

Lesson Eight: The Believer' Status Before, After and at the Time of the Prophets' Appearance

In another sermon of the Nahjul Balaghah known as „al-Khutbah al-Qasi'ah” (The Sermon of Disparagement), the Commander of the Faithful lays down and explains some of the matters which were quoted in previous from Sermon No. 1, concerning the status of the people during the Age of Ignorance, conditions of the time of the appearance of the Prophets and the situation of the people after the appointment of the Prophets to prophethood.

He portrays, in effect, the conditions and circumstances, which had naturally cast shadows over the people's lives in the Age of Ignorance as well as the victorious status, the people gained after the appearance of the Prophets under the light of their efforts, struggles and endeavors.

A study of some of the statements of this Sermon (al qasrah) which adds to our mind concerning what we learned about the background to prophethood, the Prophets' responsibilities, etc., in previous lessons, would bring us to a sound conclusion for this book. In a part of this Sermon we read: «think about the condition of people from among the believers who passed before you. What distress and trials¹ they underwent:»²

It means that we should look deep into the circumstances of the believers who lived before us, not treating them in a perfunctory manner because we cannot learn much from the formal appearance of the past events. Only when one traces the causes of these events and contemplates them deeply will one perceive that the believers of the past have been under severe pressure¹ and that they have been subjected to such hardships as hunger, torture, imprisonment and so forth and greater hardships than those we suffer today, i.e. facing political problems and happenings and recognizing the true character of different groups and fronts and the stance they take.

The Commander of the Faithful continues with the following statements, „Were they the most overburdened among all the people and in the most straightened circumstances in the whole world?”

The true believers have always been the most overburdened, the most pain suffering and the poorest creatures of God before the advent of the Prophets and the realization of Islamic revolutions (all the revolutions led by the Prophets have been Islamic in the sense that they have all been primarily aimed at submission to God). Why?

First, because the believers have to provide for their own sustenance. In fact, the true believers, those who have touched the spirit of the belief in God, never compromise with oppressive powers. They usually refuse to enter their service and to help them should they not be able to fight them.”

Thus, under tyrannical governments, the believers are constantly face to face with hardships and inconveniences as far as their economic affairs are concerned. This can be traced in Islamic traditions. On the contrary, disbelievers compromise with the oppressors very easily, enter the service and thus enjoy a comfortable life.

Second, in addition to providing for their own living, the believers are usually obliged to shoulder the burden of the oppressors' impositions concerning their luxurious life. As an example, we all know that the overthrown regime (of Pahlavi) faced exorbitant expenses, which had to be paid by those who did not compromise with it. Those who compromised with that regime were not subjected to such burdens and impositions. They themselves took advantage of the prevailing situations as well.

Third, the believers have to tolerate the political impositions of the oppressive ruling powers with whom they fight. Such powers do not let them express their beliefs and have their own free thoughts and opinions. They force the believers to accept their own oppressive thoughts. Thus, the prevailing strangulation in a society is a great burden on the shoulder of the believers who refuse to adhere to the thoughts and opinions imposed by the oppressive ruling powers. They are, in effect, the most combative people, always fighting the oppressors in order to eradicate calamities and corruptions.

It is narrated that the believer is always in a state of struggling in some way or other. Under unlawful and corruptive governments, he involves himself in organized hidden and underground battles and lives in a precautionary, dissimulative manner, and under lawful, legitimate governments, he deals with political, ideological and military involvements or fights the enemy to safeguard the way of God. Thus, the believer is always in a fighting state, which is very troublesome. Fighting does not necessarily mean receiving wounds and bearing distress. It includes, in addition to these, fears and failures, worries and anxieties. The true fighter is thus the one who does not surrender to these and who only fights for the sake of God and duty, not for the sake of victory. Accordingly, fighting is more troublesome and difficult than all the trials of life.³

Finally the Commander of the Faithful says, that are the poorest and the most straightened people because they have to live in a state of strangulation, poverty, force and precautionary silence.

He continues to explain the believers' status in the following statements: „The Pharaohs took them as slaves. They inflicted the worst punishments and bitter sufferings on them. They continuously remained

in this state of (spiritual) ruinous disgrace and severe subjugation. They found no method for escape and no way for protection.”

The first statement implies that the believers were forcefully made to obey Pharaohs (holders of tyrannical power) or deities other than the One God, although they were servants of God by nature. Sometimes, of course, such deities or objects of worship believe in God themselves and, therefore submission to them is submission to God. But when they induce people to the worship of their own selves, submission to them is submission to non-gods. It has been narrated he who listens to a speaker, becomes his servant. If the speaker speaks of God, that person will be the servant of God and if he speaks of Satan that person will be the servant of Satan.»

And Satan is sometimes the very human 'self' and 'concupiscence' to whose obedience the Pharaohs forced the believers in God, who knew no way of defending their human dignity and getting rid of such servitude.

Such was the status of the believers in God and followers of the Prophets who dealt with satanic ruling powers before the victory.

The Three-Act Play of people's Status

The status of the people before, during and after the Prophets' appointment can be likened to a three-act play, the first act of which shows hardship and distress, the second speaks of resistance and perseverance and the third pictures, victory and freedom. In fact, the believers will never gain victory without resisting hardships and struggling for their aim. The Commander of the Faithful continues, „Till when God, the Glorified, noticed that they were enduring troubles in His love and bearing distress and of fear for Him, He provided escape from the distress of trials. So, He changed their disgrace into honor and fear into safety.”

In these statements, the Imam shows that the direction of the believers' struggles is towards God and they tolerate hardships and undesirable problems such as hunger, torture, imprisonment, cudgel-punishments and so forth upon His way and for the sake of His love so that God, seeing their patience and perseverance, would reveal to them the ways of escape from nuisances and calamities, maintain their convenience and tranquility, change their disgrace into honor and fear into security and finally their defeat into victory.

It should be added here that honor (i.e. not submitting to contempt) and safety (i.e. not fearing any enemy) are the most important things the oppressed people are concerned about. Under the rule of satans (tyrannical powers) the people are not immune concerning their lives, properties, and morality and so forth, whereas under the rule of God and the oppressed people such worries and anxieties do not exist at all.

The Commander of the Faithful continues his discussion with these statements, „Consequently, they became ruling authorities and conspicuous leaders, and God's favors over them reached limits to which their own wishes had not reached,” meaning that the whole community of believers, after God, bestowed victory upon them, became leaders (Imams, guides and patterns) and objects of imitation for other oppressed people and nations who followed their ways and manners and made movements.

This is clearly observable in the world of today in which a nation of believers (i.e. Iranians), after having struggled for a long time and gaining victory over a tyrannical regime, has now become the leader of the whole world of the oppressed, and achievement which had never been imagined by Iranians.

They thought, in fact, about victory but they never imagined to become leaders and guiding patterns for all of the oppressed people of the world such as those of Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Egypt, Persian Gulf countries, Africa and America, who have been greatly influenced and motivated by Iranians' achievements. And this is nothing but God's favor as he says.

Conclusion (Two General Points in the Sermon)

First, in this Sermon (No. 191) the emphasis is mostly on the spiritual aspects of the people's calamities and adversities.. In fact, such factors as strangulation, lack of security, the burden of mental impositions and the burden of providing for the satanic wishes of illegitimate governments, all of which cause humanity to suffer spiritually and invoke one to campaign, are more emphasized than such material misfortunes (or trials) as hunger for which the people rarely campaign. To say the least, human beings' honor and dignity are the dearest things to them, which stimulate them to seriously struggle and campaign. Hunger and the like can be removed in other ways. These are the points of emphasis in this Sermon.

Secondly, the Imam emphasizes here that in a community of believers, when the arrogant government is overthrown, it is the oppressed that take it over another arrogant group. As an example, after the revolution of Moses and destruction of Pharaoh, it was the believers themselves and the masses that became rulers and established a true government.

Also, during the lifetime of the Last Prophet, as well as during the reign of the rightly guided Caliphs, the people themselves were masters of their own affairs and played significant roles in resolving the matters which came about. They loved the Prophet and accepted what he said but not blindly and under propagandic pressures. They freely accepted his decisions and they themselves made minor decisions.

Unfortunately, as time has passed, people's participation in and contribution to the ruling affairs of the Islamic communities have gradually decreased and these communities have turned out to be, like the communities predominated by ignorance, consisting of two classes of people – the arrogant and the deprived; whereas a true Islamic community consists only of one class of people and they are the believers.

1. In the terminology of the Qur'an and in Islamic usage "trial" (bala) comes to mean a bitter and a severe incident. Through these incidents, the human heroes have always been tried in the course of history and one cannot claim to be a perfect human being unless one exposes.

2. Nahjul Balaghah of 'Ali, part two, page 410.

3. Akhavan-i-Thalith, one of the forerunners of modern Persian poetry, wrote a poem entitled „Wolves and Dogs” in which he pictures the status of rebellious believers with all hardships and calamities they suffer and their battle against oppressors as well as the status of the peace-seeking disbelievers and hypocrites who compromise with tyrants and do not refuse to be subjected to meanness. Akhvan likens the believers to wolves, which keep distance with the affluent and expose themselves to great sufferings for a loaf of bread, and compares the disbelievers with dogs, which always serve faithfully, collar on the neck, in order to receive what is left over the master's table

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