

Lesson 8: Prophets & Human Guidance

1. The Purpose of Life

Did God create man as part of the chain of reproduction, to be a cog in a machine, and to be counted only as an automaton? Was man created only for his own enjoyment? Was he created only to amass as much wealth as possible through any means, direct or devious, so as to satisfy his material wants? Is there no greater idea behind His creation?

A large number of people regard only man's material aspect and neglect the other side of the coin, because they have not understood the profundity of the nature of man or because they have not correctly evaluated it. Men of great understanding have ascribed three dimensions to man:

1. Individual material dimension.
2. Social dimension.
3. Spiritual dimension.

Those who give importance only to the first dimension, overlook the profound character of man and have thus forgotten the other two important dimensions. Those who land importance to the first two dimensions, but neglect the third, only succeed in creating an environment devoid of any spiritual and moral values.

Arnold Toynbee, the famous British historian, in a long interview with *Life* magazine, said that man had submitted himself to materialism and that from that point of view we do not lack anything. However, he said, we have become bankrupt on the spiritual side of things. There is still time, he said, to address this problem and return to religion.

So a serious thinker goes further than the first two dimensions, and studies the purpose of life from all three dimensions. The third dimension gives man the power to evaluate his entrances and exits on the stage of personal and social dimensions. Man can reach perfection only by making his way through various dimensions—he must find this way, for it is the purpose of his creation.

2. Human Conscience

The question now arises of whether man's conscience alone can lead him through these dimensions. Let us begin to analyse this problem with description of human conscience itself.

Most people would agree that within the depth of man's nature, there is a power which can distinguish good from bad. This power is known as human conscience.

We do not deny that society has an influence on deciding what is good and evil: for example, dress, food and other similar things may be good at one time and place, and bad in others. Such values are the result of a particular society's view-point. However, there are certain values —good as well as evil— which are of universal nature; they are not confined to one time, place or society. For example, trustworthiness, helping the poor and the weak, working for humanity, and justice. These are considered as good values deeply rooted in the nature of man. Likewise, cheating, selfishness, and injustice are considered as bad at all times and in all places. Such universal values prove the existence of human conscience.

Can conscience alone guide us to perfection through the three dimensions of life? Conscience by itself cannot guide man completely—it needs training. Human conscience is like minerals in the earth which must be extracted and refined. Otherwise, it may be perverted and rendered useless under the influence of a corrupt social environment. Every person is familiar with the situations where he himself or a fellow human being has suppressed the voice of his conscience and given in to his evil desires.

3. Human Intelligence

From the early stages of history, man has been putting forward many ideas for the improvement of human society. But to this day, he has failed to present a plan which would satisfy all requirements of human nature. This is due to the finite nature of our knowledge about the material as well as the spiritual world.

Even when man has put forward a good idea, there is no guarantee that it will be implemented properly. On the individual level, for example, many intelligent and knowledgeable people know the harm of alcoholism, gambling and crime, but nevertheless they fall victims to such practices. On the social and collective level, we have the example of the United Nations Organization with over 150 member countries. But it is a weak world body whose resolutions generally remain merely in the minutes and only on paper. This shows clearly that human intelligence and knowledge are no guarantee for action.

4. The Divine Guidance

Human conscience and intelligence alone are not enough to guide us to the perfection in the three dimensions of life mentioned above. The Divine guidance is the answer: it comes from the unlimited

source of knowledge which has no room for error, and its implementation is comparatively more guaranteed because of the dire consequences in the hereafter from which no one can escape.

Conscience and intelligence, with confirmation from the Divine guidance, can help man to reach felicity without danger of corruption or diversion. Imam 'Ali (a.s.) said,

Then God sent His messengers and prophets to mankind to make them fulfill the pledges of His creation, to recall to them His bounties, to exhort them by preaching, to unveil before them the hidden virtues of wisdom and show them the signs of His Omnipotence.

The Need for Prophets & Messengers:

We can conclude from the above that:

- the aim of life is to achieve perfection in individual, social and spiritual dimensions;
- human conscience alone is not enough to guide man to perfection;
- human intelligence alone also does not satisfactorily guide man to formulate a plan to achieve the purpose of life;
- prophets and messengers have been sent to guide human beings to fulfill the purpose of life on this earth by nurturing their conscience and intellectual power, and also by providing a more stronger guarantor of implementing the Divine plan.

Through these four points, we discover that the prophets are necessary for the perfection of mankind, and that they were sent to inform human beings of what they require in the way of perfection so that they may tread the path of happiness. One cannot imagine that the Wise God could leave man without instructions and laws, or that He could leave them without guidance so that they may become victims of human desires and be prevented from reaching perfection.

The Distinctions of the Divine Guidance:

The Divine guidance is not concerned with one dimension of life only. God sent messengers and prophets to guide people in order to reach perfection in the material as well as the spiritual dimensions of life. The prophets and messengers have guided us in spiritual plane as well as in politics, in justice as well as in economy, in personal problems as well as in social responsibilities.

The Divine guidance is not restricted to one class of society; it encompasses all levels of people and upholds the rights of all. This belies the claim of those who think that religion was invented by the wealthy class, and that it was invented in feudal and capitalist societies to serve their interest. Moreover, history bears witness that the upper and wealthy classes did not participate in the movements led by the prophets, and that Divine religions always opposed the oppression of feudalists and capitalists.

5. Role of Miracles in Prophethood

When man realizes that he needs the guidance of prophets in order to achieve the purpose of life, he naturally feels affection for the prophets and messengers who work for his benefit and who sacrifice their lives for his advantage. This affection reaches a degree where people are willing to bear any hardship to advance the aims of the prophets; and they start preferring the commands of the prophets to their own desires.

This strong love and affection of the people for prophets of God, and the tremendous power and influences which the prophets gain has caused some ambitious persons to claim prophethood in order to advance their own interest.

So, if someone claims prophethood, one cannot believe in him without some investigation. For it is possible that he falsely proclaims prophethood, as many people have indeed done so up to the present day. In order to find out if someone is a genuine prophet, the latter must bring some evidence so that people can be sure of him and accept his claim. Thus the real prophets can be distinguished from the pretenders. This evidence is known as miracles.

What are Miracles?

Miracles (*mu`jizah*) are what the prophets did according to the will of God in order to prove the truth of their claim of prophethood, and which others are unable to copy.

This purpose of miracles makes it very clear as to why at times the Prophet did not accede to demands for more miracles. Some people, who had already seen miracles, demanded various things from the prophets as miracles not with the desire to follow the truth but to find an excuse for not believing. They even asked for things that were logically impossible. However, since the prophets brought enough miracles, they did not accede to such demands. Miracles are done according to the will of God and in situations where they are necessary.

The Qur^{ān} says, ***“The signs are only with God, and I am only a plain warner.” (29:50) It is not for any Messenger to bring a sign, except by God's permission. (40:78)***

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This lesson is based on the following: Dar Rah-e Haq Board, *The Roots of Religion*, Qum 1982. It has been compiled and edited extensively to suit the purpose of this course by S.M. Rizvi.

Question Paper on Lesson 8

Question 1: [20 points]

Tick the appropriate box:

- (a) The purpose of our creation is to serve humanity.
- (b) Social dimension of our life is related to our attitude towards other members of the society.
- (c) The purpose of our creation is to achieve perfection by observing the limits imposed by our spiritual dimension upon our material and social dimensions.
- (d) Human conscience is sufficient to guide human beings to perfection.
- (e) Perfection means submitting to the will of God to the extent that the individual's will merges with God's will.
- (f) Conscience is a power within every human being that identifies the good and the evil.
- (g) Prophets must perform miracles when demanded to prove their truthfulness.
- (h) Human intelligence and knowledge can guarantee the implementation of good ideas.
- (i) Prophets were sent to train human conscience and intelligence towards perfection.
- (j) A miracle that is beyond human capacity distinguishes a real prophet from an imposter.

Question 2: [10 points]

What is the function of human conscience? Explain, with an example, how conscience identifies universal good and evil values.

Question 3: [10 points]

Describe at least two reasons why Divine guidance is needed and why prophets and messengers were sent.

Question 4: [10 points]

How would you distinguish a real prophet from an imposter? What kind of miracle would you expect from a real prophet?

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