

## WHAT GIFT WILL YOU GIVE?

## MATTHEW 2:1-12

When pastor and author, Rick Warren, was three years old, he asked his mother, "Why do we have Christmas?" Mom patiently explained that Christmas is a celebration of Jesus' birthday. In a burst of preschooler inspiration, Warren concluded with a child's logic, "Well then, we should have a birthday party! We can have cake and Kool-Aid and sing happy birthday to Jesus!" My mom said, "Okay, we will!" Thus began a five-decade Warren family tradition: a Birthday Party for Jesus every Christmas Eve complete with angel food cake and candles that the youngest child (and now grandchild) gets to blow out. Four generations now participate in the sharing. Besides singing carols and reading the Christmas story from the Bible, each family member takes a turn sharing his or her answers to two personal questions: "What, from the past year, are you thankful to God for?" and, "Since it's Jesus' birthday, what gift will you give him this next year?" Rick Warren says those two simple questions have prompted some of the most profound and moving moments in their family's history.

I'd like to ask you that second question this Christmas Day, "Since it's His birthday, what gift will you give Jesus?" We don't often think in those terms, do we? We are far more apt to think about the incredible gifts that Jesus gives to us – life, health, family, money and all kinds of provision. Most of all we think of the gift of salvation and eternal life through His death and resurrection. Certainly we know and serve an incredibly generous God who gives us far more than we can ever understand and appreciate. Be that as it may, Jesus and you are in a relationship. And every relationship is a two way street. In every healthy relationship there's an ability both to give gifts and to receive gifts.

When I think of Christmas and gift giving, I'm reminded of the wonderful story of the magi who came to see the newborn baby, Jesus. As you recall, they brought gifts – very precious, important and significant gifts. Let's look at that story once again this Christmas Day. I want us to focus today on what gifts they brought and gave to Jesus and what those might suggest or signify to us. Who were these wise men or magi? They were known throughout the ancient world as men skilled in philosophy, medicine and the natural sciences. They also interpreted dreams. They believed in astrology – as everyone else did in pagan cultures of that day and time. Now the Bible makes it clear that Christians are to avoid astrology, but that isn't the point here. The magi represented the very best of pagan wisdom and religious perception at that time. These men were honestly seeking God the best way they knew how through the revelation of nature – the stars and their movements in the night sky.

Where did they come from? The best guess I've heard is the area around ancient Babylon in present day Iraq where the Jewish people had been exiled centuries earlier. That might explain the magi's knowledge of Jewish prophecies concerning a coming Messiah. And what was it that they saw in the night sky? Some believe it was a supernova or a comet that shone with unusual brilliance.

The most intriguing theory I've heard is that they saw a very rare, planetary conjunction of Jupiter, Saturn and Mars – a phenomenon that only happens about every 800 years. Scientists verify that such a conjunction was in fact visible back in 7 or 6 BC which coincides pretty well with all the historical information we have. But whoever these wise men were, wherever they were from and whatever they observed in the night sky, it's very clear that they knew someone important had been born that demanded their attention.

When they came, the wise men presented gifts to Jesus. What they gave is very instructive. Think with me about each gift this Christmas Day and what they might point to in your life and mine. The first gift that they gave to Jesus was gold. That might symbolize or signify ...

### **THE GIFT OF MY SUBMISSION**

Of the three gifts the wise men gave Jesus, gold is the most understandable. Gold was very precious back then and it's still very precious now. Gold has often been thought of as a gift that's appropriate to give to someone who's a king. I don't know how many of us Americans can really fully understand or appreciate the concept of kingship as it existed back in Jesus' day and time. We're so used to electing our leaders and having them serve limited terms of office. The idea of anyone having absolute power over every facet of your life for decade after decade is hard to imagine. Imagine someone whose authority you could never question. Imagine someone who made up his own laws just as he pleased and was himself above any set of laws. When the wise men gave gold as a gift to Jesus that was the kind of person they were envisioning He would become.

The Bible certainly refers to God as the King. "Who is the King of glory? The LORD, strong and mighty; the LORD, invincible in battle.... Who is the King of glory? The LORD of Heaven's Armies— he is the King of glory." (Ps 24: 8, 10 NLT) The Bible also calls Jesus a king. "Jesus found a young donkey and rode on it, fulfilling the prophecy that said: 'Don't be afraid, people of Jerusalem. Look, your King is coming, riding on a donkey's colt.'" (John 12: 14-15 NLT)

But if Jesus is a king – and He certainly is – than the only appropriate gift you and I can give Him is your total, absolute submission at all times and in every way. That's what you offer a king! Submission, allegiance, loyalty, unquestioning obedience. You don't negotiate with Him. He doesn't have to compromise with you or indulge you. He doesn't exist to serve you. You exist to serve Him. Of course, in submitting to Jesus we serve someone who is kind, gentle, gracious and loving beyond our wildest imagination. And yet, make no mistake about it; we are called to submit to Him nonetheless. Jesus Himself said, "You are my friends if you do what I command." (John 15:14 NLT) Offering God the gift of your submission looks differently at different times in your journey through life. The exact nature or character of what you submit to God changes, but not the call to submit or the gift of submission. Where is Jesus

calling you to submit to Him in 2012? Give the gift of your submission to Jesus this year. Now, the second gift the wise men gave to Jesus was frankincense. That might signify or symbolize ...

### **THE GIFT OF MY WORSHIP**

Frankincense is a sweet smelling gum resin derived from certain trees which, at the time of Christ, grew in Arabia, India, and Ethiopia. The frankincense trade was at its height during the days of the Roman Empire. At that time this resin was considered as valuable as gems or precious metals. The Romans burned frankincense on their altars and at cremations. The Jewish people also used frankincense as an ingredient in the sacred incense and holy anointing oil in the worship of God. Frankincense was strongly associated with worship. In giving baby Jesus frankincense, the magi definitely realized they were giving a gift to someone who in some way would be identified with the worship of God. Perhaps they thought of Jesus as someone who would be a priest – as someone who represented people before God. And, of course, Jesus is the great High Priest who through the sacrifice of Himself at the cross paid the penalty for our sins so that we might receive the gift of eternal life from His Father.

But there's another truth here. Frankincense was burnt with almost every sacrifice offered at the Temple in Jerusalem. When burned it produced a white smoke which symbolized the prayers of God's people ascending up to Heaven. That's the symbolism we find in the book of Revelation. "Another angel, who had a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense to offer, with the prayers of all God's people, on the golden altar in front of the throne. The smoke of the incense, together with the prayers of God's people, went up before God from the angel's hand." (Rev 8:3-4 NIV) You only ever pray to someone who you consider to be God. Prayer is an act of worship. I don't know if the magi realized Jesus was God Himself in a human body, but they gave a most appropriate gift nonetheless. You and I know Jesus is God and so you can offer to Him every day in 2012 the gift of worship – through your prayers, your songs of praise and your submission to Him as the King of kings. Give the gift of your worship to Jesus this year. The last gift we read about that the magi gave to Jesus was myrrh. That might signify or symbolize ...

### **THE GIFT OF MY LOVE**

Myrrh is an aromatic gum resin which oozes from gashes cut in the bark of a small desert tree known as the dindin tree. When people harvest myrrh, they wound the trees repeatedly to bleed them of the gum. The myrrh coagulates quickly and hardens into tear-dropped shaped chunks and is then powdered or made into ointments or perfumes. Myrrh was an extremely valuable commodity during biblical times and was imported from India and Arabia. Myrrh had medicinal uses. You might recall as Jesus hung on the cross dying He was offered wine mixed with myrrh which He refused. Myrrh was also used to

embalm dead bodies back in Jesus' day and time. It, along with other spices, was used to wrap up the body of Jesus after it was taken down from the cross. So, myrrh became identified with suffering and with death. You might say that in giving Jesus myrrh, the wise men realized in some way that suffering and death were going to be a major part of His life, His story and His impact.

But another story gives us, I believe, a glimpse into what kind of gift this myrrh might signify or symbolize. Do you remember the story in Luke 7 of a woman with a bad reputation who washed Jesus' feet with her tears and then broke open a jar of expensive perfume and poured it all over His feet? It may have been an oil or a perfume made from myrrh. Jesus' host, a man named Simon, was scandalized that Jesus would allow such a woman to touch Him. Jesus went on to suggest that this woman was an example of what it means to love Him extravagantly. Let me ask you this question. Do you love Jesus extravagantly? Or is your love for Jesus limited? How did that woman love Jesus? No holds barred. No limitations. No reservations. Nothing held back. Does loving Jesus cost you anything like it cost that woman? Will it be extravagant, expensive love? Will it cost you anything? Give Jesus the gift of your love in 2012.

One of the things Bryan Chapell's father taught all his sons was how to use a crosscut saw. One brisk fall morning, Bryan and his dad began sawing on a log that they didn't know had a rotten core. When they'd just sawed partially through the log, it split and fell off the sawing frame. The timber hit the ground so hard that a large piece was sheared off the rotten log. In Bryan's childhood imagination the unusual shape of that piece of wood looked like a horse head. It so captured his interest that he took it home with him after that day of sawing.

For Bryan's father's next birthday, Bryan attached a length of two-by-four board to that log head, attached a rope tail, and stuck on some sticks to act as legs. Then he halfway hammered in a dozen or so nails down the two-by-four, put a bow on it, and presented it to his father. When he took off the wrapping, he smiled and said, "Thank you, it's wonderful... what is it?" "It's a tie rack, Dad." Bryan said. "See, you can put ties on those nails going down the side of the horse's body." Bryan's father smiled again and thanked his son. Then he leaned the horse against his closet wall because the stick legs could not keep it standing upright. For years he used it as a tie rack.

Now when Bryan first gave his father that rotten-log-horse tie rack, he really thought it was a work of art ready for a museum. But as he got older, he realized that his tie rack was not nearly as good as he had once thought. In fact, he understood ultimately that his father had received and used Bryan's gift not because of its goodness but out of *his* goodness. Remember that as you think about what gift you will give to Jesus on His birthday. He receives your gifts, not so much because they're so great, worthy and somehow deserving of His love, but because He is great, He is worthy and because He Himself is love.