

THE BHAGAVAD GITA

THE BREATH OF GOD

Rendered for the modern reader

SCOTT STOJETZ

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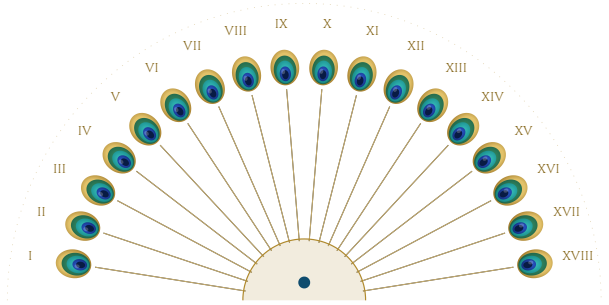

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BEFORE THE FIRST CHAPTER

A Word Before the Breath

The book in your hands has been called the Song of God for over two thousand years. I have taken the liberty of one change, and I owe you the honesty of naming it up front: I call it the Breath. A song you can miss. A song plays in another room, and a man walks past it his whole life. But the breath — the breath you are receiving right now, and again now — cannot be missed, only ignored. It has been delivered to you roughly twenty thousand times a day since the day you were born, without one reminder from you. Whatever intelligence keeps that account is the same one that speaks in these pages. That is why the title changed. Nothing else has.

As with my renderings of the Upanishads, I begin with the truth. I am not a scholar of Sanskrit, and no lineage has authorized me to touch this text. I am a student who reads it at dawn. I have rendered it — with the help of AI, honestly used and honestly credited — into plain modern English, so that the Western American reader can hear what Arjuna heard, without a dictionary and without a robe. And what Arjuna heard matters more to your Tuesday than any scripture I know.

This is not a book about a battle. It is a book about a man in the middle of his life, sunk down in the middle of his duty, asking the questions you have asked in a parking lot with the engine running: Why am I doing this? What is worth doing? Who am I, under all of it?

And the answer does not send him to a monastery. It sends him back into the work — changed. Get to the center. That is the whole invitation. Read one chapter at dawn. Let it ring.

— Scott Stojetz

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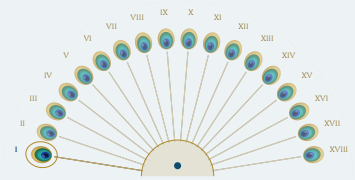

CHAPTER ONE OF EIGHTEEN

Arjuna's Despair

The Way of Action

BEFORE THE CHAPTER

Let me tell you what you're about to watch, because I've lived it and so have you. Two armies line up for a war inside one family, and the greatest warrior alive asks his driver — who happens to be God — to park the chariot between them. He looks across the field and sees his own people: teachers, uncles, cousins, bows drawn. And the man comes apart. Dry mouth. Shaking hands. The famous bow slides right out of his grip. That's a panic attack, brother — written down three thousand years before anybody had a name for it. And listen to how religious he gets while he's quitting; the mind always reaches for scripture when it wants permission to run. He ends up in the bottom of that chariot, done, at the exact center of his own duty. I've sat in that seat, and so have you. The whole song starts at rock bottom — because that's the only honest place a real practice ever starts.

1 DHRITARASHTRA SAID On the field of duty, the field of the Kurus, my sons and the sons of Pandu, gathered and hungry for battle — what did they do, Sanjaya?

2 SANJAYA SAID Seeing the army of the Pandavas drawn up for war, King Duryodhana approached his teacher and spoke these words:

3 Behold, master, this great army of the sons of Pandu, arrayed for battle by the son of Drupada — your own gifted student.

4 Here are heroes, mighty archers, the equals of Bhima and Arjuna in war: Yuyudhana, Virata, and Drupada of the great chariot.

5 Dhrishtaketu, Chekitana, and the valiant king of Kashi; Purujit, Kuntibhoja, and Shaibya, a bull among men.

6 Mighty Yudhamanyu, brave Uttamaujas, the son of Subhadra, and the sons of Draupadi — great chariot-warriors, every one.

7 And know our own distinguished men, O best of the twice-born — the leaders of my army. I name them for you now:

8 Yourself, and Bhishma, and Karna, and Kripa, victorious in battle; Ashvatthama, and Vikarna, and the son of Somadatta as well.

9 And many other heroes, armed with every weapon, skilled in every warfare, who have laid down their lives for my sake in advance.

10 Unmeasured is this force of ours, guarded by Bhishma; measurable is theirs, guarded by Bhima.

11 So stand firm in your stations, each man in his division — and guard Bhishma, all of you, above all.

12 Then the aged grandsire of the Kurus, the elder, roared a lion's roar to hearten the prince, and blew his conch with might.

13 And at once the conches and kettledrums, the cymbals, drums, and horns burst out together — and the sound was a single tumult.

14 Then, standing in the great chariot yoked with white horses, Krishna and Arjuna sounded their divine conches.

15 Krishna blew Panchajanya; Arjuna, Devadatta; and wolf-bellied Bhima, doer of fierce deeds, blew his great conch Paundra.

16 King Yudhishthira, son of Kunti, blew Anantavijaya; Nakula and Sahadeva, Sughosha and Manipushpaka.

17 And the king of Kashi, supreme archer, and Shikhandi of the great chariot, Dhrishtadyumna, Virata, and the unconquered Satyaki;

18 Drupada and the sons of Draupadi, O lord of earth, and the strong-armed son of Subhadra — each blew his own conch, on every side.

19 And the roar tore through the hearts of the sons of Dhritarashtra, resounding through heaven and earth.

20 Then, seeing the sons of Dhritarashtra in position, the weapons about to fall, the ape-bannered son of Pandu raised his bow — and spoke to Krishna:

21 ARJUNA SAID Drive my chariot, unfailing one, and set it between the two armies —

22 so I may look on these men standing here, hungry for battle — the men I must contend with in this rising storm of war.

23 Let me see the ones assembled here to fight, eager to serve in battle the ill-minded son of Dhritarashtra.

24 SANJAYA SAID So addressed by Arjuna, O king, Krishna drove the great chariot and halted it between the two armies —

25 in front of Bhishma and Drona and all the rulers of the earth — and said: Behold, son of Pritha, the Kurus assembled.

26 And there the son of Pritha saw them standing: fathers and grandfathers, teachers, uncles, brothers, sons, grandsons, comrades —

27 fathers-in-law and dear friends — in both armies. Both. Seeing all his kinsmen arrayed against his kinsmen,

28 the son of Kunti was filled with a pity beyond bearing, and said in despair: Krishna — seeing my own people here, drawn up and hungry for war,

29 my limbs give way, my mouth dries up, my body trembles, and my hair stands on end.

30 Gandiva slips from my hand. My skin is burning. I cannot keep my feet. My mind is whirling in circles.

31 And the omens I see are against us, Krishna. I can find no good in slaying my own people in battle.

32 I do not want victory, Krishna — not the kingdom, not the pleasures. What is a kingdom to us? What is enjoyment? What is life itself?

33 The ones for whose sake we would want kingdom, enjoyments, and happiness — they are standing here in battle order, staking their lives and their wealth:

34 teachers, fathers, sons, grandfathers, uncles, fathers-in-law, grandsons, brothers-in-law, kinsmen all.

35 I will not kill them, Krishna — though they kill me — not for the lordship of the three worlds. How then for one piece of earth?

36 What joy could come to us from striking down the sons of Dhritarashtra? Sin, only sin, would cling to us for slaying even these aggressors.

37 Therefore we must not kill the sons of Dhritarashtra, our own kin. How could we ever be happy again, Krishna, having killed our own people?

38 And even if they, minds sick with greed, cannot see the evil in destroying a family or the crime in betraying friends —

39 why should not we, who see the ruin clearly, know enough to turn back from this sin?

40 When the family is destroyed, the ancient laws of the family perish; and when the law perishes, lawlessness overwhelms all that remains.

41 From lawlessness, Krishna, the homes are corrupted; from corruption, the lines are confused —

42 and confusion drags the destroyers of families, and the family itself, downward; even the ancestors fall, robbed of their offerings of rice and water.

43 By these wrongs of the family-destroyers, which confound the ancient lines, the immemorial laws of clan and kin are torn out by the root.

44 And men whose family laws are torn away — their dwelling is in darkness. So we have always heard, Krishna.

45 Alas — we had resolved to commit a great sin, ready to slay our own people out of greed for a kingdom's pleasures.

46 Better for me if the sons of Dhritarashtra, weapons in hand, should kill me in the battle — unarmed, and unresisting.

47 SANJAYA SAID Having spoken so, in the middle of the field, Arjuna sank down into the seat of the chariot, and let the bow and arrows fall, his mind overthrown by grief.

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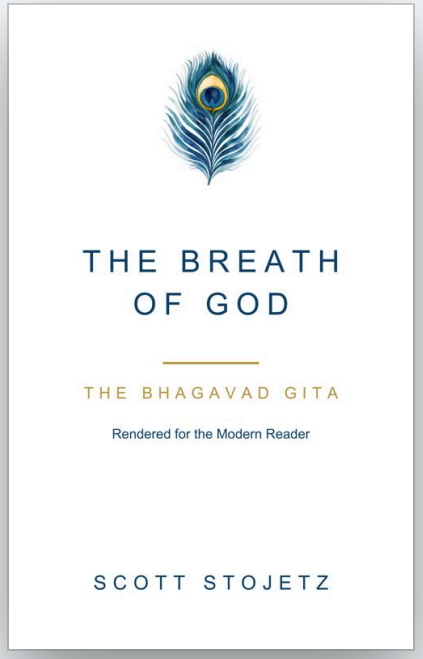

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