

The *Odyssey* of Homer

Book 9

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"My father had me learn every word of Homer . . . to see me develop into a good man." —Niceratus of Athens

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Book 9

Disaster on the Way Home

Reading 9

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This reading comes from the Cave's

The Best of Homer's Odyssey.

IN REPLY, ODYSSEUS of many counsels said to him, "Mighty Alcinous, most renowned among all people, it is a beautiful thing to hear a bard such as this man—his voice sounds like that of the gods! As for me, I declare that there is nothing better or more delightful than when a whole people join in merry festivity together, with the guests sitting side by side listening to the singer, while before them the table is loaded with bread and meats, [10] and the cupbearer draws wine from the mixing bowl and pours it into all the goblets. In my mind, this seems to be the most beautiful thing.

"Now, however, since you have turned to ask the story of my sorrows and of all the wretched trouble I

have known so that I may groan about and lament the past all the more, I wonder where to begin or how to go on telling the story, for the heavenly gods have given me much distress. First, I will tell you my name so that you too may know it. And one day, if I escape this ruthless sorrow, may you be my guests and I your host in the house where I dwell, even though it is far away. As for my name, I am Odysseus, the son of Laertes. And for all manner of tricks and stratagems, [20] I am well-known among men—so much so that my glory rises into the sky and to the heavens above. I live in far-seen Ithaca where there is a high mountain called Neriton that juts out from the sea. It is covered with forests of trees that sway in the wind.

Around Ithaca is a group of islands very near to one another—Dulichium, Same, and the wooded island called Zacynthus. Ithaca itself stretches out low along the sea, westward toward the darkness. The others stretch eastward toward the dawn and the rising of the sun. Ithaca is a rugged land but a good one for rearing children. Nothing is sweeter than to see one's own land.

"As for what happened, the divine goddess Calypso kept me with her [30] in her hollow cave, longing for me to be her husband. So too did Aeaean Circe, full of deception, retain me in her great hall, eagerly wanting me to marry her. But neither goddess could persuade the spirit in my chest, for there is nothing sweeter to a man than his own homeland and his parents. However rich a home he may have in a faraway land, if it is distant from his mother or father, he does not want it.

"But come, I will tell you of my grievous homecoming, full of many troubles that Zeus permitted while I was venturing home from Troy. The wind took me from Ilium and carried me to the land of the Cicones, [40] to Ismarus. There I sacked the city, bringing destruction to all the men. As for the women, we seized them and took them from the city along with much property and wealth that we later divided equally so that no man was cheated."

43-81 Odysseus advises fleeing from the land of the Cicones. But the men want to relax while eating and drinking the plenty they had stolen. While they are feasting, however, the Cicones gather their neighbors and attack. In the end, Odysseus and his men are routed, and many are killed, six from each ship. The rest, who "escaped death and fate," sail on, sad at heart. Their problems are not at end, though. Instead, Zeus raises a great storm that blows them in darkness, blindly. After rowing ashore and staying there for a few days, they once again attempt to sail home on the third day. But a great North Wind, the god Boreas, blows them off course just as they are rounding Cape Malea off the Peloponnese. For nine days, the wind blows them south over the fish-filled sea, past the island of Cythera and beyond.

82-115 "But on the tenth day we went ashore in the

land of the Lotus-eaters. These men eat a food that is like flowers. . . . [85-87] I sent some comrades out to go and learn what sort of men who live by bread dwelled in the land. [90] I sent two—and a third as herald with them. These left without delay to go and mix with the Lotus-eaters.

"The Lotus-eaters had no intention to bring ruin to our comrades when they gave them the lotus to eat. But whatever man ate the sweet fruit of the lotus, he no longer wished to bring back a report to the ship, nor did he wish to return home. No—his only desire was to stay among the Lotus-eating men, feeding on lotus and forgetting his return.

"So by force I brought these men weeping back to the ships. And dragging them under the hollow ships' benches, I bound them with fetters. [100] And I urged on my other faithful comrades to move quickly and load into the swift ships so that no other man would eat the lotus and forget his return home. Quickly, then, they climbed aboard, took places at the rowing benches, one after another, and they dug into the foamy gray sea with their oars.

"From then on we sailed forward with distressed hearts until we came to the land of the Cyclopes. They are an arrogant and lawless people who rely solely upon the immortal gods, and thus they do not sow any plants with their own hands, nor do they till the earth. Even so, all these plants spring up unsown and without plowing—[110] wheat, barley, and grapevines bearing wine in their heavy clusters—since Zeus' rain makes them grow. There are no counsel-giving assemblies among them, nor do they have any established laws or customs. Instead, they live at the top of lofty hills in hollow caves, and each Cyclops declares what is right for his children and his wives, and pays little attention to the rest of them."

116-186 Odysseus goes on to discuss an island off the land of the Cyclopes, who, incidentally, do not possess ships as other men do. He describes the island's hillsides and meadows, its woods, vines, and springs, and the many wild goats that live there. There's also a protected harbor, Odysseus says, where he and his men finally beach the ships and fall asleep.

Rising the following morning, Odysseus and his men hunt wild goats and kill enough for each ship, twelve total, to have nine. For the remainder of the day, they eat roasted meat and drink a sweet red wine they plundered from the Cicones. Toward dusk they spot smoke rising up from evening fires in the land of the Cyclopes, and they hear voices. Consequently, when dawn comes, Odysseus takes the men from his own ship to learn about the Cyclopes, to see if they are “violent and wild men without custom, or if they love strangers and fear the gods in their minds.” Reaching the land of the Cyclopes, they see a high cave that has sheep and goat pens surrounding it and a courtyard made of stones and pine trees.

187-192 “There slept a gigantic man, monstrous in form, who drove his sheep alone and far away—he did not deal with others, but far apart he followed his own lawless and wicked ways. [190] Thus it happened that he became a marvel to behold, a monster, not like a man who eats bread, but like a wood-covered peak on a lofty mountain, one jutting out that appears alone and apart from the others.”

193-235 *Odysseus selects a handful of his men, twelve, to go with him to explore the Cyclops’ cave. He takes with him a large goatskin of very fine and potent wine, and other provisions. He received the wine from Maro, a priest of Apollo, as a gift for not harming him or his family when Odysseus and his men were sacking the Cicones.*

When they reach the cave, the Cyclops is not there. He’s out with his sheep. Odysseus enters the cave with his comrades. Amazed at the Cyclops’ stores, the men all wish to take hold of the cheeses there, as well as a number of goats and lambs, and flee to the ship. Not Odysseus. Rather, as he puts it, he wants “to behold the man himself in order to see if he would grant to me those gifts rightfully belonging to a stranger.” Speaking to the Phaeacians, Odysseus concludes, “He appeared, but he was not destined to be a delight to my comrades.”

Following Odysseus’ desire, he and his men remain in the cave. While waiting for their host-to-be, they make a fire, sacrifice to the gods, and eat some of the cheese. Finally, the Cyclops enters the cave, carrying a huge bundle of wood for a fire.

236-306 “Terrified, we crept into the innermost part of the cavern. But into the wide cave the Cyclops drove his fat sheep, the ones that he would milk. As for the males, both rams and he-goats, he left them outside in the wide courtyard. [240] And now, lifting it high into the air, he set in place an enormous door-stone. It was a very heavy thing. Mammoth. Not even twenty-two solidly constructed four-wheel carts could hold the stone up from the surface of the earth—that’s what this massive rock was like that he placed in the entryway.

“Sitting down, he then milked the ewes and bleating goats, all in due order. And beneath them he ushered the youngest ones. Once done, he curdled half the white milk, gathered it in wicker baskets, and set it to the side. He left the other half standing in the pails, ready for him to take and drink, and ready also for his supper.

[250] “But after he had worked hard and quickly at these tasks, he kindled a fire. It was then that he spotted us. And questioning us, he asked, ‘Strangers, who are you? Where do you come from, sailing over the watery ways? Are you out on business—on some trading voyage? Or do you aimlessly wander, as pirates roam the seas, risking their lives and bringing misfortune to people in another land?’

“As he spoke, our dear hearts were shattered within, fearful of his booming voice and of the monstrous giant himself. Even so, I answered him and said, ‘We are Achaeans. We’ve come from Troy driven [260] from our path across the great depth of the sea by all sorts of winds. We were moving toward home, but by this way and other paths we have come to this place. So it was that Zeus was willing to plan it. We boast ourselves to be the people of Agamemnon, the son of Atreus, whose fame and glory is now the greatest under heaven since he sacked a great city and slaughtered so many men.

““But hitting upon this place, we come before your knees to ask that you will offer us hospitality, and that in other ways you will give us the customary gifts due to strangers. Mighty one, you should respect the gods. We are your suppliants, [270] and Zeus is the protector and avenger of the suppliant

and the stranger. Zeus is the stranger's god, who guards the revered stranger.'

"That's what I said, and at once the Cyclops ruthlessly answered me from his pitiless spirit. 'You're a fool, stranger, or you have come from far away if you're urging me to fear the gods or shrink before them. The Cyclopes don't trouble themselves with aegis-bearing Zeus or the blessed gods since we are much better than they are. I wouldn't spare you or your comrades just to escape the wrath of Zeus—not unless my own heart urged me to do so. [280] But tell me so that I may learn where you left your well-built ship when you came here. Was it at the far shore, or the one nearby?'

"That's what the Cyclops said, testing me. Yet he could not escape my notice—not a knowing man like me. And so, as I did before, I replied with deceptive words meant to trick him.

"Poseidon the Earth-shaker shattered my ship, driving her against the rocks where the land comes to an end, throwing her against the cliffs. The wind carried her in from the sea. Nevertheless, with these men here I escaped utter destruction.'

"That's what I said. But ruthlessly, the Cyclops didn't reply from his pitiless spirit. Rather, darting up, he threw out his hands to grab at my companions. He took hold of two and dashed them upon the ground as if they had been puppies. [290] And their brains ran out over the floor and wet the earth. Then, butchering them limb from limb, he prepared his evening meal and ate as a mountain lion does, leaving nothing—neither entrails nor flesh nor marrow nor bones. Seeing these reckless deeds, we raised our hands up to Zeus and wailed, feeling powerless to do anything at all.

"But when the Cyclops had filled his cavernous belly by eating human flesh and drinking milk unmixed with water, he stretched himself out among the sheep and went to bed in the cave. It was then that I deliberated within my great-hearted spirit and came up with this plan: [300] I would creep near to him, and drawing my sharp sword from its scabbard by my side, I would stab him in the chest where the midriff holds the liver, feeling the place out with my

hand. Yet second thoughts restrained my spirit—for if I had carried out the plan, we would have then and there been wasted by utter destruction. Why? We were not strong enough to push the mighty stone back from the lofty doorway where he had put it. Consequently, we stayed put, lamenting our situation and awaiting Dawn the divine."

307-335 *In the morning, and after milking his flocks, the Cyclops once again eats two of Odysseus' men. Outraged and full of fear, Odysseus plans revenge, praying that Athena might grant him success and the glory-boast. The idea is to blind the Cyclops by stabbing his one eye. They'll do it with a huge wooden stake that they'll make—one as large as a ship's mast. When the time comes, Odysseus and four others will carry out the plan, five men to hoist the stake and drive it home.*

336-412 "The Cyclops came toward evening, shepherding his flock with beautiful fleece. At once he drove the fat sheep into the wide cave—all of them. And so, he did not leave a single sheep in the wide courtyard outside. I imagine he had some foreboding, or some god urged him to do it.

[340] "Once inside, he lifted the enormous doorstone high into the air and set it in place. Then, sitting down, he milked the ewes and bleating goats, all in due order. And beneath them he ushered the youngest ones. But after he had worked hard and quickly at these tasks, he then took hold of two men and prepared his evening meal.

"Drawing near to the Cyclops and holding in my hands a rustic cup filled with dark wine, I said, 'Here, Cyclops! Drink some wine now that you've had your fill of man-flesh and so that you'll come to know what sort of wine our ship held. I brought it as a drink-offering, hoping you would pity me [350] and send me home. But you're insane! Merciless! It's far too much! How, after this, will any man come to you again from any people since you have behaved inappropriately, far outside the limits of fate?'

"That's what I said, and he took the cup and drained it dry. He was terribly pleased as he drank the sweet wine, and so for a second time he begged

me for some. 'Be generous and give me another cup. And now, at once, tell me your name so that I may give you guest-gifts that will make you glad. For even though the Cyclopes' wheat-giving fields produce wine made of fine grapes, growing large with the help of Zeus' thunderstorms, *this* is a bit of ambrosia and nectar.'

[360] "That's what the Cyclops said, and once again I offered him the shining wine. I brought and gave it to him three times. And three times he thoughtlessly drank it. Even so, when the wine began to overtake the Cyclops' mind and senses, I then addressed him with soothing words: 'Cyclops, you asked me my glorious name, and so I will tell it to you. But just as you promised, you must give me a guest-gift. My name is Nobody. My mother and father call me Nobody, as do the rest of my comrades.'

"That's what I said, and at once the Cyclops ruthlessly answered me from his pitiless spirit. 'Out of all his friends, I will eat Nobody last—[370] and all the others first. This will be my guest-gift for you.'

"Speaking, he leaned over and fell flat on his back. And there he lay with his neck outstretched and bent until sleep that conquers all took hold of him. Then: a stream of wine and chunky flesh-filled vomit rushed from his throat and mouth. Heavy with wine, the Cyclops erupted!

"It was then that I drove the stake under a heap of ashes in order to heat it. And I spoke to my comrades to give them courage so that under the influence of fear no man would hesitate or draw back. And presently, when the olivewood stake—even though it was green—was about to catch fire, and when it was terribly red-hot, [380] I carried it from the fire, while my men stood surrounding me. And a god inspired us with great courage.

"Taking the sharp-tipped olivewood stake in hand, they thrust it into his eye while I twisted it from above. As when a man bores ship beams with a drill, and those below keep the tool in motion with a strap held by the ends, and steadily the drill runs, even so we seized the fire-sharpened stake and turned it around in his eye. As we did so, flowing blood bubbled up by its hot tip. The heat charred the lids

around the eye, and even its brow, [390] as the eyeball burned and its roots crackled in the fire. As when a smith dips a great axe or a carpenter's adze into cold water in order to strengthen it, and the water screams like crazy, hissing—for this dipping is the strength of iron—so did the eye hiss around the olivewood stake.

"Terrible to look on, the giant howled loudly, and the surrounding rocks echoed! As for us, we hurried off in terror while he yanked the blood-covered stake from his eye, and with his hands he hurled it away in a frenzy of pain and agitation. Then he called loudly to the Cyclopes [400] who inhabited the caves around him along the windy heights. Hearing his loud cries, they ran from every side to the cave. And standing there, they asked him what was wrong.

"What's happening, Polyphemus? Why are you shouting and crying aloud like this in the immortal night? We can't sleep because of you! Is some man driving off your flocks against your will? Or killing you by guile or by strength?"

"And from the cave mighty Polyphemus answered, 'Friends, Nobody is killing me by guile or by strength!'

"In reply, the other Cyclopes harangued him with winged words, saying, [410] 'Well, if you're alone and nobody is harming you, then it must be some sickness from almighty Zeus that you cannot avoid. All you can do is pray to your father, lord Poseidon.'"

413-436 Finishing their admonition, the other Cyclopes depart while Odysseus laughs inwardly, celebrating the brilliance of his deceptive plan. Meanwhile, Polyphemus sits in pain in the now open entryway hoping to catch anybody daring to leave. Odysseus and his men know better, though. And as the night wanes, Odysseus forms a plan. They'll escape by means of the woolly rams and sheep! Tying themselves to their undersides—one man per three sheep—they'll slip out of the cave in the morning when the Cyclops lets the sheep out to pasture. So, they fasten themselves and await the morning.

437-463 "When the early-born rosy-fingered Dawn appeared, the male sheep went out to pasture as was

their custom, but the unmilked females bleated in their pens [440] since their udders were full to the point of bursting. Oppressed and weakened by evil pain, their master the Cyclops felt over the backs of all the male sheep as they stood up to go outside, but thoughtlessly he didn't notice the men tied beneath the wooly rams.

"The last ram of the flock ambled to the entryway, weighed down by his own wool and by me, the thoughtful and planning one. And feeling him over, mighty Polyphemus said, 'Favorite ram! Why do you leave the cave at the back of the flock? Until now you never lagged behind, but with long strides you're always the first to graze the soft bloom of the grass, [450] and first to reach the flowing river streams, and first to show your longing to return home to the pen when evening comes. Yet now you're the last one out of all the rams. Ah—you must long for your master's eye. Well, when my mind was conquered by wine, an evil man utterly blinded me with his mischievous companions. It was Nobody. And I declare to you that he has not yet escaped destruction. If only you could have thoughts, like mine, and speech, then you could tell me where that man is hiding from my wrath. And then his brain would be smashed throughout the cave and scattered upon the ground—some over here and some over there. And then my heart [460] would recover from the misfortune given me by that wretched man Nobody!'

"Speaking this way, the Cyclops let the ram go, ushering him out the door. When we had gone a little way from the cave and from the courtyard, I first loosened myself from beneath the ram and then my comrades."

464-472 Driving the sheep with them, and oftentimes glancing back as they go, Odysseus and his men rush down to their ship. The other men are happy to see them but sad for the ones who perished. Still, forbidding them to weep, Odysseus commands them to push off with all haste.

473-479 "But when I was as far away as I could be so that my voice would carry while shouting, I derisively yelled at the Cyclops in reproach, 'Hey Cyclops! Those

men you were going to gobble up in your hollow cave by means of strength and violence—they were not the friends of a weak man! Instead, your evil deeds were destined to rebound and hit you! You're a cruel monster since you did not even fear to eat your own guests in your own house! It's for this reason that Zeus and the other gods have taken revenge!'"

480-501 Hearing Odysseus' speech, the Cyclops furiously breaks off the top of a nearby mountain and hurls it at his ship. Whoosh! Splash! The massive mountaintop nearly hits! And the downward flow of the sinking mass pulls the ship landward again! Still, Odysseus and his men are able to push off and row away. Once again, however, when they're twice as far offshore, Odysseus angrily turns to yell at the Cyclops—this despite his own comrades' reproof and pleading to the contrary.

502-505 "Cyclops! If some mortal man asks you about the shameful blinding of your eye, declare to him that Odysseus, the sacker of cities, blinded it! I am the son of Laertes, and my home is in Ithaca!"

506-529 Hearing Odysseus' true identity, the Cyclops groans while recalling the prophecy that Telemus, the son of Eurymus, had made. He was a man who had lived as a seer among the Cyclopes. The prophecy was that a man called Odysseus would blind him. But, says Polyphemus, he had always believed he would be a tall, fine looking and mighty man, rather than this powerless nobody that conquered him with wine. The Cyclops then calls on Odysseus to return so that he might give him the proper gifts of hospitality, and so that his father Poseidon might escort him home. He then expresses the hope that his father will heal him—he knows none of the other gods will. Odysseus scoffs at the Cyclops, retorting that he would rather take his life from him and speed him on to Hades than see his eye restored! The Cyclops raises his hands "to the starry sky" in order to pray to Poseidon. But instead of asking for the repair of his eye, he calls down harm upon Odysseus.

530-535 "May Odysseus, the sacker of cities, the son of Laertes who has his dwelling place in Ithaca, never make it home. But if it is his fate to see those who are

BOOK 9 ▪ DISASTER ON THE WAY HOME

dear to him and to come to his high-roofed house in his own fatherland, then may he arrive after a long time and in horrible shape, after all his comrades are destroyed. And may he arrive in a ship that belongs to another man and discover woe and suffering in his house.”

536-564 Poseidon hears Polyphemus. And finishing his prayer, the Cyclops tosses yet another even greater stone at Odysseus’ ship. It lands short—and the splashing wave drives the ship to the island opposite the Cyclopes’ land. There the other men and ships are waiting for their leader and other comrades.

When they reach the shore, Odysseus and his men di-

vide the sheep they’ve taken from the Cyclops. Each ship receives an equal number. As a bonus, his men give their leader the woolly ram that saved him. Odysseus sacrifices the ram to Zeus, but the ruler of all does not bother himself with the offering. “Rather he was thinking about how he would utterly destroy” the rest of Odysseus’ ships and faithful comrades.

They feast for the remainder of the day on an unspeakable quantity of meat and sweet wine. In the morning, they prepare the ships and embark to make their way home.

565-566 “From there we sailed on with aching hearts. Glad to have escaped death, we mourned the loss of our dear comrades.”

So ends Book 9. **See you in Book 10, “A Year with Circe.”**

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