

Matthew 16:13-28: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Date: 07 March 2020

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[0 : 00] Matthew chapter 16 verses 13 to 28. Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, Who do people say that the Son of Man is?

And they said, Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. He said to them, But who do you say that I am? Simon Peter replied, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

And 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. And 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.

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. Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

[1 : 13] And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, Far be it from you, Lord, this shall never happen to you. But he turned and said to Peter, Get behind me, Satan, you are a hindrance to me, for you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.

Then Jesus told his disciples, If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.

For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done.

Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom. In the second half of Matthew chapter 16 is one of the strongest declarations of Christ's identity within the Gospels, given by Peter as he confesses that Christ is the Son of God.

Jesus asks his disciples who men say that he is, and there are a list of prophets given in response. Elijah, or maybe John the Baptist who has come back, or maybe Jeremiah or some other of the prophets.

[2 : 38] The association with Elijah can be seen back in Malachi. At the end of Malachi, that promise that Elijah will come before that great day of the Lord.

Maybe Jesus is that promise coming to pass. Maybe John the Baptist was only the start of the mission, and there needs to be another coming in the spirit and power of John the Baptist to complete it.

Maybe in the same way as Elisha finishes the ministry of Elijah. And Christ could be that one. Other prophets seem to be mentioned. No one seems to mention Moses here, which is interesting.

He is the great prophet that is to come like Moses. But that is not mentioned at this point. What is Jeremiah mentioned? Jeremiah is a righteous sufferer and martyr.

He's led as a lamb to the slaughter in Jeremiah chapter 11 verse 19. He's a prophet who preaches against the temple. Maybe Christ is coming in that mould. When Peter declares Christ to be the Son of the Living God, Christ responds by giving a symmetrical statement.

[3 : 44] You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God. You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church. There is a symmetry between those two statements. What does it mean that Christ declares Peter to be the rock?

First of all, this is something that is not exclusive to the book of Matthew. We find a similar statement in John chapter 1 verse 42. He brought him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him and said, You are Simon, the son of John. You shall be called Cephas, which means Peter. There are various theories about what it means for Christ to call Peter, Peter. Why is he called the rock? Why is he associated with this? Maybe we can look back at Isaiah chapter 51 verse 1 to 2 for some hint of what it could mean. Listen to me, you who pursue righteousness, you who seek the Lord.

Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug. Look to Abraham your father, and to Sarah who bore you. For he was but one when I called him, that I might bless him and multiply him.

[4 : 49] Abraham there is the rock. He's the rock from which Israel was drawn and hewn out as a nation. In John the Baptist teaching in Matthew chapter 3, we've already seen what might be an allusion back to this.

When John said that God could raise up from the stones children for Abraham, it was most likely that his heroes would think back to this chapter from Isaiah. Peter, like Abraham, is one who stands at the head of a people.

As Christ forms his church, he forms it with Peter as the leading one of the disciples. Christ is going to build a church.

That's interesting seeing the interplay of the language of an assembly. The church is not so much a building as an assembly of people, like a military assembly.

Christ is going to establish a new assembly, but he's going to establish it as a building. It's a building and also an assembly of people. We can think about a military assembly.

[5 : 49] We can think also about the building of a temple. And so these two things go alongside each other. Within the epistles, this interplay is explored in much more detail.

We see the way that Paul, on the one hand, will talk about Christ building a body, and on the other hand, talking about him building a building, or of the building being knit together as if by sinews, this language of the body, this language of the house, and the way that the people are described as living stones, or built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

We're building a house, but we're also building a people, an assembly of people. Jeremiah uses some sort of language of building people in places like chapter 12, verse 16, 18, verse 9, 31, verse 4, 33, verse 7, and 42, verse 10.

So this does have some sort of precedent in the Old Testament. The military connotations of an assembly might also be worth looking into here. Maybe we're supposed to think back to Israel encamped around Sinai, God forming a people in that context.

And there, the tabernacle itself is supposed to represent Sinai, and the people at Sinai, and also a body. The tabernacle is described in many ways that recall the formation of a body.

[7 : 12] Beyond this background, I think there's a particular passage that may be especially important for understanding what Christ is declaring here to Peter. In the book of Jeremiah chapter 1, Jeremiah is called for his mission.

Reading from verse 9, Then the Lord put out his hand and touched my mouth, and the Lord said to me, Behold, I have put my words in your mouth. See, I have set you this day over nations and over kingdoms, to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant.

And the word of the Lord came to me, saying, Jeremiah, what do you see? And I said, I see an almond branch. Then the Lord said to me, You have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it.

The word of the Lord came to me a second time, saying, What do you see? And I said, I see a boiling pot facing away from the north. Then the Lord said to me, Out of the north disaster shall be let loose upon all the inhabitants of the land.

For behold, I am calling all the tribes of the kingdoms of the north, declares the Lord. And they shall come, and every one shall set his throne at the entrance of the gates of Jerusalem, against all its walls all around, and against all the cities of Judah.

[8 : 23] And I will declare my judgments against them, for all their evil in forsaking me. They have made offerings to other gods, and worshipped the works of their own hands. But you, dress yourself for work, arise and say to them everything I command you.

Do not be dismayed by them, lest I dismay you before them. And I, behold, I make you this day a fortified city, an iron pillar, and bronze walls, against the whole land, against the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land.

They will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you. For I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you. Paying attention to this passage, we may be seeing a number of the elements that we find in Matthew chapter 16.

God promises to give to Jeremiah the power to pluck up and to break down, to destroy and to overthrow, to build and to plant. It's similar to the power that is given to Peter to bind and to loose. There's a similar pairing there. And that's given to Jeremiah through God's placing of his words in his mouth, so that Jeremiah might act with the authority of God's word as he bears God's word upon his mouth.

[9 : 40] Other things to notice, there are the references to gates, the gates that are threatened in the case of Jerusalem. And then also all these people bringing themselves against the gates of Jerusalem, these various kings and rulers that are conspiring to break down those gates.

And the way that Jeremiah himself is set up, set up like Peter is set up as a rock. Peter is set up as a rock. Jeremiah is set up as a fortified city, an iron pillar and bronze walls.

God declares that the gates of hell will not prevail against the church. Here he declares that they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail against you. For I am with you, declares the Lord, to deliver you.

And I believe that paying attention to this, it will help us to unlock the meaning in part of the statement that he can bind and loose. In its core meaning, it's much the same as what's given to Jeremiah.

And what Jeremiah is given is the power of God's words upon his lip. It's not just a blank check of authority. Rather, it's God giving him his word, his revelation, so that with that revelation, he can transform the world.

[10 : 54] And God has called Jeremiah, God calls Peter. And Peter is going to be the one who brings forth the word of God in the most powerful way. He's going to be the one who preaches the sermon on the day of Pentecost.

He's going to be the one who brings the word of God to the Gentiles. He's opening doors. And he's closing doors as well. The judgment upon Jerusalem, the judgment upon the Jews who reject Christ.

Peter is the one who pioneers in both of those respects. And we should take the singular you seriously. Peter is not just addressed as the spokesperson of the disciples at this point, although the other disciples later on have the same power given to them in chapter 18.

No, the point is that he has an authority as the one who's at the head of them, as the one who's going to lead them in this new stage of the kingdom. The father has revealed the son to Peter. It's usually the other way around. We usually speak about the son revealing the father. But Peter is the one who's going to bring forward this revelation to others. We might notice that Paul uses the paradigm of Peter's experience and the experience of Jeremiah in Galatians chapter 1.

[12 : 09] Galatians chapter 1 verse 11 following, And then later on, And then in verses 7 to 9 of chapter 2, Note there, the parallel between Peter's experience and Paul's experience.

Paul is seen as representing to the Gentiles what Peter represents to the circumcised. Peter is the one who's been explicitly commissioned with this ministry above all the other apostles.

He is the head of the apostles. He's the first among the apostles. He's the one that stands out, the most prominent apostle with this ministry. And Paul is his counterpart to the Gentiles.

And that relationship between them is expressed by expressing Paul's experience in the same sort of language as Peter's is. And also in the fact that Paul takes, as Peter does, the paradigm of Jeremiah as the paradigm for understanding his call.

Further to this, we might note that this is the only place within Paul's letters that Peter is referred to as Peter. Everywhere else he is called Cephas.

[14 : 08] And Peter being described as a pillar here connects with the language of rock. A pillar is something that holds up an edifice just as the rock of Peter is the rock upon which the church is built.

That initial building, that establishment, as Jeremiah is established as a fortified city, so Peter is established in a similar manner. The keys of the kingdom that are given should bring our mind back

to Isaiah chapter 22, verse 22, where similar language is used of Eliakim, the son of Hilkiyah, who is given authority over the household of David.

And I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David. He shall open and none shall shut and he shall shut and none shall open. The authority within David's house is something that is given to Peter.

The authority that he has is as a steward of the house of David. David, of course, being Christ. Now it's very easy to read this as an event that's focused upon Peter.

But it's Christ who's going to build his church. Peter is going to be the one who is the steward particularly. He's going to play a pivotal, redemptive, historical role. But Christ is the one who's going to establish his church.

[15:24] He's going to build this congregation of people. The power of the keys can be connected with the power of teaching. It's the power that Jeremiah has, the power of the word of God, to open things up, to open up the ministry to the Gentiles, to open up the ministry to the Samaritans, to open up the ministry of the day of Pentecost.

That is the authority given to Peter. And God gives him the keys by giving him his word. This is not some blank check of authority. It's not some ongoing Petrine office.

It's not the way that the Catholics have often understood this as the role of the Pope within the church that continues. Rather, it's the ministry of Peter as a pivotal figure in redemptive history.

He is the rock as Abraham is the rock. He is the rock as Jeremiah is established as a fortified city, as one who has the power to open up a new period of redemptive history.

We might also think of Matthew chapter 23 verse 13, where there are people who close up the kingdom of God to others. The scribes and the Pharisees, as they do not teach the people, they end up closing the kingdom.

[16:34] Peter is the one who's going to be opening it up. And he's going to be bringing judgment upon those who are unfaithful, but he is going to be opening things up. He is exercising an authority here that is also ascribed to the church later on.

In Matthew chapter 18 verse 17 following, If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

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. 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.

For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. These are two places in the book of Matthew where we find the expression of binding and loosing.

Also where the church is referred to. These are not common places in the book of Matthew. But yet the church is used in different senses. In the story of chapter 16, in reference to Peter, it's the church universal.

[17:41] Here it's more the church in a particular context. The building of the house upon the rock might also make us think about Christ as the Davidic Messiah.

We've already had the key of the house of David and the way that that's related to Eliakim. And then Peter has that key. He's the steward of the house of David. He's the one under the king, the Messiah, who's going to open things up for the Messiah.

That building of the house is something that's committed to the Messiah. It's something that the Messiah would do according to promise. And now Christ is going to build that house. He is going to be the one who fulfills the promise of the Davidic Messiah.

After this grand confession, however, they are instructed to keep these things quiet. It is not yet the time for this secret to be generally known. In fact, it will not be properly revealed until after the death and resurrection, which reveal the true character of Christ as the Son of God.

He is not the Son of God in the sense of a military leader, in the sense of a Davidic power who's going to rule over the nations without suffering. Rather, he is the suffering servant.

[18:49] He's the suffering king. He's the king like David during the coup of Absalom. And perhaps in Christ's rebuke that follows to Peter, we might recall that earlier event.

As David rebukes Abishai, who seeks to strike Shimei, David said, What have I to do with you, you sons of Zeruiah, that you should this day be as an adversary to me?

It's very much the similar expression that Christ gives to Peter. Peter is as Abishai. We see him doing that role later on as well, as Christ has to prevent him from striking with the sword when

