

Srimad Bhagavatam Canto 1 Chapter 3: Source of Incarnations

11 September 2026



A note before you read

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From the Supreme Lord, the imperishable seed of every descent, the countless divine incarnations arise — and of them all, Sri Krishna is the Lord Himself.

Om Namō Bhagavate Vasudevaya.

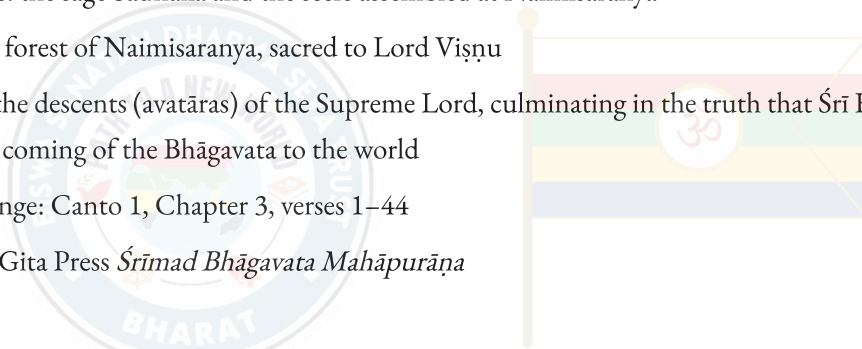
Om Namō Bhagavate Vasudevaya.

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Welcome to *Srimad Bhagavatam Wisdom*, a devotional journey through the sacred histories and teachings of the Srimad Bhagavat Mahapurana. In the first chapter the sages of Naimisaranya asked the blessed Suta why the Lord descends upon the earth; now, in the third discourse, he answers that question directly. He unfolds the great procession of the Lord's avatars — from the Primal Person on the causal waters, through the Boar and the Fish, the Man-Lion and the Dwarf, down to Rama and Krishna, and onward to Buddha and the Kalki who is yet to come. And at the centre of this shining list he places one luminous truth that the whole Bhagavata will spend twelve books unfolding: these many forms are rays and portions of the Divine, but Sri Krishna is the Supreme Person Himself.

Chapter Information

- Scripture: Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa
- Canto: 1 (Book One)
- Chapter: 3 (Discourse 3)
- Chapter title: Krishna, the Source of All Incarnations
- Principal speaker: the blessed Sūta, Ugrasravā, the reciter of the ancient lore
- Principal listeners: the sage Śaunaka and the seers assembled at Naimisaranya
- Main setting: the forest of Naimisaranya, sacred to Lord Viṣṇu
- Central subject: the descents (avatāras) of the Supreme Lord, culminating in the truth that Śrī Kṛṣṇa is the Lord Himself, and the coming of the Bhāgavata to the world
- Principal verse range: Canto 1, Chapter 3, verses 1–44
- Primary edition: Gita Press *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa*



Context from the Previous Chapter

In the second discourse the Suta had explained that the highest religion of all is unmotivated, uninterrupted loving devotion to the Lord, before whom every ritual and duty finds its true fruit. Having established *why* devotion matters, he now turns to its object — the forms in which the one Supreme Lord has come down, again and again, for the good of the world — in direct reply to the sages' question: for what purpose does the divine Lord take birth?

The Primal Person on the Causal Waters

The Suta begins at the very beginning. In the dawn of creation, desiring to bring forth the many worlds, the Supreme Lord assumed the form of the *Puruṣa* — the Primal Person — composed of sixteen principles: the ten organs of sense and action, the five elements, and the mind, all evolved from *Mahat*, the cosmic intelligence. This was the first shape the formless One took for the sake of the universe He was about to unfold.

जगृहे पौरुषं रूपं भगवान्महदादिभिः ।

सम्भूतं षोडशकलमादौ लोकसिसृक्षया ॥ १ ॥

jagṛhe pauruṣaṁ rūpaṁ bhagavān mahad-ādibhiḥ । sambhūtaṁ ṣoḍaśa-kalam ādau loka-sisṛkṣayā ॥ 1 ॥

Meaning: In the beginning, desiring to bring forth the worlds, the Lord assumed the form of the Primal Person, composed of the sixteen principles evolved from *Mahat* and the rest. (Canto 1, Chapter 3, verse 1)

As that Person lay in the yoga-sleep of *samādhi* upon the causal waters, a lotus sprang from the lake of His navel, and from it arose Brahmā, the lord of the world's progenitors. Upon the disposition of His limbs the many worlds are, as it were, superimposed; this is the Lord's most exalted form, of pure *sattva*, which the yogis behold with their inner eye — wondrous with its thousands of arms and faces, heads and eyes, resplendent with countless diadems. This form, known as Nārāyaṇa, is the imperishable seed and the resting-place of all the descents that follow: it is by a ray of a ray of Him that gods, human beings and lower creatures come to be.

एतन्नानावताराणां निधानं बीजमव्ययम् ।

यस्यांशांशेन सृज्यन्ते देवतिर्यङ्नरादयः ॥ ५ ॥

etan nānāvātārāṇāṁ nīdhānaṁ bijam avyayam । yasyāṁśāṁśena sṛjyante deva-tīryaṅ-narādayaḥ ॥ 5 ॥

Meaning: This form is the imperishable seed and treasure-house of the many descents; by a portion of His portion are the gods, the animals, the human beings and the rest brought forth. (Canto 1, Chapter 3, verse 5)

The Descents of the Lord, One by One

From this source the Suta now recounts the great procession of the avatars, in their traditional order. It reads like a litany of divine compassion — each descent answering a particular need of the world.

First, the Lord appeared as the four Kumāras, Sanaka and his brothers, taking the form of *brāhmaṇas* and observing the unbroken vow of lifelong celibacy. In His second descent He became the divine Boar (Varāha), and lifted the earth, which had sunk into the depths of the ocean, so that creation might go forward. As the celestial sage Nārada, His third descent, He gave the world the Pāñcarātra, the Vaiṣṇava science of acting without being bound by action. In His fourth form He was born of Dharma's wife Mūrti as the twin sages Nara and Nārāyaṇa and undertook severe penance. As Kapila, His fifth descent, He taught the lost Sāṅkhya philosophy to the sage Āsuri. In His sixth, born of Atri and Anasūyā as Dattātreya, He taught the science of the Self to King Alarka and to Prahlāda. In His seventh, born of Ruci and Ākūti as Yajña, He Himself held the office of Indra during the first age of Manu.



In His second descent the Lord took the form of the divine Boar and raised the sunken earth from the depths of the ocean.

The list continues without pause. As R̥ṣabhadeva, His eighth descent, born of King Nābhi and Queen Merudevī, He taught by His own example the way of the *paramahāṁsas*, the perfected souls. As Pṛthu, His ninth, He tenderly “milked” the earth of all her hidden wealth for the welfare of the world. When a deluge threatened all three worlds at the close of an age, He became the great Fish (Matsya) and carried the future Vaivasvata Manu to safety upon a boat. As the Tortoise (Kūrma), His eleventh, He bore Mount Mandara upon His back while the gods and demons churned the ocean. In His twelfth He rose from that ocean as Dhanvantari bearing the nectar; and in His thirteenth He took the form of the enchanting Mohinī, and gave the nectar to the gods. As the Man-Lion (Nṛsimha), His fourteenth, He tore apart the mighty demon Hiraṇyakaśipu as easily as a weaver splits a reed. As the Dwarf (Vāmana), His fifteenth, He came to the sacrifice of Bali and begged three paces of land. As Paraśurāma, His sixteenth, He cleared the earth of its lawless warrior kings. As Vyāsa, His seventeenth, born of Satyawatī through the sage Parāśara, He divided the one Veda into many branches for a people of feeble intellect. As Śrī Rāma, His eighteenth, He performed heroic feats such as bridging the ocean. And in His nineteenth and twentieth descents He was born among the Vṛ̥ṣṇis as Balarāma and Śrī Kṛ̥ṣṇa, and relieved the earth of her burden.

Buddha, and the Descent Yet to Come

The Suta does not stop with the descents already accomplished. When the age of Kali is well set in, he says, the Lord will appear as Buddha, son of Añjana, in the land of Kīkaṭa, to bewilder those who are enemies of the gods. And then, towards the very close of the Kali age, when rulers have mostly turned into robbers, the Lord of the universe will descend as Kalki, born of Viṣṇuyaśa.



Towards the close of the age of Kali the Lord will descend as Kalki, born of Vishnuyasha (verse 25).

अथासौ युगसन्ध्यायां दस्युप्रायेषु राजसु ।
जनिता विष्णुयशसो नाम्ना कल्किर्जगत्पतिः ॥ २५ ॥

athāsau yuga-sandhyāyām dasyu-prāyeṣu rājasu । janitā viṣṇu-yaśaso nāmnā kalkir jagat-patiḥ ॥ 25 ॥

Meaning: Then, at the junction of the ages, when the kings have mostly become like robbers, the Lord of the universe will be born as Kalki, the son of Viṣṇuyaśa. (Canto 1, Chapter 3, verse 25)

Countless as Rivulets from a Lake

Having named these descents, the Suta is careful to say that the list is not a limit but an illustration. The avatars of the Lord, that inexhaustible reservoir of goodness, are beyond all counting — as many, he says, as the streams that flow endlessly from a lake that never runs dry.



The descents of the Lord are countless, like the streams that flow endlessly from an inexhaustible lake (verse 26).

अवतारा ह्यसङ्ख्येया हरेः सत्त्वनिधेर्द्विजाः ।

यथाविदासिनः कुल्याः सरसः स्युः सहस्रशः ॥ २६ ॥

avatārā hy asaṅkhyeyā hareḥ sattva-nidher dvijāḥ / yathāvidāsinaḥ kulyāḥ sarasaḥ syuḥ sahasraśaḥ ॥ 26 ॥

Meaning: O brāhmaṇas, the descents of Śrī Hari, that store-house of goodness, are innumerable — like the thousands of rivulets that flow from an inexhaustible lake. (Canto 1, Chapter 3, verse 26)

The great sages and seers, he adds, the Manus, the gods and the Prajāpatīs — all who are endowed with great power — are themselves rays of Śrī Hari, shining with a borrowed light.

Sri Krishna Is the Lord Himself

Now comes the verse upon which this entire chapter, and in a sense the whole Bhagavata, turns. All these descents, the Suta declares, are partial manifestations — *aṁśa* and *kalā*, portions and rays of the Supreme Person. But Śrī Kṛṣṇa is not a portion of the Lord; He is the Lord Himself, appearing age after age to gladden a world tormented by the enemies of the gods.



All the descents are portions and rays of the Divine, but Sri Krishna is the Supreme Lord Himself (verse 28).

एते चांशकलाः पुंसः कृष्णस्तु भगवान् स्वयम् ।
इन्द्रारिव्याकुलं लोकं मृडयन्ति युगे युगे ॥ २८ ॥

ete cāṁśa-kalāḥ puṁsaḥ kṛṣṇas tu bhagavān svayam । indrāri-vyākulaṁ lokaṁ mṛdayanti yuge yuge ॥ 28 ॥

Meaning: All these are portions and rays of the Supreme Person, but Śrī Kṛṣṇa is the Lord Himself; age after age they bring solace to a world afflicted by the enemies of the gods. (Canto 1, Chapter 3, verse 28)

This story of the Lord's descents, the Suta says, is a sacred secret; whoever recites it with devotion morning and evening is freed from all sorrow.

The Lord Beyond the Universe He Creates

The Suta now lifts the discussion from the many forms to their formless ground. That vast material universe — the gross cosmic form — is woven out of the Lord's own *Māyā* and is, as it were, superimposed upon Him who is essentially spiritual and has no material shape. Just as the unthinking imagine that the clouds belong to the sky, or that dustiness belongs to the empty air, so the ignorant mistake this changing universe for the changeless Self who merely witnesses it. Beyond even the gross form lies the Lord's subtle form, imperceptible to sense; it is this subtle body, wrongly identified with the Self, that the soul carries through birth after birth. When such misidentification is dissolved by true knowledge, in that very moment the realization of Brahman dawns, and the soul rests in its own glory.

In these terms, the Suta says, the wise describe the descents and deeds of the Lord who is really without birth or action — for His comings and His doings are a guarded secret of the Vedas. His pastimes are never idle: by mere play He creates, sustains and withdraws the worlds, yet is never bound by them; dwelling unseen within every heart, He seems to taste the

objects of the senses, and yet, being master of Himself, remains forever untouched. No dull mind can grasp His names and deeds by cleverness alone, any more than an untutored man can fathom the tricks of a conjurer.

स वेद धातुः पदवीं परस्य
दुरन्तवीर्यस्य रथाङ्गपाणेः ।
योऽमायया सन्ततयानुवृत्त्या
भजेत तत्पादसरोजगन्धम् ॥ ३८ ॥

sa veda dhātuḥ padavīm parasya duranta-vīryasya rathāṅga-pāṇeḥ yo 'māyayā santatayānuvṛtṭyā bhajeta tat-pāda-saroja-gandham ॥ 38 ॥

Meaning: Only one who, without guile, follows the fragrance of His lotus-feet in unbroken, loving service comes to know the path of that Supreme Being, whose might is unfathomable and who bears the discus in His hand. (Canto 1, Chapter 3, verse 38)

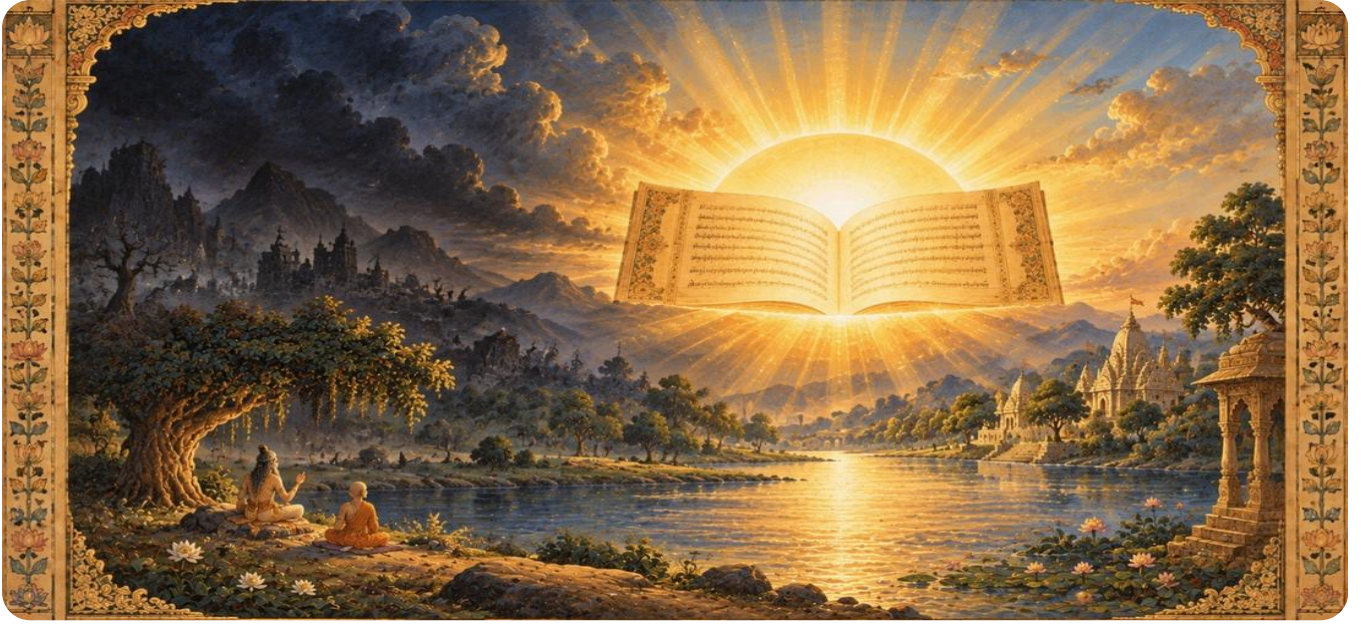
His ways, in other words, are known only to one who breathes the fragrance of His lotus-feet through constant, sincere devotion — never through cleverness or ritual show.

The Fortune of Loving Devotion

Then the Suta turns, with evident warmth, to the sages before him. You blessed souls, he tells them, are fortunate indeed: in this very life, in this world so full of obstacles, you cultivate an undivided love for Bhagavān Vāsudeva, Śrī Kṛṣṇa, the Lord of the whole universe — and by that love one never again falls into the terrible whirlpool of birth and death. In a single sentence the entire teaching of the chapter is turned toward the listener: the study of the descents is not for curiosity but for devotion.

How the Bhagavata Came to the World

Finally the Suta tells how this very scripture reached him. The divine seer Vedavyāsa, he says, composed this Purāṇa — the Śrīmad Bhāgavata, equal to the Vedas and filled with the stories of the Lord of glorious renown — for the highest good of humankind, and taught it to his son Śukadeva, the foremost of the Self-realized. Śukadeva in turn recited it to the great King Parīkṣit, who sat fasting on the bank of the Gaṅgā, surrounded by the foremost sages, awaiting his death. And now, the Suta says, when Śrī Kṛṣṇa has departed for His own abode together with religion, knowledge and all, this Purāṇa has risen like a sun for the people who have been blinded in the darkness of the Kali age.



Now that Śrī Krishna has returned to His abode, the Bhagavata has risen like a sun for those blinded in the age of Kali (verse 43).

कृष्णे स्वधामोपगते धर्मज्ञानादिभिः सह ।
कलौ नष्टदृशामेष पुराणार्कोऽधुनोदितः ॥ ४३ ॥

kṛṣṇe sva-dhāmopagate dharma-jñānādibhiḥ saha । kalau naṣṭa-dṛśām eṣa purāṇārko 'dhunoditaḥ ॥ 43 ॥

Meaning: Now that Śrī Kṛṣṇa has departed for His own abode, taking religion, knowledge and the rest with Him, this Purāṇa has arisen like a sun for those who have lost their sight in the age of Kali. (Canto 1, Chapter 3, verse 43)

The Suta was himself present on the bank of the Gaṅgā, he tells the sages, when Śukadeva recited this great Purāṇa; he learnt it there by that sage's grace, and will now repeat it to them as faithfully as he is able. With these words the stage is set: from the next discourse onward, the sacred history itself will begin to flow.

Principal Teachings

1. The one Lord descends in many forms. From the Primal Person on the causal waters (verses 1–5) proceed all the avatars — the Boar, the Fish, the Man-Lion, Rama, Krishna and the rest. The variety of forms conceals a single divine purpose: the protection and uplift of the world.
2. The descents are countless. The famous list is illustrative, not exhaustive (verse 26); the Lord's incarnations are as numberless as streams from an inexhaustible lake, and even the great sages and gods are His rays.
3. Krishna is the Supreme Lord Himself. The pivotal verse of the chapter (verse 28) distinguishes the partial descents, which are portions and rays, from Śrī Kṛṣṇa, who is *bhagavān svayam* — the Lord in His own complete Person.
4. The Lord is untouched by the world He creates. Beyond the gross and subtle forms He remains the changeless witness (verses 30–36); the universe is superimposed on Him as clouds seem to belong to the sky.

5. He is known only through devotion. Cleverness cannot grasp His names and deeds (verses 37–38); only one who serves His lotus-feet with sincere, unbroken love comes to know His ways.
6. Loving devotion frees the soul. Undivided love for Bhagavān Vāsudeva (verse 39) lifts the devotee forever beyond the whirlpool of birth and death — the practical fruit of the whole teaching.
7. The Bhagavata is a light for the age of Kali. Composed by Vyāsa, spoken by Śukadeva to Parīkṣit, it has risen like a sun (verse 43) for those blinded by the darkness of this age.

A Devotional Reflection

There is a quiet reassurance in this chapter. It answers a fear that lives in every believing heart: has God truly cared for this world? The Suta’s reply is a long procession of “yes” — the Lord came as the Boar to lift a drowning earth, as the Fish to save a righteous man from the flood, as Rama and as Krishna to relieve the world of its burdens, and He will come again as Kalki when the age grows dark. The descents are not distant mythology; they are the record of a love that keeps returning. And at the centre of that record stands one gentle, decisive line — *Krishna is the Lord Himself* — reminding us that the highest Truth is not an abstraction but a Person we may love. To read this chapter is to be invited out of anxious speculation and into simple devotion.

A Daily Devotional Practice

Take a few quiet minutes today to remember the Lord’s descents with gratitude. Recall even one of them — the Boar who lifted the earth, or Krishna who came among the Vṛṣṇis — and let it remind you that the Divine has never abandoned this world. Then, as the Suta says of this sacred story, recite or read a little of it “morning and evening,” and gently offer a single loving thought to Bhagavān Vāsudeva. Let devotion, not curiosity, be the fruit of your remembering.

Conclusion

So ends the third discourse of the Śrīmad Bhāgavata, in Book One of this great Purāṇa which the God-realized call the Paramahansa-Saṁhitā. In this chapter, Srimad Bhagavatam Canto 1 Chapter 3, the blessed Suta answered the sages’ longing to know why the Lord descends. He traced the avatars from the Primal Person upon the causal waters, through the merciful procession of the Boar, the Fish, the Man-Lion, the Dwarf, Rama and Krishna, on to Buddha and the Kalki yet to come — and then declared the great truth that these are all portions and rays of the Divine, while Śrī Kṛṣṇa is the Supreme Lord Himself. He showed that the Lord, though the maker of the universe, stands forever beyond it, and is known not by argument but by love; and he told how this very Purāṇa, spoken by Śukadeva to the dying king Parīkṣit, has risen like a sun for a darkened age. From the next discourse, the sacred history will begin to unfold in earnest. May we, remembering the Lord’s endless descents, learn to love Him who is their source.

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

Om Namo Bhagavate Vasudevaya.

References and Attribution

Primary edition: Gita Press, Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa (English), Book One (Skandha 1), Discourse 3, book pages 7–11.

Srimad Bhagavatam Wisdom · Biswa Sanatan Dharma Seva Trust. Presented following the spiritual guidance and recommendation of Pandit Dr. Shri Kashinath Mishra.

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