

The God who answers by Fire

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Abridged



Chapter 1

Arjun got out of the taxi, arriving at his home rural village. It had been a long time since he had seen his family. His parents had scraped together enough money for him to attend college, and now he had passed, with a qualification of a B.A. He took out a white handkerchief and wiped his once shiny shoes, now covered in dust from the road. He had a coconut in his bag which he was going to offer at the shrine of Ganpati, the elephant god, who had brought him such good luck. He was going to do this for his parents' sake. He was grateful to them for spending so much on his education, and he knew they would expect him to acknowledge some kind of spiritual influence in his life; but as for himself, he was not sure about God. Life in college had changed his whole outlook. The dependent, superstitious attitudes of his village relatives was in stark contrast to the independent, sophisticated city life that he had grown accustomed to – a life where one could choose their own destiny through education, scientific knowledge and modern culture. To the educated, God seemed unnecessary. His father was illiteracy, so it was all right for him to offer sacrifices to his gods to ensure a good harvest, so that there would be enough money to go towards his son's education.

Arjun did not allow himself to think of the thousands of B.A. graduates who were without jobs. Many of them were too proud to do manual work. Having been trained as professionals, they considered it beneath their dignity to work with their hands. Others simply could not get work at all in the situation caused by the exploding population. He was confident that he would be an

exception and would find a good job in the city, and to earn plenty of money to be able to send his younger brother to college, and perhaps send his little sister to high school so that she could be married to an educated husband. He was very fond of his little sister, Tara, who was six years old. He had brought some material for a dress for her, and some pretty bracelets. In his bag he also had a sari for his mother, a shirt for his father and material for a shirt and pants for his younger brother, Balkrishna, who was twelve.

Arjun's thoughts were interrupted by a shout from the field he was passing.

"Ka, ho! You have come!" It was his uncle who was laboriously walking behind the plough as the bullocks plodded over the rocky earth. "How did it go?"

"I have passed," Arjun shouted back proudly. "I am a B.A."

"Well done!" replied his uncle. "Your father and mother are waiting for you. Tara is ill."

A cloud darkened Arjun's bright horizon. What was wrong? They had not let him know. Surely they would have sent him a telegram if it was something serious. The sun was about to set as he passed the familiar sight of the idol shrine. The women and girls were getting water and watching him with curiosity and murmuring to each other, "Vishram's boy. He's been to college. He's educated - look at his clothes!"

Arjun made his way through the chickens, dogs and goats that roamed the streets, and turned off up the little lane that led to his

mud house with its tiled roof and open verandah. As he drew close to the house, he heard his mother's voice wailing the Indian wail for the dead. Other women's voices joined in. The village echoed the cry of those who are without hope. Arjun's blood froze as he stood paralysed with fear.

"Your sister has died," shouted a school boy to Arjun as he ran past him to the house.

Dazed with shock, Arjun pushed his way through the crowd and entered the room. His precious little sister Tara, was lying dead on the bed. His mother was leaning over her, calling to her to come back to life and wailing at intervals. His father was squatting on the floor with grief, while his younger brother Balkrishna was sobbing in a corner of the room. Arjun dropped his new zip bag on the ground and gazed hopelessly at the body. What a home coming! What a crashing of all his hopes and dreams! What did his education do if it could not save life and prevent death and destruction in this world?

His mother looked up and saw him. With renewed wails she threw herself into his arms and they wept together.

Chapter 2 Where is Tara?

Following the funeral ceremony, Arjun sat that night with his mother and father, saliently sipping tea. Tara was only a girl so a funeral pyre was not necessary. This was the tradition of piling wood on to the body and burning it. But in this case, Tara's body

had been wrapped in a red cloth and lowered into a rough grave down by the dry river bed. There were no flowers, few mourners, and no drums. Arjun wanted to cry out in pain for her. It seemed so wrong to leave her there under the weight of the earth, lonely, deserted. Drupabai, his mother, now mourned quietly, and in resignation, now that the first emotions had died down. She had seen three other children buried before this during her married life; it was the fate of many women in India. But the gods had spared her remaining two sons.

Balkrishna, Arjun's brother, lay asleep on the bed where Tara had lain. He would soon accept her absence in the daily adventure of youth, and he had playmates of his own age at school and in his village. Vishram, Arjun's father, put down his cup and saucer. Turning to Arjun, he broke the silence.

"So how did you get on at college?" he asked.

"I passed," said Arjun, in a toneless voice. Gone was the pride, the satisfaction and the anticipation that he had a few hours before. It did not seem to matter now.

"Good," said his father. "Now you will be able to get a good job."

Arjun did not answer. Three questions were violently revolving in his mind, crying out for an answer. He knew he had to find the answers ...

Where had Tara gone? He could not accept the materialistic outlook of his fellow students that 'when you are dead you are done for – there is nothing more.'. His parents' beliefs of reincarnation into

higher or lower forms of life did not hold any comfort. Where was she now? What was on the other side of death?

Why had she been taken? Being the oldest son of the family he had been present when the other three children had died.; but they were all babies, too young to really concern him. But Tara was a sweet child, so loving and always so pleased to see him. Tara was his special joy. Why had she been taken, so soon and so suddenly?

Tara had been playing quite happily the previous day, then in the afternoon she complained of a headache, and all night she was tossing with a fever. By the afternoon of the next day, she was slipping away. Had some viscous spirit got into her? How? Why? O God, why?

The third questions was, 'what am I to do now?' He knew he could not settle down into a job, even if he was lucky enough to get one. This aching void in his heart could never be satisfied until he found the answers to these three questions – in reality, until he had found God.

"How does one become a sadhu?" he asked his father. (A sadhu is a Hindu priest.)

"A sadhu? Replied his father in astonishment. "Why a sadhu?"

"I must find God. I must find the answer to life – to death – I must find the answer."

"But my son, you are educated," protested Vishram. "Your mother and I have worked hard to send you to college. You must find a good job with a high salary so that Balkrishna can go to college too,

and our family debts can be paid, and we can buy bigger fields and build a better house.”

“What good will that do if one gets snatched away like Tara,” Arjun said gloomily.

“But you can’t throw away all your learning and the money we spent on you,” Vishram said anxiously.

“It won’t be throwing away learning if I study the sacred books of the Hindu faith,” replied Arjun.

“But what profit will that bring?” persisted his father. “You will receive no salary for that.”

“Sadhus receive money from worshippers and do very well,” replied Arjun.

Vishram sat dumb. He knew that he should have admired his son for wanting to study the Hindu faith, but his future was limited to a world where material benefits and money were all that mattered.

“You are tired,” said Vishram. “Get some sleep and you will feel better in the morning.”

But Arjun could not sleep. He was already making plans. ‘People go on pilgrimages when they are searching for God,’ he thought. ‘I will go to the most famous places first and talk to the spiritual leaders in each place. Then I should know what to do.’ Then he thought of the coconut he had brought with him for the god Ganpati. ‘I will offer that in the morning. Maybe that will bless my journey.’

Finally, he fell asleep. He dreamt that he was travelling along an endless dark road, calling out, “Tara, where are you?” and then “God, where are you? Where are you?”

Chapter 3 Search for Truth

A few days later Arjun was walking along the main road to Nagpur. He was dressed in a saffron robe, as the Hinu’s wear, and wore no shoes on his feet. He was allowing his hair to grow long, and his chin showed signs of growing a new beard. He carried a staff in his hand and on his back was a blanket, a water bottle and a cooking pot. This was all he felt that a sadhu would need as he searched for things eternal rather than worldly comforts. He wore no paint or ashes on his forehead or body, nor sacred beads or charms, for at this stage he did not represent any god. He was looking for the god who could answer his questions.

His days at home had been agony to his soul. He had to harden his heart to the memory of his mother’s tears and his father’s grief-stricken protests, and the warnings of his friends and relatives when they heard about his mad idea of throwing away everything he had gained in search of God.

But Arjun’s mind had been made up on the morning he offered the coconut to the carved stone idol. This had been what he had learned to do from childhood, knowing no other way to get in touch with the Unseen.

Now he was on his way to Varanasi, in search of Truth. This was the sacred city of Hinduism. He would step into every shrine or temple along the way and enquire of the priest, finding out as much as the priest could tell him.

He had no money with him and would not beg. When he stepped on to the main road he prayed, "O God, if there is a God, if you are real, lead me and help me on my journey, and let me find you. Show me that you are real by supplying my needs along the way."

He went on. He was certain he was doing the right thing. He had left early that morning, before his family awoke. He did not want to cause a scene. When he had found the Truth he would return to them and bring them into the Light also.

Chapter 4 The road to Nagpur

It was terribly hot. June was drawing to a close, and though a few thunder showers had fallen, the real monsoon season was behind him. Arjun was pouring with sweat, and his water-bottle was nearly empty. There was little traffic on the road and he still had 60 miles to go before he reached Nagpur. He would pass through a few villages on the way, but none were in sight and it was nearly midday. He was about to stop and rest under a tree when he heard the sound of a truck coming behind him. As it came into view he raised his hand hopefully. The truck drew up by the side of the road and the driver put his head out of the window.

"Going to Nagpur?" asked Arjun.

"Yes," said the driver, looking him up and down. "You're not the usual kind of sadhu, are you?"

Arjun smiled and shook his head. "I don't quite know what I am but I want to go to Nagpur."

"Sure! Jump in," he said casually.

The driver, Baliram, was a good-natured fellow. "I'm stopping for a snack soon," he said. "Have you eaten?"

"No," said Arjun. He had been too thirsty to feel hungry, but now he was beginning to feel really hungry.

"Then you can get something at Khondali. They have a good tea stall there."

Arjun was silent. He did not want to tell him that he had no money.

"Are you on a pilgrimage?" asked Baliram.

"Yes," said Arjun. He was not used to his new role of sadhu.

"How far are you going?"

"To Varanasi."

"They all go there. I wonder what they find. What are you hoping for?"

"I want to find God," said Arjun, waiting for a reaction.

But the driver was pleasant. "Not many go for that," he said thoughtfully. "They want peace of satisfaction, or good luck in

marriage or business, or the promise of a better incarnation. But there aren't many who are looking for God Himself."

"Do you think I'll find him in Varanasi," asked Arjun.

"I doubt it," said Baliram. They come back from these places like Varanasi, fed up and disillusioned. They've spent all their money and got nothing in return. If I were you, I wouldn't waste my time or money. After all, no one believes in God these days. It's alright for the old and illiterate. But this is an age of machines, and technology and space travel. God is out of place in our modern world. We have our national gods as emblems and our temples that are beautiful buildings, and there are some customs that are nice to keep, but I think that spending your life looking for something that does not exist is a waste of time."

"Ah, here is our tea stall," said Baliram. They drew up under a tree and got out and stretched their cramped muscles. Two other trucks were there and Baliram knew the drivers. He introduced them to Arjun.

"He is a real sadhu," said Baliram, "One who wants to find God."

Then he called to the man inside – "Two teas and a plate of those nice bhajis please."

"I'll just have water," Arjun said quickly. "I need to fill my water-bottle."

Arjun went to the tub and filled his bottle. Baliram had understood his situation.

"You are my gust," he said when Arjun returned. "I would like to treat you to this."

"That is very kind of you," said Arjun. He would have been embarrassed if he had not been so relieved at this sign of favour on his journey – his needs being supplied.

As they ate and drank their tea, Baliram told his two friends more about Arjun.

"Where were you educated," asked Baliram.

"At Nagpur University," replied Arjun proudly.

"There you are," said Baliram to his friends. "Here's someone who has given up all that education to find God. That's what I call a sacrifice. Even though there any be no God at the end of it, it's a high ideal."

Within an hour they were on the road again.

"I have a friend in Amraoti," said Baliram. "He's a Christian. He says there is a God who came to this world once, and he's going to come again, but he doesn't seem to know much about him except that he died for our sins or something. Anyway, Christianity is an idea from the West. Look how missionaries bribed and exploited the poor of our country, then told them to be content with their lot because it was God's will for them."

Arjun did not reply. He was not sure how true this previous statement was.

They drove into Nagpur.

“Where do you want to get off?” asked Baliram.

“Anywhere will do. I have to take the road to the North.”

“Then you are not far from it here,” said Baliram. “Keep straight up on this road and you will see sign posts to Jabalpur. That’s your first big town.

Arjun thanked him and got down from the truck.

“Let me know if you find God,” shouted Baliram. “I would like to know. I do this trip every week, from Bombay to Nagpur.”

Chapter 5 Temple of Nag

It was near sunset. Arjun came across a few evening worshippers who were going to the temple of Nag. (Nag means cobra.) The worshippers were noisily ringing the bell in the outer porch of the temple and walking seven times round the bronze statue of the cobra, muttering prayers. Arjun slipped into the inner part of the temple, where no one was allowed to go except for the priests. Here it was completely dark except for a glimmer of light coming from an oil lamp which stood before the golden idol of Nag. The cobra statue stood erect, as if the snake was about to strike. In the deep shadow it looked a symbol of evil. Arjun shuddered.

A priest was standing in front of the idol, clothed in a saffron (bright yellow) robe. His head was shaved in the manner of a Brahmin, with one lock of hair in the centre. His hands were together in prayer. He chanted a repetitive prayer, with each word fading away like the clanging of a deep-toned bell.

Arjun stood watching and listening. His heart grew colder and colder as he felt the powers of evil close in around him. He wanted to talk to the priest, but he seemed hypnotised by this strange power and he could not open his mouth. Something seemed to be clutching at his throat. Then, fascinated by the gleaming image, and overpowered by the atmosphere, Arjun could not help himself bow down on his knees in front of the statue, putting his forehead on the ground in submission to the god.

Arjun tore himself away. He was pouring with sweat as he came down the temple steps. He felt exhausted. He came from the side street into the city of Nagpur – into the modern city with its shops, cinemas, cars and buses, and into the twentieth century.

“If that is God,” thought Arjun, “then I am afraid of him.” I don’t want to know him. It is better to concentrate on this life only. God seems out of place in our modern world. But supposing God does exist, what then? Will he punish us? Where has Tara gone? Is she in the grip of an evil power like that?” The thought was too terrible.

He continued on his journey. By the time he reached the outskirts of the city it was growing dark. He had had nothing to eat all day, except for the few bhajis at the tea stall, but after the experience at the temple he had no appetite. He had planned to sleep under a tree somewhere along the road, but now he was afraid to be alone in the dark. He imagined that the evil power would catch up with him and torment him.

“Sadhuju!” a woman’s voice called out. “Please come here.”

He turned and saw her standing in the doorway with a brass plate in her hand.

“Please take this,” she said as he approached.

He saw that it was a good meal of rice curry and chapatis. Arjun was amazed. Here was another sign of favour upon his journey!

“The priest has told me that if I show favour to every beggar who passes my home, the gods will give me a child,” said the woman.

“So please eat,” she said.

Arjun took the plate, sat down on the step and started to eat. The woman put a glass of water beside him. She was about thirty years of age, and for an Indian woman, to reach the age of thirty and not have given birth to a child is a disgrace.

“Is your husband here?” asked Arjun.

“No, he has gone to make other arrangements.” Tears welled up in her eyes and she covered her face with her sari. There is Ganesh, who protects us from evil spirits, and Skhanda, who fights armies of evil, but are they really God? Who is God? What is he? Or is it just a power – a force that upholds the universe?

“I understand,” said Arjun. For the first time, Arjun realised the plight of childless women. Her husband had gone to find a second wife, who would treat her as a slave. There was humiliation and sarcasm, and the thought that the gods are angry with her. There was the hopeless of never being freed from this cycle, brought upon herself by some sin she had committed in a past life, a past incarnation.

“Is there anywhere I can sleep her?” asked Arjun.

“There is a shed here by the house. You may sleep there.”

She returned to the house. Arjun spread his blanket on the floor and lay down on his back. It was till very hot with not a breath of air. It would not be possible to sleep until the early hours when it had cooled down. He lay thinking ... Is God only evil, like the god in the temple? Or is there a god who is good? Cost what it may, he would search until he found the answer.

Chapter 6 Coconut offerings

It was the full moon of the goddess of the Narbada River.

Thousands of pilgrims lined the river banks. Men and women stood in the water as far as they dared to go, for the river was flowing fast due to the recent rains. The water was muddy, brown and terrifying in its swiftness, carrying all kinds of debris and the bodies of drowned animals.

Each worshipper had a coconut which they had broken on a stone by the river. Half they gave to the priest who stood waist deep in water, and half they presented to the idol of the goddess, which had been taken out of the temple and placed at the river's edge. The priest chanted a prayer to the goddess while he performed a kind of dance ritual in the water. The goddess was draped with hundreds of garlands made of sweet-smelling flowers. Incense was burning at the four corners of a red mat on which the idol stood. As each offering was made, men clashed cymbals and beat a rhythm

on drums. Gifts of money, jewels and food were laid at the idol's feet.

Arjun mingled with the crowds. He was footsore, weary and wet. He had walked 91 miles from his last stop, not being able to get a lift. Food had been fairly plentiful each time he stopped in a village to shelter from the rain. People from the houses had felt it a privilege to feed a holy man. But he received no money.

Arjun decided to visit a rishi, someone who practiced yoga, in the hills to the north. The yogi was sitting on the floor, in the lotus position, legs crossed, with soles turned upwards and resting on the knees. Arjun waited. The yogi neither blinked or moved., not did he visibly breathe.

Finally Arjun said, "Swamiji, I have a question to ask."

Then there was silence for another minute, then the yogi said in a far-away voice, "You have brought no offering?"

Arjun had not thought of it. He had not come to ask a favour, but a question.

"I have no money," he said apologetically.

"You come into the presence of a god with empty hands?" said the yogi, still looking through Arjun as if he was not there.

Arjun drew back. He should have known. From his childhood he had been taught that gods demanded offerings and sacrifices. Otherwise, the priest could curse the offender and terrible punishment would befall him.

Arjun said quietly, "I wanted to ask you if you had found God."

There was no answer. Arjun decided that although he had decided never to beg, the next time he was offered food, he would ask for money instead. But the next time came a day later, and he was so hungry he just accepted the food.

Arjun knew that the gifts that were offered to the gods were bribes. The priest used the offerings for themselves, bribing people that they could pray to the gods on their behalf to bring good luck. "If this is the kind of god that hides behind all that, then he's not worth knowing," said Arjun to himself. He prayed, "God, if you are still leading me, please give me money, if I need it to find you. But if I can find you just as well without money, then it doesn't matter.

He did not receive a single *paisa* during the whole of his journey.

Chapter 7 Temples of a thousand gods

Arjun walked for another two weeks., stopping here and there to ask questions of sadhus, rishis and priests, but none could give him a definite answer. All they could offer him were formulas and *mantras*, to say at particular times, and always telling him of fasts and feasts that need to be kept. None could say, "I have found God."

He had read some of the laws of Manu, but they were far too intricate and complicated to take seriously. He started to think that perhaps the philosophy of Baliram, the truck driver who had first helped him on his journey, was the best philosophy – that there is no god. But something drove him on.

At last, he reached Varanasi, the most sacred of cities, the shrine of many of the gods. Would this give him the answer? As he made his way through the crowds, jostled by pilgrims, sight-seers and sacred cows, he was conscious of a heavy atmosphere. So many had come with a weight of sin, hoping to have their sins forgiven. He watched the faces of the endless stream of worshippers as they went in and out of the thousands of temples. If they had left their load of sin there, they did not seem any happier. Most of them looked weary and hopeless.

Arjun went down to the sacred River Ganges and watched the worshippers bathing, drinking the water, offering prayers, flowers and coconuts to the great mother goddess. He watched their mechanical movements. Did they really care? Did it all mean nothing to them? He went up to one elderly man who seemed very devout. His face seemed to be saddened by a yearning expression, the result of many years of performing the same exercises without finding his heart's desire.

"Have you found God?" Arjun asked the elderly man.

The man gave a short laugh. "And how shall we find him?" he replied, looking at Arjun as if he should know better.

"And have you found peace after bathing in the river?" asked Arjun.

"Peace? Where shall we find that? I do it because it is the law of Manu," he replied.

Arjun continued wandering through the crowds along the riverside, and turning towards the central temple area heard the rhythmic

clashing of symbols, drumming and the chanting of the three names of Vishnu – "Krishna, Hari, Ram; Krishna, Hari, Ram..." He stepped into the doorway of the temple and saw about 100 women clad in white saris, wearing no jewellery, seated on the floor, facing one another in rows. Some had cymbals; others clapped their hands in time to the rhythm. Mechanically they repeated the names of Vishnu as if they were in a trance. Most were young women. Some were even young girls. One came towards Arjun.

"You cannot come in here," she said. "This is the temple of the widows."

Arjun retreated. He was horrified. In his village widows still had to atone for the sins that killed their husbands, but they could still stay at home and fast, and go to the temple and pray and offer sacrifices like other people. But these Brahmin women were doomed to live for the rest of their lives in such an atmosphere bound by mesmerising ritual, chanting to the deadening rhythm until many of them went out of their minds.

He made his way to the great golden temple in the heart of Varanasi. The bell was clanging constantly, and the endless stream of worshippers brought leaves and holy water from the Ganges to be placed on a special stone next to the priest. As Arjun entered the dark abode of the god of Shiva, he noticed the same evil atmosphere that he had experienced at Nagpur. He wanted to get out at once, but he knew that Shiva was the god who created life out of death. For many this was a matter of life and death. Many had relatives who were sick or dying; some were childless women who were pleading for the gift of life in their womb.

Eventually another priest came to replace the first priest. As Arjun turned to go, the first priest saw him. Arjun put his hands together in salute.

“I have a question to ask,” said Arjun faintly. “I want to know how to find God.”

“Come to my room,” the priest said, and led the way to the back of the temple. The priest unlocked the door. There was no furniture. A mat was on the floor, on which they sat. There was no window. The walls were piled high with books and papers. In an alcove in the wall was an idol of the goddess Kali, the wife of Shiva. The door was left open to allow light into the room.

“Where are you from?” the priest asked Arjun with interest.

“From near Nagpur.” I have just graduated from the university.”

“I was educated at Oxford, U.K.” said the priest. “It’s strange that all the education of the West cannot satisfy us.”

“My sister died when I returned home,” said Arjun. “It made all my learning seem futile. I wanted to know where she had gone, and where is God?”

” There are many people who come looking for God,” said the priest. “But God seems to have his mouth shut. He does not tell us.”

“Have you found God?” asked Arjun anxiously.

There was a big long silence. Then he replied:

“We only find God as we are absorbed into his infinite essence, as a drop of water is absorbed into the ocean. That comes after many incarnations. For us Brahmins there is only one more stage to go. We are Gods now. Some day we shall be greater than God.”

The priest gave Arjun a book of the names of Shiva and told him to learn them by heart, and repeat them standing in the River Ganges. Arjun took it, but looked doubtful. “I have been told many things like this before,” he said, “but there is no truth in them.

“There are many hypocrites in the priesthood,” said the priest, “but you have not stood in the Ganges.”

“No.”

“Then go and see.”

It was late afternoon when Arjun sat again on the steps leading down to the river. He sat and studied the many different names and titles of Vishnu. He knew some of them from childhood., for he had heard his father repeat them every morning when he performed his devotions.

It grew dark, and he had not eaten all day. Arjun walked up and down the steps repeating the names of Shiva. At about midnight he was about to descend the steps when the figure of a woman dressed in a white sari appeared out of the shadows. She put out her hand and touched hi. He drew back.

“I have no money,” said Arjun.

“You came to our temple today,” she said. “We widows have to beg to earn a living.”

“I’m sorry I cannot help you,” said Arjun. “I have to now say the names of Shiva while standing in the Ganges. I must find God.”

“There is no God,” said the woman. “Extinction is best. I have often wanted to throw myself in and end it all, but I don’t have the courage.”

How long have you been here?” asked Arjun.

“I was married when I was nine, and my husband died a year later. I have been here ever since.”

Unable to give her the comfort she needed, Arjun turned and headed for the water’s edge. He paused. There was not a glimmer of light except from a lamp at the top of the steps, and the stars. He laid his staff and bundle on the steps and went down into the water. It was colder than he expected. The snow was melting in the Himalayas, and even though the river had flowed for nearly a thousand miles through the plains, it still carried a chill.

He waded deeper and deeper until the water reached his neck. The pressure of the current nearly lifted him off his feet. Arjun lifted his hands above his head, as he knew he should do when addressing deity. He looked up at the stars.

He began, “O mighty Swami, Lord Vishnu, you great Preserver of all men, hear my cry, my worship of you. I repeat your wonderful names which are too many to number ...”

The pressure of the current against his body was increasing. He had to lower his arms to keep balance. He continued ... “You who came to the great Tortoise to church the ocean, including our Mother the Cow, you who inhabit the sea as the Holy Fish, the jungles as the great Boar, you who overcame the demon Narak ... he went on gasping the names. His body was becoming numb. He was in the river of the dead – where the ashes of corpses were thrown. It seemed like all the hosts of demons were pulling at him to drag him under. His voice became fainter. He wanted to let go. He wanted to go and join Tara, but – “O God, help me!” he gasped.

A rope splashed in front of his face. “Hold on tight!” said a voice from the steps.

Arjun made a great effort and grasped the rope. He was hauled to the river bank. As he attempted to climb the steps, he collapsed unconscious.

Chapter 8 Swami Narayan

When Arjun regained consciousness, he found himself lying at the top of the steps covered with his blanket. Dawn was breaking and already early worshippers were making their way down to the river to bathe. He tried to turn over, and groaned. His body was stiff and wet, and he felt cold and numb to the bone.

“How are you feeling?”

Arjun looked up and saw a man of about forty sitting watching him. He was dressed in a white buttoned coat and trousers, and wore a white turban.

“Awful!” groaned Arjun, closing his eyes again.

“I’ll get you some tea.”

The man went off to the nearby temple and came back with tea.

“Drink this,” he said, sitting down by Arjun.

Arjun sat up and drank the tea.

“That’s kind of you. How did I get here?”

The widow you were talking to last night came to call me. I am the watchman at the temple here, he said. “She likes you – she says you’re different from the others. She had to go back to the temple, but first she helped me carry you up the steps after we hauled you on to the river bank.

Arjun started to remember the muddy waters of the night before.

“Do many worshippers survive this ordeal?” he asked.

“No,” said the watchman. They couldn’t end their lives in a better place. They get what they are looking for.”

“Then why did you save me?” asked Arjun.

“The widow wanted you.”

“But what am I to her? I have no money? Anyway, I must move on. Please convey my thanks to her when you see her.”

“If you are so keen to find God, then why don’t you go to the temple at Sarnath. The Swami Narrayan seems to know everything. Many pilgrims go there,” said the watchman rising to go.

“Where shall I find him,” asked Arjan.

He lives in the grounds of the small white temple. Anyone will show you. He saluted, picked up the cup and left.

Arjun stood up and shivered as the wind blew through his wet clothes. He wrapped himself in his blanket and put out his clothes to dry on the step. He stayed watching people in the river. None went in any farther than the waist, and even then, some had difficulty standing. He was amazed that he had not been swept away. But soon he was taking the road to Sarnath.

In the white temple he found the priest seated cross-legged on a white cushioned platform, in a small room which was bare except for six oil lamps. Incense was burning before him, and garlands of flowers, money and food had been placed before him by worshippers who came seeking his advice. He wore white, and had a beard. He smiled a weak smile at Arjun who placed his hands together and bowed.

“Namaste, Swamiji,” said Arjun weakly. He was feeling ill and had not eaten for two days. “I’m trying to find out how I can know God,” he said.

“How can one know the Unknowable?” came the crushing answer.

There was no further answer. Arjun bowed and withdrew. He picked up his staff and bundle and made his way back to the city. Now there was only one thing left to do. He would throw himself in the river tonight and that would be the end.

He started to shiver violently. A sharp pain in his chest made breathing difficult. Gasping and staggering, he finally collapsed by the roadside.

“O God, O God,” he moaned, “let me die, let me die.”

Chapter 9 Jungle Ablaze

Nine months passed. Arjun had been tramping through the hills of Central India and was now trying to get back to his village. He looked a very different figure from the proud well-dressed young man who had arrived in his home village nearly a year ago. His hair and beard had grown so long that none would have recognised him. He leaned heavily upon his stick as if bowed with age. There was hardly any flesh on his bones. Not only sickness, but discouragement and despair had aged him beyond his years.

It had been nothing less than a miracle that he had survived that acute attack of pneumonia in Varnassi. It was also a miracle that someone cared enough to get him into the municipal hospital. A sadhu lying by the side of the road was nothing unusual. But a policeman had recognised his plight and taken him to hospital.

The young doctor said to him a few weeks later, “It is a miracle that you are still alive. Some power must be keeping you alive for a purpose.”

Those words made Arjun determined to continue his search in spite of his weakness, and as soon as he was discharged, he went on to Allahabad, the junction of the sacred river Ganges and Jumna. From there he continued searching far into the Himalayas to the source of

the Ganges, meeting holy men and asking question after question. But there was no reality in their answers and none could say ‘Yes, I know God.’”

At last, utterly weary, he turned his steps homeward. Having been to a sacred spot on the River Tapti, he was coming up the jungle road from Harisal. It was full moon in the month of May. He had rested from the heat during the day. A tribeswoman had given him a good meal when he passed through a village. Now the air was cooler so he decided to walk late into the night and rest again at noon the following day. It was a steep climb up the hill. He was breathing heavily when he came to a fork in the road, where a sign post was pointing off to the right. In the bright moonlight he could read – *Wairat – To the Deity*.

He did not want to have anything more to do with gods and goddesses. He was tired of anything that called itself divine, but something compelled him to take that path through the jungle. He heard the whine of jackals and the short cough of a panther, but wild animals seemed nothing to him compared with evil spirits. He came out of the trees to a clear space with fields and pasture land. The path led up to a steep incline to the top of a hill, which is the highest point in the Satpur Range.

The white shrine of the goddess Wairat gleamed in the moonlight. The tails of freshly sacrificed goats were strung on a tree nearby. The place was littered with broken coconut shells and lemon peels, and remains of offerings to the goddess.

Arjun peered into the shrine. The flame of an oil lamp was flickering violently in the breeze. By its light, the starring eyes of a wooden idol glared at him with the same evil power he had felt from other idols. As he looked, the flame flickered out and left the shrine in darkness.

He turned to go, but a red glow over the brow of the hill made him go and investigate. Below him, on the opposite hill, was the most terrible jungle fire he had ever seen. The whole hillside was ablaze. With the force of the wind, the flames were leaping upwards hundreds of feet, and the tinder-dry wood and grass made it a terrifying inferno. Arjun watched intensely. What powers of destruction!

Out of the roaring wind and out of the fire, a 'gently whisper' spoke to him:

'The God who answers by fire. He is God.'

Arjun waited and listened. Was he mistaken? It did not come again. He knelt down in worship of the fire. But how would he get to know the God of the fire? Would he be destroyed in the attempt? Then he thought, "The Parsees worship fire. There is a temple in Amraoti. I will go there.'

With his hopes revived once more and desire rekindled, he set off in good heart along the road that descended to the plains. His goal was in view!

Chapter 10 The Enlightened One

Arjun crept into the small white temple that stood in tree-covered grounds. There were no idols – nothing in the room except a white pillar on which a fire was burning in a golden brazier. He bowed down before the fire and waited. Was this really God?

'O God,' he whispered, not daring to look at the fire. 'Please, if you are the one I am looking for, show yourself to me. Help me to know you. Answer my question.'

But no answer came. He waited a few minutes, then got up and looked at the fire. It seemed very small and insignificant compared to the forest fire he had seen two days ago. Was it really God?

Just then an old priest came in, carrying some charcoal in a copper bowl. He was clothed in a long white robe and wore a yellow turban. His beard was snow white. He was very old and very solemn. He emptied the charcoal into the fire and turned to Arjun. Arjun bowed and placed his hands together in salute.

"You are a Hindu?" The priest glanced at Arjun's saffron robe.

"I'm looking for the true God," said Arjun, rising to his feet. "Can you tell me how I can know him?"

"There are four elements – Earth, Air, Fire and Water – by which the Almighty has shown himself, and which he used to create the world," the priest recited in a mechanical voice. Mother Earth brought you forth and is present in the Air you breathe. Fire represents the mighty sun, which destroys evil and purifies what is

good, giving light and heat. Water brings life and nourishment. What more do we need? Worship them and you will be prepared for life in the hereafter.”

Arjun was disappointed. The words were so much like what he had heard on his journeys. He looked at the fire.

“And what about this fire? Where did it come from?”

“This fire represents the Eternal Fire that burns in the sun and in the heart of the Earth, the source of energy and life.”

“Do you have to keep feeding it?” asked Arjun.

“I and my assistant keep the fire burning,” replied the old priest.

“I see,” said Arjun. “It is just like any ordinary fire.”

“Yes,” said the priest, “but it *represents* the Eternal Fire.”

Arjun saluted and turned away, his hopes once again shattered.

He wearily set out on the last stage of his journey. He would be home tomorrow. He would forget about God and get a good job in the city, and send his brother Balkrishna to college. He would marry an educated wife and get a nice house on the outskirts of the city where his parents could live in their old age. His heart felt as heavy as lead. All had been useless. Why hadn’t the Ganges swept him away?

A bullock cart came along the road.

“Would you like a lift?” asked a cheerful voice. “Where are you going?” asked the driver.

“Talegaon, near the Nagapur road,” replied Arjun.

“My village is half way. You can spend the night at my house and continue in the morning. Where have you come from?” asked the driver.

“Oh, everywhere!” sighed Arjun.

“You look tired.”

“Yes, I’ve wasted my time.” Arjun explained to the driver his great search to find God, with no success.

“You poor soul,” said the driver. “I found God five years ago.”

Arjun gripped his arm. “Tell me – How? Who? Where? Who are you?”

The driver laughed. “One question at a time! I am an ordinary village man. A Mahar by caste.”

Arjun instantly let go of his arm. He had not touched an ‘untouchable’ before.

“My name is Santosh. I received that name at my baptism because ‘God is my delight’, and I want to give him pleasure and delight too. And I know it gives him pleasure when I tell you about him.”

Just then a smaller bullock cart came around the bend at great speed and hardly slowed down. As it passed, its wheel grated against the axle of Santosh’s cart. Arjun knew enough of village life to know that the normal response would be to shout, scream and

swear. But Santosh was very pleasant to the driver as they stopped to inspect the damage.

“Oh sorry,” said Santosh. “I hope no damage is done,” he said to the other driver.

“It was their fault,” said Arjun a bit later. “Why did you apologise?”

Santosh smiled, “It is the privilege of Christians to take the blame,” he said.

“You are a Christian?” asked Arjun in surprise.

“Yes, thank God! Five years ago, my cousin came to see me from his village ten miles away. He looked so different that I asked what had happened. He said that he had been born again and he wanted me to be born again too. Then he told me about the Lord Jesus Christ who is God Himself, who came especially to die as a sacrifice for the sin of the world – your sin and mine.”

Arjun looked puzzled. “My sin?” he repeated. “What’s that got to do with it?”

“We don’t usually realise what sinners we are until we realise how holy God is. Did you find a god in all your travels who was pure love, good and holy?”

“There’s not one!” replied Arjun. “They’re all evil, impure and vengeful.”

“Our God who came as the Lord Jesus Christ, is the true and living God. He is completely pure and holy. There is none like him – and he loves us.”

Santosh spoke with such assurance that came from personal experience, that Arjun knew that here was the answer – from an outcaste! He had never heard anyone speak like this before.

“The Lord Jesus was put to death when he lived on earth. Father God allowed this, so that through the shedding of his blood, we could be purified from sin. Jesus did not remain dead. He is the Creator, the Prince of Life. He rose from the dead three days later and he is alive forevermore, watching over us, preparing a place for us when we die, and helping to live a victorious life. His Spirit lives within those who believe.

Arjun listened hungrily. Here, within a few miles of his own village, was someone who could have introduced him to the True God, and he had wasted a whole year trying to find him in other places.

“But the Christians I have met don’t speak like this,” said Arjun.

“No,” replied Santosh. “Many people think that Christianity is another caste, or that they are Christians because their parents are Christians. But God has no grandchildren! Everyone has to receive Jesus for themselves.”

They were entering Santosh’s village now. People were looking surprised that Santosh had a Hindu sadhu with him. Santosh led Arjun into his house. Arjun was surprised at himself for the casual way he was able to enter the house of an outcaste. This was normally taboo for someone of his caste. Santosh’s wife offered him a meal. Whatever would his people say if they knew he was eating with *Mahars (untouchables)*?

Arjun sat while Krupabai prepared the meal, and Santosh's four children watched him with great interest. The eldest girl was seven and reminded him of Tara. Santosh went off to see his employer

"You keep your children very clean," said Arjun to Santosh's wife, Krupabai. Arjun compared them to the children in his own village, many of whom were naked and dirty.

Krupabai smiled proudly, "Yes, the Lord Jesus makes us clean on the inside first, then we learn to keep our bodies clean on the outside."

"How does he make you clean?" asked Arjun.

"By his precious blood," replied Krupabai. The Bible tells us to walk in the light, as he is in the light, and the blood of Jesus purifies us from all sin."

Arjun was amazed to hear a village woman quoting the Scriptures. In the Hindu religion, even a woman with average education would find it hard to quote verses from the Sanskrit writings.

"Do you know God?" he asked.

With absolute assurance, she answered with a radiant smile, "Yes!"

Santosh returned and sat down opposite Arjun.

Arjun looked up at Santosh.

"It's just what I heard that night – the God who answers by fire – he is God."

Santosh nodded. Sometimes it's by fire, and sometimes it's a gentle whisper from the Word of God. He chooses different ways to speak to us.

"The voice seemed to come out of the fire." Arjun explained his experience at Wairat.

In my case, God also spoke to me by fire. One night I was coming home and I found my crops set on fire. We were going to start harvesting the following week. It was a year's food supply going up in flames. Then I remembered what I had heard from a Christian – that all our works must be tried by fire – whether we are valuing all our possessions more than God. Did I really want him to be my all? I heard myself saying, "Yes, Lord, take anything and everything!" As I was being reduced to ashes, the fire of his love flooded my being and my heart was full of joy. I was baptised with the Holy Spirit his fire, as the Lord Jesus had promised."

Tears came to Santosh's eyes as he spoke. They were silent for some minutes while Santosh wiped his eyes.

"That's what I want," said Arjun decisively.

Santosh smiled. "It is God's will for you, but it is not easy. It's a hard road. The Lord Jesus warned us that if we are going to be his disciples and follow him, and really get to know him, we have to take up our cross and follow him. The cross is the symbol of death – a symbol that our old sinful nature has died and we have new life in Jesus.

Krupabai brought the meal and the family sat down to eat.

“You eat together?” asked Arjun in surprise.

“Yes, of course, replied Santosh. “The Christian family is one unit. My wife is my equal, only I have the responsibility of caring for my family, just as the Lord Jesus care for his people. We eat together to show our union to him. Let’s give thanks.”

They placed their hands together and bowed their heads. Santosh prayed a simple prayer of thanks for the food, and he thanked the Lord for bringing Arjun to them.

“You talk as if you know him,” said Arjun.

“Yes, we *do* know him,” replied Santosh.

Arjun gratefully ate the meal and forgot all about the taboo of eating with ‘*untouchables*’. Santosh had told him about a place called Chikalda. Arjun asked more about this place, where there was a school for people who wanted to know about Jesus. They also teach women to read and write, and that is how Krupabai learned to read.

“I must go to Chikalda,” said Arjun.

“But because you are education, you should go to the Bible seminary at Pune,” suggested Santosh. Many go there from all over India and many parts of Asia. All the Bible teaching is in English.

“I should like to,” said Arjun, feeling a little bit of the old pride returning, with the recognition that he could speak English.

After the meal Santosh pointed out two verses in a book call Jeremiah. “This is a word from the Lord for you,” said Santosh:

“Let not the wise man boast of his wisdom, or the strong man boast of his strength, or the rich man boast of his riches, but let him who boasts boast about this: that he understands and knows me.”

“Yes, I understand,” said Arjun, noting the warning, “But education is useful.”

The men talked long into the night. Krupabai had already settled down to sleep with the children on the verandah.

Chapter 11 Holy Fire

Once again Arjun was unable to sleep. “Lord Jesus,” Arjun whispered, his heart warming to the fact that he could pray to a personal God, “Help me to understand and to know you, even though I might have to go through fire.”

He thought of the jungle fire, and the fire that burned Santosh’s crops. He remembered Santosh’s words – “We don’t realise what sinners we are until we realise how holy God is.”

Arjun shut his eyes. He saw himself in the midst of those flames. He was surrounded by blazing purity and holiness. He saw his own pride and rebelliousness; he saw his total unworthiness – fit only to be burned to ashes.

“O my God,” Arjun cried out. “Forgive me. I am so wretched!” He hid his face and sobbed.

He remembered how he had wanted to dismiss God from his world, and how he had considered himself better than others. He saw his pride, self-righteousness and self-pity. He remembered the idolatry he had committed from childhood, worshipping idols.

Arjun felt a hand on his head. Santosh had been awakened by his cry.

“Arjun,” he said quietly, “if we confess our sins, God is faithful and just, and will forgive us our sins and purify us from all unrighteousness.”

“But how can he? My sin is too great to be forgiven.”

“The blood of Jesus purified us from *all* sin.”

Arjun was silent. Santosh prayed for him.

At last, heaving a great sigh of relief, Arjun grasped Santosh’s hand and whispered, “I’ve found him! Oh, I’ve found him. He has made me clean. I’ve got peace at last.”

Chapter 12 Death to the old Arjun

Arjun asked Santosh if he could stay for a few days so that he could learn more. Arjun asked Santosh about being baptised, something he thought he would like to do. Santosh said that he would need to understand what this really meant, and gave him a New Testament. Arjun wanted to get a job to earn some money. He was now washed and clean shaven and looking a lot more like the old

Arjun. After breakfast the next morning Santosh took Arjun into the town and introduced him to his employer, Sakharam.

“Are you a Christian?” asked Sakharam, who was a Hindu. “Can you do accounts?”

Arjun answered yes to both. “Then I will give you half a day per week, from nine until twelve. And can you start straight away?”

Arjun settled down to work on the farmer’s verandah, with lists of grain sold and accounts due from people who were in debt to Sakharam. The morning passed quickly. Sakharam seemed pleased with Arjun’s work and told him to come again the next morning. He would be paid at the end of the week.

While waiting for Krupabai to prepare lunch he went down by the river with his New Testament and began to read one of the places which Santosh had marked in for him. The passage was about baptism:

“Don’t you know that all of us who were baptised into Christ Jesus, are baptised into his death? WE were therefore buried with him through baptism into death that, just as Christ was raised from the dead through the glory of the Father, we too may live a new life.”

“So baptism is about burial,” he thought, “and there can be no resurrection without death.”

Arjun looked down at the water. At that moment a driver of a bullock cart was driving his bullocks down into the water in order to cross the river. He noticed the heavy yokes across their necks, with a long beam passing between them in the form of a cross. As they

waded into the water Arjun remembered the Bible verse that Santosh had quoted to him: “Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.”

He watched the bullocks go down into the water and then come up again on the other side. Arjun read on: “We know that our old self was crucified with him so that the body of sin might be rendered powerless, that we should no longer be slaves to sin.” And as he turned the pages, “I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me.”

Suddenly Arjun had the revelation – the Lord Jesus had taken the old selfish Arjun to the cross with him and had put him to death. Now he was living together with Jesus in a resurrected life. Arjun knelt down and committed his life to the Lord: “Lord Jesus, I take your yoke, your cross.”

Joy flooded his soul. He knew it was not going to be easy, but what joy to know that the Lord Jesus would be walking with him.

When Arjun got back to the house, he gripped Santosh by the hand and said solemnly, “I must go now and be baptised.”

Santosh’s eyes gleamed with joy. “So you understand?” Santosh gave Arjun a hug.

“Thank God,” said Santosh, and added, “But you must go home first and tell your relatives how much the Lord has done for you.”

Chapter 13 Talegaon – and a shock

The road entering Talegaon from Santosh’s village passed by Arjun’s house. He was wearing new clothes, which he had paid for from the money he had earned. When he entered the village, he stopped dead. The house he had lived in from childhood was a ruin. The roof had gone. Charred timbers inside showed that a fire had devoured most of it. The mud walls were broken down. It was a picture of desolation.

“My family! Where are they?” he called anxiously to a neighbour passing by.

“They have gone to your mother’s village,” he said. “This happened three months ago. If you had been here, you might have helped to prevent it.”

“What happened?”

A crowd was beginning to gather as the new got round that Arjun was back.

“You know your father got into debt through sending you to college, and last year’s harvest was bad. He had nothing to sell to pay the debt, so another farmer took over the fields. He wasn’t satisfied, and demanded his bullocks as well. When your father refused, he set fire to your family’s house. Your family were out, but lost everything.”

Arjun looked at the ruin. So that had happened for his sake! How could he be reconciled to his parents now? How could he tell them that he had found God?

Crowds stood around watching Arjun. He told the crowd what he had been doing and how he had found God, or rather, how God had found him. One of the sons of the farmer who had burned the house down, was standing listening.

“So, you’re a Christian!” remarked one of the men. “What will your people say to that?”

“I don’t know,” said Arjun sadly, looking at the ruin of his home. ‘But becoming a Christian does not mean changing one’s religion or caste in the outward sense – it isn’t some rite we perform to be called something different. It is becoming new on the inside, asking Jesus Christ to come into your life and change you.’

Just then his uncle came along. “A fine way you’ve repaid your parents for all they’ve done for you!

“Yes, I’m sorry uncle,” said Arjun. “

Just then his uncle came along. His uncle was furious to know that Arjun had become a Christian. “You have poured contempt on your father’s ancestors by scorning their religion. You have no heart for your parents – no gratitude, and you don’t care what becomes of them.” he said.

Arjun groaned inwardly. How could he ever convince them? He turned away and went in the direction of his mother’s village. He would be there before dark.

Chapter 14 – Arjun rejected

Had he made a mistake? He felt guilty. He felt like a worthless son.

His cousin Raganath saw him coming.

“Arjun,” cried Raganath, “You’ve come at last!” Where have you been all this time?”

“I wanted to find out where Tara had gone, and find God – the living God who made the world and who loves you,” said Arjun.

“So you’ve found God! What good has that done? You’ve lost everything and you have no job.”

“Not yet,” said Arjun. “God will show me what to do.”

His mother was cooking the evening meal. She came rushing out on the verandah. She started to weep when she saw Arjun.

“Why did you leave us? We didn’t know where you were!” If you had got a job we could have paid our debts.”

Raganath came and sat on the verandah. “He says he’s found God.”

Vishram, Arjun’s father grunted, “A lot of good that has done!”

“I know where Tara is now,” said Arjun. “She’s safe with the Lord Jesus.”

“WHO is Jesus?” asked Vishram suspiciously.

“He’s the Christians’ God,” said Raganath, who had heard of this at school.

“You throw away your education and become a Christian!” replied Vishram. “Cursed is the day you were born! You are a disgrace! Get out!”

Several men rushed to get sticks and started beating Arjun as he descended the verandah steps. Others threw stones and dirt at him as he struggled out of the village. Staggering along the road a little way, bruised and bleeding, he collapsed under a tree.

Chapter 15 A fool for God

In the cool dawn breeze, he regained consciousness. His face was swollen and his hair matted with blood. He had suffered the loss of everything now – his home and family, but he still had his precious New Testament in his trousers pocket. He pulled it out – “Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and say all kinds of evil against you because of me. Rejoice and be glad because great is your reward in heaven.”

He struggled to his feet and started limping along the dusty road. Any people he met did not speak to him. News about him becoming a Christian had spread like wildfire.

By Midday he was utterly exhausted. He had not eaten for two days and he was very thirsty. He sat down under a babul tree and wished he could die. The son of the farmer who had burned down his family’s house, came by and jeered at him – “What a fool you are!”

Arjun remembered a verse from 1 Corinthians – “We are fools for Christ” – then “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens

me”. He rose to his feet. Strength came into his body. He walked very slowly, but had enough strength to get to Santosh’s home.

Chapter 16 A new man

Now living with Santosh again, Arjun was thinking deeply about baptism. Finally, Santosh believed that he was ready. Nearly the whole of Santosh’s village, Kurha, gathered on the banks of the river. Christians were standing around praying for him. He was led down into the water by the pastor, waist deep. Santosh was there to receive him when he came out of the water.

“A new man in Christ has risen!” shouted Santosh as he threw the towel over him.

Arjun could not speak. He had met the Lord. A hymn was sung and the crowd dispersed. Sakharam, Santosh’s employer had been in the crowd. He came up to Arjun. “I would like you to come and do my accounts again,” he said.

“I was intending to go to Nagpur to get a job to pay my family’s debts,” said Arjun.

“I will pay you a rupee an hour,” said Sakharam.

“Stay until after the rains,” advised Santosh. “You need to be with Christians for a while before you go out and face the world.”

Arjun agreed.

Chapter 17 Arjun's opportunity

The rains were over. With his savings, Arjun had bought some new clothes to wear in the city. He said goodbye to the Christians at Kurha and thanked them for their kindness.

"You will always have a home here," said Santosh.

Krupabai, Santosh's wife, pressed into his hand a lunchbox of good things to eat on the way.

He passed the fields that had been his father.

"I must show this farmer and his family that I have forgiven them for destroying my family's home," he said to himself, as he saw one of the farmer's sons working in the fields.

As he continued a little further, he noticed a fire in one of the fields. The farmer's son, Atmaram, had been working with his wife in the fields and left their young son sleeping in a small thatched hut on the property. The toddler had woken and was drawn of the remains of a fire that had been used for cooking lunch. The fire had gone out, except for a glowing ember on the end of one piece of wood. The other end was cool enough for the boy to pull out. He waved the piece of wood about, hitting the straw wall of the hut. The straw caught fire and in no time the hut was ablaze. Arjun, passing by at that exact moment heard the screaming boy, dropped his lunchbox and scrambled through the hedge into the blazing hut. He swept the little boy up into his arms and backed out of the hut. His mother came and grabbed him, hugging him and weeping with relief.

Arjun remembered the promise, "When you walk through the fire you will not be burned, for I the Lord am with you." Neither he nor the little boy had been burned. Atmaram came running, greatly relieved to see his son unharmed.

"I forgive you for assisting your father in burning down my family's house," said Arjun gently.

"How could you?" sobbed Atmaram, trembling with conviction.

Arjun explained that as Christ forgave us, we too can forgive others; that Christ can forgive everyone who turns to him for forgiveness. At that point Atmaram decided to receive Christ's forgiveness for himself. Arjun prayed with him and they left the fields to visit his father. Gopichand, the chief instigator of the deed.

Atmaram explained to his father what had happened. "Don't you think we should return their fields," asked Atmaram, "and I will rebuild their house – a larger and better one."

Gopichand was appreciative of what Arjun had done, but would not give up the fields.

"Then I will buy the fields from you," said Atmaram. I will work to earn the money to buy them."

Gopichand agreed to this.

Arjun felt that this was too much to expect of Atmaram. "Just let it go," he told Atmaram.

"No," said Atmaram, "I must make amends for what we have done. My father has wronged many people and I have cooperated with

him. Now I must do what I can to make up for all that we have done to your family.”

Chapter 18 Atmaram decides.

Atmaram explained to the village people what had happened, and his plan to repay Arjun.

“We will help you build the house,” said some of the men.

Atmaram asked his father if Arjun could stay the night.

“No, he may not!” was the replay. “You have shown me no gratitude. You have become a Christian! You’ve disgraced your family as he has. You care nothing for your parents who have brought you up. You can get out – both of you! I can’t stop you working in your fields that you are buying from me, but I will not have you in my house.”

The next day Gopichand was working with his bullocks when one pulled violently as a result of Gopichand giving it an extra hard hit on the back. The rope was twisted around Gopichand’s hand. The bullock bolted and took Gopichand with it. Gopichand was badly injured. He lay on the ground semiconscious. In that moment he thought he had a dream or a vision – Arjun was holding a cup of cold water to his lips.

But it was no vision. It was real.

“Let me help you into the shade,” said Arjun, “and I will fetch a cart.

There was no doctor in Talegon. Arjun sent someone to another village to get a doctor. By the time the doctor arrived, Arjun had made Gopichand as comfortable as possible. The hand was very painful. The doctor examined Gopichand’s hand. “This must be amputated,” he said. “You will have to go to Amraoti for the operation. If you don’t, you will be dead in a week. The doctor gave him morphine for the pain.

“I would like to pray for you,” said Arjun. “I believe the Lord Jesus wants to heal you. Would you allow me to do that?”

Gopichand agreed and Arjun prayed, holding his hand.

“The pain has gone!” said Gopichand. “And I can move it!” This was not because of the morphine. It was an amazing supernatural recovery.

As a result, Gopichand’s heart was changed. “I will follow Jesus,” said Gopichand. “And Atmaram can live in my house. I want you boys to start rebuilding Vishram’s house in the morning. It must be the best house in the village, and completed in record time!

Chapter 19 Reconciliation

While Arjun’s family’s house was being built, he was a guest of honour at the home of Gopichand and family. Arjun was able to explain to them more about the Christian faith and the Bible, and the family gladly received what Arjun taught.

Just before the house was completed, Arjun and Gopichand set out to visit Arjun's family. As the cart drew up at the home, they were met by Vishram, very surprised to have a visit from his enemy, Gopichand.

"I have come to ask your forgiveness, and come to tell you that I have built a new house to replace the one I burnt down. It's yours."

Vishram was speechless.

"It's true, Father," said Arjun. "They have built you a lovely house and returned your fields."

"But why ... How can this be?" exclaimed Vishram.

Gopichand explained how Arjun had prayed for him after the accident, and God had healed him, God then showed him that he needed to repent of his sins, and how his life had been turned around when he gave his life to Jesus.

They went inside. His mother was getting the tea ready.

"Well, my son," she said, bringing the tea. "Are you still a Christian?"

"Yes, thank God, I am!" said Arjun.

"It's alright. It doesn't matter anymore," said Vishram.

"The we can call him our son again?" asked Drupabai.

"Yes," mumbled Vishram.

Drupabai at once hugged Arjun and the two of them wept.

Soon the entire village had heard the news that Arjun was now reunited with his family.

It wasn't long before Arjun's family moved into their new home. There were four rooms instead of two. The family was thrilled. It was like a palace. And besides all this, they had their crops too.

"I am very grateful," said Vishram to Gopichand.

"You have no need to be grateful," said Gopichand. "My family will never be able to repay Arjun for bringing us the Good News, and showing us what it means."

As Arjun continued to share the Gospel with his family, and show them what it means to be a real Christian, they were gradually won over and gave their hearts to the Lord. Arjun began a Christian ministry in the village, setting up and leading a church.

One day Arjun said to his father, "It would be good for you and mother to go to Chilkalda, where Santosh went. You would learn to read and write, and mother could learn sewing. You could also learn more about the Bible and then you could lead the church when I leave."

His father nodded. "I would like to go. Santosh has told me about it."

Within a week it was arranged for Vishram and Drupabai to go to Chilkalda.

"Father," said Arjun, "I have a request to make. For days I have been longing to retrace my steps on that journey I made over a year

ago, and find the people whom I questioned about God. I want to tell them that I have found the one I have been searching for, and share hope with them. And I don't think it matters if I don't get a job. I will become a pastor."

"Go, my son," said Vishram, "and God be with you."

Arjun set off once more, not in a saffron robe this time, but equipped with his Bible. The first person to give him a life was Baliram, who had picked him up the first time on his previous journey. As Arjun was sharing what had happened to him, they passed a fire burning in some fields.

"See that fire?" he said to Baliram. "That is what Jesus does in us. He burns up the things that keep us from God."

"I guess that's what I need," said Baliram softly. "I now see no purpose in other beliefs."

Arjun's testimony was powerful, and the miracles that had taken place in his life, undeniable.