

On this Rock

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[0 : 00] Let's turn back to Matthew chapter 16 and that momentous conversation that took place between Jesus and His disciples. I'm just going to read it again because it's a short passage.

Verse 13, when Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, Who do people say the Son of Man is? They replied, Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.

But what about you, He asked? Who do you say I am? Simon Peter answered, You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Jesus replied, Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by man, but by my Father in heaven. 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.

You've probably noticed that over the last few weeks, and particularly during the vacancy, that I've tried to focus our attention deliberately on the subject of the church and what the Bible has to tell us about the church, who it belongs to, what it's all about, our part and our responsibility in it, and its glorious and guaranteed future.

[1 : 27] Well, this is one of those great statements in the Bible in which we are reminded afresh that God, however irrelevant the church appears in today's world to so many people, that it's not so with God.

And that however much in the minority that we feel we are in our society, that God has a great and a glorious future for His church.

And we need to be continuously reminded of that, and I want us to do that afresh by looking at this great conversation, one which draws us once again to the person of Jesus Christ.

And that's what we're all about today as a church. That's why we're so anxious to be together and to read His Word on a Sunday morning and a Sunday evening, to be reminded of who Jesus is.

And that's exactly what this conversation starts off with. That's the context of this conversation. It's one which starts off with a most bizarre question.

[2 : 38] Well, at least it would be bizarre if it was asked by any normal person. Let me put it in context. Let me, let's imagine that after this service, there's a handful of people here. There's probably about a dozen people.

All of these people are involved in the preparation of the building. Let's imagine that instead of asking them, how do you think things are going in preparation for next week?

Let's imagine I was to gather them all together and say, what are people saying about me? What's the word on the street about me?

About who I am? If I asked that question, they're probably, knowing how polite these people are, they probably would say some, they would probably give me some polite answer.

But inside, they'd be thinking, who does this guy think he is? And they'd be absolutely right in so doing. Because if it wasn't that it was asked by the Son of God Himself, then who does this guy think he is?

[3 : 47] And perhaps, perhaps it's in that kind of provocation that some people are forced to think, well, who is Jesus?

If this question had been asked by any normal person, it would be the most arrogant, self-centered question you could possibly ask. Who do people say I am?

Well, what difference does that make? But when it's asked by Jesus, who actually is the Messiah and who is the Son of God, then that changes everything.

And loads of people have come to discover who Jesus is by being confronted with the rude reality that either Jesus is some kind of nutcase, or He actually is the Son of God.

And if this is the first time you're watching from home today, and this is the first time you've ever even thought about this, because sometimes I wonder, given the kind of world we live in, I wonder if anyone thinks anything about Jesus, if He's on the map at all.

[5 : 05] But I wonder if this is the first time you've even thought about the question, well, who is Jesus? What do I think of Jesus? What conclusion have I come to as to who He is?

And if this is the first step that you're taking on this road, I'm so glad that we're looking at this passage today, because it's a really searching question.

And Jesus is not content with what other people think of Him. He wants to know what His friends think of Him. So He homes the question in on them and says, but what about you?

Who do you think that I am? What do you say? And that brings it to another level altogether, doesn't it? Especially when we ask that question today.

Who do you think that Jesus is? Now, I guess there are some people who just don't want to think about the question at all. But that's a cop-out.

[6 : 06] Especially when you come to think about that Jesus in the whole of the history of humankind, no one has changed the course of history, has changed so many people's lives the same way as Jesus.

He is the singular most important person that has ever lived. And you don't want to think about it. I don't understand that. I think the far more sensible thing is for you to ask the obvious question, well, who is Jesus?

And you can only do that by reading about Him in the accounts that Matthew and Mark and Luke and John give. Have you ever done that?

Let me invite you to now. Let me ask you, have you ever searched this fundamental, earth-shattering, life-changing question, who is Jesus?

And if the question is life-changing, then Peter's answer was equally earth-shattering. This is what Peter said. He said, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

[7 : 19] I don't think that Peter had any idea of what he meant when he said that. This is one of the deepest theological statements that you have in the Bible.

And it involves ideas and concepts that the best brains in the world have argued about for centuries. The Son of the living God.

What does that mean? What does it mean that Jesus is the Son of God? And the kind of questions that that statement throws up, they are manifold.

Does it mean, for example, that like a normal son comes into existence at some point where he is conceived in his mother's womb? Does it mean that Jesus came into existence at some point?

Is he a created being? And if so, what makes him different from other created beings like us? You see the kind of questions that it throws up?

[8 : 28] There were some people in the third and fourth century in the early church that actually came to believe that, that Jesus was a created being, that he wasn't always God. And they had to be put right by what is known as the Athanasian Creed that stated very clearly that Jesus always was.

He didn't come into being when he was conceived in his mother's womb at Bethlehem or Nazareth. He didn't come into being when he was born in Bethlehem, but that he always was because he is God.

He is very God of very God. He is as much God as the Father is and the Holy Spirit. Now, of course, once you go down this road, there are all kinds of difficult, difficult questions.

So you see what I mean when I say that Peter, he's an ordinary fisherman. He's an unschooled, uneducated fisherman. And he comes out with this incredible statement, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

So it's no wonder that Jesus says, you didn't think this up yourself, Peter. This was revealed to you by my Father in heaven. Somehow or other, God placed the words in Peter's mouth, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

[9 : 55] And that statement forms the basis of the gospel that we believe and that brings us together this morning. It brought the disciples together.

And it was what sent them out after Jesus rose from the dead and ascended to the Father. It was what sent them out. It was the message that they took to an unbelieving world that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Of course, that's not the complete message of the gospel because it continues that that same Son of God gave his life on the cross at Calvary. And rose again on the third day so that whosoever believes in him will not perish but have everlasting life.

But you can see that that's the basis. If Jesus isn't the Son of God, then his death is of no use whatsoever. It is only the death of the Son of God that is good news for a broken and a condemned world this morning.

So, on the basis of that statement, Jesus himself responds. And I want to give some time to this great promise, this great statement that Jesus makes when he goes on to say, 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.

[11 : 33] I want to first of all say that this is one of the most misunderstood statements in the Bible. What do I mean by that?

Well, if you continue, if you read about the history of the early church, what I mean by that is the first church after Jesus ascended and as the church unfolded and developed and as the gospel spread, people came to all kinds of ideas, some of them good, some of them bad.

And one of the bad ideas was that somehow Jesus had instituted Peter as the supreme head of the church.

And they said, here is the proof. Here is Jesus saying, you are Peter and on this rock, remember what Peter means rock. Peter means rock.

So Jesus literally says, you are rock and on this rock I will build my church. Now, some people came to the conclusion that that was Jesus giving supreme authority on earth to Peter, that he was appointing him as the earthly head of the church.

[12 : 48] And they went on to believe that there was to be a succession, that when Peter died, he was to be succeeded by another Peter and another Peter and another Peter.

And the church came to believe, or part of the church came to believe, that that Peter was to be situated, located in Rome. And that was the beginning of what we now know as the Roman Catholic Church.

Now, I'm not trying to be sectarian and I'm not trying, this is not a rant. I'm not trying to be nasty in any kind. I'm just telling it the way it is.

And it's important for us to know how what we know as the Pope in today's world, how that originated. Well, this is how it originated. This is how the Roman Catholic Church came to believe that the Pope is the earthly head of the church.

And they go back to this very statement where Jesus says to Peter, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church. That's the origin or the basis of what many people believe is the principle of having an earthly leader, i.e. the Pope in Rome.

[14 : 07] Now, of course, in the Protestant Church we don't believe that, we don't hold to that. Why not? What is the argument against that? Well, the argument against it is that the understanding that I've just explained to you is not the correct one.

And that even if Jesus was telling Peter that he would build his church on Peter, it still doesn't make him the ultimate or the supreme leader of the church in the world.

Because you'll notice that if you read on in the New Testament, there is no evidence whatsoever that after Jesus was ascended that somehow Peter took over.

Yes, Peter had a central part to play. He had a crucial part to play. But so did Paul. And so did James. And so did Priscilla and Aquila and the other disciples, whether they were apostles or just disciples.

The church was composed of many leaders. And there is absolutely no evidence whatsoever, if you read Acts or Romans or Corinthians or any other part of the New Testament, that Peter somehow emerged as the single ruler or the single head of the church.

[15 : 33] Besides that, even if Peter was being referred to here by Jesus, it still doesn't mean that there is to be a succession of earthly leaders after one, after the other, after the other, after the other, etc.

There is no basis for that whatsoever. So what did Jesus mean? And this is what I want to concentrate very strongly on, on this great statement, this wonderful promise.

When Jesus, Jesus could have referred to Peter. He could have been talking about Peter. When he said, you are Peter and on this rock, I will build my church.

But not Peter singularly, but as he represented the other disciples. You see, when Peter said, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God, he wasn't just saying that on his own behalf.

He was saying that as he represented the view. He was the spokesman of the other disciples. And so when he said it, he said it on behalf of everyone else, and Jesus knew that.

[16:44] And so what Jesus could have meant was that Peter, as you represent the rest of the apostles, I will build my church on this great foundation, the apostles and their teaching and their obedience and their faithfulness and their authority.

And that's exactly what happened. Other people believe that it wasn't Peter that was the rock, but it was the statement that Peter made.

You are the Christ, the Son of the living God. And of course, as I said before, that forms the basis of the gospel, and that's the rock on which the church is built, the gospel.

But like I say, even if it was Peter, it still doesn't give any authority to Peter over and above the rest of the disciples.

Jesus was going to build his church on the obedience of his following people.

[17:52] His church were to be gathered at the time of Pentecost, and they were to go out into all the world with the gospel and to preach the forgiveness of sins for anyone who believed in Jesus.

And that's still what the church does today, I hope. It's what I hope the church in every place will do. But then Jesus goes on and he says, I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it.

Let's look, let's pick apart this great sentence and remind ourselves of what we are about in Bon Accord and what we're about in Edinburgh and Glasgow and wherever we are, wherever we are all over the world.

What is the church? Let's first of all notice that Jesus says, I will build my church. It is his church. There's a certain affection in these words, isn't there?

Quite rightly so. Because Jesus loves the church. He loves the church.

[19:09] Now the reason I want to emphasize that is because a lot of people are cynical about the church. When they think about it, they think, well, I've given up on church.

Church is just an institution. It doesn't do anything. It's full of hypocrites. It's just a dead place. It's a place that always argues.

There's always arguments in the church. There are so many churches, especially in today's world, in the Western world, you get 57 plus varieties of church wherever you go, and nobody agrees with each other, and so on and so forth.

People become cynical about it. And I'm not saying there isn't some substance to that complaint. I can't explain why the church is so fragmented.

And I would have to confess that it shouldn't be that way. And nonetheless, Jesus says in the Bible, I love my church. Remember when Paul spoke to husbands in Ephesians chapter 5, and he says, husbands love your wives.

[20:14] But you know there's more to it than that, don't you? It's not just husbands love your wives. It's husbands love your wives as Christ loved the church and gave himself for us.

You don't need to go any further than that to find proof that Jesus absolutely relishes and treasures and is thrilled with his people because he sees them as one.

Now, that doesn't give us an excuse for all our differences, and sometimes these differences are unnecessary. But nonetheless, somehow or other, in the almighty nature of God, that Jesus sees his church and he loves the church.

So let's us love the church. The church that God calls you to love is bon accord. That's where you belong. Or if you're watching from another church, the church that God commands you to love is the church you go to if it preaches the Bible.

If your church loves the Bible, then you give it everything because that for you is the church. So let's have a rediscovery today of the value and the preciousness of the church.

[21:35] And then he says, I will personally see, I will build my church. What that means is, not only does he personally love the church, but he will personally see to it that the church is built.

And that didn't mean that the disciples had nothing to do, quite the reverse. They had loads of stuff to do. They were given the task to go into all the world and make disciples of all nations. And yet Jesus says, I will be with you always, even unto the end of the church.

So anything we do for Jesus, it's actually Jesus doing in us. And that extends to the nitty gritty, to the preparing of this building, to the installation of hand sanitizers, to the preparation of rules and regulations for the safety and the security because we belong to Jesus and because we believe that somehow or other.

You know, other people think we're nuts. People look at you and say, what are you doing? Why are you not enjoying a Sunday morning? Why are you in there, crack of dawn, you're doing stuff to make sure that the church meets?

I mean, why don't you just, why don't you just accept that you're an irrelevance, close the doors and go and watch your favorite movie and have a good big breakfast? That's what people would say to us.

[22 : 55] We are nuts, aren't we? We were, Paul was nuts. People said that about Paul. He said, the foolishness of preaching. We're fools for Christ's sake.

And yet, Paul knew, and the apostles knew, and the early church knew, and the church today knows that this is what the world needs to hear.

And we have what they don't have, and we need to share it with them. And it's in the church and through the church that God speaks.

That's why it's so important. Even the nitty-gritty, even the mundane, even the tiny little things that we do, it's Jesus that is doing them in us. Now, moving on quickly.

He says, I will build my church. You know what the word for church is? The word for church is eglisia. Ecclesia. Ecclesia. And the, those of you who know, have a wee bit of a knowledge of other languages will instantly recognize that it's a word that is, there's a variant used in Spanish and in French and even in Scots and Gaelic.

[24 : 06] It's almost exactly the same word. Ecclesia. Do you know what it literally means? It literally means the gathering. It comes from the Old Testament word that meant the gathering of God's people, the congregation.

And the picture is of a gathering of people. And that's exactly what happened when Jesus ascended to heaven.

What happened? There was this enormous gathering on the day of Pentecost. There were, I think all of them, or at least 3,000 of them were converted. They became the church. That became the gathering of God's people.

And as you move through the New Testament, Paul writes to different locations where there are gatherings of God's people, like we're doing today.

We meet together. We pray. We read the Bible. We sing together. We fellowship and encourage one another. We remind ourselves of what Jesus came to do. As we are gathered, you go through to the book of Revelation, Revelation 7, and it ends with this massive gathering in heaven.

[25 : 14] That will be the ultimate church, the triumphant church in heaven, where there will be the gathering of a crowd of people that no one can even number. Which makes the situation we're in so painful, doesn't it?

It accentuates the struggle that we are currently engaged in. And I don't know, I haven't spoken to one person yet, one fellow Christian yet, who hasn't said to me, oh, it just long to meet again. Strange thing is, I didn't hear that before the shutdown. I'm sure we all meant it, but maybe it's taken this to inject a fresh realization in all of us of how precious the church is and how precious the gathering is.

And it's like God is, I don't want to put words in God's mouth, but it's almost as if God is saying to us, I'm just going to allow you to slowly realize that. I'm just going to let you take baby steps in the hope that you enjoy every moment of it.

I'm not going to let you have it all at once because I don't want you to forget how important it is to gather.

[26 : 45] And that's why we've been putting so much effort into coming again. Now, that doesn't mean that everyone's going to be able to gather. Our numbers are going to be capped at 50.

We have to accept that. Now, let me just say one or two things because, and I don't want to be controversial, but I think I need to say this. Some of you will be aware of that other churches, particularly in the United States, have made statements that are very different to the position that we've taken.

We have complied with government advice, and I believe that we were right to do so. Other churches, particularly in the States, have made statements, and I'm referring particularly to John MacArthur's church.

Many of you will know who John MacArthur is. I have nothing but huge amount of respect for John MacArthur. He is a conservative evangelical minister and has been for many, many decades, and he's done an immense amount for the gospel in the United States and beyond.

So, this is not a blanket criticism, but he has decided to defy the state of California who are encouraging all churches not to meet, but he is saying, no, we will meet.

[28 : 01] We will meet. Because, and these are his words, not mine, we obey God rather than man. Okay, that's his position.

With the greatest of respect, I really think I have to disagree with that. This is not the government saying to the church, we don't like you, we don't agree with your teaching, we want you to close. The government is not saying that at all. The government is saying we are in the middle of a crisis that affects all of us, and we've all got a part to play.

Whether you're a pub or a restaurant or a cinema or a nightclub or a shop or a church, we've all got a part to play in this.

And the Free Church of Scotland, I believe quite rightly, have said, yes, we will play that part. We will comply. Not because we take any pleasure in it.

[29 : 03] We don't. But in order to protect and in order to preserve the health of our fellow human beings, our brothers, our sisters, in the Lord Jesus Christ, we have decided to take that position rather than to take a stand.

Now, the reason I say that is because MacArthur has a lot of influence, a huge amount of influence, and I'm sure many of you have listened to him, as I have, and been blessed by his preaching.

But I have to say, on this occasion, I really have a problem. We discussed this last week at the COVID group, the Free Church of a COVID group that meet every week, and we discussed, you know, MacArthur's position and how many of our people might agree with him and so on and so forth.

And somebody said this, and this is what stuck with me. What if there was an outbreak of COVID and it was traced to a church that hadn't kept the regulations?

How does that make the gospel look? What credibility is there in the gospel if a church refused to keep the regulations and somebody, and there's an outbreak and people contract the disease and maybe even some people die?

[30 : 31] And that's a really searching point to make. And it's certainly what convinces me that we have taken the right steps.

And right now, hopefully, hopefully, we're on the brink at the very beginning of seeing the gathering once again. I hope we'll see more of it next week.

And I hope that as the government releases or eases the lockdown further, that more of us will be able to meet. I hope so. Let's pray for that so that we can all have the opportunity of resuming that precious fellowship that there is in gathering together to praise the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and to give honor to Him publicly and openly as we would want to do.

I was going to go into the rest of it, but time has gone. I'm just going to, we're going to, I just, I hope that by revisiting this great promise that Jesus will build His church, that we will be encouraged, that we today are in the right place.

And that includes those of you who are watching from home. God sees all of us as one. And we are all worshiping with hearts and minds and souls together the same Lord who we love because He first loved us.

[32 : 07] Our Father in heaven, we pray that you will hear us now and accept our worship. We pray that you will give guidance to us and we do rejoice in even the small, tiny little steps we're able to take today and hopefully next week which we hope will be a sign of things to come.

In Jesus' name. Amen.