

The One Who Searches Minds and Hearts

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[0 : 00] This is the PM service on the 15th of March, 1998. The preacher is Paul Barker. The sermon is entitled, The One Who Searches Minds and Hearts, and is from Revelation chapter 2, verses 12 to 29.

I was in the travel agents yesterday, trying to plan and book my annual holiday. And while I was in a queue, my eye was taken by all the rather seductive and alluring exotic places you could visit. Spectacular pictures on the front of all these glossy brochures in the shelves of this travel agent, making me want to go everywhere rather than stay here.

Well, in Melbourne, I mean. And of course, every travel brochure, every glossy picture, only ever picks the spectacular, the scenic and the beautiful.

Have you ever seen a Melbourne tourist brochure that has got pictures of the back streets or slums of inner suburban Melbourne, or some of the tips or the dumps, or outer western suburbs like Broadmeadows, or the Werribee Sewerage Farm, or something like that?

[1 : 20] No, we have glossy, glamorous pictures of, well, whatever is glossy and glamorous in Melbourne, but we never get a picture of the seedy. If you're on a tour, the tour guide will only ever pick out the good things, the glamorous things, the beautiful, scenic, and so on.

Now, we're on a different sort of tour at the moment. The last couple of weeks and the next couple, and tonight in the middle, we're on a tour of ancient Turkey.

It was then called Proconsular Asia. Seven ancient towns. We visited two of them last week, Ephesus and Smyrna. We're visiting two more tonight. But this is an unusual tour because we're not just seeing the good, or the beautiful, or even the spectacular.

But rather, we're seeing the good and the bad. But even more than that, we're looking underneath the surface. What's this place really like? And especially, what is it really like spiritually?

We're seeing these towns through the eyes of Jesus himself, who's described in the latter part of tonight's reading as the one who searches minds and hearts.

[2 : 31] That is not just the one who sees the surface, but who sees underneath the surface. Well, today's first stop is Pergamum. Pergamum, 110 kilometers we've traveled since last week.

We started in Ephesus, on the coast of the Aegean Sea in what's modern-day Turkey. Then we headed north to Smyrna, and now we've gone fairway, 110 kilometers, slightly inland, to Pergamum.

And what a great place this is. Pergamum would be on your tourist brochure. It would be on a glossy pamphlet. It was very spectacular, and still is. For Pergamum was marked with a 1,000-foot hill, on top of which was a citadel.

It was called the Acropolis, the hill of the city. And on the top of this citadel, there were temple buildings, and other buildings as well. There was a massive altar to Zeus, the main Greek god. Superb, and heavy, and large, and ornate. Carved marble colonnades around it. And there are other temples on this citadel as well. There was also a beautiful theater, the remains of which are still there.

[3 : 41] Very steep theater. I'd go to look at the view rather than the play, because the view down the valley was superb. Something that you'd love to see on a tourist brochure.

Not only was Pergamum spectacular from this point of view, but it was a leading city for other reasons. It was the capital city of Proconsular Asia. Not the biggest city.

That was probably Ephesus. But it's sort of like the Canberra of Proconsular Asia. That is, it's the capital without being the biggest city in trade or population. However, it was also a major healing center.

The Greek god Asclepius was the god of healing, and there was a major shrine and temple to Asclepius there, down the mountain. And so people would travel from all over to this shrine of Asclepius.

In fact, it was probably the second most important healing center in the ancient Greek world. It's the sort of ancient Lourdes for people who go all the way to France, to Lourdes, to try and find miraculous healing.

[4 : 45] People would go there to this shrine or temple of Asclepius for healing. Moreover, Pergamum was a city which had a massive library, 200,000 volumes.

So big was the library at Pergamum, it was only rivaled by the famous library of Alexandria, the city of northern Egypt. And so jealous were the Egyptians of their library that they banned the export of papyrus so that the library in Pergamum could no longer produce books for its library.

Well, the ingenious people of Pergamum invented their own writing material. We call it parchment. The word comes from the same Greek word as Pergamum. Not only this, but Pergamum was a center for emperor worship as well.

In the Roman Empire of the first century AD, people worshipped the Greek and Roman gods, they were sort of synonymous and parallel and so on. But in some places, they especially also worshipped the emperor, whoever the emperor of the day was.

Can you imagine worshipping John Howard? It sort of befuddles the mind a bit to think of it. Well, some people wanted to worship the emperor and some emperors wanted people to worship him.

[6 : 01] This was a city of about 150,000 to 200,000 people. All I've done is pick out the spectacular things, the things you'd see on the tourist brochures. But what does Jesus see in this city?

He's our guide, let him speak. And the words that we read are his. We're told that at the beginning of the passage, Revelation 2 verse 12. And to the angel or the messenger of the church in Pergamum write, these are the words of him who has the sharp two-edged sword.

That's a description of Jesus. No contest about that. Chapter 1 gave a full description of Jesus. In fact, we've just sung most of it in the second song tonight. And this is just one glimpse of that.

The one who has the sharp two-edged sword is Jesus Christ. And his initial words about this church in Pergamum are, as usual, full of praise.

Inevitably, Jesus begins with words of commendation before he goes into words of criticism. Now, Pergamum was a hard place for Christians to live in.

[7 : 07] It was very hard to live as a Christian there. Not only because of the general pagan shrines to the Roman gods, but also because they insisted on people worshipping the emperor.

So Jesus acknowledges that. He acknowledges the fact that for these Christians, it is not easy to live in Pergamum. So he says in verse 32, I know where you're living, where Satan's throne is.

Satan's throne? Certainly sounds like enemy territory. Some people think that Satan's throne was the altar to Zeus, the massive slab at the top of the citadel, at the top of the hill.

Something that it's perhaps to do with the healing temple of Asclepius. Because the symbol for healing, then as now, is a serpent. And the serpent, of course, in Genesis chapter 2 and 3 is, or chapter 3, is the symbol for Satan.

Probably, though, it's actually just referring to the worship of the emperor. Later in the book of Revelation, in all the pictures and visions, Satan keeps recurring in different guises, and always it's associated with the Roman Empire and the worship of the emperor.

[8 : 24] So that seems to be what Satan's throne is about. It's talking about, this is the place where people gather to worship the emperor. That didn't happen in every city of the Roman Empire. This was one with a major temple for the worship of the Roman emperor.

So here, then, is a Christian community in enemy territory. And the devil, the enemy, is attacking on two fronts, as he always does.

The enemy usually attacks in one of these two ways, if not both. Persecution, or seduction. Now this is a church facing persecution, firstly.

So verse 13 goes on to say, Yet you are holding fast to my name, and you did not deny your faith in me, even in the days of Antipas, my witness, my faithful one, who was killed among you where Satan lives.

These are Christians who are being praised for holding fast their Christian faith in difficult circumstances, under persecution. The Roman Empire trying to break up Christian churches, trying

to prevent people from being Christians, and persecuting, even killing, as this unknown person, Antipas, was killed.

[9 : 37] Trying to kill Christian people for their Christian faith. And even when Antipas was killed, and therefore the temptation would have been great for his fellow Christians to give up and say, I'm no longer a Christian, I'm not going to face death.

But even then, they held fast to Jesus Christ. So this is a church that has passed the persecution test.

But the other test is the seduction test. And they do not fare so well. Verse 14 goes on to say, But I have a few things against you.

You have some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling block before the people of Israel so that they would eat food sacrificed to idols and practice fornication.

Balaam was a character in the early part of the Old Testament. He was a diviner, prophet-type figure. And he was called upon and employed by the Moabite king.

[10 : 42] Moab was a nation neighboring Israel. And the king's name was Balak. It's a bit confusing, Balak and Balaam. Getting them confused is quite easy. Balak the king employed Balaam, the diviner prophet, to speak words of curse against Israel.

But every time Balaam opened his mouth to do that, he would issue forth words of praise and commendation and blessing on Israel because God was preventing him cursing them. Balaam was a bit of a fool.

His donkey spoke to him and told him off at one point. Balaam's ass. But even though God was preventing Balaam to speak words of curse against Israel, Balaam advised king Balak how to seduce Israel with the Moabite women.

Give them a few women, a bit of food and they'll be gone. And they were. The Moabite women seduced Israel and Israel as a nation fell into gross sin.

Pagan food and pagan women. Seductions of the devil in every age. Remember, of course, it was food that beguiled Adam and Eve in the garden in the very first seduction.

[11 : 51] And often it's the same. And Israel fell for it as Adam and Eve did. And so does the church in Pergamum. When Jesus is speaking about this church and saying there are some there who hold to the teaching of Balaam, it's hardly likely that there were people standing up in the church and saying we should do what Balaam did and we should advise.

No, that's not the point. Rather it seems there are people in the church who are teaching things which have the same effect as what Balaam had taught Israel way back in about 1400 BC.

That is, in the end, leading to immorality, sexual impurity or promiscuity and also into eating food offered to idols and therefore into the idolatry that is associated with such pagan practices.

Often in the ancient world the two are combined anyway. You'd go to a pagan feast and you'd end up sleeping with someone. Feasts were often excuses for great debauchery sexually.

Now anyone in Pergamon in the first century AD would struggle with this society because everyone would go to the temple to worship and be part of the feast and the drunken debauchery and so on that goes on.

[13 : 04] And we know in our own society what people say about those who refuse to be part of that sort of culture, the getting in off with some other person or getting drunk too much, etc.

the peer group pressure would have been strong as indeed in our own society it is for adults as well as teenagers. To have a bit of too much to drink, a bit of drugs, a bit of illicit sex, gambling, dabbling in the occult, peer group pressures of all sorts today no different to ancient Pergamon.

They look appealing, attractive, they seem to promise something, of course they never really deliver the goods. Maybe these teachers are the Nicolaitans.

Maybe it's a different group. They seem to have the same sort of philosophy. The Nicolaitans are mentioned in verse 15. So you also have some who hold to the teaching of the Nicolaitans. They were rejected from Ephesus as we saw last week.

Jesus is saying that this Pergamon is just like ancient Moab. God's people are being seduced by the evil one. leading into fornication and food offered to idols.

[14 : 17] As Israel sinned, so the church of Pergamon is sinning as well. And it sounds all too familiar because in our western world this could easily be a picture of what's going on in the church.

Christians in the western world are seduced, not persecuted, generally speaking. We in Australia are not being persecuted, really, but we are being seduced.

And the church seems to have swallowed some of the seduction, hook, line and sinker. It's in the third world where persecution is being wrought on the church. It's in the western world that we're being seduced.

And sadly, the devil is highly successful. The church in Australia has people from, is facing the seduction from without and sadly too often church leaders from within who are saying in effect compromise with the world, accept the world's standards, dabble and enjoy yourself in the world's pursuits and pleasures, it doesn't really matter.

There are plenty of Christians and Christian leaders who are swallowing the liberal sexual values of our pagan world as the Christians of Pergamum did as well. Jesus' words of response to this are unambiguous.

[15:32] Repent or be judged. Verse 16, repent then. If not, I will come to you soon and make war against them with the sword of my mouth.

The same sword that's mentioned back at the beginning of this letter. Seems that the proconsul, the governor of the area would carry a sword and had the right to use it. This is saying Jesus' sword is even sharper than that.

Two-edged because that's how we respond to it. One edge points to salvation. The other of the same word leads to judgment. The church in the West stands under this same judgment if it does not repent.

But as always, there is a promise in these letters to these seven towns. To anyone who has an ear, listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

To everyone who conquers, I will give some of the hidden manna. Hidden manna? Manna was the strange food given to the Israelites for the 40 years in the wilderness.

[16:37] The period around which Balaam was acting. Hidden manna? Manna was regarded as food from heaven. What this is promising to those who refuse to indulge in the food and feasts to idols is the food of heaven.

Food forever. For those who abstain now from the food to idols, Jesus is promising eternal food. The food of heaven. And more than that, he says, I will give you a white stone.

Which is a fairly obscure sort of promise. Probably though, in the Greco-Roman world, it seems that sometimes white stones were used as tickets for entry into feasts and maybe other major events, the gladiatorial games and so on.

So you'd buy your ticket and be given a white stone. Maybe inscribed with something on it. Maybe your name or maybe the name of the event or something like that. That was the ticket to get in. What Jesus therefore is promising here is not only the eternal food, but the ticket of entry to that heavenly banquet. It's ours through him.

[17:49] And it's a great promise and a great gift. Well, our next stop is Thyatira. We could spend ages in Pergamum.

Certainly very beautiful. But as we've seen, it also has a lot under the surface to make us steer clear. Thyatira, 60 kilometers southeast.

The journey that we're taking in this tour, you can see, has gone up to the north and now we've turned at Pergamum and we're heading southeast. And basically, we'll follow through to those last four towns to the southeastern direction.

So we're doing a great big crescent in our little grand tour of Turkey. Though it was the least important of these seven towns, it's the longest letter. We don't know much about Thyatira.

There's nothing excavated there virtually to show us anything about the ancient city. Though we gather it was an important trading center in place of guilds or trade unions and probably it was manufacturing cloth.

[18:50] Lydia, who's a lady mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles in Philippi, had come from Thyatira and she was a trader in cloth. Again, Jesus addresses the church through an angel or messenger.

Again, there's a description of Jesus that's unique. These are the words of the Son of God. Though that's an expression we probably know of Jesus very familiarly, it's also one that's unique in Revelation.

but more than that, this is Jesus has eyes like a flame of fire and feet like burnished bronze. Picking up descriptions back in chapter 1 as we've already sung tonight.

Probably the reference to the fact that he's there called the Son of God may allude to the fact that there was probably a temple of Apollo in Thyatira. Apollo, the son of Zeus, that is the chief god. This is a claim of Jesus that he is the Son of God. And again, Jesus' first words are words of praise. I know your works, he says. Your love, faith, service, patient endurance.

[19 : 56] I know that your last works are greater than the first. That's a stringing sentence of praise to a church. The Ephesus church didn't have love and its later works were not as good as its former ones.

It is waning in its zeal for the Lord. This church is very different from the Ephesus church. It's marked by love and its works for the Lord are improving and increasing.

Unlike the Ephesus church, the Ephesus church had been very rigorous in rooting out heresy, but this church as we'll see was one that indulged it. This was a church marked by faith or faithfulness. Service, as in a ministry, one person to another. Not of one person doing all the ministry, but of everybody in the Christian church serving each other in practical and spiritual ways.

That's a great statement of commendation. But, there's always a but, verse 20, but I have this against you. You tolerate that woman Jezebel who calls herself a prophet and is teaching and beguiling my servants to practice fornication and to eat food sacrificed to idols.

[21 : 10] It's a similar problem to Pergamum, you see. Food to idols and fornication, but no mention of Balaam, rather a different Old Testament character. This time, Jezebel.

Jezebel was a wicked queen, the worst of all of Israel's history in the Old Testament. Her husband was Ahab. Jezebel wasn't even an Israelite. She came from the northern part, from Sidon and Tyre. What's modern day Lebanon? And she, unlike anybody else in ancient Israel, formally and overtly instituted the worship of other gods.

Where Israel did worship other gods before that, it was sort of subtly and bit by bit a sort of mixture of their own proper worship of God and other things being incorporated into it.

But here, for the first time, comes a systematic removal of the worship of God and the worship of other gods and idols by this awful queen Jezebel. And the result of her life was to lead Israel astray into worshipping other gods and indulging in immorality.

[22 : 20] Now again, it's probable that there's a false teacher, it seems, in Thyatira who does not say, hey, come on guys, we've all got to follow what Jezebel said. Nobody would say that. Jezebel's a sort of arch enemy she's a very bad person.

In Israel's or Jewish eyes, she'd be sort of like a Hitler figure or in a Christian sense a Judas type figure. Nobody would ever get up and say, let's follow that sort of person. But rather, Jesus' words here are saying that the false teacher or teachers, and probably it's a woman, in the church of Thyatira has got the same effect as Jezebel.

That's how drastic the situation is. The comparison is probably meant to make the church of Thyatira open its eyes and see the truth and see how bad the false teaching in its midst was. She was a teacher like the teachers like Balaam in the church of Pergamon, promoting liberal views about this world, compromising with the world. These were probably to use modern expressions, these were Nike teachers.

That is, they were saying just do it, indulge yourself, practice what the world practices. These were Nike people through and through. It's a very dangerous philosophy, just do it.

[23 : 38] But that's the philosophy of this liberal and compromising world view. They're probably saying things like there's no harm to go up to the temple.

If God's God, then their gods are nothing. What does it matter? Go up to the temple, indulge in their feasts. The body's not all that important, so indulge your body, because in the end it's the spirit world that matters and so on.

Sounds plausible, sounds alluring, all your neighbours are going up there and having a great old time. Why don't you go? It's not that harmful. Well, we can only speculate what she was telling the church in Thyatira.

But again, Jesus' words are just as unambiguous. Repent or face judgment. Jesus is saying that this teacher is exactly the same as Jezebel, indulging and enticing people into adultery.

Literally, that is, jumping into bed with all sorts of people, but spiritually as well, because spiritual adultery is abandoning God with whom we're meant to be in an exclusive relationship and playing

around with all sorts of other gods and idols.

[24 : 49] Jesus' words very clearly, repent. Indeed, Jesus has given her time to repent, verse 21 says, but she refuses to repent.

How Jesus has done that, we're not sure, whether through John, whose book this is, or whether through other faithful Christian teachers at Thyatira, we're not sure, it doesn't matter. She's had an opportunity to repent and she has refused.

Beware then, verse 22 says, I am throwing her on a bed, probably to make her sick, is the idiom, and those who commit adultery with her, literally or metaphorically, spiritually that is, I am throwing into great distress unless they repent of her doings.

And I will strike her children dead, meaning those who follow what she teaches and indulge in the same sort of practices. And the result of this, and all the churches will know that I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve.

It's a quote from the prophet Jeremiah. It's actually a quote that applies to God. It's interesting that Jesus says it about himself. Very clear that Jesus' own view about himself was that he was divine, he was God, because he appropriates what is for God in the Old Testament for himself.

[26 : 07] Jesus is the judge. And not only, he doesn't just judge by appearances, he searches minds and hearts and judges accordingly. As the prayer at the beginning of an Anglican communion service says about Jesus, he is the one from whom no secrets are hidden.

And here is that truth for us. You cannot fool the one with the flaming fiery eye, as he was described back in verse 18. He sees beyond the surface.

We cannot escape his judgment. judgment. But this is a judgment for those in the church who've fallen. Those in the church who've followed the false teaching and not discerned what is true.

To the rest of the church, that is, as verse 24 says, those who do not hold this teaching, who have not learned what some call the deep things of Satan, probably a sarcastic comment to the followers of Jezebel who say, we've got the deep things of God here.

Rubbish, they're the deep things of Satan. To you I say, I do not lay on you any other burden, only hold fast to what you have until I come. Persevere, hang in there, be strong Christians there, resist the temptations, the seductions and so on of this world and even from within the church, hold fast to when I come.

[27 : 33] And again the promises each letter has. And what a stunning promise this is, to everyone who conquers and continues to do my works to the end, I will give authority over the nations to rule them with an iron rod as when clay pots are shattered, even as I also received authority from my father.

When Jesus rose from the dead and before his ascension he said to his disciples in well-known words, all authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. that's extraordinary in itself.

But here what Jesus is saying to each one of us who persevere in Christian faith, all authority in heaven and on earth is shared with you. Isn't that an extraordinary promise?

That we share the almighty authority of Jesus Christ for eternity in heaven. it's mind-boggling. It's hard to understand especially if you were a little Christian in a tinpot town like Thyatira under the mighty Roman empire thinking that this empire is ruling over me and I've got no hope of breaking out of this paganism.

Jesus is saying hang on and persevere and you will not only rule it but all the nations, all authority that Jesus has is shared with faithful Christians.

[29 : 01] It looks very hard to believe that sometimes but that's a promise we cling to in our perseverance. More than that Jesus promises something else as well.

In verse 28 at the end he says to the one who conquers I will also give the morning star. Well if you're like me and don't get up all that early in the morning the gift of the morning star is not all that enticing.

It's rather an obscure promise I think. Balaam in one of his words talks about a star that will rise in Judah. It's a reference in the end to Jesus Christ himself.

I think that's what it's referring to. At the end of Revelation chapter 22 the morning star seems to be Jesus. So here is Jesus saying I will give you myself.

That's the gift for those who persevere in Christian faith to the end. Let me conclude with a couple of comments. The early church as indeed any church is a mixture of good and bad.

[30 : 11] There's no perfect church then or now no matter how hard we try. From time to time people say come let's get out of this church out of this denomination and form our own church or join another purer more holy church.

Let's be the church that we're meant to be and be perfect on earth. But it never happens. It's a flawed pursuit because all churches face internal problems.

No church is perfect and therefore within every church there is the potential for an internal threat to truth and morality. That's what we've seen in Pergamum and Thyatira.

People within the church teaching false things. Jesus doesn't say to the faithful Christians come out of the church but rather stay in and resist.

That means that Christians have the obligation to detect false teaching, to detect false practices, to shun it, rebuke it, and reject it.

[31 : 21] But the imperfect church is never a reason to leave the church or leave the Christian faith. Ever. But if the church is vulnerable to internal threats, it's also vulnerable to external threats and that's what we see again in both of these two letters.

Not only were there false teachers within but there were pressures from without of persecution and seduction. temptation. This is a church in a pagan world, in a pagan hostile culture and we fool ourselves if we think we're much different in modern Australia.

Ours is a pagan secular culture. It's opposed to the gospel. Sometimes it may look as though it's sympathetic but it's not. The pull of our world, its enticements, its allurements, its indulgences, very seductive and very strong.

It is incumbent on all Christians to resist that seduction, to resist what the world promises and cling to what Jesus promises, to resist what looks to be so enticing in our world, whether it's drugs or drink or sex or the occult or any other sort of form of promiscuity, immorality or indulgence but cling to Jesus Christ.

Thirdly, these two letters remind us that Jesus is the judge. Our world doesn't believe that and one day it will come in for a shock because Jesus will come to judge.

[32 : 55] He threatened then, the promise still stands and one day he'll return and it won't be a judgment that we can fool him by. It won't be like one of our school teachers at school that we can borrow somebody else's work and they will be fooled because they think we've done very well.

It won't be the sort of exam that we can just cram at the last minute by finding an older brother or sister who's brighter than we are and get all the answers from them. No, this is a Jesus who judges by searching the hearts and minds.

He knows what's within. He's not fooled by the exterior facade. We cannot hide from him. He sees beyond the glossy tourist brochures. He sees beyond the scenic, beautiful, spectacular and he sees what's underneath, the seedy side.

The good and the bad. He sees what's within. But finally, these two letters remind us also of the rewards of Jesus for those who persevere in faith.

They're gifts, not something we earn. They are ours through Jesus' death and victory on the cross. in the end, you see, these letters are not just to two ancient churches that no longer exist.

[34 : 08] They are to us. The letters tell us that as chapter 2 finishes. Let anyone who has an ear listen to what the Spirit is saying to the churches.

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