

Rev. Dr. Chris Montovino
Did You Not Know?
January 14, 2024

Did You Not Know?

Magrey DeVega in his book *Questions Jesus Asked* said that from the earliest age we learn the importance of punctuation.¹ There are periods which mark the end of one thought before another. There are exclamation points which emphasize the feelings or emotions behind our thoughts. And then there are question marks which indicate that we expect an answer in response to our questions.

And even within questions themselves, there are several types.

First there are factual questions or those which request simple information for which there is a limited range of acceptable answers. These questions answer who, what, when, where, how, how many, and so on.

Then there are interpretive questions which prompt a person to explore a topic for deeper meaning and greater insight.

And finally there are evaluative questions or those that invite us to dive deep into our own minds and hearts for a response. DeVega wrote, “These are the hardest questions to answer, and they are the ones that can be the most transformative.”²

Jewish theologian Rabbi Abraham Heschel once said, “We are closer to God when we are asking questions than when we think we have the answers.”³

Throughout the Gospels, we see that Jesus asked each of these kinds of questions. One author suggested that Jesus asked questions 307 times in the Gospels.⁴ So what we are going to do over the course of the next several months, through Lent, into Easter, and then up until summertime, is focus on the Bible stories in which Jesus asks some of his most profound evaluative questions. Questions that will invite us to dive deep into our own minds and hearts for the response.

One thing that we will find is that whenever Jesus asks a question, it is never because he doesn’t know the answer to it. Jesus asks the question to see if we know the answer.

¹ Magrey R. DeVega, *Questions Jesus Asked: A Six Week Study in the Gospels* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2023).

² IBID, xiii.

³ IBID, x.

⁴ Martin B. Copenhaver, *Jesus is the Question: The 307 Questions Jesus Asked and the 3 He Answered* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2014), xix.

The first place where we see Jesus asking questions is in the only scriptural account of Jesus' childhood. We assume that he grew up as any ordinary child. But this story shows us that even at his earliest age of twelve, or just before the time of his Bar Mitzvah when he transitioned from childish thinking to that of an adult, he was asking hard questions.

So join me as we hear for ourselves from Luke 2:41-52.

41 Every year Jesus' parents went to Jerusalem for the Festival of the Passover. **42** When he was twelve years old, they went up to the festival, according to the custom. **43** After the festival was over, while his parents were returning home, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but they were unaware of it. **44** Thinking he was in their company, they traveled on for a day. Then they began looking for him among their relatives and friends. **45** When they did not find him, they went back to Jerusalem to look for him. **46** After three days they found him in the temple courts, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. **47** Everyone who heard him was amazed at his understanding and his answers. **48** 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."

49 "Why were you searching for me?" he asked. "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" **50** But they did not understand what he was saying to them.

51 Then he went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them. But his mother treasured all these things in her heart. **52** And Jesus grew in wisdom and stature, and in favor with God and man.

Let us pray. Prayer of Illumination.

In the holiday film, *Home Alone*, McCaulay Culkin plays a bratty eight year old Kevin McCallister who is the youngest of five siblings. At Christmastime, his family is about to embark upon a trip to Paris, France. The night before they go, Kevin was disciplined for being sassy with his parents and had to spend the night in the attic guest room.

Chaos ensues when the family wakes up late for their flight and Kevin is inadvertently forgotten in the attic...left behind. It wasn't until they were mid-flight that Kevin's mother has this sick feeling that they had forgotten something at home.

Was it their passports?

Was oven left on?

Was the garage door left open?

Finally, she screams, "Kevin!"

The story continues with her trying to return home to her son and Kevin fighting off some pesky burglars trying to break into their house while the family was away.

That is what I imagine must have been going through Mary's mind in the moment that she realized that she and Joseph had left Jesus behind in Jerusalem as their family traveled home from the temple visit during Passover.

While it is easy for us to critique Kevin's and Jesus' neglectful parents, what parent at some point hasn't struggled to keep track of the whereabouts of their child? Thank God for Track Your Friends feature on the iPhone today. But Mary didn't have that kind of luxury.

What I want to do this morning is consider the context in which Jesus's first questions take place. Then I want to talk through the meaning of the question. And finally we will consider what does his question mean for us today?

We know that when this story takes place, that Joseph and Mary lived in Nazareth which was a small village of 1600 to 2000 people. The most direct route from Jerusalem to Nazareth would have taken them 90 miles through Samaria. Often times, however in order to avoid Samaritans, they would travel the extra 30 miles around Samaria making their journey 120 miles. Overall if they were walking by foot, it would have taken them about a week to do so.

Being that it was the Passover Celebration each adult male was required to attend the temple accompanied by their families. As the text mentions, Joseph and Mary were traveling home to Nazareth along with their other children, relatives and friends. It would have been a huge entourage of uncles, aunts, grand parents, nieces and nephews, cousins, et cetera. Being that Nazareth was a Jewish town, it could have been the entire village of 2000 people. Joseph and Mary clearly assumed that Jesus, like any ordinary teenager would not want to walk with them but with his friends and cousins who were his age.

So without having eyes on Jesus, they assumed that he was traveling along with them. Until, they realized, after a whole day of traveling, that Jesus wasn't there!

Mary screamed, "Jesus!"

Notice that it took them a day to retrace their steps to Jerusalem and then another three whole days before they finally found him. I wondered if the three days was a foreshadow to the three days that Jesus went missing from the tomb? We don't know, but it's interesting to speculate.

Regardless, Mary did have some admonishing words for her son. When they found him sitting in the temple courts listening to the teachers and asking questions, they were astonished. Jesus had assumed the posture of a student, sitting with a rabbi, listening and asking questions. This was a common posture for

students to gather at the feet of their rabbis to discuss theology often in a question and answer format.

The Greek word for astonishment is *expleso* it means to strike with astonishment or amazement. It has 13 occurrences in the Greek New Testament, each referring to people's response to Jesus' teachings with authority or the miracles he did. People just hadn't seen this sort of thing before. And so we get this same sort of amazement by Jesus' parents. Something new has happened. A shift had begun in Jesus.

His transition from being a child...to being a young man.

On the one hand they were astonished, but on the other hand they were anxious. The Greek word used for anxious comes from the root word *odonao* which means to grieve, have sorrow, or be tormented.

"Son why have you treated us like this? Your father and I have been tormented, anxiously searching for you."

Notice that Jesus was neither astonished to see his parents nor anxious about why he had been left behind. He was exactly where he was supposed to be. In the temple courts, learning, and growing in his faith. Which then leads into the first of Jesus' recorded questions. "Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I had to be in my Father's house?" Questions that I'm sure his parents weren't expecting, nor understood.

As a parent, I would think a simple "I'm sorry Mom and Dad" would have been an appropriate response for any other child. But Jesus wasn't any other child.

So what was Jesus really meaning behind the question "Did you not know that I had to be in my Father's house?"

That's where I want to move into next...the meaning behind Jesus' question.

We can almost feel Joseph's daddy heart sink. This was the first recorded time that Jesus publicly distanced himself from Joseph and Mary. Ordinarily Jesus would have been known as Jesus Bar Yoseph. Jesus, the son of Joseph. In fact, later in the Gospel of John after Jesus miraculously fed five thousand people and walked on water, and he announced that he was the bread of life that had come down from heaven, people began to grumble saying, "Wait a second, isn't this Jesus, the son of Joseph?"⁵ In other words, how can a human claim to have come down from heaven?

In our passage today, Jesus distanced himself from that connection. Remember Joseph wasn't his biological father. He wasn't conceived in a normal way, but by the Holy Spirit.. Mysteriously born of the virgin Mary as we confirm in the Apostles Creed. The Angel Gabriel had told both Joseph and Mary that.

⁵ John 6:41

As a twelve year old, saying that he needed to be in his Father's house, Jesus was acknowledging God as his Father. Jesus Bar Yahweh. Jesus, the Son of God. Not Joseph. Sadly, Joseph is never heard of again in the Gospels. Tradition assumes that his absence is due to him dying before Jesus began his public ministry at age thirty. This could explain why Jesus wasn't married at this point because as the oldest son, he would have been caring for his mother and his siblings. Nothing is mentioned about Joseph for eighteen years.

Not only that, but Jesus' virgin birth set the stage for how God would mark each of our entries into the family of God. Not by human birth, but by the Spirit, through faith. The Apostle John wrote, "Yet to all who received Jesus, to those who believed in his name, Jesus gave the right to become children of God - children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God."⁶

So what then does Jesus' question mean for us?

The first thing that it points to is the importance of believing in the Virgin Birth. The claim that Jesus is the Son of God and not Joseph's son is a pivotal distinction between Christianity and other religions. Unless we believe this, we aren't Christians. One of the "earliest church fathers, Irenaeus (A.D. 130-202), believed that failing to believe in the Virgin Birth would keep someone from eternal life."⁷

Irenaeus said, "But again, those who assert that he was simply a mere man, begotten by Joseph, remaining in the bondage of the old disobedience, are in a state of death having not been yet joined to the Word of God the Father, nor receiving liberty through the Son, as he does Himself declare: "If the Son shall make you free, ye shall be free indeed." But being ignorant of Him who from the Virgin is Emmanuel, they are deprived of His gift, which is eternal life; and not receive the incorruptible Word, they remain in mortal flesh, and are debtors to death, not obtaining the antidote of life."⁸

Those are strong words from one of our earliest church fathers that must be taken seriously.

The next thing this points to is that there comes a point in everyone's life when we need to break out from our parent's faith and make it our own.

James Fowler a Sociologist of Religion coined what he calls the Six Stages of Faith.⁹

⁶ John 1:12-13

⁷ Israel Wayne, *Questions Jesus Asks, Where Divinity Meets Humanity* (Green Forest, AZ: New Leaf Press, 214), 27.

⁸IBID, 27-28.

⁹ Article posted on Theology of Work Website, Stages of Faith, at <https://www.theologyofwork.org/book/soul-purpose/section-d-things-keep-changing/chapter-10-growing-through-the-stages-of-life/stages-of-faith/>

Stage One is the Innocent which is found in preschoolers whose faith is largely prescribed by their families of origin and the religious talk around them.

Stage Two is the Literalist where children begin to distinguish between fantasy and reality. The Literalist believes similarly to the influential adults in their lives. Adults still in the literalist stage prefer communities with a strong literalist interpretation of scripture, follow rules, and have authoritative teaching. Literalists don't have room for those who question faith.

Stage Three is the Loyalist which occurs in adolescence and beyond. This is where we develop self awareness, think abstractly, and differentiate what we believe from others. People at this stage find security in being part of a community that believes the same thing that they do. They invest a lot of time in their faith community which plays a very important role in their lives.

Stage Four is the Critic where we detach ourselves from our earlier beliefs and begin to think critically about what we believe or don't believe. Some may talk in terms of deconstructing faith. Critics ask the difficult questions and are often associated with leaving home, literally or metaphorically.

The Critic Stage also "involves developing a new respect and trust for one's own intuition, feelings and judgements rather than such a heavy reliance on the views of others. People at this stage appreciate the freedom to express their own views in forums that encourage questioning and interaction. They start to enjoy encounters with the beliefs and practices of people they previously stayed away from. They don't sit easily in any leadership structure that pushes conformity."

This stage can be difficult for some parents who's children have might walked away from their faith, leaving them with a sense of guilt or shame. What we need to understand is that this is about our child's faith not our parenting and is an important and natural stage of anyone's faith development.

Stage Five is the Seer where we are less defensive about our beliefs and more open to others. The Seer demonstrates more humility and begins to see issues of faith as less black and white, but more grey. Even the Reverend Billy Graham in his later years said that some issues of faith that he had been most certain in his youth, became more grey as he aged.

In the Seer stage, "our faith is increasingly able to live with ambiguity and paradox. Like how we can be both weary and joyful at the same time. Truth is no longer a question of "either-or", but "both-and". Symbols, myths and stories take on a new relevance. We begin to love mystery and the vastness of the unknown."

And finally Stage Six is the Saint which occurs much later in life, if ever at all. "This stage results when a preoccupation with self gives way to a sense of mystical unity with all things and the complete acceptance of the ultimate authority of God in all aspects of life." At this stage we truly learn to let go, and let God!

Do we have any self avowed Saints in the room?

Some people move through these stages in sequential order. Some skips steps. Some go back and forth. What this points us to is that we are each on a faith journey. And we have to trust that God will complete what was started in us...in God's time and in God's way.

If Mary had only known about these stages of faith development, then she might not have reacted so personally to Jesus' questioning. "Son, why have you treated us like this?" Instead she would have understood that something was changing in Jesus that God was doing in him over which she had no control.

So parents, let's go easy on our children as they are figuring out faith and life. Sometimes in figuring things out, they must question everything and perhaps even negate the faith in which they were raised as they test and see what they actually believe. Still we have to trust that God is at work in them. Let's focus on what we can control which is our prayers. Never stop praying and believing that "He who began a good work in our children will be faithful to complete it in his time and his way."¹⁰

Kids, go easy on your parents. One day you might see that it is not easy to let go of your children and allow them to become their own adults. So give them grace, because they are not perfect. And remember, just because Jesus questioned his parents in this way, doesn't give you license to be sassy with your parents. Trust me. You ain't Jesus. So don't pretend that you are!

But regardless of where we might be on our spiritual journey, may we all find a spiritual home here at Cascades in our Father's house where we can sit at Jesus' feet, question our beliefs, learn together, and grow more and more into Jesus' likeness. May we like Mary treasure the mysterious things that we don't understand in our hearts. And may we all, like Jesus, grow in wisdom, and stature, and in favor with God and others. Amen.

¹⁰ Philippians 1:6