

“To the Churches in... Ephesus and Smyrna: Beware Small Compromises” // Revelation 2:1–11 // *Revelation #2*¹

Revelation Bumper / Intro

“Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it...”
Amen?

Revelation 2, if you have your Bible.

Earlier this year I read a great book called *Challenger* by Adam Higginbotham, which explained how a series of small compromises led to the greatest space disaster in our country’s history--the explosion of the Challenger Space Shuttle on January 28, 1986.

In case you don’t remember, here’s the story: NASA, in an attempt to revive lagging public interest in the space program, took on a bold project of sending 7 astronauts up into space, including a couple of regular citizens, non-astronauts, most notably an elementary school teacher named Christa McAuliffe who was going to teach school lessons live from earth’s orbit. There was a lot of buzz about it--I was in grade school and I remember everyone being excited about it and a launch date was set for January 28. Behind the scenes, some of the engineers had begun to warn NASA that that the design had a potential defect--namely, the booster rocket had this sealing mechanism that they thought might fail in cold weather. Basically,

when the rocket was at full blast, the whole structure expanded by a few inches which created these gaps in the seams where the parts came together, gaps through which fuel fumes could escape and ignite an explosion. Engineers had brilliantly developed this little O-ring sealing mechanism that sat right along the inside edges of the seams so that as the rocket expanded, the rubberized ring would slide into the gap and plug the hole. It worked well, but some of the engineers *warned that cold weather might cause the elastic seal to stiffen so that it wouldn’t seat properly--and if that happened the whole rocket would explode.* But nobody thought it would be a problem--I mean, these rockets took off from central Florida, a place that hardly ever gets cold.

Except that the night before the launch, temperatures dropped to 26 degrees Fahrenheit, which was just crazy in Florida. A handful of the engineers told management that they should delay the launch, but management was under a lot of pressure because they’d already delayed a few times already and the whole nation was ready for the event. Higher ups at NASA were pressuring the engineering firm to give the green light. There was this now infamous late night call where the engineers laid out to their managers all the reasons to delay, and one of the managers, exasperated, said something to the effect of, “Where’s your courage? Sometimes you have to bite the bullet and take a risk!” One even said, ‘I am appalled that you would suggest that we delay... Good grief, when do you want us to launch — next April?’ Eventually, caving to pressure, the engineering firm ok’d the launch, and 73 seconds after liftoff, the Challenger exploded, instantly and tragically killing all seven crew members. Later it was

¹ Sources consulted: Tim Chester, *Revelation for You: Seeing History from Heaven’s Perspective* (London: The Good Book Company, 2019); Matt Chandler, “You Were made for This Day”, Session 1 of The Overcomers Bible Study of the Book of Revelation, RightNow Media and Harper Christian Resources, May 7, 2024; Tyler Staton, “[Ephesus](#)”, March 2, 2025, Bridgetown Church; Jen Wilkin, “Seven Churches”, Session 2 of Revelation: Eternal King,

Everlasting Kingdom Bible Study, July 1, 2024; Louie Giglio, “[Dear Church, I Love You. But ...](#)”, April 21, 2024, Passion Church; Louie Giglio, “[The Perfect Church is on the Way](#)”, April 28, 2024, Passion Church; Skip Heitzig, “[The Flow of the Future](#)”, May 21, 2023, Calvary Church; Joby Martin, “[Smyrna - Suffer Well](#)”, March 8, 2020, The Church of Eleven22. Others as noted throughout.

demonstrated, beyond doubt, that the explosion was the result of O-ring failure.²

Some compromises lead to disasters, and that's what I'm reminded of when I read Jesus' messages to the first two churches of Revelation 2: ***Be wary the danger of small compromises.***

In case you've forgotten: the book of Revelation was first and foremost a letter written to 7 churches that the Apostle John had helped to plant across Asia Minor. The book relays encouragement for getting through a difficult time by means of a vision FROM Jesus about what's really going on in the world and a vision OF Jesus sovereign over it all. But before John gets into the substance of what's coming in the future, he relays specific messages to each of the 7 churches--messages in which Jesus diagnoses their problems individually and gives them specific encouragement. The things Jesus comments on are specific to those churches, but they are relevant to the church in every era. So, we're going to take the next couple of weeks to look at these letters. We're literally gonna read somebody else's mail.

Illus. *How many of you have ever received a sensitive, personal email intended for someone else?*

How many of you have ever sent a sensitive, personal email to someone else?

(Story of a pastor using Carolina Blue font to obscure the fact that the email was full of bunk)

This is a sensitive, personal letter Jesus intended for you to read, too...

(To the Church in Ephesus (2:1–7))

The first letter: **Chapter 2 vs [1]:** "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write..."

Ephesus was the **richest city** in the **richest part** of the Roman Empire.

- It was the **region's primary shipping port**, which meant that ships from all over Asia, Africa and Europe brought their products into Asia Minor through the port of Ephesus.
- As a result, Ephesus was **diverse and cosmopolitan and multi-ethnic**. It boasted the biggest amphitheatre in the region and one of the biggest libraries in the world (**pics**), the ruins of both of which you can still see today.
- **Ephesus was an extremely spiritual city**--not in the sense that it was Christian--in fact, the opposite. Ephesus housed more than 50 different temples to pagan gods. The biggest one was the Temple of the goddess Diana--her temple is literally categorized as one of the **7 wonders** of the ancient world. To give you some perspective, it was **4 times bigger than the Parthenon** in Rome.

Scholars say that the result of this was that **spiritualistic** and **pagan** practices were so mixed into every aspect of Ephesian life that you could hardly do anything without having to make a sacrifice to the gods. For example, to get involved in one of the trade guilds, so you could buy and sell in the marketplace, you had to pledge allegiance to Caesar as Lord and make an incense offering to him in the temple. And unless you participated in these pagan, it was hard to get a job or

² The book was enlightening and disturbing, but it served for me as a reminder of the dangers of compromise, particularly when you're under pressure to please certain people.

play on a sports team or even to get your kids educated. **The point is, it was hard to be a Christian in Ephesus!**

The Apostle Paul planted this church in Ephesus (that story is recorded in Acts 19).³ **Later, Paul sent Timothy** to be its pastor--that means both 1st and 2nd Timothy in our Bibles are written to the Ephesian church, as is the book of Ephesians, of course. Later on, the Apostle John himself served as pastor and, according to church tradition, probably the coolest thing of all, Mary, the mother of Jesus also made this church her home church--which I imagine led to some BANGIN' Christmas Eve services. *"This year, playing the virgin Mary in our pageant is... well, Mary herself."*

"To the angel of the church in Ephesus write..." You say, "Well who is this **'angel'** here?"

- (Now, it's *possible* that "angel" here could refer to some kind of guardian angel who is assigned to each church--which is a cool thought--though if there's one of those for The Summit Church, I bet he's tired and that he hates our multi-campus strategy. But most scholars say that "angel" here most likely means **"pastor,"** because the word **"angel"** in Greek technically means "messenger," and the pastor is the "messenger" for the church (Which I find **quite flattering**. From now on, please call me Angel J.D., or Rev Dr Angel Greear).

Vs 1 continues... **"The words of him who holds the seven stars in his right hand, who walks among the seven golden lampstands."**

- If you remember from chapter 1 John told us the 7 golden lampstands represented the 7 churches and the 7 stars represented the 7 angel-pastors.

- So what we have here is a picture of Jesus literally walking among his churches, an image I love! He's here this weekend, walking in the midst of the church.

In **vs 2**, John commends the Ephesian church for their

- **toil** for Jesus (their fervent mission work: they busy in evangelism and loving their community),
- and their **patient endurance**, because apparently they'd suffered a lot of opposition for their faith and yet they didn't give up, but stayed faithful,
- and furthermore they **"tested those who call themselves apostles and are not, and found them to be false."** IOW, they called out false teachers and wrong doctrine and refused to tolerate them.
- In **vs 6** we learn they hated **"the works of the Nicolaitans, which (Jesus says) I also hate."**
- **You're like, "Nicolaitans?" That sounds like a kids TV channel: Nicolaitans at Night. Or, like it's a division of Santa's Christmas elves or something. All good guesses, but no.** The Nicolaitans were the disciples of a guy named Nicolas--most likely the same Nicolas mentioned in Acts 6 who had been one of the original deacons of the church in Jerusalem. **He started out well, but according to the church father Irenaeus Nicolas began** to say it was ok to participate in the spiritualistic, pagan practices in Rome as long as you didn't really mean them. For example, you can pledge allegiance to Caesar as Lord and call him the King of Kings and Lord of Lords and even offer a sacrifice at his altar as long as you know in your heart you don't really mean it. For us, that would look like saying: It's ok to fly the pride flag on your window as long as you don't really mean it.
- The Ephesian church hated those kinds of compromises and they resisted them.

³ That was the story where Paul got dragged into the amphitheatre and for 2 hours this huge Ephesian crowd chanted at him, "Great is Diana of the Ephesians," which

was, I guess their equivalent of the UNC crowd chanting Tar-Heels at Duke fans--but for 2 hours straight. Paul barely escaped with his life.

(1) Doctrinally solid. (2) Busy for Jesus. (3) Suffering faithfully under persecution and refusing to compromise. What you should take away from all this is that this is a pretty *impressive church*!

“But I have this against you (vs 4), that you have abandoned the love you had at first.”

One **small but devastating crack** in this church: they’d lost their first love. But we read that description of them and say, “Wait a minute--doesn’t all their faithfulness show they *HADN’T* lost their first love? Aren’t those things--correct doctrine, zealous mission work, faithfulness under persecution--aren’t those the *definition* of what it means to love Jesus?”

No, and it’s a great irony of the Christian life: some of those most faithful to the doctrine and mission of Jesus have hearts who are cold and far from him. In fact, in what may be the greatest irony of all--often, it’s often our confidence in, and our fixation on, our correct doctrine and practice that **KEEPS US** from fellowship with Jesus because we **substitute** faithful work for him and right beliefs in him for fellowship with him. I’m not saying right doctrine or faithful labor are not important--of course, they are, I’m just saying true Christianity is more, and it’s possible to be characterized by those things and have no fellowship with him *at all*. God saved you to know him and love him and depend on him, not just to believe correct stuff and work for him.

In fact, to be totally honest with you: this has probably been my most recurring sin. Correct about Jesus, busy for Jesus, bold for Jesus, but not in love with Jesus. I wrote out a list this week of signs that this might be true of you. You say, “Where’d you get this list?” It’s a recounting of my own life.

5 Signs That You’ve Lost Your First Love:

1. **You tolerate private, heart-level sin.** You avoid outward sins--those would embarrass you and get you into trouble. But in your heart you...
 - ...hold onto grudges: there are people you love to despise and hold in bitterness or unforgiveness;
 - or there’s pride and self-exaltation you love to entertain;
 - or, there are sexual fantasies you let yourself mentally indulge in. You don’t let yourself act on them, because that would ruin your reputation, but you indulge them in your heart even though you know they grieve the Holy Spirit.
 - You see, what you most care about is not Jesus, what you most care about is what other people think about you--and that’s shown by how you tolerate secret sin on the heart level, even though you know it grieves the Holy Spirit.
2. **Prayerlessness.** Jim Cymbala says a Christian’s passion for Jesus is measured less by his church activity and more by his prayer life. He says, “You can always tell how popular the pastor is by who shows up on Sunday morning; but you can tell how popular Jesus is by who shows up at prayer meeting.” So, how much time do you spend in communion with Jesus every day? I mean, if you love someone, you enjoy being with them, right? If I tell Veronica that I love her but never talk with her or show any interest in hanging out with her, do my professions of love carry any weight? Of course not, when you love someone, you want to be with them. Does your knowledge of Scripture drive you to communion with Christ? To depend on Jesus, to fellowship with Jesus?
3. **Passionless worship.** You might know all the words to all the songs we sing, but how often do you feel them? It’s like A.W. Tozer always said, “Christians don’t tell lies, they sing them.” When we worship together here, are the realities these songs express *real* to you? Is *HE* real to you? Is grief over your sin and joy in your salvation real to you or are they just theological concepts to you? You say, “Well, I’m just not an emotional person.” That’s not true. I see how you talk **about politics**. If I

bring up **DEI**, you get passionate. And I see how you talk about your kids... or your grandkids. Or about the Canes' loss to the Panthers. You're plenty passionate, you're just not that passionate about Jesus. And BTW, when I say passionate, I'm not just talking about middle school-esque flurries of emotion, either. Real passion goes way beyond that. An older pastor friend of mine, Larry Osborne, says, "Remember the first time you held the hand of your wife or husband--remember what that felt like? All those butterflies?" He said, "I'll be honest, after being married for 40 years, I don't always feel those butterflies every time I touch her now... but that doesn't mean our passion is gone. Our love now is less like butterflies and more like the Mississippi river. You look at the Mississippi River and don't think it's doing much, but step in it and try to swim against it and you'll realize how strong that current is. Being passionate about worship is less about (hands up) and more about feeling deeply the realities our theology expresses.

4. **You don't talk much about Jesus to others.** C.S. Lewis said that the most reliable indicator of what you **care about** is what you **talk about**. And no matter what you say, if you don't talk about something freely and spontaneously whenever you get the chance, you're just not that into it. For some of us, conversation rarely turns to Jesus unless we're in church mode or at small group because, honestly, you're just not that into him. You say, "Well, again, I just think religion is a private matter." So is family, but you talk about your kids plenty. And your politics. And everybody knows about that new hunting rifle you got or that new TV show you're watching. You'll talk about these things with total strangers if the opportunity presents itself because you are *into* them. You just don't talk about Jesus that much because he just doesn't engage your heart.
5. One more, related to that: **Lack of evangelism.** **When you are in love with Jesus**, you yearn to see those he died to save brought back to him. It's what dominates your prayers. Let me just ask straight up: **When was the last time you shared Christ with**

someone? Or, if God were to answer, in one fell swoop, every prayer you prayed last month, how many new people would be in the Kingdom today? *"Oh, but look at all these theology books I read. And look at all this money I gave. And look at all these things I bravely posted on my social media account. And all the people whose theology I corrected."* Yeah, but when was the last time you shared Christ with someone? Jesus said there was more joy in heaven over 1 sinner that repents than over 99 who are already his, and if you love him, that's going to be true of your heart, too. I don't care how much theology you know, if you're not yearning to see people brought to Jesus, *you've lost your first love.*

Friend, look at Jesus' warning to this church: [5] **Remember therefore from where you have fallen; repent, and do the works you did at first. If not, I will come to you and remove your lampstand from its place, unless you repent.** "Remove your lampstand" means he'll take his presence away from our church. This is an allusion back to Ezekiel where the light of God's presence leaves the Temple because of Israel's sin. God is saying, "That's not just an OT thing. My glory, my presence, will depart from you."

Hear this: there are churches all over the world that are doctrinally faithful, morally upright and crazy busy in ministry, but Jesus' presence is gone from them because he is not loved, cherished, prized, and sought there. And that's shown by how they inwardly entertain hate and unforgiveness and gossip and lust. Or by the fact they don't pray that much. The worship quality may be high, and people may like to put their hands up, but responding to quality entertainment and passion for Jesus are not the same thing. They don't care that much about people coming to Jesus anymore-- they can't remember the last time they wept over someone who doesn't know Jesus or were personally involved in bringing someone to him.

Remember from where you've fallen and repent. Don't try to hide behind your Bible knowledge and your busy, Jesus-y calendar. The whole point of your salvation is for you to know him and love him.

The Pharisees knew the Scriptures like the back of their hand but Jesus said they missed the whole point of the Scriptures: knowing God. Jesus told them in John 5:39, "Search the Scriptures, for *in (knowing) them* you think you have eternal life." They thought eternal life came from the knowledge of the Scriptures. Jesus said, "Eternal life comes from knowing me." The point is not how much you know the Bible; the point is knowing God through the Scriptures.

It's like **Charles Spurgeon** said, *"I may know this book of thine from beginning to end, and repeat it all from Genesis to Revelation, and yet it may be a dead book, and I may be a dead soul."*

God didn't save you because he needed you. He didn't save you because he needed somebody to defend him with correct doctrine. He saved you to know you and walk with you. To love you and be loved by you.

So repent, John says, and return to your first love.⁴

That's letter 1. That was kind of a rough one, right? Let's go on to #2, it's a little more positive.

(To the Church in Smyrna... (2:8–11))

Vs. 8... "And to the angel of the church in Smyrna write...."

The city of Smyrna, today called Izmir, was another beautiful, prosperous, port city. **The city took its name** from the perfume

created by crushing the fruit of a small thorn bush indigenous to the region. The perfume made from that plant was called **myrrh**, which you've probably heard of. (Gold frankincense and myrrh.) Myrrh was from 'SMYR-na]--myrrh was in the name.

Jesus uses myrrh as a **metaphor** for this church: this was a church made beautiful through crushing—through suffering.

Interestingly, **this is 1 of only 2 churches in John's 7 about whom Jesus says nothing negative.** They got a perfect 10 with no deductions. Jesus says in **vs. 9** that the church in Smyrna was **known for 2 things: persecution and poverty**, and undoubtedly the two were **linked**—you see, the **only reason** people in so rich a city could be poor is if they were excluded from public life. **And that's what was happening in Smyrna. Believers** suffered financially because of their faithfulness to Jesus.

Their persecution **appears to have come from 2 places:**

- **First, from the culture around them.** The city of Smyrna was the hub of Emperor worship in Rome. The **Temple of Dea Roma** was there, which literally means, "Rome is a goddess." At this Temple Caesar was worshipped as the Son of God.
 - **BTW, for what it's worth, Rome didn't care if Christians worshipped Jesus.** Scholars say that Rome, you see, had 2 basic religious rules for its Empire: **Rule #1:** You can worship any god you want--we don't care how crazy, ugly, backwards or dumb, you can worship it. **BUT Rule #2:** Just don't say your god is the only god, or the supreme god, because then you'll think that you, as his followers, should rule with him. So, worship whatever God you want, but confess that Caesar is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords. That was literally

⁴ It's like D. Martyn Lloyd-Jones always said, "I spend half my time telling my church to study doctrine and the other half telling them doctrine is not enough."

inscribed on the Temple of Dea Roma: Caesar is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

- **Interestingly, some Christian traditions say that when the 2nd-century Roman Emperor Hadrian built the Pantheon (PIC),** which housed gods from all over the Roman Empire, Emperor Hadrian, in an attempt to make peace with Christians, offered to put a statue of Jesus in the Pantheon. You might imagine that Christians would have felt honored—“What? Little old us? Look how far we’ve come! Our guy gets a spot in the great hall of gods!” You might suppose they’d have thought that, but you’d be wrong. “Jesus,” they said, “will never stand as one god among many. He is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords, not Caesar, and there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved. You will not put Jesus in your hall of gods as one option among many!” The same is true today, isn’t it? No one cares that you say Jesus is your Savior—it’s when you say he’s the only Savior, the only way to heaven, or that he and he alone with what we do with our bodies that you get in trouble.
- **So, they experienced persecution from the culture around them. But that was not the only place persecution came from.** Again, vs. 9: “I know the slander of those who say they are Jews and are not, but are *(actually)* a synagogue of Satan...” Jews were supposed to be God’s people, and yet they turned out to be the **biggest persecutors** of the believers in Smyrna. Jesus said, “These look like my people but they are not.”
 - Honestly, I think the **hardest thing** to reckon with for me is not persecution from those outside the church, but the “persecution” that comes from within the church. When criticism or persecution comes from outside the church—I mean, I expect that. (And, btw, could I say, real quick: I don’t like using the word “persecution” to describe what we go through here in light of what some of our brothers and sisters in the Middle East and Russia have to deal with. Getting lied about on social media is not the same thing as them going to prison. I think we should probably save the word “persecution” for them.)
 - But still, **the pain caused by friendly fire has probably** been the hardest for me.
 - **Some of you have experienced that with friends and family...** People you thought would understand and support you in your walk with Jesus and encourage you—THEY have become your biggest critics.
 - I always have to remind myself that Jesus’ crucifixion was a joint project between the secular establishment and the religious establishment. The true gospel of Jesus ends up offending both, and both attack it from different sides.
 - The **gospel offends the secular left by saying that Jesus is Lord of our bodies, for example**--that we can’t just decide for ourselves what our personal rules are for sexual orientation or gender or marriage. The **gospel challenges the secular left when it says that all human life is sacred**, and you can’t discard a human life in the womb just because it’s become inconvenient to you.
 - The gospel **offends the religious establishment on the right** when it tells us that we should be filled with grace and generosity and that we should respond to our secular leaders with submission and honor wherever we can. It challenges the religious establishment on the right when it says that we Christians are responsible not only for our own needs, and that God holds us responsible for the needs of others around us, even our enemies. It offends us when it tells us that God wants us to love the immigrant and the stranger and the vulnerable and treat their needs like our own.
 - Hear me: if you’re living in step with the gospel you’ll make enemies of both the secular left and religious right. And I’m not saying that left and right are equally evil or depraved--they are not--just that the true gospel will end up offending them both.

- Notice, **vs. 9**, Jesus says these Jews were **"the synagogue of Satan."** People who were supposed to be God's representatives are actually the instrument of Satan. You see, Satan has two tactics: he opposes the church from the outside, in the form of persecution. He also does it from the inside, from those who say they worship God. Again, Jesus' opposition came from secular left and religious right. And if we're going to stand with him in our day, we should expect opposition from both directions also.

Jesus's counsel: **Vs. 10 "Don't be afraid"** Now, "don't be afraid" sounds like encouragement, right? But look at what he says next: "Don't be afraid... because **you are "about to suffer."** **"Look, the devil is about to throw some of you into prison to test you,"** (and it's **actually the devil** that is doing it, and he really hates you). Also, he's going to **throw you in prison. and you will experience affliction for ten days.** (10 is a number in the Old Testament that means maximum amount.) **And, ...Be faithful to the point of death,** which means, some of you are going to die."

I'm like, "Uhh... **when does the encouragement start exactly?**"

It's in the next phrase: **...Be faithful to the point of death, and I will give you the crown of life.**

- **Jesus's answer:** Don't be afraid because **I hold the crown of life. I get the last word.**
- **Notice, vs. 8,** he re-introduces himself to this church as the **"First and Last."** It's like we saw last week: When you're going through tribulation, Jesus wants you to know that he was **there at the beginning and he'll be there at the end**, and that means he's in charge of everything in the middle.
- **Vs. 8, I died and came to life.** Jesus says, "Just like God transformed the evil that happened to me into good--he took my cross and used it for the salvation of the world and then transformed it into resurrection--he'll do the same for your pain.

All of it I'm going to use as part of my good plan, and one day it all ends in resurrection for you just like it did for me."

- I love the **imagery of a tapestry (PIC)** that I often use to illustrate this to you. If you go into one of these gigantic castles they have in Germany, on the wall will be these gigantic tapestries--beautiful, ornate, intricately woven pictures. But if your guide shows you the back of that tapestry, it looks like a random, chaotic mess of threads. **Look at it from the front side:** perfect beauty and design. **Backside:** random, jumbled mess. One day Jesus will flip over the tapestry of my life, with what felt all these like chaotic strands, and I'll see it was woven together one glorious picture of Jesus in me and through me in the world. My life FEELS like *THIS* (pic of threads) right now, but one day it will look like *this*.

So, **don't be afraid.** And I can't promise you it will **end quickly**, but it will end, and I can **promise you** that when it does, what will shine out from it is the redemption and victory of resurrection.

The **fulfillment of God's good plan often takes longer** than we'd like it to... but it always ends in beauty and resurrection because he is the First and the Last.

Several years ago I heard a talk by **Steve Saint, whose father Nate Saint was** murdered in the 1950's on the banks of a river in central Ecuador. Nate Saint was part of a group of missionaries called the "Auca 5," which included Jim Elliot, who tried to establish contact with an unreached, hostile tribe, known as the Waorani, or Aucas and share the gospel with them. All 5 men were murdered by people from that tribe on January 8, 1956. They left behind wives and several small children.

One of them was little Steve Saint. Later, Steve was part of a group that went back to that same tribe, befriended them, and in one of the most remarkable grace stories I've ever heard, Steve personally **led to**

Christ the man who had murdered his father, Mincaye, baptized him and then pseudo-adopted him into his family as his kids' grandfather.

At this conference where he spoke, he talked about the difficulty of growing up without his dad, but then the joy of seeing all that used as part of God's glorious plan of redemption. God flipped the tapestry over. Steve Saint said: "Why is it that we insist every chapter of our lives be good when God promises only that in the last chapter he will make all the other chapters make sense?"

IT MAY NOT MAKE SENSE IN THE PRESENT... but it will in the end.

What we have now, church, in our 10 days of tribulation, is the Jesus who stands above the church as the first and last, who was dead and is now alive, and who holds the crown of life, ready to bestow on all those who remain faithful to him.

Jesus has offered these churches (Ephesus and Smyrna--and us!), two things if we will remain faithful:

- The first is his presence:
- The second is his commendation

His presence. If we remain faithful to him, his presence remains with us. He literally walks around our lampstand! Listen, pastoring here in the Triangle, in what many call the educational hub of America with more PhDs per capita than anywhere else in the nation, we are continually told "Well, if your church doesn't change its views on sexuality or gender identity then it is going to become increasingly irrelevant and die." One guy even told me that if we didn't change our conviction about gender, we'd have to shut our doors within the decade.

- **I don't want to get too far ahead, but in the next letter "to the church at Pergamum," Jesus describes that church as faithful in just about every way--but they compromised on the issue of sexuality and God removed his presence.**

- So, people say to me, "If you **don't soften your stance** on this, you're going to lose people." I **don't know about you**, but I'd rather lose the approval of culture than the presence of Jesus any day. You can have CNN; I'll take Jesus.

There was a lesbian couple that started to attend our church a few years ago...

- **I got to know them when one of them** reached out and asked to meet with me. I **gladly did and she said, "I need some advice**—I started to come to this church about a year ago and I believe what you're preaching and I want Jesus in my life, and I was so excited about the Jesus I was encountering that I tried to get my wife to start coming with me. She looked you up, read your statement of faith, and said, "There's no way I am going to that church. They think our lifestyle is sinful." So she found us a liberal, affirming church, with the rainbow flag out front... I'm going there." "So, to try to compromise," she said, "I went with her. After 3 weeks I told her: Jesus ain't in this church. We got us a choice: we can go to Summit, where they don't condone our lifestyle, but Jesus is; or we can go to this liberal church, where they accept us, but Jesus ain't." She said, "I don't know what you're doing, but I'm going where Jesus is." She then broke down and started crying and said, "I have accepted Jesus as my Savior and I'm ready to follow him. Can we pray for my wife?" And she started to go through the process of dissolving the marriage.
- About 6 months went by and I got a message from the wife, or ex-wife by this point, who was asking to meet. **She said, "I need to tell you a story.** My ex-wife who went to your church kept inviting me, and I wouldn't come. Well, one week she was out of town so I thought I'd slip in incognito and just check it out." Now, Summit, I can count on one hand the total number of messages I've preached here in 20 years that were exclusively on the subject of homosexuality. The week she came was one of those weeks. She said, "I couldn't believe it, and I said to myself, "I knew it. These people are obsessed with us. So, I pulled out my notebook and

said, “I’m just going to write down all the hateful things he says to show it to my ex-wife.” After 10 minutes I was crying and I looked down at my pad and I didn’t have anything written, and I said, “*%\$&#, this is the most loving anti-gay sermon I’ve heard in my life.” Then she looked at me in my office and started to cry and said, “I know this is true and I want to go with God. What do I do?”

LISTEN: Don’t compromise! I don’t know about you, but I want the presence of Jesus more than the world’s acceptance. Amen?

(VAMP)

Summit, be faithful! BECAUSE If we are faithful, God will crown us with life—a life which we experience not only in eternity but right now. Right now, in our church’s life. In our families. In our workplaces.

One of the young **men who would have first heard this letter was named Polycarp**. Tough name. Many fish. Polycarp was a member of the church at Smyrna, a personal disciple of the Apostle John. Polycarp would have been in his 20’s when John wrote Revelation, and in 115 A.D., Polycarp became the “Church at Smyrna”’s pastor.

- Polycarp was a faithful leader, worthy of everything Jesus said in his description of this church in Revelation 2. And true to Jesus’ prediction, Polycarp suffered as did the church in Smyrna that he led.
- Eventually the Roman Proconsul in Smyrna ordered the execution of Polycarp because he refused to take the oath of allegiance to Caesar and call him the “King of Kings and Lord of Lords.”

- According to church history accounts there, when the soldiers came to take Polycarp off to be burned at the stake, he asked for a few minutes to pray. Observers said he did so as calmly as if he were simply praying before a good night’s sleep.
- The soldiers brought him before the Proconsul, and the Proconsul said: “*Reproach Christ, and I will release you.*” This is in the amphitheater in Smyrna.
- **Polycarp responded:** “*Eighty and six years have I served him, and never once did he wrong me. How then shall I blaspheme my king who has saved me?*”
- The **Proconsul** said: “*Swear to the power of Caesar.*”
- **Polycarp:** “*I swear to the power of one much greater than Caesar. Give me a day, and I will teach you about him.*”
- Proconsul: “*I will tame you by fire, since you are not afraid of the wild beasts.*” And all the people gathered around the execution pyre cheered.
- Polycarp then looked at the crowd and said, “YOU THINK I’M AFRAID OF THIS FIRE? IT BURNS FOR JUST A MINUTE AND IS GONE. YOU SHOULD BE AFRAID OF THE FIRES OF HELL. I’M NOT SCARED OF THESE TEMPORARY FLAMES.” He then looked at the soldiers and said, “Go ahead, BOYS, BRING ON THE FIRE.”⁵
- According to one person there, “The fire formed a circle around him, but his body did not burn.” The Proconsul then ordered a soldier nearby to stab him with a spear, and when he did the blood that came out of chest extinguished the flames. **Whether or not that last part is true I have no way of knowing.**
- What I do know is it provides a powerful image of the church in the world: the **blood of our** faithful suffering puts out the fires of hell—in our families, in our communities, in our world.

⁵ Actual: “*The fire you threaten lasts only an hour and is quenched with just a little, but what do you know of the fires of judgment? So come on boys, bring on the fire.*”

Be faithful, and in time you will overcome... Summit, there's always a temptation to compromise with the world, or to back off the gospel. We can't do it. Losing the presence and power of Jesus isn't worth it. Compromise always feels like an easy way out, but it leads to absolute disaster, a disaster far worse than the Challenger. If the church is going to be the Challenger, and walk with Jesus in the heavens, it can't compromise even in the smallest things.

Jesus' conclusion for both churches... In Vs. 7 and 11 he says the same thing: "Let anyone who has ears to hear listen to what the Spirit says to the churches. To the one who conquers ... I will grant to eat of the tree of life (and, in vs 11, to Smyrna), will never be harmed by the second death."

His counsel to both is: LOOK TO JESUS. I mean, what else matters in life?

- Jesus said, "What does it profit?..." If you live a pain-free life with no trouble but then lose your soul for eternity, what good is that? Friend, listen, **Jesus is the First and the Last; he will have the last word, but right now, today, he offers you salvation if you will only receive him.** The most important question you'll ever consider: *Have you accepted his offer of salvation?* He stands at the door right now and knocks! *What else matters in life more than this?*
- **Summit, what else matters to our church except his presence? May this Jesus that walks among the lampstand find us faithful!**

BOW HEADS

Where are you compromising and need to surrender?

Let's open this altar...

Do you have something you need to surrender?

Or just need prayer to hold onto him in the midst of trial?

Or, do you need to receive Jesus?