

**Heart Check – Volume 2**  
*Who do you say that I am?*  
 Matthew 16:13-17

**Matthew 16:13-17.** *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.*

Caesarea Philippi is located in the far north of Israel. What Jesus taught his disciples here marked a major transition in his earthly ministry. For the very first time, Jesus announced his death and resurrection.

Other striking words Jesus shared that day with the disciples were so profound, they have been the subject of debate for 20 centuries.

Caesarea Philippi was centered on a shrine dedicated to the god, Pan, the god of grain. Pagan gods were worshipped in this location since the Stone Age.



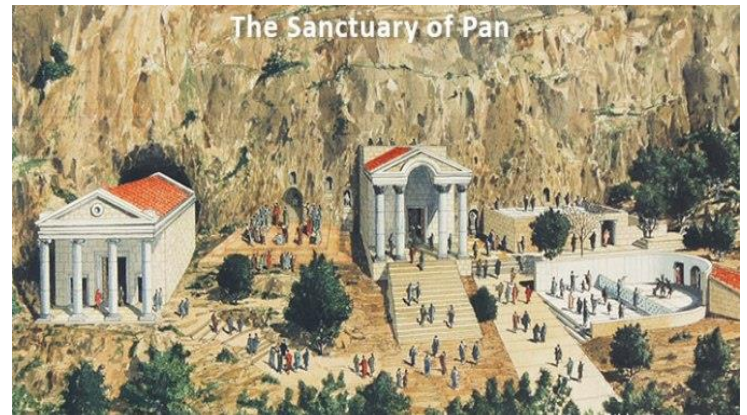
Several enclaves and a large grotto were carved in the cliff where statues of Pan and other idols were placed.

But the most fascinating feature of this pagan shrine was at the base of this massive rock cliff—a cave, just left of the large grotto, out of which a river of spring water flowed—much like the Metolius spring near Sisters, OR, only this spring came out of this creepy dark cave which added to its cultic mystique.



To the pagan mind, this cave was a gate to the underworld. They called it *The Gates of Hades* (place of the dead) and they committed detestable acts in the worship to the false gods of this shrine.

In the days of Jesus, with emperor worship coming into vogue, King Herod built a temple here, dedicating it to the worship of Caesar Augustus. This temple was constructed outside this cave.



The pagans of Jesus' day commonly believed that their fertility gods lived in the underworld during the winter and returned to earth each spring. They saw the water coming out of this cave as a symbol of the underworld and thought that their gods traveled to and from that world through the cave. They believed their city was literally at the gates of Hades, and in order to entice the return of their god, Pan, each year from his winter repose, the people of Caesarea Philippi engaged in horrible deeds, including prostitution and bestiality with goats.

When Jesus brought his disciples to this location, they must have been shocked. Caesarea Philippi was one of the most twisted and perverse red-light districts at that time and devout Jews would have avoided any contact with the despicable acts committed there. It was a city of people eagerly knocking on the doors of the underworld.

So here is Jesus, standing with his disciples at this center of pagan and emperor worship and this dark, mysterious hole emerging from the bowels of the earth, and he asks them, "*Who do you say that I am?*" Peter steps up and makes his great confession—"*You are THE Christ (the Anointed One, the Messiah), THE Son of the living God*"

This is a stunning confession for a Jewish man. Simon believes that Jesus is the long awaited Messiah and confesses that Jesus is equal to God. By calling him *the Son of the living God*, he was saying that Jesus shared the very same nature with the living God, that he is equal with God.

And Jesus' response to Simon's confession is equally stunning. In **verse 18**, he gives Simon a new name—Peter (*Petros* = rock), and then says, "*Upon this rock (petra – large rock), I will build my Church and the gates of Hades (death; not Gehenna = hell) will not prevail against it!*"

Jesus was saying that he is bringing the kingdom of God to earth and the false gods and emperors of the world, including the very power of death, itself—all of which stands in his way—will not prevail against him. Jesus and his Church, will triumph over them, and this great victory is going to happen through his death and resurrection, and through people like Peter, who confess Jesus as *the Messiah/Savior* and place their personal faith in him as *the Son of the living God* (**Revelation 12:11**).

There have been volumes written, debating what Jesus meant by the expression "*upon this rock (petra)*." Whether the "rock" is person and work of Christ, or Peter's confession, or Peter's apostolic ministry [Jesus gives Peter the keys to the kingdom, and in the book of Acts, we see this play out, as Peter is the central figure in the gospel being established among the Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles], the point is clear: Through Christ's sacrificial death and triumphant resurrection, Satan and even death itself, will be destroyed, and the Church, the beginning of the new creation in Christ, will be established on earth with irresistible power!

Then, Peter, this one whom Jesus just commended, does an incredibly stupid thing! He argues with Jesus about his death. The triumph part was all good to him, but what's this talk about Jesus dying?! Jesus doesn't mince words. He says to Peter, "*Get behind me adversary!*" In other words, these pagan gods and the gates of death are in my way. *Now, Peter, don't you get in my way!*

But there is much more in this exchange between Jesus and Peter. When Peter responded to Jesus' question by confessing Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, Jesus' response to Peter contains a word play that is of enormous significance. He said, "*Blessed are you Simon, bar-jonah (son of Jonah), flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.*"

First of all, the name of Peter's dad was John (Ιωαννης), not Jonah (Ιωνα). So why this wordplay, and what's the significance of Jesus saying that Peter didn't come by this insight about Jesus naturally—it didn't come from flesh and blood, but was supernaturally revealed to him by the heavenly Father?

The context of this wordplay and Peter's supernatural insight into the truth about Jesus reaches all the way back to **Matthew 11**. Beginning in **chapter 11**, Matthew develops a theme in Jesus' teaching ministry that culminates in **chapter 16** at Caesarea Philippi. This theme centers on the Spirit's work of revealing God's truth about Jesus Christ to humans heart that are open to God.

In **Matthew 11**, John the Baptist, who is in prison, sends his followers to ask Jesus if he is truly the Messiah. The beautiful thing is, all Jesus has to do is simply tell these men to return to John and inform him that *the blind see, the deaf hear, the dumb speak and the lame walk*. That's all John needed to hear—*the works of Messiah are happening in Jesus' ministry*—and John knew and believed that Jesus is the Christ. No other "proof" was necessary.

Then, in contrast to John the Baptist, Matthew reports how the cities of Capernaum, Chorazin, and Bethsaida saw Jesus' miracles firsthand. These three cities on the north end of Galilee formed three points of what is often referred to as the Golden Triangle, where Jesus performed the majority of his messianic miracles.

However, for the most part, the people in these three cities refused to believe in Jesus. Their hearts were not open to the gospel, and Jesus speaks "woes" over these cities, which is an expression of deep sadness—like the Yiddish "oi."

Then, Jesus thanks the Father for revealing the truth about who he is to the lowly and small and not to the wise and arrogant of the world.

In **Matthew 12**, we see an even more shocking example of rejecting Christ, in contrast to the faith of John the Baptist's faith. Here the religious leaders call Jesus' messianic miracles works of the devil. Again, Jesus doesn't mince words. He tells them that they are committing the unpardonable sin, because they are blaspheming the Holy Spirit, the One by which Jesus performs all his messianic miracles. To reject the Spirit's witness of who Jesus is, is the one sin that cannot be forgiven, because to reject Jesus is to reject the only way a person can be saved.

Then, from this point, through to **chapter 16**, Jesus' miraculous works and teaching are bracketed by the religious leaders demanding that Jesus provide a definitive sign from heaven to prove, once-and-for-all, that he is the Messiah—the first in **12:39-42** and the last in **16:4**.

But Jesus refuses. They had all the evidence they needed to believe. Instead, Jesus gives them "*the sign of Jonah*," which, ironically, is really not a "sign" at all, in the normal sense of the term. Jesus is being sarcastic.

When we think of Jonah, the first thing that comes to mind is the three days and three nights Jonah spent in the belly of the great fish, before being coughed up onto dry ground—a picture of Jesus' death and after three days being raised from the dead. However, the key element of this "*sign of Jonah*" is not the three days and three nights in the belly of the great fish. That part of the sign isn't even mentioned in Luke's gospel (**11:29-32**).

The central point of "*the sign of Jonah*" is the Ninevite's surprising response of repentance and faith to Jonah's simple and blunt warning of divine judgment! And Jesus adds a second illustration—the surprising passion of the Queen of Sheba, who traveled all the way from Africa to Jerusalem just to hear the Word of God through the teaching of King Solomon. The *sign of Jonah* is the Spirit's work of revealing God's truth to the human heart and, through the miracle of grace, the human heart responding with faith. By the way, the Hebrew name Jonah means "*dove*," a symbol of the Holy Spirit.

So, after a couple cycles of the religious leaders demanding a sign from heaven and Jesus offering them nothing more than the "*sign*" of Jonah, we come to this defining moment at Caesarea Philippi in **Matthew 16**. On the heels of the unbelieving religious leaders demanding a sign from heaven, Jesus asks the disciples—*Who do you say that I am?* And Peter answers, "*You are the Christ, the Son of the Living God!*"

Jesus' response underscores the "big idea" Matthew has been developing since **chapter 11**. Jesus said, "*Peter, son of Jonah, you didn't come up with that insight on your own. My Father in heaven revealed that to you!*" Peter's confession of faith in Christ is the "*sign of Jonah*" in operation! Jesus uses an ingenious wordplay of Peter's dad's name to connect Peter's confession of faith to the sign of Jonah and all that Jesus taught and demonstrated from **Matthew 11–16!**

The fact that you and I have placed our faith in Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God, is no feather in our caps. If the Spirit of God hadn't opened our hearts to not only hear the gospel but believe it, there is nothing in our natural selves that would have led us to believe. Even our faith in Christ is a gift of grace.

That's why Paul writes in **Ephesians 2:8-9** *For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves, **it is a gift of God**, not of works lest anyone could boast.* The question is, what does "it" refer to in the phrase, "*it is a gift of God?*" Typically, in the Greek language, the antecedent of a pronoun is the noun immediately preceding it, which, in this case the antecedent to "it" is "faith." Our faith is "a gift of God!" However, in this case it could have a collective impact, including grace, saved, and faith, but either way, Paul is saying that our very capacity to believe in Jesus is a gift from God. In other passages Paul attributes this gift to the work of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

**2 Thessalonians 2:13** *But we ought always to give thanks to God for you, brothers beloved by the Lord, because God chose you as the first fruits to be saved, **through sanctification** (being set apart) **by the Spirit** and belief in the truth.*

**Titus 3:5** *God saved us, not because of works done by us in righteousness, but according to his own mercy, by the washing of regeneration and **renewal of the Holy Spirit**.*

There is nothing we bring to the gospel other than an open heart to the Spirit's testimony concerning Jesus. That should lead us to grateful, humble worship that God would extend to us such grace.

Then, to humble us even further, we come to **Matthew 17**, where the inner 3—Peter, James, and John—are invited by Jesus to accompany him to the top of a high mountain. There, in a magnificent vision, they witness one of those rare occasions when Jesus, in his earthly humility, pops and sizzles with divine glory. Jesus is transfigured before their eyes, and in this defining moment of seeing Christ's divine glory, he is joined by Moses and Elijah—who represent the Law and the Prophets—the whole of God's revelation about the person and work Jesus Christ in Hebrew Bible.

The disciples are mesmerized by what they see. They find themselves in the presence of "*the big three!*" They decide to build an altar for each of them, but immediately a voice thunders from heaven. Moses and Elijah vamoose, and the only one standing there is Jesus. The Father says to them, "*This is my Beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. Listen to him!*" Basically, the Father was saying to the three disciples, "*Now, don't you three get in his way!*"

In this unforgettable lesson about the exclusivity of Jesus Christ as our great God and Savior, the disciples are confronted with their own form of Jewish idolatry, which in the final analysis, is as insidious as the pagan images of Pan at Caesarea Philippi. So we must ask ourselves, is there anything in our lives getting in the way of Jesus? Is your heart open to the voice of the Spirit calling you to believe and obey Jesus? Or maybe you're like my dad, who once said, "*If they find Noah's ark, I will believe.*" I'm so grateful that, in spite of my dad's initial demand for a further sign from God, he eventually placed his faith in Jesus without anyone finding Noah's ark! Dad's story is another beautiful example of the sign of Jonah.

Are you waiting for another sign of God? Is not Jesus' death and resurrection enough for you? If not, it's likely that nothing will be. Could it be that you really don't want to believe in Jesus? God rarely overrides that kind of willful unbelief. Not everyone gets what Saul of Tarsus got on the road to Damascus—an offer he couldn't refuse!

Or maybe you're more like Peter. You're a believer but you still find yourself getting in Jesus' way. You resist his teaching in your life. As a believer, do you respond with faith to the simple preaching of God's word? When you hear God's word, are you listening to the Spirit's voice? *That's the sign of Jonah active in your life.* That's God's grace reaching out to you. The question is, are you responding? Jesus' warning is as real for us today as it was to Peter and to the inner three—*Don't get in Jesus' way.* Like Peter, don't find yourself being his adversary. Jesus will build his church, with or without us, and if Peter were here, he would likely give us this piece of advice: **Don't get in his way!**

But just as importantly, take heart in Peter's story, because he got in Jesus' way several times in his life—twice here, later at Jesus' arrest where he denied him repeatedly, and even later, still, when the apostle Paul had to rebuke him to his face for his legalistic hypocrisy that was confusing the message of gospel grace.

And yet, Peter was like a cat; he always ended up landing on all fours spiritually. He learned from his blunders, and, in the process, he served the kingdom of God with great distinction as Jesus' ally, not his adversary.

Jesus understands when we fall and scrape our spiritual knees. What breaks his heart and causes him to say "oi," is when stop trusting him, and choose not to get back up.