Unique People of Christmas

James Boice



ALLIANCE OF CONFESSING EVANGELICALS

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Chapter One

The Little People of Christmas

Christmas is for little people.

Far too much attention is given to the people who are though to be important by the world-Herod, the wise men, Augustus Caesar in whose reign Jesus of Nazareth was born.

What we often fail to see is that those who are least important, humanly speaking, are often most important spiritually. You remember how the apostle Paul stated this principle. He wrote, "For God hath chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise; and God hath chosen the weak things of the world to confound the mighty; and base things of the world, and things which are despised, hath God chosen, yea, and things which are not, to bring to nothing things that are." And He explains that God has done this in order that "no flesh should glory (or boast) in his presence" (1 Corinthians 1:27-29).

Yes, Christmas is for the little people. And that means that it is for you and for me. Christmas is not for the great of this world, at least not more than the others. It was not for the great in Christ's time. Caesar knew nothing of the birth of Jesus Christ. Neither did the Roman senate, the Greek philosophers, the generals. Not even the Jewish high priest or the members of the Sanhedrin knew it. Christmas was for the people who were not important. And it is for God's little people today.

Now you are probably wondering after all of this introduction just who is the least important person in the Christmas story. You can already guess from what I have said that it is not Caesar, or Herod, or the wise men—though the wise men are part of the story. But 12 verses are given to them in Matthew's Gospel, and it is evident that Matthew thought that their coming was of great significance.

Perhaps it was the shepherds. They were among the lowest social orders of society; And yet they do not qualify, either. For 12 verses of Luke's Gospel are given to them. And they were actually the most prominent persons of all on that first of all Christmas mornings.

Perhaps it is Simeon or Zacharias. No, not these either. For Simeon is given a total of 11 verses by Luke, and the story of Zacharias together with the birth of his son, the future John the Baptist, takes up at least two-thirds of Luke's long first chapter.

Who is the person who is the least important character in the Christmas story? The least important person is one who receives only three verses in Luke's long account of Jesus' birth. And it is not even a man. She is a woman, and her name is Anna. Luke writes these words about her: "And there was one Anna, a prophetess, the daughter of Phanuel, of the tribe of Asher; she was of a great age, and had lived with an husband seven years from her virginity; and she was a widow of about four score years, who departed not from the temple, but served God with fastings and prayers night and day. And she, coming in that instant, gave thanks likewise unto the Lord, and spoke of him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem" (Luke 2:36-38).

Here was a woman who was certainly the littlest of all the little people of the Christmas story. She was widowed. And she was old—probably about 105 years old—to judge from Luke's figures. And yet, from what Luke tells us, she undoubtedly understood more about the full significance of the coming of Jesus Christ than any of the others who appear in the nativity narratives.

What was it that Anna the prophetess understood about the coming of Jesus Christ? The answer to that question is that Anna understood that the infant Jesus was to become the redeemer that God had promised to Israel. And we know this because she announced His birth to all in Jerusalem who, like herself, looked for that redemption.

Now this was a remarkable thing. But we can only understand how remarkable it was when we realize clearly what the word redemption means and what it implied in her day. The prefix of the word is re, which means "again"; and the main part of the word is based upon a root that means "to buy." Consequently, redemption means the act of buying something back or the act of purchasing it again. We use the word in reference to repurchasing goods that have been left in a pawn shop. We redeem them. And there is a technical use of the word in business to describe the action of a company that is able to buy back various bond issues in order to cancel a financial obligation.

All of this is basic to the biblical meaning of the term. But there was a very special overtone to the biblical words due to the fact that in biblical days the word was used primarily for the act of freeing a slave. A slave could be set free from slavery if someone would pay the price necessary

for his full redemption. In the various words that are used for this type of redemption in the Bible there is the suggestion that he had been "bought in the market place" (agorazo) where slaves were always sold, that he had been "bought out of the market place" (exagorazo) never to be sold there again, and that he had then been "cut loose" or "set free" (luo). When the Bible uses the term in a spiritual sense it implies that although all men have been sold under the slavery of sin and have been sold and resold as they have passed from one dealer in sin to another, Jesus Christ entered the market place in order to buy men back. And He did so in order that the sinner might be purchased out of the market place forever and be set free

In many parts of the Bible this basic idea is reinforced by references to the price paid for our redemption- Thus, Peter writes to his readers, "For as much as ye know mat ye were not redeemed with corruptible things, as silver and gold, from your vain manner of life received by tradition from your fathers, but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot" (1 Peter 1:18-19). The price of our redemption was Christ's blood. We sing about it in one of our hymns.

> Nor silver nor gold hath obtained my redemption, Nor riches of earth could have saved my poor soul; The blood of the cross is my only foundation. The death of my Savior now maketh me whole.

I am redeemed, but not with silver. I am bought, but not with gold; Bought with a price-the blood of Jesus, Precious price of love untold.1

This is what Anna the prophetess was waiting for God to do for His people in the city of Jerusalem. And when she saw the infant Jesus she recognized Him as the one who one day was to pay the price of our redemption from sin and from sin's power.

This is the heart of the Christmas story, and I want you to see it clearly. It is not merely the story of the birth of a helpless baby in a stable, as beautiful as that may be, not the wonder of shepherds, not the gifts of the wise men, not the enraptured singing of the angel chorus. The heart of Christmas lies in the fact that "God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." Jesus came to pay the price of our spiritual redemption. And no one has understood the real meaning of Christmas until he has seen that.

Now I know that some may think it fantastic that Anna actually expected these things. But she did expect them. And the fact is reinforced by Luke's statement that she was only one of many who looked for this redemption. Luke says that after she had seen Jesus she "spoke of him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem."

I personally find this very interesting, and even encouraging in the light of what seems to be so much indifference to the claims of Jesus Christ today. The world of Christ's day was filled with those who were unaware of, or indifferent to, His coming—just like today. But there were believers also. And these were actually waiting for the promised redemption. The Pharisees looked for a deliverer, but they were waiting for a leader who would enter the land of Canaan in power and who would drive out the occupying troops of the Roman army. Because of this fixed understanding of who the Messiah would be, the coming of Jesus as the redeemer passed them by. There were also Essenes. These monk-like figures looked for a teacher, a new Moses. But because Jesus did not come from their ascetic circles and teach their doctrines, they passed Him by.

The Pharisees looked for a political Messiah. The Essenes looked for a teacher. The Sadducees looked for nothing. But mere Anna were also believers. And these looked for a redeemer in Israel.

And it was the same in all of the preceding ages. Why are the Old Testament saints in heaven today? Is it because they were Jews or had done good things? Or is it because they too looked for God's redeemer?

Let us ask them. "Abraham, why are you in heaven today? Was it because you left your home in Ur of the Chaldees and went to Canaan? Was it because of your faith or your character or your obedience?" "Oh, no," Abraham says. "Haven't you read my story? God promised me a great inheritance. I believed His promise about it. But the greatest promise I believed was of the seed that should come forth in my line through whom He would bring the blessing of salvation to all people and all nations. I am in heaven because I believed that God would do that."

"Well, how about you, Jacob? Why are you in heaven? Are you in heaven because of your faith or because you were born in the line of your grandfather Abraham?" "Oh, no," Jacob answers. "I'm in heaven because I looked for a redeemer. Remember how I spoke about Him to my son

Judah as I lay dying? I didn't know his name then. But I said, The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet, until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be' (Genesis 49:10). I am in heaven because I also looked for His coming."

Next in line is David. "Why are you in heaven, David? It must be because of your character. After all, you were called 'a man after God's own heart.' " "My character!" says David. "Are you forgetting that I committed adultery with Bathsheba and then tried to cover it over by having her husband killed? I'm in heaven because I looked for the one who was promised as my redeemer from sin and the redeemer of my people. And I knew that God had promised Him a kingdom that would endure forever."

"What about you, Isaiah? Did you expect the redeemer?" "Of course, I did," Isaiah answers. "And I spoke of Him as the one who 'hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows, who was wounded for our transgressions' and 'bruised for our iniquities.' I knew that the Lord would lay on Him the iniquity of us all."

Do you see what I am saying? I am saying that this has always been the faith of God's children and that, for this reason, the redeeming work of lesus has always been found at the heart of the Christmas story. The angel said, "Thou shalt call his name Jesus, for he shall save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). And in every age God has always had those who looked for such a savior. In ancient times there were Abraham, Jacob, David, Isaiah, Malachi, and more. In Christ's own time there were Zacharias, John the Baptist, Joseph, Mary, Simeon, Anna, and a host of others. And there are scores of believers today. Are you one? Do you know Christ as your Savior? Is He your Redeemer? How sad it would be if you could manage to go through another Christmas season without coming to believe in Him who came to earth, not to remain in a cradle, but to die for you, to enrich your life now through His own indwelling Spirit, and eventually to bring you with great joy into heaven.

Now there is one more thing we need to notice about this remarkable woman Anna. Luke tells us that after she had seen Jesus she "spoke of him to all those who looked for redemption in Jerusalem." As the shepherds had earlier, she became a witness to all that she had seen and heard. And this was the apex of her spiritual perception. She spoke of Him! Do you? Are you a witness to Jesus Christ? You should be, if you know Him, for that too is a part of the real Christmas story.

Now it is evident that Anna would never have been able to speak of Jesus to those who were looking for God's redemption unless she had previously come to know who they were. She was not the kind of believer that detaches himself or herself from the world, even though she spent all other time in the temple. She was one who knew people. And she knew them well enough to be aware of their own deep spiritual longings. Because of her knowledge God used her to tell them about Jesus.

And God needs such servants today. Never forget that while you are thrilling to the Christmas season with all of the joy that comes from knowing the Lord Jesus Christ, there are others perhaps as close as the house next door or perhaps in your own home—who do not know Him and for whom these weeks lack all joy and spiritual significance. There is the neighbor caught up in his business, becoming more and more frantic as the pre-Christmas shopping days draw to a close, but inwardly empty and wondering if there is anything better in life than his business. There is the widow who has recently lost her husband in Viet Nam, or the parents who have recently lost their son. They do not know Jesus, and they have no joy nor any real comfort either. There are the lonely, the disappointed, the frustrated, the disillusioned, the abandoned members of our society—all of whom long for something better and yet do not know what that something is. For them Christmas will be a day without joy, glitter without the inner sparkle of the soul, and frenzy without lasting satisfaction. These need Jesus Christ. But they need someone to know them and to tell how He is the answer to their longings. Do you know them, as Anna knew those who were longing for something better in her day? You will never win them for Jesus Christ until you know them well enough to have shared these spiritual longings.

And there is one more thing. You must also tell them about Christ and His great work of redemption. You see, Anna did not only know the persons who looked for redemption; she also spoke to them about Jesus. She became His first great witness in Jerusalem. Isn't it interesting that the life of Jesus Christ begins and ends with the great commission. It begins here with Anna. And it ends with Jesus telling His disciples, "Go ye, therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you; and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the age" (Matthew 28:19-20).

If we really understand what Christmas is all about, we will do that and do it with great joy. And we will rejoice that God has revealed Himself to us, the little people, and given to us the task of telling of Christ's great work for man's redemption.

Chapter Two

The Men Who Missed Christmas

Few things in life are more tragic than having missed something important for no good reason. Yet this is the experience of many, many people.

Early in June, 1944, the German general Rommel was strengthening the fortifications of the beaches of western France against the imminent Allied invasion of Hitler's Europe. This was the Rommel who had gained fame as a military strategist in North Africa. He was convinced that in this stage of the war if the Allies should ever gain a foothold in France the war would be lost for Germany. He had done much to put the defenses in readiness, but as the first week of June drew to an end and the weather off the Atlantic coast grew worse, Rommel felt that he could spare a few days away from the feverish action. It was the birthday of his wife on June 6, and he had a birthday present for her. Consequently, he left the front on the fifth of June and was in Berlin with his family when the Allied invasion came on the next day.

Here was a man who had sensed the importance of this, the greatest single military invasion in history. He had prepared for it. But when it came he was busy with other things and missed his opportunity. In the confusion of that important day the combined British and American forces gained their toehold on the coasts of Normandy and were then able to push onward to the Rhine and the eventual destruction of the Third Reich.

I believe that the experience of Rommel has been the experience of many persons throughout history. But of all these experiences perhaps none has been more tragic than that of the men who missed Christmas. When I speak of the men who missed the first Christmas, I am speaking of the men who missed the birth of the Lord Jesus Christ. And yet, in another sense I am also speaking of many who miss Christmas today. These men miss the most important things in life, and yet—here is the tragedy there is no good reason why they should miss it.

The first of the men who missed Christmas was quite obviously the innkeeper. The Bible does not mention this man explicitly. Probably by the time the story of the birth of Jesus Christ was put into writing no one

remembered who he was. There was no reason to remember him. Still there certainly was an innkeeper, for when the Bible tells us that Mary "brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn" (Luke 2:7) the verse implies the existence of this man. The point of the reference is that in the hustle and bustle of the season the innkeeper missed the most important birth in history.

He shouldn't have missed it, of course. He shouldn't have missed it simply because he was so close to it. The decree of the emperor Augustus brought the family of Jesus to his town, Bethlehem. Mary and Joseph stood on his doorstep, perhaps even entered his waiting room, stood before his desk. The child was born in his stable, almost under his nose. And yet his preoccupation with his business kept him from it.

Let me share this dramatized account of the innkeeper's reasoning with you. It comes from a recent book by the distinguished American writer Frederick Buechner:

> "I speak to you as men of the world," said the Innkeeper. "Not as idealists but as realists. Do you know what it is like to run an inn —to run a business, a family, to run anything in this world for that matter, even your own life? It is like being lost in a forest of a million trees," said the Innkeeper, "and each tree is a thing to be done. Is there fresh linen on all the beds? Did the children put on their coats before they went out? Has the letter been written, the book read? Is there money enough left in the bank? Today we have food in our bellies and clothes on our backs, but what can we do to make sure that we will have them still tomorrow? A million trees. A million things. . . . Finally we have eyes for nothing else, and whatever we see turns into a thing."2

Am I pressing the point too much to say that the world is filled with such innkeepers today, materialistic men, women, and children who miss the meaning of Christmas simply because their business, parties, Christmas cards, trees, or tinsel seem too pressing? If this were not the case, there would not be so many grim faces in our stores or so many exhausted. sleepy people in our churches the Sunday before Christmas.

Do not think that I am merely speaking to non-Christians at this point. I am probably not speaking to them much at all. Who would be ate Caesar Augustus for having missed Christmas? He was too far away. There was no possibility of his having found it. We would not berate the Greeks or countless others. Actually I am speaking to Christians, for they are the ones who should take note of the birth of Christ deeply and yet often do not do it.

A number of years ago a minister named A. W. Tozer was concerned about the feverish materialism of Christians in our age. He wrote this about it. "Every age has its own characteristics. Right now we are in an age of religious complexity. The simplicity which is in Christ is rarely found among us. In its stead are programs, methods, organizations and a world of nervous activities which occupy time and attention but can never satisfy the longing of the heart. The shallowness of our inner experience, the hollowness of our worship, and that servile imitation of the world which marks our promotional methods all testify that we, in this day, know God only imperfectly, and the peace of God scarcely at all." He added, "If we would find God amid all the religious externals we must first determine to find him, and then proceed in the way of simplicity. Now as always God discovers himself to 'babes' and hides himself in thick darkness from the wise and the prudent. We must simplify our approach to him"³

The second man who missed Christmas was Herod. Herod was the king of Judaea, or as we should more accurately say, an under-king of a border province of the far-flung Roman empire. There was nothing likable about Herod. He was a sly old fox, guilty of many murders, including at least one wife and three sons. He probably had no religion. He was a cynic. He knew the traditions of Israel, but he only half believed them if, indeed, he believed them at all. Yet he should have found Christmas, if only because he had such a large stake in the outcome.

Matthew is the one who tells us Herod's story. Herod was at home in Jerusalem when news reached him that wise men had come from the east. They were asking where they could find the king of the Jews, the one born recently. Herod did not have anyone like that in his palace. There were no recent births. Besides, he was well aware that the wise men were talking about the Messiah, and he knew of no messiah. Talk like that was dangerous. Herod therefore called the religious leaders to find out where the future king should be born. The answer was "Bethlehem!" After that he called the wise men themselves and persuaded them to report to him if their search in Bethlehem proved fruitful.

"Go and search diligently for the young child, and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him

also" (Matthew 2:8). It was a sly maneuver, for murder, not worship, was in the old king's heart. It was a pity also, for Herod knew of the birth. He even knew its significance. Yet he missed it through the encrusted habit of greed and self-interest.

Does that describe you? I do not mean that question to be insulting. But isn't it true that many people miss practically everything good in life through greed and self-interest? If that is true of such things as friendship, beauty, love, good times, and happiness, how much more true is it that many miss Jesus? If you are a Herod, even in a small way, perhaps you should pay attention to something which Jesus Himself said. He said, "What shall it profit a man, if he shall gain the whole world, and lose his own soul?" (Mark 8:36). Your real self-interest lies in finding the one who loved you and died to be your Savior.

Well, innkeeper missed Christmas. King Herod missed Christmas. But there was another group who also missed Christmas. These were the religious leaders, the chief priests and the scribes. They of all men should not have missed the birth of Christ, for they had the Scriptures. They were the ones who could tell Herod where the Christ was to be born. They knew it was in Bethlehem. Yet they did not leave their own homes or the palace to investigate His arrival.

What was it that kept these men from going along with the wise men? We do not know for certain, of course. But it may well have been their pride in the fact that Herod had called them instead of others and that they had been able to produce the right answer to his question.

We see this in the religious world! There are sectors of the Church of Jesus Christ in our day in which almost any Bible question will receive a right answer. Yet in many of these places there is no real hunger after God, and thus the vital, joyous, and rewarding reality of the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ is lacking. Do not misunderstand me here. Accurate Bible knowledge is wonderful. I have said on many occasions that it is only through a knowledge of the Scriptures that we can know Jesus and that it is only through knowing Jesus that we can know God. We must study our Bibles. I spend most of my own life studying the Bible and teaching it. And yet, knowing the content of the Bible is not enough. I know that myself. If we are to be all God intends us to be, we must see beyond the Book—through it, if you will—to its Author.

Do you know the Author? If you do, it will make a difference in your life. He will satisfy you. He will make you forget yourself. Above all, you will be taught to love as God loved us when He gave us Jesus.

Francis Schaeffer has written:

"As Christians we must not minimize the need to give honest answers to honest questions. We should have an intellectual apologetic. The Bible commands it and Christ and Paul exemplify it. In the synagogue, in the marketplace, in homes and in almost every conceivable kind of situation, Jesus and Paul discussed Christianity. It is likewise the Christian's task to be able to give an honest answer to an honest question and then to give it.

"Yet, without true Christians loving one another, Christ says the world cannot be expected to listen, even when we give proper answers. Let us be careful, indeed, to spend a lifetime studying to give honest answers. For years the orthodox, evangelical church has done this very poorly. So it is well to spend time learning to answer the questions of men who are about us. But after we have done our best to communicate to a lost world, still we must never forget that the final apologetic which Jesus gives is the observable love of true Christians. . . . "4

No one can learn that love from the Lord Jesus and fail to find Christmas.

It would be entirely wrong to end this study without pointing out that although there were many who did not find Christmas—millions, in fact —there were nevertheless some who did. They were not the kings of this world They were not the religious leaders. They were not the thousands who were entirely engrossed in the countless minutiae of materialistic lives. They were just poor folk who were looking to God and to whom God came

We can think of several of them. There were the shepherds. They were nobody in the social structure of the ancient East. Most people thought poorly of them. They were not able to testify in a court of law, for their testimony was considered unreliable. And yet they saw the angels. The wise men also found Christmas. They were not even Jews-everybody knew that God's promised salvation was of the Jews. Yet the wise men saw the star. Finally, there were those like Simeon and Anna, poor but saintly folk, who like many others "looked for redemption in

Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38). No one would have given a second thought to these poor folk. They were not important. Yet they saw and even held God's treasure.

Why did these people find Christmas? I think there are two answers. The first answer is that they were honest enough to admit their need of a Savior. The self-sufficient would never have made the trip to the manger: they do not do it today. But that does not describe these who found Christ. These people knew that they needed a Savior. Secondly, they were also humble enough to receive the Lord Jesus Christ when He came. No doubt there were levels of comprehension. Perhaps the shepherds, or the wise men, or even Simeon and Anna did not understand very much. But whatever they understood they received, for we are told in each case that they praised God for the birth of the Lord.

In Europe everyone who attends a university gets the same basic training in the classics and the basic tools of religion, so that whether he becomes a doctor, lawyer, chemist, or a professor, he is only a few steps away from being fully qualified for the ministry. In one European city a German pastor was called away from his little parish in an emergency and, since there was no time for him to get another preacher to fill his pulpit the following Sunday, he called upon the tutor of a noble family who lived in the neighborhood.

The man was not a Christian. When the pastor called upon him to preach, he replied, "How can I preach that which I do not believe?"

"What?" said the pastor in astonishment. "You believe in God, don't vou?"

"Yes," replied the tutor, "I believe in God."

"And do you not believe that we should love Him?" asked the pastor.

"Yes," said the tutor again, "I believe that we should."

"Well," replied the pastor then, "I will give you a text to preach on. It is in the words of Jesus: 'Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart, with all thy mind, and with all thy strength'."

The tutor agreed to the text. So the pastor went to keep his appointment and the tutor sat down to study the text and to write out an outline for his message. He was a skeptic, you understand, a rationalist. So he very rationally wrote out his first point and gave it a reason. The first point was, "We must love God." Second he wrote down: "We must love Him

with all our powers; indeed, nothing less could satisfy Him." Third, he wrote: "Do we thus love Him?" His conscience then forced him to put down, "No, we do not."

Later, this man wrote about his experience. He said, "Without any previously formed plan, I was brought to add to my notes, 'We need a Savior.' " Here light broke in upon his darkened soul. He said, "I understood that I had not loved God, that I did need a Savior, that Jesus Christ was that Savior; and then I loved Him and I clung to Him at once. On the morrow I preached the sermon, and the third point was the chief —the need of Jesus and the necessity of trusting such a Savior."

The wise men, whether they be shepherds or magi, are the ones who acknowledge their need and humble themselves enough to receive the Lord Jesus Christ as their Savior. These, and only these, find Christmas.

Chapter Three

Those Mysterious Wise Men

From the Bible story we know very little about the wise men. Millions of Christmas cards this winter will show three kings presenting gifts to a tiny child in a manger. We will sing "We Three Kings Of Orient Are." But we do not know that there were three who brought the gifts. And we are not even told that they were kings or, for that matter, when they arrived in Bethlehem. It is likely, in view of their long journey and of Herod's command that all children under two years of age were to be killed, that they arrived when Jesus had already become a young child.

The story is simplicity itself. We read, "Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born king of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him." We are then told how the wise men inquired of Herod and how afterward, led by the star, they found the child in Bethlehem. The story concludes, "And when they were 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 unto him gifts: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. And then being warned of God in a dream that they should not return to Herod, they departed into their own country another way" (Matthew 2:1, 2, 11, 12).

The fact that the story provides so little information about the wise men clearly shows that Matthew's interest was not focused upon the wise men themselves. Rather, he is interested in the fact that the Gentiles came to worship the Jewish Messiah. He is also interested, perhaps above all, in the gifts that they bore. A literary critic would undoubtedly draw special attention to the gifts themselves, for they occur at the very end of the story after the child has been found and they occupy a place of special prominence.

It is easy to see why gold is an appropriate gift for Jesus Christ. Gold is the metal of kings. Thus, the gold that was presented to Jesus acknowledged His right to rule.

Several years ago when I was driving through Greece with my wife and our eldest daughter, who was then just a baby, I found the kingly nature of gold reaffirmed in a striking way by archeology. In the ruins of the town of Mycenae, which dates in its earliest strata from the time of the Trojan war, there is an ancient cemetery in which the kings of the towns were buried. Later at the archeological museum at Athens we saw the objects found there, and among them gold was most prominent. One of the most precious finds of this period of Greek history is an elaborately ornate death mask, called the death mask of Agamemnon, done in pure gold. There were many other gold objects. Several years before, I. had found the same thing illustrated by the elaborate burial ornaments discovered in the Valley of the Kings at Thebes in upper Egypt. This valley contained the coffin of King Tutankhamen as well as other golden objects from the same period of history. The point is also illustrated elsewhere.

It has often been pointed out by commentators that when the wise men brought gifts of gold to the infant Jesus they were actually being used by God to provide the funds necessary for Joseph to take the young child and His mother to Egypt to escape Herod's attempt on his life. This is probably true, but although it is true, it is far overshadowed by the significance of the gift itself. Jesus Christ was a king, as the wise men knew. He was the King of kings. Hence, the wise men pointed to His future kingship by their gifts of pure gold.

It is also easy to see why frankincense was a significant gift. Frankincense was a type of incense used in the temple worship. For one thing, it was mixed with the oil that was used to anoint the priests of Israel. For another, it was part of the meal offerings that were offerings of thanksgiving and praise to God. Frankincense gave the offering its most pleasant odor. Thus, it was probably of frankincense that Paul was thinking when he compared the gifts of the Philippians to such a sacrifice, calling it "an odor of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, well pleasing to God" (Philippians 4:18). In presenting this gift the wise men pointed to Christ as our great high priest, the one whose whole life was acceptable and well pleasing to His Father.

An interesting feature of frankincense is that it was never mixed with sin offerings. The meat and wine offerings were offerings for sin; and these were not to have frankincense mixed with them. Only the meal offerings, which were not for sin, were to receive the frankincense.

When we discover this fact we think naturally of the Lord Jesus Christ to whom the frankincense was given. He was without sin. When His

enemies came to Him on one occasion He challenged them with the question, "Which of you convicteth me of sin?" They were speechless. On another occasion He said of God His Father, "I do always those things that please him." None of us can say that. We are sinners. Only the Lord Jesus Christ was sinless. It was extremely fitting then that frankincense should have been offered to Him by the wise men.

"We see from the symbolism of these gifts," wrote Donald Grey Barnhouse early in his ministry, "that the eternal royalty and holiness of Christ were announced from His earliest years. He had come forth from heaven to perform the work of redemption, and He was prepared in every way to do the Father's will so that He might fulfill every demand and obligation of the law. Thus only would He become eligible to die on the cross; and by the cross alone redeem the world. That life could show that He was the fit candidate for the cross, and we cling with surety to the work that was accomplished there at Calvary, since we know that our sin-bearer was Himself without sin."5

This quotation leads naturally to the last of the gifts. For just as gold speaks of Christ's kingship and rule and frankincense speaks of the perfection of His life, so myrrh speaks of his death. Myrrh was used in embalming. And because the trappings of death, although different, were as important then as today, myrrh was well-known by those who lived in antiquity and was an important item of commerce.

We receive an idea how important myrrh was in the ancient world as we read the Bible. For instance, we read in the account of Jesus' burial that Nicodemus used 100 pounds of myrrh and aloes in order to prepare the body. If 100 pounds of this combination were used for just one body, there must have been a tremendous amount of myrrh bought and sold for funeral arrangements. Moreover, in the book of Revelation, chapter two, we read of a city of Asia Minor called Smyrna. This name was actually the Greek word for myrrh. The city was called Smyrna because of the manufacture of myrrh which was its chief industry. We have a parallel situation today in the names Hershey, Pa.; Corning, N.Y.; and Winston Salem, Va., which have also taken their names from or given their names to products.

By any human measure it would be odd, if not offensive, to present a spice used for embalming to the infant Christ. But it was not offensive. Nor, in this case, was it odd. It was a gift of faith. We do not know precisely what the wise men may have known or guessed about Christ's

ministry. But we do know that the Old Testament again and again foretold His suffering. The twenty-second Psalm describes His death by crucifixion; it was a verse from this Psalm that Jesus quoted when He cried out from the cross, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (Psalm 22:1; Matthew 27:46). Isaiah 53:4, 5 says, "Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities; the chastisement for our peace was upon him, and with his stripes we are healed." And there are dozens of other passages. Christ was to suffer. He was to die for our sin. It was the gift of myrrh that symbolized this part of His ministry.

There were also a few other uses of myrrh in the ancient world, and one of them is particularly important here. It was a use of myrrh which the Lord Jesus Christ refused.

Sometimes in the study of Scripture the student of the Word can learn a great lesson from verses that seem to contradict one another on the surface. But on closer study they are actually seen to teach some spiritual truth. In Mark 15:23 and John 19:30 there is an example of such an apparent contradiction that actually teaches us something spiritual and makes sense only when we know something more about myrrh. In the first verse we read that when lesus was crucified, the soldiers who performed the crucifixion offered Him wine mixed with myrrh and that He did not receive it. In the second verse we are told that later when some wine was again offered to Him He did receive it. What was the difference? The difference was that in the first case myrrh, which helped to deaden pain, was mixed with the wine. And since Jesus wished to bear all that suffering and death could bring to Him, when He had tasted the wine He turned from it. Later, in order to fulfill Psalm 69:21, which says, "In my thirst they gave me vinegar to drink," He called for something and drank what was offered. Myrrh was used to deaden pain. But Jesus wished to suffer all that accompanied death when He became sin for us and died for our salvation.

We have looked at the spiritual significance of each of the three gifts given to Jesus by the wise men: gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Gold for royalty! Frankincense for the purity of his life! Myrrh for suffering! And vet, the study would be incomplete unless I were also to take you to one other verse that bears upon the gifts of the wise men.

The verse is from the 60th chapter of Isaiah's prophecy. It occurs in the midst of a great prophecy of the coming of Jesus Christ in glory at the end of his present age. The chapter begins, "Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee" (verse 1). It continues by showing that the nations shall come to Christ's light "and kings to the brightness of his rising" (verse 3). Then comes verse 6: "The multitude of camels shall cover thee, the dromedaries of Midian and Ephah; all they from Sheba shall come; they shall bring gold and incense, and they shall show forth the praise of the Lord." Do you see the importance of this verse? When the Lord Iesus Christ returns a scene will be enacted that will be similar to the coming of the wise men to Bethlehem at His first coming. He will reign in power. Gifts will be given to Him. But, when the gifts are presented, they will not be gold, frankincense, and myrrh. They will be gold and frankincense only. Myrrh speaks of suffering. But when the Lord Jesus Christ died on the cross. He suffered once and for all for sin. Hereafter there will be no more need for His suffering.

Do you see that truth clearly? You should, for it is the true meaning of Christmas. Jesus Christ came to earth to die. That was His mission. He died for our sin. Now those who believe on Him wait for His second coming in glory.

Did you ever recognize that it was this truth—the truth that lesus came to die but then rose from the dead to leave the suffering behind forever —that led to the first Christian conversion? Who was the first Christian in the New Testament sense? It was John, the author of the fourth Gospel. And how did he come to believe? Early on the first Easter Sunday morning after Jesus had risen from the dead, women came to the tomb, found the stone rolled away from the opening and met the angels. They were puzzled by all of these things and so sent most of their number to find John and Peter who alone of the twelve disciples remained in Jerusalem. On hearing the news John and Peter went running to the burial site. John, the younger, arrived first. At the door he stopped and, looking in, saw the grave clothes in which the body of Jesus had been wrapped following the crucifixion. He did not then understand that He was risen.

While John hesitated at the door Peter arrived, panting and out of breath, and immediately burst through the open door into the tomb. John entered cautiously behind. There in the tomb the odor of myrrh permeated everything. The grave clothes were there, now collapsed from the weight of the spices. The head band was there. The myrrh was there. But—and this was the great point—the body was gone. Suddenly John understood that-Jesus had indeed conquered death. He had been raised in a glorified body. And John knew that the suffering of the Lord, symbolized by the myrrh, was finished forever.

Do you see it also? Do you believe? What a pity it would be if you were to go through another Christmas season over-looking the meaning of it all through ignorance! Or, what is worse, to see it all but to fail to commit your life to the One who was born on that first Christmas day in order that He might suffer for you and remove your sin forever.

The world has so many false ideas of Christmas. For some persons it is only a story that is somehow meant to glorify babies and motherhood. For others there is the false idea that we must do something for God, like that Christmas song "The Little Drummer Boy" that suggests that Jesus will smile at us if we play Him a tune on our drum. Oh no! Jesus does not need to have us play Him a tune on our little drums. He does not need anything that we can produce. But, oh, my friend, we do need Him. We need a Savior. That is why that great Christmas hymn by Charles Wesley says clearly,

Come, Thou long expected Jesus, Born to set Thy people free, From our fears and sins release us, Let us find our rest in Thee.

Born Thy people to deliver, Born a child and yet a King, Born to reign in us forever, Now Thy gracious Kingdom bring.⁶

To understand Christmas is to come believing that. It is to come to the Lord Jesus Christ from whom alone we receive salvation.

Now I have said that we are able to bring nothing to the Christ who is our Savior. But there is one sense which is an exception to that. We must come with our faith, for we must come believing. Moreover, there is a sense in which by faith we too may present the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

You begin with your myrrh. For myrrh is also a symbol of your death and of the spiritual death that should come to you for your sin. You lay it at

Christ's feet and say, "Lord Jesus Christ, I know that I am less perfect than You are and am therefore a sinner. I know that I should receive the consequence of my sin which is to be barred from Your presence forever. But You took my sin, dying in my place. And I believe that. Now I ask You to accept me as Your child forever."

After you have done that you may come with your frankincense, acknowledging that your life is as impure as the life of the Lord Jesus Christ is sinless. The Bible teaches that there is no good in man that is not mixed with evil. But it also teaches that Christ comes to live in the believer so that the good deeds produced in the life of a believer by the indwelling Christ become in their turn "an odor of a sweet smell, a sacrifice acceptable, well pleasing to God."

Finally, you may come with your gold. Gold symbolizes royalty and rule. Thus, when you come with gold and acknowledge the right of Christ to rule your own life. You say, "I am Your servant, and You are my King. Direct my life and lead me in it so that I might grow up spiritually to honor and to serve You accordingly."

Have you done that? Have you come believing in all that the myrrh, frankincense, and gold signify? If you have, you have embarked on a path of great spiritual joy and blessing. For these are the gifts of faith. And they are the only things we have to offer.

Notes

¹ "Nor Silver Nor Gold" Words: James Gray, 1900. Music: Daniel Towner.

² Frederick Buechner, The Magnificant Defeat, Harper Collins, 1974, p. 66.

³ A.W. Tozer, *The Pursuit of God*, Christian Publications edition, 1982.

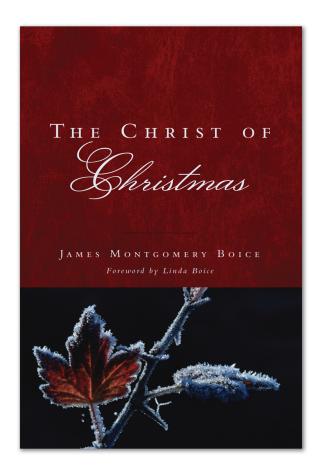
⁴ Francis Schaeffer, The Church at the End of the Twentieth Century, Crossway Books, 2nd edition, 1985.

⁵ Donald Grey Barnhouse, The Gift of Death, p. 5

⁶ "Come, Thou Long Expected Jesus." Words: Charles Wesley, Hymns for the Nativity of Our Lord, London: William Strahan, 1745, number 10. Music: Hyfrydol, Rowland H. Prichard, 1830.

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