

The Covenant Keeping Resolve of the Young Jesus (Lk 2.39-52)

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39 And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. 40 And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him. 41 Now his parents went to Jerusalem every year at the Feast of the Passover. 42 And when he was twelve years old, they went up according to custom. 43 And when the feast was ended, as they were returning, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem. His parents did not know it, 44 but supposing him to be in the group they went a day's journey, but then they began to search for him among their relatives and acquaintances, 45 and when they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem, searching for him. 46 After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48 And when his parents saw him, they were astonished. And his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress." 49 And he said to them, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" 50 And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them. 51 And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart. 52 And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man.

Introduction

Our text for today is Lk 2.39-52. It contains a simple narrative with some jarring questions. On reflection, simplicity gives way to complexity, the ordinary to the extraordinary, and the obvious to the profound. In the end, we will have say what Machen said in his work on the virgin birth: "Has the utterance from the youthful Jesus ever fully been understood-understood, we mean, even by those who have been just as fully convinced of the fact of the supernatural conception as Mary was convinced...? There are depths in this utterance which have never been fathomed even by the framers of the Nicene and Chalcedonian creeds" (Machen, *Virgin Birth*, 132).

How then are we going to arrange things in order to grapple with this special passage? We could follow the text geographically: from Jerusalem to Nazareth, back to Jerusalem and back to Nazareth again. Another way to outline is by time frames: from infancy to twelve years of age and from age twelve to manhood. But on substance, the locations and the time frames have very little detail.

So, let us begin with a title for this text and work with that in mind to come up with an outline. The title for our remembering in this communion service is "The Covenant Keeping Resolve of the Young Jesus." If you do not detect it yet, I trust that you will see how the most profound truths of Scripture come together in this text and the title reflects them. We have *covenant keeping* by a *youthful Jesus*. Upon inspection, these two things stand in a deep but marvelous tension. The tension peaks in a question of the young Jesus that states His resolve. Accordingly, our outline covers the general background of His resolve (39-40), the specific context of His resolve (41-48), the mind-boggling nature of His resolve (49-50), and the unexpected display of His resolve (51-52).

1A. The general background of His resolve

The resolve of Jesus surfaces in some dialogue with His parents in the temple in Jerusalem, but before Luke takes us there he sets the stage at home in Nazareth: **39 And when they had performed everything according to the Law of the Lord, they returned into Galilee, to their own town of Nazareth. 40 And the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him (Lk 2.39-40).** Verse 39 serves as a transition in the narrative. After the encounter of Simeon and Anna with the

infant Jesus in the Jerusalem temple, the family returned to Galilee where Jesus **grew and became strong, filled with wisdom. And the favor of God was upon him** (v. 40). These are striking words spoken of a child's development from infancy to the onset of adolescence. He grew and became strong, that is, in words all parents want to express, the child grew up with health and strength. Moreover, His strength connects with both His physical and His spiritual development. Imagine, a youth not yet twelve that displays an uncommon fulness of wisdom. True to what wisdom is biblically, His wisdom is a spiritual quality that indicates that He lived with God's approval and by His special love, care, and gifts: God's favor was upon Him. Let us mark these things down for the moment; they are important background for the rest of the story.

2A. The specific context of His resolve

It is an outstanding fact that only one event in the early life of Christ is on record regarding what the Lord thought, did, or said, as a lad. It took place when Jesus was twelve years old (Lk 2:42). His family made annual visits to Jerusalem and on this occasion when His parents left the city to return home, they mistakenly left Jesus behind too. They thought He was "**in the group**" of "**relatives and acquaintances**" that traveled with them in caravan (2.44). When they discovered that He was missing, it took three days to find Him. Finding Him in the temple, two things occur: they are taken back and they step forward.

1) First, taken back, they are astonished along with others who are amazed

Thus, we read that Jesus was **sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. 47 And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. 48 And when his parents saw him, they were astonished** (46b-48a). There is definite amazement and astonishment. What causes it? The scene is amazing, even astonishing. A young lad of twelve years sits among the teachers in the temple. It is quite the scene because these are not elementary school teachers, but teachers of adults; they are highly trained leaders in Israel. More striking than the scene of a lad among seasoned instructors is the dialogue between young and old. Jesus exemplifies the conduct of a disciple: He listens, He asks questions, and He gives answers. There is question and counter-question present and the outcome is a wonder: **all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers** (47). A person once said to me that open-minded humility, including counter-question and question, is not in the Bible. I did not recall this text in my reply. What a marvelous way to remember our Lord Jesus as a lad!

2) Second, stepping forward, they express relief along with reproach

Their distress is now beginning to fade, but before it becomes calm relief, it manifests itself in a muted scolding or perhaps a soft chiding. It is muted and soft because it is put in a form of a question: **And his mother said to him, "Son, why have you treated us so? Behold, your father and I have been searching for you in great distress"** (48b). The response of the parents, particularly the mother, is natural. Mary speaks for the father (your father and I), expresses their distress (it was great distress), and she chides Jesus for bringing this upon them: (you treated us so). Is this not so typical? The question combines loving endearment (Son) with blame (why have you treated us so), as if Jesus intentionally brought the great distress on Mary and Joseph for their harm. This astonishment, mixed with soft chiding, is the specific context that yields a revealing statement of our Lord's resolve. Notably, He replies to the question with two questions of His own.

3A. The mind-boggling nature of His resolve

This account is only recorded in one Gospel, Luke (2:41-51). The other Gospels move quickly from the entry of Christ into the world to the ministry of John the Baptist who paved the

way for the ministry of Christ. They "skip" from His birth to the beginning of His ministry. Significantly, there is no other record in the NT that reveals anything that Jesus thought, did, or said before He reached thirty years of age. It is only in Luke's Gospel that we have testimony to our Lord's own sense of calling as a youth. This sense of calling is sometimes referred to as His messianic self-consciousness. Because this event stands alone, it stands out like a preface to the life and work of Christ. Hence, it is reasonable to conclude that this account gives us something central that defines who Jesus is. As a preface it can help us find our way into, and through, the entire gospel story. Let us attack this text with two questions of our own.

1B. What, then, are the first words that we hear from the lips of Christ?

They are reported in two questions that Jesus asked His parents when they found Him: **"Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?"** (Lk. 2:49). It seems to me that the logic behind this question is this: "if you knew that I must be involved in the things of my Father then you would not have had to search for me. You would know that I would be in His temple." We can add strong logic to our Lord's discipleship, to His willingness to listen, question, and give answers. On what does this logic depend? Why should they know these things, not let the circumstance cause such distress, and why should they know where to find Him? We have some of our answer in the general background of 2.40. Remember, Jesus was filled with wisdom by the blessing of God; that is something that spills over in practical living, say, in contrast to how mere knowledge does not spill over. Add that to the virgin birth and the testimony of angels and prophets regarding this child and you have a solid basis for knowing what Jesus would be doing and where He would be doing it. So even though there is no mention here explicitly of either the Father's business (KJV) or the Father's house (ESV), the point is clear. What we have is literally, **"it is necessary for me to be in the [things] of my Father."** If He must be in the things of the Father then if His parents lose track of Him in Jerusalem, they should know where to find Him: in the Father's house of course.

2B. By these words what does the Lord Jesus tell us about Himself?

From the very first words of Christ that are recorded, we learn that Jesus is driven by a deep sense of obligation and commitment to the Father. He is under authority, recognizes that fact, and acknowledges it openly to Joseph and Mary (and presumably to His relatives and acquaintances). The implication is that they had sufficient information at their disposal to know that Jesus, even as a youth, lived in radical submission to the Father in heaven.

The central notion is submission to authority (cf. the verb of necessity: I *must* be in the things of my Father). And some things are indicated about His position under authority. His submission to authority is a matter of love (He submits to the Father), it is unique (He speaks of "my Father"), and it is comprehensive (He lovingly submits to involvement in the things of the Father). Note each in turn.

1) "In the things of the Father" expresses concreteness and detail in a sweeping way. At first it sounds somewhat vague: "in the things of my Father." But on reflection we realize that He is referring to the things of God categorically, to all the things of God. That means that His submission to authority is practical, concrete, detailed, down to earth, and thus comprehensive. Hence the translation is a good one that has, "I must be about my Father's business." He says in effect, "Whatever that business may be, that is what I must be about."

2) He is loved and loving in a Father/son relationship. His sense of obligation is not servile. His commitment to authority is filial as the love of a son to his father.

3) The uniqueness of His relationship speaks to the fact that Jesus is one with the Father. He is God the Son who has come to earth on a mission. Thus, the implication is that the

submission of Christ to the Father is a submission between equals and is therefore the result of an agreement between the members of the trinity. In other words, Jesus at age twelve is well aware that He has come to fulfill His part in the eternal covenant of redemption.

The question of Jesus to His parents is mind-boggling. It is no wonder that Joseph and Mary could not grasp the significance of His words: **And they did not understand the saying that he spoke to them** (2.50). One with the Father as the unique Son of God, Jesus shares all the divine attributes of God. They looked at God in the flesh when they looked at this twelve year old hardly half way on the journey from childhood to manhood. How could you look across the breakfast table and grasp that this child is God the Son Almighty maker of heaven and earth?

4A. The unexpected display of His resolve

Then the mystery abides because the child who mildly rebukes His parents continues to live in wise submission to their parental (5th commandment) authority over Him: **51 And he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was submissive to them. And his mother treasured up all these things in her heart. 52 And Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favor with God and man** (2.51-52). His submission is to parental authority, it is marked by wisdom, pleases God, and meets with the approval of men. Being fully God, Jesus is fully man. He waits in obedience for the Father's time.

The apostle John stated the mystery of God sitting in the temple before the eyes of His parents when he spoke of the Word that in the beginning was with God and was God, and who, without ceasing one iota to be fully God, became flesh and dwelt among us; so we beheld His glory, the glory of the beloved Son full of grace and truth (Jn 1.1-14). Truly, we have to say with Machen, "There are depths in this utterance which have never been fathomed even by the framers of the Nicene and Chalcedonian creeds" (*Virgin Birth* 132).

Conclusion

How then shall we remember our Lord Jesus? If we put all these things tightly together, we can describe Him in a compact phrase. Namely, He is the covenant keeping Son. The pieces are all packed into this short phrase: in a filial relation He is the loved and loving Son who keeps God's commandments within a covenantal framework. Let's remember Him, therefore, in terms of His undying resolve to keep His part in the eternal agreement of salvation.

Therefore, in context, we can state that the glory of God in the redemption of Jerusalem will come by this resolve of the young Jesus. He will give glory to Israel and light to the Gentiles. How will it come about? It will come about by willing submission to the Father's will in accord with the eternal covenant of redemption. It will come about by His circumcision, His presentation at the altar, and His sacrifice: all on the cross to take away our uncleanness.

Again, the response of persons in the narrative guides our response. Put as another question: how can you do anything else than raise your voice in songs of praise and words of love such as "Jesus, you are the joy of loving hearts; you are the fount of life and light of men, you are the bread of eternal life; you are the fountainhead that fills our thirsty souls." You must speak the words of Scripture on your knees in worship and awe: "**no one knows the Son but the Father**" (Mat 11.27). Who can penetrate the depths of God and man in one person and two natures?

Jesus in His youth and as a man is covenant keeping Son of God. He is therefore worthy of all praise, honor, and glory both now and forevermore! In light of these reminders, let us now take these elements of food and drink and continue to partake at the table of the new covenant in remembrance of Him; we continue because these Spirit given reminders are part of communion.