

John 10:22–38

How Jesus Celebrated Hanukkah

I took an informal survey this week. I asked a few Christians if they knew what Hanukkah was. The responses I got ranged from “It has something to do with oil miraculously burning in the temple” to “I really don’t know.” I’ve even heard Christians say that Hanukkah is just a Jewish substitute for Christmas!

The fact is, Hanukkah predates Christmas by about 170 years. For centuries it was a minor holiday in Judaism, although a significant one because of what it memorializes.

Hanukkah starts on the 25th day of Kislev according to the Hebrew calendar, which may fall anytime from late November to late December, and lasts for 8 days.

In our day Christmas has become an all out festival that’s almost eclipsed it’s real origins. Because Christmas is so big and all encompassing, Jewish families often struggle with what to teach their children about how to celebrate the holidays.

In his book *Hanukkah: The Family Guide to Spiritual Celebration* Ron Wolfson writes: “...many parents make a perfectly understandable, but incomplete, leap. “Christmas is for Christians.

They have Christmas. We are Jewish. We have Hanukkah.” In an attempt to substitute something for Christmas, the parent offers Hanukkah. In fact, Hanukkah is even better than Christmas. “Christmas is only one day. Hanukkah is for eight!” So now, incredible as it seems, the parental anxiety leads to the teaching that our party lasts longer, offers more presents, and is just as beautiful.”

Some Jewish families even put up a Hanukkah bush, which is just a Christmas tree with Judaic-themed ornaments.

What is Hanukkah, and if it predates Christmas did Jesus ever celebrate Hanukkah?

I. Hanukkah Is About Dedication To God

There was a king of Syria who ruled from 175 to 164 BC named Antiochus IV. He called himself Antiochus Epiphanes, which meant Antiochus the illustrious one. He ruled over Israel and saw it as his mission in life to eliminate Judaism from the face of the earth.

At first he tried to deal with the Jews peacefully. He tried to Hellenize all of Palestine by flooding it with Greek language, thought, education, and religion. He thought that he could once-and-for-all rid the world of Judaism.

Some of the Jews welcomed the new ways but most of them tenaciously held on to their faith and their customs.

Finally Antiochus, who the Jews called Epimanes, which means the “mad man,” couldn’t stand it any longer and attacked Jerusalem in 170 AD.

Eighty thousand Jewish people were slaughtered, thousands were sold into slavery, and millions of dollars worth of gold and silver was taken from the temple treasury.

It became a capital offence to possess a copy of the scriptures or to circumcise a baby boy. Mothers who were found guilty were nailed to crosses with their babies tied around their neck.

The temple courts were profaned, the temple chambers were used for prostitution, and worst of all Antiochus personally sacrificed a pig on the temple altar to the god Zeus.

A Jewish priest named Matthias organized an armed rebellion against Antiochus. He was killed but his four sons kept up the battle. The son who took the lead was named Judas Maccabaeus or Judas the hammer.

The revolt started in 166 BC and by 164 Antiochus and his Selucid army was defeated. Against overwhelming odds the Jews defeated the Syrian army and the temple in Jerusalem was purified. That’s what Hanukkah, or the feast of Dedication is all about.

Judas Maccabaeus enacted that “The days of dedication of the altar should be

kept in the season from year to year, by the space of 8 days, from the 25th day of the month Kislev with gladness and joy.”

Hanukkah, or the festival of lights, remembers the time when the light of freedom came back to Israel. According to the Talmud, at the re-dedication there was only enough consecrated olive oil to fuel the eternal flame in the Temple for one day. Miraculously, the oil burned for eight days, which was the length of time it took to press, prepare and consecrate fresh olive oil.

I. Hanukkah Is About Dedication To God

II. It's Easy To Be Dedicated To Religion And Miss The Reality Of God

There's nothing in the Bible that commands the celebration of Hanukkah. God commanded His people to celebrate seven specific feasts: Passover, Firstfruits, Pentecost, Trumpets, Day of Atonement, and Tabernacles.

But even though there's no Divine requirement to celebrate Hanukkah there's nothing wrong with celebrating it. There's no prohibition against Hanukkah. There was nothing wrong with the Feast of Dedication.

It wasn't commanded but it commemorated a significant event in Israel's history. It was right to be passionate for the temple and the law of God. God told the Jewish people to build that temple as a focal point of worship. God gave His holy law to distinguish Israel from all other people.

Jesus was passionate for the temple. He even drove out money changers who had set up a scam to bilk worshippers. He was passionate about God's law. He said, *For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.* (Matthew 5:18)

The problem, comes when we grab onto the externals of God's truth and miss the heart issues. It's easy to be dedicated to religion and miss the reality of God.

Unfortunately it happened to Israel and it can happen to us. **Turn to John 10 page 950**

How would Jesus celebrate Hanukkah? We're going to find out here in John 10. **Read vs 22-23**

Here's Jesus in Jerusalem for Hanukkah. He's in town during the Feast of Dedication and He walks onto Solomon's porch.

Surrounding the temple area was the Court of the Gentiles. Along two sides ran two long rows of 40 foot high columns known as the Royal porch and Solomon's porch.

Solomon's porch was an area on the east side of the temple. People went there to pray and meditate. Rabbis gathered there with their students to teach.

Up until this point Jesus had done a series of miracles, culminating in giving sight to a man who had been born blind.

Remember, all of Jesus miracles had the specific purpose of identifying Him as the Promised One. His purpose wasn't to make everybody well. If that were true He really failed because He missed an awful lot of people.

Last week we looked at what the Old Testament prophets said about the identity of the One who would come to be the Redeemer. We saw His family identity, His birthplace, and His deity all predicted in advance.

But the prophets gave some other identifying characteristics of the one we should look to as the Son of God. Isaiah said that in the time of Messiah, *...the eyes of the blind shall be opened, And the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. Then the lame shall leap like a deer, And the tongue of the dumb sing. For waters shall burst forth in the wilderness, And streams in the desert.* Isaiah 35:5-6

The reason Jesus did the miracles He did was to confirm Himself as Messiah. So He heals a man who had been blind from birth.

Not only that but He said some things which really shook up the religious establishment of His day. **John 8 Read verses 54-59**

In that short dialogue Jesus called God His Father, said Abraham had predicted His day, and identified Himself with the name "I am." Remember "I am," from Exodus 3:14, is the name of God. Jesus has done and said all of this and yet look at the question He gets asked.

Back to John 10:24

When John uses the term “The Jews” in his gospel, he’s not talking about the Jewish people in general. He means the Jewish leaders. These were the men in control of religious thought, religious teaching, and the interpretation of the Bible.

These were highly educated, well respected religious leaders who thought they were dedicated to God.

Now they’re surrounding this young Rabbi. You get the idea they’re trying to hem Jesus in so He’d be forced to give an answer to their question.

The Greek text literally says, “How long do you lift up our soul?” We’d say, “Come on Jesus, how long are you going to keep us hanging?”

And listen to His answer. **Read 25**

You have to remember, these guys asking the questions weren’t truth seekers. They weren’t asking because they they were trying to sort out the evidence.

The evidence was already there. The blind could see, the lame could walk, the deaf could hear. Jesus’ works already revealed His identity.

These men, who claimed to be dedicated to God, just wanted Jesus to make a declaration like, “Yes, I am the Messiah,” so they could go back to the Romans and say Jesus was an insurrectionist.

Here they were, standing in the courtyard of the very temple of Jerusalem. To them this place was holy. It was set apart to honor God. It was dedicated as a place of worship. And not only that, but it was during Hanukkah, the very Feast of Dedication.

And yet they were clueless. They were toe to toe with the Son of God and they were clueless. They were so very dedicated to their religion that they missed the reality behind that religion.

I look at them and wonder, are we close to being just like them in our country today?

For the past several years we’ve been barraged with “War on Christmas”

reports in the news. People are incensed that a store would tell their employees to say "Happy Holidays" instead of Merry Christmas.

A group called the "Liberty Counsel" publishes a list of businesses that are deemed by them to be "Naughty" (do not use "Christmas" in advertising) or "Nice" (use "Christmas" in advertising). While they don't call for boycotting of the "Naughty" stores, they do encourage readers to "thank the manager" of the "Nice" businesses.

If you go to Worldnet Daily's online store you can even buy bumper stickers that say: *This is America and I'm going to say it: Merry Christmas!* or *Merry CHRISTmas! An American Tradition*

I don't remember the American part in the Christmas story, but I'm going to go back and read Luke 2 again later.

Now please hear me closely before you start looking in the Yellow Pages for another church, I recognize there's a PC push in our country that views anything Christian as evil. I understand there are those who see it as their life's calling to eradicate religion from the public square.

But isn't there something out of wack when we're happy with merchants selling tons of often unneeded stuff in the name of the birth of the Savior of the world, and we get upset with those who don't pull Jesus Christ into the materialistic feeding frenzy? How can they be so anti-Christian as to not say, "Merry Christmas?" as I run up my credit card.

I'm afraid that for most people, including many Christians, Christmas is just what the bumper sticker says, An American Tradition. In fact that's what their Christianity has become: an American tradition.

I find it interesting that on Hanukkah, in the temple, Jesus doesn't say a word about Judas Maccebeus, Antiochus, Caesar, or Rome.

This is what He says: **Read 26-30**

Here's the difference between an outward show of religion and truly knowing God.

They ask, “Are you the Christ?” and Jesus answers “I’ve already told you by my miracles but you don’t believe and you don’t believe because you’re not my sheep.” Implication, His sheep believe in Him.

He says, “I give my sheep eternal life.” Just a couple of chapters back Jesus had plainly said, *Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me has everlasting life.* John 6:47

The sheep become sheep and have eternal life because they believe that Jesus Christ is truly the Savior.

This Christmas. as every year, millions of Americans will show up in Christmas services. I’m glad they do because it gives them another chance to hear the message of Christ. I’m not trying to discourage people from going to church at Christmas, but for a lot of Americans Christmas is a tradition and that’s it.

And a false dedication to externals will blind us to realities.

I. Hanukkah Is About Dedication To God

II. It’s Easy To Be Dedicated To Religion And Miss The Reality Of God

III. Jesus Christ Is Our Example Of True Dedication

How does this Hanukkah celebration go? **Read 31**

From about midway into the 3 years of Jesus’ ministry until the end the leaders in Israel plotted against Him. He called them on the carpet for their hypocrisy which is why they hated Him so.

The average people were very open to hearing Him. He became known as “the friend of sinners.” But the guys with the education who should have known better didn’t like having their privileged place in society threatened.

Ideally they wanted to catch Jesus in some public statement that would make Him sound treasonous to Rome so the Romans would get rid of Him for them.

But every once in a while Jesus just threw them such a zinger they couldn’t restrain themselves.

Every time Jesus claimed equality with the Father they were so infuriated they forgot about the Romans and tried to take matters into their own hands.

Read 32-33

Some people have tried to say that Jesus never claimed to be God. They say if we really understood the language and the culture of the day we'd understand that.

Well here's a group of men who understood the language and the culture a whole lot better than we do who knew exactly what Jesus was saying.

So here's how Jesus answers them. **Read verse 34-36**

Jesus' response centers around Psalm 82 and verse 6. That Psalm says, *I said, "You are gods, And all of you are children of the Most High. But you shall die like men, And fall like one of the princes." Arise, O God, judge the earth; For You shall inherit all nations.* Psalm 8:6-8

Notice, He wasn't saying, "Psalm 82 speaks of men as gods, therefore I, in common with other men, call myself God."

Instead He was saying, "If the Bible, in any sense, can apply the term 'gods' to men then how much more can it be applied to Him whom the Father has sanctified and sent into the world."

Sanctified means "set-apart." It means "dedicated." Jesus picks that word on purpose.

He wasn't grouping Himself with everyone else, He was distinguishing Himself. He saying "I'm not a son of God I'm the Son of God. I'm the only one who can make that claim. My miracles are a fulfillment of prophecy. I'm the child who was to be born, the son who was to be given. I'm the mighty God."

Jesus Christ is Messiah, the Savior, the Son of God, God in the flesh.

And with that paradox of the two natures (human and divine) in one person Jesus becomes our example of real dedication.

Dedication is not to religion. Religions are mankind's attempts to get back to God. Our English word "religion" comes from the Latin *religio*. It literally means "to bind again" (re "again" and ligare "to bind" That's where we get

the English word “ligament”). It comes from the idea of human beings binding themselves back to God.

That’s why religions are always based on works. Religions are about what we can do to get back to God.

The message of the Bible is, in that sense, anti-religious. It says there’s nothing we can do to make ourselves right with our Creator. That’s the whole reason why Jesus had to die on a cross.

At the cross the Creator took the sins of His creation and paid the price His own justice demands.

Colossians 2:14 says that Jesus *wiped out the handwriting of requirements that was against us, which was contrary to us. And He has taken it out of the way, having nailed it to the cross.*

We don’t do something to bring about our own forgiveness. That’s why the Bible clearly says, *Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to His mercy He saved us.* Titus 3:5

For by grace you have been saved through faith, and that not of yourselves; it is the gift of God, not of works, lest anyone should boast. Ephesians 2:8-9

The problem with religions is they anesthetize people to their need of a Savior. And that even happens when people turn Christianity into a religion.

If you’re convinced that going to church, being baptized, giving money, reciting liturgy, or whatever, is going to make you right with God then you’ll be blind to your need of a Savior.

But the real question is, if you can get to heaven by doing good, why did Jesus have to die? The Bible puts it this way: *If righteousness comes through the law, then Christ died in vain.* Galatians 2:21

If I could be forgiven based on what I do then Jesus died for nothing. Then the cross was a terrible waste. But it wasn’t a waste. It was the only way.

And so Jesus concludes with this: **Read verses 37-38**

The Message paraphrases Jesus words this way: *If I don't do the things my Father does, well and good; don't believe me. But if I am doing them, put aside for a moment what you hear me say about myself and just take the evidence of the actions that are right before your eyes. Then perhaps things will come together for you, and you'll see that not only are we doing the same thing, we are the same—Father and Son. He is in me; I am in him.*

There's never a third option when it comes to Jesus. He's not just a wonderful religious teacher. Wonderful religious teachers don't go around claiming that they're God.

You either believe or you don't believe. Jesus always made sure His words forced a decision one way or another. You can't sit on the fence with Jesus.

Do you believe that Jesus came as God in the flesh to die and rise again for your sins. Is your eternal hope in God our Savior?

Don't let religion get in the way of the reality this morning. Don't let tradition, even good tradition, stand in your way.

One last thing. The reason we say that Jesus is our example of true dedication is because of the truth of the incarnation. Christmas is about a baby who was unique in all the world. He had two natures, one human and one divine.

He grew up to be a man and as a man He made a conscious choice to obey the Father. Jesus had a human nature so He could die for humanity, but also had a human nature to demonstrate what a human being could do who was totally dedicated to the Father.

Throughout His whole life Jesus did the father's will. That's what we're called to be dedicated to, the Father's will. If you are a believer in Jesus, if you've trusted Him as Savior are you following His commitment of dedication?

The Bible says *Therefore, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.* I Corinthians 10:31

It says, *We are His workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.* Ephesians 2:10

And then it gives this challenge: *Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven.* Matthew 5:16

That's what the man Jesus did. You say, "Wait a minute Ed, He was God, I'm just me."

That's true. And it's also true that God's not asking for perfection from you and me. He's asking for faithfulness. He's looking for dedication.

How could we do any less? How could we not want to honor and please this God who has given His all for us? Not to pay Him back. We can't do that. But to say "Thank you." That we can do. That we must do.

Jesus celebrated Hanukkah, which means "dedication" by standing firm in His commitment to be dedicated to the Father. The servant's not above his master.

We're right in the middle of the Hanukkah week. Let's make the same commitment to dedication to really serve our God.