

# The Missing Years of Jesus

## Matthew 2:19-23

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*There he made his home in a town called Nazareth . . . . Mt. 2:23*

We do not know much about the life of Jesus. There is material, in Matthew and Luke, about his birth, and then, with the briefest of exceptions, the record skips to the last three years of his life. We know nothing about Christ's childhood, schooling, or early adulthood. When you stop to think about this long gap in the record, it is really quite amazing. There is so much about him that we would like to know, but do not.

While we do not know much about Jesus' life, these missing years in the record testify that he knows much about our lives. Throughout these years he was learning our common lot, what it is like to live a normal, ordinary human life. This is the miracle of particularity. He came to know every human life by living one human life.

### *Life in a home*

During these missing years, Jesus got a full picture of ordinary family life in an ordinary home in an ordinary town. He lived in Nazareth in a household that included his parents, four little brothers, and an undisclosed number of little sisters (Mk. 6:3; Mt. 13:55-56). Now, I was a little brother myself and never had the privilege of having any sisters, much less a little one, so I can only imagine the constant joy Jesus must have had with these little brothers and sisters always around and under foot! The one passage we have from Jesus' early years, the episode of his going off by himself on the visit to the temple, hints at his getting testy with his parents, who scolded him (Lk. 2:41-51). So that kind of atmosphere was not unknown in the home, nor, we can imagine, were simple household chores, mundane meals, clutter to be stepped over, and all the rest that makes up family life. He knew it all.

So nothing of our ordinary routines is foreign to him. The clutter of our homes? He is used to it. The drudge of our duties around the house and in the year? He's been there and done that. The rush to get kids out the door and off to school? He knows all about it. The quick catch up conversation over a cup of coffee? He's been part of those at the break of day and in the weary hours

of the evening. Nothing of our daily lives can surprise him or make him feel out of place or embarrassed. He has been around that block a time or two. He has sanctified our most mundane moments by living them, too.

### *Daily work*

During these missing years Jesus got in a full round of daily work. We cannot call him a workaholic, for he took time to rest. But he did work at a pace and put in a full day. It is not unlikely that he learned this work ethic as a child, seeing Mary in the house and garden and with the other children, and seeing Joseph, both in the carpenter's shop and around the house.

He knew daily work in the carpenter's trade with his father. He knew the sweat of honest labor and the weariness of a full day's work. He knew, too, we can imagine, tasks he did not want to do but did anyway because they needed doing. He knew work that was creative, work that was exhilarating, work that was frustrating, and work that was never done even though he was constantly at it. He knew the stresses and challenges of a family business with relatives for co-workers, and the difficulties of trying to please a demanding but fickle public.

There is nothing about our labors that Jesus does not understand. He's felt the thrill of those victories and the agonies of those defeats. He's known the menial and the monotonous.

Have we trials and temptations?

Is there trouble anywhere

at work? Take *that* to the Lord in prayer. He'll understand. He went to work, too. He went to work for years. Several of those years are missing in our record, but he was showing up at work through a good many of them. There is nothing you can tell him that he won't understand or care about.

### *Change*

During the missing years we've been trying to imagine, Jesus saw life in a home and life at work. Something else he saw over the round of these years was change. Jesus had to cope and contend with change just like we do.

Joseph was on the scene when Jesus was twelve and at the temple in Jerusalem (Lk. 2:41-51), but he never again appears after that. This has led the Christian centuries to believe Joseph died shortly after or sometime during Jesus' twelfth year. Well, that's change for you. We don't know how Joseph filled the home, but his absence from it must have left a gap in Jesus' heart and those of his mother and brothers and sisters. Seeing their tears

and their new loneliness, coupled with his own, was, no doubt, more change than Jesus wanted.

There had to have been other deaths and other changes in the family and neighborhood, too. Maybe changes in the economy affected the price of raw wood, which changed the costs of running the carpenter's shop, which changed the number of customers who came in, which changed everything. Maybe down the street the whole town of Nazareth seemed to change when a father's bold boy, his youngest and a friend of Jesus, decided to go off on his own. Maybe the whole town seemed to change when that boy moved away feeling adventurous and rich, but came home embarrassed and poor.

These changes I have named, with the exception of the death of Joseph, may have been imaginary, but there was one change that set Jesus on a different course. We don't know what it was. At least I don't. Was it an inner yearning? Was it a heavenly pull? It was something, at any rate; and it was something that made him set aside the tools of the shop, move away from the carpenter's bench, and go into a teaching ministry.

Change is a constant part of our lives. People come and go. Relationships build and break. Opportunities rise and run their courses. Nothing stays the same; nothing except that we want desperately to change but it never does. That stays dreadfully the same. Jesus has all this in his purview, too. We can trust his understanding and his sympathy.

You may not know much about Jesus. None of us do. Not even the most able scholar or the purest saint. There are just too many gaps in the record, too many missing years to account for, too little information to go on. Because of these missing years, we do not know much about Jesus. But because of these missing years, he knows everything about us. Thanks be to God that Christ has shared our common lot, and that we are so richly known.