

Isaiah 64:1–3 (NIV)

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down,
that the mountains would tremble before you!

²As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil,
come down to make your name known to your enemies
and cause the nations to quake before you!

³For when you did awesome things that we did not expect,
you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.

Daniel 7:13–14 (NIV)

¹³“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. ¹⁴He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all nations and peoples of every language worshiped him. His dominion is an everlasting dominion that will not pass away, and his kingdom is one that will never be destroyed.

John 1:48–51 (NIV)

⁴⁸“How do you know me?” Nathanael asked.

Jesus answered, “I saw you while you were still under the fig tree before Philip called you.”

⁴⁹Then Nathanael declared, “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the king of Israel.”

⁵⁰Jesus said, “You believe because I told you I saw you under the fig tree. You will see greater things than that.” ⁵¹He then added, “Very truly I tell you, you will see ‘heaven open, and the angels of God ascending and descending on’ the Son of Man.”

God came down for our sake and our response is offered on our knees.

There are many dramatic moments in Scripture, but few are more so than the arrival of the Israelites at Mt. Sinai after their flight from Egypt. When they come to the mountain of God, the Lord descends upon the mountaintop (Exodus 19). Thunder and lightning are the visible manifestations of God’s presence with his people; God has come to meet with his people. Later, before the Israelites leave the mountain, God would come to the tabernacle the people had built for God. We’re told that God so filled the tent that Moses couldn’t enter it (Exodus 40:35).

Sadly, such intense moments with God would not characterize the centuries ahead. Rather, the story of the Israelites would be told in their unending idolatry, not in their devotion to the Lord God. And they reaped terrible consequences for their prideful commitment to pursuing their own way, for doing what seemed right in their own eyes. Little wonder then that the psalmist cries out to God, “Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down . . .” (Psalm 47:1 above). Surely the psalmist never imagined that one day the Lord God Almighty would come down . . . in the flesh.

In the flesh

If nothing else, John’s prologue to his gospel makes clear to the reader that, indeed, God has come down in the flesh. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. . . . The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us” (John 1:1, 14).

The Word, this man Jesus from Nazareth, is the one to whom John the Baptizer points and proclaims, “Behold, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world” (John 1:29). And Jesus quickly begins to gather disciples around himself. He begins with Andrew, who goes to get his brother Simon. After returning to Galilee, Jesus calls Philip. Philip then goes to get Nathanael, who seems quite skeptical of the whole thing. Philip has told him that Jesus is the one they’ve been looking for, the one pointed to by

the Law and the prophets. When Nathanael hears that this man is from Nazareth, he scoffs, as if to say, “That dump!?” Nonetheless, he joins Philip and the others.

When Jesus sees Nathanael coming, he declares him to be a what-you-see-is-what-you-get kind of guy. But when Nathanael asks how Jesus could possibly know him, Jesus reveals that he was able to see Nathanael earlier when he was sitting under a fig tree, when that just didn’t seem possible.

It is all too much for Nathanael. Despite his earlier skepticism, he addresses Jesus as *rabbi*, and pronounces him to be the Son of God, the king of Israel. For Nathanael, the phrases “son of God” and “king of Israel” are messianic, two ways of saying the same thing. As John’s gospel proceeds, it becomes clear that “Son of God” with respect to Jesus means far more than “merely” Messiah, but Nathanael can’t have in mind any sort of Trinitarian pronouncement.

And just when we think that we’ve heard it all, Jesus tells Nathanael that he will see “greater things than that . . . you will see ‘heaven open and the angels of God ascending and descending’ on the Son of Man” (John 1:51). Using powerful imagery from the story of Jacob’s ladder (Genesis 28:10-22) and from Daniel 7, Jesus tells Nathanael all that he needs to know in order to grasp what he will soon see and hear and experience as Jesus’ disciple.

The Son of Man?

But what could Jesus mean referring to himself as “the Son of Man”? For the answer to that question we have to turn to the book of Daniel, which was very popular and influential in Jesus’ day, for good reason. Daniel is about the faithfulness of God toward those who remain faithful to God in the face of intimidation and threats. Daniel is set in Babylon during the exile. Daniel and his friends refuse to accommodate their faith in the Lord God to the culture and religion of the Babylonians. They stay resolute. Through God’s intervention, Daniel’s friends are rescued from the fiery furnace and Daniel isn’t eaten by lions after being tossed in their den.

The Romans were the “Babylonians” of first-century Judea. It was Roman soldiers who stood guard over the temple during the big Jewish festivals. It was Roman governors who desecrated the temple from time to time.

This is all pretty straightforward, but to understand “Son of Man,” we have to go to the second half of Daniel, which presents us with a problem. The writing is apocalyptic, like most of Revelation and makes little sense to us.

The authors of apocalypses, and there were many at this time, used a style of writing that was very popular among the Jews in the centuries around the time of Jesus. Such writing brought out big cosmic scenes, investing them with striking and often mysterious images and symbols. Many Jews expected God to do something *BIG* and the apocalyptic style fit those expectations.

Thus, Daniel 7 opens with beasts rising out of the chaotic seas that are ready to “devour much flesh.” Whose flesh? Israel’s of course. Who is the beast? The readers of Jesus’ day would surely cry out “Caesar!” God’s people must be doomed. Right? These mighty empires could overrun and wipe out the Jews any time they wanted to.

But there is more to this world than what can be seen or heard. So, in verse 9, we are taken to the throne room of God, where the Ancient of Days sits on his throne and judges the beasts, powerful horns and all. And, we see that someone like a human being, a “Son of Man,” is coming with the heavenly clouds toward the throne, where he will be given honor, glory, and dominion over all creation. Who is this Son of Man, whose rule will be “an everlasting one”? Who? . . . *Who?*

Who has been given dominion over all creation? Who is this Son of Man upon whom the angels ascend and descend? Who has come to us in the flesh? It is Jesus, plain and

simple . . . Mary's boy. The Word has been made mortal flesh and given lordship of all creation. From whatever direction we look, we see that God has indeed opened the heavens and come down. So, yes, we fall on our knees.

Daily Bible Readings

This week: *More on the Son of Man in John 1*

Monday, Genesis 28:10-22 The story of Jacob's dream about a ladder connection heaven and earth.

Tuesday, Isaiah 42:5-6 & 49:6 Israel (the people of God) is to be the light to the world.

Wednesday, Matthew 5:13-16 Jesus is the true light that banishes the darkness.

Thursday, John 6:25-59. Jesus, the Son of Man, is the bread of life.

Friday, Luke 17:20-37 Jesus speaks of the Son of Man (himself) and the coming of the kingdom of God using dramatic, almost apocalyptic language.

Saturday, Revelation 1 See esp. v. 13. Again, Jesus is "one like the Son of Man."

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the gospel of John.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

This class will not meet on December 25

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Samuel.

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

This class will not meet on December 26

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

December 10: Class pot-luck.

Next week we resume *The First Days of Jesus*