

Come with me to Jerusalem. It is winter. The fall harvest is complete, and the festivals are over. God's ordained festivals have been observed, and now there is a long, cold, wet winter until the spring festivals begin. If we were to follow Jesus in his time, we would follow him to the temple, even though the fall sacrifices have been completed. God did not ordain a festival time during the winter to come to the temple. Perhaps he was aware of the difficulty of traveling to Jerusalem in the rainy weather. But we follow Jesus to the temple anyway. He is going for the Feast of Dedication.

This is a traditional, historical celebration when Jewish people remember God's protection and provision for them. The Feast of Dedication, or Hanukkah, is a time when we remember another of God's great miracles. Do you recall the only reference in Scripture to this popular Jewish holiday? It is not in the Old Testament at all, seemingly the most logical place, but in the gospel of John. “Then came the feast of dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon’s colonnade” (John 10: 22-23). This covered patio at the temple was a good place to gather during the rainy season. And it was there that Jesus was observing this feast.

The events this festival commemorates occurred during the intertestamental time, the 400 years or so between the writings of the prophet Malachi and the birth of Jesus. They tell the story of an occupation and are recorded in the apocryphal books of 1st and 2nd Maccabees.

In 167 BC, Israel was occupied by the Syrians, who wanted to bring Greek culture to the region. The Greek culture recognized many gods, and the king of Syria, who controlled Israel, fancied himself one of them. His name was Antiochus, and he called himself Antiochus Epiphanies, which means Antiochus the manifestation of God. Of course, this offended the Jewish people, who believe in one God. And these people angered the ruler, who believed himself a god. So Antiochus began to oppress the people by placing statues of himself in the towns and throughout the countryside, then forcing the people to bow down to his likeness. He even placed an idol in the temple itself and had a pig sacrificed on the altar to make the temple unclean so that people could not worship there.

One of the priests of the temple, Mattathias, fought back. He fled to the hills of Judea to organize resistance to Antiochus. His son Judah, a born leader, brought many men to the hills to fight. Judah was nicknamed Maccabee (which means hammer) because the people began to see Judah as the hammer of God. In fact, many, many would come to follow Judah, believing him to be God's promised Messiah.

So the warfare began. The books of the Maccabees record the numbers and types of warriors each side had in this battle. Judah's troops were outnumbered by the Syrians and were poorly armed. Yet they assaulted the huge, well trained, well-outfitted Syrian Army. This army was trained in the style of Alexander the Great, and even had elephants that would stampede into

the Jewish troops. But the Syrians lacked the most important asset. They were no match for the one true God.

Needless to say, the battle was won. God led his troops to victory in a miraculous defeat of the Syrians. These people won their land back and once again could worship as they pleased. But the temple was defiled. So the people began the process of cleaning up and rededicating the temple.

The temple cleaned, the altar consecrated, the lampstand righted and the curtains hung, the dedication had begun. Here tradition takes over from the recorded history. Tradition says that after the war, oil was found to light the lampstand for only one day. It would take several days to prepare more oil according to the prescribed procedures. But God worked yet another miracle. The small amount of oil found, enough for only one day, burned for eight days, long enough to prepare the needed oil. The light was a symbol of God's presence, sustaining his people through all time.

So let us join Jesus at the temple almost 200 years later in a festival to remember this miracle. The temple still stands. The lamp stand still burns. But it seems to burn only through the benevolence of another foreign conqueror. The Romans now control this land. Judah the Maccabee, once hailed as God's Messiah, has been dead and buried for many generations. And the people are looking for another man to deliver them. To be more precise, they are looking right at Jesus. They ask, "how long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly."

God's people have longed for and waited for the Messiah for thousands of years. They will follow him who promises them victory. But they've failed to recognize the real enemy over whom victory will be given. Mistakenly, they equated deliverance with physical deliverance from a human enemy. But that deliverance would only be temporary. A new conqueror would darken the horizon. God desired his people to be delivered from the enemy forever--and that his enemy is the devil. Not through warfare or politics can this enemy be destroyed, but through an act of service. Humility and sacrifice are the weapons God used to bring deliverance. Only one Messiah gives victory over this enemy, and only one Messiah promises eternal life. Those who follow him will be delivered.

The truth can be seen in this tradition of God's people. Service is central to the story of the dedication. A new lampstand with nine branches, the menorah, has grown from the tradition of Hanukkah. Eight branches commemorate the miracle of the long burning oil, but the 9th is a mystery. Shammas means servant. The 9th candle is called the shammas, or servant candle, and is used to light the other lights. We see in this servant candle the Christ--Jesus the servant, bringing his light into the world. Embedded in the Hanukkah menorah is the message that Jesus teaches. Follow him and he will bring the light of eternal life.

Jesus uses the metaphor of a shepherd, and those who follow are his sheep. But a shepherd is not a conqueror of his flock. He is a servant. He leads them, feeds them, and teaches them. If the enemy comes into the camp, the shepherd will sacrifice his life for the sake of the sheep, if that's what the situation calls for. It takes a humble man to serve sheep in such a way,

for the sheep often do not even know the protection that they receive. But they do know the shepherd's voice. It is a voice they follow, a voice that leads them to sustenance and to the light.

Returning to Jesus and his delayed arrival into Jerusalem for the Feast of Dedication, John tells us this is when the people asked Jesus to declare himself. And Jesus does. He declares himself as the one for whom they have waited. His miracles and his teaching attest to his authority. But like Judah the Maccabee, who many thought was the Messiah, Jesus will die. Jesus will die on the cross for his people's freedom from sin. He will die to give them and us new life. When Jesus proclaimed he was the Messiah, Judah had been dead and buried for many generations. The Jewish people were low on hope. Then Jesus died too. However, unlike Judah, Jesus did not remain in the tomb. His burial was the pause between his battle with the true enemy, the devil, and the announcement of his victory when Jesus was raised from death three days later. No false Messiah had done this thing. We are delivered forever.

But there are times, in the winter of our lives, when the testing seems too great. Then the lights of the Hanukkah menorah can remind us that Jesus brings the light of eternal life with God's Spirit to lead us. Just as the light in the temple was seen as God's presence protecting his people, God's Holy Spirit has come to make us temples for God's glory. When that temple is attacked an enemy seems on the verge of conquering, the light of the Servant reminds us of his victory and we marvel at His dedication to us.