

Introduction

The family is finally here, surrounded with food at the table. The people are coming from near and far for the holidays: from the heights of Hermon to the barren Beersheba, from the Jordan's Jericho to the sacred Shechem, from the majestic Megiddo to the mighty Mediterranean. The sun's bright orange rays along the horizon cast long, chilly shadows from the Jordan River in the east, up the wilderness of Judah, and into the majestic Old City of Jerusalem as darkness begins to fall. The busy holiday season is upon us. It's Passover. A Hebrew psalm, called the Great Hallel, echoes antiphonally through the temple between the Levitical church musicians, who cantor the verses, and the congregation or choir, who sings the refrain over and over again, יְיָ לְעוֹלָם לְעוֹלָם, "for his love endures forever." Now the wonderful music of the temple echoes down the stone-clad streets of Jerusalem into Jewish homes, as it's recited in table prayers. As the family gathers together, friends and relatives all chime in around the room, "Let me tell you a story!" "Let me tell you a story!" Of all the stories shared, one takes precedence:

Give Thanks for the Story of the Lord's Love

A moment of silence captures everyone's attention at the table. "Let me tell you a story about our people Israel. *This story goes back to the beginning of time.* Every nation has their own gods. But our God is the God of gods and the Lord of lords. He made the heavens. He made all the stars we can see from Mt. Zion once it gets dark and the torches get extinguished. He created the moon that shines so clear on a night like this. He warms our life with the sun. He spread out the earth from the watery mass of matter. He created the soaring Mt. Hermon. He created the mighty Mediterranean that stretches beyond the eye can see. He etched out the Sea of Galilee and the Jordan River that meanders its way down to the salty Dead Sea. He sends the morning dew and the winter rains so our crops grow. *Then this story goes to the worst part of our nation's history.* Many, many years ago, we were trapped far away from home in Egypt. Our patriarch Joseph had saved their country during a severe famine, but Egypt completely forgot. They turned us into slaves and treated us like objects only good for churning out bricks. We were in bondage, trapped in despair, with no way we could save ourselves. *Then this story goes to the greatest act of salvation our Lord has accomplished.* He sent Moses, one of our own raised in Pharaoh's court, to strike down all Egypt's firstborn, from the poor maidservant to Pharaoh himself. So he set us free! But no sooner did we leave than Pharaoh changed his mind. Look one way, and it's death in the Red Sea. Look another way, and it's death in Pharaoh's army. But the Lord stretched forth his mighty hand and his outstretched arm to divide the Red Sea in two! He brought us through on dry ground and shook Pharaoh off from breathing down our necks when the waves came crashing down! We were free at last! *Then this story goes to the greatest act of preservation our Lord has accomplished.* On the other side of the Red Sea lay a vast wilderness. No food, no water, no idea where we were going. Then we all turned into unthankful, ungrateful people. What we have isn't good enough! We got nothing! Throughout forty years the Lord guided us with water from the rock, manna and quail, and Joshua's army that fended off attacks. How in the world did we survive so many years with so little? Only because of the Lord! *Then the story culminates in the greatest gift our Lord has given his people.* He struck down two kings, Sihon and Og, on the east side of the Jordan to give us a

home at last! Forty years of living in tents, now we have an inheritance, the inheritance he promised our father Abraham long ago! Let me recap it all for you – our Lord’s creation, deliverance, and salvation – but in reverse order. He ***remembered us in our low estate***. He ***freed us from our enemies***. He ***gives food to every creature***. This story is why we are sitting here today. How else can you respond to this story of the Lord’s love? ***‘Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good!’*** Say it again and again, ***‘His love endures forever.’***”

A moment of silence captures everyone’s attention in church. “Let me tell you a story about our people today. *This story goes back to our Lord’s work as Creator*. He made the majestic Rocky Mountains and the rolling Appalachians. He carved the mighty Mississippi out of the land. He formed our world, from the Australian Outback to the African savanna, from northern European castles to southern Asian jungles. He warms our beaches with the sun’s rays and lightens downtown restaurants with the moonlight. He knit your body together in your mother’s womb. He regulates your heartbeat, he causes your lungs to fill with oxygen, he allows your stomach to digest your turkey. *Then this story goes to the worst part of our history*. Many, many years ago, when we were all born into this world, we were born selfish, looking out for how we could survive in this cut-throat world. We were slaves to this sinful world that did not turn out as our Creator God intended. We were in bondage, trapped in despair, with no way we could save ourselves. *Then this story goes to the greatest act of salvation our Lord has accomplished*. He sent another Moses, his Son Jesus, the great Passover lamb who died in our place to deliver us from the shackles of sin and the dungeon of despair. He set us free! When it looked like there was no way out, he sent this Moses to transform a watery grave of certain death into a dry path to life. *Then this story goes to the greatest act of preservation our Lord has accomplished*. A vast wilderness of life lay before us, and we have not known where to go. We have not always been sure we would make ends meet. Sometimes we’ve turned into unthankful, ungrateful people. What we have isn’t good enough! We got nothing! But he continues to send bread our way. He continues to give us water to drink. He’s fended off attacks from foreign armies and personal foes. How in the world did we survive so many years with so little? Only because of the Lord! *Then the story culminates in the greatest gift our Lord has given his people*. At the end of our earthly pilgrimage, the Promised Land is waiting, an inheritance he has promised to all believers! Let me recap it all for you – our Lord’s creation, deliverance, and salvation – but in reverse order. He ***remembered us in our low estate***. He ***freed us from our enemies***. He ***gives food to every creature***. This story is why we are sitting here today. How else can you respond to this story of the Lord’s love? ***‘Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good!’*** Say it again and again, ***‘His love endures forever.’***”

Conclusion

The family is finally here, surrounded with food at the table. The people are coming from near and far for the holidays: from dorm rooms in State College to professorships in Lexington, from homes in Milwaukee to homes in Bay City, from tiny Stockbridge to big Ann Arbor. The sun’s bright orange rays along the horizon cast long, chilly shadows down Pauline Blvd. as darkness begins to fall. The busy holiday season is upon us. It’s Thanksgiving. A Hebrew psalm, the Great Hallel, echoes antiphonally through church in a modern piano setting, as the pastor cantors the verses and the congregation sings the refrain over and over again, “His love is everlasting,” “His love is everlasting.” Now the wonderful music of church echoes down the asphalt-clad streets of Ann Arbor into American homes, as it’s recited in table prayers, “O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his mercy endures forever.”

Surrounded with food at the table, what stories will you tell this Thanksgiving? Will it be the story of an unthankful, ungrateful person who can't get beyond the busy holiday season, so overwhelmed with the present she's forgotten about the past? Or will it be the story of a thankful, grateful person who remembers that the Lord's mighty acts throughout history are the basis for thanksgiving today? Look hard enough, and his acts of creation, deliverance, and salvation are found in everyone's stories. What's the point of our trip throughout the ages tonight? Give thanks for the story of the Lord's love! This story is why we are sitting here today. How else can you respond to this story of the Lord's love? ***Give thanks to the LORD, for he is good!*** Say it again and again, "***His love endures forever.***" Amen.