

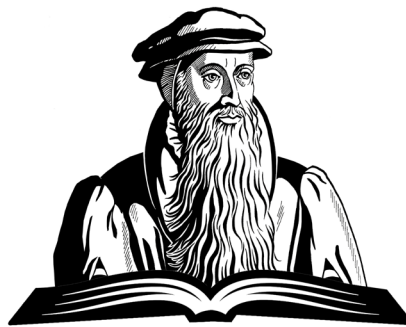
VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

# The Letters to the Seven Churches in Asia

*by Rev. William Macleod*

Lecture #6

## The Letter to the Church in Sardis



The John Knox Institute  
of Higher Education

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*Entrusting our Reformed Inheritance to the Church Worldwide*

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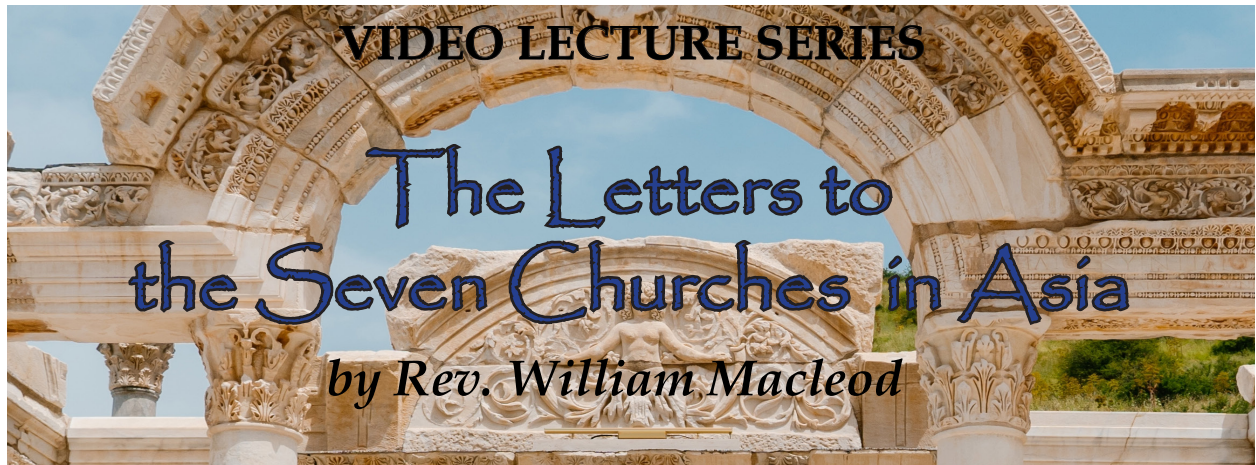
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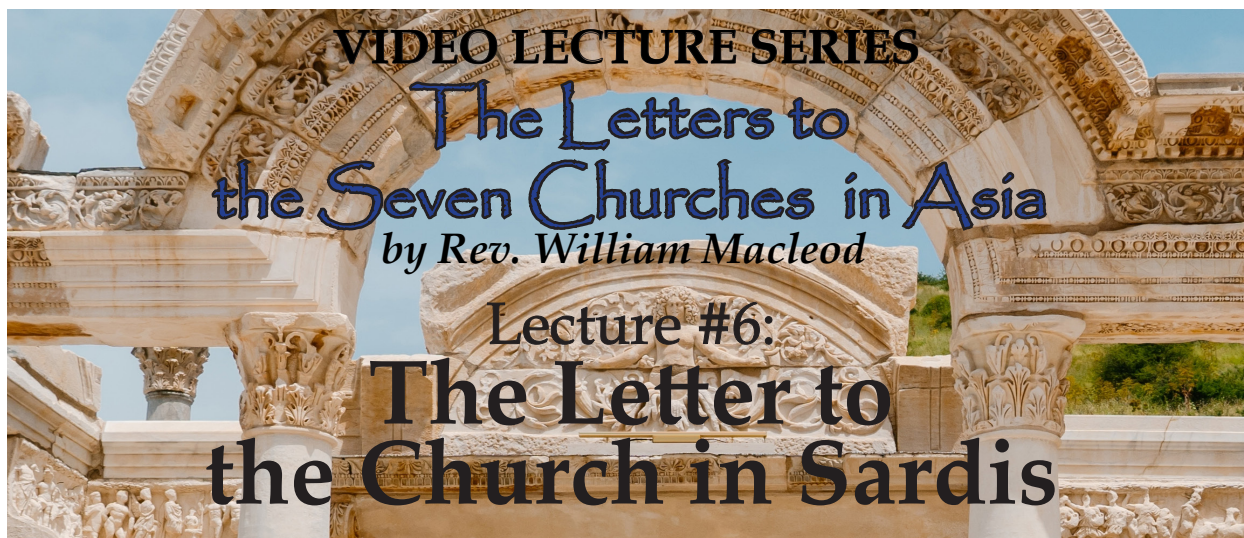
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Rev. William Macleod recently retired, after serving as minister of the gospel for 45 years at Knightswood Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), in Glasgow, Scotland. In addition, he was for many years the editor of the denominational magazine, *The 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 next lecture is on *The Letter to the Church in Sardis*, and it's recorded for us in Revelation chapter 3, and verses 1 to 6. Sardis was about thirty miles to the southeast of Thyatira. So all these churches were in what is known as Asiatic Turkey today. The church in Sardis appears to have been in a dreadful state. They have a name that they live, but are dead. So that's hypocrisy, an hypocrisy of the worst order. Hypocrisy is always a temptation in the church. It's more common that we, perhaps, think. There's a bit of it in us all, pretending to be better than we are. We don't like people to see our sins, and we live a certain kind of life outwardly towards others, and yet, in our hearts we're not always as genuine and as sincere as we should be. But it was particularly bad in the time of Jesus. The Jewish church in his day largely rejected him. They were self-righteous, and they didn't need a Savior. They thought that they could get to heaven without him. But it's also around today—self-righteousness. Now here, in Sardis, they had a name that they lived but were dead. But yet, amongst them there was a godly remnant, and we're told about them in verse 4.

So again, first of all, today we look at,

### **1. The One Who's Writing this Letter**

Chapter 3, verse 1: "And unto the angel of the church in Sardis write; These things saith he that hath the seven Spirits of God, and the seven stars; I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead." So the one who writes, he says he has the seven Spirits of God, and this is, of course, the Holy Spirit, the Spirit in his perfection. Seven is the perfect number, and it's the number of the church. Christ has the Spirit. He died, rose again, ascended up to heaven, and was given the Holy Spirit to bestow upon his church. He was given the gift of the

Spirit to give to the church—the Comforter, the Helper, the Advocate—the Spirit. We all need the Spirit, and Sardis badly needs the Holy Spirit.

The Spirit is the one who convicts of sin, of righteousness and judgment to come. The Spirit leads us to feel our need so that we cry out to God for mercy. And the Spirit is the one who performs the new birth in us. “That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit” (John 3:6). We have to be born of the Spirit, born again. The Spirit causes those who are dead in trespasses and sins to be resurrected. He enters into us, and he causes us to be alive, resurrected, new men and new women in Christ Jesus. And he indwells the Christian, uniting us to God, and giving us spiritual life, keeping us alive. The Spirit is the one who sanctifies us, who makes us grow in grace and grow in holiness.

Now, the church in Sardis was dead. They were dead because they were trusting in their own gifts, trusting in their own program. Too many churches are like that today. They trust in their own program of activities, and their own busyness, and they’ve got their various associations, the various things that they do, and they have their programs. And they think that because this is attractive and popular, it’s wonderful, and they think there’s life there. But life is something different from a program or activities. Life is in the heart. It’s our relationship to God.

The church in Sardis, it had name that it lived. People said, “That’s a Christian church.” No doubt they were busy in Christian activities. But it’s not enough to be busy in Christian activities. It’s not enough to have attractive music, perhaps, and a nice atmosphere, and exciting preaching, entertaining, and people enjoy coming, and lots of people come along. But it can all be on a superficial level, just like a golf club is perhaps attractive to some, or some other association where people gather for entertainment, for enjoyment. We must beware of trusting in our program, or trusting in our works and rituals, which others sometimes find a very traditional ritual attractive—choral singing, or whatever it might be, the ritual that is performed. But no, we need the Spirit, the Holy Spirit, spiritual life; the life of God in the soul of man. “He that hath the seven Spirits of God”—the Holy Spirit.

And he that has “the seven stars.” The seven stars were interpreted for us in chapter 1 as the seven angels of the churches, or the seven ministers. Christ is the one who has the pastors, the ministers. And if their pastor is dead, the people will be dead. Like people, like priest—a congregation seldom rises above the godliness of the minister. How important it is for you who are ministers, to fellow pastors, to ensure that you are godly yourselves, that you spend the time you should in your private devotions and prayer, and in the meditation on God’s Word, and in seeking God’s face, and in repenting, and believing, and following the Lord, so that being godly, you’re able to set a godly example before your people, and you’re able to preach in a godly way. We need preachers with power—not human power, not the power of human gifts, but the power of God, God’s holy power.

There were popular ministers in Jeremiah’s day, and they went around preaching, “Peace, peace, when there is no peace,” saith God to the wicked (Jeremiah 6:14). And Jesus says, Beware when all men speak well of you, because they did that of the false prophets (Luke 6:26). They didn’t speak well of Christ, but he was the true Prophet. And we should be followers of Christ. So, our aim is not to be popular, it’s to be faithful. A congregation needs to hear God’s Word, and to be humbled by God’s Word, called to repentance. People don’t like their sins being pointed out, and they don’t like being called to repentance. But if we are faithful, that’s what we must do. Ministers must not be putting church members to sleep. We need revival. We need awakening. “Awake thou that sleepest, and arise from the dead, and Christ shall give thee light” (Ephesians

5:14).

So the one who writes, then, is the one who has the seven Spirits of God. And if we need anything in the church in Scotland today, surely we need the Holy Spirit amongst us, reviving us, quickening us, giving power in the pulpit and power in the pew, and power in our prayers, and power in our witness—the one who has the seven Spirits of God, and has the seven stars in his hand.

And then, secondly,

## **2. A Name that You Live and Are Dead**

“I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead.” The church should be alive. Indeed, it should be on fire for God, full of love, full of zeal for God’s glory, full of zeal for the conversion of sinners, full of the Holy Spirit, delighting in God—evangelizing, ministering, caring, preaching, praying, singing the praises of God. But instead, there was a terrible hypocrisy in Sardis. They had all the trappings of a church. They had the name of a church. Regular services were held. There was activity there, there was children’s work, and youth work, and women’s work, and this work and that work. Outwardly, everything was fine, but God sees the heart, and their hearts were spiritually dead. Busy in activities, but members self-righteous. No heresy, as such; no immorality amongst them, such as was there in Pergamos and Thyatira. No, they were orthodox, but they were dead. There was no love for the Lord and zeal for him.

Sadly, too many modern churches are like that. There’s so little zeal for the Lord, that it’s difficult to get people to come two services on the Lord’s Day. They’re so busy with their family, with sport, with entertainment. There’s no battling of the flesh, fighting against sin and temptation; no striving after holiness; no hungering and thirsting after God; no reading of good books, and searching into the great theological heritage that we have; no real experience of God in their own lives; just certain beliefs and practices. Believing in God, yes, but the devils believe and tremble (James 2:19). Practicing, coming to church, going through the service; outwardly, everything’s okay, but dead. Jesus tells us the parable of the fig tree that was planted in the vineyard. The owner of the vineyard comes and says, “Cut it down. Why cumber the ground. These three years I have come seeking fruit, and there’s no fruit. What good is a tree that doesn’t bear fruit?” God’s looking for fruit in our lives. “Cut it down, why cumbereth it the ground?” (Luke 13:7). Are you like that—unfruitful? Are you like the church in Sardis—you have a name that you live, a Christian name, as it were, a name to be a follower of Christ, but dead? Are you aware of your deadness? Are you mourning over your deadness? That’s a sign of life. If you’re aware of your deadness, and mourning over it, that shows that actually you’re not dead, you’re alive. Or are you so dead that you’re quite apathetic, and not aware that you are dead? Just like the Pharisees and scribes in Jesus’ day. They thought they were sure to go to heaven, but they were on the way to hell. All of us need a Savior.

Verse 2: “Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die.” Be watchful. Remember Jesus, in the garden of Gethsemane, he had his disciples with him. He said to them, “Watch and pray,” lest you enter into temptation (Matthew 26:41). If they had watched, they would have stood with him. They wouldn’t have denied him. They wouldn’t have fled. “Could ye not watch with me one hour?” he said to them (verse 40). Watch! Satan’s out to get you. Watch and pray. The roaring lion walketh about seeking whom he may devour (1 Peter 5:8). Watch out for him. Sometimes he comes as an angel of light in disguise, pretending, using God’s Word, but he’s out to destroy you. Watch against Satan, the wiles of the devil.

Remember, decline and backsliding doesn't happen suddenly. It's something that takes place slowly. Bit by bit, you slide away. How important it is to use the means of grace, the public means of grace—the church on Sunday, and prayer meetings, Bible studies. And then, our Lord's secret means of grace too—reading our Bibles, and praying, and waiting on God, and trusting God, self-examination, confessing our sins, repenting of our sins. These things are so important. And if we do that, “Be watchful, and strengthen the things which remain, that are ready to die.” There's death around you. Others are spiritually dead. But you, strengthen the things which remain. It's as it were, the fire is going out. And when the fire's going out, what do you do? You gather the embers together, and you put more fuel on the fire. And so, we must gather up what's good, and cry to God for his Spirit, for the oil of the Spirit to make us burn brightly again. Realize the sad situation of the church, and look to Christ in faith to revive us and quicken us. Claim then, claim the blood of Christ to wash away your sins, and seek first the kingdom of God. Seek his face and his favor. Come together for fellowship, not for gossip, not for worldly talk, but to talk of Christ, to talk of what he has done for you, what your needs are, what he can do for others also. Remember the old illustration of a coal in the fire. If you take a lump of coal out of the fire and place it on the hearth, it soon dies. It's when it's in the fire with other coals that it burns. We're like that. We have to be with others and stirring one another up, provoking one another to love and to good works (Hebrews 10:24). Strengthen what remains.

And then he says, “I have not found thy works perfect before God.” God's eye is constantly upon us. We are naked and open in the presence of God, in the eyes of him with whom we have to do. He reads our thoughts. Be aware of God's eye upon you, and fear God. “Fear God, and keep his commandments: for this is the whole duty of man” (Ecclesiastes 12:13). Don't offend God. Don't grieve him by your thoughts, and by your words, and by your deeds, otherwise he will withdraw his blessing; he'll take his blessing from you. “Grieve not the holy Spirit of God, whereby ye are sealed unto the day of redemption” (Ephesians 4:30). We grieve the Spirit by our sins. The Spirit seals us, places his stamp upon us, assures us of our salvation, keeps us going, as it were, until the day of redemption. But if we grieve the Spirit, then he withdraws, and our assurance is weakened.

And then, verse 3: “Remember therefore how thou hast received, and heard, and hold fast, and repent.” Remember how thou hast heard. Think back to what happened when the gospel first came to Sardis, how you were converted, how the church was formed, planted there, and how it began to grow. Think of your conversion, the zeal that you had, your first love for the Lord. Stir yourselves up. Remember how you were aware of God's wrath against sin, and conscious of your own guilt, and how you repented, and the joy that you found when assurance of your salvation came, the peace that flooded into your heart. Remember and hold fast. Cling to that early teaching and these early practices. Hold onto the truth. Stand firm for the Lord. Love these old paths and old ways of God, the good old tried and tested ways. And be aware, be aware of the danger of superficiality and worldliness, and rededicate yourself to the Lord. “Remember ... how thou hast received and heard, and hold fast, and repent.”

### **3. There's a Warning**

“If therefore thou shalt not watch, I will come on thee as a thief, and thou shalt not know what hour I will come upon thee.” How quickly the Lord can come in chastisement, to correct us, to discipline us. No child likes being found out and punished. We don't like being corrected. And of course, there's the warning that if we're not truly converted, if we're just mere hypocrites

following the rest and pretending to be Christians, he will come as a thief. Remember the days of Noah. They were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage until the day that Noah entered the ark, and then the waters came, the flood came, and drowned them. It was too late then; God had shut the door, and none of them could enter. Or think of the days of Lot. Again, eating and drinking, going about their work, buying and selling, up for a breakfast, when Lot left Sodom, and God came in judgment, and fire and brimstone came upon Sodom. Death comes often suddenly. The end of the world will come suddenly. Watch and pray. Be aware. Christ is coming, and he's coming as a thief in the night. Prepare and be alert.

Verse 4: "Thou hast a few names even in Sardis which have not defiled their garments; and they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy." Even in Sardis, when the church was in such a bad way, there were a few faithful Christians. Whatever the church around you is like, make sure that you are faithful, and that you stand out for the Lord. Sometimes faithful Christians can be found in surprisingly dead churches, liberal churches, and sacramental churches. They're getting little good for their souls there, but yet they're standing for the Lord. And they're obviously waiting upon God in the secret place and in private, and keeping their souls alive in the midst of deadness around them. It was like that in Sardis, great deadness, but yet there were a few names who had not defiled their garments. They were trusting in the Lord, keeping themselves pure from worldliness and sin, kept by the power of God, through faith, unto salvation. We need God's power to keep us because we cannot keep ourselves. But we must exercise faith—"kept by the power of God through faith" (1 Peter 1:5)—trusting, believing, praying, crying to Christ to keep us—kept unto salvation.

Sin and backsliding defile our garments, they soil our clothes. Keep your Christian robes clean and pure. Be like the salt of the earth. If the salt its savor—its tastiness—"wherewith shall it be salted? It is thenceforth good for nothing, but to be cast out, and to be trodden under foot of men. Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid" (Matthew 5:13–14). Be the light of the world. Let your light shine. The world has no light apart from you. Be like a light, like a lighthouse warning of the rocks. Be always pointing to Christ. Be different from the world around you. Watch and pray lest you enter into temptation, and love Christ with all your heart. And if you love him, you'll keep his commandments (John 14:15).

"And they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy." "Enoch walked with God: and he was not; for God took him" (Genesis 5:24). He walked with God, and then one day, he walked straight into heaven. God took him. It's a great thing to walk with God. Each one of us has to strive more and more to walk with God, to love God, to trust God, to follow God, to pray to God, pray without ceasing, in everything giving thanks, consciously aware of God, as it were, our hand in God's hand, each day going about our business, wherever we are, whatever we are doing—walking in the street, cleaning the dishes, working in the office, driving the car—whatever we're doing, watch and pray, walk with God, talk with God, give thanks to God. Live in his presence. Seek direction from him.

"And they shall walk with me in white: for they are worthy"—in white. "Though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool" (Isaiah 1:18). If you will hear, and if you will obey, and if you will walk with me, then, purified in the blood, you shall be whiter than the snow.

#### **4. He that Overcometh**

And verse 5: "He that overcometh, the same shall be clothed in white raiment; and I will

not blot out his name out of the book of life, but I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.” He that overcometh—overcomes what? Sin, temptation, overcomes the flesh, sinful lusts and envy, and bad temper, and greed. Pride—how hard it is to overcome pride! Overcoming the world, the world that seeks to seduce us, wants us to be like itself, doesn’t like us being different. “Come and join with us in our parties, join with us in our sins.” But the friend of the world is an enemy of God. And we must overcome the devil, Satan, who’s always tempting us to sin—“It’s just a little sin. It won’t do you any harm. It would be an interesting experience for you. You can ask for forgiveness afterward.” No, “Resist the devil and he will flee from you” (James 4:7). Stand against him. Use the Word of God, like Christ did, when the devil said to him, “Command these stones be made bread,” Christ said, “It is written, Man shall not live by bread alone.” Bow down and worship me. Christ said, “It is written, Thou shalt worship the Lord thy God, and him only shalt thou serve.” Cast yourself off the pinnacle of the temple. No, “it is written...Thou shalt not tempt the Lord thy God” (Matthew 4:3–10). He was quoting from the Old Testament, from the Word of God, and the sword of the Spirit sends the devil to flight. Keep your conscience clean. Overcome and persevere, and so, you will be clothed with white raiment in heaven. Who are these arrayed in white raiment? These are they have washed their robes. These are they that are passed through great tribulation (Revelation 7:13). Yes, there are these trials and tribulations. “In this world, ye shall have tribulation” (John 16:33). But these are they that are passed through “great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the lamb” (Revelation 7:14). We need that white raiment, not like Adam, when he, with fig leaves, tried to cover his nakedness; not like man with the rags of his self-righteousness—the Pharisees; but with the beautiful white robes of Christ’s righteousness.

“And I will not blot out his name out of the book of life.” The book of life is a book of those who are entitled to eternal life. In one sense, this could never happen that someone would have their name blotted out of the book of life. We’re told that the book of life was written from the foundation of the world—Revelation 17, verse 8. But it’s a severe warning. You might think your name is in the book of life. If you behave in a sinful way, your name will be blotted out. Make your calling and election sure, and make it sure, by adding “to your faith virtue; and to virtue knowledge; and to knowledge temperance; and to temperance patience; and to patience godliness; and to godliness brotherly kindness; and to brotherly kindness charity” (2 Peter 1:5–7).

And “I will confess his name before my Father, and before his angels.” Those who are ashamed of Christ, he will be ashamed of them on the judgment day. But here, those who confess him, those who overcome, Christ will happily acknowledge them on the judgment day. “They are mine,” he says. “In that day when I make up my jewels” (Malachi 3:17), not one of them shall be lost (John 17:12). Behold, I and the children whom God hath given me (Isaiah 8:18).

So, what about you, then? Do you have a great future? You do have, if you are, indeed, remembering, and watching, and holding fast, and keeping your garments from being spotted by the world. But if you’re sleepy, and dead, and self-righteous, then there’s only judgment ahead. “Strengthen the things that remain,” therefore. “He that hath an ear” to hear, “let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.” The Spirit here is warning the churches. Let us take it to heart. Let us make sure that we don’t have a name that we live, and are dead. But let us have a name that we live, and be alive, really alive for the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.