

Chapter 22: Tragedy of Karbala Remains Unforgettable

In the month of Muharram 61 A.H. a terrific tragedy took place in Iraq on the bank of the river Euphrates. It seemed in those days to be trivial and insignificant from the historical point of view. A large army which had been mobilized by the Umayyad regime besieged a group of persons numbering less than one hundred and put them under pressure so that they might take the oath of allegiance to the caliph of the time and submit to his authority. As the persons constituting this small group did not swear allegiance and did not surrender, a severe battle took place.

Its duration was very brief. The matter was settled in less than a day's time and all the persons constituting that small group were killed. It appeared at that time that like hundreds of other similar and more important events which continue to take place in human history this historical event would also be recorded in history and forgotten with the lapse of time.

The usual way of life of the Muslims did not change on account of this tragedy and everyone remained engaged in his daily business. The Muslim tradesmen were busy with their occupations. The masjids were frequented as usual. The Muslim preachers spoke about lawful and unlawful things, Paradise and Hell, spiritual reward and punishment and other religious matters from the pulpits. The only thing which was not talked about was this event which was apparently transient and without any effect.

It was only the organization of the caliphate which published this event in various regions of the Islamic territories although in a brief and ambiguous manner. This was done with two objects in view; firstly that the people should come to know about the leaders of the movement opposed to the government having been killed, and should take a lesson from it, and similar risings should not take place in future; secondly that the caliphate should show itself guiltless and innocent in the matter and the leaders of the movement should be depicted as adventurous and mischievous. Husayn bin Ali who was at the head of the rising was to be introduced as opposed to truth and a liar.

Not only the regime of Bani Umayya and its supporters but even the majority of the Muslims of those days considered this tragedy to have culminated in the success of the killers of Imam Husayn. It was

imagined that not only that the Imam and his companions had met martyrdom but thereafter none from amongst Ahlul Bayt (the progeny of the Holy Prophet) nor anyone else would pick up courage to oppose Yazid, and the hearts which had been wounded due to the martyrdom of the Imam would also heal up with the passage of time.

Those people were not aware of the true spirit of this tragic event which covered only a few hours. They did not know that with the passage of time the greatness and effect of this sacred campaign against falsehood and tyranny would continue to increase.

At the time of the occurrence of this tragedy there were only a few persons from amongst the Ahlul Bayt, who could assess its value and importance, speak about the effects, which it would have later on the Muslims and relieve them to some extent from the misunderstanding in which they were involved.

These were the few persons who could unveil with their speeches, the wickedness of the prevailing regime and the misunderstanding of the people and draw the attention of the people to the blow, which had been dealt to the enemy by those martyrs who were lying calmly in their graves, and to the tumult those heads would create in history later –the heads, which had been severed and held on the spears.

The persons who went to various cities and regions in the capacity of prisoners, changed the thinking of the people and exonerated their sacred martyrs from the charges leveled against them in such a way that the facts of the event became crystal clear.

Here arises a question, which must be looked into and answered. The question is: Why did it so happen that the tragedy of Karbala occupied the central position amongst all the historical events of Islam and all religious risings, and no collective rising, struggle and martyrdom could acquire greatness in the world similar to that of the rising of Imam Husayn?

In the Battle of Uhud which took place near Madina in the month of Shawwal 3 A.H. between the Muslims and the polytheists of Makkah, a group of forty Muslims disobeyed their commander owing to some misunderstanding. Consequently 700 Muslims, who were fighting against 3000 polytheists, were defeated after having gained victory over the enemy. More than 80 persons were martyred. The bodies of most of the martyrs were mutilated in such a way that a sister could not identify the body of her brother except by means of a defect in his finger. Notwithstanding this the Battle of Uhud and the martyrdom of more than 70 to 80 Muslim mujahids have not acquired the grandeur of the tragedy of Karbala.

Another tragical event is that of the martyrs of Fakh, wherein a number of the descendants of the Holy Prophet were martyred near Makkah during the time of Hadi Abbasi.

Another similar event is that of the martyrdom of sixteen Hasani Sayyids who were imprisoned in the Hasimiyya jail of Kufa under the orders of Mansur Dawaniqi. They died one after the other and Mansur did not allow their dead bodies to be buried. When all of them died he ordered the roof of the jail to be

made to fall on the dead bodies of these sons of the Holy Prophet. They were neither bathed, nor shrouded nor buried. These as well as other similar tragedies of the history of Islam cannot equal the tragedy of Karbala and none of these martyrs can be matched with Imam Husayn.

Hamzah bin Abdul Muttalib, the magnanimous uncle of the Prophet of Allah was martyred in Uhud and he received the title of Doyen of Martyrs from Allah and His Prophet. However, if even his name is substituted for that of Imam Husayn it cannot be expected to create the same effect.

We do not intend to give and cannot perhaps give a complete and comprehensive answer to this question. It may, however, be said that besides the personality of the leader of this rising which is certainly a reason for its enjoying precedence over other risings, one of the most important and effective factors and causes for the superiority of Imam Husayn's rising was the chapter which was added to the tragedy after the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and his companions. It was a chapter on the creation of which the enemy himself insisted and thus unintentionally provided the means of his own disgrace. The result was that it was through Ahlul Bayt, who had been made prisoners, and also through those who had killed Imam Husayn, the world came to know about the reality and importance of this rising.

The enemies most brutally treated the Ahlul Bayt after the martyrdom of the Holy Imam and termination of fighting. They denuded the martyrs of their belongings, and plundered their dresses. They rushed into the tents, looted the property of Ahlul Bayt and set their tents on fire. They attempted to kill the ailing Imam Sajjad in his bed. They got the dead bodies of the martyrs trampled upon under the hooves of the horses and held their heads on the spears. They behaved harshly towards the bereaved prisoners and struck a stick on the lips and teeth of their Imam.

These heinous acts which recoiled upon the enemy themselves and made the real position known to the people commenced from Karbala and continued up to Damascus. Yazid himself took part in these atrocities and had a share in the consequent disgrace for himself and his associates.

On the contrary the Ahlul Bayt showed perfect greatness and magnanimity and behaved as if nothing had happened and they had experienced no hardship. Most of the people were under the impression that they had been defeated and eliminated, but wherever they went they talked about their own success and the enemy's disgrace.

At a time when most of the people thought that the enemy had been victorious, they introduced themselves as exalted and successful, and the proud enemy as unfortunate and disgraced, in history. Contrary to the anticipation of the people they predicted the downfall of Bani Umayya.

If Ibn Sad and Ibn Ziyad, after the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and his companions, had even as a matter of expediency, shown honor and respect to the Ahlul Bayt of the Holy Prophet and offered condolences to them for the tragedy which had been brought about by themselves. They did not prevent the burial of the martyrs but buried them earlier than their own soldiers, and sent the Ahlul Bayt to Madina directly from Karbala with due honor and respect.

If the barbarous activities of the enemy on the one hand and the impressive preachings of the Ahlul Bayt on the other, had not taken place, the martyrdom of the Imam and the tragedy of Karbala would certainly not have been reflected in the world in the shape which it assumed, and the enemies of the Imam, too, would not have been disgraced to such an extent. This too was as willed by Allah.

The enemy took the powerful preachers (Ahlul Bayt) forcibly as captives from one city to another and provided them an opportunity to speak to the people, who were mostly spectators of this tragedy, and introduce themselves to them and mentioned the Holy Prophet everywhere as their father or grandfather. The Ahlul Bayt got the first opportunity to display their eloquence on the 12th of Muharram when they were brought into the city of Kufa. Seeing Kufa was very painful for the Ahlul Bayt, because the major part of the Caliphate of Imam Ali had been spent in this city. In 41 A.H. the daughters of Imam Ali had gone from Kufa to Madina along with their brother Imam Hasan and now, after twenty years, they had arrived as prisoners in a city where they had ruled for about four years. The people of Iraq who had been the Nahrawan supporters of Ali in the Battle of the Camel, Siffin and Nahrawan had now killed his son and taken his other descendants captives.

However, it might be said that the orators of Ahlul Bayt had come from Madina and the Hijaz to Kufa and Iraq to address the people and the people assembled in the lanes and bazaars to hear their speeches. They commenced their mission from the very 12th day of Muharram and spoke out to the people without fear. When there was no chance of speaking in the bazaar or at the door and no audience other than the court of Ibn Ziyad was available, they continued their task there also, although it was in the shape of replies to his questions, and then returned to the prison of Kufa.

The speeches of these brave and matchless orators extremely impressed the people, stirred their hearts and changed their views. Tears began to trickle from their eyes and they realized their grave error. These speeches roused the sentiments of the people and the value and importance of this event became known to them. The efforts of the enemy to tamper with the facts of this event were frustrated and the tragedy of Karbala was recorded in history in its true shape.

The severe thirst of Ahlul Bayt was confirmed in the pages of history. The misdeeds of the enemy were recorded. History also shows the spiritual eminence of the companions and supporters of the Imam. This sentence of Ali bin Husayn is also recorded in history: "When we are on the right path why should we fear death?" The following words of Qasim bin Hasan also brighten the pages of history: "For me death is sweeter than honey". The devotion and the manner of speech of Muslim bin Awsaja has been embodied in these words: "If we withdraw our support from you and fail in performing this duty what excuse shall we put forward before Allah? I swear by Allah that so long as I live I shall not give up my support to you till I may lay down my life for your sake and am killed earlier than all your other friends".

The Imam had permitted Sa'id bin Abdullah Hanafi to go away. His spiritual greatness, character and courage is summed up in this sentence: "I swear by Allah that even if I am killed and am brought to life again and am then burnt in fire and my ashes are scattered in the air and this process is repeated

seventy times I shall not leave you till I am martyred in this path".

The following words have made the name of Bishr bin Amr everlasting in the history of the martyrs of Islam: "O Husayn bin Ali! May the fierce animals of the desert tear me into pieces if I leave you and enquire about your circumstances from others. Why should I withdraw my support to you when you are alone and friendless? I am not at all going to do any such thing". He expressed his devotion in these words: "Is it possible that I should leave the son of the Holy Prophet at the mercy of the enemies and try to save my own life? May Allah not bring such a day".

The following words uttered by other honorable martyrs of Karbala, which show their matchless magnanimity, valor, sincerity and steadfastness are recorded in the pages of history: Amr bin Qurza Ansari said while he was breathing his last: "O son of the Holy Prophet! Have I been faithful and have I discharged my duty?"

Habib bin Mazahir Asadi said to Muslim bin Awsaja when the latter was about to die: "Muslim! I congratulate you for you are going to Paradise earlier than us".

Muslim who was lying on the ground said in reply: "Habib! I am going, but you must not desert the Imam".

Abu Thamama Saidi said to the Imam at about noon: "What a good thing it would be if we offer the noon prayers along with you before we are martyred!"

If those speeches which were delivered in Syria had not been there and if the sister and son of Imam Husayn had not got opportunities to speak in the courts of Ibn Ziyad and Yazid, the event of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and his companions might not have been recorded in history in its present form. History would have ignored the true accounts. Even the sentence uttered by a black slave who said to the Imam: "Do not deprive me of martyrdom and let me acquit myself of my responsibility in spite of my having a black face" would have been forgotten.

Indeed there are very few chapters in history which remained immune from any change to such an extent. Historians often differ about most of the details of historical facts, but it may be said with certainty that the tragedy of the martyrdom of Imam Husayn is one of the most luminous, sublime and the most unique chapters of history. None has been able to tamper with this historical event and to write contrary to the facts.

The renowned historians like Shaykh Mufid, Tabari and Abul Faraj Isfahani have unanimously recorded the exact details of this tragedy. As we have already mentioned, its reason was that the enemy made a grave mistake and insisted unintentionally that this tragic event should be related in Kufa –the center of Iraq, Damascus –the center of Syria and Madina –the center of the Hijaz by the Ahlul Bayt, who had been taken prisoners and were eye-witnesses of the happenings on the day of Ashura and who could explain them better than anyone else. Ali bin Husayn related these events to the people one day in the

bazaar of Kufa, on another day in the Jamea Masjid of Damascus, and after some time in Madina, in such a way that the position became crystal clear to them as if they themselves had been present in Karbala on the day of Ashura.

At last Yazid felt regretful on account of these developments. He realized correctly that it was a grave mistake to bring the women and children to Kufa and Syria as prisoners and it would have been better if the matter had ended with the martyrdom of Imam Husayn and his companions, and a new chapter had not been opened, and the Ahlul Bayt had not been allowed to speak in the bazaars and before the public gatherings. However, it was then too late.

What had been said with the lips could not be returned to the breasts and the scenes seen by the people and the speeches heard by them could not be wiped out from their memory. It was no longer possible that those, who had cried loudly in the bazaars, should once again consider the descendants of the Holy Prophet, about whom the verse of Purification (33:33) was revealed, rebellious and fit to be killed!

When common people are overtaken by a calamity they usually conceal it and do not wish that others should know what has befallen them. Contrary to this the Ahlul Bayt endeavored that as far as possible they should apprise the people of what they had suffered. It was for this reason that whenever they got an opportunity they mentioned the events of Karbala in detail and even Imam Husayn who possessed the highest human and Islamic virtues was usually mentioned with the title of the martyr.

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