

THE MISSION EMBRACED

SERIES: UNTO US

By Danny Hall

There's probably nothing more challenging than parent-child relationships. I've been on both sides of the equation in my life, having parents and being a parent. Parents suffer anguished concern for their children, and children long to be released into adulthood.

We've been studying the gospel of Luke in this series, looking at the birth of Jesus. Now as Luke unfolds the story of Jesus we're into the early stages of his life, leading up to the launching of his ministry. The story that we're going to look at now gives us the one snapshot we have of Jesus' childhood and his relationship with his parents. Luke 2:41-52:

Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. 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. Everyone who heard him was 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 like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you.”

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

Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

Let me describe the setting.

A journey of devotion to God

It was the Feast of the Passover. There were three major feasts that the Jews were required to celebrate in Jerusalem, but as they became more and more scattered about the Roman Empire, eventually only the Jewish men were required to make the pilgrimage to Jerusalem, and for only one of the feasts each year. The Feast of the Passover was perhaps the most holy and high of these feasts, commemorating God's graciously

delivering them from their slavery in Egypt. It also anticipated the time when Messiah would come to once again deliver them. So the Passover Feast was an important time, and the population of Jerusalem would swell with all the pilgrims who came for it.

Luke says that every year Jesus' parents go to Jerusalem for the Passover Feast. This again shows what Luke has been telling us about Jesus' parents all along. They are very devout, committed followers of God. They make this annual trek in order to worship God, to fulfill the Law. Luke was careful to show us throughout the story of Jesus' birth that this normal young husband and wife have truly given their lives to God. They want to obey him, follow him, honor him with all of their lives.

Now, the journey itself would be interesting. They live in Nazareth. Probably they would take the normal route in their day, which was to go east across the Jordan, down the east side of the Jordan river, and back west into the city of Jerusalem, in order to avoid traveling through Samaria. There was a lot of prejudice and division between the Samaritans and the Jews. In my previous series of studies we looked at a story in John 4 in which Jesus as an adult travels through Samaria. John records very specifically that Jesus determines to go through there for a special reason, because that was not the normal route (Discovery Paper 4992). But assuming that Jesus' parents on this particular trip follow the normal route, it would be about an eighty-mile journey. They would travel either on foot or with donkeys. It would take them three to four days. The route would take them through some dangerous country. Remember the story of the Good Samaritan that Jesus will tell later in his life about robbers attacking a certain man on a journey

(Luke 10:25-37). This journey would take them through the kind of country where robbers would often attack travelers.

Because of that, it was the custom to travel in large caravans. So most likely Jesus' parents and he would be traveling in a large company of people including other relatives and friends from their area who are going to celebrate the Feast of the Passover.

Mary accompanies Joseph. The women were welcome to come along, but since the law required only that the men come, her accompanying Joseph once again points to her devotion to God. Also, their twelve-year-old son Jesus is now coming along. We're not told if they took Jesus with them every year when they went up.

A twelve-year-old Jewish male was one year away from his rite of passage into adulthood, which would happen at his thirteenth birthday. The year between age twelve and age thirteen was one of intense study. In preparation for assuming the responsibilities of a Jewish male before God, Jesus would be learning the Law, somewhat like learning catechism in our time. Jesus' traveling with his parents also points to Mary's and Joseph's complete commitment to God, to raising their son Jesus to follow the path of learning to know God's word and God himself.

Luke says that they stay in Jerusalem for the entire week of Passover, which wasn't required, but yet again points to their devotion to follow and fully obey the Lord.

At the end of the Passover Feast they head back home, and here the story takes its problematic turn.

Drawn by God's mission

Lest we think that Jesus' parents are irresponsible, in these large caravans children would often be mixed in with the other families. Some of these people are their relatives and friends. They go the full first day's journey assuming that Jesus is just hanging out with other children or other families. But when they get ready to make camp that night, they can't find him anywhere.

If you are a parent, you can imagine what that must have been like. We've all probably gone through something like that, perhaps turned around at the shopping mall to find our child gone, and felt fear fill our heart. I remember one instance of this when we were living in Vienna a number of years ago. An American family in our church lived right near an area of Vienna called the Naschmarkt, which is a huge open-air market. During the week it just has produce stands, but on Saturdays that market becomes one of the largest flea markets I've ever seen in my life, absolutely teeming with people. Well, we were at home having a quiet moment one Saturday when our phone rang, and these frantic parents were calling everybody they could reach in the church to help look for their little girl, who had gotten lost in that crowd. So we got dressed quickly and went down there along with everybody else we could locate, and we just fanned out across that

sea of people, looking for her. You could barely walk through it on a Saturday, it was shoulder to shoulder. Thankfully we did find the little girl, and she was safe and sound.

At the end of this first day of travel, that's what happens to Mary and Joseph. After they've searched again and again through the company, the truth sinks in—Jesus is not there! It's nighttime on treacherous roads, so they can't even head back to Jerusalem until the next day. Can you imagine that sleepless night? At dawn when it's safe to travel, they go back to Jerusalem to look for him, and then they eventually find him on the following day. It says "after three days," which probably means the one day's journey out of town, one day's journey back to town, and one day of looking. It's possible, the way the phrase is constructed, that they look for three more days, but most likely they find him on this third day.

They eventually go to the temple, and there they find Jesus sitting and talking with the teachers. Now, there are some fanciful stories about this outside the Biblical record, in other writings about Jesus' life, and it has been depicted in paintings. These somehow have Jesus instructing the teachers, but that's not what Luke describes for us here. It was normal in that day for the teachers of the Law to gather around them groups of people who were interested in learning. Their teaching method would often be a question-and-answer dialogue. It's most likely that Jesus has gone back to the temple, and in his quest to learn more, has sat down with a company of people under some teachers and participated in the question-and-answer dialogue. They're all amazed that this twelve-year-old boy has such a deep understanding of God's Law and of God himself. So Jesus

is deeply involved in this dialogue with the teachers of the Law when his parents walk in. Their interaction with Jesus is the highlight of this story. It's a classic parent-child moment. Translated into our modern vernacular, they say to him, "We've been looking for you day and night; for three days now you've been gone! Don't you know that we've been out of our minds with worry? How in the world could you do this to us?!!!"

Jesus' answer to them might on the surface appear to be insubordinate and somewhat cocky, but it's not. He's simply trying to explain what he thinks they should already understand. He says, "Why were you searching for me?" He doesn't mean that they shouldn't have come looking for him. What he means is simply, "Why didn't you come here first when I was missing? Shouldn't you have assumed that this is where I would be? You know that I'm supposed to be in my Father's house." Already at the age of twelve, Jesus understands his unique relationship to the Father, his unique calling as the Son of God to fulfill his mission. He is saying in effect, "This is the natural place for me to be in order to grow and live out the mission for which God has sent me here, for which I am going to live and eventually die."

The temple is at the beginning and end of Luke's telling of the gospel story. At the temple, the place where God's Law was taught and where the sacrifices were offered, Jesus will offer himself as the final and complete sacrifice, fulfilling all that the temple stands for. So Jesus says to his parents, "This is where I should be."

But his parents don't understand. Despite the fact that they went through that miraculous sequence of events—angelic visitations, the virgin birth, angels' appearing to shepherds, and so on in the unfolding of Jesus' early life—they are still caught off guard by the wonder that their twelve-year-old son is now in the temple interacting with the teachers of the Law and displaying wisdom beyond his years. They do not fully comprehend the incredible thing that God is doing.

Luke records that they return home after that and very graciously puts in the little detail that Jesus is obedient to them. This twelve-year-old boy is not insubordinate. He honors his parents and he loves them for who they are and what they are doing in his life. But here we see the beginnings of the conflict between his living out God's mission for his life and his relationship with his parents. From that point he begins to grow in all areas of his life as he moves toward adulthood and toward the ministry that he will have.

Now, this is a simple and profound story, a fun story in some ways, filled with drama and anguish of heart. What difference should it make to you and me? I want us to look at what's happening in Jesus' life and the implications it has for us as we follow God, and then look at his parents and what we can learn from them. (If you're not a parent, perhaps you can think of yourself as part of the family of God with responsibility to see the next generation grow up.)

The price of following God's path

Jesus is for the first time publicly acknowledging the mission for which he came to this earth. He is beginning to understand his unique relationship with God. These are the first words of Jesus recorded in any of the gospels. He says he is to be about his Father's work, to be living in it, and his Father's house is the appropriate place for him to be. Even at the age of twelve he is beginning to embrace his mission.

As he does so, two important facts come into focus for him. First, when he embraces the mission for which he has been born, he will be misunderstood by other people. When you begin to walk in paths that are laid out by God, it will take you to places that the rest of the world won't understand, even people who are close to you.

Second, living out the mission and following the path that God has for Jesus will cause pain in other people's lives, in this case his parents. That will unfold in different ways across his life, culminating when those he loves, who have followed him closely, have to watch him die on the cross. To follow the mission of his life means that he has to be willing to allow other people to be hurt by his devotion to God.

There's much more we could say about Jesus' embracing his mission, and in a moment we're going to come back to that. I'm going to give you some questions to ponder in your own heart.

But first let's look at his parents, particularly Mary, whose point of view Luke highlights here. As parents, if we are going to encourage our children and the next generation of people to really be devoted to God, to follow him, then we have to be willing to endure pain in letting them go. Remember the story we looked at in the last message (Discovery Paper 5224). Joseph and Mary brought Jesus to the temple to be dedicated to the Lord, and they met Simeon, who offered a word of prophecy and encouragement to them, but then turned to Mary and said these very telling words: "And a sword will pierce your own soul too." He used the word for the long, broad, two-edged sword, the most pain-inflicting weapon there was. He says, "This child will pierce your soul." Here in this very next story that Luke records we see that beginning to be fulfilled. As Jesus begins to live out his mission, Mary goes through this anguish and distress, and her own soul is pierced.

God may take our children to places that we would have never designed for them, had the choice been ours. That pain is part of the process of letting our children go and trusting them. And because we're going to have to learn to endure the pain of letting our children go, we have to learn to trust God with them, to believe that God who calls us to follow him is completely trustworthy. We can trust that his work in their lives is the right way for them to go, trust that he will care for them and nurture them. This does not absolve us from our responsibility as parents, but it gives us the context in which to help our children to grow and follow God with their whole hearts.

Mary and Joseph are now encountering this, and of course in the rest of Jesus' life this conflict will be played out. In the end Mary will stand at the foot of the cross and watch

her son die a painful, shameful death as the fulfillment of his mission here on earth. She has to trust that God knows what he's doing.

Now, in order for you to think about all this, let me give you some questions to ponder.

Pondering God's calling

First of all, do you look at your life with a sense of calling or mission? In other words, do you see your life as marked out by God, as a gift for God, to be lived for his glory? Do you believe that you are not here randomly but he has created you for a purpose, to love him and honor him and to love others in his name? This story teaches us that we can ask this question at a young age. Jesus was wrestling with it at the age of twelve. We should encourage our children early in their lives to embrace the beautiful fact that we're not here by accident and that God wants to lead us on a path of fellowship and union with him and of amazing impact in our world for good, if we will follow that mission in life that he has for us.

Second, are you willing to pursue that calling no matter what the cost? It's one thing to say, "I want to do what God wants me to do." It's another to say, "No matter what it costs, I'm willing to do that." In Jesus' own life, that journey would take him through incredible rejection and ultimately to his death. The glory and honor of God sometimes requires us to make enormous sacrifices. Are you willing to pay the cost to live for God's

glory, to be misunderstood, to cause pain and receive pain, trusting that God's work in the end will triumph and you will be vindicated for your faith in him?

Third, as a parent, or someone responsible for others, what do you want for your children—your agenda or God's agenda? We've talked about this a lot at PBC because of the crazy culture of Silicon Valley. It's very easy for us as parents to map out our children's futures so there are only a few acceptable paths for them to follow, and sometimes we even narrow that down to only one or two occupations. We create an agenda for our children. But the question for us as parents and those responsible for the next generation is, whose agenda are we following? At the end of the day there aren't three or four acceptable occupations or paths, there's really only one, and that's the one that God has created for our children to follow.

On the heels of that, do you really believe that following God will be what is best for your children? Do you have that much faith in God? We pay a lot of lip service to the idea of following God in our churches. But do you really believe that whatever God might do with your children, whatever path he might take them on, that is the best way for them to live their lives?

Finally, are you willing to pay the price to let your children follow God?

Let me bring all this together by sharing a few thoughts from my own experiences. I've mentioned that my father passed away recently, and I've thought a lot about the impact of

my parents on my life, what they've meant to me and how they've shaped me. In reading this story I thought my parents had been a lot like Mary and Joseph. I wish that I were a little bit more like Jesus! But they were just normal people who had a very deep devotion to God. They took me to church from the start. My early memories are of Mom and Dad putting my brother and me to bed at night and sitting by our bedside, reading God's word and praying with us. They consistently lived out what they believed, they loved God, and they wanted us to grow up learning about God. In my teen years I walked away from all that for a while, but it wasn't because of my parents. They faithfully walked with the Lord and encouraged us to as well.

Most importantly for me, I remember some key times in my life when their willingness to entrust me to God came into play. My mom was a professor at Emory University. She has two master's degrees and a Ph.D. She did her undergraduate studies at Emory University, came back and got her doctoral degree there, and then taught there for thirty years. So when I chose to go to Emory University, she was thrilled, because it was her favorite school, and because I got to go there for free since she was on the faculty. But I had trusted in Christ right before I started college, and my first two years at Emory University were when I started getting involved in ministry. I began to teach Bible studies and speak at youth meetings, and God began to develop gifts in me and give me a heart to do ministry. It was during those two years that I concluded that the path that I had thought I was going on was not the one that God had for me. God had a different path, one that would lead me into the ministries that I have been doing for the last thirty-plus years. I remember the night I sat at the kitchen table in my parents' house and said to them, "I

think I want to leave Emory University, and I want to go to Bible college, because I want to learn how to be a teacher and preacher of the Scriptures.” They never blinked. They looked me in the eye and said, “If that’s what God is calling you to do, we’re behind you a hundred percent.”

Then I remember the night twenty-three years ago when Ginger and I got on a plane at the Atlanta airport to go to Austria, with their ten-month-old grandson in our arms. And my parents never blinked an eye when we did that, and I know there were some swords piercing their hearts that night when we took off to go. They supported us. The legacy I received from my parents was the freedom to follow God. They never hemmed me in, even when it caused them pain, when it took me on paths that perhaps they didn’t understand and that would certainly cost them something in terms of distance, perhaps in terms of their own dreams for us. They released me to do what God called me to do. In their doing that, I had an enormous freedom in my life, and a sense of being loved and secure, supported by them to follow whatever God put into my life.

Now I’m at the other end of the spectrum. I’m a dad myself, and I’ve watched my own son Christopher grow up. He’s now married and doing well living in southern California. He is a great young man, but I’ve found myself having the reverse problem. When he graduated from college and was planning to get married, one of the things that was first and foremost on his radar was wrestling with whether God was calling him to basically follow in my footsteps and do ministry. He was considering going to seminary to pursue that in his near future. But God now has him on a path that has diverged from that, at

least for this season of his life. He's in the business world and plans to stay there for while, although he might one day return to seminary studies. I find myself thinking, "No, no, don't do that! Be like me! Follow this path!" I see his gifts, and I see his mind and heart. He's really involved in ministry, teaching Bible studies and leading home groups and doing all kinds of things that are just wonderful. But I have to ask myself, "What if God doesn't take him on the path that I dreamed of?" I have to release him to follow whatever path God takes him on, even if it leads him into the business world for his whole life, to do ministry out of that context.

That's the struggle we have, and that's why God keeps calling us back to this question: Do we believe that God's way is the right way for our own lives, and for our children and those others that we're responsible for in the rising generation?

That's a beautiful challenge that Jesus and Mary and Joseph wrestled with. My prayer is that all of us will so focus on the greatness and beauty and wonder of who God is that we're willing to take those steps of faith and trust him for those hard things.

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Luke 2:41-52

Sixth Message

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