

Lecture 5: Discussion on Surah Al Asr

‘Hal min nasarin yansurana? Hal min nasarin yansurana?, Hal min’

Is there a helper to help me? Is there a helper to help me? Is there a

Labbaik ya Hussain!

Labbaik ya Hussain!

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

وَالْعَصْرِ

“By the time.” (103:1)

إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَفِي خُسْرٍ

"Verily man is in loss".(103:2)

إِلَّا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ وَتَوَّصَوْا بِالْحَقِّ وَتَوَّصَوْا بِالصَّبْرِ

“Save those who believe, and do good deeds, and exhort one another to truth and exhort one another to endurance.” (103:3)

The specific time of Asr is being sworn by to convey with certainty that man is destined to be a loser. The only exception is for those who accept faith and do good deeds, and they also promote “haq” (truth) and demonstrate “sabr” (patience). This particular Surah of the Quran begins with the word “Asr” (time) and ends with the word “sabr”.

The Holy Quran is a complete and comprehensive Book and without any doubt, its identity as a composite whole is firmly established. Yet, today I want to share my intuitive outlook in this regard with you. That is, if we focus our attention on a certain segment of the Quran, for example if we focus totally and specifically on Surah Asr under consideration, then we discover that this particular component of the Quran is so weighty that it can claim to be at par with the entire Quran. All of what is evident in the Quran seems reflected in this component. I notice the same grandeur in this brilliant Surah Asr, too.

In this Surah (chapter) God is communicating a message, and keeping this message in view, at the very outset He swears by Time. In literary configuration, sometimes a particular technique is used to introduce a topic or a subject. In Arabic this is referred to as technique of Bara'at-Istehlal. This implies that the very first word used or the beginning itself, portrays the essence of the entire work and gives a clear indication of what is to be expected ahead.

The ninth surah of the Quran, Surah Bara'at uses this very technique. Out of all the hundred and fourteen chapters in the Quran this is the only one that does not begin with Bismillah, the name of Allah. Not using Bismillah here is pointing to the use of the same technique that informs of the outcome at the very start.

Absence of Bismillah here clearly indicates that we will not witness any reference to Mercy of God. In fact, it prepares us to expect warnings of punishment, threats of dire consequence and expression of dislike. So a passage that spells punishment, that declares immunity cannot be coupled to God's quality of Mercy and Compassion. It cannot be introduced in the name of Allah, the Merciful the Compassionate, for such a beginning would simply not be congruent with the situation.

I remember an incidence here that is worth sharing with you. Asmae was a noted Arab scholar and a remarkable poet and he narrates that once he decided to go on a sight-seeing trip in appreciation of nature. So he set out from home to roam through deserts and mountains, view plains and valleys, enjoy the waterfalls and the natural beauty all around. Vast stretches lay ahead of him but he saw no human being around.

While he was roaming in this solitude he saw a respectable looking elderly man. Asmae was drawn to him, as he had not met another human for many days. He reached out to him and soon realized he was talking to a learned man with a good literary taste.

Now when a poet comes across an appreciative audience, he relishes this opportunity. Asmae asked the Arab, "If you like I can present my work to you". The Sheikh being a man of good taste gave a remarkable reply, "If I have to listen to something why should I listen to your work? Can anything ever compare to God's work? So if you must then recite to me the work of God". Asmae says, "I obliged him. I kept reciting verses from the Quran and the learned Sheikh kept nodding his head in appreciation". After every sentence he kept saying, "Yes this is the work of God". He was truly moved by the recitation and acknowledged it by saying, "Why should I not be influenced? After all this is the work of God and

His work is the best of all”.

Asmae kept reciting and the Sheikh kept reaffirming, “Yes this is the work of God”. At one point in the recitation the Sheikh lifted his bowed head and asked, “Whose work is this”? Asmae was taken aback by this inquiry. So far the Sheikh had affirmed but now he was questioning the authenticity. He replied, “This is God’s work” but the Sheikh disputed, “This is not God’s work”.

Asmae was confused by this change of stance and deliberated how best he could respond. In this perplexed state he realized he had by mistake altered the last part of the sentence. So he recited the correct text at which the Sheikh nodded, “Yes this is the work of God”. Asmae wondered how a small alteration had drawn this response of vehement denial. And what was this minor alteration? The verse Asmae recited was,

وَالسَّارِقُ وَالسَّارِقَةُ فَاقْطَعُوا أَيْدِيَهُمَا جَزَاءُ بِمَا كَسَبَا نَكَالًا مِنَ اللَّهِ

“One who steals, be it man or woman, cut their hands. This is a recompense for their deeds and a severe punishment from God”.(5:38)

This far Asmae had recited the text correctly. The original verse concludes with authority that

وَاللَّهُ عَزِيزٌ حَكِيمٌ

“God is All Mighty, All Wise”(5:38).

Asmae had by mistake recited ‘God is Forgiving, Most Merciful’, instead of the actual text.

Now all these are Names of God and Asmae presumed substituting one for another was not a major error, but the Sheikh had clearly disagreed and only gave assent after its correction. “What’s the matter Sheikh”? Asmae asked, “Agreed I made a mistake but it was not so grave for you to declare categorically that it could not be the work of God”.

The Sheikh said, “How come despite your literary taste and insight you cannot figure out that it would be inappropriate for God to introduce himself as Most Forgiving and Merciful when He is handing down punishment? These names are relevant only after holding a discussion on forgiveness and mercy”.

“However, here the reference is to harsh outcomes and chastisement, hence God uses the name Al Aziz, the All Mighty that suggests He possesses power over everything. He has complete authority to punish any guilty person and to determine this punishment on the basis of wisdom such that punishment dealt serves to deter crime, discourage bad intentions and dissuade criminal activity. Thus, in the context used, the names All Mighty and All Wise are most suited, whereas use of names Most Forgiving and Most Merciful are not appropriate”.

From the discussion conducted so far we can safely conclude that if locations are so specifically transfixed that a particular Name of God cannot be replaced by another one of His Names, for we have to admit that Asmae had by mistake recited ‘Ghafoor ur Raheem’ instead of ‘Aziz ul Hakeem’. He did not name another being. In fact, he did not name anyone besides God, so if we do not have the liberty or permission to exchange one name of God with another, it is frightening to imagine a situation where no linkage to the name exists at all.

So, I was telling you that this Surah Asr too employs the use of the technique of Bara’at Istehlal. A certain topic is being discussed in this Surah, and in relation to the topic God swears neither by the sun, nor the moon and neither by the stars or the galaxies. In fact, He swears by Time. The very first word of the Surah gives insight into what lies ahead. This word informs us that there is a particular Asr time in God’s estimate that is important enough to swear by. After swearing by “Asr” so vehemently we are warned:

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وَالْعَصْرِ

“By the time.” (103:1)

إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لِفِي خُسْرٍ

"Verily man is in loss".(103:2)

إِلَّا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ وَتَوَّصَوْا بِالْحَقِّ وَتَوَّصَوْا بِالصَّبْرِ

“Save those who believe, and do good deeds, and exhort one another to truth and exhort one another to endurance.” (103:3)

The word “Save” in the above verse separates the people who deserve to be forgiven from the rest of humanity that has bargained for loss. Now I ask my audience, is this Surah representative of the whole Quran or not? Is it or is it not informing us of God’s absolute decision? That only those who believe and do good deeds should expect deliverance and there is no salvation for the rest.

The order of expression in the Surah is also meaningful. As a rule when an order is issued for a group than the smaller subgroup is excused and the larger one is bound by the order. It is improper to enforce judgment or restriction on a smaller group and excuse the larger section.

Suppose we have a group where some people are educated and some are not. If the educated people outnumber the uneducated, that is, if the educated are in a majority, then assessment will target the majority. It may be said, ‘the group is educated except for a few people’. If instead the assessment says, ‘the group is uneducated except for a few people’, then this order of representation is incorrect. An order must encircle the group or the number of the people forming the majority. The minority as a rule is exempt from the order.

In the Kalima, ‘**There is no god but Allah**’, the term ‘no god’ encircles the majority. There is no other god for anyone we can see is not God. What we can comprehend is not God and anyone we can hear is not God either. Besides, the projection of our imagination and the image formed by our estimation is also not God. He is not in the past, present or future. Now this list is so extensive for whatever or whoever we see is not God. In the context of Kalima those who cannot be God, form the majority and our one and only Allah stands out as a singular minority.

A similar example can be quoted from the Quran,

قُلْ لَا أَسْأَلُكُمْ عَلَيْهِ أَجْرًا إِلَّا الْمَوَدَّةَ فِي الْقُرْبَىٰ

“Say, I do not ask of you any recompense for it (the toils of Prophethood), save the love of (my) relatives”. (42:23)

This puts aside all recompense efforts, be they prayers, praise, good deeds or any other response. All are being refused. Only one form of recompense is suitable and that is love of the Prophet’s near and dear ones. Except for this specific love, no other compensation is acceptable to the Prophet.

It clearly means that if a person thinks compensation can be offered in the form of nawafil (additional prayers) or in the form of rukuh, sujood, qiyam or qaood, or by recitation and remembrance of Quran, or by performing Haj, then this is not true. Now if it is assumed that the Prophet can be duly rewarded by this form of compensation, and our obligations to the Prophet will be fulfilled by this activity, then the answer to this is simply,

قُلْ لَا أَسْأَلُكُمْ عَلَيْهِ أَجْرًا إِلَّا الْمَوَدَّةَ فِي الْقُرْبَىٰ

“I ask of nothing but the love of my near ones”. (42:23)

In matters of religion the mandatory obligations have to be observed and the necessary tasks must be undertaken with responsibility. You must worship in the spirit of worship. Hence, if you want to offer anything as compensation to the Prophet than it can only be love of near ones. Nothing else can qualify or be worthy of recompense.

Similarly in Surah Asr, God exempts the group that earns salvation. The majority order ***“verily man is in loss” (103:2)*** is supplemented by two emphasis points. The first emphasis is conveyed by the Arabic word “inna” (verily) followed by the next emphasis in the form of pre-fix ‘lam’ with a ‘fatha’ on the word “lafi”. In Arabic the alphabet ‘lam’ is for emphasis. Using these two emphasis points the absolute ruling is conveyed that majority of human beings are losers.

Let the literary minded amongst my audience pay special attention to what I am about to say. In this sentence of Surah Asr ***“verily man is in loss”***, there is no verb (in the Arabic text); not in any tense, past, present or future. It does not say man will be a loser or is a loser or was a loser. The is, was or will be are added on by us. There is no verb in the text. This is a noun clause and it has a profound and far reaching effect. It encompasses past, present and future and is relevant at all times. The Quran does not suggest that man will, at some point in the future, become a loser. That question does not arise for man is a loser and is likely to remain a loser.

A loser is not one destined to enter Hell and burn in flames of fire. Real loss is in the form of denial of God’s Mercy. If Compassion and Mercy are not directed towards man from any direction, he definitely stands to lose even if he does not feel the pain or affliction at that moment. So the sentence ‘Man is a loser’ means man is denied God’s Mercy in this world and the Hereafter. The desired glance of Mercy is not for this person. Such people form the losing majority.

Towards whom is this glance of Mercy then directed? It is directed towards

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“those who believe and do good deeds and exhort one another to truth and exhort one another to endurance.” (103:3)

The obvious reference is to people who do not just bank on doing good deeds themselves, rather they exhort or ‘will’ others to do good and also urge them to uphold the truth.

The word ***“tawasau”*** (Will) in our everyday use refers to the deathbed wish. Instructions or requests we make in our dying moments are referred to as a Will (wasiyat). Now let us look at the Quranic verses where God has used this word for Himself,

يُوصِيكُمُ اللَّهُ فِي ۞۴ ۞۴ أَوْ لَدِكُمْ ۞۴

“Allah commands you concerning your children” (4: 11)

And we are further told,

وَصِيًّا نَا الْاِنْسَانِ بِوَالِدَيْهِ اِحْسَانًا

“We have exhorted man to treat his parents kindly”(46: 15)

Also there is a command in three consecutive verses:

ذَلِكُمْ وَصَّاكُمُ

..thus doth He command you... (6: 151, 6: 152, 6: 153)

ذَلِكُمْ وَصَّاكُمُ بِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَعْقِلُونَ

“This He enjoins on you, so that you understand” (6: 151)

ذَلِكُمْ وَصَّاكُمُ بِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَذَكَّرُونَ

“This He enjoins on you, so that you may be mindful” (6: 152)

ذَلِكُمْ وَصَّاكُمُ بِهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ

“This He enjoins on you, so that you may fear Him” (6: 153)

So if Will is a dying wish why would God refer to His exhortations as such? The concept of death does not exist for God. For Him there is life and only life. The word Will has a broad meaning and can be used in multiple ways. It is a final decision. Something that is not likely to change. It is fixed, final and permanent.

The speaker addresses you on Friday and Eid sermons with the words ‘O God’s creation I exhort you’. So it is clear that Will is a message that is not likely to change or alter. What we say in our lifetime can be renewed, changed or deleted but what we say close to death attains certainty and is referred to as wasiyat even though the word itself is not linked directly to death. Referring to the Surah again, let us reiterate that salvation is for those who demonstrate faith, do good deeds and exhort one another to truth and endurance. They do so in an emphatic manner and what they say is authentic and final.

Respected audience, if I deliberate on this Surah in a lecture form you will get bored, so keeping your disposition in mind I shall adopt a particular style so you do not lose interest and my direction stays focused, too. I request you to pay attention and grasp each and every word I say. In this particular Surah and in many other places in the Quran the word ‘Iman’ (faith) is coupled with the words ‘amal e saleh’

(good deeds). Consider these,

وَعَدَ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ مِنْهُمْ مَغْفِرَةً وَأَجْرًا عَظِيمًا

“Allah has promised those who believe and do good deeds forgiveness and a great recompense.”

(48:29)

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ سَيَجْعَلُ لَهُمُ الرَّحْمَنُ وُدًّا

“Verily those who believe and do good deeds God (Ar-Rahman) will appoint for them love.”

(19:96)

Whenever, God mentions those who have faith, He follows it by mentioning their deeds. Both these words used one after another double to form a regular pattern. There is no doubt that religion is neither exclusively deeds, nor is it entirely faith. Religion will only be effective when faith is coupled with good deeds and if this faith serves as an agent for useful activity.

In the absence of faith, you can very well judge, there is no genuine resolve to do good deeds. Let me say, there is no freshness in faith without supporting deeds and minus faith deeds are a non-entity. I cannot deny the solitary existence of faith, but at least let me say that faith in the absence of corresponding action is a tree with no signs of spring, or a tree without any fruit.

Spring is meaningful only in the presence of a real tree. This tree must have branches, too. That is why Faith is a primary component of Asool e Din (Rules of Religion), whereas Deeds are regarded as supplementary components of Religion (Farou e Din). A branch that has been cut off from an un-blossomed tree will remain green for a while but will soon wilt away because it is severed from its roots.

Thus, deeds not supported by faith are akin to a severed branch. Similarly, faith not accompanied by deeds is passive. Since, faith is the fuel that propels all actions; its presence signals the ability or the potential for action. However, the tree will show signs of spring only when this potential is translated into action.

Here permit me to say that God selected Unity for His Being. Why say selected? He is by Himself. He is Alone. He is One. He is Unique. He is Incomparable and ‘there is no one like Him’. These characteristics are exclusive to God. Now besides God whatever else exists, be it ideologies or personalities or creation at large, there is plurality for them. It is categorically stated,

سُبْحَانَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ الْأَزْوَاجَ كُلَّهَا

“Glory be to Him who created pairs of everything” (36:36).

Let me translate this more precisely. He created pairs of everything and interlinked them to each other. When the two components of a pair are together they are useful and productive. Absence of one or another is considered death. A combination of Body and Soul signifies life while separation of the two is death. Knowledge and its Application is another pair. To possess knowledge but show no utility for it signifies presence of one component of a pair only. On the other hand if you are a doer but you possess no knowledge than this too is not enough. Knowledge has to be coupled with its Application. The body has to have a soul and words must possess meaning.

At this stage, if you focus your imagination you will appreciate this delicate point. A word does not exist without a meaning and similarly meaning does not exist without a word. However, a word cannot exchange place with its meaning, nor can meaning replace the word. Word belongs to the book but do you think its meaning resides in the book right next to the word? Meaning occupies another location. Words are for the book. Meanings are for the people. They are for the people who possess knowledge.

It is for this very reason that God did not appoint words or the Book as a witness to the Prophet. Instead He pointed to the source where the meaning resides. After all Prophethood is not about words; it is all about meanings. Words can never bear witness to the Prophet. This is the responsibility of people who perceive the essence of Prophethood.

قُلْ كَفَىٰ بِاللَّهِ شَهِيدًا ۖ بَيْنِي وَبَيْنَكُمْ ۖ وَمَنْ عِنْدَهُ عِلْمُ الْكِتَابِ

“Say, between me and you God is sufficient as a witness and he who has knowledge of the Book.” (13:43)

The words “he who has knowledge of the Book” is extremely refined and meaningful. The word “Book” is being mentioned here as a mere formality. The witness here is one who has knowledge of the Book but the Book itself is not the witness. Knowledge of the Book is not with the Book. The location of knowledge is not the Book, it lies elsewhere. Thus, words are for the Book and knowledge is for people worthy of it. Both must stay together.

Now after accepting this logic if I assume that words alone are sufficient then my contention would be wrong or to put it differently, my words would be so meaningless! No doubt words are connected to their meanings but no one can say meanings reside on a paper. Words are for the paper. They are for the book. But meanings reside within the hearts. The real Ayaat are stored in the hearts and breasts of those granted knowledge.

Nature has a way of creating pairs. Sometimes in the form of two identical things like two ears, two eyes, and sometimes two separate things are paired together, like heart and mind. Now feel the difference between the heart and mind. Knowing is one thing and believing is another. The two are often phrased

together: knowing and believing.

This may be of interest to you. To know something does not mean to believe it, too. There are plenty of examples in this world where one may know but not believe. However, knowledge that does not lead to conviction is of no consequence. The purpose of learning is to believe. Hence, by not believing the very purpose of acquiring knowledge is negated. It is as though the preface of the book remains and the content is wasted. As if ablution is done but prayer remains unsaid.

To all those present I wish to say that knowing is one thing and believing is another. In my opinion even one who does not know agrees that the location of knowledge cannot be the heart. And it is not the heart. The right location is the mind. The location of belief is the heart. The mind knows and the heart believes. In addition we can say the heart either believes or it does not believe.

Believing and not believing are both functions of the heart. Now if a state of equilibrium exists and the heart accepts the righteous and rejects the evil, then this is a remarkable heart! On the contrary if the heart rejects the virtuous and accepts the worthless than woe be to this heart! This is sheer rebellion.

Knowing and not knowing are functions of the mind. Believing and not believing are functions of the heart. This is the reason God mentions the heart when praising the faith of somebody. The Quran informs us,

اللَّهُ حَبَّبَ إِلَيْكُمُ الْإِيمَانَ وَزَيَّنَهُ فِي قُلُوبِكُمْ

“Allah has endeared the faith to you, and made it attractive to your hearts” (49:7)

When rebuking the disbelievers He says,

فِي قُلُوبِهِمْ مَرَضٌ فَزَادَهُمُ

“Their hearts are diseased they do not believe” (2: 10)

He further says

وَلَمَّا يَدْخُلِ الْإِيمَانُ فِي قُلُوبِكُمْ

“Faith has not yet entered your hearts”. (49: 14)

When mentioning faith God does not mention the mind. He mentions the heart. Believing and not believing are functions of the heart. When we believe or chose not to believe, our hearts are involved in the process. But knowing is a function of the mind. Whenever, we forget something and try to remember

it, our minds are taxed. We feel the stress. Hence, we establish that the location of knowledge and belief are separate. The function of one is to Know and the other is to Believe. Had the two functions been identical then in that case, those who knew would also believe.

Nature in general has paired of things. Religion exists in this form, too. One component is 'Iman', faith and the other is 'amal', action or deeds. If we bank on our faith and discard action then we too belong to the group that considers one component of religion to be sufficient, for we are content with mere faith and are indifferent to related deeds. A similar situation will arise if we engage in action but disconnect with faith. The essence of religion is served best when both components are assigned their due; faith in its place and action in its place.

I wish to add to this analysis. Faith and action form a pair in relation to religion. Now look at these separately. Action itself has two aspects. Doing something and not doing it. Shariat (Rules of Law) not only require us to do some work, it also forbids or restrains us from doing certain things. Am I right? It tells us not to indulge in vice but wants us to follow the obligatory. You will be a good practitioner if you respect both aspects. Now if you say your prayers regularly and also indulge in theft then are you a worthy practitioner? Will anyone approve of this practice? No way. You qualify by doing what you are required to do and avoiding that which is forbidden.

I will explain this difference to you. Obligatory or mandatory work is not to be performed all the time. It is to be undertaken only sometime. There is no perpetual requirement of obligatory prayer (namaz or salat) or fast (roza) or recitation (zikr) or Pilgrimage (Haj). Mandatory tasks are occasional.

Now what does the Law say regarding forbidden tasks? When shall we not lie? When shall we not steal? When shall we not be unfair? When are we not to keep our promises? These questions are meaningless. These are not to be undertaken at any time. Not during the day, not at night, neither in the morning nor in the evening.

Thus, we find out that the negative aspect has a broad spectrum, whereas the positive aspect is applicable at some time and is not applicable at another time. Since, the not doing part has such a wide expanse it takes precedence over the doing part. Simply put, first reject that which must not be done and later do what must be done.

It is obvious that you will avoid vice if you dislike it and do what is required if you like it. So it is established that action has two aspects. One aspect is positive and the other one is negative. There is love on one side and hatred on the other side. Repulsion on one side and attraction on the other.

Now just as action has two aspects, faith too is dual natured. Faith implies believing or accepting something. But on what condition must this acceptance come? On refusal to accept some other things first. You cannot accept everything. You cannot group together theft and prayer, falsehood and fasting. Now if by any chance you accept both the just and the unjust then this cannot be termed faith for if after accepting the truth you accept the false then the earlier acceptance is wasted. As a rule first you refuse

the false and then you accept the truth. So there are two aspects of faith and two aspects of action.

At this stage I have to state that there is a vast difference between faith and action. I will highlight the main differences between the two. Faith is not acquired with the help of eyes or ears, nor with the assistance of the tongue or hands or feet. Faith is not related to our physical being. In fact, it is linked to our spirit (ruh).

In accepting or not accepting faith our body is not affected. You can accept faith while lying down, or while walking or sitting down. You can accept faith when you are awake and at a higher level you can even accept faith while asleep. But certainly our physical body is not involved in the process.

Since, faith is not an activity; we are not required to do anything or to say anything. Neither are we required to go here and there. It is simply an approval by the spirit, an acceptance not by the tongue but by the spirit. Reference to the heart is merely figurative, for it is really the spirit that is involved. For acceptance of faith and its subsequent retention we are not required to do or say anything. Hence, faith does not calculate our strength or measure our capacity for acceptance. No energy is expended in the process and no work is done.

Action, on the other hand may run an occasional check to assess our financial capability with respect to payments for zakat, khums, Haj, compensation for fasting and others. But how much does it cost to accept faith? What do you spend on believing in God and His Prophet? What expenditure is involved in acceptance of faith to suggest it is affordable for the rich and not the poor, for the healthy and not the sick and for the relaxed and not the agitated? Is Faith only for those with opportunity and time and can others be excused?

In matters of faith you are not required to do anything. It is mandatory for everyone at all times and in all situations. There is no condition for possession of power or strength or any concept of proper or improper time for acceptance or demonstration of faith.

But where deeds are concerned, strength is essential. We can stand up for prayers if we are strong. We can fast or perform Haj if we are healthy. Who can perform the task and who is exempt from it? These queries will crop up. Shariat will then give concessions, reduce task or change the requirement. If you cannot do this then do something else instead. Now faith is not subject to change and since it is not associated with strength or capability, there is no substitute for it.

I will highlight another point here. There is no compulsion in matters of faith. I want you to think about it. Does God force us to believe in Him? Faith and compulsion cannot co-exist. The term compulsion itself indicates the absence of belief, and faith is all about believing. Force negates the very concept and purpose of belief and since it is not true acceptance it is not faith.

Remember there is no compulsion in religion so a non-believer can never be converted to a believer by force. Faith and force cannot be grouped together so it is a sheer waste arguing why God did not

enforce faith by the use of sword, or the Prophet force people to accept his Prophethood. The choice to agree or disagree rests with the people for there is no compulsion in matters of faith or religion.

Once you accept faith and become a believer (mu'min), then the follow up stage is mandatory submission plus practical demonstration. Prayers must be said, fasts must be observed, sinful practices must be avoided and good deeds are to be undertaken. Prior to acceptance of faith the choice to agree or disagree existed. Now think and tell me as a believer, do you have a choice in matters of practice? No. There is compulsion now. You will be forced to do things and refusal will lead to punishment.

For non-believers there is no punishment in this world, but if a believer rejects mandatory activity he invites punishment even in this world. There is no compulsion in acceptance of faith but there is compulsion in follow up practice. Now remember the Quranic verse,

لَا إِكْرَاهَ فِي الدِّينِ

“There is no compulsion in din (religion)”. (2:256)

What does “din” stand for? Faith or practice? It is an accepted norm that religion (din) implies practice and we also know there is compulsion in practice. Thus it is obvious in this ayat “din” refers to faith for we have established that there is no compulsion in accepting faith. It is worth noting that the word ‘din’ when used alone refers to Faith and not Practice.

There is no compulsion in religion. Now we know there is no compulsion in matters of faith but there certainly is compulsion in follow-up deeds. Actions can be forced but you cannot force people to accept faith. So when it is said there is no compulsion in religion, we know we are talking about faith. Now if the same Creator tells us,

الْيَوْمَ أَكْمَلْتُ لَكُمْ دِينَكُمْ

“This day I have perfected for you your religion” (5:3)

Then ponder and tell me what has been perfected, faith or action? What is being referred to here? Our belief or our deeds? Reference is being made to that aspect where there is no compulsion. We thus find out this is not a reference to action but faith. Previously we were not aware that it was incomplete, but today it has been perfected. That is why the message concludes by informing us,

وَرَضِيَ لَكُمْ الْإِسْلَامَ دِينًا

“And have chosen for you Islam as your religion”. (5:3)

The day this message was conveyed, regardless of what day it was or what happened that day, it is clear that some part of religion was incomplete. For us, ordinary humans, some component of faith was incomplete and for our Prophet some component of his Prophethood was missing. With delivery of the message, our yet incomplete faith was perfected and similarly the Prophet by conveying God's message to us completed his task of Prophethood. The task of the messenger is to convey, which he did, and the task of the believer is to accept the message. God sent the Message, and the Prophet conveyed His Message, that on this particular day our faith has been perfected.

I think I do not need to elaborate any more. If anyone thinks faith can exist even if a part of it is missing, then this assumption is incorrect. Faith is not something that we can split and keep some part and reject some part of it. Faith for us is akin to Prophethood for the Prophet. Our faith and the Prophet's task are interlinked. It is spelt out in the Quran that in case the Prophet does not convey this specific Message it would be as though he had not conveyed the (entire) Message of his Prophethood. Similarly, if we do not accept this particular Message we too risk the possibility of losing our entire faith.

It is sufficient for me to tell you that faith is far superior to deeds that are subordinate to faith. Now if a portion of unfinished deed results in wastage of the entire task then how can faith survive in the absence of a vital component? Consider this. If you are offering prayers and have performed all the mandatory tasks except one essential component will your prayer be valid? Half of it? One third? One fourth? Some fraction of it?

While fasting you observed all the restrictions save one, then will this fast be acceptable? If a deed comprising thousands of segments is incomplete in the absence of a single segment then is faith so weak that despite missing elements it remains whole and intact? Please remember that faith survives as a sum total and it goes as a whole. Faith is not something that exists in an inferior or fractional state.

God created everything in the form of pairs. The presence of both components of a pair is essential for its usefulness. If one component of a pair is present and the other is absent then we might as well not have any of them. Consider body and soul, knowledge and action, faith and activity, words and meanings, heart and mind and add to that Quran and Ahlul Bayt. Each component is vital for the purposeful existence of the pair.

Let us now go back to the verse where God swears by Asr, the Time. God alone knows how significant this particular time is. Going by our experience we swear by a thing we are attached to. The person swearing will swear by a thing that is important as well as dear to him. Without this attachment nothing is worth swearing by. So it is obvious that the Time which God swears by has a special significance for Him.

The very first word "**Wal-Asr**" (by the Time) opens the door and gives an insight into the message. This is a specific time, a particular time that God is swearing by. The Asr time we experience daily is not significant enough to be sworn by. This is the Asr time of one particular day in the life of the universe

that is worth swearing by.

Now let us search for this Asr time in the battlefield where the two groups identified in this Surah face each other. One of these crosses all limits of evil and injustice while the other surpasses all standards of goodness and justice. Besides Time of Asr we must identify the presence of the losers as well as the presence of the believers and doers of good deeds. There are many references in the Quran to those who believe and do good deeds, but here we have an additional sentence that informs us that these people

وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالْحَقِّ وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالصَّبْرِ

“Exhort one another to ‘haqq’ (truth) and exhort one another to ‘sabr’(endurance)”.(103:3)

The word ‘sabr’ is pointing to the fact that this particular Asr is an extremely difficult and testing time.

The battlefield of Karbala offers a complete depiction of each and every aspect of this worthy Surah. At Asr time on the tenth of Moharram our Imam had a strange desire. What was that? He wished that his sympathisers and mourners were with him on that day, at that particular moment. He wished for the presence of each and every one of them. He desired the presence of children, of young and old people and of men as well as women. He hoped his followers were there with him and he was in front of them.

Our Imam knew there would be mourners of this tragedy. He knew that his followers would establish mourning at a level the world had never seen before and that they would ensure sustained remembrance such as has not been upheld for anyone else. Imam Hussain knew that other imams from his family would not be mourned the way his martyrdom will be commemorated.

Our Imam was aware there would be mourners and grievers who would narrate this tragedy and people who would listen intently and shed tears of sorrow. All this would take place in the future but for the present he wished them to be there to witness the hardships he was undergoing. His sentence was, “wish all of you were here on the day of Ashura”.

There is a reason for every wish, for every desire. Why did our Imam desire our presence that day? Not to save him from the thrust of swords. Not to take infant Asghar from his hand for burial. Not to assist him in picking up brother Abbas’s slain body. Not because he was having difficulty in picking up his young son’s body. Not to save Zainab’s veil or to assist the prisoners.

Imam Hussain’s has a strange wish and that is “tanzarooney”, “If only my followers could see me”. Mind you, your Imam is ascertaining the Time he wished to be seen. “Wish you could see me”. When? “When I was pleading for some water for my thirsty infant Asghar. When I was holding the baby in my hands. Wish you were there to see in how many different ways I tried to persuade them to give some water to the innocent child! I did not beg for my Akbar, only for my Asghar; not for one who could speak, only for

one who could not speak. Wish you could see how ruthlessly my request was turned down”. This was our Imam’s historic message.

Now try to visualize how dreadful this Asr time was when Bibi Zainab saw her brother’s head being severed from his body. This was also the time when she was deprived of her veil covering. This was the time when the camps were put on fire, and a time of sheer despondence and hardship for the Prophet’s family.

Imam Hussain’s daughter, Fatima Kubra narrates that when Asr time faded out, when her father’s head was mounted on a spear and when there was no one at all to help them, she stood watching the martyred bodies. There was no one to attend to them, to bathe them or arrange for their coffins. She watched helplessly and wondered now that the men had been slain, what will be the fate of the rest of them. Will they be killed or made prisoners? Who can stop the enemy from carrying out these terrible deeds?

Her head was swooning with unrelenting thirst when she noticed a man carrying a dagger approach her. She thought of seeking help from her phuppi (aunt) when this dreadful man snatched her head covering and struck her back with his dagger. She fainted and collapsed to the ground. After a while she heard her aunt’s persistent plea, “Get up, my daughter”. She realized her head lay in her aunt’s lap and she was saying, “My daughter, get up. I have to look after the orphans. I have to inquire about the welfare of the whole household. I have to attend to my sick nephew. How long will you lie in this state”?

Fatima Kubra realized her aunt was urging her on so she lamented that she had no head covering. Her aunt replied, “My child, open your eyes and look at me”. When she opened her eyes she was horrified to see that her phuppi Zainab’s head was uncovered too, as were the heads of all the other ladies.

She got up and walked with her aunt towards her sick brother, Imam Zain ul Abideen. There she saw a man drag him out of his bed. He fell to the ground, at which Bibi Zainab remarked, “Son did I live to see you roll in the dust like this”? The ailing nephew slowly got up and lamented, “Phuppi dear, all the male members have been slain. Alas, I alone survive to see you bare headed like this”!

God’s wrath be on the transgressors.

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