

MAN OF SORROWS - LOVE

It was the day after Christmas at a church in San Francisco. The pastor noticed that the nativity scene outside the church was missing the baby Jesus from the figures. Immediately, he went to call the police. As he was picking up the phone, he looked out the window and noticed that little Jimmy from down the street had the figure of the baby Jesus in a little red wagon. He walked over to him and said, "Well, Jimmy, where did you get that baby Jesus?" Jimmy replied, "I got him from the church." "And why did you take him?" With a sheepish smile, Jimmy said, "Well, about a week before Christmas I prayed to Jesus. I told him if he would send me a red wagon for Christmas, I would give him a ride around the block in it."

Today we are concluding our series Christmas Through the Eyes of Isaiah. We have looked at Isaiah 7 which reminds us that Jesus is Emmanuel, God with us. We have looked at Isaiah 9 which reminds us that Jesus is the light of the world, He is our Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. Today we remember that the reason that Jesus was born was to die and give His life for ours. Jesus was born to suffer.

Isa 53:3 He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows, and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. 4 Surely he took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows, yet we considered him stricken by God, smitten by him, and afflicted. 5 But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. 6 We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all.

Jesus came to the earth to reveal God to us. He lived and did many miracles, but that is not why he came. Jesus came to die for us, he came to give His life as a sacrifice so that we could live. We see this truth from the very beginning of His life.

Matt 2:7 Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. 8 He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." 9 After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. 10 When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. 11 On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. 12 And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

We do not know much about these Magi who came from the East. In the second century, an early church father named Tertullian suggested that the Magi were kings because the Old Testament had predicted that kings would come to worship him. He also concluded that there were three of them based on the number of gifts mentioned; gold, frankincense and myrrh. The manufacturers of nativity scenes caught on so in every nativity scene, you see the three kings or wise men. However, the Bible doesn't say they were kings or tell us how many of them came.

In the original language they are called the "magi" from an ancient Persian word, "magoi" which was used to describe people who acted in very strange ways. They were into astrology, spells and incantation and dressed in a very bizarre manner. The Latin word is "magi" from which we get words like "magician."

We don't really know who they were, where they came from or even how many of them there were. Why doesn't Matthew tell us any of this information? I'm not sure I know with certainty, but I'd suggest that all of this detail is left out of the picture in order that the full emphasis may be placed on the one thing that is central to this story, namely their statement, "we have come to worship." Jesus is the central character, not the Magi.

It's likely that these magi were descendants of the ten tribes of Israel that remained in Babylon after the time of Daniel and were then taken to Persia. Perhaps they were chosen as youth like Daniel to serve in the royal court. Many of the Jews did not return after the captivity but chose to remain behind and were assimilated into the culture and religious practices of the Persians. These magi may not have been very orthodox in their faith, but still, they were looking for the coming messiah. They took literally the statement from Numbers 24.17: "A star will come out of Jacob; a scepter will rise out of Israel." And so, they searched the skies for hundreds of years looking for a sign that the messiah had come. And when they saw the star, they rejoiced and came seeking the one who was born king of the Jews.

Christmas is often seen as a time for the giving gifts. People frantically try to find that perfect gift for that special person that will express their feelings and relationship. The gifts of the Magi were appropriate because they express the very essence of who Jesus Christ is.

1. The Gift of GOLD - obedience

This first gift recognized Jesus as being a King. The Magi knew that the star symbolized the birth of someone that was special – the King of the Jews. Gold carries obvious worth. Gold has always been seen as a symbol of great wealth and power. It is precious across all cultures and times. It is truly a gift fit for royalty.

This Christmas, what will you give Christ as your King? As people of the kingdom, our king deserves our allegiance. The kingdom of God comes into our hearts when our hearts come under the rule and reign of the Lord. There is nothing more precious to God than our obedience. As a Christian, God asks for and expects our obedience. We see examples of this all through the Bible.

1 Sam 15:22 But Samuel replied: "Does the LORD delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the LORD? To obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed is better than the fat of rams.

Obedience and faithfulness mean that God calls the shots in our lives. It means that our lives are totally controlled by him.

A wife who is 85% faithful to her husband is not faithful at all. There is no such thing as part-time loyalty to Jesus Christ. - Vance Havner

Obedience means more than just pretending to be good or looking good. I heard the story of a mom who went to visit her son for dinner. He found out that he was living in a two-bedroom apartment, and that his roommate was a girl. During the course of the meal, his mother couldn't help but notice how pretty his roommate was. Over the course of the evening, while watching the two interact, she started to wonder if there was more between him and his roommate than met the eye. Reading his mom's thoughts, his son said, "I know what you must be thinking, but I assure you, we are just roommates."

About a week after the visit, his roommate came to him saying, "Ever since your mother came to dinner, I have not been able to find the silver plate. You don't suppose she took it, do you?" He said, "Well, I doubt it, but I'll email her, just to be sure." He wrote: Dear Mother: I'm not saying that you 'did' take the silver plate from my house, I'm not saying that you 'did not' take the silver plate, but the fact remains that it has been missing ever since you were here for dinner. Love, Your Son.

Several days later, he received an email from his mother which read: Dear Son: I'm not saying that you 'do' sleep with your roommate, and I'm not saying that you 'do not' sleep with her. But the fact remains that if she were sleeping in her OWN bed, she would have found the silver plate under her pillow by now. Love, Mom

This Christmas I encourage you to offer Jesus the gift of obedience. Is there an area of your life where you know you are being disobedient to Christ? Maybe it is something that you are doing that needs to stop. Maybe it is something that you are not doing that you should. The gift of obedience.

2. The Gift of FRANKINCENSE – worship

Frankincense was used as incense. When we lived in Kuwait and you walked through the malls you could smell it everywhere. It was used to make up a special blend of incense that was used in the temple – and only in the temple.

Ex 30:34 Then the LORD said to Moses, "Take fragrant spices -- gum resin, onycha and galbanum -- and pure frankincense, all in equal amounts, 35 and make a fragrant blend of incense, the work of a perfumer. It is to be salted and pure and sacred. 36 Grind some of it to powder and place it in front of the Testimony in the Tent of Meeting, where I will meet with you. It shall be most holy to you. 37 Do not make any incense with this formula for yourselves; consider it holy to the LORD. 38 Whoever makes any like it to enjoy its fragrance must be cut off from his people."

Incense represents the prayers and worship of God's people. The altar of incense was just outside the Holy of Holies, the place where the glory of God was thought to dwell. There are several places where we see incense associated with worship:

Psalm 141:2 May my prayer be set before you like incense; may the lifting up of my hands be like the evening sacrifice.

Rev 5:8 Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

Because of this, incense was only to be offered in the temple. The worship of any other thing than God is wrong.

2 Chr 34:25 Because they have forsaken me and burned incense to other gods and provoked me to anger by all that their hands have made

Frankincense represents the gift of worship that we offer God. There is power in worship. Orel Herschiser pitched an unbelievable 1988 season for the Los Angeles Dodgers. During the playoffs the TV cameras zoomed in and caught Orel in the dugout between innings singing softly to himself. Unable to make out the tune, the announcers merely commented that Orel's record certainly gave him something to sing about.

Johnny Carson replayed that tape on the Tonight Show a few days later when Orel appeared. Johnny asked him what song he had been singing during the game and if Orel would sing it again right then and there. The audience roared its approval over Orel's embarrassed reluctance. So, on national TV, Orel softly sang the tune TV crews had barely caught on tape: "Praise God from whom all blessings flow. Praise Him all creatures here below; Praise Him above ye heavenly host, Praise Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Amen." It was such a powerful moment that it would be used again for Carson's final episode as one of the key highlights to the show's 30-year history.

This Christmas I encourage you to offer Jesus the gift of worship. Take time to simply worship Him for who He is. The gift of obedience and the gift of worship.

3. The Gift of MYRRH – thanks

Myrrh was another expensive item at the time of Jesus. It was used as a perfume and is mentioned several times in the Song of Solomon. This is probably the perfume that Mary poured on the feet of Jesus looking forward to His death. Because it had a pleasing smell it was often used to prepare dead bodies to take away the odor of death.

John 19:39 He was accompanied by Nicodemus, the man who earlier had visited Jesus at night. Nicodemus brought a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about seventy-five pounds. 40 Taking Jesus' body, the two of them wrapped it, with the spices, in strips of linen. This was in accordance with Jewish burial customs.

The gift of Myrrh represented the death that Jesus was going to die for each one of us. Even at His birth his reason for coming to earth was clear – to give His life for us.

Hundreds of years before Jesus, Isaiah must have wondered at the words, "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed. We all, like sheep, have gone astray, each of us has turned to his own way; and the LORD has laid on him the iniquity of us all."

Like Mary who poured the perfume on Jesus' feet, I see the gift of Myrrh as the gift of thanks. It is a recognition of what Jesus has done for us and our response to His sacrifice. God demands our obedience. He deserves our worship. But He desires our thankful hearts. Often, we simply take for granted what God has done for us. We forget the meaning of His sacrifice.

This past Dec 9 marked the 60th anniversary of *A Charlie Brown Christmas*. Maybe some of you missed on detail. In that climactic scene when Linus shares "that's what Christmas is all about," he drops his security blanket. The act is intentional. Most telling is the specific moment he drops it: when he utters the words, "fear not" Looking at it now, it is pretty clear what Charles Schultz was saying, and it's so simple it's brilliant. The birth of Jesus separates us from our fears. The birth of Jesus frees us from the habits that we are unable (or unwilling) to break ourselves. The birth of Jesus allows us to simply drop the false security we have been grasping at so tightly, and learn to trust and cling to Him instead. In the midst of fear and insecurity, this simple cartoon image from 1965 continues to live on as an inspiration for us to seek true peace and true security in the one place it has always been and can always still be found.

I know that a number of you have been busy in the past few months buying gifts for friends and children.

Imagine on Christmas morning your kids opening their presents and just complaining about everything you bought them. All the time and money you put into those presents was not appreciated at all. Imagine if no one said “thank you”. We are like that sometimes with Jesus. We forget to take the time and thank Him for His sacrifice for us.

A thankful heart can change your whole perspective. Everything in life is different when it is received with thanks. What gift of thanksgiving can you offer Jesus this year? Again, God demands our obedience, deserves our worship but desires our thanks. The greatest gifts you can give your savior are the gifts of obedience, worship and thanks.

Isaiah prophesied that a virgin would give birth to a child and that he would be God with us. He prophesied that a light would come and that light would be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. He also prophesied that a suffering servant would come, and that by His wounds, we would be healed. This is Christmas through the eyes of Isaiah. We understand how these words spoken centuries before were fulfilled in the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross.

This Christmas remember to take time to thank Jesus for what He has done. Jesus laid aside his majesty and was born in a manger so that He could die on a cross for us. Jesus was despised, rejected, a man of sorrows, familiar with suffering. He was despised. He took up our infirmities and carried our sorrows. He was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; punished in our place. Jesus took the iniquity of us all and died for us so that we could live.