

The Son of Man Breaks Down Hell's Gates

Matthew 16:13-20 (NIV)

¹³ When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴ They replied, "Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets." ¹⁵ "But what about you?" he asked. "Who do you say I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ Jesus replied, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven. ¹⁸ 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. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." ²⁰ Then he ordered his disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Messiah.

Jesus asked his disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" (verse 13) And the answers were many. "Some say John the Baptist." (verse 14) Which was a little weird because John had already been beheaded at this point and had during his life pointed to Jesus specifically as the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world. John had also baptized Jesus with the amazing reveal of the Holy Spirit descending on Jesus as a dove and alighting on him and the Father's voice from heaven booming his love and approval for his Son. Yet, it was what people said. "Others say Elijah." (verse 14) Because Elijah never died. He was taken up in a whirlwind and the prophet Malachi foretold that Elijah would come again before the Day of the Lord came. However, Jesus had taught his disciples explicitly that John the Baptist was the Elijah who was to come. "Still others [say that the Son of Man is], Jeremiah or one of the prophets" (verse 14) because this Jesus is powerful in proclaiming the Word of God, like a prophet.

Are these answers really any different from answers we get today when asking, "Who do people say Jesus is?" They say, "He's a revered religious leader." "He was a great prophet." "He's a good moral teacher." "He was a really nice guy who loved everyone."

"But what about you? Who do you say I am?" (verse 15) Jesus doesn't just want to hear the perception of him by other people. He gives his disciples a chance to articulate their faith, what they actually believe about him. Will they parrot what everyone else is saying? Will they say something different? He puts us on the spot to personally answer the question of who Jesus is.

While I doubt most of you would parrot the answers that basically he's a good moral, religious teacher, do we give the impression that that is all he is, that Jesus is merely a positive force in my life, a self-help guru, something to brighten my day and help me think positive thoughts? Or do we shy away from saying who Jesus is because you don't talk religion? Do we not talk about him because we think that everybody already knows who Jesus is? Do we not talk about Jesus because we think that this person won't be convinced or believe what I have to say, so why waste my breath? But Jesus' question to us stands.

So, if we are going to talk about who Jesus is, we should listen to what he says about himself and observe what he has done. After being conceived in Mary, an angel told Joseph that this baby was to be called Jesus because he will save his people from their sins. He also was to be called Immanuel, meaning that this baby is God with us. The Magi worshiped Jesus as king, not just of the Jews but of the non-Jews, the Gentiles as well, a king over all nations. We already talked about what happened at Jesus' baptism where God the Father in heaven declared Jesus to be his Son with whom he is well pleased. Jesus made sick people well, paralyzed men walk, blind people see, mute people speak. He calmed a storm with his voice. He declared himself the Lord of the Sabbath. He said of himself that he was greater than Jonah, greater than the wisest king who ever lived, King Solomon. He drove out demons. He raised dead people back to life. He read people's hearts, forgave sins, called himself the "I AM," that very special name of God.

Based on what he said and did, you really have 3 options when it comes to answering the question of who Jesus is. C.S. Lewis popularized these options by proposing that Jesus is either a liar, a lunatic, or Lord. Either he lied about all these things and deceived people to believe them. Or he is a crazy person who actually believes these things about himself even though they are false. Or he is who he actually says that he is: the I AM, God made flesh, the Immanuel, God with us, the Lord of all. So, who do you say Jesus is?

Peter picked Lord as he answered, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God." (verse 16) What did Peter mean? He was confessing that Jesus is the one who was promised to come, the offspring of the woman, of Eve, who would crush the serpent's head, destroy the devil. Jesus is the one who was chosen to be perfect for us, to sacrifice his life in place of ours carrying all our sins, all the things we do wrong, on his shoulders, in order to heal us, to make us right with God. He is from David's line to be the everlasting King of all nations, Lord of all. He is God's Son, the one who brings life to all people – not just through creation but also eternal life through his perfect substitutionary life lived for us and his life sacrificed for us on the cross. He's the only one, the I AM. All other gods are dead, lifeless, created by our imaginations. Jesus is the Son of the living God, the only God who actually saves us.

Do you say Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, the Son of the living God as Peter did, or do you say that he was simply a revered religious teacher, a good moral guy who loves people? Do you tell people what you confess in our creeds, that Jesus is the only Son of God, who is God in and of himself, who has no beginning and no end, who is uncreated but has a relationship with God the Father such as an adopted Son, that he came for our salvation, that he came as our substitute and brought us life now and forever in heaven?

If so, then Jesus' words apply to you just as they did to Simon Peter, "Blessed are you, for this was not revealed to you by flesh and blood, but by my Father in heaven." (verse 17) This was revealed to you by God through his Word. The Holy Spirit worked that faith in your heart so that you have confessed Jesus as your Lord, the I AM, as the one in charge of the world, of you, as the only one who saves us, who makes peace between us and God, brings us together. You know who Jesus really is.

And what does this confession of Jesus do for you and for others? Jesus tells us: "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." (verse 18) Is the value of knowing Jesus just to weather the storms that crash against our faith? There are lots of places in the Bible, in God's Word, that support that truth that God's Church, his believers, will always withstand whatever this world throws at it. But is that the picture Jesus is giving here? Is knowing Jesus just for use for our personal defense?

Think about the phrase "the gates of Hades will not overcome [my church]." (verse 18) What are gates used for? Are gates offensive weapons? No, they're defensive. They are meant to keep some things out and other things in. Hades, hell, death, wants to hold sinful people in it always and forever, but Jesus, being who he is, opens up those gates. Hell cannot withstand and resist Jesus, who he is, what he does. Jesus smashes down the gates of hell to free souls from their rightful condemnation due to their sin. He did that for you and me. He freed us from our sentence of eternal condemnation and instead made us a part of his Church, his people, believers. Hell cannot reclaim us, cannot lock us back up because of who Jesus is, just as Peter confessed, as we confess.

Peter's confession is the rock that opens the gates of hell to free us! This lines up with what Jesus says next: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." (verse 19) The confession of who Jesus is unlocks people from hell and makes them bound for heaven because he is the one to take away our sins and give us eternal life with the living God.

We call this locking and unlocking that Jesus talked about "The Keys." It's not some arbitrary thing where we get to decide who stays in hell and who goes to heaven. No, it's based entirely on the confession of who Jesus is. It's telling people that Jesus came and took your and my sins away. You do not belong to hell; you belong to God. You are freed from all the bad that you have done because Jesus paid the price, completely freeing you from your debt. We forgive people, not holding the debt of their sins against them, as Jesus has forgiven them. But we do hold people to their sins when they reject Jesus and what he has done for them. That's the keys Jesus gave not just to Peter, but to all believers, as we see this teaching echoed later on in the Bible to all his followers.

The keys are an incredible thing that we have because we know who Jesus is and what he has done. We are not existing in this world to simply weather the storm of unbelievers, of those who don't get who Jesus is. We are here to use who Jesus is to bust down the gates of Hades, to break people out of hell, just as was done for us. We are here to declare to real, live people that Jesus paid the price and has freed us from eternal damnation and instead sets them free to live eternal life with God. This is why Jesus wants us to articulate who he is.

The gates of Hell can't fight off who Jesus actually is or hold people back from God and keep them in their condemnation. This is why we say and share who Jesus is. He really is the Messiah, the Son of the living God, who really did live perfectly for us, who really did pay the price for our sins to release us from Hades. The Son of Man breaks down hell's gates. Amen.