

ON THIS ROCK

Matthew 16:16-18, “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.”

The above verses follow the Lord’s questions to his disciples. He had asked them, “Who do men say that I, the Son of man, am?” He had ministered for years and had traveled throughout the land of Israel. Now what was the result? Who among the people really knew who He was?

You be the judge: Every answer the disciples gave Him had one thing in common. They were all wrong. Now I ask, what would you think if you quizzed your followers and campaign workers after years of campaigning and no one knew who you were? Had you been successful in getting your message across? Apparently not. Where was the problem? Was the message unclear or poorly delivered? What was the problem?

The Lord probably thought, “Perhaps My own disciples do not know who I am?” Simon Peter, What do you say? “Simon Peter answered and said, Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

At last, somebody knew! Great! But how did he know when no one else seemed to know? The Lord gave Peter this explanation.

Matthew 16:17, “And Jesus answered and said unto him, Blessed art thou, Simon Barjona (son of Jona): for flesh and blood has not revealed *it* unto you, but my Father which is in heaven.”

That is how Peter knew. His earthly father, Jona (flesh and blood), did not tell him. The “heavenly Father” had revealed it to Peter. The difference was that Peter really wanted to know the Lord. And in addition to the revelation from the heavenly Father, the Lord Jesus proceeded to give Peter **another revelation**. And

when the Lord gave Peter this added revelation, He did not use the name “Simon,” which he had received from his earthly father, Jona. He called him Peter, the name which the Lord had given him. And here is the Lord’s added revelation:

Matthew 16:18, “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.”

This verse is the **new revelation** given by our Lord. But what do these words really say. Protestants and Catholics have argued for years about their meaning and application. Sad to say it seems so many have missed His meaning. Let’s see if we can bring clarity out of confusion.

First, we must understand the Lord’s words. What are “the gates of hell”? Would you know them if you saw them? Furthermore, what does He mean by hell? Our common King James translation of the Bible uses the word hell to translate **three different** Greek words: hades, gehenna, and tartarus. This has caused nothing but confusion.

For now we will focus only on **hades** because it is the Greek word in our verse, “the gates of hell (hades).” We are helped with this word because hades was also used by the Jews when translating the Old Testament in to Greek. They used hades as being equal to the Hebrew word, sheol, which means simply, “the grave.”

Next let’s work on the word, “**gates**,” In English we think of a gate as a door in a fence, or a port of entry. Therefore people sometimes think of the gates of hell as the entry to the infernal region not far from the lake of fire. Instead, let us find expressions in the Old Testament for help with **the word gates**.

In Genesis 19:1 we find two angels sent by God to visit Lot who lived in the city of Sodom. It says, “Lot sat in the **gate** of Sodom: and Lot seeing *them* rose up to meet them.” Lot did not have a ring side seat at the city’s entrance, but was involved in the city government. In verse 9 the men of the city protested Lot

interfering in their intended activities and retorted, “This one *fellow* (speaking of Lot) came in to sojourn, and he will needs be **a judge**, (a government official).”

In 2 Samuel 19:8 we read of King David, “Then the king arose, and sat in the **gate**. And they told unto all the people, saying, Behold, the king does sit in the **gate**. And all the people came before the king...” Here we find a king sitting in judgment, sitting “in the gate,” rendering judicial decisions on matters that were presented to him.

Proverbs 31:23 says of the virtuous woman, “Her husband is known in the **gates**, when he sits among the elders of the land,” and of herself in verse 31, “Give her of the fruit of her hands; and let her own works praise her in the **gates**.” Thus in all these verses we see that the **gate** or **gates** represent the seat of government from which we can also see that “authority,” in the sense of governmental authority, is the meaning of our word gate(s).

If we put these words together with these meanings we can see that the expression, **the gates of hell**, means “**the authority of the grave**.” Having discovered its meaning, we will also find that same expression used many times in other Bible verses. For example:

Job 38:17, “Have the **gates of death** been opened unto thee? or hast thou seen the doors of the shadow of death?” The context is clear, Job spoke of death and the grave.

David wrote in Psalm 9:13, “Have mercy upon me, O LORD; consider my trouble *which I suffer* of them that hate me, thou that liftest me up from the **gates of death**.”

Again in Psalm 107:18 David said, “Their soul abhors all manner of meat; and they draw near unto **the gates of death**.”

Isaiah 38:9-10, “The writing of Hezekiah king of Judah, when he had been sick, and was recovered of his sickness: I said in the cutting off of my days, I shall go to **the gates of the grave**: I am deprived of the residue of my years.”

We are satisfied that there is abundant proof of the meaning of our phrase, “**the gates of hell**.” Let us return to our verse, “thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build my church; and **the gates of hell** shall not prevail against it.”

It is time to see if we can find the antecedent for the pronoun “**it**.” An antecedent is the noun to which the pronoun refers. In English we would say that this pronoun “it” is singular in number and neuter in gender. In Greek it is also singular in number but it is feminine in gender. Thus we must look back in our sentence for a singular feminine noun. We have not one, but two candidates: rock and church. Both are singular, feminine Greek nouns.

We pause to say that the Lord could not have been referring to Peter as the rock. The grammar forbids that choice because Peter comes from the masculine Greek word “petros.” The church (ecclesia, fem. sing.) could not be built on Peter (petros, masc. sing.) but only upon the rock (petra, fem. sing.).

Before we jump to conclusions too hastily, we should notice that which ever noun we pick, it must make sense that “the gates of hell” will “not prevail against it.” Remember, “**the gates of hell**” means “**the authority or power of the grave**.”

It will also help if we consider the possibility of “the gates of hell” or “the power of the grave” **prevailing over “it**.” Now it is time to choose!

If we pick the word “**church**,” and we know that the word church means a called out assembly of people, then what does the verse mean if we say that “the power of the grave” does (or does not), “prevail over the church”? Think about it. But let’s go on.

But if we choose the “**rock**” as our antecedent, and we know that the word “rock” often refers to Christ, then what does it mean if we say that “**the power of the grave**” does, or does not, “**prevail over the rock** (which is Christ)”?

It is hoped that by this time the reader can see that the Lord Jesus is the “rock” upon which the church is built. Since “the gates of hell” means the power of the grave, it should also be clear that if the power of the grave did prevail over Christ, He could not have risen from the grave. Death would have overpowered Him!

We are thrilled to see that the power of death could not prevail over Christ because He rose victorious over the grave. We also see His resurrection is the victory by which He prevailed over the grave. In the words of the Bible, “O death where is thy sting, O grave where is thy victory?” (1 Cor. 15) Death was swallowed up in victory for Christ at His resurrection, and it will be the same for us when He comes to raise us. All the redeemed, both of the Kingdom Church of which this verse refers, as well as “the church which is His body,” will be with Christ in victory over the grave, because He lives!

To support our explanation or interpretation set forth above, notice what we find in the verses following, “from that time forth began Jesus to show unto his disciples, how that he must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised again the third day” (Mt. 16:21). You see, “from that time forth,” in other words, beginning then, at that very moment in time, when He had just finished giving His added revelation to Peter, He confirmed, **for the very first time**, “that He must go unto Jerusalem, and suffer many things of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be **raised again the third day**.” Yes, tragic as it sounded, and it stunned Peter. The Lord would go to Jerusalem and be put to death, but the power of the grave could not hold Him. He would rise the third day!

The death, burial, and resurrection of the Lord Jesus Christ, but especially His resurrection, is what our Lord had newly revealed to Peter. And a church built on such a rock would have a solid foundation. And if the power of death cannot prevail over the rock, then neither can it prevail over the church. The security and stability of the church centers in our risen Lord Jesus Christ!

Ivan L. Burgener, 5/02/05