

SERIES: Advent, 2008

SERMON: **The Light of the World Is Jesus**

SCRIPTURE: John 1:1-14

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I suspect you have heard sermons on just almost every conceivable Christmas topic, but perhaps you have never heard one about Hanukkah, the Jewish holiday called the Feast of Lights that is celebrated this time of year. Did you know that today is the first of the eight days of Hanukkah for 2008? And are you aware that Hanukkah is mentioned in the New Testament? Even more importantly, are you aware of its significance as a witness to the Light of the World, Jesus?

During my high school years I lived in Clayton, Missouri, a suburb of St. Louis and largely a wealthy Jewish community. We didn't fit the culture, but I loved Clayton High School. It was about 80% Jewish, and whenever there was a Jewish holiday, school would still be held because it was a public school, but only the *goyim*, we Gentiles, would be in attendance. This happened for Yom Kippur, Passover, Purim, Sukkot, and Rosh Hashana. All of these holy days were deemed more important than Hanukkah by the rabbis, since they all have their origin in the OT, while Hanukkah does not. But the kids always liked Hanukkah best, because Hanukkah was almost identical to Christmas. There were trees, lights, lots of food, and, most importantly, presents.

Hanukkah always begins on the 25th day of Chislev, which for us is December, but since the Jewish calendar is a lunar one, Hanukkah can come early or late in December, much like our Easter can fall anywhere from late March to late April. This year Hanukkah begins at sundown tonight, December 21; only rarely does it begin on Christmas Day. However, it is possible that the early Christians observed Christmas on the 25th day of the 12th month, not because we know that was the actual birthday of Jesus, nor because they were trying to Christianize a pagan holiday, the winter solstice, but because they borrowed the date from the Jewish feast of Hanukkah.

I want to speak this morning about the significance of Hanukkah as a pointer to the Light of the World—Jesus.

The historical background of Hanukkah

The feast of Hanukkah finds its origin in the Intertestamental period between the writing of the last book of the OT, Malachi, and the first book of the NT, Matthew. This period, roughly 400 B.C. until 4 B.C. is often called The 400 Silent Years, since there is no historical record of it in the Bible and because there were no recognized prophets from God during this time. But we are not ignorant of what occurred during this period, because there were extensive written records provided in the Apocrypha, religious books written during that period, and by the historian Josephus, a later contemporary of Paul. Hanukkah commemorates a great victory by the Jewish people that was achieved in 164 B.C. And while the OT doesn't speak of this battle historically,

it does speak of it prophetically.

Daniel predicts that oppression would come upon God's people from a “man of sin.” (Daniel 8:9-14) You’ve heard about this man, Antiochus IV, for he is the one who partially fulfilled the prophecy of Daniel 9 regarding the abomination that causes desolation that we’ve been studying in Matthew 24. But let’s try to get a better understanding of who this man was and how he fits into biblical history.

The prophet Daniel, writing in the second half of the 6th century B.C., predicted that a Greek empire would follow the Babylonian and Medo-Persian Empires during which he lived, but would itself dissolve into four parts. Sure enough, Greece became a world empire under Alexander the Great, and when he died in the year 323 B.C., his kingdom was divided among four of his generals. One of these four controlled a large area to the north of Israel known as Syria while a second general ruled over the Egyptian empire to the south.

For about 100 years the little province of Israel was under the dominion of Egypt, but eventually a state of war erupted between Egypt and Syria that would last for decades, and the little Jewish nation was trapped in the middle, as though between the anvil and the hammer. At times she literally did not know to which empire she belonged and, therefore, to whom she should to render allegiance and pay taxes.

Into this electrified atmosphere rose a Syrian leader by the name of Antiochus IV, who would rule Syria for 11 years, from 175 to 164 B.C.. He assumed the title “Epiphanes,” which means literally, “the Manifestation of God,” claiming to be God in human flesh, so you can see that he was not exactly humble. He launched a successful military campaign against Egypt and was preparing to follow it up with a final, devastating blow when the Roman Senate demanded that he return home or face war with Rome. Frustrated at the very moment of apparent success he started home, but stopped in Jerusalem on the way from Egypt to Syria, and, almost like a spoiled child angry over not getting his way, he decided to take out his frustrations on the Jews.

Antiochus attacked and burned Jerusalem and forbade the Jews to follow the Mosaic Law, observe the Sabbath, circumcise their children, or even possess a copy of the OT. He even had a pig sacrificed on the brazen altar of the Jewish temple, and then had his soldiers carry a statue of Zeus Olympus into the holy of holies. He demanded that the Jewish people bow down to worship his god and eat swine's flesh, which they were forbidden to do in the OT. History records that as many as 80,000 Jews were executed for their refusal. As a result his enemies gave him a nickname. Instead of Antiochus Epiphanes, they called him Antiochus Epimanes, meaning Antiochus the Madman. But his brutal actions would not go unchallenged.

Victory was achieved by a deliverer named Judas “the Hammer.” In the little village of Modin, 15 miles northwest of Jerusalem, a Jewish priest by the name of Mattathias and his five sons rebelled at Antiochus’ orders to worship his idol and eat swine’s flesh. Under the leadership of the eldest son, known in history as Judas Maccabeus, or “Judah the Hammer,” a guerrilla-style war was launched against Antiochus Epiphanes and his Syrian army. Its purpose

was to force the Syrians out of Israel and to restore the worship of Jehovah. You can read about this war in the Apocryphal books of 1 and 2 Maccabees.

After a three-year struggle the Maccabeans were finally successful. In fact, three years to the day from when the pig was sacrificed on the altar, on the 25th day of the 12th month, Judas and his men cleansed the altar and temple. It was this defeat of a pagan army and the rededication of the Temple to Jehovah which gave rise to the Jewish holy day of Hanukkah, for the word Hanukkah literally means “dedication.” That is the holy day we read about in John 10:22: “Then came the Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah, as you can see in the footnote of the NIV) at Jerusalem. It was winter.”

However, for many centuries Hanukkah has also been known as “the feast of lights,” the reason being that . . .

A “miracle” of light signified God's pleasure in the cleansing of the temple. I put the word “miracle” in parentheses here because even Jewish scholars will admit that the miracle may be just a legend. The story goes that when Judas Maccabeus and his followers arrived at the Temple to cleanse it they found only one small flask of oil bearing the seal of the high priest, containing only enough oil to light the menorah for one day. But a miracle occurred, and the oil lasted eight days, allowing the priests to cleanse the Temple and properly sanctify more oil.

The story, whether true or a legend, allegedly explains why the Hanukkah holiday lasts eight days and why the Hanukkah menorah has eight candles. Many, in fact, have a ninth candle, the one taller than all the others called the Shammas candle (meaning servant). With the Shammas candle each of the remaining eight candles is lit on the successive nights of Hanukkah, much like we do with an advent wreath.

The Biblical fulfillment of Hanukkah

It is my contention that Hanukkah, like each of the other Jewish holy days, signifies a great biblical truth. Yom Kippur, or Day of Atonement, finds its fulfillment in the forgiveness Jesus Christ provided when He died on the cross. Succot, or the Feast of Tabernacles, signifies the fact that Jesus Christ came and dwelt among us as one of us. Rosh Hashana pictures Jesus as King. Hanukkah, too, has a biblical fulfillment, but to grasp that fact we need to make a quick digression to the OT prophets.

The prophets frequently associated the coming of Messiah with light. (Isaiah 9:2; 60:1-3, 19-20) There are many references we could examine, but let's focus on the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah 9:2 we read this famous prophecy: “The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned. . .” Then a few verses later the prophet offers this amazing Messianic prophecy: “For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.”

If you turn over to Isaiah 60, another Messianic chapter, you find the same theme in verses 1-3: “Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you. See, darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples, but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you. Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your dawn.”

Later in the same chapter, verses 19-20, we find the same theme:

“The sun will no more be your light by day, nor will the brightness of the moon shine on you, for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your God will be your glory. Your sun will never set again, and your moon will wane no more; the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of sorrow will end.”

If the coming Messiah is connected by the prophets so clearly with light, it shouldn't surprise us that, in addition, . . .

The Incarnation of Christ itself was clearly identified with light. (Luke 2:32) We're all familiar, of course, with the brilliant star that shined in the East, directing the steps of the shepherds and the magi. But do you recall the words of Simeon, a righteous and devout old man waiting in the Temple of Jerusalem for the coming of Messiah? When Mary and Joseph brought the baby Jesus into the Temple to dedicate him, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying: “Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace. For my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the sight of all people, a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel.” (Luke 2:29-32)

Then in the great incarnation passage in John 1 we see Jesus identified as the light.

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.

Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

There came a man who was sent from God; his name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all men might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light. The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. (John 1:1-9)

Over 30 years later, as Jesus carried on his earthly ministry he referred to Himself frequently as the Light of the World. But are you aware that right smack in the middle of His discourses about being the Light of the World Jesus attended the Hanukkah feast in Jerusalem?

Jesus calls attention to Himself as the Light of the world, with Hanukkah falling right in the middle of these discourses. (John 8-12; 10:22) Listen again to John 10:22: “Then came the Feast of Dedication (i.e. Hanukkah) at Jerusalem. It was winter, and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's Colonnade.” I find it interesting that the two chapters immediately preceding and the two chapters immediately following this reference to Hanukkah contain multiple references to Jesus as “the Light of the World.” We find it first in John 8:12 immediately following the story of the woman taken in adultery: “I am the light of the world.

Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”

Then in chapter 9 there is the account of the man born blind. Just before healing the man Jesus said, “As long as it is day, we must do the work of him who sent me. Night is coming, when no one can work. While I am in the world, I am the light of the world.” (John 9:4-5) And then immediately after he observes the Hanukkah feast in Jerusalem, the very next event is the death of Lazarus (chapter 11). When warned by his disciples against going back to where Lazarus was buried due to the hatred of the Jews, Jesus answers, “Are there not twelve hours of daylight? A man who walks by day will not stumble, for he sees by this world's light. It is when he walks by night that he stumbles, for he has no light.” (John 11:9-10)

And then in John 12 after Jesus predicts his death and the crowd asks Him, “Who is this 'Son of Man' you are talking about?”, Jesus answers, “You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going. Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light.” (John 12:35-36).

The suggestion is made by some Jewish Christian scholars that the very origin of the lights of Hanukkah may be found in Jesus' multiple claims in the Gospel of John that He is the Light of the World (Remember that lights are not mentioned in connection with Hanukkah before the first century). They conjecture that the early Christians focused on Jesus as the Great Deliverer, of whom Judas Maccabeus was only a precursor, and that the early Christians, almost all of whom were Jews, were the ones who first lit candles at the Hanukkah festival in honor of their Leader, the Light of the World. This might explain why their contemporary Josephus is the first one known to call it “the feast of lights.” They further claim that Jesus is represented by the Shammash candle, the Servant candle.

I believe this theory falls short of proof, but it is intriguing. Of course, even if it could be shown that lights were connected with Hanukkah before the time of Christ, that still would not prevent Jesus Christ from being the ultimate fulfillment of what the lights signified.

The prophetic significance of Hanukkah

In studying the book of Daniel one fact is perfectly clear: the prophecies concerning the four great empires—Babylonian, Medo-Persian, Greek, and Roman—along with the prophecies of Antiochus Epiphanes, have not been *completely* fulfilled. We talked about double fulfillment over the past two weeks as we focused on the Second Coming, but I want to demonstrate to you that this is especially obvious in regard to the major elements of Hanukkah.

Oppression will *again* come upon God's people, this time from *the* man of sin. (Daniel 9-11; 2 Thes. 2:3,4) Antiochus was a man of sin, but this one, the Anti-Christ, is known as *the* man of sin. He will not just put up a statue of Zeus in the Temple, but he will do worse—He will set *himself* up in the Temple, proclaiming himself to be God. He will usher in a time of lawlessness and persecution such as the world has never known, the Great Tribulation, which

will culminate in the battle known as Armageddon. Listen to the prophecy of 2 Thes. 2:3-4: “That day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He will oppose and will exalt himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, so that he *sets* himself up in God's temple, proclaiming himself to be God.” But once again, as in the days of Judas Maccabeus, God will spare His people. Victory will come, not by *a* deliverer, but by *the* Deliverer.

Victory will come by *the* Deliverer. (Rev. 19:11-21) Revelation 19 indicates that Jesus Christ Himself will return to this earth to fight for His people and will defeat the armies Anti-Christ has amassed against Jerusalem. Revelation 19:11-21:

I saw heaven standing open and there before me was a white horse, whose rider is called Faithful and True. With justice he judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire, and on his head are many crowns. He has a name written on him that no one knows but he himself. He is dressed in a robe dipped in blood, and his name is the Word of God. The armies of heaven were following him, riding on white horses and dressed in fine linen, white and clean. Out of his mouth comes a sharp sword with which to strike down the nations. "He will rule them with an iron scepter." He treads the winepress of the fury of the wrath of God Almighty. On his robe and on his thigh he has this name written: KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.

And I saw an angel standing in the sun, who cried in a loud voice to all the birds flying in midair, "Come, gather together for the great supper of God, so that you may eat the flesh of kings, generals, and mighty men, of horses and their riders, and the flesh of all people, free and slave, small and great."

Then I saw the beast and the kings of the earth and their armies gathered together to make war against the rider on the horse and his army. But the beast was captured, and with him the false prophet who had performed the miraculous signs on his behalf. With these signs he had deluded those who had received the mark of the beast and worshiped his image. The two of them were thrown alive into the fiery lake of burning sulfur. The rest of them were killed with the sword that came out of the mouth of the rider on the horse, and all the birds gorged themselves on their flesh.

But there is one more fulfillment of Hanukkah that I see in prophecy. The legend of the oil that kept the lights going for eight days after the cleansing of the temple is probably just that—a legend. But according to Rev. 21, when Jesus cleanses the universe of sin, He will become the Light that will never go out.

A real miracle of light will signify God's pleasure in the cleansing of the universe. (Rev. 21:23,24) Listen to Revelation 21, where the description of the New heaven and new earth and New Jerusalem are given. Beginning in verse 22 we read:

"I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple. The city does not need the sun or the moon to shine on it, for the glory of God gives it light, and the Lamb is its lamp. The nations will walk by its light, and the kings of the earth will bring their splendor into it. On no day will its gates ever be shut, for there will be no night there."

The personal significance of Hanukkah for each of us

I'm not suggesting that we Christians start celebrating Hanukkah as one of our holy days, though there is certainly nothing wrong with doing so. Instead I urge us to think through the spiritual truth behind Hanukkah and to be sure we see Jesus as the Light of the World for our own lives.

The true light that gives light to every one has come into the world. (John 1:9;3:19)

This is the message of John 1:9 and John 3:19: "The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. . . This is the verdict: Light has come into the world."

Let me ask you this question: What has been the greatest moment in the history of the world since Creation up to this time? Was it the discovery of fire? Or the invention of the wheel? Or the writing of the Magna Carta? Or the posting of the 95 Theses by Martin Luther? Or the discovery of atomic energy? Or the step that Neal Armstrong took on the surface of the moon? These are all very significant milestones in the history of the human race, but all of them pale into insignificance when compared to the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. The light that emanated from the first atomic explosion was like the flicker of a dying candle compared to the light that dawned in Bethlehem 2000 years ago.

Notice that John identifies Jesus as the "true" light, the real or genuine light as opposed to all the partial, imperfect, or misleading lights in our world. The only place where men and women and young people and children can find adequate illumination about themselves, about life, and about the future is in Jesus.

So great was that light that John says it gives light to every man. But does that mean that every person can now see? No.

Each person must decide whether to hate the light or walk in the light. (John 3:16-21;12:35) Listen to the best known verse in all of Scripture, John 3:16, and the paragraph which follows:

"For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe stands condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of God's one and only Son. This is the verdict: Light has come into the world, but men loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil. Everyone who does evil hates the light, and will not come into the light for fear that his deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light, so that it may be seen plainly that what he has done has been done through God."

Notice here that while Light has come into the world, not everyone responds the same to it. Some hate it because of their fear of exposure. Spiritually they instinctively put on dark glasses because the light hurts their eyes. But some come to the light in humble faith and repentance.

Over in John 12, a passage we looked at earlier, Jesus said, (v. 35) “You are going to have the light just a little while longer. Walk while you have the light, before darkness overtakes you. The man who walks in the dark does not know where he is going. Put your trust in the light *while you have it.*”

This was a veiled reference to the fact that He wouldn’t be with them long; in fact, He would be going to the Cross very soon. But there's an important application of this warning to “trust in the light while you have it” for every one in every age. The light for any individual lasts only as long as life itself! If we die before responding positively to the light, there is no more hope, only everlasting darkness.

Perhaps there is someone here today who has been thinking about the claims of Jesus Christ on your life. Well, thinking about it will not do. The great Baptist preacher Charles Haddon Spurgeon once wrote that if you continue to think about it “you will think yourself into hell.” Someone else may be saying, “I am praying about it.” The Bible does not ask you to pray about it either. If you are not a believer in the Lord Jesus Christ, the Bible calls upon you to believe on Him. That is all; it is the only useful response. “Now is the accepted time,” God says, “behold, now is the day of salvation.”

The baby boomer generation, we are told, always wants to know, “What's in it for me?” Well, in closing, let me try to answer that question.

If we put our trust in the light we will become sons of light. (John 12:36) That’s exactly what John 12:36 says: “Put your trust in the light while you have it, so that you may become sons of light.” Friends, there are only two sides in the spiritual realm—darkness and light. Those who walk in darkness may be sinful reprobates or they may be good, moral, upstanding citizens, but what they have in common is that they cannot see where they are going morally and spiritually. They have no ultimate meaning or purpose in life. Their goals are confused and their hopes for the future are at best a crap shoot. If you asked them, “If you were to die tonight do you know for sure you would spend eternity with God in Heaven,” their best answer would be, “I hope so.”

On the other hand, those who walk in the light may be good, moral, upstanding citizens or they may be people with major moral, psychological, and spiritual hangups, but what they all have in common is that they have come to the Light for cleansing and forgiveness. When asked, “Suppose you were to die tonight and you stood before God, and He asked you, ‘Why should I let you spend eternity with Me?’, what would you tell Him?”, their answer would be, “The only reason I should be allowed into Heaven is that Jesus died for me and paid the penalty for my sin.”

Friends, Jesus is the light of the world. It is my prayer and hope that no one will leave this place this morning without acknowledging that fact and then acting on it. Invite the light into your life, bask in it, allow your body to soak up its rays—it will make this Christmas the brightest of your life. More importantly, you can begin an incredible journey of becoming a devoted follower of Jesus Christ.