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24) Contemplation of Past Nations and Their Actions

آي بُنَي اِنِّي وَإِن لَم آكُن عَمَّرتُ عُمْرَ مَن كَانَ قَبْلِي فَقَد نَظَرتُ فِي اَعمَالِهِم وَفَكَّرتُ فِي اَخبَارِهِم وَسِرْتُ فِي آثَارِهِم وَ مَن كَدَرِهِ حَتّى عُدْتُ كَاحَدِهِم بَل كَانِّي بِمَا انتَهى إليَّ مِن أُمُورِهِم قَد عَمَّرتُ مَعَ اوَّلِهِم إلى آخِرِهِم فَعَرَفتُ صَفَقَ ذَلِكَ مِن كَدرِهِ وَنَفْعِهِ مِن ضَرَرِهِ فَاسْتَخْلُصتُ لَكَ مِن كُلِّ اَمرٍ نَخِيلَهُ (جَلِيلَهُ) وَتَوَخَّيتُ لُكَ جَمِيلَهُ، وَصَرَفتُ عَنْكَ مَجْهُولَهُ وَرَأَيتُ حَيثُ عَنانِي مِن اَمْرِكَ مَا يَعنِي الوَالِدَ الشَّفِيقَ وَاجمَعتُ عَلَيهِ مِن اَدَبِكَ اَن يَكُونَ ذَلِكَ وَانتَ مُقْبِلُ العُمرِ وَمُقْتَبِلُ الدَّهْرِ خَيثُ عَنانِي مِن اَمْرِكَ مَا يَعنِي الوَالِدَ الشَّفِيقَ وَاجمَعتُ عَلَيهِ مِن اَدَبِكَ اَن يَكُونَ ذَلِكَ وَانتَ مُقْبِلُ العُمرِ وَمُقْتَبِلُ الدَّهْ وَشَرائِعَ الإسْلامِ وَاحْكَامَهُ وَحَلالَهُ وَحَرامَهُ وَلا لَوْ نِيَّةٍ سَلِيمَةٍ وَنَفْسٍ صَافِيَةٍ وَانَ اَبتَدَأَكَ بِتَعْلِيمٍ كِتَابِ الله وَتَأْوِيلِهِ وَشَرائِعَ الإسْلامِ وَاحْكَامَهُ وَحَلالَهُ وَحَرامَهُ وَلا أَجَاوِزَ ذَلِكَ بِكَ إلى غَيْرِهِ ثُمَّ اَشْفَقتُ اَن يَلْتَبِسَ عَلَيكِ مِن السَّاسُ فِيهِ مِن اَهوائِهِم وَآرائِهِم مِثْلُ الَّذِي التَبَسَ عَلَيهِم فَكَانَ إلَى عَلَى مَا كَرِهْتُ مِن تَنْبِيهِكَ لَهُ اَحَبُّ إلَيْ مِن اِسْلامِكَ إلى اَمْرٍ لا آمَنُ عَلَيكَ بِهِ الهَلَكَةَ وَرَجُوتُ اَن يَعَدِيكَ لِقَصَدِكَ فَعَهَدْتُ الله فِيهِ لِرُشْدِكَ وَانَ يَهدِيكَ لِقَصَدِكَ فَعَهَدْتُ الْيَكَ وَصِيَّتِي هَذِهِ الْمُنْ وَانَ يَهدِيكَ لِقَصَدِكَ فَعَهَدْتُ الْيَكَ وَصِيَّتِي هَذِهِ

"My son! Although I have not lived the long life of my predecessors, I have looked at their actions, contemplated the reports about them, and journeyed among their ruins until (it was as if) I had become like one of them. In fact, because of the reports that have reached me of their affairs, it is as if I had lived with the first of them to the last of them. Thus I have distinguished their pure from their impure, and their benefit from their harm. I have extracted for you from every matter the purest of it, and exclusively aimed at presenting you its beautiful aspects and turned away from you its unknown things.

Since I am concerned about your affair with the concern of a compassionate father, and I have resolved on bestowing on you good discipline, I considered (it appropriate) that it should be while you are in your youth and in the prime of your life, possessing sound intention and a pure soul. I considered that I should begin by teaching you the Book of Allah and its interpretation, the laws and commandments of Islam and its lawful and unlawful matters, and that I should not take you beyond that to anything else.

Then I feared that matters in which people had conflicting desires and opinions would confuse you just as it had confused them. Thus, despite my dislike of cautioning you, it was preferable to me to firmly

establish that, than to leave you to a matter in which I am not free of the fear of your destruction. I hoped that God would give you success in it through your right direction and guide you to your objective, so I entrust this will of mine to you".

Commentary

There are several worthy points in this section of Imam 'Ali's letter:

1. Mentioning The History Of The Past Nations

As we have often noticed before in the same way that the creation is governed by laws and is based on a series of causes and effects, and not a single action occurs without these factors of cause and effect, the fate of nations and human communities depend on a series of causes and effects. No nation becomes prosperous or miserable, progressive or backward, strong or weak, steady or destroyed without valid reasons. There are factors which influence them greatly.

Therefore, a survey of the history of the past nations and the factors which contributed to their prosperity or misery may help us find our way in a troubled world in which we now are. This is because the same factors which were at work shaping the life of the people in the past are still active.

It is for this reason that Imam 'Ali (as) in his letter to Harith al-Hamdani emphasizes that:

"Learn lessons from past events for future events, because they are similar to one another." 1
It is exactly for this reason that one third of the Qur'an consists of the stories and histories of past nations and according to the Qur'an, this survey of the past will help everybody since

"..in their histories there is certainly a lesson for men of understanding" [Qur'an 12:111]. Then in the Holy Qur'an, Allah orders the Prophet (S) "therefore relate the narrative that they may reflect." [Qur'an 7:176].

In his Qasi'ah sermon, where he talks on the issues of the prosperity and misery of nations and Muslims and the factors responsible for them, Imam 'Ali (as) talks about the similarity among the fates of the nations and the identical factors of their successes and failures,

He says: Avoid facing the punishments which were inflicted upon the past nations. Remember their attitudes in hardships. Try not to be like them.

After comparing their behavior when they were prosperous and at the time of their misery and depression, then adopt those actions of theirs which brought about their prosperity and providence, which made their foes flee from them, which put assets at their disposal, which made strong their social

bonds, which made them avoid discord and disunity, which made their harmony feasible, and which enticed them to shun those actions which weaken their power, i.e., deceptive action and jealousy.

"Think about the conditions of the believers of the past, how they were tested by God. Did they not have to face a lot of hardships?

"But when God, the Almighty, observed their perseverance and patience in the face of obstacles for His sake, He changed their misery into prosperity, and their fear into security. God made them governors, statesmen and leaders. They received such favors from God they had not even hoped for.

"Observe how they were moderate, their hands were in the service of one another, their swords helped each other, their eyes were piercing, and their intentions and aims were united. Did they not become leaders of the entire earth?

Then observe the end of their lives. When they became disunited their unity was fractured, and there were disagreements among them; they divided, and started to quarrel. At this time, God changed their strength into weakness and deprived them of their assets. What remained of them is their sad stories for you today to behold and for you to take lessons.

Then Imam 'Ali (as) adds:

"You see how nations are similar in their states and traits."2

This very principle of similarity in states and traits among nations, which depicts their fates, is of crucial significance for Imam 'Ali (as) in his sermon. That is why he emphasizes a survey of the lives of people of the past.

2. Every Father Should Try Educating His Child

Among the factors which build up man's personality are the family environment and parental guidance. The latter factor is of crucial importance in child's life, especially in his life manners and etiquette.

Since in Islam "adab" or "good manners" are used to evaluate one's amount of education and are recognized as the best indicator of one's personality, therefore, training one's children in this aspect is given great gravity in Islam.

In his treatise on law, Imam Zayn al-'Abidin (as) says concerning this issue:

وَامَّا حَقُّ وَلَدِكَ فَأَن تَعَلَمُ انَّهُ مِنكَ ومُضافٌ اِلَيكَ في عَاجِلِ الدُّنيا بِخَيرِهِ وَشَرِّهِ وَانَّكَ مَسؤولٌ عَمَّا وَلَيتَه بِهِ مِن حُسنِ" الأَدَبِ وَالدَلالَةِ عَلَى رَبِّهِ عَزَّ وجَلَّ وَالمَعُونَةَ لَهُ على طَاعَتِهِ فَاعمَل في آمرِهِ عَمَلَ مَن يَعلَم أَنَّهُ مُثَابٌ على الإحسانِ اِلَيهِ، المُعاقَبٌ على الإساءَة اِلَيه "It is your child's right on you that you should know that he is from you and will be ascribed to you through both his good and his evil in the immediate affairs of this world. You are responsible for what has been entrusted to you, such as educating him in good conduct, guiding him towards the path of his Lord, the Almighty, and helping him to obey Him. So act toward him with the action of one who knows that he will be rewarded for good doing toward him, and punished for doing evil to him."

In accordance with our religion leaders, other children's rights are: selecting good names for them, reading Qur'an, swimming, shooting, providing them with jobs and spouses, feeding them rightfully and housing them appropriately.4

As we have seen before at the adulthood, like at the time of childhood, man's spirit is malleable. Whatever changes the child is exposed to is eternal. Regarding this, Imam Musa ibn Ja'far al-Kadhim (as) has said:

"Learning in one's youth is like writing on stone. But learning in old age is like writing on the surface of water".5

3. The War among 72 Nations

In the book "The reasons behind the rise of Islam and the fall of the Muslims," one of the reasons for this fall is said to be sectarianism. Two other factors are responsible for these differences, however:

a) Lack of the recognition of the truth. Hafiz, the Persian poet, says in this regard:

The quarrel among the seventy-two nations is not valid.

For, not seeing the truth, they resorted to fantasy.

b) Selfishness and self-conceit.

We have already said if we wish to get rid of the sectarian differences among people, we should use reasoning in the light of the Book and the Prophet's kinfolks, and avoid being indoctrinated by poisoning ideas of some.

We should also avoid being carried away by selfishness and self-conceit in the recognition of facts and truth in different sects.

Imam 'Ali (as) in his letter asks his child not to be carried away by these two factors: selfishness and self-conceit.

4. Why Is Imam 'Ali Unwilling To Teach Any Book On Religion

But The Qur'an And The Shari'ah?

As we saw before, Imam 'Ali (as), as a kind father, decided to teach his son, Imam Hassan (as), the Qur'an and the sacred "Shari'ah", which are the sources of all human knowledge. He decided not to teach him anything else. But he practically saw that people, due to their selfishness, started having different sects. Thus, he decided, along with Qur'an and Shari'ah, to teach other issues to his son as well: topics such as: monotheism, Prophethood, resurrection philosophy, history, education, ethical points, the recognition of the factors of corruption... and the like.

But Imam 'Ali (as) is innately dissatisfied to enter into this game because entering this scene does not have any profit whatsoever. This is because the Book of God and its interpretation is the essence of all knowledge and sciences and will make it needless for people to study other things. But consider the condition of Islam in those dark days when people separated themselves from the Prophet's kinfolk. This separation from the guidance of the Prophet's kinfolk caused people to have different understandings of the facts and truth. In this way, different sects came into being. Under such conditions, Imam saw it feasible to start giving Imam Hasan (as) new insights about religion.

Furthermore, this section of Imam 'Ali's letter neither involves unwillingness towards religious discussions, nor, does it indicate, as some have erroneously assumed, that the Qur'anic sciences and religious commandments are of lower importance. Each one of these has its special value.6

- 1. Nahj al-Balaghah, Letter No 69.
- 2. Nahj al-Balaghah, Sermon 192.
- 3. . Shaykh Saduq's Khisal, vol.. 2, p.350.
- 4. Kanz al-'Ummal, Hadith 35340; Hikmah's Nahj al-Balaghah, Hikmah no.399; Bihar, vol.74, p.80; Bihar, vol.74, p.85; Kanz al-'Ummal, vol.16 Hadith 45409 45411.
- 5. . Safinah al-Bihar, vol. 1, p.680, item "Shabab" (Youth).
- <u>6.</u> Concerning Imam 'Ali's unwillingness, the translators and interpreters of Nahj al-Balaghah have said nothing. Some refer the unwillingness to Imam Hasan (as) without mentioning the cause for it. There are some hints to Imam 'Ali's unwillingness, however, in Ibn Abi Al-Hadid's commentary, vol. 16, pp.63-69, and Ibn Maytham's commentary, vol. 5, p. 18.

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