

## **Hope of the Servant Light**

*By Bobby Schuller*

Well today we are on the Sunday of hope on the lighting of our advent wreath. It's interesting when you read the Old and the New Testament, probably the most common theme throughout the Bible, you see it in the Psalms, you see it through the prophets, is that the Lord lays down the strong and lifts up the weak. That the Lord destroys the proud and lifts up and promotes and profits the humble. You see it in songs, you see it in stories, and you especially see it during this season of advent.

Today, we see it in the passage that was sung, the Messiah passage, the one that Hannah read, and that is “for unto us a child is born, unto us a Son is given.” Now we remember the second half usually. “The government will be upon His shoulders and He’ll be called wonderful counselor, mighty God, Prince of Peace, Everlasting Father” I got them backwards, sorry about that. You guys get to audit me because it's behind me. I don't get to turn and look. I got a cheat sheet up there but I had to squint.

But all these things that we're talking about, this princely godliness, this is in a Jewish passage in Isaiah. What's it about? Who's

it about? A child! That God is going to use a little child to free all the nations. That's such a Hebrew way of looking at the world, and it makes sense because when you look at the Jewish people, you see a people that are sort of caught at the, I think, one philosopher called it the hub of the flower. When they used to think that there were three continents: Asia, Africa, and Europe, and that there was this thing right in the middle and that was Israel, always caught between these three continents and cultures colliding.

And you see that it's God's plan to use these people to save the whole world. What a God thing to do. God doesn't use Caesar, He doesn't use Alexander the Great, a tyrant we're going to talk about later today, He calls a little known nomad, Abraham, out of the wilderness to establish a people to be blessed and to be a blessing to the whole world.

And let that be a message of hope for you. Maybe you're going through something. You feel weak, you feel out of energy, you feel like you're going through difficult times. I want you to know that God is on the side of the humble. God is on the side of the weak. God is on the side of the sinner. God is with those who are struggling. In fact Israel even means the one who struggles with God.

Stay humble and remember in that humility to look to your neighbor who maybe is going through a difficult time to lead, to help, to comfort and to guide. It's the best thing you can do as a believer. When

you're powerful, stay humble. When you're weak, keep hope alive. God is always on the side of the little guy.

And in fact today we lit the candle of hope, and is it lit still? Oh yes, good it is. Hope didn't go out. That's good. So the candle is still lit and it actually reminds me of the topic I want to tackle today, it might seem bizarre, but today I want to talk about Hanukkah. Crickets, guys, its crickets; nothing. Hanukkah. We're going to talk about Hanukkah today as we go into the advent season. Many of our Jewish neighbors and friends will be celebrating Hanukkah soon in the month of December, and it's the last feast of.. there are now eight feasts in Judaism; there were seven originally.

And the reason I want to talk about Hanukkah is it really communicates so well the power of God. I do believe Hanukkah is a God story. I do believe Hanukkah happened.

You can't understand Hanukkah unless you understand Alexander the Great. Now Alexander is one of my favorite historic characters. I talk about him a lot, but he's important to the Biblical story, and indeed he's important to all of Western civilization. Alexander the Great is what happens when you get a rich kid who was mentored by maybe the greatest philosopher in human history, Aristotle. He was the son of Philip the second who would have been probably histories, one of history's most famous Napoleon-type figures. Philip the second raised up this gigantic well-trained army, and then mysteriously died. Most people think it was

Alexander's mom. And Alexander ascends to the throne, probably a genius, very, very good looking, alluring, inspiring, enshrouded in legend, and at twenty-seven or something comes in control of the world's strongest army and decides to just take over everything, and he does. Alexander the Great just goes after everything.

Now by the time he arrives to Israel, Israel has been under the control, sort of, of the Persians, but it's been a friendly relationship. The most important thing was Alexander the Great was different than all the other tyrants and generals before him because he was the world's first missionary, and not a missionary for good. Some of the stuff he did was good, really. But Alexander's goal was, in his view, to spread civilization to the Barbarians. It was to bring this thing we now call Hellenism, Greek Philosophy, Greek culture, Greek language, a Greek way of life, to other cultures in Africa, in Asia, and in parts of Europe to sort of civilize them.

And so when he would conquer these places, he always wanted the same stuff. He wanted theaters, which are fine, but he wanted theaters, he wanted people to see Greek myth, he wanted temples for his gods to be put up everywhere. He wanted sports; that is he almost always the gymnasium, the Olympics. And he wanted the schools. He wanted people to learn Greek philosophy. And at the school level, Hellenism's goal was to teach a type of, especially in that day, radical humanism that isn't quite like the humanism today, but it was all about the glorification of

the beautiful body. It was always the body, it was always about beauty, a lot of it was outward appearance, some of it was stoic philosophy and other things.

All this to say that their goal was to sort of wash out other world views and cultures and things, and replace it with Greek thought and Greek life. Well you can see how this would be a big problem for the Jewish people. At first it's not a huge deal, but Alexander, as you may know, as all of the great generals and great powers who thought they were gods or that they would live forever, they end up sort of just dying tragically. Usually the deaths are really stupid and embarrassing.

Alexander the Great dies and his empire is split up, and this is where we get to the Bible, okay. His empire is split up between four of his generals, and Israel gets caught right between the Ptolemaic Empire and the So Lucan Empire. This is the most boring part of my sermon; I need you to stick with me here okay? Just remember this is important.

So you have these two empires. All of these empires are Greek, they all speak Greek, they're all about Hellenism, they're all about Greek philosophy, they're all about paganism, but first it comes under the Egyptian one, Ptolemais. And Ptolemais was interesting because they just sort of wanted to influence the Jewish people just through the alluring nature of theater and sports just like today, just to do it the normal way. And it was working, actually. In fact you had one big problem is in the gymnasium, men, boys would wrestle with each other

and they wrestled naked to glorify the human body. Well when you have Jewish boys who are circumcised that want to wrestle naked, which you're already not supposed to do, it creates this cultural problem, and so there are all these boys who wish they hadn't been circumcised. Choir, I'm not going to go down the circumcision road. Let's stop it right there. We're just going to bring it back to the reservation.

The point is this: this is actually when the Sadducees emerged as this very Greek, secular, like we don't really believe in God, we don't really believe in heaven, we don't really believe in the Bible, but they're still Jewish sort of in nature. And then you have the Pharisees who are the ultra-orthodox like anti this, super religious, very strict, and this is kind of when these two begin to emerge, and that's important when you read the New Testament. Anyway.

Of course the four empires are at peace for a time, but eventually as all power-hungry men do, they go to war, and the Seleucid Empire takes Israel from the Ptolemis. Now the Ptolemis, as we said, tried to do Hellenism through this alluring way, not the Seleucids. Seleucids said you become Hellenized or you die. But the fact that they wanted to force them somehow caused a holy spark to light within the heart of the Jewish people.

But it's interesting that in this time, the Seleucids then say you worship our gods, you go to our gyms, you go to our schools, you go to our theaters or you die. You assimilate or you die. And this led to all

sorts of revolts and eventually you get this new tyrant named Antiochus the fourth who kills, in one day, he kills forty thousand Jewish people, enslaves another forty thousand. Most of the people living in Jerusalem leave and are replaced with Greeks. He takes pig entrails and covers the whole temple in pig entrails, removes all of the godly things that they're supposed to do in the Torah, and puts a statue of Zeus in the holy of holies. Many scholars believe that when Daniel, way before this, was prophesying about the abomination of desolation, that this is what he was talking about that would be coming, that there would be this abomination, this horrible thing.

When this happens you then have small tribes of priests and people who are faithful to God hiding out in the hills. And when they're found, the guards and the soldiers from the Greek empire still try to force them to do sacrifices to Pagan gods. And this is where the story turns, and this is when we get to hammer time. You'll know what hammer time is in just a minute, it's awesome.

There's an old priest Mattathias or Mattathias or Fortiatus; the Jews call him old Matthew and I like that easier because it's easier to say. Old Matthew, an old priest is with his five sons and they're living up in the hills and they're hiding out, and they're found, and this guard tells them you and you guys, you have to sacrifice a pig to this pagan god or die. And old Matthew, who is this kind of bear of a man, old, old man, looks at him and says no. No. No.

So they arrest him and they say all right, somebody needs to do it and a young priest, who made an oath that he would always be faithful to God only, volunteers to sacrifice this pig to this pagan god. And old Matthew in the story, just as the young priest is about to make the sacrifice, somehow struggles free, grabs the knife from the guard, kills the priest and kills all the guards. And it's this like epic thing.

And then his legend spreads around, they go up into another hill to hide, and there old Matthew dies, actually, just shortly after this experience. And one of his sons, Judas Maccabeus. Maccabeus is a classical Greek word that means 'the hammer.' Judas the Hammer emerges and he becomes this William Wallace freedom fighter leader, raises up an army of six thousand young men, and they're able to defeat, what was at the time, one of the most sophisticated, well-trained professional armies and establish their own kingdom, the Hasmonean dynasty. And so they kick out the Greeks and they get their own free Jewish nation state.

When this happens, this sort of culmination of this story, which itself was a miracle, there's no way these guys should have won. Before every battle they would have like hours of worship and prayer, and ask God to give them the victory, but if they didn't get the victory that they would always stay faithful even to death. I mean think about it, it's amazing time to live and again testifies to that story that God lays down the proud and the strong and lifts up the humble. That God rescues us

when we're in our weakest. That when we think we're in the worst place, sometimes we're in the best place and we don't even know it.

And so they raise up this army and they march into the temple and it's this amazing experience; they clean the whole temple, they disassemble the altar, and to their surprise, in the holy of holies they find still a menorah was left. Now the menorah light was supposed to be lit all the time and that was supposed to symbolize God's fire, God's light, God's power with us that it will never leave us. That menorah had to be used with kosher oil that took eight days to be made. But the only kosher oil they had left was just a little bit; like one days' worth of oil.

And so they had this debate, they said well should we wait eight more days, even though we've dedicated the temple to light the menorah? Should we light it now? What should we do? And we don't know who said it but somebody said let's just light it and if the light goes out, God is not with us, but if the light stays lit until we get more oil, God is with us. So back then they lit all the lights and they lit the menorah, and to their amazement, the miracle is that though they only had one days' worth of oil, the menorah stayed lit for eight days until they had enough oil.

Now it is a miracle, isn't it? It's a powerful miracle and it's a great story and a great testimony, but there's a deeper message in that, too, isn't there? That when in the natural we only have a year's worth of energy, or a day's worth of energy, or a month, we feel like I'm out, I can't go any longer. When we pair that with faith that we trust that why don't

we try it anyway? Why don't we try going a little longer? You'll always be surprised at how faithful God is to help us when we only have one day's oil that He can give us eight day's worth of fire.

In fact I just want to encourage you today that if all you have is just a little, to give it to the Lord and see what He can do with that. Maybe you're thinking about coming back to faith; maybe you grew up a Christian but you've just had so many trials, you've seen so many religious people and you've seen so many people that have done this or done that, and you're just done with it. But maybe you're sensing that the Holy Spirit is stirring in your heart and you're thinking of coming back to the Lord, or coming back to church, or getting your life right with God.

I want to encourage you. Jesus says if you have the faith of a mustard seed, not the faith of a barn full of grain, but the faith of a mustard.. just a little bit. If one percent of you believes, if one percent of you trusts, if one percent of you says maybe, give that little bit to God and watch how far He can take it. He's going to take you far. Give Him your heart and watch what He can do with that.

God is on your side, even when you're sinning, even when you're going through tough times, even when you're going through disease or difficulty, He never leaves us and that is the powerful message of Hanukah. And that's what our Jewish neighbors will be celebrating, and

indeed that's what Jesus celebrates in John chapter 10 when He gathers with His disciples and they themselves celebrate Hanukah.

Now Hanukah today is quite a bit different then it was in the first century in Jesus' time because of the temple era. And this is amazing. Now in Jesus' day, Hanukah and the feast that comes before it, Sukkot, were huge events in the life of the Jewish people, and this event mostly happened, not just in homes, but in the temple as a massive worship service. A sukkah is a tent in Hebrew. It's the festival of tabernacles or the festival of tents where the Jewish people remember what it was like being in the wilderness, but really at the heart of it in those days it was a prayer for rain. When you're an agricultural people you need rain. And so in Sukkot in October usually or November, they would have this gathering where they would pray for rain in the temple. And it said that you'd have maybe one to three million people would gather in one space.

Now think of the biggest stadium; what is Wembley like a hundred thousand? I'm just ball parking here, guys. That was a pun, on accident. Angel Stadium, I think, is thirty thousand people. Think of a million people, two million people gathered in one of the largest public spaces in those days, the temple courts, to celebrate Sukkot and Hanukah.

Sukkot was a festival of water and the priest would take this water offering and he would pour it down this funnel and people would raise palm branches and they would say Hosanna, Hosanna, and that means

save us. But what they're saying is save us with what? With water, with rain, make it rain this year, God; we want to see rain.

When Sukkot was happening, the next festival to come was Hanukah, and during Hanukah, in Jesus' day, they would bring in four gigantic menorahs and place them in the court of the women. These menorahs were eighty-six feet tall and each lamp had sixty-five gallons of oil. Now, Jim how tall is this roof do you think? Twenty-eight feet. See guys, I needed Jim last service. This is a twenty-eight foot high ceiling. The menorahs in the temple were eighty-six feet high. So take the height of this sanctuary and quadruple that, and you get the height of these menorahs. And so what would happen is right as Sukkot ended in those days, they don't do it this way anymore, Sukkot from the water ceremony as the sun was setting, because remember in Judaism a day begins at sunset, not sunrise. As the sun was setting, Hanukah would begin as it's getting dark, and remember in those days they don't have electricity, so the sky.. and it's the desert, right? So the sky is going to be full of stars and there's not going to be any light pollution at all.

And then they would have a five thousand voice choir at sunset begin to sing the hallel, and they would illuminate these menorah's that said that the whole city; that there wasn't one house that didn't have lights from the menorah shining on it. So just think this bright huge light, like every wick is a bonfire and it's just crazy and awesome, and people are singing and they're singing hosanna. And in fact the Mishnah

says if you've never experienced the first day of Hanukkah in the temple, you have never experienced true joy. Wow, what a great story.

And scholars believe that Jesus again, who celebrated Hanukkah, that during Sukkot and during Hanukkah in John chapter seven, He goes into the temple, and right as they're pouring living water, which means water that's not still, living water is water that you use for a mikvah so it has to be from the ground; not from a well, it has to be from a spring or river.

So they would take living water and make a water sacrifice, praying for rain, and just when they do that, Jesus looks at His disciples in the temple and He says "anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink, and out of him will flow," or out of her will flow "rivers of living water." Powerful Jewish message.

And then, just after that, when they light the candles, if you look at a menorah today, it has nine candles; there are four on either side and one in the middle. The one in the middle is called the servant light. That is the one you use to light the other lights with. And the servant light is meant to represent God. It's God's life, God's fire, God's power, and the rabbis call that in those days 'the light of the world.'

So at first they pour out the living water and Jesus says anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink, and then they light the menorah, and Jesus looks at His disciples and He says "I am the light of the world." I am the light of the world. And let me tell you He is. Two

thousand years, our people have told the story of light of the world and the living water that came to save us, not just the Jews but Gentiles as well; to reconcile us unto God and unto each other. The Prince of Peace. Thank you.

Wonderful counselor, mighty God who lays down the proud and lifts up the humble, who helps those who are in their weakness and in their difficulty and in their loneliness, and I think who promotes those who in their power and in their strength remain humble to help those who are in need, and I think that's you.

Look when we light a candle, we are reminding ourselves of the light of the world. That when we only have a little bit of oil left, God's got a lot of fire left. Guys hear me: when you've got a little oil, God's got a lot of fire. He can do a lot with your little. I'm here to testify that I can tell you story after story of child, of broken person, of addicted person, of person who's come through difficult times that God has used them in amazing ways to get out of incredible circumstances.

Maybe you're full of despair and you're saying to yourself man it's always going to be this way. I want to encourage you the victory is not far. I think of so many times where I thought about giving up on the eleventh hour on something that I really felt like God wanted me to do, and I'm so glad I didn't; that I didn't blow out the candle on the seventh day. That I waited.

And maybe you say is all this pain for nothing? Very often there's times when we go through pain that seems meaningless, but on a long enough timeline, we're able to look back and see God had a purpose for that pain. God had something in mind that He was able to take that thing that the enemy wanted to use to harm me and to use it for good for some purpose.

Many of the people that I talk to have gone through tremendous amounts of pain that have come through on the other side. I've asked them in interview after interview 'if you could, would you go back and not have that pain in your life.' I've never heard anyone say yes. People believe that the pain that they go through, the difficulties that they go through become a part of who they are today. I don't think God's hurting you or harming you or killing anybody, but I do believe that God can use your pain for purpose and its going to make sense someday.

For many of us, when we think about courage, we think about taking a leap of faith, we think about taking some like giant step into something, but I always think of this quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson. He says "a hero is no braver than any other man, he's just braver five minutes longer." It's true. Sometimes we give up and we're so, so, so close to the finish line.

So I want to encourage you today. God's with you. Keep hope alive. You're going to get there. I'm on your side. We're all on your side and so is the Lord.

Father, we thank you, we love you, we praise your name, and we ask, Father, that you would light a fire in our hearts that, Lord, when we're out of oil, when we're out of steam, when we feel like we can't go or do anymore, we pray, Father, that you'd help us get through.

For those of us that are doing great, help us to have eyes to see people that we could help, especially young people. When we see teenagers and children or young adults that need guidance, Lord, I pray that you would help us who are more seasoned to find ways that we can help them and lead them. Lord, we love you and we thank you, it's in Jesus' name we pray, amen.