

Don't Forget the Reason We Give Christmas Presents

In spite of complaints about inflation and low wages, stores in the U.S. have been crowded this Christmas, and online retailers are racking up sales. Parents are scrambling to buy Moana dolls, Legos, a popular robotic monkey toy named Peanut and a four-wheel drive vehicle for kids that costs \$405. Meanwhile, the most popular gifts for adults include pocket translators, wireless phone chargers, portable spy cameras and \$99 Black Falcon drones.

And don't forget the sleeper gift hit of 2024—miniature chain saws. These are on sale for \$ at Home Depot!

The National Retail Federation says Americans spent \$967 billion on Christmas gifts, Christmas decor and holiday travel last year. That comes out to an average of \$902 per person. Financial observers say spending on gifts in 2024 will hit an all-time record.

But why do we give presents to each other at this time of year? The tradition goes back more than 2,000 years, when some foreign visitors brought unusual gifts to the infant Jesus in Bethlehem.

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These visitors were called “magi from the east” in Matthew's Gospel (Matt. 2:1). While the Jews were looking for a political savior, most of them had no idea God would send His Son in the form of a baby lying in a crude manger. Yet these magi, who traveled from what is now Iran, Iraq or Saudi Arabia, had tracked the appearance of a strange star. They believed it signaled the fulfillment of an ancient prophecy about the birth of a new king.

The magi were most likely priests or astronomers. We assume there were three of them, but the Bible doesn't say that—only that they carried three gifts. They had no idea they were fulfilling the words of Isaiah, who prophesied centuries earlier that visitors on camels would bring “gold and frankincense” to Israel to witness the glory of God (see Isa. 60:1-6).

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The magi brought gold, frankincense and myrrh to Jesus. What do these gifts mean to us?

– **Gold represents the kingship of Jesus.** Herod hated the idea of a new king, and he wanted to destroy Jesus because he craved the crown. But Jesus has been crowned King of all kings, and He will rule the nations forever.

– **Frankincense symbolizes the priesthood of Jesus.** Just as the priests in the tabernacle offered the incense of worship and prayer continually, Jesus lives to make intercession for us today. Now, because of Christ's sacrifice, we carry the fragrance of the presence of Jesus everywhere we go.

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– **Myrrh symbolizes the sacrifice of Jesus.** This aromatic resin was a key ingredient in the anointing oil used in the tabernacle. But pure myrrh was also used as an embalming fluid, and it was even more expensive than gold. Somehow the magi understood that this King and priest would give His life for the world. Even when Jesus was lying in a manger as a helpless baby, His cruel death on a cross was foretold.

The gifts of the magi also fulfilled a prophecy in Psalm

72:9-11 (NASB 1995): "Let the nomads of the desert bow before him, and his enemies lick the dust. ... the kings of Sheba and Seba offer gifts. And let all kings bow down before him, all nations serve him" (see also Matt. 2:9-11).

When the magi knelt and worshipped Jesus, they were inviting us to do the same. They traveled to Bethlehem from a distant land to show us that Christ came for the whole world, not just for an elite few. They pointed at Jesus and signaled to people from every continent: "This is your King, too."

What should be our response? Ancient Christians celebrated the birth of Jesus by giving gifts to remind each other of God's gift of salvation. That tradition somehow morphed into our current multi-billion dollar Christmas shopping spree. I don't think the original magi would understand our fascination with drones, chain saws, toys, gift cards and after-Christmas sales. We commercialized something that was holy.

Jesus is our King, our priest and our Savior. This is why we celebrate. Like the magi, we should fall to the ground. He is not only King of the Jews, but also King of the whole earth. He deserves our wholehearted worship. As you give and receive gifts this Christmas, take time to ponder the value of the ultimate gift.

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