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THE ETERNAL WORD: GOD THE SON IN ETERNITY PAST

JOHN 1:1-3

Michael Reeves

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made” (John 1:1-3). It is often the case that familiar sentences are familiar because of how powerful or world-changing they have been. They are familiar because of how defining they are, and so it is here in John 1. These familiar words are revolutionary. They set Christianity gloriously apart from every other belief system.

The Eternal Word

John is simply exegeting Genesis 1. There in the very beginning in Genesis 1, we see how the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters. Why was He doing that? For the same reason He later hovered over the waters of the Jordan at the baptism of Jesus. The Spirit was there to anoint the Word as He went out to do His work. In creation and in salvation, in creation and in new creation, the Spirit anoints the Word, and so God speaks and, on His divine breath, His Word goes out. His Word goes out and light and life and all creation are brought into being.

It’s not that in the beginning the Word came into existence as creation came into existence (John 1:3). He is not a creature. No, here is a Word who was with God and who was God. Now, that alone tells us something quite unique, extraordinary, and simply delightful about this God. For it is not simply that here is

a God who *happens* to speak (the gods of most religions are said to speak at some point). No, this is a different claim.

It is of the very nature of this God to have a Word to speak. This God cannot be Wordless, for the Word is God. God cannot be without His Word. Here is a God who could not be anything but communicative, expansive, outgoing. Since God cannot be without this Word, here is a God who cannot be reclusive.

For eternity, this Word sounds out, telling us of an uncontainable God, a God of exuberance, of superabundance, an overflowing God, not needy but supremely full and overflowing: a glorious God of grace. Here is a God who loves to give Himself.

It is Genesis 1 that is dominant in John's mind as he wrote these opening verses. "In the beginning"; "the light shines in the darkness" (vv. 1, 5). And that helps us see that John has a Hebrew, scriptural idea of what "word" means. This is not a Hellenistic import on the faith.

But to appreciate a little more deeply what John meant when he wrote of the "Word," it's worth seeing something else from the Old Testament that seems to have been on his mind. Genesis 1 is dominant, to be sure. But in verse 14, John writes that the word "became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory." Here, John chooses an unusual verb to express what he means.

More literally, he writes that the Word "tented" or "pitched his tent" among us. And with this mention of glory, it seems clear that John is thinking of the tabernacle, the tent where the Lord would come and be with His people in the wilderness, and where His glory would be seen. As the Israelites saw the bright glory cloud filling the tabernacle, so the Word is where we see the glory of God. It is a surprising glory we see in the One who became flesh and dwelt among us. But in the humility of that One who had no pillow; in His humility, grace, righteousness, gentleness, and faithfulness; in the compassion of the One who went all the way to the cross—we see His glory, a glory unlike the glory of any other.

Now, in the innermost part of the tabernacle, the Holy of Holies, the Lord was described as being enthroned between the cherubim of the mercy seat on the Ark of the Covenant (Lev. 16:2; 1 Sam. 4:4). And inside that gold-plated ark/throne were kept the two tablets on which were written the ten "words" or commandments: the law, *the Word of God*. For the Israelites, it modeled the truth that the Word of God belongs in the presence, in the very throne, of God!

The Word of God, then, is the One who belongs in deepest, most essential closeness with God, and the One who displays the innermost reality of who God is. He is "the radiance of the glory of God and the exact imprint of his nature" (Heb. 1:3). For He Himself is God. He is God's "Amen, the faithful and true witness, the beginning of God's creation" (Rev. 3:14).

This was the subject of what was perhaps the greatest battle that the church fought in the centuries after the New Testament: to uphold the belief that Jesus truly is God, none other than the Lord God of Israel Himself.

That He is, as was enshrined in those stirring words of the Nicene Creed, “God from God, light from light, true God from true God, begotten not made, of one being with the Father.” Those doctrinal words are pastoral dynamite. The great Puritan theologian John Owen saw this with great clarity in his wonderful work *Communion with God*.¹ Owen explained in the first third of that book how so many Christians labor under the misapprehension that behind gracious Jesus, the friend of sinners, is some more sinister being, one thinner on compassion, grace, beauty, and goodness—one we would like to know less.

Owen pointed out that since Jesus is this Word, we can be rid of that horrid idea. *There is no God in heaven who is unlike Jesus*. One with His Father, He is the Word, the imprint, the expression, the radiance, the glory of who His Father is. If you’ve seen Him, you’ve seen His Father. And that means that through Christ, I know what God is truly like. Through Christ, I see how much this God detests sin. Through Christ, I see that, like the sinful, dying thief, a sinner like me can cry, “Remember me,” for I know how He will respond. Though I’m so spiritually lame, leprous, diseased, and dirty, I can call out to Him. For I know just what He is like toward the weak and sick.

Another great Puritan preacher, Stephen Charnock, once wrote,

Is not God the Father of lights, the supreme truth, the most delectable object. . . . Is he not light without darkness, love without unkindness, goodness without evil, purity without filth, all excellency to please, without a spot to distaste? Are not all other things infinitely short of him, more below him than a cab of dung is below the glory of the sun?²

Isn’t that the delight in God that we want for ourselves and for every believer? Here was a man besotted with God, a man who, through the gales and storms of life, seemed to carry this core of sunshine with him: his knowledge of God. But where did such gladness come from? Charnock could not have been plainer: true knowledge of the living God is found in and through Christ. But what we see in Christ is so beautiful it can make the sad sing for joy and the dead spring to life:

1. John Owen, *Communion with God* (Edinburgh: Banner of Truth, 1991).

2. Stephen Charnock, *The Complete Works of Stephen Charnock*, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: James Nichol, 1865), 91.

Nothing of God looks terrible in Christ to a believer. The sun is risen, shadows are vanished, God walks upon the battlements of love, justice hath left its sting in a Saviour's side, the law is disarmed, weapons out of his hand, his bosom open, his bowels yearn, his heart pants, sweetness and love is in all his carriage. And this is life eternal, to know God believingly in the glories of his mercy and justice in Jesus Christ.³

In Jesus Christ, we exchange darkness for light as we think of God. For, unlike all the idols of human religion, He perfectly shows us an unsurpassably desirable God, a righteous and kind God, a God who makes us tremble in awe and rejoice in wonder.

Another great pastoral benefit comes from verse 3: "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." Christ the eternal Word is the one through whom all things were made. But secular thinking in the West has eaten away at this like acid in the church. And it has left many Christians with the sneaking suspicion that while Jesus is a savior, He's not really the Creator of all. So they sing of His love on a Sunday—and *there* they feel it is true—but walking home through the streets, past the people and the places where real life goes on, they don't feel it is *Christ's* world. As if the universe is a neutral place, a secular place. As if Christianity is just something we have smeared on top of real life. And Jesus is reduced to being little more than a comforting nibble of spiritual chocolate, an option alongside other hobbies, an imaginary friend who "saves souls" but not much else.

The Bible knows of no such piffling and laughable little Christ. "All things were made through him, and without him was not any thing made that was made." Christians, therefore, cannot jettison this truth when we walk out into the world. Jesus Christ is the one "from whom are all things" (1 Cor. 8:6). He is the Word, the agent of creation who continues to uphold and sustain the creation He brought into being.

From the tiniest sea urchin to the brightest star, all things bear *His* magnificent stamp. The heavens cannot but declare *His* glory, for they are His craftsmanship, and they continue to hold together only in Him. His character is written into the grain of the universe so intimately that even to think against Christ the Logos you must think against logic and descend into folly—and so it is the fool who says in his heart, "There is no God" (Ps. 14:1). In His world, our faculties work better the more they are harnessed to faith in Him. Then we are able to be more

3. *Ibid.*, 163.

logical, more vibrant, more imaginative, and more creative, for we are working with the map of the universe as He made it.

The Eternal Son

But there is another eternal title of Christ that starts creeping into John's prologue.

In the first few verses, John focuses on the title "the Word." But he shifts from this in verse 12. "To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become *children of God*" (emphasis added). How so? "The Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only *Son* from the Father, full of grace and truth" (v. 14; emphasis added). Further, "No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known" (v. 18).

For as well as being God's eternal Word, this One is also God's eternal Son. In those titles, you can feel some of the difference of meaning. "Word" is a title that speaks more of His *oneness* with God, the fact that He *is* God; "Son" brings out the other sweet truth, that He has a real *relationship* with God His Father.

Once again, Christianity has something over every other belief system in the world. It is an infinitely superior truth that no human mind ever dreamed of. John is saying that God is eternally a Father loving His Son. (The Spirit John will teach about later.) Later, in John 17:24, he'll record Jesus saying, "Father . . . you loved me before the foundation of the world." Every other belief system in history has had either fundamental nothingness or fundamental chaos out of which everything has come, or else a god or gods who only want to throw their weight around. Such invented gods want servants or company, and that is their reason to create. But here in John's gospel, we see an entirely different God: an Almighty God who is love.

In his first epistle, John would write that "God *is* love" (4:8; emphasis added), for this God would not be who He is if He did not love. If at any time the Father did not have a Son whom He loved, then He simply would not be a Father. To be who He is, then, He must love. To be the Father *means* to love, to give out life, to beget the Son.

Now the eternal sonship of Christ is such a precious truth to Christians. And why that should be was proven well by Arius in the fourth century when he denied it. As Arius saw it, there once was a time when the Son was not. At some point, in other words, God had created the Son.

But here's how Arius saw God. It was obvious, he thought, that God wouldn't want to dirty His hands with creating a universe. So He created the Son to do that work for Him. First of all, that means that God is not eternally a Father, since

He doesn't eternally have a Son. In fact, He's not really a Father at all. There's the primary comfort of the Lord's Prayer gone up in a puff of philosophy.

Second, for Arius, it's not that the Father truly *loves* the Son; the Son was just His hired workman. And if the Bible ever spoke of the Father's pleasure in the Son, it can only have been because the Son had done a good job. That, presumably, is how to get in with Arius's God. No eternal Son, no Fatherly God, no gospel of grace.

There was also for Arius the problem of the Son's own motivation. Have Philippians 2 in mind, but then imagine that the Son was a creature who had never sat on the heavenly throne at the right hand of God. Now, why would He humble Himself from some exalted, semi-divine, angelic status in heaven? Why would He humble Himself down to the cross? What's His motivation?

His motivation must be that God would exalt Him to a heavenly glory He had never known before. So He's doing it for Himself. But that cannot be with the *eternal* Son. With the eternal Son, God is not using Him as hired help, and He's not using God to get heavenly glory. He's *eternally* been at the Father's side. He is the *eternally* beloved. His motivation was not to get for Himself a glory He had never had, but to *share* with us what He Himself had always enjoyed: sonship! To come to us and bring us in Him back to the exalted position He had always enjoyed with His Father.

And so who He is entirely shapes what it is He offers in the gospel. The person of Christ shapes the work of Christ and the nature of the gospel of Christ entirely. For the eternally beloved Son comes to us to share with us the very love that the Father has always lavished on Him. He comes to share with us and bring us into the life that is His, that we might be brought before the Most High—not just as forgiven sinners, not just as righteous, but as dearly beloved children sharing by the Spirit the Son's own "Abba!" cry. The Father's eternal love for the Son now encompasses us.

In verse 12 we read, "To all who did receive him, who believed in his name, [the Son] gave the right to become children of God." This is a theme that then gets woven throughout the rest of John's gospel. In verse 18, the Son is presented as being eternally "in the bosom of the Father," according to the ESV footnote. He has that closeness and deep intimacy with His Father. Later, in 17:24, Jesus declares that His desire is that believers might be with Him where He is. And that gets modeled for us at the Last Supper in John 13. There, we read, "One of his disciples, whom Jesus loved, was reclining at table at Jesus' side," or more literally, according to the footnote, "in the bosom of Jesus" (John 13:23).

Jesus has eternally been in the bosom of the Father, and John is now in the bosom of Jesus, which is why Jesus can say to the Father in John 17:23, "You . . . have loved them even as you have loved me" (NIV). For the greatest privilege of the

gospel—capping off our election, our calling, our forgiveness, our being clothed in righteousness, shaping our sanctification, shaping our glorification—is that the Son shares with us His own sonship, that we might be known as the children of God.

Without the eternal Son, you don't get that gospel! No eternal Son, no sonship. No eternal Son, no eternal Father. If God is not Father, He couldn't give us the right to be His children. If He did not enjoy eternal fellowship with His Son, then one has to wonder if He has any fellowship to share with us, or if He even knows what fellowship looks like. If, for example, the Son was a creature and had not eternally been "in the bosom of the Father," knowing Him and being loved by Him, then what sort of relationship with the Father could He share with us? If the Son Himself had never been close to the Father, how could He bring us close? He could not bring us to that "children of God" relationship.

With no eternal Son, we must see that God would be loveless and that salvation would look entirely different. Distant hirelings we would remain, never to hear the Son's golden words to His Father: "you . . . have loved them even as you have loved me" (NIV). But the gospel of the eternal Son gives us such intimacy and confidence before our Father in heaven. We are beloved children of the Most High!

There is no other God who can do that, to bring us so close, to have us so loved, to give us such an exalted status. No other God could so win our hearts. Only with this God can we say with all sincerity, "Our Father," knowing that we pray, as old John Calvin put it, as if it were through the mouth of Jesus.⁴

The Most High delights to hear us as His very children, and enjoys our prayers as sweet-smelling incense before Him. Only with this God—with the eternal Son—is prayer a delightful privilege.

And, once again, all of this means you've got a salvation that is of grace from first to last. If salvation is not about being adopted into the family of the Father, it's just not so clear that it has to be entirely of grace. We sometimes speak as if our only problem before God is that God is perfect in holiness and we are not. But if our only problem is that we're not good enough, we'll have to give it another go. We'll try to sort ourselves out and do better. But if salvation is to be adopted as children into the Father's family, then our performance is just not going to work, because you simply cannot earn your way into a family.

God's blessing is sonship (v. 12)—becoming a child of God—and so effort can do nothing to get you into the family. Your efforts can only make you a slave,

⁴ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 3.20.21.

and no amount of effort can make you a son. All our efforts to win God's salvation by our own strength will only produce slaves—slaves who inherit nothing. But sonship is free!

Five hundred years ago, the neglect of the eternal Son, and how His person and being shapes the gospel, was at the very heart of the problem in the church. The person of Jesus Christ, the Eternal Word and Son—His identity—did not shape and drive the gospel as people heard it. In medieval Roman Catholicism, Christ was only the delivery boy who brought us what we really wanted: “grace.”

And, like spiritual Red Bull for the lazy, this “grace” was the thing people really wanted. It was the thing they needed to give them the energy to go out and do the holy things that would earn them heaven. And so the prize for the believer was so often some “thing” other than Christ. The prize was so often heaven, not Christ. Jesus Christ had been reduced to being one little brick in the wall of that system. To be honest, it didn't even have to be Him who'd won grace in the first place. St. Nicholas or St. Barbara or St. Anyone could have done it.

Then, in the Reformation, the world heard a profoundly Christ-centered message: that God does not give us some “thing” called “grace” to energize us so we could earn heaven. No, God gives His Son, His Word who became flesh. And it is from His fullness that we receive grace upon grace. The Eternal Son: *He* is the gift from heaven. Verse 12 says, “to all who did receive *him* . . . he gave the right to become children of God” (emphasis added). It is in Him we find ourselves clothed with righteousness and justified. In Him, the Son, we are adopted as the children of God. And in Him, we are therefore saved. And because we are in Him, we are kept to the uttermost.

In Reformation thought, Christ is the treasure, Christ is our security. In Reformation thought, Christ is the jewel and the cornerstone of the gospel, giving it its shape and giving us a comfort and a joy that no gospel without Him could match. In Reformation thought, *solus Christus* was the center of the five solas, for it shaped what the Reformers meant when they talked about grace and faith.

Sola Gratia (“grace alone”): when the Reformers talked about salvation by grace alone, they meant not that we're given some “thing” called grace, but that we're given *Christ* by the gracious kindness of God.

Sola Fide (“faith alone”): faith is not some thing we do; it is the empty hand that receives Christ.

Sola Scriptura (“Scripture alone”): Scripture, our supreme authority, our deepest foundation, is about Him.

Soli Deo Gloria (“glory to God alone”): If you would know how to give God alone the glory, you would exalt Jesus Christ. For only through Christ is the living God glorified.

Let us preach Christ: Christ alone, the eternal Word, the eternal Son. For there is no gospel without Him. You can speak of grace, you can speak of faith, you can speak of hope, you can speak of the gospel, you can speak of grace alone. But there is no gospel if you do not preach Christ alone.

This is the center to which we must hold fast. Since we see in Him the radiance of God's glory, what better center is there to pledge ourselves to? In all our preaching, we preach Christ—Christ alone. We preach Him to ourselves, to His people, to the world. We preach His glorious person and His all-sufficient work, and that is what honors the Reformation. That is the beginning of all Reformation. This is what will reform lives and reform the church in our day. For when Christ alone is faithfully preached, the world will see His glory. That is the only light that will drive out and overcome all darkness.

SON OF GOD AND SON OF MAN

MATTHEW 26:63–64

Paul Twiss

Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo? Deny thy father and refuse thy name; or, if thou wilt not, be but sworn my love, and I'll no longer be a Capulet. . . 'Tis but thy name that is my enemy: thou art thyself, though not a Montague. What's Montague? It is nor hand, nor foot, nor arm, nor face, nor any other part belonging to a man. Oh, be some other name. What's in a name?" Familiar words from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, a tale of two star-crossed lovers whose relationship is hindered by virtue of their names. In this short excerpt, Juliet's frustration is evident as she proclaims the supposed trivial nature of a name. She goes on to say, "A rose by any other name would smell as sweet," suggesting, therefore, that neither people nor objects derive their value or their worth by the title by which they're called.

"What's in a name?" she asks, and if we think about it, we may empathize with her confusion. Her logic seems reasonable. Indeed, the whole play revolves around two families that are feuding on the basis of their names. It seems irrational. If it weren't for their names, these two may have enjoyed blissful matrimony. But as we take a step back and consider Shakespeare's point of view, we see that maybe he disagreed.

You see, Shakespeare is ultimately in charge of the script. He is in charge of the narrative, and it is not long after this scene that both lovers' lives end in tragedy. It is as if Juliet is asking, "What value is there in a name?" and Shakespeare replies, "Very much, my dear. You will lose your life on account of it."

As we consider the biblical text and specifically the gospel, we do well to realize that often, specific events, teachings, and interactions are purposefully structured around a name. The trial of Jesus is one example (Matt. 26:57–68). It is significant as it presents a climax to the tension that has been prevalent throughout the gospel story between Christ and the authorities. In this charged situation, we find two of the most Christologically significant titles used for Jesus coming together. Jesus is asked, “Are you the Son of God?” which He affirms, “Yes, you have said that it is so.” Then He goes one step further and says, “And I am the Son of Man.” In response, the authorities call out for His death (vv. 63–66, paraphrase). Therefore, the question must be asked as to the meaning of these two names and the significance of them coming together. That is what we will think about in this chapter.

The Interconnectedness of the Bible

In order to gain a right understanding of these titles, we must go beyond the borders of this scene. Indeed, we must go beyond the borders of the gospel. It is true that up until this point, “Son of God” and “Son of Man” have occurred many times in the narrative, and it is also true that both have occurred many times in the Old Testament. Thus, we can trace out story lines relating to both the Son of God and the Son of Man that develop through the Old Testament. These story lines imply that by the time we get to the Gospels, we see Jesus drawing from a pre-established body of theology when He uses these two titles. He is tapping into the story lines that exist in the Hebrew Scriptures.

Before considering these two story lines, let me first offer a word on methodology. What we are considering here is what can be referred to as the interconnectedness of Scripture. We have sixty-six books, yet they are interconnected, relating to one another. The way I picture this is to think of those sixty-six individual volumes on a library shelf, and you pull off one book—say, Romans. As you pull Romans off the shelf, what you see is that there is actually a piece of string passing through Romans to the other books of the Bible. In fact, when you look closely, you see many pieces of string passing through one book to all the other books, so much so that it is not possible to pull one book off the shelf alone. To rightly and fully study it, you have to pull all of them off the shelf because the Bible is interconnected.

Why must we rightly consider all of these connections to get to a full understanding of the text? To answer that question, we must think about the Bible’s authorship both from a divine and a human perspective. We affirm that God wrote the Scriptures. He is the ultimate author of the Bible. Thus, we expect that

there are no theological contradictions. But more than that, as we think about the fact that the Bible tells a story of redemption from Genesis to Revelation, we can consider how the story is told.

As an author communicates a narrative and develops a plot, he does so by way of connections—by way of overlap—from one scene to the next. He employs conceptual and thematic links in order to tell and develop the story. We know this to be true from our everyday experience. When we watch a movie, the director does not feel the need to continually explain every aspect of the plot because he assumes that we are able to make connections. We build a cumulative understanding of characters and themes as the movie progresses. The same is true of the biblical text.

Considering the issue from the human perspective, the Bible is comprised of sixty-six books. It has one ultimate author, God, and many human authors. But how was the Bible written? How did we reach this final product? Picture the community of God's people gathered around the Scriptures. The text is being read out loud day after day. The words, the thoughts, the concepts are slowly working their way into the minds of the audience. Then God raises up another man to add to the canon. As this new author puts pen to parchment, the words, concepts, and ideas of the previous Scriptures are already in his mind. They have already shaped his worldview. Indeed, we can say that to some degree, what he is about to write has already been determined by what came before. More than that, in order to be clear to that audience, the author would intentionally draw on that with which they were familiar—namely, the Scriptures they had already heard.

This is how the inspired text was birthed. The Bible is inherently interconnected. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to study it in this way. We must always ask how a particular text may be pulling on previous texts. As we think about "Son of God" and "Son of Man," often these two titles are said to refer simply to Jesus' deity and humanity. But if we think about the Bible's interconnectedness, we start to see that those simple definitions do not provide the complete picture.

Jesus as Son of God

Concerning the Son of God story line, we must begin in Genesis 1. Though the narrative is familiar, we must not miss the driving momentum that exists in this chapter toward day six. Day six presents the pinnacle of God's creation as He creates mankind. We see the author's emphasis by virtue of the fact that there is more space given to the sixth day than any other day. We also find the divine plural "let us," which is not found in any other day. And by virtue of the fact that the sixth day is the last creative act, we understand that mankind is the pinnacle of the created order.

We see in verse 26 that God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” Now, although Adam is not explicitly referred to as a son of God here, we can infer that this is the language of sonship. He is created in some way to be like the Creator. He imitates God, just as many men and women have sons or daughters that look like them or have similar mannerisms. Then we see in Genesis 5, according to the interconnectedness of Scripture, a repetition of this language: “When God created man, he made him in the likeness of God . . . when Adam had lived 130 years, he fathered a son *in his own likeness, after his image*” (vv. 1, 3; emphasis added). It would seem that the language found back in Genesis 1 is the language of sonship. This is then confirmed for us when we think about the genealogy in Luke 3. Luke traces the lineage of Jesus Christ all the way back to Adam and he finishes the genealogy by saying, “Adam, the son of God” (Luke 3:38). Adam is the very first son of God.

What does it mean to be a son of God? Sonship means privilege. Adam is made in the image and likeness of God. He is unlike anything else in the created order. He receives a unique privilege. But sonship also entails responsibility. In Genesis 1:28, we read that God told them to be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth, subdue it, and have dominion over it. Sons of God have a responsibility as vice regents and representatives of God to subdue the earth and fill it.

Bringing together the privilege and responsibility, we might sum up what it means to be a son of God by saying that he was to mediate God’s person to the created order. He is made in the image and likeness of God, and he was to fill the earth and rule over it as a vice regent of God. He was to mediate God to creation.

The son of God story line continues when, in Genesis 3, he fails. One of the beasts of the field usurped man’s authority, and Adam sins. He scorns his privilege; he fails in his responsibility. As a result, this crisis initiates a search for another son of God, one who would embrace the privilege and fulfill the responsibility, one who would succeed in mediating God to the created order.

The next manifestation of a son of God is in Exodus. It is interesting to note that the Exodus narrative is described in terms of light and darkness, the dividing of waters, and the emergence of dry land. These are linguistic triggers that point us back to a previous event. In accordance with the interconnectedness of Scripture, Genesis 1 already employed these terms to describe the creation event.

There are many observations that could be made regarding this connection, but in terms of sonship we simply note that God’s creative work in Genesis gave rise to a son. Thus, as we engage in a close reading of the Exodus narrative and see these terms occurring a second time, we should anticipate a son.

Sure enough, that is exactly what we find. In Exodus 4:22, God says, “Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, ‘Let my son go that he

may serve me.” Israel is a son of God. Indeed, in accordance with the interconnectedness of Scripture we can infer the theology of sonship from Genesis onto the nation of Israel. They have inherited the privilege and the responsibility. They have the mandate to mediate God to the world. As such, we find in Exodus 1:7 that they were already behaving like a son: “The people of Israel were fruitful and increased greatly; they multiplied and grew exceedingly strong, so that the land was filled with them.” That echoes Genesis 1:28.

Now, in the transition from Adam to Israel, there is a significant detail that must not be overlooked. Until this point, sonship has worked out on an individual level. But when you get to Exodus, the son of God becomes a corporate body, a nation. From now on, the mission of the son of God takes on a nationalistic force. From now on, the mediation of God’s person to the created order will be achieved not simply by a man to the created order, but by a nation to the nations.

Tragically, just as with Adam, Israel failed in the task. God gave them the law, but they did not obey it. We see in the book of Judges that the people behaved as pagans in the Promised Land. The implication of this was that there was zero international interest in Israel at that time. Nobody wanted anything to do with Israel at the time of the Judges. There was no mediation of God to the nations. So the search continues. The world is in need of another son of God.

We move forward in the story line to 2 Samuel 7 and the Davidic covenant. God answers the issue of Judges—the absence of a king—by raising up a monarch who is beloved of the Lord. He establishes a covenant with him, which becomes the channel through which He accomplishes His purposes in redemptive history. And in the context of that covenant, we find the language of sonship. “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son” (2 Sam. 7:14). Thus, as we move forward in the story line, we shift back from corporate to individual. More specifically, we move from nation to king. This transition doesn’t nullify the sonship of Israel, but it simply complements it because a nation needs a king, and a king needs a kingdom. Further, we now have the establishment of a relationship whereby when the individual son of God, the Davidic King, succeeds and mediates the person of God to the nation of Israel, then the corporate son of God, Israel, will succeed and mediate God’s presence to the nations. When the king flourishes, the nation will follow. However, David fails. He commits adultery with Bathsheba. He sets the Davidic house into disarray, which in turn sets the nation of Israel into disarray. Because of David’s adultery, the nation of Israel takes its first step towards exile.

There are many more passages where sonship theology is in view, but as we go back to Matthew, we understand that it is no small question when Jesus is asked, “Are you the Son of God?” Notice at this point the collocation of terms, “Tell us

if you are the Christ, the Son of God.” Christ means “Messiah.” Messiah means “Anointed.” Anointed, in this case, refers to the Davidic King. My paraphrase would be, “Are you the Davidic King, the Son of God?” Jesus says, “Yes.” He affirms that He is the Davidic King, the Son of God who has come to reign over them. He affirms that He will mediate the person of God to them, causing Israel to flourish and the nations to turn to Him. This confession has global implications. It is quite some claim for a carpenter from Nazareth.

At this point, we could ask the question, how is it that Jesus can be a son of God who does not fail? How does He succeed where all previous sons failed? The answer to the question is that He is God the Son. He can be the incarnate Son who does not fail because He is the Son Eternal.

So What?

We live in a consumer-driven culture. The appetite for consumerism that we see in society bleeds into the church, such that on a Sunday morning, people want to be told three things to do in their life that coming week. They want some advice to consume; they want “application.” While it is by no means wrong to give practical instruction from the Word of God, at the same time, we have a unique opportunity to simply preach the glory of Christ. We have a unique privilege to show people the riches and the profundity of the gospel. And we trust that as we simply set forth this Man in all of His beauty, splendor, and excellences, people’s hearts will be led to worship. And as people are led in worship of this Man, we also trust that other more “practical,” more “pressing” issues will begin to drop into place. That is to say, we will live wisely when we worship well.

Jesus as Son of Man

Jesus is not content to stop with simply acknowledging that He is the Son of God. He augments the confession. He goes further and essentially says, “I’m not only the Son of God but I am also the Son of Man.” This leads us to a second story line in the Bible.

In accordance with the interconnectedness of Scripture, we turn again all the way back to the book of Genesis. Without rehearsing the narrative a second time, we do well to remember that when man was created, he was taken from the earth. There is an intrinsic connection between us and the ground. Thus, when we arrive at Genesis 3, we see that as Adam turned his back on God, he did not simply cause mankind to fall but caused the whole created order to fall. When Adam sinned and fell, he pulled down the cosmos with him. The stars in the sky do not shine today as they once did. The seas, oceans, rivers, the rocks,

and mountains do not praise God today as they did once upon a time. The most beautiful scene that we could find on planet Earth is but a faded sepia image of the universe before the fall.

With that in mind we see in Genesis 11 the very first occurrence of the phrase “sons of men” (NASB). We also note in Genesis 11 how the narrative is intentionally crafted in such a way so as to point us back to Genesis 1–3. There are many words that are taken from those first few chapters of Genesis—we read of the heaven (11:4), of all the earth (11:1), of the east (11:2), of building and making (11:3, 4, 5) and naming (11:9), and of the divine plural again (11:7).

Further, we see the theme of filling the earth, though in a negative sense. In Genesis 11, these men basically say, “Let us build a tower to make a name for ourselves—so that we won’t be dispersed.” These men are refusing to obey the mandate to go and fill.

Thus, if we step back and consider the big picture, we see that Genesis 11 functions as a second fall narrative. Genesis 1–2 give the creation account; chapter 3 records the fall; chapters 4–6 tell of the explosion of sin; chapters 7–10 report the flood, that God starts over and recreates; and then in Genesis 11, we see mankind turning its back on its Creator—again. The Tower of Babel incident brings us right back to square one. It is the fall, take two.

It is important to realize that this is the context for the first use of the phrase “sons of men.” The narrator wants us to connect these people with their father, Adam. Indeed, more literally translated, the sons of men are the sons of Adam. They are the offspring of the one who caused all of creation to come tumbling down. What characterizes them is their fallen nature—their sin and transgression. And as you trace this phrase throughout the Old Testament, you find that it always fits this picture. Sometimes the sons of men are portrayed as lost, helpless, weak, and in need of salvation. Other times they are spoken of as rebellious and wicked, those who turn their back on God. In every case, the sons of men are characterized as those who epitomize the fallen nature of humanity and, by implication, the whole universe.¹

Then we arrive at Ezekiel. His ministry provokes curiosity because God calls Ezekiel “son of man” time and again throughout the book. But when properly considered, we might think this is illogical. Ezekiel the man isn’t characterized by wickedness. He seems to be a good guy. He has been training his whole life for the priesthood, and then God raised him up to be a prophet. He seems to be pursuing righteous conduct, and yet somehow God calls him “son of man.” How do we relieve this tension? The answer comes by thinking through the nature of

¹ Chrys C. Caragounis, *The Son of Man* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2011), 57.

Ezekiel's ministry. Ezekiel was a prophet who more than any other prophet not only spoke the words of God but also acted them out. He not only delivered the oracles of God but also embodied them.

We see in Ezekiel 1–2 that he falls flat on his face as though he were dead, but the Spirit enters him and puts him on his feet. This is a picture of the salvation that Israel will soon receive in chapter 37. In chapter 4, Ezekiel lies on his side for 490 days, and then for 40 days he builds a siege work, sets his face against it, eats the bread of the siege, drinks the water of the siege, cuts his hair and beard, and loses his wife—all of it so as to act out to hard-hearted Israel the judgment that was coming upon them.

Throughout the book, Ezekiel functions like a miniature Israel. Thus, we can say that he assumes an intermediary role. Ezekiel represents the people. He stands before them and identifies with them. God calls him “son of man” not because he is characteristically wicked but because he represents the sons of men. As such, in the son of man story line, Ezekiel indicates an important shift—God's designation for him demonstrates that the term has taken on a representative function.

That then takes us to the culmination and the completion of son of man theology in the Old Testament: the book of Daniel. Daniel presents a schema for salvation from the exile to the end of redemptive history. Daniel 7 is the centerpiece of the book and theological linchpin. Salvation history can be understood by what happens in this chapter. In verse 2, Daniel says, “I saw in my vision by night, and behold, the four winds of heaven was stirring up the great sea.” Verse 3 then reads, “Four great beasts came up out of the sea.” Now, why did Daniel talk about four earthly, human kings in terms of beasts coming up out of the created order? The answer, in part, is in order to lock our thinking into a creation-type paradigm. We have already read of beasts coming up out of the created order back in Genesis 1. So it is no accident that Daniel describes four earthly human kings in terms of beasts arising from the earth. He wants us to be thinking through a lens of creation, through a lens of Genesis 1–3.

It is with this context established that we work through the logic of the vision. Here we see four arrogant, wicked earthly kings rising up, grasping for power that is not rightly theirs, working against God and ultimately being destroyed (Dan. 7:4–10). Then in verses 13–14 we read, “behold, with the clouds of heaven there came one like a son of man, and he came to the Ancient of Days and was presented before him. And to him was given dominion and glory and a kingdom, that all peoples, nations, and languages should serve him; his dominion is an everlasting dominion, which shall not pass away, and his kingdom one that shall not be destroyed.” The question becomes, how does this son of man fit into the

larger son of man story line that we have traced out so far? We must pay attention to the details. He is not actually described as a son of man but as one *like* a son of man. That one word in the Aramaic bears much theological weight. He is like a son of man, which means there are some ways in which this Son of Man is similar to the previous sons of men. But he is also dissimilar.²

Considering the points of dissimilarity and returning back to the creation metaphor that Daniel has established in verses 2–3, we remember that in Genesis 3, a beast of the field usurped man’s authority and triumphed. In Daniel 7, the beasts of the field try and try but they cannot usurp man’s authority. In Genesis 3, the beasts win; in Daniel 7, the Son of Man wins. Thus, the first point of dissimilarity is that this Son of Man reverses the fall narrative. He wins and succeeds where the first man failed.

We might ask how this Son of Man succeeds where all others failed. Notice that the Son of Man travels on the clouds of heaven (7:13). In ancient Near Eastern thought, anyone traveling on clouds was understood to be deity. Notice also that in the same verse, this Son of Man comes face-to-face with the Ancient of Days. No one has ever seen God and lived, and yet here is one who stands before Him. Finally, notice that He receives worship and an honor that is normally reserved for God (7:14). This, then, is the second point of dissimilarity: this Son of Man is divine. And that explains how He succeeds in reversing the fall narrative.

What are the results of His success? This question brings us to a point of similarity. The first thing to observe is that He is a man. He is somehow divine, but we see that He is also described as a human being—a son of man. More than that, in accordance with Ezekiel’s son of man, this one represents others. We see that most clearly as we look at the second half of chapter 7, which is the explanation of the vision. It is interesting to note that, when you read through the second half of chapter 7, the Son of Man is nowhere mentioned. He is so key to the theology of the vision and to the whole book, and yet He is not mentioned in its explanation. By contrast, we see that the saints of the Most High are in view (Dan. 7:25, 27). They are the ones who receive the kingdom. The reason Daniel can interchange one for the other is because they are so tightly connected. The King reigns over His people and as He succeeds, so they are led in victory. This Son of Man is representing the sons of men.

Furthermore, remembering that the sons of men come from the ground, the Son of Man’s ministry has implications for the created order. His success—triumphing

² I owe this observation and the subsequent discussion to Abner Chou, *I Saw the Lord: A Biblical Theology of Vision* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2013), 142.

over the beast of the field where Adam failed—means not only that the sons of men now succeed but also that the cosmos is redeemed.

Returning then to Jesus' confession at His trial: His double proclamation—that He is the Son of God and the Son of Man—is the Christological climax of the gospel narrative so far. He is basically saying, "In every way that you might conceive, I am the centerpiece of redemptive history. For Israel, yes, and for the whole universe." And understanding the implications of this confession, the authorities cry out for His death.

Son of Man *and* Son of God?

The only question that remains then is: What is the significance of the two terms being brought together? Is there a relationship between Son of Man and Son of God that is in view at the trial scene? In response, we note that this is not the first time the two titles have been paired together. Indeed, when we read the Gospels closely, we see an interplay between the Son of God and Son of Man woven throughout. Often, there are confessions in the gospel narrative that Jesus is the Son of God, the Son of the Most High, the Son of the Blessed One, to which Jesus replies not by teaching them about the Son of God, but by teaching them about the Son of Man. For example, Jesus asks, "Who do you say that I am?" Peter replies, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." And in turn Jesus does not say, "Let me tell you about that Son of God." Rather, He essentially says, "The Son of Man has to suffer" (Matt. 16:15–23). The gospel authors have already brought these two titles together in the narrative on several occasions.³

The probable significance of their being brought together—at the trial and elsewhere—is that the fulfillment of one is contingent upon the fulfillment of the other. Specifically, the mediation of God to the nations through the Son of God is the means by which the Son of Man's cosmic reconciliation can happen. Or to put it another way, it is because Jesus succeeds as the Son of God that He can also succeed as the Son of Man. Like a domino effect, one precipitates the other.

Conclusion

Do not be content to rehearse a message the profundity of which you have not sorted out. Rather, give yourself to every word of the text and understand that in the names of Christ, in the corners of the narrative, in all of the details, there is a glory and a richness that we can spend eternity delighting in, meditating upon,

³ Seyoon Kim, *The Son of Man as the Son of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 1–5.

and preaching to others. Further, work diligently to communicate the story line of Scripture. We must understand the inherent interconnectedness of every single text. We must do the hard work of seeking out those connections and understanding rightly the meaning that is built into them. We must labor to show people the drama of redemptive history as it has been given to us from Genesis through Revelation, knowing that we showcase God's glory when we show them the bigger picture.