

A covenant child

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[0 : 0 0] passage that we've read just a few moments ago in Luke's Gospel and in chapter 2. This story, this account of Jesus in the temple at Jerusalem when He was a lad, as the account informs us, just 12 years old. This was an annual gathering, an annual feast, the Feast of the Passover.

It was customary for Jewish families, even those who didn't live in Jerusalem, to make a particular effort to make their way to Jerusalem for the different festivals. But if they were only able to go to one festival, then this would be the one that would have been given priority, the Feast of the Passover. And often, as circumstances allowed, children would accompany the parents to this feast. In the case of Jesus, He was 12 years old. On the following year, it would have been a very special year, because when Jewish boys were 13 years old, they would become sons of the law. Indeed, even today, we hear of the bar mitzvah. That's what it means, son of the law. So, on this occasion, that is not what would have been happening. But maybe for the parents, they felt it would be important for him to be there, to maybe just witness what happened in preparation for what would be his own experience the following year. Or maybe it was the case that simply every year, as a family, they had this custom of heading to Jerusalem. We're not told all that level of detail.

But I want to think about this occasion that's described for us of Jesus at the temple. And of course, we want to do so in the light of the baptism, the sacrament of baptism, the sign of baptism that we will be participating in immediately following the sermon. We will be baptizing children of the covenant, children who form part of God's covenant community, of a community of believers to whom God has made promises, made long ago, but that extend from generation to generation. As believers, we are persuaded that our children belong to God, that they are members of God's family. And so, baptism, which is the sign of the family, the sign of the covenant community, belongs to them.

But what, if anything, distinguishes our children as covenant children? And I want to think about that question and see what answer we can give to it. But to try and answer that question or begin to answer that question by considering a real-life example of a covenant child blessed with covenant-keeping parents. And of course, who I have in mind is Jesus. Jesus was a child of the covenant. He was blessed with covenant-keeping parents. On this very occasion, they were giving evidence of their concern to behave towards their child as covenant-keeping parents as they brought him to the temple to participate in the feast of the Passover. And we're sure in any number of other ways. Joseph and Mary sought to fulfill their obligations as believing parents. Jesus then was a child of the covenant, born to believing parents who belong to God's covenant people. And in that regard, he was just like Aurel and Ebony and Aaron and Joshua.

Of course, there were differences between Jesus and other covenant children, and we'll touch on those in passing in due course. But the differences that exist don't take away from the significance of the spiritual similarities between Jesus as a covenant child and any other covenant child. And as we think about Jesus this morning as a covenant child, and certain characteristics of Jesus, and indeed of all covenant children, we'll also try and think about Joseph and Mary as covenant parents, and some of the the corresponding responsibilities that fall upon believing parents in caring for and in bringing up our children. And as we do that, it's also worth stressing that some of these duties and privileges are shared by all the covenant community, by all those who form part of this congregation. So, even if you're not a parent, or maybe your children are now grown up and you don't have the same kind of parental responsibilities that you had in the past, nonetheless, what I have to say is still relevant. Because as I say, those responsibilities for bringing up our children, they fall very particularly upon parents, but they also extend to all who form part of the congregation, our congregation in this instance.

[5 : 53] There are three realities that I want to draw out from this passage concerning covenant children. The first one is where a covenant child belongs, and then we're going to notice what a covenant child does, and then finally and very briefly how a covenant child grows. And I imagine we'll probably spend a little bit more time on the first of these three. First thing that I draw out from the passage then, where a covenant child belongs. And I'm thinking very especially of the words of Jesus in reply to his mother when he was eventually found after this frantic search that poor Joseph and Mary had undertaken to find Jesus. And just remind ourselves of the dialogue that we have here recorded from verse 49. Or if we take it from the question that Mary poses in verse 48,

Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you. And how does Jesus reply? Why were you searching for me, he asked. Didn't you know I had to be in my father's house?

I had to be in my father's house. Now what do we make of these words of Jesus directed to his mother, this 12-year-old speaking in this way to his mother?

It's sometimes suggested that the words of Jesus are almost a gentle rebuke intended for his appearance. And this suggestion is attributed to Jesus growing in his own self-awareness as the Son of God.

Now that may be. But I think I'm more inclined to detect in the words of Jesus a childlike and very human naivety in the response of Jesus. Jesus seems genuinely surprised. And even lacking in the ability to anticipate the distress his actions had obviously caused. There's no doubt that what Jesus did caused distress to his parents. That is evident. But I suppose the question is, was Jesus aware of that? Did he know that that would be the case? Did he anticipate that? Did he think that, yes, it will cause them distress, but ultimately it's for their own good to gain a better understanding of who I am? Or was it simply that he was a 12-year-old child? And 12-year-old children don't always anticipate the consequences of their actions. There was no malice, of course, in what

[8 : 45] Jesus did. There was no disobedience. There was no ill intent. But might there not be an element, a degree of immaturity. And even suggesting that shouldn't shock us or surprise us. I don't think our response should be, oh, but we can't say that about Jesus. We can't say that Jesus was immature.

Of course, he was immature. He was 12 years old. 12-year-olds, by definition, are immature. They're not yet 18. They're not yet 20. They are what they are. They're 12 years old.

Immaturity comes with the territory of being 12 years old. Now, of course, the degree of immaturity will vary greatly. And those of us who have had children perhaps will have been able to see that, though it would be very foolish to give examples of that. But, you know, we see that in terms of people's degree of maturity. But moving on to what really concerns me, and that is this matter of belonging where a covenant child belongs. And I think we can detect three truths concerning Jesus that this question that He poses to Mary reveals or betrays, if you wish. First of all, I think it reveals Jesus' sense of sonship. Jesus describes the temple as my Father's house. It's so clear that Jesus identifies and relates to God as His Father. Now, the whole question of the manner and chronology of Jesus' growing self-awareness is an intriguing one, and probably one that we gain little from speculating about. But I think we can detect in this incident a sense of sonship that goes beyond a sense of being a sense of being a son of God to being the son of God. As I say, it's an intriguing question to what extent Jesus grew in His own self-awareness of who He was as He matured, as He developed. But I do think that here there is evidence, there's an indication that He is beginning to have a far greater awareness of His unique relationship to God as His Father. It's interesting in that regard that a Jew would not ordinarily speak of God as my Father. It wouldn't be uncommon to address God as our Father. But my Father would be deemed unduly familiar. It's not that it would be wrong to do so or incorrect to do so. It would just be felt that that isn't appropriate. And yet, Jesus has no difficulty in speaking of God as my Father, using this very familiar and intimate language.

But what has all this got to do with our own children? Well, Jesus could speak of God as my Father. But what about our children? Can our children speak of God or direct their prayers to God, speak to God, relate to God as my Father? And in answer to that, I would say yes, yes, and yes again.

[12 : 17] As parents, and indeed as a church, we should ever be inculcating in and impressing upon our children their spiritual identity as sons and daughters of God. Now, our children will, in due course, have the responsibility of embracing the faith for themselves and living as grown-up sons and daughters of God.

But we can and ought to see and treat our children as children of God from the very womb. They can speak of God as my Father. Let's think of prayer just to maybe illustrate that truth.

Would you, as a believing parent, balk at your child praying the Lord's Prayer? Would you say to your child, no, you can't pray that prayer because you're not a believer yet? Would you say that to your child?

Well, no, of course not. You would encourage your child to pray the Lord's Prayer. And how does that prayer begin? Our Father, who art in heaven. As we would encourage our children, teach our children to pray in that way. We're recognizing, and quite rightly so, a spiritual reality concerning the identity of our children. They belong to God's family, a sense of sonship. But I think we also can detect in what Jesus says, and indeed what He says of Himself applies to other covenant children. And that is a sense of belonging. Of course, this is very related to a sense of sonship. As God's Son, Jesus belongs in God's house. He belongs in the temple.

It's His Father's house, and so it's His house. He feels at home in the temple. He belongs there. Now, in the case of Jesus, as I hinted at just as we began, the opportunities He would have had as a child to be in the temple, the place He describes as my Father's house, would have been very limited.

[14 : 29] If it was the family custom to go for the Passover, well, that would have been once a year. If they were very dedicated and pious and participated in the other festivals, well, perhaps it could have been on a few more occasions. But it still would have been a very occasional visit to Jerusalem.

But Jesus knows that He belongs in the temple. He belongs in this place that He describes as my Father's house. There is this real and clear sense of belonging. Well, let's think about our own children. How does that apply to our children?

Well, we don't equate this building to the temple. This is just a building. However, it is the place where God's people gather, as we've gathered this morning, to worship God, to enjoy fellowship one with another as God's family.

And our children belong here. This is their house. And as parents, and as a church, as a congregation, it should be our concern to bring up our children in such a way that they sense almost unthinkingly that this is where they belong, together with, in fellowship with God's people.

A sense of belonging. There's a third aspect to this, a third sense that I think we can detect in Jesus, in His words, and we can apply to our own children. And I'm describing it as a sense of joyful compulsion. And I'm thinking about how Jesus uses this language of necessity in speaking to His mother and explaining His presence there in the temple. Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?

[16 : 24] Didn't you know, don't you know that I must be in my Father's house? That's the tenor, that's the manner in which Jesus speaks. Not that, you know, I want to be or it's nice to be. No, I have to be here. I must be here.

Now, I'm describing that, a sense that we can detect in the words, a sense of joyful compulsion. For Jesus, there is a real sense of compulsion to be in His Father's house, but it is a joyful compulsion.

He ought to be there, but He wants to be there. Now, isn't that a wonderful combination to have? It was true of Jesus. Is this not what we wish for our own children? That when it comes to the gathering of God's people, to worship God, there would be impressed upon them a sense of joyful compulsion.

Yes, this is what I ought to do. This is perhaps what my parents obliged me to do, but it's something I want to do. Joyful compulsion.

I wonder if we, you know, in speaking in these terms, some of us perhaps as parents are beginning to think or wonder, well, is this where the similarities between Jesus and our children break down?

[17 : 47] Well, I hope that that is not the case, and I certainly know that it is the case. However often we may fail in this, that we have a responsibility as parents, and perhaps especially as a congregation, to make this place a place where our children enjoy being and participating, a place where they know that they are loved and valued, a place where they are listened to, taken account of, just like Jesus in the temple, just 12 years old, just a teenager, not even a teenager, and yet the men in the temple, the important people engaging in conversation with Him, listening to what He had to say, answering His questions, giving Him the opportunity to answer their questions.

He belonged there, and that was recognized by the grown-ups in that place. But are we really saying that our children can and should say what Jesus said?

Don't you know I must be in my Father's house? Well, that is what I'm saying. Let me give you maybe an example, a made-up example, but perhaps not that distant from reality sometimes.

It's a cold, wintry Sunday morning, not like today. You wake up and the sun's shining, and, you know, it's nice to get out of the house, to come to church.

But think of a cold, dark winter's morning. You've had an exhausting week. It's just been one of those weeks, and you haven't had a moment's rest.

[19 : 33] The car, as you look out the window, it's covered in frost. I know it's going to be a whole exercise to make it ready even to drive in.

You just imagine that the roads haven't been gritted because, well, you know what the cancer are like, and all the cuts, and so on and so forth. Maybe you're not feeling that great. Maybe you're thinking, well, we'll just skip church today.

And you tell your wee son or your wee daughter, and they respond, but Daddy, I have to go to church today. I have to be there. Would that not be a cause of perhaps rebuke, but also of delight for us, that it would be the conviction of our children that there would be in them, as indeed that there might be in us, that sense of joyful compulsion.

Yes, it is what I ought to do, but it is also what I want to do. I think we find this in Jesus. Didn't you know that I had to be in my Father's house?

And as our children grow up and become teenagers and adults, we ought not to expect them to abandon their spiritual family any more than we would expect them to abandon our natural family.

[20 : 48] That ought not to be our expectation that, yes, well, no doubt that's what will happen once they grow up. They belong. This is where they belong.

But that sense of belonging must be inculcated and cultivated and guarded by us as parents and as a congregation. Where a covenant child belongs.

Much more briefly, let's think about what a covenant child does. And let's move on to verse 51. What happens immediately after this encounter?

The moment when the parents find Jesus, he explains his actions. They don't really understand, but life goes on. And how did it go on?

Well, we read in verse 51, Then Jesus went down to Nazareth with them, with Mary and Joseph, and was obedient to them. And focusing very especially on what is said there concerning Jesus, that he was obedient to them.

[21 : 55] What does a covenant child do? He obeys. Now, as I say, we're not going to dwell long on this, partly for reasons of time.

But this is a fundamental characteristic of a covenant child. Now, again, when we read that, and in the real world, we often see that that isn't the case.

I wonder if we hear that and we say, well, here we do have, and of course we do have, a fundamental difference between Jesus and our children. Jesus was, indeed, perfectly obedient.

Our children are not. When we were children, we were not. Is there any parent here this morning who would like to contest that and say, no, my child is perfect?

Anybody? Any takers? I don't think so. We know that's not the case. We weren't, and our children aren't. Our children are sinners. They disobey.

[23 : 00] Disobeying, indeed, comes naturally to them, as it does to us. But they are covenant children. And as covenant children, they are to be characterized by obedience.

They need to learn to be obedient. It's very interesting that in the Bible, this language of learning obedience is even used of Jesus.

In Hebrews chapter 5 and verse 8, we read of how Jesus learned obedience through suffering. Now, that process of learning obedience in the case of Jesus was sinless.

That is not so for us. But even so, there is this recognition that Jesus, as He grew up, from an infant to a child to a teenager to a man, He learned obedience.

How much more do we need to learn obedience, and do we need to teach obedience to our children? I don't think there is a greater good that you can do for your child than to teach them to be obedient.

[24 : 06] They are to be taught to honor and obey their parents in the first instance. Why is that important? Why is it important for us to teach our children to be obedient?

You might say, well, it will make for a much easier life for us as parents. Of course, that's true. If we have very obedient children, then we save ourselves an awful lot of stress and hassle. Is that the reason?

Is it so that we can show them off to others? Look at my child, how obedient and dutiful and polite he is. Is it because we want to protect them from harm?

Well, that certainly is true. An obedient child will in great measure be protected from harm. Not holly, but in great measure. Well, these maybe are, or some of what I've suggested may be legitimate reasons for teaching our children obedience.

But why this is so important is that by modeling and teaching them obedience, we are training them to live as sons and daughters of God.

[25 : 10] We are training them to love Jesus, the one who has taught us that if we love him, well, we demonstrate that love by keeping his commandments, by being obedient to him.

If a child is incapable of obeying his parents, what prospect is there of them obeying God? And so for that reason, fundamentally, we have this duty and this onerous task of teaching our children to be obedient.

Now, of course, our children will and do disobey. And we as parents will fall short in modeling obedience and in teaching obedience. And what happens when they do disobey as they do and as they will?

Well, we will apply appropriate and loving correction, but we will also take it as an opportunity to teach them obedience. You see, even in their disobedience, we can teach them obedience.

How so? Well, we teach them to confess the fault that they have committed, to repent of their sin. And in doing that, they are being obedient, for this is what God commands to those of us who disobey.

[26 : 21] And so even in the disobedience, we have this opportunity to teach them obedience. Of course, this was never necessary for Jesus. In this point, the comparison breaks down.

But let's finally look at the third aspect that I'm drawing from this passage in the description, partial description of a covenant child, and that is how a covenant child grows.

And here I'm thinking especially of this summary description of Jesus' development that we have at the very end of our passage. And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men.

And it's often been noted and quite reasonably and understandably how this verse provides us with a picture, you might even say a model, of balanced growth. It does indeed.

I've heard the illustration given of a four-legged table. And, you know, the point is made, what use is a table if it's a four-legged table? I know you get some weird tables that have different numbers of legs.

[27 : 30] But if you imagine a four-legged table, what use is a four-legged table if only three of the legs are functioning? You might say, well, three out of four, that's not bad. You know, it's pretty good. But we know that three legs out of four just won't be enough.

The table will be useless. Even though three are fine, that one that's missing will mean that the table just isn't fit for purpose. And I think we can apply that to what is said here of the manner in which Jesus grew and the manner in which children should grow in wisdom, in stature, in favor with God, in favor with men.

Sometimes described as intellectually, physically, spiritually, and socially. All of them are necessary. Jesus grew in all of these ways into a man.

And that is necessary for our children also. We can see for ourselves, maybe we experience it. We can see it in the mirror perhaps.

We can certainly see it as we observe others that there are plenty of folks out there in here who are missing a leg or maybe two. There are people who grow intellectually.

[28 : 36] They do very well academically. They get straight A's in their hires. They go to university. They get a PhD. They grow physically. Picture of health. But their marriage is a disaster.

Why? Because they're emotionally immature. Emotionally immature and they can't handle the commitment of that relationship. And so, there's something missing in their development. And that's something we can observe in ourselves often and as we look around us.

It's necessary to grow as Jesus grew. All children need to grow up in a balanced way. But I think it's true that covenant children have the special privilege of enjoying such growth as that is cultivated and fostered by their believing parents.

Now, we can't make them grow but we can, in a measure, cultivate and direct their growth. Let's just have a quick scan at the elements that are identified here in Luke's summary description.

Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and favor with God and men. He grew in wisdom. Now, I've already equated that to intellectual growth but that doesn't really do justice to the word.

[29 : 53] The biblical concept of wisdom is broader and deeper than how we would normally understand intellect. Intellectual is usually a word that we use synonymously with clever.

He's a very intellectual person or child. But you can be clever and unwise. And as believing parents, our greatest concern is for our children to be wise in the manner that they live rather than them to be academically brilliant.

If they are so gifted, well, we celebrate their successes. But that's not our primary concern. It ought not to be our primary concern but rather that they would grow in wisdom. How do we raise wise children?

Well, listen to the promise that parents will make this morning. Do you promise independence and God's promised help by your prayers, teaching, and example to bring up your child in the instruction and discipline of the Lord?

I think that captures the elements involved. We stand in dependence on God's help. And this is reflected in our prayers. We ask for wisdom for ourselves and we ask for wisdom for our children.

[31 : 05] But we also look to model wisdom and instruct in wisdom, in stature. You might say, well, that's not very spiritual, physical development, but it's important to God.

It's part of who we are. He has created us as physical beings. We have been fearfully and wonderfully made as physical beings. We have a duty to care for our children in regard to their physical development, to provide for their health and health care, their diet, exercise, that they would sleep enough hours in the night, and so on.

That's important. That's our responsibility, that they would grow in favor with God. This, of course, is an area of development that only believing parents can take proper responsibility for.

That is why it would be unreasonable to ask unbelievers to promise to bring up their children in the instruction and discipline of the Lord. How could they do so? in favor with God.

Of course, this is very much tied to what we've already said concerning obedience and wisdom, so we won't dwell any longer on it. But it is our great desire that our Father in Heaven would speak to our children as he spoke to Jesus.

[32 : 22] This is my loved Son in whom I am well pleased. Why? Because they are growing in favor with God. And finally, in favor with men. Sometimes described as social development.

This is a distinct area of development, but it is so connected to wisdom and favor with God. It is interesting how Solomon in his wisdom connects favor with God and favor with men.

In one of his Proverbs in chapter 16, he says, When a man's ways are pleasing to the Lord, he makes even his enemies live at peace with him. Of course, it is a proverb.

It is not a blanket guarantee that that is always the case, but it states a general truth that being in favor with God will ordinarily lead to and facilitate being in favor with others.

For those of us who are parents, it might be good to pause and conduct a parental audit on how we are doing in helping our children grow up as Jesus grew up.

[33 : 27] Well, let's draw things to a close. Our children, the children of this congregation, are children of the covenant. They are God's children.

And may they ever have a growing sense of sonship, of being sons and daughters of God, of belonging to God's people, and a growing sense of joyful compulsion in the service and in the worship of God.

May they learn God-pleasing obedience. May they grow in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men.

Well, let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you for your word. We thank you that you are a God who does not leave us in the dark as to how we are to live, and particularly in this matter of bringing up our children in a way that is pleasing to you and of blessing to them.

And we begin our immediate response is one of recognizing how far short we fall. And so we come and we plead your mercy upon us and upon our children.

[34 : 34] We confess our shortcomings, so often the product of selfishness and foolishness and stubbornness on our part. But we thank you that you are a patient and a merciful God, and we pray that you would not overlook, but that you would be good and bless our children even in the face of our many failings and limitations.

But we do pray that you would help us as parents and as a community of believers to take upon ourselves with ever greater concern and seriousness the duties that we have.

And all of these things we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.