

O Allah, Free Every Captive

اللَّهُمَّ فَكِّ كُلَّ أَسِيرٍ

Meaning of Asīr

The word *Asīr* originates from *al-asr*, which means:

الشَّدُّ بِالْقَيْدِ...

“Fastening with a bond...”

Rāghib, the famous lexicographer, in his Qur’anic dictionary *al-Mufradāt*¹ says:

One who was tied by fetters was known to be *asīr*; thereafter, the word was intended for every entity that is seized and bound, even if it was not fettered by anything... for example:

أَنَا أَسِيرٌ نِعْمَتِكَ.

“I am bound to your favor.”

From the abovementioned definition, the comprehensiveness of the concept of the word ‘*asīr*’ becomes clear. The traditions of the Holy Prophet (s) and his immaculate progeny also reveal this truth. Following are some examples:

a. Imām Abu’l Hasan al-Thāliṭh² (‘Alī al-Naqī (as)) is reported to have said:

وَالْجَاهِلُ أَسِيرٌ لِسَانِهِ.

The ignorant one is a captive of his tongue.

b. In a supplication³ from Y^ʿsha' bin N^ʿn (as) we find the following expression:

إِلَّهِ: أَنْتَ مَلِكُ الْعَطَايَا، وَأَنَا أَسِيرُ الْخَطَايَا.

“O God, You are the Sovereign of bestowals while I am a captive of my faults.”

c. In one *Ziy^ʿrah* of *Arba^ʿn4* (40th of Im^ʿm al-Husayn (as)) said to be taught by Im^ʿm al-S^ʿdiq (as), we address Im^ʿm al-Husayn (as) as follows:

السَّلَامُ عَلَى أَسِيرِ الْكُرْبَاتِ.

“Peace be upon the captive of deep sorrows.”

d. In his well known epistle⁵ to M^ʿlik al-Ashtar, Im^ʿm ‘Al^ʿ (as) says:

...فَإِنَّ هَذَا الدِّينَ قَدْ كَانَ أَسِيرًا فِي أَيْدِي الْأَشْرَارِ؛ يُعْمَلُ فِيهِ بِالْهَوَى، وَتُطَلَّبُ بِهِ
الدُّنْيَا...

“...for surely this Religion was a captive in the hands of the evil folk, for under its pretext they would follow their base inclinations and seek worldly gains...”

e. In *Nahju’l Bal^ʿgha*⁶, while explaining the characteristics of the angels, Im^ʿm ‘Al^ʿ (as) is reported to have said:

...فَهُمْ أَسْرَاءُ إِيْمَانٍ...

“...for they are captives of faith...”

The word ‘as^ʿr’ likewise has a relative connotation: whereas a group of people may be captives of their

vain inclinations but suffer no physical imprisonment, while another group may enjoy utter spiritual freedom, but be in the state of physical captivity.

The Apparent Extension of Asr

Certainly, this verse is one of the most painful verses of the supplication. Many innocent human beings throughout the world today suffer imprisonment. While a group among them are victims of oppression and breach of man-made law, there is a class whose very innocence has brought them behind bars.

Being behind bars is only one part of the story. The oppression and torture that these innocent captives have to bear is terrible and inexpressible. Such kind of treatment stems from the kind of cruelty possessed by the wardens of the different prisons, who receive the power of discretion from their masters, who in turn possess authority through their respective governments. The following statement from Amnesty International⁷ speaks of this reality:

Torture does not happen in a vacuum. The social and political context, and the supply of tools and techniques for inflicting pain rely on a failure of political will. If the governments of the world had the political will to stop torture they could do so.

In order to appreciate the gravity of the matter, one can refer to the relevant texts available on prison torture in the Internet from human rights organizations such as Human Rights Watch [hrw.org] and the like. Due to the brevity of this commentary, however, we would only mention a few examples of the situation prevailing on the prisons of the world:

Prisoners Suffering Torture

1. MEN, WOMEN & CHILDREN: "... but torture continues and is not confined to military dictatorships or authoritarian regimes; torture is inflicted in democratic states too. It is also clear that victims of torture are criminal suspects as well as political prisoners, the disadvantaged as well as the dissident, people targeted because of their identity as well as their beliefs. They are women as well as men, children as well as adults."⁸

2. WOMEN: "Amnesty International (AI) has documented countless cases of women being tortured in custody. In its coverage of armed conflicts, it has reported the systematic use of sexual violence as a weapon of war."⁹

3. CHILDREN: "The fact that children could suffer torture at all should come as a terrible shock. Their dependency and vulnerability should render them immune from the atrocities adults inflict on one another. Their very innocence should put them beyond reach.

Yet violence against children is endemic: children are tortured by the police or security forces...¹⁰

Methods of Torture

The survey showed that beating is by far the most common method of torture and ill-treatment by state agents today, reported in over 150 countries. People are beaten with fists, sticks, gun-butts, makeshift whips, iron pipes, baseball bats, electric flex. Victims suffer bruises, internal bleeding, broken bones, lost teeth, ruptured organs and some die.

Rape and sexual abuse of prisoners is also widespread. Other common methods of torture and ill-treatment include electric shocks (reported in more than 40 countries), suspension of the body (more than 40 countries), beating on the soles of the feet (more than 30 countries), suffocation (more than 30 countries), mock execution or death threat (more than 50 countries) and prolonged solitary confinement (more than 50 countries).

Other methods include submersion in water, stubbing of cigarettes on the body, being tied to the back of a car and being dragged behind it, sleep deprivation and sensory deprivation...

The most common forms of judicial corporal punishment include amputation and flogging. Some forms such as amputation and branding are deliberately designed to permanently mutilate the human body. However, all of these punishments can cause a range of long-term or permanent injuries.¹¹

The attitude of Islamic law, however, whose source is the Creator of human being himself, is greatly different. Browsing through the history of Islamic leadership from the time of the Holy Prophet (s) until now, we come to understand the verity of this contention. Following are examples:

1. The first war that the Muslims valiantly fought was Badr. Overwhelming the disbelievers, the Muslims apprehended many nonbelievers and took them as captives. However, the Prophet (s) considered the 'captives' as human beings and believed that they too had certain rights. No one was allowed to maltreat them. Instead ways of letting them free were suggested to them. Accordingly many were set free with a ransom fee. History tells us that¹²:

وَكَانَ يُفَادِي بِهِمْ عَلَى قَدْرِ أَمْوَالِهِمْ.

“And the Prophet (s) took a ransom fee from them according to their financial state.”

Some of the captives had no wealth, but knew the art of writing. The Prophet (s) would tell each of them to teach ten men from Medina as a ransom.

2. It is reported¹³ that after Ibn Muljim struck the fatal blow on Imam 'Alī (as), the Imam addressing his two sons (as), said:

إِحْبِسُوا هَذَا الْأَسِيرَ وَأَطْعِمُوهُ وَاسْقُوهُ وَأَحْسِنُوا إِسَارَهُ.

“Imprison this captive, and give him food and drink, and deal with him in a good way in his captivity.”

And in another tradition¹⁴ he says the following about Ibn Muljim:

إِنَّهُ أَسِيرٌ؛ فَأَحْسِنُوا نُزْلَهُ، وَأَكْرِمُوا مَثْوَاهُ. فَإِنْ بَقَيْتُ، قَتَلْتُ أَوْ عَفَوْتُ. وَإِنْ مِتُّ،
فَأَقْتُلُوهُ قَتْلَتِي، وَلَا تَعْتَدُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَا يُحِبُّ الْمُعْتَدِينَ ﴿٢﴾

“Indeed he is a captive; therefore give him good food and a nice place; then if I were to remain alive I would either kill him or forgive him; and if I die, then kill him the way he struck me [with one blow] and do not transgress the limits, for verily Allah does not love those who transgress the limits.” [2: 190]

This practical encounter of Imam ‘Alī (as) in those sensitive moments exemplifies the outlook of the teachings of Islam. Grudge and revenge does not remain in the heart of ‘Alī (as), for every element of his body is the instrument of Allah (swt).

3. If one were to study carefully the rights of prisoners according to Islam, he would realize how far apart man made law is from Divine law. Shaykh Najm al-Dīn Tabasī in his *Mawārid al-Sijj* [Occasions of Prison] enumerates some of the rights of prisoners as follows: 15

“...believing prisoners can attend Friday and ‘īd Prayers under surveillance, and then return immediately to their cells, prisoners may meet with their near ones and are free to receive food and clothing from them too, prisoners should be imprisoned in a healthy environment and allowed to go out under surveillance during a particular time, one who is ill should not be imprisoned, the support that the prisoner gives to his family, must be drawn from the public treasury (*baytu’l mawā’id*) of the Muslims, etc...”

The above however should not lead one to believe that prisoners should be left without interrogation or motivation to repent. The prisoner is dealt according to the crime that he or she has committed. Political prisoners are also dealt with in a different way. However, the prisoner is not treated like an animal or tortured or raped or even psychologically threatened or intimidated. These are against the dictates of the Islamic Shar‘ah. Rather, they are dealt with as human beings and no one is allowed to transgress the limits laid by Almighty Allah. Hence, should we hear or observe inhuman behavior from the prison wardens of a so-called Islamic state, we must not be led to think that that is what Islam believes. There is a vast difference between the criteria being ‘Islam’ and the criteria being ‘the deed of a non-practising Muslim ruler.

Look at the following traditions carefully:

Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq (as) is reported to have said:

إِنَّ عَلِيًّا (ع) كَانَ يُطْعِمُ مَنْ خُلِدَ فِي السِّجْنِ مِنْ بَيْتِ مَالِ الْمُسْلِمِينَ.

“Surely, ‘Ali (as) would feed the captive who served life imprisonment from the treasury of the Muslims.”

Imam ‘Ali (as) 16 is reported to have said:

إِطْعَامُ الْأَسِيرِ وَالْإِحْسَانُ إِلَيْهِ حَقٌّ وَاجِبٌ، وَإِنْ قَتَلْتَهُ مِنَ الْغَدِ.

“Feeding the captive and doing good to him, is a compulsory right, even if you were to kill him [in accordance with the penal laws of Islam] the following day.”

Hawā al-Nafs: One of the Most Destructive Kinds of Captivity

1. The Holy Qur'an [Sūrat al-Qasas 28:50] says:

وَمَنْ أَضَلُّ مِمَّنِ اتَّبَعَ هَوَاهُ بِغَيْرِ هُدًى مِنَ اللَّهِ؟

“...and who is more stray than he who follows his low desires without any guidance from Allah?”

2. Imam ‘Ali (as) is reported¹⁷ to have said:

كَمْ مِنْ عَقْلٍ أَسِيرٍ عِنْدَ هَوَىِّ أَمِيرٍ.

“How great a number are there intellects under the captivity of dominant inclinations!”

3. Imam ‘Ali (as) is reported¹⁸ to have said:

إِنَّ أَخُوفَ مَا أَخَافُ عَلَيْكُمْ اثْنَتَانِ: اتِّبَاعُ الْهَوَىِّ وَطُولُ الْأَمَلِ.

“Surely there are two things that I fear most from you: following your vain inclinations and having forlorn

hopes.”

One of the most destructive extensions of captivity is the captivity of the soul by base inclinations. In the language of the Qur’ān, it is called “*al-hawā*”. It is a great hurdle on our way to God. Nearly every world problem today stems from this very element of destruction. Rather, the entire history of creation is replete with examples that show how destructive this kind of captivity has been: due to this very captivity, Satan did not prostrate before Adam although he was commanded to do so, Cain was led to kill Abel despite the latter being his own brother, Noah’s (as) son left his father although the latter was a prophet of Allāh (swt), and the list goes on. Study the causes of the different wars and conflicts of the past and present and you would realize that the root cause is this very kind of captivity. When a president suffers such captivity, he kills many innocent civilians; when a minister of finance is shackled by such captivity, he embezzles millions of dollars; when an irreligious and aimless human being suffers such captivity, he engages in different kinds of evils. In short, whosoever enjoys more power affects mischief accordingly.

Freedom from such captivity, however, is in our hands. Almighty Allāh has given us the keys to the door of the prison and advised us to leave, but the attraction of the amenities of the prison, it seems, has kept us from moving.

Hawā al-Nafs Lowers One to the Example of a Dog!

The Holy Qur’ān [chapter 7, verse no. 175–176] says:

وَإِتْلُ عَلَيْهِمْ نَبَأَ الَّذِي آتَيْنَاهُ آيَاتِنَا فَانْسَلَخَ مِنْهَا فَاتَّبَعَهُ الشَّيْطَانُ فَكَانَ مِنَ
الْغَاوِينَ. وَلَوْ شِئْنَا لَرَفَعْنَاهُ بِهَا وَلَكِنَّهُ أَخْلَدَ إِلَى الْأَرْضِ وَاتَّبَعَ هَوَاهُ فَمَثَلُهُ كَمَثَلِ
الْكَلْبِ إِنْ تَحَمَلَ عَلَيْهِ يَلْهَثُ أَوْ تَتْرُكُهُ يَلْهَثُ

“Relate to them the story of the man to whom We sent Our Signs, but he passed them by: so Satan followed him up, and he went astray. If it had been Our Will, We should have elevated him with Our Signs; but he inclined to the earth, and followed his own vain desires. His similitude is that of a dog: if you attack him, he lolls out his tongue, or if you leave him alone, he (still) lolls out his tongue.”

This verse, according to a tradition quoted by ‘Allāmah Tabṭabāṭabā’ī in his *al-Mizān* and narrated by *Tafsīr al-Burhān*, talks about Bal‘am bin Bā‘ūr. He was a man who lived during the time of Prophet Musa (as) and enjoyed a high spiritual state, for according to a tradition reported from Imām al-Ridā (as) he knew the *ism al-a‘zam* (the Great Name of Allāh). Later, due to his base inclinations, he became a supporter of Fir‘awn and became spiritually ignoble. Imām al-Ridā (as) is reported to have said¹⁹: “Surely Bal‘am bin Bā‘ūr was given the Great Name of God and whenever he would pray with the

same, his supplication would be accepted. Then he inclined towards Fir‘awn. Once when Fir‘awn was after Prophet Mūsā (as) and his followers, he met Bal‘am and said: ‘Pray to Allāh to throw Mūsā (as) and his followers into our trap.’ Subsequently, he climbed his donkey to set out for searching Mūsā (as) and his companions. The donkey, however, did not move. So he began hitting it. Thereafter Allāh (the Invincible and Exalted) enabled it to speak and [addressing Bal‘am] it said: Woe unto you! For what are you hitting me? Do you want me to accompany you so that you pray against Prophet Mūsā (as), the Prophet of Allāh and the believing nation? Bal‘am [paid no attention] and continued hitting the donkey until he killed the animal. Thereupon Bal‘am forgot the great Name of God.”

This verse is a lesson for all those learned folk who have attained a degree of piety. If one is not steadfast in his war against his base soul, there is a risk of him falling into a state of degradation and spiritual destruction. We seek refuge in the All-Merciful Lord from every kind of ignominy that separates us from His Neighborhood.

Verse no. 176 considers the example of Bal‘am as the example of a dog:

فَمَثَلُهُ كَمَثَلِ الْكَلْبِ إِنْ تَحْمِلَ عَلَيْهِ يَلْهَثُ أَوْ تَتْرُكُهُ يَلْهَثُ ذَلِكَ مَثَلُ الْقَوْمِ الَّذِينَ كَذَبُوا بِآيَاتِنَا فَاقْصُصِ الْقَصَصَ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

“So his parable is as the parable of a dog; if you attack him, he lolls out his tongue; and if you leave him alone he lolls out his tongue; this is a parable of those who reject our signs; therefore relate the narrative so that they may reflect.”

Preference of External Imprisonment Over Internal Imprisonment

The Qur‘ān [12:33] quotes Prophet Yūsuf’s (as) prayer:

قَالَ رَبِّ السِّجْنُ أَحَبُّ إِلَيَّ مِمَّا يَدْعُونَنِي إِلَيْهِ

“O My Lord, prison is dearer to me than that unto which they invite me...”

The story of Prophet Yūsuf (as) in the Holy Qur‘ān is a lesson for every human being who aspires to live a life of freedom and prosperity. After Zulaykha provoked Yūsuf (as) but was met with failure, she tried to accuse him of seducing her. Her accusation was proven to be false by a witness. The news of this event spread in the town and Zulaykha was accused of trying to provoke Yūsuf who was ‘the embodiment of chastity.’ In order to extinguish the fire of the situation, she invited those women who accused her and giving each a citrus fruit and a knife, told them to cut the fruit when Yūsuf passed by.

Instead of cutting the fruit they wounded their hands. They were captivated by the physical beauty of Y^{usuf} (as).

The Holy Qur'^{an} says:

1. The news spread and the women began talking:

﴿ وَقَالَ نِسْوَةٌ فِي الْمَدِينَةِ امْرَأَتُ الْعَزِيزِ تُرَاوِدُ فَتَاهَا عَنْ نَفْسِهِ قَدْ شَغَفَهَا حُبًّا إِنَّا لَنَرَاهَا فِي ضَلَالٍ مُّبِينٍ ﴾

“Certain women that were in the city said, ‘The Governor’s wife seeks to seduce her slave from his (pure) self; surely he has affected her deeply with love; verily we see her in manifest error.’”

[S^{urat} Y^{usuf} – 12:30]

Whereas at the onset the women reckon Zulaykha to be in manifest error, they themselves invite Y^{usuf} (as) to have a relationship with them later.

2. Zulaykha invites the women:

﴿ فَلَمَّا سَمِعَتْ بِمَكْرِهِنَّ أَرْسَلَتْ إِلَيْهِنَّ وَأَعْتَدَتْ لَهُنَّ مُتَّكًا وَأَتَتْ كُلَّ وَاحِدَةٍ مِّنْهُنَّ سَكِينًا وَقَالَتْ أُخْرِجْ عَلَيْهِنَّ فَلَمَّا رَأَيْنَهُ أَكْبَرْنَهُ وَقَطَّعْنَ أَيْدِيَهُنَّ وَقُلْنَ حَاشَ لِلَّهِ مَا هَذَا بَشَرًا إِنْ هَذَا إِلَّا مَلَكٌ كَرِيمٌ ﴾

“When she heard of their scheming talk, she sent for them, and prepared for them a repast and gave each of them a knife and said [to Y^{usuf}]: ‘Come out unto them.’ And when they saw him they extolled him; and [in their amazement] cut their hands saying: H^{ash} lilL^{ah}! (Far from All^{ah} is every imperfection!) This is no mortal; this is none but a noble angel.’” [S^{urat} Y^{usuf} – 12:31]

3. Zulaykha admits that they were right, and threatens Y^{usuf} with Imprisonment:

﴿ قَالَتْ فَذَلِكُنَّ الَّذِي لُمْتُنَّنِي فِيهِ وَلَقَدْ رَاوَدتُّهُ عَنْ نَفْسِهِ فَاسْتَعْصَمَ وَلَئِن لَّمْ يَفْعَلْ مَا أَمُرُّهُ لَيُسْجَنَنَّ وَلَيَكُونًا مِنَ الصَّاغِرِينَ ﴾

“She said: This is he about whom you blamed me; and indeed I sought to seduce him from his [pure] self, but he did firmly abstain himself guiltless; and now if he does not do what I command

him, he shall certainly be imprisoned, and he shall certainly be of those brought low!” [Ṣrat Ỵsuf – 12:32]

Despite accusing Ỵsuf (as) at the onset of trying to seduce her, she clearly admits that she was the one who tried to provoke him. Furthermore, she says that he would either have to surrender to her desire or fall in prison [and thus also be branded as the one in fault]

4. The women would like to have relationship with Ỵsuf (as)

قَالَ رَبِّ السِّجْنُ أَحَبُّ إِلَيَّ مِمَّا يَدْعُونَنِي إِلَيْهِ وَإِلَّا تَصْرِفْ عَنِّي كَيْدَهُنَّ أَصْبُ إِلَيْهِنَّ وَأَكُنْ مِنَ الْجَاهِلِينَ

“He said, ‘O My Lord, prison is dearer to me than that unto which they invite me (yad‘anan ilayhi); and if you do not avert from me their conspiracy I would be inclined to them and become of the ignorant ones.” [Ṣrat Ỵsuf – 12:33]

In a lengthy tradition narrated²⁰ by Aḅ Hamẓ al-Thuṃ, Iṃm Zayn al-‘Abiḍn (as) is reported to have said that after leaving the gathering that Zulaykha had organized, each one of the women sent a message to Yusuf secretly [in the absence of Zulaykḥ] and asked him that they would like to meet him. But Prophet Ỵsuf (as) refused, and prayed to Alḷh:

وَإِلَّا تَصْرِفْ عَنِّي كَيْدَهُنَّ أَصْبُ إِلَيْهِنَّ وَأَكُنْ مِنَ الْجَاهِلِينَ

“If You do not ward off their scheme, I would be inclined to them and be of the ignorant ones.”

According to the commentators of the Qur‘ān, the word *yad‘anan ilayhi* (“they call me to”) which is in the imperfect tense (*mud‘iri*) indicates that they were persistently inviting Ỵsuf (as) towards themselves. However, Prophet Ỵsuf (as) cried:

قَالَ رَبِّ السِّجْنُ أَحَبُّ إِلَيَّ مِمَّا يَدْعُونَنِي إِلَيْهِ وَإِلَّا تَصْرِفْ عَنِّي كَيْدَهُنَّ أَصْبُ إِلَيْهِنَّ وَأَكُنْ مِنَ الْجَاهِلِينَ

“O My Lord, prison is dearer to me than that unto which they invite me; and if you do not avert from me their conspiracy I would be inclined to them and be of the ignorant ones.” [Ṣrat Ỵsuf–12:33]

This verse clearly shows that Prophet Yusuf (as) had the sexual desire, and was aware of the danger he was entrapped in. He therefore beseeched Almighty Allah to protect him from what they conspired. He preferred to be imprisoned and accepted humiliation [of being attributed falsely to be at fault] but did not dare to disobey his Lord. And the All-merciful Lord responded:

﴿ فَاسْتَجَابَ لَهُ رَبُّهُ فَصَرَفَ عَنْهُمْ كَيْدَهُنَّ إِنَّهُ هُوَ السَّمِيعُ الْعَلِيمُ ﴾

“And his Lord accepted his prayer and warded off their conspiracy; surely he is the All-hearing, the All-knowing.”

These are situations when the true nature of a believer is revealed. Prophet Yusuf (as) prefers to be a captive of the external forces than to be entrapped by the licentious forces within, which ruin the human being and his entire future. The prison here is a sanctuary and salvation. It is a place of shelter for this spirit, which is burning with the love of Allah (swt). He is ready to suffer the travails and hardships of imprisonment and humiliation but cannot withstand the torture of disobeying the only Beloved, who reared him to be what he was. And how can it ever be conceivable for one whose heart brims with the love of Allah to even think of blemishing his hands with sin?

A Subtle Allusion

‘Allamah Tabataba’i in his *Al-Mizān* says something worthy of reflection: when Zulaykha tightly closed the doors of her room (*ghallaqat al-abwab*), and relying on the apparent power that she had, said: *‘hayta lak’* (Come [to me]!), Yusuf (as) was immersed in the love of Allah and forgot every apparent means of refuge, including himself; hence when seeking refuge in Almighty Allah, he never said *“Inna a ‘adhū”* (Surely I seek refuge) but said: *‘ma ‘dhalh!’* [Nb: Although both *a ‘adhū billah* and *ma ‘dhalh* show that Yusuf seeks Refuge in Allah, but in the case of the latter (i.e. *ma ‘dhalh*) the supplicant forgets all the apparent means of refuge, including himself].

‘Allamah Tabataba’i²¹ says:

...فَلَمْ يَقُلْ: إِنِّي أَعُوذُ مِنْكَ بِاللَّهِ أَوْ مَا يُؤَدِّي مَعْنَاهُ، وَإِنَّمَا قَالَ: مَعَاذَ اللَّهِ...

...he [prophet Yusuf (as)] did not say: ‘Indeed I seek refuge with Allah from you...’ or a statement similar to that; rather he only said: *‘ma ‘dhalh’* (hence not making any mention of “I” or “You” or any other means)...

Then ‘Allamah continues saying:

...وَكَمْ مِنَ الْفَرْقِ بَيْنَ قَوْلِهِ هَذَا وَبَيْنَ قَوْلِ مَرْيَمَ لِلرُّوحِ لَمَّا تَمَثَّلَ لَهَا بَشَرًا سَوِيًّا:
إِنِّي أَعُوذُ بِالرَّحْمَنِ مِنْكَ...

“...and what a great a difference between this statement of his and Maryam’s statement to the Holy Spirit when he appeared to her in the form of a man: ‘surely I take refuge in the All-merciful from you...’
[19: 18]

The Captive of Allāh on Earth!

‘Allāmah Majlis in his magnum opus ‘*The Oceans of Lights*’ narrates²² a tradition in which the Prophet (s) is asked to explain the status of Imām ‘Alī (as), whereupon the Prophet (s) speaks about his merits at great length. At one point he says:

أَلَا وَمَنْ أَحَبَّ عَلِيًّا سُمِّيَ أَسِيرُ اللَّهِ فِي الْأَرْضِ، وَبَاهَى اللَّهُ بِهِ مَلَائِكَتَهُ وَحَمَلَةَ
عَرْشِهِ.

“Indeed whosoever loves ‘Alī is called the captive of Allāh on the earth and Allāh is proud of him near His angels and the Bearers of His throne.”

Here two points must be understood:

1. What does ‘love for ‘Alī (as)’ mean in this tradition?
2. What does it mean to be Allāh’s captive on earth?

What makes us love ‘Alī (as)? Is it his blessed physical appearance? Is it the place where he lived? Is it the people whom he met? Is it the tribe which he belonged to? Or is it his excellent characteristics, which manifest true Islam or in the words of the gnostics ‘manifest the Divine Attributes’? Clearly it is the knowledge of ‘Alī’s manifestation of Divine Attributes that ignites sparks of love in our hearts. We would like to enjoy his company; rather, if we look at the depth of the matter, ‘we would like to be another ‘Alī.’ Love itself draws one to seek unity with the beloved.

The believers, therefore, who experience love for Imām ‘Alī (as), in reality seek ‘his Attributes.’ And ‘the attributes of ‘Alī (as)’ are the attributes of the Prophet (s); and the attributes of the Prophet (s) are manifestations of the Attributes of Allāh (swt). Look at the following traditions carefully:

The Holy Prophet (s) is reported²³ to have said:

مَنْ أَحَبَّ عَلَيًّا فَقَدْ أَحَبَّنِي، وَمَنْ أَحَبَّنِي فَقَدْ أَحَبَّ اللَّهَ.

“Whosoever loves ‘Alī loves me; and whosoever loves me loves Allāh.”

What use is that love which has no tangible effect? In a tradition, Imām Muhammad al-Baqir (as) addressing Jābir Ju’fī, says²⁴:

...يَا جَابِرُ: مَنْ أَطَاعَ اللَّهَ وَأَحَبَّنَا فَهُوَ وَلِيْنَا، وَمَنْ عَصَى اللَّهَ لَمْ يَنْفَعَهُ حُبْنَا.

“...O Jābir! He who obeys Allāh and loves us is our friend; and whosoever disobeys Him, our love would not benefit him.”

Imagine that you are fond of particular attire, which would surely make you look presentable and handsome and beautiful. If there is no hurdle in your way or there is a hurdle, but can be removed easily, wouldn’t you try to purchase the dress? Certainly you would. Likewise, if ‘one really is fond of acquiring the attributes of Imām ‘Alī (as)’ and has the means at his disposal and can vanquish the hurdle of ‘his selfish desires’ wouldn’t he struggle for the same?

Nevertheless, there are degrees of love, which remain in the level of the heart and have little effect in the minds and the hearts. Such people, due to maintaining their ‘innate disposition’ (*fitra*) up to a certain extent, would be cleansed in the Hell Fire before residing in heaven. Some traditions do allude to this reality.

But when we equate a lover of ‘Alī (as) with a captive of Allāh (swt) whom Almighty Allāh is proud of, it is wrong to think that love here merely stands for emotional attachment. Can the possession of ‘emotional attachment’ be the same as ‘complete obedience to Allāh’? Certainly not. Therefore love in the tradition under discussion is of a greater degree. The Holy Qur’ān [2: 165] alludes to this as follows:

وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا أَشَدُّ حُبًّا لِلَّهِ ...

“And those who believe have more intense love for Allāh.”

A Free Man in Karbalā’

The timeless event of Karbalā’ reveals a beautiful example of one who freed himself from the shackles of his vain inclinations and consequently represented an embodiment of his name. He was called *Hurr*

(the free one). At the onset he was among the commanders of Yazīd. However, upon realization of the worth of the truth, he repented and joined the ranks of Imām al-Husayn (as). Having fought very bravely in the ranks of the Imām (as) against the Kuffār, he attained the exalted station of martyrdom. In his last moments, as Imām al-Husayn (as) was wiping blood from his radiant face, he said:

أَنْتَ حُرٌّ كَمَا سَمَّتْكَ أُمُّكَ، وَأَنْتَ حُرٌّ فِي الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةِ.

“You are Hurr (a free man) as your mother named you; and you are free in this world as well as the Hereafter.”

The well-known Shī‘a historian, Bīqir Sharīf al-Qarashī, in his *Hayāt al-Imām al-Husayn (as)* after quoting the above, remarks:

لَقَدْ كَانَ الْحُرُّ حُرًّا حِينَمَا غَلَبَ عَقْلُهُ هَوَاهُ...

“Surely Hurr was ‘a free man’ when his intellect won over his vain inclination (*hawāhu*).”²⁵

A Deliberation on the Solution

1. When we pray to Almighty Allāh to release all the captives, we do not pray for the release of every kind of captive, whether he or she be a captive of Allāh or a captive of Satan. Rather, we pray for all those captives whose captivity impedes them from physical and spiritual prosperity. However, deliverance from spiritual captivity, as we mentioned above, is in the hands of the captive himself. If he wakes up from his slumber and changes his wrong attitudes, he would free himself. And one who is successful in doing so can struggle to spread the culture of how to free others from the shackles of spiritual imprisonment, and consequently translate this radiant verse of the supplication into action.
2. Both physical and spiritual captivity sometimes are genuine and the fault of the prisoner himself. For example: if one were to intentionally steal or prefer one’s mundane desires to Divine law. Hence, the supplicant should also try to humbly seek the eradication of the causes that lead to such imprisonment. In reality, both kinds of imprisonment in their genuine state stem from *ittibā‘ al-hawā* (following one’s base inclinations]. Therefore, we must pray that the culture of *taqwā* penetrates into our societies so that ‘genuine’ imprisonment no more prevails.
3. Many cases of imprisonment in the contemporary era are manifestations of oppression by ungodly governments. Such acts of oppression can sometimes be thwarted by a united uprising by the masses. If the masses continue such protests, it would obviously frighten the government and there would be

chances for the release of the innocent captives.

4. A substantial number of so-called Muslim states can hamper the mass killings of the blood thirsty superpowers, for one of the most significant sources of energy are in their hands: oil, or 'black gold.' The case of Palestine also can be solved very easily by them. But it is their base interests that hamper them from using their intellects, and in the process make them earn eternal ignominy.

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1. al-Mufradī, pg. 76, new ed.
 2. Bihār al-Anwār, v. 78, pg. 368, tr. 3
 3. Bihār al-Anwār, v. 94, pg. 93, tr. 8
 4. Bihār al-Anwār, v. 101, pg. 331, tr. 2
 5. Nahj al-Balāgha, Letter 53
 6. Nahj al-Balāgha, Sermon 91
 7. <http://www.stoptorture.org> [1], A branch of Amnesty International
 8. Ibid.
 9. A branch of Amnesty International – www.stoptorture.org/report/index.htm [2]
 10. Ibid.
 11. Ibid.
 12. Hayāt al-Nabī wa Sīratuhu, v. 2, pg. 60
 13. Mawsū'at al-Imām 'Alī bin Abī Tālib, v. 7, pg. 250, tr. 2949
 14. Ibid., v. 7, pg. 250, tr. 2950
 15. Maw'irid al-Sijj, pg. 493 onwards
 16. Mizān al-Hikma, v. 1, pg. 76
 17. Mu'jamu Ghurairil Hikam, pg. 34
 18. Nahjul Balāgha, sermon no. 28
 19. Al-Burhān Fī Tafsīri'l Qur'ān, v. 3, pp. 246–247
 20. Tafsir al-Mizān, v. 11, pp. 164–165
 21. al-Mizān, v. 11, pp. 120–123
 22. Bihār al-Anwār, v. 27, pg. 115, tr.89
 23. Bihār al-Anwār, v. 5, pg. 69, tr.1
 24. Mizān al-Hikma, v. 1, pg. 519, tr. 3211
 25. Hayāt al-Imām al-Husayn, v. 3, pg. 222

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<https://www.al-islam.org/manifestations-all-merciful-abu-muhammad-zaynul-abidin/o-allah-free-every-captive>

Links

[1] <http://www.stoptorture.org>

[2] <http://www.stoptorture.org/report/index.htm>