

Module 9: Self-Discovery Through Change and Rebirth

Topic 3 Content: Ovid's *Metamorphoses* Fables III-X

Fable III

The formation of man is followed by a succession of the four ages of the world. The first is the Golden Age, during which Innocence and Justice alone govern the world.

The Golden Age was first founded, which, without any avenger, of its own accord, without laws, practiced both faith and rectitude. Punishment, and the fear of it, did not exist, and threatening decrees were not read upon the brazen tables, fixed up to view, not yet did the suppliant multitude dread the countenance of its judge; but all were in safety without any avenger...Not as yet did deep ditches surround the towns; no trumpets of straightened, or clarions of crooked brass, no helmets, no swords then existed. Without occasion for soldiers, the minds of men, free from care, enjoyed an easy tranquility. The Earth itself, too, in freedom, untouched by the harrow, and wounded by no ploughshares, of its own accord produced everything; and men, contented with the food created under no compulsion gathered the fruit of the arbute-tree, and the strawberries of the mountain, and cornels, and blackberries adhering to the prickly bramble-bushes, and acorns which had fallen from the wide-spreading tree of Jove. Then it was an eternal spring; and the gentle Zephyrs, with their soothing breezes, cherished the flowers produced without any seed. Soon, too, the Earth unploughed yielded crops of grain, and the land, without being renewed, was whitened with the heavy ears of corn. Then, rivers of milk, then, rivers of nectar were flowing, and the yellow honey was distilled from the green holm oak.

Fable IV

In the Silver Age, men begin not to be so just, nor, consequently, so happy, as in the Golden Age. In the Brazen Age, which succeeds, they become yet less virtuous; but their wickedness does not rise to its highest pitch until the Iron Age, when it makes its appearance in all its deformity.

Afterwards, (Saturn being driven into the shady realms of Tartarus), the world was under the sway of Jupiter, then the Silver Age succeeded, inferior to that of gold, but more precious than that of yellow brass. Jupiter shortened the duration of the former spring, and divided the year into four periods by means of winters, and summers, and unsteady autumns, and short springs. Then, for the first time, did men enter houses; those houses were caverns, and thick shrubs, and twigs fasted together with bark. Then, for the first time, were the seeds of Ceres buried in the long furrows, and the oxen groaned, pressed by the yoke of the ploughshare. The Age of Brass succeeded, as the third in order, after these; fiercer in disposition, and more prone to horrible warfare, but yet free from impiety. The last Age was of hard iron. Immediately every species of crime burst forth, in this age of degenerated tendencies; modesty, truth and honor took flight; in their place succeeded fraud, deceit, treachery, violence, and the cursed hankering for acquisition. The sailor now spread his sails to the winds, and with these, as yet, he was but little acquainted; and the threes, which had long stood on the lofty mountains, now, as ships bounded through the unknown waves. The ground, too, hitherto common as the light of the sun and the breezes, the cautious measurer marked out with his lengthened boundary. And not only was the rich soil required to furnish corn and due sustenance, but men even descended into the entrails of the Earth; and riches were dug up, the incentives to vice, which the Earth had hidden, and had removed to the Stygian shades. Then destructive iron came

forth, and gold, more destructive than iron; then War came forth, that fights through the means of both, and that brandishes in his blood-stained hands the clattering arms. Men live by rapine; the guest is not safe from his entertainer, nor the father-in-law from the son-in-law; good feeling, too, between brothers is a rarity. The husband is eager for the death of the wife, she for that of her husband. Horrible stepmothers then mingle the ghastly wolfsbane; the son prematurely makes inquiry into the years of his father. Piety lies vanquished, and the virgin Astraea is the last of the heavenly Deities to abandon the Earth, now drenched in slaughter.

Fable V

The Giants having attempted to render themselves masters of heaven, Jupiter buries them under the mountains which they have heaped together to facilitate their assault; and the Earth, animating their blood, forms out of it a cruel and fierce generation of men.

And that the lofty realms of aether might not be more safe than the Earth, they say that the Giants aspired to the sovereignty of heaven, and piled the mountains, heaped together, even to the lofty stars. Then the omnipotent Father, hurling his lightnings, broke through Olympus, and struck Ossa away from Pelion, that lay beneath it. While the dreadful carcasses lay overwhelmed beneath their own structure, they say that the Earth was wet, drenched with the plenteous blood of her sons, and that she gave life to the warm gore; and that, lest no memorial of this ruthless race should be surviving, she shaped them into the form of men. But that generation, too, was a despiser of the Gods above, and most greedy of ruthless slaughter, and full of violence; you might see that they derived their origin from blood.

Fable VI

Jupiter, having seen the crimes of this impious race of men, calls a council of the Gods, and determines to destroy the world.

“Not even at that time was I more concerned for the empire of the universe, when each of the snake-footed monsters was endeavoring to lay his hundred arms on the captured skies. For although that was a dangerous enemy, yet that was with but one stock, and sprang from a single origin. Now must the race of mortals be cut off by me, wherever Nereus roars on all sides of the earth; this I swear by the Rivers of Hell, that glide in the Stygian grove beneath the earth. All methods have been already tried; but a wound that admits of no cure, must be cut away with the knife, that the sound parts may not be corrupted. I have as subjects, Demigods, and I have the rustic Deities, the Nymphs, and Fauns, and the Satyrs, and the Sylvans, the inhabitants of the mountains; these, though as yet, we have not thought them worthy of the honor of Heaven, let us, at least, permit to inhabit the earth which we have granted them. And do you, ye Gods of Heaven, believe that they will be in proper safety, when Lycaon remarkable for his cruelty, has formed a plot against even me, who own and hold sway over the thunder and yourselves?” All shouted their assent aloud, and with ardent zeal they called for vengeance on one who dared such crimes. Thus, when an impious band madly raged to extinguish the Roman name in the blood of Caesar, the human race was astonished with sudden terror at ruin so universal, and the whole earth shook with horror. Nor was the affectionate regard, Augustus, of the subjects less grateful to thee, that was to Jupiter. Who, after he had, by means of his voice and his hand, suppressed their murmurs, all of them kept silence. Soon as the clamor had ceased, checked by the authority of their ruler, Jupiter again broke silence in these words: “He, indeed, (dismiss your cares) has suffered dire punishment; but what was the offense

and what the retribution, I will inform you. The report of the iniquity of the age had reached my ears; wishing to find this not to be the truth, I descended from the top of Olympus, and, a God in a human shape, I surveyed the earth. 'Twere an endless task to enumerate how great an amount of guilt was everywhere discovered; the report itself was below the truth.'

Fable VII

Lycaon, King of Arcadia, in order to discover if it is Jupiter himself who has come to lodge in his palace, orders the body of an hostage, who had been sent to him, to be dressed and served up at a feast. The God, as a punishment, changes Lycaon into a wolf.

I had now passed Maenalus, to be dreaded for its dens of beasts of prey, and the pine-groves of cold Lycaeus, together with Cyllene. After this, I entered the realms and the inhospitable abode of the Arcadian tyrant, just as the late twilight was bringing on the night. I gave a signal that a God had come, and the people commenced to pay their adorations. In the first place, Lycaon derided their pious supplications. Afterwards, he said, I will make trial, by a plain proof, whether this is a God, or whether he is a mortal; nor shall the truth remain a matter of doubt. He then makes preparations to destroy me, when sunk in sleep, by an unexpected death; this mode of testing the truth pleases him. And not content with that, with the sword he cuts the throat of a hostage that had been sent from the nation of the Molossians, and then softens part of the quivering limbs, in boiling water, and part he roasts with fire placed beneath. Soon as he had placed these on the table, I, with avenging flames, overthrew the house upon the household Gods, worthy of their master. Alarmed, he himself takes to flight, and having reached the solitude of the country, he howls aloud, and in vain attempts to speak; his mouth gathers rage from himself, and through its usual desire for slaughter, it is directed against the sheep, and even still delights in blood. His garments are changed into hair, his arms into legs; he becomes a wolf, and he still retains vestiges of his ancient form. His hoariness is still the same, the same violence appears in his features; his eyes are bright as before; he is still the same image of ferocity. "Thus tell one house; but one house alone did not deserve to perish; wherever the earth extends, the savage Erinys reigns. You would suppose that men had conspired to be wicked; let all men speedily feel that vengeance which they deserve to endure, for such is my determination."

Fable VIII

Jupiter, not thinking the punishment of Lycaon sufficient to strike terror into the rest of mankind, resolves, on account of the universal corruption, to extirpate them by a universal deluge.

Some, by their words approve the speech of Jupiter, and give spur to him, indignantly exclaiming; others, by silent assent fulfill their parts. Yet the entire destruction of the human race is a cause of grief to them all, and they inquire what is to be the form of the earth in future, when destitute of mankind? Who is to place frankincense on the altars? And whether it is his design to give up the nations for a prey to the wild beasts? The ruler of the Gods forbids them making these inquiries, to be alarmed (for that the rest should be his care); and promises, that from a wondrous source he will raise a generation unlike the preceding race. And now he was about to scatter his thunder over all lands; but he was afraid lest, perchance, the sacred aether might catch fire, from so many flames, and the extended sky might become inflamed. He remembers, too, that it was in the decrees of Fate, that a time should come, at which the sea, the earth, and the palace of heaven, seized by the flames, should be burned, and the laboriously-wrought fabric of the

universe should be in danger of perishing. The weapons forged by the hands of the Cyclops are laid aside; a different mode of punishment pleases him: to destroy mankind beneath the waves, and to let loose the rains from the whole tract of heaven. At once he shuts the North Wind in the caverns of Aeolus, and all those blasts which dispel the clouds drawn over the Earth; and then he sends forth the South Wind. With soaking wings the South Wind flies abroad, having his terrible face covered with pitchy darkness; his beard is loaded with showers, the water streams down from his hoary locks, clouds gather upon his forehead, his wings and the folds of his robe drip with wet; and, as with his broad hand he squeezes the hanging clouds, a crash arises, and thence showers are poured in torrents from the sky. Iris, the messenger of Juno, clothed in various colors, collects the waters, and bears a supply upwards to the clouds. The standing corn is beaten down, and the expectations of the husbandman, no lamented by him, are ruined, and the labors of a long year prematurely perish. Nor is the wrath of Jove satisfied with his own heaven; but Neptune, his azure brother, aids him with his auxiliary waves. He calls together the rivers, which, soon as they had entered the abode of their ruler, he says, "I must not now employ a lengthened exhortation; pour forth all your might, so the occasion requires. Open your abodes, and, each obstacle removed, give full rein to your streams." Thus he commanded; they return, and open the mouths of their fountains, and roll on into the ocean with unobstructed course. He himself struck the Earth with his trident, on which it shook, and with a tremor laid open the sources of its waters. The rivers, breaking out, rush through the open plains, and bear away, together with the standing corn, the groves, flocks, men, houses, and temples, together with their sacred utensils. If any house remained, and, not thrown down, was able to resist ruin so vast, yet the waves, rising aloft, covered the roof of that house, and the towers tottered, overwhelmed beneath the stream. And now sea and land had not mark of distinction; everything now was ocean; and to that ocean shores were wanting. One man takes possession of a hill, another sits in a curved boat, and plies the oars there where he had lately ploughed; another sails over the standing corn, or the root of his country-house under water; another catches a fish on the top of an elm-tree. An anchor (if chance so directs) is fastened in a green meadow, or the curving keels come in contact with the vineyards, now below them; and where of late the slender goats had cropped the grass, there unsightly sea-calves are now reposing their bodies. The Nereids wonder at the groves, the cities, and the houses under water; dolphins get into the woods, and run against the lofty branches, and beat against the tossed oaks. The wolf swims among the sheep; the wave carries along the tawny lions; the wave carries along the tigers. Neither does the powers of his lightning-shock avail the wild boat, nor his swift legs the stag, now borne away. The wandering bird, too, having long sought for land, where it may be allowed to light, its wings failing, falls down into the sea. The boundless range of the sea had overwhelmed the hills, the stranger waves beat against the heights of the mountains. The greatest part is carried off by the water: those whom the water spares, long fastings overcome, through scantiness of food.

Fable IX

Neptune appeases the angry waves; and he commands Triton to sound his shell, that the sea may retire within its shores, and the rivers within their banks. Deucalion and Pyrrha are the only persons saved from the deluge.

Phocis separates the Aonian from the Actaeon region; a fruitful land while it was a land; but at that time it had become a part of the sea, and wide plain of sudden waters. There a lofty mountain rises towards the stars, with two tops, by name Parnassus, and advances beyond the clouds with its summit. When here Deucalion (for the sea had covered all other places), borne in a little ship, with the partner of his couch,

first rested; they adored the Corycian Nymphs, and the Deities of the mountain, and the prophetic Themis, who at that time used to give out oracular responses. No man was there more upright than he, nor a greater lover of justice, nor was any woman more regardful of the Deities than she. Soon as Jupiter beholds the world overflowed by liquid waters, and sees that but one man remains out of so many thousands of late, and sees that but one man remains out of so many thousands of late, and sees that but one woman remains out of so many thousands of late, birth guiltless, and both worshippers of the Gods, he disperses the clouds; and the showers being removed by the North Wind, he both lays open the earth to the heavens, and the heavens to the earth. The rage, too, of the sea does not continue; and his three-forked trident now laid aside, the ruler of the deep assuages the waters, and calls upon the azure Triton standing above the deep, and having his shoulders covered with the native purple shells; and he bids him blow his resounding trumpet, and the signal being given, to call back the waves and the streams. The hollow-wreathed trumpet is taken up by him, which grows to a great width from its lowest twist; the sun. Then, too, as soon as it touched the lips of the God dripping with his wet beard, and being blown, sounded the bidden retreat; it was heard by all the waters both of earth and sea, and stopped all those waters by which it was heard. Now the sea again has a shore; their channels receive the full rivers; the rivers subside; the hills are seen to come forth. The ground rises, places increase in extent as the waters decrease; and after a length of time, the woods show their naked tops, and retain the mud left upon their branches. The world was restored; which when Deucalion beheld to be empty, and how the desolate Earth kept a profound silence, he thus addressed Pyrrha, with tears bursting forth: - "O sister, O wife, O thou, the only woman surviving, whom a common origin, and a kindred descent, and afterwards the marriage tie has united to me, and whom now dangers themselves unite to me; we two are the whole people of the earth, whatever both the East and West behold; of all the rest, the sea has taken possession. And even now there is feelings, if without me thou hadst been rescued from destruction, O thou deserving of compassion? In what manner couldst thou have been able alone to support this terror? With whom for a consoler, to endure these sorrows? For I, believe me, my wife, if the sea had only carried thee off, should have followed thee, and sea should have carried me off as well. Oh that I could replace these people that are lost by the arts of my father, and infuse the soul into the moulded earth! Now the mortal race exists in us two alone. Thus it has seemed good to the Gods, and we remain as mere samples of mankind."

Fable X

Deucalion and Pyrrha re-people the earth by casting stones behind them, in the manner prescribed by the Goddess Themis, whose oracle they had consulted.

He thus spoke, and they wept. They resolved to pray to the Deities of Heaven, and to seek relief through the sacred oracles. There is no delay; together they repair to the waters of Cephisus, though not yet clear, yet now cutting their wonted channel. Then, when they have sprinkled the waters poured on their clothes and their heads, they turn their steps to the temple of the sacred Goddess, the roof of which was defiled with foul moss, and whose altars were standing without fires. Soon as they reached the steps of the temple, each of them fell prostrate on the ground, and, trembling, gave kisses to the cold pavement. And thus they said: "If the Deities, prevailed upon by just prayers, are to be mollified, if the wrath of the Gods is to be averted; tell us, O Themis, by what art are the loss of our race is to be repaired, and give assistance, O most gentle Goddess to our ruined fortunes." The Goddess was moved, and gave this response: "Depart from my temple, and cover your heads, and loosen the garments girt around you, and throw behind your backs the bones of your great mother." For a long time they are amazed; and Pyrrha is

the first by her words to break the silence, and then refuses to obey the commands of the Goddess; and begs her, with trembling lips, to grant her pardon, and dreads to offend the shades of her mother by casting her bones. In the meantime they reconsider the words of the response given, but involved in dark obscurity, and they ponder them among themselves. Upon that, the son of Prometheus soothes the daughter of Epimetheus with these gentle words, and says, "Either is my discernment fallacious, or the oracles are just, and advise no sacrilege. The earth is the great mother; I suspect that the stones in the body of the earth are the bones meant; these we are ordered to throw behind our backs." Although she, descended from Titan, is moved by this interpretation of her husband, still her hope is involved in doubt; so much do they both distrust the advice of heaven; but what harm will it do to try? They go down, and they veil their heads, and ungird their garments, and cast stones, as ordered, behind their footsteps. The stones (who could have believed it, but that antiquity is a witness of the thing?) began to lay aside their hardness and their stiffness, and by degrees to become soft; and when softened, to assume a new form. Presently after, when they were grown larger, a milder nature, too, was conferred on them, so that some shape of man might be seen in them, yet though but imperfect; and as if from the marble commenced to be wrought, not sufficiently distinct, and very like to rough statues. Yet that part of them which was humid with any moisture, and earthy, was turned into portions adapted for the use of the body. That which is solid, and cannot be bent, is changed into bones; that which was just now a vein, still remains under the same name. And in a little time, by interposition of the Gods above, the stones thrown by the hands of the man, took the shape of a man, and the female race was renewed by the throwing of the woman. Thence are we a hardy generation, and able to endure fatigue, and we give proofs from what original we are sprung.