

THE CHAIN OF BLESSING - HOSEA 2:21,22

THANKSGIVING, 2005

This will be an unusual Holiday calendar this year. It will not only be unusual because Christmas Day and New Year's day both fall on Sundays. It will also be unusual because the Jewish Feast of Hannakah will also begin on our Christmas Day and conclude on New Year day. Hanakkah occurs at a different time each year during the month of December. It's pretty rare that it falls directly on our celebration of Christmas. Hanakkah is the Hebrew word meaning "dedication". The modern Jewish celebration commemorates the rededication of the temple in 165 B.C. after it had been desecrated by the godless Antiochus Epiphanes. But the feast of Hanakkah also remains a continuing testimony to the miraculous provision of God for His people during the O.T. days.

Shortly after Alexander the Great had conquered the Palestinian region making it a part of the Greek Empire, he died a premature death at the age of 33 by consumption. Since there was no one of his caliber left to rule, the Greek Empire was divided up into 4 parts - The area around Greece, Egypt and south, Asia Minor and the Palestine region including Syria and Israel. For a century and a half, various generals ruled over Israel, and life continued in a comparatively normal fashion. But then, in 171 B.C., a man named Antiochus IV came to the throne, and things took a drastic turn for the worse. Changing his name to Antiochus Epiphanes, he claimed to be god incarnate. Daniel had actually prophesied concerning this man hundreds of years before showing him

to be a type of the Antichrist who would come in the last days, but the Jewish people were not ready for the atrocities that they would suffer. Antiochus ransacked the city of Jerusalem, killing thousands of innocent Jewish people. But the most painful experience for many occurred when he went into the temple area, and dedicated the Brazen Altar to Zeus by offering a pig upon it. The holy sanctuary of the Lord had been defiled and polluted. Then one by one, Antiochus brought Jewish priests and leaders before the temple. If they ate of the pork and honored Zeus, they would live. But if they refused to recognize the chief god of the Greek pantheon, they would be put to death. Many faithful Jews suffered martyrdom during these days, and their courage is documented in Jewish writings. 90 year old Eleazar who was beaten to death at the foot of the altar. Hannah and her 7 sons who all gave eloquent testimonies before they were put to death.

But the best known leader of the resistance was a man named Mattathias Maccabeas who along with his 5 sons would bring a ray of sunshine to the nation of Israel during this time of darkest storm. Mattathias was an aged priest who was brought before the altar and ordered to eat of the pork that was forbidden by his Jewish law. It was as if the magnitude of the atrocity suddenly overcame Mattathias as he sprang upon the Greek officer in charge and grabbed the sword out of his hand. At once, his 5 sons, John, Simon, Judah, Eleazar and Jonathan, sprang from the crowd to his side. Together they were able to overcome the Greek soldiers, and they escaped into the mountains of the Negev where David had fled from Saul a thousand years before. Word of their

courageous if seemingly foolish act spread quickly, and soon devout Jewish men began to go to the Negev to join their motley army. A revolt had begun.

As the strength of their numbers grew, Judah Maccabbeas began to form these men into a fighting machine. And like David of old, he began to lead his revolutionary band in strategic raids against the weakening Greek armies that were overextended in the vast empire. Whenever the Greeks tried to retaliate, the Maccabean army would lose itself in the desolate Negev region. Finally, after 3 years of frustrating and wearing down the demoralized Greek armies, the Jewish rebels had grown in strength and power to the point where they felt confident to meet the enemy in open battle. Stunning victories at Beth-Horon and Emmaus sent the Greeks scrambling in retreat and opened the road to Jerusalem.

The first order of business for liberated Jerusalem was the cleansing of the Temple area. All remnants of tribute to Zeus were removed and the Brazen Altar and Temple area were purified. And here is where the miracle of God's provision is found that is commemorated even today in the 8 day feast of Hannakah. According to the Jewish Talmud, the Maccabees could only find one small cruse of unpolluted oil to be burned in the lampstand in the holy place. It would only be enough oil for one day, and it would take another week for a new supply of oil to be consecrated according to the dictates of the law. “We must wait for the consecrated oil to be produced for the lampstand is not to go out once it is lit”, was the suggestion made. “But no, we must not wait. God's temple has laid in disgrace and ruins for such a long time. Who knows

when the Greek army might return? We must light the lampstand now and let God provide for us”, was the final decision.

So the lampstand was lit. And miraculously, the lampstand burned on long after the oil supply should have been used up. For 8 full days the lampstand burned until a new supply of oil was consecrated. So on the 25th of Kislev, 165 B.C., 3 years to the day from the defilement of the temple, the house of the Lord was purified and rededicated. And the pagan authorities learned their lesson. For while the Jewish people never found permanent independence until that day in April, 1948, the Greeks and then the Romans had a new respect and honor for the temple of the Lord following this time. King Herod would even initiate a mass renovation of the temple. And ironically, the next person to cleanse the temple was the Lord Jesus Christ himself as he rebuked the materialistic abuses of the Jewish priests and leaders. But even to this day, Jewish people everywhere remember the miraculous way in which God provided for his people. And in their celebration, they are reminding themselves that God is a God who delights in meeting the needs of his people.

The Apostle James wrote, "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows." James 1:17. God is a providing God. In fact, one of the names of God found in the O.T. is Jehovah-Jireh - the God who provides. Now sometimes God chooses to give us those gifts in an unusual, miraculous way. These are the times that stick in our memory. These are the times that we

commemorate. But more often, God chooses to give us these good gifts through a very common, normal routine. Our temptation is to take God's gifts in this way for granted. But we must resist this temptation, for God's gifts in the routine of life are just as much from His hand as are God's gifts in the miraculous way. As we are basking in the glow of our Thanksgiving celebrations, I would like to direct your attention to the normal chain of God's blessing. And as we look at this blessing chain from God, we also need to remind ourselves of the responsibilities that we have in responding to God's blessing.

In Hosea 2:21,22, we read these words: In these 2 verses, we find the normal chain of blessing that God gives to his people. For the Hebrew word Jezreel means the people of God. And the people of God have always recognized their need for God's provision. One of the distinctions between the people of God and those who do not believe in God is found in the fact that the people of God recognize their dependence upon God to provide for their daily needs. The people of God know God to be a loving, heavenly Father who delights in meeting the needs of his children. So, one of the petitions of the people of God to their heavenly Father is "give us this day our daily bread".

Now all of the world in Hosea's day, and most of the world even today literally rely upon God every single day for their daily provisions. As Americans, we do as well, but it is far easier for us to forget that we do. As someone once said, "It is much harder to really ask God for our daily bread in faith when our freezer is filled with 20 loaves." God has blessed us with an

abundance that literally staggers the minds of most people in the world. So, as Americans, we face the perhaps greater difficulty of living by faith, trusting in the reality of God's daily provision in the midst of abundance.

But for most of God's people throughout the world, the prayer for daily bread is a very literal and urgent one. About a decade ago now, Sandy and I went the Central African Republic on a 3 week short-term missions trip. We visited a missions hospital in Ippy and I was the Bible teacher for a week long missions conference for a hundred or so missionaries. In our journey over there, we met many, many Christians. In fact, the percentage of Christians in the C.A.R. probably approaches the percentage of Christians in the U.S. Some of the believers that we met were godly saints, having walked with the Lord for decades. Others were new Christians, just beginning to cut their teeth in the word of God. We didn't meet one national Christian who had a refrigerator. So when these Christians prayed to God for their daily bread, that is exactly what they meant. They needed to go out into their garden and get some Mantiok, or go out to a fruit tree and pick a Papaya, or go into the town market and buy some meat for today. And then tomorrow, they needed to do it all, all over again. And most of the people in the world, percentage-wise, live just about like that.

Now in this passage in Hosea, God gives his normal chain the blessing in which he answers the cry of his people to give us this day our daily bread. As God's people cry out for their daily needs to be met, the plants respond to the cry by giving grain and grapes. But in order for the plants to grow, they must

cry out to the earth for a place to drive down their roots for stability and nourishment. And the earth responds by giving to the plants what is needed for them to grow and bear fruit. But then in order for the earth to be able to give to the plants what they need, the earth has the cry out to the skies for sunshine and rain. So God declared to Hosea his prophet, I will respond to the skies, and they will respond to the earth; and the earth will respond to the grain, the new wine and oil, and they will respond to the people of God. Here is the chain of blessing from God the provider in answer to the plea of his people to give us this day our daily bread - from the sky to the earth to the plants to his people.

Now I would like to make 2 observations concerning this chain of blessing this morning. These observations are not profound. In fact, they are very obvious. But they are important for us to remember, for without them, the chain of blessing is broken.

1. Every link in the chain can only give what it has first been given by God. This perhaps is an obvious observation. But it is one which must be made because one of the great temptations that we all face is to neglect the giver of every good gift and not give to Him the credit to which He is due.

Who made the sun with the ability to shine its life giving rays towards the Earth? The Sun is an amazing celestial body. With a diameter of 865,000 miles, the sun's diameter is more than 100 times that of our earth's. Whizzing through space at a speed of 43,000 miles per hour (or 12 miles a second), the sun maintains almost the exact temperature of 11,000 degrees Fahrenheit. And this is critical. For a significant variation in temperature either way would

either burn up or freeze the earth. But it is also critically important how much of the sun's energy we receive. For the earth receives only 1 two-billionth of the sun's energy. In fact, all of the planets together receive less than 1 two-hundred millionths of the sun's energy. The rest is dispersed out into space. But what we receive from this speeding ball of fire that is just the right size and temperature and just the right distance from the earth is exactly what is needed to sustain life here on this earth. Who made this sun with such delicate balance? Did the sun create itself? Could the sun have evolved from nothing by chance? The Bible says that only a fool claims that there is no God.

But the sun needs just the right recipient for its potentially life-giving rays. For many other planets receive the sun's energy, but they don't respond like the earth. But this sphere that we live on, suspended in space, with a surface that is about 70% water and 30% land, surrounded by an atmosphere made up of 78% nitrogen and 21% oxygen with 1% assorted other gases, this home that we call earth is the perfect recipient for the sun's energy. The rich soil drinks in the sun's rays, mixing it with moisture and air and other chemicals and nutrients to provide a fertile birthplace for fruit producing plants. Who made the earth so perfect to respond to the sun's warmth? Did the earth bless itself with such richness?

But then the seed must germinate, and the plant must grow. And as that green sprout pokes its head up through the ground, another miracle begins to take place. Through a process that we call photosynthesis, the plant begins to take energy from the light of the sun and from water and from carbon dioxide

in the air to make food for itself. Did the plant give itself this ability? Who created the plant to be able to manufacture its own food?

Finally, we come along. We pick the fruit off the tree and eat it. By its nutrition our lives are sustained. But even though we enjoy the fruit of the tree, we didn't create its life. Oh, we might have cultivated the ground and fertilized the soil and done everything in our power to provide an atmosphere conducive to life. But it was sun that responded to the earth that responded to the plant that produced the fruit that sustains the life of every human being on this earth. And at every link of the chain, God's hand of blessing is found.

2. Every link in the chain is only blessed as it passes on the blessing that it has received from God. This observation likewise is quite obvious, but it is also important to note.

Can you imagine what would happen if the sun suddenly decided that it would not give forth its life-giving rays anymore? Rather it would hoard all of that energy for itself, turning all of that power inwardly. The sun wouldn't last long, would it? It would either burn up or explode as all of that massive power built up inside of it. In trying to hoard its energy, the sun would lose all of it. For the sun is only able to use its power as it serves as a channel of blessing for others.

Do you know what happens to the earth when it receives and receives of the sun's energy and doesn't give any blessing back in produce? We flew over one of the largest areas in the world where this has taken place when we returned from the Central Africa Republic. It is called the Sahara Desert. And

it is frightening to look down out of the airplane and see miles and miles of barren wasteland - completely useless to anybody. Right below the Sahara Desert there is fertile farmland. But the Sahara is barren and fruitless. The nation of Israel is proving that this doesn't have to be the case. Through wise conservation, desert lands are being recaptured and turned into fruit producing orchards. I understand that the land of Israel is the only place in the world where the desert is receding. And as the land gives back the blessings received in fruit and produce, the soil is enriched into greater fruitfulness.

You see, the law of nature is that blessing only continues to flow as it is passed on to others.

There are two bodies of water in the land of Israel. In some ways, they are very similar. They are both in the same nation. And they both contain the very same water. But that is where the similarity ends. For in reality, these 2 seas are as different as night and day, as death and life. The Southern of the 2 is actually called the dead sea. It is named well because there is not one living creature in it. With a salt concentration 9 times that of the Ocean, there aren't even any birds around it. No boats dot it rocky beaches. Even though roughly 5 million tons of fresh water are poured into it every day, the Dead Sea contains 24% solid matter - mostly salt along with magnesium chloride, potassium chloride, calcium chloride and magnesium bromide. When you swim in the Dead Sea, you come out feeling like you have baby oil all over your body.

In contrast, some 80 miles north of the Dead Sea is the Sea of Galilee. And what a difference there is found in this body of water. Teeming with life,

this Sea even today provides the livelihood for scores of fishermen. When one visits the Sea of Galilee, he sees the beaches dotted with fishing boats. Jesus spent a good portion of his ministry here, because the people were here. Catching the fish for food and profit, farming the fertile land around the Sea, building their towns and cities by the water's edge, this formed a major hub of activity during the days of Christ and it remains so even to this day.

If the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea have the very same water, what accounts for the stark difference between the two? The answer is very simple, isn't it? The Sea of Galilee receives its life giving water from the Hula River and then passes on the blessing down the Jordan River. The Dead Sea, on the other hand, is the lowest spot on the face of the earth - some 1286 feet below Sea level. It receives all of that life-giving water, but it doesn't give any away. It just takes and takes and takes. And in its hoarding, it turns life-giving water into death.

SPIRITUAL APPLICATION:

Now I needn't take a great deal of time for personal application because the principle of God as it applies to our personal lives is quite obvious, isn't it?

We have been given many blessings. The world tells us that happiness and fulfillment is found in gathering as many blessings as we can in a lifetime. The one with the most toys wins at the end of life. It sounds reasonable. But the world's message runs in direct contradiction to the law of nature that God has set forth as a principle of life. The chain of blessing only continues as the author of blessing is recognized and as the flow of blessing continues. When

either the author of blessing is denied or the flow of blessing is stopped, the blessing becomes a curse, life becomes death. And we are seeing this process happening all around us today. In a nation of unbelievable affluence and prosperity, we are seeing more unhappiness and discontentment and unfulfilled lives than ever before in the history of man. We must recognize the chain of blessing that God has ordained. When he generously bestows blessings on us, we must be channels to pass those blessings on to others. We don't do that simply to get more blessings - that would be selfishly motivated. But we do that because we didn't do anything to deserve the blessings in the first place. The blessings came from God. So as we have freely received, we freely give of ourselves to others.