

Text: Matthew 16:18

Title: The Gates of Hades

Truth: Christ's church will survive and thrive in God's program for all ages.

Date/Location: Saturday and Sunday September 5-6, 2020 at FBC

Introduction

One verse in Scripture uses the phrase "gates of Hades." It is Matthew 16:18, following on the heels of the Peter's pronouncement of Jesus as the Christ, and the prediction that Christ will build his church on the "rock."

Matthew 16:18 "And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this rock I will build My church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it."

We have previously studied about this rock, which I take not to be Peter personally, nor the disciples corporately, but the truth of Jesus as the Christ. The church is built on the one foundation stone, which is Jesus Christ and His salvation. We will not focus our attention on that any further in these notes.

However, there is a question about the last phrase "the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." Do these gates represent an offensive weapon that has turned against the church in an attempt to destroy it? What exactly does this mean?

I. Some Exegetical Details

A. The **subject** of the phrase is "the gates" modified by the word "Hades." These are the "Hades-gates." In Greek this is pronounced as "Hah-dase."

B. The **verb** "prevail against" can be translated as *overcome* or *overpower*. The Greek dictionary defines it as, "to have the strength or capability to obtain an advantage, be dominant, prevail...defeat, win a victory over."

However, the contextual nuance is a bit stronger than the dictionary allows. It is not just that the gates of Hades have a *capability* or *strength* to overcome the church. Jesus is not commenting only on the relative strength of the gates of Hades and the church. He is saying that regardless of the strength of the gates, they will not actually defeat the church.

At times these "gates" may appear stronger. But they are not stronger, nor will they win out in the end. They loom large in the minds of the believer, possibly because the believer looks at them compared to

himself or his little church. Indeed, compared to our individual feeble strength, we are overmatched. But our Commander-in-Chief is Jesus Christ, Who possesses infinite power. Refer to Matthew 28:18.

- C. The **pronoun** "it" has as its antecedent the church. We know this because the word "church" is a feminine noun form, and the pronoun "it" matches in feminine gender. But "it" is not an individual local church. "It" refers to the total church under its head, Jesus Christ. That whole army is un-conquerable in the long run.

II. What are Gates in General?

- A. The gates are gateways or doorways, like city gates. City gates in the Old Testament were the literal place where people came and went. They were also a meeting place where the elders would meet and conduct business (Gen. 19:1, Ruth 4:1). This does not seem to answer directly our identification of the gates of Hades since Hades is not a city.
- Lk. 7:12 And when He came near the **gate** of the city, behold, a dead man was being carried out, the only son of his mother; and she was a widow. And a large crowd from the city was with her.
- Acts 3:10 Then they knew that it was he who sat begging alms at the Beautiful **Gate** of the temple; and they were filled with wonder and amazement at what had happened to him.
- Acts 9:23-25 Now after many days were past, the Jews plotted to kill him. 24 But their plot became known to Saul. And they watched the **gates** day and night, to kill him. 25 Then the disciples took him by night and let him down through the wall in a large basket.
- Heb. 13:12 Therefore Jesus also, that He might sanctify the people with His own blood, suffered outside the **gate**.

- B. Some gates are for guarding or keeping people in.

Acts 12:7-14 Now behold, an angel of the Lord stood by him, and a light shone in the prison; and he struck Peter on the side and raised him up, saying, "Arise quickly!" And his chains fell off his hands. 8 Then the angel said to him, "Gird yourself and tie on your sandals"; and so he did. And he said to him, "Put on your garment and follow me." 9 So he went out and followed him, and did not know that what was done by the angel was real, but thought he was seeing a vision. 10 When they were past the first and the second guard posts, they came to the iron **gate** that leads to the city, which opened to them of its own accord; and they went out and went down one street, and immediately the

angel departed from him. 11 And when Peter had come to himself, he said, "Now I know for certain that the Lord has sent His angel, and has delivered me from the hand of Herod and from all the expectation of the Jewish people." 12 So, when he had considered this, he came to the house of Mary, the mother of John whose surname was Mark, where many were gathered together praying. 13 And as Peter knocked at the door of the gate, a girl named Rhoda came to answer. 14 When she recognized Peter's voice, because of her gladness she did not open the gate, but ran in and announced that Peter stood before the gate [gateway or entryway with gates; different word but related].

C. A "light" metaphor derived from this literal meaning of a city gate is that it speaks about the entry to a spiritual pathway for life.

Matt. 7:13-14 NKJ Matthew 7:13 "Enter by the narrow **gate**; for wide is the **gate** and broad is the way that leads to destruction, and there are many who go in by it. 14 How narrow is the **gate** and difficult is the way which leads to life, and there are few who find it."

Luke 13:23-25 Then one said to Him, "Lord, are there few who are saved?" And He said to them, 24 "Strive to enter through the narrow **gate**, for many, I say to you, will seek to enter and will not be able. 25 When once the Master of the house has risen up and shut the door, and you begin to stand outside and knock at the door, saying, 'Lord, Lord, open for us,' and He will answer and say to you, 'I do not know you, where you are from,'

D. In summary, the usage of the word throughout the NT indicates just what we would think—a doorway protected by a door with a lock of some sort. It is an entry, or a means to keep something out, or a mechanism to keep something in. For example, a city gate keeps out bandits at nighttime. A prison gate keeps prisoners from escaping to the outside world, as well as keeping their friends from coming in to attack the prison and help them escape.

III. The Metaphorical Use of Gates Used by Jesus in Matt. 16:18

There are two commonly held explanations of how Jesus uses the phrase "gates of Hades."

A. The first possibility is that He uses the figure of "gates" as reference to an **offensive** activity. On the surface, this seems very strange because gates do not seem to be an offensive tool at all.

Remember, gates are designed to keep someone in, or to keep someone out, but this is a rather passive activity. Could the gates be a metaphorical reference of demons or people inside of the gates coming out in a horde to attack the Christian church? That seems somewhat possible, on first read, but we'll have to hold judgment on that for a second.

The reason this view seems so plausible is that the church is constantly under attack, even in so-called civilized societies such as ours.

- B. The other common interpretation is that the gates are more of a **defensive** instrument meant to hold people inside and to keep outsiders from taking whatever is inside. In this scenario, the gates are holding in the residents of Hades, but cannot “withstand” the attack of the church as *it* takes the offensive posture. In this view, the church is busy breaking down the gates in an attempt to rescue people from death. Or better yet, trying to airlift people out from behind the gates! This also seems possible, although it has to expand the definition of Hades from just those actually in it to those living humans who are destined to go there.

This view also seems plausible, because the Great Commission was given to the church, and we are working to “save souls from death” (James 5:20). But in fact, the right explanation is different than this.

IV. The Gates are Gates of Hades, not Gates of Hell

- A. Most people read this text as if Hades = Hell because of the dominant KJV tradition in the English speaking world, so that “the gates of Hades” = “the gates of Hell” = “gates of the lake of fire.” Then, they reason, if it is the gates of Hell, there are a lot of bad demons in Hell, so they will come out and attack the church. And the church, though injured from time to time, will ultimately prevail and be in heaven and all will be well. That sounds encouraging. BUT, it is not quite right.

Now, it is true that the Devil and his minions are adversaries to the work of God. But do they come out of Hell? Do they come out of Hades? The text of Scripture tells us that the Devil roams about like a roaring lion (1 Peter 5:8). He does not seem to be confined to or resident in Hell right now, that place of eternal punishment. If he were there, he would not be getting out of there on weekend passes doing whatever evil he wanted to do. The same goes for Hades. He is not headquartered there either.

Let us be clear in our minds that we are talking about the gates of Hades, not of Hell. They are not the same thing.

B. Who is presently in Hell, anyway? And what about Hades? Who is in there? Do they get out of there and run campaigns against the church of Jesus Christ? Or does the church attack them as if there are people in there who can be removed?

1. The residents of Hell. So far as I know, there is no one in the lake of fire right now. The lake of fire will first be populated by the Beast and False Prophet (Revelation 19:20). After that, Satan is thrown in (20:10). Then finally, the souls+resurrected bodies of all unbelievers (20:14-15) will be sent there. Hades itself is thrown into the lake of fire as well, thus distinguishing the two places from each other. But, since there is no one in that place just yet, no one can come out to attack the church. The church would have no interest therefore to go in there.
2. The residents of Hades. This is what is more commonly called “Hell” in everyday English. In the Old Testament it is called Sheol. It is the place of the souls of the dead, those departed from this life. The believers before Christ went to “Paradise,” and the lost to Hades, the bad “compartment” (Luke 16:19-31). The people who go to Hades cannot get out of there. This is in accord to the words of our Lord (Luke 16:26), and the doctrine that there are no second chances after physical life is over (Hebrews 9:27). Therefore, they cannot come out to attack the church. And the church cannot go in and short-circuit divine punishment by extricating the residents of Hades.

V. The Old Testament Context

- A. Often a good way to understand something in the NT is to hunt around in the Old for a similar idea. The New Testament writers were steeped in Old Testament language and theology, and Jesus was too, as the author of those holy writings!
- B. Job 17:15-16 “Where then is my hope? As for my hope, who can see it? Will it go down to the gates of Sheol? Shall we have rest together in the dust?” In this passage, “gates of Sheol” is basically death. Job views death as having an entry-way (something like you would find at the end of the valley of the shadow of death when you pass into death itself). That entry-way is the “gates” of Sheol. Sheol is the world of the dead. In the mind of the Old Testament person, this place was for both believers and unbelievers.

C. Hades and Sheol are basically different words for the same thing. The gates of Sheol is roughly the same as the gates of Hades. In support of this, look at:

Psalm 16:10 “You will not abandon me to **Sheol**.”

Then look at Acts 2:27 which says, “You will not leave my soul in **Hades**.”

Sheol (Hebrew) and Hades (Greek) are used interchangeably in this context.

This in turn indicates that the gates of Hades speaks of the realm of the dead, or more simply, just death. The Messiah would not be left there in the realm of the dead.

C. See also Job 38:17, Psalm 9:13, 107:18, Isaiah 38:10 for more “gates of Sheol/death.”

VI. Finally, the Meaning of the Gates of Hades

A. Taken together, we have learned that: Gates are not offensive. Rather, they hold people out or keeping those inside confined. The gates are the gates of *Hades*, not of Hell. No one in Hades or Hell is ever allowed to get out to afflict the church. The church cannot go and do battle with those places or remove people from them. Finally and importantly, the “gates of Hades” refer to death itself.

B. So read it that way:

Death cannot prevail against the church.

Death cannot overpower the church.

Death cannot overcome the church.

VII. Application to YOU

A. Assurance

1. Jesus defeated death – Rom 6:9, Acts 2:24, Heb. 2:14. Jesus destroyed the power of Satan over death and demonstrated Himself to be the “Lord of death.” and has the keys of Hades and death (Rev. 1:8). Get that—Jesus, our Lord, has the keys to the “gates of Hades”! This is because He defeated death.

2. The church—all true believers—are IN Jesus Christ. What Matthew 16:18 says is that those who are enlisted in the Lamb’s book of life and are to be saved *will in fact be saved*. None will be lost! The church will not be destroyed, even when faced with the devil’s worse tool—death itself. The church will be extricated from the clutches of Hades

and death because Christ has redeemed her to Himself. Believers in Christ are set free from death and Hades – Rom. 8:2, 1 Cor. 15:54-57. Note: Hades does not have the victory!

B. Boldness

We live for Christ. If there becomes a serious cost of living for Christ, we know that it cannot go so high that we become lost. The church will not be destroyed. Therefore, we can minister boldly for Christ amid an evil generation. We are certain of ultimate victory.

Missionaries over the ages are a great example of this boldness. They would *abandon* themselves to the cause of Christ, no matter if they faced death. They were bold as lions. Some of them are a reason that some of us are saved today.

C. Witness

The church is not doing war against the gates of Hades as some have claimed. BUT, there is a truth that comes out of the real meaning of the “gates” phrase that is related to this.

We *are* trying to rescue souls out of death (and Hades, and eventual Hell) and bring them to heaven. But Hades does not want to give up her dead very easily—in the sense that she has claim on each and every human being that is presently alive. All will go to Hades and eventually to Hell if they are not rescued. People are perilously stuck on that broad road that leads to destruction. They are subject to death and then judgment (Heb. 9:27).

Besides that, they are enslaved to death (Heb. 2:15). Death can be held over their heads to make them do awful things, or to encourage them to “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die,” and life is hopeless unless we extract the most pleasure out of it that we can.

We have an enormous power at our disposal: the gospel of Christ. In it, we can tell people that *you too can be free eternal death*. This power is what Jesus speaks about in the very next verse: the keys of the kingdom of heaven. When we proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ, and someone is saved, we are loosing those who are bound on the road of Hades. If they refuse, then we must declare that they cannot be loosed any other way, and thus will be found forever and ultimately their residence will be Hades and then Hell itself. See John 20:23.

In other words, Jesus is the key owner; he has the keys, and he allows us to use them. What are keys, by the way? They are a metaphor for

power and authority. Jesus has the power over death and is its new master. Satan cannot claim that title! Our task is to rescue lost sinners from Hades and eternal punishment, to rescue people from death which is the fate suffered by all of humanity.

We declare forgiveness and new life through the gospel of Christ. No one can stop us from rescuing those who will be God's people. No one can nullify the offer of forgiveness in Christ Jesus. Hades is greedy and wants all humans for itself; we want some for God, and the church will get what we want for the Lord. Not even the threat of death itself can stop the church from living out its mission.

Because He has the keys to Hades and death, and He has all power (Matt 28:18), we can go forward confidently in preaching the gospel.

- D. Not only will we be able to win some who are presently on the road to Hades, but also we ourselves as part of the church will not be destroyed by death. Hades will not be able to swallow *us* up like it has every other human in history. Death could not hold Christ (Acts 2:24) and it will not be able to hold the Christian either, nor the entire Christian church.

Conclusion

It is good to remember that the point of the text is *not* about the strength of the gates of Hades or the residents inside of those gates. The point is that the church cannot be defeated by death. It is ultimately invincible because Christ is its head.

This is like the nation of Israel: ultimately, it cannot be destroyed because of the promises of God. So too the church cannot be defeated or destroyed. Not even death can destroy the church. Communists may attempt to destroy it. And secularists. And atheists. And human governments. Persecutors may attempt to swallow it up. Nor indeed, will Satan and all of his demons, who work for that Hades-dominion, be able to conquer the church. Their efforts are in vain, because not even death itself—the most potent enemy—will destroy the church.

Death will destroy those who come against the church, but not the church!

If you want to boil it right down, here it is: the gates of Hades will not prevail against the church means “death will not overcome the church.” In the end, death cannot conquer the church. Here and now, the church will win some out of the broad way that leads to death and give them that same assurance and boldness and witness that we possess.