

21 Kislev, 5772 (17/12/11) *Chanukah: Against All Odds, We Shall Overcome* J. M. Terrett

Vayeshev And He Settled
Torah: Gen. 37:1-40:23
Haftarah: Amos 2:6-3:8
Brit Chadashah: Matt. 1:1-6; 16-25
Ps. 112

Two of the most popular holidays of the year are about to occur within a week of each other: Chanukah, which runs from the 20th to the 28th of December and Christmas, which occurs next Sunday. Both of these holidays have strong spiritual roots and yet both of them are celebrated with very little regard to their original meaning, even though spiritual leaders, both in Judaism and Christianity, try their best to remind their people of the reasons why each festival is celebrated.

I do not want to go on a rave about our need to understand the reasons for the season, nor do I want to attack all the commercialism which has been affecting people for the last month as retailers pull in up to 40% of their annual sales and as friends and families make plans to take time off work and get some rest and take time they usually do not have to get together. You see, I kind of like the season and some of those old movies are fun to watch and every now and then a show will have not just a Christmas special, but also a Chanukah special!

What I want to talk to you about briefly this morning has to do with putting the story of Chanukah into its historical perspective and understanding what it means to celebrate their courage as we remember the enormous price that Matthias and his family paid for the stand they made.

In the wake of Alexander's conquest of the Persian Middle East, the political vacuum left by his death was eventually filled by the four generals who divide his empire up between them. Two regimes, the Ptolemies and the Seleucids fought for control of the Middle East and the Holy Land once again became a battlefield between two great world powers.

In the mean time, Jewish people adapted to the new political situation and once again became prosperous, not just in the Holy Land, but throughout the ancient Middle East. At first they enjoyed the same rights with the Greeks as they had enjoyed with the Persians and the period of time between Alexander's conquest and the destruction of the second temple saw Judaism becoming a major growing world religion with more converts than at any other time of our history.

This did not come without a price and it is this price I want to talk to you about. A lot has been written about the need for people to learn to accommodate to new cultural situations without falling prey to assimilation and things have not changed much over the years. The Greek domination of the Middle East encountered considerable resistance from many of the older cultures and languages and the new rulers of the region knew they had to work hard if they wanted to hold onto to their domination.

They embarked on a program of forced hellenization and the Jews of the Holy Land became their special targets. Not only did they want the Jews to use the Greek language, but they wanted them to adopt the Greek religion, even though the Persians had never required this level of assimilation from the people they

conquered. Jewish people have never had a problem functioning as a minority group wherever we have lived, because part of our mandate has always been to be a light unto the nations among whom we live. As Messianic Jews and Gentiles, this is still our mandate and we will make any accommodations we have to in order to preserve our faith and express this faith in meaningful ways in whatever situations we find ourselves. We get used to being different, but it is our spirituality which will really make a difference to the culture in which we live and not the customs we have and the language we speak.

Things went fairly well for the Jews for a few generations after Alexander until one ruler of the Syrian Seleucids, Antiochus Epiphanes, wanted all of his subjects to recognize him as a manifestation of one of the Greek gods and to convert to that religion. He especially targeted the Jews of the Holy Land and did everything he could to wipe out the practice of Judaism and to replace it with the worship of the Greek gods.

He was initially very successful and the temple was forcibly turned into a temple to Jupiter and he had anyone murdered who dared to stand up against him. Thousands of Jews died during this campaign and only those who lived outside of his empire were spared this forced assimilation – all the rest had to follow his rules which included: outlawing the Sabbath, forbidding circumcision and requiring every male Jew to make an annual sacrifice on the altars which were built in every Jewish village throughout the Holy Land.

Scholars had to pretend to be gambling in order to study the Bible and anybody who refused to participate in pagan worship was killed. Only a handful of people who hid in the hills were able to preserve their faith, all the rest assimilated in the Greek religion and it looked like Judaism was about to be extinguished.

At various times in our history, we have encountered great opposition and there have been moments when it looked like we would not survive and that all efforts to resist ended only in failure.

Two passages and then a third as we examine the price which often has to be paid before we are eventually able to rise above defeat and regain some of the ground believers will lose at various times in our history.

Rev. 12:11: “And they overcame him by the blood of the lamb and because of the word of their testimony and because they did not love their life to the point of fearing death”

Rev. 13:7:” It was given to him to make war on the saints and to overcome them and power was given to him over every tribe, every people and every tongue and every nation.”

Rom. 8:35-37: “What shall separate us from the love of Messiah? Shall it be tribulation, or distress or persecution or hunger or nudity or peril or the sword? According as it is written, for Your sake we are killed every day and we are accounted as sheep to be slaughtered. But in all these things we are more than conquerors through Him who loved us.”

There will be times in our personal lives and in our generational lives when we encounter enemies as vicious and as successful as Antiochus Epiphanes and there will be times when we have to go underground and into hiding and lose almost everything we have, and see things go from bad to worse before they get any better.

This is not because we are bad people or because we are failures in our attempts to live spiritual lives in the midst of great spiritual darkness, but because we are in the midst of a great spiritual struggle and we may lose a lot of battles before things eventually turn around – and in some cases they may not turn around in our life time. If we want to insist on immediate victory, then we make the battle all about our own agenda and not about the greater issues which the L-rd is working on in the lives of all the nations and generations of mankind.

Matthias and his sons rebelled against the Greeks and they began a long, vicious campaign to regain the holy land and it took a generation and many thousands of lives, and quite a few setbacks before the victory was finally won. This is the side of Chanukah people do not often talk about and it is the side of spiritual warfare which discourages many and causes them to walk away from the L-rd when the opposition gets too much.

How about you? I want to see great victories in my life and in the life of our community and in the life of our movement – and in the life of the spread of the Gospel among the nations and peoples of our planet as things heat up in our globalized, techno crazy world, but sometimes we are going to see great setbacks and even tragic defeats, but it does not mean we are on the losing side, we are just having to serve the L-rd during dark times where it would be easier to assimilate and give up, than to make a stand.

Two things and then I will close. Matthias died before his sons could begin to turn things around, but he died a free man. His sons went on to free the Holy Land and the festival of Chanukah celebrates the cleansing of the temple, where the people gathered to celebrate the festival of Sukkoth two months later than the usual date.

They had been unable to gather for the required eight days of rejoicing and initially Chanukah was called the Sukkoth of the month of Kislev, but there was a problem. People knew that the prophecies about the Messiah said that He would soon appear and Chanukah became a festival where people believed that He would come into the temple during the festival and declare Himself.

This aspect of the festival was suppressed and removed and it has become a festival of spiritual heroism, instead of a celebration of divine intervention. We need to understand that Messiah did come into the temple during the season of Chanukah and did declare Himself and that true spiritual heroism is prepared to face whatever level of opposition we encounter, whether we are able to drive the enemy out of the temple, or whether we have to hide in the hills and wait for a better day.

Secondly, not all the Jews welcomed the Maccabees and some of them who had assimilated formed a protective union called the Decapolis and continued to practice the Greek religion even after the rest of the Jewish people returned to the practice of biblical Judaism.

We live in a world where an increasing resistance to biblical spirituality may eventually mean we will have to pay an enormous price to practice our faith and many faith communities will give up their faith and assimilate into the beliefs and the morality of the dominant secular culture which wants us to go beyond accommodating our faith to make it meaningful to them and assimilating was from biblical faith and biblical morality.

There are too many Decapolis's in our world today and too many believers who are not prepared to face the level of spiritual opposition which is building in today's world which is becoming increasingly hostile to biblical spirituality.

Whether we experience the level of victory which Judah the Macabee did, or whether we have to hide in the hills like his father Matthias did, in all these things we shall overcome. This is the message of Chanukah. We have to hold onto our faith and wait on the L-rd for His deliverance, whether we see it in our lifetime or not.

May the spirit of the Maccabees fill our holiday celebrations and remind us of their courage that served them through periods of great opposition as well as during times of great victory.

Happy Chanukah.