

WEEK 6

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Digging Deeper

Words of a Dying Man

Jesus Christ, the Son of Man

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DEFINITION

The designation Son of Man means, for Jesus, both that he is human as we are, a son of Adam, and that he is the coming Messiah, who has been given authority by the Most High and reigns over his kingdom through his weakness, seen most clearly at the cross.

SUMMARY

While the expression “son of man” occurs frequently in the OT as a synonym for “man,” the book of Daniel also uses it to refer to the coming divine ruler who will be given authority and a kingdom by God; both of these usages form the background of the Jesus’s own self-designation as the Son of Man. We understand how this Son of Man will reign his kingdom, then, by the way that Jesus himself takes up the authority given to him by God to rule, namely, in his suffering, death, and resurrection on our behalf. We know, therefore, that this Son of Man rules his kingdom by means of his weakness, though he will one day come again in power to finally destroy all of his enemies and take his rightful place as the visible king of creation.

The Title: “Son of Man” “Son of Man” a Human Being

The expression “son of man” occurs frequently in the OT as a synonym for “man”—a son of man is by nature man himself. It is a Semitic idiom signifying “human being.” Virtually all of the 107 occurrences of the expression bear this out. Numbers 23:19 illustrates this well: “God is not a man, that he should lie, or a son of man, that he should change his mind.” So also Job, reflecting on his comparatively low status before God and frustrated to vindicate his innocence in suffering, complains that a man would not dare argue his case with God “as a son of man does with his neighbor” (Job 16:21). David uses this idiom also in his famous reflections on creation: “When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?” (Ps. 8:3–4). Ninety-three of the OT occurrences of this term are found in Ezekiel where the prophet himself is the point of reference. A “son of man” is a human being.

Messianic Connections

At least twice in the OT “son of man” is used with Messianic significance. The best known is Daniel 7:13–14:

I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.

In this context, this one “like a son of man” conquers the evil world system (7:9–12), obtains authority to rule over God’s kingdom (7:13–14), and exercises that authority universally, sharing his rule with the people of God (7:15–28). What is striking here is that God’s kingdom is given to “one like a son of man”—God’s kingdom in the hands of a man!

Psalm 8:4 has Messianic connections also, even if more subtly. In this brief psalm, David reflects on the regal dignity given to man at creation:

What is man [Heb. *enosh*] that you are mindful of him, and the son of man [Heb. *adam*] that you care for him? Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet.

David marvels that man, though comparatively insignificant, is yet created in God's image, "a little lower than the angels," and designed to rule over creation as God's vice-regent (cf. Gen. 1:26–28). Hebrews 2 picks up this psalm (2:5-8) with the added observation that man has "not yet" obtained this dominion (2:8, presumably reflecting further on the fall in Gen. 3). But the writer is confident that the noble cause is not lost: "But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death" (2:9). The stunning announcement of the gospel is that the Son of God, sharing in the shining glory of deity above all angels (Heb. 1), has become one of us. He too "for a little while was made lower than the angels." Our high dignity ("made a little lower than the angels," 1:7) is that to which the Son of God stooped in condescension (1:9), in order by death to make propitiation for us and win for us what we by sin had lost (1:10-18). The Son of God has become the son of man in order – as man – to redeem and restore man to his originally designed status and glory. This of course ties into the larger Messianic hope of the OT and the whole Bible story.

Combining these two passages and their respective implications we note that the OT Messianic hope anticipates not just a king over Israel but one whose reign as a son of man extends to all the world.

"The Son of Man" as Transcendent

The prophecy of Daniel 7 encompasses a long look at future history from the time of Daniel to the consummation when the enemies of God are brought to final judgment and the people of God share in its rule. At what appears to be the climax of history (7:9-12) this "one like a son of man" approaches the Ancient of Days "with the clouds of heaven" to receive universal authority and eternal dominion. He is "like a son of man," yet he does not come from earth to heaven but out of obscurity into manifestation, approaching the throne of God as one who has that right. He rides on the clouds, a function associated elsewhere with God (Ps. 104:3). He moreover is worshiped, given universal homage (7:14). All this serves to indicate that this one "like a son of man" (i.e., human) is the transcendent Messiah.

Note also that although the Aramaic expression "Most High" is used of God himself throughout Daniel (3:26, 32; 4:14, 21, 22, 29, 31; 5:18, 21; 7:25), a different (Hebrew) expression is used in Daniel 7:18, 22, 25, and 27 when speaking of "the saints of the Most High." Hamilton argues effectively that in these instances the expression "the Most High" has reference to the Son of Man and thus affirms his transcendent deity (see *With the Clouds of Heaven*, 151-153).

We might also note here that, in context, this establishes a striking contrast: the various world-kingsdoms, though ruled by men, are described as hideous beasts; God's kingdom will reside in the hands of a man who is himself God. He and he alone has earned the right to rule universally and eternally.

The Identity of the Son of Man

Any Bible reader will instinctively recognize that all this takes its place in the larger sweep of Messianic expectation that finds its fulfillment in Jesus the Messiah, the uniquely qualified divine-human king. And in fact Jesus himself confirms this for us, explicitly associating himself with Daniel's "son of man" (Matt. 26:63–64). This is in fact his favorite self-designation, recurring some eighty times in the Gospels, and becomes on his lips a Messianic title. Jesus is the Son of God. He is also the Son of Man.

Implications

New Testament scholars have noticed three broad associations with Jesus' use of this self-designation. His Authority even in His Earthly Ministry

The authority of the Son of Man is clearly the focus of attention in Daniel 7:13–14— the Son of Man’s enthronement and universal, unchallenged reign. Jesus claims this authority for himself also. In Matthew 12:8, for example, Jesus affirms, “the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” He does not unpack for at this point just how he would exercise his lordship over the Sabbath, but the claim was plain, and it must have been startling to those who heard it.

So also in Matthew 9:1-8, when a paralytic is brought to Jesus for healing, Jesus first pronounces his sins forgiven (9:2). The scribes who heard it were incensed at such audacity (9:3), and in response Jesus explains that this was just the point: “that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins”—he said to the paralytic—“Rise, pick up your bed and go home” (9:6). Matthew himself reaffirms that this is indeed the point Jesus intended (9:8).

Jesus possesses divine authority—authority over the Sabbath, authority to heal, and even authority to forgive sin—for he is Son of Man.

His Humiliation, Rejection, Suffering, Death, and Resurrection

Ironically, Jesus also used the title “Son of Man” in connection with his rejection, sufferings, death, and resurrection:

Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head (Matt. 8:20).

And he began to teach them that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes and be killed, and after three days rise again (Mark 8:31; Matt. 16:21).

He was teaching his disciples, saying to them, “The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him. And when he is killed, after three days he will rise” (Mark 9:31).

Let these words sink into your ears: The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men (Luke 9:44).

In context, these predictions of his passion come on the heels of the disciples’s confession of Jesus’s Messiahship. It is no wonder that the disciples found this association of “Son of Man” and Messiah with notions of rejection and suffering and defeat puzzling. A royal, reigning sufferer?

This is a familiar and important theme in Scripture—that it was by means of his suffering, death, and resurrection that the Lord Jesus achieved his mediatorial kingship. Because of his successful saving work, universal authority was “given” to him (Matt. 28:18), and God “made him Lord and Christ” (Acts 2:36) and “bestowed on him the name that is above every name” (Phil. 2:9; cf. Isa. 53:10–12; Eph. 1:20–21). Because he had successfully borne the curse of sin God “gave him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life” to those he had come to save (John 17:2; cf. Matt. 11:27). This is why older theologians commonly referred to Jesus as “reigning from the cross”—it was in seeming his weakness and defeat that he rescued his people and brought them into God’s kingdom (Col. 1:13).

This idea is in view in the grand scene of Revelation 5. God on the throne holds the seven-sealed scroll, presumably his “last will and testament” for creation—his plan for judgment and salvation. Only the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the slain lamb, is found worthy to take the scroll and open the seals. That is, only he is worthy to carry out God’s purpose in history. Why?

“Because (hoti) you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation, and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth” (5:9–10). It is by his death and resurrection that Christ achieved his mediatorial reign. Indeed, it is not for nothing that it was at his trial our Lord invoked this theme:

And the high priest said to him, “I adjure you by the living God, tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” Jesus said to him, “You have said so. But I tell you, from now on you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power and coming on the clouds of heaven” (Matt. 26:63–64; note that Jesus brings together the Messianic enthronement prophecies of both Ps. 110:1 and Dan. 7:13–14).

Here in his death—his seeming defeat—and his consequent resurrection our Lord receives his kingdom. Here he established his right to rule (for more, see Jeremy Treat, *The Crucified King*).

A Rule Yet Realized?

But we cannot stop here. Although he has achieved his rule and established his kingdom, it remains quite evident that his is a kingship not yet fully realized. His rule is still opposed and contested. The world has not bowed in submission and attributed to him the lordship that he has achieved. His kingdom is now, but surely there is more to come.

In fact the NT presents Jesus's kingship as one that is realized in stages—both now and not yet. He was born king, the promised Son of David (Matt. 2:2, etc.). He exercised his kingship in his earthly ministry (Matt. 12:28). His kingship was established in his saving death, as we have seen (cf. John 12:31–32), and in his triumphant resurrection (Matt. 28:18) and ascension to the heavenly throne (Acts 2:36; Eph. 1:20–21). Yet with all this, his kingdom is highly contested, still violently opposed (cf. Ps. 2:1–3). Very simply, his kingdom, though present, has been inaugurated; the king has yet to exercise the full rights of his rule over his enemies.

His Return in Eschatological Glory

Most prominently, when Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man, it was with connotations of his eschatological glory, his return to earth to exercise the full rights of his kingship and bring God's kingdom to consummation.

Truly, I say to you, in the new world, when the Son of Man will sit on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28).

Immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from heaven, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then will appear in heaven the sign of the Son of Man, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven with power and great glory. And he will send out his angels with a loud trumpet call, and they will gather his elect from the four winds, from one end of heaven to the other (Matt. 24:29–31).

When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne (Matt. 25:31).

Daniel's prophecy envisions the coronation of the king (7:13–14), the establishing of his rule, but the prophecy looks further to the kingdom in its climactic form with the Son of Man ruling with his saints universally, with all enemies subdued (7:9–27). In these verses cited above, the Lord Jesus lays claim to that rule himself. With obvious reference to Daniel 7, the apostle John leads us to anticipate the same: "Behold, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him" (Rev. 1:7). And this all climaxes, of course, in the return of Christ depicted in Revelation 19, as Jesus the conqueror descending on a white horse in war against all his enemies. Here at last, "the kingdom of this world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ, and he shall reign forever and ever" (Rev. 11:15). God's kingdom will come in its fulness by the saving work of the Son of Man.

Concluding Reflection

Man created in God's image is designed to rule over God's creation as his vice-regent. This exalted status was forfeited by sin, but in Jesus, the True Man, humanity is redeemed and restored. He is the Son of Man, the transcendent Messiah, who by his saving work has earned a universal kingship that is being exercised now in rescuing his people, one by one, out of the kingdom of darkness, and bringing us safely into the kingdom of light. This saving rule will finally climax when he returns, at which time "every knee will bow" before him and acknowledge him as Lord (Phil. 2:9–10).



Questions to ask when reading the Bible

Sometimes when we read a passage in the Bible it can be confusing or we may not know how to best figure out what it is saying. Below are some good questions to ask when reading the Bible to help make the Bible make sense.

1. What stands out to me?

Note that this does not say “What does this passage mean?” Consider what stood out to you? What did you notice? What did the Holy Spirit highlight for you as you read it?

2. What does the text say about the character/nature of God?

The Scriptures are primarily about God so ask first what the text says about Him before moving to what it says about us, about His plan, or about anything else.

3. What does the text say?

Look at what the text literally says first (this may not be the intent of the text but it is important to look at it as read... at least initially).

4. How is it saying it?

What is the genre of the text and how should we read text in that genre?

5. Why does it say it that way?

Speculate about why the author chose this method of saying what they've said.

6. What is it trying to say?

Getting behind the Scripture, looking at its context, its original audience, its author, etc., what is the text trying to get across to the reader (both the original audience and us today?)

7. How does this fit into the whole of the book and the whole of Scripture?

Looking at the whole book, does what is being said jive with the whole book, with the whole of Scripture?

8. What questions do I have?

Do you have questions about the text? If they aren't answered in the text, are they good questions or are we asking questions that the text isn't meant to answer?

9. How do I feel about this teaching/text? Why do I feel that way?

What does your gut say? Are you frustrated with it? Are you trying to make it say something else than what it says? Does it make you uncomfortable? Where are these feelings coming from? Is there sin in my life I need to repent of?

10. What is the universal application of this text/teaching?

What are we to do with this text? Consider the original audience as well as us today.

11. What is my personal application?

What is God calling you to apply with what you've learned with this text?

12. How will I apply what it calls me to?

Make a plan to apply what God has taught you. Seek to be faithful and obedient to His leading, wherever it may go.