

Handout 3: Revelation, Chapter 2:1-11 (Talk 4)
David Crabtree, Reformation Fellowship, July 18, 2021

I. Introduction

- A. This week we will look at the first two of the letters to the churches.
 - 1. Last week I talked about the nature of the predicament that believers found themselves in.
 - a) There was great pressure on them to worship the gods and the emperor.
 - b) They were subject to various penalties for not doing it.
 - (1) Including death penalty
 - 2. The church in every city had a slightly different set of circumstances.
 - a) And they each responded a little differently.
 - 3. So this is Jesus' critique of each church as they enter into a period of persecution.

II. Ephesus

- A. Probably most important city in Asia Minor
 - 1. On the river Cayster
 - a) The location of the city had to be moved 3 times.
 - (1) Harbor kept silting up.
 - 2. Wealthy, very cosmopolitan
 - 3. Mixed culture from the time the Greek colony was established
 - a) But more Asian than Smyrna
 - 4. Large Jewish population
 - a) Jews had long enjoyed special status in Ephesus.
 - (1) Including citizenship?
 - b) Considerable bitterness between the gentiles and the Jews
 - 5. Three major trade routes passed through Ephesus.
 - a) And it was a port with access to sea lanes.
 - 6. Very impressive buildings
 - a) 3 Gymnasiums
 - (1) The one by the dock was huge.
 - b) 5 Bath houses
 - c) 1 large theater (25,000)
- B. Had a very ancient temple (Artemisium)
 - 1. There was a highly respected holy place in Ephesus dating back to ancient times.
 - 2. An ancient temple was burned down in 356 BC.
 - 3. The rebuilt temple was four times the size of the Parthenon.

- a) One of the seven wonders of the world.
- 4. The temple was the engine of the economy.
- 5. It was an important place of asylum (more later).
- C. Ephesus became a custodian (neokoros) for Roman imperial temples.
 - 1. To Rome
 - 2. To Julius Caesar
- D. Ephesus became a very important Christian community.
 - 1. It became the main city of Christianity after the destruction of Jerusalem.
 - 2. Church appears to have been larger and more secure than in other cities.
 - a) But this may have changed under Domitian.
 - (1) Temple built to Domitian in Ephesus.
 - (a) Worship of Domitian was a municipal activity.
 - 3. Paul spent three years there; gave a parting message to its elders.
 - a) I will read that presently.

Acts 20:17 From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the elders of the church. *18* When they arrived, he said to them: "You know how I lived the whole time I was with you, from the first day I came into the province of Asia. *19* I served the Lord with great humility and with tears, although I was severely tested by the plots of the Jews. *20* You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. *21* I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus.

Acts 20:22 "And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there. *23* I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me. *24* However, I consider my life worth nothing to me, if only I may finish the race and complete the task the Lord Jesus has given me—the task of testifying to the gospel of God's grace.

Acts 20:25 "Now I know that none of you among whom I have gone about preaching the kingdom will ever see me again. *26* Therefore, I declare to you today that I am innocent of the blood of all men. *27* For I have not hesitated to proclaim to you the whole will of God. *28* Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood. *29* I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock. *30* Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. *31* So be on your guard! Remember that for three years I never stopped warning each of you night and day with tears.

Acts 20:32 "Now I commit you to God and to the word of his grace, which can build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified. *33* I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. *34* You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. *35* In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Acts 20:36 When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed. *37* They all wept as they embraced him and kissed him. *38* What grieved them most was his statement that they would never see his face again. Then they accompanied him to the ship.

- b) Paul met with constant opposition from the Jews.
 - (1) There was a lot of tension between Jews and Christians in Ephesus.
 - c) Paul said savage wolves would come he when he left.
 - (1) Those who would distort the truth to attract disciples.
 - (a) "So be on your guard!"
 - (i) The letter suggests that they took this warning to heart.
- E. According to tradition, the Apostle John spent several years there.
- 1. Wrote the Gospel of John there
 - 2. Died and was buried there
 - 3. His exile to Patmos must have been an interruption in the time he was in Ephesus.

III. Revelation 2:1-3

To the angel of the church in Ephesus write:

These are the words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand and walks among the seven golden lampstands: 2 I know your deeds, your hard work and your perseverance. I know that you cannot tolerate wicked men, that you have tested those who claim to be apostles but are not, and have found them false. 3 You have persevered and have endured hardships for my name, and have not grown weary.

- A. To the angel
 - 1. The angels are like God's liaisons to the churches.
- B. From the one who holds the seven stars (people of God) and walks among the lampstands (churches).
 - 1. This is from the scene in chapter 1.
 - 2. Jesus is the heavenly high priest.
 - a) He has authority over them.
 - b) He knows these churches well.
 - c) He cares about them.
- C. Commendation
 - 1. Jesus knows their deeds.
 - a) He doesn't talk about their souls.
 - 2. Their hard work
 - a) Primarily the spiritual and psychological work of keeping oneself in line
 - 3. Their endurance

4. Intolerance for wicked men
 - a) The false apostles
 - (1) People speaking as though they have the authority to speak for God, but they are faking it
 - (2) The Ephesians were able to determine that they were false.
 - b) The Nicolaitans
 - (1) They are mentioned later.
5. They have suffered in the name of Christ.
 - a) They haven't faltered in this.
6. This is all high praise.

IV. Revelation 2:4-7

Rev. 2:4 Yet I hold this against you: You have forsaken your first love. 5 Remember the height from which you have fallen! Repent and do the things you did at first. If you do not repent, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place. 6 But you have this in your favor: You hate the practices of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate.

A. Criticism—You have forsaken your first love.

1. This is difficult.
 - a) Commentators
 - (1) They don't love God; dry theology.
 - (2) They no longer love one another.
 - b) It is hard to choose between these two options.
 - (1) I think Jesus is saying that they have lost their love for their fellow believers.
 - (a) This is an emphasis of John in his other writings.

1John 3:11 This is the message you heard from the beginning: We should love one another.

1John 4:7 Dear friends, let us love one another, for love comes from God. Everyone who loves has been born of God and knows God. 8 Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love.

- (b) My guess is that the tension between Jews and Gentiles in Ephesus in general, spilled over into the Church.
 - (i) Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, assured the gentile believers that they were just as much God's people as Jewish believers.

Eph. 2:11 Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called "uncircumcised" by those who call themselves "the circumcision" (that done in the body by the hands of men)—12 remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without

God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

Eph. 2:14 **For he himself is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility,** 15 by abolishing in his flesh the law with its commandments and regulations. His purpose was to create in himself one new man out of the two, thus making peace, 16 and in this one body to reconcile both of them to God through the cross, by which he put to death their hostility. 17 He came and preached peace to you who were far away and peace to those who were near. 18 For through him we both have access to the Father by one Spirit.

Eph. 2:19 Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, 20 built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. 21 In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. 22 And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

(ii) It may have been across this ethnic divide that love failed.

2. Remember the height from which you have fallen.
 - a) There is a big gap between present behavior and their behavior when they first came to Christ.
 - (1) In about 54 AD Paul wrote:

Eph. 1:15 For this reason, ever since I heard about your faith in the Lord Jesus **and your love for all the saints,** 16 I have not stopped giving thanks for you, remembering you in my prayers.

3. They are requested to act the way they acted when they first heard the Gospel.
 4. Repent!
 - a) Otherwise, Jesus will remove their lampstand.
 - (1) They will be disowned.
 - (2) Ephesus was moved twice.
 - b) This is a serious issue.
 5. But you hate the Nicolaitans.
 - a) Jesus ends on a positive note.
 - b) Jesus hates them also.
 - c) Who are the Nicolaitans?
 - (1) We will talk about them later.
 - (2) They were apparently compromisers.
- B. This is a serious charge with a serious penalty.
1. I don't know how this lack of love manifested itself.
 2. John wrote in I John 3:17-18:

17 If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him? 18 Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.

- a) One possible manifestation would be a lack of sharing one with another.
 - (1) Possibly across the ethnic divide

C. Solution: repentance

- 1. If they don't repent, their lampstand will be removed.
 - a) I assume that means they will no longer be among the communities of believers.
 - b) That is a serious penalty.

D. Jesus comes back to their good quality.

- a) They hate the Nicolaitans (whom God also hates).

V. Revelation 2:7

Rev. 2:7 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, I will give the right to eat from the tree of life, which is in the paradise of God.

A. Closing

- 1. He who has an ear, let him hear
 - a) A development of something in Isaiah which was then used in Gospels
 - (1) God closed the ears of his people because of their rebelliousness.

*Is. 6:9 He said, "Go and tell this people:
"Be ever hearing, but never understanding;
be ever seeing, but never perceiving."*

- (2) In the Gospels, Jesus used parables, which made clear to some and obscured to others.

Matt. 13:9 He who has ears, let him hear."

Matt. 13:10 The disciples came to him and asked, "Why do you speak to the people in parables?"

Matt. 13:11 He replied, "The knowledge of the secrets of the kingdom of heaven has been given to you, but not to them. 12 Whoever has will be given more, and he will have an abundance. Whoever does not have, even what he has will be taken from him. 13 This is why I speak to them in parables:

*"Though seeing, they do not see;
though hearing, they do not hear or understand.*

14 In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah:

*"You will be ever hearing but never understanding;
you will be ever seeing but never perceiving.*

- b) This is a critique for the one open to critique.
 - c) This is repeated to each church.
 - 2. What was said to the Ephesians was said for the benefit of all the churches.
 - 3. Every letter ends with a different expression of reward for the one who remains faithful to the end (“the one who overcomes”).
 - a) “The one who overcomes” is the one who remains faithful till the end.
 - b) In Ephesus, the one who overcomes will get to eat from the tree of life in paradise.
- B. What are the local associations with tree of life?
- 1. The shrine of Artemis was originally just a tree.
 - a) The temple was always associated with a tree.
 - 2. The temple was an asylum for anyone accused of crime.
 - a) Known throughout Asia for its asylum
 - (1) An accused person could get “salvation.”
 - b) The temple grounds were expanded into part of the city.
 - c) It became a curse for the city.
 - (1) Organized crime was operated from the temple.
 - (2) The Romans tried to end the practice but could not.
- C. So what is Jesus saying?
- 1. There is a kind of “salvation” that could be seen in Ephesus.
 - a) Criminals could be spared punishment for a time.
 - 2. The one who overcomes can eat of the tree of life in paradise.
 - a) He can be spared the punishment of eternal death.
 - b) And receive eternal life.
 - c) This is a far more significant salvation.

VI. Observations about the letter to Ephesus

- A. Jesus is very blunt in these letters.
 - 1. Shocking to those of us in our culture
- B. It is hard to know what it means to love our brother.
 - 1. I don’t know what it means to love one another.
 - a) I often ask myself, “What would love dictate that I do in this situation?”
 - (1) I often don’t know.
 - 2. To call a person in the church a “false apostle”, would not look very loving.
 - a) And yet they were commended for doing that very thing.
 - b) To be loving is not synonymous with being nice.
 - 3. Here is what I can say:
 - a) God wants us to value what he values.
 - (1) Loving our fellow believers is just a part of that.

- (a) Every believer is cherished by God.
- b) We ought to value our fellow believers as God values them.
 - (1) We need to strive to love our fellow believers.
 - (a) To act in a way that benefits them.
 - (2) Returning to their first love would mean going back to consistently asking what love would dictate.
- 4. We are called to be humble servants with respect to our fellow believers.
 - a) We should act in a way that is long-term constructive in our dealings with others.

VII. Smyrna

A. Geographical setting

- 1. A sheltered harbor
 - a) It had two harbors.
 - (1) One large harbor and one small.
 - b) Silting was not as big a problem.

B. Distinctives

- 1. Known for its beauty
 - a) Beauty of its buildings in the natural setting
 - b) A hill in the city with the top surrounded by porticoes that apparently looked like a crown
 - (1) At least four ancient authors refer to the “crown” at Smyrna.
 - c) Theater, stadium
- 2. Particularly Greek (less of an Asian component)
 - a) It was an early Greek settlement.
- 3. Likened to a phoenix in ancient times.
 - a) It was destroyed about 600 BC by Lydia.
 - b) Just a village for 300 years
 - c) Re-founded by Lysimachus in 290 BC.
 - d) A lively port since then (Izmir, Turkey)
- 4. Became fiercely loyal towards Rome early
 - a) When threatened by Pergamum, they befriended Rome for protection.
 - b) When Roman troops were trapped in cold weather fighting Pergamum, they collected and sent clothing.
- 5. Imperial cult was a very big deal in Smyrna.
 - a) Offered to worship the goddess Roma early.
 - (1) “The Smyrneans can be considered as the creators of the goddess Roma.”
 - b) Applied for and received permission to build the second Asian temple to deity of Rome and Caesar-cult

“It was almost impossible to have a share in a city’s public life without also having a part in some aspect of the imperial cult.”

6. Large Jewish population
7. Citizens had immense pride in their city’s history.
 - a) Birthplace of Homer
 - b) Was said to be “a paradise of municipal vanity”
8. Known for its suffering
 - a) Smyrna means “myrrh.”
 - (1) Used for embalming the dead.
 - b) Several myths that had local connections all featured suffering.
 - (1) Niobe, Tantalus, Pelops

VIII. Revelation 2:8-11

“To the angel of the church in Smyrna write:

These are the words of him who is the First and the Last, who died and came to life again.

9 I know your afflictions and your poverty—yet you are rich! I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are a synagogue of Satan. 10 Do not be afraid of what you are about to suffer. I tell you, the devil will put some of you in prison to test you, and you will suffer persecution for ten days. Be faithful, even to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.

11 He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. He who overcomes will not be hurt at all by the second death.

- A. To the angel of the church in Smyrna
- B. From the risen Christ
 1. The First and the Last
 - a) Borrowed from Isaiah 44:6 and 48:12
 - (1) In both passages, the phrase is a claim of YHWH’s incomparability.

Is. 44:6 “This is what the LORD says—

*Israel’s King and Redeemer, the LORD Almighty:
I am the first and I am the last;
apart from me there is no God.*

Is. 44:7

*Who then is like me? Let him proclaim it.
Let him declare and lay out before me
what has happened since I established my ancient people,
and what is yet to come—
yes, let him foretell what will come.*

2. The one who died and came to life again

- a) Proof of his power over death.
- b) Allusion to the history of Smyrna (?)

C. Commendation

1. The believers in Smyrna were poor and picked on.
 - a) This echoes the ethos of a city of suffering.
 - b) You are rich (in the way that counts).
 - (1) Part of the illusion that Revelation is countering.
2. The accusations against them come predominantly from Jews.
 - a) Their accusers are ethnic Jews.
 - b) Although they are God's people by birth, they are more accurately characterized as an assembly of Satan.
 - (1) They are acting on behalf of Satan against the people of God.

D. Prediction

1. Don't fear what is coming.
2. The devil will put some of you in prison for ten days to test you.
 - a) If you are faithful, I will reward you.
 - (1) The crown (victory wreath) of life
 - (a) An allusion to the setting of the city of Smyrna
 - b) Jesus calls them to be faithful even to the point of death.
3. This is a gracious prediction.
 - a) Clearly something that is in God's control

E. Closing

1. This message is for the one who is willing to listen.
2. The one who remains faithful in the face of death, will not experience the second death (eternal death).
 - a) Death is not as great a threat as it seems.

IX. Observations about the letter to Smyrna

1. The major source of persecution appears to have come from the Jews.
 - a) Probably lawsuits and complaints to the authorities
2. There is nothing negative said about the church in Smyrna.
 - a) The suffering to come is clearly testing and not punishment.
3. However, the letter is not overly affirming.
4. "Don't fear" the trials to come is easier said than done.
 - a) Even Jesus feared his ordeal.

A. The parody

1. Tree of life in paradise of God
 - a) Greek makes a distinction that is also made in English.
 - (1) Tree (a living organism) (δένδρον)
 - (2) Wood (a building material) (ξύλον)
 - (3) However, this distinction is not as strictly made in Greek.
 - (a) In classical Greek ἔυλον can mean (“tree”), but this is very unusual.
 - b) In the LXX, the translators used ξύλον to mean “tree” very often.
 - (1) In the LXX δένδρον is not used much.
 - (2) Why might this be?
 - (a) Translators of the LXX liked to retain as many features of the Hebrew text as they possibly could.
 - (i) They stretched Greek syntax and vocabulary as much as they could to do so.
 - (b) In Hebrew, there is no lexical distinction between “tree” and “wood.”
 - (i) They used ἄρβυλον for both these meanings.
 - c) In the narrative about the tree in the garden of Eden, the LXX has ἔυλον throughout.
 - (1) So the LXX used the phrase ξύλον ζωῆς to translate the phrase “tree of life.”
 - (a) 7 times in OT
 - (b) However, 3 times in Proverbs, the phrase δένδρον ζωῆς is used.
 - d) To the NT listener, the phrase ξύλον ζωῆς would have sounded antiquated and LXX-ish.
 - (1) Kind of like switching into King James wording would be for us.
 - (2) At the very least, it would have caused the listener to wonder why.
 - e) As we will see, John likes to incorporate local allusions into the letters.
 - (1) Could local allusion explain John’s choice of words?
 - f) There are two features of Ephesus that could shed light on this issue.
 - (1) The most common symbol for the temple in Ephesus was a tree.
 - (a) A sacred tree may have been the reason for the construction of a temple at this location.
 - (2) This temple had a long history of being a sanctuary for people who had committed crimes.
 - (a) Criminals from all over came to the temple to live.
 - (b) It became a curse for the city.
 - (i) Organized crime was operated from the temple.
 - (ii) They tried to end the practice but could not.

- (3) So there is a sense in which the temple in Ephesus could be referred to as a “tree of life.”
 - (a) It provided a kind of “salvation” to criminals.
 - (i) But this “salvation” was perverse and ugly.
 - (4) Could John be alluding to another salvation? A far better one?
 - (a) That salvation is also based on a tree.
 - (b) That salvation stems from a death on a cross.
 - (i) A selfless act on the part of Jesus Christ.
2. If John intended these associations, he is using this phrase to evoke the loving sacrifice of Jesus as an example for all believers to follow.
- a) If Jesus died for us, we should be able to extend our hand to fellow believers.