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Jesus and Hanukkah

By Bobby Schuller

Well, if you are watching this on television, so not for those of you who are watching this live or those of you who are here, if you're watching this on television, Merry Christmas from last year. I'm going to let you guys in on a little bit of a television secret, televangelism secret: most ministries that are on TV are delayed by usually about three to six months in which there's all sorts of editing that goes on and tapes and plans and all those types of things. We've gotten our turn-around time to two weeks, which I think is really good. I think we're the shortest turnaround time of any television ministry, and it's been a lot of work to do that.

And that made me think for a minute about what you are experiencing right now. And at the end of the day, I feel that whatever it is you're going through, it's a human experience and that all of us, when we get to the first Sunday of advent, we examine one word and that word is hope. I can't know what you're going through a year from now. There's no way to know. I mean I could predict, but I'd probably be lucky. Even a broken clock is right twice a day, they say, right?

What I can predict, though, is this: whatever you're going through, God's going to get you through. And it's a timeless thing that we as human beings, we go through suffering. We experience loss, sometimes we lose a loved one, sometimes we lose our own health or ability to do certain things – we can't do it the same that we used to. And there's a real sense of loss in that. Our families break up, kids move away sometimes, sometimes we go through divorce or bad breakup or falling out with a friend or a business partner. And when we go through these tragedies and difficulties or we get sick or when our country doesn't go the way we want it to go, it can feel just a tremendous sense of loss, like will things ever be good again? And I want you to know they won't just be good again; they're going to be great. God will get you through this valley into victory.

It's interesting because I know I've showed this picture before. There's a picture of me and Cohen at Disneyland. What you have to understand is a lot of people in Orange County have annual passes, it's a onetime fee once a year, and it's free! It's cheaper to go to Disneyland than to go to the movies. And so why wouldn't you go. It's amazing, especially with your kids and in Cohen's case, my son, he has epilepsy and cerebral palsy, and he's also intellectually disabled and so it's hard for him. He can't play on a jungle gym like a normal kid can. I can't throw a baseball with my son, but I can go to Disneyland with him

because it's safe, and he loves it. And if he had it his way, he'd be there all day every day.

This picture, it was raining, which is peculiar because here in Southern California, it hardly ever rains. We only get 14 inches of rain per year, and of course you can see it's a very wet and rainy Friday.

And that's what I really want to get at today. There are a lot of ministers, God bless them, and maybe they're right, maybe I'm wrong, that give you advice that you ought to raise your expectations. That you ought to have big expectations. That you ought to carry those expectations in your heart. And I think I know what they mean, but I have found expectations to be incredibly disappointing. Whenever you have a date or a number that you've got to get, and if you don't get it from God or from life or from whatever, despair starts to sink in. You get enough of those and you start to think nothing can happen. But I think that is better than expectation is hope. Hope! A positive sense on the inside that even though I don't know how this is going to work out, I know it's going to work out. And I'm going to keep the mindset to look for opportunities and possibilities in my life to turn this around into something better. Hope beats expectation every time.

I think that what's better is to teach the word of God which tells us how to get through difficult times. And the way to get through difficult times is the same way that you navigate a ship through the fog. You know where you want to go, you know there's things around you, but

you use the things that God has given you to get through. You don't know when the storm is going to go away, but you know you're going to get through, you know you can trust the compass. You can't see north or south, but you can see your compass. This is our compass, the word of God, and it guides us through the difficulty, through the fog of life, and it helps us, not to have expectations, dates and times, but to remain hopeful, and to be hopeful encouragers to our neighbor, because everybody needs a hopeful person in the room. Am I right? Can I get an amen for all the hopeful saints and sinners in the house? So that is the goal. And today, that is the hope candle that we light.

Now being a minister, I have been a minister since I was very young. I've been ordained for 20 years, believe it or not. I've been ordained five times. Different traditions. And you run out of things when advent comes around because you always have to preach the same scriptures, and there's really only six or seven of them. There's a couple in the New Testament, and there's the Isaiah passages and there's one in Ezekiel, and so I've decided that I'm going to add every year into this a teaching on Hanukkah because it's right around the same season. And that Hanukkah has really something to teach us as Christians.

Hanukkah is a godly day, and Jesus celebrated it, as Hannah read in John chapter 9. I hate how they put the Festival of Dedication; they should just put Hanukkah because then it would ring true in people's

minds. But Jesus celebrates Hanukkah, and we're going to talk about that in just a minute of what that would have been like for Him.

But first, I want us all to understand this amazing story that's located in the Maccabees sub-Nautica book of the Bible. It's not the Bible but it's a holy writing.

Okay, so it goes like this. To understand Hanukkah, you have to understand Alexander the Great. You all mind if I geek out on history really quick? All right, Alexander the Great, to understand Alexander the Great, you have to picture the rich kid who got like everything. His father, Philip the second, was one of the most gnarly tough dudes in human history. He had a limp leg like a pirate captain. He had his eye gouged out so he could only see through one eye. He was a tough, grizzled man. Historians love to point out this interesting fact that nation states that are completely surrounded tend to develop the toughest military people in the world. Great example is Germany. Germany has always had being completely surrounded, a pretty tough military. The Chinese and particularly the Tang Dynasty had an incredible military completely surrounded. You could probably look at Israel today, a small nation, only 8,000 square miles, completely surrounded by belligerence, has the 8th most powerful military, maybe better than that, and maybe the greatest air force in the world. There's something about being constantly hit, constantly beat on that can make you sort of feel like you

need a tougher military. And one of those countries was Ancient Macedonia.

This is Philip the second's territory, a nation completely surrounded by Greece and Bulgaria and other parts constantly attacking it. This guy, Philip the second, in his life, creates this army of just tough, grizzled veterans who are amazing fighters and in his lifetime, at his death, he has the greatest military that has ever existed until that point, and he's about to invade the world, and suddenly he dies. Now this is a fun fact in history, nobody really knows how he died, but most people think it was Alexander's mother, Olympias, that she assassinated him. He was assassinated. And Alexander the Great, this 20-something, good looking, rich kid inherits the greatest army in the world. More than that, Alexander was incredibly brave, he was a great fighter, he was probably a genius, he was very, very good looking, and he just conquered everything. He just conquered everything.

One of the most amazing things about ancient warfare is how the heads of state. So Alexander the Great is the king of the Macedonian Empire. He would be at the front line of every fight. So like if there was a charge of horses, he'd be the tip of the spear. Can you imagine that? Can you imagine like there's a bunch of marines invading some country in the United States and Donald Trump is the first guy off the boat with this like gun, there's bullets whizzing over his head. It's crazy. And that's how warfare was back then.

So when that happens, and you're victorious, people start to think that maybe luck or something more is on your side, and by the time he dies, Alexander the Great believes himself, and everybody agrees, that he's a god. That he's maybe part.. like a demigod. Anyway, he conquers the whole world. At age 32, out of nowhere, something starts going wrong with his health. After 12 days of grueling suffering and abdominal pain, he dies. Nobody knows what killed him. Could have been typhoid, it could have been malaria. He could have been poisoned. Nobody knows.

He dies in Babylon, and this empire that he created in a handful of years that stretched all the way from Bulgaria to modern day Pakistan. I mean a massive area of land, especially in the ancient world. Would take months to go from one end to the other on horseback. All this power, all this wealth goes to four guys, his top four generals. They split into four Greek empires, and now here's the whole point.. I'm getting to Hanukkah, I promise, Russ. I'm getting to Hanukkah, okay? I'm getting there.

Alexander the Great was the world's first missionary. Not for the Lord but for Hellenism. Unlike all the military guys that conquered the whole world, Alexander the Great wanted every city, every place he conquered to be Greek. So when he would conquer a place like Israel, any place he conquered, he always did four things. He built a theater, he built schools, he built temples, and he built gymnasiums or some type of place for wrestling and sports, and wanted everyone to convert to

Hellenism, to speak and write Greek, to understand Greek philosophy and Platonism. He was mentored by one of the greatest philosophers of all time, Aristotle. That was his mentor. That was like his guy. Isn't that crazy? Like that was hey Aristotle. Hey Alexander the Great.

So Alexander the Great wants to convert everybody and this becomes a huge legacy. So could you bring that map back up? So the four generals then, these are all Greek sort of mini empires, and they're all at peace for a time. Of course predictably the kings of these different empires go to war with each other and this, you can see, originally Israel during Alexander the Great, is actually a part of this Egyptian kingdom, Ptolemais empire. So, this part was originally yellow, and this group the Seleucids and the Ptolemais go to war and the Seleucids take over Israel.

When the Ptolemais, the Egyptian guys were controlling Israel, the Hellenism thing was like optional. There's a lot of liberty, and they were kind of like if you want to speak Greek, you can. If you want to do your Jewish thing, you can. If you want to go to the theaters and go to gymnasiums, you can. And so this was actually working where a lot of these Jewish young men were like converting to Hellenism. One of the main things that the Greeks loved was wrestling, and when men wrestled, they wrestled naked. And so if a Jewish young man wanted to wrestle but he's circumcised, everybody's pointing and laughing and in some cases they wouldn't let him compete. And so a lot of young men didn't want their sons to be circumcised and becomes all of this cultural

stuff where even though they're free to choose, they really start leaning towards Hellenism. And by the way, I think if Israel had stayed Ptolemaic, I think Judaism would have evaporated. Like so many other cultures, I think it just would have been allured into the theater, the sports and all that stuff.

But as luck would have it, the Seleucids take Israel, and their policy is different. They say oh you Jews, you can't stay Jewish, you have to become Hellenized. And something about.. isn't that weird? Human beings, it's like if you let them do it, they'll do it. But it's like if you force them to do it, it lit this holy spark where now there was this insurgency and unrest, they're like no, we will circumcise our children. We will study the word of God. We will worship in the temple. And so this tension begins to grow because the state wants these Jewish young men to convert to Hellenism.

And so this all comes to a head when the new king of the Seleucid empire Antiochus the 4th, declares, like Alexander the Great did, that he's a god. He goes into the temple of Jerusalem; he defiles the temple by tearing down and looting all of the stuff. He puts on the altar an idol to Zeus and sacrifices a pig and lays pig entrails in the holy of holies. And at this point, a lot of the faithful Jews, they called themselves the Hasid's at the time, flee into the mountains into the hills into hiding to continue to worship God.

And so in a chase after them, this Antiochus 4th tyrant decides to go and find these villages and stuff, and make sure that they're obliging to the Hellenism, in many of these cases they were bringing either a Zeus idol, it's like a Baal version of Zeus, or an idol to Antiochus. And so in this one story, they arrive in this town and the village gathers around, and leading them is their priest, an old big man named.. he was described as like bear of a man, fighter, old guy, and they called him old Matthew. And they come in and they command old Matthew, make a sacrifice to the pagan god of Antiochus. Matthew looks at them and says.. there's this long poem and Maccabee is about it, but he says I'll never do it. I'll never do it. I made an oath, I'm faithful to God. I'll never ever do that.

And so another young priest says I'll do it. He goes up to the altar, he has a pig, he's about to sacrifice the pig and behind him comes old Matthew, like you kind of think him lumbering up, grabs the knife from the young man, kills the young man, and kills all of the Greek guards who are forcing him to do this. And then in this Brave Heart style, Last of the Mohicans guerrilla warfare thing, old Matthew raises up all of the men in this village and they decide that they're going to start this rebellion.

He dies up in the hills and his son Judas Maccabee; Maccabee means the hammer, it was a nickname that was given to him, either because he fought with a hammer but more likely because he was just

such a good general, leads this amazing revolt. And when you read this story in the historic context, it's incredible, this is Judas Maccabee. And it's just incredible that this ragtag band of Jews was able to remove the greatest military force on earth from their nation. It's very much akin to the like American Revolution story that we tell ourselves, a bunch of farmers and pitchforks kicked out the British Empire, the greatest empire at the time. Although, France is usually removed from that story. They didn't have a France! They didn't have another empire coming and helping them. They removed the Seleucid Greeks from Israel and reclaimed their nation. Some of these stories, when you read original documents and stuff, they would have like these long hours of prayer and worship, and it was always like.. it was always like Lord, help us win, but if we lose, let us die honorably. There was like this need.. it was like they all really didn't think almost, it seemed like in the beginning, that they would actually win. It was more like I would rather die than dishonor the Lord and dishonor my ancestors and dishonor my faith. And God used that to bring freedom and life to their country.

So often in life, we look at our situation and we just think who can get through this? Who could beat this thing? I just remain convinced that when people do the honorable thing, even though it may like risk and destroy their whole lives, when people do what is truly right every time, God can use that to overcome the most unbelievable things. God can do whatever God wants to do, whenever He wants to do it. And this

is a God who loves you, and is on your side. He is going to get you through what you're going through, my friend. I want you to trust and believe that you're going to get through this.

So when they reclaim their country, I'm almost done with my sermon and I still haven't really gotten to Hanukkah. When they reclaim their country, and reclaim Jerusalem, they walk into the temple and it's an ugly hideous sight. The temple is supposed to be the Garden of Eden. And the Menorah, which is in the temple since the beginning, it's supposed to be a tree. It's supposed to be the tree of life, and it's supposed to always be lit as a sign of hope and life to all who enter the temple. And a sign of the Holy Spirit. And so the Menorah is there and they walk in, everything's been looted, but there's one Menorah left in the temple, and there's pig entrails and blood and people have been killed there, and ugly, ugly things, Satanic things. And they clean it out and they clean everything, and they want to rededicate the temple, but all they have is a Menorah with one day's oil in it. But to make the oil for a Menorah, it takes eight days to make it kosher. So they ask the question, they debate among themselves: should we wait a few days and then light it? Should we dedicate it today? But then we're going to run out of fire. The Menorah's going to go out. And they come up with this idea, let's just light it and see. And if it stays lit, if one day's worth of oil stays lit for eight days, who can say that God wasn't with us?

And I love that this is the miracle story. It's not the battles that were won, it's not when people were miraculously healed or when there were guys like killing elephants, hiding in grass in the thing. All these miracles that happened, the one they always talk about is that a candle with only one bit, one day of oil stayed lit for eight days. Why is that the memory? Why is that the thing that they wanted their ancestors to remember forever? I believe it's because one of the major themes of the Bible is that God elevates the humble; that God elevates the honorable; that if you give God one day worth of oil, He can give you eight days' worth of light.

That is, in a way, what life with the Lord is. That in our weakness, we become strong. That when we're down to nothing, God is up to something, as my dad likes to say. That He can carry us through if we just give Him that little leftover that we have. Give God the little that you have and watch Him do great things with it.

And so Jesus, in John chapter 10, is celebrating Hanukkah. And one of the things I love about this, Hanukkah, in Jerusalem when Herod's temple was still there, the great temple, it would have looked like this in Jesus' day. About two hundred years after the event, they're still celebrating Hanukkah. In the court of women, there would have been four gigantic Menorahs, eighty-six feet tall. So this is 28-feet, the sanctuary, so three times the height of our sanctuary, some guy, one of the priests would have to go up on this eighty-six-foot-long ladder, can

you image that? That would have been like pretty scary. The wicks were like made of rope. I read somewhere that the oil for each candelabra was like five hundred gallons of oil per wick, and they said that the whole city, you could see the Menorah is lit through the whole city of Jerusalem. It was always at night, remember a day begins at sundown, not sunrise in Judaism, so this holiday begins at evening. The whole city is alight with the Menorah and a five thousand voice choir in a church attendance of one point five million people would sing the Hallel. Is that the Hallel? His love endures forever! His love endures forever. His love endures forever. Singing Psalm 118 over and over.

And what they wanted us to remember is basically we will never forget what God can do. We'll never forget. We'll never forget.

Incidentally, on the Menorah, do we have one here? This is an ancient Menorah. The bigger one in the middle, used to have seven, now its nine, and the bigger one in the middle is called the servant candle, the servant candle. And that's the one that you use to light all the other candles. It doesn't count as one of the days. It's the one that's always lit. And it's also in Jesus' day, the rabbis called that candle the light of the world. The light of the world.

The reason this is important is because in John, where Jesus is celebrating Hanukkah, Jesus also refers to Himself as the light of the world. It is the one light that lights all the other lights. It's the one light that never goes out. And that's who He is to us, and it's hard after you

hear that whenever you read John, to not think of the Menorah which isn't a Hanukkah thing, it's a temple thing. It's the tree of life. That at the center of the tree of life is this light that never goes out and His name is Jesus Christ. And He lights all the other candles. The rabbis also refer to themselves sometimes as the light of the world, too, that their job was to bring light to their students. And maybe that's a way you should view yourself even. That in life, it is so important, especially as things get darker and maybe things get difficult, I mean darker literally, in winter, that we continue to bring hope to people. I think hope is contagious, and I think despair is contagious. I think we have to think responsibly about the attitude we carry around other people. That we need a hopeful person in the room. We need a hopeful person in the room. Not someone who's going to guarantee anything, not someone who's going to give me a date, not someone who's going to prophesy, but someone who knows the word, the word of God, that tells us that we serve a good God who gets us through tough times, someone who says something like tough times never last, but tough people do. We need someone like that, and you can be that person today. You can be that person in the room.

I'm surprised how many people want to write your ending. They want to write the ending to your story. I'm surprised how many people feel the freedom to tell you, your business isn't going to work out, your ministry is going to fail, that's a bad idea, you're a bad parent, you'll never reconcile with your family, you'll never save your marriage, I

couldn't save mine. I'm amazed at the way, especially family members will say that to their own kin. Don't let anyone write the ending to your story. God has written the ending to your story and it is good. I don't know what it is. It's like reading a book, but the Bible says He is the author and finisher of our faith, He's written your story, and He's written its ending, and it's very good. The only one who can throw that ending away is you. Don't settle for one of those bad endings. We don't know what its going to look like, we don't know when, but trust He's going to get you through it.

Well, I'm so proud of you. And I think you're doing better than you think you are, and I want you to know that this church believes in you, that we are praying for you really, and that we love you and we know you're going to get through whatever it is you're going through.

Father, we thank you that you are the candle that never goes out in our hearts. That you are the light of the world, and you're the light to our world and we ask, Father, for your revelation, but most of all, for your hope. That you'd give us that thing we need to get through to where we need to go. We pray that our lives would be a testimony. For those of us who are in good times, to remind our neighbor who's suffering that we serve a good God who will carry us through. Lord, we love you and we thank you, it's in Jesus' name we pray, amen.