



“Immanuel: God Walks with Us”

Daniel 7:9–14; Matthew 12:1–8

God walks with us? Who is this man, Jesus?

Jesus and his disciples are just walking through a grainfield on the Jewish Sabbath, a Saturday, minding their own business, munching on some heads of grain, when they are accosted by some Pharisees. How dare these men break off a few heads of grain to eat, demand the Pharisees. The Law of Moses, God’s Law, commands that no work be done on the Sabbath and that meant even breaking off a bit of grain!

I picture Jesus calmly turning to the Pharisees and pausing as he considers his reply. Then he tells them a story they all know. How David and his rebels, on the run from Saul, had come to the priests at the tabernacle in Nob and eaten the bread that had been set out for God (1 Samuel 21:1-9). The tabernacle was God’s dwelling place and every day the priests set out fresh loaves for God’s consumption. Sure, it was the priests that actually ate the loaves, but it was what they signified that mattered. The tabernacle was God’s place. But David and his men had eaten that bread and David had gone on to the Israel’s greatest king. And now, these Pharisaic busybodies were challenging Jesus over some grain plucked from a field.

After reminding the Pharisees of the story, Jesus proceeded to give it to them straight. Something greater than the tabernacle/temple stood in their midst and he quoted Hosea for them: “I desire mercy and not sacrifice” (6:6). What a slap in the face—quoting Scripture to a Pharisee! And before they can recover, Jesus drops the proverbial hammer: “The Son of Man is Lord of the Sabbath.” Jesus is Lord of the Sabbath and he will declare what is proper and what is not! . . . I can almost imagine the Pharisees never really getting over that one. For who is the maker of Sabbath Law? None other than the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.

It seems like such a simple encounter, but it is one of the most profound and revealing in the gospels. Jesus is the Law-giver. But why does Jesus describe himself as the Son of Man? Who or what is the Son of Man?

The Son of Man

When Jesus refers to himself as the Son of Man, he is calling on the figure in the seventh chapter of Daniel. 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. The book of Daniel was put into its final form and portions added during the time of the Maccabean revolt.

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. 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 what 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

Jesus answers the question: he is the Son of Man, the one given dominion over all of God’s creation. 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? The Pharisees had to be stunned every time Jesus referred to himself in this way.

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, to reiterate, it is a powerful image drawn from Daniel 7:13-14. You might read back over the passage from Daniel again – this is the Crucified One, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

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.

More even than the Son of Man

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. 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. He is the Lord of the Sabbath. He is Immanuel -- God with Us.

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?