

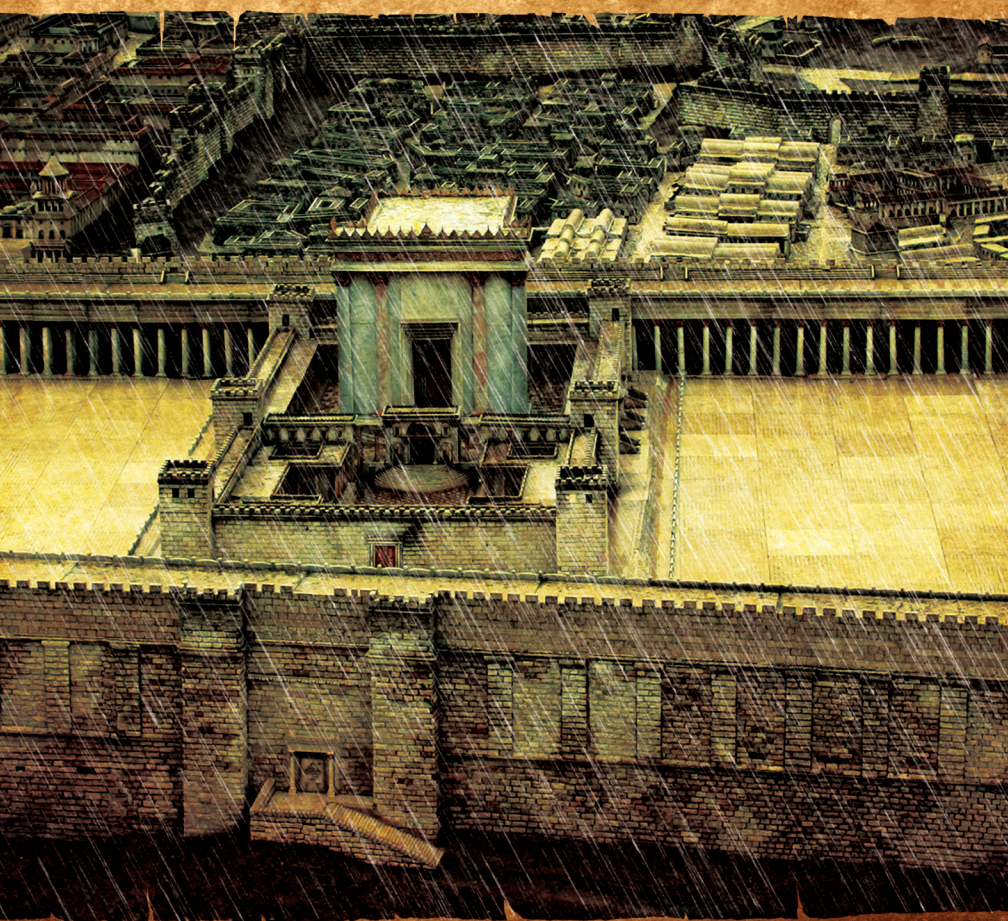
HORIZONS

FOR ADULTS

DECEMBER 6, 2020

“AND IT WAS WINTER”

BY LAIRD BALDWIN



We don't normally associate the seasons with controversy in Jesus' life and ministry. We probably read right through most seasonal references in Scripture without noticing. Yet the Bible never wastes words; therefore, we should assume that comments about times and seasons are there for a reason. Thus John's observation was important when he wrote, "And it was at Jerusalem the feast of the dedication, and it was winter. And Jesus walked in the temple in Solomon's porch" (John 10:22, 23).

Winter in Israel is the rainy season. Song of Solomon 2:11 tells us, "For, lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone." Perhaps Jesus walked in Solomon's porch on account of the rain. Tradition says Solomon's porch was so named because it was the last remnant of the original temple. And, because the portico was a covered colonnade, it made for a decent shelter against the winter rains.

The Jews most likely knew they could find Jesus there in winter. It was the Feast of Dedication, a time Jesus would not miss. Although not one of the feasts of the Old Testament, this feast was joyously celebrated to commemorate the purification and rededication of the temple by Judas Maccabee on the twenty-fifth day of Kislev (roughly our December), three years after the temple had been defiled by Antiochus Epiphanes. The eight-day festival, also known as the Festival of Lights, was marked by the illumination of homes and by family reunions. Surely Jesus would have been present on such a happy occasion.

The Jews had waited months for this opportunity. They were still smarting from the thrashing Jesus gave them during the Feast of Tabernacles, when they had claimed spiritual superiority in response to His healing of a blind man. They had dared Jesus to call them blind, but He did much more than that. He called them thieves and robbers, strangers and mere hirelings. The Jews could mount no reply to such a rebuke at that time, so they waited for another opportunity; and it had arrived. It was winter, and they had found their prey.

JESUS ANSWERS THE JEWS

Scripture indicates that the Jews surrounded Jesus as soon as they saw Him and began to pepper Him with questions (John 10:24). "How long dost thou make us to doubt?" The text suggests

the Jews felt they had been left hanging in suspense about Jesus. They felt as if somehow they had been deprived of sufficient evidence to believe that Jesus was the Messiah, and now they waited breathlessly for more information.

Exactly the opposite is true. “I *told* you,” Jesus replied, “and ye believed not.” If they had been willing to accept all the evidence Jesus provided, they would never have raised their question.

So why didn’t Jesus simply tell the Jews, “I Am Christ”? Why appear to beat around the bush when He so plainly told the Samaritan woman (John 4:25, 26)? The Bible doesn’t answer the question directly, but we might infer one possible solution from how Jesus answered Pilate’s question, “Are You the King of the Jews?” Had Jesus simply replied yes, His answer might have provoked a total misunderstanding that He posed a political threat to Pilate and even to the Roman government. Instead Jesus explained, “My kingdom is not of this world: if my kingdom were of this world, then would my servants fight, that I should not be delivered to the Jews: but now is my kingdom not from hence” (John 18:36).

On the other hand, the critical issue that divided the Jews from Jesus was not political, but spiritual: unbelief. Throughout His ministry Jesus appeared to emphasize believing in Him on the basis of evidence rather than on words alone. Jesus’ preaching was buttressed by substantial works, the combination of which provided a credible basis for believing in Him. Therefore, what we have in Jesus’ response is this same two-pronged defense of His rightful claim as Messiah.

JESUS TOLD THEM

Any cursory reading of John’s Gospel justifies Jesus’ claim. He told the Jews repeatedly and plainly of His identity, as can be seen passages such as John 5:17. “My Father worketh hitherto, and I work.” That the Jews sought to kill Jesus for this statement reveals they had some inkling of what He meant, “that God was his Father, making himself equal with God” (v. 18).

Or consider how in John 6 Jesus insisted several times that He alone is the “bread of life” (vv. 35, 41, 48, 51–58) sent from Heaven by the will of His Father. Not only had Jesus told the Jews His identity in so many ways, He marveled that they could not accept plain speech (John 8:43). That is, the Jews could not bear to listen to Him. The root of the problem, as it always is,

was not the lack of information, but the lack of faith. Likewise, if people today deny that Jesus declared His deity, their claim flies against the plain statements Jesus gave repeatedly. We know He is the Christ because He told us.

JESUS PROVED HIS CLAIM

The challenge Jesus faced on that winter day hearkened back to an earlier debate, one that arose from the healing of the blind man, recorded in John 9. On that occasion, the Pharisees were obsessed with interrogating the blind man to determine the origin of his sight. Their motivation was to disprove Jesus as the Messiah, and that, in turn, gave rise to a fascinating debate between the Pharisees and the previously blind man. The Pharisees disparaged Jesus repeatedly, saying, that they knew He was a sinner and did not know where He came from. The healed man replied, “Why herein is a marvellous thing, that ye know not from whence he is, yet he hath opened mine eyes. . . . If this man were not of God, he could do nothing” (John 9:24–33).

That is exactly the point. Jesus repeatedly did such works to demonstrate His deity, His origin, and His rightful claim to Messiah. Yet the Jews willfully rejected every bit of the evidence they saw with their own eyes. They rebelled at Jesus raising a paralyzed man and forgiving his sins. They were enraged at the raising of Lazarus and sought to put Lazarus to death again. They were ever consumed with looking for a way out, a way to avoid believing in Jesus and acknowledging Him to be the Christ.

Yet there Jesus stood, in Solomon’s porch on a winter day, spontaneously defending Himself against the crowd. Had the Jews been willing to accept the accumulated evidence, they could have taken comfort in Jesus’ remarkable promise to follow—a promise made to all who become His sheep by saving faith. “My sheep hear my voice, and I know them, and they follow me: and I give unto them eternal life; and they shall never perish, neither shall any man pluck them out of my hand” (John 10:27, 28).

Are you one of His sheep? ■

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