

Making Sense of the Bible:

Rediscovering the Power of Scripture Today

Introduction & Chapters 1-2

- **Ice Breaker**

- What was your first Bible?
- Did you / do you have a “family” Bible?

- **Opening Prayer**

Open our ears, O God, to what you would have us hear. Through your holy Word, convict us, challenge us, and comfort us. Open our minds to new insights and fresh perspectives about our questions. Open our hearts to the moving of your Spirit. In the name of Jesus Christ your Son. Amen.

- **Opening Discussion**

- “What is one thing about the Bible that has troubled, perplexed, or confused you? Why?”
 - Brainstorm in pairs
 - Summarize these issues/questions on white board or flip sheet
- Turn to the Table of Contents and review the organization of the study
 - *Section 1 - The Nature of Scripture*
 - *Who, how, why it was written*
 - *Types of books*
 - *Criteria used to determine what got included*
 - *Section 2 - Making Sense of the Bible’s Challenging Passages*
 - *Science and religion*
 - *Historical accuracy*
 - *End times*
- Turn to the Introduction
 - Scan through the paragraphs. What rings true for you?
 - *Hamilton says he doesn’t have all the answers – neither do we*
 - *Try to use “I think/believe” language, rather than laying down the law*
 - *We may not change our minds, but we’ll certainly better appreciate different perspectives*

- **Background Information**

- [Adam Hamilton](#) – Senior Pastor [United Methodist Church of the Resurrection](#) in Leawood, Kansas
- *One of the largest UMC churches (multi-site) in the world (averaged 13,000+ attendees in 2019)*
- *Prolific writer*
- *Leader in the denomination*

- **Video – Making Sense of the Old Testament (length – 10:26)**

- *The Pentateuch – the first five books of the Bible*
 - *We were taught Moses wrote the Pentateuch throughout Sunday School*
 - *Indications in the Bible itself that Moses didn’t solely author them*
 - *Deuteronomy 34 describes Moses’s death*

- *Numbers 12:3 - “Moses was the most humble man who ever walked on the face of the earth”*
 - *Scholars believe there were different authors*
 - Does Biblical authorship matter to you? Are you threatened by Moses (or any single person) not having written the Pentateuch?
 - “All scripture is inspired by God” – Do you believe this? What about the psalmist in Psalm 22 - “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”
 - Did the Bible draw you to Christ, or something/someone else?
 - What versions of the Bible do you access and where do you keep them?
 - *The B-I-B-L-E! Yes, that’s the book for me! I stand alone on the Word of God, the B-I-B-L-E!*
The B-I-B-L-E! Yes, that’s the book for me! I read and pray, trust and obey, the B-I-B-L-E!
 - What does it mean to “stand alone on the Word of God”?
 - What does it mean to “trust and obey” the Bible?
 - Does this song reflect the way you view the Bible? Why/why not?
 - Hamilton mentions that even when he’s struggling with biblical text, God speaks to him through it. What is your experience when you encounter tough verses?
- **Introduction + Chapters 1 & 2**
 - Break into five Groups, each with a sheet of paper titled with one of these common ways to view the Bible: Owner’s Manual / Magic 8 Ball / Book of Systematic Theology / Science Textbook / Book of Promises
 - Refer to Chapter 1 for info on your assigned perspective
 - Discuss characterizing the Bible in this way
 - Does one of these characterizations appeal to you?
 - How could each fall short, or lend itself to confusion, misguidance, or disappointment?
 - Share back with the larger group
 - *Consensus scientific view of history:*
 - *13.77 billion years ago – universe created*
 - *4.5 billion years ago – earth created*
 - *230-66 million years ago – dinosaurs*
 - *200,000 years ago – humans*
 - *40,000 years ago – art on cave walls*
 - *12,000 years ago – last Ice Age*
 - *9000 B.C. – Fertile Crescent cities*
 - *3000 B.C. – wheel adopted, stone gave way to bronze*
 - *2600 B.C. – Egyptians started building pyramids*
 - Review Biblical history table on p.13
 - Does anything strike you as particularly interesting or surprising?
 - Maps on p.16
 - What was the strategic significance of the Holy Land?
 - *Avoided traveling through the Arabian desert*
 - What strategic significance exists today?
- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

References for material:

- [*Making Sense of the Bible: Rediscovering the Power of Scripture Today; Leader Guide; Video*](#)

Italics imply important points or example answers the leader can convey

Chapters 3-5

- **Ice Breaker**

- How often and when do you turn to the Old Testament (if ever)?

- **Opening Prayer**

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- **Opening Discussion**

- Which OT books are most meaningful to you today?
- How do you view the authors of OT books? In what ways are they the same or different from NT writers?

- **Chapter 3 – The Old Testament in Fifteen Minutes**

- Hamilton proposes that while Genesis tells us about primeval history, its real point is to tell us about ourselves today.
 - What does Genesis say to you about yourself?
- How much of the OT text do you believe is:
 - Dictated directly from God
 - Transcribed from interactions with God
 - Inspired by interactions with God
 - Interpreted through personal experience
- What do you see as the role of a prophet?
- Who might be considered modern prophets of today?
- Other reflections?

- **Chapter 4 – Who Wrote the Old Testament, When, and Why**

- How important is it to you to know who exactly wrote each book of the Bible?
- Where do you fall in the spectrum of biblical scholars Hamilton discusses?
 - Minimalists/Liberal – skeptical of historical value of OT writings
 - Maximalists/Conservative – biblical accounts are entirely accurate
- What do you think of Hamilton's comparison of the Babylonian exile with 9/11?
- Other reflections?

- **Chapter 5 – Which Books Made it Into the Old Testament and Why**

- Are there any books in the OT that you might have left out of the OT canon?
- Hamilton points out that Jews don't consider their Bible the "Old Testament" as they don't consider it to be "old"
 - In what ways does this alter your perspective on the Christian Bible?
- [42] "History is told from the perspective of the teller, often to meet the needs of the people in a given time"
 - How is our current view of history, both biblical and secular, influenced by authors?
- Do you consider some scriptures more authoritative than others (Hamilton uses the Ten Commandments as an example)?

- What does the proliferation of different versions of the Christian Bible imply to you?
- Other reflections?

- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Chapters 6-7

- **Ice Breaker**

- What's your favorite way to experience books (hardback, paperback, computer, tablet, phone, audio)?
What's your favorite time to enjoy books?

- **Opening Prayer**

Providing God, we come this day hungry for your message to us. Feed us with your holy word. Nourish our souls with your divine guidance. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

- **Read Luke 2:42-50**

- What does this passage tell you about Jesus?
- *Jewish boys studied scriptures at age 5 and the oral tradition (Mishnah) at age 10 to prepare for his adulthood at age 13. Mishnah info:*
 - *Presented to Moses with the written Torah at Mt. Sinai*
 - *Exposition of the written Torah*
 - *Six "orders" – Seeds/Festival/Women/Damages/Holy things/Purities*
- *The term "bar mitzvah" (agent/son subject to the law) comes in use in 14th century, but 13 was identified in the Mishnah as the age of majority.*

- **Opening Discussion**

- In what ways did Jesus convey and perhaps modify the message of the scriptures? *He focused the message (e.g., Matthew 22:34-40) and in some ways intensified it (e.g., Matthew 5:21-22, 27-28, 31-32, 33-34, 38-39, 43-44)*

- **Chapter 6 – Jesus and the OT**

- Have you seen Hebrew scrolls? What was your impression?
- What parallels do you see with the progression from scrolls to books and the progression from physical Bibles to e-Bibles?
- [50] Jesus' favorite books may have been Psalms, Isaiah, and Deuteronomy.
 - What are yours?
- [50] *In two of the temptations, the devil quotes scripture. This highlights that just because someone quotes scripture, doesn't mean they are speaking for God.*
- [51] Jesus may have felt Moses shaped the commands in ways that did not fully capture God's will.
 - Do you think the writers/editors of the NT may have fallen into the same predicament?
- Other reflections?

- **Chapter 7 – Prophecy, the OT, and the Early Church**

- Read Luke 24:13-34
 - Hamilton emphasizes the Scriptures Jesus interpreted were those of Moses and the prophets. The early church looked at them through the lens of the risen Christ.
 - What OT scriptures do you tend to look at through the lens of Jesus?
- Read Matthew 1:22-23... Isaiah 7:14... Isaiah 7:1-17
 - How does this change the interpretation of the prophecy?
 - Does this bother you?

- [58] Hamilton says this is “unnerving” for college students.
 - Have you had similar experiences with scriptural interpretation that may have shaken your foundation or even your faith?
- Is this a bad thing?
- [59] “The power of poetry is its ability to speak to new situations.”
 - Do you agree?
- Read Isaiah 53; split into 3 groups: A, B, & C
 - [group A] What did these words mean when Isaiah first wrote them?
 - [group B] How did Jesus and early Christians interpret them?
 - [group C] What do they mean for you today?
- Greek word translated as “fulfill” could also mean “complete.” Prophecies came to completion through Jesus, even if they had previously been fulfilled.
 - What do you think about that?
- Other reflections?

Closing Prayer (take turns among class members) -or- use the one Hamilton provides:

We thank you, O Holy One, for the wonderful words of life. Guide us in the coming days as we continue to explore what your Word meant – to the ancient community to which it was addressed, to Jesus, and to the early church. Most of all, by your Spirit, guide us as together we seek to discern what your Word means for us today and what you would have us to hear today. In the name of your son Jesus Christ. Amen.

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Chapter 8

- **Opening Prayer**

Come, Holy Spirit. We yearn to encounter you, the Living God, as we explore the New Testament Scriptures. Be present today, and guide us to deeper understandings of your Holy Word. In Christ's name we pray. Amen.

- **Ice Breaker**

- If a non-Christian asked you where to start reading in the Bible to find out about Jesus, what would you tell them?

- **Review the "I Am" sayings in John**

- 6:35 (bread)
- 8:12 (light)
- 10:9 (gate)
- 10:11 (good shepherd)
- 11:25 (resurrection and life)
- 14:6 (way, truth, life)
- 15:1 (true vine)
- 8:58a (I am)

- **Video - Making Sense of the New Testament (length – 14:40)**

- Christian faith is anchored in Jesus' words, rather than a book.
 - Does this differentiate Christianity?
- *Timeline of the Gospels*
 - 30-65AD: *Kerygma – preaching of the early Church*
 - 40-65AD: *Collections or pre-Gospel material*
 - 48-65AD: *Paul's writings, starting with Galatians or 1 Thessalonians*
 - 65-90AD: *Gospels*
- When you read the Gospels, to which do you typically go first?
- When might you go to John vs. the Synoptics? *For the "I Am" sayings which tell us who Jesus says he is; sometimes I think the actions in the other three demonstrate who Jesus is more clearly than the sayings in John*
- *Three criteria over the course of 300 years*
 - *Apostolicity – association with 1st generation leaders*
 - *Catholicity – useful and accepted by most*
 - *Consistency – with the Gospel*
- Why should you read the NT? Hamilton [quoting Luke and John] says so you know the truth and come to believe that Jesus is the Son of God and have life in his name.
 - What do you say?
- How many have read the book or seen *The Davinci Code* movie? What do you remember that seems to run counter to the New Testament? *Mary and Jesus were married. They had a child together.*
- Other reflections from the Hamilton video?

- **Chapter 8 – The New Testament in 15 Minutes**

- [66] Describes the structure and parallels with the OT (sections for history, writings, and prophecy)

- Would you have structured it any differently?
 - [67] Synoptic Gospels focus on the “Kingdom of God.”
 - Does this image work for you today, or do you think it was written to resonate for the Christians at the time? If not, what image would work for you today?
 - The greatest commandment is to “love” God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength...not to “serve” Him as your king.
 - How important is that last part to you?
 - [69] 21 of 27 are letters, and 13 are attributed to Paul.
 - What does that say to you?
 - [70] Reading the NT changed Hamilton’s life.
 - Did you have a similar experience?
 - Other reflections?
-
- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**
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Chapter 9

- **Opening Prayer**

Gracious Heavenly Father, thank you for speaking to us through your Holy Word. Help us to keep it close to our hearts and minds, and may it flow like honey from our tongues. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

- **Ice Breaker**

- Recall a time when a letter touched you.

- **Read Acts 8:1-3...9:1-19**

- In the video on the NT, Hamilton stated that “Jesus is not only the messenger but also the message.”
 - How do you see this reflected in the story?
- Why did Jesus choose Saul?
- In the video, Hamilton says that when we read the epistles, it's like we're reading someone else's mail.
 - How does this change your perspective on these books?

- **Chapter 9 – Reading Someone Else's Letters**

- [75] Many letters were simply lost, as early Christians wouldn't have revered them as scripture
 - Consider electronic communication today. Is it more or less likely that important messages can be lost?
- [76] Reading someone else's mail...What Paul wrote to the Galatians might not be the same thing he would write to our church.
 - Is anyone trying to deliver a message to our church today?
- Read Acts 13:13-16 <Paul's sermon>...42-52;
Read Galatians 2:15-21
 - *Perhaps the first epistle written (~50AD)*
 - *Central Turkey where Paul and Barnabas traveled*
 - *Gives direction for Gentiles converting to Christianity (most Christians were Jews at the time)*
 - What was Paul's message for Galatia?
 - Is there a message for us today?
- [80] Salvation was a gift from God. John Wesley drove this message home.
 - Libertines vs. Legalists – In what ways is this still a problem?
 - Does Paul's letter to the Galatians help us with this problem? (*ref: Galatians 5:13-26*)
- [82] Paul wrote in a very different world. We live in a very different world from our ancestors in 1950. Discrimination was accepted practice and reinforced by “separate but equal” laws. These laws were written by professed Christians.
 - Were these 90% really Christian?
 - Would Paul have considered them Christian in 1950? What about today?
- [83] Parents are circumcising their children
 - *Fluctuated from 64.5% to 58% between 1979 and 2010*
 - *American Academy of Pediatrics fluctuated their position (1970s – no benefit; 1989 – potential benefit; 1999 – despite benefits not enough evidence to recommend; Current – evidence supporting benefits, but stop short of recommending for all boys)*
 - Muslims and Jews circumcise. Christians seem to make the choice for non-religious reasons.
 - Does this matter to you?

- *Acts 16:3 – Paul has Timothy circumcised since he was the son of a Greek father (and a Jewish mother) and wanted to increase his standing with the Jews in the region.*
 - Other reflections?
- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**
-

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Chapters 10-11

- **Opening Prayer**

Nurturing Father, we are amazed at your continual and innumerable gifts, including your holy word. We thank you for the writers of your holy scripture, and pray that your message will shine through their words to our hearts. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

- **Ice Breaker**

- If you were able to ask Paul one question, what would it be?

- **Review Romans 1:1-6; 1 Corinthians 1:1-3; 2 Corinthians 1:1-2; Galatians 1:1-4; Ephesians 1:1-2; Philippians 1:1-2; Colossians 1:1-2; 1 Thessalonians 1:1; 2 Thessalonians 1:1-2; 1 Timothy 1:1-2; 2 Timothy 1:1-2; Titus 1:1-4; Philemon 1:1-3**

- What's the first word in each of these passages?
 - What impact does seeing Paul's name at the beginning of these books have on you?
- Hamilton points out that in many cases, Paul may not have actually written, or even dictated these letters.
 - How does this bother you?
 - How might this actually substantiate Paul's message?

- **Chapter 10 – Who Really Wrote Paul's Letters?**

- Which books does Hamilton claim were dictated by Paul? *Romans, 1 Cor, Col, 2 Thes* (*Romans scribe identifies himself as Tertius; the others contain notes about Paul writing the greeting with his own hand*)
- [86] Hamilton talks about his assistant Sue being able to channel him 99% of the time.
 - Do you have examples of such channeling that you've experienced?
- [86] If there is improvisation in Paul's letters, does it discredit or diminish them? How about the ones in which he didn't add his mark?
- [87] Which books are the disputed books? *Eph, Col, 2 The, 1 and 2 Tim*
 - Why are they disputed? *Vocabulary and style, as well as themes beyond Paul's period [88]*
- [88] Hamilton conveys the story of someone completing Rev. Tom Shipp's sermon posthumously.
 - What is your reaction to this?
- [89] Hamilton's closing point that the composition of books of the Bible is more complex than dropping out of the sky.
- Other reflections?

- **Chapter 11 – How, When, and Why the Gospels were Written**

- *Gospels were written in AD 70-90, after the letters*
- [92] Oral presentation by eyewitnesses was valued over anything written, so as long as the disciples were alive, their speech was most important.
 - Is this still true today?
- Luke indicates that many others attempted to record the events of Jesus' life.
 - Would you like to read these "pre-gospels"?
 - How would having more gospels in the Bible improve or detract from it?
- [93] Matthew and Mark both including the parenthetical note "(let the reader understand)"
 - One example of many in the synoptic gospels
 - 95% of Mark is in Matthew and 80% is in Luke

- Why keep Mark in the Bible?
 - *Matthew and Luke likely drew from a third source besides Mark – “Q”*
 - *55% of Matthew and 42% of Luke are from Mark*
 - *25% of material common to Matthew and Luke is not in Mark (e.g., the sayings of Jesus)*
 - *[98] AD 70 – Mark (Peter’s interpreter) writes his gospel*
 - *AD 70s-80s – Matthew & Luke are written*
 - [99] Are documents recording events 40 years earlier, reliable?
 - How reliable are the stories you’ve heard your parents tell?
 - What if you were to write a document describing your life several decades ago? Would it be reliable?
 - [100] Gospels were written for a specific audience
 - Luke 6:20-21 – “Blessed are you who are poor...”
 - Matthew 5:3,6 – “Blessed are the poor in spirit”
 - How are they different? What might that say about their intended audience?
 - Other reflections?
- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Chapter 12

- **Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, we praise your name for all you've given us – which is truly everything. Grant us wisdom to discern your word for us today, and the courage to apply it to our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

- **[optional] Video – Repeat Making Sense of the New Testament (length – 14:40)**

- **Ice Breaker**

- How would you describe the Gospel of John?

- **John 1:1-18** (3 volunteers read aloud verses 1-5, 6-14, 15-18)

- What strikes you about this passage? *Tells who Jesus is from the beginning; poetry; symbolism from the author (rather than from Jesus)*
- *92% of John is unique*
 - *3 year ministry (vs. 1)*
 - *3 trips to Jerusalem (vs. 1)*
 - *Jerusalem-centered (Mary, Martha, and Lazarus in Bethany, just outside of Jerusalem)*
 - *No parables*
 - *Lazarus's raising, not the cleansing of the temple, prompts Jewish leaders to execute Jesus*
 - *Foot washing vs. body/blood at Last Supper*
 - *Crucifixion happens before Passover*
- *3 main parts of John:*
 - *Ministry from John the Baptist to Jesus' public teachings*
 - *Dialogue with immediate followers*
 - *Passion/Crucifixion/Resurrection*
 - *+Appendix restoring Peter after his denial*
- Why do you think so much of John is unique and so much synoptic material is omitted?
- John refers to Jesus' healings as "signs" rather than "miracles."
 - Does this make a difference to you?
- *Authorship of the Gospel of John*
 - *Same author as epistles and Revelation*
 - *Scholars believe it was not the apostle John*
 - *Perhaps a collection of authors*
 - *Perhaps John is the source, but others composed the Gospel*

- **Chapter 12 – The Perplexing, Puzzling, and Profound John**

- [104] John is focused on who Jesus is ("I Am" sayings) rather than what he did.
- [105] The Synoptic Gospels paint a human picture of Jesus with hints of divinity; John does the converse
 - When you think of Jesus, which picture first comes to mind – human or divine?
- [106] The divide between mainline and conservative/evangelical churches in the last century is along the lines of the divide between the Synoptics and John.
 - Kingdom of God vs. personal relationship with Jesus
 - Do you agree with Hamilton's observation?
 - What other things might cause differences between mainline and non-mainline churches?

- Other reflections?
 - **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**
-

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Chapter 13

- **Opening Prayer**

Dear Lord, speak now for your servants are listening. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

- **Ice Breaker**

- To which book or books are you least likely to turn in the New Testament, and why?

- **Have different class members read aloud: Matthew 5:1-3, John 3:16-17, Acts 9:3-6, Romans 8:38-39, 1 Corinthians 12:27-28, Galatians 2:16, 1 Timothy 4:11-12, Philemon 1:8-10, James 2:14-17, 1 Peter 2:11-12, 1 John 5:18-19, Jude 1:4, Revelation 22:1-2**

- Stepping back and taking a holistic view of the NT, what key elements do you see?
- Does any single book come close to covering all these elements?

- **Chapter 13 – Which Books Made It into the NT and Why**

- [110] Do you think Paul would ever have imagined his letters rising to the level of “scripture”?
 - Does it increase or lessen the impact of writings if the author “knows” they will be conveyed as scripture?
- [112] *First Clement was likely not included because of lack of apostolicity (vs. catholicity and consistency)*
 1. *Paul's letters had circulated widely*
 2. *Even the early church struggled to understand Paul*
 3. *Paul's teaching was being distorted by some*
 4. *Paul's letters were being considered scripture*
- [113] *Didache*
 - *User manual for Jewish-Christians*
 - *Considered “spurious” (lack of catholicity)*
 - *Quotes Matthew*
 - *Recently discovered in 1873 (Greek) and 1900 (first 5 chapters in Latin)*
 - *Calls for Christians to pray the Lord's Prayer three times a day*
 - Do you think this is a good idea? Why or why not?
- [114] *Mark was Peter's interpreter*
- [115] *Marcion – struggled with God of OT vs. NT*
 - *Spawned Gnosticism – separation of Christianity from Judaism*
 - “lower world” (physical) vs. “upper world” (spiritual)
 - In what ways have you experienced this division?
 - How do you reconcile the God of the OT vs. NT?
- [119] *Bishop Athanasius in 367AD first lists the current 27 NT books, in slightly different order. In 397AD, the Council in Carthage, Africa pronounced these were the only divine Scriptures.*
- [120] *Criteria for canonization*
 - *Scholars: Apostolicity, Catholicity, Orthodoxy*
 - *Hamilton: Usefulness, Consistency, Association, Acceptance (not Inspiration, because it could not be objectively identified)*
 - *If you were choosing criteria, what would they be?*
- [124] *Figures like Luther and Calvin questioned the teachings of some of the books*
 - *Do pastors today question the teachings in the NT?*

- [125] *Hamilton emphasizes that the NT is a product of human work*
- Other reflections?

- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Chapter 14

- **Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, as always, we thank you for caring so much for us, a sinful people. We come to you and your word this day for inspiration. Breathe into us your Holy Spirit. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

- **Ice Breaker**

- How would you describe what the Bible is?

- **Video** – Questions About the Nature of Scripture (duration: 11:30)

- Do you think of the Bible as the words of God or the words of people?
- When Adam Hamilton says “Scripture is a sacrament,” what does that mean to you?
- What do you think of the colander example (you hold onto the important stuff and you let the other stuff fall through)?
- How do you decide what to hold onto (greatest commandments)?
 - Consider the example of slavery as it appears in the Bible and its treatment now.
 - What other things might you wrestle with, and perhaps let slip through your colander?

- **Read Genesis 32:22-32**

- “Israel” means “May God prevail” “He struggles with God” “God perseveres or contends”
- In what ways have you struggled with God?
- In what ways have you struggled with the Bible?

- **Chapter 14 – Is the Bible Inspired?**

- [129] *Inspiration does not equate to Composition, Dictation, or Perfection*
- [129] “Inspiration awakens us to new possibilities by allowing us to transcend our ordinary experiences and limitations. Inspiration propels a person from apathy to possibility, and transforms the way we perceive our own capabilities.” [Scott Barry Kaufman in *Harvard Business Review's* blog]
 - In what circumstances have you found that you are most likely to be inspired?
- Read 2 Timothy 3:16-17
 - What did Hamilton say about “Paul’s perspective of all scripture”? [131]
 - *authoritative documents by Jewish and early Christian communities*
 - Did he mean every word, or big ideas and key passages?
- [132] Hamilton talks about God inspiring us to say or do something, but not necessarily telling us exactly what to say or do.
 - How does this change your perspective on what Paul chose to say or do?
 - Is it concerning or comforting?
- [133] *theopneustos* – “God-breathed” Greek work potentially first coined by Paul
 - *Hamilton suggests there might be several ways to interpret this word.*
 - [134] *God breathes upon the human words and animates them*
 - [135] *Authors were moved by the Holy Spirit, and God breathed upon the scriptures as they were subsequently read by Christians*
 - Are there others you would offer?
 - **Psalm 109**
 - [136] Do you think this passage was really inspired by God?

- [136] Were scripture writers inspired to a greater degree than we are inspired today?
 - [138] *Hamilton claims that what differentiates them is not their level of inspiration, but their closeness to the events described*
- [143] Some things taught in scripture may not represent God's character nor his will for us today.
 - Do you agree?
- Other reflections?

- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Italics imply important points or example answers the leader can convey

Chapters 15-18

- **Opening Prayer**

Holy God, we long to hear your Word for us today. We yearn to have a better understanding of the Bible. By your Spirit, make us receptive to what will be revealed as we wrestle with Scripture. Amen.

- **Ice Breaker**

- How do you discern what is and isn't the "Word of God"?

- **Chapter 15 – Is the Bible the Word of God?**

- In what ways does God speak to you?
- [148] Jesus chooses to preach God's word by telling stories rather than reading text from the OT (which only appears once in the Gospels).
 - Why do you think that is?
- Why do you think Jesus himself frequently referred to as the Word of God?
- Other reflections?

- **Chapter 16 – How Does God Speak to and Through Us?**

- Has God ever spoken directly to you? When?
- Have you ever felt God speaking through you? When?
- What does Hamilton mean when he says "we are all a bit spiritually hard of hearing"?
- Do you think God speaks to us today in the same way he spoke to the biblical authors?
 - In what ways is it the same and in what ways is it different?
- Other reflections?

- **Chapter 17 – Is the Bible Inerrant and Infallible?**

- How do you respond to assertions that the Bible is inerrant and infallible?
- [157] *Augustine holds that some scripture, though inerrant, appears untruthful, and attributes this to:*
 - *Faulty manuscript*
 - *Misinterpretation by the translator*
 - *Personal lack of understanding*
- [160] Hamilton doesn't believe in inerrancy because:
 - The Bible itself doesn't profess its own inerrancy
 - The Bible has many errors and inconsistencies
- Do you agree with Hamilton's position? Why or why not?
- What errors or inconsistencies in the Bible cause you to question its inerrancy?
- What are your thoughts on the Chicago Statement Hamilton discusses in this chapter?
- Other reflections?

- **Chapter 18 – A High View of Scripture?**

- [174] "Both conservatives and liberals have ways of reinterpreting certain passages that do not support their biases and political or theological convictions."
 - Can you provide examples of such reinterpretation?
 - What is the danger here?
- [176] What do you think of the proposition by Hamilton's fellow preacher that the two commandments Jesus cites as the 'greatest' can be used as a colander which retains important things and lets others fall through?

- [180] What do you think of Hamilton's suggestion that there should be a way to bring reason, experience, and theological reflections to bear on scriptures, identifying parts which should no longer be binding?
- Other reflections?

- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Chapters 19-21

- **Opening Prayer**

Holy God, we long to hear your Word for us today. We yearn to have a better understanding of the Bible. By your Spirit, make us receptive to what will be revealed as we wrestle with Scripture. Amen.

- **Ice Breaker**

- Name scientists you have known who are professing Christians?

- **Video – The Bible and Science (length – 12:09)**

- What experiences have you had with “Creationists” who do not believe the prevailing scientific thought on the creation of our planet?
- What were you taught in school?
- What were you taught in Sunday School as a child (if applicable)?
- What do you think of Hamilton’s thinking related to the goal of the biblical authors (not a scientific explanation but a theological teaching of truths), including the creation account in Genesis?
- How do you personally relate the story of Adam and Eve’s fall?

- **Chapter 19 – Science, the Bible, and the Creation Stories**

- [192] What do you think of Jimmy Cochran’s view on reconciling God and evolution (“Any craftsman can build a chair, but how many can design a chair that builds itself and improves over time?”)
 - How does Artificial Intelligence (AI) factor into this view?
- Other reflections?

- **Chapter 20 – Were Adam and Eve Real People?**

- Hamilton notes a major leap forward 35,000-45,000 years ago in human beings, with a corresponding burst in creativity and symbolic thinking.
 - How do Adam and Eve fit within this timeline, or do they exist more as a metaphor for human beings in general, outside of this timeline?
- Other reflections?

- **Chapter 21 – Were There Dinosaurs on the Ark?**

- What are your personal beliefs with respect to the story of Noah and the Ark?
- If you don’t believe it literally happened as described, why was it included in scripture?
- Other reflections?

- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Chapter 22

- **Opening Prayer**

Loving Father, we come today seeking insight into your holy word. You've made us a curious people. Grant us the wisdom to discern your message to us. In your Son's name we pray. Amen.

- **Ice Breaker**

- Read Jeremiah 12:1
- Recall the story of Joshua fighting at Jericho
 - How would a reader characterize God?
- Recall the story of Jonah
 - How would a reader characterize God?

- **Video – Violence, Suffering and Other Troubling Issues (length – 14:25)**

- Do you ever characterize God as “horrible” when reading the OT?
- Read Deuteronomy 20:16-18
- What passages in the OT trouble you about God’s nature? *War; Noah; Sodom and Gomorrah & Lot’s wife; animal sacrifice; God killing the firstborn sons in Egypt; God ordering the killing of those who worshiped the Golden Calf; God kills Uzzah for reaching up with his hand to steady the ark*
- What passages in the NT trouble you in a similar way? *Peter killing Ananias & his wife; Jesus killing a herd of pigs by sending the evil spirit into them*
- Is there any justification for “herem” [heh-reem] today?
- Are you satisfied by Hamilton’s explanation that these passages reflect more the humanity and the people of the time rather than God’s true nature? (i.e., “God breathing through fallible human beings”)
- Could God have changed from the time of Joshua to Jesus, or did we as humans change?
- How do we fit God into our cultural norms? (*Prosperity Gospel preachers matching American materialism; Apartheid; Republicans vs. Democrats vs. Libertarians*)
- Does God want us to be happy?
- *Rather than letting our presuppositions bias our view of God, try to look through an objective lens.*

- **Chapter 22 – God’s Violence in the OT**

- [207] Do you agree that religion is the source of much of the violence in the world?
- [208] Hamilton provides a list of crimes for which the Hebrew Law prescribes the death penalty
 - What crimes today do you consider worthy of the death penalty?
- [209] Can you imagine God asking you to strap on a sword and go kill friends and neighbors who had offended him?
- [211] *Two Possible Solutions to the Moral and Theological Dilemmas*
 - *Accept the scripture as literally accurate and deal with it*
 - *Understand that the authors were representing what they believed about God rather than what God inspired them to say.*
 - [214] *These scriptures tell us more about the authors than about God.*
- [216] Hamilton suggests we read Joshua to avoid falling into the same trap of invoking God’s name in pursuit of violence
 - Do you agree?
 - Are there other reasons why we might read these troubling passages?

- [216] “Pre-emptive” war
 - Can such wars be justified?
 - What characterizes a morally just war?
- Other reflections?

- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Chapter 23

- **Opening Prayer**

Eternal God, we long to know you as we are known. Be present to us as we seek to discern your nature and will. Guide us as we encounter you in Scripture and in the person of your son, the Word made flesh. Amen.

- **Ice Breaker**

- Where are you on the (1-10) spectrum from God as the “micromanager” to God as the “absentee landlord”?

- **Chapter 23 – Suffering, Divine Providence, and the Bible**

- [220] How far have we come in what we know today vs. what was known 2000-3000 years ago?
 - How much more do we have to learn from science?
 - How much more did the Hebrews think they had to learn 2000-3000 years ago?
- [221] Read Psalm 1
 - How do you interpret this psalm?
 - Does it ring true for you?
- [222] Read Psalm 73:1-20
 - How do you interpret this psalm?
- [223] *Two things from the Job story:*
 - (1) *Orthodox view of divine providence is challenged*
 - (2) *Job demonstrates faith in adversity*
 - *Suffering may be punishment or a test of one’s faith*
- [224] What reasons do you have for suffering?
 - Punishment
 - Test of one’s faith
 - What else?
- [225] Do you agree with Hamilton when he suggests God doesn’t inflict cruelty to teach us? That suffering is probably more accurately described as consequences?
- [226] What are some examples of people rationalizing suffering as God’s punishment?
 - *Haitian earthquake (Hamilton’s example from the book)*
 - *AIDS*
 - Others?
 - Why do people do this?
- [227] *Danger in attributing bad things that happen to others as “God’s will”*
- [230] *God’s sovereignty doesn’t mean He causes things, but that He will have the final word*
- Other reflections?

- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**

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Chapter 24

- **Opening Prayer**

Loving God, we desperately want to grow closer to you through a better understanding of the gift of yourself in your Son. Strengthen our relationship with you through your Son Jesus. Amen.

- **Ice Breaker**

- Does skepticism ever creep into your mind when you read the Gospels?
 - When?
 - Is this a bad thing?
- *Chapter 24 is the first of three chapters which cover the NT:*
 - *Trustworthiness*
 - *How literally to take Jesus' sayings*
 - *Whether one must accept Jesus as personal Savior in order to go to heaven*

- **Have different class members read the following Bible verses:**

- Matthew 1:1
- Mark 1:1-3
- Luke 1:1-4
- John 1:1-5
- John 21:24-25

- **Chapter 24 – Can We Trust the Gospel Accounts of Jesus?**

- [231] “The general testimony [of the Gospels] is consistent, but they differ in details.”
Exercise:
 - [2 minutes] Jot down events in Jesus' life conveyed in the Gospels
 - *Virgin birth, Mary going to Elizabeth, Jesus' baptism, healing of the blind, removing evil spirit (Legion), sacrifice on the cross, resurrection (appearing in the upper room), appearing to the disciples on the road to Emmaus, Peter's denial, Jesus forgiving the sins of the paralytic man, Zacchaeus, water to wine, sermon on the mount, calming the water, feeding the 5000, suffering under Pontius Pilate*
 - Share yours with the group
 - As others are sharing, write down those you didn't share
 - Share what you didn't mention with the group
 - *Gives a quick feel for different recollections*
- [231] The Gospels are not simply writing *biographies* of Jesus
 - In what other categories of a library search engine might you place the Bible?
- [233] Only the most skeptical historians question Jesus' existence.
 - Have you ever met anyone who doubted Jesus existed?
- [234] *The differences in the Gospels should only trouble us if we believe that they are God's word verbatim*
 - *Four witnesses in a court case with such agreement would be compelling*
 - *Discounts the common source for at least three of them*
- [235] Reasons why an intelligent person might believe the Gospels to be reasonably accurate:
 1. Paul's testimony (from an original opponent of Christianity)
 2. Paul's willingness to suffer and die for his convictions

3. [236] Many other eyewitnesses to Jesus who could have countered any fabrications by the Gospel writers
 4. Disciples' willingness to face opposition/death ("It is one thing to be willing to die for a story you've heard secondhand yet believed.")
 5. [237] Luke including historically accurate information
 - Are these compelling reasons to you?
 - What other evidence might you be looking for?
 - [238] *Additional reasons*
 1. *Personal experience of those who claim to have an encounter with Christ*
 2. *Personal experience of those whose lives have been positively affected by their faith*
 - Hamilton's personal call to faith
 - Do you ever wish you had a different sort of personal call to your own faith?
 - Other reflections?
-
- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**
-

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Chapters 25-26

- **Opening Prayer**

Lord Jesus, open our ears to your words today, and help us to understand your true meaning for us in this day. In your holy name we pray. Amen.

- **Ice Breaker**

- Do these sayings of Jesus tend to trouble your heart?
 - [Matthew 5:11] “Blessed are you when others revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account.
 - [Matthew 5:28] Everyone who looks at a woman with lust has already committed adultery with her in his heart.
 - [Matthew 5:32] But I say to you that whoever divorces his wife except for sexual unfaithfulness forces her to commit adultery. And whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery.
 - [Matthew 18:8] And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire.
 - [Matthew 19:24] It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.
- Are there other sayings of Jesus that trouble you?

- **Chapter 25 – Did Jesus Really Say That?**

- [243] What does Hamilton’s “prophetic hyperbole” mean to you?
- Reinterpret the passages in the above Ice Breaker to the core of what you think Jesus was trying to say
- [244] What do you think Jesus meant when he said “Whatever you ask for in prayer with faith, you will receive”?
- [245] *Hamilton’s insight – “Anyone who had committed an unpardonable sin would have turned so far from God that he or she would no longer care about God’s pardon.”*
- *Point of the chapter...*
 - *Seriously but not literally – Jesus is trying to lead us away from the harmful*
 - *By his actions, Jesus offers the sinners his grace*
- Other reflections?

- **Chapter 26 – “No One Comes to the Father Except Through Me”?**

- Read John 14:1-6
- What does Jesus mean by “way,” “truth,” and “life”?
- *Two ways to interpret “No one comes to the Father except through me”:*
 - *Eternal fate of non-Christians (emphasis on what the individual does)*
 - *...except through **my saving work** (emphasis on what Jesus does)*
- What are your thoughts on the eternal fate of non-Christians?
- [249] *Pluralism/universalism – everyone goes to heaven*
 - *Hamilton thinks some will persistently reject God’s grace*
- [250] *Exclusivism/particularism – God’s gift of salvation must be accepted*
- [250] *Inclusivism – Jesus is the way, truth, and life, but God can give salvation to anyone he chooses*
- [252] *Wesley, C.S. Lewis, Roman Catholics all seem to hold the view of:*

- ...except through **my saving work** (emphasis on what Jesus does)
 - *Inclusivism*
 - [252] “I share Christ with others not because I believe all who don’t know him will be eternally tormented in hell. I share him with others because I believe that in Christ we see the clearest picture of who God is and what God longs for from humanity.”
 - What are your reactions to this?
 - Read Ephesians 2:8-10
 - Other reflections?
-
- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**
-

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Chapter 27

- **Opening Prayer**

Heavenly Father, give us new perspective to better understand difficult Bible verses like those about slavery and women. Help us to know your intent for us today. In Jesus' precious name we pray. Amen.

- **Video – Wrestling with Issues of Sexuality and Relationships (length – 15:42)**

- *There are 326 references to slavery in the Bible – all but two condone it*
- The Bible was “written for boys”
 - Have you had your daughters or other girls bring this up to you?
 - Why don't we see more condemnation of this by modern-day church?
- What timeless directives in the Bible are still applicable in our day and age?
 - *Golden Rule, give with a cheerful heart, do unto the least of these, pray in private, two greatest commandments, 10 commandments*
- Some claim - “if you loosen the reigns, you no longer hold to Biblical authority.”
 - Do you hold to Biblical authority?

- **Have class members read the following Bible verses**

- Exodus 20:17 & 21:7; Deuteronomy 22:28-29; 1 Corinthians 14:34; Ephesians 5:22-24; 1 Timothy 2:11-15

- **Chapter 27 – Women Need Not Apply**

- [255] Women cannot be preachers as Roman Catholic, Southern Baptist, Jewish Orthodox, Mormon, and factions of other denominations
 - [255] Pope's reason was because of Jesus' choice of apostles
 - Hamilton - “...likelihood of receiving a hearing and becoming accepted leaders...”
 - Gradual change.
 - Why is this taking so long for some denominations?
- [256] Jewish morning blessing – “Blessed are you O God, King of the Universe, Who has not made me a woman.”
 - How do men react to this?
 - How do women react to this?
- [256] What would have been Paul's motivation to direct that women be silent in church, even at that time?
 - *“...it was likely becoming a ‘problem’ in some churches that women had recognized the egalitarian nature of the gospel.”*
 - *Eve as being deceived and becoming the transgressor*
- [257] *Egalitarian first Genesis creation story vs. second Genesis creation story*
 - *“ezer” – not “helper” but rather “strong individual coming to the aid of someone weaker*
- [259] 40% of murdered women are killed by husbands/boyfriends compared to 7% of murdered men
 - What does this say to you?
- [260] Jesus is crucified and buried in a garden.
 - Does Jesus reverse the curse of Eden?
 - Why or why not?
- Other reflections?

- **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**
-

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Chapter 28-29

- **Opening Prayer**

Eternal God, we trust in the assurance that wherever two or three are gathered together, there your Spirit will be present. We give thanks for the community of faith, where we can gather with others to wrestle with whatever concerns are laid on our hearts.

- **Ice Breaker**

- How closely do you think you adhere to Biblical commandments?

- **Chapter 28 – Is It Okay to Get a Tattoo?**

- [262] Hamilton cites A.J. Jacobs *The Year of Living Biblically*
 - Doing good things changes the way we think
 - Do you agree?
 - The important thing is “picking and choosing the right things” from the Law
 - How should we do this?
 - *God equips us with a conscience to discern*
 - *WDMDT (What do Mom and Dad think)?*

- **Have class members read the following Bible verses**

- Leviticus 20:13; James 4:12; Romans 1:26-28; Galatians 5:14; Mark 10:6-9; Romans 13:8-10

- **Chapter 29 – Homosexuality and the Bible**

- According to Gallup Polls:
 - Americans overestimate the percentage who are gay or lesbian at 23.6%
 - The number of Americans who self-identify as LGBT is 3.8%
 - The percentage who thought gay and lesbian relations were morally acceptable
 - 2002 - 38%
 - 2015 - 63%
 - The percentage who favor legalized same-sex marriage
 - 1999 - 35%
 - 2015 - 60%
 - What has changed?
- *Alternate explanations for Biblical references about homosexuality*
 - *Condemning homosexual rape rather than two people sharing their lives in a loving relationship*
 - *Condemning temple prostitution*
 - *Condemning something that did not conform to the norm (Moses’s way was identifying what was abnormal, which was therefore unclean, therefore off limits, and therefore an abomination)*
 - *Condemning pederasty (mature men and pubescent boys)*
 - *Biblical commands which never reflected the will of God (as with slavery, violence, subordinate women)*
- [273] Three broad categories into which scripture passages fit:
 - Timeless will of God
 - God’s will in a particular time but not for all time
 - Cultural and historical circumstances when they were written, but never God’s timeless will

- Do these make sense to you?
 - [274] *The way we categorize scriptures is a matter of Biblical interpretation as opposed to Biblical authority*
 - Have your interpretations on this or any topic in scripture changed over time?
 - [276] *Not looking for a pass to be immoral but a blessing to share their life as a companion and helper*
 - [277] How could homosexual marriage be seen as a threat to real marriage?
- **Supreme Court Ruling recognizing same-sex marriage (June 26, 2015)**
 - What is your reaction to this ruling?
 - **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**
-

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Chapter 30

- **Opening Prayer**

Lord God, we find it difficult to understand the book of Revelation. Reveal to us your message for us today through these verses. In Your Holy Name. Amen.

- **Ice Breaker**

- What do you recall from the book of Revelation?
- What studies have you done on Revelation?
- Have you taught any lessons on Revelation?
- How many sermons have you heard on Revelation?
- Why do you think it isn't more prevalent?

- **Have members of the class read the following Bible verses**

- Revelation 1:1; 4:11; 7:9; 12:7; 12:9; 19:11; 20:10; 21:1,2,3,4

- **Chapter 30 – Making Sense of the Book of Revelation**

- [282] Of the messages given to the churches, which do you think are applicable to our church today?
 - Ephesus – lost spiritual passion; embraced pagan culture
 - Smyrna – experienced persecution from the local community (Jews)
 - Pergamum – paying homage to the emperor
 - Thyatira – listened to a false teacher supporting eating food sacrificed to the pagan gods
 - Sardis – reputation for vibrant faith, but “soiled” themselves in the world
 - Philadelphia – harassed by the local synagogue
 - Laodicea – lukewarm in faith
- [283] Four views on how to read Revelation
 - Futurist – prophetic of the last days before/after Christ returns (many believe starting now)
 - What do you think of the *Left Behind* series?
 - Historicist – prophetic starting with the time of John
 - Preterist – pertaining to events in John's time
 - Idealist – perpetual struggle between good and evil, appropriate for all eras
 - Which of these views hits the mark for you?
- [286] Conflict pits worship of God against worship of Rome. Hamilton says “In every age, there is a temptation for the state to deify itself.”
 - How have you witnessed this in modern times?
 - [288] *Monuments in D.C. are like temples*
 - “American civil religion”
 - What does this mean to you?
 - How is it at odds with Christianity?
- [287] “666” symbolizes complete imperfection
 - Does this number have significance for you?
 - What numbers have significance for you?
- [289] “the real point of Revelation: It is not aimed at telling us when the end will happen. It is aimed at telling us that *in the end, none of these gods will be left standing, and that Christians are called to give our hearts and our allegiance only to one God, who is worthy of our praise.*”

- How does Hamilton's "real point" work for you?
 - Other reflections?
 - **Homework assignment: Read Chapter 31 to close out the series**
 - **Closing Prayer (take turns among class members)**
-

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