



REASON TOGETHER
— CHURCH —

UPON THIS ROCK

Matthew 16:13–20

Sermon & Pastor's Commentary

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

Pastor & Teacher

REASON TOGETHER STUDIES

UPON THIS ROCK

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MAIN STUDY QUESTION

*What did Jesus mean when He said,
“Upon this rock I will build My church?”*

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REASON TOGETHER STUDIES

SERMON TRANSCRIPT

UPON THIS ROCK

Matthew 16:13–20

“What did Jesus mean when He said, ‘Upon this rock I will build My church?’”

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

Pastor & Teacher

Aloha, and welcome everyone.

My name is Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley.

I have been in the ministry for over thirty years.

Whether you have been here many times...

or this is your very first visit...

we are honored that you are here.

I pray that from the moment you walked through the doors you felt welcomed...

accepted...

and at home.

Here at Reason Together Church we have a very simple invitation.

Bring your questions.

Open your Bible.

And let's reason together through the Word of God.

Would you join me in prayer?

Father,

as we open Your Word today,

we ask that You would quiet our hearts.

Help us set aside the distractions that have followed us into this room.

Help us to lay aside our assumptions...

our traditions...

our opinions...

and anything that would keep us from simply hearing what You have said.

Father,

we are not asking merely for more information.

We are asking for understanding.

We ask that Your Holy Spirit would guide us into truth.

Help us to understand not only what Your Word says...

but why You said it.

If there is someone here today who has never trusted Jesus Christ as Savior,

I ask that today would be the day You draw them to Yourself.

For those who are hurting,

bring comfort.

For those who are discouraged,

bring hope.

For those who are searching,

bring answers.

And for all of us,

help us leave this place knowing Jesus Christ more clearly than when we arrived.

May everything that is said...

everything that is learned...

and every decision that is made...

bring glory to You.

For we ask these things

in the wonderful name of our Lord and Savior,

Jesus Christ.

Amen.

If you have your Bible this morning,

would you open it with me to Matthew chapter 16.

Our study today begins in verse 13.

As we read together,

I'd like you to notice three things.

Notice the question Jesus asks.

Notice Peter's answer.

And notice the promise Jesus makes.

When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, saying, Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?

And they said, Some say that thou art John the Baptist: some, Elias; and others, Jeremias, or one of the prophets.

He saith unto them, But whom say ye that I am?

And Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.

And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona: for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.

And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.

And I will give unto thee the keys of the kingdom of heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt bind on earth shall be bound in heaven: and whatsoever thou shalt loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

Then charged he his disciples that they should tell no man that he was Jesus the Christ.

This morning...

I don't want to begin with what Jesus said.

And I don't even want to begin with why Jesus said it.

I want to begin with where Jesus said it.

Because I believe the location may help us understand the conversation.

In fact...

I think it may become one of the most important questions we ask today.

Why did Jesus choose this place to have this conversation?

Think about it.

Jesus could have asked this question beside the Sea of Galilee.

He could have asked it in Capernaum.

He could have asked it in Jerusalem.

He could have asked it while walking almost anywhere in Israel.

But He didn't.

Matthew tells us...

"When Jesus came into the coasts of Caesarea Philippi..."

That detail isn't there to fill space.

The Holy Spirit never wastes words.

If God tells us where something happened...

there is usually a reason.

So before we ask,

"What did Jesus mean?"

let's first ask,

"Why here?"

Let's travel there together.

Picture yourself walking with the disciples.

You're leaving the familiar villages of Galilee.

The terrain begins to change.

Mountains begin to rise around you.

The air becomes cooler.

As you continue north,

a massive wall of rock suddenly dominates the landscape.

It is unlike anything you've seen in Galilee.

Carved into that cliff are shrines dedicated to pagan gods.

Temples stand nearby.

The influence of Rome is everywhere.

Even the city itself bears the name of Caesar.

This is not a place known for worshiping the God of Israel.

This is a place where competing religions...

human power...

and pagan worship all come together.

There was also a large cave at the base of that rock.

Ancient pagan tradition associated that cave with the realm of the dead.

People believed it was an entrance to the underworld.

Now let's be careful.

The Bible never tells us that Jesus pointed to the cave.

The Bible never tells us that He motioned to the rock.

The Bible never says He used the landscape as an object lesson.

We should never claim as fact what Scripture does not say.

But neither should we ignore what Scripture does say.

Jesus intentionally came here.

The disciples knew where they were.

Matthew knew where they were.

And the Holy Spirit wanted us to know where they were.

That means the setting deserves our attention.

Because in just a few moments...

Jesus is going to ask the one of the most important questions any person will ever answer.

Jesus asked,

"Whom do men say that I, the Son of man, am?"

What an interesting question.

Jesus already knew the answer.

He wasn't gathering information.

He was preparing His disciples.

So they answered.

"Some say that thou art John the Baptist."

Others said,

"Elias."

Others believed,

"Jeremiah."

Or...

"One of the prophets."

Let's think about those answers for just a moment.

None of those people were insulting Jesus.

In fact...

every one of those names represented someone greatly respected.

John the Baptist...

the greatest prophet according to Jesus.

Elijah...

the fearless prophet who stood against the prophets of Baal.

Jeremiah...

the weeping prophet who faithfully proclaimed God's truth despite overwhelming opposition.

The people were saying wonderful things about Jesus.

But every one of them missed the truth.

And I think there's an important lesson there.

It is possible to admire Jesus...

and still not know Him.

It is possible to respect Him...

and still misunderstand Him.

It is possible to believe He was a great teacher...

a great prophet...

even a great moral example...

and still miss who He really is.

The world has never had a shortage of opinions about Jesus.

The problem isn't a lack of opinions.

The problem is arriving at the truth.

Then Jesus asked the question that every person must eventually answer.

"But whom say ye that I am?"

Notice what changed.

The crowd disappeared.

Public opinion disappeared.

Family traditions disappeared.

Religious culture disappeared.

Now it became personal.

Who...

do...

YOU...

say...

that I am?

There comes a point when every one of us must answer that question.

Not our parents.

Not our church.

Not our denomination.

Not our favorite preacher.

Us.

Peter answered first.

"Thou art the Christ...

the Son of the living God."

I want you to notice something.

Peter didn't simply say,
"I think You're special."
He didn't say,
"I believe You're a prophet."
He didn't even say,
"I believe You're the Messiah."
He said,
"Thou art the Christ...
the Son of the living God."
Remember where they're standing.
Surrounded by temples.
Surrounded by idols.
Surrounded by people worshiping gods made with human hands.
And Peter says,
"You are the Son...
of the living God."
Not another god.
Not one god among many.
Not a better god.
The living God.
Every false religion surrounding them claimed to possess truth.
Every temple claimed authority.
Every idol demanded devotion.
Yet standing in the middle of all of that...
Peter identified the only One who actually possessed life.
What an incredible confession.
Then Jesus answered,

"Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona."

That phrase deserves a moment of our attention.

Simon was Peter's given name.

"Barjona" simply means,

"son of Jonah."

Jesus is addressing Peter personally.

Almost tenderly.

"Simon...

son of Jonah..."

Then Jesus explains why Peter is blessed.

"For flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee...

but my Father which is in heaven."

Peter didn't figure this out because he was smarter than everyone else.

He didn't win an argument.

He didn't solve a theological puzzle.

The Father revealed the truth to him.

That should remind us of something important.

No one comes to know Christ merely by accumulating information.

There is a difference between information...

and revelation.

You can know facts about Jesus...

without knowing Jesus.

You can memorize verses...

study history...

read theology...

and still never personally recognize Him as the Christ.

Peter's confession was born because God opened his eyes.

And I find that encouraging.

Because the same God who revealed Christ to Peter...

still opens hearts today.

Now I want you to notice something that is often overlooked.

The entire conversation up to this point has been about one subject.

Jesus.

Not Peter.

Jesus.

Who is Jesus?

What do people believe about Jesus?

Who do you say Jesus is?

Everything centers upon Him.

Only after Peter identifies Christ...

does Jesus begin speaking about Peter.

I think that's important.

Because many discussions about this passage begin where Jesus did not begin.

They begin with Peter.

Jesus began with Himself.

And I believe that's exactly where we should begin as well.

Then Jesus said,

"And I say also unto thee,

That thou art Peter..."

Let's stop there for just a moment.

Jesus isn't correcting Peter.

He's commending him.

Peter has just confessed the greatest truth a man could ever confess.

Jesus isn't minimizing Peter's role.

He's honoring it.

Peter will become one of the leading voices in the early church.

He will preach at Pentecost.

He will boldly proclaim Christ before rulers.

God will use him in remarkable ways.

Peter's place in God's plan is important.

There should be no desire on our part to diminish that.

The question has never been,

"Was Peter important?"

Of course he was.

The real question is this.

What did Jesus mean when He continued by saying,

"...and upon this rock I will build my church."

For nearly two thousand years,

that question has been debated.

Some believe the rock is Peter.

Others believe the rock is Peter's confession.

Others believe Jesus is referring to Himself.

Rather than beginning with opinions,

let's continue doing what we've done all morning.

Let's allow the Bible to guide us.

Whenever I come to a difficult passage,

I like to ask a simple question.

"Has God already talked about this somewhere else?"

Because Scripture is its own best interpreter.

Long before Peter was ever born...

God had already introduced Himself by a particular name.

"The Rock."

Listen to Moses.

"He is the Rock,
His work is perfect."

Listen to David.

"The LORD is my rock,
and my fortress,
and my deliverer."

Again David writes,
"The LORD liveth;
and blessed be my rock."

Isaiah speaks of the Lord as the everlasting Rock.

Over...

and over...

and over again...

God identifies Himself as the Rock.

Now we come into the New Testament.

Paul removes all doubt when he writes,

"And that Rock was Christ."

Then he writes again,

"For other foundation can no man lay

than that is laid,

which is Jesus Christ."

That's an extraordinary statement.

There aren't many foundations.

There isn't another foundation.

There is one.

Jesus Christ.

Then we read what Peter himself wrote years later.

Isn't that interesting?

If anyone could have clarified what Jesus meant,
it would certainly be Peter.

So what does Peter do?

Does he point believers to himself?

No.

He points them to Christ.

Peter describes Jesus as the living Stone.

He calls Him the chief Cornerstone.

Then Peter says that all believers are living stones being built into a spiritual house.

Peter never presents himself as the object of our faith.

He points us to Jesus.

Now let's put all of that together.

The Old Testament repeatedly identifies God as the Rock.

Paul says,

"That Rock was Christ."

Paul says Jesus is the only foundation.

Peter calls Jesus the chief Cornerstone.

When I place all of those passages beside Matthew chapter 16,

I believe they all point in the same direction.

Jesus Christ is the ultimate Rock.

Now...

let me pause for just a moment.

I also believe something else.

And I want to be very careful how I say it.

I believe where Jesus spoke these words is important.

Not because the location determines doctrine.

Scripture determines doctrine.

Always.

But God often uses settings...

places...

and circumstances...

to illuminate truth.

Jesus frequently taught that way.

He talked about water while standing near wells.

He spoke about sheep where shepherds worked.

He spoke about sowing where fields surrounded Him.

He pointed people from the visible...

to the invisible.

So I cannot help but wonder...

Standing in the shadow of that massive rock...

surrounded by temples carved into stone...

with reminders of death nearby...

whether Jesus intentionally allowed everything around the disciples to reinforce what He was saying.

Notice what I said.

I said,

"I wonder."

I did not say,

"The Bible says."

There is a difference.

The Bible never tells us Jesus pointed toward the cliff.

The Bible never tells us He laid His hand on a rock.

We should never preach our imagination as though it were Scripture.

But neither should we ignore the remarkable setting God chose to preserve in Matthew's Gospel.

At the very least,

the location causes us to slow down.

To think.

To observe.

To ask,

"Why here?"

And I believe that's exactly what we've been doing together this morning.

Then Jesus made a promise.

One sentence.

A promise that has now stood for nearly two thousand years.

"I...

will...

build...

My...

church."

Let's slow down and listen to every word.

"I..."

Who is the Builder?

Jesus.

Not Peter.

Not the apostles.

Not a denomination.

Not a pastor.

Jesus.

"I..."

The Builder identifies Himself.

"...will..."

Not,

"I hope to."

Not,

"I'll try."

Not,

"If people cooperate."

"I will..."

This is a divine promise.

It is certain.

It is settled.

"...build..."

The church is not a human invention.

It isn't a business.

It isn't a social club.

It isn't a political movement.

It isn't built by clever programs...

larger buildings...

better marketing...

or stronger personalities.

Jesus said,

"I will build..."

Everything we do...

every sermon...

every Sunday School lesson...

every conversation...

every visit...

every prayer...

every cup of coffee we share...

is simply joining Him in what He is already doing.

We are servants.

He is the Builder.

"...My..."

That one little word changes everything.

The church belongs to Christ.

It isn't my church.

It isn't your church.

It isn't the pastor's church.

It isn't the deacons' church.

It isn't the members' church.

It is His church.

That ought to humble every pastor.

Including me.

I'm simply one servant...

caring for something that belongs to Someone else.

One day every pastor leaves.

One day every generation passes.

One day every church building will disappear.

But Christ's church remains.

Because it belongs to Him.

"...church."

The word means

"a called-out assembly."

People.

Not buildings.

Not organizations.

People redeemed by the blood of Jesus Christ.

Now...

I want to take you back to Caesarea Philippi one more time.

Imagine those disciples standing there.

Behind them...

temples carved into solid rock.

Monuments to human religion.

Monuments to political power.

Monuments that announced,

"Our gods are strong."

"Our kingdom is permanent."

"Our empire will last forever."

Jesus looked beyond all of it.

Without raising an army.

Without building a temple.

Without occupying a throne.

He simply said,

"I will build My church."

History has now answered the question.

Where is Caesar's empire today?

Gone.

Where are the temples of Pan?

Ruins.

Where are the priests who served those pagan gods?

Gone.

But where is Christ's church?

It is still here.

On every continent.

In thousands of languages.

Gathering today...

just as Jesus promised.

Empires have come...

and gone.

Kings have risen...

and fallen.

Governments have changed.

Cultures have changed.

The church remains.

Not because Christians are stronger than everyone else.

Because Christ keeps His promises.

Then Jesus added one more statement.

"...and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."

I have heard many explanations through the years.

Some very good.

Some not so good.

Let's stay with what we know.

The word "Hades" refers to the realm of the dead.

Death itself.

The grave.

The place people feared.

And standing in a place where many associated that nearby cave with the underworld...

Jesus declared that death itself would not overcome what He was building.

Think about that.

Only a few months later...

Jesus Himself would die.

His body would be placed in a tomb.

If anyone watching that day had forgotten His promise...

they might have concluded the Builder had failed.

But Sunday morning changed everything.

Death could not hold Him.

The grave could not keep Him.

The stone was rolled away.

Christ arose.

And because the Builder conquered death...

death could never destroy His church.

I think that's one of the most beautiful parts of this entire passage.

Jesus wasn't making a promise He hoped someone else would fulfill.

He would personally guarantee it.

By His own resurrection.

That's why Christians can face death differently.

Not because death isn't real.

But because Christ is greater.

That's why the church continues.

Not because Christians never die.

But because our Savior lives.

Everything...

comes back...

to Jesus.

Now...

let's return to the question we asked at the very beginning.

Not...

"What did Jesus say?"

Not even...

"Why did Jesus say it?"

But...

"Where did He say it?"

I believe that question has helped us appreciate this passage in a fresh way.

Not because the location determines doctrine.

It does not.

Scripture always determines doctrine.

But sometimes...

the setting helps us appreciate the message.

And I believe this is one of those occasions.

Standing in a place filled with false religion...

surrounded by monuments to human power...

near a place people associated with death...

Jesus declared that He would build something none of those things could ever overcome.

What confidence.

What authority.

What assurance.

Now let me ask you a question.

Where is your confidence today?

Is it in a denomination?

Those can change.

Is it in a church building?

Buildings eventually wear out.

Is it in a pastor?

Pastors grow old.

Pastors retire.

Pastors die.

Is it in a church tradition?

Traditions have their place.

But traditions cannot save anyone.

Or...

is your confidence in Jesus Christ?

The Rock.

The Builder.

The Cornerstone.

The One who conquered death.

The One who still builds His church.

Perhaps there is someone here this morning who has spent years admiring Jesus.

Respecting Him.

Learning about Him.

But you've never answered His question personally.

"But whom say ye that I am?"

That question is still waiting for an answer.

Peter answered,

"Thou art the Christ...

the Son of the living God."

That confession still changes lives today.

Jesus Christ died for our sins.

He was buried.

He rose again the third day.

He offers forgiveness...

eternal life...

and a relationship with God...

to everyone who will trust Him.

You don't come to Christ by joining an argument.

You come by placing your faith in Him.

Maybe that's the decision someone needs to make today.

Others of us already know Christ.

Perhaps our application is different.

Maybe we've become discouraged.

We look at the condition of the world...

the confusion in our culture...

the attacks on Biblical truth...

and we wonder what will become of the church.

May I remind you...

Jesus never said,

"You build My church."

He said,

"I will build My church."

The responsibility is ours to be faithful.

The responsibility is His to build.

That ought to take a tremendous burden off our shoulders.

We preach faithfully.

We teach faithfully.

We pray faithfully.

We love people faithfully.

We serve faithfully.

But we don't carry the church.

Jesus does.

And because He does...

we have every reason to live with hope.

Before we close,

let me remind you about the resources that are available this week.

The Pastor's Study walks through today's passage in greater detail and allows you to continue reasoning through the Scriptures at your own pace.

The Sunday School Lesson is designed for families and small groups to continue the discussion together.

Keiki's Corner helps our children begin building their lives upon the only true foundation.

The Devotional carries this truth into each day of the coming week.

And don't forget your Monday Morning Matters sheet.

Take it home.

Read through it after dinner this evening.

Ask yourself,

"Why does this matter to me?"

"How should this affect my Monday morning?"

Then write down your thoughts while they're still fresh.

One final reminder before we pray.

If Reason Together Church is your church home,
there is an offering box available at the back of the room.

Giving is one of the ways we worship the Lord together.

If you're visiting with us today,

we're not asking you to give.

Your presence is a blessing enough.

If you are visiting and belong to another congregation, please continue supporting your own home church faithfully.

If this is your first Sunday with us,

we would love for you to leave your first name and email address on one of our guest cards.

Not because we're building a mailing list.

But because we'd simply like the opportunity to thank you for spending part of your day with us.

And after the service...

please stop by the Reason Together Café.

I'd love the opportunity to meet you personally.

If you're visiting for the first time,

we have a Reason Together Church coffee mug we'd like to give you.

And while you're there...

please enjoy a complimentary cup of locally grown Hawaiian coffee.

The coffee is free.

And so are the refills on conversation.

Would you bow with me as we close in prayer?

Father,

thank You for reminding us today that our confidence does not rest in people...

or institutions...

or traditions...

but in Jesus Christ.

Thank You that He is the Rock.

Thank You that He is the Builder of His church.

Thank You that because He conquered death,

the gates of Hades will never prevail against what He is building.

Help us leave this place trusting Christ more completely than when we arrived.

Help us build our homes...

our families...

our ministries...

and our lives...

upon the only Foundation that can never fail.

If there is someone here who has never trusted Christ,

continue speaking to their heart today.

Draw them to Yourself.

And for those of us who already belong to You,

help us serve with joy...

with humility...

and with confidence...

knowing that Jesus is still building His church.

We ask these things

in the precious name of our Lord and Savior,

Jesus Christ.

Amen.

To our church ohana...

Aloha.

And to those who joined us for the very first time today...

Aloha Nui Loa.

REASON TOGETHER STUDIES

PASTOR'S COMMENTARY

UPON THIS ROCK

Matthew 16:13–20

*And I say also unto thee, That thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. **Matthew 16:18***

Dr. Thomas W. Hawksley

Pastor & Teacher

Commentary in Brief

CENTRAL CONCLUSION Peter is the rock-related confessing apostle in the immediate wordplay, while Jesus Christ is the ultimate Rock, foundation and Cornerstone whom Peter confesses. Peter's witness is foundational because it proclaims Christ. Jesus remains the Builder, Owner and living Lord of His church.

Matthew 16:13–20 is often drawn into a contest between interpretations before the reader has listened to the movement of the passage. Jesus begins with His identity, receives Peter's confession, pronounces Peter blessed, promises to build His church and declares that death will not overcome it. Every statement belongs to that progression. The passage honors Peter without allowing Peter to replace Christ as the church's final foundation or confidence.

This commentary expands the reasoning behind the sermon. It examines the setting at Caesarea Philippi, the language of Peter and the rock, the meaning of the church, the gates of Hades, the keys and the authority to bind and loose. It then compares Scripture with Scripture so that no single phrase is isolated from the Bible's larger testimony about Christ and His church.

1. Why the Setting Matters

Caesarea Philippi

Matthew tells us that Jesus entered the district of Caesarea Philippi before asking, "Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?" The location lay north of the Sea of Galilee near the base of Mount Hermon and near springs associated with the headwaters of the Jordan River. It stood outside the ordinary center of Jewish religious life and bore the marks of Greco-Roman religion and imperial power.

The region had earlier been known as Paneas or Panias because of its association with the god Pan. The modern name Banias preserves a form of that name. Philip the tetrarch developed the settlement and called it Caesarea in honor of the emperor, distinguishing it from the coastal Caesarea. The setting therefore carried several visible claims at once: the claims of nature, pagan worship and Rome.

The Rock Face, Grotto and Spring

The site is dominated by a dramatic limestone cliff and a large grotto. Archaeological remains and ancient testimony connect the area with the worship of Pan and related deities. Josephus describes Panium as a place near the sources of the Jordan with a mountain, a dark cavern and deep water. He also reports that Herod built a temple near the site in honor of Caesar and that Philip later developed Paneas and named it Caesarea (Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 15.363–364; 18.28; *Jewish War* 1.404–406).

Those details give the conversation remarkable force. In a place marked by monumental rock, Jesus spoke of the rock upon which He would build. In a district filled with temples and imperial honor, He spoke of

My church. Near a grotto associated with depths and the underworld, He declared that the gates of Hades would not prevail.

NECESSARY CAUTION Matthew does not say that Jesus pointed toward the cliff or cave. The text also does not record local residents calling that specific grotto “the gates of Hades.” The setting illuminates Jesus’ words, but it must not be made to say more than the inspired text says.

We can therefore distinguish what is certain from what is inferred. It is Biblically certain that Jesus and the disciples were in the district of Caesarea Philippi. It is historically well grounded that the area contained a monumental rock face, a grotto, pagan sanctuaries and imperial associations. It is a strong theological inference that Jesus intentionally allowed the setting to reinforce His teaching. It remains unproven that He made a recorded gesture toward a particular feature of the landscape.

2. The Question That Governs the Passage

Jesus first asked what others were saying about the Son of Man. The answers were respectful: John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah or another prophet. Yet admiration was not recognition. The crowd could speak highly of Jesus while failing to identify Him rightly.

But whom say ye that I am? **Matthew 16:15**

The word but turns public opinion into personal confession. Jesus did not ask whether the disciples admired His teaching or appreciated His miracles. He asked who they believed He was. That question governs everything that follows. The rock, the church, the keys and the victory over Hades cannot be interpreted correctly if they are detached from the identity of Jesus.

Peter answered for the disciples: “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Christ means Messiah, the promised and anointed King. Son of the living God distinguishes Jesus from every lifeless idol and every merely human ruler. At Caesarea Philippi, surrounded by the remains of religious and imperial claims, Peter confessed the living Son.

3. Peter’s Confession and the Father’s Revelation

Jesus pronounced Peter blessed, not because Peter had solved the mystery through unusual intelligence, but because the Father had revealed the truth to him. “Flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father which is in heaven.” Peter’s blessedness is real, yet it is received. The revelation comes from God and the confession answers that revelation.

This guards against two opposite errors. Peter must not be dismissed as though he were incidental to the passage. Jesus addresses him personally, blesses him, names him and entrusts responsibility to him. At the same time, Peter must not be treated as an independent source of authority. What he knows has been revealed by the Father and what he later exercises has been entrusted by Christ.

The following verses confirm both truths. Peter can speak under divine revelation in verse 16 and then resist the path of the cross in verses 21–23. Jesus can call him blessed and later rebuke him sharply. Peter's importance is genuine, but his security and authority never arise from an unfailing human nature.

4. Peter, the Rock and the Wordplay

Petros and Petra

Matthew 16:18 contains an unmistakable wordplay: “Thou art Peter [Petros], and upon this rock [petra] I will build my church.” Petros is the masculine form used as Peter's name. Petra is the ordinary feminine noun for rock or rocky foundation. The difference in grammatical gender is naturally affected by the need for a masculine personal name.

The familiar argument that Petros must mean a small loose stone while petra must mean a massive bedrock foundation should not control the interpretation. In New Testament-era Greek the meanings overlap. Jesus also likely taught in an Aramaic-speaking setting where kepha could stand behind both parts of the saying, as reflected in the name Cephas. The wordplay makes Peter directly relevant to the statement.

That observation, however, does not settle the entire theological question. The rock can be considered in relation to Peter personally, Peter as the confessing apostle, the confession he makes and Christ who is the content of that confession. The immediate grammar and the broader Biblical witness must be allowed to speak together.

Four Common Approaches

Christian interpreters have commonly emphasized one of four approaches.

- Peter personally: the direct wordplay, second-person address and gift of the keys place Peter in the immediate foreground.
- Peter's confession or faith: the narrative centers on the truth Peter confesses, revealed by the Father.
- Christ Himself: the wider Bible identifies God as the Rock and Christ as the only foundation and chief Cornerstone.
- An integrated apostolic-confessional view: Peter is the immediate confessing apostle whose foundational witness rests entirely upon Christ.

The integrated view best preserves the strengths of the passage without forcing an unnecessary choice. Peter is not removed from the word rock, and Christ is not displaced by Peter. Peter is foundational as a divinely instructed apostolic witness to Jesus Christ. Christ remains the ultimate Rock, the content of the confession and the One upon whom the church finally depends.

This integrated reading also reflects Ephesians 2:20–22. The household of God is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, while Jesus Christ Himself is the chief Cornerstone. Apostolic witness can be

foundational because it authoritatively proclaims Christ. The Cornerstone gives the entire structure its identity, alignment and permanence.

5. “I Will Build My Church”

Christ Is the Builder

The promise is active and personal: I will build. Jesus does not merely authorize others to begin a religious institution. He declares what He Himself will accomplish. The future of the church therefore rests first on Christ's action, not on human ingenuity, public approval or institutional strength.

This promise does not excuse passivity. The apostles preached, taught, prayed, suffered and organized the life of the early congregations. Pastors and churches are still called to labor faithfully. Yet their work is stewardship. Faithfulness belongs to the servant; the power to create spiritual life and preserve the church belongs to Christ.

The Church Belongs to Christ

Jesus says My church. The possessive pronoun is both theological and pastoral. The church does not belong to Peter, a later pastor, a denomination, a board, a family or a generation. Leaders may be entrusted with responsibility, but ownership remains with Jesus Christ.

The word translated church is ekklesia, an assembly or gathered community. Matthew 16:18 and 18:17 are the only Gospel occurrences of the term. It should not be reduced to a building or an organizational structure. Jesus promises to gather and preserve a people who belong to Him. Buildings, constitutions and ministries can serve that people, but none of them is the living church apart from Christ's people and presence.

PASTORAL IMPLICATION The church is not carried on the shoulders of a pastor. Leaders are called to preach faithfully, teach clearly, love sacrificially and serve humbly. Christ carries what belongs to Christ.

6. The Gates of Hades

The Greek phrase is pylai hadou, the gates of Hades. The King James Version translates the term hell, but Matthew uses Hades, the realm of the dead, rather than Gehenna, the term commonly associated with final judgment. The phrase has Old Testament parallels in the gates of death and the gates of Sheol, including Job 38:17 and Isaiah 38:10. The primary promise is therefore not that Christians will stage an assault against a cave entrance. It is that death and the realm of the dead will not overcome Christ's church.

The imagery of gates suggests the power and confinement of death. Every earthly empire eventually yields to the grave. Every human leader dies. Every building ages. Christ's church endures because its Builder

entered death and rose victorious. Matthew 16:21 immediately turns toward Jesus' coming death and resurrection, placing the promise within the story of His victory.

Broader spiritual opposition may be included as a secondary implication. Satanic power, persecution and false teaching oppose the people of Christ. Yet the text's central hope is resurrection hope. Acts 2:24 declares that death could not hold Jesus. Revelation 1:18 presents the risen Christ holding the keys of death and Hades. The gates cannot prevail because the Builder is alive.

7. The Keys, Binding and Loosing

Entrusted Kingdom Authority

Jesus promised Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Keys represent entrusted authority. Isaiah 22:22 supplies an important background image in which the key of the house of David is given to a steward. The steward acts with real responsibility, but the authority remains delegated.

Peter's role in Acts gives visible expression to this promise. He preaches at Pentecost in Acts 2, participates with John as the gospel reaches Samaritans in Acts 8 and brings the gospel into the Gentile household of Cornelius in Acts 10. He does not create the kingdom or own its door. He serves publicly at crucial openings of gospel witness.

Under Heaven's Rule

Binding and loosing describe authoritative kingdom judgment and teaching under heaven's rule. The grammar can carry the sense that earthly action corresponds to what has been determined in heaven. Peter's authority is therefore not autonomous power to make heaven obey him. It is the responsibility to declare and apply heaven's truth faithfully.

Matthew 18:18 later uses binding and loosing language in the plural while addressing the disciples in the setting of discipline and reconciliation. Peter's distinctive role in Matthew 16 remains, but related responsibility is shared within the church's authorized witness. Authority is accountable to Christ, the gospel and the apostolic truth.

8. Scripture Interprets Scripture

God Is the Rock

Across the Old Testament, ultimate rock language belongs to God. Moses calls Him "the Rock" whose work is perfect (Deuteronomy 32:4). David calls the Lord his rock, fortress and deliverer (2 Samuel 22:2–3). The Psalms confess that God alone is rock, salvation and refuge (Psalm 62:2, 6–7). Isaiah calls the Lord the everlasting Rock (Isaiah 26:4).

This Biblical pattern does not erase Peter from Matthew 16. It establishes the deepest theological meaning of foundation and security. No human being can occupy the place that Scripture assigns to God.

Christ Is Foundation and Cornerstone

The New Testament applies foundation and rock imagery directly to Christ. Paul writes, “For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11). He identifies the spiritual Rock with Christ in 1 Corinthians 10:4. Peter himself directs believers to Jesus as the living Stone, chosen and precious, while believers become living stones in a spiritual house (1 Peter 2:4–8).

These passages show why the church’s final confidence cannot rest in Peter’s independent human strength. Peter’s greatest service is to confess and proclaim the Christ who is the foundation. He points away from himself to the living Stone.

9. Peter’s Foundational Witness

Peter occupies a prominent place among the apostles. Matthew names him first among the Twelve. Jesus prays for him and commands him to strengthen his brothers in Luke 22:31–32. After the resurrection, Jesus commissions him to feed His sheep in John 21:15–17. The opening chapters of Acts repeatedly show Peter speaking and acting at decisive moments.

A fair reading must honor that role. Some interpretations react so strongly against later claims about Peter that they minimize what Jesus actually says. That reaction is unnecessary. Peter can be genuinely blessed, genuinely commissioned and genuinely foundational without becoming the independent owner or ultimate foundation of the church.

Galatians 2:11–14 is also important. Paul opposed Peter when Peter’s conduct contradicted the truth of the gospel. The episode does not erase Peter’s apostleship. It demonstrates that apostolic authority remains accountable to the gospel. Christ and His truth govern the witness, not the reverse.

10. What the Passage Does Not Teach

Careful interpretation includes recognizing what a passage does not establish. Matthew 16:13–20 does not teach that every later church leader inherits unlimited personal authority. It does not identify a building, denomination or institution as the church’s owner. It does not place Peter beyond correction. It does not authorize leaders to speak independently of Scripture or to make heaven ratify personal decisions.

The passage also should not be reduced to a denominational argument. Jesus’ question confronts every reader: Who do you say that I am? A person can win an argument about Peter and still fail to confess Christ. The purpose of sound interpretation is not merely to defeat another tradition, but to see Jesus more clearly and trust Him more completely.

Nor should historical background replace the inspired text. Caesarea Philippi enriches the setting. Greek and Aramaic observations clarify the wordplay. Archaeology helps us picture the world of the disciples. Yet doctrine must finally rest on the words of Scripture read in their immediate context and in harmony with the whole Bible.

11. Pastoral Meaning for the Church Today

Every Person Must Answer Jesus

Public opinion about Jesus remains varied. Some admire Him as a teacher, reformer or spiritual example. The question of Matthew 16 is more direct. Jesus asks for confession and faith. Peter's answer identifies Him as the Christ and the Son of the living God. Respect that stops short of trusting Him is not the confession the passage requires.

Leaders Are Stewards

Pastors and teachers should feel both the weight and the freedom of this passage. The church belongs to Christ. Leaders must handle Scripture faithfully, represent other interpretations honestly and resist the temptation to make ministry depend on personality, celebrity or control. At the same time, they are free from the impossible burden of carrying the church as though its future depended entirely on them.

The Church Can Serve Without Fear

Cultures change, institutions weaken and opposition rises. Christ's promise remains. The church's confidence is not triumphalism, as though every congregation or program must succeed. It is resurrection confidence. Even when local expressions change or faithful believers suffer, death cannot cancel what the risen Christ is building.

FAITHFUL RESPONSE Preach Christ rather than human personality. Teach Scripture carefully and distinguish certainty from inference. Use history and original-language study to illuminate the text, not replace it. Serve faithfully while trusting Christ with the results. Face death and cultural uncertainty with resurrection hope.

Conclusion: Christ Carries His Church

Matthew 16:13–20 is a Christ-centered passage that honors Peter. Peter is blessed because the Father revealed the identity of Jesus to him. He becomes a leading apostolic witness and receives genuine kingdom responsibility. His confession is foundational because it declares the truth about Jesus.

The broader witness of Scripture identifies God as the Rock, Christ as the only foundation and Christ as the chief Cornerstone. The best expression of the passage is therefore integrated: Peter is the rock-related confessing apostle in the immediate wordplay, while Jesus Christ is the ultimate Rock and foundation whom Peter confesses and upon whom the church depends.

Caesarea Philippi gives the declaration unusual power. In a place marked by monumental rock, pagan worship, imperial honor and underworld associations, Jesus announced a church that belongs to Him and a victory that death cannot overturn. The setting illuminates the words, but the promise rests on Christ.

THE ENDURING CONFESSION Christ is the Rock. Christ is the Builder. Christ is the Cornerstone. Christ is the living Lord of His church.

Selected Sources

Primary Scripture

Matthew 7:24–27; 10:2; 16:13–23; 18:15–20; Luke 22:31–32; John 1:42; 21:15–17; Acts 2; 8; 10; Deuteronomy 32; 2 Samuel 22; Psalms 18 and 62; Isaiah 22:22; 26:4; 38:10; Job 38:17; 1 Corinthians 3:11; 10:4; 15:20–26; Ephesians 2:19–22; Galatians 2:11–14; 1 Peter 2:4–8; Revelation 1:18; 20:14.

Historical and Interpretive Sources

Flavius Josephus, Jewish Antiquities 15.363–364 and 18.28; Jewish War 1.404–406. John Chrysostom, Homilies on Matthew, Homily 54. Augustine, Retractations 1.21. Jack P. Lewis, “The Gates of Hell Shall Not Prevail Against It,” Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society 38.3.