

The Story (22) – Son of God

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I. Review and Introduction

A. Three weeks ago we looked at the miracle of Jesus' birth. To repeat Wayne Grudem's comment, "The fact that the infinite, omnipotent, eternal Son of God could become man and join himself to a human nature forever, so that infinite God became one person with finite man, will remain for eternity the most profound miracle and the most profound mystery in all the universe."

B. Two weeks ago we looked at aspects of Jesus' ministry prior to his crucifixion. We saw that he announced the good news of the kingdom, taught about the nature and character of the kingdom, taught about the ethics of the kingdom, demonstrated or previewed aspects of the kingdom in his miracles and exorcisms, and trained the Apostles.

C. Last week we focused on Jesus' extraordinary nature, the fact he is no ordinary man.

1. His extraordinary nature is evident in the things he said. In that regard, we looked at the parable of the bridegroom in their midst, the comparison to Jonah and Solomon, the sermon in the synagogue, the conversation with the woman at the well, his statement when he was on trial, his statement that "before Abraham was, I am," his claim in Jn. 14:6 to be the exclusive path to the Father, and his call to unrivaled loyalty.

2. And his extraordinary nature is also evident in the things he did. We saw him accepting worship, forgiving sins, and performing great miracles.

D. The assigned topic for this morning is "Son of God." Again, I was not entirely sure of what I was expected to teach under this title, given what I have said in previous weeks, but I will first explore the phrase "Son of God" and then say a bit toward the end about the titles "Messiah/Christ" and "Son of Man."

II. "Son of God"

A. The phrase "son of God" can refer to different kinds of relationships with God. In other words, it need not mean by itself that the being referred to as a "son of God" is divine.

1. Adam, for example, is called "the son of God" in the genealogy in Luke 3. He is "the son of God" in distinction from others in the genealogy in that God was his direct creator.

Adam had no human parents, no intermediate human causes of his existence. But he clearly is a man, a human being. He is made in the likeness and image of God, but he is not in nature God.

2. Angels are sometimes referred to as "sons of God." You see that most clearly in Job 1:6, 2:1, and 38:7. See also Ps. 29:1 and 89:6, where the phrase is often translated "heavenly beings." Yet angels are not divine; they are beings made by God (Neh. 9:6 [NIV adds "starry"]; Ps. 148:2-5; Jn. 1:1-3; and Col. 1:15-16). Similarly to Adam, they are his "sons" in the sense God was their direct creator. They are similar to God in certain ways but are not divine, not worthy of worship.

3. In Mat. 5:9 Jesus says, "*Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.*" Here it is the reflection of God's character that is in view. Those who are reconcilers, who are agents of healing in the midst of fragmentation, are mirrors of God. They have a family resemblance; "the apple does not fall far from the tree" we would say. But they are not divine in nature; they are human beings. This same sense is in Lk. 6:35: *But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil.* In imitating God one is acting like a son, following in his father's footsteps as a son customarily did.

4. And, of course, the ultimate imitating of God will come in the consummation when our sanctification is completed and we are like Christ, and thus like God, in a fuller and more complete way. That is what is behind Rev. 21:6, *And he said to me, "It is done! I am the Alpha and the Omega, the beginning and the end. To the thirsty I will give from the spring of the water of life without payment."*⁷ *The one who conquers will have this heritage, and I will be his God and he will be my son.*

5. In 2 Sam. 7:14 the Davidic king, the descendant of David (in this case Solomon) who carries on his ruling dynasty, is referred to as a son of God. The king is not divine in nature but occupies the office through which God's reign is to be reflected. The king is to rule as an expression of God's rule, which includes showing God's passion for justice, his commitment to the covenant, his hatred of idolatry, and his concern for the oppressed. He is God's son in terms of his calling.

6. Covenant people, those who have put their trust in God, sometimes are called sons of God. In Deut. 14:1 Moses tells the Israelites, "*You are the sons of the LORD your God,*" and in Gal. 3:26 Paul tells the Galatian Christians, "*For in Christ Jesus you are all sons of God, through faith.*" There "son" is used to designate a special relationship, a closeness or bond, between God and his covenant people, as with a father and son. It is not intended to convey that covenant participants are divine.

B. Jesus as "the Son of God"

1. Some of the references to Jesus as "Son of God" could be taken in one of the senses that lack divine connotations, senses that need not mean he is in nature God. He is the

ultimate Davidic king and thus like other Davidic kings before him he could be the "Son of God" in terms of that office and calling.

2. Jesus also is sinless and thus is one who perfectly reflects God's being and character in this world. He could be seen as "Son of God" in that more limited sense.

3. But there are uses of "Son of God" in reference to Jesus that cannot be so confined, uses that show his uniqueness and indicate his divine nature. And once that sense of "Son of God" as applied to Jesus is clear, the more ambiguous uses take on a new light.

a. We read in Jn. 1:1-2, 14: *In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.*² *He was in the beginning with God.*³ *All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made. . . .*¹⁴ *And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of **the only Son** from the Father, full of grace and truth.*

(1) This uniqueness – the fact he is the *only Son* – is repeated in several places. Jesus says in Jn. 3:16-18: *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his **only Son**, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.*¹⁷ *For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him.*¹⁸ *Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the **only Son of God.**"*

(2) John writes in 1 Jn. 4:9, *In this the love of God was manifested among us, that God sent his **only Son** into the world so that we might live through him.*

b. In Jn. 5:22-23 Jesus states, *"The Father judges no one, but has given all judgment to the Son,*²³ ***that all may honor the Son, just as they honor the Father.** Whoever does not honor the Son does not honor the Father who sent him."*

c. In Jn. 17:1-5 Jesus prayed: *"Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you,*² *since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.*³ *And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent.*⁴ *I glorified you on earth, having accomplished the work that you gave me to do.*⁵ *And now, Father, glorify me in your own presence with the glory that I had with you before the world existed."*

d. Hebrews 1:1-4 states: *Having long ago spoken to the fathers many times and in many ways by the prophets,*² *in these last days God spoke to us by **[the] Son**, whom he appointed heir of all things, **through whom also he made the universe;***³ ***who being the radiance of the Glory and [the] exact representation of his nature, and sustaining all things by the word of his power,** after providing purification of the sins sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven,*⁴ *having become as much greater than the angels as the name he has inherited [is] superior to theirs.*

e. Paul writes in Col. 1:13-20: *He rescued us from the dominion of the darkness and transferred [us] into the kingdom of **the Son** he loves, ¹⁴in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

¹⁵*He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation, ¹⁶for by him **all the things in the heavens and on the earth were created**, the visible and the invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities; all things have been created by him and for him. ¹⁷He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. ¹⁸And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that in everything he might have first place. ¹⁹For in him all the fullness [of God] was pleased to dwell ²⁰and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things in heaven or things on earth, by making peace through the blood of his cross.*

f. 1 Jn. 5:11-12 states: *And this is the testimony, that God gave us eternal life and this life is in his Son. ¹²The one who has the Son has the life; the one who does not have the Son of God does not have the life.* This Son clearly is unique.

4. Satan, demons, the disciples, and the Jews all seemed to recognize that "Son of God" applied to Jesus went beyond the title as applied to others.

a. Satan in Mat. 4:3 recognized that "Son of God" as applied to Jesus implied the ability to work miracles (turn stones to bread).

b. The demons in Mat. 8:29 recognized that "Son of God" in Jesus' case included the power to torment them. In Mk. 3:11 they fall before him crying out "You are the Son of God." Clearly something unique and overpowering is included in that title.

c. The disciples in Mat. 14:33 worshiped Jesus as "the Son of God," which clearly shows they saw the phrase as expressing his deity.

d. In Jn. 19:7 the Jews accused Jesus before Pilate saying, *"We have a law, and according to that law he ought to die because he has made himself the Son of God."* They understood that the phrase "Son of God" as applied to Jesus included a claim of deity which was blasphemous for a mere human to make. You see this same link between sonship and a claim of deity in Jn. 5:17-18: *But Jesus answered them, "My Father is working until now, and I am working." ¹⁸This was why the Jews were seeking all the more to kill him, because not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.*

III. "Messiah/Christ"

A. The Hebrew term "Messiah" and its Greek equivalent "Christ" mean "Anointed One." In Jewish culture the term referred to the special servant of God who would bring about God's

ultimate design for the world. He was the one alluded to in the text in Isaiah 61 that Jesus read in the synagogue in Nazareth.

B. During his ministry, Jesus used this title, but he seemed to keep it on the "down low." As I reminded you last week, he said in his private conversation with the woman at the well Jn. 4:26 that he was the Messiah. When Peter confessed Jesus as the Christ "in house" in Mat. 16:13-20 (Mk. 8:27-30; Lk. 9:20), Jesus acknowledged the truth of the statement but told the disciples not to tell anyone that he was the Christ.

C. Jesus reluctance to wave that banner before the general public was tied to the false ideas that were associated with the Messiah. Many Jews believed the Messiah would be God's agent for expelling Rome from Palestine by military force. So making that title one's public identification would have been understood as a call for revolution and war which would have hindered his ministry and brought an immediate confrontation with Rome.

D. As I indicated last week, that was behind his careful response to Caiaphas's question in Mat. 26:63. He said "Yes" he was the Messiah, but did so in a way that indicated that the "yes" needed some qualification in light of false expectations that had grown around the Messiah's role. That his answer was "yes," even if "yes but," is clear not only from the summary of his answer reported in Mk. 14:62 ("I am") but also from the fact he was mocked during his trial and crucifixion for having claimed to be the Messiah (Mk. 15:18, 32; Lk. 23:35-39) and the fact the charge Pilate nailed over his head was "King of the Jews." That also shows how explosive that claim was in that social environment.

IV. "Son of Man"

A. Jesus' most frequent self-designation was the phrase "Son of Man." He refers to himself that way over 80 times in the Gospels.

B. In the Old Testament, the word is most often used simply as a reference to a "man" or a "human being." You see that clearly, for example, in its use in Psalms (8:4, 80:17, 144:3, 146:3). Ezekiel is addressed by God as "son of man" over 90 times. The emphasis there is on Ezekiel's humanity, his mortality, as over against God's supernatural greatness and power.

C. In Dan. 7:13, however, the phrase "son of man" takes a different cast. There, in the context of the great judgment that comes when the little horn is raging against the saints, Daniel sees one "like a son of man," a picture of humanness, but who comes with the clouds of heaven as God is said to do, a picture of divinity. This is the Messiah. He is given by God the Father an eternal and universal kingdom. It is this kingdom that is consummated, that comes to full expression, in conjunction with the final judgment and is inherited by the saints (vv. 22, 26-27).

D. In several places Jesus links his usage of "Son of Man" to the reference in Dan. 7:13. In Mk. 14:61-62, for example, Jesus answers the question whether he is the Christ, the Son of the

Blessed, this way: "I am, and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of Power, and coming with the clouds of heaven." Craig Blomberg remarks (*Jesus and the Gospels*, 343):

Jesus is describing himself as the "one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven" who "approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence" and given authority and power over all humanity, leading to universal worship and everlasting dominion (Dan. 7:13-14). This claim to be far more than a mere mortal is probably what elicited the verdict of blasphemy from the Jewish high court.

E. This may have been Jesus' favorite self-reference because of its ambiguity. Stein states (p. 150):

The confusion surrounding the title "Son of Man" served Jesus well. It functioned much like a parable. To those on the inside it revealed Jesus' messianic calling; to those on the outside it had a riddlelike quality (Mk 4:10-12). To the latter it was perhaps understood as a circumlocution or as a general reference to Jesus as a human being. Thus it served Jesus' purpose admirably. He could use it openly without fear and yet privately explain its meaning to his disciples (Mk 4:34).