

# Destiny Is a Two-Edged Sword

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There was a man in a far land renowned as a prophet and a sage, learned and wise. His remote cottage could only be reached by many days on horseback through unyielding terrain. Despite the hardships seeing him presented, many aspired to the pilgrimage. Some came to ask advice, others to find wisdom and some to know the future God had ordained. The prophet refused no one an audience as he was humble and fatherly toward all.

The prophet had one servant who prepared his meals and attended to guests. This servant was a young man who had been orphaned at birth and grew up handed off from one relative to another until all had had their fill of him. He was strong and stubborn, perceptive and quick-tempered. How he came into the prophet's service no one was sure, but it was rumored that the prophet had sought him out in response to a dream.

It hadn't taken many months in the prophet's house before the young man was completely transformed. His argumentative nature was turned to a genuine thirst for understanding. He applied himself to every opportunity to watch and learn from those who came to his mentor.

During the second year of his service, the young man witnessed the arrival of three distinguished visitors. They were very nearly his own age, but their clothes and their bearing indicated their elevated status: nobility. Nearing the time to establish themselves and set a course for their futures, their families insisted that they present themselves to the prophet and ask for guidance and blessing.

The three, though equals, were as different as they could be and still be called friends. One was tall and loud with a demanding tone and an air of natural authority. He was easily the leader of the three comrades and was quick to make decisions even when none was necessary. When the prophet was present, he never took his eyes from him.

The second friend was thick and jovial, swift to laugh or to provoke the others to smile. He moved with comfortable steps but seemed reluctant to speak of serious matters or press his point if one of the others disagreed with him. He was at ease when in the prophet's guest quarters, the servant noticed, but laughed

louder and talked more when in the presence of the prophet himself.

The last of the three seekers was quiet and could have been mistaken for timid, as the servant almost did, except that he met the eyes of all who spoke to him. Though his words were few, they were measured and always just sufficient, never more. The servant was more intrigued with this quiet young man than with any he had met in the two years of his service.

For several days after the young men arrived, they were occupied by the regimen the prophet required – prayer and meditation, daily readings from the sacred writings, and work. The work was dependent on what was needed. Some tilled, some planted, some built, but all were to participate in the prophet’s life – body, soul and mind – while his guests.

The tall, direct youth had not expected this “delay” in receiving the blessing of the prophet and seemed constantly on the verge of pressing the prophet to do something – what, he did not know. The jovial comrade was more comfortable passing the time in this manner; happy enough to avoid any serious face to face meeting with the prophet. The only thing more awkward to his sensibility would be to return to his family without having gotten what he came for. The third young man simply watched and waited. He made no comments, nor did he make any particular requests of the servant. He worked without complaint or expression.

Finally, the morning arrived when the prophet requested that the young men join him in his sunrise prayers. From outside the rough-hewn chapel, the young servant could hear the murmurs and smell the candles; just outside the door at his post he waited. Inside, the prophet knelt facing a well-made wooden altar draped by home-made cloth. The three guests knelt on prayer benches behind him. After the appointed hour had concluded, the prophet rose, called the young servant inside and spoke.

“Blessed are you who seek God’s guidance and blessed are you to whom He gives insight,” he pronounced.

He approached them where they still knelt and gently laid his hand on their heads, one by one blessing in low tones the life and service of each man. When he was finished, he returned to the small altar where he himself had been in prayer.

The prophet motioned to the servant to step behind the altar and from there, directed the young man to

retrieve three small wooden chests, arranging them side by side on the altar in the order of the kneeling comrades. The three seekers could see each box had a carefully painted copy of each man's family crest upon the lid. Ancient family symbols rich in meaning and unique to each. The old prophet directed the three men to stand. Then the prophet began.

“Each of you has before him his future. Your past, your family, your learning – all are as these wooden boxes. A simple vessel from which you will emerge.” At this the prophet opened the lids of the three chests. “See here, my young friends, are the paths of your lives.”

Each chest contained a bed of straw, on which lay a small flat stone tablet, white as chalk. The prophet continued, “On each tablet is God's message to you, much as He wrote upon stone in ancient times. On the underside of the tablet is written what you are to become. It is how you will be remembered. By knowing, you will begin to live out that destiny ... a destiny that you will be responsible for. Read, each of you, and go with God.” The prophet stepped aside and waited.

The face of each young visitor showed the astonishment that the young servant felt. For a moment they stood motionless. Then, most likely to no one's surprise, the tall outspoken young man stepped forward to just within reach of his chest. The prophet watched from the side of the altar; his mesmerized young servant from behind.

“What *will* I become?” he muttered to himself, confident yet fascinated. His mind raced with the dreams he had dwelt upon since childhood. Grand dreams from a family of note. He saw the faces of his father and mother, and of his older brothers, who had upheld his family's name well since their visit to the prophet years earlier. Their names would most certainly be remembered; would his own?

He reached out, firmly grasped the white stone, pausing to enjoy the moment, then turned it over to read the outcome of his life before it had truly begun.

He stood staring for several minutes. His friends could not see his face, but the prophet and the servant saw a look as one who had been slapped by his bride on their wedding day rather than kissed. He turned without a word letting the tablet slip from his hand, shattering against the rough stone floor. He walked from the chapel, across the grassy stretch to the barn. Inside he saddled and mounted his horse. He rode away without any of his things.

The small party in the chapel watched in silence. The two remaining friends looked at each other sharing the craving to know what had been written on the tablet that now lay broken beyond repair. They turned back to the prophet, who simply gestured toward the other chests.

The second comrade had no hint now of his amiable self and appeared as one partially paralyzed. The prophet motioned again, this time directly toward him. The young man took one halting step after another until he was within reach of the altar. There he stared at the tablet for some time. Then he cautiously extended his hand and slowly closed the lid containing the tablet of his destiny, his family crest staring back at him from the lid. He bowed reverently, if awkwardly, and walked swiftly out of the chapel. He too left without his possessions.

The young servant had never witnessed anything like this and raged inside with questions and thoughts. The third young man stood resolutely, now alone. He stepped to the altar without being directed. The prophet nodded to him and the young man spoke. "I cannot speak for my companions. As they are, they have acted. As I hope to serve God, so I choose." He decisively gripped the white stone tablet from the chest that bore the ancient crest of his clan, drew it close and read it. He gazed thoughtfully at the inscription and then at the prophet. The prophet nodded gently and the young man smiled. He lay the stone back in its place face down and bowed to the prophet, who blessed him again. Then to the young servant's surprise, the noble youth bowed to him as well and departed.

The young servant stood, motionless, unable to sort through the questions that burned inside. Before he could ask anything of the prophet the old man spoke.

"My son," he began quietly, "do you understand why the Narrow Way *is* narrow?" The servant could barely follow the question so distracted as he was with the events of the afternoon. The Narrow Way? He fumbled to make an answer until the prophet finally cleared his throat.

"It is narrow," the old sage continued, "because it lies between Pride and Fear. They are broad and flat paths with much room to wander. The Narrow Way is the way of submission — an abhorrence to Pride and an antagonism to Fear. Thus only a few find it."

The young man abruptly blurted out, "But master, what was written upon their stone tablets?!"

"Prophets only rarely pronounce the future, but always proclaim the truth." The old man ignored the

puzzled look upon his servant's face and continued. "Our first guest had high expectations for himself. Reared and suited to strength of will, he believes more in himself than anything else. He must have balance to find the Narrow Way. His hopes were to read of wealth, conquest or position. Instead, he read three words: *servant, fool, poor*. He has never before considered these. But these are what he *will* become."

The sage's young assistant responded slowly, "Then his life is fixed. He is to amount to nothing."

"Oh no!" laughed the prophet. "He may yet be glad for his destiny. A *servant* of God, a *fool* for Christ, and one of the *poor* who inherit the kingdom of heaven! Joy upon joy for that young man! But only if he finds the Narrow Way. Otherwise it may be as you say, since on any other path all of us amount to nothing."

"And the second man, sir. He came all this way and left without knowing! What is to become of him?"

"Our second young friend's stone is yet to be inscribed – for fear rejects responsibility and truth. It hides sometimes in levity and cannot abide confrontation. For this young man, the words "conqueror" or "servant" would have been equally un-welcomed. He will go lightly in heart, living by happenstance until such time as he discovers a pearl of great price; then he will desire to know his destiny."

"What is this *pearl*?" ventured the young servant.

The sage shrugged. "Anything that he desires more than his own life. Perhaps a wife or a child; his own freedom, or justice for the innocent. If he is greatly blessed, then salvation itself. Then he may venture here again and his tablets will have words then. Then he may come out of Fear and see the Narrow Way."

The prophet paused and walked to the front of the altar. He slowly lowered the lid on the chest of the first seeker.

"I beg you Sir," the servant could not help himself. "The final man was so different from his friends. He even bowed to me! He did not seem caught in Pride or swayed by Fear. What did this man read?"

The old man smiled as he moved to the third chest. He gently closed the lid, tarrying over it and laying his hand upon the family crest. The crest was a gold shield with a mountain emblazoned on it, framed by an eagle on one side and on the other, a stag with a large rack standing on its hind feet.

"Our Lord has said that to him who has ears..." The prophet trailed off as he stared at the crest on the lid. For a moment he seemed to be remembering.

"Please forgive me my lord, I don't understand, but there was something ..." groped the young servant.

His heart longed for something, but he could not find the words. "I want...I mean...how can I, some day...sir...be as that man. He seemed so...content with his fate."

The prophet looked up suddenly. "No, no my young friend. Not fate, only destiny. Destiny is a path we are granted, called to, even drawn to, but we choose to follow or to resist."

"But sir, if what they *will become* is written before they read, aren't then destiny and fate not the same?"

The prophet smiled, pleased that the young servant had reasoned so swiftly. "My son, destiny is for the living; fate is for the dead. If you know the Narrow Way, then you will hear the calling; if you hear the calling, then you will come to know the purpose; if you know the purpose, then you will see your destiny; if you see your destiny, then you will make your choices, and so your destiny comes to pass."

"But sir, it still sounds as if I am not really free to choose. It seems so ... inescapable. And, forgive my boldness sir, somehow ... unfair."

The prophet chuckled. "What makes you think our destinies do not include us in all our glory *and* all our weakness?" The young servant's look was so perplexed, so uncomfortable and yet so familiar. The prophet looked back down at the chest the third visitor had drawn from and sighed, "Do not let this trouble you. I felt the same way when I was young! It seemed then that I had too little to say in the matter of my own destiny. Now after long years of choices, it seems I have too much!" He shook his head in amusement. Then the old sage struck the lid of the chest with three sharp taps, and looked into the eyes of his young servant. "Do you wish to know what *your* destiny holds my young friend?"

*Mine?!*, thought the young man. He was too shocked to answer for several minutes, staring wide-eyed at the old sage. Finally he managed to stammered, just barely above a whisper, "Now, sir?"

"Why not, young one?" the prophet said turning the wooden chest with the gold shield, eagle and stag around to face the young man. He opened its lid slowly to reveal the white stone tablet of the visitor the servant had so admired.

"After all," smiled the prophet. "This is your family crest too."