

# EXEGETICAL BRIEF:

## "The gates of Hades will not withstand her" (Matthew 16:18)

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Simon says, "You are the Christ, the Son of living God." Then Jesus says, "You are Peter (Πέτρος), and on this bedrock (πέτρα) I will build my church" (Mt:16,18).

Here is the centerpiece of the Gospel according to St. Matthew and a key passage in all Scripture. Here is the preacher's opportunity (Sept 18, 2011; Pentecost 14) to proclaim Jesus as the Christ, anointed for his three-fold office. Here is precious instruction on the doctrines of the church, of revelation, and of the ministry of the keys. In such a rich text, one statement in the text may not always receive sufficient attention. The statement in question: Matthew 16:18c. The Greek: *πύλαι ᾧδου οὐ κατισχύσουσιν αὐτῆς*. To keep this exegetical brief genuinely brief and to assist the preacher with his task, what follows is a short overview of the noun ᾧδης in the context of Scripture and of this statement by the Savior.

While *Hades* certainly had a role in Greek mythology and cultic religion, Jesus' disciples and St. Matthew's first readers would have made a much stronger connection to the Scriptures of their day. The Septuagint translators chose this word for the Hebrew *Sheol*, *שְׁאוֹל*. This was the grave, or else the condition of being dead. The same noun ᾧδης was sometimes the rendering of the Hebrew *מוֹת*, or death. What was abundantly clear was that apart from the Lord there is no release from it. Hence the "gates or "bars" of *Hades*. According to Isaiah 38:10, King Hezekiah in his illness lamented the prospect of having to enter "into the gates of *Hades*" (*שְׁאוֹל מְשֻׁבָּה*, *ἐκ πύλαις ᾧδου* in LXX). In Psalm 9, David pleaded with the Lord, "Have mercy and lift me from the gates of death" (*מִמוֹת מְשֻׁבָּה*; *ἐκ τῶν πυλῶν τοῦ θανάτου* in LXX). According to Job 38:17, the Lord challenged Job, "Have the gates of death (*שְׁאוֹל מְמוֹת*) been shown to you? Have you seen the gates of the deepest darkness (*שְׁאוֹל מְצִלְמוֹת*)?" Here in Job the Septuagint translators rendered "gates of death" as *πύλαι θανάτου* and "gates of deepest darkness" as *πυλωροὶ ᾧδου*.

In the New Testament *Hades* is understood as death or as the place of the dead, with much more emphasis on the terrible consequences of sin to be endured by those cannot escape it. For rejecting their Savior's frequent visits, Jesus told the residents of his adopted hometown, "And you, Capernaum, will you be lifted to the heavens? No, you will go down to *Hades*" (Mt 11:23). On another occasion Jesus taught the lesson of the rich man who lived splendidly in this life. Yet after he died, he found himself in *Hades*, where he was "in agony in this fire" (Lk 16:23), no doubt suffering the "eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels" (Mt 25:41).

One wonders whether the combination of these last two passages (Lk 16:23 and Mt 25:41) has prompted many commentators to go beyond what Jesus had in mind when he spoke to the Twelve about "the gates of *Hades*. One interpreter announces that the expression "'gates of hell' by metonymy represents Satan and his legions as it were storming out of hell's gates in order to attack and destroy the church" (William Hendriksen, *Exposition of the Gospel according to Matthew*, p 649). Another opines that Hades is "the abode of the devils" and that the implication of Jesus' words in Mt 16 is that "hell's gates shall pour out her hosts to assault the church of Christ" (R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of St. Matthew's Gospel*, p 628). A more recent commentator suggests "the idea that Satan will send his forces out of the gates of Hades to assault Jesus' disciples, the church" (Jeffrey A. Gibbs, *Concordia Commentary: Matthew 11.2-20.34*, p 821-822).

Certainly there is nothing amiss with repeating one of Holy Scripture's most urgent warnings. Our Lord

frequently cautions his church to be on guard against the attacks of the devil and his allies. His writers exhort the saints to find protection in him and his Word. "Put on God's panoply," Paul urges, "so that you can take your stand against the devil's schemes" (Eph 6:10). Nevertheless the exegete and preacher would do well to consider this phrase from another angle. Perhaps this is not the church holding a firm defensive position against the terrible powers of hell. Perhaps Jesus is promising just the opposite, that the gates of death will be stormed by the church, and with thrilling success.

The Son of Man has led the charge. After all, he is "the Son of the *living* God" (Mt 16:16). Shortly after Peter made his great confession, Christ fulfilled his royal office and battled with sin and its consequences on the cross. He served his priestly task and offered up his life as payment for sin. Yet the bars of death lacked the strength to contain him. "He must be killed," Jesus would soon tell his disciples, "and on the third day be raised to life" (Mt 16:21).

He who overwhelmed death now builds his church on the bedrock (*πέτρα*) of the apostles' confession (Mt 16:18a). From that strong position he sends her forth like a mighty army, bearing "the keys of the kingdom" (Mt 18:19). Her soldiers proclaim the gospel in Word and Sacrament. "The weapons [they] fight with ... have divine power to demolish strongholds" (2 Cor 10:4). They boldly announce the forgiveness of sins, life, and salvation. "I hold the keys of death and *Hades*," her Champion announces (Rev 1:18), and with that confidence his disciples go on the attack. Day after day they storm the sturdy gates of *Hades* and free those held captive within death's citadel.

Why even consider this interpretation? Simply put, gates do not "overcome," and to propose that they do so by metonymy is unnecessary. Nor must the verb *κατισχύουσιν* have that sense. When used transitively *κατισχύω* means to "have strength against" or to "be powerful against." In fairness to Jesus' metaphor in this context, then, our interpretation could more fully demonstrate his heartening promise to the apostolic church. She goes on the offensive, confident of victory. She boldly confesses the name on which she has been built. She proclaims Christ crucified and risen to all who have been captured by the prospect of eternal death, "and the gates of Hades (or death) will not withstand her."

Death has been swallowed up in victory. Where, O death, is your victory? Where, O death, is your sting? The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God! He gives us, the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. (1 Cor 15:54b-57, NIV).