

Are You the Son of God?

Daniel 7:9-14, Luke 22:54-71 (ESV)

December 25, 2005

“Are you the Son of God?” Therein lies the question of Jesus Christ. Who is he? “Are you the Son of God?” This question of identity is asked in today’s reading at his trial before the council. In effect this question is asked throughout the gospel of his entire life, death, and resurrection. Indeed, this question is precisely the question of Christmas, the question of Jesus Christ to which the gospel of Christmas provides the answer. And, of course, this question is our question yet today, the question which we have to ask, the question which we have to answer about him, and therefore the question and the answer with which we have to live and to die. We may find that it is not Jesus who is on trial here. So what good news can Christmas bring to bear upon this pressing question?

“Are you the Son of God?” Thus the council queried Jesus. But the angel Gabriel has already announced as much to Mary, in words we read every Christmas: “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.... The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God” (Luke 1:30-33, 35 (ESV)). This is the good news of Christmas.

“Are you the Son of God?” Elizabeth, kinswoman of Mary and mother of John the Baptist, speaking under the authority of the Holy Spirit, has already said so to Mary: “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb! And why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me?” (Luke 1:42-43 (ESV)). “Are you the Son of God?” Zechariah, father of John the Baptist, also speaking under the authority of the Holy Spirit, has already said so: “Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David” (Luke 1:68-69 (ESV)). “Are you the Son of God?” The angel of the Lord who spoke to the “shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night,” has already said so: “Fear not, for behold, I bring you good news of a great joy that will be for all the people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is Christ the Lord.” (Luke 2:8-11 (ESV)). This is the good news of Christmas.

“Are you the Son of God?” Righteous and devout Simeon, to whom it had been revealed “by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ” has already said so in the temple even as he took the baby Jesus up in his arms: “Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace, according to your word; for my eyes have seen your salvation that you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for revelation to the Gentiles, and for glory to your people Israel” (Luke 2:25-32 (ESV)). The prophetess Anna, also at the temple at that very hour, gave thanks to God for the redemption she recognized in Jesus Christ (Luke 2:36-38 (ESV)). “Are you the Son of God?” Jesus himself has answered the question as a child when his parents found him in the temple at Jerusalem: “Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:49 (ESV)). Can we not hear all these witnesses and so realize who he is?

“Are you the Son of God?” John the Baptist has already said as much, fulfilling in his own ministry the ancient prophecy of Isaiah: “The voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord” (Luke 3:4 (ESV)). The voice of God himself has already said so, speaking from heaven when Jesus was baptized: “You are my beloved Son; with you I am well pleased” (Luke 3:22, cf. 9:35 (ESV)). Luke has already said so in his genealogy of Jesus: “...Son of David...son of Abraham...son of Adam, son of God” (Luke 3:23, 31, 34, 38 (ESV)). And all of this is from only the first three chapters of Luke. How stubborn could the council be? How hard-hearted is the world? More to the point, where do we stand in the great scheme of things, the trial of Jesus, the trial of the world, even our own trial?

It gets worse. Even the devil knows full well who Jesus is. That is the basis of his temptations in the wilderness. The devil said to him, “If you are the Son of God,” and the question is written in such a way as to indicate that he is, “command this stone to become bread” (Luke 4:3 (ESV)). And again, the devil said to him “If you are the Son of God,” and again, the question is written in such a way as to indicate that he is, “throw yourself down from here” (Luke 4:9 (ESV)). Even the devil’s underling demons and unclean spirits know who Jesus is and have said as much as he threw them out of the people they possessed: “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One of God” (Luke 4:34 (ESV)). And, “You are the Son of God!” (Luke 4:41, cf. 8:28 (ESV)). This carries us up through chapter four. Then come more miracles and healings, teachings and professions of faith. But this is enough for now. This is enough for us to realize that the good news of Christmas, that Jesus is the Son of God, is the answer to the questions raised by his life, death, and resurrection, and to the question asked of him at his trial.

On the morning of the last day of his earthly life, Christ, born the Son of God so many years earlier, stood before the full assembly of the ministers and the elders

of the people of God to answer precisely that question. The irony is overwhelming. They represent the entire church of God gathered in council, yet they all conspire together to extinguish the one hope of salvation.¹ They pretend to ask if Jesus is the Christ, but he knows that they are not interested, and he tells them so.² They presume to judge him, though he is without fault, without knowing that he is the prophesied Son of Man who will sit in judgment on them and on all the universe. As it is written in Daniel, “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.”

So the elders and priests seized upon his words and twisted them to ask, “Are you the Son of God?” Sadly enough, the council spoke the truth it did not realize and asked a question to which it did not want an answer. They were not seeking information. They were not seeking truth. They were not seeking knowledge. They were not seeking faith. They were determined to convict and so to execute Jesus, and any excuse would do. This one served admirably. Claiming to be the Son of God would be a terrible act of blasphemy, unless, of course, it happened to be true, which was a possibility they never considered. Jesus knew, of course, what was going on. His response to them, “You say that I am,” indicates that they said the right words but did not believe them, they said the right words but did not act upon them, they said the right words but did not live by them. Here is an important warning for us. Anyone can say that Jesus is the Son of God. Even the devil and his demons say that. And they know that. But somehow they do not believe that. They do not believe in him. They do not trust him. They do not live for him. So the point of the question now turns against us. Given the Christmas truth that Jesus is the Son of God, the question becomes: Do we believe in him? Do we trust him? Do we live for him?

The council was not alone in their disdain for Christ, their contempt for the Son of God. “The men who were holding Jesus in custody were mocking him as

¹John Calvin, *Calvin's New Testament Commentaries*, eds. David W. Torrance and Thomas F. Torrance, vol. 3: *A Harmony of the Gospels: Matthew, Mark and Luke, Vol. III and The Epistles of James and Jude*, trans. A. W. Morrison (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1972), 3:164.

²James Luther Mays, ed., *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching*, vol. *Luke*, by Fred B. Craddock (Louisville, Kentucky: John Knox Press, 1990), 266.

they beat him. They also blindfolded him and kept asking him, ‘Prophecy! Who is it that struck you?’ And they said many other things against him, blaspheming him.” To the one who had never done wrong, they did wrong. The one who never hated, they despised. The one who did not hurt others, they hurt. The one who was the light of the world, who saw and knew all things, they blindfolded and ridiculed, while their own eyes remained uncovered but they still could not see who he was or what was going on. In short, they refused to acknowledge that he was the Son of God. And their failure stands to warn us against our own.

The problem strikes even closer to home than the council or the guard. It ran to the inner circle of the disciples. “And immediately, while he [Peter] was still speaking, the rooster crowed. And the Lord turned and looked at Peter. And Peter remembered the saying of the Lord, how he had said to him, ‘Before the rooster crows today, you will deny me three times.’ And he went out and wept bitterly.” The outward details of the denial are well known. The inner reality was that Peter failed to recognize that Jesus was the Son of God. To acknowledge him as the Son of God would call for honor, worship, and obedience. To refuse honor, worship, and obedience would indicate a lack of acknowledgment of Jesus as the Son of God. Again, there is no advantage in our criticizing Peter. His failure is remembered as a warning against our own.

“Are you the Son of God?” There is no more important question before us. If Jesus is the Son of God, that changes everything. Sin, death, and evil are conquered. Our self-centeredness is undone. We are called to faith, worship, and obedience. But if Jesus is not the Son of God, all is lost. Sin will run its course. Death will be forever. Evil will reign unopposed. We will be left to faithlessness, self-servingness, and anarchy. Surely we can see the importance of the great truth of Christmas.

There is, however, a second level of consideration to all of this. Even given the Christmas truth that Jesus is the Son of God, there is still the question of whether we acknowledge him as such. The council did not know that he was the Son of God and so could not acknowledge him as such. Of course, they did not want to know, and that was a great deal of the problem, but it was still the case that they could not acknowledge him. The demons did know that he was the Son of God but they refused to yield him faith. They acknowledged him in their own way, and they obeyed him, though admittedly unwillingly. But they did not believe in him. Do we believe in Jesus as the Son of God? Do we believe in the truth and reality of Christmas? Do we acknowledge him as Son of God, as Savior, and as Lord? Do we entrust our lives to him, giving ourselves to him without reservation, or do we

foolishly acknowledge “still other events and powers, figures and truths, as God’s revelation”?³

In a few moments, a young man will profess his faith before God and this congregation and will be baptized as a follower of Jesus Christ. With the nurture of his new family and with opportunities he has been given to read and study the Bible, he has come to a saving faith in Jesus as the Son of God. He knows what Christmas is all about. He knows what the ancient council was trying to deny. And so he shares with us the privilege of celebrating this Christmas not only by remembering the birth of Christ but also by witnessing the rebirth of new Christian. Thanks be to God! This young man is staking his life on the Christmas gospel, and his profession of the Christian faith is an invitation to all of us to reaffirm our own faith and to put our lives on the line for the Lord again.

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To God be the glory forever and ever! Amen.

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³*The Book of Confessions* (Louisville, Kentucky: Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), 2002, “The Theological Declaration of Barmen,” 8.12.