

# Following Jesus

JESUS IS THE MESSIAH, THE SAVIOR OF THE WORLD SENT BY GOD.

We live in a culture that no longer believes in truth and absolutes. People seem quite happy to mix and match their religious and worldview beliefs in any way they please, no matter how contradictory or mismatched they might be. Spiritual and religious pursuits for many have become more like a visit to a smorgasbord where people can pick and choose what they want to consume and simply ignore what does not appeal to them. They do not really focus on truth or intellectual consistency but rather go with whatever feels good or seems right for them.

None of the choices in today's hodgepodge of religions, including a spaghetti-like atheism called "Pastafarianism," offers anything that can match what God has provided in His Son. Jesus alone promises the righteousness we need to stand before God.

The study of passages about Peter's confession of the Messiah stands against the backdrop of Caesarea Philippi (Matt. 16:13-20; Mark 8:27-30; Luke 9:18-21). The significance of this location becomes more meaningful when viewed in the context of syncretism. The city's association with pagan worship practices and affiliations provided an interesting setting. Some ancient cultures considered Caesarea Philippi as the "gates of Hades" because of its proximity to a cave with links to the underworld in mythological beliefs. By choosing this location for His question and proclamation, Jesus symbolically positioned His mission against the syncretic backdrop, signifying the establishment of a monotheistic faith centered on His unique identity as the Messiah.



## Matthew 16:1-28

Matthew 16 is a pivotal chapter in the Gospel of Matthew, rich in theological significance and central to understanding Jesus's identity

and mission. This chapter can be divided into several key sections, each illustrating crucial moments in Jesus’s ministry and His interactions with both His disciples and religious leaders.

The chapter opens with the Pharisees and Sadducees approaching Jesus, demanding a sign from heaven to prove His authority. Jesus responded by telling them the only sign they would be given would be “the sign of Jonah” (vv. 1-4). Jesus and His disciples then sailed across the Sea of Galilee, and after the voyage Jesus warned them to beware of the teachings of the Pharisees and Sadducees (vv. 5-12).

The chapter’s most significant moment came at Caesarea Philippi when Peter confessed Jesus to be the Messiah (vv. 13-20). From this point, Jesus spoke more openly about His impending suffering, death, and resurrection (vv. 21-23). Finally, Jesus taught His disciples about the cost of discipleship, calling them to deny themselves and take up their crosses (vv. 24-28).

In summary, Matthew 16 is critical for revealing Jesus’s divine identity, the nature of true discipleship, and the foreshadowing of His redemptive work. It challenges readers to move beyond superficial understanding and embrace the deeper implications of following Christ.



## Know the Messiah (Matt. 16:13-20)

Outside Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked His disciples who people thought He was. He also challenged them to consider who they believed Him to be. Peter responded by acknowledging Jesus as the Messiah and Son of the living God. Jesus affirmed this response as an insight provided by God the Father and the foundation for the church.

### VERSE 13

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**When Jesus came to the region of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”**

Jesus traveled **to the region of Caesarea Philippi**, located on the slopes of Mount Hermon about twenty-five miles north of the Sea of Galilee. Philip the tetrarch had recently renamed the city of Paneas, a center of worship for the Greek god Pan, in honor of himself and Augustus Caesar.

Matthew offered no reason why Jesus and His disciples traveled to *Caesarea Philippi*. However, this location provided a more dramatic setting for Peter's confession for two reasons. First, Jesus's presence in this predominantly pagan territory emphasized His increased ministry to Gentiles. Second, a place devoted to the honor of the Roman emperor served as stunning backdrop to the declaration of Jesus's identity as Messiah, the King who would be given all authority and ultimately bring all human kingdoms to an end.

In order to prepare His disciples for the true nature of His messianic work, Jesus asked, **“Who do people say that the Son of Man is?”** His question was not a request for information concerning what the people thought, but rather it was meant to correct misconceptions the disciples themselves may have had concerning His identity and mission.

In Mark 8:27 and Luke 9:18, Jesus asked, “Who do people [or the crowds] say I am?” whereas Matthew substituted “Son of Man” for “I.” While some have concluded that this has little significance, Matthew's use of *Son of Man* demonstrated Jesus's own understanding of His identity did not depend on what other people thought.

#### VERSE 14

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**They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others, Elijah; still others, Jeremiah or one of the prophets.”**

The range of the disciples' answers indicates that they had knowledge about the peoples' messianic expectations. Herod Antipas's (son of Herod the Great) paranoia had already led him to identify Jesus as **John the Baptist** come back to life (14:1-2), which could have fueled this rumor among the people. Another opinion offered up **Elijah** the prophet as a possibility. Malachi 4:5 speaks of Elijah's future role before the day of the Lord. The focus on the prospect of judgment and miracles of nature and healing logically reminded some people of the biblical accounts of *Elijah* (1 Kings 17-19; 21; 2 Kings 1-2). The rabbis of Jesus's day held that Elijah would appear as the forerunner of the Messiah.

Due to His strong opposition to the temple leaders, some speculated that Jesus may have been a resurrected **Jeremiah**, who himself experienced great opposition from the religious and ruling authorities of his day when the prophet foretold the downfall of Jerusalem, the destruction of the temple, and the exile of the people. Others speculated that Jesus was **one of the prophets** from the Old Testament returned.

The disciples' responses suggest the people believed Jesus to be a powerful prophet of God. They saw in Him the fulfillment of prophecy.

However, they had no clear understanding of the Messiah. In general, the people thought that Messiah would come as a conquering warrior or political leader. Some may have thought the Messiah would be a prophet or would come to power after the return of the prophets. Yet all these answers fell short of honoring Jesus for who He really is.

#### VERSE 15

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**“But you,” he asked them, “who do you say that I am?”**

Jesus pressed His disciples for their response to His question. **“But you”** introduces His question, marking a contrast. Jesus wanted to know what His chosen twelve disciples believed about Him. Jesus asked the entire group, **“But you . . . who do you say that I am?”** in order to give them the opportunity to move beyond the realm of opinion to an outright confession of their faith in Him.

#### VERSE 16

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**Simon Peter answered, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”**

**Simon Peter answered** Jesus’s question for the entire group. In a region largely devoted to a pagan god, Peter declared of Jesus, **“You are the Messiah, the Son of the living God.”** The term *Messiah* comes from a Greek word often translated as “Christ” (KJV, NASB) and means “anointed one.”

This is the only confession of Jesus as the Messiah in the Gospel of Matthew. Peter immediately added the title *the Son of living God*, a characteristically Jewish way of referring to God. This designation distinguished Jesus from the lifeless idols as the one true God who alone can impart life to others.

#### VERSE 17

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**Jesus responded, “Blessed are you, Simon son of Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father in heaven.”**

Jesus acknowledged Peter’s strong confession of faith. The Greek word for **blessed** means especially favored by God and was the word Matthew used at the beginning of each beatitude (5:3-10). Jesus affirmed that Peter’s confession did not come solely as a result of human understanding and reasoning (**flesh and blood** is a Jewish idiom for human agency);

rather while human reasoning played a role in the process Peter's statement was ultimately a revelation from God. Note the intimacy in the phrase, **my Father in heaven**. The Jews spoke of God as Father, but they preferred "our Father." Jesus's relationship with His Father went deeper. In declaring that His Father had revealed His true identity to Peter, Jesus was also speaking of the unique relationship Jesus had with the Father.

#### VERSE 18

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**"And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overpower it."**

Jesus's declaration, "**You are Peter**," mirrors Peter's confession of Jesus, "You are the Messiah" (v. 16). Various interpretations have been given concerning what Jesus meant when He said, "**and on this rock I will build my church**." Some suggest Peter is the rock. The play on words in Greek between *Peter* (*Petros*) and *this rock* (*petra*) make sense only if Jesus spoke directly to Peter and explained the significance of this connection. In Aramaic, the language in which this sentence was likely spoken, both "Peter" and "rock" are *kepha*. While Christ is the foundation stone of the church (1 Cor. 3:10-11), Paul notes that the church is "built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone" (Eph. 2:20). In the book of Acts, Peter played a primary leadership role in the early church.

Another view is that Peter's confession served as the rock on which Jesus would *build* His church. Therefore Jesus declared that Peter's act of confessing Jesus as the Messiah (or "Christ") served as the foundation stone for His church and the model for all believers.

Promising the indestructibility of His church, Jesus declared that "**the gates of Hades will not overpower it**." The metaphor *gates of Hades* refers to the powers of death (Isa. 38:10) and essentially meant the same thing as "the gates of death" (Job 38:17; Pss. 9:13; 107:18). Jesus assured His followers that His church will never die despite His own death on a cross which He would soon announce (Matt. 16:21). No matter how relentless and brutal the attacks against believers become, the church will never be destroyed.

#### VERSE 19

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**"I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will have been loosed in heaven."**

Jesus described the authority He delegated specifically to Peter and generally to the church as **the keys to the kingdom of heaven**. A master of the house would only hand the keys to the doors of the estate to the most trusted servant. In handing them over, Jesus would share His authority to open and close, to lock and unlock, the entrance to His home. Therefore, His servants will declare that Jesus is the Messiah and that faith in Him is the only way to come into *the kingdom of heaven*. The phrases **will have been bound** and **will have been loosed** stressed how God's sovereign initiative will be worked out in the church. Jesus gave His disciples responsibility, authority, and supernatural power to lead the church according to His will and His teaching.

## VERSE 20

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**Then he gave the disciples orders to tell no one that he was the Messiah.**

That Jesus **gave the disciples orders to tell no one that he was the Messiah** likely shocked them, especially following Peter's remarkable confession of faith (v. 16). Jesus probably wanted to lessen the excitement of the people who might have started a revolution against Rome and sought to make Him king of Israel (John 6:15). At this point, Jesus seemed interested in not directly confronting Jewish leaders' and peoples' misconceptions about who He was.

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### **Explore Further**

Read the article "Messiah" on pages 1087–1092 in the *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, Revised and Expanded*. Why are prophecies about the Messiah important for our understanding of who Jesus is?

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## **Embrace His Mission** (Matt. 16:21-23)

Jesus revealed to His disciples the divine plan for His mission which included His suffering, death, and resurrection. Peter, struggling to accept this, rebuked Jesus, insisting such things must not occur. Jesus sharply rebuked Peter, calling him a stumbling block and accusing him of prioritizing human concerns over God's will.

## VERSE 21

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**From then on Jesus began to point out to his disciples that it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders, chief priests, and scribes, be killed, and be raised the third day.**

Matthew marked a second crucial point in the narrative with the phrase **from then on** (see 4:17), and Jesus's focus began shifting towards **Jerusalem**. To this point, Jesus had stayed mainly in the region of Galilee thus avoiding spending too much time in *Jerusalem*, the religious and political heart of Israel. He gave His disciples the shocking news that **it was necessary for him to go to Jerusalem and suffer many things** at the hands of the religious leaders there (**the elders, chief priests, and scribes**). Up to this point, Jesus had only implied that He must suffer, **be killed, and be raised the third day** (12:40; 16:4), but now He declared it plainly.

## VERSE 22

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**Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, “Oh no, Lord! This will never happen to you!”**

Unsurprisingly, Peter initiated the disciples' reaction. He **took him aside** to get up close to Him so that he might **rebuke** Jesus privately. Peter assumed that he knew better than Jesus. Although Peter addressed Jesus as **Lord**, he did not relate to Him as his Lord in this moment. His first statement in the phrase **“Oh, no”** may be literally translated “mercy on you,” asking God to show His mercy by preventing what Jesus had predicted from coming to pass.

## VERSE 23

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**Jesus turned and told Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me because you're not thinking about God's concerns but human concerns.”**

In a matter of only a few minutes, Peter, the rock, had become a **hindrance**, a stumbling block. By addressing Peter as **Satan**, Jesus indicated that *Satan* had inspired Peter's response. Since the beginning, the devil had attempted to circumvent God's plan (4:8-9), and now Peter had inadvertently fallen prey to Satan's deception. Jesus set Peter straight by telling him that he was **“not thinking about God's concerns but human concerns.”**



## Explore Further

Because we desire comfort, security, success, and prosperity, we face the challenge of these things constantly interfering with our ultimate calling to follow Jesus. What are some ways you can put Jesus's call to spread the gospel and make disciples as your first priority every day?

- What are some ways you can do so with your local church?
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## Become His Disciple (Matt. 16:24-26)

Jesus explained the standard for His disciples. Following Jesus requires self-denial and self-sacrifice for His sake. The Christian life is a paradox where death produces life and sacrifice provides great gain.

### VERSE 24

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**Then Jesus said to his disciples, “If anyone wants to follow after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.”**

Jesus spelled out **to His disciples** what it meant to **follow after** Him. To follow after Jesus is to become His committed disciple. The first two imperatives, **deny himself** and **take up his cross** indicate Jesus was calling for singular decisive acts or decisions. The third imperative, **follow me**, flows out of the first two and the Greek indicates Jesus was calling for a commitment to a continual, on-going life of following Him.

Denying self means putting God and His kingdom priorities first. Even before Jesus went to the cross, He called for His disciples to behave in such a way as to put their own lives on the line—taking up their crosses—to join Him in living in such a way that the desire for self-preservation and one's own self-interests are subordinate to following Jesus.

The Roman Empire used the horror of crucifixion as one way to keep conquered populations in line, executing criminals and rebels from the lower and slave classes by the thousands. While the disciples did not yet have a full understanding of what Jesus's sacrifice would entail, they would have been familiar with the various aspects of Roman crucifixion. So Jesus's call to take up their crosses and follow Him would have been seen by them as a radical, shocking statement. Taking up the cross meant to follow Jesus wherever that may lead and no matter the consequences.

## VERSE 25

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**“For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of me will find it.”**

Jesus became more clear what self-denial and cross-bearing meant: **“whoever wants to save his life will lose it.”** Those who choose to focus their time and resources in gaining worldly pleasures and comforts will lose what it means to truly live. By trying to avoid self-sacrifice and suffering for the sake of Christ in this life, in the end they forfeit eternal life.

Paradoxically, **“whoever loses his life because of me will find it.”** Jesus was referring to a person who sacrificed the things of this world for the sake of following Him, serving God and others. It means putting God and His priorities first. Sacrificing one’s own life out of devotion to Christ might seem radical, but when weighing the outcomes of both paths, only the decision to pursue Christ will result in finding true, lasting life.

## VERSE 26

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**“For what will it benefit someone if he gains the whole world yet loses his life? Or what will anyone give in exchange for his life?”**

With two rhetorical questions, Jesus drove home His point. The first, **“what will it benefit someone if he gains the whole world yet loses his life?”** (“soul,” ESV, KJV). The *life* Jesus was speaking of is eternal life, for that is of more value than gaining all the pleasures and things that most people desire in this life. The second question, **“what will anyone give in exchange for his life?”** points to the magnitude of the loss of one’s eternal soul because nothing in the world is sufficient to trade for it. Eternal life has far greater worth than all the wealth, fame, and power the world has to offer because in the end all such things are temporary and will pass away along with the world itself (1 John 2:15-17).



### **Explore Further**

What are some examples of self-denial that might be necessary for Christians to follow Jesus? What might carrying one’s cross look like in daily life? What steps are necessary to truly follow Jesus?