

A MUSLIM CALL FOR HOPE: LIVING AS FAITHFUL PEOPLE IN A VIOLENT AGE

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“And convey unto them, setting forth the truth, the story of the two sons of Adam — how each offered a sacrifice, and it was accepted from one of them whereas it was not accepted from the other. And Cain said: I will surely slay thee. Abel replied: Behold God accepts only from those who are conscious of Him. Even if you lay your hand on me to slay me, I shall not lay my hand on you to slay you: behold I fear God the Sustainer of all the worlds.” (The Holy Quran Chapter 5- Verse 27-28)

Follow Abel, not Cain

In this creation story, Cain represents human failure, unable to resolve his problem in the right-positive way. When he came to a dead end, he used violence and killed his brother Abel. Abel decided to go the peaceful, secured way of facing hatred and envy with the right and positive attitude. Both have created a model for humans. But, unfortunately, the world today lives in a violent era influenced by the concept of the failed son. The Holy Quran, the divine message to humanity, states clearly that we make mischief and chaos on earth, not God. God said, “Now whatever calamity may befall you will be an outcome of what your own hands have wrought, although He pardons much.” (Chapter 42-verse 30) In the Islamic perspective, the violence and calamities are looked upon as tests to verify how the believers will react and resolve such difficulties. It is a test in a sense God is verifying whether the believers will remain patient and return to Him. This test can be seen as a punishment to the sinners and as moments for “extra credit” to the righteous when they meet God on the Day of Judgment.

The Quran says: “Do men think that on their mere saying, we have attained to faith, they will be left to themselves, and will not be put to a test? Yea, indeed, we did test those who lived before them; and so, too shall be tested the people now living and most certainly will God mark out those who prove themselves true, and most certainly will He mark out those who are lying.”

Life appears to have two faces: a bright shining one and a dark frowning one. Hardships and difficulties, which violence is one aspect of, are the dark ugly face. Man has to experience that face of life. So if he/she could deal well and in goodly terms and overcomes that dark face then it will pass. Tests can be in a physical body, such as sickness and weakness, lack of food and drink, losing loved ones, or jail, humiliation and injustice. Tests can be sudden and take life, or they can be gradual. Tests may bring good results as well as bad ones. This is why it is important for the wise person not to be dragged by the pain of that test and to try to handle it patiently, to learn how to remove it and avoid it next time, and to learn lessons from such moments of testing.

Prophet Muhammad (Peace Be Unto Him) said: “Neither fatigue, disease, sorrow, sadness, hurt, nor distress befalls true believer even if it were a prick he receives from a thorn, but for which Allah (God) remove some of his sins.”

Follow models of patience

We need patience for our devotion and worship. We need patience for resisting worldly temptations. And we need patience to overcome our difficulties and tests. The Holy Quran tells us about different models of patience that the apostles of God resembled. Adam with Satan, Abraham with the tyrant Nimrod, Ishmael (as Muslims maintain) with the test of his sacrifice by his father, Jacob when he lost his son, Joseph and his brother, Joseph with his own brothers, Moses with Pharaoh, and Jesus with his enemies. The Quran empowers us with the special stories of five specific apostles of God, those of strong will and determination: Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, and Muhammad (PBUT). The Quran tells us how those

five set the model for their followers to counter the violence of their rejection until God interfered and resolved the situation. Patience is a special gift to a person who can benefit a lot from such a practice in their life. Patience is a religious necessity as well as a worldly one. It elevates human spiritually and physically, individually and congregationally. Patience is necessary like a farmer after seeding the soil or student with his lessons. Patience is the key to Paradise and protection from Hell. Paradise at the end of this life is so precious and the price has to be paid by the believers.

Turn to God in prayer

True faith in God teaches us to also use another technique to overcome our violent circumstances. Allah says in the Quran: "O you who have attained to faith! Seek aid in steadfast patience and prayer: for, behold, God is with those who are patient in adversity." So after we talked about patience we come to the other technique which is prayer in which a believer will draw him/herself out of all the attachment of this world and turn to the Almighty with true submission and sincerity, crossing all the human, materialistic, and psychological barriers between a believer and God, turning to Him with a pure humble heart and with full confidence of the answer. God is the only One worthy of man's awe and reverence requiring one's turning back to Him. God is so close to every human being if just that later turns correctly to Him in his inquiries. When a simple man came to Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) to ask if Our Lord was close so that he may talk intimately and closely, or far away so that to call on Him from far away. God addressed this man's question through a revelation by saying: "And if My servants ask you about Me — behold, I am near; I respond to the call of the one who calls, whenever he/she calls unto Me: let them then respond unto Me, and believe in Me, so that they might follow the right way." 2-186

This is why Prophet Muhammad emphasized the concept of prayer as a way to reconnect with the divine and seek comfort for the problems we are going through after we make sure we fulfilled all the requirements of reason and logic from our side. Prophet Muhammad also said: Prayer is the essence of worship.

Someone may ask how prayer can benefit if everything is predestined and decreed already? The Gracious God has destined things with a natural law and process. So for example, He destined hunger will be countered by food, thirst with water, sickness with medicine, birth by way of marriage between man and woman, fruits and vegetable with seeding and care, life with air, water and food; and set the law of prayer to be of the greatest benefit in removing harm, or increasing righteousness, or inviting good. When we pray sincerely and truly from the depth of our heart, God responds in one of three ways. Either fulfilling the prayer immediately or saving it to be multiplied in the hereafter, or providing equal benefit in health, physical, or other good conditions. So God is always there listening to our prayers, and watching over us, inviting us to know Him correctly so that we can reconnect and benefit from Him fully. Imam Ja'far Al-Sadiq the great-grandson of Prophet Muhammad was once [told]: "Although we pray a lot, no response seems to come." He replied that is because you call on the One whom you do not really know. God is always there, and He has His way and wisdom in how things happen around us. We may understand His wisdom or not, it is up to Him, not us. But in general, God has forbidden desperation for those who truly believe in Him. He said: "Say: thus speaks God, O you servants of Mine who have transgressed against your own selves! Despair not of God's mercy." 39-53. And since violence and troubles are our doing then there is always hope to fix and change the situation however bad it may be. It requires a strong and good will from our side as human beings. The law of God says: "Verily, God does not change men's conditions unless they change their inner selves." Similarly, God says: "In this way does God set forth the parable of truth and falsehood: for, as far as the scum is concerned it passes away as does all dross; but that which is of benefit to man abides on earth."

Create channels of peace

People of faith must work together honorably in overcoming their enmity and hatred. They must work hard in creating new channels of peace, not new weapons of destruction, compete in the absolute good for humanity, for the better in every field in this life and in the moral system. They must compete in building

humans who will adopt the example of the earliest son of Adam, Abel — who reacted righteously to the invitation of violence. The Quran teaches us to strive hard to such high values when we read: “And who could be better of speech than he who calls his fellow men unto God, and does what is just and right, and says: Verily, I am of those who have surrendered themselves to God. But since good and evil cannot be equal, repel evil with something that is better and lo! He between whom and yourself was enmity may then become as though he had always been close unto you, a true friend! Yet to achieve this is not given to any but those who are want to be patient in adversity: it is not given to any but those endowed with the greatest good fortune.”

Subdue enemies with love

True success comes when we subdue the hearts of our enemies by the language of love and compassion and not when we break their necks by our power and weapons. Hearts have a special language that does not abide by the language of violence; hearts surrender completely to the power of love, giving, preference, and mercy. Now the hope is coming from all those who believe in such languages to stand up and act. Prophet Jesus (pbuh) preached to love your enemy. Muhammad set all his enemy of Mecca free when he had the power over them, as many apostles of God did. The perfect man is not an illusion, but a reality many people of faith are seeking. He is there in the divine manual to humanity, the Holy Scriptures in our hand but we do not follow.

From my perspective as an imam, let me share some reflection on our recent days. Few people realize the danger of nuclear weapons and the race to develop them. These weapons could destroy all the beautiful life on our marvelous planet. We must plant high ethics and morals in the minds and hearts of our new generation.

Restore link to divine law

Our link with divine law has been broken. We utter the wisdom of the prophets and sages without putting it into action.

Some people consider themselves superior to the rest of mankind. They believe this gives them the license to commit atrocities such as rape, enforced migration of peoples from their homeland and persecution to the point of genocide in the name of ethnic cleansing. Thus, in the struggle for material dominance, man has adopted a new set of values that have spread in the form of aggression, terrorism and organized crime, which controls arms, sex and drugs. Is this the New World Order with its global justice that humanity aspires for?

To rescue the ship of humanity, we must turn to heavenly laws that have no bias towards anyone. We must also liberate man from ignorance and immorality. Such noble values require complete and total dedication, self-sacrifice, and coordinated willing efforts for the good of all people.

There is no peace so long as there is the oppressor and the oppressed, the over-fed and the hungry. We must return to the essence of religious values, which were perfected by the teachings of Muhammad who described himself in the following words: “The likeness of me and the Prophets before me is that of a building which they completed except for the last stone, and I am that last stone.”

It is the values adopted by a man of reason, knowledge, wisdom and the purification of the soul that instills in him the love for all people, a love so comprehensive and sincere that he prefers his fellow being over himself. As Muhammad, in concert with all the Prophets, says: “None of you is a believer until he loves for his brother and sister that which he loves for himself.”

Values free us to follow God

These values liberate us and free us to follow God. We are then free from ignorance, superstition, sectarianism and religious fanaticism. This liberates us from the worship of our baser self to the worship of God, the Creator, whose justice does not discriminate between white and black, strong and weak, or

rich and poor. The Quran says, "Be just and fair and witnesses for God even against yourselves, parents, or next of kin." 4-135.

It also says: "God enjoins and commands justice, benevolence and the help of relatives and forbids inequity wrong doing and transgression." 16-90. Muhammad further emphasizes this by saying: God does not regard a people who do not do justice by taking the rights of the weak from the powerful among them.

In this we see Muhammad calling for high moral values and standards, applying them first to himself, perfecting them to the point that if he wronged someone he hurried to compensate him. If he distributed charity, he did so without bias. He condemned the maltreatment of any person. He called people to regard the revealed religions with respect and commanded adherence to them by their respective followers. All this was done in order to create a productive society in which the individual was favored on the basis of his piety, the observance of duty, the protection of rights, and the shunning of evil. Should not the international organizations protect these rights and values assiduously, or should they follow the example of the fabled judge? The fame of this judge grew, when his neighbors visited him complaining that their ox had run into his field trampling his vegetables, flowers, and killed his chickens. Upon hearing this, the judge grew furious, and started yelling abuse at his visitors demanding compensation and the immediate slaughter of the rampaging ox. Then his guests replied: Your honor! Sorry, it seems we have made a mistake. It is not our ox that trampled your field. Your ox did the damage. The judge paused for just a moment, coughed politely, and then bellowed for the books of law and new world order to be brought to him. At the same time, he turned to his visitors and said: We must study the case more closely and consult the legal body and specialists in such matters. Perhaps, he stammered, we may find an explanation for what our ox has done.

I wonder at the wisdom of the Powerful in the world organizations as to why they act like this judge who measures with two scales of justice? Can this bring about peace?

Man now fears his fellow man. He devours his prey despite his fullness. He has infected himself with the viruses of lust and greed. Through the bitterness of his plight, he spreads his disease broadcasting promiscuity and pornography throughout the world by use of satellites, as if he aims to eradicate any remnants of purity and virtue.

The Arab poet says: "The wolf howled and I found company. A man spoke and the world narrowed in my fright of him."

Our world is a global village

We know our world is now one global village, or a ship that ploughs the seas of the universe. In order to avoid the wreckage of this ship upon the rocks of egoism, corruption, and oppression, it is necessary for men of wisdom, heralds of justice and those who dedicate themselves to the cause of high ideals and values, to join together with the men of religion and lay down a blue-print for a building furnished with the best values of all the revealed religions. Thus, they will create a building, which welcomes people of all nations to enter, live under its security, and roam freely through its rooms.

Hence, I call for the use of a book, each chapter of which specializes in each religion, to be taught by qualified and sincere teachers in schools throughout the world. It should express the brotherhood and sisterhood of mankind, the importance of knowledge, wisdom and self-purification. It must be an advocate of justice, equality and instill in the reader compassion towards the creation of God. Muhammad says: All creatures are God's dependents; the most loved by God are those who are most helpful to them. In short, this book must represent the mission of the Prophets of all revealed religions. God defines this mission addressing Muhammad in the Quran: "We have not sent you except as a Mercy to all the Worlds." 21-107.

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