

Peter and the Rock

Matthew 16:13-20

We probably know this story well, and many of us have a ‘soft spot’ for Simon Peter. He seems so real and down-to-earth; he’s impulsive and sometimes gets things wrong but we think ‘his heart is in the right place’.

The timing is interesting. This seems to be a turning point in Jesus’ ministry, as the next verse says that from this time he begins to show the disciples that he must go to Jerusalem where he is going to suffer and be killed. We’ll maybe look at that another time.

The disciples have had quite a long time with Jesus now. They have heard what he says and seen what he does. His message follows on from what his cousin John had been declaring in the wilderness: ‘Repent, for the kingdom of the heavens has come near’ (**Matthew 4:17**). Over the next few years, as they travel around with Jesus, there is one question that is all around them, in their minds and in what they can hear other people talking about: ‘Could this carpenter from Nazareth really be the promised Anointed One of God, the Messiah, the Christ?’ They had wondered that about John, too (**Luke 3:15**), but he had been executed by Herod the tetrarch (**Matthew 14:1-12**), so what about Jesus?

Sometimes, when he had ejected the power of evil from people’s lives, the evil spirits had called out in recognition that he was the Son of God (**Luke 4:41**). The Samaritan woman at the well had asked about the One who was coming and Jesus had told her plainly that he was the Messiah (**John 4:25-26,29**). And people were starting to talk, in open discussion about whether someone from Nazareth – of all places – could really be the Messiah. He was supposed to come from Bethlehem, of course, but they didn’t know that was where Jesus had been born (**John 7:25-27, 31, 41-42**).

John the Baptist had made it pretty clear who Jesus was, and even before he had first met Jesus, Simon Peter’s brother Andrew had told him ‘We have found the Messiah’. Nathanael had blurted out that Jesus was ‘the Son of God, the King of Israel’, simply because Jesus had seen him sitting under his fig tree before Philip called him! (**John 1:41**)

So, that was the information that they had all started with, all those months before. What was so very different about Peter’s declaration when they were all there in the north, near Caesarea Philippi? First of all, Jesus wanted some feedback; he wanted to know what the public were saying about him. Had they realised who he was? No, but they did think he was someone special, maybe John the Baptist, Elijah or one of the Old Testament prophets, raised from the dead with miraculous powers.

But what did the Twelve think? They had the inside story. They didn’t just see what Jesus **did** – his miracles – or even what he **said** – he taught with authority, not like the scribes who just quoted the Scriptures lifelessly (**Matthew 7:29, Mark 1:22**). Day by day, as they shared the life of this extraordinary man, they saw the reality that the apostle John summed up, years later, in his account of Jesus’ life *“The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”* (**John 1:14**)

Gradually, light was beginning to dawn! At about the same time as the events in **Matthew 16**, Peter describes the process that has been unfolding in their understanding: *“Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and to know that you are the Holy One of God.”* (**John 6:68-69**)

Something real and spiritual was going on with Peter and the disciples. As we shall maybe see another time, he certainly hadn’t got the whole picture, but now Peter wasn’t just relying on what other people had said, he knew it deep down inside him. Jesus tells him that it is the Father who has revealed to Peter that he, Jesus, is the Messiah, the Son of the living God. About a week later, Peter would actually hear the Father’s voice confirming that Jesus is his Son, but the process of revelation and faith had already started before that.

And then Jesus makes this well-known statement, which has been widely quoted and often badly misunderstood: *“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.”* (**Matthew 16:18**) When Jesus had first met Simon, he had given him this

nickname, *Petros* in Greek or *Cephas* in Aramaic (**John 1:42**). Now he makes this play on words and confirms why he gave the nickname . . .

Time for a little Greek lesson! Don't worry, it's easy stuff . . .

There are four Greek words used in the New Testament for various sizes of stone¹, but the two biggest one are used here in this verse. *Petros* is a big stone, too heavy for one person to lift, a boulder like we can often see lying at the foot of a cliff or on a Dartmoor tor. *Petra* means bedrock, the mass of rock which we see as the cliff or tor itself, protruding from the ground, a mountain top or the underlying rock deep below our feet.

So, Jesus says to Simon Peter, 'You are a boulder, and on this bedrock I will build my church.' What does he mean? Obviously, a boulder is made of the same stuff as the bedrock, so Peter shares some of the same qualities, but he is only a boulder, not the bedrock itself. What is the bedrock? What is the foundation on which Jesus promises to build his church?

The process which has taken place with Peter has three parts:

First, revelation. God has spoken directly to him and shown him that Jesus is 'the Christ, the Son of the living God'.

Second, faith. Peter, as he said himself, has believed what God has shown him and has come to know who Jesus is. Not just an idea, but real trust.

Third, he has spoken out what has become real to him, confirming publicly what has become real to him.²

This is the bedrock! This is the vital foundation on which the Lord Jesus promises to build his church, which will not be overpowered by evil. Peter is not the foundation, but the process which happened to him **is**! The word 'church' (Greek *ekklesia*) means 'called out', so those who are part of his church are those who have been called out – God has spoken to them and they have responded. The same process which happened with Simon Peter! When we understand what 'church' means, it's obvious that it's neither a building nor an organisation, but those who have responded in faith to the call of God through Jesus.

We need to know the answer to this question: 'Am I part of the church which the Lord Jesus is building?' We can find the answer by following the same process as Peter did:

1. Have I heard God speaking to me through the message? As Paul wrote, *"faith comes from hearing the message, and the message is heard through the word about Christ."* We're not talking about hearing a physical voice, but somehow the message is getting through and making sense to me personally. Do I need to explore and discover how it can change my life?

2. Have I put my trust in what Jesus has done for me? Have I received forgiveness through his death on the cross and been 'reborn' as Jesus described to Nicodemus? (**John 3**). Or as Paul describes in **2 Corinthians 5:17**: *"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!"*

3. Have I declared my faith publicly? Perhaps by being baptised? Or by just letting it be known that I am a follower of Jesus?

All these steps are vital, and they follow on from one to the next. Trying to follow step 3 without first following steps 1 and 2 is useless and makes no sense at all.

Many years later, Peter wrote a letter to other believers, to encourage them in their faith, and spoke of this process of new birth which had become real to him all those years before: *"Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade. This inheritance is kept in heaven for you, who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time."* (**1 Peter 1:3-5**)

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¹ If you want to explore more about these words, see 'Bedrock' from www.justonecandle.uk

² Paul describes the same process in **Romans 10:8-10**.