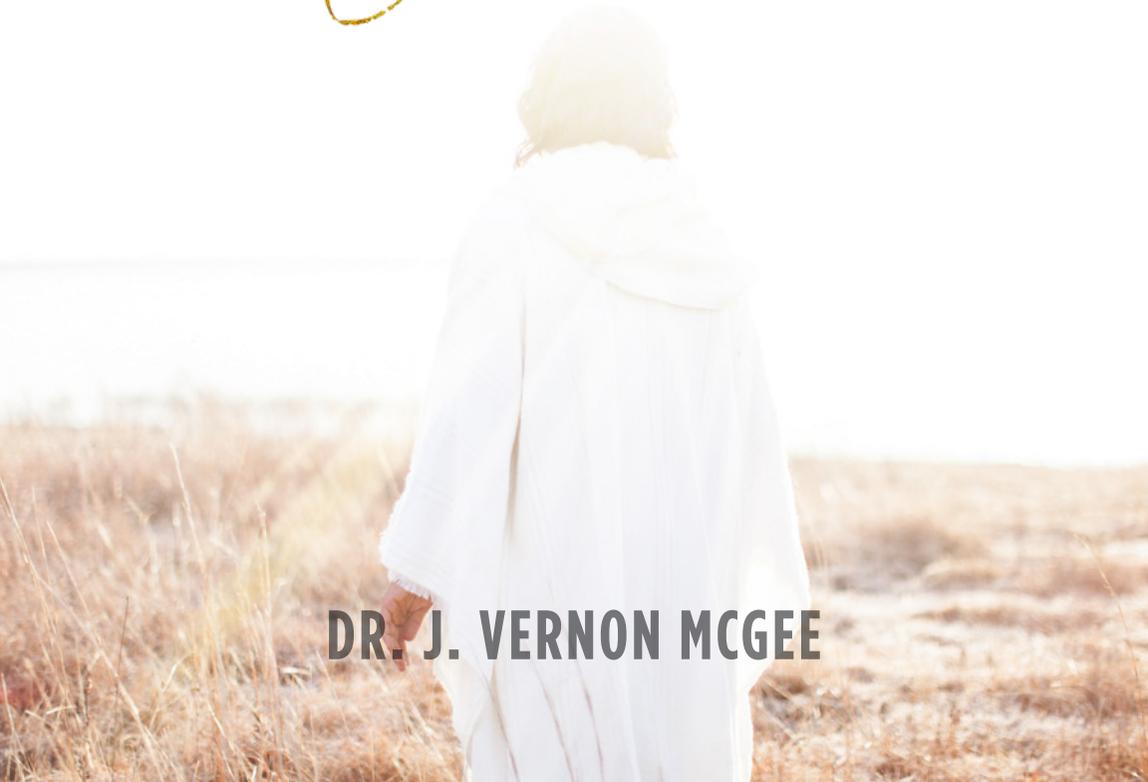

FROM THE MINISTRY OF



THRUthe**BIBLE**

THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION:

Who is Jesus?

A person wearing a white, hooded robe is seen from behind, standing in a field of tall, dry grass. In the background, there is a calm body of water under a bright, hazy sky.

DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

THE MOST IMPORTANT QUESTION:
WHO IS JESUS?

When Jesus came into the region of Caesarea Philippi, He asked His disciples, saying, "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" So they said, "Some say John the Baptist, some Elijah, and others Jeremiah or one of the prophets." He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus answered and said to 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 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. And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." Then He commanded His disciples that they should tell no one that He was Jesus the Christ. –Matthew 16:13-20

Who is Jesus?

This question has caused more confusion, difference of opinion, and division than any other. It has always been so.

During Jesus' years of earthly ministry, He walked in and out among everyday people. He taught as no other man ever taught. He performed miracles. He expressed to men and women the longing of the Father's heart for lost sinners. He mingled with people, spoke with them, ate with them. He rebuked religious rulers and spoke words of comfort to sinners. But even after living and serving among people for two and a half years, there was still confusion concerning His person—who *was* He, actually?

So Jesus took His disciples to Caesarea Philippi, outside of the Promised Land of that day and into gentile territory, beyond the northern border of Judea, to a remote place away from the curious crowd and caustic criticism of religious rulers. I think our Lord had two purposes in mind. He went there for the sake of His disciples, that they might have clearly in their minds who He was. His second reason may have been to gird Himself for the task ahead, because it was at Caesarea Philippi, six months before His crucifixion, where He told these men for the first time He was going to Jerusalem to die on the cross. We can well understand that before this traumatic experience it was necessary for them to be clear as to who He was.

Some today think it's not really important that we believe in the virgin birth or the miracles of Jesus or in His deity. After all, they say, it's essential only to believe in Jesus. But may I say, you and I cannot trust Him unless we have confidence in His person. We cannot have a Savior unless He is every whit who He claimed to be. The real test for anyone is: "What do you think about the Christ?" (Matthew 22:42). You cannot be right in any thought or deed until you think rightly of Him.

So when Jesus took His disciples aside, He asked them this question first: "Who do men say that I, the Son of Man, am?" (Matthew 13:13). In other words, *What are folks out yonder saying? Those with whom I've come in contact, rubbed shoulders with, spoken to? They've seen miracles performed. What do they think concerning me?*

Of course, the disciples had always mingled with the crowds, and they'd heard many things. So they gave Him a report. Notice that all of them chimed in here. I think each one of them made a suggestion because He asked it of all of them. Maybe Thomas said, "Well, I've heard some of them say You're John the Baptist." And probably John the apostle said, "Well, I've heard some say You're Elijah." Then Andrew maybe added, "But I've heard some of them say You're Jeremiah." All of the disciples made a contribution. Then one of them, probably Philip since he was a very quiet fellow, spoke: "They also say You're one of the prophets." So you can see there was a broad difference of opinion concerning who Jesus was.

FOUR OPINIONS

Let's take each one and examine just who the people thought Jesus might be.

#1: JOHN THE BAPTIST

I suppose the majority of people thought He was John the Baptist. Many had heard this forerunner of Jesus speak, and probably many knew of his untimely demise. They knew how brutally and cruelly he had been beheaded and how his voice had been silenced because he stood out against evil in his day. He actually had the courage to rebuke a king, and for that he was beheaded. So there were those who believed Jesus was John the Baptist returned to life.

To believe that, in my opinion, was superstition; but they believed it because the Lord Jesus had at the beginning taught the same message as John the Baptist: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." And when our Lord picked up the message, He gave the same message. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand." Also there was something about our Lord that reminded



The Lord Jesus

has always been the

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those who heard Him of John the Baptist, so they said, “I think He is John the Baptist.” Now that was a great compliment, because even John’s enemies regarded him as a prophet from God.

#2: ELIJAH

Others thought Jesus was Elijah, and there was a scriptural basis for this. Elijah is the prophet they remembered above all the others. He was probably the most courageous man who ever walked this earth. My friend, he walked alone with God. He had no one with whom He could fellowship. Not a one. “Oh,” you say, “but there were 7000 Israelites out yonder who didn’t bow the knee to Baal” (see 1 Kings 19:18). Elijah didn’t know them. And neither would Elijah be found hiding in a cave up in the mountains with the 100 mentioned in 1 Kings 18:13.

Elijah was out in the open, standing alone against great odds. He stood against the evil of his day—Ahab and Jezebel, and you just won’t find any worse than those two. What Ahab didn’t think of, Jezebel did, and she thought of twice as much evil as Ahab ever did. She was one of the most wicked people to ever walk across the pages of Scripture. Yet Elijah stood against her and the prophets of Baal. He made a great impression on his people. Not only that, he made an impression on God—as you may remember, he didn’t die, but rather was carried away in a chariot of fire.

In the book of Isaiah, and then Malachi 4:5 specifically, God predicted Elijah’s return: “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the LORD.” So they had scriptural support to believe Elijah would return. And when our Lord Jesus came, rebuking the religious rulers and standing against evil, they said, “He must be Elijah!” May I say, I can’t conceive of a greater compliment than that.

#3: JEREMIAH

Some thought Jesus was Jeremiah. I must confess I'm puzzled how anyone could imagine Him to be Elijah and then somebody else think He could be Jeremiah, because Jeremiah was the opposite of Elijah. For example, I can't find Elijah shedding a tear. I see no sympathy in that man whatsoever. He was as cold-blooded as they come. I see no sign even of weakness until the day he crawled under a juniper tree and said, "I want to die" (see 1 Kings 19). But his condition at that time can be explained; he was physically exhausted—so much so that what he needed most was good food and rest. He wasn't well when he made that statement, and the Angel of the Lord—who I believe was the preincarnate Christ—nursed him back to health. Oh, how tender our Lord was with this overwrought prophet. And do you know what Elijah did after he had recovered? Back into the court of Ahab and Jezebel he went, back again to bring anathema down upon them. That's Elijah.

But Jeremiah was the opposite, emotional. He was the weeping prophet of the Old Testament—God's crybaby, if you please. He said it himself, "Oh, that my head were waters, and my eyes a fountain of tears, that I might weep day and night for the slain of the daughter of my people" (Jeremiah 9:1). Why did God choose such a person as a prophet? Because that kind of tenderhearted man was needed to give the harshest message of all. He said to the people of Judah, "You're going into captivity." He broke the news, "God will destroy the temple and the city." My friend, God doesn't want a harsh person to give a message like that. God wants someone with a tender heart, and Jeremiah had a heart of compassion for his people. You could say he had a heart like a woman's.

Finally, he went to the Lord and said in effect, "If you don't mind, I'll resign. I can't go on giving a message like this. It's breaking my heart." But before long he came back and said, "Lord, Your Word in my heart is like a fire. When I try to keep

quiet, I can't. So if you don't mind, I'll go back and cry some more" (see Jeremiah 20:9). He was God's man, my friend. And when you see Jeremiah weeping, you know exactly how God feels about sending His people into captivity.

So the Lord Jesus reminded people of Jeremiah, especially when He sat and wept over the city, saying, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the one who kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to her! How often I wanted to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, but you were not willing! See! Your house is left to you desolate" (Matthew 23:37-38). He knew that city was to be destroyed just as it had been in the days of Nebuchadnezzar. But this time it would be destroyed by Titus the Roman with just as much brutality, cruelty, and bloodshed. Like Jeremiah, our Lord wept over the city. It broke God's heart.

#4: ONE OF THE PROPHETS

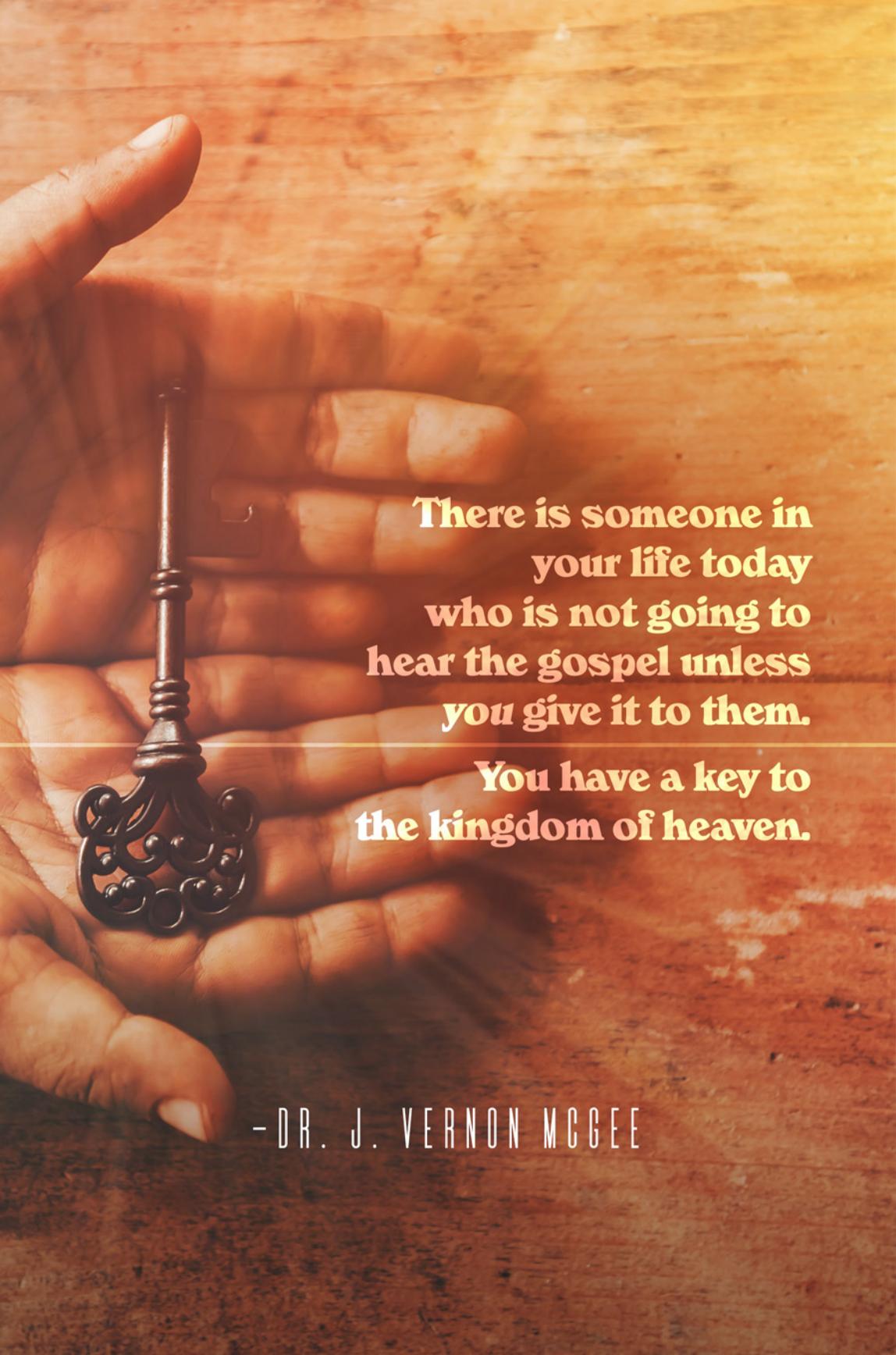
Others thought Jesus was just one of the prophets. May I say to you, everything they said was complimentary, but it fell far short of the true identity of Christ. Also in our day, friend, to miss the fact that the Lord Jesus Christ is God incarnate is one of the most tragic blunders you can make. People in His day were making the same blunder. Here He was rubbing shoulders with them, and they were missing who He was.

“WHAT DO YOU SAY?”

Now Jesus turns from the crowd outside to His own disciples. You must remember that He’s been with them for two and a half years. They’ve been together constantly, day and night. He has slept beside them, eaten meals with them. Everything Jesus did was under their scrutiny. He could say to them, “Which of you convicts Me of sin?” (see John 8:46). Even Judas, for three years, kept his eyes on Christ. Oh, what a critic he was. Possibly he was thinking, *Just wait until He stubs his toe. I’ll get Him.* But our Lord never stubbed His toe—He never stumbled, so when Judas finally betrayed Him, he had to confess, “I have betrayed *innocent* blood” (see Matthew 27:4).

So, speaking to His intimate friends who knew Him better than anyone, He asked, “But who do *you* say that I am?” (Matthew 16:15). All of these men are able to answer through their spokesman, Simon Peter:

Simon Peter answered and said, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”—Matthew 16:16



**There is someone in
your life today
who is not going to
hear the gospel unless
you give it to them.**

**You have a key to
the kingdom of heaven.**

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Peter could have said nothing higher than that. What he was really saying was, *You are the Messiah, the Anointed One, the One predicted in the Old Testament.* The psalmist David said in Psalm 2:2, “The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the Lord and against His Anointed.” His “Anointed” is Christ; He is the one who is God’s partner, God’s equal, the Christ. Now Peter says to Jesus, *You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.*

Isaiah 9:6 speaks of Christ in His second coming: “For unto us a Child is born, unto us a Son is given.” Notice the child was born, but the Son was *given* (not born)—because He is the eternal Son of God, and God the Father is the eternal Father. My friend, when you have an eternal Father, you have to have an eternal Son. And when you have an eternal Father and an eternal Son, you never have any “begetting.” The Lord Jesus has always been the Son of God.

When He was put on trial, the religious rulers who knew the Old Testament Scriptures pointedly asked Him, “Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” Remember His answer—He was under oath at the time: “I am. And you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven” (Mark 14:61-62). He made the highest claim anyone can possibly make for that title, “Son of Man.” It’s equal with the title “Son of God” or “Son of the Blessed.”

Now may I say to you, Peter and the other disciples are accurate on the person of Christ. They know who He is.

Our Lord speaks to them—notice this very carefully:

Jesus answered and said to him, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.”—Matthew 16:17

In other words, you can’t come to this estimate of the Lord Jesus Christ unless the Holy Spirit of God opens your eyes to see Him. Paul says, “No one can say that Jesus is Lord except by the Holy

Spirit” (1 Corinthians 12:3). I don’t mean just to say the word “Lord,” because many use that term. But I’m saying no one can acknowledge Him as Lord in their heart unless the Holy Spirit reveals Him. The Lord Jesus Himself said that when the Holy Spirit has come, “He will take of what is Mine and declare it to you” (John 16:14).

Friend, that is why the Bible is different from any other book in existence today. Any book written by a person can be figured out by another person. I remember what my geometry teacher used to say when I’d complain that no one could figure out the solution: “There can never be a problem made by a person that someone else couldn’t work out.”

But the Bible is different from any other book. You will not, nor can you, understand it—nor will you ever know the person of Jesus Christ—until the Holy Spirit of God opens your eyes to see Him in all of His winsomeness, in all of His loveliness, and in all the glory of His person. I am not disturbed today to hear an unbeliever say, “I do not believe in the deity of Christ.” Actually, if they say they *do* believe in the deity of Christ, something is wrong. You can’t believe in His deity until the Holy Spirit of God makes Him real to you.

THE FOUNDATION OF THE CHURCH

Simon Peter answered and said, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." Jesus answered and said to 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 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. –Matthew 16:16-18

I think these verses are more misunderstood in Christendom today than any others. We miss in our English translation the play on words our Lord made. He used two Greek words for the English word "rock." Speaking to Peter, Jesus said, "You are *Petros*, and on this *petra* I will build My church." In other words, "You are just a little rock"—and that's all we are, just little pebbles on the beach—"but on the bedrock, I will build my church."

This is the first time Christ mentioned His church, and He mentioned it only twice. He said, "I will build" At that time, the church was in the future. The church came into existence after His resurrection, on the Day of Pentecost.

What did He mean when He said to Peter, “*I’ll build my church on the rock*”? He certainly didn’t mean He would build it on Simon Peter, because He changed the word altogether. He didn’t say, “You are *Petros*, and on this *Petros* I will build My church.” He said, “*You’re a little pebble, and I’ll build My church on the foundation rock.*” What is that foundation? I’ve heard people say it’s your confession of faith in Christ. Absolutely not! What is the foundation, the rock, on which the church is built? Paul makes it abundantly clear:

For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ. –1 Corinthians 3:11

Our Lord Jesus Christ is the foundation on which the church is built.

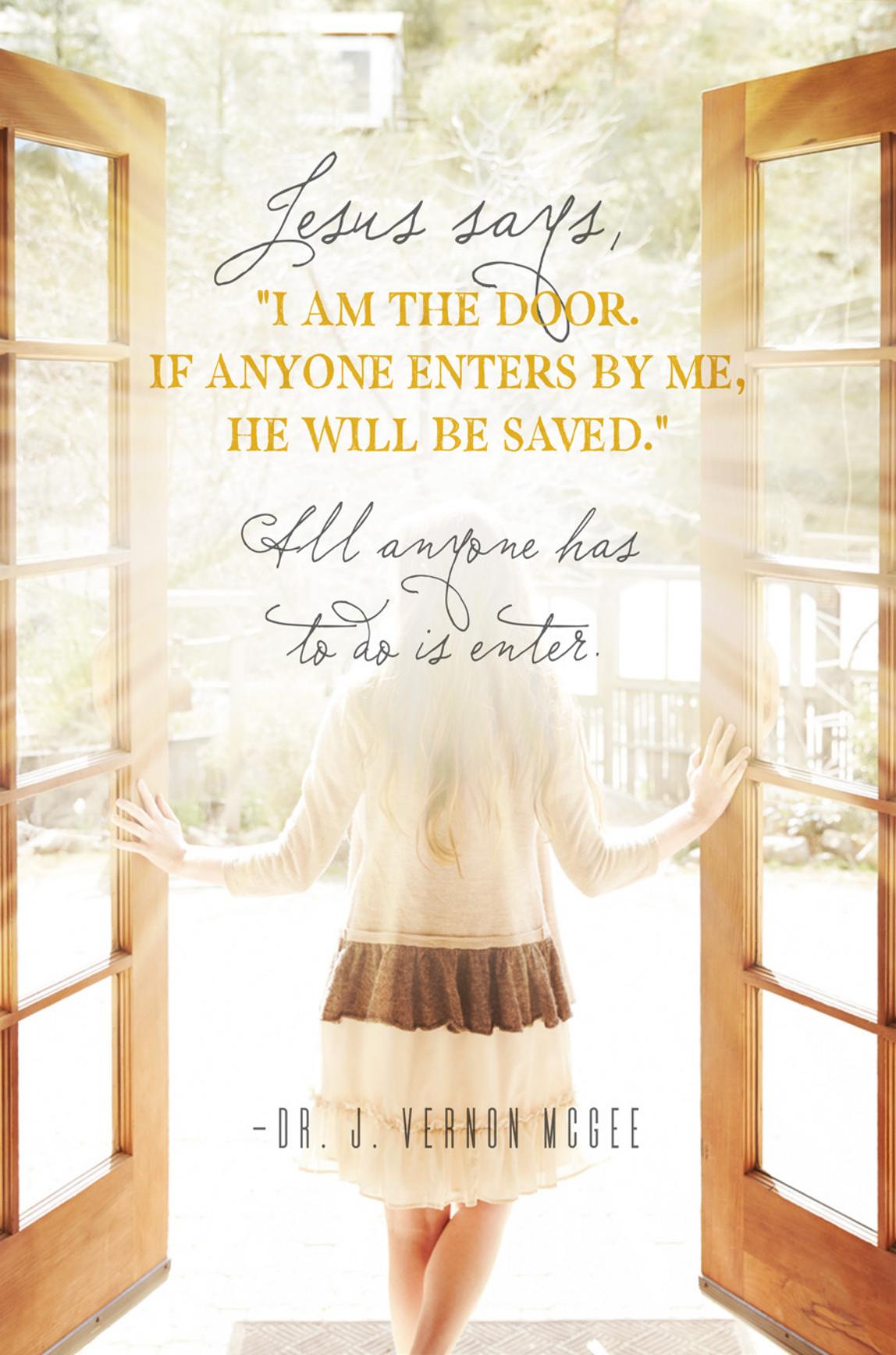
Did Simon Peter understand it this way? He most surely did. Speaking of Christ, he wrote:

Coming to Him as to a living stone, rejected indeed by men, but chosen by God and precious, you also, as living stones, are being built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. Therefore it is also contained in the Scripture, “Behold, I lay in Zion a chief cornerstone, elect, precious, and he who believes on Him will by no means be put to shame.” –1 Peter 2:4-6

Peter says Christ is a living stone. How are we living stones? We have been born again by the Word of God. Simon Peter understood absolutely that not he but the Lord Jesus Christ is that cornerstone:

Therefore, to you who believe, He is precious; but to those who are disobedient, “The stone which the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.” –1 Peter 2:7

My friends, your confession, my confession, and Simon Peter’s confession establish us as little rocks on Christ the solid Rock.



Jesus says,

**"I AM THE DOOR.
IF ANYONE ENTERS BY ME,
HE WILL BE SAVED."**

*All anyone has
to do is enter.*

- DR. J. VERNON MCGEE

THE KEYS OF THE KINGDOM

As Jesus continues to speak to Peter, He says something else that's significant for us, and which also has been greatly misunderstood:

“And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.” –Matthew 16:19

What did He mean by this? Did Jesus mean He was actually giving to Simon Peter some keys, and whatever Peter bound on earth would be bound in heaven, or loosed on earth would be loosed in heaven? Yes, He meant that. But they weren't given only to Simon Peter. Jesus gives them to those who make the same confession made by Peter, those who know Christ as Savior. He gave them to all of the disciples, and He gave them to you if you are a child of God. You have keys to the kingdom of heaven!

The keys were the badge of authority for the office of the scribes who interpreted the Scriptures to the people, as in Nehemiah's day (see Nehemiah 8:1-8). When Nehemiah wrote, there probably

were no more than two copies of the Scriptures in existence. Multitudes of people who returned to the land of Israel after seventy years of captivity had never heard the Word of God.

So Nehemiah, a wonderful layman, put a pulpit down by the water gates, and in the morning he called all the people together and had the greatest Bible reading on record. They read all the way until noon. Ezra the priest would read a Bible portion, then priests (students of the Scriptures) stationed among the people would ask, "Did you understand what he read?" Some people would answer, "No, I never heard that before. What does it mean?" and the priests would stop and explain it to them. When faces lit up with understanding, the signal was given, Ezra would read another segment, and the whole thing was repeated.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to study the Bible that way today? Instead of a single pastor up front there'd be teachers throughout. We'd read a little and then ask, "Do you understand?" And if you didn't understand, someone would explain it to you right then. That's the way they did it in that day because everyone didn't have a Bible on their bookshelf or nightstand like we have now.

There began in Nehemiah's time one of the greatest revivals you find recorded in the Bible. Also the Order of the Scribe began with Ezra, and in time all the scribes began to wear keys. In Christ's day you would see them moving around in the temple area, all wearing keys as the badge of their office.

As the Lord Jesus instructed His disciples He said, "Now that you know who I am, I'm taking the keys away from the scribes and putting them in the hands of those who know who I am. Because that's the key to the Scriptures: Knowing who I am. Now you have the key to Christendom."

My believing friend, that key is in your hand today. You have the keys, and there is someone in your life today who is not going to hear the gospel unless *you* give it to them. You have a key to the kingdom of heaven. Do you use it?

Jesus said, “I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved” (John 10:9). Have you ever opened the door and said to someone, “Walk in”? Every believer has the keys to the kingdom of heaven and a responsibility to use them. It’s a wonderful thing to use the keys and open the door so some person who has not heard the gospel before or has not accepted it can walk in and come to faith in Jesus Christ.

One night in London years ago, a woman—a prostitute—lay dying in the slums. She sent her young son to the nearest church to get a rector to come down and talk to her. She said to her boy, “Go get a minister to get me in.” So the boy went down to the rectory and knocked on the door. The rector came to the door and said to the ragged little urchin, “What do you want?”

“My mother wants you to come and get her in.”

The rector asked, “What?”

The boy repeats, “My mother is dying. She wants you to come and get her in.”

At last, the man understood what the little fellow meant. He was liberal in his theology and had never actually preached the gospel. On the way over, he wondered what in the world he’d say to her. He couldn’t preach what he’d been preaching to his congregation—that message wouldn’t get anybody in. It was scholarly and couched in sunshine and rosy language, but it was no good for a dying woman in sin. He thought of what his own mother taught him when he was a boy at her knee.

When he got to the dying woman’s bedside, he asked her, “What is it that you want?”

“I want you to get me in,” she said. “I’m an awful sinner, but I want you to get me in.”

He didn’t know what to say, but in a faltering way—after all, he’d never done this before—he turned to John 3:16. That’s all he could think of; it was the verse his mother had given to him when he was

a boy, so he read it to the woman on her deathbed: “For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have everlasting life.”

She asked, “Does that mean me?”

“It does. ‘Whoever’ means you and me and anyone.”

“I believe it,” she said. “Tell me more.”

He only knew John 3:16 for salvation, so he gave it to her again: “God so loved the world.”

She said, “Do you suppose He loves me that much?”

He answered, “Well, He loves you so much that He gave His Son to die for you.”

“Oh,” she said, “then I’ll trust Him.” Then a smile came over her face, and she said to him, “Minister, thank you for getting me in.”

When that pastor recounted this incident later, he said, “You know, that night I got two people in. I got that poor woman in, and I got myself in. I had never been in before.”

My friend, that is the use of the keys of the kingdom of heaven. Right now, the door is open. Jesus says, “I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved.” All anyone has to do is enter.

Every believer has the key to the kingdom of heaven, and we have the responsibility to use it. If the Spirit of God has made Him real to you, He can also make Him real to others. Remember our Lord said to Peter, “Flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.” Our part is merely to present His Word—even a single verse like John 3:16 may be enough—and He does the saving.

Oh, what a thrill it is to see someone walk through the open door to come to faith in Jesus Christ. He is the Son of the living God.

A photograph of two men, one Black and one white, smiling and talking to each other outdoors. They are both gesturing with their hands as if in conversation. The background is slightly blurred, showing other people and greenery.

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A close-up photograph of a person's hands holding a smartphone. The phone screen displays a list of booklets from the TTB.org website. The background is a blurred outdoor setting with a wooden table.

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