

## Lesson 40: The Third Imam (Husayn bin ‘Alī)

**Name:** *Husayn.*

**Agnomen:** *Abu ‘Abdillah.*

**Title:** *Sayyidu ‘sh-Shuhadā.*

**Father:** *‘Ali bin Abi Tālib.*

**Mother:** *Fātimah, daughter of the Prophet.*

**Birth:** *3 Sha‘bān 4 A.H. in Medina.*

**Death:** *10 Muharram 61 A.H. in Karbala, Iraq.*

### 1. Birth & Early Life

Imam Husayn (Sayyidu ‘sh-Shuhadā, “the lord among martyrs”), the second child of ‘Alī and Fātimah, was born in the year 4 A.H.; and after the martyrdom of his brother, Imam Hasan al-Mujtaba, became Imam through Divine command and his brother’s will.

Imam Husayn was always with his brother during the life of the Prophet and Imam ‘Alī; he shared in the most important events of that era. He stood by his brother during the difficult times of the latter’s imamat. His own imamat was for a period of ten years, all but the last six months coinciding with the caliphate of Mu‘awiyah.

### 2. Mu‘awiyah’s Rule

Imam Husayn lived under the most difficult outward conditions of suppression and persecution. This was due to the fact that, first of all, religious laws and regulations had lost much of their weight and credit, and the edicts of the Umayyad government had gained complete authority and power. Secondly, Mu‘awiyah and his aides made use of every possible means to put aside and move out of the way the Ahlul Bayt of the Prophet and the Shi‘ah, and thus obliterate the name of ‘Alī and his family. And above all, Mu‘awiyah wanted to strengthen the basis of the caliphate of his son, Yazid, who because of his lack of principles and scruples was opposed by a large group of Muslims. Therefore, in order to quell all opposition, Mu‘awiyah had undertaken newer and more severe measures. By force and necessity Imam

Husayn had to endure these days and to tolerate every kind of mental and spiritual agony and affliction from Mu'awiyah and his aides—until in the middle of the year 60 A.H. Mu'awiyah died and his son Yazid took his place.

### 3. Yazid's demand for Bay'ah

Paying allegiance (*bay'ah*) was an old Arab practice which was carried out in important matters such as that of kingship and governorship. Those who were ruled, and especially the well known among them, would give their hand in allegiance, agreement and obedience to their king or prince and in this way would show their support for his actions. Disagreement after allegiance was considered as disgrace and dishonor for the people and, like breaking an agreement after having signed it officially, it was considered as a definite crime. Following the example of the Holy Prophet, people believed that allegiance, when given by free will and not through force, carried authority and weight.

Mu'awiyah had asked the wellknown among the people to give their allegiance to Yazid, but had not imposed this request upon Imam Husayn. He had especially told Yazid in his last will that if Husayn refused to pay allegiance he should pass over it in silence and overlook the matter, for he had understood correctly the disastrous consequences which would follow if the issue were to be pressed. But because of his egoism and recklessness, Yazid neglected his father's advice and immediately after the death of his father ordered the governor of Medina either to force a pledge of allegiance from Imam Husayn or send his head to Damascus.

After the governor of Medina informed Imam Husayn of this demand, the Imam refused to accept the demand and overnight started with his family toward Mecca. He sought refuge in the sanctuary of God which in Islam is the official place of refuge and security. This event occurred toward the end of the month of Rajab and the beginning of Sha'ban of 60 A.H. For nearly four months Imam Husayn stayed in Mecca in refuge. This news spread throughout the Islamic world. On the one hand many people who were tired of the inequities of Mu'awiyah's rule and even more dissatisfied when Yazid became caliph, corresponded with Imam Husayn and expressed their sympathy for him. On the other hand a flood of letters began to flow, especially from Iraq and particularly the city of Kufa, inviting the Imam to go to Iraq and accept the leadership of the populace there with the aim of beginning an uprising to overcome injustice and inequity. Naturally such a situation was dangerous for Yazid.

The stay of Imam Husayn in Mecca continued until the season for pilgrimage when Muslims from all over the world poured in groups into Mecca in order to perform the rites of the hajj. The Imam discovered that some of the followers of Yazid had entered Mecca as pilgrims with the mission to kill the Imam during the rites of hajj with the arms they carried under their special pilgrimage dress (*ihram*).

The Imam shortened the pilgrimage rites and decided to leave. Amidst the vast crowd of people he stood up and in a short speech announced that he was setting out for Iraq. In this short speech he also declared that he would be martyred and asked Muslims to help him in attaining the goal he had in view

and to offer their lives in the path of God. On the next day he set out with his family and a group of his companions for Iraq.

Imam Husayn was determined not to give his allegiance to Yazid and knew full well that he would be killed. He was aware that his death was inevitable in the face of the awesome military power of the Umayyads, supported as it was by corruption in certain sectors, spiritual decline, and lack of will power among the people, especially in Iraq. Some of the outstanding people of Mecca stood in the way of Imam Husayn and warned him of the danger of the move he was making. But he answered that he refused to pay allegiance and give his approval to a government of injustice and tyranny. He added that he knew that wherever he turned or went he would be killed. He would leave in order to preserve the respect for the house of God and not allow this respect to be destroyed by having his blood spilled there.

## **4. Towards Karbala**

While on the way to Kufa and still a few days' journey away from the city, he received news that the agent of Yazid in Kufa had put to death the representative of the Imam in that city and also one of the Imam's determined supporters who was a wellknown man in Kufa. After their death, their feet had been tied and they had been dragged through the streets. The city and its surroundings were placed under strict observation and countless soldiers of the enemy were awaiting him. There was no way open to him but to march ahead and to face death. It was here that the Imam expressed his definitive determination to go ahead and be martyred; and so he continued on his journey.

Approximately seventy kilometers from Kufa, in a desert named Karbala, the Imam and his entourage were surrounded by the army of Yazid. For eight days they stayed in this spot during which the circle narrowed and the number of the enemy's army increased. Finally the Imam, with his household and a small number of companions were encircled by an army of thirty thousand soldiers. During these days the Imam fortified his position and made a final selection of his companions. At night he called his companions and during a short speech stated that there was nothing ahead but death and martyrdom. He added that since the enemy was concerned only with his person he would free them from all obligations so that anyone who wished could escape in the darkness of the night and save his life. Then he ordered the light to be turned out and most of those who had joined him for their own advantage, dispersed. Only a handful of those who loved the truth and the Banu Hashim remained.

Once again the Imam assembled those who were left and put them to a test. He addressed his companions and Hashimite relatives, saying again that the enemy was concerned only with his person. Each could benefit from the darkness of the night and escape the danger. But this time the faithful companions of the Imam answered each in his own way that they would not deviate for a moment from the path of truth of which the Imam was the leader and would never leave him alone. They said they would defend his household to the last drop of their blood and as long as they could carry a sword.

On the ninth day of the month the last challenge to choose between "allegiance or war" was made by the

enemy to the Imam. The Imam asked for a delay in order to worship overnight and became determined to enter battle on the next day.

On the tenth day of Muharram of the year 61/680 the Imam lined up before the enemy with his small band of followers, less than ninety persons consisting of his companions, thirty some members of the army of the enemy that joined him during the night and day of war, and his Hashimite family of children, brothers, nephews, and cousins. That day they fought from morning until their final breath, and the Imam, the young Hashimites and the companions were all martyred. Among those killed were two children of Imam Hasan, who were only thirteen and eleven years old; and a five-year-old child and a suckling baby of Imam Husayn.

The army of the enemy, after ending the war, plundered the family of the Imam and burned his tents. They decapitated the bodies of the martyrs, denuded them and left them on the ground without burial. Then they moved the members of the family, all of whom were helpless women and girls, along the heads of the martyrs, to Kufa. Among the prisoners there were three male members: a twenty-two year old son of Imam Husayn who was very ill and unable to move, namely 'Alī bin Husayn, the fourth Imam; his four year old son, Muhammad ibn 'Alī, who became the fifth Imam. The enemy took the prisoners to Kufa and from there to Damascus before Yazid.

## 5. The Consequences of Karbala

The event of Karbala, the capture of the women and children of the Ahlu 'l-bayt of the Prophet, their being taken as prisoners from town to town and the speeches made by the daughter of 'Alī, Zaynab, and the fourth Imam who were among the prisoners, disgraced the Umayyads. Such abuse of the family of the Prophet annulled the propaganda which Mu'awiyah had carried out for years. The matter reached such proportions that Yazid was compelled to publicly disown and condemn the actions of his agents. The event of Karbala was a major factor in the overthrow of Ummayyad rule although its effect was delayed. It also strengthened the roots of Shi'ism. Among its immediate results were the revolts and rebellions combined with bloody wars which continued for twelve years. Among those who were instrumental in the death of the Imam not one was able to escape revenge and punishment.

Anyone who studies closely the history of the life of Imam Husayn and Yazid and the conditions that prevailed at that time, and analyzes this chapter of Islamic history, will have no doubt that in those circumstances there was no choice before Imam Husayn but to be killed. Swearing allegiance to Yazid would have meant publicly showing contempt for Islam, something which was not possible for the Imam, for Yazid not only showed no respect for Islam and its injunctions but also made a public demonstration of impudently treading under foot its basis and its laws. Those before him, even if they opposed religious injunctions, always did so in the guise of religion, and at least formally respected religion. They took pride in being companions of the Holy Prophet and the other religious figures in whom people believed. From this it can be concluded that the claim of some interpreters of these events is false when

they say that the two brothers, Hasan and Husayn, had two different tastes and that one chose the way of peace and the other the way of war, so that one brother made peace with Mu'awiyah although he had an army of forty thousand while the other went to war against Yazid with an army of less than a hundred persons. For we see that this same Imam Husayn, who refused to pay allegiance to Yazid for one day, lived for ten years under the rule of Mu'awiyah, in the same manner as his brother who also had endured for ten years under Mu'awiyah, without opposing him.

It must be said in truth that if Imam Hasan or Imam Husayn had fought Mu'awiyah they would have been killed without there being the least benefit for Islam. Their deaths would have had no effect before the righteous-appearing policy of Mu'awiyah, a competent politician who emphasized his being a companion of the Holy Prophet, the "scribe of the revelation," and "uncle of the faithful" and who used every stratagem possible to preserve a religious guise for his rule. Moreover, with his ability to set the stage to accomplish his desires he could have had them killed by their own people and then assumed a state of mourning and sought to revenge their blood, just as he sought to give the impression that he was avenging the killing of the third caliph.

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This lesson has been adopted with changes from 'Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn at-Tabataba'i, *Shi'a Islam*, Qum. For references, see the original source.

## Question Paper on Lesson 40

Question 1: [20 points]

True or False:

- (a) All but the last six months of Imam Husayn's imamat coincided with the caliphate of Mu'awiyah.
- (b) Sayyidu 'sh-Shuhadā' means the lord of the martyrs.
- (c) Yazid came to power in the middle of 61 A.H.
- (d) The people of Cairo invited Imam Husayn to go to Egypt.
- (e) Imam Husayn was fully aware that he would be killed if he did not pledge allegiance to Yazid.
- (f) The event of Karbala was a major factor in the overthrow of the Umayyad rule.
- (g) Hasan and Husayn had two different tastes because one chose peace and the other war.
- (h) Yazidi forces respected the sanctity of the Ka`bah.
- (i) Imam Hasan's two children, aged 13 and 11, were martyred in Karbala.

