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Matthew 16:13 - 16:26



Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this discourse, Steve Gregg reflects on the interaction between Jesus and his disciples at Caesarea Philippi. While taking his disciples away from the crowds for some spiritual inventory, Jesus asks them who people are saying he is and who they believe him to be. Peter responds by confessing Jesus as the Christ, which prompts Jesus to explain his upcoming suffering, death, and resurrection. The discourse touches on various topics, including the expected return of Elijah, the multiplication of food, and Simon Peter's name change to Bar-Jonah.

Transcript

In Matthew chapter 16 and verse 13, Jesus took his disciples aside to a place away from the crowds in order to probably have a little bit of R&R and to also take inventory on the disciples, how they were doing spiritually. The disciples also circulated among the crowds and overheard things that Jesus didn't overhear. They sometimes had maybe their finger on the pulse of what the general attitudes were of the crowds that Jesus spoke to, which the crowds would not demonstrate in Jesus' presence or be quite as transparent around him doing.

And so Jesus takes his disciples aside and he makes some inquiries of them to find out exactly where they stand and where the crowds stand with reference to himself. It says in verse 13, when Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples saying, who do men say that I am the Son of Man? So they said, some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets. And he said to them, but who do you say that I am? And Simon Peter answered and said, you are the Christ, the Son of the living God.

Jesus answered and said to him, blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And 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.

Then he commanded his disciples that they should tell no one that he was Jesus the Christ, at least not yet. The time would come when they would have to tell the world, but at this point in time, he did not want them to disclose what he had pointed out to them. Now this section has so many things that require comment that I will not attempt to cover it all in this one session.

But we will take it as much as we can, and there's even more besides that follows this that occurred on the same occasion. Actually all the way to the end of the chapter, which is many more verses, about nine more verses, is on the same occasion. Where Jesus and Peter are interacting there at Caesarea Philippi.

Caesarea Philippi was up to the north and outside of the land of Israel, up near the headwaters of the Jordan River. And it was a place that Jesus apparently knew that he could get away from the crowds. And he took his disciples there and spent some time alone with them there.

We don't know how long he spent with them, but on that occasion he inquired of them what the general opinion was of those out there who were talking about him. He said, who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am? Now he apparently did not have access to that information as readily as they did. Perhaps because the disciples were more ordinary, maybe many people in the towns didn't know who the disciples were when they came to town and would say things in their presence that they wouldn't say in Jesus' presence.

And so he knew he could get the straight stuff from them. Since in his preaching they probably stood among the crowds and overheard the comments. So the disciples answered and they said, some say you're John the Baptist.

Some, Elijah, and others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. Now, why would they say he was John the Baptist? John the Baptist was dead. But you might remember that Herod, when he heard that John the Baptist was dead, or excuse me, when Herod heard of the miracles Jesus did, of course Herod knew that John was dead, that Herod thought that maybe Jesus was John the Baptist raised from the dead and that would explain why there were supernatural miracles accompanying him.

This, of course, was a reflection of Herod's own guilty conscience for having killed John and he was somewhat haunted by the memory of John and thought, uh-oh, this guy with the miracles, that must be John, come back to haunt me. Now, if there were some saying that Jesus was John the Baptist, they may well have been some of those of Herod's household, some of the Herodians, as the Bible calls them, who shared Herod's opinion that Jesus might be John the Baptist returned. Some said that Jesus was Elijah.

Now, the reason for them suggesting that would be because they expected that Elijah was going to come back before the Messiah. In Malachi chapter 4, God said that he

would send Elijah before the coming of the great and notable day of the Lord, the great judgment, which occurred in 70 AD on the nation of Israel. And Elijah was sent before that event.

John the Baptist was that fulfillment, as Jesus pointed out, twice. But the people, some people, I guess, understood that John was Elijah, but some were actually wondering whether Jesus was Elijah and whether the next person to show up would be the Messiah. Now, why would they think Jesus was Elijah and not think he was the Messiah? Probably because they believed that the Messiah would do more things of a military sort and a political sort than Jesus was doing.

And so they thought, well, maybe this guy who's got all these miracles, maybe he's the forerunner. Elijah did a lot of miracles. Maybe this is Elijah come back.

And then some said he was Jeremiah. Now, that's an interesting one. There is no prediction in the Old Testament that Jeremiah would come back.

Jeremiah died in the 6th century BC at the time of the Babylonian exile. And, you know, he was dead for centuries before Jesus came along. Why would they think that he was Jeremiah? Well, the rabbis had a tradition.

They said that when the Babylonians invaded Jerusalem, that Jeremiah had rescued the Ark of the Covenant and had taken it down to Egypt. Now, we do know that Jeremiah went to Egypt, and there has been some tradition over the years that the Ark may be down there somewhere in Egypt or in that area. But the Jews had this tradition that Jeremiah had taken the Ark of the Covenant out of the temple and carried it down to Egypt.

And the Ark, of course, had in it a golden pot full of manna, which was the food that God fed the children of Israel with in the wilderness. The rabbis taught that when the Messianic Age was about to dawn, Jeremiah would reappear, and he would come out with the Ark of the Covenant and take that golden pot of manna and feed the people from that manna. In fact, it is possible that when Jesus fed the multitudes, and we read that they were about to take him and make him a king by force, that they were thinking of him in those lines.

It was thought that Jeremiah would miraculously feed all the people from the manna from the golden pot in the Ark. That would require something like a multiplication of food, and Jesus did that kind of multiplication of food. And some people apparently thought he might be Jeremiah.

Now, this expectation that Jeremiah would come was not in the Old Testament Bible. It was just something the rabbis had come up with. But the people's own religious ideas were very much molded by what the rabbis taught.

And so some thought maybe this is Jeremiah who the rabbis said was coming back. And the disciples say that some people said that Jesus was one of the prophets. Now, it's not clear whether this means one of the prophets of the Old Testament, like Jeremiah or Isaiah or Ezekiel, or whether it just meant he's another one of the prophets.

There was a class of persons sent by God to Israel called the prophets. And if Jesus was yet another prophet, he'd be one of them, one of the prophets, not necessarily one of the previous prophets, but just one of those who was of the class of the prophets. It's hard to know exactly what this opinion was when they thought he was one of the prophets, whether they thought maybe he was Isaiah or Ezekiel or something like that, or whether they just thought he was another prophet to come like them, the next one in a series of prophets that God had sent.

Now, Jesus, after he heard this, obviously didn't hear the answer he was looking for or an answer that he agreed with. And he also, apparently by the way the disciples answered, could not quite make out what their opinion was and whether they felt any of these answers were valid. So he then says to them, but who do you say that I am? Now, he asked this to all of them.

He says he said to them, but Peter answered up for the rest. Now, whether his answer was agreeable with what all the others were thinking or not, we don't know for sure. But we do know that the apostles spent an awful lot of time together.

And I'm sure that on many occasions when it was late at night and they were laying out under the stars, they talked among themselves. You know, sometimes they were out of earshot of Jesus. Sometimes they deliberately were out of earshot of him.

On another occasion when they were talking about who was the greatest, the Bible indicates that while they were on the road, some of the disciples were hanging back further from Jesus where he couldn't hear them and debating among themselves who was the greatest. There were times when even though they traveled with Jesus, they probably were out of earshot from him and talked about things that they wouldn't have talked so freely about in his presence. And it's probable that Peter knew that most of the disciples were thinking about the same way he was.

They probably had talked among themselves. Who do you think this guy Jesus is, man? And so when Peter spoke up, in all likelihood he was expressing what he knew to be the opinion of all of them. Although if he didn't know what their opinion was, he might have spoken up anyway because he was that kind of a guy.

He just spoke up when he had something on his mind. He spoke his whole mind. And it says, Simon Peter answered and said, You are the Christ, the son of the living God.

Now the word the Christ means the Messiah. So he's saying you are the one that the

prophets predicted would come. You are the Messiah.

You're also the son of God. Now it's not clear exactly how Peter understood the term son of God. We understand the term today in terms of the incarnation.

That Jesus was born of a virgin and God was his father. And he was born of God. But in the Jewish idiom, son of God can be simply a term for king of Israel.

In fact, in many of the old cultures, the kings were considered to be sons of the gods of their nations. The king of Moab would be the son of Chemosh. The pharaoh would be the son of the sun god Ra or whatever.

The kings of Israel could be called sons of Yahweh, the sons of God. As a matter of fact, Solomon is spoken of that way in 2 Samuel chapter 7. Where God tells David that his son will sit on his throne after him and build the temple. And he says, I will be to him a father and he'll be to me a son.

That is a reference to Solomon, but it has a secondary reference, more importantly, to Jesus. But the point is that the term son of God may not have had in Peter's understanding the full grasp of the deity of Jesus that we have from the later writings. We don't know that the disciples fully understood that.

But he knew that he was sent from God. He knew that he was God's appointed king of Israel, the Messiah. And this much he could bear witness to.

Now, Jesus answered and said to him, Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah. Bar-Jonah simply means son of Jonah. It means that Simon Peter's father's name was Jonah.

And the term Bar before that means son of. So he's basically saying, Blessed are you, Simon, son of Jonah. For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my father who is in heaven.

I find that rather interesting that Jesus said that flesh and blood, which means human beings, have not revealed this to you, but you had it revealed to you by my father who is in heaven. The reason I say that is because there was a time earlier when flesh and blood did say things like that to Peter about Jesus. Peter did hear those things from his own flesh and blood brother.

We read of it in John chapter 1. It says again the next day, John stood, this is verse 35, with two of his disciples and looking at Jesus as he walked. He said, Behold, the Lamb of God. The two disciples heard him speak and they followed Jesus.

Then Jesus turned and seeing them following, said to them, What do you seek? And they said to him, Rabbi, which is to say teacher, where are you staying? And he said to them, Come and see. Then they came and saw where he was staying and remained with him

that day. Now it was about the tenth hour.

One of the two who heard John speak and followed him was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. He first found his own brother, Simon, and said to him, We have found the Messiah, which is translated the Christ. And he brought him to Jesus.

Now when Jesus looked at him, he said, You are Simon, the son of Jonah, Simon Bar-Jonah. You shall be called Cephas, which means a stone, or Peter. Cephas is Aramaic for a rock.

Peter or Petros is Greek for the same thing. Now the point here is that Andrew, Peter's brother, came to him first and said, We have found the Messiah, the Christ. And Peter came and met Jesus.

Now who revealed to Peter that Jesus was the Christ? Well, the first person to make the suggestion to Peter was his own brother, Andrew. And yet when Peter said, You are the Christ, Jesus said, Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you. You didn't learn this from people, from human beings.

But you've learned it from my Father, which is in heaven. It's been revealed to you by him. Now is there a contradiction here? Did Peter in one story learn that Jesus was the Christ from a human being, and then in this story it says that no human being revealed that to him? I think what we have to understand is that Peter, in addition to being told by his brother that Jesus was the Christ, had had a personal revelation of that from God as well.

And this brings something very important to mind. Many of us know about Jesus by hearsay merely. I mean, there are many people in the church, and a great number of people who are not in the church, who if you ask them, Who do you say Jesus is? They'd give the same answer Peter gave.

Well, he's the Messiah, he's the Christ, he's the Son of God. They give the right answer. But in many of their cases, they are only repeating what they've heard from other people.

They have never had that personally revealed to them by God. Many people have been raised in Christian homes, and they can recite all the right words about who Jesus is. Maybe they've been raised in a church, and they know the doctrine.

They learned it from Sunday school or on up or from their preacher. And if you ask the question, they'll give the right answer. But in many cases, it cannot be said of them that they did not learn this from flesh and blood.

It was not revealed to them by that but by the Father. Because there are some people who don't have any revelation from the Father. They just know how to repeat what

they've been told by human beings, by flesh and blood.

And yet there is a step beyond this. You see, it is, I'll just, I'll speak for myself. My own testimony is like this.

I was raised in a Christian home. I believed in Jesus. My parents taught me the gospel.

My parents read the Bible to me. My parents taught me how to say the right things about Christ. They encouraged me to receive Christ.

I went forward at several different altar calls in order to do so. And yet for a very long time, I'd say my first 16 years, my knowledge of Jesus was by hearsay. Merely I believed in him, and I really, I may have even been saved for all I know.

It's hard to say really for sure. Because I had accepted Christ the best I understood. I could have given the right theologically correct answer to anyone who gave me the question, Who do you say Jesus is? And I would have given the right answer.

Because I knew it. But I knew it by hearsay. I knew it because people told me.

I knew it because my parents and my church and my Sunday school teachers had taught me this. When I was 16 years old, something else happened in my life. I came to the point of an encounter with God that was different than anything previously.

I refer to it as the time when I was baptized in the Holy Spirit. Although other people might have a similar encounter and not associate with the baptism in the Holy Spirit. But in my life, it was when I was baptized in the Holy Spirit at age 16.

My life with God changed completely. I had believed every Christian doctrine prior to that, and I had sincerely believed it. But now my knowledge of God was on a different plane.

There was something revealed to me. The presence of God was a reality with me in a way that it was only a theological belief before. There was a revelation in my inner man of Jesus Christ.

So that my knowledge of Him is no longer by hearsay merely. I know Him as somebody who is a companion that I relate with on a regular basis as I would with any other companion. He is as real to me as anyone else could be.

This is something that I now recognize that I needed, but I didn't know I needed. People can know the right doctrines. And because they can parrot them, they may not know that they've had no real encounter with God.

Peter learned from his brother that Jesus was the Christ. But that wasn't significant. What was significant was that God eventually revealed to Peter that Jesus was the Christ.

He got a revelation not from flesh and blood, but from the Father. And that is what each of us, I think, need. Because in times of trial, in times of testing, in times where we hear convincing arguments from unbelievers, in times of persecution, and maybe even torture, just having heard certain things about Jesus and having accepted them from the mouth of other people may not be what it takes to endure such persecutions, to confront arguments that we don't know how to answer.

But if you've had a revelation of Jesus in your heart, if you know Him, if you know Him like you know your best friends, like you know your parents, if you know Him that way, then there's no possibility that you could ever not know Him. There's no possibility that someone could argue His existence out of your awareness. For somebody to try to convince me that God doesn't exist, they'd be up against as big a challenge as trying to convince me that my parents don't exist.

I know my parents, and I know God. And I know them about equally, in a sense. I've known them almost the same length of time now, if you can compare how old I am.

But the point is that there is a threshold that Christians, I believe, need to cross in order to be like Peter, one who knows that Jesus is the Christ Son of God, not just by having heard that, not because flesh and blood, some human beings told you so, but because you've had a personal revelation from God that is in the inner man. It's like a light goes on that was never on before. It's like suddenly you've got company in there.

And you always believed that you had company because your doctrine told you did, but now there's really someone there. There's really someone that you know who's with you. And when you talk with Him, it's really like you're conversing with somebody and not like you're talking into the air.

It's an amazing thing. And apparently Peter came to that point. His first awareness of Jesus being the Christ was taught to him by someone else.

But the ultimate awareness, and that which made him so convinced that he was willing eventually to die on a cross, rather than deny it, was that he had a revelation from the Father in his inner man that Jesus is the Christ. And we need to have that revelation. If you are a believer merely because you were raised in a Christian home or in a Christian church, but you cannot really testify that you've had any revelation from God inwardly of Jesus, then that is something for you to look forward to and for you to seek.

And when you pass that threshold, your relationship with God is on an entirely different plane. Now, Jesus said to Peter, You're blessed because flesh and blood has not revealed it to you but my Father. And then he made certain promises to Peter, unique promises, about giving him the keys to the kingdom and building the church on this foundation and so forth.

I'm going to have to postpone discussion of those verses until next time because the clock shows me that I'm out of time for this session. But those are very important things that Jesus said to Peter following this, about him being a rock and building the church on that rock and binding and loosing and those kinds of things. We'll have to wait till tomorrow to talk about those because those are deep things and we simply can't give them a short treatment.

So, if you'll join us again next time, we will continue studying in this chapter of Matthew 16.