

SESSION TWO

Upon This Rock

Matthew 16:13-20

PART ONE · LEADER PREPARATION GUIDE

SESSION OVERVIEW

Discovery Aim: Participants discover why Jesus staged this scene at Caesarea Philippi, that Peter's confession is revealed rather than deduced, and that Jesus answers the confession with three gifts: the name fulfilled, the Church founded on the rock, and the keys promised. The strongest Protestant reading of "this rock" gets its full day in court.

Catholic Touchstone: The Church built on Peter. "On the rock of this faith confessed by St. Peter, Christ built his Church" (CCC 424; 552): Peter and his confession are not rival foundations but one, the confessor made rock precisely as confessing.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Location is the first sermon. Caesarea Philippi sat twenty-five miles north of Galilee, pagan territory, at the foot of a colossal rock cliff. Built into that cliff was the grotto of the god Pan, with niches for idols still visible today, and a gleaming temple Herod had built for the divinized Caesar. Many modern commentators note that the cave there has long been associated with the underworld. Jesus hikes the Twelve two days out of their way to ask his question in front of a giant rock face crowded with dead gods and a self-deified emperor. Matthew does not tell us why Jesus chose this district, but the staging reads as deliberate: against that backdrop, "the Son of the living God" lands like thunder.

Two questions structure the scene: "Who do men say that the Son of man is?" draws a poll (the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah); "But who do you say that I am?" draws a confession. Simon answers for the Twelve, as he habitually does; St. John Chrysostom calls him "the mouth of the apostles." The confession is total: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God."

Jesus' first response is about the answer's *source*: "flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven" (16:17). Peter's confession is a grace, a revelation received, not a deduction achieved. File this carefully: when the Church later speaks of a charism protecting Peter's confession of the faith, the root is here, in a truth the Father, not talent, put in Peter's mouth.

Then the name given at first sight (John 1:42) receives its job description: "you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church." Jesus was almost certainly speaking Aramaic, and in Aramaic the wordplay would use a single word where our translations have two: you are Kepha, and on this kepha I will build.

(The New Testament itself preserves the Aramaic name: Paul routinely calls Peter Cephas, and John 1:42 records the naming in Aramaic.) Matthew's Greek renders the name *Petros* because a man needs a masculine name, and the common noun *petra*. The old argument that *petros* means a small stone while *petra* means bedrock belongs mainly to older Attic poetry; the distinction had largely faded in the Koine Greek of the New Testament, and it never existed in Aramaic at all.

Be ready to be more honest than the pamphlets on both sides. St. Augustine himself, in his *Retractations*, notes that he had expounded the rock both ways in his career, as Peter and as the Christ Peter confessed, and explicitly leaves the choice to the reader. The Catechism happily speaks both ways too (CCC 424 and 552). The Catholic claim is not that the confession reading is forbidden; it is that Peter-as-rock is what the wordplay says, and that the two readings converge: Peter is the rock precisely as the graced confessor of the true faith. The steelman chain at Build 5 and 6 walks this honestly.

"I will build my church": *ekklēsia* appears in the Gospels only here and at Matthew 18:17. In the Greek Old Testament it renders the *qahal*, the covenant assembly of Israel. Jesus is not founding a club; he is announcing the rebuilt assembly of God with a new foundation stone.

"The powers of death shall not prevail against it" (16:18, RSV2CE) translates the Greek "gates of Hades." Gates are defensive architecture, so many readers see the image reversed: not the Church holding out under siege, but death's fortress failing to hold against the Church's advance. At minimum, the promise is that death will never overcome or hold the Church. And a promise of perpetuity quietly implies something about the foundation: a Church that death cannot end is built on a rock that death cannot remove. Let that sit unexplained tonight; Session Ten will collect it.

The keys (16:19) are tonight's cliffhanger, and protecting them is your hardest leadership task of the study. Where keys come from, whose job it is to carry them in a kingdom, and the Old Testament job posting behind them: all of that is Session Three's live discovery, and the sealed guess depends on it. Tonight you may only point at the keys and smile.

OLD TESTAMENT ROOTS AND FULFILLMENT

Isaiah 51:1-2. "Look to the rock from which you were hewn... look to Abraham your father." Scripture itself calls a renamed patriarch the rock from which the covenant people were quarried. If Abraham can be the people's rock without rivaling the God who is the Rock (Deuteronomy 32:4), so can Kepha. Tonight's key live discovery for the steelman.

Psalms 118:22 and Isaiah 28:16. The rejected stone made head of the corner, the tested cornerstone laid in Zion: Scripture's rock imagery is rich and layered, and the New Testament uses all of it, Christ the cornerstone (1 Peter 2:4-8), the apostles the foundation courses (Ephesians 2:20; Revelation 21:14). The question is never whether rock imagery can apply to others under Christ; Scripture plainly does it. The question is what this particular sentence says.

2 Samuel 7:12-16. The Davidic covenant: an everlasting house, a kingdom that shall not fail. "Christ" is a Davidic royal title, and "Son of God" carries Davidic overtones (2 Samuel 7:14; Psalm 2:7), even as Peter's confession surpasses them, naming Jesus' unique divine sonship (CCC 442). The Davidic register

makes the scene a kingdom scene, and kingdoms have structures. That observation is the bridge to Session Three; walk onto it but not across it.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

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St. John Chrysostom *Homilies on the Gospel of Matthew, Homily 54*

Chrysostom calls Peter the mouth of the apostles, the one who answers when all are asked, and he marvels at the exchange of confessions: Peter confesses Jesus to be the Son of the living God, and Jesus confesses what Peter shall be, pronouncing blessing on him and founding what no time will overthrow.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Cyprian of Carthage *On the Unity of the Catholic Church, 4*

Cyprian teaches that although the Lord gave power to all the apostles, he built the Church upon one, and by beginning from one made her unity visible. The other apostles were what Peter was, Cyprian says, but the primacy is given to Peter so that the Church of Christ may be shown to be one, a single origin for a single flock.

VOICES OF THE CHURCH

St. Leo the Great *Sermon 4, On His Birthday as Pope*

Leo preaches that the strength given to the rock does not fail: in Peter's see, what Peter confessed and what Peter received remain at work, so that the solidity Christ granted the fisherman endures in the office. The Lord, Leo insists, remains the true builder; Peter is strong because Christ makes him so, and never apart from him.

CATECHISM CONNECTION

CCC 552 states it plainly: because of the faith he confessed, Peter will remain the unshakable rock of the Church, whose mission is to keep that faith from every eclipse and strengthen his brothers in it.

CCC 424 gives the other half of the same coin: on the rock of this faith confessed by St. Peter, Christ built his Church. The Church reads Peter and his confession together, never as rivals.

CCC 442 notes that Peter's confession of the divine sonship, received by revelation from the Father, is the faith the Church has proclaimed from the beginning, beginning with Paul's own preaching.

THREAD WATCH

The Job Posting thread nears its payoff. The keys are promised tonight and explained next week. Expect someone to ask where the key imagery comes from; the only correct answer is a grin and "bring your sealed sheet next week." If anyone starts flipping toward the prophets, land the plane fast.

The Fisherman-to-Shepherd thread develops silently. "I will build my church" tells us Simon's mission involves a structure, but the animal changes later. First blank stays sealed until Session Six.

The Revealed Confession thread plants tonight. "Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you" (16:17) is the acorn of everything the Church will later say about a charism protecting Peter's confession. It resolves at Session Twelve; tonight it only needs to be noticed and underlined.

SESSION GOALS

1.

See the staging: why Caesarea Philippi, and what the rock cliff full of dead gods does to the scene.

2.

Discover that Peter's confession is revealed, not deduced (16:17), and mark it for the study's final session.

3.

Walk the *Petros/petra* steelman at full strength, including Augustine's honesty, and resolve it with the Aramaic and with Isaiah 51.

4.

Leave the keys deliberately unexplained, protecting Session Three's discovery.

TIME NOTE

75 to 90 minutes. If time runs short, compress Build 1's scene-setting and cut Build 8. Protect Builds 5 and 6 at all costs; the steelman chain is the doctrinal heart of the night. End with the keys cliffhanger no matter what.

PART TWO · DISCUSSION GUIDE

Opening Prayer:

Father in heaven, flesh and blood cannot show us your Son; only you can. Reveal him to us tonight as you revealed him to Simon: the Christ, the Son of the living God. And build in us what you build on rock: a faith the powers of death cannot shake. Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

WIN · OPENING QUESTIONS

1.

Where do you go, or what kind of place do you pick, when you need to have a really important conversation? Why does setting matter?

2.

If someone asked the people who know you best "who do they say you are," what would the poll results be, and how close would they get?

BUILD · INTO THE TEXT

1.

Read Matthew 16:13. Jesus has walked the Twelve twenty-five miles north into pagan territory to ask his question. Here is what stood at Caesarea Philippi: a colossal rock cliff, a cave shrine to the god Pan carved into it, idol niches in the stone, and a temple to the divinized Caesar. Why stage the question *here*?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Because the setting is a sermon. Against a giant rock face crowded with dead gods and a self-deified emperor, Jesus asks who he is, and Peter's answer, "the Son of the *living* God," detonates against everything behind him. Many interpreters have associated the grotto there with the underworld, which makes the coming line about the powers of death local color, not abstraction.

Jesus chooses his classrooms. Whatever he is about to found, he founds it staring down every rival claim to deity and every empire built on stone, and the setting could hardly be more fitting.

2.

Read 16:14-16. Two questions: what do the crowds say, and what does Peter say? Notice also *who* answers when all twelve are asked.

ANSWER · share after the discussion

The crowd's poll is flattering and wrong: the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, a prophet. Respectful categories, all too small. Peter's confession is total: "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Messiah, and Son, of the God who lives.

And it is Peter who answers for the group, as he does over and over in the Gospels; St. John Chrysostom calls him the mouth of the apostles. Twelve were asked; one habitually speaks. The Gospels never explain this arrangement; they simply keep showing it to us. Keep counting the pattern as the study goes on.

3.

Read 16:17. Before any names or rocks, Jesus makes a claim about where Peter's answer came from. What is the source of the confession, and why does that matter?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

"Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." Peter did not reason his way to the confession or intuit it by talent. It was revealed; he received it. The truest thing Peter ever said was a grace before it was a statement.

Underline this verse in your Bibles, literally. Much later, this study will ask how a fisherman's successors could possibly be protected in confessing the faith, and the seed of every answer is here: the confession was never sourced in flesh and blood to begin with. For now, just notice it and remember it.

4.

Read 16:18 slowly. Last week Jesus coined a name at first sight and left it undefined. What happens to the name tonight, and what is the Old Testament grammar of that (think Genesis 17)?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

The name gets its job description. "You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church": *Kepha* finally learns what he is for. Just as Abram's new name carried its mission inside it, father of a multitude, Simon's new name turns out to be a building specification.

Notice too what Jesus says he will build: "my church," *ekklēsia*, the word the Greek Old Testament uses for the covenant assembly of Israel. This is not the founding of a club; it is the rebuilt assembly of God, and Jesus names its foundation stone out loud.

5.

Steelman time, and this one deserves our best. A Protestant friend says: "The rock is not Peter. In Greek, Peter is *petros*, a stone, but Jesus builds on the *petra*, bedrock, meaning Peter's confession, or Christ himself. Peter himself calls Christ the cornerstone (1 Peter 2:4-8), and Paul says no other foundation can be laid than Christ (1 Corinthians 3:11)." Make that case as strongly as he would. What is it seeing correctly?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

It sees plenty. Scripture's rock imagery is gloriously flexible: Christ is the cornerstone, the apostles together are foundation courses (Ephesians 2:20; Revelation 21:14), and only God is the Rock in the absolute sense (Deuteronomy 32:4). Any reading that makes Peter a rival foundation to Christ deserves to lose. And the confession really is central to the scene; Jesus blesses Peter precisely as confessor. Even St. Augustine, in his *Retractations*, admits he preached the rock both ways across his career and leaves the reader free. Catholics should say all of this cheerfully, because the Catechism itself speaks both ways (CCC 424, 552).

Having granted all that, three problems remain for the "not Peter" reading, and we will take them one at a time in the next question.

6.

LIVE DISCOVERY. Now press. Problem one: what language was Jesus actually speaking, and what happens to the two-word argument in it? Problem two: read 16:17-19 and count the pronouns: who is

every single gift addressed to? Then someone find and read Isaiah 51:1-2 for problem three: can a mere man be called the rock of God's people without blasphemy?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

One: Jesus spoke Aramaic, and in Aramaic the wordplay runs on one word, not two: you are Kepha, and on this kepha I will build. Matthew's Greek uses *Petros* for the name simply because a man needs a masculine noun. The small-stone versus bedrock distinction belongs mainly to older Attic poetry and had largely faded from the everyday Greek of the New Testament. The wordplay only works at all if the rock is the man just renamed; otherwise Jesus coined a name for nothing.

Two: every gift in 16:17-19 is second person singular: blessed are *you*, I tell *you*, *you* are Peter, I will give *you* the keys, whatever *you* bind. The paragraph is a torrent aimed at one man. Three: Isaiah settles the propriety question: "Look to the rock from which you were hewn... look to Abraham your father." Scripture itself calls a renamed patriarch the quarry of the covenant people, with no insult to the God who is the Rock. Abraham could be it; Kepha can be it. And here is the peace treaty: the readings converge. Peter is the rock as the graced confessor of 16:17. Take away the confession and there is no rock; take away the man and there is nothing to build on. The Church has never had to choose.

7.

Read 16:18 again, the last clause: "and the powers of death shall not prevail against it." The Greek behind that phrase is "gates of Hades." Think about gates for a second: are gates offensive or defensive weapons? So which direction is this battle moving?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Gates defend. Gates have never once charged across a battlefield. So many readers see the image reversed: not the poor Church huddled under siege, but death's own fortress failing to hold as the Church advances on it. However the picture is drawn, the promise is the same: death's gates lose; death will never overcome the Church.

Now quietly notice what perpetuity implies. A Church that death can never end stands on a foundation that death can never remove. How exactly a foundation outlives a mortal fisherman is a question tonight deliberately leaves open. Sit with the itch; the study will scratch it.

DIG DEEPER · A kingdom needs more than a king

"Christ" is a royal, Davidic title, and "Son of God" echoes the promises to David's line (2 Samuel 7:12-16; Psalm 2:7), even as Peter's confession reaches beyond dynasty to divine sonship. Peter has just confessed Jesus as the Davidic King, and Jesus immediately responds with kingdom architecture: an assembly, a foundation, and, in the next verse, keys. Ancient Near Eastern kingdoms were not one-man shows; they had structures, officers, and one office in particular that Israel's readers knew well. Naming it tonight would spoil next week. Just register that when the King starts handing out keys, he is doing something with a history.

8.

Read 16:19, and then we stop, I promise: "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." Do not answer these tonight, just feel their weight: in a kingdom, where do keys come from? Whose job is it to carry them? And has anyone in Scripture ever held keys like this before?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Tonight's only correct answer is the cliffhanger itself. There is an exact Old Testament job posting behind this verse, keys included, and one week from now this group is going to find it with their own hands, and someone at this table may have already guessed where it is. Sealed sheets stay sealed.

Leaders: whatever you do, do not relieve the tension. If the group leaves tonight mildly annoyed at you and itching to search the prophets, Session Three will be the best night of the study. The one thing you may say: kings do not carry their own keys.

9.

Verse 20 is strange after all this glory: "he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ." Why the gag order?

ANSWER · share after the discussion

Because Messiah meant tanks and thrones to that generation, and Jesus' road runs through a cross. The confession is true but not yet tellable; it needs Good Friday and Easter before it can be preached without being misheard, and the very next scene (16:21-23) proves the point when Peter himself cannot accept a suffering Christ.

There is a pastoral edge for us: even true things about Jesus can be weaponized or distorted when severed from the cross. The Church Peter anchors is not a victory-parade Church; she is founded in the shadow of a confession that had to wait for Calvary to make sense.

SEND · TAKING IT WITH US

1.

"Who do you say that I am?" is still the question under every other question. If Jesus asked you tonight, with no crowd to hide in, what would your honest answer be, and what is it costing you lately?

2.

Peter's greatest moment was received, not achieved: "flesh and blood has not revealed this to you." Where do you need to stop grinding for certainty and start asking the Father to reveal?

LIVE IT THIS WEEK

1.

Pray with Matthew 16:13-20 once this week using *lectio divina*: read it three times slowly and answer the Lord's question out loud, alone, in your own words.

2.

Find a photo of the rock cliff and Pan grotto at Caesarea Philippi (search Banias, Israel) and look at it while rereading the passage. Note what changes when you can see the stage.

3.

Keep the daily Our Father for the pope, and add one line in your own words asking Christ to keep his Church unshaken this week.

Closing Prayer:

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, against every dead god and every proud empire, we confess you. You build what death cannot take. Build our faith on rock this week: not on moods, not on performance, on rock. And teach us to wait well for what you have not yet shown us. Amen.

Scripture Memory Verse: "And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it." (Matthew 16:18, RSV2CE)

PART THREE · LEADER REFERENCE CARD

Every passage used in Session Two, in order of use. All references RSV2CE.

PASSAGE WHERE IT IS USED

Main text, read in sections through the Build

Isaiah 51:1-2

Live discovery, Build 6: Abraham called the rock

1 Peter 2:4-8; 1 Corinthians 3:11

Build 5 steelman: Christ the cornerstone and foundation

Ephesians 2:20; Revelation 21:14

Build 5: apostles as foundation courses

Deuteronomy 32:4

Build 5: God the Rock in the absolute sense

Genesis 17:5

Build 4 callback: renaming carries mission

2 Samuel 7:12-16; Psalm 2:7

Dig Deeper: Davidic kingship behind the titles

Psalm 118:22; Isaiah 28:16

Leader background: Scripture's layered stone imagery

Matthew 16:21-23

Build 9: why the messianic secret

CCC 424; 442; 552

Catechism Connection and Build 5-6 resolution