

PETER'S GREAT CONFESSION

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By Stan Weese
Matthew 16:13-20

PASTOR STAN WEESE

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INTRO.

-- We're going through the Gospel of Matthew and are in chapter 16.

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-- Chapters 15-17 are a time of transition in Jesus' ministry. Jesus is concluding two years of ministry in Galilee (the northern part of Israel) and is preparing to move on to ministry in Judea (the southern territory, where the capital city of Jerusalem is located).

-- The last half of chapter 16, which we will look at today and next Sunday, is a pivotal point in Matthew's Gospel. Today's passage contains what is often known as "Peter's Great Confession," and also contains the first use of the word "church" in the NT. Throughout the NT the word "church" always refers to people who have responded to God's call to faith in Christ.

-- There are two great disclosures about the church in this passage: the Church's confession and the Church's assurance.

I. The Church's Confession (vv. 13-17)

A. The Setting (v. 13a)

-- The setting for this story is a place called Caesarea Philippi.

v. 13a

-- It is located about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee, at the base of Mount Hermon, in territory that was mostly Gentile. I've been there and saw ruins of structures that date from Jesus' time. One of the most interesting features were the arched niches that were carved into the stone on the side of the mountain. In Jesus' day the niches held little statues of various pagan gods. A person could choose which idol they wanted to worship. Contemporary Americans would have loved it because it was all about inclusiveness. There was a great variety of gods, and they were all on equal footing at Caesarea Philippi.

B. The Questions

-- This is the setting where Jesus asks the Disciples two questions.

1. Who Do the People Say Jesus Is? (v. 13b-14)

-- The Disciples' reply to Jesus indicates that the people had various ideas about Jesus' identity. Frankly, some of these ideas sound a bit weird - like the kind of thing that you might see on the cover of a check-out lane tabloid. I can imagine the headline on the cover:

"Ancient Prophet Elijah Returns as Carpenter Turned Miracle- Worker" / or

"Spirit of Beheaded John the Baptist Takes Possession of His Cousin from Nazareth"

-- What we see here in the Disciples' report is that the people held Jesus in high esteem - but not high enough. They viewed Jesus as a prophet, a view that was, fact, dangerously deficient.

2. Who Do You Say I Am? (vv. 15-17)

-- But the really important question is the second question.

a. Jesus' Question (v. 15)

-- Jesus places a strong emphasis on "you" in this question:

"And you, who do you say that I am?"

b. Peter's Reply (v. 16)

-- The one who replies for the entire group of Disciples is Peter.

v. 16

(1) "Simon Peter"

-- Notice that Matthew uses the name "Simon Peter." Simon was the disciple's Hebrew name, the name that his parents gave to him at birth. Peter was the nickname that Jesus had given to Simon when they first met. Peter was a Greek word that meant "rock," but in Jesus' time it was hardly ever used as a name.

(2) "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

-- Remember when Jesus calmed the storm on the Sea of Galilee, the disciples asked:

Matthew 8:27 … "What sort of man is this, that even winds and sea obey him?"

-- Now, they are ready to answer that question. Jesus is the Christ, the long-awaited Messiah, the One who fulfills all the OT prophecies of a coming Deliverer.

-- Peter adds that Jesus is "the Son of the living God." The idols in the niches at Caesarea Philippi were lifeless gods who did not exist. The God of Israel is the only true and living God, and Jesus is His unique, divine Son.

c. Jesus' Declaration (v. 17)

-- In response to Peter's confession, Jesus makes this declaration:

v. 17

(1) Not from Human Reasoning

-- Peter's confession did not come from human reasoning. After all, the religious leaders had seen the signs that Jesus had been performing and accused Jesus of being Satanic. The crowds had seen those same miraculous signs and had decided that Jesus was a prophet.

-- So how did Peter and the other Disciples come to believe in Jesus as the Messiah?

(2) By Divine Revelation

-- The truth about Jesus' identity had been revealed to them by God the Father. It's always God who opens darkened hearts and blinded eyes to the truth.

2 Corinthians 4:4, 6 In their case the god of this world has blinded the minds of the unbelievers, to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of the glory of Christ, who is the image of God.… 6 For God, who said, "Let light shine out of darkness," has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ.

Galatians 1:15-16 But when he who had set me apart before I was born, and who called me by his grace, 16 was pleased to reveal his Son to me, in order that I might preach him among the Gentiles, I did not immediately consult with anyone [lit., flesh and blood].

II. The Church's Assurance (vv. 18-20)

-- Then we find a great assurance for the Church in verses 18-20.

Cf., vv. 18-20

-- These verses contain some of the most controversial, difficult, and misunderstood statements in the entire Gospel.

A. Jesus Will Build the Church.

-- v. 18a, "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church…"

1. "Church"

-- This is the first time that the word "church" appears in the Gospel. It refers to those who are called out, those who respond to God's call to salvation through faith in Christ.

2. The Builder

-- The one who builds the Church is Christ. The Church cannot exist or grow apart from the supernatural activity of God.

3. The Instrument

-- Christ builds the Church by working through His followers, through those who are in the Church. Jesus indicates here that He will use Peter to play a key role in the founding of the Church. Let's look more closely at two important assertions that Jesus makes about Peter.

a. He Is the Rock. (v. 18a)

-- There are 3 main ideas about what is "the rock" on which Jesus will build His Church.

(1) The rock is Jesus.

-- Some hold that the rock here is Jesus Himself. While it is true that in other passages Jesus is called the rock on which the Church is built, that is the least likely idea in this passage.

(2) Peter's Confession

-- Other commentators think that the rock on which Jesus will build His Church is Peter's confession.

While that may be possible, it still is not the most obvious meaning here.

(3) The most likely meaning here is Peter - that Peter is the rock on which Jesus will build the Church. That is the most natural reading of the passage, but we try to find another meaning largely because of the way that the Roman Catholic Church has misapplied the passage to teach papal authority and infallibility.

-- What is most likely in this passage is that Jesus is explaining why He gave Simon the nickname "Peter," rock. Jesus is going to use Peter to lay out the initial foundation of the Church. We see that clearly in the book of Acts. In the first half of Acts, chapters 1-12, the main person that Christ uses to lead and to build the Church is Peter.

It's Peter who preaches the sermon on the Day of Pentecost. It's Peter who heals the lame beggar and

then stands up to the threats of the Sanhedrin. It's Peter who pronounces judgment on Ananias and Sapphira when they lie to the Church. And it's Peter whom Christ calls to take the Gospel to the Gentile Centurion Cornelius. In that first half of Acts, under the leadership of Peter, the Church grows from a 100 believers to several thousand. Jesus is building the Church using Peter as His primary instrument.

That's the way it always is. Christ builds the Church, and He builds it through us. Billy Graham knew that. When someone commented to Graham that he had done great things, Graham replied, "God has done some good things through me."

b. The Keys (v. 19)

-- An even more difficult part of this passage is what Jesus says about the "keys of the kingdom" in verse 19.

-- Again, there are various ideas about what Jesus is meaning here, but I believe that the keys are the proclamation and promises of the Gospel.

Cf., Romans 1:16 For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek.

-- Those who proclaim the Gospel cannot forgive sins, but we can declare to those who repent and confess their sins and turn to trust in Christ that their sins are forgiven. We can do that not by our own authority but on the authority of God's Word.

1 John 1:9 If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

-- Concerning the "binding" and "loosing," a look at the footnote in the ESV might help to understand the meaning. The footnote indicates that the verse could be translated this way:

v. 19, "and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."

What that is saying is that whatever happens on earth has first been decreed in heaven, whatever is accomplished on earth was initiated in heaven.

B. Jesus Will Preserve the Church. (v. 18b)

-- v. 18b, "And the gates of hell [lit., Hades] shall not prevail against it"

-- Notice again that the ESV has a footnote for this part of the verse, indicating that the Greek word is "Hades," which actually refers primarily to the grave. The expression "gates of Hades" was commonly used by the Jews to refer to the power of death. So, what Jesus is telling us here is that death cannot prevail against the Church, against Jesus or His followers.

CONCLUSION

For 16 years, North Korea has been ranked as the "most oppressive place in the world for Christians." Every year the U.S. State Department names it as one of the world's worst religious persecutors – torturing and executing those even suspected of worshipping God. It is estimated that there up to 70,000 Christian prisoners in concentration camps in North Korea, and the Database Center for North Korean Human Rights conjectures that more than 75 percent of them do not survive. Defectors have spoken of Christians being crushed by steamrollers and used to test biological weapons, or hung on a cross over a fire.

You might expect the church in North Korea to be on the edge of extinction. But Vernon Brewer, founder and president of humanitarian organization World Help, says this:

"Despite efforts to eradicate Christians, we have found the church in North Korea is actually growing. They know only God is powerful enough to break through the darkness of the most oppressive regime on earth."

-- As author and scholar J. C. Ryle has said:

"Nothing can altogether overthrow and destroy [the church]. Its members may be persecuted, oppressed, imprisoned, beaten, beheaded, burned. But the true Church is never altogether extinguished: it rises again from its afflictions. It lives on through the fire and water.