

Section 21: Punishment For Transgressing the Limits

Surah al-'Araf – Verse 163

وَسَأَلَهُمْ عَنِ الْقَرْيَةِ الَّتِي كَانَتْ حَاضِرَةَ الْبَحْرِ إِذْ يَعْدُونَ فِي السَّبْتِ إِذْ تَأْتِيهِمْ
حِيتَانُهُمْ يَوْمَ سَبْتِهِمْ شُرْعًا وَيَوْمَ لَا يَسْبِتُونَ لَا تَأْتِيهِمْ كَذَلِكَ نَبْلُوهُمْ بِمَا كَانُوا
يَفْسُقُونَ

163. “And (O Muhammad) ask them about the town that was by the sea, when they exceeded (the limits) of the Sabbath when their fish came to them on the day of their Sabbath, appearing on the surface of the water; but on the day they did not keep Sabbath, they (the fish) did not come unto them. Thus did We try them for the transgressions they used to commit.”

By the command of Allah, hunting fish on the Sabbath was forbidden for this group of the Children of Israel who were living on the bank of the sea. (Maybe, it was the Red Sea, beside the land of Palestine, which is known as Haifa Harbour today).

But, on that very day, fish were seen with a more tremendous amount, so that people's mouths watered. This circumstance was a divine trial for them.

Those people exceeded the law of Allah deceitfully, and, by making pools on the bank of the sea and banning the way of the fish therein, they captured them in those pools on Saturdays, the which were easily hunted on Sundays. Then, they claimed that, according to the commandment, they had not hunted them on the Sabbath.

The verse says:

“And (O Muhammad) ask them about the town that was by the sea, when they exceeded (the limits) of the Sabbath when their fish came to them on the day of their Sabbath, appearing on the surface of the water; but on the day they did not keep Sabbath, they (the fish) did not come unto them. Thus did We try them for the transgressions they used to commit.”

Therefore, by legal tricks and deceit, the real feature of sins may not be changed, (like making pools on the seaside for hunting fish on the following day).

In one of his sermons, Hadrat Ali (as) has intensively criticized the justification of sins, and the justification of ‘wine’ with ‘date liquor’ (nabith), ‘bribery’ with present, and ‘usury’ with ‘transaction’.¹

Surah al-‘Araf – Verse 164

وَإِذْ قَالَتْ أُمَّةٌ مِنْهُمْ لِمَ تَعِظُونَ قَوْمًا اللَّهُ مُهْلِكُهُمْ أَوْ مُعَذِّبُهُمْ عَذَابًا شَدِيدًا قَالُوا مَعذِرَةٌ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكُمْ وَلَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَّقُونَ

164. “And (remember) when a group of them said: ‘Why do you admonish a people whom Allah will destroy or punish with a severe punishment?’ They said: ‘In order to have an excuse before your Lord, and that they may keep from evil.’”

It seems that, from the point of behaviour, the Children of Israel were divided into three groups. One group, who formed the majority, were the violators of Divine Law. The second group were the sympathetic admonishers.

The third group were those who were inattentive to the social evil affairs. The latter ones told the sympathetic admonishers not to make themselves tired, for their preach would not affect the mischief makers and, in any case, the corruptors should be the dwellers of Hell.

But those who enjoined right and forbade wrong said that their action was not useless. They said the least thing was that they were excused with Allah.

Yes, the members of societies are usually found in the category of these three groups.

In Surah Al-Mursalat, No. 77, verses 5 and 6, we recite:

“And by those who reveal the (Divine) Reminder,” “to justify or to warn.”

It should be noted that ***‘forbidding wrong’*** is necessary for completing the statement and having excuse with Allah. The verse says:

“... They said: ‘In order to have an excuse before your Lord...”

We must not justify our faults with ***‘Divine will’***. The verse says:

“And (remember) when a group of them said: ‘Why do you admonish a people whom Allah will destroy or punish with a severe punishment?’...”

Unfortunately, those who are inattentive to the evil affairs, instead of protesting against the corruptors, protest against those who enjoin the right. But, even if we do not probable a good effect, we must forbid the wrong in order to complete the statement and to have excuse before Allah.

However, godly people are not hopeless of improving the society. The verse concludes:

“...and that they may keep from evil.”

Surah al-‘Araf – Verses 165-166

فَلَمَّا نَسُوا مَا ذُكِّرُوا بِهِ أَنْجَيْنَا الَّذِينَ يَنْهَوْنَ عَنِ السُّوءِ وَأَخَذْنَا الَّذِينَ ظَلَمُوا بِعَذَابٍ
بِئْسَ بِمَا كَانُوا يَفْسُقُونَ

فَلَمَّا عَتَوْا عَن مَّا نُهَوُّا عَنْهُ قُلْنَا لَهُمْ كُونُوا قِرَدَةً خَاسِئِينَ

165. “So when they forgot what they were reminded of, We delivered those who forbade evil and seized those who were unjust with a dreadful punishment for the transgressions they used to commit.”

166. “So when they defied what they had been forbidden from, We said to them: ‘Be you apes scouted’.”

In this verse, the Qur’ān implies that finally mammonism overwhelmed them and they forgot the command of Allah (s.w.t.), therefore they confronted the bitter moment of punishment.

The verse says:

“So when they forgot what they were reminded of, We delivered those who forbade evil and seized those who were unjust with a dreadful punishment for the transgressions they used to commit.”

Who Were Delivered?

From those three groups of people: (the sinners, the inattentive ones, and the admonishers), only the third group were secured from the punishment of Allah. As the Islamic traditions indicate, when this group, the third group, saw that their admonishments were not effective in the wrong doers, they became worried and said that they would go out of the city.

They left the city at night and went into the desert. Accidentally, by that very night, the retribution of Allah befell upon the couple of the abovementioned groups who were inside the city.

The sort of their retribution is explained in the second verse of the above verses as follows:

“So when they defied what they had been forbidden from, We said to them: ‘Be you apes scouted’.”

It is clear that the commandment saying **‘Be you’**, here, is a genetic command, which means they changed immediately in the shape of ‘apes’.

According to some Islamic literature, of course, those who were transformed continued to live only for a few days, and then they died, so that there could appear no generation from them later.

Surah al-‘Araf – Verse 167

وَإِذْ تَأَذَّنَ رَبُّكَ لِيُبْعَثَنَّ عَلَيْهِمْ إِلَى يَوْمِ الْقِيَامَةِ مَنْ يَسُومُهُمْ سُوءَ الْعَذَابِ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ
لَسَرِيعُ الْعِقَابِ وَإِنَّهُ لَغَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ

167. “And (remember) when your Lord proclaimed that He would surely send against them, until the Day of Resurrection, those who would inflict on them a grievous punishment. Verily your Lord is certainly quick to requite (evil), and verily He is Forgiving, Merciful.”

This verse and the verse after it point to a part of the worldly retributions of those Jewish people who stood against the commandments of Allah and trod on the truth, justice, and honesty.

At first, the verse says:

“And (remember) when your Lord proclaimed that He would surely send against them, until the Day of Resurrection, those who would inflict on them a grievous punishment...”

It is understood from this verse that this rebellious group will never meet a complete calmness, although they establish a government for themselves.

Then, at the end of the verse, it adds that Allah is both quick in punishing those who deserve punishment, and forgiving, Merciful unto those wrong doers who repent. The verse says:

“... Verily your Lord is certainly quick to requite (evil), and verily He is Forgiving, Merciful.”

This Qur’ānic phrase indicates that Allah has left the way wide open for them to return in order that no one imagines that a compulsory fate with adversity, retribution, and chastisement has been assigned for them.

Surah al-‘Araf – Verse 168

وَقَطَّعْنَاهُمْ فِي الْأَرْضِ أُمَّمًا مِّنْهُمْ الصَّالِحُونَ وَمِنْهُمْ دُونَ ذَلِكَ وَبَلَوْنَاهُمْ
بِالْحَسَنَاتِ وَالسَّيِّئَاتِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَرْجِعُونَ

168. “And We dispersed them into communities on the earth, some of them being righteous, and some of them otherwise, and We tried them with good things and bad things that they might return.”

It was ordained that for a length of time the Children of Israel visited honour and power, in order that maybe they might become thankful. And, for another length of time, they were involved in calamities that might the sense of repentance and humiliation be renewed in them.

Some of them were virtuous and believed in Islam, while some others pursued corruption, and insisted on their own mammonism and stubbornness.

The verse says:

“And We dispersed them into communities on the earth, some of them being righteous, and some of them otherwise, and We tried them with good things and bad things that they might return.”

Surah al-‘Araf – Verse 169

فَخَلَفَ مِنْ بَعْدِهِمْ خَلْفٌ وَرِثُوا الْكِتَابَ يَأْخُذُونَ عَرَضَ هَذَا الْأَدْنَىٰ وَيَقُولُونَ سَيُغْفَرُ
لَنَا وَإِن يَأْتِهِمْ عَرَضٌ مِّثْلَهُ يَأْخُذُوهُ أَلَمْ يُؤْخَذْ عَلَيْهِمْ مِيثَاقُ الْكِتَابِ أَن لَا يَقُولُوا عَلَى
اللَّهِ إِلَّا الْحَقَّ وَدَرَسُوا مَا فِيهِ وَالِدَارُ الْأُخْرَىٰ خَيْرٌ لِلَّذِينَ يُتَّقُونَ أَفَلَا تَعْقِلُونَ

169. “Then there succeeded after them (an evil) posterity (who) inherited the Book (Turah), taking

the transitory goods of this lower world, and saying: 'It will be forgiven us'. And if similar transitory goods were to come to them (again), they would take them, too. Was not the covenant of the Book taken with them that they should not attribute anything to Allah except the truth? And they have studied what is in it, while the abode of the Hereafter is better for those who keep from evil. Have you then no sense?"

In former verses, the words were about the ancestors of the Jews, but in this verse, the statement is upon the children and descendants of them.

At first, the Qur'ān remarks that their descendants inherited the Turah, but they used to prefer the material of this low world to the obedience of Allah. 2 The verse says:

"Then there succeeded after them (an evil) posterity (who) inherited the Book (Turah), taking the transitory goods of this lower world..."

Then, the verse implies that when they are hesitating between the struggle of conscience, on one side, and their worldly interests, on the other side, they appeal to some false hopes and say that they do obtain this existing interest, which is in cash, whether it is lawful or unlawful, and since the Lord is Merciful, Forgiving, He will forgive them.

"...and saying: 'It will be forgiven us'..."

This phrase shows that after committing such an action, they assumed a kind of fleeting regret and a state of extrinsic repentance. But, as the Qur'ān says, this regret and remorse of theirs had no root in them. And that was why if they found another material benefit like that, they would take it, too. 3 The verse says:

"...And if similar transitory goods were to come to them (again), they would take them, too..."

However, this part of the verse points to the bribery of some of the Jews and perverting the heavenly verses of the Turah thereby, and also forsaking the ordinances of Allah because of the contrast of those laws with their benefits.

Therefore, next to that, the verse says:

"...Was not the covenant of the Book taken with them that they should not attribute anything to Allah except the truth?..."

If they were not acquainted with the divine verses (of the Turah) and committed such wrong actions, they might have an excuse for themselves. But, the difficulty of the event is in this fact that they had frequently seen the verses of the Turah and had understood them, yet they spoilt them and defied the command of Allah by setting them aside. The verse says:

“...And they have studied what is in it...”

At the end of the verse, the Qur’ān implies that they make mistake, and such actions and these goods will not be useful for them. The fact is that the abode of Hereafter is better for the pious. The verse says:

“...while the abode of the Hereafter is better for those who keep from evil...”

Then the Qur’ān questions them whether they have not any sense to perceive those facts that are so clear. Here is the words of the Qur’ān:

“...Have you then no sense?”

Surah al-‘Araf – Verse 170

وَالَّذِينَ يُمَسِّكُونَ بِالْكِتَابِ وَأَقَامُوا الصَّلَاةَ إِنَّا لَا نُنْضِيعُ أَجْرَ الْمُصْلِحِينَ

170. “And those who hold fast to the Book and establish the prayer, verily We do not waste the reward of the reformers.”

This verse points to another group, opposite to the above-mentioned perverted group, who not only avoid any perversion and concealing the Divine verses, but also take hold of them and practice them minutely. The Qur’ān has called this group ‘the reformers’ of the world, and maintains an important reward for them. Concerning them, it says that surely Allah does not waste the great reward that they will have with Him. The verse says:

“And those who hold fast to the Book and establish the prayer, verily We do not waste the reward of the reformers.”

The above-mentioned verse clearly indicates that, without taking hold of the Heavenly Books and Divine commandments, the fulfilment of the true reforms in the world is impossible. This meaning emphasizes this fact, once more, that religion is not something only related to the world of super nature or to the next world.

Religion is effective in the spirit of life for all human beings. It protects the interests of all humankind and it is alongside the execution of the principles of justice, peace, tranquility and any concepts which are gathered in the vast meaning of the term ‘reform’.

Surah al-‘Araf – Verse 171

وَإِذْ نَتَقْنَا الْجَبَلَ فَوْقَهُمْ كَأَنَّهُ ظِلَّةٌ وَظَنُوا أَنَّهُ وَاقِعٌ بِهِمْ خُذُوا مَا آتَيْنَاكُمْ بِقُوَّةٍ
وَاذْكُرُوا مَا فِيهِ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَتَّقُونَ

171. “And (remember) when We plucked the mountain (and held it) above them as if it were a canopy, and they supposed it was about to fall on them (when We told them:) ‘Hold you firmly what We gave you and remember what is in it, that you may keep from evil.’”

This is the last verse in this Surah which is upon the life of the Children of Israel. In this verse, the Qur’an reminds the community of the Jews another happening. The event is both a lesson of admonition and an evidence of giving a covenant. It says:

“And (remember) when We plucked the mountain (and held it) above them as if it were a canopy...”

It was so that they imagined the mountain was nigh to fall down over them. Therefore, a shaking horror and anxiety encompassed them, thoroughly their entity, and they began weeping with supplication. The verse says:

“...and they supposed it was about to fall on them...”

It was at the same time that they were in that condition and they were told to hold firm what Allah gave them. The verse continues saying:

“...(when we told them:) ‘Hold you firmly what We gave you...’”

They ought to be in awe of Allah’s punishment and fulfil their duty according to the covenants He has taken from them in it. The verse says:

“...and remember what is in it, that you may keep from evil’.”

This means that the entire messengership of Moses (as) and other prophets, and their constant struggles and hard conflicts, as well as the grievous anxieties and laborious hardships that they tolerated, all were for the sake that the command of Allah and the principles of the truth, justice, purity, and piety be executed rather perfectly among all human beings.

1. Nahjul-Balaghah, Sermon No. 156

2. The Arabic word /xalf/ is applied for an ‘impious child’, while the Arabic word /xalaf/ is applied for a ‘pious child’.
(Narrated from Majma‘-ul-Bayān)

3. The Arabic term /‘arad/ means any capital or property, but the term /‘ard/ means only the money which is in cash.

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