

Lesson Sixteen: Man's Situation in the Intermediate Realm

The present existence of an intermediate realm and of separate destinations there for the virtuous and the wicked is a well-founded religious belief. There can be no doubt that after death the spirits of men the only element within them that is truly essential are transferred to the vast expanse of the non-material world.

Just as the spirit appears in man's body and material form after it has been fashioned to completion, the spirit retains its attachment to the body as long as the body retains the capacity for a harmonious relation with the spirit. Once this capacity vanishes as a result of external factors so that the union of spirit and body is sundered, the spirit separates from the body and pursues its existence under a different order and set of conditions.

What we mean by this order is the intermediate realm, the first stage reached by man after his migration from the world. He pauses there in the course of his journey to the meeting with God. He enters a realm with its own specific characteristics and properties, remaining there until the coming of resurrection.

A further change then brings about the transformation of the intermediate realm, and man enters the plain of resurrection, the next stage in his journey toward God.

A limit or boundary separating two things is called *barzakh* in Arabic, which explains why the intermediate realm that separates the temporary and evanescent life of this world from the eternal life of the hereafter is also called *barzakh*. Life there is characterized by the liberation of the spirit from the fetters of the material body.

The spirit is no longer harassed by passion and instinct, and thanks to the absence of time and space, the horizons of man's vision are vastly enlarged. In just the same way that there is no question of time or space in the world of dreams, in the intermediate realm, too, man can observe and examine everything in a single instant.

The Qur'an says:

“The intermediate realm extends from now until the time of resurrection” (23: 100).

In the same connection, the Qur'an describes the state of the martyrs after their death:

“Do not imagine those who have been killed in God's path to be dead; rather they are alive and receive sustenance in the presence of their Lord” (3: 169).

The verse refers, of course, to willingness to defend the sanctity of Islam and the Qur'an, to the virtue of heroically resisting the unbelievers and atheists even to the point of attaining martyrdom. This is the highest point the believer can reach: the desire to sacrifice himself for the sake of his pure goals and thereby to join the caravan of martyrs.

He regards it as a great duty to guard God's religion and to strive for the implementation of the commands of the Qur'an, and he therefore exerts great effort to secure the security and survival of the religion of God. Such a protector of the true faith must necessarily begin by purifying himself and avoiding all kinds of pollution by sin and disobedience to God.

It is only then that he may properly return his soul the loftiest trust which he has been given to God, its true owner, while fighting for the sake of His religion. He will then receive the reward of life everlasting in the company of God's chosen elite.

The Qur'an says:

“God has bought the properties and souls of the believers in exchange for paradise. They are to strive in the path of God, destroying the enemies of religion or themselves being killed. This is a firm promise of God, binding upon Him, contained in the Torah, the Gospels and the Qur'an, and who is more faithful to his promises than God? O believers, rejoice in this transaction, for it truly guarantees great happiness” (9: 111).

The Qur'an also draws attention to the punishment being suffered before the occurrence of resurrection by those bound for hellfire:

“Hellfire has already encompassed the unbelievers” (9:49).

After death, the spirits of the virtuous will rejoice in liberation from the constricting cage of this world, they will delight in their ability to roam freely through the infinite. Life on the earthly plane is concerned only with the limited amount of matter that is visible on the surface of the earth.

By contrast, the spirits of the virtuous know no limitation of space or time as they continue their upward ascent. Each in accordance with its rank advances joyfully to its specific station and degree, and everywhere it enjoys unhindered access. The eyes of the blessed witness pure and uncontaminated

sources of eternal beauty in comparison with which the beauties of this world are slight and inconsequential.

The spirit is no longer subject to the limits imposed on it by a weary, heavy body; it is not accompanied by the broken and suffering countenance of old age.

Nothing exists here for the righteous servants of God except beauty, luminosity, love, familiarity and affection, and pure, sincere friendship with the servants and friends of God.

The Qur'an promises those who have made obedience to divine command their guiding principle in this world that they shall enjoy the company and fellowship of God's chosen elite.

The companionship of those upon whom God has bestowed His blessings in full measure is indeed a source of great pride for the virtuous.

This is the promise contained in the Qur'an:

“Those who obey the commands of God and His Messenger shall be resurrected together with, and enjoy the company of, those upon whom God has bestowed His kindness and favor in full measure the prophets, the sincere devotees, the martyrs and the righteous. What noble and precious companions they are!” (4:64).

It should be remarked, of course, that enjoying the company of God's chosen elite does not imply equality with them in terms of spiritual station and degree. While being in close contact with them, the virtuous will enjoy God's favor and blessings to an extent commensurate with their own ranks and degrees of closeness to God. Not everyone will enjoy an equal share, in just the same way that not everyone attains the same degree of ascent.

* * * * *

One of the companions of Imam as-Sadiq, upon whom be peace, relates that he once posed him the following question:

“O descendant of God's Messenger! When the true believer finds himself on the threshold of death, is he grieved by the taking of his soul?”

The Imam answered:

“Never! When the messenger of death comes to take his spirit, he is at first distraught. But then the angel consoles him and says: ‘O friend of God, do not distress yourself. I swear by the Lord Who sent Muhammad as His Messenger that we will treat you more kindly and gently than your father. Open your eyes and look at us.’

“Then the Messenger of God and the other preceptors of religion will appear before him, and the angel

entrusted with the task of taking his soul will say to him: 'This is the Prophet and the leaders of religion who will be your friends and companions.'

“He will then open his eyes partly, and hear God calling him as follows: O soul that has found tranquillity in the protection of Muhammad and his pure family, now return to your Lord. You have accepted as truth the authority of the Imams, and because of this you are now happy. Be certain that you have also earned thereby the pleasure of your Lord. Come now and be the companion of My chosen elite, and take up the abode that has been prepared for you in paradise everlasting.’

“Nothing could be more desirable for the believer at that moment than for his soul to take flight and receive all that it has been promised.” (*Furu al-Kafi*, Vol. III, pp. 127–128)

The Painful State of the Impure

The spirits of the impure are meanwhile caught up in terrible darkness and gloom. Overwhelmed by misery and disaster, they mourn their lives of sin. Realizing that neither their relatives nor the material wealth they accumulated can do anything to deliver them, they torment themselves in their wretchedness.

Still more terrible than their fate is that of cruel, vicious and arrogant tyrants. The sighs and laments of their oppressed victims are like so many daggers plunged in their hearts. The specter of those whom they have wronged assaults them mercilessly with constant blame and reproach, augmenting constantly the pain and misery they suffer.

The vision of these spectacles of terror is like a tormenting flame consuming the heart of the criminal.

The Qur'an depicts the catastrophic destiny of aggressive tyrants as follows:

“They will be brought to hellfire every morning and evening, and the descendants of Pharaoh will be punished most severely” (40:46).

They will then recall vividly the repeated warnings of the prophets and men of religion who told them of the disasters that awaited them. They will begin to blame themselves for not following the commands of the prophets and not heeding their kindly advice, for had they done so, they would not have cast themselves into perdition.

In the course of the Battle of Badr, some of the leaders of Quraysh were killed and their bodies were thrown in a pit. After the victory of the Muslim army, the Most Noble Messenger, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, leaned over the edge of the pit and addressed them as follows:

“We have attained all that God promised us; are you now convinced of the truth of God's promises?”

Some of the companions then said: “O Messenger of God, you are talking to the dead, to bodies that

have been thrown into a pit; do they understand anything of what you say?"

The Prophet answered them: "They hear more clearly than you do." (*Bihar al-Anwar*, Vol. XIX, p. 346)

One of the companions of the Commander of the Faithful, upon whom be peace, said:

"Once I left Kufa in the company of the Imam. He stopped in the cemetery at Wadi al-Salam, standing there like someone about to address a gathering. I remained there standing with the Imam until I grew tired and sat down. Another long time passed, and I grew tired of sitting. So I stood up again and remained standing until once again I grew tired and sat down. Finally, I arose once more, and said to the Commander of the Faithful: 'I fear for you, seeing you standing so long; rest a little.'

I then spread out my cloak on the ground for the Imam to sit down. He said: 'O , Habba! I am standing here engaged in conversation with the believers.' I then asked him: 'Do they also engage in conversation with each other?' 'Yes,' he said. 'Once the veil is lifted you will see them gathered in circles conversing with each other.' I said: 'Are you speaking of their bodies or their spirits?' 'Their spirits,' he answered." (*al-Kafi*, Vol. III, p. 242)

From this narrative it can be deduced that the spirit does not entirely sever its relations with the body. It is true that after the death and the cutting of the link between the spirit and the body, the spirit leaves for a different realm. However, on account of the union that existed between them in this world, some weak connection persists, in the form of a certain affinity. On account of this affinity and its former union with the body, the spirit is oriented toward the remains of the body in way that it is not oriented to anything else.

Islam has laid down certain instructions relating to the body after death. The reason for them is the continuing affinity of the spirit for the body and the trials and turmoil the spirit encounters in the unfamiliar realm of the *barzakh*, governed as it is by new principles and criteria.

In the intermediate realm men encounter each other in bodily forms specific to that realm. The pure and virtuous are gathered together, in groups determined by their spiritual rank and degree. The unbelievers and the evil also find themselves in each other's company. The dealings and relations of the pious with each other are based on familiarity, intimacy, and pure love, and thus anticipate the states of paradise. By contrast, the relations of the unbelievers with each other will inevitably partake of the character of hellfire; mutual enmity, disgust and envy will prevail among them.

It is self-evident that since all things will be determined in the intermediate realm by the particular laws and criteria that prevail there, the companionship and conversation of the blessed and the damned, as well as the enjoyment of divine bounties by the former and the experience of punishment by the latter, will also be marked by the characteristics of that realm.

Although the bodies of men in the intermediate realm will in general resemble the bodily form they had in

this world, certain differences will also be apparent, because every quality and attribute will take on an external form commensurate with its inner nature. Thus the spiritual light or darkness found within individuals will become clearly visible in their faces.

Ibrahim b. Ishaq recounts that he asked Imam as-Sadiq, Upon whom be peace: "Where are the souls of the believers?" He answered: "The spirits of the believers are lodged in paradise, where they are given to eat and to drink. They see and visit each other, and they say, 'O Lord, bring about resurrection so that what You have promised us may be fulfilled.'"

Ibrahim next asked: "Where are the spirits of the unbelievers?" He answered: "Their place is in the fire, where they are compelled to eat the food of the fire and to drink its drink. They see each other and meet each other and they say, 'O God, do not bring about resurrection lest that which You promised us be fulfilled.'" (*al-Mahasin*, p. 178)

Abu Basir relates that the question of the spirits of the believers and the God-fearing was once being discussed in the presence of Imam as-Sadiq, upon whom be peace. The Imam said: "The spirits of the believers meet each other." I asked: "Do they indeed meet each other?" He replied: "Yes, and they talk to each other and recognize each other; when you see someone there, you will say, 'This is so-and-so.'" (*Ibid.*)

Those living in the intermediate realm can even establish contact with the material world and its inhabitants. By virtue of the inner capacities they developed and the deeds they performed while still in the world, they can acquire information of a general kind about their relatives and friends to the degree that is permitted by the special circumstances of the intermediate realm.

The situation of people in the intermediate realm naturally differs from one person to the next. In a sense, everyone there has his own world, the nature of which is determined by the conduct he exhibited in this world; not all the dwellers in the intermediate realm can communicate uniformly with this world and its people. The degree to which an individual may have awareness of the material world and communicate with it depends on the spiritual rank and degree of development he has attained.

Those who worship and fear God have, therefore, better and more extensive capacity for gaining awareness of the material world. Within the limits set by the particular circumstances of the intermediate realm and depending on God's permission, they can be present wherever they wish, simply through willing it and turning themselves in the proper direction. As for the errant and sinful, their communication with the world serves simply to increase their regret and torment.

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

"The believer visits his dear ones and relatives, and he sees what he loves, while whatever he dislikes is concealed from him. The unbeliever also visits his dear ones and relatives, but he sees what he hates and dislikes, while whatever he loves is concealed from him.

“Among the believers are those for whom Friday is a day of visiting, and there also those the balance of whose deeds permits them to see them.” (*al-Kafi*, Vol. I, p. 62)

Someone relates that he asked the Commander of the Faithful, upon whom be peace, whether the dead are able to visit their relatives. He answered that they are, whereupon the questioner asked: “When and how often?” He answered: “Every week, every month, or every year, depending of spiritual rank and capacity.” (*Ibid.*, Vol. II, p. 62)

The Qur'an speaks in the following terms of the constant torment and punishment that are administered to the evil and corrupt in the intermediate realm:

“They are brought to the fire every morning and evening, and the descendants of the Pharaoh shall be brought forth on the day of resurrection with the severest torment” (40:46).

It is obvious that this verse must refer to the intermediate realm, not to resurrection, for after resurrection there will be neither morning nor evening.

The Qur'an similarly says of the blessed:

“Provision shall be brought to them every morning and evening” (19:62).

This verse also contains mention of morning and evening, the reference being probably to the morning and evening of the intermediate realm which follow upon the morning and evening of this world. It cannot refer to paradise, because the Qur'an says:

“There (in paradise) they shall not see the sun nor experience severe cold” (76:13).

“The people of paradise shall have on that day a better abode and the fairest of places for repose” (25:24).

In the second of these two verses, the word *maqil* which we have translated as “place of repose” is of particular interest because it refers to a nap taken before noon. It is true that sleep in the intermediate realm cannot resemble exactly sleep in this world, but it is nonetheless different from what will prevail after resurrection, namely eternal wakefulness. This is indeed one reason why people are described as *qiyam* “awake” or “alert” on the day of resurrection.

The degree of life possessed by those in the intermediate realm is, in some sense, fuller than the life of this world, which may be what is suggested by this tradition: “People are asleep, and when they die they wake up.” (*Li'ali al-Akhbar*, p. 396)

This refers to the fact that when a person goes to sleep, his senses and perceptions are weakened; he can almost be said to be half-alive. When he awakens, he regains a full measure of life. Likewise, the degree of life man enjoys in this world is less than which awaits him in the intermediate realm; when he

is transferred to that realm, his degree of life is enhanced.

al-Ghazali says:

“When we are asleep we witness a world in which we do not imagine that we are asleep. This particular state is only a part of the total scheme of our life, the totality being represented by our waking state, and indeed, as soon as we wake up, we realize that our state while asleep represented only a part of our life, not the whole.

“This being the case, why should our present life not be like a period spent asleep in relation to the hereafter? Our firm belief that our present life in this world is equivalent to life as such is just like the supposition of the sleeper.

“When we wake up, we say that we understand we were sleeping and dreaming; whatever we experienced had no reality. By this we mean that our sleep was only part of the greater reality which is constituted by our waking state, for sleep is in itself a reality. Likewise, the life of this world is real in and of itself, but compared with the more expansive life that awaits us, it counts as a dream.” (Quoted in *Bist Guftar*, p. 323)

In the intermediate realm, the spirits of men pursue their lives according to the different degrees of consciousness that their belief and awareness have made possible for them. Since life there is not subject to the laws of matter, following instead its own particular criteria, its conditions must naturally be different from those of our present life. However, since man's perceptions are much sharpened in the intermediate realm, the spiritual torment and pleasure which he undergoes there escape our present powers of description.

The fruit of man's deeds becomes tangible for him in the intermediate realm. Those who have never had the good fortune of doing good deeds wish to return to the world to make up for their past. The Qur'an says:

“Spend in the path of God a part of the sustenance We have bestowed on you, before death overtakes you. Then the sinner will say, ‘O Lord, if You were to grant me a respite and postpone my death a little, I would certainly do good and become one of The virtuous’.” (63:10).

As for the righteous and pious, they will joyously exclaim in the intermediate world:

“Would that our relatives and kin knew how God has forgiven us and bestowed mercy and favor upon us” (36:26–27).

One of the characteristics of the intermediate realm is that both its pleasures and torments are temporary, being brought to an end when resurrection begins.

Certain verses of the Qur'an refer to the state of people intermediate between belief and unbelief i.e.,

those who were deprived by various circumstances or hardships of the opportunity of learning about Islam or investigating its truth, or were prevented from migrating from one land to another.

It is probable that such persons, if they have not committed any crimes, will be enveloped in God's mercy and forgiveness on the day of resurrection. In the intermediate realm, neither will they be punished nor will they enjoy blessings; they will simply wait for their destiny to be clarified.

The disquiet they endure will be comparable to that of prisoners whose case is still under investigation and whose future is unclear.

The Qur'an says:

“Those who have wronged themselves in this world will be asked by the angels when they die what they have done. They will say, ‘We were weak and oppressed and unable to move.’ Then the angels will ask, ‘Was God’s earth not wide enough for you to travel in it (so that you might hasten from the land of ignorance to that of faith and knowledge) ?’

The abode of These evildoers shall be hellfire; how evil and terrible an abode! Excepted from this shall be those men, women and children who were indeed unable to act or to move; they could not flee and they had no path of escape. It may be that God will forgive and show mercy to them, for He is Merciful and Pardoning” (4:97–99).

This verse clearly relates to the intermediate realm, because after resurrection the status and destiny of everyone is made clear.

* * * * *

In reality, then, the intermediate realm represents a small portion of the reward or punishment that man will receive after resurrection; it is like a window through which one can glimpse the ultimate outcome of his affair.

There are numerous traditions concerning the state of the God-fearing in the intermediate realm. They state clearly that although the God-fearing do not yet enter paradise, a gate to paradise is opened before them permitting them to glimpse the abode that awaits them and feel the pleasant breezes that blow there.

Tolstoy, the great Russian author, writes:

“O God, it is You alone Who can open a door On the world of mercy to Your servant who lies buried beneath the ground.

“Out of all these bones lying here, gradually rotting, Which belong to a king, and which to a beggar? Which belong to a judge, and which to a soldier? Which belong to a pious man who has bought heaven

for himself, and which to a sinner, who has been driven away from the kingdom of heaven? Whatever we see is darkness, visions and ghosts O God, it is only at the threshold of Your throne, only in Your heavens that we may find a path leading to tranquillity and salvation.

“On the day that nothing remains of our earthly form except a pitiful handful of dust and all the brilliance of our life has been buried in the black earth, it is You alone Who can open a door on the world of mercy to Your servant who lies buried beneath the ground.” (Quoted in *Zibatarin Shahkarha-yi Shir-i Jahan*, p. 300)

The first reality that presents itself to man the moment he dies and embarks on a new life is the voiding of all the customs, conventions and norms that governed his worldly life. All outward causation and instrumentality will come to an end, and man will enter a realm that is utterly empty of all the varied phenomena found in this world. All the aims and pursuits he has followed throughout his life will turn into a mirage.

The Qur'an says:

“If you were to see catastrophic misery of the oppressors when they are caught in the throes of death! The angels lift their powerful hands to seize their souls, telling them: ‘Give up now your souls. Today you shall suffer torment and humiliation because you spoke lyingly of God and refused in arrogance to accept His signs.’

Certainly, you will return to Us, one by one, as We first created you. You will leave behind all property and wealth We bestowed on you (this being the cause of your arrogance), and all the intermediaries and intercessors you thought you had shall be destroyed and separated from you.” (6:93-4)

“If you speak truly when you say there is no resurrection, why is it that when you stand at the bedside of the dying, as their souls rise in their throats, at a time when We are closer to them than you are (although you do not realize this) Why is it that then, if everything is indeed in your hands or the hands of nature, you do not return their souls to their bodies?

If the one who dies is among those who have drawn nigh to God, their place is in eternal rest and repose. If he is from among the Companions of the Right, then give glad tidings that he is safe. If he is from among the deniers and misguided, then his share shall be the boiling water and his abode shall be the hellfire. All of this is truth, concerning which there is no doubt.” (56:83-95)

Commenting on the part of the verse that refers to “those who have drawn nigh to God,” Imam as-Sadiq, upon whom be peace, says that it refers to the intermediate realm, while “eternal rest and repose” refers to paradise. (*Tafsir al-Qummi*)

Imam as-Sadiq also said: “By God, I fear for you in the intermediate realm.” `Amr b. Yazid then asked

him: "What is the intermediate realm?" He answered: "The tomb in which you will stay until the day of resurrection." (*al-Kafi*, Vol. I, p. 66)

Man puts his trust in two things in this life. First, the worldly goods of which he imagines himself to be the owner and which he regards as the means for attaining his wishes and desires. Second, those persons without whose help and influence he thinks himself incapable of fulfilling his needs powerful friends, relatives and the like.

The Qur'an stresses that both of these pass away and have no ultimate validity. Once man finds himself on the threshold of death, he is compelled to sever all material attachments, and with a belated realism that is forced upon him, he understands the emptiness of everything in which he had placed his trust.

He even wishes for the impossible to return and warn his relatives not to do anything which might plunge them into the same whirlpool of eternal wretchedness as himself.

The Most Noble Messenger, peace and blessings be upon him and his family, is reported to have said:

"The spirit of the dead will cry out after death: `O family and offspring! Take care not to be deceived by the world as it deceived and misled me. I accumulated wealth, making no distinction between the licit and the illicit, in the end leaving it behind for others to enjoy; all that remains for me is misery. Take care to avoid what has befallen me.'" (*Bihar al-Anwar*, Vol. III, p. 136)

Imam al-Hadi, upon whom be peace, compared the world to a marketplace when he said: "The world is a market in which some people profit and others lose." (*Tuhaf al-Uqal*, p. 483)

The Qur'an likewise summons men to engage in a profitable trade in the market of this world:

"O believers, shall I guide you to a trade which will free you from painful torment in the hereafter? Believe in God and His Messenger and struggle in God's path with your property and your person" (61:10-11).

One of the companions of Imam as-Sadiq, upon whom be peace, said: "I asked the Imam to counsel me. He answered: `Make provision for your journey, and make ready the goods that you will need on your voyage. Take all the necessary measures yourself, and do not instruct another after the end of your life to send on what you need.'" (*Mishkat al-Anwar*, p. 72)

The Commander of the Faithful, upon whom be peace, said:

"The world is a transient abode, not a permanent dwelling. People in this world are of two kinds: those who have sold themselves, who have deviated from the path of truth and are advancing toward perdition; and those who have bought themselves, who have chosen the path of salvation and liberated themselves." (*Nahj al-Balagha*, section 133)

Source URL:

<https://www.al-islam.org/resurrection-judgement-and-hereafter-sayyid-mujtaba-musavi-lari/lesson-six-teen-mans-situation#comment-0>