

This Rock – Matthew 16.13-20

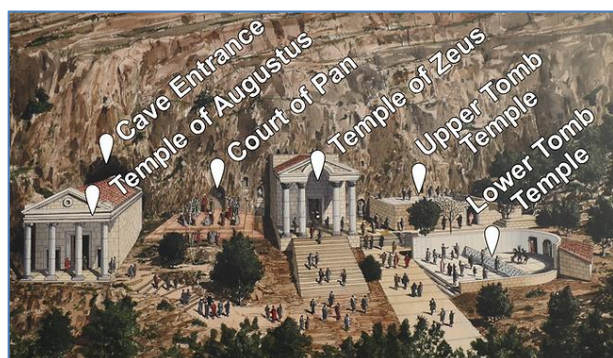
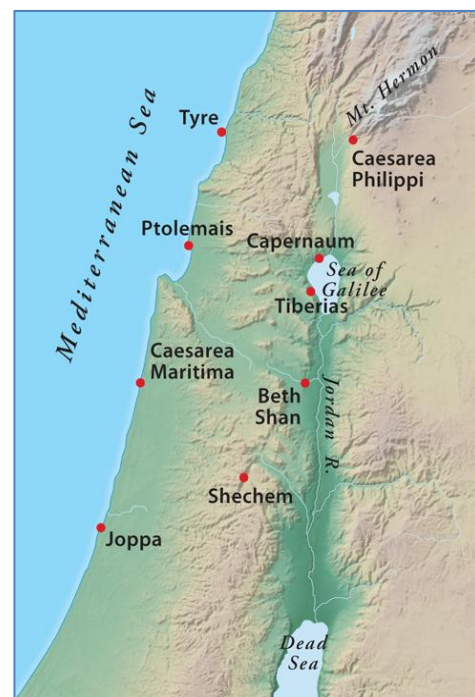
“For centuries, Roman Catholics have used this verse to teach that the church was built upon Peter. They claim that he was the first pope, and by means of papal succession, all of the popes were the true representatives of God from whom they received their authority. As a result, they claim that the Roman Catholic Church is the one and only true church.”

The Context in Matthew

- Matthew presents the King. His gospel begins, “The book of the generation of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham” (1.1). He is ‘son of David’ first, and as such, heir to the *throne*. He is ‘son of Abraham’ second, and therefore heir to the *land* and *promises* of God.
- **Matthew 1-4:** The *pedigree* and *prophecies* of the King. *Seven* prophecies are fulfilled (cf. 1.22-23).
- **Matthew 5-7:** The *principles* of the King. The Sermon on the Mount describes the spiritual character and conduct expected of His subjects.
- **Matthew 8-9:** The *power* of the King. *Ten* miracles in *three* cycles (three-three-four) display the authority Christ has in every sphere – whether over leprosy, demon possession, the wind and the waves, blindness or death.
- **Matthew 10-12:** The *presentation* of the King. The disciples are sent out to preach the nearness of the kingdom (10.7). Christ Himself makes a personal appeal to the people (11.28). Ultimately, He is rejected (12.14) and withdraws Himself from Jerusalem to the border of the land in *Caesarea Philippi* (12.15; 16.13).
- **Matthew 13:** The *parables* of the King. The King is rejected. There is therefore a delay in the kingdom programme, and its manifestation on earth. The mysteries of the kingdom reveal the character of the intervening period.
- **Matthew 14-18:** The *purpose* of the King. Upon the confession of His Person, the Lord Jesus will disclose a purpose not formerly revealed. Thus, there is the revelation of the *Christ* (16.16), the *church* (16.18) and the *cross* (16.21).

The Country of Caesarea Philippi

- The location of Caesarea Philippi is significant. Phillips says, “*In this distant and obscure spot on the boundary between Jewish and Gentile territory, the Lord turned His back on a Jewish kingdom and embraced a mostly Gentile church.*”
- Caesarea Philippi is at the foot of Mount Hermon, the highest mountain in Israel. A massive cliff at its base overshadows the city.
- The site was originally known as Panias, named after the Greek god Pan – the deity of shepherds, flocks, wild nature, music, and fertility.
- The site contained a prominent cave which was believed to be Pan’s birthplace and a portal to the underworld – the “gates of Hades”.
- The area was a centre of pagan worship, especially Canaanite Baal worship. The area was scattered with at least 14 idol temples.
- Herod the Great built a striking white marble temple to Augustus Caesar near the cave in 19 or 20 BC.
- Philip the Tetrarch (son of Herod) enlarged the town around 1 or 2 BC. He renamed it *Caesarea* in honour of Caesar Augustus and added *Philippi* (of Philip) to distinguish it from the coastal *Caesarea Maritima*.
- At the time of the Lord, a river emerged from the Cave of Pan. Today, the river is called Banyas, one of the four sources of the Jordan.
- As the water shot out from the cave, small stones and pebbles [*petros*] were broken off the cliff [*petra*] and filled the riverbed.



The Confession of Peter

v.13. In the environs of Caesarea Philippi, the Lord Jesus **asked** his disciples *two* questions about His identity (v.13, 15) – one concerned *public* opinion, and one concerned the *personal* opinion of His disciples. Mark records the verb in the imperfect tense, He ‘kept on asking’ (8.27). This implies a repeated, ongoing action. The Lord pressed the question to probe their understanding. First, the public opinion: **Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?** This was a popular talking point! The Pharisees had said, “Who is this that forgiveth sins also?” (Luke 7.49). The disciples had said, “What manner of man is this! for he commandeth even the winds and water, and they obey him,” (Luke 8.25). Even Herod the Tetrarch said, “John have I beheaded: but who is this, of whom I hear such things? And he desired to see him.” (Luke 9.9). But, what of the people? Who did they think the Lord Jesus was? Notice the Lord speaks of Himself as the **Son of man** – a title which emphasises His ideal and perfect manhood, and therefore His right to dominion.

v.14. Some of the people said He was **John the Baptist**, perhaps because He associated with John at the beginning of His public ministry and preached the same message of repentance. But no, Christ is not John the Baptist. Some thought He was **Elijah**, perhaps because Elijah was the prophet predicted to herald the coming of Messiah (Malachi 4.5). The miracles of Elijah also echoed the miracles of the Lord Jesus. But no, Christ is not Elijah. Others thought He was **Jeremiah**, partly because Jewish traditions said Jeremiah had hidden the Ark of the Covenant and other sacred items before the Babylonian destruction of the Temple, and that he would one day return to restore them when the Messiah came (2 Maccabees 2.1-8). The Lord Jesus also showed the same kind of compassion as the so-called ‘weeping prophet’. But no, Christ is not Jeremiah. Finally, some thought the Lord Jesus was **one of the prophets**, or “old” (early) prophets (Luke 9.19) because He spoke with the same kind of authority as them. After all, God had promised He would raise up “a prophet like Moses” from among the people (Deuteronomy 18.15-18). The opinions of the people were unanimous in that they all agreed the Lord Jesus was someone great. There are many today who call Jesus great – a great teacher, orator, moralist or healer. But He is more than great. He is not one of a series, or the equal of other great ones. He is unprecedented, unparalleled, unrivalled and unique.

v.15. The Lord Jesus was more interested in the *personal* opinion of His disciples: **He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am?** In the Greek text, it is more emphatic: “But ye, who do ye say that I am?” In contrast to what everybody else was saying, what did the apostles believe? **v.16.** **Simon Peter** [*petros*] answered and said, **Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.** Again, the Greek is more emphatic: “You are *the* Messiah, *the* Son of *the* God, *the* living one.” As **the Christ**, He is the anointed prophet (full and final revelation), priest (full and free redemption) and king (universal and eternal rule and reign). As the **Son of the living God**, the Lord Jesus is sent *from* God, and is co-equal *with* God, bearing His essence, nature and character. The living God is significant in an atmosphere of idolatry like that of Caesarea Philippi.

What is the Rock?

v.17. Peter’s glorious confession was not deduced from human logic – **flesh and blood**. It did not derive from the intuition and wisdom of man. This was a result of divine illumination from God the **Father**. **v.18.** Peter’s appreciation of Christ gave him the privilege of receiving a great revelation. The Lord Jesus says, **“thou art Peter [*Petros*], and upon this rock [*petra*] I will build my church.”** The rock is Peter’s confession of Christ. Several arguments support this conclusion:

- **Aramaic.** If the Lord Jesus was speaking Aramaic – the language of daily life in Galilee and Judea – the word in each case would be the same, “You are *kêpā*’ (rock) and on this *kêpā*’ (rock) I will build my church.”
- The Aramaic word *kêpā*’ (which can describe both a small stone and a large rock) transliterates to Cephas – the nickname given to Simon Peter by the Lord Jesus (John 1.42). To attempt to convey the word play in English, we would say something like, “You are Rocky, and upon this rock I will build my church.”
- **Greek.** However, the NT was written in Greek, not Aramaic, and, indeed, the Lord Jesus may have purposely spoken these words in Greek. Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Matthew used two *different* Greek words in the sentence, which doesn’t quite preserve the pun so evident in Aramaic.
- Matthew wrote, “Thou art Peter [*Petros*], and upon this rock [*petra*]...” *Petros* is a masculine noun; *petra* is a feminine noun. It is a contradiction of Greek grammar for a feminine to modify a masculine, or vice versa. Therefore, grammatically, it cannot possibly mean that the church would be built upon Peter.
- If Peter was intended, the Holy Spirit *could* have used *Petros* twice – though it would sound unnatural and awkward in Greek. It seems as if the Spirit of God is purposely making a distinction.
- **Definition.** Though sometimes overstated, there is a distinction in meaning between *petros* and *petra*. *Petros* (masculine) refers to a small stone (pebble), or a piece of movable rock. On the other hand, *petra* (feminine) refers to bedrock, a cliff or a large, immovable mass of rock.
- Thus, Peter was a small stone or pebble, just like those that filled the riverbed at the cave of Pan. “This rock” refers to the massive cliff overshadowing Caesarea Philippi, and by inference, to Peter’s confession about Christ.
- The confession of Christ was the bedrock on which the church would be built (Acts 8.37).

- John Riddle says, “The Lord did not say directly ‘Upon me’ but ‘Upon this rock’ – the truth confessed by Peter. Not Christ as the Son of man, but the Son of God.”
- **Symbolism.** There is further precedent in the OT. A rock is often used as a symbol of deity and is a Divine title of Christ (Psalm 118.22; Isaiah 28.16) as well as God Himself (Deuteronomy 32.4; Psalm 18.2). Indeed, Abraham and his confession of faith in God is conceived as bedrock from which the nation was hewn (Isaiah 51.1-2).

So, the rock is not the unstable, wavering Peter who denied the Lord (cf. v.23), but his confession of Christ. FF Bruce says, “what matters is not the stature of the confessor but the truth of the confession.” We further note that Peter himself identified the Lord Jesus as the foundation Stone (Acts 4.10-12; 1 Peter 2.5-8), as did Paul (Romans 9.32-33; 1 Corinthians 3.11; Ephesians 2.20). Thus, it is upon the bedrock of the confession of Christ as the Son of God that the Lord Jesus would **build His church**. Notice it is “my” church. This is not the rebuilding of the OT tabernacle or temple, but something uniquely and peculiarly His own. This is a reference to the *church of the dispensation* which the Lord Jesus would begin building on the Day of Pentecost – it was still future. He would be the chief cornerstone, that which shaped and characterised the structure of the whole building. Extending from Him were the two lines of the “apostles and prophets” who further laid the foundation by their teaching (Ephesians 2.20-22).

Peter himself is called a *stone* because he would be built into the edifice as a living stone. There is a vital connection between a stone and a rock. A stone derives from the rock! JN Darby says, “I who build, and build on this immovable foundation – I give you the place of a stone (Peter) in connection with this living temple.”

The Gates of Hell

In another implicit reference to the massive rock formation overshadowing the Cave of Pan (thought to be the gate of Hades), the Lord Jesus firmly declares that the **gates of hell shall not prevail against** the church. In the Hebrew Scriptures, the term “gates of death” (or the ‘grave’, Sheol) was an idiom for physical death (cf. Job 38.17; Psalm 9.13; 107.18; Isaiah 38.10). It is by physical death a person enters the place of the departed dead – Hades (Greek) or Sheol (Hebrew). Thus, the Lord Jesus would build His church, and physical death could not destroy it – whether “His death nor the deaths of the apostles nor the deaths of countless martyrs throughout the history of the church,” (Fruchtenbaum). Death cannot hold, has no authority over, and will never prevail against God’s people! In other words, this church will be built on resurrection ground. He came out from the grave as the risen Christ. This is the One who builds what death cannot destroy – the church of the dispensation. For His church, death with its terrible consequence has no power.

The Keys of the Kingdom

v.19. Peter would have a particular and privileged ministry in relation to this new phase of the kingdom. To him (uniquely) would be given the **keys of the kingdom of heaven**. What are these keys? In Scripture, keys represent authority – particularly the authority to open and close doors, to grant or else deny access (cf. Revelation 1.18). Peter would have the privilege of opening the church aspect of God’s kingdom programme – both to Jews, Samaritans and Gentiles (cf. Matthew 10.5-6). Once Peter had opened the door for one group, it remained open.

- In Acts **2**, Peter opened the door for the *Jews* on the Day of Pentecost.
- In Acts **8**, Peter opened the door for the *Samaritans*. Fruchtenbaum says, “Philip entered Samaria and preached the gospel to the Samaritans, and many Samaritans believed, were regenerated by the Holy Spirit, and received salvation. However, the Spirit did not baptise them into the body, because while Philip had the gospel, he did not have the keys. So, the church of Jerusalem sent Peter to Samaria, and by the laying on of hands, the Spirit baptised the Samaritans into the body (Acts 8.17).”
- In Acts **10**, Peter opened the door for the *Gentiles*. In the meantime, Paul was saved and commissioned by God to be the apostle to the Gentiles (Acts 9). Whilst he was the one called as the Apostle to the Gentiles, like Philip, he did not have the keys either! “So before Paul could start his missionary work, God sent Peter to the house of Cornelius. By his preaching, the Gentiles believed” and were added to the body” (Fruchtenbaum).
- Peter’s opening of the way of salvation by the preaching of the gospel was in stark contrast to the religious leaders, who, by their hypocrisy, human traditions and system of works had *shut up* the way of access to the kingdom (23.13).

Binding and Loosing

Peter was further given special authority to bind and loose. Similar statements were later made in reference to the local assembly (18.18) and *all* the disciples (John 20.23).

In a Jewish context, the terms **binding** and **loosing** described the activity of a judge who declared persons *innocent* or *guilty*, thus ‘binding’ or ‘loosing’ them from the charges made against them. In terms of the Rabbinic office, binding and loosing also carried a legislative force – they could ‘forbid’ or ‘permit’ according to their interpretation of the Law. This authority in the church was not given to the Jewish leadership, but rather to Peter, then all the apostles.

Thus the apostles could *forbid* and *permit* or *declare guilty* or *innocent* in the sense that the apostles would become the Spirit inspired mouthpieces of God Himself. The word of God would allow them to speak and judge with authority. Carson makes an important point, "This is wrongly translated 'shall be bound' and 'shall be loosed,' seeming to make Jesus teach that the apostles' acts will determine the policies of heaven. They should be translated 'shall have been bound' and 'shall have been loosed'. This makes the apostles' acts a matter of inspiration or heavenly guidance." That is, the Apostles on earth are merely declaring and ratifying what has already been bound in heaven by the word of God which stands forever.

There are examples of such apostolic authority in the NT. In Acts 5, Peter bound Ananias and Sapphira for judgment. In the case of the man at Corinth, his sin was bound upon him according to the instructions given by Paul in 1 Corinthians 5.3-5, and his sin loosed, according to 2 Corinthians 2.6-11. The church has a limited authority to bind and loose in a judicial sense, but not to the same degree as the apostles. The apostles could impose a death sentence, while the church can only excommunicate the sinner (Matthew 18.17-18).

There is similar language in John 20.23 which speaks of "remitting" and "retaining" sins. This did not infer upon the apostles the divine prerogative of forgiving sins, rather, the Lord was giving them authority to *proclaim* forgiveness or retention of sins through the preaching of the gospel (cf. Acts 10.42-43; 13.38).