

Missing!

Beyond Bethlehem: The Boyhood of Jesus – Part III

Luke 2:41-51

Introduction

In the Jewish culture, there was not a calendar in any home that did not have a circle around the seven days that marked the Feast of Passover.

Jewish law required all the men, from the age of thirteen and up, to attend three feasts in Jerusalem: Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles. Custom allowed men who lived far away to attend only one of the three, and Passover was typically the favored feast.ⁱ

It is at this very moment in the Jewish calendar, which would have been late March and early April, that Luke gives another glimpse into the boyhood of Jesus.

The Passover Lamb at the Feast of Passover

Turn in your Bible to the Gospel by Luke and look at chapter 2, verses 41-42.

Now His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover.

And when He became twelve, they went up there according to the custom of the Feast;

Let me hit the pause button for a moment. I could deliver a sermon on this one sentence alone. You are probably thinking, “I know you could, but please don’t . . . it’s Christmas!”

Let me at least give you a view through this window into the devotion of Joseph and Mary to God.

The law allowed any Jewish male who lived beyond fifteen miles of Jerusalem to celebrate Passover in his own village and to not have to make a lengthy and expensive journey.ⁱⁱ

Nazareth is about sixty-five miles north of Jerusalem, so Joseph is well outside the fifteen-mile perimeter that would have required him to attend Passover there. It would have taken several days of travel during which he would have been away from his business and responsibilities.

Understand as well that the law did not require women to attend any of the feasts in Jerusalem. In this culture, they would stay behind to keep the children and tend to the livestock and crops.

However, it would have been the desire of every godly man *and* woman to travel to Jerusalem, the heart of their nation and their worship, to enter into these celebrations of national life and faith. We know from history that every faithful Jew wanted to celebrate the feasts in Jerusalem at least once during their lifetime.

With all this in mind, look at verse 41 again.

Now His parents [Joseph and Mary] went to Jerusalem [when?] every year at the Feast of the Passover.

What insight this gives us into the dedication of these parents to the worship of their living God. Joseph and Mary went every year!

This year is especially significant because Jesus is twelve years old. He is only months away from full membership into the synagogue. The modern custom recognizing this is called a bar mitzvah.

The word “bar” means “son”. We have read Jesus saying to Peter, in Matthew 16:17, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-jona . . .”. This means Peter’s father’s name was Jonah. “Bar mitzvah” means “son of the law; son of the commandment”.

According to the *Mishnah*, a commentary of every aspect of Jewish living during the days of Christ, fathers were instructed to include their sons in the observance of the Passover “one or two years before they are of age” – which was thirteen, the year they became sons of the law and were responsible to keep the law for themselves.ⁱⁱⁱ

So twelve-year-old Jesus, overflowing with energy and curiosity, is accompanying Joseph and Mary as they fulfill their annual custom of celebrating the atoning work of God through the Passover lamb.

What irony this is! Joseph and Mary are bringing the eternal Deliverer to Jerusalem as they celebrate an earlier deliverance from Egypt through the Passover lamb.

What a moment in time! This couple is bringing the final Passover Lamb to celebrate the feast of Passover lambs.

Jerusalem would be packed with pilgrims. Merchants would line the streets with their booths to sell their wares, and the most intense activity would be at the sheep stalls where the Jewish pilgrims bartered for sheep to sacrifice at the temple.^{iv}

Joseph, Mary, and young Jesus would have gone to the stalls to choose their lamb. Perhaps Joseph let Jesus pick him out.

There were still shepherds living who had been keeping the temple sheep – the paschal lambs in Bethlehem – when the angels had appeared with the good news of Christ’s birth. The sheep they have been tending were now led to Jerusalem. By the time Jesus, Joseph and Mary went to pick out their lamb for the festival feast, one historical record indicates that more than 250,000 sheep had been driven into the city.

There are perhaps as many as a million pilgrims stuffed into Jerusalem as the sun rises on Passover day. All twenty-four divisions of priests are serving in the temple instead of just one division, and they will be busy every single moment. Jesus would watch as His stepfather killed the lamb and a priest caught the blood in a silver or golden basin and then doused the foot of the altar with the blood. Joseph would have prepared the lamb as the Levite choirs sang Psalms 113-118 – arrangements we have never

heard, but will one day, I believe, in the millennial kingdom.

Joseph would then have put the lamb over his shoulder, walked with Jesus and Mary to wherever they were staying, and prepared for the meal. Jesus would have asked His stepfather the ceremonial question that night, “Why is this night different from all other nights?” Joseph would have answered with the story of the deliverance of the Jewish people from Egypt, led by Moses, their deliverer.

The night would end late and many people would take to the streets for joyful reunions with friends and family. Others would wait for the opening of the doors at midnight on the temple mount where they could go for further worship and prayer.^v

Messiah – Missing!

This Passover celebration went on for an entire week. Most Jews would have come for the significant two-day portion of the ceremony, which included the Passover meal.^{vi}

Not this family, however. Notice the first part of verse 43.

and as they were returning, after spending the full number of days . . .

In other words, Joseph and Mary stayed the entire week – they were not going to miss a moment.

Missing!

Jesus could not get enough either. Notice in verses 43b-44a.

. . . the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. But His parents were unaware of it,

but supposed Him to be in the [minivan]..

This is not exactly what the verse says, but it is the same idea.

but supposed Him to be in the caravan . . .

It was the custom for women and children to travel in the front of the caravan and for the men to travel behind them to make sure no one got lost along the way. The two sections would meet in the evening as they prepared to camp.

Joseph thought Jesus was with Mary, and Mary thought Jesus was with Joseph. That night they realized Jesus was not with either of them, and He was not with any of the other families either. It finally hit them, “We left Jesus in Jerusalem!”

Have you ever left your child somewhere? Are you willing to admit it? Have you ever arrived home from church and realized you are one kid short?

This, however, was not just *any* kid!

“Honey, do you know where the Savior of the world is?”

“No, I thought He was with you!”

“Me?! I thought you had Him!”

“Oh no, we’ve lost the Messiah!”

CBS online news ran a story about a mother forgetting to take her son home after a birthday party at Chuck E. Cheese. I can understand this. Have you ever been to Chuck E. Cheese? You could lose an elephant in there! What made this all the more dramatic was that it was *his* birthday party.

The news story said that the party went just fine. The problem came when all the children and adults climbed into three different vehicles and headed home. Everyone got in but Michael. Apparently, the six-year-old returned to the play area and was left behind. Employees found Michael wandering around the restaurant when they closed at 10 p.m. Michael’s mother had assumed that her son was staying with his grandmother and did not even know he was missing until the next morning.^{vii}

Found!

Now it is one thing to lose your child and not know it until you get him back. It is another thing to lose your child and know it and not know where he is.

This is the situation with Mary and Joseph. Their realization grows into a three-day search. Look at verses 45-46a.

When they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem looking for Him.

Then, after three days they found Him in the temple . . .

Now there are some who think this reflects poorly on Joseph and Mary as parents. I do not think so. In fact, it may be nothing more than they had such perfect confidence in Jesus that they did not ask Him who He was planning to travel with back to Nazareth. They were sure He would be where He was supposed to be.^{viii}

However, this will lead others to believe that Jesus sinned; that He ran away to join the circus, so to speak.

Believing this would contradict the clear record of scripture. We read of Jesus:

- “. . . [He was] tempted in all things as we are, yet [was] without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15);
- “. . . [He was] holy, blameless, pure, set apart from sinners . . .” (Hebrews 7:26);
- “[He] committed no sin . . .” (I Peter 2:22);
- “. . . and in Him there is no sin.” (I John 3:5).

The point is, Jesus was capable of unknowingly causing His parents to panic, but as a sinless being, He was incapable of knowingly doing it.

Jesus was both fully God the Son and fully a twelve-year-old boy. The Holy Spirit in concert with Christ’s divine nature would protect Him from sinning, but as a normal twelve-year-old boy He was able to fully embrace the human experience, emotion, and learning curve. This included making mistakes, stubbing His toe, and not thinking through consequences, as twelve-year-olds sometimes do not.

Was Jesus ever silly? Did He ever do something dumb or dangerous? Did He make mistakes? Was He ever immature before He was mature? Was He ever unaware and naïve?

Absolutely! However, being silly, unaware, or naïve, or doing something dumb, immature, or even dangerous are not the same things as being sinful.

We will talk more on this in our next discussion, but between now and then, how would you answer these questions? Did Jesus ever get a spanking? Was He ever given time out? We will answer these questions next time.

For now, understand that something major was happening in this “pre-bar-mitzvah’ed” Son of God. We have every reason to believe that it was during this Passover celebration that there was enough spiritual revelation provided to Jesus that by the time He was found by Mary and Joseph, He knew He was not just any twelve-year-old boy with a mom and dad and a little house and carpenter shop in Nazareth.

To begin with, when Mary and Joseph found Him, we read in verses 46b-47,

. . . [He was] sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions.

And all that heard Him were amazed at His understanding and His answers.

One author pointed out that the Passover season was a time when the Sanhedrin, Jewish leaders of

renown and scholarship, would meet in public to discuss religious and theological questions.^{ix}

This has led many to believe Jesus is captivating the highest court of Jewish law and liturgy with His questions.

Jesus was not faking anything here. He was not demonstrating omniscience – such attributes will be demonstrated when He is older. He had legitimate questions, but He also had a quick, well-studied mind. And His perspective was unique, as we will see in a moment.

Luke says,

[They] . . . were amazed at His understanding and His answers.

This could be rendered, “they admired His insight and wisdom”.^x

In other words, Jesus was wise beyond His years.

So what we have in this scene is a sinless, intelligent, scripturally well-studied, perceptive, and, most importantly, illuminated by revelation from God the Father twelve-year-old Jesus.

Right in the middle of the leading rabbis surrounding young Jesus, Mary and Joseph arrived. They had looked everywhere but here.

Notice verse 48.

When they saw Him, they were astonished; and His mother said to Him, “Son, why have You treated us this way? Behold, Your father and I have been anxiously looking for You.”

I love this – Mary was a normal mother. Never mind the fact that Jesus was surrounded by the highest ranking officials in the nation; never mind that He was evidently holding them spellbound. Never mind any of that.

Mary basically says, “What in the world are You doing? We’ve been looking all over for You! What in the world got into You, young man?”

Now, I am not Jesus, but this sure sounds familiar!

Notice what Mary did not say, with a halo around her head and with perfect composure, “Oh, there You are, Son, in the temple, of course. We’ll just sit over here until You’ve finished Your Q & A, and then we’ll go home.”

No, she said, “Your father and I have been looking all over for You, and we’ve been worried sick.”

The word “anxiously” can be translated, “with anguish.”^{xi}

By the way, we would have acted in the same manner, or worse. Mary and Joseph had lost their son, who knew where, in a city with hundreds of thousands of travelers. And for three days, they probably had not slept or eaten a bite.

Explained!

Now get ready for the first recorded words and, in fact, the only recorded words of Jesus prior to the beginning of His ministry eighteen years later. Look back at verse 48, where Mary rebuked Jesus, and continue through verse 49.

. . . “Your father and I have been anxiously looking for You?”

And He said to them, “Why is it that you were looking for Me? Did you not know that I had to be in My Father’s house?”

Literally, Jesus was saying, “Did you not know that I had to be involved in the things of My Father?”

He knew! He knew!

One author illustrated the growth of His understanding as being like glowing rays of light spilling out more and more at the dawning of a new day.^{xii}

It seems clear that this Passover, in the city of Jesus’ father David, God the Father revealed to Him that He was God the Son. The sun rose while He was in Jerusalem.

Jesus Christ was human and divine. These two natures were not separate within Him but intertwined in a way that is a mystery to us. His human nature – His human mind and heart grew to understand His divine nature.

In these first recorded words of Jesus, He literally blew everyone’s mind with His personally possessive reference to God as His Father.

Notice again, in verse 49, Jesus said He had to be, not in “our,” but,

. . . My Father’s house

No one spoke of God as “Father”. In the entire Old Testament collection of thirty-nine books, God as “Father” appears only fourteen times, and always in reference to the Jewish nation. God was referred to as Abraham’s Father, but Abraham did not speak of God as “my Father”. No one talked like this.

However, at the age of twelve, Jesus clearly knew that God was His father in a way in which He was not Father to anyone else.^{xiii}

Jesus was now conscious of His Person, His relationship to His Father, and His mission.^{xiv}

It is intriguing the way Jesus innocently and naïvely said to Mary and Joseph, effectively, “I thought you knew this. You of all people should have seen this coming.”

However, the text is clear in verse 50,

But they did not understand the statement which He had made to them.

Why would this be a surprising, confusing announcement? The implication is that their son had never said anything like this before. He was now speaking a different language than they could even imagine.

Mary and Joseph have been to some degree confused since the conception of Christ. Think about it!

The Holy Spirit is only named “The Holy Spirit” three times in the entire Old Testament. This name appeared twice in Isaiah and once in Psalms, and none of the verses were descriptive or explanatory.

The angel came to Joseph, effectively saying, “Go ahead and take Mary to be your wife because the Child she is carrying is conceived of the Holy Spirit.” (Matthew 1:20)

Well, that explains it!

Gabriel went to Mary and said, “You’re going to have a baby.” And Mary said, “How can this happen when I’ve never been with a man?” Gabriel answered, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you. . .” (Luke 1:26-35)

Joseph and Mary were both wondering, “Who in the world is that?”

Now, shocking as it was to their Jewish ears in the Old Covenant, Jesus said He was in the temple involved in the things of *His* Father.

Let me pause long enough to commend Mary and Joseph once again. Do not miss the fact that they were obedient to God in spite of being, for the most part, in the dark!

How many times have you said to God, “I’ll do whatever You ask of me as long as You clear up some questions.”?

We have confidence in the will of God when it is understandable. We would rarely say, “I’m in the middle of God’s will and is it ever confusing!”

The parents of Jesus would remain confused, along with their later-born children. In fact, they would be unbelieving of Christ’s claims, considering

Jesus to have, at one point, lost His mind (Mark 3:21).

This was true until after the resurrection of Christ from the grave.

Now some would say there is no way a twelve-year-old could grasp his mission in life. They believe that is too young to formulate a personal identity and mission.^{xv}

This is not true. Anyone who thinks this should read a few more biographies of distinctive leaders both inside and outside the church.

A couple of weeks ago I was introduced in my study to the life of Allen Gardiner. This man was the founder of what became the South American Missionary Society, a society used by God in the 1800s especially to reach South America with the gospel.

One night in December, a little more than two hundred years ago, Mrs. Gardiner entered her little boy’s bedroom and found him sleeping on the cold hard floor. She woke him up and put him in his bed. He protested and informed his mother that one day he was going to be traveling the world and needed to begin getting used to hardship. He was six years old.

Gardiner spent his life traveling throughout South America distributing Bibles and Christian literature. He was not received well anywhere he went, often narrowly escaping with his life. Throughout Chile, Argentina, and Bolivia he plodded on. On one occasion he trekked a thousand miles overland by pack mule from Buenos Aires to Santiago distributing the word of God. He had few converts and even fewer church plants. In his late fifties, he and his missionary teammates died while attempting to reach a new field filled with hostile Indians. He was found next to his boat with his journal still in his hand in which he had written his last words, “Let not this mission fail. I beg Thee to raise up others and to send forth laborers into this harvest. Let it be seen, for the manifestation of Thy Glory and Grace that nothing is too hard for Thee.”^{xvi}

It all began to burn in Gardiner’s heart at the age of six.

Jesus Christ was twelve. And He spoke with determined intentionality, “I have to be involved in My Father’s business. I have to be. This is what I must do.”

- . . . “I must preach the kingdom of God . . .” (Luke 4:43);
- “[I must] pass through Samaria.” (John 4:4);

- . . . “The Son of Man must suffer . . .” (Luke 9:22);
- . . . “Zaccheus . . . I must stay at your house.” (Luke 19:5);
- “I have other sheep . . . I must bring them also . . .” (John 10:16);
- “. . . The Son of Man [must] be lifted up; so that whoever believes in Him will have eternal life.” (John 3:14-15).

In a gracious but mild rebuke, Jesus responded to Mary’s complaint with the message, “Don’t forget, Joseph isn’t My father . . . God is My Father.”

Returned!

After saying all of this, we would never imagine reading the next verse in Luke’s Gospel, verse 51 of chapter 2,

And He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and He continued in subjection to them . . .

We would expect to read, “They went down to Nazareth and *they* subjected *themselves* to *Him*.”

Or we would expect to read something like, “And Jesus moved into the temple and became the youngest priest in the history of Israel.”

No, Jesus went back to Nazareth and remained under the authority of His parents.

The tense of the verb in verse 51 indicates that Jesus continually responded to the authority of His parents.

Jesus is still growing and still preparing.

By the way, knowing who He was did not create in Jesus pride or a condescending air toward His peasant parents. The dawning of this truth did not make Him less obedient to them; it profoundly highlighted His obedience to them.

The same should be true of us. The fact that we belong to God as His children should profoundly mark *our* relationships with humility, deference, and grace. Because the truth has dawned in our hearts

that God is our Father, by faith in His unique Son, we should be better spouses; we should be more honest employees; we should be more diligent students; we should be more gracious people.

Because of this revelation, the obedience of Jesus to His parents becomes a model for us all. His earthly relationships will be the fruit of His primary relationship. In the same way, our earthly relationships should bear the fruit of this truth dawning in our own hearts that we happen to have a relationship with our Father as sons and daughters.

Who we belong to should affect everything that belongs to us! When it does not, we know it, do we not?! We know how far from the Model we have begun to muddle through.

I am often reminded of what an older Christian leader told me one day. He said, “The Christian life is not a lot of decisions, but only one. The decision is, ‘I will live my life for the glory of God . . . no matter when, no matter where, no matter what.’”

The Christian life is one decision, but with ongoing determination; one decision, but with daily application.

There in the temple, in this life-altering scene, young Jesus makes a profound discovery and a godly decision, “I must give My life for the glory of My Father.”

This decision meant going back to Nazareth and being an obedient child. There was nothing glorious about this; there was nothing grand or splendid about this; there were no fireworks or claps of thunder as a result. This decision meant chores, homework, growth spurts, and the difficulty of waiting, learning, and growing.

This was one decision with ongoing determination. Perhaps on this Lord’s day, we must make a fresh commitment to this same decision, whether we are six, sixteen, thirty-six, fifty-six, or seventy-six. Perhaps we need to say, “I will devote myself to the things of my Father; I will live to please my Father, no matter when, no matter where, no matter what.”

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 12/20/2009 by Stephen Davey.

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ⁱ Warren W. Wiersbe, Be Compassionate: Luke 1-13 (Victor Books, 1989), p. 32.

ⁱⁱ William Barclay, The Gospel of Luke (Westminster Press, 1975), p. 29.

ⁱⁱⁱ R. Kent Hughes, Luke: Volume 1 (Crossway, 1998), p. 99.

^{iv} Ibid., p. 100.

^v Ibid.

^{vi} R. C. H. Lenski, The Interpretation of Luke's Gospel (Augsburg Publishing, 1946), p. 162.

^{vii} "Mother Forgets Her Child at His 6th Birthday Party,"

<http://cbs4.com/topstories/Michael.Emmanuel.Chuck.2.397660.html?detectflash=false>, Jun. 5, 2006.

^{viii} G. Campbell Morgan, The Gospel According to Luke (Fleming H. Revell Company, 1931), p. 44.

^{ix} Barclay, p. 29.

^x J. Reiling and J. L. Swellengrebel, A Translator's Handbook on the Gospel of Luke (United Bible Society, 1971), p. 151.

^{xi} Ibid., p. 152.

^{xii} Ivor Powell, Luke's Thrilling Gospel (Kregel Publications, 1965), p. 79.

^{xiii} Lenski, p. 167.

^{xiv} J. Dwight Pentecost, The Words and Works of Jesus Christ (Zondervan, 1981), p. 76.

^{xv} Charles R. Swindoll, The Origination of Something Glorious: Luke 1:1-6:49 (Insight for Living, 1992), p. 67.

^{xvi} E. Michael and Sharon Rusten, The One Year Christian History (Tyndale, 2003), p. 680.