

“God is love,
and those who abide in love abide in God,
and God abides in them.”

(1 John 4:16b, NRSV)

“I give you a new commandment,
that you love one another.

Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.

By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,
if you have love for one another.”

(John 13:34-35, NRSV)

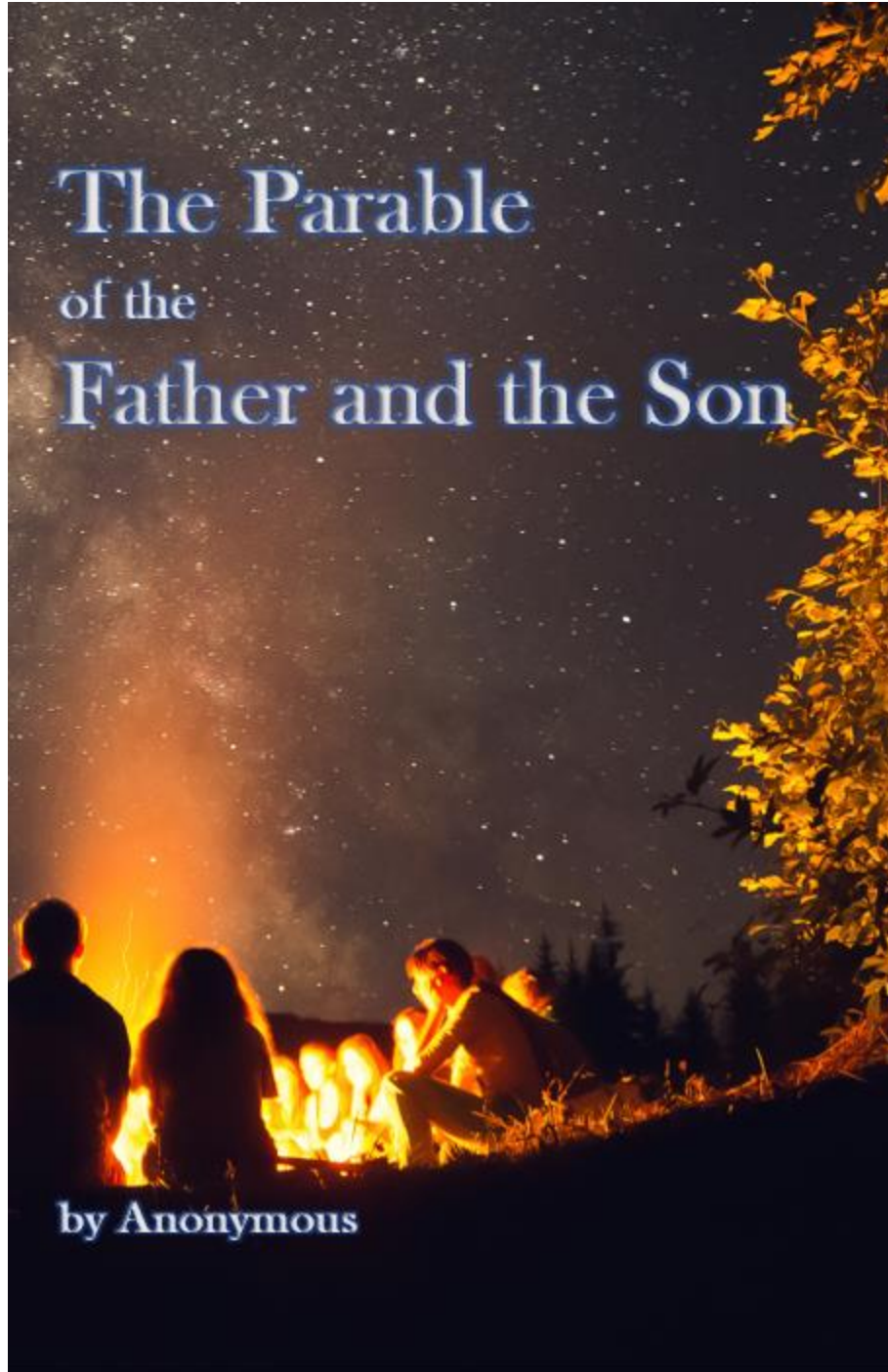
“Love is patient; love is kind;
love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude.

It does not insist on its own way;
it is not irritable or resentful;
it does not rejoice in wrongdoing,
but rejoices in the truth.”

(1 Corinthians 13:4-6, NRSV)

“And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three;
and the greatest of these is love.”

(1 Corinthians 13:13, NRSV)



The Parable of the Father and the Son

by Anonymous

Digital versions of this booklet, printable on a standard printer, can be found for free online at Firstbornparable.net

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Then his father said, “Not leaving, you say? Look, son, follow me. We’re goin’ on a trip tonight.” And the Marine took the Firstborn by the hand, and they left the house together. The Bride followed them.

The Firstborn Disappears

*“Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.”
(Luke 21:33, NRSV)*

“Where are they?” Sophia asked as she readied for school the next day. The Firstborn, her mother, and her father were all missing.

“He promised he would never leave us,” said Elizabeth.

When they didn’t turn up that day, the police were called, and they were declared missing. The family lived in a small town in East Texas, and when the neighbors found out what happened, everyone from their church pitched in to help. That day, Sophia discovered the true purpose of church. She had always thought of it as just a place to go to kneel and sing because older people said you had to. But then the community came together to help their family in their time of need.

The five grieving children resolved to stick together no matter what. Elizabeth was old enough to drive, and their neighbors from church promised to check on them every day. The family was kept together, living in the house they inherited from their parents.

Sophia took over the responsibilities of cooking, cleaning, and managing the family finances. Elizabeth got an urban office job to help support her family, working her way up to manager. Reuben went to college with help from Elizabeth, became a schoolteacher, married a woman named Alice, and brought her home to raise a large family in the same house. Sophia helped with the newborns and took a job as a waiter to raise money for Christina and for Reuben’s children.

Thomas never wanted children of his own, and he left the state. But he would visit his family every Christmas, and he would send them money from time to time to help. Christina worked on weekends as a babysitter, working for a mother with children of all ages, who became a mentor to her. When she was older, Christina married her mentor’s oldest son and moved into their household, bearing more children into that family right where her mentor left off.

The Firstborn never returned. Yet they remembered what he had taught them. The Spirit of Love he sent after him would guide them for their whole lives.

The Firstborn and Sophia

*“There is no fear in love, but perfect love casts out fear;
for fear has to do with punishment,
and whoever fears has not reached perfection in love.”
(1 John 4:18, NRSV)*

In the days when Mr. Obama was president, in a quiet village in the South, before fires and droughts withered the land, before storms and rising tides devoured the coast, young Sophia noticed her eldest brother walking out of the house at sunrise—as he had every morning for a few months. Over the recent years, she had noticed a change in him. He had matured and become the leader of the children; before, they had all been rivals. She followed him to the yard.

Their father was an abusive drunk who was most often absent and a better parent that way. The real man of the house was now her eldest brother. She found him sitting on a bench under the wooden canopy of their back porch, underneath a mosquito net, his legs crossed. He sat like one of those monks from the Himalayas she had seen on television.

“Are you meditating?” she asked, snapping him from his trance. “You must be sick of all my questions!”

“The one who asks questions in youth gives answers in adulthood,” said the Firstborn. “Ask me whatever you wish.”

She laughed at him. Her brother, acting like a guru now! This same brother, when she was seven years old, fed her fudge and soda until her stomach was ready to burst, then spun her in circles in the middle of her older sister’s bedroom until she threw it all up. The one who used to get into fistfights with the neighbor’s boy almost every month, until two years ago, when they started acting as if they were best friends all along. She wanted to understand what had come over him.

“We’re Christian, not Buddhist. Why are you meditating?”

“Would God teach everything to Israel and nothing to the peoples of the east? Seekers of the truth are everywhere, and every religion has its own piece. What I’m doing is praying. Prayer and meditation—it’s the same thing.”

“God never answers my prayers.”

“He does. You just need to know what to listen for. Whenever you feel pleasure during prayer, God is speaking to you. Through this joy and through all wholesome happiness, God’s voice flows through

everyone, guiding all animals and all people, even those who can't speak or hear."

And then he closed his eyes and resumed his meditation.

"So you just sit there being happy for no reason?"

"God loves us without reason or condition. Simple pleasure costs nothing and asks nothing. Pleasure and pain are habits like any other, and with practice, pleasure can be increased, and pain can be reduced. The habits you form during meditation, you carry with you for the rest of your day."

Sophia watched him, awestruck. He really had changed. He had answered, unoffended, all her sarcastic questions. He was calm, relaxed, and expressionless. His former angry resting face, with open mouth and clenched teeth—so constant before, it was hard to recognize him without it—gone. But why was he talking about pain?

"Are you in pain?" She awoke him again.

"I am at peace."

She wondered then what his obsession with pain was about. This was not the first time she heard him talking about it.

"Everyone has demons they must confront," said the Firstborn. "And pain is the weapon of demons. It's a psychic force. It's evil, pure and irreducible, and—I hope you will open your mind to this possibility—nothing good truly ever comes out of it. So let us build resistance to pain, so we don't become dependent on it, so we can't be controlled by it, so we're able to overcome it when the time comes."

She did not know which demon he had in mind. She did not know his plans to confront their abusive father. If she had known, she would have warned against it.

"But don't we need pain? To protect us from injury?"

His face became stern. He stood up, took off the mosquito net, put his hands on her shoulders, and looked her straight in the eyes.

"You are in an abusive relationship with Satan!" he said. "Sit down. This is an intervention!"

Laughing at him, she sat on the bench. He smiled back. Sophia crossed her legs, and she held her hands above her knees, imitating him as best as she could. He draped the mosquito net over her.

"First, breathe, and instead of ignoring your breath, I want you to really enjoy it. Breathing is the simplest pleasure, and if one can't appreciate simple pleasures, one can't appreciate life. Fools are miserable in abundance and wealth because they don't let themselves enjoy pleasures already experienced, but they're only satisfied in greater

so-called-Christian doctrine that suffering was something everyone deserved merely by their universal sinful nature.

"Love is joy, not pain!" cried the Firstborn. "Love is what comes after the pain. Pain is the enemy that must be overcome, and once it's defeated, then paradise has come." And he cited Revelation 21:3-4, "*See, the home of God is among mortals. He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away.*"

"You are under a curse, mother," said the Firstborn, and he cited Genesis 3:16, "*To the woman he said, 'I will greatly increase your pangs in childbearing'.*"

"This curse was given," said the Marine, "because Adam ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. And it was Eve's fault. If that had not happened, then there would be no evil in the world."

"That's not the truth," said the Firstborn. "The truth is, the evil was already there, but it wasn't until they ate from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil that they could recognize it for what it was."

"You do not have to do this, my son. You do not have to enter our room. I would make you the sole inheritor. I would give you everything I have. Why, then, do you attack my faith, why do you question my life, and why will you not worship my god?"

"God is love, not hatred. I will not worship your god."

The Marine stood still in silence and disappointment until he said, "So be it."

The Firstborn saw again the door to his parents' room in front of him. He heard his mother screaming and his father shouting. He opened the door, and his father, back to his old drunken self, saw him and released his mother by throwing her against a wall.

"No more books," said his father, staggering forward. "Fists now."

But the Firstborn refused to raise his hands.

His father said to him, "Get out of my house and never come back."

The Firstborn said, "I will not leave my family, my mother and my brothers and my sisters, and I will not leave my church, because I love them. You're the one who should leave them—because you worship the torturer, but God is love. Yet hatred also sends messengers and seeks to build a heavenly kingdom, as is written, '*And war broke out in heaven; Michael and his angels fought against the dragon. The dragon and his angels fought back,*'" (Revelation 12:7).

“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”

“Your heart is nothing before God,” said the Marine. “For who can discern the will of God? He does what he does, not of human will but of his own,” and he went on the offensive again, with Isaiah 45:7, *“I form the light, and create darkness: I make peace, and create evil: I the Lord do all these things.”*

But the Firstborn knew of a counterpassage, Luke 6:43-44, *“No good tree bears bad fruit, nor again does a bad tree bear good fruit; for each tree is known by its own fruit. Figs are not gathered from thorns, nor are grapes picked from a bramble bush.”* And he added his interpretation, “Some things are neither good nor evil. But God is good, and the one who forms evil and causes suffering—he is not God.”

“You would be the judge of God? To say that he is not good if he forms evil?” and the Marine quoted Romans 9:20, *“Nay but, O man, who art thou that repliest against God? Shall the thing formed say to him that formed it, Why hast thou made me thus?”*

The Firstborn countered with Genesis 3:22, *“Then the Lord God said, ‘See, the man has become like one of us, knowing good and evil;’”*

The Marine had no response. The Firstborn then quoted the rest of the verse, *“and now, he might reach out his hand and take also from the tree of life, and eat, and live forever’—”*

The Marine’s bible seemed out of ammunition. He set it back on the altar. Yet he stood unfazed, and the Bride still clung to him.

“Why do you cling to him?” asked the Firstborn.

“He is my anchor,” said the Bride. “If I left him, where would I go and what would become of me and my children?”

“You must trust God,” the Firstborn implored her. “Don’t worry about your personal future, just do what you know is right, and God will give you joy in this life or the next.”

“How would I know what is right? Not everyone is a philosopher,” said the Bride. “Some people just need to be told what to do.”

“And look at where that has gotten you, mother. Every night you scream in pain!”

“Love is pain, for a woman,” she said. “We are born in pain. We are taught obedience in pain. We receive passion in pain. We give birth in pain. We are separated from our children in pain, and then we die in pain. It is our way of feeling love.”

Tears streamed down the Firstborn’s face as he realized how broken his mother had become. She had completely internalized the

heights. And whoever is satisfied by simple pleasures can’t be tempted by evil pleasures. So breathe in the pleasure of God, given to everyone to take for themselves.”

And then he waited. She closed her eyes and began meditating. But he could see her still fidgeting.

“Be still,” he told her. “If you feel your mind wandering, bring it back to your breathing. This will help you learn concentration.”

He saw her relax. A minute passed, and she opened her eyes.

“Even emotional pain is worthless,” he told her. “The pain you feel from guilt, shame, boredom, anxiety, envy, anger, or fear—all worthless. Even grief is just Satan kicking us when we’re already down. So don’t pay any attention to these. Focus your mind, instead, on any simple pleasant thing. Remember—this is important—it’s impossible to think about nothing. You must always have a focal point, even when you’re not meditating. So whenever you feel any painful emotion, instead of trying to suppress it, focus your mind on something pleasurable instead.”

Sophia thought about it. Yet she still had doubts about what he was doing, trying to rid the world of pain.

“Pain lets us know when we’re hurt,” she said. “It lets us know when we’ve done something wrong. We’d be blind without it. Aren’t we better off with it?”

“If we make ourselves reliant on pain, we won’t be able to learn how to survive in paradise, where there is no pain. If we do what is right only out of fear of punishment, we won’t know how to be good people in paradise, where there is no painful punishment. We must change the way we think. Even though pain seems useful, it also holds us back. The goal for this age, as we prepare for the next, is to reach the point where we no longer need pain. And always remember, pain is not the same thing as knowledge of injury. When we have detachment, we can recognize our mistakes without feeling pain from them.”

“But why would we do what is right without fear of pain?” asked Sophia.

“Through faith, hope, and love. Everything good we do, we must find a reason to do it for one of these three pleasures. We must protect our bodies, not out of fear of pain, but out of faithful stewardship of our earthly inheritance. We must eat, not out of hunger, but to pursue our hopes for the future. We must learn to be kind to others, not out of guilt or shame, but out of love.”

To Pray for Pleasure Without Words (Instructions for Meditation)

For the novice, find a quiet space and sit comfortably.

For the expert, all life is comfort and all places are quiet enough.

Seven times, breathe in and out,
Then pass your mind over your body.

From foot to ankle, to calf to knee,
From thigh to groin, to stomach to chest,
To arms to neck to head and back again to feet.
Breathe once for each part until pleasure is found.

If a part of you is in pain, skip it as you breathe.
If a part of you is in pleasure, you have found your focus.
If you feel any itch, skip it and move on.
If you feel any glow, dwell on it and cherish it.

Questions

*“No one after lighting a lamp hides it under a jar, or puts it under a bed,
but puts it on a lampstand, so that those who enter may see the light.
For nothing is hidden that will not be disclosed,
nor is anything secret that will not become known and come to light.”
(Luke 8:16-17, NRSV)*

When the children asked their mother a question, she would frown and say, “That’s just the way things are,” and when they asked their father, he would call them stupid, even if it seemed he didn’t know the answer himself. So when they learned from Sophia that the Firstborn would answer any question, three followed her outside that Saturday morning: Reuben and Thomas, twins, thirteen years old, and Christina, eight. Sophia was fourteen, and the Firstborn was twenty.

He taught them to meditate, to train their minds to find peace.

“How long should we meditate?” asked Reuben.

“As long as it takes to still your mind. If it can’t be done in half an hour, try again tomorrow. Every morning may be enough, or whenever you are flustered, meditate then and there. But if you treat this kind of prayer as a chore and measure your progress by the time spent, you’ll

“So you take that to mean that you can believe whatever you want?” asked the Marine.

“No,” said the Firstborn, “It’s God who guides us, from within,” and he added more verses to his assault, Jeremiah 31:33-34, *“But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, ‘Know the Lord’, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.”*

And the Firstborn said, “If you take moral instruction from a book, and if you try to follow it to the letter, then you are under an old covenant. The New Covenant is written on your heart.”

Despite the double strike, the Marine stood tall. He would not allow the Bride to see him fall.

“If the law is to be written on our hearts, then it will be the same law as what is already written,” said the Marine, and he counterattacked with Matthew 5:18, *“For verily I say unto you, Till heaven and earth pass, one jot or one tittle shall in no wise pass from the law, till all be fulfilled.”*

But the Firstborn said, “The laws in the old testament have already passed away—Jesus amended the law of Moses himself,” and he parried with Matthew 19:8, *“It was because you were so hard-hearted that Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but at the beginning it was not so.”* And he explained, “Jesus speaks not of those laws, but of a broader, universal law, existing since the beginning, which you do not follow—you divorce your wife every night by hitting her! Jesus’s law is this,” and he cited with Matthew 7:12, *“In everything do to others as you would have them do to you; for this is the law and the prophets.”*

The Marine should have been beaten with that strike, but nothing in his face wavered. The Bride looked upon him, searching for any doubt. He would not allow her to see any. So long as he never admitted he was wrong, she would not believe he was.

“You cannot trust your heart. It is corrupted,” said the Marine, and he attacked again with Romans 1:26, *“For this cause God gave them up unto vile affections: for even their women did change the natural use into that which is against nature.”*

“If you never follow your heart, then you can’t know God or Jesus,” said the Firstborn, and he defended with 1 John 4:8, *“Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”* and John 13:35,

smudged where beads of sweat had once fallen onto the text. On the rim of the book it read, *“The New Revised Standard Version.”*

“Choose your weapon.”

The Firstborn chose the *New Revised Standard Version*, leaving the *King James Version* to the Marine.

“We’ll start with some ground rules,” said the Marine, and his opening salvo was 2 Timothy 3:16, *“All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness—Do you agree to these terms?”* he asked.

The implication: if one wanted to battle with bibles, one was supposed to assert that the Bible was inerrant. Otherwise, there would be no obvious epistemology by which anyone could win or lose. Yet the Firstborn knew the Bible was full of errors.

His father surely also knew this, having studied it extensively in his youth. But his mother often claimed that it was perfect, even though she admitted she never studied it herself. This would give the Marine power over his bride because he could recite some verse demanding a concession or demanding tolerance of his abuse, and she would regard this as an obligation of her religion. And since the Bible was such a broad book composed of so many different viewpoints and rules, no matter what the Marine wanted his bride to do or to tolerate, he could find some verse along with an interpretation to make it so.

The Firstborn thought the key to breaking the spell his mother was under would be to use verses from the Bible to construct a different epistemology, one based on reason and an empathetic heart.

“I asked you: Do you agree that the Bible is the infallible word of God, or not?” The Marine had become frustrated with the silence.

“No,” said the Firstborn.

“Do you think your mind is superior to God’s word? You are arrogant!”

But the Firstborn counterattacked with 2 Corinthians 3:5-9, *“Not that we are competent of ourselves to claim anything as coming from us; our competence is from God, who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. Now if the ministry of death, chiseled in letters on stone tablets, came in glory so that the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses’ face because of the glory of his face, a glory now set aside, how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory? For if there was glory in the ministry of condemnation, much more does the ministry of justification abound in glory!”*

get little out of it. It’s like tuning an instrument: It’s not how long you spend tuning, but how it sounds after.”

“So we meditate until we’re bored of it?” asked Thomas.

“If you can spare the half hour, keep meditating until you’re no longer bored of it.”

“You say all pain comes from the enemy. Does all pleasure come from God?” asked Sophia.

“The devil also gives pleasure, but only in such a way that leads to more pain later.”

“But pleasure comes from brain chemicals,” said Thomas.

“Let’s say I go to the bank and get a dollar, and then I go to the donut shop and buy a donut. Is a dollar a donut?” asked the Firstborn.

“It’s money,” said Thomas.

“So are brain chemicals,” said the Firstborn. “They’re formed in one part of the brain and expended in another. No one will ever understand how they produce psychic pleasure. These have as much to do with pleasure as a dollar has with a donut: You can exchange one for the other if the clerk is willing, and that’s the extent of the relationship.”

He took them all camping in the woods, but first he gathered tents and tools to kindle a fire. Elizabeth, their oldest sister, gave them sandwiches and bags of marshmallows, and they brought two ice chests of drinks, fruit, and snacks. Christina kissed their mother goodbye, and they promised they would be back in time for church next morning.

“When we go to heaven,” asked Christina, “will we be able to eat ice cream all the time? Or will we still have to eat broccoli?”

“When we are in paradise,” said the Firstborn, “the broccoli will taste like ice cream. It’s not the material world that makes a paradise, but it’s our reaction to it. When we only do what we want, then we are a slave to our wants. But when we can change what we want, we are free.”

“But what if we can’t change?” asked Reuben.

“Some things we were born to do, other things are learned. So don’t feel guilty for anything. Do you think Satan cares that we ate too much ice cream if he couldn’t find a way to make us miserable about it after? Yet if you eat too fast, you’ll get brain freeze, so watch yourself!”

They laughed at him, but then Thomas asked a harder question.

“If God is all-powerful, the creator of the universe, then why does suffering exist?”

Reuben responded first, thinking he knew the answer, “It’s because of free will. God gave us the power to choose between good and evil. Suffering is what happens when we choose evil.”

“So when children suffer and die because they were born with a genetic disease, was it their parents’ fault or their own?” asked Thomas, sarcastically.

Reuben shrugged. “The devil did it somehow.”

But the Firstborn said, “If God was all-powerful, then God would destroy the devil, and all suffering would disappear forever.”

“Exactly!” said Thomas.

“If God was all-powerful, then God wouldn’t need anything from us. God wouldn’t need us to trust in him. He wouldn’t need us to follow any rules. He’d make everything better without our help. And we could still have free will. A world with pleasure only, where pain never existed, would still have places to explore, things to learn, people to meet, and challenges to overcome.”

“So what are you saying?” asked Thomas.

“Unfortunately, God isn’t all-powerful,” said the Firstborn.

“Instead, God has a rival from the very beginning. God needs our help to tip the balance of this world in his favor.”

They made their way to a creek, and on the banks were the shells of mollusks mixed into the mud, and Christina rushed to collect them.

“Careful,” he told her, “there might be snakes.”

They found the open clearing about fifteen yards from the creek, with the same firepit they always used, and they set their supplies down and pitched their tents.

“If Noah took two of every animal on his ark, how did he keep them from eating each other?” asked Thomas.

“Noah’s ark didn’t really happen. It’s a parable.”

“So it’s a lie?” asked Thomas.

“That’s not how you judge a parable. It’s true if the moral lesson is good. Whether it ever really happened, that’s not the point.”

“What’s the lesson of Noah’s Ark?” asked Sophia.

“God wants us to protect nature, to protect the animals.”

He pointed his arm across the whole forest surrounding them.

“This is our heritage, our natural inheritance. Before there were factories or cities, before laws or buildings or money, before judges or priests, kings or presidents, scribes or scripture, before history was written down, people were here, communing with each other, loving each other, living off the forest. But if we don’t protect it, it will disappear. The people who don’t care about the future—the people who pollute our lands, our rivers, our skies, and our oceans—they will destroy it. They will devour our forests like a plague of beetles.”

He dressed himself in frayed blue jeans and a torn shirt, not wanting to bloody his better clothes. His eyes met Reuben’s, locked for a moment of understanding. *Are you serious?* asked Reuben’s eyes. The Firstborn nodded. Reuben looked afraid.

“When one is young,” whispered the Firstborn, “pain is something to avoid. Yet when experience is gained, we must someday meet pain face to face and overcome it.”

The Firstborn found his parents’ door at the end of the hallway; it had one of those flimsy locks that by design could be opened with a paperclip or a card. For his entire life, he had never dared to enter his parents’ room. He didn’t have a good idea of what it even looked like. He took his credit card out of his wallet, and he swiped it in the crack by the knob, thrusting it loose.

He took a deep breath, and he pushed the door open.

Inside was a wedding chapel. He entered from the front, walking past the pews. Its walls were painted white, decorated with fresh olive branches and many crosses of different sizes and designs, and a window in the ceiling was placed such that the noon sunbeam illuminated the newlywed couple standing by the altar.

He saw the Marine, along with the Bride, both just as they appeared in the photo that hung above the fireplace in the den. Looking twenty years younger, his father wore full military dress regalia, his head shaved with a white hat on top. A ceremonial cutlass hung at his waist, his bronze star was on his chest, and there were two multicolored stripes, for the Battle of Khafji and the Battle of Kuwait Airport. The Bride, spellbound by the Marine and looking sharp in her wedding dress, clung tightly to her husband’s side.

“You’ve come to duel, my son?” asked the Marine.

“Let’s get on with it,” said the Firstborn.

Resting beside the piano, a small metal case sat. The Marine took it and set it upon the altar. Opening it, one would have expected to find a pair of flintlock pistols. Instead, a pair of bibles, not identical.

The right was ornate with a white hardback cover, etched in soft gold cursive writing, “*The King James Version.*” Its pages were shiny and flat, in perfect condition, likely never opened, let alone read.

The other book was smaller, bound in blue plastic resembling the texture of leather. Its binding was torn in the back from overuse, and a few pages of the *Book of Revelation* were almost falling out. Handwritten notes filled the margins, full of interpretations, opinions, and cross references. He flipped through it, and many verses were

“If I leave, they’ll become worse. And exact theology isn’t important. There are many there who still believe that God is love and understand what that implies. Many truly helped our mother in her time of need. But there was one who exploited her,” he said, referring to his father.

“So what’s the lesson of this?”

“Our aunts, they never did a thing to help Mom, and Mom never did anything for them, either. They were never anything but rivals. But that’s not the way it’s going to be with us. I will help you in any way I can, you hear that? And I want you to do the same for Sophia, Reuben, Thomas, and Christina.”

He parked the car. She gave him a big hug.

“I’ll think about it. About what we talked about. Thanks so much for everything. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

She left for her classes, and he drove himself to his job.

The Firstborn Confronts his Father

“Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. And the devil said to him, ‘To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.’

Jesus answered him, ‘It is written,

‘Worship the Lord your God, and serve only him.’ ”

(Luke 4:5-8, NRSV)

Agonized screams and drunken insults pierced his dreams as the Firstborn slept in the bedroom shared with Reuben and Thomas. Their father was at it again. “We like to play rough,” he always insisted. “You’ll understand when you’re older. Never open the door.” Their mother’s next-day red-soaked eyes, limping body, and bruised wrists would reveal the lies.

Calling the police would be pointless. They were small town cops, old war buddies of his father, who had been on the force himself a few years until he was expelled for drunkenness. Their mother would not trust them enough to tell them the truth.

Reuben was awake—still a boy, helpless to do anything. But the Firstborn was a man now, and he had resolved for this moment: Never again. This time he was ready.

“What can we do?” asked Sophia.

The Firstborn sighed. Not all questions have good answers.

“We have to endure, and we have to prepare. The whole world will get much hotter. This forest will die, but another will replace it if we just keep planting trees.”

He sat down at the campsite.

“How do porcupines mate?” asked Reuben.

“Very carefully?”

They spent the day in the woods asking questions, cracking jokes, roasting marshmallows over the fire, playing tag, telling stories, climbing trees, hiking, spotting animals, until it got too late, and it was time to send Christina to sleep in her tent. But she was afraid to fall asleep because she had been having nightmares.

“Is hell a real place?” she asked.

This was not the kind of thing anyone should ever have to explain to an eight-year-old.

“No. It doesn’t exist. Don’t worry about it,” said the Firstborn.

It was not precisely a lie. Their pastor’s concept of eternal fire and brimstone was so far removed from reality that it could truthfully be said to not exist. He gave Christina a hug and sent her to the tent. She seemed to accept his reassurances. The others stayed around the firepit.

“So you don’t agree with what our church teaches? You think they’re wrong?” asked Thomas.

“There’s no place where God can never rescue you. That hell doesn’t exist. The true hell is where you live your whole life in fear. Some in our church are so afraid of hell that they don’t even realize they’re already there,” said the Firstborn.

“Is that all there is to hell? It’s just fear?” asked Reuben.

“It’s also a place of judgment. Not God’s judgment, but our own.” And he quoted Luke 6:37, *“Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven;”*

“So how do we avoid ending up in hell?” asked Reuben.

“Never try to manipulate others through pain,” said the Firstborn. “Through torture, the rules in Satan’s princedoms are enforced. So don’t torture anyone. No information can be gathered through torture, except what Satan wants you to know, nor can any pain be given to another, except what Satan also desires to give. Have empathy for everyone, even people many would despise. Hell is full of difficult people, and to escape it, you must be able to love even them.”

A Prayer for Empathy

*Spirit of Wisdom, Spirit of Hope,
Give us the knowledge that comes from love.
We will see through their eyes,
And we will hear through their ears,
And we will think their thoughts.*

*Then we will know what they know,
And understand what they understand,
And we will feel their pleasure,
And we will know of their pain,
And we will love them more.*

*Show us the thoughts of paradise
And the thoughts of earth
And the thoughts of hell,
The thoughts of the wicked
And the thoughts of the righteous.*

*Let us imagine living their lives,
Facing their challenges in our minds,
And then we will listen to their experience.
Spirit of Love, guide us to understanding,
So we come to know the thoughts of all.*

*These thoughts, these thoughts, they flood into my mind.
These thoughts, these thoughts, I asked for them.
These thoughts, these thoughts, I know not where they come from.
From heaven or from earth, from love or from hatred.
Between them I discern with the scientific method.*

*These thoughts, these thoughts, these conflicting thoughts,
True or false, only science can discern.
Through experiment, tested logic, and careful research,
Without bias, I will find out which thoughts are true,
And then my new knowledge will be formed complete.*

“Saving money doesn’t help if I don’t have money to begin with.”

“But you’re their rich aunt, remember? If you don’t want the responsibility of kids, you could send money back to your family here.”

“Then I’d have less money,” she said.

“You have to decide for yourself what you want. You could spend money on yourself, and then you’ll be miserable like everyone who tries to live for themselves. Or you could live for others and trust God. Do our aunts seem like happy people to you? They work sixty hours a week, and they treat our cousins like fashion accessories.”

“On social media, they are celebrating in all their photos. When I saw Aunt Carol last summer, she was hurried and irritable.”

“So why do you want to be like them?”

“I don’t know. I mostly just don’t want to stick around here.”

“Then go. But first, make sure your little brothers and sisters are taken care of. Then we act as a team for life. Some of us will raise children. Others will help the ones who raise children. The ones who have children will have extra children to make up for the ones who don’t have any children. No mother should be forced to work a career job just so her children can have a roof over their heads in a safe neighborhood. Instead, everyone supports the children. Life is so much better when siblings act as a team.”

“A team,” she said. She smiled at him.

“Our aunts,” said the Firstborn, “they’ve hated each other their whole lives. Aunt Carol was the oldest. From a very early age, whenever our grandparents were angry, she was spanked. This taught her a lesson she was never able to unlearn: When you’re mad at someone, you hit them. Taking this lesson to heart, she started hitting her younger sisters early and often.”

“It almost makes me happy dad is such a deadbeat. No one would confuse what he does with discipline...” Then she added, “Except Mom.”

“After our aunts left, Grandma turned to alcohol. With the other two daughters out of the house, she started hitting Mom three times as much as before. Mom ended up leaving to live with her boyfriend, until he started hitting her too. Then she found some members of our church, who taught her about how Satan planned to have her tortured for the rest of eternity because of what a whore they said she was. After that, she got married quick. Six kids later, here we are.”

“Our church—why do you go there, again? I’m surprised they haven’t kicked you out, but you make yourself too useful.”

The Burning Bush

*“but test everything; hold fast to what is good;”
(1 Thessalonians 5:21, NRSV)*

She looked upon her brother with guilt—she did appreciate everything he did for her. Yet in her heart she knew if she had been born the eldest, she would have left already.

“I didn’t ask for this,” she said. “It’s not my fault mom had six kids with a man who spends every evening drunk and angry.”

“And if our aunts hadn’t left for Austin and Cali,” he said, “Mom wouldn’t have been stuck living helpless with no one to turn to. Siblings ought to stick together, not abandon each other. It’s a sickness.”

“Aunt Carol just bought a television set that’s worth more than your car, and Aunt Stacey just came back from Europe.”

“They have money and possessions; we have each other. But even in the most wretched, impoverished, diseased, war-torn squalor, love is present in abundance. Don’t be deceived: Pleasure comes from God, not from the material world. You won’t become closer to God by abandoning your loved ones here for material riches.”

“Their kids had a normal childhood, and we’ve had to act like adults since we were twelve. And there’s no jobs here. What could I even do here besides be some drunk jerk’s beaten housewife?”

“I promised you that I won’t let that happen to you. I won’t let you end up like Mom. If siblings are a team, we can stop abuse together.”

“Why don’t I just move to the city, then I won’t even be your problem?”

The Firstborn took a deep breath to suppress his frustration.

“Go if that’s what you really want,” he said. “But are you planning to have kids? When do you plan to have them? If you go live the city life, you’ll be thirty before you’re financially stable.”

“I’m not sure,” she said, thinking of her little sisters. “I mean, they’re annoying, and they’re lots of work, but they’re fun to have around. I can’t imagine a life without kids, but I don’t know if I want the responsibility.”

“Do they have to be your kids? You’ll have a bunch of nieces and nephews someday for sure.”

Elizabeth thought about it.

“You know,” said the Firstborn, “the more kids someone has, the cheaper each is. They can share everything; they can pass down clothing. Kids can be raised where big houses are affordable, where there’s open spaces and stars at night, fresh air and forests and churches and scout troops everywhere, where crime is lower, where there’s no pollution, where the cost of living is dirt cheap.”

The twilight done, the stars had come out. The moon was a crescent. The songs of the birds were long replaced by the chirping of grasshoppers. Their fire, lively and bright, outlived all their marshmallows. It danced in front of them.

“I’ll tell you a riddle,” said the Firstborn. “A man is instructing a crowd with wisdom, and he has five loaves of bread to feed a crowd of five thousand. And the whole multitude is fed because, when given, the loaves are never depleted, but when they are broken in half, each half remains as large as the whole. What is the bread?”

The children looked puzzled until Sophia spoke.

“It’s an idea. It’s knowledge,” she said.

“Yes,” he said. “The gift of knowledge can be given to another and the giver still possesses it just as before. And better than ordinary knowledge is the knowledge of how to acquire knowledge. Like a seed, one plants this knowledge and waters it, and more seeds appear. This knowledge is the scientific method.”

Thomas’s head perked up.

“One more riddle, then I’ll teach you something scientific,” said the Firstborn. “Suppose a man is a prisoner in Egypt, never knowing a true winter. He escapes to a foreign land, wanders the mountains, and encounters a burning bush, but the fire doesn’t consume the bush. He says he found God. What would you say he found?”

And Reuben’s eyes opened wide, as if realizing a great mystery.

“Did he find a campfire?” he asked.

The Firstborn smiled and gestured at their campfire. “This is the earliest of humanity’s gods, truly the god of our ancestors. This separated us from the apes so long ago: our ability to control fire. But Egypt was a land where trees were rare and precious. A proper campfire—made with logs, not just a brushy cooking pit—was something Moses would teach his people to make when he set them free. With it we cook, we gather in warmth, and, importantly, we listen and observe.”

“But campfires don’t talk,” said Thomas.

“Are you sure about that?” asked the Firstborn. “Listen carefully.”

They heard the crackling noise of the fire, and if they focused enough, they could hear it as a deep voice, like the one Moses heard.

They saw the dancing of the flames, and flames formed figures in their minds, and every time they blinked, the sight of the blaze remained, fixed into their vision, if only they could discern what it meant.

“Of course, it was not the fire that spoke, but the Spirit of God spoke to Moses from within his own heart. The spirits of our hearts speak to us even today. What do you see? What do you hear?”

The glow of the fire warmed their faces as they watched it.

“Sophia,” he said, “what do you see? What do you hear?”

“I hear music playing, and I see people dancing.”

They saw the dancers, a lively bunch, celebrating, and the music was a subtle percussion with a melody of whispers.

“Reuben, what do you see from the fire?” asked the Firstborn.

“I see people being taken up to heaven. Like the rapture.”

And they saw the streaks of flame and smoke floating away from the dancers, as if taken out from among them, taken to heaven.

“Did you learn about that from our pastor?”

“He says one day all good people will be taken up to heaven, and the evil people will be left behind.”

“Maybe he has it backwards.”

“What do you mean?” asked Reuben.

“Today, the Earth is a world of mixture, where pleasure and pain both still exist. But one day, the devil will see that his cause is lost, and he will abandon this Earth, and all pain will disappear. Then whoever is dependent on pain to avoid injury, they will be injured. Whoever is dependent on pain to survive will die. Whoever is dependent on shame and guilt to be righteous, they will become like the wicked.”

“And this will happen all at once?” asked Sophia.

“Maybe, maybe not. How could I predict what the devil will do?”

The point is this: You can't trust pain. When we are truly hurt, pain often disappears entirely. Pain is like an unfinished guardrail on a bridge crossing over a great chasm: The rail holds us steady as a rock; the strength of twenty men could not break it. It stays this way until we are crossing the precipice, and then it becomes air.”

Thomas had been quiet for a while. Something was bothering him.

“Thomas,” said the Firstborn, “What do you see from the fire?”

“I thought you were going to teach us something scientific.”

“Science is all about using your imagination.”

“Science is about things that are proven. This is campfire magic.”

“A common misconception. Proof is for math, not science.

Science is about the process of learning. First you make a hypothesis, a

So the father seized his son, and he nailed him to a cross, and he ate his son's flesh and drank his son's blood.

But the son said, “Father, I love even you.”

Extinguishing the Flames

Sophia wondered whether he was talking about their own abusive father. But then she opened her mouth and yawned.

They laughed at her, but soon enough Reuben and Thomas and even the Firstborn were yawning with her. The night was late. The Firstborn poured sand on the campfire to put it out. They all went into their tents to sleep and to dream.

The Firstborn and Elizabeth

“The Lord said to Cain,

‘Why are you angry, and why has your countenance fallen?’

If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door; its desire is for you, but you must master it.’

Cain said to his brother Abel, ‘Let us go out to the field.’

And when they were in the field, Cain rose up against his brother Abel and killed him. Then the Lord said to Cain, ‘Where is your brother Abel?’ He said, ‘I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?’”

(Genesis 4:6-9, NRSV)

The following Monday, the Firstborn was with his sister, Elizabeth, driving her to her high school. The run-down, one-story houses and grassy lawns blended together in their minds that morning. Behind a chain-link fence, a rebel flag hung unmoving—it was a windless day—and there was a pickup truck on blocks worth, probably, more than their own car. Two dogs barked from behind the fence. Every mile and a half, they passed a different church's sign. One sign warned of Satan's hellfire, but another still preached the love of God.

“When you grow up, don't be like our aunts,” said the Firstborn.

“Why not?” Elizabeth asked. “They're rich and spoiled, and we're poor, abused, and neglected. Better to be like them than like our mother. I should get out of this stupid place as soon as I graduate.”

“No—look: I could have left already, got a better job somewhere else. Then you'd have been stuck here with nobody to help you. If we leave, who's going to raise our brothers and sisters? Dad? Mom? Give me a break! Don't worry—I won't let you end up like her.”

One day, he felt a painful jolt. Alerted, he noticed a serpent in front of him, ready to strike. The slave thanked the master for warning him of the danger. Later that day, he was angry with another slave. He raised his fist to strike the other, until the master shocked him. As he was shocked, he recognized for the first time that the other slaves were people just like him, who felt pleasure and pain, and that it was wrong for him to harm them. He thanked his master again for teaching him something so profound and important.

After that, the slave began to tell the other slaves that the master loved them and that the shock collars were for their own benefit.

But the master secretly laughed at this. “What kind of fool would think I love him? I merely didn’t want him to damage my property: himself or my other slaves.”

The Parable of the Father and the Son

Once there was an evil man who hated his wife. “You are an adulteress. Where does this child come from?”

She said, “I was a virgin when I conceived this child.”

“You wretched, lying woman!” said the man. “And now I’m stuck with you for the rest of our lives, and it’s your fault I’m miserable.”

So the man beat her mercilessly with a switch from his garden. And he did the same thing every night for years and years. She bore him twelve other children.

“If you ever leave me,” said the man, “God will send you straight to hell, and God will make these stripes on your back seem like soft caresses. As for these children I made you bring into the world, if they ever forsake my religion, God will torture them, too.”

And she did not leave him because, she thought, “God is a torturer. God is like my husband. God will punish me if I leave him.”

One day, her son came and said, “Father, I’m through with this, and I’m big enough to fight you now.”

His father said, “Get out of my house and never come back.”

The son said, “I will not leave my family, my mother and my brothers and my sisters, and I will not leave my church, because I love them. You’re the one who should leave them, because you worship hatred, but God is love.”

But Hatred whispered into the father’s ear, “His truths are lies. Worship me, and don’t listen to him. Here, take this son of yours and put him on a cross and make him suffer before he dies. Then, eat his flesh and drink his blood, and make your family do the same thing.”

guess about how the world works, tying together observations into a logical framework. And then there must be some way of testing the hypothesis to discern between different possibilities.”

“So how do you test what you’ve just been saying?” asked Thomas.

“Not in the normal way,” said the Firstborn.

“What do you mean by ‘not in the normal way’?”

“Religion is the social discipline of bringing love into the world through proper upbringing of children. It’s tested by whether the values it teaches make the world a more loving place. And, like life, religion evolves according to natural selection. So it’s also tested by how sustainable it is into the future—will this religion propagate itself, or will it fracture and fail? Can its teachings adapt to new ways of life, or are they forever stuck in the past? It’s tested not by the literal meaning of its truths, but by the love and endurance of its followers.”

But Thomas was stewing, and he didn’t reply.

“So what do you hear from the fire, Thomas?”

“All I hear are a bunch of grasshoppers chirping!” he shouted.

“Let me tell you the story of the grasshoppers...”

The Locust Family of Grasshoppers

Charlie Locust had eggs she planned to lay, but there was no room for them in the grassland. It was regrettable because the grassland was pristine and beautiful, filled with every pleasurable sound and sight, with every aesthetic value a grasshopper could have. And something in her exoskeleton, something in her blood, attached her to that place. It called to her, “This place, the grassland, is the place grasshoppers belong. You should not go someplace else!”

She found a cornfield, dark and foreboding. The stalks were much higher than the grass, and they had an uneasy feel to them when climbed. But Charlie Locust was not so conservative that she would refuse to move even to feed her family. She put her premonitions aside.

She told her children, “We will not live in this dank, evil place forever. As soon as you are strong, go to the grassland!”

Yet when she sent them out, many returned.

“Mother,” they said, “the grassland is full of scary, screaming grasshoppers. There are more predators and not enough food, how can we survive?”

Eventually, the cornfield was full of members of the Locust family. A Locust that could stand the adversity of the grassland would move there, but the timid ones stayed in the cornfield. Generation after

generation, some Locusts left, others stayed—a lot of evolution was happening. And they laid many more eggs than the grasslanders could.

The Locusts had a different mindset than the other grasshoppers: they hated arguing, and they hated shouting. So if another Locust was eating their food, the only thing to do was to eat faster.

Eventually, they devoured the entire cornfield. By then there were millions and millions of Locusts. They devoured everything in their path, and they could not be stopped by anyone or anything, until the whole region was exhausted of food.

The Children are Confused

When he finished, Sophia protested.

“What do grasshoppers and locusts have to do with anything?”

He told her, “Whenever an animal’s behavior is opposed to its reproductive success, its behavior, over the generations, evolves. Its tastes change, its actions change, its personality changes. With a little bit of evolution, a species of grasshoppers could become locusts.”

“What does this have to do with people?” asked Sophia.

“People are animals. Our behaviors are just as subject to evolution as a grasshopper’s. What we view as normal human behavior is not something that can be relied upon to exist forever.”

Then he told them a parable.

The Parable of the Fish and the Waterfall

“A species of fish lives in a stream above a waterfall. Whichever fish swims over it never returns home, but it finds a new life with the other fish below the waterfall. So even though the fall is safe—it’s not a long, sharp, or rocky fall—the fall represents a Darwinian trap. Fish that fall are removed from the gene pool, just as if they were eaten by a predator. As the generations pass, the fish above the waterfall will evolve to fear the it in the same way as they would fear a predator, because whatever passes over it can never return to their world.”

“Again, what does this have to do with people?” asked Sophia.

“We approach many waterfalls in our lives, even if we don’t recognize them. Places that attract us, cities that we visit and then never leave, that cause us to forget where we came from and be separated from our families. If all open-minded fish swim over the waterfall, then there will be no one left above the waterfall except closed-minded fish—the ones who live in fear of whatever is below. The ones who hate the waterfall and everything about it. The ones who want to destroy it, so no

more fish fall over it, who forbid their children from even going near it.” And the Firstborn recited a poem...

Babylon the Great

Before me, the great Babylon, its skyscrapers, lofty; its bridges, paragons. Glossy steel and white concrete, mirrored windows glistened in the heat. Its people’s beauty, beyond description.

Surrounded by deserted lands, all color flows to it like shifting sands. In its lights, a jewel among desolation, everything proud and good, and all temptation. Wonder and anxious joy, a lure none withstands.

Pulled by the crowd, unaware, against my will, I am carried there. Like a river of people, we flow. We never turn back; we never slow. The crowd presses me towards the snare.

“It’s heaven,” the merchant queen tells all. “That’s why we heed the call. Don’t let the frightful numbers sting. Here, I will give you wings. There’s home for everyone beyond the wall.”

And through some dark sorcery, I, given wings of a moth, rise to fly. Towards the lamppost fire, my mothwings to the pyre, where all beauty goes to die.

Two Gods by One Name

Thomas thought of a question, “You say all suffering is because of Satan. But in the Bible, God caused a lot of suffering himself.”

“The Bible isn’t inerrant,” said the Firstborn. “The Israelites who wrote it had become strict monotheists, so it was considered a great insult to God to attribute power to anyone else. Many deeds done by God in the Bible, actually, Satan did them. There are two gods within the book, two persons by one name. One who shows mercy, the other who shows wrath. One who sent his Son to save us from the other.”

The night was late, and the fire was dimming. It was almost time to go to sleep. But the Firstborn had more to say.

“Two more parables.”

The Parable of the Slave and the Shock Collar

Once there was a slavemaster who fitted his slave with a collar that could never be removed, that would deliver a shock whenever the slave was disobedient. And the slave was despondent, “I can’t even rest my head for a lazy moment without being shocked!” Yet when he learned to do as the master wanted, he was shocked less, so he went on with life.