

PARENTS! WHERE ARE YOUR CHILDREN?

SERIES: JESUS, SAVIOR OF THE LOST

By Ron Ritchie

No matter what kind of parent you are, married, single, a grandparent raising grandchildren, a foster parent--raising children in this modern, high-tech, fast-paced society is a real challenge. I suspect that your heads and hearts spin daily as you evaluate all the opportunities that you have to offer your children in this age. As Christian parents, we are tempted daily to open every possible door of opportunity to our children. We want them to have a good and full life which will allow them to reach their full potential. Deep within our hearts we are tempted to offer our children the secrets of living on earth, the absence of failure and pain, and the sweet joy of success. The merchants of this world are not blind to this "window of opportunity," and have filled our society with seminars, clinics, books, and workshops on how to raise our children. Unfortunately, it is usually on a self-centered, horizontal, competitive level, which ends in self-destruction.

On any given week day we can go out to schools in our community and watch what happens when the final bell rings. Station wagons and cars will show up with faithful mothers or babysitters to pick up waiting youngsters. These cars will not take the children home for a time to sit at the kitchen table with Mom, having cookies and milk, reviewing the day, and talking about life. The cars show up to take them for two and three more hours of clinics, workouts, and practices where they can continue to excel and find their "full potential."

On any given Saturday or Sunday morning there are several fields where children participate in various sports. Many are taken there by faithful fathers who may want to absolve their own guilt for being absent through divorce or work pressures, but also with the hope that their children will grow up successful. One mother told me that her seven-year-old son sat down at the table and said after thinking through all the clinics that he had to be in that week, "Mother, I can't take it anymore!" Granted, there is nothing wrong in these activities in themselves. The question is, how many and to what end?

As a result of this "station-wagoning" of our present generation, we as well as our children are living in a stressed-out condition, pushed beyond our limits because we want our children to become over-achievers--the best, the strongest, the fastest. In the midst of this shuffling of our children, few take notice that we have given over the high privilege of parenting to others, "professionals" who may know very little about nurturing, and by default many of us are becoming nothing more than local chauffeurs.

I cannot stand before you and say I did it all right, so you ought to follow me. No one even talked to me about this when I was raising children. I did not have a father. I did not have a mother who told me anything about raising children. Children just arrived and then we tried our best. Rather, I would like to go back to the scriptures and ask all of us who are Christian parents to consider whether or not there are areas in which we need to correct our course in order to line up our lives with God's view of parenting.

Five thousand years ago, the mandate from God through Moses was,

"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, all your might, and these words which I am commanding you today shall be on your heart, and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and daughters, and you shall teach them when you sit down in your house, and when you walk by the way and when you lay down and when you rise up" (Deut. 6:5-7).

Finding the time to be a parent takes forethought and hard work. We are not rabbits who have offspring, and somehow they grow up. We are human beings who are to pass on much more to them than how to have more

rabbits.

God's view of children follows: "Behold, children are a gift of the Lord, the fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior. So are children of one's youth. How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them" (Psalm 127:3-5).

Although the scriptures proclaim that children are a gift, our society's stance is the polar opposite. This generation is called the "throw-away" generation in contemporary literature. If we do not throw them away in abortion, then we throw them away by putting them into private schools, clinics, and day care centers so as not to interfere with our own careers, hopes, and dreams. In contrast, the scriptures say that the parent is to have a genuine relationship with the Lord. It is from him that we derive our life, example, power, love, patience, direction, and wisdom. It is from him that we see the value of our children, assume responsibility to raise them to love the Lord, and prepare them as arrows to shoot into the next generation. That is the key: they must have direction, they are to go somewhere. Hopefully, through our children, another generation will be prepared by God to hear the message of redemption through Jesus Christ.

The challenge for the Christian parent is to choose the right target at which to take aim and shoot our arrows. There are three possible targets. First, there is nothing. Longfellow said it so long ago: "I shot an arrow into the air, it fell to earth I know not where." The principle is if you shoot at nothing, you will hit it every time. A lot of us are doing that with our children. We are preparing them for nothing by not assuming our God-given responsibility.

The second target is the world system, which the apostle John describes as "the lust of the flesh," in order to achieve power; the lust of the eyes, in order to achieve possessions; and the boastful pride of life, in order to achieve position. You can see this so well modeled in the recent movie, "Dead Poets Society", with Robin Williams, in which he is a modern Mr. Chips. In an English prep school of the 1950's, this teacher's mission was to teach a class of affluent kids the joy of living. This was in opposition to the wishes of the parents who desired their children be prepared to achieve the lost opportunities and advantages of which they were deprived in their generation. The problem with the movie is that it ends up in the world system of shallow fulfillment and empty values.

The third target is godly wisdom. Job sums up this target so clearly when he said, "Behold, the fear of the Lord, that is wisdom, and to depart from evil is understanding" (Job 28:28). Honoring, loving, submitting to the one and only living God is wisdom. From this God comes wisdom, the skill of living life on this earth in a way that will bring understanding, wholesomeness, peace, and joy to us as parents and then to our children in this and the next generation.

In the scriptures we are blessed with models of parenting from the lives of Mary and Joseph. We will look at the early life of Jesus in Luke 2:39-52. When he was only 40 days old we saw that God was preparing Jesus' earthly parents to love, trust, and rely on him for all of life. They were responsible to take the life of Christ as an infant in the flesh and prepare this arrow for succeeding generations.

In our last message, Luke told us of the virgin birth of Jesus, circumcised on the eighth day under the Law, and then taken to the temple on the fortieth day to be dedicated to the Lord, according to Exodus 12. It was at that point that Simeon, a godly man in the community, came forward to do the dedication. As he blessed the child, he could not believe that he saw God's Messiah in his arms, and said, "A light of revelation to the Gentiles, and the glory of thy people Israel." He turned to Mary and prophesied, saying, "Behold this child is appointed for the fall and rise of many in Israel and for a sign to be oppose--and a sword will pierce even your own soul, to the end that thoughts from many hearts shall be revealed."

Later, verse 39 continues: "When they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own city of Nazareth." According to Matthew 2:1-23, there are two years missing from the Luke 2 account in which several events occurred: (1) Mary and Joseph were visited by the three kings, (2) Herod plotted to kill the "Shepherd of Israel", (3) the family escaped to Egypt, (4) the slaughter of the innocent male children under two years of age in Bethlehem, and (5) the death of Herod the Great. Mary and Joseph subsequently returned from Egypt and went to Galilee.

Today, as we look at Luke 2:40, we want to ask the question, "Parents! Where are your children?"

I. Hopefully, Maturing in Godly Wisdom, Luke 2:40

The child continued to grow and become strong, increasing in wisdom; and the grace of God was upon him.

In this passage, Jesus was about two-years old. We will see three things occurring in the young life of Jesus. First, he grew physically. Down through the centuries, hundreds of stories have been quoted about the boyhood of Jesus, although the Bible is completely silent on any Little League activities, piano lessons or awards for languages. If we were to believe some of the legends, however, we would have to say that Jesus had a lot of fun as a boy. One legend says that lions and leopards worshiped him. Another says that when Jesus was an infant, he said to a palm tree, "Bend down and refresh my mother with your fruit," and the palm tree obeyed. Another story says that when Jesus was five years old, he molded twelve sparrows from clay, then he clapped his hands and the sparrows flew away. These stories will continue to be told as long as people think that Jesus knew from his infancy exactly who he was and the power that was available to him in his deity. They think he was "grown up" from the time he was born, in other words. But this verse does not say that.

Our Lord Jesus was born as a baby, incarnated, God in the flesh. He experienced the full spectrum of his humanity, yet without sin. The apostle Paul said it clearly in Philippians 2:6-8: "Who, being in the very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death, even death on the cross." Our Lord experienced in his humanity all the joys and temptations of growing up, becoming strong physically like all the other children in his neighborhood, yet without sin.

Jesus went through a process of increasing in wisdom. Jesus was raised by godly parents according to the Law of Moses. Early in his life, he learned the joy of studying the Law, the prophets, and the Psalms. Proverbs encouraged him to seek godly wisdom, not that which the world relies upon. Webster says, "Wisdom is the quality of being wise; the power of judging rightly and following the soundest course of action based on knowledge, experience and understanding." That definition describes wisdom out of our own resources. James, however, warns: "But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your heart, this wisdom is not that which comes down from above but is earthy, natural, demonic. For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there is disorder and every evil thing" (James 3:14-16). Of this wisdom, the apostle Paul said to the Corinthians: "God made foolish the wisdom of this world" (I Corinthians 1:20). All the wisdom of man is foolishness to God, because it does not include him.

On one hand, there is the wisdom of the world, and then there is the wisdom of God. Godly, spiritual wisdom is the skill necessary for godly living in an ungodly world. Godly wisdom takes the revelation of Scripture and applies that truth to our own lives and the lives of those around us. Godly wisdom is the true insight into the true nature of things visible and invisible on all levels of human experience. "The wisdom that comes from above," says James, "is pure, peaceful, gentle, merciful, filled with good fruit, understanding, without hypocrisy" (James 3:17). Psalm 111:10 says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom; a good understanding have all those who do his commandments." Proverbs 2:2-6 says, "Make your ear attentive to wisdom, incline your heart to understanding; for if you cry for discernment. Lift your voice for understanding; if you seek her as silver, and search for her as for hidden treasures; then you will discern the fear of the Lord, and discover the knowledge of God. For the Lord gives wisdom. From his mouth come knowledge and understanding."

We pray to him about all our circumstances in order to seek wisdom and live as godly people. Proverbs 2:13-14, 18 says: "How blessed is the man who finds wisdom and the man who gains understanding. For its profit is better than the profit of silver and its gain than fine gold. . . . She is a tree of life to those who take of her and happy are all who hold her fast." These scriptures say that if you want to know how to function in this world on every level of human experience, then ask God. Talk to God, study his word. Stop in this generation

of stress. Slow down. Shut down the motor. Sit with your children, talk with them. Wherever you are, talk to them about things that are eternal.

The young Jesus was encouraged by the Holy Spirit, the word of God, and his parents to develop in the area of godly wisdom in order to lead a life that pleased his heavenly Father in a fallen world. Jesus had to go through the process of developing godly wisdom over a period of time.

Not only did Jesus grow physically and intellectually, but he also grew spiritually. The Lord God was pleased with his son as evidenced by his words at Jesus' baptism: "This is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased" (Luke 3:22). The prophecies of the Old Testament are set up to teach us about who Jesus is. In Isaiah 11:1-3 there are these words about Jesus: "Then a shoot will spring up from the stem of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him. The spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and strength, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, and He will delight in the fear of the Lord." Isaiah 53 says: "He grew up before him as a tender shoot, and like a root out of parched ground" so that he could fulfill his ministry in his generation."

I am sure that Mary and Joseph experienced the temptation to push Jesus to experience his full potential. Yet they chose by the power of the Holy Spirit and the instructions from the word of God, the prophecy of the angel Gabriel, the shepherds, Elizabeth, Zechariah, Simeon, and Anna to be instruments of God to help their child develop physically, intellectually, and spiritually to the glory of God rather than the world system.

Recently, I was a guest in the home of a friend who lives in Santa Barbara. I met one of their two daughters who was about to deliver her first child. Her husband was on leave from New Guinea where they are missionaries with Wycliffe Bible Translators. She related that she and her husband were back from New Guinea where they are missionaries with Wycliffe Bible Translators. He was on leave to do further research, and then they would return after a few months.

As I came down the stairs the next morning to get a cup of coffee, I heard beautiful music coming from the parlor. I stopped in my tracks in awe by the scene that was before me. The couple was sitting facing each other, singing a hymn while she played a cello and he played the violin. When the song was over he read some scripture to her, and then they joined in prayer. My eyes were glued to those two lovely people as they worshiped God; I felt as if I were in the Holy of Holies. All I could think of was how delighted God must be with these two potential parents who would pass on to their child all the truths of their heavenly Father. They were preparing ahead of time by falling in love with the Lord in order to be godly parents.

Parents, where are your children? Hopefully, they are maturing in godly wisdom and favor with the Lord.

II. Hopefully, Maturing in Favor with God Luke 2:41-52:

And his parents used to go to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of Passover. When he became 12 they went up there according to the custom of the feast. As they were returning after spending the full number of days, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. And his parents were unaware of it, but supposed him to be in the caravan, and went a day's journey; and they began looking for him among their relatives and acquaintances. And when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, looking for him. And it came about 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 amazed at his understanding and his answers. And when they saw him, they were astonished; and his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us this way? Behold, your father and I have been anxiously looking for you." And he said to them, "Why is it that you were looking for me? Did you not know that I had to be in my father's house?" And they did not understand the statement which he had made to them. And he went down with them, and came to Nazareth; and he continued in subjection to them; and his mother treasured all these things in her heart. And Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men.

At this time Jesus was drawing close to his thirteenth year, a time when he would be pronounced a man, a son of the covenant, through a Jewish ceremony which we call Bar-Mitzvah. A son of the covenant has the freedom to experience all the privileges of the synagogue. That might explain why Jesus lingered in the temple at this point.

The Jews had three major feasts that they would seek to attend each year as a family: Passover, Pentecost, and the Day of Atonement. For those living outside of Jerusalem it might be difficult to attend all three occasions, so many families would plan to go to at least one feast each year. The Feast of Passover was held in Jerusalem to commemorate Israel's deliverance from Egypt. It was at that point that the nation of Israel was born, cut free from the bondage of Egypt to enjoy the new life of grace and fellowship with God. This deliverance was accomplished by the "blood taken from a sacrificial lamb." Each faithful family had placed the blood on their doorpost so that the angel of death would pass over when he saw the blood and spare the life of the firstborn. The Passover meal was followed by the seven days of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Apparently, Jesus' family had stayed for the full seven days and then found a caravan that would safely carry them back to their home in Nazareth.

In the midst of the thousands of Jews who were leaving town at the same time, Mary and Joseph assumed Jesus was somewhere apart from them in the caravan. However, the family realized after a day out of Jerusalem that Jesus was not with them. They looked for him among their relatives and acquaintances, but to no avail. Rushing back to Jerusalem with hearts filled with fear and worry, they spent the next three days looking for their son.

"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 amazed at his understanding and his answers." Jesus had been seeking wisdom all these years, so being in this situation was not amazing to him. Only people who do not seek wisdom are amazed in the face of wisdom. Here were the teachers of the Law and the prophets and the Psalms, and they were amazed at this young man's godly wisdom. Since it was Passover time, perhaps they were listening to him and answering the questions that had to do with this major event in the life of his people. As the Final Passover Lamb, Jesus might have been asking about the significance of the Passover as it related to his life.

When they saw him they were also astonished; and his mother said, "Son why have you treated us this way? Behold, your father has been anxiously looking for you." Mary and Joseph were not only astonished at Jesus' ability to handle the teachers, but they were also amazed that he had stayed behind and created such anxiety. Jesus was sitting in one of the porches of the temple area, where the great teachers answered the questions of the students who gathered to hear them. Here was their son, holding the audience in the palm of his hand, answering deep questions about the things of God. They sensed that something other than the normal give and take with their twelve-year-old son was going on. (Mary came to a full realization of who her son was only after his resurrection and the coming of the Holy Spirit.) But it was here in the temple area that one could gain wisdom, and wisdom was one of Jesus' major interests in life. He was the right person at the right place at the right time, seeking wisdom, insight into the true nature of things visible and invisible, on all levels of human experience.

And he said to them, "Why is it that you were looking for me? Did you not know that I had to be in my Father's house? Jesus was essentially saying, "Mother, based on your own experience with the angel Gabriel, the confirmation of your cousin Elizabeth's song, the prophecy of Simeon, the visit of the three kings, you have always known who I am and why I have come to earth. I myself am slowly but surely coming into that full reality. The full reality is that I am the final Passover Lamb, the Savior of the world, the light of the world. I am all that Israel was supposed to be, the salt and light of the world. I am the world's only hope for salvation." He was surprised at his parent's lack of understanding of his person, his relationship to his heavenly Father, and his mission. Through his study of the Scripture he realized he was to be about his heavenly Father's business. The purpose of his life on earth was to accomplish God's plan for him. In Psalm 40 it was written of Jesus, "Behold I come; in the scroll of the book it is written of me I delight to do thy will. O my God, thy law is within my heart" (Psalm 40:7,8). Jesus was on earth to please his father.

"And they did not understand the statement which he had made to them. And he went down with them in

subjection to them; and his mother treasured all these things in her heart. " Mary and Joseph did not understand their son and the words of eternal life. Jesus was seeking to show them eternal truths, but they could only see from their material view of reality. At 12, Jesus was growing in his awareness of the Spirit, the word, and the various experiences he had that he would one day become the final Passover Lamb. And yet, in the midst of all of this, he was still in subjection to his earthly parents.

Luke then summarizes the following 18 years of Jesus' life before he entered his public ministry: "Jesus kept increasing in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and man" (verse 52). Intellectually, he increased in wisdom. The Lord from his early childhood, through his teens, and then into manhood, focused on gaining wisdom in his humanity. He developed the skills for handling and understanding life as his Father desired life to be lived. The fruit of this shows up in Matthew as he goes back to Nazareth in Matthew 13:54: "And coming to his home town he began teaching them in their synagogue, so that they became astonished and said, 'Where did this man get this wisdom. Is not this the carpenter's son? Is not his mother called Mary?'" In other words, he had no credentials from private schools, workshops and seminars that other children had. Where did he get this insight into reality? They were astonished, shocked by his abilities.

Physically, he increased in stature. He was an example of God's desire for the human body, without sin and its resultant decay. Adam and Eve had shown us the perfection of innocence, but Jesus was perfection in holiness.

Spiritually, the Lord increased in favor with God. He was a joy to his heavenly Father, full of grace and truth. Socially, he increased in favor with men until he announced that he was the long awaited Messiah, and then the camps divided.

Parents, where are your children? Hopefully, they are maturing in godly wisdom, and in favor with God. However, the mandate is not over. To review, God's view of parenting is expressed in Deuteronomy 6:5-7: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words, which I am commanding you today shall be on your heart; and you shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up." That is what is referred to by "teachable moments." We must grab every one of them.

Likewise, God's view of children is stated in Psalm 127:3-5: "Behold, children are a gift of the Lord. The fruit of the womb is a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior. So are children of one's youth. How blessed is the man whose quiver is full of them." Parents, treat your children as gifts of God, and prepare them to be shot into the next generation so that men and women might have hope through the gospel of Jesus Christ.

So we need to ask ourselves two questions. First, as Christian parents is our love for Jesus Christ growing and maturing? Why does it have to start with us? Paul says, "For in Christ is the mystery of God in whom are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge." He is saying that if we have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and it is growing, we will uncover a hidden treasure, all the wisdom and knowledge necessary to cope in this world.

Secondly, as Christian parents are we helping our gifts from God, our children, to grow in favor with God as we encourage them to love the Lord and his word? Are we preparing our "arrows" in such a way that when we shoot them into the next generation they will penetrate the bullseye on the target marked "godly wisdom"?

Proverbs 9:10 says: "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is understanding." It takes time to be with our children, it takes time to be with the Lord. As parents, where are our children? Where are we in relationship to this truth?

Our Heavenly Father, as parents we want to pray the same prayer which Moses addressed to you so long ago, "Teach us to number our days aright, that we may gain a heart of wisdom in order to raise our children to love you and seek your wisdom all the days of their lives." Amen.

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