside. And that feeling . . . is never judged, shamed, or criticized by God” (p. 60). Have you ever felt these things about God? How does Enns’s contention that this feeling isn’t criticized by God make you feel?
2. Old Testament theologian Water Brueggemann calls passages of scripture like Psalm 88 Israel’s “countertestimony,” because they challenge the “main testimony” of scripture (p. 61). According to Enns, why do we need this countertestimony?

3. Writing about Psalm 73, Enns suggests, “After a period of brooding to himself, entering the sanctuary was the psalmist’s act of trust. That’s the take-home message here for us” (p. 70). When facing suffering, do you enter “the sanctuary”? Why or why not?
4. “The Bible is less an instructional manual and more of an internal dialogue, even debate, among people of faith about just who this God is they are dealing with” (p. 70). How might seeing the Bible as an “internal dialogue” change your approach to scripture, and thus God?

CHAPTER 4: TWO MISERABLE PEOPLE WORTH LISTENING TO

1. Qohelet (from the book of Ecclesiastes) and Job are rarely lauded as models of faith by Christians today. Why is that? What threats or challenges might their stories pose to contemporary ways of understanding the Christian faith?
2. “The book of Ecclesiastes isn’t a drawn-out and sorry tale of weak faith and poor thinking that the truly faithful need to avoid. It is an honest reflection of what people of true faith experience” (p. 79). Does this chapter change how you view the book of Ecclesiastes specifically and your own faith more generally? If so, how?
3. “Even if you are able to quote [the Bible] chapter and verse, don’t count on [the biblical] portraits of God to work everywhere and every time. . . . God remains shrouded in mystery, inaccessible, beyond our mental

reach” (p. 87). What can the story of Job teach us about who God is and how God should be approached?

4. “God exposes the limitations of our thinking. Then we can see the inevitability to letting go of the need to know and trust God instead—as best we can each moment—because God is God” (p. 89). Why might it be important to learn to let go, challenging though it is?

CHAPTER 5:

BELIEVING IN GOD: SO EASY EVEN A DEMON CAN DO IT

1. “*Believing* is a ‘who’ word—letting go of fear and the burning impulse to act, and trusting God” (p. 97). When you think of the word *believing*, what comes to mind? Where does trust fit into that—if at all?
2. Enns examines the concept of faith by looking closely at the Greek word *pistis* (pp. 98–102). Does knowing more about this word enrich your understanding of faith? How so?
3. “Spiritual maturity,” Enns suggests, “is living a God-conscious existence of being aware of the responsibility to choose whether we are going to trust God with all our moments, or trust ourselves” (p. 105). According to this definition, how spiritually mature are you? What steps could you take to increase that maturity?
4. Enns quotes a famous prayer by Thomas Merton on page 111. How could praying this prayer strengthen your ability to trust God more fully?

CHAPTER 6:
UH-OH: WHEN CERTAINTY IS CAUGHT OFF GUARD
(AND WHY THAT MIGHT NOT BE SUCH A BAD IDEA)

1. “It seems to me that life is a series of challenges to any notion of faith that is preoccupied with correct thinking” (p. 118). What do you make of Enns’s claim here? Has this been your experience?
2. Enns lists five common obstacles to remaining Christian (pp. 119–20). Have you ever encountered these “obstacles”? If so, how did they affect your faith?
3. Enns offers seven thoughts about how he has “reimagined thinking about God and faith in God” (pp. 150–54). Which of these thoughts is new for you? Which might help you approach these five obstacles (pp. 119–20) in a fresh way?
4. “I feel it is part of the mystery of faith that things normally do not line up entirely, and so when they don’t, it is not a signal to me that the journey is at an end but that I am still on it” (p. 154). How might Enns’s words help you through times in your faith journey when things “do not line up”?

CHAPTER 7:
GOD WANTS YOU DEAD

1. We often think of our faith as a castle, “where we go to be safe and protected,” yet doubt “tears down the castle walls we have built . . . and forces us outside to walk a

lonely, trying, yet cleansing road” (p. 158). How might this metaphor enrich your understanding of both faith and doubt?

2. “The life of Christian faith,” Enns writes, “is more than agreeing with a set of beliefs about Christ, morality, or how to read the Bible. It means being so intimately connected to Christ that his crucifixion is ours, his death is our death, and his life is our life” (p. 162). Where does the crucifixion fit into your understanding of the Christian life?
3. “Doubt is sacred. Doubt is God’s instrument, will arrive in God’s time, and will come from unexpected places—places out of your control” (p. 164). How do you view doubt? Is it unwelcome or, as Enns states, “sacred” and “God’s instrument”? How has this chapter changed the way you understand the role and value of doubt in your faith journey?
4. Enns describes the spirituality of Mother Teresa—specifically how she experienced a “dark night of the soul” for roughly fifty years (pp. 169–72). What can her story teach us (for example, about being honest in our spiritual lives, learning to trust God, or letting go of control)?

CHAPTER 8: CULTIVATING A HABIT OF TRUST

1. “Our experiences of God matter—those sacred moments that defy the very rational capabilities we are

so keen to rely on” (p. 188). Can you point to specific “sacred moments” in your faith journey? If so, how have those moments shaped your approach to God?

2. Enns uses the words *journey*, *pilgrimage*, and *mystery* to describe his faith because he believes that “vocabulary actually affects our mental architecture” (p. 190). What words do you use to describe your own faith? Why do you use those specific words, as opposed to others?
3. Enns claims that the Old Testament has more to say than the New Testament about “struggling with faith, doubt, and the need to trust God” (p. 195). Do you agree with this? What passages can you cite from the New Testament that deal with these themes?
4. Would it transform how you view a crisis of faith if you felt Christ was with you in it (p. 200)? How so?

CHAPTER 9: BEYOND TRUST

1. Enns offers a list of traits of those for whom “finding and holding on to certainty is central” to their faith (p. 204). Before reading this book, what would you have thought of those traits? What do you think of them now?
2. Do you see the “mysteries and uncertainties” of life as “opportunities to trust more deeply” (p. 205)? Why or why not?

3. Enns writes that “our faith communities have a sacred responsibility to protect the future by actively and intentionally creating a culture of trust” (p. 208). What would such a culture look like? What about contemporary Christianity would have to change for a “culture of trust” to be created?
4. “A faith that remains open to God complicating our certainties will not only affect our own lives and the lives of those closest to us. It will also make us better world citizens” (p. 209). Are you open to God complicating your certainties? Why or why not? What do you imagine that might look like?

FINAL QUESTION

1. How has this book affected the way you think of the following concepts: faith, belief, trust, certainty, reason, and doubt? How will this book change the way you live out your faith?