

Chapter 21: The Ninth of Muharram

The ninth day of Muharram was the successive third day without water in Imam Husayn's camp. The children, particularly, suffered greatly from the agony of thirst. Sukaynah (a.s.) the daughter of Imam Husayn (a.s.), who was a child then, later narrated, *"By the nightfall of the ninth day, I and the other children in the camp were almost dying due to thirst. There was not a drop of water available. We went around to find out if any water is available. I found that my brother Ali al-Asghar, who was six months old, had turned pale and was crying incessantly due to lack of water and milk, as my mother's breasts had dried up due to her not getting any food or water for the last three days. My aunt Zainab was unsuccessfully trying to console the infant. We were crying out aloud. My father's companion Burair al-Hamadani, who happened to pass by our tents and see our plight, was greatly distressed."*

Burair called some of his friends and insisted that each one of them should hold a child by the hand and approach the enemy guarding the banks of the Euphrates. Burair hoped that on seeing small children crying for water the guards might allow them to drink water. One of Burair's friends, Yahya al-Muzani said that if the stonehearted enemy refused and a skirmish ensued, the children would be exposed to mortal danger. He therefore thought it unwise to take the children with them. It was then decided that only Burair and his friends would approach the riverbank from the road leading to Ghazaria. Once, Ishaq, a relative of Burair, was in charge of that part of the riverbank. He allowed Burair and his companions to go forward and drink as much water as they liked. When they reached the river, Burair's friends were overjoyed at their good fortune and without even sipping a drop of water, collected it in the leather bag brought by Burair. When the enemy soldiers found that instead of drinking water, for which they had permission, Burair and his men were trying to take water to Imam Husayn's camp, which was strictly prohibited by their commander. An altercation ensued in which Burair shouted that it was shameful that he and his friends should be allowed to drink water but the grandson of the Prophet (S) and his small children were forbidden. An arrow pierced the leather bag and pinned it to Burair's neck.

The intense arguments were heard in the camp and immediately Imam Husayn (a.s.) asked some of his friends to rescue Burair. On seeing several persons approaching them, Ishaq's men were subdued lest there should be bloodshed. Bleeding profusely, Burair proudly set down the leather bag and asked the children in the camp to drink. The anxious crowd of jostling children upset the vessel and in no time, the

water flowed out and was absorbed by the parched earth. Burair was grieved that the water brought at the risk of life could not pass the thirsty throats of the children in Imam Husayn's camp. [1](#)

Imam Husayn (a.s.) came to know that the vile Umar bin Sa'd was planning a sneak attack by his entire force from behind to kill everyone including women and children and destroy Imam Husayn's camp. To safeguard against such an event, a trench was dug all around the camp, leaving a small passage in the front. Firewood and other available fuel was lit and thrown into the trench. The heat of the burning trench was added to the agony of the three-day's thirst.

One of Umar's soldiers called Jawairia, mocked saying, *"O associates of Husayn, this fire should remind you of the fire of Hell that is waiting for you."* Imam Husayn (a.s.) replied, *"You mention my connection with fire, while I am expecting eagerly to meet my Creator."* Thereafter, Imam Husayn (a.s.) raised up his arms and prayed, *"O Lord, make this man taste the fire in this world before the one that awaits him in the next."* Jawairia's horse suddenly shied and threw him straight into the burning trench, reducing him to ash. [2](#)

Imam Husayn (a.s.) deputed his brother Abbas (a.s.) to go and speak to Umar bin Sa'd. Abbas (a.s.) went with about twenty companions. He asked Umar bin Sa'd, *"Why have you surrounded us? What crime has Husayn committed?"*

Umar replied, *"Our chief [ibn Ziyad] has ordered that we should either make Husayn accept Yazid as the leader of Muslims and pay allegiance to him, or kill him along with all those who support him."*

Abbas (a.s.) asked his companions to stay back and he said to Umar bin Sa'd, *"Do not take any hasty step till I give your message and get the reply from al-Husayn."* When Abbas (a.s.) left, Habib ibn Mudhahir addressed the surrounding army, *"You are a wretched gathering who have assembled here to kill the only surviving son of Fatima and the grandson of the messenger of Allah. You should know that the Prophet not only loved Husayn, but also commanded you to love and respect him. You have gathered at the instance of Yazid who is a hypocrite and a sinner. His father Mu'awiya, grandfather Abu Sufyan and grandmother Hind hated the Prophet (S) and openly fought against him till they were overpowered and pretended to become Muslims. Have you forgotten that Husayn is the last of the five persons about whom Allah has revealed the verse of purification?"*

Zohair ibn Al-Qain said, *"You are a cruel and heartless assembly of people who deny water to infants, children and the old and ailing. Do you not hear the voices of the children crying for water? What sin have the children committed that you deny them water for the last three days? God will surely punish you for what you are planning to do. It is not too late even now. Go away and do not harm Husayn or his people, for indeed Husayn is innocent."*

Some in the crowd kept quiet for fear of reprisal, other in anticipation of reward and yet other merely out of their inherent cruel nature. Yet others said, *"You are very few and sure to be killed. Leave Husayn and join us for your safety and prosperity."* Habib and Zohair replied, *"Life amidst sinners and tyrants like*

you is a curse. Death with Husayn is the ultimate triumph here and in the hereafter.”

Abbas (a.s.) came back after talking with Imam Husayn (a.s.). He addressed the commanders and the surrounding army:

“I once again remind you that you have gathered to kill the Prophet’s grandson al–Husayn. With him is the progeny of Fatima and Ali and a few friends. You have prevented water from reaching Husayn’s camp so much so several infants are near death. What crime have they committed to be so tortured by your inhuman act? What crime has al–Husayn done by which you could absolve yourself from his murder? In the past, people have killed prophets and pious people and deserved God’s wrath. You are also doing the same now. Do not blame us that you were not warned sufficiently or that you did not know with whom you are bent on fighting and killing. In fact, you all know who Husayn is, for it is you people who wrote and invited him to guide you as your Imam. Now, al–Husayn has asked me to give you respite till tomorrow morning so that you may contemplate during the night and comprehend the result before you take any action. After that, you will be solely responsible for your deeds and there will be no scope to plead ignorance or find escape from the consequences of your action.”

In fact, by this action, Imam Husayn (a.s.) gave a night’s reprieve to provide an opportunity to revive the oppressors’ dead conscience and to enable them to realize and correct their mistake. It had a big effect on the enemy, for, from their ranks several persons switched over to Imam Husayn’s camp. On the other hand, none from Imam Husayn’s camp wished to leave despite being offered asylum and safe passage or being aware of imminent death.

Qurra bin Qeis al–Handhali, Habib ibn Mudhahir’s nephew, who had earlier acted as ibn Sa’d’s messenger, was enraged at the injustice and cruelty of ibn Ziyad in shutting down all accesses to water. He cursed ibn Sa’d and joined Imam Husayn’s camp saying, *“I have left behind Hell which surely was my destination if I had stayed with and fought for ibn Sa’d. I do not wish to go back to it. Husayn’s camp is heaven and no wise man would prefer hell to Heaven.”*³ The disgusting conduct of Yazid’s army in sealing the banks of the river and preventing water from reaching the children and women in Imam Husayn’s camp, prompted some thirty soldiers to leave Yazid’s army and cross over to Imam Husayn’s camp.⁴ This incident occurred late within the last night before the battle. Al–Hurr himself crossed over to Imam Husayn’s camp along with his brother, son, and servant in the morning of the tenth of Muharram.

The fact that some persons, contrary to all odds and human nature, left a huge army when definite success and prosperity was within their reach, and crossed over to support a small band of men facing certain death, is another unique aspect of the battle of Karbala. Yet, inexplicably, most authors narrate that it was Imam Husayn (a.s.) who sought a night’s respite from the attack by ibn Sa’d and for prayers too.⁵

Here, we should remember that for centuries, most of the historians were under the control of the Umayyads and the Abbasids who were inimical towards the *Ahlul Bayt* (a.s.). They sought to remove

anything that glorified the *Ahlul Bayt* (a.s.) and supplement it with dubious, if not derogatory and unconfirmed reports. M.S. Mirza quotes the learned historian J.A. Conde, “*A sort of fatality attaching itself to human affairs would seem to command that in the relating of historical events, those of the highest importance should descend to posterity only through the justly suspect channels of narration written by the conquering parties. The mutation of empires, the most momentous revolutions, and the overthrow of the most renowned dynasties seem all to be liable to this advantage; it is from the Romans themselves that the history of their rivalry with the Carthaginians has come down to us, and even if Greek writers have similarly treated the subject, these men were tributaries and dependants of Rome, who did not spare the flatteries best calculated to conciliate its favour.*”⁶

It is therefore not surprising that most historians report contrary to the above version and mistakenly report that it was Imam Husayn (S) who sought time from the enemy. The popular version was created by simply attributing the last part of al-Abbas’ speech to an unnamed soldier from ibn Sa’d’s army who was supposed to have said, “*We give you time till morning to ponder over the matter of accepting Yazid as your leader. If you do not accept Yazid as your leader, we shall kill you in combat.*”⁷ The mutilation is cleverly carried out by attaching a religious sanctity of ‘request for time for penitent prayers’. However, a factual and sincere analysis brings out the lie.

It was an inviolable custom in those days that during battles, all fighting ended with the sunset to be resumed after the dawn on the next day. Only dacoits and plunderers violated this code, but never a fighting army or a person of noble descent. At Karbala, on one side was the huge army of Yazid and on the other side was the noble person of Imam Husayn (a.s.), his family and a few companions. With such overwhelming numbers, a sly nocturnal attack never even would have been contemplated. Hence, there was never any threat of a nocturnal attack. It will be trite to suggest that Imam Husayn (a.s.) perceived a nocturnal attack and wanted to forestall it by seeking a night’s respite.

The *Ahlul Bayt* (a.s.) never neglected prayers. Imam Ali (a.s.) was martyred while prostrating in the Morning Prayer. The *Ahlul Bayt* (a.s.) supplicated to God during long hours in the nights. For Imam Husayn (a.s.), prayers were an integral part of his self. It is unimaginable that Imam Husayn (a.s.) asked for a night’s respite to perform his prayers and supplications in penitence.

Lastly, the effect of a night’s respite appears to have worked only in favour of Imam Husayn (a.s.) to kindle the conscience of a few enemy soldiers who left ibn Sa’d and joined Imam Husayn (a.s.). On the other hand, no amount of advice or persuasion could dislodge even a single member from Imam Husayn’s camp. The Twelver Shia believe that the Prophet (S) as well as Imam Ali (a.s.) had given Imam Husayn (a.s.) the names of those who would be martyred along with him in Karbala. The Imam also knew that, in the initial stages, some of them would be with the enemy and that they would ultimately join him. It is therefore considered that Imam Husayn (a.s.) gave the respite to enable such people to come over to him from the enemy’s camp.

After the sunset, in the night between the ninth and the tenth days of Muharram, Imam Husayn (a.s.) led

the obligatory prayers with his companions. As soon as the prayers were finished, Imam Husayn (a.s.) made a speech before his companions. First, he praised the Lord for giving so many sincere companions and friends. He then said,

“I am thankful to you all for your affection and your willingness to help me at this hour. But, I assure you that Yazid is only thirsting for my blood. I hereby discharge you from the obligation under your pledge of allegiance to me and I release you from all bonds you pledged to assist me. I like that you leave me now and go back to your homes. I shall not hold you responsible if you go away now, as it is now not obligatory for you to remain with me. If you feel shy to leave before my eyes, I will make it easy for you by putting out the lights so that, in the darkness, nobody can see who has left the camp.”⁸

So saying, Imam Husayn (a.s.) snuffed out all the lights and darkness enveloped for a long time. At that time, there were few hundred persons besides Imam Husayn (a.s.), but, when the lamps were lit, only fifty-four companions remained, in addition to Imam Husayn’s kith and kin.

Those who remained with Husayn (a.s.) were resolute about sacrificing their lives for the cause of the Imam of the day. Imam Husayn’s brother, Abbas (a.s.) said, “*Woe to the life without you!*”⁹

Muslim bin Awsaja, an octogenarian and a companion of the Prophet (S) got up and said, “*I have heard the messenger of Allah declaring that ‘Hasan and Husayn are from my flesh and blood, and it is obligatory on everyone to obey and love them as much as I myself love them.’ So, if I desert you now, am I not responsible before the messenger of Allah? I will not tolerate a tyrant and infidel to harm you. We shall make ourselves a shield to defend and protect al-Husayn, the example of virtue and righteousness.*”

Zuhair ibn Al-Qain said, “*If we were to be killed a thousand times and our bodies revived, we would fight against the oppressor to protect our Imam and his just cause.*”

Seeing the love and devotion of his companions, Imam Husayn (a.s.) said, “*I am indeed proud to have such companions. Neither the prophets of yore, nor my grandfather, nor my father had as many devout companions as I now have at this time of adversity.*”

Another unique feature of the battle of Karbala is that impending calamity and certain death should have, normally, brought a gloom over Imam Husayn’s camp. Quite contrary to this natural response, the entire camp was jubilant. Some prided that they were fulfilling their covenant by offering their lives for Imam Husayn (a.s.). Some others were anxious to meet the Prophet (S) and Imam Ali (a.s.) and receive the rewards that awaited them. Each one was advising the other to be steadfast and to sacrifice his life for the cause of the Imam (a.s.). Muslim and the octogenarian Habib, who always presented a sober countenance, gleefully laughed as if they were small children, awaiting and about to receive the object which they fondly desired. Even the women rose to the occasion. Recounting stories of valour of the martyrs Hamza (a.s.), Ja’far (a.s.) and Imam Ali (a.s.) and several others, they encouraged their children to face the enemy valiantly and discharge their obligation to the Imam of the time. The teens were

enthusiastic and joyful in anticipation of tasting the elixir of death in martyrdom, which they considered sweeter than honey, while defending the Imam (a.s.). Historians like Abu Makhnaf, al-Tabari and Abu Ishaq al-Esfarayini record that throughout the night, supplications and prayers and frequent cries of 'Allaho Akbar' were reverberating along with the wailing of the thirsty children demanding water with their mothers trying to console them, that Imam Husayn's camp sounded like a busy bee hive.

In the enemy's camp, al-Hurr commanded a thousand men against Imam Husayn (a.s.). He was restless, for he realized that it was he, with his thousand men, who had surrounded Imam Husayn (a.s.) and prevented him from going back to Mecca, Medina or any other place. He felt guilty when he heard the cries of thirsty and hungry children in Imam Husayn's camp. The blocking of the riverbank to prevent water, the sharpening of swords and the elaborate plans of Umar bin Sa'd to eliminate a handful of persons, pricked al-Hurr's conscience. The innately cruel and vile nature of Yazid, Umar bin Sa'd and ibn Ziyad further tormented his conscience and soul. He paced his tent throughout the night. His son asked him the reason for his anguish. Al-Hurr replied, "*I am at the crossroads between Heaven and Hell. I have decided to leave Hell and go to Heaven.*" So saying, at the first ray of dawn, al-Hurr jumped on to his horse followed by his noble brother, son and faithful slave. They galloped towards Imam Husayn's camp. Al-Hurr stopped a short distance from Imam Husayn's tent, asked his son to tie his hands behind his back, in the manner of tying an apprehended criminal. Seeing al-Hurr, his brother, son and slave, Imam Husayn's companions advanced, thinking from the past experience that al-Hurr was coming to cause mischief. Al-Hurr asked his son to lay down all arms. All of them surrendered with bowed heads. Al-Hurr begged to be pardoned and Imam Husayn (a.s.) readily pardoned him saying, "*I am pleased with you, and your Lord the Creator is also pleased with you.*"

The above facts bring out another unique aspect of the battle of Karbala. In battles, people desert from a weaker side, be it weak in arms or numbers, to the opponent who has superior strength or numbers. In the battle of Karbala, none from Imam Husayn's camp left him though apparently Imam Husayn (a.s.) had no superiority in numbers or arms. On the other hand, from Yazid's army of over a lakh of soldiers, at least forty persons came over to fight for Imam Husayn's cause. There was no incentive for them other than the independence of their spirit to uphold justice and oppose repression. They did not choose to strike any deal in the darkness of night. The switching over was not a clandestine affair, but an open and defiant protest by right thinking persons against the oppression and injustice of Yazid and his hordes.

[1.](#) Life of Imam Husayn [s] [The Saviour], p. 153–158.

[2.](#) Life of Imam Husayn [s] [The Saviour], p. 158 – 159.

[3.](#) Life of Imam Husayn [s] [The Saviour], p. 145.

[4.](#) Al-Iqd al-Fareed, vol. 4 p.168, Imam Husayn (a.s.) & Tragic Saga of Karbala, p 184.

[5.](#) Nafasul Mahmoom, p 322, Imam Husayn (a.s.) & Tragic Saga of Karbala, p. 177, Life of Imam Husayn (a.s.) [The Saviour], p. 152 – 153.

[6.](#) The Caliphate by Agha Muhammad Sultan Mirza, p. 24 quoting "History of the Dominion of the Arabs in Spain."

[7.](#) Nafasul Mahmoom, p 322, Imam Husayn (a.s.) & Tragic Saga of Karbala, p. 177, Life of Imam Husayn the Saviour, p. 152 – 153.

- [8.](#) Nafasul Mahmoom, p 323, Imam Husayn (a.s.) & Tragic Saga of Karbala, p. 178, Life of Imam Husayn the Saviour, p. 160 – 153.
- [9.](#) Al-Irshad of Sheikh al-Mufid, Tr. IKA Howard, p. 347.

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