

Srimad Bhagavatam Canto 1 Chapter 1: Questions of the Sages

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A note before you read

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The primary and recommended way to study is to read directly from the physical Gita Press Bhagwat. When you are travelling, away from home, or the book is not at hand, these summaries may be used as a companion for continued study, revision and understanding.



In the sacred forest of Naimisaranya, the sage Shaunaka and a great assembly of seers honour the blessed Suta and place before him the questions that open the Srimad Bhagavatam.

Om Namō Bhagavate Vasudevaya.

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Welcome to *Srimad Bhagavatam Wisdom*, a devotional journey through the sacred histories and teachings of the Srimad Bhagavat Mahapurana. Today we stand at the very wellspring of that great river of stories — the first chapter of the first Canto. Here, in a forest made holy by long devotion, a company of sincere seekers ask the questions from which the entire scripture will flow. Before a single history is told, the Bhagavata teaches us how to begin: with reverence, with the right questions, and with a longing to hear of the Lord.

Chapter Information

- Scripture: Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa
- Canto: 1 (Book One)
- Chapter: 1 (Discourse 1)
- Chapter title: Questions of the Sages
- Principal speakers: the sage Vedavyāsa (the opening invocation) and the assembled sages of Naimisaranya
- Principal listener: the blessed Sūta, Ugraśravā, the reciter of the ancient lore
- Main setting: the forest of Naimisaranya, sacred to Lord Viṣṇu
- Central subject: the three great questions — the one means to the highest good, why the Lord descends, and where righteousness takes refuge in the age of Kali
- Principal verse range: Canto 1, Chapter 1, verses 1–23
- Primary edition: Gita Press *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa*



The Book Opens with a Meditation

The Bhagavata does not begin with an event. It begins with an act of worship. Before recounting a single history, the sage Vedavyāsa — also called Bādarāyaṇa — turns his mind toward the Supreme Truth in the celebrated invocation known as the *maṅgalācaraṇa*.

This transcendent Reality, the verse says, is the source out of which the universe rises, the ground on which it stands, and the end to which it returns. He is present within all that exists, yet distinct from all that is unreal. He is self-conscious and self-effulgent, shining by His own light. It was He who revealed the Vedas, by His mere will, to Brahmā, the very first seer — those Vedas whose depths bewilder even the greatest sages. In Him this threefold creation, woven of goodness, passion and darkness, though unreal, appears as real, resting upon the reality of its ground — even as the shimmer of sunlight is mistaken for water in a mirage. And by His own self-luminous glory He forever casts away all illusion. Upon that Supreme Truth, and upon nothing lesser, the sage fixes his mind.



The Bhagavata opens with a meditation on the Supreme Truth from whom all things arise (verse 1).

जन्माद्यस्य यतोऽन्वयादितरतश्चार्थेष्वभिज्ञः स्वराट्
तेने ब्रह्म हृदा य आदिकवये मुह्यन्ति यत्सूरयः ।
तेजोवारिमृदां यथा विनिमयो यत्र त्रिसर्गोऽमृषा
धाम्ना स्वेन सदा निरस्तकुहकं सत्यं परं धीमहि ॥ १ ॥

*janmādyasya yato'nvayād itarataś cārtheṣv abhijñāḥ svarāṭ tene brahma hṛdā ya ādi-kavaye muhyanti yat sūrayaḥ । tejo-
vāri-mṛdāṁ yathā vinimayo yatra tri-sargo'mṛṣā dhāmnā svena sadā nirasta-kuhakaṁ satyaṁ paraṁ dhīmahi ॥ 1 ॥*

Meaning: We meditate upon the Supreme Truth from whom this universe springs, in whom it abides, and into whom it returns; who is self-effulgent and all-knowing; who revealed the Vedas to Brahmā, the first seer; in whom the threefold creation, though unreal, appears real; and who by His own light forever dispels all illusion. (Canto 1, Chapter 1, verse 1)

Having bowed to the Truth, Vyāsa tells us what this book is. In this glorious Bhāgavata is taught the supreme Religion — the religion of loving God, called Bhāgavata Dharma. It is entirely free from every self-deception born of desire, free even from the desire for liberation itself. Here is expounded that absolute Reality known only to saints whose hearts hold no malice; the Reality that bestows the highest bliss and uproots the threefold agony — the sorrow of the body, the sorrow that comes from nature's forces, and the sorrow inflicted by other beings. By other means, it is uncertain whether God can be swiftly held within the heart. But through this work, He is instantly seized by those blessed souls who long, with a keen heart, simply to hear it recited.

धर्मः प्रोज्झितकैतवोऽत्र परमो निर्मत्सराणां सतां
वेद्यं वास्तवमत्र वस्तु शिवदं तापत्रयोन्मूलनम् ।
श्रीमद्भागवते महामुनिकृते किं वा परैरीश्वरः
सद्यो हृद्यवरुध्यतेऽत्र कृतिभिः शुश्रूषुभिस्तत्क्षणात् ॥ २ ॥

*dharmah projjhita-kaitavo 'tra paramo nirmatsarāṇāṁ satāṁ vedyam vāstavam atra vastu śivadam tāpa-trayonmūlanam ।
śrīmad-bhāgavate mahā-muni-kṛte kiṁ vā parair īśvaraḥ sadyo hṛdy avarudhyate 'tra kṛtibhiḥ śuśrūṣubhis tat-kṣaṇāt ॥ 2 ॥*

Meaning: Here is set forth the highest dharma, stripped of every selfish pretext, knowable only to the pure-hearted who bear no envy — the very substance that grants supreme good and uproots the threefold suffering; who needs another scripture once the Supreme Lord is captured in the heart, at once, by those eager souls who serve this Bhagavata with devotion? (Canto 1, Chapter 1, verse 2)

The Ripened Fruit of the Veda

Then Vyāsa offers an image so tender it has been treasured for ages. The Veda, he says, is a wish-yielding tree, and the Śrīmad Bhāgavata is its ripened fruit — fallen to the earth from the mouth of the parrot-like sage Śuka, filled with the flowing nectar of supreme bliss. It is sweetness unmixed, without rind or seed, pure essence. And so the sage calls out to every soul with a taste for the divine: O lovers of sacred joy, drink this nectar of the Bhāgavata again and again, so long as there is consciousness left in you.



The Bhagavata is the ripened fruit of the Veda-tree, fallen from the mouth of the sage Shuka (verse 3).

निगमकल्पतरुर्गलितं फलं शुकमुखादमृतद्रवसंयुतम् ।

पिबत भागवतं रसमालयं मुहुर्हो रसिका भुवि भावुकाः ॥ ३ ॥

nigama-kalpataror galitaṁ phalaṁ śuka-mukhād amṛta-drava-saṁyutam । pibata bhāgavataṁ rasam ālayaṁ muhur aho rasikā bhuvi bhāvukāḥ ॥ 3 ॥

Meaning: The Śrīmad Bhāgavata is the ripened fruit of the wish-yielding tree of the Veda, fallen from the mouth of the sage Śuka and full of nectar; O devotees of true taste, drink this nectar again and again upon the earth. (Canto 1, Chapter 1, verse 3)

There is a gentle play on words here: *Śuka* also means “parrot,” and it is well known that a fruit already tasted by a parrot is the sweetest of all. The Bhagavata, having passed through the mouth of the pure sage Śuka, is that supremely sweet fruit — ready now to be received by us.

A Sacrifice in the Naimisaranya Forest

With the invocation complete, the scene opens upon the earth. Once, in the forest known as Naimisaranya — a place sacred to Lord Viṣṇu — the sage Śaunaka and many other seers had gathered. Together they had undertaken a great sacrifice, vast in its vow, to be carried on through the course of a thousand years, all with a single aim: to realize the Lord who is sung in the heavens and who is the very abode of His devotees.



In the forest of Naimisaranya, sacred to Lord Vishnu, Shaunaka and a great assembly of seers undertake a sacrifice to be carried on for a thousand years.

One morning, after they had poured their oblations into the sacred fire, the sages turned toward a guest seated among them — the Sūta, Ugrasravā, a knower of the ancient lore. He is the son of Romaharṣaṇa, and is not to be confused with Śuka, the sage of the previous image. They paid him their respects; and when he had taken his seat, they placed before

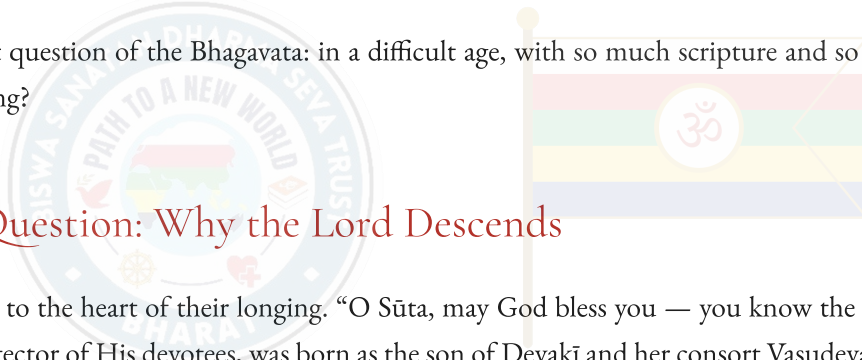
him their questions, with all due reverence. In that simple courtesy — honouring the teacher before asking — the Bhagavata quietly shows us how sacred knowledge is to be sought.

The First Question: The One Essential Good

“O sinless Sūta,” the sages began, “you have studied, and you have expounded, all the Purāṇas and the histories and the codes of sacred law. Whatever is known to the divine sage Bādarāyaṇa — Vedavyāsa himself — and to the other great seers, all of that you know in truth, by their grace, which you earned through your guileless and pure heart; for teachers confide even their deepest secrets to a beloved and worthy pupil. Therefore, be pleased to tell us that which you have determined, through the study of all these sacred books, to be the unfailing and easy means to the supreme good of all people.”

Then they spoke of the age in which they — and we — now live. In this age of Kali, they said, people are for the most part short of life and slothful, little inclined to walk the path of God-realization, dull of wit, unfortunate, and tormented by disease and many afflictions. The scriptures, too, are many, and they teach not one single discipline but a host of practices; being so vast, they can be heard only piece by piece. “Therefore,” the sages asked, “draw out by your discerning insight the very essence of them all, and declare it to us who are full of faith — that our minds may become still and serene.”

This is the first great question of the Bhagavata: in a difficult age, with so much scripture and so little time, what is the one thing worth doing?



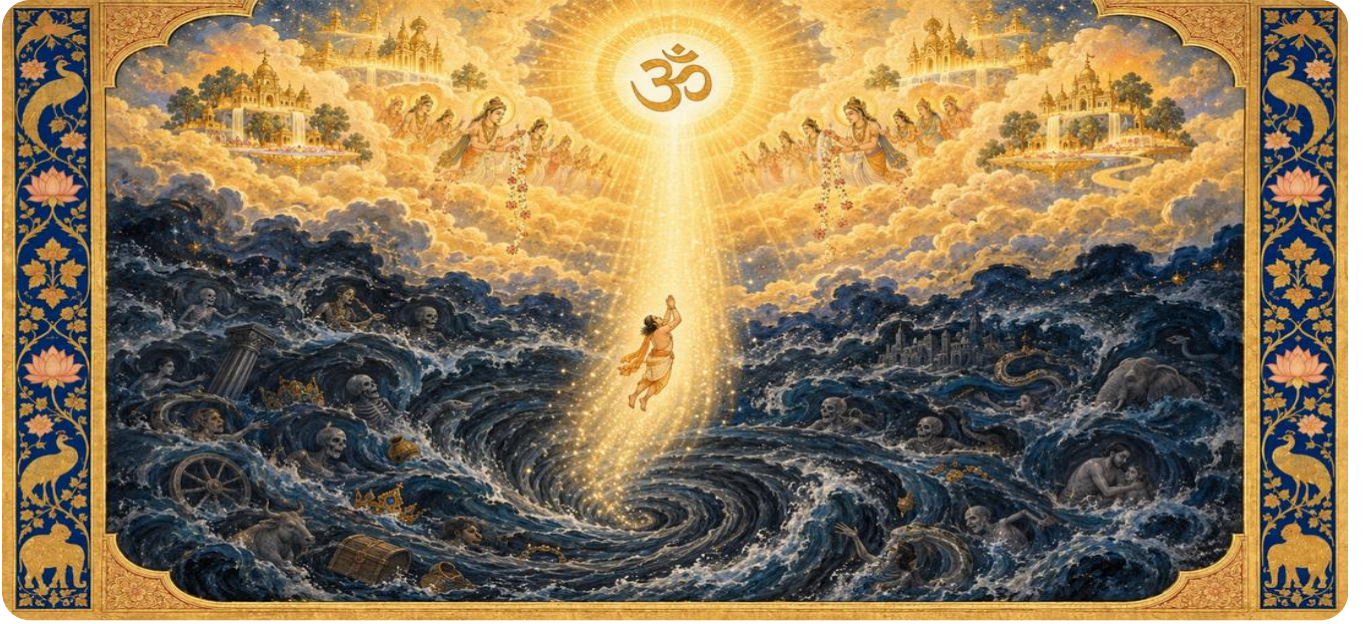
The Second Question: Why the Lord Descends

Now the sages come to the heart of their longing. “O Sūta, may God bless you — you know the purpose for which the divine Lord, the protector of His devotees, was born as the son of Devakī and her consort Vasudeva. Explain it to us, who are so eager to hear; for the Lord’s descent upon this earth is for the protection and the prosperity of all living beings.”

And then they speak a truth about the holy Name that has since become the refuge of countless souls.

The Power of the Holy Name

One who has fallen into the terrible whirlpool of birth and death, the sages declare, can be delivered simply by uttering the Lord’s Name — even helplessly, even without full intention. For the Lord is the terror of all terror; Fear itself is afraid of Him. Even a name spoken in weakness, even a cry uttered in distress, reaches Him, and He who is dreaded by Fear itself sets the fallen soul free at once.



Even a helpless utterance of the Lord's Name delivers the fallen soul, for Fear itself is afraid of Him (verse 14).

आपन्नः संसृतिं घोरां यन्नाम विवशो गृणन् ।
ततः सद्यो विमुच्येत यद्विभेति स्वयं भयम् ॥ १४ ॥

āpannaḥ saṁsṛtiṁ ghorāṁ yan-nāma vivaśo gr̥ṇan । tataḥ sadyo vimucyeta yad bibheti svayaṁ bhayaṁ ॥ 14 ॥

Meaning: One fallen into the terrible whirlpool of birth and death is at once delivered by uttering the Lord's Name, even helplessly; for Fear itself is afraid of Him. (Canto 1, Chapter 1, verse 14)

The sages press their point with two luminous comparisons. Those sages who have taken shelter at the Lord's feet, and who therefore abide in perfect calm, purify all who come into contact with them — and purify them at once; whereas even the waters of the celestial Gaṅgā cleanse the heart only by long and continued use. Who, then — though longing to purify his own soul — would refuse to hear the glory of that divine Lord, whose exploits are extolled by saints of holy renown, and whose glory wipes away the very impurities of the Kali age? The medicine for this dark age, the sages imply, is already in their hands: it is the hearing of the Lord's glory.

A Longing to Hear His Deeds

Their request now grows fuller. They ask not for one story, but for the whole shining record of the Lord's descents. "Narrate to us, who are full of reverence, the noble doings of the Lord who playfully assumes His many forms — the doings sung by the seers, by Nārada and others. Recount the blessed stories of the descent of the Almighty, who enacts sports of every kind by the power of His Yogamāyā, His divine potency. For our part, we are never sated with hearing His exploits — exploits that grow more and more delightful at every step to listeners who have a true taste for what is sweet. Indeed the divine Śrī Kṛṣṇa, who had veiled Himself in a human semblance, performed together with His elder brother Śrī Balarāma feats that lay far beyond all human power."



Krishna, veiled in human semblance, performed together with His elder brother Balarama feats beyond all human power.

The Third Question: Where Has Dharma Gone?

At last the sages reveal why, of all times, they raise these questions now — and why here, in this very forest. “Having come to know that the age of Kali has arrived, we have gathered in this holy retreat, sacred to Śrī Viṣṇu, for a long sacrificial session — and so we have gained ample time to hear the stories of Śrī Hari. This age of Kali steals away the purity of men’s hearts, and it is hard indeed to overcome. Yet, anxious as we are to cross beyond it, Providence has arranged our meeting with you — even as a skilled pilot is sent to those who seek to cross a turbulent sea.”



Providence arranged the sages' meeting with the Suta, as a skilled pilot is sent to those who seek to cross a turbulent sea.

And then comes the final question, the question upon which the entire scripture turns. Since Śrī Kṛṣṇa — the Master of Yoga, the friend of the Brāhmaṇas, the very armour of righteousness — has now departed for His own supreme abode, tell us: in whom has righteousness sought protection now?

ब्रूहि योगेश्वरे कृष्णे ब्रह्मण्ये धर्मवर्मणि ।

स्वां काष्ठामधुनोपेते धर्मः कं शरणं गतः ॥ २३ ॥

brūhi yogeśvare kṛṣṇe brahmaṇye dharma-varmaṇi । svām kāṣṭhām adhunopete dharmah kaṁ śaraṇaṁ gataḥ ॥ 23 ॥

Meaning: Since Śrī Kṛṣṇa, the Master of Yoga, the friend of the Brāhmaṇas and the armour of righteousness, has departed for His own abode, tell us: in whom has Dharma now taken refuge? (Canto 1, Chapter 1, verse 23)

It is a question full of tenderness and of fear. The Lord who was the shield of Dharma has withdrawn from mortal sight; Kali has come; and a world that loved Him wonders where goodness will now find its shelter. With this question hanging in the sacred air of Naimisaranya, the blessed Sūta prepares to speak — and the whole ocean of the Bhāgavata waits to pour forth in answer.

Principal Teachings

1. Begin with reverence and the right question. Before knowledge is given, the teacher is honoured (verse 5). The whole Bhagavata is set in motion not by a demand but by a devout, well-framed inquiry — a reminder that the seeking heart matters as much as the answer.
2. The Supreme Truth is the source, support, and goal of all. The invocation (verse 1) fixes the mind on the one Reality from whom all arises, in whom all rests, into whom all returns — self-effulgent and beyond all illusion.
3. Bhāgavata Dharma is love free of self-interest. The supreme religion taught here (verse 2) is free of every selfish motive, even the desire for liberation — devotion offered purely for the Lord's own sake.
4. Hearing of the Lord is the remedy for the age of Kali. In a short, distracted, disease-ridden age (verse 10), the sages find one sufficient practice: to hear and speak the glory of the Lord (verse 16), which wipes away Kali's impurities.
5. The holy Name delivers even the helpless. No qualification is required but the Name itself (verse 14). Uttered even in weakness, it frees the soul from the whirlpool of birth and death.
6. Holy company purifies at once. The Lord's devotees purify all who come near them instantly (verse 15) — a grace swifter even than the sacred river.
7. The Lord descends for the good of all. His birth and deeds are not for Himself but for the protection and prosperity of every living being (verse 13) — the reason the sages long to hear His stories.

A Devotional Reflection

There is something quietly moving in the way the Bhagavata begins. No miracle is worked in this chapter; no demon is slain. What happens is smaller and, in its way, greater: a group of sincere people, gathered in a holy place, ask the right questions. They do not ask how to gain wealth or power. They ask for the one thing worth doing, for the meaning of the Lord's coming, and for where goodness may shelter now that He has gone from sight. And already, in the asking, the answer has begun to glow — for the very hearing of the Lord's glory, we are told, is itself the medicine for our age. When we sit with this chapter, we are invited to become like those sages: to quiet the restless mind, to honour what is sacred, and to bring our own honest questions to the feet of the Lord, trusting that He is nearer than our fear.

A Daily Devotional Practice

Take a moment today to do what the sages did — to hear the Lord's glory. Read or listen slowly to even a few verses of the Bhagavata, and if you can, gently repeat one of the Lord's holy names, remembering that even a helpless utterance reaches Him. Let the practice be small and sincere. That is enough to begin.

Conclusion

So ends the first discourse of the Śrīmad Bhāgavata — the story that unfolds in the Naimisaranya forest, in Book One of this great Purāṇa, which the God-realized call the Paramahansa-Saṁhitā, the book of the perfected souls. In this opening chapter, Srimad Bhagavatam Canto 1 Chapter 1, the sage Vyāsa bows to the Supreme Truth, offers us the ripened fruit of the Veda, and then lets us overhear the sages of Naimisaranya as they ask their three great questions: what is the one unfailing means to the highest good, why does the Lord descend, and in whom has righteousness taken refuge now that Śrī Kṛṣṇa has returned to His abode? These questions are ours as much as theirs. From the next discourse, the blessed Sūta will begin his reply, and the sacred history will open before us like a flower. May we, like those seekers of Naimisaranya, gather our restless minds with faith and drink again and again the nectar of the Lord's glory.

May the divine wisdom of Srimad Bhagavatam awaken pure devotion within our hearts.

Om Namō Bhagavate Vasudevaya.

Jay Shree Madhav.

References and Attribution

Primary edition: Gita Press, Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa (English), Book One (Skandha 1), Discourse 1, book pages 1–3.

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