

Shabbat Hanukkah
Num 7:18-29; Zech 2:14-4:7; Jn 10:22-47
Notes by Tim Hegg

Dedication

Hanukkah means ‘dedication’ (חֲנֻכָּה, *chanukkah* from the Hebrew root חָנַךְ, *chanach*, “to dedicate”). Of course, “dedication” in and of itself may not be praiseworthy. A thief may be fully dedicated to his thievery, or a false teacher to his error. Our society is full of people who dedicate their time and energy to worthless things. Many idolaters are fully dedicated to the false gods they worship. So dedication, in and of itself, is not enough.

The festival of Hanukkah, however, commemorates the struggle of the Jewish people in the times of Judas Maccabee to retain their ability to worship God as He had prescribed: through the means given to Israel in the Torah, which included the Temple, priesthood, *moedim*, and living in accordance with God’s commandments. What is more, in attempting to retain those things which God had commanded, they also were struggling for their identity as God’s people. The pagan nations who ruled Israel at the time were “dedicated” to making the Jews into normal, Hellenized citizens, who no longer would be distinct, but who would unify around the Emperor and the pantheon of gods he represented. They doubtlessly knew the transition would be difficult—even very difficult, but they honestly believed that in the long run, it would be best for everyone. After all, a good majority of time and effort were constantly being expended by the ruling government simply to keep the peace with the “hot-headed” Jews. If they were eventually to be amalgamated into the general society, the problem would resolve itself. Rather than standing as distinct from the rest of society, the Jews would finally be one with them.

And many Jews agreed with this perspective. We know that the hellenization of the Jewish people had been under way for sometime, and that burden of being distinct had grown to be too much for many. They were willing to find “peace at any cost,” even if it meant denying the God of their fathers.

This perspective was not new. Even in the time of Samuel the people were clamoring for a “king like all of the nations,” that is, a king who would be the incarnation of a god, and would therefore have divine influence over the events which affected the nation. Feeling rejected, Samuel complains to God about the people’s request. But God’s response to him is surprising:

“Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them. Like all the deeds which they have done since the day that I brought them up from Egypt even to this day—in that they have forsaken Me and served other gods—so they are doing to you also. (1Sam 8:7–8)

So Israel’s desire to be like the nations, to “fit in,” to “go with the flow” was a factor from her earliest years. Even on her journey across the desert to the promised Land, when she encountered grave difficulties, going back to Egypt seemed quite attractive. The troubles of the moment eclipsed the need to obey. Personal comfort was pushed to the forefront, and the dedication to live and make decisions based upon God’s principles, regardless of the cost, was lacking.

This issue has faced Jewish people within the Christian church, though usually the pressure is more subtle. The idea that a Jew should forgo his or her identity as a Jew in favor of unity within the Christian church has led many Jews to hide their ethnic identity in favor of their spiritual identity in Yeshua. The

church has taken this so far as to affirm (at least in some quarters) that holding on to one's Jewish identity is contrary to the message and gospel of the Messiah. There does not seem to be a problem with those who want their local assemblies to be "flavored" with other ethnic cultures, but bring in Jewish symbols and the issue is viewed differently.

Of course, politically the same thing faces the nation of Israel today. She is being pressured to give up the Land God granted to her through covenant; to diminish her religious expressions, and to "fit into" the world's syncretistic, politically correct stance, where everyone is right and all distinctions are abolished. And many, even the majority of Jews, seem to be in favor of this! The "Peace Now" movement in modern Israel seeks to compromise clear Torah commandments in favor of getting along with her Muslim neighbors.

I do not mean to imply that the present government of Israel is seeking to honor God. Clearly this is not the motivation, at least on a government-wide scale. But it is remarkable that the current government seems more than willing to compromise the very things that have made Israel distinct (Sabbath, kosher laws, etc.) in order to find "peace."

The same thing was happening during the time of the Maccabees. If the story found in the apocryphal work is reliable, the war between the Jews and the ruling powers (under the leadership of Antiochus IV) was sparked when Mattityahu refused to sacrifice an unclean animal to the pagan gods. Yet his fellow priest (so the story goes) was more than willing to comply! Mattityahu ended up killing his fellow priest in order to keep him from the heinous act. And thus the war began.

Note carefully that there were priests more than willing to comply to the demands of Antiochus in order to have "peace." Yet in the actions of Mattityahu we begin to see the core characteristics of "dedication." He had come to realize that such a compromise spelled the end of the nation of Israel. If Israel was willing to enter into paganism in order to co-exist with her neighbors and the ruling government, Israel would be lost. So he put his life on the line, and called all who were faithful to join him.

God honored this dedication. The miracle of Hanukkah is not, first and foremost, the miracle of the lights that burned for eight days in the re-dedication of the Temple. The miracle of Hanukkah was that God allowed the few to conquer the many. Like Gideon of old who defeated the enemy through a mere 300 soldiers, God gave victory to the few who followed Mattityahu. Thus, He showed to all that it was His victory, not theirs. But He gave the victory because the few were willing to dedicate their lives to the cause of truth, and commit themselves into God's hands, leaving the outcome to Him.

This did not mean that their struggle was without loss. The Jewish fighters sustained heavy losses, and gave up all manner of comforts to remain valiant in the strife. (Some have suggested that the words of Hebrews 11:37-38 may describe the struggle of the Maccabees.) Yet in the end they were victorious because they were fighting for the very things that are close to God's heart, the things He is also willing to fight for.

The dedication we celebrate at Hanukkah, then, is first the re-dedication of the Temple, a striving to retain the ways of God which He has given us for our good and His glory. And secondly we celebrate the dedication of the few who, in the face of much opposition, maintained a fervent, steadfast resolve to fight for what was righteous and good.

The celebration of Hanukkah thus calls us all to consider our own dedication to the Lord and His ways. In a society in which immorality has become an acceptable way of life, are we willing to work hard to recapture a biblical perspective? Are we willing to reconstruct the boundary lines of God's word which will protect us and help us to build families that remain solid and firm, and support the next generation in their search to know God and follow His commandments?

We have been so lulled to sleep by the steady decline of values that we struggle to think outside of the “politically correct” box. Do we have the dedication to God and His ways to affirm right and wrong even when we are mocked for it? Can we make a decision for righteousness even when that decision means we will be viewed as distinct and out of the mainstream of acceptable society?

If the message of Hanukkah is that remaining distinctly God’s people is worthy of engaging in battle, even a battle that may mean the forfeiture of life, then the question comes to us as to how dedicated we are to be “in the world, but not of the world” (cf. 1John 2:15ff). Are we willing to retool our way of looking at life so as to align our thoughts with what God has revealed in His word? How dedicated are we to finding out what God wants, and then implementing these truths into our everyday lives? How much comfort are we willing to give up in order to maintain God’s principles of righteousness in our marriages, our homes, our families, and our community? May God grant to each of us a humble heart that holds His friendship as our highest treasure, and is willing to do all He directs to honor Him.