

Hanukkah: When God Hides

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We're in the season of Hanukkah—party time. The time of year where it gets really, really, really dark and we respond with lights, along with several other cultures in the world that kind of did it for the same reasons. In a few weeks, Messianic communities and Jewish communities around the world will light candles for Hanukkah.

Hanukkah is of course a festival of lights. Eight nights of flames pushing back the darkness. And due to tradition, most people think Hanukkah orbits the idea of a miracle with oil. That's a very popular version of the story that's handed down. That's the Hallmark version. If you watched it on Hallmark Channel, that's what it would look like. It would be beautiful. But that's not why Hanukkah exists.

The Real Story

The story of Hanukkah is nuanced and heavy because it's not a fairy tale. It has a lot of darkness in it, especially regarding the heroes—the Maccabees. When we read the accounts in the intertestamental books, several books of Maccabees, they make it clear: these weren't the heroes we were hoping for, because they ended up turning into tyrants worse than the Greeks after they gained power. But we can still learn. That's why the stories are in the Bible or passed down through Jewish tradition—so that we can learn.

We can see what faith looks like and then what happens when you pass the test but also you decide to sway. That's the story of Israel. Hanukkah exists because of what happened when God went silent. And an empire tried to erase his people from existence. And I want to take you into that story today. Again, not the sanitized version but the real one. Because I think that this has something to say to everyone in the room today. Especially if you've ever felt like God disappeared when you needed him most.

The 400-Year Gap

And so if you open your Bibles and you go to the very end of what we would call the Old Testament. The OG Bible. In our Christian canon it ends in Malachi. And you turn the page

from Malachi, you get a little blank page, you turn it again—Matthew. Poof. Old Testament, New Testament just like that. Very easy transition. But there's a gap there. There's a little blank page in between the Old and New Testament. There's a gap in history of about 400 years of things that went on. So there's a gap that's older than our country, of lots of things that took place that take us from the events of post-exilic Israel, the Judeans returning from Babylon and trying to set up their life after it was basically erased, to Yeshua being born. Four centuries of God saying nothing. No prophets. Heaven's on mute.

And in that silence, the world kept turning. Empires rose and fell. Alexander the Great conquered everything from Greece to India in about a decade. And then he died at 32. What have I done in my life?

Antiochus the Madman

One of the things that took place during that season were the Seleucid Greeks. They ended up controlling the land of Israel, Judea, and such. And for a while it was tolerable. We had these new occupiers, another empire coming in. But it was manageable. I mean, the Greeks let the Jews worship their God, keep their customs, maintain the temple. It was freedom. Kind of. Not really. It was faux freedom, but at least it was survivable.

And then a leader by the name of Antiochus the Fourth came to power. And everything changed. And this man, Antiochus number four, gave himself the title Epiphanes. And Epiphanes is a word that means God manifest. When he looked in the mirror, he saw divinity staring back at him. His critics had a different name for him. They called him Epimanes, which means the madman, crazy joker. Oh, it's Antiochus Epimanes. Epiphanes. It's funny, right? They had slurs and anyway. Same root word, very different meaning. The people who lived under his rule knew who he really was.

Hellenization and Erasure

And this king decided that his empire would be unified. One people, one culture, one religion, one way of life and thinking. It's called Hellenization. Become Greek, become one of us, or else. The Jews with their strange invisible God and their stubborn refusal to assimilate became a problem very quickly.

And so in 168 BC, Antiochus made his move. He marched into Jerusalem. He entered the temple, the holiest site in all of Judaism. And the place where God's presence was said to dwell. And he went into the only place the high priest could enter once a year, and he desecrated it. He

set up an altar to Zeus in the holy place. He sacrificed a pig on the altar—a pig in the temple of God. He outlawed the Torah. Possessing a copy of the scriptures became a capital offense. They burned every scroll they could find. Banned circumcision. Any family caught circumcising their son was executed. The mother and the person who performed the ritual as well. According to historical accounts mentioned in second Maccabees, the bodies of infants were sometimes hung around the necks of their mothers before they were paraded through the city and thrown from the walls. Too detailed. Sorry. I'll turn it back.

They banned Sabbath observance. They banned the festivals. He made it illegal to be Jewish. And you could call it persecution, but really it was erasure.

A Familiar Wound

And we know something about that in the US as we celebrate Thanksgiving. That's what we tried to do. That's what we almost successfully did when we first came here. We know what it's like to take a people's bodies away, then take their culture, and then erase their memory by sending their children to new schools to grow up without their culture. We did this to the Native Americans here. So it's not something so far-fetched from our own history that we can at least be empathetic of.

Where Is God?

But here's the question that is deafening. When all this was taking place, where's God? You're not supposed to ask that in church. No, because the Bible provokes us to ask the question. The Bible tells us about a God who can handle your questions and your occasional not understandings. It's a really big God. Sometimes we think that God's really small. God's going to get really mad. God's going to—I don't know. He's like us. And when you open the Bible to the areas of the Bible that are not allowed to be talked about, you see a much bigger God at play. And you become more comfortable with how he does things, even if it's not comfortable when he does them.

During this time, there was no Elijah calling down fire. No Isaiah thundering judgment. There was no Moses demanding, "Let my people go." It was silence. The temple's defiled. Families are getting slaughtered, and heaven said nothing.

The Uncomfortable Verse

[Isaiah 45:15](#) says something that most pastors skip, and it's uncomfortable. Can someone hand me the remote that I put back there? This verse doesn't preach well. It doesn't sit well on a coffee mug. It certainly wouldn't be the pick for the bumper sticker. Let's see if I got the—Thank you, Samuel.

Truly, you are the God who hides himself, oh God of Israel, the savior.

We don't like this verse. It doesn't fit in our theology of a God who's constantly accessible, constantly obvious, constantly showing up when we need him, constantly answering prayers on our timeline. But the Jews living under Antiochus, they knew exactly what this verse meant.

God Hides

God hides. Not always, not forever. But sometimes. In the moments when you need him most. When the empire is crushing you, when evil seems to be winning without consequence. God gets quiet sometimes. And you're left with a choice. Do you still believe? Do you still stay faithful to the mission that you're on? Do you still trust the character of God you can't currently see, hear, or feel? That's not a hypothetical question for the Jews that were living in Judea. That was every day. They have to wake up and make a decision. Are they going to be who they are and who they were meant to be even when it's hard? Or are they just going to kind of go with the flow and assimilate?

A Wound in Scripture

This experience isn't new in the biblical story. It runs through scripture like a wound that doesn't heal completely. It always makes you kind of turn your head. Why? You run through the Psalms of lament. Do you hear how the psalmists—the people who wrote Psalms that the Holy Spirit said, "That's going in the Bible"—talk about and describe their frustration with God when they live life like we do? I know we've never gotten frustrated with life. But the men and women of faith talked about in scripture go through the same experiences that we do. And somehow some way they're giving us encouragement.

The Cries of the Psalms

See, how about [Psalm 13](#)? May someone hit the button. You should just be able to hit the right arrow key on the laptop. How long, oh Lord, will you—let me go back one. How long, oh Lord, will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me?

[Psalm 44](#): Awake, Lord, why do you sleep? Rouse yourself. Why do you hide your face and forget our misery and oppression?

[Psalm 88](#), the darkest Psalm in the entire collection. And in all of the Psalms of lament, people are crying out to God. A lot of times people will take shots at God in a way that is just releasing steam. Like, God, I'm feeling like I'm surrounded. God, your enemies have—where are you? I'm drowning.

[Psalm 22](#) is a great one. It's one that Yeshua quotes. Father, Father, where are you? Why have you forsaken me? And the whole Psalm is about going through the struggles of being persecuted by people and it just doesn't feel like God is there. But at the end of [Psalm 22](#), it's great because it says, "But, you know what? I've learned, God, you were there the whole time."

Psalms of Lament

"Praise be to you." So all of the Psalms of lament that seemed to address the frustration with God end with praising God and resolving it. Except [Psalm 88](#). And it ends here in verse 18. It says, "You have taken from me friend and neighbor. Hello, darkness, my old friend."

Why would the Holy Spirit put a Psalm like that in the Bible? Because the Holy Spirit knows that we're living in the same messed up world that everyone else is, and sometimes we have big feelings too. And that's okay. Because that's why they're here.

These are not the Psalms for weak faith. These are songs of honest faith. This is what honest, mature faith looks like. Faith that brings a real experience to God rather than a sanitized version of what we think he wants to hear.

The Jews under Antiochus had these songs. They read them every day as their people were being slaughtered. They sang them in secret, in caves hiding in the dark. "How long, O Lord? Why do you hide your face?" No answer came. And they still believed.

That's the part that gets me. Not the persecution. Persecution's easy to understand. Evil people do evil things. It's how the world turns. But faith that persists when heaven is silent—that's something else entirely. It's a whole different beast.

God's Hiddenness vs. Absence

And here's the distinction, and I hope you understand this: God's hiddenness is not the same as his absence. Absence means he's not there. Hiddenness means he's just not visible. A God who

is absent can't help you. But a God who's hidden, he's present. He's working. He's with you. You just can't see him yet.

Deuteronomy 31. It's Moses' last pitch to Israel before they enter the land. His big speech. He's about to hand the car keys to them, knowing they're going to total this thing. And God is speaking up with the blessings and the curses, and he's wrapping up and he's saying, "I'm going to hide my face from you. I will certainly hide my face from you on that day."

God hiding his face isn't God leaving and abandoning. It's God choosing not to be visible, and there's agency in that. There's purpose in it. Even when we can't see the purpose. Even when the purpose feels cruel.

The Jews in 168 BC couldn't see what God was doing. They saw an altar defiled. The scrolls burning. The bodies of mothers and babies being thrown from walls. But God hadn't left, because he was about to do something nobody expected.

Mattathias and the Uprising

In a small village called Modein, about 20 miles northwest of Jerusalem, there was an old priest named Mattathias. He had five sons. These weren't generals. They weren't prophets. They were not political leaders or wealthy aristocrats. They were nobody important.

One day a Greek official came to the village of Modein to enforce the new laws. He set up a pagan altar in the village and commanded the Jews to sacrifice to Greek gods publicly as a sign of submission. Mattathias refused. "No."

And then another Jew stepped forward to comply. "What? I'll go ahead and do it." He wanted to save his own skin by betraying his faith in front of his neighbors. And something snapped in this old priest. So he killed him. Mattathias, the priest who refused. Killed the man. To prevent him from betraying his people. And then he attacked and killed the Greek official as well. Then he kicked over the altar. What else do you do at that point? And then he ran to the hills. What else do you do at that point? He took his five sons, and they ran up the hill.

As they were going, they were shouting. "Whoever is zealous for the Torah, follow me!"

It was insane. It was a death sentence. This was an old man and his boys against the most powerful military force in the known world. The Maccabees, this group, they weren't action heroes. They were traumatized refugees who had watched their neighbors be executed. They were freedom fighters. They were fathers who had buried their sons. They were people pushed past the point of survival who decided that death fighting was better than death complying.

No prophet told them to do this. No angel appeared with instructions. No voice from heaven said, "Now is the time." There was no burning bush, there was no fleece, nothing. They just decided: We will not let our faith die. We will not let them erase us. Even if God is silent, we will act like he's still God. That's what faith in hiddenness looks like. Not waiting for clarity. Not demanding answers before you make your move. Just stubborn, desperate, reckless faithfulness when heaven is quiet.

The Years They Couldn't See

Can you imagine what Mattathias and his sons couldn't see when they ran for the hills? You just watched your dad do this, you know? That's the moment for the boys. Even though I'm sure they're all adults, you just saw your dad do this and you're like, "Did you know dad could? Dad's running! Let's go."

You don't know what's going to happen next. You're abandoning your home. You're homeless. All of that in a split second. You've got to make a move. They couldn't see past the next second.

They couldn't see that one of them, Judah, would become a military genius, earning the nickname the Maccabee—which means "the hammer." They couldn't see that this ragtag guerrilla army of farmers and priests would defeat professional Greek forces over and over and over again, using their own terrain, using surprise and sheer audacity. They couldn't see that in 3 years, just 3 years, they would retake Jerusalem. They couldn't see that they would cleanse the temple, tear down the defiled altar, build a new one, and rededicate the house of God. They couldn't see any of that. They just stayed faithful in the dark.

And that's what Hanukkah celebrates. The word itself means "dedication"—rededication of the temple after it had been defiled. The moment when faithfulness in silence finally gave way to the restoration that was to come. The moment when it turned out that God hadn't been absent after all. Just hidden. Just a little quiet. Not because they had all the answers. They just refused to quit.

Your Own 168 BC Crisis

So what do we learn from that? Well, as cheesy as it may sound, some of you are going through your own 168 BC crisis. In all seriousness, this is why the word is given to us. This is why the stories are passed down. Because they're examples. Because even though we're not fighting the same battle that they are, we're fighting the same types.

Greek soldiers—haven't seen a lot of them around. But maybe some other circumstances that feel like occupation. How about the diagnosis that took over your life and changed every single plan you had? That reset everything for your entire family. How about the relationship, or even the divorce, that burned down everything you spent years building? A betrayal by someone you trusted most, and you still can't make full sense of it. A loss that knocked the wind out of you, and you're still just trying to figure out how to breathe.

A child who walked away from the faith and maybe doesn't return your calls as often as you'd like. A job that disappeared and took your entire purpose and identity with it. Or that depression—that depression that descended and won't lift no matter how hard you try. And you've prayed. And you've begged. And you've bargained. And you've cried out in the middle of the night when no one else could hear. And you feel like heaven is still silent.

Sitting in Silence

I sat with someone once, and they told me, "I've been praying every day for 2 years, and I'll be honest, I don't think God hears me anymore."

And it's always nice when you can give someone an answer. But that doesn't happen all the time. So I didn't have an answer for him. All I could do was sit there with him. Because sometimes there's not an answer. Sometimes all you can do is be present with someone in silence and refuse to offer explanations that actually don't explain anything away.

You've done all the things that you're supposed to do. You've read the books. You've gone to the conferences. You've asked for prayer. And still you're not moving in the direction that you think. I'm not going to try to give you a cheap answer for what the Bible doesn't give you a cheap answer on, but does testify about.

I will tell you this. If you find yourself in a season of silence, it's not abandonment. God has not abandoned you. The God who hid his face from Israel in 168 BC was the same God who showed up in the dedication of the temple just 3 years later. The God who let Antiochus desecrate the altar was the same God who raised up deliverers nobody saw coming. The hiddenness wasn't the end of the story. It was the setup for the deliverance that no one was expecting to come.

Job's Refusal

You know who else demanded answers from a hidden God? The book of Job. That's why the book's in there, by the way. It's to help address and process when we go into these types of

seasons and it doesn't make sense anymore.

Job lost everything. He lost his wealth. He lost his kids. He lost his health. And his friends showed up to explain: "You're a sinner, of course. You just got to learn something. Just repent and it'll all go away."

Job refused. He wanted God himself to show up and explain himself. "You're going to have to do better than that."

And after 37 chapters, God finally speaks up. And he doesn't explain. And he doesn't give any reasons to Job.

He says, "Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?" There's a great nuance in that chapter that David has a great teaching on. I'm sure he'd love to share with you one day. After 37 chapters, we have four chapters of God saying, "I'm God and you're not. I hold things together that you can't even fathom." And it sounds harsh, but here's what I've come to believe. God's answer to Job isn't as much data and information for help and process as it is just his presence. Can't you see that I'm here the whole time? Still God. Never stopped. Job never gets the explanation. Never. He gets God. He gets face-to-face. And his response? "My ears have heard you, but now my eyes have seen you." The Maccabees didn't get an explanation, either. They got deliverance. Unexpected, unexplainable, undeniable deliverance. Sometimes you don't get the why. You just get the who. Showing up when you least expected it.

When God Hides Himself

So, what do we do when this amazingly complex and nuanced, very big and amazing, awesome God does hide himself? You stay. The Maccabees didn't abandon the faith when heaven went silent. They didn't decide, "Well, God's not talking, so he must not exist." They stayed. You stay at the table when you can't feel his presence. You keep praying even when it feels like the words hit the ceiling and fall back down on you. You keep showing up to worship even when everyone else seems to be having an experience that you're not really having. And then you act.

Acting on What You Know Is True

Matthias, he didn't wait for a prophetic word. He acted on what he already knew to be true. Please don't kill people. The lesson from the story. But he acted. He stood for truth and he didn't have to consider it. He didn't have to wait for God. He acted. This—no. We're not going to let our identities be erased. We're going to stand with our faith and we'll die faithful. He

knew the Torah. He knew the covenant. He knew who God was even if he couldn't see what God was doing. Sometimes faithfulness and hiddenness means acting on old revelation when new revelation isn't coming. You know what's true. Act on it.

Remember What He Has Done

And then you remember. When you can't see what God is doing clearly, remember what he has done. That's why Jews still tell the Exodus story. That's why it is such a prevalent thing in the Bible. It's the memorial. It's why we focus so much on communion, especially at Passover. Do this in remembrance of me. Because when you're in darkness, you need the memories of light. What has God done in your past? What prayers has God answered? You ever notice the older I get, I realize God answers all of the prayers in some way, shape, or form, and it's just sometimes I miss it. Sometimes I keep praying for what God's already answered because it happened in such an underwhelm. It just snuck in. Oh, wait, I've had this. God loves to work that way, and it is something that is irritating because I like the big—see? No, it's a very subtle, still, small voice. What impossible situations has God brought you through? Cling to that. Write that down. Tell yourself again, I have a resume with this God. And you wait. Not passive waiting, but active, expectant, stubborn waiting.

Waiting in the Darkness

Habakkuk 2:3 says, "Though it linger, wait for it. It will certainly come and will not delay." It's speaking about God's revelation. It's speaking about God coming out from the hiddenness. That's the context of the chapter. It's God's revelation coming. Wait for it. The deliverance came for the Maccabees. It took 3 years of hiding in caves. But the waiting wasn't wasted because it was preparation.

What I love about Hanukkah, and same thing about Christmas if I can be honest, it falls in the darkest part of the year, December. The days get shorter, longest nights. The sun sets at 5:00 p.m. My kids are livid they can't play with their friends after dark. Too dark, come on. Lots of darkness. And right there in the darkest season, we light candles. We light it up. I put out lights on my house. I light it up. Looks like the Griswolds, I don't care. Because I want my kids to learn a principle that we find from the Bible. It's that even in the darkest times, we're going to light stubbornly, even if it's obnoxious. Stubbornly light up the house in the darkest part of the year. Heck yeah. First night, you light one, two the second night, three, building the light until the darkness is pushed back by all eight candles. That's the whole theology of Hanukkah in one image. Darkness is real, the hiddenness is real, but the light refuses to die. It's resilient.

And so, over the next few weeks, we're going to keep walking this road together into Hanukkah and then right after Hanukkah, we're going to talk about what happens when God isn't just hidden, but also slow. When the rescue takes longer than you think you can survive. When the empire moves fast and God moves slower than you would think he should, and you're caught in the middle. And then we're going to arrive, of course, during Hanukkah itself. And we're going to explore something that changes everything about the story. And that's centuries after the Maccabees, another Jewish teacher stood up at the same temple during the same festival and made a claim that rewrote the whole story. But that's for later.

Hidden and Savior

So today, in a world like this one, we sit in the darkness. And we stay faithful, no matter what. [Isaiah 45:15](#) doesn't just say, "You are a God who hides." It says, "You are a God who hides yourself, oh God of Israel, the savior." Hidden and savior. Both are true at the same time. The Maccabees couldn't see deliverance coming, but it came. Antiochus thought he could erase Israel from history. He couldn't. The temple was defiled, but it was rededicated. The lights went out. They were relit. And so, if you're in darkness today, if God feels hidden, and the empire, the world, feels unstoppable, and you don't know how much longer you can really hold on, you're in good company with the authors of the Bible. And they're cheering you on with their stories. Remember who your God is. The people who gave us Hanukkah felt the same way. And they made it through. Not because they had answers, but because they had faithfulness. And so, during this time, stay faithful. Because the story of Hanukkah is the light is coming. And it's going to be unstoppable. Amen.

Please stand as we conclude with worship. And I don't know what you're going through today or where you're at. But if you need prayer for any reason or anything, could be something related to the message or could be something completely different. Doesn't matter to our prayer team. We'll have prayer partners at each side of the stage. Come up for prayer during this time. If you carried something into today that maybe it's time to leave here and not pick back up. Guys, we have a symbolic altar here. You can come down, kneel down, and just put it there. And you can stand up and leave it.

Prayer and Worship

Avinu Malkeinu, our Father, our King. Father, we thank you for this opportunity to dive into your word and also learn about the stories that are outside of your word, the stories of old, the stories of the time of silence in the Bible. Father, I thank you for the opportunity to learn more

about who you are and how great you are and how you work. And that the Holy Spirit within us would give us not only patience and endurance, but also understanding that even though we may not know why, the light is still coming. Give us strength during this season with the power of your love and peace. In Yeshua's name we pray. Arise, oh Lord, lift up your eyes. Don't forget I'm helpless. You lead me to waters and pastures so green. Pour out your oil and choose goodness and mercy for me. No, I will not be in want. No, I will not be in want. You're with me. I will not fear. You comfort me. My love, you're perfect. You cast out all my fear. In you, through you, to you are all things. So arise, oh Lord. Lift up your eyes. Don't forget we're helpless.

We thank you, Father. The word says that in our weakness you are made strong. That you perfect everything that concerns us for your glory, our good, and the salvation of many. We thank you, Father, that your word says that you will never leave us nor forsake us. That you are faithful to the thousands of generations for those who love you. We thank you, Father, that all things work together for good for those who love you and are called according to your purposes. And we bless you for your faithfulness and for your perfect timing in all things. And we thank you, Father, that even when we can't see, when we don't perceive that you are still moving according to your will and your way and your good intention for your kingdom work in the earth, in our lives.

Closing Prayer and Blessing

So thank you, good and faithful Father. We bless you and we honor you. May we continue to allow you to be magnified in our lives. May we not share your glory with anything. May we guard it. And thank you that you are not a man that you should lie nor the son of man that you should change your mind. Have you not said it? Will you not do it? Thank you, Father. You are a faithful God. And what you say really, really, really does happen. We thank you, Abba, in Yeshua's name. Sing the Shema with me.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. Blessed is the name of his glorious kingdom for all eternity. And may the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you. May the Lord lift up his countenance toward you and give you his peace in the name of our Sar Shalom, our prince of peace, Yeshua Hamashiach, we pray. Amen and amen. Shabbat Shalom, family.

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