

God's gift list at Christmas

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The idea of giving gifts at Christmas started with God. It started when "God so loved the world that he gave his only Son" (John 3:16). In 2 Cor. 9:15 it says, "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!" This gift was in the form of a person, a baby who would grow up as the Lord Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world.

From my childhood I recall my grandpa, Reuben Myer, a minister in the Middle Creek Church of the Brethren, coming around at Christmas time and giving us an orange and a small box of chocolate candy. I remember this not as a high-cost gift, but as a memory that had special meaning. Do we understand the meaning behind the first Christmas gift?

The scriptures record the coming of the wise men from the East some time after Jesus was born. In Matt. 2:11, their visit is described: "On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure chests, they offered Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh." God's star had guided them to the child. There was also some divinely appointed meaning behind the selection of the gifts.

Gold—A tribute to a King

They did not give a toy for a baby, but a treasure for a King. Actually, when the wise men came, Jesus was no longer a baby in a manger. He was a young child in a house.

The wise men had asked early on, "Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews?" (Matt. 2:2). Gold is considered a precious metal. In the Bible it is first mentioned in Gen. 2:11, and the last reference is in Rev. 21:21. It is precious because it is scarce. Remember how people flocked to California in 1849 during the Gold Rush. Ancient Egyptians knew how to hammer gold into such thin leaves that it took 367,000 leaves to make a pile 1 inch high.

The first gift at Christmas was not a leftover item but a very valuable possession. This gift was an early indication that Jesus was destined to be a King.

Frankincense—The worship of God

This was one of the primary spices in the burning of incense (Exod. 30:34). It was not for ordinary or private use. The rising odor from the incense was a symbol of the human spirit that rises in worship and adoration of God.

The wise men may not have had a good body odor after traveling a few hundred miles across the Syrian desert sand from Babylon, but their spirits were sweet with devotion. One can sense the character of their worship. It included devotion, believing faith, self-sacrifice, intelligence, and obedience. Let us be sure that we give the gift of worship in our celebration of Christmas.

Myrrh—Faith in a suffering Savior

Myrrh was a spice used to anoint the dead. On the cross it was mingled with wine and offered to Jesus as an anesthetic (Mark 15:23). Jesus was offered myrrh at both ends of his earthly life. It shows that the purpose of Christ was not completely fulfilled in his being a baby: He came to die.

The religion of Jesus Christ is not a pure celebration of joy. There is suffering, sorrow, pain, and death. Near the end of Jesus' earthly life, Mary of Bethany came to anoint him with very costly, sweet-smelling nard. Judas Iscariot objected, but Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial" (John 12:7).

What gifts do we bring to Jesus today? Would we feel comfortable traveling with the wise men and sharing their gifts? Might we have suggested that we exchange names and give the gifts to ourselves? By giving a gift like gold we can declare, "King of my life, I crown thee now." By giving a gift like frankincense we can express, "Jesus, I worship you, I adore you, I love you." By giving a gift like myrrh we can testify that Christ has redeemed us by his death. These will be valuable gifts that have meaning long after the tinsel and wrappings have lost their glitter.

Our world does a multi-billion dollar commercialized version of Christmas celebrations every year. May we not lose sight of the first gift list at Christmas!

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