Al-Islam.org
Ahlul Bayt Digital Islamic Library Project
Published on *Al-Islam.org* (https://www.al-islam.org)

Lesson 20: The Prophet's (S) Description of Heaven and Hell

There are various ways of attaining the station of fear of Allah, amongst which is contemplation on the spiritual states of the dreadful and fearful of Allah whom knowing can aid man at selecting them as the best role models in the course of attaining the state of fear and dread of the presence of Allah. For this reason, in this section of the *hadith*, the station of fear of the best of Allah's slaves, the angels, has been introduced and in the previous lesson we discussed about it.

Meditation about the Greatness of Creatures

The other way of attaining the station of fear is meditation about the greatness of creatures. Without doubt, comprehending the greatness, stability and firmness of creatures leads man to understand better the majesty and infinite wisdom of Allah and his own incapacity, inability and indigence [in the face of Allah] and in this case undertake more diligent endeavor in the direction of attaining perfection and completion and forsake obeying the appetitive soul. In addition to this, by knowing the majesty of Allah and his boundless authority and power, he becomes acutely afraid and apprehensive of disobeying Allah.

By examining in religious texts and *hadith*s and verses of the Gracious Qur'an the directives about knowledge of the greatness of creatures and awareness of the majesty of the Creator, we find that Allah and the saints [*awliya'*] of religion have taken a lot of effort to explain the greatness of the creatures of Allah. They have set forth with their clear explications the delicateness, stability, firmness and variety of creatures and in this way used to incite people to look around themselves and meditate about the creatures of Allah, ranging from very small creatures to the big and great creatures.

In his brilliant explanation, Imam 'Ali (*'a*) makes meditation and contemplation about the infinite power of Allah and the variety of His blessings known as a means of being led to the correct path and to fear of Allah:

“Had they pondered over the greatness of His power and the vastness of His bounty, they would have returned to the right path and feared the punishment of the Fire; but hearts are sick and eyes are impure. Do they not see the small things He has created, how He strengthened their system and opened for them hearing and sight and made for them bones and skins? Look at the ant with its small body and delicate form. It can hardly be seen in the corner of the eye, nor by the perception of the imagination; how it moves on the earth and leaps at its livelihood. It carries the grain to its hole and deposits it in its place of stay. It collects during the summer for its winter, and during strength for the period of its weakness. Its livelihood is guaranteed, and it is fed according to fitness. Allah, the Kind, does not forget it and Allah, the Giver, does not deprive it, even though it may be in dry stone and fixed rocks.”[1]

Imam al-Sadiq (*‘a*) narrates a thorough *hadith* that Zaynab the perfume seller came to the Noble Prophet’s (S) house and asked about the majesty of Allah, the Exalted. In response to her question, the Noble Prophet (S) embarked upon comparing the cosmoses and seven skies and the galaxies and also the minuteness and smallness of every one of them with the other; one of his statements was:

“This earth and that which is inside it and that which is above it is in the face of the second sky like a finger-ring that has fallen [or been lost] in the desert.”[2]

This relationship also exists regarding every cosmos when compared with the cosmos above it until we arrive at the seventh sky, which too is nothing when compared to the Divine Throne.

In order to give rise to wonderful fruits from meditation about the expansiveness and greatness of the cosmos and to perceive the minuteness and smallness of man, the scholars of ethics and divine instructors have recommended that when you want to recite your prayers and attend to the divine Essence, go to an expansive desert with boundless vastness because it is in that case that you will better perceive your minuteness in the presence of His majestic creation.

It is natural that as a result of man being confined to a closed and confined environment, his imagination of the cosmos is limited to that same tight environment but once he goes to the expansive desert and witnesses the mountains and seas, he will have another conception of the world. It has to be borne in mind that this is just in regard to the expansiveness and greatness of the world, regardless of the comparison of the earth with the sky and the first sky with the rest of the skies!

Nowadays, information which has been attained from the galaxies and stars by means of telescopes and spaceships gives invaluable help to man in understanding the created world. It is natural that if before worship man thought a little about the greatness of creation, he would perceive his smallness better and in this case get closer to Allah, because the way of getting close to Allah is feeling small and minute in His presence.

The Indescribable Greatness of the Resurrection

There is not the least doubt that the last world, among others heaven and hell, are among the greatest creations of Allah whose conception and perception are not feasible for us. On the basis of what is gathered from the verses of the Qur'an and the *hadith*s, in the same way that we are incapable of perceiving the greatness of Allah, we are incapable of perceiving the greatness of the Day of Resurrection and its awe and terror too and we cannot have any conception of it. But paying heed to and taking a look at the explanation of the Qur'an and *hadith*s in regard to the Day of Resurrection prepares us better to perceive our smallness and circumstances in the face of the greatness of the Resurrection and heaven and hell, which are signs of the greatness of the Creator.

In regard to dread and terror that prevails over the Resurrection, the Qur'an states:

يَوْمَ تَرَوْنَهَا تَذْهَلُ كُلُّ مُرْضِعَةٍ عَمَّا أَرْضَعَتْ وَتَضَعُ كُلُّ ذَاتِ حَمْلٍ حَمْلَهَا وَتَرَى النَّاسَ سُكَارَى وَمَا هُمْ بِسُكَارَى وَلَكِنَّ عَذَابَ اللهِ شَدِيدٌ

"On the day when you shall see it, every woman giving suck shall quit in confusion what she suckled, and every pregnant woman shall lay down her burden, and you shall see men intoxicated, and they shall not be intoxicated but the chastisement of Allah will be severe."[3]

The Resurrection plain is so terrifying and horrifying that man becomes unconscious, such that he has no power to control himself. A mother, for whom her most beloved one is her child, even worse a suckling baby who has an intense material and emotional need of her, forgets the baby as a result of fear and dread.

Once man carefully attends to the concept and purport of the *ayat*s of the Qur'an, he will comprehend how daunting they are and impel man to review his opinion in regard to their perceptions and vain activities, a transformation will occur in man and will forsake that which is an encumbrance on the path to guidance and prosperity.

But it is regrettable that we seldom pay attention to the purport of these *ayat*s and content ourselves only with recitation and outward form of *ayat*s and refrain from contemplating about the meanings and perceiving their greatness. With regard to what has been mentioned, we are incapable of perceiving the essence and greatness of the hereafter and heaven and hell and our conception of the Resurrection, heaven and hell is similar to the imagination and feeling which arise in the world.

If it is narrated to us about the fire of the hell and its burning, our imagination of its burning is like the burning we feel when we put our hands on fire and nothing more. Or, when mention is made about the blessings and pleasures of heaven, our conception does not go further than what we have known and felt in the world.

The utmost limit of man's brain goes so far as to conceive things which it has seen or their prototypes which it has witnessed, even then after comparison, and it has no conception and imagination of things which it has not seen. It is as a result of these very limitations in the perception and comprehension and activities of the brain of man that there is no option for explaining the attributes and qualities of the last world save that they are explicated in forms which are similar to what man perceives in the world, otherwise he will never at all comprehend those qualities.

For this reason, it is possible for those qualities to have occurred a million times for them to reflect and reproduce themselves in the realms of our worldly comprehension and understanding and be effective, otherwise if it is beyond the realm of our perception, it will not be effective in us because it is not perceptible and comprehensible.

In regard to what has been mentioned, effort has been made in the Qur'an and *hadith*s to explain the majesty of heaven and hell and the blessings and punishments in the form of examples which people are acquainted with. In this *hadith* too the Noble Prophet (S) has selected this same method in order to explain the greatness of heaven and hell.

Describing a Section of the Tortures of Hell

The Noble Prophet (S) explains a section of the punishments of hell to Abu Dharr stating that if an insignificant amount of it appears in the world, it will have very destructive and disastrous effects. He also mentions an example from heavenly blessings which are unbearable for earthly man. This elucidation is intended at guiding us lovers of the world and its treasures so that as a result of comparing the world with the hereafter, we may perceive the minuteness and smallness of the world.

Even if the last world with all its indescribable largeness and expansiveness is itself a specimen of the *ayat*s (signs) of Allah and all have acquired existence with one existential resolution [of Allah] but are themselves evidence of the majesty and power of the divine Essence.

The Noble Prophet (S) states:

"O Abu Dharr! If on that day man had works equal to the works of seventy prophets, he would count his works as few as a result of that which he sees."

We do not even have works equivalent to the works of one believer, what with having the acts of adoration and works of the Noble Prophet (S) and what with performing good works equivalent to the worship of seventy prophets (S). Even if, assuming impossibility, we had such aptitude and capacity as to perform works equivalent to the works of seventy prophets (S), we would still not consider it equivalent to a minute particle on the Resurrection once we see the greatness and expansiveness of that Day.

The Last Day is so frightening and terrifying that without the grace and favor of Allah even the works of

seventy prophets (*'a*) will not be of any avail to us. For this reason, we always have to have hope in the grace and mercy of Allah and safeguard the outpour of His clemency by means of supplication and imploration and inward attention to His expansive mercy. We ought not to rely on our works, because they do not avail us anything.

In continuation, the Noble Prophet (S) states:

"And if a pail of the pus and filth of hell were poured on the eastern part of the earth, the brains of the people living on the western part of the earth would boil."

In the Gracious Qur'an kinds of food for the dwellers of hell are mentioned, amongst which is refuse [*ghislin*]:

فَلَيْسَ لَهُ الْيَوْمَ هَهُنَا حَمِيمٌ * وَلاَ طَعَامٌ إِلاَّ مِنْ غِسْلِينٍ

"Therefore, he has not today a true friend, nor any food except refuse."[4]

refuse [*ghislin*], which is the drink of the people of hell, denotes filthy water which remains after washing clothes and utensils. That water is very fetid and dirty as a result of sucking all the dirt and smell out of the washed items. In reality, refuse is dirt and contamination which is a result of the filthy and ugly works of man and is so smelly, fetid and chocking that if a pail of it were poured in the eastern part of the cosmos, the brains of those dwelling on the western part of the world would boil.

Our conception of the boiling of man's brain is limited to a very inflamed and burning fire brought close to the head of a human being until their brain boils and becomes exterminated but no matter how hot and burning that fire might be, it is not effective when placed at a distance of ten or more meters. But in the Resurrection, the dwellers of the eternal infernal hell become so thirsty that they become compelled to drink boiling and hot water one pail of which if poured on the eastern part of the earth would boil and wipe out the brains of those dwelling on the western part of it.

The fire of hell and the punishment of the grave and the Resurrection are not comparable to the fire of earth and its punishment. The fire of the world is cold and docile and only burns the surface and is easier to endure than the fire of the eternal inferno but the fire of hell is pure and even conscious. It is for this reason that no fire in the world burns the soul but the fire of hell burns and melts the heart and soul too in addition to the body. There is no doubt that the fire of hell and its punishment are a reflection and consequence of man's works in the world.

The Reaction of People and Angels in Face of the Clamor and

Roar of Hell

In continuation, the Noble Prophet (S) explains the intensity of the roaring and clamor of hell stating:

"And when the hell roars, no angel and messenger remains standing save that they fall on their knees and say, 'O Lord! Give us redemption!' Even Abraham forgets his son Isaac and says, 'I am Your friend Abraham. Forget me not'."

Allah in the Qur'an states:

فَأَمَّا الَّذِينَ شَقُوا فَفِي النَّارِ لَهُمْ فِيهَا زَفِيرٌ وَشَهِيقٌ

"So as to those who are unhappy, they shall be in the fire; for them shall be sighing and groaning in it."[5]

Interpreting this *ayat*, 'Allamah Tabataba'i states:

"In the commentary of the Qur'an by Zamakhshari entitled, "*Kishaf*", '*zafir*' denotes air and breathing out and '*shahiq*' implies breathing in the air. Allah's purport is that the dwellers of hell take air in their chests and then release it and because of the hotness of the fire and the greatness and magnitude of the punishment, raise their voices in lamentation and wailing and mourning."[6]

According to the aforementioned commentary, in the same way that man breathes in and out, hell too breathes in and out. By breathing out, the hell takes out the flames and burning heat which embraces all the dwellers of the inferno and by breathing in pulls the dwellers of hell back inside. The Noble Prophet (S) states, "Once hell roars, all the people, even the great prophets of Allah (*'a*) and the angels residing in His proximity become fearful and scared and fall on the ground, forget all the people and things and only think about themselves.

They neither have the ability to move nor the tranquility to remain calm, that is why they fall on their knees in humility and lowliness and raise their hands asking for the infinite mercy of Allah and ask Him to grant them redemption; such that Abraham (*'a*) forgets his most beloved son Isaac and says, "O Lord! I am Your friend Abraham. Forget me not and grant me redemption from this great and deadly event." This is an example of the requital of Allah on the Day of Resurrection which would drive all creatures into fright if it were to appear in the world.

In order to gather more awareness of hell and its tortures, it is worthwhile to quote a thorough *hadith* from Imam al-Sadiq (*'a*):

"One day when the Prophet (S) was seated, the Angel Gabriel came close to him in a sad and sorrowful state as a result of which his color had transformed. The Prophet (S) stated, 'Why are you sad and

sorrowful?' Gabriel replied, 'O Muhammad! Why ought I not to be thus when the breaths of hell have been released today?' The Prophet (S) stated, 'What are the breaths of hell?'

He replied, 'Verily Allah, the Exalted, created the fire, then let it burn for a thousand years until it became red. Then, He ordered it to go down for a thousand years until it became white. Then after that too He ordered it to burn for a thousand years until the fire became black and that is the black and dark fire. Therefore, if one hook of the chain of the burning fire whose height is many inches high were let loose on the world, the world would melt as a result of its fire'."

After that the Noble Prophet (S) cried and the Angel Gabriel also cried. Allah sent an angel to the two of them and that angel said, "Allah sends His peace upon you and states that He protected you from committing sins for which you would be punished."

Heaven Is the Eternal Abode of the Believers and Righteous

Without the least doubt, heaven and its blessings are among the greatest creations of Allah and is allotted to people who traverse the path of servitude and obedience to Allah and by means of faith and good works have attained the highest human levels and in the end have got the capacity of ascending the spiritual realms [or celestial world]:

> وَبَشِّرِ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ أَنَّ لَهُمْ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الأَنْهَارُ... وَلَهُمْ فِيهَا أَزْوَاجٌ مُطَهَّرَةٌ وَهُمْ فِيهَا خَالِدُون

"And convey good news to those who believe and do good deeds, that they shall have gardens in which rivers flow...and they shall have pure mates in them, and in them, they shall abide."[7]

In another verse, Allah states:

> وَعَدَ اللهُ الْمُؤْمِنِينَ وَالْمُؤْمِنَاتِ جَنَّاتٍ تَجْرِي مِنْ تَحْتِهَا الأَنْهَارُ خَالِدِينَ فِيهَا وَمَسَاكِنَ طَيِّبَةً فِي جَنَّاتِ عَدْنٍ وَرِضْوَانٌ مِن اللهِ أَكْبَرُ ذَلِكَ هُوَ الْفَوْزُ الْعَظِيمُ

"Allah has promised to the believing men and believing women gardens, beneath which rivers flow, to abide in them, and goodly dwellings in gardens of perpetual abode; and best of all is Allah's goodly pleasure—that is the grand achievement."[8]

The truth is that man prepares his heaven and its blessings by means of his righteous deeds and good works. For this reason, the more he endeavors at servitude and obedience of the Lord, and overcomes the hurdles by means of ascetic self-discipline and fighting with the carnal soul, the more he attains abundant and higher blessings; this is a reality we clearly infer from the *hadith*s and verses of the

Gracious Qur'an. It has been narrated from Imam al-Sadiq (*'a*) that the Prophet (S) stated:

"When I was taken around the sky, we entered heaven and there I saw the angels busy building a palace and were placing bricks of gold and silver one over the other and sometimes used to put their work to a stop. I asked them, 'Why are you working intermittently?' They replied, 'We are waiting for materials and stuffs to be provided to us.' I asked, 'What are your materials?' They said, 'The invocations '*subhanallah* [glory be to Allah]', and '*al-hamdu lillah* [praise be to Allah]', and '*la ilaha illa Allah* [there is no god but Allah]' and '*Allah-u Akbar* [Allah is Great]' which is pronounced from the lips of the believer; once he gets pre-occupied with these invocations we too get busy with building and whenever he stops reciting these invocations, we stop our work as well'."[9]

The Noble Prophet (S) introduces and elucidates about heaven thus:

"O Abu Dharr! If one of the women of paradise were to appear on a dark and unlit night, she would enlighten the world more than does the moon of the fourteenth night [of the lunar month] and the perfume which will arise from scattering her hair will reach the noses of every creature of the earth and if one of the clothes of the dwellers of the Garden of eternal bliss were spread in the world today, every person who would see that would become unconscious and the eyes of men would not have the ability to see its radiance."

It can be gathered from the words of the Noble Prophet (S) that man's organs and eyes are in the Resurrection stronger than organs and eyes in the world: people in the world are so weak and their perception and comprehension and endurance is so minute that if one of the clothes of paradise were to appear in the world, no eye would have the capacity to see and perceive it and every person who sees it would lose his senses and become unconscious; in spite of the fact that wearing and looking at that dress is a normal thing.

The truth is that in heaven aptitudes, amongst them the ability to see and perceive, are very high. The consciousness and perception of existents having the aptitude to perceive and comprehend, such as man, will be increased to more than a million times in the hereafter. In the last world, all things have life and in reality true life exists there and under its auspices everything has an intellect and a conscience and the ability to speak; it is for this reason that even the trees and stones speak:

وَمَا هَذِهِ الْحَيَوةُ الدُّنْيا إِلاَّ لَهْوٌ وَلَعِبٌ وَإِنَّ الدَّارَ الآخِرَةَ لَهِيَ الْحَيَوَانُ لَوْ كَانُوا يَعْلَمُونَ

"And the life of this world is nothing but a sport and a play; and as for the next Abode; that most surely is the life—did they but know."[10]

It is natural that when everything has life, and even the herbs and stones speak as well, without the least doubt people will also have life and existence and all the organs of their bodies will be able to speak. It is for this reason that when in hell the ears, eyes and skin of the bodies of the dwellers of hell will give

evidence about their crimes and sins, they will say, “How did you provide evidence about our works.” Those organs will reply thus:

...أَنْطَقَنَا اللهُ الَّذِي أَنْطَقَ كُلَّ شَيْءٍ ...

“...Allah who makes everything speak has made us speak...”[11]

That which has been mentioned in this section in regard to the tortures of hell and the blessings of heaven cannot be measured by standards of this world. What is the nature of substances such as the refuse of hell which are so fetid and dangerous and choking that if a pail of it were poured on the eastern part of the cosmos would boil the brains of those living on the western part of it!?
Of course, in order for us not to imagine that such a thing is not feasible and is far from conception, Allah has placed and compressed energies in some substances such as atomic energy in uranium which if a small amount of their energy were released, it is so explosive and destructive that it would wipe out and turn upside down the whole city.

This is just the energy of elements and materials existent in this world. Now that world whose power and energy is probably a million times more than the power and energy of this world leaves behind very great effects which are not perceptible to us.

That which has been mentioned is intended to make us comprehend our place of abode and circumstances; we ought to know that we have not been created for this limited world, in which we enjoy limited perception and conception. Our perception and conscience are limited in a world whose pleasures are limited too.

We ought to know that whatever is in the world is a pre-requisite for the hereafter and has a partial phenomenon of that thing which exists in the hereafter. Gratifications which we perceive in the world are not comparable to the pleasures of the Last Abode. Calamities and afflictions with which we are confronted are nothing compared to the tortures of the next world.

Without the least doubt, comparing the tortures of this world with those of the Last Abode and also comparing the blessings and pleasures of the world with the gratifications of the Eternal Abode and explaining the differences and great disparities between them results in man, to the extent of his capacity and the ability of his brain, to perceive his minuteness and smallness and the world in which he lives in contrast to the Last World and also comprehend the minuteness of the created order vis-à-vis the Creator.

The other fruit of this comparison and analogy is forsaking pride and egotism and humility and submissiveness vis-à-vis right. If he derives benefit from the world, he ought not to take pride in himself and if he is deprived of a blessing, he should not wish for it because all the blessings of the world are not worth the value of one apple of paradise.

For this reason, this world is not a place of falling in love. We ought, by the grace of the directives of the prophets (*'a*) and the saints [*awliya'*] of Allah, to perceive the greatness of the Resurrection and its Creator and by knowing our circumstances endeavor not to be entangled in pride, egotism, self-admiration and bigheadedness.

1. Nahj al-Balaghah, p. 736, sermon [khutbah] 227.
2. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 60, pp. 83-85, Iranian print.
3. Surat al-Hajj 22:2.
4. Surat al-Haqqah 69:35-36.
5. Surat Hud 11:106.
6. Tafsir al-Mizan, vol. 11, p. 21.
7. Surat al-Baqarah 2:25.
8. Surat al-Tawbah (or Bara'ah) 9:72.
9. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 8, p. 123.
10. Surat al-'Ankabut 29:64.
11. Surat Ha Mim (or Fussilat) 41:21.

Source URL:
https://www.al-islam.org/provisions-journey-mishkat-volume-1-muhammad-taqi-misbah-yazdi/lesson-20-prophets-s-description#comment-0