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Lesson Fourteen: Characteristics of the Hereafter

The images that we form in our minds of persons, gardens, cities or other places when we hear them described to us, are generally quite different from we later see when we come to observe the objects at first hand. This is true despite the fact that we have often seen similar objects earlier in our lives and are therefore able to make comparisons.

When we wish to give some idea of the bliss or punishment that awaits man in the hereafter, the vocabulary we have at our disposal in this world is clearly inadequate to delineate an accurate picture. The reality will not in any way conform to our mental deductions.

It is not easy for us to perceive the painful torments that sinners will justly endure and the countless blessings that await the believer, for we have never beheld or touched them. They belong to the realm of the unseen; we are unable to experience them directly, and our mind is not equipped to comprehend their precise and true sense. The images we have of concretely existing objects cannot be extended to cover a reality that lies beyond our reach and experience.

The terms and expressions that we have in our vocabulary are designed for the limited affairs and concerns of this world. This is all we have at our disposal words the reach of which not extend beyond the four walls of our present world.

A different vocabulary and a different mode of vision are therefore required for perceiving and understanding matters that lie beyond this limited realm.

Although the life of this world and that of the hereafter have certain aspects in common, both representing forms of life in which pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, are present, there are also profound and fundamental differences between them.

In this world, life begins with infancy and ends with old age, but no such change or transformation exists

in the hereafter. Here man must labor and sow; there he reaps.

Thus the Commander of the Faithful said:

“Today is the day of work, not the day of accounting; tomorrow is the day of accounting, not the day of work.” (*Nahj al-Balagha,* sermon 42)

In this world the rays of man's awareness can illuminate for him a realm that appears extensive to him but is in reality finite, whereas in the hereafter human perception attains its utmost expansion and becomes unlimited.

Defects, lacks and sicknesses constantly plague man in this world, but the very concept of these is non-existent in the hereafter. There, perfection, happiness and purity exist in the most sublime form. In this world, man is constantly striving to gain possession of what he does not have, and he is never satisfied with what he acquires.

In the hereafter, he never experiences the tormenting feeling of lack, for God wills that whatever he desires should immediately be placed at his disposition. Apart from this, he will have attained there the true object of his love; he will be in the presence of the One in painful separation from Whom he has been grieving and lamenting. There is therefore absolutely nothing left for him to desire, and none among the dwellers in paradise could wish for any change in his state.

The Qur'an says the following concerning the unique characteristics of the blessings of paradise and the unique happiness they bestow, not in any way comparable to the enjoyments of this world:

“The likeness of the paradise that has been promised to the God fearing is a garden where flow beneath trees; its foods will be constantly available, and the shade there will be permanent” (**13:35**).

Only a pale and inevitably deficient portrayal of the blessings of paradise can be given for the inhabitants of this finite world. The verse therefore offers an approximate and allusive description of paradise; what will ultimately present itself to us as paradise is infinitely more sublime than the gardens of this world and the joys of walking freely among trees in the fresh morning air.

The fruits of the hereafter are not tied to any season or subject to blight; they are constantly within reach of the blessed. The shade cast by the trees of paradise bear no resemblance to the shade of trees in this world, which gradually shifts in accordance with the motion of the sun, or even disappears once autumn strips the trees of their leaves. In short, like all the other blessings of paradise, the shade of paradise is eternal and it holds its denizens at all times in its gentle embrace.

In the final analysis, the Qur'an clearly recognizes the inability of man to grasp and perceive the characteristics of paradise and says:

"None can perceive what blessings are hidden for man in that realm which will delight his eye" **(32:17)**.

Furthermore, there is no limitation, with respect to type and category, that will be placed on the blessings of paradise:

"Whatever the heart desires and delights the eye will be brought into being" **(43:71)**.

We know that God's acts are implemented by means of His all-powerful will; as soon as He wills a certain thing, its existence on the plain of being follows automatically. Thus the Qur'an says:

"Whatsoever We will to exist and command to come into being, that very instant it comes into being without any delay" **(16:40)**.

One of the distinguishing features of the hereafter is that the dwellers in paradise will reach a point at which their deeds come to resemble the acts of God; they rely on their wills for the accomplishment of their deeds, without the need for physical strength or means and instruments.

The Qur'an says concerning the life of the blessed in the hereafter:

"They have whatever they wish and desire" **(39: 34)**.

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

"The fruits of the hereafter are plucked without any effort; desire and inclination suffice to obtain them." (*Nahj al-Balagha,* ed. Fayd, sermon 164)

Security and Peace

One of the fundamental differences between life in this world and life in the hereafter is that the relationships prevailing in the latter are utterly different from those found in the material world, because of the sublime and perfect nature of the hereafter.

In this world, beings infringe on each other, because of the particular type of relationships that exist here and the conditions created by time and space. By contrast, in the hereafter none will find his own existence threatened by that of another and none of the relations prevailing there will be based on negation or repulsion; all relationships will revolve around an axis of security and peace.

The closer in the hierarchy of existence a sphere of being is situated to the Exalted Origin of all being, the greater will be the degree of Unity and harmony it possesses, and the farther removed it will be from separation, contradiction, and opposition.

Once man reaches the sublime realm of the hereafter and enters the proximity of God's mercy, he will be

beyond the reach of the unpleasant contingencies of the material world. Conversely, the farther removed a sphere of being is in the hierarchy of existence from the Effulgent Principle of all existence and the lower its rank, the more severe will be the contradictions that prevail in it and the more widespread will be the processes of mutual rejection and denial at work in it.

The Qur'an says the following concerning the relationships prevailing in the hereafter:

"In truth, the God-fearing shall have gardens with flowing rivers in Paradise. They will be invited to enter eternal paradise to the accompaniment of greetings and peace and in the enjoyment of utter respect and security. We will utterly purify their hearts of all darkness, hatred and envy, and all other undesirable characteristics, so that will treat each other as brothers and friends and will sit facing each other on thrones of dignity. No pain or grief shall afflict them, and they shall never be banished from paradise" **(15:45-48).**

In another verse, the Qur'an refers to the order prevailing in paradise by the term "The Abode of Peace." It is an order in which all things will exist and interrelate on a basis of peace, because entry to such a pure realm one free of all defect and contradiction is necessitated precisely by their uniform motion toward God and their attainment of proximity to the Origin of all being. Thus the Qur'an says:

"They shall have abode of peace and security in the presence of their Lord; God shall be their friend and protector for they were doers of good" **(6:127).**

Awesome Torment and Shattering Punishment

The human intellect and powers of perception of man are also incapable of grasping the true nature of punishment in the hereafter; there is no tongue capable of describing the torment that the Creator will inflict. The Qur'an provides the following description of the painful state that will be the lot of the damned in hellfire:

"The fire of hell will burn them from within and will then proceed outwards; its first spark will strike the heart" **(104:6-7).**

How terrible is the furnace which will be fueled with the bodies of the sinners as well as the stones of hell! Let us see what the Qur'an says about it:

"Death will confront them on every hand, there is no question of their dying for their torment will be severe and eternal" **(14:17).**

The Commander of the Faithful, peace be upon him, said the following in the *Du'a Kumayl* concerning God's wrathful punishment and the terrifying spectacle of eternal torment:

"However great and fearsome be the torments and trials of this world, they are like a game when

compared to the torment and punishment of the hereafter. The hardships and pains of this world are slight and of limited duration, but punishment in the hereafter lasts for all eternity. No clemency or commutation will be available to those who have earned that punishment, for the punishment is a fire kindled by God's wrath, anger and vengeance. So grievous is that torment that neither the heavens nor the earth can endure it."

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In order for eternity to come about, it would be enough for God to remove the principle of entropy from matter; the particularities and characteristics of the hereafter would then come into view, and everything pain and pleasure, all living beings would take on the aspect of eternity. The lash of death and destruction would no longer fall on the shoulders of all beings, and we would live eternally in the present world, the cause of corruption and death having been removed from it.

We must therefore address our Lord as follows, with utter sincerity:

"O Creator, keep distant from us the torment of hellfire, for indeed that torment is grievous and permanent" (**25:65**).

The believer who is firmly convinced that the day of requital will come, who knows that the place of the sinner and the oppressor will be the low levels and regions of hell, will fear the outcome of his deeds. However much one exercises vigilance over the self and strives to remember that God Almighty is aware of all things, it is still possible that under the influence of instinctual urge he may fall into the pit of sin and impurity. One of the ways to protect oneself against such lapses is therefore to appeal to God's infinite kindness and confess to his sins and shortcomings.

When confessing to his sins, man should in the first place address himself with the command to abandon all sin.

Reminding himself that hell is an evil abode, he warns himself not to transgress the limits set by God and to reflect on the residence he wishes to occupy in the hereafter. He aspires to the abode that overflows with the blessings of God and has been made ready for the pure and God-fearing.

As soon as man's inward relationship with God begins to weaken, and he begins to distance himself from a firm rooting in faith, the entirety of his being becomes a hunting ground for demons who rob him of all virtue, piety, and the capacity for salvation.

Conversely, steadfastness on God's path and constancy in implementing His commands protect the heart of man from satanic thoughts and inclinations. Since man is full of weaknesses and defects, he ought always take refuge in the source of all good and evil to protect himself against the danger of sin.

The Noble Qur'an declares to men that they should take refuge with God from whatever pulls in the direction of rebellion and disobedience to divine command and thus leads them astray.

"Say: `I seek refuge in the Lord of mankind, the Sovereign over mankind, the God of mankind, from the evil of Satan, the Satan that inspires evil thoughts in the hearts of mankind and belongs either to the category of jinn or to that of mankind'" **(114:1-6)**.

"Satan incites you to ugly and forbidden acts with the fear of poverty, but God promises you forgiveness and generosity; His compassion is infinite and He is All-Knowing" **(2:268)**.

It is true that God's mercy and kindness are universal in their extent, but this should not be taken as negating the principle of punishment and requital. One cannot interpret God's compassion and generosity in a sense that requires Him to love transgression, cruelty, and injustice, or treat uniformly the oppressor and the oppressed.

His justice requires Him to give to everyone in accordance with his need and his state; it is this wise principle, this all-encompassing law of divine justice, that ensures the firm orderliness of the world.

The Noble Qur'an says:

"O Messenger, the unbelievers ask you whether what you say concerning religion and the day of resurrection is true. Tell them, `Yes, I swear by God that all the threats and promises are true, and you will have no escape from God's punishment.' If on that day the oppressors rule the entire face of the world and wish to sacrifice all their wealth in the hope of saving themselves from punishment, they will be unable to do so.

When they witness the torment, they will conceal their regret in order not to give joy to their adversaries. They shall be judged in justice, and no injustice will be involved in their punishment. Be aware, O mankind, that whatever exists in the heavens and on earth is God's, but most men are unaware. It is God who brings men to life, Who causes the living to die, and it is to Him that you will return" **(10:53-56)**.

When man enters the world, in accordance with the will of a power higher than himself, he naturally stands in need of that infinite power. He is lowly and humble when confronted with that Absolute One. Were that Exalted Being, empowered as He is over all powerful and arrogant tyrants, not to punish disobedient despots by humbling them before Him, then justice and wisdom would lose all their meaning.

Should God prepare a kind reception in the hereafter for those bloodthirsty tyrants who have blackened the pages of history with their shameful deeds, or make ready for them a secure place of enjoyment? Does not the torment of hellfire represent true justice and therefore mercy for them?

Can any intelligent man push the belief in the meaninglessness and absurdity of the world to the point of imagining that bloodthirsty and evil men will be free of all punishment for their deeds? Can the slightest evidence for such a degree of meaninglessness be found anywhere in the universe?

One can see indications of the torment of the hereafter in the remorse and regret that are experienced by sinners when their conscience begins to weigh heavy upon them. This remorse is like a small hell that troubles and burns the heart of the sinner; it is an indication that a means for assessing good and evil and measuring men's deeds exists within the very order of creation.

One cannot call God just and merciful unless He punishes the corrupt for their deeds, for it is His absolute justice that prevents an atom's weight of good and an atom's weight of evil from remaining unaccounted for.

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

"If God gives respite to the oppressor, his punishment is never cancelled. Not only are his comings and goings under God's surveillance; He watches his gullet closely and what passes down it." (*Nahj al-Balagha,* ed. Subhi Salih, p.141)

He also said, in similar vein:

"I swear by God that if my hands and feet were to be chained, and I were made to turn back and forth, night and day, on a bed of thorns, I would prefer it to meeting God and His Messenger on the day of resurrection as one who had oppressed people and usurped their wealth." (*Ibid*, p. 246)

Fear of One's Deeds

The exemplars of religion have always emphasized the fear of God goes back in fact to men's fear of their own deeds. Not only is this fear not harmful; it is extremely beneficial in that it keeps man's deeds in balance and under control. Fear of the unpleasant consequences of sin induces caution in man and helps him to rein in his rebellious instincts; it makes him a disciplined and orderly being.

If man were only to place his hope in the infinite mercy of God, with an unbridled optimism not balanced with fear, the result would be the transgression of all limits. The one whose heart is filled only with the hope of God's mercy will feel absolutely free to engage in any foolish and corrupt act he wishes; he will still hope for God's mercy and regard himself as worthy of God's forgiveness despite all the abominations he has committed. Such a person will never think of obeying God nor will he aspire to purity; his entire conduct will be suffused with corruption, but he will entertain hopes of a bright future.

Since, then, the absence of fear of God leads to corruption and sinful behavior, religion prescribes that man should alternate between hope and fear: while hoping for God's infinite mercy and generosity, man should reflect carefully and soberly on the consequences of his deeds, fearing their possible outcome.

On the other hand, if we completely abandon our hope of God's favor and kindness, our belief in a better future, in bright horizons where we can compensate for our sins and acquire virtue, would be threatened. All the spiritual potentialities which might one day blossom forth as a result of our constant exertions

would remain buried for ever.

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

"Do not consider even the purest member of this community as safe from divine punishment, for the Qur'an tells us, `It is only those who stand to lose that feel safe against God's punishment.' Likewise, do not cause the most evil of men to despair of God's mercy and favor, for God says, `Only the unbelieving people despair of God's mercy ...'" (*Kalimat-i Qisar,* no. 227)

Once Imam Musa b. Ja'far, upon whom be peace, said to Hisham b. Hakam:

"No one possesses true faith unless he both fears and hopes. The fear and hope of such a one is grounded in knowledge and awareness." (*Mustadrak al-Wasa'il,* Vol. II, p. 290)

The messengers of God and the leaders of religion who have been the intermediaries between God and man always based their summons on the combination of fear and hope. On the one hand they gave their followers the glad tidings of eternal bliss in exchange for obeying God's laws, and on the other hand they warned them of the consequences of rebellion against the laws of religion, namely punishment by God in the hereafter.

The Glorious Qur'an says concerning the Most Noble Messenger:

"We sent you for no purpose other than giving mankind the glad tidings of God's mercy and warning them of His punishment, but most men are unaware of this truth" **(34:28)**.

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By placing stress simultaneously on fear and hope, Islam removes all kinds of fear which far from changing the reality of man's situation simply weigh him down. It both liberates him from fear of earthly factors and uproots from his being all kinds of false hope, so that he comes to place his reliance only on the eternal power of God.

Islam teaches that none of the factors that customarily induce fear in man possess in themselves the ability to cause benefit or harm, nor do they have the capacity to extend assistance; there is therefore no reason to fear them. Worthy of being feared is only that supreme and all-subduing power to the dominion of which all beings throughout the universe are subject. It is He Who gives and withholds.

The Qur'an says:

"O Most Noble Messenger! Say `Who is it that provides you with sustenance upon the heavens and the earth? Who is it that gives you eyes and ears? Who is it that gives life to the dead and brings forth the living from the dead and the dead from the living? Who is it Whose command has bestowed order on the whole created universe?' They will say: `God.' Then ask them why

they do not fear God" **(10:31).**

First material bounties and blessings are mentioned in this verse, and then the spiritual favors without which the material gifts would be pointless and empty of meaning. The verse then proceeds to mention two of the most remarkable phenomena in the world of being life and death which serve together, in a complex and mysterious way, to illustrate the Infinite knowledge and power of the Creator.

Then, after its evocation of the creation of all blessings and the mysteries of the universe, the verse mentions the guardian and administrator of all beings, and reminds short-sighted and misguided men that they should begin to fear God and His wrath, since they already acknowledge the disposition of all things to be in His hands.

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Abu Dharr al-Ghifari, the noble companion of the Messenger of God, upon whom and whose family be peace and blessings, whose heart overflowed with faith and sincere devotion to God, was troubled after the death of his son by anxiety over his fate and uncertainty whether he had truly joined the ranks of the blessed or been given a place among the damned.

Coming to his son's grave full of this painful anxiety, he placed his hands on the grave and said:

"O son, may God embrace you in His infinite mercy! While you were in this world you treated me well, and now that you have left this world, I declare myself well pleased with you. I swear by God that your death has not caused me any grief or distress, for I have no need of any but God. Were it not for the question of the hereafter and an eternal abode, I would be content to be in your place. It is anxiety over your fate for all eternity in the hereafter prevents me from mourning your death. I swear to God that I am weeping not out of sorrow at your death but because of the stages you must now traverse in the hereafter. Would that I knew what you have said and what you have been told after your death!"

He then turned toward God and addressed Him as follows:

"O God, I absolve him from whatever obligations to me as his father You placed upon him, so absolve him too from whatever obligations toward Yourself You placed upon him. Such generosity becomes You better than it becomes me." (*Furu al-Kafi,* Vol. III, p. 250)

The Dissolution of Ties

One of the properties of resurrection is that it brings about the dissolution of all the relationships and mutual influences that mark the present order of the world. All causes and connections will be severed, so that things will no longer effect each other and creatures will no longer be subject to each other's influence. The only relationship that remains will be that of each object or being with its Creator; all other relationships will become utterly void.

This dissolution of ties and relationships will in reality demonstrate the essential nullity of all external causation; it is only the inner truth of all things that will be manifest on that day.

If the same causes and conditions that exist in the phenomenal world were to prevail on the plain of resurrection, the state of all created things would remain exactly the same as it is now and nothing would ever come to an end unless its very essence were transformed.

The Qur'an depicts the scene of resurrection as follows:

***"When the leaders of falsehood seek to dissociate themselves from their followers and behold punishment of God, all causes will be cut off them and no relationship will remain."*(2:166).**

When the followers of the sinful lords of corruption begin to despair and cannot see even the smallest glimmer of hope for salvation, in their extreme wretchedness they turn for help to those false leaders whom they had followed so trustingly and unconditionally. But they will dissociate themselves from their followers and turn away from them.

Then those followers will realize that all causes have ceased to operate and all doors have been closed. They will come to their senses and regret all the precious opportunities they have missed, all the vast possibilities they had for spiritual growth and perfection. They will be utterly dismayed, but regret and sorrow will be of no use. No path will open up before them to expiate past sins, nor will they have any time to engage in good deeds. They are doomed to remain for over in the pit they have dug for themselves, a pit that is now filled with torment and punishment.

Hisham b. Hakam asked Imam as-Sadiq, upon whom be peace:

"Will the spirit dissolve after it has quit the bodily frame, or will it remain in existence unchanging?"

The Imam answered: "Yes, the spirit will remain as it is until the trumpet of resurrection is sounded. Then all things will be voided. Neither sense will remain, nor anything to be sensed." (Tabari, *Ihtijaj*, Vol. II, p. 97)

So when all relationships of cause and effect are severed, the inner nature of all things will emerge. The manifest and the unseen realms will unite, and all the veils and obstacles that had hidden things from each other will vanish. The Qur'an says in this connection:

***"We have lifted from you the veil, so that this day your vision is sharp"* (50:22).**

On the day of resurrection none but God will have sovereignty or will.

The Qur'an declares:

***"On that day, none will be able to do anything for another; only God's will and command will have an effect"* (82:19).**

"On that day to whom shall belong the absolute ownership of the world? To God, the Unique and All-Powerful" **(40:16)**.

Views of the Scholars

A question that arises here is whether the paradise and hellfire that are promised us already exist, or whether these realms of mercy and torment will be brought into being by the powerful will of God at the time of resurrection.

Muslim scholars have discussed this question for an extremely long time and put forth two views. The first is that paradise and hellfire do not presently exist; once the present order of the world comes to an end and is replaced by a new order, the infinite and everlasting power of God will create both heaven and hell.

However, the great majority of theologians state with great emphasis that the respective abodes of the pure and the sinful have already been created and therefore exist in the present. They cite numerous verses and narrations in support of this contention.

It is indeed necessary to draw inspiration from the text of the Qur'an and from religious traditions in order to discover the truth of the matter, which is in fact what the majority of Islamic scholars proclaim it to be.

The Qur'an says:

"Fear the fiery torment which has been prepared for the punishment of the unbelievers" **(3:131)**.

"Hasten to receive the forgiveness of your Lord, to the paradise which encompasses in its breadth all the heavens and the earth and which has already been prepared for the God-fearing" **(3:133)**.

We can easily deduce from the word "prepared" the sense of "created." In addition, there are other indications in Islamic sources confirming the correctness of this view.

The Qur'an says the following in description of the ascension of the Most Noble Messenger, peace and blessings be upon him and his family:

"The Prophet saw once more the angel of revelation, near the lote-tree of the limit, at the place where eternal paradise is located" **(53:13-15)**.

From these verses, too, it can be deduced that paradise already exists.

From other verses, however, verses which compare the breadth of paradise to the extent of the heavens and the earth, it can be deduced that paradise and hellfire are in a sense contained within the inner aspect of this world. On the day when the veil concealing the inner dimensions of things is removed and

man gazes freely on the whole panorama of existence, he will clearly see the true aspect of paradise and hellfire immediately before him.

However, under current circumstances, they lie beyond our perception. We can observe the earth and the heavenly bodies with our eyes, but our vision is not equal to the perception of the inner nature of this world; we cannot penetrate its depths. If we had a different mode of perception, we could see the inner dimension of this world.

An analogy is provided by the fact that although we are surrounded by sound waves, our normal auditory faculties cannot pick them up unless aided by a transmitter. Once we have the receiver, we become aware of the waves. Despite this, some of the friends of God have been able to see paradise and hellfire while still in this world, with the truth-perceiving vision they had.

The created order is so vast and sublime that it is impossible for man to grasp all its various dimensions, despite the progress his knowledge has made. This being the case, the mere fact that the existence of paradise and hellfire have remained up to now beyond the reach of his direct knowledge does not permit him to deny their reality or to regard his denial as in way decisive. It is easy enough to negate and deny, and indeed many people do so, but no acceptable reason can be advanced for denying the existence of other worlds.

Has any outstanding scientific personality been able to draw on the accumulated resources of his specialization to examine all the aspects of creation and conclude, on the basis of precise experimentation, that paradise and hellfire are definitely non-existent?

Is it indeed possible for anyone even to make such an attempt, and is it conceivable that such a claim would have any basis in science?

Although man is continually engaged in the conquest of new realms, we know that the universe is so vast that if the sound waves which circle the globe in seven seconds were to traverse the whole universe at the same speed, it would take a hundred million years!

The amount of awareness and knowledge that we presently possess is the product of the augmentation of man's knowledge with each succeeding generation. It is quite probable that in the vast ocean of the cosmos great worlds exist the structure of which totally escapes our awareness; there is no reason for absolutely denying their existence.

Einstein said:

“The great riddle of creation remains insoluble. We cannot even be sure that it will ever be solved. What we have been able to read so far in the book of nature has taught us many things, but we know that in contrast to the sentences we have able to read and understand, we are still far removed from being able to decipher everything. Is indeed such a total decipherment possible?” (*Khulasa-yi Falsafi-yi Nazariya-*

yi Einstein, pp. 19–20)

Considering all this, the categorical denial of the present existence of both paradise and hellfire lacks all logical justification.

In addition, once the carpet of time is rolled up and motion itself is thereby brought to an end, temporal relationships which permit “before” and “after” to be established will no longer exist.

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