

HOW TO LOSE THE LORD

Luke 2:41-52

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The angels have returned to wherever it is they came from. Visitors from the east are still fresh on *our* minds, but they're already distant memories for this family from Nazareth. There have been no more special visitors to note, prophets to consult, shepherds to host, or miracles at which to marvel. More than a decade of silence about the life of Jesus sits on either side to the story.

Luke is the only one to fill in this gap, even though it is not much. While this account stands alone in the gospels, it is not random. Moments of significance were marked for Jewish males on several occasions: on the 8th day of life at circumcision, at dedication or presentation to God in the temple at 6 weeks, bar mitzvah (son of the law) at age 12, and public life around age 30.ⁱ

Luke reminds us that Jesus was in harmony with the faith in each of these. This story marks the faithfulness of Jesus and his family at age twelve. The law of Moses required pilgrimages for Passover, Pentecost, and Tabernacles (Ex. 23:14), but for people at a distance like Jesus' family, only the Passover was required. When the seven-day festival ends, the pilgrims from Galilee return home from this annual trip.ⁱⁱ

It is more than 60 miles between the two cities, so this trip would take several days by foot. Clearly this is a family that is investing deeply in their religious tradition. Jesus is being raised as a devout Jew. So, this is setting of the text: Passover was finished, and the pilgrims headed for home. Luke says that Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem without the knowledge of his parents. Initially, he doesn't say why Jesus stayed remained behind, but that soon becomes clear.

Mary and Joseph packed up their things and headed home with their travelling companions. When night came after the first day's journey home, Mary and Joseph went to look for Jesus, but he was nowhere to be found. Suddenly, the concern of two parents turns to panic. In such a caravan, it is not surprising that a boy among relatives and friends wasn't missed for a day. They had every reason to think Jesus was in the group of travelers. Mary and Joseph cannot be accused of neglect. It was common for a large group of family and friends to travel together, sharing in the nurturing of the children.

As soon as the parents were aware of his absence, they searched for him for three days. It may be that Luke accounts for the first day of travel, a day of return travel, and then on the third day they find him. Either way, you can imagine the feeling his parents had while searching. Some of you don't have to imagine. You've felt it. If you haven't lost some one, you've at least lost something.

They retraced their steps. They asked questions of people. They returned to all the places they'd been during the festival. Can you hear them? "Where can he be?" "How long has he been gone?" "Are we not searching hard enough?" "Are we looking in the right places?" It's one thing to lose your son, but it's quite another thing to lose God's son.

But, the truth is that it is not as hard as one might think to lose sight of the Lord. I imagine their trouble started in the same way ours does. They assumed that Jesus would simply remain along for the journey they were on. For centuries, people have been making the same mistake.

Too often, we assume that Jesus simply accompanies us as we go about our business.ⁱⁱⁱ Many have begun a relationship with Jesus only to take him for granted, assuming that he is there to bless whatever it is that we set about to accomplish. Jesus becomes an added blessing or a new amenity that merely enhances, and doesn't interfere, with the life we already intended to lead. In doing so, we have called him "lord" but made him into less. We call on him to do our bidding. We attach him to our desires. We consult him in a moment of need, but we have not considered that he might have a purpose for us all on his own.

I. How to lose the Lord: *Assume he follows your lead.*

Jesus did not come so that you can make a claim on God. *He came so that God could make a claim on you.* The quickest way to lose the Lord is to **assume he follows your lead.** The truth is that the only way to find him is to begin following *him*.

If it could happen to Mary and Joseph, after all they've experienced, we have every reason to believe it could happen to us too. Maybe you can relate to this story all too well. There have been times in your life when you went your own way assuming Jesus was with you, taking Jesus for granted. Suddenly, you look around and neither you nor He is where you expected to be. Again and again, you have decided to strike out on your own and do it your way. You know this struggle.

Is Jesus leading the purposes and priorities of your life? Or, have you simply hoped that he's back there somewhere ready to bless the dreams you made all on your own? If you sense he's no longer there, if you've begun to feel a distance between you and God, the answer is not that God has changed or that God has moved. It's time for you to search for the Lord, to find him in prayer and in the scriptures.

So, they rushed back to Jerusalem. Notice something interesting: they didn't find him in the first place they looked. Three long days this couple from Nazareth searched Jerusalem. They walked the back alleys, asked merchants, and called out his name as they searched. We know how Jesus received his first name, but my guess is that here at age twelve Mary started using his middle name. That's what mothers do when things get serious. What name did they shout? Where do you think they spent all this time looking? I imagine they went to the places that Jesus had the most fun. A back alley kicking the ball around with other kids? They probably

checked the places of work where Jesus was learning his way around the workshop, training for a future as a carpenter. They may have gone searching in all the places where you and I search for meaning and life: places of pleasure, and work, and happiness. The text says they checked first with friends and relatives.

You can look for the Lord in all of these places and none of them leads to the life he offers. You can look for Jesus in any number of places but until you turn to the things of God, you won't find him. If the first way to lose the Lord is to assume he follows your lead, the second way to lose the Lord is to **forget where to look**.

II. How to lose the Lord: *Forget where to look.*

I imagine they looked in the same kind of places we often look: the wrong places.

Finally, they found him in the temple sitting among the teachers. Rabbis didn't stand at the front of the class when they taught. They sat and their students gathered around. Notice that twelve-year-old Jesus is sitting among the teachers listening, asking questions, and amazing everyone with his grasp of the faith. You could translate the passage literally, "he was shocking them with his understanding and answers."

His parents were stunned, too. Probably not in the same way. Mary blurts out an accusation, perhaps tinged with that mixture of guilt and relief that most parents will recognize. She says, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." In other words, "Why did you do this to us? You had us scared half to death! Your father and I have been searching for you like crazy!"

That's when Jesus speaks for the first time. They're certainly not the first words in his life, but they're the first words for our ears. "Why were you looking for me?"

It's a gentle rebuke of his mother. "Why were you searching for me?" He expected more from his mother and father. Mary and Joseph searched everywhere, except the Temple. They searched for three days before finally ending up here, the place where the Word of God was taught and the place where the Son of God would obviously be. They didn't find him in the expected places, the safety of his extended family, or the Mount of Olives where they perhaps had camped. Why did it take them three days to figure out that Jesus *must* be in his Father's place?

More importantly, is it possible that you and I spend most of our efforts looking for Jesus in all the wrong places? Why does it take us so long to find Jesus? On the eve of a new year, many people hope to be nearer to the Lord this year than the last. Some have been singing "joy to world" and "peace on earth," only to turn the calendar and realize that there are many places in life and our world where there is no peace and very little joy. "Where is the Lord?" they ask, "in a world like this." Has he left us?

We would be wise to remember that the Lord has not moved. He's right where he always promised to be doing what God has always promised to do. Like Mary and Joseph, we can spend not only three days but our entire lives trying to find Jesus in all the wrong places. If we fail to understand who Jesus is and what His mission was, we can end up like Mary and Joseph searching in all the wrong places.

We can attempt to find Jesus trying to earn enough credit to make it to heaven. We can attempt to find Jesus in the depths of our own sinful heart. We can attempt to find Jesus in other religions or popular spiritual fads. We can attempt to find Jesus on the golf course or on a lake while fishing. We can attempt to find Jesus without the Church. The list can go on and on and on. But if Jesus has not promised to be there, why are we looking for him where he has not promised to be?

The easiest ways to lose the Lord are to assume he follows your lead and to forget where to look. A third way to lose the lord is to **leave his Father's work.**

III. How to lose the Lord: *Leave His Father's work.*

At the center of the story, in verse 49, Jesus makes the declaration in the form of question: "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" But they did not understand what he was saying to them."

For me, it was an Ace hardware store. You know how it happens. I was with my dad once second and alone the next. I don't remember if he left the aisle first or me. My guess is that upon losing sight of him, I immediately picked the wrong direction and found myself alone on an aisle that looked the same to a 5-year-old as every other aisle.

It wasn't long before a kind gentlemen noticed that I looked concerned and alone. Those still exist, by the way. He politely led me up to a front desk, where the plan was for a cashier to calmly call my dad to come collect me. Standing there in a check-out lane with nothing to buy and no way to pay, the employee grabbed the phone off the pole, pressed loud-speaker, and asked me what my dad's name was.

I don't want to exaggerate the point, but at that age, I still had trouble with "R" sounds. That's fine unless you need to instruct someone to call "Bart" to front desk. There I was, lost and doing my best to communicate, but nobody seemed to understand who my father was.

So it was with Jesus. His words weren't the problem. It had been spoken clearly. But he's announcing for all who listen the identity of his true father, hoping someone – anyone – will understand.

Had things been so ordinary for such a long time that they forgot about who Jesus was? There are no more choirs of angels, adoring shepherds, or magi. Maybe the mystery surrounding their son's birth had begun to fade like a dream? Maybe Mary and Joseph were aware of what their son would do and become but figured that was years away. One thing is for certain, they have not yet truly grasped who their Son is.

Until this point, every sign of Jesus' special nature and mission have come to us through others: the angel, Mary, Elizabeth, Zechariah, shepherds, Simeon, and Anna. Now, Jesus claims it for himself.^{iv}

It's hard to fault his parents. The text sees them almost entirely in a positive light. They are here taking Jesus around, teaching him who he is going to be. At this age, Joseph would have been showing him around Jerusalem showing him what he's going to be, saying things like: "You're going to be a carpenter", "You're going to be a faithful Jew," "You're going to go to the temple, and do the Passover..."

Tim Keller imagines that just like Joseph was teaching his son, Jesus' heavenly father was too. I think that's a pretty good guess. Luke doesn't say it, but if Jesus was able to stay behind and contend with the leading teachers of his nation, there's every reason to believe that his real father was speaking to him as he was led around Jerusalem as well.

Perhaps, when he went to the temple, he heard: "You are the new temple and you're going to make this place obsolete." When he walked along the streets of Jerusalem, he heard that someday he'd be carrying a cross. Most of all, when he sat down at the Passover and looked at the lamb he heard his heavenly father say, "You're going to be the lamb."

The boy Jesus says that his relationship with the God of heaven is like the relationship between a Father and a Son. Again and again in his ministry, Jesus had to keep repeating this same idea. He is the Son, and God is his Father. Here at twelve years old, Jesus asserts his unique relationship with his heavenly Father. There is a purpose. There is a program at work. Jesus receives this identity from the one who created him for it.^v

That's the point which Mary and Joseph failed to grasp. Where do you find the Son of God? Doing the things of God. Doing the Father's work.

Jesus can be found wherever two or three are gathered to worship in his name. He can be found in the waters of your baptism. The Lord can be found whispering (and shouting) to you through the pages of his Holy Word. He can be found speaking to you through the gospel proclaimed. He can be found when we remember his death through the bread and the cup. He can be found amidst your enemy when you say, "I forgive you." He can be found in the love and fellowship you experience with your fellow Christians. He can be found in a neighbor you choose to love and serve. There's no need to live in mystery, wondering where to find the Lord. He is where he always has always been.

What he explained to them is that the Son of God was still where he'd always promised to be: in his Father's place and concerned with his father's business. This is what was necessary. "Don't you know that is it is necessary?" Jesus says.

It is not the only time that Jesus reminds a travelling couple what is "necessary."

Jesus explained this to those two confused travelers on the road to Emmaus at the end of Luke (Luke 24:23-35). The Messiah had been crucified on the cross. When it seemed like all was lost, when all creation was searching for three days, Jesus could be found right where he had always promised to be: Doing his father's work. "Was it not necessary for the Christ to suffer these things and to enter into His glory?" he asked them (Luke 24:26).

He was here to seek and to save the lost, to bring justice to the nations, and to be the final Passover lamb. He was a new Exodus and He would lead his people out of slavery and into freedom. For three days the whole world held its breath, wondering what happened to the Lord. When those three days had passed, when and all the teachers of the law had been confounded, the whole world discovered that Jesus was right where he was created to be. He rose from the grave proclaiming once and for all that the victory had been won.

The good news for us in this week after Christmas is that, like Mary and Joseph, our search has ended. We know where Jesus is. The hard part, perhaps, is that our search doesn't end where we might expect. We should know that Jesus must be about his Father's work. This is his life's mission. This is what is necessary.

If you want to find the Lord this year, don't expect him to follow your lead. Don't forget where to look. Join him in the work of God, our Father. That's where you will find him.

The Father's work was *necessary* for the Lord.
If you want to be near him, it will be necessary for you too.

ⁱ Fred Craddock, *Luke* (Westminster John Knox Press, 1990), 41.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ N.T. Wright, *Luke for Everyone*, 30.

^{iv} Craddock, 42.

^v David Garland, *Luke: Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Zondervan, 2011), 144-145.