

Parenting
Luke 2:40 – 52

And the Child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom; and the grace of God was upon Him.

His parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. And when He was twelve years old, they went up to Jerusalem according to the custom of the feast. When they had finished the days, as they returned, the Boy Jesus lingered behind in Jerusalem, and His parents did not know it. But supposing Him to have been in the company, they went a day's journey, and sought Him among their relatives and acquaintances. So when they did not find Him, they returned to Jerusalem, seeking Him. Now so it was that after three days they found Him in the temple, sitting in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard Him were astonished at His understanding and answers. So when they saw Him, they were amazed; and His mother said to Him, "Son, why have You done this to us? Look, Your father and I have sought You anxiously."

And He said to them, "Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" But they did not understand the statement which He spoke to them.

Then He went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them, but His mother kept all these things in her heart. And Jesus increased in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

This is the only story in the Bible about the life of Jesus from the age of 1 to 30-something. As far back as the latter part of the fourth century, people have tried to fill in that blank with fantastic stories. The reason such stories did not begin to appear until then is because of what happened at the beginning of the fourth century. The Roman emperor, Constantine, observed that the Christians within his population were hard-working, honorable, paid their taxes, and never had tried to start a revolution. He came to the conclusion that he needed to encourage this movement rather than continue to suppress it. He closed government offices on Sunday, which meant that no one could get the appropriate tax documents for the marketplace, so the markets all closed, making it much easier for Christians to assemble in the daytime, rather than, as they had been doing, meeting before sunrise or after sunset, because they all had to work when the sun was up and the tax office was open. Constantine did a few other things that were favorable to them, but the most important was that he honored the Christians. Christianity suddenly became fashionable, so people flocked to churches. And, within 50 years, the church was run by the fashionable, rather than by the faithful. Teaching became dominated by the latest new story or doctrine. Included in that were fantastic tales about the childhood of Jesus. But the reality of Jesus' childhood is not so glamorous. He grew up in a low-class family, just like the vast majority.

He was tempted in all points just as we are, yet without sin, as recorded in Hebrews 4:15.

He was born with a nature just like ours. As Solomon wrote in Ecclesiastes 7:29, "God made man upright, but they have sought out many schemes." Although many teach that we are born with a sinful nature or that we are born guilty of sin, that cannot be true unless Jesus somehow escaped that nature, making Him nothing like us. Rather, Jesus is described here as growing in stature and strength, increasing in wisdom, and finding favor with those He met.

Certainly, Jesus started out with parents whom God described as righteous (Matthew 1:18 – 25, Luke 1:28 – 30). God let those parents know from the time of conception that this Child

would be the Messiah. Joseph and Mary had encounters with angels and prophets to reinforce the magnitude of the job with which God was entrusting them.

So, what can we learn about parenting from Joseph and Mary? Were they not unique? No. Parenting is parenting. The objectives of all faithful parents are the same. What I find interesting is that God went to a lot of trouble to have the Messiah grow up in this broken world with no advantages other than good parents.

First, parenting is a huge responsibility. God picked the best He could find among the descendants of David. Certainly, God had fenced Himself in somewhat concerning whom He could choose. By promising David that the Messiah would come through him (2 Samuel 7:13 – 16 and a half dozen other places), God limited the pool from among which He could select. But, since more than 900 years had passed since that promise had been made, the target population had expanded and He had many from whom to choose.

One odd-ball theory of that time was that the Messiah would appear full grown (a whole doctrine built around one verse, Malachi 3:1), overlooking that this would invalidate the promise to David.

The Messiah had to be like us, not advantaged, or the promises about Him would not all come to pass. The fact that Joseph and Mary were poor people with no advantages, who had to raise this baby to become the Savior of the world, seems a lot different than the tasks we have as parents. But, I think God engineered it the way He did so that we, as parents, could draw certain parallels and lessons.

Joseph and Mary needed to set a good example for Jesus, so He would learn how godly people function. They would need to provide Him with a sufficient education so He could learn the Scriptures. They would need to develop His outlook on life, His compassion, His world view so that He could recognize Himself as He learned those Scriptures about the Messiah.

They had pretty much the same job that we do as parents. Ben Franklin, despite his various character flaws, had a sensible outlook on life. He wrote in his autobiography of an encounter with a friend who had come for a visit (they did not have cell phones). Franklin asked about the welfare of the man's small children, who responded, in part, with the intention of not teaching his children about religion, but rather to let them choose for themselves when they were of age. Franklin just nodded. A little later, the guest asked to see Franklin's somewhat famous gardens. As they toured, one plot was just dirt. The visitor asked, "What will you do with this plot?" Franklin replied, "I plan to allow it to decide for itself what it will grow."

We, as parents, have the same daunting task of preparing our children for life in this broken world, and for eternal life. While our children will not be the next Messiah, they can have a huge impact on future generations, not as those whose names are destined to be in all the history books of the future, but as those who influence the next generation, which mushrooms out with succeeding generations into a multitude of faithful people. Good parenting has a huge impact on the future of the faithful.

Second, parents do not need to be rich or even middle class. God picked poor people. Certainly, God did provide for them. The wise men brought gold, frankincense, and myrrh, the latter two being almost as valuable as gold by weight. But God did not raise Joseph's family to wealth. They got by. Certainly, they had difficulties. They suffered along with everyone else under the tax burden imposed by the occupying Roman forces. They had no upward mobility in either wealth or influence, no matter how hard they worked. They lived in a dictatorship, so had no input, however small, in their own government. One advantage, perhaps provided by God, was an abnormally high literacy rate. God had set up Israel with one tribe dedicated to education

in the Scriptures: the Levites who ran the schools. They taught reading and math and geography and science, so that the general population could read and understand their own Scriptures. Many other cultures of that day did not have that.

We, as parents (or grandparents or great-grandparents), are in the same position. Parenting does not require social or economic status. We are fortunate to have some say in our various levels of government, much more at the lower levels like city and county. Most parents around the world do not. Yet, they can, with the right attitudes and objectives, provide what is needed for a successful spiritual life. Even in places where education is of very low quality and of proportionately high expense, parents can impart enough basic literacy to enable children to understand the Scriptures, and to teach them how to go about understanding those writings.

God acknowledges, in several places, that the faithful will suffer as a result of their faith. But, God also promises that our outlook on those difficulties will get us through them. In several places, the faithful are instructed to look to the positive outcomes of perseverance and overcoming rather than at the immediate discomfort (for example, Romans 5:3 – 4, Hebrews 12:11, James 1:3). Further, there is that passage in the Sermon on the Mount, in Matthew 6:33, “But seek ye first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things (such as food and clothing) will be added to you.” He does not promise to fulfill our wants, but rather our needs. And even if we should starve to death, that outcome is far better than what we would have encountered if we had stayed alive on earth.

Certainly, when we have opportunity for financial gain, we should take it. We are far better able to put those profits to good use than is the general population. But we need not stress over not having those gains. And teaching our children that Biblical outlook will save them a huge amount of anxiety and allow them to feel good about themselves as children of God in a world that never says that you have enough stuff. Instead, we impart a mastery of living that does not depend on wealth; a character that allows them to avoid many of the attractive nuisances that are pushed at us by the world.

A third lesson we can draw from the example of Joseph and Mary, parents do not need to be perfect to be successful. Notice how we could lay blame on Joseph and Mary just from this one scene. Notice that they took the time, they spent the money, to go to Passover every year. But, the Law stipulated that every male over 30 was required to go to the “place of the Lord’s choosing,” as it is put in the Law, three times per year (Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles). In the first century, that meant three times per year to the Temple. In the case of Joseph and Mary, that was nearly 100 miles one way, not to mention the expense of not working, finding shelter, and eating for two weeks of travel and one week of festival.

In the first century, many Jews lived outside of Palestine, despite the fact that the Law clearly says that they need to live in the Promised Land. Most of them took up residence in other places due to war or other political upheaval. They were just getting out of the way for the safety of their families. But, they forgot to move back. Egypt, Syria, Turkey, Greece, and Rome all had sizeable Jewish populations. While travel from Nazareth to Jerusalem would be daunting, think about 150 miles from Egypt, 500 from Turkey, or 1200 from Greece (not all by land). You would spend the majority of the year on the road to make it to those three festivals. So, the custom became accepted that you should make it to the festivals as often as you could, and the bar for what was reasonable kept getting lower. So, I’m sure that one festival every year was remarkably good for someone from Nazareth.

Also, we know from Matthew 13:55 and Mark 6:3 that Jesus had four brothers and at least two sisters. So, as the years went by, the group kept getting bigger. Didn’t Joseph and Mary

count noses before they headed home? Although twelve-year-olds are likely to have enough responsibility to be allowed to be out of sight for periods of time, at critical junctures, we really should be sure everyone is where they should be.

Parents make mistakes. All is not lost when we do. We can kick ourselves for not being better role models or for not always having the best answer. Or, we can learn from our mistakes and move on. We left a kid a church once, which, if you are going to forget to count noses, that would seem to be a less hazardous place to do it. In fact, making a mistake and owning up to it teaches a lot of positive things to the kids. And, by not being devastated but rather learning and moving on, we model how to master living on this broken planet. Stuff happens. We don't always guess right. If the response the kids see is that we agonize over every less-than-superb choice, we will make them a bundle of nerves, prone to anxiety or even depression. God did not need for Joseph and Mary to be ideal parents, just faithful parents who got better as they worked through life. That's how Christianity is supposed to be; not a study in how we messed up, but a testament to how we can overcome ourselves by focusing on the good stuff.

And, the fourth parenting model we can gain from Joseph and Mary, kids hit that magic age, which is different for every kid, when they begin to develop abstract thought. Usually, that age is around 12, although I have seen 10-year-olds who had it, and 16-year-olds who didn't. I get the sense that Joseph and Mary were not quite prepared for Jesus to make that transition. They did not give Jesus credit for being able to think through the situation in which He found Himself.

Some people make way too much out of Jesus' response, "Why did you seek Me? Did you not know that I must be about My Father's business?" Some draw the conclusion that Jesus was just putting up with His clueless parents, that He already knew everything. He was just waiting until He turned 30 (the age when you were considered a man and could speak up in the synagogue). But that does not fit with the descriptions of Jesus growing and increasing in wisdom. And, He is described as obedient to His parents. So, I take Jesus' reply to mean, "Where else would I be? I have listened at all the family gatherings as the story of my birth and John's birth were recounted again and again, and I have been paying attention in school and get what it means to be identified as the Messiah." I think He was teasing His parents with, "You searched for me three days. You should have known where I would wait for you, not at the candy store."

Joseph and Mary were caught flat-footed when Jesus turned the corner from concrete to abstract thinking. We, as parents, need to learn from their mistake. Further, we can encourage that development by giving children situations where they have the opportunity to try out that new way of thinking. Jesus had His school lessons from the Scriptures, and He was pushed, intellectually, to think about the passages about the Messiah, most of which are significantly abstract or figurative. If we give kids the chance to think about thinking, to begin to recognize how other people think and feel, we give them a big head start in being able to deal with the world in a Biblically successful way. That way, their transformation into the character of Jesus will not be such a big leap.

From this brief recounting of the parenting of Joseph and Mary, obviously we can understand that they were chosen specifically by God for their character, their focus on godly things, their probability of providing a suitable launchpad for the Redeemer. That choosing by God laid on them a huge responsibility. But the responsibility of every parent is not all that different. We don't want to become paranoid as a result of the pressures of that responsibility,

but we need to keep it in view. The objective is to turn out faithful adults. We cannot lose sight of that in the midst of the everyday chaos of childrearing.

Being that successful parent does not require stuff, just faith, selflessness, and dedication to the task. We all would like to give more things to our kids, and giving them stuff is fine. But, it is not important for their character development. We need to be content where we are so that they can be content where they end up. If they learn to be content based on those who genuinely care about them, the pressures of the outside world will not divert them. They will learn to use the world, not to let the world use them. Withdrawing from the world does no one any good, because we could not share the gospel. Rather, we need to show them how to live successfully based on our trust of God and of one another, and our selflessness as a way of life.

Parents do not need to be perfect. In fact, hiding our flaws is counterproductive. First, the kids probably already figured out that you messed up. Second, demonstrating how to live a joyful life by learning from mistakes and moving on is a skill few on this planet have mastered. We can have joy by focusing on the next good thing. Wallowing in the shortcomings of the past only makes us an easy target for the temptations of this world.

And, finally, be prepared for, and promote, abstract thinking. Children cannot relate to a God they cannot see and who is a Spirit, who is the collection of all proper logic and positive character traits. None of that is comprehensible to a concrete thinker. We, as parents, cannot wait until they surprise us with an abstract thought, but rather nurture and promote that way of thinking in little doses, teaching them to think, not just react.

God came to earth as a baby and grew up in a broken world. He had great parents, despite them being less than perfect. Jesus developed into the walking illustration of what God is like. We are supposed to develop into that same image. Giving kids a head start on how that sort of thinking works gives them a giant head start on success on God's terms.