

Lesson Eighteen: Testimony by the Most Veracious of Witnesses

The Noble Qur'an makes it clear that the testimony given by sinners in the court of divine justice will be utterly unique in nature, bearing absolutely no similarity to the juridical procedures of this world.

The verses of the Qur'an that speak of the giving of testimony on the day of resurrection proclaim that the hands, feet and even the skin of the sinners will disclose the hidden sins that they committed during their lives and that were previously unknown to all but God; the sinner will stand revealed, to his utter dismay and terror.

The animation of these witnesses and the testimony they will bear to the events that have happened in the world show that all the deeds we perform are recorded both in the external world and in the various organs and limbs of our bodies. When the conditions of this world are replaced by those of the hereafter, on the day when, as the Qur'an puts it,

“secrets are made manifest and none will be able to conceal anything or seek help from anyone.”
(86:9–10)

all the deeds that have been recorded will pour forth and begin to bear witness.

We can indeed observe in this world a pale and feeble example of what is meant by things acquiring speech.

A doctor, for example, understands the language of the body. The rate of the pulse may indicate fever, and yellowness of the eye proclaims the presence of jaundice. To give another example, we can tell the age of a tree from the circles within its trunk.

It is nonetheless true that we cannot know the exact modality of the testimony that will be given in the hereafter. However, once the veil is lifted from men's sight, their power of vision will increase and their level of perception will be raised. They will embark on a new life with enhanced means of perception and

will see many things that surrounded them in this world although they were unaware of them. Thus the Qur'an says:

“You were in a state of negligence; now We have lifted the veil from you so that your sight is today keen.” (50:22).

Other verses speak of the multiplicity of the witnesses that will come forward:

“Let them fear a day on which their tongues, their hands and their feet shall bear testimony against them.” (24:24).

“A day on which all the enemies of God will be drawn into the fire as they stand next to their destined abode, their ears, their eyes and the skin on their bodies shall testify to the sins they have committed. They will address their limbs in astonishment, saying, ‘How do you testify concerning our deeds’

They will answer, ‘God who gave speech to all creatures has also given us speech. First He created you, and now He brings you back to Him. You concealed your ugly deeds not in order that your ears, eyes and skins should not give witness today, but because you imagined God unaware of what you hid from other men. It is this groundless assumption that has brought about your perdition, for today you are in the ranks of the losers.’ (41:19–23).

This verse stresses that man is unable, in the last resort, to conceal the sins he has committed with his limbs. This is not because he under estimates his bodily form, which in the end turns out to have been a means for recording his deeds, but because he imagines that things are essentially autonomous and that much of what he has done will be beyond the reach of God's knowledge. It is this unawareness of the fact that nothing in creation is hidden to God that casts men into the pit of eternal wretchedness.

The Qur'an further proclaims:

“Today We place the seal of silence on the mouths of the unbelievers and transgressors. Their hands shall speak to us, and their feet shall bear witness to what they have done.” (36:65).

Imam as-Sadiq, upon whom be peace, said the following in clarification of this matter:

“When men are gathered together before God on the day of resurrection, everyone will be given the record of his deeds. When they see the list of their crimes and their sins, they will begin to deny them and they will refuse to confess. Then the angels will bear witness to those sins having occurred, but still the sinners will swear that they have done none of the deeds of which they are accused. This is referred to in the verse:

“On the day when God shall resurrect them all and they will swear lyingly to God as they once swore lyingly to you” (58:18).

It is then that God will place a seal on their tongues and cause their bodies to begin speaking about what they have done.” (*Tafsir al-Qummi*, p. 552)

Irrefutable Witness

Even more remarkable is the fact that the deeds man has performed will themselves take shape before his astonished eyes. This must definitely be regarded as the most veracious form of testimony possible; it closes off before the offender any defense, deception or flight from chastisement, and strips him of denial and sophistry. No crime remain unproven, and the sinners will be overtaken by shame and humiliation.

The Qur'an says:

“On the day of resurrection they will find whatever they have done confronting them.” (18:49).

Or again:

“There will be a day on which everyone who has done a good deed will find it confronting him, and those who have done evil will wish that it were kept far distant from them. God warns you against His punishment for He is in truth compassionate toward His servants” (3:30).

Since it is impossible for deeds to disappear in the hereafter, the most that sinners can hope for is that a distance be maintained between them and their deeds, a clear expression of their disgust with what they themselves have done.

In addition to all the forgoing, and still more important than it, God describes Himself as the witness to all the deeds of men:

“Why do they not believe in the signs of God? He is a witness to all that you do.” (3:98).

The Qur'an also mentions the prophets and those who have drawn close to God as witnesses to man's deeds:

“The earth will shine with the light of its Lord. The record of men's deeds will be brought forth and the prophets and the martyrs shall be summoned to bear witness and judge among men so that none shall be wronged.” (39:69).

It should be borne in mind that such witness and testimony will not be restricted to the outer aspect of men's deeds. What is meant is rather testimony to the quality of deeds with respect to their good or their evil, and whether they represented obedience or sin: in short, the inner aspect of deeds.

The giving of witness on the day of resurrection is a sign of honor and respect for those who are called upon, but it also indicates that while in this world they had a certain awareness of men's inner beings,

that they were able to observe them just like their outer beings and thus to record their deeds with precision and inerrancy.

It is obvious that conventional knowledge and sense perception are quite inadequate for testimony of this kind; it depends on a more profound mode of awareness that is able to embrace the inner dimensions of man, an awareness that transcends our normal capacities and permits an unfailing distinction to be made between the pure and the impure.

Such testimony is based upon a clear vision of reality, and as such it is infallible.

The Qur'an says:

“Tell men that whatever they do God will display to them whatever they do, and the Messenger and the believers are aware of it. Then they shall return to God Who knows the hidden and the manifest, so that they will be requited for their good and their evil.” (9:105).

According to commentaries on the Qur'an, what is meant here by “the believers” is the Inerrant Imams from the Household of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him and his family. They are distinguished from other God-fearing people by the special grace and favor they have received from in that they are both inwardly pure and have been utterly purified by God. It is for this reason that the giving of testimony in the hereafter has not been vouchsafed to all men of piety.

Imam al-Baqir, peace be upon him, said in a certain tradition:

“No group or class of men can bear witness to the deeds of men except the Inerrant Imams and the prophets of God. The generality of the community has not been described by God as witnesses, because in this world there are people whose testimony cannot be trusted even for a handful of grass.”
(*Tafsir al-Mizan*, Vol. I, p. 332)

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All the deeds of men have a profound effect on their beings. If someone knows that injustice and crime are sinful but nonetheless engages in them at the behest of his instinctual nature, a contradiction will arise in his inner being that will burn and torment him profoundly. But is it not he who has created this contradiction?

If envy gnaws away at a man's inner being, is anyone responsible apart from himself?

Imam as-Sadiq, upon whom be peace, said:

“Sin cuts more deeply than a knife.” (*Bihar al-Anwar*, Vol. LXXIII, p. 358)

All of our words and deeds are stored in the vast and mysterious archive of our body and our soul, and they will be brought forth in the tribunal of resurrection. The totality of our acts, good and bad, are stored

up within us and will ultimately take shape to confront us.

The reckoning of men's deeds that will take place in the hereafter will, then, be utterly unique. No one may hope to obfuscate the truth or to deny the contents of the precise record that is laid before him. Everyone will be compelled to accept the truth and to submit to its consequences. The hands, the feet and the skin will be called on to give witness; God from Whose knowledge not a single atom in the heavens and earth is hidden and Who is aware of the falling of leaf from a tree, will also be a witness; and the prophets and the Imams will bear their witness to whatever we have wrought.

It is obvious that it is impossible for us now to understand and perceive fully all these dimensions of the inevitable reckoning that will follow resurrection.

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