

Lesson 22: The Maccabean Resistance (1 Maccabees 1-7; 2 Maccabees 4-15)

Mattathias and the Rise of a Jewish Resistance

Things could not have looked worse for the Jewish people. The Temple is desecrated like never before, Jerusalem is under foreign power, the faithful are killed specifically for their fidelity to the Law, and there is no longer any semblance of religious freedom for the Jews in Judah. Antiochus IV is humiliated and taking his rage out on Jerusalem and the Jewish people.¹ As part of Antiochus' reign of terror, he orders the surrounding towns, knowingly populated by Jews, to erect altars on which pigs are to be sacrificed to the pagan gods, thereby forcing the people to renounce their faith in Yahweh.² It is Antiochus' goal to leave no village left untouched by the influence of the Greek culture and to suppress the Jewish faith. All, it might appear, is lost for the Israelites. Antiochus, however, is unknowingly setting himself against not just a people and culture, but God Himself. He might have political and military strength, but he lacks divine assistance and the blessing from Yahweh. The total dominance of the Greeks over the Jewish people will not be as easy as Antiochus believes.

As the attack on the Jews moves out from Jerusalem to neighboring towns and territories, the Greek armies force their rule throughout the Judean countryside. The military advance, however, meets unexpected resistance in the small village of Modein about twenty miles south of Jerusalem. A man, Mattathias, and his five strong sons stand in defiance of the order to offer pagan sacrifice and to build an altar to the pagan god Zeus.³ Mattathias is known within the town as a man of integrity and the people instinctively look to him for counsel as to how to handle the call for pagan worship and is called forward to be the first to offer the sacrifice. Should he submit to Antiochus' order then the rest of the town would surely follow his example. Mattathias, however, is a righteous man and refuses to apostatize. No doubt he is inspired by the sacrifice of those who he knows have been killed for their fidelity to the Covenant.⁴ Mattathias responds with strong conviction to the Greek officer calling for pagan sacrifice, "Even if all the nations that live under the rule of the king obey him, and have chosen to do his commandments, departing each one from the religion of his fathers, yet I and my sons and my brothers will live by the covenant of our fathers. Far be it from us to desert the law and the ordinances. We will not obey the king's words by turning aside from our religion to the right hand or to the left."⁵ Clearly, Mattathias will not be intimidated into turning from his faith even if some of his fellow citizens probably think he can easily justify for the sake of peace making an offering in the name of the pagan authority. Mattathias, however, proves himself to be a man of integrity and leadership and refuses to renounce his faith.

¹ Since it was the Romans that had defeated Antiochus he should have been vengeful toward them not the Jewish people, but he knew he was stronger than the Jews and so he went after the weaker target. This demonstrates just how enraged and irrational Antiochus had become.

² 1 Maccabees 1:41-54

³ 1 Maccabees 2:1-6

⁴ The Church Father Tertullian said is well: "the blood of the martyrs is the seedbed of the Church."

⁵ 1 Maccabees 2:19-23

Yet, even with this strong show of faith and leadership a man from the town steps forward to offer pagan sacrifice. We can only imagine the tension in the air after Mattathias' act of defiance and a fellow townsman stepping forward as a sign of peaceful acceptance of Antiochus' order for the good of the town. Mattathias, however, will have none of this infidelity. "When Mattathias saw it, he burned with zeal and his heart was stirred. He gave vent to righteous anger; he ran and killed him upon the altar. At the same time he killed the king's officer who was forcing them to sacrifice, and he tore down the altar."⁶ This may seem like a savage and disproportionate action, but his action is simply in defense of the faith of the Jewish people and their fidelity to the Lord.⁷ The action also establishes his leadership among the people.⁸ In response to Mattathias' action the remaining villagers attack the rest of the Greek patrol which had been sent to Modein, killing them in the name of the Lord. Now the people of Modein and the followers of Mattathias are rebels and can expect the full force of the Greek military power to come after them and destroy them. Consequently, they go into hiding in the surrounding hills. They are now a hunted people without a town for refuge.⁹

Mattathias' action is a good lesson in faith. Like Moses before him, he literally takes on an empire by himself. He acts in faith and righteousness without concern about the consequences and ventures everything for the heavenly kingdom. One of the favorite tactics of the devil is to have us worry about the consequences. It is easy, even reasonable to think about the consequences of our decisions, but as long as the devil can tempt us with distraction on what we think will be the results of our fidelity rather than simply being faithful, he goes a long way toward securing ourselves for him and not for the Lord. God, however, simply wants us to be faithful to Him and let Him worry about the consequences of our actions. He is more capable of bring about good things from our fidelity to Him than we are capable of calculating our actions according to an unknown future, and so it is the work of the spiritual life to submit our desire to control the future to a simple fidelity to the life of faith.

⁶ 1 Maccabees 2:24-25

⁷ The Catholic Church upholds religious freedom as one of the most fundamental of all human rights. Vatican II proclaimed that "the human person has a right to religious freedom. Freedom of this kind means that all should be immune from coercion on the part of individuals, social groups and every human power so that, within due limits, nobody is forced to act against his convictions nor is anyone to be restrained from acting in accordance with his convictions in religious matters in private or in public, alone or in associations with others. The Council further declares that the right to religious freedom is based on the very dignity of the human person as known through the revealed word of God and by reason itself. This right of the human person to religious freedom must be given such recognition in the constitutional order of society as will make it a civil right" (*Dignitatis humanae*, #2).

⁸ While not explicit, this action echoes back to the priest Phinehas (Numbers 25:6-18) who killed an Israelite and a Midianite woman for their infidelity. From this same event God moves the Israelites to attack the Midianites and defeat them. The memory of Phinehas is part of Jewish tradition (cf. Psalm 106:28-31; Sirach 45:23) and is possibly part of the context within which Mattathias' action is understood. This aggressive action is of a different kind than the passive acceptance of martyrdom seen earlier. In this context it seems passive resistance is not enough and the defense of their faith calls for a resort to armed conflict. While aggressive, the military action to follow by Mattathias and his followers is defensive in nature and is an early example of a just war. [See appendix "Violence in the Old Testament" regarding the "just war theory." (quote from GS 79 and CCC 2308-2309)]

⁹ 1 Maccabees 2:27-28

The first response to the Jewish uprising is an attack by the Greek forces on many of those in hiding.¹⁰ The attack was strategically timed for the Sabbath, and so the Jews who were on the defense would not fight out of respect for the law to keep holy the Sabbath and so were slaughtered, around one thousand men, women and children in total. When Mattathias hears of the slaughter he proclaims that the Sabbath is made for man, not man for the Sabbath, and so it is right to defend oneself even on the Sabbath. He says, “Let us fight against every man who comes to attack us one the Sabbath day; let us not all die as our brethren died in their hiding places.”¹¹ So we see that defending life is of the highest order and, under specific conditions, can be the justification for an armed defense against an unjust aggressor.¹² And with this other Jews join the ranks led by Mattathias to build an army to defend themselves from the Greek oppression.¹³

Mattathias is sure to emphasize the law over life itself and exhorts the people to “show zeal for the law, and give your lives for the covenant of our fathers.”¹⁴ He makes this point by then bringing in the memory of Abraham, Joseph, David and other figures from the Old Testament that would have evoked strong images of faith and fidelity.¹⁵ This should be a reminder to us today to frequently meditate on the story of salvation history and the men and women of the Church, including the lives of the saints.

“The Hammer”

Just before his death Mattathias names his second son, Simon, as the head of the family and Judas Maccabeus, another son, as the commander of the resistance.¹⁶ In these important decisions Mattathias proves himself to be a wise man for Judas will be a successful military leader. Much of the story now centers on the work of Judas, hence these two books receive the name Maccabees (which literally means “the hammer” – Judas’ nickname for his military strength).

By 165 BC it becomes clear to the Seleucid (Greek) authorities that the rebellion of the Maccabees must be taken seriously. Antiochus sends his military commander Apollonius to lead the military response against the rebels. Apollonius probably thought this would be an easy victory but rather than easily beating the Jewish uprising, he and his forces are soundly defeated and Apollonius is killed.¹⁷ Judas, himself, kills Apollonius and takes the Greek commander’s sword as his own.

¹⁰ 1 Maccabees 2:29-38

¹¹ 1 Maccabees 2:41

¹² See appendix “Violence in the Old Testament”. [footnote on justified violence]

¹³ A neighboring tribe of faithful Jews, the Hasideans, join Mattathias. They join in the struggle against the Greek powers but keep their own identity. The Hasideans will later become the Pharisees.

¹⁴ 1 Maccabees 2:50

¹⁵ 1 Maccabees 2:51-61; Here a recurring theme of the Old Testament is restated, “Be not afraid.” Fear is the work of the devil, so it is part of spiritual progress to foster a spirit of courage in the Lord. It can be safely inferred that without knowledge of the story it is very difficult, if not impossible, to grow bold in faith.

¹⁶ 1 Maccabees 2:65-70

¹⁷ 1 Maccabees 3:10-12

Immediately after this defeat the Seleucids send a force double the size of that of Apollonius' army toward Jerusalem by a different route (along the coast and then inland) commanded by General Seron. While the Maccabees are severely outnumbered, they have God on their side. This is a great event that harkens back to David and Goliath:

“When he approached the ascent of Bethhoron, Judas went out to meet him with a small company. But when they saw the army coming to meet them, they said to Judas, ‘How can we, few as we are, fight against so great and strong a multitude? And we are faint, for we have eaten nothing today.’ Judas replied, ‘It is easy for many to be hemmed in by few, for in the sight of Heaven there is no difference between saving by many or by few. It is not on the size of the army that victory in battle depends, but strength comes from Heaven. They come against us in great pride and lawlessness to destroy us and our wives and our children, and to despoil us; but we fight for our lives and our laws. He himself will crush them before us; as for you, do not be afraid of them.’ When he finished speaking, he rushed suddenly against Seron and his army, and they were crushed before him.”¹⁸

Judas leads his army in an ambush of Seron and his forces about ten miles northwest of Jerusalem, killing the Greek commander and routing the stronger army. Judas is clear about the message: victory comes from God, not from human power. With their second victory over the Greek forces it is becoming increasingly clear that the Maccabees are a force that can no longer be taken lightly. If it was not the case before, it is now obvious that the Maccabees are a serious problem for the Greek empire.

Antiochus Increases His Attacks

Antiochus himself gathers all the forces of his kingdom and empties his treasury to purchase more mercenaries for another battle. In order to secure more money for his now bankrupt kingdom Antiochus prepares a large-scaled military expedition into Persia (modern day Iran) to collect more wealth from the neighboring territory.¹⁹ The king places one of his high-ranking officials, Lysias, in charge of the kingdom while Antiochus leads the forces into Persia. Lysias was left with one command – put down the Jewish rebellion in the Holy Land once and for all and punish the Jewish people by selling them into slavery.²⁰

Lysias chooses two generals, Ptolemy and Nicanor, to organize 47,000 Seleucid soldiers and put down the rebellion. So confident are they of their certain victory (Judas has only 6,000 untrained men) that they bring along slave traders to take the Jewish people into slavery and turn a huge profit.²¹ Again, while Lysias is better armed, Judas and his men have the Lord on their side. The Maccabees acknowledge their dependence on God by first turning to prayer with a day of fasting and penance.²² Judas is so bold that he

¹⁸ 1 Maccabees 3:16-23; This speech from Judas reminds one of the that famous speech from Shakespeare's King Henry V as he leads his men into battle on the feast of Saint Crispian, putting love of principle above love of self. It is an ancient theme, but one that should still inspire us today.

¹⁹ 1 Maccabees 3:26-31

²⁰ 1 Maccabees 2:35-36

²¹ 1 Maccabees 3:38; 2 Maccabees 8:1-12

²² 1 Maccabees 3:44, 46-53

practically challenges Yahweh to show His strength by throwing the priestly garments on the ground and demands that God to do something so that the garments might not be worthless. Judas' boldness is one of trust in God, not in himself. He has learned the lesson of the Old Testament well – trust in the Lord, meditate on the Law, and make prayer a priority.

Part of Lysias' army (6,000 men) is ordered to separate themselves from the full army to encamp for a surprise attack on the Maccabees. Judas learns of the plan from some of the local people and immediately initiates a counterattack against the full Seleucid camp that is now weakened by the absence of the 6,000 soldiers. The Maccabees are still outnumbered roughly 14 to 1 and yet they have trust in their God. Judas reminds the people of how Yahweh had saved Moses and that God is always faithful to the covenant.²³ With renewed courage the Maccabees go out and defeat the Greek army again. What was just guerrilla warfare now escalates into a full-scaled battle between two sizable armies. This is the third successive victory for Judas and his men against a much larger and better-equipped military, and the greedy slave dealers go home empty handed.

Jerusalem Reclaimed, the Temple is Cleansed and the First Hanukkah is Celebrated

Now Lysias, the regent of Antiochus, is in deep trouble since he failed at the one thing he was ordered to achieve, so the next year (164 BC) he takes an army of 65,000 soldiers and mercenaries to finish off the Maccabees once and for all.²⁴ By this time Judas has rallied 10,000 men to go into battle against Lysias and again, beginning with prayer, defeats the Greek forces.²⁵ Judas is now 4-0 against the Greek army, all David and Goliath type victories, and this time Judas brings his men straight to Jerusalem to regain the Temple.²⁶ When Judas enters the Temple he chooses “blameless priests” to clean the sanctuary and remove all the defiled things that had been brought into the Temple.²⁷ It is worth noting that what is of concern for Judas and the Maccabees is the Temple, the place of worship, and not wealth or political power. They have been purified by prayer and fasting and Yahweh delivers Jerusalem and the Temple to them. This is Judas' fifth and what will be his last victory.

Ironically, or perhaps providentially, the Temple is restored and rededicated on December 25, 164 BC, exactly three years to the day after the first pagan sacrifice had profaned the Temple. Now the sacrifices commanded by the Law and Moses are resumed for the Jewish people. Judas orders a celebration of the Temple's rededication, which is what becomes the eight-day festival of Hanukkah.²⁸ Hanukkah is a Hebrew word meaning “dedication.” Lamps were lit to symbolize the light of the Law, and tradition holds that at the rededication of the Temple there was only enough oil for one

²³ 1 Maccabees 4:6-11

²⁴ 1 Maccabees 4:26-29; 2 Maccabees 10:1-8

²⁵ 1 Maccabees 4:30-34

²⁶ 1 Maccabees 4:36-41

²⁷ This is an anticipation of Matthew 21:12-13 when Jesus cleanses the Temple.

²⁸ 1 Maccabees 4:56-59

day but the lamps stayed lit for eight days, hence the celebration becomes an eight-day celebration, which is why it is sometimes called the “Festival of Lights.”²⁹

Antiochus Repents

Throughout these events Antiochus is in Persia pursuing wealth from a city famed for its abundance of silver and gold. He tries to take and plunder the city but the people rise up and drive him and his army into retreat. Once again he flees a city humiliated and filled with rage. When he hears of the defeat of his army in Jerusalem he turns his rage again to the Jews and marches to Jerusalem without stopping.³⁰ This time things turn out very differently.

On his way to Jerusalem Antiochus is “seized with a pain in his bowels for which there was no relief and with sharp internal tortures...and so it came about that he fell out of his chariot as it was rushing along, and the fall was so hard as to torture every limb of his body. Thus he who had just been thinking that he could command the waves of the sea, in his superhuman arrogance, and imagining that he could weigh the high mountains in a balance, was brought down to earth and carried in a litter, making the power of God manifest to all...Then it was, broken in spirit, he began to lose much of his arrogance and to come to his senses under the scourge of God, for he was tortured with pain very moment...And he uttered these words: ‘It is right to be subject to God, and no mortal should think that he is equal to God.’” With this, Antiochus declares Jerusalem to be a free city and the Jews equal to the citizens of Athens, “and the holy sanctuary, which he had formerly plundered, he would adorn with the finest offerings.” On top of all of this, Antiochus himself just before he dies becomes a Jew.³¹

This is an extraordinary turn of events. The leader of the oppressing forces against the Jews himself becomes a Jew and restores all the freedom and wealth he had spent a lifetime taking away from the Jewish people. It is an end to his life that no person could have accomplished, only God Himself. And so Antiochus becomes a witness to all the nations of the power of Yahweh, and the Jewish people are re-established in the Promised Land with access to the Temple for worship according to the Law. Through the faith of the Maccabees and their willingness to venture everything, including their own lives, God blesses them with a divine favor beyond their imagination. The question that remains for us today is, “What am I willing to venture for the sake of the Kingdom?”

Prayers for the Dead

In this unique stage in salvation history leading up to the New Testament, the books of Maccabees teach us something about purgatory, the importance of praying for the dead and of the communion of saints. Maccabees reinforce the idea and value of martyrdom and the belief in life after death,³² but this is developed further with the first instances of

²⁹ Interestingly, it is on the feast of Hanukkah that Jesus tells the Jews that he is the Son of God (cf. John 10:22-39).

³⁰ 2 Maccabees 9:1-4

³¹ 2 Maccabees 9:5-17; Early Church writers interpreted Antiochus’ suffering and death as a direct result of his desecration of the Temple, the worst of sins. Even though the grace of conversion comes to him at the end of his life, he must still offer expiation for his grave sin.

³² Cf. 2 Maccabees 7

prayer for the dead. After the battles of the Maccabees, Judas orders his soldiers to pray for their fallen comrades and to atone for their sins.³³ The sacred writer, in fact, does not only affirm the resurrection of the dead, but clearly supports the belief that it is possible for a person to be cleansed of sin after death (purgatory), and that the prayers of the faithful can help bring that purification about. The teaching of the Catholic Church, therefore, that the faithful can pray for those who have gone before us but died in venial sin is not something new. This belief, in fact, predates the Christian community. “From the beginning the Church has honored the memory of the dead and offered prayers in suffrage for them, above all the Eucharistic sacrifice, so that, thus purified, they may attain the beatific vision of God.”³⁴

Connected to this idea is the belief in the communion of saints. None of us lives in isolation. This is true when it comes to our economic life, our professional life, our family life, and so on, but it is especially true relative to our spiritual life. We receive our faith from the generations that precede us, and we are nourished in our faith from the community around us, which includes the community of saints who have already attained the glorious reward of Christ’s victory over sin. In this sense it is not only fitting, but proper that we offer our prayers and sacrifices for the good of others, including those who have gone before us “marked with the sign of peace.”³⁵ As the Catechism says, “In full consciousness of this communion of the whole Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, the Church in its pilgrim members, from the very earliest days of the Christian religion, has honored with great respect the memory of the dead; and ‘because it is a holy and a wholesome thought to pray for the dead that they may be loosed from their sins’ she offers her suffrages for them. Our prayer for them is capable not only of helping them, but also of making their intercession for us effective.”³⁶ As the sacred text from Maccabees proves, this belief is not simply an invention of the medieval church, but it is a doctrine that was present among the Jewish people before the birth of Christ.

³³ 2 Maccabees 12:39-45

³⁴ CCC, #1932; see also CCC, ##1371, 1479

³⁵ From the canon of the Mass.

³⁶ CCC, #958