



The Gospel of Matthew - Chapter Sixteen

IX Matthew 13:54-16:20 - The Identity of the Messiah Revealed (continues/concludes)

Summary of Chapter Sixteen

From the outset of his earthly ministry, Jesus had been supporting his Gospel proclamation with amazing miracles yet there were many, especially among the religious leaders who rejected him. That both Pharisees and Sadducees should come to Jesus to ask for a further heavenly sign to support his claims was clearly an attempt on their part to trap him in some way to provide support for their case against Jesus. He refused to comply with their request except to say that a sign of Jonah, who spent three days in the belly of a great fish, would be the sign to that generation of who Jesus was when he would spend three days buried in the earth before being resurrected to new life.

Having previously taught that the Kingdom of Heaven was like yeast in the way that it permeates secretly through people's lives to bring about a positive change, Jesus now uses an analogy of yeast in a negative sense, with regard to the false teaching of the religious leaders, which was so often accepted as true but silently deceived the hearts of those who accepted it instead of the Gospel message of truth.

Jesus asked his disciples what the crowds were saying about him, which was that he was a prophet, perhaps one from of old brought back to teach them the ways of God. When asked who the disciples thought he was, Peter, inspired by the Holy Spirit, acknowledged that Jesus was indeed the Messiah. Jesus warned them not to make this publically known at that time.

Jesus then went on to prophesy for the first time that, as the Messiah, he had to suffer and die at the hands of the religious leaders but would be resurrected. Peter objected to this statement for which Jesus severely rebuked him, saying that he was still thinking in human terms.

The chapter concludes with a stark call to discipleship that involves those who would answer the call to be prepared to bear their own cross, whatever that might be for them as an individual, but certainly a requirement to die to self.

IX.e Matthew 16:1-20 - Peter confesses Jesus as the Christ, the Son of the living God

In response to the Pharisees and Sadducees' demands for a sign, Jesus announces he will give no more signs (vv.1-4), and warns his disciples about the spiritual 'leaven' of the Pharisees and Sadducees (vv.5-12). Jesus then asks his disciples about the identity of the Son of Man (vv.13-14). Peter rightly confesses Jesus (vv.15-16), and Jesus in turn makes a pronouncement about Peter (vv.17-20).

IX.e.i Matthew 16:1-4 - The Demand for a Sign

Despite all the miracles Jesus had performed from the beginning, the religious leaders requested further evidence of Jesus' messianic claims. Jesus knew they were looking for a way to trap him so he refused to comply, showing he knew of their hypocrisy.

¹ The Pharisees and Sadducees came, and to test Jesus they asked him to show them a sign from heaven.

Matthew 16:1

The Pharisees and Sadducees were often bitter opponents of each other: <<*When he said this, a dissension began between the Pharisees and the Sadducees, and the assembly was divided*>> (Acts 23:7), but they joined forces against Jesus, whom they saw as a common threat to their leadership and power. They came to Jesus not out of need or genuine faith but to test him.

A sign from heaven. Jesus had already performed many miracles or signs that validated his messianic identity, starting with his sign of changing water to wine for the benefit of his followers: <<*Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him*>> (John 2:11). It should be remembered that God had given them signs from heaven before and the people had been extremely fearful of them: <<*When all the people witnessed the thunder and lightning, the sound of the trumpet, and the mountain smoking, they were afraid and trembled and stood at a distance, and said to Moses, 'You speak to us, and we will listen; but do not let God speak to us, or we will die'*>> (Exodus 20:17-19). These men were asking for a sign that they could use against Jesus, for they clearly had closed their minds to the reality of who was among them.

Pharisees were a laymen's fellowship, popular with the common people and connected to the local synagogues, chiefly characterised by adherence to extensive extra-biblical traditions, which they rigorously obeyed as a means of applying the law to daily life. They wielded significant power and influence in the lives of ordinary Jews. Many were zealous and pious, but there were others that had a reputation of being self-seeking and domineering.

Sadducees were a small group who derived their authority from the activities of the temple. They were removed from the common people by aristocratic and priestly influence, as well as by their cooperation with Rome's rule. They did not view God as the Almighty source of power behind all things, did not believe in the spiritual realm including the existence of angels or demons, and they did not

believe in the resurrection of the dead. They formed the majority group in the ruling council, the Sanhedrin and the High Priest Caiaphas was a Sadducee.

A valuable lesson for Matthew's first listeners and the church today is that, once God has given a sign, he should not be put to the test by asking for another one: <<They tested God in their heart by demanding the food they craved. They spoke against God, saying, 'Can God spread a table in the wilderness? Even though he struck the rock so that water gushed out and torrents overflowed, can he also give bread, or provide meat for his people?''>> (Psalm 78:18-20), yet the command had been made clear: <<Do not put the Lord your God to the test, as you tested him at Massah>> (Deuteronomy 6:16), something that Paul would later reiterate: <<We must not put Christ to the test, as some of them did, and were destroyed by serpents>> (1 Corinthians 10:9). However, this passage is not so much aimed at those who want reassurance in their faith but at those who are seeking for reasons to disbelieve that Jesus is the Christ, or indeed that God exists at all!

² He answered them, 'When it is evening, you say, "It will be fair weather, for the sky is red."³ And in the morning, "It will be stormy today, for the sky is red and threatening." You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times.

Matthew 16:2-3

For the sky is red. That Jesus uses meteorological signs that were commonly used to predict the day's weather would indicate that the sign from heaven they had requested in v.1 was not so much the miracles of healing the sick, driving out demons and control of nature that Jesus had been performing, but was a physical change in the appearance of the sky to show that Jesus was from God. Such thinking has almost pagan overtones and is not what would be expected from those who profess to serve the creator God.

You know how to interpret. Such observations about the weather came about through experience of seeing certain weather patterns but what no one knows is how and why God designed the global weather patterns: <<Do you know the balancings of the clouds, the wondrous works of the one whose knowledge is perfect>> (Job 37:16). That is where the true miracles lie. Jesus rebukes the religious leaders for their limited thinking in that they could look to the natural world and understand what it meant but they failed to look to the supernatural ways of God, i.e. cannot interpret the signs of the times, in order to see that God had stepped into history during their generation to bring the long promised salvation offered through his Christ. Moses had prophesied that God would indeed do this: <<No, the word is very near to you; it is in your mouth and in your heart for you to observe>> (Deuteronomy 30:14), yet they failed to observe the presence of The Word, despite reading Moses every week in their synagogues. This was not the sign that God would give them on this occasion: <<You have not come to something that can be touched, a blazing fire, and darkness, and gloom, and a tempest, and the sound of a trumpet, and a voice whose words made the hearers beg that not another word be spoken to them>> (Hebrews 12:18-19).

Modern science has taken weather forecasting to a new level, although it is far from being totally accurate. Mankind has been allowed to develop all sorts of technologies through acquired knowledge and yet sometimes does not even have the true insight that lesser creatures possess: <<*Even the stork in the heavens knows its times; and the turtle-dove, swallow, and crane observe the time of their coming; but my people do not know the ordinance of the Lord*>> (Jeremiah 8:7), and: <<*The ox knows its owner, and the donkey its master's crib; but Israel does not know, my people do not understand*>> (Isaiah 1:3).

⁴ An evil and adulterous generation asks for a sign, but no sign will be given to it except the sign of Jonah.' Then he left them and went away.

Matthew 16:4

When Jesus called them an evil and adulterous generation he was not referring to everyone that was alive at that time. It was aimed mainly at the religious leaders and those who supported them, who had been provided with all the evidence that Jesus was the long awaited Messiah. They not only rejected his claims but they actively opposed the work he was doing in their midst. Yet they could perceive no wrongdoing on their own part: <<*This is the way of an adulteress: she eats, and wipes her mouth, and says, 'I have done no wrong'*>> (Proverbs 30:20).

Jesus was indeed giving the astute listener a sign, for it was within Jewish thinking and understanding that a sinful generation would immediately precede the coming of God's Kingdom.

The sign of Jonah. Jonah had spent three days and nights in the belly of a great fish as he tried to flee from God's calling on his life: <<*But the Lord provided a large fish to swallow up Jonah; and Jonah was in the belly of the fish for three days and three nights*>> (Jonah 1:17). Jonah's rescue by God was a sign to the people of Nineveh that his message was from God. Jesus' death and resurrection will likewise be God's sign to the present generation, and for every generation that would follow on from them.

Then he left them and went away. Jesus clearly had concluded his discourse with them and saw no further point in debating what he must have seen as a lost cause.

IX.e.ii Matthew 16:5-12 - The Yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees

If Jesus' opponents had been active in their unbelief, his disciples here were passive in theirs. They had witnessed all the signs they would ever need and more beside, and yet they could still not comprehend the Kingdom power that was on display in everything that Jesus said and did in their presence.

Jesus warns his disciples to beware of the false and corrupting teaching of the religious leaders, using yeast as an analogy for the way that teaching would silently permeate through an undiscerning listener. The disciples took his words literally and thought Jesus was rebuking them as they had forgotten to bring bread for their journey. Jesus had to point to what they had witnessed in his own teaching and the miracles of feeding the multitudes to enable them to understand he was not talking of physical but spiritual matters.

⁵ When the disciples reached the other side, they had forgotten to bring any bread.

Matthew 16:5

The other side often marks the movement from a Jewish to a Gentile territory and vice versa: <<*When he came to the other side, to the country of the Gadarenes, two demoniacs coming out of the tombs met him. They were so fierce that no one could pass that way*>> (Matthew 8:28), and: <<*Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds*>> (Matthew 14:22).

They had forgotten to bring any bread. Jesus and his disciples would normally be self-sufficient in their work. It was the same for Paul: <<*For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us; we were not idle when we were with you, and we did not eat anyone's bread without paying for it; but with toil and labour we worked night and day, so that we might not burden any of you*>> (2 Thessalonians 3:7-8), despite Jesus' own teaching that those they ministered to had a responsibility to provide for them: <<*Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the labourer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house*>> (Luke 10:7).

⁶ Jesus said to them, 'Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.' ⁷ They said to one another, 'It is because we have brought no bread.' ⁸ And becoming aware of it, Jesus said, 'You of little faith, why are you talking about having no bread?' ⁹ Do you still not perceive? Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹⁰ Or the seven loaves for the four thousand, and how many baskets you gathered? ¹¹ How could you fail to perceive that I was not speaking about bread? Beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees!' ¹² Then they understood that he had not told them to beware of the yeast of bread, but of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees.

Matthew 16:6-12

Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees. In contrast to: <<*He told them another parable: 'The kingdom of heaven is like yeast that a woman took and mixed in with three measures of flour until all of it was leavened'*>> (Matthew 13:33), where it was used in the positive sense to indicate how the Kingdom spread silently through the hearts and lives of those who accepted Jesus. Here yeast is a negative metaphor to indicate how the evil of corruption can infiltrate and ruin what is good. Disciples are at greatest risk from hypocrites who sound plausible in their profession of faith and yet can lead people astray with their false doctrine.

When Jesus warns against Pharisaic yeast, hence Pharisaic teaching, he is not implying that he disagrees with all Pharisaic teaching; the context specifies which teaching he means. The Pharisees and Sadducees have posed challenges intended to discredit Jesus; Jesus' words against the yeast of the Pharisees and

Sadducees in this context must constitute a warning against such cynicism, which rapidly poisons the attitudes of others. Yeast was an appropriate metaphor for something that spreads; today it might be employed with regard to the negative image of cancer. The disciples' passive unbelief suggests that the threat of Pharisaic leaven is closer to them than they would have guessed.

We have brought no bread. The disciples are so preoccupied with their physical needs and their neglect in not bringing the provisions they required for the journey, that they failed to understand that Jesus' reference to yeast is figurative, intended as a spiritual lesson. Following Jesus' rebuke, they finally understood.

Do you not remember the five loaves for the five thousand, Jesus is crystal clear why they cannot understand him. Spiritual understanding cannot come apart from faith. Had they simply forgotten to take bread, a technical rather than a moral failure, Jesus could have provided bread. That Jesus could miraculously supply bread had already eluded them twice; by this point his disciples should have more faith, so he corrects them.

The feeding of the five thousand is recorded in Matthew 14:13-21, and the four thousand in Matthew 15:32-39. Refer to those passages for appropriate comments concerning the two occasions.

IX.e.iii Matthew 16:13-20 - Peter's Declaration about Jesus

Jesus asked his disciples who the people thought he was and they told him that many held him to be a prophet of old come back to teach the people of God. Then Jesus asked them who they thought he was. Peter, enlightened by the Holy Spirit, acknowledged that Jesus is the Christ of God, something Jesus wanted them to keep to themselves until after his resurrection.

¹³ **Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, 'Who do people say that the Son of Man is?'**

Matthew 16:13

Caesarea Philippi, located 25 miles or 40 km north of the Sea of Galilee, had been a centre for the worship of Baal, then of the Greek god Pan, and then dedicated to Caesar, who was considered to have the status of a god by the Romans. At this time it was an important Greco-Roman city, with a primarily pagan Syrian and Greek population. In fact, its name had recently been changed from Panæas to Caesarea Philippi by Philip the Tetrarch, one of Herod the Great's sons, in honour of himself and Augustus Caesar. Excavations at the site have revealed coins minted to depict the temple built in honour of Augustus Caesar, and a pagan cave dedicated to Pan, with shrines and cult niches that are still visible today. It marks the most northerly point of Jesus' work in Israel and since it was mostly pagan it is likely that Jesus was there to teach his disciples. The location for his transfiguration may have been nearby, as will be discussed in Matthew Chapter 17.

Who do people say that the Son of Man is? There were many rumours circulating concerning the true identity of Jesus, none of which were fully accurate, although the majority showed that he was generally held in high esteem by the ordinary people: <<*Many Samaritans from that city believed in him because of the*

woman's testimony, *'He told me everything I have ever done'*>> (John 4:39), and: <<*Yet many in the crowd believed in him and were saying, 'When the Messiah comes, will he do more signs than this man has done?'*>> (John 7:31), and quite a number of influential people as well: <<*Nevertheless many, even of the authorities, believed in him. But because of the Pharisees they did not confess it, for fear that they would be put out of the synagogue*>> (John 12:42). In addition to those listed in v.28, there were others who saw him simply as the carpenter from Nazareth: <<*Isn't this the carpenter? Isn't this Mary's son and the brother of James, Joseph, Judas and Simon? Aren't his sisters here with us?'*>> (Mark 6:3), and religious leaders who thought he was in league with the Devil: <<*And the teachers of the law who came down from Jerusalem said, "He is possessed by Beelzebul! By the prince of demons he is driving out demons"*>> (Mark 3:22). Jesus' questions here prepare the way for his teaching. He needed to clarify that the Messiah of God had to be humbled: <<*For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*>> (Mark 10:45), and exalted: <<*And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that whoever believes in him may have eternal life*>> (John 3:14-15), for the sake of his people. This went against popular expectations in Jewish culture and thinking.

Son of Man is Jesus' favourite self-designation: <<*And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man'*>> (John 1:51), indicating the true meaning of his identity and ministry as:

1. The humble servant who has come to forgive common sinners: <<*'But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins' – he then said to the paralytic – 'Stand up, take your bed and go to your home'*>> (Matthew 9:6).
2. The suffering servant whose atoning death and resurrection will redeem his people: <<*'For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done. Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom'*>> (vv.27-28).
3. The glorious King and Judge who will return to establish God's Kingdom on earth: <<*When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on the throne of his glory*>> (Matthew 25:31), and: <<*Jesus said to him, 'You have said so. But I tell you, From now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven'*>> (Matthew 26:64).

Son of man is clearly a lower title than Son of God (v.16), but chosen by Jesus to show his full humanity as well as his full deity. It was a term frequently given by God for Ezekiel to keep him humble and Jesus perhaps used it to highlight his own amazing humility in his love and devotion to his Father and all his people.

¹⁴ And they said, 'Some say John the Baptist, but others Elijah, and still others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.'

Matthew 16:14

John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, one of the prophets. The responses are in line with the popular messianic expectations held in Israel, arising from a strand of OT predictions about a great prophet who was to come: <<*The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet. This is what you requested of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly when you said: 'If I hear the voice of the Lord my God any more, or ever again see this great fire, I will die.'* Then the Lord replied to me: 'They are right in what they have said. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their own people; I will put my words in the mouth of the prophet, who shall speak to them everything that I command>> (Deuteronomy 18:15-18), and: <<*Lo, I will send you the prophet Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes*>> (Malachi 4:5).

There are many external to Christianity that accept that Jesus was a great prophet sent by God, including the views of Islam. However, such a viewpoint is inadequate for it misses the whole purpose of God himself stepping into history in order to provide a route for all of mankind to be reconciled back to their creator. Even the greatest of God's prophets were only able to speak the words from the limited knowledge that had been revealed to them by God. Jesus is much more than a prophet; he is the Prophet, High Priest and King.

¹⁵ He said to them, 'But who do you say that I am?' ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, 'You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.'

Matthew 16:15-16

Simon Peter answered. Peter acted once again as spokesman for the Twelve.

Messiah means Christ, Greek *Christos*, and is taken from the Hebrew *mashiakh*, which means anointed. It points back to David as the anointed king of Israel.

The Son of the living God. There is only one true God, unlike the pagan gods of Caesarea Philippi (v.13). Jesus is God's unique Son, the fulfilment of the OT promise of a divine Son as anointed King: <<*I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me. When he commits iniquity, I will punish him with a rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings*>> (2 Samuel 7:14), and: <<*I will tell of the decree of the Lord: He said to me, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you*>> (Psalm 2:7).

God's revelation of Jesus' true identity is a key point in history and is foundational to the Christian faith. He was not just another prophet or a great teacher. He was part of the Godhead that had created everything: <<*In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people*>> (John 1:1-4).

¹⁷ And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven.

Matthew 16:17

Jesus answered him. Although Peter spoke for the group, Jesus' reply is directed at Peter himself.

Blessed is the Greek *makarios*, and is more than a temporary or circumstantial feeling of happiness, it is a state of well-being in relationship to God that belongs to those who respond to Jesus' ministry. Jesus is not conferring blessing so much as acknowledging Peter's condition of being privileged to benefit from God's personal revelation.

Simon son of Jonah. Simon had a natural father, John, but his ability to confess Jesus in v.16 came not from any human source, i.e. flesh and blood, but through the Holy Spirit, that is, from my Father who is in heaven.

¹⁸ And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it.

Matthew 16:18

You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church. This is one of the most controversial and debated passages in all of Scripture. The key question concerns Peter's relationship to this rock. In Greek, Peter is *Petros* or stone, which is related to *petra* or rock. The other NT name of Peter is *Cephas*: <<*He brought Simon to Jesus, who looked at him and said, 'You are Simon son of John. You are to be called Cephas' (which is translated Peter)*>> (John 1:42), and: <<*What I mean is that each of you says, 'I belong to Paul', or 'I belong to Apollos', or 'I belong to Cephas', or 'I belong to Christ'*>> (1 Corinthians 1:12), which is the Aramaic equivalent *kepha*' also meaning rock, and translates in Greek as *Kēphas*.

This rock has been variously interpreted as referring to:

1. Peter himself;
2. Peter's confession;
3. Christ and his teachings.

For several reasons, the first option is the strongest. Jesus' entire pronouncement is directed toward Peter, and the connecting word 'and', Greek *kai*, most naturally identifies this rock with Peter himself. But even if this rock refers to Peter, the question remains as to what that means.

Protestants generally have thought that it refers to Peter in his role of confessing Jesus as the Messiah, and that the other disciples would share in that role as they made a similar confession: <<*So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone*>> (Ephesians 2:20), where the church is built on all the apostles: <<*And the wall of the city has twelve foundations, and on them are the twelve names of the twelve apostles of the Lamb*>> (Revelation 21:14).

Roman Catholics have appealed to this passage to defend the idea that Peter was the first pope. However, this claim is based purely on speculation. There was clearly no hierarchy in the apostolic group, although Peter often acted as their spokesman. He did become an elder of the church in Rome during the latter stages of his life: *<<Now as an elder myself and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory to be revealed, I exhort the elders among you>>* (1 Peter 5:1), but too much can be read in to this for John too was accepted as an elder in Ephesus: *<<The elder to the elect lady and her children, whom I love in the truth, and not only I but also all who know the truth>>* (2 John 1), and: *<<The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth>>* (3 John 1); as was James in Jerusalem: *<<The next day Paul went with us to visit James; and all the elders were present>>* (Acts 21:18), a role he clearly shared with others. Such men were given respect and authority due to their apostleship. None of them was ever given authority to have overall control of the church or to act as God's sole representative on earth.

Jesus' statement did not mean that Peter would have greater authority than the other apostles, indeed, Paul corrects him publicly: *<<But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood self-condemned>>* (Galatians 2:11), nor did it mean that he would be infallible in his teaching for Jesus rebukes him in v.23, nor did it imply anything about a special office for Peter or successors to such an office. Certainly in the first half of Acts, Peter appears as the spokesman and leader of the Jerusalem church, but he is still 'sent' by other apostles to Samaria: *<<Now when the apostles at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them>>* (Acts 8:14). Also, he had to give an account of his actions with regard to the Roman centurion Cornelius when Peter came before the Jerusalem church as recorded in Acts 11:1-18. Peter is presented as having only one voice at the Jerusalem council and James has the decisive final word; refer to Acts 15:7-21. And, although Peter certainly has a central role in the establishment of the church, he disappears from the Acts narrative after Acts Chapter 15, with the account of Paul dominating to the end of that book.

The true foundational rock is Christ and his teaching, he is both the church's founder and foundation stone: *<<For they drank from the spiritual rock that followed them, and the rock was Christ>>* (1 Corinthians 10:4b), and is established to draw more people to him: *<<From the end of the earth I call to you, when my heart is faint. Lead me to the rock that is higher than I>>* (Psalm 61:2). That this was revealed to Peter by the Holy Spirit then enabled Jesus to transfer that foundation over to Peter in human terms so that Jesus' message could be taken forward by Peter and then by the others who would come to understand and accept the revelation in the way that Peter had. However, Jesus will always remain as the foundational stone of the structure of the worldwide church, and everything else that is good in God's Kingdom: *<<So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are citizens with the saints and also members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord>>* (Ephesians 2:19-21).

Church, the Greek word *ekklēsia*, is used in all the Gospels only here and in: *<<If another member of the church sins against you, go and point out the fault when the two of you are alone. If the member listens to you, you have regained that one>>* (Matthew 18:15), and the remaining dialogue to Matthew 18:21. Jesus points ahead to the time when his disciples, his family of faith: *<<But to the one who had told him this, Jesus replied, 'Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?' And pointing to his disciples, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother'>>* (Matthew 12:48-50), will be called my church.

Jesus will build his church, and although it is founded on the apostles and the prophets, 'Christ Jesus himself [is] the cornerstone' as noted in Ephesians 2:20 earlier. Some scholars object that Jesus could not have foreseen the later emergence of the church at this time, but the use of Greek *ekklēsia* to refer to God's 'called out' people has substantial background in the Septuagint. For example: *<<And the Lord gave me the two stone tablets written with the finger of God; on them were all the words that the Lord had spoken to you at the mountain out of the fire on the day of the assembly>>* (Deuteronomy 9:10), *<<Then Moses recited the words of this song, to the very end, in the hearing of the whole assembly of Israel>>* (Deuteronomy 31:30), *<<and that all this assembly may know that the Lord does not save by sword and spear; for the battle is the Lord's and he will give you into our hand>>* (1 Samuel 17:47), and: *<<Then the king turned round and blessed all the assembly of Israel, while all the assembly of Israel stood>>* (1 Kings 8:14). Jesus is predicting that he will build an assembly or community of believers who follow him.

This 'called out' community would soon become known as my church, a separate community of believers, as described in the book of Acts, and yet the language used by Jesus would clearly provide a continuous link with that of the OT covenant community of God. It is also fully in keeping with the concept of God rebuilding his community of believers as recorded in the OT. For example: *<<Do good to Zion in your good pleasure; rebuild the walls of Jerusalem>>* (Psalm 51:18), *<<For God will save Zion and rebuild the cities of Judah; and his servants shall live there and possess it>>* (Psalm 69:35), and: *<<I will set my eyes upon them for good, and I will bring them back to this land. I will build them up, and not tear them down; I will plant them, and not pluck them up>>* (Jeremiah 24:6).

The church would not so much be built upon the rock of Peter but of the living stones of all who would choose to accept the gracious offer of Christ: *<<Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ>>* (1 Peter 2:4-5).

Gates of Hades is the Greek *hadēs* or hell, and is also referred to as 'the gates of Sheol' *<<I said: In the noontide of my days I must depart; I am consigned to the gates of Sheol for the rest of my years>>* (Isaiah 38:10), and 'gates of death' *<<Have the gates of death been revealed to you, or have you seen the gates of deep darkness?>>* (Job 38:17), *<<Be gracious to me, O Lord. See what I suffer from those who hate me; you are the one who lifts me up from the gates of*

death>> (Psalm 9:13), and: <<they loathed any kind of food, and they drew near to the gates of death>> (Psalm 107:18).

Gates were essential for a city's security and power. Hades, or Sheol, is the realm of the dead. Death will not overpower the church or prevail against it. The gates of Hades is a familiar Semitic expression for the threshold of the realm of death. The words used here suggest that death itself assaults Christ's church, but death cannot crush it. The church will endure until Christ's return, and no opposition, even widespread martyrdom of Christians or the oppression of the final antichrist, can prevent the ultimate triumph of God's purposes in history.

¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.'

Matthew 16:19

I will give you is a positive statement showing that authority will pass from Jesus to Peter here and, by taking this whole passage in context, to all others who share his proclamation. Jesus would soon overcome death, the concept of *Sheol*, and the one who rules over the realm of the spiritually dead: *<<Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil>> (Hebrews 2:14), and: <<When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. But he placed his right hand on me, saying, 'Do not be afraid; I am the first and the last, and the living one. I was dead, and see, I am alive for ever and ever; and I have the keys of Death and of Hades>> (Revelation 1:17-18).* The actual handing over did not occur until after Jesus' ascension with the pouring out of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost.

The keys of the Kingdom of Heaven. Peter is given the authority to admit entrance into the Kingdom through preaching the Gospel, an authority that is subsequently granted to all who are called to proclaim the Gospel. Note the contrast with the scribes and Pharisees, who shut the Kingdom in people's faces, neither entering themselves nor allowing others to enter: *<<But woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the kingdom of heaven. For you do not go in yourselves, and when others are going in, you stop them>> (Matthew 23:13).* In Acts, Peter is the apostle who first preached the message of the Kingdom to the Jews at Pentecost (Acts Chapter 2), to the Samaritans (Acts Chapter 8), and then to the Romans (Acts Chapter 10).

Keys opened locked doors or gates, but the carrying of keys especially symbolised the authority of the person who bore them. One who carried keys to a royal palace was the majordomo, as in: *<<I will place on his shoulder the key of the house of David; he shall open, and no one shall shut; he shall shut, and no one shall open>> (Isaiah 22:22), <<And to the angel of the church in Philadelphia write: These are the words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens>> (Revelation 3:7).* Supervisors held the keys to the temple courts among Jesus' contemporaries, and in Jewish lore prominent angels carried certain keys.

Whatever you bind, whatever you loose. Peter also has authority to exercise discipline concerning right and wrong conduct for those in the Kingdom, an authority that is not exclusive to Peter but is extended to the church as a whole: <<*Truly I tell you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven*>> (Matthew 18:18), and: <<*If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained*>> (John 20:23). Jesus delegates authority to human leaders in the church who are called to govern his church on earth, under his ultimate authority, through the application of his Word.

Scholars have proposed many interpretations of binding and loosing, but in Jewish texts these terms, ‘*asar* and *hittir* or *sera*’, could refer to authority to interpret the law, hence to evaluate individuals’ fidelity to the law. Peter and those who share this role evaluate not those who are in the community, but those who would enter it; God’s people must evaluate on the authority of the heavenly court, not on human judgement.

Peter must thus accept into the church only those who share his confession of Jesus’ true identity. Of course, the church should emulate Jesus’ practice of welcoming the unconverted, but this is not the same as acting as if all comers were true disciples of Christ regardless of their commitment. Today some churches both admit into membership the unconverted and fail to take the message of Jesus’ identity to the unconverted outside their walls. The danger of building a church on those not committed to Christ’s agendas is that in time the church will reflect more of the world’s values than Christ’s; this was one way some originally abolitionist churches compromised with the slave trade.

²⁰ Then he sternly ordered the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Matthew 16:20

Not to tell anyone. Jesus warned his disciples against telling anyone that he was the Christ, since the concept of the Messiah was widely misunderstood by the crowds and often by the disciples themselves. Jesus would only permit his disciples to fully proclaim him after his death and resurrection, a truly historic event that could not be prevented for any reason: <<*None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory*>> (1 Corinthians 2:8).

The context suggests why Jesus admonished his disciples to keep his identity secret. Until after the resurrection the disciples were unprepared and unable to understand the Cross; and apart from the Cross they could not understand the real nature of Jesus’ messianic mission.

X. Matthew 16:21-17:27 - The Suffering of the Messiah Revealed

Jesus reveals the nature of his messiah-ship. He is a suffering Messiah, and those who are his disciples must suffer with him. The transfiguration discloses who Jesus really is: the Son of God. Believers, who are themselves sons of the Kingdom, are free from the old era of the law.

X.a Matthew 16:21-28 - The suffering sacrifice

Jesus predicts his suffering and resurrection (vv.21-23), thus revealing the true cost of discipleship (vv.24-28).

X.a.i Matthew 16:21-23 - Jesus Foretells His Death and Resurrection

For the first time, Jesus informs his closest followers that he is destined for the Cross, something that did not fit with their understanding of the Messiah. When Peter objected to Jesus speaking in that way, Jesus rebuked him for failing to comprehend what he was saying from a Kingdom viewpoint.

The Gospel message is incomplete without the Cross, in fact it lies at its very core. Recognising Jesus as the Messiah was a good first step, but not very helpful when the disciples' concept of Jesus' messiah-ship differed so greatly from his own. Jesus' messiah-ship meant that he would suffer and die; those who wish to follow him must be ready to pay the same price. Crucifixion was the most scandalous form of criminal execution in Jesus' day. Even the term sounded terrible to ancient readers, and no one should blame the disciples for hoping he was speaking metaphorically.

²¹ From that time on, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and undergo great suffering at the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.

Matthew 16:21

From that time on brings to a conclusion Jesus' Galilæan ministry and the beginning of his journey to Jerusalem to face the Cross. It also marks a change in his teaching since they had professed him as the Son of God, he could now start to reveal to them new truths about what must happen to him.

Undergo great suffering. Jesus would not be the first person to face physical abuse such as the spitting and the beatings he received. There were thousands of people who had faced Roman scourging and death by crucifixion, so although unimaginably painful, Jesus' physical suffering would not be unique. However, Jesus would also bear the weight of the guilt and shame for all of mankind who had sinned against God; he would bear the wrath of God to atone for all that sin as well; and, in addition, he would face separation from the Father's love for the only time in eternity. That makes the burden truly unique as well as unimaginable. But there is more, he did it while he himself was without sin and he willingly took all this on himself in place of those who truly deserved to die for their own sin.

At the hands of the elders and chief priests and scribes. This would have been a stark revelation to his disciples. In their understanding they would have seen these men as the ones to herald in and then fully support the Messiah; they would not have thought of them as his main opponents, even if they had objected and rejected his teaching to date.

Be killed. This is the first of four times that Jesus predicted his arrest and crucifixion; the others being: *<<As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to*

them, 'The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into human hands, and they will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised.' And they were greatly distressed>> (Matthew 17:22-23), <<While Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside by themselves, and said to them on the way, 'See, we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man will be handed over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death; then they will hand him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified; and on the third day he will be raised'>> (Matthew 20:17-19), and: <<You know that after two days the Passover is coming, and the Son of Man will be handed over to be crucified>> (Matthew 26:2).

Jesus' substitutionary death was not some horrible accident or quirk of fate. It was preordained by God the Father before the dawn of time with the full agreement of God the Son: <<For this reason the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord. I have power to lay it down, and I have power to take it up again. I have received this command from my Father'>> (John 10:17-18). It would be achieved through the power of the Holy Spirit, who had also overseen Mary's virgin conception: <<The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God'>> (Luke 1:35).

On the third day be raised. Jews used inclusive counting so that part of Friday, the day of his crucifixion, was day one; Saturday was day two; and the morning of Sunday, when his resurrection was confirmed, was day three. This was to be the sign of Jonah as noted in v.4 and previously in Matthew 12:39.

²² And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, 'God forbid it, Lord! This must never happen to you.'

Matthew 16:22

In the context of the Jewish master-disciple relationship, it would have been audacious for a disciple to correct his master, let alone rebuke him. Paul would later quote from Isaiah 40:13, a text that Peter should have considered here before taking such an action against Jesus: <<For who has known the mind of the Lord? Or who has been his counsellor?>> (Romans 11:34).

God forbid it. Peter had failed to comprehend from the Scriptures, as did almost all other Jews, that God had actually pre-ordained the death of his Christ as the solution to mankind's apostasy and subsequent reconciliation back to himself, since before the creation of the world.

This must never happen to you. Peter, like most of his fellow Jews, resisted the idea that the Messiah must suffer, even though it is found in the OT, such as Psalm 22 and Isaiah Chapter 53, as well as in: <<And I will pour out a spirit of compassion and supplication on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem, so that, when they look on the one whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child, and weep bitterly over him, as one weeps over a firstborn>> (Zechariah 12:10), and: <<'Awake, O sword, against my shepherd, against the man who is my associate,' says the

Lord of hosts. Strike the shepherd, that the sheep may be scattered; I will turn my hand against the little ones>> (Zechariah 13:7).

²³ But he turned and said to Peter, ‘Get behind me, Satan! You are a stumbling-block to me; for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.’

Matthew 16:23

But he turned. Peter had taken Jesus aside (v.22), but Jesus wanted to make the rebuke very public. Not to hurt Peter further but to ensure that all the disciples grasped what he was saying, for it could have been any one of the disciples who had tried to stand in his way for all the right human reasons, failing to comprehend their actions in doing so.

Get behind me, Satan. The rebuke given here is the strongest record of any given to his disciples. Not even when Jesus prophesied Peter’s denial of him did he rebuke him in this way: <<*Jesus said to him, ‘Truly I tell you, this very night, before the cock crows, you will deny me three times’*>> (Matthew 26:34), nor is there any record that he did so following the denial. In ancient times the disciple would literally walk behind his master to show deference to his authority and status. Jesus is not only placing Peter figuratively behind him to remind him of his place, he is labelling him in the camp of his greatest adversary, such is the level of Peter’s misunderstanding: you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.

Satan attempted to hinder Jesus’ mission through Peter, who must change his human-centred ideas about the mission of the Messiah. Peter still did not understand that Jesus’ messianic role must include suffering and death. The rebuke here may seem harsh and may well have been intended to shock Peter and the others into understanding just how serious Jesus was about his destiny. But Peter was not only out of order; he was the devil’s agent. In the wilderness temptation Satan offered Jesus the kingdom without the Cross: <<*Again, the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour; and he said to him, ‘All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me’*>> (Matthew 4:8-9). In essence, Peter now offers the same temptation, encountering the same title and rebuke.

Any time that a disciple hinders the work of the Kingdom, whether deliberately or unintentionally, whether by what they do or do not do, they become an agent of Satan, i.e. as if they were Satan himself.

You are a stumbling-block to me. Peter’s words and actions should be seen as a temptation to Jesus’ human nature to accept the advice to avoid suffering. To do so would be to oppose the will of God.

Jesus, in turn, would become a stumbling-block to those who reject God’s plan for salvation, something identified by the prophet long before: <<*He will become a sanctuary, a stone one strikes against; for both houses of Israel he will become a rock one stumbles over – a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem*>> (Isaiah 8:14).

Setting your mind on human things. The devil has influenced this world so deeply that the world's values are quite often the devil's values: <<*Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish*>> (James 3:15), and: <<*Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you*>> (James 4:7); by valuing the things human beings value, like lack of suffering, Peter shows himself to be influenced by the devil. The religious leaders later echoed Satan's temptation as well: <<*'He saved others; he cannot save himself. He is the King of Israel; let him come down from the cross now, and we will believe in him. He trusts in God; let God deliver him now, if he wants to; for he said, "I am God's Son"'*>> (Matthew 27:42-43).

X.a.ii Matthew 16:24-28 - The Cross and Self-Denial

Jesus provides stark analysis of the true cost of discipleship. Although it will be different for each individual, the call is clear - all disciples are to die to their own self will and live according to the will of God, being faithful to the call of God on their own lives in everything they do, say and are.

²⁴ Then Jesus told his disciples, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.

Matthew 16:24

If any want to become my followers indicates that discipleship is a matter of free will. The offer is made to all who will listen although only a few will truly accept the cost of acceptance: <<*Your people will offer themselves willingly on the day you lead your forces on the holy mountains. From the womb of the morning, like dew, your youth will come to you*>> (Psalm 110:3).

Let them deny themselves. Self denial appears to be one of the hardest parts of becoming a disciple. Yet it is what Jesus had done and others are expected to follow their chosen leader: <<*And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death – even death on a cross*>> (Philippians 2:7b-8).

Take up their cross and follow me. Crucifixion is a shocking metaphor for discipleship. A disciple must deny himself, i.e. die to self-will, take up his own cross, that is, embrace God's will, no matter the cost, and follow Christ. Paul would later acknowledge and reiterate the call, noting it as a privilege to do so: <<*For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well*>> (Philippians 1:29).

The moment a person becomes one of Christ's followers, their own life and will become forfeit; they die with Christ to sin, that is, to the right to make selfish, self-seeking choices: <<*Do you not know that all of us who have been baptised into Christ Jesus were baptised into his death? Therefore we have been buried with him by baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, so we too might walk in newness of life*>> (Romans 6:3-4). Although the majority of modern-day Christians do not make this level of commitment, the call is clear and has never been rescinded.

25 For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.

Matthew 16:25

Verses 25-27, each beginning with for, Greek *gar*, provide three related reasons why disciples must let go of their earthly lives and take up their cross.

Those who want to save their life. John makes it more explicit: <<*Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life*>> (John 12:25). The person who rejects God's will and instead pursues his own will for his life ultimately loses eternally every earthly good he is trying to protect. Conversely, those who lose their life for Jesus' sake will receive rewards far beyond their imagination let alone what they could ever have achieved during their lifetime on earth, i.e. they will find it.

Ultimately, one has to remember that the soul is eternal and the human body only temporal for the duration of life on earth. There may be a temptation for the better things that earthly life seems to offer but the choice to be made is whether the soul, which belongs to God, will return to his eternal presence or will be separated from him forever.

26 For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?

Matthew 16:26

Gain the whole world. Acquiring all of the money, pleasure, possessions and power of this world brings no lasting benefit if, in doing so, a person forfeits his life, his very soul to spiritual death and eternal separation from God. Paul had a clear understanding of this: <<*Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but one that comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God based on faith*>> (Philippians 3:7-9).

What will they give in return for their life? Eternal life comes at a cost. It cost the life of God's only Son and it will cost the individual will of those who wish to accept the gracious offer of salvation through Jesus: <<*Truly, no ransom avails for one's life, there is no price one can give to God for it. For the ransom of life is costly, and can never suffice, that one should live on for ever and never see the grave*>> (Psalm 49:7-9). Death is an inevitable consequence of life since the fall of Adam. However, it is not the end but a new beginning. What matters is the choice that one makes in this life as to where they would wish to spend the rest of eternity!

27 'For the Son of Man is to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay everyone for what has been done.

Matthew 16:27

The Son of Man is to come. The Second Coming of Christ with his angels in the glory of his Father will bring judgment for those who have chosen to follow their own will, and reward only for those who have taken up their cross: <<*For the Lord himself, with a cry of command, with the archangel's call and with the sound of God's trumpet, will descend from heaven, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive, who are left, will be caught up in the clouds together with them to meet the Lord in the air; and so we will be with the Lord for ever*>> (1 Thessalonians 4:16-17).

Son of Man combines in one person both human and divine traits, and is used in Scripture to indicate that such a person is much more than a merely gifted mortal, when passages such as: <<*what are human beings that you are mindful of them, mortals that you care for them?*>> (Psalm 8:4), and: <<*He said to me: O mortal, stand up on your feet, and I will speak with you*>> (Ezekiel 2:1), where the Hebrew for mortal is *ben adam*, literally son of man, are linked with the mysterious 'son of man' in Daniel's vision of heaven: <<*In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence*>> (Daniel 7:13 NIV).

He will repay everyone for what has been done. Salvation is a free gift of grace and mercy. It cannot be earned by works as some Jewish traditions taught from a misinterpretation of the law. However, faith produces good works: <<*For we are what he has made us, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand to be our way of life*>> (Ephesians 2:10). Those that produce fruit will be rewarded accordingly when they stand before Christ at the end of the age.

²⁸ Truly I tell you, there are some standing here who will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.'

Matthew 16:28

Some of the Twelve who were standing there with Jesus in Cæsarea Philippi would live to see the Son of Man coming in his Kingdom. This predicted event has been variously interpreted as referring to:

1. Jesus' transfiguration, recorded in Matthew 17:1-8.
2. His resurrection, refer to Matthew 28:1-10.
3. The pouring out of the Spirit at Pentecost, recorded in Acts Chapter 2.
4. The spread of the Kingdom through the preaching of the early church.
5. The destruction of the temple and Jerusalem in AD70.
6. The Second Coming and final establishment of the Kingdom of Heaven.

The immediate context seems to indicate the first view, the transfiguration, which immediately follows and is recorded also in Mark 9:2-10 and Luke 9:28-36. There, some of Jesus' disciples saw what Jesus will be like when he comes in the power of his Kingdom. This interpretation is also supported by: <<*For we did not follow*

cleverly devised myths when we made known to you the power and coming of our Lord Jesus Christ, but we had been eyewitnesses of his majesty. For he received honour and glory from God the Father when that voice was conveyed to him by the Majestic Glory, saying, 'This is my Son, my Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.' We ourselves heard this voice come from heaven, while we were with him on the holy mountain>> (2 Peter 1:16-18), where Peter equates Jesus' 'glory' with his transfiguration, of which Peter was an eyewitness.

At the same time, interpretations (2), (3), and (4) are also quite possible, for they are all instances where Jesus 'came' in the powerful advance of his Kingdom, which was partially but not yet fully realised.

Some interpreters think that Jesus is more generally speaking of many or all of the events in views (2) through (4).

View (5) is less persuasive because the judgment on Jerusalem does not reflect the positive growth of the Kingdom.

View (6) is unacceptable, for it would imply that Jesus was mistaken about the timing of his return.