

Peter and the Rock



SABBATH AFTERNOON

Read for This Week’s Study: *Gal. 4:4, Heb. 7:26, Matt. 16:13–20, Eph. 2:20, Matt. 16:21–27, 17:1–9.*

Memory Text: “‘But what about you?’ he asked. ‘Who do you say I am?’” (*Matthew 16:15, NIV*).

From that time Jesus began to show to His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised the third day” (*Matt. 16:21, NKJV*).

The New Testament is clear: Jesus had to die. As He faced the looming shadow of the Cross, Jesus prayed: “‘Now My soul is troubled, and what shall I say? ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? But for this purpose I came to this hour’ ” (*John 12:27, NKJV*). This was the divine plan, conceived within the mind of God, even “before time began” (*Titus 1:2, NKJV; see also 2 Tim. 1:9*).

That’s why Jesus didn’t say simply that He was going to suffer many things and be killed and raised up on the third day, but that He *must* face these things. Given the nature of God, the sanctity of the law, and the reality of free will, His death was the only way that humanity could be saved from the penalty of transgression.

This week we pick up more of the story of Jesus, though we will focus on Peter and how Peter responded to the ministry of Jesus as He marched toward a death planned from “before time began.”

* Study this week’s lesson to prepare for Sabbath, May 21.

“You Are the Christ”

Imagine what it must have been like for Peter, who had been with Jesus almost from the start. What must have gone through his mind as he witnessed one incredible event after another: the healings, the casting out of demons, the feeding of the multitudes, the amazing teachings, the controlling of nature, raising the dead, and the walking on water together? What questions (such as, again, Why did He allow John the Baptist such an ignominious end?) must have bounced around inside him, day after day, seeing things that no one in all of history had ever seen? After all, Jesus was God in human flesh and lived and ministered to humanity in the flesh (*Gal. 4:4; Heb. 7:26; Isa. 9:6; Luke 2:10, 11*). So, those who were around Him, who lived with Him, and who were His disciples were going to have plenty of unique experiences.

Read Matthew 16:13–17. What question did Jesus ask His disciples, and of what significance is it that Peter is the only one recorded as answering? And why is his answer so pivotal?

Peter’s declaration of Jesus as “the Christ, the Son of the living God” (*Matt. 16:16, NKJV*) is one of the high points in all of Scripture. Peter called Him “the Christ,” the Anointed One, and with this confession he was saying (correctly, as it turned out to be) that Jesus was the Messiah, the One who was to come in fulfillment of the covenant promises made to Abraham and then Israel (*see Gal. 3:16*).

Also, Peter proclaimed Jesus as the Christ in the region of Caesarea Philippi. This was Gentile country. In the days prior, Peter had watched Jesus care not only for the Jews but for the Gentiles, as well. With the aid of the Holy Spirit, Peter recognized that Jesus was something much more than a Jewish prophet, as others had suggested. His ministry extended much further than that of John the Baptist, Elijah, or Jeremiah. Indeed, it was to encompass all humanity; hence, Jesus calls Himself “the Son of man,” showing His personal identification with all human beings. As the Bible later shows, Peter still had so much to learn about Jesus and the fullness and universality of what He had come to do.

What are the things that Jesus has done in your life that you could testify to as a witness to others? Why is it good always to keep these things before you and to share them?

“On This Rock”

Right after Peter’s bold confession of faith in Jesus as “ ‘the Christ, the Son of the living God,’ ” Jesus says something in answer to Peter.

Read Matthew 16:17–20. What did Jesus say to Peter, and how are we to understand what He meant?

The phrase “on this rock” has been controversial within the Christian church. Catholics interpret the “rock” to mean Peter himself, arguing that Peter was the first pope. Protestants, however, and with good reason, reject that interpretation.

The biblical weight of evidence is clearly in favor of the idea that the Rock is Christ Himself and not Peter.

First of all, in a few places Peter refers to Jesus, and not to himself, with rock imagery (*see Acts 4:8–12, 1 Pet. 2:4–8*).

Second, found throughout the Bible is the image of God and of Christ as a rock; in contrast, humans are seen as weak and untrustworthy. “For He knows our frame; He remembers that we are dust” (*Ps. 103:14, NKJV*). “Do not put your trust in princes, nor in a son of man, in whom there is no help” (*Ps. 146:3, NKJV*). As John wrote, too, about Jesus: “and [He] had no need that anyone should testify of man, for He knew what was in man” (*John 2:25, NKJV*). And He knew, too, what was in Peter (*Matt. 26:34*).

In contrast, what do these texts tell us about who the Rock really is and upon whom the church is built? *1 Cor. 10:4; Matt. 7:24, 25; Eph. 2:20.*

“How feeble the church appeared when Christ spoke these words! There was only a handful of believers, against whom all the power of demons and evil men would be directed; yet the followers of Christ were not to fear. Built upon the Rock of their strength, they could not be overthrown.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, p. 413.

What has been your own experience in regard to the fallibility and weakness of human beings? How can you use these experiences to help you lean only on the Rock?

Peter as Satan

Read Matthew 16:21–23. Why is Jesus suddenly so tough on Peter?

Peter’s problem wasn’t that he was trying to protect Jesus. He was trying to steer Jesus. He was no longer following Jesus; he was telling Jesus to follow him.

Jesus said, “‘Get behind Me, Satan!’” (*Matt. 16:23, NKJV*) because, like Satan himself in the wilderness, Peter had become a threat to the mission of Christ.

Mark 8:33 notes that during this exchange, Jesus turned and looked at His disciples. He had come to save them. He was not going to be tempted otherwise, and certainly not by one of His own disciples, no matter how well-meaning that disciple thought he was.

As much as Simon Peter had grown in his walk, he was still trying to control things, including Jesus Himself. In this sense, Peter wasn’t all that different from another disciple, Judas, who tried to manage Jesus and to execute his own plans for what he thought a Messiah ought to be like. But unlike Judas, Peter was deeply repentant and willing to be disciplined and forgiven.

Read Matthew 16:24–27. What does Jesus mean when He says, “‘For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it’” (*Matt. 16:25, NKJV*)?

We live in a culture that tells us to follow our dreams, to sacrifice everything for what we want. But Jesus tells us to do the opposite; He invites us to give up our dreams and entrust them to Him. Peter and the disciples were gradually learning what true faith is. True faith isn’t supposed to be the exciting experience of pursuing what you most want. True faith is the painful experience of *releasing* what you most want. When you let go of your dreams, you are “losing your life.” And at the same time, you are finding it.

What are some things that you had to lose in order to follow Jesus? Maybe at the time they seemed so important, but looking back, how do they appear now?

Encouragement From Heaven

Read Matthew 17:1–9. What happened here, and why was it so important for both Jesus Himself and for the disciples?

Jesus “had dwelt amid the love and fellowship of heaven; but in the world that He had created, He was in solitude. Now heaven had sent its messengers to Jesus; not angels, but men who had endured suffering and sorrow, and who could sympathize with the Saviour in the trial of His earthly life. Moses and Elijah had been colaborers with Christ. They had shared His longing for the salvation of men. . . . These men, chosen above every angel around the throne, had come to commune with Jesus concerning the scenes of His suffering, and to comfort Him with the assurance of the sympathy of heaven. The hope of the world, the salvation of every human being, was the burden of their interview.”—Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pp. 422, 425.

How fascinating that Jesus, the Son of God, in His humanity had the need of comfort and encouragement from these men, who themselves knew their own share of suffering and discouragement. Luke records that they spoke to Him about “His decease which He was about to accomplish at Jerusalem” (*Luke 9:31, NKJV*). Notice the word *accomplish*, which can also be translated as “fulfill,” more evidence that Jesus’ death was necessary for the salvation of humanity. With so much at stake, it’s no wonder that heaven saw the need and sent this encouragement.

Also, despite all that they had seen and heard already, Peter, James, and John were going to get even more reasons to believe. The voice coming out of the cloud certainly had to be encouraging as well, once they got over their initial fear. How revealing, too, that Matthew says that Jesus “came and touched them and said, ‘Arise, and do not be afraid’ ” (*Matt. 17:7, NKJV*). Even amid all that He was about to face, Jesus comforts and encourages His disciples.

No matter who we are or how strong our faith and commitment are, we can all at times use encouragement. This also means that someone you know might be in need of it, as well. Whom do you know that you could give some encouragement to right now?

Jesus and the Temple Tax

Read Matthew 17:24–27. What is going on here, and what does this also tell us about Jesus?

Though all Jews were required to pay the temple tax, priests, Levites, and rabbis were exempt. So, this question about whether Jesus paid the temple tax was also a challenge to His ministry.

Ellen G. White writes that Peter missed an opportunity to testify on this occasion to the absolute authority of Christ. “By his answer to the collector, that Jesus would pay the tribute, he had virtually sanctioned the false conception of Him to which the priests and rulers were trying to give currency. . . . If priests and Levites were exempt because of their connection with the temple, how much more He to whom the temple was His Father’s house.”—*The Desire of Ages*, pp. 433, 434.

We can learn much from Jesus’ gracious response to Peter. Rather than humiliate him, Jesus gently explains his error. Moreover, Jesus adapts to the course Peter had taken in a most creative way. Rather than simply paying the tax—thereby acknowledging His obligation to it—Jesus gets the tax elsewhere: from the mouth of a fish.

This miracle is unusual; it’s the only time Jesus performs a miracle seemingly for His own benefit. But that wasn’t the miracle’s purpose. Instead, the miracle was a demonstration to everyone of Jesus’ authority not only over the temple but over all of creation. From a human standpoint, how can we even begin to understand how Jesus could have performed this miracle? Of all the things that Peter had seen, can you imagine what must have gone on in his mind when he throws out his line, catches his first fish, and finds the exact amount owed for the temple tax? (*See Isa. 40:13–17.*)

Though there was no necessity for Jesus and His disciples to pay the temple tax, Jesus had them do it anyway, in order to avoid unnecessary controversy. What are ways we can learn to de-escalate situations, especially on things that are not absolute, in order to avoid unnecessary conflict?

Further Thought: The story of how Jesus has Peter pull the money, the exact amount needed, out of the mouth of the first fish Peter catches is extraordinary, so extraordinary that some scholars have tried to argue it away as just a “bit of a folktale,” a cute story to make a point, nothing more. Of course, that’s a totally inadequate solution (it’s no solution at all, in fact). Sure, in contrast to the other kind of miracles—for example, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, raising the dead, feeding the hungry—this one is of a different nature altogether. In the Bible, too, we do have the floating axe head (*2 Kings 6:2–7*) and the wet fleece on the dry ground and the dry fleece on the wet ground (*Judg. 6:36–40*); so, it’s not of a nature totally unknown in Scripture. Why didn’t Jesus simply hand Peter the money and tell him to pay it rather than perform such an amazing feat in order to solve what was a relatively small problem? The text doesn’t say. However, as the lesson said, it does show us the incredible power of God, which should not be surprising to us. After all, we see evidence of His incredible power all the time. Our mere existence, much less than that of the visible cosmos, is an amazing manifestation of the power of our God. If God could do this, a specific coin in a specific fish’s mouth was nothing. Though written in a different context, Paul’s point is so well taken: “Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!” (*Rom. 11:33, NKJV*). The account in Matthew is just one more manifestation of this truth.

Discussion Questions:

- 1 Peter’s struggle to submit his will to God is our struggle, as well. A powerful metaphor of this struggle can be found in Malachi 1, where God asks the Jews to bring only their best animals for sacrifice. “ ‘When you bring injured, lame or diseased animals and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands?’ says the LORD” (*Mal. 1:13, NIV*). Why would God care what kind of sacrifices we bring to Him? Because He wants us to entrust Him with what we most want to hold on to. What things in your life do you find yourself clutching on to the most? How can you release these things to the Lord?
- 2 Think about the way Jesus handled the situation with the temple tax. Rather than exacerbate the situation, He let it rest. What does this teach us about the day-to-day conflicts we might find ourselves in? How do you know when it’s time to speak and when it’s time to be silent?

The Bridge That God Built: Part 2

Note: Pastor Frank Kalom ministered to 21 village churches scattered among the steep mountains and valleys around the Maramuni River area of Papua New Guinea. After visiting members on the other side of the river, the pastor and his traveling companion learned that the bridge crossing the river had been washed away.

The two men followed the river upstream, searching for a place to cross. But their way was blocked by boulders.

As they stood on the bank above the raging river wondering what to do next, they saw a huge log come hurtling down the river, tossing about like a cork. As the log neared where the men were standing, it suddenly was thrown into the air and came to rest across the two banks, just like a bridge.

Quickly grasping the opportunity they were sure God had given them, the men climbed down the muddy bank and stepped gently onto the log. Deciding it was safe, the two carefully walked across the log and up the bank on the opposite side.

As soon as the two men jumped off the log, it crashed back into the madly swirling water and went hurtling downstream. They watched in amazement and gratitude as the log sailed down the river. Still standing in the slippery mud, they offered heartfelt thankful prayers to God, then began the arduous task of clambering up the slippery path toward the pastor's home village.

Along the trail they met some people who knew the regular bridge had been washed out.

"Where have you come from?" the strangers asked in surprise.

"From the village on the other side of the Maramuni River," Pastor Frank answered.

"But that's impossible! The bridge was washed out yesterday," the strangers answered. Then Pastor Frank told them about the bridge that God had built.

They didn't believe the story, so they followed the footprints back to the place where the pastor and his companion crossed the river. They saw two sets of heavy prints in the soft mud leading up the bank of the river, and a mark in the mud where a large log had been—but they saw no log. Then they knew that God really had sent a bridge so that His servant could return home.

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The Lesson in Brief

► **Key Text:** *Matthew 16:15*

► **The Student Will:**

Know: Discern the real meaning of Christ’s Messianic identity and its practical implications for the believer’s everyday life.

Feel: Passionately desire a dynamic relationship with the Messiah that allows His heavenly power to flow through him or her.

Do: Take steps to tear down the re-creation of Jesus in our image so that our lives can more fully reflect the life Jesus wants to live in us.

► **Learning Outline:**

I. Know: Developing a Clear Picture of Jesus’ Identity

- A** What is the significance of Jesus’ fulfillment of the covenant promises that foreshadowed the Messiah?
- B** Why was the imagery of a rock used to represent Christ?
- C** How did the experience of the Transfiguration confirm Christ’s real identity for the disciples?

II. Feel: Experiencing That Christ’s Miracle-Working Power Proceeds From a Correct Understanding of His Identity

- A** How can an incorrect understanding of Jesus’ identity limit His ability to empower us?
- B** How can unusual experiences of God’s power help to confirm Christ’s identity to us?
- C** How can we overcome the temptation to fight for control of our circumstances, trusting Jesus instead?

III. Do: Take Steps to Allow the Rock (Jesus) to Guide Our Lives.

- A** How can we avoid the temptation to remake Jesus according to our ideas, thus limiting His ability to transform us?
- B** What did Peter’s declaration “You are the Christ!” mean to Peter? What could it mean to us today?

► **Summary:** By knowing Christ’s identity, we may become like Jesus.

Learning Cycle

►STEP 1—Motivate

Spotlight on Scripture: *Matthew 16:15*

Key Concept for Spiritual Growth: Correctly understanding Jesus' identity enables us to experience His power in our daily lives more fully. If we believe that He was just another prophet or just another rabbi, we limit what He can do through us.

Just for Teachers: When someone loses that which contributes to his or her self-perception, we often say that they are going through an “identity crisis.” Such losses might include the loss of employment, spouses, parents, familiar surroundings, et cetera; the question of “Who am I?” is foundational for building relationships, future planning, and much more.

With this idea in mind, our lesson opens as Jesus' earthly ministry is winding down. Soon His disciples will spearhead God's mission, but without Christ's physical presence. Jesus understands that their success depends largely upon their understanding of His identity. Is He another prophet like Jeremiah or Isaiah? Or is He a radical rabbi persistently out of touch with traditional Judaism? Is He a lunatic or a hallucinating fanatic? Or is He an enlightened teacher trying to expand their self-understanding and raise the standard for societal ethics? Or, still further, is He something beyond anything they have previously experienced—as in God incarnate? The conclusion these disciples reach will profoundly affect their ability to carry forward their heavenly assignment. The conclusion modern believers reach will likewise affect their ability to do the same.

Opening Discussion: Sometimes spouses are overheard saying, “That's not the woman I married!” or vice versa. They mean either that the spouse's genuine identity was concealed before matrimony or that the person's character and personality have changed. How difficult is it to build lasting relationships with people if uncertainties about their character and identity abound? How secure would your eternal relationship with Jesus be if you were unsure about His identity?

►STEP 2—Explore

Just for Teachers: The church is securely established upon the solid foundation of Jesus Christ. How comforting that shifting human opinions, uncertain human characters, and embarrassing human failures cannot supplant that assurance. Christ's church is ever identified primarily with

Jesus the Messiah. Human scandals have damaged its reputation, insensitive members have tarnished its luster, and individual blunders have retarded its progress. Christ's church, however, marches forward through history, outliving the opponents and skeptics who arrogantly predicted its downfall. Jesus' parable about two builders finds wonderful applications here. Wise people build upon granite foundations. Foolish people build upon shifting sands, which inevitably generates negative results. But people whose lives are certainly built upon the Rock, Jesus, cannot be overthrown by satanic agencies.

Bible Commentary

I. The Certain Foundation (*Review Matthew 16:17–20 with the class.*)

The phrase “this rock” is variously interpreted. Roman Catholicism insists that Peter (from the Greek *Petra*) was designated by Christ Himself as the rock. Their evidence is drawn from the fact that Jesus assigned this nickname to Simon, which, they insist, demonstrates Christ's intent to make Peter the foundation of His fledgling church. Thus, their doctrine of apostolic succession assigns Peter the position of first pope as personally appointed by Jesus Himself.

Protestant interpreters, however, differ sharply with this viewpoint. Generally speaking, their interpretations center on two other possibilities. *First*, interpreters believe that the “rock” refers to Peter's confession, meaning that the truth of Peter's proclamation that Jesus was Christ (God's anointed Son) was the foundation upon which Christ would build the church. *Second*, other interpreters suggest that the rock to which Christ refers is not Peter's confession but rather Jesus Himself. Visualizing this narrative, Christ might have used Simon Peter's nickname (“Rocky”) to wittily introduce Himself as that Chief Cornerstone upon which God's church would be founded. Perhaps Jesus said, pointing toward Peter, “You're ‘Rocky;’ ” and, immediately repositioning His finger toward Himself, added, “Upon *this* rock [unequivocally indicating Christ Himself] will I build My church.” (After all, next to Christ any human foundation *is* nothing short of rocky or shaky indeed.)

Biblical evidence indeed points away from Catholicism's interpretation toward other possibilities, as noted above. For example, Peter never refers to himself as the cornerstone but does identify Christ with the cornerstone (*Acts 4:8–12, 1 Pet. 2:4–8*). Elsewhere (*Luke 20:16–18, Matt. 21:40–42*), Gospel narratives record Jesus using the cornerstone terminology in which He unequivocally refers to Himself. Jewish tradition frequently referenced God with rock-life metaphors (*for example, Gen. 49:24; Deut. 32:4, 15, 30, 31; 1 Sam. 2:2; 2 Sam. 22:47; 23:3; Pss. 18:46; 31:2, 3; 61:2; 62:2, 7; 71:3; 78:35; 89:26; 92:15; 94:22; 95:1; Isa. 17:10; 44:8; Hab. 1:12*). Paul comes alongside Peter in identifying Jesus

with rock metaphors and similes (*Rom. 9:31–33, 1 Cor. 10:4*). Given this evidence, it certainly seems more plausible that Christ referenced Himself as that bedrock. Jesus, as God’s Son, was the Foundation upon which God’s church would be built.

Consider This: What disturbing implications may be drawn from the suggestion that humans could replace Christ as the church’s solid foundation?

II. The Affirmation (*Review Matthew 17:1–9 with the class.*)

Moses stands paramount among Old Testament characters beloved within Judaism. Through Moses, divine legislation dictating the comprehensive Jewish lifestyle was delivered. Moses miraculously entered God’s presence and lived. Moses’ writings, the torah (Genesis through Deuteronomy), framed daily Jewish living. Moses had delivered Hebrew slaves from Egyptian oppression, parted seas, and worked miracles. Among Jewish audiences, being favorably compared with Moses was overflowing praise.

The Transfiguration narrative contains several allusions—possibly missed by modern readers but nevertheless recognizable to Jewish readers—to God’s glorious self-revelation before Moses at Sinai. (1) The six days recorded in Matthew 17:1 alluded to Exodus 24:16, when clouds enshrouded God before His glorious revelation. (2) Jesus’ facial transformation (“shining/beaming”) reflected Moses’ facial transformation (radiated glory), caused by exposure to God’s divine glory (*Exod. 34:29*). (3) Both Elijah and Moses experienced Jehovah firsthand at the mountain (Sinai) (*Exod. 24:15–17, 1 Kings 19:8–14*). (4) The Israelites had lived in tabernacles during their wilderness travels surrounded by God’s presence. (5) God’s voice called Moses from the cloud, while God’s voice affirmed Jesus from the cloud (*compare Matt. 17:1–9 with Exod. 24:15–18*). (6) The disciples’ fearful reaction reflected the wonderment experienced by ancient Israel whenever encountering God.

These allusions strongly suggest that Jesus was the new Moses or perhaps, even, the prophesied future Prophet foretold by Moses (*Deut. 18:15*). During spiritually darkened times, what assurances could supersede the realization that God’s glory, enshrouded for many generations, had finally returned through the ministry of God’s unique Son? What possible circumstances could have provided greater affirmation of Christ’s identity, ministry, and divine standing?

Consider This: With so much evidence affirming Christ’s identity, what excuses could we offer for missing it?

►STEP 3—Apply

Just for Teachers: We all need role models, especially when we are young, with whom we can identify. Our glorious spiritual role model, Jesus Christ,

attracts our attention and allegiance because we “identify with” Him. Clearly, accurately understanding His identity is the primary component in “identifying with” Him. How can we ensure that we have that accurate identification?

Application Questions:

- ① How could understanding your self-identification protect you from superimposing that identity upon Jesus?
- ② How could misidentifying Christ become a spiritual hindrance?
- ③ How can experiential events (for example, Christ’s transfiguration) reinforce our understanding of Christ’s identity?
- ④ What personal spiritual encounters have clarified Christ’s identity in your thinking?
- ⑤ Why should impressions from individual spiritual experiences never be used to establish Christ’s identity apart from scriptural revelation?
- ⑥ Should Christ ask who you say He is, how would you respond?
- ⑦ How does verbally confessing our understanding of Christ’s identity reinforce our personal spiritual journey?

►STEP 4—Create

Just for Teachers: Identifying with Jesus, alone, cannot effect salvation. Neither does knowing Jesus’ identity necessarily transform us into Christian disciples. Conscious decision-making, based upon a biblical identification of Christ, is the indispensable instrument for conversion. How unfortunate would it be should Christ’s identity be clearly understood without the accompanying saving action of choosing Christ and committing ourselves eternally to Jesus!

Closing Activity: Distribute lined paper to members, asking them to write out their answer to Christ’s question “Who do you say that I am?” Their description should fill every other line, leaving blank lines in between. Once the description is completed, invite them to fill the intervening spaces with their personal responses to their portrayal of Christ’s character. Responses should outline their commitment to some aspect of Christ’s identity.

Alternate Activity: To do this activity without supplies, pose the question directly to the class. Ask members to respond personally to their portrayal of Christ’s character, sharing what His identity means to them.