

Sabbath School Lesson #8 – Peter and the Rock – 14-20 May 2016

Christ, the Rock, asked Peter and the other disciples, “But whom say ye that I am?” (Matthew 16:15), to which Peter replied, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16). We hope the reader will be familiar with Matthew 16:13-26.

Jesus had returned from healing the Gentile woman’s daughter, and was in the region of Caesarea Philippi, in the north east of Palestine, near the source of the Jordan, when He put the question to His disciples, “Whom do men say that I the Son of man am?” The answer was ready, because everybody was talking more or less about Jesus, and the disciples knew what was being said. There were various opinions about the new Teacher, but most of them were the result of thoughtless curiosity, instead of being based on an intelligent appreciation of His work. Some said He was Elijah, some that He was John the Baptist, and others that He was Jeremiah or some other of the ancient prophets. All knew that He was more than an ordinary man. All the answers indicated that people thought He was one risen from the dead; but since they thought that He had this mark of Divine power, why could they not readily admit that He was the coming One for whom God had prepared a new body?

By the answers which showed their ignorance of Christ’s real nature, the people showed themselves to be without excuse for not knowing Him. But those were the answers from the general public; then came the direct question: “Whom say ye that I am?” Promptly came the answer from Peter, “Thou art the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Anybody else might have known this, as well as Peter and the other disciples; for Peter did not know it by any wisdom or shrewdness that he possessed. Jesus questioned, “Blessed art thou Simon, son of Jona; for flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but My Father which is in heaven.” God is no respecter of persons, and is as willing to reveal the truth to all men as to any one person.

There was nothing in Christ’s bodily appearance to indicate that He was the Son of God. Indeed, that was rather against Him. It was written of Him, “He hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see Him, there is no beauty that we should desire Him” (Isaiah 53:2). But the flesh of Jesus veiled His Divinity, so that only the works that He did, and the words that He spoke, could make it known. Spiritual things “are spiritually discerned” (1 Corinthians 2:14). God is Spirit, and His sons are born, not of flesh nor of blood, but of the Spirit; and therefore only those who are spiritual can recognise them. Thus it is that to be “a lover of good men” (Titus 1:8) is a characteristic that marks one as taught by God, and so to that degree able to teach others. Thus, Peter could not discern “the Christ” by “flesh and blood.”

The term “flesh and blood” is often used in the Bible as a synonym of earthliness and mortality. It indicates everything that is the opposite of God. “Flesh and blood cannot inherit the kingdom of God; neither doth corruption inherit incorruption” (1 Corinthians 15:50). Christ Jesus, whose name is “God with us” (Matthew 1:23), God manifest in the flesh, reveals what the infinite power of God can do, what righteousness it can work, in spite of the weakness of the flesh, and through it. Jesus, “born of a woman, born under the law” (Galatians 4:4), was a partaker of flesh and blood, as all whom He came to redeem, and was therefore partaker of all human weakness in like measure; yet He never gave way to any weakness, and “knew no sin” (2 Corinthians 5:21). It shows that inherited and acquired weaknesses of our flesh cannot hinder the perfect manifestation of the righteousness of the Spirit of life in us, if we are earnestly desirous of it. The flesh cannot reveal godliness, but it cannot hinder godliness from revealing itself. Christ has “power over all flesh” (John 17:2), even over ours. While our flesh be corruptible until the coming of Christ, when this mortal shall put on immortality, and “corruptible shall put on incorruption;” the corruption of the flesh can be so cleansed by the stream of Christ’s life flowing through it, and still abiding in it, that no impurity will manifest itself. This is the glorious lesson to be learned from “the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

It is a glimpse of “the mystery of godliness” (1 Timothy 3:16). It reveals to us the fact – not the explanation of it – Christ can dwell in all His fulness in every man, so that each one has the whole of Him, and yet even “the heaven of heaven cannot contain Him.” Until we realise that Christ is infinitely more and greater than any or all flesh, greater even than the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth, we do not know Him as we ought to know Him in order to appreciate Him as our Saviour. “The flesh profiteth nothing.” “Henceforth know we no man after the flesh: yea though we have known Christ after the flesh, yet now henceforth know we Him no more” (2 Corinthians 5:16). When we know Christ as “a quickening Spirit” (1 Corinthians 15:45), we have really entered into the holiest by “a new and living way” (Hebrews 10:20) that He has consecrated for us through the veil. God grant that for everyone reading this, the veil may quickly be done away. Not only may Christ’s flesh no longer serve to veil His Divinity

from the eyes of our understanding, but may our flesh no longer serve as a veil to hide the shining forth of Him who “dwelleth between the cherubim” whose rightful throne is our heart.

Again we ask the question, ‘Why did Christ ask His disciples what men said of Him, and what they held Him to be?’ It was certainly not because He did not know, nor was it because of any feeling of vanity. It was evidently a desire to strengthen His disciples, to help them to avoid being affected by public opinion. The disciples had ‘an opinion of their own,’ and yet not of their own. It was not an opinion, but positive knowledge derived from God Himself. Only people who have this personal acquaintance with Christ, even through His Spirit, can really confess Him, and can give a positive testimony when others are in doubt. One thing must not be forgotten, and that is that talking about Christ does not make one a Christian. In the days of Ezekiel the people seemed to be talking of little else but the message that the prophet had from the Lord; but it amounted to nothing (see Ezekiel 33:30-32). It is true that “with the mouth confession is made unto salvation,” but this saving confession cannot be made unless “with the heart man believeth unto righteousness” (Romans 10:10). Not only does mere talking about Christ amount to nothing, but the most zealous profession of faith is worse than useless if the life itself does not make the confession. As it is written, “Burning lips and a wicked heart are like a potsherd covered with silver dross” (Proverbs 26:23).

Words, human words, are empty things. Only the Word of God is living and powerful and everlasting. It is not by talking, not by anything that any man can say, that the Christ of God can be made known. Belief in Christ’s Divinity cannot rest on human authority, not even on ecclesiastical authority. It is of no use merely to tell people that Jesus is the Son of God with power according to the Spirit of holiness by the resurrection from the dead, unless the word spoken is the Word of life – unless the speaker’s own life is in the words. It is not argument, but the manifestation of the life of Jesus Christ in the flesh, in spite of the flesh, that wins.

Moreover the fact that one has made a good confession of Christ’s Divinity does not ensure him against denying Him. How much knowledge of Christ’s Divinity ever really took possession of the mind of Judas, we do not know; but we do know that Peter, who was foremost in declaring Christ to be “the Son of the living God,” and who, when others forsook the Lord, said, “Thou hast the words of eternal life. And we believe and are sure that Thou art that Christ, the Son of the living God” (John 6:66-69), he denied the Master with oaths, saying, “I know not what thou sayest; I know not the Man” (Matthew 26:70-74). “Let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall” (1 Corinthians 10:12). “We are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence steadfast unto the end” (Hebrews 3:14).

Little time need be spent with one who believes the Bible, to show him who is the foundation on which the church is built. He does not even need to be told what is indeed the case – that the word “Peter” is not the same as the word rendered “rock” in Matthew 16:18. “For other foundation can no man lay than that is laid, which is Jesus Christ” (1 Corinthians 3:11). The church is built, not upon the apostles and prophets, who are a part of the church, but upon Jesus Christ, who is the chief corner Stone, and the entire foundation; for this tried Stone, this precious corner Stone, is laid in Zion for a foundation (Isaiah 28:16). Peter was indeed a stone, but a rolling stone, while Christ is the Rock, in whom is no unrighteousness. The word here rendered “rock” is the same that occurs in Matthew 7:24-25; 1 Corinthians 10:4; 1 Peter 2:7; and Romans 9:33. It is not Peter, not even the confession that Peter made, but Christ Himself, that constitutes the “sure foundation” of the church. Against this foundation the gates of hell – *hades*, the grave – could not prevail, for they could not hold Him. God brought Him forth from the grave, “having loosed the pains of death: because it was not possible that He should be holden of it” (Acts 2:24). Build on Christ, the solid Rock!

Those who make Peter the foundation of the church, forget that flesh and blood cannot reveal the Christ. The strongest man is as helpless as the weakest: all stand in equal need of Christ the only Rock. Were the keys of the kingdom of heaven not given to Peter? – Yes, to Peter and all other disciples, and not to them only, but to all the true and sincere believers in Christ. Wherever two or three believers are gathered in Christ’s name, there He is in the midst of them, with all power in heaven and earth. Every one who has been reconciled to God, He has given to him the word of reconciliation, that he may act as ambassador in the absence of Christ’s visible presence. Reference to Jeremiah 1:10 shows that this power to bind and loose was no new thing given to men. But it is no power inherent in man, and is possessed only by those who are filled with the Word; for it is the Word itself that works. Even Christ Himself said, “I can of Mine own self do nothing: as I hear, I judge” (John 5:30), and the servant is not above his Lord. But every servant may be as his Lord, and this assurance should make us confident in Christ, in the face of all the weakness of the flesh.