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And on This Rock



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"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it."

—Matthew 16:18

PETER

In considering Jesus' words, we must understand that Jesus did not really say, "You are Peter," as we understand those words in English, but rather said, "You are a rock." I won't get into a battle over whether Jesus was speaking in Greek, Hebrew or Aramaic, because in whatever language he was speaking, the text was written in Greek and it is that Greek text which God commended to us as his Word. In the Greek text which we are looking at today, Jesus said, "*lego hoti su ei Petros,*" meaning literally, "I say that you are a rock."

If I were to call you a rock, what would you think? Would you think that I meant that you were as strong, or as quiet, or as smart as a rock? Would you be pleased or insulted? Obviously, such a question cannot be answered without knowing the context in which I was speaking.

One often hears the comment, and it is quite true, "A text without a context is a pretext." By ripping this verse out of the context of the Bible and assuming that Jesus was comparing

Simon to rocks in general, some have made it to say all sorts of things that Jesus never intended. Much that Jesus said and did makes no sense if we ignore the context. He is a lamb only in the context of the sacrificial system. We do not say that Jesus has the attributes of a lamb, but that he fulfills the role of the Sacrificial Lamb. Jesus is the Bread that came down from heaven in the context of the manna that God sent to provide for his people in the desert. Even what Jesus did was done in the context of the Old Testament. He healed people's diseases in the context of Isaiah 53. He spoke in parables in the context of Isaiah 6. He died on the cross in the context of Psalm 22. No other life has been so totally in a context as his. Everything that happened to him and everything that he did was done "so that Scripture might be fulfilled." Therefore, it would be unwise to assume that Jesus spoke without any context when he said to Peter, "I also say to you that you are Peter, a rock."

In the following pages, I will look at three different aspects of the context in which Jesus said to Simon, "You are a rock." The first two have to do with the historic or cultural context of the word "rock," and the last has to do with the immediate context.

STANDING STONES

In the Old Testament, people would often mark extraordinary events by taking a large stone and turning it up on end in such a way that it obviously did not get there by the usual natural means. These were memorial stones, which by the very fact of their being clearly placed on end for a purpose were intended to prompt the question, "Who put this stone on end and why?" This is exactly what Joshua told the Children of Israel when they crossed the Jordan. He had them take twelve large stones from the middle of the Jordan and set them up in Gilgal. Then Joshua said:

When your children ask their parents in time to come, "What do these stones mean?" Then you shall let your children know, "Israel crossed over the Jordan here on dry ground." . . . so that

all the peoples of the earth may know that the hand of the Lord is mighty, and so that you may fear the Lord your God forever (Joshua 4:21-24).

Thus, the stones were to cause those who saw them to remember God's work on behalf of his people from generation to generation.

When Jacob slept in the desert and had the dream of the ladder stretching up into heaven, in which God made to him the same covenant that he had made to Jacob's grandfather Abraham, Jacob said, "How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:17). Then Jacob "took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel" (Genesis 28:18-19). The stone was going to stand as a visible testimony to God's meeting with him and the covenant they made.

When Jacob had lived in his uncle Laban's house for twenty years God came to him and said, "I am the God of Bethel, where you anointed a pillar and made a vow to me" (Genesis 31:13). In speaking to Jacob, God referred to the pillar because it was a reminder and a witness for the two of them of the promises that they had made to each other. As Jacob fled from Laban's house back toward the land of his birth, he stopped in Bethel to build an altar to God in memory, as Scripture says, of the meeting he had had with God when he had been there before. Then God appeared to Jacob again and made various promises and changed Jacob's name to Israel. This was one of the most significant meetings between God and man in the Old Testament, and what was Jacob's first action after God went up from speaking with him? According to Genesis 35:14, "Jacob set up a pillar in the place where he had spoken with him, a pillar of stone; and he poured out a drink offering on it, and poured oil on it." Another memorial stone was being set up to be a reminder of God's having met with man.

Consider also the stones Moses commanded Joshua to set up in the Promised Land (Deuteronomy 27 and Joshua 8). In

this way God made sure that the Children of Israel had a memorial on this side of the Jordan of their encounter with him at Sinai in the desert.

After setting up yet another memorial stone, Joshua said, "See, this stone shall be a witness against us; for it has heard all the words of the Lord that he spoke to us; therefore it shall be a witness against you, if you deal falsely with your God" (Joshua 24:27).

Just as Joshua had set up a stone "for a witness against us," so Jesus set the twelve disciples up as witnesses to what they had seen and heard. They had walked and talked with God, and all that they needed to do was to stand as he had set them in order to be witnesses to him. When their detractors "saw the boldness of Peter and John and realized that they were uneducated and ordinary men, they were amazed and recognized them as companions of Jesus" (Acts 4:13). These ordinary men pointed, as memorial stones, to the one who had set them up.

Jesus is building his church (*ekklesia*—literally congregation) by means of the witness of those who have met him and been changed by him. "On this rock, the rock that I have set up as my witness to what I have done," Jesus says, "I will build my fellowship." He even says that the gates of Hades itself will not be able to withstand it. He is giving us a weapon that is stronger than all of the powers of evil, stronger than the devil, stronger than death itself. This weapon will ultimately control the fate of all mankind. It is so simple that it seems foolish and so weak that it seems worthless. It is simply standing, as a stone set on end, which causes all who see it to ask, "Why is this stone standing up and who set it here?" We are to stand, foolishly and innocently, pointing to heaven and the King of heaven who has set us up as witnesses to what he has done in our lives. It is not so much in church programs or doctrinal statements, but in who we are as a new creation that the world will be able to see the work of the one who set us on end. We must be changed and be visible.

This is not a defensive weapon. It will more often get us into trouble on this earth than it will get us out. The weapon

given us here is offensive in that it is not for our protection, but rather for the propagation of the gospel. Jesus indicated not only that it is powerful, because the gates of hades will not prevail against it, but that it is his chosen tool, by saying, "On this rock I will build my Church." He could easily have spread the New Covenant by military conquest as some religions have done. He could have opened the earth to swallow all who did not believe and then decreed that the children of believers would by nature be born holy. He could have done anything that he wanted, and in fact he did. This is what he wanted because this is what he chose. He chose to spread his gospel by means of individual testimony to what he has done in the lives of individual people.

UNCUT STONES

We have just looked at standing stones as one aspect of the context in which Jesus referred to Simon as a rock. Now let's move on to the other historical aspect of that context, the rocks used in the altars to God.

When God instituted the building of altars to him, he included one rule regarding the rocks that were to be used in their construction. God said, "If you make for me an altar of stone, do not build it of hewn stones; for if you use a chisel upon it you profane it" (Exodus 20:25). And again in Deuteronomy, "You shall build an altar there to the Lord your God, an altar of stones on which you have not used an iron tool. You must build the altar of the Lord your God of unhewn stones" (Deuteronomy 27:5-6). When Joshua and the Israelites built an altar on Mount Ebal, they made certain to follow this rule, for we read, "Then Joshua built on Mount Ebal an altar to the Lord, the God of Israel, just as Moses the servant of the Lord had commanded the Israelites, as it is written in the book of the law of Moses, 'an altar of unhewn stones, on which no iron tool has been used'" (Joshua 8:30-31).

REVEALED BY MY FATHER

Before Jesus made this strange statement in calling Peter a rock, he had made another statement that was almost as

strange. Peter had said, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (Matthew 16:16), to which Jesus had responded, "Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father in heaven" (Matthew 16:17). Now why, after approximately three years with Simon, had Jesus not taught him this? Jesus didn't say, "Blessed are you because you have believed me." He said that this insight had been revealed by his Father. Remember also that Jesus had, in fact, taught consistently about who he was. How many times had he referred to God as "my Father"? In fact, Peter had been there when Jesus had said, "All things have been handed over to me by my Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father, and no one knows the Father except the Son" (Matthew 11:27).

Take note, therefore, that Jesus did not say that flesh and blood did not "tell" Peter this, but that flesh and blood did not "reveal" it. Peter had never been asked to believe in a set of principles regarding Jesus, but rather to get to know the person. As Peter had gotten to know the person of Jesus, he had also become aware in a personal way, through the teaching of God the Father, exactly who Jesus was. That which Jesus said was "blessed" in Simon Peter was not that Peter had simply confessed that Jesus was the Son of God. Rather, Jesus recognized that Peter had spiritual knowledge of this fact which surpassed simple brain knowledge. Remember that Jesus did not pronounce such blessings on Satan when he tempted Jesus in the desert, saying, "If you are the Son of God" (Matthew 4:3, 6). Obviously, Satan knew who Jesus was, but Jesus did not bless him for this. Again, consider the demoniacs among the tombs in the country of the Gadarenes. They met Jesus with the words, "What have you to do with us, Son of God?" (Matthew 8:29). Did Jesus bless them for this knowledge? No, the demons that were speaking were sent into a herd of pigs. Mark even tells us that it was habitual that when demons were cast out of people, they would fall down before Jesus saying, "You are the Son of God" (Mark 3:11). Peter had a knowledge that had been given him by God the Father, a knowledge which transcended an assent to the fact

of who Jesus was, and included a spiritual sight that cannot be gained without the work of the Father.

This word "reveal" had been used before when Jesus said, "No one knows the Father except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him" (Matthew 11:27). So Jesus reveals the Father, and the Father reveals the Son. When Jesus chooses to reveal the Father it is not simply teaching about him. He had been teaching about the Father to everyone who would listen, and yet he said that no one knows the Father. No one knows the Father or the Son until they are revealed.

Now let us consider this in light of the uncut stones of the altar. God had said, "If you use a chisel upon it you profane it" (Exodus 20:25). Peter or Satan would equally well have been able to give assent to the knowledge of who Jesus was. If Peter had been simply agreeing with what people had told him, no matter how much he had believed it, it would have been no more important to Jesus than the demons' affirmation had been. Peter would have been a cut stone; he would have been a trained parrot that never doubts a word that comes out of its mouth. He would have profaned the altar of God. But Jesus said that flesh and blood did not reveal these things to Peter. Peter was not a cut stone. No tool had been used on him. Later in life, when Peter and John were being questioned, the rulers and priests marveled at their confidence and understanding, because they knew that these men were uneducated and untrained. Had the rulers had any understanding, they would have known that God has always chosen the uncut stones for his altar.

Jesus was probably more excited at this moment than the disciples, because he finally saw fruit beginning to mature. Previously, when he had spoken of his death "they understood nothing about all these things; in fact, what he said was hidden from them, and they did not grasp what was said" (Luke 18:34). In John 12 we are told that the disciples did not understand what Jesus told them about his death until after he had been glorified; then they understood. Until now Jesus had been alone on the earth in terms of no one understand-

ing in a deep sense who he was and what he had come to do. Peter still did not understand everything, but Jesus recognized the hand of his Father in the depth of the understanding with which Peter affirmed who Jesus was. This was the beginning!

Jesus had taught his disciples to pray, "Your kingdom come" (Matthew 6:10). Now it was happening. God was setting up his Kingdom on this earth. Jesus recognized that a milestone had been passed in the road to God's ultimate victory over death and sin. His Kingdom was coming. Peter was a rock, the first rock in the new altar to God, just in time for the blood of the New Covenant to be spilled on it at Passover and Calvary. Can you hear Jesus' excitement when he says, "And on this rock I will build my Church"? He was promising that Peter would not be left alone but that he, Jesus, would continue to build an entire congregation, starting with this first rock. He would build an assembly of other uncut stones, and as a master builder he would lay one stone on another until his house and his altar and his Kingdom would be complete. What a joy it must have been to Jesus to see that first stone in place, knowing that it had been cut with eternal love by his Father in heaven and was now given to him as the first fruits of his labor.

It is not without reason that Peter is the one who tells us in his first letter that we also must "like living stones, let [ourselves] be built into a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:5). We also must be stones not cut by men, with no tool used on us, formed by the will of God and presented by him to his son, for his son to build into his Church. We must never make the mistake of thinking that Peter is the only rock and we are all different. Peter is different in that he was the first, but we are all being built into the same spiritual house, and the craftsmen are still the Father and the Son. As Stephen said in his sermon before he was stoned, "The Most High does not dwell in houses made with human hands" (Acts 7). God himself is our architect and builder.

By no means does the idea of being uncut stones give approval to ignorant or lazy Christians, nor to the neglecting of teaching sound doctrine. Jesus spent years training his dis-

ciples before he allowed them to teach. After Paul was converted in Damascus, he went into Arabia to study before his missions trips began. Timothy was told to "study to show yourself approved" (2 Timothy 2:15 KJV). These examples show the "training in righteousness" (2 Timothy 3:16) which is essential to Christianity.

Cut stones suggest becoming acceptable according to the standards of the world, especially in terms of the external trappings of religion without the inner reality of knowing Christ. The danger is that one becomes righteous in one's own eyes and cannot see the need of a savior.

In Philippians 3, Paul listed seven reasons that he might have had to trust in the flesh, such as circumcision and his standing as a Pharisee. These were all characteristics that made Paul look good to man, but made him abhorrent to God. As cut stones go, Paul was as well cut as they come. Everything listed made him look holy to the culture, but made him unsuitable to be used in a truly holy altar to the living God. He would profane it. It is for this reason that Paul said that he counted all of these things as loss and rubbish in order to gain Christ. These cuttings made Paul his own idol and were a positive impediment to his surrender to Christ. Before he could be made ready for the altar that Jesus was building, Paul had to understand that he brought nothing to the bargaining table except a sinful and dirty life. He had to become an uncut stone.

It is as Jesus had said, "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants; yes, Father, for such was your gracious will" (Matthew 11:25-26). The wise and intelligent are stones that have been made profane by being carved into the image of men and external religion, while infants are those that as yet have not been cut. Jesus said, just as the Old Testament had, that such stones were displeasing to God and were not to be used in the construction of his altars. That is why it was God's "gracious will" to hide understanding of spiritual matters from those with whom it would be profane to build. Of course God has and

does convert people from all walks of life, but the more that one has been cut and shaped by the external tools of religion, the more drastic and painful is the circumcision of the heart that is necessary to conversion.

CAESAREA PHILIPPI

By looking just a few verses earlier we see that this conversation took place "when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi" (Matthew 16:13). Why were they in Caesarea Philippi? Why did Jesus bring his disciples here, thirty miles north of the region in Galilee where they had been, shortly before they began their journey south to Jerusalem for Jesus to be sacrificed? Was Jesus, like Jonah, fleeing his assigned mission? Or did Jesus have a reason to choose this particular spot to promote his disciples from slaves to friends?

Caesarea Philippi was a center for pagan idolatry.¹ It was the site where the temple to Pan, the pagan god of fertility, was carved into the side of an enormous cliff, with one of the three rivers that combine to form the Jordan River flowing out of the bottom of the cliff, out of the temple itself. This temple, carved into a cliff, with a river flowing out between the pillars of the temple, had to be one of the wonders of its time. When we consider how this scene lent itself to the pagan mindset of a fertility god and how Jesus used those very elements to define his Church we will see that Jesus did not bring his disciples here by accident. As always, Jesus was in command of every aspect of his surroundings.

In this desert land of Israel, any source of water was treasured, and the source of water was considered to be the source of life itself. To the pagan culture, if a river flowed out of a cliff then a god must live in the cliff to control the source of life, so they built a temple there on the face of the cliff, above and around the cave from which the river flowed. Carved right into the face of the cliff there were alcoves in which were statues of the pagan god Pan. Through these idols the people worshiped Pan with the kind of rituals that one would expect for a fertility cult.

On the face of this rock in Caesarea Philippi was carved

the temple to the dead god made of stone. Both Peter and Christ made implicit reference to this temple in their conversation. Peter referred to it first when he called Jesus "the Son of the living God," in contrast to the lifeless stone god whose statues stood in this temple.

To Simon Peter's implied contrast Jesus gave the surprise response that Peter himself was a rock. In a sense Jesus was saying, "You are right, I am not like the idol carved into the face of this cliff, made of stone and sin, but you are like the cliff face. Here a lifeless god is pictured on a lifeless rock, but I, the Son of the living God, will be pictured in you as carved into a living rock." Peter was to be a rock with the image of Christ engraved upon him, just as the image of Pan was engraved upon this cliff. Jesus is making a similar comparison to the one that he had made when he said, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's" (Matthew 22:21). It is all a matter of whose image is displayed.

One difference between these contrasting temples was to be that Jesus would build his own Church, while this temple to Pan had been built by the hands of men; for Jesus said, "On this rock I will build my Church." Jesus was speaking more about the kind of Church which he would build than he was speaking about what Peter was like. As Peter later wrote, "like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house" (1 Peter 2:5). It is a work done inwardly by God that draws the congregation of Christ together. In Romans 8:29 we read, "Those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn within a large family." God is to be worshiped by our being formed, or conformed into the image and likeness of Jesus. His worshipers are to be the stones that display the face of Christ to the world. Then rivers of life will flow out of these living stones bringing the waters of life to a dry and thirsty land. We will become the source of life for a world badly in need of it. It is through the face of Christ being displayed in his children's lives that Christ will propagate his Church. Just as Jesus said earlier, "Let your light shine before

others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matthew 5:16). The praise of God arises in others first when they see the grace of God in us.

CONCLUSION

Let us very briefly recap. We looked at three different aspects to the context in which Jesus used the term "rock." These are different aspects of the same context and not three competing contexts. First, the standing stone gives testimony to great events and meetings with God by virtue of its very existence. Second, the rocks used in building altars to God had to be uncut to maintain the purity of the altar, so that they were carved out by the hand of God rather than the hand of man. And last, the image of the god being worshiped at Caesarea Philippi had been carved right into the rock face of the cliff. All three of these together form a picture of the individuals who have been brought into the family of God, and also of the means by which Jesus is building his Church.

Peter, and all who have been reborn, are monuments and witnesses to the great work of God in the lives of men. By coming into contact with us, the rest of the world is forced to ask what power could have set us up on end and made us so unlike other men. We need more than anything else to let the light shine so that others may see our good works and praise our Father in heaven. We must be changed and be visible.

Peter, and all who have been reborn, are stones that, through no worth of their own, have been chosen by God for the construction of the spiritual house in which his Spirit dwells. As such we must put away all thoughts of our own accomplishment and merit, and look only to him who is building. We behold in awe that we were chosen to be the material of which his house is built. As Christ builds us into the structure of his house, we must pray that we be solid stones, which can then be built upon, to the completion of his Kingdom.

Peter, and all who have been reborn, are rocks that are being carved as images of the God whose river of life flows in and through and out of each one of us. Let us bear that image

proudly and fearfully, knowing that it is "God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:12).

We are living stones, cut by the hand of God, not the hand of men, with his image being engraved on us more clearly every day, which are to stand in this world as monuments to God having come to earth and met with us.

What power and responsibility we have been given—the power to overcome hades and to free its slaves! What power and what responsibility! If the Church of Christ is not growing around us, with other stones being placed upon us, and others upon them, is that because the weapons given us are too weak or because we have failed to enter the war? The method Jesus will use to further his Kingdom and release the prisoners of hades involves us. When Jesus said that the gates of hades would not prevail against his Church, he obviously intended his Church to be battering those gates.

Jesus said, "On this rock I will build my Church." Pray that we might be that rock.

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Notes

1. For a description of Caesarea Philippi at the time of Christ, see: Ray Vander Laan, "Gates of Hell," in *That the World May Know*, edited by Paul D. Varnum (Colorado Springs, Colorado: Focus on the Family Films, 1996).