

Luke 2:41-52 – Jesus Lost and Found

Introduction

Luke is the only one of the Gospel writers to tell us anything about the childhood of the Lord Jesus Christ – apart from what we are told of his birth and the first weeks of his life. And Luke does not tell us very much. There is just this incident recorded in Luke 2:41-52 of the 12 year old Jesus being lost and found.

None of the authentic Gospel writers tell us anything about miracles performed by Jesus in his childhood – unlike the apocryphal “Gospel of Thomas”.

Since this is all that is recorded of Jesus’ childhood, it should be treated as all the more important. This incident stood out in the memory of his mother, Mary, and was important to Luke’s account of Jesus.

Notice particularly the verses that sandwich the record of this incident:

When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him. (vv. 39-40)

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 favour with God and man. (vv.51-52)

Luke is underlining the reality of the Incarnation. Although he was the Son of God (more of that later), Jesus came and lived an ordinary human life, identifying himself completely with us. Yet it was an *extraordinary* human life, for it was a perfect human life – without sin; a model human life.

The hymn *Once in Royal David’s City* puts it like this in verses 3 and 4:

And through all his wondrous childhood
He would honour and obey,
Love and watch the lowly maiden,
In whose gentle arms he lay:
Christian children all must be
Mild, obedient, good as he.

For he is our childhood’s pattern;
Day by day, like us he grew;
He was little, weak and helpless,
Tears and smiles like us he knew;
And he feeleth for our sadness,
And he shareth in our gladness.

He is, of course, far more than a pattern for perfect childhood – Mrs Alexander wrote this hymn for her Sunday School Class. He is the pattern for all that we should be as human beings – all that we were meant to be.

Before we look at the details of this passage, it is helpful for us to remember what the world in which Jesus lived and grew up was like.

Jesus grew up in a land under Roman occupation. The presence of Roman authorities and soldiers was very visible though it was not often oppressive. The Roman authorities allowed the Jews a great deal of freedom, particularly the freedom to exercise their own religion. Nevertheless, the Jews of Jesus’ day were very aware that they were not free to rule themselves; their king was a puppet of the Roman government. So the Jews longed to be liberated from Roman power.

Moreover, Jesus and his family lived in Galilee – Galilee of the Gentiles. This was an area of the country with a very mixed population – you could find pig farmers on the shores of Lake Galilee.

Jerusalem, in the South, remained the centre of Jewish religious life with its Temple that had been rebuilt by King Herod. The religious authorities in the South looked down their noses at those who came from Galilee – “Can anything good come out of Nazareth?”

With this background in mind, let’s look at what Luke has to tell us in this incident concerning the 12 year old Jesus.

The family trip to Jerusalem, vv. 41-42

Every year Jesus’ parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom.

The Passover was the most important festival in the Jewish year. It celebrated God’s rescue of his people from slavery in Egypt – the Exodus.

You remember that Pharaoh, king of Egypt, would not let the Israelites go even after God had sent many plagues on the land of Egypt. Then God told his people to kill a lamb, one lamb for each household, and to paint the blood on the lintel and doorposts of their house. They were to stay in the house that night, to eat the lamb in haste with unleavened bread and to be clothed and packed ready to leave Egypt. God was coming down in judgment that night. The firstborn in every Egyptian household would be struck dead. Only the Israelites, sheltering under the sign of the shed blood of the lamb would be spared.

After the death of the firstborn, Pharaoh let the Israelites go. At last they were freed from slavery and were on their way to the promised land.

And every year the Israelites celebrated the day God had rescued them from slavery and foreign domination as they celebrated Passover together with the killing and eating of a lamb and with unleavened bread.

Every Jewish family able to travel would make their way to Jerusalem to celebrate together. There, each family would sacrifice a lamb and celebrate the time when they were freed from slavery. And every year, at Passover, they would pray that God would come and do it again; that God might free them from the power of the Romans and establish his kingdom on earth.

Each year, Jesus’ family travelled to Jerusalem. They were clearly a family that took their Jewish faith seriously and who rejoiced in all that God had done for his people. This year Jesus had turned 12, the age when a child was reckoned to be becoming a man. So, as a young adult he accompanied his parents – or rather, he travelled in their company of relatives and friends from Nazareth and perhaps the wider region.

Jesus is lost

But then we read, vv.43-45:

After the festival 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 travelled 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.

Mary and Joseph had not seen Jesus on the first day’s journey out of Jerusalem, but this would not have seemed strange to them. They had assumed that Jesus was travelling with other members of their party, perhaps relatives or perhaps young people of his own age and so his absence was easily missed. But when they stopped for the night and it was time to

camp together they searched for him and could not find him. So Mary and Joseph, in the morning no doubt, begin to retrace their steps, looking for their son. They made it all the way back to Jerusalem without finding him. Now they were really troubled, for Jerusalem with its narrow streets and alleys and Roman soldiers was no place for a young man to be on his own.

Jesus is found

At last Jesus is found, vv46-48a:

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.

When we read, “after three days” this probably includes the days of travelling: one day when Mary and Joseph travelled with their company away from Jerusalem before they realised that Jesus was not with them; one day travelling back to Jerusalem looking carefully around them on the road to see if he had been injured or lost on the way; one day searching the city of Jerusalem before Jesus was at last discovered.

Jesus had spent these three days in the Temple courts. He was with the teachers of the law – the Scribes – listening to them and asking them questions. And he was responding to their questions or to their answers to him – “Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers.”

What was Jesus talking about? Luke does not tell us so cannot know with any certainty. But it is not unlikely that he was talking to them about the Passover – the festival that was just drawing to a close. Maybe he was talking to them about the way in which God had rescued his people from slavery all those years ago through the sacrifice of a lamb. Maybe he was asking them about the significance of this story, a story commemorated year-by-year. Maybe he was asking them why they were still under the dominion of pagan foreign powers and whether and how God might act again to free them from their oppressors. Did the lamb, sacrificed so long ago, point to what God might yet do to save his people and rescue them from slavery?

He was only asking questions. He was respectful of the authority of these teachers. Yet all were amazed at his understanding and his answers. Even Mary and Joseph when they arrived and found him were astonished at what they saw and heard.

Mary’s words and Jesus’ reply

But as Mary’s three days of anxiety turned into relief it was accompanied by a measure of anger. “Son,” she says, “why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.” (v. 48b). She does not say “We are so sorry we left you behind”, but brings an accusation against Jesus that lays all the blame on him.

Note her words, “Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.” Joseph, the one who has brought Jesus up as his own son is here called Jesus’ father by Mary.

But note Jesus’ reply, (v.49): “Why were you searching for me? Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?” or “about my Father’s business?” – either translation is possible. Mary had referred to Joseph as Jesus’ father but Jesus responds by gently reminding his mother that God is his Father. The 12-year-old Jesus has a growing awareness of who he is – the Son of God come from heaven to save his people from their sins. He has a growing realisation of his calling to be obedient to the Father and what this will involve.

In the first century, a son would commonly learn his trade from his father and would first help in his father’s business and then succeed to his business. Jesus himself learned from Joseph the craft of being a carpenter (see Mark 6:3 where Jesus is called “the carpenter”).

But he was also beginning to learn the business of his heavenly Father. This was the business that would dominate his life and shape its course. This would not be the last time that Jesus would be found in the temple, conversing with the leaders of Israel and astonishing all who heard him.

Being about his Father's business will take him to the agony of Gethsemane and his prayer of submission, "Father ... not my will but yours be done" (Lk. 22:42). It will take him to the cross, for he is the Lamb of God the shedding of whose blood will take away the sin of the world.

The Temple

The first two chapters of Luke's Gospel have focus a good deal on the temple. John the Baptist's father, Zechariah, received a life-changing message from God in the temple. After Jesus' birth, Mary and Joseph presented him to the Lord in the temple. There an old man called Simeon was waiting for the day when God would visit his people again. He took the baby Jesus in his arms and declared that he could now die content for he had seen God's salvation that would embrace Gentiles as well as Jews. Here in the temple, an old woman, Anna, saw the child and praised God, speaking about this child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

And now the child is becoming a man and is in the temple in Jerusalem, the place which is a symbol of God's dwelling with his people – it is the 'House of God'. And here is the one who is himself the fulfilment of the temple: he is Immanuel, the one in whom God has come to dwell with us. The Lord has come to his temple, come to question the Jewish leaders. He comes at first to question them respectfully, but this would not be the last time that Jesus would be found in the temple, conversing with the leaders of Israel and astonishing all who heard him. And perhaps there is already a hint of the conflict that lies ahead and which will lead to the cross – the destruction of this temple and rebuilding of it in three days.

In the meantime

But in the meantime we read (vv. 51-52):

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 favour with God and man.

Jesus readily submits himself to his earthly parents. He is the incarnate God, fully taking on our humanity that he might be the sinless and perfect human being. He continues to grow in wisdom and knowledge – understanding more fully what Father God is calling him to be and to do. And here, through this incident of his visit to Jerusalem, there is the clear indication that the day is coming when he will no longer be the carpenter from Nazareth but will be devoted entirely to the will and business of his heavenly Father. He will be the Lamb of God, the Passover sacrifice through which his people will be rescued from slavery. He will be the Saviour of the world.

How does God address us through this passage?

It calls us to see and understand who Jesus is

Have you recognised who Jesus is? Not just a good man – even a perfect man. Not just a great prophet and teacher. He is the Son of God come to earth. He is God incarnate – God come to take on a human life like our lives that he might rescue us from the slavery of sin. He is the Lamb of God come to take away the sin of the world.

He is the one in whom and through whom God meets us and in whom and through whom we meet God – not in a temple made of stone and covered in gold but in the temple of his own person, the dwelling place of God with us.

Mary and Joseph found Jesus after three days and were in for a surprise when they saw him. What they saw and his words to them turned their world upside down. Have you found Jesus, the one who will turn your life upside down and who will surprise you with his grace and forgiveness?

This passage underlines for us what it means to follow Jesus

Following Jesus means that, like him, we must be devoted to doing the Father's will, being about the Father's business. Can this be said of us?

One thing I ask from the LORD,
this only do I seek:
that I may dwell in the house of the LORD
all the days of my life,
to gaze on the beauty of the LORD
and to seek him in his temple. (Psalm 27:4)

That will mean different things for each one of us as God has differing plans and different jobs for each of us in the business of his kingdom (Bryony).

May the Saviour teach each one of us to listen to his voice – his call upon our lives – and to follow him gladly and wholeheartedly.

This passage reminds of the value of asking questions

In your witness to others, maybe you feel that you cannot come out with a clear and succinct statement of the gospel ending in a challenge to faith. But you can ask Jesus to teach you to be wise in asking questions: What are your hopes and fears? How can I pray for you? What can I do to help you? Questions that respect the person you are talking to and yet challenge them to think afresh about themselves and about God.

Prayer

Lord Jesus, help us to learn of you and to follow you. Help us always to be about the Father's business. Help us to grow in wisdom and in every good quality we see so clearly displayed in you. Help us to bring blessing into the lives of those around us that they too might praise your name.

Peter Misselbrook

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