

In the Messiah's Hands

John 10:22-30 (NIV)

²² Then came the Festival of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³ and Jesus was in the temple courts walking in Solomon's Colonnade. ²⁴ The Jews who were there gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." ²⁵ Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The works I do in my Father's name testify about me, ²⁶ but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. ²⁷ My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸ I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹ My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. ³⁰ I and the Father are one."

If you were going to pick someone to defeat your enemies, what would that person look like? Would they be a muscle-bound, cunning military strategist, someone who holds no quarter for enemies? Would they be a diplomat, soft-spoken, refraining from physical provocation? The Jewish people had a very specific idea of what their rescuer would look like. They thought about him every year at the Festival of Dedication.

The Festival of Dedication - some obscure Old Testament religious celebration, right? Actually, you are probably familiar with the Festival of Dedication if I use its alternate name: Hanukkah. Maybe to you Hanukkah is nothing more than a Jewish version of Christmas celebrating it through eight crazy nights instead of one day. Maybe all you know about Hanukkah is that Adam Sandler wrote a song about it listing a number of Jewish celebrities.

The history of Hanukkah is a high point in Jewish heritage. It's not in the Bible, but it is history, in a time when the fractured Greek kingdom of Alexander the Great was still fighting with each other. Around 200 B.C. the Seleucids waged war against the Ptolemies which resulted in the Seleucids taking over the Egyptian kingdom including Judea. At first everything was fine. The Jews were allowed to continue worshiping as they always had. But in 168 B.C. the Seleucid ruler Antiochus IV Epiphanes marched into the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem, built an altar to Zeus, and sacrificed pigs there. It was a massacre of the Jewish people and an utter desecration of the most important building for the Jewish faith. What's worse is that the Jews were forbidden from continuing in their worship, forbidden from offering sacrifices according to God's Word, even forbidden to circumcise their males.

With their commanded worship of God taken away, the Jews went to war against the Seleucids. A man named Judas Maccabaeus led them into battle. The Jews didn't outright fight against their foreign oppressors; they used guerilla warfare, hit and run tactics. Judas the Hammer, as he was called, would strike fast and then disappear. This guerilla warfare continued for three and a half years until the Maccabee family and the Jewish people had finally driven the Seleucids out.

Now they could remove the altar to Zeus and cleanse the Temple from the pig sacrifices. It was time to rededicate the Temple, which meant lighting the menorah - a candle holder with seven branches for seven candles representing God as light for his people. The problem was that they only had enough sacred oil to keep it lit for one day. Yet, the menorah burned for eight days until they were able to produce more of the oil to be used in the Temple as they began to restore it and resume sacrificing to God. Thus, the eight days of Hanukkah, or of the Festival of Dedication.

To the Jews, their rescuer, their Savior, their Messiah, looked like Judas "the Hammer" Maccabaeus. Their rescuer was a fighter, a tactician, a strong man capable of leading the Jewish people to kick foreigners out. This Jesus that they saw before them was nothing special. He wasn't a warrior. He wasn't a tough guy. He's the one who said if someone hits you, you should turn the other cheek and let them hit that side as well. He said blessed are the meek. This Jesus was a far cry from being a Judas Maccabaeus. The Jews who were there to celebrate Hanukkah were encircling him like a pack of dogs. In that hostile environment they said, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly." (verse 24)

In this world, there are so many pictures of Jesus. We are probably most familiar with the picture of a white, Caucasian, blue-eyed, brown-haired Jesus. I don't know what Jesus looked like, but I do know that he was Jewish, Middle Eastern. If we are going for accuracy, that's probably what Jesus looked like, not the typical portraits we see. But that picture of the white, Caucasian, blue-eyed, brown-haired Jesus, why do we picture Jesus this way? Why did the artists picture Jesus this way? It's because it makes him more relatable. Those who look like me are like me. Those who don't look like me aren't like me. Put the image of Jesus in my hands, and I am going to make him look like me or at least what I think he should look like for me.

We keep making up our own ideas of how to make Jesus more like us. In one particular movie they go around the table saying a meal time prayer, but they address it to the Jesus they like best – whether it be baby Jesus, bearded Jesus, and many other various description of Jesus that are just plain blasphemous. Doing this to Jesus is like describing a blind date to someone by picturing them as you want them to look like, not what they actually look like.

When the image of Jesus is in our hands, our portrayal of him goes beyond physical appearance. Just like the Jews who were picturing a Judas Maccabaeus type rescuer, so we picture Jesus as thinking like we do. I can't tell you the number of times when people have argued with me theological points on the basis of "I don't think Jesus would..." or "I think Jesus would..." When the image of our Rescuer, our Messiah, is in our own hands, we conjure a picture of Jesus that is distorted, that is false. Instead of letting Jesus inform us of himself, we create a new picture of what we want Jesus to be, and, because we want him to be that way, he must be that way. We've created the white, Caucasian, blue-eyed, brown-haired Jesus that never existed. We have created a false god by putting his image in our hands.

Jesus takes the idea of him as their Messiah out of their hands, out of their ideas, by answering their question about whether or not he was the Messiah saying, "I did tell you, but you do not believe...You do not believe because you are not my sheep." (verses 25, 26) "You think you know me, but you have created this other image of me. If it were up to you, I would look like Judas the Hammer." When the image of Jesus is in our hands, when we decide who Jesus is, then we do not believe Jesus is who he says he is, then we are not his sheep, his followers. By putting Jesus in our own hands we put ourselves on a path to eternal death, to perish apart from God.

Let's take our picture of Jesus out of our hands and put it in his. This is the picture Jesus gives us: "The works I do in my Father's name testify about me." (verse 25) Putting Jesus' image in his hands, we know who he is by seeing what he did. He opened the eyes of blind men. He drove demons out of people. Those who were sick for decades were instantly healed by Jesus. People who could not walk now did. Jesus even foretold his greatest work yet to come that he as the Good Shepherd would lay down his life for his sheep only to take it up again. No one would take his life from him, but he would lay it down of his own accord and take it back up again. With the people he raised from the dead, Jesus' works previewed his own death and resurrection.

Jesus' works clearly testify that he is the Messiah, even though he wasn't coming suited up with armor with a sword and a shield at his side ready to wage a physical war. Instead, he was waging a spiritual war. Right here Jesus is telling the Jews and us the outcome of him being the Messiah. "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one will snatch them out of my hand. My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. I and the Father are one." (verses 27-30)

Here's your Messiah. He's not the guerilla warfare tactician. No, he is so much more than other earthly rescuers. He is God. He and the Father are one. They are inseparable and yet separate persons – the mystery of the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. He is the strongest entity in existence. No one is bigger than him. No one is more powerful than him. This is who Jesus is. This is who the Messiah is as presented from the Messiah's hands.

We are in the Messiah's hands, and no one can snatch us out of his hands. Forget putting Jesus in our own hands, forget making him look like us and act like us. We need this Messiah. We need this true man and true God who guarantees that we cannot be snatched out of his hands, that we cannot be ripped from our God or the eternal life that he promises us. When we listen to Jesus tell us about himself, then we learn that no one, not a single entity in all of existence, not a single event, not a single person, not a single being, not even the devil himself along with all his evil angels, can ever snatch us from out of his hands. Instead, he gives us eternal life. He promises that even in death we will live, live with him and the Father because no one can snatch us out of his hands. We are in the Good Shepherd's hands and that means eternal life with him.

Listen to the voice of the Good Shepherd. Take your ideas of Jesus out of your hands away from who you want him to be, who you think is more relatable. Instead, put it in the Good Shepherd's hands. These are the hands that cannot be penetrated by anyone. These are the hands that hold on to us to eternal life so that we will never perish. These are the hands of God the Father. No one can snatch us away from the Father. No one can snatch us away from the Good Shepherd. This is our Messiah. Amen.