

What about you?

So how would you answer today if Jesus asked you, “Who do you say that I am?”

If you have not accepted Him as your personal savior that is the first step. If you have accepted Him, have you perhaps made him merely your personal savior? Have you read the Scriptures with more of an emphasis upon what God can do for you instead of a focus upon Him living in you so that His desire, to reach all people with His love, is fulfilled?

Jesus asked difficult questions. Eventually He was put to death because of what He said. However He rose from the grave to prove He was who He said He was—the Savior of the World.

May God guide you as you further study this topic to understand His heart. We encourage you to support your church in its local outreach and foreign missions programs to those who have yet to hear the message of God’s love. Find a missionary that you can pray with and faithfully support. Consider what cultural barriers you can cross to bring God’s love to a foreigner in your own country, or even a neighbor who may be “a bit different” than you.

Sources and Endnotes

A special thanks goes to Bible teacher Ray Vander Laan and the video series “That the World May Know” which inspired much of the information contained within this teaching. We encourage you to learn more about this and similar topics at [www.faithlessons.org](http://www.faithlessons.org).

<sup>1</sup> Tyre and Sidon was the same area where God sent Elijah in the Old Testament when the widow of Zaraphath fed him (1 Kgs 17:9). In the Gospel of Matthew 11:21-24 Jesus pronounced judgment on Jewish towns of Chorazin and Bethsaida suggesting that if the pagan cities of Tyre and Sidon had experienced what Chorazin and Bethsaida did, they would have long ago repented in sackcloth and ashes.

<sup>2</sup> In Jesus’ day a large temple like structure was built around the entrance to the cave. An ancient Jewish manuscript predicted that when the Messiah would come these Gates of Hades at Caesarea Philippi would collapse.

<sup>3</sup> Jesus, following the method of Jewish Rabbis, taught his followers by linking the lesson to what was at hand to help them remember. Jesus did this many times. Matthew 6:26 & 28, 13:47, and Luke 8:1-ff are just a few examples. Here Jesus links his teaching to the name, Peter, *petros*, (πέτρος), which he had given to Simon several years before, It means ‘stone, that is, ‘a piece of a rock’.

The name *Simon* means “reed”. Jesus may have called him *Petros* ‘stone’, to contrast the two objects. A reed is something alive which last a short time. It sways in the wind and is easily bruised. A stone endures and cannot be easily wounded. (An interesting Bible study is to see when Jesus uses the name *Simon* and when he refers to him as *Petros* or when both names, *Simon Peter*, are used).

<sup>4</sup> The church that Jesus talked about was certainly not a building. Buildings for Christians to gather in did not become popular until several hundred years after Christ. The Greek word for church is *ecclesia* (ἐκκλησία). It means “an assembly” or “gathering of people”. The literal roots of this word mean “out-called” and refers to those who are called out to worship God.

<sup>5</sup> The Greek word *petros*, (πέτρος) although similar, is not the same semantically as the Greek word *petra* (πέτρα) . The word *petra* is used for a large rock or cliff like that at Caesarea Philippi. The original language of the scriptures shows that Jesus said he would build his church on or from *petra*, and not *petros*:

“καὶ ἐπὶ ταύτῃ τῇ πέτρᾳ οἰκοδομήσω μου τὴν ἐκκλησίαν”  
and/but on/from this the rock build-shall-1<sup>st</sup>sing my the out-called

It is important to note that Jesus’s first language was Aramaic. Some scholars suggest that Aramaic does not have the distinction between “stone” and “rock” as Greek does. However it is likely that Christ knew both languages. He interacted with Greek speaking people and Mark’s Gospel account says that Jesus spoke to a larger group than just the disciples, Mark 8:34. We cannot be sure what language Jesus used at this particular point but it was a Greek speaking area. It is important to note that the writers of the New Testament chose to include the distinction between *petros* and *petra* in the Scriptures.

Furthermore, when comparing what Jesus taught regarding leadership (Matthew 20:26, Luke 9:46, Luke 9:24-27 as well as other passages) it is clear that Christ never intended to build his church upon a hierarchy of any one man or even upon a group of men such as the disciples. A church is ‘a gathering of people’ so Jesus was most logically referring to the pagan peoples assembled at the large rock (*petra*) of Caesarea Philippi.

Many evangelical churches teach that “the rock” is Simon Peter’s confession that Jesus is the Christ. That if we confess Christ as the Son of God, then God builds His church upon us. This teaching, while perhaps well intended, does not have the syntactic, contextual and archeological support that the interpretation of Matthew 16:18 presented here does.

Other interpretations, although well intended, do not match so well with overall theme of the Old and New Testaments, that God is redeeming lost people to himself. Moreover, there would be no reason for Christ to take his disciples on a long journey, to a center of pagan worship like Caesarea Philippi, to ask this question if it were not for him to show His disciples the lost peoples of the world and reveal who he was—The Savior of all mankind.

<sup>6</sup> How can we be sure that Jesus was teaching His disciples at this very site where pagan worshippers were gathered in

Who do you say I am?



An artist impression of Jesus’ visit to Caesarea Philippi’s Rock of the Gods.’

Caesarea Philippi and not perhaps at another location nearby? Because the same Bible verse tells us that Jesus refers to the cave that is located there called the “Gates of Hades”. So understandably it was in view. Moreover Mark’s account mentions a crowd of people which could have been the pagan worshippers.

<sup>7</sup> Prepositions in most languages, including Greek, can have a wide variety of meanings. The Greek preposition *epi* (ἐπὶ ) in this verse is in the dative case and thus it can mean any of the following: *on, at, in; of, from or after. with, by near; over; because of, on the basis of; to, for; against; in addition to; about, concerning.*

The preposition *kai* (καί) often translated as “and” can mean any of the following: *and, also, but, even; that is, namely, both . . . and, not only . . . but also.*

It appears that Jesus may also be drawing a contrast between Simon Peter (*petros*) and the rock face (*petra*) saying in effect, “You Simon (a Jew) are a stone BUT FROM this rock (the non-Jewish tribes of the world) I will build my church”. Jesus also says that Simon is a “son of Jonah” (Matt 16:17). Simon’s father’s name was John, not Jonah. But Jesus called him this because Jonah signifies someone who does not want to go to the Gentile nations. See Jonah 1, Acts 10 & Galatians 2:11-16.

<sup>8</sup> Marks account from 8:27-37 tells how Jesus went on to explain, not only that He would build His church from these pagan peoples, but that He would be soon killed. All this must have greatly disturbed the disciples. Peter thought that he had to do something and tried to dissuade Jesus.

<sup>9</sup> Much of the Book of Romans is dedicated to explaining God’s plan to reach all the Gentile nations of the earth, especially chapters 9-11 and 15. Missions is often the overlooked theme of Romans. Paul’s last words in the book concludes, “...so that all the nations might believe...”

<sup>10</sup> It is interesting that historically the early Christian church was planted among the Gentiles living in the Decapolis and the region surrounding Caesarea Philippi. These churches became some of the strongest churches in the early days of Christianity. The worship of Pan and Baal eventually disappeared in fulfillment of what Jesus said there.

<sup>11</sup> The Greek word for nation is *ethnos* (ἔθνος) from which we get our word for ethnic group. Jesus said to make disciples of all *ethnos*, Matthew 28:19.



What would you say is the most important question in your life? Is it whom you will marry? What career you will follow? Or, is it where you choose to live?

Jesus had a very important question to ask His disciples. The answer to His question still determines the course of history. It ultimately determines what we become.

His question was simply this: “Who do you say I am?”

Of course Christ knew who He was, but He asked this question in order to teach us something crucial about Himself and also ourselves. To understand what Jesus was teaching by posing this question we have to understand both ...

...the timing and the location that he chose to ask it.

Several times Jesus had taken His disciples on what we might call “short term missions trips”. They followed him across cultural and political barriers to visit places like Samaria, or the Decapolis, which was an area of Greek and Roman cities. At times His followers may have been confused as to why Jesus visited such places. They were Jews and they wanted to stay where they were comfortable among their own people.



Once Jesus took his disciples on a trip to Tyre and Sidon<sup>1</sup>. Imagine the disciples grumbling along the road as they walked behind Jesus, “Where in the world is He taking us to now? Doesn’t he know these people around here are pagans?” Jews did not like anyone who was not “one of their kind” and even referred to some people as “dogs”. In Greek this word for *dog* is *kuón* (κύων).

On this trip Jesus meets with someone that the disciples apparently despised: a Canaanite woman. When Jesus speaks with her He uses a more gentle word to make an indirect reference to her plea for help. The Greek word used this time is *kynariois* (κυνάριοις) which means “house dog” or “puppy”. It appears that Jesus was sarcastically bringing attention to the wrong attitude that the disciples showed towards her. Instead Jesus did help this woman and His response demonstrated to the disciples that it was wrong to look down upon anyone. Mark 7:24-30

## The Senior Class Trip

But Jesus had one more place to take His disciples. It would be a long trip – a hike of more than 30 miles. This trip was going to be the big “Senior Class Trip” -- the one that is saved for the end of the year before graduation. The account is in Matthew 16:13-19. It was a trip to Caesarea Philippi.

What!!! Caesarea Philippi was the “Sin City” of their day. It was the center of pagan worship in that part of the world at that time. There were at least 14 pagan temples located there. In ancient times it was a center for Baal worship. At this city there was a large rock face with a cave<sup>2</sup> at its base called the Gates of

Hades. The people believed that the god Baal descended into in the depths of the earth through this cave each winter. In order to bring Baal out of the cave each spring (so that their crops would grow) pagan worshippers performed perverse fertility rites involving people and animals. These acts of pagan worship went on for all to see before the entrance to the Gates of Hades. People even sacrificed their children to the god Baal.



The Old Testament told how God hated Baal worship. It was so revolting that the Greeks stopped it when they arrived about 300 BC. Instead they inserted the worship of the god Pan, the half-man half-goat god of the wild. Images of Pan were carved into the rock face and this cliff is referred to as the ‘Rock of the Gods’.

Imagine the disciples’ bewilderment that Jesus would take them to such a place. They probably wanted to hide their eyes from seeing the idols, the gates put over the cave, and the disgusting worship of false gods. They may have been very fearful to be there. But it was there that Jesus took them to teach them something by asking, “Who do men say that I am?”

It is easy to understand Simon’s outburst when Jesus asks the question. Simon Peter responds, “You are the Christ! The son of the Living God!” We can imagine his thinking, “You are OUR JEWISH Messiah! These people worship false gods of stone that are no gods at all. But you are the Son of the only TRUE LIVING GOD!”

Jesus affirms Simon Peter’s answer<sup>3</sup>, saying that, he was correct and that God gave him that answer. But Jesus wants His disciples to learn something more about who He is, than only a Jewish Messiah. Jesus next says something that went against the disciples view of who He was. Jesus said that He was going to build His church<sup>4</sup> out of this rock<sup>5</sup>. The rock face at Caesarea Philippi was filled with images of the false gods. To the Jew it was a symbol of lost people without hope. The rock and the worshippers there represented everything about a lost world apart from



One of the many small grottos carved into the rock face at Caesarea Philippi visible today. These held images like that of the Greek god Pan.



God. The people that they saw there were the very people that the Jewish disciples despised and wanted to avoid. Yes, Jesus was telling them that he was going to call out His

‘gathering of people’ (ἐκκλησία, *church*) from the pagans that were worshipping there<sup>6</sup>.

## From this rock

Christ was saying that He was going to bring forth a body of believers from the non-Jewish tribes of the



The “Rock of the Gods” at Caesarea Philippi. The cave which was called the Gates of Hades is seen in the center of this photo. Rubble from the ancient pagan worship site is scattered around the area.

world. “But from<sup>7</sup> this rock I will build my church”. This must have shocked the disciples<sup>8</sup>, but eventually they did understand. The book of Acts tells how Simon Peter later accepted what Jesus taught them. Peter said,

“I now realize how true it is that God does not show favoritism but accepts men from every nation who fear him and do what is right.”

Acts 10:34-35

The Apostle Paul<sup>9</sup> wrote,

“[For the time being] Israel has experienced a hardening in part until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.

Romans 11:25

And isn’t this indeed what has happened in history?<sup>10</sup> The Good News of Jesus has, and is still reaching around the world. Missiologists have cataloged thousands of distinct people groups and linguists have counted over 7000 different living languages spoken on the earth today. Each language group is an ethnic nation<sup>11</sup>. These people groups are the non-Jewish nations (Greek: *ethnos*) represented at Caesarea Philippi by the pagans who had come from different regions to worship there.

Today many of these people groups have been reached with the Good News of Jesus. Groups from around the world have gladly left pagan forms of worship to welcome the love of God through the message of Jesus. When the story of God’s love and salvation through Christ came to one group in Papua New Guinea their only question was, “Why did it take you so long to get here?” They wondered why we didn’t reach them earlier with such Good News.

All this is the fulfillment of what Jesus said about where he would build His church. He is building His

church today from people formerly lost who were without the knowledge of Him.

One cannot be a serious student of Scripture and not see God’s missionary heart from cover to cover in the Bible pages:

- God’s very first words in the Bible, “Let there be Light” tell of missions, that is, bringing the light of God’s truth and love to the darkness.
- God’s first words to mankind were a charge to fill the earth with God’s glory, the image of God put into each of us. Genesis 1:28
- Christ said His purpose was to “seek and save the lost” Luke 19:10. His very name, *Jesus*, means “God is salvation.”
- The last book of the Bible tells the fulfillment of God’s plan:

***After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb.*** Revelation 7:9

Christ is still building His church today from every group of people around the world who are receiving the Good News of forgiveness through Him.



People groups, like the Mayogo of the Congo, around world welcome the Good News of God’s love for them.



The Bible has been translated into more languages than any other book. Over 2000 languages have some portion of it and more languages have Bible translation programs now than at any other time in history.