

The Faith of the Wise Men

Devotional Reading: [Isaiah 49:1–6](#)

Background Scripture: [Micah 5:2–4](#); [Matthew 2:1–12](#)

[Matthew 2:1–12](#)

¹ After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem ² and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

³ When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him. ⁴ When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. ⁵ “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written:

⁶ “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 shepherd my people Israel.’”

⁷ Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared. ⁸ He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

⁹ After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. ¹⁰ When they saw the star, they were overjoyed. ¹¹ 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, frankincense and myrrh. ¹² And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

Key Text

“Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews? We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”—[Matthew 2:2](#)

Faith That Pleases God

Unit 1: Profiles in Faith

Lessons 1–5

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Describe the historical setting of the encounter between Herod and the wise men.
2. Contrast God’s guidance of the wise men on their mission with his guidance of Christians today.
3. Identify one area of ministry where God is leading him or her and discuss with a church leader the best way to follow that path faithfully.

Lesson Outline

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How to Say It

Damascus Duh-mass-kus.

Euphrates You-fray-teez.

frankincense frank-in-sense.

Herod	<i>Hair-ud.</i>
Idumean	<i>Id-you-me-un.</i>
Judea	<i>Joo-dee-uh.</i>
<i>magoi</i> (Greek)	<i>mah-joy.</i>
myrrh	<i>mur.</i>
Persia	<i>Per-zhuh.</i>
Sadducees	<i>Sad-you-seez.</i>
Zebulun	<i>Zeb-you-lun.</i>

Introduction

A. Still Seeking Jesus?

The Christmas season reveals many sayings that try to encapsulate the meaning of the holiday in just a few words. Near my neighborhood, one house always displays a banner that reads, “Christ is the reason for the season.” Another neighbor annually displays a sign proclaiming, “Let’s put Christ back in Christmas.” These sayings are self-explanatory. After all, why have a season bearing the name of Christ without consideration of Christ himself?

Even asking that question shows the absurdity of some secular Christmas traditions. Should Christmas remind us of cola-drinking polar bears in red mufflers? Clydesdales hauling a beer wagon? A snowman come to life? Or is there something more important?

Another saying requires a bit of knowledge of the biblical Christmas story to make sense: “Wise men still seek him.” This saying is based on the account in today’s text.

B. Lesson Context

Our text for study involves a mysterious star. This invites a consideration of the distinction between astronomy and astrology. In modern times, we make a clear-cut distinction between those two areas of inquiry. But the two were blended together in the ancient world. *Astronomy* is the scientific study of the sun, moon, stars, planets, etc.; *astrology* combines that study with the belief that the so-called gods orchestrate the appearance, positions, and movements of heavenly phenomena and, therefore, reveal information about divine plans for the future (omens). Astrology is practiced today in the form of horoscopes associated with the zodiac.

In the Old Testament, astrologers are mentioned most notably in the book of Daniel ([Daniel 2:2, 10; 4:7; 5:7, 11](#); see also [Isaiah 47:13](#)). The people of Israel were warned about pagan occult practices; astrology, being a type of divination, was one of those ([Deuteronomy 18:10–11; Jeremiah 10:2](#)). And moving from consulting the stars to worshipping the stars was an all-too-easy step to take ([Deuteronomy 4:19; 17:2–5; Jeremiah 8:2](#)).

The ancient Greek translation of the book of Daniel designates such men as *magoi*, from which we derive our modern word *magician*. But words change meaning over time, and how ancient people

viewed *magoi* is not to be equated with the contemporary role of a magician who uses sleight of hand to entertain audiences. Instead, this word describes men of wisdom; we surmise they were astrologer-scholars. This same Greek word *magoi* is behind the English transliteration “Magi” in [Matthew 2:1, 7, 16](#). *Magoi* occurs also in [Acts 13:6, 8](#), translated there as “sorcerer.”

I. The New King Is Born ([Matthew 2:1–2](#))

A. Coming to Jerusalem (v. 1)

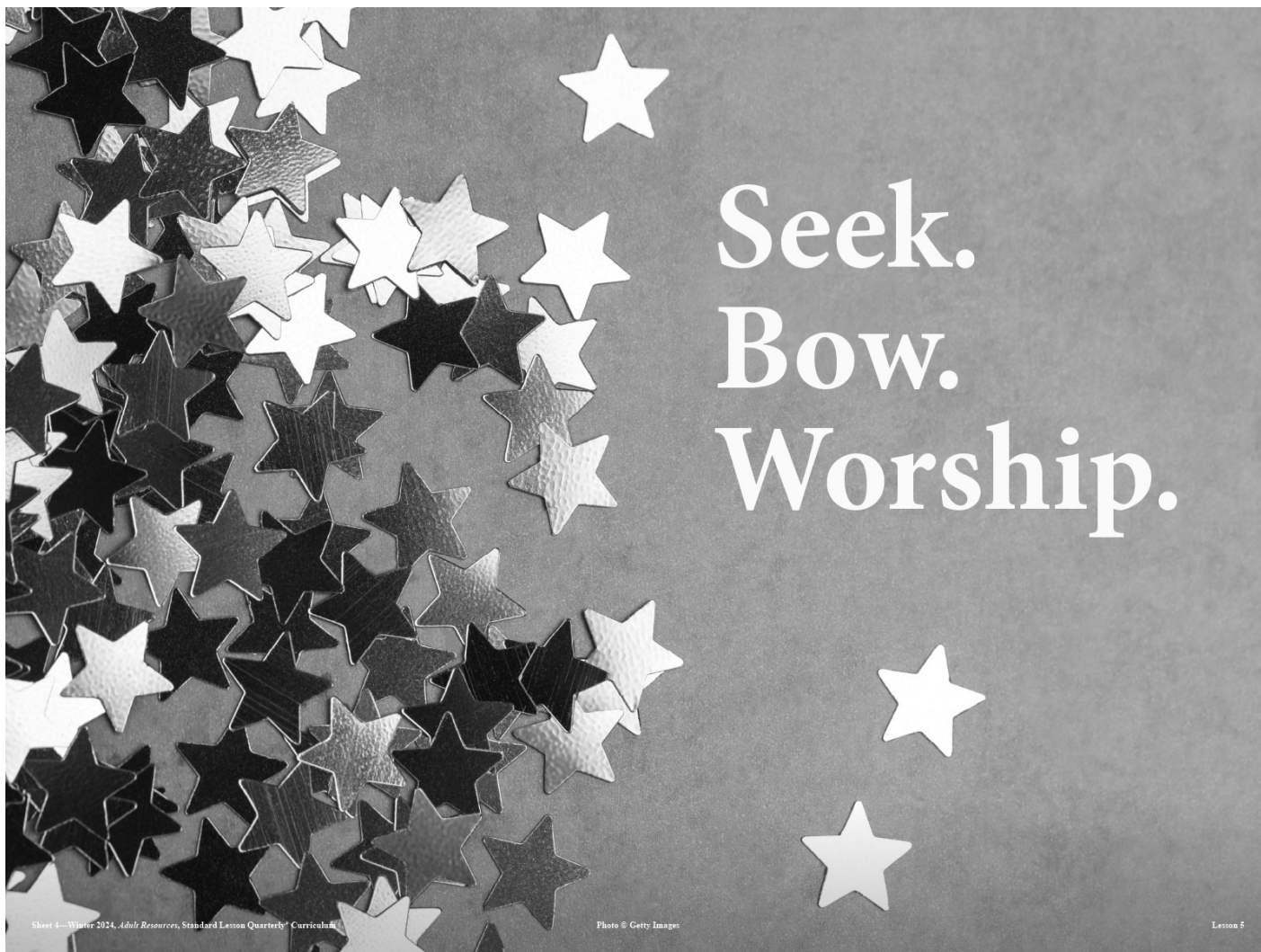
1a. After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea,

Matthew gives fewer details about the actual birth of Jesus than does Luke. Instead, Matthew relates the nativity story with simplicity: *Jesus was born in Bethlehem*. A few details are added, tying his account to the geography and history of Palestine. Bethlehem (meaning “house of bread”) *in Judea* was a village located a few miles south-southwest of Jerusalem. It is not to be confused with Bethlehem of Zebulun ([Joshua 19:15](#)). The Bethlehem noted in today’s text was the birthplace of King David ([1 Samuel 20:6](#)).

1b. during the time of King Herod,

The phrase *the time of King Herod* sets the context of a specific ruler in an identifiable time frame. This is the king known as Herod the Great, who ruled 37–4 BC as the first Roman puppet-king of Judea. The name *Herod* occurs in the New Testament about 40 times, often referring to different people—it’s a challenge not to get them confused! According to our best records, the Herod in view here died in 4 BC. Therefore, the events in today’s text take place shortly before that (compare [Matthew 2:19](#)).

Herod the Great was not an ethnic Jew but an Idumean (related to modern Arabs). He is designated “the Great” because of his extensive building projects. The grandest of these was the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, a project he began about 20 BC and that was unfinished at the time of his death (compare [John 2:20](#)).



Visual for [Lesson 5](#). Point to the visual after reading verse [2b](#) and ask volunteers to share how they seek, bow, and worship.

1c. Magi from the east came to Jerusalem

Many legends have arisen in Christian tradition about these *Magi*. These include speculations regarding their occupations (kings?), their number (three?), their names (Melchior, Caspar, and Baltazar?), and their place of origin (Babylon? Persia?). Matthew’s account doesn’t answer such questions. See the [Lesson Context](#) for background observations regarding the word *magoi*, translated as “Magi.”

We should understand *from the east* as describing their point of origin, not their route; it’s “Magi from the east,” not “came from the east.” This origin reminds us of the lands of Babylon and Persia, which lie 600 miles or more from Jerusalem in a straight line that crosses the Syrian Desert. But it is highly unlikely that the wise men traveled across that intervening desert. Instead, they would have come *to Jerusalem* by following the Euphrates River valley to Syria and then south through Damascus. This was a well-traveled trade route through a region known as the Fertile Crescent. Such a route would have been over a thousand miles, making a grand geographic arc from the Middle East to Palestine. To walk this distance would have taken four months (compare [Ezra 7:8–9](#)).

That there are at least two Magi is certain because the term is plural. But beyond that, we don't know how many there were. (The tradition that there were three wise men seems based on the fact they offer three gifts to Jesus in [Matthew 2:11](#), below.) They likely would have been in a large, well-funded entourage, perhaps a couple of dozen men altogether (compare [1 Kings 10:1–2](#)). These details paint a picture of determination on their part.

B. Seeking the King (v. 2)

2a. and asked, “Where is the one who has been born king of the Jews?”

Verse 7, below, indicates that the Magi were granted a personal audience with Herod at some point. But we aren't sure that was the case, as these wise men posed the question in the verse before us. An immediate audience would indicate that they were not a rag-tag group of nobodies! They either had diplomatic letters of introduction, could offer generous bribes, or presented such a regal appearance that Herod agreed to see them sooner rather than later. This access to Herod has led some to speculate the visitors were “kings” in their own right. However, Matthew does not mention this, and it is not implied in their designation as “wise men” or *magoi*.

2b. “We saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him.”

The reason for the Magi's question is threefold. First, the fact that a particular *star* caught their attention points to their vocation as learned stargazers. These were astrologers who spent many hours attempting to interpret astral movements as omens from deities. (See the [Lesson Context](#) for a deeper dive here.) While the Old Testament connects divination with pagan idolatry ([Deuteronomy 18:10](#); [2 Kings 17:17](#); [Jeremiah 14:14](#)), we should not rule out God's use of a specially prepared star to signal the birth of Jesus.

Second, the Magi's departure point in the east yields the possibility that they were Jews from the large Jewish community that remained in Babylon after the exile ended around 538 BC. But that possibility seems unlikely, given their astrological orientation.

Third, the wise men interpreted the new star as a sign that the newly arrived King of the Jews was important enough to be worthy of their *worship*. Although not specified by Matthew, this is often seen as a fulfillment of the “star ... out of Jacob” prophecy of [Numbers 24:17](#). Whether these men were Jews or not, this realization had touched them profoundly—so much so that they were willing to come to Jerusalem at enormous cost and considerable danger.

What Do You Think?

In what ways can seeing creation lead you to worshipping God?

Digging Deeper

How would you respond in worship in this regard?

“The Star”

As I was channel-surfing one day, I chanced upon a science-fiction tale. It was a TV adaptation of a

short story titled “The Star,” written by Arthur C. Clarke in 1954.

The plot involved a spaceship that was exploring the Phoenix Nebula, the remnant of a star that had exploded as a supernova. Aboard the spacecraft was a Roman Catholic priest highly skilled in astrophysics. As the exploration progressed, a horrific truth dawned on him: this supernova had been the star of Bethlehem. The viewer was drawn to the conclusion that an entire civilization that was “disturbingly human” had been exterminated by this supernova. The result for the priest was a crisis of faith.

Such stories can engage the imagination in profound ways, but the imaginative elements are (or should be) easily recognized. When it comes to pondering rightly God’s provisions for humanity, it’s vital to avoid speculations and to stick with established facts: (1) the wise men were guided by a phenomenon provided by God, and (2) the “how” of that phenomenon is not provided. When you are pondering how God may be guiding you, how much effort do you devote to separating fact from imaginative thinking?

—R. L. N.

II. The Old King Is Troubled (Matthew 2:3–8)

A. Consulting the Scholars (vv. 3–4)

3. When King Herod heard this he was disturbed, and all Jerusalem with him.

The wise men’s inquiry did not sit well with the paranoid *King Herod*. He was an old man who had sons and wives put to death when seen as threats to his throne. So Matthew, in grand understatement, says Herod *was disturbed*. This was not mild irritation! The old family saying is “When Momma’s not happy, nobody’s happy,” and it applies here. In *Jerusalem*, when Herod wasn’t happy, no one in Jerusalem was happy, fearing another murderous rampage. The people of the city would be willing to do about anything to placate the king.

4. When he had called together all the people’s chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born.

The *chief priests* ruled Jerusalem’s temple. They had an uneasy alliance with Herod that had enriched them greatly as the party of the Sadducees ([Acts 5:17](#)). The *teachers of the law* were the experts in the Jewish Scriptures, often called upon to interpret fine points of the Law of Moses.

Herod was no expert on things such as prophecies concerning coming kings. Even so, he was apparently aware that the Jews believed a Christ was coming, the chosen *Messiah* of the Lord. (*Christ* and *Messiah* both mean “anointed one”; [John 4:25](#).) Herod connected these prophecies with the inquiry of the wise men. Therefore, he *asked* (probably more like demanded) the religious leaders to reveal the birthplace of the Messiah, believing it must be specified in the writings of the prophets. While this would give an answer to the wise men, Herod had a more devious motive in learning the location, as we shall see.

B. Pinpointing Bethlehem (vv. 5–6)

5–6. “In Bethlehem in Judea,” they replied, “for this is what the prophet has written: ‘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 shepherd my people Israel.’”

In response, the religious leaders quoted [Micah 5:2](#). On the precise designation *Bethlehem in Judea*, see commentary on [Matthew 2:1a](#), above. The prophet Micah worked in the eighth century BC, during the time of the prophet Isaiah. So this prophecy was already 700 years old at the time of Herod.

The Gospel of Matthew shows great interest in fulfilled prophecy, so this verse is a highlight. Micah’s prophecy checks many boxes. It recognizes the relative insignificance of Bethlehem, still valid in Herod’s day. It foretells the raising up of a new *ruler* from this city. And it indicates this person would not be a mere city ruler or district supervisor. Instead, the prophesied Messiah would *shepherd my people Israel*.

What Do You Think?

How might your congregation’s influence in your community remind people of Jesus?

Digging Deeper

How will your congregation glorify the Lord locally? nationally? globally?

C. Plotting Murder (vv. 7–8)

7. Then Herod called the Magi secretly and found out from them the exact time the star had appeared.

The word *secretly* indicates that *Herod* had dismissed the religious leaders in order to meet with *the Magi* alone. He set aside his rage in favor of putting on his happy face for this meeting. Ancient astrology was based on keeping precise records, so the wise men would have known *the exact time the star had appeared*. The response of the wise men is not given. But we know the answer must have been at least four months prior to this meeting since that’s the time required for the wise men to have walked to Jerusalem. The wise men’s response was important to Herod because it determined the time window of his murderous decision in [Matthew 2:16](#).

8. He sent them to Bethlehem and said, “Go and search carefully for the child. As soon as you find him, report to me, so that I too may go and worship him.”

Since we know Herod’s real intent and how things turned out (see [Matthew 2:13–18](#)), the story becomes downright sinister at this point. His expressed desire to *worship him* is a flat-out lie. But since Herod had been helpful to the wise men, they had no reason to suspect ulterior motives. So they took his words at face value.

What Do You Think?

How do believers discern whether to obey or disobey government leaders?

Digging Deeper

How do [Daniel 3](#); [Romans 13:1–14](#); [Titus 3:1–2](#); and [1 Peter 2:13–17](#) inform your answer?

The Great and the Terrible

Ivan IV was born into the royal family of Russia in the year 1530. At 16, Ivan was crowned “tsar and grand prince of all Russia” by the Russian Orthodox Church and became the undisputed leader of feudal Russia.

Ivan was convinced that he was God’s representative on earth. Therefore Ivan saw extending the power of “Holy Russia” over neighboring countries as his duty. Moreover, he thought it was his right and responsibility to punish the sins of his rivals with unspeakable tortures that were fashioned after medieval ideas of hell. Increasingly mentally unstable, he killed his eldest son and heir to the throne in a fit of rage. By his death at age 53, he had thoroughly earned his reputation as “Ivan the Terrible.”

Political leaders such as Herod and Ivan aren’t the only ones susceptible to seeing themselves as God’s infallible representatives. Many others have fallen (or jumped) into that trap (examples: [Numbers 12:2](#); [Ezekiel 22:28](#)). Ordinary people still use the name of Jesus to advance their agendas. As the modern saying goes, “Hands are the window to the intent.” However, Jesus had this idea first (see [Matthew 7:16–20](#)). To know who follows Jesus, we must look at what they do. And when we look at them, let’s make sure to look at ourselves as well.

—A. W.

III. The Child Is Worshipped ([Matthew 2:9–12](#))

A. Following the Star (vv. 9–10)

9–10. After they had heard the king, they went on their way, and the star they had seen when it rose went ahead of them until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw the star, they were overjoyed.

The Magi would have exited Jerusalem from a gate near Herod’s palace on the city’s western side. We don’t know what time of day it was. But to travel near or after sunset in a pre-electricity era simply didn’t happen. The great joy the men experienced is thus understandable if the reappearance of *the star* happened as (or if) darkness settles. The wording indicates that the star moved in the same way as the pillar of fire guided the Hebrew people through the wilderness (see [Exodus 13:20–22](#)). The Magi could walk to Bethlehem in the dark, reaching *the child* Jesus without waiting until sunrise.

B. Presenting Treasures (v. 11)

11. 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, frankincense and myrrh.

The location of *the child with his mother Mary* was no longer the manger of Luke’s account ([Luke 2:16](#)) but a *house*. Therefore, we may assume that the time spent by Mary and Joseph in the place of the manger was short before they found adequate shelter.

The Magi were not empty-handed in their worship of Jesus. They presented him with costly gifts fit for a king (see [Isaiah 60:6](#)). We easily understand the value of a gift of *gold*. While Matthew does not specify the form of this precious metal, it was likely coins. These were a vital resource for the family's subsequent flight to Egypt and return to Nazareth ([Matthew 2:13–23](#)).

Frankincense was considered the finest incense in the ancient world (see [Exodus 30:34](#); [Revelation 18:13](#)). The word comes from Old French and means “pure incense.” Made from the resin of the *Boswellia* tree and imported from southern Arabia and Africa, it was prized for its use in religious ceremonies and as a costly sacrificial offering.

Myrrh is an aromatic resin of the *Commiphora* tree. It was (and remains) valued as an ingredient in perfume; it was also used for anointing and in preparing a body for burial ([John 19:39](#)). It also had medicinal uses, both as a type of antiseptic for wounds and as a type of pain reducer (see [Mark 15:23](#)). Both frankincense and myrrh were extremely valuable and served as a compact treasure for Joseph and Mary, providing further resources beyond the gold.

What Do You Think?

How will you bring your best gifts to Jesus?

Digging Deeper

Who will you share those gifts with as an act of worshipping God?

C. Exiting Another Way (v. 12)

12. And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route.

The wise men, unsuspecting of Herod's treachery, needed to be *warned in a dream* not to report back to that tyrant. This warning served to protect not only the child Jesus but also Mary, Joseph, and the Magi. Herod's intent all along was to have this potential king killed, and the others could have very well ended up feeling the despot's wrath as well (compare [Matthew 2:16](#)).

The Magi left Bethlehem by *another route*, a road that would not take them through Jerusalem. For Matthew, this further confirmed that God was orchestrating the birth and protection of the Messiah.

What Do You Think?

How can a believer discern whether a dream is from the Lord or not?

Digging Deeper

What Scriptures inform your response?

Conclusion

A. Offer Thy Heart

A favorite Christmas carol of mine about the wise men is the nineteenth-century composition

“The Three Kings” by Peter Cornelius. True, it has many of the legendary aspects of their story in presuming that they were kings, that they came from Persia, etc. The lesson of the carol is still powerful, though, and speaks to us today as one stanza implores the audience to travel with the kings to Bethlehem and offers hearts to the infant King of kings.

Most of us don’t have much gold to offer Jesus. And if we even had any frankincense or myrrh, how would we offer those? But we can offer him sincere hearts in worship. He is the Son of God, the true Messiah. At this time of year when we remember and celebrate the birth of our Lord in Bethlehem, may we offer our most precious gift: our hearts.

B. Prayer

Father, help us to emulate the faith of the wise men! As they let nothing stop them from reaching Jesus, may we do so as well. May the faith that allowed them to thwart the plans of a powerful opponent be ours as well. May we offer your Son, Jesus, no empty-handed worship. We pray this in Jesus’ name. Amen.

C. Thought to Remember

Wise men and women seek to worship King Jesus only and fully.

Involvement Learning

Enhance your lesson with [NIV Bible Student](#) (from your curriculum supplier) and the reproducible activity page (at www.standardlesson.com or in the back of the [NIV Standard Lesson Commentary Deluxe Edition](#)).

Into the Lesson

Invite volunteers to recall the most exciting baby announcement they ever received. Prompt them to share more by asking: 1—What circumstances made this announcement particularly special? 2—What hopes and dreams did you have for the coming child?

Alternative. Distribute the “Baby Gifts” exercise from the activity pages, which you can download. Have learners complete it individually in a minute or less before discussing conclusions as a whole class.

Say, “As we study today’s lesson, consider how the baby announcement and gifts reveal the child’s importance to the gift-givers and gift-receivers.”

Into the Word

Ask a volunteer to read aloud [Matthew 2:1–4](#). Divide learners into two groups: **Magi Group** and

King Herod Group. Instruct groups to study these verses from the perspective of their group’s namesake. Write the following questions on the board for groups to answer: 1—How did they get the “baby announcement”? 2—What was their response to the news? 3—Why did they want to know the location of the child? 4—What are one or two additional details about your character(s) based on [Matthew 2:1–4](#)?

Write the following headers on the board: *Magi* and *King Herod*. Invite volunteers from the groups to list their answers in the appropriate columns. Ask for volunteers to compare and contrast the information in the columns.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud [Matthew 2:5–8](#). Have the **Magi Group** read [Isaiah 9:2–7](#), and have the **King Herod Group** read [Micah 5:2–5](#). Instruct groups to study these verses from the perspective of their group’s namesake. Write the following questions on the board for groups to answer: 1—How does this prophecy connect to your group’s namesake? 2—How might they have believed these prophecies would be fulfilled compared with how they were? Have a volunteer from each group share their responses. Invite each group to add their responses to the columns on the board.

Ask a volunteer to read aloud [Matthew 2:9–12](#). Direct the **Magi Group** to discuss why they were able to accomplish their goal, then ask the **King Herod Group** to discuss why Herod’s goal was foiled. Again, ask volunteers to write their group’s conclusions on the board under the appropriate header.

Ask the class to look at the board and draw conclusions about God’s guidance in this Scripture passage. Ask volunteers to discuss other examples from the Bible, history, or their own lives when good triumphed over evil plans.

Into Life

Say, “The Magi lived in faith and showed obedience to God by following the star and believing his guidance.” Divide the class into small groups of three learners. Encourage learners to think about a church ministry to which God is leading him or her to volunteer. Ask: “How can you show faith and obedience this week in that ministry?” Invite learners to identify one area of ministry where God might be leading him or her to serve, and have them share these ideas with their small group. Encourage small groups to spend time praying for each other to follow God’s leading faithfully.

Alternative. Distribute copies of the “Faith in Action” activity from the activity page. Have learners complete it individually in a minute or less before discussing conclusions in small groups. Challenge them to complete the first step of the activity during class, then complete the rest of the activity throughout the upcoming week. Give individuals the opportunity to share about this experience at the beginning of the next class time.