

Last verses of Surah al-Baqarah – 4

Friday Khutba by Dr Zahid Aziz, for Lahore Ahmadiyya UK, 25 March 2022

لَا يُكَلِّفُ اللَّهُ نَفْسًا إِلَّا وُسْعَهَا لَهَا مَا كَسَبَتْ وَعَلَيْهَا مَا اكْتَسَبَتْ رَبَّنَا لَا تُؤَاخِذْنَا إِنْ نَسِينَا
أَوْ أَخْطَأْنَا رَبَّنَا وَلَا تَحْمِلْ عَلَيْنَا إَصْرًا كَمَا حَمَلْتَهُ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِنَا رَبَّنَا وَلَا تُحَمِّلْنَا مَا لَا
طَاقَةَ لَنَا بِهِ وَاعْفُ عَنَّا وَارْحَمْنَا أَنْتَ مَوْلَانَا فَانصُرْنَا عَلَى الْقَوْمِ الْكَافِرِينَ ﴿٢٨٦﴾

“Allah does not impose on any soul a duty beyond its ability. To its benefit is what (good) it earns, and to its detriment is what (evil) it works. Our Lord, do not punish us if we forget or make a mistake. Our Lord, do not lay on us a burden as You did lay on those before us. Our Lord, do not impose on us (afflictions) which we have not the strength to bear. And pardon us! And grant us protection! And have mercy on us! You are our Patron, so grant us victory over the disbelieving people.” (The Quran, 2:286)

In the previous *khutbas* I have explained two of the three verses which constitute the last section of chapter 2 of the Quran. What I have just recited is the third verse, and chapter 2 ends with it. Chapter 2 covers many fundamental teachings of Islam and a person may wonder whether he or she is capable of living up to those teachings. So this verse begins by announcing the principle that Allah does not impose on any soul anything it is not capable of doing. He does not break people with burden. This principle is repeated twice more in the Quran in the words: “We do not impose on any soul a duty beyond its ability” (6:152, 7:42). It is also said in the Quran, addressing the Muslims that Allah “has not laid upon you any hardship in religion” (22:78). There is also a well-known hadith in the beginning of Sahih Bukhari in which the Holy Prophet said: “Religion is easy (إِنَّ الدِّينَ يُسْرٌ), and if anyone exerts himself too much in religion it overpowers him; so act aright and keep to the mean and be of good cheer and ask for (Divine) help in the morning and in the evening and during a part of the night” (Bukahri, hadith 39). In other words, if you over-do in observing the rules and regulations of religion meticulously, and in every minor details that you can think

of, you will just be overwhelmed by your observance of the religion. You will never be satisfied that you have done everything correctly.

As regards imposing only those duties on humans which are within their capabilities, we may make two points. Some religions hold that human beings are naturally sinful from birth. Other religions hold that human beings are born already burdened with sins committed during a past life. If that was true, then to tell people to avoid sins is to impose on them duties they are not capable of fulfilling. But the Quran teaches that people are capable of avoiding sins.

To get an idea of what is a soul's ability or capacity, let us consider the potentialities of the human body. Born a helpless baby, he can become a great athlete through training and practice. Similarly, the acts of worship and the acts of goodness to others, as prescribed by Islam, which may seem a burden at first, become possible to do, in fact become a source of pleasure and nourishment, if you persevere with them. The first sentence of this verse has also been taken to mean: Allah does not impose on any soul a duty *except to increase its ability*. What appeared to be a burden stops being a burden.

Next we are taught the principle that every soul, starting from a clean, neutral state, makes spiritual gains by working to do good, and makes spiritual losses by working to do evil. If this statement is translated literally it means: *For it, is what it earns, and against it, is what it earns*. It is a simple "for" and "against" statement. The word for "earns" shows that work and action is required. You cannot achieve any benefit or reward for your soul without doing work of the right kind. Similarly, you cannot cause detriment to your soul, and become subject to God's displeasure and punishment, unless you actually worked to do evil, but the neglect of doing good also leads to the committing of evil deeds. Only five verses before this, using the same word for "earn", this law is laid down: "And guard yourselves against a day in which you will be returned to Allah. Then every soul will be paid in full *what it has earned*, and they will not be wronged" (ch. 2, v. 281). This shows that deeds and actions are what matter, for both good and evil.

Then follow some prayers. First: “Our Lord, do not punish us if we forget or make a mistake.” Here Allah teaches us to regard our past sins as being due to forgetfulness or error of judgment. When a person is truly and sincerely repentant for past wrongdoing, he is often too harsh on himself, exaggerates his guilt in his mind and condemns himself too severely. There are incidents in which some person approached the Holy Prophet Muhammad to confess a sin which he regarded as too serious, but the Holy Prophet suggested to him that perhaps he was exaggerating its seriousness. So here Allah tells us to plead before Him that our sins were due to forgetfulness or mistake, and not due to a deliberate defiance of His commands.

Next is: “Our Lord, do not lay on us a burden as You did lay on those before us.” This could not have been a burden laid on them by Allah, since Allah has just said that he does not impose on anyone any obligation beyond their ability to bear it. This burden was laid by the people of the earlier religions themselves. The Jewish priests and religious jurists had made religion a burden for the people by requiring them to follow the most detailed rules and regulations in their acts of worship, which hardly anyone could meet in full. Jesus condemned those religious lawyers and said: “You load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers” (Luke, 11:46). Just think today how a Muslim is deeply worried by the rulings of the religious leaders that his prayer or his fast is invalidated by some small failure to follow a rule precisely and exactly. In the Christian faith as it later developed, religion was made a burden by its belief that to attain absolute purity a person must renounce all worldly desires and occupations and take to becoming a monk or nun, and that everyone else remained a sinner. This is a prayer that we may not follow in the footsteps of those who went before us and made the following of religion into a burden that people could not bear. So people turned away from religion, considering it to be impossible to act upon. Here we may note that it is the scholars of religion, whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim, who make religion into a burden, so it becomes difficult for people to understand its beliefs and to observe its practical duties. As opposed to this, the prophets sent by Allah, and then after them the holy men and saints sent among Muslims, make religion easy. Someone asked Hazrat

Mirza Ghulam Ahmad whether if he omitted doing a certain thing during prayer, or he may have asked, if he did a certain thing during prayer, will it make the prayer invalid? Hazrat Mirza sahib replied: Don't say, "will it make the prayer invalid? Just ask: Is that thing necessary to do during prayer." Hazrat Mirza sahib did not want any Muslim to think in terms of his prayers becoming invalid because that they not followed some rule or other because of lack of knowledge or forgetfulness or mistake.

Thirdly is the prayer: "Our Lord, do not impose on us (afflictions) which we have not the strength to bear." Having asked forgiveness for past sins, as we move forward to doing good deeds, and have to face suffering and trials in that path, may those trials not be so harsh that we cannot remain steadfast and instead we stumble!

The final three short prayers are: "And pardon us! And grant us protection! And have mercy on us!" These relate to making progress in the future. The first, "and pardon us", is asking for pardon for past *actual* wrongdoings, so that they do not hold us back from future progress. The second, "and grant us protection", is asking for protection in the face of *fear of the potential* of wrongdoing in the future. The third, "and have mercy on us", is that, being freed of past sins, and granted protection against apprehension of future ones, we may make progress in attaining to higher moral and spiritual stages, and actively do good deeds.

Lastly, comes the prayer: "so grant us victory over the disbelieving people". Neither this verse, nor its context, nor preceding verses, have any connection at all with fighting a war. Therefore, the victory here is *either* a spiritual victory of Islam over wrong creeds, but a victory by character and moral behaviour, *or* it means a victory over the forces of unbelief within ourselves and the "disbelieving people" is our own inner self.

If we take it to be a prayer for victory in battle over the disbelievers, then this prayer is even more remarkable. It does not contain any boasting, gloating or triumphalism over the enemy. It does not say: We are great and we will win. It teaches Muslims to remember their own sins and shortcomings and to pray for being saved from their own weaknesses, and then to pray for victory. This means that the Muslim

victory will be due to their humility and moral greatness over the enemy. In fact, the Quran informs us that whenever any prophet and his followers had to fight battles against their enemies, their prayer was: “Our Lord, grant us protection from our sins and our extravagance in our affair, and make firm our feet and grant us victory over the disbelieving people” (3:147). If the soldiers of an army are confessing their own sins, and asking for protection against their own extravagances in their matters, as they pray for victory over the enemy before the battle, they will not behave savagely or harshly towards their enemies and will feel humble while victorious. They will not be committing any war crimes.

May Allah enable us and the world to follow such teachings, ameen.

بَارِكْ اللَّهُ لَنَا وَكُمُ فِي الْقُرْآنِ الْعَظِيمِ، وَنَفَعْنَا وَإِيَّاكُمْ بِالآيَاتِ وَالذِّكْرِ الْحَكِيمِ، إِنَّهُ تَعَالَى جَوَادٌ كَرِيمٌ
مَلِكٌ بَرٌّ رَوْفٌ رَحِيمٌ-