

MT. 16-18 – WAS PETER ‘THE ROCK?’, TRANSFIGURATION, FORGIVENESS



After keeping the Feast of Tabernacles in Jerusalem, Jesus goes to Galilee to continue His ministry, which has less than a year left. Although He had recently multiplied the bread and fish for thousands, the Jewish leadership still demanded a special sign from heaven to prove His claims.

We read, "Then the Pharisees and Sadducees came and *testing* Him asked that He would show them a sign *from heaven*" (Mt. 16:1). This is the first time that two opposing Jewish factions would combine to try to trip Jesus up in some blunder.

Barclay explains, "Hostility, like necessity, makes strange bedfellows. It is an extraordinary phenomenon to find a combination of the Pharisees and Sadducees. They stood for both beliefs and policies which were diametrically opposed. The Pharisees lived life according to the minutiae of the oral and the scribal law; the Sadducees rejected [these] completely, and accepted only the written words of the Bible as their law of life. The Pharisees believed in angels and in the resurrection of the body and the Sadducees did not...And--most important of all--the Pharisees were not a political party and were prepared to live under any government which would allow them to observe their own religious principles. The Sadducees were the small, wealthy aristocracy, who were the collaborationist party and were quite prepared to serve and cooperate with the Roman government, in order to retain their wealth and their privileges. Further, the Pharisees looked for and longed for the Messiah; the Sadducees did not. It would have been well-nigh impossible to find two more different sects and parties; and yet they came together in their envenomed desire to eliminate Jesus."

The Rabbis taught when the Messiah appeared, He would do great signs, such as stopping the sun in its tracks or producing thunder in the midst of them. But Jesus knew they weren't asking this in good faith (here, the Greek word *peirazontes* for "test" means try to trip up). These leaders in Galilee had heard or witnessed so many miraculous healings and the feeding of thousands in two occasions, but it wasn't enough. Mark adds Christ "sighed deeply" when He heard this, as to say, here they are, up to their old tricks again. So

Christ replied, "When it is evening you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,' and in the morning, 'It will be foul weather today, for the sky is red and threatening.' Hypocrites, you know how to discern the face of the sky, but you cannot discern the signs of the times. A wicked and adulterous generation seeks a sign, and no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah.' And He...departed" (Mt. 16:2-4).

Barclay adds, "It is Jesus' reply that the signs were there, if they could only see them. They were weather-wise. They knew the same weather saying that we ourselves know: 'A red sky at night is the shepherd's delight; a red sky in the morning is the shepherd's warning.' They knew very well that a red sky in the evening presaged fine weather and that a red sky in the morning was the warning of a storm to come. But they were blind to the signs of the times [the Messiah was among them doing many miracles]. Jesus told them that the only sign they would receive was the sign of Jonah. We have already seen what the sign of Jonah was (Matt 12:38-40). Discerning the times refers primarily to the ministry of Christ, which they refused to accept and believe in. He then added this warning to His disciples, "Beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and the Sadducees" (16:6). We then have the explanation, "Then they understood that He did not tell them to beware of the leaven of bread, but of the doctrine of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (16:12).

Jesus later explains what He meant, "Be on your guard against the leaven of the Pharisees, which is *hypocrisy*" (Luke 12:1). He had already called both these groups hypocrites, for they had let their titles and power puff them up, becoming proud and self-righteous. They had become insincere actors, focusing on externals instead of internals, to win the praise and backing of men.

Time was running short and Jesus needed a more peaceful setting to teach His disciples, so they traveled, not to Tiberias, but an isolated northern part of Israel known as Caesarea Philippi. We read, "When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, 'Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am? So they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others

Jeremiah or one of the prophets.' He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' (Mt. 16:13-15).

Expositor's explains, "Caesarea Philippi was built by Herod Philip the tetrarch, who enlarged a small town on a plane 1150 feet above sea level at the base of Mount Hermon, renaming it in honor of Caesar, 'Philippi' being added to distinguish it from the coastal city of the same name. It lies twenty-five miles north of Galilee. Snow-capped Mount Hermon can be seen on a clear day from as far away as Nazareth, where Jesus grew up. The inhabitants were largely Gentile...Opinion on Jesus' identity was divided. Some thought he was John the Baptist risen from the dead--Herod Antipas's view (Mt. 14:2). Those who thought he was Elijah saw him as forerunner to a Messiah still to come (Mal. 4:5-6). Only Matthew mentions Jeremiah, the first of the so-called latter prophets in the Hebrew canon."

After Peter confessed Jesus was the long-awaited Messiah we come to a controversial section in Mt. 16:18-19, "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven."

The Catholic Church has used these verses to justify the Pope's authority over the Church, claiming to be the successor of Peter. Pope Leon I was the first to claim this in A.D. 445.

Nelson's Bible Commentary notes, "Peter in the Greek text is *Petros* and rock is *petra*. *Petros* is a movable stone, large or small and *petra* is a ledge or shelf of rock. This statement by Christ may have been made with a gesture at the rocky structure nearby. Some argue this distinction cannot be drawn because the Lord spoke Aramaic, a language in which such variations of meaning do not exist; however, [God's Spirit inspiring] the NT did use different vocabulary. Moreover, this perhaps was one of the times that Jesus spoke Greek, for He was trilingual, speaking Greek, Aramaic, and Hebrew. Otherwise the pun—*Petros*, *petra*—doesn't make sense, and why mention the Aramaic translation at other times in the book unless such usage was uncharacteristic and the Greek was more normal? The rock on which Christ

would build His church is probably the confession of Peter." Peter did become a spokesman for the apostles, but in his interventions seen throughout the New Testament, he never made unilateral decisions as if he were the head, but consulted with the rest of the apostles until a consensus was arrived. It was "the apostles" decisions that prevailed (see Acts 6:6; 8:14; 15:22, 23, 33; 16:40).

Jesus mentioned He was establishing His Church and His disciples would be an integral part of the foundation, as Paul later said about the Church, that was "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief cornerstone" (Eph. 2:20).

Regarding giving Peter (and the rest of the disciples in Mt. 18:18) the keys to make binding decisions in the Church, the saying goes back to Isaiah 22:22, where Eliakim was the faithful steward who had the key to the House of David to make administrative decisions. Barclay adds, "To loose and to bind were very common Jewish phrases. They were used especially of the decisions of the great teachers and the great Rabbis. Their regular sense, which any Jew would recognize was to allow and to forbid. To bind something was to declare it forbidden; to loose was to declare it allowed. These were the regular phrases for taking decisions in regard to the law. That is in fact the only thing these phrases in such a context would mean."

Jesus then told His disciples to keep as a secret this revelation of Who He truly was, the Messiah. We read, "From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that he must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day" (16:21).

Peter thought this was a very negative view of things and tried to correct Jesus but was reprimanded with the words, "Get behind Me, Satan! You are an offense to Me, for you are not mindful of the things of God, but the things of men" (16:22). This is a strange way to talk to the man He just said would be the rock to build His Church upon. Clearly, Peter was not the "rock" but Jesus and the statement Peter had said about being the true Messiah of mankind.

Jesus then warned all of the disciples about not trying to change His mission or fate, and to follow

His timeline and decisions. He said: "If anyone desires to come after Me, let him deny himself and take up his cross [the sufferings to come] and follow Me...For the Son of Man will come in the glory of His Father with His angels, and then He will reward each according to his works. Assuredly, I say to you, there are some standing here who shall not taste death till they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom" (16:27-28).

How were they to see the Son of Man coming in His Kingdom? The next verses answer this. "Now after six days Jesus took Peter, James, and John his brother, led them up on a high mountain by themselves, and He was transfigured before them. His face shone like the sun, and His clothes became as white as the light. And behold, Moses and Elijah appeared to them, talking with Him....when they had lifted up their eyes, they saw no one but Jesus only. Now as they came down from the mountain, Jesus commanded them, saying, "Tell the **vision** to no one until the Son of Man is risen from the dead" (17:1-9). When they asked Him about the Elijah to come, Christ explained that there would be a future Elijah before His second return to the earth, and that John the Baptist had been the forerunner of His first coming (17:10-13).

Notice it was *a vision*, not something real. Barnes adds, "This vision was designed to confirm He was the Messiah...When He was crucified they would need this evidence that He was the Christ. Then they were to use it. There were three witnesses of it, as many as the law required Deut. 17:6; Heb. 10:28, and the proof that he was the Messiah was clear. Besides, if they had told it then, it would have provoked the Jews and endangered His life. His time was not yet come. The sole design of this transfiguration was to convince them that He was the Christ and greater than the greatest of the prophets--that He was the Son of God."

Returning to Galilee, Christ began healing people again, this time a young person possessed of a powerful demon that His disciples were not able to cast out. Jesus did so and said this type required fasting and praying to be cast out (Mt. 17:21). This principle is applied by the ministry before doing the same.

A question then came up about whether Jesus paid the Temple tax, based on Exodus 30:13. Although as the true king of the Jews, He didn't

have to pay it, but He set an example for us to pay taxes. Where would the money come from? Jesus performed a miracle, and the coin came from the mouth of a fish (17:27), for He controlled nature and had the angelic world at His beckoning.

After the transfiguration and a glimpse of the coming kingdom, the apostles' growing ambitions come out. We read, "At that time the disciples came to Jesus saying, 'Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?' Then Jesus called a little child to Him, set him in the midst of them, and said, 'Assuredly, I say to you, unless you are converted and become as little children, you will by no means enter the kingdom of heaven. Therefore whoever humbles himself as a little child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one little child like this in My name receives Me" (18:1-5). He also warns them how serious it is to cause one of these humble people to trip up and sin, and the horrible judgment upon that guilty person.

He then gives three parables or illustrations to make the point. The first is the parable of the lost sheep, which shows how caring God is about everyone He calls, just as a shepherd leaves the 99 sheep behind to find the missing one.

Next, he explains how to deal with offenses in the Church. We are to go to the person privately and mention the problem with humility, and see the reaction, whether the person concedes the wrong action and repents of it. If not, then we are to take some members as witnesses and in private, talk to the person again. If the person refuses to recognize the fault, then we are to go to the ministry about it. If the person refuses to acknowledge the fault and repent of it, then the ministry can suspend the person from church until there is repentance. That is the way to keep peace.

Christ reiterates the point with the parable of the unforgiving servant to remind us of how we should recognize our own faults and forgive the faults of others upon repentance, as God does with us. We owe God so much more because of our faults and sins than others do to us. He ends saying, "So My heavenly Father also will do to you if each of you, from his heart, does not forgive his brother his trespasses" (18:35).

As James says, "For judgment is without mercy in the one who has shown no mercy. Mercy triumphs over judgment" (James 2:13).