

Lecture 4: Concept of Martyrdom in Islam

A lecture delivered at Husain Day, held at New York, on Sunday, October 25, 1987

Allah says in the Qur'an:

And reckon not those who are killed in Allah's way as dead; nay, they are alive (and) are provided sustenance from their Lord; rejoicing in what Allah has given them out of His grace, and they rejoice for the sake of those who, (being left) behind them, have not yet joined them, that they shall have no fear, nor shall they grieve. They rejoice on account of favour from Allah and (His) grace, and that Allah will not waste the reward of believers. (The Family of 'Imran, 3: 169-171)

These three verses prove that the martyrs are not conquered by death. The moment a believer is slain in the way of Allah, his eternal life begins; a life in which he gets sustenance from Allah. He rejoices for himself and hopes that even those whom he has left behind would receive the honour of martyrdom, so that they too would achieve this ever-lasting, never-ending life as he has.

Why has Allah bestowed this special favour on martyrs? The value and worth of a sacrifice entirely depends on the value of the purpose for which that sacrifice was offered. Many people sacrifice their lives for wealth. But it is just a wastage of life, and nothing else. How can a life be immortal, if it was worthless enough to be sacrificed for some stones or minerals? No matter how precious gold and diamonds are, they are lifeless. These treasures themselves have no life; how can they make a life immortal?

Political power? Prestige? Fame? Popularity? None of these have any independent existence. These are imaginary things. As they say, beauty is in the eyes of the beholder. Likewise, these imaginary pictures are in people's minds only. They are merely transient images. Now they are; now they are not. A life sacrificed on their altar will disappear just like a passing shadow.

Those whose faith in the Creator is superfluous, can never solve the mystery of martyrdom. They feel puzzled as to why the Muslims, the true believers, appear eager to die in the way of Allah. They call them “suicide squad”. But it is not suicide. Suicide implies termination of life, while martyrdom is continuation of life.

Although in Islam even a normal death is not the end of life; it is a transition from this world to the next. How good or bad that life will be, depends on one's faith and deeds. But martyrdom removes that uncertainty, that suspense. Allah immediately bestows on the martyr the joy, the everlasting bliss and an immortal life.

So this is the reality which the Qur'an has taught us: That if we are killed in the way of Allah, we shall continue our lives in the next world with true honour and real prestige. Not only that: We shall be sacrificing a transitory life of a few years; but Allah will reward us with eternal and everlasting life in His presence. It is because Allah, the Eternal, is the Creator of life, and when a life is sacrificed to please Him, He in His mercy bestows prestigious immortality on that life. Shahadat or martyrdom means testifying, witnessing. A martyr testifies with his blood the glory of God; his indelible blood becomes a permanent evidence of God's unity, His power and His majesty. Allah as a reward makes him immortal. The flame of life is never extinguished; death cannot conquer his soul.

Allah has said in the Qur'an: Surely Allah has bought of the believer their persons and their properties for this: that they shall have the Garden. (9:111).

Here we find a business deal made between Allah and the believers. There are four elements in every trade transaction: a seller, a buyer, a merchandise and a price. In this deal too all the factors are clearly mentioned: The believers are the sellers; and Allah is their customer, who has bought from them their lives and their properties, and has offered the Garden as the price.

It should not be forgotten that, in real fact, everything — including the believers and their lives and properties — belongs to Allah. Still He, in His mercy and grace, is buying His own belongings from the believers — which they had received from Allah Himself, in the first place. So He buys what in fact already belongs to Him, and then offers an everlasting price for it, and that is the Garden.

Islamic laws, sent down by Allah, recognize three modes of business deal:

- (1) Where on conclusion of deal, goods are handed over to the customer and price paid to the seller — all in the same sitting;
- (2) Where the goods are delivered in that sitting but payment of price is deferred to an agreed date;
- (3) Where price is paid in that sitting but delivery of goods is deferred to an agreed date. Islam

recognizes all three types of transactions as valid and binding.

But if neither the goods have been delivered nor the price has been paid, then such a deal is not binding in Islamic jurisprudence.

Now let us look at this deal of the believers in this background. We know that we have not received the price, i.e. the Garden, yet. Now if a believer does not hand over his own life and properties immediately to Allah, that deal would not be binding. In other words, we shall have no claim on the price, on the Day of Judgement. But here arises the big question: How can we hand over our lives and properties to Allah?

The answer: We can easily do so by changing their status. Let me give another example from Islamic Laws. Suppose a believer dedicates his property as an endowment (waqf) in the way of Allah, and appoints himself as its first trustee (mutawalli). Now he will continue to look after and manage that property as he was doing before but with one difference: Previously he was managing it as his own property; now he shall do it as Allah's property. Previously he was the owner; now he considers himself merely the agent of the owner— agent of Allah.

Likewise, we should immediately hand over our lives and properties to Allah, although we shall continue to look after them as Allah's agents. And whenever the Owner, i.e Allah, tells us to return His belongings to Him, to spend our lives and properties (which now belong to Him) in His way, we should gladly sacrifice all that is in our hands.

After all it is not our life, it belongs to Allah; it is not our wealth, we are keeping it as agents of Allah; our family, our children, our honour, our authority— nothing belongs to us, we have sold everything to Allah, and when He, as the rightful Owner, decides anything about His property, we as His agents have no right to grumble. When the call comes to return our lives to Allah, to sacrifice our families and children in the way of Allah, we should gladly hand back everything to Allah; rather we should be thankful to Him that He has relieved us from the responsibility of looking after a trust property.

Thus a believer knows that he has no say about his life or about his death. His own soul does not belong to him, and he keeps the Qur'anic guidance before his eyes: Say: Surely my prayer and my sacrifice and my life and my death are all for Allah, the Lord of the worlds. (6:162)

Let us look at Imam Husayn's life and martyrdom if we want to find the most perfect and the most brilliant example of this verse. A great number of Muslims all over the world have just been busy commemorating the tragedy of Karbala in which Imam Husayn (peace be upon him) sacrificed his life 1347 years ago to save Islam from the strangulating hold of Yazid. When he refused to give allegiance to Yazid, he knew very well what he would have to suffer. But he was not after worldly power or material gain which could be abandoned in face of danger. He was seeking the pleasure of Allah, and this he could not abandon, come what may. He was following the policy of Islam and the Qur'an. He made it

perfectly clear in his will which he wrote at the time of his departure from Medina. He writes:

“I am not leaving Medina because of any arrogance or vanity. I am leaving, so that I may reform the community of my grandfather, and so that I may enjoin good and forbid evil, and establish the way of my grandfather, the Messenger of Allah, and my father, the Leader of the faithful.”

This explains in prose what Imam Husayn often declared in a poem when he was proceeding to Iraq. He was frequently heard reciting these two lines:

*If the religion of Muhammad cannot be kept intact
Except with the sacrifice of my head, then O swords! Come and take it.*

And to save the religion of Muhammad, Imam Husayn offered not one, but at least 72, heads. He, and his children and companions were denied water for three days; his companions, relatives and children were killed; even the six-month's infant, 'Ali Asghar, was made target of a three-pointed arrow. When Imam Husayn was martyred, the ladies of the Prophet's household were imprisoned, and brought to the courts of Ibn Ziyad and Yazid in Kufa and Damascus. But their determination, their firm resolve, like that of Imam Husayn never faltered.

And who can imagine the determination, the love and the joy which Imam Husayn (peace be upon him) had and felt for Islam, for the cause of Allah. On 10th Muharram, when every passing moment brought a new hardship for him and his small caravan, Imam's face radiated more and more with content and tranquility. It was this prestigious love of Allah which prompted Imam Husayn to say to Allah in the last moments of his earthly life:

O Allah! I left the world altogether for Your love I orphaned my children so as to see You
Even if You cut me into pieces in way of love My heart would not incline to anyone but You.

In this way he has shown us how a man should live for Allah and how he should die for Allah. His supreme sacrifice has taught us how we can turn death into eternal life

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