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| The Son of Man |
| **Pastor Steve Schell**  **Questions**  1) How often do you think about the day Jesus will return to the earth? What kind of circumstances bring that to mind?  2) Does the thought of Jesus coming again cause you to feel hope or worry? Why is that?  3) What is your favorite promise in the Bible about what will happen when Jesus comes again? Tell us why that one is so special to you. |
| **John 1:51-52** |
| After recognizing that Jesus knew things about him that only God could know, Nathaniel immediately told Him that He was the promised Messiah. He said, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel” (v49), to which Jesus replied with a statement that must have stunned Nathaniel. Basically He told him, “Because you believe in Me, someday you’ll rise from the dead and return to earth with Me to set up the kingdom of God.” By combining Jacob’s vision of a ladder lifted up to heaven (Ge 28:12) with Daniel’s vision of a heavenly Son of Man (Da 7:13-14), Jesus showed him a picture of the end of the age. Why would He do that, particularly with someone He just met? He skipped over, at least, 2,000 years of history and took him straight to a vision of the last days. Why? Isn’t that a mysterious season we’re wise to admit we don’t understand and ignore because God is in control, and what we believe won’t change His plan anyway? And there is a logic to that kind of thinking. It says our job is just to be faithful, and He’ll take care of the rest.  But Jesus didn’t say such things accidentally. He didn’t make wild statements in order to be shocking or sensational. Yet He would speak the truth, the whole truth, at moments when no one expected it, with the result that there were times when people were left speechless. This was one of those moments. Nathaniel’s mouth must have dropped open. He probably stood there staring, trying to comprehend what he had just heard. Did Jesus say He’s the ladder? Did He call Himself the Son of Man? And, was I just told that I’ll be there at the end of days watching God’s kingdom being set up on earth?  Last things first  Why would a person who was beginning their discipleship need such information? Why do “last things” matter? The answer is quite simple. It’s because knowing the end puts the present into perspective. Knowing God exists, changes how I view myself. Knowing God is good, changes how I view evil. Knowing who created me, explains why I’m alive. Knowing God will raise the dead to life, changes the way I view death. Knowing God will someday judge all humanity, defines for me what’s right and wrong. And knowing Jesus will someday destroy the forces of evil and set up His kingdom on earth, allows me to cope with the evil I have to pass through on my way there.  The Son of Man  The term “Son of Man” does indeed mean a human child, but when Jesus called Himself this, His Jewish listeners knew their Bible well enough to recognize that He was declaring Himself to be a very special human child (2Sa 7:14; Ps 2:7; 89:26-27; Heb 1:5). And when He added to that title words like “clouds,” “angels” and “glory,” they knew He was pointing to a remarkable prophecy by Daniel and that He was saying He was that Person (Mt 16:27; 26:63-65).  • DBS (Sun-Thurs)  An everlasting kingdom (Da 7:4-28)  Daniel was shown a vision of the empires which would rule over the Middle East, particularly over the land of Israel. He saw symbolic beasts which represented four empires, three of which have already come and gone: Babylon, Greece and Persia. But he also saw a fourth beast which symbolizes the antichrist’s final empire, the one that will be governing much of the earth when God decides that the time has come to bring all human government to an end and to set up a righteous government that will last forever. Daniel’s prophecy actually shows us the very moment when God will take control of the earth, and it reveals that it will be a time of violent persecution of God’s people. Daniel was told that a horrible man will oppress believers until God takes away his dominion and destroys it forever (Da 7:26). Then he was told that a new, eternal kingdom would be set up which would be governed by “the saints of the Highest One” (Da 7:27). All of this would be done under the authority of Someone who looks like a “Son of Man” (Da 7:13).  Now with that prophecy in mind, let’s go back to the conversation between Jesus and Nathaniel. Moments after they met, Jesus told him that the day would come when he would watch all this take place.  Why does this matter?  Why does this matter? Why do you and I need to understand what Jesus said to Nathaniel? The answer is: because you and I are going to see the same thing. Listen:  “For just as lightening comes from the east and flashes to the west, so will the coming of the Son of Man be…. But immediately after the tribulation of those days the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will fall from the sky, and the powers of the heavens will be shaken. And then the sign of the Son of Man will appear in the sky, and then all the tribes of the earth will moan, and they will see the Son of Man coming on the clouds of the sky with power and great glory. And He will send forth His angels with a great trumpet and they will gather His elect from the four winds, from one end of the sky to the other” (Mt 24:27-31).  Going up and going down  In the original Hebrew, the angels first go up, and then they go down. It’s that way in the Greek translation of the Hebrew (Septuagint), and that’s the order of the events in Jesus’ description as well. First, up; then, down. Now, in my mind the normal direction for angels would be first down, and then up. They would descend from heaven to earth and then ascend back into heaven; at least, that’s the way it’s generally pictured in the Bible. But not here. So, what kind of “angels” are these who start on the earth, rise up to heaven and then return to earth? I think the “angels” in this vision aren’t all angels, not in the usual sense of the word. I think many of the glorious angels Jacob saw are resurrected humans rising to meet their Lord in the air and then returning to earth to rule with Him in His kingdom. Paul describes that moment this way:  “For the Lord Himself will descend from heaven with a shout, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet of God, and the dead in Christ will rise first. Then we who are alive and remain will be caught up together with them in the clouds to meet Him in the air, and so we shall always be with the Lord” (1Th 4:16-17).  Jesus said He would send His angels to gather believers from the “four winds.” This is the resurrection and the rapture. The dead rise first, and then those believers still living on the earth are transformed into their new bodies, and rise to meet the returning Jesus in the air. In other words, the “ladder” Jacob saw in his dream is Jesus. He’s the One who will lift us up to heaven and then bring us back to earth. Jesus Himself is the resurrection (Jn 11:25). Like a ladder, He’s going to lift us up. If we believe in Him, He will “raise [us] up on the last day” (Jn 6:40).  A seed of hope  So in His very first meeting with Nathaniel, Jesus planted in this new disciple’s heart a “seed of hope.” He told him that someday He would see with his very eyes the resurrection of the dead. The day would come when he would rise into the air to meet the Son of Man and then return with Him to earth to set up God’s eternal kingdom. What a promise! What hope He gave Nathaniel, from the very beginning! But why? The answer is simple: because he would need it. The political climate would soon change and their lives would be in danger because they had become Jesus’ disciples. In fact as the years went by, all but one would be martyred for their faith. And tradition says Nathaniel would be executed in Armenia for converting a king’s brother to Christ (Rick Renner, No Room for Compromise, Vol.2, Institute Books, Tulsa, 2015, p.213). And Jesus knew that the young man standing in front of him needed God’s perspective. He needed to know the end of the story. He needed to know that Jesus would be victorious. No matter how difficult circumstances became, no matter how strong the evil in this world appeared to grow, no matter what Nathaniel might have to endure as a follower of Christ, he would always know this: A day will come when Jesus will resurrect him from the dead. He will be there, among the “saints of the Highest One,” rising to meet the Son of Man in the air.  Our hope  Jesus makes this same promise to us. If we truly believe in Him, the day will come when we too will hear His voice and rise to meet Him. No matter what we may face between now and then, we too can carry within ourselves this same “seed of hope.” Knowing the final chapter of history lets us live our chapter with boldness and joy. It keeps everything in perspective. Someday we too will be climbing Jacob’s Ladder! |