

Introduction

So far, in our study of Matthew 16.13-20, we have learned that Christ promises to construct an assembly of sinners through the confession of faith in Him as messianic Lord. What Peter confessed correctly, He preached authoritatively as the foundation that the church confesses willingly and publicly (Rom 10.9-10; thus, those healed from demonic oppression do not remain mute). This assembly is the new Israel, the new covenant community of brothers and sisters in a new human family. He calls us together in newness of life (Rom 6.4) that we attain by discipleship and church self-discipline (Mat 18.15-20) built on the massive foundation rock of Peter and the apostles (Eph 2.20). Thus, the words of the apostles are the very words of God. In His building program, Jesus efficaciously elicits the confession of faith in Him *through* which He saves us. We have salvation *by Christ* through faith. Furthermore, by the power of His grace, Jesus builds His church by bringing slaves to sin through the entryway of baptism into the church (Rom 6.4; 1 Cor 12.13).

Thus, we have many things in this highly significant passage of Scripture: definition of the church, the word of God as the true and sole foundation of the church, and implications from the foundation regarding discipleship and church discipline. However, we have not yet addressed what I want to call *the* promise of the text. Of course, the entire passage is a promise looking to the future: Jesus says, **I will build my church**, but the promise I have in mind is the promise that He makes about the church, or better, the promise that He makes to the church. The promise is that He will build His church and *the gates of hell will not prevail against it*.

His promise, therefore, presupposes conflict of some sort with the gates of hell and victory in this conflict. As we shall see, the subject in view is death, so, today we will consider this conflict in two points: 1) conflict with death is real, and 2) victory over death is certain. Emphasis will be on the second point, which gives the title for this message: "Building the Church on Peter with Promise."

1A. Conflict with death is real

We can get the ball rolling here by noting how the subject of death emerges in the text: **I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it** (Mat 16.18). The relationship that Jesus expresses between His church and the gates of hell is like two parties in a struggle: one party will prevail and the other party will not prevail. In this battle, the gates of hell are the losers; they will not prevail in warfare with the church. Of course, gates do not fight in a war. Gates are defensive positions of a city under siege. The city here is Hades, the unseen place of the dead, or in a word, death. Ridderbos gives a helpful comment on the phrase, "the gates of death": "the picture that it evokes is one of a fortress or prison with thick, impregnable gates, where death is king and the dead are held captive. Once someone has entered these gates, no human or earthly power can rescue him" (*Matthew* 304). What Jesus is telling us is that there is conflict between the church He will build on Peter and death.

The church is made up of sinners that Jesus makes into living stones in God's building, but sinners are subject to dying and death (Rom 8.10, **the body is dead because of sin, the Spirit is life because of righteousness**). Although Jesus is universal sovereign and Sabbath king as *risen* Lord, His people (most of them) must face the grim reaper. Even though God raised Jesus from the dead and even though He is our Savior, we must still experience death as the consequence of sin for God has so ordered it. Death is something that you and I must experience unless Jesus returns during our lifetime. It is a basic reality that we should ponder and come to terms with. It is a fact ("a hard fact"), but we must remember that the death of His saints is precious in the eyes of the

Lord. We need to incorporate some of that preciousness to God into our thinking, and we must do so without some form of denial, but in full grip of the real conflict that we have with death.

Therefore, two comments are in order to view conflict with death as a reality, a reality that we do not deny.

1) First, when we think of the reality of death, we must consider it something abnormal. Biblically speaking, we are way off the mark if we speak of death as simply part of life. It is wrong to think that death in the world and in the human family is just part of what is normal, part of the food chain, and simply a natural event. No, death is an unnatural event. It is the result of sin. By man, sin entered into the world and death by sin (Rom 5.12). In a conversation a few years ago, Jay Adams and I were reminiscing about the faculty at Westminster Seminary back when he was a teacher and I was a student. In the middle of the conversation, he said this about one of the most godly faculty members: “The last time I saw him he was bent over and almost crippled; there before my eyes, I could see the horrendous effects of sin. I do not mean that he was not a godly man. He was, but aging and death are the effects of sin.” To be sure, death is a regular part of life, that is, it occurs regularly: generation after generation, family-by-family, and person-to-person, we hear the inevitable phrase, “**And He died**” (cf. Gen 5.5-31; 8.29, and so forth). It is regular, relentlessly regular, but death in the human family is abnormal due to the abnormality of sin.

2) Second, it is something we do fear, and should fear in some measure. People who speak much about how they do not fear death may be trying to convince themselves that they have nothing to fear. However, sin has strength by the law and thus sin gives death a powerful sting (1 Cor 15.56, **The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law**). Therefore, we should have some measure of fear about death. We fear the unknown and death has many unknown factors surrounding it. Very few people experience death ahead of time like Lazarus (Jn 11). It is not something to which we are accustomed, like things we experience repeatedly and eventually become comfortable with them (though death can be distant and dream-like per visual media).

Furthermore, we should fear death, or at least be uneasy with it, because by physical death we as believers enter into an unnatural state of affairs between our death and the resurrection at the end of history. Theologians call this “between” time the intermediate state. The way the Apostle Paul describes it indicates that though in death, we are with the Lord (and that is better than being here away from Him, 2 Cor 5.6-8), nevertheless, we will be with Him while our bodies are in the grave. Being somewhere without our bodies means that we are not all there. This is different from speaking of people in the body who are not all there! Being somewhere without our bodies is like leaving your arm or leg behind on a battlefield. Your arm or leg is part of what makes you, you. As human beings, we are material-immaterial unities; in this vein, Paul speaks of the inner and outer man (the outer man is dying, but the inner man is being renewed daily, 2 Cor 4.16). Death means that we consciously enter the Lord’s presence to be with Him and know that we are there with Him. However, Paul says that to go somewhere without a body is like being unclothed; it is a state of exposure, of feeling exposed, naked, and unprotected (2 Cor 5.3-4). It is something we do not desire. It is an inexplicable, mysterious, anomalous, abnormal, and unnatural state of affairs.

Thus, death is neither normal in the human family nor natural for a Christian. The persistent, regular, and unrelenting enemy takes people captive indiscriminately and rules over them with a rod of iron. With undying determination, death protects its dominion with great impregnable gates. Because of its powerful sting, it is something we do and should fear.

Of course, our comfort is in Christ whose love casts out fear. This brings us to our second main point, namely, victory over death is certain.

2A. Victory over death is certain

Our Lord builds the church on Peter with this promise: the gates of death will not prevail against it. This means that despite the fact that His church is a gathering of sinners, nevertheless,

it is *bound for glory beyond the grave, certainly*. Jesus promises to construct His church by making us *living stones* in God's building (1 Cor 3.9; 1 Pet 2.5). In a word, He is promising to bring us over a pathway of dying and death to victory beyond the grave by promising that the gates of hell will not prevail against us.

Jesus is a gentle and humble king and high priest of our souls and through difficulties, He will build His church and work out His purposes to bring us safely home with Him to heaven's glory. We were captives in sin and death, but we are that no longer. We have much to learn and battles to fight, but the victory is ours for sure because Jesus is the king of the church who will subdue all His and our enemies. The last enemy that He will destroy is death; the great stronghold of death will fall down in crumbles before us. Death where is your victory? It has no victory:

For this perishable body must put on the imperishable, and this mortal body must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." ⁵⁵ "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. ⁵⁷ But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain (1 Co 15.53-58).

This is so even with the fact that all the building stones are sinners. We may live foolishly instead of wisely, selfishly instead of lovingly, earthly minded instead of heavenly minded. If we do so, we will pay the price and experience the consequences that follow sowing to the flesh instead of sowing to the Spirit.

Nevertheless, Jesus holds the keys of death (Rev 1.18), builds the church, and robs death of its captives. Thus, whatever the church faces through time to the end of the age, and despite succumbing to physical death, Christ sustains the church in an unconquerable life.

Some examples flesh this out for us; we need them because the certainty of our future glory in resurrection victory over death is so astounding that it numbs the brain. We need some way to take it in for our comfort and hope.

1) The example of Martha at the tomb of Lazarus

There is a play on words in the text that helps grab the mind: those who die live, and those who live, never die.

Martha said to Jesus, "Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died." ²² But even now I know that whatever you ask from God, God will give you." ²³ Jesus said to her, "Your brother will rise again." ²⁴ Martha said to him, "I know that he will rise again in the resurrection on the last day." ²⁵ Jesus said to her, "I am the resurrection and the life. Whoever believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, ²⁶ and everyone who lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?" ²⁷ She said to him, "Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, who is coming into the world" (Jn 11.21-27).

The theology in the play on words is fleshed out in the resurrection of Lazarus: ⁴¹ **So they took away the stone. And Jesus lifted up his eyes and said, "Father, I thank you that you have heard me. ⁴² I knew that you always hear me, but I said this on account of the people standing around, that they may believe that you sent me."** ⁴³ When he had said these things, he cried out with a loud voice, "Lazarus, come out." ⁴⁴ The man who had died came out, his hands and feet bound with linen strips, and his face wrapped with a cloth. Jesus said to them, "Unbind him, and let him go" (Jn 11.41-44). Here, people overhear the prayer of our Lord, and He says that this is for their good. He thanks the Father and indicates the purpose of His audible prayer: **that they may believe**. Then, with the loud voice of the champion in victory, He gives His command, **Lazarus, come out**. Marvelously, the dead man obeys the command of Christ. This points us to two important gospel truths (fleshing out the gospel). First, it points to how Jesus builds His church by His effectual call. Sinners bound fast in sin and nature's night hear His call; those dead in sin and enslaved by sin respond in the obedience of faith. The dead cannot hear His call until He gives them ears to hear it. Then they follow: "my chains fell off, my heart was free, I rose went forth and followed thee." Second, it points to the resurrection harvest that will come at the end of the age. The resurrection of Lazarus is resurrection of the last day (11.24) anticipated in the gospel preached by Jesus in word *and deed*.

2) The example of little girl

In an almost matter of fact way, Matthew reports that when Jesus took a little girl by the hand, she arose from the dead and the news spread **“through all that district”** (Mat 9.26). What can we say about this? We can only bow our heads and try to take in the astounding event: she arose from the dead. This fact, by this Savior, reeks with gospel-good-news that reveals the victory of His church over death.

Furthermore, a striking part of the text is the way Jesus describes the girl’s condition in death: **the girl is not dead but sleeping** (9.24). Jesus is speaking figuratively for we know that the girl had died (9.18). He describes the reality of death figuratively by analogy with sleep in a way similar to what He told the disciples about Lazarus: **our friend Lazarus has fallen asleep...plainly, Lazarus has died** (cf. Jn 11.11-14).

Jesus does not use the language of sleep to teach that the state of man in death involves soul-sleep for the intermediate state until the resurrection. Rather, *what we have here is a distinct way of viewing death that results from linking it with resurrection*. Death is like sleep when viewed in relation to the resurrection. That is, death, in light of the new wine Christ came to secure, is not the end as something final; the state of death is not permanent. For those who are the objects of Christ’s covenant love, death, though real and unnatural, is like being asleep. The believer’s death is a sleep-like death in Jesus’ hands and under His loving care (the body looks like it is sleeping and it is sleeping because it will wake up at the resurrection; the body sleeps).

In this account, we have the tasty flavor of new wine. Without describing the state of death itself, this language reeks with the warm overtones and comforts of putting a little boy or girl to bed. With a hug, a kiss, a tucking in, and a “good, night” we say the precious words, “I will see you in the morning.” Death has comforting overtones. This is another look at death. Jesus raised this child from the dead, and His language associated with the deed gives a unique definition of death for the people of God. *Death is a temporary state, like sleep. It is a time of rest with the Lord until resurrection morning*. The body sleeps while the person, though in an anomalous and incomplete state, is with the Lord in blessed fellowship.

That is the picture that I have when I look back to the funeral service of our brother Dave. His body was there in a casket before us; he was there before us in terms of his body. Eyes closed, He did not move. He looked like a person sound asleep. Thus, we sang his favorite song, “it is well with my soul” and I preached about his life and ours, his death and ours, his sovereign Lord and ours. We could do these things and then say, “Brother, you are all tucked in there for the night, and we will see you on resurrection morning.”

Application

The promise inspires hope in the face of death. In other words, death does not have the victory or the last word. It may cut across our path in times unexpected, but because Jesus builds His church with promise, His people are more than conquerors. That is quite a word: conqueror and more! Consider Paul’s word in this regard: ²⁸ **And we know that for those who love God all things work together for good, for those who are called according to his purpose.** ²⁹ **For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the firstborn among many brothers.** ³⁰ **And those whom he predestined he also called, and those whom he called he also justified, and those whom he justified he also glorified.** ³¹ **What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?** ³² **He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?** ³³ **Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies.** ³⁴ **Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died- more than that, who was raised- who is at the right hand of God, who indeed is interceding for us.** ³⁵ **Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword?** ³⁶ **As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long; we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered."** ³⁷ **No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us.** ³⁸ **For I am sure that neither death nor life, nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers,** ³⁹ **nor height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord** (Rom 8.28-39)

May we fall down before the majesty of the Lord of the church, to Him as risen Lord belong all glory and honor both now and forevermore, Amen!