

Jesus: Liberator and King

Advance in Faith 1 — Unit 2

Week 2 — Jesus' identity: The Son of Man



Jesus used one phrase to describe everything he did. Whether teaching, telling parables, healing people, casting out demons, or sending out disciples, his mission was to establish the *kingdom of God*.

But he was a very different kind of king than the world had ever experienced. He didn't walk around demanding recognition or forcing people to submit. He referred to himself with a much less regal phrase: *son of man*. More than 50 different times (80+ verses), Jesus applied this cryptic phrase to himself. Why? What did he mean?

The enigma

Like the parables, Jesus intended *son of man* to be a puzzle. People didn't know what it meant:

John 12:34 "How can you say that the *Son of Man* must be lifted up? Who is this *Son of Man*?"

If Jesus intended to be cryptic, he succeeded! People are still puzzling over what he meant.¹ The church fathers understood *Son of Man* to mean Jesus' humanity, while *Son of God* meant his divinity.² That's correct, but they hadn't grasped why he focused on his humanity.

Some have wondered if *Son of Man* was a title for the Messiah.³ But that is not the case in any of the Jewish literature before Jesus,⁴ and Jesus' audience did not recognise it as a messianic title.

More recently, scholars have researched how *son of man* was used in Aramaic, the language Jesus spoke.⁵ They conclude it simply meant someone, anyone, a person. That's similar to how the phrase is used in the Old Testament, where it means a human or humankind.

But why would Jesus refer to himself simply as a person? Isn't that too obvious? Well, actually, no: it's not obvious what a true human looks like. Israel was called to be truly human, but—as the prophets regularly reminded them—they did not achieve that goal. Jesus could not look to King Herod or to the High Priest and say, "Ah, I get it: that's what it means to be human." He's in radically new territory being a genuine son of man—a true human, what God created us to be.

We need to dig back into the OT to see what Jesus meant.

¹ Burkett, Delbert. *The Son of Man Debate. A History and Evaluation*. Cambridge: University Press, 2000.

² For example, Tertullian, "Against Marcion" 4.10, trans. Peter Holmes in *The Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol III: Latin Christianity: Its Founder, Tertullian*, ed. A Roberts et al. Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Co, 1885, 359.

³ For example, Donald Senior, "Son of Man" in *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*, edited by D N Freedman et al. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2000), 1242.

⁴ The possible exception is the *Similitudes of Enoch* (1 Enoch 37-71) which uses *son of man* with some messianic content based on Daniel 7, but this probably does not pre-date Jesus.

⁵ Casey, Maurice. *The Solution to the 'Son of Man' Problem*. London, New York: T&T Clark, 2009. Hurtado, Larry. *'Who is this son of man?': The Latest Scholarship on a Puzzling Expression of the Historical Jesus*, T&T Clark, 2012.

What were humans created to be?

At creation, God defined us—our identity and mission:

Gen 1 ²⁶ Then God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. And let them have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over the livestock and over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.” ²⁷ So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.

Please excuse the sexist translation. *Man* (verse 27) means humanity: it explicitly means both male and female. We're going to stick with this language (even though it's not politically correct), because our phrase *son of man* means descendant of Adam.⁶

So who are we? We *are* God's image: a living sculpture infused with his breath (Gen 2:7), mirroring God to each other and to creation. God's intent is that when we see each other, we go, “Oh, wow! You remind me of what God is like.” That's our identity: God's likeness.

What are we doing here? We are charged with managing God's world, ruling it so all the creatures get a fair go. We are managers who rule over and care for creation—a reflection of how God rules over and cares for us. That's our mission: stewards of creation.

Have you ever questioned our significance in the vast universe?

Psa 8 ⁴ What is **man** that you are mindful of him,
the **son of man** that you care for him?

⁵ Yet you have made him a little lower than God,⁷
and crowned them with glory and honour.

⁶ You have given them dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under their feet.

In poetic passages like this, *son of man* is often parallel to *man*. We seem like insignificant specks on the surface of a planet in a vast universe, but God has placed us just one step below himself in relation to creation. That's significance!

That's who we are and what we do—our identity and mission.

We are the image of God, charged with ruling God's creation.

Jesus embodies this: he is the **image of God**, the **ruler over creation**:

Col 1:15 He is the image of the invisible God,
the firstborn [head of the family] over all creation.

⁶ The Hebrew word for man is *adam*. Son is *ben*, so “son of man” in Hebrew is *ben-adam* = descendant of Adam.

⁷ The word is *Elohim*—the normal Hebrew word for God. Some translators find it hard to accept that humans can be one step below God (in relation to creation), so they have changed it to read “angels” instead.

Rebellion redefines us

But instead of managing the creation and keeping everything in order, a lower creature (serpent) subdued us. We rebelled against God's command, valuing God less than a piece of fruit. It backfired: we compromised our authority.

Instead of caring for our brothers, we started destroying each other (Gen 4). Our violence corrupted the whole world (Gen 6:11). Evil rulers threaten anyone who opposes their power. Death reigns.

What tragedy! Evil and death rule us:

Eccl 8:11 ... the heart of the **sons of man** is fully set to do evil.

Psa 90:3 You return man to dust and say,
"Return, O **sons of man!**"

Humans desire to run the world, but without God our plans are evil:

Gen 11:5 And the LORD came down to see the city and the tower, which the **sons of man** had built.

Psa 14² The LORD looks down from heaven on the **sons of man**, to see if there are any who understand, who seek after God.

³ They have all turned aside; together they have become corrupt; there is none who does good, not even one.

Humanity is shattered and scattered, characterised by evil and death. It is no small thing for Jesus to be a *son of man* as God intended!

The family called to be true humanity

So God chose one family through whom he would restore the blessing that the nations are missing, namely God's reign (Gen 12:3). Yet Abraham's family were broken humans. They lie, bringing a curse instead of blessing (Gen 12:17). They rule with violence against others (Gen 34). They abuse each other (e.g. Joseph in Gen 37). Despite all this, the heavenly ruler raises up Joseph who helps Pharaoh rule well, for the saving of human lives (Gen 45:5-8).

But how can God's people survive in a broken world where inhuman rulers enslave them, even killing babies to keep power (Ex 1:16)? Exodus recounts how God stands up for his children, for Israel is God's son (Ex 4:22). With ten mighty acts, God shows Pharaoh who really runs the world. God opens a way through the Red Sea, saving his people, sinking the deadly power of Pharaoh's army. He establishes Israel as his kingdom, giving them his Law. They are to show the other nations how wonderful it is to be reigned by God:

Ex 19:5-6 ... you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.

When David becomes king, he shepherds God's people for their benefit, not his own. He reflects God heart (1 Sam 13:14). Yet, David is constantly slaughtering Philistines to protect God's people. As a man of war, David is not permitted to build God's temple (1 Chron 22:8; 28:3). Nevertheless, God promises David's dynasty will persist through his descendants forever (2 Sam 7:12-15).

Inhuman rulers are beastly

But can those who are genuinely human—ruling under God—succeed against the depraved humans who rule for selfish ends, using violence and death to subjugate others? That struggle was Israel's history.

Assyria wiped out the northern tribes in 722 BC. 135 years later, Babylon captured what was left, cutting off the David kingship and destroying the temple. It looked like God's project was over.

Daniel was one of the many who were exiled to Babylon. In his visions, he sees the empires as sub-human. They don't rule as humans: they rip the peoples apart, ruling like brute beasts. This seems to be how the world runs: generation after generation, empire after empire, century after century. Daniel 7 recounts a nightmare vision of four beasts—four kingdoms spanning half a millennium. Human rule becomes progressively more depraved—less human:

- The Babylonian beast at least postures as human (7:4)
- Persia is partially upright, but devours much flesh (7:5).
- There's nothing human about the four-headed monster (7:6).
- The last beast in Daniel's vision is a mechanised destroyer ("iron teeth"). It's not only inhuman: it's barely even animal!

Faced with beast after beast, spiralling down into deadly rule, people barely even remember what God intended humans to be.

And that's the sudden unexpected turn of Daniel's vision. The Ancient of Days takes his seat to set things right (7:9). The totally inhuman beast dies, and the others lose their power. Daniel sees a figure that looks human—*one like a son of man* (7:13). To him God entrusts the Adamic charge of providing human (not beastly) rule to over earth.

That's what God was calling his people to do! Daniel, like the others in exile, is called to be a *son of man* in the face of the beasts (8:17).

Jesus, the Son of Man

And that's how Jesus views himself. He is born under Roman rule. How could anyone stand against such an oppressive power? Can Jesus survive? Or will the Roman beast slaughter him as it does anyone who stands against it? They beheaded John the Baptist! If they see Jesus as

a threat—the King of the Jews—will they crucify him? And if they do, will that be the end of the last remaining thread of God's project?

It is no small thing for Jesus to be truly human. To be God's ruler, he must face and defeat evil. How can he do that? The evil powers tear to pieces anyone who stands against them.

- Can he be truly human, in a world where “the heart of the **sons of man** is fully set to do evil” (Eccl 8:11)?
- Can he be the son of David who rescues Israel from incessant oppression by the **sons of men**? (2 Sam 7:14).
- Can he be “the man of your right hand, the **son of man**” who restores God's decimated people (Psa 80:17)?
- Can he be a truly human ruler—“one like a **son of man**” in the face of the beasts (Dan 7:13)?
- Can he be what Adam was meant to be, now that the world is overrun by evil and death?

That's the challenge Jesus faces every day as he wakes up, every step he plans. How can he deliver humanity from the tyranny of beastly rulers, the reign of evil, and the crushing dehumanization of death?

To be the true *son of man* is no simple ask! To be the genuinely human (not beastly) ruler, to restore God's rule to the world of rebels—that is Jesus' most challenging task.

And that's precisely what you hear him saying as you examine his *son of man* sayings. He's talking about the confrontation between God's reign and the beastly powers that he must overthrow.

Conclusion

Jesus—the true *Son of Man*—was tasked with establishing the *kingdom of God* in a world where beastly inhuman rulers slaughter anyone who stands against their power. That is the gospel Jesus proclaimed—the good news that the reign of evil was over and was about to be replaced by the reign of God through humans instead!

This is an astoundingly rich gospel! It's not about getting my individual sins forgiven so I can escape from this world and float off to a disembodied existence in the sky. If Jesus succeeds in what he set out to do, humanity is released from the power of the beasts, restored to manage creation as God's representatives. Can you imagine such a world? What would it look like?

After the cross and resurrection, heaven's management returns to earth. Jesus receives all authority in heaven and on earth, so evil must yield to his authority. We are ambassadors of King Jesus, in his world.

How do we do that? He restores us to be true sons of men—like Jesus, not like the beasts. This is far more than being “nice” to people. True sons of men must confront evil—but we don’t use the weapons of evil. Following the Son of Man, you may quite literally put your life on the line—taking up your cross as he took up his. Can we learn this from Jesus? Can we follow him as he leads us into what we are to be (sons of men) and to do (kingdom of God)?

The only way to learn what it means to be truly human is to look at the Son of Man. Like a jigsaw, humanity is so fractured that we don’t even know what we should look like. The Son of Man is the picture of what Father intends us to be—the picture on the box. And the Holy Spirit is the great restorer, putting us back together so we conform to the image of Jesus, the body of Christ, the image of God in his world.

Group Questions

1. What did Jesus mean by calling himself the *Son of Man*?
Why do you think he called himself that?
2. If Jesus is the truly human one, what does that mean for us?
What would it look like for us to be genuinely human, in the sense God intended when he created humans?
3. But if we take this posture of being human in the face of evil around us, couldn’t we get hurt as Jesus did? Is it safe?
(Remember to include what happened to Jesus’ apostles, and how they died.)
4. What would it look like for you to represent God in your street, caring for your neighbours in a truly human way?
What can you do?

In your group prayer time, ask the Holy Spirit to help us to be Jesus’ body at work where you live.

Memory Work

See Matthew 20:25-28 for the context for this memory verse. Jesus describes how the rulers of the world who use their power to preserve themselves. By contrast, the truly-human servant-ruler (Son of Man) gives his own life to liberate his people.

Matthew 20:28 (NIV)

²⁸ ... the **Son of Man** did not come to be served,
but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Take Home Exercise

Read Mark 5 – 8.

As you read, meditate on how the Son of Man establishes his kingdom authority:

- He releases people from evil powers that enslave them, restoring their humanness (5:1-20).
- He is not defiled by unclean touch: instead he cleanses and restores people (5:21-43).
- The rulers who currently have power fight against him and keep doing evil (6:1-29).
- He provides what his subjects need, rescuing from disaster and disease (6:30-56).
- He opposes those who crush people with their rules (7:1-23).
- His authority extends to the world beyond Israel (7:24-8:10).
- He exposes the hidden evil of the current rulers/rule-makers (8:11-26).
- His disciples recognise him as the anointed King (Christ/Messiah), but they don't understand what it means for him to be a truly human ruler (Son of Man). Giving his life for his people is Jesus' method—the path we must follow (8:27-38).

So, what is the good news (gospel)? In the words Jesus chose, it is:

The Son of Man establishing the kingdom of God.

Are you beginning to understand what he meant?