

CHRISTMAS THROUGH THE EYES OF HANUKKAH

JOHN 10:22-39

I.

Living in a society and a community where Christianity has a more dominant influence upon culture than does Judaism, we tend not to understand and appreciate the Jewish holidays. At this time of year the Jewish celebration of Hanukkah is overshadowed by the celebration of Christmas. Living in Connecticut for fifteen years, my family became more familiar with many Jewish traditions. We had three synagogues within walking distance of our church building. I had the opportunity to baptize several people from Jewish backgrounds. For a time we had a woman and her daughter living with us who came from an Orthodox Jewish background.

There are some things about Hanukkah that have relevance to us as Christians, especially in this Christmas season. The fact that Jesus celebrated Hanukkah should heighten our interest. I would like to share these things with you this morning.

So let's consider first THE CELEBRATION OF HANUKKAH (PROJECTOR ON--- I. THE CELEBRATION OF HANUKKAH) Hanukkah is an eight day feast, or holiday, that is celebrated by the Jews in December. Like all of the Jewish holidays, the time of Hanukkah is based upon the lunar calendar. So its time of celebration in our Western calendar varies from year to year. This year Hanukkah began on December 10 and it concluded on this past Friday.

Hanukkah is typically a family celebration. Usually there are family dinners, exchanges of gifts, and games. A central feature of the celebration is the lighting of candles on a candlestick. The candle in the middle is used to light the other candles. On each of the eight nights an additional candle is lit. So by the eighth night there are eight candles burning. Today, of course, electric lights and candles are more often used.

(DREIDEL) It is customary for children to play with a dreidel, a small four sided spinning top with Hebrew letters on the side that stand for “a great miracle happened there,” referring to the miraculous story of Hanukkah. While Hanukkah is a relatively minor holiday in the Jewish religious calendar, its proximity to Christmas has given it greater prominence in the Western world.

II.

Consider then THE ORIGIN OF HANUKKAH. (II. THE ORIGIN OF HANUKKAH) The name itself comes from the Hebrew verb chanak, which means “to dedicate.” The word begins with the Hebrew letter “h,” which has a hard sound. It is often translated as “ch” rather than “h.” That is why sometimes you will see “Hanukkah” spelled with a “ch” at the beginning of the name rather than just an “h.” One example of where this Hebrew word is used is in the Law of Moses in Deuteronomy #20 v. 5. (DEUTERONOMY 20:5) There Moses writes, **“Then the officers shall speak to the people, saying, ‘Is there any man who has built a new house and has not dedicated it? Let him go back to his house, lest he die in the battle and another man dedicate it.”** So the Feast of Hanukkah is the Feast of Dedication.

In 586 BC the Babylonians overran Judah, and Israel disappeared from the scene as an independent nation. Seventy years later the Persians conquered the Babylonians. Their king let the Jews return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple. But Jerusalem remained under Persian control for a couple of hundred years.

(ALEXANDER THE GREAT) Then Alexander the Great came on the scene. He was the young Greek general who conquered much of Europe and the Middle East in the 300s BC. (GREEK EMPIRE) Alexander died at an early age, and his large empire was divided up among four of his generals. (DIVIDED GREEK EMPIRE) For the next couple hundred years, General Ptolemy’s family controlled Egypt, and General Seleucus’s family controlled Syria.

The land of Israel, unfortunately, was right between these two regions. It became the site of battles between the two powers on either side of it. During the first part of the period the Egyptian Greeks mostly had control of the holy land, and during the second part, the Syrian Greeks had control. About 175 BC a guy by the name of Antiochus Epiphanes (ANTIOCHUS EPIPHANES) came to power in the Syrian Greek empire. He was a bad guy who is described in some detail in a prophecy that is contained in Daniel #11.

Antiochus tried to spread Greek influence throughout the region that he controlled. If he had limited his efforts to art and literature and sports, he probably would not have had too much resistance from the Jews. But he also tried to impose Greek religion upon them. That led to big problems.

In 170 BC Antiochus began to forcibly impose his religious beliefs upon the Jews. He tore down the wall around Jerusalem, abolished Jewish sacrifices in the temple, prohibited the practice of circumcision, destroyed copies of the Hebrew Bible, and set up a Greek worship system in the temple. Jews who resisted were killed.

But things went from bad to worse. (ALEXANDRIA) In December of 168 BC Antiochus was moving into Egypt, trying to gain control of that part of the world, when the Romans showed up. They had a huge armada. Near Alexandria, the Roman general had a meeting with Antiochus, and told him that he had to leave Egypt and agree to submit to the Romans. Antiochus could see that he was no match for the Romans. He realized that he had to submit. But he was not happy about it. He felt humiliated.

(PROJECTOR OFF)

On his way back north, he vented his anger on the Jews. Twenty thousand of his troops entered Jerusalem on a Sabbath day. They put an idol to Zeus in the temple and sacrificed a sow on the altar. This, of course, was an abomination to the Jews. Many more of the Jews were killed by the Greeks.

Soon after this, there was an encounter that a Jewish priest had with these Greeks which led to open rebellion. An official from the king came to the village of this old priest, whose name was Mattathias. He asked Mattathias to take the lead in offering sacrifice to a pagan god. When another Jew in town offered to do it instead, Mattathias struck down and killed both this Jew and the Greek official. Mattathias and his five sons had to flee to the hills. In the next few months he and two of his sons were killed. But the remaining three sons led a rebellion against the Greeks that became known as the Maccabean revolt. One of the sons who led the revolt for a while became known as Maccabee, which means "hammer."

Though greatly outnumbered, the Jews were successful in forcing out the Greeks. In December of 165 BC--- the Jewish month of Chislev--- on the 25th day of the month, exactly three years after the altar in the temple had been desecrated, the temple in Jerusalem was rededicated.

The earliest Jewish writings do not contain mention of this, but the story developed that the Jews found a jar of holy oil in the temple. It was only enough to light the lamps of the golden lampstand in the holy

place for one day. It took eight days to prepare new oil that met the standards required by the Hebrew Scriptures. Supposedly this small amount of oil miraculously lasted until the new oil was available on the eighth day. Thus the tradition of the candle lighting developed. The annual observance of Hanukkah was first known as the Feast of Dedication, or the Feast of Lights.

III.

Thus we come to our Scripture passage in John 10 vv. 22-30 and the subject of JESUS AND THE CELEBRATION OF HANUKKAH. (PROJECTOR ON--- III. JESUS AND THE CELEBRATION OF HANUKKAH) According to vv. 22 & 23 of John 10 (p. 896 in pew Bibles), **“At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the colonnade of Solomon.”**

Jesus had come to Jerusalem to observe the feast of Hanukkah, which John calls the Feast of Dedication. (SOLOMON’S PORTICO) He was hanging out in the portico of Solomon, which was on the east side of the temple compound.

The context of this visit is significant. A couple of months earlier Jesus had healed a man born blind. Chapter 9 tells that story. The healing of people with leprosy and who were born lame or blind was regarded by Jewish religious leaders as a sign of the Messiah. Since these feats had never been accomplished in recorded Jewish history, and since the Old Testament regarded these miracles as being characteristic of the coming messianic kingdom, the religious leaders believed that only the true Messiah could do these things.

Jesus had just healed the blind man a couple of months earlier in Jerusalem. It was in this setting that Jesus proclaimed, **“I am the light of the world.”** (9:5) The term “light” for John seems to symbolize life, especially eternal life. In v. 10 of #10 Jesus declares, **“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”**

Having healed the blind man a couple of months earlier and having demonstrated that He was the light of the world, it was appropriate that Jesus should appear at this Feast of Lights to make another presentation of His claims to be the Messiah. It was apparently already the custom for Jews during this Feast of Lights to place candles outside of their homes. Many would light one lamp or candle for each resident of the home.

The biggest lamps in all of Jerusalem were in the inner courtyard of the temple in what was known as the Court of Women. (TEMPLE CANDELABRA) These lamps were made largely of gold. They were 86 feet tall, which would be the height of a six or seven story building. At the beginning of Hanukkah, or the Feast of Lights, the lamps would be lit. Because of their huge size and great height they put out a lot of light at night.

(TEMPLE AT NIGHT) An early Jewish document from the Talmud describes the lighting of these huge lamps: **“There were candlesticks there--- in the Court of Women--- with four golden bowls on the top of them and four ladders to each candlestick, and four youths of the priestly stock and in their hands jars of oil holding a hundred and twenty logs which they poured into all the bowls. They made wicks from the worn out drawers and girdles of the priests and with them they set the candlesticks alight, and there was not a courtyard in Jerusalem that did not reflect the light... Men of piety and good works used to dance before them with burning torches in their hands, singing songs and praises...”** (Megilla 31) Thus was much of Jerusalem lit at night by these four candelabras.

(PROJECTOR OFF) Now, standing not far from these giant lampstands, at the Feast of Lights, this One who had proclaimed Himself to be the light of the world, made another challenge and appeal to the Jewish people. Verse 24 says, **“So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, ‘How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.’ Jesus answered them, ‘I told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name bear witness about me...’”** Jesus had met the tests which the Jewish leaders themselves had established for determining the Messiah.

Jesus continues in vv. 26 -29, **“...but you do not believe because you are not among my sheep. My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish, and no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all, and no one is able to snatch them out of the Father's hand.”**

This is a great passage on the eternal security of a true believer in Jesus. The author John uses a double negative in v. 28 to translate the words of Jesus, who was probably speaking in Aramaic. This is poor grammar in English but perfectly permissible in Greek. It is the strongest grammatical expression that John could use to express a truth that he wished to proclaim. Literally he says, **“They--- followers of Jesus--- shall not never perish...”** Once we are one of Jesus' sheep, we are part of His flock forever.

The Jews were wanting Jesus to tell them if He was claiming to be the Messiah. He says, "Look at My works. I have met the tests that you have established for the promised Messiah and the tests which the Hebrew Scriptures have established. I have healed lepers. I have healed the blind."

Then, without directly answering their question about Him being the Messiah, He goes one step further. According to v. 30 of #10 He declares, "**I and the Father are one.**" Jesus claims to be one with God the Father. Whether Jesus is claiming to be one in nature or one in purpose or one in essence, it is clear that He is making a claim to deity, and His audience thus interpreted it.

The point that I would like for you to see here is that Hanukkah, or the Feast of Lights, or the Feast of Dedication, was the only early Jewish holiday that was not established by the Hebrew Scriptures. There was nothing in the Bible that commanded the Jews to observe this feast. In fact, the Pharisees of Jesus' time, who were the conservatives of Bible interpretation, seem not to have been too thrilled about it. For the feast also drew attention to the Maccabeans and their descendants who ruled both as kings and high priests for about a hundred years after the Maccabean revolt.

The Maccabeans were not descendants of the ancient line of high priests through Aaron and Zadok. The Maccabeans also came to side with the Sadducees, who were a religious party which had a more liberal interpretation of the Old Testament Law. They did not believe in things like angels and resurrection from the dead. The high priests were mostly Sadducees. The Maccabean kings also came to be morally and spiritually corrupt. The rabbis, who were mostly Pharisees, did not approve of any of this. So many of them weren't so thrilled about observation of Hanukkah.

Down through history attacks have been made on some aspects of the observance of Hanukkah. We don't know, for example, how the practice of lighting an additional candle each night of the feast came about. Some Jewish writers suggested that it had pagan origins relating to the lengthening of the day of the winter solstice, which was the shortest day of the year.

Despite all of this questionable background involving the celebration of Hanukkah, Jesus came to Jerusalem to participate in the celebration. He used the feast as an opportunity to tell people who He was. In the sight of those giant torches, which commemorated the most recent deliverance of the Jews from their enemies, Jesus indicated not only that He was the ultimate deliverer and Messiah, but also that He was God come in the flesh.

The lesson for us is this: There have been Christians and cultists and secularists down through history who have all criticized the practice of celebrating Christmas. They have pointed out that the Bible nowhere commands or even mentions such a celebration. They point out that some Christmas traditions are secular or even pagan in origin. Some claim that the date for Christmas was chosen because it was originally the date of a pagan Roman celebration called Sol Invictus. A Christian emperor of Rome allegedly picked it because he wanted the celebration of Christ's birth to overshadow the more pagan celebration. There is also crass commercialism associated with Christmas.

The example of Jesus in His celebration of Hanukkah would seem to teach us that we Christians should feel no guilt in celebrating Christmas. Indeed, we should use it as an opportunity to proclaim Jesus for who He is. In our secular world it is hard to ignore the religious roots of Christmas. We should not hesitate to remind our world that Christmas is not just about giving and family and warm, fuzzy feelings. It is about the entrance of God into the human race to show His love for us and ultimately to die for our sins so that we might have eternal life through faith in Him.

Years ago ABC commentator Harry Reasoner observed, **"...even if you did not get your shopping all done, and you were swamped with the commercialism and frenzy, be at peace. And even if you are the Deacon having to arrange the extra seating for all the Christmas Christians that you won't see until Easter, be at peace. The story stands. It's all right that so many Christians are touched only once a year by this incomparable story. Because some final quiet Christmas morning, the touch will take."** (Dec. 24, 1973) Perhaps it will be this year.

We genuine Christians ought to view Christmas as an opportunity. It is an opportunity to proclaim the birth of Christ in Christmas cards, in church pageants, in singing Christmas carols, and in bringing friends to church. In this pandemic year it may mean inviting people to participate online. We take advantage of the season to look for opportunities to share our faith at work and with our friends and relatives as we talk about the true meaning of Christmas.

IV.

There is a further application for us. Let's look at vv 31-39 of John #10 and MAN'S RESPONSE TO THE JESUS OF HANUKKAH AND CHRISTMAS. (PROJECTOR ON--- IV. MAN'S RESPONSE TO THE...) Notice how these Jews respond to Jesus' claim to be one with the Father. Beginning in v. 31 the text says, **"The Jews picked up stones again to stone him. Jesus answered them, 'I have shown you many good works from the Father; for which of them are you going to stone me?' The Jews answered him, 'It is not for a good work that we are going to stone you but for blasphemy, because you, being a man, make yourself God.'"** These Jews understood what Jesus was claiming about Himself. They just didn't like it.

According to v. 34 and following: **“Jesus answered them, ‘Is it not written in your Law, ‘I said, you are gods’? If he called them gods to whom the word of God came—and Scripture cannot be broken— do you say of him whom the Father consecrated and sent into the world, ‘You are blaspheming,’ because I said, ‘I am the Son of God’?”** Jesus is referring to a passage in Psalm 82 in which judges in Israel were called “gods.” Jesus is saying that if in some sense these guys could be called “gods,” certainly it is legitimate to call Him the Son of God.

Finally, Jesus concludes, beginning in v. 37, **“If I am not doing the works of my Father, then do not believe me; but if I do them, even though you do not believe me, believe the works, that you may know and understand that the Father is in me and I am in the Father.”** The narrator John adds in v. 39, **“Again they sought to arrest him, but he escaped from their hands.”**

This is what I want you to see: Hanukkah was a celebration of the last great deliverance from oppressive enemies that Israel had experienced. Once again the Jews were under the domination of a foreign power--- the Romans. The celebration of this feast was a symbol of the hope that the Jews had that they would again be delivered from foreign oppression.

As the Jews of Jerusalem lit lamps in front of their homes, and as they lit the giant lights of the temple, they reminded themselves of God’s miraculous intervention in a key moment of their history. Another tradition that the Jews had was to sing the Hallel on each day of the feast. The Hallel was the section of the Psalms that included Psalm 113 through Psalm 118. As they sang the Hallel on each day of the feast (PSALM 118:27), they recited v. 27 of Psalm 118, which says, **“The Lord is God, and he has made his light to shine upon us.”**

Meanwhile, a couple of months prior to this Hanukkah recorded by the Apostle John, Jesus had healed a man born blind. (PROJECTOR OFF) This had never before happened in the history of Judaism. The Jewish leaders themselves had said that only the coming Messiah could do such a thing. Upon that occasion Jesus had declared that He was the light of the world.

Now upon the occasion of the Feast of Lights Jesus presented Himself as Israel’s Messiah, as the provider of deliverance upon which this feast focused. He went a step further than that. He said that He was God. In effect, He was indicating that He was the One who had intervened to provide deliverance for the Jews from the Greeks during the Maccabean revolt 200 years earlier.

What was the response of these Jews to Jesus? They rejected Him. They took up stones to kill Him for blasphemy. At the beginning of John's Gospel (PROJECTOR ON--- JOHN 1:11) this disciple of Jesus says, **"He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him."**

All too often a similar thing happens at Christmas. We give gifts. We go to church. We sing Christmas carols: "Joy to the world, the Lord has come. Let earth receive her king. Let every heart prepare Him room..." But the truth is that some of us have never really received the gift which God provided for us at Christmas. We have not become part of Christ's universal church composed of believers in Him from throughout the world and from many denominations. We have not acknowledged Him as our Lord. We have not received Jesus as king of our life, and we really have not prepared room for Him in our heart.

Is that true of you this morning? If it is, you can change it. The same gospel writer who said that Jesus came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him (JOHN 1:12) also declared, **"But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God..."** If we simply put our trust in Jesus as our Savior, we will become part of His family.

It can be a somewhat frightening thing to give over the control of our lives to someone else. But the One who was powerful enough and loving enough to enter this world and die for us, is also powerful and loving enough to give us the abundant life that He promised. He also promises that He will provide us with forgiveness of sins and eternal life. If you have never trusted in Him as your Savior, why don't you trust Him today! Receive Him--- welcome Him into your life so that you can become a child of God. It will make this Christmas more significant than any Christmas that you have ever experienced.