

The Strength of Three

There was once a family of three sons. The boys were not kind to one another. In fact, they fought constantly, each one trying to outdo the others in some sort of sport. For instance, if one boy were building a raft, another had to build a canoe. Then the third had to build an even larger and finer boat. Because each of them worked alone, their work was difficult, and the results were not always worthwhile. Of their three boats, not one was seaworthy. There was little peace in their home.

Their father **despaired**¹. He feared they would never learn to cooperate. He decided to try to teach them a lesson. He gathered up a cartful of thin reeds and tied them together with strong vines. At dinner, he announced a contest: "Behold this bundle of twigs," he bellowed. "I challenge you to break it in half, for whoever figures out the secret will win a life of rich rewards."

The oldest son took the bundle in his **calloused**² hands. He was strong, and he used all of his strength to try to break the reeds, but they would not be broken. Finally he gave up, and his younger brother took on the challenge. He balanced the reeds across the tabletop and used all of his weight to try to snap the bundle, but it did not crack. Finally, he gave up, and the youngest brother took the tightly bound twigs in his hands. He, too, struggled with all of his might to snap the bundle into two pieces, but it would not break.

Finally, the father took the bundle from them. He untied the vine that held them together. He then divided the bundle into three equal piles of twigs. "Now break your twigs into two," he said. Each boy, one at a time, did as his father asked. The task was easy. Each bundle broke with hardly any effort. "When you divide your work, it is easy and you can accomplish much," the old man said. And with that, the young men understood that alone each of them was weak. But together, they had great strength.

¹ **despair:** to lose hope

² **calloused:** covered with hardened skin formed from doing hard work