

# Moments *for* You

Volume 64, Number 4

Theme: Gifts



## SEEKING AND BRINGING

*“There shall come a Star out of Jacob, and a Sceptre shall rise out of Israel” (Numbers 24:17).*

For a long time those who studied the constellations believed that a star would signal the birth of a mighty king in the land of Israel. The Magi were wise men who studied ancient texts and also studied the universe. They saw an unusual star and surmised that this must be the sign of the Messiah promised in the Jewish Scriptures. They took the word of God seriously and were among the first to celebrate Christmas. One cannot come to Jesus without coming to His word and believing it. Remember, “Faith cometh by hearing, and hearing by the word of God” (Romans 10:17).

### SEEKING AFTER GOD

The Lord says, “Ye shall seek Me, and find Me, when ye shall search for Me with all your heart” (Jeremiah 29:13). The wise men were devoted to finding the truth and doing whatever was necessary to verify it for their own hearts and minds. They traveled from an area around Persia (which includes modern-day Iraq, Afghanistan, and Iran) to make their way to the place where the star led them. It is estimated that a trip by camel caravan would have taken up to six months to complete. Despite the cost and dangers involved, their fervent hearts drove them to see for themselves what the Scriptures declared.

We have seen how the Magi sought Him, now let’s look at what they brought Him!

### THE GIFT OF GOLD

Gold was a gift given to a king. The Magi believed they had found

the King when they finally made their way to Jesus. The amount of gold they gave Him is not mentioned, but this act should remind us that now is a great time to align your spending with your faith. One preacher I knew made a commitment to give more money to missions every Christmas than he would spend for any one person’s gifts. That is a great policy—and a wonderful way to honor Jesus.

### THE GIFT OF FRANKINCENSE

Frankincense was a costly sweet-smelling incense. The Jewish people burned incense in the Temple as a sign of their prayers being sent up to God. The Magi gave Jesus a gift that revealed great respect and faith that He would be able to hear and answer man’s needs. Indeed, Jesus is our Advocate—seated now at the right hand of God. He intercedes for us when we pray. We should be praying for lost friends, for each other, and for missionaries around the world who are serving God in some very dangerous places. When you think of the frankincense, let it remind you to pray, and in the process let it remind you to praise and honor Him who hears and answers your prayers.

### THE GIFT OF MYRRH

Myrrh was a product used in burial. Strangely, the Magi brought this gift to Jesus. Whether they knew it or not, they were honoring the One who would die for the sins of the world. That baby in the manger at Bethlehem was more than a mere man. He was the One who would go to Calvary and pay for our sins. We cannot properly celebrate Christmas without remembering that Jesus came to die for you and for me. Christmas is a sweet and special time, but we must

not leave out the fact that this baby had the shadow of the cross stretched across His manger.

The Bible says that the Magi “fell down, and worshipped” Jesus. This is what we must learn and relearn as believers. Let us honor the One born in Bethlehem, the One who lived without sin, the One who died in our place, the One who rose from the dead, and the One who will never leave us nor forsake us. Never let us be silent about what God has done for us.

—J. Mike Minnix, adapted

## OVERWHELMED BY THE PRESENCE OF CHRIST

*“When Jesus was born ... there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem” (Matthew 2:1).*

There has been a great deal of confusion surrounding the visit of the wise men. What exactly are “wise men” anyway? The more accurate term is “Magi”—originally the name of a Persian priestly caste, but later this title was used widely for magicians and astrologers.

How many Magi were there? Traditionally, we think of three wise men, but this is not necessarily the case. Matthew does not tell us how many Magi there were—all we can be sure of is that there was more than one.

When did the Magi visit Jesus? You might think by watching a typical Sunday school Christmas performance that the Magi were right on the heels of the shepherds—arriving minutes after the actual birth—but this was not the case. Matthew says that when King Herod committed his massacre, he estimated that the “King of the Jews” was possibly as old as two years—and we read that he got this estimate from the Magi (Matthew 2:16).

These are the details surrounding the visit of the Magi, but there is much more for us to gain from this passage. We learn, more importantly, how we should respond to the presence of Christ.

### REJOICING

The response of the Magi begins with the star over Bethlehem. “When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceeding great joy” (Matthew 2:10). The star, which was the indicator of the presence of the Christ child, caused the Magi to “rejoice.” And notice the emphasis Matthew gives us here—he reports that they “rejoiced with exceeding great joy.” How often does that describe us when we are in the presence of Christ? We must keep in mind that as believers, we are always in the presence of Christ. This, perhaps, is why the Apostle Paul insists that we should “Rejoice in the Lord always” (Philippians 4:4).

This exhortation should not only challenge us, but it should also excite us—the Christian life is intended to be a joyful life. Yet as I say that, I realize that, for many people, Christmas is not a joyful time. It is during the Christmas season when we seem to most profoundly miss those people in our life who have passed on. It is during the Christmas season when we become more prone to anxiety and depression. It is during the Christmas season when we seem to worry most about finances. For these reasons, the Christmas season is not always a joy for every individual.

There is, however, a way to overcome the sadness and anxiety we experience this time of year. The way in which Christians are able to win back their joy is simply to rejoice in the presence of Christ. But in order to do this, we must first recognize that our difficulties begin when we focus

on our circumstances rather than on our status as a child of God who is loved by the Creator of the universe.

Remember that Mary and Joseph were not overjoyed with their circumstances, either. It is true, neither Mary or Joseph rejoiced at the news of Mary's pregnancy. Mary, as you know, was pregnant out of wedlock. "How shall this be?" she asked the angel (Luke 1:34). Joseph initially wanted to put Mary away quietly (Matthew 1:19). Mary was confused, Joseph wanted to break up—neither were happy with their circumstances.

But they began to have a change of heart. An angel convinced Joseph that he should not leave Mary, and Luke records Mary's new perspective on things: "My soul doth magnify the Lord, and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour" (Luke 1:46–47). The lesson to be learned here is clear—the Christmas season will be most joyful, life will be most joyful, when we take our attention off our circumstances and learn to "rejoice in the Lord."

### WORSHIPPING

The second response the Magi had to the presence of Christ was that they "worshipped Him" by giving Him "gifts." Now we must ask, "How often are we moved by the presence of Christ to worship Him by bringing Him gifts?"

How are we to do that? What kind of gifts can we bring Christ? The Apostle Paul tells us plainly, "I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service" (Romans 12:1). Gold, frankincense, and myrrh might have been acceptable to the child Jesus, but Paul tells us we must present our very selves to the resurrected Christ.

Some Christians think their only responsibility is to scribble a check or to give a few hours of service here and there for the church. This is not what it means to worship Christ. Paul describes a "living sacrifice"—every part of our life should be a form of worship to God. That means your marriage, your role as a parent, your job—all of these things are to be treated as contexts for worshipping God.

For many of us, we leave church on Sunday so full of joy after an hour of worship only to have the rest of the week bring us stress. Why does this happen? This happens because when we leave church we often cease to worship God. If we could only comprehend how to worship God Monday to Saturday, then we might be the joyful Christians we should be.

Jesus Christ wants *you*. Jesus was born for *you*. Jesus died for *you*. And now Christ invites *you* to worship Him daily. The choice is yours, but know this—the key to true joy is found in worshipping Jesus Christ.

—Bryn MacPhail, condensed

### GIFTS FOR GOD

In the book of Genesis, we find the story of Adam and Eve and their two sons, Cain and Abel. The Scriptures say that "Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock" (Genesis 4:3–4). The word "offering" means a present, a gift unto the Lord. The natural, first response of our first family, when blessed with a wonderful harvest or a growing flock, was to bring a present unto the Lord.

Now, that story is repeated all through the Bible. A natural response to God is to offer Him a gift. Mary of Bethany did that with our Savior when she broke the alabaster box and

anointed His head and His feet and the perfume filled the room (Mark 14:3; John 12:3).

Joseph of Arimathea did the same thing. He took the tomb that was new, hewn for himself and his family and gave it to the Lord Jesus (Matthew 27:57–60). He had no idea of the resurrection from the dead when he gave the tomb to our Lord. It was a gift from Joseph forever.

Nicodemus took one hundred pounds of spice in order that it might be enfolded in the winding sheet to help preserve Jesus' precious body from what he thought was inevitable decay and corruption. It was a gift, a lavish one, and an expensive one, from the hand of Nicodemus (John 19:39–40).

It is a normal response on our part, when we come into the presence of our God, to present to Him a gift. I would love to lay a gift at His blessed feet. Where is He? There is a sure and certain answer to that question in the word of God, for the Lord is always identified with His people. "As ye have done it unto one of the least of these My brethren, ye have done it unto Me" (Matthew 25:34–40). The heart of our Savior is still among the poor and the humble of the earth. God bless you as you minister to the needy in the name of Jesus.

It's a wonderful thing and a blessed thing to offer unto God an offering of what you possess—what you have. But it is a far more glorious thing to make an offering, a dedication, a gift, a present of yourself: "I am crucified with Christ: nevertheless I live; yet not I, but Christ liveth in me: and the life which I now live in the flesh I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me, and gave Himself for me" (Galatians 2:20).

—Dr. W. A. Criswell, condensed

## THE INDESCRIBABLE GIFT

*"Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift" (2 Corinthians 9:15).*

What can possibly make a gift indescribable? Since all human presents can be described, it is clear that the only thing that can make a gift indescribable is that it has to have something of God mixed with it.

### THE NATURE OF GOD'S GIFT

When Paul speaks of Jesus as God's "indescribable gift" it is evident that he is not merely toying with words or exaggerating. Why is the gift of God beyond description? There are several reasons, and the first is the nature of the gift itself. The gift is Christ. So in order to fully describe this gift, we must be able to fully describe who Jesus is and what He has done for our salvation. Think of the difficulties involved in unfolding just that first part: who Jesus is. Jesus described Himself as being one with God the Father, and the Scripture everywhere testifies to that fact. Even His name, Jesus, means "Jehovah saves." Immanuel means "God with us."

If Jesus is God, we cannot describe Him because God Himself is indescribable. Can we say what it means for God to be self-existent, having no origins and being beyond the full range of human discovery? Can we say what it means for Him to be self-sufficient, needing nobody? Can we understand what it means to be a spirit or to be "infinite, eternal, and unchangeable"? The nature and work of the Lord Jesus Christ are beyond our full understanding, and therefore also beyond our powers of description.

### THE GRACE OF GOD'S GIFT

The gift of God is also indescribable because of the grace by which it

is given. Most of our gifts have nothing to do with grace. We give because the recipients of our gifts have some claim upon us: they are members of our family, people who have helped us in some way, or individuals who gave to us last year. But the great gift of Christ is granted not to God's friends, but to His enemies, to those who in their sins have risen up against God and declared war against the Almighty. "While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us" (Romans 5:8).

#### THE EFFECTS OF GOD'S GIFT

The gift of God accomplishes all this and more in those who believe:

**First**, Jesus brings forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of God's grace. This means removal of sin so far as God is concerned. The Bible tells us that God hurls "all their sins into the depths of the sea" (Micah 7:19). It says, "I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions" (Isaiah 44:22). David wrote, "As far as the east is from the west, so far hath He removed our transgressions from us" (Psalm 103:12). The Bible says, "I will remember their sin no more" (Jeremiah 31:34; Hebrews 10:17).

**Second**, the believer in Christ is justified before the court of God's justice. Forgiveness is a negative thing; it forgets the past. Justification is positive; it brings a new standing before God that we did not have before and could never have achieved for ourselves. The Bible speaks of it as being clothed with the righteousness of Christ, as with a new suit of clothes.

**Third**, we are adopted into God's family. Before, we were "without Christ ... having no hope, and without God in the world" (Ephesians 2:12). But now we marvel at the "love the Father hath bestowed upon us, that we should be called the sons of God" (1 John 3:1).

**Fourth**, as God's children we are God's heirs. Paul writes, "If children, then heirs; heirs of God, and joint-heirs with Christ" (Romans 8:17). This means that we possess all things jointly with Christ. All things! That is clearly indescribable.

**Fifth**, we have the gift of the Holy Spirit who unites us to Christ forever. That makes our bodies temples of God, who dwells in us (1 Cor. 3:16).

**Sixth**, we have a divine peace that goes beyond circumstances. Paul calls it a peace "which passeth all understanding" (Philippians 4:7).

**Seventh**, we have a home in Heaven prepared for us by Christ. Just before His crucifixion, Jesus said to His disciples: "In My Father's house are many mansions: if it were not so, I would have told you. I go to prepare a place for you. And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come again, and receive you unto Myself" (John 14:2-3).

#### GIVING THANKS FOR THIS GIFT

Have you thanked God for His great gift of salvation? If that gift is as great as the Bible says it is and as wonderful as our hearts and minds acknowledge it to be, then we should literally cry out with Paul, "Thanks be unto God for His unspeakable gift!" Thanks be to God for Jesus!

And when we are crying out thanks, let us not forget that the best thanks are not in word alone. Thanks are expressed in deeds, too. What deeds? If you have never received the Lord Jesus Christ as your personal Savior, your first deed should be to receive Him and worship Him, as the shepherds, wise men, and others of the Christmas story did. That is, you should take the gift God gives you. Do not think of it in terms of your worthiness. You are not worthy and never will be worthy. Just take it.

You can also express your thanks by service. You have much, but there are others who have little. Reach out to them in Christ's name. Let God's gift be the pattern for your giving and His service be the pattern for your service.

Finally, we also have an obligation to speak to others. Notice that in the Christmas story nearly everyone spoke to others about God's gift. The wise men said, "We have seen His star in the east, and are come to worship Him" (Matthew 2:2). The shepherds "made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this Child" (Luke 2:17). Simeon "blessed God" (Luke 2:28). Anna "spoke of Him to all them that looked for redemption" (Luke 2:38).

—Condensed from *The Christ of Christmas* by James Montgomery Boice

## YOU CANNOT EARN A GIFT

*"By grace are ye saved through faith; and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of God" (Ephesians 2:8).*

Salvation is a gift you receive, not a paycheck you earn. Don't underestimate the significance of this biblical truth. If you get it wrong—and it is incredibly easy to get it wrong—you've missed Heaven.

I'm not overstating the case. If you lean on your own merits, your religious fervor, the sincerity of your motives, or the goodness of your overall behavior, you will remain in your sins, under the wrath of God. Friends, I am convinced that a great many people who go to church regularly are going to be shocked one day when they are driven from the presence of God forever.

In the opening verses of Ephesians 2, the Apostle Paul writes about the true condition of every human apart from Christ. Left to ourselves, we

are all sinners, enslaved to spiritual forces that are hell-bent to give us just enough of whatever it takes to get us to drift through this life without ever seriously considering our need of the Savior, who is Christ Jesus. The picture is a hopeless one. We are dead toward God, dominated by the devil, and destined for Hell. By nature and by choice, we are an offense to the God of the universe. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God" (Hebrews 10:31). That is why verses 4–9 contain such good news!

On His own initiative, God has acted on our behalf. We were objects of His wrath, but God, because of the great love with which He loved us, had mercy upon us. We were dead, but God made us alive together with Christ. We were slaves, powerless and punishable, but God has raised us up with Christ and seated us with Him in the heavenly places. All by Himself, God has taken action to reverse our condition in sin. In a word, God has done everything, everything necessary to save sinners.

Why? What impulse moved Him to have anything at all to do with us? The heart has trouble accepting such overtures on face value. Why did God come for me, for you? Paul takes pains in our passage to make it clear that God was not motivated by anything He saw in us. Instead, the compelling reasons are all found in God Himself. Paul uses several words to speak of the origins of God's saving movement toward us. We read of His *rich mercy*, His *great love*, and His *kindness toward us* in Christ Jesus. But the single most powerful word to describe why God did for us what He did, the word that explains why a dead sinner on his way to Hell can suddenly respond to the good news of the gospel is the word *grace*.

### SALVATION IS THE FREE GIFT OF GOD

That's the whole point of the word *grace*. Grace is the unmerited free favor of God expressed toward guilty and unworthy sinners. It is love that doesn't make sense. To drive this home, Paul comes right out and says that our salvation is not from ourselves; it is God's gift.

Get this straight: God's salvation comes only to those who are at the end of themselves. They come with no merits of their own, no bragging points, no negotiations. They realize that their only hope is found, not in anything they have done, but in what He has already accomplished for them.

### GOD GIVES THE CAPACITY TO RECEIVE HIS GIFT

Dead in sins, we are unable to even respond to His loving word to us, which is why He not only sends His Son to atone for our sins, not only sends someone to tell us that good news, but gives us the gift of faith so that we might trust Him. The part of verse 8 that reads "it is the gift of God" refers to the grace and the salvation and the faith. Which is why I heard the gospel many times before it hit me one day.

### ALL THE GLORY IS GOD'S

If it's not by my achievements, nor a reward for any good or religious or generous deeds I have done, I have nothing I can boast in except the Lord. Most religions spell righteousness with God "D-O." I have to earn it—compel God by my good life and religious activity and philanthropy to overlook my sins, which are minor in my own eyes. The Bible spells righteousness with God "D-O-N-E." It lays out God's prognosis of our condition and makes it clear that our only hope lies outside ourselves. We need a Savior who secures forgiveness of sin and righteousness with God on

our behalf. And then we need Him to open our eyes to see our need and His provision, because without His intervention we are blind to His glory, deaf to His loving call, incapable of any movement toward Him. Salvation is a gift to be received, not a paycheck we earn.

—Lloyd Stille, adapted

## IMPERFECT GIFTS

*"Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father" (James 1:17).*

When I was a child, I wondered why I had to thank God for food I didn't want to eat. In my immature mind, gratitude was a response to receiving something I wanted—like a hamburger and french fries, not asparagus. So why did I have to be thankful for something I didn't want?

In the human realm, my thinking was logical. Not everything people give us is for our good. And of course not everything we want is good. But the situation with God is different. As Christ reminded us, loving parents do not give their children a stone rather than bread, or a snake instead of a fish. And God is far more loving than our earthly parents (Matthew 7:9–11).

This doesn't mean that God's children can expect a pain-free, stress-free life. James tells us not only that every good gift comes from our heavenly Father, but also that we are to "count it all joy" when we fall into various trials. The testing of our faith produces patience, and the work of patience makes us perfect and complete, lacking nothing (James 1:2–4).

Even when we receive something that doesn't seem good, we can be grateful because we know there is more to it than we can see. What seems like an imperfect gift may be the means by which God perfects us.

—Julie Ackerman Link, *Our Daily Bread*