

Luke 2:40-52

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 August 2026

Preacher: Jon Gemmell

[0:00] Reading from Luke chapter 2 verse 40. Thinking he was in their company, they travelled 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 that 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 favour with God and man.

[1:28] The Lord Jesus encourages us with the words, If you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father in heaven give the Holy Spirit to those who ask?

And so this morning, our Father, we are here before you, asking that you would send your Spirit, and that he would make these written words, living words in us, to the glory of your Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, in whose name we pray.

Amen. It's only 123 days until Christmas, and therefore I thought, why not look at the end of Luke chapter 2?

I was slightly nervous driving up the road, but then I saw on the announcements the nativity service on the 20th of December, and I thought you guys were already thinking that way. So what a great privilege to look at this passage together.

Susie Dent of Countdown Dictionary Corner fame, wrote a list of the most commonly misquoted British idioms.

[2:35] Phrases like, on tender hooks instead of on tenter hooks. Phrases like, all that glitters is gold, when Shakespeare actually wrote, all that glisters is gold.

We often say it's a mute point, but the phrase is actually a moot point. We talk about nipping things in the butt, which sounds quite rude, when it should be nipping things in the butt.

We talk about batting down the hatches, when it should be battering down the hatches. And we talk about being ready to go, we're chomping at the bit, when the phrase is actually chomping, chomping at the bit.

But apparently, the most misquoted British idiom is this one. People say that is a damp squid. And of course, the right phrase is a damp squib.

We're talking about disappointing projectiles, not moistened cephalopods. And if you're anything like me, the end of Luke chapter two can feel very much like a damp squib, or if you're uninformed, a damp squid.

[3:47] Think about what we have had in the previous 119 verses, as Luke has begun his gospel. There have been angels, prophecies, songs, two miraculous births.

We've had sacrifices and circumcisions. We've met the very young, and we've met the very old.

We've heard about mighty Roman emperors, regional governors, and humble shepherds.

We've been to palaces and ordinary stables. Again and again, people have spoken astonishing words about what God is doing in this moment in history.

that God decisively is about to enter the world stage to finally and fully save his people. The long-awaited redemption of Israel has arrived.

Ancient promises are being fulfilled. A new age, says Zechariah, is dawning. Every scene seems to contain another character joining the dots and explaining the enormous theological significance of this baby born in Bethlehem.

[5:11] And then we arrive at the end of Luke chapter 2. And this chapter gets lost, doesn't it? So we make sure we get to the beginning of Luke chapter 2 on Christmas Day.

We might do Simeon and Anna in that awkward Sunday between Christmas and New Year. And once January starts, we just move on with a new series. And so this unique story of the 12-year-old Jesus at the end of Luke chapter 2 is never really given the attention that it deserves.

But it does seem like a damp squib. An ordinary story about parents losing a child. parents searching for a child.

Parents finding a child by retracing their steps and finding him in the last place they saw him. And then everyone goes home again.

So ordinary. I'm sure lots of parents here, if they're honest, could say, I've got a story a bit like that. Why, of all the stories Luke could have told us about Jesus between his infancy and the age of 30 when he begins public ministry, why of all of those 30 years, why of all of the corpus of information about the Lord Jesus do we get this one, Jesus' 12-year-olds in the temple at Passover?

[6:42] I mean, we would be intrigued about loads of stories about Jesus growing up. I'd like to see him at his Saturday school prize giving as he completely wipes the board in all of the categories.

I want to suggest, though, and this is what I tell Cornhill students all the time, that there is a load more going on in the Bible than we assume there is. So I want us to look at this story, I want us to dig deep, I want us to see four little vignettes about what I think Luke is doing in this passage and what he's teaching us about the Lord Jesus.

I think it is the most encouraging, strengthening, and marvellous climax to Luke Does Christmas that any of us could have imagined. Because even as we just read it, it gives us something that we've never had before.

We've heard angels tell us who Jesus is. We've heard Elizabeth tell us who Jesus is. We've had the fetal John the Baptist leap in his mother's womb to indicate who Jesus is.

We've had Zechariah, John the Baptist's father, tell us who Jesus is. We've had Simeon tell us who Jesus is. We've heard Anna tell us who Jesus is. And now, for the first time, we hear Jesus tell us who Jesus is.

[8:10] And his first recorded words in Luke's gospel reveal two extraordinary truths. Jesus knows whose son he is, and Jesus knows what he must do.

Jesus knows whose son he is, and Jesus knows what he must do. That's what we're going to see in our passage this morning. And Luke is writing his gospel to his patron, Theophilus, his benefactor. And Luke is writing it so that Theophilus would have certainty about the things that he's been taught about the Lord Jesus. And let me tell you, if we really get into this passage, we too will have certainty about the Lord Jesus.

And that certainty will breed confidence in us, encouraging us to lean our whole lives upon the Lord Jesus and to be on the front foot as we seek to tell others about him.

Let's look at our first vignette. It is a simple story. But I think it's a simple story that we've misunderstood. After Jesus was presented in the temple as a baby, after he circumcised and met by the overjoyed senior citizens of Simeon and Anna, Mary, Joseph and Jesus returned to Galilee to their hometown of Nazareth.

[9:33] Then in verse 41 of Luke chapter 2, the calendar jumps forward 12 years and the camera zooms in again on this ordinary family.

And Mary and Joseph, seemingly as they did every year, are travelling south to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, one of the feasts ordained by God where all of the people would travel to be in his very near presence.

The celebrations go according to plan and eventually it is time to return home. This was a huge national occasion. People would travel in convoy.

Whole neighbourhoods would take the journey together. Families, friends, neighbours and relatives, all making this long journey winding south down the road.

And so as the crowds began to move north, Mary and Joseph simply assumed that Jesus was elsewhere in the travelling party. Perhaps he's with the relatives.

[10 : 39] Perhaps he's with the boys from the neighbourhoods. But we've often read this, I think, that this is negligent parenting from Mary and Joseph. Joseph. They misplaced him.

They forgot him. They assumed he was somewhere that he wasn't. They left him behind. But verse 43 will not let us make that assumption. The boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem.

His parents did not know it. It's not that Jesus' alarm clock didn't go off and he didn't quite make the journey on time. He deliberately, age 12, stays in Jerusalem unbeknownst to his parents.

And it's very interesting to think why this deliberate staying behind in Jerusalem. As the journey continues, Mary and Joseph gradually become more unnerved by Jesus' absence.

They begin searching. They ask those people and them and those ones and the boy from down the road, have you seen Jesus? When did you last see him? Eventually, they realize the horrifying truth.

[11 : 52] Jesus is not in the convoy. So they turn around and retrace their steps back to Jerusalem. They search Jerusalem and eventually, after three days, they find Jesus.

He is in the temple, sitting among the teachers. He's listening to them and asking them questions. Now, in first century rabbinical tradition, you don't ask questions to find answers.

The way you have a dialogue about the things of God is through rhetorical questions. The religious leaders ask a question. Jesus asks a question. Jesus is not so much seeking to learn as he's engaging in the debate of the religious leaders in Temple HQ right there in Jerusalem.

and all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. Verse 47. This 12-year-old boy, Jesus, who deliberately stayed at home in the temple has become the center of attention.

And Mary and Joseph finally arrive and they too are astonished. Verse 48. We knew he was doing well in Saturday school. we had no idea he was of this pedigree as a religious figure.

[13 : 15] And I'm sure with a mixture of emotion, relief, and considerable frustration, Mary's words, son, why have you treated us so?

Behold, your father, brackets Joseph, and I have been searching for you in great distress. You can almost hear it in her voice, can't you? Jesus, it's so great to see you.

Never do that again. But then Jesus speaks and these are the first words from Jesus' mouth in Luke's gospel.

In fact, the first recorded words of Jesus in the whole Bible. Why were you looking for me? Did you not know I must be in my father's house?

Or as the footnote suggests, I must be about my father's business. And this changes a mundane story into something we should listen very carefully to.

[14 : 19] Mary says, your father, brackets Joseph, and I have been searching for you. And then Jesus says, did you not know that I must be in my father's Yahweh, God Almighty, in his house?

Or about my father's business. Mary says, your father, meaning Joseph. Jesus says, my father, meaning God himself.

That is the great issue in the story, that Jesus knows whose son he is. Now, of course, the Old Testament does refer to God as father.

Israel is spoken of as God's firstborn son. David, the Messianic king, is spoken of son of God language. But nobody would retrofit son language to the personal pronoun, God is my father.

He might be the father of the nation, but to personalize it and individualize it, that would be scandalous to these first century ears. Not merely the father, but my father.

[15 : 28] My father's house, my father's business. Mary says, your father, brackets Joseph, and I have been looking for you. Jesus effectively replies, mother, you should have known exactly where to look for me.

It's not difficult. I must be in my father's house about my father's business. And remember how the ancient world worked?

There was no employment as a careers advisor. You simply did what your father did. Carpenters begat carpenters, fishermen begat fishermen, lawyers begat lawyers, stenographers begat stenographers.

And so, Jesus is making a very clear claim, not my father Joseph's house being about his business of carpentry, but my father God's house about his business of what he's doing in the world.

He knows exactly whose son he is, and he knows exactly what he must do. I must be about my father's business.

[16:45] That little word must is enormously important. It brings urgency. It brings gravity. It brings sheer understanding of not just whose son Jesus is, but what his work in the world must be.

There is a mission upon him. The very reason that he was sent down from God the father. a divine must is governing Jesus' actions, even here at the age of 12.

Jesus already knows it. I must be about my father's business. Jesus knows whose son he is, and he knows what he must do. Jesus is absolutely certain, and because Jesus' age 12 is absolutely certain, Theophilus can be certain, and because Theophilus is certain, we can be certain.

And we can have absolute confidence about the person of the Lord Jesus, and the work that the Lord Jesus has come to do. It is a simple story, but also it's a symmetrical story, a symmetrical story.

Luke writes to Theophilus that he's written an ordered account, and let's be clear, it is so ordered, it is painstakingly ordered, and even Luke does Christmas is beautifully, arranged together, it's arranged into six episodes, the four middle ones are all a bit of action with a bit of song, like Luke is engaging in a bit of Gilbert and Sullivan, but that makes the first story and the last story individual, because nobody does singing, in fact, Zechariah in the temple does the complete antithesis of singing, he is struck mute, and so that draws us to think, well, why are these two bookends, how are the inclusio related, and that brings us to a fascinating discovery, if only we will ponder it for a moment, who is Zechariah, well, he's a priest of the clan of Abijah and he's serving in the temple, and it should be the very best day of his life, because it's the day that he offers incense before the [18:59] Lord in the daily offering, and miraculously an angel appears to him and says, you and your wife are going to have a son, and he's like, how will I know this is true, and he's so unbelieving that he is struck dumb as a sign to him that what the angel has said will really come true, isn't that interesting, that the way that Zechariah is built at the beginning of Luke's gospel is that he is a bona fide a poster boy for what Old Testament Judaism should look like, and yet when push comes to shove, even the finest example of Old Testament Judaism isn't quite on board with what God is doing in the world, and rather than say, may it be as you have said, like Mary does only in the next story, he says, how on earth will this be true?

An Old Testament priest who should say something can't out of unbelief, and isn't it amazing that Jesus is in a place that he shouldn't say anything but he says everything and astonishes everyone. An old priest who should know things, who should say things but can't out of disbelief, and the young Jesus who is in a place where no 12-year-old boy should be found, engaging in discussion, astonishing everyone.

An old priest who should say something but can't, a young boy who shouldn't say anything but ends up saying everything and astonishes everyone. And Luke will repeatedly say in his gospel that what Jesus has come to do is so completely revolutionary, it is incongruous with the old.

You cannot put new wine into old wineskins because they're too brittle and will simply burst. And so isn't it interesting that even here at the very beginning of his gospel, Luke in the way that he's organized his Christmas narrative is showing that exact thing.

[21:00] That even the finest in Zechariah and Elizabeth of Old Testament Judaism can't even comprehend a miraculous birth in the usual way.

Well how on earth are they going to be on board with a miraculous birth in a miraculous way that will lead to the recreation of the whole world? It is a symmetrical story and in that way is quite wonderful.

But also it's a shadowy story. A shadowy story. Have you ever noticed how this visit to Jerusalem casts a long shadow forward over the rest of Luke's gospel?

Look at the details with me. Firstly verse 41 it is Passover. And where are they? They're in Jerusalem. A place they have journeyed to all the way from Galilee in the north.

And who is there? Well Jesus 12 years old. And everyone else departs and Jesus is left all alone while his friends and family scatter from him.

[22:17] fourth they search for him but they cannot find him. He is not findable. After three days he is found or literally Jesus appeared to them.

And Jesus speaks about the necessity of being in his father's house about his father's business. And then that final comment at the end of the narrative he returns home in submission to his earthly parents.

And I want to suggest that this is not a damp square but Luke has chosen this exact episode to cast a long shadow over the rest of the gospel.

Because Jesus will once again travel south from Galilee in the north to Jerusalem in the south. A journey he will begin in chapter 9 verse 51. He will arrive in Jerusalem in chapter 19 verse 45.

And in chapter 23 he will go all the way to the cross during Passover. And this time he won't have 12 years under his belt. He will have 12 apostles by his side.

[23 : 30] And after the celebration of the Passover on the other side of that Passover meal again Jesus will be left all alone as all of his friends and all of his family scatter from him.

And they will think he's gone. But after three days he will appear to them. And all of this will be done in submission not to his earthly parents but to his heavenly father.

Not my will be done but yours. In absolute submission and absolute abandonment as the work that Jesus must do is fulfilled as he dies on a cross for sinful people that they might be reconciled to God forever.

Isn't it amazing that this is a shadowy story? A shadowy story that Luke puts here that we might have absolute confidence that Jesus knows exactly who he is and exactly what must be done.

So we see that Jesus isn't just a revolutionary who fell foul of popular opinion but he is single-mindedly myopically devoted to the work that the father has sent him down to do.

[24 : 44] This is not a damp squib. This is an amazing story that is a microcosm of the big story. It is if you like Luke is giving us a little Russian doll that will fit perfectly within the big Russian doll that the whole of Luke is building towards.

God through Luke is giving us a pattern and because this pattern is established our confidence can only grow. Jesus says age 12 I must be about my father's business and years later he does it.

He does it perfectly. Now I think that his father's business and his father's house are more connected than we think. Because what is the father's business is rebuilding the father's house, rebuilding the temple.

So Jesus' business of dying on a cross is also the rebuilding of his father's house. That you will no longer have fellowship with God in a back room in a temple in Jerusalem.

you will have fellowship with God through the risen, exalted Lord Jesus Christ. Meaning no matter who you are, what you've done or where you are, you can draw near to God the father simply through Jesus because the work he was sent to do has been finished.

[26 : 14] Point four, you've done very well. This will be brief. It is a strengthening story. because we ask, it's clear Jesus knows this stuff, but the question is, how does Jesus know this stuff?

This is where our Christology is so important because we think that Jesus, when he's in that manger in Bethlehem, is fully cognizant of everything as God himself. And that would be a mistake because that would diminish that Jesus is not only 100% God, but he's also 100% human.

That he learns like we do. He comes to an understanding like we do. He's not like Neo in the Matrix where he just unplugs from the Matrix and says, I know Jiu-Jitsu.

That's not the way this is working. How does Jesus come to know whose son he is and what his work is to be?

Well, look how the story begins and how the story ends. Verse 40, and the child grew and became strong, filled with wisdom, and the favour of God was upon him.

[27 : 33] Verse 52, and Jesus increased in wisdom and in stature and in favour with God and man. How does Jesus, the son, come to know who his father is and what his work must be?

Well, here's what Luke is telling us. Jesus knows who he is and what his work is to be by reading the Bible. That's how Jesus comes to know all this.

That's how the penny drops. That's how his heart is swelled, how his devotion grows, how his commitment to save sinful humanity is spurred. He reads the Bible.

And so the way that Jesus learns about who he is and the way that we learn about who Jesus is, the way that Jesus understands his work and the way that we understand his work is the same.

He is like us. And therefore, as we come into September, which is a great time of transition where things change, studies change, work changes, habits change, routine changes, the weather will certainly change.

[28 : 43] what a great thing to propel us on our way to hear the challenge of Luke chapter two.

That the one thing we must be as autumn comes and the calendar prepares to roll over one more year, the one thing we must be is we must be Bible people.

How is God going to grow you as a Christian? Well, first and foremost, he's going to use the regular means of grace of his words. And we know it works because it worked in Jesus' life and because it worked in Jesus' life, it will work in your life.

If we devote ourselves to the scriptures, we will have certainty about the Lord Jesus. We will find him to be a rock on which we can build our lives and every part of it.

And as we fill ourselves up and learn to love the written word, man, will our hearts grow in love for the living word, the Lord Jesus Christ.

This amazing saviour who age 12 says, I know who my father is and I know what I must do. And we read the rest of the Luke's gospel and we realise he's done it perfectly, which is the very reason that all of us and any of us have any hope whatsoever.

[30:04] Let me pray for us. Father God, we praise you and thank you for the gift of your son Jesus. Thank you for his coming into the world and his determination to see your work through to completion for each of us.

Father, please give us certainty in who Jesus is and all he has accomplished, all that he's done and all that it means for us individually and as a church.

And may that certainty turn to confidence, confidence about the gospel, confidence in living for Jesus, confidence in persevering and striving to tell others about this wonderful saviour who came into the world for us, who went all the way to the cross that we might have hope and rose again to prove that it's all true.

And so may Jesus be high and lifted up amongst us. May Jesus be high and lifted up in us. And may these scriptures fuel us along the way.

Help us to keep treasuring your gospel in each of our hearts. And we pray this in Jesus' mighty name. Amen. Amen. Amen.