

Opener: “When Holy Things Get Vandalized”

The Temple was desecrated under Antiochus IV, who ruled the Seleucid Empire... And small band led by Judas Maccabaeus rose from Israel’s hill country. Using high-ridge strongholds and hill-forts to out-manuever imperial armies in the passes, they reclaimed Jerusalem, cleansed the sanctuary, and launched the Feast of Dedication—Hanukkah.

Centuries later, Jesus walked in Solomon’s Portico during that very feast (John 10:22-30, NASB), offering a new perspective: secure belonging: “My sheep hear My voice... no one will snatch them out of My hand.”

This week, we trace that story...

When holiness is pressured, God forms a dedicated people who carry light through the dark (Dan 8:13-14; John 10:27-29).

Introduction: The Desecration (Dan 8:9–14)

Big Idea: Under pressure, God forms a dedicated people who carry light through the dark.

When a holy space is violated—when worship is mocked or the altar is treated like scrap—our souls ache. Do we rage? Hide?

While Christians have long faced adversity, the feeling of living in a land hostile to our beliefs has become a common topic for discussion in Western countries, including the United States. For many, the cultural landscape has shifted, leading to concerns about diminishing religious freedom, anti-Christian bias, and rising social and political challenges.

Read Daniel 8:9-14:

- **The "Little Horn"** is a future king of fierce countenance who will arise from the Hellenistic kingdoms that succeeded Alexander the Great. He will grow great and powerful, but not by his own power.
- **Opposition to God and His People:** The horn will magnify itself against God and His people, the "holy people" or "saints". He will cast down the truth and desecrate the temple by stopping the daily sacrifices.
- **The Sanctuary** represents the temple and God's people, who will be trampled underfoot.
- **The Time Frame:** A holy one asks for the duration of this desolation and rebellion, receiving the answer, "Unto two thousand and three hundred days; then shall the sanctuary be cleansed". This period is often interpreted as referring to Antiochus IV's desecration of the Second Temple in the 2nd century BCE (Dan 8:13–14).¹

The Hill-Country Advantage

- Why the Judean highlands matter: narrow approaches, steep wadis, and defensible hill-forts along ridge routes and passes.
- Small, mobile forces can strike, retreat uphill, and hold chokepoints.

Illustration: Simple map slide with ridge route highlighted and a few hill-fort markers (no deep dive into Shephelah this week).

The Maccabean Revolt: Guerrilla Resolve → Temple Cleansed

Remember Alexander? After his death, his empire was divided among his generals. The Seleucid Empire was established by Seleucus I Nicator, who ruled from 323 to 64 B.C. The story of the Maccabees and the Maccabean Revolt takes place in the mid-2nd century BCE, from 167 to 164 BCE. This was when the Jewish rebels, led by Judas Maccabeus, fought against the Seleucid Empire to reclaim and rededicate the Temple in Jerusalem. The conflict marked a pivotal moment for religious freedom, the recapture of the Temple, and the beginning of the Hasmonean Dynasty...

Our story takes place in the Hill Country of Judea

- Where there are narrow approaches, steep wadis, and defensible hill-forts along ridge routes and passes.
- Here, small mobile forces can strike, retreat uphill, and hold chokepoints.

Picture a quiet town in the Judean highlands: stone houses, narrow lanes, terraced hills. The ridge road runs like a spine above steep valleys. News travels fast along a ridge—faster than the soldiers winding through the wadis below.

Into the town of **Modein** marches an imperial envoy, carrying the king's order: "Offer sacrifice to the gods. Prove your loyalty." Priests tense. Fathers glance at sons. One family steps forward: a priest named **Mattathias** and his boys; the official smiles with confidence. "Just a pinch of incense," he says. "It keeps the peace."

Mattathias looks at the altar that the empire has hauled in. He sees not "peace," but covenant betrayal. And when another Israelite hurries forward to make it quick and be done with it, Mattathias moves first, tearing down the blasphemous rite and declaring in a voice that carries over stone walls, "Whoever is zealous for the Law and supports the covenant—follow me!" The moment cracks like thunder. The family runs for the hills.

They don't run to hide; they run to **choose their ground**. The Judean highlands are a teacher; up here, the roads pinch tight, the slopes tire heavy infantry, and a handful of determined fighters can hold a pass that a thousand men can't widen. Word spreads along the ridge route to Mattathias's third son, **Judas Maccabaeus**, nicknamed "the hammer."

Judas studies the land the way a shepherd studies the weather. He knows where a patrol will hesitate, which turn in the path steals an army's breath, which hill-fort can see two valleys at once. He gathers farmers with slings, priests with spears, and boys who learned to run the terraces like goats. They don't look like an army. They don't have polished armor. But they have something the empires forgot: **home terrain and holy resolve**.

Down on the coastal plain, the Seleucid commanders scoff. "Break them in the open. March up and be done." But the hills refuse to cooperate. At **Beth-horon**—a steep ascent where the road narrows—Judas lets the enemy stretch out thin like a rope over a thorn bush. Then he pulls. The front wavers, the middle can't see, and the rear can't help. Rocks fly, horns sound, and suddenly the empire learns what the ridges can do.

Night after night, the pattern repeats. **Emmaus, Beth-horon**... And at the approaches to the ridge, the big army keeps trying to swing a hammer where there's no room for the swing. Judas fights like a ghost: appearing, striking, vanishing. He wastes nothing, not strength, not daylight. He teaches his men to move with the land: to take the high ground that looks down three ways; to block a pass with faith and stubbornness; to let fear run downhill while courage climbs.

But this is not just tactics. It is **worship under pressure**. The Temple in Jerusalem has been **defiled**, the altar polluted, the lamps dark. Every skirmish in the hills is a prayer with a blade in it: "How long, O Lord? Cleanse Your house." They fight not to carve out a warlord's fiefdom, but to restore the place where God said His name would dwell.

The Seleucid court sends a stronger force... The standards gleam, armor rattles, drums roll. This empire believes in mass. But Judas believes in moments. He picks the battlefield where mass becomes a burden. He pulls the enemy into a funnel, holds them there with grit, and then strikes the point that binds the whole body. When the line buckles, he doesn't chase glory, he protects the path home. This is **guerrilla resolve**: win the ground that matters, not the headlines that don't.

And then, like a door finally giving way under steady pressure, the route to Jerusalem opens. The city is quiet in the winter sun. Inside the city, in the courtyard, the air smells wrong. The altar stones are stained and broken. The sanctuary looks like a heart left untended. The men who have fought in dust and blood stand still now, bareheaded. Some weep. Even the bravest look small in that great courtyard.

Judas does not linger in outrage. He organizes a **repair**. The polluted stones are taken down—not thrown away in anger but carried aside like the remains of something that was once holy. Priests cleanse the courts. New altar stones are cut. The lampstand is set straight. Oil is prepared. Songs are remembered. And the people bruised by war turn to **worship-work**, the best work they know.

They choose the day, **the 25th of Kislev**, and dedicate the altar again. Not a minute of it is casual; this is reverence at its fullest. They light the lamps. Imagine... The light catches on new stone, glinting on bronze, warming faces cracked by the winter wind... And the crowd exhales a breath it has been holding for years. The songs rise, not triumphal so much as **thankful**: a sound of home being home again.

They celebrate for **eight days**. Not to be excessive, but to **remember**. The joy mirrors the festival they were not free to keep while soldiers paced these courts. The boys who learned to run the terraces of the hillsides now learn the lines of psalms. The men who learned to fight in shadow, now learn to stand in the light. Mothers who kept faith alive around kitchen embers now see those embers answered by lamps in the temple.

And they named it: **The Feast of Dedication—Hanukkah**. Not the feast of victory, though there were victories. Not the feast of independence, though independence flickered. Dedication: because the work was not to make Israel famous, but to make Israel **faithful** again. To say with altar and lamp and song, “This house is Yours, O Lord—and we are too.”

What did they win? More than a battle. They won the **space** to worship rightly, the **memory** to teach their children, the **courage** to be God’s people when the world wanted them to be anything else. And they won it not by becoming what they hated, but by becoming who they were: covenant people who know their land and their God.

History rolls on. Empires change uniforms. New banners fly over old stones. But every winter, as the days grow short, the people take out the lamps and tell the story: how a priest in Modein refused a neat, quiet compromise; how his sons learned the strength of narrow roads and high places; how God gave back a cleansed altar to a people who would not surrender their worship.

And Centuries continue, another winter comes. A teacher walks under the long colonnade east of the Temple Mount—**Solomon’s Portico**. It is the **Feast of Dedication** again. Questions press Him the way armies once pressed the passes: “If You are the Christ, tell us plainly.” He speaks not like a warlord but like a **shepherd**: “My sheep hear My voice... and no one will snatch them out of My hand.” The lamps burn, and the light falls on a face that will soon walk a harder road than Beth-horon ever offered. He has come to cleanse a deeper sanctuary... The hearts of His people, and to dedicate a living temple that no empire can defile.

And that is the story: **guerrilla resolve** born of covenant love; a **Temple cleansed** by faithful hands; a **feast of dedication** that teaches us to keep our worship bright. In dark times, light the lamps. In pressured times, remember who—and Whose—you are.

Jesus at Hanukkah (John 10:22–30)

A small, outgunned band who leveraged hill-forts and ridge routes to cleanse God’s house, to Hanukkah, the Feast of Dedication, to Jesus standing in Solomon’s Portico at that very feast! (John 10:22–30)

- Setting: “It was winter... the Feast of Dedication.” Jesus in Solomon’s Portico.
- Crowd’s demand for a political messiah; Jesus’ answer: Shepherd-Messiah who gives eternal life and unstealable belonging.

When holiness is pressured, God forms a dedicated people who carry light through the dark (Dan 8:13-14; John 10:27-29).

Friends’ Holiness: A Practice of Dedication

Holiness begins with consecration—simple, obedient availability to the Light, not with grasping control. ¹⁰

The Maccabees faced coercion; Jesus faced the demands of the crowd. Both choose conviction without panic. ¹¹

Holiness practice for the week:

1. Home Rededication (1 minute daily): Pick a place (desk, stove, doorway). Place a small stone, plaque, or something as a remembrance and pray, “Here I am—Yours.”

Prayer:

“Holy Father, through Jesus our Shepherd, You have made us Your own. Cleanse what has been defiled; calm what is anxious; consecrate us again. Make us steadfast like hill-forts and generous like lamps. Here we are—Yours. Amen.”

Bibliography & Resources

Daniel’s vision of desecration and promised cleansing frames the Antiochus crisis; see Dan 8:9–14 (NASB).

Cyndi Parker, *Listen to the Land*, lessons on Judean hill country and festival Jerusalem (student notes/transcripts). Parker consistently ties tactics to terrain (ridge routes, chokepoints, line-of-sight).

For hill-fort logic in Judea (e.g., Beth-zur/Beth-horon), see Parker, *Listen to the Land* (Judean Highlands & Historical Jerusalem); cf. 2 Chr 11:5–12 (fortified cities in Judah, NASB).

1 Maccabees 2–4 narrates Mattathias at Modein, Judas’s tactics near Beth-horon and Emmaus, and the victories opening the way to Jerusalem.

1 Maccabees 4:36–59; *2 Maccabees* 10:1–8 describe dismantling the polluted altar, rebuilding, and establishing the eight-day Feast of Dedication (Hanukkah).

For how Judean highland terrain (ridge routes, passes, hill-forts) shapes tactics, see Parker, Cyndi. *Listen to the Land: Student Guide*. BS600 “Listen to the Land (Biblical Geography).” Vancouver, WA: BiblicalTraining.org, 2021. Also, cf. the course video lectures and the student guide. <https://www.biblicaltraining.org/learn/institute/bs600-listen-to-the-land-biblical-geography>.

On the Feast of Dedication in Jesus’ ministry, see John 10:22–30 (NASB); for theological framing, N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), and John MacArthur, *John 1–11* (Chicago: Moody, 2006).

N. T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), esp. discussions of Jesus redefining messiahship around the shepherding presence of Israel’s God.

John MacArthur, *The MacArthur New Testament Commentary: John 1–11* (Chicago: Moody, 2006), comments on John 10:22–30 (Feast of Dedication; assurance).

Paul N. Anderson, *The Riddles of the Fourth Gospel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), on Johannine festival settings and relational “knowing.”

Carole Dale Spencer, *Holiness: The Soul of Quakerism* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2007); Thomas R. Kelly, *A Testament of Devotion* (New York: Harper, 1941), “Holy Obedience.”

For accessible systems language to help the congregation imagine courageous, non-reactive presence, see Brené Brown, *Daring Greatly* (New York: Gotham, 2012).