

Thoughtful Gifts

Why did the Wise Men give Joseph and Mary gold, frankincense, and myrrh?

Many people believe that it's the thought that counts when it comes to gift giving. Maybe that's because the thought behind the gift makes it more than just a useful or interesting object—it makes the gift a symbol of the gift-giver's love or consideration for the recipient. Some gifts also mean more than the thought behind the gift; these kinds of gifts have a widely accepted symbolism that adds even more significance. When a gift has all three—practical utility, personal value, and symbolic meaning—it may be the most thoughtful and appreciated gift of all.

Consider the thought behind the gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh that the Wise Men gave to the Christ child (see Matthew 2:11). The Bible doesn't say why the Wise Men brought these particular gifts, but all three gifts had practical value and perhaps symbolic meaning for the Son of God and His earthly parents.

Gold

Practical use: For a young couple who would soon have the expense of traveling to Egypt to avoid the wrath of Herod, the gold would be an invaluable gift.

Symbolic meaning: Gold is the typical gift for kings (see 1 Kings 9:14, 28) because it symbolizes kingship and royalty—a fitting gift for the “King of kings” (1 Timothy 6:15).

Frankincense

Practical use: Aside from its considerable monetary value, frankincense was used as a sweet-smelling incense and perfume.

Symbolic meaning: Frankincense comes from a sweet tree resin and was used in priesthood ordinances, in burnt offerings (see Leviticus 2:1), and in oil for anointing priests. Thus, it can represent the Lord's priesthood and His role as the Lamb of God to be sacrificed on our behalf (see John 1:29).

Myrrh

Practical use: Myrrh, a bitter oil from a tree resin, was also economically valuable but probably more beneficial to Mary and Joseph for its medicinal uses.

Symbolic meaning: In the New Testament, myrrh is usually associated with embalming and burial because of its preservative qualities (see John 19:39–40). Myrrh's medicinal uses can symbolize Christ's role as the Master Healer, and its use in burials can symbolize “the bitter cup” He would drink when He suffered for our sins (see D&C 19:18–19). ■

