

Matthew 16:13-20

Review

Last time, we looked at the first half of Matthew 16. In this chapter, Matthew transitions again from recounting some of Jesus' miracles to more of Jesus' teachings. Recall that the Sadducees and Pharisees had approached Jesus to test Him by asking Him to perform a miracle. Jesus refused their request, asking why they could foretell the weather by looking at the sky, but couldn't discern the **"signs of the times"** – that is His fulfillment of the ancient messianic prophecies. Then after departing from them, Jesus warned His disciples about the **"leaven"** of their false teaching.

The passage we take up next is one of my very favorites in all the Word of God. I'm really excited about this lesson, because while studying the passage in preparation, God opened up for me new insights into this familiar story. The writer of Hebrews tells us that **...the word of God is living and active...** God speaks to us by His Word day-by-day, revealing to us new truths about Himself, and drawing us closer to Him. Thus, He fulfills His promise made through the prophet Jeremiah to the exiles in Babylon.

¹³You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart.

Jeremiah 29:13 (ESV)

Let's continue now with our verse-by-verse study in Matthew.

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. ¹⁹I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." ²⁰Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ. Matthew 16:13-20 (ESV)

Both Mark and Luke also report this event (Mark 8:27-30, Luke 9:18-20). Of the three accounts, Matthew's is the most detailed. The other accounts don't add any significant insights to the story, so we won't examine them in any detail.

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Nahal Hermon – Caesarea Philippi

Caesarea Philippi is in northern Galilee at the southwestern base of Mt. Hermon which forms the modern border of Israel, Lebanon, and Syria.

The city was founded sometime after the conquest of the eastern Mediterranean region by Alexander the Great in 333 BC. The city was originally called Paneas after the Greek god Pan to whom a temple was built in the city.

Pan's temple was adjacent to a limestone cave known as Pan's Grotto out of which a stream called Nahal Hermon – one of the three main headwaters of the River Jordan – once flowed. A major earthquake (possibly the great Jordan Rift Valley Earthquake

of 1033 AD) has since largely blocked the cave and changed the stream's flow. Today it originates from diffuse springs a short distance below and in front of the cave entrance. The spring of Paneas is about 1,300 feet above sea level at the base of Mt. Hermon which rises to over 9,000 feet. From the spring, the Jordan drops about 2,000 ft over the course of about 25 miles to the Sea of Galilee some 700 feet below sea level.

Paneas became part of the Roman Empire in 20BC when it was annexed to the Herodian Kingdom of Judea ruled by King Herod the Great. When he died in 4BC his kingdom was divided into parts ruled by his sons who were called tetrarchs. Herod's son Philip became tetrarch over the northernmost territory of Herod the Great's kingdom and established his administrative center at Paneas – renaming it Caesarea Philippi after himself and his patron – the Roman emperor. On modern maps, the city is known by its Arabic name – Banias.

NOTE – Caesarea Philippi should not be confused with Caesaria Maritima on the Mediterranean coast. That city was an important seaport during the Roman occupation of Israel, from which Paul returned from his missionary journeys, and later departed in chains to be tried before Caesar.

Matthew's account doesn't tell us how Jesus and His disciples came to be at Caesarea Philippi. Recall from our previous study that after His encounter with the Sadducees and Pharisees for whom He refused to perform a miracle, Jesus departed by boat from the region of Magadan on the western shore of the Sea of Galilee to "***the other side***" where Jesus warned His disciples about the "***leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees***." From there, Mark tells us that they came to Bethsaida (Phillip's hometown) near the inflow of the Jordan into the Sea of Galilee opposite Peter, John, and James' hometown – Capernaum.

It would make sense that the group then journeyed up the Jordan river from Bethsaida to Caesarea Philippi. This was the most direct route, and of course the Jordan provided them drinking water, so they needn't have carried water with them. As we will see in Matthew 17, Jesus was leading them up to a high mountain (possibly Mt. Hermon) upon which He was transfigured before them and appeared

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gloriously with Moses and Elijah. If indeed, Mt Hermon is the same high mountain where Jesus was transfigured, then Caesarea Philippi lay along the path leading up to its summit from Bethsaida.

None of the accounts about this event explicitly says how many of Jesus' disciples were with Him on this journey. But the story gives a sense of intimacy with Jesus among a small group of disciples. Certainly, only a small number who could journey in a single small fishing boat arrived in Bethsaida from "the other side." There is no way to determine how many left Bethsaida with Jesus after He healed the blind man there. As we shall see, Jesus had already set His course toward the Mount of Transfiguration when He left Bethsaida, so it seems He only brought an intimate inner circle of His disciples with Him on the journey. The only ones specifically mentioned are Peter, John, and James.

As they neared Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked a pointed question.

¹³Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" Matthew 16:13 (ESV)

Of course, being Immanuel (עִמָּנוּאֵל *immānū'el*) – God with us, Jesus certainly knew what people were calling Him, and who people thought He was. In asking the question, Jesus was setting up His disciples (and us) for a "teachable" moment that would culminate on the Mount of Transfiguration when He gave some of them a slight, brief glimpse of His true glory.

The way Jesus couched this question is somewhat humorous. He gave them the answer about His "true identity" within the question itself. Jesus often referred to Himself as the ***Son of Man***. By doing so, He outraged the Jewish leaders and the ordinary Jews of His own hometown Nazareth. They knew that this title was the same one Daniel used in his messianic prophecy about the coming King of Israel.

***¹³"I saw in the night visions,
and behold, with the clouds of heaven
there came one like a son of man,
and he came to the Ancient of Days
and was presented before him.
¹⁴And to him was given dominion
and glory and a kingdom,
that all peoples, nations, and languages
should serve him;
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,
which shall not pass away,
and his kingdom one
that shall not be destroyed. Daniel 7:13-14 (ESV)***

Thus, by calling Himself ***The Son of Man***, Jesus in essence plainly declared Himself as the fulfillment of that prophecy – the promised מָשִׁיחַ *māšîaḥ* (anointed one) of Israel.

But Jesus didn't ask who His ***disciples*** believed He was – not yet. He wanted ***them*** to consider what ***others*** believed about Him while He was leading them toward the Mount of Transfiguration.

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They then gave Him their honest considered responses to His question.

14And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.” Matthew 16:14 (ESV)

By this time, Jesus’ cousin John the Baptist had been beheaded by command of Herod Antipas (Matthew 14:1-12, Mark 6:14-29, Luke 9:7-9). Apparently, some people believed that Jesus was a reincarnation of John the Baptist. In fact, the tetrarch himself believed this.

1At that time Herod the tetrarch heard about the fame of Jesus, 2and he said to his servants, “This is John the Baptist. He has been raised from the dead; that is why these miraculous powers are at work in him.” Matthew 14:1-2 (ESV)

NOTE – Matthew’s account of the death of John the Baptist is given as a sort of explanatory note to what Herod Antipas said here to his servants about Jesus being the reincarnated John the Baptist (Matthew 14:3-12). Jesus Himself had learned about John’s execution just prior to the feeding of the 5,000 (Matthew 14:13).

Elijah and Enoch are the two people the Old Testament says did not die in the ordinary sense.

24Enoch walked with God, and he was not, for God took him. Genesis 5:24 (ESV)

...

11And as they still went on and talked, behold, chariots of fire and horses of fire separated the two of them. And Elijah went up by a whirlwind into heaven. 2 Kings 2:11 (ESV)

Thus, some Jews had apparently begun to believe that Jesus was Elijah come back to life. If indeed, others were saying that Jesus was the reincarnation of Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the other Old Testament prophets, they were certainly ignoring the implication Jesus made by repeatedly calling Himself ***The Son of Man***.

15He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?” 16Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ [Χριστός christos], the Son of the living God.” Matthew 16:15-16 (ESV)

Everybody loves Peter. He exhibited the childlike faith in which Jesus said we must ***all*** receive the Kingdom of God if we wish to enter into it (Luke 18:17). We get the sense here in Matthew 16:16 that Peter blurted out his answer even before Jesus finished asking the question. We can almost hear the other disciples muttering to themselves something like, “There goes Simon shooting off his big mouth again.” Peter certainly had his ups and downs in His relationship with our Lord. That’s one reason his character resonates with us. We see something of ourselves in Peter’s struggles and his triumphs. Even after many years – first walking with the incarnate Jesus and later serving the Church as an evangelist and leader, Peter never lost the childlike wonder of his faith. He provides Christians a good example of enthusiastic service to God’s Kingdom, and joy of our salvation in Christ.

The Greek word ***Χριστός christos*** Peter uses here in Matthew 16:16 means “anointed” or “anointed one.” It occurs over 500 times in the New Testament. It is the corollary Greek word for the Hebrew ***מָשִׁיחַ māšîaḥ*** used in the Old Testament to refer to the promised redeemer of God’s chosen people

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Israel. מָשִׁיחַ *māšîaḥ* also means “anointed” and is transliterated into English as “Messiah.” In using this word, Peter clearly acknowledges Jesus’ own title for Himself – ***The Son of Man***.

ASIDE – Although we read this account in modern languages translated from ancient manuscripts written in Greek and Latin, Jesus and His disciples almost certainly conversed day-by-day mostly in Aramaic – the language commonly used throughout the region at the time. The Aramaic form of the word מְשִׁיחָא *mshîḥā* is quite similar but not identical to the ancient Hebrew form of the Old Testament.

17And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.

Matthew 16:17 (ESV)

Jesus’ response to Peter’s quick, correct answer is equally enthusiastic. He begins by calling Peter using his given name – Simon Bar- Jonah. Peter’s family name Bar-Jonah means “son of Jonah.” Many cultures in the world still today use some form of their language’s words for “son of” to formulate family names. Peter’s father’s name – Jonah – means “dove.” It is intriguing that the “Greek” for Peter’s family name we find here in this verse – Βαριωνᾶ *bariōna* – is a transliteration of the Aramaic form of the name – בַּר יוֹנָה *yônâ bar*.

The name Simon (Greek – Σίμων *simōn*) means “hearkening” or “to hear.” It is derived from the Hebrew שִׁמְעוֹן *šim ōn*. Recall that Jacob’s first wife Leah gave this name to his second son.

33She conceived again and bore a son, and said, “Because the LORD has heard [שמע *šāma*] that I am hated, he has given me this son also.” And she called his name Simeon [שִׁמְעוֹן *šim ōn*]. Genesis 29:33 (ESV)

When Jesus said that Simon’s sudden realization that Jesus is מָשִׁיחַ *māšîaḥ* didn’t come from ***flesh and blood***, of course that included Himself in the form of the Son of Man. Not only had no other person told Simon who Jesus is, but even Jesus Himself had not. Simon had suddenly come to the certain knowledge that Jesus isn’t just “a good man” or “a gifted and righteous rabbi,” as most people in the world today think of Him, but that He was and is the מְשִׁיחַ *māšîaḥ* – the one who would finally defeat Satan, sin, and death – whom God had promised to send as the offspring of Eve all the way back in the Garden of Eden when mankind first fell into sin (Genesis 3:15). That divine revelation came to Simon by the will and voice of God the Father. True to his name, Simon had heard and was blessed as Jesus said.

When we were little, and our parents called us by our full names, that was a certain clue that they were about to say something important that we needed to heed. Jesus called Simon by his given and family names here as an “attention grabber” so that Peter and all the disciples would pay attention to what He was about to say.

18And I tell you, you are Peter [Πέτρος *petros*], and on this rock [πέτρα *petra*] I will build my church, and the gates of hell [ᾗδης *adēs*] shall not prevail against it.

Matthew 16:18 (ESV)

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It is significant that Jesus uses Peter's given name Simon initially in Matthew 16:17 in response to Peter's straightforward answer to Jesus question who His disciples thought He was. In God's Word we find several instances in which God renamed someone in response to significant events in their lives.

For example, when God established the covenant of circumcision with Abram (אַבְרָם *'abrām*) whose original name meant "exalted father," God renamed him Abraham (אַבְרָהָם *'abrāhām*) – meaning "father of a multitude" signifying that Abraham was to become the progenitor of the nation of Israel (Genesis 17:5).

Later as Jacob (יַעֲקֹב *ya 'āqōb*) – whose given name means "heel holder" or "supplanter" was returning to the land of promise after a twenty-year absence with his 12 sons who would become the patriarchs of the tribes of Israel, God renamed Jacob Israel (יִשְׂרָאֵל *yīsrā'ēl*) which means "God prevails" (Genesis 32:28).

So it was with Simon whom Jesus renamed Peter. Of course, there is no more significant event in life of any person than the moment in which we first come to saving faith in Jesus' Gospel as Peter did here at Caesarea Philippi. By the time these accounts were written down, Simon was commonly called by Jesus' "pet" name Peter or by both his given name Simon and the name Peter which Jesus gave him. In fact, in the very first mention of Simon in the gospel accounts, Matthew mentions specifically that Simon "**...is called Peter.**" (Matthew 4:18)

NOTE - Jesus called Peter by his original name Simon son of John three times in a row when the risen Lord restored Peter into fellowship after his failure and denials on the night Jesus was betrayed. Here again, Jesus did this as a means of getting Peter's attention to make sure he understood His three separate commissions for Peter to "**Feed my lambs,**" "**Tend my sheep,**" and "**Feed my sheep.**" (John 21:15-19)

18 And I tell you, you are Peter [Πέτρος petros], **and on this rock** [πέτρα petra] **I will build my church, and the gates of hell** [ᾗδης adēs] **shall not prevail against it.**

Matthew 16:18 (ESV)

We need to pause for a moment and carefully examine what Jesus said as He gave Simon Peter his new name, because in my (always) humble opinion, many Bible expositors have gotten this wrong.

This verse is the first mention in God's Word of the Church. The Greek word – ἐκκλησία *ekklēsia* – that's translated into English as "church" is a compound word composed of ἐκ *ek* meaning "from" or "out of" and καλέω *kaleō* meaning "to call," "to invite," or "to call by name." Of course, this is particularly applicable to Simon whom Jesus had called to leave behind his vocation as a fisherman and to follow Jesus as his Teacher and his Lord to become a fisher of men. In fact, there at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus had just called Simon out with a new name – Peter – which we'll look at in more detail shortly. But this calling out from the world is equally applicable to all Church members who have been called by the Father through the voice of His Spirit into fellowship with and service to our Lord Jesus. We know that the Church is not a physical facility. The Church is the universal fellowship of God's people – called out from the world by Him and set apart (made saints) for Him.

Peter's new name – Πέτρος *petros* – is the diminutive form of the word πέτρα *petra*. Both words mean rock or stone, but the diminutive form refers to a stone such as one might hold in the hand, while the word we see translated as "rock" in Matthew 16:18 speaks of a larger stone like a building

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stone or a boulder. So, Jesus was having a little joke here with Peter and the other disciples using this play on words.

NOTE – Peter is also called by the name Cephas (**Κηφᾶς *kēphas***) in the gospel of John (John 1:42) and in two of the Pauline epistles – 1 Corinthians and Galatians. Cephas is a Greek proper name derived from an Aramaic word meaning “rock.”

Which rock did Jesus mean when He said, “**...on this rock...?**” That question has been the subject of considerable debate over the centuries since Jesus told this little joke. But what did Jesus mean when He said he would build His Church upon this **πέτρα *petra***?

The view held by the Roman Catholic church is that Jesus meant Peter himself, saying that He would transform Peter from a **Πέτρος *petros*** one might hold in the hand into the **πέτρα *petra*** building stone upon which His Church would be founded. The Catholic church view is that the Church was built through the succession of Popes who followed Peter as the “mother” Church’s leaders. But if this is what Jesus meant, He had His work cut out for Him in Peter’s transformation. Far from standing firm in his profession of faith when faced with danger for proclaiming the Gospel, Peter would soon deny three times that he even **knew** Jesus. Recall that Jesus Himself would emphasize Peter’s lack of rocklike character when He called Peter three times by his given name Simon son of John before assigning him the new tasks of feeding His lambs, tending His sheep, and feeding His sheep.

The idea of Peter the man being the foundation upon which Jesus is building His church just doesn’t ring quite true to me. The true foundation of the Church is without doubt Jesus – and Him crucified, not any mortal man. Peter himself speaks of Jesus as the Cornerstone upon which we – His Church – are being built.

4As you come to him, a living stone rejected by men but in the sight of God chosen and precious, 5you yourselves like living stones are being built up as a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. 6For it stands in Scripture [Isaiah 28:16]:

“Behold, I am laying in Zion a stone, a cornerstone chosen and precious, and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.” 1 Peter 2:4-6 (ESV)

I think most likely, when Jesus spoke of the rock upon which He would build His Church, He meant Himself as the foundation – the certainty of which was revealed to Peter by God the Father at Caesarea Philippi when he said, “**You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.**” Jesus is the foundation upon which the church is built, and the God-given revelation of Jesus as **מָשִׁיחַ *māšîaḥ*** is how true believers – His living building stones – are being built up into His Church that rests on Him as its foundation.

18And I tell you, you are Peter [Πέτρος *petros*], and on this rock [πέτρα *petra*] I will build my church, and the gates of hell [ᾗδης *adēs*] shall not prevail against it.

Matthew 16:18 (ESV)

So, what did Jesus mean when He said that **...the gates of hell [ᾗδης *adēs*] shall not prevail against...** His Church? Often, we think of this phrase in terms of Jesus using His Church as His

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army in assaulting the realm of the evil one on Earth. But recall that Caesarea Philippi where this story took place was a city originally named after the Greek god Pan. The pagan worship of Pan took place at Pan's Grotto and at other shrines carved nearby in the face of the cliff. The cave where this pagan worship took place has therefore sometimes been known as "the gates of hell." Perhaps Jesus was hearkening back to Old Testament references to death as the "gates of hell." (e.g. Job 38:17 & Isaiah 38:10). Certainly, Jesus has won the victory over death by His shed blood on the cross and His resurrection. His true Church shares in that victory over death through our profession of faith in Jesus Gospel.

19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. Matthew 16:19(ESV)

Peter is often depicted carrying keys in paintings and statues because of this verse. He is also depicted in literature as the gatekeeper in Heaven for the same reason. But of course, the Kingdom of Heaven has no literal keys, and no human gatekeeper allows or denies entry into Heaven. Our means of entry into the Kingdom of Heaven cost Jesus His life. On the cross, and by His resurrection on the third day, Jesus purchased for all of us the means for entering the Kingdom of Heaven. All that is left for us is to lay claim to what Jesus has already obtained for us. Paul tells us exactly how we must make that claim.

9b...if you confess with your mouth that Jesus is Lord and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved. Romans 10:9b (ESV)

The statement Jesus makes here about binding and loosing is talking about our supplications to our Father in prayer. He expands on this idea later in His instructions regarding so-called "church discipline."

18 Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. 19 Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. Matthew 18:18-19 (ESV)

20 Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ. Matthew 16:20 (ESV)

Jesus knew the fore-ordained timetable of His earthly ministry just as He now – in His re-glorified state at the right hand of the Father knows the day and hour of His coming return. He knew that day at Caesarea Philippi that it was not yet time for Him to be revealed to the general public as **מָשִׁיחַ** **māšîaḥ**. His Father had revealed Him as the Christ only to Peter on that day. Apparently, the remainder of the disciples in this small group also agreed with Peter's profession of faith. So, Jesus charged them all to keep the revelation to themselves until the proper time.

Looking Ahead

God willing, next time we'll continue our study of Matthew.