

Fast 14: The expansion of the Holy Prophet's heart and mind

¹Have We not expanded for you your breast (with Divine light and wisdom), ²and removed from you your burden, ³which weighed down your back, ⁴and exalted for you your mention? ⁵Surely with difficulty is ease, ⁶with difficulty is surely ease. ⁷So when you are free (from anxiety), work hard, ⁸and make your Lord your exclusive object.” — ch. 94

أَلَمْ نَشْرَحْ لَكَ صَدْرَكَ ۖ وَوَضَعْنَا عَنكَ وِزْرَكَ ۖ
الَّذِي أَثْقَلَ ظَهْرَكَ ۖ وَرَفَعْنَا لَكَ ذِكْرَكَ ۖ
فَإِنَّ مَعَ الْعُسْرِ يُسْرًا ۖ إِنَّ مَعَ الْعُسْرِ يُسْرًا ۖ
فَإِذَا فَرَغْتَ فَانصَبْ ۖ وَإِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ فَارْغَبْ ۗ

The *expanding of the breast* is also mentioned in Moses' prayer in 20:25:

“My Lord, expand my breast for me.” — 20:25

قَالَ رَبِّ اشْرَحْ لِي صَدْرِي ۝٢٥

- **Verses 1–3:** When the Holy Prophet was assigned his mission of reform of humanity, he felt it as an unbearable burden and his heart was uneasy and anxious about it. But God filled his heart with light, tranquillity and knowledge. This, so to speak, expanded his breast. It brought him relief and comfort, lifting his burden, and gave him confidence. He became capable of understanding the most subtle of concepts and encompassing the broadest range of spiritual knowledge. This was necessary as he had to preach to the entire world, in which there existed a wide range of religions and philosophies.
- It is also stated about all humans:

“So whomsoever Allah intends to guide, He expands his breast for Islam...” — 6:125

فَمَنْ يُرِدِ اللَّهُ أَنْ يَهْدِيَهُ يَشْرَحْ صَدْرَهُ لِلْإِسْلَامِ

“Is he whose breast Allah has **opened** to Islam so that he follows a light from his Lord (like the hard-hearted) —? So woe to those whose hearts are hardened against the remembrance of Allah! Such are in clear error.” — 39:22

أَفَمَنْ شَرَحَ اللَّهُ صَدْرَهُ لِلْإِسْلَامِ فَهُوَ عَلَىٰ نُورٍ مِّنْ رَبِّهِ ۗ فَوَيْلٌ لِلْقَاسِيَةِ قُلُوبُهُمْ مِّنْ ذِكْرِ اللَّهِ ۗ أُولَٰئِكَ فِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ ۝٣٩

The word “opened” in the last verse above (*sharh*) is the same in Arabic as the word translated as “expand” in the three verses we have quoted above it (94:1, 20:25 and 6:125). This expansion or opening signifies the illumination of the mind with wisdom and Divine light, and filling it with the satisfaction of having found the truth. The last verse above clearly mentions a person following *light* from his Lord in connection with the expansion of his breast. It contrasts the person whose breast has been opened with one whose heart is hardened against the remembrance of God.

Verse 4: “exalted for you your mention” — When all these verses were revealed, the Holy Prophet was an ordinary, obscure man of no importance. No one was interested in him. As promised here, *his mention was exalted*. Eventually, his name spread all over the world, and people became keen to find out every detail of his life and work, millions of them wanting to take his character as an example. From being least known, he became the best-known person in the world, known for his high character and morals, reform work and founding a great religion. This verse indicates that Muslims must strive their hardest to make the Holy Prophet’s name exalted in the world by presenting the true picture of his life and refuting allegations against him.

Verses 5–6: It is twice stated that difficulty is followed by ease. This came true during the mission of the Holy Prophet, that the period of difficulty and adversity for him and his followers led to the period of ease. The same statement is repeated, and this indicates a prophecy, yet to be fulfilled, that when Islam is again in difficulty, that condition will give way to ease. But what can sustain us during that period of intense difficulty, when we bear the crushing burden of the task of presenting the true picture of Islam to the world? It is this: if our hearts are filled and stretched with the correct knowledge of Islam, and filled with Divine light through worship of Allah.

But the passage also reveals a general law of nature, that to achieve anything we first have to encounter difficulty, and if we bear with it and do not give up, then it is followed by ease when we achieve our objective.

Verses 7–8: These instructions guide us as to what to do when we reach the period of ease. We must continue to work hard, to avoid falling into the ways of laxity and carelessness that lead to decline, and we must continue to turn to God since the temptation in easy circumstances is to forget Him. Thus the Holy Prophet, even when he reached the height of rulership over an entire nation and had tens of thousands of devoted followers, continued to lead the same life of austerity, hard work and service of God and humanity, as he had always done.

- The Quran also speaks of a person’s breast as **narrowing** or becoming straitened. Regarding the Holy Prophet in this connection it says:

“And We know indeed that your breast narrows at what they say; so celebrate the praise of your Lord, and be of those who prostrate (before Him). And serve your Lord, until there comes to you what is certain.” — 15:97–99

وَلَقَدْ نَعْلَمُ أَنَّكَ يَضِيقُ صَدْرُكَ بِمَا يَقُولُونَ ﴿٩٧﴾
 فَسَبِّحْ بِحَمْدِ رَبِّكَ وَكُنْ مِنَ السَّاجِدِينَ ﴿٩٨﴾ وَاعْبُدْ
 رَبَّكَ حَتَّىٰ يَأْتِيَكَ الْيَقِينُ ﴿٩٩﴾

The narrowing of the breast indicates his distress and pain at the false allegations of his opponents, as opposed to a state of tranquillity and satisfaction. The passage above goes on to say that through prayer this narrowing can be relieved and made to vanish. Regarding what is meant in the closing words by “what is certain”, there are different opinions. One meaning is that through the worship of God he can attain to certainty. So the assurance that he would be successful would fill and expand his breast again. This advice is not only for the Holy Prophet but for every Muslim.