

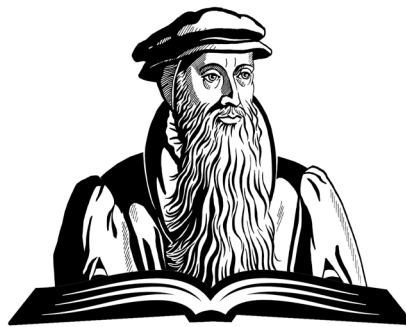
VIDEO LECTURE SERIES

# The Letters to the Seven Churches in Asia

*by Rev. William Macleod*

Lecture #7

## The Letter to the Church in Philadelphia



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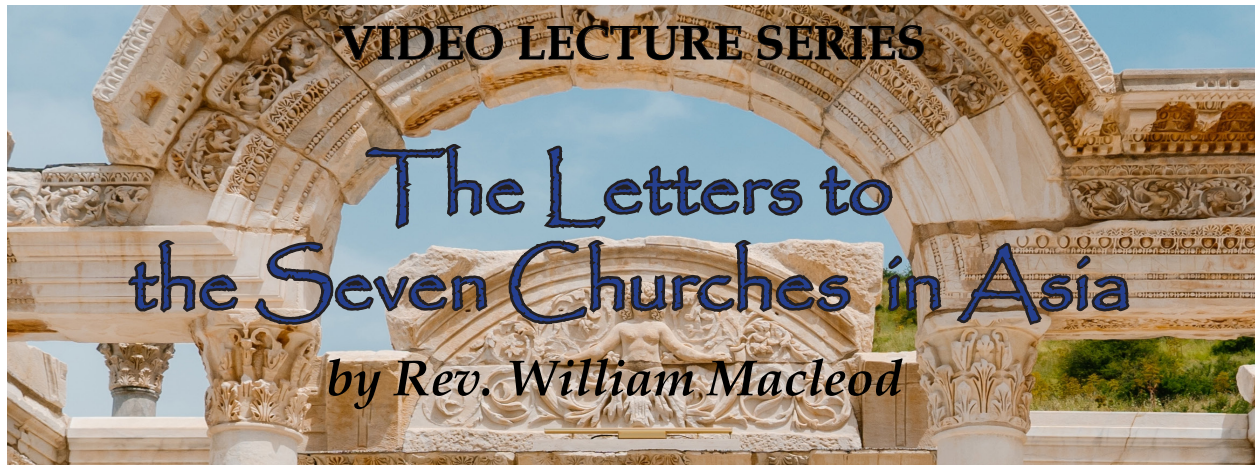
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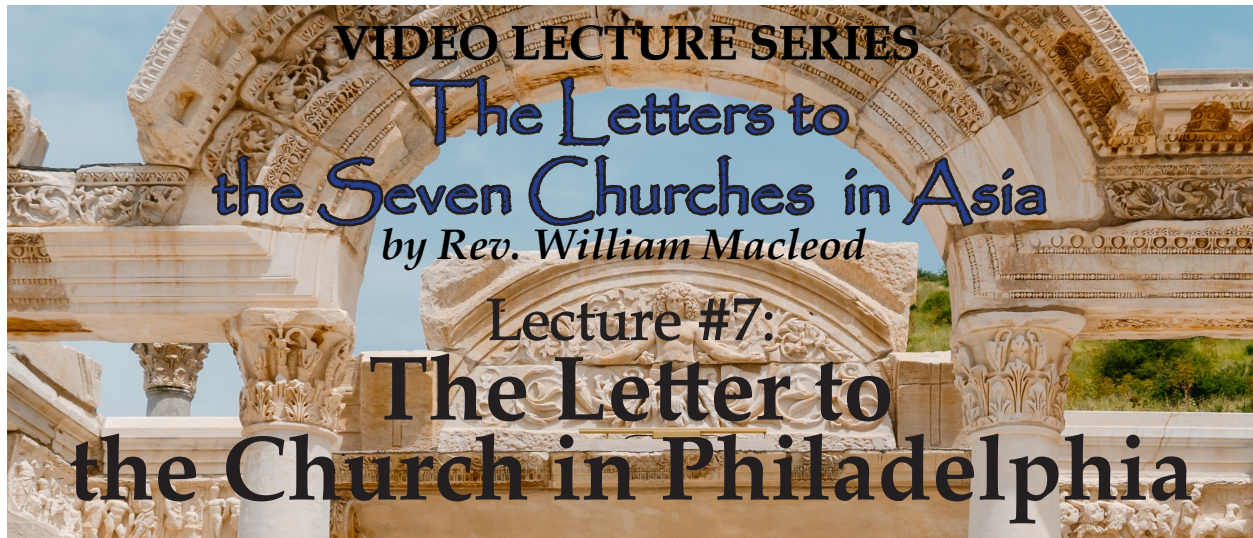
Rev. William Macleod recently retired, after serving as minister of the gospel for 45 years at Knightswood Free Church of Scotland (Continuing), in Glasgow, Scotland. In addition, he was for many years the editor of the denominational magazine, *The Free Church Witness*. He was also Professor of Systematic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

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### Introduction

Our lecture today is on *The Letter to the Church in Philadelphia*. It's recorded for us in Revelation chapter 3, and verses 7 to 13. Philadelphia was situated about thirty miles southeast of Sardis. It was on one of the main trade routes, and was a prosperous city, a great center of Greek culture. The church appears to have been small, financially poor, and yet, it was a faithful church, and like the church in Smyrna, it's one of the two churches that receives no criticism in the letters that are sent to these seven churches in Asia. They are encouraged to stand fast, to be steadfast in a hostile environment.

The minister of my childhood, in Stornoway,<sup>1</sup> Rev. Kenneth Macrae,<sup>2</sup> his diary was published, edited by Rev. Iain Murray, and published by Banner of Truth—an excellent book. When he was dying, he wrote to his congregation. His words were: “Hold fast, let no man take thy crown.” He was quoting from the words spoken to this church. What a great challenge to this congregation, as he was leaving them, but a challenge to every congregation, your congregation and mine. “Hold fast...that no man take thy crown” (verse 11). Make sure that you keep on going, so that at the end of the day, God will place a crown, a crown of glory upon your head.

So first, again,

### 1. He Introduces Himself

We see that in verse 7: “To the angel of the church in Philadelphia write; These things saith he that is holy, he that is true, he that hath the key of David, he that openeth, and no man shutteth; and shutteth, and no man openeth.” He that is holy—how holy Christ is! Perfect and

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<sup>1</sup> Stornoway is the main town, and the largest, of the Outer Hebrides island off the northwest coast of Scotland in the United Kingdom. It is the capital of the Isle of Lewis and Harris.

<sup>2</sup> Rev. Kenneth A. Macrae (1883–1964), was a Presbyterian minister in the Free Church of Scotland.

holy. Holiness is the great distinctive of God. We think of Isaiah 6, where the prophet gets a great vision, a vision of God: “Holy, holy, holy is the LORD” God Almighty (Isaiah 6:3). The holiness of God is the awesomeness of God. We are to fear before him. 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). Reverence is essential in the presence of God. We need to capture that again. We used to be far more reverent in the past. But too many modern churches treat Christ as if he was just one of themselves. There’s no reverence, no godly fear. All the effort is put into pleasing man, and making a comfortable atmosphere for man—the entertaining music, and sermons full of jokes, and superficial stories. But no, there has to be a sense of the holiness of God. We’re coming into his presence. God is awesome; he that is holy. Holy is the Lord. “Be ye holy; for I am holy” (1 Peter 21:16; Leviticus 21:8).

And, “He that is true.” His word is sure. His promises are sure, and we can rejoice in them. But his threatenings are also sure, and we must take them seriously. Christ often spoken about hell. Nobody spoke more about that place, that lake of fire, the place where the worm dieth not, and the fire is not quenched. Nobody spoke more of it than Jesus. He’s always warning. He’s telling us to take his Word seriously, his warnings. He will come one day as a thief in the night, and will he find us ready, prepared to meet our God? *He that is holy, he that is true.*

“He that hath the key of David.” Jesus was the Son of David. He was the true Messiah. The Jews rejected him, but he had the key of David. The key opens the new Jerusalem. It opens heaven for us, and if we are going to get to heaven, we must deal with Jesus. He is the one who opens, and no man shuts, and he shuts, and no man can open. He says, “I am the door: by me if any man enter in...he shall go in and out, and find pasture” (John 10:9). He is the door, and we must come through him unto salvation. He is the only way, John 14:6—“I am the way, the truth, and the life: no man cometh unto the Father but by me.” So, if we’re going to come to the Father, if we’re going to come to salvation, if we’re going to enter into heaven, we must deal with Jesus. We must come to him. Faith in Christ is the only way. “What must I do to be saved?...Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, and thou shalt be saved, and thy house” (Acts 16:30–31).

So, right at the beginning of this letter, there is,

## **2. A Call to Seriousness**

Remember. remember in your church, the awesome holiness of Christ. And remember that his Word is truth. His warnings must be taken seriously, and his promises—we can rejoice in them, they are sure. Christ is the key, the key to heaven, and he’s the only one who has.

And then, verse 8: “I know thy works.” Sometimes we can be working away for the church, we’re doing this, we’re doing that, we’re working away secretly, and maybe we think nobody’s noticing. Perhaps no one around us is noticing, and maybe we feel it’s hard to keep on working when we’re not appreciated. But remember, “I know thy works.” I know what you’re doing, says Christ, I can see it. I can see what you do for that poor old lady. I can see what you do for that sinner lost in sin. I can see what you do in visiting the sick, and helping the poor. I can see your works of charity, of love. “I know thy works.” People might take us for granted, but Christ doesn’t. And that’s encouraging. And Christ, at the end of the day, is the only one that matters. People can think we’re wonderful, but if Christ doesn’t think we’re wonderful, then we’re in a bad way. But even if people despise us, if Christ thinks we’re great, that’s what matters.

“I know thy works...I have set before thee an open door.” But what is an open door? Paul, in 1 Corinthians 16, verse 9, he says, “A great door and effectual is opened unto me,” in Ephesus.



He had great opportunities there to preach, to teach, to witness. People were coming to him, people prepared by God, and he was seeing lives being changed. In his letter to the Colossians, Colossians 4, verse 3, he says, pray “that God would open...a door of utterance, to speak... of Christ.” It’s wonderful when God sets before us an open door. Two things are necessary. An audience—people who are prepared by God, who have a sense of need, who have a hunger, who have a desire to know, who are interested. That’s wonderful, when you have such people coming to you. And then, to have the ability to communicate the gospel with simplicity, with clarity, with conviction, with power. We need the help of the Holy Spirit, but when we have the Holy Spirit, the door opens, the blessing follows, and the church grows. “I have set before thee an open door”—a small church, but there’s this open door, a door of opportunity and a door of blessing. The church won’t die. There’s growth ahead.

“Thou hast a little strength.” They were a small church. They felt themselves, no doubt, to be feeble, but God delights sometimes, oftentimes, indeed, to work through the weak. It brings glory to him. “When I am weak, then am I strong” (2 Corinthians 12:10). It’s good to discover our weakness so that we will, like Paul, put our trust in the Lord. “When I am weak, then am I strong.” He is the one who strengthens us, who works through us. He can use you and me when we feel very feeble. Remember Gideon, when he had 30,000 soldiers with him, God couldn’t use him, so he reduced the number to 300 (Judges chapter 7). But then God could use him. Because God was showing, “I’ll get the glory, where 300 soldiers would overcome a million Midianites. You can do it, because I’ll be with you.” So, in our weakness, we put our faith in him and receive strength.

“For thou hast a little strength, and has kept my word.” That’s important, terribly important. If we’ve been given a word of Christ, treasure it, keep it in our memories, keep it in our thoughts. Keep the whole Word of God. Don’t forget any part of it. Not one jot or one tittle from the law will pass away till all be fulfilled (Matthew 5:18). Every part must be kept. He that breaks one of these least commandments, and teaches men so, shall be called least in the kingdom of heaven (verse 19). So keep the commandments. Keep the Word of Christ. Keep even the little words. “Thou has kept my word”—value it and keep it carefully.

“And hast not denied my name.” In times of persecution, when there’s lots of opportunity for sin and for falling away, it’s wonderful to stand for the Lord. When people are mocking and ridiculing you for the gospel, and yet you’re not ashamed to stand at his side. “Thou...hast not denied my name.” I hope that’s true of you, that you have stood for the Lord, in your situation, in your family, in your workplace, in your neighborhood, wherever you are; and that as churches, we have not denied his name. When others despise us, let us hold fast to Christ and not deny his name.

And then, we’re told about,

### **3. Enemies Being Converted**

Verse 9: “Behold, I will make them of the synagogue of Satan, which say they are Jews, and are not, but do lie; behold, I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee.” The synagogue of Satan—you see that referred to Revelation chapter 2, and verse 9, in the letter to the church at Smyrna. These would be ethnic Jews, and they were very hostile to the early Christians. They rejected Christ the Messiah. They wouldn’t receive him, indeed, they crucified him. And they were very much against those who believed in Jesus. Christ said of them that “Ye are of your father the devil, and the [works] of your father you will

do”—John 8:44. They thought they were the children of Abraham, but they were the children of the devil. Abraham is the father of the faithful. Those who are true believers, they are the children of Abraham. They said they were Jews, but they’re not real Jews. Yes, literally they’re Jews, but they are not real Jews in God’s sight. The circumcision which really matters is not the circumcision of the flesh, but the circumcision of the heart. Paul talks about that in Romans 2, and verse 28, those who were circumcised in the heart. Are you circumcised in heart? Are you a child of Abraham? That is what matters. They were “of the synagogue of Satan,” these Jews were opponents to God, and to Christ, and to the gospel, to the Christian church.

And he says here, “I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee.” Christ is promising to convert them. He can convert the most hostile of persecutors. Remember how he converted Saul of Tarsus, who was on his way to Damascus, “Breathing out threatenings and slaughters against the disciples of the Lord” (Acts 9:1). Jesus met him on the road: “Saul, Saul, why persecutest thou me?...it is hard for thee to kick against the pricks.” “Who art thou, Lord?...I am Jesus whom thou persecutest” (verses 4–5). What a challenge to him! And he soon becomes Paul the Apostle—he is converted. “I will make them to come and worship before thy feet, and to know that I have loved thee.” So these Jews were going to be converted and brought to acknowledge of the Lord Jesus Christ as the Messiah, and the Christians as the true children of Abraham.

Verse 10: “Because thou has kept the word of my patience, I also will keep thee from the hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world, to try them that dwell upon the earth.” You have kept hold of Christ, and he will keep hold of you. He speaks here about the word of his patience, that is, the word of his perseverance, the word and promise of his keeping us. He will keep us. We cannot keep ourselves, but he will keep us. If it was up to us to keep ourselves, there would be no hope for us. We are weak, but Christ keeps us, and that’s where our trust is.

“The hour of temptation, which shall come upon all the world.” The first persecution came from the Jews. They were very hostile to the early Christians. But another persecution is coming that will be far worse, it shall come upon the whole world, upon all “them that dwell upon the earth.” And that will be the persecution from the Romans, a terrible persecution against the Christian church. And yet, there is a promise here, a promise to the faithful there in Philadelphia, that they will be kept. The Lord’s arms are around us. He is a wall of fire around his people, and a glory in their midst (Zechariah 2:5).

Then verse 11: “Behold, I come quickly.” Jesus said that 2,000 years ago. Was he mistaken? Definitely not. Christ is never mistaken. But what we must remember is that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day. What is 2,000 years in the light of eternity? It’s nothing. It’s just like a day that passes away. So, in the light of God’s eternity, yes, he’s coming quickly. But also, he comes quickly, in the sense that he comes with death to us. Often, death comes suddenly. Seldom are people really aware of what is happening. Whatever happens, we’re to be ready. We’re always to be living in this world as those who are watching and waiting—waiting for the return of the Son of man, waiting for the day when he will come to take us to be with himself. Prepare to meet your God.

#### **4. Hold Fast What You Have**

You have something really precious, something wonderful. It’s tremendous to be a Christian, to have all your sins forgiven; to have peace with God; to be adopted into his family; to be sanctified by the Holy Spirit; to know that one day you’ll be perfect; and to know that you’re on

the way to heaven, where you'll be perfectly blessed in the full enjoying of God to all eternity. Hold fast what you have. Cling to it. Let no man take your crown. A crown is promised. They were used to the Greek races in these places in ancient times, and a crown, a laurel wreath, would be given to the winner. And it is, as it were, God, at the end of the race, is holding up this crown to place it upon our heads. Why are we going to let anyone else get it? Let us run so that we will be first. Let us persevere. Let us keep on going. Let's make sure we have the crown, and that we don't lose it to anyone else.

"Behold, I come quickly: hold that fast which thou hast"—hold on to the gospel; hold on to the Bible; hold on to the Christian faith; hold on to Christ. Let no man take your crown. Fight the good fight of faith. Run the race, keep on going till the end.

## **5. A Promise to the Overcomers**

And then, verse 12: "Him that overcometh will I make a pillar in the temple of my God, and he shall go no more out: and I will write upon him the name of my God, and the name of the city of my God, which is the new Jerusalem, which cometh down out of heaven from my God: and I will write upon him my new name." So here's a promise to the overcomers. Are you one of the overcomers? You shall be "a pillar in the temple of my God." David wished that he could stay in the tabernacle, in the temple. He says, Psalm 27, and verse 4:

One thing I of the Lord desir'd,  
and will seek to obtain,  
That all days of my life I may  
within God's house remain;  
That I the beauty of the Lord  
behold may and admire,  
And that I in his holy place  
may rev'rently enquire. (Scottish Metrical Psalter)

He would have loved to stay permanently in the temple, seeing the beauty of the Lord, and inquiring and seeking a blessing for himself. But he went into the temple, but he had to go home again.

But here's a promise, a promise to be overcomers, that you will dwell in the house of the Lord, and dwell in it forever. And you will be a pillar. A pillar is solid, it stands, and you will stand forever. There was a terrible earthquake in AD 17 which flattened the city of Philadelphia. It was rebuilt, but here's a promise, that you will be a pillar that will stand, a solid pillar in the new Jerusalem, a city that will never be flattened.

"And I will write upon him the name of my God." "They shall be mine...in the day when I make up my jewels" (Malachi 3:17). I write my name upon them, and the name of my God. We belong to him. We are his, and he is ours. His name upon us means that we are his property. We are his. We are his portion. We are his inheritance, and he is our portion, our lot, and our inheritance.

"And the name of the city of my God, which is new Jerusalem"—new Jerusalem, the heavenly city—"which cometh down out of heaven from my God." Revelation 21, verse 2. John sees the new Jerusalem descending from heaven, as a bride adorned for her husband ready for her wedding day. Here is the new Jerusalem. And the church in Philadelphia will be part of that new Jerusalem. It has a glorious future—part of the city, and indeed, the bride of Christ.



“And I will write upon him my new name.” Christ’s name—you are redeemed at great cost, not with silver and gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a Lamb without blemish, and without spot. Redeemed by the blood—we are saved, we are made the wife, as it were, of Christ. And when a wife marries, she takes her husband’s name. And so, we take the name of Christ. We are his, and he is ours. Think of Boaz. He took Ruth as his wife—Ruth the Moabitess. And so, she becomes part of his family. And she becomes the mother of Obed, who was the father of Jesse, who was the father of David. So Ruth becomes the great-grandmother of David, and through David, a mother of Christ. She, through the redemption of the kinsman-redeemer, Boaz, she is integrated into the family. And so with you, the church in Philadelphia, “I will write upon [you] a new name”—my name, you are mine; you belong to me.

“He that hath an ear, let him hear what the Spirit saith unto the churches.” Listen to what the Spirit is saying. Hold fast. Keep on going. You will be kept. You have a great future. The church in Philadelphia was small and weak, but it was faithful, and that’s what matters. Are we faithful Christians? Is our church a faithful church? If it is, it will stand, and it will be part of the new Jerusalem. Amen.