

EPISODE 6 – Greek on Greek: wounded pride

CD 2 tracks 1-2

total running time: 16:22

Agamemnon humiliates Achilles (⌚ 9:30)

Inside their city, the Trojans waited for the Greeks to give up and sail home. In their camp, the Greeks waited for the Trojans to emerge so that they could sack the city. Whole years went by without a single battle. The Greeks in their camp became restless, impatient. Old, stupid rivalries began to rear their heads among the many Greek kings. The high king of the whole
5 camp, the high king of all of Greece, Agamemnon, became worried. He could see that soon this camp would become a kind of war.

The biggest threat of all, of course, came from the swift-runner, the son of Peleus and Thetis, Achilles. This was not a man who enjoyed waiting. This was a man who loved to hunt, to fight, to kill. He prowled around the camp like a caged beast, staring, glaring at anyone who dared
10 even to look at him.

Agamemnon had an idea. He ordered the swift-runner Achilles to set off in a ship and sail up and down the coast, attacking anywhere known to be sympathetic to the Trojans. In this way, Achilles was away for years, attacking, sacking, looting, burning anywhere that nurtured men and women.

15 When finally he returned to the Greek camp, what a hoard he brought with him! Gold, jewels, weapons, tools, food, wine and slaves. Among the slaves, the high King Agamemnon saw a woman – a daughter of a priest of Apollo. As soon as Agamemnon saw her, he wanted her for himself. He wanted her for his bed. And so he took her.

Among the slaves, the only one who was a match for this daughter of a priest of Apollo, was
20 a woman named Briseis. Agamemnon, with great ceremony, gave this Briseis to Achilles to thank him for all the things that he had done during his voyage, as though that voyage had brought glory onto the Greeks instead of shame.

But, up above, Trojan-loving Apollo was watching and listening. These Greeks, first they attack and besiege his favourite city, then they slaughter its children, and now they enslave the
25 daughter of his loyal priest! The lord of light, the mighty archer, has many awful ways to punish men and women.

By night, under cover of darkness, he sent into the Greek camp tens, hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands of silky, grey backs – field mice – that brought with them a sickness that thrived on the pools of filthy water, the heaps of stinking rubbish that had gathered in the
30 Greek camp over the years.

The first the Greeks knew of it was when the stray dogs of the camp died one by one. Then goats, mules, horses began to die. And then men. It was an awful sight to see a man with whom you'd risked your life wither away, age whole years across a single day, and die. The plague prowled through the camp for months.

35 Eventually Achilles called a meeting in the gathering place. He said, “Look, wherever I turn I can see rising into the sky the smoke of funeral pyres. There is, among our number, one who can understand the moods of the gods and goddesses by the patterns the birds make as they fly through the sky. We have a prophet, a seer, a wise man: far-sighted Calchas should speak.”

40 Old Calchas winced. He said, “Swift-runner Achilles, please, promise me your protection before I explain the source of this plague because the bearer of bad news is never welcome and my words will bring upon me the anger of the powerful.”

Achilles nodded. Old Calchas said, “This plague has been sent by the lord of light. Apollo is furious with us because our high king, Agamemnon, has taken to his bed a daughter of
45 Apollo’s loyal priest. Until that woman is set free, every day will see more dead.”

“Old man,” said Agamemnon, “would good news burn your tongue? Never a prophecy of victory for me – only more bad news, heaped upon the one who pays for your food! I love this woman, this daughter of a priest of Apollo. I love her as dearly as I love my own wife, Clytemnestra, so far away. But, since I value the well-being of my subjects – you, my armies
50 – more than I do my own peace of mind, I will let this woman go. I’ll let her go tomorrow, with gold, in one of my ships. However, this means that I, your high king, am to go without the treasures of Achilles’ voyage. That is unthinkable! If I’m to let this woman go, I want one in return!”

“From where?” said Achilles. “There are no slaves left to be shared out. You, of all of us, know
55 that. When Troy falls you’ll be given three or four slaves to make up for the one you let go today.”

“Why, thank you,” said Agamemnon. “But I seem to remember that I am the high king of this army and not you. You are just another prince under my command. Your good opinion of me means nothing to me! But since you’re so keen to make up for my loss, I will take a slave from
60 you. Yes! Yes, that Briseis. I gave her to you when you returned to this camp. I take her now. She is mine now!”

Achilles took a little step forward then. He felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked behind him. There was his best friend Patroclus, shaking his head. Achilles stepped back. Were it not for the hand of his friend, Achilles would have jumped, beaten the high King Agamemnon to the
65 ground, torn off his shiny breastplate and scooped his beating heart out of his chest.

“Take her!” said Achilles, “But this means the son of Peleus and Thetis will not fight for you again. No oath binds me to the protection of Helen. I was not one of those kings who stood on the severed limbs of a stallion and swore to protect her years ago. And yet I have fought for you for years. I’ve waded through fields of blood. And for what? So that when finally I find a
70 woman, you can take her from me? Well, I will not fight for you again, not if you beg me!”

“Good!” said Agamemnon. “Go, leave this place. By tomorrow you’d be forgotten. Just some stupid boy who’s not man enough to take a command. You are not a warrior. Why the lowliest

soldier in the shabbiest squad in this army knows, to win this war, he must obey me. He must obey his king. You are a monster. I have never seen such delight in the eyes of one when he took the life of another. This army, my camp is better off without you!" And he turned and he was gone. The crowd was gone in moments, leaving only Achilles and Patroclus in their place, Achilles shaking with fury.

***Zeus grants a wish* (☉ 6:52)**

And so it was, the next day the daughter of the priest of Apollo was set free. She sailed home in one of Agamemnon's ships with gold. As soon as she reached her homeland, the plague in the Greek camp ended. Apollo turned his glare elsewhere.

And so it was, two servants were sent across the camp, down to where the breakers crash and drag, down to Achilles' hut, to demand he give up his slave Briseis. They were terrified as they approached his hut but he welcomed them politely. He let the woman go readily. He embraced her one last time. There were tears in their eyes when they parted and then Briseis walked across the camp to Agamemnon's hut, to Agamemnon's bed.

That night, when the sky was bright with stars, the swift-runner Achilles walked to the edge of the ocean, waded into the shallows, sank to his knees, and his face creased into a childish sob. Through his tears he saw the shining path made by the moon. Down that path walked Thetis.

"Mother, many's the time in father's hall I heard you say that Zeus desired you. Go to him now. He could make these Greeks taste pain. I want blood in the sand! I want the ships of this camp burning! And then these Greeks will remember that I was out on the battlefield every day, cutting off heads with every stroke of my sword, while their torn-hearted, dog-faced king cowered behind the palisade."

"My dear son," she said, "I can refuse you nothing. I will go to Zeus, whose temple is the sky, and he will grant your wish. Until then, stay by your ships." And she rose up into the heavens. She made her way through the clouds, high and high and high, until she came to the slopes of Mount Olympus, and there was Zeus' palace. She ran in through the doors. There was Zeus himself, the cloud-compeller, sitting on his golden throne. Thetis threw herself onto the floor at his feet.

She curled her left arm over his knees and she said, "Great Zeus, if ever I have pleased you in word or in deed, listen to me now! My son, Achilles, has been bitterly insulted by swaggering Agamemnon. Agamemnon has taken his woman, who he won in warfare. He has taken her to his own bed. And now my son refuses to fight. He will not lift a sword for the Greeks. He has retired from the fray. Oh great Zeus, I beg you, teach that swaggering, dog-faced Agamemnon how much he needs my son. Give the Trojans a tremendous victory. May the Greeks wallow in their own gore! May they be steeped in their own blood! If you grant my wish then bow your head in agreement. If you do not bow your head, I know that I, of all immortals, count the least."

And great Zeus listened. And he pondered in his heart. And then he bowed his head and he said, "I grant your wish." And he said, "These things I will bring to pass." And he thought "In my
35 own way."

And Thetis thanked him with all of her heart and then she descended from the heavens. And no sooner was she gone than Hera, ox-eyed Hera, the queen of heaven, Zeus' wife, and Athene, goddess of war and wisdom, came striding into Zeus' palace. And Hera sniffed at the air.

40 "I smell fish! That sea-nymph Thetis must have been here. What did she want?" And Zeus said, "She asked a favour and I have granted it."

And he smiled, and he got up to his feet, and he made his way out of his palace and he descended from the heavens down and down and down and down to a rocky crag on Mount Ida, the great mountain that stretched up behind the city walls of Troy. And he sat and he
45 waited until the dawn took her golden throne. And he looked down at the city of Troy, ringed in stone with its shining diadem of towers. And he looked across the plain and the Greek camp and the blue waves of the sea, and he lifted his right hand and, in it, he was holding a set of golden scales.

And into one pan of the scales, he put the luck of the Greek army; and into the other pan of the
50 scales, he put the luck of the Trojan army. And he held the scales by the centre of the beam and he watched as the Greek luck sank down and down and down, towards Hades' halls. And the Trojan luck soared up into the skies.