

THE KING OF KINGS: A STUDY OF MATTHEW

The King's Ministry: A Study of Matthew 14–20

STUDY EIGHT

Answering Life's Ultimate Question

Matthew 16:13–20

Jesus knew His time was getting short, so He cut to the chase and asked His disciples a crucial question: “Do you really know who I am?”

—Pastor Charles R. Swindoll

THE disciples watched their master-teacher with wide eyes. Jesus had healed the sick, exorcised demons, calmed storms, multiplied food to feed multitudes, and much more. Through these demonstrations, Jesus taught His students complex truths about the kingdom of heaven.

Finally, the day came for the professor to hand His students their final exam—one crucial question that encompassed all they had learned. Jesus asked them, “Who do you say I am?” (Matthew 16:15).

A sense of urgency accompanied the words framing Jesus' question. With each passing day, His enemies moved ever closer, the cross loomed ever larger, His time grew ever shorter. Had His closest followers put together the pieces? Could they comprehend their king's identity from all they had heard and seen? Their future depended entirely on them answering correctly.

In fact, our answer to Jesus' question also determines our future. Not only our tomorrow . . . but also our forever. For that reason, *it's life's ultimate question.*



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Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

Answering Life's Ultimate Question

Matthew 16:13–20



PREPARE YOUR HEART

Ask the Lord to reveal deep truths through His Word with the following prayer:

Father, help me see Jesus through the eyes of His disciples. Take me back to the time and place He posed this most important question. Stir my heart to feel the question's significance as well as the privilege of knowing the truth. May I boldly declare what I know without reservation. In Christ's name. Amen.



TURN TO THE SCRIPTURES

As you read *Matthew 16:13–20*, take a look at the photos of *Caesarea Philippi* at bibleplaces.com. For centuries, pagans flooded this naturally beautiful site at the headwaters of the Jordan River to worship their idols:

- **Canaanites** from the time of Joshua when it was called “Baal-gad” or “Baal-hermon” (*Joshua 13:5; Judges 3:3*)
- **Greeks** from the time of Alexander the Great, who considered the large cave with its deep pool the birthplace of Pan, the Greek god of nature
- **Romans** from the time of Herod the Great, who built a gleaming white marble temple to worship Caesar Augustus at the mouth of the great cave

Commentator William Barclay summed up the sensation of entering this place, “Here was an area where *the breath of ancient religion was in the very atmosphere*.”¹ People from all nations paid homage to their gods and kings at Caesarea Philippi.²

It was no accident, then, that Jesus brought His followers into this very place to proclaim *His supremacy* as the one true God and King and to announce *His church* as the light-bearer to a dark world.



Answering Life's Ultimate Question

Matthew 16:13–20



Observation: Question, Confession, and Announcement

In the observation phase, we'll notice the flow of the dialogue. First, Jesus asks a general question, and the disciples respond (Matthew 16:13–14). Second, Jesus narrows His question to the personal level, and Simon gives the supreme confession (16:15–16). Third, Jesus completes the interchange with His surprise announcement of the church (16:17–20).³

General Question—Matthew 16:13–14

How did Jesus begin His conversation with the disciples, according to *Matthew 16:13–14*, and how did the disciples answer?

Jesus didn't fit the expected idea of the Messiah as a warrior-king, so the Jews cast Him in a forerunner role—in the mold of the likes of John the Baptizer, Elijah, or Jeremiah. A prophet, yes, but not the conqueror who would liberate the Jews.

Personal Question—Matthew 16:15–16

Jesus turned from discussing public opinion to probing the disciples' personal belief: "But who do you say I am?" (Matthew 16:15). Read aloud Peter's confession in *16:16*. Imagine nearby pagan worshipers offering goat sacrifices to Pan and praising Caesar as son of god. How does each word of Peter's confession highlight Jesus' supreme authority and divine identity?



Answering Life’s Ultimate Question

Matthew 16:13–20

Simon was saying that Jesus was not like the gods. No, no, no. Jesus was the ONE TRUE GOD. He was the Anointed One, the promised Messiah. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll

Jesus’ Response—Matthew 16:17–20

Simon’s confession was a key that unlocked Jesus’ revelation of His church. Fill in the blanks in the following chart as you observe each part of *Matthew 16:17–20*.

Revelation	Declarations
A Blessing (16:17)	
A Name (16:18a)	
First Promise (16:18b)	
Second Promise (16:19)	
A Warning (16:20)	

In this first mention of the church in the Bible, Jesus introduced the coming of a new chapter in the pages of history, the transition to a new stage in God’s plan. How fitting that this mystery was revealed by Jesus, “the head of the church, which is his body” (Colossians 1:18)!

Simon’s confession came as a revelation from heaven, not from flesh and blood but from the living God. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Interpretation: The Rock, the Building, and the Keys

To interpret the meaning of Jesus’ words, let’s focus on each of His metaphors: *rock*, *building*, and *keys*.

The Identity of the Rock

Jesus promised to build His church “upon this rock” (Matthew 16:18) right after renaming Simon, *Petros*, meaning “rock.”⁴ Some say Jesus identified Peter as the foundation of the church. However, “upon this rock” uses a different Greek form for “rock,” *petra*, so Jesus was likely referring to something different than Peter.



Answering Life's Ultimate Question

Matthew 16:13–20

If not Peter, to what did the “rock” refer? Consult pages 26–27 in Pastor Chuck’s commentary, *Insights on Matthew 16–28*, and write down what you discover.

What does “rock” mean? I suggest that Jesus was saying, “This rock-like declaration, this rock-like revelation, this profession of faith will be the foundation of My church.”
—Pastor Church Swindoll

The Nature of the Building

Now what will Jesus do with the rock? Explain the theological significance of each word in Jesus’ statement “I will build my church” (Matthew 16:18).

The Greek word translated “church,” *ekklesia*, describes the assembly of the body of Christ. The church was born when the Holy Spirit baptized Christ’s followers for the first time at Pentecost (Acts 2:1–4). Although Satan may threaten Christ’s building project, Jesus promised, “All the powers of hell will not conquer it” (Matthew 16:18).⁵



Answering Life's Ultimate Question

Matthew 16:13–20

The Meaning of the Keys

Jesus issued His second promise: “I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 16:19). The keys refer to the authority to “open up membership in physical, visible, earthly community that would become known as the church.”⁶

Peter exercises this authority by “binding” and “loosing” heavenly matters on earth (see Matthew 16:19 NASB). The clue to deciphering this verse is the passive voice of the verbs. Whatever has already been pronounced true in heaven (such as forgiveness of sins and security in Christ), we can pronounce true on earth. On what basis do we draw our authority? *The Word of God*.

One can speak authoritatively of what is forbidden or permitted based on what the Scriptures teach. —Pastor Chuck Swindoll



Correlation: Jesus, The Lord of All

Now let's take a few minutes to see Jesus' declaration unfold into reality. Read about Peter and Cornelius in [Acts 10](#) and note the ways in which this remarkable account correlates with the truths above. Look for the revelatory rock. Note how the building expands. Find the authoritative keys.

“And we apostles are witnesses of all [Jesus] did throughout Judea and in Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a cross, but God raised him to life on the third day. . . . And he ordered us to preach everywhere and to testify that Jesus is the one appointed by God to be the judge of all—the living and the dead. He is the one all the prophets testified about, saying that everyone who believes in him will have their sins forgiven through his name.” (Acts 10:39–40, 42–43)



Answering Life's Ultimate Question

Matthew 16:13–20



Application: What Is Your Answer?

Some people say that Jesus was a good man who brought a message of peace. Others claim that He was a daring revolutionary who got caught in the crossfire of politics and religion. Popular world religions often herald Him as a great prophet or teacher but nothing more. None of these views, however, paints the true portrait of Jesus. Pastor Chuck elaborates:

Jesus was and is the God-man—the eternal Son of God who became human, lived a sinless life, died as a perfect substitute for our sins, rose miraculously and victoriously from the dead, ascended into heaven to intercede for us as our High Priest, and will come again as our Judge and King.⁷

Who is Jesus to you? How has this passage affected your belief? Has it revealed a new aspect of His nature? Who in your life can you pray for now—that he or she might discover the true answer to life's ultimate question? Write your reflections below.

Jesus is the promised Messiah, the Son of the living God. Matthew's question to us is the same as Jesus' to His disciples. *So, who do you say Jesus is?*



Answering Life's Ultimate Question

Matthew 16:13–20



A FINAL PRAYER

Close your time in a personal prayer, sharing with the Father your devotion to His Son as your Savior and the hope of the world.

ENDNOTES

1. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Matthew*, vol. 2, rev. ed., The Daily Study Bible Series (Philadelphia: Westminster John Knox Press, 1975), 134, emphasis added.
2. To honor Pan, the Greeks named this site Pania, called “Bania” today. When Herod the Great’s son, Philip, became tetrarch, he built his capital there and named it in honor of Caesar Augustus. To distinguish it from his father’s Caesarea by the sea, he called it Caesarea Philippi.
3. To learn about Pastor Chuck Swindoll’s *Searching the Scriptures* method of Bible study, go to the Web page, “[How to Study the Bible for Yourself](#).”
4. When Jesus first met Simon, Jesus foretold, “You will be called Cephas’ (which means ‘Peter’)” (John 1:42, emphasis added). That day came when Simon pronounced Jesus “Messiah, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). Simon’s confession prompted his name change to Peter. Jesus may have been making a pun from Simon’s new name, saying in so many words: *Through the man whose name means rock, God has just revealed the rock on which I will build My church.*
5. Jesus may have made this declaration within sight of the Grotto of Pan where the Greeks thought the great cave was the gateway to Hades and the underworld.
6. Charles R. Swindoll, *Swindoll’s Living Insights New Testament Commentary: Insights on Matthew 16–28*, vol. 1B (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House, 2020), 28.
7. Swindoll, *Insights on Matthew 16–28*, 32.

