

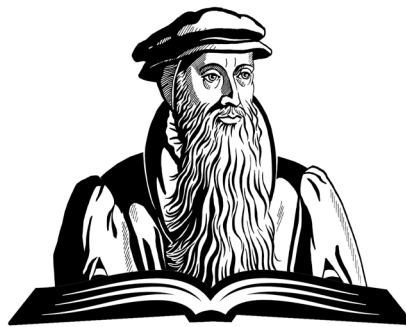
VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

# The Letters to the Seven Churches in Asia

*by Rev. William Macleod*

Lecture #4

## The Letter to the Church in Pergamos



The John Knox Institute  
of Higher Education

## **John Knox Institute of Higher Education**

*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

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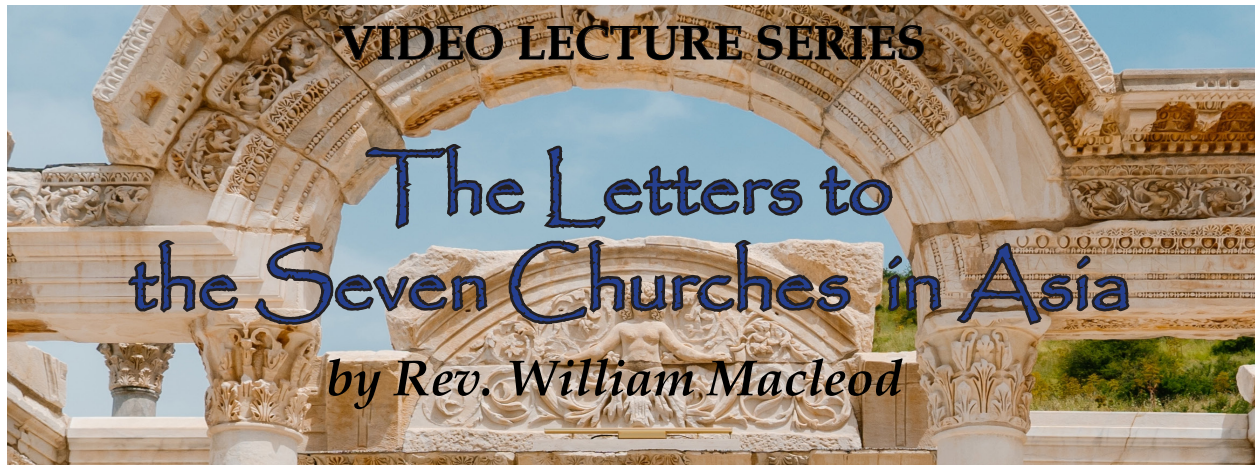
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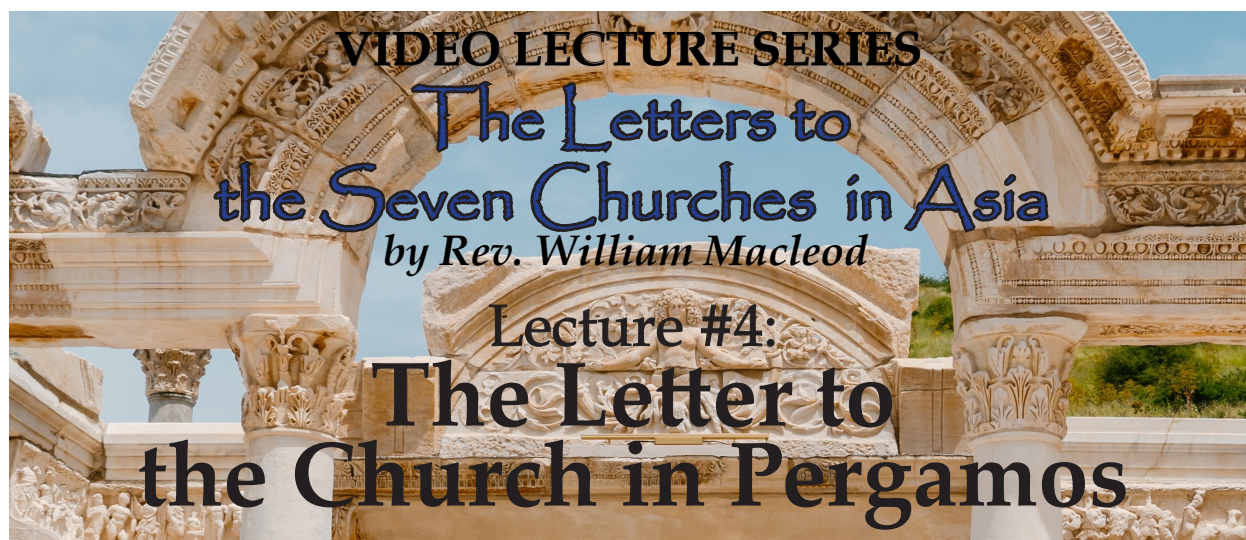
Rev. William Macleod recently retired, after serving as minister of the gospel for 45 years at Knightswood Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), in Glasgow, Scotland. In addition, he was for many years the editor of the denominational magazine, *The Free Church Witness*. He was also Professor of Systematic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

Our lecture today is on *The Letter to the Church in Pergamos*, and it's recorded for us in Revelation chapter 2, and verses 12 to 17. Pergamos was about fifty miles north of Smyrna. It was a great center of Greek culture. It had a huge, famous library of Greek literature. It was a large city, some 200,000 inhabitants, and it was the seat of Roman power in that area. This church is praised for its stand in the face of persecution, but sadly, we're told there is immorality in its midst. There's a big call to repentance, and a threat of Christ using a sword against them, that sword with the two edges. So there's a warning there.

## 1. The One Who is Writing

But first, noticing *The One Who is Writing*, here, verse 12: "And to the angel of the church in Pergamos write; These things saith he which hath the sharp sword with two edges." The personal introduction at the beginning of each letter is relevant to that letter, and most of these personal introductions draw upon the vision that John was given, in chapter 1, of the Lord Jesus Christ. If you'll remember, in chapter 1, Christ was pictured with this twoedged sword coming out of his mouth (Revelation 1:16).

People today think of Jesus often as "gentle Jesus." They think so much about God being love, and Jesus being loving, and they forget that there's a sword there too. They stress so much the smooth things, the encouraging things, the comforting things, the loving, and they fail to lay emphasis upon the challenge. They're seeker sensitive in their churches, and don't want to make people feel uncomfortable in any way, so there's little mention of sin, of judgment, of wrath, or the need to repent. But there is a great danger in that. It becomes like the false prophets in the

days of Jeremiah. Jesus said, “[Beware] when all men speak well of you! for [they did that of] “the false prophets” (Luke 6:26). These false prophets, their message was “Peace, peace; when there is no peace [for the wicked]” (Jeremiah 6:14). And, so there’s that danger in the church today, too much emphasis on peace, and love, and gentleness, and the failure to realize that there’s a sharp twoedged sword coming out Christ’s mouth, or in his hand.

The true Christ has a frightening side to him, as well as a comforting side. He hates sin; he can’t tolerate it; he won’t compromise with it; and he will deal painfully with backsliding. Our Lord Jesus is not blind to immorality and idolatry. He will fight against false professors of faith and will chastise them, and if they are unconverted, he will deal even more drastically with them. If you are sinning and not being chastised or corrected for it, if you’re living in sin, be afraid. “Whom the Lord loveth he chastens, and scourgeth every son whom he receiveth” (Hebrews 12:6). So, if you be without chastisement, whereof all are partakers—all of God’s children—then you are illegitimate, not real children. Whom God loves, he chastens, so, if you are sinning, and you’re not suffering, be frightened—you have no right to think you’re a Christian.

The Lord Jesus is concerned with the sins of his people, but the unconverted he sometimes doesn’t bother; just leaves them, leaves them to wallow in their sins, because when they die, they will be cast into hell. He has a painful sword, and he will use it; two edges, a sword to destroy his enemies and his persecutors. He rules and defends his church. He restrains and conquers all his and our enemies. Trust Christ, respect Christ, love Christ, obey Christ. Don’t despise his Word. Heed his warnings. Don’t ignore his chastisements. Don’t neglect his law. Your soul is important, and the souls of those in your church are important, and as churches, we must seek to live according to God’s Word, practicing what God lays down for us in his law. “Seek...first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and [then] all these [other] things shall be added unto you” (Matthew 6:33).

## **2. Words of Praise**

Again, having introduced himself as the one who has the sharp sword with the two edges, first of all, there’s *Words of Praise*, verse 13: “I know thy works, and where thou dwellest, even where Satan’s seat is: and thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith, even in those days wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth.”

“I know thy works.” There were some very good things about this church in Pergamos. There were really godly people in the church, some who were very diligent and holy in their lives. They were working for God, and they were standing on his side, reading his Word, praying, meditating, evangelizing, doing good works, showing love to fellow Christians, reaching out to the unconverted, to sinners, caring for the sick and for the poor. “By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another” (John 13:35)—the mark of the true Christian, brotherly love. “Love one another,” said Christ, “as I have loved you” (verse 34). Christianity is to be practical. It’s to be loving. “I know thy works”—that was good, there was praise. There were works there.

## **3. Hold Fast, Stand Firm**

Secondly, “where thou dwellest...where Satan’s seat is”—the seat of Roman power, here called “Satan’s seat,” because the emperor was claiming to be god, claiming to be divine, and Roman power was used to try and get everybody to acknowledge the emperor as god, to give some worship to the emperor, and then you could do what you liked yourself, and worship



whoever you wished. Some places, places where some churches are, are much more wicked than other places, and it's much more difficult to be a Christian. It couldn't be easy for these people in Pergamos. They were living where Satan's seat was.

And so, Jesus says, hold fast to the name of the Lord. You have held fast in the past, and keep on holding fast today. "Thou holdest fast my name, and hast not denied my faith." There was persecution, there were threats, there was danger, but they were making a great stand. The authorities were saying, "Just acknowledge that Caesar is lord, then you can do what you like, nobody will interfere with you." But Christ is Lord. Christ is the alone Lord. There is no supreme lord but Christ. They were bold, they were faithful, they were not ashamed of the Lord Jesus Christ.

You and I might be under pressure too, maybe in our workplace, maybe amongst our friends or family. Perhaps pressure has been put on us to compromise. Stand for him. Stand for the Lord! Don't accept anyone else as the supreme head of the church. The Pope isn't the supreme head of the church. No king is the supreme head of the church. No president is the head of the church. No government is the head of the church. The Head of the church is Christ alone. He's our Head, he's the supreme being. He's the one who must be given first place. He is the one who is Lord of all.

And then, we're told about this man, Antipas: "Wherein Antipas was my faithful martyr, who was slain among you, where Satan dwelleth." The name "Antipas" means "opponent," and he was an opponent of wickedness, and an opponent of compromise, and of false doctrine, and of state interference in the church. Very likely, he was the pastor of this church, the church in Pergamos, and he had been martyred for the sake of Christ. He paid the ultimate price—his life. He loved Christ too much to deny him. Those who deny me, says Christ, I will deny them before my Father in heaven (Matthew 10:33).

We don't know much about Antipas. One story that has come down to us—whether it's true or not, we're not sure—but one story was that the Romans made a hollow ox of brass, and they placed Antipas inside of it, and then put fire under this ox of brass, and roasted him to death. They made him, as it were, a burnt offering—horrible. But the important thing is, he stood firm, and more than that, the church was not intimidated by what they did. He made a great stand, and his stand encouraged the church also to stand. Christians today are terribly persecuted in some countries. We think of North Korea, we think of Iran, northern Nigeria, east Africa. We thank God for those who stand firm on the Lord's side. We too must stand firm.

#### **4. Beware of Immorality**

But then we're surprised at the shocking immorality that occurred in this church, verse 14: "But I have a few things against thee, because thou hast there them that hold the doctrine of Balaam, who taught Balac to cast a stumblingblock before the children of Israel, to eat things sacrificed unto idols, and to commit fornication." You would expect a church like this that had endured persecution to be pure and to be strong, but sadly, there was some compromise with immorality. They had there those who held to the doctrine of Balaam.

Balaam is a fascinating character. You'll remember how the children of Israel came out of Egypt, travelled through the desert, and then came to the promised land. First, they had to face Sihon, king of the Amorites with his army, and they overcame him. And then the giant king of Bashan, Og, with his soldiers, and they overcame him, and took possession of his land too. Balac, the king of Moab, seeing this huge number of people—millions of them—camped on

the border of his land, he was terrified, wondered what to do. He realized he couldn't overcome them by warring against them as King Sihon, and King Og had done. So he sent for Balaam, the soothsayer, the magician, the wizard, and hoped that Balaam would curse Israel. But you'll remember how God met Balaam on the way, and God warned him seriously that he must only say what God gave him to say. And three times, Balaam blessed Israel. "How can I curse when the Lord has blessed," he said. "Blessed is he whom God blesses, and cursed is he whom God curses. Blessed is Israel." He sees no iniquity in Jacob nor perverseness in Israel. "I see him as the sand of the seashore by multitude. I see him, and I see his wonderful future, and the sceptre coming out of Jacob, the star of Israel—the Messiah coming." It's a wonderful prophecy that Balaam makes. And Balac told him to return home and gave him not a penny for a reward. But Balaam longed for the reward that Balac had offered. And so, he suggested something else. "If you want Israel destroyed," he said, "I'll tell you what to do. Get the pretty women from Moab and Midian to go and invite the Israelites to their feasts, to their idol feasts, to their parties, and to immorality." And they did that and it worked. And Israelites were drawn into immorality, fornication, and idolatry, with a result that God's wrath came upon them, and 24,000 Israelites died. Balaam got his reward. He loved the wages of unrighteousness. But God's wrath came upon him. He was slain. Numbers 31, verse 16 tells us how God's wrath came upon him, and how he didn't enjoy the reward he got.

Beware of false teachers. Beware of them who love the wages of unrighteousness. Beware of them who are involved in promoting sexual immorality. Beware of false teachers. I remember hearing one teacher say, quoting Luther, "Sin boldly." He seemed to be encouraging some kind of Antinomianism—"Sin, and don't worry about it. Don't be troubled about it." Luther never meant that. Luther said, "When you sin, don't let Satan cause you to give up and despair, but repent immediately and ask for forgiveness." Luther wanted people to turn from sin and to give up sin. But it's dangerous—"Sin boldly, go and sin, and don't worry about it. The blood of Jesus Christ washes away all sin. God's grace is amazing; it will pardon you, whatever you do. Don't worry about sin, just eat, drink, and be merry. Have a good time, and you'll get to heaven at the end of the day, because Jesus is your Savior." But that sort of teaching is totally contrary to Scripture. Scripture says, the Bible says, Christ says, "Depart from iniquity. Turn your back on sin. Flee from fornication. Flee from idolatry. Don't toy with it, don't play with it. Run from it, oppose it." You're justified, and when you're justified, all your sins are forgiven, but that doesn't mean that you go on in sin. No, justification always leads to sanctification—should lead. There's something far wrong if it doesn't. And in sanctification, we depart from sin. We mustn't continue in sin that grace may abound. We've been born again. We've got a new nature. Live according to your nature. Live as those who are new creatures in Christ Jesus. The true Christian hates sin. Show that you're a true Christian by hating sin, and beware of lust. So there was this teaching there in Pergamos; very serious immorality was practiced.

"So hast thou also them that hold the doctrine of the Nicolaitans, which thing I hate." We saw a reference made to these Nicolaitans earlier, in verse 6 of the chapter. The church at Ephesus hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans. Here, we see that Christ hates it too. But sadly, the people in Pergamos, some of them liked and held to the teaching of the Nicolaitans, a teaching that encouraged indulging the flesh, immorality, and sexual perversion. No, stand against these things; fight against it. Remember, no holiness, no heaven. God demands holiness. Without it, no man shall see the Lord (Hebrews 12:14). So there's a warning against immorality.

And then there's this demand, *Repent or else*, in verse 16: "Repent; or else I will come unto

thee quickly, and will fight against them with the sword of my mouth.” God hates sin and lust. He hates eating foods offered to idols, as things offered to idols. “Turn ye, turn ye from your evil ways; for why will ye die?” (Ezekiel 33:11). Separate yourselves from idolatry and from idol feasts and immorality.

Some people think repentance is something you do once at the beginning of your Christian life. No, repentance is something that we have to do every day. Yes, there’s initial repentance, but every day we sin, and every day we are to pray to the Lord, Forgive us our sins—“Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors” (Matthew 6:12). Every day we’re to hate sin, turn from it, confessing it and forsaking it, remembering the sword that comes out of Christ’s mouth. No chastisement is joyous “but grievous: nevertheless, afterward it yieldeth the peaceful fruit of righteousness unto them who are exercised thereby” (Hebrews 12:11). No child enjoys being disciplined, and neither does the Christian enjoy God’s discipline. So beware. “Love not the world, neither the things that are in the world” (1 John 2:15). Mortify the flesh—put to death the flesh in your members. “As strangers and pilgrims, abstain from fleshly lusts, which war against the soul” (1 Peter 2:11).

## 5. A Great Promise

And then, finally, there’s *A Great Promise*, verse 17: “He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches”—if you have ears, listen—“To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna, and will give him a white stone, and in the stone a new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiving it.” Always in the church, there is good and bad together. There’s the wheat and the tares. Remember that parable, the Son of man sowing the children of the kingdom, the devil coming along in the night like the enemy, and sowing tares, or weeds, among the wheat (Matthew 13:24–30). To begin with, they all look much the same. But eventually, it’s clear who are the wheat and who are the tares. Jesus said, The kingdom of heaven is like unto ten virgins (Matthew 25:1–13). Five of them were wise, five were foolish. Five were prepared, ready for heaven; five weren’t, and they ended up excluded. So, conscious then of this division, overcome worldliness. Turn your back upon it. Repent of your sins. Follow the Lord carefully. Walk softly before him. Love the Lord. And if anyone loves the Lord—“If ye love me, [you’ll] keep my commandments” (John 14:15). Don’t say you love the Lord when you’re wallowing in sin.

And there’s a promise: “To him that overcometh will I give to eat of the hidden manna.” Remember how the children of Israel, they got this bread in the wilderness, bread from heaven to feed them. And then, Moses was told to take some of this “manna” and to put it into an earthen vessel, and to hide it in the Holy of Holies in the Tabernacle (Exodus 16:31–34). It was put there, it was preserved for Israel. And now, Christ is saying, those who overcome, overcome sin and temptation, I will bring out the hidden manna, and I will give them some of that manna, some of this heavenly food. And Christ, of course, himself says, “I am the living bread which came down from heaven” (John 6:51). To him that overcomes will have the bread that came down from heaven, the hidden manna.

“And I will give him a white stone.” In ancient times, a judge would have two kinds of stones in front of him—white stones, and black stones. If somebody was acquitted—they were judged, they were tried, they were found not guilty, the judge would give him a white stone. If he was found guilty, he would be given a black stone. “I will give him a white stone.” The one who overcomes—justified, sanctified, glorified, on our way to heaven.



“And in the stone a new name written.” What name?—the name of Christ himself. Yes, “Belonging to Christ.” “A new name written, which no man knoweth saving he that receiveth it.” Acquitted, a white stone, and a special blessing just for you, a special blessing from Christ.

So, in conclusion, there’s praise here for those who stand firm in the midst of persecution. Jesus is Lord and only Jesus. Secondly, beware of immorality; avoid it like the plague. It’s disastrous, it’s destructive, it brings people down to hell. Personally, repent of sin, flee from it, and as a church, do the same. And thirdly, avoid worldliness; avoid being carried away by the gods of this world, money, and pressure, and things like that. A friend of the world is an enemy of God (James 4:4). Stand firm and there’s a glorious future for you, a blessed, eternal enjoyment of heaven. Amen.