

Saint Peter and the Keys

By Greg Witherow

In the gospel of Matthew, Simon Peter confesses Jesus to be the Christ, the Son of the living God. Christ then turns to Simon, gives him a new name and hands him a set of keys. This article will serve as a primer in reviewing the significance and meaning of this event and the resulting distinctions of Peter's role.

The Keys To Paradise

It should be noted that when Christ turned to Peter and said, "I will give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven" he was not speaking in a vacuum. There was a Biblical context for the Apostles to understand the meaning of Christ's words. We see this beginning in the book of Genesis. At the start of the Bible Man is placed in a garden and given the task of guarding it¹. But Adam failed by allowing the Serpent to enter the garden and deceive his wife. In failing to guard the garden a chain reaction was triggered, resulting in The Fall. Man had been entrusted as the guardian and steward of Eden. By failing in his stewardship the keys to the garden were taken from Adam and given to the angels. It was now the angels who would lock the garden to intruders. It was they who would brandish a sword of fire at the doorway of Eden. And it was they who were given the privilege of delivering the Law, a role originally reserved for Man². In the Gospel of Matthew Christ begins to hand over to Peter what Adam lost.³

The Keys Of Peter

A direct reference to the keys and their function is found in the book of Isaiah, the 22nd chapter. Here is the story of Eliakim, a man who serves as a type⁴ of the Apostle Peter. In the chapter a man named Shebna is deposed as chief steward of the king. In reading we learn the chief stewards job description. His function was namely this: to reside "over the house" of the king, ruling in his place when the king was absent. Additionally, the position of steward was an established royal office; it was to have successors. In the chapter an unfaithful Shebna is removed from office and replaced by the faithful Eliakim. We pick up the story in verses 21 through 23 where Isaiah speaks to Shebna about Eliakim, the new chief steward.⁵

¹ In Genesis 2:15 Adam is told to cultivate and keep the Garden. The Hebrew word for "keep" is shamar. It means to "keep, guard, observe, protect, keep watch" and other related synonyms.

² See Hebrews 2:2, Galatians 3:19, Acts 7:53, Deuteronomy 33:2

³ The Protestant theologian James Jordan points this out in his book, "The Sociology of the Church", p.39ff

⁴ Typology is one of the four senses of scripture defined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church, section 115ff. Scripture itself recognizes typology is embedded in real historical narratives. Romans 5:8 states that Adam is a type of Christ.

⁵ It is interesting to note the first charge listed (in verse 16) against Shebna. Namely that he built a sepulcher in a rock. Notice how Christ would glorify Himself by building a house (the Church) on a rock for the living, the regenerate. In comparison, Shebna sought to snatch glory for himself by building a house in a rock (a sepulcher) for the dead.

“I will clothe him with your robe. And strengthen him with your belt; I will commit your responsibility into his hand. He shall be a **father** to the inhabitants of Jerusalem and to the house of Judah. The **key of the house of David** I will lay on his shoulder; **he shall open and no one shall shut; and he shall shut and no one shall open**. I will fasten him as a peg in a secure place, and he will become a glorious throne to his father’s house.”

We should take note of several things. First, Eliakim is given a robe. The robe was a symbol of authority in the Old Testament. We are reminded of Joseph in Genesis and the robe that was placed on him by Pharaoh in making Joseph the viceroy of Egypt⁶. But more importantly, Eliakim was called a father to the inhabitants of the kingdom. He was to have father-like responsibilities in his oversight, to care for and protect his people.

But most significantly, Eliakim was given the keys of the house of David. And these keys had binding authority in his administration. The decisions of the chief steward had the authority of the king. Like Christ, who is said by the same prophet to have the government on His shoulders, the keys were placed on Eliakim’s shoulder.⁴

This background is critical if we are to understand the role of the Apostle Peter. **How can we claim to have a grasp on the context of Christ’s words to Peter without understanding the groundwork laid out in the Old Testament?** We cannot read the New Testament in a vacuum. Neither can we understand the role of Peter without grasping the role of the chief steward. In comparing the charge of Eliakim in Isaiah 22 with Christ’s words to Peter in Matthew 16 we see a remarkable similarity.

“And I also say to you that you are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it. And I will **give you the keys to the kingdom of heaven**, and **whatever you bind** on earth will be [will have been] bound in heaven, and **whatever you loose** on earth will be [will have been] loosed in heaven.”⁵

⁶ The first robe was given to Joseph by his father Jacob; the robe of many colors. As a result, the robe provoked Joseph’s brothers to harm him and it was used as evidence of his “death”. The second robe of Joseph was the one worn in the house of Potipher. This robe too would come to haunt Joseph as his seductress ripped it off his back and used it as evidence of his “crime”. On a tip from the king’s cupbearer (a role symbolizing the sacrament) Joseph was elevated to **viceroy of Egypt, given a new name** (as Peter also was) and had a new robe placed on his shoulders. Joseph’s authority was binding. When the people wanted to know what to do when the famine came, Pharaoh said, “go to Joseph, do what he tells you.” Those words are almost exactly what Mary told the servants when Christ turned the water into wine. She said, “do whatever he tells you.” Joseph’s viceroy position for the Pharaoh in many ways serves as a forerunner to Peter. In the book of Esther, Mordecai too would be given a robe as a sign of his office and made viceroy to King Ahasuerus. In the Old Testament we see Joseph, Eliakim and Mordecai as viceroys-chief stewards of their respective kings. In so doing, each man attending to his office serves as a type or picture of the Apostle Peter. These men are also in some ways types of Christ as well as Peter. There is no conflict here. Scripture does not force us with an either/or scenario. For example both Peter and Christ (in Revelation 1:18) can be said to “have the keys”. There is no contradiction with Christ in heaven holding the keys while Peter on earth also holds them. This is implied in Matthew. The binding takes place *in both heaven and earth*. What Christ is binding in heaven, Peter is binding on earth.

⁴ Only 3 people in scriptures are *explicitly* said to have a set of keys; Eliakim, Peter and Christ (Rev 1:18).

⁵ In Matthew chapter 18 Christ gives the rest of the Apostles the authority to bind and loose. The authority is in overseeing doctrine and imposing discipline. This authority is not reserved to Peter alone. The successors of the Apostles continue to have this authority to this day. However, the ceremony of

The Naming Of Peter

Simon was also given a new name (Peter in Hebrew or Cephas in Aramaic). The fact that he had his name changed by Christ is significant. A select number of individuals in the scriptures had their names changed by God. These were individuals who were set apart for significant roles in redemptive history. Included in this list were Abram (Abraham), Sarai (Sarah) and Jacob (Israel). In naming Peter, Christ sets Peter apart and honors him in a way he did not distinguish the other eleven Apostles.

Not only was the naming noteworthy, but the name itself was remarkable. Peter was given a name signifying an attribute almost exclusively attributed to God. As best as we know, nobody in the history of the Jews had ever been named “Rock”.⁶ Peter was the first person in Jewish history (that we know of) to bear the name. And the name itself points us to a deeper meaning of Peter’s role. We are told in Matthew that it is upon “this rock” the Christ will build His Church. Which brings us to our next topic.

There has been much discussion over the ages in contrasting the name of Peter in Matthew 16, which in the Greek is, translated “Petros” and the rock upon which Christ will build His Church which in the Greek is translated “Petras”. Without getting into the nuances of the Greek it doesn’t seem unreasonable to weigh the following information when forming an opinion. It can be noted that when Christ spoke these words to Peter in the presence of the Apostles He most assuredly was not speaking Greek but Aramaic, the language of the Jews. We can see this in the text as Christ called Peter the son of Bar-Jona. Bar-Jona is an Aramaic term which means son of (Bar) a dove (Jona). What Christ actually spoke and what Peter and the Apostles heard was (transliterated here with the English), “you are Cephas, and on this Cephas I will build my Church”. Cephas, sometimes spelled Kephass, is the Aramaic word for Peter and Rock. (Note: The spoken Aramaic is seen emanating from the original Greek text of John 1:42 where the Aramaic name Cephas is used. Also, the Apostle Paul in utilizing the Greek language to write to a Greek audience refers to Peter as Cephas in 1 Corinthians. St. Paul is drawing our attention to the name given Simon as it was spoken by Christ in Aramaic.)

One could argue that regardless of the language Christ spoke, the book of Matthew was inspired and written in Greek. This is a good point. While we don’t have the original manuscripts for the book of Matthew (the only book with this uniquely Petrine passage)

introducing this authority to the other Apostles differed from that of Peter. Peter was singled out first, indicating a “firstness” or primacy in his role. Additionally, Peter had his name changed; a significant name at that. His ceremony was more formal as it fell within the context of overseeing *doctrine*; he identified Jesus as the Christ. This shows the first function of the keys. The Apostles received the authority to loose and bind (again, the keys) in the context of imposing *discipline*. This shows the second function of the keys.

⁶ In Isaiah 51:1 Abraham is referred to as “the rock from which you were hewn.” While not named the Rock, this man who stood at the head of the Old Covenant had rock like qualities. Those qualities include his confession, his faith, his works and his unique covenantal position. In the New Testament believers are referred to as living stones that make up the building of the Church, built on the foundation laid on the rock.

many in the Church have viewed the book as a Greek original. There is a slight hiccup in that viewpoint though and it's one that I will share. The two earliest sources that comment on the origination of Matthew state that it was "written in the language of the Hebrews"; namely Aramaic.⁷ In one regard this makes sense. It is widely understood that the gospel of Matthew was written for the Jews. If it was written for the Jews why not write it in the language of the Jews? The caution here is that **if your entire interpretation of the passage resides in contrasting the Greek words Petros with Petras**, the peg you're hanging your hat on may not be as secure as you think.

The Steward Over The Household

In the New Testament we see the primacy of Peter depicted in a number of passages. In Luke chapter 12 Christ tells a parable about a group of faithful servants. At the conclusion of the story it is Peter who asks the question of whether this parable is intended for the Apostles. Christ then states, "Who then is that faithful and wise steward, whom his master will make ruler over his household, to give them their portion of food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes. Truly, I say to you that he will make him ruler over all he has." Here again we see the "firstness" of Peter as Christ alludes to the office of steward (one who rules the house) in the tradition of Joseph of Genesis and Eliakim.

"I have prayed for you"

During the Last Supper the disciples argued over who was the greatest amongst them. Christ instructs them that the greatest will be the one who serves the others. Then Christ turns to Peter and says, "Simon, Simon! Indeed Satan has asked for you (the you is plural; Satan has asked for the Apostles), that he may sift you (the Apostles) as wheat. But I have prayed for you (the you is singular, He has prayed for Peter), that your faith should not fail; and when you have returned to Me, strengthen your brethren." It was to be Peter who would serve his brethren by strengthening them.

There are a few things of interest in this passage. The first is that the discussion is within the context of who was the greatest. Christ redefines greatness as measured through serving. He then calls on Peter to serve his brethren by strengthening them. The second thing of interest is that Christ chooses not to pray for the Apostles (He obviously does many other times) but rather He singles out Peter. Christ is looking for Peter to hold things together after The King has left.⁸

⁷ Papias (c. A.D. 60 – 130) said that Matthew "arranged the oracles in the Hebrew dialect." Irenaeus (writing about A.D. 180) speaks of a "gospel" of Matthew written "for the Hebrews in their own dialect."

⁸ The third thing to notice is that in Peter's strength (your faith shall not fail) He calls him Simon (verse 31). This is in contrast to verse 34 where Christ says, "Peter, the rooster shall not crow this day before you will deny three times that you know Me." Here He calls him Peter. Christ is reminding Peter to be humble in his strength (Simon) but reminding him of what he is called to be, regardless of his weakness (Peter).

The Council of Jerusalem

In the book of Acts (chapter 15) we see Peter faithfully fulfilling his given responsibilities. As the story goes, the Apostle Paul had found himself in opposition to a group within a number of local churches over the matter of circumcision. The dispute was not small. For whatever reason, the word and authority of an Apostle, Paul in this case, did not settle the matter. Instead the churches sent a delegation representing both factions (which included Paul) to Jerusalem in what became the first Church council. The actions of the local churches imply that they are seeking an authoritative, not consultative, answer to the questions at hand.

Upon their arrival the two parties presented their cases. As the discussion wore on the debate became an increasingly heated exchange. Both parties were convinced they were rightly interpreting scripture. As trained Pharisees headed each party (Paul on the one hand, the sect of the believing Pharisees on the other), all were highly educated, fluent in the scriptures and no doubt used them to their advantage. We can only imagine the open “Bibles” and impassioned pleas. As there was no consensus forming, Luke could only describe the debate as one with “much dispute”. However, in the very next sentence Luke pens a dramatic and sudden turn of events. The entire ruckus came to an abrupt end when the Chief Apostle “rose up⁹” and rendered his decision. At the conclusion of four short recorded sentences uttered by Peter the debate was over. After Peter spoke, “all the multitude kept silent”. Paul and Barnabas added their testimony to Peter’s. James rendered the application. But Peter put all the parties to silence when he judiciously administered the keys, making a binding (thus the silence), doctrinal declaration (as he did with Christ when he professed, “You are The Christ”).¹⁰ The storm had come, the winds had blown, but the Church remained safely moored to the chair of Peter.

Conclusion

At the end of the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew Christ makes the statement that the wise man will build his house on the rock.¹¹ There are certainly multiple applications to the text. One application is that Christ is the Wise Man as He builds His house (the Church) on the rock, Peter. Remember, it is Christ that is doing the building when he states in the same gospel, “**I will build** My Church”. Building His Church on Peter does not contradict having the Church built on God (the ultimate Rock), on Christ, His Word, the Apostles or even Peter’s confession. Peter’s office, teaching, authority and confession are based in Christ and therefore have the authority of Christ. To **knowingly** reject Peter is to reject Christ¹¹.

⁹ As Peter rises from his chair we derive the term “the chair of Peter”. Ex cathedra means “from the chair.”

¹⁰ Both Christ (in the gospels) and Paul (in Galatians) severely and publicly rebuked Peter for failure in private judgments. Has a believer ever been more harshly rebuked? However, in Peter’s public judgments His words were taken as authoritative.

¹¹ In Luke Christ elaborates by stating that in building his house, the wise man will have “laid the foundation on the rock”. Again, Christ is the Wise Man as He builds His house (the Church) on a solid foundation (the Apostles with Christ as the cornerstone) on Peter (the rock).

¹¹ In Luke 10:16 Christ tells the seventy disciples (including the 12 apostles) before sending them out that, “he who rejects you rejects me”.

We have all heard of the marks of the Church - marks that vary depending on who you ask. Here Christ gives us an indication of one of those marks. The Church built on the rock is one that lasts the tests of time and weathers the inevitable storms. **As a former carpenter Christ is more than equipped to build a house that lasts until The End.** When conflicts arise from within or from without, the Church built on the rock will weather the storm. The house that falls apart or slips from its foundation proves it was a poorly built house, of poor workmanship and therefore never built by the Carpenter. That house was built by Man.