

# Patience and Gratitude



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This article discusses the meaning of patience (Sabr) and gratitude (Shukr) and shows how they are integral elements of faith analyzing various verses of the Holy Qur'an and many Traditions (ahadith).

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## Abstract

The '*patient and grateful servants*' in the Qur'an are those who take lessons from how God has created the world of nature and how He has treated the previous nations in history (14:5, 31:31, 34: 19, 42:33). The significance and connection of these two qualities is seen more vividly in a Prophetic narration: '*Iman* (belief, faith) is split in two halves: one half of it is [in] patience, and the other half is [in] gratitude.'<sup>1</sup>

A clear meaning of this is that at times of ease, success and bounty, a believer must be grateful, and at times of difficulty, loss and affliction, a believer must be patient. In several hadiths, the 'one who is grateful when he is given [a blessing], and patient when he is afflicted [with hardship]' is described as a believer, the best of people, the noblest and most honourable servant to God, and one who is given the good of this world and the Hereafter.<sup>2</sup>

This article discusses the meanings of each quality and how they are integral elements of faith. It shows that the essence of both qualities is the realisation that God is the sole owner of everyone and everything in the universe. God's absolute ownership is the spirit of patience and gratitude.

## Gratitude

*Shukr* (gratitude, gratefulness, thankfulness) is defined with respect to *ni'mah* (blessing, bounty). It is a feeling in a beneficiary regarding a benefactor who has bestowed some good, fortune, or favour upon him. The essence of gratitude is the realisation and acknowledgement that 'I owe this bounty to so-and-so, and it was because of him that I received this benefit.' The Qur'an says:

***"Whatever blessing you have is from Allah (16:53)."***

For this reason, it instructs us to be grateful to Him for His bounties (2:152, 2:172, 16:114, 29:17, 31:14).

According to al-Raghib, *shukr* is to recognise a blessing and display it. It has been said that it was originally *kashr*, meaning 'to unveil and expose,' then the first two letters were swapped. Its opposite is *kufr*, which is 'to cover, conceal, and forget a blessing.'<sup>3</sup>

Upon further reflection and analysis, one can reduce this to ownership: gratefulness means understanding that the real owner of this bounty is God. It is in my possession by His bestowment, so I am not its real owner to do whatever I want with it. I am rather an agent that has been given charge, possession, and authority over this bounty by the real Owner. That is why the essence of gratitude is not separable from obedience and worship. The Qur'an uses the two interchangeably:

***"Give thanks for Allah's blessing, if it is Him that you worship" (16:114; also, see 2:172).***

Moreover, the Qur'an has used gratefulness against extravagance (*israf*). Prophet Lot is described as a grateful servant (54:35) while his tribe is termed an extravagant lot (7:81). Likewise, God orders His servants to eat, drink, and give thanks (2:172, 16:114, 34:15) but not waste (7:31). This contrast shows that *israf* (wastefulness, extravagance) – which is when one uses resources irresponsibly and not as outlined by God – is the opposite of gratitude. That is why according to a hadith, gratefulness for God's bounties necessitate abstinence from what God has prohibited.<sup>4</sup>

In one narration, Abu Basir asks Imam al-Sadiq, "Is there any limit to gratitude such that if a servant lives up to it he would count as grateful?" The Imam replied, "Yes" and he explained: "He should praise God [verbally] for every bounty that He has bestowed upon him with regard to his family and possessions. He should also pay any applicable due in the wealth that God has given him."

Afterwards, the Imam quoted several verses from the Qur'an as examples of expressing gratitude and praise (43:13, 23:29, 17:80).<sup>5</sup> As Rumi beautifully puts it:

*Being ungrateful is indeed like this: / To reject one who comes with blessing and bliss.*

*'I don't want your good, if you don't mind! / 'I don't want an eye, so make me blind!'*<sup>6</sup>

It is for the same reason that the Qur'an says:

***"Whoever gives thanks, gives thanks only for his own sake" (27:40, 31:12).***

Giving thanks for any bounty is using it in the way it was intended for, which is conducive to our own welfare and benefit. It also maintains, preserves, and increases the blessing for us:

***"And when your Lord proclaimed, 'If you are grateful, I will surely enhance you [in blessing]'"***  
***(14:7).***

The opposite of it would be wastefulness and extravagance, which will certainly cause the loss and destruction of our resources and blessings.<sup>7</sup> It is narrated from the Prophet, Imam Ali and Imam al-Sadiq: 'If one is given gratitude, he will not be denied increase [of blessings].'<sup>8</sup>

Moreover, the opportunity, awareness, and ability to thank God are themselves further bounties by God. God revealed to Prophet Moses: "O Moses! Thank Me as I deserve.' He replied, 'My Lord! How can I thank You as You deserve, while any thank that I give you is a bounty by which You have blessed me!?' He said: 'O Moses! Now you have thanked me [as I deserve] for you have realised that this [thankfulness of yours] is from Me.'<sup>9</sup>

Similarly, Imam al-Sajjad prays to God: "How can I achieve thanksgiving? For my thanking Thee requires thanksgiving. Whenever I say, 'All praise belongs to Thee!' it becomes thereby incumbent upon me to say [again], 'All praise belongs to Thee!'"<sup>10</sup>

## **Achieving Gratitude**

The Qur'an describes Prophet Noah as a '**very grateful servant**' (17:3). Imam Baqir explained this by saying: "Noah was called a grateful servant because he used to utter every morning and evening: 'O God, verily I take Thee as witness that any blessing or well-being in religious or worldly affairs that comes upon me in the evening or the morning is from Thee alone. Thou hast no partner. To Thee I owe all praise and thank for it until Thou art satisfied and after Thy satisfaction.'<sup>11</sup>

Therefore, observing this verbal formula every morning and evening can pave the road and prepare the grounds for developing this quality. This, however, is only the start. Prophet Noah's praise was only a verbal utterance, but his verbal utterance was an expression and manifestation of what he held in his heart.

To achieve due gratefulness to God, we need to know His bounties and blessings upon us. We are composed of soul and body. Our physical body, which is the lower and transient aspect of our being,

consists of many parts, faculties, and functions that physiologists have ever been studying and discovering more about. Now, what we know of our body is negligible compared to what we do not know. Think of how much God has blessed us just in terms of our physical bodies. Then think of His blessings external to our body, such as food, shelter, clothing, security, sustenance, family, wealth, rain, sun, oceans, and everything found in nature. Then think of the soul and God's immaterial blessings, such as intelligence, emotions, education, determination, guidance, faith, and connection with Him.

Add to these all possible evils and misfortunes that could have struck us if God had not protected us against them. Any illness, pain, disability, loss, calamity, defect, deviation, and sin that others have been afflicted with could have equally happened if it were not for His mercy. Imam Husayn prays to God: "O God! What Thou hast deflected and turned away from me of troubles and distresses is more than what appears to me of wellness and joy."<sup>12</sup> This is why God admonishes us in the Qur'an:

***"Will you then be grateful?" (21:80).***

Taking a few minutes to continue this thread, we can better appreciate the meaning and depth of 'All praise belongs to Allah.' Then we will say this with all our being and from the depths of our hearts. The Qur'an says:

***"If you enumerate Allah's blessings, you will not be able to count them" (14:34, 16:18).***

It is for this reason that we can never praise and thank God as He deserves. We cannot achieve His praise completely because we do not encompass His bounties.<sup>13</sup>

Not only are we indebted to God's bounties, but all existents are. The first and foremost blessing of God is existence itself, which encompasses every being, whether animate or inanimate, material or immaterial. The goodness of existence manifests in the striving of living creatures for survival. Hence, God's blessings and bounties embrace every being and creature: ***"My mercy embraces all things" (7:155)***. That is why ***"All praise belongs to Allah, the Lord of all worlds."***<sup>(1:2)</sup><sup>14</sup>

According to the Muslim mystic Shaiq al-Balkhi,<sup>15</sup> there are three conditions to a proper and complete praise of God: 1) to know God as the Giver of bounties to you, 2) to be pleased and satisfied with what He has given you, and 3) to not use His bounty in the way of His disobedience.<sup>16</sup> The poet Sa'di eloquently states:

*The winds, the clouds, the sun and the moon / Are running day and night to fill up your spoon,  
So, that you may be heedful and in tune / When you sit down to eat your lunch at noon.*<sup>17</sup>

Imam al-Kazim said: "God is generous whether He gives or withholds, because when He gives, He gives what does not belong to you; and when He withholds, He withholds what does not belong to you." This is why we should praise God in all circumstances, whether we achieve or fail, in pleasure and pain, in health and illness.

It is narrated that when a pleasing event happened to the Messenger of God, he would say, "Praise be to God for this blessing," and when a distressing event happened to him, he would say, "Praise be to God at all times." 18 Ibn 'Abbas said: "The first group that will be called to Paradise on the Day of Resurrection are those who praise God in all conditions." 19 There are also some hadith from the Infallibles to this effect. 20

In many narrations, we have been advised to be good neighbours to – or good protectors of God's bounties. According to these very hadiths, this means being grateful to their Benefactor, and to give the dues that is mandatory upon us toward them. Otherwise, God's bounties will depart from us, and it seldom occurs that they return afterwards. 21

Therefore, to achieve gratitude, we are to constantly remind ourselves that we are only deputies and representatives of any blessing that we have, not the real owner of it; we do not have what we have by our own merit and virtue. Rather, anything that we have is from God, Who has given it to us to test us and help us grow by spending it as He pleases. We should also remind ourselves that doing so is only to our own benefit, because it will preserve and increase God's blessings upon us, and will make us God-like, Whose hands of generosity are ever wide open even to those who least deserve it. As the Qur'an says:

***'The Jews say, "Allah's hand is tied up." Tied up be their hands, and cursed be they for what they say! Rather, His hands are wide open: He bestows as He wishes' (5:64).***

## Patience

It is narrated from the Prophet and several Imams, with slight variations: "Patience (*sabr*) to faith (*iman*) is like the head to the body. When the head is gone, so is the body. Likewise, when patience is gone so is faith." 22 The Qur'an describes the patient as follows:

***"And give good news to the patient – those who, when an affliction visits them, say, 'Indeed we belong to Allah, and to Him do we indeed return'" (2: 155–156).***

What makes them patient is their firm belief that ***"Indeed we belong to Allah, and to Him do we indeed return. (2: 156)"*** This can be linked again with the concept of ownership. The essence of patience is the realisation and acknowledgement that I and everything I have belong to God. I do not own even myself, let alone my possessions, properties, qualities, achievements, and actions.

If this idea is truly established in one's heart, then he will not feel a loss when he apparently loses some property, misses some benefit, or fails to achieve a goal. The other half of the formula – "and to Him do we indeed return" – reinforces this by inspiring hope in one's heart for the rewards and blessings that God has prepared for and promised to the patient.

## Types of Patience

According to the narrations, there are three forms of patience:

1. Patience in afflictions, which is to bear the bitterness of troubles and misfortunes.
2. Patience in obedience, which is to bear the difficulty of performing what we are commanded.
3. Patience in sins, which is to stop and refrain from committing sins despite their attraction.<sup>23</sup>

## Patience and Faith

The close tie between faith and the above types of patience is evident. Faith entails that any trouble or affliction that befalls us is under God's watch and according to His decree. It is a test of patience by Him to make us grow and attain felicity and reward. Faith also entails a sense of obedience and servitude to God, which leads one to do what He has commanded and to abstain from what He has prohibited. Belief in God's presence and watch also necessitate one to avoid committing sins.

Imam al-Sadiq said: "We [Imams] are patient, but our Shi'as are indeed more patient than us." Then he explained this by adding: "We have patience while we know [the wisdom behind our difficulties], but you are patient while you do not know."<sup>24</sup> Rumi articulately pens the beauty of trials as follows:

*The trial of your Friend is so that you may grow*

*His knowledge is superior to all that you know.*<sup>25</sup>

Another fundamental connection between patience and faith is that if one believes in the Hereafter and its immense rewards and punishments, then the affairs of this world will become less significant in his eyes, for any benefit or loss here is trivial compared to eternal bliss and everlasting torment. Imam Ali said: "Whoever is certain about the Hereafter forgets this world."<sup>26</sup> In another similar hadith he said: "Whoever loves meeting God forgets this world."<sup>27</sup>

The Qur'an tells us about certain individuals who were mesmerised by Korah's glamour. When they expressed their wish, and yearning to have similar wealth and luxury, the knowledgeable ones in their community advised them:

***"Woe to you! Allah's reward is better for someone who has faith and acts righteously, and no one will receive it except the patient" (28:80).***

Patience in this sense is not a moral virtue or quality, but it is a matter of worldview. It is about how one weighs, assesses, and discounts present and future benefits and losses. It is in this light that the Prophet said: "Good for him who abandons a current pleasure for an unseen promise." Such exchange is the essence of faith, and thus the idea that patience to faith is like the head to the body. Hafiz, the great

Persian poet, movingly describes the reward of patience:

*When I was given patience to forbear abuse, / It was a promise of success and a pleasing news.*

*With sweets and honey my words are replete / It's a reward of patience from indulging in sweets.*<sup>28</sup>

## **Patience in Practice**

The Qur'an says:

***“Piety is not to turn your faces to the east or the west; rather, piety is [personified by] those who have faith in Allah and the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and the prophets, and who give their wealth, for the love of Him, to relatives, orphans, the needy, the traveller and the beggar, and for [the freeing of] the slaves, and maintain the prayer and give the zakat, and those who fulfil their covenants, when they pledge themselves, and those who are patient in stress and distress, and in the heat of battle. They are the ones who are true [to their covenant], and it is they who are the Godway”. (2: 177).***

The true realisation of any moral virtue occurs when it becomes one's second nature, such that the person acts according to it without much difficulty or pretention.<sup>29</sup> One way to achieve this is to act 'as if' one possesses the virtue. Imam Ali says, “If you are not tolerant, put on the garb of tolerance, because it rarely happens that that one imitates a people and does not soon become one of them.”<sup>30</sup>

Practice and consistency help one develop this quality in time. Another instruction is found in the Imam's answer when he was asked about *iman* (faith, belief). He said: “Faith stands on four pillars: patience, conviction, justice, and *jihad*. Patience itself has four aspects: eagerness, fear, disinterestedness, and anticipation. Whoever is eager for Paradise will let go of lustful desires; whoever fears the Fire [of Hell] will keep away from sins; whoever is disinterested in this world will find hardships to be light; and whoever anticipates death will hasten toward good deeds...”<sup>31</sup> This hadith refers to the various types of patience and the root of each.

Imam Ali describes the importance and results of self-purification while striving to obey God: “You should know that there is no act of obedience to God except that it is accompanied by some pain, and there is no act of disobedience to God except that it comes with some pleasure. Thus, may God have mercy on the person who cuts free from his lusts and uproots the desires of his ego, for indeed the ego is the hardest thing to control, and it ever drags one to a sinful desire.”<sup>32</sup>

Rumi eloquently instructs his readers to learn patience as it offers long-term rewards:

*If you want your speech to be sweet and neat / Have patience and abstain from eating the sweet.*

*The bitterness of patience is the desire of the wise / But children ever crave for sweets and prize.*<sup>33</sup>

Another means of developing moral virtues is to study and reflect on the inspirational accounts of brave men and women who showed patience at the most difficult times, in circumstances that most people would not be able to endure. It is said that once the wife of Fath al-Mawsili, who was an early Muslim mystic, fell down and hurt herself, but then she smiled instead of crying. She was asked, “Doesn’t it hurt?” She replied, “The pleasure of its reward took away the bitterness of its pain.”<sup>34</sup>

A similar account to this is narrated about Aminah Bigum, the learned daughter of Muhammad Taqi Majlisi and the wife of Muhammad Salih Mazandarani, who are both among the leading figures of piety and scholarship in Shi’ism. It is said that once she fell from the stairs, broke her head and shin, and started bleeding. However, she was only heard saying contentedly, “All praise belongs to God, the Lord of all worlds.” She was asked, “Don’t your wounds hurt?” She said: “I was pacified when I remembered the reward that God gives me for bearing this pain.”<sup>35</sup>

These accounts are confirmed by a hadith by Imam Ali concerning the verse:

***“Whatever affliction that may visit you is because of what your hands have earned, and He excuses many [an offense].” (42:30)***

Imam Ali also said: “No vein is moved out of place, no one hits a stone, no foot slips, and no thorn scratches the skin – except for some sin, and yet what God pardons is more. If God penalises one for his sin in this world, then God is greater and nobler than penalising him again in the Hereafter.”<sup>36</sup>

A challenging type of patience is in social interactions, when one faces abuse, misbehaviour, and oppression in family, at work, or in other places. The Qur’an addresses this issue in several places. Even though the Qur’an sanctions equitable retaliation, it immediately warns us of exceeding beyond that:

***“So should anyone aggress against you, assail him in the manner he assailed you, and be wary of Allah, and know that Allah is with the Godwary” (2: 194; also see 17:33).***

Even when it is permissible to retaliate, patience is yet a higher virtue:

***“And if you retaliate, retaliate with the like of what you have been made to suffer, but if you are patient that is surely better for the patient. So be patient, and you cannot be patient except with Allah [’s help]. And do not grieve for them, nor be upset by their plot.” (16: 126–127).***

The advice ‘to not be upset by their plot’ is because: ***‘Indeed Allah is with those who are Godwary and those who are virtuous’ (2: 128)***. Hafiz says:

*What more do we want when the Beloved is with us? /*

*The bliss of His presence is sufficient for us.*<sup>37</sup>

This is effectively a result of a monotheistic view of the universe. In any interaction, one should see himself dealing only with God. If one does good to others for the sake of God, then their ungratefulness should not hurt or disappoint him by any means. Imam Ali says: “Let not the ungrateful discourage you from doing good, for sometimes you are thanked for a good deed by one who derives no benefit from it. Indeed, what you gain from the gratitude of the grateful is more than what the ungrateful wastes. **‘And Allah loves the good-doers (3: 134, 3: 148, 5:93).**”<sup>38</sup>

Sa’di says:

*You do good and throw it in Tigris, my friend,*

*For God, will pay you back when you hit a dead end.*<sup>39</sup>

Believing in a single Lord (*rabb*) that governs the universe and a single system that pervades all beings, directs a person’s actions toward that One Lord, and attunes the person with that single system.

Regarding this, Rumi says:

*The world is a mountain / And our actions are a shout;*

*The shout will echo back, / So we should watch out!*<sup>40</sup>

## Summary

Gratefulness is to acknowledge God as the absolute owner of everyone and everything. The result of this acknowledgement is that the person will dedicate himself and all of the resources he is endowed with in the cause of the One and Real Owner. Patience is also a result of seeing one’s self and properties as possessions of God, as opposed to one’s own belongings. Both qualities share the foundation of belief in God as the absolute Lord and the only Owner of everything in the universe.

Patience and gratitude are the fruits and implications of this same belief that differ due to a believer’s circumstances. For this reason – according to several hadiths – the reward of one who is grateful and benevolent in health, wealth, and comfort is the same as the reward of one who is patient in affliction, poverty, and fasting.<sup>41</sup>

Imam al-Baqir said: “A servant is always in [at least] one of three things: an affliction, a decree, or a bounty. When God afflicts him, his duty is to forbear (*sabr*); when God carries out His decree about him, his duty is to submit (*taslim*); and when God blesses him with a bounty his duty is to be grateful (*shukr*).”<sup>42</sup>

1. Tuhaf, p. 48. Ahsa’i, ‘Awali al-La’ali, vol. 2, p. 66, h 171. Suyuti, al-Jami’ al-Saghir, vol. 1, p. 479, h 3106. Kanz, vol. 1, p. 36, h 61. Mustadrak.W, vol. 11, p. 287, h 13039.

2. Iskafi, al-Tamhis, p. 58, h 163. Tuhaf, p. 364. Ghurar, h, 1539 and 6120. Tabrisi, Ali ibn al-Hasan, Mishkat al-Anwar, p. 22. Warram, vol. 2, p. 247.

3. Raghīb, al-Mufradat, under sh-k-r.
4. Kafi, vol. 2, p. 95, h 10. Khisal, vol. 1, p. 14, h 50.
5. Kafi, vol. 2, pp. 95-96, h 12.
6. Rumi, Mathnawi, vol. 3, lines 365 and 367.
7. Ansari, Tafsir-i Surah-yi Luqman, pp. 77-80.
8. Tuhaf, p. 41. Nahjul Balaghah, Saying 135. Amali.T, p. 693, h 1473. Warram, vol. 2, pp. 84-85.
9. Kafi, vol. 2, p. 98, h 27. Mishkat, p. 32. A similar account is narrated from Prophet David (a). See Daylami, vol. 1, p. 122.
10. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 91, p. 146, Munajat al-Shakirin.
11. 'Ayyashi, vol. 2, p. 280, h 17. 'Ilal, vol. 1, p. 29.
12. Ibn Tawus, Iqbal al-'amal, vol. 2, p. 76. Kaf'ami, al-Balad al-Amin, p. 252.
13. Razi, vol. 1, pp. 23-24 and vol. 1, p. 193.
14. Razi, vol. 1, p. 194.
15. A leading early figures of Islamic mysticism. He was killed in 194 AH.
16. Qurtubi, vol. 1, p. 134.
17. Sa'di, Gulistan, Dibachah.
18. Kafi, vol. 2, p. 97, h 19. Amali. T, pp. 49-50, h 64. Mishkat, p. 31.
19. Warram, vol. 1, p. 230.
20. Kafi, vol. 5, p. 15. Naraqī, Jami' al-Sa'adat, vol. 3, p. 192.
21. Kafi, vol. 4, p. 38. Tuhaf, vol. 4, p. 48. Faqih vol. 2, p. 60, h 1706. Amali T, p. 246, h 431.
22. Himyari, Qurb al-Isnad, pp. 155-156, h 572. Kafi, vol. 2, p. 87ff. Tuhaf, pp. 202, 211 and 282. Khisal, vol. 1, p. 315. Nahjul Balaghah, Saying 82. Suyuti, al-Jami' al-Saghir, vol. 2, p. 113, h 5136. Kanz, vol. 3, p. 744, h 8631-8632, and 1vol. 6, p. 241, h 44309.
23. Kafi, vol. 2, p. 91, h 15. Tuhaf, 206. Warram, vol. 1, p. 40. Daylami, vol. 1, p. 127. Suyuti, al-Jami' al-Saghir, vol. 2, p. 114, h 5137. Kanz, vol. 3, p. 273, h 6515.
24. Mishkat, pp. 274-275.
25. Rumi, Mathnawi, vol. 4, line 107.
26. Ghurar, h 2772.
27. Ghurar, h 2491.
28. Hafiz, Ghazal 183.
29. Naraqī, Jami' al-Sa'adat, vol. 3, p. 227.
30. Nahjul Balaghah, Saying 207. Ghurar, h 6435.
31. Nahjul Balaghah, Saying 31.
32. Nahjul Balaghah, Sermon 176
33. Rumi, Mathnawi, vol. 1, lines 1610-1611.
34. Ghazzali, Ihya' al-'Ulum, vol. 12, p. 53.
35. Dastghayb, مؤمن, vol. 1, p. 55.
36. Kafi, vol. 2, p. 445, h 6.
37. Hafiz, ghazal 268.
38. Nahjul Balaghah, Saying 204.
39. Sa'di, Mawa'iz, mathnawiyat.
40. Rumi, Mathnawi, vol. 1, line 216.
41. Kafi, vol 2, p. 94. Tabrisi, Ali ibn al-Hasan, Mishkat al-Anwar, p. 27.
42. Khisal, vol. 1, p. 86, h 17. Rawdat al-Wa'izin, vol. 2, p. 472. Tabrisi, Ali ibn al-Hasan, Mishkat al- Anwar, p. 300.

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