

PETER

CORNERSTONE OF CATHOLICISM

STUDY GUIDE

SESSION 4



LECTIO™

UNVEILING SCRIPTURE AND TRADITION

TIM GRAY

Nihil obstat: Derek Barr, Censor Deputatus

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SESSION 4

PETER THE ROCK: THE PRIMACY OF JESUS



OPENING PRAYER

“Without having seen him you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy... Come to him, to that living stone, rejected by men but in God’s sight chosen and precious; and like living stones be yourselves built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.” —1 Peter 1:8, 2:4-5

Eternal God—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—thank you for revealing yourself to us, loving us, and giving us the gift of your holy Church. You have made each of us with a unique identity and purpose, having in mind our common mission to love and serve you through the Church, both on earth and in heaven. Help us to follow the example of St. Peter by being faithful disciples and living stones with which Jesus will build his Church. Make us into the men and women you are calling us to be, in every situation and at every moment. Amen.

St. Peter, pray for us.

INTRODUCTION

In our last session, we discussed several episodes in Matthew’s gospel when Jesus challenged the Apostles’ faith. Clearly, he wanted to push them beyond merely hearing his words and observing his actions to living both out in their lives as his chosen followers. In this next session, Jesus will ask a question that will reveal the hearts of the Apostles and gauge where they are in their faith. Of the Twelve, it will be Peter who will respond to the question, and his reply will not only impact the direction of his life—and ours as well—but the ensuing exchange between Peter and Jesus will reveal something deeper about the identities of both men.



Christ’s charge to Saint Peter / V & A Images, London / Art Resource, NY



CONNECT

1. From last session, what struck you most about how Jesus handled the two different storms on the Sea of Galilee?

2. What's the most difficult environment you've ever had to work in? How did that environment affect you mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually?

3. How or why did your parents choose your given name? How or why did you choose the names of your children? Do you have a special namesake or patron, or a story explaining why you were given the name you have? If you have been confirmed, how or why did you choose the name of your confirmation saint?



WATCH VIDEO

The following is a brief outline of the topics covered in the video teaching.

I. Matthew 16:1-12; Mark 8:14-21

A. Jesus warns Apostles about leaven of Pharisees and Sadducees

B. Jesus is the "Bread of Life" that they do not perceive/understand

II. Healing of Blind Man (Mark 8:22-26)

A. Recall that Bethsaida is pagan hometown of Peter, Andrew, Philip

B. Jesus heals blind man in two stages and says "Don't go back"

1. Some environments can blind us to the ways of God

2. What is your Bethsaida? What is becoming your barrier to God?

III. “But who do you say that I am?” / Peter’s profession

A. Mutual revelation—about Jesus and about Peter

1. “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” (Matthew 16:16)
2. “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church.” (Matthew 16:18)

B. Jesus

1. “Christ” is Greek translation of Hebrew word *messiah*, which means “anointed”; in the Old Testament kings were anointed, thus Peter is proclaiming Jesus King
2. “the Son of the Living God” (as compared to Caesar Augustus, whose temple was in Caesarea Philippi and who was the son of the “dead” god Julius)

C. Peter

1. “Blessed are you”—Peter receives a blessing
2. “Simon bar Jona” (Simon son of Jonah); but Simon’s father’s name is John; Peter to be a “disciple” and new son of Jonah
3. “You are Peter [*Petros*], and on this rock [*petra*]”
4. Any name change is significant; Abram—Abraham; Jacob—Israel
5. Christ the builder (*Christus Faber*); Jesus is a wise man building on rock/Peter; recalling Solomon building the temple on the foundation stone (*eben shetiyya*) on Mt. Moriah (2 Chronicles 3:1)

D. What is the significance of Caesarea Philippi to this question from Jesus? (It will be the question for Peter and the early Christians under Roman persecution.)



DISCUSS

1. Before healing the blind man in Mark 8, Jesus “led him out of the village” (Mark 8:23). After miraculously restoring the man’s sight, Jesus tells him not to go back to the village (Mark 8:26). Why did Jesus say that? How does environment affect us in our lives of faith? How can our growth in virtue be helped or inhibited by a good or bad environment? Why are we often tempted to go back to our former ways of behaving, thinking, and speaking?

2. When Simon Peter boldly declares to Jesus “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God” (Matthew 16:16), what does he reveal about Jesus’ identity and his mission? What do Jesus’ words to Peter, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church” (Matthew 16:18), reveal about Jesus’ identity and his mission?

3. What does Jesus’ declaration to Peter, “And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church” (Matthew 16:18), reveal about Peter’s identity and his mission?



*Delivering the Keys of the Kingdom to Saint Peter / Erich Lessing /
Art Resource, NY*

4. Jesus poses his question, “But who do you say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15), not just to Peter, but to all the Apostles. How does this same question and our answer to it, reveal who we are (our identity) and what we do (our mission)? Do you consider your faith—and how you follow Jesus—an essential part of who you are? If so, how does this impact your life?

What mission do you think Jesus is calling you to take on, individually and as a member of his Church?

St. Augustine tells us that the name “Peter” comes from the word for a “rock” in exactly the same way as the name “Christian” comes from “Christ.”

5. At Caesarea Philippi, Peter proclaimed Jesus as the Son of the living God. Peter’s conviction about Jesus’ identity would direct Peter’s future decisions and actions. At the end of his life it would also determine how Peter would die at the hands of the Roman authorities. How does our conviction about Jesus’ identity affect our behavior at work, in school, in our neighborhoods, or in our families? Does being identified as a Christian cause you difficulties in any of those arenas? If so, how? How do you respond to those difficulties?

“Brothers and sisters, what happened in a unique way in Saint Peter, also takes place in every Christian who develops a sincere faith in Jesus the Christ, the Son of the living God. Today’s Gospel challenges each of us: How is your faith? Let each of us answer in our heart. How is your faith? How is it? What does the Lord find in our hearts: a firm heart, like a rock? Or a heart like sand, that is, doubtful, mistrustful, unbelieving? It would do us good to think about this throughout the day. If the Lord finds in our hearts a faith—I won’t say perfect, but sincere, genuine—then He will see in us, too, the living rocks on which He builds His community. For this community, the foundation stone is Christ, the unique cornerstone. For his part, Peter is the rock, as the visible foundation of the unity of the Church; but every baptized person is called to offer to Jesus his or her own faith, poor but sincere, so that He can continue to build His Church, today, in every part of the world.” —Pope Francis



MEMORY VERSE

“And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.”

—Matthew 16:18



CLOSING PRAYER

Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the Living God, thank you for calling us to be your disciples, and to be members of the Church you have built upon the rock of Peter. Living as Christians and fulfilling our mission to serve you and your Church are only possible through your grace. Help us to always follow you faithfully, and like Peter to firmly proclaim our faith in you—in all that you are, in all that you have done, and in all that you continue to do. Help us to discover and rediscover the mission, identity, and purpose you have given each of us, and to become the men and women you are calling us to be. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

St. Peter, pray for us.

FOR FURTHER READING

Pope Francis, *Vatican Radio*, “Pope Francis: Jesus builds the Church on faith”; Sunday Angelus address, August 24, 2014 (translated)

Catechism of the Catholic Church 203 (“God Reveals His Name”) and 441–445 (“The Only Son of God”)

COMMIT—DAY 1

JESUS HEALS THE BLIND MAN



Does our environment or culture make a difference in how we live out the faith? How does your family, work, or school affect how you live out your Christian life, in positive and negative ways?

What warnings does Jesus give in the following verses?

Matthew 6:5 _____

Mark 8:15 _____

Mark 8:26 _____

From Jesus' warnings, it appears that there are situations, relationships, and surroundings that Jesus wants his disciples to avoid. For example, Jesus publicly rebukes the scribes and Pharisees (Matthew 23) and references them in less than flattering terms in the Sermon on the Mount ("You must not be like the hypocrites"—Matthew 6:5). Jesus knew well the pride and hypocrisy of many of the Pharisees and warned his disciples, "Take heed and beware the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees" (Matthew 16:6). Jesus knew how difficult it was not to give in to temptation, whether in pride or other sins, without the added encouragement of the bad example of others.

Jesus healed a man's blindness, then warned him, "Do not even enter the village" (Mark 8:26). Dr. Gray suggests that Jesus did not want the man to return to his former life and environment, because they would undermine his changed life. St. Paul would later warn believers to "cast off the works of darkness" (Romans 13:12). Not only must we avoid the darkness we once embraced, but we must beware of those who remain in that darkness. The pull away from the light can work against our faith and draw us toward sin.

What can we do about the kinds of surroundings we can't escape—a negative workplace, a difficult home life, friendships that nudge us away from virtue and faith? Are there practical things we can do to hold on to our faith in these areas? Are there situations we can actively avoid within these places? How can we constructively change negative environments? Are we ever called by God to remove ourselves from environments that we consider essential to our education or livelihoods, even in a painfully sacrificial way?

How can we resist the temptation to “return to Bethsaida”—situations or places we need to leave behind for our faith? How can we help others who are in their own “Bethsaida”? What does God provide for his people when temptation comes? (Read I Corinthians 10:13 to help answer this question.)

It is precisely when we are having difficulty leaving sin behind, or struggling with the temptation to return to sinful habits, that we need the encouragement of other Christians to help us remain faithful. What does Scripture tell us in the following verses?

Ecclesiastes 4:9-10 _____

Proverbs 27:17 _____

1 Thessalonians 5:11 _____

Hebrews 3:13 _____

Hebrews 10:24-25 _____

Do you have a Christian friend who helps keep you accountable in your faith? If not, who can you approach to help encourage you in this way?

In addition to seeking other Christians to help us stay accountable, frequent Confession and reception of the Sacraments are crucial to strengthening our will to fight temptation. Jesus himself seeks to infuse us with his love and life to make it possible for us to imitate him in all areas of our lives. As we regularly yield to him, we are better equipped to resist the temptations when they arise. By being conformed to Christ, we may then effect a change in the people around us to become what St. John Paul II called “a culture of life and a civilization of love.”

COMMIT—DAY 2

CAESAREA PHILIPPI



Caesarea Philippi is located in the northern most part of Israel, situated some 30 miles north of the Sea of Galilee on the southwestern base of Mt. Hermon. There is a great spring that feeds the Jordan River as it begins its journey south from the surrounding heights. In the first century, Josephus, in *The Wars of the Jews*, (Book 1, Chapter 21.3) described the topography: “[Here] is a top of a mountain that is raised to an immense height, and at its side, beneath, or at its bottom, a dark cave opens itself; within which there is a horrible precipice, that descends abruptly to a vast depth; it contains a mighty quantity of water.”



Caesarea Philippi photo © Augustine Institute

Caesar Augustus gave this district to Herod the Great, who annexed the territory to his kingdom. Herod, being a shrewd politician, erected a temple in the city in the emperor’s honor, making the city one of three cities which Herod dedicated to Caesar (the other two being Sebaste in Samaria and Caesarea Maritima along the Mediterranean coast). Josephus noted, “And when Caesar had further bestowed upon [Herod the Great] another additional country, he built there also a temple of white marble.” After Herod the Great’s death, his son Philip ruled the area and gave the city the name Caesarea Philippi.



Temple Site photo © Augustine Institute

Jesus posed the question “Who do you say that I am?” to the disciples in Caesarea Philippi. As is often the case, understanding the location gives us a deeper understanding of Jesus’ words and actions. To better understand the connection between the passage in Matthew 16 and Caesarea Philippi, we need to explore the practice of the *imperial cult*.

The worship of the Roman emperors began with Caesar Augustus’ adoptive father Julius Caesar, who saw himself descended from the goddess Venus. After his death, the Roman senate conferred upon Julius the status of a god of the Roman state. Augustus dedicated a temple to him. Augustus also benefited from his father’s title. It followed that if his father was “god,” then Augustus himself was a “son of god.” Soon temples were built not only to honor the “god” Julius, but also the “son of god” Augustus.

This practice was repeated as temples honoring various emperors were built across the empire over the centuries. Herod the Great's temple to honor Caesar Augustus in Caesarea Philippi was part of the backdrop behind Jesus' question to the disciples.

Worshipping a pagan king as a god was nothing new. Cultures reaching as far back as the Egyptians and Mesopotamians believed in the divinity of their leaders. Many times God's people were tested, as pagan rulers required them to choose between fidelity to the one true God of Israel or the pagan state, gods, and cultural practices. Look up the following passages and note in each passage: (1) What is the test put to God's people? (2) Who is being tested? and (3) What is the outcome of the test?

Daniel 3

Test: _____

Who is tested: _____

What is outcome: _____

Daniel 6

Test: _____

Who is tested: _____

What is outcome: _____

2 Maccabees 6:18-31

Test: _____

Who is tested: _____

What is outcome: _____



Statue of Plinio the Young/ Scala / Art Resource, NY

The early Christian Church suffered tests of fidelity. Pliny, in his letter to the Roman emperor Trajan, recounts how he put to Christians a choice: Invoke the pagan gods and offer incense to the emperor's image and live, or persist in their Christian confession and die. Sacred Tradition tells us that St. Peter suffered martyrdom under Emperor Nero for just such a refusal to deny his Christian faith.

Pliny the Younger was a Roman governor of Bithynia-Pontus from 111-113.

In his first letter, St. Peter encourages the flock Jesus called him to feed and tend, saying,

“But in your hearts reverence Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to make a defense to any one who calls you to account for the hope that is in you, yet do it with gentleness and reverence.” —1 Peter 3:15

Peter continues later in the same letter saying,

“Beloved, do not be surprised at the fiery ordeal which comes upon you to prove you, as though something strange were happening to you. But rejoice in so far as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed. If you are reproached for the name of Christ, you are blessed, because the spirit of glory and of God rests upon you. But let none of you suffer as a murderer, or a thief, or a wrongdoer, or a mischief-maker; yet if one suffers as a Christian, let him not be ashamed, but under that name let him glorify God.... Therefore let those who suffer according to God’s will do right and entrust their souls to a faithful Creator.” —1 Peter 4:12-19

God’s people are called to give a continual witness to Jesus Christ. St. Peter exhorts us to know our faith so that we can be ready at all times to give a defense of what we believe, why we believe it, and in whom we believe. At Caesarea Philippi, Peter gives clear witness to Jesus with his words, and many years later he will also give the same witness with his death.

In every age there are Christians who are called to lay down their lives for the faith. Where and how are Christians called to lay down their lives today? Take a moment to pray for these brothers and sisters in the Lord.

While we may not be called to be martyrs, we may have to go through suffering for our faith. Peter encourages us to “rejoice in so far as you share Christ’s sufferings, that you may also rejoice and be glad when his glory is revealed.” Take some time to reflect on what does it mean to “share” in Christ’s sufferings? How does sharing in Christ’s sufferings affect our attitudes about suffering? How can we share in his joy when we suffer?

(If you are suffering right now, take time to offer this suffering to God and ask him to help you experience a share in his joy. If you know others who are suffering, lift them up in prayer, and ask God to show how you can be a witness of Christ’s comfort for them in these next days.)



COMMIT—DAY 3

JESUS, SON OF THE LIVING GOD

Considering the passage from Matthew 16, Pope Francis states that “Jesus feels great joy in his heart because, in Simon, he recognizes the hand of the Father, the work of the Holy Spirit.... What happened in a unique way in St. Peter, also happens in every Christian who develops a sincere faith in Jesus the Christ, the Son of the Living God.” Let’s reflect on how Jesus’ questions and words affect Peter, and how the Holy Spirit works in Peter’s heart to bring about his profession in Jesus Christ—a profession for which he will ultimately give his life.

LECTIO

The practice of praying with Scripture, *Lectio Divina* begins with a close reading and rereading of a Scripture passage. Read the following Scripture passage from Matthew 16:13-18. Then answer the questions below to take a closer look at some of the details of the passage.

“Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, ‘Who do men say that the Son of man is?’ And they said, ‘Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets.’ He said to them, ‘But who do you say that I am?’ Simon Peter replied, ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ And Jesus answered him, ‘Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it.’” —Matthew 16:13-18

Where does this conversation take place? According to Dr. Gray’s teaching, what was the significance of Caesarea Philippi as a backdrop for Jesus’ questions?

The Apostles respond to Jesus’ first question by naming other men. Who are they? What do those men have in common? Why do you think these particular men are named?

What phrase does Peter use to describe God in his response to Jesus? Note the use of this phrase in the following verses from the Old Testament: Jeremiah 10:1-10, Daniel 6:25-27 (in response to an earlier edict in Daniel 6:6-9), Hosea 1:10. How does Paul use it in 2 Corinthians 6:16? How does this add meaning to Peter’s use of the same phrase?

MEDITATIO

Lectio, is followed by *Meditatio*, time to reflect on the Scripture passage and to ponder the reason for particular events, descriptions, details, phrases, and even echoes from other Scripture passages. Take time now to meditate on Matthew 16:13-18. To help you get started, consider this short reflection given by Pope Francis during a Sunday Angelus address:

“Even today, so many people think Jesus may be a great prophet, knowledgeable teacher, a model of justice.... And even today Jesus asks his disciples, that is, all of us: ‘Who do you say that I am?’... What do we answer? Let us think about this. But above all, let us pray to God the Father, through the intercession of the Virgin Mary; let us pray that He grant us the grace to respond, with a sincere heart: ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.’ This is a confession of faith, this is really ‘the Creed.’ Let us repeat it together three times: ‘You are the Christ, the Son of the living God...’” —Pope Francis

As we’ve seen in this study, location can often give us insight into particular passages of Scripture. How might we understand Peter’s response in light of the culture and buildings in nearby Caesarea Philippi?

The Apostles recount that many think Jesus is just another prophet—a holy man that God may be speaking through, but still just a man. How does Peter’s response indicate that Peter understands who Jesus truly is?

After the death of her brother Lazarus, Martha makes a similar profession to Peter’s:

“Jesus said to [Martha], ‘I am the resurrection and the life; he who believes in me, though he die, yet shall he live, and whoever lives and believes in me shall never die. Do you believe this?’ She said to him, ‘Yes, Lord; I believe that you are the Christ, the Son of God, he who is coming into the world.’” —John 11:25-27

What does this passage tell you about Martha’s faith? How are all people throughout history asked to answer the question, “Who do you say that I am?” Take some time to reflect with Pope Francis: “What do we answer?” And pray for the grace to respond with a sincere heart.



COMMIT—DAY 4

PETER, THE ROCK

Scripture tells us that the man who would become the head of the Apostles was first named Simon. See for yourself in the following verses:

Luke 4:38 _____

Luke 6:14 _____

Mark 1:16 _____

And his father's name was John:

John 1:42 _____

John 21:16 _____



Caesarea Philippi photo © Augustine Institute

But at Caesarea Philippi, Jesus gives Peter two new names:

*"... Blessed are you, **Simon Bar-Jona!** ... And I tell you, you are **Peter**..."* (emphasis added)

—Matthew 16:17-18

His first name, Simon, is changed to Peter, and his surname, Bar-John (literally, son of John), is changed to Bar-Jona (literally, son of Jonah). Each new name indicates something unique about Peter, his identity, and his mission.

In the Old Testament story, name changes identified individuals who were to play key roles in God's plan of salvation. Whose names are changed in the following passages?

Genesis 17:5-8 _____

Genesis 35:10-12 _____

God called Abram to leave his home and journey to the land of Canaan, where God changed his name to Abraham and promised to bless this childless man with a multitude of descendants. Later God would change the name of Abraham's grandson Jacob to "Israel," who, with God's blessing, was to become not just the father of twelve sons, but the father and namesake of the twelve tribes that would make up the nation and kingdom of Israel. Over and over throughout the Old Testament the one true God is identified as "the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob" and "the God of Israel." And it was to Israel that God entrusted his Law and teaching.

Once we see the significance of name changes in the Old Testament, then we should take a closer look at the change from Simon bar-John to Peter bar-Jonah. Let's start by looking at the name "Peter."

Peter comes from the Greek word *petros*, which means "rock." We should note that an important person was compared to a rock in the Old Testament. Look up the following passage. Who is compared to "rock"?

Isaiah 51:1-2 _____

It was out of the rock of Abraham that God's people of the Old Covenant were hewn. Peter will be the rock upon which God will build, with living stones, the Church of the New Covenant.



St. Peter/Capernaum photo © Augustine Institute

The image of a rock also played a key part in a dream of the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, as interpreted by the prophet Daniel. In his dream the king saw a statue made of several metals, each metal representing a different kingdom. But then something happens. Look up Daniel 2:34-35 and 44-45. What happens to the statue, and what becomes of the rock (or stone) in this passage?

From this small stone Daniel foretells that the God of heaven will set up a kingdom that will never be destroyed. The rock is the beginning of this kingdom.

Jesus begins his ministry by preaching, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand" (see Matthew 4:17). Before he begins the journey to Jerusalem, where he will be crucified, Jesus is identifying the rock he had chosen and upon which he will build this kingdom:

"And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church ..."

—Matthew 16:18

The kingdom that Jesus is building, one that will last forever, is the Church.

In the Old Testament there was another builder, Solomon. Let's compare Solomon and Jesus. What does each of the following verses tell you about Solomon and Jesus?

	Solomon	Jesus
Who's son is he?	1 Kings 1:32-33 →	Matthew 1:1 →
What is his position or role?	1 Kings 1:34 →	Matthew 27:37 →
What does he possess?	1 Kings 3:10-12, 28 →	Matthew 7:28-29 →
What does he build?	1 Kings 6:1 →	Matthew 16:18 →
What does he build on?	2 Chronicles 3:1 →	Matthew 16:18 →

Jesus is a new Solomon, a new son of David. Like Solomon, Jesus is a wise man who builds on rock. Solomon built the Temple, and God's presence dwelt in the Holy of Holies in the heart of that Temple. Jesus will build the Church, and God will dwell in its members, as St. Paul teaches: "Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?" (1 Corinthians 3:16). Solomon built his Temple on the foundation stone atop Mount Moriah. Jesus will also build his Church on stone, on a sure foundation, the rock of Peter.

The early Church spoke often of the sure foundation that Jesus provided in building his Church on Peter, the Apostles, and their successors (the bishops). Here are a couple examples:

"Wherever the bishop appears, let the congregation be there also. Just as, wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church. It is manifest, therefore, that we should look upon the bishop even as we would look upon the Lord Himself, standing, as he does, before the Lord." —St. Ignatius of Antioch, "Epistle to the Smyrnaeans," c. 105.

"On him (Peter) He builds the Church, and to him He gives the command to feed the sheep, and although He assigns a like power to all the apostles, yet He founded a single chair (cathedra), and He established by His own authority a source and an intrinsic reason for that unity....If someone does not hold fast to this unity of Peter, can he imagine that he still holds the faith? If he (should) desert the chair of Peter upon whom the Church was built, can he still be confident that he is in the Church?" —St. Cyprian of Carthage, "On the Unity of the Catholic Church," c. 251.

St. Paul refers to the Church in his First Letter to Timothy:

"You may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and bulwark of the truth." —1 Timothy 3:15

It is a great gift to us who live 2,000 years after Jesus' life, death, and resurrection that he built his Church on such a firm foundation. Take some time in prayer to thank God for the gift of the Church, and to ask for the grace to make Peter's profession of faith your own and to remain faithful to that profession to the end of your life.

COMMIT-DAY 5

TRUTH AND BEAUTY



The Prophet Jonah, Michelangelo - Sistine Chapel ceiling fresco 1508-1512



The Prophet Jonah / Erich Lessing / Art Resource, NY

In Matthew 16, Jesus gives Simon Peter the new surname of “bar Jona,” literally “son of Jonah.” Since Peter’s mission is to be connected with Jonah, it’s important to remember the significance of this Old Testament prophet. We’ll do so with the help of Michelangelo’s wonderful painting.

At the beginning of the 16th century, Pope Julius II commissioned Michelangelo to repaint the entire ceiling of the Sistine Chapel. At this time the barrel-vaulted ceiling was painted a brilliant blue and dotted with stars; this common scheme (which used the ceiling to portray the heavens above the worship space of the church) was about to be completely covered by Michelangelo’s work. In magnificent colors, Michelangelo depicted scenes from the biblical accounts of Creation, Adam and Eve, and Noah and the Flood, across the center of the ceiling. As the vaulted ceiling arched downward, Michelangelo painted images of the pagan sibyls [seers] and Israel’s prophets, who prophesied about the messiah who would bring salvation to Jews and Greeks alike. And some 30 years later, Michelangelo would paint his “Last Judgment,” on the wall behind the altar, a massive work stretching from the altar below to the ceiling above.



Design for the 15th-century decoration of the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel / Scala / Art Resource, NY

SISTINE CHAPEL: chapel of the pope in the Vatican; site of the Papal Conclave where the cardinals meet to elect a new pope

Starting over the entrance of the chapel, the depictions of the prophets begin with Zechariah and continue onward with Joel, Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Jeremiah on alternating sides of the chapel, finally finishing with the prophet Jonah hovering over the high altar and the “Last Judgment.” Zechariah sits comfortably in his painted room. But as we move down the length of the ceiling, the prophets and sibyls grow in size until we reach Jonah, who appears as the largest of the figures, so large that his feet seem to reach out of the bottom frame of the fresco.

The Bible includes the books of seventeen different prophets. The ceiling of the Sistine Chapel pictures only seven prophets. Can you recall any prophecies that explain why these seven prophets were chosen to be pictured? (Look up the following verses if you need some assistance.)

Zechariah 12:10 _____

Joel 2:28 _____

Isaiah 7:14 _____

Ezekiel 37:26 _____

Daniel 9:24 _____

Jeremiah 31:15 _____

Jonah 1:17 _____

Even though the ceiling at this point is arching forward, Michelangelo’s masterful use of foreshortening makes Jonah appear to be leaning backward, leaning so far back that his feet do not touch the stone footrest provided for him. Along with Jonah appears a large fish, which swallowed him in the prophet’s story. There is also the tree under which Jonah finds shade from the sun while he waits for the great city of Nineveh to be destroyed.

FORESHORTENING: a method of representing an object in a picture in depth

The book of Jonah has four chapters that span only a couple pages in the Bible. One wouldn’t expect for Jonah, of all the prophets, to have such a prominent size and place overlooking the altar. To understand Jonah’s unique credentials, we need to go back to Jonah’s story and to Jesus’ reference to Jonah in the gospels.

The book of Jonah tells us that Jonah is called by God to proclaim judgment against Nineveh, the capital city of Israel’s enemy at that time. Jonah wants no part of it. He knows that God is merciful and will save the Ninevites if they repent. Instead Jonah flees to the Mediterranean port city of Joppa. There he boards a ship, hoping to escape his mission. A storm rages, following the ship and striking fear into the hearts of the sailors. The gods are angry, they conclude, and seek out the offender. It is Jonah. Jonah offers a solution and the sailors reluctantly agree: they toss him overboard. Jonah is swallowed by a great fish.

While in the belly of the fish for three days and nights, Jonah cries out for God's deliverance and is spit upon the shore. Jonah now obeys God and goes to Nineveh. He proclaims God's message. Then, believing the people will not repent, he slips away to find a vantage point from which to watch the destruction of his enemy's capital city. The destruction doesn't come. The people have responded to God's call and repented. Jonah is miserable—and annoyed with God for holding back his hand of wrath.

God then teaches Jonah a lesson by raising up a plant that Jonah is happy to use as shade. The next morning, God sends a worm to destroy the plant, and Jonah suffers from the heat. Jonah, still morose, tells God he wants to die because of the loss of the plant. God rebukes him for pitying the plant, which he had nothing to do with, more than an entire city of over a hundred thousand people who were created by God's own hand.

Jesus mentions Jonah twice in the gospels. The first time is in response to a request by the Scribes and the Pharisees for a sign:

"But he answered them, 'An evil and adulterous generation seeks for a sign; but no sign shall be given to it except the sign of the prophet Jonah. For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the whale, so will the Son of man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. The men of Nin'evah will arise at the judgment with this generation and condemn it; for they repented at the preaching of Jonah, and behold, something greater than Jonah is here.'" —Matthew 12:39-41

The "sign of Jonah," Jonah's three days in the belly of the whale, prefigures Jesus' resurrection, which will occur after Jesus has been in the earth, the tomb, three days. The sign of Jonah was especially dear to the early Christian community who preached Jesus' death and resurrection to all the ends of the earth. Jonah and the whale appear often among the images found in the catacombs as well as early Christian sarcophagi. Jonah, as a sign of the Resurrection, becomes the ideal prophet to position at the head of the Sistine Chapel, since he also prefigures Christ's Second Coming and the resurrection of the faithful which is depicted just below Jonah's fresco in the "Last Judgment."

Jesus references Jonah a second time in Matthew 16 when he changes the name Simon bar-John to Peter "bar-Jonah" (the Aramaic word "bar" meaning "son of"). What can we determine from this change? With his resurrection, Jesus will be the new Jonah, fulfilling the sign of Jonah. Peter is to be the new "bar-Jonah."

Interestingly, Old Testament prophets and their protégés often referred to one another as father-son, so Elisha refers to Elijah as "My father, my father!" (see 2 Kings 2:12).



Jonah and the Whale © Nicku / Shutterstock.com

Once Jesus has ascended into heaven, Peter, as the new son of Jonah, will lead the mission to preach the gospel to all the nations, similar to Jonah's mission to Nineveh. The similarities do not end there. We'll see in our remaining sessions how Peter will sail from a Mediterranean port, just like Jonah before him. He will eventually land in Rome, the capital city of the Jew's enemy. There Peter will preach repentance and faith in Jesus Christ. Just as God's mercy and forgiveness were poured out on the city of Nineveh, so will many Romans receive forgiveness of sins and be baptized into Christ's Church.

Now we understand more clearly why Jonah has such a prominent place in the Sistine Chapel. Every new pope is called to follow in the footsteps of St. Peter, to be a new bar-Jonah who will preach the gospel to the ends of the world. In this chapel, where the conclave of cardinals sits under the watchful eye of Jonah, cardinals must discern who among them will best fulfill the duties as bar-Jonah. Pope-Emeritus Benedict XVI, when recalling the conclaves, reflected on Michelangelo's art: "I know well how we were exposed to those images in the hours of the great decision, how they called us to task, how they insinuated into our souls a sense of the greatness of the responsibility. To place these keys [left to Peter] in the right hands: this is the immense responsibility in those days."



The Prophet Jonah and the Separation of Light and Dark / Scala / Art Resource, NY

It is interesting to note that in Michelangelo's "Last Judgment," Peter stands at Christ's left, holding the keys of the kingdom. Jesus' right hand is raised in triumph and in blessing, but also directs our eye upward to Jonah. Jonah in turn, if we follow his gaze, directs our eyes to God in the ceiling's first scene of Creation, where God separates darkness and light. The twisting figure of Jonah provides a link between the drama of Michelangelo's ceiling and the drama of the lower chapel. In the former, God's gift of Creation is marred by man's fall from grace, and all of salvation history longs for the messiah promised by the prophets. In the latter, Christ is proclaimed the Messiah, fulfilling the prophecies in his actions. Significantly, these paintings are located over the chapel's altar, where the Messiah comes again in every Mass, while also reminding us that his Second Coming will raise to new life those who have proven faithful.

SESSION 4

Take a moment to journal your ideas, questions, or insights about this lesson. Write down thoughts you had that may not have been mentioned here. List any personal applications you got from the lessons. What challenged you the most in the teachings? How might you turn what you've learned into specific action?

This image shows a single sheet of cream-colored paper with horizontal ruling lines. The paper has a slightly textured appearance and some minor discoloration or staining, particularly along the left edge. There are approximately 20 horizontal lines spaced evenly across the page. The lines are a light brown or tan color. The paper is oriented vertically.

SESSION 4

PETER THE ROCK: THE PRIMACY OF JESUS

This image shows a single sheet of cream-colored paper with horizontal ruling lines. The paper has a slightly textured appearance with some minor discoloration and faint smudges. There are 20 horizontal lines in total, evenly spaced across the page. The lines are a light brown or tan color, matching the paper's tone. The paper is oriented vertically and occupies the entire frame.