

The Gates of Hell November 25, 2018

Friends have asked me what impacted me most on my trip to the Holy Land. You might think that visiting the birth place of Jesus in Bethlehem, or the place of his crucifixion or walking the via Delarosa would have topped the charts. That was intriguing, but frankly, there have been so many shires and cathedrals built on those sites, and it has become SO commercial, that it seemed so far removed from the Jesus I have known and envisioned in my heart.

And, there were many sites on our trip that were impressive by their sheer magnitude, like the Pyramids. Whoa!

But the greatest *spiritual* impact for me was. . . a cave

Here it is – a cave.

Anyone recognize this cave?

It's in Caesarea Philippi.

I'm sure that clears it up for you. (ha)

Here you see Caesarea Philippi north of the Sea of Galilee



During the time of Jesus, Caesarea Philippi was one of the political and cultural centers of the Greeks and Romans who dominated the region which was otherwise populated by Semitic-speaking people.

It had historical significance because this imposing outcropping of rock had been the worship nexus for many gods down through the millennia, most recently the Greek god Pan.

You've undoubtedly seen his image, the half man, half goat flute player. He's the fertility god.

This is actually a very G-rated image of Pan.

So, what's the significance of the cave?

To the pagan mind, this cave at Caesarea Philippi created a gate to the underworld, where Pan went during the winter and then returned to earth in the spring.

Back in the day, a giant spring gushed from the mouth of the cave, tumbling down the valley and into the Sea of Galilee.



The belief was that Pan traveled to and from the underworld (the place of death) through this water passage in the cave.

That made the cave, quite literally, the Gate of Hell.

Because of this importance, the Greeks built a temple there to the god Pan.

(By the way, Pan was a scary, terrifying god, and from his name we get the word PANIC!)

In order to entice Pan to return each year in the Spring, the people of Caesarea Philippi threw sacrifices into the cave (you can see an old altar there) and they engaged in horrible deeds, including prostitution and sex between humans and goats.

Because of Caesarea Philippi's reputation, a devout Jews would have avoided this area like the plague, not wanting any contact with a place of such despicable acts.

Going to Caesarea Philippi was like going to Time Square in the 70's!

It was the red-light district of their world.

Jesus' disciples must have been shocked when he brought them to this area.

But he did, and what happened there impacts us in New Beginnings in 2018.

When Jesus came to Caesarea Philippi, he asked them "Who do people say that I am?". After they listed a few options (John the Baptist, Elijah), he asked them, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter, never one to hesitate, said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God!" Jesus responded, "And I tell you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church,

and the gates of Hell will not prevail against it." **Matthew 16:13–23**

YES!

A little aside here. There's lots of talk about who or what this rock was upon which Jesus will build his church.

The most common understanding is that the rock is Peter. This interpretation is certainly embraced by Catholics, who regard Peter as the first pope.

Another understanding is says that the rock is Peter's confession: "Jesus is the Christ" Meaning that *Jesus* is the foundation of the church.

That would certainly be supported by Paul's statement in **1 Corinthians 3:11**

For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ.

An additional understanding that's gaining traction is that "this rock" Jesus spoke of was neither Peter himself nor his confession, but rather the massive rock structure looming over them. (*This interpretation is set forth in the Lexham Geographic Commentary.*)

Against the backdrop of this massive rock, with all its carved images of gods, representing cultures and world views that seemed so insurmountable to a dwindling group of disciples, Jesus says, “On top of all of this, the millennia of worship of false God, I will build MY church. All the others have fallen, but my church will prevail.

The Son of the *LIVING* GOD, as opposed to this god of death, would upend all cultures, all empires, all world views.

Right here, in the cultural and political center of the pagan world with its fascination with sex and power and death, Jesus will build his church,
and the Gates of Hell looming overhead will not prevail against it.

You can pick your interpretation, but the resounding declaration in all is the same.
**THE GATES OF HELL WILL NOT PREVAIL AGAINST THE CHURCH,
THE TRUE BODY OF CHRIST WILL SURVIVE AND THRIVE.**

I’ve wondered. Did Jesus use this metaphor because the cave was right there,
towering over them with intimidating significance,
or did he have his disciples make this 30-mile journey
(a 14-hour walk from the Sea of Galilee)
BECAUSE he was orchestrating this powerful moment
at the Gates of Hell.

I don’t know, but in either case, the resound declaration is the same:

**I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH
AND THE GATES OF HELL WILL NOT PREVAIL AGAINST IT.**

And this he declared when he knew what was coming down the pike.
He was going to be betrayed by one of his closest followers.
He was going to be denied three times by one of his dearest friends.
He was going to be conspired against by his own people.
He was going to be turned over to be killed
because of the cowardice of the official in charge, namely Pilot.
His earthly ministry is soon come to an abrupt end.
He was going to be crucified on a Roman cross.
All of the apostles would be persecuted, and all but John killed.
Emperor Nero would throw Christians to the lions as a sporting event at the Colosseum.

Yet, knowing all this, Jesus says,
[I will build my church and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.](#)

That spoke to me on so many levels.

That spoke to me because I love New Beginnings
which is a local expression of the body of Christ.
The work of God that flows through New Beginnings will prevail,
and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

That spoke to me because I love you'll.
Those here today who are in Christ, part of his enduring body, his enduring church . . .
The work that God is doing in and through you will prevail,
and the gates of hell will not prevail against it.

And that spoke to me as one of the small bricks (meaning me) in the church of Jesus Christ,

Isaiah 54:17 speaks of this promise for this small brick, and for you.

No weapon fashioned against you shall prosper,
And every tongue which rises against you in judgment you shall condemn.
This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord,
And their vindication is from Me,"
(Says me? Thank God, NO!) Says the Lord.

NO WEAPON:

Not death or the fear of death, nor the obsession of death.

(Which, by the way, is what bothers me about how we celebrate Halloween)

Not the Imperial Cult – the worship of the empire – being number ONE!
and its lust for power and control

Not the predominant culture,
with its glorification of self – it's about me-myself and I!
and with its lust for pleasure through self-indulgence and sexual immorality

Not military powers
and the use of violence to assert one's supremacy,
especially when done in the name of God.

Not any strategy the devil can conjure up to distract, malign, wound or slander

Not human failure

Not human defiance

Not betrayal

NO WEAPON

So now, what will that require of us?

The Scripture continues in Matthew, and you'd expect to hear,
"So guys, since we win, sound battle cry, organize, unite, storm the gates of hell!

Come on. We've gotta fight the good fight!
It's time to reclaim this world for Christ, to reclaim our nation for Christ.

Down through the centuries Christians have certainly heard this call:
Undoubtedly the Crusaders of the Middle Ages rose to the call.

But that call appeals to our pride in an attitude of triumphalism
and births our militant aggressiveness.
That call is fueled our sense of exceptionalism.

But those who hear this call have failed to read what comes next in the story.
Right after, the gates of hell will not prevail, we read. . .

Matthew 16:21

From that time on Jesus began to explain to his disciples that he must go to
Jerusalem and suffer many things at the hands of the elders, the chief priests and the
teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.

The mind-boggling paradox of the kingdom of God!

Here's the truth:

Jesus' bold declaration is only reassuring and energizing if you're ready to be cruciformed.
If you have surrendered your life to the purposes of God.

If you have arrived at the point where you with Paul can say,

"I am crucified with Christ, nevertheless I live, but not I, but Christ lives in me."

You see, Jesus' declaration is not, *YOU* will prevail,
and all your ambitions and plans and desires will prevail.

He says his *church* will prevail.

What *he's* doing in the world will prevail.

What he's doing in and through New Beginnings will prevail.

What he's doing in and through you and I will prevail.

Now, if that is your heart's desire, then this is great news.

But, if you are living for your own happiness and pleasure,
take no comfort in these words.

The cruciformed life is always a joyful one, but not always a happy one.

(One-third of your life you can expect to be a lament.)

And Jesus doesn't suggest it will get any better as time goes on!

Listen to Paul in 2 Timothy 3

1You should know this, Timothy, that in the last days there will be very difficult times. **2**For people will love only themselves and their money. They will be boastful and proud, scoffing at God, disobedient to their parents, and ungrateful. They will consider nothing sacred. **3**They will be unloving and unforgiving; they will slander others and have no self-control. They will be cruel and hate what is good. **4**They will betray their friends, be reckless, be puffed up with pride, and love pleasure rather than God. **5**They will act religious, but they will reject the power that could make them godly.

And unfortunately, he's not talking about the people outside the institutional church. He's describing teachers *in* the church who "oppose the truth by their actions just as Jannes and Jambres opposed Moses."

Paul says to Timothy, basically, brace yourself, 'cause this is how it's going to be. In fact . . .

Yes, and everyone who wants to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will suffer persecution . . . But you must remain faithful.

That's the reality check . . . but in no way does it undermine the promise.

I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH AND THE GATES OF HELL WILL NOT PREVAIL AGAINST IT.

So come what may, don't become defensive.

Don't go on the offense.

Simply stand your ground.

Whatever comes, STAND.

As **Ephesians 6** says,

Our struggle is not against flesh and blood, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the powers of this dark world and against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly realms. Therefore, put on the full armor of God, so that when the day of evil comes, you may be able to stand your ground, and after you have done everything, stand.

Just STAND, knowing who prevails in the end.

STAND ready to be cruciformed by whatever means God chooses.

So let me ask you . . .

What weapon has been fashioned against the church universal?

Is the church universal under attack?

What weapon has been fashioned against this church?

Is our church, New Beginnings, under attack?

What weapon has been fashioned against you personally?

Are you under attack?

No weapon fashioned against you shall prosper . . .

This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord.

**I WILL BUILD MY CHURCH
AND THE GATES OF HELL WILL NOT PREVAIL AGAINST IT**