

## Part Three

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### [Prayers: The Act of Spiritual Ascension](#)

**Featured Themes:**

**Prayers; Despair**

الَّذِينَ إِن مَّكَّنَّاهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ أَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتَوُا الزَّكَاةَ وَأَمَرُوا بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَنَهَوْا عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَلِلَّهِ عَاقِبَةُ الْأُمُورِ

***(They are) those who, if We establish them in the land, establish regular prayers and give regular charity, enjoin the right and forbid wrong: with God rests the end (and decision) of (all) affairs. (22:41)***

Prophet Muhammad once shook a dry branch of a tree such that all of the leaves of the branch fell off, and then he said, “The sins of those who pray drop off as the leaves of this branch fell off.” [1](#)

In the thick of the battle of Karbala, on the day of Ashura, Abu Thumamah al-Saydawi advised his commander, “Aba Abdullah, the time for noon prayer has come.”

The Imam did not rebuke him for interrupting; instead, he replied, “You have remembered the prayer. May God make you steadfast in your prayers. Yes, the time for noon prayer has just begun.”

Prayers are the pillars of our faith. Our entire religion has been condensed into the prayers. If our prayers are accepted, then all of our good deeds will be accepted. When sincerity, honesty, and humbleness are shown in the prayers, then certainly the prayers will be heard by the Almighty and our other good deeds will be accepted. However, if the prayers are carelessly performed, then perhaps God

may overlook our good deeds.

When we recite the *ziyarah* of Imam Husayn, we highlight his dedication to the prayers, “I bear witness that you established the prayers, and gave charity, and enjoined good, and forbade evil.” Beyond politics, these four aims, also encapsulated in verse 22:41 summarize the main message of Imam Husayn. Therefore, we must uphold them, particularly the prayers; for they are what Imam Husayn stood for, and they are what he wants from his followers.

Nevertheless, a fallacy has spread that one does not have to pray because the intercession will come to their aid. This is a complete misconception. As Imam as-Sadiq warned us on his deathbed, “Our intercession will not reach those who take their prayers lightly.” Hence, loyalty to Islam begins with your prayers. Nothing can substitute for the prayers. Improving our relationship with God deepens our understanding of the prayers, and similarly improving the prayers deepens our connection with God.

Praying is not unique or exclusive to Islam. All religions encourage some form of meditation or prayer, no matter who they consider the divine to be. Even the pre-Islamic idol worshippers of Arabia prayed.

﴿ وَمَا كَانَ صَلَاتُهُمْ عِنْدَ الْبَيْتِ إِلَّا مُكَاءً وَتَصْدِيَةً فَذُوقُوا الْعَذَابَ بِمَا كُنْتُمْ تَكْفُرُونَ ﴾

***Their prayer at the House is nothing but whistling and clapping. So taste the punishment because of what you used to defy. (8:35)***

True, their prayers were lacking and it was not what God wanted from them; but nonetheless, they did pray.

Therefore, the concept stated by the Prophet that “abandoning the prayers marks the division between faith and disbelief”<sup>2</sup> is not limited to Islam. Even if in your heart, you truly believe in God, the prophets, the imams, and the Last Day, you cannot call yourself a true believer if you do not recite the obligatory prayers, for the Prophet has said, “Whoever makes light of his prayers is not from me.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, those who do not pray are not recognized as being remotely close to the Prophet.

Unfortunately, the latter tends to be our case these days. Some Muslims are neglecting their prayers because they are too busy working, or studying, or engaged in family or social affairs. They claim that there is no time to perform the five daily prayers. Perhaps, we may live in a very fast-paced and demanding world that requires much of our time and energy, but we have to remember our essence and why we were created. The prayers act as a healthy “time-out” throughout the day to listen to our heart and soul. If we listen carefully, they are telling us that we need to remember God and include Him in our daily life; and the best way to do this is through the obligatory prayers.

One of the beauties of this universe is that God has provided us with many spiritual parables in life. When you love someone, you think about that person all the time. You might spend only one hour a day

talking to that person, but the rest of your day is spent in thought about them. You will find any way to communicate with the person you love, no matter what the barriers are. Thinking and talking to the one that you love preoccupies your time. God wants us to feel that way about Him, even more. After teaching Prophet Moses the prayers, God ordained:

﴿إِنِّي أَنَا اللَّهُ لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا أَنَا فَاعْبُدْنِي وَأَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ لِذِكْرِي﴾

***“Indeed I am God – there is no god except Me. So worship Me, and maintain the prayer for My remembrance.” (20:14)***

He wanted Prophet Moses to maintain this sort of relationship with Him, to think about Him and talk to Him continuously. God wants this for us as well.

Remembering God gives us strength and helps us to remain optimistic. Imam Zain al-Abideen said in *Dua Abu Hamzah*, “O Lord, through remembering You, my heart became alive.”<sup>4</sup> Everything else for the Imam – money, food, family, socializing, and entertainment – became secondary. He thrived on praising Him.

You will not realize what you are missing out on if you neglect your prayers. You will feel empty inside but will not know why. You will feel lost and hopeless like someone who has lost a loved one. Besides, who is closer to our soul than God? When you have Him near, then you have everything, but when you lose Him, you lose everything.

Rectifying our prayers is also the first step in redressing the social ills of our communities. God will help us stem the tide of these mounting problems, but only if we seek help from Him. Belief is the key. In order to be assuring of His help, we have to believe, not just in Him, but that He will indeed help us; all we have to do is ask Him.

﴿وَنُنزِّلُ مِنَ الْقُرْآنِ مَا هُوَ شِفَاءٌ وَرَحْمَةٌ لِّلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَلَا يَزِيدُ الظَّالِمِينَ إِلَّا خَسَارًا﴾

***We send down in the Qur’an that which is a cure and mercy for the faithful; and it increases the wrongdoers only in loss. (17:82)***

Nevertheless, despite the vast mercy of God, many despair of His aid. Losing hope in God is considered a cardinal sin in Islam. Murder and adultery are not the only major sins; despairing of God’s mercy is at the same level. Imam as-Sadiq was sitting near the Sacred Mosque as Hajj ended when a man inquired as to what sort of person has the greatest sin. He replied, “Whoever circumambulates this House, walks between the two mountains of Safa and Marwah, witnesses the two stands in Arafat and Muzdalafah but still doubts God’s forgiveness.” After going through that course of spiritual purification, if you are still unsure about God’s forgiveness, then you doubt Him. From the very beginning, God created, shaped,

sustained, and guided you. If after all this you still mistrust His intentions, then that mistrust may become your destruction.

Often more times than we would like to admit, we forget about God, but God never forgets about us. Prophet Joseph was jailed under the orders of the *Aziz* of Egypt. When one of his companions in the jail was being released, Prophet Joseph requested him to recommend his matter to the *Aziz* so that he too could be released. At this time, the Angel Gabriel appeared to him in the jail and made him look at the floor of the jail. When Prophet Joseph did so, he could see the bottom of the earth and the sea. He saw in the bottom of the earth an ant with a particle of grain in its mouth. The angel said, “Do you think that your God who has not even forgotten this ant at the bottom of the earth, takes care of it and feeds it, would forget or disregard you?”

Still at times, our trust in God wavers. Praying offers us a vital link to keep up that hope and connection. For years, I have repeatedly spoken about the subject of the prayer and I will continue to address it for the rest of my life. If you are young, I urge you to rectify your prayers. Commitment to the prayer only gets harder as you grow older and your responsibilities increase, though your strength decreases. Train yourself to perform all of the prayers, particularly the morning prayer. When you begin your day with God, then you will stand poised and energized throughout the day.

﴿أَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ لِدُلُوكِ الشَّمْسِ إِلَى غَسَقِ اللَّيْلِ وَقُرْآنَ الْفَجْرِ إِنَّ قُرْآنَ الْفَجْرِ كَانَ مَشْهُودًا﴾

***Maintain the prayer from the sun's decline till the darkness of the night, and [observe particularly] the dawn recital. Indeed the dawn recital is attended [by angels]. (17:78)***

As much as possible, say your prayers on the exact time, not just within the time frame allowed for them, but at the beginning of the prayer time. When Imam Husayn's companion reminded him about the prayer on the day of Ashura, the Imam praised him for remembering the prayer at its onset. “Yes, the time for noon prayer has just begun.” You will see the effect of praying on time in your life if you make it a continuous habit.

Of course, you also need to remember that your prayers need to come from the heart. A tradition says, “None of a servant's prayers will be accepted except for that which comes from the heart.”<sup>5</sup> One has to have spiritual presence of the heart (*hudhur al-qalb*) while praying. Losing focus only takes a split second and Satan will do his best to distract you. The moment you think about food, family, or your fiancée, your prayers are not worth as much. You need to try as hard as you can to pay full attention to what you are saying and doing, for only those portions that you are paying attention in will be credited to your account.

One day, the Prophet saw a man praying inside the mosque who was rushing through his *ruku* (bowing) and *sujud* (prostration). He said that if this man died praying like that, he would not die on the path of

Islam. While in *sujud* we should try to remember the following tradition from the Prophet, “If one only realized how many blessings of God encompass a person when they put their forehead on to the dust, a person would never raise their head from the ground.” If we tried to keep this in our thoughts then perhaps one would extend the *sujud* and enjoy the grace and mercy that God is showering upon us.

It must be remembered that the rewards of prayers are not confined to this world only. In return for the sincerity of your prayers, God will grant you an eternal home in the highest level of Paradise. Therefore, try your utmost to take care of your prayers. You will be rewarded for your prayers, just like you will be rewarded for attending any religious session. You will reap the fruits of your choice at a time when you are all alone and afraid, and at that time, you will suddenly sense the Divine aid coming to you.

So from now on, make sure that you stand for all of your prayers and on time. Pray with your family if you can; but if that is not possible then pray alone. It will not take you more than a few minutes. Once you begin, you will find yourself wanting to spend more and more time with God, as you taste the sweetness of the prayers. Once you have grown accustomed to that, then you would never want to substitute anything else in exchange for it.

## The Final Departure & the Four Fears

### Featured Themes:

#### Despair; Expectations of Death

تَبَارَكَ الَّذِي بِيَدِهِ الْمُلْكُ وَهُوَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ. الَّذِي خَلَقَ الْمَوْتَ وَالْحَيَاةَ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ أَيُّكُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا وَهُوَ الْعَزِيزُ  
الْغَفُورُ

***Blessed is He in whose hands is all sovereignty, and He has power over all things. He, who created death and life that He may test you [to see] which of you is best in conduct. And He is the All-Mighty, the All-Forgiving. (67: 1-2)***

Nothing strikes more terror into our hearts than death. we shriek from death in revulsion, yet we all are marching towards the same fate. No matter how far we flee, it will soon catch up to us.

Death is part of life because it is the next step in the human life cycle. Interestingly, the Holy Qur'an interprets death differently than life because it puts death before life. Without death, we would not be able to recognize life, nor would we be able to progress towards our final goal. The Noble Prophet said, “You were created to abide eternally.”

Many cringe from death because they fear that it will be their annihilation. However, others look forward to it because they believe that it will bring rest. Both are mistakenly wrong in their approach about death because everyone's experience at death will be different. Some people may draw comfort from the

notion that their loved ones are now “at peace” after their passing away from this world, but in reality this may not be the case. Some people, who denied the existence of the Hereafter, may not even reach Heaven because according to the Prophet they “erred when they thought they would cease to exist.”

There is good reason why our inner nature abhors death. For most of us, entering the boundary between life and death will be a traumatic moment, according to the Prophet. Further, he says, “They are being transferred from the abode of deeds to the abode of torment or prosperity.” When we die, the Angel of Death will take our souls from our bodies. We may try to scream for help, but our tongues will be paralyzed; our connection to this world will be severed. We will have iron vision and we will see the reality of what is before us. The veil between the two worlds, the world of the living and the dead will disappear.

وَجَاءَتْ سَكْرَةُ الْمَوْتِ بِالْحَقِّ ذَلِكَ مَا كُنْتَ مِنْهُ تَحِيدُ ۚ وَنُفِخَ فِي الصُّورِ ذَلِكَ يَوْمَ الْوَعِيدِ ۚ وَجَاءَتْ كُلُّ نَفْسٍ مَعَهَا ۚ  
سَائِقٌ وَشَهِيدٌ ۚ لَقَدْ كُنْتَ فِي غَفْلَةٍ مِّنْ هَذَا فَكَشَفْنَا عَنْكَ غِطَاءَكَ فَبَصَرُكَ الْيَوْمَ حَدِيدٌ

***Then the agony of death brings the truth: “This is what you used to shun!” Then the Trumpet will be blown: “This is the promised day.” Then every soul will come accompanied by a driver and a witness: “You were certainly oblivious of this. We have removed your veil from you, and so your sight is acute today.” (50: 19–22)***

Although the transition will be physically and psychologically challenging, the Prophet taught us to say, “O God, help me against the stupor of death:

اللَّهُمَّ اعْنِي ۚ عَلَى ۚ سَكَرَاتِ الْمَوْتِ. اللَّهُمَّ خَفِّفْ عَلَيْنَا سَكَرَاتِ الْمَوْتِ

***Allahumma, ainna alaa sakaraat al-mawt; Allahumma, khaffif alayna sakaraat al-mawt.***

***O Allah! Help me at the time of the stupor of death! O Allah! Lighten upon us the stupor of death!***

We need to repeat his words in our prayers in order to lighten that moment, which will come upon all of us.

كَلَّا إِذَا بَلَغَتِ التَّرَاقِيَ. وَقِيلَ مَنْ رَاقٍ. وَظَنَّ أَنَّهُ الْفِرَاقُ. وَالتَّفَّتِ السَّاقُ بِالسَّاقِ. إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ يَوْمَئِذٍ الْمَسَاقُ ۚ

***No indeed! When the soul reaches up to the collar bones, and it is said, “Who will take him up?” and he knows that it is the [time of] parting, and each shank clasps the other shank, that day he shall be driven toward your Lord. (75:26–30)***

After the stupor of death lifts from us, we will find ourselves all alone, in a new and confusing world, a

world in which we will come face to face with the consequences of our deeds that we performed in this worldly life.

Are we prepared for this?

﴿قُلْ يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ هَادُوا﴾ إِن زَعَمْتُمْ أَنَّكُمْ أَوْلِيَاءُ لِلَّهِ مِنْ دُونِ النَّاسِ فَتَمَنَّوْا الْمَوْتَ إِن كُنْتُمْ صَادِقِينَ ﴿٤﴾

**Say, “O Jews! If you claim that you are God’s favorites, to the exclusion of other people, then long for death, should you be truthful.” (62:6)**

If we have truly prepared ourselves rightfully for the Hereafter, then we will not hesitate in the slightest to meet the consequences of our actions because we want to be rewarded with Paradise. However, most of us are afraid because of the fact that we know very well all of the secret thoughts and misdeeds that we performed throughout our lives. As Voltaire, the French philosopher said, “Fear follows crime and is its punishment.” No one needs to instill this dread into us; for we feel it ourselves. It is the most direct result of our mistakes. Rather than living in terror or denying the reality of the Hereafter, if we fear and recognize the next world, then we must take this opportunity now to reform ourselves while we still can before it is too late.

﴿وَأَمَّا مَنْ خَافَ مَقَامَ رَبِّهِ وَنَهَى النَّفْسَ عَنِ الْهَوَىٰ﴾. فَإِنَّ الْجَنَّةَ هِيَ الْمَأْوَىٰ ﴿٤﴾

**But as for him who is awed to stand before his Lord and forbids the soul from [following] desire, his refuge will indeed be Paradise. (79:40–41)**

Not all of our fear comes from guilt; for some of our fear is simply of the unknown. Death is the “undiscovered territory.” Nothing we hear about it now can fully prepare us for our life after death. Despite all of our religious teachings, the amount that we understand about the next world is still vastly unknown.

As Thomas Hobbes, the English philosopher who lived over 400 years ago said, “I am about to take my last voyage, a great leap in the dark.” During his lifetime, he supported the monarchy brutally and fearlessly, but when it came time for his own death, he found himself helpless. He was unprepared to face death.

Plato held the same view, that we fear death primarily because we fear the unknown. If we were to reflect upon it, we would realize that death is only a natural progression of our existence. Like we believe, his thought was that the soul is trapped in the body and held prisoner to its excesses.

Through dying, the soul will be set free and allowed to move onto its final destination. It is as the poet Abu Ala al-Maari commented in his final days when blindness and infirmity confined him indoors. When

someone asked him how he was doing, he replied he was held captive through three things: his blindness, his confinement, and his body, and he was waiting for death to come and set his soul free.

Nonetheless, despite how little we understand about death, reflecting upon it is invaluable. We learn poignant lessons when we visit the cemetery. Today, we may bear the weight of a coffin but tomorrow we will be inside of it. I knew a man once who had committed many terrible sins. Suddenly, one day he decided to correct his life. I never heard of him committing a sin again. I asked him what led him to change his life so drastically. He replied that he had been to a funeral for someone who was his own age, and it struck him that death can even approach him without warning.

Therefore, he decided to prepare himself; he asked the caretaker a cemetery to sell him a grave. Initially, the caretaker thought that the grave was for his parents. Then, he thought that maybe the man had a terminal illness. Finally, he sold him the plot, and the man began digging his grave with his own hands. After he fashioned a hole, big enough for himself, he put himself inside of it for several hours and imagined what it would be like when his family, friends, and neighbors would heap the earth over him and bury. After that image, he was a changed man.

I am not trying to frighten you needlessly. Reflecting on death does terrify us, but it also awakens us, just like it did with this man. It shocks us into reforming ourselves. In this life, we fear just standing before an ordinary traffic judge. On that Day, the stakes will be much higher and we will have no friends, supporters, or attorneys to defend us. Most of us will be so scared that we will be not be able to stand.

﴿وَتَرَىٰ كُلَّ أُمَّةٍ جَائِيَةً كُلُّ أُمَّةٍ تُدْعَىٰ إِلَىٰ كِتَابِهَا الْيَوْمَ تُجْزَوْنَ مَا كُنتُمْ تَعْمَلُونَ﴾

***And you will see every nation fallen on its knees. Every nation will be summoned to its book: “Today you will be requited for what you used to do.” (45:28)***

The knowledge of that moment helps us maintain self-control and repel the whispers of Satan.

Another thing which will help us remain on the path of the truth is knowing that God is constantly watching us.

﴿أَلَمْ يَعْلَم بِأَنَّ اللَّهَ يَرَىٰ﴾

***Does he not know that God sees? (96: 14)***

Although He is the most Merciful, but His punishment will also be the most merciless to those whose evil was grand, so much so that “even the heavens and earth will not be able to withstand it.”<sup>6</sup>

﴿وَلَوْ أَنَّ لِلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا مَا فِي الْأَرْضِ جَمِيعاً وَمِثْلَهُ مَعَهُ لَافْتَدَوْا بِهِ مِنْ سُوءِ الْعَذَابِ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ وَبَدَأَ لَهُمْ مِنَ اللَّهِ مَا﴾

لَمْ يَكُونُوا يَحْتَسِبُونَ

***Even if the wrongdoers possessed all that is on earth, and as much of it besides, they would surely offer it to redeem themselves with it from a terrible punishment on the Day of Resurrection, and there will appear to them from God what they had never reckoned. (39:47)***

Therefore, reforming ourselves should be the most important task while we are still alive.

In many instances, the Prophet taught us ways to alleviate the sufferings of death. One of the most effective ways is to cultivate loyalty towards the Prophet and his Ahlul-Bayt. He foretold, “Love for me and my Ahlul-Bayt aids in three situations: when beholding the Angel of Death; when being placed in your grave; and when standing before God, the Almighty.”<sup>7</sup>

Despite all of the terror, God gives the believers glad tidings about death:

يَا أَيَّتُهَا النَّفْسُ الْمُطْمَئِنَّةُ ۖ أَرْجِعِي إِلَىٰ رَبِّكِ رَاضِيَةً مَّرْضِيَّةً ۖ

***“O soul at peace! Return to your Lord, pleased, pleasing!” (89:27–28)***

True believers will experience no fear at the moment of death, and they will be spared from the Hellfire.

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ سَبَقَتْ لَهُمْ مِنَّا الْحُسْنَىٰ أُولَٰئِكَ عَنْهَا مُبْعَدُونَ ۖ لَا يَسْمَعُونَ حَسِيسَهَا وَهُمْ فِي مَا أُشْتَهَتْ أَنفُسُهُمْ خَالِدُونَ ۖ لَا يَحْزَنُهُمُ الْفَزَعُ الْأَكْبَرُ وَتَتَلَقَّاهُمُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ هَٰذَا يَوْمُكُمْ الَّذِي كُنْتُمْ تُوعَدُونَ ۖ

***Indeed those to whom there has gone beforehand [the promise of] the best reward from Us will be kept away from it. They will not hear even its faint sound and they will remain [forever] in what their souls desire. The Great Terror will not upset them, and the angels will receive them [saying]: “This is your day which you were promised.” (21: 101–103)***

In particular, books of *tafseer* (exegesis) specify that “those for whom the good from Us has gone before” refers to those in the *wilayah* (embracement) of the Prophet and Ali b. Abi Talib. Befriend them in your lifetime, and be loyal to him in this life, and you will be freed from the anxiety and loneliness on that day of the great terror. Rather than fearing to meet your Lord, you will long to meet your Lord, like Imam Husayn, and the other imams were.

## **Repentance & Ethical Obligations**

**Featured Themes:**

**God’s Mercy; God’s Love; Repentance**

الْتَائِبُونَ الْعَابِدُونَ الْحَامِدُونَ السَّائِحُونَ الرَّاكِعُونَ السَّاجِدُونَ الْآمِرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَالنَّاهُونَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَالْحَافِظُونَ ﴿٩﴾  
لِحُدُودِ اللَّهِ وَيَبْشُرِ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ ﴿٩﴾

***[The faithful are] penitent, devout, celebrators of God's praise, wayfarers, who bow [and] prostrate [in prayer], bid what is right and forbid what is wrong, and keep God's bounds – and give good news to the faithful. (9: 112)***

Thousands of years ago, prophet Moses was crossing the Sinai Desert when he encountered a man living in the barren wilderness.

“Where are you going?” the man inquired.

“On top of Mount Tur to speak with God,” Moses replied.

“Will you take a message to Him from me?” the man asked.

Moses questioned him, “What is the message?”

The man's eyes angered. “Tell your Lord that I am very angry with Him!” he grumbled. “Tell Him that He should be ashamed of Himself! I do not want to be His servant, and I do not want Him to be my Lord! I do not want His sustenance, food, health, or assistance! He can keep them for Himself! I am very disappointed in Him, and I do not want to have anything to do with Him!”

Outraged, Moses parted from the man and resolved never to report this rude message to God. After winding his way up the treacherous slope, he reached the pinnacle of the mountain and had nearly completed his communion with God when he was asked by the Almighty whether he had something else to convey.

There was no way he could lie to God. “I have a message to give You,” he said, “but it is very impolite, I cannot bring myself to deliver it.”

“Is it from your servant or Mine?” asked God.

“It is from Your servant,” Moses admitted, and grudgingly repeated the message.

After he had finished reiterating that man's tirade, God spoke to him and replied, “Moses, hasten to this man. Send him My peace and greetings. Tell him that even if he does not love his Lord, his Lord still loves him. Even if he does not care about Me, I, his Lord still care about him. I am not doing him a favor by providing for him, this is my obligation. He may feel ashamed of being My servant, but I do not feel ashamed of being his Lord. I still want him to return to Me. I will welcome him back whenever He decides to return.”

Moses rushed from the mountaintop bearing this message of overwhelming generosity to the man.

Completely taken aback, the man fell to the ground and cried out, “Oh God, I thought You hated me. Now, I know that You are my true friend.”

Every person is born with an immaculate heart according to God. When the heart of a person is clean, it can contain God within it, for God says that neither the heavens nor the earth can contain God, only the heart of a believer can. It is through the heart that we can feel God’s presence, His warmth, and His love inside of us. When God is in our hearts, we sense a form of communion with Him. We feel Him guiding and protecting us, but sometimes we force Him out of our hearts when we continuously commit immoral acts. For God is immaculate, thus He can only reside in a virtuous heart, not one that is tarnished with sin or filth. Nonetheless, God has provided a way for Him to return into the heart of a person that has sinned, and that is through repentance.

Repentance cannot be a hallow confession. One cannot stand in the market, and steal an item, whether hastily or deliberately, and then immediately seek repentance; for this is not a sincere admittance. One has to feel the intense remorse throughout his entire body and vow never to repeat that act again.

Unfortunately, there are people who perpetually repeat offenses without recognizing the gravity of their actions. They view their acts as minute, private or inconsequential; but in fact, they have become immune to their sinful ways. They have tainted their heart with so much sin that it has become hardened and blind to the reality. Even worse, the evil act eventually becomes insignificant for them.

The Qur’an declares that the most severe punishment against a habitual sinner is the hardening of the heart. If a sinner continues the offenses, without true repentance, then one will suffer in this life and in the next. It can almost be compared to a smoker. A smoker knows that cigarettes will cause damage to their body and if they persist, then their entire health will suffer and deteriorate.

In order to save a troubled soul, sincere repentance must be performed. A committed vow not to repeat the offense again should be binding. Allow yourself the opportunity for God to reside in the center of your heart. Without His presence there, one will feel empty, unloved, and abandoned. It is the heart that communicates with God; and He will not reject a sincere repenter, for God is full of mercy and compassion.

In another instance, Prophet Moses asked, “God, are you close enough to me that I can whisper to You, or are you far away from me that I have to call out to you?”

“I am a close companion of whoever remembers Me,”<sup>8</sup> came the reply.

وَإِذَا سَأَلَكَ عِبَادِي عَنِّي فَإِنِّي قَرِيبٌ أُجِيبُ دَعْوَةَ الدَّاعِ إِذَا دَعَانِ فَلْيَسْتَجِيبُوا لِي وَلْيُؤْمِنُوا بِي لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْشُدُونَ ﴿١٢٠﴾

***When My servants ask you about Me, [tell them that] I am indeed near. I answer the supplicant’s call when he calls Me. So let them respond to Me, and let them have faith in Me, so that they may***

**fare rightly. (2: 186)**

No matter what our crimes are, God still wants us to return back to Him. He showers His limitless blessings on believers and atheists alike.

يَا مَنْ يُعْطِي مَنْ سَأَلَهُ، يَا مَنْ يُعْطِي مَنْ لَمْ يَسْأَلْهُ وَمَنْ لَمْ يَعْرِفْهُ تَحَنُّنًا مِنْهُ وَرَحْمَةً

***O You who gives to the one who asks. O You who gives to the one who does not ask and does not even recognize You - out of His compassion and mercy.*** [9](#)

As we pray to God through the blessed words of our Imam, this shows us that He loves us despite our misdeeds.

الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ الَّذِي يُجِيبُنِي حِينَ أُنَادِيهِ، وَيَسْتُرُ عَلَيَّ كُلَّ عَوْرَةٍ وَأَنَا أَعْصِيهِ، وَيُعْظِمُ النِّعْمَةَ عَلَيَّ فَلَا أُجَازِيهِ

***All praise be to God Who answers me whenever I call upon Him, and hides my secrets even though I transgress, and grants me His blessings even though I do not deserve them.*** [10](#)

His mercy is infinite. He has no reason to take vengeance on us, because He does not want to see us suffer. However our suffering is often due to our own actions.

Still, we rebuke Him by persisting in our rebellion.

وَأَنْتَ لَا تَحْتَجِبُ عَنْ خَلْقِكَ إِلَّا أَنْ تَحْجِبَهُمُ الْأَعْمَالُ دُونَكَ

***And You do not hide Yourself from Creation except that they hide themselves from You through their deeds.*** [11](#)

Sinners impair the functioning of our hearts. God created our hearts as tools to communicate with Him. Nevertheless, whenever we sin, a dark stain settles on our hearts and interferes with our ability to perceive the light of God.

كَلَّا بَلْ رَانَ عَلَى قُلُوبِهِمْ مَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ. كَلَّا إِنَّهُمْ عَنْ رَبِّهِمْ يَوْمَئِذٍ لَمَحْجُوبُونَ

***No indeed! Rather their hearts have been sullied by what they have been earning. No indeed! They will be alienated from their Lord on that day. (83: 14-15)***

Unless we purify our hearts from sin by truly repenting, the stains will remain as a scar. The heart of a sinner becomes so dysfunctional that it can no longer carry out its original purpose which is

communicating with the Creator. “There is no severe punishment for a person than the hardness of the heart,”<sup>12</sup> cautioned Imam al-Baqir. Hardness of the heart does not come easily. It accumulates after many years of sinning. However, God gives us many chances and opportunity after opportunity to turn back to Him before allowing our hearts to become cold and bitter.

﴿قُلْ لِعِبَادِيَ الَّذِينَ أَسْرَفُوا عَلَىٰ أَنفُسِهِمْ لَا تَقْنَطُوا مِن رَّحْمَةِ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَغْفِرُ الذُّنُوبَ جَمِيعًا إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْغَفُورُ الرَّحِيمُ﴾<sup>4</sup>

**Say [that God declares,] “O My servants who have committed excesses against their own souls, do not despair of the mercy of God. Indeed God will forgive all sins. Indeed He is the All-Forgiving, the All-Merciful. (39:53)**

This verse does not address the average sinner. It addresses those engulfed in sins. Despite how far they have sunk, God still reaches out to them, for He loves us all and does not want us to perish. Nevertheless, if we insist on ignoring His kind warnings, then eventually we will become blind to our own wrongdoings. We will have no guilt over what we do. Should that ever happen, then we will have damaged ourselves beyond recovery.

﴿فَلَوْلَا ﴿٤﴾ إِذْ جَاءَهُمْ بَأْسُنَا تَضَرَّعُوا وَلَكِن قَسَتْ قُلُوبُهُمْ وَزَيَّنَ لَهُمُ الشَّيْطَانُ مَا كَانُوا يَعْمَلُونَ﴾<sup>4</sup>

**Why did they not entreat when Our might overtook them! But their hearts had hardened, and Satan had made to seem decorous to them what they had been doing. (6:43)**

That point is the point of failure, the end game of life, for God did not create us to live apart from Him. On the contrary, He created us to appreciate His generosity and compassion, for He is the One who is the source of all good; and He has intended for us to cultivate His noble virtues, such as patience and forgiveness, in order to enjoy His presence.

If instead, we sever ourselves from Him by sinning, then we will torment only ourselves. He does not need to exact out His punishment on us. We will suffer inside ourselves, for crimes affect the perpetrator first. We are the first ones who will feel the results of whatever we do to ourselves before it even reaches others.

﴿قُلْ يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ قَدْ جَاءَكُمُ الْحَقُّ مِن رَّبِّكُمْ فَمَنِ اهْتَدَىٰ فَإِنَّمَا يَهْتَدِي لِنَفْسِهِ وَمَنْ ضَلَّ فَإِنَّمَا يَضِلُّ عَلَيْهَا وَمَا أَنَا عَلَيْكُمْ بِوَكِيلٍ﴾<sup>4</sup>

**Say, “O mankind! The truth has already come to you from your Lord. Whoever is guided, is guided only for [the good of] his own soul, and whoever goes astray, goes astray only to its detriment, and it is not my business to watch over you.” (10: 108)**

It is told that on another occasion, when Prophet Moses was living in the desert, a severe drought struck Bani Israil. As food grew scarce and their animals began to wither away, they began to panic. Some murmured that they were the target of God's displeasure. In desperation, they gathered and prayed, beseeched God to send down rain and implored Him to tell them why He was putting them through this great test.

In response, God revealed to Prophet Moses that something indeed was wrong. He was withholding His blessings from them because a man among them was guilty of slander.

"That is it?" wondered Moses. "All of this because of one man?"

With a heavy heart, Moses conveyed the Divine message. Whispers began to circulate the crowd as to who the man might be. Since Moses did not know for sure who the man was, he commanded the man to take it upon himself to leave the community for the sake of its survival.

Immediately, the guilty man realized his crime. His heart began to beat faster, and his mouth became dry. He was petrified that someone may recognize him. Everyone would come to know that it was him. No one had spread more rumors among the Bani Israil than he did. He was infamous, and so he had to leave from there. It was the right thing to do, the moral thing to do. His people should not have to suffer any more because of his evil deeds.

Nevertheless, how could he humiliate himself in front of all of his people? What would they say? How could he admit to being the cause of God's wrath?

Aside from that, this was the desert. He had no means of livelihood, so where would he go?

As he contemplated back and forth inside of his mind, Moses repeated his request. Hours passed. Frustrated, Moses asked God to reveal the man's identity since he had not identified himself.

"Moses, I despise tale bearing," God revealed. "Do you want Me to be a talebearer?"

They remained at an impasse. Finally, Moses repeated his request one last time and then gave up.

The man felt horrible, for he had never realized the ramifications of his tale bearing before. He had not thought that his innocent slander could bring down the chastisement of God upon everyone. Silently, he began pleading to God for help. He admitted that he had done wrong, and he promised never to repeat his mistake; if only He would give him another chance.

Out of nowhere, lightning crashed. Moses blinked. Giant, dark clouds rumbled overhead, and the Children of Israil were suddenly soaked with rain.

Amazed, Moses asked God what had happened.

"I sent the rain because of the repented slanderer," came the reply. "He atoned himself and sought

forgiveness.”

That one man’s crimes brought catastrophe to the entire community; however, his sincere repentance immediately drew the blessings of God. This is why we address God as “the Compassionate, the Merciful.” We teach our children this phrase, and thus we fully have to believe in it ourselves.

God has given us many ways to repent to Him, but the fastest way to return to God is through the Ahlul-Bayt, in particular, Imam Husayn. A tradition reads, “All of us (the Ahlul-Bayt) are ships of salvation, but the ship of Husayn is the fastest.” The Prophet assured, “Husayn is the light of guidance and the ship of salvation.”<sup>13</sup> No matter how deeply one may be drowning in worldly sins, one can cling to Imam Husayn and find their way back to God. He has granted that honor to the Imam and has informed us about this great blessing.

Therefore, we need to thank God for offering us the opportunity to repent, and we have to take advantage of it. He has invited us to seek his forgiveness and He is waiting for us. So let us turn back to Him and sincerely repent for the mistakes that we have committed in our lives.

## [Marriage Series: Purpose of Tying the Knot](#)

### **Featured Themes:**

#### **Spouse Qualities; Purpose of Marriage**

سُبْحَانَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ الْأَزْوَاجَ كُلَّهَا مِمَّا تُنْبِتُ الْأَرْضُ وَمِنْ أَنْفُسِهِمْ وَمِمَّا لَا يَعْلَمُونَ ﴿٤﴾

***Immaculate is He who created pairs of all kinds of what the earth grows, and of themselves, and of what they do not know. (36:36)***

One day a man decided to raise birds. He bought a male and female bird and began to care for them. By nature, the male bird was dominating and would aggressively chase after the female bird, and she naturally would run away, but once he caught her, she succumbed to his wants. One day, the female bird got very sick. All day she lay lifeless, unable to move.

The male bird would stand by her side and peck at her neck, and nudge her to get up, but she remained still. For several days she remained like this until one day, in the middle of the night, the male bird screeched a haunting cry, which woke the man up. The man went to check on the birds and found that the female bird had died. The following morning the male bird seemed withdrawn and quiet. Two days later, the male bird also died due to his intense grief of losing his mate.

This is a true story about two birds who loved each other so much that one could not live without the other. As human beings, we also long for such a love in our life partner; the type that is inseparable; full

of tenderness, compassion, and tranquility.

However, finding a suitable partner has become a Herculean task. Establishing a family is only a dream for some people. This phenomenon is not limited to the West; it is also a worldwide phenomenon. It is not due to lack of money, nor is it due to a lack of jobs. Rather, it is due to a lack of pure, refined human beings; and as a result, we are suffering and so is our society.

What is more is that the rate of happy marriages seems to have drastically declined. Before getting married, you need to ask yourself, why do you want to get married in the first place? Why do you want another person in your life? Look at the social upheaval of unhappy marriages. You do not want to be another statistic. From the beginning, one should try to make their marriage different and invest in its success by conducting it according to the teachings of the Qur'an and the Ahlul-Bayt.

Some people get married only to fulfill their fantasies of physical enjoyment. Others marry to parade their husband or wife to the public; to show how attractive of a "catch" they have found. Still others marry to remove the financial burden from their shoulders, and some, unfortunately, only marry to obtain immigration status.

However, only a select few marry for the reasons described in the Holy Qur'an. Only a few sincerely seek a soul mate to share in the happiness with them for the rest of their lives. Only a few think of finding a partner not only for themselves, but also a proper parent for their children; a father or mother who can nurture their children into excelling above themselves.

These are the Islamic reasons for marriage. As such, an increasing number of people are finding it very difficult to search for a like-minded husband or wife, who is ready to undertake the responsibilities of the family life.

Many married people complain that they have been miserable for decades. From the beginning, they were disappointed in their marriage because they did not make the right choice. Either they blindly fell in love, or they were forced to marry against their wishes, or they met each other at unsuitable places. A marriage that begins in the street will end in the street. A marriage that begins in a nightclub will end in a nightclub. A marriage that begins with text messaging will end with text messaging. One day he will send you a message saying, "Goodbye, I am dumping you!" A marriage that begins because of money will end because of money. The physical beauty that enticed one into marriage will become a curse and lead to divorce.

When one intends to get marry they should solely put the satisfaction of God above their own satisfaction or the satisfaction of their parents. Ask yourself whether your marriage is Islamic or not? Will God share His happiness with you on your wedding night, or will He turn His face away from you? If He is happy, then your marriage will be blessed; but if he's not, then no wealth or connections can save you.

Today, those people who can admit that they chose the wrong spouse are a lesson for you. We must

learn from their mistakes in order to avoid them. Study your potential mate's character and commitment before marriage. Ask yourself whether you really want to stay with that particular person for the rest of your life or not? If you just get married because you are enjoying the romance, then you will wake up one day and realize that this relationship has no future.

You will go to the religious leader and ask for a divorce. Divorce may take five minutes, but its ramifications will last an entire lifetime. Your mental health and reputation are at stake, so one must be very careful before entering into a marriage. Islam encourages marriage, but it also encourages rationality and caution when choosing a partner.

When I was a child, I would occasionally accompany my father to solemnize marriages, the bride used to take her time to approve the marriage. My father would have to ask her repeatedly whether or not she conceded to marry the groom. Eventually, she would say yes, but it would take time because it is a lifetime decision. Nowadays, when I solemnize marriages, sometimes even before I finish the question, the bride hastily says, "Yes!" I hope one takes the time to understand the true meaning of marriage when a person says yes.

The Holy Qur'an discusses two purposes of marriage, the first of which is procreation:

وَاللَّهُ جَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَزْوَاجِكُمْ بَنِينَ وَحَفَدَةً وَرَزَقَكُمْ مِنَ الطَّيِّبَاتِ أَفَبِالْبَاطِلِ يُؤْمِنُونَ ﴿٤﴾  
وَبِنِعْمَةِ اللَّهِ هُمْ يَكْفُرُونَ ﴿٥﴾

***God made for you mates from your own selves and appointed for you, from your mates, children and grandchildren, and We provided you with all of the good things. What, will they believe in falsehood while they deny the blessings of God? (16:72)***

Soon after marriage comes parenthood. To be a good parent is a huge responsibility. You may say now that you do not want children, but you will change your mind as you mature and the marriage progresses. Having children is a natural part of married life. If you can have children but choose not to, then you will suffer, and so will the marriage.

The Qur'an also describes marriage as a way for one part of the soul to fulfill its yearning for the other:

﴿ يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَخَلَقَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا وَبَثَّ مِنْهُمَا رِجَالًا كَثِيرًا وَنِسَاءً ﴿٤﴾

***O mankind! Be wary of your Lord who created you from a single soul, and created its mate from it, and from the two of them, scattered numerous men and women. (4: 1)***

This is the real reason why you need to get married. You do not need a partner to cook or clean for you; or a partner to bring home money. These things are secondary. Most importantly, marriage is to bring

about peace, protection, and comfort to the soul.

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ مَوَدَّةً وَرَحْمَةً إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ  
يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

***And among His signs is that He created for you mates from your own selves that you may take comfort in them, and He ordained affection and mercy between you. There are indeed signs in that for a people who reflect. (30:21)***

Marriage is for spiritual and emotional healing. When you are sick, you can go to the doctor. When you are hungry, you can go to a restaurant. However, when you are sad and lonely who else can you go to but your spouse?

It is written in *Bihar al-Anwar* that for a few moments after his creation, Adam felt very alone. Therefore, God created Eve immediately.

Adam was mesmerized. His heart swelled up with joy, hope, and peace. “God,” he asked tentatively, “who is this that You just created right now?”

“Adam,” God replied, “she is your partner and your intimate friend. You are permitted to live with her.”

Adam was very happy.

One cannot truly flourish in this life without a partner. One cannot fulfill their mission on earth alone. One has to marry in order to develop oneself.

Unfortunately, marriage has lost much of its meaning today, and so many people fear marriage. However, one will look forward to marriage if one reflects on what it truly means. When a marriage is based on respect and mercy, not abuse and exploitation, then it will serve its intended purpose; it will become a source of one’s happiness.

When one does get married, one has to realize that a giant responsibility lay ahead of you. You are responsible for your husband or wife. This other person that is living with you is a human being with feelings. More than your money, they need your kindness, attention, and good manners. When the Prophet asked what a woman’s right on her husband was, he replied, “To feed her, clothe her, be kind and humble towards her,” [14](#) a man must not be arrogant or demonstrate his force inside of the house.

If you want to prove that you are a man then do it outside of the house; not in the kitchen because the food is not ready. This is not the attitude of a believer who fears standing before God. Your household should be a place where you can show God your sincerity, not your hardheartedness. Some people go home angry and victimize their wife or child, not their real enemy. Do not go home angry. Cool down first and then go home.

The Prophet said, “The best of you is the one who has the best manners, and the one who has the best manners is the one who is closest to his family, and compared to all of you (and your closeness to your family), I am the closest to my family.” Another time he said, “The closest person to me on the Day of Judgment will be the one who had the best manners with his family.” You will not earn the privilege of standing with the Prophet only through prayers, fasting, and charity, but by being the best mannered within your home.

You will gain this privilege by treating your family with kindness and forgiveness, like Ali b. Abi Talib did. Despite his immense responsibilities towards Islam, he used to come home and take care of his wife Fatima, and their children. He used to ask Fatima how he could help her with her chores. This is the best etiquette of a husband and a father.

A model example of a good marriage was that of Imam Ali and Lady Fatima. Why was Fatima al-Zahra the best wife? Why did Imam Ali continue to miss and weep for her years after her departure? He summarized the answer in one sentence to Ammar b. Yasir, “By God, I never angered her and never upset her and she never angered me or upset me.”<sup>15</sup> That was Fatima, and Fatima was not the daughter of a king who was living in royalty in a grand palace.

She worked very hard every day for her family. Back then, in that society it was common for people to have servants. When her hands were cracked and bleeding, she asked her father for a servant to assist her, but he advised her to be patient because our days in this life are numbered and the real happiness is reserved for the next life. She believed in this and continued to live a humble, yet fulfilling marriage.

Many people have asked whether premarital relationships are healthy or risky. The answer depends on what “premarital relationship” means. If it means getting to know your future husband or wife with the intention of marriage, then that is absolutely healthy and it is what Islam asks from us. You should establish mutual understanding before you get married. You should get to know your future partner’s personality and lifestyle, so you will not discover unbearable conditions during the marriage, such that it leads to the disintegration of the marriage or family later on. You have a natural right to know your future spouse.

However, if by “premarital relationship,” it means having a physical relationship then this is very dangerous. Even if you are engaged and about to be married, you should not have any form of a physical relationship with each other, otherwise this will prevent you from rationally understanding each other.

When you are engaged, your emotions are skyrocketing. You are the happiest couple on earth. You would die for each other; and your life seems perfect. You have no serious responsibilities. You see your fiancé at his or her best. You forget about the reality of life, its expectations, responsibilities, and challenges. The real marital life is full of struggles; it will continuously swing from bitterness to sweetness. Once you’re married life together begins, you will tell each other how you have changed

compared to the engagement time. Before, you were always smiling, but then you became sick and tired of one another. Unfortunately, this is what is happening more and more today. Young couples are not realizing that marital life is about commitment, sacrifice, patience, and responsibility. Marriage should be looked upon as a final sale – non-refundable, non-transferable, and no-exchanges.

Sadly over the years, I have been inundated with many stories about marriages in the community falling apart. What is happening to our community? Where is our faith? Why are we being afflicted with the ills of the society? God wanted us to practice the ways of Islam and to influence the society that we live in, in a positive way, not for us to be contaminated by its social problems. We should be leading the way for others on how to have successful marriages. We are raised on Islamic ethics of patience, sacrifice, and goodness.

Moreover, the best ones to show us how to carry that responsibility and practice of marriage was the Noble Prophet and the Ahlul-Bayt; and among them was Imam Husayn, a man who had the best family and the best children. Imam Husayn did not only teach us how to die in honor, but he also taught us how to live an honorable life.

## **Marriage Series: Qualities to Search for in a Partner before Marriage**

### **Featured Themes:**

#### **Background of Family; Faith and Character of Individual**

﴿ يَا أَيُّهَا النَّاسُ اتَّقُوا رَبَّكُمُ الَّذِي خَلَقَكُمْ مِنْ نَفْسٍ وَاحِدَةٍ وَخَلَقَ مِنْهَا زَوْجَهَا وَبَثَّ مِنْهُمَا رِجَالًا كَثِيرًا وَنِسَاءً ۗ ﴾

***O mankind! Be wary of your Lord who created you from a single soul, and created its mate from it, and from the two of them, scattered numerous men and women. (4: 1)***

“No institution has been founded more beloved to god almighty than marriage,”<sup>16</sup> said Imam al-Baqir, the fifth Imam from the Ahlul-Bayt. To preserve the sanctity of marriage, one needs to seek the right qualities in a potential partner. Although one may look for innumerable traits, six of them should be focused on the most. When you find someone with these qualities then forego the rest, as they are not as crucial. However, if someone lacks one of them, then be cautious.

The first factor that one needs to consider is the background of the family; it is not enough to just look at the individual. Human beings are like goods in the market; some are genuine, while others are counterfeit. A tradition says, “People are minerals like gold and silver.”<sup>17</sup> Some are plentiful and cheap, while others are valuable and scarce. Therefore, search for someone from a sincere family, not necessarily a rich or famous family, but a family that is known for their generosity and faith. Thus, seek

out families that are genuine, not pretentious; one that is known for their morals and ethics.

We have all heard the Prophet's warning, "Beware of a flower that is growing in the trash (meaning a beautiful woman who has grown up in an indecent environment)." [18](#) Aside from the inherited influence of the family, one also needs to keep in mind of the social atmosphere. This is another important quality when choosing a life partner; where were they raised; what was that society like; did it have a negative influence on that individual? These are some important questions to ask yourself in regards to your prospective partner.

The extended family is also critical. Not only did this person spend his or her formative years with the extended family, but these relatives will not disappear after your wedding. In fact, you will be adopting them as your extended family. They will become your aunt, uncle, and grandparent, and more importantly, they will become the aunt, uncle and grandparent of your children. One must be very cautious of who your children's relatives will be.

Of course, you should not just look at the family and ignore a great individual. Exceptions are always there. From time to time, you do meet people whose demeanor vastly exceeds that of their blood relatives and vice versa. You should also not reject someone who has no family, or who is orphaned, or separated.

In addition, converts (or reverts as they are often referred to as) to Islam forms another giant exception. We tend to find that the Muslim community has wronged them, and many converts find it nearly impossible to marry. This is terrible and completely contrary to the teachings of Islam. Only piety distinguishes us from one another. Despite not coming from Muslim families, most converts are completely dedicated to the religion, some even more so than born Muslims. They can be compared to Salman al-Farsi, who although his parents were not Muslim, the Prophet included him as his family (*ahlul bayt*). Islam does not have a caste system. God's love and compassion encompasses all of His creatures. A tradition notes, "He has hidden His friends among His servants, so do not disrespect any of His servants." [19](#) In such cases, you need to evaluate the individual, not the family.

In any case, despite the importance of investigating the family, you still need to scrutinize the individual. Character, integrity, manners, and morality are the building blocks of an exceptional person. The number one personal characteristic that you should check for is honesty. Mutual trust forms the basis of a stable marriage. You need to be able to trust your partner in order to focus on your duties as a spouse and as a parent.

Without trust, your marriage will fall apart. The road to divorce begins with suspicion. You cannot live with someone whom you do not trust. You will not be happy together. The Prophet said, "The core of faith is trustworthiness, and the worst trait is treachery," [20](#) and "The center of hypocrisy is dishonesty." [21](#) So inquire about a person's honesty. If you cannot ask them yourself then have someone else ask for you. Do not waste your time with a person who is dishonest, a liar or an illusionist, unless you want to

live the rest of your life in suspicion and fear.

Another quality to look for in a person is that they are devoted to God and the family. I knew a religious woman who married a very devout man. He did not drink, smoke, or do drugs, and he prayed five times a day, sometimes even more. However, two years later, they divorced. When I asked her why, she said that he was devoted to his friends but not to the marriage. Rather than paying attention to her and their little daughter, he would invite his friends over after work. She would cook for them, and they would eat and socialize all night. She hardly ever saw him. In reality, he was religious to himself.

He prayed, but neglected his wife and child. He did not understand the true meaning of marriage. A man who is truly devoted to God will never abuse or neglect anyone, let alone his wife and child. The Prophet said, “A Muslim is the one whose hand and tongue people are safe from,” and “One will not enter Paradise until you believe, and you will not have believed until you love and respect each other.”<sup>22</sup> Caring about one another is the essence of religion.

The prospected person needs to be devoted to God and to you. People become more devoted to each other when they are impressed by each other’s inner characteristics. Everything else disappears eventually, but our essence remains. Some Muslim philosophers maintain that the human personality is immutable. While our motivations may change, our essence will remain the same. In most cases, someone who is prone to envy will remain envious; someone who is cowardly will most likely remain a coward.

Religion helps us ease and suppress our undesirable traits, but it cannot eradicate them completely. Even children display completely different personalities at a very young age. Some want to share while others are selfish. Who taught them this? Of course, parents must do their best to instill socially appropriate values into their children, but many of these characteristics are innate. Therefore, search for a spouse whose innate characteristics please you. Look at their essence, not merely their physique. Money, beauty, authority, and fame will all come and go, but the character of a person will remain true.

Of course, you should not completely neglect physical attraction either. You do not have to emphasize moral beauty at the expense of ignoring physical beauty. You should enjoy looking at your spouse. It is not fair to yourself or to your spouse that you marry someone whom you are not attracted to. Nevertheless, beauty is in the eyes of the beholder.

All mothers will tell you that her child is the most beautiful child in the universe – even though you might have to recite a prayer before you look at them! Keep in mind that physical beauty may be felt at the first glance, but inner beauty will endure. Whoever you love will appear beautiful to you. However, someone that you hate will seem to be the ugliest person alive, no matter how beautiful you once thought that person was.

Lastly, one needs to consider the intelligence and open-mindedness of a person. Your future partner needs to be intelligent. Marriage is about spending quality time with your partner. In order to enjoy that

time, one needs to have an intelligent and open-minded husband or wife. You and your future family will suffer if you marry someone who is unintelligent. As Imam Ali warned, “Don’t befriend someone who is dim-witted, for that person will want to help you but (because of his/her incapacity) they will harm you.” Along the same line, avoid someone who is mentally unstable or easily angered. One needs to have a stable environment to raise a good family.

A critical note to remember is that do not expect to change your husband or wife after marriage. It rarely happens. Most compromises need to take place before the marriage, not afterwards. If you want your potential mate to start praying, or quit smoking, or wear hijab, then wait for him or her to reform themselves beforehand, and make sure that the change comes from inside, not a superficial change. If that person loves you, then he or she will truly change.

It is my hope that these few words will guide the single ones among you, and assist you to embark on a most successful journey that beholds you. By choosing the right spouse, you will have the potential to reform society and the perception of marriage. Work towards a blessed union, instead of being another modern statistic.

We ask for God’s help in every aspect of our lives.

## **Marriage Series: Ingredients for a Healthy Marriage**

**Featured Themes:**

**Forgiveness; Listening; Arrogance; Sharing; Honor/Respect; Sacrifice**

﴿وَاللَّهُ أَخْرَجَكُمْ مِنْ بُطُونِ أُمَّهَاتِكُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ شَيْئًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ السَّمْعَ وَالْأَبْصَارَ وَالْأَفْئِدَةَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ﴾

***God has brought you forth from the bellies of your mothers while you did not know anything. He gave you hearing, eyesight, and hearts so that you may give thanks. (16:78)***

Six essential ingredients will be discussed in addressing an Islamic marriage; a marriage that will help one lead a stable and productive life, one which would please God.

The first ingredient is forgiveness. We all make mistakes. Although God created us physically perfect, our spiritual side is left for us to develop in order to reach relative moral perfection. We all have faults and shortcomings. Some of us realize our errors quickly and try to make amends; others take time to realize their mistakes; while some never realize their mistakes at all, nor do they ever apologize.

﴿قُلْ هَلْ نُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِالْأَخْسَرِينَ أَعْمَالًا﴾ ﴿الَّذِينَ ضَلَّ سَعْيُهُمْ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَهُمْ يُحْسِبُونَ أَنَّهُمْ يُحْسِنُونَ صُنْعًا﴾

**Say, “Shall we inform you about the biggest losers in regard to works? Those whose endeavors go awry in the life of this world, while they suppose they are doing good.” (18: 103–104)**

Such people may live their entire lives thinking that they are always right, and do not ever want to be corrected. This is very sad indeed. The ability to recognize our mistakes through our “self-reproaching soul (*al-nafs al-lawwamah*)” is one of God’s greatest gifts to mankind.

﴿وَلَا أُقْسِمُ بِالنَّفْسِ اللَّوَّامَةِ﴾

**And I swear by the self-reproaching soul! (75:2)**

If one is fortunate, then before going to sleep, one’s soul will nag them about their errors and evil deeds which they performed that day. One should listen to it and try the next morning to compensate for whatever wrong was done. However, if one is unfortunate, then they will tell their self that they did not really do anything wrong. Whoever was harmed by me deserved what they got. In this case, one will continue to repeat the same mistakes. This kind of an attitude is a form of arrogance. When it comes to marriage, if one cannot recognize their mistakes or forgive their partner’s mistakes, then the marriage will become a source of unhappiness and bitterness

In contrast, forgiveness holds a double reward. When you forgive someone, you allow that person to realize his or her mistakes gently and you increase in wisdom yourself. Your relationship with them becomes enjoyable again.

You may object that your spouse (or former spouse) ruined your entire life. You may ask how you are supposed to forgive a person when you are still suffering because of him or her. That is exactly why you should forgive that person. When you truly forgive people, nothing stays in your heart against them. If you can forgive someone who damaged you for many years, then your inner capacity for mercy and compassion will increase; and you will feel relief instead of distress. The moment you cleanse your heart of grudges, you will be set free.

As an example, one day Malik al-Ashtar, the commander-in-chief of the armed forces under Imam Ali was walking through the market in Kufa when an ignorant man threw a date pit at him. Malik turned his face away and left without involving himself in the situation. The other shopkeepers gathered around that man and asked him if he knew who he had struck. He said he did not know and did not care. They told him that it was Malik al-Ashtar, the commander-in-chief, and that Malik could easily ruin his entire life for this act!

Terrified, the man abandoned his shop and chased after Malik. People told him that Malik had gone to the main mosque of Kufa. When he got to the mosque, he saw Malik praying. He waited impatiently for Malik to finish his prayers and then threw himself at his feet, begging for forgiveness and saying that he did not realize who he was.

After the man finished pleading, Malik told him, “The only reason I came to the mosque at this time was to pray for your forgiveness.”

A forgiving person will always be filled with happiness and peace. When the Quraysh used to stone the Prophet, he would ask God to forgive them. He never bore hostility in his heart. When Abdul Rahman b. Muljam struck the poisonous sword on the head of Imam Ali and was then brought before him, Imam Ali felt sorry for him. This is a sign of genuine forgiveness. When you truly forgive someone, you will pity that person. You will sympathize with that person because of the generosity in your heart.

Conversely, when you harbor resentment inside of yourself, your capacity for hatred and estrangement will grow. Day by day, you will hate more and more. You will never find inner peace. You will not be able to sleep properly, nor cope with things throughout the day.

God created your heart to be the center of love and compassion. If you fill it with hostility and hatred, then it will malfunction. Your heart is the only avenue of spiritual connection, so you need to keep it clean. Do not pollute it with grudges. This is why forgiveness is very important.

Without forgiveness, one’s marriage will never survive. If your spouse does something that bothers you (and everyone is guilty of this), then try to teach them lovingly rather than punish them. People need time to learn. Some people spend twenty years in school working towards their post doctorate degree, and even afterwards they continue to be like a student in their field. We all learn from our mistakes, and thus we need to master the art of forgiveness.

﴿وَلْيَعْفُوا وَلْيَصْفَحُوا ۗ أَلَا تُحِبُّونَ أَنْ يَغْفِرَ اللَّهُ لَكُمْ وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ﴾

**...and let them excuse and forbear. Do you not love that God should forgive you? And God is All-Forgiving, All-Merciful. (24:22)**

The second vital ingredient in a marriage is communication. You need to be able to hear each other’s frustration and grievousness. Only the inconsiderate are not willing to listen.

﴿وَإِنِّي كُلَّمَا دَعَوْتُهُمْ لِتَغْفِرَ لَهُمْ جَعَلُوا أَصَابِعَهُمْ فِي آذَانِهِمْ وَاسْتَغْشَوْا ثِيَابَهُمْ وَأَصْرُوا وَاسْتَكْبَرُوا وَاسْتَكْبَرُوا ۗ﴾

**Indeed whenever I have summoned them, so that you might forgive them, they would put their fingers into their ears and draw their cloaks over their heads, and they were persistent [in their unfaith], and disdainful in [their] arrogance. (71:7)**

Your marriage will fall apart if you refuse to listen; it will not be able to prosper. In order for a marriage to develop, one needs to listen to the other person.

Third, one needs to remove any kind of arrogance. Conduct yourself with humility, not stubbornness. Open yourself up to new ideas (as long as they are within the boundaries of Islam). Never assume that you are right and your partner is always wrong. Never assume that you are perfect and have to teach everyone else. Do not force your preferences on your partner. You cannot make your wife believe in ideas that she disagrees with. Marriage is all about mutual understanding and respect.

Do not force your customs on your spouse. Just because your great-grandmother did something one way does not mean that you need to do it that way also. Your great-grandmother lived back in the old country. Times are changing; circumstances are different; and customs are diverse.

Do not assume that just because you are older or more educated, you know better than your spouse. Wisdom has nothing to do with education. You may meet people with a high education who are not wise; and others who are less educated yet prudent. We can all learn from each other.

Fourth, marriage needs to be about sharing. One needs to share in the other partner's pain, happiness, goals and dreams. One needs to be willing to sacrifice for each other.

I knew a very respectable scholar whose wife fell sick and went blind. He stayed home to take care of her. When people told him that he had a responsibility to spread Islam, he replied that he had a human being at home who needed his help. For fifty years, his wife had been there for him, and now it was his turn to care for her, thus he stayed home, cooked for her, served her, and cleaned her.

One also needs to honor and respect their spouse. One should never belittle or insult their partner.

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا يَسْخَرُ قَوْمٌ مِّن قَوْمٍ عَسَىٰ أَن يَكُونُوا خَيْرًا مِّنْهُمْ وَلَا نِسَاءٌ مِّن نِّسَاءٍ عَسَىٰ أَن يَكُنَّ خَيْرًا مِّنْهُنَّ وَلَا تَلْمِزُوا أَنفُسَكُمْ وَلَا تَنَابَزُوا بِاللِّقَابِ بئسَ الْأِسْمُ الْفُسُوقُ بَعْدَ الْإِيمَانِ وَمَن لَّمْ يَتُبْ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ ﴿٤٩﴾

***O you who have faith! Let not any people ridicule another people: it may be that they are better than they are; nor let women [ridicule] women: it may be that they are better than they are. And do not defame one another, nor insult one another by nicknames. An evil name is transgression after faith! And whoever is not penitent – they are the wrongdoers. (49:11)***

Think about the effects of what you say. Comparing your wife's food to your mother's will not make her a better cook. Comparing your husband's salary to your neighbor's will not help him earn more. You will just drag each other down. When you see faults in each other, try to overlook them, or encourage each other to improve them. The Prophet said, "If you distress a believer, then even offering him or her everything in the world as a form of retribution would still not compensate them for the grief they went through."<sup>23</sup> Insulting them has no benefit.

In particular, watch yourselves when you get angry, for anger is a branch of insanity. Conflicts used to arise for the Prophet at home, but he would restrain his anger and we must do the same. A man asked

the Prophet to advise him about something, and so the Prophet repeated three times, “Do not get angry, do not get angry, and do not get angry.”<sup>24</sup>

﴿ الَّذِينَ يُنْفِقُونَ فِي السَّرَّاءِ وَالضَّرَّاءِ وَالْكَاطِمِينَ الْغَيْظَ وَالْعَافِينَ عَنِ النَّاسِ وَاللَّهُ يُحِبُّ الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴾

***Those who spend in ease and adversity, and suppress their anger, and excuse [the faults of] the people, and God loves the virtuous ones. (3: 134)***

Especially restrain yourself from quarrelling in front of the children. A mother who disrespects the father in front of their children will bring disrespect upon herself as well. First, the children will imitate her and disrespect their father, and then they will also disrespect her. Solve your personal problems privately; and while in front of the children and other people, respect your partner.

Sixth, before you marry, you need to understand that marriage involves hard work and sacrifice. Once you get married, you can no longer be lazy or idle. You will eventually become a mother or father and your responsibilities will grow. If you are a man, then you have to realize that you are supposed to be the main breadwinner of the family. You have to go to work early in the morning every day. One cannot stay home and be lazy. A tradition says, “There are some sins that God will only forgive when you exert yourself in seeking livelihood.”<sup>25</sup> Prayers are not enough; one must work hard in this life.

The home requires responsibility too. Your house needs to be presentable. A husband once complained that his wife spends the entire day watching T.V. or going shopping. His home was not tidy and meals were rarely prepared. This is irresponsibility on the wife’s part. Marriage is a huge responsibility and involves great sacrifice. One needs to learn to take responsibility for their family’s needs.

Some wives rightfully complain that their husbands come home late at night. After you get married, you have to realize that a human being is at home waiting for you. A wife does not only need money or material things; she needs companionship as well. Do not just think that by giving her a credit card you are fulfilling your responsibility. One must not stay out all night with their friends. Before it gets late in the evening, say goodbye to your friends and go home. Your wife should be your first priority.

One also needs to be moderate in their expectations. Marriage is not about extravagance, consumerism, or materialism. It is about partnership and raising the next generation. Avoid comparing yourself to others. Do not overburden your husband with demands that he cannot afford, nor expect from your wife things that she cannot perform.

﴿ وَلَا تَتَمَنَّوْا مَا فَضَّلَ اللَّهُ بِهِ بَعْضَكُمْ عَلَى بَعْضٍ لِّلرِّجَالِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا كُتِبُوا وَلِلنِّسَاءِ نَصِيبٌ مِّمَّا كُتِبْنَ وَأَسْأَلُونَ ﴾  
﴿ اللَّهُ مِنْ فَضْلِهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ كَانَ بِكُلِّ شَيْءٍ عَلِيمًا ﴾

***Do not covet the advantage which God has given some of you over others. To men belongs a***

***share of what they have earned, and to women a share of what they have earned. And ask God for His grace. Indeed God has knowledge of all things. (4:32)***

Be happy and content with what you have; you can never be content if you compare yourself to what others have. Even if you are living in a grand palace, you will one day find a more beautiful and larger palace. A tradition says that in the matters of this world, look to those who are below you; and in matters of the Hereafter, look to those who are above you. Aspire to attain what they have.

May God bless us all with happy marriages that bring joy and blessings for us in this life and in the Hereafter.

## **Leadership in Islam**

**Featured Themes:**

**God's Control; Belief in the Unseen; Imam's Role**

﴿يَوْمَ نَدْعُوا كُلَّ أُنَاسٍ بِإِمَامِهِمْ فَمَنْ أُوتِيَ كِتَابَهُ بِيَمِينِهِ فَأُولَٰئِكَ يَقْرَءُونَ كِتَابَهُمْ وَلَا يُظْلَمُونَ فَتِيلًا﴾

***That day We shall summon every group of people with their leader (imam), then whoever is given his book in his right hand – they will read it, and they will not be wronged so much as a single date-thread. (17:71)***

In recent decades, the question of politico-religious leadership in Islam has risen to the forefront of debate. From the East to the West, from academics to policymakers, world attention has shifted to the subject of who truly holds authority in Islam.

As followers of the Ahlul-Bayt, we know the answer. Although we can explain to other Muslims (through the Qur'an and the tradition of the Prophet) how the current Imam, Imam al-Mahdi, is leading us in his absence, still a deeper explanation on his leadership in the broader context of rational proof is needed, particularly because the subject of our Imam has piqued much interest, even outside of the Islamic community.

It must be noted that if God willed, He could control the minutest workings of the universe firsthand. However, for reasons unknown to us, He created intermediaries to act on His behalf. For example, although all light emanates from Him, He Himself does not shine light directly on the planet. He created the sun to carry out this task.

﴿وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمُ الشَّمْسَ وَالْقَمَرَ دَائِبَيْنِ وَسَخَّرَ لَكُمُ اللَّيْلَ وَالنَّهَارَ﴾

**He disposed the sun and the moon for you, constant [in their courses], and He disposed the night and the day. (14:33)**

Although He sustains us, He does not give us food with His own hands, nor does He put it into our mouth for us. He assigns our means of sustenance to others, such as the fields or our parents.

﴿وَالَّذِي هُوَ يُطْعِمُنِي وَيَسْقِينِ﴾

**...and provides me with food and drink... (26:79)**

He is the source of healing. No doctor can save a person whom God has decreed to take. Yet, in order for Him to heal us, we need to seek medical help. Otherwise, we will remain sick.

﴿وَإِذَا مَرَضْتُ فَبُهِدَ اللَّهُ لِي فُجْرَةَ﴾

**...and when I get sick, it is He who cures me. (26:80)**

Likewise, although God guides us, He does not inform or speak to us directly. Anyone claiming to be in a direct, two-way communication with God is a liar. It is said that Saint Paul was on his way to Damascus to persecute the Christians when he saw a vision of God. Such stories are difficult for Muslims to believe because when Prophet Moses asked to see God, He replied:

﴿وَلَمَّا جَاءَ مُوسَىٰ لِمِيقَاتِنَا وَكَلَّمَهُ رَبُّهُ قَالَ رَبِّ أَرِنِي﴾  
﴿أَنْظُرْ إِلَيْكَ قَالَ لَنْ نَرَاكَ وَلَكِنِ انظُرْ إِلَى الْجَبَلِ فَإِنِ اسْتَقَرَّ﴾  
﴿مَكَانَهُ فَسَوْفَ نَرَاكَ﴾  
﴿فَلَمَّا تَجَلَّىٰ رَبُّهُ لِلْجَبَلِ جَعَلَهُ دَكًّا وَخَرَّ مُوسَىٰ صَعِقًا فَلَمَّا أَفَاقَ قَالَ سُبْحَانَكَ تُبْتُ إِلَيْكَ وَأَنَا أَوَّلُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ﴾

**When Moses arrived at Our meeting and his Lord spoke to him, he said, “My Lord, show [Yourself] to me, that I may look at You!” He said, “You shall not see Me. But look at the mountain: if it abides in its place, then you will see Me.” So when his Lord disclosed Himself to the mountain, He leveled it, and Moses fell down swooning. And when he recovered, he said, “Immaculate are You! I turn to You in penitence, and I am the first of the believers.” (7:143)**

Instead, God sends intermediaries such as prophets, imams, and Divine scriptures to teach us.

﴿إِنَّكَ لَا تَهْدِي مَنْ أَحْبَبْتَ وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ يَهْدِي مَنْ يَشَاءُ وَهُوَ أَعْلَمُ بِالْمُهْتَدِينَ﴾

**You cannot guide whomsoever you wish, but [it is] God [who] guides whomsoever He wishes, and He knows best those who are guided. (28:56)**

All of His prophets and messengers are linked, one after the other.

قُلْ آمَنَّا بِاللَّهِ وَمَا أُنزِلَ عَلَيْنَا وَمَا أُنزِلَ عَلَىٰ إِبْرَاهِيمَ وَإِسْمَاعِيلَ وَإِسْحَاقَ وَيَعْقُوبَ وَالْأَسْبَاطِ وَمَا أُوتِيَ مُوسَىٰ وَعِيسَىٰ ۚ  
وَالنَّبِيُّونَ مِنْ رَبِّهِمْ لَا نُفَرِّقُ بَيْنَ أَحَدٍ مِنْهُمْ وَنَحْنُ لَهُ مُسْلِمُونَ ۚ

**Say, “We have faith in God, and in what has been sent down to us, and what was sent down to Abraham, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob and the Tribes, and that which Moses and Jesus were given, and the prophets, from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him do we submit.” (3:84)**

Islam did not begin with Prophet Muhammad. It began with Prophet Adam, the first human being to worship God on earth, and then it culminated the belief in the last prophet, Muhammad. If you remove one prophet from the chain, then you lose the continuity. You have only two choices: accept all of them or accept none of them. You cannot exclude anyone of them merely because you do not like him. This is our belief as Muslims.

In addition to this, all of the prophets, not just Prophet Muhammad, had successors. Prophet Moses had a successor; Prophet Jesus had a successor; and Prophet Muhammad had twelve successors who God Himself had appointed. He did not leave the matter open for the general public to decide or to elect. Every era of human history had either a prophet or an imam alive on earth. Hence, you cannot exclude the successors – the chosen successors (*imams*) – from the chain, any more than you can exclude any of the prophets.

Therefore, when God revealed the final verse of the Qur’an about the succession to the Prophet (*Imamah*), He used two specific words: *akmaltu* (completed) and *atmamtu* (perfected).<sup>26</sup> Without *Imamah*, Islam is neither complete, nor perfect; without believing in *Imamah*, even our faith is neither complete, nor perfect. Refusing to believe in *Imamah* leaves a giant gap in our faith.

Another prime requisite of the faith is belief in the unseen. Even if we cannot see the final successor (*khatim al-awsiya*), meaning the 12th Imam, whose leadership we are living under, we must still have conviction in his existence. In the Qur’an, belief in the unseen supersedes everything else:

ذَٰلِكَ الْكِتَابُ لَا رَيْبَ فِيهِ هُدًى لِّلْمُتَّقِينَ. الَّذِينَ يُؤْمِنُونَ بِالْغَيْبِ وَيُقِيمُونَ الصَّلَاةَ وَمِمَّا رَزَقْنَاهُمْ يُنْفِقُونَ ۚ

**This is the Book, there is no doubt in it, a guidance to the God-conscious, who believe in the Unseen, and maintain the prayer, and spend out of what We have provided them with. (2:2-3)**

God equipped us to believe in the unseen Reality. He wants us to see Him with our inner eyes, not our physical eyes. There is no point in praying or fasting if you refuse to believe in the unseen.

Although God is the core of the unseen, He created more invisible entities. In the Qur'an, He talks about the angels and the spirits (*jinn*s) and other beings that exist outside of our sensory boundaries. In addition, the past has become part of the unseen. We have faith that the prophets are part of our history. There have been those who questioned whether Muhammad or Jesus ever existed. Yet, when we look inside of ourselves, we can find confirmation that they did exist. God created many aspects of the spiritual world invisible to our physical eyes but visible to our hearts and spiritual eyes.

As the Qur'an says,

***“The heart is not deceived by what it sees.”*** [27](#)

Our eyes may deceive us, but our hearts never do. Therefore, we view God with our hearts and our minds. We view the prophets with our hearts. Even more, we see Imam Mahdi with our inner vision. We understand him clearer that way than we would if we saw him in person because using our spiritual vision renders us immune from delusion.

However, believing in Imam Mahdi requires strong faith and a strong heart. A heart weakened by sins first needs to be purified of the impurities by ceasing to sin, not just for a day or two, but at least for 40 days. Recovering from inner filth requires patience and steadfastness, but it is necessary in order to ascend to the levels of faith; the first of which is monotheism (*tawhid*), and the last of which is belief in the authority of the Imam.

We are presently being tested with the absence of the Imam.

﴿أَحْسِبَ النَّاسُ أَنْ يُتْرَكُوا أَنْ يَقُولُوا إِنْ آمَنَّا وَهُمْ لَا يُفْتَنُونَ﴾

***Do the people suppose that they will be let off because they say, “We have faith,” and they will not be tested? (29:2)***

When some newly converted Muslims informed the Prophet that they had become believers, God instructed him to reply that these people have only verbally accepted and have yet to put their belief into practice. Indeed, real faith requires practicing the message not just verbally attesting to it.

God promises to help the sincere.

﴿وَالَّذِينَ اهْتَدَوْا زَادَهُمْ هُدًى وَآتَاهُمْ تَقْوَاهُمْ﴾

***As for those who are [rightly] guided, He enhances their guidance, and invests them with their God-consciousness. (47: 16)***

God will also test our sincerity. We all know the story of Bani Israil when they were ordered to sacrifice a

cow. It sounded ridiculous to them and they tried to evade it. In the end, they reluctantly sacrificed the cow. They failed in their test.

Today, 3,000 years later, although God is not testing the Muslims with a sacrificial cow; he is testing us with belief in the Ahlul-Bayt, and in particular, Imam Mahdi. Not everyone will pass this test. Many have failed despite the overwhelming body of literature describing the Imam. Besides from the fact that hundreds of Qur'anic verses allude to him, a thousand traditions from the Prophet describe him and his reappearance, still many reject him. Some of these resources were compiled by Al-Kanji al-Shafi.

These traditions relate the Imam's first name, last name, nickname, description, and the circumstances around his reappearance. It is said that he will be from the line of the Prophet, through his daughter Fatima and his grandson Husayn, and more specifically, the son of Imam Hasan al-Askari, the 11th Imam. Throughout history, only a few Muslims on the fringe have ever rejected these traditions, such as Ibn Taymiyyah, who bore enmity against the Ahlul-Bayt. Otherwise, the vast majority of Muslim scholars have considered them reliable.

From these sources, we learn that the Imam will reappear when two conditions are met. One is the will of God.

﴿وَلِلَّهِ غَيْبُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَمَا أَمْرُ السَّاعَةِ إِلَّا كَلَمَحٍ الْبَصَرِ أَوْ هُوَ أَقْرَبُ إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَلَى كُلِّ شَيْءٍ قَدِيرٌ﴾

***To God belongs the Unseen of the heavens and earth. The matter of the Hour is just like the twinkling of an eye, or [even] swifter. Indeed God has power over all things. (16:77)***

The Prophet foretold, “When the Mahdi, who is from us, comes, God will settle the matter overnight.”<sup>28</sup> It will happen that fast; and no one knows when the final phase of the world will begin; only God knows. He will then grant permission for the final Imam to reappear when the followers themselves are prepared. When we are ready to stand with him and not against him, then He will send the Imam to our aid.

Muslims are not alone in waiting for him; all of humanity is waiting for a savior, but we have not proven our worthiness yet for his return. His absence is our problem; it is not his problem or God's problem.

It is not just that we are reluctant to sacrifice ourselves for the truth and justice. We still need to work on our own manners (*akhlaq*). Our Imam wants quality followers, not just anyone who faces the *qiblah* (direction of the prayer in Mecca) and prays. He wants followers who will stand with him even if what he ordains contradicts our own desires. If he tells us to change, then we must be willing to listen to him, and not follow our own wishes.

Before he went into his occultation, the Imam said, “What prevents us from returning to them is the bad news of (them performing the evil things) that we detest from them.” He is aware of what we do. Our

own sins are driving our Imam away from us. We may not have power over cosmic events, but we do have power over our own selves. This is something that we can rectify, and should try our hardest to do.

Contrary to popular imagery, the Imam will not base his conquest on violence. The Imam should not be presented to the world as a warrior, since there is enough conflict on the earth today. People are waiting for him to bring peace and justice, not violence and bloodshed. One of the verses that apply to him reads as follows:

﴿الَّذِينَ إِنْ مَكَّنَّاهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ أَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتَوُا الزَّكَاةَ وَأَمَرُوا بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَنَهَوْا عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَلِلَّهِ عَاقِبَةُ الْأُمُورِ﴾

***Those who, if We granted power to them in the land, maintain the prayer, give the zakat, and bid what is right and forbid what is wrong; and with God rests the outcome of all matters. (22:41)***

His mission is not to kill, but to combat moral decadence with righteousness, to use justice to counter the inequity, and to end injustice, tyranny, prejudice, hostility, and hatred that has overwhelmed our world. You cannot fight prejudice with prejudice, nor hatred with hatred. You have to combat prejudice with tolerance, and hatred with mercy. If only some Christian world leaders would obey Jesus' teachings in this matter:

But I tell you who hear me: Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who mistreat you. If someone strikes you on one cheek, turn to him the other also. If someone takes your cloak, do not stop him from taking your tunic. (Luke 6:27–29)

Therefore, we need to make ourselves ready. Our situation on earth is desperate, and we need the help of our Imam. In order to speed up his return, we need to prepare our souls and our dwellings, and make sure that everything in our lives is acceptable to him, and that we do nothing to be ashamed of. After doing all of this, we need to pray for God to hasten the Imam's appearance and grant us the privilege to see the light of the family of Muhammad walking upon the earth again.

## **Principles of Parenting**

**Featured Themes:**

**Faith; Mission of Life; Restoring Islam; Pride in our Faith; Respecting Children; Hajj; Bringing up Balanced Children**

﴿فَبَشِّرْنَاهُ بِغُلَامٍ حَلِيمٍ. فَلَمَّا بَلَغَ مَعَهُ السَّعْيَ قَالَ يَبْنَىٰ إِنِّي ۖ أَرَىٰ فِي الْمَنَامِ أَنِّي أَذْبَحُكَ فَانظُرْ مَاذَا تَرَىٰ قَالَ يَا بَتِ أِفْعَلِ ۖ مَا تُؤْمَرُ سَتَجِدُنِي ۖ إِنْ شَاءَ اللَّهُ مِنَ الصَّابِرِينَ. فَلَمَّا أَسْلَمَا وَتَلَّهُ لِلْجَبِينِ. وَنَادَيْنَاهُ أَنْ يَا إِبرَاهِيمُ. قَدْ صَدَّقْتَ الرُّؤْيَا إِنَّا كَذَلِكَ نَجْزِي الْمُحْسِنِينَ﴾

***So We gave him the good news of a forbearing son. When he was old enough to assist in his endeavor, he said, “My son! I see in a dream that I am sacrificing you. See what you think.” He said, “Father! Do whatever you have been commanded. If God wishes, you will find me to be patient.” So when they had both submitted [to God’s will], and he had laid him down on his forehead, We called out to him, “O Abraham! You have indeed fulfilled the vision”! Thus indeed do We reward the virtuous! (37: 101–105)***

Once, a man who had bought a ton of goods hired a porter to carry his new purchases home. As they went along, the man struck up a conversation with him and asked what family he came from.

When the porter gave his name, the man was shocked.

“You’re *his* son?” he rebuked. “What a wonderful father he is and what a despairing son you are!”

The porter, who had revealed that he was the son of a wealthy prominent man set down his load and said, “Don’t say that. Instead say what a wonderful grandfather and what a horrible father. My grandfather sacrificed his life for my father. However, when I came along, my father neglected me. All he cared about was his own wealth and reputation. So what else was I supposed to do?”

Our concerns about raising children in the West run much deeper than whether they will become servants or not. We have to be concerned about whether or not they will practice their religion or will they abandon it. Although we have no guarantees, what we do to steer them towards staying on the path of the religion lies on our shoulders; and we will be questioned about it in the next world.

﴿إِنَّا نَحْنُ نُحْيِي الْمَوْتَىٰ وَنَكْتُبُ مَا قَدَّمُوا وَآثَارَهُمْ وَكُلَّ شَيْءٍ أَحْصَيْنَاهُ فِي إِمَامٍ مُّبِينٍ﴾

***Verily We give life to the dead, and We record that which they send before and that which they leave behind (aatharahum), and all of the things have We taken account in a clear Book (of evidence). (36: 12)***

*Aatharahum* (“that which they leave behind”) in this context, according to some commentators, refers to our children. A righteous child is the best legacy that a parent can leave, for a tradition says that a righteous child is one of only three things that can benefit the parents in the Hereafter. Sacrificing ourselves for their moral growth is well worth it, not only for this world, but more so for the next life.

Many parents invest their time and money into trying to make their children happy. As Muslims, we should amend that objective to making them righteously happy. Without following God’s path, your children will never truly be happy.

In particular, help your children understand why God created them. No one has come to earth accidentally. God made all of our souls for a reason; otherwise, without understanding the meaning of

life, our children will wander confused, not realizing their purpose for which they were created.

﴿أَفَمَنْ يَمْشِي مُكِبًّا عَلَىٰ وَجْهِهِ أَهْدَىٰ أَمَّنْ يَمْشِي سَوِيًّا عَلَىٰ صِرَاطٍ مُسْتَقِيمٍ﴾

***Is then one who walks headlong, with his face groveling, better guided, – or one who walks evenly on a Straight Way? (67:22)***

No one would ever think of going to a university without knowing why they are there and what they are supposed to do, so how can a person be expected to live life clueless?

Other religions give different answers to the eternal question of human existence. Christianity for example, teaches that our earthly life is a punishment for the original sin. It teaches that childbirth itself (which is the process of bringing new life into this world) is a curse as well.

However, the Qur'an rejects these ideas. It teaches us that we are sent to this world with a mission. All of us, no matter who we are, or where we come from, have been sent to be God's representatives on earth and to carry out His plan.

﴿وَإِذْ قَالَ رَبُّكَ لِلْمَلَائِكَةِ إِنِّي جَاعِلٌ فِي الْأَرْضِ خَلِيفَةً قَالُوا أَتَجْعَلُ فِيهَا مَنْ يُفْسِدُ فِيهَا وَيَسْفِكُ الدِّمَاءَ وَنَحْنُ نُسَبِّحُ بِحَمْدِكَ وَنُقَدِّسُ لَكَ قَالَ إِنِّي أَعْلَمُ مَا لَا تَعْلَمُونَ﴾

***When your Lord said to the angels, “Indeed I am going to set a viceroy on earth,” they said, “Will You set in it someone who will cause corruption in it, and shed blood, while we celebrate Your praise and proclaim Your sanctity?” He said, “Indeed I know what you do not know.” (2:30)***

We were not meant to live miserably on earth as a punishment. Instead, God wants us to be happy, and fosters our happiness by teaching us the most wholesome way to live through His messengers.

Therefore, it is imperative that you teach your children about their mission in life, and it is very important for you to think about it yourself as well.

One individual can change the world. Many world leaders and reformers hailed from humble backgrounds. Some were hungry, fatherless, homeless, and uneducated, but at a crucial point in their lives, they had an inner revolution and realized that they were capable of changing the world.

These goals of course, can be both positive and negative. A few lawless people changed the face of Islam in the West through terrorist acts. They killed many and wounded others, and as a result, Muslims are still suffering today, particularly our sisters. This handful of people created a mass hysteria about Islam. They were deluded into thinking that by attacking Britain or America they could raise the banner of Islam in those lands. Islam presents a message of tolerance and peace, not violence and hatred. They tried, but they erred.

Each one of us can effect enormous change for the good, not for evil. Although it is easier to destroy than it is to create, we all have the responsibility of restoring the true image of Islam in the West. No one else will do it for us. The media will not one day wake up and decide to portray Muslims in a favorable light. We are the ones who need to intervene and dedicate our time and efforts to reviving Islam in those areas; not by violence, but by education and by our good manners.

We need to be dedicated, and to believe that our work will bear fruit. One time, I was on a boat in Alaska with nearly forty youths clutching Bibles. They were on their way to Bible camp for the summer. I was very impressed and admired them for spending their entire summer break at Bible camp studying religion, when in America they could have gone anywhere else. Those youth were on their way to make a change. We can do the same too; we need to find our way. Reflect and meditate and perhaps you will find your way. We must all ask ourselves what is our purpose in this life. Is it just to eat, have fun, and drive a nice car? God has placed the answer inside all of us.

After helping our children understand their mission in life, parents also need to assist their children to take pride in their religious identity. Make them feel proud to be Muslim, not ashamed of it, as if they are doing something wrong. Religious knowledge alone does not suffice. We also need to have a strong sense of self-esteem, so you will be able to influence others and not be influenced in the face of social pressure.

Although many youth know Islam extensively, they hide their Muslim identity out of embarrassment. In addition, some immigrant youth suffer from an inferiority complex. They imagine that because they came from Iran, Iraq, Syria, or Afghanistan they are less intelligent, less capable, and even less innovative than Westerners are. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, although there is no need to justify our own worth, Islamic history disproves such a notion.

The scientific and cultural legacy of Islam is extensive and glorious. Advances in science, chemistry, medicine, astronomy, mathematics, philosophy, and art used to radiate from the Islamic world. The royalty of Europe used to travel to Muslim Spain to partake in their medical accomplishments. Numerous European textbooks have been translated from Arabic.

Today of course, the situation has reversed, not because we are inherently inferior, but because we have picked up an inferiority complex after being colonized and ruled over by adversaries. That is however changing, no longer is it an era for Muslims to feel embarrassed about who they are. Stand tall when you tell people that you are Muslim. Let them learn about Islam through your behavior and make sure that your behavior qualifies you to be an ambassador of Islam. In society, one of us represents all of Islam.

Aside from confidence in our religion, in order to help our children develop high self-esteem, we need to avoid three mistakes in raising them: humiliation, overprotection, and perfectionism.

As parents, we need to realize our children are not our private property. They are a trust from God, and

He will ask us about how we treated them. Never put them down or disrespect them. We are the closest people to them. Just as we have the ability to shape them, we also have the ability to harm them. Do not degrade them because they have poor grades or are overweight. Humiliating them will not help them to excel. In fact, it will only discourage them. You need to teach them how to do things right, not just tell them what they are doing wrong.

This was the approach of the Prophet. Although he always knew who was responsible for what, whenever he saw something in his community that he disliked, he would address it indirectly from the pulpit (*minbar*), even if the offenders were sitting in front of him. He never named them directly because he wanted to avoid embarrassing them. He encouraged them to change by preserving their dignity.

﴿ فَبِمَا رَحْمَةٍ مِّنَ اللَّهِ لِنْتَ لَهُمْ وَلَوْ كُنْتَ فَظًّا غَلِيظَ الْقَلْبِ لَانْفَضُّوا مِنْ حَوْلِكَ ﴾

***It is by God's mercy that you are gentle to them; and had you been harsh and hardhearted, surely they would have scattered from around you. (3: 159)***

Overprotecting our children will also stunt their growth. Although we need to look after our children because they are unaware, inexperienced, and vulnerable, but to keep them from venturing into the outside world at all will impede their progress in life. We need to develop a sense of mutual trust and encourage them to communicate with us so that we can let them explore life safely. For instance, do not prevent your sons or daughters from traveling to study if you feel that they will be safe and in good company.

Do not prevent them from going to Hajj, especially if they save their money to go while they are teenagers. As soon as they become financially able, Hajj becomes mandatory upon them. They are religiously obligated to go, but many parents forbid them and tell them to enjoy life now and go for Hajj later.

Hajj is a phenomenal experience. It will open the eyes of our children who are being raised in the West. We are spoiled in the West. We can buy whatever we want from the market. In some countries, people have to put their names on a waiting list to get a soft drink! Therefore, when they leave the comfort of their homes for Mina, Arafat, and Muzdalafah, and sleep on the dust surrounded by millions of strangers, they will realize the meaning of this verse:

﴿ مِنْهَا خَلَقْنَاكُمْ وَفِيهَا نُعِيدُكُمْ وَمِنْهَا نُخْرِجُكُمْ تَارَةً أُخْرَى ﴾

***From it did We create you, into it shall We return you, and from it shall We bring you forth another time. (20:55)***

Hajj can revolutionize the thinking of someone who has lived nowhere but the West. It hammers in the

meaning of life and a sense of human equality and deep consideration for others. During the winter season of Hajj it is bitter cold. Most of the people cannot sleep due to the cold. This is for one night; but it should make us wonder, how many homeless people suffer like this every day?

Do not deprive them of the beauty of these realizations. Let them travel. Yes, be prudent, but if you do everything for them, they will internalize the idea that they are incapable of doing anything on their own and they will suffer because of this.

Finally, although we should encourage our children to excel, we should not expect them to be perfect. For some parents anything less than an A+ is a disaster. Life is a learning experience. We are all humans, not superhuman. A young man once told me that his parents had taught him about the “15” *Masoumeen* (Infallible Imams). I asked him who the 15 were (because there are only 14) and he told me they were the Prophet, Fatima al-Zahra, the twelve Imams, and then himself because his father always told him that he had to be the fifteenth *infallible*.

No one is perfect. Do not overburden your children with these expectations. Use their mistakes as an opportunity to teach them. No one will ever be perfect, so be lenient on them. Even God is All-Forgiving and Merciful. Otherwise, they will run away from the family once they are able to.

The family atmosphere has a lot to do with how the children’s personalities form. One can easily tell whether a child has been raised in a caring or a violent environment. Children are unwritten books. They will thrive on love and tolerance, but will shrivel at harshness and neglect. If you are too hard on them, they will rebel.

Both the father and the mother need to share disciplinary responsibilities. Neither parent should undermine the other’s efforts to discipline the children. If they disagree, they need to discuss their differences in private, not in front of the children. Otherwise, their disunity will counter their efforts and manifest itself in the child’s personality. Do not victimize your children. An overwhelming number of criminals and dictators had disturbed upbringings. If you and your spouse do not get along, then take care of your problems outside the earshot of your children. Do not make them pawns in your arguments. Children need a stable and peaceful family environment in order to flourish.

The mother is the centerpiece of the family. The elegance and beauty of the family rests upon her. The stability of the family depends much more on the mother than on the father. She is the one who nurtures the children in their early years. When she breastfeeds her child, she holds them close to her heart and builds their character from her own. Those first two years are very decisive in shaping the character of the baby. Most of the time, when the mother is moral the entire family will likely be moral as well. So women should not underestimate their responsibilities. Although, some people believe that motherhood is a curse, we believe it is a privilege and an opportunity. “Heaven lies beneath the feet of the mothers.”<sup>29</sup> Our mothers offer us a passport to Paradise.

Spiritually, we have two major responsibilities towards our children. One is to connect them to the Ahlul-

Bayt, not just God, for the Ahlul-Bayt are the quickest routes to reach God.

We need to inculcate the love for Muhammad, Ali, Fatima, Hasan, Husayn, and the imams in our children from an early age. They will understand God's mercy through the Ahlul-Bayt.

Traditionally, we tend to instruct children in the mechanics of religion first before addressing the spirit. We usually teach our children how to pray before inspiring in them the essence of prayer. Some Muslims ask why they do not enjoy praying. Probably, they do not enjoy it because they learned the actions before the feelings. We need to know why we pray before we pray. Therefore, we need to convey to our children the emotions, as well as the actions of spirituality.

Lastly, we need to be careful about how we present God. Many parents are tempted to present God as frightening, threatening, and angry, for instance, saying to our children, "God will punish you!" A youth once told me that when he was growing up he only heard about the Hellfire, and the first time he heard about Heaven was at Disneyland. Do not scare your children away from God.

We teach them every day to say, "In the Name of God, the Infinitely Compassionate, the Most Merciful (*Bismillahir Rahmanir Raheem*)," sometimes several times a day. Portraying Him as their disciplinarian is an oxymoron. Teach them instead about God's infinite mercy and love; teach them about His protection and forgiveness. This is how we will link them to God. Make religion pleasant for them so they will want to hold onto it. Help them to understand that God is their closest friend, so when they are alone or in any type of need they will not hesitate to turn to Him.

## Youth Predicaments

**Featured Themes:**

**Ways & Customs; Holy Qur'an; Islam's Way; Mosque & Women; Mosque & Youth; Religious Institutes**

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا اتَّقُوا اللَّهَ وَلْتَنْظُرْ نَفْسٌ مَّا قَدَّمَتْ لِغَدٍ وَاتَّقُوا اللَّهَ إِنَّ اللَّهَ خَبِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ. وَلَا تَكُونُوا كَالَّذِينَ نَسُوا اللَّهَ فَأَنسَاهُمْ أَنفُسَهُمْ أُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْفَاسِقُونَ. لَا يَسْتَوِي أَصْحَابُ النَّارِ وَأَصْحَابُ الْجَنَّةِ أَصْحَابُ الْجَنَّةِ هُمُ الْفَائِزُونَ

***O you who have faith! Be wary of God, and let every soul consider what it sends ahead for tomorrow, and be wary of God. God is indeed well aware of what you do. And do not be like those who forget God, so He makes them forget their own souls. It is they who are the transgressors. Not equal are the inmates of the Fire and the inhabitants of Paradise. It is the inhabitants of Paradise who are the successful ones. (59: 18–20)***

Our youth should be the ones who are reviving and transmitting Islamic values. Unfortunately though, practically, they have fled from our institutions. Our traditional Islamic programs hold little, to no interest

for them. Although they should be in the forefront, they are nonetheless absent. Normally, people (mostly men) from their 40's to their 80's dominate most of the mosques. We have to ask ourselves why this is. One problem may be the ever-increasing, unbridgeable gap between Islamic and Western culture. Another may be our own cultural habits that disenchant the youth and drive them away.

Perhaps our parents who migrated to the West should have considered heavily that they would be bearing children into a society that may not be welcoming towards Islam. One may not fully realize the depth of disparity between these two lifestyles. All of the adults in our community, whether parents, elders, religious leaders, or civic leaders need to familiarize themselves with the negative realities of American culture in order to educate the younger generation of the dangers that are present in the society.

Let me give you some basic examples. In the American culture, from the time that the children are in elementary school, the society is gearing them towards dating, having a boyfriend or girlfriend. For most American parents and society, this is socially acceptable. If they do not partake in this, then others think there is something wrong with them. Alcohol is omnipresent.

In Europe, toddlers are sometimes given sips of alcohol drinks in order to familiarize them with the taste. When I was flying back from an Islamic country, the couple behind me kept asking for wine for themselves and their children, and imagine we were coming from an Islamic country. Women's fashions and clothes are designed to reveal their bodies, rather than conceal it. Hiding one's attractiveness is unheard of. Nothing is protected and nothing is covered.

Perhaps the most important difference between our cultures is that Islamic culture still promotes adherence to the sources of ethical and conservative values – the Qur'an and the Sunnah. It is not a culture of moral resistance.

Following the teachings of the Prophet is praised.

﴿ فَلَا وَرَبِّكَ لَا يُؤْمِنُونَ حَتَّىٰ يُحَكِّمُوكَ فِيمَا شَجَرَ بَيْنَهُمْ ثُمَّ لَا يَجِدُوا فِيهِ ۖ أَنفُسِهِمْ حَرَجًا مِّمَّا قَضَيْتَ وَيُسَلِّمُوا تَسْلِيمًا ۗ ﴾

***But no, by your Lord! They will not believe until they make you a judge in their disputes, then do not find within their hearts any dissent to your verdict and submit in full submission. (4:65)***

However, modern Western culture has more of a tendency towards rebellion. Muslims are not the only ones who feel this pull. Even Christians are suffering in such an environment today. Some Christian leaders have confided that even they are finding themselves defamed and marginalized, since Western culture tries to outcast religion. Individualism forms a major pillar of an American society.

Popular culture teaches people that the individual comes first, and then the society is second. The individual is more important than the society. You should not restrict yourself. You should do whatever

you think is good for you no matter what your parents think. You should enjoy yourself. Unfortunately, the new generation is being indoctrinated with this idea.

On the other hand, Islam teaches us not to be selfish. It teaches us to put God first before everything else. We are His slaves. He put us on earth to test us and to see whether or not we will follow Him. Eventually, we will return back to Him.

قُلْ إِنْ كَانَ آبَاؤُكُمْ وَأَبْنَاؤُكُمْ وَإِخْوَانُكُمْ وَأَزْوَاجُكُمْ وَعَشِيرَتُكُمْ وَأَمْوَالٌ اقْتَرَفْتُمُوهَا وَتِجَارَةٌ تَخْشَوْنَ كَسَادَهَا وَمَسَاكِينُ ۚ

تَرْضَوْنَهَا أَحَبَّ إِلَيْكُمْ مِنَ اللَّهِ وَرَسُولِهِ وَجِهَادٍ فِي سَبِيلِهِ فَتَرَبَّصُوا حَتَّى يَأْتِيَ اللَّهُ بِأَمْرِهِ وَاللَّهُ لَا يَهْدِي الْقَوْمَ الْفَاسِقِينَ

ۚ

***Say, "If your fathers and your sons, your brethren, your spouses, and your kinsfolk, the possessions that you have acquired, the business you fear may suffer, and the dwellings you are fond of, are dearer to you than God and His Apostle and to waging jihad in His way, then wait until God issues His edict, and God does not guide the transgressing lot." (9:24)***

We recognize that if we put anything above God, whether it is our parents, spouses, children, siblings, business, or wealth, then we will feel the setback. These morals are limited to the Islamic culture; American society tends to hold an opposite view from Islam; facing all of these odds, we are raising our children in this society. Without proper Islamic guidance from an early age, Muslim boys and girls will have no choice but to join the mainstream culture. If this happens, then naturally our children will not want to come to the mosques because it represents a reality which they do not want to live in.

However, that is not the only reason why our youth are estranged. Despite the society that we live in, many of our youth do have a strong Islamic identity, but still they do not want to associate themselves with the Islamic centers. They have two concerns: one is called "orthodoxy," and the other is "orthopraxy." By "orthodoxy," I mean that some of our youth are uneasy about some of our ideas; and by "orthopraxy," I mean that some are uneasy with some of our customs.

It must be noted that the Qur'an itself is not the problem. I have yet to meet a Muslim youth who rejects the Qur'an. Although some youth I meet do not understand the Qur'an, but they do still accept it as the word of God. My advice is for those youth who are confused about it should study it. The Qur'an has a unique peculiarity that once a person dedicates their time to reading and understanding it, it will open up, and we will enjoy it. However, if a person is bored with it, then it will become inscrutable. It depends on our intention.

ۚ وَنُنزِّلُ مِنَ الْقُرْآنِ مَا هُوَ شِفَاءٌ وَرَحْمَةٌ لِّلْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَلَا يَزِيدُ الظَّالِمِينَ إِلَّا خَسَارًا ۚ

***We send down in the Qur'an that which is a cure and mercy for the faithful; and it increases the***

### ***wrongdoers only in loss. (17:82)***

The Qur'an has healing, salvation, and mercy for those who appreciate it; but others are driven farther and farther away. It is like the ocean. Some people swim on its shores, some go further out, and others dive deep into it. An average person who has no time for the Qur'an will understand nothing but the initial meaning; but those who want to expand their knowledge can study it their entire lives and never exhaust its supplies.

Therefore, we see that the Qur'an is not the problem. However, some of our youth have issues with the sanctity of the hadith collections. At school in the West, children are taught critical thinking from an early age. They are taught to use their reason to attack the text. Even the Bible is open for criticism. However, in the mosque, Sunnis are told to accept the six books of hadith unquestioningly, even if what they read contradicts their common sense.

They are reminded that criticizing the Companions is blasphemous and are drilled with hadiths like, "My Companions are like stars and whichever one you follow you will be guided."<sup>30</sup> This hadith makes no sense at all. Hundreds of thousands of people became "Companions" by merely seeing the Prophet, but how did that make them flawless? They criticize the Shia for having 14 Infallibles; but with this hadith, they made a hundred thousand people infallible and they see nothing wrong with it.

The Shia are not the only ones who reject this particular tradition. Even many prominent Sunni scholars have denied it. Yet it is commonly repeated; however, it does not work for our youth. It drives them away from Islam. They ask simple questions like, "Why, if all of the Companions were "rightly guided" did some of them kill each other or call each other heretics?" Rather than receiving an intelligent answer, they are warned against investigating that part of history. They are told that these traditions are sacred; and the thinking youth are unconvinced. Some even leave Islam, not knowing if there is an alternative path

Many other youth are driven away by our habits. They do not have a problem with Islam, but they have a problem with how it is implemented. For example, some of the mosque cultures in the West tend to be hopelessly misogynistic. Count the number of women inside a mosque in the West. Women are not welcomed; the mosque is mainly catered for the older men. Some, in fact, discourage women from visiting the mosque altogether.

When they do go, they are often relegated to dark, ill-kept corners. I wonder how we expect our wives to be our children's first teachers if we ban them from the mosque. I wonder how we can expect our youth to come to the mosque when their own mothers cannot bring them there from an early age. Even male youths avoid the mosque.

Our youth need to be regularly present in the mosque if we want them to represent Islam. A simple solution is to make Islamic organizations less hostile to women and the youth. Also, in some cases, the mosques are not family-friendly. In contrast, churches welcome the entire family. The entire family goes

to church on Sundays; they listen to the sermon and pray together. They enjoy worshipping together and bond with each other. However, in some mosques, the entire family is not present. Everyone should feel a sense of ownership and welcoming in the mosque. Going to the mosque should be pleasant for everyone, and each member of the family should encourage the others to attend.

Additionally, from the early days of Islam, the mosque was always the intellectual center of the community. However, nowadays it has been reduced to a mere place of worship. Although it may be open five times a day for prayers, there is no scholar to learn from or discuss issues with. It is very sad to see the impact of this.

Ironically, 9/11 opened the eyes of many American to the beauty of Islam. Immediately after 9/11, we actually saw more non-Muslims than Muslims in the audience; the mosque became a magnet for them. Unfortunately, they soon realized that they had no place there. They were not welcomed, and they did not learn anything. They left and never came back. Often times, there is a major discrepancy between faith and practice.

Thus, the mosques need to be revitalized into friendly centers of learning for everyone. They need to fulfill the same role that they did during the time of the Prophet. Once, the Prophet found two groups of people in the mosque, one studying and the other one praying. When asked which one was better, he smiled and said that both of them were good, but then pointed to the group that was studying and said, "But I was sent for this." His main mission was to teach. Without learning, one cannot worship properly.

Many Muslims recite their prayers, but their prayers do not restrain them from evil acts, the way that it should. Praying has become a ritual, like brushing your teeth three times a day. God wants our prayers to be meaningful, and that meaningfulness requires knowledge.

We also need to communicate with the youth in a language that they understand without patronizing them. We need to address them at the same intellectual level that they hear at the universities. As Muslims, we are facing some contemporary dilemmas that even the Muslim scholars (*ulama*) have not resolved. When we reveal our ignorance about those issues, then our word loses credence with them.

We also need to stop importing religious leaders from abroad. We need homegrown religious scholars who are familiar with Western culture and lifestyle.

وَمَا كَانَ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ لِيَنْفِرُوا كَافَّةً فَلَوْلَا نَفَرَ مِنْ كُلِّ فِرْقَةٍ مِّنْهُمْ طَائِفَةٌ لِّيَتَفَقَّهُوا فِي الدِّينِ وَلِيُنذِرُوا قَوْمَهُمْ إِذَا رَجَعُوا إِلَيْهِمْ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَحْذَرُونَ ﴿٩١﴾

***Yet it is not for the faithful to go forth all together. But why should not there go forth a group from each of their sections to become learned in religion, and to warn their people when they return to them, so that they may beware? (9: 122)***

The development of traditional Muslim seminaries (*hawzahs*) and seminaries is excellent. We need to combine academic studies at the universities with traditional teachings at the *hawzah* in order to produce future leaders of Islam in the West.

We all need to step up to fulfill these responsibilities. Do not leave it for someone else. When God intends goodness for one of His servants, He opens up his eyes to study religion and serve Islam. Imam Husayn and the Ahlul-Bayt are waiting for us all to volunteer and carry on their message and their mission.

## The Spirit of Ashura

### Featured Themes:

#### Preamble to Ashura; Reasons for Ashura; Muawiyah; Yazid; Remembering Ashura

إِنَّ اللَّهَ اشْتَرَىٰ مِنَ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ أَنفُسَهُمْ وَأَمْوَالَهُمْ بِأَنَّ لَهُمُ الْجَنَّةَ يُقَاتِلُونَ فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ فَيَقْتُلُونَ وَيُقْتَلُونَ وَعَدًّا عَلَيْهِ ۖ  
حَقًّا فِي التَّوْرَةِ وَالْإِنْجِيلِ وَالْقُرْآنِ وَمَنْ أَوْفَىٰ بِعَهْدِهِ مِنَ اللَّهِ فَاسْتَبْشِرُوا بِالَّذِي بَايَعْتُمْ بِهِ وَذَلِكَ هُوَ الْفَوْزُ  
الْعَظِيمُ ۖ

***Indeed God has bought from the faithful their souls and their possessions for Paradise to be theirs: they fight in the way of God, kill, and are killed. A promise binding upon Him in the Torah and the Injeel (Gospel) and the Qur'an. And who is truer to his promise than God? So rejoice in the bargain you have made with Him, and that is the great success. (9: 111)***

The eve of ashura is a very solemn night for many muslims worldwide. We begin to recall the events of that evening up until the next day. Immediately, grief strikes the heart upon hearing the story. Without compulsion, one joins a wave of mourners remembering the life and sacrifice of Imam Husayn, his family, and his companions; and we all remember them in sadness.

On this night, we share our sympathy with the Ahlul-Bayt and their grandfather, the Prophet, who is cited by Bukhari as saying that the Prophet held Husayn in his arms and said, “Husayn is from me, and I am from Husayn. May God love whoever loves Husayn.” Whoever shares in the sorrow of Imam Husayn is beloved in the eyes of God.

On the eve of Ashura, millions of people around the world feel sadness over the events that happened on the plains of Karbala over 1,350 years ago. One gathering ends and then another begins. In the morning, they begin in Australia and the Far East. By the time that program finishes, new commemorations begin in the Middle East and Africa. Still later, more commemorations begin in Europe and America for a noble and innocent man named Aba Abdullah Husayn. No corner of the earth is absent of his remembrance on the eve and day of Ashura.

Three catalysts led to the uprising of Imam Husayn. The first was the pressure to pay allegiance to Yazid. The second was the presence of people of conscience, who in search of freedom pushed him to rise against the Bani Umayyad. Finally, the third was nothing other than the pivotal principle of Islam, “enjoining the good and forbidding the evil.” These three factors combined to result in the uprising of the Imam on the day of Ashura.

Before he died in the year 60 ah, Muawiyah b. Abi Sufyan had ruled the Muslim stage for four decades with an iron fist. He was the first person to change the caliphate, the succession to the Prophet, into a monarchy. This is a historical fact, and the Muslim historian, Ibn Khaldun was one of those who mentioned this.

In order to secure his son’s succession to the throne, Muawiyah summoned one of his senior aides named Ziyad b. Abihi, as well as, Al-Mugheerah b. Shubah to inform them that before he died he wanted to see his son Yazid crowned as Commander of the Faithful. They advised him against that because people would reject him due to his licentiousness. However, Muawiyah insisted on this.

At the time of Muawiyah’s death, Yazid was on a hunting expedition outside Damascus. He hastily returned to the royal palace to take his position. His first action as caliph was to write an urgent letter to his first cousin, Waleed b. Utbah b. Abi Sufyan, the governor of Madinah, instructing him to take oaths of allegiance from the prominent leaders of Madinah – for he knew that Madinah was the intellectual and spiritual center of Islam at that time.

A few days later, the message arrived in Madinah, and immediately Waleed summoned Imam Husayn to his palace. Imam Husayn adamantly refused to give his hand saying, “We are the family of prophethood and the guardians of the message. Yazid is a corrupt licentious man who drinks alcohol and sheds innocent blood, and someone like me will never pay allegiance to someone like him.”

Those few words highlighted Yazid’s character, who was the personification of sin. Bukhari relates that the Prophet warned the people, “My community (ummah) will perish at the hands of a childish boy from Quraysh,”<sup>31</sup> clearly referring to Yazid b. Muawiyah. Someone like Imam Husayn whose mission was to preserve God’s message on earth could never bow to him.

﴿وَلَا تَرْكَنُوا إِلَى الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا فَتَمَسَّكُمُ النَّارُ وَمَا لَكُم مِّن دُونِ اللَّهِ مِن أَوْلِيَاءَ ثُمَّ لَا تُنصَرُونَ﴾<sup>٤</sup>

***And do not incline toward the wrongdoers; lest the Fire should touch you, and you will not have any friend besides God, then you will not be helped. (11:113)***

The pressure mounted, and the Imam could not remain in Madinah any longer. He left Madinah in the month of Rajab and arrived in Mecca in the month of Shaban. He remained there for four months. News spread rapidly that the Imam had been forced to abandon his birthplace. People began to question what was happening. Scores of delegates came from abroad to encourage him to lead a revolt against the

Bani Umayyad. They told him that they were extremely dissatisfied with the government, they wanted to seek guidance, and needed a savior to rescue them from Yazid.

Their fears about Yazid were indeed true, for Yazid left three major legacies during his rule. To start with, in the first year of his rule, he murdered Imam Husayn and his small group of followers. The next year (62 ah), he attacked the city of Madinah and made it a free-zone for three days for his soldiers to rape and pillage as they wished. Historians relate that ten thousand innocent civilians were killed inside of Madinah, and women and girls were raped. Lastly, in the third year of his rule, he destroyed the Holy Ka'bah.

In addition to the visitors, Imam Husayn also received many letters pleading him to aid the people of Kufa, and elsewhere, against the tyrants of the Bani Umayyad. He sent his cousin Muslim b. Aqeel to Kufa to investigate the situation. Within a few days of his arrival, thousands of people paid allegiance to Muslim, and he wrote back to Imam Husayn that 18,000 men were waiting for his arrival. This was the second factor that led to his tragic journey.

The third was nothing other than adherence to the basic principle of faith, “enjoining the good and forbidding the evil.” The ummah had neglected that principle.

﴿الَّذِينَ إِن مَّكَّنَّاهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ أَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَآتَوُا الزَّكَاةَ وَأَمَرُوا بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَنَهَوْا عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَلِلَّهِ عَاقِبَةُ الْأُمُورِ﴾

***Those who, if We granted power them in the land, maintain the prayer, give the zakat, and bid what is right and forbid what is wrong. And with God rests the outcome of all matters. (22:41)***

Islam was not meant to be a faith strictly based on a set of rituals. Moral security comes first. Without moral security, no one can worship in peace. The only way to establish peace and justice on earth is to enjoin good and forbid evil.

However, Islam had become ritualized, and it was on its last breath. It had been stripped of its substance by such a caliph at its head. Imagine how people would react today if a leader of any country went on television and asked the people to abstain from alcohol but he himself held a bottle in his hand. That was Yazid. Even when his father sent him to Hajj to rehabilitate him before he took over the throne, he could not live without wine. “Leave the mosques for the worshippers to inhabit, and let me sit at the tavern and drink my fill,” were his exquisite lines about drinking. These were his words; and this was Yazid b. Muawiyah – the “cursed tree” described in the Qur’an.<sup>32</sup> In truth, his entire lineage was cursed.

When Imam Husayn took it upon himself to leave Hejaz, scores of people advised him against heading towards Iraq. They begged him to stay and told him that they needed him there. The Imam had one reply:

I heard my grandfather the Messenger of God, may the peace and blessings of God be upon him and

his family, say that if a person sees an oppressive tyrant ignoring the boundaries of God and betraying the Sunnah of the Prophet of God and treating the servants of God aggressively and wickedly, and that person does not oppose him through his words or deeds, then it is incumbent upon God to give that person the same end as the tyrant (i.e. to send him to the Hellfire).

Keeping quiet under despotic rule is tantamount to aiding a tyrant. Thus, Imam Husayn had no choice but to embark on his mission.

Some people argue that Imam Husayn should not have jeopardized his own life and his family's lives to confront Yazid. In response, one would ask, "Was it necessary for the martyrs of Badr or Uhud to give up their lives?" Were all the martyrs throughout history misguided? Our survival depends on sacrifice. All religions believe this, not just Islam.

"The martyrs are the princes of Paradise." Imam Husayn saved Islam for us by sacrificing himself. Otherwise, Islam was fated to go the way of the other major divine messages. God sent the largest contingent of prophets to the Jews, but Judaism was later changed. He sent Jesus who achieved world recognition, but his message was changed. This was exactly what was going to happen to the message of the Seal of the Prophets, Muhammad. It took the blood of Imam Husayn to keep the true message of Islam intact.

During his time, he was the one who took that responsibility on. Now, we also have a responsibility in our time. We must not be indifferent, nor can we be mere spectators. These are difficult times for us, and we have to do whatever we can to aid our religion righteously according to our capacity.

كُنْتُمْ خَيْرَ أُمَّةٍ أُخْرِجَتْ لِلنَّاسِ تَأْمُرُونَ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَتَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَتُؤْمِنُونَ بِاللَّهِ وَلَوْ آمَنَ أَهْلُ الْكِتَابِ لَكَانَ ﴿٤﴾  
﴿٤﴾ خَيْرًا لَهُمْ مِنْهُمْ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ وَأَكْثَرُهُمُ الْفَاسِقُونَ

***You are the best nation [ever] brought forth for mankind: you bid what is right and forbid what is wrong, and have faith in God. And if the People of the Book had believed, it would have been better for them. Among them [some] are faithful, but most of them are transgressors. (3: 110)***

The Muslim ummah has been praised on one condition, "it enjoins the good and forbids the evil." Otherwise, there is no difference between Muslims and others. Only a person who can carry out that responsibility has true faith; and the others are still aspiring to truly follow their religion. God says about the ancient civilizations that perished:

﴿٥﴾ كَانُوا لَا يَتَنَاهَوْنَ عَنِ مُنْكَرٍ فَعَلُوهُ لَبِئْسَ مَا كَانُوا يَفْعَلُونَ ﴿٥﴾

***They would not forbid one another from the wrongs that they committed. Surely, evil is what they had been doing. (5:79)***

Due to the fact that they abandoned that duty, they were destroyed.

Today, we have an enormous responsibility. We should not commemorate Ashura just to cry and lament, but rather, we have to learn and reflect. Imam Husayn gave his entire life and family in order to enjoin good and forbid evil. We need to ask ourselves whether we are fulfilling that duty, even if it is just among our families and friends. People ask me sometimes whether they should advise their parents or relatives to pray; and the answer is that of course you should! If you want your family to remain safe and united then you need to remind them. Certainly, you would tell your family and friends to avoid a hazardous road because you care about them. Likewise, when it comes to moral issues, you have to enjoin what is right to those you care about. They may not listen to you immediately, but you need to be patient for it takes time. One has to be consistent.

﴿وَأْمُرْ أَهْلَكَ بِالصَّلَاةِ وَاصْطَبِرْ عَلَيْهَا لَا نَسْأَلُكَ رِزْقًا نَحْنُ نَرْزُقُكَ وَالْعَاقِبَةُ لِلتَّقْوَى﴾

***And bid your family to prayer and be steadfast in its maintenance. We do not ask any provision of you. It is We who provide for you, and the outcome will be in favor of the God-conscious. (20: 132)***

God revealed to Prophet Jethro, “O Jethro! I am going to destroy 100,000 of your people – 60,000 of the good and 40,000 of the bad.”

Jethro was shocked. “God,” he asked, “I understand why You want to punish the evil ones, but what crime have the good people committed?”

God revealed, “O Jethro, they sided with the evildoers and did not show or express anger at My anger.”<sup>33</sup> In other words, they did not side with God. This is how important enjoining good and forbidding evil is.

No one at that time could have stood up for the cause like Imam Husayn. Had he ceded his responsibility and yielded to the Bani Umayyad, Islam would have perished. He could never have allowed that to happen, for he was the son of Imam Ali, the first defender of Islam. His blood revived Islam and the ummah. Mere talk was not enough; and he knew that he had to give his life to save the religion. The survival of Islam depended on him. This was why Imam Husayn was content to give his life for the sake of Islam, and not only his life, but even the lives of his loved ones as well. On the day of Ashura, ten children of Ali b. Abi Talib sacrificed their lives for the sake of Islam.

As a result, today Imam Husayn is the universal icon of reform. Wherever you go, Imam Husayn is honored, and even non-Muslims revere him. Although the actual battle of Ashura only took a few hours, it has been immortalized. Did you ever ask yourself why? Did you ever ask yourself why some may not always come to the Islamic centers during the year, but they always show up during the time of Ashura? Is it just tradition, or is it something else?

The battle of Ashura did not take place between two leaders or two tribes. It was a conflict of truth versus falsehood; justice versus injustice; dignity against disgrace. This is the essence of Ashura, and this is why we keep coming back to our religious centers every year for more inspiration.

Ashura inspires all of us. You will see the effects of remembering it; perhaps not today, perhaps not tomorrow, but definitely sometime during your lifetime. This is the effect of Imam Husayn, and this is why the anniversary of Ashura needs to be commemorated. Promise yourself that every year, no matter where you are, no matter what you are doing, you will take the time to remember Imam Husayn, for the cause that he fought for will never end until we have the honor to witness the illuminating face of Imam Mahdi. That will be the final day of Ashura, and at that time we will witness universal peace.

One should ask themselves “where would I stand?” If there are two camps, one camp is for the truth and the other is for falsehood, which one would you choose? Would you join Imam Husayn if he was standing before you? Most of us would say yes! We must remember that even today, Imam Husayn needs our help; his sister, Lady Zaynab needs our help. I am sure that one of the things that they would ask of us is not to sell our selves short while living in the West. We must all endeavor to live an honorable life; live a clean life. Our lives have a very important role. We have to be ready to sacrifice everything for Islam. We have to work hard as we are the soldiers of Imam Husayn and the future soldiers of Imam al-Mahdi.

Even today, our lives have a meaning and purpose. Each and every person was born with a quality that is meant to be shared with others. We need to tap into those qualities. You have the potential to make positive changes, not only for yourself, but more so, for others. Today, we may not be needed in the battlefield, but we are needed in the classroom, workplace, political offices, soup-kitchens, and neighborhoods; we have a role to play in these and many other walks of life. Today, the sword has become the pen that writes great works about Islam; the armor has become the speech that will protect Islam; the soldiers of Islam are represented by our fortress of ethical and moral values. This is what Imam Husayn wants from all of us; this is the sacrifice of Ashura.

## Reformation & Transformation

### Featured Themes:

### Lessons Learned; Building Faith; Avoiding Sins

﴿وَنَفْسٍ وَمَا سَوَّاهَا ﴿۹﴾ فَأَلْهَمَهَا فُجُورَهَا وَتَقْوَاهَا ﴿۱۰﴾ قَدْ أَفْلَحَ مَن زَكَّاهَا ﴿۱۱﴾ وَقَدْ خَابَ مَن دَسَّاهَا ﴿۱۲﴾﴾

***By the soul and Him who fashioned it, and inspired it with [discernment between] its virtues and vices: one who purifies it is certainly felicitous, and one who betrays it certainly fails. (91:7-10)***

Millions of muslims worldwide will continue to make their annual presence at religious institutes' commemorating the life and legacy of Imam Husayn, his family and companions. More so now, we all have to ask ourselves, how will commemorating Ashura change us?

Ashura does not end on the 10th of Muharram just because the main commemorations have ended. The aim of the Ashura sessions is nothing less than the salvation of humanity. We come to be inspired, touched, and motivated by Imam Husayn, but more importantly, to apply his message to our own lives on a daily basis.

These sessions need to be a catalyst for change. One may not see a radical change in their life in only ten days. However, these sessions should open our eyes to show us our way in life and help us to reorganize our priorities. We cannot remain stagnant and continue in our negative ways.

Do not despair if you try to change but are not completely able to. One must keep on trying. At the end of the struggle, when one reaches salvation, then you will be grateful that you did not give up. Meanwhile, you will enjoy and benefit from the journey of reformation.

This path to inner change needs to begin first with ourselves, then our family, and then our society. God created human beings to be the jewel of this universe. A hadith *al-Qudsi* says, "My servant, I have created everything for you, and I have created you for Me."<sup>34</sup> A married couple who have only one child will bequeath everything to that child; we have the same value before God Almighty.

The importance of humanity lies deep in the soul. All of God's messengers came for one reason – to teach us how to refine our souls and make us become true human beings. One of our *maraja*<sup>35</sup>, Sheikh Abd al-Kareem al-Haeri went to the shrine of Imam Husayn and told him, "Today I have reached the height of knowledge. People follow me, but I want you to help me become a true human being."

Imam Ali said, "Your first battlefield should be your soul. If you can subdue it, then you can subdue others; but if you succumb to it, then you will succumb to others."<sup>36</sup>

A team that cannot win on its own turf will not be able to win elsewhere. We have to be victorious inside ourselves first. Afterwards, we can venture outside of our own souls into our families and our communities, and then we will be able to go forward easier. However, if we fail inside our own souls, then we will most likely fail in the outside world. If we cannot resist temptations in our lives then how can we expect our children to resist it in theirs? We need to begin with ourselves first.

The Bible has a beautiful verse, "For what shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world but lose his own soul?" (Mark 8:36)

فَاعْبُدُوا مَا شِئْتُمْ مِنْ دُونِهِ قُلْ إِنَّ الْخَاسِرِينَ الَّذِينَ خَسِرُوا أَنْفُسَهُمْ وَأَهْلِيهِمْ يَوْمَ الْقِيَامَةِ أَلَا ذَلِكَ هُوَ الْخُسْرَانُ الْمُبِينُ

***You worship whatever you wish besides Him. Say, “Indeed the losers are those who ruin themselves and their families on the Day of Resurrection.” Look! That is the manifest loss! (39: 15)***

True failure in this world is when we will stand before God on the Last Day and will realize that we had lost our soul in this world because we had not been able to restrain ourselves from sin. It has nothing to do with losing our prestige, health, or wealth in this temporary world. We must try very hard not to lose ourselves. Some people try to guide others, but fail to guide themselves. Some people want to try and reform the entire world but fail because they do not have enough willpower to control their own souls. A failed person cannot reform others. This is why we must begin with ourselves.

Think of Prophet Joseph, a major reformer of his time. He was at the peak of glory and power, but he was not interested in either one. He had the wealth of Bill Gates, the charisma of the most famous celebrities, and the inner beauty of a saint. That was Joseph at his time. Yet, at the height of his prestige, he asked God:

رَبِّ قَدْ آتَيْتَنِي مِنَ الْمُلْكِ وَعَلَّمْتَنِي مِنْ تَأْوِيلِ الْأَحَادِيثِ فَاطِرَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ أَنْتَ وَلِيِّ فِى الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ تَوَفَّنِي ۚ<sup>۴</sup>  
مُسْلِمًا وَالْحَقْنِي بِالصَّالِحِينَ ۚ<sup>۴</sup>

***My Lord! You have granted me a share in the kingdom, and taught me the interpretation of dreams. Originator of the heavens and earth! You are my guardian in this world and the Hereafter! Let my death be in submission [to You], and unite me with the Righteous. (12: 101)***

God gave him command over the greatest empire of his time which was Egypt, and bestowed him with supernatural knowledge. Yet, he turned his attention away from the worldly matters; and prayed to be a true slave of God. He wanted to be with the spiritually elite ones, and this is described in the exegesis (*tafseer*) of the Qur'an as being the Prophet Muhammad and his family (the Ahlul-Bayt). He saw beyond his own time.

We need to be very careful with our inner self. Our soul is the closest thing to us, much closer than our family or possessions. Certainly, one may ask, how can we reform ourselves?

Imam Ali said, “The first step to sinning is the assent of the soul.” Our soul has two parts to it: one good and the other evil. We need to be careful and vigil of the latter; and must try our hardest not to give into it.

We can control the evil half of our soul by holding it accountable for its deeds. Every night, before we go to sleep, we should review our day. Make time to speak to yourself for ten minutes. Go over what we did from the early hours of the morning (when we woke up to pray), until the nighttime when we are ready for bed. It will only take a few minutes to do this. Some people waste hours on the Internet or on their cell phones. Make a phone call to yourself. The Prophet said, “Strengthen your souls by evaluating

them, and guard them by opposing them.”<sup>37</sup> Put a restraining order against the part of your soul that tempts you to do evil acts. Follow the advice of the Commander of the Faithful who said, “The best commander is the one who has command over his own soul.”<sup>38</sup> Through this process, we will embark on the journey towards salvation; and God will make it easy for us. Our deeds remain written with Him forever, so we cannot allow ourselves to forget them.

﴿بَلِ الْإِنْسَانُ عَلَىٰ نَفْسِهِ بَصِيرَةٌ﴾

***Rather each person is a witness to himself. (75: 14)***

All of us have bad habits that we must try to quit performing. A young man confessed that he could not stop himself from dating girls. I told him that he is not the only one; and some others his age have the same problem. He asked me how to stop. I told him that the first step is to be honest with yourself, for that shows that you are serious about changing. I told him that if you want to stop dating other people’s daughters and sisters, then think of the girls that you are dating as being your own sister, would you want someone else to use your sister as entertainment? Think seriously about the potential consequences before you pick up the phone and ask a girl on a date.

Whenever you are tempted to do anything at all, think about the consequences. Every action has a reaction. This is not just a law in physics, but it also holds true for everything in life. Everything that you do has a price to pay, and sometimes, the price is heavy. Would you charge up your credit card, which has a ten thousand dollar limit on it just because you can do it? Who will pay for it? It is you and only you who will have to pay, and surely, the payback will be very difficult.

Dating has a similar price. First of all, it will distance you away from God because it is a violation of His command. You will lose His blessings and guidance. If you promise to stop, but keep regressing, then your soul will become weakened, and you will wonder why you ever wanted to go back to God in the first place.

In addition to this, dating cheapens men and women. Everyone prefers to buy a brand new car; a new car has a new car smell and clean seats. You know that you are the first driver. A second-hand car is not clean and thus you will not value it like a new car. It is the same with people. If you cheapen yourself and reduce your moral value, then your future family will not respect you as much. Besides, you need to see it from another perspective as well; would you tolerate someone in the community that tampers with your daughter or sister? Obviously you would not, so think about it before you infringe on the honor of other families.

That is how we must try to keep ourselves away from sins, by examining ourselves and considering the consequences. Imam al-Ridha narrates a story of a monk, at the time of the Children of Israil, who saved himself by holding himself accountable for his deeds. After 40 years of worship, God had asked

him to offer a sacrifice. After he gave the sacrifice, God rejected it. The monk was worried; but rather than blaming others, which is usually what we do, he was honest with himself. He blamed God's rejection on himself; for he had indeed betrayed his own soul. God inspired him to realize that those few moments were superior to all the 40 years of his worship.

You should be the first one to realize what is wrong inside of yourself before others mention it. God has provided us with the ability for self-reflection. However, we have to accept others' advice as well. We have to thank them for advising us, even if they are criticizing us. We should not get angry or offended, for sincere advice is the best gift that we can ever get.

﴿إِلَّا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالْحَقِّ وَتَوَاصَوْا بِالصَّبْرِ﴾

***Except those who have faith and do righteous deeds, and enjoin one another (tawaasaw) to [follow] the truth, and enjoin one another to patience. (103:3)***

*Tawaasaw* refers to mutual advice. True believers should be able reach out to their brothers and sisters and ask what they are doing wrong and get honest advice. A tradition states, “Your friend is the one who tells you the truth, not the one that (just) tells you that you are right.”<sup>39</sup> Another tradition says, “A believer is a mirror to a believer.”<sup>40</sup> For many people, the mirror is an important piece of furniture in their house because it shows them exactly how they look. We need to cultivate honest friendships with those who will give us sound advice.

Thus, everything that has been mentioned will enable us to continue on the journey of reform; a journey which we renewed at the beginning of this month, and which God willing, we will all continue to tread in the memory of our beloved Imam Husayn who sacrificed everything that he had for the reformation and transformation of the human race.

1. Wasael Al-Shi'a, Al-Hur Al-Amili, v. 1, p. 398
2. Al-Khilaf, Sheikh Al-Toosi, v. 1, p. 690
3. Al-Hada'iq Al-Nadhirah, Al-Bahrani, v. 1, p. 84
4. Even if it is not the month of Ramadan, I still urge you to reflect on the duas (supplications), these are beautiful treasures we have inherited from our infallible imams. Once during Hajj, I saw a group of youth from the West circling the Ka'bah and reciting this dua. What a beautiful way to address Allah.
5. Al-Kafi, v. 3, p. 363
6. Dua Kumayl
7. Mizan Al-Hikmah, v. 1, p. 518
8. Al-Kafi, v. 2, p. 496
9. Dua Rajab
10. Dua al-Iftitah
11. Imam Ali Zain al-Abideen, Dua Abu Hamzah al-Thumali.
12. Mustadrak Al-Wasael, v. 12, p. 93
13. Madinat Al-Ma'ajiz, Al-Bahrani, v. 4, p. 51
14. Al-Kafi, v. 5, p. 511

- [15.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, Al-Allamah Al-Majlisi, v. 43, p. 134
- [16.](#) Wasael Al-Shia, v. 20, p. 14
- [17.](#) Al-Kafi, v. 8, p. 177
- [18.](#) Al-Kafi, v. 5, p. 332
- [19.](#) Al-Khisal, Sheikh Al-Sadooq, p. 209
- [20.](#) Mizan Al-Hikmah, v. 4, p. 214
- [21.](#) Mustadrak Al-Wasael, v. 14, p. 15
- [22.](#) Mustadrak Al-Wasael, v. 8, p. 362
- [23.](#) Mustadrak Al-Wasael, v. 9, p. 99
- [24.](#) Al-Kafi, v. 22, p. 303
- [25.](#) Kanzul 'Ummal, v. 6, p. 482
- [26.](#) Al-Qur'an, 5:3
- [27.](#) Al-Qur'an, 53:11
- [28.](#) Bihar al-Anwar, Al-Allamah Al-Majlisi, v. 13, p. 42
- [29.](#) Mustadrak Al-Wasael, v. 15, p. 180
- [30.](#) Fath Al-Bari, Ibn Hajar, v. 4, p. 49
- [31.](#) Fath Al-Bari, v. 11, p. 417
- [32.](#) "When We said to you, 'Indeed your Lord comprehends all mankind,' We did not appoint the vision that We showed you except as a test for the people and the tree cursed in the Qur'an. We deter them, but it only increases them in great rebellion." (17:60)
- [33.](#) Wasael Al-Shi'a, v. 11, p. 416
- [34.](#) Sharh Usool Al-Kafi, v. 4, p. 232
- [35.](#) One of the highest levels of religious authority that a person can reach to.
- [36.](#) Nahjul Balaghah
- [37.](#) Mustadrak Al-Wasael, v. 12, p. 155
- [38.](#) Mizan Al-Hikmah, v. 4, p. 2927
- [39.](#) Al-Eedhah, Al-Azdi, p. 70
- [40.](#) Mustadrak Al-Wasael, v. 9, p. 49

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