

Seeing Christ in the Jewish Feasts



Class 6

Hanukkah

The Feast of Light

- Reading: John 10:22-42
- Until recently, Hanukkah has been seen as a very minor holiday in the Jewish year.
- With the immigration of large numbers of European Jews to the United States in the early 20th century, this began to change as these immigrants assimilated into American society.
- For most American children, Christmas is the high point of the year, primarily because of the shower of gifts they can anticipate.
- Not wanting their kids to feel left out, Jewish Americans began to appropriate Hanukkah - the closest Jewish holiday to Christmas - as a sort of “Jewish Christmas,” with gift giving, lights, and in some cases even a tree (euphemistically called a “Hanukkah bush”).
- Previously, however, Hanukkah was given no more importance than any of the other minor holidays which are not found in the Bible.
- Even today, the traditions associated with Hanukkah are seen as somewhat questionable by many Jewish scholars.
- There are a number of reasons for this, not least of which is that the core story behind Hanukkah involves a clear violation of the commandments surrounding temple worship and sacrifice.

PART 1

Identify the Current Issue

- God can use even our rebellion to glorify himself.
- The story of Hanukkah begins in 167 B.C., with the occupation of Jerusalem by Antiochus Epiphanes, ruler of the Hellenistic (Greek influenced) Seleucid Empire.
- Antiochus was determined to spread Greek culture to every corner of his empire, and in the case of Israel this meant forcing the Jews to worship Zeus.
- Unlike other conquered peoples, however, the Jews were not willing to worship the gods of their conquerors.
- Enraged at what he perceived as stubbornness, Antiochus seized the city of Jerusalem, entered the temple with his soldiers, and sacrificed a pig on the altar in the Holy of Holies.
- He then attempted to force the Jewish men in the area to eat the pig meat, which is unclean according to levitical law.
- Antiochus removed all of the Torah scrolls from the temple and had them burned.
- He also had his soldiers kill anyone in Jerusalem who was found to have a Torah scroll in his possession, as well as any mother who had her son circumcised.
- Antiochus's brutal attempts to force Greek culture and religion on the Jews merely strengthened their resistance, and soon after the desecration of the temple a rural priest named Mattathias began what was to become a violent revolt against the Seleucid occupiers.
- A soldier had come to Mattathias's small town of Modi'in, where he set up an idol in the town square and ordered the townspeople to offer sacrifices to it.
- Before the first Jew could complete his sacrifice, however, Mattathias killed him in a righteous fury, then slew the king's soldier.

- According to the apocryphal Book of Maccabees, “Then Mattathias cried out in the town with a loud voice, saying: ‘Let everyone who is zealous for the law and supports the covenant come with me!’
- Then he and his sons fled to the hills and left all that they had in the town” (1 Macc. 2:27–28).
- This action made Mattathias and his family into folk heroes, and after Mattathias’s death about one year later, his son Judah Maccabee led a ragtag army of Jewish rebels to victory over their oppressors.
- And that’s where history gets a bit muddy.
- We know for certain that Judah Maccabee and his followers retook Jerusalem, where they entered the temple and began cleansing it and rededicating it to the Lord.
- On the face of it, this seems fine - until you read the laws regarding temple services and see that nobody is allowed to enter the Holy of Holies except for members of the levitical priesthood, the descendants of Aaron.
- By disregarding the law and the covenant, the Maccabees placed the newly independent nation of Judah firmly on the side of compromise.
- This continued to be the case even after the Roman general Pompey captured Jerusalem in 63 B.C., creating a hybrid form of Judaism that was deeply influenced by the Greco-Roman culture of the day.
- The story of Hanukkah
- Here’s how the story of the Hanukkah miracle is told: having cleansed the temple, the Maccabees search for undesecrated oil with which to light the lampstand in the Holy of Holies.
- Once lit, this lamp is supposed to burn day and night (Exod. 27:20–21), but they can only find one day’s worth of oil.
- It will take eight days to press fresh oil and consecrate more.
- What to do?
- In faith, the Maccabees bless the day’s worth of oil they have found and light the lamp.

- And - miracle of miracles! - the oil lasts for eight full days, until they are able to replenish the supply.
- God's command regarding the lamp is honored, thus proving that God is pleased by the re-consecration of the temple.
- This story is not found in the Book of Maccabees; it was not written down until approximately 600 years after Judah Maccabee, in the Babylonian Talmud.
- In reality, the eight days of Hanukkah were likely instituted by the Maccabees as a belated celebration of the Feast of Tabernacles.
- 2 Maccabees 10 says:

"Now upon the same day that the strangers profaned the temple, on the very same day it was cleansed again, even the five and twentieth day of the same month, which is Casleu (Kislev). And they kept the eight days with gladness, as in the feast of the tabernacles, remembering that not long afore they had held the feast of the tabernacles, when as they wandered in the mountains and dens like beasts. Therefore they bare branches, and fair boughs, and palms also, and sang psalms unto him that had given them good success in cleansing his place. They ordained also by a common statute and decree, That every year those days should be kept of the whole nation of the Jews. (vv. 5-8)"

- The Hanukkah story appears to be the continuation of an attempt to legitimize the Maccabean disregard for the Torah's injunction against anyone other than the sons of Aaron performing temple services.
- Thus, the events which led to the establishment of Hanukkah also served to strengthen the Hellenized form of Judaism - a form which was firmly established by the time of Jesus, and which we see in the New Testament.
- Nonetheless, Hanukkah today is celebrated as the Festival of Lights, honoring a God who loves his people and who intervenes on their behalf.
- God took the rebellion of the Maccabees - which was not only a rebellion against Antiochus, but also against God's word concerning temple worship - and turned it into a lasting testimony to his glory.

PART 2

Discover the Eternal Principles

- There are three spiritual lessons that we would like to get from Hanaukka:

- 1. There is curable and incurable blindness.**
- 2. Jesus is the light of the world.**
- 3. We are supposed to reflect that light.**

1. There is curable and incurable blindness.

- In John 10, Jesus calls himself *“the gate for the sheep”* and *“the good shepherd”* (v. 7, 11).
- Verses 19–21 say, *“At these words the Jews were again divided. Many of them said, ‘He is demon-possessed and raving mad. Why listen to him?’ But others said, ‘These are not the sayings of a man possessed by a demon. Can a demon open the eyes of the blind?’”*
- Some of the people thought Jesus was out of his mind for calling himself a sheep-gate and a good shepherd.
- Others reasoned that he could not be insane or demon-possessed, based on the strength of his miracles.
- There is no indication that this second group understood what he was saying any more than the first did, but at least they were willing to listen.
- Throughout Jesus’ ministry this same division can be seen: some people dismissed his teachings as mindless raving, while others recognized that Jesus not only taught with clarity and authority, but also with signs and wonders.
- Neither group really seems to have understood what Jesus was saying - for that matter, even his disciples missed it much of the time! - but their willingness or unwillingness to listen divided them into two camps.
- Both were blind, but only one could have their eyes opened.

- It is worth taking to time to consider others' arguments carefully, even if we end up rejecting them.
- At least we will reject them with understanding.

2. Jesus is the light of the world.

- Jesus grew up with Hanukkah, although it was called the Feast of Dedication at that time.
- Whether Jesus actively celebrated Hanukkah as an adult is not clear; we do know that Jesus was in Jerusalem during at least one Hanukkah celebration, and that he chose this time to make one of his clearest claims of Messianic identity (John 10:22-42).
- Among other things, Jesus said, "*I and the Father are one*" (v. 30), and "*I am God's Son*" (v. 36).
- It is significant that Jesus chose to make this declaration in Solomon's Colonnade (v. 23), rather than in the inner temple courts.
- This colonnade was part of the Court of the Gentiles, meaning that anyone, Jew or Gentile, could come there to worship God.
- Thus Jesus declared himself to be the Son of God not to the Jewish leadership alone, but to all the world.
- The Gentile world, as well as the Jewish, was privy to this announcement.
- Making the point even more inescapable, Jesus tells the Jewish leaders, "*The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me*" (vv. 25b-27).
- This harkens back to what Jesus said earlier in chapter 10: "*I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me - just as the Father knows me and I know the Father - and I lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd*" (vv. 14-16).
- Jesus is declaring himself to be the Messiah of the whole world, not just of the Jews.

- This is a point that is often missed when we study the Scriptures.
- Statements such as *"I am the light of the world"* (John 8:12) are taken for granted: of course Jesus is the light of the world.
- Nothing special there, everyone knows that.
- But to the Jews of Jesus' day, this idea was revolutionary.
- The Messiah was supposed to be the light of Israel, not the Gentiles as well!
- Sure, the Messiah would establish Jerusalem as the center of the world, and the Gentiles would come there to worship the Lord - but as second-class spiritual citizens.
- The Messiah would establish the Jewish people as the light of the world, not take up the position himself.
- The Jews were expecting a Messiah who would bring glory and honor to all of Israel: a mighty king who would lead the Jews, who in turn would rule the world.
- And Jesus was proposing to trash those dreams of glory, inviting the Gentiles in on an even footing.
- This was revolutionary and wonderful.
- We should remember how glorious a thing it is that our Lord is the light of the world.

3. We are supposed to reflect that light.

- Matthew 5:14-16 says, *"Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid. Neither do men light a candle, and put it under a bushel, but on a candlestick; and it giveth light unto all that are in the house. Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."*
- We need to be sure that we don't act like the Jews did 2,000 years ago.
- Often we Christians look for credit, when it really belongs to God.

- The end of Jesus' saying is more important than the rest: "*and glorify your Father which is in heaven.*"
- **IF** there is any good in us whatsoever, it is because God has worked in us.
- **IF** we do any good works at all it is due 100% to the spiritual influence of God's Word and His spirit.
- It is not within a man to be righteous.
- When people see the light of our good works, they are seeing the light of God reflected in us.
- Jesus understood that in his own life, and wants us to understand it in ours as well.
- We are not righteous due to our own merit.
- We are made righteous by the merciful grace of our God.
- We must reflect the same light of God that Jesus did.

PART 3

Apply Your Findings

- The Maccabees rebelled against Antiochus for a good reason, but when they ignored God's precepts regarding temple worship, their zeal led them to disobedience.
- Too often we find ourselves justifying wrong actions in the name of righteous motivations.
- Yet God, in his sovereign grace, has allowed Hanukkah to become a light-giving holiday.
- And he has done the same for many well-meaning blunders of ourselves throughout the years.
- This should open our eyes to the fact that God is often less concerned with details than we are.
- We correctly point out the mistakes of others, and think ourselves righteous for doing so.
- But God looks at the heart.
- For example, there are elements of holidays that many of us remember which have no basis in Scripture and could even be considered unscriptural (Easter eggs and Christmas trees come readily to mind).
- Yet God has not turned his back on us for celebrating them; on the contrary, he can use these holidays to bring the lost to himself.
- God uses anything and everything for his purposes.
- God uses **US** for his purposes.
- We can reflect his goodness and mercy.
- Let's remember to do so.