

COURSE CORRECTION PART 3: THE GATES OF HADES & BEYOND

Matthew 16: 13-19

Matthew chronicles the time Jesus took His team of leaders-in-training on a field trip. They ventured north to Mt. Hermon in the region of Caesarea Philippi near Panias. Mt. Hermon is unique for many reasons. It towers almost 10,000 feet over the northern border areas of Israel making it Israel's highest point. Its three distinct snow-covered summits are visible from over 60 miles away. Internal springs feed a waterfall that flows downstream into the Sea of Galilee and ultimately into both the Jordan River and the Dead Sea.

Hermon means both *sacred* and *forbidden place*, each making more sense as one grows familiar with the tortured history of the now mostly uninhabited 5,000 acres it sits upon. Excavations have uncovered more than 20 temple sites on the slopes of the mountain. This would make it the equivalent of the southern United States' Bible belt if these temples were, well, holy, in any of the ways we define holy. Mt. Hermon's history reads a bit like Sodom and Gomorrah, but straight up, 9,232 feet straight up to be precise. This is where Jesus chose to hold a seminar for His disciples.

How bad was Mt. Hermon? We will stick with *bad* as modifiers just won't suffice for this one. Jerome, translator of the fourth-century Latin Vulgate Bible, cited Mt. Hermon as *anathema* due to its inherent evil provenance. This mountain saw fallen angels, giants, newly minted pagan god and goddesses, lost tribes of Israel, Alexander the Great, flute playing half-man-half-goat gods, sensual pagan rituals, child sacrifice and a toll road between our world and the netherworld. On the plus side, Jesus redeemed it and it now has a ski resort!

Baal. We are familiar with the saga of the tribe of Dan. During the days of the Judges, the tribe of Dan moved to the region near Mt. Hermon and Caesarea Philippi and slowly adopted the Canaanite worship of Baal and Ashtaroah. Dan received a smaller portion of the land than the other eleven tribes. To the north they spied a land more desirable than their own, one inhabited by peaceful people. They raided it, took it as their own, and established the City of Dan near the Lebanon border and the coast near Mt. Hermon. Later, after the reign of Solomon, the kingdom was split into two parts: Israel's ten tribes in the north, and

Judah's two tribes in the south. Dan was in the far northern part of Israel. The pull of the Canaanite god Baal was intense at this point and Jeroboam, King in the North, built golden calf alters at Dan in the north and Bethel in the south. Special festivals and feasts were scheduled and Israel, specifically the tribe of Dan, were full on worshipping idols rather than the Most High God of Israel. This took place within sight of Mt. Hermon, with portions occurring on the mountain.

Nephilim. Long before Dan and his tribe are the story of the angels who fancied the lovely daughters of men so badly, they traded heaven for earth and domestic marriage. Genesis 6:4 reads: "The Nephilim were on the earth in those days – and also afterward – when the sons of God went to the daughters of men and had children by them." The "fallen" angels descended to Mt. Hermon. The extra-biblical book of Enoch tells us 200 angels came to earth, fathered giants with extraordinary strength, and taught their offspring sorcery and incantations. Near the end of their 40-year travels Moses and the Israelites defeated Amorite King Og and the remnant of the Nephilim. It was reported Og's height was between 12 to 13 feet. It's easy to see how the Jews viewed the Nephilim and their abode on Mt. Hermon as demonic. Even the Canaanites, an evil people in their own right, referred to the descendants of the Nephilim as spirits of the dead and Mt. Hermon as the "realm of the dead."

Pan. Alexander the Great built a countryside shrine to the Greek god Pan on Mt. Hermon. Pan is the god of wooded areas, nature and pasturelands, and was worshipped mostly in grottos and caves. Pan's upper torso was human (although unattractive with horns) and he had the lower body of a goat. As the god most closely associated with spring he came to be associated with the rites of fertility. Pan was said to be partial to wood nymphs and over time came to be associated with ritual sexual practices, especially those on Mt. Hermon.

Mt. Hermon featured an enormous interior waterfall that dropped into a pool that flowed into the Sea of Galilee. It was in the cave opening and the cascading water that the pagans of Jesus' day believed the fertility gods, Pan in particular, would return to the surface from the underworld each spring. Rituals to entice Pan to return to the surface included prostitution, animal sacrifice sexual relations with goats and on a few occasions, child sacrifice. The cave where these ritual activities took place was called the Gates of Hades.

Why there? Why then? Jesus took his disciples of the New Covenant Israel and forerunners of what would one day become the New Covenant church to the widely perceived most vile and evil place in all of Israel to make several points. He did all of this in classic Jesus fashion, albeit without the use of parable, although there may be a parable in the setting alone. At that point in time speculation was growing as to who and what Jesus was, especially what his endgame might be. His legend was growing by the day, so He escaped the prejudiced confines of greater Jerusalem for the seclusion of Mt. Hermon. If He was trying to get away from the common person, He chose well. If He was seeking temporary separation from the Pharisees...brilliant choice; Pharisees would rather die than walk up that mountain. It is here on this historically evil mount (mountains are mountains, they cannot be evil in and of themselves, people made this place evil) Jesus asks His most theological question to the disciples:

Jesus came to Caesarea Philippi. There He put His question to His disciples: 'Who do people say that the son of man is?' 'John the Baptist,' they replied. 'Others say Elijah. Others say Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.' 'What about you?' He asked them. 'Who do you say I am?' Simon Peter answered. 'You are the Messiah,' he said. 'You are the son of the living God!' 'God's blessings on you, Simon, son of John! Flesh and blood did not reveal that to you; it was my Father in heaven. And I have something to tell you, too: you are Peter, the rock, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell won't overpower it' (Matthew 16:13-19)

Jesus was not interested in His polling numbers or social quotient/recognition factor in the Middle East. It was clear that the average person saw Jesus as a talented, miracle working latter-day prophet, probably the greatest of all time. His first question was merely a softball tossed down the middle to set up His second question: *But who do you guys say I am?* Peter (yes, that Peter... Peter of the three denials fame) chose to answer for the group: *You are the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.*

Peter answered correctly. Peter answered perfectly. Thanks to our rear-view mirror gift of two millennia we know he would not fully live into the reality of his answer until Pentecost, but he/they had to begin somewhere, and this was both the time and the place. Jesus compliments him on his answer coming from a holy

place rather than any form of conventional wisdom or human knowledge. His inner-most spiritual center awakened to reach this conclusion. Did he fully grasp the implications of his answer? Could he fully come to grips with it at that moment? Were we able to come to grips with the full ramifications of Jesus as our personal Lord and Savior early in our faith relationship? How about today? Next Thursday? No, he did not fully grasp the totality of his answer, but he would. Time, space and the arrival of the Holy Spirit would lead him to a new level of spiritual awareness, but that day, on that rock, it began in earnest.

Let's break this down by verse as we move closer to the course correction portion of our lesson.

You are Peter, the rock, and on this rock I will build my church (v.18). Let's begin with what Jesus means by "church." The Greek word here is *ecclesia* meaning assembly. Etymologically it means "called out." This is close to the definition of "holy," or set apart. We get what the church is, or at least what it is supposed to be, but why was Jesus talking about an entity that would not exist for decades?

We need to clear this up as it's not fair to the first-century believers who made up the emerging church. The "assembly" of followers of Jesus as Messiah was never to be a substitute for Israel; it was to be a renewed Israel, a New Covenant Israel. The New Interpreter's Bible Commentary states: "Matthew is speaking of the renewed people of God, constituted by the disciples of Jesus, the heir and continuation of empirical Israel that has forfeited its standing and role. The *ecclesia* represents the congregation of Yahweh. This does not mean Matthew considered the church a replacement for Israel, but a special community of the New Covenant within, or alongside, empirical Israel." History tells us that the New Testament "Christian" church, as we generally understand it, did not exist until after the ill-fated Jewish Zealot war against Roman forces in Jerusalem.

Is it course correction time yet? No, but we are inching closer. Peter is seen by Catholics as the first in the line of the Papacy. Are they right? Well, Jesus did say he would build his church upon Peter. You can grouse grammatically about the nickname for "rock" and the actual "rock" differing by gender in Greek. Theologians do so all the time, seeming to forget that Jesus most likely spoke in Aramaic, which has no such gender distinctions. So, is it O.K. for Peter, the person, to be the "rock" or is it Peter's faith that is the "rock" in question? Yes and yes,

have it both ways as both are needed and necessary. I think it's fine for Catholics to revere Peter as they do, and I believe Protestants might err on the side of lessening his impact. It's also true we really don't know with certainty what Jesus meant with this word play, but that hasn't stopped us from having strong opinions. At minimum, Peter was the foundation upon which Jesus would build His new Kingdom, movement, and people. He would die, resurrect, ascend, be replaced by God the Spirit, Pentecost would take place and Peter would step up as the first spokesperson for the movement, the renewed Israel. Jesus would be the builder; Peter would be the foundation upon which the movement, the New Israel, and for us, the Church, would be built.

Now it's course correction time. The oft overlooked theological gem in this field trip is Jesus' usage of "rock" while standing on a large rock that had been the scene of thousands of years of evil abuses. Was this why Jesus chose to say "... and on *this* rock I will build my church?" I believe so. The church of Jesus, the Christ, would take the battle to the enemy from that point forward. Jesus would die and resurrect from the dead to overcome the permanent power of sin. Death would no longer have final say. Factor in the rest of the verse: "and the gates of hell won't overpower it," and realize they were standing at what was widely held to be the actual gate to hades and the realm of the dead... and it comes together.

It's possible the disciples had been fidgeting standing on a mountain reputed to be as evil as Hermon. Imagine the overpowering sense of relief when they heard Jesus say his movement, the renewed Israel, his church, would be more powerful than hell and hades, from the evil below, and all it represented.

Paul captures this in his letter to the church in Rome:

For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers, nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus (vv. 38-39).

A one-day seminar, held on a large rock formation with a very bad reputation, made clear that the powers of death would soon, no longer prevail, the pervasive grip of evil would soon loosen; and, come persecution or pandemic, the church of Jesus Christ would stand.

Jesus came to reset a church, a people, a movement that had lost its way and almost all its traction. With the foundational faith and courage of Peter (after a bit more polishing) the future would be back in God's hands and His church would be built upon, virtually on top of, and over the gates of all evil. Consider this course well corrected.

Amen and Amen

Dr. Michael McCullar
Formations Pastor
Johns Creek Baptist Church