

I wonder how he celebrated it. Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Feast of Dedication. We call it by a different name: Hanukkah. Today it is celebrated as a sort of alternative to Christmas. But at the time of Jesus it was kind of a combination between Independence Day and Thanksgiving. Hanukkah or the Feast of Dedication celebrated the daring deeds of the Jewish hero, Judas Maccabaeus. It took place between the time frame covered by the Old Testament and the New Testament. It was a time when the Greeks were forcing the people of Israel to give up their religion and adopt their customs. When the Jews resisted, the temple was desecrated, priests were attacked and ordinary citizens feared for their lives if they held onto the worship of the Lord.

Not everyone went along with the changes. A man named Matthias had enough. So he and his sons formed the core of an armed resistance. And every time the Greek commanders sent another wave of troops from their headquarters in Syria, the overmatched and outnumbered band of Israelite rebels successfully defeated the foreigners. Under the leadership of Matthias' son Judas, the Israelites managed to regain control of the land. It all culminated in the rededication of the temple. In December 165 A.D. they celebrated restored temple worship with a festival. And ever since Hanukkah has been a religious celebration.

There is something more significant than just a history lesson. While Jesus was in Jerusalem for this festival, he was challenged. At the time of Jesus, a new foreign power named Rome was the occupying power and was making life difficult for the Jewish people. So the Jews were expecting someone more like Judas Maccabaeus to make Israel great again. And when they looked at Jesus, he didn't meet their expectations.

Jesus is in the temple area. He's probably teaching, explaining the Scripture to his disciples and anyone else who will listen. Then we learn, "The Jews gathered around him, saying, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly.'" This is a confrontation. It is almost like a pack of wolves surrounding Jesus, teeth bared, ready to attack. Jesus doesn't match their expectations of a true hero, so they seize the opportunity to attack him.

There was a study released recently that concluded rates of anxiety and depression have been rising in America since the 1930's. Sounds illogical, doesn't it? If you've had talks with your parents or grandparents about the good old days, they would be reluctant to go back to the way things were. One of the researchers made this observation: We seem to have so much ease and relative economic prosperity compared to previous centuries, yet there's this dissatisfaction, there's this unhappiness, there are these mental health issues in terms of depression and anxiety." The best they can come up with to explain the trend is a shift in values. Over the past 80 years they point to a greater focus on money, fame, and image. The pursuit of those things seem to be most responsible for driving the surge in depression and anxiety.

Those misplaced expectations are responsible for our feelings of unhappiness and dissatisfaction. There are wolves all around us. Wolves encircle us with the standard of success promoted on your Facebook and Instagram feeds. Wolves pressure you to pursue the image and fame that defines so many people all around you. Wolves are ready to pounce on your prospects for prosperity, causing you to chase after more and more, only to prey on your accomplishments and leave you feeling empty.

Those expectations have an influence on our identity as Christians. We want Jesus to be our hero. We want him to make us feel happy and satisfied. WE want him to make our lives

filled with picture-worthy moments that could be shared and make our friends and perfect strangers feel jealous. We want Jesus to make us successful and prosperous. We look at Jesus and we wonder if we have the wrong hero. But as we pursue the things we think will make our lives better, we actually end up losing out on the benefits of having a good shepherd.

Jesus gives a clear answer to his critics and challengers. However, it's not necessarily the answer they are looking for. He replies to their confrontation: "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, but you do not believe because you are not my sheep." Jesus has clearly shown and told who he really is. That's not the problem. The problem arises when his identity clashes with misplaced expectations.

Jesus wants us to see we're asking the wrong questions. If Jesus clearly lets people know who he is, then we need to turn the attention toward ourselves. Are we really his sheep? Do we miss the clues? Are we distracted from hearing his voice?

When we see what Jesus does and hear what he says, we get to see a true hero. Jesus doesn't leave us hanging. He does the things God promised the Savior would do. Jesus teaches that he is the Messiah. In fact, he has made it so clear that he is true God, equal to the Father, that the crowds who hear him are ready to carry out the 1st century equivalent of a lynching. More than once.

And if Jesus is true God, he is a lot better than any hero angry crowds expected. Jesus continues: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me." Jesus is not oblivious to the dangers you face in this world. It's not just that Jesus is acquainted with you and might be able to recall your name. Jesus knows you intimately and cares about each one of his sheep. He knows the wolves that surround you and he's aware of the fangs bared against you. Left all to yourselves, sheep don't stand much of a chance against any predator. That's why they need a shepherd. Jesus stands between his sheep and the dangers threatening them.

And since Jesus knows you intimately, he isn't unconcerned about your expectations. Judas Maccabaeus was a great hero who did some amazing things. But he couldn't keep Israel secure forever. In times other armies came and invaded and captured the land. Jesus didn't look or act like Judas Maccabaeus. He doesn't deliver the success and comfort we think will be the answer to our anxieties and depression. Jesus does something better.

Rather than appearing onto the national scene at that Hanukkah celebration flexing his muscles like a conquering hero, Jesus is the shepherd ready to sacrifice everything for his sheep. Earlier he tells us what kind of hero he is: "I lay down my life for the sheep." Jesus sacrificed all for you. Because of his sacrifice, now Jesus says: "I give them eternal life." Jesus cares enough to not let you wander your own way as a sheep. Jesus cares enough to rescue you from danger. Jesus cares enough to snatch you away from your expectations that could never deliver the prosperity and happiness you want from them.

Knowing who Jesus is helps us better appreciate our own identity as his sheep. Your worth isn't defined by what the pack of wolves out in the world expects from you. Jesus knows you well enough to claim you as his sheep. Your identity isn't tied to the image you project from the pictures decorating your refrigerator or posted all over social media. Your identity is tied to your Good Shepherd. It doesn't matter how much success or fame or money you have, because you have life through the sacrifice of your Good Shepherd.

I'm one of those absent minded people. As I drive away from my house, I start to

wonder if I locked the front door. As I check the purchase in my car, I have to check to see if I left my credit card on the check out counter at Walmart. We have this fear of a burglar breaking in, or a thief snatching our wallet or purse. What a hassle to cancel all your credit cards and have to get a new driver's license.

With Jesus and through his sacrifice on the cross, you have real security. Jesus says: "I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish, no one can snatch them out of my hand. Jesus has you in his care. Jesus has you safe and secure. Judas Maccabaeus couldn't do that. No military or political leader would be bold enough to make that kind of promise. No hero could deliver what Jesus does.

In the research about the rise in anxiety and depression among young people over the past decades, the authors suggest one solution. Those earlier times were filled with racial and gender discrimination. But those traditional times kept people in closer relationships with each other. Families had more children. Everyone worked together on the family farm. They shared their joys and burdens through those close relationships. Many of our modern troubles come from the progress that leads to our isolation.

Your Good Shepherd holds you tightly in his arms. His sheep hear his voice and place their trust in him and keep following him. Jesus promises his sheep will never perish. You will never experience the isolation of life without God. Your security isn't dependent on how hard you hold onto him, but the hold Jesus has on you.

You don't need to celebrate Hanukkah. And ultimately the history of Israel between the Old and New Testaments might shed some light on what happens during the life of Jesus, but it isn't a deal breaker. From what we learn from Jesus at this confrontation in Jerusalem at the Feast of Dedication, we learn to celebrate something different. Celebrate the Hero Jesus. Celebrate the glory of the Good Shepherd hidden by the misplaced expectations of the crowds. Celebrate the heroic strength the Good Shepherd showed when he stretched out his arms on the cross. Celebrate the eternal life that awaits you in heaven through the resurrection and life of that same Good Shepherd. Celebrate the safety and confidence you enjoy today through the Good Shepherd. Celebrate Your Good Shepherd who exceeds expectations. Amen...