

EPISODE 10 – The Pity of Achilles

CD 3 tracks 1-2

total running time: 13:23

A father begs for the return of his son (Ⓢ 6:24)

Imagine old Priam, the white-bearded Priam of Troy. Imagine Priam, king of Troy, sitting on his golden throne like a statue. For two days he had not eaten. He had not drunk. He had not spoken. The only movement was the movement of tears, trickling down his cheeks and his beard and his neck.

- 5 And then at last he opened his mouth and he said, “Achilles cannot be altogether a godless man. And surely he loves his own father, old Peleus? I will go to him myself and I will beg him to return the body of our son, Hector. I will beg him, in the name of his father, to return the body of our son. And I will offer him Hector’s weight in sparkling, yellow gold.”

And Queen Hecuba buried her face in her hands and she said, “The old man has gone mad!

- 10 The mighty gods have addled his wits. That savage beast, that wild animal, will tear him limb from limb, just as he has destroyed our own son!”

But Priam took no notice of her. He got up to his feet. He made his way to the treasure house of the palace. He lifted the lids of chests and coffers and he took out gold: arm rings, radiant; shields, shining; burnished battle vests; decorated drinking vessels; golden goblets. He piled

- 15 gold upon gold upon gold.

And Paris followed him and Paris said, “Father, you cannot go to the Greek camp alone. At least take me with you!”

And Priam said, “No, I go alone.”

“Then take somebody with you!”

- 20 And Priam said, “Very well. I will take little Polyxena with me.” Now Polyxena was the youngest of all the children of Priam and Hecuba, a beautiful young woman.

And so it was that night a cart was harnessed to two horses and the cart was filled with gold.

And Priam and Polyxena, with black cloaks over their shoulders and black hoods drawn down over their faces, climbed up onto the seat of the cart. And they shook the reins and the great

- 25 bronze gates of the city were opened and they made their way across the plain towards the Greek camp.

There was a full moon shining in the sky and, as they journeyed across the plain, they passed churned earth and splintered trees and shattered chariots and dead horses, swollen with decay, their hooves pointing up towards the stars. They passed the bodies of foot soldiers,

- 30 some still sticky with gore and some no more than tatters of skin clinging to bleached bones.

And everywhere the scuttling of rats and the fighting of dogs over carrion. And everything black and grey and silver in the moonlight.

And, when they reached the gates of the palisade, some god must have been watching over them because the gates were open and the sentinels were asleep. And they made their way

35 across the Greek camp, the great curled prows of the ships dark against the silver sky above their heads. And at last they came to the seashore, where the waves suck and drag.

And there was the hut of Achilles. And old Priam clambered down from the seat of the cart and Polyxena stayed with the gold. But the old king made his way across and he lifted the latch of the door and he pushed it open. And there was Achilles, sitting alone, staring at the ground.

40 And old Priam ran across. He threw himself down at Achilles' feet. He curled his left arm over Achilles' knees. He kissed the man-slaying hands that had so recently been the death of his own son.

And he said, "It is a father's joy to hear his son returning home, to hear the sound of the doors swinging open and then the stamping of earth from sandals. And then perhaps he hears the
45 sound of a satchel or a shield being thrown onto the ground. And then he hears maybe a snatch of song, and he sees his own son come striding into his hall and pouring himself a cup of wine and drinking and wiping the froth from his lips. Achilles, even now as I am speaking, your father, old Peleus, will be dreaming of your return. He will be longing for your return, a return that I will never see. At least give me the body of Hector. I will pay for it with his weight
50 in sparkling, yellow gold."

***Achilles relents – at a price* (© 6:59)**

And it seemed to Achilles that he saw his own father before him. For years he'd cursed this Priam as the bullish father of a brutal brood. But now he saw white hair, white beard – an old man, scarred with care, trembling hand – a father who'd lost a son. And Achilles' eyes filled with tears. He put his hands on the old man's shoulders and the two men wept together as
5 though they were family, as though their sorrows were the same.

When his tears could no more come, Achilles said, "How much you've suffered! Such pain would crush my spirit. And you must have a heart of iron to walk among your mortal foes. How blessed we seemed when we were born, I and your son, Hector, both of us born the sons of kings. But both of us had been cursed by the gods. For my father too will soon discover he has
10 outlived his son. I grant your wish. You'll have his body and more. For however long you need to grieve him, to mourn his passing with proper honours, I'll hold back the Greek armies. I'll wait, I'll watch for grieving smoke."

And Achilles ordered that a weighing scales, an enormous weighing scales, be built outside his hut, each pan large enough to take the body of a grown man. And then, wrapped in a woollen
15 shroud, the corpse of Hector was laid at their feet.

And old Priam dropped to his knees and he began to fold back the layers of wool. And, as he did so, golden Apollo took pity on him and, with one movement of his hands, he undid all the damage that had been done, so that, when Priam folded back the last layer of wool, there was Hector's face in all of its beauty, as though he was asleep. And the old king kissed his son. He
20 kissed the forehead and the cheeks, and his tears splashed down onto Hector's face.

And then the body was lifted and it was laid onto one of the pans of the scales. And Polyxena began to unload gold from the cart. She piled gold upon gold upon gold upon gold. But, when the cart was empty, the body of Hector was still heavier. And so she unclasped the necklace from her throat and she threw it into the pan. She pulled bracelets and bangles from her wrists
25 and she threw them onto the pan. She pulled the rings from her fingers. And Achilles sat and he watched her, and as he watched her he fell in love with Polyxena.

And the last ring that she pulled from her finger and threw into the pan lifted the body of Hector. The scales balanced perfectly. And the body was taken and it was laid tenderly in the cart.

30 And Achilles said, "Old man! Princess! Come and eat with me before you go!"

And so it was that old Priam and Polyxena sat down at a table with Achilles. And meat and bread and wine were served. And Achilles broke the white bread with his own hands and he offered it to them.

And, when they had finished eating, Achilles reached across and he took Priam's hand and he
35 kissed it. And he said, "Old man, we mortals are wretched things and the gods who know no care have woven sorrow into the pattern of our lives."

And then he reached across and he took Polyxena's hand and he kissed it. And, as he kissed it, he pressed onto her finger that ring, that golden ring in the shape of a curved arrow whose sharp tip touches its feathered tail. And Polyxena looked at the ring. And then she and her
40 father got up to their feet and they climbed onto the seat of the cart and they shook the reins and they made their way across the plain and back to the city of Troy.

And for ten days there were funeral games in honour of Hector. And then, on the eleventh day, a pyre was built outside the city walls and the body of Hector was laid on the pyre. And all that day the heat of the fire's heart consumed the house of bone.

45 And, when all had been reduced to white ash, Paris gathered the charred bones of his brother and he wrapped them in a crimson cloth and they were put into a golden casket. And earth was piled over the casket and stones over the earth and earth over the stones. And then the people of Troy returned to the city, all but Andromache. She knelt beside her husband's grave and she said, "Sweet Hector, I could not even hold your hand when you died."