

Peter and the Rock (Christ)



SABBATH—MAY 14

READ FOR THIS WEEK'S LESSON: Galatians 4:4, 5; Hebrews 7:26; Matthew 16:13–20; Ephesians 2:20; Matthew 16:21–27; Matthew 17:1–9.

MEMORY VERSE: “ ‘But what about you?’ [Jesus] 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,¹ and be killed, and be raised the third day” (Matthew 16:21, NKJV).

The New Testament is clear: Jesus had to die. As He faced the shadow of the Cross, Jesus prayed: “ ‘My heart is troubled. What should I say? ‘Father, save Me from this hour’? No. This is the very reason I came to this hour ’ ” (John 12:27, NIV). This was God’s plan, born within the mind of God, even “before time began” (Titus 1:2, NKJV; read also 2 Timothy 1:9).

That is why Jesus did not just say that He was going to suffer many things and be killed and raised up on the third day. He said that He must face these things. Because He was God and the law was holy, His death was the only way that people could be saved from the punishment for sin and lawbreaking.

This week we will pick up more of the story of Jesus. We also will focus on Peter and how Peter would act toward the ministry (work done for God) of Jesus as He marched toward a death planned from “before time began.”

DEFINITIONS

1. scribes—teachers of Jewish law and tradition who copied and interpreted the Bible.

“YOU ARE THE CHRIST” (Matthew 16:13–17)

How must Peter have felt as he experienced the healings, the casting out of demons, the feeding of the crowds, the amazing (wonderful) teachings, the controlling of nature, the raising of the dead, and the walking on water together with Jesus? What questions must have gone through his mind? One such question could have been this: Why did Jesus let John the Baptist die a terrible and sad death? Why would He let this terrible thing happen after all the wonderful things He had done? These were things that no one in all of history had ever seen before. After all, Jesus was God in human flesh and He lived and ministered (gave help) to humans (Galatians 4:4, 5; Hebrews 7:26; Isaiah 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 very special experiences.

Read Matthew 16:13–17. What question does Jesus ask His disciples? What does it mean that Peter is the only one who answers this question? And why is Peter’s answer so important?

Peter makes a bold announcement that Jesus is “ ‘the Christ, the Son of the living God’ ” (Matthew 16:16, NKJV). This announcement is one of the most important points in all of the Bible. Peter calls Him “ ‘the Christ,’ ” the Anointed (Chosen) One. With this announcement, Peter says (correctly, as it turns out) that Jesus is the Messiah (the Chosen One; the Christ), the One who would come to fulfill the covenant² promises made to Abraham and then to Israel (read Galatians 3:16).

Peter makes this announcement in the area of Caesarea Philippi. This was Gentile (non-Jewish) country. In the past, Peter had watched Jesus care both for the Jews and for the Gentiles. With the help of the Holy Spirit, Peter recognizes that Jesus is something much more than a Jewish prophet (special messenger), as others had thought. Jesus’ ministry goes much further than that of John the Baptist, Elijah, or Jeremiah. Indeed, it was to include all kinds of people. So, Jesus calls Himself “the Son of Man.” This shows that He considers Himself as One with all humans. As the Bible later shows, Peter still had so much to learn about Jesus and His worldwide work.

DEFINITIONS

2. covenant—a promise or an agreement between God and His people.

What are the things that Jesus has done in your life that you could witness to others about? Why is it good to always remember these things and to share them?

“ON THIS ROCK” (Matthew 16:17–20)

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 Jesus meant?

The wording “on this rock” has caused a disagreement within the Christian church. Catholics interpret the “rock” to mean Peter himself. They argue that Peter was the first pope. But Protestants³ do not accept that interpretation.

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

First of all, in a few places Peter speaks of Jesus, and not of himself, with rock imagery⁴ (read Acts 4:8–12; 1 Peter 2:4–8).

Second, all through the Bible the image (word-picture) of God and of Christ as a rock is found. But humans are seen as weak and untrustworthy. “He [God] knows what we are made of. He remembers that we are dust” (Psalm 103:14, NIV). “Don’t [do not] put your trust in human leaders. Don’t [do not] trust in people. They can’t [cannot] save you” (Psalm 146:3, NIV). As John wrote, too, about Jesus: “He didn’t [did not] need others to tell him what people are like. He already knew what was in the human heart” (John 2:25, NIV). And He knew, too, what was in Peter’s heart (Matthew 26:34).

But what do these verses tell us about who the Rock really is and upon whom the church is built? (1 Corinthians 10:4; Matthew 7:24, 25; Ephesians 2:20).



All through the Bible, Christ is pictured as a rock.

“How feeble the church appeared when Christ spoke these words! There were only a few believers against whom all the power of devils and evil men would be directed. But the followers of Christ were not to fear. Built upon the Rock of their strength, they could not be beaten.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, page 413.

What has been your own experience with the weaknesses of people? How can you use these experiences to help you to depend only on the Rock?

DEFINITIONS

3. Protestants—members of the Christian churches that separated from the Roman Catholic Church in the 16th century.

4. imagery—language that causes people to imagine pictures in their minds.

PETER AS SATAN (Matthew 16:21–23)

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

Peter's problem is not that he is trying to protect Jesus. He is trying to control Jesus. He is no longer following Jesus; he is telling Jesus to follow him.

Jesus says, " 'Get behind Me, Satan!' " (Matthew 16:23, NKJV) because, like Satan himself in the wilderness, Peter has become a threat to the mission of Christ.

Mark 8:33 notes that during this talk Jesus looks at His disciples. He has come to save them. He is not going to be tempted the other way. And certainly not by one of His own disciples (Peter), no matter how well-meaning that disciple is.

As much as Simon Peter has grown in his walk, he is still trying to control things, including Jesus Himself. In this sense, Peter is not all that different from another disciple, Judas. Judas tries to manage Jesus and to make his own plans work for what he thought a Messiah should be like. But unlike Judas, Peter is deeply sorry and willing to be corrected and forgiven.



True faith is letting go of what you want most.

Read Matthew 16:24–27. What does Jesus mean when He says, " 'If he wants to save his life, he will lose it. But if he loses his life for me, he will find it' " (Matthew 16:25, NIV)?

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 slowly learn what true faith is. True faith is not about getting what you most want. True faith is the painful experience of letting go of what you most want, to gain what God wants for you. 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 important, but looking back, how do they look to you now?

ENCOURAGEMENT FROM HEAVEN (Matthew 17:1–9)

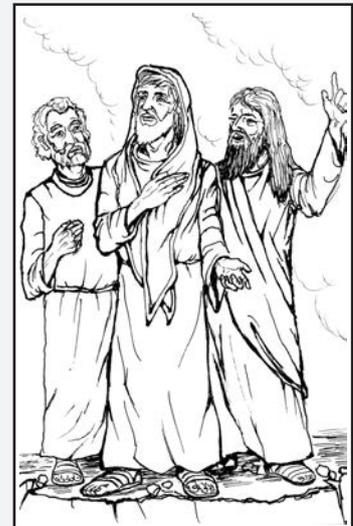
Read Matthew 17:1–9. What happened here, and why was it so important for both Jesus Himself and for the disciples?

Jesus “had lived in the love and fellowship of heaven. But in the world that He had created, He was alone. Now heaven had sent its messengers to Jesus. They were not angels but men who had gone through suffering and sorrow. And they could sympathize with the Saviour during the most difficult time of His earthly life. Moses and Elijah had been colaborers with Christ. They had shared His desire for the salvation of men. . . . These men had been chosen above every angel around the throne and had come to talk with Jesus about the scenes of His suffering. They came to comfort Him with the promise of heaven’s sympathy. The hope of the world, the salvation of every human person, was the subject of their interview.”—Adapted from Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, pages 422, 425.

How interesting that Jesus, the Son of God, in His humanity has need of comfort and encouragement from these men. They themselves know their own share of suffering and discouragement. Luke writes that they spoke to Him about “His decease [coming death] which He was about to accomplish [He was going to bring about by dying] in Jerusalem” (Luke 9:31, NKJV). Notice the word *accomplish*, which means “fulfill.” So, here is more proof that Jesus’ death is necessary for the salvation of humanity. The meeting of Moses and Elijah with Jesus is very important. Heaven saw the need for them to go and encourage Jesus.

No matter what they already have seen and heard, Peter, James, and John are going to receive even more reasons to believe. The voice coming out of the cloud gives more encouragement, too, after they get over their fear. It also is interesting that Matthew says Jesus “came and touched them and said, ‘Arise, and do not be afraid’” (Matthew 17:7, NKJV). Even with all the suffering Jesus would soon face, He comforts and encourages His disciples.

No matter who we are or how strong our faith and sense of duty are, we can all use encouragement sometimes. Someone you know might be in need of encouragement, too. Whom do you know that you could give some encouragement to right now?



Heaven sent its messengers to Jesus—Moses and Elijah—men who had suffered and knew sorrow.

JESUS AND THE TEMPLE TAX (Matthew 17:24–27)

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



Peter finds the exact amount owed for the temple tax in the mouth of the first fish he catches.

DEFINITIONS

5. Levites—members of the priestly Hebrew tribe of Levi who served under the priests of the family of Aaron.

All Jews were required to pay the temple tax. But priests, Levites,⁵ and rabbis were excused from paying this tax. 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 witness about the full authority of Christ. “By Peter’s answer to the collector, that Jesus would pay the tax, he made it seem that he supported the false idea of who Jesus was. . . . We know that the priests and Levites were excused from paying tax because of their connection with the temple. So, Jesus would have the best reason for not paying tax because the temple was His Father’s house.”—Adapted from *The Desire of Ages*, pages 433, 434.

We can learn much from Jesus’ kind response to Peter. Rather than embarrassing Peter, Jesus gently explains his mistake. Jesus makes use of the course Peter had taken in a most creative way. Jesus does not simply pay the tax. This would mean that he needed to pay it. Instead, He gets the tax elsewhere: from the mouth of a fish.

This miracle is unusual. It is the only time Jesus seems to do a miracle for His own benefit. But that is not the miracle’s purpose. Instead, the miracle is an example to everyone of Jesus’ authority over the temple and over all of creation. As humans, how can we even begin to understand how Jesus could have done this miracle? Of all the things that Peter has seen, can you imagine what must be going on in his mind when he throws out his line, catches his first fish, and finds the exact amount owed for the temple tax? (Read Isaiah 40:13–17.)

It was not necessary for Jesus and His disciples to pay the temple tax. But He had them do it anyway in order to avoid further trouble and quarrels. What are ways we can learn to avoid unnecessary trouble, especially over things that are not very clear?

ADDITIONAL THOUGHT: The story of how Jesus has Peter pull enough money out of the mouth of the first fish Peter catches is unusual. It is so unusual that some scholars have tried to throw it out. It is just a “bit of a folktale” to make a point, nothing more. Of course, that is no solution at all. Sure, there are the other kinds of miracles; for example, healing the sick, giving sight to the blind, raising the dead, feeding the hungry. These miracles are of a different nature altogether. From the Bible, too, we learn about the floating axe head (2 Kings 6:2–7) and the wet fleece (sheep’s wool) on the dry ground and the dry fleece on the wet ground (Judges 6:36–40). So, such unusual events are not unknown in the Bible. But why did Jesus not simply hand Peter the money and tell him to pay it rather than do such an amazing act in order to solve what seemed to be a small problem?

The verses do not say. But, as the lesson says, it shows us the great power of God. This should not surprise us. After all, we see proof of His wonderful power all the time. If God could make the universe and all that is in it, then a coin in a fish’s mouth was nothing. Writing about a different subject than Matthew, Paul makes a very good point that can help us to understand this story of the fish: “How very rich are God’s wisdom and knowledge! How he judges is more than we can understand! The way he deals with people is more than we can know!” (Romans 11:33, NIV). The story in Matthew is just one more example of this truth.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

① Peter’s struggle to submit (give) his will to God is our struggle, too. A powerful example of this struggle can be found in Malachi 1. There God asks the Jews to bring their best animals for sacrifice. “ ‘You bring animals that have been hurt. Or you bring disabled or sick animals. Then you dare to offer them to me as sacrifices! Should I accept them from you?’ says the **LORD**” (Malachi 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 holding on to the most? How can you give these things to the Lord?

② Think about the way Jesus handles the situation with the temple tax. Rather than make the situation worse, He lets it rest. What does this teach us about the day-to-day quarrels we might find ourselves in? How do you know when it is time to speak and when it is time to be silent?