

Son Of Man

Look in a Christian prayer book. You'll find the titles Christ and Son of God easily. Look for 'Dear Son of Man, Bless us ... etc.' and you'll have a long search. Christians today just don't use the title. In fact, no-one else does in Mark's Gospel. Jesus, however, was addicted to this title. He calls himself 'Son of Man' over ten times in St Mark's short Gospel. Why? Two reasons: safety and symbolic depth.

Safety

If Jesus had gone around using a title for himself like *Messiah* or *Son of God* it would have been dangerous. Devout Jews would surely have accused him of blasphemy, others would have tried to make him a messiah of popular imagination - one to kick out the Romans and set up a free Israel. Son of Man simply means 'ordinary man', a mere mortal. Call yourself this and you get no blasphemy charges and no wild-eyed messiah groupies.

Symbolic Depth

Jesus wasn't stupid. It turns out that 'Son of Man' says most about him. But you have to dig deeper into Hebrew Scripture to find out why.

- First, as already said, it means an ordinary mortal, a simple man.
- Second, in the prophecy of Isaiah, there are passages about a mysterious servant. He is innocent of wrongdoing, and yet he suffers a punishment that the guilty should take. He is a representative human for many humans.

See, my servant will prosper; he shall ... rise to great heights. ...On him lies a punishment that brings us peace, and through his wounds we are healed.

(Isaiah 53)

- Third, in the prophecy of Daniel, there is a vision of '***one like a Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven***' - a figure given great power and authority by God to judge the nations.

So a deeper study gives us three main images for Son of Man: a **representative human** who is a **suffering servant** in our place and yet will return as a **glorious judge**. Son of Man is a richer title than the other more obviously messianic titles. Son of Man doesn't just tell you *who* Jesus is, but it also hints at *how* his life will pan out. He is truly a man and yet he is the glorious judge of all. Between the two is the *route* of suffering and service. The thirteen times Jesus calls himself 'Son of Man' sometimes hint at his power and authority but more usually refer to suffering and service.

Paralysed Man 2:1.12

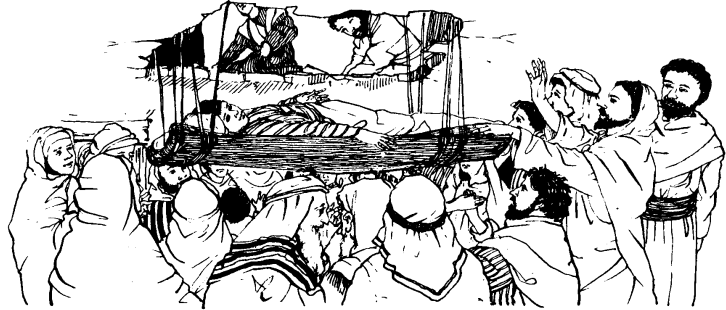
'I will prove to you, then, that the Son of Man has authority on earth to forgive sins ... get up, pick up your mat, and go home!' (2:10-11)

By saying to a paralytic that his 'sins were forgiven', Jesus caused scribes to think he was blaspheming (insulting God by pretending to have God's power). By curing the paralytic, the scribes are invited to see that same divine power that could heal a man inwardly heal him outwardly.

Jesus provokes a challenge to faith: how can divine power and authority rest in one who looks like an ordinary man, like a son of man?

What were ordinary houses like?

Four men carrying a paralytic on a stretcher couldn't get through the door so they go through the roof.



How did they get up to the roof?
How did they manage to stand on it?
How did they break through it?
How could a roof be simple enough to break through yet strong enough to support the weight of five men?

The houses were simple baked mud boxes with steps along an outer wall to the roof area. The roof itself was flat and sturdy. Branches and reeds were laid in layers across strong rafters and clay was rolled over them and baked dry for binding and strength. Four determined men could quickly chop into it and make a large hole between the rafters.

Prediction of the Passion 8:31-33

'The Son of Man must suffer much and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the teachers of the Law. He will be put to death, but three days later he will rise to life.' (8:31)

It's crucial to know that this passage follows straight after the one in which Peter calls Jesus the Messiah. The job's only half done. Jesus now needs to spell out exactly what kind of Messiah he is. This requires some tough talk to shatter the disciples' illusions.

Jesus gets across that he is not the Messiah of popular imagination: he is to suffer much. Jesus gives Peter a severe telling off when the disciple finds it difficult to believe in a suffering Messiah.

Mark never wastes words, and yet he records at least three occasions when Jesus clearly tells the disciples about his coming suffering. Why? First, to get across how slow the disciples were to understand; they just didn't seem to catch on. Second, it shows how easy it was *not* to recognise Jesus as the true Messiah. Thirty years on in Rome, Mark's readers might have wondered, 'Why didn't many others see Jesus as the true Messiah?' Mark's answer seems clear: if even his closest companions were confused about what kind of Messiah he was then you shouldn't wonder that others didn't see him for what he truly was and is.

Request of James and John 10:35.45

'For the Son of Man himself did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.'

Mark 10:45

In spite of Jesus driving home the fact he is destined to suffer and die, James and John still don't get it. They make an ambitious request for the 'best seats in heaven'. They seem blissfully unaware that the route to glory is by way of the cross.

Jesus uses two symbols for his suffering: being baptised and a drinking a cup.

Jesus spells out very clearly that a spirit of suffering service should replace ambitious self-seeking. He sets the disciples an example to follow. Notice the hint of Isaiah's suffering servant in the quote above.

Son of Man: for Christians today

For Christians today, the Son of Man is a more difficult title because most are not aware of the depth of meaning it holds. Some Christians may readily identify with the figure of Suffering Servant because we live in a world where there is so much suffering. The title underlines the fact that Jesus' humanity was not phoney: his life of service, suffering and death were real.

All Christians face the 'Son of Man' challenge; they are to recognise Christ in the ordinary situations of their life; they must believe that his divine power is at work in spite of appearances. They are to follow the Son of Man on the royal road of the cross if they are to share his glory.

All Christians look to the Second Coming, the *Parousia*, when Jesus will appear as a glorious judge and redeemer.

Activities

1 Choose **one** of the three Son of Man passages discussed above.

You are a journalist at the scene. You're not a disciple, simply a curious and unbiased reporter.

- a) Design a headline and leading statement (see beside for examples).
- b) Write a punchy 150-word first paragraph in which you give the overall details of the incident in question.

PARALYSED MAN WALKS AGAIN

'I'm healed inside, too.'

REJECTION, SUFFERING, DEATH

Triple whammy for Nazarene preacher

BROTHERS' BEST SEAT BID BUST

Take a back seat, says leader

2 Read the selection of quotes in which Jesus calls himself the 'Son of Man'.

- a) i) What does this title mean? ii) Why did Jesus use it of himself?
- b) Which of the quotes beside hint at
i) power and authority? ii) suffering and service?
- c) Which of the situations referred in the quotes took place
i) in a cornfield?
ii) near Caesarea Philippi?
iii) before the Sanhedrin?

d) **'And he gave them strict orders not to tell anyone about him.'** 8:30

'... and he said all this quite openly.' 8:32

- i) What was Jesus being secretive about, and why?
- ii) What was Jesus being quite open about, and why?

Q And he said to them, 'The Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath; so the Son of Man is master even of the Sabbath'. 2:27-28

R And he began to teach them that the Son of Man was destined to suffer grievously, to be rejected by the elders and the chief priests and the scribes, and to be put to death, and after three days to rise again... 8:31-32

S 'Now we are going up to Jerusalem, and the Son of Man is about to be handed over to the chief priests and the scribes.' 10:33

T 'For the Son of Man himself did not come to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.' 10:45

U The high priest put a second question to him, 'Are you the Christ,' he said, 'the Son of the Blessed One?' 'I am,' said Jesus, 'and you will see the Son of Man seated at the right hand of the Power and coming with the clouds of heaven.' 14:61-62

3 The title 'Son of Man' ought to be used more in Christian prayer and worship. Do you agree? Give reasons for your opinion, showing that you have considered a number of views.

For ...

- Son of Man says most about Jesus – and about the pattern of his life
- gets across Jesus' true humanity – one with us
- gets across the need for humble service
- reminds Christians of the Second Coming – when the Son of Man will come in glory
- links Christianity with its Jewish roots ...

Against ...

- Jesus used Son of Man to avoid trouble to his ministry
- now Christians use titles that get across his glory because they believe it is clearer now
- Son of Man may confuse today's Christians; many wouldn't understand the richness of its meaning
- early Christians, like St Paul and St Mark, always opted for more divine titles – Lord, Christ, Son of God ...