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“In the Fullness of Time”

Jerry Arnold

“Father in Heaven, as we have come to the time of worship where we are going to open Your Word, we are asking in a very, very special way that You would be the One who does the teaching. We pray that You would now flood the auditorium with angels, that You would create an environment of heaven, that You will move into our minds and hearts through Your Holy Spirit, and that You would be the One teaching us from Your word. We are asking Heavenly Father that Your presence will be so marked, so mighty and miraculous that hearts will be changed for eternity. We ask Lord and we pray this in Jesus name, Amen.”

This is the 26th year I’ve been a Pastor preaching a Christmas sermon. You know there is not much written in the Bible about Christmas. And I’ve ran out of angles, or so I thought. In fact, I was thinking, the only angle left is to preach it from the donkey’s perspective. But I couldn’t really come up with enough to do that with. But as I was studying this week, it dawned on me. I did a little research and I found something I am excited about. I believe you will be too. And that is about gifts. Gifts! I like receiving gifts, and sometimes I like giving gifts. It’s not my love language to give gifts; it’s more of my love language to receive them. So Christmas has always been a special time for me. I like; I like giving gifts.

But how did the tradition of Christmas and gift giving get together? We would like to be noble in our thinking, noble in our hearts to say, “Well, the wise men brought gifts to baby Jesus and so that’s why we give gifts to one another.” Well, it’s not really, exactly how Christmas and gift giving came together. The giving of gifts around Christmas predated the birth of Jesus. The Romans had a festival called “Saturnalia.” It was a festival honoring their god Saturn. In their mythology Saturn was the god who was the ruler of agriculture. And they honored him every September 17- September 24, and they did it by Saturnalia. It was a festive time period, and they would give gifts to one another. The reason they did that is that in their mythology, Saturn was – well, he came upon some hard times. His son dethroned him, and so he was looking for a place to reign and he went to Italy. And during his reign in Italy, it was a time of perfect peace, of wonderful prosperity, and of total happiness. They called it the time of – well, they called it “The Golden Age.”

And so as Romans were growing up, they were taught about the “Golden Age,” when Saturn ruled Italy. And they would celebrate that. And December 17th- 24th was a time of good will, good food, it was a time to visit; it was a time of gift giving. In fact, they even had a program where the slaves were set free for one week. They had to come back, but they were free for one week. And they even had a custom where slaves could sit at the master’s table and the master would serve the slave. So Saturnalia was a pretty popular festival.

After the days of Christ, some who were Roman, who became Christian, continued the custom. And so for one week, December 17 – December 24 they would give gifts to one another, but that would end in the 4th century. In the 4th century, the church designated December 25 as the day to remember the birth of Jesus. Now note how I said that. It is the date to remember the birth of Jesus. He was not actually born on that day, and some people have a big hang-up about that. But I am sure you don’t have a big hang-up about the 4th of July. I mean it’s very rare that we celebrate the 4th of July on the 4th July. It’s when it conveniently fits that extended weekend. And

December 25 is the same way; it's the day set aside to remember the birth of Jesus. And, when that happened, Saturnalia died out, and so did gift giving. No gift giving associated with December 25, not yet. But there was one Roman tradition that continued, and that was gift exchanges on the first day of the year. That continued all the way until the reign of Queen Victoria in 1837.

Some of you have looked on your calendar and you see December 26 it says, "Boxer Day." Well, I've seen that for years and I thought, "Man, who was it you know, that was such a good boxer that he got a day named after him?" Or, "What country likes boxing so much that they have a special day set aside to honor boxing?" Well, "Boxing Day," was a day in England set aside on the 26th where you put your presents in a box and prepare them to give to somebody on the first day of the year on January 1. And it's still celebrated by the Scots, not too many other people worry about it.

Now what about gift giving at Christmas, how did that come all together? There was a bishop of Myra. Now Myra was in the region where Turkey is today. It was called Asia Minor years ago. And in the 4th century this bishop, named Nicholas, who later would become a saint, known as Saint Nicholas. The legend about him is that he gave gifts to poor children throughout his area. Now he would die on December the 6th. And in honor of Nicholas, there was a day, December 6th, called St. Nicholas Day. And on that day presents were given to children. That custom continued all through the Middle Ages. So, one of the happiest days and the most exciting days of the year to thousands of Christian children in Eastern and Central Europe, was St Nicholas day on December the 6th.

Well, we go on. Christmas took a sad turn during the Middle Ages. European rulers recognized the story in the Bible of the wise men coming with the gifts. The wise men came and gave gifts to the ruler. "Aha," they thought, "...that's what Christmas is all about, gifts to the rulers! We are the rulers, we deserve the gifts." And so they basically taxed the poor people. They made it a law that they had to give a gift to the ruling people of their country. And that even got worse because appointed government officials also declared they needed a gift too. So you were paying everybody. And so December 25 became a dreaded holiday to the poor people of Europe; they hated it. You have to give, give, give!

That would change in the 10th century. There was a bohemian duke who became king. His name was, Wenceslaus. I think that's how you say it? And he refused gifts, he refused tribute, and in fact, he took on the role of wise man. And during the month of December every year, he would go out and he would give firewood, food and clothing to poor people. On December 25, 1067, William the Conqueror reversed the previous practice by doing this. He gave the large sum of money to the church. His act broke the law, broke the tradition, and initiated the great change. And so Christmas begin to evolve.

When you come to Martin Luther's era, the Germans embraced the story of Saint Nicholas and King Wenceslaus, they liked the idea, and so they begin giving gifts on Christmas. But their tradition was, to do it anonymously. And there is some wonder associated with an anonymous gift. If one of you got a gift today and it says, "From someone who cares for you in the congregation," you'd look around, and all of a sudden everybody will start looking better.

And so the Germans, they had this tradition, they would give gifts on Christmas Day in honor of Saint Nicholas and King Wenceslaus. The Dutch, not to be outdone, came up with their own practice. They are the first ones who actually wrapped gifts in wrapping. And what they would do is that they would hide their gifts and leave notes, little hints. So you'll go in one place and pick up another note, almost like a road rally, but it was a gift rally, trying to find your gift. And that was a practice of the Dutch.

The Danes came along. Excuse me I said it wrong. The Dutch hid their gifts; the Danes are the first ones to wrap their gifts. But they did it in a unique way. They would buy small gifts and they would wrap it in a box. They'll get a little larger box, and put that box in that box, wrap the bigger box and they would do that until there was a large box. And their custom was that they would put a name on the largest box. And if it was Karen, they would take it to Karen. When she would open it, there would be another box in it and it would be another name of somebody else. She would take it to them. When they open it, there would be another name of somebody else until it finally got to whom the present was supposed to go to. It would go through many hands. That was the custom of the Danes.

The sharing of gifts on Christmas Day did not spread in England at all. Now, there is couple of reasons why. Now you must understand that my grandfather on my mom's side, my mom's father was English. So I am talking about family here, and I am not being derogatory to the British nation. But here is the fact from history. The English did not celebrate Christmas by giving gifts because the truth is, the English celebrated holidays by getting rowdy and drunk. And they didn't give gifts at that time; it was an opportunity for irreverence.

You had that class, and then you had another group called the Puritans. And they came along, and their influence upon the holiday was that children should not receive presents on Christmas. They didn't care what was happening in all of the rest of Europe. God was the one who got a gift on that day, and so if they want to give gifts, give it to God. There should be no celebration at all; it should be a day of solemn reflection. Maybe some of you are like the Puritans, I don't know.

America would change forever in the 1820's. A man named Clement, Clark Moore wrote a poem. "It was a night before Christmas, and all through the house, I could hear the snoring of my spouse." Actually it doesn't go quite like that. But that poem, believe it or not, changed America. Magazines, newspapers and books included that poem in their printing. And as people read about it, the idea of gifts arriving on Christmas Eve and being opened on Christmas Day became so much a part of America that by the 1860's, 40 years later, America became the center of Christian gift giving. Some people say that this whole thing is nothing but rank-commercialism. Now possibly! But it's also a wonderful time to teach people about God. It's a wonderful time to share with other people. In fact, one of the lessons of Christmas is that Christ came to give. He came to give gifts.

Today, in our study from the word of God, we are going to see that the gifts that the wise men brought are actually gifts that teach the plan of redemption. Let's turn in our Bibles to Matthew chapter 2. The wise men came to Jerusalem, they inquired, "Where is He who was born, king of the Jews?" The whole city was in a stir. They were brought before Herod. We'll pick up the story in verse 8. It says, chapter 2 verse 8, "And he..." that's Herod, "...sent them to Bethlehem and

said, 'Go and search carefully for the young Child, and when you have found Him, bring back word to me, that I may come and worship Him also.' When they heard the king, they departed; and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy. And when they had come into the house, they saw the young Child with Mary His mother, and fell down and worshiped Him. And when they had opened their treasures, they presented gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh."

Most of you are quite familiar with the story and you recognize that contrary to the popular manger scenes, the wise men were not there at the birth of Jesus. They'll come along about 2 years later. Jesus is young boy, up and running and tearing around and having a good time on his good, strong legs. He probably knows how to say a few words by then, and he is the delight of Joseph and Mary. The wise men show up and they have gifts for this baby boy: gold, frankincense and myrrh.

Now in the days of Jesus gold was of great value. It is today as well. In fact, if you don't like your gold, you are welcome to give it to me, I'll be happy to take it off your hands; I'd be delighted to. Gold was a gift reserved for people who were to be honored. Apparently the wise men recognized Jesus was One to honor. Gold has an amazing history in the scriptures. I'd like for you to turn to the first place that's mentioned in the Word of God, Genesis chapter 2. Genesis chapter 2 and we'll begin with verse 8. "The Lord God planted a garden eastward in Eden, and there He put the man whom He had formed. And out of the ground the Lord God made every tree grow that is pleasant to the sight and good for food. The tree of life was also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

What is taking place here? It's creation, creation! We read on, "Now a river went out of Eden to water the garden, and from there it parted and became four riverheads. The name of the first is Pishon; it is the one which skirts thee whole land of Havilah, where there is gold." Gold! When was gold created? Creation day! You know, you would think that they'd be able to figure out the chemistry that creates gold, but they can't. They've tried and tried and tried, 'cause if they could figure that out, you could create gold. Gold was created by God; gold was placed here by God during creation week. It goes on to say in verse 12, "And the gold of that land is good." The gold of that land is good! So the gold that is here was created by God then. It was part of the home of Adam and Eve.

Now look at Revelation chapter 21. Gold will be mentioned again in the Bible, in fact, this is the last reference to gold. In Revelation 21 verse 18 it's talking about a city called New Jerusalem. Rev. 21 verse 18 describing the construction it says, "...and the construction of its wall was of jasper; and the city was pure gold..." The city was pure gold! Now that's amazing, I've heard for years that the streets are gold. "I am going to walk those golden streets when I die..." right? We sing songs about it, all kinds of ideas around, but the city was gold! And you look at verse 21 it says, "The twelve gates were twelve pearls; each individual gate was of one pearl. And the street of the city was pure gold, like transparent glass." Here we find in the Scriptures that the home God created for us originally had gold. And the home God is creating for us now has gold.

When the wise men came and presented gold to Jesus it's very, very unlikely that they understood connection scripturally. They are being prompted by the Spirit of God to honor One with what they could. They brought gold. But the lesson to us is the lesson that that gold is reflective of the Creator of the heavens and the earth. And the Creator of the heavens and the earth who made us a home, and is making us another home is honored in the gift of the gold. But here is how it gets interesting: Not only does the gift of the wise men give us an education into the life experience of the plan of salvation, but it tells us the very gifts that God would return to us. God, my brothers and sisters, is providing a home for you. He is giving a gift of a home for you.

The next gift was frankincense. Now if you were a two year old boy and you were strong and vibrant and clear minded, frankincense? I mean it's like getting an old spice for your birthday of something you know? What kind of gift is that? Now frankincense is an incense and it comes from inside of a frankincense tree. It comes right from the heart. There is a pulp that is used to create the frankincense. It's a beautiful aromatic fragrant that comes. It is mentioned first time in the Bible in Exodus chapter 30. Let's turn there. Exodus chapter 30 mentions frankincense. In Exodus 30 verse 34 the Lord will be speaking. "And the Lord said to Moses: 'Take sweet spices, stacte and onycha and galbanum, and pure frankincense with these sweet spices; there shall be equal amounts of each. You shall make of these an incense, a compound according to the art of the perfumer, salted, pure, and holy. And you shall beat some of it very fine, and put some of it before the Testimony in the tabernacle of meeting where I will meet with you. It shall be most holy to you. But as for the incense which you shall make, you shall not make any for yourselves, according to its composition. It shall be to you holy for the Lord. Whoever makes any like it, to sell it, he shall be cut off from his people.'"

This incense and this frankincense compound that was made from ingredients, ordained by God, was only to be used in the approach of God at the Tabernacle. Anybody who made it and used it privately was to be set apart from the people. It was a holy mixture. In fact, it was so beautiful in fragrance and so strong and powerful that during the major festivals like Passover, they would sacrifice approximately 250 thousand lambs on the Passover weekend, and associated with that they would have their incense and their frankincense. The sweet aroma created was so powerful in its smell; you could smell it 20 miles away from Jerusalem. Do you know what's amazing? They've lost the ingredients. Nobody on earth knows how to make that. That smell will never be smelled again on earth, unless Jesus comes along and creates it again for us. Pretty interesting, but this has application to us. Frankincense!

Look at Revelation chapter 8 where incense is mentioned again. Revelation chapter 8 beginning with verse 1, "When He opened the seventh seal, there was silence in heaven for about half an hour. And I saw the seven angels who stand before God and to them were given seven trumpets. Then another angel, having a golden censer, came and stood at the altar. He was given much incense that he should offer it with the prayers of all the saints upon the golden altar which was before the throne. And the smoke of the incense with the prayers of the saints, ascended before God from the angel's hand." Here you have worship again. Incense! Your prayers are met by angels with incense. That incense, sprinkled on your prayers and it goes up before God as a sweet smelling aroma to Him. You see, when those wise men came to Jesus, the gift of incense

was an acknowledgment that this was a child to be worshiped. Gold to honor the Creator, now incense to worship the Creator.

What about the gift to us? Anyone who enters into a prayer experience that is worshipful will connect with God. And when you connect with God, you are going to receive a gift. The gift that you are going to receive is the gift of hope. You see, wherever God is, there is hope. No matter how difficult your life is, no matter how hard your struggles are, no matter what challenges you are facing, when you get next to God, you will have hope because God is hope. It is part of His nature.

So thus far we see that the lesson from the wise men is that Jesus is giving us a gift of a home, and that Jesus is giving us a gift of hope. What about myrrh? Well myrrh was a beautiful fragrant; it was taken from the bark of a tree, from the outside of a tree. And it was used by perfumers and common people, and wealthy people could have it. It was not directly associated with worship. In fact, it was associated with sweet smell and unfortunately it was associated with death. In fact, you may have read in the Book of Proverbs where Solomon is describing a young man walking. "I saw him walking in the evening, and there she came. She was dressed to the nines you know, and she said, 'Hey, my husband is gone and he won't appear to the day appointed. I've been looking for you, I have made my bed and I have sprinkled it with mint, aloes and myrrh. Come; let us take our fill of love until morning.'" And Solomon, you can almost see him shaking his head, he said: "The young man goes like an ox to the slaughter not realizing that her way is the way of death."

Myrrh is associated with death in the Scriptures. Let me show you its first reference, first mention in Genesis 37. In Genesis 37 you have a very familiar story to you. Joseph went out to check on his brothers. His father asked him to check on his brothers and when he arrived, his brothers didn't like him, they threw him in the pit. They were going to kill him. But you come to Genesis 37 verse 25 it says: "And they..." those were the brothers, "...sat down to eat a meal. Then they lifted their eyes and looked, and there was a company of Ishmaelites, coming from Gilead with their camels, bearing spices, balm, and myrrh, on their way to carry them down to Egypt." They will sell Joseph to those traders for 20 peaces of a, is it 20 shekels? It's right there in the story, 20 shekels of silver. So they sell him. And where does Joseph end up going? Down to Egypt!

After the story of the wise men, Jesus' stepfather and mother will go down to Egypt as well, then they'll come back. But Egypt, as you are aware, had a whole culture developed around the concept of death. They are the ones who developed embalming. Part of the embalming process was myrrh. So here they are, selling their brother to people carrying myrrh down into Egypt. Myrrh is associated with death. Look at John chapter 19. John chapter 19, Jesus will die. In verse 38 we read this. Jesus has died, and in verse 38 we read: "After this, Joseph of Arimathea, being a disciple of Jesus, but secretly, for fear of the Jews, asked Pilate that he might take away the body of Jesus; and Pilate gave him permission. So he came and took the body of Jesus. 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."

Could those wise men had known that gold, frankincense and myrrh would tell salvation story? Myrrh associated with the death of Jesus Christ as He is giving us the gift of eternal life. Jesus would give His life; His life –death, and from death life to us. You see, God loves giving gifts. And the greatest gift He can give us is a home, is a hope, and heaven for eternity.

I don't know how you feel about gifts and giving gifts at Christmas? I hope your spoil you children and grandchildren. I hope you indulge them. Those are happy times for children. I hope you agree, don't you? That's right! And I hope, I hope you receive gifts. What a wonderful experience to receive a gift. Do you realize, Christmas- Christmas is a time to receive a gift from God. The gift is Jesus Christ. When you receive that gift, that precious gift from God, you have the promise of a home, the promise of hope, and the promise of heaven.

I have a question for you today. Would you like to receive a gift God has offered to you? If you want to receive Jesus, I am going to ask you to stand where you are. "Father in heaven, thank You that in You we know we'll have a home, that in You we know, we have hope, and in You we have heaven. We thank you for Jesus, and in His name we pray, Amen."