

# GROWING IN GOD PODCAST



## GIG279 – Eight Reasons for Christians to Celebrate Hanukkah

I thought since we were into the Hanukkah season that it would be fun to do a little message that would give us a feel for Hanukkah and our celebration of it. I wanted to title this *Eight Reasons for Christians to Celebrate Hanukkah*. Now, these are reasons that I just came up with. I came up with eight because of the fact that when we celebrate Hanukkah, we have eight candles that are lighted through this time of the celebration. So I just thought I would work with the number eight and see what ideas came to mind that are specific things that we as Christians can celebrate and reasons we can celebrate Hanukkah.

First of all, what I would like to do is give a short history about Hanukkah so there is a little bit of understanding. The purpose of this celebration heralds back to the time of the Maccabees and the Maccabean Revolt that took place. If we would go back to the date of about December 25<sup>th</sup>, 168 BCE, we find that Antiochus IV Epiphanes was taking over the Temple and demanding that sacrifices be made on the altar to Zeus. These defilements of the altar of the Temple in Jerusalem were, of course, blasphemous to the Jewish people, and they were devastating to the Jewish faith. So it was part of something that began to create a lot of anger and resentment within the Jewish community.

This was followed by other demands that were made. For instance, they were no longer allowed to celebrate Shabbat. They were no longer supposed to circumcise their children. There was a definite requirement of Hellenization that was being laid upon the Jewish people. Part of this Hellenization was that they be made to eat swine as part of a show that they really were being converted to Hellenistic practices; and this being a tremendous violation of the Law of Moses was something that, again, created a great deal of anger. So in Modi'in when Mattathias was demanded to go up on the altar and eat swine, he started a revolt; this was the beginning of the Maccabean Revolt, as it is called, which went on for many years. It was a tremendous historical event because this small band of Jewish farmers and people who had no weaponry and were not trained in warfare began to revolt against the oppressors. They ended up winning many battles, and they actually ended up retaking the Temple in Jerusalem. As part of the retaking of the Temple in Jerusalem, there was a process of cleansing the Temple; actually, it was termed a rededication of the altar. And I know that today when we hear the story of Hanukkah, a lot of times we hear that when they retook the Temple, they found only one cruse of oil; no more oil had been sanctified. So they went ahead and put this oil in the menorah and lighted it, and it lasted for eight days; and this is the foundation of the practice of Hanukkah.

Historically, it seems like what happened, and you can get this from different sources; you can go back to the ancient sources, you can go back to the Book of Maccabees itself, which is very historic and detailed in the events that happened. I went to the Book of Maccabees, First and Second Maccabees. I also went to the Jewish Encyclopedia. I looked at another reference called *The New Testament Milieu*,<sup>1</sup> which gives a history and also cites the Book of Maccabees. When we begin to look at all these different formats of the history, we find that what happened was a cleansing of the altar, a rededication of the

---

<sup>1</sup> Du Toit, A. B. et al. *The New Testament Milieu*. Vol. 2. Halfway House: Orion Publishers, 1998. Print. Guide to the New Testament.

altar; in fact, we know that it is called the Feast of Dedication. This is really pointing to the fact that it was not necessarily a miracle of lighting of the menorah and the oil lasting for eight days, but instead, what happened was when they retook the Temple, they realized that all of this had gone on with sacrificing to Zeus and sacrificing unclean animals; and so, they literally tore the altar apart, they took everything out of the Temple and they rebuilt an altar with new stones according to the Law of Moses. They also rebuilt all of the Temple service, which included the menorah itself, the altar of incense; all of these things were actually rebuilt. So when we talk about this time of the Feast, or the celebration, it really was a rededication of the Temple with all of the Temple elements involved. So then what we are really talking about is a rededication of the Temple. A rededication of the altar for sure, it was a brand-new altar. But everything was new, and everything was rededicated at this time. Therefore it is referred to as the Feast of Dedication, and we should think about it in that terminology.

What I would like to do then is to get started here. I know that is a very thumbnail sketch and it leaves out a lot of details, and it could be done much better. But the point is to find these eight reasons why, in my own personal opinion, it is appropriate and Christians should engage in the celebration of Hanukkah. The first thing I want to do is go to John the tenth chapter, verses 22-24. This is out of the New American Standard Bible. It says, "At that time the Feast of Dedication...." So here we see directly in the Scriptures this being referred to as the Feast of Dedication. "At that time the Feast of Dedication took place at Jerusalem; it was winter, and Jesus was walking in the temple in the portico of Solomon. The Jews then gathered around Him, and were saying to Him, 'How long will You keep us in suspense? If You are the Christ, tell us plainly.'" So we see Christ coming to the Temple during this Feast of Dedication. We assume that He was there to celebrate the Feast of Dedication. It was all about a rededication of the Temple, and I think this was very much in the heart and mind of Christ to see a rededication of the Temple; and so it was very appropriate to Him in His ministry. This is the first reason that we celebrate it, or should consider celebrating it as Christians, because it is biblical. It is found in the Bible. It is a biblical feast and celebration that the Jewish people had, and we see that Christ engaged in the celebration of Hanukkah.

My second reason is that it is the rededication of the altar and the Temple itself. We likewise are looking for a new dedication of our lives, of ourselves to God and to His service. That is what the Temple represented; it was the service of God that was performed in the Temple. This was a rededication. And we find in our lives, as we go through time, that there are things that go on in our life. There are times of withdrawal, there are times of sin; there are times when we wish we were walking with God in a manner better than what we are always able to do. And so, it is wonderful to have a time when we can come and concentrate on rededicating ourselves, rededicating our families, rededicating our churches, into another level of service, a deeper level of service to the Lord. Just the fact that we need times of rededication and recommitment to the Lord in my mind would be a second reason that Hanukkah is very appropriate for us to celebrate.

My point three would be the restoration of the rulership of Israel under the Jewish people. This is something we look forward to, that there is going to be a restoration. Israel had been under the rulership of others actually since the days of the kings, the kings of Judah. The Maccabees took charge and regained control and authority over Jerusalem, over the Temple Mount, and over Israel itself. This actually took place under Simon, who was the second oldest Maccabean brother; in 141 BCE he finished driving the Syrians out of Israel altogether, and the Jewish people celebrated 78 years of Jewish rulership of all of Israel again. As I said, this was the first time that the Jews themselves and the leaders in Israel had been in control of Israel since the days of the kings of Judah.

I think that we likewise should celebrate the fact that we are seeing the beginnings. Now there is a state of Israel, and the land of Israel, once again, is under the rulership and leadership of the Jewish people. This is part of the restoration that is promised in the prophets over and over again. And we should celebrate the fact that with our own eyes, in our own lifetime, we are experiencing and watching and being a part, if we are yoked together with Israel and the Jewish people, of this restoration of the rulership and leadership of the land of Israel under the Jewish people as it was promised by God. That to me is something that we as Christians should be a part of, and we should celebrate with the Jewish people at all times.

My fourth point would be the fact that these things also foreshadow the days of Messiah, the days of the Messiah ruling on earth. We as Christians believe that Christ is the Messiah, but we also recognize that the Kingdom of God is not just going to exist in heaven. Christ taught us to pray, "Thy Kingdom come. Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven." We know that for the complete fulfillment of the prophecies of the Messiah, there must be an earthly rule where Messiah rules and reigns on the throne of David in the earth. And so, when we look at these days of the Maccabean Revolt and their struggle to retake the land of Israel, not just the Temple Mount or the Temple itself but all of the land of Israel, and to bring it back under their control, we see that this really is a foreshadowing, if you please, of the days of Messiah that are prophesied time and time again in the Hebrew Scriptures. So we can celebrate Hanukkah as a forward-looking celebration to the days when God in all of His authority will be restored Himself as the ruler over this natural world – not just the world of the heavens, but over this natural world – and that He will establish, as He has said, His Son, His King, His Messiah on the earth to rule over the nations of the earth. So to me, Hanukkah very much speaks to the days of the complete fulfillment of the Messianic prophecies, where we see God's Kingdom and God's rulership on earth as it is now in heaven.

A fifth thing that we can look at is recognizing, again, and always holding in our hearts, the fact that the Jewish people for over two thousand years have found themselves being persecuted and being under the oppression that they were under during the time just preceding the Maccabean Revolt. There were other times; as we know during the New Testament times they were under the oppression of the Roman rule, and that oppression and anti-Semitism is something that has continued on historically since the days of the final destruction of the Temple in 70 AD. We see that it is followed up by the Holocaust itself. And so, this idea of recognizing the persecution of the Jewish people under the anti-Semitism which has existed on this earth is very much something that needs to be remembered. It is one of the things that we talk about with the Holocaust: the cry, "Never again."

We should live our lives as Christians in oneness with the Jewish people in their fight against anti-Semitism, in their fight against persecution, because their fight is our fight. If we see the destruction of the Jewish people, it is a precursor to the destruction of the Christians and others who are trying to practice their religion freely in the world today. And so, I think as we celebrate Hanukkah as Christians, we can light a candle as they do in the memorial celebration of the Holocaust, and do it in remembrance of the many persecutions and pogroms; during that time, they were made to eat swine, and they were forced to convert and to hellenize. That was exactly what the revolt of the Maccabees was against, and it is exactly the war that was won. And in our day and age, I hope that we look forward to the winning of the war of anti-Semitism as they won it in the days of the Maccabees. They were able to retake the Temple, rededicate the Temple, and get rid of the travesties and the pollution and the desecration that had taken place in the Temple and surrounding the Temple during those days. I hope that we can

celebrate Hanukkah and look forward to the end of persecution and the desecration of God's people in our day and age.

Point six is the fact that during Hanukkah we see the public display of the hanukkah, or the menorah, that is lighted. This to me is showing the bold proclamation of the Jewish people publicly of their faith. Now, it may seem like a simple act that you put the hanukkah in your window or in your front yard; but there were times in which this was really a death sentence, because it was flying in the face of those who were demanding that they hellenize, and that they eat pork. To show that they were celebrating Jewish practices like Shabbat and still circumcising their children was flying in the face of this persecution. So it was a bold proclamation of their faith, saying, "We will not bow down," as we see with Daniel in the Book of Daniel, where he refused to bow to the image. And he paid the price – he was thrown into the lion's den. Thank God that God saw fit to save him as He did the three Hebrew children from the persecution that came from their declaration, their bold declaration of faith and their refusal to bow down.

This has been part of the heart of the Jewish people for many, many years. And I think as Christians, in celebrating Hanukkah we can celebrate that bold proclamation of Jews down through the centuries that say, "We will not bow down to the idolatry of this age, or to rulers that happen to find themselves in power." Because as we see today, those rulers have disappeared, but Judaism and the Jewish people have not disappeared. They are still here, and they are expressing boldly during this time of Hanukkah their faith and their belief in what God has spoken to them and the promises that they have. I think that we as Christians should join with them in their bold celebration of their faith, their bold celebration of the Word of God, and their bold holding to the promises that God has given them; that they will, no matter how much persecution they face, be standing on that Word and believing to see God deliver them as He has delivered the Jewish people down through the ages by His power and His hand.

And so to me, for us as Christians to celebrate Hanukkah is to join with the Jewish people in their bold proposition. The hanukkah itself, or the menorah itself, can be a proclamation we make publicly that we believe God, we believe the promises of God, we believe the Word of God, and we should do that. The Scriptures teach us in the New Testament that if you are going to light a light, then you do not put it under a bushel basket and hide it away. And I think that is true of lighting the hanukkah or lighting the menorah – you do not light it and then hide it in the back room. You make it a public proclamation of your faith in the Word of God. We see in the New Testament Scriptures that this is something we are encouraged to do: light a candle, light a light, be a city on a hill that everybody sees and everybody hears the proclamation of our faith and our love for the Lord, for His Word, and all of these things. So this bold proclamation of our faith is another reason to me for Christians to celebrate Hanukkah.

Reason number seven is simply to show our oneness today with Judaism, with the state of Israel, and with the Jewish people everywhere that still remain in the Diaspora. These are our elder brothers in the faith. They always have been that, and somehow we as Christians should say that we are one with them, that we are declaring and standing up for them and standing up in oneness with them as they face the challenges that they face today in developing the state of Israel and living in the land that God has promised them, surrounded many times by enemies and those declaring their destruction. We should use Hanukkah as an opportunity to say we do stand with the Jewish people, we do stand with Israel, we do stand with Judaism in celebrating and worshiping one God, one true God, who is the author of the Word of God that we hold to. We have one set of Scriptures that we hold onto in the Hebrew Scriptures, and along with the Jewish people we believe this to be the Word of God. By faith we are enjoined into

the covenant of Abraham and we celebrate this Word with them. So it is an opportunity to stand with them.

Reason number eight may be a little different to people, and some may agree or not agree. But I think as we look back again to point one, we see that biblically, Jesus celebrated Hanukkah. He was in the Temple at that time of the Dedication and was participating in the celebration of it. When I look at His participation, what it reminds me of is the fact that Christ, the one we call Jesus as Christians and have for years, was an observant Jew. He was born into Judaism. He was born into a Jewish family. He lived in the land, He lived in the culture, He lived in the Scriptures. He went to the synagogue, He went to the Temple. He said Himself, "I have not come to destroy the Law, but I have come to fulfill the Law." And in my mind, in the celebration of Hanukkah we have to somehow reconnect ourselves with the Jewish Jesus. His name is Yeshua, which means Joshua. The full spelling of the name of Joshua in the Scriptures is Yehoshua.<sup>2</sup> People say, "Well, we are saying the English translation of His name, Jesus." No, if you are going to say His name in English, it is Joshua. But He was a Jew. He is a Jew. And I think that for me, in celebrating Hanukkah we reconnect ourselves as Christians to our Hebrew roots of faith. He was our connection. He was the one who grafted us in to the covenants of Abraham, according to Paul's teaching. And I think that it allows us in this celebration of Hanukkah to return to our Hebrew roots – to recognize them, to be thankful for them, to engage with them, and to learn more deeply the ways that were the ways of this Jesus that we talk about.

I am not trying to take away from the name of Jesus. There are many miracles and things that have happened in that Name. But there is no question that the beginnings of that Name were part of the disconnect between Christianity and Judaism that in my heart I cry to see repaired. I want to see this breach repaired. And part of repairing it can be done as we see that this One who came, that we believe was the Anointed, the Christ of God, was Yeshua. He was a Jew in every way, shape, and form. He observed Judaism, and it was through His obedience to the Law that we find the fulfillment of what we believe He provided for us in salvation. So my point number eight is, let's reconnect through the celebration of Hanukkah with our Jewish roots of faith. Let's proudly recognize them and proudly voice them, and not be disconnected any longer. I do not want Christianity and Judaism divided and disconnected. I think there is something very important in the coming together of Christians and Jews in today's world, and Hanukkah can be a bridge for us to see that happen.

So those are my eight points. I hope they have been a blessing to you. And I hope you will find that blessing in celebrating as a Christian this time of Hanukkah. Maybe go back yourself into the Book of Maccabees, maybe into the Jewish Encyclopedia or some of these other sources, and read the stories for yourself. Find out how it was done and what was done. And let it be something that becomes very special to us as Christian believers, and also creates in us a oneness with our Jewish brothers and sisters in this day and age.

I bless you with this word, and Father, I ask You that You open our hearts, our minds and our spirits to find something new and alive in the celebration of Hanukkah as those who are of the faith of Christianity.

Amen.

---

<sup>2</sup> Freedman, David Noel, ed. "Jesus (Person)." *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* 1992: n. pag. Print.