

The Boy Jesus in the Temple

Devotional Reading: Psalm 27

Background Scripture: Luke 2:41-52

Today's Scripture: Luke 2:41-52

I. Jesus Went Missing

Luke 2:41-45

⁴¹ Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. ⁴² When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. ⁴³ After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. ⁴⁴ Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. ⁴⁵ When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him.

41. Earlier verses of this chapter highlight the obedience that characterized the lives of *Jesus' parents*. They traveled to Bethlehem in obedience to the emperor's decree (Luke 2:1-5). Then, they followed the requirements of the Law of Moses regarding Jesus' circumcision (2:21) and the offering of purification after childbirth (2:22-24).

Passover is the *festival* that commemorates Israel's deliverance from bondage in Egypt. It is one of the three festivals that all Jewish men were required to travel to *Jerusalem* to observe (Exodus 23:14-17; Deuteronomy 16:16). Those Jews living far away from Jerusalem—in the scatter-

ing of people called the *diaspora*—would not be able to journey to Jerusalem three times each year.

42. At *twelve years old*, Jesus was nearly the age when Jewish boys were expected to become aware of their spiritual duties. Second-century-AD records, such as the Mishnah, state that the age of 13 is when a Jewish boy is considered an adult and, therefore, must follow the requirements of the law. At this age, a bar mitzvah ceremony occurs. However, the customs of the ceremony were recorded after Jesus' time. Before reaching that age of maturity, it would also have been customary for Jewish boys to attend *the festival* in Jerusalem.

43. The celebration of Passover is immediately followed by the seven-day-long Festival of Unleavened Bread (Leviticus 23:5-6). Although *the festival* is technically distinct from Passover, the two are right next to each other on the calendar. Thus, it is natural to see them as one and the same event: a singular event lasting eight days.

Those who traveled some distance to Jerusalem for Passover, like Mary and Joseph, often journeyed in large groups as an extended family or clan. The group could pool resources for the trip, and a sizeable assembly helped protect travelers from would-be robbers. While traveling as a group, Mary and Joseph would easily have assumed that if Jesus was not

with them, he was with other members of their caravan, including extended family and neighbors.

Jesus *stayed behind in Jerusalem* rather than join his parents and the other travelers in the return journey to Nazareth following the observances. Luke does not say whether Jesus accidentally missed the group's departure or he made a deliberate choice to remain in Jerusalem. Regardless, the significance of Luke's account is that Jesus was not with his parents as they left the city.

44. To go a day's journey on foot means that Mary and Joseph might have covered some 15 to 20 miles back to Nazareth before realizing that Jesus was not among *their company* of travelers. Perhaps it was when the group paused to rest or to share a meal that Mary and Joseph *began looking for him* from among the group of travelers consisting of *their relatives and friends*. While no other family members are mentioned in this instance, Jesus is elsewhere said to have had brothers and sisters (Matthew 13:55-56; Luke 8:19; etc.). It could be the case that, as the family's eldest child, Jesus was given more freedom than his younger siblings.

45. If the discovery occurred in the evening—a fair assumption from the fact that they had completed a day's journey (Luke 2:44, above)—they would have been forced to set out toward *Jerusalem* the following morning.

II. Jesus Was Found

Luke 2:46-50

46 After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48 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."

49 "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" 50 But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

46. By one estimate, *three days* includes the parents' departure from Jerusalem. Therefore, the order of events is as follows: a day to journey away from Jerusalem, a day to return, and a third day to search the city and temple.

The first-century Jewish historian Josephus estimated that more than two-and-a-half million people visited Jerusalem during the week of Passover, 10 times the amount of people as usual. Even after the eight days of celebration concluded, many people would remain in the city before returning home.

At the center of all this activity was Jesus *in the temple*. The temple *courts* covered more than 25 acres after they were expanded by Herod the Great (reigned 37–4 BC). Finding the boy Jesus among the crowds would have been an insurmountable challenge.

The title *teachers* applied to those who were experts of the Law of Moses. Jesus' *sitting* at the feet of the teachers reflects the posture of a student. Further, the 12-year-old Jesus was an active learner, *listening to them* and *asking them questions*. The text does not say the topics of study, but experts in the law possessed authority when teaching in the temple.

47. Jesus showed remarkable spiritual and intellectual wisdom for someone so young. The crowd was *amazed*, both at *his understanding*—intelligence and discernment—and the *answers* he gave to inquiries. Even though he was only a boy from rural Galilee, Jesus could sit among Jewish rabbis.

48. Now, it is the parents' turn to be shocked. Their reaction was similar to but not synonymous with the reaction of the teachers in the temple: *they were astonished*. The text does not reveal why they specifically felt this way. Perhaps they were surprised that they managed to find Jesus in the temple, or maybe they were stunned that he had seemingly behaved irresponsibly.

Jesus' unconventional response in the previous verse seems to lead Mary to demonstrate some level of anxiety and fear, displayed by her question: *why have you treated us like this?* She reprimands him for the anxiety he caused her and Joseph.

49. This reply to Mary's question must have astonished her and Joseph, and it prefigures the wisdom that Jesus would have as an adult. Jesus' answer is difficult to translate. The expression translated *I had to be* indicates the fulfillment of God's plan or purpose. A pressing reality—God's plan—caused Jesus to stay behind in Jerusalem: he had to be in his *Father's house*. While in the temple interacting with teachers, Jesus was engaged in the matters of God; he was doing something his heavenly Father would have him do.

50. Jesus' *saying* left Mary and Joseph perplexed. Perhaps Mary recalled what the angel Gabriel announced to her regarding Jesus' status as the "Son of the Most High" (Luke 1:32) and "the Son of God" (1:35). Mary may have wondered how he would be given "the throne of his father David" (1:32). She could not have anticipated that the angel's words would mean that her Son would seek out the experts in law at the age of 12.

III. Jesus Went Home Luke 2:51-52

⁵¹ Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them.

But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. ⁵² And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.

51a. Jesus' response to Mary and Joseph might appear that he was behaving defiantly. However, the verse before us prevents that impression. The family returned to Nazareth, where Jesus was obedient to them by showing his parents respect and honor. In Judaism, the command to "honor your father and your mother" is considered so important that it is followed by the conditional phrase: "that you may live long in the land" (Exodus 20:12). Honoring one's parents meant more than only demonstrating obedience. It included the responsibility to care for them and treat them well in their old age. Jesus fulfilled this command by asking his disciple to care for Mary in his absence (John 19:26-27).

51b. The fact that Mary *treasured all these things in her heart* is consistent with her response to the shepherds' message following Jesus' birth (Luke 2:19). She would have days to reflect on this unique child. Perhaps her confusion turned to gratitude for her growing child, who continued to surprise her.

52. Jesus' growth *in wisdom and stature* demonstrates his mental, physical, and spiritual growth as the Son of God. The *favor* he experienced includes the winsomeness and goodwill shown to him, including his approval *with God and man*. Jesus' family, neighbors, and his heavenly Father were all pleased by his work on his Father's business. Luke's summary of Jesus' growth and maturity prepares readers of this Gospel for a 10-year leap in the narrative. The next chapter in the Gospel of Luke details Jesus' baptism and the inauguration of his full-time earthly ministry (Luke 3:1-22).

Involvement Learning

The Boy Jesus in the Temple

Into the Lesson

Consider your life as a 12-year-old. Where was your home located? If you attended church, what was that like? Which school did you attend?

When we look at today's story from the Gospel of Luke, we will see that when Jesus was only 12 years old, he deeply understood spiritual matters and astonished elders with his wisdom.

Into the Word

Read Luke 2:41-45. Why did Jesus' family travel to Jerusalem?

Read Luke 2:46-52. What do Jesus' actions in the temple reveal about his awareness of his mission?

What emotions might Mary and Joseph have felt when they could not find Jesus?

What emotions might Mary and Joseph have felt after they found Jesus in the temple?

Using your "sanctified imagination," how do you think Jesus' actions differed from those of typical first-century 12-year-olds?

How do you think Jesus' actions were similar to typical first-century 12-year-olds?

Key Verse

"Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?"

—Luke 2:49

Into Life

Think of a young person from your congregation or neighborhood. Write a note to encourage that young person in his or her spiritual journey. Consider delivering the letter and to be available as a source of spiritual support for the young person. What thoughts or feelings did you have after that exercise?

Thought to Remember

Seek to receive the approval of God and the goodwill of others.