



THE FIRST LETTER OF PETER
I PETER

Matthew 16:17–20

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.

Reflection

The first words of Matthew’s gospel were
these:

‘This is the genealogy of Jesus the
Messiah’

But it has taken 16 chapters for someone
other than the narrator to realise and say
the same thing; that Jesus is the Messiah,
the Christ, God’s anointed king. That per-
son was Peter, speaking on behalf of the
disciples in yesterday’s passage.

Now that Peter has made his grand confession about Jesus, Jesus in turn makes a grand pronouncement about Peter. That's what we have in front of us in our passage today. Jesus' words here have become highly controversial in the history of the church, especially between Roman Catholics and Protestants. So much so that verses 18 & 19 in particular are amongst the most discussed, hotly debated and researched verses in all of Scripture. This is largely because, in my opinion, the Roman Catholic Church misreads them to invest Peter with an authority and a succession of leadership that simply isn't justified by these words. In the lead up to this passage we've heard Jesus repeatedly warn about the traditions of men. In Roman Catholic tradition, Peter is the first Pope. And just as Jesus has charged the

well-meaning Pharisees with adding their traditions on top of the word of God I think that is what is at risk here. It is essential that the word of God always takes precedence over rules and traditions made up by men.

So today we are going to focus on these two controversial verses, starting with verse 18:

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.

The first thing to note here is Jesus' play on words. You may remember that Jesus changed Peter's name from Simon to Peter. 'Peter' means rock. So here Jesus is

saying 'I tell you that you are Peter ('rock'), and on this rock I will build my church.' His meaning is pretty clear. And Jesus's words in this verse come true as we see history unfold in the book of Acts. For instance, on the Day of Pentecost in Acts 2 the church numbered around 120 people. Peter preached and about 3,000 people gave their lives to Jesus. A nice foundation. And then just as significantly in Acts chapter 10 and 11 God uses Peter to open the door of the church to the Gentiles. But as Acts progresses we see Peter in many ways pass the baton to Paul and then Paul on to many others. The emphasis of verse 18 then, as with the overall message of Acts, is that it is Jesus who builds his church through the work of his Spirit.

But we shouldn't downplay Peter's foun-

dational role either. Do you remember Peter's courage in Matthew 14 when he stepped out into those raging seas and took a few steps, walking on the water towards Jesus? That's the kind of faith that Jesus uses to build his church. But you'll remember also that Peter began to sink, his faith wavering, and Jesus reached down and pulled him right back up again. It's in this fashion that Jesus builds his church; his strength through our weakness. Not through Popes, but through fallible, courageous people like Peter. Peter will pass from the scene, but Jesus remains, relentlessly building his church. Peter may have been a foundational rock but Jesus Christ is the cornerstone, the master builder, and the temple – to draw together other similar biblical images. It is Jesus who builds his church.

But what about this reference to ‘the gates of Hades’ not overcoming his church? In biblical times ‘Hades’ was the realm of the dead. And ‘gates’ were essential to the security and might of a city. So the ‘gates of Hades’ represents the ‘power of the death.’ Here Jesus is promising that even death itself will not overpower his church.

Moving on to verse 19,

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.”

This verse is even more difficult to interpret but as always when we find a difficult

verse in the bible, context is the essential starting point. We've just seen Jesus use a building metaphor when speaking of building his church, and a gate metaphor when speaking about death. It's only natural that the term 'keys' should link back to these two pictures of building and gates. The keys that Jesus gives Peter are to the kingdom of heaven which has been the great theme of Matthew's gospel so far. We've seen time and time again that the only way to enter the kingdom of heaven is to respond to the gospel in repentance and faith. So the keys that Peter is given, the keys to letting people into the kingdom of heaven, must be Jesus entrusting him with the preaching of the gospel. Just like in Acts 2 when he preached. So Jesus is entrusting Peter and his disciples with the gospel that will prove the keys to open-

ing up the kingdom of heaven to people from every nation on earth and the means through which Jesus builds his church.

Keeping with this image, even the binding and the loosing becomes clearer. You see the gospel of Jesus Christ has a polarising effect. You either accept or reject it. It's black and white. You either accept Jesus as your Lord and Saviour, as king over your life, or you reject him. And subsequently you're either bound in your sins into all eternity, or loosed from your sins into all eternity, depending on your response to the gospel. Our response to the gospel binds us or sets us free. Here the Roman Catholic church would say that Peter and his successors have been given the authority to bind and set free, to receive people or exclude individual peo-

ple from salvation. But that is not the decision of any man. It is a person's response to the gospel that determines their salvation; not a person's response to a human institution.

This verse might be hard to understand and it has certainly caused much confusion over the years but when you pan back and look at the witness of the whole bible it becomes very clear that we are saved by grace alone, through faith alone, and this is an act of God through the work of his Holy Spirit – not a human institution.

Think & Pray

Please spend some time now working carefully and prayerfully through these verses for yourself. They are unique to

Matthew. They only occur here. Given their uniqueness and obscurity you might like to think about how much emphasis we should place on them. But they are still God's word so then perhaps spend some time trying to place what you find in these verses in the wider framework of the bible. Difficult passages become much easier when you realise that the bible does not contradict itself. These verses cannot then be in conflict with the wider truths of Scripture, so when set in their immediate and wider biblical context often verses like these become much easier to understand. So perhaps reflect over them in light of Jesus mission on earth, the book of Acts and the New Testament teaching on salvation and the church. Do these perspectives make them any clearer?

Also spend some time now praying to God for wisdom as you approach this passage and other difficult passages like it. But please don't get so caught up in the detail today that you miss the big picture. Look at how Jesus has built his church! A rag-tag group of twelve Jewish men led by a carpenter who makes a promise to a fisherman, 'I will build my church.' And a church that is now billions strong and still growing. Praise Jesus this morning for his church and the way he so magnificently keeps his promises.