

Fast 20: Forgiveness of sins by Allah

- For a person, a fallible mortal, to be made responsible and accountable for his deeds could be a heavy burden. As we saw in the last Study, he has to face Allah as an individual, all by himself, with no one to assist him. This is why Allah speaks so often of His forgiveness and asks man to seek it constantly. This subject is too vast to be covered in brief Studies like these. Firstly, there is the following repeated principle:

“Allah does not impose on any soul a duty beyond its ability. To its benefit is what (good) it earns, and to its detriment is what (evil) it works.”
(2:286)

لَا يُكَلِّفُ اللَّهُ نَفْسًا إِلَّا وُسْعَهَا لَهَا مَا
كَسَبَتْ وَعَلَيْهَا مَا اكْتَسَبَتْ

“We do not impose on any soul a duty beyond its ability.” (6:152 and 7:42)

لَا نُكَلِّفُ نَفْسًا إِلَّا وُسْعَهَا

This means that all the commandments and prohibitions prescribed by Allah are within the capacity of any human being to act upon. If there is something which is possible for one person to do, but not for another, then the latter can follow that injunction as best as he is able to. The Quran says: *Tā'at-un ma'rūfat-un* (طَاعَةٌ مَعْرُوفَةٌ), which most translators translate into English as “reasonable obedience (is required)” (24:53).

The first verse above goes on to lay down the principle that any good that a person does works in his favour, and any wrong he does brings him harm. That is the reason behind the commandments and prohibitions. It is not to make people suffer.

- The passage 2:286, the start of which was quoted above, continues:

“Our Lord, do not punish us if we forget or make a mistake. Our Lord, do not lay on us a burden as You did lay on those before us. Our Lord, do not impose on us (obligations, trials, etc.) which we have not the strength to bear.”

رَبَّنَا لَا تُؤَاخِذْنَا إِنْ نَسِينَا أَوْ أَخْطَأْنَا
رَبَّنَا وَلَا تَحْمِلْ عَلَيْنَا إَصْرًا كَمَا
حَمَلْتَهُ عَلَى الَّذِينَ مِنْ قَبْلِنَا رَبَّنَا وَلَا
تَحْمِلْنَا مَا لَا حَاقَةَ لَنَا بِهِ

Any sin, even deliberately and knowingly done, can be considered as forgetfulness or a mistake when you look back and realise that you should not have done it. So in the first prayer we are asking forgiveness for **all** our sins, not just those committed by actually forgetting or making a mistake without realising it.

The burden which Allah laid on “those before us” could **not** have been a burden which Allah sought to impose on them because it was said just before that “Allah does not impose on any soul a duty beyond its ability”. This burden was brought on themselves by their own wrongdoing. **The Muslim prayer here is to avoid falling into the mistakes of followers of earlier religions.** They had gone to two opposite extremes. The Jews had come to regard the performance of rites and rituals as the real aim of religion, and forgot that these were meant to create love of God in a person’s heart and purity of character in his dealings with others. The Christians went to the opposite extreme of declaring as unnecessary all the structure of religion, and regarded good intentions as sufficient. They also went to an extreme in instituting monkery and monasticism, i.e., the giving up of the world altogether to attain spiritual purity. **Muslims pray here to avoid going to these extremes of the past people in both directions.** But the same happened to them as well. Most Muslims consider, for example, the reciting of words of prayer by one’s tongue to be what Allah wants, even without those words entering the heart. There are others who pay little attention to the prescribed acts of worship in Islam, and prefer to indulge in all kinds of spiritual practices for the purification of the soul which they have introduced into Islam.

Thirdly, we pray not to be tested and tried in ways that are beyond our power. A person may find himself in circumstances in which doing the right thing is very difficult and may bring suffering on him. We pray for such trials not to befall us.

- The above-quoted verse continues and closes as follows:

“And pardon us! And grant us protection! And have mercy on us! You are our Patron, so grant us victory over the disbelieving people.”

وَأَعْفُ عَنَّا وَاعْفِرْ لَنَا وَارْحَمْنَا
 أَنْتَ مَوْلَانَا فَانصُرْنَا عَلَى الْقَوْمِ
 الْكَافِرِينَ

Asking for pardon relates to actual wrongdoing committed in the past. Asking for grant of protection refers to the fear of committing wrongs in the future, that we may be protected against weakness. Asking for mercy relates to the desire to make progress, so that protected from sin we may do acts of active goodness in the world.

The context of this verse has no connection at all with fighting a war. Therefore a victory over the disbelieving people is either a spiritual victory, in which Muslims show themselves to be better in behaviour than other people, or by the “disbelieving people” it may mean the forces of disbelief which attack a person from within him.