

Meeting With Christ

Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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YOU ARE PETER (2)

Matthew 16:13-20

This is the second part of a study on Jesus' declaration concerning Peter in Matthew 16:18. The Lord said to him, *You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it.* This passage has given rise to many interpretations, the main point of discussion being the meaning of the word 'rock'. What did Jesus mean by 'on this rock'? What is the rock?

In our previous lesson, we explained the three main views. Firstly, there is the view that Peter is the rock. Secondly, some have supposed that Peter's confession of Jesus is the rock. The rock therefore points back to v. 16 where Peter declared, *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.* And thirdly, other people believe that Christ Himself is the rock. We saw that none of these explanations are completely satisfactory. They each have their own difficulties.

So today, I would like to put forward a fourth possibility which, I think, presents fewer problems. I will let you to be the judge.

My God, my Rock

On this rock I will build My church. Let us consider what the Bible has to say about the word 'rock'. The first thing we notice is that in the OT, it is a word which is constantly applied to God. God is repeatedly spoken of as the rock.

Two different Hebrew words are used: *seh'-lah* and *tsoor*. Both words are found together in Psalm 18:2 in reference to God.

*Psalm 18:2. The Lord is my **rock** (seh'-lah) and my fortress and my deliverer, My God, my **rock** (tsoor), in whom I take refuge; my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.*

The same thing happens in 2Samuel 22:2-3. David said, *The Lord is my **rock** (seh'-lah) and my fortress and my deliverer; my God, my **rock** (tsoor), in whom I take refuge; my shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold and my refuge...*

In Isaiah 26:4, the prophet Isaiah wrote these words of encouragement. *Trust in the Lord forever, for the Lord God is an everlasting **rock**.*

‘The Lord is my rock.’ ‘The Lord is an everlasting rock.’ ‘My God, my rock.’ You just need to open a concordance and you will see a great number of references to God as the Rock.

Why were Isaiah, David or the psalmist all calling God ‘rock’? Well, think about it. What impression does the word ‘rock’ give you? It expresses stability. It expresses strength. It expresses an unchanging character. It is perhaps the nearest thing in this world that we can call eternal. It never seems to change. It is the same yesterday, today and forever. So that picture is what is being expressed here. You see that it can appropriately apply to God. The faithfulness of God. His power. His incorruptibility. His steadfastness. All these qualities are pictured in this word ‘rock’. That is why the psalmist can say that God is ‘his refuge and his strength,’ the rock in whom he can hide and be secure.

Can that picture apply to a man? Not really. The Bible compares man to the grass or the flowers of the field (Isaiah 40:6-7). He may be beautiful today, but he is dead the next day. He is not reliable. The human flesh is indeed weak and transient. And the church cannot be built on the foundation of a man, of any particular man. In fact, the word ‘rock’ in the OT is never applied to man. When used figuratively, it appears only in reference to God. We find no exception to this.

A representation of Christ

You will not be surprised if I tell you that in the NT, ‘rock’ is often used of Christ. Listen to these verses.

- *1 Corinthians 10:4. ... and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual **rock** which followed them; and the **rock** was Christ.* The rock was Christ. It was a representation of Christ.
- *Romans 9:33. As it is written: "Behold, I lay in Zion a stumbling stone and **rock** of offense, and whoever believes on Him will not be put to shame."* Christ became for Israel a rock of offense by their continuous rejection of Him.
- *1 Peter 2:8. "A stone of stumbling and a **rock** of offense." They stumble, being disobedient to the word, to which they also were appointed.* Here again Christ was a rock of offense to the disobedient Jews.

So we see that Christ is the rock in the NT and God is the rock in the OT. Could it be that when Jesus said, *You are Peter and upon this rock*, He meant the rock of God? ‘I will build My church on God.’ The problem is still the same as saying that the rock is Christ because you still have the words *You are Peter* at the beginning of the phrase. What are you going to do with these words? We pointed out in our previous lesson that if Christ is the rock, then the words *You are Peter* become irrelevant. Jesus didn’t have to say *You are Peter*. He could have simply said, *On this rock, I will build My church*, without any reference to Peter. The introductory words, *You are Peter*, make a link between Peter and the rock. But what is the nature of that link? We explained the last time why the rock cannot be Peter himself.

What is the rock then? Where do we go from here? There seems to be no other explanation.

From Simon to Peter

Jesus said to Peter, *You are Peter*. It is important to know that Peter was not originally called Peter. His name originally was Simon, Simon Barjona, i.e., Simon the son of John. That’s the name he grew up with. When he met the Lord Jesus and became His disciple, that’s when his name was changed from Simon to Peter. This incident is reported in John 1:42.

John 1:42. He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him, and said, "You are Simon the son of John (*Simon Barjona*); you shall be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

Your name is Simon. But now, you shall be called ‘rock’ which in Aramaic is *Cephas*, and in Greek it is the word *Petros* – Peter.

What was Jesus doing when He told Peter that his name was to be changed? By this action, Jesus was telling Peter that his character will be changed. Names in the Bible signify character. When we speak of God’s names for example, we are in fact talking about God’s character. And therefore, a change of name means a change of character.

The Lord Jesus was saying to Peter, ‘Your name is Simon right now. But it is going to be changed to Peter because your character is going to change. You are going to become an entirely new person.’ But not just any kind of new person. What kind of new person is pictured in that new name? ‘You are going to be changed from Simon to this new person that can be described as rock – the same word that is applied to God in the Scriptures.’

When Jesus said, *You are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church*, He actually made a pun on Peter’s name. He said, ‘You are Peter (*Petros*), and upon this rock (*petra*) I will build My church.’ *Petros* and *petra* both mean rock but they are not synonyms. There is a distinction that should not be overlooked. *Petros* signifies a separate stone, or a fragment broken off, while *petra* is the massive rock. We can say that *Petros*, literally a ‘little rock’, is a stone which is a fragment of *petra*, the bigger rock. Jesus was actually saying, ‘You are Peter, a piece of rock, and on that rock of which you are a fragment, I will build My church.’ So the idea is that *Petros* comes from *petra*.

Born of the Rock

There is a very interesting verse in Deuteronomy which alludes to the same idea of a rock coming from another rock. More specifically, it pictures God as a rock who bore children. Listen to this. Deuteronomy 32:18.

*Deuteronomy 32:18. You neglected **the Rock who begot you**, and forgot the God who gave you birth.*

This is an amazing verse. The rock who begot you. The rock who bore you. The rock who gave you birth. The image here is of God as a father or a mother who gives birth to children, namely to the Israelites. The Israelites are therefore the sons of the Rock. They have been born of the Rock.

Now, if you are born of a rock, then you are also by nature a rock. A human being gives birth to another human being, not to a lion or a bird. You share the same nature as the one who bore you. The same principle is expressed at the spiritual level in a verse like John 3:6. *That which is born of the flesh is flesh, and that which is born of the Spirit is spirit.* According to this principle, whoever is born of God participates in the same nature as God. The Israelites, who have been born of the Rock, were also rocks. Since God is the Rock, this means that the Israelites were partakers in a certain sense of the ‘divine nature,’ being born of God.

Think of Peter. After Peter made his confession that Jesus was the Christ, the Lord said, *Blessed are you, Simon Barjona...* That was his original name. This was Peter in his natural state, Peter in his unregenerate state. Then when we come to the next verse, v. 17, the Lord Jesus uses another name. Simon Barjona becomes Peter. *You are Peter*, that is to say, You are a stone. This is his regenerate name when he became a disciple. This is the new person who has the rock-like nature, the divine nature.

Peter was given a new name because he was going to become a new person, a new person with a divine nature. It is quite significant that it is Peter himself who wrote to believers in 2Peter 1:4, *...in order that by them you might become partakers of the divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.* A new nature is communicated to those who have been born

again. Peter was saying, 'Once you were simply flesh. And what was born of the flesh is flesh. But now, you have been born of the Spirit because whatsoever is born of the Spirit is spirit. You have become partakers of the divine nature, just like me. I was changed from Simon to Peter, *Petros*, rock. Because I have been born of the divine Rock.'

The living stones of the spiritual house

Peter is the only person in the NT who uses the term 'divine nature.' Notice what he also said in 1Peter 2:4-5 about the divine nature in us. It is very much related to the idea of the rock as the foundation of the church.

1Peter 2:4. And coming to Him (Jesus) as to a living stone, rejected by men, but choice and precious in the sight of God (here we find that Jesus is the living stone, a living rock. Then observe v. 5), 5 you also (you, Christians), as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.

You, Christians, are also rocks, living rocks and you are being built into that temple of God, into a spiritual house. Do you get the picture? Jesus is building His church. What is He building His church on? He is building it upon the rock and all those who are rocks, i.e., all those who participate in the divine nature.

When you become a Christian, your character is going to change. It will be changed to *petros*, to rock. God will change you into rock so that you share the divine character of being a rock, of being incorruptible, of being holy, of being steadfast and faithful. You become a living stone that God uses to build His church on.

Once we understand this, Jesus' statement in Matthew 16:18 becomes much clearer. *You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.* What is the rock? The rock is the divine nature. It is fundamentally God. But it is also Peter and all those who have become partakers of the divine character because they too are living rocks, like Christ Himself who is the living Rock.

This is what allows the apostle Paul to declare on a one hand that the church is built on Jesus alone (1Corinthians 3:11) and on the other hand that it is built on the apostles and the prophets (Ephesians 2:20). At first sight, that seems to be a contradiction. How can the church be built on Jesus alone, but also on His followers? It should be either one or the other. When we see that the rock refers to the divine nature, to the divine nature in Christ and in us, then we realize that there is no contradiction in Paul's teaching. The church is composed of that divine nature found perfectly in Christ and that divine nature is also in us. Every true Christian has a rock-like nature, a divine nature, because he is born of the Spirit of God.

The overcomers

So what is the church built on? I say it one more time. The church is built on God Himself and all those who, being born of the Spirit, participate in the divine character. And since the Spirit of God is eternal, we have everlasting life. No wonder the gates of death shall not prevail against the church. It will not overpower the new nature that is in us because we have eternal life. In fact, we will prevail against it. This victorious life, the apostle John wrote about it in 1John 5:4.

1John 5:4. For whatever is born of God overcomes the world. And this is the victory that has overcome the world -- our faith.

Whatever is born of God has this rock-like nature that overcomes the world. The world does not overcome it. Death does not overcome it either.

And it is through faith that God makes us new again. Notice that John does not say that God builds His church upon our faith. He builds His church upon the rock, the divine character. But it is through faith that we come to this divine character. So the foundation upon which the church is built is not our faith. It is not our confession. It is God's work in us which enables us to participate in the divine nature.

Not only do we overcome the world, we overcome also the evil one. Let's read 1John 2:13-14

*1John 2:13. ...I am writing to you, young men, because **you have overcome the evil one**. I have written to you, children, because you know the Father.*

*14 I have written to you, fathers, because you know Him who has been from the beginning. I have written to you, young men, because you are strong, and the word of God abides in you, and **you have overcome the evil one**.*

These are the powers that can bring death to us. It is Satan. It is the world. It is the flesh. But these powers of death shall not prevail against us because we have the divine nature in us, the rock on which Jesus is building His church.