

LIFE GROUP DISCUSSION

- 1 Have there been past experiences or unresolved issues that may be contributing to these negative emotions during the Christmas season?
- 2 In what ways can you choose joy and gratitude, even in the midst of challenging emotions, during the Christmas season?
- 3 Is there anyone you need to forgive, in order to release pent-up anger and bitterness? What can help shift your focus away from anger and bitterness?

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Sunday Word

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THE CHARACTERS OF CHRISTMAS

PART 1 - HEROD

There are some killjoys at a party. Those who rob us of joy whenever they see that we are happy. They dampen the mood and even ruin the occasion. There is a man who tried to kill Christmas. He's angry about the whole thing. Like the Grinch Who Stole Christmas, he would prefer the whole thing went away. He is the man history calls Herod the Great.

HEROD'S BACKGROUND

He was only 25 years old when he became the governor of Galilee. In 40 B.C., the Roman Senate named him "King of the Jews." It was a title the Jews hated because he was not a Jew by birth and he was not a Jew by religion. Herod was a cruel man. Human life meant nothing to him. He lusted for power and would harm anyone who tried to stop him. Throughout the years, he killed many people, including his brother-in-law, mother-in-law, and even his wife. He did this because his wife was a threat to his power. So, what's about to happen is a significant event because of what he did.

THE BIRTH OF JESUS

Matthew 2:1-6 "2 After Jesus was born in Bethlehem in Judea, during the time of King Herod, Magi from the east came to Jerusalem 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."

The Magi are the Wise Men from the East. They were priests of an oriental religion who practiced astrology. In Persia, they were considered powerful men. The important thing to Herod was not who they were but what they asked: Matthew 2:2 "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 2:3 says, "When King Herod heard this he was disturbed," He was troubled and shaken. Herod knew the Jews were looking for a Messiah so he called together all the people's chief priests and teachers of the law, he asked them where the Messiah was to be born. When they said, "In Bethlehem in Judea," he had to move fast. This is one thing I know, all dictators and tyrants are cowards at heart. They rule by force and the one thing they fear most is a force greater than theirs. If Messiah had come, then it meant that Herod was ruling in opposition to God. Therefore, he must kill that baby.

THE PLAN

So Herod hatched a clever plan. Matthew 2:7-8 "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."

Off they went. You know the rest of the story. The star miraculously reappeared and led them to the exact house. When they found the child Jesus they bowed down and worshipped Him, offering Him gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Just before the Magi stepped off center stage, we are told one last fact about them: Matthew 2:12 "And having been warned in a dream not to go back to Herod, they returned to their country by another route." The Magi went east. Mary, Joseph, and Jesus went west toward Egypt.

When Herod found out that the wise men tricked him, he got very angry. He told his people to kill all the baby boys in Bethlehem and nearby who were two years old or younger, based on the information he got from the wise men. Can you imagine the scene? Soldiers on a death squad breaking into Bethlehem homes in the dead of night, seeking every baby boy. Killing all night long. They had their orders. Kill every baby boy. Don't miss one. By morning the slaughter is over, the soldiers gone, the babies dead. In the town of Bethlehem, you could hear loud cries and mourning, mothers who refuse to be comforted. Their children are gone.

The Bible concludes the story by noting the death of Herod in verse 19. According to the history archives, when Herod died, maggots had eaten away part of his body. He died in agony-insane, tormented, and delirious. The man who tried to kill Christmas didn't win. Herod the Great didn't get the one that mattered the most. God saw to that. He murdered thousands in his lifetime but he couldn't kill the most important person of all, and that is Jesus.

THREE WAYS OF LOOKING AT CHRISTMAS

Although Herod is the leading figure in this tragic drama, he is not the only player on the stage. Besides Herod, there are the Wise Men and the scribes of Jerusalem. All three represent different ways of looking at Christmas.

1. Hostility.

Herod stands as a symbol of the kind of world Jesus came into. He represents the world's welcoming committee for the Son of God. Jesus is born and the rulers try to kill him. John 1:11 says, "He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him.." Herod stands for the bloodthirsty, cruel, vindictive side of the world system. A world where human life is cheap. A world where killing is accepted and even expected.

Herod died but his spirit lives on. To this day there are those who are offended by Jesus, even by the mere mention of His name. They oppose spiritual truth and want to erase every trace of Christmas from public life. Instead of saying Merry Christmas, people say Happy Holidays. The mere mention of Christ offends them. Or the abbreviated word of Christmas to Xmas. What a disrespect to Christ's name.

2. Indifference.

The scribes, who are also teachers and recorders of God's laws represent the religiously indifferent. These were the insiders who knew all the facts about the birth of the Messiah but did nothing about it. They didn't care enough to get excited. When Herod asked where the baby was to be born, they knew the answer. They told him where to look, but didn't care enough to investigate for themselves. It was all academic to them.

3. Worship.

There is one final group on stage. They are the Wise Men who when they found the baby, bowed down and worshipped him. It is an ironic twist of the Christmas story that it is the pagans who recognize Jesus for who He really is. The Wise Men proved themselves worthy of their name. When they found Him, they worshipped Him gladly.

HOW DO YOU RESPOND?

The ultimate question is not how someone else responds but how you respond to Jesus. That's the only thing that matters. Are you with Herod, with the scribes, or with the Wise Men? Are you hostile to Jesus? Are you too busy to get involved? Are you coming to worship him as Savior and Lord? For all those who feel they are too busy to join the search for Jesus, C. S. Lewis wrote these words: "Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in."

Jesus stands at the end of life's road for all of us. There can be no middle ground. To ignore Him is the same as to hate Him because you end up without Him either way. Perhaps hatred is nobler than casual disinterest because when you hate, you at least must pay attention to the object of your hatred, and that very attention may lead someday to a change of heart. To ignore Jesus altogether means to live as if He doesn't matter at all. But the truth is, no one can ignore Him forever. We will all have an appointment with Christ sooner or later.

This is the story of Rose Kennedy, the mother of President John F. Kennedy. Many years ago at a Bible study Jess Moody was teaching, he challenged his hearers to make their hearts ready to meet the Lord because life is short for all of us, and no one knows what the future may hold. When the meeting was over, Rose Kennedy spoke to Jess Moody privately. "I've done what you were talking about." When she got married, she had been lured by the power of money. She became selfish, living only for her own desires. Then she gave birth to a beautiful baby girl with severe mental retardation. She said that she and her husband were devastated by the news. Then the devastation turned to anger at God. She asked the Lord, "How could you have done this to us?" The anger became bitterness that drained every bit of joy from her life.

One night she and her husband had been scheduled to attend a social gathering. They decided at the last minute not to go when she realized that her anger had consumed her. She was afraid of what she might do or say if someone asked about their daughter's condition. But then, their maid who worked for the family spoke to her. "Mrs. Kennedy, I've been watching you for the last few weeks and I've seen how angry you are. If you don't do something, it's going to ruin you. I think you should pray this prayer: "O Lord, make my heart a manger where the Christ child can be born."

She was so angry that she fired the maid on the spot. But that night when she went to bed, she couldn't sleep. She couldn't get that simple prayer out of her mind. Finally, she knelt by her bed, and in an act of deep surrender she prayed, "O Lord, make my heart a manger where the Christ child can be born." At that moment, when she cried out in anguish, God heard and answered her prayer. On this night, she opened her heart to Christ in a new way. Love replaced the anger that had gripped her soul. She rehired the maid who stayed with the family until she died many years later.

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WHEN THE ENEMY ATTACKS YOUR IDENTITY

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