

Christmas 1, December 29, 2024

### **LUKE 2:41–52. (EHV)**

Every year his parents traveled to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. When he was twelve years old, they went up according to the custom of the Festival. When the days had ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it. Since they thought he was in their group, they went a day's journey. Then they began to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were 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 this way? See, your father and I have been anxiously looking for you." He said to them, "**Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be taking care of my Father's business?**" They did not understand what he was telling them. He went down with them and came to Nazareth. He was always obedient to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart. Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and with people.

What was Jesus like as a child?

What was it like for Mary and Joseph to have a son who, whenever they asked him to sweep or clean, always said, "Gladly"? What was it like to be one of his brothers or sisters, to be playing in a room with Jesus by yourself, and every time Mary or Joseph had to walk into the room and ask, "Who did that?"—to know not only that it was always you who did it, but also that you were never going to get away with pointing the finger at Jesus?

Did he ever trip and fall? Did he play sports? Did he ever lose?

If you have ever asked yourself any of these questions, you are not alone. It was precisely this hunger among early Christians for stories and anecdotes about the boy Jesus that resulted in, for instance, the writing of the Infancy Gospel of Thomas. This "Gospel" was supposedly written by an Israelite named Thomas—not the apostle—and the author invented all sorts of outlandish miracles that Jesus performed when he was only five years old.

Stories like the time when a boy ran up against him and struck his shoulder, and Jesus got mad and told him, "You won't be going back the way you came," and instantly the boy fell down dead. And the parents of the dead boy went to Joseph and complained saying, "Since you have a child like this, it is impossible for you to live with us in the village. You must teach him to bless, and not to curse, for he is killing our children."

Or like the time when Jesus was playing in an upper room with his friends, and one of them fell down to the ground floor and died. And all the children ran away except Jesus. And since Jesus had a reputation for killing children, when the parents showed up they blamed and threatened Jesus. So Jesus told the young boy, "Zeno, stand up and tell me: Did I throw you down?" And immediately Zeno stood up and said, "Certainly not, my lord. You did not throw me down, but have raised me up!"

Such stories are interesting, even if clearly untrue, but the reality is that God has only revealed one story from Jesus's youth, and it's the only one we need.

God's law had dictated that every Israelite man should journey to Jerusalem to appear before the LORD in the temple three times a year—for the Feast of Passover, the Feast of Weeks (also called Pentecost), and the Feast of Booths or Tabernacles (Deut. 16:16). Even though women were not required to attend these festivals, godly women also made the journey if they were able to. Luke tells us that Mary went with Joseph to celebrate the Passover every year.

According to early Jewish tradition, a child, especially a male, was supposed to accompany his father as soon as he was able to take his father's hand and walk with him from Jerusalem up to the temple mount. So even though Luke says nothing of the boy Jesus before he was twelve years old, this was likely not Jesus's first time going with his parents to Jerusalem. He had accompanied them from little on.

And how he must have grown to love it! The journey itself was probably an adventurous one for a little boy—walking about seventy to eighty miles over hills, through valleys, along the river, up to the holy mountain on which Jerusalem sat. There Jesus would see millions of people, which was millions more than he encountered back home in Nazareth.

And once they arrived, there were the preparations for the Passover. Their traveling party probably divided into groups of about twelve people, since a Passover lamb could typically feed about that many. Joseph had to arrange for a suitable room in Jerusalem in which his family and their dining group could eat the Passover. Perhaps Joseph took Jesus with him to select a regulation Passover lamb from the dealers. Perhaps Jesus also accompanied Joseph to the temple when Joseph had the lamb slaughtered, skinned, and gutted, and then carried it back to the place where they would celebrate the Passover. Perhaps he helped his father stick the wooden spit through the lamb on which the lamb would be roasted.

And then there was the Passover meal itself, and what was doubtless Jesus's favorite part: As the appetizer course was almost finished and Joseph's cup was filled with diluted wine for the second time, he would perhaps nod to Jesus and Jesus would smile and ask him, "What does this ceremony mean to you, father?" And Joseph would explain how the LORD had passed over the houses of the Israelites in Egypt and spared them, and how they were eating unleavened bread because the Israelites had to leave in haste, and how they were eating bitter herbs to remind them of how bitter the Israelites' slavery was in Egypt. Then they would sing Psalms 113–114.

And after the Passover meal was finished, the festival lasted seven more days. Perhaps they stayed in Bethany with friends during this time. Maybe this is how Jesus came to be acquainted with the family of Mary and Martha, with whom he stayed when he was much older.

Just like today, a Jewish boy seems not to have been considered a Bar Mitvah, a "son of the commandment" or religiously responsible adult, until he was thirteen, much like we don't consider children to be religiously responsible adults until they are confirmed at about fourteen. To put it in negative terms, Jesus could not be excommunicated for failing to appear in Jerusalem for these three festivals until he was thirteen.

So when Jesus was twelve, the Passover was especially important to him. Joseph had to make sure Jesus understood all his religious festival duties, so that he could fulfill them the following year.

Of course, this was an exciting time for any twelve-year-old Jewish boy, just as confirmation instruction leading up to confirmation is an exciting time for thirteen- and fourteen-year-old boys and girls. But it definitely wasn't the only thing on a twelve-year-old boy's mind.

They were making and establishing friendships that suited them. They were getting involved in games and contests with each other. They were paying more attention to the world around them—to news, to politics, to girls. They were beginning to go through the teenage rebellion and wildness that would bring headaches to their parents, but that they would need to go through in order to find their place in the world. As is generally recognized, puberty and morality are not typically close companions.

That's what makes the story of this particular twelve-year-old so astonishing.

“When he was twelve years old, they went up according to the custom of the Festival. When the days had ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it. Since they thought he was in their group, they went a day's journey. Then they began to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him. After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers.”

This is one of the hints we get about what Jesus was like before this event. Joseph and Mary, even though they were in charge of the Son of God himself, were so accustomed to their routine and so accustomed to Jesus's obedience that it didn't even occur to them to check to make sure he was with their traveling party when they left. But you can imagine what they felt like when they realized at the end of the day that Jesus was not with them. Remember when God came to Cain after he had murdered his brother and asked him, “Where is your brother Abel?” How terrifying that must have been for Cain! How much more terrifying it would have been for Mary and Joseph if God had come to them and asked, “Where is my Son whom I gave you?”

And in the meantime what are we to imagine transpiring with Jesus? Obviously, he was spending his days in the temple. But what about food? And where was he spending the night?

Only one thing is clear: While other twelve-year-old boys were concerned about and occupying themselves with friends, games, news, girls, and getting into trouble, the twelve-year-old Jesus's greatest concern and joy was spending time in the temple learning more about God's word and God's will.

Can you imagine what these teachers in Jerusalem experienced? Imagine inheriting a student who had never once been distracted when being taught and who had always done his homework faithfully. By now word had doubtless spread among them about this bright boy from Nazareth. What Mary and Joseph found was not normal. When we think of a classroom, we think of one teacher and many students. But with Jesus it was the opposite: Jesus, one boy, was sitting among many teachers. It took more than one to engage Jesus.

In humility he was learning from people whom he himself divinely called to their position. He was listening to them and asking them questions. But they and others who had gathered around were giving equal attention to him, and marveling at his piercing questions and intelligent answers to their questions.

But now the situation reaches a climax. “When his parents saw him, they were astonished. His mother said to him, ‘Son, why have you treated us this way? See, your father and I have been anxiously looking for you.’ He said to them, ‘Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be taking care of my Father's business?’”

There it is: The answer to anyone who wants to point the finger at Jesus and accuse him of sinning against his parents. The answer is not, "It wasn't Jesus's fault. It was his parents' fault for not making sure he was with them." The answer is not, "As long as you're in church, no one can accuse you of sinning." No, the answer is that Joseph and Mary were not the only parents Jesus had. Jesus was gently but firmly reminding his mother of what the angel Gabriel had told her: He was the Son of God. God himself was his father. Already at age twelve, Jesus realized even as true man that he was the promised Messiah. Was it not expected of him, was it not fitting for him, was it not right of him, to spend time with his real Father at his real Father's house and to be about his real Father's business?

Actually, the astonishing thing isn't that Jesus stayed behind in the temple. The astonishing thing is that, after he has reminded them that God himself is his real Father, Luke tells us this: "He went down with them and came to Nazareth. He was always obedient to them. . . . Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and with people." Jesus, as a twelve-year-old, entering the so-called rebellious teenage years, knowing that he is the Son of God himself, goes obediently home with these humans and continues to do what they tell him to do. And as he continues to grow older, he doesn't leave behind any dark secrets and make any enemies through sin. Both God and humans can only continue to be pleased with him.

How many lessons we can learn from the boy Jesus!

First, the Bible tells us that we "are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus. For all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ." If you are baptized, then you have put on Christ, and if you have put on Christ, then God is your Father just as he was and is Jesus's Father.

So it is good for us, especially for you children and teenagers, to ask this question: If you could choose any activity to occupy yourself with apart from your parents' supervision or the supervision of anyone else and you didn't have to worry about what to eat or where to sleep, what would you choose?

If the answer was, "Attend a concert," or, "Hang out with my favorite actors," or, "Party," or worse... If the answer was not, "Spend time with my heavenly Father in his Word or at church," then that shows we haven't even reached the Christian maturity level of a twelve-year-old boy. It shows that God is not number one in our hearts, that we are guilty of idolatry. For that we must ask God's forgiveness.

Second, the Scriptures give us all authority to which we must be obedient. Even the president as the chief executive of our country has to submit to the other two branches of government and is still subject to the law. How do we treat those in authority over us? Do we simply ignore them when we think we know better?

Ask yourself this: How often do you think Jesus knew better than Mary and Joseph? And yet what are we told? "He went down with them and came to Nazareth. He was always obedient to them." And it did not hurt him to subject himself to imperfect authorities. No, we're told he grew in wisdom and in favor with God and with people. The devil is lying to you if he is telling you that you can get ahead in life or get wiser by ignoring what authorities tell you and going your own way. Disobedience ends in death. Children, obey your parents, whether you know better than they do or not. Parents, obey the government, whether you know better than they do

or not. For all of us owe obedience to God above all, who always knows better than we do, and he is the one who commands our obedience to the authorities he has placed in our lives.

And finally, of what does this story assure us? King David, a man after the Lord's own heart, once prayed, "Remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways" (Ps. 25:7). Who of us can look back on our preceding years, especially our teenage years and earlier and say, "If I had to do it all over again, I would do it all exactly the same"? Those years, more than any other, should remind us that we deserve hell.

But look, here is the One who steps in your place. Here is One who is perfect, even as a twelve-year-old. And if he is perfect as he enters his teenage years, should we doubt that he has kept God's entire law for us throughout his life? Paul wrote to the Romans, "Through the disobedience of the one man, [Adam,] the many were made sinners. Through the obedience of the one man, [Jesus,] the many will be made righteous" (Rom. 5:19). The righteousness we see in Jesus the twelve-year-old is the righteousness God sees in us for Jesus's sake. For all of you who believe in Jesus, the righteousness of the baby Jesus, the righteousness of the twelve-year-old Jesus, the righteousness of the thirty-year-old Jesus, the righteousness of the dying Jesus is all yours.

Let us then put our faith in this Jesus for our righteousness and, having been made righteous in God's sight, let us make this Jesus our example and our guide for righteous living as we conclude the current year and enter the new one. Amen.