

## **Christmas 2019-Part 3**

### **The First Christmas Gifts**

Pastor Mike Fabarez

Well, merry Christmas, everyone. We're glad that you're here celebrating with us. And we know that your Christmas time is not official until you see these three guys in your life. Right? Have you seen those? Our Christmas kid's pageants always got to have these three. And if you have a nativity set, we certainly need to have these three figurines. You can't have a nativity set without your three guys here. And the problem is, when I was a kid, I used to hear this song all the time. We Three Kings of Orient Are. And I didn't read the Bible like I should have because I always envisioned these three guys from the Orient.

So, you know, I came to learn later in studying the Bible that what I need to know is that the word Orient has been used in scholastic circles to represent the Near East as well as the Far East. I was thinking way too far east when it came to the guys who are depicted in those scenes. And of course, we say the east because in the Bible, it says in Matthew Chapter 2 that they came from the east. "When Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea," the Bible says, "in the days of King Herod," Herod the Great, "behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem." And the east there we know where the east is because of the word that translates "wise men" in the Greek New Testament. The word that translates wise men is the word that's transliterated "Magi." And the Magi we know come not from the Far East, they come from Mesopotamia. They come from the ancient region between the Euphrates and the Tigris River. They come from the old empire of Babylon, or more specifically, the Persian Empire that followed them.

We know that these wise men, as they're called, or the Magi came from that region with an interest in this child who was born in Judea of Israel because of their influence that they received from Daniel the prophet. In the 4th and 5th century B.C. Daniel, who lived a long life and had a long ministry as a prophet, succeeded the period of the Babylonians and Nebuchadnezzar the great king into the period of the Mido Persians. And he was put in charge, you might remember, in Daniel of the magicians they were called as is translated there, and there were many words used to describe this royal group of people who were not just kings, they were administrators and leaders for sure, but they were really the kingmakers. They were the professors of the era, the intellectuals, they were the astronomers. So much in Persia, if you know your astronomy, came from the early research, not just of China but also of Persia. And they knew their stars, they knew their star maps, they drew their calculations.

There was something about this group that was very important to every administration in Mesopotamia. They had had a great influence from Daniel, who had so much to say throughout his period of leadership, and as God used him as a prophet to speak of a coming king, a king that would be born in fulfillment of the promise of a king in Israel. And yet, as Daniel says, if you've ever read his prophecy, he talks many times throughout his life of that king of Israel being the king, not only of the Jews, but the king of the whole world, that every people and every tongue and every tribe and every nation would be subject to this great king.

And 400 years after Daniel, we certainly had the influence of his prophecies still resonating with that group that came from the east, and that's why they're a part of your nativity set. And you'll usually see them there in that stable scene in the manger where you have that little baby being born in Bethlehem and the shepherds were watching their flocks out in the field. But it's

interesting, if you read carefully the story of the Magi, you'll find out that those wise men did not go to the manger. They weren't there at the birth of Christ. They weren't there like the shepherds were. They actually didn't go to a manger. They went to a house. That house, though it was in Bethlehem, it says "the child was there with Mary, his mother and they fell down and worshiped this child" in the house.

Now, this is a picture of a house, obviously a reproduction of a first-century house, and it's not a manger. That's very different than what we have in our nativity sets. We also know how much longer it was after, at least the general idea how much long after the birth of Christ it was, because when Herod finally finds out that the Magi, the wise men had tricked him in not telling him where this child was because they had been warned that Herod wanted to kill the child, Herod became furious and he sent and killed the male children in Bethlehem and in all that region who were two-years-old or under. Now that's an age group that he picked, it says in the next phrase, according to the time that he had ascertained from the wise men. So it's clear that Herod understood that these wise men had come, these Magi had come, of a child who had been born, we would guess there, if you're going to kill two and under, probably 18, 19, 20 months, maybe as much as 22 months after the shepherds were celebrating his birth. So the wise men come not to a stable, they come to a house. They come a year plus, a year and a half after the birth of Christ. So in your nativity set, you just need to move your wise men a little further from the stable because that's not where they actually belong.

Now, you always have three of them, don't you? Whether like in my childhood they are, you know, from China or whether they're, you know, this mixed group of people. Usually it's a mixed ethnicities, you'll see them in a lot of these nativity sets, you always will have three. But we get the three, not from how many the Bible says there were because the Bible doesn't tell us how many Magis showed up. All we know is they came with three gifts: gold, frankincense and myrrh. That's important because those three gifts are representing something the Bible would invite us to try and investigate if there's any meaning to that, and if there is meaning, what would that meaning be? But there are three gifts. It doesn't tell us how many Magi there were. They were so important, I can assure you, in going this 600, 700 miles up and around the Arabian desert that they weren't going to travel by themselves. They weren't going to travel by themselves because they were so important. They're not going to travel by themselves with such expensive gifts. They're going to come in a big entourage, for sure. So go buy multiple nativity sets, collect a lot of wise men and put them far away from the stable. (audience laughter) And then you'll be probably tracking much more biblically than you are presently.

Nevertheless, they have three gifts and the first gift that they bring is the gift of gold. Now, why would God give us these three things? It doesn't tell us anything, really, historically within this passage about the wise men, doesn't tell us their names, doesn't tell us a lot of things we might want to know, but it does tell us specifically the three kinds of gifts. Now, Matthew was written primarily to a Jewish audience. I mean, they're all written to a Jewish audience at some level. But Matthew in particular is quoting the Old Testament more often. He's clearly addressing those who know the Old Testament Scriptures. So maybe we can come to understand something about why this would be an appropriate gift for the toddler Jesus, the Christ child, when you have this particular gift given within the context of our research of the Old Testament.

But gold is no mystery to us. We all know what gold is. And certainly today we'd like to have more of it because it's trading at about \$1,483 an ounce right now. I mean, you want to give a gift

at Christmas, a few ounces of gold my way would be just fine. It would make me happy. Share that tonight. You could exchange gifts, gold bars, gold coins. Those are great gifts and everyone knows they're valuable. That's certainly important for you to know the value of gold, because it's a precious metal and always has been. The Bible talks a lot about precious metals all the way back, the gold specifically, to the second chapter of Genesis. So we have a lot of discussion about it because it's always been, you know, as we would say, the gold standard of precious metals.

But in Exodus Chapter 25, we start to see the significance that God wants to associate with gold. When it comes to gold it's not just something that would be a good investment and a good asset to have in any monetary economic system, it's important when God starts building his worship center. It says in Exodus 25 that God instructs Moses specifically to go and collect some of the things from the people that would be contributed so that he can construct a worship center that would always be the thing that would play in the minds of the people when they came to worship the God of heaven. And it says, "Whoever's heart moves him," to a free voluntary offering in this case, "you shall receive the contribution for me." And what's the contribution that you should receive from them?" Three things. Precious metals, right out of the gate and the first one is always, of course, gold. "Gold, silver and bronze."

Then you go on to read the details about how God constructs the worship center and it's all about gold. You saw the movie and you know this Ark of the Covenant box is in D.C. in a warehouse somewhere. That's a joke. But that it is called the Ark of the Covenant, we call it, which is, of course, constructed of a certain kind of wood. But then it's overlaid with gold. Ark means box. That's all ark means. It means a box. And the one that Noah had was a big box. This is a small box. And this small box was covered with gold and it was called the box or the Ark of the Covenant. The covenant is a promise that God makes to deal with his people graciously and mercifully and to put his favor and rest his love upon his people. But this box, which was at the very center of the architecture of the structure of this thing called the Tabernacle, because it's a portable worship center, that was to be the focus, at least visually and architecturally, of the worship center. And it was a gold box carried by poles, which you should be careful to do. Ask David about that. You don't want to carry it any old way. This was a very important and sacred box. They put the Decalogue in it, the Ten Commandments stone tablets, and that was the center of worship.

But it's not the only place you would see gold. Matter of fact, when you start looking at the utensils that were built for the Tabernacle, they would be gilded with gold, whether it's the incense altar or whether it's the showbread table or the candelabras. All of it was all about reflecting gold. You walk into the worship and the holy places there in the worship center you were going to see gold. Later, about 600 years later, God calls Solomon, the son of David, to build the temple. And when he makes him build the temple, of course, this is got gold galore. It's all over the place. It's gilded walls. It's everywhere in the worship center. The candelabras are bigger. The places of worship are bigger. The showbread tables, the stand, the incense altar, the outside altar. All of this is covered with and gilded with gold. Almost everywhere you looked, gold.

What was that about? That was certainly reflecting something of the value, the preciousness, the authority, the wealth of God and what they thought about God and lifted their gaze upward, the idea was God is a great God. He's a great God like a great king would be. And we recognize his royalty and his authority. We see that reflected in the thing that's the most precious metal

commodity, at least the one that was traded in the ancient world, and we need to make sure that we see him as that kind of regal authority, that sovereign ruler of the universe.

Of course, God set up human leaders as well, and they were just representing the leadership of God on earth. At least that's the way it was supposed to be. It was Saul, that's the people's choice first of all, and then with David, God's choice, and then his son Solomon after David had established the kingdom. God said, okay, Solomon, it's time for you not only to build the worship center, the Solomon's Temple, but it's time for you to build your own royal palace and certainly he did and it was gilded with gold. The human authority, like the divine authority, was recognized by the regal gifts and the regal commodities of gold. And it was the thing that showed their power and their strength. Here we see a depiction, at least an artist depiction of the kind of gilded, dazzling palace of King Solomon.

So, to think about the wise men, these professorial leaders of Persia come and recognize this king who was being born in fulfillment of Daniel's prophecies, it would make sense that they would bring gold. I don't just think it was, well they brought some valuable things to him or they just brought him money in the monetary, you know, unit of the ancient world, if it was a lot of money, it would be gold. I just don't think it's an arbitrary thing. It certainly is connected with the kingship of God.

Not only that, as they come and bring this gold, it says that they are coming saying this child is a king. They come to King Herod and they ask about the king of the Jews, which, by the way, is not a good thing to say to Herod, because that was the title he likes to carry of himself, that he was the king of the Jews. This kind of vassal king from Rome. He was there in the first century and he was wanting to be the king of the Jews and here come these leaders saying there's a prophetic scriptural king of the Jews who is supposed to be born and we want to know where he's born. He is a king. He's royalty. We saw his star when it rose and we preached and talked about that, did our research on those things in the past. But here's the important thing in this context. When it comes to the king, what kind of king is he? We've come to worship him.

Now, you might think of the pagan nations that surrounded Israel as a bunch of polytheists, but they weren't, at least in this case. The Persian Magi we know historically we're monotheists. They were Zoroastrians and that was certainly not the religion of the Bible, but they were those who recognize that there was one king and one authority. And the thing about monotheism, in particular Judaism, is that you don't give worship or that kind of homage to an earthly leader. You only give that to a divine king. And the king, of course, for all Jews was to be recognized as that God, that infinite, transcendent God who dwells in unapproachable light. And even in this passage to the Jews, we have introduced in the writings of the second chapter of Matthew a picture of some kind of divinity here in this child, in this toddler in Bethlehem, being reflected in part by his title and the gifts that they bring, the gift that you would bring to royalty. What a strange scene it must have been to bring gifts of gold. It doesn't say they're giving it to the parents, they're giving it to the child as an act of homage and then bowing down before this child and worshipping him. A strange sight, indeed.

Yet he didn't grow up like a king. He was born of these parents from Nazareth. They didn't seem like they had a lot of money. I'm sure they would be very glad to receive these expensive commodities. But it seemed like to them on the outside, at least for most of Jesus' life, that he was just a normal person. Matter of fact, he was a roaming rabbi who didn't even have, according to

Luke 9, a place to lay his head. Yet that title carried through not only because it was fulfilling Scripture, but even in his death, you might remember, hanging over his head, you remember Pilate directed the Roman soldiers to write an inscription over his head. Do you remember that? And the Pharisees, they objected. They didn't want this inscription over his head. But it was the thing that he was being called from his toddler years. He was being called the king of the Jews.

It was written in three different languages. "Melech," the Hebrew word for "king," right there emblazoned over his head. "Basileus," the Greek word for "king," the common language of the day. Then for the Latins and the Romans standing around, "Rex," the word Rex. He was there hailed with a sign over his head as king, the Melech, the Basileus, the Rex, the king of the Jews, this Jesus from this dusty town of Nazareth, born in Bethlehem because of a census. This was a title that he carried his whole life, even though he was dying this ignoble death on a cross being crucified outside the gates in the city of Jerusalem.

What a strange thing it was and yet this gift certainly representing something that's hard to avoid in Scripture, a picture of royalty given to a child who would bear a title in Scripture and yet wouldn't seem to carry the regal kind of external regalia of any kind of king. Yet he's a king, despite what you might see in terms of the rejection of his people and the rejection of the world. But it's to be recognized within the pages of Scripture that you ought to see him as a king. And he was a king and he is the King and one day he'll return and take his great power, the book of Revelation says, and start to reign. They gave him gifts of gold, and that was easy to figure out.

It's the next one people stumble on. OK, gold, king, I get that. That seems to make sense. But what's this frankincense all about? Well, that's a good question. You want to buy some gold, you go online, you can buy gold for \$1,400 an ounce, but you can buy a bag of frankincense on Amazon for \$14. So if you want to get into the game of the gifts to the Magi, you can start here. I love the descriptions, by the way, on Amazon, they're very telling. And I like this one. It's in small print, but "it smells like church." (audience laughing) So whatever else you gather from frankincense, I guess you know this: according to this description, at least, it's going to smell like church. And I'm not sure that's all that bad of a description, in part because of how this was used.

Let's start at the beginning as most people don't even know what frankincense is. You've got to go down to a particular kind of tree that's native to the Arabian Peninsula. In that Arabian Peninsula, there's a kind of tree, a genus of tree, that you could harvest frankincense from. You harvest it from the bark or from the tree itself. If the bark, and this is sure how it was discovered, was maybe picked on by the beak of some bird, or in somehow it was injured by, you know, the scraping of some, you know, cart coming up next to it. When the injury to that bark took place, what you would have or you could do this manually with a tool, what you would have is the secretion of this resin that would come out of the tree. That resin, as it dried, could be scraped off and collected from the tree and that would be from this particular kind of tree, it would be what we know of today as frankincense. You could collect it and put it in some kind of container and you would have a container of frankincense that came from the resin that would seep out of a tree. You'd let it sit, you'd let it harden, you'd scrape it off, you put it together and you would collect it.

Now, why in the world would you collect frankincense? What would be the purpose? Well, the purpose would be that it smelled good. In the Bible, the Bible says we want this to be a very important feature. Matter of fact, a very exclusive feature of that worship center, Moses, that

you're going to construct by my instructions. We want to make sure not only is it gilded with gold to reflect the royalty of God and the great kingship of God, we want this thing, frankincense, to be the thing that you encounter in the aroma of your nostrils. You smell it. "The Lord says to Moses," take for instance in this case, "take sweet spices," and we named three of them here, "stacte, onycha and galbanum." You're impressed at that. You don't need to applaud at that. But there are three words you don't normally say in a given week.

Those were three of these spices and they're pretty much nondescript, at least in most people's minds. Biblically, they're here and they're there and gone and yet one thing that is the dominant feature of the sweet spices that you have is that you're supposed to include those around, as though the main entree is in this thing that you're making in Exodus 30, you're making it "with pure frankincense." So that is the main course. And the dish that you are now creating through these other ingredients so that you can "have with the equal parts of all of these things added to the pure frankincense an incense that's blended by," and we know that it's meant to smell good with this phrase, "it's blended by the perfumer, seasoned with salt." Then here are some important words. It's "pure." It's to be done carefully by the refiner of a perfumer. And it's supposed to be "holy." And the word holy means it's to be set apart and unique and uniquely utilized.

Matter of fact, it says you can beat all of this into a small kind of granular dish here that you keep together. It's part of the testimony of the tent of meeting it's to be kept there. That's the a.k.a. for the Tabernacle where you worship. And it says there, the tent of meeting, is a place where I come, symbolically, here and meet with the people. You're going to come to worship me at this place. And the thing is, it's going to be a holy aroma that is then used in this worship center and it's going to be exclusively for that. That incense is what we'd call the compound now. The incense that you burn, you shall make it according to its composition and you shall not make it for yourselves. It shall be set apart and wholly for the Lord.

Now, that's important, we have a dish there that the main ingredient is the pure frankincense. You've got some other things to bring out the certain kind of aroma in that, and that is to be used only at the worship center. Smells like church. Not a bad description of the i.d. here of what you're experiencing in your olfactory senses as you go to worship and you smell this. That was part of the worship experience, and God said, I want that to be what you come in and smell. And the reason you're going to smell it, one reason is because it's going to be on this thing called the incense altar and it's going to be burning there and you can't even get near this without smelling it. And that is going to be a dominant feature of what you smell.

It should be holy to the Lord, it says, it goes on to say, and you shall make it, whoever makes it, makes any like it, if you make any, if you try and replicate this smell, it says, to use it as a perfume, you're going to be cut off from the people. Now, think about that. Here's a unique kind of thing. At the core of it, it's this pure frankincense that's got these special ingredients to bring out the aroma of the frankincense and you can't make that for anything else. If you go to worship and you go, "I really like this. I'm going to try and figure out how to make this for myself." You would be ejected from the people of Israel.

Which, by the way, should be on the warning label when you go to get your Essential Oil Sacred Frankincense, because you usually get kicked out of church if you have this on your person. I'm just kidding. It's just a joke. And I'm realizing Essential Oil jokes in Orange County don't go over

very well. (audience laughing) But I'm just kidding. I had a little kid come up after the last service saying, "You really can't have that?" No, no, I'm kidding. You can eat bacon. You can have a ham omelet. This is the Old Testament ceremonial law and in the Old Testament ceremonial law, you couldn't have frankincense and it was sacred frankincense and you shouldn't be selling it unless you're selling it to the church. I'm just... It's a joke, everyone (audience laughing). Don't write me.

Back to the serious stuff. Leviticus Chapter 2 was not only that it was constantly burning in the background of the worship center. When anyone brings a grain offering, now think about this, you are so used to thinking about the animals being sacrificed. A lot of the sacrifices were what was grown in the field. You bring a grain offering or you bring something that you created as a meal with flour and oil. So, "If anyone brings a grain offering as an offering to the Lord, it shall be made a fine flour, shall pour oil on it, and shall put frankincense on it." That's the thing that gives it the smell. It gives it that aroma. "And you to bring it to Aaron's sons, the priests. And you shall take it from a handful of fine flour and oil with all of its frankincense," the dominant thing that's going to make it smell, "The priest shall burn it as it's memorial portion on the altar, a food offering with a", and here's the picture, "a pleasing aroma to the Lord." Now, the Lord doesn't have nostrils. He doesn't smell anything. The picture here is one of you smelling, "Oh, I love that smell. It smells so good. I can't replicate this in my diffuser at home. I can't make this in the backyard on the barbecue. It's something I can only smell when I go to worship God."

And the Bible says, picture me now, God says, accepting that offering. You bring that offering, you bring that thing that you are saying, "I know I'm imperfect, but I'm bringing you this offering so that you'll, in this case, look past my imperfection, my sin and my transgression, you'll look beyond that. I'll have atonement for those sins, a covering of those sins because of your sacrificial requirement. And you can now receive what I'm doing, receive what I'm saying, receive me as a person. Just like someone would go, "Ah, that smells so good." That picture there of that odor, that aroma being exclusively as a picture of you coming to present yourself to meet the Lord in the worship center. So all those clouds you see in the depictions of the pictures of the Old Testament, yes, some of them smelled like a barbecued because you were barbecuing animals and you're feasting on those with the Levites. But you know what? A lot of the smells that you would smell if you came to any worship center in the Tabernacle or 600 years later in Solomon's Temple would be the fragrant aroma of frankincense. That was a key thing.

Now, Matthew didn't explain any of that. He just itemizes it. God reveals that that was what was brought. Historically, that's the case. But I think anyone who's well-versed in the Old Testament who reads that, and that was the audience of the gospel of Matthew, they would think, no doubt, about the reality of the worship center and the aromas coming up before God.

How did Christ serve in that way? Well, it smells like church. That's true. And the idea of you being right with God is the picture of you coming to a place where you're having some kind of connection with something, some mediatorial, some intermediate person, some kind of intercessor who is going to make what you bring before God, as you meet with God, going to make you right before God. In Revelation Chapter 3 has the picture of you bringing your request, bringing your praise, bringing everything that you want to communicate to God and having it be acceptable. That's the picture of the censer. And that was always dominated by the smell of frankincense. It was given in this picture of the Heavenly Tabernacle. It was given, this incense, to offer with the prayers of the saints on the golden altar before the throne, the incense altar, and the smoke of the incense with all the prayers of the saints. It arose before God from the hand of

the angel and, of course, the picture always was that fragrant aroma acceptable to God. God now listening to the prayers of his people. How is that? Because the Bible says that that sacrifice was acceptable to God.

Jesus comes to bring himself as the sacrifice that takes away the sins of the world. The Bible says that there is a problem we have, Christ solves it, God now looks at me, and though anyone could bring a charge against me because of my sin, God says no one can bring a charge against you because I have justified you. Who is there left to condemn? Christ is the one who was that sacrifice, that offering, who rose up acceptably before God. More than did he died, he didn't just die. It was proven that it was acceptable and that God accepted that sacrifice. He was raised and is at the right hand of God. Indeed, he is like that fragrant intercessory smell, that aroma. He is interceding for us. That's why we pray in Jesus' name. We start with a prayer of repentance in Jesus' name. We say, God, I want you to accept who I am, sinful, fallen, broken, transgressing your law. But I want you to accept me. The only way to do that, the Bible says, is through the agency, the intermediate mediatorial work of Christ offering himself as a sacrifice on our behalf.

They bring an offering. One of the offerings is something that would be so set in the minds of the Jewish educated person as a fragrant offering to God that is acceptable. Christ now receives that and his house in Bethlehem is now filled with the aroma of frankincense, the dominant smell and aroma acceptable to God because Christ would make us acceptable to God.

We have the gift of gold, a royal gift, the gift to frankincense, a priestly gift, a gift that reminds us of our acceptability through another. Then lastly, we have the picture of this thing called myrrh, which you can also buy in bags in different qualities. You can get it for about the same price, a little bit less than you can the frankincense available online. But what is that? Same thing. It's a resin out of a tree, a different kind of tree, with a different aroma and a different smell. And that tree you harvested those congealed parts of that, and then the pattern in Scripture was you took those resin pellets and you took them and put them in oil and you liquified them. Myrrh was known and used throughout the Old Testament, most often in a liquefied form, as it says in Exodus Chapter 30 verses 22 through 25.

The Lord's giving instruction about that worship center and it says, "Take the finest spices." At the top of that list was not only frankincense, it was that different now odor, the liquid smell, the aroma of myrrh, liquid myrrh, "500 shekels." And it breaks down all the ways that we're supposed to do it. You've got some cane in it and cassia and you've got all the instructions on how to make it. You're going to "make it as a sacred anointing oil blended as by the perfumer; it shall be a holy anointing oil." So anointing oil. Here is an oil now that has a perfumer smell. It smells different than the frankincense, but it was liquefied and put into an oil canister. The old oil canisters were usually, at least used around the Old Testament, a horn of an animal. It makes a perfect hollowed-out space that you could carry around this sacred anointing oil. It was only to be used for the act of anointing. Anointing means to pour or to cover something in. And you would do that in a ceremony in the Old Testament of pouring this oil that smells a particular way. It was a good smelling, perfume-smelling oil, but it had that flavor and that aroma of myrrh. And it would be used to pour on the head of people on the occasion of three different classes of people in the Bible.

The prophets would be anointed who now could authorize the spokesperson role that they fulfilled in telling us what God's thoughts are. The priest, who would accept our sacrifices, had to



be anointed with the anointing oil that smelled of myrrh, and the king had to be anointed with the horn of oil from the prophet to anoint and set apart someone as the king of Israel. The prophet, the priest, the king, all anointed with the smell and aroma of myrrh. That's what you had as the instructions of the Old Testament.

You say, "But I remember myrrh in the gospel there in Mark 15. Myrrh shows up when he's on the cross being crucified and the Roman soldier, when he said I thirst, came over with his sponge filled with wine and myrrh. They offered it to Christ. So in his death the next time we get the reference to myrrh in Scripture goes from the gift when he was a toddler to it being shown up here as being offered him and he refuses it in this scene on the cross. You'll see in a minute, he refuses it a second time when we see the other scene in John Chapter 19, when he dies and they carry out the custom of how they took steps to preserve the body in the grave. When they put it in a crypt or in a sepulcher or in the ground, they would wrap it in myrrh.

Nicodemus, you might remember he was the one, as it says here in Chapter 19, way back in Chapter 3 of John had come to Jesus in the shadows of darkness to ask him about eternal life. That's when Jesus said "you need to be born again." "God so loved the world." All those verses came out of that conversation with Nicodemus. "He comes to the tomb bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, about 75 pounds." I'm thinking about how what a big, heavy bag that was. That was a lot that you would wrap in this kind of mummified picture of putting these spices around the body for obvious reasons as a body would decompose in the grave. It was part of the preserving process, which has always been a part of the biblical burial practices in the Bible all the way back to the Hebrews, which were borrowing the embalming practices of the Egyptians.

Nevertheless, in the case of Christ, they wrap him in all of this, they put his body there in the grave of Joseph of Arimathea, and they did it with linen cloths and all those spices. It smelled of myrrh. It's the regular practice of the Jews as they put a body into the grave. So here is Jesus' body in a grave after his crucifixion. That picture of him being an acceptable sacrifice. That smell, if you will, of frankincense. Now he's encased in a grave with the smell and aroma of myrrh that you might have had of an anointed one, if he was anointed by a king, as a king or a priest or a prophet. But the Bible says that, of course, he didn't need those spices and he didn't need his body preserved because he wasn't going to stay in that grave very long. The whole point of the Christian faith is that that sacrifice of Christ, that fragrant aroma before the Father was acceptable and therefore death didn't have a hold on Christ, he conquered death by walking out of the grave, folding up the grave clothes and all of the 75 pounds of spice that reeked of the aroma of myrrh, it doesn't reek of it, it smelled as good as myrrh smells, it was a fragrant aroma, and he walks out.

The Bible says that David, as he speaks of the corruption of the flesh in the grave, says there's going to be someone who is not abandoned to the grave. He will not see corruption. And Peter quotes that in Acts Chapter 2 and then he speaks of David. He says, you know what, that statement about the king not undergoing corruption in the grave can't possibly refer to David. He's not referring to himself, he says, because I can tell you the father David, the patriarch David, both died and was buried. You can go to his tomb. It's with us here in Jerusalem to this day. But Peter says, but in his role, not just as king, but as a prophet, David knew that God had sworn an oath to him that one day he would set one of his descendants on his throne. That's the fulfillment of the Davidic Covenant. And he foresaw and spoke about the resurrection of Christ.

That's what that passage speaks to, that he wouldn't undergo corruption, that he wouldn't decay and decompose in a grave. "He was not abandoned to Hades," to the grave, "nor did his flesh see corruption." "This Jesus was raised up, and we are all witnesses of it." That was the whole point of the preaching of Peter at the day of Pentecost in Acts Chapter 2. Jesus is not bound by the grave. The wages of sin was death. Christ paid that fully. The frankincense offering was acceptable. He now is raised from the dead, and the myrrh is only the myrrh of the anointing and not the myrrh of the grave. He is freed from all of that. "We've seen him alive." Now he's "exalted at the right hand of God, and we've received from the Father the promise of the Spirit." We are fully acceptable to him. He's granted his Spirit. He's poured it out today on ourselves. You've seen it yourselves. You're seeing it here. You've heard of it and all the phenomenal things that went in Acts Chapter 2, and they say God has fulfilled his promise.

Three gifts, all speaking of three different aspects of Christ's offices, that he comes to fulfill the kingly role as the authority. He has all authority. He's a king. He's greater than the king that you might give your homage to or your taxes to. He's one you would give your worship to. He would make us right with God. The frankincense is a reminder of the acceptability of sacrifices before God. But the only one sacrifice that would ever do, the one sacrifice that would put all the other symbolic sacrifices into a position of being absolutely null and void and passé. Then, of course, the myrrh reminds us, I think clearly, of the death of Christ where it is not even needed, the conquering of death in the grave. Three gifts, symbolic. We can only piece together through the Scriptures how these might have been perceived by first-century Jews who recognized the importance of gold, frankincense and myrrh. And I think that plays itself out in the New Testament. So those wise men, the Magi, in your kid's play or in that nativity set on your mantel, is a reminder to us of the first Christmas gifts that were presented to magnify, to express, to accentuate the roles of Christ.

Now, God doesn't want your gold, it isn't needed. He doesn't need your frankincense. He doesn't need your myrrh. We don't need any of those symbols anymore. What we need is a response to what those things mean. If Christ really has all authority and you'd like to give Christ a Christmas gift, then the Christmas gift you need to give him is what you should do in response to one who has all authority. As Jesus ended his ministry, he says, "I have all authority." Then he gives instructions and expects you to surrender your will to those instructions. He asks you to obey him and to do what he says. He sends his apostles with his instructions to represent what he wants you to do. How he'd like you to live. He wants to be your good shepherd, John 10, and be the King of your life and the Lord of your heart and all that is required. The only thing that is acceptable is a full surrender to the regal and sovereign authority of Christ.

And if he's a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice to God, then you should trust in him. And you should look across the aisle at anyone else who's got some other way to try and get right with the living God, the creator that created them, and say, sorry, Jesus said there's only one exclusive means of salvation, and everyone should be called to put their trust in Christ. As he said, "I'm the way, the truth, the life, and no one's going to come to the Father except through me." You want the acceptable prayers to come before the Father, you have to pray in Jesus' name. You have to come and express your confidence in being accepted to God only through your dependence on Christ. If you were to die today and stand before God, the only means you would have to be acceptable before God is to say I trust exclusively in Christ and his authority and his finished work for me on the cross, living in my place and dying in my place.

Then the good news is, the reminder of myrrh, as the depiction of the anointed one, the holy one who would be anointed with that aroma and not needing that preserving agent in the grave, we've got a conquering king who's conquered death for us. There should be a confident hope that this life is not all there is, that our minds are set in another place that we're praying for daily the coming of a kingdom, that we have our hearts and our citizenship in heaven. From there, we're waiting for our savior to return until the kingdoms of the world become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ. That's the picture of the Christian. The problem of mortality being replaced by the hope in immortality, living for a new world that the Bible says is promised. Full surrender, exclusive trust, a confident hope that you're not, as the world so often is, so fixated on what happens here and all of their joy and all their happiness dependent on those things. We recognize that when we do grieve, we don't grieve as the rest of the world that has no hope. I trust that your hope and your trust and your surrender and allegiance are in the King of kings and Lord of lords, represented well by the first Christmas gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. I hope that makes for a good wish list, if you will, for Christ that you can give to him as you exchange gifts with one another.

Let's pray. God, help us in our day when we have so many reasons for people to tell us that we shouldn't put our exclusive trust in Christ and we shouldn't bow to the authority of this God of the Bible and the Christ that he set up as Lord. People saying, "Well, you know what? How can you be sure about what lies beyond the grave?" All of these things that people might say to us that would make it harder in our day, perhaps inviting the ridicule of our world to really give our full surrender to the Jesus of the Bible, to say that Jesus is my only hope. It's not my good deeds, it's not my good works, it's nothing else but Christ alone. And then to be able to say, God, my hope is not in this world. It's not in the kings of this world, the governments of this world, the economy of this world. My hope is in the Christ who's gone to prepare a place for me. He's going to come again and receive us unto himself, that where he is, we'll be also. God, give us a confident hope, an exclusive trust and a full surrender to the King of kings and Lord of lords.

In Jesus' name. Amen.