

The Rock

Matthew 16:13-20

This is surely one of the most discussed passages in Matthew's gospel, one given to all sorts and variety of explanations. And the shame of it, in my opinion, is that most of the focus is upon the meaning of Jesus' words to Peter, "...on this rock I will build my church," and we skip over words that are rich in meaning and application to us as a church. And we skip over the beginning of the passage, when we see just how plainly Jesus fulfills the prophecies of the Old Testament. So its quite a fascinating passage, and one that contains more than simply a misapplied application used by the Roman Catholics regarding Peter as the first Pope.

So let's start at the beginning, where Jesus asks his disciples a very specific question with an obvious intention to teach them something. The question is,

I. WHO IS JESUS?

v.13

Luke's gospel gives us this same account, with a further explanation of what Jesus wanted his disciples to understand about his life and ministry.

Luke 9:18 "And it happened, as He was alone praying, that His disciples joined Him, and He asked them, saying, "Who do the crowds say that I am?" 19 So they answered and said, "John the Baptist, but some say Elijah; and others say that one of the old prophets has risen again." 20 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Peter answered and said, "The Christ of God." 21 And He strictly warned and commanded them to tell this to no one, 22 saying, "The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day."

Jesus taught that lesson often, trying to enable his disciples to understand something about his impending suffering and death. They struggled to grasp that idea, for the Jewish mind wasn't used to thinking about a suffering savior. But they did expect a savior. They expected the return of a prophet, Elijah or John the Baptist! Or even Jeremiah. And they had some biblical reason for those expectations. The point is that,

A. Jesus is the fulfillment of OT shadows.

Or, I could put it this way, the Old Testament provided the prophetic picture of Jesus, pointing the people of God to the true Jesus. So Jesus asks, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" The Son of Man was his own most popular self-identification, a title actually that has reference to his divine nature, or deity, rather than his humanity. But it was not provocative to those who didn't know the Jewish faith, and it came across without any unnecessary declaration of supernatural or divine power that might cause opposition.

Again, remember Luke's account, He strictly warned and commanded them to tell this to no one, saying, "The Son of Man must suffer many things, and be rejected by the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day." But his disciples still needed a bit more of an advanced lesson. And they began with the suggestion of a good answer, John the Baptist.

If you remember, John the baptist can rightly be called the last of the OT prophets. He was a forerunner of Jesus, and he came as a prophet after 400 years of silence. No prophets since Malachi. So perhaps Jesus is John the Baptist, come back to life. It's the wrong answer, but it does represent much faith, faith to believe that God could raise a man from the dead!

Just go back to,

Mat. 14:1 “At that time Herod the tetrarch heard the report about Jesus 2 and said to his servants, “This is John the Baptist; he is risen from the dead, and therefore these powers are at work in him.”

So the resurrection of John the Baptist would certainly indicate the presence of God. But no, Jesus wasn't John the Baptist raised from the dead. Nor was he Elijah, though there was a direct connection with the Old Testament prophets. Remember, no prophets had come to speak for God since Malachi. And these were Malachi's last words, the last words recorded in the Old Testament,

Mal. 4:4 “Remember the Law of Moses, My servant, Which I commanded him in Horeb for all Israel, With the statutes and judgments. 5 Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet Before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD. 6 And he will turn The hearts of the fathers to the children, And the hearts of the children to their fathers, Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse.”

So Elijah the prophet would come back! And we already know that John himself was the fulfillment of that prophecy.

Luke 1:16 “And he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God. 17 He will also go before Him in the spirit and power of Elijah, ‘to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children,’ and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”

All of that prepares the way for Jesus! All of the Old Testament prepares the way for Jesus. And remember the marvelous Bible study that the disciples enjoyed on the road to Emmaus, after Jesus' resurrection.

Luke 24:19 “And He said to them, “What things?” So they

said to Him, “The things concerning Jesus of Nazareth, who was a Prophet mighty in deed and word before God and all the people, 20 and how the chief priests and our rulers delivered Him to be condemned to death, and crucified Him. 21 But we were hoping that it was He who was going to redeem Israel. Indeed, besides all this, today is the third day since these things happened. 22 Yes, and certain women of our company, who arrived at the tomb early, astonished us. 23 When they did not find His body, they came saying that they had also seen a vision of angels who said He was alive. 24 And certain of those who were with us went to the tomb and found it just as the women had said; but Him they did not see.” 25 Then He said to them, “O foolish ones, and slow of heart to believe in all that the prophets have spoken! 26 Ought not the Christ to have suffered these things and to enter into His glory?” 27 And beginning at Moses and all the Prophets, He expounded to them in all the Scriptures the things concerning Himself.”

So Moses and all the Prophets teach us about Jesus! Jesus fulfills all the OT shadows. And, then to add to that,

B. Jesus is the anointed Son of God.

Peter's answer. Peter's correct answer. Peter's glorious answer!

v.15-16

The Christ means the Messiah. The anointed one. Just a couple of verses from the OT.

Ps. 2:1 “Why do the nations rage, And the people plot a vain thing? 2 The kings of the earth set themselves, And the rulers take counsel together, Against the LORD and against His Anointed, saying, 3 “Let us break Their bonds in pieces And cast away Their cords from us.”

And, of course, Simeon.

Luke 2:25 “And behold, there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon, and this man was just and devout, waiting for the Consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was upon him. 26 And it had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ.”

So the messiah would come! And Peter was able to put some of that together, that this Messiah, this Christ, would be “the Son of the living God.” The messiah would be the son! The messiah would be the son of God! Peter got it! And he was absolutely correct. And that declaration about the identity of Jesus is the foundation of our faith. But then,

II. WHO IS PETER?

Jesus has quite an answer.
v.17-18

So who is Peter? He is the recipient of the revelation of God, that’s who. The faith he proclaims and professes is not anything that a man would make up or come up with on his own. It came from God, and that is so crucial for understanding the “faith once for all delivered to the saints,” as we studied this morning. That is so crucial for understanding the whole nature of what is truth. It is revelation.

It’s not what I think that matters, or what I believe. It’s not what the wisdom of any man determines, but what God reveals. And that is the role of an apostle, one who would receive the revelation of God.

A. Peter, an Apostle, has received the revelation of God.

2 Peter 1:19 “And so we have the prophetic word confirmed, which you do well to heed as a light that shines in a dark place,

until the day dawns and the morning star rises in your hearts; 20 knowing this first, that no prophecy of Scripture is of any private interpretation, 21 for prophecy never came by the will of man, but holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Spirit.”

That’s revelation. Men spoke from God. The origin of truth is never in a man. The definition of truth is never determined by a man, it is never defined by the will of a man. Do you remember Paul’s somewhat defensive explanation of his ministry to the Galatians,

Gal. 1:11 “But I make known to you, brethren, that the gospel which was preached by me is not according to man. 12 For I neither received it from man, nor was I taught it, but it came through the revelation of Jesus Christ.”

And there was good reason for this emphasis upon the origin of revelation resting with God, for it keeps men humble. And it protects God’s people from depending upon other men!

1 Cor. 2:3 “I was with you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. 4 And my speech and my preaching were not with persuasive words of human wisdom, but in demonstration of the Spirit and of power, 5 that your faith should not be in the wisdom of men but in the power of God.”

That has to be my goal as I preach to you, that what you learn from me is that the message I preach comes from God. The word of truth I declare to you comes from God. And the power of that wisdom is not in me, it is not in my eloquence or ability, but it is entirely from God!

So Peter’s commendation from Jesus is that what he just proclaimed is a revelation from God. And, then, that faith proclaimed by the Apostle becomes part of the foundation of the church.

So,

B. Peter, as an Apostle, forms the foundation of the church.

Quickly, let me dispense with the idea that Peter is thus identified as the first Pope, a man who could call himself the vicar of Christ. A vicar is a mediator, a substitute, and there is no substitute for Jesus. Jesus is the mediator, the only mediator between God and man. And the rest of the New Testament, consistently, refers not to one apostle elevated and made prominent over the others, but to the whole of them. The twelve, the apostles together.

So it is that the apostles, together are the foundation.

Eph. 2:19 “Now, therefore, you are no longer strangers and foreigners, but fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, 20 having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone, 21 in whom the whole building, being fitted together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord, 22 in whom you also are being built together for a dwelling place of God in the Spirit.”

To skip to the very end of the Bible, we read this about the heavenly Jerusalem, the church glorified,

Rev. 21:14 “Now the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were the names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb.”

So what is the rock upon which the church is built? It is the rock of the apostles. And it is the rock of the apostolic faith, a faith so well declared by Peter. Peter the man is not exalted above other men. But Peter the apostle finds his place in the foundation of the church. And the faith he proclaims is the faith upon which that church is, indeed, built!

So the rock, a Greek word referring to Peter’s own name, the rock is either the apostolic band as a whole, or it is the apostolic profession of faith which Peter speaks. I tend to think it is that first explanation, the apostles together, but those apostles are not separated from the doctrine they profess.

In all of this, there is, of course, no sense anywhere of the ability to pass on that succession as the head of the Roman church. The Roman succession of Popes is a travesty, and a mockery of Jesus’ authority and unique place as the only king and head of the church. Jesus alone is the mediator between God and man. Jesus alone will be the head of his church. Jesus himself will build his church!

III. WHAT, THEN, IS THE CHURCH?

That’s really what this is all about. Not the establishment of a corrupt papacy among fallen men, but a promise.

A. The church shall prevail.

The point of mentioning Peter as a rock is to emphasize the character of the rock. Nowhere in the rest of the Bible does Peter stand out as a man with specific authority, higher than the other apostles. Nowhere do we find Peter in a position of singular importance. It is always the apostles. And the point, then, is the unshakable nature of that apostolic foundation. That’s the definition of a foundation, isn’t it? And typically, a foundation is made of rock or stone.

Some years ago, my brother had a very large tree fall on his house. It damaged a significant portion of the house, and thankfully, no one was injured. As the evaluation and estimates for the repairs were being prepared, it became obvious that the house itself had been rocked off the foundation. Just at one point, but because of that the whole house was condemned. It

was taken down, completely removed, and from the foundation up, it was rebuilt. A whole new house, built upon a whole new foundation.

When my own house was damaged in that flood some fifteen years ago, we could see where the front wall had moved across the foundation. Thankfully, for us, only the front wall had to be replaced, and the house itself was saved. But the whole of that wall was removed and rebuilt. The house has to stand upon the foundation.

That's the strength of a building. That's the structural integrity. And Jesus' point here is that the church has such a strength. The church will prevail! Jesus is the master builder. He is the contractor. Never has a more positive or triumphant statement been made. "I will build my church."

Satan will not win. "The gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." Hades refers to the dead, and the more familiar expression isn't wrong at all, "The gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." Despite the best efforts of the Devil himself. Despite all his schemes, all his wiles. Despite all his cunning and clever craftiness, he will not succeed. Jesus will build his church.

Sometimes, however, in the midst of any particular situation, that seems to be a questionable conclusion. So many times, in my experiences as a pastor, so many times it seems that Satan attempts to prevail. So many times he attacks, so many times he uses his schemes to try to cause harm to the church. And too often, it seems that he succeeds. He causes harm.

So let me declare this to you, for your strength and encouragement. Jesus is greater than the devil. And Jesus shall build his church. The Devil will not prevail. All the minions of

heaven will not prevail! Yet, it is a battle, a spiritual battle. For,

Eph. 6:12 "For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places."

But we have a foundation. We have a rock that is unshakable, unlovable. We have the church. And,

B. The church shall manifest the kingdom of God.

The church shall show forth that kingdom. The church shall give evidence of that kingdom by her own presence on earth. And the church shall remain, unto the end of the age. With this authority, so clearly spelled out by Jesus,

v.19

That is an amazing verse, for it so clearly declares that what the church does actually reflects what God does in heaven. It doesn't mean that God is subject to us, or dependent upon us, but it does mean that the church is the outward manifestation of God's work in his own kingdom. And so, when the church takes action, to open its door in terms of church membership, or to close its door in terms of church discipline, such action manifest, or shows forth, what God himself does in heaven.

It is astounding, that God would give to the church the prerogative and the authority to exercise the keys of the kingdom. Again, the image of keys is unmistakable. The elders open the door to the membership of the church. We do so on the basis of a profession of faith, but it is a specific action by the church. We unlock the door, and by profession of faith, a Christian is admitted to the membership of the church as a reflection of their membership in the kingdom of God.

Similarly, with discipline. One of the keys of the kingdom surely is the right administration of church discipline. And the exercise of that discipline, by the church, even unto erasure and excommunication, is a representation of discipline in the kingdom of heaven.

Binding and loosing are words with specific reference to forbidding and permitting. So a person who continues to believe that which is forbidden, or to do actions that are forbidden, refusing to repent, they are declared to be an unbeliever!

Mat. 18:15 “Moreover if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he will not hear, take with you one or two more, that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.’ 17 And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church. But if he refuses even to hear the church, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. 18 “Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.”

I should emphasize that this authority is not inherent in any man, but Jesus assigns the power to the church, and by extension to the rulers of the church, the elders. And actions taken by the church, according to Jesus’ own words, are a manifestation of actions taken by God in heaven. So we read,

v.18. “I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. 19 And I will give you 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.”

Beloved, the church shall prevail. Satan shall attack, he will cause harm. Sometimes, disastrous harm. And yet the church shall be victorious. I say that not because I am an optimist by

nature, but because I believe the word of God. And I approach my ministry here in that very context.

“The church shall never perish! Her dear Lord to defend, to guide, sustain and cherish, is with her to the end; though there be those that hate her, and false sons in her pale, against or foe or traitor she ever will prevail.”

“Crowns and thrones may perish, kingdoms rise and wane, but the church of Jesus constant will remain; gates of hell can never ‘gainst that church prevail; we have Christ’s own promise, and that cannot fail.”

The refrain of that hymn, of course, has the encouragement and application for us, even today. “Onward, Christian soldiers, marching as to war, with the cross of Jesus going on before.” We march onward with this encouragement and this promise,

Mat. 28:18 “And Jesus came and spoke to them, saying, “All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth. 19 Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, 20 teaching them to observe all things that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”