

Matthew 16:13-18

Introduction

Matthew 16:13-20 is the *resounding climax* of Matthew's Gospel to this point. *Everything* in Matthew has been *building* up to *this* moment. And yet as we'll see in a couple of weeks, this climax is also setting us up for a major transition. This is a turning point in Matthew – climax in verses 13-20... and transition in verses 21-23. It would be hard to overestimate the importance of these two passages in the whole “big picture” of the book of Matthew. Today, we'll look at verses 13-18.

I. Matthew 16:13a – Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi...

Caesarea Philippi was a pagan Roman city about 25 miles north of the Sea of Galilee. What we have here is basically Jesus' final withdrawal from Galilee, because the next time He is in Galilee He'll only be passing through on His way to Jerusalem (16:21; 17:22-19:1). Matthew doesn't tell us that Jesus actually entered the city, but only that He entered the district of Caesarea Philippi. Here, away from the Galilean crowds, Jesus can perhaps have a little more time alone with His disciples.

II. Matthew 16:13 – Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”

Jesus often referred to Himself in the third person as “the Son of Man”, and so both Mark and Luke explain that Jesus is simply asking: “Who do people say that *I* am?” (Mk. 8:27; cf. Lk. 9:18). Who *is* Jesus? That's the ultimate theme running throughout *all* of the Gospels! A whole lot has happened since Jesus first began preaching in Capernaum of Galilee (4:12-17). Jesus has been proclaiming the message of the kingdom in both word and deed, preaching and teaching, healing the sick, freeing the demon-possessed, feeding the multitudes, and calming the seas. And yet just to see and witness these things and know that they have happened is never enough. And so it's in light of these things that we must be *always* answering this question: “*Who is Jesus?*” “[Jesus] asked his disciples, ‘Who do people say that the Son of Man is?’”

III. Matthew 16:14 – And they said, “Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”

There was a common view in Jesus' day that some of the greatest Old Testament heroes would reappear just before the end time to prepare the way for the coming age of the Messiah's kingdom (cf. Luke 9:7-8; Hagner). God said this in Malachi: “I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes” (4:5). So not only was it thought by some that Elijah would literally be resurrected from the dead, but now there were additional candidates besides just Elijah – Jeremiah, John the Baptist, any one of the other prophets! It's pretty clear that Jesus was still very popular with the crowds. But it's also clear that the crowds thought of Jesus as someone who came to *prepare* the way for the Messiah. In their minds, if He were actually the Messiah, then they would already be witnessing the great and awesome day of the

Lord. The crowds were in a state of expectation, but they were expecting someone else. They were looking for someone else.

IV. Matthew 16:15 – He said to them, “But who do you say that I am?”

Now obviously, there is a sense in which Jesus is not concerned in the slightest about who other people say that He is. Jesus is not looking for affirmation. So then what’s the point? *Why* does Jesus ask the question? “But who do you say that I am?”

V. Matthew 16:16 – Simon Peter replied, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

This is the only time that Matthew ever refers to “Simon Peter” – using both names. For Matthew, this is a solemn moment of immense significance and importance. Peter could not possibly have been any more clear, or any more concise! “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” “The Christ” equals “the *Messiah*” in Hebrew. In the Old Testament, God never promised a coming “*Messiah*” – at least the Old Testament prophets never used that exact *title*. And yet pervading the entire Old Testament was this promise and expectation of a *deliverer* whom God would one day send to free His people from all bondage and oppression. And so “*Messiah*” became the title that God’s people used to *sum up* all of their hopes and expectations for the coming deliverer and King – the promised son of David. Now so far *in Matthew*, the title “*Messiah*” or “*Christ*” has appeared *only six* times. *Five* of these times are Matthew’s *own* narrative comments (four of which are in the introductory first chapter) and the sixth time is when Herod inquired about where the Christ was to be born. In all of His preaching and teaching, Jesus has never once claimed this title for Himself. And yet Peter, having listened to Jesus’ preaching and teaching, and having understood the meaning of His miracles, *now for the very first time* assigns this title to Jesus. Jesus is not simply one of the prophets... He is not one among many... He is not a forerunner preparing the way...”

“You are *the Christ*... the ***Son of the living God***.” When God made a covenant with King David in the Old Testament, you could say that He *adopted* David’s son to be His own son.

- ✓ 2 Samuel 7:12-16 – When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come from your body, and I will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. ***I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son.*** When he commits iniquity, I will discipline him with the rod of men, with the stripes of the sons of men, but my steadfast love will not depart from him, as I took it from Saul, whom I put away from before you. And your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me. Your throne shall be established forever.

So every son of David who ever ruled as king in Jerusalem could be viewed in some sense as a “son of God”. We could say that each descendant of David *became* a *son of God* at the moment of his coronation. Listen to what David wrote in Psalm chapter two:

- ✓ Psalm 2:6-8 – The LORD said to me, “You are my Son; *today* I have begotten you.

And yet at the same time, every Davidic king (including David himself) failed to bring about the kingdom that God had promised to David. It was in light of these things that God's covenant with David came to be understood *ultimately* as a promise of *the one* – *the* son of David who would be *uniquely* Israel's Messiah, and *uniquely* the Son of God. At Jesus' trial, the high priest said to Him:

- ✓ Matthew 26:63 – I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are *the Christ [Messiah]*, the *Son of God*.

In John chapter one, when Nathanael met Jesus and realized that Jesus had seen him when he was sitting under the fig tree, he exclaimed:

- ✓ John 1:49 – Rabbi, you are the *Son of God!* You are the *King of Israel!*

Martha confessed:

- ✓ John 11:27 – Yes, Lord; I believe that you are *the Christ [Messiah]*, the *Son of God*, who is coming into the world.

But there was a sense in which it was not until Jesus' *resurrection* and His *coronation* at the right hand of God that He was truly begotten as God's *royal* Son. Listen to what Paul said to the Jews at Antioch:

- ✓ Acts 13:32-33 (cf. Heb. 5:5) – And we bring you the good news that what God promised to the fathers, this he has fulfilled to us their children *by raising Jesus*, as also it is written in the second Psalm, “*You are my Son, today I have begotten you.*”

Jesus did not begin to exist at that moment, but He did take up His royal authority as David's son at that moment. And it's because of *this* that God can say to Jesus: “You are my *Son, today* I have begotten you.”

- ✓ Hebrews 5:5 – So also Christ did not exalt himself to be made a high priest, but was *appointed* by him who said to him, “You are my Son, *today* I have begotten you.

So in one sense we can say that Jesus is “begotten” as the “son of God” at His royal coronation and at His appointment as the high priest of His people (“*today*”, God says). But, of course, in the end the only reason that Jesus could be resurrected from the dead and exalted to the very throne of God as *the royal son of God* is because He had *always been* the *eternal* Son of God!

- ✓ Hebrews 1:3-5 – He is the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature, and he upholds the universe by the word of his power. After making purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty on high, having become as much superior to angels as the name he has inherited is more excellent than theirs. For to which of the angels did God ever say, “You are my Son, today I have begotten you” [Psalm 2]? Or again, “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son” [2 Samuel 7]?

And so the Apostle John can say at the end of His Gospel”

- ✓ John 20:31 – These [signs] are written so that you may believe that Jesus is *the Christ* [*Messiah*], *the Son of God*, and that by believing you may have *life in his name*.

I think we can be sure that Peter did not understand the full significance of his own words, but he understood enough. You are the Christ, the Messiah, the promised son of David and deliverer of God’s people. You are the royal “son of the living God” – the one we have all been waiting for! When Peter says that Jesus is the Son of “the *living God*”, he is using familiar Old Testament language. Not only does this set God apart from the lifeless idols of the nations, it’s also an exclamation that God is the “dynamic God of Israel’s faith and history... [he is] alive and active [and sovereign] in His world” (France).

- ✓ Jeremiah 10:10 – But the LORD is the true God; he is *the living God* and the everlasting King. At his wrath the earth quakes, and the nations cannot endure his indignation.
- ✓ Daniel 6:26 – He is *the living God*, enduring forever; his kingdom shall never be destroyed, and his dominion shall be to the end.

And so Peter exclaims with *passion* and *conviction* that Jesus is not simply one of the prophets... He is not one among many... He is not a forerunner preparing the way...” You are *the* Christ, *the* Messiah, *the* promised son of David and deliverer of God’s people. You are the royal “son of the living God”! And yet what does it *mean* for Peter to say this? In the big scope of things, what does this confession really *matter*?

VI. Matthew 16:17 – And Jesus answered him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah [son of Jonah/John]! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven.”

If Peter had been tempted to take any credit for his insight in seeing what so many other people had failed to see, Jesus is careful to point out that Peter’s understanding is the result of *God’s* gracious revelation. It is not Jesus who is blessed by Peter’s confession, but Peter who is blessed by God’s personal illumination and revelation. It is not Jesus who is blessed by Peter’s confession, but Peter who is blessed by God with the *ability* to make this confession! Just a minute ago we asked: What does it really *matter* who the *disciples* say that Jesus is?” And now we see that this Peter’s confession is not the chance result of his own wisdom, but the *guaranteed* result of *God’s* gracious and sovereign *revelation*.

So what’s going on here? Where is Jesus going with this? Do you get the feeling that it’s time to buckle our seatbelts and hold on tight for something amazing? Well, here it comes: “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven...”

VII. Matthew 16:18 – “And *I tell you*, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of [Hades] shall not prevail against it.”

In response to Peter's confession of Jesus ("you are the Christ"), Jesus makes a declaration concerning Peter: "You are Peter [Petros], and on this rock (petra) I will build my church. Who will build the church? *Jesus* will! And who's is the church? It is *Jesus'* church! "I will build *my* church", says Jesus! And yet upon what rock will Jesus build His church? Upon *Peter*(!!!) – upon Peter *as the one* who has now confessed Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God – *not of his own inspiration*, but according to God's sovereign revelation! So is the success of this building project ultimately dependent upon Peter? No, not at all! It's dependant on the gracious and sovereign purposes of God, which are all accomplished through the work of the master Builder, Jesus Christ.

But now we have to ask what is this "*church*" that Jesus will "build"? We might take the answer for granted, but this is actually the *first* of only *two* times in *all* of the Gospels that the word "Church" is *ever* used (cf. Mat. 18:17)! So what were the disciples supposed to think when Jesus talked about building His "Church"? Would this word sound strange to their ears? Well, the word for "Church" (ekklesia) means "assembly", and it was actually a very *familiar* word to the disciples. This word appeared in their Greek Old Testament *eighty* times, and almost every one of these times the "ekklesia" was none other than the *assembly* of *Israel*. The "assembly" was a title that Israel owned with pride (cf. France). They were, after all, the "assembly" of the Lord!

- ✓ Deuteronomy 23:2-3 – No one born of a forbidden union may enter *the assembly of the LORD*. Even to the tenth generation, none of his descendants may enter *the assembly of the LORD*. No Ammonite or Moabite may enter *the assembly of the LORD*. Even to the tenth generation, none of them may enter *the assembly of the LORD* forever.
- ✓ 1 Chronicles 28:8 – Now therefore in the sight of all Israel, *the assembly of the LORD*, and in the hearing of our God, observe and seek out all the commandments of the LORD your God.

Israel was uniquely and especially the assembly of the Lord when they were gathered together for worship at the temple.

- ✓ Psalm 26:12 – My foot stands on level ground; in the great *assembly* I will bless the LORD.
- ✓ Psalm 22:22 – I will tell of your name to my brothers; in the midst of the *congregation* [*assembly*] I will praise you.

Israel was not only called the "assembly"... God also spoke in the Old Testament about the day when He would "*build*" His people.

- ✓ Jeremiah 24:6 – I will set my eyes on them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down.
- ✓ Jeremiah 31:4 (cf. 33:7) – Again I will build you, and you shall be built, O virgin Israel!

So if you were the disciples, what would you think if you heard Jesus say to Peter, "You are Peter, and upon this rock will I *build* my *assembly*"? In the Greek, Jesus emphasizes the word "*my*" – "I will build *my* assembly." And what assembly will this be? Peter has just confessed Jesus to be the *Messiah*, the Son of the living God. So this assembly that Jesus builds must be the assembly of the *Messiah* – what we might call the Messianic community! In fact, "such a community surrounding the Messiah had become a standard Jewish expectation" (Blomberg).

And so here is the **rebuilding** of Israel that God promised in Jeremiah (cf. Amos 9:11 & Acts 15:16)! Only now this Israel is being redefined not according to ethnicity, but rather according to its *relationship to the Messiah* (cf. France). The true “assembly of Israel” is now the “assembly of the Messiah.” As Jesus the Messiah says to Peter: “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build *my* assembly [*my* church].”

And so we see that we *are* this assembly of the Messiah! We *are* the promised Messianic community! We *are* the people that the Messiah is building! We are the people of the kingdom! We *are* the church of Jesus, the Christ – the Son of the living God! The Apostle Paul writes to the church at Ephesus:

- ✓ Ephesians 2:19-22 – So then you [Gentile believers] are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints [Jewish believers] and members of the household of God, ***built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets***, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. In him you also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit.

For 2000 years now, the Messiah has been ruling and reigning, and gathering and building His assembly in anticipation of the day when the kingdom is consummated, and we inherit for all eternity the new heavens and the new earth, in which only righteousness dwells (2 Pet. 3:13). But can we really be *confident* that the Messiah’s church will arrive victorious in the consummated kingdom? Well, let’s review! Who will build the church? ***Jesus*** will! And who’s is the church? It is ***Jesus’*** church! “I will build *my* church”, says Jesus! And upon what rock will Jesus build His church? Upon *Peter*... as one who has confessed Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God – ***not of his own inspiration***, but according to God’s sovereign revelation! The success of this building project is ultimately dependent upon the gracious and sovereign purposes of God, which are all accomplished through the work of the master Builder, Jesus Christ. And *this* is why Jesus can make this triumphant declaration:

“I will build my church, ***and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.***” In the Old Testament, the phrase “gates of Sheol” was just another way of referring to the “gates of *death*” (Isa. 38:10; Job 17:16; 38:17; Ps. 9:13; 107:18; Job 38:17). Even all the powers of death itself will never prevail against the Church that Jesus builds.

Nothing—not even the death of the Messiah—can prevent the community from arriving victoriously at its eschatological goal (the consummation, the end, the summing up of all things, the fulfillment)... The church as God’s [Messianic] community will never die or come to end... If the church escapes destruction despite the death of its leadership, so too will it escape anything that the enemy might bring upon it. [Even] those who die as a part of that church cannot be defeated by death but will be raised at the end time. The church... can never be destroyed. (Hagner)

And so we can already envision the day when the Messiah’s work of building is completed. Listen to the Apostle John’s description of a vision that he was given:

- ✓ Revelation 21:10-14 – [The angel] carried me away in the Spirit to a great, high mountain, and showed me the holy city Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God, having the glory of God, its radiance like a most rare jewel, like a jasper, clear as crystal. It had a great, high wall, with twelve gates, and at the gates twelve angels, and on the gates the names of *the twelve tribes of the sons of Israel* were inscribed... And the wall of the city had twelve foundations, and on them were *the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb*.

See how the Old Testament assembly of Israel has come to its fulfillment in the New Testament assembly of the Messiah? When the kingdom is consummated, then Messiah's "assembly" shall also attain the richest blessings Messiah's reign can give. Nothing, therefore, can eliminate Messiah's church or prevent it from reaching that consummation. (Carson)

Conclusion

Brothers and sisters, the very first application of this passage is simply to bask in what we are, and who we are! We can so easily take the church for granted, and yet in the church we have the assembly of the Messiah that God promised Israel He would build! We are the eschatological, end-times people of the Christ, the Son of the living God. Now tell me – who needs “self-esteem”? We need to get a better grip on our true identity – not just as individuals, but as a people!

But the second application of this passage is to be filled up with a *confidence and a boldness* that then moves us to *action*.

“The power of Satan shall never destroy the people of Christ. He that brought sin and death into the first creation, by tempting Eve, shall never bring ruin on the new creation, by over-throwing believers. The... [assembly of the Messiah] shall never perish or decay. Though often persecuted, afflicted, distressed, and brought low, it shall never come to an end. It shall outlive the wrath of Pharaohs and Roman Emperors [and the secular governments of today]. Visible churches, like Ephesus, may come to nothing. But the true Church never dies. Like the bush that Moses saw, it may burn, but shall not be consumed. *Every* member of it shall be brought safe to glory. In spite of falls, failures, and short-comings—in spite of the world, the flesh, and the devil—no member of the true Church shall ever be cast away.” (Ryle)

What a wonderful assurance! And it is this wonderful assurance that ought to move us to *action*. In light of Christ's promise to build His church, we can be assured that if Christ has not yet returned, then it's *because* He's still building! He is still saving, and sanctifying, and gathering, and assembling His people. And so we can go about the work and business of the kingdom always with hope, and confidence, and joy, knowing that there is never any reason for dismay or despair.

“This passage also instructs us, that so long as the Church shall continue to be a pilgrim on the earth, she will never enjoy rest, but will be exposed to many attacks; for, when it is declared that Satan will not conquer, this implies that he will be her constant enemy. While, therefore, we rely on this promise of Christ, feel ourselves at liberty to boast

against Satan, and already triumph by faith over all his forces; let us learn, on the other hand, that this promise is, as it were, the sound of a trumpet, calling us to be always ready and prepared for battle.” (Calvin)