

THE QUEST of AMSIGGEL



A story about a young man
who longs for peace, kindness
and security, and sets out
on a journey in search of them.

THE QUEST OF AMSIGGEL

(The Seeker's Quest)

1. Birth

It was a dark and stormy night, with heavy cloud and bitter cold. Lightning blazed across the mountain; thunder roared round the ravines and crags; a violent wind drove rain against the house door. That night the child Amsiggel was born, and from the womb he came forth smiling!

"Poor poor thing!" cried Grandmother, "Born in a tempest on the darkest of nights." "Oh what," they asked, "will become of this child?" "Stormy will be his days," she declared, "and tempestuous his life!" "No! no!" protested Grandfather, "See, he watches us as one who knows what is; he smiles at the world as one who knows what soon will be." At that moment, they raised their eyes and saw a full moon riding the ragged clouds of night, and round the moon a ring of brilliant light. "Hear my words!" the old man said, "A storm brought us this child, but he'll outlive the storm. Born in darkness, he'll lead us into light; born amidst thunder and lightning, he'll bring us peace from all that beats down on us." Amazement seized them all. "We'll call this child Amsiggel (One Who Seeks)," continued the old man, "for he'll search out hidden things; he'll discover what we've never known and show us the Way of Peace."

Two years went by and a baby girl was born, a sister for Amsiggel. They called her Tazzwit (Little Bee). At midday she came, in springtime, with fruit trees in blossom, green tips of barley sprouting from the earth, and birds making merry in the fields and woods. The family were very happy, and all creation with them, thanking their Creator for the beauty of everything around them.

But the year moved on. No rain fell. The streams dried up and so did the wells; cruel hunger gripped the land. To a distant spring they went to fill their jars with drinking water. The children had only small turnips to eat. Their mother wept; they wept too. Father went to look for work in town. Grandfather just sat in the archway staring down the track. He overheard some neighbour women saying Grandmother had cast spells on him; in a rage he struck her and sent her away. A year of misery was that year!

Time went by and Amsiggel grew. He was a helpful boy and all the villagers liked him. He enjoyed going down to the river and watching it flow by. "Where does this water come from?" he asked himself, "And where does it go?" He climbed to the top of a hill and lay down on a large rock gazing up at the clouds in the sky, and he marvelled at all he saw. "Why is the sky blue?" he asked, "And why are the clouds white?" All day he spent there. "Why does the sun shine yellow at midday, he wondered, "but red in the evening?" Another time he stayed till sunset. "Where does it go at night?" he wondered, "Does it sink into the ground? Or is it extinguished in the sea?" And as the moon rose he asked, "Where does the moon come from? And what happens to it during the day? Does it get shy and hide when daylight comes? Or does it melt like snow in the warmth of the sun?" One day in the forest, he heard the sound of the wind in the trees. "Seek and you'll find," It seemed to say, "Seek and you'll find!" Three times he heard these words and then no more. That day, he went home amazed at the world around him.

He himself was a mystery to the boys of his own age, for he did not behave like them. He didn't want to tussle and squabble as they did. He wouldn't play or sit with them. "Why can't you be like us, Amsiggel?" they asked him one day. "Because you're like nails in a bag," he replied, "all sticking out in different directions!" Another time they asked him, "Why have we never heard the name of God pass your lips?" "Should I use silver for hammering iron?" he replied, "You only mention God's name when you want to back up lies and stir up trouble." Another day they reproached him. "The goat that doesn't go with the flock gets eaten by the wolf!" they said. "The goat that doesn't go with the flock," he retorted, "may find fresh grass and lead them all to richer pastures."

One of them was a tough boy called Igider (Eagle). One day he made fun of Amsiggel and, grabbing hold of him, pushed him hard. Amsiggel fell on the rocks cutting his leg and his head badly. When the boys saw the blood, they ran away and left him lying on the ground. Then Igider went to Amsiggel's house and told lies about him. "Amsiggel threw rocks down the well," he said, "Amsiggel peed on the shop door. Amsiggel kicked a hole in the water channel." When Amsiggel got home, his Grandfather added to his other woes a good beating. Bitter resentment arose in Amsiggel's heart that day; he would gladly have killed Igider.

2. Escape

Each day Amsiggel went to school in the mosque. He respected the teacher and tried to memorize the words written on his slate, but his mind wasn't really on his lessons. He often looked out of the window. He thought of the squirrels playing among the rocks. He thought of the honeybees buzzing in the orchard, the frogs croaking by the spring, the blackbird singing in the poplars beside the river. He remembered all he'd seen in the forest and asked himself, "How does a straight tree grow from twisted roots?" He thought of the hearthplace beside the spring and asked himself, "Why does smoke go up and water down?" He recalled the dust storms that spring up in the evening and wondered, "Where does the wind come from? Is it the trees that stir the air, or the air that moves the trees?" His thoughts travelled through forests and crags, and his imagination carried him into the realm of the clouds and the stars of heaven. And many times he suffered the stick for not knowing the words on his slate.

One day he came home and found Grandfather sitting in the doorway. "Grandad, some things I just can't understand!" he said. To which the old man replied, "The shade cast by a palm tree lies far from its roots. Keep looking for the answers, son, till you find what you're after!"

In those days Amsiggel's mother was expecting a third child. She had a hard time of it and the baby was born dead. She grew weaker, and got so ill she could no longer get up from her sleeping mat. For two months she lay between life and death. Her husband came back from town and saw how she was: she could no longer do the housework. So he divorced her and married another. She went back to her parents, and three months later she died. The new woman of the house had no time for Amsiggel or his sister Tazzwit. As the old-timers say, "An orphan's feet raise dust in the rainy season and spread mud in the summer drought!" They wanted to marry Tazzwit to a man in town who had lent her father some money. She'd never seen him, and she knew nothing of him: she was thirteen years old. She cried and cried, and Amsiggel could find no way to comfort his sister, for he too was overcome by many tears. Four days remained before the wedding party.

That night thieves came. They dug a hole in the wall of the village shop and took the money box. At daybreak the shop people came from house to house asking everyone where they had been that night. They found all the villagers had been at home, except for Amsiggel. That night he'd gone out to follow some shooting stars, wanting to see whether they were falling in the forest or on the other side of the mountain. Igider told them all he had seen Amsiggel going out in the direction of the shop.

Straightaway they went, and dragged Amsiggel from his bed. They threw him into a deep storage pit and left him there with nothing to eat or drink. Amsiggel just didn't know what had happened. He heard the other boys reciting in the mosque, but nobody came to see him. Two days and two nights he stayed there, with mixed up thoughts going round and round in his head. Then some men of the village came and pulled him out, and began to beat him with sticks saying, "That's what a thief deserves!" Then they drove him out of the village and through the fields, throwing stones after him.

Amsiggel climbed the track up the hill towards the forest. He walked until he was exhausted and could go no further. Fainting away, he fell down beneath a fig tree. As he slept he was suddenly awakened by the voice of a girl. Turning over he recognized Tazzwit. She ran to him: "O Amsiggel! What's happened to you? What's all this blood on your face?" "You can see how I am," he said, "but I really don't know what happened!" She took his hand. "Come, we'll go back home!" she said. "No!" he replied, "The family don't want me, and neither does the village – they chased me away with stones! I'm going to look for a safe and peaceful place." "Well in that case, I'll come with you!" said Tazzwit. "No, this path is too hard for you." he replied, "You'd never make it." "Even if it's hard," she insisted, "what have I left at home except drudgery and ill-treatment?"

At that moment came a sound like whispering in the leaves of the fig tree. "Seek and you'll find," it said, "Seek and you'll find!" As they turned, they saw Grandfather coming towards them. "O Grandad," exclaimed Tazzwit, "Was it you who said that?" "I didn't say a thing, my dear," he replied. "So why have you come out to the forest Grandad?," asked Amsiggel. "Go now Amsiggel!" he replied, "God has ordained for you to ask and seek. Look how vast this world is! Go and search everywhere till you discover the whole truth – till you know everything as it really is and understand what is hidden from us." Tazzwit spoke up. "Grandad, I'm going with him!" she said. "Go, you too, my dear." he replied, "Your brother will look after you. I know the man who wants to marry you – he's a drunkard. Best for you to be far away." Then the old man looked at them carefully. "Listen!" he said, "There's something more I want to tell you. Don't worry at all about what's kept safe for you. I've got it hidden till you return!" Then he raised his hand, and Amsiggel and Tazzwit kissed the top of his head. He stood up and started back to the village. Amsiggel and Tazzwit set off along the track.

“What did Grandad mean,” she asked, “about what is kept safe for us?” “He has something.” replied her brother, “and I don’t know what it is. He knows something we don’t know.”

3. The Woodcutter

And so they went. As they followed the track, Tazzwit happened to see something on the ground amidst the long grass. She bent down and picked it up. “It’s an egg!” she exclaimed, “but I’ve never seen an egg like this one before. Look, its shell is hard – you can’t break it.” She put it to her ear. “How amazing!” she exclaimed, “This egg is talking – it says ‘tick tock, tick tock’. What bird could have laid an egg like this?” “That’s not an egg,” said her brother, “I’ve heard about things like this. They call it a watch. See these hands – they go round and show what time it is.” “Where’s it come from?” she asked. “Someone probably dropped it coming from market or town,” he said. “The people who made this amazing thing must have been great scientists,” remarked Tazzwit. “surely they must be very wise and intelligent?”

Amsiggel and his sister went on through the forest until they came to a little house. It was made of wood and beside it was a pile of small logs. Amsiggel called to whoever lived there, and a man came out carrying an axe on his shoulder. When he saw them, he put the axe down and greeted them. He brought some water for them to drink. They spoke for a while about the trees and the firewood and then Amsiggel asked the Woodcutter, “Do you live alone in this forest?” “Not at all!” he replied, “I have my friends here – the fox and the mice and the storks.” “Do you talk with these friends of yours?” asked Tazzwit. “Oh no,” he replied, “We’re all too busy with our work. See, the ants, the honeybees, the birds, how they’re coming and going, fetching and carrying all the time.” “But the trees and bushes,” said Tazzwit, “they just stay where they are.” “Even the trees and bushes are busy,” he replied. “They stretch out their leaves to the sun, send down their roots to drink water beneath the soil. They make flowers and fruit. Isn’t that work? It’s only man and his domesticated animals that don’t like working.” “Well, which is most useful?” asked Amsiggel, “an ant, or a mule?” “The ant willingly carries his load,” replied the Woodcutter, “but the mule with great reluctance. The ant does what his masters say, but the mule needs his master’s stick. The ant is always running, but the mule stops still whenever his master leaves him. And if he doesn’t stand still, he’ll wander far away, and if he doesn’t wander away he’ll just eat his saddle.” They all laughed.

Then the Woodcutter said to them: “It seems to me that those who live in the forest are more intelligent than those who live in the town. We don’t read books but we read what’s written in the clouds of the heavens and the mud of the river and the bark of the trees. Listen and I’ll tell you what I’ve learned from the insects of the forest. There’s one that shines in the darkness. There’s one that spins a web. There’s one that writes with mucus on the ground. There’s even one that plays football. I asked myself, ‘Where did these insects come from? Did they just make themselves on their own, or is there Someone who made them?’”

Then Tazzwit showed him the watch which she’d found by the side of the track. “Look at this egg we found,” she said. “Weren’t those who made this amazing thing great scientists?” “They certainly knew science,” said the Woodcutter, “but there’s greater science than this in the forest. This ‘egg’ of yours isn’t like a real egg – no bird will ever hatch from it. It cannot grow and bear young. But the eggs that birds lay, they contain something greater than this one you’ve found, because each real egg contains a little bird which is alive. When the little bird hatches, it will grow and fly and sing and make its own nest and eggs. Can human beings do anything as amazing as this with their science and wisdom? Man is very intelligent, but the one who made man is wiser by far. Come on now, let’s move these logs before it rains.”

They lifted and carried the pieces of wood till all were safely brought into the shelter of the house, then they sat together in the porch. “I thought about all this,” the Woodcutter continued, “and I asked myself ‘If someone exists who made this world, what’s he like? How can I possibly know him? Where can I possibly find him? Is he somewhere here in the forest, or in the fields? Or can I fly up among the stars to search for him in the glory of Heaven?’ So I asked the sun and moon, ‘Was it you who made this world?’ They said ‘No.’ I asked the mountains and crags, ‘Is there a spirit in you that made this world?’ They said ‘No.’ I asked the sea and the rivers, ‘Is there in you some power that made this world?’ They said ‘No.’ Then I asked them all, ‘If you didn’t make this world, please show me who did make it.’ ‘There’s one greater than us.’ they said, ‘He’s not visible to the eyes of man. It’s he who made us.’ I didn’t ask them with words and it wasn’t with words that they replied, but the wisdom and beauty they were made with showed me the answer.”

Amsiggel asked, “What’s he like, the one who made all this?” “Well, when we see the moon and stars,” replied the Woodcutter, “they show us his glory. When we witness the scorching heat of the sun, the bolts of lightning striking the earth, the violent explosions of the thunder, the hurtling flood of the river in spate, they show us his power. His beauty is shown in the flowers and the leaves of the trees. His wisdom is revealed in the birds and honeybees, each doing the work he gave it to do. When we look at the crags and mountaintops we know he’s steadfast and unchanging. When we hear the birds singing we sense that his word is sweet. When we see what we human beings are like – we can see and hear and think and speak – we know that he sees and hears and thinks and speaks better than we do, because the one who creates will always be greater than what he’s created. And whenever we sit amidst all these things, we can feel his love and his peace, and our hearts are filled with praise and thanksgiving.”

It was getting dark and the Woodcutter could see they were tired. He brought them bread and olive oil, and then he gave them some blankets and showed them where to sleep. Amsiggel said to him, “I’ve never heard anything, Sir, like what you’ve told us today.” The Woodcutter replied, “Perhaps you’ve never asked someone living among the creatures of the forest.” Then Amsiggel said, “But the one who created us, what connection is there between him and us? I can see this world is like a watch, made with great wisdom. But when God created the world, did he wind it up and leave it to go by itself till it all runs down? Or does he continue to keep winding it up?” The Woodcutter looked at him and said, “Sometimes I think he’s far away – that he’s turned his face from us like someone crushing ants underfoot. But sometimes I think he takes an interest in us and does good things for us. Sometimes I think he likes to help us with the problems of everyday life. But other times I think he just watches us so he can punish us for the faults he sees us commit. These are things beyond my understanding. But it’s getting late. Go to sleep now till morning.”

4. The Hermit

When Amsiggel got up next morning, he found that the Woodcutter had lit a fire and was heating up water for mint tea. “We’d like to repay you in some way for your kindness to us,” Amsiggel said to him. “I don’t need anything,” replied the Woodcutter, “but take these things with you so you can provide for yourselves along the way.” And he gave him a shoulder bag containing nails for mending shoes, and some small pieces of leather and a needle with various threads. When they had drunk their tea he gave them what remained of the bread and saw them safely on their way.

They kept going until eventually they came upon a ruined house with a man sitting in the doorway. He was dressed in rags. They greeted him politely but he made no reply, just sitting there with his head down. “Please Sir,” said Amsiggel, “where does this track go to?” The Hermit stared at them, lost in thought. Eventually he spoke. “It goes up and it goes down,” he said. “It rises and it falls.” “I think, Sir, that you live beside this track,” said Amsiggel, “so don’t you know where it leads to?” The Hermit said nothing for some moments, then announced, “Nobody knows where it goes to!” Amsiggel was very surprised and asked, “Doesn’t it come to an end somewhere?” The Hermit looked down, absorbed in his meditation. “Well, what can I say?” he replied eventually. “No-one has ever come to here from the end of the track. It probably has no end.” “Well, the sky has no end,” replied Amsiggel, “but the birds fly here and there and get where they want to go. If we follow this track, even if we never get to the end of it, surely at least we’ll get somewhere!”

The Hermit stood up. He seized Amsiggel by the hand saying, “That’s quite right! I can see you are a person of intelligence and discernment. Listen, my boy, and I’ll tell you something. On the apricot tree five hundred leaves go to making one apricot. On the pomegranate tree a thousand leaves go to making one pomegranate. If you want to talk sense you should think a hundred times and observe a hundred times before you open your mouth.” At this, Amsiggel was even more surprised. The Hermit continued, “Let me ask you now: Why has God made us with two eyes and only one mouth? Why has he given us two ears and only one tongue?” “Perhaps,” suggested Amsiggel, “it’s because he wants us to look and listen more than we speak.” The Hermit nodded, “And why has he fixed it so we can close our mouth but cannot close our ears?” “I suppose it’s so we’ll keep quiet and listen,” said Amsiggel. “But why has God made a little channel round the top of our ear?” asked the Hermit. “That I can’t answer,” admitted Amsiggel, “Perhaps you know why!” At this, the Hermit said, “Whenever you hear something you don’t like, you can direct it along the channel for the wind to whisk away before it gets into your head. Weigh up all you hear, my boy, and see whether or not it’s true and makes sense. Remember, the empty walnuts are the ones that speak!” (i.e. They echo when tapped because the kernel has shrivelled up.)

At this Amsiggel went quiet, not daring to say a thing. The Hermit too said nothing. At last Amsiggel spoke up, “We met a Woodcutter,” he said, “who showed us how beautiful and good the world is – birds and flowers and insects all created with great wisdom and scientific knowledge. He told us there’s someone who made all these things. For my part, I think that the beauty of this world lies in its colours. If it were just black and white, we wouldn’t know what real beauty was. But there’s one thing I don’t understand. What are these colours and where do they come from? The snow is white with cold, but an egg turns white with heat. How can cold and heat agree to make whiteness?” The Hermit replied, “The sun turns red in the cool of the evening but iron turns red in the heat of the fire. How can coolness and heat agree to make redness? I don’t know how, my boy!” he admitted. Amsiggel sighed. “There are many things in this world that we don’t know and don’t understand,” he said.

“The road goes up and it goes down,” replied the Hermit, “but we’ll never get to the end of it! Here we are sitting at the roadside: we look and we listen, but we don’t really know it – neither as it is nor as it will be. The Woodcutter showed you how good and beautiful the world is, but I’ll show you something else, because something has happened to it to spoil its beauty and goodness. To me the world looks just like this ruined house.”

“Tell me what you mean, Sir,” said Amsiggel. “Well, if you look carefully,” the Hermit replied, “you’ll see that nothing is ugly or bad in itself. Everything starts out well and gets spoiled by something else. You can go into an orchard of almond trees and marvel at how lovely the blossom is, but then you see the mildew on the growing fruit and it spoils all the beauty. You drink water from the river and it’s sweet and cool, but you find it contains bugs which will make anyone who drinks it ill. You go into a house and find that a lovely strong baby boy has just been born there, but he grows up deaf and dumb. See how a farmer sows barley and the shoots spring up, but as soon as the ears begin to fill they go rotten. And see how a man will love his bride and spend all he has to marry her, but something comes between them and he sends her away. Although a house may be built on a good foundation, its walls and roof, in the course of time, are bound to fall. All of creation shows how God made everything perfect and beautiful, but something has come between the creation and its beauty – something has spoiled all that exists.”

“But what was it that got in and spoiled everything?” demanded Amsiggel. “Oh, the world is full of butterflies and cats!” replied the Hermit. “Is it really butterflies and cats that have spoiled the world?” said Amsiggel. “Not really,” he replied, “but people are like butterflies and cats. The butterfly beats her wings and flutters this way and that. The wind carries her here and there, as she looks for the one flower that is prettier than all others. That’s what people are like. They don’t know where to find what they want. The cat too, he chases his tail round and round in the hope of catching it, but he can never get hold of it. That’s what people do – they’re just chasing their shadow. They dash around until they’re exhausted but still don’t get what they want. If the cat finally succeeds in getting a grip on its tail, what does it do then? After a couple of quick chews it lets go, then stands up and walks away. It’s lost all interest in its tail. People don’t know what they want, and if they do happen to get what they’re after, they decide they don’t like it. Totally confused! Don’t know where to find what they want, nor how to enjoy what they get! Something has come between man and his own common sense – and it’s ruined him!”

“Do you know,” asked Amsiggel, “what it is that’s come between man and his common sense?” The Hermit replied, “Perhaps whatever it was that happened to the world also happened to man, so he’s no longer what he was when God created him. We can see the world is full of diseases and disasters and evil of all sorts. It looks like something happened to this world – as though a terrible blight has descended upon it – because all that lives in this world gets sick and dies. Oh if only we had health and comfort! Yet with each passing year, health weakens and comfort flees! That’s life – because man is sick and he’s living in a sick world.”

Amsiggel and Tazzwit set out once more along the track. The Hermit wished them a good journey. “If you find someone,” he said, “who knows what’s happened to the world, and what’s spoiled it, and how we can get free from this terrible blight that’s fallen upon it all, come back and tell me!”

5. The Old Woman

The track wound between the trees. Amsiggel and Tazzwit walked until midday, and by then they were tired and thirsty. They saw an old woman gathering herbs. Tazzwit called to her, “Please, have you a little water to drink?” “Come over here,” she replied, “I’ll take you to the spring.” They

followed her past a little hut made of reeds and oleander branches, and up a path until they reached a spring flowing with cool water.

When they had drunk their fill, they lay on the ground beside the spring to rest. Sleep quickly overcame them. After a while, Amsiggel woke up to the sound of the Old Woman weeping. He wakened his sister, and they asked her, “What is it? Why are you crying?” Tazzwit took her hand saying, “What’s the matter?” “Oh it’s a hard world!” she replied, “You don’t know how hard until you’ve been through it yourself!” They felt really sorry for her. “Don’t cry!” they said, “Just tell us what’s happened.” “How wretched I am,” said the Old Woman, “to be left without a friend in the world! No one ever gives a thought for me now I’m old. Ever since I was a little girl I’ve always told my troubles to God, but now that everyone else has abandoned me, he’s abandoned me too – he no longer hears me or cares about me. He’s just left me with trouble and sorrow.” “Even if others forget, we won’t ever forget your kindness to us,” said Tazzwit. “Can you see this hearth,” replied the Old Woman, “and what the fire is like? The sparks fly upward and the charred wood sinks down. The good deeds you do fly away and just leave you with ashes.” “But don’t good deeds fly up to God?” asked Tazzwit. “Who knows?” said the Old Woman, “Who knows whether they get to God or not? Here we are amidst the ashes – that’s all I can be sure of.”

“Enough of tears!” said Tazzwit kindly, “Just tell us your troubles so we might find a way to help you.” “Do you really want to know?” asked the Old Woman. Then she looked up at them both and said, “May God save you from enemies like those who came between me and my husband! They accused me of what I never did. He sent me from the house, so I went back to my parents’ home. But when I got there, I found they’d all died. Our house was occupied by strangers who’d taken it by force. I fell down in a faint. When I came to, I realized that my last two little coins had been stolen from me. I collapsed again on the ground, not knowing what to do or where to go. All I had was taken from me: my husband, my children, my home, and now even my money. See how God has afflicted me! And here I am in the forest amidst the wild beasts, surrounded by spirits. Each day I gather herbs and leaves and the fruits of the forest. Some I eat and some I make into remedies to heal the sick. But you yourselves, where are going? Aren’t you a long way from your family?”

“We’re looking for some place of peace and security,” said Tazzwit. “It must be Heaven you’re after,” replied the Old Woman, “You’ll not find peace and security in this world. See, everything that has life reaches for the sky, longing to get to Heaven. Grass springs up; reeds rise above the ground; trees tower high; children grow up; wild goats climb the pinnacles, and birds soar above them all. Every one of them tries to draw close to the Lord God – but which of them can reach Heaven where he dwells? See what happens to them all. Everything that wishes to rise gets forced back down. The grass withers; the reeds bend; the trees fall; the goats come down to the valleys; the birds come back to roost; and the children die. They all return to the earth they’re made from. Not one reaches the heights or gets to the security he longs for.”

“I’ve heard,” said Amsiggel, “that all the men in Heaven will be like great kings.” When she heard this, Tazzwit looked hard at him. “Well what about us women?” she retorted, “Won’t we be in Heaven too?” The Old Woman spoke up once more, “We don’t even get into the mosque,” she said, “so how can we get into Heaven! We womenfolk don’t know how to say our prayers, and we don’t understand the words they say. We have nothing to do with things like that.” “Please don’t cry!” said Tazzwit, “God will have mercy on us if he wishes.” “But how can we know,” sobbed the Old Woman, “if he wishes or not?” “They say God is merciful,” said Tazzwit. “But who knows?” said the Old Woman, “Who know whether he’ll be merciful to me, or to you, or to your brother? If only someone could set our hearts at rest from all we fear in this world and the next!”

“Just believe in God and bear it all patiently,” said Amsiggel kindly. “Oh words like that, how many times I’ve heard them,” sighed the old woman, “but they’re like the moon to one who walks in darkness! Waxing and waning, getting bigger and smaller; coming and going, and no-one knows if it’ll light him home or not. We long to hear something reliable, something like the sun which shines all day and never fails to brighten the path that takes you where you want to go. Oh how wretched we are! Who can relieve us of this fear and doubt? Who can save us from hardship and anxiety? Who can bring us into a place of safety in this world and the world to come?” “We are looking, me and my brother,” said Tazzwit, “to see if we can find someone who knows all this. If we do, we’ll come back and tell you.” “Go then,” said the Old Woman, “and search for someone who can take us to safety!”

“We will,” agreed Amsiggel, “but before we go, surely there’s something we can do to help you.” Then they set to work: they fixed up the hut and cleared the path to the spring. They brought some large stones and made a good hearth for her. Then they kissed her on the forehead and set off once more along the track.

They kept walking till they came to a river. People were standing on the bank, unable to get across because it was flowing fiercely and the flood had carried away the bridge. Some men brought tree trunks and ropes. Tying them together, they dragged them so they lay across the river to the other side. Then, when they had weighted the ends with heavy rocks and the bridge was firm, people began to cross. Amsiggel and Tazzwit were just going over when they heard a scream behind them. They turned to look. A woman had slipped off the bridge. She was swept away in the flood. The people all started shouting and running to where she was, but the current was too strong and it carried her off before they could reach her. Amsiggel and Tazzwit were very upset. "Who knows when God might call any one of us?" Tazzwit said. "And who knows where we'll stand with God if he does?" Amsiggel replied. Dusk found them still in the forest, so they slept till morning.

6. The Nomad

At daybreak they set out once more. Eventually the track brought them out of the forest and led them up between mountainous crags. They kept going till they came to a flock of sheep and goats grazing in a grassy area. There was a tent there, made of black hair, and a donkey beside it. A family of nomads were gathered in the tent, eating a meal. When the woman saw them, she got up and invited them to share in what they were eating from the bowl. The family asked where they'd come from and where they were going, so Amsiggel told them about the journey he and Tazzwit had made and about the people they had met. "But there are three enigmas we've not been able to resolve," he added, "The Woodcutter says someone created this world beautiful and good. The Hermit says something has happened to the world and spoiled its beauty and goodness. And the Old Woman says there's no longer any security in the world at all – and even the world to come, she can't be sure of safety there."

"We all long for security," said the Nomad, "but we won't find it anywhere in this world, or the next, and the reason is simply that we don't know how to really satisfy God." Hearing this, Amsiggel added, "The Old Woman, poor thing, is afraid God will never accept her, because she isn't able to fulfil the requirements of religion." "We don't fulfil the requirements either," agreed the Nomad's wife. "We live in the wilds," added her husband, "so we don't hear the call to noonday or evening prayer. We don't know the months or days of fasting. We don't have beggars to give alms to. We don't know how to do the ritual washing. Pilgrimage and mosque teacher are both of them far away from where we are. We don't know the words recited in the mosque and we don't understand their meaning anyway. So what will become of us? How can we possibly be pleasing to God? And how can we ever be safe in his care?"

"Isn't there some other way to please God and find safety in him?" asked Amsiggel. "Only those who go to the mosque find acceptance with God and live in security," replied the Nomad woman. Her husband turned to them and said, "There's a story that the old-timers used to tell. Once there was a king who invited some men to eat supper with him in the palace. They entered into the king's presence and bowed to the ground before him with the utmost reverence. They did not smoke or spit; they did not dare to cast an eye at the servant girls of the palace, nor did they allow a single coarse word to slip from their lips. These were clearly men of excellent character, and the king was delighted with them. However, he was a man of intelligence and he knew what people are like. So when his guests had gone, he sent his servants to ask their neighbours how they acted in the market and enquire from their wives how they behaved at home. When the servants returned to the palace, they reported to the king, "Those men beat their wives; they cheat in the market; they quarrel with their neighbours. Each one fights for his own advantage – they are not worthy to be friends of yours." The king replied, "Let them never again be seen in my palace!"

The Nomad continued, "In the mosque, people bow to the Great King and do all they can to show how good they are. But when they come out of the mosque, that's when the King tests them to see what they're made of. What do you think? Prayer and fasting that fail to make a man treat his family well, what use are they? And one who doesn't deal honestly in the market, how can he satisfy God in the mosque? This is why there's no longer any security in the world – because people no longer know how to please God through decent honest behaviour. Instead they try to please him by reciting words and skipping meals. They're just used to things as they are – they're not looking for anything new!"

Amsiggel regarded them, then said, "I can't make any sense of this. Take silver, for example. Everyone says silver is valuable, and it has a very high price. But what use is silver? Wouldn't a steel knife be more useful – you could cut turnips with it. Or an iron key – you can open the door with it. Or even a wooden spoon – you can fill the porridge bowls with it. All these are useful things for us.

But a silver ring, what can you do with it? Or a silver brooch, what good is it? It seems to me that people no longer know what's useful from what's no use at all!" The Nomad agreed, "They're all accustomed to doing what everyone else does," he said, "They just do whatever their ancestors did, following the customs handed down without considering what benefit they might have."

The woman sighed deeply. "All this is bewildering," she said, "Don't you think there could be some other way to please God?" Her husband replied, "A cow tethered in a field goes round in circles trampling the earth until it no longer has anything left to eat. It tugs and tugs, and does all it can to break its rope or uproot the stake it's tied to, trying to get to some fresh grass. And that's just what we're like. We long to go and explore the whole great kingdom of God but we're tied down, afraid of what people will say!"

"You told us that the important thing is for us to do good to one another," said Amsiggel respectfully, "but how can we know what is good? Surely there are things which are good for one person and bad for another, and there are things which are bad for one person and good for another." The Nomad's wife interrupted him: "I can't understand what you're trying to say Amsiggel!" she said. "Well, if my sister and I have an apple and I take it all for myself, that's good for me but it's not good for her. If I cut it and give her half, I've reduced the good I have and increased what she has. So, can we cut goodness in half and share it among ourselves? If someone goes to the market and buys something for more than it's really worth, that's a bad deal for him but it's a good one for the man who sold it to him. Or if the boy watching the sheep hears the call to prayer and leaves the flock grazing on the hillside to go the mosque, people would say that's a good thing, but it's a bad thing for the owner of the sheep. I can't work this out. How can we know what's good from what's bad?"

"And I've got another question too," continued Amsiggel, "If I do something with the best of intentions but then find it harms someone else, how can I make good the bad I've done? How can I put it right with the people concerned and with God? For example, if I sling a stone to stop the sheep straying and it hits a child and he dies, what can I do so that his family will forgive me? And what can I do so that God will forgive me? Or if I have a disagreement with someone and punch him and then find he was right after all, what can I do so that he'll forgive me? What can I do so that God will forgive me?"

They stayed there with the Nomads for a week, and during that time Amsiggel plaited raffia twine from dum leaves and mended all the children's sandals. Tazzwit sewed up their ragged clothes with the needle and thread which the Woodcutter had given her. Then Amsiggel and Tazzwit left them and continued their journey, remembering the questions which the Nomad and his wife had asked.

7. The Thief

They kept going until about midday when they chanced upon two young men coming up from the fields with spades on their shoulders. They exchanged greetings and continued together along the track.

They chatted a while about ploughing and harvesting, and then Amsiggel asked, "What are your names?" One replied, "I'm Hamu the Beard, and we call this fellow Hamu the Thief." Amsiggel was surprised. He enquired of them, "I can see why they call you the Beard because your beard – but 'the Thief', why that name?" "Well," he replied sadly, "I once stole a chicken from the village magistrate and they found it in my house." In surprise, Amsiggel asked him, "How long ago did this happen?" "Two years ago," he replied, "and from that time I've never stolen anything." "Well then," said Amsiggel, "it's clear you're no longer a thief!" Hamu the Beard intervened, "A shady character," he said, "is always open to suspicion!"

Amsiggel thought about this, then said to him, "You have a beard – anytime you want, you can shave it off and change your appearance. So can't your friend change too?" "Ah" replied Hamu the Beard, "hair grows on the surface of a man but a thieving nature lies deep inside him." "Well, can't someone change what's inside him?" asked Amsiggel. "This fellow," Hamu the Beard replied, "he's had thieving nature since he was a child – sucked from his mother's breast and eaten from his father's toil. A small boy is like oleander wood – while still green you can make what you want of it, but once it dries out it's good only for the hearth!"

Turning to the Thief, Amsiggel asked, "Has the magistrate forgiven you?" "He forgave me," he replied, "when I returned the chicken, but he's never forgotten what I did. Whenever I meet him he laughs at me and insults me, both him and his family and all his relations." "But if you promised never to steal again," said Amsiggel, "won't they let you turn over a new leaf? Can't you find some way to

be reconciled to them?” “Oh no,” he said, “because they always suspect me. And whenever anything gets stolen anywhere in the village, they think I’ve taken it!” Amsiggel was amazed at this.

“These people,” the Thief continued sadly, “are like an apple, looking good on the outside but rotten within. The wrong I did was seen straightaway, but the wrong they do – they just know how to hide it. They tell you how good they are, but I know for a fact they’re worse than me. They just act in secret so no-one sees them.” “You’re quite right,” agreed Amsiggel, “People are not ashamed of what they do if there’s no-one around to see it.”

“In wintertime,” said the Thief, “the snow falls and covers up all the rubbish littered on the ground. But when the sun comes out, it melts the snow and reveals the rubbish still there. The snow is like someone who says ‘I’m a good person – I’ve done nothing wrong!’ That person is lying, because he’s covering up the filth in his heart and mind. God will reveal it all on the Day of Judgment, just as the sun reveals the bad things that the snow hides from view.” “Many people say they’re good,” agreed Hamu the Beard, “but they have a lying nature, betraying the trust of others and cheating them. They have an envious nature, wanting what belongs to others. They have an aggressive nature, quarreling with anyone who opposes them. They have a lustful nature, wanting other women. They have a conceited nature, taking advantage of their brothers and workmates. They have a lazy nature, not keeping their promises. Well, we all know what we’re like!” “You’re right,” agreed Amsiggel, “We know what’s hidden in the heart of man. But none of us wants to forgive someone who’s done us wrong, because we all want to give the impression we’re better than others. We may hide our faults, but how could we ever really purify ourselves from that evil hidden deep within us?”

“It’s not at all easy!” said Hamu the Beard, “Like the cow, for instance, continually bothered by flies. She waves her tail, stamps her feet, shuts her eyes, shakes her head, but she just can’t get rid of those flies. They won’t leave her alone. Every day they keep on itching and annoying her. That’s how the cow spends her days until eventually she dies. It’s like that for us too. Evil words and wicked thoughts come to us from all sides. They bother us and upset us and entice us and preoccupy us. We don’t like it at all and we feel quite ill at ease. We flap around, just as the cow wafts her tail, trying to send away all those evil things – we say our prayers, we keep the fast, we read and recite, we give alms, but we cannot get away from the evil of the world which keeps settling on our body. That’s how we spend our days until eventually we die. The flies don’t actually get inside the cow until she’s dead, but evil things get right inside us even while we’re still alive.”

“God save us!” exclaimed the Thief, “because we cannot avoid the polluting things of this world, nor do we know any way to remove the pollution within us.” “You’re right!” said Hamu the Beard regarding him closely, “because, as we said, a bad person can’t become good in the sight of God or in the sight of other people.” Amsiggel spoke up: “All this goes to alienate a person from his neighbour, to alienate him from himself, and to alienate him from God too. If only there could be reconciliation and peace between us all! If only there could be compassion which might draw together those at odds!” None of them spoke, all absorbed in their own thoughts. Then Hamu the Beard said, “I’ve heard there’s a place on the other side of these mountains which they call Peace. Perhaps the people there will know a way for us to be at peace with one another.”

8. The Blacksmith

Amsiggel and Tazzwit stayed the night with the two young men named Hamu and early next morning set out once more along the track. It was a hot day and there was no shade; before long they began to get very thirsty. Still they kept going, until they saw a little house in the distance. This cheered them up greatly – they reckoned they would find some refreshment there.

As they drew near, there came from inside the house the sound of heavy hammer blows. Amsiggel called loudly, but no-one heard him; Tazzwit knocked on the door, but no-one came. Pushing it open a little, they peered inside. They saw two men there, beating out iron with a heavy hammer. It was a forge, dark and gloomy with a scorching hot furnace and sparks flying everywhere. They went in and stood watching the blacksmiths. Tazzwit was so thirsty she fainted away. “This is like the Abode of the Dead,” said her brother to himself, “We called out at the door but no-one heard us. We knocked but no-one let us in. And now we’re inside, we’re doomed to darkness and scorching fire with hammerings and poundings as though we’d entered the Torments of the Grave.”

Eventually the blacksmiths put down their tools and pointed to a log bench where he could take Tazzwit to sit. They brought them a drink. When they’d recovered a little, Amsiggel told them about their journey and the hardships they’d encountered along the way. The Blacksmith answered, “Man is like a coin, rolling here and rolling there, constantly shifting from one moneybag to another. All our

life we're on the move, and we find no rest in this world!" His brother spoke up: "Yet the old-timers say, 'You can't roll further than the bottom of the hill!' And every coin has two sides: whichever side it falls on, that's how it lies. We have two sides, and whichever side we fall on that's where we stay. When we roll to a stop on the Day of Judgment, we'll find ourselves either in Heaven or in Hell, and that's where we'll stay!"

"Do you know what will happen on the Day of Judgment?" asked Amsiggel. "Well, they say we'll each stand before God," replied the Blacksmith, "and every one of us will recite a complete account of what he's done. Those who've done admirable things will recount them. Those who have done shameful things will recount them. Then everyone you've dealt with shamefully will stand up and call you to account for how you treated them. They'll weigh you in the perfect Scales that never lie. Then the Guilty will go to Hell, and those who've done all that God desires will go to Heaven." Amsiggel turned this over in his mind. "But which of us," he demanded, "has done all that God desires?" The Blacksmith gazed at him. "That's what people say," he replied, "but there probably aren't any of us who've done all that God desires." "Well, if it's like that," asked Amsiggel, "what will happen to those of us who fall short?" "Well, we'll just ask God to have mercy on us," replied the Blacksmith uneasily. "Do you know if God will have mercy on us all, or just some of us?" insisted Amsiggel. "What can I say?" replied the Blacksmith, "He alone knows!" "That doesn't comfort me at all!" said Amsiggel, "Can't we even know for sure whether we're going to Heaven or to the other place?" "Whoever is afraid of damnation must hope for mercy," replied the Blacksmith.

At this his brother spoke up: "People say that one good deed will weigh more than a hundred evil deeds. So we must do good deeds and try to balance the Scales." His brother studied him closely, then said, "Do you think you'll be able to stand before God and weigh up all the evil you've done along with the good? Won't you just be disgraced by your sins and the shameful things you've done?"

"I'll tell you a story," he continued, "I heard it from the old-timers. Once there was a king who was a very religious man, and he would not eat pigmeat. He had a cook in his palace who prepared his meals every day. One day this cook made a stew for the king. He put some beef in, and some lamb, and some pigmeat... then added extra ingredients, like salt and vegetables, and stirred it all together until it was well cooked. It gave off a wonderful aroma so the king was ready to eat with a good appetite. When the cook brought it in, the king said, 'This is an excellent stew. What did you put in it?' 'A little beef,' he replied, 'a little lamb, and a little pigmeat.' The king rose in anger. 'You wretch!' he shouted, 'Did you suppose that the beef and lamb would purify the pigmeat? On the contrary, that pigmeat has corrupted the whole stew!' Turning to his servants he commanded, 'Tie up this pagan. Cut off his head and throw him in the dark pit along with his stew! He's brought corruption into my presence. Death is all he deserves!'" The Blacksmith continued, "That's what will happen to anyone who stands before God bringing into his presence evil mixed with good. And what will God say to him then? He'll say, 'Throw this wretch into the Pit! He's brought corruption into my presence! Hellfire is all he deserves!' And I can tell you that good deeds will never remove evil deeds, because the evil deeds have corrupted the whole person. What you've put into the oven is exactly what you'll take out of it!"

"This is enough to make my hair stand on end!" exclaimed Amsiggel faintly. "Can't we find any way," he asked, "to wipe out what's made us unacceptable to God and ashamed of ourselves, before we get as far as the presence of God himself? Can't we purify ourselves from our sins before they get put on the Scales?" "If only a man could know for sure whether God will have mercy on him!" replied the Blacksmith, "If only we could make our peace with him before the Hour of Retribution comes!" Hearing this, Amsiggel sighed deeply. "This is the hardest of all the questions we've heard during these past days," he said. "Keep climbing along this track," replied the Blacksmith, "until eventually you get to the village called Peace, 'If they don't know the answer, no-one will!"

9. The Village called Peace

Two days more they spent on the road, and it was evening before they came to the village of Peace. There were some men sitting and chatting in the shade of a shop doorway – each one had something broken or damaged. One had a broken plough, one had a table whose leg had come off, another had a spade with no handle, and one had brought a cart with a twisted wooden wheel. Amsiggel exchanged greetings with them, then looked inside the shop. He saw a man there planing wood.

"Is it the carpenter you want?" the men asked, "Have you got something broken or damaged?" "Everywhere we've been these days," replied Amsiggel, "we've heard about what's broken and

damaged. Does this carpenter of yours know how to straighten out a twisted life? Does he know how to fix a broken heart? Does he know how to mend a ruined world?" "He probably does!" they replied.

They were still speaking when a girl came up. She was evidently the carpenter's daughter, and she'd brought mint tea for her father. When he emerged, he looked cheerfully at Amsiggel and his sister and said, "God guards the path of those who please him! You've come a long way, and you're very welcome!" he added kindly, "You'll find rest and peace here among us." And he told his daughter to take them home. Walking through the village, they saw the women drawing water and the men digging in the fields. There seemed to be singing everywhere, like the singing of angels. They had never heard singing like that before.

The girl took them into a house. They sat in a long room where she brought things for making mint tea and a loaf of bread still warm. She said, "I'm called Honey and my father's name is Faithful – his name actually means 'One who wants the best for everyone'". On the wall was a picture of a shepherd. He was carrying a lamb across his shoulders, with other lambs round about him. "Who's that shepherd?" Tazzwit asked. Honey looked at her a moment, then said, "That's the Good Shepherd. He's looking after his lambs... like our Saviour looks after us." "What do mean, your 'Saviour'?" asked Tazzwit puzzled. The girl smiled and said, "A saviour is someone who rescues anyone in danger. If you've fallen into a deep hole, he'll haul you up before you starve to death. If you've fallen into the river, he'll pull you out before you get swept away."

"Tell us about this Shepherd, your Saviour," said Tazzwit. "Well, the shepherd is the one who goes in through the door of the sheepfold," Honey replied, "The sheep obey his voice and he calls those that are his, each one by name. He leads them outside, and his sheep follow him because they recognise his voice. He himself said, 'I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd gives his life for the sheep. I am not like the hired hand who runs away when the wolf comes because the sheep are not his. I am the Good Shepherd and I am ready to die for their sake. I have other sheep that don't come to this sheepfold, and I must gather them too. They will obey my voice, and there will be one flock and one Shepherd.'" Honey looked up at the picture. "One day," she continued, "he asked the people 'What would any one of you do if he had a hundred sheep and one of them got lost? Wouldn't you leave the others, and go to look for the lost one? And when you'd found it you'd pick it up and carry it on your shoulders till you'd brought it safely home. Then you'd call your neighbours saying: Come and celebrate with me: I've found my lost sheep!'"

Tazzwit was lost in thought. "That's a truly good shepherd," she said, "He really cares about his sheep! Even the lamb that strayed away, he went off to look for it." "He watches over them night and day," said Amsiggel, "and he's willing to sacrifice himself, even to death, so that no harm will come to them." "And that's exactly what our Saviour does," continued Honey, "He calls to each of us by name and searches for any one that's lost. He sacrificed all he had for our sake, so he could bring us safely into the sheepfold. That's why we call him our Saviour." They all went quiet, thinking about what Honey had told them. Then she said, "Come on, I'll show you where you'll be sleeping. We can talk some more in the morning."

When they woke up next morning, there were a lot of children playing and laughing happily together in the courtyard in the middle of the house. The carpenter came in with some mint tea and a bowl of soup for each of them. Amsiggel said to him respectfully, "It's amazing! I've never seen children like this before. They're not fighting or quarreling or insulting each other, and I've not heard any bad language from them at all!" The carpenter smiled, and he said, "O Lord God, your praise fills the heavens, from the tongues of infants and babies. You are high above all who quarrel and fight." Then he asked them about where they'd come from and where they wanted to go. They told him about the people they'd met on their journey, and they recounted what the Woodcutter, the Hermit, the Old Woman in the forest, the Nomad, the Thief and the Blacksmith had each said. "These people," said Amsiggel, "each of them is anxious about some things which don't make sense to them."

"Tell me what their questions are," suggested Faithful kindly. Feeling quite encouraged, Amsiggel told him: "The Woodcutter says, 'We can see the wisdom and goodness of the One who made all the creatures of the forest, but we can't tell whether he's still looking after the world or if he's just left it to look after itself.' The Hermit says, 'Everything in the world is sick – there's a blight upon it.' The Old Woman says, 'There's no security in this world or in the hereafter.' The Nomad asks, 'How can we find a way to please God?' The Thief asks, 'What can a bad person do to become good?' The Blacksmith asks, 'Can anyone purify his heart from shame and be free from fear on the Day of Judgment?'" Then Amsiggel continued, "Have you, the people of Peace discovered how someone can make his peace with God and with the other villagers and with himself?"

The carpenter smiled cheerfully. "Thank God for this hour that's brought us together," he said, "because it says in his word, 'I will bring them into the security which they long for.' God wants to

show each of those people the Way of Peace.” “What is the Way of Peace like?” asked Amsiggel, “And where is it so that someone can set out on it?” Faithful regarded him seriously. “It’s true that nowadays people call us the People of Peace, but in times past it wasn’t peace that occupied our thoughts. That was a time of violence. Our forefathers fought against other tribes and took all their possessions by force.” “What happened among you then,” asked Amsiggel, “to make you change so completely?” “Someone came to us,” replied Faithful, “and he gave us peace with God, with our neighbours, and with ourselves. He made for us a new covenant. He showed us how to be kind to one another, and how to consider what others would like, without asking for more than our fair share or wanting to get what doesn’t belong to us. He showed us how to help any who are in need, to feed any who are hungry and clothe any who are cold. He summed up in one sentence all that’s written in the law of God and the prophets – he said, ‘Treat other people just as you’d like them to treat you!’”

“That’s a good saying,” said Amsiggel, “but if you are easygoing with people and always do them good, won’t they take advantage of you and take what’s yours?” “Not at all,” replied Faithful, “because God is the one who stands with us and protects us from the devil and all his servants. ‘If God be for us who can defeat us?’ That’s why we’re not afraid to leave all our affairs in his hand, because nothing happens to us except at his command.” Then Faithful continued, “Stay here with us for a time and I’ll explain everything God has shown us.”

Several months they spent there: Amsiggel went regularly with Faithful to the workshop, and Tazzwit helped Honey at home. They heard about all that had been done by the one they called their Saviour. At last the time came to leave and Amsiggel said to them, “Dear friends, you’ve been very kind to us, but we must go back and see all the people we met on our journey and then return to our home.” Tazzwit, however, did not want to go back. “No,” she said firmly, “I’ve found here among these people all I was looking for. I can’t leave them now!” “But think of the fox,” Amsiggel said to her kindly, “He goes out to hunt far from home, and then he brings back what he’s caught to those left in the den. We must take back to them what we’ve heard, because we’ve left them all perplexed and dejected.” He turned to Faithful and his daughter. “But I would like to ask you a favour,” he said, “even greater than the kindness you’ve already shown us. Can you come with us and set these people free?” “Let’s ask God to show us what he wants us to do,” replied Faithful. He closed his eyes and prayed: “O God our Lord, we praise you because you’ve filled our hearts with your peace. You’ve given us peace with one another and peace with you. Show us now if you want us to go with our dear guests and take your word to those who questioned them along the road. Show us what you want of us, in our Saviour’s name.” They all said, “Amen!” Faithful looked at them a moment, then declared, “He who goes on this road, nothing will upset him! Stay till tomorrow and we’ll go with you.”

10. At the Blacksmith’s

Early next morning they set out from the village of Peace, retracing their steps along the way they had come. After two days’ journey they came to the Blacksmith’s. He and his brother welcomed them in. Sitting everyone down, they brought mint tea. Then Amsiggel told them about their arrival at the village of Peace, and he introduced their companions. “This man,” he said, “is Faithful. He and Honey, his daughter, have been very good to us – looking after us in their village, and now in coming along with us.” “Anyone who does good,” the Blacksmith replied, “is very welcome!” Then he said to Amsiggel, “Do you remember our conversation that day, and how we discussed what might happen on the Day of Judgment?” “Ask them,” Amsiggel agreed, “They’ll know the answer.” “Alright, I’ll tell you all what’s troubling us,” said the Blacksmith, “We’d like to know what will happen to someone who fails to do all that God requires of him? Must he inevitably stand up on the Day of Judgment and recite a full account of all he’s done? And what should he do if he knows he’s done things that make him ashamed or make him unacceptable to God: that’s what troubles us.” “It’s a difficult question,” replied Faithful, “because anyone in doubt will always live in fear of the Day of Judgment.” Hearing this, the Blacksmith’s brother spoke up. “But won’t our good deeds balance the Scales?” he asked.

Faithful regarded him and said, “I’ll tell you a story. Once there was an old man who had a large house and many fields. All his life he’d bought and sold and accumulated wealth for himself. He thought about nothing except what would be to his own advantage. He had no time to consider the hardship faced by others; he turned a blind eye to any who were sick or in need. That’s how he lived until he got old. Then he began to think about the hereafter. He said to himself, ‘I’ll do some good deeds to balance the Scales before I die.’ So this old man went out and began to give to the disabled and the blind; he gave to the mosque and to the poor.” Faithful stopped speaking and looked round at them all. Then he asked, “What do you think will become of that old man in the Scales of God? He

spent sixty years indulging himself for the present, and now he wants to spend one year providing for his future. Will he purchase a place in Heaven that lasts forever with the alms of one short year? What will God say to him on the Day of Judgment? He'll say, 'You foolish man! Did you think to get for yourself in the hereafter more than you got for yourself in the world? Hell is the place for you and for all who care only about themselves!'"

They all went quiet, thinking about this. Then the Blacksmith's brother said, "But if we do good deeds from childhood, perhaps they'll be enough to outweigh our sins." "Do you think there's any one of us," retorted his brother, "who's counted all his good deeds and all his sins since childhood to know which will weigh more?" His brother looked up thoughtfully and said, "But one who's done even a single good deed – God may have mercy on him if he wishes." "Well what good is that?" replied the Blacksmith, "We don't know if he wishes or not! Look, God has decreed that we must always live half way between hope and fear – we hope for his mercy and we fear his punishment." "Well in that case," said his brother doubtfully, "perhaps he'll have mercy on us if we believe there is no god but him." "Not likely," retorted the Blacksmith, "Even Satan believes in God and knows he's unique, but what good does that sort of faith do? Does it make Satan acceptable to God?" "I don't know," sighed his brother, "There's nothing for it but to hope he'll be merciful towards us!" They he turned to Faithful and asked, "Isn't God called the Merciful One?"

"He certainly is the Merciful One," replied Faithful, "but he doesn't have mercy on everyone who disobeys his word. Do you know what happened to our ancestor Adam? God told him, 'Don't eat the fruit from that tree in the middle of the garden.' But he went and ate some. What happened to Adam then? God drove him out of the garden and posted angels there to guard the gateway. The way back into the garden was blocked by God so that Adam and his wife could never again go back into it. However much Adam might try to call out to God and bang on the gate, he could never return to that paradise. Even if he did all the good he could do, and put all his effort into pleasing God throughout the rest of his life in this world, he could not go back to where he'd been. God did not allow him to go back into paradise. Now then, Adam disobeyed God's word once, guilty of one transgression, and God took him away from the paradise he'd been in. So what do you think? Was God merciful to him or not?" "No, he was punished," the Blacksmith agreed, "God was not merciful to him." "But if God judges so strictly," said his brother, "how will anyone receive his mercy? Can you explain this puzzle to us, Faithful?"

Faithful looked round at them all again and said, "If you've broken God's word, what will you need most of all?" No one spoke. "If you've not done what God wants of you, what will you need most of all?" Still they said nothing. "If the judgement of God lies upon you, what will you need most of all?" They all looked at him, then the Blacksmith said, "It seems to me you'd need someone to stand between you and God, someone who has himself done all that God requires. You'd need someone able to ask God to have mercy on you!"

"Listen, all of you" said Faithful, "I'll tell you a story. Once there was a village magistrate, a good man who always kept his word and judged justly and wisely. One day a boy went out hunting birds with a catapult. He shot a pebble which shattered the window of the magistrate's house. They seized him and brought him before the magistrate. Trembling with fear, he fell to the ground saying, 'O Sir, may God lengthen your life!' The magistrate told him to be quiet, then asked, 'Was it you who broke this window?' 'O Sir,' he replied, 'I didn't mean to – the wind just carried the stone!' 'Whoever breaks a window,' declared the magistrate, 'must fix it!' 'Oh please forgive me,' begged the boy, 'I'm very sorry for what I've done!' 'How are you going to fix it?' asked the magistrate. 'I won't ever break another one,' replied the boy. 'How are you going to fix it?' insisted the magistrate. 'O Sir, I'll do a good deed. I'll go and give two loaves of bread to those blind men at the door of your house.' 'Do you think that food for beggars will mend the window? Come on now, how are you going to fix it?' 'O Sir, I don't know,' said the boy, 'No one can mend a pane of glass once it's got broken.' 'You'll pay for a new pane,' replied the magistrate. 'But Sir,' said the boy, 'I haven't got any money to buy a pane of glass.' He bowed then to the ground saying, 'O Great Magistrate! O Great Magistrate!' 'That's not how to pay for the window,' said the magistrate. The boy continued, 'O Magistrate, great is your mercy! O Magistrate, great is your mercy! Just forgive me this one time.' 'No,' insisted the magistrate 'You must fix what you've broken.' The boy bowed his head: he didn't know what to do. He had no money to pay for the glass he'd broken. He just stood there in silence. Then the magistrate asked him, 'Have you parents or brothers with money who can come and free you from this debt?' 'I've got an uncle,' he replied, 'but I don't know if he'd come.' His uncle was sent for. When he arrived, he took two silver coins from the pouch of his robe and gave them to the magistrate. Then the magistrate said to the boy, 'Go in peace, son! Your uncle has paid for you!'"

Faithful looked round at them all and asked, "Did you understand this parable?" At this, Amsiggel spoke up. "The magistrate is like God," he said, "and the boy is like me. The window that got broken represents the bad things I've done and the good things I've not done. But as for the boy's uncle, I don't know who he is!" Then Faithful replied, "The one who paid our debt – we call him our Saviour. Because really we're all like that boy: we haven't enough to settle up what we owe. So God sent one who was able to settle up for us. He came to pay for you and me, and each one of us, to save us from our doom. And on the Day of Judgment the Great Magistrate will say to us, 'Go in peace, son! Your Saviour has paid for you!'"

At this, they all went very quiet, thinking about what they'd heard. Then the Blacksmith's brother asked, "So, if he's already paid for us, what should we do ourselves?" Hearing this, Faithful asked, "What would the boy in the story do?" Amsiggel spoke up: "He'd feel very grateful to the one who came to his rescue. He'd be really attached to him. He'd want to go everywhere with him because he'd love him so much." "We can't do a thing," agreed Faithful, "except feel grateful to the one who has freed us from our Debt. We can't do anything except believe in him, hold onto him, lean on him." Then the Blacksmith asked, "What will happen on the Day of Reckoning to one who believes in him?" "For us, there won't be any Reckoning," replied Faithful, "because he's already paid all we owe. He won't let us suffer the Torments of the Grave, because he's already taken us past the Scales and the Reciting of Accounts and saved us from the Fire of Hell. And that's how we receive the mercy of God, just as he intended from the beginning of time!"

Three days they spent there; then the blacksmiths said, "This is all quite new to us. Stay another few days because we want to understand more about these things." But Faithful replied, "God bless you. We'd like to stay, but there are still other people and we must help them too." "Alright," said the Blacksmith, "Just let us come with you!"

11. At the Thief's

They set out once more, following the track until they came to the village of the two young men, Hamu the Beard and his friend Hamu the Thief. They found them in the fields, digging out the mud and debris from an irrigation channel. The two young men were happy to see Amsiggel and Tazzwit and their companions, and they all sat together in an orchard talking about the events of the past few days. Then the Blacksmith addressed them, "We've heard," he said, "that you are both called Hamu, but we can't tell which of you is Hamu the Beard because neither of you has a beard." They all laughed. Then they asked the Beard, "Why have you shaved it off?" "That's simple," he replied, "I happened to find a razor beside the channel." They all laughed again. Then the one called the Thief stared at him saying, "Look, you've changed your appearance simply with a razor costing two ryals. Can't I change too?"

Turning to Amsiggel, they said, "Do you remember our conversation? We asked if a bad person can become good in the eyes of God and in the eyes of other people?" They all looked then at Faithful to see if he knew the answer. He said to the two lads (both called Hamu), "When we got here, we found you digging out the channel. Tell me, where does this water come from? Does it flow from a spring or from the river?" "From a spring," they replied. "Okay, and when the water flows from the spring, what's it like?" he enquired. "It's pure and clean and sweet," they said. "So, where does the mud and debris come from?" he asked. "It just falls in," they replied, "whenever animals or children walk along beside the channel." Then Faithful said to them, "You see, this water comes from the spring perfectly pure, but the further it goes the muddier it gets with the dirt and rubbish that fall into it, until finally it reaches the plain where it expires among the stones and sand and disappears completely." "That's right," they agreed. "Listen then," he said, "and I'll show you what this signifies, because it happens to us all just like that. When a person is born his heart is clean and his mind is pure, but from that point on he goes downhill, winding his way amidst the crooked tricks and the satanic wiles of this world until he grows old and weak and finally dies. For as long as he's in the world, dirt keeps on falling into him and making him more and more muddy." Faithful paused, then said, "And what about this mud and rubbish? Some of it floats along in full view but some flows beneath the surface and isn't so easily seen. Some people show how filthy they are, but others hide their uncleanness. The sins of some people are so obvious that you can easily foresee the judgment that will fall upon them. But others, it's only later that their sins will show."

"Listen, all of you" continued Faithful, "and I'll tell you a story. Once there was a man who smoked fifty cigarettes a day. His clothes and his hands and his body were completely permeated by cigarette smoke. When he got home, his wife complained to him about the stench. So he went and

had a thorough wash in the public baths; he changed his clothes and he came back clean from the stink of cigarettes. But it wasn't really that simple. On the outside he was fine, but what was he like inside? What about all the smoke that had gone inside him? The smoke that had fouled up his lungs: that's what was killing him. And man is in just this condition. He can wash his skin; he can wash his clothes; but his heart is still full of all kinds of evil. And how can it be made clean?"

"O Faithful, you know exactly what we're like!" said the other Hamu, "It's very difficult to get ourselves clean from all the pollution deep inside us. It's not easy to avoid evil talking and wicked thoughts, because man is weak. Although we want to do what pleases God, we can't manage it. We all know we fail in this!"

"But is it possible for a bad person become good in the sight of God and man?" asked the Thief, "Can we dig out the mud and debris of sin from our hearts?" "There is someone," replied Faithful gently, "who is able to make your heart clean. He can remove all the uncleanness and all the evil and fill your heart with the Spirit of love and peace. If you truly regret the wrong things you've done and turn away from all that makes you unclean, there's only one thing more you need to do." "And what's that?" asked the Thief intently. "You need to hold onto our Saviour," said Faithful, "Believe in him and lean on him because he gave himself to set us free from all evil and cleanse us to become his people. In this way you can start a new life, and God will forgive you and willingly forget what you've done in the past. In fact, he'll do a miracle in you – he'll purify you from within and fill your heart with the beauty and goodness of heaven."

They were all thinking about this when Faithful continued, "But don't forget how the women sift lentils day by day and remove the grit and the vetch seeds that have found their way into it. If you enter into new life, God will help you every day to sift within you all that is evil, be it words or deeds or thoughts. He'll help you eliminate wicked words from honourable speech, to keep lies out of sincere conversation. He'll help you avoid all that would entice you to satanic deeds, and he'll keep you away from those who've accustomed themselves to the filth of this world. He'll be with you – the one who can save you from all that pollutes the heart of man. Believe in him, hold onto him, lean on him. If you do, you'll always be good in the sight of God."

"But how can we be good in the sight of man?" asked the Thief, "How can people forgive us? They can never forget what we've done in the past!" "No longer," replied Faithful, "do we see anyone as other people see them. Because we know that if someone has entered into new life, then God has transformed him. The old has gone from him and he's become new, because God has made peace with him through our Saviour. God no longer counts his sins. Anyone who's become new will find acceptance with us as he has with God. We'll love him and appreciate him, and we won't think about the past at all. If someone used to be a thief, we'll no longer call him a thief, because we must forget what he did in the past." "If that's so," said the one called the Thief, "what name will you give me now?" "We'll call you Hamu the New," replied Faithful, "because the old Hamu has died within you."

Then the other Hamu spoke up. "Thank you, Faithful," he said, "for telling us all this." "We should thank God," replied Faithful, "because it's he who's forgiven us all the wrong things we've done." Then Hamu the New said, "Let us come with you on your journey and hear more about these things." "Come on then," replied Faithful, "There's still time for us to see the Nomad today." Immediately, they started up the track.

12. At the Nomad's

When they came to the Nomad's encampment, they sat happily in the shade of the tent and Amsiggel recounted all their experiences. He told how Faithful and Honey had come with them, accompanied by the Blacksmith and his brother and the two lads called Hamu. Then the Nomad asked, "Have you found an answer to our question?" "What was your question?" enquired Faithful in friendly fashion. "Well, we've actually got two questions," he replied, "The first is: What is good? How can we know good from bad?"

Faithful smiled. "Quiet, all of you!" he said. Silence fell and there was no sound. Then he said, "Can you hear your heart beating? Listen carefully to your heart, because that's where the Lord God reveals what is right. The heart of man is his life. When the heart goes silent, he's dead. It's to the heart that God reveals what he wants of us as long as we live, and he'll show you what is good and what is bad. Listen always to what your heart tells you, and act on it, because it will be the truth of God."

"I've listened to my heart beating," said the Nomad's wife, "but I've never yet heard a word from God. How can he show us what's good and what's bad?" "A person who listens carefully to the birds

sing,” replied Faithful, “will know each bird by its song. A person who’s accustomed to measuring fields and rooms will know from a distance how many paces long they are. And a person who’s accustomed to hearing his heart will know what is good from what is bad, because his heart will weigh up what he sees and hears. If you see someone climbing off his mule so a blind man can ride, you know he’s done good. If you see someone lift a heavy sack for an Old Woman and carry it where she wants it, you know he’s done good. Someone who picks up broken glass from the path, or takes a straying donkey back to its owner, we all know that it’s good he’s done. Our heart shows us that it’s good to help people like this. Everywhere in the whole world, from the beginning of time to the present, this has been obvious because the heart of man shows him what is good. And we can put into practice goodness of this sort every day.” “Is there anyone,” asked Amsiggel, “who’s done all the good he could do? Surely there’s no one who’s been perfectly good?” “What you say is quite correct, Amsiggel,” replied Faithful, “and anyone who knows the good he should do but fails to do it – he is guilty of a sin!” “You’re right Faithful,” said the Nomad’s wife, “It’s easy to know what is good, but it’s hard for us to do it.”

“You’ve told us what good is like,” said the Nomad, “but how can people know what is bad? – they just don’t listen to what their heart tells them. They’re so used to doing evil that they can no longer distinguish between good and bad.” “You’re right,” replied Faithful, “But even they really know what is good and what is bad. There’s no liar who’ll tolerate his son lying to him. Even if a man tells lies more than anyone in the whole village, he’ll not stand for his son to lie to him, because there’s something in the heart of man that shows him lying is bad, and it can never meet with his approval. And it’s the same with theft. There’s no thief who’ll tolerate someone stealing from him. Even if he has lots of property himself and knows the one who steals from him is in need, he’ll not accept it, because there’s something in the heart of man that shows him stealing is bad, and it can never meet with his approval. Similarly, there’s no adulterer who’ll tolerate his wife committing adultery, because there’s something in the heart of man that shows him adultery is bad, and it can never meet with his approval. That’s how it is: we all know what is bad.” “You’re right Faithful,” said the Nomad, “It’s easy to know what is bad, but it’s hard for us to avoid it and keep away from it.”

“So, what was your second question?” asked Faithful. The Nomad replied, “Someone who knows he’s done wrong, and knows he’s failed to do good, how can he possibly enter into peace with God? How can he obtain God’s approval? What can he do to get God’s forgiveness?” “Well now, see your grey donkey there beside the tent,” replied Faithful, “When God created it, he gave it a black mark on its back above its front legs. What shape is the mark?” To this the Nomad replied, “It’s like if you put one stick across another.” “Well, that mark is the sign of a new covenant between us and God,” said Faithful, “Listen, all of you, and I’ll tell you about it. Once there was a good man who did everything God required of him; he taught people all about the way of God. He was kind and helped anyone in need; he did good to everyone, whoever they were. One day he was riding to the big city on a donkey: those who came to meet him along the road were so pleased to see him that they wanted to make him their king. But when he reached the city, one of his friends betrayed him. They seized him, tied him up, tore his clothes and beat him severely. Despite this, he did not retaliate at all – he didn’t hit back or dispute with them or get a sword to start a riot. Then they took him and hung him to die on a tall wooden pole. That pole was made of two pieces of wood; one was stuck into the ground and the other went across the top like that shape on the donkey. He hung there with his blood dripping to the ground – and he said nothing, except one thing. He raised his voice to heaven and cried out, “O God, forgive them! They just don’t know what they’re doing!” In fact, God had planned all this and knew about it from the very beginning. He puts that mark on every donkey colt born throughout the whole world so that we’ll never forget the one who rode on a donkey colt or how he asked God to forgive those who killed him.”

Then Faithful continued: “The man who rode that donkey, he wasn’t like other people, because he’d never done anything bad or shameful. He was always doing good to everyone; he did all that God required of him. He never needed God to forgive him, nor did he have to ask for mercy – he didn’t have to suffer the judgment of death that loomed over everyone else. And that’s why God planned for him to do something no one else could do except him. He sent him to do something very special.” “What did God plan for him?” asked the Nomad, “Why did he send him?” “God sent him,” said Faithful, “to suffer the judgment that lay upon mankind. He himself did not have to be punished for anything he’d done because he was without fault and had never done anything bad. That’s why he could bear the punishment that was coming to others. God sent him to die and suffer the Torments of the Grave and after that to rise from among the dead. And by raising him from the tomb to new life, God showed us he’d found acceptance with him. Then God lifted him out of this world and into his

presence in heaven. And this new kind of life, he's now given to all who believe in him. He's made peace between us and God; he's made a new covenant between us and our Creator."

"Who was that man who came and made peace for us?" asked the Nomad. Amsiggel spoke up, "It's the one we call our Saviour!" Tazzwit said, "It's the Good Shepherd who dies for the sheep!" Hamu the New said, "It's the one who makes us clean from the inside!" The Blacksmith said, "It's the one who paid the debt we owed!" At this they all fell silent, listening to what their hearts were saying.

That night they stayed at the encampment. Early next morning the Nomad brought them some sheep's milk and they had breakfast. Then they set out, accompanied by the Nomad and his wife who left their children there, some to watch the sheep, some to look after the tent. At this moment, Amsiggel remembered the bridge and the poor woman who'd fallen in the river, and he said to himself, "It'll be hard to cross if the river has risen any further."

Descending from the higher land, they entered the forest and went on till they came to the river. When they got there, the bridge and its foundations had been completely washed away. They asked some people how they could get across. "Keep going up the river," they replied, "until you get to the big bridge." They set off again but it was a long way. When they finally reached the big bridge they were impressed with its strength. It was so high above the river that the water could not reach it. They crossed safely and continued along the track.

"Year by year," said Faithful, "people make wooden bridges and the river carries them away. Wooden bridges are fine for a while, but when the floods come they always collapse. Do you see the metaphor? The things we do and make are like that. What we do and make is fine for a while but eventually it collapses. Someone may do his ritual washing and say his prayers and keep the fast and do all that religion requires in order to draw close to God. The things he does may be fine for a while, but he never knows if they'll endure to eternity or not. People are all in need of a bridge to cross over from this world to heaven but they're always in doubt whether a bridge made of things they do will take them to the other side. They're afraid they'll just get carried off in the flood that comes with death... because the bridges they build always fall down!"

"We need a firm high bridge," said Amsiggel, "one that will carry us from earth to heaven without doubt or fear. And I know what you're going to say, Faithful, because there is someone who is a firm bridge." "You're right Amsiggel," agreed Faithful, "No one on this Bridge will slip or fall into the Abyss. He'll get safely to the other side, because he himself said, 'I am the way, the truth and the life. No one will get to God's presence unless I take him there myself.'"

They stopped then to pray and thank God, saying, "O Lord God, we praise you because you've sent us the Saviour to remove our sins, to release us from the bondage of this world, to make a covenant of peace between you and us, and pay the debt that was beyond us, to take us from this earth into the world to come. All this was according to your plan in your great love and mercy. And now, O Lord God, guide us along the track and bring us safely to the old woman. Show us how we can comfort her from all that frightens her. We ask this in the name of our Saviour, Amen."

13. At the Old Woman's

They continued along the track, talking together about all that had happened. Eventually they came to the Old Woman's hut. As soon as she recognized them, she came out and hugged them and kissed them. They all sat down, some on the grass and some on the stones beside the hut. They brought water from the spring, and when they had drunk, Amsiggel asked her politely, "Do you remember we told you we were going to see if there was still any goodness in this world? Well, here we are, and we've found goodness in it!"

Then the Old Woman spoke up. "I've got some good news too," she said, "I'll tell you what's happened to me, and it's the most wonderful thing! Two nights ago I was sleeping when suddenly there appeared to me in a dream one who looked like an angel. His clothes were white like snow and flashed like lightning, and he carried in his hand a golden key. He spoke to me in our own language and said, 'Come, you who toil and carry a heavy load and I will give you rest. Take up my yoke and learn from me, because things are peaceful with me and my heart is full of kindness, and you'll find with me the rest you need.' When I heard this I asked him, 'Who are you Sir?' and he replied, 'You don't know me yet, beloved daughter, but you will come to know me.' I asked, 'O Sir, what's that key in your hand?' and he said, 'This is the key to heaven, ready for its time.' I said, 'I want, Sir, to leave this world and go with you wherever you wish.' Then he looked at me and his face was filled with sympathy as though he knew all that had come upon me of trouble and sorrow, and he said, 'Your time has not yet come, my daughter, but in the life of this world you'll see the goodness of God.'

You'll enter the safe refuge and rest from all that torments.' At that I woke up. I just lay there in bed, and my heart was filled with a great peace. I thought and thought, but I couldn't fathom the meaning of what I'd seen. Was it an angel, or was it someone else? What was the key in his hand? Where is this safe refuge which he'd take me to? And what is the goodness I would see in this world?"

They were all overcome with amazement at what the Old Woman told them. Then Faithful said to her, "You are very blessed! Our Saviour has appeared to you in a dream. He's set his favour on you and granted you to enter into the safety of God in this world and the world to come." "But... the key?" she asked. "No one can enter someone else's house unless the master of the house invites him in," he replied, "No one can enter heaven unless the one with the key opens the door for him." "Is it our Saviour who has the key to heaven?" asked Tazzwit. Faithful replied, "He it was who said, 'I possess the keys of Death and the Place of the Dead... Whatever I open, no one can shut; and whatever I shut, no one can open.' He also said, 'I am the Door. Anyone who enters through me, will be safe. Never will I send away anyone who comes to me!'"

Faithful looked at the Old Woman and said, "You are blessed indeed, because few get through this door. The one who appeared to you in the dream once said, 'Enter through the narrow door, because the wide one leads to destruction and many go through it. But this door that leads to life is narrow and few find it.' One day he spoke to the people who believe in him and said to them, 'Don't let anxiety enter your hearts. Believe in God and believe also in me because I'm going away to prepare a place for you. I'll come back and take you with me, and you too will be where I'm going to be.'"

"I'm so thankful to God," said the Old Woman, "and I'll never forget this dream or its meaning. I'm not afraid now of what will happen to me in the hereafter, but I still don't know if there's any safety to be had in this world." Faithful replied, "When our Saviour came into the world, he travelled from place to place doing good to everyone in need. He was always concerned for those who were weak or ill or afraid, and he healed all who were in bondage to Satan. One day he was in the house of prayer. A woman was there who'd been oppressed by a demon for eighteen years: she was hunched and could not straighten her back. When he saw her, he called to her, 'O woman, see now, you're healed from your affliction!' He laid his hands on her and immediately her back went straight. He has compassion like this on all who are afflicted. Still today, he is able to save anyone who takes refuge in his name – he can shelter them from Satan and from all that torments. He hears anyone who calls to him and he says to them, 'Don't be afraid! Just believe!' So don't be afraid now. Just put yourself under the protection of his name and you'll always be safe – he'll bless you more than you could possibly imagine." Then Faithful smiled and said to her, "These next few days we'll see what good things God will do for you!"

"The wild animals we'll chase out of the forest," he said then, "and as for the invisible spirits, I'll tell you what we'll do about them! Our Saviour has power to drive them out. Crowds of people came to him in those days bringing all who were possessed by demons – he drove them out with a word and healed all who were ill." "How wonderful!" said the Old Woman. "I'm so thankful to God for sending one able to do this." "If you believe in him," said Faithful, "he'll protect you from all that torments. The demons fear his name and flee from it. They cannot approach one who is under the protection of his name." Then Faithful stood up with Honey and all their friends, and they formed a circle round the Old Woman's hut. Faithful shouted out loud, "In our Saviour's name I command you to come out from the hut, and the spring, and from the whole forest, and never return." "Amen, Amen," said the others.

Then he spoke to the Old Woman. "Take refuge always in the name of our Saviour, and tell him anything that troubles you – he'll keep you safe." "I believe," she said, "in the one who appeared to me in the dream, but I really don't know how to pray or ask him for anything." "Didn't he speak to you in our own language?" Faithful replied, "Well, speak to him just like that, any time you like. He'll understand what you want and what you're asking. Speak to him as though you were still a child, just as a little girl talks to her mother. One day people brought little children to our Saviour, wanting him to lay his hands on them and bless them. His disciples tried to stop them but he said, 'Let the little children come to me. Don't try to stop them, because the kingdom of heaven is for this sort of people.' He also said, 'Anyone who doesn't want to enter the kingdom of heaven like a little child will never enter it.' Believe in him with all sincerity just as little children believe."

The Old Woman raised her eyes to heaven and said, "O Lord God, I thank you that you've restored to me the faith I had when I was small. You've come close to me to comfort my heart from all that frightens me. You've brought these people to me to help me with all that's too hard for me." They were all very happy to hear this, thanking God. Then they set out along the track once more, accompanied by the Old Woman, towards the place where the Hermit lived. As they went, they sang a

song to God: "In God alone I seek rest: in his presence I find safety. God alone is my rock, my tower and my place of refuge: I shall never be shaken."

14. At the Hermit's

They found the Hermit sitting beside his ruined house, as always, lost in thought. Having recognised them, he gazed at them some time before waving a greeting, then they all sat down beside him. He studied them all again and said, "Well, did you get to the end of the road?" "You were right," replied Amsiggel, "This road has no end! Nevertheless, we found what we were looking for along the way. And what about you? Are you still meditating? Have you discovered anything new?" "Here I am," replied the Hermit, "just where you left me!" Then turning to Faithful he enquired, "And what do you think about this world we live in? Doesn't it look like a terrible blight has fallen upon it? Isn't the whole world in decay like this ruin, afflicted by diseases and all kinds of disasters?" "You're right," replied Faithful. The Hermit regarded him seriously, then asked, "Was the world like this from the beginning, or has something happened to spoil it and bring it to this sad state?"

"What do you think?" replied Faithful, "What is the Creator of the world like?" "He's perfect," answered the Hermit, "He does nothing bad." "And what is the Creator able to do?" asked Faithful. "Obviously, he's able to do anything at all," replied the Hermit. "Quite right," said Faithful, "Now since the Lord God is perfectly good, he would want to create the world good. And as he's able to do anything at all, he would be perfectly able to create it good. Isn't that right?" "That's right," agreed the Hermit, "But since he created it good, what happened to spoil it?" "Well," Faithful asked, "What is it that spoils things now, worse than anything else?" The Hermit replied, "Surely nothing is worse than man who tyrannizes, wages war and kills others. But we also have disease and plague and earthquakes and famine, and man is not responsible for those: that's what I really can't understand. What is the terrible blight that's fallen upon the whole world?"

"Listen, all of you," said Faithful, "and I'll tell you what happened. When the Lord God created the world, he observed all he'd made and saw it was perfect. There was no disease and nothing that could kill: the world was good, just as God is good. He made a garden in it, and he created Adam and his wife, and he told them to look after it and to eat the fruit from all the trees... except the tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. 'The day you eat from that tree,' God told him, 'the blight of death will come upon you!' Then Satan appeared in the form of a snake and said to the woman, 'Oh no, there won't be any blight on you. God only said that to you because he's afraid you'll become like him with knowledge of good and evil.' The woman looked at the tree and liked what she saw. She really wanted to eat from it and she thought it would also be able to give them knowledge. She picked some fruit and ate it and gave some to her husband and he ate it too. Then God called to Adam saying, 'Have you eaten from the tree I told you not to eat from?' Adam replied, 'It was my wife who gave it to me.' God said to the woman, 'What's this you've done?' She said, 'The snake told me it would be a good thing to do.' Then the curse of God fell upon the snake so that mankind and the snake would always be enemies. Then God said to the woman, 'with sharp pains you'll give birth, and you'll be under your husband's authority.' And he said to Adam, 'You've eaten from the tree which I told you not to eat from. From now on there will be a curse on the earth because of you. With wearisome toil you'll get your food from it all the days of your life. The earth will bring forth brambles and thorns and you must find what you'll eat from amongst them. With the sweat of your face you'll get your bread until you yourself return to the earth, for from earth you were made and to earth you will return.'" Faithful paused, then he said, "That's how the world was spoiled on account of our father Adam, because he and his wife disobeyed the word of God. But it's not only they who have disobeyed his word. Their children right down to the present generation still disobey it. Disease and wearisome toil and death are inevitable for all of us, because we are so far from what God requires of us."

"What you say is absolutely right," agreed the Hermit, "And that's why there's this awful blight upon the world: because God has cursed it, and there is no longer any hope for it." "A curse is certainly upon it," said Faithful, "but God has not left us without hope, because he's sent us one who is able to remove the blight – one who can heal people and give them perfect health and eternal life. Listen, all of you, and I'll tell you about the one who brought the blessing of God from heaven to earth. One day he was going out of a town, accompanied by his disciples and many other people. A blind man was there, called Bartimaeus the son of Timaeus; he was sitting by the roadside, begging. Hearing who was going by, the blind man called out, 'Help me! Help me!' The people rebuked him and told him to be quiet, but he kept on shouting even louder, 'Help me!' Our Saviour stopped and

told them to call him. ‘Cheer up,’ they said to the blind man, ‘Get up – look he’s calling you to him!’ The blind man leapt to his feet, threw his cloak to aside and came to him. ‘What do you want me to do for you?’ asked our Saviour. ‘O Sir,’ replied the blind man, ‘I wish I could see!’ ‘Go then,’ he said, ‘You are healed because you believe.’ In that instant he could see, and he followed him along the road. And there were many others, blind and paralysed and dumb people and epileptics – he healed them all.”

“This one you call your Saviour,” said the Hermit, “it’s clear that he was full of the power of God so he could heal people from their illnesses. But the blight of death, that’s the biggest problem.” “Well,” replied Faithful, “one day he went to a town called Nain, accompanied by his disciples and many others. When he got to the town gate, some people were carrying out a young man who’d died. His mother was a widow and she had no one apart from him. Many of the townspeople had come with her. When he saw her, he felt very sorry for her. Then he said, ‘Don’t weep!’ and he went up to the bier and touched it. The men carrying it stopped. Then he said, ‘Young man, I command you, Get up!’ The dead person got up and started to speak. Our Saviour took him and gave him to his mother. The people were all awestruck. They praised God and said, ‘A great prophet has come to us. God has drawn near to help his people.’”

“That Saviour evidently had power to heal people,” observed the Hermit, “and power even to raise the dead. But there’s still something in this world which afflicts it more severely than sickness and death: it’s human conflict – quarrels and disputes on every hand!” “You’re right,” said Faithful, “People don’t know how to treat one another well or be patient with one another, nor how to help and do good to one another. Everyone is envious of what someone else has, reluctant to let others get what they’re entitled to.” “There’s no peace and quiet where people are to be found,” agreed the Hermit, “because every one is sticking up for himself. A continual blight this is upon the world! And it’s the worst thing of all!” “When Adam was created,” replied Faithful, “he was perfect, but when he disobeyed God, he became like this ruin. And it’s the same with us: we’re not at all like we were when God created us, for something has happened to spoil us just as it spoiled Adam.” “Now I can see what’s happened to us,” declared the Hermit, “We’ve disobeyed God’s word just as Adam did, and we no longer do what God requires of us.” “Correct,” said Faithful, “So what do we need now? We need someone who can rebuild this human house and remove the blight from our hearts. We need someone who can take away the sin that spoils us.” “Well, who can take away sin?” asked the Hermit.

Faithful replied, “One day many people came to see our Saviour, and the house was so crowded that there was no space at all inside or even outside the door. Four men came carrying a paralysed man, but they couldn’t take him in to where our Saviour was because of the crowd. So they climbed up on to the roof, removed a section above where he was, opened a hole and lowered the mat with the paralysed man lying on it. Our Saviour saw how much they believed in him. He said to the paralysed man, ‘Son, your sins are taken away!’ Some teachers of the law were there, thinking, ‘How can he speak like that? It’s blasphemy! Who can take away sins apart from God alone?’ But our Saviour knew in his spirit what was going through their minds, and he said to them, ‘Why do you have such thoughts? Which is easiest, for me say to this paralysed man: Your sins are taken away, or to say: Get up, pick up your mat and walk? But I’ll show you that I can take away sins.’ He turned then to the paralysed man saying, ‘Get up, pick up your mat and go home! He got up immediately, picked up his mat and went out in front of all them all. Everyone was astonished and praised God saying, ‘We’ve never seen anything like this.’”

“That’s an amazing thing!” said the Hermit, “This Saviour of yours had power to heal the sick, to raise the dead, and even to set people free from the bondage of their sins. He removed the blight from all of them – but how long ago did this happen?” “About two thousand years ago,” replied Faithful. “Ah well!” said the Hermit, “Your Saviour no longer lives in this world, and the world still suffers the blight!” “Listen carefully,” said Faithful, “to what I’m going to say. The first time, he came to show us he has power to remove the blight, but he’ll come a second time at the end of the world, and then he’ll remove it completely and make everything new.” “How we long for such a time!” sighed the Hermit, “when the world could be made new! As it is, the world is exceedingly sick and completely futile.” “The time is very near,” replied Faithful, “but God has not left us in the world just to sit in useless futility. The one who came to remove the blight has sent us to help people suffering from it. He himself went from place to place helping all who were sick and supporting all who were weak... and he wants us to do likewise.”

Then Faithful looked round at them all and asked, “Do you think we can find a way to do something positive for the world before it passes away? Can we add a little to the good in it and reduce a little of its evil? Look, who was it built this house? Who dug the well? Who planted the trees? Who cut down the thorns? Who cleared the stones from the earth? Didn’t our ancestors find

something useful to do in this world?" The Hermit replied, "They did all those things because they wanted to leave their children with more than they had themselves." "Yes, and that's what we must do too," agreed Faithful, "so we can leave our children more than we have ourselves."

At this, the Hermit stood up. "Now I understand," he said, "how my life can have a useful purpose. First of all, I'll come along with you and help all the people we meet. Then I'll return to rebuild my house." "God bless you!" they all cried. Then Amsiggel spoke up: "We'll no longer call you the Hermit (Master of the Ruin): We'll call you the householder (Master of the New House)!" Then Faithful broke into song with a Psalm: "Sing praise to God, O all mankind! Glorify him, all who live the world! How great is his steadfast love towards us! He'll never abandon us in this world or the next!" They all took up the words, singing happily together.

15. At the Woodcutter's

Then they all got up, ready to continue their journey through the forest. As they went, Amsiggel told them the Woodcutter's ideas: "He looks at the stars and sees in them the glory of their Creator. He looks at the hot sun and the rushing river and sees in them his power. He looks at the flowers of the forest and sees that God appreciates beauty. He looks at the insects of the earth and sees they were made with great wisdom. But he has the idea that our Creator has abandoned us and no longer takes any notice of us." They kept walking until eventually they reached the Woodcutter's house. Amsiggel called out to him, but no one answered! He knocked on the door, but there was no one there! As they sat down to rest a boy walked through the trees, so they asked him, "Have you seen the Woodcutter?" "No," he replied. Amsiggel enquired, "Will he be away all day, or is he coming back sometime?" "Only he knows his own business!" replied the boy. No sooner had he said this than they heard footsteps coming through the trees, and the Woodcutter appeared.

He was delighted, and having exchanged warm greetings with Amsiggel and Tazzwit he said, "I recognized your voice in the distance when you called, and as soon as I heard it I came to welcome you and your companions. Come on all of you into the house." He brought some figs and grapes, and when they had all sat down, Faithful said, "This Woodcutter has shown us something very important. He heard Amsiggel's voice and came straightaway, without delaying a moment, because Amsiggel is a special friend. And he invited us in too because we're Amsiggel's companions. He looked round at them all, then said: "That's what God does. Whenever we call to him in our Saviour's name, he hears us and welcomes us straightaway, because the one who brought us to him is specially dear to him."

"I know there is a Creator who made mankind," said the Woodcutter, "but he's far away now, in the highest heaven, and he's left us here below in this world where each of us must stick up for himself." Faithful took him by the hand. "Look at the birds in the sky," he said, "They don't plough or reap or gather the harvest into barns, but their Creator gives them all they need. And look at the flowers of the forest: they're dressed better than Solomon in the majesty of his kingdom. That's because a father will never leave his children to fend for themselves: he'll look after them and see to all their needs. If we ourselves do that much for our own offspring, won't our Father in heaven do more for us than we do for our own children?" Then Faithful said to him, "God wants us always to tell him about our concerns and our needs. His word says, 'Ask of God and he'll give to you; seek from him and you'll find; knock on his door and he'll open it to you.'"

The Woodcutter was doubtful. "Do you think God really looks after us like a father who loves his children?" he said, "But wouldn't someone who cares for his children protect them from all that makes them cry?" "That's exactly what's happened," replied Faithful, "Our Saviour came and took away all that frightens and intimidates us. He's filled our hearts with peace and hope." "We really thank God for that," said Amsiggel, and all the others said, "Amen! Amen!" The Woodcutter was surprised: "Do you all believe in this Saviour?" he asked. The Hermit said, "He came to remove the terrible blight from this world." The Old Woman said, "He's brought us into the safe refuge." The Nomad said, "He's shown us how to obtain God's favour." The new Hamu said, "He's changed bad people into good in the sight of God and man." The Blacksmith said, "He's paid the debt we owed." His brother said, "He's made peace between us and God so we need not fear the Day of Judgment."

"Now we have all these things, just as our brothers have said," affirmed Faithful, "but in a future time there will be more than this, because God's wisdom and power that made this world will make a new world after it. This old world will be annihilated with fire, and another will be formed, full of all that's good and beautiful. Nowadays people call our Saviour 'Lord of the Hour' because he's going to return at the end of the age and raise the dead and take them into new life. He himself said, 'Don't be surprised at this, because the hour will come when all who are in the graves will hear my voice, and

then they will come forth.' He'll separate those who believe in him from everyone else, and take those who are his to share in the life which is much better than the life of this world."

"But how will those who've died get up out of the ground?" asked the Woodcutter, "Doesn't the body return to dust? So how will it get up?" "Well, consider what happens to charcoal," replied Faithful, "This piece of charcoal was once a stick of wood. Pick it up and tap it, and it disintegrates. But if you bury this charcoal in the ground, it will never rot or spoil. Leave it for five years, summer and winter, and it will remain exactly the same. Now, tell me, what has entered into the charcoal to make it imperishable?" "Fire has gone into it," replied the Woodcutter, "and changed it into charcoal." "But what is fire?" asked Faithful, "We know fire destroys all it touches, yet it has made this piece of wood indestructible. This is one of the wonders of the Lord God. And if he can do such a thing in this Age of the Blight, won't he be able to do much more when he makes all things new? He'll change this weak body that dies into a strong body that lasts forever. He'll transform this earthly body into a body fit for heaven."

"What you've said is true," agreed the Woodcutter, "because I've seen it in the creatures of the forest. Like the tadpole that's black and swims in the water, then gets bigger and grows legs and becomes a green frog that jumps on dry land. Or like a caterpillar with many legs that eats leaves of grass, and then becomes a butterfly that drinks from flowers and flies in the sky. If God is able to change the body of the insects, it won't be difficult for him to change our human bodies too." Then the Woodcutter added, "All this can be clearly seen by one who looks, but if you'd not come I would never have known its meaning." "We should thank God," said Faithful, "because he's shown us the truth as it really is."

So they all raised their voices and sang, "Praise God because he's good: he always acts with steadfast love." They spent some days with the Woodcutter, then set out again on the track leading to the village of Amsiggel and Tazzwit. He went with them.

16. At the Village

Emerging from the forest, they walked on between some fields. They could see how dry the earth was, cracked all over, badly needing rain. As the village came nearer, they were chatting among themselves – all except Tazzwit who was very quiet. She came beside Honey. "Do my brother and I really have to return to our village?" she said, "Can't we go back and stay with you? All that awaits us here is trouble!" "Don't worry, Tazzwit," she replied, "With us is the one who is able to protect you from all that causes trouble."

A little further on Tazzwit spoke to her again. "Poor thing!" she said, "I feel very sorry for the Old Woman. Her husband sent her away and her children are taken from her, and now she's all alone in the forest with no one to look after her." "We who are called the people of Peace," said Honey, "divorce is not allowed among us. On the wedding day, the bridegroom and bride make a covenant promising always to be loyal to one another and patient with one another." "That's amazing!" said Tazzwit. "In the beginning," continued Honey, "God created one man and gave him one woman – not two or four – so they could help one another through all the bad times and rejoice together in all the good times. As for the Old Woman, we don't yet know what will come to pass for her or exactly how God will bless her, but it says in his word, 'Those who love God, whom he has called as he planned, we know he does them good in all that happens to them.' I believe this promise: there's no doubt at all, he'll do her good!"

As they continued, Amsiggel began to think about his enemy Igider, the one who had tormented him in the past. As these thoughts went through his head it began to rain; they took shelter under a terebinth tree. "What's upsetting you, Amsiggel?" asked Faithful. "I've remembered an enemy I have in this place," he said, "and I don't know what to do about him." They fell silent, watching the rain fall. Then Faithful said to him, "See these fields, how dry the soil is. The villagers are badly in need of water, and at this very moment God has sent relief to them, as though we ourselves had brought them blessing from heaven. This is what God does in his kindness, so what do you think, Amsiggel? Shouldn't we also do good to those who've treated us badly? Our Saviour said, 'Be kind to your enemies and ask God to have mercy on those who mistreat you – in this way, you'll be like God who is in heaven.'" Faithful looked at him and said, "O Amsiggel, we don't yet know what God's going to do in your village!"

When the rain stopped, they set out again along the track. After walking about a half an hour, they reached the village: it was evening time. They were very surprised to find the whole village silent as though it were deserted – no one at all in the fields or in the shop doorway. When they got to the

house of Amsiggel and Tazzwit they found some men standing at the door. Amsiggel asked them, "What's going on?" "There's sickness in the whole village," they replied, "Some have died and some are close to death. Your grandfather, poor man, is inside and having a hard time of it." Amsiggel asked them about his father: "Has he come back or is he still in town?" "His news is not at all what you want to hear," they replied, "He's in jail."

Amsiggel and Tazzwit went in to see the old man. Opening his eyes he looked at them, and they went over to him. The old man whispered, "If only she'd come back for me to see her before I go! Every one of us pays the price for what he's done!" "I don't understand what you mean Grandad," said Amsiggel. Tazzwit was crying. Then they heard a sound in the doorway of the room and the Old Woman came in carrying a glass. She gave it to Tazzwit saying, "Give him to drink." Amsiggel and Tazzwit were very surprised; they gave it to the old man. He took the glass and drank the medicine, then closed his eyes and drifted off into sleep. They left the room then, all weeping and not knowing if he would live or die.

Then Faithful gathered them all together. "It's getting late," he said "Show us the way to a spring, because we won't be drawing water from this well!" They went then and brought water from the spring, and after about an hour night fell. They all gathered in the courtyard of the house and prayed: "O God our Lord, you created the world and all that's in it. We know you are able to heal the old man, and we ask you to reveal your wisdom and power and kindness to the people of this village and restore its health, in our Saviour's name." They all said, "Amen."

An hour passed and everyone was overcome by sleep, apart from Faithful and Amsiggel who kept watch. About three hours later the old man woke up asking for something to drink; they gave it to him. Next morning, when they all awoke, the old man was still fast asleep. The neighbours came in with some porridge, and Faithful asked them, "Is it just this village that's sick, or other villages too?" "Just us," they replied, "It looks as though God is punishing us for our misdeeds, because the other villages are perfectly alright." Then Faithful and Amsiggel went to look at the well. There was nothing particular to see, but it did have rather an unpleasant smell. Faithful climbed down till he reached the water, then came up and said to Amsiggel, "It's full of fish!"

They went back to the house to call their companions. When they got there they found the old man sitting up in bed, his fever gone. Seeing them he said, "Come all of you: I want to tell you something!" They gathered round him, and he said, "I've done something I'm ashamed of. I paid attention to the malicious lies of some women who came between me and my wife." Then he took the Old Woman by the hand and said, "This blessed woman has saved my life. I treated her very badly, and she has treated me very well. I drove her out of the house, and she has driven the fever out of me! Tell me now, all of you, what I must do." They were silent, then Faithful spoke up. "Take her," he said kindly, "as God wishes. She is your wife and it is written, 'What God has united, let not man divide.'" This saying pleased them all, and then Amsiggel said, "We've seen today that God is able to bring together those who are separated." The Woodcutter said, "He's able to meet all our needs!" The Hermit said, "He's able to rebuild whatever is ruined!" The Nomad said, "He's able to rescue us from any difficulty!" Hamu the New said, "He's able to change evil to good!" The Blacksmith said, "He's able to free us from us all we're ashamed of!" Then, looking round at them all, the old woman said, "He's able to bring us into perfect security! In my dream he told me, 'In the life of this world, you'll see the goodness of God.' And now I've clearly seen it."

They were still talking when a man came in. Tazzwit let out a shriek. "Daddy!" she said. It was the father of Amsiggel and Tazzwit, the son of the old man and woman. They ran to him, all talking and asking questions at the same time and thanking God. He asked for quiet so he could tell them what had happened. "One day," said, "I asked the boss to pay me. He refused, so I got into a fight with him, and they took me to jail. But I thank God for all that this, because in jail I met two men. I asked them what they'd done and they told me they'd done nothing wrong. Only one thing stood against them: they prayed to God in the name of Christ. I said to them, 'It's no offence to pray!' Those who examined their case found they'd broken no law, and so released them straightaway. But they talked with me about Christ, saying that God had sent him to make a covenant of peace between himself and mankind. Their words impressed me. I asked them where they'd heard about these things, and they told me there are many in our country who believe as they do."

When they all heard this, they were filled with joy and thanked God. Then Faithful stood up, seized the hand of the father of Amsiggel and Tazzwit and said to him, "We've seen today that our saviour spoke the truth when he said, 'I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will have the light of life and will never walk in darkness.'" Their father was amazed. Looking round at them, he asked, "Do you all believe in Christ too?" "The people of our village," replied Faithful, "took the way of Christ long ago." At this, he was even more astonished. "Did the people of olden days believe in

Christ?" he asked. "Many of them were Christians," replied Faithful, "and there were great scholars among them. They were people of our country and they are famous to this day all over the world." "They left us an ancient book," he added, "and in it is written a record of what Christ did and said." Their father asked him, "Do you still have that book?" "Yes, we still have it," replied Faithful, "And though it's many years old, there's not a single page missing." "Do you all read it?" he asked. "Each of us takes from it what he needs," replied Faithful, "and writes it down in order to memorize it and apply it to his life." Hearing this, they were all very glad and amazed at what God had done.

17. Conversation in the Village

After that they went to the well; they started scooping out the fish with buckets, pouring the water on to a bit of waste ground. For five days they kept up this work until they had cleaned out the well. Then they put a concoction down it to kill whatever was left.

At that moment some people came by, dragging a youth all tied up with cords. Amsiggel recognized it was Igider. "What's he done?" asked Amsiggel. "This wretch," they replied, "stole our cow. And last week he stole some barley from the hamlet of Ayt-Sukka. And yesterday he stole Addi's shoulder-bag from the vegetable patch. And it was him who took the money box from the shop that time when the villagers chased you away!" "Let me have a word with him please," replied Amsiggel. They stopped in the road and Amsiggel said to him, "Igider, is it true you've done all this?" "I'm in a mess!" he replied, "This disease has killed my father and mother, and my little brothers and sisters have no one but me. And now they're taking me off to the magistrate!" "Don't worry about them at all, Igider!" replied Amsiggel, "We'll look after them till you come back." "Why is it, Amsiggel," he said, "that you want to do me good when I've only ever done you harm?" "I'll tell you why," he replied, "and you'll be glad too and come to know the Way of Peace."

That night Amsiggel had a dream. In his dream he saw an angel standing in the room where the old man slept. The angel gave him a spade and showed him a place to dig in the corner of that room. He dug and dug until he struck something hard, then kept on digging until a large wooden box appeared. He opened the box, and found it full of gold and silver. When he woke next morning, he went and told his grandfather about his dream. The old man looked at him and said, "Well, the time has come for me to deliver what the Lord God left in my safe keeping. Fetch the spade!" Amsiggel began to dig up the floor in the corner till he came to something hard. As he removed the earth a box appeared just like the one he'd seen in his dream. When they opened it, they found it full of bracelets and brooches of gold and silver. Amsiggel asked, "Where did all these riches come from, Grandad?" "My own father was a goldsmith," replied the old man, "in the service of the king. He left all this to me saying 'Hide this in safekeeping until you find someone able to make peace between us and God and between man and his neighbours and between man and himself.' And God has shown us that now the time of this peace has come." "But what shall we do with these goods, Grandad?" asked Amsiggel. "We'll do good with them!" he replied, "Get started, dear lad, and build a school where children can find an answer to all their questions, build a clinic where the sick can be healed, build a workshop where the poor can earn their living, and so you'll give new life and solid hope to the whole village."

"O Grandad!" exclaimed Amsiggel, "You saw all of this from afar and you understood and knew it all before it happened!" "I don't know anything," replied the old man, "but I always lived in hope, from the moment when a boy was born amidst thunder and lightning with a smile on his face. That night I said, 'A storm brought us this child, but he'll outlive the storm. Born in darkness, he'll lead us into light; born amidst thunder and lightning, he'll bring us peace from all that beats down on us.' And now, Amsiggel, you've done all I imagined, seeing that you've discovered the Way of Peace." "Do you believe, Grandad," asked Amsiggel, "in our Saviour?" "I've seen with my own eyes," he replied, "one who can turn infamy into honour, conflict into peace, tears into joy, wickedness into goodness, enemies into dear friends. I've observed the miracles he's done among us: what more do I need in order to believe in him? There's no one else able to make peace between man and God, between man and his neighbour, or between man and himself, apart from him alone." Then the old man said, "Now I've done what was decreed for me, having delivered what God put in my safekeeping. Long enough I've spent in this world, and now I would enter into the sure and everlasting place. I trust the one I've believed in, that he will guard what I've placed in his safekeeping until the Last Day." Amsiggel wept, but the old man said, "Don't weep, my child. I'm leaving you in peace and comfort till we meet again in heaven." No sooner had he said this than his spirit departed.

The Old Woman continued living with Amsiggel and his sister. She cooked, brought the water, washed the clothes, and looked after both them and their guests along with the brothers and sisters of

Igider. Everyone helped with the work of building according to what the old man had said. Their father went back to town and sent a letter telling about his work and about some Christians he met with there.

Several months went by, and the guests decided to return, each to his own home – all except the Old Woman who stayed there. Every two months they came back to see Amsiggel and Tazzwit, and they all gathered together to praise God, to read from his word and to encourage one another. Day by day Amsiggel taught in the school and the children asked him about everything they didn't know, and he told them all about the knowledge of the world and of heaven from the books which the People of Peace brought him. Tazzwit worked in the clinic, dispensing the Old Woman's remedies to anyone who was ill. Others laboured in the workshop, making woollen blankets, leather sandals and wooden utensils and furniture. Everything they produced was strong and well-made, and they sold it in the market. Their goods were very popular and people said, "This is well-made and very strong – it's the work of Amsiggel's People."

Some months passed and Amsiggel married Honey. They made a firm covenant always to help one another loyally and patiently. When Igider was let out of prison, he too embarked on the Way of Peace, regretting all the wrong he'd done in the past. Tazzwit saw how much he'd changed as he helped everyone wanting to learn a new craft. Eventually he asked to marry Tazzwit, and they too made a firm covenant together.

And thus it was that the village was filled with peace and the blessing of God. Many came to see what Amsiggel's People did, and many believed in those days and took the news to other villages. And so the peace of God spread throughout our land and reached every place. They sang a song saying, "O Lord God, your name is great in all the world," and "The earth is God's and all that exists in it; the world is God's and all who live in it."

18. Conversation with Bubker

The months and the years passed by, and boys and girls were born to Amsiggel and Honey. One day he received a visit from Ayt-Zawit Bubker who was the chief leader of the mosque in the town. Amsiggel shook hands with him in friendly fashion and invited him into the house "We've heard, Mr Bubker," he said, "that you're a good man and always try to please God." "May God lengthen your life, Amsiggel," replied Bubker, "We too have heard that you're good people and kind to everyone." Then Bubker continued: "Forgive me, Amsiggel, if I ask you about what you believe and how you worship God." "Thank you, Mr Bubker," replied Amsiggel, "I'll tell you what I know."

They sat down and Honey brought them mint tea. Bubker raised his glass. "In the name of God!" he said. "In the name of God!" Amsiggel replied. Bubker was pleased; he sipped and said, "Very good tea you have in these parts! And I notice you said 'In the name of God!' like we do." "Well," replied Amsiggel, "Everything we do, Mr Bubker, we do in the name of God. Without his help we could do nothing at all! He it is who gives us health and intelligence and everything we possess." Bubker was pleased with this, and they talked on together about the wisdom and love of God.

Then Bubker asked him, "Tell me, brother Amsiggel, how do you pray?" "I'll tell you what our prayer is like," replied Amsiggel, "Of course, a person must first of all prepare himself, knowing that he's going to speak to the Creator of the heavens and the earth. But tell me what you think, Mr Bubker. Which is hardest: to wash our hands, or to wash our heart?" Bubker looked at him a moment then said, "It's our heart which is hardest to wash." Amsiggel continued, "Whenever we wish to pray to God, we first search our hearts to see if there's anything to shame us. Then we pray in the name of Christ who came to purify us from all evil."

"Do you pray in Arabic?" asked Bubker. Amsiggel replied, "God knows everything that can be said, and he understands every language. We speak to him in Tashelhayt." "What do you say in your prayer?" asked Bubker. "We praise God," replied Amsiggel, "because he created the world and everything in it. And we thank him for his mercy and love, and for all the good things he does for us every day. We ask him to guide us and strengthen us in the Way of Goodness, and then we ask him for anything we might need. We ask him on behalf of any neighbours who might be ill; we ask him to bless our friends and our enemies."

"That's all very good, Amsiggel!" said Bubker, "Would you like to show me the words you say when you pray?" "One day," replied Amsiggel, "the people asked Christ to show them how to pray, and he said to them, 'Pray like this and say to God: Our Father who is in heaven, may there be great honour to your name! May your kingdom come! May there be what pleases you in the world, as there is in heaven! Give us today the bread we need for today! Forgive us for the evil we do, just as we

forgive those who do us evil! Keep far away from us everything that would entice us to do evil! Rescue us from the devil!” When Amsiggel had said this, Bubker raised his eyes to heaven and said, “Amen O Lord God, Amen!”

Then Bubker asked him, “How many times do you pray each day?” “Hours of prayer aren’t prescribed for us, Bubker,” he replied, “but we pray whenever we want. We praise God when we get up in the morning; and whenever food is set before us we thank him for that blessing. I pray with my children before each of us goes off to work. I pray along the road and in the workplace. Then I pray too with any of my friends who come to see me, and I pray with my wife before I sleep.”

Then Bubker asked him, “Do all the people of your village follow this way, my brother? Do they all do like you?” “There are those who’ve chosen this way, and there are those who’ve chosen other ways. There’s the Jew, Yaaqub Ben Isshaq – he prays his prayers – and there’s the Arab, Si Mhammed Shrif – he also prays his prayers – and there are others too.” “But don’t you have any conflict with one another?” asked Bubker. Amsiggel smiled. “Oh no,” he said, “we are brothers. Thank God, we all live in peace together. They respect us and we respect them; they help us and we help them.” “But what about your children,” he asked, “Don’t they get into fights with one another?” “Not at all,” replied Amsiggel, “They all talk and play and have a happy time together.” “But surely it’s necessary for people to be all the same,” insisted Bubker, “if they are to avoid falling out with one another!” “Look at the birds pecking in the fields,” replied Amsiggel, “Some of them run and some of them hop, but they don’t quarrel about the best way to get along. They all live happily together. If there’s respect and courtesy among us, we’ll all be at peace.”

“God be praised for you, Amsiggel!” declared Bubker, “Forgive me if I ask you about another thing.” “No problem at all!” he replied, “Just ask me.” “Some people,” he said, “maintain that you have changed the Gospel which Christ brought.” Amsiggel looked at him a moment, then said, “What would you say, Mr Bubker? Would the disciples of a prophet really be able to change his words for other words? Wouldn’t his words be more precious to them than their own lives? For he would have entrusted what he said into their safekeeping. Christ himself said, ‘The heavens and the earth will disappear, but my words will never disappear.’ When Christ was living in this world, he went everywhere doing good. Crowds of people came to him in those days and they saw what he did and heard what he said. Would they all be able to forget his words and his deeds? Would they accept some words that were different from the words they’d heard?” “No,” agreed Bubker, “They would not accept them.” “And when the Gospel of Christ was written down,” continued Amsiggel, “it was taken to every corner of the world. Even if they’d wanted to change his word, would they have been able to change what was written in all those books in every place and make them all identical so they all said exactly the same thing throughout the whole world?” “No,” agreed Bubker, “They could never have managed that.” “Well then, Mr Bubker,” concluded Amsiggel, “this Gospel which we have is the true Gospel. It has never been changed, for God has guarded it, and he would not allow people to cast aside the word of his command to them.”

Then Bubker said, “When I studied the history of our land, I was surprised at how peaceable the early Christians were. They didn’t get weapons or fight against other people. They didn’t try to defeat others or convert them by force. They just spoke to people about the way of Christ and helped them with the problems of daily life until their message had spread throughout the whole world.” “You’re right, Mr Bubker,” said Amsiggel, “Christ never took a weapon or stirred up a fight. He commanded his disciples to be peacemakers, and then he sent them out to fill the world with the loving kindness of heaven. The meaning of the word Gospel is ‘good news’ and the Gospel shows us how to do good to everyone with the joy that is real and lasts for ever.”

“I have one more question,” said Bubker, “Why do those who believe in Christ call him the son of God? What can be the meaning of that word? – because God does not get married or have children!” “You’re quite right, my brother Bubker,” replied Amsiggel, “God isn’t like man: he doesn’t get married or have children. This metaphor isn’t as you’ve understood it. Do you know how Christ was born?” “We all know that,” replied Bubker. Amsiggel continued, “God sent the angel Gabriel to a girl called Mary, and the angel said to her, ‘You’ll become pregnant and give birth to a boy!’ Mary asked him, ‘How can that happen to me? I haven’t got a husband.’ He told her, ‘The Spirit of God will come down on you and the power of God will cover you. That’s why we’ll call the special boy who’ll be born to you the Son of God’” “What you say is correct,” said Bubker, “We know that Christ was born through the Spirit and power of God. That’s no different from what we say.”

Then Amsiggel said, “But one born from the womb of a virgin without a man would not be like other people, would he!” “We know,” replied Bubker, “that Christ did miracles more than any other prophet.” “What you say is right, my brother Bubker” agreed Amsiggel, “He made the blind to see, the paralysed to walk, the lepers to be clean, the deaf to hear and the dead to rise. Vast numbers of people

believed in him because the spiritual power of God was seen in him more than in all the prophets of past times. He could do all this because he wasn't like us. His body was a human body, but the spirit in him was the spirit that descended upon him in his mother's womb. His appearance was that of a man, but the power in him was the power of heaven."

Amsiggel continued, "That's why Christ never did anything evil or blameworthy." "We know," Bubker replied, "that each of the prophets asked for God's forgiveness, just as we do ourselves." "You're right, Bubker," agreed Amsiggel, "One of them asked God to forgive him as many as seventy times. But Christ never asked for forgiveness, not even once. One day he asked the people, 'Which of you can prove me guilty of a sin?' No one replied – there was nothing they could say. Another day they testified concerning him, 'He never did any sin!' All this goes to show that he wasn't like other people." "Now I understand," said Bubker, "why you call him the son of God. Firstly, because he was born through the spirit of God. And secondly because in him was the power of God." "You're right, my brother Bubker!" agreed Amsiggel, "but there's still a third reason – because God appointed him to do something that the prophets could not do. He sent the one who was blameless to bear the blame of others. He sent the one who wasn't liable to the judgment of death so that he could die in our place."

Bubker thought about this, then said, "I understand what you're saying Amsiggel, but some of us argue that Christ did not die: the Jews just thought they'd killed him but in fact it was someone else." "If you permit, my brother Bubker," replied Amsiggel, "I'll show you what Christ himself said before the Jews captured him. He said, 'We'll go to Jerusalem and they'll deliver me into the hands of the Jewish leaders. They'll condemn me to death. They'll mock me, spit on me, beat me and kill me. But on the third day I'll rise from the dead.' Christ knew what would happen to him, and he told them three times so they'd not forget it. When the Jews and Romans agreed together to kill him, they all knew that the one in their hands was the son of Mary. And when they killed him, his mother and brothers and his disciples were standing beside him. They knew very well that it was him. And when he rose from the dead, he spoke with them and ate with them, and showed them the marks which the nails had left in his hands and feet. How could one stand before his mother and brothers and friends without them recognising who he was?"

Then Bubker asked, "But would God leave a prophet to die like a thief or a murderer?" "God intended this from the beginning," replied Amsiggel, "In fact, all this was recorded in the writings of the prophets long before. God had shown them that the Christ would die because, through the blood of Christ, he wanted to make a new covenant between himself and mankind. And when he died Christ bore the judgment which the world deserved. He suffered the Torments of the Grave so that we would not have to suffer them. He himself said, 'This is the truth. It's the truth I'm going to tell you. If a grain of wheat does not fall into the ground and die, it will remain a single grain. But if it dies, it will produce a great harvest.' He did not remain a single one, for he rose on the third day, just as he'd told his disciples he would. Then God lifted him up to heaven where he will be until the end of the world. Then he'll come back to gather together all who believe in him, and take them with him into eternal life. And so he'll have a great harvest."

Then Amsiggel continued: "Look brother, this is what it's like. When a strong wind blows, it uproots the dry grass from the surface of the earth. The words of the prophets are like a strong wind: they sweep away the primitive ignorance of mankind. But the earth needs more than wind that uproots the dry grass. It needs rain for new grass to grow. Man is not just in need of prophets bringing commands and obligations. He also needs some way of being filled with the spiritual power of heaven and the strength of God. Christ showed us that he is able to do all this for us. He has granted us to be filled with the spirit of heaven which helps us continually. His spirit impels us, strengthens us and give us great joy. He fills us with his wisdom and his kindness, and guides us in all we do. And we thank him greatly for this blessing he has given to us."

Bubker continued thinking about all this. Then he said, "Thank you Amsiggel. I don't want to be one of those who oppose what they don't understand. Now I know what your beliefs are. If people would only ask, they would not say foolish things about you all." Then Amsiggel said, "It's a great pleasure, Bubker, to see such patience and love between us. We've spent a good time together." Then Bubker rose, hugged Amsiggel and they shook hands. Amsiggel accompanied him as far as the road. Then he went back home and called to Honey so they could pray together and ask God to bless their friend Ayt-Zawit Bubker.