

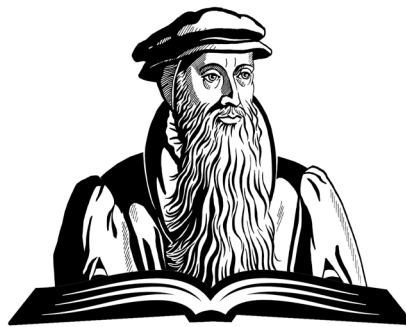
VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

The Letters to the Seven Churches in Asia

by Rev. William Macleod

Lecture #1

Introduction



The John Knox Institute
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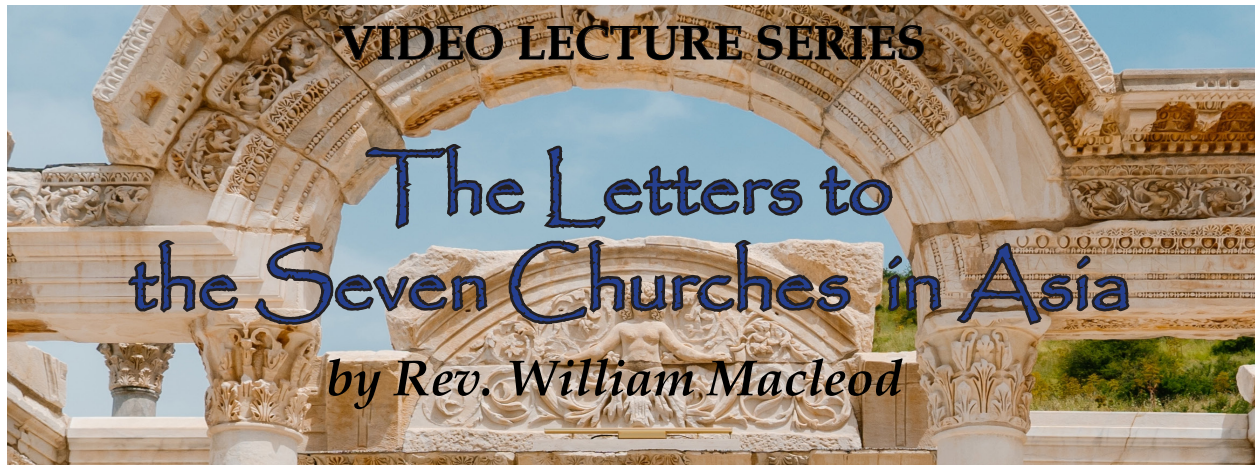
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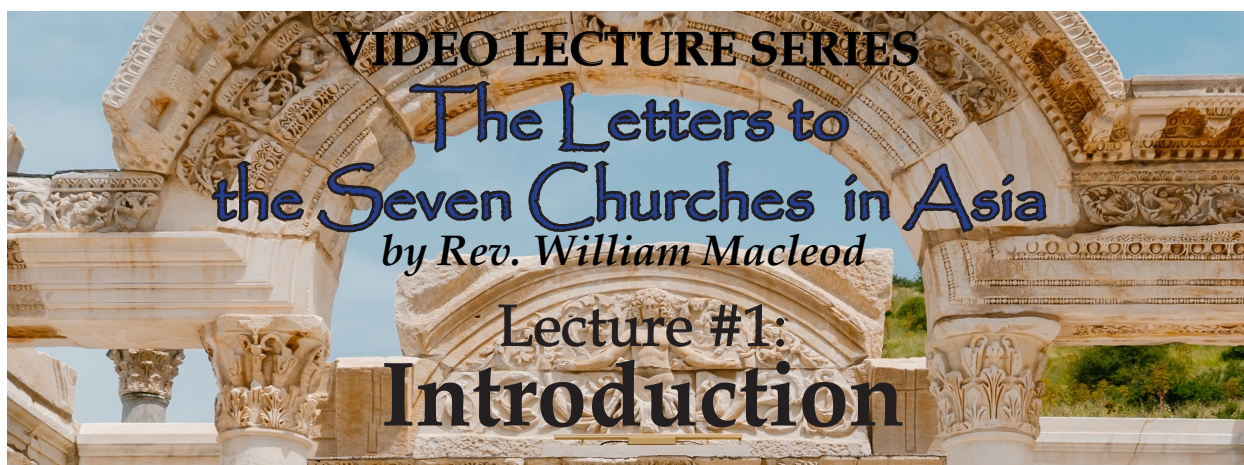
Rev. William Macleod recently retired, after serving as minister of the gospel for 45 years at Knightswood Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), in Glasgow, Scotland. In addition, he was for many years the editor of the denominational magazine, *The Free Church Witness*. He was also Professor of Systematic Theology and Principal of the Free Church (Continuing) Seminary, in Inverness, Scotland. He is married and has three adult children and six grandchildren.

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1. Historical Background

This series of lectures is on *The Letters to the Seven Churches in Asia*, which are recorded for us in the Book of Revelation, in chapters 1 to 3. Today, I would like us to have an introductory lecture. It is reckoned that the Book of Revelation was written around AD 90, that is, around sixty years after the death and resurrection of Christ, and of course, after the day of Pentecost, when the church experienced the pouring out of the Holy Spirit, and the church began to grow rapidly. But it's now sixty years after that, so, the apostles, most of them, are by now dead. Remember how Stephen, the first Christian martyr, when he was full of faith and of the Holy Ghost, he had so much wisdom that the Jews, who argued with him found it impossible to convince him, and in the end, they stoned him to death. But when he was dying, he prayed, "Lord, lay not this sin to their charge" (Acts 7:60). And you'll remember how Saul of Tarsus was there as one of his persecutors, and God blessed that prayer to Saul of Tarsus, who later was converted and became Paul the Apostle.

Well, by AD 90, James, of course, James the son of Zebedee, he had been beheaded by Herod. And Peter, we're told by church history that he was crucified—crucified upside-down because he wanted to be different from his Lord. Paul himself had been beheaded, and all the apostles, apart from John, were now dead. So the first stage of the Holy Spirit's power and the rapid growth of the church had passed, and to some extent, backsliding had affected many of the churches. Heresy came in, in different forms, and then immorality. Immorality was widespread in the ancient world, just as it is today, and sadly, when immorality is going on all around, sometimes it comes into the church as well. So, by AD 90, it was a dark and discouraging time, just like our own days here in Scotland, in the world today in 2025.

These seven churches are selected as representative of the rest. They were not the only churches in Asia Minor. We know that there were other churches in that area, for example, the

church at Colossae, to which Paul writes the Letter to the Colossians; the church at Hierapolis, and so on. But these were selected as representative of the rest. And they're there, these letters, not just for churches 2,000 years ago, but, of course, for the church today as well. "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for instruction in righteousness, that the man of God might be thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Timothy 3:17).

This book, the Book of Revelation, was written in order to encourage the church at that time of difficulty and persecution. It begins, we're told, "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him, to shew unto his servants things which must shortly come to pass" (Revelation 1:1). So it was revealing things that were shortly going to come to pass. The great doctrine of this book is that God reigns, Christ is in control; God's purposes are being carried out. Christians, despite how they feel, they are on the winning side, and we are all, who are in Christ, "more than conquerors through him that loved us" (Romans 8:37). But the letters to the seven churches also address particular concerns. There are rebukes, and there are encouragements; and they're the kind of rebukes and encouragements that churches today also need.

2. The One Who Gives this Vision

So first of all, we notice the one who is given this vision, and who write to the churches—it's John. He introduces himself in verse 4 of chapter 1: "John to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace be unto you, and peace, from him which is, and which was, and which is to come; and from the seven Spirits which are before [the throne of God]." And then it tells us in verse 9: "I John, who also am your brother, and companion in tribulation, and in the kingdom and patience of Jesus Christ, was in the isle that is called Patmos, for the word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ." So John, here, an old man, very likely in his '90s, he's on the island of Patmos, and he's there as a prisoner, a few miles away from the mainland of Asia Minor, from Ephesus, where he had labored latterly, and the brothers and sisters who he loved there. So he's on his own on the island of Patmos, a prisoner.

He tells us, verse 10: "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's Day." The Lord's Day is the first day of the week. It's the day in which Jesus rose triumphantly from the grave, and it's now the Christian sabbath. And we can see that from the place that it has in the New Testament. For example, in Acts chapter 20, and verse 6, we read of Paul coming to Troas and waiting six days in order to be present for the worship on the Lord's Day, the first day of the week, when we find him preaching and celebrating the Lord's Supper with the church there in Troas. Also, in 1 Corinthians chapter 16, verse 2, Paul says to the church in Corinth how, on the first day of the week, they are to gather offering for the poor saints in Jerusalem. So it was a day when they would come together, and when, each week, they must give to the Lord as the Lord prospers them for the relief of poor Christians in Jerusalem.

The first sabbath, in the Old Testament times, was the last day of the week. God created the world in six days, and then he rested the seventh day. He was setting a pattern for us, so that we too would have one day of rest amongst the seven days of the week. That Christian sabbath was practiced on throughout the Old Testament. You'll remember how, on Mount Sinai, God spoke the law in the ears of all Israel. And God said, "Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy...In it thou shalt not do any work" (Exodus 20:8, 10). It was written with the finger of God on tablets of stone so that it would be preserved down through the ages. It was a permanent law. The moral law of God is a description for us of God's character, and it's there set for us as a pattern which

we are to follow to the end of time. So, in the Old Testament times they were remembering God's great work of creation, the six days of creation, meditating on the Creator, remembering the Creator in the days of their youth. And now, in the New Testament, we have an even greater work than the work of creation. We have the work of redemption. And Christ finished that, when, having died for our sins, and rested in the grave on the sabbath, he rose the first day of the week. And so, that became the Christian sabbath.

And he says to people that we need a sabbath: "The sabbath was made for man, and not man for the sabbath" (Mark 2:27). It's made for our good, for the good of our bodies, the good of our minds, and the good of our souls. Let us remember to keep this one day in seven holy, a holy day of rest for meditating upon the things of God, reading his Word, worshipping him, joining in with the Lord's people. Other days are for buying, and selling, and working, but the Lord's Day is the market day for the soul, and we need to buy for our souls, as it were, the manna from heaven, the good things of spiritual benefit to us.

3. John Sees the Church

So John was there, and it was obviously in his own heart, and reading, thinking, praying, meditating on the things of God, and he was filled with the Holy Spirit. So he says: "I was in the Spirit on the Lord's day." And then, in verse 10, he says that he heard behind him "a great voice, as of a trumpet." And what does he see? He says, "I turned to see the voice that spake with me. And...I saw seven golden candlesticks" (verse 12). The first thing he sees is the church. He hears this loud, commanding voice behind him, calling him to pay attention. The voice is saying, "I am Alpha and Omega, the first and the last: and, What thou seest, write in a book, and send it unto the seven churches which are in Asia; unto Ephesus, and unto Smyrna, and unto Pergamos, and unto Thyatira, and unto Sardis, and unto Philadelphia, and unto Laodicea" (verse 11). He is called to pay attention, to see, and to listen.

And when he turns, he sees seven golden candlesticks. You'd think, rather, that he would have mentioned, first of all, the one who is amongst the seven golden candlesticks, that he would mention Christ first. But instead, he mentions the church. Remember how Jesus said, "I am the light of the world:" he that [believes in] me shall not [sit] in darkness" (John 8:12). Then he says to his disciples, "Ye are the light of the world....Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father which is in heaven" (Matthew 5:14, 16). Jesus is the light, and we are the light. But we are the light only as we receive Christ's light and shine it forth. Christ has gone to heaven; he's no longer present; he's no longer visible in this world. But we are the ones who are to shine forth the light of Christ in the darkness of this world. And so, he says, "I am the light, and you are the light." The church represents Christ and bears testimony to him, and we're not to be presenting ourselves, or parading ourselves, or looking for our own glory, but the church is to be focusing on Christ and seeking to glorify him. He didn't leave us as orphans in this world. He went off to heaven, yes, but he gave us his Holy Spirit as a Comforter, the encourager, the one who would help us to be the light of the world ourselves. And we shine forth Christ's light as we receive the oil of the Holy Spirit into our hearts.

So, John turns, and he sees seven golden candlesticks, or seven lampstands. Seven is the number of the church, the perfect number. The church is made up of sinners, and yet, sinners saved by grace; sinners who have been born again, who are new men and new women in Christ Jesus, and who have been baptized with the Holy Spirit and set on fire, as it were, for God.

*The Lord will light my candle so,
that it shall shine full bright:
The Lord my God will also make
my darkness to be light.*

—Psalm 18:28, Scottish Metrical Version, from *The Psalms of David in Metre*.

He sees the seven churches, and their names are given. And as we noted earlier, they're not the only churches in Asia. There are other churches, but these are selected so as to be representative, and so as to teach us what we need to learn. They are typical of the rest and they're ideal for teaching. They're like your churches and mine. Some are busy churches, large churches, very active. But have they lost their first love? Some are persecuted, small, poor churches, but faithful and godly, and need encouragement. Some are worldly, and immoral, and tolerating sin. Others, like the church in Sardis, have a name that they live, but are actually dead—spiritually dead. Others are self-righteous and proud, and full of themselves, but to God, they are lukewarm and sickening, and he says he's going to spew them out of his mouth.

Today, God's churches are to be found in every country of the world. Satan attacks them in different ways. There's liberalism in some churches; sacramentalism, where there's far too much emphasis on the sacraments. Some churches are pharisaical, self-righteous. Some churches allow immorality. Some are small, but zealous. What is your church like, and how does it distinguish itself? Each of us has to study these letters to the churches and see what we can learn and how we can benefit from these letters. They are written to us today, just as well as they were written 2,000 years ago to these specific churches in Asia. So first, John sees the church, the seven golden candlesticks.

4. John Sees the Lord Jesus Christ

And then he tells us, verse 13: "And in the midst of the seven candlesticks one like unto the Son of man." In the Greek, there's no definite article with regard to "the Son of man," and yet it's obvious that it's not "one like unto *a* Son of man," but rather, "*the* Son of man." It's the Lord Jesus Christ himself that John sees. He had died—died on the cursed cross of Calvary for our sins, He rose again on the third day, triumphant over death and over the grave, victorious, having accomplished salvation. He's now ascended up to heaven, and he's glorified. But he's still a man. He's "The dust of the earth," as someone said, "on the throne of heaven."¹ He still has his two natures. He is God, with a divine nature—unchanging God, in all God's glory, equal to the Father. But he's also truly a man, with a real human body.

We're told, here, that John sees him, and he's wearing a garment down to his feet, a long garment, royal robes. There's a dignity about him. There's a glory in this person that he sees. And he's "gird about the paps with a golden girdle" (verse 13). Around his chest, there's a belt of gold—gold again speaking of his kingly glory. Verse 14: "His head and his hairs were white like wool, as white as snow." That speaks of purity; sinless, and holy, and pure. Also, you'll remember, in Daniel chapter 7, we find there the "Ancient of days," which is obviously the Father in heaven. He's the Ancient of days with hair white like wool (verse 9). And so, our Lord Jesus is also ancient, in the sense that he is eternal. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God" (John 1:1). In the beginning, the Word began?—no, no. John chapter 1, verse 1 tells us, "In the beginning"—when things began, when time began, "the Word"—the Lord Jesus Christ—already was. And so, he said to the Jews, I am older than

¹ This quote is attributed to Scottish theologian and Presbyterian minister, John "Rabbi" Duncan (1796–1870).

Abraham—"Before Abraham was, I am" (John 8:58). "I AM THAT I AM" (Exodus 3:14); I am Jehovah (Exodus 6:3), and was there from the beginning (1 John 1:1).

And we're told, here, that "his eyes were as a flame of fire" (Revelation 1:14), penetrating, seeing into hearts, seeing into dark corners. The Lord Jesus knows what is happening. He knows what is going on. He hears every word, he sees every thought that passes through your heart and your soul. "All things are naked and opened unto the eyes of him with whom we have to do" (Hebrews 4:13). Let us remember this—wherever we are, whatever we are doing, he's watching. There's nothing hidden. He's watching, he's noting. He's grieved by our sins. All our thoughts, words, and deeds are obvious and plain in his sight. Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, he sees. That's challenging, but at the same time, it's also comforting. Wherever we are, the Lord is there looking after us, caring for us, seeing our enemies, and seeing their designs against us.

Verse 15: "And his feet like unto fine brass, as if they burned in a furnace." His feet as brass, shining, bright, burning brass, as it were; his feet to trample upon his enemies. He had, on the cross of Calvary, through his death, placed his foot upon Satan's head and crushed it into the dust. The seed of the woman bruised the head of the serpent (Genesis 3:15). He tells us, "I have trodden the winepress alone, and of the people there were none with me" (Isaiah 63:3). In Revelation 14, verse 20, we're told that he treads the winepress of the wrath of God, and blood comes out to a distance of 1,600 furlongs. He tramples his enemies and destroys them. Let us make sure we're not enemies of Christ. We've not no future as enemies of Christ, but one of suffering and misery.

And then we're told about him that his voice was "as the sound of many waters" (verse 15). I once visited the Niagara Falls in Canada. It was fifty years ago, but I can still remember the roar of the many waters of that great waterfall. I come from the Island of Lewis, off the northwest coast of Scotland. When there's a storm, you go to the west coast of the Island of Lewis, and the noise is deafening, as the great Atlantic waves smash against the rocks. It's a noise of many waters. It's a tremendous voice that comes from Christ, a voice that we must listen to. None are too deaf to hear his voice.

And then verse 16: "And he had in his right hand seven stars," and these seven stars are explained for us to be "the angels of the seven churches" (verse 20). The seven messengers—the word "angel" and "messenger" is the same in the original language, but it's the seven ministers or pastors of these churches. They're in his right hand. He's the one who has called them, he's the one who has sent, who has appointed these ministers. And "the right hand" is, of course, the hand of power, so he is the one who gives power.

And then we're told that "out of his mouth went a sharp twoedged sword" (verse 16). "Out of his mouth"—his Word; the Word that created the world in the beginning. He said the word, and it happened, created out of nothing by the Word of his power. And now, that Word is the sword of the Spirit, a sharp twoedged sword, dividing between "soul and spirit...joint and marrow...a discernor of the thoughts and intents of the heart" (Hebrews 4:12)—a twoedged sword in judgment and in chastisement.

"And his countenance was as the sun shineth in his strength" (verse 16). The sun, a very bright, very glorious—you'll remember, on the mount of transfiguration, how the veil that covered the glory of Christ was raised a little, and Peter, James, and John saw him—his clothes sparkling with brightness, and his face shining with brightness. Something of the glory of Christ shone through. Well, here, John, many years later, sees Christ again, in his glory, and it's as if he were looking at the sun shining in all its fulness and dazzling brightness. It's an awesome sight.

You'll remember how Isaiah, in Isaiah chapter 6, saw the Lord in all his glory there in the temple. God appeared, and this was the Lord Jesus Christ, Jehovah. Jesus is Jehovah. And his glory was revealed. And there was seraphim around the throne crying, "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts" (verse 3). It was indeed an awesome sight.

5. John's Response

And so, we notice the effect this had on John: "And when I saw him"—verse 17—"I fell at his feet as dead." He's absolutely shocked. Here is this one, the one who has leaned on Christ's breast at the last supper. You'll remember how they were lying there around the table, and he was leaning on Christ's breast, how he was called the beloved apostle, the beloved disciple. But there's no informality now. He's in his '90s, an old Christian, a godly old man, who served the Lord all his days. And yet, there's a tremendous sense of awe and of wonder.

In many churches today, there's very little reverence. Christ is treated as if he was just an equal to us, or maybe a little bit bigger, a kind of chum. But that's totally contrary to Scripture. In the Old Testament, when the Lord Jesus comes down on Mount Sinai, the Word of God, and speaks out the law of God, the mountain burned with fire like a furnace, and the voice came from the mountain, "I am the LORD thy God which brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage"—therefore—"Thou shalt have no other gods before me" (Exodus 20:2-3). The Israelites were afraid, and they said to Moses, Moses, let God speak to you, and you speak to us. If we hear God speaking to us like this, we will die (verse 19). They were afraid. They saw something of his glory, and they were worshipping in awe and reverence. And so, also, in Isaiah, we made mention of Isaiah 6, and how he saw the Lord high and lifted up, and train of glory filling the temple, and the temple shook, and the Seraphim cried "Holy, holy, holy." And we're told that Isaiah cried out, "Woe is me!...for I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips" (Isaiah 6:5). The great prophet Isaiah was overwhelmed with the sight. Reverence is fitting in God's church. Yes, in the New Testament too, remember Hebrews 12, verses 28 and 29: "Our God is a consuming fire" (verse 29), therefore, let us worship him "with reverence and godly fear" (verse 28). In one sense, the most important lesson for the church to learn today is reverence, and awe, and respect, the fear of the Lord, which is the beginning of wisdom (Proverbs 9:10). So that is the first thing—he falls at his feet as one dead. And great John, he is so overwhelmed with the glory of the risen, exalted, glorified Christ.

But then, secondly, we see how he's encouraged: "And he laid his right hand upon me, saying unto me, Fear not; I am the first and the last" (verse 17). The glory is overwhelming, but John is not about to be killed. The love and mercy of Christ comes through, and the encouragement—that hand upon him strengthening him. "Fear not," he says, "I am the first and the last: I am he that liveth, and was dead; and behold, I am alive for evermore" (verses 17-18). I'm eternal. I was there from the very beginning. I became man, I lived in this world, yes, and I died for your sins, and I rose again, and I'm never going to die again. The work that I did, I finished it. I completed it. It is finished, it is done. You are saved! Your sins are forgiven. Here is the glorified Son of God, exalted, and he's encouraging John, and telling John how his salvation has been accomplished.

And then, he says: "I have the keys of hell and of death" (verse 18). He has the key of death. Death cannot lock you up. The grave cannot keep your body. When you die, immediately, if you're a Christian, your soul goes to heaven to be with the Lord. If you're not a Christian, your soul goes immediately to hell. But then, at the last day, the Lord Jesus, as it were, uses that

key, and opens the grave, and everyone rises again. And we will all stand before the judgment seat of Christ, so that our whole life will be reviewed. And on that day, he will say to those who love him and trust in him, “Well done, good and faithful servant;...enter into the joy of thy lord” (Matthew 25:23). And he will say to those who rejected him, and despised him, and lived for their own pleasure, “Depart from me, ye cursed,” ye workers of iniquity, into that place “prepared for the devil and his angels” (verse 41). These issues are very serious. Are you prepared? prepared for death? prepared for the second coming? prepared for the judgment?

John is to write what he has seen, what is, and what shall be, and he is to send it to these seven churches in Asia. And he is to send it to us today. So, these things are very important. We have, here, a description of churches, different kinds of churches—some good churches, some bad churches. In every church, we need repentance for our sins, and we need also encouragement to keep on doing what is right, to live for God, and to live for his glory. May God bless to you his Word. Amen.