

# Jot & Tittle

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## **The Keys of the Kingdom**

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One particularly difficult passage in the New Testament that challenges our interpretive skills is found in Matthew 16:17-19. In response to Jesus' question, Peter had confessed his belief that Jesus was the Messiah, the Son of God. Jesus responded to Peter by promising to give him "the keys of the kingdom of heaven." What did Jesus have in mind? In what way did Peter make use of this privilege during his lifetime? How does this passage apply today? These are some of the questions that orbit around this difficult passage.

### *Identifying the Nature of the Kingdom of Heaven*

"The term 'kingdom of God' or 'kingdom of Heaven' signifies God's sovereign, dynamic and eschatological rule."<sup>1</sup> In other words, these phrases refer to the fact that God reigns over His creation. That reign has taken various forms in history and will take a unique form in the future. While God has always maintained a spiritual rule over the world, He also exerted a limited political rule in the past. His chosen people, Israel, lived under a divine theocracy followed by a political monarchy. God ruled His people through a variety of kings in a physical, earthly kingdom. That reign through earthly kings came to an end when these kings no longer upheld God's covenant. However, in His grace God promised to raise up a

descendant of King David who would renew that earthly kingdom. The ancient kingdom of Israel would find its fulfillment in a future, earthly kingdom ruled by God's Messiah. We sometimes refer to that future kingdom as the Millennium.

When Jesus came, He offered this earthly kingdom to God's people, declaring that the kingdom of heaven was "near" (Matthew 4:17). However, the Jewish people of Jesus' day rejected Him as their Messiah and consequently rejected His offer of the earthly, Davidic, millennial kingdom. Some scholars believe that the Davidic kingdom has "already" begun through the church, even though that kingdom has "not yet" reached its fullest expression. However, the New Testament presents a consistent distinction between the Jewish nation and the church. Therefore, it seems preferable to conclude that the Davidic, millennial kingdom has not yet been inaugurated. That day will come when Jesus returns.

What, then, is the nature of the present kingdom rule of God over His creation? As in times past, God is currently exerting His direct rule over the world rather than a rule through the agency of kings. The spiritual aspect of that rule today is evident in His church. The church is first mentioned by Jesus in Matthew 16:18 in close connection with the concept of the kingdom of heaven (verse 19). While the promises of God's messianic kingdom await the return of Jesus Christ, God is still working in this world. He uses the church to advance the spiritual (not the political) aspects of His kingdom.

### *Identifying the Nature of the Keys of the Kingdom*

Jesus gave Peter the "keys of the kingdom," referring to the spiritual kingdom that would become identified with the church after Christ's ascension. A "key" refers to the authority to admit or deny access. Jesus presented Peter the authority to admit or deny access to the kingdom of heaven. However, this authority doesn't necessarily imply a supreme priestly function resting in a single church leader.

In Luke 11:52 Jesus rebuked the scribes for taking away the "key" to knowledge and thereby hindering people from entering into a proper understanding of God. Since this is the only other reference to a key in the four Gospels, it provides a significant clue to understanding the nature of the keys of the kingdom of heaven in

Matthew 16:19. Jesus was granting Peter the privilege of opening access to heaven through the proclamation of the knowledge of God, the gospel message. “Keys were a sign of authority, the ability to open to others the truths of God’s kingdom (cf. Isa. 22:22; Rev. 1:8; 3:7). To insert the key and open the doors of the kingdom of heaven would be literally to preach the gospel.”<sup>2</sup> The fact that Peter was the first to declare the gospel to the Jews (Acts 2:14-39) and then to the Gentiles (Acts 10:25-48) following Jesus’ ascension underscores this interpretation.

### ***Identifying the Nature of Binding and Loosing***

Closely connected with Jesus’ bestowal of the keys of the kingdom on Peter is His declaration that whatever Peter would bind on earth would be bound in heaven. Jesus made an identical statement to all His disciples in the context of church discipline in Matthew 18:18. One of the difficulties with these statements stems from a failure to recognize the nuances of its Greek verb forms. When the verbs are translated “will be loosed . . . will be bound” in heaven, the implication is that God in heaven is obligated to observe the decisions of the church or certain church leaders.

However, these verbs actually imply completed action. “It is the unanimous testimony of Greek grammarians that the perfect tense denotes a past action, the results of which endure to the present. The periphrastic form of the perfect usually emphasizes the existing state.”<sup>3</sup> Therefore, the state of binding and loosing has already been determined by God in heaven. “. . . when the perfect participle is given its full force in the Matthean passages, the periphrastic future perfect in 16:19 becomes ‘whatever you bind on earth *shall have been* bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth *shall have been loosed* in heaven’ (similarly for 18:18).”<sup>4</sup>

Based on this translation, Peter was not given controlling authority over heaven, but was instructed to pronounce the decisions already made in heaven. Since the keys of the kingdom were connected with the proclamation of the gospel, the binding and loosing would relate to the authoritative declaration of God’s revealed will for people on earth. “On the basis of God’s Word,

those who preach the gospel have the authority to assert that those who receive Christ are forgiven.”<sup>5</sup>

### ***Identifying the Function of the Keys of the Kingdom Today***

Jesus clearly entrusted the keys of the kingdom of heaven to Peter in Matthew 16:19, based on the single pronoun “you.” However, Peter may be seen as representative of the rest of the disciples. As the other disciples grew in their recognition of Jesus’ messianic identity, they too would have entered into the role of authoritative spokesmen of the gospel. In fact, Jesus later said to the disciples as a group that they held the authority of binding and loosing (Matthew 18:18), a declaration that was most likely intended to apply to the whole church. Matthew 28:18-20 may lend weight to this broader dispensing of authority to all believers.

Christians today can proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ with confidence and authority. When we declare that salvation is available only through faith in Jesus, we uphold the declaration of God in heaven. Our very presentation of the gospel opens the door for those who believe but confirms in their lost condition those who reject Jesus. To share the gospel of Jesus Christ is both an awesome privilege and a humbling responsibility.

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<sup>1</sup> Caragounis, C. C. “Kingdom of God/Kingdom of Heaven” in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. Edited by Joel B. Green, Scot McKnight, and I. Howard Marshall. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992, p. 417.

<sup>2</sup> Robertson, Arthur. *Matthew*. Chicago: Moody Press, 1983, p. 91.

<sup>3</sup> Toussaint, Stanley. *Behold the King*. Portland, OR: Multnomah Press, 1980, p. 206.

<sup>4</sup> Carson, D. A. “Matthew” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, vol. 8. Edited by Frank E. Gaebelin. Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1984, pp. 370-371.

<sup>5</sup> Robertson, p. 91.