

GRACE International Fellowship - 31st December 2006

The raising of the Son (Luke 2:21-52)

Four views of the dawn

Last week we saw that the birth of Christ was the dawn of God's blessing after a long night of waiting. Malachi had prophesied over 400 years earlier that God's sun of righteousness would rise, and Zechariah, the father of John the Baptist, picked up on this idea in his prophetic description of the significance of Christ's birth. God included four different perspectives on this dawn of the Messianic age in His word. The four Gospels all open in different ways because of their focus on different aspects of Christ's person:

- **Matthew** – presents Christ as King therefore opens with genealogy emphasising descent from David and story of magi visiting the new-born king
- **Mark** – emphasises Christ as the suffering servant – he opens immediately with John and the beginning of Christ's servant ministry
- **John** – primarily concerned with presenting Christ as the divine Son of God, therefore begins with a theological foreword about Christ's identity and incarnation.

What about Luke? What is distinctive about the opening to his Gospel, and why is this? Luke's focus is on Jesus' perfect humanity, and he tells a series of stories that reveal to us how Christ was perfect even from the time of His birth.

Luke opens with a series of stories preceding and surrounding the birth of Christ. In addition, Luke alone gives us an insight into the childhood of Christ, telling the story of his visit to the Temple at 12 years of age. The stories of Luke chapters 1 and 2 follow a symmetrical pattern. Each unit is separated by a phrase that indicates the passage of time:

1. **Zechariah in the Temple – the failure of the Old Testament (1:5-25)**
In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth (1:26)
2. **Mary praises God for the significance of Christ's coming (1:26-56)**
Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home (1:56)
3. **John is born – Zechariah praises God (1:57-80)**
And the child grew and became strong in spirit; and he lived in the desert until he appeared publicly to Israel (1:80)
4. **Jesus is born – shepherds praise God (2:1-20)**
On the eighth day, when it was time to circumcise Him, He was named Jesus (2:21)
5. **Simeon and Anna praise God for the significance of Christ's coming (2:21-40)**
And the child grew and became strong; He was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon Him (2:40)
6. **Jesus in the Temple – the perfection of the New Testament (2:41-52)**

Dutiful parents

Mary and Joseph were dutiful Jewish parents. Luke gives us several pointers throughout this chapter that show us that this was true:

They had Him circumcised on the eighth day and named Him Jesus (v21)

Circumcision was given to Abraham as a sign of God's covenant with him. God told Abraham that every male child should be circumcised on the eighth day (Genesis 17:12). It was customary at this time to publicly name the child (as with John the Baptist in 1:59). Mary and Joseph gave to the baby the name Jesus as the angel had told them. This act shows their dedication to God's purpose for the child.

They presented Him to the Lord as the firstborn (vv22-24, 27, 39)

The time of purification refers to the Law that said that a woman was ceremonially unclean after giving birth to a son for a further period of 33 days after the child was circumcised (see Leviticus 12:1-5 – in the case of a daughter being born the woman was ceremonially unclean for a total of 80 days). The woman then had to come to the priest with two animals as an offering for her ceremonial purification – a year-old lamb as a burnt offering and a young pigeon or dove as a sin offering (Leviticus 12:6-7). There was a provision for those people who were too poor to afford a lamb to be able to offer two doves or young pigeons instead of the lamb and bird. The fact that Mary offered two birds (v24) shows that they were a relatively poor family. Christ was born into poverty.

Because Jesus was a firstborn son there was an additional requirement for Joseph and Mary to “redeem” him. This custom originated with the first Passover when God spared the firstborn sons of every home with blood on the door frame from His judgement (Exodus 13:11-13). This custom was intended to remind the Israelites that everything they owned was a gift from God and that they should offer to Him the very best of everything. Firstborn animals had to be sacrificed or redeemed by the offering of another animal or an amount of money, whilst firstborn sons had to be redeemed with a payment of money. The amount to be paid for this “redemption” was later fixed at five shekels (Numbers 18:14-16).

Luke twice reminds us in this passage that Mary and Joseph did everything that the custom of the Law required of them (v27 and v39). Christ had come to fulfil the Law (Matthew 5:17), and this process began with the actions of His faithful mother and step-father.

They took Him yearly to Jerusalem for the Passover festival (v41)

Verse 41 tells us that every year the family of Jesus went to Jerusalem for the Passover festival. This was a considerable effort for a family from Nazareth, but is further evidence of the couple’s devotion to the Lord and the godly upbringing they gave their children, including Jesus. This yearly journey to Jerusalem for the Passover was continued by Christ during His public ministry.

Hope fulfilled

Luke includes the stories of two people who saw the young Jesus when Mary and Joseph brought Him to the Temple. These two represent the faithful people in the nation of Israel who were waiting with anticipation for the coming of the Messiah (described as “the consolation of Israel” in v25 and “the redemption of Jerusalem in v38). They are a further link with the Old Testament.

Simeon (2:25-35)

We are not told Simeon’s age, but it is generally assumed from his readiness to die after seeing Christ (v29) that he was elderly. He was a faithful worshipper of God and the Holy Spirit was upon him (v25). Simeon’s meeting with Jesus was no coincidence, but planned by the Holy Spirit (v27). We have recorded two blessings of Simeon (the same Greek word is used in v28 for “praised” and v34 for “blessed”), one directed to God and the other to Mary:

- **His blessing to God (vv29-32)**

Simeon is now ready to depart because his hope has been fulfilled. He describes Jesus as the salvation of God prepared in the sight of all people who would be a light to bring revelation to the Gentiles and glory to Israel. We have here an echo of Isaiah 52:10 and a great promise (as we have already seen in 2:10) that this baby would not only be a Saviour for Israel but would bring salvation to all nations.

- **His blessing to Mary (vv33-35)**

Simeon’s prophetic words to Mary foretold that Jesus would cause many in Israel to fall and to rise. It is debated whether this refers to two groups of people – those who reject Him and therefore stumble and those who accept Him and are therefore raised up by God (compare to I Peter 2:6-8) – or one group who initially fall (being brought to a humble acceptance of Him) and then are raised up again (compare to I Peter 5:6). Whichever is intended, the promise is clear, that Jesus will provoke strong reactions and that the destiny of people will depend on Him. He will also face opposition, and will reveal the hearts of people. There is an ominous word for Mary too, that she will suffer as a result of Jesus (v35).

Anna (2:36-38)

Anna certainly was an elderly lady. The NIV suggests that she was 84 at this time (v37), but a more natural reading of the Greek would suggest that she had been widowed for 84 years. If this was so, we must add these 84 years to her 7 years of marriage and a likely minimum of 12 years before marriage. This would have made her 103 years of age! This elderly lady had made the Temple her home and was a prophetess. She also met the child Jesus (again this was no coincidence, but divinely timed – v38) and began to tell all those who were faithfully waiting for the Messiah about Him (v38).

A unique childhood

Luke alone of the four Gospel writers gives us an insight into the childhood of Jesus. This is in keeping with Luke’s focus on Christ’s perfect humanity. In 2:40 Luke summarises the development of Jesus from the presentation in the Temple (when He was just over one month old) until the age of 12 years:

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

The first half of this statement is virtually identical to Luke's words about John the Baptist in 1:80, and emphasise Jesus' normal physical development – He grew in size and became stronger physically. The second half of the statement emphasises His psychological development, being filled with wisdom and experiencing the favour of God. This statement could be said of other children, and does not specifically speak of a unique relationship with God or of Christ's divinity. It has been quite common for people to suggest that at this stage Jesus was no different from other children raised in devout homes, and that He did not develop self-awareness of His role as the Messiah until His baptism by John, when the Holy Spirit descended upon Him (Luke 3:22). The suggestion is that it was at this point that Jesus became the Son of God in a unique sense, as the Spirit came to live in Him. According to this view, the period of 40 days fasting in the desert and the temptation of Christ were part of His self-discovery. However, this common view does not fit well with Luke's account of the twelve year old Jesus in 2:41-50.

This scene forms the end of the parallel series of stories that began with the elderly priest Zechariah in the Temple, and sees the young child Jesus in the Temple. At twelve years of age Jesus was at an intermediate stage between childhood and adulthood. He could therefore have been travelling either with the men or with the women and children (assuming that the caravan Mary and Joseph were travelling in was arranged in this way). The fact that Mary and Joseph did not know where He was does not imply any negligence on their part, as it would have been quite normal for children to move within the extended circle of family and friends (v44). They travelled for a whole day before realising that Jesus was missing (presumably at the end of day when they would be settling down for the evening). As soon as they discovered that He was not in the group they returned to Jerusalem. It would have taken a further day for them to travel back, and so it was on the third day that they discovered Him in the Temple courts (v46). The words "anxiously searching" used by Mary in v48 are extremely strong, implying pain or suffering. I am sure that most parents can identify with that feeling of excruciating anxiety when fearful for the safety of their children, and this can only be more acute for Mary and Joseph with their awareness of this child's unique identity. Imagine losing the Messiah!!! It should be noted at this stage that Luke's description of Mary and Joseph as "his parents" (v48, also vv 27 and 33) does not imply that Joseph was Jesus' natural father, simply that He was the adopted son of Joseph. As we have already seen, Luke is very clear about Jesus' virgin birth and in 3:23 he also makes Joseph's relationship to Jesus clear.

The description of Jesus in the Temple is significant in understanding who He was and who He understood Himself to be even at this age. Jesus was among the teachers in the Temple. Although this may have been unusual enough for a 12 year old boy, He was also asking them questions (v46). It appears that His questions were not simply childish enquiries (the Sunday School teacher will be familiar with the usual spiritual questions of children), but probing questions. Not only did He ask questions, but He also gave answers that amazed them (v47). This was no ordinary 12 year old. He was extraordinary not only in His hunger for spiritual things, but also in his ability to explain the meaning of Scripture in ways that experienced teachers had not previously understood. Even more remarkable is His answer to Mary when she asks why He has treated them in this way (v48). Jesus' answer does not imply impertinence but shows innocence – He is not being cheeky, but sincere. He simply says that He had to be in His Father's house (v49). This is the real point of the story. The question is who is Jesus' father. Mary describes Joseph as His father (v48), but Jesus replies by describing God as His Father (v49). Mary and Joseph did not fully understand His meaning (v50), but Jesus is clearly describing a unique relationship with God as His Father. It was unheard of for any Jew to speak of God in such intimate terms, describing Him as "my Father".

It is clear that Jesus, even as a child, was aware of His unique relationship with the Father and had understanding of God's word beyond His years. However, He also demonstrated an innocence and lack of adult responsibility appropriate for His age. In v51, in case we feel that Jesus was disrespectful in any way to Mary and Joseph, Luke summarises the remainder of His childhood in simple terms that he "was obedient to them". Jesus was the perfect child just as He would be the perfect man. He was sinless and innocent. However, He still needed to develop, and v52 tells us that He "grew in wisdom and stature, and in favour with God and men". The development of Christ was unique. It is no wonder that we repeatedly see Mary and Joseph wondering at Him (vv33, 48 and 51). The process of parenting any child is one of learning and self-discovery, but in the case of Christ this must have been especially so. This glimpse of Jesus the child shows us that Christ had to develop physically and psychologically like any other child, and that this included growing in favour with God and people (this does not imply that the Father was increasingly pleased with Him over time, but that all of Christ's growth was pleasing to Him), but that He also had a unique awareness of His identity and relationship with the Father that grew with Him. We have no reason from Scripture to believe that Christ was anything less than the Son of God,

God incarnate, from the time of His conception. We can see, however, that His limitation of His own power included a limitation appropriate to His human age. There is no suggestion of Him manifesting supernatural powers until the beginning of His public ministry (the changing of water to wine is described as His first miracle in John 2:11). It would be unwise to speculate further about the childhood of Jesus, but it is enough to know that His mother, and later His half-brothers, Jude and James, could follow Him without any reason to doubt His sinless humanity or His true divinity.

Family relationships

We must be careful in drawing applications for family life from the example of Christ, Mary and Joseph. Clearly no child is the same as Jesus, and no parents have been entrusted with such a great responsibility as Mary and Joseph. However, I believe there are some valuable lessons for parents and children from the example of the family life of Jesus.

Parents

Parenthood is a great responsibility and a wonderful gift from God (as I am currently discovering!) Perhaps the greatest challenge in parenting is to balance freedom with responsibility. This is particularly difficult in our modern society where the emphasis is so much on the freedom and rights of children to the neglect of the responsibility of children within the family. There is not a great deal of advice about this balance in Scripture because in the culture of the time children were children until they reached adulthood (the "teenager" did not exist). However, there is a great deal that Christian teenagers can learn from Scripture, and we will return to some of this in the next section. Mary and Joseph are, in many ways, model parents, and Christian parents can learn from their example in several ways:

(i) Naming Him

Jesus was given a special name (meaning "Yahweh saves") because the angel had given it to Him. There was no doubt of its meaning or that this baby would grow up to fulfil it. To name a child is a great privilege and responsibility. In Scripture names were often prophetic, speaking about aspects of the person's character, physical appearance or the work they would accomplish for God. In a few cases God changed the names of people to fit their new identity in His plan: Abram ("exalted father") became Abraham ("father of many"), Jacob ("deceiver") became Israel ("prince with God") and Simon became Peter ("the stone"). Unfortunately, in modern society, parents are more likely to name their children after a celebrity of the day, the place they were conceived or simply because they like the sound of a certain name. There is a strong tradition of Christians choosing biblical names for their children or at least choosing a name with a godly meaning, expressing hope for the child's future character. When parents choose a name for their child they do well to consider the meaning of the name and to approach this important decision prayerfully.

(ii) Raising Him according to God's word

Mary and Joseph followed exactly the requirements of the Law in raising Jesus. Christian parents are not under these same requirements, but we are still responsible to raise our children according to the principles of God's word. The responsibility for teaching children God's word does not rest primarily with the Sunday School teacher but with the parents. This is a vital truth. It is so important to read God's word with children and to discuss it with them. Not only this, but we must exemplify it to them. Our children will learn more from our example than from our words. We must show them an example of godliness and faithful living in a world of selfishness and godlessness. One other way in which Mary and Joseph set an example for us is their willingness to surrender Jesus to God's plan. In one sense every child has a unique purpose in God's plan and parents are merely stewards of that potential until the child reaches maturity to be able to decide his or her own path. The first priority for any Christian parent should be to see their child growing up to be a man or woman of God. Our ambition for our children should be godliness and surrender to God's will. It is not wrong to hope that they will have success in this world and material security, but we must consider God's purposes as the greatest priority. If we fail to communicate this to our children in how we teach them about life, finances and education, we have failed to raise them in a godly way.

(iii) Raising Him within the extended community of God's people

Mary and Joseph raised Jesus within the context of an extended family and the community of God's people. The trip to Jerusalem for the Passover was a significant family event. Christian parents must also seek to raise their children within the community of God's people. Church should be an important feature of family life. Churches should make an effort to include families, and children should be seen as part of the church family.

Children

Christ's attitude to His earthly parents could be explained in one word: obedience (v51). This is not a popular notion among teenagers of today, needless to say! Scripture teaches us to honour our parents (Exodus 20:12), and clearly this means that in most cases children should obey their parents. The New Testament also re-emphasises this responsibility – Colossians 3:20 says simply:

Children, obey your parents in everything, for this pleases the Lord.

How are Christian teenagers in the modern world to apply this biblical truth? It should be said firstly that this is not a carte blanche for parents to act as dictators. Parents have a responsibility to respect their children and to give them freedom to develop as individuals. However, it is clear that Christian children should be obedient to their parents. There are a few key principles that will help in this process:

Ask for their opinion – do not always wait for your parents to tell you what they think or what they expect from you. Show them your respect for them by asking them for their opinion, and when you do ask listen. It is a very wise thing to take advice from your parents. Remember that although they will not always be right, they do love you and genuinely have your best interests at heart, they know you better than you might think, and they have more experience of life than you do. You can almost certainly learn something from them. Listen more than you talk!

Be honest – you should always try to be completely honest with your parents. This does not mean that you will tell them everything that's going on in your life (sometimes there are things that are just too embarrassing to tell them), but when they ask you questions you should not lie to them. Distrust grows in relationships where there is dishonesty or lack of openness. Even when you feel that your parents are always breathing down your neck try to remember that if you are honest with them they are more likely to trust you and give you a bit more freedom.

Care for them as real people – this might really sound like a step too far, but as a Christian teenager you can ask for God's help with it. Pray for your parents and ask God to help you to understand them. Try to see your parents as real people with needs, and look for ways to care for them in a practical way. If you have the right attitude towards them you will find it a lot easier to obey them, even when you don't want to. If you remember that their decisions are (almost always) made lovingly, and that even when they aren't this is because they are only human too, it makes it much easier for you to avoid the kind of frustration that leads to rebellion. Keeping your relationship with the Lord smooth will really help you to relate better to your parents.

One specific question for the Christian teenager whose parents are not believers arises in this discussion: what about when obedience to our parents conflicts with obedience to God? The example of Jesus in the Temple sheds some light on this question. Jesus was aware that His true parent was God, and obedience to His Father was His number one priority. This should be true for the Christian teenager too. However, we must balance this principle with obedience to our parents. I would summarise this balance in two statements:

- *Obedience to God takes priority over obedience to our parents* – in situations where obedience to our parents would mean disobedience to God we must respectfully disobey our parents. There are few good examples where this is necessary. One situation may be in Chinese families if parents expect you to offer incense to idols or ancestors.
- *There is no excuse for disrespecting our parents* – the principle of respecting our parents takes priority over obedience to them. Where teenagers must disobey their parents this must always be done in a respectful, not a rebellious way. Even adults must show respect to their parents although they are no longer bound to obey them.

It is important to say that disobedience to parents while we are still living under their roof and financially dependent on them should be a rare exception. One question that sometimes arises where a child of non-Christian parents becomes a Christian is baptism. In this situation I would advise the teenager to try to explain to the parents why baptism is important to them in the hope that the parents will permit them to be baptised, but if the parents refuse to give permission then the teenager should show respect by waiting until he or she is an adult or perhaps even until he or she has left the parental home.

Lastly, I must emphasise that there are some situations where children should not be bound by the principle of obedience to parents. These are only where the parents have failed so clearly in their God-given responsibility as parents that they no longer deserve the obedience of their children, namely in situations of abuse, whether physical, sexual or emotional. In these situations the child should seek help from outside the family and must not feel guilty about doing so.