

The Church of the Servant King
Survey of the Bible Series
The Gospel of Matthew
(Lesson SB-MT16)

Enemies in Pursuit of a Common Foe – the Pharisees and Sadducees Seek a Sign (16:1-4)

In these verses, Jesus is still on the west side of the Sea of Galilee in the area known as Galilee. In chapter 15, a group of Pharisees from Jerusalem had traveled north to investigate Jesus. Here in chapter 16, Pharisees and Sadducees question Jesus. Their questioning is not from an attitude of seeking the truth, rather the sign they sought was a sign consistent with their view of what the *true* Messiah would be and do. They sought a sign like that of the plagues on Egypt (Ex 7-12), or having the sun stand still (Josh 10:12-14) which involved Israel's victories over its enemies.

In a veiled way, Jesus prophesies His own death on the Cross. This is the second time in which Jesus has prophesied about His death with reference to Jonah (see Matt 12:39-41). On both occasions, the prophecy was in response to the religious leaders seeking a sign.

The Leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees (16:5-12)

Leaven does not always refer to evil; however **in this instance it does**. Leaven is used to represent evil in 1 Corinthians 5:6-8 and Galatians 5:9 as well as many Old Testament passages such as Exodus 12:15 and Leviticus 2:11. However, this is not always the case, e.g. Leviticus 7:13 and 23:15-18.

Review Note Regarding The Parable of the Leaven in Matthew 13:33 - In the parable of the leaven, we saw that although leaven sometimes symbolizes evil, the principle of leaven is that a little leaven has an effect upon the whole of the dough with which it interacts. When yeast is kneaded into dough, it expands by itself. The kingdom of heaven (i.e. the Millennium) is seen to grow based upon the internal dynamic of the Holy Spirit verses being powered by outward armies or organizations. The kingdom was offered without any display of pomp or extravaganza.

We saw that the *point of the parable* was – the kingdom produces ultimate consequences out of all proportion to its insignificant beginnings. The dough [not mentioned] is Israel, whereas the yeast or leaven is the gospel of the kingdom. This is a parallel truth to the parable of the mustard seed. *Alternative interpretations (the professing, but unbelieving Church of the mystery age or unbelieving Israel of the Tribulation) of this parable by various dispensationalists overlook the fact that the leaven represents a principle related to a growth dynamic and not evil in this context (i.e. Matthew 13).*

Back to Matthew 16:5-12 – Here the picture of leaven interacting with the whole of the dough is a good picture of the manner in which evil has a tendency to permeate the thoughts of all those with whom it interacts. In much the same manner that a little yeast affects the whole lump of dough, so false doctrine affects the entire perspective of the believer. The false doctrine of the Pharisees and the Sadducees stemmed from their respective distortions of the Law (see previous lesson) into a means of salvation or evidence of salvation. Other distortions of these two groups either centered around or derived from that basic distortion. The grave danger of false doctrine to the believer is that it affects a believer's ability in several ways:

- Improper understanding of the spiritual life (e.g. legalism in Phase 1 & 2 and no grace orientation to life)
- Lack of objectivity in life (e.g. exaggerated self opinion or improper view of humility, no spiritually grounded self esteem, inability to deal with injustice in life, no orientation to authority or true humility, improper view of the purpose of human

history, improper view of God's interactions with man, distraction with human good endeavors)

- Deception regarding one's relationship and fellowship with God

Peter Confesses Jesus as the Christ (16:13-20)

Caesarea Philippi was north of the Sea of Galilee and Lake Huleh on the east side of the Jordan and near the ancient town of Dan at the base of the southwestern slope of Mount Hermon. It was about 120 miles from Jerusalem, 50 from Damascus, and 30 from Tyre on the coast. This town had long been associated with idol worship. It was first a Canaanite sanctuary for the worship of Baal and for centuries it was a center of worship of the heathen god Pan whereby it became known as *Paneas* and in more recent times *Banias* (because there is no *P* in the Arabic alphabet). It was the northernmost point of Jesus' travels and it was in the vicinity of Caesarea Philippi that Jesus began to prepare His apostles for His approaching sufferings, death and resurrection which included the transfiguration event. The site for pagan worship centered on a massive stone façade and was the basis for Jesus' play on words – "upon this rock."

In **verse 18**, Peter's answer that Jesus was "the Christ, the Son of the living God" was an acknowledgment that Jesus was the Messiah. The Greek word Χριστός is the same as the Hebrew word for *Messiah* and means *the anointed One*. Hebrew Scriptures (i.e. the Old Testament) were very clear that the Messiah was more than a human; he was God (Is 9:6; Jer 23:5-6; Mic 5:2).

Jesus' response to Peter's statement has been the basis for much controversy and debate through the years. Did Jesus mean that He would build his church on Peter so that Peter was the first Pope? Or, did Jesus mean that He would build his church on Himself, the Rock (πέτρα), whereas Peter stone was really just a chip of the Rock? First, I will present some exegetical facts:

- The Greek word for *Peter* is Πέτρος and is in the masculine gender.
- The Greek word for *Rock* is πέτρα and is in the feminine gender.
- The Greek word for church is ἐκκλησία and means *assembly*.

Now, I will present some other observations:

- The future tense of the verb "I will build" indicates that the foundation of the church is yet to come.
- Much is sometimes made of the distinction between (rock, stone – masc. gender) and (rock – fem. gender). Thus, it is argued that the rock on which the church is to be built is not Peter, who is a mere stone, but Jesus himself, the rock of foundation (cf. 1 Pe 2:5-8).
- Had Matthew wanted to say that Peter was a stone in contrast with Jesus the Rock, the more common word would have been *lithos* which refers to a stone of any size. However, if Jesus had used, there would have been no pun or play on words (i.e. *petros* – *petra*).
- Jesus is using a figure of speech in Matthew 16:18 known as a *metaphor*, i.e. one term is used to represent something else. [Note: a simile is a figure of speech in which two unlike things are compared, e.g. "he is solid like a tree."]
- The problem with metaphors in the Bible is that sometimes broad generalizations can be made about their meaning in all instances based upon their use in one passage, e.g.
 - Some have opined that leaven always represents evil; however, we have seen in the previous lesson that it is not always so in the Bible.
 - Jesus is said to be the church's foundation in 1 Co 3:11; however, in Eph 2:19-20, the apostles and the prophets are the foundation and Jesus is the cornerstone.
 - In Matt 16:18, Peter has the keys, yet in Re 1:18 and 3:7, Jesus has the keys.
 - In Jn 9:5, Jesus is the light of the world, yet in Matt 5:14, His disciples are.
- Metaphors should be interpreted based upon their immediate context.
- In this passage, Jesus is the builder of the church, therefore it would be using mixed metaphors to see Him as the foundation also.
- Jesus changed Peter's name from Simon to Cephas (Aramaic for rock) or Peter (Greek for rock) when they first met.

- We must allow that an objective analysis of this passage could see Peter in some way being the foundation of the church, yet not force us to adopt the Roman Catholic views of papal succession, infallibility, or the priority of Peter.
- Eph 2:20 indicates that the apostles and the prophets are the foundation of the church.
- Peter and the other apostles would not have understood Jesus' reference to the church as anything other than an assembly of those who believed in Jesus. They had no concept of the New Testament church of Acts that would consist of Jews and Gentiles.

Various interpretations of this passage have been presented over the years. The major interpretations are:

- Jesus was indicating that He would build His church upon Himself in contrast to Peter who, although a rock, did not match Jesus.
- The church is built upon Peter and the other apostles as the building's foundation stones (Eph 2:20; Re 21:14).
- The church is built upon Peter's testimony of faith based upon revelation given to him by the heavenly Father.
- Jesus was praising Peter for his accurate statement about Him, and was introducing His work of building the church on Himself.

While I could accept any of the above interpretations, I prefer the following interpretation:

- Peter was the first to make this confession that "Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God."
- Peter was very prominent in the early church (Acts 1-2).
- However, Peter was subject to the other apostles in that he was sent on occasion by the others (e.g. Acts 8:14).
- He was held accountable by the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:1-18) and rebuked by Paul (Gal 2:11-14).
- Peter's special apostolic authority in the form of the "keys of the kingdom" relates to Peter's re-offer of the kingdom to Israel ("church" = assembly of Jews in Acts 3 especially 3:19). Peter was granted the privilege of re-offering the kingdom first to Israel. Peter had no special authority to bind or loose except the binding or loosing that would occur as a result of Israel's acceptance or rejection of the truth. The same privilege was extended to the other apostles in Matt 18:18.
- A point of confusion: the fact that the word church has a general meaning (i.e. "assembly") and a more technical meaning (i.e. "Church" = body of Christ in a different age) is significant.
- Jesus' use of the word "church" to refer to an assembly of Jews at a point in time future to Matthew 16 is confused with the fact that Peter would re-offer the kingdom to the "church" (i.e. assembly of Jews) in Acts 3 within the Church Age.
- I have no major issue with those who view Peter as simply the first among equals (i.e. the other apostles) to acknowledge Jesus as the Messiah and Son of God, especially in view of Matthew 18:18.
- However, to limit the explanation to that point alone ignores the special authority that seems to be conveyed to Peter by our Lord.
- I have no major issue with those who understand that it was upon the same faith to be expressed eventually by all apostles that Jesus would build the Church (i.e. His body in the Church Age).
- However, to limit the understanding of this passage to that point ignores the distinction between the general and technical uses of the word "church" not to mention the context of Matthew 16 to include the gospel of the kingdom that Jesus and His apostles were preaching up to that point in the narrative and even after Matthew 16.

In **verse 18b**, Jews would have understood Jesus' reference to the gates of Hades to refer to physical death. The phrase "gates of Hades" or very similar expressions are found in canonical literature (Job 17:16; 38:17; Psa 9:13; 107:18; Isa 38:10), non-canonical Jewish literature, and pagan literature and it refers to death and dying. So, Jesus is saying that even death will not prevent Him from establishing His church. Remember that Hades in the New Testament is synonymous with Sheol in the Old Testament. There are two compartments in

Hades, i.e. torments and Abraham's bosom or paradise (Luke 16:22-23). One was the abode of unbelievers and the other the abode of believers of the Age of Israel and prior. Therefore, the gates of Hades referred to death.

In verse 19, the phrases "the keys of the kingdom of heaven" and "whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" needs explanation. The phrase "*the keys of the kingdom of heaven*" refers to the re-offer of the kingdom to Israel that occurred in Acts 3. Peter had the privilege of explaining the transition to a new age (e.g. Acts 2:14-39 and 3:11-26). Included within Peter's explanation of the transition to the new age of the Church was the re-offer of the Messianic Kingdom to Israel should they repent regarding the Person of Jesus Christ (Acts 3:12-21). Peter possessed the keys to the kingdom in the form of the re-offer of the kingdom to Israel after the Church Age began.

The phrases "*will be bound*" and "*will be loosed*" are perfect tense verbs (i.e. completed action in past time with results that continue indefinitely). In other words, a more correct translation might be "*shall have been bound in heaven*" and "*shall have been loosed in heaven.*" Peter accomplishes the binding and loosing by proclaiming truth that had already been given to him and allowing the free will of men to respond or reject. The response or rejection had been seen by God the Father since eternity past and entered into the divine decree of God for human history. Peter had no special authority from God to bind or loose men's souls, only to proclaim the truth that would then bind or loose men's souls based upon their response. Jesus makes the same statement to all the disciples in 18:18. Heaven had acted first by foreknowing those who would believe.

In **verse 20**, Jesus gives His apostles a strange command. The reason Jesus gives this command is that He knew based upon His experiences so far that the nation was not going to respond to His offer of the kingdom. There was no reason for His disciples to try to convince the nation if Jesus Himself was being rejected. Instead, Jesus begins to prepare His disciples during the remainder of His ministry for His death and resurrection. From this point forward in Matthew, there is little to no teaching of kingdom (Messianic) rules or principles. Jesus' teaching begins to shift to prophecy related to His death and resurrection, the Tribulation, and the Second Advent.

Jesus Predicts His Death and Rebukes Peter (16:21-23)

Peter was trying to keep the Lord from dying, but that was the primary reason Jesus came into the world. Trying to prevent the Crucifixion, as Satan had earlier tried to do (4:8-10), resulted from not thinking from God's viewpoint.

Discipleship is Costly (16:24-27)

A disciple of Jesus must deny himself and all of his ambitions. He must take up his cross of death to self and follow Jesus' example of self-sacrifice. In the Roman Empire a convicted criminal, when taken to be crucified, was forced to carry his own cross. This showed publicly that he was then under and submissive to the rule he had been opposing. Likewise, Jesus' disciples must demonstrate their submission to the One against whom they had rebelled.

A Prediction by Jesus (16:28)

After speaking of His coming kingdom, Jesus stated that some disciples standing there with Him would be permitted to view His coming kingdom before they experienced death. This statement has caused many to misunderstand the kingdom program since they wonder how the disciples saw the Lord coming in His kingdom. The transfiguration (17:1-8) is the explanation.