

# Savitri and Satyavan

## **Preface**

This story is word for word from the book, “Stories from the Mahabharata”, by Swami Sivananda. This book is published by The Divine Life Society. The ISB number is 81-7052-026-6 ES 168 and is the fifth edition printed in 2007. The story of Savitri is on pages 116 to 128. There are many authors who have written about Savitri and I have read many of them. Out of all the ones I have read, the written by Swami Shivananda seemed complete and written in a language that is easily understandable. The words he has used are filled with bhav and convey the message of 1) reverence for self and others, 2) selfless love, 3) unwavering determination 4) individual can bring about a change and 5) sacrifice for the greater good of all.

## **The Epic**

The story of Savitri, the ideal wife, is told by sage Markandeya to Yudhishtira.

There lived in the Madra country, a pious, exceedingly virtuous and high-souled king, called Asvapati. He was firm in promise and truthful. He was ever engaged in sacrifices. He had subdued his senses and devoted himself to the welfare of all living beings.

He had no offspring and so became sorrowful. In order to be blessed with a child, he observed rigid vows and austerities. He offered daily ten thousand oblations to the Goddess Savitri and partook of moderate food only at midnight. He observed all the penances for eighteen years and at the end of the period, the Goddess Savitri was pleased with him. She said, “O Asvapati, king of the Madra country, choose a boon whatever you desire.”

*Asvapati:* O Goddess! May many sons worthy of my race be born to me. I choose this as my boon.

*Goddess Savitri:* O king! I know your desires before hand. I spoke to Brahma. You will soon have a glorious daughter through His grace. I tell you this at His command. You need not, therefore, make any reply.

After conferring this boon, the Goddess vanished. In due course of time, Asvapati’s wife, princess malavi, gave birth to a lotus-eyed daughter. As the goddess Savitri gave the king this daughter, on account of his daily offering her oblations, both the father and the Brahmins named her ‘Savitri’. In course of time the girl attained maidenhood.

Savitri was exceedingly beautiful. She was shining with divine splendour. People thought that she was a divine being who had come down to Earth. Therefore none thought himself equal to marry her. The king became anxious.

*The king:* Beloved Savitri! This is the proper time for giving you in marriage but none asks me for your hand. Go and choose yourself a worthy husband.

Thereupon Savitri made prostrations to her father and carried out his command. She visited all the holy places and the hermitages with the ministers and returned to her father’s place. Savitri saw her father seated along with sage Narada. She bowed down with her head at the feet of both.

*Narada:* O king! Where has your daughter been? Where does she come from? Why have you not given her in marriage?

*Asvapati:* She was sent abroad for this very purpose and she has returned. Listen to her, O divine sage, and hear who has been chosen by her as her husband.

Urged by her father to relate everything in detail, she said thus, “There was in Salva a pious Kshatriya king, Dyumatsena by name, who lost his eyes. When that wise monarch, whose son was yet a boy, became blind, his kingdom was seized by his old enemy who lived in the vicinity. Dyumatsena accompanied by his wife and the boy went to the forest. He began to practice asceticism. His son, Satyavan, born in the city and brought up in the hermitage has been chosen by me, with all my heart, as my worthy husband.”

*Narada:* The son of Dyumatsena is brilliant like the Sun, wise as Brihaspati, heroic as Indra, forgiving as the Earth. He is equal to Rantideva in charity. He is devoted to the Brahmanas and truthful as king Sibi. He is equal to Yayati in generosity. He is as lovely to look at as the full moon. He is as beautiful as either of the twin Asvins.

*Asvapati:* O adorable Rishi! You have described his noble qualities. Now tell me of his defects, if there be any.

*Narada:* He had only one defect and no other. Satyavan, who has only a short span of life in store for him, will, within a year from this day, breathe his last.

The king: O beautiful Savitri, go and seek another for your husband. The divine Narada tells me that within a year Satyavan will pass away.

*Savitri:* Whether his life be long or short, whether he be gifted with good qualities or destitute of them, I have once for all chosen him as my husband. I will not certainly select any other a second time.

*Narada:* O king! Your daughter is firm in her resolve. She cannot be made, in any way, to swerve from her righteous path. The noble qualities that are present in Satyavan are lacking in any other person. Therefore, I wish that your daughter be given in marriage now to Satyavan only. May you all be happy!

*The king:* The words of your pious self are wise, true and should never be dishonoured. You are my preceptor. I will act as directed by you.

Then Narada ascended the sky and reached heaven. The king began to make preparation for the marriage of his daughter. He went to the Medhya forest with his daughter and the priests on an auspicious day and reached the hermitage of Dyumatsena. There he saw that highly wise and old king seated on a mat of Kusha under a Sala tree.

The king Asvapati paid his respects to that royal sage and introduced himself to him. The king Dyumatsena offered the monarch Asvapati a seat and Arghya, etc., and asked what brought him there.

*Asvapati:* O royal sage! This fair damsel Savitri is my daughter. Please accept her as your daughter-in-law.

*Dyumatsena:* Exiled from our kingdom, we have taken to forest life. We live the life of ascetics and practice virtue with subdued senses and passions. Therefore, how will your delicate daughter endure the hardships of forest life in a hermitage?

*Asvapati:* Neither happiness nor misery have any permanence. My daughter and myself are aware of this. I have come to you. O king, with a firm resolve. Do not say ‘nay’ to me. You are my equal.

*Dyumatsena:* Long ago, I entertained a desire of forming an alliance with you. But I am now destitute. Therefore I hesitate. Let what I then desired be accomplished this very day. You are a welcome guest to me.

Then the two monarchs invited all the Brahmanas dwelling in the hermitages and celebrated marriage with the prescribed rites. Having given away his daughter in marriage with suitable presents, Asvapati left for his own place with contentment.

Satyavan was extremely delighted as he had for wife a woman endowed with all noble qualities. Savitri also was equally glad as she had Satyavan for her husband whom she had desired in her heart.

She removed all her ornaments and put on bark-dress and red-coloured cloth. She pleased everyone by her good services – her mother-in-law by ministering to her physical comforts, helping her in her age and all other acts of service; her father-in-law by worshipping him as a god, serving him with reverence and also by restraint of speech in his presence. She delighted her husband by agreeable words, sweet disposition and attending to his wants.

Savitri counted each day as it passed away because the words of Narada were always present in her mind. On a particular day, she ascertained by calculation that her husband's death would take place on the fourth day thereafter. She observed the Triratna (three-night) fast and remained without food both day and night. The father-in-law of Savitri came to know of her vow and became very anxious.

*Dyumatsena:* Princess! It is very difficult to observe the vow you have taken, because it is extremely hard to fast continuously for three nights.

*Savitri:* O venerable sire! You need not be sorry. I will be able to complete the vow. I have undertaken this vow with a very firm resolve. Determination is the sole cause of success in every undertaking.

*Dyumatsena:* O Savitri! I cannot ask you to break your vow. Men, like us, should rather encourage you to complete it. May you fulfil your vow!

On the fourth day Savitri said to herself, "Today in that day." In the early morning she performed her worship and offered oblations to the blazing fire. She then bowed down to all the Brahmanas, elders, her mother-in-law, and father-in-law, one after the other and stood humbly before them with folded hands.

All the ascetics pronounced for the welfare of Savitri and the benediction that she might never be a widow. Then her mother-in-law and father-in-law said: "You have fulfilled the vow. The time for breaking the fast has come. Do what you think proper." Savitri said, "I will take food only when the Sun sets."

While Savitri was thus talking about the breaking of her fast, Satyavan was starting for the forest with an axe on his shoulder. Thereupon Savitri said to her husband, "You should not go alone. I will go with you. I dare not let you go alone today."

*Satyavan:* My dear, you have never visited the forest before. The path is rugged. You must be exhausted and weak by the observance of the fast. How will you be able to walk?

*Savitri:* I do not at all feel exhausted on account of the fast. There is no exertion in this. Moreover, I am very eager to go with you today. Pray, do not therefore prevent me.

*Satyavan:* As you are eager to go with me, I will fulfill your desire. But take the permission of my parents first.

Savitri who had fulfilled a great vow made obeisance to her mother-in-law and father-in-law and said, "My husband is going into the forest for gathering fruits and fuel. In is my fervent desire that your worshipful self and my father-in-law will kindly permit me to accompany him. I cannot bear to be separated from him this day. Almost a full year is past and I have not gone out of our hermitage. My desire to see the forest in bloom is indeed very great."

*Dyumatsena:* Up to this time Savitri had never made a request to me. So let her desire be fulfilled.

Savitri thus obtained permission from her mother-in-law and father-in-law and accompanied her husband to the forest with a smiling face though with a heavy heart. She saw the charming forest.

Satyavan gathered fruits and filled his bag. He then began to cut down a tree for fuel. As he was cutting the branches he felt severe headache. He came to Savitri and said to her thus, "I have a severe headache on account of exertion. I feel unwell. It seems to me that my head is being pierced by arrows. I am unable to stand."

Then Savitri sat down on the ground with his head on her lap. While thus sitting she saw the dark and dreadful form of a man with blood-red eyes and clad in red garments. He was standing near Satyavan with a noose in his hands and gazing at him. Beholding him, Savitri gently placed her husband's head on the ground. She was stricken with grief. She arose quickly and folding the palms of her hands in reverence said these words with a trembling heart in great sorrow, "I know you to be a divine being from your superhuman appearance. Kindly tell me, O great god! Who you are and what is your desire?"

*The figure:* O Savitri, you are devoted to your husband. You have acquired merit by your austerities. It is for this reason that I address you. Know me, good lady, to be Yama. The life of this prince Satyavan, your husband, is finished. I will bind him with my noose and take him away with me. Know this to be my intention.

*Savitri:* We have heard that your messengers come to take human beings away. Then how is it, O Lord, that you have come in person?

*Yama:* My messengers are not fit to bring to my abode such a pure and holy person as Satyavan, who is an ocean of good qualities. Therefore, I have come in person.

Then Yama forcibly drew out of the body of Satyavan his subtle body (linga sarira) or astral body, which is of the size of a thumb and bound it with the noose. The body being deprived of Prana or the vital life element lost its luster and remained there like a log of wood. It was a sad sight. Yama, holding the subtle body of Satyavan bound with the noose, proceeded towards the South. Savitri arranged for the safety of the body of her husband and followed Yama with an afflicted heart.

*Yama:* Go back, Savitri, and perform the last rites of your husband. Your duties to your husband have been discharged by you. This far only you can come, no further.

*Savitri:* Whither my husband is carried or goes of his own accord, thither I must go. This is the ancient path of duty. There shall be no obstacle to my course on account of my asceticism, my devotion to superiors, my affection for my husband, my observance of vows and also because of your grace. It is said by the wise, versed in true knowledge, that one contracts friendship with another by going only seven paces with him. I will tell you something, keeping this friendship in view. Pray, listen to it. Men who lack in self-control do not observe the proper rites and sacrifices even in the forest; nor do they discharge the necessary duties of the three modes of life, viz., married life, life of celibate in the preceptor's hermitage or the life of renunciation (Sannyasa). A householder's life leads to true religious merit. That is the reason why the wise assert that the life of a householder which leads to righteousness is the best of all modes of life. All of us follow the householder's path because of the virtues of married life. I do not wish to follow either the second or third path above mentioned, because the wise people say that married life is the most important.

*Yama:* Go back. I am delighted with your speech. Choose a boon now, with the exception of your husband's life.

*Savitri:* My father-in-law has been driven away from his kingdom. He has lost his eyesight. He now leads a pious life in a hermitage in the forest. Let that king, through your grace, regain his sight and become powerful.

*Yama:* O Savitri! I give you this boon; that which you have asked of me will take place. I see you are fatigued now by your journey. Do not proceed further. Go back.

*Savitri:* I do not feel fatigue as I am with my husband. I must surely follow the same path as my husband. I must surely go to that place where you are taking my lord. Listen again to what I say. It is said by the wise that even a single interview with the virtuous is highly desirable. Friendship with them is much more so. The company of the righteous persons is never without fruit. Therefore one should always live in the company of virtuous persons.

*Yama:* The words spoken by you are pregnant with great significance. They are delightful to the mind also. They are thought provoking. They augment the wisdom of even the learned. Choose a second boon with the exception of Satyavan's life.

*Savitri:* May my father-in-law regain his kingdom which he has lost.

*Yama:* The king will soon be restored to his kingdom. He will be ever firm in his own duties as a king. Princess! I have now gratified your wish. Go back to your abode so that you may not have to undergo any further fatigue.

*Savitri:* O Lord! You have controlled all the creatures by rules of Dharma. You carry them away, not according to your caprice, but according to Dharma. Hence you are called, Yama, i.e. one who governs by ordinances. Hear again my words, The eternal duty of the righteous is mercy, charity, benevolence and absence of malice towards all living beings in thought, word and deed. The righteous show mercy even to their enemies who attack them.

*Yama:* The words uttered by you are as delicious to me as water to a thirsty person. Choose any other boon that you like but not the life of Satyavan.

*Savitri:* My father, the king, has no son. Let him have one hundred sons who will perpetuate his family. This is the third boon that I ask you.

*Yama:* O good girl! Your father will have one hundred brave sons, the perpetuators of his race. Princess! Your desire is now gratified. Go back. You have come a very long way with me.

*Savitri:* I do not feel that I have travelled any distance when I am in the presence of my husband. It is my mind that travels a great distance. Now, listen, as you proceed on, to these words.

You are the powerful son of Vivasvan (the Sun God). You are therefore called by the wise as Vaivasvata. You judge all creatures impartially and rightly and for this reason, O Lord, you are styled as the Lord of Justice (Dharma Raja). People do not place so much confidence on their own selves as on the virtuous. Therefore everybody wishes particularly to be in the company of the virtuous.

*Yama:* O auspicious damsel! I never before heard such words as have been just spoken from any other person than you. I am pleased with them. Ask for a fourth boon with the exception of Satyavan's life and then go away.

*Savitri:* Let me have one hundred strong and powerful sons who will perpetuate our line. This is the fourth boon I pray for.

*Yama:* Gentle lady! You shall have one hundred strong and powerful sons who will make you happy. Princess! You have come very far. You must be very tired. Therefore go back to your abode.

*Savitri:* The virtuous people are ever unceasingly devoted to religion. The company of the virtuous is ever productive of good. Virtuous people are not afraid of other virtuous people. The

virtuous people by their own merits make the Sun move. It is the virtuous who support the Earth by their practice of austerities. Good acts done to the virtuous are never fruitless. As the righteous are characterized by noble qualities, they become protectors of all creatures.

*Yama:* The more you give expression to words pregnant with meaning, which deal with righteous conduct and which are delightful to the mind, the more I am inclined to respect you. Ask for an incomparable boon, O chaste lady!

*Savitri:* You have granted me the boon that I shall have one hundred sons and yet you are carrying away my husband. The boon that you have just given me cannot bear fruit without my husband. I choose my incomparable boon: 'Let Satyavan live' and may your words then prove true.

Yama, saying 'be it so,' loosened the noose that bound Satyavan and said, "O chaste lady! I release your husband. He will be free from disease. He will achieve his object in life. He will be ever successful in his undertakings. He as well as you will live four hundred years. He will become very famous in the world. He will certainly have a hundred sons by you."

Then the Lord of Justice (Yama) returned to his abode. Savitri returned to the place where her husband's dead body lay. Beholding her husband on the ground she sat down placing his head on her lap.

Soon after, Satyavan regained his consciousness and said to Savitri, "O, I have slept for a very long time. Why did you not wake me up? Where is that dark-complexion person who was dragging me away?"

*Savitri:* You have been in deep sleep for a long time. You are very tired. Look, it is now late in the night.

Satyavan got up like one who was refreshed after an undisturbed sleep. He looked round in all directions of the forest regions and said, "I set out with you for gathering fruits. When I was cutting wood I had a shooting pain in my head. I could not stand up long and I fell asleep in your lap. I remember all this, my good Savitri. Then I saw the dreadful dark form of a highly effulgent being. Please tell me whether what I saw was a dream or a reality."

*Savitri:* Prince, the night is deepening. Tomorrow I will disclose to you faithfully all that occurred. I see you are unwell. You will not be able to discern the path to our abode as it is very dark now. We will go at the break of dawn when the forest paths are visible.

*Satyavan:* I have recovered from the headache. I am quite refreshed. I am eager to see my parents now. Surely my parents will be sorely afflicted on account of my absence. My father, with an afflicted heart, will be at this time enquiring of the residents of the hermitages, one by one, about me. My father is old; so also my mother. Surely I am their only stay. I live because it is my duty to make them happy. I am impatient to see my parents. Therefore, O Savitri, let us start immediately.

Thereupon Savitri rose up. She took her husband by his arms and made him rise. She placed her husband's left hand on her left shoulder, supported him with her right hand passed round him and thus walked slowly.

In the meantime, Dyumatsena regained his sight. He could behold everything with a clear vision. Accompanied by his wife Saivya, he visited all the hermitages in search of his son and daughter-in-law, being anxious for their safety. The hermits comforted them by saying: "Satyavan is certainly alive, because his wife Savitri is a virtuous girl. She has great powers acquired by austerities and self-control.

Then in a short time Savitri accompanied by her husband Satyavan reached the hermitage and entered cheerfully. All the residents of that grove were eager to know what had happened.

They questioned Satyavan: “O renowned prince! Why did you not return earlier with your wife? What obstacle stood in your way? We were anxious. You must relate all about it.”

*Satyavan:* Taking leave of my father I went with Savitri. While cutting down firewood in the forest my head began to ache. Afflicted with pain, I rested for a long time. Hence my return so late in the night. There is no other reason for my late arrival.

*The sages:* You do not know how your father Dyumatsena has suddenly recovered his eyesight. Therefore let Savitri relate it. O Savitri! We are desirous of learning all this from you. You are surely acquainted with the mysteries of good and evil. Know that you are like the goddess Savitri in glory. You know the cause of this. Therefore speak truly. If it is fit to be related, please tell us.

*Savitri:* It is as you know it to be. Your desire can never prove fruitless. I have nothing to conceal from you. Now hear the true cause of this. The high-souled Narada had foretold the death of my husband. Today was that fatal day. Therefore I did not leave my husband’s side. When my husband fell asleep, Yama, in person, approached him, bound and led him away in the southern direction where the manes or the Pitrus reside. I then began to praise the Lord. He conferred on me five boons. Hear from me what they are. I have obtained two boons for my father-in-law, i.e., recovery of his sight and of the kingdom which he had lost. I have further obtained for my father a hundred sons and an equal number of sons for myself. Again my husband Satyavan has been blessed with a life of four hundred years. I observed the vow of three nights; fast for the sake of my husband’s life. I have now faithfully given you a full account of the happenings.

*The Sages:* O chaste girl! You are endowed with virtuous qualities and asceticism. It is by you that the family which was drowned in troubles and miseries has been rescued.

The assembled sages then eulogized Savitri and paid their adorations to her. They took leave of the king and his son and returned to their hermitages with merry hearts.

The night passed. The Sun’s disc appeared in the horizon. All the sages performed their morning rites and assembled at the hermitage of Dyumetsena. They were not tired of telling Dyumetsena all about the great fortune and achievement of Savitri.

Then all the ministers came from the country of the Salvas to see their king. They informed Dyumetsena of the death of his enemy at the hands of his own minister. They further added that all the subjects had declared him as their legitimate king even though he was blind and that they were sent on the strength of this determination on that part of the subjects to reinstall him as their king.

When they saw him with eyesight restored, they were extremely delighted. They bowed down their heads to him.

Then Dyumatsena made obeisance to the old Brahmins in the hermitage. He was in turn honoured by them. He set out for his capital surrounded by his army and with his queen Saivya, Satyavan and Savitri.

Then the Brahmins joyfully installed Dyumatsena as king and his high-souled son as crown prince (Yuvaraja).

Then, after a long time, a hundred sons were born to Savitri. They were heroic and attained great renown. She had also one hundred highly powerful brothers (sons of her father Asvapati).

Thus Savitri rescued from misfortune her own self, her father, mother-in-law, father-in-law and her husband’s line. The glory of chastity or Pativrata Dharma is indescribable. A chaste woman can do and undo things. She can have victory over fate.

He who listens with devotion to this excellent story of Savitri will attain happiness and achieve all that he desires. He will never have any cause for sorrow.

*(Pativrata Mahatmya – Vana Parva, Ch. 298)*

### **Conclusion**

From reading the epic of Savitri, one can get a glimpse of our great Vedic culture. One can see that women were held in high reverence. They were not forced upon, but their opinion was considered. Savitri was given the freedom to choose her own husband. Savitri understood the importance of the character of Satyavan and went all out to regain him back, even from death. For a very intelligent and determined woman, she still was humble and worked for the welfare of others. Vedic culture has produced both men and women who understood who they were and followed their dharma with responsibility.