

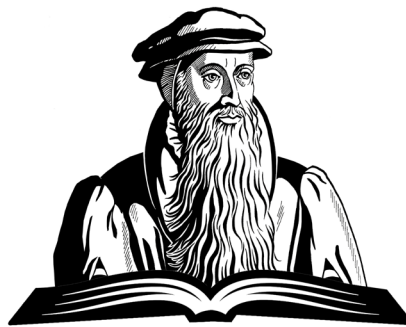
VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

The Letters to the Seven Churches in Asia

by Rev. William Macleod

Lecture #2

The Letter to the Church in Ephesus



The John Knox Institute
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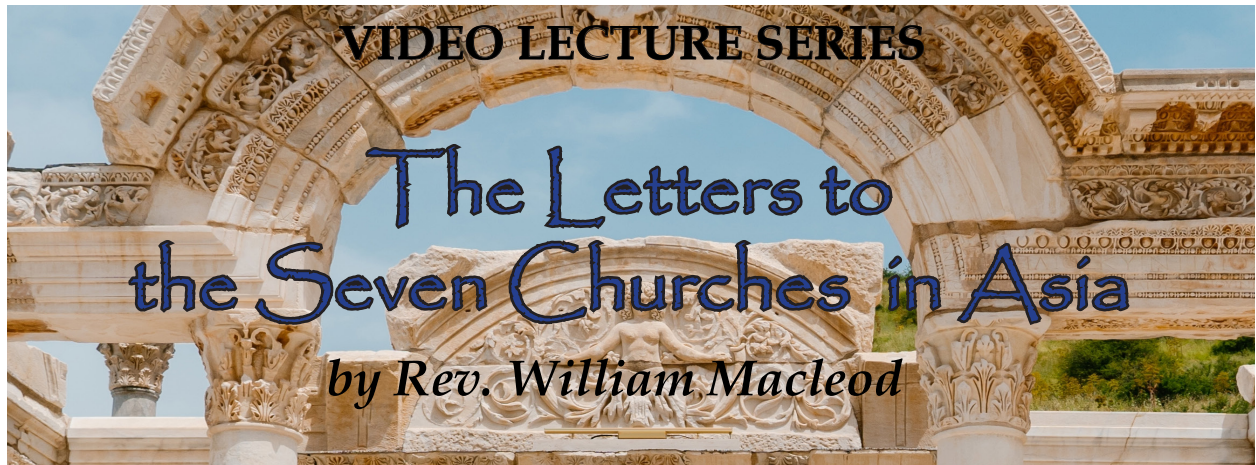
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Rev. William Macleod recently retired, after serving as minister of the gospel for 45 years at Knightswood Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), in Glasgow, Scotland. In addition, he was for many years the editor of the denominational magazine, *The 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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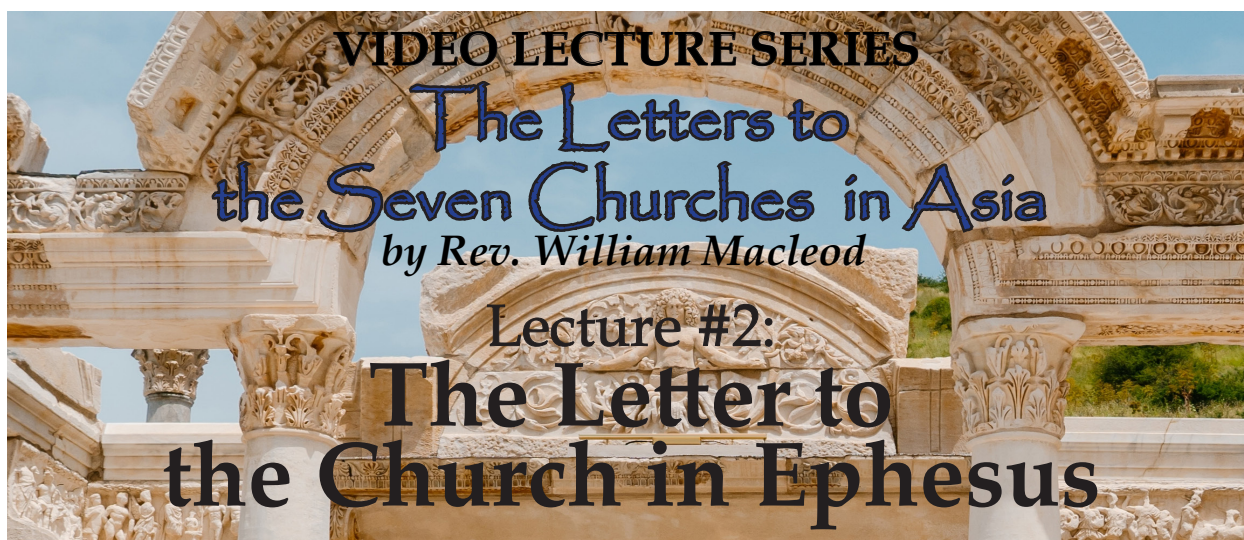
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Introduction

Our lecture today is on *The Letter to the Church in Ephesus*, and it's recorded for us in the Book of Revelation chapter 2, and verses 1 to 7. While this letter was written to a church which existed long ago, it's preserved for us in the Bible, and it's there with a purpose—it's for our benefit today. "All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness: that the man of God may be...thoroughly furnished unto all good works" (2 Timothy 3:16–17). Every part of Scripture is important, and it's all there for us today. It's profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, and to instruct us in righteousness. There's much that we can learn from these letters to the churches. These churches, these seven churches in Asia 2,000 years ago, actually represent the church in every age and the church today as well. So, fellow Christians, this letter is for you and for your church, and, as Christ says, in verse 7, "He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches." If you have ears, listen, hear, pay careful attention to what Christ is saying to the churches. Take heed to the warnings, and be encouraged by the promises.

1. The One Who Addresses the Church

So, first of all, in looking at this letter, we see *The One Who Addresses the Church*. He introduces himself at the beginning of the letter, chapter 2, verse 1: "Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write; These things saith he that holdeth the seven stars in his right hand, who walketh in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks." In our introductory lecture, we saw the description that was given there in chapter 1 of the risen and exalted Lord Jesus Christ. He

was the glorious individual in the middle of the seven golden candlesticks, in the middle of the churches.

So here, in verse 1, *a truth is emphasized*. He is the one who holds the seven stars in his right hand. We noted that the seven stars were the seven angels of the seven churches—chapter 1, verse 20—and the seven angels would be the seven pastors or ministers of these churches. He holds them in his right hand—the hand of power. He is the one who calls and sends ministers. “How shall they preach, except they be sent?...How beautiful are the feet of them that preach the gospel of peace” (Romans 10:15). So Christ holds the seven stars. He calls, he sends; they’re specially responsible to him. They are undershepherds; he’s the Good Shepherd, and these seven are the undershepherds.

And, *his right hand*—remember Matthew chapter 28, the great commission: All power in heaven and in earth is given unto me (verse 18). The right hand of power—all power is given unto me in heaven and in earth. Go ye therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit: teaching them to observe whatsoever things I have commanded you: and lo, I am with you always (verses 19–20). The one who has the power, and the authority, and who reigns on the throne of heaven. He is with his church, and he’s saying to his disciples, “Go out and teach, preach, proclaim the glad tidings of great joy. Proclaim that message to every man and woman in the world, and “lo, I am with you always.”

He walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks. Our Lord Jesus is not sleeping. He’s not sitting and inactive. He’s walking in the midst of the candlesticks. He’s very active. He’s assisting; he’s assessing; he’s rebuking; he’s encouraging. He’s noting what is wrong: “O Lord, thou hast me search’d and known. Thou know’st my sitting down, and rising up; yea, all my thoughts afar to thee are known” (Psalm 139, verses 1 and 2; SMV¹). And remember, he has that twoedged sword in his mouth. He’s the great Prophet. His word is as a sword. He rebukes and he encourages. He walks in the midst of the seven golden candlesticks. He is the Lord. He is the Master. He’s the one we must fear, and respect, and honor, and trust, and obey, and rely upon. He’s our King.

2. Words of Praise

And then, there’s *Words of Praise*, verse 2: I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience, and how thou canst not bear them which are evil; and thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars.” There’s a serious fault in the church at Ephesus. But first of all, he addresses to them words of praise, words of encouragement. It shows his kindness. He doesn’t, as it were, jump in feet first in frightening words, but he’s kind and encouraging.

Ephesus was relatively a huge city in the ancient world. It’s reckoned that there was a population of about a quarter of a million there. And in that large city, there was a big church. Remember how Paul planted it on his first missionary journey, but he couldn’t stay around. And then he returned on the second missionary journey, and he spent two years there; first of all, preaching, teaching in the synagogue, and then, when he was forced out of the synagogue, he went to the lecture hall of Tyrannus, and there, everyday he was preaching God’s Word. So we’re told that all Asia heard the gospel. People from all over the region, they were come to Ephesus, into the markets and to do their business, coming into the city, and coming in, they would go

1 SMV. the Scottish Metrical Version of the Psalms 1650.

to the hall of Tyrannus. And there, they would hear, so many of them, would hear the teaching of Paul. And many were converted. In fact, so many were converted that we're told that they held a great bonfire, Acts chapter 19, of books of magic worth, it was reckoned, around 50,000 pieces of silver. These books of incantations, and spells, and curses, books of magic, they were burned on this bonfire. Many turned from idols to the living and true God; so many, in fact, that Demetrius, the silversmith, became very concerned for his trade. People didn't want his silver shrines and idols, and so, he and his fellow silversmiths rioted against Paul and the Christians. So there was persecution in that early church.

So he says, verse 2: "I know thy works, and thy labour, and thy patience." Thy works—it was a busy church, large, and really active. Lots of things were going on in the church—laboring, hard work for the Lord. They weren't a lazy church, they weren't apathetic, they were committed, and that's good, and that is appreciated by Christ. They were really committed people.

"I know they labour, and thy patience"—this word "patience," in the New Testament always means "perseverance," keeping on going, when things are tough. I know thy perseverance, how you keep on going, how you stand fast, how you go on for the Lord. "And how thou canst not bear them which are evil." There was a standard of morality there. They were standing for truth and for what was right. "You cannot bear with what is evil."

"And thou hast tried them which say they are apostles, and are not, and hast found them liars." People who were claiming to be apostles—as we get people nowadays claiming to be apostles—people claiming to be apostles, but they weren't; they were false apostles. The apostles were there only at the very beginning, the twelve apostles. And when they passed away, they weren't replaced. They were the foundation of the church. The church was built upon "The foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ himself being the chief corner stone" (Ephesians 2:20)—the teaching of the apostles and the prophets. They were claiming to be apostles, but the church in Ephesus found them to be liars; disciplined them.

And verse 3: "And hast borne, and hast patience"—you've borne the trials, the troubles, the opposition, the difficult things that were happening, the difficulties in the church, the difficulties in your own private lives. "Thou hast borne, and hast patience" and this is greatly appreciated by Christ.

"And for my name's sake hast laboured, and hast not fainted." Working for Christ, loving Christ, working for Christ, working away for the church, they hadn't fainted, they hadn't given up. And so, we see here great praise is given to this church in Ephesus. I wonder, is your church something like this, a church in which there is lots of work going on? And that's good; laboring for the Lord, and patience and perseverance, and church discipline for those who are doing what is evil, and those who are claiming to be true apostles, claiming to be prophets, or whatever, and they are liars. Standing for the Lord, not fainting, working diligently for him—surely, it was a wonderful church.

3. A Serious Fault

But then, we notice that there's *A Serious Fault* in this church, verse 4: "Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love." And this is not regarded as something minor. Think, for example, of a young couple who fall in love with one another, and they're much taken up with each other, and they get married. And then after a time, the husband notices that his wife is growing cold. There's no longer the joy, the excitement that there was,

and he begins to worry. Has someone stolen away her affections? You know, Christianity is like falling in love with Christ. We love him because he first loved us, and he wooed us, and we fell in love with him. And love is vital to Christianity, just as it's vital to marriage. How much do you love Christ? Is that love today stronger than it ever was? In a happy marriage, the love grows as the years pass. In a sense, there's nothing more important in marriage than love. You can do many works, and go through the motions, as it were, and you can perform all the duties, but if there's no love? We can have, in our churches, the right beliefs, be an orthodox church, and we can have lots of good works going on, but that's useless if there's no love in the church.

Remember Peter—he denied the Lord three times, with oaths and curses (John 18:15–27). That was a terrible sin. But then, you remember, after Jesus rose from the dead, how the Lord Jesus came to him, and said to him, “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me more than these?” And Peter said, “Lord you know that I love thee.” And then, he asked again, “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?” Peter said, “Lord, you know that I love you.” And then he asked the third time, “Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me?”—“Lord thou knowest all things. Thou knowest that I love thee.” He's reluctant to compare himself with others, but love is there. He loves Christ, and that's what's so important. And Jesus says to him, “Feed my lambs,” and “Feed my sheep.” (John 21:15–17). So, he's reestablished; he's placed there once again in the church as an apostle.

So, love is very important. It's not enough to be going through the motions of church life, but we must also love the Lord. We must watch, as Christians, because our job can start becoming very important for us—making money, looking after our family, the pleasures of the world. Are these things drawing away our heart from Christ? Is there something wrong in our church? Have we left our first love? What is wrong in the church? Have you grown cold? How could Christians possibly lose their love for Jesus?

Well, there are certain ways in which it's possible. Sometimes it's possible because professing Christians were never actually converted, they just follow the crowd. Young people are sometimes like that. Their friends become members in the church, and maybe they've grown up in a Christian home, and they've been taught these things. And so, they just follow on, and there they are, they're members of the church, professing faith, but they've never really fallen in love with Christ. They've never had an experience of his love shed abroad in their hearts by the Holy Spirit. So if they've never been converted, it's no wonder that their profession of love becomes rather empty.

Another possibility is that, yes, it is true Christians that we're talking about now, but they're backslidden. They started well, but then other things came in. You see, as Christians, we're involved in a war. We're fighting against the world, and the flesh, and the devil. It's not easy. Imagine yourself being on the frontline in a place like Ukraine, and there's these drones flying through the sky, and there's missiles, there's bombs, there's bullets; there's danger everywhere. You've got to be so alert. Well, the situation of a Christian is even more dangerous than that. We have the flesh within us, these roots of corruption that still remain there. We have the world around us seeking to entice us and seduce us, and lead us away from Christ. And then, we've got Satan, going about as a roaring lion seeking who he can devour. Satan, the wily serpent—Paul said, “We are not ignorant of his devices” (2 Corinthians 2:11). He's very clever, he knows how to come and tempt us. Remember how he was so successful in tempting our first parents, when they were perfect in the garden of Eden, and they sinned and fell. It's easy to backslide. “Watch and pray, that ye enter not into temptation” (Matthew 26:41). We need to be diligent—diligent in reading our Bible; diligent in prayer. I heard recently of one minister who was looking after

and seeking to pastor ministers who had fallen into sin and into immorality, and he said, in every case, he noted that they had failed to maintain a private life with Christ. They had failed in their private devotions, and that came first, and then came their falling into sin. So beware—beware of temptation; beware of backsliding.

And all of us of course, need to be challenged. None of us love the Lord as much as we should. So, we should stir ourselves up, daily repenting of our sins, daily trusting in the Lord again, and remembering, “If any man love not the Lord Jesus Christ, let him be Anathema”—accursed—“Maranatha”—the Lord is coming (1 Corinthians 16:22).

4. A Serious Warning and a Threat

So then, we notice verse 5, the warning that is given here: “Because thou has left thy first love” (verse 4) “Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works; or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.” It’s *A Serious Warning*. Remember from where you have fallen; repent; return. Return to the Lord. Do your first works. Make sure you love Christ as you used to love him at the beginning. And let your love show in your works. If we love him, we keep his commandments, keeping them with enthusiasm, with joy and delight. Love is not just a feeling, it’s an action. Do your first works. Show your love to Jesus with acts of devotion towards him. And put your whole heart into it. Don’t be just doing it out of a sense of duty, but delight in the Lord. Be satisfied with him. Enjoy God. Meditate upon him, on his person, and his work, and his Word. Pray, and seek the Lord, go on in seeing him. Go on in searching his Word.

If you’re unconverted, of course, you’ve got to seek salvation. It’s not just a matter of reforming, it’s a matter of being born again. You must be born again (John 3:3). It’s possible that you’ve just become a member of the church, and you’ve never had this radical change. If any man be in Christ, if any man is a real Christian, old things are passed away; behold, all things are made new (2 Corinthians 5:17). Make sure you’re a real Christian. Do you have the marks of a true Christian? Is the fruit of the Spirit there? “The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, meekness, temperance” (Galatians 5:22–23). If unconverted, repent. If you’ve backslidden, remember—remember Christ, remember from where you have fallen. Christ used to be everything to you. Stir yourselves up. Return to Christ. Meditate upon the cross, where the Savior suffered on your behalf. Turn your back upon worldly pleasures. May Christ be your chief pleasure. May you be able to say, “To me to live in Christ”—he’s everything to me—“to die is gain” (Philippians 1:21); repent.

And all of us, as we read this letter to the Church at Ephesus, all of us should be challenged to stand ourselves up and to seek more and more of the presence of Christ, the felt presence, delighting in God; and rededicating ourselves to him. We must be hungering and thirsting for him, seeking his face, and seeking his favor.

Verse 5: “Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen, and repent, and do the first works”—and then there’s *a threat*—“or else I will come unto thee quickly, and will remove thy candlestick out of his place, except thou repent.” What is this threat?—to remove the candlestick? What would happen if the candlestick were removed? Ephesus, the church in Ephesus would no longer be a true church. It would just be a kind of sham, an empty shell, a rejected church. Christ himself would depart from it. It’s the presence of Christ that makes a church. “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst” (Matthew 18:20). Christ is present in the church. And where Christ is missing, the power is gone,

the life is gone, it's just an empty ritual. When Christ leaves, all we have left is a shell. And that seems actually what happened to the church of Ephesus. There's no church in Ephesus today. Islam came along; there was no strength to stand against Islam, and that whole area was taken over by the Muslims. The same has happened in other churches today. Roman Catholic churches, everything was fine in the beginning, but then there was a self-righteousness, ritual, faith in a church, faith in a priest, in a pope, in a mass, rather than faith in Jesus. In the Greek Orthodox church, with its icons; and similarly, many Anglican, Methodist, and Presbyterian churches are just, they are a name of a church, but there's no church there; it's an empty shell. So we're to take this warning seriously.

What good is a church without Christ? I fear sometimes that God is leaving the churches in Scotland today. We see few conversions. We see a terrible worldliness in the church, a spiritual apathy. People seem happy with just one service on a Sunday. There's no appetite for the things of God, no hungering or thirsting after righteousness, no delight in his worship so that they're wanting to worship God morning and evening; and few are coming forward to minister God's Word. And there's trouble in congregations, of division and disharmony. The blessing of Christ is missing. So we, like the church in Ephesus, need to repent, to remember from where we have fallen, and repent, and do our first works, "or else I will come unto thee quickly and remove thy candlestick out of its place, except you repent." Would your church be like the church at Ephesus—a church that left her first love?

5. Another Word of Praise

But then there's *Another Word of Praise*, verse 6: "But this thou hast, that thou hatest the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which I also hate." We don't know very much about the Nicolaitans. They were obviously a heretical sect. They appear to have been Antinomians, neglecting and against the law of God, indulging in lusts, emphasizing the grace of God—"Grace saves. Because of grace, I can do what I like. The blood of Jesus Christ washes away all my sins. God forgives me, so it doesn't matter really, and the more I sin, well, the more God will forgive me. And I can just indulge myself, and God is glorified in forgiving me." But that's terribly wrong. Remember what Paul said, in Romans chapter 6: "Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?"—go on sinning?—"God forbid. How shall we, that are dead to sin, live any longer therein? (verse 1)" We're Christians! And when you're a Christian, what happens?—you die. You die to the old life. You die to your sins. How shall we that are dead to sin go on wallowing in sin? No, we must leave that life behind. God loves holiness. He is holy, and he says, "Be ye holy, for I am holy" (1 Peter 1:16); and, without holiness, no man shall see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). God hates immorality, and if we love God, we should hate immorality too. So, there's this good point in Ephesus—they hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans, which Christ also hates.

6. The Final Challenge and the Promise

And then, in verse 7, *The Final Challenge*: "He that hath an ear, let him hear." Do you have ears? Then hear, then listen, take heed to the warning that is given. Repent, return, return to your first love. "To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God." To him who overcomes—what is it to overcome? It's to battle with sin and temptation, to overcome the world, the flesh, and the devil. It's to return to your first love. Return to Christ. Overcome your backslidings, the seductions of the world, and the temptations of Satan. Stand fast in the midst of persecution. Press onward. Keep on going on the Christian road. Be

a pilgrim: “As strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11). You are citizens of heaven—be heavenly.

And there’s *a promise*. If we overcome, he will give us to eat of the tree of life which is in the midst of the paradise of God. Remember how Adam and Eve were in the garden of Eden, and there were two trees in the midst of the garden. There was the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and they were forbidden to eat of that tree. They ate of it, and so, they were banished from the garden—thrown out. And the way into the garden was enclosed by cherubim with a flaming sword that turned every way, so that they couldn’t come and eat of the tree of life and live forever (Genesis 3:24).

But then, you’ll remember what the Lord Jesus Christ did, how he came and opened a way for us. And he says, “I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father, but by me” (John 14:6). “I am the door; by me if any man enter in, he...shall go in and out, and find pasture” (John 10:9). He comes to the tree, and you’ll remember how Zechariah puts it: “Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, and against the man that is my fellow...smite the shepherd, and the sheep shall be scattered: and I will turn mine hand upon the little ones” (Zechariah 13:7). Awake, sword. You’ve been sleeping for thousands of years, but here’s somebody approaching the garden. Who is it? It’s my fellow—fellow of Jehovah, the Son of God. He comes, the sword awakes, but Christ comes forward. The sword is plunged in him. And so, he opens a way for his people to approach the tree of life. “To him that overcometh will I [grant] to eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God.”

Turn you back upon the world. Overcome the world. Be pleasing to God. Delight in what God delights in. And then, come and feast. And the marriage supper of the Lamb is there before you. Christ himself, he is indeed, the tree of life, and we will feed upon him forever. Some people will be excluded from paradise, but not you, if you love the Lord, if you love him with all your heart. “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him” (1 John 2:15), but love the Lord Jesus Christ.

So, what is the great message, then, of this letter? It’s to love Jesus. It’s to turn away from false gods; to set your affection more and more on the Lord; to return to your first love; to give your whole heart to him. As churches, to remember the importance of loving Christ and being devoted to him, dedicating ourselves to the Lord. Return to your first love, and so you will eat of the tree of life, which is in the midst of the paradise of God. Amen.