

# life groups study guide

## Matthew 16



*"We have all experienced times of exaltation on the mountain, when we have seen things from God's perspective and have wanted to stay there. But God will never allow us to stay there. The true test of our spiritual life is in exhibiting the power to descend from the mountain. If we only have the power to go up, something is wrong. It is a wonderful thing to be on the mountain with God, but a person only gets there so that he may later go down and lift up the demon-possessed people in the valley."*

***In Life Groups, kids, youth and adults study God's Word together and discuss the issues and challenges of life.***

*"We are not made for the mountains, for sunrises, or for the other beautiful attractions in life— those are simply intended to be moments of inspiration. We are made for the valley and the ordinary things of life, and that is where we have to prove our stamina and strength."*

**Oswald Chambers**

### Ascending the Mountain

We are all probably familiar with the term "mountaintop experience". The term, when used in a spiritual context, refers to special times in our lives where we experience God, His presence or some exciting and tangible movement of the Holy Spirit in a powerful, dynamic way. The experience is so incredible that we don't want to leave, so as to prolong the experience as long as possible. The first time I heard the term I was literally in the mountains. I was at Young Life's Frontier Ranch summer camp facility in Buena Vista Colorado and a leader cautioned us that we would soon be coming "down off the mountain" and back to our lives in the real world – down in the valley. Though I tried and tried, I could not duplicate the mountaintop experience back down in the lowly valley.

Q :: Tell about a mountaintop experience you had; describe both the experience itself as well as what "coming back down" was like.

Q :: What are the dangers, or potential pitfalls, of a mountaintop experience?

Q :: Do you think it possible to manufacture a mountaintop experience, or is it something more organic; something that only God initiates?

Q :: Aside from not living near mountains, why do you think these experiences happen so infrequently?

In Matthew 16, the apostle Peter has what we might call his own little mountaintop experience. His confession of Christ as Messiah, the Son of the Living God results in Jesus bestowing upon Peter praise, blessing, a new name, and a new commission.

Read Matthew 16:13-20

In verse 13 Jesus asks "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" Perhaps this is just an icebreaker for Jesus, but there seems to be an intentional distinction being drawn between who others say Jesus is and who the disciples think He is – especially given that Jesus, as He demonstrated time and time again, knew the thoughts of others and was probably not asking out of a lack of knowledge.

Q :: Why was it important for the disciples to think about—and verbalize—who others thought Jesus was? What was Jesus after?

Q :: Is that an important thing for us to know and be able to verbalize as well? Why?

Q :: Why do you suppose that all of the people were giving responses from the prophet category?

We see Jesus interact with Peter in ways that He simply does not interact with the others (both good and bad). When Christ asks who THEY say He is, Peter makes his famous confession and Jesus does something unique – and remarkable: He changes his name. In 16:18 Jesus declares that Simon is now “Peter”. This is the Greek word “petros,” a masculine noun. It referred to a detached stone, and in Liddell and Scott’s Greek lexicon the word is quoted as applied to sling-stones or even boundary-stones (which, while large, could be moved by a man).

“This rock” is the Greek word, “petra,” a feminine noun. It referred to bedrock. These two words (petros and petra) cannot grammatically link up to each other because of their gender. The disciples did not see this declaration as a reference to Peter’s superiority because they continued to argue over who was greatest (Matt. 18:1, 18; John 20:21). These two terms are related but distinct in Greek. The meaning of the passage, as inferred from the Greek, seems to be “You are Peter, and any man can move you, but the faith you have expressed in My deity is a rock as immovable as the mountains – and on it I will build My church.”

Q :: Often in Scripture, we see Peter as anything but a “rock”. What can we learn from Jesus picking this name for Peter?

Q :: Is it possible that God may view us through a different lens than we view ourselves – and what might those differences be?

## Descending the Mountain

Clearly at this point Peter is on a spiritual high. Jesus has just changed his name, infused him with a vision of his purpose, stoked his spiritual fires, and honored him for his confession of Jesus’ true identity. It takes only three short verses before Peter comes crashing back down the mountain. It’s really less a “descent” and more of a spectacular ski-jump wipe-out like the one that used to be in the opening of *Wide World of Sports* – or maybe more like a car plummeting off a cliff and bursting into flames as it strikes the rocks below. Whatever analogy you prefer, we see Peter make another bold proclamation – and we see Jesus again treat Peter as He treated no other disciple.

Read Matthew 16:21-23

Interesting to note: Jesus pointed out in his commendation of Peter that His doing so was not because of something Peter came up with on his own, but because God had revealed truth to him and He embraced – and proclaimed it. There are distinct parallels at work in these latter passages. Satan has revealed an UN-truth about Christ to Peter (that the path Jesus is on cannot possibly involve suffering and death) and Peter not only believes it – but he proclaims it.

Q :: It is clear that Peter could not perceive any way God’s will (as revealed in the blessing and promises of verses 17-19) could be accomplished by Jesus’ death. How does this relate to our views on suffering in the world – and in our own lives?

Q :: How can we fall into the same trap as Peter, where our perception of God’s plan may actually become a hindrance to it?

Q :: What do we learn about the importance of the beliefs that we allow ourselves to give voice to?

Thankfully, our most recent mistake is not the thing which defines us. Immediately following the episode of Jesus calling Peter Satan, we see in Mark 17 Jesus going up onto a high mountain and he takes with Him James, John --- and Peter!

Peter’s mountaintop experiences were not over.

His mistakes – no matter how severe – had not disqualified Him from special fellowship and revelations from Jesus. The same is true for us.