

Fast 30: Conclusion to Chapter 2 of the Quran

- The last verse of chapter 2 is a well-known prayer:

“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. 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 (afflictions) which we have not the strength to bear. And pardon us! And grant us protection! And have mercy on us! You are our Patron, so grant us victory over the disbelieving people.”

— ch. 2, v. 286

لَا يُكَلِّفُ اللَّهُ نَفْسًا إِلَّا وُسْعَهَا لَهَا مَا
كَسَبَتْ وَعَلَيْهَا مَا اكْتَسَبَتْ رَبَّنَا لَا
تُؤَاخِذْنَا إِنْ نَسِينَا أَوْ أَخْطَأْنَا رَبَّنَا وَلَا
تَحْمِلْ عَلَيْنَا إَصْرًا كَمَا حَمَلْتَهُ عَلَى الَّذِينَ
مِنْ قَبْلِنَا رَبَّنَا وَلَا تُحَمِّلْنَا مَا لَا طَاقَةَ لَنَا
بِهِ وَاعْفُ عَنَّا وَاعْفِرْ لَنَا وَارْحَمْنَا
أَنْتَ مَوْلَانَا فَانصُرْنَا عَلَى الْقَوْمِ الْكَافِرِينَ



- Since chapter 2 covers many fundamental teachings of Islam and a person wonders whether he or she is capable of living up to that standard, this verse begins by announcing the principle that Allah does not impose on any soul anything it is not capable of doing. He does not break people with burden. If human beings are naturally sinful from birth, as some religions hold, or they are born already burdened with sins committed during a past life, as some other religions hold, then to tell them to avoid sins is to impose on them responsibilities they are not capable of fulfilling.
- To get an idea of what is a soul's ability or capacity, let us consider the potentialities of the human body. Born a helpless baby, he can become a great athlete through training and practice. Similarly, the acts of worship and the acts of goodness to others, as prescribed by Islam, which may seem a burden at first, become possible to do, in fact become a source of pleasure and nourishment, if they are persevered with. The first sentence of this verse has also been taken to mean: Allah does not impose on any soul a duty *except to increase its ability*.
- Next we are taught the principle that every soul, starting from a clean, neutral state, makes spiritual gains by working to do good, and makes spiritual losses by working to do evil. If this statement is translated literally it means: *For it, is what it earns, and against it, is what it earns*. It is a simple “for” and “against” statement. The word for “earns” shows that work and action is required. You cannot achieve any benefit or

reward for your soul without doing work of the right kind. Similarly, you cannot cause detriment to your soul, and become subject to God's displeasure and punishment, unless you actually worked to do evil, but the neglect of doing good also leads to the committing of evil deeds. Only five verses before this, using the same word for "earn", this law is laid down: "And guard yourselves against a day in which you will be returned to Allah. Then every soul will be paid in full *what it has earned*, and they will not be wronged" (ch. 2, v. 281). This shows that deeds and actions are what matter, for both good and evil.

- Then follow some prayers. First: "Our Lord, do not punish us if we forget or make a mistake." Here Allah teaches us to regard our past sins as being due to forgetfulness or error of judgment. When a person is truly and sincerely repentant for past wrongdoing, he is often too harsh on himself, exaggerates his guilt in his mind and condemns himself too severely. There are incidents in which some person approached the Holy Prophet Muhammad to confess a sin which he regarded as too serious, but the Holy Prophet suggested to him that perhaps he was exaggerating its seriousness. So here Allah tells us to plead before Him that our sins were due to forgetfulness or mistake, and not due to a deliberate defiance of His commands.
- Next is: "Our Lord, do not lay on us a burden as You did lay on those before us." This could not have been a burden laid on them by Allah, since Allah has just said that he does not impose on anyone any obligation beyond their ability to bear it. This burden was laid by the people of the earlier religions themselves. The Jewish priests and religious jurists had made religion a burden for the people by requiring them to follow the most detailed rules and regulations in their acts of worship, which hardly anyone could meet in full. Jesus condemned those religious lawyers and said: "You load men with burdens hard to bear, and you yourselves do not touch the burdens with one of your fingers" (Luke, 11:46). Just think today how a Muslim is deeply worried by the rulings of the religious leaders that his prayer or his fast is invalidated by some small failure to follow a rule precisely and exactly. In the Christian faith, religion was made a burden by the notion that to attain absolute purity a person must renounce all worldly desires and occupations and take to becoming a monk or nun, and that everyone else remained a sinner. This is a prayer that we may not follow in the footsteps of those who went before us and made the following of religion into a burden that people could not bear. So people turned away from religion, considering it to be impossible to act upon.
- Thirdly is the prayer: "Our Lord, do not impose on us (afflictions) which we have not the strength to bear." Having asked forgiveness for past sins, as we move forward to

doing good deeds, and have to face suffering and trials in that path, may those trials not be so harsh that we cannot remain steadfast and instead we stumble!

- The final three short prayers are: “And pardon us! And grant us protection! And have mercy on us!” These relate to making progress in the future. The first is asking for pardon for past *actual* wrongdoings, so that they do not hold us back from future progress. The second is asking for protection in the face of *fear of the potential* of wrongdoing in the future. The third is that, being freed of past sins, and granted protection against apprehension of future ones, we may make progress in attaining to higher moral and spiritual stages, and actively do good deeds.
- Lastly, comes the prayer: “so grant us victory over the disbelieving people”. Neither this verse, nor its context, nor preceding verses, have any connection at all with fighting a war. Therefore, the victory here is *either* a spiritual victory over other faiths, a victory by character and moral behaviour, *or* it means a victory over the forces of unbelief within ourselves and the “disbelieving people” is our own inner self.

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And lastly, Eid Mubarak to all readers of these Quran Studies,

Wishing all of you a very happy and blessed Eid!