



# **MOUNT MERRION FREE PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

**[BELFAST NORTHERN IRELAND].**



## **Pulpit Ministry of Mount Merrion Free Presbyterian Church**

Lord's Day Morning 8<sup>th</sup> February 2009.

*Series The Seven Churches Of Revelation*

*No.2 Smyrna "A Church Strong in Tribulation."*

Scripture Reading Rev Ch 2:8-11

By. Rev. Paul Thompson.

We stated in our previous study that no book of the bible has had more books and volumes published, or sermons preached with a view to securing the right interpretation of its message than John's Revelation. It must always be kept in mind that the book of Revelation is not a book that is to be approached with a view to interpreting its message [to do so would be purely academic]! Revelation is a book that is to be read [Ch1:3]. As men read and hear this book read, God will speak and bless. This book is a message for the Church from Christ. The entire Church of Christ in all successive ages is represented by the seven Golden Candlesticks [v12] [the interpretation is given in v20].

Many take the view that the conditions of each church described in the seven letters represent several phases or conditions of the Church, to be expected throughout the ages. That view though widely accepted is quite untenable. For this reason, all of these Churches are seen as existing at the same time, Laodicea existed side by side with Ephesus, Sardis existed in the same time as Philadelphia etc. Each Church demonstrates a particular condition, however, this is not specifically relating to seven time periods of the Church. We reject the view that each Church represents a limited period of time. Rather they represent existing conditions that are to be found in the Church on earth at anytime. As you examine the Church in any period, you will find the Spirit of Laodicea, in another Church the Spirit of Sardis etc. what is so important in understanding the letters to the Churches is the connection between the vision of Christ in Ch1 and Christ's words to the churches in Ch2. The description of each Church's situation is revealed in each letter. In His prefatory words, Christ identifies himself to each Church in terms appropriate to their needs and condition. Ephesus [Ch2:1]; Smyrna [Ch2:8]; Pergamos [Ch2:12]; Thyatira [Ch2:18]; Sardis [Ch3:1]; Philadelphia [Ch3:7]; Laodicea [Ch3:15].

The Churches of Ephesus and Smyrna couldn't have been more different. The Ephesian Church was a large and flourishing church that occupied a dominant position in the City, they were strong in every way, doctrinally and in discipline. Though the Smyrna Church was small, yet out of all the Churches none is higher esteemed by Christ than Smyrna.

#### 1) Christ's Appraisal.

As Christ the head of His Church evaluated this particular congregation He saw a Church in great distress, a persecuted Church. Christ speaks of his people's distress in three ways, (1) Firstly they were in tribulation. (2) They were a poverty stricken Church. The outward persecution meant that their outward estate was plundered, their minister and members were fined for making known the Gospel of Jesus Christ in that city. (3) The Third part of their affliction was the reproach of men, [mocked and reviled] a church verbally slandered and accused by those professing to be of the seed

*"Seeing that a Pilot steers the ship in which we sail, who will never allow us to perish even in the midst of shipwrecks, there is no reason why our minds should be overwhelmed with fear and overcome with weariness." ...John Calvin...*

of Abraham, professing to love, serve and worship the same God. Though the Smyranean Church was beset with difficulties on every side, yet Christ said of them, *“But thou art rich.”* Christ was fully aware of the Church’s outward afflictions *“I know thy works, and tribulation and poverty, but thou art rich...”* Christ is obviously not speaking of monetary riches, but rather spiritual riches, riches that they had in Christ. Though wicked men would take away their earthly possessions, yet that which they had in Christ remained unchanged! What riches has the Christian? [Eph2:7] *“The riches of Glory”* [Eph3:16], *“the riches of Grace”* [Col 2:2], *“the riches of the full assurance.”* It was that which was going to get them through trying times. Though tried on every side, Christ knew this Church, *“I know thy works.”*

## 2) Christ’s Warning.

The fires of persecution were already burning against the church, under the Roman Emperor Domitian John had been expelled to the Isle of Patmos. Christ is forewarning the Christian’s at Smyrna of greater persecution that was on its way. The dark clouds of persecution were gathering over this little flock. However, Christ wants this small church to know that though the instruments of persecution were men, it was Satan was orchestrating this persecution [v9], *“The synagogue of Satan.”* Christ wants them to know that there is even greater persecution coming. If you think that this is bad, there is worse to come! Notice the future tense that Christ employs, *“Those things which thou shalt suffer.”* However, in his word to this church Christ warns them against befriending the world.

### i) A warning against worldliness.

The Christian is to seek after heavenly treasure, the riches of glory, the joys and glories of another world, which infinitely excel everything that is valuable on earth. That is to be the overriding concern, it is true that we must work and provide for our families, there is nothing wrong with having money and wealth, I say that with the proviso that we do not become consumed with our earthly possessions.

The message of Christ to us today is never forget that the world is no friend of the Church. The Church of Jesus Christ is to be conscious that persecution is never far away! Christ knows that there is always a temptation to avoid persecution by joining forces with the world! John Ch16:33, *“In this world ye shall have tribulation.”* My people marvel not if the world hate you! Persecution and tribulation from the world is not something that we are called to contend with, we are called to expect. However, when the going gets tough, we are not to seek a compromise with the world, that is how the world acts. It will offer terms of peace to the church, certain conditions in order to secure a trouble free environment. Peace can never be sought with the world, there is a natural antagonism.

*“The Church does not exist for its own glory...the church does not exist for the purpose of showing her own strength...but of manifesting the grace and power of the Lord her God.” ...Herman Hoeksema...*

The Church is not to befriend the world. We are not to ostracise ourselves from the world, we are in this world though we are not of this world. Christ says in Matt 6:19-20 *“Lay not up for yourselves treasures upon earth, where moth and rust doth corrupt, and where thieves break through and steal: But lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust doth corrupt, and where thieves do not break through nor steal.”* We are to spend our time labouring for heavenly treasure, earthly treasures could be gone in an instant, yet when placed securely into the hand of God it is securely deposited. Christ is warning God’s people against worldliness, focusing all our attention upon our worldly possessions, to the point were we disregard attending to our spiritual possessions. The Church at Smyrna had treasure in heaven. Like Moses we ought to suffer with the people of God rather than enjoy the pleasures of the world for a season. Isa Ch31:1 *“Woe to them that go down to Egypt for help...”* [v3], *“Now the Egyptians are men, and not God; and their horses flesh, and not spirit.”* Christian if you are in dire straits, never be tempted to seek the help of the world, it will bring untold ruin to your home and family [e.g. of Lot]. Isa 31:4 *“For thus hath the LORD spoken unto me, Like as the lion and the young lion roaring on his prey, when a multitude of shepherds is called forth against him, he will not be afraid of their voice.”* You cannot overcome the world and persecution by numbers, only God and His Spirit can help us.

The illustration of Michael Faraday a brilliant English Scientist who left a lecture at which the King was present just to be at his midweek prayer meeting, he preferred the words of a heavenly monarch to that of an earthly!

### 3) Christ’s Encouragement. *“Fear Not...be thou faithful”*

Each title that Christ uses to address each particular church is particularly suited to that churches present condition. Christ describes himself as ‘the first and the last’ and *“He that was dead and is alive.”* Both of these titles speak of Christ’s eternity and his victory over death. Christ expects this church to draw from these titles. Christ does not promise this Church deliverance from their persecution, but he encourages them with grace to bear their affliction.

#### i) Fear None of these things.

What a statement; how can a Church facing great persecution possibly fear none of these things which he has just told him. Picture the scene, the minister of this fledgling congregation stands up on the Lord’s day morning with this letter from John, as he reads, the letter informs them of a mighty wave of persecution worse than what they previously had known, yet he tells them to fear not! Was this a case of a preacher offering meaningless words? No, these were Christ’s words, they came from the ‘I am.’ They were to fear nothing for Christ was leading them into this persecution, and he was going to surely lead them through it. He gives the period of persecution ‘ten days’, we know not for sure how

long this would have been, however, it demonstrates that it would come to an end. The period of Ten days signifies a limited period of persecution. Christ is showing this persecuted people that even Satan who is the antagonist of the Church must abide by Christ's ruling. Tribulation is only for a season. It was John Calvin who said that, "*Seeing that a Pilot steers the ship in which we sail, who will never allow us to perish even in the midst of shipwrecks, there is no reason why our minds should be overwhelmed with fear and overcome with weariness.*" Only Christ can enter into the dark chamber of the heart, where unseen to others lies hidden pain and discouragement. The words of comfort spoken by friends come only from an external understanding of the circumstances, but Christ who is omniscient and sees all in His Church, knows the hearts of his people, "*I know thy works...*" Again I repeat it, How precious would these words have been to that little church in Smyrna, '*On that following Lord's day morning, the minister [Angel] of the Church in Smyrna would have ascended his pulpit with an unusual manner of confidence, he would have begun to read, here is a letter in John's handwriting, but it is from Christ, what a sermon that would have been!*'

ii) *Be thou faithful unto death.*

Christ was not saying that they would escape death, indeed Christ was saying that some of them would be taken in death in the heat of persecution. But even then, Christ gives to his people an unusual boldness. This has been proven by many of the saints facing death. Indeed this very Church despite the martyrdom of many of its members, would remain faithful for many years after. Persecution raged against the Smyrnan Church, to the point that its own minister would be martyred. Polycarp the minister of this congregation who was also a student under the Apostle John was led to the stake and burned and then stabbed, when asked to recant his faith in Christ and his belief in the gospel, he boldly affirmed, "*Eighty and six years have I served him, and I have received only good at his hands. Can I then curse him, my king and my saviour.*" We can be faithful, for Christ is with us. It is here that we need to connect the vision. The one who spoke to the persecuted saints in Smyrna was none other than Christ, He who stood in the midst of the candlesticks, who towered above the Churches enemies. These are the words from the lips of Christ. By the description that Christ gave of himself in v8, he was in actual fact saying, "*My people don't forget that I am in your midst.*" Though now in heaven, he is still present with his Church. Christ was saying to this church, *I have experienced the valley of death, I walked it alone, something you will never have to do as a child of God!*

God's people are prone to forgetting that very thing, Christ had told the disciples, "*I will never leave thee nor forsake thee*" "*I will be with thee even unto the end of the world [age].*"