

Fast 27: Prophets and Messengers — their submission to God and their mortality

- In three places in the Quran the Holy Prophet Muhammad is instructed to declare that he is “the first of those who submit”:

“Say: I am commanded to serve Allah, being sincere to Him in obedience, and I am commanded to be the first of those who submit. Say: Surely I fear, if I disobey my Lord, the punishment of a grievous day.” (39:11–13; see also 6:14 and 6:163)

قُلْ إِنِّي أُمِرْتُ أَنْ أَعْبُدَ اللَّهَ مُخْلِصًا لَهُ الدِّينَ ﴿١١﴾
وَأُمِرْتُ لِأَنْ أَكُونَ أَوَّلَ الْمُسْلِمِينَ ﴿١٣﴾ قُلْ إِنِّي
أَخَافُ أَنْ عَصَيْتُ رَبِّي عَذَابَ يَوْمٍ عَظِيمٍ ﴿١٣﴾

The word here for “those who submit” is *muslimīn*, which is the Arabic for “Muslims”. Obviously, the Holy Prophet was not the first person in history whom the Quran calls “Muslim”, since it calls Abraham as “Muslim” in 3:67 as we saw in Study 25. What is meant by “first” is that while preaching to others the teaching of submission to God, the Prophet Muhammad is the first to act on this himself. He is the first and the foremost of all in following his revelation, before asking others to do so. And he is commanded to serve Allah with sincerity.

The last statement in the above verse mentions “disobeying the Lord”. There was, of course, no possibility that the Holy Prophet would disobey Allah and be punished as a result. However, every prophet was a mortal and therefore the law which applied to all mortals could not exclude a prophet. It also shows that the Holy Prophet felt responsible and answerable for his actions. He did not think along the lines: I am a prophet of God, God has protected me against any wrong-doing, anything I say or do is right, so I need not worry about my actions. On the contrary, he became even more concerned and “fearing” about acting rightly and regarding himself as a fallible human being. This statement occurs twice more in the Quran in the same words:

“Surely I fear, if I disobey my Lord, the punishment of a grievous day.” (6:15 and 10:15)

إِنِّي أَخَافُ أَنْ عَصَيْتُ رَبِّي عَذَابَ يَوْمٍ عَظِيمٍ ﴿١٥﴾

- That prophets were mortals has been mentioned above. This is repeatedly mentioned in the Quran, in connection with messengers as a whole, as well as with individual messengers including the Holy Prophet Muhammad. They had human physical needs:

“And We did not send before you any messengers but they surely ate food and went about in the markets.” (25:20)

وَمَا أَرْسَلْنَا قَبْلَكَ مِنَ الْمُرْسَلِينَ إِلَّا إِنَّهُمْ لَيَأْكُلُونَ الطَّعَامَ وَيَمْشُونَ فِي الْأَسْوَاقِ ط

“Nor did We give them (the prophets) bodies not eating food, nor did they live forever.” (21:8)

وَمَا جَعَلْنَاهُمْ جَسَدًا لَا يَأْكُلُونَ الطَّعَامَ وَمَا كَانُوا خَالِدِينَ ﴿٨﴾

- The Quran mentions some messengers, by name, who had the following dialogue with their opponents:

“...They (the opponents) said: You are nothing but mortals like us; you wish to turn us away from what our fathers used to worship, so bring us clear authority. Their messengers said to them: We are nothing but mortals like yourselves, but Allah bestows (His) favours on whom He pleases of His servants. ...” (14:10–11)

... قَالُوا إِنْ أَنْتُمْ إِلَّا بَشَرٌ مِّثْلُنَا تُرِيدُونَ أَنْ تَصُدُّونَا عَمَّا كَانَ يَعْبُدُ آبَاؤُنَا فَأْتُونَنَا بِسُلْطَانٍ مُبِينٍ ﴿١٠﴾ قَالَتْ لَهُمْ رُسُلُهُمْ إِنْ نَحْنُ إِلَّا بَشَرٌ مِثْلُكُمْ وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ يَمُنُّ عَلَىٰ مَنْ يَشَاءُ مِنْ عِبَادِهِ ... ط

- Even more generally, the Quran mentions people of the times of previous prophets in these words: “those who disbelieved before, then they tasted the evil consequences of their conduct, and they had a painful punishment” (64:5), and then it says:

“That is because their messengers came to them with clear arguments, but they said: Shall mortals guide us? So they disbelieved and turned away, ...” (64:6)

ذَلِكَ بِأَنَّهُ كَانَتْ تَأْتِيهِمْ رُسُلُهُم بِالْبَيِّنَاتِ فَقَالُوا أَبَشَرٌ يَهْدُونَنَا فَكَفَرُوا وَتَوَلَّوْا ...

- The fact that messengers were ordinary mortals was a reason why their people rejected them. This attitude is mentioned many times, for example in case of Noah:

“But the chiefs of his people who disbelieved said: We do not see you as anything but a mortal like us, nor do we see that any follow you but those who are the lowest of us at first thought. Nor do we see in you any superiority over us; no, we think you to be liars.” (11:27)

فَقَالَ الْمَلَأُ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا مِنْ قَوْمِهِ مَا نَرِكَ إِلَّا بَشَرًا مِثْلَنَا وَمَا نَرِكَ اتِّبَعَكَ إِلَّا الَّذِينَ هُمْ أَرَادُوا أَنْ يَبْغُوا مِنَ الرِّأْيِ وَمَا نَرِي لَكُمْ عَلَيْنَا مِنْ فَضْلٍ بَلْ نَحْنُ نَحْنُ كَذِبِينَ ﴿٢٧﴾

For similar statements in rejection of other prophets see 26:154, 26:186, 36:15, 54:24 etc. By “mortal” they mean in particular an ordinary mortal. They would only be impressed by someone who had a high worldly position or someone who could perform supernatural feats. They do not give importance to the prophet’s message or

his moral standing. How can an ordinary man know more than us and become our guide? In other human walks of life, we see the same kind of attitude. Someone ordinary, not part of the established hierarchy, brings a new idea or challenges some existing practice. He, or she, meets with the same reaction: He can't know more than us, he doesn't have any qualifications, he is not an important, recognized person. In all these cases, the message is not looked at, but the status of the person.

What we learn from the Quran, in this respect, is that Allah can bestow the highest honour on the most ordinary of mortals, leaving aside the important and the powerful. This is really a test for them, whether they value the truth sufficiently that they would accept to follow an ordinary mortal if he brought them the truth.