



Looking at literature through a Biblical lens

THINK ABOVE THE BOX
Bible Study Guide for
The Gift of the Magi
By
O. Henry*

LIFE IS SHORT. ETERNITY IS FOREVER.



2 Corinthians 4:18 TLB *So we do not look at what we can see right now, the troubles all around us, but we look forward to the joys in heaven which we have not yet seen. The troubles will soon be over, but the joys to come will last forever.*



The Gift of the Magi*

*Bonus! You can also view an illustrated narration of the story here:

[The Gift of the Magi - Faith Church, Milford Ohio Vimeo](#)

One dollar and eighty-seven cents. That was all. And sixty cents of it was in pennies. Pennies saved one and two at a time by bulldozing the grocer and the vegetable man and the butcher until one's cheeks burned with the silent imputation of parsimony that such close dealing implied. Three times Della counted it. One dollar and eighty-seven cents. And the next day would be Christmas.

There was clearly nothing to do but flop down on the shabby little couch and howl. So Della did it. Which instigates the moral reflection that life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating.

While the mistress of the home is gradually subsiding from the first stage to the second, take a look at the home. A furnished flat at \$8 per week. It did not exactly beggar description, but it certainly had that word on the lookout for the mendicancy squad.

In the vestibule below was a letter-box into which no letter would go, and an electric button from which no mortal finger could coax a ring. Also appertaining thereunto was a card bearing the name "Mr. James Dillingham Young."

The "Dillingham" had been flung to the breeze during a former period of prosperity when its possessor was being paid \$30 per week. Now, when the income was shrunk to \$20, though, they were thinking seriously of contracting to a modest and unassuming D. But whenever Mr. James Dillingham Young came home and reached his flat above he was called "Jim" and greatly hugged by Mrs. James Dillingham Young, already introduced to you as Della. Which is all very good.

Della finished her cry and attended to her cheeks with the powder rag. She stood by the window and looked out dully at a gray cat walking a gray fence in a gray backyard. Tomorrow would be Christmas Day, and she had only \$1.87 with which to buy Jim a present. She had been saving every penny she could for months, with this result. Twenty dollars a week doesn't go far. Expenses had been greater than she had calculated. They always are. Only \$1.87 to buy a present for Jim. Her Jim. Many a happy hour she had spent planning for

something nice for him. Something fine and rare and sterling—something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim.

There was a pier glass between the windows of the room. Perhaps you have seen a pier glass in an \$8 flat. A very thin and very agile person may, by observing his reflection in a rapid sequence of longitudinal strips, obtain a fairly accurate conception of his looks. Della, being slender, had mastered the art.

Suddenly she whirled from the window and stood before the glass. Her eyes were shining brilliantly, but her face had lost its color within twenty seconds. Rapidly she pulled down her hair and let it fall to its full length.

Now, there were two possessions of the James Dillingham Youngs in which they both took a mighty pride. One was Jim's gold watch that had been his father's and his grandfather's. The other was Della's hair. Had the queen of Sheba lived in the flat across the airshaft, Della would have let her hair hang out the window some day to dry just to depreciate Her Majesty's jewels and gifts. Had King Solomon been the janitor, with all his treasures piled up in the basement, Jim would have pulled out his watch every time he passed, just to see him pluck at his beard from envy.

So now Della's beautiful hair fell about her rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters. It reached below her knee and made itself almost a garment for her. And then she did it up again nervously and quickly. Once she faltered for a minute and stood still while a tear or two splashed on the worn red carpet.

On went her old brown jacket; on went her old brown hat. With a whirl of skirts and with the brilliant sparkle still in her eyes, she fluttered out the door and down the stairs to the street.

Where she stopped the sign read: "Mme. Sofronie. Hair Goods of All Kinds." One flight up Della ran, and collected herself, panting. Madame, large, too white, chilly, hardly looked the "Sofronie." [*aristocratic and wise*]

"Will you buy my hair?" asked Della.

"I buy hair," said Madame. "Take yer hat off and let's have a sight at the looks of it."

Down rippled the brown cascade.

"Twenty dollars," said Madame, lifting the mass with a practiced hand.

"Give it to me quick," said Della.

Oh, and the next two hours tripped by on rosy wings. Forget the hashed metaphor. She was ransacking the stores for Jim's present.

She found it at last. It surely had been made for Jim and no one else. There was no other like it in any of the stores, and she had turned all of them inside out. It was a platinum fob chain simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by meretricious ornamentation—as all good things should do. It was even worthy of The Watch. As soon as she saw it she knew that it must be Jim's. It was like him. Quietness and value—the description applied to both. Twenty-one dollars they took from her for it, and she hurried home with the 87 cents. With that chain on his watch Jim might be properly anxious about the time in any company. Grand as the watch was, he sometimes looked at it on the sly on account of the old leather strap that he used in place of a chain.

When Della reached home her intoxication gave way a little to prudence and reason. She got out her curling irons and lighted the gas and went to work repairing the ravages made by generosity added to love. Which is always a tremendous task, dear friends—a mammoth task.

Within forty minutes her head was covered with tiny, close-lying curls that made her look wonderfully like a truant schoolboy. She looked at her reflection in the mirror long, carefully, and critically.

"If Jim doesn't kill me," she said to herself, "before he takes a second look at me, he'll say I look like a Coney Island chorus girl. But what could I do—oh! what could I do with a dollar and eighty-seven cents?"

At 7 o'clock the coffee was made and the frying-pan was on the back of the stove hot and ready to cook the chops.

Jim was never late. Della doubled the fob chain in her hand and sat on the corner of the table near the door that he always entered. Then she heard his step on the stair away down on the first flight, and she turned white for just a moment. She had a habit of saying a little silent prayer about the simplest everyday things, and now she whispered: "Please God, make him think I am still pretty."

The door opened and Jim stepped in and closed it. He looked thin and very serious. Poor fellow, he was only twenty-two—and to be burdened with a family! He needed a new overcoat and he was without gloves.

Jim stopped inside the door, as immovable as a setter at the scent of quail. His eyes were fixed upon Della, and there was an expression in them that she could not read, and it terrified her. It was not anger, nor surprise, nor disapproval, nor horror, nor any of the sentiments that she had been prepared for. He simply stared at her fixedly with that peculiar expression on his face.

Della wriggled off the table and went for him.

"Jim, darling," she cried, "don't look at me that way. I had my hair cut off and sold because I couldn't have lived through Christmas without giving you a present. It'll grow out again—you won't mind, will you? I just had to do it. My hair grows awfully fast. Say 'Merry Christmas!' Jim, and let's be happy. You don't know what a nice—what a beautiful, nice gift I've got for you."

"You've cut off your hair?" asked Jim, laboriously, as if he had not arrived at that patent fact yet even after the hardest mental labor.

"Cut it off and sold it," said Della. "Don't you like me just as well, anyhow? I'm me without my hair, ain't I?"

Jim looked about the room curiously.

"You say your hair is gone?" he said, with an air almost of idiocy.

"You needn't look for it," said Della. "It's sold, I tell you—sold and gone, too. It's Christmas Eve, boy. Be good to me, for it went for you. Maybe the hairs of my head were numbered," she went on with sudden serious sweetness, "but nobody could ever count my love for you. Shall I put the chops on, Jim?"

Out of his trance Jim seemed quickly to wake. He enfolded his Della. For ten seconds let us regard with discreet scrutiny some inconsequential object in the other direction. Eight dollars a week or a million a year—what is the difference? A mathematician or a wit would give you the wrong answer. The magi brought valuable gifts, but that was not among them. This dark assertion will be illuminated later on.

Jim drew a package from his overcoat pocket and threw it upon the table.

"Don't make any mistake, Dell," he said, "about me. I don't think there's anything in the way of a haircut or a shave or a shampoo that could make me like my girl any less. But if you'll unwrap that package you may see why you had me going a while at first."

White fingers and nimble tore at the string and paper. And then an ecstatic scream of joy; and then, alas! a quick feminine change to hysterical tears and wails, necessitating the immediate employment of all the comforting powers of the lord of the flat.

For there lay The Combs—the set of combs, side and back, that Della had worshipped long in a Broadway window. Beautiful combs, pure tortoise shell, with jewelled rims—just the shade to wear in the beautiful vanished hair. They were expensive combs, she knew, and her heart had simply craved and yearned over them without the least hope of possession. And now, they were hers, but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornments were gone.

But she hugged them to her bosom, and at length she was able to look up with dim eyes and a smile and say: "My hair grows so fast, Jim!"

And then Della leaped up like a little singed cat and cried, "Oh, oh!"

Jim had not yet seen his beautiful present. She held it out to him eagerly upon her open palm. The dull precious metal seemed to flash with a reflection of her bright and ardent spirit.

"Isn't it a dandy, Jim? I hunted all over town to find it. You'll have to look at the time a hundred times a day now. Give me your watch. I want to see how it looks on it."

Instead of obeying, Jim tumbled down on the couch and put his hands under the back of his head and smiled.

"Dell," said he, "let's put our Christmas presents away and keep 'em a while. They're too nice to use just at present. I sold the watch to get the money to buy your combs. And now suppose you put the chops on."

The magi, as you know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.

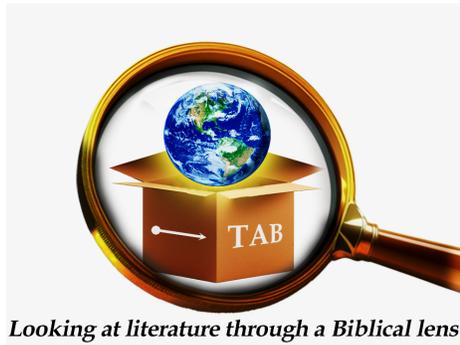
The End

**Project Gutenberg. (n.d.). Retrieved February 20, 2025, from [Project Gutenberg](#).*

Minor changes to the text were made for today's audience. Definitions added are within brackets.

Written by O. Henry in 1905.

**Illustration by P. J. Lynch taken from [The Gift of the Magi - Faith Church, Milford Ohio Vimeo](#)*



1. The author O. Henry speaks about the human condition when Della is distraught and crying over the state of her savings with a profound statement: *... life is made up of sobs, sniffles, and smiles, with sniffles predominating.* To Della, it may have felt like the end of the world at that moment, but was it really? God helps us when we all experience those feelings that life is just too sad and difficult with happy moments few and far between. Check out our logo below for a bit of perspective:



2 Corinthians 4:18 TLB *So we do not look at what we can see right now, the troubles all around us, but we look forward to the joys in heaven which we have not yet seen. The troubles will soon be over, but the joys to come will last forever.*

C. S. Lewis wrote in the *The Chronicles of Narnia, The Last Battle* about this too:

"And as he (Aslan) spoke, he no longer looked to them like a lion; but the things that began to happen after that were so great and beautiful that I cannot write them. And for us this is the end of all the stories, and we can most truly say that they all lived happily ever after. But for them it was only the beginning of the real story. All their life in this world and all their adventures in Narnia had only been the cover and the title page: now at last they were beginning Chapter One of the Great Story which no one on earth has read: which goes on forever: in which every chapter is better than the one before."

Our lives on Earth can be thought of as the *cover and the title page*, with eternity being the *Chapter One of the Great Story*. God comforts us in the Bible with the following:

Philippians 4:6-7 GNT *Don't worry about anything, but in all your prayers ask God for what you need, always asking him with a thankful heart. And God's peace, which is far beyond human understanding, will keep your hearts and minds safe in union with Christ Jesus.*

Revelation 21:4 TLB *He will wipe away all tears from their eyes, and there shall be no more death, nor sorrow, nor crying, nor pain. All of that has gone forever.*

The following post reflects on this:

*“What a shame we might waste the only life we have being grumpy all the time because we allow our problems and disappointments to **steal our joy** and shift our daily focus from **thankfulness to disgruntledness**... Whether we’re facing a divorce, illness, financial hardships, loss of loved ones, relationship problems, unemployment, disappointment, crushed dreams - we can still make the intentional choice to be thankful for the life we have, even if it looks different than we want it to. We can still determine to enjoy the life God has given us and remember to thank Him every day for what we do have instead of focusing on what we don’t. We can still choose to be happy, despite our circumstances.”*

- Tracie Miles

Life Is Too Short To Live Unhappy | Tracie Miles | {Encouragement for Today}

Tracie offers a wonderful prayer to God:

“Lord, I have allowed myself to get into a pattern of being unhappy due to my circumstances, even though You have given me so many blessings I often take for granted. Forgive my ungratefulness. Help me embrace Your gifts of true joy and peace and remember to choose happiness every day. In Jesus’ Name, Amen.”



Looking at literature through a Biblical lens

Think Above the Box: In the moment, as sad as Della was feeling, she actually had a lot to be thankful for, such as her loving husband, a roof over her head and good health. Perhaps Scripture would have helped her keep things in the right perspective. Imagine, like Tracie, that you were possibly facing the last moment of your life. After surviving the event, would there be anything that you might want to change in your life?

2. It is obvious in this story that Della and Jim were very much in love with each other, but the following few lines may cause a modern gal to ruffle her feathers!

Only \$1.87 to buy a present for Jim. Her Jim. Many a happy hour she had spent planning for something nice for him. Something fine and rare and sterling—something just a little bit near to being worthy of the honor of being owned by Jim.

Now wait a minute! Jim *owns* her? No way! But perhaps that is an old-fashioned way of saying that a husband and wife belonged to *each other*...

1 Corinthians 7:3-4 ERV The husband should give his wife what she deserves as his wife. And the wife should give her husband what he deserves as her husband. The wife does not have power over her own body. Her husband has the power over her body. And the husband does not have power over his own body. His wife has the power over his body.

“There’s a tendency for people to jump to the worst possible interpretation of everything, but that isn’t fair to the text. The sense I am left with after reading the Bible as a whole is that men loved and appreciated their wives, just as they do today.”
- Amy K. Hall

Did Old Testament Men Treat Their Wives Like Property?

EXTRA CREDIT: Here’s a further explanation of God’s view of marriage:

*“In **Ephesians 5:25**, we see this command to husbands: “Husbands love your wives.” How? “Just also as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.” That’s a tall order for husbands, right? Husbands are to love their wives, lead their wives, in the same way Christ loved the church. How did Christ love the church? He sacrificially lived his life and gave his life up for the church.”*
- Brett Kunkle

Challenge Response: The Bible Says Men Are Superior to Women

It’s almost like Della and Jim are in this music video! (I’m not crying, you’re crying!)

“Through all the seasons life shall bring us / Our love grows deeper, our roots run wild / and nothing shall be able to separate us from the love of God.”
- Jade Wales



Christian Wedding Song "Carry You Through" by ONE GLORY

3. Our little couple definitely exemplify the concept of mutual sacrifice due to their deep abiding love for each other. They both sacrificed their most prized possession in order to give the most special gift they could think of to their spouse.

*“The husband and wife had such great love for each other, that they sacrificed their treasured possession to purchase a gift that would bring the other joy. This certainly reflects God’s love. He cherishes His only begotten Son, Jesus. Yet, ‘it pleased the Father to bruise Him’ (to sacrifice Him) **Isaiah 53:10**. Why? Because of His great love for the world and knowing that His sacrifice would bring everlasting joy!”*
- Shari Abbott

Isaiah 53:10 TLB But it was the Lord’s good plan to bruise him and fill him with grief. However, when his soul has been made an offering for sin, then he shall have a multitude of children, many heirs. He shall live again, and God’s program shall prosper in his hands.

What’s the Story Behind “The Gift of the Magi” by O’Henry? » Reasons for Hope* Jesus

*“‘Sacrifice’ is a word that comes to mind when we think about the truths and realities embedded in the gospel. From **Romans 12:1** to **Hebrews 9:28** there are a plethora of Bible verses about sacrifice that explain why Jesus died for our sins and how we should live out selfless love in our own lives.”*
- Billy Hallowell

10 Bible Verses About Sacrifice – and Jesus’ Love.

“Jesus Christ, I think upon your sacrifice. / You became nothing, poured out to death. / Many times I’ve wondered at your gift of life...and once again I look upon the cross where you died, / I’m humbled by your mercy and I’m broken inside. / Once again I thank you, once again I pour out my life...”

- Matt Redman

🎵 Jesus Christ, I Think Upon Your Sacrifice (Once Again)

4. O. Henry ends his little tale with the following statement about how Dell and Jim were as wise as the Magi:

The magi, as you know, were wise men—wonderfully wise men—who brought gifts to the Babe in the manger. They invented the art of giving Christmas presents. Being wise, their gifts were no doubt wise ones, possibly bearing the privilege of exchange in case of duplication. And here I have lamely related to you the uneventful chronicle of two foolish children in a flat who most unwisely sacrificed for each other the greatest treasures of their house. But in a last word to the wise of these days let it be said that of all who give gifts these two were the wisest. Of all who give and receive gifts, such as they are wisest. Everywhere they are wisest. They are the magi.

Just who are these guys that we set up standing to the side of our manger scene by the Christmas tree? Let’s go to the Bible to be enlightened, shall we?

“...the Magi “preached” the gospel in a tangible way. Whether they fully knew it or not, their gifts told the story of how God himself came down from Heaven as our King (gold) to fulfill his priestly duties (frankincense) and eventually died for our sins (myrrh).”

- Robert Hampshire

The Gifts of the Magi: Spiritual Meaning and Significance

EXTRA CREDIT: Take a deeper dive into the Magi here.

Matthew 2:11 AMP And after entering the house, they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell down and worshiped Him. Then, after opening their treasure chests, they presented to Him gifts [fit for a king, gifts] of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

“The Magi didn’t just show up with gifts—they modeled how we can respond to Jesus with our lives. So, as you reflect on their story, ask yourself: what gifts are you bringing to the King?”

- Alfred Edersheim

Why Did the Magi Bring Gold, Frankincense, and Myrrh to Jesus?

VISUAL LEARNER’S DEPARTMENT: Click on the website below to see beautiful watercolor illustrations from the story drawn by Lisbeth Zwerger.

Cizgili Masallar features Lisbeth Zwerger illustrations for Gift of the Magi

REAL LIFE: *“A maintenance man who worked at a mission hospital in the Gaza Strip came to Turkey and brought the amazing message of Jesus to this Jewish man. Steven’s life was flipped upside down when Yeshua opened his eyes. Terrorism loomed large but so did the call to faith. From street corners in Ankara to life-altering prayers, this Jewish Air Force officer’s life was changed forever.”*
- One for Israel

Jewish Air Force Colonel finds Yeshua [Jesus] in an unlikely place!

APOLO-GET-ITS: Ok, math students, answer me this: nothing + nothing = ?

“Not only is Darwinian evolution a bankrupt theory but to call it a scientific theory does a great injustice to the name of science. For according to Ray Comfort in referring to evolution: ‘It is embarrassingly unscientific to speak of anything creating itself from nothing.’

With no God to believe in the only thing we can say about human existence is that we came from nothing and when we die we go back to nothing and somehow in between these two states of nothingness, we must find some kind of meaning. And since life is so short and sometimes so unfair meaning for many is often impossible to find.”
- Curt Blattman

Evolution – An Embarrassing Theory - Bible Apologetics

EXTRA CREDIT: ‘Cuz you can never have too much ammo!

Nobody Times Nothing Equals Everything - Bible Apologetics

LOVE TO LINK!

The depth of content offered in the Think Above the Box Study Guides would not have been possible without the many talents and Spirit-inspired links that are included for each book. Isn't it great that while you use the study guides you can click on a link and go to these great sites without searching for them?

We would like to express our deep appreciation and gratitude to all the Bible publishers, pastors, bloggers, filmmakers, musicians and Christian media websites for the vast amount of information they provide online. Your efforts are truly a blessing to all who access your sites!

TAB highly encourages students to explore each of the links at their leisure as it is like going down a holy rabbit hole!

[Proverbs 31 Ministries](#)

[Stand to Reason](#)

[Biblia.com](#)

[One Glory](#)

[Reasons for Hope* Jesus](#)

[Pure Flix - Insider](#)

[Matt Redman](#)

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[ONE FOR ISRAEL Ministry](#)

[Bible Apologetics](#)

Afterword

Please check out our site **Think Above the Box** for more study guides, blogs, and links to thought-provoking material.

*And please leave us a note on our site about your experience!
We would love to hear your comments!*



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