Spiritual Dimensions of Mourning for Imam Husayn (a) Part 1

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Mohammad Ali Shomali

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Authors(s):

Mohammad Ali Shomali [1]

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Part 1: The Divine Plan for Human Salvation

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Spiritual Dimensions of Mourning for Imam Husayn (a) Part 1

Part 1: The Divine Plan for Human Salvation[1]

Mohammad Ali Shomali

Abstract

Human beings are labouring towards their Lord and will eventually encounter Him. Once we struggle to eliminate the superficial aspects of this world we will be able to achieve the new life given to those who believe, purify themselves, and perform righteous deeds. Given that the outcomes of our deeds count for very little in this long journey, God, with His infinite mercy, provided male and female role models who are on the straight path to assist people in purifying themselves to live a prosperous life and achieve eternal bliss. He also multiplies the righteous deeds of the faithful; our task is to learn how to use shortcuts to felicity presented by God.

One of these shortcuts is enduring hardships which are a prerequisite for progress for spiritual elevation provided that they are accompanied with gratitude as opposed to complaining. Another quick path is to share in Imam Husayn's grief during the Battle of Karbala.

This address offers the benefits people can derive from Imam Husayn's sacrifices to preserve Islam by mourning over the magnitude of the event's hardship. People are to love Imam Husayn by learning from his teachings and resembling him in his conduct. Since on the Day of Judgment, the Ahlul Bayt will enjoy the uppermost status everyone will wish to have, we also are given permission to reach that position by sharing in Imam Husayn's hardship.

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God, the Almighty, has granted mankind physical life by means of which human beings may reach a higher state of living. It is definitely better that man does this by his own efforts, for even if he does not, as the Qur'an states, it will inevitably happen:

O man! You are labouring toward your Lord laboriously, and you will encounter Him. (***84:6***)

In this verse, God is giving a general message: O' mankind! Willing or not, understanding it or not, you are labouring towards your Lord and you will encounter Him. That meeting will undoubtedly take place. But for those who are impure, that meeting will be painful, instead of being sweet. This is similar to weak beings like ourselves being harmed if we stand too close to the sun. We would not benefit from the sun's rays or even be able to watch and enjoy them. In the Hereafter, meeting Allah will be painful for those who are not purified or well–prepared.

However, man is able to improve himself in this world by thoroughly purifying his soul and increasing its capacity to such an extent that not only will meeting Allah be incredibly sweet for him in the Hereafter, he might also be able to experience it in this world.

Thus, it is not necessary for him to die to experience it. This is a new life that people can find, even in this world. In other words, life in the hereafter currently exists, although it is hidden. In this regard, the Holy Qur'an states:

"They know just an outward aspect of the life of the world, but they are oblivious of the Hereafter." (***30:7***)

Those who are negligent about the Hereafter only notice the superficial aspect of this world's appearance and are thus inattentive to the Hereafter; if we remove this superficial aspect and delve deeper, we would see that the Hereafter truly exists right here and now, parallel to the life that we are living in this world. It is only a matter of pulling the curtain aside. When a person dies, he will be: ***"from you, and so your sight is acute today."*** (***50:22***) ***O'*** mankind! When you die, you will see that you were negligent about this: ***"…they are oblivious of the Hereafter."*** (***30:7***)

The negligent are those who know and have access to it, yet even so they are inattentive to it. This is a similar case for those who wear glasses. They may sometimes think they lost their glasses and end up looking for them while they are unaware that they already have them on. This is an example of negligence. The Holy Qur'an says: ***"You were certainly oblivious of this."*** (***50:22***)

As said in the Qur'an, Allah would then remove this cover:

We have removed your veil from you, and so your sight is acute today. (***50:22***)

God says that He has pulled the curtains aside. Rather than referring to an enormous curtain that separates the people of this world and that of the spiritual life or the Hereafter, this curtain is indeed that of which people place in front of themselves. The Arabic term 'ghita'ak' refers to our own curtain. This veil can range from being extremely long to having no curtain at all. Afterwards, God says He has removed your curtain from in front of you "so your sight is acute today."

Now your eyes are so sharp you can see anything. Therefore, it is obvious that there is life in the Hereafter, though a curtain prevents us from seeing that. If we can release our soul from material bonds and achieve a new life, then what will inevitably take place after death could easily happen right now. God, the Almighty, mentions this new life in some verses of the Qur'an, amongst which is the following:

Whoever acts righteously, [***whether***] ***male or female, should he be faithful, We shall revive him with a good life and pay them their reward by the best of what they used to do.*** (***16: 97***)

Rather than merely reading these verses, take them in with all your heart. Imagine the Prophet (s) reciting this verse to you. God says that He will give a new life to everyone, whether male or female, to those who perform good deeds and is a believer. Islam might make differences between men and women in certain rulings, but on the path to perfection and on the journey to meet Allah, there is no difference between them. And where there are differences between them in Islamic rulings, it is only for the good of the people and society. However, whenever self-purification and getting closer to God is considered, the way is open to all, regardless of gender.

'Allamah Tabataba'I commented with regards to giving a new life to those who do good deeds by saying that this does not mean that the person's everyday life will change; rather, he will experience an entirely new life. The Qur'an continues: ***"...and pay them their reward by the best of what they used to do."*** (***16:97***)

The reward God will provide for them is according to the best deeds they performed. It may be that if someone has recited his best two- rak'at prayer, God will consider all his prayers accordingly. Similarly, if he has completed one sincere pilgrimage, God will count all his pilgrimages accordingly. When God wants to reward someone, He will not merely count the good deeds separately and reward accordingly. He multiplies them, and even gives specific people immeasurable rewards:

… Indeed the patient will be paid in full their reward without any reckoning. (***39:10***)

A person who performs righteous deeds will enjoy paradise in this world. Indeed, he will become a 'walking paradise' through whom those who come in contact with would be able to smell the fragrance of heaven. Elsewhere the Qur'an says:

O you who have faith! Respond to Allah and the Apostle when he summons you to that which will give you life. (***8:24***)

It is important to note that there are two requirements in the verses ***"Whoever acts righteously,*** [***whether***] ***male or female….."***[2] and "O you who have faith!," two requirements are stated: one is faith and the other is righteous deeds. We also read:

O you who have faith! Answer Allah and the Apostle when he summons you to that which will give you life. Know that Allah intervenes between a man and his heart and that toward Him you will be mustered. (***8:24***)

This verse also refers to the same fact that being faithful and obeying God and His Prophet leads us to having a second life.

What is meant by righteous deeds is submitting to religion by following the path which God has shown to us out of His Mercy. In doing so, that new life can be achieved. According to the Holy Qur'an, that right path is worshipping Him: ***"Worship Me. That is a straight path."*** (***36:61***)

To understand what the right path is, God says in the Holy Qur'an***: "Guide us on the straight path, the path of those whom You have blessed."*** (***1: 6-7***)

Thus, people are to look for those who are on this "straight path" and emulate them. And those whom God "blessed" are the revered infallibles. Taking into account that naming ourselves after them is not enough, we are to follow their lead. For example, having the name Mohammad Ali does not guarantee that I am a follower of Muhammad (s) and Ali (a). Some people are named Hasan; others are named Husayn. We also have names such as Sadiq, Kazim, Jawad, Mahdi, Amir and the like.

Knowing too well that having these beautiful names is not enough to help us find the right path, we must strive to successfully pass the classes taught by the infallibles. These names are merely entry requirements that can help us find the right path; yet unless we attend the actual course, we will not know the meaning of the name or the one after whom we are named. While being grateful to God for signing up, it is incumbent upon us to be in the presence of the immaculate teachers of this school and listen to them.

One great teacher in this school is the Holy Prophet (s) who "…purifies them, and teaches them the Book and wisdom."[3] The Prophet (s) "purifies" and "teaches". The teachers in this school do not only educate the students on theoretical matters; rather, they inform others while being the perfect exemplars

of what they teach. The Prophet (s) did not order people to do anything unless he acted upon it first. If we want to join those whom God has blessed, we are to enter this school fully engaged in what is expected from us and ready to act upon our duties. With regards to this, the Holy Qur'an states: ***"Whoever obeys Allah and the Apostle, they are with those unto whom Allah has bestowed favor..."*** (***4:69***)

Those who obey God and His Apostle (s) will find themselves beside those whom God has fully blessed. After this, Allah specifies the four groups who are blessed:

...from among the Prophets and the most truthful and the witnesses and the righteous, and what a good company they are. (***4: 69***)

These four groups are our role models and we are required to follow them. But how? Through obedience, as seen in the verse, "Respond to Allah and the Apostle....." along with performing righteous deeds, since ***"Whoever acts righteously,*** [***whether***] ***male or female, should he be faithful..."***[4]

One of the most successful and perfect of those teachers is Imam Husayn (a), with whose instruction, we can easily and comfortably succeed in this path. To further explain this point, it is necessary to understand the outcome of our good deeds in that no matter how much a human being obeys and performs righteous deeds, it would still count for very little. When we consider our distance from God in addition to our weaknesses and limitations, we will see that there is a long way ahead of us and however much we struggle, we will not be able to gather enough provisions and resources for this long journey. Imam Ali (a) – with all his sincere worships and great services for Islam, while fully comprehending this journey – as well as his actions – said:

Alas! The provision is so little, the journey is so distant, and the path is so lonely.[5]

Imam Ali (a) felt concerned when he remembered his little provision on the one hand and the far journey to be made in loneliness on the other. If this is how Imam Ali (a) feels then where do we stand? Why is the journey so long? Isn't it is because we are heading towards infinity?

Thus, it would be wrong to believe that those daily prayers we recite, which are many times carelessly done, are enough. It is not even certain that during our entire lifetime, we have done two units (rak'ahs) of prayer with the presence of heart. We do some so-called fasting while we might commit numerous sins as well. We perform hajj whilst possessing impure intentions or might be annoying or even hurting our fellow pilgrims. In short, what can we say?

We will be so miserable if we pride ourselves for the little that we do, such as performing some religious obligations, attending religious functions, giving sermons, or having built several mosques. If we are fully aware that we are heading towards God, we will understand that even though we have gathered many provisions, it will still count for very little. However, it is not wise to renounce performing good deeds and forsake the right path because of this.

Another way to achieve eternal bliss is to make sincere efforts while fully realizing that our actions are not enough, and to implore God, saying: “O’ God! I did what I could. Please have mercy upon me and accept and grow it.”

God multiplies the righteous deeds of the faithful. It may be that a person gives a little charity, but God will increase it so much that its worth may become greater than Abu Qubays Mountain (in Mecca) on the Day of Judgment. Sometimes we may be surprised with the way God assigns great rewards for certain deeds such as visiting Imam Husayn’s (a) holy shrine, reciting the chapter Tawhid of the Holy Qur’an once, or fulfilling the need of a brother or sister in faith. God knows that we will not achieve much through our day-to-day performance. If God wants to give us only one reward for each action we perform, we would not get anywhere.

On the other hand, God does not want to give us reward without us doing anything, because in this way we would not try to progress or improve. God creates opportunities for us to progress, and those who take advantage of and appreciate those opportunities will benefit tremendously. On the Day of Judgment, someone who does not receive that many rewards mentioned in narrations (hadiths) cannot complain that he had gone to hajj once and yet expects to receive the rewards for going to hajj a thousand times. God will remind that servant of the worth of fulfilling a person’s need, which is much greater than performing the hajj pilgrimage. Thus, on that day, people will have no excuse. God, the Almighty, has and always will give us scores of opportunities and if we appreciate and use them, He will have a reason to reward us.

One issue in Shi‘a jurisprudence is the rule of compromise in the reasoning of recommended rulings (al-tasamuh fi adillah al-sunan). We have many narrations from the Prophet (s) and Imams (a) implying that if a person is told that performing a certain deed receives a certain amount of reward and the person does that deed hoping to receive it, then he or she will eventually be given that reward, even if the Prophet (s) had not actually said it:

Whoever receives some narration about a reward for performing a good action and he actually performs that action in order to get that reward, he will be given that reward even if that narration was not said by the Messenger of God.[6]

Thus, if you hear or read a hadith that, for example, recommends a certain prayer in the Night of Qadr (Laylat al-Qadr) because it earns a special reward and a person actually reads the prayer, he or she would be given that reward even if that hadith was mistaken or forged. Of course, the narration and the recommended action must be in themselves reasonable and in compliance with the Qur’an, established sunnah, and reason.[7]

This is why our jurists are more flexible in declaring an act as recommended (mustahabb) than to declare an act as obligatory or forbidden. It’s as if God is saying, “My servant made an effort while hopeful of receiving a reward, and so I will reward him; no one can complain or ask why I did not offer

the same to them."

Or God offers to forgive all those who go on the Day of 'Arafah to the plain of 'Arafat. The only condition for this is that you have to be aware and ask for forgiveness. So, if we do not benefit from this offer and are not forgiven, we should not complain and question why others have been forgiven. As far as God was concerned, He was ready to forgive all mankind. And even the person who could not actually go could at least have the desire in their heart to be there, and God would still give them something.

Therefore, if we take up the opportunities that God has given us on our journey, then we could have some hope. But if we want to only consider our own actions such as performing the daily prayers and fasting only in the month of Ramadan, then our expectations will not be fulfilled. And if we do not act upon these duties, then we cannot have any hope. But it is also clear that no one should misunderstand this reasoning and say that if this is so then our deeds are in vain. You must try to do as much righteous deeds as possible, while realizing these are not enough.

We must be aware. Certainly the faithful person is astute. The most astute faithful was the Commander of the Faithful (a). He showed that being astute is the one who makes business with God. Knowing that there is none more trustworthy and generous than God, negotiating with anyone apart from Him is a deception. Even if it is not a deception, the person will eventually become bankrupt because his assets will be limited. Therefore, it is crucial that people only negotiate with Him.

If we want to use our lives properly and enjoy every moment of them in the most productive way, we must use those shortcuts presented to us by God. For example, one of those shortcuts and great opportunities is the Night of Qadr. This is the night which is ***"better than one thousand months."***[8]

Every good action performed in this night is rewarded by God as if it has been performed every night in one thousand months.

Thus, since we cannot excessively perform good deeds such as fasting, performing prayers, and reciting the Qur'an to receive rewards, enduring hardships is a shortcut given by God to the faithful who love God. Of course, we should do as much as we can because it gives us the strength to endure hardships. And if we truly comprehend what this hardship is for, we are to thank God for it. This is why after reciting Ziyarat 'Ashura we prostrate to God and say:

O God! To You belongs the praise of the grateful ones for their hardships. All praise is due to Allah for my great tragedy.

We also recite in a recommended supplication after the daily prayers in the month of Rajab:

"O God! Truly I ask you to grant me the patience of the thankful..."

Hence, people are to praise God like those who are patient and grateful to Him for their suffering. We must be among those who learned from Imam Husayn (a) that hardships can be blessings. We must be

among those who learned from Lady Zaynab that hardship is beautiful in her famous statement: “I saw nothing but beauty!”[9]

Thus, it is not surprising that on the Day of Judgment the faithful will see that the rewards God gives them for their hardships are greater than the rewards given for their worship. There are many kinds of troubles from which we may suffer. On the Day of Judgment, the rewards given to the faithful for being patient in difficulties will bore than what they will be given for their religious obligations.

Of course, prayer and fasting are the basic requirements for their success. The requirement for benefitting from these hardships is to have faith and to perform righteous deeds; otherwise, instead of benefitting from those opportunities, complaining or nagging will cause people to lose their rewards. Prophet Jacob considered Joseph’s abduction ***“a beautiful patience”*** (***12: 18*** & ***83***).

This is the patience that is accompanied by gratitude, not the kind followed by complaints and objections against God. How pathetic we must be to lose a reward after we have faced hardships! If we are experiencing a hardship, adversity, calamity or any other trouble, of which a faithful person undoubtedly experiences, we are enduring that situation anyway, so why not make an investment of it for our Hereafter? Make benefit of it for seeking nearness to God! Praise Him and do not complain!

According to a narration in Abi Faad Hilli’s ‘Uddat al-Da‘i, on the Day of Judgment, when the faithful see what God gives them instead of what they wanted and did not receive in this world, they will wish none of their requests in this world had been answered. You may have taken care of a patient who has not been cured yet, wanted money which God has not given you, or attempted to marry without success.

Everyone has his own problems and beseeches God and mourns about them. Sometimes it proves beneficial when a request is granted, and sometimes it is not. On the Day of Judgment, when we see what God will give us instead of what we had wanted and did not receive, we would wish that none of our requests in this world were granted. We would wish that all of it had been saved up for the Hereafter. On the Day of Judgment, all of us will wish we had suffered more hardships in this world. Currently, we do not perceive for our eyes are closed. We do not know the benefit of these hardships.

Concerning the qualities of the Imams’ followers, Imam Sadiq (a) states, “We are patient, but our followers are more patient than us.” This narration becomes more comprehensible in the following part: “We are patient with respect to what we know and they are patient with respect to what they do not know.”[10]

The Imams are patient while knowing the positive outcomes of sufferings, but their followers are patient while being unaware of the other side of sufferings. The faithful person who is enduring hardships in this world, for example, whose family has left him or whose children do not respect him, does not currently know what he will gain for enduring these hardships for the sake of God. This is why it is difficult for him.

The underprivileged whose poverty is not due to laziness and is still poor does not understand how

many blessings he will receive after this poverty and so it is difficult for him to remain persistent. For those who know, not only is it easier to endure hardships; rather, they will also thank God. The patience of the grateful is then not so difficult. Therefore, the Imam (a) regarded his followers as more patient than the infallibles.

What is the patience of grateful people like? If I want to give an example, it could be compared to the difficulty we face when we want to pass an exam. We will study hard before the exam and we may have been sleepless for a week or more. But this is not bitter for us. It might be difficult, but not bitter. Sometimes, something is difficult and painful for people though it is not bitter. The same pertains to the hardships faced by Household (a). Do not ever think that the events of 'Ashura were not difficult. They were extremely difficult. They were painful, but they were not bitter. They were not ugly. That is why in Ziyarat 'Ashura, the supplicant thanks God by saying, "O God! To You belongs the praise of the grateful ones for their hardships."

On the Day of Judgment, the one who has endured hardships the most will have the greatest reward. The Holy Prophet (s) stated, "No Prophet suffered hardships like me." You may wonder why God's beloved servant should suffer most from hardships. The answer is that enduring hardship is not a sign of being disliked; God loved him more than anyone and he had to face hardships in order to be spiritually elevated. The person who is a nearer to God might face more hardships. Why? Is He an enemy of the servant? Does He want to annoy the servant for no purpose? No. The servant is given hardships for two reasons:

1) Hardship is the prerequisite for progress, and

2) God only tests when He knows that the one tested is competent for the test.

God will not impose more on the faithful than they are able to endure; but He might gradually increase their capacity and their hardships accordingly. A good teacher does this. A trainer will do likewise. A good trainer will not expect everything of us on the first day. He would first evaluate our competence and then, when our capacity has increased, he will intensify his instructions. God increases the hardships of those whom He loves as their competence increases.

In the next part, we will study the suffering of Imam Husayn (a) and the way we can benefit more from mourning for him in our pursuit of salvation.

1. This is the first part of an address originally presented at the Manchester Islamic Institute in the UK on the Day of Ashura 1429 A.H. (January 19th, 2008). It is published here with slight changes.
2. Qur'an, 16:97.
3. Qur'an, 62:2 & 3:164.
4. Qur'an, 16: 97.
5. Sharh Nahj al-Balaqhah, Ibn Abi al-Hadid, vol. 18, p. 226.
6. Wasa'il al-Shi'a, vol. 1, p. 80 & vol. 30, p. 246. There is a chapter about this issue in vol. 1, pp. 8-82 which has ten hadiths.

7. Of course, everyone has to be careful, not to accept everything, because there are many superstitions or ideas that make no sense which are clearly far from truth and no one should act upon such narrations.

8. Qur'an, 97:3.

9. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 45, p. 115.

10. Al-Kafi, vol. 2, p. 93.

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