

Mary's Conversation With Christ

The blockbuster motion picture of the 1990 Christmas season was the movie "Home Alone" which made millions upon millions of dollars in its run in the theaters and probably as many millions more in the video cassette releases. Many of you are probably familiar with the story. It's set in suburban Chicago and is about a large family that decides that they're going to spend their Christmas vacation in Paris, France. They're busy the night before, family tensions build, short words are said — you know how it goes. The next morning there's been a power outage, the alarm doesn't go off and they're running late. They hurry out and just make it in time for their flight. After all this hectic preparation, at last they are able to relax. Mid-Atlantic the mom remembers that she forgot their eight year old son who's still back at the house. Hence the title, "Home Alone." Meanwhile, back in suburban Chicago, this eight year old has some of his fears and fantasies of childhood come true as he becomes the boss of the house.

The main plot revolves around a couple of burglars that are working the neighborhood that Christmas season while so many people are away. The majority of the movie is the on-going conflict, battle after battle, between this eight year old boy and the two experienced burglars. He does things like pouring water over all of the steps so that the burglars fall and get hurt. Now of course, if it were set in Minnesota, you wouldn't have to do that — nature would take care of it! He does things like heating the door knob on the front door of the house with an electric charcoal starter so when the burglar grabs hold of the door knob he fries his hand. The whole movie is just one battle after the other — and the kid always wins. At the end, the burglars are beaten and the child is the champion.

Now strange as it may seem, there is actually a biblical precedent to this modern movie story. It is the story of another child who's parents forgot him in the busyness of all of the holiday happenings. They didn't leave him home alone, but they forgot him when they got to their destination and left him behind. The child's name was Jesus. If the story were being made into a movie today, it would probably be entitled "Away Alone."

The Biblical account in Luke 2:41-52 sounds like a movie script.

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.

There's a story behind this conversation. Of course you recognize that Mary and Joseph were Jewish and the Old Testament law in Exodus stated that Jewish men were supposed to come to Jerusalem three times a year for annual religious festivals. By the first century, tens of thousands of Jewish families were spread all over the empire and couldn't make the trip three times a year. So the best most of them would try to do is come once every year and typically they would come at Passover.

Passover was the annual Jewish commemoration of when the Hebrew people had been delivered from slavery in Egypt 1500 years earlier. It was time for Joseph to make this annual trip. Although the law didn't require him to take his wife or his children under thirteen along with him, he chose to do that nevertheless. It was a dangerous trip. They traveled by caravan for there were so many robbers and thieves and violent

people along the trade routes of Palestine in those days that those who traveled alone were in great danger.

Typically, an extended family, sometimes several hundred people, or an entire village would go together. They would usually travel during the daytime and camp out at night. On a typical journey, some of the men and all of the women and young children would leave first and then the rest of the men and the older children would catch up later because they would travel more quickly than

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those that had the young children along.

They went to Jerusalem as was their custom and at the end of that particular Passover festival Mary started out — thinking that twelve year old Jesus was staying behind with Joseph. Joseph, when he left later in the day, assumed that Jesus had gone with Mary. It wasn't until they connected up at night, camping out with all of the other extended family and neighbors, maybe even well into the evening because they thought Jesus was with some other family, that they realized in horror that he wasn't there. So they did what any parents would do. They desperately searched around, they asked everyone if they had seen him and they came to the conclusion that they had left him behind in Jerusalem. But by then it was night. It was a dangerous enough journey back to Jerusalem in the daytime, but there was no way that this couple could do it at night. So they had to wait until the next morning. Then, of course, they had a full day's journey back to Jerusalem and by then it would be night again. So it wasn't until the morning of the third day that they could actually begin their search for Jesus.

Anyone who has ever lost a child, even for a moment, can rather easily identify with the emotions of this couple. Parents in this situation imagine all the possible bad things that can happen and then assume the worst possibility has happened. My guess is that Mary and Joseph had sleepless nights and their conversations were sometimes filled with anger toward themselves as each one said, "If I had only. . .," or they would blame the other person until it tested their relationship.

It must have been a difficult time for them and I think especially difficult for Mary. For while she had the maternal instinct of any mother and certainly loved her twelve year old son, she recognized that this Jesus of hers was different. Angels had come to announce his birth. She knew that he was the Son of God — it was promised that he would be the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior of his race. How would she ever explain to God that she had lost Jesus?

Meanwhile, back in Jerusalem, Jesus was not worried about it at all. He was, in some ways, a rather typical twelve year old who was very focused on what he was doing. He was having a great time and his parents weren't the least bit on his mind at all.

Jesus was at the temple. There was a group of men, religious leaders, called the Sanhedrin who in those days composed the hierarchy of the Hebrew faith. Usually they met in private, but a few times a year after a big festival they would come out and have their theological discussions and debates in public so anybody could come and listen or ask them questions. Jesus went to see what was going on. In many ways he did not stand out in the crowd. He asked questions as did others.

It's interesting to me, if you've seen some traditional art work or remember from your own childhood a Sunday School picture that depicts this scene that typically it has little Jesus in a white robe, maybe with a halo over his head (which always made him easy to identify) and all of these old men in their dark flowing robes with big beards are sitting there listening to him as he teaches them. That's not the way it was at all. They were central and he was on the periphery of the circle. It was he who, initially at least, was asking the questions. He was learning.

It's amazing when you think about who he is that he was that humble, that open, that willing to listen to what other people had to say. He wanted to soak up the truths about God and about the Bible. But, typical of the question and answer learning method of the day, the teachers would also have questions that they would ask of those that were around the circle. Someone would finish a speech and then pick somebody out of the audience and ask a question to find out whether you understood what was said or not.

One of those times, one of those teachers picked Jesus. Everyone was amazed who heard the understanding that he had with his answers. This twelve year old was somehow different. This seventh grader was articulate. He had learned his stuff! He could repeat it back. He integrated it well. He was amazing!

Right then, while these exchanges were taking place and everyone was enthralled by the conversation between these powerful, learned professors and the seventh grader who had never entered into conversation with them like that before — he was interrupted by his mother Mary who, to her amazement, saw her missing son in the midst of this crowd.

I think every mother probably knows the emotions that she experienced. In less than a second, she switched from agonizing despair and deep worry to huge relief, then to a new surge of anger. She blurts out, "Son, why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." Apparently Mary hadn't read all the recent books about how to approach your children in stressful circumstances and I suppose some would say that she has too much emotion and was shaming him and laying guilt on him. She really was saying, "What is the matter with you anyway, Jesus?"

Mary and Joseph never expected to see what they saw. They didn't expect a twelve year old to be teaching the professors about theology. It was, in a sense, the beginning of a new chapter for Mary and Joseph. For while they had long known that he was different, that he was sent from God, that his birth was supernatural, they never had been able to think through what the implications were. They saw him in terms of the child that was tucked in at night. They saw him in terms of their son who had nicks and bruises and childhood

diseases. They saw him as the apprentice in the carpenter's shop who helped Joseph as he took on the assignments that were given to him in the community of Nazareth. But they never saw him like this before. They never saw him as the teacher, as the one so articulate and so wise. Like many parents, Mary saw Jesus more in terms of herself than in terms of him. "Why have you treated us like this?" There was the assumption that what he had done was focused on them when it really had little to do with them.

Maybe her tone of voice and words reflected the harsh realization that she was losing her boy. He was no longer limited to Joseph's carpenter shop in that obscure little village of Nazareth. Her little boy was becoming a man and that meant that she was going to lose him.

When Jesus answered he meant his parents no malice. His words were, I think, kind and yet significant. He asked, "Why were you searching for me? 'Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?'" Do you know that these are the first words of Jesus that are recorded in the Bible? He expected them to have a clearer understanding. He really thought that they would know who he was and what he was doing. And so he was surprised by their misinterpretation of what had happened that day.

I sense that there's something very special going on here, something so significant that we must be careful not to miss it. Understand that when Jesus was born and he was a baby put in a manger, he didn't talk. I think sometimes people think when Jesus was born he talked to Mary and Joseph. Or that he walked home from the stable after he was born or that he performed miracles. No, he was just like any other child. What was special about him was the angel's announcement about him before his birth; otherwise they never would have guessed that this was the Son of God in human flesh. Nor did he know, as a baby lying in the manger, that he was God. He was a baby like any other baby.

Think about yourself. When's the day that you first knew what your name was? What's the day when you recognized that you were male or female? Or that you're shy or outgoing, or musical or mechanical or artistic? You don't remember the day for any of those things. When you were born you didn't know things about yourself that you know now. Somewhere along the way you just discovered them. As a teenager and young adult it's a stunning realization to find out things about yourself that you never knew and to realize that your parents who've known you longer than you've known yourself don't know these things about you.

And you begin to wonder how that could possibly be.

As Jesus grew older he began to realize who he was. He sensed that he was different from the other children, different from the other members of his family. He recognized that God was present in him in a way that God was not in other people. And one day he came to the realization that he was, in fact, God. That he was the Christ, the Son of God, the Lord of all.

Now I can't help but wonder if that day was not this day at the temple, when he was away alone. From his infancy to when he was thirty years old this is the only record of Jesus' actual words. Something extraordinary must have happened that day and I suspect that it was on that day that he realized fully who he was. He was twelve years old — a year before his Bar Mitzvah, when a Jewish boy becomes a man. Bar Mitzvah means "son of the commandment" and that he is now responsible for himself in keeping the laws of God.

When he spoke that day, he significantly and yet subtly changed Mary's words. She had said, "Your father and I have been anxiously searching for you." She was referring to Joseph. Jesus said, "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" He was referring to God.

Do you know that there is no record in ancient Hebrew literature where any ancient Jew ever referred to God as "my" Father? There are a small handful of references where some said "our" Father. Jesus was claiming a unique relationship to God unlike anyone else. In his adult life when Jesus referred to God as my Father they picked up stones to kill him because they understood what he was saying — that he was the Son of God unlike anyone else. He was twelve years old and

he was saying, "What my life is all about and whom I have come to serve is my Father God, not my adoptive father Joseph.

This chapter of Jesus' story ends with an interesting epilogue. In Luke 2:50 we read that his parents did not understand what he was saying to them. I think that's sad. Here's a twelve year old who's had the biggest day of his life, the greatest recognition and realization he has ever had and his own parents don't understand what he is saying. I don't think that's unusual. Parents often don't understand. Not because they don't want to but simply because they can't. You try to communicate to your parents. You try to tell them about your feelings. You try to tell them about your thoughts. You try to tell them where you're at and what's going on in your life and what's happening and what's dif-

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ferent. And they just don't get it and after a point, you don't even try anymore. You conclude that they just can't or won't understand.

Jesus knows because he's been there. His parents didn't understand him either. Jesus was smarter than his parents, wiser and better. He knew what he was doing, he knew who he was and they got mad at him for it. It wasn't easy.

The epilogue adds that he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. The word Nazareth doesn't mean much to us. Nazareth was an obscure, unimportant, insignificant little village. Years later when one of Jesus' disciples heard he was from Nazareth he didn't want to follow Jesus because, "What good thing has ever come out of Nazareth?" Jesus obeyed his parents and went back to Nazareth even though it must have seemed a dull place after the excitement of Jerusalem. But he did it.

It says a lot about him. He wanted to obey those who didn't understand him in the difficult place. You know it's not a great test of anyone's character to follow after somebody you like and respect — someone who is always right. The great test of someone's character is when you're with somebody who doesn't understand you and yet you choose nevertheless to get along with that person.

Everyone of us has faced what Jesus faced that day in Jerusalem. And everyone of us has to decide whether we're willing to follow and obey someone who has misunderstood us. Jesus did it.

And then there's Mary mentioned in this epilogue. I'm always impressed with Mary. She was a fantastic woman. She did something that's a powerful precedent for every parent, especially every parent with pain. Do you remember in the Christmas story as the angels and the shepherds said things that she didn't understand and seemed impossible to her? It says that Mary didn't understand it, but she kept all these things in her heart, that she pondered them, she mulled them over. It says that again here. She didn't understand but she took what she didn't understand and treasured those things in her heart and in her mind. How could she do that? How do you treasure misunderstanding and pain?

Mary had a deep confidence in God. A confidence that all of these strange things, these impossible things, these embarrassing things somehow would be fit together by God for good. She chose to take every word and every experience and rather than forget them, she chose to turn them into memories that she would put on a special shelf of her mind. She was convinced that some day God would make good sense out of that which she could not figure out.

Godly fathers and mothers have been following Mary's example for centuries. When a child dies or a marriage falls apart or they have a prodigal son or daughter, they, like Mary, store it away in their hearts

convinced that someday God will take that jagged piece of life and he will put it as the missing piece in a puzzle. Then it will fit perfectly to finish off a magnificent tapestry of which we never could have dreamed.

The last line of the epilogue of the conversation between Mary and the twelve year old Christ says, "Jesus grew in wisdom and stature and in favor with God and men." Jesus was growing up. He was once slight and now he was putting on weight. He was wise when he was twelve but wiser when he was thirteen. When he was fourteen he knew even more — the changes were evident, you could see them. Puberty is maturity. He who had a smooth face was now showing the whiskers of a man and he who had a boy's body was taking the shape of an adult. Jesus was changing. He was different. He was growing and everybody who looked at him was delighted. The people in his family and in the neighborhood and God, as well, took delight in Jesus. They liked him.

Here, too, is a word for us. We want instant changes. We expect Christian disciples to happen overnight. We want instant maturity. But we, like Jesus, are also in process. Our children are in process, I am and you are and all those around us are in process. What we need to do is let God do in our lives what He did in Jesus' life. Each day becoming a little wiser until eventually all those around are delighted in what they see and, most of all, God is delighted as well.

And so ends the story of the boy who was left behind — "Away Alone." Could it be that like Mary and Joseph you, too, have been searching for Jesus? You can find him today. Perhaps you feel you're short on understanding too. But maybe, even without full understanding, you'll come to Jesus Christ and acknowledge him as your Savior, as the Son of God, as the Lord of Life. Do you know what will happen? It's guaranteed by God to happen for all of those who commit their lives to Jesus Christ as Savior and Lord. Life is transformed. One soul is saved for eternity and Jesus will go home with him.

If you've never accepted Jesus Christ as Savior, do it now. Pray a simple prayer of faith saying, "God, I confess my sin. I accept Jesus as my Savior," and he'll go home with you today to be with you forever.

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