

# Why Do We Call Jesus “Son of God?”

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*Below is the short version: If you want to do the biblical survey of this language read below the asterisks.*

Rather than think of Jesus as a demi-god, or God’s little boy, or the product of some mysterious spiritual/sexual union in Mary, we have made the case that “Son of God” language is best understood as the language of Kingship in Israel as well as much of the ancient world. Jesus is the adopted King—the rightful heir of the throne of David, the one who brings the nations into God’s Kingdom, lifts the curse of law and unforgiveness, renews and brings divine light and life to the world starting at Zion. He embodies in himself the life-giving qualities previous attributed to the temple, and he reigns—not just from a Zionist throne—but from the throne of heaven. In the tradition of Daniel he seems to be the embodied presence of the divine. He is God’s creative arm through which everything has been made. He is ultimately King—not Caesar. All God’s fountains are found in him—and all other social-political hopes are but cheap, idolatrous substitutions. He alone grants forgiveness, cleansing, life, right relations between people and nations—he alone will recreate heaven and earth and bring all things under his headship. In him we see divine freedom and deferential love and by being united to him we are graciously swept up into God’s eternal life.

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The term *Son of God* has a variety of nuances in the New Testament. We probably cannot provide one comprehensive definition that will always serve us well as we read the varied New Testament texts. That Peter himself had little understanding of his own words when he made the good confession (*Jesus is the Christ, the Son of the Living God* Matthew 16:16) suggests Jesus’ ministry and most especially his resurrection did much to transform the meaning of this central Christian phrase. (Romans 1:4)

This, however, does not excuse the church from the responsibility of knowing what we mean when we confess that Jesus is the “Son of the living God.” Ostensibly we do mean *something* when we utter these words at baptism. Admitting that there is varied and evolving meaning for “Son of God” in scripture does not mean that there is no such thing as orthodoxy on this point or that any well-intentioned notion will suffice.

This paper is an effort to briefly survey “Son of God” language so that we may have a sense of the richness and the various shades of meaning inherent in this the ancient, fundamental Christian confession.

## Uses Not of Immediate Concern

It would be useful to acknowledge a number of biblical uses of “son of God” that need not immediately concern us. First, “Sons of God” may refer to angelic beings like the Nephilim in Genesis 6:2. Likewise, “Son of God” may refer to all humanity. In Luke 3:38 Adam (who means humanity) is the last name mentioned in a long genealogy is called the “son of God.” In this sense all humans are sons of God in that we are all sons of Adam, created by God. To assert that Jesus is human is crucial to the Christian

confession, but such is not what is meant by the peculiar language of “Son of God” in Jesus’ case. Here we are using language that insists that Jesus is profoundly unique. Third, we may acknowledge a number of uses like that found in Galatians 3:26—“you are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.” Christians see themselves as adopted—God’s children-- by virtue of being spiritually integrated into Christ. Christian “sonship” is then derivative of Christ’s own sonship. This particular Pauline language points us to the glorious freedom of the children of God. But the description of the church as free “sons of God” must, as we shall see, first be rooted in our understanding of Jesus’ own freedom and sonship.

### **The Old Testament Base-line**

Any understanding of Jesus must, in turn, be rooted in the Judaism in which Jesus lived. It is often forgotten in our circles that Jesus came proclaiming the Kingdom of God, and his disciples fully expected that the chief import of his ministry was to be the restoration of Israel’s monarchy and its place in God’s plan to reshape the world in the end. “Son of God” language has to be understood in terms of its origins in the ancient world and its repeated usage in the Old Testament.

An appropriate starting place may be Exodus 4:23 where God commands, “Let my son go, so he may worship me.” Hosea 11:1 echoes this usage, “When Israel was a child, I loved him, and out of Egypt I called my son.” The whole nation—the descendents of Israel--were thought of as God’s son. This is important to remember, for at their coronation Davidic Kings liturgically assumed the very same identity-- “Son of God.” In Psalm 2 God says, *"I have installed my King on Zion, my holy hill."* At which point David (and his successors) pledge and testify, *"I will proclaim the decree of the LORD: He said to me, "You are my Son; today I have become your Father."* Here the King is assuming, embodying in himself, the identity of the whole nation. As Israel is God’s Son, the ruler becomes the embodiment of the nation. We may then think of the King—the Son of God-- as a representative of all God’s people.

Of course we also may think of him as a representative of the divine rule. David was promised by God in 2 Sam 7:13-14, *"I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. 14 I will be his father, and he will be my son."* When Israel said, “give us a King like the other nations have,” God gave in. Though God knew he was the only rightful King, Israel borrowed from the other nations the notion that another king could receive an adoptive kind of authority through which God exercised his creative power in the world. He was to be his co-regent on the earth.

The expression “Son of God,” (perhaps borrowed from the other nations) is very common in the ancient world. In the near east it commonly points to a King whose earthly temple is infused by the life of a deity. Both Canaanite and Babylonian deities exercise ongoing authority in the world through the power of their temples and the rule of the King—the divine representative. Thus, the Psalms are replete with the notion that Israel’s King will exercise God’s creative power. Perhaps a critical passage at this juncture is Psalm 89:20-21, 25-27,29.

*I have found David, my servant;*

*With sacred oil I have anointed him  
My hand will sustain him...  
I will set his hand over the sea,  
His right hand over the rivers.  
He will call out to me, You are my Abba  
My God, the Rock my Savior  
I will appoint him my firstborn  
The most exalted of the kings of the earth...  
I will establish his line forever,  
His throne as long as the heavens endure.*

In other words, in anointing (granting messiahship) to the King and installing him on Zion, God was investing the Davidic king with power over the other nations. The King could even hold back the very chaotic waters that motivated the nations and which threatened to undo the living order. This motif is found throughout Egypt, and even by the time of Jesus, Roman emperors were known as “*filius Dei, Son of God.*” Throughout the ancient world this phraseology was understood to be the quasi-divine title of a ruler who represented a deity’s interest in the world. It’s likely that something like this provides part of the appropriate background for understanding the centurion who crucified Jesus when he exclaims upon Christ’s death that “surely this was the Son of God.”

Perhaps this generalized glimpse into near-eastern thought is enough to suggest that the Davidic kings do not ever live up to these ideals. Crucial is the promise of 2 Samuel 7 and Psalm 89 etc. God promises David an everlasting Kingdom—that he will raise up heirs to the throne by which he would crush the enemies of the Lord and rule with justice. The destruction of the Davidic monarchy and the apparent failure of this promise created a crisis in the life of Israel which the prophets would try to resolve.

Isaiah foresees God’s return to Zion, the restoration of Israel and the destruction of death itself. Ezekiel envisions a new Jerusalem, where the Temple is restored, giving forth living water to all the nations and restoring the Land. Israel looked forward to the day when God would *restore the kingdom to Israel*—that Messiah would lift the curse brought on by Israel’s disobedience, bring on national forgiveness of sins so that all the nations would come to worship Israel’s God. The restoration of the Davidic throne would mean that once again all of life would be dripping in the Lord’s abundance, the whole world made knew by the powerful rule of the Davidic anointed one—messiah—Son of God.

### **The Messianic Baseline in the Gospels.**

It should be very evident, then, that when Peter confesses Jesus as *the Christ, the Son of the Living God* in Matthew 16:16 or when Mark declares that his gospel is that of *Jesus Christ, the Son of God* in Mark 1:1, “Son of God” language is referring to Jesus as the Christ—the anointed king of Israel—the long awaited heir to the throne. Even in John we encounter Nathaniel’s confession functioning just like Peter’s in the Synoptic gospels: “*Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.*” (See also John 20:31) The

Church's primitive preaching as it is recorded in Acts 13:32ff roots the meaning of "Son of God" in the set of Davidic images we have already discussed from Psalm 2. At its base-line in the gospels "Son of God" is a synonym for Messiah. To say this is not to lessen what we mean by "Son of God." For we have to remember what all this implied within a Jewish end-time frame of reference. The messianic King would fend off the powers of chaos, forgive the national debt of sin and thus lift the curse of the law, bring about justice, abundant life and the reconciliation of all nations. Even when the angel appears to Mary in Luke 1:32 the term "*Son of the Most High*" clearly is understood within a messianic frame of reference—"the Lord God will give him the throne of his Father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."

Yet, there has been a persistent tendency (which developed quite early) to take a succeeding verse (Luke 1:35) as an alternative foundation for understanding "Son of God" language. The Angel tells Mary that the "*Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most high will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.*" I readily grant that this verse in isolation might suggest that "Son of God" language refers to the incarnation—and that God through the Holy Spirit somehow in some spiritual/sexual way Fathered Jesus. But this interpretation is dubious. Not only because of the preceding verses which clearly root the meaning of Son of God in Jesus' kingship, but because miraculous birth stories—even virgin birth stories-- were stock stories in the Hellenistic world. They always heralded the birth of a great figure or king. Miraculous—even virgin birth—I suspect did not always necessarily imply the spiritual/sexual union of divine and human—at least not for Jews! But such birth narratives would routinely foreshadow kingship and greatness.

Admittedly, the early church found "Son of God" language and "Son of Man" language useful to affirm that God had assumed humanity in Jesus Christ and that Jesus was both human and divine. One can affirm this doctrine, without agreeing that this is what is usually meant by son of God language in the New Testament. Alexander Campbell assumed this history of interpretation—where Jesus is thought to be born or become a son in the conception narrative--, but he argued strenuously that Jesus was not the "eternal Son of God," because this would suggest that Jesus was eternally subordinate to the Father. Campbell firmly believed that the Word was never apart from God and that this Word took on the role of a son only in his historical, incarnate life. The language of the creed that spoke of Jesus "proceeding from the father" was for Campbell language about the incarnation-- not about Jesus' eternally derivative and subordinate position with regard to the Father. The problem Campbell was dodging might be just as easily avoided by dropping this trajectory with regard to the meaning of "Son of God" to start with.

The "high" Christ-language found in Hebrews, for instance, emphatically grounds its understanding of Jesus' sonship in terms of David's sonship. Even Jesus' priesthood as "Son of God" is derived from a messianic understanding of Psalm 110 where David is hailed as priest in the Jebusite order of Melchizedek. This gave David priestly power and ministry even though he was not a Levite. Whatever other streams of meaning the church

later integrated into the term “Son of God,” it always seems to begin from this Davidic baseline. (Hebrews 7:2-3)

One can firmly believe in the virgin birth and believe the highest traditional claims about Jesus without thinking that “Son of God” language in the Gospels has much to do with the birth narrative. Luke is the only Gospel writer to include the virgin birth story. Clearly, the other gospel writers believed Jesus’ sonship could be understood without reference to the birth narrative. Without doubting miraculous virgin birth at all, neither should we. Anyone who has tried to teach children how Jesus is both the embodiment of the God of Israel and at the same time “God’s little boy,” will immediately grasp the nature of this problem. It is nearly conceptually impossible to avoid the notion that Jesus is not the real God when we follow this tradition of interpretation. As soon as Jesus becomes a created son, then he will cease to be the embodiment of God himself, or else folks will be forced to move in the direction of two gods.

“But someone may ask, “doesn’t Jesus pray to his Father?” Yes. But this should be taken as an echo of Psalm 89 which we have cited above. This Psalm says of the Davidic Kings *“He will call out to me, “You are my Abba” my God, the Rock, my Savior.* (89:26) The early church often cited this Psalm with reference to Jesus as God’s firstborn, the highest of Kings. Psalm 89:23 promises to crush the Davidic King’s foes before him, to strike down his adversaries. Verse 25 says, “I will set his hand over the sea—his right hand over the rivers.” In other words all the forces of chaos—the terrible deathly waters— the King will be able to overcome. And so when Jesus prays in the Garden *Abba*—this is the prayer of the Highest King who knows all things are possible. And so he says, “all things are possible for you, take this cup from me. Even here the language of Father and Son should be understood at its root as Adopted King language—the language of Davidic Kingship as it is liturgically expressed in the Psalms.

### **Son of God as Messiah with a difference**

Most of the New Testament language about Jesus as Son of God can be understood in light of this basic meaning—Jesus is God’s chosen king who is restoring the nation, ushering Israel into its end-time calling of uniting the nations. He is God’s ruling arm finally bringing from a restored Zion a reign of healing and justice upon the earth.

But it needs to be said that with Jesus we are confronting “Son of God/messiah” language with a difference. The early church thought the Messiah to be reigning even though he died and was rejected. The concept of a crucified messiah was (and is) radical! Few Jews expected the Messiah to suffer and die. And yet, as counter-intuitive as this seemed to the early church, the explanation for suffering sonship was grounded in the ideas of “sonship” in the Old Testament. In Luke 24:25-27 the resurrected Jesus asks, *“Did not the Christ have to suffer these things and then enter his glory?” And beginning with Moses and all the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the Scriptures concerning himself.”*

Here, perhaps, it’s important to remember our starting point in Exodus 4. There, the ancestor Jacob/Israel, the person, becomes a representative for the whole nation. The

nation, contained, as it were, in its ancestor is called the Son of God. In successive epochs in Israel's history certain people contain within themselves the hopes of the entire nation, and it is required that they offer themselves and be offered up by those who love them to God as a means of reconstituting the nation. We see this theme in the story Hannah offering up Samuel, and in Samson's being specially dedicated to a service that calls him to suffering and death. We have already made the point that David, by taking the title, "Son of God" was representatively taking on the identity of all Israel and reconstituting the nation, renewing the covenant, this time on Mount Zion. Jeremiah 1:5 seems to suggest that God selected Jeremiah from before birth even as he had Jacob in order to reconstitute the nation. Jeremiah's calling to preach to a resistant audience, to remonstrate against the temple, to suffer, be thrown into the pit, and be delivered from that prison all anticipate and give shape to Jesus' own ministry as someone who is embodying in himself a newly constituted Israel.

All of this has its antecedent in the Abraham and Isaac story—where we first hear of a beloved son. Particularly in the story of the binding of Isaac, we see how the chosen son (Isaac)—the one who embodied all of Abraham's hopes—the one through whom Israel's particular calling would be realized—must offer himself up or be offered up for God's purposes. The Hebrew writer explicitly sees this through the lens of death and resurrection. This ethos characterizes Isaiah's notion of the suffering servant—who embodies the new prophetic community that is called to reconstitute Israel. The suffering servant is both Israel and the prophet who embodies Israel as a redemptive sufferer. This is a dimension of sonship language. And in several places we hear hints that the King, as representative of Israel and her hopes—must be offered up—given in the tradition of Isaac, Abraham's son.

The resurrection would change the meaning of Messiah. Davidic kings were long thought to reign from a throne on Zion and that the temple drew its authority and power from the heavenly divine throne. That was a given. But the church's claim for him is that Jesus, crowned king on Golgotha, was raised to reign on the heavenly throne of God himself.

The Gospels clearly deny that this is merely the church's retelling the story after the fact. Jesus is portrayed as having pointed to this messianic vocation with a difference. In Luke 20:44 Jesus asks a question about Psalm 110. *David calls [the messiah] 'Lord.' How then can he be his son?"* However we read this exchange, it seems evident that Jesus is acknowledging that "messiah" is something more than just another descendent of David who would rule in the same way as David did. For Jesus, Messiah was someone whom David called Lord and yet was still David's descendent.

Perhaps I can best get to how the concept of Son of God/Messiah language is being modified by going straight to the climax of the Synoptics. Here I refer to Mark's version of Jesus' interrogation.

*Mark 14:61-64 Again the high priest asked him, "Are you the Christ, the Son of the Blessed One?" 62 "I am," said Jesus. "And you will see the Son of Man sitting*

*at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven." 63 The high priest tore his clothes. "Why do we need any more witnesses?" he asked. 64 "You have heard the blasphemy. What do you think?"*

Here, I think it is unlikely that the High Priest is openly inviting Jesus to commit blasphemy. I doubt Jesus' claim to be king in and of itself is blasphemous—certainly it was revolutionary-- and enough for him to get killed by the Romans. But when he answers, *Ego εἰμι*, I AM, he is deliberately using the Divine Name. And by citing Daniel 7:13, Jesus is claiming that his throne is God's heavenly throne. This is what in the Jewish mind is blasphemy—not a mere claim to the Jewish throne. Jesus is claiming to be a figure that can stand in the divine presence, receive worship, and exercise divine sovereignty! He is the mysterious figure whom Daniel describes thus:

*"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. 14 He was given authority, glory and sovereign power; all peoples, nations and men 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.*

While the language of "Son of God" does not appear in the text of Daniel 7, Jesus does cite this passage describing the "Son of Man" in response to the High priest's question about his being the "Son of God." And at this point it is probably useful to point out a long Christian tradition of interpreting Jesus as the figure, whom Nebuchadnezzar sees in the fiery furnace along with Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. This figure brings the faithful servants through this fiery metaphor for sheol/the grave. And he is described by the pagan King as a "*son of the gods*." (Dan 3:25)

What we are likely encountering with "Son of God" language in various New Testament texts, then, is a kind of fluidity of meaning. It is possible that some heard Jesus' final claim to be the Son of God not in terms of Psalm 2 but also in terms of Daniel 3:25. The disciples on one occasion worship Jesus, hailing him Son of God. (See Matthew 11:33 as well as John 19:7) Within such a frame of reference it is understandable how Jews could have heard "Sonship" language as blasphemy.

### **John: Interpenetrating Glory of Father and Son**

In John again, we hear "Son of God" language taken to a different level. In the Synoptics we hear the assumption of Jesus contemporaries that the Messiah would rebuild the temple in such a way that YHWH would return to Zion. Matthew 27:39-40 testifies to this assumption and that Jesus must have made some claim about this. *Those who passed by hurled insults at him, shaking their heads and saying, "You who are going to destroy the temple and build it in three days, save yourself! Come down from the cross, if you are the Son of God!"* But what is only an accusation in the Synoptics, Jesus says plainly in John. *"Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days."* (John 2:19) In John we learn that the claim is that Jesus' own body is now the temple—the place where the glory of God resides. *"But the temple he had spoken of was his body."* Once again, the Old

Testament continually hailed Zion and the temple as an echo of Eden—the place where heaven and earth strangely meet—the place from which God would re-shape the earth. Jesus in attributing this language to his own body is using the same OT messianic language but it is taken in the additional direction of the King himself—in his person—embodying the creative glory of God.

Clearly the climax of “Son of God” language in the New Testament is found in the Gospel and letters of John after the church’s reflection has undergone some development and benefited from 20/20 hindsight. In John 5:16-18 we see that John is recording a tradition of Jesus talking about his relationship to the God of Israel in a way that affirmed his equality with God.

*So, because Jesus was doing these things on the Sabbath, the Jews persecuted him. 17 Jesus said to them, "My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I, too, am working." 18 For this reason the Jews tried all the harder to kill him; not only was he breaking the Sabbath, but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God.*

“Son of God” language was not mistaken as if Jesus were claiming to be inferior in rank to God. Jesus enemies took it as the opposite—they took it as a claim of equality with God.

In John Jesus submits to the Father because we see that this is what divine love *freely* does. Gentile Lords expect obedience by virtue of their position. The lesser must obey the greater because the greater has the power to set consequences. If the weak want things to go well, they obey, for it is fruitless to resist the controlling power. Nobody should dispute that God is rightfully in control. But we will not love obedience if this is our only motivation. Those who love God do what he says. But the only people who will consistently do what God says are those who are *lovers of God*. Jesus, our example, does not obey God the Father out of the *necessity* of an inferior rank; he obeys *freely* out of a deep affection for the Father born of the Father’s own submissive love. The leadership of the Father is the Father’s initiative to submit to the Son. Jesus submitted himself to God the Father in response to the Father’s own submission. *“the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does. For the Father loves the Son and shows him all he does.”* (John 5:19-20) Christ’s lovingly surrendering the kingdom up to the Father in the end is in this sense only a free response to the Father’s first freely conferring *all authority* upon him. Jesus freely worships the Father. But this is no less free than the Father’s initial glorification of the Son. John 13:31-32 says, *“Now is the Son of Man glorified and God is glorified in him. 32 If God is glorified in him, God will glorify the Son in himself, and will glorify him at once.* There is a mutual glorification and interpenetration between Father and Son in John’s writings. Ultimately this language is pointing to loving relationality within the life of God. 1 John 5:20 insists, *“we know also that the Son of God has come and has given us understanding, so that we may know him who is true. And we are in him who is true—even in his Son Jesus Christ. He is the true God and*

*eternal life.*” Here, God in his different modes of being, is enjoying a relationality that is mysterious, deferential and free.

### **Creedal Synthesis and Conclusion**

We come now to some scriptural creeds about Jesus from which the early church did its reflection. Let’s start with the Pauline description of the Son in Colossians 1:13-20

*13 For he has rescued us from the dominion of darkness and brought us into the kingdom of the Son he loves, in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.*

*15 He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. 16 For by him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things were created by him and for him. 17 He is before all things, and in him all things hold together.*

*18 And he is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. 19 For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, 20 and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.*

Here we note that once again Sonship language is Kingdom language. To confess Jesus as Son is to confess him as the king who has liberated Israel and the nations by bringing about the forgiveness of sins.

Beyond this, the King is the icon of the otherwise invisible God. We briefly touched on the notion that in the ancient near east the king and his temple often imaged the heavenly temple and throne, and the creative power of the deity exercised itself through the king’s earthly rule. This was no less true of the Davidic Kingship, as we have seen. The Psalms even suggest that the faithful participant in the temple courts—will see the light of life. But here the creed takes the Davidic framework a step further, attributing all the creative fullness of YHWH himself to Jesus. The light of God which shone into the primordial darkness is none other than the light of the Son. Here the Son is eternal creator. Finally, the God of Israel is alone King, through Jesus Christ.

These themes are emphasized also in Hebrews 1.

*in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. 3 The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. After he had provided purification for sins, he sat down at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. 4 So he became as much superior to the angels as the name he has inherited is superior to theirs.*

The succeeding verses again cite the Davidic Psalms which have been the base-line for this summary view of Jesus’ Sonship. As with the Pauline creedal material Jesus is not just creator but the ultimate heir of all things. And, as in Paul, where Jesus is the icon of the otherwise invisible God—Sonship language here suggests that Jesus is the *radiance of Divine glory*. Thus, the Son’s work as divine King is not merely redemptive and recreative, reconciling and cleansing, it is also revelatory. Jesus is the ultimate messenger, for in him, God reveals himself. It is through his person that God speaks.

### **Why, then, does the church call Jesus “Son of God?”**

Rather than think of Jesus as a demi-god, or God’s little boy, or the product of some mysterious spiritual/sexual union in Mary, we have made the case that “Son of God” language is best understood as the language of Kingship in Israel as well as much of the ancient world. Jesus is the adopted King—the rightful heir of the throne of David, the one who brings the nations into God’s Kingdom, lifts the curse of law and unforgiveness, renews and brings divine light and life to the world starting at Zion. He embodies in himself the life-giving qualities previous attributed to the temple, and he reigns—not just from a Zionist throne—but from the throne of heaven. In the tradition of Daniel he seems to be the embodied presence of the divine. He is God’s creative arm through which everything has been made. He is ultimately King—not Caesar. All God’s fountains are found in him—and all other social-political hopes are but cheap, idolatrous substitutions. He alone grants forgiveness, cleansing, life, right relations between people and nations—he alone will recreate heaven and earth and bring all things under his headship. In him we see divine freedom and deferential love and by being united to him we are graciously swept up into God’s eternal life.