

Proverbs 1:20-33

Psalm 19

James 3:1-12

Mark 8:27-38

Notes on the Gospel Lesson

There are three distinct sections to this passage: verses 27 – 30 describe Peter’s great declaration that Jesus was the Messiah. Verses 31 – 33 depict the first time that Jesus’ predicts his own death and resurrection while verses 34 – 38 is Jesus’ call to his followers to take up their cross and follow him.

There is no mention of Jesus going to Caesarea Philippi in Mark’s gospel prior to the 8th chapter. A glance at a first century map of Palestine shows that the city was a great distance away from the area around the Sea of Galilee where most of Jesus’ ministry took place. To understand why he may have made such a journey, we must examine some background of the situation in Jesus’ day.

After the death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C., his kingdom was divided between his three surviving sons. Archelaus was given Judea and Samaria (although he was later deposed by the Romans), Herod Antipas was given Galilee and Perea, while Philip was given Gaulinitis. Philip built his capital at the foot of Mount Hermon and named it Caesarea Philippi for both Caesar and himself.

Most of Jesus ministry was in Galilee which was ruled by Herod Antipas (the Herod who had John the Baptizer put to death). Jesus’ ability to draw large crowds would have quickly come to the attention of Antipas and he would have been under threat (see Luke 13:31). Moving into Gaulinitis would have protected Jesus from Antipas’ wrath. Remember that the relationship between Antipas and Philip was broken (see Matthew 14: 3 – 4) so there was no question of Philip turning Jesus over to his brother.

At Caesarea Philippi was a sacred precinct that had temples to the god Pan and to Augustus Caesar. The temple to Caesar was built over the opening of a cave that was thought to be bottomless and was considered to be one of the entrances to the underworld. It is in Matthew’s account of this event that Jesus tells Peter that the church will withstand the “gates of hell”; a powerful image as the gates of the underworld were in plain sight. It may have also been a dramatic contrast to see the various pagan shrines while the disciples listed the various opinions that people held concerning Jesus’ identity. In a world of competing claims on the devotions of humanity, Peter’s declaration that, “You are the Messiah!” is a clarion call that rings out over the din.

A notable point of the second passage is Jesus emphatic statement to Peter. The Greek word for “get behind” in the original text is *hypago*. This is not a passive verb. The two closest examples in modern English would be either in the urban slang, such as “Get out of my face!” or in the rural usage of “Git!” Jesus is being extremely forceful; the temptation to avoid the awful fate that awaited him had to be resisted with his whole being.