

Wrestling With Doubt, Finding Faith

Chapter 1

- **Opening Prayer [from Leader Guide]**

Holy and loving God, thank you for your continuing presence in our lives. Thank you for Jesus, who modeled a life of faith for us to follow. Thank you that you accept our doubts and our questions. Give us courage to voice our questions and doubts. Open our hearts and our minds to your word as we seek answers so that we may grow stronger in our faith and closer to you. Amen.

- **Video [13:56]**

- How frustrated do you get when you can't get absolute certainty?
- Were there points in your life when you would have labeled yourself an atheist or an agnostic?
- What are the biggest things that make you doubt God's existence?
- Why do you believe in God?
 - Is it your sense of awe... upbringing... belief in Jesus... something else?
- What are examples can you think of that, for you, express the glory of our Creator?
- How does Hamilton's analogy of the watch speak to you?
- How would you feel if you got to the end of your life and found that there was no God?
- Other reflections?

- **Chapter 1 – Is God Real?**

- [19] Hamilton points out that Christians do not, as Stephen Hawking wrote, think of God as a humanlike being. Rather, we are created in God's image.
 - What does being created in God's image mean to you?
- How can you see the model of quantum physics potentially supporting God's connection with Creation?
- [22] Hamilton describes how he came to believe in God, starting with reading the Bible at fourteen.
 - How does your personal journey compare to this?
- [24] Hamilton brings us full circle back to the root of his belief, saying it is ultimately a *choice*.
 - Have you always felt your belief was a matter of choice?

- **Prayer [from Leader Guide]**

Holy and Loving God, thank you for Jesus Christ. Thank you for the teachings and the witness of your followers that are recorded in the Bible. Thank you for the people and the experiences that have brought us to faith in you. Thank you for accepting our questions and our doubts when our faith falters. Be with us as we search for answers to our questions. Give us the assurance of your abiding love and continuing presence when we find ourselves in times of doubt. In the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

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Chapter 2

- **Opening Prayer [from Leader Guide] – also note that Hamilton prays at the end of the video**
Holy and loving God, thank you for the Bible. Thank you for this holy book that teaches us about you and reveals your love for us. Thank you for the people who took the time to write these documents – the ancient historians, poets, prophets, apostles, and scribes. Thank you for the people who preserved these documents and compiled them into the Bible for future generations so that we might read these words of life. Be present with us as we study, learn, and grow together. Amen.
- **Video [14:15]**
 - Is there a specific book of the Bible that was pivotal for you in coming to Christ?
 - What are the hardest parts or themes of the Bible for you to read? *In the book, Hamilton gives the examples of violence, misogyny, and conflict with science*
 - How do you deal with Bible passages that just “don’t sound like Jesus”?
 - Do you skip them? Avoid them? Struggle through them? Embrace the challenge?
 - What do you think of Hamilton’s approach with reading the “minor notes” in light of the “major chords”?
 - What are the major chords for you? *Great commandments; Golden Rule; Micah 6:8 (do justice, love kindness, walk humbly with God)*
 - What proportion of the Bible would fall into the following three categories for you?
 - “That’s not right” - doesn’t express God’s will
 - “That was right in the context/time of the writers”
 - “That’s right”
 - In what ways could living the Bible in a completely literal fashion be a fool’s errand?
 - Other reflections?
- **Chapter 2 – The Good Book?**
 - [29] Quote attributed to Mark Twain – “It’s not the parts of the Bible I don’t understand that trouble me; it’s the parts that I do understand that really trouble me.”
 - Do you think we might be avoiding the truly troubling parts of the Bible that we *do* understand? If so, why?
 - [58] *“The words of the prophets continue to ‘afflict the comfortable’ and ‘comfort the afflicted’”*
 - What parts of your daily life would change if we didn’t have the Bible?
 - [56-] Hamilton does a quick survey of the Bible, proposing the value that each section brings
 - Creation story
 - Exodus deliverance
 - Judges and kings
 - Poetry and wisdom
 - Prophets
 - Life of teaching of Jesus
 - Stories of the apostles
 - Letters from the apostles
 - Promise of the new heaven at the end of times
 - When do you find yourself turning to or encountering each of these sections?
 - What does it mean to you that “Every scripture is inspired by God”? [2 Timothy 3:16]
 - Hamilton notes that Paul would likely not have considered his letters to be “scripture”
 - What qualifies as “scripture” to you? *sacred writing; holy book; authoritative writing*
 - [59] Hamilton highlights the end of 2 Timothy 3:16-17 – “All Scripture is God-breathed...so that the servant of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work”

- Do you feel thoroughly equipped?
 - **Prayer [from Leader Guide]**
Holy and loving God, thank you for breathing your holy word into the hearts of your believers so long ago. Thank you that the Old Testament historians, psalmists, and prophets, and the New Testament apostles took the time to write down the words you inspired in their hearts so that we, too, may grow to know you and draw near to you in faith; in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.
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Chapter 3

- **Opening Prayer [from Leader Guide] – also note that Hamilton prays at the end of the video**
Holy and loving God, you offer us the gift of eternal life. You have given us free will to make our own choices. You offer us forgiveness and a new start when we confess our sin before you with a repentant heart. We thank you for the gift of eternal life, an amazing gift of grace. We thank you for your love and compassion for all of your children; in Jesus’s name we pray. Amen.
- **Video [13:42]**
 - Where are your favorite places to write, pray, and study (like Hamilton enjoys on his porch in the rain)?
 - What are your impressions of Hell?
 - Are there unforgiveable sins for you?
 - Matthew 25 (story of the separation of the sheep from the goats)
 - Why do you think Jesus told this story about the final judgement?
 - *Three Christian approaches to salvation at the end of life*
 - *Exclusivism – only those who have accepted Jesus as their personal savior will make it to Heaven*
 - *Universalism – God will save everyone in the end*
 - *Inclusivism – Christ is the only Savior of the world; gift of salvation can be given by God to anyone He chooses. However, he does not save anyone who does not want to be saved.*
 - What is your exposure to each of these, and under which approach(es) have you lived?
 - Have you shared your faith with someone due to fear of their ultimate fate?
 - How does this differ from sharing your faith to simply convey Jesus as the Way, Truth, and Life in your life?
 - Which do you think is more effective?
 - Other reflections?
- **Chapter 3 – Are All Non-Christians Going to Hell?**
 - [64] The Greek word “Gehenna,” used 12 of 13 times for hell in the NT, refers to a Jerusalem’s trash dump where fires were kept burning.
 - How does this affect your understanding of hell?
 - [78] Hamilton talks about the large number of people who are “hamstrung” by a variety of reasons which keep them from Christ. He then points out that God is more compassionate than any of us, and could make room for such people.
 - What are the reasons you’ve seen which hamstring people?
 - How has interacting with people of other faiths affected your faith?
- **Prayer [from Leader Guide]**
Holy and loving God, thank you for the holy scriptures that reveal your love and your will to us. Guide us as we seek to discern the meaning of the scripture passages that we do not easily understand. Help us remember that even when we disagree with other Christians we can trust in your steadfast love and join together in love to worship and serve you; in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

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Chapter 4

- **Opening Prayer [from Leader Guide] – also note that Hamilton prays at the end of the video**
Holy and loving God, thank you for the gift of life and the promise of eternal life. Thank you that you accept our questions and our doubts, especially when we wonder if your promises of forgiveness and heaven seem too good to be true. Open our hearts to receive your love. Open our minds to receive and understand your word. Give us courage to step out in faith; in Jesus’s name we pray. Amen.
- **Video [14:57]**
 - What experience do you have praying while you walk? Where have you done it?
 - What are the most memorable cemeteries in your life?
 - What are the most compelling reasons to you that there is a heaven?
 - What end-of-life experiences have you had that made an impression on you?
 - How does what you believe about death change the way you live?
 - What are your experiences with *The Chronicles of Narnia*?
 - Other reflections?
- **Activity – Word Cloud**
 - **[prior to class] Set up three word cloud prompts using a Web service (mentimeter.com is a free one):**
 - What do you expect heaven to look like?
 - What do you expect to do in heaven?
 - Who do you expect to see in heaven?
 - Display the first of the three prompts in a screen on the room
 - Have class members register their responses using the Web service (mentimeter uses a QR code on your prompt display to allow them to respond)
 - Discuss the displayed results of the prompt before moving on to the next
 - [after class] Forward the results to class members
- **Chapter 4 – Is Heaven Real?**
 - [87] 2021 Pew Study found 73% of Americans believe in heaven (26% of agnostics and 3% of atheists)
 - Why do you think so many agnostics and even atheists believe in heaven?
 - Scripture and many books give us visions of heaven.
 - Do you find these visions inspiring? Obstructing? Inconsequential? Something else?
 - John 11:25-26 – “Jesus said to her, ‘I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die.’”
 - Why do you think Jesus is so explicit on this point, rather than using his common teaching practice of parables and other indirect language?
 - [95] Hamilton notes the change that happened in the disciples, leaving their fear behind and boldly preaching the gospel.
 - Is this witness enough for you, or do you long for such a firsthand experience yourself?
 - [96] What did you think of Dr. Parnia’s conclusions from near-death experiences about the presence of a “human consciousness or soul” bound to the brain but also separate from it?
 - [101] Hamilton’s response to questions about end-of-life – “I not only believe it, I’m counting on it.”
 - How do you react to that response?
 - What does it mean to you when in The Lord’s Prayer we say “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is *in heaven*”?
 - Other reflections from the chapter?

- **Prayer [from Leader Guide]**

Holy and loving God, thank you for this group and the opportunity to learn and grow together. Be present with us as we study the challenging questions. Help us grow closer to you in faith; in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

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Chapter 5

- **Opening Prayer [from Leader Guide] – also note that Hamilton prays at the end of the video**
Holy and loving God, you are the creator and master of the whole world. You are all-powerful and all-knowing. Yet you invite us to pray. You invite us into conversation with you. You listen as we share the desires of our hearts. You listen as we cry out in grief and voice our fears and concerns. You listen as we offer our thanksgiving and our praise. We thank you for inviting us into relationship with you; in Jesus’s name we pray. Amen.
- **Video [15:29]**
 - Where is the place you pray most frequently?
 - Have you ever felt a time when Jesus “moved mountains” in response to your prayers?
 - What relative percentage of your prayer time is spent in the following:
 - Adoration
 - Confession
 - Thanksgiving
 - Intercession
 - How would your prayers change if you first considered whether they aligned with the will of God?
 - How do you think we’re teaching our children to think of prayer?
 - Can you think of any prayers which you’re glad were not answered?
 - Can you share any examples where you are better for a painful experience in your life?
 - Other reflections?
- **Chapter 5 – When Prayers Go Unanswered**
 - Has unanswered prayer ever led to doubt or disillusionment in your faith?
 - What are some of the inconsequential things you’ve found yourself (or others) praying about?
 - Do you think such prayer is harmful?
 - What do you remember from the film *Bruce Almighty* when Bruce answered “YES” to all prayers?
 - What do you feel is the most important purpose of praying?
 - [115] Hamilton describes prayer as potentially imparting “spiritual power, peace, and strength.”
 - Do you agree with him, and if so, do you think there’s “power in numbers”?
 - [118] To what extent have you found prayer to be a release from anxiety or depression?
 - [120] “Ora et Labora” discussion - read the Lottery Ticket story:
A man prayed to God to win the lottery every day for 65 years. He prayed in the morning, at lunchtime, in the evening and just before he went to sleep.

The man passed away and went to heaven. The man was rather upset with the Lord and sought him out.

When the man found the Lord, he said "I've been praying 65 years. Every day when I woke up, ate my lunch, had my dinner in the evening and just before I went to sleep. How come I never won??"

And the Lord said, "IT WOULD HAVE HELPED IF YOU BOUGHT A TICKET!"
 - How have you found yourself “asking to win the lottery but not buying a ticket” [in other words, not participating in the answer to your prayers]
 - Other reflections?
- **Prayer [from Leader Guide]**
Holy and loving God, thank you for inviting us into relationship with you through prayer. Thank you for listening to us and hearing our prayers. Help us to remember that you are always in our midst, that your love always surrounds us, and that you are ready to give us your gifts of peace, comfort, wisdom, and direction, as we are ready to receive them. Help us to be open to the ways you respond to our prayers and the ways you call us to be

answers in your name to the prayers of others; in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.

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Chapter 6

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Holy and loving God, thank you for accepting our doubts and our questions. Thank you for the assurance of your love and presence, especially when our faith feels fragile. Give us courage to ask the hard questions and to seek your truth in all circumstances. Be with us in our searching and reassure us that searching draws us into a stronger relationship with you; in the name of Jesus Christ we pray. Amen.
- **Video [14:47]**
 - Do you know anyone who has lost their faith due to their own suffering, or that of a friend or family member?
 - What are the most difficult types of suffering for you to deal with?
 - Can you describe a funeral you've attended which you found more uplifting than others?
 - If we value our freedom to make decisions, and we recognize this freedom can be the root of some suffering, and heaven is a place without suffering, does that mean we won't have the freedom to make decisions in heaven?
 - How often do you consciously choose to believe in God?
 - Do you see value in considering this more frequently?
 - What impact might that have on your life?
 - Other reflections?
- **Chapter 6 – Why Do the Innocent Suffer?**
 - [129] “God understands your anger, and his shoulders are broad enough to handle it.”
 - What Bible stories can you recall which portray people getting mad at God?
 - [2 Samuel 6] God strikes Uzzah dead for reaching back and touching the Ark to steady it on its cart as they return to Jerusalem. David becomes angry.
 - [Job 3++] Job gets angry at his predicament (but does not follow his wife's advice to go so far as to curse God)
 - [Jonah 4] Jonah is disappointed when God spares the repentant Ninevites, and then gets mad at the plant which was providing shade and then withered.
 - [Numbers 11] Moses gets angry that God has placed the burden of the Israelites on him.
 - David and Habakkuk express anger over God's evident failure to answer their cries.
 - Ephesians 4:26 – “In your anger do not sin: Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry”
 - How might this apply to being angry at God?
 - How do you think God reacts to anger expressed to him?
 - [130] Hamilton quotes Psalm 91:
*“Because you have made the LORD your refuge,
the Most High your dwelling place,
no evil shall befall you,
no scourge come near your tent.”*
 - This seems to say bad things won't happen to you if you trust in God. How do you deal with this passage? Hamilton says it is hyperbolic expression
 - Do you think God disciplines us, and if so, when and in what form?
 - [138] Hamilton notes the following causes of suffering:
 - Human activity
 - Natural disasters
 - Illness
 - Accidents
 - Are there others you would add to this list?

- How would you describe to a friend what God does in the face of suffering?
 - *Romans 8:28 – And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”*
 - How does your faith change the way you live your life?
 - Other reflections from the chapter?
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- **Prayer [from Leader Guide]**
Holy and loving God, thank you for your steadfast love and your continuing presence. Help us to continue to grow stronger in our faith; in the name of your Son, Jesus Christ, we pray. Amen.
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