

CHOOSING THE RIGHT WAY BY DOING THE PRESCRIBED PRAYERS

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

O you people, worship... (2:21)

If you wish to understand the bliss and benefit that come with prayer, and the grave loss and destruction that come from vice and dissipation, from not carrying out the commands of God, then listen to this short symbolic story and try to understand it.

Once upon a time, two soldiers are ordered to go to a far town. They walk together till they come to fork. A wise man standing at that point tells them: 'The road on the right is risk-free and nine out of ten travelers on that road meet with great advantage but no difficulty. On the other hand, the one on the left offers no benefit and nine out of ten travelers on it suffer great loss. Both roads are the same in length. But there is this one difference-the traveler on the left road, which has no regulation and no one in authority, travels without equipment or arms. He therefore appears to be very comfortable and in an easy situation. The case for the other soldier is just the opposite; the road he is taking is under military regulation. He must carry a bag full of nutritious rations four kilos or so in weight and a mighty army weapon of considerable weight which will defeat any enemy easily.'

After listening to the wise man's advice, one of the two soldiers, the fortunate one, takes the right fork. He lifts the considerable (but not unbearable) load onto his back; but his heart and soul are at the same moment freed of very burdensome debts and fears. The other man, the unfortunate one, opts out of military service, he refuses to be under regulation and takes the left fork. His body is free of that considerable weight but his heart and soul suffer from innumerable dangers and anxieties. He is constantly fearful and forever in need. At last, he gets into the town. There, he is treated as a rebel and fugitive.

The soldier who accepts military regulation, keeping his bag and weapon and going on the right road, goes in peace, without feeling any indebtedness to, and being afraid of, anybody. He too reaches the town, but is treated there as an honest soldier who fully performs his duties.

Now, O my undisciplined, carnal soul, pay attention: One of the soldiers represents an obedient servant of God while the other represents the rebellious and those who follow their own caprices. That road is the life-line coming from the world of souls, passing through this world and the grave and continuing towards the Hereafter. The weight (considerable but not unbearable) and the weapon are

the obligation of worship and piety. Prayers seem to be a strenuous demand, but in fact, they give such peace and comfort as cannot be explained in words. The one who prays recites in his prayers *ashhadu an la ilaha ill-Allah*, that is, 'I bear witness that there is no god but God, Who is the Creator and All-Provider. Everything whether of harm or benefit is in God's gift. He is both the All-Wise, He never does useless things; and He is the All-Compassionate; His mercy and bounty are abundant. Having faith, the believing soldier sees in every eventuality a door to the wealth of God's Mercy, and knocks on it with his supplication. He realizes that everything in the universe is at the disposal of his Rabb, his Lord and Sustainer. He takes refuge in Him. Putting his trust in God in full submission, he guards himself against all the evils of the world. His faith gives him complete confidence.

As with every good action, the source of courage is faith in, and loyal devotion to, God; and as with every bad action, the source of cowardice is misguidance. Even if the earth explodes like a bomb, it would not frighten a good servant of God with a truly illuminated heart. He may even observe the event in admiration as a marvel of the Eternally-Besought's Power-whereas a rationalist and famous but non-believing philosopher might tremble at the sight of a comet in the sky, fearful lest it should strike the earth. (Such was indeed the response of some people in America to the recent sighting of Halley's comet.)

Man has endless demands, but his capacity to supply them is ever slight. He is under the threat of many afflictions while his individual strength is quite inadequate to withstand them. In other words, while his strength is limited to wherever he can reach, his wishes and demands, his suffering and sorrow, are as wide as his imagination.

Now anyone not wholly blind to the truth will understand that it is a great benefit, happiness and bounty for so poor, impotent and weak a creature as man to submit to God, to worship, believe and have confidence in Him. As everyone will agree, the safe road is preferable to the dangerous one, even if there is a very low probability of safe passage. The way of belief which we are trying to explain is the safe way and leads one to endless bliss with near certainty. However, the way of unbelievers and transgressors, as agreed upon by innumerable experts and people of insight and observation, and even admitted by transgressors themselves, is not profitable with near certainty of endless loss.

In sum, we may put it in this way: just like the bliss of the other world, the happiness of this world, also, depends upon submission to God and being His devoted servant. Then, we should continually praise God, saying, 'Praise be to God for obedience and success in His way', and thank Him that we are Muslims.