

# Hrothgar's Sermon

*Young Beowulf has just returned from defeating Grendel's mother. He has fulfilled his boast; he has won great riches; he is on top of the world. He is now in a very dangerous position.*

*Before the festivities honoring the young hero begin, Hrothgar, the wise old king of the Danes, pauses to give a few words of wisdom and warning to the Geat warrior. The very things that have made you great -- physical force and a hunger for fame and riches -- can bring you down.*

Hrothgar spoke; he examined the hilt,  
that relic of old times. It was engraved all over  
and showed how war first came into the world  
and the flood destroyed the tribe of giants.  
They suffered a terrible severance from the Lord;  
the Almighty made the waters rise,  
and drowned them in the deluge for retribution.  
In pure gold inlay on the sword-guards  
there were rune-markings correctly incised,  
stating and recording for whom the sword  
had been first made and ornamented  
with its scrollworked hilt. Then everyone hushed  
as the son of Halfdane spoke this wisdom.  
"A protector of his people, pledged to uphold  
truth and justice and to respect tradition,  
is entitled to affirm that this man  
was born to distinction. Beowulf, my friend,  
your fame has gone far and wide,  
you are known everywhere. In all things you are even-  
tempered,  
prudent and resolute. So I stand firm by the promise of friendship  
we exchanged before. Forever you will be  
your people's mainstay and your own warriors'  
helping hand.

Heremod was different,  
the way he behaved to Ecgwa's sons.

His rise in the world brought little joy  
to the Danish people, only death and destruction.  
He vented his rage on men he caroused with,  
killed his own comrades, a pariah king  
who cut himself off from his own kind,  
even though Almighty God had made him  
eminent and powerful and marked him from the start  
for a happy life. But a change happened,  
he grew bloodthirsty, gave no more rings  
to honour the Danes. He suffered in the end  
for having plagued his people for so long:  
his life lost happiness.

So learn from this  
and understand true values. I who tell you  
have wintered into wisdom.

It is a great wonder  
how Almighty God in His magnificence  
favours our race with rank and scope  
and the gift of wisdom; His sway is wide.  
Sometimes He allows the mind of a man  
of distinguished birth to follow its bent,  
grants him fulfilment and felicity on earth  
and forts to command in his own country.  
He permits him to lord it in many lands  
until the man in his unthinkingness  
forgets that it will ever end for him.  
He indulges his desires; illness and old age

mean nothing to him; his mind is untroubled  
 by envy or malice or the thought of enemies  
 with their hate-honed swords. The whole world  
 conforms to his will, he is kept from the worst  
 until an element of overweening  
 enters him and takes hold  
 while the soul's guard, its sentry, drowzes,  
 grown too distracted. A killer stalks him,  
 an archer who draws a deadly bow.  
 And then the man is hit in the heart,  
 the arrow flies beneath his defences,  
 the devious promptings of the demon start.  
 His old possessions seem paltry to him now.  
 He covets and resents; dishonours custom  
 and bestows no gold; and because of good things  
 that the Heavenly Powers gave him in the past  
 he ignores the shape of things to come.  
 Then finally the end arrives  
 when the body he was lent collapses and falls  
 prey to its death; ancestral possessions  
 and the goods he hoarded are inherited by another  
 who lets them go with a liberal hand.  
 "O flower of warriors, beware of that trap.  
 Choose, dear Beowulf, the better part,  
 eternal rewards. Do not give way to pride.  
 For a brief while your strength is in bloom  
 but it fades quickly; and soon there will follow  
 illness or the sword to lay you low,  
 or a sudden fire or surge of water  
 or jabbing blade or javelin from the air  
 or repellent age. Your piercing eye  
 will dim and darken; and death will arrive,  
 dear warrior, to sweep you away.

"Just so I ruled the Ring-Danes' country  
 for fifty years, defended them in wartime  
 with spear and sword against constant assaults  
 by many tribes: I came to believe  
 my enemies had faded from the face of the earth.  
 Still, what happened was a hard reversal  
 from bliss to grief. Grendel struck  
 after lying in wait. He laid waste to the land  
 and from that moment my mind was in dread  
 of his depredations. So I praise God  
 in His heavenly glory that I lived to behold  
 this head dripping blood and that after such harrowing  
 I can look upon it in triumph at last.  
 Take your place, then, with pride and pleasure  
 and move to the feast. To-morrow morning  
 our treasure will be shared and showered upon you."  
 The Geat was elated and gladly obeyed  
 the old man's bidding; he sat on the bench.  
 And soon all was restored, the same as before.  
 Happiness came back, the hall was thronged,  
 and a banquet set forth; black night fell  
 and covered them in darkness.

**(A NEW VERSE TRANSLATION)**

## **BEOWULF**

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