

Prisoners of War and their treatment by the Holy Prophet Muhammad

Friday Khutba by Dr Zahid Aziz, for Lahore Ahmadiyya UK, 12 March 2021

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّبِيُّ قُلْ لِمَنْ فِي أَيْدِيكُمْ مِنَ الْأَسْرَىٰ إِنَّ يَعْلَمِ اللَّهُ فِي قُلُوبِكُمْ خَيْرًا يُؤْتِيكُمْ خَيْرًا مِّمَّا أُخِذَ
مِنْكُمْ وَيَغْفِرَ لَكُمْ ۗ وَاللَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ ﴿٥٧﴾ وَإِنْ يُرِيدُوا خِيَانَتَكَ فَقَدْ خَانُوا اللَّهَ مِنْ قَبْلُ فَأَمْكَنَ
مِنْهُمْ ۗ وَاللَّهُ عَلِيمٌ حَكِيمٌ ﴿٥٨﴾

“O Prophet, say to those of the captives who are in your hands: If Allah knows anything good in your hearts, He will give you better than what has been taken from you, and will forgive you. And Allah is Forgiving, Merciful. And if they intend to be treacherous to you, so indeed they have been treacherous to Allah before, but He gave (you) mastery over them. And Allah is Knowing, Wise.”
(The Quran, 8:70–71)

These verses are about the prisoners that the Muslims took from their enemy at the well-known battle of Badr. This was, as everyone knows, the first battle of the Holy Prophet Muhammad, when the Quraish from Makkah marched out with an army to attack the Muslims at Madinah. As you know, the Holy Prophet and the other Muslims who had been living in Makkah had faced so much persecution there that, by and by, most of them emigrated, or fled, to settle in Madinah. The Holy Prophet himself had been in Madinah for just a year and a half when this battle took place. Muslims won this battle despite their army being less than one-third of the Quraish army, which was not only larger but also much better armed.

Having won the battle, Muslims took some seventy prisoners from the enemy fighters. This was the first time that the Muslims had their enemies under their power, to kill, enslave or ill-treat as they pleased, and to take revenge for the persecution they had suffered at Makkah for so many years till their emigration only very recently. Although it is reported that two prisoners were executed, but if these reports are correct then these two were among the worst persecutors of Muslims at Makkah. If

Muslims had believed that they are allowed to convert people to Islam by force, then this would be the ideal opportunity for them to put this teaching into effect and make these prisoners declare that they had embraced Islam.

The Holy Prophet consulted his Companions about how to treat the prisoners. Hazrat Abu Bakr advised that they should be treated leniently, while Hazrat Umar urged the Holy Prophet to be stern and kill them. He accepted Hazrat Abu Bakr's advice. How the prisoners were treated by the Muslims is mentioned by Sir William Muir in his biography of the Holy Prophet written more than a hundred years ago. He refers to the Holy Prophet's command to Muslims to treat the prisoners well and he also refers to the above verse of the Quran, and writes:

“In pursuance of Mohammad's commands, and in accord with the passage already quoted, the citizens [i.e. the Ansar of Medina], and such of the refugees as possessed houses, received the prisoners, and treated them with much consideration. ‘Blessings be on the men of Medina!’ said one of these prisoners in later days; ‘they made us ride, while they themselves walked afoot: they gave us wheaten bread to eat when there was little of it, contenting themselves with dates. It is not surprising, therefore, that some of the captives, yielding to these influences, declared themselves Believers, and to such their liberty was at once granted. The rest were kept for ransom. ... The kindly treatment was thus prolonged, and left a favourable impression on the minds even of those who did not at once go over to Islam.”

“The captives were redeemed according to their several means — some paying a thousand, and others as much as four thousand pieces. Such as had nothing to give were liberated without payment; but a service was required To each were allotted ten boys, to be taught the art of writing; and the teaching was accepted as a ransom.”
(*The Life of Mohammad*, by William Muir, revised edition, 1912, ch. 12, pp. 233–234)

So there were some prisoners whose relatives from Makkah sent money to have them freed, some other prisoners who earned their liberty by each teaching ten

Muslim children to read and write, and lastly those prisoners who could neither pay nor teach and they were freed by the Muslims anyway.

You may also recall that in an earlier *khutba* I mentioned the incident of one Suhail ibn Amr, a leading opponent of the Holy Prophet who was one of those captured at the battle of Badr. He had a talent for making speeches and he employed this skill in Makkah to make speeches against the Holy Prophet. After his capture, Hazrat Umar suggested to the Holy Prophet that Suhail's teeth should be pulled out "so that he would never be able to exercise his oratory against you." The Holy Prophet rejected this without hesitation and said: "Certainly not. I will not mutilate anyone, for God would mutilate me even though I am His Prophet."

Let us now turn to the two verses I quoted at the beginning. The first says: "O Prophet, say to those of the captives who are in your hands: If Allah knows anything good in your hearts, He will give you better than what has been taken from you, and will forgive you. And Allah is Forgiving, Merciful." This is quite extraordinary in its sympathy for the enemy. They are told that if they have good intentions and behave well, they will suffer no loss as a result of having had to pay for their freedom. In fact, they will gain because God will give them more than what they had to pay to the Muslims! But it could also mean, not any material gain to make up for this loss, but that God will turn their hearts towards Islam. So, although they had to pay to gain their freedom from captivity, yet as a result of that *same* captivity they would have the opportunity to see Muslims and true Islam close at hand, and be blessed to accept it. Sir William Muir, after quoting this verse, writes:

"It will be seen from this quotation that Mohammad already contemplated the possibility of converting the prisoners to his cause; and in some instances, as we shall see, he was successful" (*ibid.*, p. 232).

The second verse in the passage quoted at the beginning of this *khutba* ("And if they intend to be treacherous to you,...") assures the Muslims that there is no danger for them in releasing these prisoners because if they fought against the Muslims again

they would be defeated again.

This obligation to set free those who are captured during war, which broke with the general practice in the world of killing them or making them slaves, is clearly stated as a principle in the Quran: “So when you meet in battle those who disbelieve, strike the necks; then, when you have overcome them, make (them) prisoners, and afterwards (set them free) as a favour or for ransom till the war lay down its burdens” (47:4). The words “strike the necks” simply indicate fighting. Although an enemy combatant may be killed as a result, these words cannot be equated to killing because the verse goes on to say: “when you have overcome them, make (them) prisoners”. It is then laid down as the rule that the prisoners must be freed, and this may be done as a favour to the enemy or, if the war has proved to be a burden, by taking some payment for their freedom. This taking of payment includes having an exchange of prisoners with the enemy whereby they return the prisoners they captured from your side in exchange for the prisoners you captured from their side. At many battles after the battle of Badr the Holy Prophet freed the captured soldiers without demanding anything in return.

This teaching, on how to treat the fighting men of the enemy whom Muslims capture, remained the same all during the Holy Prophet’s life. Close to the end of his life he received revelation in connection with fighting certain tribes of the idol-worshippers. The revelation said to Muslims: “Will you not fight a people who broke their oaths and aimed at the expulsion of the Messenger, and they attacked you first?” (9:13). So this was not a war of aggression launched by the Muslims. In regard to such people, this revelation also said: “And if anyone of the idolaters seek your protection, protect him till he hears the word of Allah, then convey him to his place of safety. This is because they are a people who do not know” (9:6). There is a classical commentary of the Quran by Ibn Jarir, written more than 1100 years ago. It explains the words “then convey him to his place of safety” as follows: “The meaning is to return him, after he has heard the word of Allah, if he refuses to accept Islam and is not admonished by the word of God that is read to him, to his place of safety, that is to

say, to a place where he is safe from you (O Prophet) and your followers, until he reaches his abode and joins his people, the idolaters.”

Muslims are not to take advantage of an enemy soldier who comes to them seeking their protection in order to learn about Islam. They are required to teach him the word of God. If he declines to embrace Islam after hearing the word of God, Muslims are to return him to his own people, the people who are at war with the Muslims, and that is called “his place of safety”. There can hardly be any greater tolerance than this.

بَارَكَ اللهُ لَنَا وَكَرَّمَنَا فِي الْقُرْآنِ الْعَظِيمِ، وَنَفَعَنَا وَإِيَّاكُمْ بِالآيَاتِ وَالذِّكْرِ الْحَكِيمِ، إِنَّهُ تَعَالَى جَوَادٌ كَرِيمٌ
مَلِكٌ بَرٌّ رَوْفٌ رَحِيمٌ-
