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We Need the Son of Man

a sermon on Daniel 7:1-14

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You are probably wondering why in the world I chose such a bizarre passage for the sermon this morning. A lion with wings, a bear with a mouth full of ribs, a leopard with four heads, some kind of monster with ten horns and another little horn with eyes and a mouth that shouts blasphemies, a flaming throne with burning wheels ... it all reminds me of the witty comment: "It's not the parts of the Bible I don't understand that bother me; it's the parts I do — like love your neighbor and forgive your enemies." Why not pass by this bizarre zoo and preach about how to be a better person or how God helps us? You might think I just like the odd corners of the Bible, but you'd be off the mark. I do love to open the Bible to you and explain it, and all of it is important. Still, I would not tackle this passage without a good reason, and I have a very good reason. During Lent I am preaching on Pictures of Jesus in the Old Testament. This passage not only contains a picture of Jesus, it contains what was possibly Jesus' favorite picture of himself. No kidding. This passage was very important to Jesus, and that makes it worth our effort to explore.

Throughout all four gospels, Jesus refers to himself by a specific title. It isn't Messiah. It isn't Son of God. It is not Lord or Savior. He is all of those things, and he knew himself to be them. Nevertheless, he had a title he preferred above any other, and that's what he called himself: the Son of Man.

There is a lot that's odd about this title. First, it does not mean what you would expect. The Son of Man is not a title of humility that means "a human being." In the book of Ezekiel, Ezekiel is called "Son on Man" with this meaning; Ezekiel was a mortal man. Jesus does not mean that, however. He draws it from this passage, Daniel 7 (and we know that because of the times he talks about the Son of Man coming with the clouds of heaven and sitting on the right hand of God). In Daniel 7, the Son of Man is an exalted figure with divine authority. So "the Son of Man" is not a contrast to "Son of God." In the hymn "Fairest Lord Jesus" we use it that way. We sing of Jesus as "Son of God and Son of Man," meaning he is both divine and human. But when Jesus calls himself *the* Son of Man, that's not the point he's making. When he calls himself the Son of Man, he claims a heavenly, not an earthly, authority and destiny.

Second, this is the most common title for Jesus in the gospels after the name "Jesus." But, we find it only on the lips of Jesus. His disciples never call him that. What's more,

the church never picked this up and used it. In our hymns and creeds, we do not refer to Jesus as “the Son of Man,” the way he used it. Doesn’t that seem odd, that the church never used Jesus’ favorite term to describe himself? Bible scholar I. Howard Marshall offers some pretty good reasons why: The title “the Son of Man” was replaced by other titles that spoke the same truth with greater clarity, such as Son of God, Savior, and Lord. Understanding “the Son of Man” requires familiarity with Daniel 7, and so most non-Jews would have had no clue what it meant and would probably misunderstand it. This is a good reason not to start using it today, because who in our culture hears “the Son of Man” and thinks immediately of Daniel 7? I’d wager most of you did not before this sermon.

Anyway, it is an odd title, drawn from an odd passage of scripture, but it was very meaningful to Jesus, so we ought to understand it as best we can. Jesus called himself “the Son of Man.” What did he want us to know about him? To figure this out, we will have to look at Daniel 7, at first century Jewish expectations inspired by Daniel 7, and at what Jesus said. That’s a lot of meat for one sermon, but it will be fun.

We start with the heavenly vision of Daniel 7. If it reminded you of the book of the Revelation, that’s because they are the same kind of writing. We call it Apocalyptic writing, and this is a classic example. You have a heavenly vision, usually with bizarre and mysterious features, often followed by some sort of interpretation. The purpose of this kind of writing was to encourage people suffering persecution. Apocalyptic writing uses all these weird symbols to remind suffering believers that God is in charge. Even though they are suffering, and it looks as if evil has won, just you wait, because God is going to show up and do some smashing. Notice in Daniel 7 that the fourth beast is put to death and its body burned. The message is clear: Evil may have its day, but God wins. And when he does, he will give his people victory and bless them. The Revelation was written because the Roman Empire was persecuting Christians in the first century. Daniel 7 was written because the Greek heirs of Alexander the Great, who ruled Israel from Syria, were persecuting Jews in the 2nd century before Christ.

That is what’s going on in Daniel 7. The vision tells the story of God’s people suffering, but it provides an ending that had not yet happened. The four beasts represent the various empires that had ruled over Israel. The lion is Babylon; the bear, Media; the leopard, Persia; and the fourth beast, the monster, represents the Greeks, who conquered the Middle East under Alexander. The ten horns symbolize power and can represent the kings who hold that power. The little horn with the big mouth is a specific king, Antiochus IV, who ruled from 175 to 163 B.C. He was the one who started the persecutions. Like Hitler, he decided the world would be better off without Jews. He wanted to force them to convert to paganism. Torture and killing were his tools of choice. His evil sparked the Maccabean revolution, the success of which Jews still celebrate at Hanukkah.

So the nasty beasts are pagan empires. The little horn with the big mouth was the Hitler of his day. When we come to the heavenly throne, the symbolism becomes a bit more obvious. Who is the Ancient of Days? God. The middle of our passage offers a strong picture of God's rule. The most important part, for our purposes this morning, comes next. "I saw in the night visions, and behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man." Who is this figure, and what does he represent?

I want you to notice two key things: First, the figure is a creature that looks like a man. Just as the beasts looked like different animals, this figure resembles a human being. A contrast is being drawn, between the beastly nature of the earlier figures and the higher, more rational, more God-like nature of this one. Second, this son of man figure ascends from earth to heaven. This is clear in the text. He ascends *to* the Ancient of Days, who gives him an everlasting dominion. As for who this is, Daniel 7 explains it in verse 18. The first half of the chapter is the vision; the second half is the interpretation. "As for these four great beasts, four kings shall arise out of the earth. But the holy ones of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever."

So the figure who looks like a son of man, a human being, symbolizes the people of God. OK, but how do we get from this to the way Jesus used it to describe himself? One answer is: If the beasts could represent the kings who ruled those four empires, then the one like a son of man could represent the ruler of God's people.

Another answer is: This figure (one like a son of man) represents a story. It represents the story of the suffering and vindication of God's people. They would be trampled down, but God would raise them up. He would give them victory. Jesus believed that this was his story too. He would suffer. He would be trampled down. But the Father would vindicate him. This is why when the high priest questioned him at his trial, Jesus answered, "From now on the Son of Man will be seated at the right hand of the power of God" [Lk 22.69]. Notice that by this point, the Son of Man is an individual (Jesus) with divine authority. And notice too that they understood him very well. When he said this, they asked him, "Are you, then, the Son of God?" After his answer, they did not need further witnesses to condemn him on a charge of blasphemy.

Jesus turned the son of man figure in Daniel 7 from a symbol of God's people into a specific individual, but he was not the only one to do so. Other faithful Jews were looking for and hoping for a Savior they called the Son of Man. A writing called 4 Ezra read Daniel 7 as a prophecy of the coming Messiah. Another writing, called 1 Enoch, interprets the vision in Daniel 7 as Messianic prophecy. Here is just a sample: "This is the Son of Man, to whom belongs all righteousness ... the Lord of the Spirits has chosen him, and he is destined to be victorious ... [He] is the one who would remove the kings and the mighty ones from their comfortable seats and the strong ones from their thrones" [1 Enoch 46.3-6]. It goes on like that. Thus we know that in the first century, faithful Jews were reading Daniel 7 as the promise of a coming Savior who would

suffer, but God would give him victory, and he would establish God's kingdom and rule with everlasting dominion. Is it any wonder Jesus preferred this title? When people heard "Messiah" they thought of an earthly king who led armies. When they heard "Son of God" they wanted to pick up stones to kill the blasphemer. "The Son of Man" gave Jesus a way to talk about himself that told his story: the story of God's kingdom, of Jesus' suffering, and of his ultimate triumph and glory.

All this becomes clear when we listen to the things Jesus said about the Son of Man. Jesus used this title to talk about his authority. When he healed the paralytic, he said, "So that you may know that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins," he said to the paralytic, "I say to you, stand up, take your mat and go to your home" [Mk 2.10-11]. On another occasion he claimed, "The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath" [Mk 2.28]. In Daniel 7, the one like a son of man rules with divine authority. Jesus used this title to talk about his own authority, not just in the future but the divine authority he exercised during his ministry.

Jesus used the title to talk about his suffering and death. Before he headed to Jerusalem, "he began to teach his disciples that the Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and that he must be killed and after three days rise again" [Mk 8.31]. Last week, in my sermon about the Suffering Servant, I explained how Isaiah 53 shaped the way Jesus thought about himself and his mission. He went to Jerusalem knowing he would die. But he wasn't crazy. He understood his death to have a purpose: nothing less than the forgiveness of sin and the healing of the world. Just as that passage was working in his mind, so was Daniel 7. The vision is about the exaltation and glory of the one who suffered. In Daniel 7 the Son of Man ascends to heavenly glory with God. Jesus looked past his death to vindication and exaltation. His Father would raise him to glory. His favorite title pointed to that faith he had, the hope he had in the Father to exalt him after his humiliation.

Jesus also used the title to identify himself as the coming Savior and judge. He said, "The Son of Man will send out his angels, and they will weed out of his kingdom everything that causes sin and all who do evil" [Mt 13.41]. He also said, "I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on his glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel" [Mt 19.28]. In Daniel 7 God defeats evil and set the world right. Jesus understood that he has the crucial role to play in that. He is both Savior and judge, the One who defeats evil and sets things right.

If you survey the way Jesus uses the title "the Son of Man," you will find it throughout all four gospels. And you will find most of the uses fall into the three categories I have just outlined: Jesus' authority, his death and resurrection, and his future role as Savior and judge. You can see how each of these fits into the overall framework of Daniel 7,

where the one like a son of man suffers but then is exalted to divine glory and everlasting dominion. At this point I want to say that I see exactly where Jesus was coming from (I think). If I had to face the cross with all its pain and humiliation, I would cherish a picture that pointed to resurrection and glory on the other side. The title “the Son of Man” shows us both the humiliation and the glory.

OK, good. Now you know what the title “the Son of Man” is all about. When you are reading the gospels, which I am sure you do regularly and (pun intended) religiously, and you come across this title on the lips of Jesus, you will automatically think back to Daniel 7. You’ll say to yourself, “Oh yeah, I know why he’s saying that.” And this is a happy outcome for the time you have invested listening to this sermon. However, I dare not finish without asking the question that has been lurking in the back of your mind like a watchdog ready to bark: So what? So Jesus is the Son of Man? That’s good for him. What about me? What does this mean for my life today?

You know it is important because it is about Jesus. That gives it immediate relevance because he is the way to God – the only way to God. Only he has the power to give life. He is the Son of Man. You are not the Son of Man, and neither am I. But you know what? If you belong to Jesus Christ, then his story is your story. To put it another way, his life provides the basic outline for your life. He suffered. He died. God raised him up to glory and power. You suffer. You will die. If you belong to him, God will raise you up to glory and power. So this story we have seen in Daniel 7 and the gospels turns out to be your story too. And once you realize this, you have power.

Let me tell you about a guy I’ll call Wally. Wally was a safety-first Christian. He lived his faith cautiously. He affirmed his faith in Christ when it cost him nothing to do so. But if there was a price to be paid, even a small one, he wouldn’t stick his neck out. If he was at a party and the talk turned religious, he kept his mouth shut. He didn’t want to seem different. Anyone that shy about his faith naturally would not stand up and be counted when it mattered most. His faith in Jesus was like a secret he kept to himself most of the time, like a fragile ornament he was afraid would break. It made him feel good. It provided him a comforting sense of eternal security. But he never took a stand, never made a significant sacrifice. How do you think God felt about Wally? Jesus said, “If anyone is ashamed of me and my words, the Son of Man will be ashamed of him when he comes in his glory and in the glory of the Father and of the holy angels.”

Following Jesus makes us different. It demands sacrifices from us, big sacrifices. When the whole world seems to be rushing the other way, how can we swim against the stream? Where do we find the courage to stand up? How can we set aside self-interest and make the sacrifices God calls us to make? Following Jesus is hard if you do it right. And you want to do it right. You don’t want him to be ashamed of you. What inspires you to keep going when life keeps hammering you down?

The Son of Man! You look to Jesus, and you see in him your destiny. He suffered. God raised him up. You can suffer. You can pay the price of faithfulness. Because you know that God will raise you up. Jesus looked beyond the cross to the glory that awaited him. You can too. And that glory is not an escape from this world and its obligations; it is fuel to keep going. Jesus' hope for glory did not deter him from the cross. It strengthened him to face the cross.

People may think your faith is ridiculous. Antiochus IV would have laughed at Daniel 7. After all, Antiochus had an army and money and power. But God has the real power, and God always gets the last laugh. Jesus' enemies despised him. They made fun of him. Any fool could see he had no power, no future. They were wrong. In this world you may wonder what sense it makes to go on trusting in God, trusting him so much you do stick your neck out. Daniel 7 was right. Jesus was right. You are right, to go on trusting. Do not be afraid to live your faith. Believing in Jesus means you never have to be afraid. He is the Son of Man. Amen.

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