

THE WINTER HOLIDAY JESUS CELEBRATED



(Joh 10:22)

1. Christmas is sometimes referred to as the “season of lights.”
2. And though Jesus never celebrated Christmas, He *did* (as our text indicates) celebrate another “winter” holiday which took place at roughly the same time, one also associated with lights: “The Feast of Dedication” or “Hanukkah” (Heb. to dedicate).
3. For eight nights (during this time), the city of Jerusalem would be aglow with lights – most especially the temple. As such, this holiday is also referred to as “The Festival of Lights”.
4. And though (on the surface) there may seem to be no real association between dedication and lights (or the two names given to this holiday), it becomes immediately apparent once you consider the history behind how Hanukkah came into being:
 - 4.1. The holiday started almost 200 years before the time of Jesus and marked the exodus from a very dark time in Israel’s past.
 - 4.2. The prosperity and good things afforded to the people of Israel after the rebuilding of the Temple in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah eventually became their distractions from faithfulness to God and led to yet another foreign people occupying their land. This time it was the Syrians who (during their occupation) did more than just massacre many of their people, they also took away their religion. The practice of Judaism was outlawed and the Temple desecrated through the sacrificing of pigs and the erection of an altar to Greek god, Zeus.
 - 4.3. Thankfully (however), such idolatry eventually caused one brave Jewish priest and his five sons to rise up and fight back. The most instrumental of this priest’s sons was named Judah but earned the nickname, Maccabee/Maccabeus (Heb. derivative meaning “the Hammer”). Under his leadership and guerilla-style warfare, the Hammer successfully drove the Syrians out of Jerusalem in the winter of 164 B.C.
 - 4.5. And first thing the Hammer did - after ridding the land of the Syrians and cleansing the Temple (of its pagan defilements), was re-light its menorah, the golden lampstand with seven branches commanded (by God) to remain perpetually lit as a sign of the Jews uncompromising dedication to Him and His Law (often metaphorically referred to as “light” in the Scriptures).
 - 4.6. This then is the connection between Hanukkah’s two names (the Feast of Dedication and the Festival of Lights). The light of the menorah (and those additional lights lit by the Jews on this holiday) symbolize not only their re-dedication to God and His (“light” or) Law, but also to stand against the darkness of this world never (again) allowing God’s good gifts and blessings to distract them from that mission.
 - 4.7. Seeing that it takes place at the end of the year (in commemoration of the event that established it), meant it also functioned as a sort of new year resolution for the Jewish people.
5. And (as our text again points out), Jesus observed this holiday (with all the aforementioned history, symbols and meaning intact). IOW: He believed what it represented and communicated was important to the spiritual life of God’s people in His day.
6. So the question is, what can we learn from it? How can it help us? How can we apply it to our own “festival of lights”?
7. Three ways:
 - 7.1. Rededication to our mission as lights for God and His Law.**
 - 7.1.1. In His first public sermon, Jesus preached the necessity of such dedication just as it was for the Jews under the OC.
 - 7.1.2. (Mat 5:13-16) = Our (mandated) mission is to make sure that our lives communicate uncompromising obedience to God and His Law. Consider:
 - 7.1.2.1. “salt” and “light” are both metaphors for God’s Law in Scripture (e.g. Num 18; Psa 119). Hence the reason Jesus immediately follows this mandate by communicating His commitment to the Law and its fulfillment by God’s people if they are to reach heaven (5:17-19).

7.1.2.2. That our reaching heaven is conditioned upon our fulfillment of this mission is also implied in Jesus' discussion of salt and light (in re: to "salt" - v13 w/Mat 9:42-50 = Salt [again] represents God's Law. Being "salted" represents the execution of God's Law [in this case, as the judgment of God in the fires of hell]. What leads to this unfortunate end is a life of practicing sin or a person who loses their "saltiness" – i.e. a person who is no longer practicing God's Law. Hence the reason we are to have "salt in [ourselves]" - i.e. be those characterized by practicing God' Law. Plugged back into Mat 5:13 = losing our saltiness will mean missing heaven; in re: to "light" [Jesus' instruction here also implies the loss of heaven if we fail] – 14-15 w/Luk 8:16-18).

7.2. Rededication to our mission to stand against the darkness of this world (as those lights for God and His Law).

7.2.1. Jesus expects us to fulfill our mission as lights for Him and His law not only when it is popular or acceptable – but most especially when it is not those things. We are to stand as such lights in powerful protest against the spiritual darkness of the world around us.

7.2.2. This is one of the main purposes for the church's existence on earth (Mat 16:17-19) = The way we stand against the spiritual darkness of this world ("the gates of Hades") is through being the church: the place on planet earth where God's powerful light (i.e. His law) conquers the darkness (we "bind" [or punish] it and "loose"[deliver] people from its condemnation/control). The church is the new land of Goshen in the world of Egypt (the only place where it is not dark). It is in this way that we also become "the city on the hill" that Jesus mentions (back) in Mat 5 (a city is not one-but many people). The significance of this analogy ("city on a hill" = In ancient times, this was how those lost at sea or in the wilderness found their way out/ determined the direction to safety: by navigating according to the light on the high place).

7.2.3. How we know that standing against the darkness is the primary context/scenario for fulfilling our mission as lights = Because that is the context for Jesus' mission mandate in 5:13-16.

7.2.4. (Mat 5:1-12) = A chiasm intended to be interpreted according to its ABC-CBA structure. Who then Jesus is referring to as the "poor and mourning" [vv3-4] are the same as those He refers to as "persecuted for righteousness' sake" [in vv10-11] – i.e. those who b/c of their dedication to God and His LAW, are now being mistreated by the dark, sinful world around them. Hence the reason Jesus can say that such people are "blessed" (vv 3and 4) - b/c their "reward in heaven is great"(v12) (See Luk 6:20-26). The point NOT to miss: The darkness around us should never cause us to shrink back from our dedication to God and His Law – no matter the threats against us. Better to be reviled by the world than spoken well of by the world (since the latter means we are not being the light we sb (Heb 10:38-39, "if my righteous one shrinks back, my soul will have no pleasure in him. We [however] are not those who shrink back *and are destroyed.*" – Notice what happens if we shrink from our mission).

7.2.5. BTW: the world we live in today has become very dark (How do we know?) B/C spiritual darkness has overcome world? No (1Jo 5:19). B/C it has overcome the majority of what is called Christianity/church. This is a sign that we are in the last days (Mat 24:3-8 [just the beginning], 9-13, 14 [the true end]; Rev 20:1-9; 2Ti 4:2-4; 2Ti 3:1-5; 2Ti 4:2-4).

7.3. Resolving to never allow the good gifts we receive (even on Christmas) to distract us from our mission.

7.3.1. God's gifts are meant to motivate us in our mission, never distract or take us off mission.

7.3.2. When we allow God's good gifts to distract and control us, we have turned those good things into the ultimate things and are now guilty of idolatry and on our way to hell. BTW: being distracted and being controlled are the same thing. When something is distracting you, it is controlling you (and therefore has become an ultimate thing in your life) (Luk 17:32-33 "Remember Lot's wife. He who seeks to preserve his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life [i.e. does not live for the things of this world/allow them to distract/determine/control what he does/does not allow them to become the ultimate things] will keep it.").

7.3.3. (1Co 6:12-13): 1) Our "bodies" (our physical existence in this world is "for the Lord" – accomplishing His mission) (14), 2) Being "dominated" (controlled or distracted) by what is "lawful" (or good) leads to being dominated (controlled or distracted) by what is not (lawful or good).

CLOSING CONTEMPLATION: It is in the three ways (just discussed) that our lives are a "value add" to this world. So the question is, "has this been your life (so far) in this world?" Is your existence adding value or are you simply wasting air and space? God has given us an important (and worthy) mission: to be His lights. Are you His light? Has your life been a light for God and His Law that stands against the darkness and is not distracted by the good gifts He gives to make the mission easier? If not, now it is time for re-dedication and New Year resolutions in that direction. Jesus is looking for hammers *not* _____. **WHICH.ONE.ARE. YOU?**