

Srimad Bhagavatam Canto 1 Chapter 9: The Passing of Bhishma

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On his bed of arrows at Kurukshetra, the grandsire Bhishma fixes his gaze upon Sri Krishna and gives up his mortal body, extolling the Lord with his last breath.

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. The war is over, the funeral rites are done, and one great soul still lingers on the battlefield. Bhishma, the grandsire of the Kuru line, lies upon a bed of arrows of his own choosing, waiting for the auspicious hour to depart. In this ninth chapter of the First Canto, King Yudhishtira comes to him for instruction in sacred duty, a vast assembly of sages gathers around him, and the dying patriarch — with Sri Krishna standing before his eyes — pours out one of the most luminous death-bed prayers in all of scripture. Here we watch a warrior become a saint, and a man who has lived a whole age of the world lay it all down at the feet of the Lord.

Chapter Information

- Scripture: Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa
- Canto: 1 (Book One)
- Chapter: 9 (Discourse 9)
- Chapter title: The Passing of Bhishma
- Principal speaker: the blessed Sūta, Ugrasravā (narrator); the grandsire Bhīṣma (Devavrata)
- Principal listener: King Yudhiṣṭhira and the assembled sages; the narration itself is addressed to the sages of Naimisaranya, headed by Śaunaka
- Main setting: the field of Kurukṣetra (Vinaśana), the place of the great battle, and afterward Hastināpura
- Central subject: Yudhiṣṭhira and the Pāṇḍavas, with Śrī Kṛṣṇa, call upon Bhīṣma as he lies on his bed of arrows; Bhīṣma instructs the king in Dharma and, his eyes fixed on the Lord, gives up his body while extolling Him
- Principal verse range: Canto 1, Chapter 9, verses 1–49
- Primary edition: Gita Press *Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa*

Context from the Previous Chapter

In the eighth discourse, the grieving family offered water to their dead upon the bank of the Gaṅgā. There the pregnant Uttarā ran to Śrī Kṛṣṇa in terror, and the Lord shielded the child in her womb from Aśvatthāmā's unfailing weapon, preserving the line of Kuru in the future Emperor Parīkṣit. Queen Kuntī poured out her matchless prayer, welcoming adversity so that she might never forget the Lord; and King Yudhiṣṭhira gave way to a remorse that even Kṛṣṇa's comfort could not lift. It is with the king still burdened by that sorrow that the ninth chapter opens.

The Journey to Kurukshetra

Still troubled in heart over the wrongs done to humanity in the war, and wishing to be enlightened about all sacred duties, King Yudhiṣṭhira set out for Vinaśana — the field of Kurukṣetra — where Devavrata, the grandsire Bhīṣma, lay upon his bed of arrows. All his celebrated brothers followed him in chariots drawn by fine horses and decked with gold, and with them went the sages Vyāsa, Dhaumya the family priest, and others.



King Yudhishtira and his brothers, with Sri Krishna and the sages, ride out to the field of Kurukshetra to seek Bhishma's counsel.

Lord Śrī Kṛṣṇa Himself rode along in a chariot together with Dhanañjaya (Arjuna); and in their midst King Yudhishtira shone as brightly as Kubera, the chief of the Yakṣas, surrounded by his Guhyaka attendants. Perceiving Bhīṣma lying upon the ground like a god fallen from heaven, the Pāṇḍavas and their followers, and Śrī Kṛṣṇa with them, made their obeisance to him.

The Great Assembly of Sages

Bhīṣma's passing was no private matter, for he was the foremost of the Bharatas. At that hour a great host of holy men had gathered on the field to see him — Brāhmaṇa sages, celestial sages, and royal sages, all assembled together.



A great assembly of Brahmin, celestial, and royal sages gathers around Bhishma as he lies on his bed of arrows.

There were Parvata and Nārada, Dhaumya and the divine Bādarāyaṇa (Vyāsa); Bṛhadaśva, Bharadwāja and Paraśurāma, the son of Reṇukā, each with his pupils; Vasiṣṭha, Indrapramada, Trita, Gṛtsamada, Asita, Kakṣivān, Gautama, Atri and Viśwāmitra; Sudarśana and other holy sages such as Brahmarāta (Śuka), and Kaśyapa and Aṅgīrasa too, all arriving with their disciples. Seeing these highly blessed souls assembled there, Bhīṣma — well-versed in the principles of right conduct — paid his respects to them with due regard to the time and the place. And knowing the glory of Śrī Kṛṣṇa, the Lord of the universe, who had taken a personal form through His own Māyā, who sat before him and was at the same time enthroned within his heart, Bhīṣma offered his homage to Him.

कृष्णं च तत्प्रभावज्ञ आसीनं जगदीश्वरम् ।
हृदिस्थं पूजयामास माययोपात्तविग्रहम् ॥ १० ॥

kṛṣṇaṁ ca tat-prabhāva-jña āsīnaṁ jagad-īśvaram hṛdi-sthaṁ pūjayām āsa māyayopātta-vigrahaṁ

Meaning: Knowing His glory, Bhīṣma worshipped Śrī Kṛṣṇa, the Lord of the universe, who was seated before him in a form assumed through His own divine power, and who dwelt at the same time within his heart. (Canto 1, Chapter 9, verse 10)

Bhishma's Words of Comfort and the Rule of Time

Then, his eyes blinded with tears of affection, Bhīṣma looked upon the sons of Pāṇḍu, who sat beside him full of modesty and love, and spoke to them tender words. How painful and how unjust it had been, he said, that they — the very progeny of righteousness, devoted to the Brāhmaṇas, to Dharma, and to Lord Acyuta — should have lived a life of such suffering, which they in no way deserved. When the great Pāṇḍu breathed his last they were all of tender age, and their mother Prthā had borne many hardships on their account.



With tears of affection, Bhishma comforts the Pandavas, teaching that all their sorrows were the working of Time (verse 14).

All these unwelcome experiences, Bhīṣma told them, were the work of Time, the unseen hand of Providence; for the whole world with its guardian deities is governed by Time, even as the clouds are driven by the wind.

सर्वं कालकृतं मन्ये भवतां च यदप्रियम् ।

सपालो यद्वशे लोको वायोरिव घनावलिः ॥ १४ ॥

sarvaṁ kāla-kṛtaṁ manye bhavatāṁ ca yad-apriyam sapālo yad-vaśe loko vāyor iva ghanāvaliḥ

Meaning: I consider all that has been unwelcome to you to be the work of Time; for the world, together with its guardian deities, is ruled by Time, even as a mass of clouds is driven by the wind. (Canto 1, Chapter 9, verse 14)

How strange it was, he marvelled, that adversity should visit a house where Yudhiṣṭhira the son of Dharma was king, where Bhīma wielded the mace and Arjuna the bow Gāṇḍīva, and where Śrī Kṛṣṇa Himself was the friend and well-wisher! No man, he said, can ever fathom the intention of the Lord; even great seers are bewildered when they seek it out. Therefore, knowing for certain that all these events rested upon the will of Providence, Bhīṣma urged Yudhiṣṭhira to follow that will and to protect his helpless subjects as their one true monarch.

Bhishma Beholds the Lord of the Universe

Then the grandsire turned from consolation to the deepest truth. Śrī Kṛṣṇa, he declared, is God Himself, none other than the Prime Person, Lord Nārāyaṇa. Deluding the world by His own Māyā, He moves unrecognized among the Vṛṣṇis. None but Lord Śiva, the celestial sage Nārada, and Lord Kapila know the most hidden glory of this Kṛṣṇa — whom the Pāṇḍavas took for their cousin, their beloved friend and well-wisher, and whom, out of affection, they had made their counsellor, their envoy, and even their charioteer. He who is the Soul of all, the same in every eye, without a second and free from every trace of egotism — in Him there can be no real division of high and low.

Look, said Bhīṣma, at His compassion for those who are devoted to Him alone: Śrī Kṛṣṇa has appeared in person before me at the very hour of my death. And a Yogī who casts off his body with his mind fixed on the Lord and His Name upon his tongue is freed from every worldly craving and released from the bondage of action.

भक्त्यावेश्य मनो यस्मिन् वाचा यन्नाम कीर्तयन् ।

त्यजन् कलेवरं योगी मुच्यते कामकर्मभिः ॥ २३ ॥

bhaktyāveśya mano yasmin vācā yan-nāma kīrtayan tyajan kalevaraṁ yogī mucyate kāma-karmabhiḥ

Meaning: A Yogī who, giving up his body, absorbs his mind in the Lord and chants His Name with his voice is released from all selfish desires and from the bondage of action. (Canto 1, Chapter 9, verse 23)

Bhīṣma prayed that this same Lord — adorable even to the gods, four-armed, His lotus face beaming with gracious smiles and reddish eyes — might remain before him until he laid down his body.

Bhishma Instructs the King in Sacred Duty

Hearing all this, Yudhiṣṭhira — even as the grandsire lay upon his bed of arrows — put to him his questions about the many forms of Dharma. And Bhīṣma, who had realized the Truth, discoursed upon them one by one: the duties determined by one's Varṇa and Āśrama; the twofold path of engagement in the world (Pravṛtti) and of withdrawal from it (Nivṛtti); the Dharma of charitable gifts, the duties of kings, and the courses of conduct that lead to liberation; the duties of women, and the way of loving devotion to the Lord. He explained, too, the four ends of human life — Dharma, Artha, Kāma, and Mokṣa — illumining each with instructive stories, both briefly and in full.

The Northward Sun and Bhishma's Final Prayer

While Bhīṣma was still discoursing upon Dharma, the sun began its northward course, the Uttarāyaṇa — that sacred turning of the year which Yogīs choose for the hour of their departure. So the grandsire brought his teaching to a close. Freeing his mind entirely of all worldly attachment, he fixed his thought and his unwinking eyes upon Śrī Kṛṣṇa, the Prime Person, who stood before him in His four-armed form, clad in shining yellow robes. At a single glance from the Lord, the last traces of sin within him were dissolved, and the pain of the arrows piercing his body quietly disappeared. Then, stilling all the activities of his senses, Bhīṣma began to extol Lord Janārdana.



As the sun turns northward, Bhishma fixes his mind and unwinking eyes on the four-armed Sri Krishna and begins his final prayer.

श्रीभीष्म उवाच

इति मतिरुपकल्पिता वितृष्णा

भगवति सात्वतपुङ्गवे विभूम्नि ।

स्वसुखमुपगते क्वचिद्विहर्तुं

प्रकृतिमुपेयुषि यद्भवप्रवाहः ॥ ३२ ॥

śrī-bhīṣma uvāca iti matir upakalpītā vitṛṣṇā bhagavati sātвата-puṇḡave vibhūmni sva-sukham upagate kvacid vihartuṁ prakṛtim upeyusi yad-bhava-pravāhaḥ

Meaning: Bhīṣma said: Now, freed of all craving, let my mind be fixed upon the all-pervading Lord, foremost of the Sātvatas, who, though ever absorbed in His own bliss, sometimes takes to His creative energy in sport — the energy from which the stream of the whole world flows. (Canto 1, Chapter 9, verse 32)

Remembering Krishna Upon the Field

The old warrior's prayer then returned, again and again, to the beauty of the Lord as he had beheld Him upon the field of battle. May my mind rest, he prayed, upon Śrī Kṛṣṇa, whose face on the battlefield was darkened by the dust raised by the horses' hoofs, whose locks were loosened and adorned with drops of perspiration, and whose skin was pierced by Bhīṣma's own sharp arrows, though it was covered by shining armour.

युधि तुरगरजोविधूम्रविष्वक्-
कचलुलितश्रमवार्यलङ्कृतास्ये ।
मम निशितशरैर्विभिद्यमान-
त्वचि विलसत्कवचेऽस्तु कृष्ण आत्मा ॥ ३४ ॥

yudhi turaga-rajo-vidhūmra-viṣvak- kaca-lulita-śramavāry-alaṅkṛtāsye mama niśīta-śarair vibhidyamāna- tvaci vilasat-kavace 'stu kṛṣṇa ātmā

Meaning: May my mind rest upon Śrī Kṛṣṇa, whose face upon the battlefield was grey with the dust raised by the horses' hoofs, whose scattered locks were bedecked with drops of sweat, and whose skin — though clad in gleaming armour — was pierced by my own sharpened arrows. (Canto 1, Chapter 9, verse 34)

Then he recalled a moment that had pierced his heart more deeply than any arrow. To honour Bhīṣma's own battlefield vow — that he would compel Kṛṣṇa to take up arms — the Lord had broken His own solemn word not to fight. Leaping down from the chariot and seizing one of its wheels, He rushed at Bhīṣma like a lion springing upon an elephant, the earth trembling beneath His feet and His upper garment slipping to the ground behind Him.



To honour His devotee's vow, Sri Krishna breaks His own, leaping from the chariot with its wheel to rush at Bhishma upon the field (verse 37).

स्वनिगममपहाय मत्प्रतिज्ञा-
मृतमधिकर्तुमवप्लुतो रथस्थः ।
धृतरथचरणोऽभ्ययाच्चलद्गु-
ह्रीरिव हन्तुमिभं गतोत्तरीयः ॥ ३७ ॥

sva-nigamam apahāya mat-pratijñām ṛtam adhikartum avapluto rathasthaḥ dhṛta-ratha-caraṇo 'bhyayāc caladgur harir iva hantum ibhaṁ gatottariyaḥ

Meaning: Setting aside His own promise in order to make my vow come true, He sprang down from the chariot, took up its wheel, and rushed at me as a lion rushes to kill an elephant — the earth shaking under His stride and His mantle falling away behind Him. (Canto 1, Chapter 9, verse 37)

Struck by the piercing arrows of a desperado like himself, His armour broken and His body smeared with blood, the Lord had come on to kill him, brushing aside even Arjuna's protests. May that Lord Mukunda, the bestower of blessedness, Bhīṣma prayed, be my one refuge.

शितविशिखहतो विशीर्णदंशः
क्षतजपरिप्लुत आततायिनो मे ।
प्रसभमभिससार मद्वधार्थं
स भवतु मे भगवान् गतिर्मुकुन्दः ॥ ३८ ॥

śita-viśikha-hato viśīrṇa-danśaḥ kṣataja-paripluta ātatāyino me prasabham abhisasāra mad-vadhārtham sa bhavatu me bhagavān gatiṁ mukundaḥ

Meaning: Wounded by my sharp arrows, His armour shattered and His body bathed in blood, He rushed forward to slay me, an aggressor — may that Lord Mukunda be my final refuge. (Canto 1, Chapter 9, verse 38)

He remembered, too, how the Lord had taken up the charioteer's whip and reins for the sake of His friend Arjuna, looking so beautiful in that humble role that those who fell gazing upon Him on the battlefield attained a form like His own; and how, in an assembly of sages and princes during Yudhiṣṭhira's Rājāsūya sacrifice, this same Śrī Kṛṣṇa had been worshipped first of all — and how He, the Soul of the universe, now stood before Bhīṣma's own eyes.

One Lord in Every Heart

At last the grandsire's vision opened wide. Having shaken off the foolish notion of diversity, he declared that he had realized the one unborn Lord who, though single, is severally enthroned in the heart of every embodied being — even as the one sun appears as many to the many eyes that behold it.

तमिममहमजं शरीरभाजां
हृदि हृदि धिष्ठितमात्मकल्पितानाम् ।
प्रतिदृशमिव नैकधार्कमेकं
समधिगतोऽस्मि विधूतभेदमोहः ॥ ४२ ॥

tam imam aham ajam śarīra-bhājāṁ hṛdi hṛdi dhiṣṭhitam ātma-kalpitanām pratidṛśam iva naikadhārkam ekaṁ samadhi-gato 'smi vidhūta-bheda-mohaḥ

Meaning: Freed of the delusion of diversity, I have realized that unborn Lord who, though one, is seated within the heart of every embodied being — appearing as many, even as the one sun appears differently to each eye that sees it. (Canto 1, Chapter 9, verse 42)

Bhishma Enters the Eternal

Having thus merged all the activities of his mind, his speech, and his sight in Śrī Kṛṣṇa, the universal Soul, the grandsire fixed his own self within the Self of the Lord — and Bhīṣma breathed his last, his breath dissolving into the boundless air.



As Bhishma enters the eternal, kettledrums sound and flowers shower from the heavens over the field of Kurukshetra (verse 45).

Perceiving that Bhīṣma had entered into the one indivisible Brahman, all who were present fell silent, like birds at the close of day. Then kettledrums sounded, beaten by both gods and men; the noble princes cried out their praise, and showers of flowers rained down from the heavens.

तत्र दुन्दुभयो नेदुर्देवमानवादिताः ।
शशंसुः साधवो राज्ञां खात्पेतुः पुष्पवृष्टयः ॥ ४५ ॥

tatra dundubhayo nedur deva-mānava-vāditāḥ śaśaṁsuḥ sādhave rājñāṁ khāt petuḥ puṣpa-vṛṣṭayaḥ

Meaning: Then kettledrums sounded, played by gods and by men; the saintly princes uttered their praises, and showers of flowers fell from the sky. (Canto 1, Chapter 9, verse 45)

Yudhiṣṭhira had the funeral and other rites duly performed for the departed grandsire, and for a while was plunged in sorrow. The assembled sages, with great delight, extolled Śrī Kṛṣṇa, uttering His secret names; then, holding Him within their hearts, they returned each to his own hermitage. Thereafter Yudhiṣṭhira, accompanied by Śrī Kṛṣṇa, returned to Hastināpura and consoled his uncle Dhṛtarāṣṭra as well as his aunt Gāndhārī, renowned for her austerity.

Important Verses

The chapter closes with Yudhiṣṭhira taking up the burden of kingship at last — not for himself, but as a sacred duty, with the blessing of his elders and of the Lord:

पित्रा चानुमतो राजा वासुदेवानुमोदितः ।
चकार राज्यं धर्मेण पितृपैतामहं विभुः ॥ ४९ ॥

pitṛā cānumato rājā vāsudevānumoditaḥ cakāra rājyaṁ dharmeṇa pitṛ-paitāmahaṁ vibhuḥ

Meaning: Permitted by his uncle and approved by Śrī Kṛṣṇa, the son of Vasudeva, the mighty king ruled his ancestral kingdom in accordance with Dharma. (Canto 1, Chapter 9, verse 49)

Principal Teachings

1. Time is the hand of Providence. Bhīṣma teaches that even a house guarded by Yudhiṣṭhira, Bhīma, Arjuna, and Kṛṣṇa Himself was not spared sorrow, for the whole world is ruled by Time as clouds are driven by the wind (verse 14). Our losses are not accidents; received with faith, they turn the heart toward the eternal.
2. The Lord's intention is beyond calculation. No man, and not even the greatest seer, can fathom why the Lord acts as He does (verse 16). Devotion begins where our reasoning ends — in trust rather than in explanation.
3. A holy death is the fruit of a God-fixed mind. The Yogī who leaves his body with his mind absorbed in the Lord and His Name on his tongue is freed from all bondage (verse 23). What we remember at the last is shaped by what we cherish now.
4. God honours the vow of His devotee above His own. To make Bhīṣma's vow come true, Kṛṣṇa set aside His own promise and rushed at him with a chariot wheel (verse 37). The Lord's "defeat" by His lover is His deepest glory, and Bhīṣma made that very moment his refuge.
5. The one Lord dwells in every heart. Shaking off the illusion of separateness, Bhīṣma realized the single unborn Lord seated in all beings, as the one sun appears as many to many eyes (verse 42). This vision of unity in the Divine is the summit of the chapter.
6. Dharma must be learned from the realized. Yudhiṣṭhira does not invent his duty; he seeks it from Bhīṣma, who had realized the Truth, and receives the whole map of Varṇa, Āśrama, and the four aims of life. Right action rests upon received wisdom, not private opinion.

A Devotional Reflection

There is something deeply moving in the way Bhīṣma dies. He does not close his eyes and turn inward to a formless void. He opens his eyes and drinks in the face of the Lord — dust-covered, sweat-adorned, even scarred by Bhīṣma's own arrows — and he loves that face all the way to the end. His last meditation is not on his long and honoured life, nor on his fearsome vows, nor on the kingdom he served, but on a single memory: the day the Lord loved him enough to break His own word for him. That is a startling thing to carry into death. It tells us that what redeems a life is not its record of duty, however great, but its capacity for love. Bhīṣma had lived an age of the world in service; yet when the northward sun opened the door, he walked through it clutching nothing but Kṛṣṇa. We are invited to ask, quietly, what memory we would want before our own eyes at that hour — and to begin gathering it now.

A Daily Devotional Practice

Today, choose one name of the Lord — Kṛṣṇa, Mukunda, Govinda, or Nārāyaṇa — and let it rest on your tongue through the ordinary hours of the day, softly repeated as you work and walk. Bhīṣma teaches that the mind at the last is drawn where it has long been trained to go. So practice now, in small moments, the very remembrance you would wish to have at the end. Before you sleep, recall one way the Lord has been merciful to you, and offer Him your thanks. Let the practice be simple and steady; that is enough to begin.

Conclusion

So ends the ninth discourse of the Śrīmad Bhāgavata, which the God-realized call the Paramahansa-Saṁhitā. In this chapter, Srimad Bhagavatam Canto 1 Chapter 9, we have followed King Yudhiṣṭhira and his brothers, with Śrī Kṛṣṇa, to the field of Kurukṣetra, where the grandsire Bhīṣma lay upon his bed of arrows. We have seen the great assembly of sages gather around him, heard him comfort the Pāṇḍavas with the wisdom of Time and Providence, and instruct the king in the whole range of sacred duty. And we have watched him, as the sun turned northward, fix his eyes upon the four-armed Lord and pour out a death-bed prayer of surpassing beauty — remembering Kṛṣṇa upon the battlefield, taking the Lord who broke His vow for love as his one refuge, and realizing at last the single Lord who dwells in every heart. Then, his mind wholly merged in the Lord, the grandsire breathed his last amid the sound of drums and a rain of flowers, and Yudhiṣṭhira took up his ancestral throne in righteousness. May we learn, from this warrior-saint, to keep the Lord's face before our eyes to the very end.

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

Om Namo Bhagavate Vasudevaya.

Jay Shree Madhav.

References and Attribution

Primary edition: Gita Press, Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa (English), Book One (Skandha 1), Discourse 9, book pages 32–37.

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