

Matthew 16:13-20: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 0 0] Matthew chapter 16 verses 13 to 20 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.
- Today is the feast of the confession of Peter. So we'll be taking a break from our study of John's Gospel to look at Matthew chapter 16 verses 13 to 20, in which Peter declares that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the living God.
- [1 : 1 9] Now first of all, why do we take time out to look at a passage like this, rather than just going straight through the scriptural order? One of the reasons why is because our faith is a faith that is grounded in historical events.
- And so having particular times of the year where we remember significant historical events within the Gospels and elsewhere, is a means by which we root ourselves in cycles of remembrance, anticipation, through the cycles of the year that remind us that our faith is grounded in events that happen in time and space.
- Our faith is based around not just abstract doctrines like justification and sanctification, adoption, glorification, but around specific occurrences in history.
- And one of these important events is the confession of Peter. As we see within the Gospel, it is a turning point within the narrative. It's at this point that the narrative starts to turn away from the Galilean ministry and move towards Jerusalem.
- Shortly after this, Jesus will go up with three disciples onto the Mount of Transfiguration, and then descending it, he will set his face towards Jerusalem and move towards Jerusalem.
- [2 : 3 3] If the first phase of the Gospel focused around the witness of John the Baptist, and Jesus moving on from that witness into his Galilean ministry, the second stage of the Gospel takes the confession of Peter as its starting point.
- We see this more clearly within the Gospel of Luke, where there are very manifestly two stages in Jesus' ministry. Jesus has the first stage that is built around Galilee, and begins with the theophanic event within the baptism, and then the second stage begins with the witness of Peter, the transfiguration, and then the movement towards Jerusalem.
- Now, John the Baptist's witness is a crucial part of the Gospel, so much so that every single Gospel records John the Baptist. And at a later point in Acts, we're told that to be an apostle, someone had to be a witness of Christ from the beginning, with the ministry of John the Baptist, until the resurrection.

The witness of Peter will play a similarly important role, a pivotal role, in the development of the early church. Now, as Protestants, we can often be nervous about the character of Peter, and giving him the sort of status that Roman Catholics give him, particularly in the reading of this passage.

But yet, I think as we read through the Gospel, we'll see that he's given a prominence that deserves attention. As with Mary, we can often be scared of some extremes, and miss what the Gospel is actually saying.

[4 : 11] There are many points within the Gospel, for instance, in going to the tomb, where Peter seems to be given a priority. It will be Peter who leads the way in bringing the Gospel to the Gentiles later on.

His witness plays that pivotal, crucial role in moving the Gospel out into that wider realm. Likewise, for the early church, he's the one who leads the other apostles on the day of Pentecost.

He's the one who's involved in pioneering the Gospel in the land of Samaria, in the dealings with the Jewish leaders, and in various other situations, until Acts chapter 12, where there is a transition point, and Paul starts to take the priority.

Paying close attention to the text will help us to recognise the importance of Peter as a character, but will also disabuse us of some misunderstandings that we might have, and extreme views.

Immediately after this event, Peter has to be rebuked as, Satan, get behind me, Satan, because of his failure to recognise the character of Christ's mission. He, like many others, does not understand what Christ has been called to do, and that failure to understand Christ's mission leads him to make demands upon him that are characterised by misunderstanding.

[5 : 34] Likewise, we see the experience of the disciples in chapter 17 that follows, where they cannot heal, or drive out the demon from the young lad, and Christ rebukes them for their unbelief.

As he comes down the mountain, this has similarities with Moses' confrontation with Aaron, after he comes down the Mount Sinai, and Aaron has failed to lead the people and has built a golden calf, Jesus' disciples fail in key ways.

Another thing to notice is that Peter is not the only one given the power to bind and loose. A couple of chapters later, in chapter 18, the disciples more generally are said to have this power.

And so this is not something that is restricted to Peter. Peter is the first of the disciples, the one who leads them out into the first stage of their mission, but he's not the only disciple with that authority, nor is he a disciple who continues in that role in the longer term in certain respects.

We see that it's James that really leads the council in Jerusalem. It's Paul who becomes the great apostle to the Gentiles. So we need to be careful of giving Peter too exalted a place.

[6 : 51] So while recognising the importance of the character, let's not exaggerate it. After he makes his confession, Jesus says that Simon should be called Peter.

Now Peter associates him with stones and rocks. And Christ then goes on to say that on this rock, I will build my church. Now it's interesting, just a few verses later, Peter is compared to another sort of rock, a stumbling block, something that gets in the way of Christ's mission, rather than being a foundation upon which Christ's church could be built.

It's an obstacle in its way. And so there's something ambivalent about Peter's identity or Simon's identity. Either he can be a stumbling block or he can be the rock on which things are built.

Now that imagery of the rock on which things are built is something that is taken up in Ephesians. We see it also in the book of Revelation, where in the book of Ephesians, in chapter 2, verse 20, the church is built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ being the chief cornerstone.

And Peter is the lead one of the apostles. He's the one, in many respects, upon which this building is erected as part of its foundation.

[8 : 11] I believe that there's Old Testament background that helps us to understand what Jesus is saying to Peter at this point. In Isaiah chapter 22, we read the statement to Eliakim, the son of Hilkiah.

In that day, I will call my servant Eliakim, the son of Hilkiah, and I will clothe him with your robe and will bind your sash on him and will commit your authority to his hand. And he shall be a father to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah.

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. And I will fasten him like a peg in a secure place and he will become a throne of honour to his father's house.

The authority committed to Eliakim over the house of David and the keys that he's given to open and shut are very similar to the keys of the kingdom that are committed to Peter.

Peter will pioneer the gospel to the Gentiles. He will be one who opens certain key doors, doors that are of crucial, redemptive, historical importance.

[9 : 20] And so the importance of Peter as a character should not be neglected. Other background in the Old Testament that I think is worth paying attention to is found in the book of Jeremiah. Jeremiah is commissioned for his work and he's told, 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 disasters should 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. And I will declare my judgments against them for all their evil in forsaking me.

[10 : 29] They have made offerings to other gods and worship the works of their own hands. But you, dress yourself for work, arise and say to them everything that 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. In that declaration to Jeremiah, he's given very similar things.

Authority to build and to plant, to destroy and to overthrow. It's similar to the power to bind and to loose or to open and to shut.

Those paralleled pairs are things that we see in the case of Eliakim, in the case of Jeremiah, and in the case of Peter. And in the case of Jeremiah, there's more going on there.

[11 : 31] There's a battle with enemies set around the gates in their thrones, besieging the city. And then, parallel to that, Jeremiah himself being besieged by opposing forces, by the forces of the land who are rejecting him, the kings of Judah, its officials, its priests, and the people of the land.

This is much what we see with Peter. Peter leads the disciples and the disciples and Peter are surrounded by all these opponents, these leaders of the land.

But like Jeremiah, Peter is made into a fortified city, an iron pillar, bronze walls. He is like a rock as he is established as Peter.

And the church is built upon that sort of foundation as he is established by the Spirit in strength. This is a prophetic calling that we're seeing here, I think.

And we should look back to the example of Jeremiah to find a paradigm within which to understand what's taking place. Peter has had something revealed to him by God.

[12 : 36] It's a prophetic sort of insight. And now, he's going to be given an authority that corresponds to that of a prophet. And on the basis of that prophetic authority, God will bring his gospel out into the world.

God is building an assembly or a church upon the rock. It's interesting. We might think that God might build a temple, but no, it's not a temple. It's an assembly. You don't usually build an assembly, but bringing the building metaphor together with the assembly metaphor, we're seeing something about the character of that assembly, that the church is a temple, but the church is a military-like assembly at the same time.

And those two things together help us to understand what Christ is going to achieve through his body. That this body that's going to be formed is primarily formed of people.

It's not an architectural reality so much as a human reality, a reality that is formed of individual lives joined together in a single body. One question to reflect upon.

What are the gates of hell being referred to here? What are the gates doing? Are these gates that are being stormed by a military opponent?

[13 : 53] Or are they gates performing some other purpose? Think about the examples of gates that we have in scripture, some of the ways that the gates are described, some of the things that occur at the gates, and maybe you'll have a clearer idea of what is being said here.