

Peter Declares That Jesus Is the Messiah

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say the Son of Man is?”

¹⁴ They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

¹⁵ “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?”

¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

¹⁷ Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” ²⁰ Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

QUESTIONS

1. Where does Matthew say that the event of Peter’s declaration of Jesus as the Messiah take place? What significance does this place have during that time?

Caesarea Philippi was a region about 20 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. It was historically a place where the pagan god Baal had been worshipped in ancient times, more recently the Greeks had renamed it Paneas in honor of their Greek god Pan who had been worshipped there, then after the Romans took over the area, Herod the Great built a temple there to honor Caesar Augustus. After Herod’s death, his son Philip renamed the place after the new Caesar Tiberius and himself, Caesarea Philippi. Commentators note that it was in this place where the Gentiles had celebrated and worshiped their worldly powers, that the Messiah, the true King of Kings was revealed to the world through Peter’s God-breathed declaration of Jesus as the Son of God, the Messiah.

2. What does Jesus ask his disciples? And what is their answer?

“Who do people say the Son of Man is?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

3. What does Jesus then ask his disciples? And what is their answer to that question?

“But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”

4. Where does Jesus say that Peter’s answer comes from?

Jesus replied, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven.

5. Jesus makes three pronouncements about Peter's role as the leader of Christ's church, what are they?

I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.

6. Research what you can find about this disciple whom Jesus calls "Peter" and the significance of that name.

His given name is Simon.. The gospel of John tells us that Jesus calls him Peter as he calls him to follow him as a disciple. In Matthew's gospel, Jesus does not call him Peter until this event although Matthew uses that name as he narrates the gospel, calling him Simon but parenthetically notes that he means the called Peter.

Peter means rock, Petros in Greek, Cepha in Aramaic.

Peter is a very common name in English, but there is no historical evidence that it was a common name in Jesus' day, it would have been a unique, nickname that was given Peter. Some scholars compare this renaming of Simon to that of Abraham (from Abram (protector father) to Abraham (their protector, father of many nations) The implications being that when chose to form a new community or people, he renamed the leader. It was understood that to name something was to claim dominion over it. When Adam was told to name the animals of the world, he was also given dominion and responsibility or stewardship of them. When Jesus renames Simon to Peter, he claims authority over Peter who would in turn be a steward of Christ's followers, his Church.

7. What does Jesus say he will do with Peter, the rock?

It is Jesus who will build his church. And he will build it upon this rock, meaning both Peter's installation as the church's leader, but more importantly that the confession of faith that Peter makes of Jesus as the Son of God is that which is foundational to the Church, in other words, it is upon such confession that the Church is founded.

8. What does Jesus mean by "the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."?

The "gates of Hades or Hell" refers to death and to the underworld of Satan or evil which will be in conflict and outright battle against the Church, but Christ declares that it will never defeat the Church.

9. What does Jesus mean when he says that that he will give Peter the keys to the kingdom of heaven?

It does not mean that Peter is standing at the gate of heaven's door admitting or rejecting people into heaven. What Jesus is saying here is that Peter has been given teaching authority as the leader of the Church on earth. Jesus has been preparing him and the other disciples to be Rabbis for his followers, to teach them what they need to know, how to live and how to serve Christ. He is referring to the teaching office in the Church.

10. What does Jesus mean when he says that “whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven”?

Jesus is using a rabbinical terminology for authoritative teaching. Peter has the authority to interpret and apply meaning from Scripture to particular cases brought to him to decide, especially as it will apply to the life of the church. The Church’s role in the life of Jesus’s followers is to guide believers in the application of Jesus’ teachings to our daily lives.

11. Why does Jesus tell his disciples to keep what has been revealed to them about his identity as the Messiah to themselves?

It was not time yet to make such a public profession. It was however time for his disciples to know this as Jesus prepares them for the task ahead of leading his Church.

DISCUSSION

The commentator notes that this particular text has long been a point of contention between the Roman Catholic Church and the Protestant Church over whether Jesus’ meaning here is that it was Peter or Peter’s faith upon which Christ would build his Church. What do you think? What is the implication of each of these interpretations?

The implication of building the Church upon Peter is that Peter was the appointed leader of the Church and held those powers and authority noted here by Jesus. Thus the papacy held that there was a succession of leaders from Peter authorized as the leader, the Pope.

The implication of building the Church upon the faith of Peter expressed in his confession of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the Living God is that Peter, although authoritative in his leadership, was a leader, but not the only leader of Christ’s followers. Christ would build his church on such faithful professions made and held by those who came to be his followers.

There is evidence that the disciples had already come to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, we find them worshipping him as the Son of God after he walks on water and calms the sea, etc. So why is this confession of Jesus as the Christ so significant here?

What Matthew seems to distinguish about this confession of faith is that Jesus tells Peter that it was not something that he came to realize on his own, but that God had revealed this to him. Many people can believe that there is a God and even that Jesus is the Son of God and that it is through him that we are saved, but that is not the same as when we accept that reality for our own lives, make that profession of faith for ourselves, ask him to be our savior and lord, that we are “blessed” as Jesus says. That we have made a relationship with God through Jesus. That is the work of the Holy Spirit in us.