

Knowledge of the Unseen

(Verse 20)

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَعْلَمُ غَيْبَ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ وَاللَّهُ بَصِيرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ

“Certainly Allah has (complete) knowledge of that which is hidden in the Heavens and the Earth and Allah is the One who Sees what all of you (His creations) do.”

The lexical meaning of the word “hidden” (غيب) is something that is covered. Anything that is hidden or concealed from us – whether this is something physical which is discernable by the senses or something that is Divine, however it has been clothed with the physical (world) and is far from being discernable by our senses – is referred to as being of the hidden (غيب).

Those events that have occurred in the past or the events that will come about in the future, even if on their own are things which can be recognized by our senses, however in the present time they are outside of our jurisdiction, are also clear examples of what is considered as unseen (غيب).

Those affairs that naturally cannot be discerned by our senses and which are far above that which mankind is able to discern or understand with his limited ability of perception such as the Essence of Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He) or His Characteristics; the reality of the raising up from the graves and many other things are all issues that are related to the Knowledge of the Unseen and it is only Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He) who has complete knowledge of these things.

Until that time that mankind does not understand and unlock the mysteries of the universe, method of creation, the rules that govern the world of creation, and does not gain knowledge of these things, all of these will continue to remain as issues related to the unseen, which maybe slowly and gradually will enter into the knowledge of mankind.

The tiny and minute creations and also the large creatures that exist around us – both those that live on the land and in the depths of the oceans which are scattered around – have all been created according

to their own disciple and order, and all of these will remain as issues of the unknown. This is the point which has been alluded to in this verse when He (Glorified and Exalted is He) says:

وَاللَّهُ غَيْبُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ

“And to Allah belong the unknown secrets of the Heavens and the Earth.”

From this verse of the Qur’an and many other verses, we realize that the only One who has complete Knowledge of the Unseen is Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He):

وَ عِنْدَهُ مَفَاتِحَ الْغَيْبِ لَا يَعْلَمُهَا إِلَّا هُوَ

“And with Him are the keys of the Unseen that no one knows except for Him.”¹

قُلْ لَا يَعْلَمُ مَنْ فِي السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ الْغَيْبَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ

“Say (O’ Muhammad) no one has knowledge of that which is hidden in the Heavens and the Earth except for Allah.”²

Without doubt, Knowledge of the Unseen which is specifically limited to Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He) and not a single person shares in this knowledge, is the comprehension of the Essence and Pre-Existence of Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He) which He has not received from anywhere – rather, this is His actual essence and He is free from all sorts of possible obligations, limits and confines.

However, by Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He) limiting the allocation of such Knowledge of the Unseen to Himself it does not mean that at times, some of His specific servants cannot be acquainted with some of this hidden knowledge by them. It has been mentioned in regards to the Prophet of Islam (blessings of Allah be upon him and his progeny) that:

عَالِمُ الْغَيْبِ فَلَا يُظْهِرُ عَلَى غَيْبِهِ أَحَدًا إِلَّا مَنْ ارْتَضَى مِنْ رَسُولٍ

“The Knower of the Unseen (Allah) so then He does not make known what is hidden to a single person except those whom He is pleased with from amongst His Messengers.”³

According to the clear reading of this verse of the Qur'an, the Prophet (blessings of Allah be upon him and his progeny) had been permitted to have the Knowledge of the Unseen by the permission of Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He) and thus he had been informed of hidden events and issues that would come to pass.

This issue is not only limited to the Prophet of Islam (blessings of Allah be upon him and his progeny) – rather according to the clear verses of the Qur'an, even Prophet `Isa ibn Mariam al-Masih (peace be upon them) was acquainted with a great deal of information that had come from the Knowledge of the Unseen. The Qur'an quotes him as saying to the people:

وَأُنَبِّئُكُمْ بِمَا تَأْكُلُونَ وَمَا تَدَّخِرُونَ فِي بُيُوتِكُمْ

“And I inform you of what you eat (even though I have not seen you eating) and that which you store in your houses.”⁴

Prophet Nuh (peace be upon him), the Leader of the Prophets (*Shaikhul Anbiya`*), was one of those people who requested Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He) to destroy the people of his community (due to the sins they were committing). In relation to the outcome of his people and that of his own children, he was informed (given Knowledge of the Unseen) that:

رَبِّ لَا تَضْرِبْ عَلَى الْأَرْضِ مِنَ الْكَافِرِينَ دَيَّارًا إِنَّكَ إِن تَذَرَهُمْ يُضِلُّوا عِبَادَكَ وَلَا يَلِدُوا إِلَّا فَاجِرًا كَفَّارًا

“(And Nuh said) O’ my Lord! Do not leave upon the Earth any dweller from amongst the unbelievers for surely if You leave them, they will lead Your servants astray and will not beget any but immoral, ungrateful (children).”⁵

In addition, in three separate incidents that occurred, the travel companion of Prophet Musa (peace be upon him) – meaning Prophet Khidhr (peace be upon him) – informed Prophet Musa (peace be upon him) of Knowledge of the Unseen.

The first event was when he damaged the ship; the second was when he killed the young boy; and the third one was when he came across the dilapidated wall in the city which he rebuilt. In order to remove the surprise and shock of Prophet Musa (peace be upon him), Prophet Khidr (peace be upon him) proceeded to explain his astonishing actions to him by detailing the events that would occur in the future that were hidden from the understanding and knowledge of Prophet Musa (peace be upon him) by saying to him:

“Since the oppressive ruler of the time was taking away all of the ships of the people and it was possible that theirs (owner of that ship) too would be taken, I damaged a part of the ship since I wanted this oppressive king to lose interest in this ship. The young boy that I killed was due to the fact that if he continued to live, he would have chosen the path of rebellion and corruption, and continuing in this course of life, he would have ended up murdering both his mother and father.

I fixed the wall that was almost destroyed since under the wall, there was a buried treasure that belonged to two orphans. By fixing the wall, I intended to keep the treasure hidden from the eyes of the people of that city so that in the future, those who owned that wealth could take it out (and make use of it).”⁶

That which has been mentioned are all examples of events that were hidden and only those servants of Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He) which He is pleased and content with were given knowledge of. These sorts of events occurring can never be interpreted as these personalities being partners with Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He) since these two types of knowledge are different and separate from one another.

The knowledge of Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He) and the Knowledge of the Unseen is inherent and is not something that can be acquired – it is pre-existent and is in no way limited or restricted. However, the knowledge of the Prophets and those people who are the worthy and suitable servants of Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He) is limited and restricted.

After Amir al-Mu'minin `Ali ibn Abi Talib (peace be upon him) conquered the city of Basrah (in present day Iraq) and destroyed the power and influence of those who broke their treaty with him (namely Talhah and Zubair), he then proceeded to inform the people of the events that would occur in the future in Basrah. One of the companions of the Imam (peace be upon him) asked him, “Do you inform us of the Unseen (غيب)?” The Imam (peace be upon him) replied to him as follows:

لَيْسَ هُوَ بِعِلْمٍ غَيْبٍ وَإِنَّمَا هُوَ تَعَلَّمَ مِنْ ذِي عِلْمٍ

“This is not information of the unseen (that is limited only to Allah and of which no one else has permission to know), rather that what I say is knowledge that one who possesses knowledge (the Prophet of Allah) taught me.”⁷

In addition, there are countless narrations that bear witness to the fact that our religious leaders – the A'immah (peace be upon all of them) – in certain instances and circumstances, had informed us of events that would occur in the future.

Of these instances is the Knowledge of the Unseen that Amir al-Mu'minin `Ali ibn Abi Talib (peace be upon him) referred to as “...that which the one who possess knowledge taught me” and obviously such a

report and Knowledge of the Unseen can never be construed to go against the verses of the Qur'an that speak of the Knowledge of the Unseen being limited to the Essence of Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He) alone.

Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He) commanded His Prophet (blessings of Allah be upon him and his progeny) to tell the people the following: "I never claim to have Knowledge of the Unseen and if I had such knowledge, then surely very many bad things would have been kept away from myself and I would have had much good come to me."

لَوْ كُنْتُ أَعْلَمُ الْغَيْبَ لَأَسْتَكْثِرْتُ مِنَ الْخَيْرِ

"And had I (Muhammad

) known the unseen I would have had much good (come to me)."

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In another verse of the Qur'an, the Prophet (Glorified and Exalted is He) is commanded to say to the people:

لَا أَقُولُ لَكُمْ عِنْدِي خَزَائِنُ اللَّهِ وَلَا أَعْلَمُ الْغَيْبَ

"I (Muhammad) do not say that I have the hidden secrets of Allah with me, nor do I have Knowledge of the Unseen."⁹

The purpose of these noble verses is not to show some sort of humility or humbleness in the Prophet (blessings of Allah be upon him and his progeny); rather this is a truth that the Qur'an is elucidating upon and the logical and philosophical reasons and other verses of the Qur'an also confirm this belief.

However, it goes without saying that the purpose of these verses – by the testimony of the Qur’an itself which is currently under study – is that specific Knowledge of the Unseen which none other than Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He) has access to is the boundless, limitless Divine Knowledge – meaning the Knowledge of the Essence and Pre-Eternity of Allah (the knowledge which is the Essence of Allah and is neither an addition to His Essence, that knowledge which has been with Him for eternity).

Thus, these verses do not negate the Knowledge of the Unseen being provided to the Prophet (blessings of Allah be upon him and his progeny) through Divine revelation or from the information given to him through the Angels or from some other means that are made accessible to him as all of these forms of Knowledge of the Unseen are limited and not a part of his essence – rather, they must be acquired.

Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He) informed Adam, the Father of Humanity, with a series of truths and Names, that even the Angels were not acquainted with and it is the Angels who were even prevented from such magnificent knowledge!¹⁰

In addition, Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He) informed the mother of Musa of the outcome of the struggles of her child.¹¹

He (Glorified and Exalted is He) also informed His final Prophet (blessings of Allah be upon him and his progeny) of that fact that some of his wives were spreading secrets about him to others¹² – and thus, this is that same Allah (Glorified and Exalted is He) who is able to permit His other righteous servants to be acquainted with the Knowledge of the Unseen.

It is in the greatness of His glory that they are able to (with the permission of Allah), be informed of the events that have happened in the past and those that will occur in the future and there is not the smallest amount of doubt – either from the point of view of what our knowledge tells us, nor from the related proofs (Qur’an and ahadith) in regards to this.

Yahya ibn `Abdullah has said, “I was in the presence of Imam Musa ibn Ja`far al-Kadhim and asked him: ‘Do you have Knowledge of the Unseen?’ In relation to my question, he become upset and said to me, ‘From this type of question, the hairs on the body of a person will stand up! That which we know and we inform you about is the knowledge which has reached us from the Prophet of Allah.’”¹³

وَ الْحَمْدُ لِلَّهِ رَبِّ الْعَالَمِينَ

...and all the praise belongs solely to Allah, the Lord of the Universe

1. Surah al-An`am (6), Verse 59.

2. Surah al-Naml (27), Verse 65.
3. Surah al-Jinn (72), Verse 26.
4. Surah Aali Imran (3), Verse 49.
5. Surah Nuh (71), Verse 26 & 27.
6. Surah al-Kahf (18), Verse 60 – 82.
7. Nahjul Balagha, Speech 128.
8. Surah al-A`raf (7), Verse 188.
9. Surah Hud (11), Verse 31.
10. Surah al-Baqarah (2), Verse 31 – 33
11. Surah al-Qasas (28), Verse 10.
12. Surah al-Tahrim (66), Verse 13.
13. Rijal al-Kishi, Pages 252–253; Amali of Shaikh Mufid, Third Sitting, Page 493. For a deeper understanding on the issue of Knowledge of the Unseen, refer to the book, Mafahim al-Qur'an, Pages 321 to 383. In this section of the book, a complete discussion in relation to the Knowledge of the Unseen of the Prophet and the A'imma has been covered.

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