

SM029 – Standing by the Gates of Hell

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The stories of Jesus have reached into the hearts of millions. They have changed people, families, and nations. Not all have loved the stories Jesus told. Not all have honored the life He lived. Some were angry with Him, the things He did and the things He said. Others were deeply moved and found hope. What will your response be?

Today on Stories of the Master, Standing by the Gates of Hell. This story is from Matthew 16:1-23. I hope you will follow along in your Bible.

My name is Jonathan, and I will be your Storyteller and Teacher.

I'm so glad you're here. Gather your friends. Come close and listen. It's time for the world to hear again the stories of the Master.

And now, Standing by the Gates of Hell.

SM029 Standing by the Gates of Hell

Five loaves of bread and two fish – that is all Jesus needed to feed 5000 hungry men, many of whom had their wives and children with them. And when they finished, they had twelve baskets of food left over, more than what they started with.

Seven loaves of bread and a few fish – that is all Jesus needed to feed 4000 hungry men, many of whom had their wives and children with them, much more than what they started with.

The miraculous multiplication of food was one of the most extraordinary signs Jesus gave the people to show that he was the promised Messiah. It wasn't what people started with that mattered – it's only if they gave what they had to Jesus. That is what mattered. And when people gave what they had to him, miraculous things took place. Surely no one could doubt Jesus, not the common people and not even the rulers of the people, but one day, a delegation of rulers came to Jesus and asked him the strangest question, "Jesus, show us a sign from heaven. Give us a sign to prove that you are from God."

What? How could they ask for a sign? Had not Jesus given bread to people in the wilderness just as God gave bread to people? And had not Jesus performed hundreds, perhaps thousands of healings for people, cast out evil spirits, and turned sinful lives around and given hope to those in need? Why were they asking for a sign? What more could he do?

And so Jesus said to them, "When it is evening, you say, 'It will be fair weather, for the sky is red.'³ And in the morning, [you say] 'There will be a storm today, for the sky is red and threatening.' Do you know how to discern the appearance of the sky, but cannot discern the signs of the times?⁴ An evil and adulterous generation seeks after a sign; and a sign will not be given it, except the sign of Jonah." And He left them and went away.

How true were Jesus' words, and how shameful they were for those who claimed to be the spiritual leaders of the people! They knew how to figure out the weather, but they could not figure out the ways of God! They could look at the sky and know what would happen next whether it would be sunny or rainy, but they could see what Jesus was doing and not understand that God was at work.

There was only one reason why these leaders were so blind – they had evil hearts and hearts full of adultery. The prophets of old had spoken this way. They proclaimed to God's people that their hearts were full of selfishness and that in worshipping false gods they were spiritual adulterers. Their heart should have been full of love for God only, but they had given their love to false gods.

And now, the leaders in Jesus time were doing the same. Because they could not see that Jesus was from God, they showed that their hearts were full of selfishness, evil, and misplaced love.

And so Jesus would not give them any sign – except the sign of Jonah. But what was the sign of Jonah?

Jesus left the religious leaders of the people. He got into a boat with his disciples and they sailed to another part of the Sea of Galilee. As they journeyed, the disciples started to get hungry and one of them said, "Oh no. We forgot to bring the food. We forgot all the bread and fish we had. We don't have anything to eat."

They all began to grumble and complain and Jesus said, "Watch out! Beware of the bread that comes from the religious leaders."

And the disciples started saying, "Why is Jesus concerned about us eating bread that comes from the religious leaders? I know we forgot bread but why doesn't he want us to buy bread from them?"

Jesus listened for a few moments while the disciples talked about this and finally he had heard enough. They missed his point completely. Jesus wasn't talking about physical bread that the leaders could give them but their spiritual bread which was corrupt and would make people sick spiritually. He said to his men, "" You men of little faith, why do you discuss among yourselves that you have no bread? ⁹ Do you not yet understand or remember the five loaves of the five thousand? How many baskets full of bread did you pick up when we were finished? Twelve? Yes! We started with five loaves and I turned it into twelve baskets ¹⁰ The seven loaves I used for the four thousand men. How many large baskets full did you pick up when we finished there? Seven baskets? We started with seven loaves, fed four thousand and ended with seven baskets! ¹¹ How is it that you do not understand that I did not speak to you concerning physical bread? But beware of the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees."

"Oh, now I get it," some of them were saying, but all of them hung their heads in shame. They were men of little faith. They had seen Jesus miraculously feed thousands of people from just a little bit. Providing for their needs was no problem for Jesus and was not the slightest concern for him. But Jesus wanted to protect them from evil hearts, adulterous ways, and false teaching of those who claimed to be the spiritual leaders of the people.

And the same is true for us. We get so concerned about our daily needs and we forget that God can easily meet our daily needs and will meet them. And what he wants us to focus on is protecting our hearts from evil.

Some time later, Jesus and his disciples reached land. They left their boat on the shore and walked north and came into the district ruled by one of Herod's sons, Philip. They walked all the way to a village at the foot of Mt. Hermon and enjoyed the beauty of God's creation. This snow capped mountain rose over 9000 feet into the sky and on the southwest corner there was a cave and from the cave a stream flowed down to the Sea of Galilee.

This area was populated from ancient times and was a place of worship – pagan worship. Ancient Canaanites worship Baal there and Romans worshipped the false god Pan. Herod the Great built a marble temple to Caesar and his son Philip beautified the area and changed the name to Caesarea in honor of Caesar. Baal, Pan, and now Caesar – all false gods. This wicked place seemed to be the very gates that allowed entrance to the underworld. This place seemed to descend to Hell below and to allow the evil from Hell to rise up and bring spiritual pollution to the world. And this is where Jesus gathered with his disciples and asked them the most important question in the world as they were standing by the gates of Hell.

He looked at them all and said, "What are people saying about me? Who do people say that I am?"

It was quiet at first – then one of the disciples said, "I have heard people say that you are John the Baptist. I don't know why they would think that. Maybe they heard that Herod Antipas thinks that and is afraid of you. Maybe they think you are John raised from the dead!" They all laughed.

"Who do people say that I am," Jesus asked again. And another disciple said, "I have heard people say that you are Elijah. They believe you are the fulfillment of the prophecy of Malachi that says that Elijah will come and restore God's people."

Another disciple said, "I have heard some say that you are one of the prophets." And another disciple said, "I have heard some say that you are not just a prophet but some think you are Jeremiah the prophet."

Jesus listened as they spoke. And when they quieted down, he asked them another question, "OK – we know what they think, but what do you think? Who do you say that I am?"

All the disciples looked down and remained quiet. John, Andrew, Philip, Thomas, James – these men who had seen him feed thousands of people from a few loaves, who had seen him cast out evil spirits from people, who had seen him change lives with a word of forgiveness, who had seen him heal the sick, give sight to the blind, strengthen the weak legs of the lame, make the paralyzed walk, and even raise the dead and walk on water – they all looked down and were quiet, except one.

One disciple kept his head up straight and he kept looking at Jesus. His eyes and Jesus' eyes locked and a smile broke out on both of their faces and Peter said, "You are the Messiah. You are the One Israel has

been waiting for. You are the One the prophets spoke about. You are the King of Israel, the Son of the living God who will rule the world.”

And Jesus said, ““Blessed are you, Simon Son of John, because flesh and blood did not reveal *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven. ¹⁸ I also say to you that you are Peter, you are a rock, and upon this rock I will build My church.

Jesus pointed to the cave from which the spring of water came, the cave that was also used as a place of worship of false gods and said to his disciples, “The gates of Hell will not be able to stand against you. ¹⁹ I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.” Then He said something to the disciple that would cause them great confusion and concern at first. He warned the disciples that they should tell no one that He was the Christ. He said, “Listen, what Peter said is true. I am the Messiah. But don’t tell a soul!”

And when we come back we will discover why Jesus wanted them to keep his identity a secret.

Interlude

Hello everyone, this is Jonathan Williams the creator of and storyteller for Stories of the Master. Today’s story is the story of the great confession by Peter where he acknowledged that Jesus was the Messiah. This had been a long journey for him and for the others. They had seen him do so much and they believed at some points that he was the Messiah but at other times doubts would surface. Finally, in a key moment Jesus asked them to share their heart conviction about who he was and Peter was the first to say it – Jesus was the promised Messiah – and when we get back to the story we’ll talk about what Jesus said to Peter and to the other disciples.

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Jesus and his disciples were at the cave which was used for hundreds of years for the worship of false gods. Here Peter and the other disciples proclaimed their loyalty to Jesus as Messiah. Let’s get back to our story and learn more about why Jesus said what he said to Peter and the others and we will also learn why he told them to keep his identity a secret.

Part 2

Out of the twelve disciples, only Peter had the insight and the courage to say what no one else could say or would say – Jesus was the promised Messiah of God – the one who would bring salvation to the whole world.

And because of this confession, Jesus pronounced a blessing upon him and a blessing upon all who would follow him. Let's look at what Jesus said to Peter and to the disciples on that day and see what we can learn. We will also look at why Jesus told them to keep his identity a secret.

First, Jesus said to Peter, "Blessed are you Peter because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but my Father who is in heaven." In other words, "Peter, you did not figure this out on your own. And you did not learn it from others. But you learned it from God. My Father has revealed it to you. He has been speaking to you and you have been listening. Blessed are you!"

And friends, I want to ask you a question today. Have you been listening to the voice of God speaking to you? God has sent the Spirit of Jesus into the world and he is speaking to people about Jesus. He speaks to people through the Bible. He speaks to people through the words of other people. He even speaks to people through dreams and visions. But whatever method God uses to speak to you, he wants you to realize this most important truth – Jesus is God's promised Messiah. Jesus is the One the prophets spoke about. Jesus is the Savior of the world and the only one who can bring healing and blessing to this world ... and to your life. The Father in heaven revealed who Jesus was to Peter. Has the Father in heaven revealed Jesus to you?

Second, what Jesus said to Peter shows us that God has a great building project and this project is based upon men and women of character and courage who are listening for the voice of the Spirit of God. Jesus said to Peter, "You are Peter, i.e., you are a rock, and upon this rock I will build my church." Many people get all confused about this passage. They think Jesus was making a statement about church organization, declaring Peter to be the first pope, or that God always wanted there to be only one supreme leader to the church.

But Jesus wasn't talking about that. Jesus was using what is called a "play on words." The name Peter means "a rock" and Jesus used Peter's name to express what kind of person his building project would need for the future. And Jesus said that "this man whose name was rock was the kind of person with the kind of quality needed for his building project."

What was Jesus' building project? Was it a building project like Herod the Great and Philip who made a temple made of marble for Caesar? Was God interested in buildings made with hands? No, God's building project was people. The kind of temple God was after was a temple of humans. What God desired all along was to live in people and among his people. God wanted a temple made, not by people, but a temple made of people and God wanted this temple to be built in the whole world. He wanted this temple to be built with men and women, to be built with Jew and Gentile, to be built with people from every nation, every language, every ethnic race. He wanted a worldwide family, a worldwide temple in which he would dwell, a temple made with people.

But in order to build this temple, he would need to build it with a strong foundation and the strong foundation consisted of people with strong character, with courage, and with conviction, people, like Peter, a rock, who said, "I believe that you are God's promised Messiah."

Are you this kind of person? If you are not, ask God to make you that way. Are you part of God's temple? If not, ask God to reveal Jesus to you and to bring you into his family and into his building project. There is nothing more important, nothing more significant you can give your life to.

Why was this kind of person, a person with rock-like character so important? It is because of the task that God is calling his people to. Jesus changes images when he speaks to Peter and to the other disciples. At first he spoke of a great building project. Now he changes the image to one of warfare and this is the third thing we must learn from this episode in the life of Jesus and why Jesus chose to stand by the gates of Hell when he spoke these things.

Jesus said, "The gates of Hell will not be able to stand against His people." Jesus pictures his followers attacking the very gates of Hell. But there is something very important we must all learn. We must not misunderstand this. Jesus is not telling his people to pick up swords, or guns, or bomb vests and kill people. Jesus is telling us that we are fighting a very different kind of war. We are fighting a spiritual war. He did not tell us to attack the gates of any city in the world. We are attacking the gates of Hell.

Why the gates of Hell? Because the kingdom of Hell holds prisoners. The kingdom of Hell holds people in darkness. The kingdom of Hell keeps people from seeing the light of God. Hell sends out lies into the world. The spirit of the evil one makes the hearts of people evil. The spirit of the evil one seduces people into committing spiritual adultery which is what the leaders of Israel were committing and what Jesus warned his disciples about when he told them to beware of their bread.

Fighting the forces of evil is not fun. Warfare is not fun. But Jesus came to fight the great enemy of mankind – the evil one. He defeated him in the wilderness during his 40 days of fasting. He defeated him every time he cast out an evil spirit. And now Jesus was enlisting his followers to join him in fighting the same evil forces that enslaved the nations of the world in deception. Jesus is calling his people to attack the gates of Hell itself through praying, preaching, teaching, and loving the lost.

And as scary as that sounds and as hopeless as that sounds, Jesus promised this, "the gates of Hell will not be able to stand against his people. They will fall!"

They will fall because Jesus said, "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." What are keys for? Keys are for unlocking doors and for locking doors. Jesus has given to His people the keys to unlock doors to let the prisoners go free. Listen to what Jesus said when he began his ministry in Israel.

" THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD IS UPON ME,
BECAUSE HE ANOINTED ME TO PREACH THE GOSPEL TO THE POOR.
HE HAS SENT ME TO PROCLAIM RELEASE TO THE CAPTIVES,
AND RECOVERY OF SIGHT TO THE BLIND,

TO SET FREE THOSE WHO ARE OPPRESSED,
¹⁹ TO PROCLAIM THE FAVORABLE YEAR OF THE LORD.”

And that is what Jesus did. He unlocked doors to let people out. And other doors he locked. He cast evil spirits out of people and locked them away from harming people. And here Jesus is telling his people that he is going to give these keys to unlock some doors and lock up other doors. We will knock down the gates of Hell and we will set prisoners free and lock up in the dungeon those forces and those lies that have enslaved people for generations.

And Jesus, wanting to encourage us for this great work said that whatever we do will be backed up with the power of heaven. If we lock things up, it will already be done in heaven. If we unlock doors, the power of heaven will back us up 100% - it will have already been done.

This was a lot of information to pass on to his followers on that day. Jesus had revealed himself as the promised Messiah. No more guessing, no more parables, no more riddles. Jesus openly said he was the Messiah and then he blessed Peter and the other disciples and us by speaking of the great mission to attack the gates of Hell.

But then, Jesus said, “Don’t tell anyone I am the Messiah.” Why did Jesus forbid them? And the answer is that if they were to go out and tell the world, “Yes, Jesus is the Messiah, He has finally proclaimed it,” the crowds would have misunderstood Jesus’ goals. The crowds would have wanted to crown him as king and have him march on the gates of Rome. But Jesus wanted people to march on the gates of Hell.

Jesus knew the people would not understand who the true enemy was and so Jesus wanted to reveal his identity only to a few people – at first. Jesus knew something else. He knew that in a matter of months, he would go to Jerusalem and rather than being crowned as king, the rulers would crown him with thorns and that he would die.

From that time Jesus began to show His disciples that He must go to Jerusalem, and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and be raised up on the third day.

Being raised up on the third day – this was the sign of Jonah that he gave to the religious leaders. Just as the prophet Jonah was three days and nights in the belly of the great fish, so Jesus would die and be three days and nights in the grave and then rise up from the grave – the victor over Hell itself!

But Peter did not understand this and could not believe Jesus was speaking about dying. Had not Jesus just announced that he was the Messiah? The Messiah does not give himself up. The Messiah does not die at the hands of rebellious leaders. And so

²² Peter took Him Jesus aside and began to rebuke Him, saying, “God forbid *it*, Lord! This shall never happen to You.”

But it was not the Spirit of God that was speaking through Peter this time. It was another spirit, a spirit that Jesus had faced before, a spirit that tried to turn Jesus aside from walking the path God had given

him and Jesus turned and said to Peter, “Get behind Me, Satan! You are a stumbling block to Me; for you are not setting your mind on God’s interests, but man’s.”

And my friends, the rebuke that Jesus gave to Peter presents a question for all of us. What do we set our interests on – on the things of God or on the things of man? Do we want an earthly kingdom that will not last, or an eternal kingdom that sets people free? Are we interested in storming the gates of Rome, or any other city on earth, or are we interested in knocking down the gates of Hell?

My friends, I hope you will choose the things of God. I hope you will join Jesus in storming the gates of Hell.

Ending

Hello again everyone – this is Jonathan Williams and as we bring this story to a close, I must ask you again, are you storming the gates of Hell with Jesus? Who do you know today who is bound in sin and in lies and needs to be freed from the prison house of Hell? Pray for that person and ask God to use you and to give you the keys to unlock those doors for your friend or your family member. Join with Jesus in his great campaign to set people free.

And perhaps you who are listening today need to be set free. I urge you today, do not delay, but call upon the Lord who did suffer and die, but who three days later rose from the grave. Jesus is Lord of all. Let him be your Lord and Savior today.

Write to us and tell us of the ones you are praying for and if Jesus has set you free write us and share that good news with us also. Write to us at Stories of the Master – PO Box 90047 in SA TX 78209 in the U.S. That’s Stories of the Master – PO Box 90047 in SA TX 78209.

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My name is Jonathan Williams and I hope you have been blessed today and I look forward to you joining us next week for another Story of the Master. Until then, may the Master himself richly bless you.