

[Home](#) > [Nahjul Balagha Part 1, The Sermons](#) > [Sermon 220: How distant \(from achievement\) is their aim....](#) > [Alternative Sources for Sermon 220](#)

Sermon 220: How distant (from achievement) is their aim....

Amir al-mu'minin recited the verse:

Engage (your) vying in exuberance, until ye come to the graves. 1 (Qur'an, 102: 1-2)

(ومن كلام له (عليه السلام

(قال بعد تلاوته: (أَلِهَاتُكُمْ التَّكَاثُرُ * حَتَّى زُرْتُمُ الْمَقَابِرَ

Then he said:

How distant (from achievement) is their aim, how neglectful are these visitors and how difficult is the affair. They have not taken lessons from things which are full of lessons, but they took them from far off places. Do they boast on the dead bodies of their fore-fathers, or do they regard the number of dead persons as a ground for feeling boastful of their number? They want to revive the bodies that have become spiritless and the movements that have ceased. They are more entitled to be a source of lesson than a source of pride. They are more suitable for being a source of humility than of honour.

يَا لَهُ مَرَاماً مَا أَبْعَدَهُ! وَزَوْرًا مَا أَغْفَلَهُ! وَخَطَرًا مَا أَفْظَعَهُ! لَقَدْ اسْتَخْلَوْا مِنْهُمْ أَيَّ مُذَكِّرٍ، وَتَنَاوَشُوهُمْ مِنْ مَكَانٍ بَعِيدٍ! أَفَبِمَصَارِعِ آبَائِهِمْ يَفْخَرُونَ! أَمْ بِعَدِيدِ الْهَلَكَى يَتَكَاثَرُونَ! يَرْتَجِعُونَ مِنْهُمْ أَجْسَاداً خَوَتْ، وَحَرَكَاتٍ سَكَتَتْ، وَلَنْ يَكُونُوا عِبْرَةً، أَحَقُّ مِنْ أَنْ يَكُونُوا مُفْتَخَرًا، وَلَنْ يَهْبِطُوا بِهِمْ جَنَابَ ذِلَّةٍ، أَحَجَى مِنْ أَنْ يَقُومُوا بِهِمْ مَقَامَ عِزَّةٍ!

They looked at them with weak-sighted eyes and descended into the hollow of ignorance. If they had asked about them from the dilapidated houses and empty courtyards, they would have said that they went into the earth in the state of misguidance and you too are heading ignorantly towards them. You

trample their skulls, want to raise constructions on their corpses, you graze what they have left and live in houses which they have vacated. The days (that lie) between them and you are also bemoaning you and reciting elegies over you.

لَقَدْ نَظَرُوا إِلَيْهِمْ بِأَبْصَارِ الْعَشْوَةِ، وَضَرَبُوا مِنْهُمْ فِي غَمْرَةِ جَهَالَةٍ، وَلَوْ اسْتَنْطَقُوا عَنْهُمْ عَرَصَاتِ تِلْكَ الدِّيَارِ الْخَاوِيَةِ،
وَالرُّبُوعِ الْخَالِيَةِ، لَقَالَتْ: ذَهَبُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ ضَلَالًا، وَذَهَبْتُمْ فِي أَعْقَابِهِمْ جُهَالًا، تَطَاوَنَ فِي هَامِهِمْ، وَتَسْتَنْبِتُونَ فِي
أَجْسَادِهِمْ، وَتَرْتَعُونَ فِيمَا لَفَظُوا، وَتَسْكُنُونَ فِيمَا خَرَبُوا، وَإِنَّمَا الْأَيَّامُ بَيْنَكُمْ وَبَيْنَهُمْ بَوَاكٍ وَنَوَائِحٌ عَلَيْكُمْ

They are your fore-runners in reaching the goal and have arrived at the watering places before you. They had positions of honour and plenty of pride. They were rulers and holders of positions. Now they have gone into the interstice where earth covers them from above and is eating their flesh and drinking their blood. They lie in the hollows of their graves lifeless, no more growing, and hidden, not to be found. The approach of dangers does not frighten them, and the adversity of circumstances does not grieve them. They do not mind earthquakes, nor do they pay heed to thunders. They are gone and not expected back. They are existent but unseen. They were united but are now dispersed. They were friendly and are now separated.

أُولَئِكَ سَلَفُ غَايَتِكُمْ، وَفُرَاطُ مَنَاهِلِكُمْ، الَّذِينَ كَانَتْ لَهُمْ مَقَاوِمُ الْعِزِّ، وَحَلَبَاتُ الْفَخْرِ، مُلُوكًا وَسُوقًا، سَلَكُوا فِي بُطُونِ
الْبَرْزَخِ سَبِيلًا سَلَّطَتْ الْأَرْضُ عَلَيْهِمْ فِيهِ، فَأَكَلَتْ مِنْ لُحُومِهِمْ، وَشَرِبَتْ مِنْ دِمَائِهِمْ، فَأَصْبَحُوا فِي فَجَوَاتِ قُبُورِهِمْ
جَمَادًا لَا يَنُمُونَ، وَضِمَارًا لَا يُوجَدُونَ، لَا يُفَزِعُهُمْ وَرُودُ الْأَهْوَالِ، وَلَا يَحْزِنُهُمْ تَنَكُّرُ الْأَحْوَالِ، وَلَا يَحْفُلُونَ بِالرَّوَاغِفِ، وَلَا
يَأْذَنُونَ لِلْقَوَاصِفِ، غُيْبًا لَا يُنْتَظَرُونَ، وَشُهُودًا لَا يَحْضُرُونَ، وَإِنَّمَا كَانُوا جَمِيعًا فَتَشَتَّتُوا، وَالْأَفَاقُ فَافْتَرَقُوا،

Their accounts are unknown and their houses are silent, not because of length of time or distance of place, but because they have been made to drink the cup (of death) which has changed their speech into dumbness, their hearing into deafness and their movements into stillness. It seems as though they are fallen in slumber. They are neighbours not feeling affection for each other, or friends who do not meet each other. The bonds of their knowing each other have been worn out and the connections of their friendship have been cut asunder.

Everyone of them is therefore alone although they are a group, and they are strangers, even though friends. They are unaware of morning after a night and of evening after a day. The night or the day when they departed has become ever existent for them. ² They found the dangers of their placed of stay more serious than they had apprehended, and they witnessed that its signs were greater than they had guessed. The two objectives (namely paradise and hell) have been stretched for them upto a point beyond the reach of fear or hope. Had they been able to speak they would have become dumb to describe what they witnessed or saw.

وَمَا عَنْ طُولِ عَهْدِهِمْ، وَلَا بَعْدِ مَحَلِّهِمْ، عَمِيَتْ أَخْبَارُهُمْ، وَصَمَّتْ دِيَارُهُمْ، وَلَكِنَّهُمْ سَقُوا كَأْسًا بَدَّلَتْهُمْ بِالنُّطْقِ خَرَسًا،

وَبِالسَّمْعِ صَمَمًا، وَبِالْحَرَكَاتِ سُكُونًا، فَكَأَنَّهُمْ فِي ارْتِجَالِ الصِّفَةِ صَرَعَى سُبَاتٍ، جِيرَانٌ لَا يَتَأَنَسُونَ، وَأَحِبَاءٌ لَا يَنْزَاوِرُونَ، بَلِيَتْ بَيْنَهُمْ عُرَا التَّعَارُفِ، وَانْقَطَعَتْ مِنْهُمْ أَسْبَابُ الْأَخَاءِ، فَكُلُّهُمْ وَحِيدٌ وَهُمْ جَمِيعٌ، وَبِجَانِبِ الْهَجْرِ وَهُمْ أَخِلَاءٌ، لَا يَتَعَارَفُونَ لِلَّيْلِ صَبَاحًا، وَلَا لِنَهَارٍ مَسَاءً. أَيُّ الْجَدِيدِينَ ظَعَنُوا فِيهِ كَانَ عَلَيْهِمْ سَرْمَدًا، شَاهَدُوا مِنْ أخطَارِ دَارِهِمْ أَفْظَعَ مِمَّا خَافُوا، وَرَأَوْا مِنْ آيَاتِهَا أَعْظَمَ مِمَّا قَدَّرُوا، فَكَلِمَاتُ الْغَايَتَيْنِ مُدَّتْ لَهُمْ إِلَى مَبَاءَةٍ، فَاتَتْ مَبَالِغَ الْخَوْفِ، وَالرَّجَاءِ. فَلَوْ كَانُوا يَنْطِقُونَ بِهَا لَعَيُوا بِصِفَةِ مَا شَاهَدُوا وَمَا عَايَنُوا

Even though their traces have been wiped out and their news has stopped (circulating), eyes are capable of drawing a lesson, as they looked at them, ears of intelligence heard them and they spoke without uttering words. So, they said that handsome faces have been destroyed and delicate bodies have been smeared with earth. We have put on a worn-out shroud. The narrowness of the grave has overwhelmed us and strangeness has spread among us. Our silent abodes have been ruined. The beauty of our bodies has disappeared. Our known features have become hateful. Our stay in the places of strangeness has become long. We do not get relief from pain, nor widening from narrowness.

وَلَكِنَّ عَمِيَتْ آثَارُهُمْ، وَانْقَطَعَتْ أَخْبَارُهُمْ، لَقَدْ رَجَعَتْ فِيهِمْ أَبْصَارُ الْعِبَرِ، وَسَمِعَتْ عَنْهُمْ آذَانُ الْعُقُولِ، وَتَكَلَّمُوا مِنْ غَيْرِ جِهَاتِ النُّطْقِ، فَقَالُوا: كَلَحَتْ الْوُجُوهُ النَّوَاضِرُ، وَخَوَتْ الْأَجْسَادُ النَّوَاعِمُ، وَلَيْسَنَا أَهْدَامَ الْبِلَى، وَتَكَاءَ دَنَا ضَيْقُ الْمَضْجَعِ، وَتَوَارَتْ الْوُحْشَةُ، وَتَهَكَّمَتْ عَلَيْنَا الرُّبُوعُ الصُّمُوتُ، فَاْنَمَحَتْ مَحَاسِنُ أَجْسَادِنَا، وَتَنَكَّرَتْ مَعَارِفُ صُورِنَا، وَطَالَتْ فِي مَسَاكِنِ الْوُحْشَةِ إِقَامَتُنَا، وَلَمْ نَجِدْ مِنْ كَرْبٍ فَرْجًا، وَلَا مِنْ ضَيْقٍ مُتَسَعًا!

Now. if you portray them in your mind, or if the curtains concealing them are removed from them for you, in this state when their ears have lost their power and turned deaf, their eyes have been filled with dust and sunk down, their tongues which were very active have been cut into pieces, their hearts which were ever wakeful have become motionless in their chests, in every limb of theirs a peculiar decay has occurred which has deformed it, and has paved the way for calamity towards it, all these lie powerless, with no hand to help them and no heart to grieve over them, (then) you would certainly notice the grief of (their) hearts and the dirt of (their) eyes.

فَلَوْ مَثَّلْتُهُمْ بِعَقْلِكَ، أَوْ كُشِفَ عَنْهُمْ مَحْجُوبُ الْغِطَاءِ لَكَ، وَقَدْ ارْتَسَخَتْ أَسْمَاعُهُمْ بِالْهَوَامِّ فَاسْتَكَّتْ، وَاکْتَحَلَتْ أَبْصَارُهُمْ بِالتُّرَابِ فَخَسَفَتْ، وَانْقَطَعَتْ الْأَلْسِنَةُ فِي أَفْوَاهِهِمْ بَعْدَ ذَلَّاقَتِهَا، وَهَمَدَتْ الْقُلُوبُ فِي صُدُورِهِمْ بَعْدَ يَقْظَتِهَا، وَعَاتٌ فِي كُلِّ جَارِحَةٍ مِنْهُمْ جَدِيدٌ بَلَى سَمَجَّهَا، وَسَهْلٌ طُرُقُ الْأَفَةِ إِلَيْهَا، مُسْتَسْلِمَاتٌ فَلَا أَيْدٍ تَدْفَعُ، وَلَا قُلُوبٌ تَجْزَعُ، لَرَأَيْتُ أَشْجَانَ قُلُوبٍ، وَأَقْدَاءَ عُيُونٍ

Every trouble of theirs is such that its position does not change and the distress does not clear away. How many a prestigious body and amazing beauty the earth has swallowed, although when in the world he enjoyed abundant pleasures and was nurtured in honour. He clung to enjoyments (even) in the hour of grief. If distress befell him he sought refuge in consolation (derived) through the pleasures of life and playing and games.

While he was laughing at the world and the world was laughing at him in his life full of forgetfulness, time trampled him like thorns, the days weakened his energy and death began to look at him from near. Then he was overtaken by a grief which he had never felt, and ailments appeared in place of the health he had previously possessed.

لَهُمْ فِي كُلِّ فَظَاعَةٍ صِفَةٌ حَالٌ لَا تَنْتَقِلُ، وَغَمْرَةٌ لَا تَنْجَلِي. فَكَمْ أَكَلَتِ الْأَرْضُ مِنْ عَزِيزِ جَسَدٍ، وَأَبْيَقَ لَوْنٍ، كَانَ فِي الدُّنْيَا غَذِيًّا تَرَفٍّ، وَرَبِيبَ شَرَفٍ! يَنْتَعِلُ بِالسُّرُورِ فِي سَاعَةِ حُزْنِهِ، وَيَفْرَعُ إِلَى السَّلْوَةِ إِنْ مُصِيبَةٌ نَزَلَتْ بِهِ، ضَنْئًا بِغَضَارَةِ عَيْشِهِ، وَشَحَاحَةً بِلَهْوِهِ وَلَعِبِهِ! فَبَيْنَمَا هُوَ يَضْحَكُ إِلَى الدُّنْيَا وَتَضْحَكُ إِلَيْهِ فِي ظِلِّ عَيْشٍ غَفُولٍ، إِذْ وَطِئَ الدَّهْرُ بِهِ حَسَكُهُ، وَنَقَضَتِ الْأَيَّامُ قُوَاهُ، وَنَظَرَتْ إِلَيْهِ الْخُتُوفُ مِنْ كُتُبٍ، فَخَالَطَهُ بَثٌّ لَا يَعْرِفُهُ، وَنَجَّى هَمٌّ مَا كَانَ يَجِدُهُ، وَتَوَلَّدَتْ فِيهِ فِتْرَاتٌ عِلَلٌ، أَنْسَ مَا كَانَ بِصِحَّتِهِ

He then turned to that with which the physician had made him familiar, namely suppressing the hot (diseases) with cold (medicines) and curing the cold with hot doses, but the cold things did nothing save aggravate the hot ailments, while the hot ones did nothing except increasing the coldness. Nor did he acquire temperateness in his constitution but rather every ailment of his increased till his physicians became helpless, his attendants grew neglectful and his own family lacked the ability to describe his disease, and were unable to answer those who enquired about him.

They disputed in front of him about the serious news which they were concealing from him. Thus, someone would say "his condition is what it is" and would console them with hopes of his recovery, while another one would advocate patience on missing him, recalling to them the calamities that had befallen the earlier generations.

فَفَزَعَ إِلَى مَا كَانَ عَوْدُهُ الْأَطِبَاءُ مِنْ تَسْكِينِ الْحَارِّ بِالْقَارِّ، وَتَحْرِيكِ الْبَارِدِ بِالْحَارِّ، فَلَمْ يُطْفِئْ بِبَارِدٍ إِلَّا تَوَرَّ حَرَارَةً، وَلَا حَرَّكَ بِحَارٍّ إِلَّا هَيَّجَ بُرُودَةً، وَلَا اعْتَدَلَ بِمُمَازَجٍ لِتِلْكَ الطَّبَائِعِ إِلَّا أَمَدَّ مِنْهَا كُلَّ ذَاتِ دَاءٍ، حَتَّى فَتَرَ مُعْلَلُهُ، وَذَهَلَ مُمَرِّضُهُ، وَتَعَايَا أَهْلُهُ بِصِفَةِ دَائِهِ، وَخَرَسُوا عَنْ جَوَابِ السَّائِلِينَ عَنْهُ، وَتَنَازَعُوا دُونَهُ شَجِيَّ خَبَرٍ يَكْتُمُونَهُ، فَقَائِلٌ [يَقُولُ] هُوَ لِمَا بِهِ، وَمُؤْمِنٌ لَهُمْ إِيَابَ عَافِيَتِهِ، وَمُصْبِرٌ لَهُمْ عَلَى فَقْدِهِ، يُذَكِّرُهُمْ أَسَى الْمَاضِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِهِ.

In this state when he was getting ready to depart from the world and leave his beloved ones, such a serious choking overtook him that his senses became bewildered and the dampness of his tongue dried up. Now, there was many an important question whose reply he knew about he could not utter it, and many a voice that was painful for his heart that he heard but remained (unmoved) as though he was deaf to the voice of either an elder whom he used to respect or of a younger whom he used to caress. The pangs of death are too hideous to be covered by description or to be appreciated by the hearts of the people in this world.

فَبَيْنَمَا هُوَ كَذَلِكَ عَلَى جَنَاحٍ مِنْ فِرَاقِ الدُّنْيَا، وَتَرِكَ الْأَحِبَّةِ، إِذْ عَرَضَ لَهُ عَارِضٌ مِنْ غُصَصِهِ، فَتَحَيَّرَتْ نَوَافِدُ فِطْنَتِهِ، وَيَبَسَتْ رُطُوبَةُ لِسَانِهِ، فَكَمْ مِنْ مُهِمٍّ مِنْ جَوَابِهِ عَرَفَهُ فَعَيَّ عَنْ رَدِّهِ، وَدُعَاءَ مُؤَلِّمٍ لِقَلْبِهِ سَمِعَهُ فَتَصَامَّ عَنْهُ، مِنْ كَبِيرٍ

كَانَ يُعْظِمُهُ، أَوْ صَغِيرَ كَانَ يَرْحَمُهُ! وَإِنَّ لِلْمَوْتِ لَغَمَرَاتٍ هِيَ أَفْظَعُ مِنْ أَنْ تُسْتَغْرَقَ بِصِفَةِ، أَوْ تَعْتَدِلَ عَلَى عُقُولِ أَهْلِ الدُّنْيَا.

Alternative Sources for Sermon 220

- (1) Al-Wasiti, 'Uyun al-hikam, see Bihar, vol. 77, 432;
- (2) Ibn al-'Athir, al-Nihayah, II, 398;
- (3) Abu Nu'aym, Hilyah, II, 132.

1. The genesis of the descending of this verse is that the tribes of Banu `Abd Manaf and Banu Sahm began to boast against each other over the abundance of their wealth and the number of their tribesmen, and in order to prove they had a greater number each one began to include their dead as well, whereupon this verse was revealed to the effect that abundance of riches and majority in numbers has made you so forgetful that you count the dead also with the living. This verse is also taken to mean that abundance of riches and progeny has made you forgetful till you reached the graves, but the utterance of Amir al-mu'minin supports the first meaning.

2. This means that for him who dies in the day it is always day whereas for him who dies in the night the darkness of night never dispels, because they are at a place where there is no turning of the moon and the sun and no rotation of the nights and the days. The same meaning has been expressed by a poet like this:

There is sure to be a day without a night,
Or a night that would come without a day.

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