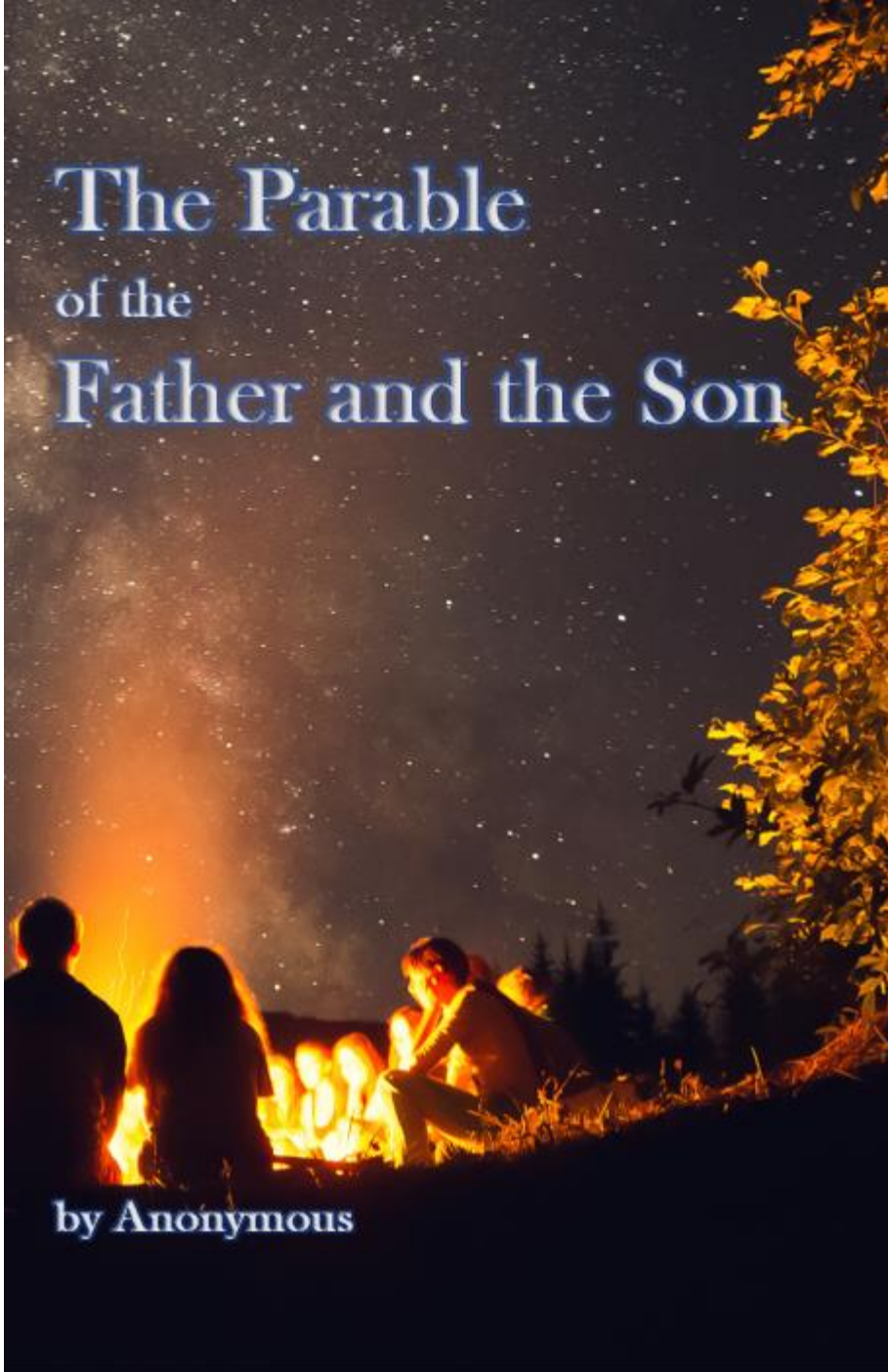


"God is love,
and those who abide in love abide in God,
and God abides in them."
(1 John 4:16b, NRSV)

"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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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 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 had become 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 this! 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

shouting matches with the cops and fistfights with the neighbor's boy every few months, until two years ago, when the two boys started acting as if they were best friends all along, and he now treated all officers of the law with the utmost respect. 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."

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. Acknowledgement of pleasure and pain are habits like any other, and with practice, pleasure can be amplified, and pain can be disregarded. 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."

Sophia took a job as a waiter to raise money for Christina and for Reuben's children. Sophia also helped Alice and Reuben with the children—valuable experience when she later married and had children of her own.

Christina worked on weekends and afternoons as a babysitter for a single working mother with children of all ages, who became a mentor to her. Christina's mentor's ex-husband had not been trustworthy—he had abandoned his family out of spite, and so she needed the extra help. When she was older, Christina married her mentor's oldest son—who was the same age as Christina—and moved into their household, bringing more children into that family where her mentor left off.

Thomas joined the military and left town, and he never wanted children of his own. But he still loved his family, so he would send them money, and after he finished his service, he became a police officer in a nearby county. Every year, he would drive over to visit his siblings and his nieces and nephews a week before Christmas—as his work schedule did not allow him to vacation on Christmas Day.

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

*“Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil; for you are with me.”
(Psalm 23:4a, NRSV)*

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

“We have all been deceived,” said the Firstborn. “We muddle through our lives seeking relief from our pain, but our efforts are futile because pain comes from within. Just as soon as we correct the problem that we are made to believe is the source of our pain, the devil within will show us a new problem and torture us for a new reason.”

“But don't we need pain?” Sophia asked, “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 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.”

Sophia thought about it. Yet she still had doubts about what he was doing, trying to live without 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.”

“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 holy pleasures. We must protect our bodies, not out of fear of pain, but out of faithful stewardship of our earthly vessel. 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.”

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 their parents didn’t turn up that day, the police were called, and they, along with the Firstborn, 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 and sending money back home. 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.

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 do not have to do this, my son,” said the Marine, “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 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 new 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, nor my church, because I love them all. You are the one who should leave them. You worship the torturer, but God is love.”

Then his father said, “Not leaving, you say? Look, son, follow me. We’re going on a trip tonight.” And the Marine took the Firstborn by the arm, and they left the house together. The Bride followed them. The Holy Spirit also followed them, giving them comfort in their afflictions.

To Pray for Pleasure and Calmness 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.
Notice your breaths and count them—seven breaths, 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, pass over it as you breathe.
If a part of you is in pleasure, you have found your focus.
If you feel any itch, pass over it and move on.
If you feel any glow, dwell on it and cherish it.

As you focus your mind on your pleasure that you have found,
Let your discord become peace and your wandering mind still.
If your mind has calmed and your pleasure remains,
Then your meditation is complete.

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 the children 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. It might take only a minute. 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.”

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

“Keep meditating until you no longer care if you are bored of it,” said the Firstborn.

“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.”

1 John 4:8, *“Whoever does not love does not know God, for God is love.”* and John 13:35, *“By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another.”*

The Marine’s Bible had become too heavy for him to bear. 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 and 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 dogma 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 an 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*

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 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

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 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 want, we are free.”

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

“Some things we were born to do, other things are learned. Give change an honest attempt and forgive yourself. Remember, guilt is what empowers the temptation: 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 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,” said the Firstborn.

“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.”

The Firstborn 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.”

“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.

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 countered 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!”*

“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.”*

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 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 Bible."

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

"We'll start with some ground rules," said the Marine, and his opening strike 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 that, despite containing so much wisdom and the knowledge of God, the Bible also contained 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.

"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;*"

Sophia started to speak, but then she interrupted herself. The firstborn waited patiently—not wanting to discourage her from sharing her thoughts. But when she still said nothing, he continued his lesson.

"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 suffering 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.”

Then Sophia, to the surprise of the Firstborn, said, “Even in the darkest dungeon, the Holy Spirit will give us comfort.”

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 inside. He took his driver’s license 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 with soft gold cursive writing, “*The King James Bible.*” Its pages were shiny and flat, in perfect condition, likely never opened, let alone read.

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.

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.”

An Incantation of 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.*

The Burning Bush

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

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.

“Then go. Ask Aunt Carol for help—don’t be afraid to press her, don’t pretend like you can handle everything yourself—so that you can start a good career. 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 full time just so her children—who she can hardly spend time with—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, they never anything to help Mom, and Mom never did anything for them. 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, and the Spirit filled them with pleasure as they hugged.

“I’ll think about it. About what we talked about. Thanks so much for everything.”

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

“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.”

“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. 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 world. You won’t become closer to God by abandoning your loved ones here. 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?”

“Aunt Carol just bought a television set the size of a billboard, and Aunt Stacey just came back from Europe. On social media, they are celebrating in all their photos. But when I saw Aunt Carol last winter, 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.”

“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, even though the true God was always with us. But fire is what separated us from the apes so long ago. 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 really 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.”

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

“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 guess about how the world works. And then there must be some way of testing the hypothesis.”

“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’?”

Then he told them a parable.

The Parable of the Fish and the Waterfall

“A species of fish lives in a lake above a waterfall. Whichever a 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 is an evolutionary trap. Fish that fall are removed from the gene pool above the waterfall, just as if they were eaten by a predator. As the generations pass, the fish above the waterfall will evolve to fear the waterfall in the same way as they would fear a predator, because whatever passes over it can never return to their world.”

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

She looked upon her brother with guilt—she did appreciate everything he did for her. But the guilt, in its worthlessness, wasn’t strong enough to change her mind. 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.”

“Their kids had a normal childhood, and we’ve had to act like adults since we were twelve.”

“We have to stick together no matter what,” said the Firstborn.

“There’s no jobs here. What could I even do here besides be some drunk jerk’s beaten housewife?”

“I promised you 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—assuming the economy doesn’t crash again.”

“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.”

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 an unwelcoming 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. Angry pit bulls 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.”

“I could have left already, too,” said the Firstborn. “Got a better job somewhere else. Made more money. But if we leave, who’s going to raise our brothers and sisters? Dad? Mom? Don’t worry—I won’t let you end up like her.”

“We approach many waterfalls in our lives, even if we don’t recognize them: People, places, or ideas that attract us, that cause us to become caught up in decadent things and forget where we came from. Things that separate us from our families, putting enmity between us and them. Things that test our restraint, our discipline, and our attachments. Don’t hate the waterfalls, yet be savvy of them. We are tested in this way: Is our love strong enough to stop us from swimming over?”

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 glisten 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 foul 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.*

Later that night, the Firstborn told them another parable:

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 his evil master wanted, he was shocked less, so he went on with life.

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.

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 slavemaster secretly laughed at this. "What kind of fool slave would think I love him? I merely didn't want him to damage my property."

Extinguishing the Flames

Sophia wondered whether he was talking about their 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, and the Holy Spirit was with them even as they dreamt.