

Biblical Backgrounds of Current Christmas Customs and Symbols



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INTRODUCTION

Note: This program may be used by itself for teaching or individual devotions. It will be most informative and helpful if it is used with the accompanying document containing more information, *Biblical Backgrounds of Current Christmas Customs and Symbols: PowerPoint Guide and Commentary.*

- The Bible is the background and foundation of our culture in America and throughout much of the West.
- The Bible is the basis for current Christmas customs and symbols.
- The Gospel of Jesus Christ is displayed through Christmas customs and symbols.
- We discern a threefold structure in the Gospel message: guilt, grace, and gratitude; or sin, salvation, and service.

I. Guilt is the result of our sin.

The soldiers twisted together a crown of thorns and put it on his head. They clothed him in a purple robe. (John 19:2)

- The Advent color, purple, signifies penitence for our sin and preparation for the coming (advent) of the King.

I. Guilt: the result of our sin.

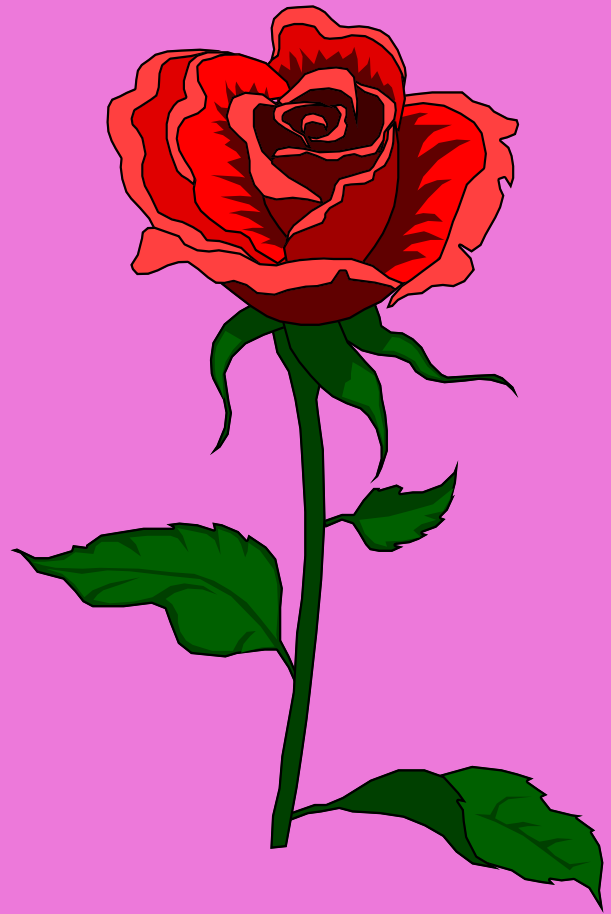
And so John came, baptizing in the desert region and preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. (Mark 1:4)

I. Guilt: the result of our sin.

The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose.

(Isaiah 35:1 KJV)

- In the Messianic Rose Old Testament prophecy links Christ's 1st and 2nd advents.



II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

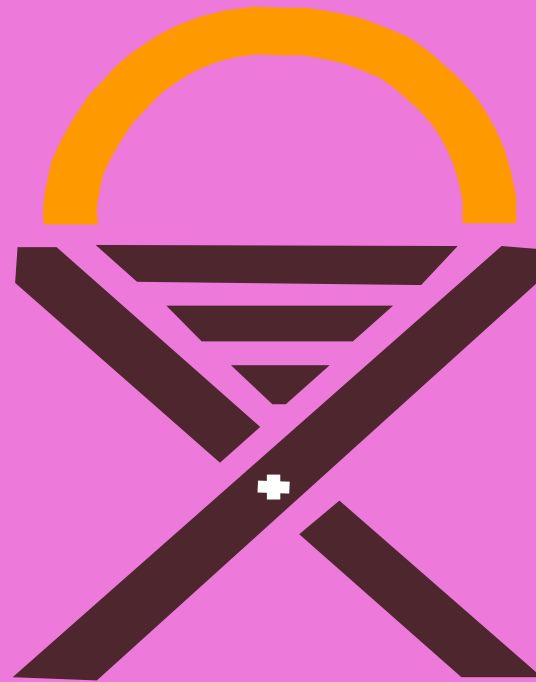
- The poinsettia symbolizes God with us, Immanuel, in redemption in the typology of the burning bush. (Exodus 3:2, Luke 19:44b)



II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

[Mary] gave birth to her firstborn, a son. She wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn.
(Luke 2:7)

- The manger symbolizes Jesus' humble birth.



II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

- In Luke 2:7 the Greek word for inn is *kataluma*, the area in a home, typically a cave in first century A.D. Bethlehem, where people slept at night. The *kataluma* was in the front of the cave. This is why we don't read of any innkeeper.
- The manger for the animals was in the back of the cave.



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II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

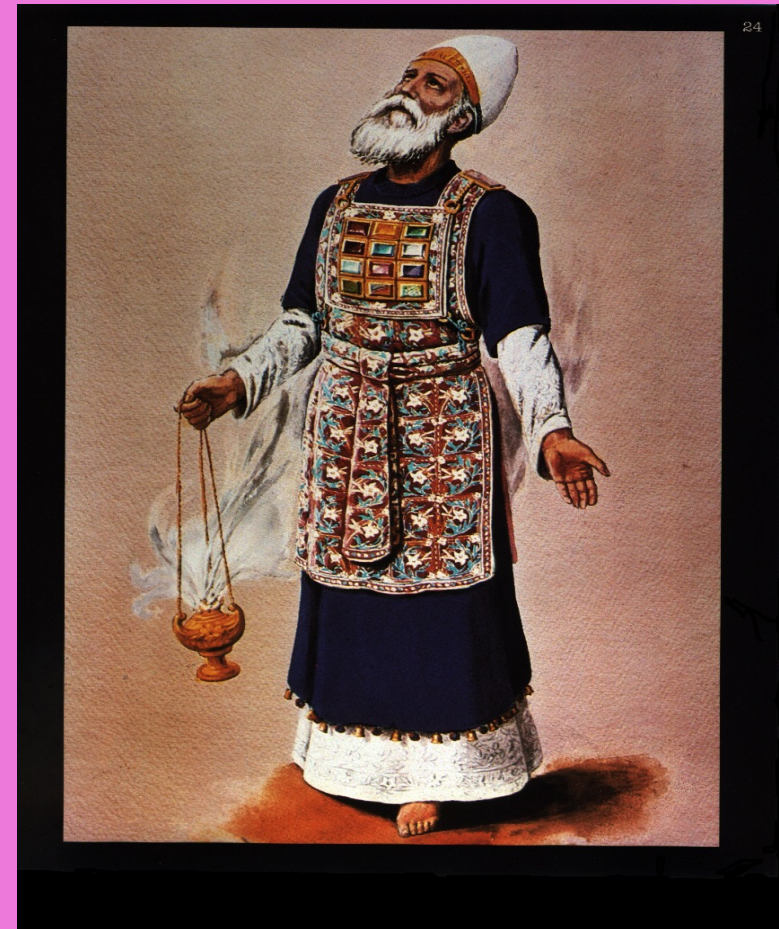
- Bells announce the birth of Christ and call his people to worship.
- Using bells to celebrate the birth of Christ is thought to have begun by Bishop Paulinus of Nola in Campania, Italy, who died in AD 431.
- Bell ringing to celebrate Christ was used to eclipse a pagan superstition in the Middle Ages.



II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

And upon its hem you shall make pomegranates of blue, purple, and scarlet, all around its hem, and bells of gold between them all round...And it shall be upon Aaron when he ministers, and its sound will be heard when he goes into the holy place before the LORD and when he comes out, that he may not die.
(Exodus 28:31-35)

- God told Moses to have bells put on the robe under the high priest's ephod, a sleeveless vestment worn by the high priest over the robe of blue cloth with bells and alternating pomegranates around the hem.



II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

When Christ came as high priest...he went through the greater and more perfect tabernacle...he has appeared to do away with sin by the sacrifice of himself. (Hebrews 9:11-28)

- Matthew Henry observed that the bells of Aaron's robe “typify the sound of the gospel of Christ in the world, giving notice of His entrance within the veil for us,” which is what he came to do. He finished that work on Calvary. (Matthew 27:51)



II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

- To inspire and to teach the meaning of the birth of Jesus, St. Francis of Assisi built a life-size stable in a cave in Graecia, near Assisi in 1223.
- The crèche came to be used in homes as well as in churches.
- The Magi (wise men) may have visited while Jesus was in the manger (the crèche).
(Matthew 2:11)



II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

Jesus...said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life." (John 8:12)

- Candles symbolize the light Jesus brought into the world.



"His love is the light of the world."

II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

During the season of Advent, when we celebrate the first coming of Christ, we notice all the beautiful lights. Remember what Jesus said, “I have come as a light for the world in order that everyone believing in me may not remain in the darkness.” (John 12:46, my translation) Jesus, here saying he is a light, is referring also to the prophets who testified about him, who thus were also lights pointing to the Christ to come: Jesus, THE light of the world. (John 8:12). The Greek word for world (κόσμος [*kosmos*]) in 8:12 refers to the whole world, including all the spiritual darkness in it now. Jesus later said, “I have told you these things, so that in me you may have peace. In this world you will have trouble. But take heart, I have overcome [Greek: νενίκηκα (*nenikēka*) conquered] the world” with all its evil. (John 16:33) What comfort and peace this reality provides! We celebrate now his first coming; in his second coming, our celebration will be huge and eternal!

II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

For your sake, for your loved ones' sake, and for all others, the Lord has called us to proclaim his Good News; don't neglect to point them beyond Santa, gifts, digital devices, and the other temporal and short-lived delights of the season. Point them to the One it is all about, and with his help you can all do far more than just cope...you can rejoice and thank God! As you look at the beautiful lights, think about Jesus, and contemplate the eternal light and joy who will not fade, the One who conquers all darkness, Christ the Lord!

II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

We also consider the meaning of the colors of Advent and Christmas. They significantly represent and remind us of who Christ Jesus is and what he came to do, filling us with joy as we contemplate:

- blue signifying Jesus' royalty, kingship;
- red signifying his shed blood for the redemption of our sins;
- green signifying the resultant life eternal for all who believe and do God's will;
- white signifying purity, victory, holiness, perfection, and celebration (cf., e.g., Revelation 3:4-6; 7:9-17; 19:11-16).

II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.



The colors at Christmas are very significant. Use them for talking with family members, or with people in a witness for the Lord, about why Christ came. When looking at a Christmas tree or driving by a beautiful display, as in this photo in a mall in our city, ask, “Have you ever thought about what the beautiful Christmas lights signify?” Questions, especially when timely asked, motivate further thought. Notice how Jesus often used questions.

II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

*For as in Adam all die,
so in Christ all will be
made alive.*

(1 Corinthians 15:22)



- The color green symbolizes life which has been given by Christ to people who have been dead in sin.

II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

Jesus said... "I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live." (John 11:25)

- The green circular wreath symbolizes eternal life in Christ.



II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

The soldiers twisted a crown of thorns and put it on his head. (John 19:2)

- The wreath, especially with the pointed holly leaves, also recalls Jesus' crown of thorns.
- The holly berries portray the blood he shed as “again and again they [the soldiers] struck him on the head.” (Mark 15:19)



II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

...making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.

(Colossians 1:20)

- The color red symbolizes the blood Jesus shed for the complete remission of all our sinfulness and sins.



II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

*...peace through his blood,
shed on the cross.*
(Colossians 1:20)

- The red bows remind us of the blood Jesus shed to redeem us, which is the reason for his first advent.
- View the long and broad ribbon on bows which graphically, profoundly, and stirringly depicts streams of Jesus' blood.



II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

The Advent wreath's candles symbolize five key aspects of the Messiah's coming.

1st candle: **promise**.

To us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. (Isaiah 9:6)



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The Advent wreath's candles symbolize five key aspects of the Messiah's coming.

2nd candle: **waiting**

The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call his name Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)



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The Advent wreath's candles symbolize five key aspects of the Messiah's coming.

3rd candle: **peace**

He will judge between many peoples and will settle disputes... swords into plow-shares....

(Micah 4:3)



II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

The Advent wreath's candles symbolize five key aspects of the Messiah's coming.

4th candle: hope

The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David...; his kingdom will never end.
(Luke 1:32-33)



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The Advent wreath's candles symbolize five key aspects of the Messiah's coming.

5th candle: joy, adoration, and the purity and victory of Christ

I bring you good news of great joy...for all the people...he is Christ the Lord. (Luke 2:10-11)



II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.
(Galatians 4:4-5 NASB)

The Date: December 25?

The Bible does not say the precise date Jesus was born. Edersheim explains why December 25 is reasonable. Others say early Christians set that date to eclipse the pagan festivals of Saturnalia and *Sol Invictus* pertaining to the winter solstice.

II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

The bread of God is he who comes...and gives life. (John 6:33)

- In medieval times the Garden of Eden was depicted by one fir decorated with apples (symbolic of man's fall). Later wafers (symbolic of man's salvation) were added.



II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

What will you do with your natural Christmas tree?

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who is hung on a tree." (Galatians 3:13)

"We are witnesses of everything he did in the country of the Jews and in Jerusalem. They killed him by hanging him on a tree,... " (Acts 10:39)

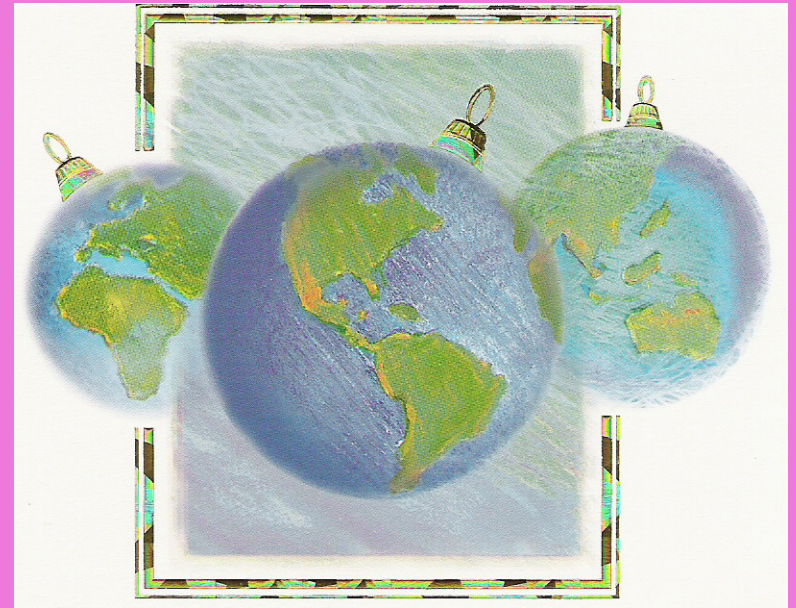
- The Tree Cross, used as a worship aid in this church, is made from the trunk of a Christmas tree, and is used at Easter to remind worshipers of why Jesus came. It links Christmas with Easter. The figures are Mary and the Risen Christ.



II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

...go and make disciples of all nations.... (Matthew 28:19)

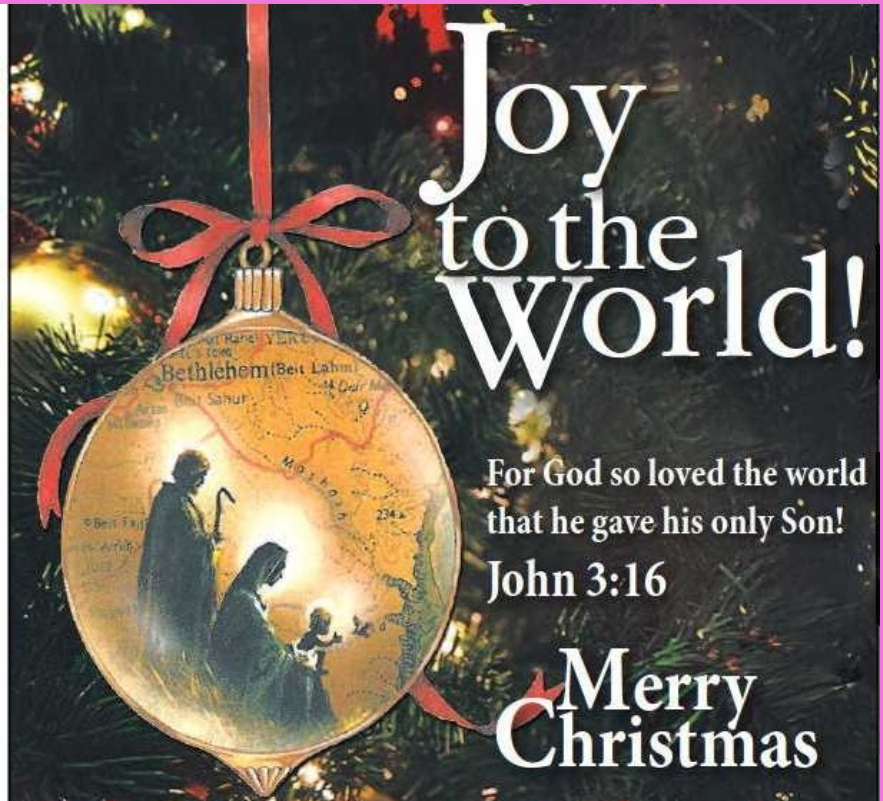
- Ball ornaments represent the world, created and redeemed by God in and through Jesus Christ.
- The different colors also symbolize the Gospel's being for "every tribe and language and people and nation" around the globe. (Luke 2:10, 14; John 3:16; Revelation 5:9)



II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

Ball ornaments represent the world Jesus came to redeem and into which he has commissioned those who believe in and follow him to go.

(Luke 2:10, 14; John 3:16; Matthew 28:19; Revelation 5:9)



II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

And there were shepherds living out in the fields nearby, keeping watch over their flocks at night.
(Luke 2:8)

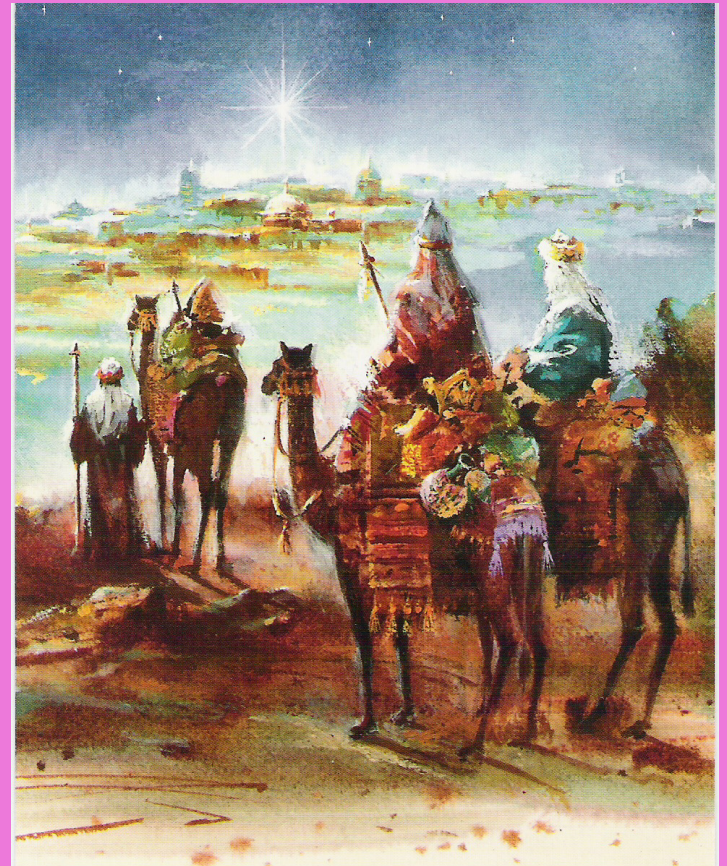
- Candy canes portray the staffs of the Bethlehem shepherds and the red stripes Jesus' blood: thin stripes representing his scourging; large stripes his blood from the cross. White recalls his purity and victory.



II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

“We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him.” (Matthew 2:2)

- The star symbolizes the spiritual light Jesus brought into the world of darkness.
- The star also reminds us of the one the Magi saw.



II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

God sent...Gabriel...to Mary.... “Greetings, to you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”
(Luke 2:13-14)

- Angels appear five times in the Nativity narratives of Matthew and Luke.



II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

The child is destined...to be a sign that will be spoken against...a sword will pierce your own soul too. (Luke 2:34-35)

- Forty days after Jesus' birth the Holy Spirit inspired Simeon to tell Mary what Jesus came to do, graphically depicted by the Passion Cross.



II. Grace: the unearned blessing of God whereby he's taken away our sin and guilt as only he can.

*For God so loved the world,
that he gave his only begotten
Son, that whosoever believeth
in him should not perish, but
have everlasting life.*

(John 3:16, KJV)

- While too rarely seen as a symbol of Christmas, the cross is the reason Jesus came.



III. Gratitude: always in the Bible the believer's daily expression in response to God's grace

*A great company
appeared...praising God
and saying, "Glory to
God..." (Luke 2:13 ff)*

- Carols' predecessors were the psalms and hymns Jesus, his disciples, and the church sang in gratitude. (Acts 16:25)
- Angels' praises may have been sung.



III. Gratitude: always in the Bible the believer's daily expression in response to God's grace

For the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.
(Romans 6:23)

- We give gifts in recognition of God's giving the greatest gift of his only begotten Son for us.



III. Gratitude: always in the Bible the believer's daily expression in response to God's grace

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem² and asked, "Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star in the east and have come to worship him." (Matthew 2:1-2)

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III. Gratitude: always in the Bible the believer's daily expression in response to God's grace

They bowed down and worshipped him. Then they...presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. (Matthew 2:11)

- The gifts we give represent the gifts of the wise men (Magi).
- The most important aspect of the Magi's adoration of Christ is that they were pagan gentiles, another of the statements throughout God's Word that it is his will that his people proclaim his plan of salvation to every nation, tribe, people and language. (Revelation 7:9)



III. Gratitude: always in the Bible the believer's daily expression in response to God's grace

Frankincense is resin from trees of the genus *Boswellia*. It was burned on the altar of incense in the tabernacle's Holy Place. (Exodus 30:1-8)

Frankincense is one of the gifts of the Magi (Matt. 2:11) which fulfilled Isaiah's prophecy that gold and frankincense would be brought from the Gentiles to honor the heavenly king. (Isaiah 60:6)



III. Gratitude: always in the Bible the believer's daily expression in response to God's grace

Frankincense is the purest incense. It was burned on the altar of incense in the tabernacle's Holy Place, thus an offering to God, indicating Jesus' divinity. Frankincense also makes a white smoke symbolizing the prayers of God's people. (Exodus 30:1-8; Revelation 5:8, 8:3-4)



III. Gratitude: always in the Bible the believer's daily expression in response to God's grace

The word, myrrh, refers to an aromatic gum, and the perfume extracted from it. Myrrh has been used from ancient times for medicinal purposes, including to heal wounds, and to prepare bodies for burial. Thus, the Magi's gift of myrrh points to Jesus' destiny to suffer and die a special death. (Cf. John 19:38-42, esp. v. 39; Matthew 26:12; Mark 14:4,8)



III. Gratitude: always in the Bible the believer's daily expression in response to God's grace

*Christ Jesus...being in very nature God,.. made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant.
(Philippians 2:6 ff)*

- The gifts we give also reflect the desire of believers to emulate the unselfishness of Christ.



III. Gratitude: always in the Bible the believer's daily expression in response to God's grace

- The original St. Nicholas was a benevolent and wealthy 4th century bishop who gave to those in need.
- He was a delegate to the Council of Nicea (A.D. 325), which testified that the Father and the Son are two distinct persons who share the same substance. (John 10:30)



III. Gratitude: always in the Bible the believer's daily expression in response to God's grace

*Jesus said...I am the
resurrection and the life.
Those who believe in me, even
though they die, will live,...
(John 11:25)*

- Since it is always green, ivy is another symbol of the eternal life Jesus came to bring for those who believe in and follow him. (John 14:21)



III. Gratitude: always in the Bible the believer's daily expression in response to God's grace

The Lord said, *My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.*
(2 Corinthians 12:9)

- Since it clings to its support, ivy is also a symbol of attachment, undying affection, reliance on one stronger, and fidelity.



CONCLUSION

- Let us now enjoy the Advent and Christmas season to the fullest.
- Let us not fear the non-Christians' and even anti-Christians' attempts to “secularize” Christ out of Christmas; they can't do it anyway. The Triune God is sovereign and everywhere present!

- Let us transform the cultural trappings into the true meaning of Christmas, as the early church did, by
 - + recalling the Biblical message underlying their symbolisms, and by
 - + attaching Biblical significance to those customs we want to use or with which we come into contact (such as Santa Claus to St. Nicholas).
- Always be encouraged by viewing all these matters from this perspective: Jesus told us, “I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” (Matthew 16:18 ESV)

Our Christmas this year and every year will be most rewarding, meaningful, and fulfilling, if we keep in mind the essential meaning of Jesus' first advent: how God has removed our *guilt* by his *grace* through faith in Christ Jesus,

- + letting that understanding shape the perceptions and experiences we have, and then
- + out of *gratitude*, following our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ—i.e., acting in accord with his Word and will in thanksgiving for all he has done for us at such great cost to himself in the most wonderful demonstration of love ever, in his life, suffering, death, and resurrection—throughout the new year and always.

In so doing...

May you have a very merry
Christmas
AND
a new year of joy and fulfillment!

Sources and Resources

- Pictures, graphics, and other quotes are from file documents now in the public domain or from free sources on the Internet.
- Photos: Edward D. Seely
- Videos: Edward D. Seely
 - + Bethlehem Cave clip includes Jeries Farah, Israeli guide.
 - + Granular myrrh (left photo) is from aromaHQ.com.

More information on the subjects in this presentation is available on my general Website at <https://fromacorntooak12.com/> and on my academic Website at <https://seelyedward.academia.edu/research#papers>.

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