

Hannukah



Have you ever wondered about Hannukah? It is called the “Festival of Lights,” and is celebrated by Judaism every year, just before our Christmas. During Hannukah, Jews place an eight-branch candlestick in their front window, and light one candle each night. It is important to them. But it should be important to us as well because it is found in our Bible, but not in theirs. Let’s take a look at Hannukah and see what it is all about.

In the middle of the 2nd century BC, about 167BC, the Syrians sent an army into Israel, sent there by King Antiochus, defeated the Israeli armies, and captured Jerusalem. The desecration of the Temple followed, with the slaughter of a pig on the Altar, and the desolation of all temple services. Judaism had lost its reason for being, and the people were despondent.

The Syrian army was despatched throughout Israel, from village to village, to have everyone turn from Judaism to the paganism popular in Syria. Those who agreed, were asked to make a small sacrifice to a pagan idol; those who didn’t were threatened with death by the sword. Many Jews gave in and made the pagan sacrifice.

At a certain village called Modein, the people were called together by the Syrian soldiers to sacrifice to the pagan god. A rural priest, Mattathias refused to sacrifice to the idol, and slew a Jew who stepped forward to do so and then killed the Syrian captain. Mattathias fled to the hills with his whole family, gathering many others to himself. [see 1 Maccabees 2:14-28] When he died a year later, his son Judas Maccabeus and his whole family took over the rebellion, to live as outlaws, determined to uphold the Faith of Judaism. Others gathered around them, in the hills, and they began to take on Syrian army groups, killing them as enemies of their country and their religion. Month after month, their numbers grew, despite the efforts of the enemy soldiers to capture them, until at last, about 160 BC, the Jewish guerillas, led by Judas Maccabeus, were strong enough to take on the whole Syrian army, defeat them, and force them out of Jerusalem. Imagine the horror and degradation the Jewish patriot soldiers felt when they entered the defiled Temple. However, they set about cleansing the Temple, removing the defiled altar, and building another with 12 stones representing the 12 tribes of Israel (based on the 12 sons of Jacob). When they had finished, under the direction of the priests, they began the re-Consecration of the Temple. [see 1 Maccabees 4: 36-59]

Above the Altar was a Great Lamp, which symbolized the Presence of God—but they could only find enough properly blessed oil to burn in the Lamp for one day. It would take the priests 8 days to consecrate new oil for the Lamp. Nevertheless, they poured

this one day's supply into the Lamp, and proceeded with the 8-day reconsecration. When they came into the Temple the next day, the Great Lamp was still burning, and when they returned on the 3rd day, it was still burning. Filled with enthusiasm, they continued the re-Consecration of the Temple, and when they returned on the 4th, 5th, 6th, and 7th day, the Lamp was still burning. On the 8th day, the Great Lamp, representing the Presence of God was still alight—but now they had enough oil consecrated to fill up the Lamp, which they did in Joy and Praise. The Temple had been cleansed and re-Consecrated, and the sacrifices to Almighty God could resume in Peace and Joy.

This Cleansing of the Temple is remembered each year by our Jewish brothers and sisters when they light an 8-branch candlestick in their homes and synagogues. (The ninth and centre candle is for the lighting of each of the 8 candles.) Each day, they light one candle, with prayer and praise, until all 8 are burning. Thus, Hannukah is celebrated for 8 days each year as the Festival of Lights.

If you look in your Bible, you will find all this detailed in the 1st Book of Maccabees, in the 2nd and 4th chapters. The 2 Books of Maccabees are in our Old Testament and are the part of the OT written in Greek (instead of Hebrew) often called the Apocrypha or the Deuterocanonicals. These books were in the Bible used by Jesus and the Apostles—but all 14 of these books were removed in the third century AD by Jewish Rabbis because they were not written in Hebrew, only in Greek. And Protestants in the 16th century followed that ruling, leaving the 14 books out of the protestant version of the Old Testament. Anglican, Orthodox and Roman Catholic Bibles however still contain these 14 books in our Old Testament. Thus, the story of Hannukah is in our Bible, but not in the Jewish Bible. Interesting?

What is even more important is the fact that if the Jewish outlaws had not stood up for the Faith defeating the Syrians, and reviving the Temple services, Judaism could have died out before the Birth of Christ. If there had been no Judaism, God could not have come to earth as our Messiah and Saviour, nor would there have been any people ready to hear and understand what God was doing to redeem and save us. If there had been no Hannukah, there would have been no Christmas, no Good Friday, no Easter, and no Christianity.

So Hannukah is important historically and religiously for us. The Cleansing of the Temple and the Festival of Lights prepares the way for God to come with power and in peace.

But there is one other thing to remember. It was the courage and faith of two persons, the priest Mattathias, and following him his son, Judas Maccabeus, who ignited the faith and resolve of many. Without them, nothing towards the restoration of Judaism would have happened. Their faith and courage became the fire that ignited the resolve of thousands of our Jewish brothers and sisters and opened the way ultimately for our salvation. Isn't that often the way? The faith and courage of one or two persons can change history—change the world. Our salvation has been won by the death and

resurrection of one Person—Jesus the Son of God. God is able to use each person's courage or sacrifice and build upon it. And God can do the same with us. Christ is counting on you to make a difference where you live. Each of us is called to be another "Judas Maccabeus" in our own way, in our own time. What we do is important to God, and He is able to take our faith and courage, and use it, bit by bit, to build the Kingdom of God. None of us are unimportant—all of us can make a difference for God.

So, receive the Blessed Sacrament this morning, be strengthened in the "inner man" by His Grace, reaffirm your faith in God today, and take your rightful place in history in building the Kingdom of God

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen

PS: Hannukah is often spelt "Hanukkah" depending on the dictionary used. I have used the spelling in the illustration, though the internet uses the alternate spelling. Not sure what the difference in spelling may mean. In both cases, it is an English translation of the word in Hebrew.

[If you like this, I suggest you might like to read: "Elijah, a prophet of God."]