

**The Heart of Christmas 2 - Frankincense**  
**Pastor Joe Oakley - GFC - 12-22-24**

We're in a sermon series entitled – The Heart of Christmas.

Before I preach this morning I want to urge you to keep Christ in Christmas. Research conducted by the Barna Research Group found that only 37% of adults think the birth of Jesus is the most important aspect of Christmas. To most people, Christmas is about presents, parties and a paid holiday. 44% of the respondents said family time is the most important part of the Christmas celebration. Family is important and gifts, parties and days off are great. But I urge you - don't forget about Jesus as we celebrate His birthday.

If your family has no place for Jesus in your Christmas season, I urge you to put Christ into your Christmas. As the words to Joy to the World say: "Joy to the world, the Lord is come! Let earth receive her King; Let every heart prepare Him room." Have you made room for Jesus in your Christmas celebration?

If not, here's some ways you can do that. First of all, we have a Christmas Eve service here at 6 PM. You can start a family tradition of actually worshipping Christ at Christmas. If you can't be here – and I realize some can't – you can keep Christ in your Christmas by reading the Christmas story from the Bible together. Or maybe you can sing some carols – not just Jingle Bells or songs about Santa – I mean songs about Jesus.

Christmas was always something I anticipated growing up. Why? I was going to get presents! Most years my grandparents would visit and we would have a tree with lots of presents underneath. We would open those gifts on Christmas Eve, and all 5 of us kids would pester our parents all day – "Can we open our gifts now?"

When we became grandparents our grandkids came to our house and pestered us with "Can we open our gifts now?" I still anticipate Christmas. Why? Because I'm getting presents? NO! I'm content with what I have and when people ask me what to buy me, it's hard to think of anything.

What I anticipate about Christmas is the joy of giving to others. I love seeing my grandchildren tear open their presents. The joy I receive is now the joy of giving rather than receiving. I've put away the childish role of getting and taken on the adult role of giving. I've learned the truth that Jesus taught in Acts 20:35

***It is more blessed to give than to receive.***

Some believers are still in the childish mode when it comes to God. They are always focused on receiving from God rather than giving to God. I realize God already has everything – but there are gifts we can give Him - not just at

Christmastime – but all the time!

We find what we can give to God in the Christmas story and the gifts that the wise men brought to Jesus. We find this in Matthew 2:1-11

***Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, saying, "Where is He who has been born King of the Jews? For we have seen His star in the East and have come to worship Him." ... and behold, the star which they had seen in the East went before them, till it came and stood over where the young Child was. When they saw the star, they rejoiced with exceedingly great joy.***

***And when they had 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 gifts to Him: gold, frankincense, and myrrh.***

The wise men gave Jesus gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. We can give to God the same three things. We learned last week that gold represents giving our wealth, frankincense represents giving our worship and myrrh represents giving our whole lives to Him.

Last week Pastor Shireal preached an awesome sermon on Giving God our Gold – our tithes and offerings. Today I'm preaching on Frankincense – Giving God our Worship.

By the way, the essence of worship is giving! Thanksgiving is giving thanks to God for what He has done. Praise is giving glory to God for who He is. Worship it totally giving ourselves to God as a living sacrifice. So let's look at what it means to give God our frankincense.

Frankincense is mentioned 17 times in the Bible. It was used as one of four sweet scents compounded together to make the ceremonial incense of the Jews. It was used in both sacrifices and prayer. Revelation 5:8-9 says:

***The twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb. Each one had a harp and they were holding golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints. And they sang a new song...***

Frankincense represents the prayers and worship of the saints that rises up to God in heaven as a sweet-smelling sacrifice.

I want to remind you that worship is a heart attitude that is outwardly expressed in an appropriate biblical manner. Some people say – I worship God in my heart, so I don't have to show it. But Jesus said John 4:24

***God is Spirit, and those who worship Him must worship in spirit and truth.***

## 1- True worship starts in the heart – but it is expressed outwardly.

We cannot excuse ourselves from worshipping because it is not our personality to be demonstrative. Listen closely – we should not be the ones who determine how we will worship. God is the One who tells us how He wants to be worshipped! And He tells us in His word to sing, shout, clap, dance, and bow down.

When the wise men got close to Jesus – they rejoiced. They rejoiced with exceedingly great joy! And the closer you get to Jesus – the more you will rejoice! Wise men and women worship the Lord today! Even if things don't turn out like you thought!

After all – think about it – the wise men were looking for a king – so they went to the place where the king lived – in Jerusalem. But Jesus was not there! They thought they would find Jesus in the city of kings – but He was in the city of shepherds. You see - Sometimes you follow a star and end up at a stable.

When they wind up in a stable – wise men seek God anyway! When the wise men got close to Jesus – they rejoiced. But they didn't stop there – they pressed on. And when they finally found the Christ – when they got into His presence - the Bible says they fell down and worshipped him.

You see there's a time for singing – shouting – clapping and dancing. But there's a time when the only appropriate response is to fall at His feet and give your frankincense – your worship - to Him. The wise men sought Jesus and when they found Him they worshipped.

## 2. Worship requires seeking God.

Psalm 105:3-4 says:

***Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice. Look to the Lord and His strength; seek His face always.***

You can praise from afar. You can give thanks from a distance. But worship is face-to-face -- up close and personal.

Have you ever walked out of a church service where you felt nothing, only to overhear someone else say, "Wow, what an awesome service! God really showed up today." And you wonder, "Were we in the same service? I didn't feel a thing."

I've been in that place where it seemed everyone was feeling something except me. I just chalked it up to them being more emotional than me. But I had a hunger in me to experience the presence of God. Over time, I learned how to discern the presence of God. I've learned it's not a feeling – it's a spiritual awareness. Not being aware of God's presence will hinder your worship.

I want to encourage those of you who have problems recognizing God's presence by telling you there were people in the Bible who did not recognize the presence of God. For instance, in Genesis 28:10-16 Jacob was traveling and found a place to stop and sleep.

***Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. And behold, the Lord stood above it...***

Then God spoke a blessing over Jacob and his descendants.

***Then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said, "Surely the Lord is in this place, and I did not know it."***

It's possible God is in a place and we don't know it. Jacob was nowhere – He was on his way to somewhere, but he was nowhere - in a place with no name. It was just a wide spot in the road on the way to where he was going. What He did not know was that God was going to turn nowhere into somewhere. It was known forever after as Bethel – the House of God.

You may feel like you are nowhere, but God can turn your nowhere into somewhere in an instant. God can turn your nothing into something. All it takes is for Him to show up and for you to recognize His presence.

We try to make our church as comfortable as we can for people – there's nothing wrong with that. But let me tell you – your surroundings don't dictate whether or not God shows up. You can be in a good place when God shows up or you can be between a rock and a hard place and God can show up and change everything overnight.

Don't give up in your hard times. God can meet you there. After all –

- Daniel encountered God in a lion's den.
- Jonah encountered God in the belly of a whale.
- Paul and Silas encountered God in prison.

So don't give up, don't give in. It's possible God is in some situations right now and you don't see it. The word of the Lord to you in your situation is keep on seeking the Lord and praise Him right where you are! He will show up!

### **3- Worshippers continually draw near to God.**

The wise men travelled a long distance to get near to Jesus. When they got close, they rejoiced. But they didn't stop there – they kept going until they got into His presence. And when they were in His presence they worshipped. Listen, the enemy wants to do everything possible to cause you to pull away from God. He wants you to think God is not good – or serving Him is a waste of time.

But worshippers press through that and draw near to God. Hebrews 10:22 says:

***Let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith.***

We worship by faith – not by sight! It is impossible to worship God in unbelief! I didn't say it's hard. I didn't say it's unlikely. I said it's impossible. How do I know that? The Bible tells me so in Hebrews 11:6.

***Without faith it is impossible to please Him, for he who comes to God must believe that He is, and that He is a rewarder of those who diligently seek Him.***

We must approach God in faith. We must diligently seek Him. He will reward those who diligently seek Him. What's the reward? HIM! We must always diligently seek the Lord - to draw near in faith. Hebrews 10:19-21 says:

***Since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, His body... let us draw near...***

Our confidence in entering the presence of God only comes by the new and living way – the blood of Jesus. We are able to draw near to God to the extent we place our faith in the work of Christ on our behalf rather than our own works.

We must develop the habit of drawing near to God. When we do - James 4:8 promises us –

***Draw near to God and He will draw near to you.***

One of the saddest verses in the Bible is found in Exodus 20. The presence of God came down with smoke and fire at Mt. Sinai. Verse 21 says –

***The people stood afar off, but Moses drew near the thick darkness where God was.***

The difference between Moses and the people was that he drew near to God, but they stood afar off. Moses always drew near to God. We see an example of this in Exodus 3:1-4. Moses saw a bush on fire, but it did not burn up.

***Then Moses said, "I will now turn aside and see this great sight, why the bush does not burn." When the Lord saw Moses coming to take a closer look, God called to him from the middle of the bush, "Moses! Moses!"***

There are things that happen in our lives that look strange. There are things we see that we don't understand. At those times we can choose to walk on by or draw near to God. If we walk on by we miss out on what God is doing.

If we draw near – God will reveal more of Himself to us. When did God speak to Moses? When Moses drew near to look – then God spoke. God didn't yell at Moses as He was passing by, "Hey, Mo! It's the Lord speaking. Come on over here and let's talk." No, Moses drew near first. God responds when we draw near. There's a greater dimension of God's presence we enter when we draw near.

To get into God's presence, we must draw near and we must respond to the voice of God.

It's possible God's in a place and we don't know it.

It's possible God's in an event and we don't know it.

It's also possible God is speaking and we don't recognize His voice.

So, how do we develop our awareness of the presence of God? There are several aspects to the presence of God:

The Omnipresence of God means that He is everywhere at the same time.

The Inner Presence of God - When we are born again, the Holy Spirit lives in us.

The Manifest presence of God means– revealed, evident, obvious, clearly visible, plain, to be aware of.

We can develop of awareness of God's manifest presence by developing our awareness of the God's omnipresence. Romans 1:20 says:

***Since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities — His eternal power and divine nature — have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.***

Become aware of His presence in His creation - a sunrise or sunset, stars, mountains, rivers. Become aware of God in His people. Become aware of God in creation and begin to praise Him for it. Then become aware of His abiding presence within us. Develop an awareness that you are the temple of the Holy Spirit. He lives in you! Become aware of His still small voice.

Then, in corporate worship, when we all worship together, begin to focus on Jesus and draw near to Him.

Once you've experienced the presence of God – nothing else will do! Singing songs is not enough! Praising is not enough! Just having a church service is not enough! Only His presence will ultimately satisfy! You will say like David in Psalm 16:11

***In Your presence is fullness of joy; at Your right hand are pleasures forevermore.***

I will never stand afar off again – I will always draw near to you Lord!

Okay – I’ve saved the best part of this message for the end. I want to let you in on something I discovered about frankincense. Frankincense is made from the sap from a very scraggly but very hardy boswellia tree – also called the frankincense tree.

Different trees produce more or less valuable frankincense based on their climate and their soil. Frankincense trees are considered unusual for their ability to grow in places where nothing else grows. They sometimes grow directly out of solid rock or in places where they barely can grow roots.

Here’s the amazing thing – the rougher the environment, the worse the soil, the harder it is to grow – results in the best - most superior – most costly – most fragrant frankincense.

I almost jumped out of my chair when I discovered this in my study.  
 I got to thinking about the cost of worship.  
 I thought about the sacrifice of praise.  
 I thought about how there are some environments that are hostile to worship.  
 Some people want to shut your worship down!  
 And sometimes your own flesh fights against worship.

Satan definitely wants you to give up on worship! He wants you to think you can’t worship in those tough times – those hard times – those times when it’s dry and hard and nothing good seems to be happening – times when it seems you are barely hanging on to God.

But God says – “That’s the best worship! That’s the best fragrance! That’s the worship I love the most!”

That worship really cost you something.  
 You’re worshipping when you’re between a rock and a hard place!  
 You’re worshipping when you’re barely holding on – barely getting by!  
 That worship is most precious to God.  
 Yes – He loves it when you worship during the good times – but there’s something about worshipping in the tough times that makes it more valuable!  
 You and I are the modern-day wise men, overcoming every obstacle, following Christ no matter what the hardship.

We worship when we’re up and we worship when we’re down!  
 We worship when it’s easy and we worship when it’s difficult.  
 We worship when we feel like it and we worship when we don’t!

Our worship is not dictated by our circumstances, our personality, our feeling or anything other than this – Jesus is Lord and He’s worthy of our worship – all the time – no matter what!

So let’s offer our frankincense – our worship – to Him!