

Sierra Leadership Network Curriculum: Month 2, Year 3

Participation in the Sierra Leadership Network (SLN) is a process of adult learning. It is the responsibility of the participant to do their assignments and seek out the necessary accountability. It is the responsibility of the participant to schedule time with their mentor, not the other way around. Here is a checklist of this month's exercises and space for comments. All useful generated materials should be placed in your Sierra Leadership Network binder. The mentor will look over the exercises and be given opportunity to add their own comments. Be sure you take your binder to the meetings at Granite Springs Church to also be available to the SLN directors.

Month 2, Year 3

Date Completed

____/____/____ Apocalypse

[Estimated time: _____]

Mentor Comments:

____/____/____ Biblical Interpretation:

Mentor Comments

[Estimated time: _____]

____/____/____ Faith:

Mentor Comments

[Estimated time: _____]

Participant Signature

Mentor Signature

I: Apocalypse

“Apocalypse” is a genre in Scripture that is quite likely the most difficult for us to handle. Narrative we can connect with because it is like history. Poetry we understand. The Epistles are letters that we are listening in with but reading apocalyptic literature in the Bible is like overhearing a divinely inspired, authoritative dream and trying to make sense of it. There is no wonder that the church has diverged wildly on the subject, sometimes in the most divisive and embarrassing ways.

Apocalyptic literature grows out of the assertion that we serve the “Living God”. The God we profess to believe in and serves is not disinterested in the affairs of planet earth (Deism), he is not impersonal being some mysterious force or ground of all being (Pantheism), but having the qualities of personhood in that he has a will. He cares about things and in fact will take action and intervene. CS Lewis’ attack on Pantheism speaks to this about as well as anything I’ve ever read:

Men are reluctant to pass over from the notion of an abstract and negative deity to the living God. I do not wonder. Here lies the deepest tap-root of Pantheism and of the objection to traditional imagery. It was hated not, at bottom, because it pictured Him as a man but because it pictured Him as king, or even as warrior. The Pantheist's God does nothing, demands nothing. He is there if you wish for Him, like a book on a shelf. He will not pursue you. There is no danger that at any time heaven and earth should flee away at His glance. If He were the truth, then we could really say that all the Christian images-of kingship were a historical accident of which our religion ought to be cleansed. It is with a shock that we discover them to be indispensable. You have had a shock like that before, in connection with smaller matters --when the line pulls at your hand, when something breathes beside you in the darkness. So here; the shock comes at the precise moment when the thrill of *life* is communicated to us along the clue we have been following. It is always shocking to meet life where we thought we were alone. "Look out! " we cry, "it's *alive*." And therefore this is the very point at which so many draw back--I would have done so myself if I could--and proceed no further with Christianity. An "impersonal God" - well and good. A subjective God of beauty, truth and goodness, inside our own heads --better still. A formless life-force surging through us, a vast power which we can tap --best of all. But God Himself, alive, pulling at the other end of the cord, perhaps approaching at an infinite speed, the hunter, king, husband-that is quite another matter. There comes a moment when the children who have been playing at burglars hush suddenly: was that *a real* footstep in the hall? There comes a moment when people who have been dabbling in religion ("Man's search for God") suddenly draw back. Supposing we really found Him? We never meant it to come to *that!* Worse still, supposing He had found us?

Miracles by CS Lewis, pp. 124-125

Biblical Narrative tells the story of God's might deeds in the past. How he intervened in history in the lives of Adam, Noah, Abraham and Jacob. How he called and created the

people of Israel, how he saved them from Egypt, guided them and tested them in the desert and brought them to a new land, only in the end to expel them and return them. The Bible looks back on the history of Israel and pulls back the curtain to reveal what God has done. In poetry we learn more about God's heart, his character, his intention. From these we derive a theology, generalizations and abstractions relating to who God is, how he works, what he cares about, what his agenda is. From these sources we tend to extrapolate and derive what has been called "a personal relationship" with God in Christ. Through prayer and living based on God's "track record" in Scripture we imagine what God is doing with us, in us and through us.

Apocalyptic literature is unnerving because it speaks the intention and intervention of God into the present and the future in terms that are dramatic and mysterious. Suddenly the stakes seem higher than with other passages of Scripture. Suddenly we begin to imagine that "normal" life as we know it where we assume God's actions to be quiet, hidden, and open to interpretation may any day be shattered to find a living God acting, deciding, judging, exalting and condemning. Anyone with any sense of the God of the Bible should rightly pause and consider the implications. As CS Lewis said, we suddenly gasp with the absolute and unquestioning realization that "He's alive!"

A number of difficulties present themselves almost immediately with apocalyptic literature. God's intervention is described in the kinds of terms we associate with dreams. Characters can be different things in different places. Jesus is a man with a flaming sword and a lamb that was slain. Beasts appear that seem to relate to historical figures, or perhaps to future figures but direct identification isn't always clear. As difficult as it is to agree on what has happened in the past, it is far more difficult to agree as to what will happen in the future through this dream shaped glass. We have the additional complication that these writings were written in the past, leaving open the possibility that fulfillment at some level has taken place long before any of us were born.

Interpretation of Biblical apocalyptic literature, especially the book of Revelation has tended to fall imperfectly into three camps:

1. **Revelation as history:** where many or all of the events in the book of Revelation have already occurred centuries before in the time of the Roman empire. This position has a foundation in the fact that many of the characters described in the book of Revelation bear striking similarity to persons and events in the Roman Empire. This of course makes perfect sense because John is relating this vision to Christians in the empire who are struggling to "overcome". His words bring hope that God has not abandoned them in their misery and that he in fact will intervene on their behalf. The board is set and the pieces are in motion and God will win, redeem his own and be victorious. The difficulty of this position is likewise found in its strength. The final victory has not yet come. Some of what is envisioned can be seen to have been fulfilled yet other elements have clearly not been. The final judgment has not taken place and God has not yet fully

realized his victory over sin, death and Satan. We still wait with the original audience of the book.

2. **Revelation strictly as foretelling of the "end times":** The strength of this position is the weakness of the "history" camp. God has not yet come to judge the living and the dead so perhaps we should read the characters of the book as players yet to present themselves upon the stage of history. The weakness of this position is that it disturbs an important rule of Biblical interpretation: the primary meaning of the text is found in the meaning of the author for his intended audience. Would John have recorded this dream in this way with the knowledge that no one he knew or could ever know would find any significant relevance in it? In fact, the difficulty is that no one for almost 2000 years could find relevance in it and no generation in fact could ever be sure that this book should bring them comfort because no one can be sure that theirs is the last generation. Once Jesus returns then that generation could say, "oh yeah, I guess it was meant for us..." Not much help really. John writes the book with the passion of a preacher giving hope to the people he knew suffering in the midst of persecution and struggle. There clearly it must have been written to mean something for the people of his day.
3. **The Theological:** This camp reads the book of Revelation as things that were true for John's generation and have been true ever since, even for us today. We understand different players in history as playing these roles repeated throughout history in different times and places. The book itself seems to bear some of this out when it talks about "Babylon", a power that by the time of John had long since been spent. The difficulty with this position is that John is clearly trying to refer to specific historical characters and events. Apocalyptic literature refuses to be thrown into the blender only to yield general truths and principles about living in this world. The whole point of the genre is to inject our imaginations with faith filled visions of God pulling back the veil and bringing history to a righteous conclusion.

Whereas you can find people who are purists with regard to these camps, many people do a fair amount of mixing and matching between the positions. All camps have strengths and weaknesses selective applications of the assumptions of the positions tends to be the norm. You will undoubtedly arrive at your own conclusions.

II: Biblical Interpretation

Assignment:

1. Read Daniel 7-12 and the book of Revelation in as few sittings as possible. Outline or take notes to the degree that it helps to interact with the books.
2. Write a sermon or teach a lesson based on something found in the book of Revelation.
3. Engage the following questions:
 - a. As you interpret this passage, where do you see yourself falling in terms of the camps I've described above?
 - b. In doing research for your passage how did the sources or commentaries you consulted seem to come down in these camps?
4. Preach the sermon, teach the class, and get some evaluation from your mentor in terms of how it went.

III: Faith

My favorite definition of faith is found in Hebrew 11:1:

"Now faith is being sure of what we hope for and certain of what we do not see."

After that comes James 1:2-4:

James 1:2-4 (NIV)

Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Asking God to increase your faith is a dangerous prayer. Just look at what God used to increase the faith of Abraham. By definition faith stand directly opposed to most of the things from which we derive comfort: control, stability, security. After grace faith is the most essential ingredient in our walk with God and God jealously and zealously engages us so that our faith will grow. It is not a path for cowards. According to the book of James adversity and trials are some of God's chief tools in testing and growing our faith. These things can arrive in many ways: money troubles, conflict, marital struggles, health issues, people close to us who are in trouble in one way or another, etc. Anything that arises in life that can bring us to a place to doubt God, his calling or his provision for our lives. Do some reflecting on past and present adversity in your life. Is God working in these things? Either write a thoughtful page or two on the subject or discuss it with your mentor.