

Lesson 11: The Importance and Role of Fear and Sorrow (1)

This section of the Noble Prophet's (S) advices is related to fear and sorrow. It seems that the relationship between this section and the previous sections lies in the fact that once man has planned to devote his life to worship and servitude of Allah, which is that same real perfection, he needs means and tools which can help him prepare better for his movement towards perfection.

In order for decision and will power to appear in man, special pre-requisites and basics have to be fulfilled. (In man's soul conception and affirmations and spiritual states like feelings and emotions prepare the ground for will power and decision.) Therefore, if those pre-requisites are properly used once they are met, or after their being fulfilled, a suitable opportunity for man's advancement towards perfection is said to have been made available.

All too often, man desires something but mere desiring does not cause him to resolve to take action, but sometimes spiritual states appear which impel him to take action and advancement; in reality, these spiritual states bring valuable opportunities into appearance.

Fear and Sorrow and Abstinence from Sin

One of the spiritual states which impels man to take action and becomes a strong incentive for abstaining from sin is fear and sorrow. The two greatly help man to come to himself, make the most of his time and not use it in pursuit of vain and futile activities. Of course, not every kind of fear and sorrow is praiseworthy and motivates man to search and work. Sorrow which causes man to get affected by dejection and to quit everything leaving him with neither the vigor to worship nor the energy to work is blameworthy and likewise fear which causes the termination of man's hope and leads to despondency in such a way that man too gets pessimistic about himself is blameworthy.

Not only do some of the fears and sorrows not inspire man to spiritual journeying to Allah but become its hindrances and impediments, like the fears and sorrows which occur with regard to the world; one loses

an amount of money and they are ever after gloomy and sorrowful as to the cause of their loss. Even in prayer one is thinking about that lost money! Or fear which one has with regard to losing his property and opportunities; man fears that he will lose his post and position. These kinds of fears and sorrows become a hindrance in spiritual wayfaring to Allah.

Of course, sometimes it occurs that sorrow with regard to issues of the world is related to Allah, like when an affliction befalls man and they fear that it might be divine requital. It is natural that this kind of fear and dread will become a source of motion for them. Or one becomes heartbroken at losing some [worldly] favors and a cause of their awakening that they ought not to fall in love with the world. Therefore, it is likely that fear of losing worldly blessings can indirectly motivate man to motion in the direction of eschatological and spiritual perfection.

Allah, the Exalted, states in two verses that once We send prophets (‘a) to the people, We afflict them with hardships and adversities:

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا فِي قَرْيَةٍ مِّنْ نَّبِيٍّ إِلَّا أَخَذْنَا أَهْلَهَا بِالْبَأْسَاءِ وَالضَّرَّاءِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَضَّرَّعُونَ

“And We did not send a prophet in a town but We overtook its people with distress and affliction in order that they might humble themselves.”¹

And in another verse, Allah states:

وَلَقَدْ أَرْسَلْنَا إِلَىٰ أُمَمٍ مِّن قَبْلِكَ فَأَخَذْنَاهُم بِالْبَأْسَاءِ وَالضَّرَّاءِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَضَرَّعُونَ

“And certainly We sent apostles to nations before you, then We seized them with distress and affliction in order that they might humble themselves.”²

It is because of His grace for them that Allah afflicts His slaves with hardships and problems in order for it to become a cause of alertness and vigilance for them and awakening from heedlessness so as to acquire more preparedness for accepting right. Because until man is intoxicated with pleasure and elation and drowned in prosperity, he lacks the preparedness to accept right and what is related to the hereafter.

Fear and Sorrow and the Spiritual Ascension and Growth of Man

It has been said that fear and dread with regard to matters of the hereafter causes spiritual ascendance, perfection and prosperity. In this regard, Allah states:

وَأَمَّا مَنْ خَافَ مَقَامَ رَبِّهِ وَنَهَى النَّفْسَ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ * فَإِنَّ الْجَنَّةَ هِيَ الْمَأْوَىٰ

“And as for him who fears to stand in the presence of his Lord and forbids the soul from low desires; then surely the Garden—that is the abode.”³

With regard to the role of piety in keeping man away from sins and fear of Allah, Imam ‘Ali (‘a) states:

“O creatures of Allah! Certainly fear of Allah has saved the lovers of Allah from unlawful items gave His dread to their hearts till their nights are passed in wakefulness and their days in thirst.”⁴

Elsewhere, Imam ‘Ali (‘a) introduces fear of Allah as a sign of good opinion with regard to Allah:

“The most fearful of Allah is the one who holds good thoughts about him.”⁵

The Difference between Fear and Sorrow

Sorrow occurs in circumstances once favor has been divested of man or when harm is directed at him and causes grief and contrition. It is natural that this condition is related to a matter which happened in the past; for instance, man has done an indecent action which resulted in bad effects, one has said bad words which resulted in the disgrace and defamation of someone else and is remorseful as a result of it. Or, he had capital from which he could have benefited enormously but has lost it. In any case, sorrow and grief overtake man once he loses opportunities or he is deprived of blessings and/or calamities befall him.

Fear occurs with regard to the occurrences and matters which will occur in the future: he fears that an ordeal will befall him, an affliction or misfortune will be directed at him, and/or a blessing will be taken away from him. In reality, fear and sorrow are two similar qualities of the soul whose adjuncts are different; one is related to the past and the other is connected to future.

For the reason that danger always exists in this world, the being of fear in man is natural because man is an entity that is prone to injury, and there is always the possibility of his health, life and ease and security falling in danger.

The difference between a believer and a unbeliever lies in the fact that the believer does not have an autonomous opinion about the common causes [or ordinary means] and believes that everything springs from Allah, for this reason he fears Allah but a nonbeliever does not conceive Allah, someone in whose hands all the sovereignty lies, and maintains that there are autonomous common causes [or ordinary means]. Of course, in the same way which the believer fears Allah because of conceiving all the authority in Him, it is only in Allah that he puts his faith for the reason that he does not believe in an intermediary role other than Allah.

It has been recorded in a *hadith* that:

“Allah subdues the others for a person who is Allah-fearing and He fills with fear everyone who is not

afraid of Him.”[6](#)

Once a believer has gathered that all the means lie in Allah’s hands and all the sovereignty of the world belongs to Him, he does not perceive any autonomy for others save Allah but only reveres Allah because he has been relying on Allah and fears only Him and day by day his faith gets increased and in the end Allah grants him so much power that he fears none save Allah and the others get overcome by him. He is inflexible in the face of falsehood and discharges whatever obligation he has diagnosed. But people do not fear someone who does not venerate Allah and they compromise with other people in order to safeguard their position and try to gratify others.

The natural disposition of man is such that whenever he is happy and overjoyed with the world and is busy with himself, he lags behind in paying attention to Allah and spiritual matters. It is for this reason that in the Qur’an this drunken ecstasy is castigated:

وَلَئِنْ أَذَقْنَاهُ نِعْمَاءَ بَعْدَ ضَرَاءٍ مَسَّتْهُ لَيَقُولَنَّ ذَهَبَ السَّيِّئَاتُ عَنِّي إِنَّهُ لَفَرِحَ فَخُورٌ

“And if We make him taste favor after distress has afflicted him, he will certainly say, ‘The evils are gone away from me. Most surely, he is exulting, boasting.’”[7](#)

Castigating the world, Imam ‘Ali (‘a) states:

“... What is your condition? You feel satisfied with what little you have secured from this world while much of the next world of which you have been deprived does not grieve you. The little of this world which you lose pains you so much so that it becomes apparent in your faces, and in the lack of endurance over whatever is taken away from you; as if this world is your permanent abode, and as though its wealth would stay with you for good.”[8](#)

Opposite to this merrymaking and joyousness is sorrow and sadness about the past and dread in regard to the future which make man inclined towards obedience, worship and devotion to Allah. It is for this reason that these two psychological mentalities and emotions have been hailed, as the import of some of the traditions impart [to us] that Allah grants favor upon a community amongst whom there is a sorrowful man. Essentially, people who used to derive benefit from the directions and the divine invitations of the prophets (‘a) and saints [awliya] of Allah were people who held fear of Allah in their hearts.

... إِنَّمَا تُنذِرُ الَّذِينَ يَخْشَوْنَ رَبَّهُم بِالْغَيْبِ وَأَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ ...

“You warn only those who fear their Lord in secret and keep up prayer...”[9](#)

The invitation and instruction of the Prophets (S) are ineffective in people who do not fear Allah, as Allah

states:

سَوَاءٌ عَلَيْهِمْ ءَأَنذَرْتَهُمْ أَمْ لَمْ تُنذِرْهُمْ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ ...

“Surely those who disbelieve, it being alike to them whether you warn them, or do not warn them, will not believe.”¹⁰

The notion of fear of Allah

Man fears something which harms and poses danger for him. Now what is the purport of fear of Allah, the Merciful, who does not intend to harm His slaves? It can be said, in general, that in reality man's fear springs from danger that will be directed at him and contingently of someone who will direct that harm at him. When man fears his enemy, it is basically his foe's torture and injury which he fears and his fear of his adversary is by accident.

From the material aspect, when man believes that control of the cosmos and its causes lies in Allah's hands, his fear of Allah denotes apprehension of nature's wrath and worldly calamities because he knows that once he becomes an object of Allah's anger, nature and its material causes will be wrathful to him and consequently earthquakes and floods and the rest of the heavenly and earthly tribulations will be directed at him for the reason that nature's anger is derived from the wrath of Allah.

It can be gathered from the Noble Prophet's (S) sayings in this section of the *hadith* that sorrow and fear are desirable once its domain develops from volitional premises and reflection and meditation and later on stimulate man to move along the path of Allah and perfection; not that every fear and sorrow ought to be desirable.

Grief and sorrows which crush man [by destroying his self-confidence and vigor] and impedes him from working and living is not desirable. It occupies him when he wants to study, and during prayer the worries of this world hinder him from being absorbed with Allah. These [kinds of] sorrows and woes are not only undesirable but are robbers.

Some people who are cowards lose their peace of mind and ease if they perceive a possibility that danger will be directed at them, even if that likelihood is meager. This kind of fear is worthless. Fear and sorrow has value when it leads to man's spiritual progression. With these expositions, the connection between fear and sorrow and obedience and devotional servitude to Allah becomes obvious and that all too often man derives the best benefit from these two states in order to attain his perfection and bliss.

The World Is a Prison for a Believer and Paradise for an Infidel

For the purpose of bringing about the conditions for fear and sorrow and clarifying these two, the Noble Prophet (S) states:

“O Abu Dharr! The world is prison for a believer and paradise for an infidel, no believer turns his night into morning save with grief.”

Once this feeling that he is in prison has been enlivened in man, he does not anticipate merrymaking [in this world] and does not think about being preoccupied with the pleasures of this world. He [only] derives benefit from the blessings of this world to the degree of gaining enough ability for spiritual journeying. He thanks Allah after deriving benefit from every blessing and attaining every gratification.

In contrast [to the believer], the world is paradise for an unbeliever, because he can strive to attain his comfort and satisfaction as long as he is in this world and if luxury and pleasure ever occur for him, it is in this world and he will be entangled in the requital of Allah on the Day of Resurrection for the ugly works which he perpetrated in this world. The punishment and wrath of Allah is so intense that the world, in spite of all its problems, is [still] paradise for him!

There is a famous narrative that a poor and sickly Jew approached Imam al-Hasan (‘a), who was dressed in costly clothes and mounted on a horse, and said, “Your grandfather stated that the world is a jail for a believer and a heaven for a nonbeliever. Now for who is the world a paradise, for you who are mounted on a horse with magnificence and glory, or for me who is poor and sick? With all the encumbrances and hardships, the world is hell for me, not paradise!’

Imam al-Hasan (‘a) stated, “If you knew what hard punishment Allah has in store for you, you would understand that the world, in this same state that you are, is paradise. In contrast, if you would perceive what stations Allah has kept in store for us, you would understand that [even] if the whole world were given to us, it would be nothing more than prison.”

Once the world is a jail for a believer, it is natural that he is sorrowful because prison is not a place of joyousness.

It is worthy of mention that commendation of sorrow in this *hadith* does not imply that every sorrow is praiseworthy and that man has to try to be sad all the time. It is not feasible to deduce such a general and common connotation [from the above statements in regard to sorrow]. It is doubtless that every point which is mentioned in such kind of admonitions is restricted and its scope is limited; but with the help of research and acquaintance with the words of Allah and of the Infallible Imams (‘a), one realizes that in what instances comprehensive and general judgments become limited.

Meditation about Hell Is a Cause of Fear and Sorrow for a Believer

In connection to the reasons for a believer’s sorrow, the Noble Prophet (S) states:

“With regard to the fact that Allah has given the news that he will cast man into hell and has not

promised him to release him from there, why ought not a believer to be sorrowful?”

One of the causes of fear and sorrow in man, especially a believer, is contemplation about the unequivocal promise of Allah that all people will enter hell and in this connection the Noble Prophet (S) prepares the ground for sorrow by mentioning this point.

In this regard, Allah states:

وَأِنْ مِنْكُمْ إِلَّا وَارِدُهَا كَانَ عَلَى رَبِّكَ حَتْمًا مَقْضِيًّا

“And there is none of you but shall come to it, this is an unavoidable decree of your Lord.”¹¹

A believer has faith in the Qur'an and the explicit judgment of Allah that he will enter heaven and no one has the guarantee of being taken out of hell. Yes, those who are an object of Allah's grace and favor, and have been successful at discharging Allah's duties, will be released from hell but they do not know whether they belong to that group or not. This very thought is enough for them [to become fearful and sorrowful]. He does not know what his fate will be; for this reason joyousness and happiness are meaningless to him and this thought and sorrow restrains him from heedlessness.

This apprehension and anxiety prompts man to come to themselves and desert merrymaking and partying and ponder about his destination. Of course, there are also other causes and factors in the world which result in man's sorrow and sadness, like being affected by illnesses and calamities. Or that a man's rights are violated and they are not able to get justice done; in this connection, the Noble Prophet (S) states:

“A believing man is confronted with illnesses, encumbrances, unforeseen hardships and oppression, but no one helps him. For this reason, he asks Allah, the Exalted, for help and reward and compensation.”

Even if the causes and factors which give rise to sorrow are countless, some sorrow which arises from some of them is not so worthwhile and plays no role in a believer's self-building and edification of character because these kinds of woes also come to pass for others. Sorrow and grief is very desirable when it arises from a believer's knowledge that he is likely not to be released from hell once he enters it.

In continuation, the Prophet (S) states:

“A believer departs from the world in a sorrowful state, but he is led towards the ease and grace of Allah once he departs.”

As has been said, until a believer is in this world, he is faced with worries and woes as a result of which he gets sad and grieves and/or gets despondent when he thinks about his pre-destination and looks at the shortcomings of his past. Therefore, that time when he leaves this world which is entirely filled with encumbrances and sorrow towards the eternal world and the proximity of right is when his sadness and

sorrow comes to an end and that's when he gets happy and joyous.

“O Abu Dharr! Allah has not been worshiped in the same way as prolonged sorrow.”

A slave who is always afraid of Allah and has been patient in the face of hardships has been more devoted to Allah than everyone else.

It is natural that once man was fearful and sorrowful with regard to his destination, he supplicates and prays to the Divine Threshold and consequently he cleanses his inside of impurities and sin. Likewise, he engages in more worthy worship accompanied by more wakefulness and vigilance and purity of heart is a precondition for the acceptance of prayer. Therefore, sorrow and grief is itself worship because it makes man attentive to his position of servitude and the greatness of his Lord.

Now that the discussion has come this far, there is room for us to cite some *hadiths* regarding the state and station of a believer at the time of his death and meeting Allah, the Merciful. It has been recorded in a *hadith* that at the time of a believer's death, two angels say to him:

“O friend of Allah! Do not be sorrowful or fearful and receive the glad tidings of paradise and rejoice. Fear and sorrow will not affect you and you are not deserving of that. Verily Allah, the Exalted, has willed to free you from every pain and punishment and make you partake of the sweetness of Allah's mercy. Verily, hell is closed over you and you will never enter hell at all.”^{[12](#)}

Imam ‘Ali (‘a) states;

“My friend and brother, the Prophet of Allah, said to me, ‘A person who is happily looking forward to meeting Allah and not to be rejected by Him ought to choose you to be his guardian and a person who gets happily anxious to meet Allah and for Allah to be pleased by him should love your son al-Hasan, and a person who is gladly looking forward to meeting Allah without being fearful must love your son al-Husayn.”^{[13](#)}

^{1.} Surat al-A'raf 7:94.

^{2.} Surat al-An'am 6:42.

^{3.} Surat al-Nazi'at 79:40–41.

^{4.} Nahj al-Balaghah, p. 353, sermon [khutbah] 113, trans. Fayd al-Islam.

^{5.} Ibid., p. 887.

^{6.} Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 69, p. 406.

^{7.} Surat Hud 11:10.

^{8.} Nahj al-Balaghah, p. 350, sermon [khutbah] 111, trans. Fayd al-Islam.

^{9.} Surat Fatir 35:18.

^{10.} Surat al-Baqarah 2:6.

^{11.} Surat Maryam 19:71.

^{12.} Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 8, p. 21, hadith 205.

^{13.} Ibid., vol. 27, p. 107, hadith 81.

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