

THE FRIENDS OF ISRAEL TODAY

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You know when you stop and think for a moment about the life of Jesus, you begin to realize some key things about how we worship God through Christ today, and how Jesus worshipped the Father when He was on earth. Today we, as Christians, celebrate holidays like Christmas and Easter, but during the days of Jesus there was no Christmas, and there was no Easter. Jesus worshipped the Father through the Jewish festivals, and one of the special holidays Jesus would celebrate around this time was the festival of Hanukkah.

In John chapter 10 the Apostle John peers in on Jesus' celebration of Hanukkah, or as John calls it the Feast of Dedication. John calls it the feast of Dedication because the story of Hanukkah is connected to an amazing moment in Israel's history, when the Jewish people defeated the Greeks who were forcibly Hellenizing them... that means Greeks wanted Jews to look like Greeks. The Greeks were demanding the Jewish people who were living in Israel around 167 BC to drop everything that defined them as Jewish... they were to stop following the Torah, stop celebrating Sabbath and eating kosher food, stop circumcisions, and to show their allegiance to the Greek leader at that time, Antiochus Epiphanies, they were forced

to slaughter a pig, The Greeks even slaughtered a pig in the holy Jewish Temple... all of this happened until Judah Maccabeus, a Jewish priest from Modi'in, stood up against the onslaught of anti-Semitism and fought back against the Greek forces.

Through a series of campaigns the small rebel Jewish forces defeated the great Greek army. When the Greeks finally retreated the Jewish people were able to go to the Temple in Jerusalem and cleanse it from being defiled by the Greeks and the unclean offerings and idols be worshiped there. Around 165 BC the Jewish people re-dedicated the Temple to the Lord. That's why John calls it the feast of Dedication.

Now it's usually around this time when we turn on the radio when we're driving in the car or we go shopping, or when we go to church the music we hear and the Scripture passages we read begin to change... we start to hear Christmas music playing... now some place play Christmas music a little too early, but it's usually right after Thanksgiving into early December we begin to hear all the great Christmas songs and hymns and we start to read Biblical passages about the advent of Christ.

The same was experienced in Israel during the days of Jesus, the songs and hymns started to change on the approach of Hanukkah...

the readings of the Old Testament in the Synagogue started to change. One of the passages the Jewish people would read for Hanukkah is seen in John 10, where we read Jesus celebrated Hanukkah... it's the passage on the "Good Shepherd"... in John 10:11 Jesus says... I am the Good Shepherd!... But His statement comes from Ezekiel 34 where the Lord judges the "Shepherds" of Israel, who led Israel astray, who didn't defend Israel against idols and the worship of false gods, the shepherds of Israel would were too busy feeding themselves that they neglected to feed the flock of Israel.

The story of Hanukkah is a great story of how God protected the Jewish people from being destroyed by the Greeks, but the sad part of the story is that there was only one leader... one priest from Jewish people who stood up against the Greeks... all of the other Shepherds and leaders of Israel slaughtered pigs, they gave up the Torah, in fear they sold their flock... the Israelites to the Greeks. There was only one "Shepherd" of Israel who took action... Judas Maccabeus.

The Jewish people would read Ezekiel 34 which says this about its leaders... the shepherds of Israel:

The word of the LORD came to me: "Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel; prophesy, and say to them, even to the

shepherds, Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat ones, but you do not feed the sheep. The weak you have not strengthened, the sick you have not healed, the injured you have not bound up, the strayed you have not brought back, the lost you have not sought, and with force and harshness you have ruled them.

Sadly, Israel's history is full of leaders that led them astray. It's full of leaders who forgot to make the Lord their priority, and who neglected to care for their flock... Israel. This passage in Ezekiel 34 is so awesome because the Lord says He's tired of the lack of good leadership in Israel so He Himself will lead them.

“For this is what the sovereign LORD says: Look, I myself will search for my sheep and seek them out. As a shepherd seeks out his flock when he is among his scattered sheep, so I will seek out my flock. I will rescue them from all the places where they have been scattered on a cloudy, dark day. I will bring them out from among the peoples and gather them from foreign countries; I will bring them to their own land. I will feed them on the mountains of Israel, by the streams and all the inhabited places of the land. In a good pasture I will feed them; the mountain heights of Israel will be their pasture. There they will lie down in a lush pasture, and they will

feed on rich grass on the mountains of Israel. I myself will feed my sheep and I myself will make them lie down, declares the sovereign LORD. I will seek the lost and bring back the strays; I will bandage the injured and strengthen the sick, but the fat and the strong I will destroy. I will feed them—with judgment!

Wow! When the Lord looks around at the lack of leadership, the lack of good shepherds He says... “I’ll do it myself... I will shepherd my people.”

Is it any surprise that as Ezekiel 34 is being read during Hanukkah in Synagogues all around the world today and during the days of Jesus that Jesus would use the opportunity to say in John 10, ““I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep... “I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me—just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.”

On Hanukkah when Jesus remembers that God provided a victory against the Greeks and preserved them from another massive empire, and they also remember that only one priest, one of many priests in Israel, said “NO” to those who tried to strip the Jewish people of their faith. Jesus speaks up and says to the Jewish people during Hanukkah... “I’m the good shepherd.” I’m the shepherd that will never let you down, I am the shepherd who loves you more

than my own life... I won't sell you out for wealth or fame...
instead I will lay my life down for you.

So for many of you listening you probably don't celebrate
Hanukkah, and that's ok... but for the next eight days as Jewish
people celebrate the festival of lights... give glory to God for
sending us our Shepherd, our Good Shepherd who loves you more
than His own life.