

# SUPERIOR DEVOTION

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Over the last two weekends, we have been considering the arduous journey of the wise men from the Far East to Bethlehem. They came all that way just to find the young King of the Jews and worship Him and present Him with their gifts—gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

Our hope is to discover in their story, help for our own, to learn what it is to worship God with all that is in within us, thus fulfilling God's primary commandment.

## **True Worship**

What is true worship? Is it singing loudly about God?

Is worship true if we stand to our feet and lift our hands?

These things may express worship, but true worship is not found in these expressions, because worship is a matter of the heart.

Worship is not any isolated religious experience; it is a manner of life. A lifestyle. The way you conduct your everyday life. Thus, the entire journey of the wise men—from its inception to its planning, from its preparation to its fulfillment—was their worship to Christ.

And so it will be with you. The Apostle Paul prayed, "*May your roots go down deep into the love of Christ*" (Ephesians 3:17). Your love for Christ must seep into every part of your life—from the way you dress yourself to the way you drive, from the way you do your job to the way you treat your family, from your relationship with the Church to your relationship with the unchurched.

Looking again at the expedition of those eastern sages, we have so far learned that the first act of worship is pursuit, for they were not content to sit and ponder the great acts of God, they involved themselves.

And if the first act of worship is pursuit, then the second act of worship is giving, for they presented Him with their gold, their earnings, their life's treasure.

## **Tears of Devotion**

Today, we will contemplate their third act of worship: devotion, for they also presented Jesus with frankincense.

The name of this gift comes from the Old French: *franc – encens*, which means superior fragrance.

Wikipedia informs us: Frankincense is tapped from the very scraggy but hardy *Boswellia* tree by slashing the bark, which is called striping, and allowing the exuded resins to bleed out and harden. These hardened resins are called tears.

The aroma of frankincense is produced by heating the resinous tears, as on a coal or with fire.

Now, let's see what this has to do with a worshipful lifestyle.

One's devotion to Christ is not evidenced or measured by an outward habit or ritual, but from its heart by a steadfastness, a persistence, a relentless clinging to Jesus, especially through tears in the stormy times of life.

Tears express our yielding, breaking under pressure. Natural human pride resists showing brokenness. That's why we so often hold back our tears; we think them a sign of weakness, of which people may take advantage, or at least make fun. Sometimes we imagine that God, too, despises such weakness. On the contrary the psalmist wrote these lyrics...

Psalm 56:8

*You keep track of all my sorrows. You have collected all my tears in your bottle. You have recorded each one in your book.*

Not a sign of weakness in God's eyes, your tears are like the crushing of grapes that produces sweet wine. It is good to bear up under adversity, to meet challenge and pressure with strength. But strength has its limits, and strength only increases by reaching those limits and pressing further. That is true for your muscles; it is also true for your spirit.

## **Growing to Potential**

Surrendering your heart to the Lord Jesus Christ produces new life—spiritual life. It's the new birth of the human spirit. But what is born must also grow in order to reach its potential.

That is the epic tragedy of what took place in Newtown, Connecticut, last week: not only were lives lost, but very young lives were snuffed out before they had a chance to grow to potential. The thought of that compounded loss forced tears from our otherwise composed president.

Do we think him a weak leader for those tears? Of course not!

Jesus Himself wept on occasion.

As Jesus stood before Lazarus' tomb (John 11), He wept. The people said, "See how He loved him (Lazarus)." Did Jesus weep for the loss of His friend? I have heard the story often presented in that way, but I think that was not the cause. Jesus was Master over death. He had already raised dead people to life; He would shortly raise Lazarus. He was already thanking the Father for that privilege. No, He wept for the people—including His dear friends, Mary and Martha—who still did not understand who He was, what He was capable of, and what He had come to do. Their unbelief broke His heart.

Then, Jesus stood on the hillside overlooking Jerusalem (Luke 19) and He began to weep. Did He weep because it was such a lovely sight? Did He weep because of the rejection He was about to receive? No, He wept for the hard-heartedness of the people, for their stubborn resistance of God's extended grace, for their rebellious self-promotion at the expense of their salvation. Their unbelief broke His heart.

A woman came to our church, who had lost her beloved husband after 42 years of marriage. She found her faith renewed while watching Christian programming on television and sought to grow her faith in a local church. As she sat in our service of worship and prayer and preaching the Word, her tender heart was squeezed even more, not by pain, but by joy—a new joy, mixed with overflowing gratitude—overwhelmed by the love of Jesus Christ.

She apologized to me for her embarrassing tears, but I told her, "Let them flow! They are cleansing and healing your heart and conscience. The Lord is making you tender-hearted. It's not a curse; it's a blessing!"

She cried for weeks, and months, and years. When she prayed, she cried. When she spoke, she cried. Her heart had become a fountain of gratitude. Laughing and crying, all at once! Not everyone cries like that, but some do.

### **Trusting Through Tears**

The Wikipedia article continues: There are numerous species and varieties of frankincense trees, each producing a slightly different type of resin. Differences in soil and climate create even more diversity of the resin, even within the same species.

People who do not cry profusely, do not love the Lord less than those who do. Different circumstances—soil and climate—create diversity of expressions.

But when storms visit your life, when your outer bark is slashed, you will weep. And our Father will store up your tears in a “bottle,” because they are precious to Him, as the tears of a child are to any loving mom or dad.

If we will trust God through our difficulties and challenges, instead of railing against Him or doubting His love, He will use those difficulties to extract spiritual sweetness from our lives, a lasting fragrance that will bless others.

2 Corinthians 1

<sup>3</sup> *All praise to God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God is our merciful Father and the source of all comfort.* <sup>4</sup> *He comforts us in all our troubles so that we can comfort others. When they are troubled, we will be able to give them the same comfort God has given us.*

Wikipedia adds: One kind of frankincense tree, known as *Boswellia Sacra* (the sacred Boswellia), is considered unusual for its ability to grow in environments so unforgiving that it sometimes grows directly out of solid rock. How the trees initially attach themselves to the rock is not known but it's accomplished by a bulbous disk-like swelling of the trunk. This disk-like growth at the base of the tree prevents it from being torn away from the rock during the violent storms that frequent the region they grow in. This feature is very slight or altogether absent in trees grown in rocky soil or gravel. The tears from these hardy survivors are considered superior for their more fragrant aroma.

*Boswellia Sacra*—the best of the best! Firmly attached to a rock. Cannot be torn away by fierce storms. And it produces superior tears.

This is how I pray for the families of Newtown that suffered the loss of their children and family members last week. This is how I pray for those who experienced immense loss from Hurricane Sandy in October. This is how I pray for you when you are going through difficult seasons in life.

While I pray for recovery of your health, for new employment and provision, for restoration of peace in your life—I always pray for your confidence in God to press ahead, to move forward, to embrace change, to make progress.

## **Never Give Up**

Jesus once said to Peter, *“Satan has desired to separate you from Me, like sifted wheat, but I have prayed for you, that you will not give up your faith”* (Luke 22:31).

Storms are not the enemy of the child of God, for his or her life is founded on the solid rock, Christ Jesus.

Sorrow is not the enemy of a child of God, for God is our perpetual Comforter. Experiencing sorrow is a necessary part of this life.

2 Corinthians 7:10

*The kind of sorrow God wants us to experience leads us away from sin and results in salvation. There's no regret for that kind of sorrow.*

If you let your distress bring you *to God*, not drive you from Him, the result will be all gain, no loss. We don't regret that kind of pain. We say, "It hurts so good."

Hebrews 13

<sup>26</sup> *When God spoke from Mount Sinai his voice shook the earth, but now he makes another promise: "Once again I will shake not only the earth but the heavens also."*<sup>27</sup> *This means that all of creation will be shaken and removed, so that only unshakable things will remain.*

<sup>28</sup> *Since we are receiving a Kingdom that is unshakable, let us be thankful and please God by worshiping him with holy fear and awe.* <sup>29</sup> *For our God is a devouring fire.*

God is a devouring fire, but not a destroying fire. Like the coal's heat devours the tear of frankincense, releasing its fragrance, God releases humility and compassion in our lives through the things that shake and test us.

Shaking will come. Storms will come. It is inevitable in this world.

When Jesus' disciples peered into the future to try to understand how things would end, Jesus told them...

Matthew 24 (MSG)

<sup>6</sup> *When reports come in of wars and rumored wars, keep your head and don't panic. This is routine history; this is no sign of the end.* <sup>7</sup> *Nation will fight nation and ruler fight ruler, over and over. Famines and earthquakes will occur in various places.*

"This is routine history." They're just a part of life. That doesn't mean they are not tragic and costly; only that they are also normal.

Trials will come, but they will not overcome, if you take them to God through Jesus Christ.

That is the lesson of the frankincense. The highest devotion is neither easy nor casual; it is difficult and costly. But it is also superior; the kind that is worthy to bring before a king.

What will you give to Jesus this Christmas?