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Chapter 19: Yazid's forces gather at Karbala

Ibn Ziyad had given strict orders to surround and compel Imam Husayn (a.s.) to proceed to Kufa where a large army was assembled. However, Imam Husayn never allowed them to succeed in their plan. He proceeded to take a different route and arrived at Karbala. On the second of Muharram, the year 61 AH when Imam Husayn pitched his camp at Karbala, al-Hurr also pitched his camp a little distance from Imam Husayn's camp. Al-Hurr wrote to Ubaidullah ibn Ziyad stating that Imam Husayn (a.s.) had finally pitched his camp and settled at Karbala and appeared to have no plan to proceed to Kufa. Had Imam Husayn (a.s.) proceeded to Kufa, it would have been construed as his seeking to fight the forces of Ibn Ziyad who had already gathered there. By pitching his camp at Karbala, Imam Husayn (a.s.), forever, removed even the remotest chance of an allegation that he was the aggressor since he sought the stationary army of ibn Ziyad. By making ibn Ziyad to change his plans and send his army to Karbala, Imam Husayn (a.s.) showed who was the aggressor and who was after whom. Secondly, by avoiding going to Kufa, Imam Husayn (a.s.) forestalled the possible allegation that since he knew that a huge army had gathered and was for him at Kufa, it was suicidal to proceed to Kufa. Lastly sitting at a neutral place, Imam Husayn (a.s.) kept the door for negotiations open, as could be seen in the following pages.

If at all it can be called a 'battle', the battle of Karbala was extremely unequal and one sided. On the one side, when Imam Husayn (a.s.) pitched his camp in Karbala on the second of Muharram the year 61 AH, there were only few hundreds of persons, including ladies, children, teenagers, old men and only a few able (to fight) persons. According to some historians, there were five hundred cavalry and about a hundred infantry in the camp of the Imam Husayn. 1 Some companions of the Imam (a.s.) suggested that it was possible to defeat al-Hurr's army of the thousand men before any additional forces arrived. The Imam (a.s.) refused, saying that the Ahlul Bayt never commenced any hostility. Instead, Imam Husayn (a.s.) wrote and sent letters to Sulayman bin Surad, al-Musayyab bin Najaba, Refa'ah bin Shaddad, Abdullah ibn Wal and other known adherents of the Ahlul Bayt (a.s.).

The letters were identical and were as follows:

"Those who do not stand up to a tyrant and transgressor of the faith will suffer in this life and the life to come. You are aware that the Banu Umayya are impelled by their satanic desire, have perpetuated

corruption, usurped the treasury for themselves, transgressed religious injunctions and permitted what is prohibited and prohibited what is lawful in Islam. You will recall that you wrote to me complaining that you are left without a guide in religion and had invited me to Kufa. Now, I am besieged by Yazid's army. If you still hold fast to the pledge you made and the affection you promised to show me, know that at your instance I have come. I will not be surprised if you retract from your pledge, for, you had betrayed my father Ali and my brother Hasan."2

Imam Husayn (a.s.) gathered his small group of companions and said to them,

"The course which affairs have taken is manifest to you. The world has changed its colours; virtue has almost vanished. This is the age of Wrong and the followers of Right have passed away. A time has come when the true believer has to separate himself from the mischievous mutineers and turn towards his Creator. Do you not see that the Divine Commands are neglected and what is forbidden is practiced with relish? Life under tyrants is hard to live and I consider death a great honor."3

Hilal bin Nafi' got up and said, "I would prefer to sacrifice my life than to live after you." Zohair ibn al-Qain said, "If I were to be killed in defending you and then raised to life again a thousand times, I would still defend and not desert you."

The battlefield chronicler Abu Makhnaf records that on the other side, in the course of two days, between the third and the fourth of Muharram, the plains of Karbala were filled with over a hundred and forty thousand warriors from Syria, Iraq, Iran and other countries to oppose Imam Husayn (a.s.). Umar bin Sa'd bin Abi Waqqas brought an army of six thousand soldiers, four thousand men were headed by Shibth bin Rib'iy, various contingents of between ten and twenty thousand men each headed by Urwa bin Qays, Sinan bin Anas an–Nakh'iy, Hussayn Bin Numair, Shimr bin Thil Joushan, Mudha'ir bin Raheena al–Mazini, Yazid bin Rikab al–Kelbi, Nadhr bin Harasha, Muhammad bin al–Ash'ath, Abdullah bin Hussayn, Khouli al–Asbahi, Bakr bin Ka'b bin Talha, Hajjar ibn Abhur4 besides the warriors under the command of Umar bin Hajjaj.

On the fourth of Muharram, Umar bin Sa'd wanted Urwa bin Qais a prominent figure from Kufa to go to Imam Husayn (a.s.) and inquire why he had come. Urwa was one of those who had repeatedly written to Imam Husayn (a.s.) inviting him to come to Kufa. He made a lame excuse from the task of meeting Imam Husayn, as he felt ashamed to face the Imam (a.s.). Ibn Sa'd tried to persuade other prominent personalities of Kufa to go on the errand, but they refused out of shame as it was they who had written letters inviting Imam Husayn (S) to come to Kufa. Then, Katheer bin Abdullah agreed to go to Imam Husayn's tent. He was stopped by Zohair ibn al–Qain or by Abu Thumama according to some sources, and asked to remove his weapons that he did not agree and went back. Umar ibn Sa'd then sent Qurra bin Qeis al–Handhali. Imam Husayn (a.s.) asked if anyone knew Qurra. Zohair ibn al–Qain said that Qurra was his sister's son and belonged to the clan of Tameem. Qurra agreed and deposited his weapons with Zohair and was allowed to meet Imam Husayn (a.s.). To Qurra's question, Imam Husayn (a.s.) replied that the people of Kufa wrote letters inviting him to come to Kufa and guide them in

religious matters as they were without an Imam. Imam Husayn (a.s.) further said that in those circumstances, as an Imam, it was his divinely entrusted mission to come and guide the people of Kufa even at the cost of his life. Imam Husayn (S) then said that if the people of Kufa had changed their mind and they did not want him to come to Kufa, he was ready and willing to go back. Zohair told Qurra that it was unfortunate that Qurra was with the opponents of the grandson of the Prophet (S).7 On hearing this, Qurra replied that before taking any decision he would first prefer to convey the reply of Imam Husayn (a.s.) to ibn Sa'd and watch his reaction.

On the nights of the fourth and the fifth of Muharram, Umar bin Sa'd wanted to meet Imam Husayn (a.s.). Arrangements were made in an open space between Imam Husayn's camp and Umar's army when a long conversation ensued during which Imam Husayn (a.s.) showed hundreds of letters written by the people of Kufa. The next night a similar meeting took place in which Imam Husayn (a.s.) explained that he had come only in response to the invitation of the people of Kufa; that it was his Divinely entrusted mission, as an Imam, to guide Muslims and that he had no other aspirations.8

Umar bin Sa'd wrote to Ibn Ziyad, "By God's grace, an inevitable conflict and unnecessary bloodshed has been avoided in my dialogue with al-Husayn. He showed me over twelve thousand letters written by the people of Kufa inviting him to guide and lead them in religious matters. Al-Husayn has not come with any ulterior motive of grabbing power, but only to perform his religious obligation as an Imam. If, however, the people of Kufa say that they do not need him, he intends to go back to Medina or to any far-off place or even to any foreign country. As a last alternative, al-Husayn suggested that there should be a meeting between him and Yazid and the matter of leadership of the Muslims should be decided by public choice. Let me know what you propose to do in the matter keeping in mind all the alternatives, so that the matter may be resolved peacefully, without hurting the Prophet's grandson."9

Khouli, who was inimical to the Ahlul Bayt, wrote to Ibn Ziyad that Umar ibn Sa'd appears to have been impressed with Imam Husayn's reasoning and mellowed and hence might not carry out the purpose for which he was given the command of the army. On hearing this, Ibn Ziyad said sarcastically, "Look, here is an advisor and well wisher of Muslims." Ibn Ziyad was enraged by the attitude of Ibn Sa'd and he called for Shimr bin Thil Joushan to whom he gave a letter to be delivered to Umar ibn Sa'd. Shimr gleefully took the letter to Karbala and gave it to Umar bin Sa'd on the night of the sixth of Muharram.

The contents of the letter were recorded by Abu Makhnaf as well as A'sam al-Kufi, and translated into English by Mirza Ghulam Abbas Ali as follows:

"O son of Sa'd! I have known that you spend whole nights out of your camp along with Husayn near the bank of the Euphrates. You hold friendly discourses with him on various topics and show him mildness. Now as soon as this reaches you and you read it, see that no drop of water is carried to Husayn's camp, if you mind your own welfare. Post your men between the Euphrates and Husayn's soldiers. Attack and destroy them. I allow the use of water of the Euphrates by Christians and Jews, but refuse it to Husayn, his relatives and friends. Guard the banks, so that they may not be able to take any water in return for

what they have done to Uthman who was so badly treated. I know that harming dead bodies does no good or evil, but I command you to trample their dead bodies under the hoofs of horses after you will have killed them. If you are reluctant to carry out my orders, hand over the charge of my forces to the bearer Shimr bin Thil Joushan and come to me to wait for my future orders. As soon as you receive this letter, seal the banks of the river and see that not a drop of water reaches Husayn's camp." 10

Umar bin Sa'd realized that Shimr had always carried a grudge against him for being preferred and given command of the army and that he was overlooked; therefore, he incited Ibn Ziyad against him. The possibility of losing his command of the army as well as the riches promised by ibn Ziyad, was enough to, once again, blind Umar ibn Sa'd from the reality placed before him by Imam Husayn (a.s.) during the preceding nights. He forthwith ordered the closure of the banks of the Euphrates by posting several battalions under the command of Amr bin al-Hajjaj, and Hussayn ibn Numair with strict instructions not to allow anyone from Imam Husayn's camp to come near the river and take any water. 11

- 1. Nafasul Mahmoom, p. 295 quoting Murooj ath-Thahab.
- 2. Imam Husayn (a.s.) & Tragic Saga of Karbala, p. 155–156.
- 3. Life of Imam Husayn the Saviour, p. 136, Nafasul Mahmoom, p. 270, Imam Husayn (a.s.) & Tragic Saga of Karbala, p. 156.
- 4. Life of Imam Husayn the Saviour, p. 143, 144.
- 5. Nafasul Mahmoom, p. 303
- 6. Life of Husayn the Saviour, p. 145.
- 7. Nafasul Mahmoom, p. 304-305.
- 8. Life of Imam Husayn [s] [The Saviour], p. 146, Imam Husayn (a.s.) & Tragic Saga of Karbala, p. 170–171.
- 9. Imam Husayn (a.s.) & Tragic Saga of Karbala, p. 161, 171, Nafasul Mahmoom p. 305.
- 10. Life of Imam Husayn [s] [The Saviour], p. 147, Imam Husayn (a.s.) & Tragic Saga of Karbala, p. 167 quoting Ansabul Ashraf, vol. 3 p. 180, Nafasul Mahmoom, p 307.
- 11. Imam Husayn (a.s.) & Tragic Saga of Karbala, p. 168, Nafasul Mahmoom, p. 307.

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