

# CHRISTMAS SURPRISES



## Surprise Reactions

### Key idea:

In a surprising twist, the news about Jesus unmasked three responses still common today: Herod's hostile fear, the religious leader's complacent indifference, and the Magi's joyful worship.

### Key text:

Matthew 2:1-18

After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem <sup>2</sup> 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." <sup>3</sup> When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. <sup>4</sup> When he had called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Christ was to be born. <sup>5</sup> "In Bethlehem in Judea," they replied, "for this is what the prophet has written: <sup>6</sup> "But you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for out of you will come a ruler who will be the shepherd of my people Israel." <sup>7</sup> Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. <sup>8</sup> He sent them to Bethlehem and said, "Go and make a careful search for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him." <sup>9</sup> After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen in the east went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. <sup>10</sup> When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. <sup>11</sup> On coming to the house, they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him. Then they opened their treasures and presented him with gifts of gold and of incense and of myrrh. <sup>12</sup> And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route. <sup>13</sup> When they had gone, an angel of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream. "Get up," he said, "take the child and his mother and escape to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you, for Herod is going to search for the child to kill him." <sup>14</sup> So he got up, took the child and his mother during the night and left for Egypt, <sup>15</sup> where he stayed until the death of Herod. And so was fulfilled what the Lord had said through the prophet: "Out of Egypt I called my son." <sup>16</sup> When Herod realized that he had been outwitted by the Magi, he was furious, and he gave orders to kill all the boys in Bethlehem and its vicinity who were two years old and under, in accordance with the time he had learned from the Magi. <sup>17</sup> Then what was said through the prophet Jeremiah was fulfilled: <sup>18</sup> "A voice is heard in Ramah, weeping and great mourning, Rachel weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because they are no more."

## Key points:

1. Matthew 2 introduces a shift in time, location, and main characters.
2. The three main groups of characters (the magi, Herod, and the religious leaders) have three very different reactions to the birth of Jesus.
3. The Magi respond with joyful worship, even being willing to travel great distances to find and worship Jesus.
4. Herod the Great responded with fearful hostility, even murdering all the young boys in Bethlehem to try and kill Jesus and protect his throne.
5. The Religious Leaders responded with complacent indifference, not even accompanying the Magi for the short 6-mile trip to Bethlehem to see if the Messiah had been born.

## Discussion Questions:

1. The teaching contrasts three responses to Jesus: joyful worship (the Magi), murderous rage (Herod), and complacent indifference (the religious leaders). Which response do you find most surprising or challenging, and why?
2. Which of the three responses (worship, hostility, or indifference) do you think is most common in our culture today? Why?
3. Bret noted that "hurt people hurt people" and that fear can lead to irrational behavior. Can you think of a time when fear of surrendering something to God caused problems in your life or relationships?
4. The religious leaders knew Scripture well enough to quote where the Messiah would be born, yet they didn't travel six miles to investigate. How can we guard against having biblical knowledge without genuine encounter with Jesus?
5. The teaching suggests that Herod's fear of losing his kingdom mirrors our own fear when Jesus' lordship threatens our control. What areas of your life do you find hardest to submit to Jesus' kingship?
6. Bret compared Herod's 'slaughter of the innocents' to our cultural practice of abortion that slaughters approximately a million children annually. How should Christians respond to this reality with both truth and compassion?
7. The Magi traveled hundreds or thousands of miles over two years to worship Jesus. What does their sacrifice teach us about the value and priority we place on encountering Christ?

8. The teaching warns that a lukewarm, indifferent heart cannot remain neutral toward Jesus but will eventually slide toward hostility. Have you observed this pattern in your own life or in others?
9. Bret described a lack of joy as a "warning light" in our spiritual lives. What are other warning signs that might indicate we're drifting toward complacency or fear?
10. Read Revelation 3:15-16 (Jesus' words to the Laodicean church about being lukewarm). Why do you think Jesus would rather people be "hot or cold" than lukewarm? What makes lukewarm faith so dangerous?
11. The teaching pointed out that the religious leaders eventually moved from indifference to actively plotting Jesus' death. How does complacency create a slippery slope toward greater resistance to God?
12. Joy is presented as both a response to and an indicator of proper heart orientation toward Jesus. When you lack joy in worship or spiritual practices, what does this reveal about your relationship with God?
13. The religious leaders continued temple operations for 30 years after Jesus declared God's Spirit had departed. How can churches or individual Christians today function religiously without God's actual presence?
14. The teaching emphasizes that worship involves both outward actions and inward heart response. How can you cultivate authentic, joy-filled worship rather than merely going through religious motions?
15. Reflecting on the three responses to Jesus, where do you honestly find yourself today, and what specific steps can you take this week to move toward joyful, wholehearted worship?