

What Are the Gates of Hell?

Daniel 11:36; Matthew 16:18

August 18, 2024

Greg L. Price

The Church of Rome claims that it is an infallible truth that Christ established Peter as the first Pope to be the head of the Universal Church upon earth, and Peter passed that same universal headship on to his successors after him (The Council of Vatican I—those not believing this cannot be saved and are cursed).

Protestants protested against this false claim at the time of the Reformation and faithful Protestants have done so since then. Protestants made clear that Peter (personally/individually) was not the rock upon which Jesus would build His Church, but the Rock was Jesus Himself (or was the confession Peter made that Jesus was the Christ, the Son of the living God). Protestants also supplied abundant testimony from Scripture and the Fathers, confirming that Rome's interpretation was not the interpretation of the early Church Fathers.

The Papacy usurped the authority and office of Christ as the only Head of the Church, as the only King of kings, and as the only Mediator between God and man. That is why Protestants have historically believed the Papacy to be the Antichrist (the one who sits upon his throne in the Church in the place of Christ, making himself like God).

Even one of the great doctors and saints of the Church of Rome, Augustine, made clear who is the Rock upon which the Church is built.

Therefore, thou art Peter and upon this rock, which thou hast confessed, upon this rock, which thou hast acknowledged, saying, thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God, I will build my church, upon myself, who am the Son of the living God, I will build my church, upon myself I will build, not myself upon thee (Sermon 76, "De Verbis Domini [13]").

Before returning to Daniel 11:36 to continue our discussion there of the Papal Antichrist who is described as a king who does according to his own will and exalts himself above all that is called god, we must complete our study of Matthew 16 and seek to understand the meaning of two more questions: (1) What are the gates of hell?; (2) What are the keys of the kingdom? Today we will focus upon the first question and continue (God willing) to the second question next Lord's Day.

After Jesus identifies Himself as the Rock ("upon this rock" Matthew 16:18), He gives two infallible promises: (1) I Will Build My Church; (2) The Gates of Hell Shall Not Prevail against It.

I. **Promise #1: I Will Build My Church.**

A. Here Jesus promises to build His Church upon Himself (or upon Peter's confession). This conveys the picture of Jesus building His Holy Temple by adding living stones (believers) who are being saved.

1. How can Jesus be both the Builder of His Church and the Rock upon which His Church is built? Just as Jesus can be both the sacrifice for sin and the High Priest that offers Himself as a sacrifice to God for the sin of His people, so He can be both the Builder and the Rock upon which His Church is built. He fulfills more than one simultaneously.

2. This is a certain promise that the Church of all the redeemed in Christ, which stretches from Adam to the end of time (all who are chosen in Christ Jesus from before the foundation of the earth), will continue to be built upon Jesus. Jesus calls it "my Church".

3. I submit that Jesus is not saying that He will begin to build for the first time His Church upon Himself, but rather that He will continue to build His Church upon Himself (cf. Philippians 4:4 where the future tense has the idea of continuing to rejoice not beginning to rejoice). This is not a promise to begin building a distinct, new Church, but a promise to continue to build the Church of the redeemed (which

includes Old Testament believers like those mentioned in Hebrews 11).

B. Scripture testifies to this truth that Jesus was the Rock upon which Jesus built His Church through the proclamation of the gospel even in the Old Testament before the incarnation.

1. Does not Scripture speak of Christ as being Israel's Rock (1 Corinthians 10:4)? Does not Scripture teach that the covenant made with Abraham (which includes all who believe) was confirmed in Christ (Galatians 3:17)? Does not Scripture say that Moses led the Church as Israel wandered in the wilderness (Acts 7:38)? Was not the gospel preached unto Old Testament believers (Galatians 3:8; Hebrews 4:1-2)? Then Jesus was building His Church in both the Old and New Testaments.

2. If Christ is the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world (Revelation 13:8), is He not also the Rock upon which the redeemed are built from the time when the promise of Christ was first made to Adam and Eve until now (Genesis 3:15)? The same kingdom of God (or church) that was taken away from unbelieving Jews was that which was given to believing Jews and Gentiles (Matthew 21:43). There is only one olive tree (church) for God's people of the Old and New Testaments (Romans 11).

3. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* (1647) speaks of the Old Testament Church of Israel as being "a church under age" (19:3)—not a non-existent church. Our Protestant forefathers agreed.

4. The Church is composed of those who are called out by the gospel of Christ to be living stones built upon the Rock—Christ. Was the gospel preached in the Old Testament? Was it received by faith? They then became living stones in the spiritual temple Jesus was building then and is building now. Jesus is one in both testaments. The Church is one in both testaments. The gospel is one in both testaments. Salvation is one in both testaments—by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone.

II. **Promise #2: The Gates of Hell Shall Not Prevail against It.**

A. The Papacy and the Church of Rome claim that this promise guarantees the infallibility of the Pope (infallibility means it is impossible to err from the truth).

1. The Church of Rome interprets the gates of hell (hades) as being heretics and their heresies that attack the Church of Rome built upon Peter (and the Papacy). Rome understands the promise to mean that it is impossible that heretics and heresies will corrupt the Church of Rome that is built upon the Papacy (through Peter).

2. It is claimed that Jesus promises that the Church of Rome and the Papacy will infallibly be kept from heresy and corruption in its official declarations according to the promise of Christ and that the Papacy and Church Councils will infallibly make declarations concerning faith and morals when speaking in its official capacity from the throne.

B. However, there is no mention here of infallibility. We have an infallible standard (Scripture), but nowhere in Scripture is the Church promised infallibility—the impossibility of error (Acts 17:11).

1. The *Westminster Confession of Faith* states the historic Protestant position:

All councils since the apostles' times, whether general or particular, may err, and many have erred; therefore they are not to be made the rule of faith or practice, but to be used as an help in both (31:4).

The infallible rule of interpretation of Scripture, is the Scripture itself; and therefore, when there is a question about the true and full sense of any scripture (which is not manifold, but one), it may be searched and known by other places that speak more clearly (1:9).

The Supreme Judge, by which all controversies of religion are to be determined, and all decrees of councils, opinions of ancient writers, doctrines of men, and private spirits, are to be examined, and in whose sentence we are to rest, can be no other but the Holy Spirit speaking in the Scripture (1:10).

2. The promise of Jesus here is not that His Church will not be corrupted in history by error, but that it will not be overcome/destroyed by error. The gates of hell shall not remove Christ's Church of His redeemed/elect from the earth (no matter how much persecuted or how much apostasy may abound). The gates of hell shall not prevail against the church that is built upon the Rock—Jesus Christ (Matthew 7:24-25). The gates of hell will attack and will seek to destroy the Church, but it will never be successful, for Jesus Christ is its foundation and its builder, and He has promised to be with His Church throughout the world unto the end of the age (Matthew 28:20).

3. The promise of Jesus is infallible (it is impossible to err). He promises that the Church of His elect will never be shaken off its firm foundation that is built upon Christ. This is a promise of the perseverance of the saints unto the end. Yes, there may be found even within the Church of the redeemed errors that do not strike at or destroy the foundation of grace alone by faith alone upon Christ alone, but the foundation that is truly built upon Christ will remain (wood, hay, and stubble may be burned up, but Christ the Rock and Foundation can never be overcome by the gates of hell).

4. The gates of a city in ancient times were where the judges and rulers sat to execute their power. "Hell" (*hades* in Greek) most likely does not refer to the lake of fire. That is usually the Greek word, *geéna*. *Hades* is used in the New Testament 11 times (and only once does it clearly refer to hell, the lake of fire—Luke 16:23). On the other occasions, it most likely refers to the grave or the state of death (e.g. Revelation 20:14). This phrase "gates of hades" is used one other time in the Greek Septuagint—Job 38:17 (and there it refers to the grave). So the Lord promises that because He is the one who builds His Church, not even the power of death or the grave (or the devil who holds people in fear of death) can destroy those clinging to Christ the Rock of their salvation.

5. We may be little stones that are added by Christ to this worldwide Holy Temple, but like Peter (who even denied knowing the Lord Jesus, but repented) with all of his sins and weaknesses, Jesus has chosen to take that which is weak and frail and to build His Church with those who are by nature even the chief of sinners. Jesus promises that His almighty power will protect and will cause to persevere every single one to the end that He has effectually called to Himself by regeneration, faith, repentance, and new obedience (John 6:37-39). This is not a calling to live for ourselves, but rather to die to self and to live to Christ.

C. Application

1. As ministers, we must always remember that we are through our preaching/teaching only sub-contractors—Jesus is the Contractor, the Master Builder. This should humble us before Him and strip away our pride. He's the Lord—we are His servants. It should show us that we can do nothing without Him, but that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. The power is not in us—it is in Christ who has called us and lifts us from discouragement at not seeing the results we pray for and desire, and rather to keep our eyes upon Jesus—the Head of the Church who will never leave us nor forsake us. Based upon Christ's promise in Matthew 16:18, our forefathers confessed and so do we (*Westminster Confession of Faith*, 25:5):

There shall be always a church on earth to worship God according to his will.

2. Here is a promise to lift our spirit when trouble of every kind assails us—we are secure in Christ. We need not fear what will happen to the faithful Church of Jesus Christ even if the Visible Church seems to diminish in size and resources, even if its leaders seem to weaken and pass away. For the building of Christ's Church does not depend upon man, but upon Christ. Remember, we are all expendable in the work of Christ's kingdom. Christ has promised to build His Church and He will accomplish it. There is no flood in this life—whether death, persecution, sin, or the powers of death or hell that can separate a living stone that trusts in the resurrected Christ alone for eternal salvation from the Rock of his/her salvation—even Jesus.

Copyright 2024 Greg L. Price.