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Hypocrites And Repentance

وَإِذَا قِيلَ لَهُمْ تَعَالَوْا يَسْتَغْفِرْ لَكُمْ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ لَوَّوْا رُؤُوسَهُمْ وَرَأَيْتَهُمْ يَصُدُّونَ وَهُمْ مُسْتَكْبِرُونَ

“When it is said to them, ‘Come, the Messenger of Allah will pray for your forgiveness,’ they turn aside their heads, and you see them turning away their faces in arrogance.”¹

سَوَاءٌ عَلَيْهِمْ أَسْتَغْفَرْتَ لَهُمْ أَمْ لَمْ تَسْتَغْفِرْ لَهُمْ لَنْ يَغْفِرَ اللَّهُ لَهُمْ إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يَهْدِي الْقَوْمَ الْفَاسِقِينَ

“It is the same for them whether you pray for their forgiveness or not. Allah will not forgive them. Surely, Allah guides not rebellious transgressors.”²

A sinner, who realizes that he is a sinner and that he has transgressed the limits set for him by Allah, will, try to find a way to repent. But a sinner who does not recognize that he sins, who thinks that the sins he commits are actually good deeds, will not try to find a way to repent. If one suggests to him to follow the correct path, the path which will bring him success, he will arrogantly reject it because of his ignorance.

Hypocrites belong to this second group of sinners. They pretend to be Muslims and to have faith. All that they do is fake; they do not have sincere faith in Allah or His Messenger. In reality, they epitomize compound ignorance (*jahl murakkab*) unaware of both of their mistakes and of their ignorance.

It is because of this kind of ignorance that whenever anyone of the hypocrites during the time of the Prophet was encouraged to go before the Prophet (S) and ask him to ask for forgiveness, he would arrogantly refuse and shake his head, showing that he does not need the Prophet to do that for him. The reason for this is that such hypocrites did not believe in the Prophet or his religion.

This kind of behavior is not exclusive to hypocrites, rather it is found in any society that is ignorant, but unaware or its ignorance. Such a society will never do anything to fix itself. It is for this reason that

scholars have said that guiding people who possess simple ignorance (*jahl basit*), or ignorant people who admit that they are ignorant, is easy, while guiding people who possess compound ignorance, ignorant people who do not know that they are ignorant, is difficult or even impossible.

The Prophet's Repentance Results In The Pardon Of Sins

It can be gathered by the verses regarding the prophets who repented for a sinner that people would come to the prophets because of the close relationship that they had to Allah, asking them to ask for forgiveness. They would, in other words, ask the prophets to ask Allah to forgive them.

Jacob's (*Ya'qub*) sons regretted their evil deed when they saw Joseph (*Yusuf*), whom they had thrown into a well, become the vizier of a part of Egypt's land. They went to their father and said:

"Oh father! Ask forgiveness for our sins for us, for we were truly at fault."³

Jacob told them that he would soon do this for them, that is, he would plead for their forgiveness once he saw the signs of regret on their faces. He said:

"Soon I will ask my Lord for forgiveness for you, for he is indeed the oft-forgiving, the most merciful."⁴

Sometimes the prophets would promise to ask Allah to forgive sinners. An example of this is when Abraham (*Ibrahim*) made such a promise to Azar:

"I shall pray for forgiveness for you, though I have no power (to get) anything on thy behalf from Allah."⁵

The meaning of this sentence, which sheds light into the reality of the prophets performing repentance for others, is that the prophets are not in charge of forgiving or punishing sinners. Allah did not give the task of judgment to them. The prophets are nothing more than a means; if Allah's permission was not prevalent, such asking for the forgiveness of others would be ineffective.

The Qur'an's Order To The Muslims

The Qur'an clearly orders sinners to go to the Prophet and ask him to seek their forgiveness from Allah. The Qur'an states, with no uncertainty, that if the Messenger of Allah prays for a sinner and asks Allah to forgive his sins, his sins will be forgiven. The verse reads as follows:

"We did not send a messenger, except to be obeyed, in accordance with the will of Allah. If they had only, when they were unjust to themselves, come to you and asked Allah's forgiveness, and the Messenger had asked forgiveness for them, they would have found Allah indeed the oft-returning, the most merciful."⁶

For this reason the Muslims of the past would ask their infallible leaders to repent in their stead. Thus, the infallibles interceded for them in this world.

This ability and this kind of intercession are not exclusive to prophets. A believer can ask Allah to forgive other believers, resulting in the forgiveness of their sins. But the believers cannot ask Allah to forgive the polytheists, as it says in the Qur'an:

“It is not fitting for the Prophet and those who believe that they should pray for forgiveness for the polytheists.”⁷

Sometimes the 'throne-bearers' (these are Allah's infallible angels) pray for the pardoning of believers' sins, as mentioned in the Qur'an:

“Those who sustain the throne (of Allah) and those around it sing glory and praise to their Lord, believe in Him, and implore forgiveness for those who believe.”⁸

This verse, as well as the verses mentioned from the *Surahs Nisa'* and *Yusuf*, are proofs of the Qur'anic validity of intercession. Allah, because of the station that the prophets occupy in proximity to Him, accepts their intercession and forgives the sins of those who take the prophets as intercessors.

A Misunderstanding

Some of those who do not believe in the Shia creed claim that the intended consequence of coming to the Prophet and his asking for forgiveness is that the Prophet forgives those who have transgressed his own rights.

The reason for this is that the hypocrites were people who oppressed the Prophet, and because of this, the Prophet had a right over them. According to this, the station that the Prophet had, namely being able to ask Allah to forgive the sins of others, was not a special station.

Every human is equal to the prophet in this sense. Anyone who oppresses another must ask that person to forgive him. The people holding this opinion did not pay attention to one point: if the meaning were this, that is that the Prophet would forgive them for the oppression that they had committed against him, the verse would read as follows: “Go to the prophet and he will forgive you.” But in the verse the term “pray for your forgiveness” is used. The difference between the two is clear for those who can see.

A Condition For Making The Repentance Of Others Effective

The Qur'an states plainly that Allah will not forgive the sin of polytheism, as the following verse says:

“Allah does not forgive setting up partners with Him, but He forgives anything else.”⁹

Hence, polytheism is an unforgivable sin and a barrier for the forgiveness of other sins.

The Prophet's asking for the forgiveness of hypocrites is ineffective because of their being polytheists. Polytheism is a crime that cannot be excused. The heart of a polytheist is dark and thus unsuitable for being forgiven. This reality is lucidly explained in the Qur'an:

“Whether you ask for their forgiveness or not (their sin is unforgivable); even if you ask seventy times for their forgiveness, Allah will not forgive them, because they have rejected Allah and his Messenger.” [10](#)

Since the topic of intercession has come up, we will discuss it in order to remove some doubts. But this subject should be discussed elsewhere in more detail.

Sometimes people think of intercession as favoritism or as an excuse to supersede the divine law. This would result in a person gaining a recompense of which he was unworthy.

It must be realized that intercession is a definite part of the Islamic belief system. Anyone who has even a little information about the Qur'an, the prophetic traditions or the belief system of the Muslims in all ages and places would know that intercession is given only to those who deserve it. This point should not be subject to doubt.

We must define the reality of intercession and its conditions before we relate the verses regarding it. The purpose of doing this is to distinguish between real intercession and the fake intercession which some people claim that they will receive in the future.

The Literal And Figurative Meaning Of Intercession

Intercession comes from the Arabic word *”shifa’ah,”* the literal meaning of which is to put two things together, to pair them. In religious terminology, it means the friends of Allah (the prophets, Imams and righteous people) help those who have committed mistakes in their lives. There are two cases of helping a sinner. This first kind is similar to favoritism, where oppression and unjust discrimination take place. The second kind is similar to reform, giving hope and a way to reach perfection.

If one would help undeserving people and place them before others this would be unjust discrimination and an encouragement for committing sin. This is the incorrect form of intercession. Sinners having such a hope of intercession do not cease to commit sins. Obviously this is not the goal of the verses regarding intercession. Intellect would reject such a belief.

It is not unjust discrimination when a sinner who has a spiritual relationship with Allah and faith in Allah's friends receives the help of the intercessors on the Day of Judgment. This is not only an encouragement, but it is justice, a way of obtaining spiritual growth and a reason for a sinner to turn back after he has walked half way down the road of destruction.

The explanation for this is the same as that found in the glorious Qur'an – the intercession of the friends

of Allah depends on Allah's permission. No one can intercede until Allah permits it. It goes unsaid that Allah does not give permission superficially, or without wisdom behind it. Allah's permission only includes those who deserve forgiveness, who have made mistakes in their lives but have not reached the level of disparagement and insolence.

If one's relationship with Allah has become weak on certain levels, it is still not completely broken. Such people deserve intercession.

Intercession has a condition that makes it serve as a warning sign. When a person realizes that he occasionally commits a sin, he must stop doing that sin immediately. He must cease sinning because he does not want the doors of intercession to close on him. There will be no road of salvation for one stuck behind closed doors.

Attention to this matter has an affect on sinners. It makes them return to the correct path and change their incorrect lifestyle. In reality, it encourages them to clean up their lives.

Experience shows us that a criminal will turn back from the road of destruction if given hope. He will turn back if he feels that there is salvation in changing his wrongful ways.

In international law, there is a law that forgives and releases prisoners who have been sentenced to life in prison. The reason this law exists is to give the prisoners hope, resulting in a change in lifestyle. If this hope were not present, there would be no reason for them to sit peacefully in the prison. There would be no reason for them to stop committing crimes, because there is no punishment worse than life imprisonment.

Intercession is the hope given to deserving people. It makes them change their religious and ethical lives. It is exclusive to those who have protected their relationship with Allah and His friends. But, the person who has not performed good deeds, has not been benefited with faith in Allah and has spent his life in sin and corruption will never receive intercession. The difference between these two groups of people can be brought to life by an example:

Imagine that some soldiers are ordered to build an army base on the top of a mountain. Building this army base is incredibly important to protect their country from foreign attack. An adept general gives them the necessary tools to build this army base. He then gives the order. Some undisciplined and scared soldiers do not obey the general's command and remain at the bottom of the mountain. These soldiers will never receive the general's help. But, another group of soldiers sacrifice themselves and quickly climb up the mountain. The general will take care of weak soldiers in this second group when they tremble out of fear. He will also help them climb the mountain at its difficult parts.

This kind of help is a form of intercession given to those walking along the path. There is no problem with the general the general announcement of this before climbing the mountain by saying: "I shall help you if you cannot climb up the difficult parts. I shall use all of my strength to help you achieve this goal."

This sentence from the general will encourage the soldiers. It will give them hope. It will increase their strength and power of resistance. In reality, this is a way to train the soldiers and a tool for them to reach perfection.

The Qur'an And Intercession

The verses regarding intercession can be divided into three categories:

First: verses that negate intercession. For example:

“Then guard yourselves against a day when one soul shall not avail another, nor shall intercession be accepted for it, nor shall compensation be taken from it, nor shall anyone be helped (from outside).” [11](#)

Second: verses that specify intercession for only Allah. For example:

“You have none, besides Him, to protect or intercede for you.” [12](#)

Third: verses that state clearly the existence of those who intercede by the permission of Allah. Allah also limits the acceptance of this intercession as He pleases. For example:

“Who is there that can intercede in His presence except as He permits.” [13](#)

And:

“On that day no intercession will avail except for those for whom permission has been granted by (Allah), the Most Gracious, and whose word is acceptable to Him.” [14](#)

These verse and the verses that are mentioned in the footnotes clearly state the fact that there will be intercessors on the Day of Judgment. They will intercede, with the permission of Allah, for sinners and Allah will accept their intercession.

One who doubts the validity of intercession or completely rejects it can understand the matter clearly by studying the relevant verses.

What Are The Meanings Of The Verses That Negate Intercession?

The goal of the first group of verses which downright negate intercession becomes clear when one looks at the superstitious beliefs that the polytheistic Arabs had about intercession. They said: “These idols are our intercessors before God.” Allah related this belief in different chapters of the Qur'an. For example:

“They say: ‘These are our intercessors with Allah.’” [15](#)

Many of the verses that negate intercession are negating the kind of intercession that the ignorant Arabs believed in. Because of this, when the Qur'an mentions the subject of interceding idols it quickly negates it, then says intercession belongs to Allah. The Qur'an states:

“What! Do they take for intercessors others besides Allah? Say: ‘Even if they have no power whatever and no intelligence?’ Say: ‘To Allah belongs exclusively (the right to grant) intercession.” [16](#)

What is understood is that the purpose of the verses which negate intercession is not to negate the correct form of intercession, which, as the third group of verses state, is done with Allah's permission. Instead, they negate the intercession of idols, to which Allah has not granted the authority of intercession.

The goal of some other verses that apparently negate intercession is, instead, to condemn some of the false notions held by the Jews in the Prophet's time. They thought that they would receive the intercession of the prophets from whom they descended, regardless of the sins they committed. They thought that they could expunge their sins, just as they expunge their crimes in this world, with bribery, favoritism, gifts and so forth. They thought that they could sway the Judge's mind.

The Qur'an states, in order to negate this kind of thinking and in order to announce that no person has an absolute right to intercession, that bribery and gifts will not be accepted, and that nothing other than one's actions will be a source of salvation. The Qur'an states:

“Then guard yourselves against a day when one soul shall not avail another, nor shall intercession be accepted for it, nor shall compensation be taken from it, nor shall anyone be helped (from outside).” [17](#)

As a result, when one considers the popular beliefs or the polytheistic Arabs and Jewish beliefs about intercession and looks, as well, at the previous and subsequent verses, one realizes that the verses which negate intercession are negating the false forms of intercession that these two groups believed in.

This false intercession differs from the intercession that the second and third groups of verses mention.

The verses that state that intercession is only for Allah and the verses that state that intercessors exist with the permission of Allah do not contradict each other in the least. The reason for this is that intercession belongs to Allah and others only have this ability through Allah's permission.

[1.](#) 63:5

[2.](#) 63:6

[3.](#) 12:97

[4.](#) 12:98

[5.](#) 60:4

[6.](#) 4:64

[7.](#) 9:113

[8.](#) 40:7

[9.](#) 4:48

[10.](#) 9:80

[11.](#) 2:48 ,also refer to 2: 123, 2:254 and 74:48

[12.](#) 32:4, also refer to 6:51, 6:70, 39:44 and 40:18

[13.](#) 2:255

[14.](#) 20: 109, also refer to 10:3, 21:28, 19:87, 34:23, 43:86 and 53:26

[15.](#) 10: 18

[16.](#) 39:43-44

[17.](#) 2:48 This verse is about the history of the Israelites. This is negating the intercession that the Jews believe in.

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