

Srimad Bhagavatam Canto 10 Chapter 17 — Kaliya and the Fire

5 October 2026



When a midnight forest fire surrounds the sleeping people and cattle of Vraja, Krishna, the infinite Lord of infinite power, simply drinks up the terrible blaze and saves them all.

Om Namo Bhagavate Vasudevaya.

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Welcome back to *Srimad Bhagavatam Wisdom*, our devotional journey through the sacred histories and teachings of the Srimad Bhagavat Mahapurana. This seventeenth chapter of the Tenth Canto answers a question left open by the last and then brings the day of Kaliya's deliverance to a close with one more wonder. King Parikshit asks why the serpent Kaliya had abandoned his home and what quarrel he had with Garuda alone; and Sukadeva explains how Kaliya, drunk with pride, had stolen the tribute owed to Garuda, and how, driven off by Garuda's mighty wing, he fled to a single pool within the Yamuna that lay forever barred to that great eagle — kept safe there by an old promise the sage Saubhari had once won from him. Then, as Krishna rises from the lake to the boundless joy of Vraja, and the weary people rest that night on the riverbank, a sudden forest fire encircles them in the dark; and the infinite Lord, seeing His people in danger, simply drinks up the blaze and saves them all.

Chapter Information

- Scripture: Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa
- Canto: 10 (Book Ten, First Half)
- Chapter: 17 (Discourse 17)
- Chapter title: The History of Kaliya and the Swallowing of the Forest Fire
- Principal speaker: Sukadeva Gosvami (narrating to King Parikshit)
- Principal listener: King Parikshit
- Main setting: The Yamuna and the surrounding forest of Vrindavana in Vraja
- Central subject: The reason Kaliya left his home; his offense against Garuda; the protective vow of the sage Saubhari; Krishna's joyful return to Vraja; and the swallowing of the midnight forest fire
- Principal verse range: Canto 10, Chapter 17, verses 1–25
- Primary edition: Gita Press Śrīmad Bhāgavata Mahāpurāṇa (Sanskrit-Hindi, Volume 2)

Context From the Previous Chapter

In Chapter 16, Krishna leaped into the poisoned Yamuna, danced upon the hoods of the serpent Kaliya, and spared him at the prayer of his wives, banishing him to the ocean and healing the river. This chapter first explains why Kaliya had come to dwell in that lake, and then completes the day with the pastime of the forest fire.

Parikshit's Question

King Parikshit, still absorbed in the story, asked Sukadeva why the serpent Kaliya had abandoned Ramanaka, the home of the serpents, and what wrong he had done to Garuda alone that set the great bird against him. Sukadeva answered by telling the history behind the pastime just heard.

Kaliya's Offense Against Garuda

Long ago, Sukadeva explained, an arrangement had been fixed for the serpents: month by month, on their appointed days, each serpent was to bring an offering and place it at the foot of a certain tree as tribute to the mighty Garuda, the carrier of the Lord, in return for his protection. All the serpents dutifully gave their share. Kaliya alone refused: swollen with confidence in his own poison, he scorned the arrangement entirely and simply kept Garuda's portion for himself.

विषवीर्यमदाविष्टः काद्रवेयस्तु कालियः ।

कदर्थीकृत्य गरुडं स्वयं तं बुभुजे बलिम् ॥ ४ ॥

viṣa-vīrya-madāviṣṭaḥ kādraveyas tu kālīyaḥ kadarthī-kṛtya garuḍaṁ svayaṁ taṁ bubhuje balim

Meaning: But Kaliya, the son of Kadru, intoxicated with the pride of the potency of his venom, disregarded Garuda and himself devoured the tribute that had been set aside for him. (Canto 10, Chapter 17, verse 4)



Kaliya, drunk with the pride of his venom, devoured the tribute owed to Garuda; enraged, Garuda struck him with his golden wing and drove him away (verses 2-8).

Hearing of this, Garuda, the beloved carrier of the Lord, rushed in fury and at great speed to kill Kaliya. The venom-armed serpent rose with his many hoods and bit at him; but the son of Tarksya flung him off and struck him with his left wing, blazing golden. Battered by Garuda's wing and utterly overcome, Kaliya fled into the one lake of the Yamuna that Garuda could not approach.

सुपर्णपक्षाभिहतः कालियोऽतीव विह्वलः ।

हृदं विवेश कालिन्द्यास्तदगम्यं दुरासदम् ॥ ८ ॥

suparṇa-pakṣābhīhataḥ kālīyo 'tīva vihvālāḥ hradam viveśa kālindyās tad-agamyam durāsadam

Meaning: Struck by Garuda's wing and utterly overwhelmed, Kaliya entered that lake of the Yamuna which was unapproachable and impossible for Garuda to reach. (Canto 10, Chapter 17, verse 8)

The Vow of Sage Saubhari

Why could Garuda not enter that lake? Sukadeva explained that once, long before, Garuda had been hungry and had seized and eaten an aquatic creature there, against the prohibition of the sage Saubhari, who dwelt beside the water. Seeing the fish grieving at the death of their leader, the compassionate sage, wishing to secure the welfare of the creatures of that place, pronounced a solemn vow.

अत्र प्रविश्य गरुडो यदि मत्स्यान् स खादति ।

सद्यः प्राणैर्वियुज्येत सत्यमेतद् ब्रवीम्यहम् ॥ ११ ॥

atra praviśya garuḍo yadi matsyān sa khādati sadyaḥ prāṇair viyujyeta satyam etad bravīmy aham

Meaning: If Garuda ever again enters here and eats the fish, he will at once lose his life — this I declare in truth. (Canto 10, Chapter 17, verse 11)



Long ago the sage Saubhari, grieving for the fish of this lake, declared that if Garuda ever ate them here he would lose his life — and so the lake became a refuge Garuda could not enter (verses 9-12).

This truth was known only to Kaliya, and to no other serpent. And so, in fear of Garuda, Kaliya had come to live in that very lake — until at last Krishna drove him out. In this way Sukadeva showed that even the serpent's long refuge, and his final banishment, unfolded within the Lord's larger design.

The Joyful Reunion of Vraja

Sukadeva then returned to the day of Kaliya's deliverance. Krishna rose from the lake adorned with divine garlands, fragrances, and garments, covered with great jewels and gold. Seeing Him, all the cowherds sprang up as if their very life-airs had returned to them, and embraced Him again and again with overflowing love. Yasoda, Rohini, Nanda, the cowherd women and men all came to Him, their long anxiety at an end; even the dry trees of the place, it is said, seemed to revive with joy. Balarama embraced His brother, laughing, for He knew His power, and took Him upon His lap again and again; and the cows, bulls, and calves felt the highest delight.



Krishna emerges from the lake adorned with divine garlands, jewels, and gold; the cowherds rise as if their life-airs had returned, and all Vraja embraces Him with joy (verses 13-19).

The brahmanas and family elders, with their wives, came to Nanda and said, ‘Your son was seized by Kaliya, yet by great fortune he is freed; give charity to the brahmanas for Krishna’s deliverance.’ Glad at heart, Nanda gave away cows and gold. And the greatly blessed Yasoda, who had lost and regained her son, embraced Him, took Him upon her lap, and shed tears of joy again and again.

The Midnight Forest Fire

That night, weary with hunger, thirst, and the labours of the day, the people of Vraja could not return home and lay down to rest there on the bank of the Yamuna. But at midnight a great fire, arising in the dry summer forest, surrounded the sleeping Vraja on every side and began to burn them. Waking in alarm and scorched by the flames, the people of Vraja ran for shelter to Krishna, the Lord of the universe, who by His own Maya appeared among them as a human child.



Waking to find the forest fire closing in, the people of Vraja take shelter of Krishna and Balarama, unable to give up His fearless feet (verses 21-24).

‘Krishna, Krishna, greatly fortunate one! O Balarama of immeasurable prowess!’ they cried. ‘This most terrible fire is devouring us, your own people. Save your friends from this hard-to-cross fire of death, O Lord; for we cannot bear to abandon your feet, which alone are the shelter of fearlessness.’

सुदुस्तरान्नः स्वान् पाहि कालाग्नेः सुहृदः प्रभो ।
न शक्नुमस्त्वच्चरणं सन्यक्तुमकुतोभयम् ॥ २४ ॥

su-dustarāṇ naḥ svān pāhi kālāgneḥ suhṛdaḥ prabho na śaknumas tvac-caraṇaṁ santyaktum akuto-bhayam

Meaning: Save us, Your own people and Your friends, from this insurmountable fire of destruction, O Lord; for we are unable to give up Your feet, which bestow complete fearlessness. (Canto 10, Chapter 17, verse 24)

Krishna Swallows the Fire

Seeing the helpless distress of His own devotees, the infinite Lord of the universe, the holder of unlimited power, drank up that terrible fire and delivered them all. In a single quiet act He turned their terror into safety, ending the long day of Kaliya’s deliverance as it had begun — with the Lord protecting those who had taken refuge in Him.

इत्थं स्वजनवैक्लव्यं निरीक्ष्य जगदीश्वरः ।
तमग्निमपिबत्तीव्रमनन्तोऽनन्तशक्तिधृक् ॥ २५ ॥

itthaṁ sva-jana-vaiklavyaṁ nirīkṣya jagad-īśvaraḥ tam agnim apibat tīvram ananto ’nanta-śakti-dhṛk

Meaning: Seeing the distress of His own people, the infinite Lord of the universe, the holder of infinite power, drank up that terrible fire. (Canto 10, Chapter 17, verse 25)

Principal Teachings of This Chapter

1. Pride invites its own downfall. Kaliya's contempt for Garuda and theft of the tribute (verse 4) begins the whole chain of his exile. Arrogance, especially toward what is sacred, quietly prepares our own ruin.
2. The Lord's design encloses even our wanderings. Kaliya's refuge in the one lake safe from Garuda, arranged long before by a sage's vow, was itself part of the path to his meeting with Krishna. Nothing lies outside the Lord's larger plan.
3. A saint's compassion has lasting power. Saubhari's vow to protect the fish (verse 11) shaped events for ages. The mercy of the holy, offered even to the smallest creatures, echoes far beyond its moment.
4. Devotees cannot give up His feet. In the fire, the people of Vraja declare they cannot abandon Krishna's fearless feet (verse 24). The soul that has tasted His shelter clings to Him precisely when danger is greatest.
5. The Lord protects those who take refuge in Him. Krishna simply drinks the fire (verse 25). No danger, however overwhelming, can consume those who have made Him their shelter.

A Devotional Reflection

This short chapter ends the long day of Kaliya with an image every devotee can hold onto: the people of Vraja, ringed by fire in the dark, crying out that they cannot let go of Krishna's feet — and the Lord simply drinking the fire away. What strikes us is not only the miracle but the words of the people. They do not first ask to be saved; they say they cannot abandon His feet. Their refuge is not a strategy for rescue but the deepest truth of their hearts, and the rescue follows of itself. Perhaps this is the whole lesson of the chapter, and of Kaliya's story too. Kaliya's pride drove him into exile and finally beneath Krishna's dancing feet; the cowherds' love drives them, even in terror, to cling to those same feet and be saved. The difference between the serpent and the devotee is not the nearness of the Lord's feet, for both are brought to them, but whether we come in pride to be humbled or in love to be sheltered. When the fires of life close in, may we too have learned to say, before anything else, that we cannot let go of Him.

A Daily Devotional Practice

Today, when some worry or fear presses upon you, make your first response not a plan but a prayer of refuge, echoing the people of Vraja: 'I cannot give up Your feet.' Let taking shelter of the Lord be your instinct before you reach for any other help, trusting that the One who drank the forest fire can carry you through your own. Recall this pastime and rest in His protection. Begin by chanting gently: Om Namo Bhagavate Vasudevaya.

Conclusion

The seventeenth chapter of the Tenth Canto completes the story of Kaliya and closes his day of deliverance. Sukadeva explains how the serpent's pride against Garuda and the ancient vow of the sage Saubhari had brought him to the very lake where Krishna would subdue him — showing that even a fugitive's hiding place lay within the Lord's design. Then Krishna rises from the water to the boundless joy of Vraja, and when a midnight forest fire encircles His sleeping people, He drinks up the blaze and saves them all. From the pride that exiles to the love that takes shelter, the chapter sets before us two ways of coming to the Lord's feet, and leaves us with the cowherds' unforgettable cry that they cannot give Him up. May we, remembering how He swallowed the fire for those who clung to Him, make His feet our first and last refuge in every danger.

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 (Sanskrit-Hindi, Volume 2), Book Ten (First Half), Discourse 17.
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