

THE GATES OF HELL

In this article I would like to look at a familiar scripture to most of us and challenge you to look at this verse in a very different way.

I would like to look at Matthew 16:18 where Christ speaks about building His church. The verse reads: "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it."

The Catholic view of this verse is that Peter is the rock on which the church is built to support their view that they have the power to change things like the day on which the sabbath is kept.

Peter, however, is translated from the Greek word "petros" meaning small stone in contrast to the Greek word "petra" meaning a large rock on which the church is built upon in this verse so the Church of God has always stated the rock on which the church is built is Jesus Christ.

In the next verse, Matthew 16:19 Jesus went on to say: "And I will give the keys of the kingdom of Heaven to you. And whatever you may bind on earth shall occur, having been bound in Heaven, and whatever you may loose on earth shall occur, having been loosed in Heaven."

The Catholic Church also sees the interpretation of this as giving Peter and succeeding popes the permission to change laws as they see fit, even the ten commandments, such as the change of the Sabbath from Saturday to Sunday.

The context is unclear whether the keys to the kingdom is given to just Peter or all the apostles. The keys to the kingdom is likely the knowledge of how to enter the kingdom of God. Luke 11:52 speaks of the key of knowledge which the Jewish lawyers had taken away from the people.

The binding and loosing power is unlikely a reference to changing doctrine. Just like the judges of Old Testament times the apostles could not change laws. What they were to do was clarify and judge on the application of laws in particular situations. This didn't mean God carte blanche supported their bad judgments that clearly broke the spirit and intent of the laws God had given them. When they misjudged the application of the law such as the Pharisees this was sternly disapproved by Jesus.

Matthew 16:19 is likely to be a transference of the power of spiritual judgment to the ministry of the church that was given to judges in Deuteronomy 17:8-11 where if a matter was too hard for people to judge on they could bring it to the judges and they would have to submit to the ruling of the judges. The members did not have to bring a matter to the judges if they could reach an agreement for themselves but if they did they had to submit to the ruling. The Apostle Paul discussed this power of judgment in the church in 1 Corinthians 6:1-8 when members were going to court against each other. Some of these matters could have been brought before the elders to decide upon. Depending on the nature of some disputes some will need to go before the courts of the land.

My particular focus for the rest of this article will be on the latter part of Matthew 16:18 where Jesus went on to say that “the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”

The common interpretation is that the “it” here refers to the church and this latter part of the verse means that the church is in the defensive position being attacked by Satan but Satan shall not win and the church will never die.

This principle of the church never dying is a correct principle seen in the prophecies of the book of Revelation with the existence of the church right up to the end time which could also include the interpretation of church eras drawn from Revelation 2 and 3.

In Acts 8 it speaks of the apostles having to come to Samaria to lay hands on new converts that Phillip the deacon had baptised which shows the usual method of the Holy Spirit being given requires the presence of a minister and for the church to now be existing there would probably need to be an unbroken chain of ministers from then up to the present day.

That said, is this principle of the church being attacked yet never being destroyed by Satan what Jesus is trying to convey in Matthew 16:18?

When I was new to the church I was fascinated to learn about the history of God’s true church over the centuries and recall the common interpretation of Matthew 16:18 mentioned in relation to that history.

While I accepted this point of view at the time there was one thing in this verse I could never properly explain and be able to reconcile with that interpretation of the verse – that was Jesus’ use of the word gates when He speaks about the gates of hell. What on earth did Jesus have in mind when He used the word “gates”?

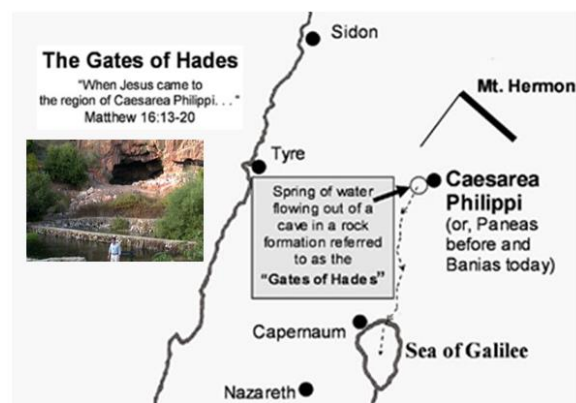
If we are being attacked by Satan why even use this word gates for the party that is doing the attacking? The best thing that I could come up with was the imagery of gates of a spooky cemetery like out of some Scooby Doo cartoon.



That was the best explanation that I could come up with and I sat that one on the shelf in my mind for many years. I was later challenged on the meaning of this verse when I purchased a terrific DVD series called “That The World May Know” put out by Focus on the Family which was all shot on location in Israel at various archaeological sites with biblical lessons drawn from the historical and geographical background of the land of Israel.

One of the lessons was at Tell Dan in the very north of Israel near one of the sources of the Jordan River right next to Caesarea Philippi, where Jesus and the disciples were when He spoke the words of Matthew 16.

Sadly, I didn’t make it up there on my two trips to Israel but I have it at the top of my list for next time.



In our 21st century our cities do not have walls with gates but if you said the term “the gates of hell” to someone in the first century the imagery that would immediately spring to mind is that of a walled city with gates.

The presenter of the DVD series I bought when discussing Matthew 16:18 said recall to mind all the city gates we have visited on our tour of all the archaeological sites. He then asked a simple but challenging question - if Jesus is making an analogy of hell being a city with gates just like those they had visited then who is attacking who?

If Jesus is drawing the analogy of hell being a city with gates then we would have to conclude that Satan and his kingdom is the one being attacked not the one doing the attacking.

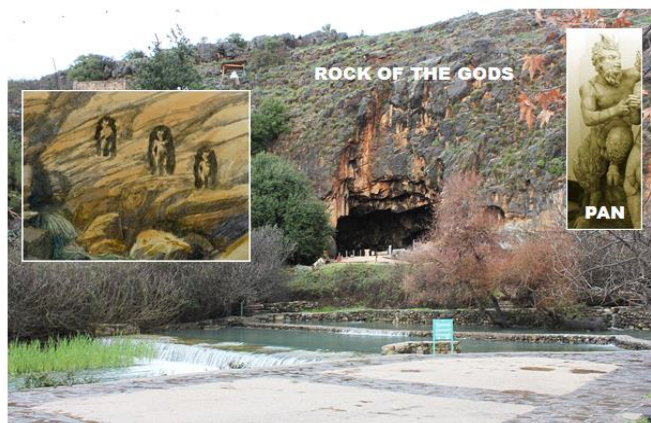
If Hell is being compared to a city with GATES then who is attacking who?



Do we have anything in the context of this passage that might support Jesus using this analogy of hell being a city with gates being attacked? The Greek word for hell used here is hades meaning a grave. If we substitute grave for hell it sounds rather weird – the gates of the grave. Makes no sense at all. There is, however, another use of the word hades. Hades was also used in Greek mythology for the pagan underworld – the realm of the dead.

This is significant when we look at the out-of-the-way place that Jesus took the disciples to in Matthew 16. At one of the sources of the Jordan at Tell Dan was a cave with a spring. In Christ’s time pagans worshipped the Greek god Pan who was half-man, half-goat at this site.

They believed that this cave was the gate or entrance to the underworld - a literal gate to hell. The great rocky outcrop above the cave was also known as the rock of the gods.



THE GATES OF HADES (UNDERWORLD)

The presenter of the DVD series went on to give his alternate interpretation saying that the church has to attack and confront Satan and the evils of this world and do whatever we can to make this a better world.

That alternative is influenced by the Protestant view that this is the only time of salvation for all people which I believe is not correct. Jesus said in John 18:36 that this was not his world and if that if it was His servants would fight. We can only make a small dent at best on the all-encompassing evils in this world if we were to go about it like Protestant churches try to.

If we rule out the alternate interpretation given by that presenter on that DVD series then how are we to interpret Matthew 16:18 if Jesus really is drawing the analogy of hell being a city with gates and that hell is what is being attacked?

We are only left with two possibilities. The first one is that the church attacking the gates of hell is not something that occurs in this age but in the world to come. We know from Revelation 19 that the church will be a part of the victorious army of Christ that will conquer the kingdoms of this world at His return.

Speaking of this time Psalm 149 says “Let the high praises of God be in their mouth, and a two-edged sword in their hand, to carry out vengeance on the nations and punishments on the peoples, to bind their kings with chains and their nobles with iron-bands, to carry out on them the judgment written; this is an honor for all His saints” (verses 6-9).

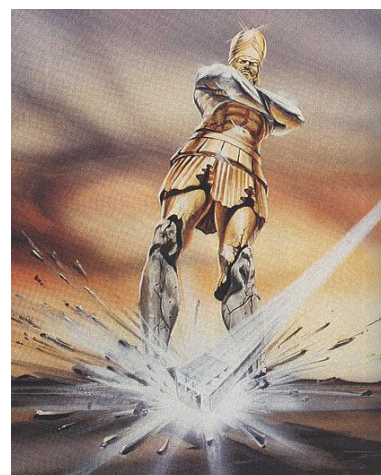
The second possibility is that the “it” at the end of the verse does not refer to the church but something or someone else. Both the common interpretation and that DVD presenter’s alternative interpretation assumes that “it” is the church. This is natural since the immediate noun or subject before the word “it” is the church however it is not the only subject other than hell mentioned in the verse.

It could also be understood this way – the gates of hell shall not prevail against it or the Rock upon which the church is built. Remember the context of this verse is immediately after Christ has asked His disciples who they and others think that He, Jesus Christ, is.

Is there anywhere else in the scriptures perhaps where we see this imagery of the rock prevailing against and crushing the gates of hell?

What about this image on the right of a great stone destroying the kingdoms of this world as seen in the vision of Daniel 2? Might this be what Jesus is drawing upon and trying to convey in Matthew 16:18?

In Daniel 2 where it speaks of a great rock being carved out without hands and striking the great image on his toes before completely destroying the kingdoms of this world which are manipulated and controlled by Satan and the demons.



Additionally we know Satan himself and his cohorts will at Christ’s command be consigned to the bottomless pit and not be able to influence mankind throughout the millennium. This, to me, is the most likely of these two possibilities.

In conclusion, to defend the common interpretation of the church being on the defensive and being attacked by Satan one MUST come up with a plausible explanation for the use of the word gates in this verse for the attacking party and not simply ignore its use and its implications.

The use of the word gates and the location that He was at the time He said it strongly argues that Jesus really is drawing the analogy of hell being a city with gates and that hell is what is being attacked, not the church.

Satan and his kingdom will not prevail in the end. The Great Rock carved without hands, Jesus Christ, will ultimately prevail against Satan and his kingdom when He returns in power and glory.