

Series Theme: The Names of Jesus

Title: Jesus as Son of God

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Memory Verse: The disciples worshipped him. “You really are the Son of God,” they exclaimed. Matthew 14:33

Summary: “Son of God” has a very different meaning to Christians than it did in Jesus’ time. It was a title of honor but not carrying with it any indication of being divine. Jesus used this title for himself rarely; however both Satan and some demons called Jesus by this title. The people around him at his crucifixion used it in a mocking way. Our lesson is to use our talents to further God’s plans.

The First Scripture Lesson: Luke 4:1-12

The Second Scripture Lesson: John 10:24-38

Grace to you and peace from the One who is and who was and who is to come.

This morning we are going to take a look at another name that Jesus was known by – Son of God. Christians probably think this is a “no-brainer” – of course, Jesus is the Son of God – Jesus is the second part of the Trinity. But Son of God appears several times in the New Testament and it is used by several different beings. And the Christian meaning it carries today is different than in Jesus’ time.

The angel who visited Mary to tell her of the role she would play in the birth of Jesus told her that her son would be very great and would be called the Son of the Most High (Luke 1:32). We don’t know if Mary told Jesus as he was growing up what the angel had told her – we have no evidence that she did.

We do know that Jesus remained in Nazareth living a rather quiet life, helping his father in his carpentry business, until he began his ministry when he was about 30 years old. He first went to his cousin John to be baptized as a sign to himself and others that he was a changed person – no longer a quiet carpenter from Nazareth but instead an itinerant preacher, teacher, healer, and prophet, following the call of God.

For Jesus his baptism must have been a life-changing experience. John the Baptist knew his cousin was favored by God. He also knew he, John, was not the expected Messiah but rather the one who was prophesied to come before. John was willing to do as Jesus asked, baptizing this special man in the Jordan River.

But scripture tells us that this baptism was not usual. We believe that God is present at all baptisms, but God played an amazing role in Jesus' baptism. God spoke at this baptism, and it is likely that Jesus was the only one who heard the words – ***You are my beloved Son, and I am fully pleased with you.*** (Mark 1:11) We must wonder how Jesus understood these words – that he was God's Son. If he understood the heavenly voice as defining him and pointing him toward his ministry, what did this mean? He didn't have long to ponder this question.

As soon as Jesus was baptized, scriptures tell us that Jesus went out into the wilderness to be tempted by Satan, aka the devil. This was our first reading. Did you catch what Satan called Jesus? Son of God. Jesus at this time had done nothing since he had not yet even begun his ministry. He hadn't turned the water into wine at the wedding in Cana, he hadn't healed anyone or brought anyone back to life. He had not yet preached the Sermon on the Mount. In other words, Jesus had not done anything to "earn" the title Son of God. Yet the devil called him this throughout their encounter.

In this passage most translations use the phrase – If you are the Son of God – and that is what it says, but there is a shade of meaning that is lost in translation. In Greek, the language of most of the New Testament, the word "if" can also mean "since." This "since" meaning leaves no room for an answer of anything but "yes." This does change the emphasis of the devil's question – it's not ***if*** you are the Son of God – rather it is ***since*** you are the Son of God. That makes it a completely different question. This gives me a whole different perspective on their meeting. Satan wanted Jesus to decide how he was going to use the special power he had as Son of God. Would Jesus be willing to use his powers as Son of God to minister to his own needs – using his special abilities to provide food, bring him power and influence, and to call on angels for help?

Perhaps Satan knew that the divine part of Jesus' nature was off limits to him – since in an encounter with God, Satan wouldn't have a chance. But since Jesus was unique – fully divine and fully human – perhaps Satan wondered if that human part of Jesus could be tempted. This does present an interesting dilemma for Jesus at the very beginning of his ministry. Jesus needed to decide how he was going to use his exclusive position. Was he going to use his power to gain money, power, or prestige – the three things that all humans strive for? Or would Jesus use his power in other ways? That was a question Jesus had to answer as he started out on his ministry.

Jesus was not trying to figure this out in a neutral environment – just as the many other titles Jesus had, this one – Son of God – was one that had used by the Jews for centuries. It was first used to identify the Jewish nation. God said, ***"I will claim you as my own people, and I will be your God."*** (Exodus 6:7) As time went on this title wasn't used for all Jews – only those who were righteous. As time passed Son of God was used to the king of Israel. King David is the most famous king. This definition of Son of God remained into Jesus' time. So, if a Jew heard that Jesus was the Son of God, people would think that he was the rightful Davidic king of Israel. This would not have made them think he was divine.

That being said, Son of God did not stand alone; rather it was closely related to the title Messiah or Christ. This was the reason that Jesus' message was so difficult to accept, both for the Roman authorities as well as the Jewish religious leaders. Jesus threatened both the Roman occupying force and those influential officials of the Temple.

One thing that Jesus did that likely angered the religious leaders was how he addressed God. Jesus was the first one to be on an intimate basis with God, calling God, My Father. God was no longer the distant, judgmental God but rather God who is patient, loving, and available. Although Jesus was the first person to be on such intimate terms with God, he didn't keep this intimacy only for himself. When one of his disciples came and said, "**Lord teach us to pray**" (Luke 11:2), Jesus began this teaching with – Our Father. This term is intimate – Abba, Father, Daddy. Jesus almost always began his prayers in this familiar and personal way.

Jesus was recognized as Son of God by Satan as noted earlier, but also by demons that were sent out of the body of a man who had been possessed.

They began screaming at him, "Why are you interfering with us, Son of God? Have you come here to torture us before God's appointed time?" (Matthew 8:29)

The disciples, too, recognized Jesus as the Son of God. After being with Jesus, helping to feed the 5,000, after Jesus walked on water to come to them in their boat during a storm, and after he helped Peter to walk on water himself, after experiencing all these things in a single day, the disciples realized who he was: **Then the disciples worshiped him. "You really are the Son of God!" they exclaimed.** (Matthew 14:33)

The title Son of God played an important role in Jesus' arrest, trial, and crucifixion. But instead of people using this title to address Jesus, they used it contemptuously. For example, during his trial, **Jesus remained silent. Then the high priest said to him, "I demand in the name of the living God—tell us if you are the Messiah, the Son of God."** (Matthew 26:63)

Then while Jesus hung on the cross, the crowds yelled at him, **"Look at you now! You said you were going to destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days. Well then, if you are the Son of God, save yourself and come down from the cross!"** (Matthew 27:40)

Finally, when Jesus breathed his last and the curtain at the Temple was torn in two from top to bottom and the earth shook and rocks split apart, the Roman soldiers at the crucifixion were terrified at this moment and they said, **"This man truly was the Son of God!"** (Matthew 27:54)

So we can see that many people and other beings saw Jesus as somehow connected to the title Son of God. But Jesus didn't refer to himself in this way very often. Once Jesus did use that title for himself. That was in our second reading. He asked those around him, those ready to stone him, **why do you call it blasphemy when I say, 'I am the Son of God'? After all, the Father set me apart and sent me into the world.** (John 10:36)

So to go back to the scene at the beginning of his ministry – when Jesus was tempted by Satan to decide how to use his God-given, special and unique place, Jesus did decide. He decided to use his power not to save himself or to give himself special privileges or fame or power. Rather he gave himself up to save those who believed in him. Jesus came as Son of God and acted as servant of all.

Here is a story that illustrates how Jesus is still alive and working in our lives in our world:

A man's daughter had asked the local pastor to come and pray with her father. When the pastor arrived, he found the man lying in bed with his head propped up on two pillows and an empty chair beside his bed. The pastor assumed that the old fellow had been informed of his visit. "I guess you were expecting me," he said.

"No, who are you?" the old man asked.

"I'm the new pastor at your local church," the pastor replied. "When I saw the empty chair, I figured you knew I was going to show up."

"Oh yeah, the chair," said the bedridden man. "Would you mind closing the door?" Puzzled, the pastor shut the door.

"I've never told anyone this, not even my daughter," said the man. "But all of my life I have never known how to pray. At church I used to hear the pastor talk about prayer, but it always went right over my head..."

"I abandoned any attempt at prayer," the old man continued, "until one day about four years ago my best friend said to me, 'Joe, prayer is just a simple matter of having a conversation with Jesus. Here's what I suggest. Sit down on a chair, place an empty chair in front of you, and in faith see Jesus on the chair. It's not spooky because he promised, 'I'll be with you always.' Then just speak to him and listen in the same way you're doing with me right now."

"So, I tried it and I've liked it so much that I do it a couple of hours every day. I'm careful, though. If my daughter saw me talking to an empty chair, she'd either have a nervous breakdown or send me off to the funny farm."

The pastor was deeply moved by the story and encouraged the old guy to continue on the journey. Then he prayed with him, and returned to the church.

Two nights later the daughter called to tell the pastor that her daddy had died that afternoon.

"Did he seem to die in peace?" he asked.

"Yes, when I left the house around two o'clock, he called me over to his bedside, told me one of his corny jokes, and kissed me on the cheek. When I got back from the store an hour later, I found him dead. But there was something strange. In fact, beyond strange – kinda weird. Apparently, just before Daddy died, he leaned over and rested his head on a chair beside the bed."

What is our take-home lesson? There is no question whether Jesus is really God's Son; even the devil and demons were willing to concede that. The lesson is about how Jesus dealt with

temptation at the beginning of his ministry and how he was going to use the special gifts God had given him. God has given each of us special gifts as well – different from the ones Jesus was given but still special gifts from God. And Jesus called us God’s children. In John 1:12 we read, “¹² ***But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God.***”

We too have to decide how to use our gifts; we too experience temptation just as Jesus did. The lesson is about how Jesus – and we – decide to act. Selflessly or Selfishly. Listening to prayers or cramming our schedules with things that satisfy our personal needs. Nourishing others or filling self. Choosing whether to step out in faith or remain safe in the shadows. Decisions and choices. Let us choose wisely. Let us choose to follow Jesus’ example. Let us pray.

Amazing and loving Father, we thank You that You gave of Yourself in the form of Jesus. He lived as one of us for a time, teaching, healing, preaching, and showing us how we should live our lives. Thank You for showing us through Your Son Jesus how to live our lives. Jesus – Son of God – not only our ideal but our Savior, Savior of us all. This is a great lesson to remember this first Sunday after Easter. Thank You for this season. Thank You for giving us Your Son. In His name I pray. Amen.