

In My Father's House
By Jason Huff
Deuteronomy 16:1-6, Psalm 106:1-12, Luke 2:40-52

Today's third passage is a special one...we're continuing our series in Luke, and we've reached the only passage in the entire Bible that speaks about Jesus as a child. Here's the passage from Luke 2:40-52...“Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he was saying to them. Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.”

Today, we're looking at a truly unique passage of Scripture. People throughout history have wondered what it would have been like growing up with Jesus...to have known him as a young child or as a teenager. In fact, we still have stories written around 150 AD or so that claim to tell us about Jesus bringing clay birds to life and doing other miracles as a child. Now the church always recognized them as fraudulent. But we know about the stories because there are simply a lot of copies of them in a lot of languages, and apparently they stayed somewhat popular until the Middle Ages. They are still fascinating today because we long to know more about Jesus. Maybe it's all the more intriguing because the one story we do have about Jesus' childhood is one of the most difficult and fascinating in the whole New Testament for us to grasp. The text today leaves us with a lot more questions than it does answers. But perhaps we can learn from the young Jesus and see why it was that Luke included this story in his gospel.

So let's start with understanding what was going on in this passage. Jesus and his family were going to Jerusalem to celebrate the feast of the Passover. Now this was the biggest feast of the year for the entire Hebrew nation. There were three festivals celebrated where the men were supposed to go to Jerusalem – Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Now Passover was the biggest of the festivals because it celebrated God's liberation of the Jewish people from Egypt. It was considered by far the most sacred of the holidays that reminded them of God's salvation. Now the other celebrations were important too, but Passover was different -- even casual Jews who weren't observant of the other holidays celebrated this one. Jerusalem would have been packed out because every man the age of 13 or over went, and often families would attend too. So imagine all these people from all over Israel converging on Jerusalem. What was already a big city was filled to overflowing with pilgrims who came to celebrate the feast.

Now Jesus was 12 years old, so he didn't absolutely have to go, but he likely went because his family did...and they probably went every year. As the passage soon points out, they went as a caravan. Groups would go together to ward off bandits who might attack a lone traveler on the road. It was also a big celebration; Jesus and his family would likely see friends and relatives that he might not see for months or even the rest of the year. So you can imagine just what kind of madhouse this could have been.

This sets the stage for what happens next. The festival ends. According to tradition, on the last day of the festival, the devout would enter the temple one last time before going home. Maybe this is when Jesus first came to the attention of the scholars and scribes and teachers. Maybe Jesus lost track of time talking to them...hard to believe, but Scripture tells us in Philippians 2 that he emptied himself of much of his divinity when he became human in order to experience life as we do. It's a possibility that shows us that Jesus was human too. Maybe, as many of us do, assumptions were made about where Jesus was. Maybe he'd been with a friend or a grandparent earlier and Mary and Joseph just assumed he was in the back of the caravan with them. We're not sure. We do know, though, that there was likely a great crowd in Jerusalem, and it might have been hard to make sure everyone in a group was accounted for.

But as I think on it, I think that Mary and Joseph may have been a little lax...not because they were bad parents. Far from it! But we know that Jesus never sinned. This meant that He always honored his father and mother. He didn't disobey unless he knew something was amiss. Now all of us have children like that, right? But seriously, Jesus was not a problem child, at least not in the typical sense. He may have had problems that came from knowing he was different. He might have been teased for talking to God so much or praying while other boys his age were playing. We aren't sure. But on the whole, it would have been easy for Mary and Joseph to think, "Jesus is going to be right with us...he always is. He'll be along." But then after traveling the full day, they camp for the night, and they find out Jesus isn't with them. For the first time, they get truly scared. This special child has been entrusted to them, and they've lost him.

It's one of the scariest passages to me now as a parent. As a child, I always focused on the boy Jesus wowing them in the temple. But for Mary and Joseph, this has to bring them close to panic. Yes, Jesus is unique...but he's still only 12. Where could he be? Did we miss something? Who's to blame? Is he going to be OK? What will we do? I can only imagine the kind of fear they felt. And so they want to hurry back, but it's already nightfall, and there's no possible way that they can go after him now. It's far too dangerous. So they have one sleepless night, and then a second day going as fast as they can to Jerusalem. And even then, it's going to be too late for them to search. So another night follows. Finally, they wake up on the third day and start looking for Jesus. And eventually that day, they wander into the temple, tired and scared and hoping that maybe he's there...and he is.

Now like I said, it's easy to focus on the teachers who are amazed at Jesus' understanding. This is an important point that tells us that even before Jesus was considered to be an adult – which in their culture was the age of 13 – he was deeply in tune with God and with the Scriptures. Jesus didn't suddenly decide one day that he was going to become the messiah. Even though he was emptied of much of what made Him God – His omniscience, his might, his glory – he had an awareness of who He was.

Clearly the teachers in the temple weren't even sure what to make of his incredible understanding of God, it was so profound. It's possible that one of them took him home each night just to talk with him more, or perhaps all the scribes and teachers wound up not going home, discussing God's ways long into the night. Again, the passage doesn't tell us, but it seems clear that Jesus was in no danger and was in fact quite the talk of the temple.

Joseph and Mary were astonished once they finally found him. It seems that *they* were very surprised that he would have spent all this time in the temple. And that's reasonable enough, because who would expect any 12-year old to want to talk with grownups about God for three days? But I think too that they didn't yet fully understand Jesus' calling. They were learning as they went. All they knew was this child they loved dearly hadn't come with them. Now let's be realistic here...it would have been dangerous and foolish for Jesus to have tried to catch up with their caravan if they had left without him. But Mary's motherly instincts come out, and she tells him the grief that she and Joseph have gone through. You can kind of see her running up to him and giving him a hard time all at once.

But then comes the clincher. Jesus asks why they were searching for him. For him, being in the temple is the most natural thing in the world. Being in the place where God is worshipped and honored and discussed, that's where he'd be. And his parents had seen him over the last 12 years...they knew his heart. They knew where he'd be. But the statement that throws everybody off is this...Jesus says, "Didn't you know that I had to be in my Father's house?" The text says, they don't understand what he was saying to them. Now what Jesus says *is* a little confusing – because Jesus uses some odd wording, what he says could be translated, "I had to be about my father's business" or "I had to be part of my father's household." But that's not what is confusing his parents here. What's confusing them is the use of the word Father.

As far as most people were concerned, Jesus already had a father: Joseph. While Luke makes it clear that Joseph is not Jesus' natural father, we also know that Joseph was always *considered* his father. When Jesus is taken to the temple dedication, we're told his parents did it. When Simeon makes his prophecy, it says "the child's father and mother were amazed." When Mary confronts Jesus about staying behind the temple, she says, "Your father and I were worried sick about you." So when Jesus says "I must be in my Father's house," he confused them.

And the reason that they are so confused is that nobody ever talked that way about God. Jesus is saying something totally radical...he is calling God His very own father. This simply wasn't done! The only time where it appears that an individual might be able to call God his Father in the Old Testament is in Psalm 2, which was taken by some to be about King David. Now Israel as a whole could call God Father collectively, in the sense that God fathered the nation and called Himself its father. But for an individual to call God his Father was seen as audacious at best and perhaps even blasphemous. John 5:18 tells us that the Jewish leaders eventually sought to kill Jesus eighteen years later because he "was calling God His own Father, making Himself equal with God." So when Jesus says He must be in His Father's house, Mary and Joseph have no idea what to make of it. They don't understand because they have no frame of reference for it. But even as a young child, Jesus is establishing that He is indeed the Son of God who can truly claim God as His Father.

Then the passage ends with a telling statement – they all went home, and Jesus was obedient to them. Luke makes it clear that this was not a story of disobedience but a unique incident that revealed more of who Jesus was and is. We're told that Mary treasured up this incident in her heart, just like she did Jesus' birth. She too is learning from him and working to understand this amazing, matchless miracle child. She isn't content to just let things be; she wants to learn what God is doing through her son. And Jesus matures in wisdom, stature, and favor, both with God and men. He grows up, and all the while, Mary is watching, silently pondering. It's these details, Mary's observations, which have led most scholars to believe that Luke interviewed Mary and got her story. And this is a transition point, too; Jesus family plays only a minor role in the story from here on out.

So what can we take from this? What does this story give us beyond the tale of an astonishingly brilliant young child who is so absorbed in his conversations with the teachers of God's Word that he misses his ride home? Here's what I think makes this story something we can remember throughout the week. First, Jesus teaches us of a heavenly Father. Second, he teaches us about obedience. And finally, he teaches us about responsibility.

Let's talk first about God as our heavenly Father. Jesus' first spoken words that we know about reveal to us this eternal mystery. Before Jesus, we only had glimpses of the Trinity we now understand of God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Jesus is in very nature God, one with the Father, but still unique from the Father. But perhaps even more important is that Jesus calls God Father. The first person of the Trinity is known to us not by a proper name but by a relationship. The first person is our Father, and not just Jesus' father but the Father of all who believe in Him. This radically changes our relationship with Him.

God as Father is not distant. He is not some being up in the sky somewhere who exists to punish us or zap us when we do something wrong. While He is all-powerful and almighty, He also relates to us on a very personal level. We can call Him Father because Jesus revealed Him as Father to us. Many religions have no concept of this. The Qu'ran, for example, states that God is not a father. And others don't have any sense of God as we think of Him. Even the ancient religions that had a character like Zeus as the father of the gods and of men never saw that god as one that was a personal God who would ever relate to humanity. But Jesus gave us a gift because now we know that God is our Father. God is someone who loves us more than our very own earthly fathers do, one who protects us and cares for us and even knows how and when to discipline and correct us. Without Jesus and the words he said in this passage, which he elaborates on in his ministry, we would not know God as a personal, loving Father. He is in His Father's house, doing the work of His Father, and revealing the truth: that God wants for us to be His children, to father us as only the perfect father can. Maybe we've gotten too used to this idea; maybe we've lived with it for so long that we don't appreciate just how important this is. Only Christianity reveals that God is not just *a* creator father figure but *the* Father who wants his children to know him intimately. And this changes how we pray, how we think, and how we live, because we can do all of those things knowing that our God loves us enough to be our very own Father too.

Second, Jesus teaches us obedience. Even in His limitations, He was still God. He could ask the Father for anything. He was the only teenager in the history of the world who really did know more than his parents! And yet he obeyed them, not out of pity, not out of rote obligation to the law or the commandment to honor his father and mother – as part of the Godhead, he created the law and the ten commandments, after all! But he was living out the truth. He was in a right relationship with his parents when he obeyed them. In fact, the Greek text has the sense that he was submitted to them. He knew that for that time, he needed to be under their authority.

And that sets an example for all of us. We may know more than our boss about a subject. We might think that something a teacher has given us for an assignment is bogus. (And that's true for all students...it happened in seminary too, believe me.) We may feel that the speed limit shouldn't be the speed limit. There are countless situations where things may not be right as far as we are concerned. But Jesus shows us that obedience to others can create harmony and respect. If the son of God could submit himself to the authority of two human beings, devout but often wrong and occasionally even sinful, then we can manage it too when the time calls for it.

Now the third point is the one that puts obedience into perspective, and that is responsibility. There are times when obedience to someone is, in fact, truly wrong and actually sinful. There are other times where our responsibility is to do what's best rather than that which is merely good. Jesus doesn't just say "I had to be in my Father's house" to emphasize where he'd be. His words in Greek really stress that it was *necessary* for him. It wasn't an option. He had to be there. Why? We can't explain that totally. Yet Jesus knew that he *had* to be there, worshipping, teaching, listening, asking. There are times when we will create hardships for ourselves or for others because we must do what is right even though the consequences are harsh. It seems that Jesus is OK with that. Jesus is most concerned with our living out the truth faithfully and accepting the cost. When it comes down to it, our responsibility to God is the one thing that trumps our need to obey. We can't use it as a crutch to justify disobedience to those we simply don't like or disagree with, but our ultimate obedience and responsibility is to God.

But what this also illustrates is that we have some responsibilities that God places on us. Jesus knew the Bible; He knew the teachings and the teachers. He was close to the Father in a way that you and I can only imagine, at least for the time being, whether he was on a hill talking to the crowds or sitting in a garden praying. There was no absolute need for him to be at the synagogue or temple listening to other people preach and teach at all. But he did it because he knew his place was with the people of God, in the place where God established that He would be worshipped, in the place devoted to God. He had the responsibility to be there at that time, and he followed that responsibility. It makes us ask too...how are we doing in our responsibility and obedience to God? Now coming to church doesn't make you a good Christian any more than standing in the police station makes you a cop or standing in the newspaper office makes you a reporter. God wants us to be here cheerfully. But is God tugging on you to get more involved...to be obedient to Him in studying the Bible? To be responsible for giving to God's work? To be mindful to take care of the less fortunate in our midst? The good news is, we can be obedient and responsible, precisely because we know that we have a heavenly Father who in His love empowers us to be changed from the inside out, and that internal change that affects who we *are* also touches everything on the outside that we *do*.

The truth is, there is much more just hiding under the surface of this passage about Jesus, far more than we have time for...the fact that he was a child once and went through all of that just like us is enough for ten sermons. The late Rich Mullins wrote a song about the parallels between his childhood and what it must have been like for Jesus. As the song goes, "You was a boy like I was once, but was You a boy like me? Well I grew up around Indiana, You grew up around Galilee...and if I ever really do grow up...Lord I want to grow up and be just like You." As we go out into the world this week and into the new year, let's do it determined to grow up just like Jesus...to know our true Father, to be obedient and responsible to Him, and to find in that obedience the wonderful love He has waiting for us. Let's pray.