“I HAD TO BE IN MY FATHER’S HOUSE”

Luke 2:41–52

Key Verse: 2:49

“ ‘Why were you searching for me?’ he asked. ‘Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?’”

What are you really in to? Be honest. It’s interesting to see what children are in to. Some are in to games, or sports, or outdoor adventures; others are in to music, or reading, or video games, or even math. They can get in to it for hours and hours until we hardly see them. We all naturally gravitate toward what we’re really interested in. In today’s passage we see what Jesus was in to when he was just twelve years old. Luke records this event for several reasons. He wants to show us how Jesus, as an ordinary human being, grew. He wants us to see Jesus’ awareness of his identity and mission even as a child, and how it impacted his mother. Most of all, Luke wants us to see Jesus as a wonderful example for children and for all human beings of all ages. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his word today.

Look at verse 41. The major backdrop for the life of Jesus was Passover. That annual holiday celebrated when God saved his people from slavery in Egypt. Passover was just a shadow of Jesus, who came to this world to save us from our sins. For the Jews, Passover was the main religious holiday of the whole year. It was also known as the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and it lasted a whole week. The festivities began with offering a lamb and eating the Passover meal at sundown. Then it was followed by eating bread without yeast for a the rest of the week. It was to help the Jews really humble themselves and remember how they had suffered as slaves in Egypt, and how God in his great mercy had redeemed them and set them free by the blood of a lamb.

Verse 41 says that Jesus’ parents went to this festival “every year.” They lived in Nazareth, which is about 80 miles away from Jerusalem, and they would travel on foot in caravans. So it took three whole days to get there. On the long, three-day journey, to help the time go by, parents would teach their children to sing the famous Song of Ascents, Psalm 120–134. The words of these psalms helped the Israelites in their real lives to call on God, to remember his grace and blessings, to repent, to depend on God, to find real joy and hope in him. It was a great time to be together as family, and, to learn what it meant to live in the real world as God’s people. Families would also prepare a lamb to take with them, and other items for the Passover meal, as well as make arrangements for a place to stay in Jerusalem. Some would leave Jerusalem right after eating Passover, but the more devout Jews would stay in Jerusalem the whole week, worshiping God. So, for those traveling from Nazareth, this meant a full two weeks away from their ordinary lives. As we saw earlier in this chapter, Jesus’ parents were poor. But they observed this Passover Festival every year, investing all this precious time, and their meager resources. They did it to honor God and to make a godly environment for Jesus and their other children to grow up in. Parents can still learn a lot from them.

Look at verse 42. This time Jesus was twelve years old. It was an important age for Jewish boys. When they turned 13, boys would be considered adult men, responsible for their decisions and for their commitment to God. They were expected to understand their identity as God’s people and their covenant relationship with God. So, leading up to this, boys would go through an especially intense study period for several years, learning God’s words and how they apply to life. The boy Jesus was now nearly finished with this preparation.

What happened? Look at verses 43–45. After the week-long festival, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, while his parents went home. How could such a mistake happen? His parents must have assumed that as a big boy now, Jesus had been walking with his friends. But when it was time to camp for the night, he was nowhere to be found. They searched among relatives and friends, but no Jesus! They all had walked 20 miles that day, so they needed to sleep, but first thing the next morning, the family had to walk back to Jerusalem. Probably his mother Mary didn’t sleep at all that night. When they got to Jerusalem the following night, it was dark and there wasn’t much they could do, so they had to sleep again. So on the morning of the third day they started looking for the boy Jesus in the city. We can just imagine where they started looking. Twelve-year-olds like to eat and play, so they might have begun in the market where people were selling food and children were playing. But no Jesus. Anyone who’s had a child missing even for an hour goes through a living nightmare of worries, imagining all kinds of dreadful things. Where on earth could Jesus be?

Look at verse 46. This twelve-year-old boy was in the temple courts. What was there to do *there*? It says there were “teachers” there. What were they teaching? Not stuff kids would be particularly interested in. They were teaching God’s words. They were teaching especially how people should be living in obedience to God’s words. For many people, one hour of Bible study in a week is plenty. Many adults have a hard time paying attention after just ten or fifteen minutes. But twelve-year-old Jesus had been there for three whole days! And that was *after* three days of traveling to Jerusalem, singing chapters from the Bible, and going through a week-long religious holiday with various prayers and scripture readings. Most adults would have been ready to get out of there and get back home. But Jesus stayed to learn even more. He wasn’t just sitting there. It says he was “listening” and “asking questions.” He was actively engaged. And look at verse 47. Evidently, some of his questions were so hard, the teachers couldn’t even answer them, so Jesus did himself. And people were amazed at the answers he gave. He wasn’t just a precocious child. His appetite for the things of God was voracious. These teachers in Jerusalem may not have been the best, but Jesus was still so eager to learn from them.

What lessons can we learn here? First of all, we shouldn’t underestimate children. Children can have a tremendous capacity to learn. Especially, twelve-year-olds are already at the point of being able to think deeply about life’s questions and understand profound truths. But this event isn’t just about our view of children or about having intensity. The main lesson here is that Jesus’ intensity was focused on learning from God’s words. It reminds us of Psalm 119. Verse 20 says, “My soul is consumed with longing for your laws at all times.” Wow. And verses 97–100 read, “Oh, how I love your law! I meditate on it all day long. Your commands are always with me and make me wiser than my enemies. I have more insight than all my teachers, for I meditate on your statutes. I have more understanding than the elders, for I obey your precepts.” It suggests that the boy Jesus was in love with God’s words, meditating on them more and striving to obey them more than even the most trained experts.

Why was he so in to God’s words? It’s simple. It came from his faith in God and his love for God. Even pre-teens can have faith in God and love God. When we believe that God is real, we really want to get to know him more. That’s the best motivation for learning his words—not just to pass a test or get adults off our backs, but to really know God. The more we get to know God, the more we cannot but love him. The more we love God, the more we want to please him. This is where the desire to obey his words comes from.

Of course Jesus was unusual. He was the Son of God, conceived by the Holy Spirit. It must have given him a deeper understanding than any other human being ever had. But Luke is also showing us that as a child, Jesus was growing as any other ordinary child does. Of course, growing physically came naturally. But growing in wisdom and grace could happen only as he sought to know his Father God better and better through his words. Jesus’ intense longing from his boyhood to learn from God’s words is a shining example for all of us. Honestly, we all have so many interests other than God’s words. We get excited about doing all kinds of other things, but when it’s time to study the Bible, we start yawning and looking at the clock. Of course, God has to help us have spiritual desire. But we also have the responsibility to kindle within ourselves a longing for his word. 1 Peter 1:23–25 reads, “For you have been born again, not of perishable seed, but of imperishable, through the living and enduring word of God. For, ‘All people are like grass, and all their glory is like the flowers of the field; the grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of the Lord endures forever.’ And this is the word that was preached to you.” And 2:2 says, “Like newborn babies, crave pure spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow up in your salvation…” This pure spiritual milk is the living and enduring word of God. We’re told to crave it.

Luke goes on to show us the boy Jesus’ encounter with his parents. Read verses 48–50. What we first notice here is how upset his mother Mary was. In Greek the word “anxiously” is literally “in intense pain, anguish or torment.” Any mother can understand. Until now Jesus must have been such a lovely boy, so mindful of everyone, especially his mom. It was probably the first time he’d ever disappeared without permission. Mary couldn’t understand how he could do this.

How did Jesus answer? Read verse 49 again. In a sense, he’s saying, “You should’ve known where I’d be. Where else did you expect me to be?” But what do his words mean? In one sense, he’s making a bold statement about his identity. Humanly Jesus was the son of Mary. But spiritually speaking, he was the Son of God. He didn’t really belong to Mary; he belonged to God. Now that he was becoming a man, his commitment would have to be to God even more than to his mother. As we know, many men grow up physically but are known as “momma’s boys.” They’re still depending on the emotional security of mom. With that dependency they don’t mature or know who they are. But from age twelve Jesus knew who he was and how his relationship with his mom needed to change.

Read verse 49 again. With these words Jesus was also revealing his fundamental life choice. He was choosing to be in his Father’s house. The psalmist wrote to God: “Better is one day in your courts than a thousand elsewhere; I would rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God than dwell in the tents of the wicked” (Ps84:10). What a great choice the boy Jesus made! No one was dragging, or forcing, or bribing him; he *wanted* to dwell with God; he *wanted* to learn of God; he *chose* to be with God. As we’ve seen, when we become young adults, we become personally responsible for our choices. And every choice matters because these choices set the direction of our lives. How do we choose to spend our time? Where and with whom do we choose to be? In 2019 may God help us all choose to be with God in our practical lives.

Look at verse 49 once more. Jesus said, “I had to be.” Throughout Luke’s Gospel the word “must” is important. This expression that he “had to be” there is telling us that he had a mission from God. Not only did he know his identity, that God was his real Father, but also he knew what his life’s mission was. It was to be in his Father’s house. It meant more than just a place to stay. It meant learning of God, worshiping and obeying him. In Greek “in my Father’s house” literally means “in the things of my Father.” Jesus’ life mission was to be fully involved in the things of his Father. The KJV says “about my Father’s business.” Many fathers have expectations that their sons will do what they do, to carry on the family business. Many sons try to please their human fathers for a while, but then find out that their father’s dreams are not *their* dreams. Actually it’s so hard to figure out what we should be doing with our lives. We’re taught to “do you,” to do what “feels right for you.” But a life centered on one’s self ultimately can’t be the right path for anyone. We each need to find out what God’s will for me is—not people’s will, but God’s will. And that’s easier said than done. How can we find what God’s will, God’s mission for my life, really is? Like the boy Jesus, we have to be listening to God very carefully, especially to his word.

Sadly, Jesus’ parents were too upset at this time to understand what he said (50). Luke goes on to tell us what happened after this extraordinary event. Look at verse 51a. Jesus had such amazing understanding, better than his parents, better even than the best Bible teachers in the nation. But his deep understanding didn’t make him proud. He went home to Nazareth and was obedient to his parents. His obedience to his parents was part of his obedience to God. Look at verse 51b. Mary his mother never forgot these things about her son, keeping in mind what God’s purpose for him was.

Read verse 52. What a simple yet powerful statement: “Jesus grew.” So many people get wounded from childhood, and it stunts their growth emotionally and spiritually. But Jesus grew. How? It says both “in wisdom” and “in stature,” meaning he grew both physically and spiritually. It also says “in favor with God and man.” He grew in pleasing God. And when he did, he also grew in winning the respect of the people around him. He was the ideal human being, the Second Adam. How did he grow? No doubt it was through practicing his faith in God and his love for God. It was through meditating on God’s words personally.

As we face the new year 2019 we may want to make many new year resolutions. But may God help us resolve in the new year to grow like our Lord Jesus did, especially through cultivating a deep desire for his word.