

## JESUS THE SON OF MAN

John 1:43-51 The next day Jesus decided to leave for Galilee. Finding Philip, he said to him, "Follow me." Philip, like Andrew and Peter, was from the town of Bethsaida. Philip found Nathanael and told him, "We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." "Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?" Nathanael asked. "Come and see," said Philip. When Jesus saw Nathanael approaching, he said of him, "Here is a true Israelite, in whom there is nothing false." "How do you know me?" Nathanael asked. Jesus answered, "I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you." Then Nathanael declared, "Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel." Jesus said, "You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You shall see greater things than that." He then added, "I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

This is not the typical encounter you expect after rest under a fig tree on a warm day. Imagine the English equivalent. It's raining so rather than being under the fig tree, Nathanael is relaxing over a pint in the pub, his day's work done. Reflecting on spiritual things, as well as his life's frustrations. And then his friend Philip comes and says "I've found the man who is going to solve all your problems and he comes from Wolverhampton". And Nathanael chokes over his pint "Wolverhampton – can anything good come from there" (apart from Slade that is?) We can call Nathanael "an honest doubter". He wonders what this Jesus stuff is all about, as many do today. Philip just says "come and see" and he follows – Philip's a new Christian, often the best evangelists. As Nathanael and Philip leave the pub, Jesus meets Nathaniel and declares him a true Englishman, already having seen him and witnessed his thoughts while he was in the pub. And Nathanael realises he is face to face with the Son of God. And Jesus says again "You shall see greater things than that, I tell you the truth, you shall see heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

The Son of Man. An expression Nathanael was never going to forget. He would hear Jesus use the term for himself repeatedly over the next three years. It was Jesus's favourite way of referring to himself. Never Messiah, rarely Son of God, usually Son of Man. And no one else calls him that, right through the New Testament. Not Paul, nor John, nor James, nor the writer of Hebrews. I believe we can be sure that this was precisely the name that Jesus used for himself.

Nathanael would also have known that when he spoke to him this first time, Jesus was drawing parallels with the life of Jacob, the founder of Israel. As it says in Genesis 28, Jacob had a dream of a stairway resting on the earth, with its top reaching to heaven, and the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And Jacob heard God promise his descendents the land of Israel but also he heard God say "I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go".

Now let's look a bit closer at the encounter of Jesus with Nathanael. Jesus is linking what he says to Jacob's story.. He is declaring to Nathanael - you are an Israelite like Jacob (Israel was Jacob's name after he trusted in God). You won't be like the old Jacob who gained his inheritance and wealth by trickery – you are a "true Israelite in whom there is no deceit". And I believe he is saying, even as God watched over Jacob, I have watched over you, Nathanael "I know who you are. I know everything there is to know about you. I know what you think and where you go and what you do. Nathaniel, I love you. And I want you to follow me."

And this is what I think Jesus means when he talks about Jacob's ladder. You will see me, the Son of Man with your waking eyes, not in a dream. And I will not remain at the foot of the ladder on earth like Jacob, nor will I only be at the head of the ladder like God the Father, in heaven. I am the ladder itself. I, the Son of Man, am the ladder itself that makes the bridge from heaven to earth. You will see me establish communication from earth to heaven that will never be broken, while the promise to Jacob "I am with you" will be fulfilled eternally. Indeed heaven will never again be closed to men who put their trust in me. In me the glory of heaven comes down to earth, and Satan's rule is defeated as the kingdom of heaven comes in. And through contact with me, earthbound man will be lifted up to heaven. As Jesus was later to say "I am the way and the truth and the life. No-one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

Serious stuff! Can I substantiate it? To see how to substantiate it, we need to dig deeper into Scripture regarding the expression "the Son of Man". I think Nathaneal knew his Old Testament pretty well, he probably had in mind the prophecy that the Messiah would come from Bethlehem. That's why he was so cynical about Wolverhampton – sorry, Nazareth! So the expression "Son of Man" would have meant at least three things to Nathaneal.

First, it would relate simply to humanity in contrast to God. That's like in Psalm 144:3-4 "O Lord, what is man that you care for him, the son of man that you think of him? Man is like a breath; his days are like a fleeting shadow." Or listen to Job 25:6 "how much less man, who is but a maggot-- a son of man, who is only a worm!" Jesus came down from heaven to become a human being in all the weakness and vulnerability that these passages evoke. Jesus himself puts it like this in Luke 9:58 "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."

And yet the other obvious Old Testament reference is entirely the opposite of this humble figure of weak humanity. Listen to Daniel 7:13-14 "In my vision at night I looked, and there before me was one like a son of man, coming with the clouds of heaven. He approached the Ancient of Days and was led into his presence. He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men of every language worshiped him." This is a mighty figure descending from heaven, the eternal ruler and judge of earth and heaven, who shares God's power.

And the Gospels record words of Jesus that show this was also his self-understanding. He speaks often of his future exaltation and glory as in Mark 8:38 "If anyone is ashamed of me and my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his Father's glory with the holy angels." In John 5:26-27 Jesus says "For as the Father has life in himself, so he has granted the Son to have life in himself. And he has given him authority to judge because he is the Son of Man." And Jesus acknowledges that as a Son of Man he also has heavenly origins in John 3:31 "No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven—the Son of Man".

All these thoughts would be in Nathaniel's mind. Jesus was at both ends of Jacob's ladder. He was human but also divine. But here's the issue that would have mattered to Nathaniel, and must also matter to us. How would Jesus bridge that gap, as the Son of Man? How would he be the ladder itself? How could angels ascend and descend on him, the Son of Man? And here is I believe the key. Because the Old Testament and Jesus' own words give us one more meaning of son of man to consider. Jesus saw himself as the Son of Man as also the suffering servant of Isaiah 53. As many of you will know, this is a mysterious individual who is exalted by God but will die to save his people. As verse 5 for example says "he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was

upon him, and by his wounds we are healed.” Bridging earth and heaven, the only one who could! And yet Isaiah himself does not use the term “the Son of Man”.

So how do we know this applies to Jesus? From Jesus’ own words. In John 12:34 Jesus says “The Son of Man must be lifted up’ as Isaiah had said “See, my servant will act wisely; he will be raised and lifted up and highly exalted.” Jesus will be lifted up on a cross so that later he will be exalted in heaven. Jesus says in Luke 22:37 “It is written: ‘And he was numbered with the transgressors’; and I tell you that this must be fulfilled in me. “ thus quoting Isaiah 53:12 which also states “he poured out his life unto death...For he bore the sin of many, and made intercession for the transgressors.” Listen also to how Jesus criticised James and John in Mark 10:45 when he says “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” where ransom relates to the “guilt offering” of Isaiah 53:10. Jesus is indeed the ladder – when he is on the cross. By putting our trust in his sacrifice on the cross we can go from earth to heaven when we die. And through his sacrifice, that defeated Satan, heaven comes to earth in our lifetime.

We don’t often think of Jesus as a theologian, but for me this incorporation of the suffering servant into the exalted Old Testament Son of Man is the greatest theological thinking ever. Here is how the theologian Ladd puts it: “the Son of Man is not only a heavenly, pre existent being; he appears in weakness and humility as a man among human beings to fulfil a destiny of suffering and death...pouring the Suffering Servant into the Son of Man concept”.

I don’t believe God “downloaded” Jesus’ mission for him, like some computer programme. Rather, I believe by a profound prayer life and study of the scriptures, Jesus’ mission gradually emerged for him, as grew up he worked away in the carpenter’s workshop. So when he began his ministry at around age 30, Jesus called himself the Son of Man to show his unique mission, as the human Son of Man, the mighty divine Son of Man, and the suffering Son of Man, who links the two. Not at all the military Messiah Israel had been taught to expect. He shapes three Old Testament concepts into a beautiful diamond of truth, full of ever changing facets of immortal light as it is turned in the hand.

Nathaneal needed no more convincing than to hear Jesus and meet him in the flesh. But what does it mean to us that he is human, divine and on the cross formed a bridge between?

What does it mean for example that Jesus as the Son of Man is human like us, he laid his majesty aside to be born human? It matters first because as a human he can relate to us, as in Hebrews 4:15 “we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are—yet was without sin”. This is tremendously important for our salvation. Jesus, the Son of Man who is wholly human, can identify totally with the human condition. And furthermore, Jesus as the second Adam, was able to do what God intended of the first Adam; to obey and not to disobey, thus breaking Satan’s hold over fallen mankind. And to fulfil God’s original purpose for mankind of ruling over creation. And finally he gives us an example to follow, who again must be human. This is the foot of the ladder. The man like us, but one through whom earthbound man is lifted up to heaven

And yet Jesus the Son of Man also had to be God. Why? As it says in Isaiah 44:20, “man cannot save himself”. Because only God himself can save man – we are hopelessly fallen. Second, it was the divine Son of Man who was able to give the Holy Spirit to his followers after he ascended into heaven, the Holy Spirit who is with us still to encourage us, remind us of Jesus’ teaching and empower us to perform his miracles. So Jesus could fulfil his prophecy “I tell you the truth, anyone who has faith in me will do what I have been doing. He will do

even greater things than these” (John 14:12).” And third, as God, Jesus will be the judge of all mankind, at the end of time. This is the top of the ladder. In him the glory of heaven has come down to earth.

But also Jesus as Son of Man had to be both human and divine. And here the ladder is complete. Only as a human son of man could Jesus be our substitute sacrifice to die in our place on the cross. Only someone divine could bear all the sins of humanity – a finite creature could not have borne the penalty. He had to be both. The cross bridges the gap, as Isaiah’s servant, the suffering son of man. And there’s more. Because we were alienated from God by sin, we needed someone to come between God and ourselves, and bring him back to us. Only someone who is truly and fully God could be the mediator between God and man, to turn us back to God and reveal God more fully in us. But only someone who is fully man could represent us to God. And this is what Jesus does, as it says in Hebrews 7:25 “he is able to save completely those who come to God through him, because he always lives to intercede for them”.

We meet with Jesus the Son of Man again at the start of Revelation. John, now an old man, is on the Island of Patmos, in exile. But he encounters the risen Jesus as he now is, indeed like Daniel did 1:13-16 as “one like a son of man,” dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire.” John falls down in terror at the sight. And yet this mighty figure is also the gentle one who waits humbly for us to let him enter our hearts in 3:20 “I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me.” He is inviting us to put our trust in him, the Son of Man, suffering on his cross as the link from earth to heaven.

It occurs to me unless you’re a DIY-er you may not have been up a ladder lately. So let me finish with a different image. I want to help you to think with a different image. When I was in Frankfurt at the European Central Bank I used to be on the 27<sup>th</sup> floor of the building, and I had some really great views of the city, and of planes landing and taking off at the airport. And thanks to the lifts getting up there was a matter of seconds. But do you know how long it took to get down when there was a fire alarm? About 20 minutes! I didn’t count the steps but I reckon there were a good 1000 or so. As for climbing up the stairs, forget it! It would have left me drenched with sweat, if I didn’t get exhausted on the way. Hardly ready for a day’s work!

Likewise without a lift of sorts, reaching heaven is impossible for sinful mortals like us. Thankfully as the son of man Jesus is heaven’s lift. In Jesus, God descends to us, is fully human, dies in our place and we ascend to God. Because he is the son of man, both human and divine. Friends, Jesus, the Son of Man had come to pay for Nathanael’s sins at the cross and give him credit for his righteousness. What Jesus came to do for Nathanael, he did for all people. It’s sad then when you hear people insist that they’ll take the stairs to heaven instead of following Jesus – doing things in our own strength. They think they’re good people so everything will be fine. The Apostle James makes it clear that taking the stairs to heaven is not an option. James said that if we break one of God’s commands, we have broken them all (James 2:10). So no one is capable of reaching the top because “all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (Romans 3:23). The only way up is by faith in Jesus.

I wonder if there is anyone here who longs to know this Jesus, the one who met Nathanael telling of a Son of Man, who is mighty and humble, suffering and loving? Maybe you’ve been an honest doubter like Nathanael. But Jesus has seen you, in your garden, at the pub, at your workplace, in your highs and lows. And he loves you, as he loved Nathanael. He is knocking

today at the door of your heart. You just have to say this “Son of Man”, I open my heart to you. Be with me, as one who understands me totally, who loves me, who died for me, who speaks for me to God himself. Who, lifted up on his cross, is the ladder, the lift to heaven, which also brings heaven to earth. I put my trust in you.” It is time. As Jacob himself put it “Surely the Lord is in this place, and I was not aware of it.” But now you are aware, God is here. He’s saying, as he said to Jacob, “I am with you and will watch over you wherever you go” – if you put your trust in me. It’s time to respond to him, the Son of Man. He is calling you home.