

## The Childhood of Jesus

Luke 2:41-52

Nathan Gray

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### *Introduction*

What were you like as a child? Maybe you haven't changed much since then or maybe you've changed a lot. Some of you are still children. Wherever you are in life, we have all been younger than we are now, and those experiences shaped our lives as they are today. I think that's why our deepest friendships are often with those we have known since we were young. We have watched them grow and change over many years. We truly know who they are now because we knew who they were.

Today's Bible reading has a similar effect on our understanding of Jesus. In the four accounts of Jesus' life, we only get one story of his childhood. And yet, in this single story, Jesus' identity is proven and underlined. He was human and he is the Son of God. Based on this passage, you cannot claim that adult Jesus believed or preached anything different from what he knew as a young man.

Let's start by setting the scene before we dive into its significance and relevance.

### *Setting the scene*

This story takes place during a trip to Jerusalem. Verses 41 and 42 say, *'Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. When [Jesus] was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom.'* We are not told whether Jesus had attended this festival before. All we know is that he attended this particular festival when he was twelve years old.

Jesus and his family attend the full seven-day festival and then his family begins the eighty-mile journey back to their hometown of Nazareth. They are travelling in a caravan of friends, family and neighbours, and this journey would likely have taken three to four days. At the end of each day, the caravan would regroup and stop for the night. It is at this moment, after the first full day's travel, that Jesus' parents realise he isn't with them. Verse 44 says, *'Thinking [Jesus] was in their company, they travelled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends.'*

We shouldn't overcriticize Mary and Joseph for not knowing where Jesus was. We know that Jesus had younger siblings who could have required their parents' attention. They are travelling with family and friends; Jesus is probably safe with them. Jesus is also at an age where it would have been normal to give your child a measure of independence and trust. This is a naturally occurring incident.

Even so, their child is missing. So, *'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.'* (Verses 45-46). Back in Jerusalem,

Mary and Joseph discover Jesus engaged with the Jewish teachers. This is a typical picture of a Jewish pupil learning and one commentator said, 'Jesus is portrayed as a boy with a thirst to understand and discuss spiritual questions.' The scene itself would not have been unusual, except '*Everyone who heard [Jesus] was amazed at his understanding and his answers.*' (Verse 47). Young Jesus surprises everyone with extra-ordinary wisdom.

His parents are equally amazed, but they are also full of anxious concern. Mary rebukes Jesus saying, "*Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.*" (Verse 48). Whatever Mary's intentions were behind this approach, she unwittingly presented Jesus with an opportunity to explain the purpose of this event. In verse 49, Jesus says, "*Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?*" We will dive into what Jesus is saying shortly, but it is clear that this young man already knows something of his unique relationship with the Lord God Almighty.

We might now expect Jesus to continue his "rebellious" behaviour, but instead, he demonstrates his obedience to his heavenly Father by submitting himself to his earthly parents. '*He went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them.*' (Verse 51). There he continued to grow up as a normal young man, but one clearly blessed by God. '*Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.*' (Verse 52).

What are we to learn from this incredible story? I have four quick facts about Jesus that I want to share with you, and then we'll look at how we apply this passage to our daily lives.

#### *Jesus knows he's the Son of God.*

The first fact is this: Jesus knows he's the Son of God. Twelve-year-old Jesus knows he's the Son of God. In verse 49, Jesus calls the temple, "***My Father's house.***" Whilst the Jews did occasionally refer to God as their Father, it was not a common way to address God. More significantly, however, no one in the Old Testament referred to the temple as their Father's house; not even Solomon who built it.

Jesus is not using the language of a faithful Jewish follower. Jesus is describing a new and intimate relationship with God. And, he has made this declaration with the same certainty that I can say the wall behind me is blue. Jesus casually assumes he is the Son of God, which packs way more punch than if he spelt it out. A commentator illustrated this wonderfully with a story about baseball catcher Yogi Berra. In 1974, Yogi Berra's son really wanted tickets to see Frank Sinatra, but all the nearby shows were sold out. Hearing this, Yogi said to his son, "Don't worry, I'll see what I can do." When his son asked what that might be, Yogi replied, "I'll call Frank." Twelve-year-old Jesus makes his incredible and ground-breaking statement in a similar matter-of-fact way.

When I say Jesus knows he's the Son of God, this is not information he discovered in a book. This knowledge seems to have developed naturally out of an inner compulsion. Notice that Jesus says, "***I had to be*** in my Father's house." He was drawn to the temple. I imagine it to be like tourists in a foreign country. When you don't know a culture or language, you are drawn to the people and places that speak your mother tongue and resemble your home country. Emily rightly had a go at me and Tori for travelling all the way to Italy and then ordering a

McDonald's. In a similar way, Jesus' nature as the Son of God is drawing him to his heavenly Father.

I say this to demonstrate that Jesus' adult ministry was not initiated by the sudden discovery of his true identity when he turned thirty. Jesus has known that he is the Son of God and has been obedient to his divine nature since he was at least twelve years old.

*Jesus knows his mission.*

Secondly, Jesus knows his mission. The temple was the traditional seat of God's presence, so it made sense for Jesus to reveal his identity there rather than a random street corner. But the temple was also a place of instruction in the ways of God, and young Jesus deliberately highlighted this by engaging with the teachers.

Through this event, Jesus doesn't just unveil who he is, he also makes his mission known. Jesus identifies himself with his Father's desire to be known and worshipped. He is announcing that one day he will be an instructor of God's ways, will, and character.

With the high point and the culmination of Jesus' ministry being his saving death and resurrection, it is easy to forget that much of his earthly ministry was teaching. Right after he calls his first disciples, we read this in Matthew 4, '*Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people.*' (v23). Jesus gave us the Sermon on the Mount, he illustrated truth through parables, and he gave his twelve disciples countless lessons.

Yes, the primary purpose of Jesus coming to earth was to reconcile us to God; to bring us peace with our holy creator by suffering the punishment we should receive for our wrongdoing. But he also came to teach us to repent, how to live Godly lives, how to worship God, how to walk with God, and so on.

John highlights this in the first chapter of his Gospel. He writes, '*No one has ever seen God, but the one and only Son, who is himself God and is in closest relationship with the Father, has made him known.*' (John 1:18). Only Jesus can truly make the Father known. If you want to know what the Father is like, look at and listen to Jesus. In this small moment, in Luke chapter two, at just twelve years of age, Jesus recognises his great mission to make God known.

*Jesus had a normal childhood.*

Thirdly, Jesus had a normal childhood. Luke makes it very clear that Jesus grew up normally as most humans do. In verse 6, Jesus is a baby. In verse 27, Jesus is a child. In verse 43, he is the boy Jesus. Finally, in verse 52, he is Jesus, now in adulthood.

Luke also says in verse 40, '*the child **grew** and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was on him.*' And we heard in verse 52, '*Jesus **grew** in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and man.*'

Jesus grew up completely naturally. Jesus grew up physically from infancy through to adulthood. He grew up mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. He also grew up socially, he related normally to other people. Adult Jesus struggled to conduct his ministry in his hometown because he grew up so normally. In Matthew 13, his old neighbours say, *'Where did this man get this wisdom and these miraculous powers? Isn't this the carpenter's son? Isn't his mother's name Mary, and aren't his brothers James, Joseph, Simon, and Judas? Aren't all his sisters with us? Where then did this man get all these things?'* (v54-56)

I enjoyed meditating on the humanity of Jesus as I prepared this sermon. We know Jesus empathises with our great trials like bereavement, temptation, and sorrow, but Jesus also had to deal with annoying siblings. There are all these wonderfully mundane things that Jesus experienced. Family life, trips to festivals, being an older sibling, being given responsibility from his parents, learning to work, and he may have had to do chores. Jesus endured all the highs and lows of human life, but also all the okay bits in between. He truly was as human as you and me.

#### *Jesus had an abnormal childhood.*

And yet, Jesus also had an abnormal childhood. Whilst very human, Jesus also displayed characteristics of his divinity in his youth. His perfect obedience to his parents is one sign. Mary and Joseph must have thought they lucked out, looking at his siblings and other kids being rebellious and rude whilst Jesus remained innocent of any wrong.

His remarkable wisdom is another sign. The amazement of those listening in Luke chapter two is mirrored later in Jesus' ministry. Mark 1:22 says, *'The people were amazed at his teaching, because he taught them as one who had authority, not as the teachers of the law.'*

Yet there is a clear progression from our story to this verse in Mark. Jesus speaks with authority and not as a teacher of the law. Verse 52 said it directly, *'Jesus grew in wisdom.'* There is a mysterious interplay between the full power and wisdom of God contained in the natural development of a human being. He wasn't a baby superhero unable to control his power like Jack-Jack in *The Incredibles*. But his wisdom also didn't magically appear when he turned twenty-eight, it's there at age twelve. It is a mystery I don't think we will comprehend on this side of heaven.

#### *Jesus is both man and God.*

In each of these four facts, we are given evidence towards the central teaching of this story; that Jesus was always fully man and fully God.

This is a well-known truth, but it is always worth repeating because the gospel hinges on it. Simply, if Jesus was not human, he could not have died for us. And, if he were not God, then he could not be the sinless sacrifice we need to pay our penalty. And, as with any relationship breakdown, only the parties involved can reconcile the dispute. Only God can restore us to himself.

This story takes on unique significance though because Jesus is only twelve years old. You may have heard C.S. Lewis' argument that Jesus was either mad, bad or God. Based on the things he said, Jesus was either deluded, a liar, or in fact the Son of God in human flesh. This story helps to refute those first two arguments. Jesus was clearly not crazy; he was a very normal twelve-year-old boy who was trusted by his parents and related normally with his friends and neighbours for many years. Equally, Jesus did not start claiming he was the Son of God solely in his adulthood. Jesus had some concept of his relationship with God from his youth and there was evidence for it in his perfect obedience and extraordinary wisdom.

### *Application*

This is an incredible and mysterious truth. There is so much wonder in it but also so much that doesn't make sense. But I think that's the point of the story. How are we supposed to respond when facing biblical issues that confuse us? Because God wants all people to come to faith, not just those with PhDs in Theology.

We find the answer in the simple and humble faith of Mary. At first, we read in verse 50 that Mary *'did not understand what [Jesus] was saying.'* It was too radical to grasp. But then we read in verse 51, that *'his mother treasured all these things in her heart.'* And this phrase has already appeared in Luke's Gospel. In verse 19, *'Mary treasured up all these things and pondered them in her heart.'*

If anyone was going to understand the mysteries of Jesus, it would be his mother. She heard, witnessed, and experienced them closer than anyone would. In her presence, Jesus was called Son of the Most High, Saviour, Messiah, Lord, the salvation of all nations, and the redemption of Israel. So don't feel guilty when you don't understand something in the Bible, Mary struggled too.

But that didn't stop her from trying. She didn't discard these confusing moments. She gave them their due place in her heart even though she didn't fully understand them. She also pondered them. She sought to make sense of them. And we know from the books of Acts that God made things clear to her and she joined the early church. We should equally treasure the mysteries of the Bible and we should expect that God will bless our faithful meditations with greater understanding and deeper faith too. Psalm 1 says, *'Blessed is the one whose delight is in the law of the Lord, and who meditates on his law day and night.'* (v1-2).

So, Nathan, how can I practically meditate on mysteries? I have two suggestions for you, but I hope you will go away and consider your own too. Have you thought about bringing a notebook to church? I tend to use my phone now which I'm sure looks bad from the front. I find writing notes during the sermon helps me to concentrate but it also allows me to reflect on what was said. I can take any uncertainties I have and ponder them further in my quiet time or find answers from wise teachers that I trust.

My second suggestion is aimed at parents and young people. I feel blessed to have grown up in a pastor's home because it meant that Sunday lunch was always spent discussing the sermon with Dad. I would highly recommend that parents use lunch or dinner time to chat

about spiritual matters. Chat about the sermon or Sunday School with your children and help them to understand anything they didn't. I'm sure you'll find it helpful too as you have to be able to explain it yourself. And young people, seek answers from your parents. When you are an adult, you likely won't be living in the same house as someone who has thirty years more life experience than you. Now is your time to mine them for their wisdom.

### *Conclusion*

Will we allow these mysteries to amaze us and bring us closer to God, or will we use them to push him away? Whether you are a Christian or not, we should not allow mysteries to become a stumbling block in our journey of faith. Instead, let's take them as opportunities to trust in God, learn about him, understand him deeper, and worship him in all his majesty.

It is never too early or too late to make this effort. If twelve-year-old Jesus can be engaged in spiritual matters, then so can young people today. If it took Jesus' mother thirty-odd years to work it out, it isn't too late for anybody else. May he graciously bless us all with a greater knowledge of himself. Amen.

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**Sermon in two sentences:** Jesus has always been fully man and fully God. This is a great mystery that even his mother didn't understand but she put effort into understanding it and her faith deepened as a result.