

## (21) THE COMMUNITY OF JESUS: MATTHEW 16:13-26

- Focus Idea:** The people of God have a clear mission; as true disciples of Jesus, they will follow him into death. But their death is not meaningless nor is their task without hope, for in the end the gates of Hades will fall before the advances of the church.
- The Context:** Matthew 16 follows an assorted collection of miracles, teachings, and rebukes to the Pharisees situated in the center of the first gospel. Jesus' declaration that he is on a journey toward Jerusalem and toward his own death opens a new phase in his public ministry, and the events that follow Matthew 16 take an ominous turn toward that end.
- The Characters:** The focal figure in this passage is Peter. Born Simon, this disciple was renamed Peter ("the rock") by Jesus. With his brother Andrew, Peter left a fishing career in Galilee and followed Jesus. Despite his headstrong character and impulsive tone, Peter became one of Jesus most trusted disciples, joining James and John as something of an "inner circle" among the fellowship of followers. He would later become a leader in the New Testament church and, as bishop of Rome, the first Pope in history.
- The Core:** By the time that Matthew's gospel had been written (approximately 80-90 AD), Jesus had long departed the earth. The church that gathered to hear stories about their leader lived a perilous existence. Persecutions of Christians, first by Jewish synagogue leaders and later by Romans, were part and parcel of the experience of following Jesus.

This passage surely served as a source of hope for the church. It would also have offered a warning to those who thought that participation in the community of believers was a low-stakes affair.

In vs. 13-20, Matthew portrays Peter favorably. When Jesus asks his disciples about his identity, it is Peter (not surprisingly) who speaks up. While others Jesus has encountered believe their rabbit is John the Baptist or an Old Testament prophet, Peter declares that Jesus is actually the *fulfillment* of John's preaching and Jeremiah's predictions. He is the Messiah, the Son of the Living God (vs. 16).

In response to this confession of faith, Jesus declares that "on this rock" (*either the person of Peter, or his testimony, or both?*) the church would be established. And against its advances, not even the gates of Hades/Hell will prevail (vs. 18). The enemy has no defense for a church that makes Jesus her Lord.

But Peter's moment in the sun will not last long. Matthew transitions quickly to Jesus' predictions of his death in Jerusalem (vs. 21) and to Peter's attempts to keep Jesus from traveling to his demise there. Jesus' rebuke of Peter is staggering: his own disciple, the one who had so recently confessed Jesus' true identity, is admonished as "Satan" (vs. 23)

Peter's mind is on human concerns, not on the concerns of God, Jesus says. The only appropriate frame of mind for a disciple, the teacher continues, is to expect pain, suffering, and death (vs. 24-25). Self-denial is required. For Jesus, this kind of death to self was the only way to truly live; it profits nothing, he urges his followers, to gain the whole world while losing one's soul (vs 26).

In these words, the young church saw together the incredible cost of discipleship and the ultimate victory of the church.