

# Five Gifts That The Wise Men Brought

Matthew 1:1-12

By Phillip G. Kayser at Dominion Covenant Church on 2016-12-25

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## Introduction

During the last three Sundays we have been looking at the roles of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit in the first advent. Today we will examine the grateful response of believers to God's grace. Obviously we had application during each of the previous sermons, but you could think of the gifts of the Magi as representative of our healthy response to God.

Now, many sermons assume that since there were three gifts there must have been three wise men. The text doesn't say that. That may have been the case. But there may have been two or there may have been several. We aren't told. Most sermons on the wise men only address the three tangible gifts that they brought. And that is perfectly valid. But if you consider the languages of love, there were really five gifts that these wise men presented to Christ. And in that I think they stand as a model to us.

## **I. Gift #1 - Their Presence**

The first gift was their presence. They showed up. They traveled a long way to be with Mary, Joseph, and Jesus. And people don't often think of that as a gift, but it is.

Growing up, I think the most wonderful part of Christmas was going home to see my family. I spent most of my youth in a boarding school and only saw my parents at Christmas and summer vacation. It was hard on the parents as well as the kids, but the mission required it. So we really looked forward to those times together. My mother would stay up late to welcome us and had prepared chicken and dumplings or curried dumplings, and to this day dumplings have a warm spot in my heart. There's probably not much nutrition in them, but the gift of love and presence that stands behind those dumplings in my memory makes them special.

Now, don't get me wrong, we loved the Christmas gifts that we got too. But I think the warm feelings of being able to spend time with family was an intangible gift that many people take for granted until they are away from home for a long time. Anyone who is in a nursing home will tell you how important it is to be visited. Years ago our family read Corrie ten Boom's book, *The Hiding Place*, and one of the things that Corrie was most grateful

for was being able to be in the presence of her sister Betsie during her imprisonment. It meant the world to her. And there are many prisoners who rarely get visits, and when they do, they treasure those visits.

Now the reason I even mention this in Matthew 2 is because it took quite some doing for these men to personally deliver their gifts. How do I know that? First of all, they probably came from Persia, which was from the East of Bethlehem. That would have been a long and difficult journey.

Secondly, they are called magi. Actually, the Greek is magoi. But this is a Persian term that referred to people who gave counsel to kings. They would have had a hard time getting off from work. And it was a long trip, and they would have had to guard against bandits.

Let me give you some background on that term. These men were not astrologers as some people claim. The book of Daniel uses the term magoi several times in the Greek translation and they were always distinguished from the class of astrologers and diviners (LXX of Dan. 1:20; 2:2,10,27; 4:4; 5:7,11,15). I have several verses that make a distinction between astrologers, diviners, and magoi. The magi were the wise men who had special training as counselors to the king or other civil magistrates. They were cabinet officers. Every time the plural magoi or the singular magus occurs in the Bible, it refers to people who gave counsel to magistrates because of either their wisdom or their access to special revelation. Acts 8 speaks of a bad one: Simon Magus. Acts 13 speaks of Elymas the magus who influenced Sergius Paulus the proconsul. The Greek translation of Daniel calls Daniel and his three friends magoi and Daniel eventually becomes the head of the magoi, astrologers and diviners. The bottom line is, it would take some special arrangements for three of the king's Magog to get a few weeks off to visit the newborn king of the Jews. These men had to overcome several work and travel related inconveniences.

To me this speaks volumes. They didn't send the gifts by UPS (like we have been conveniently doing over the past few weeks). And interestingly, they probably would have had the money to be able to send these gifts via a messenger. But they brought the gifts themselves.

I think the value of their personal presence far outweighed the value of the money and the perfume. There are some who substitute giving a present for being present, and it is not the same. Sometimes it is unavoidable. We can't go to Canada, California, and Florida to hand-deliver our gifts. So we are grateful for Amazon and other services that ship. But it is not the same. My mom tells me of a great, great (and I think there is another great in there)

grandpa who was a traveling salesman and never at home. He provided very well for the family, sending home regular installments of money. But that's not what great, great, great Grandma Gee wanted. She kept asking for him to come home. She wanted to be with him. And finally, she told him don't send me any more money. I only want to see you. He sent home \$1000 (which was a vast sum in those days) and said that he couldn't make it. In a fit of anger, she threw the money in the fire. That kind of temper may be a hint as to why he didn't want to be home; I don't know. But in her mind, when there was not even a desire for personal presence, the gift had little meaning. Now that's not to say there's not a place for sending gifts. I think there is. But I believe the greatest gift we can give is making ourselves available to those that we love.

But I do want to make the same application to how we treat the Lord, because after all, these magi had taken the time to be in the presence of the Lord Jesus Himself. What kind of effort do you put into seeking His face? Now your strongest language of love may not be closeness or quality time. It may be gift giving or acts of service, and those are wonderful. But God loves all the languages of love and we ought not to neglect personal presence as we seek to grow in our relationship with the Lord. If you're like me, you're more of a Martha than a Mary and serving comes easy and spending quality time with Jesus does not. I will admit that I find it harder to spend extended times at the feet of Jesus. Even during devotions I'm always thinking of things that need to be done for Jesus - just like Martha. I need to listen to Christ's correction. So, for those of you who are Marthas like I am, I want to ask this question: "What kind of effort do you expend in seeking God's face?" It's a convicting question for me, but I think it is a question we need to ask.

The magi came to Christ despite inconvenience. Is traveling to church on Sunday too much effort to give for the Lord? What are your devotions like? Is waking up in time so that you can even have some devotions too much effort? In your relationship with God, your gifts and offerings that you put into the plate (as wonderful as those are - like the \$1000 that great, great, great grandpa Gee gave to his wife, they) are no substitute for being present. With King David let us long for the presence of the Lord.

## **II. Gift #2 - Their Worship**

The second thing these magi did was to worship. Verse 2 says that this was their long anticipated plan. "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him."

In verse 11, that was the very first thing that they did. It says that they "fell down and worshiped Him."

Worship came before presents or any other formalities. Their first and foremost desire was to give God the glory He deserves. And that continues to be a precious gift in God's sight. You may not have a lot that you can give to the Lord, but we can all give these first two things: spending quality time with God and worshiping God. When God sees whole-hearted, sincere worship, it is a pleasing and fragrant aroma to Him. But when we make pretense at worship like Herod did in verse 8, it turns the Lord off. I hope your first and foremost reason for being in church this morning is not that the session expects it, or others expect it, but that you really want to give of yourself to the Lord. It is a precious gift.

### **III. Gifts #3-5 - Gold, Frankincense And Myrrh**

#### ***A. Their value - gifts fit for a king***

But let's look next at the three gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Why were they given? I know as a child I puzzled over the frankincense and myrrh. I knew that the gift of gold would have been pretty cool, but frankincense and myrrh? What's with that? Did these wise men do like some dads and shop last minute, and that's all that was left in the stores? I doubt it. I believe there were reasons for those gifts. If you read in the commentaries you will see various suggestions.

Some have suggested that those three items were given simply because they were very expensive gifts, and therefore fit for a king. And that would be true. I think it does factor into the explanation. These are indeed royal gifts. Frankincense and Myrrh were extremely expensive back in those days and of course gold was the most precious metal at that time. So some commentaries believe that the wise men simply tried to figure out what were the most expensive gifts that would travel well, and they gave these. They were certainly gifts fit for a king. And the value would have helped Joseph and Mary support Jesus for quite some time - especially when they fled to Egypt. God was thinking of the needs of this family and providing financially for them. I think that aspect alone is cool.

#### ***B. Prophecies of these three gifts***

But I think there was a lot more to it than that. You see, the Old Testament prophecies that this Messiah King would receive precisely those three items. So from God's perspective there is at least the purpose of prophecy being

fulfilled. Let me give you a few of the Scriptures. And these are Scriptures that even the wise men probably knew about. This was the beginning of Psalm 72's fulfillment which said that the kings of all the nations would bring gifts, fall down before Him and serve Him. Isaiah 60 prophesied that these kings would come on camels bringing gold and frankincense. Psalm 45 speaks of this great King as being perfumed with Myrrh. Song of Solomon speaks of Him as coming out of the wilderness with gold, frankincense and myrrh. And so there is a deliberate fulfillment of prophecy that God has been orchestrating at this nativity scene. We can at least say that much as a minimum.

### ***C. The symbolic significance of these three gifts***

But we might go a step further and ask, "Why did God prophecy that Christ would receive gold, frankincense and myrrh? Was it simply to portray Him as a King?" It does indeed portray Him as a King, but is there more? I think there is. Now, what I am about to describe may not have been in the minds of the Magi. But God had firmly established those three items in the symbolism of the temple and the Old Testament rituals, and they beautifully display the strange character of this King; like no other king that had ever come.

#### **Gold**

What did gold symbolize throughout the Old Testament? If you study the symbolism of the temple, you will know that gold was a symbol of God's divinity. Jesus was not simply a king; He was the King of Kings and Lord of Lords because He was God manifest in the flesh. So the Old Testament Messianic kingship passages that connect Christ with gold are symbolic of His divinity. In fact, the temple furniture that represents Christ is made of wood (representing his humanity) completely clothed in gold (representing his divinity). Now, whether that symbolism was in the mind of the magi, I am not dogmatic; but I believe the symbolism of gold was crystal clear in at least some Old Testament foreshadowings of Christ. And the fact that these believers worship Jesus shows to me that they did indeed understand His deity. No Jewish believer would have ever worshiped a mere human. That would have been considered blasphemy. So their giving of the symbol of divinity may have been intentional when you see that it was accompanied by worship. They may indeed have been informed by the Old Testament symbolism.

## Frankincense

What about frankincense? Frankincense was also seen as a royal gift in four O.T. passages, so it is at least consistent with kingship. But everywhere else in the Old Testament (18 times) frankincense is tied to the temple work. In fact, my massive ten volume dictionary of Greek, which analyzes the usages of Greek terms probably more than any other dictionary, says this:

"Frankincense seemed to be such a characteristic element in the sacrificial system that the term could be used to represent the entire system ([as can be seen] in Isa. 43:23; Jer. 6:20)" etc.<sup>1</sup> That dictionary says that it is primarily a priestly symbol. So I would say that though it is four times used in connection with a king and is therefore consistent with kingship, frankincense symbolized Jesus as a priest - the priest-king after the order of Melchizedek. And it especially symbolized the priestly intercession of Christ since frankincense was offered up during the time of prayer on the altar of incense. Actually, it was also placed on the showbread when it was offered up to the Lord; it was placed on the grain offering; and it was used in the censor during worship and prayer time. In fact the word for prayer censor is simply a variation of the word frankincense. Frankincense is libanos and censor is libanotos. So this gift pointed to the fact that this King was a Priest King who would offer up intercession on behalf of Israel. In terms of long-established Old Testament symbolism, it was such an appropriate gift to give to Jesus.

## Myrrh

What about the myrrh? It is pronounced more (מר) in Hebrew and either mura (μύρρα) or smurna (σμύρνα) in Greek. Myrrh is perhaps the oddest of the three gifts. It was an extremely bitter compound. Even though it was an expensive perfume, (and that is no doubt at least one reason why the Magi gave it - because it was expensive), it was associated with suffering because it was frequently used as a narcotic to dull pain and was also invariably associated with death and after death it was used to embalm bodies.<sup>2</sup> In the Jewish mind, when you think of myrrh, you often think of death. You just never had a burial without myrrh. Even the form of the word suggests this. The Greek derivatives from the word myrrh are bitterness, grief, and gall. And that's why I say that it is kind of an odd gift.

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1 Andrew Bowling, "ל," Theological WordBook of the Old Testament, 1:468, #9248

2 TDNT says, "In antiquity myrrh was found among the Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans as a perfume, as incense, and as a medicine with many different uses. Acc. to Hdt., II, 86 it was employed by the Egyptians in embalming." Theological Dictionary of the New Testament," TDNT, paragraph 3. accord://read/TDNT\_Complete#29373

Why would anyone want to point to death at a baby shower? Just like you wouldn't give a funeral arrangement of flowers at a baby shower, you wouldn't tend to give myrrh. It could be too easily misinterpreted. But whether they knew this Christ would die on their behalf (something I suspect) or whether not, I believe we can at least say that God Himself guided them to give the gift to fill out the symbolism of salvation. Just as the other baby passages of Jesus prophetically point to His suffering, I believe this one does too. God was pointing to the bitterness, suffering and death of this baby King.

### **How the three symbols belong together**

These three gifts explain why Christ came into the world. He came to be the divine King who was promised to rule over the entire earth. He came as the Priest King who would intercede on our behalf. But before any of that could happen, He had to come as the sacrificial King; the suffering King; the King of tears and sorrows and bitterness of heart; the dying King. And to prove that this was God's intent in this gift, I want to look at the four other times that the gift of myrrh was given to Christ.

The second time Christ was given myrrh was in Luke 7:36-50 where the converted prostitute anointed Christ's feet with myrrh. And Christ in that passage recognizes her faith in His coming sacrifice and tells her, "Your sins are forgiven . . . Your faith has saved you. Go in peace."

A similar incident is explained by Jesus in Mark 14, and I'll have you turn to that passage. Some have thought these two incidents are the same incident. I don't think that is the case. Mark 14 actually happens much later in His ministry. In verses 1-2 the Pharisees plot as to how they can kill Christ. So already Mark's storyline gives a foreboding of Christ's imminent death. In verse 2 Mary pours a flask of very costly oil of spikenard (and the literal rendering is myrrh of nard) on His head, and in verse 4 some complain that this was a waste of fragrant myrrh. It was a special formulation of myrrh made liquid. Now look at what Jesus says in verses 8-9.

She has done what she could. She has come beforehand to anoint My body for burial. [Did you get that? This gift of myrrh and burial were associated in Christ's mind. He goes on] Assuredly I say to you, wherever this gospel is preached throughout the whole world, what this woman did will also be spoken of as a memorial to her."

He was saying that the gospel of His death was foreshadowed and pictured in the myrrh. It was a fragrant aroma; but that aroma was only brought about by the suffering, bitter agony, and the death of our savior. We should never lose sight of this fact at Christmas. Christ's birth should not be thought of



only in a sentimental way. It was the means of God to achieving His death on your behalf.

Turn next to Mark 15:23. This incident takes place while Christ is hanging on the cross as our sacrifice. It says, "Then they gave Him wine mingled with myrrh to drink, but He did not take it." As I mentioned earlier, myrrh was a narcotic to dull the suffering and take away some of the pain. But since Christ came into the world precisely to suffer on our behalf, He refused to take any escape. Rather than tasting the bitter narcotic to dull his pain, He was going to endure the bitter torment of God's wrath so that we would not have to.

The last passage is in John 19:39-40. After Christ's death Nicodemus came to prepare Christ's body for burial. It says,

And Nicodemus, who at first came to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about a hundred pounds. Then they took the body of Jesus, and bound it in strips of linen with the spices, as the custom of the Jews is to bury.

So that establishes that using myrrh and aloes was the normal custom of the Jews for burial. And by the way, the hundred pounds was an enormous amount of myrrh and aloes, but again, this was not an ordinary death. This was the death of the Suffering King. The rich brought myrrh to Jesus at His birth, and the rich brought myrrh to Jesus in His death.

And so in terms of the symbolism, I hope you can see that the three gifts mentioned in Matthew 2 cannot be separated. Without the suffering spoken of in the myrrh, there could be no basis for the intercession spoken of in the frankincense, and there could be no resurrection which would declare Him to be the Son of God come in power. Christ cross and His Kingship belong together. Unfortunately some theologies (Dispensationalism in particular) separate cross and kingdom by thousands of years. But Jesus is both Lord and Savior right now. The order is not Savior and Lord in the Bible, but Lord and Savior. Even in the order of these gifts it is Lord and Savior. He is King over all and He is Savior of His elect. But the two presuppose each other. The Kingdom is infallibly being established precisely because of Christ's sufferings and present intercession.

So this passage really does contain glorious symbolism. It not only symbolizes the offices and work of Christ, it symbolizes the appropriate response of our hearts. It should be our joy to give gifts to Jesus, who has given us His all. It should be our joy to worship Jesus, who has devoted Himself to us. And it should be our joy to continually put our faith in Jesus.

I want to end by reading for you the glorious future that these magi

introduced as recorded in Isaiah 60:

Arise, shine; for your light has come! And the glory of the LORD is risen upon you . . . The Gentiles shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising. . . . The multitude of camels shall cover your land, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come; they shall bring gold and frankincense, and they shall proclaim the praises of the LORD . . . Surely the coastlands shall wait for Me; and the ships of Tarshish will come first, to bring your sons from afar, their silver and their gold with them, to the name of the LORD God, and to the Holy One of Israel, because He has glorified you. . . . Therefore your gates shall be open continually; they shall not be shut day or night, that men may bring to you the wealth of the Gentiles, and their kings in procession.

The magi were merely the first stage of this glorious expansion of Christ's kingdom. Christmas means that the King has come and He will shortly do everything necessary to establish His kingdom. Let's be as excited as the magi were when they brought Him their best. Amen.