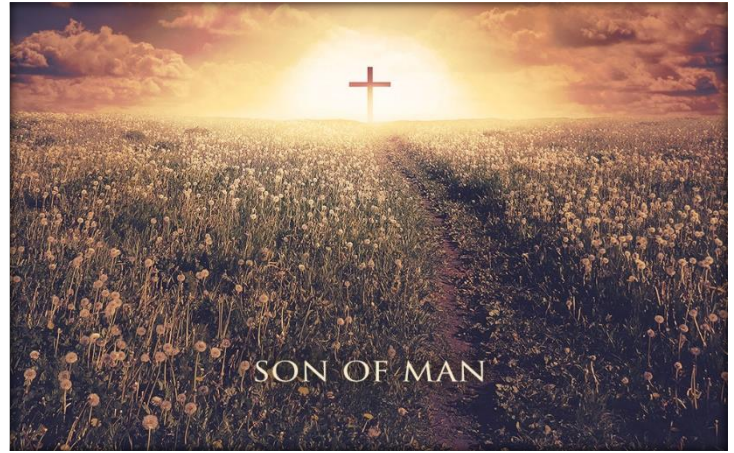


# “Inevitable—Son of Man”

*Daniel 7:9–14; John 1:43–51; Mark 14:60–62;  
Matthew 24:27–31*

## ***The true story***

Throughout his public ministry, Jesus referred to himself as the Son of Man. What does he mean? As the final days and hours approach, this question becomes more urgent and the answer ever clearer. Jesus is the Son of Man from Daniel, the one who comes before the throne of the Ancient of Days and is given dominion over all of God’s creation.



## ***The “Son of Man”***

How odd is it that Jesus referred to himself in a way no one else did -- this mysterious “Son of Man”? It never even became one of the confessional titles for Jesus used by the early Christians. Nonetheless, Jesus refers to himself as “Son of Man” throughout the gospels. Further, Jesus always uses the definite article: “the Son of Man,” never “a Son of Man.” In the book of Ezekiel, the phrase is used 93 times to refer to the prophet’s mortal humanity and is often translated as “mortal one.” Is that all Jesus could mean? In a word, no.

As we’ve seen, Jesus is ushering in the kingdom of God and is, indeed, God incarnate. So what gives? To answer that, we have to go to the book of Daniel, a very popular piece of writing among the Jews of Jesus’ day.

## ***Daniel’s vision of the Son of Man***

Glance through the second half of Daniel, chapters 7-12, and you’ll see that it is very different from the endlessly entertaining and “preachable” stories in the first half of Daniel. The writing is apocalyptic, like most of Revelation. In a way, the second half of Daniel merely retells the themes from the first half but in the intensely symbolic language of the apocalyptic genre. It was a style of writing that was very popular among the Jews in the centuries around the time of Jesus. Such writing brought out big cosmic scenes, investing them with striking and often mysterious images and symbols. Many Jews expected God to do something big and the apocalyptic style fit those expectations. The word “apocalypse” comes from the Greek word meaning an “unveiling.” Apocalyptic writing was intended to pull back the curtain so the reader could see the cosmic significance of worldly events, such as the abominations committed in Jerusalem by the Syrian ruler Antiochus Epiphanies more than a century and a half before Jesus, whose actions were so profane to the Jews that they triggered the Maccabean revolt. Not surprisingly, the book of Daniel was put into its final form and portions added during the time of the Maccabean revolt.

Thus, Daniel 7 opens with beasts rising out of the chaotic seas that are ready to “devour much flesh.” Whose flesh? Israel’s of course. Who is the beast? Antiochus Epiphanies is the latest such monster, at the time the book was put into its final form. Surely God’s people must be doomed. Right? These mighty empires could overrun and wipe out the Jews any time they wanted to.

But there is more to this world than can be seen or heard. So, in verse 9, we are taken to the throne room of God, where the Ancient of Days sits on his throne and judges the beasts, powerful horns and all. And we see that someone like a human being, a Son of Man, is coming with the heavenly clouds toward the throne, where he will be given honor, glory, and dominion over all creation. Who is this Son of Man, whose rule will be “an everlasting one”? Who? . . . *Who?*

## ***Meeting the Son of Man face to face***

John’s gospel, similarly to the others, tells the story of Jesus calling his first disciples. Jesus begins with Andrew, who then goes to get his brother Simon. After returning to Galilee, Jesus calls Philip, who was from the same hometown as Andrew and Peter. Philip then goes to get Nathanael, who seems quite skeptical of the whole thing. Philip has told him that Jesus is the one they’ve been looking for, the one pointed to by the Law and the prophets. When Nathanael hears that this man is from Nazareth, he scoffs, as if to say, “That dump!?” Nonetheless, he joins Philip and the others.

When Jesus sees Nathanael coming, he declares him to be a straightforward, what-you-see-is-what-you-get kind of guy. But when Nathanael asks how Jesus could possibly know him, Jesus reveals that he was able to see Nathanael earlier when he was sitting under a fig tree, when that just didn’t seem possible.

That and the witness of the other men are too much for Nathanael. Despite his understandable skepticism, he addresses Jesus as rabbi,<sup>1</sup> and pronounces him to be the Son of God, the king of Israel. For Nathanael at this point, the phrases “son of God” and “king of Israel” are messianic, two ways of saying the same thing. As John’s gospel proceeds, it becomes clear that “Son of God” with respect to Jesus means far more than “merely” Messiah, but Nathanael can’t have in mind any sort of Trinitarian pronouncement.

And just when we think that we’ve heard it all, Jesus tells Nathanael that he will see “greater things than that . . . you will see ‘heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending’ on the **Son of Man**” (John 1:51). Using powerful imagery from the story of Jacob’s ladder (Genesis 28:10-22) and from Daniel 7, Jesus tells Nathanael all that he needs to know in order to grasp what he will soon see and hear and experience as Jesus’ disciple.

### ***A confrontation with the Son of Man***

Early on a Friday morning during Passover in about AD 30, Jesus is hauled before a Jewish tribunal led by the high priest Caiaphas. When confronted with trumped-up charges against him, Jesus stays silent. So Caiaphas pressed him: “Are you the Messiah, the Son of the Blessed One?” Jesus’ answer is straightforward and unequivocal; “I am. And ‘you will see the **Son of Man** seated at the right hand of the Power and ‘coming with the clouds of heaven’” (Mark 24:61-62, NRSV). Yes, he is, indeed, the Son of Man who is ushering in the kingdom of God. Caiaphas’ response is to stand up, tear his robe, and shout “blasphemy!” Caiaphas understands quite well what Jesus is claiming. If true, then nothing can be the same. But if Jesus is wrong or is lying, then he is indeed guilty of blasphemy and more.

But of course, Jesus was not wrong, He was who he claimed to be. He was, and is, the Son of Man and more. He even spoke of the day ahead when he would be vindicated, when all would see the truth of his words and actions.

### ***The vindication***

When we come to the Bible, we find that some of it is pretty straightforward -- we can understand it without too much trouble. But other portions of Scripture defy us and tie us up in knots as we try to make sense of what we read. Chapters 24 and 25 of Matthew are clearly among the latter -- challenging and difficult, made more so by our ignorance of some vital context. You might take a few minutes and read chapter 24 for yourself...

Ok, what is the chapter about? Nearly everyone I’ve met would answer, “Jesus’s second coming, of course.” This is especially true in the aftermath of the Left Behind series of books. . . . However, you would be wrong. Read again 24:1-2. Jesus predicts that the temple is going to be pulled down, stone upon stone. His disciples ask him for a sign to the timing of this cataclysmic event and Jesus begins a long discourse on what is to come. Now read 24:34, where Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place.” What!?!???

Over the years, I’ve read many attempts to explain away Jesus’ plain meaning -- namely, that the generation to whom he is speaking will live to see the events described in apocalyptic fashion in chapter 24. Why seek to explain it away? Because, if Jesus is talking to the disciples about his second coming, then he was wrong, for the generation of his disciples passed away a long, long time ago. We still await Jesus’ return and the consummation of his kingdom.

### ***But Jesus wasn’t wrong, and he meant what he said.***

Jesus’ phrase in v. 30, “the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven,” is a quote from Daniel 7:13 (above). In Daniel, the Son of Man is coming before the throne of God to receive his rightful authority and dominion over God’s creation. He is going toward God, not toward the earth. The direction of his “coming” in this passage is *upward not downward*.

Here is what is going on. Jesus had pronounced God’s judgment on the temple the day after Palm Sunday, just as Jeremiah had six centuries before. Four decades after Jesus’ pronouncement, when some of the disciples were still living, the temple was pulled down by Roman legions as they burned Jerusalem, just as the Babylonians had destroyed Solomon’s Temple in 587 BC, a few decades after Jeremiah’s pronouncement of God’s judgment. Thus, Jesus’ judgment on the Temple would be vindicated (shown to be in the right) by the destruction of the Temple, just as Jeremiah had been vindicated.

The Son of Man would be resurrected and exalted to the right hand of God (the ascension), both acts of vindication, for they showed that Jesus had been right in his claims to be Messiah, Son of Man, and more. Similarly, he would be vindicated by the destruction of the temple. That’s the whole thing in a nutshell.

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<sup>1</sup> By the end of the first century AD, rabbi came to be used only with respect to those formally “ordained.” But in Jesus’ day, it referred to someone held in high esteem when it came to spiritual matters and learning.

### ***The Son of Man . . . The Word***

By continually referring to himself as the Son of Man, Jesus draws on the image from Daniel 7:13-14. He is the one raised up by God to usher in God's kingdom. Jesus is the one "given authority, glory and sovereign power." This carpenter from the no-account village of Nazareth? No wonder Caiaphas was floored by the claim.

Because we proclaim Jesus to be fully God and fully human, it is understandable that we often take "Son of Man" to be a statement about Jesus' humanity, making "Son of God" a statement about Jesus' divinity. But "Son of Man" is not a cryptic way of saying that Jesus is human. Rather, it is a powerful image drawn from Daniel 7:13-14. You might read back over the passage from Daniel yet again – this is the Crucified One, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

Daniel the man had to stay faithful in a hostile world, when it seemed that all was surely lost. So, the book of Daniel comes from a time when God's people were being persecuted and tortured. For them too, it must have seemed that all was lost. Who could stand up to the power of Antiochus Epiphanies?

So, it has always been. There are always monsters on the horizon. ISIS, Putin, and the rest are merely the latest. They won't be the last.

Daniel 7 is an ever-present reminder that the monsters and beasts of this world do not win. Sure, they might triumph in a battle or two here or there. But defeat God? No.

Indeed, God's victory over the beasts, over sin, even over death was won nearly 2,000 years ago.

And so, again we come to the identity and nature of Jesus. Who was he? What was and is his significance? The crowds and even his disciples didn't really understand. Do we? Really? Our claims of Jesus go far beyond even those of the Son of Man in Daniel 7. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," begins the opening chapter in John's gospel. As we've seen, the chapter closes with Jesus' claim to be the Son of Man.

Even for us, speaking of Jesus' identity and nature gets lost in a morass of little understood ten-dollar words and general confusion. Really, how could this man from Galilee be the Lord and Creator of the cosmos? Jesus and God: One? Really? It seems absurd on its face. How could anyone be expected to believe such a thing? Why are we surprised that so many, even today, reject the notion out of hand?

The apostle Paul understood this. Invariably, when he arrived in a city and began to speak to them of Jesus, he was scoffed at and ignored. How silly! How crazy! Yet he pressed on. Like Jesus, he didn't water down the claims or pretend away their consequences. When we offer Christ to others, there is only Jesus to present – the Jesus-who-is. The Jesus who is God incarnate, fully God and fully human. The Son of Man and the Word. All other "Jesuses" are no more real than the Easter bunny, and who would place their faith in a rabbit?

What began with these words: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God," soon became this: "The Father and I are one." We don't have to immerse ourselves in the profound Trinitarian implications of these words to grasp that in Jesus we meet someone completely and utterly unique. He is a man; yet he is God. Deny either and you've lost the truth about Jesus.

Even more staggering is the knowledge that Jesus' vocation, his mission, was one of personal sacrifice, a willingness to lay down his life for his sheep. For he was not sent to condemn the world, but to save it (John 3:17).

And save it he did . . . from all the beasts and the monsters. Could there be better news?

### ***A beginning and an end***

Even those who may know little else about the Bible are familiar with its opening: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, . . ." Most also know that God pronounced it good: "And God saw that the light was good; . . ." God created all that is -- all matter, all energy -- and, not surprisingly, it is a good creation. When God's redemptive work is fully realized, the cosmic warp and distortion of sin will have been washed away; creation will be as God created it to be.

We should never forget that at "The End," stands not an event or even a place, as wonderfully as that place might be depicted. Standing there is a person, the Lamb, Jesus the Christ. He is the beginning and the end, the Alpha and the Omega. He is the substance of our hopes and the embodiment of God's promises. However wonderful I might imagine eternity with Christ to be, I am imagining in black-and-white, compared to the wonders of God's colors.

As hope-crushing as our present sufferings may be, the light of Christ, a light that shines with the brilliance of a thousand suns, beckons us and those we love to join him, now and forever. . . . *Amen. Come, Lord Jesus!*