

Fast 27: Jihād — What is it?

- The word *jihād* does not mean ‘war’. According to classical Arabic dictionaries it means the exerting of one’s power in repelling something bad. It can be against a visible enemy, against the devil, or against one’s own self. This word by itself does not refer to any religious duty of Muslims. In Arabic, even non-Muslims can be said to be doing a *jihād* against Muslims, as the Quran says:

“And We have enjoined on man goodness to his parents. But if they strive (*jāhadā*) to make you set up partners with Me, of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them.”
(29:8, see also 31:15)

وَوَصَّيْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ بِوَالِدَيْهِ حُسْنًا وَإِنْ
جَاهَدَكَ لِتُشْرِكَ بِي مَا لَيْسَ لَكَ بِهِ عِلْمٌ فَلَا
تُطِعْهُمَا

Here the unbelieving parents of a Muslim are said to be conducting a *jihād* against him to make him worship things other than the one God.

- When the Holy Prophet was living in Makkah, and there was no revelation in the Quran relating to fighting battles, the Quran still mentioned *jihād* as being conducted by Muslims, and this was in the sense of spiritual striving to attain nearness to God:

“And those who strive hard (*jāhadū*) for Us, We shall certainly guide them in Our ways. And Allah is surely with the doers of good.”
(29:69)

وَالَّذِينَ جَاهَدُوا فِيْنَا لَنَهْدِيَنَّهُمْ سُبُلَنَا وَ
إِنَّ اللَّهَ لَمَعَ الْمُحْسِنِينَ

The result of this *jihād* is stated to be God’s guidance of those who strive in His ways.

- The word *jihād* is used precisely in the same sense twice in a previous verse in the same chapter:

“And whoever strives hard (*jāhada*), strives (*yujāhidu*) for himself (i.e., for his own benefit). Surely Allah is above need of His creatures.” (29:6)

وَمَنْ جَاهَدَ فَإِنَّمَا يُجَاهِدُ لِنَفْسِهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ
لَغَنِيٌّ عَنِ الْعَالَمِينَ

This is a person who is striving, or conducting a *jihād*, to improve himself.

- Again, before the Quran ever mentioned Muslims as having to fighting battles, it mentioned their *jihād* of bearing their difficulties patiently in the face of persecution for their faith, persecution which forced them to flee for their lives:

“Then surely your Lord, to those who flee after they are persecuted, then struggle hard (*jāhadū*) and are patient, surely your Lord after that is Protecting, Merciful.” (16:110)

ثُمَّ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ لِلَّذِينَ هَاجَرُوا مِنْ بَعْدِ مَا فُتِنُوا
ثُمَّ جَاهَدُوا وَصَبَرُوا إِنَّ رَبَّكَ مِنْ بَعْدِهَا
لَغَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ ﴿١١٠﴾

It is wrongly thought that patience and doing *jihād* are opposite things, and that one can either show patience, i.e., do nothing, or do *jihād*. And there is a misconception that at Makkah, before the Holy Prophet’s move to Madinah, the Quran taught Muslims only to show patience (*ṣabr*) but at Madinah it changed this teaching and required them to do *jihād*. The error of this view is shown by the verse quoted above, since it describes those who do *jihād* as being patient. **Remaining patient** was also a struggle or *jihād*.

- Yet again at Makkah, Muslims were taught:

“And strive hard (*jāhidū*) for Allah with due striving (*jihād*).” (22:78)

وَجَاهِدُوا فِي اللَّهِ حَقَّ جِهَادِهِ^ط

This is a *jihād* to attain nearness to God. It is called here *ḥaqqā jihād*, meaning the “due” *jihād* or *jihād* as it ought to be done.

- Another revelation at Makkah is as follows:

“So do not obey the disbelievers, and strive (*jāhid*) against them a mighty striving (*jihād*) with it.” (25:52)

فَلَا تُطِعِ الْكَافِرِينَ وَجَاهِدْهُمْ بِهِ جِهَادًا
كَبِيرًا ﴿٥٢﴾

This is a *jihād* which, as the verse says, is to be carried on against the unbelievers, but it is not by means of the sword but by means of the Quran. And it is called here “a mighty *jihād*.”

- The above two verses show that a *jihād*, **in the terminology of the Quran**, is the struggle made to attain nearness to God and to subdue one’s passions, and the struggle made to win over the unbelievers, not by means of force but with the truths and arguments brought by the Quran.