Sermon Series: The Four Building Blocks of Our Faith
Sermon Title: The Prevailing Church

Text: Matthew 16:13-20 -- Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" 14 And they said, "Some say John the Baptist, others say Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." 17 And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. 18 And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. 19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven." 20 Then he strictly charged the disciples to tell no one that he was the Christ.

Introduction: This Scripture reminds us that **Christ's church is meant to be a prevailing church**. The word "**prevail**" as it's used here in **verse eighteen** means "***to triumph, to overcome, to get the victory.*** The Lord uses the word to speak of His future bride that will not be **overcome** by the gates of Hades, but will ultimately stand victorious in the last accounting. Now to be sure this description doesn't seem to fit all of the churches that we see today. **Listen to this**: Almost 7 in 10 pastors (69%) believe there is a growing sense of fear within their congregations about the future of the nation and the world, according to a **Lifeway Research** study from 2023. Additionally, more than 3 in 5 (63%) say their churches have a growing dread about the future of Christianity in the U.S. and around the world. **Does this sound like a prevailing church to you? Of course, when we ask the question, it assumes we know what one looks like**. I would like to suggest that our Lord was describing a prevailing church when He took His disciples to Caesarea Philippi. Here are four observations from our passage in **Matthew 16** that help us understand what a victorious, overcoming church looks like.

A prevailing church lives out its confession on the doorstep of the unbelieving world (**Matthew 16:13a -- Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi**). Jesus took the disciples to **Caesarea Phillipi**, a city that was as pagan a territory as one could find. Located at the southwest base of Mount Hermon, it was known first for the worship of the **Canaanite god, Baal**, and later it became famous as a center for the worship of the **Greek god of fertility, Pan**. As a part of the Roman Empire under the authority of Herod, the residents officially recognized **the divinity of Caesar** as well. **It was there that Jesus called for a decision about His own identity**. Why would He lead the disciples 25 miles from Galilee to this well-known center for pagan worship? I suggest He had two reasons for doing so. (**1**) AS A REMINDER TO BE IN THE WORLD, BUT NOT OF IT. **That message was given to the Jews in the Old Testament** -- **Deuteronomy 11:26-32 -- "See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you obey the commandments of the Lord your God, which I command you today, and the curse, if you do not obey the commandments of the Lord your God, but turn aside from the way that I am commanding you today, to go after other gods that you have not known. And when the Lord your God brings you into the land that you are entering to take possession of it, you shall set the blessing on Mount Gerizim and the curse on Mount Ebal. Are they not beyond the Jordan, west of the road, toward the going down of the sun, in the land of the Canaanites who live in the Arabah, opposite Gilgal, beside the oak of Moreh? For you are to cross over the Jordan to go in to take possession of the land that the Lord your God is giving you. And when you possess it and live in it, you shall be careful to do all the statutes and the rules that I am setting before you today. It was also part of our Lord's prayer for His followers in the New Testament -- John 17:14-17 -- I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. I do not ask that you take them out of the world, but that you keep them from the evil one. They are not of the world, just as I am not of the world. Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth**). God has called us to holiness. This doesn't happen by accident. We must be intentional in our decision-making, being very careful to expose ourselves only to those things that promote purity while avoiding anything that lures us into sin. As someone has said, "**The Christian**

is not ruined by living in the world but by the world living in him." And (**2**) **AS A REMINDER THAT THE GOSPEL IS FOR EVERYONE** (**Isaiah 42:6 -- "I am the Lord; I have called you in righteousness; I will take you by the hand and keep you; I will give you as a covenant for the people, a light for the nations, to open the eyes that are blind, to bring out the prisoners from the dungeon, from the prison those who sit in darkness; Romans 1:16 -- For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, to the Jew first and also to the Greek**). Jesus did not come for the Jews only. "**For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son**..." Remember that the Great Commission is to go into **all the world** and preach the Gospel.

Obviously, an effective witness involves both a holy life and a holy message. **A drunk named Joe was miraculously converted at a Bowery mission**. Prior to his conversion, Joe had gained the reputation of being a dirty wino for whom there was no hope, only a miserable existence in the ghetto. But following his conversion to a new life with God, everything changed. **Joe became the most caring person that anyone associated with the mission had ever known**. Joe spent his days and nights hanging out at the mission doing whatever needed to be done. There was never any task that was too lowly for Joe to take on. There was never anything that he was asked to do that he considered beneath him. Whether it was cleaning up the vomit left by some violently sick alcoholic or scrubbing the toilets after careless men left the bathroom filthy, Joe did what was asked with a soft smile on his face and with a seeming gratitude for the chance to help. He could be counted on to feed feeble men who wandered into the mission off the street, and to undress and tuck into bed men who were too out of it to take care of themselves. **One evening, when the director of the mission was delivering his evening evangelistic message to the usual crowd of still and sullen men with drooped heads, there was one man who looked up, came down the aisle to the altar and knelt to pray, crying out for God to help him to change**. The repentant drunk kept shouting, "**Oh God, make me like Joe! Make me like Joe! Make me like Joe! Make me like Joe!**" The director of the mission leaned over and said to the man, "**Son, I think it would be better if you prayed, 'Make me like *Jesus*!'**" The man looked up at the director with a quizzical expression on his face and asked, "**Why? Is he like Joe?**" I'LL REMIND YOU ONCE MORE THAT CHRISTIANS FORM THE REPUTATION OF CHRIST IN THIS WORLD. WHEN WE ARE HOLY, WE PROCLAIM THAT OUR LORD IS HOLY.

A prevailing church confesses "Christ as Lord" (**Matthew 16:13b-16 -- Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, he asked his disciples, "Who do people 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." 15 He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" 16 Simon Peter replied, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God"**). Herod thought that Jesus was **John the Baptist** risen from the dead (**See Matthew 14:1-2**). Some Jews believed Jesus was **Elijah** (**Malachi 4:5-6 -- "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes. And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers**) or **Jeremiah**, or one of the other prophets. ***Jesus asked this question not to learn what others were saying, but to correct in the minds of the disciples a misconception about His role***. Peter, through divine intervention, gets it right. Notice his response.

- **You are the Christ**. The term means "**anointed**" and is used 39 times in the Old Testament to describe prophets (**Psalm 105:15 -- Touch not my anointed ones, do my prophets no harm**), priests (**See Exodus 28:41**) and kings (See **2 Samuel 1:14 where David refers to King Saul as the Lord's anointed**). It came to be linked to David as the anointed king of Israel and his offspring who would be the hope of the nation. This figure would triumph in the last days over Israel's enemies (**Psalm 2:7-8 -- I will tell of the decree: The Lord said to me, "You are my Son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession**).
- **The Son of the Living God**. Jesus refers to Himself in this way to point out how He contrasts with the other Messianic figures and the dead gods of the pagans worshipped in **Caesarea Philippi**. **The Gospel of Matthew is filled with testimonies regarding the deity of Christ** (**1**) **HIS CONCEPTION** (**Matthew 1:21-23 -- She will bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this**

took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: "Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall call his name Immanuel); (2) **HIS RETURN FROM EGYPT** (Matthew 2:15 -- this was to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet, "Out of Egypt I called my son); (3) **HIS BAPTISM** (Matthew 3:17 -- a voice from heaven said, "This is my beloved Son, with whom I am well pleased); (4) **HIS TEMPTATIONS** (Matthew 4:2 -- If you are the Son of God, command these stones to become loaves of bread; 4:5 -- If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down, for it is written, 'He will command his angels concerning you,'); and (5) **DURING EXORCISMS** (Matthew 8:29 -- And behold, they cried out, "What have you to do with us, O Son of God?). It is His special relationship with the Father that sets Him apart from anyone else. **By the way, notice that Jesus did not blush at Peter's statement but called him blessed by God in being able to discern the truth**. There is no room in Christianity for referring to Jesus as anything less than that which is confessed by Peter. (**REVIEW: A PREVAILING CHURCH IS ONE THAT LIVES OUT ITS CONFESSION ON THE DOORSTEP OF THE UNBELIEVING WORLD; ONE THAT CONFESSES CHRIST AS LORD**.)

A prevailing church is built by Christ (Matthew 16:17-18a -- And Jesus answered him, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah! 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). This brings us to one of the most controversial passages in the Bible. Jesus says, "You are Peter (PETROS --which is roughly the English "Rocky") and on this rock (PETRA) I will build my church..." Some have argued that this verse gives credence to the papal line beginning with Peter as **the foundation "rock"** for the church. Yet this can't be right because the Bible says elsewhere that the foundation upon which the church was built was not laid by Peter alone but by the apostles and prophets (Ephesians 2:20-21 -- you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord). Others have contended that the term "**rock**" refers to Peter's confession, not to Peter, making this a statement that should focus more on his confession than his person. However, it is likely that the term "**rock**" refers to Peter and not to his confession or Jesus would have said, "**You are Peter**, **but** (not and) **on this rock I will build my church**" so that the disciples would have clearly understood His meaning.

What's the solution? Jesus' intent isn't to make Peter the foundation for the church, but to acknowledge that **he is the rock because he is the one in this situation who confesses Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God**. Later, when others share his proclamation, they are also given authority in guiding the church (Matthew 18:18 -- Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven). **The focus here is only on Peter in so far as he is the first one to get it right. Jesus will build His church, but it will come about through the foundational work of those called and gifted by God who together agree that He is the Christ, the Son of God** (See Ephesians 4:11-13). This does not guarantee a perfect church, just a maturing one. This poem expresses our hope: ***I think that I shall never see a church that's all it ought to be; A church whose members never stray beyond the straight and narrow way; A church that has no empty pews, whose pastor never has the blues; A church whose elders always speak, and none is proud and all are meek. Such perfect churches there may be, but none of them are known to me. Still, we'll work and pray and plan to make our own the best we can.*** (**REVIEW: A PREVAILING CHURCH IS ONE THAT LIVES OUT ITS CONFESSION ON THE DOORSTEP OF THE UNBELIEVING WORLD; ONE THAT CONFESSES CHRIST AS LORD AND ONE THAT IS BUILT BY CHRIST.**)

A prevailing church wins the battle against the gates of Hades (Matthew 16:18b-19 -- the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven). Someone has said, "**The church has many critics, but no rivals**!" What is our Lord saying?

- **Death will not be the victor**. **Hades is the place of death. Satan is the one who wields the power of death according to Hebrews 2:14, but death will have no victory** (**1 Corinthians 15:54-57 -- When the perishable puts on the imperishable, and the mortal puts on immortality, then shall come to pass the saying that is written: "Death is swallowed up in victory." "O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?" The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ**).
- **Christ is the key that unlocks the way that leads to life** (**See Acts 4:12**). If Christ is the key, then what is Peter to do with it? Well, follow the book of Acts and the ministry of Peter and you see that God uses him to pray for the Holy Spirit to come upon the **JEWS** (**Acts 2:37-38 -- When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, "Brothers, what shall we do?" Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit**), the **SAMARITANS** (**Acts 8:14-17 -- When the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had accepted the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them. When they arrived, they prayed for them that they might receive the Holy Spirit, because the Holy Spirit had not yet come upon any of them; they had simply been baptized into the name of the Lord Jesus. Then Peter and John placed their hands on them, and they received the Holy Spirit**) and the **GENTILES** (**Acts 10:44-46 -- While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit came on all who heard the message (Cornelius and those in his house). The circumcised believers who had come with Peter were astonished that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out even on the Gentiles**). He literally opens the door to the kingdom to everyone! To be sure, the gospel of Christ saves them. But Peter is the human agent that God uses to bring them in.

So, what have we said today? The victorious church is one that (1) lives out its confession on the doorstep of the unbelieving world, (2) confesses Christ as Lord, (3) is built by Christ and (4) wins the battle against the gates of Hades.

Closing: It is in Christ that we find life and overcome death. **Dr. W. A. Criswell is the former Pastor of the First Baptist Church of Dallas, Texas**. He related a story that on one occasion he found himself seated on an airplane beside **a well-known theologian**. He desperately wanted to start a conversation and eventually, they talked. The man told Dr. Criswell about how he had recently lost his little boy through death. Dr. Criswell listened as he told his story: His son had come home from school one day with a fever that his parents thought was one of those childhood things. It turned out to be, however, a very virulent form of meningitis. The doctor told him that his son would not survive. And so, this professor, loving his son as he did, sat by the bedside to watch this death vigil. It was the middle of the day and the little boy whose strength was going and whose vision and brain were becoming clouded said, "***Daddy, it's getting dark, isn't it?***" The professor responded, "***Yes son, it's getting dark, very dark***." The boy said, "***Daddy, I guess it's time for me to go to sleep, isn't it?***" "***Yes son, it's time for you to go to sleep***." He had a way of fixing his pillow just so, and putting his head on his hands when he went to sleep. "***Good night, Daddy. I will see you in the morning***." **He then closed his eyes in death and stepped over to heaven**. Dr. Criswell said the professor didn't say anymore after that. He just looked out the window for a long time. Finally, he turned and with tears streaming down his cheeks said, "***I can hardly wait until the morning***."

THAT'S THE HOPE THAT ALL OF US SHARE AS CHRISTIANS. **LISTEN**: JESUS IS CALLED THE MORNING STAR IN **REVELATION 22:16** FOR A REASON. ONLY HE CAN TURN THE DARKEST NIGHT OF THE SOUL INTO LIGHT THROUGH HIS ATONING SACRIFICE FOR SIN ON THE CROSS OF CALVARY. NOW, LET'S GET BUSY SHARING THE GOOD NEWS SO THAT MORE PEOPLE CAN FACE THE LAST ENEMY (DEATH) WITH THE SAME KIND OF ETERNAL OPTIMISM AS THAT GRIEVING FATHER. **DEATH CAN HIDE BUT IT CAN'T DIVIDE. THEY ARE BUT WITH CHRIST ON THE OTHER SIDE**!