

Osaka International Church
Bradford Houdyshel

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Title: "Who is this 'Son of Man'?"

Key verse: John 12:34 (NKJV) – The people answered Him, "We have heard from the law that the Christ remains forever; and how can You say, 'The Son of Man must be lifted up'? Who is this Son of Man?"

Good morning everyone. Happy New Year! It's good to see you all here today. Last week was Christmas, and for my message a week ago I asked the question that the wise men asked: "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?" This term "King of the Jews" was a title used for the promised Messiah that the Jewish people were expecting would make His appearance soon. Today, I have another question and another title for Jesus. Like last week, the question comes from the pages of the New Testament and it forms the title of my message. In John 12:34, the people ask Jesus, "Who is this 'Son of Man'?" This was a term Jesus sometimes used to refer to Himself. In fact, this was the term He used most often for Himself – not "Messiah," not "Son of God" ... He most often referred to Himself as "the Son of Man." I would like to take a look at this phrase in the Scriptures and see how it is used and what we can learn about Jesus from it. Many of you know that I have been taking online seminary courses, and last November we were looking at this phrase in one of my lessons. Surprisingly, also in November, one of my favorite Christian radio programs also discussed this term "Son of Man" in quite a lot of detail. Today, I would like to share with you some of the things I have learned.

As I said a moment ago, "Son of Man" is the term Jesus used most often to refer to Himself. Here are a few verses to show you this, quoting Jesus each time:

Matthew 8:20 (NASB) – Jesus said to him, "The foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head."

Matthew 11:19 (NASB) – "The Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Behold, a gluttonous man and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' And yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."

Matthew 12:8 (NASB) – "For the Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath."

Matthew 13:37 (NASB) – And He said, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man..."

Luke 5:24 (NASB) – "But so that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins," He said to the man who was paralyzed, "I say to you, get up, and pick up your stretcher, and go home."

Luke 19:10 (NASB) – "For the Son of Man has come to seek and to save that which was lost."

John 3:14-15 (NASB) – “And just as Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, ¹⁵ so that everyone who believes will have eternal life in Him.”

What does this phrase mean, that the Son of Man must be “lifted up”? This is a reference to His crucifixion, which is necessary for our salvation. Let’s read one more passage:

John 12:32-34 (NKJV) – “And I, if I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all peoples to Myself.” ³³ This He said, signifying by what death He would die. ³⁴ The people answered Him, “We have heard from the law that the Christ remains forever; and how can You say, ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up’? Who is this Son of Man?”

That last sentence is where the title of my message today comes from. As you see from this sampling of verses, Jesus frequently refers to Himself as “the Son of Man.” What is the meaning of this term? Is it a Messianic title? Is it only used for the Messiah?

Look again at the people’s two questions in John 12:34. The people are a bit puzzled. They expect the promised Messiah, the Christ, to remain forever as their king. And yet He has just said to them that He will be “lifted up,” indicating suffering and death. They ask, “How can You say, ‘The Son of Man must be lifted up’? Who is this Son of Man?” Well, as the New Testament story unfolds, we see how Jesus is crucified, then raised triumphantly from the dead, and then He ascends into heaven with a promise to return.

In fact, this term “Son of Man” was one of the titles by which the expected Messiah was called. Many Jews of this time believed so. Indeed, when Jesus is arrested and brought before the Jewish council, the Sanhedrin, He was questioned by the high priest. Let’s read what happened:

Mark 14:61-64 (NKJV) – But He kept silent and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked Him, saying to Him, “Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” ⁶² Jesus said, “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.” ⁶³ Then the high priest tore his clothes and said, “What further need do we have of witnesses? ⁶⁴ You have heard the blasphemy! What do you think?” And they all condemned Him to be deserving of death.

There was no doubt in the high priest’s mind about what Jesus’ answer indicated. Jesus said yes, He is the Christ, the Son of the Blessed – this term “the Blessed” was a common way to refer to God. Jesus was saying He is the Son of God. Furthermore, He says that these people will one day “see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Power [*that means: at the right hand of God*], and coming with the clouds of heaven.” Please remember this phrase “coming with the clouds of heaven.” I will return to that image later in today’s message.

The high priest and the rest of the Sanhedrin interpreted Jesus’ words as saying He was equating Himself with God. Indeed, let’s take a look at how Luke describes this scene:

Luke 22:67-71 (NASB) – “If You are the Christ, tell us.” But He said to them, “If I tell you, you will not believe; ⁶⁸ and if I ask a question, you will not answer. ⁶⁹ But from now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God.” ⁷⁰ And they all said, “So You are the Son of God?” And He said to them, “You say correctly that I am.” ⁷¹ And then they said, “What further need do we have of testimony? For we have heard it ourselves from His own mouth!”

For Jesus to use this description of Himself was rightly interpreted to mean that He was claiming to be the Son of God. He was claiming divinity. There are people who try to say that Jesus didn’t claim to be God, but we see from passages like this that that is indeed what He was claiming to be. Let’s look at one more passage:

John 8:30-33 (NASB) – “I and the Father are one.” ³¹ The Jews picked up stones again to stone Him. ³² Jesus replied to them, “I showed you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you stoning Me?” ³³ The Jews answered Him, “We are not stoning You for a good work, but for blasphemy; and because You, being a man, make Yourself out to be God.”

What I have shared with you thus far in today’s message is that the term “Son of Man” was Jesus Christ’s preferred term to use for Himself, and that within the Jewish society of His day, this term was recognized as a Messianic title.

Next, I would like to ask the question: In Scripture, is this term “son of man” always a Messianic title? The answer is: No.

Let’s back up a little bit in today’s study and look at how this term is used in the Old Testament. In fact, most of the time that this term is used, it merely means *a human being*. Let’s look at a few examples:

In Psalm 8:4 (NASB), we read this about God – What is man that You think of him, and a son of man that You are concerned about him?

In Job 25:6 (NASB), one of Job’s friends has some strong words – “How much less man, who is a maggot, and a son of man, who is a worm?”

In both of these verses, we have an example of parallelism, where both “man” and “son of man” are set in a parallel framework, indicating that the two terms basically mean the same thing.

The term “son of man” is used about 120 times in the Old Testament, and it almost always is just a way to refer to a human being. More than 90 times, this term is used in the book of Ezekiel and is applied to the prophet Ezekiel himself, who is addressed as “son of man.”

In Ezekiel 2:1 (NASB), the prophet writes this – Then He [God] said to me, “Son of man, stand on your feet, and I will speak with you.”

And Ezekiel 3:4 (NASB) – Then He said to me, “Son of man, go to the house of Israel and speak with My words to them.”

What is being communicated when this term “son of man” is used? When God uses this term to address Ezekiel, and when the term is used elsewhere in the Old Testament, it is generally used to stress the distinction between the holy, infinite God and mere mortal human beings. We humans are creatures; God is the Creator. We humans are mortal, God is eternal.

When Jesus Christ uses this term for Himself, part of what is going on with His usage of the term is that He desires to identify with us human beings and our condition. That is why the Second Person of the Trinity decided to leave His divine position and come to earth, taking on human flesh in what we call the Incarnation, an event we celebrated last week with the birth of Christ. He took on human flesh in order to redeem our human flesh – He took on mortality in order to defeat death by His sacrifice for our sins on the cross and His resurrection from the dead. In this way, He defeated death and offers us eternal life with Him.

That is one aspect of Christ’s usage of the term “son of man” for Himself: to identify with us human beings. But there is another aspect – a very important aspect. And that leads me to a most remarkable passage in the book of Daniel, chapter 7.

If you are familiar with this book, the prophet Daniel is shown a number of visions during His lifetime. In chapter 7, he has a vision of four beasts, each of which apparently represents a major empire. Bible scholars generally interpret these four beasts as representing the empires of Babylon, Medo-Persia, the Greeks under Alexander the Great, and then the fourth and most fearsome beast is seen as Rome. This last beast has ten horns, and then one additional little horn comes up. Interpreters suggest this little horn represents the Antichrist. Next, Daniel describes a scene in heaven, and I would like to read that passage:

Daniel 7:9-14 (NASB) –

I kept looking

Until thrones were set up, and **the Ancient of Days** took His seat;

His garment was white as snow, and the hair of His head like pure wool.

His throne was ablaze with flames, its wheels were a burning fire.

¹⁰ A river of fire was flowing and coming out from before Him;

Thousands upon thousands were serving Him,

And myriads upon myriads were standing before Him;

The court took its place, and the books were opened.

¹¹ Then I kept looking because of the sound of the boastful words which the horn was speaking; I kept looking until the beast was killed, and its body was destroyed and given to the burning fire.

¹² As for the rest of the beasts, their dominion was taken away, but an extension of life was granted to them for an appointed period of time.

¹³ I kept looking in the night visions,

And behold, with the clouds of heaven, **One like a son of man** was coming,

And He came up to **the Ancient of Days** and was presented before Him.

¹⁴ And to Him was given dominion, honor, and a kingdom,
So that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away.
And His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed.

If you are familiar with the book of Revelation, you will see some similar language here. Indeed, the events of Revelation might be describing the final fulfillment of what we are reading here in Daniel – many Bible scholars say. I wish to focus on two persons we are introduced to here.

The first is the person called “the Ancient of Days.” Let me quote from the ESV Study Bible’s notes on this passage:

“His clothing was white as snow,” representing uncompromising and radiant purity; “his hair was as white as pure wool,” symbolizing the wisdom that comes with great age. His chariot-throne was “flaming with fire” and its “wheels were ablaze,” images of the divine warrior’s fearsome power to destroy his enemies. A “stream of fire” flowed out from before him, and he was surrounded by “myriads upon myriads” of angelic attendants. The scene depicts in powerful imagery a judge who has the wisdom to sort out right from wrong, the purity to persistently choose the right, and the power to enforce his judgments.

(Excerpt From: Crossway. “ESV® Study Bible.” Apple Books.)

The “Ancient of Days” is God Himself.

And there is a second person – He is called “one like a son of man” in verse 13. That verse then says, “And He came up to the Ancient of Days and was presented before Him.” He is presented to the Ancient of Days, to God. Verse 14 says, “And to Him was given dominion, honor, and a kingdom, so that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away. And His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed.” It is quite striking that He is given “an everlasting dominion” – this is no mere human, and certainly not an angel either. He is called “one like a son of man” – somehow, He looks somewhat human, and yet He is more than human.

Ancient Jewish commentators pondered these verses. There was a widespread notion that this passage described what was termed “two powers in heaven.” The commentators couldn’t quite grasp who this second person might be, but many thought this may be a description of the expected Messiah. But what kind of man will this be? There were a variety of theories circulating around trying to answer this question. Some of the Jewish commentators thought this “one like a son of man” in Daniel 7 was perhaps a divinized human – a man who was divinized in some way, perhaps a man who had lived and died and then was glorified in heaven, but who will return to earth to establish the kingdom. Another theory was that this was a divine being created by God who will somehow become a human – a humanized angel, perhaps. And a third theory is that this second power in heaven is actually an eternally existent divine being who is of the same essence as God. These theories were being discussed in the years before Jesus appeared on the scene. Today we know that this third theory is the one that turned out to be an accurate notion of what type of person the “son of man” is.

Next, I'd like to spend a few minutes in another portion of the book of Daniel. Two weeks ago, Pastor Bruce quoted some verses from Daniel chapter 9 about the coming Messiah, and I would like to read those verses again today. In that chapter, the angel Gabriel appears to Daniel in a vision and tells him a remarkable prophecy. Let's read Daniel 9:24 (NIV), where Gabriel says this: "Seventy 'sevens' are decreed for your people and your holy city to finish transgression, to put an end to sin, to atone for wickedness, to bring in everlasting righteousness, to seal up vision and prophecy and to anoint the Most Holy Place."

The verse begins with a reference to seventy periods of time called "sevens." Well, one week is seven days, so this term "sevens" may be a reference to weeks, and therefore many Bible translations call this "seventy weeks." Each of these "sevens" or "weeks" is actually not seven days long but seven years long. The counting of these "seventy weeks" begins when the Jews are released from their captivity in Babylon and allowed to return to Jerusalem.

Let's read Daniel 9:25 – "Know and understand this: From the time the word goes out to restore and rebuild Jerusalem until the Anointed One, the ruler, comes, there will be seven 'sevens,' and sixty-two 'sevens.' It will be rebuilt with streets and a trench, but in times of trouble."

I said a moment ago that these "sevens" can be called "weeks" and that they are actually periods of seven years each. Therefore, in this verse, seven "weeks" is 49 years. That is how long it took to rebuild Jerusalem after the Jews were allowed to return there. You can read this story in the books of Nehemiah and Ezra, where we read that they completed the task amidst much trouble, just like verse 25 says. After those seven "weeks" comes sixty-two "weeks," and then verse 25 says that the "Anointed One, the ruler, comes." That is the expected Messiah. By the way, the Hebrew word "Messiah" and the Greek word "Christ" mean "Anointed One."

Two weeks ago, when Pastor Bruce read this verse, he read it in a translation called the Living Bible, and I noticed that the Living Bible calculated these years for us – the seven "weeks" and the 62 "weeks." Let's read verse 25 again in the Living Bible: "Now listen! It will be forty-nine years plus 434 years from the time the command is given to rebuild Jerusalem, until the Anointed One comes! Jerusalem's streets and walls will be rebuilt despite the perilous times."

It took 49 years to rebuild Jerusalem, then after that there will be 434 years until the Anointed One, the Messiah, comes. Well, that brings us up to the first century A.D.

At that time, there was considerable expectation that the Messiah was about to appear. In the Gospel records, we see several indications of this expectation. For example, in John chapter 1, John the Baptist is asked if he is the Messiah. He says that he is not, and later he points to Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" in verse 29. Later in verse 41, Andrew goes to find his brother Peter and declares to him that "We have found the Messiah."

So, let's return to Daniel chapter 7 and its vision of heaven and the Ancient of Days and a second person at the throne who is referred to as "one like a son of man." Who is that second power in heaven? Answer: that is the Second Person of the Holy Trinity, the one who is described in Philippians chapter 2 as the one who laid aside His divine privileges to take on human flesh and

to die for us. It is He who will, in the end, defeat all His enemies, and He will have His kingdom, as we read in both Daniel 7 and the book of Revelation.

Let's read Daniel 7:13-14 again –

I kept looking in the night visions,
And behold, with the clouds of heaven, **One like a son of man** was coming,
And He came up to **the Ancient of Days** and was presented before Him.
¹⁴ And to Him was given dominion, honor, and a kingdom,
So that all the peoples, nations, and men of every language might serve Him.
His dominion is an everlasting dominion which will not pass away.
And His kingdom is one which will not be destroyed.

This “son of man” is said to come “with the clouds of heaven.” I have another quote for you from the ESV Study Bible, commenting on verse 13 here:

The “one like a son of man” combines in one person both human and divine traits. Elsewhere, this phrase “son of man” often distinguishes mere human beings from God (e.g., Psalm 8:4, Ezekiel 2:1). However, this son of man seems also greater than any mere human, for to “come on the clouds” is a clear symbol of divine authority (cf. Psalm 104:3; Isaiah 19:1).
(Excerpt From: Crossway. “ESV® Study Bible.” Apple Books.)

Earlier in today's message, I quoted for you Psalm 8:4 and Ezekiel 2:1. Now, let's look at Psalm 104 and Isaiah 19. Talking about God, Psalm 104:3 (NASB) says this: “He lays the beams of His upper chambers in the waters; He makes the clouds His chariot; He walks on the wings of the wind.”

Isaiah 19:1 (NASB) – “The pronouncement concerning Egypt: Behold, the LORD [Yahweh] is riding on a swift cloud and is about to come to Egypt; the idols of Egypt will tremble at His presence, and the heart of the Egyptians will melt within them.”

Yahweh makes the clouds His chariot. He rides on a swift cloud. These are features of the supreme God, Yahweh. And yet, in Daniel 7:13, the “one like a son of man” has this feature: He is coming “with the clouds of heaven.” The ancient Jews noticed this language and noticed the fact that there are two persons who both seem to be Yahweh.

And Jesus called Himself the “Son of Man.” A few minutes ago, I quoted for you Mark 14:61-62 (NKJV), when Jesus was being questioned by the Sanhedrin. Let's look at it again –
But He kept silent and answered nothing. Again the high priest asked Him, saying to Him, “Are You the Christ, the Son of the Blessed?” ⁶² Jesus said, “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.”

In the days before His arrest, Jesus was on the Mount of Olives and He gave some description of future events that would signal His return. We call His talk there “the Olivet Discourse” because it took place on the Mount of Olives. In the middle of His discourse, He says this:

Matthew 24:29-31 (NASB) – “But 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 the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. ³⁰ And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will mourn, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. ³¹ And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet blast, and they will gather together His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other.”

More about the end of the current age can be found in the book of Revelation. Let’s look at Revelation 1:6-7 (NASB) – And He [Christ] made us into a kingdom, priests to His God and Father—to Him be the glory and the dominion forever and ever. Amen. ⁷ Behold, He is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see Him, even those who pierced Him; and all the tribes of the earth will mourn over Him. Even so. Amen.

This is our destiny: to reign with Christ in His Kingdom. But the tribes of the earth will mourn when He returns, for they will not have a part in that kingdom. As the book of Revelation unfolds, we see judgment on the evildoers of the earth and on the Antichrist and on the devil. Christ returns to establish His kingdom of peace and justice, and we see the new heavens and new earth.

I would like to close with a passage from First Corinthians. 1 Corinthians 15:51-58 (NASB) – Behold, I am telling you a mystery; we will not all sleep, but we will all be changed, ⁵² in a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet; for the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable, and we will be changed. ⁵³ For this perishable must put on the imperishable, and this mortal must put on immortality. ⁵⁴ But when this perishable puts on the imperishable, and this mortal puts on immortality, then will come about the saying that is written: “Death has been swallowed up in victory. ⁵⁵ Where, O Death, is your victory? Where, O Death, is your sting?” ⁵⁶ The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the Law; ⁵⁷ but thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ. ⁵⁸ Therefore, my beloved brothers, be firm, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, knowing that your labor is not in vain in the Lord.

We have victory through the Lord Jesus Christ. He has conquered death, and He will give us new bodies – no longer perishable and mortal, but immortal and imperishable. This is our hope. And this gives us confidence to live as disciples of Christ. Let us remember that final exhortation: to be firm no matter the circumstances we find ourselves in, always excelling in the work the Lord has given us to do: to reach the lost and to make disciples of all nations.