

# A Pattern for Progress

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## Psalm 37:1-6, 10-11, 23-25, 28

Do not fret because of evil men  
or be envious of those who do wrong;  
for like the grass they will soon wither,  
like green plants they will soon die away.  
Trust in the Lord and do good;  
dwell in the land and enjoy safe pasture.  
Delight yourself in the Lord  
and he will give you the desires of your heart.  
Commit your way to the Lord;  
trust in him and he will do this:  
He will make your righteousness shine like the dawn,  
the justice of your cause like the noonday sun.  
A little while, and the wicked will be no more;  
though you look for them, they will not be found.  
But the meek will inherit the land  
and enjoy great peace.  
If the Lord delights in a man's way,  
he makes his steps firm;  
though he stumble, he will not fall,  
for the Lord upholds him with his hand.  
I was young and now I am old,  
yet I have never seen the righteous forsaken  
or their children begging bread.  
For the Lord loves the just  
and will not forsake his faithful ones.

## Luke 2:39-52

When Joseph and Mary had done everything required by the Law of the Lord, they returned to Galilee to their own town of Nazareth. And the child grew and became strong; he was filled with wisdom, and the grace of God was upon him.

Every year his parents went to Jerusalem for the Feast of the Passover. When he was twelve years old, they went up to the Feast, according to the custom. After the Feast was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. Thinking he was in their company, they traveled 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 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 favor with God and men.

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Luke 2:52: *kai Iesous proekopten [en te] sofia kai elikia kai chariti para theo kai anthropois.* "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men."

This verse, and the few lines that precede it, are *all that we know* about the life of Jesus between the time of his infancy and the time of his baptism by John the Baptist, when he was around thirty years old. What happened to Jesus while he was growing up? We're curious about that.

Some of the early Christians were just as curious, if not more so, and they fashioned some pretty fanciful stories about him to fill the gap. The boy Jesus made twelve sparrows out of clay, and when he clapped his hands they flew off. Visiting a dyer, he dipped several sheets of cloth into a vat of black dye; when the dyer complained to Mary, Jesus took them out one by one, each dyed a different color as the dyer requested. Jesus humiliated his old teacher by giving more esoteric explanations of the meaning of Hebrew letters than the teacher could come up with. When Joseph the carpenter had trouble fitting pieces of wood together, Jesus just blessed them and they fell into place. A local bully broke Jesus' sand castles with a stick, and Jesus spoke a word that withered him on the spot. The other kids wouldn't play with Jesus, so he turned them into goats.

These are only a sample of the antics attributed to the miracle-working "Super-Boy" that we find in the so-called "Infancy Gospels," and apocryphal books like the Gospel of James or the Gospel of Thomas. If we're tempted to think some of the stories we read about Jesus in the Bible sound too miraculous to be true, we should compare them with the stuff that didn't make it — really far-out, goofy and even not very nice stories that aren't worthy of our Lord.

But there's nothing far-fetched or miraculous about the incident that was read to us this morning from the second chapter of Luke's Gospel. In some ways it's a pretty down-to-earth story, something that could happen to us, perhaps a parent's worst nightmare. It reminds us of the movie *Home Alone*. In that film the family takes a plane trip, and when they reach their destination they discover they had forgotten one of the boys! Everyone thought he was with somebody else — just as, in our passage from Luke, Jesus' parents went a day's journey toward Nazareth before they realized Jesus was still back in Jerusalem.

Were they careless parents, to go that far without knowing for certain where he was? We have to put this story into its cultural setting. Whole villages would travel together up to Jerusalem for the Feast of Passover, and many villagers would be related to one another. It was a logical assumption that Jesus was somewhere else in the party, perhaps with neighbors or cousins. Families in ancient Jewish culture were *extended families*, not the *nuclear family* we have today. Besides, Jesus was twelve years old. In that culture, that's when a boy became a man. They didn't have a special world of teen-age life back then. When a boy reached the age for his *bar mitzvah*, he was ready to start moving into the world of adult male responsibilities. And a girl might be married at thirteen or fourteen. You had to grow up fast, because life was too short to prolong your childhood any longer than necessary. At age twelve, Jesus could very well be expected to be responsible for himself.

So what's remarkable about this story isn't that Jesus' parents didn't miss him for a whole day. What's remarkable is where they finally found him when they went back to the city. He wasn't where we, today, might expect to find a teenage boy that stayed behind after a trip to the city. We might look for him at Best Buy, or someplace where he could be trying the latest computer games. Or maybe we'd look in SportMart, or the Cinema. Whatever ancient Jerusalem had for amusement or entertainment, that must have been where Joseph and Mary first looked for Jesus, because Luke tells us it took three days before they finally found him — in the Temple, discussing theology with the experts! It seems they didn't quite understand why Jesus wanted to be there. "How could you do this to us?" Mary asked. "Your dad and I have been looking all over for you!" And they didn't understand Jesus' answer: "Why were you looking for me? Didn't you know I need to be in my Father's house?" Luke tells us that Mary really had to think about these things, turning them over in her mind — "treasuring them in her heart" — as the days and years wore on.

No, Jesus wasn't the "Super-Boy" of those apocryphal stories. He's "the Word made flesh," a human being with all the attributes of humanity. He was, as the writer of Hebrews says, "one who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin" (Hebrews 4:15). So when we read about how he grew up, we can understand that his growth is something of a pattern for our own progress and maturing as the Lord's people. Beholding the glory of the Lord, Paul says, we're "being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another" (2 Corinthians 3:18). Can we do miracles, as Jesus did? Jesus promised we would do even *greater* things than he did, because he has gone to the Father (John 14:12). We might be able to do far more than we think we can, through the power of the Holy Spirit, just as Peter and the apostles did.

But even if we aren't able to emulate the healing miracles of our Lord, we can still follow him on the path to maturity as servants of God.

Luke outlines that path in the one verse of Scripture that covers everything we really know about Jesus from the time he was twelve till he began to preach the message of the kingdom of God. The redeeming work of Christ was a reality in the plan of God "before the foundation of the world" (Revelation 13:8), but at the human level it had to manifest itself in a "normal" process of growing up. Jesus had to be prepared for his ministry, and Luke gives us a window into how he was prepared: "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men." In this incident from chapter 2 of his Gospel, we see another *epiphany*, a revelation of God the Father at work in the Son — A Son who told his earthly parents, "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" What can we learn from this *epiphany*?

First, Jesus progressed in *wisdom*. What does the Bible understand by this word *sophia*, translated "wisdom"? It doesn't mean having a lot of book learning, technical skills or arcane knowledge about some complicated subject. Wisdom, in Scripture, is always practical. It's the ability to cope with the situations of life, the ability to handle relationships and deal with moral issues. All the knowledge in the world won't help a person whose life is falling apart because of bad decisions he's made. Wisdom helps us to make good decisions, and *good* decisions are those that take the Lord into account. The wisdom books of the Bible steer us in that direction; Proverbs says, "The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight" (Proverbs 9:10). Ecclesiastes urges us, "Fear God, and keep his commandments; for this is the whole duty of man" (Ecclesiastes 12:13).

Obviously, making good and wise decisions must mean making decisions according to God's pattern for human life. And that means knowledge of the Word of God is essential to growing in wisdom. We can't "write our own ticket," as far as our priorities and standards and values are concerned, and expect to live in wisdom. And we can't depend on the advice of friends or acquaintances, — or columnists or filmmakers or commentators — who don't understand God's purpose for his human family. As one of my college professors, Dr. Charlie Thrall, used to say, "You don't get wisdom by pooling ignorance." Wisdom begins in one place, and that's in the study and application of Scripture, especially those principles for life in the kingdom of God that Jesus lays down in the Gospels. The boy Jesus sets the pattern for us here, even at the age of twelve. It wasn't in the amusement parks or computer arcades where Jesus lingered — or whatever was their equivalent in old Jerusalem — when his parents left him behind. They found him in the Temple, asking deep and perceptive questions of the teachers of the Law. And "everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers" (Luke 2:47).

When wisdom from the Lord replaces the so-called wisdom of the world, it makes a big difference in your life. Before I knew the Lord I was a prisoner of my emotions; I became hurt and angry over slights, real or imagined, and it tore my life apart. My Ph.D. did nothing for me then. I had to come to the place where I realized my ignorance of true wisdom, and submitted to the wisdom of God. After that, things began to change. Do I still take offense and become tempted to lash out at people whom I think have crossed me? Of course I do! But now that little voice speaks in my head saying, "You're not going to react to this as you would have before. You're going to do the right thing and conduct yourself in a way that honors the Word of God." That little voice saved me this week when something happened that made me feel "put down."

There are lots of ways to grow in this wisdom that comes from the Lord. Join a Sunday school class that studies the Scripture. Start a Bible study group in your home and invite mature Christians to be part of it. Listen to the Bible on cassette tapes while driving through rush hour traffic. Pick up good teaching on Christian radio and television. Do some personal study with a good book for a guide. "Grow in wisdom" as you apply the Word to the issues you face in community, family and personal life.

Second, Jesus progressed in *stature*. The Greek word *elikia* can mean either physical stature or coming to an appropriate stage of life. Both are important. As to physical growth, let's consider the question of healthy living. Early last year my doctor strongly suggested I drop my weight, which was pushing 185 pounds. Now, I love to eat — as most of us do! But I went on a low-carb diet and lost those 20 or 25 extra pounds. I can tell the difference when I try to wear some of my old clothes that haven't been altered. Along with that my cholesterol numbers came out great — which was my doctor's main concern.

I don't know what all your health issues are, though I'm aware that many of you are dealing with serious conditions, some of them long-term. I have to say I admire you for your faithfulness in serving the Lord despite those limitations. Whether or not you're in reasonably good health, what can you do *now* to preserve your health through diet, exercise, rest, or giving up harmful habits such as the use of alcohol or tobacco? Our body is a temple of the Holy Spirit, and the Lord intends for us to use and enjoy it for his glory. Jesus "grew in stature," Luke tells us. That must mean he took care of himself physically, even as he progressed through the stages of youth and young manhood and attained the stature of a "prophet from Nazareth" (Matthew 21:11) — a preacher bringing the word of the kingdom and healing in the power of God, so that the report of his ministry went out through that entire district (Matthew 9:26).

Third, Luke tells us that Jesus progressed "in favor with God and men." The English translation here might be a bit misleading. We know that Jesus certainly enjoyed the favor of God, but after he started preaching he wasn't always favored by people. His message of the kingdom wasn't what some folks wanted to hear, because it turned their comfortable world upside down. Jesus was surely not one of the Pharisees' favorite people. But the Greek here suggests another nuance: *chariti para theo kai anthropois*. The word *charis* means "grace" or "gifting." It wasn't that everyone *liked* Jesus, but that he was *gifted* with people — he had the ability to understand and help them. As Peter puts it in Acts 10:38, "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power; . . . he went about doing good and healing all that were oppressed by the devil, for God was with him." Jesus was able to help others because he understood what was in their hearts. The Gospels are filled with stories of how he healed their diseases, forgave their sins, cast out those demons that oppressed them, enlightened them about the ways of the Lord, and gave them a vision for what life could be in the presence of the living God.

We can't control whether people favor us or like us, but we *can* grow in our sensitivity to the needs of others, and we can cultivate our ability to help them. One way to help others is simply to be a good listener. All the pious advice in the world may not help those hurting people we know. But just spend time with them and listen to their story, and then pray with them — and they may well sense that the Lord and his people really do care, and take courage amidst all their difficulties.

Of course, there are many other ways to grow in giftedness with others, and sometimes when we help others we help ourselves. I recall many years ago, when I was going through a bad time in both my marriage and my job, I knew a family in the church I attended in which the husband was completely paralyzed in bed, and even had to be fed through a tube. I learned that he had grown up in Boston. I had spent twelve years in Boston attending graduate school, and being a camera buff I had a good collection of slides of historic old buildings and other scenes. I took my projector over to the family's home, having turned all the slides sideways so the man could see them from his angle. It was a small thing, but I felt better about myself after this act of kindness. And I wasn't even a Christian in those days. How much better if I had been able to pray with this family going through such difficulty and encourage them in the Lord. Follow the example of Christ. Do what you can to "go about doing good," and begin to grow "in favor with God and men." As we read in Psalm 37, "Trust in the Lord and do good. . . . If the Lord delights in a man's way, he makes his steps firm" (Psalm 37:3, 23).

We could say more about this, but our time is nearly gone. Here are a couple of final thoughts about our text: "And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and men." First, Jesus establishes a pattern for us of well-rounded maturing in a life that honors God. Some of you are familiar with the 4-H clubs. The four H's stand for Head, Heart, Hands and Health. My father was involved in the 4-H as a country preacher in Vermont in the 1930s, and I remember something interesting he once mentioned: those four H's come right out of our verse, Luke 2:52. Wisdom — the head. Stature — our health. Hands — our outreach to others. Heart — our love for God. It's a pattern for a life of wholeness that reflects God's blessing; as Paul says, "God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure" (Philippians 2:13).

Second, Luke says, "Jesus *grew*." Other translations are, "Jesus *increased*" or "Jesus *progressed*." The Greek verb *prokopto* doesn't speak of passive progress. It's based on a word that means "to beat." Jesus "beat his way forward" to attain these qualities of growth, my Dad used to say. Our progress toward the Christlike life isn't going to take place if we just sit around waiting for it to happen. The Lord has maturity

there for each of us, but we may have to “hack our way” through a wilderness of distractions in order to cultivate these qualities.

Jesus sets the pattern for maturity, and each of us can follow that pattern, with his help, whether we’re eighteen or eighty. Our story of the boy Jesus is another *epiphany* for us; we see God at work not in the miracle-working “Super-Boy” of those fanciful old stories, but in the Christ who had emptied himself of his heavenly glory and lived under conditions much harsher than you and I typically face. And, as that old hymn says,

*O dearly, dearly, has He loved,  
And we must love Him, too,  
And trust in His redeeming blood,  
And try His works to do.*

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