

011 What Was It Like Growing Up in Nazareth?

Matthew 2:19-23; Luke 2:39b, 40

Message by Dr R Bruce Montgomery ~ Grace Church ~ 2/18/18

Left off last week Jesus and Joseph and Mary were refugees in Egypt, having fled Bethlehem at the warning of an angel. Barely escaped with their lives as Herod's soldiers massacred the baby boys.

We don't know exactly how long Joseph, Mary and Jesus were in Egypt, but we know they left after Herod's death, which occurred in 4 B.C. Evidently they had not had any other children at this point.

Again Joseph gets guidance and information from an angel of the Lord in a dream. Herod the Great is dead. It's safe to move back to Israel. *Matthew 2:19-23 After Herod died, an angel of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt²⁰ and said, "Get up, take the child and his mother and go to the land of Israel, for those who were trying to take the child's life are now dead."*

Again they obey the Lord's direction. ²¹*So he got up, took the child and his mother and went to the land of Israel. ²²But when he heard that Archelaus was reigning in Judea in place of his father Herod, he was afraid to go there. Having been warned in a dream, he withdrew to the district of Galilee, ²³and he went and lived in a town called Nazareth. So was fulfilled what was said through the prophets: "He will be called a Nazarene."*

Evidently as they are en route, probably heading towards Bethlehem in Judea, their ancestral home, Joseph has yet another dream not to settle in Judea, but to go to further away from the action to the region of Galilee, where they settle in Nazareth.

The Jews in Judea looked down on those northern country bumpkins in Galilee in general. They viewed the Galileans as materialistic and spiritually ignorant. After all, the rabbinic academies were all located in the south. They also had different attitudes towards the Hebrew language, and different customs and attitudes towards marriage.

And they particularly looked down on those who came from Nazareth. Even those in other parts of Galilee shared their disdain for people who live there.

A Roman garrison was based there, and you now what goes on in army towns! It had a bad reputation, and Jews who lived there were viewed as traitors by their countrymen because they hobnobbed with the enemy.

Settling in Nazareth stigmatized Jesus for the rest of his life. Growing up there made Jesus a despised and rejected individual.¹

In John 1:45, 46, when one of Jesus' future disciples was excitedly told by some friends, *"We have found the one Moses wrote about in the Law, and about whom the prophets also wrote – Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph,"* his response was *"Nazareth! Can anything good come from there?"*

So, why do they choose to go to Nazareth in Galilee?

1. Matthew doesn't mention it, but Luke reminds his readers that this was the place both Joseph and Mary were living before making the trip to Bethlehem. *Luke 2:39b . . . they returned to their own town of Nazareth.²*

They've been away a few years, but things probably hadn't changed much. They would have friends there. When they had left, Mary was pregnant – very pregnant. Now she could show off her baby to her old friends, and get to see the ones they had, to rump the hair of the children who had been babies when she left, *"my how you've grown!" "You remind me so much of your aunt Sarah, may she rest in peace."*

Joseph would be able to get back to work as a carpenter/contractor. Carpenters had been in short supply up north ever since Herod began his massive rebuilding of the Temple in Jerusalem.

So it makes sense to return to their hometown. There's another reason though that they didn't return to Bethlehem, and that was the man was now on the throne of Judea.

¹ Of course that, too, was in keeping with the prophets.

² He had already let us know that was where they were living before they were married. **Luke 1:26 In the sixth month** (of Elizabeth's pregnancy with John the Baptist), **God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.**

When Herod the Great died, his kingdom was divided into four parts (called tetrarchies). His oldest son Archelaus was made ruler of two of them: Judea and Samaria.

If anything, Archelaus was even worse than his father Herod. Shortly after he had succeeded to the throne, as Passover Season was approaching and the city filling with people, a group of Jews gathered at the temple to protest and demand some changes. (We could refer to them as an “Occupy Jerusalem” political movement).

They insisted that Archelaus punish some of his father’s Hellenistic favorites, and demanded that the high-priest Joazar ben Boethus, who had been appointed by the late king, be dismissed. They claimed they had the right to elect a purer and more God fearing man.

All attempts to pacify the crowd proved unsuccessful. Don’t know who threw the first stone, or drew the first blood, but fighting broke out and a section of soldiers had to withdraw with losses.

Archelaus’ response was to summon all his armed forces, cordon off the hill by cavalry and clear the court with infantry. People had already begun to sacrifice their Passover lambs when the troops began their blood-bath. Three thousand people were killed and everyone else scattered.

Even his father Herod the Great had never gone to the extreme of killing people on Temple premises. Archelaus was obviously a feared and hated ruler. Not only was he cruel and incompetent, the Jews despised him for another reason: he was the son of a Samaritan woman.³

So it was because of the new ruler’s reputation and the warning of the angel, Joseph took Mary and the child back to Nazareth. Antipas, another of Herod’s sons, was ruler of Galilee, and wasn’t perceived as such a threat.

So, what was it like for Jesus growing up in Nazareth? Luke summarizes his human development from the age of about four to the age of 12 in just one verse.

Luke 2:40 *And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.* (Every parent’s dream for their children).

That’s really all that Scripture records. Have been lots of stories generated over the years, including some in the apocryphal books, but most of them are fanciful.

While we don’t have a diary or written record, we do know quite a bit about the nature of Jewish upbringing at that time, and can reconstruct much of what his life was like from rabbinic writings and historical accounts.

Mostly, when he wasn’t helping his mother gather brush wood for the fire or carrying water, he was going to school. Started school at the age of five. Each synagogue in the first century usually had its own elementary school and secondary school, in which children and adults studied Torah and the oral traditions.

Formal education ended at the age of 12 or 13, but the more gifted students who wanted to could continue their studies at the secondary school (*Bet Midrash*) in their spare time. A few of the most outstanding *Bet Midrash* students eventually left home to study with a famous rabbi.

Jews considered participation at the synagogue and education in the school to be equally important – didn’t really make a distinction between the two, because they held that study of the Scripture is one of the highest forms of worship.

The starting point of the studies wasn’t Genesis, but Leviticus, which dealt with the topics of ritual purity and sacrifices. Then would follow the other four books of Moses, and after that, the prophets and other sacred writings. All their knowledge and wisdom came from the Scriptures, which also served as textbooks for history, geography and philosophy.

Not all rabbis were qualified to teach the children. Qualifications included being utterly devoted to their vocation, patient, meticulous in attention to detail, and having high moral and ethical standards.

Students were expected to treat the teacher with the same respect and reverence as they would a king, standing when the teacher entered the room, and only being seated when told they

³ Eventually his reign became intolerable to the Roman authorities, and he was deposed by Rome in A.D. 6.

could do so. Once seated, they weren't allowed to get up and leave the room. They never called him by his name, but always addressed him as "Rabbi."

One of the key educational method was memorization. While reading and writing were important skills that had to be learned, scrolls were scarce - only a few people had immediate access to more than a few of the approximately twenty biblical scrolls.

Even the youngest student studied seven days a week. On the Sabbath, they weren't given any new material, but spent time memorizing what they had learned in the previous six days.

The result of this intense education was that most people had committed large portions of Scripture to memory, and all knew by heart the history from Adam to Zerubbabel.

We don't have time to go into more details of Jesus' life - things like what he ate, what he wore, how he spent his time when he wasn't in school. Perhaps will take time in two weeks before we pick up the next recorded event in his life, which occurred when he was twelve.

Today let's just summarize and remember that Jesus was fully human boy.⁴

- He had to learn to walk.
- He skinned his knees when he slipped and fell.
- He had to learn the alphabet.
- He got stickers in his toes.
- His fingernails turned black when he hit his fingers with a hammer.

⁴ **I John 4** talks about testing false prophets: **I John 4:2,3** *This is how you can recognize the spirit of God. Every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God.*

Gnosticism, believing matter to be evil, rejected the idea that the Messiah had a physical body. **Docetism** held that he only appeared to be human. Many people have the wrong idea that the incarnation was like the phone booth in a Superman movie - where Jesus is like Clark Kent - he goes into the booth one way and comes out another! Superman takes on the guise of a bumbling reporter. Jesus was not a superman, he was fully human in all respects as we are.

- His skin tore and bled when the saw slipped.
- He got hungry and thirsty.
- He got tired and had to take naps, especially when he was young.
- He had real hurts, shed real tears.
- Got his feelings hurt when someone made fun of him or called him names
- Laughed with joy and clapped his hands when his dad brought home a toy he had made
- Got anxious when it grew dark and Joseph wasn't home
- Suffered disappointments, like when he was the last one picked for a game

If God not only wanted to be worshipped by people, but to really know them and be loved by them, he did the right thing by becoming one of us. Because Jesus is *Emmanuel*, God with us, he knows us intimately.

Hebrews 4:15 *For we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who has been tempted in every way, just as we are - yet was without sin.*

- He knows our frustrations
- He knows our disappointments
- He knows our loneliness
- He knows our heartaches
- He knows our fears
- He knows our griefs
- He knows what it is like to be misunderstood
- To be laughed at
- To be bullied
- He knows what it is like for hopes and dreams to come to nothing,
- And for people to reject his love and best intentions for them.

Jesus came as a man to identify with our human predicament. But He doesn't stop there. He didn't only come to identify with, but to deal with our predicament, to do something about it!

The reason it was so important that Jesus was really human was because only as a real man could Jesus become our Savior.

As God, he could not die for sinners. But as man he could.

The “fall into sin,” was caused by a single man, Adam, and affected every single person. The remedy for sin was accomplished by another single man, Jesus, acting on behalf of all other people.⁵

Because Jesus was every bit a man, he could represent us on the cross, take on our sins, and die in our place.

He was born to die. His aim in life was to die in our place, so that we wouldn't have to. He died that we might live.

If Jesus had been unreal in any sense of the word – a mere apparition, dressed up in disguise, a ghost in man's costume, he would have made him the ultimate alien. And God's plan for our salvation would fall apart!

Christ existed before the incarnation. He was spirit. He was the eternal Word. He was with God and was God.⁶ But he took on flesh and blood and clothed his deity with humanity.⁷

Here's a final “*so what difference does all this make to me and you?*”

Hebrews 2:14–15 *Since the children have flesh and blood, he too shared in their humanity so that by his death he might destroy him who holds the power of death – that is the devil- and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by their fear of death.*

In dying, Jesus de-fanged the serpent. Satan's ultimate weapon against us is our own sin. If the death of Jesus takes it away, the chief weapon of the devil is taken out of his hand.

Satan no longer has any legitimate grounds to accuse us before God. He cannot make a case for our death penalty, because the Judge has acquitted us by the death of his Son!

As Paul writes in Romans 8:33 “*Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies.*”

So we are free from the fear of death. If we do not need to fear that last and greatest enemy, death, then we do not need to fear anything. We can be free. Free from guilt! Free for joy! Free for ourselves, free to enjoy God, and free for others.

⁵ Romans 5:1215 . . . *sin entered the world through one man, and death through sin, and in this way death came to all men, because all sinned . . . if the many died because of the trespass of the one man, how much more did God's grace and the gift that came by the grace of the one man, Jesus Christ, overflow to the many.*

⁶ John 1:1; Colossians 2:9

⁷ He became fully man and remained fully God. It is a great mystery in many ways. But it is at the heart of our faith and is what the Bible teaches.