

Hanukkah

'The Feast of Dedication was taking place in Jerusalem. It was winter and Jesus was walking in Solomon's porch in the temple area' (John 10:22 & 23).

Hanukkah is known as the Feast of Dedication and the Festival of Lights. The above scripture infers Jesus was involved in this Jewish festival. The word Hanukkah means dedication. This festival is about the rededication of the third Jewish temple, after Antiochus Epiphanes destroyed it in 167 BC. He had houses burned, the walls of Jerusalem torn down, many thousands of people were sold into slavery or murdered, then he had the temple plundered and defiled. Epiphanes put an idol of Zeus on the holy altar then sacrificed a pig. He sprinkled its blood in the Holy of Holies and poured broth over scrolls containing the scriptures, cut them to pieces and burned them. The temple was defiled and desecrated, then it was made into a shrine for Zeus and Epiphanes only allowed pigs to be sacrificed on the altar. The goal of Epiphanes was to obliterate every vestige of Judaism. To save their own lives and the lives of their families, many Jews gave up and obeyed the new pagan laws. Many devoted Jews who tried to live their lives according to the scriptures, were murdered. Jewish history has recorded many courageous acts of faithful devotion to God during this time in their history.

One of the most courageous acts resulted in the commencement of Hanukkah – a new feast and festival, not included in the Old Testament writings, but secured in the New Testament by the above verse. It has been celebrated by Jewish people ever since, and was celebrated by the Jews in Jesus' time. To understand the details of Hanukkah, we need to go back to about 130 years before Jesus was born, when a priestly family from the tribe of Levi were hiding themselves in the mountains of Judea. They revolted against the threat to Jewish life, culture, language and customs. Mattathias and his five sons; one of whom was known as Judah the Maccabee, which means 'hammer', led the family. Just before Mattathias died, he passed his leadership to his son Judah, who formed a small army of dedicated Jews. Judah encouraged his band of men by saying, "It is easy for many to be overcome by a few; in the sight of heaven there is no difference between deliverance of many by a few, for victory in war does not depend upon the size of the army, but on the strength that comes from heaven. With great presumption and lawlessness they come against us to destroy us and our wives and our children and to despoil us; but we are fighting for our lives and our Torah laws. God Himself will crush them before us, so do not be afraid of them."

Three years after the desecration of the temple, this band of courageous Jews won an astonishing victory, took back Jerusalem and established Judea as an independent country, which remained that way until the Romans conquered them. The Lord overthrew the massive army that came against the band of faithful Jews. The Jews knew they were vastly outnumbered but they trusted in the Lord, for He was in charge. It was a show of faithfulness and trust in God and in return, He faithfully and miraculously overcame their enemy. In battle after battle, the small band of Jews overcame the mighty Greek/Syrian army and drove the Syrians out of the land of Israel. Once the Syrians were gone, the Jews turned their attention to repairing and cleansing the temple. The book of 1 Maccabees describes the extent of the damage: "They saw the temple laid desolate and the altar profaned; the gates were burned and the courtyards overgrown with plants as in a thicket, or like one of the mountains, and the chambers laid in ruins." The altar was torn down and completely rebuilt.

The temple was made ready for the presence of the Lord but there was not enough oil for the Menorah (the lampstand; Exodus 25:31 to 40) and it would take eight days to prepare another jar of suitable pure oil according to the instructions given by the Lord (Exodus 30:23 to 31). There was just enough oil to burn for one day, but they decided to light it anyway, and miraculously the Menorah burned for the eight days it took to prepare the new oil. That is why the Hanukkah Menorah has eight, and sometimes nine branches, and why the Jews celebrate the feast and festival for eight days. It really was an historic victory.

Exactly three years to the day after the temple's altar had been desecrated; the newly restored temple was rededicated. However, it could have been rededicated two months earlier. Judah the Maccabee, the leader of the revolt against Syria, believed they were living out a scriptural prophecy. 'He shall speak words against the Most High God and shall try to wear out the holy

ones of the Most High; and will try to change the times of the feasts and the law. The holy ones will be given into his hand for 3½ years but the court of the Most High will strip him of his rulership which will be completely destroyed in the end' (Daniel 7:25 & 26).

The date Judah the Maccabee believed Daniel had prophesied was Tishrei (September-October) the 7th month on the Jewish calendar. Judah the Maccabee knew the first two temples had been dedicated during Sukkoth or the Feast of Tabernacles, so he waited until then. They celebrated Sukkoth two months later in Kislev (November-December). Some believe this connection to Sukkoth is the reason why Hanukkah is celebrated for eight days, as Sukkoth is also celebrated for eight days, but it was actually to do with the oil, as mentioned earlier. This was the same rebuilt temple Jesus said would be destroyed yet again. "I tell you truthfully; there will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down" (Matthew 24:2). That happened in 70 AD during the reign of Nero. All that is left of the third temple is the Western Wall, which is still standing today.

The War of the Maccabees, resulting in the creation of Hanukkah, was an extremely important time for both Jews and Gentiles alike. If Epiphanes had been able to succeed in his destruction of the Jewish culture, and had introduced the pagan forms of idolatry to the Jews that was part of his agenda, then Jesus could not have come at that point in time. That war secured Israel and the Jewish people so our Jewish Messiah could come at the divinely appointed time. As Christians, we should observe and respect the eight days of Hanukkah, because without the Maccabees War, the stage would not have been set for Jesus to come and we would not have our salvation. We must thank God for the Jews who have brought light to this dark world. Our salvation has come from the Jews (John 4:22).

Amen and God bless you.

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