Coping with Adversity, Part 1

Synopsis of the Friday Sermon delivered by Ameer Mustapha Elturk on April 01, 2011

Man has to struggle through life’s journey. This journey has its phases of easy times and difficult times, prosperity and adversity, challenges and rewards, as well as successes and failures. Muslims today are going through difficult times. Hardly a day goes by without having to struggle against some challenge, misfortune or trial, which may be either personal or collective at the level of family, community, country, or world. How should we handle calamity and manage our affairs in times of crisis? How do we cope with adversity?

These questions have to be addressed at two levels—the philosophical and the practical. The sermon today will revolve around the philosophical aspects of the subject. Insha’Allah, the practical aspects will be dealt with in another sermon. At the philosophical level, we need to understand the nature of man, the nature of universe, and the nature of God. This will facilitate not only the comprehension of the problem but also the management thereof.

Nature of man: The very purpose of creation of human beings is to submit willingly and lovingly to the will of Allah (SWT); in other words, to become His bondsmen on earth. Allah (SWT) says, “I did not create the jinn and the humans except that they may worship (serve) Me” (al-Dhariyat, 51:56). He is the Creator. He is the Malik (owner) and we are the mamluk (owned). “Exalted is He who holds all control in His hands; who has power over all things; Who created death and life that He may try you—which of you is best in deeds; and He is the Mighty, the Forgiving” (al-Mulk, 67:1-2). It is Allah (SWT) who created us and put us to test. His servants are not going to go through this life without any trial or tribulation. Allah (SWT) clarifies this further when He says, “Was there not a period of time when man was nothing to speak of? We created man from a drop of mingled fluid to put him to the test; We gave him hearing and sight; We guided him on the Way, whether he is thankful or unthankful” (al-Insan, 76: 1-3). The two main tools of knowledge that help men to reflect and arrive at decisions are the faculties of hearing and sight. Allah (SWT) guided humanity by sending them prophets and messengers to guide them to the right path. “…when guidance comes from Me, as it certainly will, there will be no fear for those who follow My guidance nor will they grieve” (al-Baqarah, 2:38). Generally, man is ungrateful to his Lord and this is what Allah (SWT) informed us about the nature of man when He said, “As for man, whenever His Lord tests him and grants him honor and blesses him, he says, ‘My Lord has honored me.’ but when He tries him through the restriction of his provision, he says, ‘My Lord has humiliated me’” (al-Fajr, 89:15-16). Here Allah (SWT) is presenting to us the attitude of man toward his Lord when it comes to testing him through prosperity and adversity.

Every person is put to test. Even the prophets are not exempt from being tested. According to the meaning of a hadith, Muhammad (SAW) when asked about the people who were tried and tested the most replied that they were the prophets; then those who came after them (in terms of status) and then those who came after them. A man will be tested according to the strength of his faith. If his faith is strong, then the distress with which he is tried will be greater. And if faith is weak, he will be tested in accordance with the level of his faith. The stress will keep befalling the slave until he walks on the surface of the earth free from sin.

Therefore, we need to have the correct attitude when it comes to trial and tribulation. We are the slaves of Allah (SWT) and we are being tested by Him. Therefore, whatever comes by way of test has to be endured with the belief that ultimately there is good in whatever comes from Allah (SWT) as He always intends well for his servants. He wants the best for them. We should have firm faith that there is definitely ease with every hardship as confirmed by the Qur’anic ayah, “So, verily, with every difficulty, there is relief: Verily, with every difficulty there is relief” (al-Inshirah, 94:5-6). This is the positive way to look into our distress.

Ibn al-Jawzi, the author of a well know book Talbees Iblees (The Devil’s Deception), profoundly summed up his thoughts on this subject. He said: “I found myself in trouble; so I made du’a consistently all the while requesting relief and comfort. The response to my du’a seemed to be delayed and so my soul became disturbed and worried. However, I rebuked it saying, woe unto you! Look attentively at yourself. Are you the one that is controlled or are you the controller? If you desire that your goals be fulfilled, and become impatient when they are not, then where is your test? It is the ultimate test that you get the opposite of whatever you desire? So dear restless soul, try to understand the meaning of the word ‘abd and whatever is dear to you will become worthless and whatever is difficult will become easy.”
Nature of Universe: We need to understand the nature of the universe that surrounds man. The world we live in is a temporary abode. It is not to last forever and the life herein is not the real and everlasting life. “The life of this world is merely an amusement and a diversion; the true life is in the Hereafter, if only they knew” (al-Ankabut, 29:64). We have been created and put in this world to be tested by Allah (SWT). This is not the real world. This life is an illusion. “…The present world is only an illusory pleasure. You will surely be tried and tested in your possessions and your persons, and you shall surely hear many hurtful things from those who were given the Book before you and from those who set up partners with God, but if you endure with fortitude and restrain yourselves, that indeed is a matter of strong determination” (Aal Imran, 3:185-186). This is what determines our faith. We should, therefore, be patient and be mindful of Allah (SWT).

On the occasion of Battle of Tabuk, when some of the believers decided to lag behind even after they were commanded by Allah (SWT) to go and fight the disbelievers, Allah (SWT) asked a question: “O you who believe, why, when it is said to you, ‘go forth in the cause of Allah’ you cling heavily to the earth? Do you prefer this world to the life to come? The enjoyment of this world is but a little compared with the life to come” (al-Taubah, 9:38). There can be no comparison between the finite and the infinite. The duniya (world) is temporal while the akhirah (hereafter) is eternal. Only a true believer understands this reality. This reality is explained in another ayah of the Qur’an which also speaks about the psychology of man when it says, “Know that the life of this world is but a play and amusement, adornment and mutual boasting, and rivalry in (worldly) possessions and children. It is like plants that spring up after rain; their growth (at first) delights the tillers, but then you see them wither away, turn yellow, and become stubble. And in the next life there is terrible punishment but also forgiveness from Allah (SWT) and His good pleasure, and the life of this world is nothing but an illusory pleasure” (al-Hadid, 57:20). Another fact regarding the universe, as we learn from the Qur’an, is that the whole universe will one day perish. “All that is on earth will perish; while your Lord’s own Self will remain full of majesty and glory” (al-Rahman, 26-27).

We need to understand that this world is a place of test and should be used as a means (to reach our Lord) and not as an end. In this regard, the Prophet (SAW) is reported to have said: “This duniya has been created for you and you have been created for the akhirah.” He is also reported to have advised Abdullah ibn Umar (RA): “Be in this world as a stranger or as a wayfarer.” Abdullah ibn Umar (RA) used to say, “If you reach the evening, don’t wait for the morning (you may not wake up in the morning; you may die. Utilize the evening to reach your Lord.) Similarly, if you wake up in the morning, don’t await the evening. Take advantage of your health over your sickness and of your life before death overtakes you.” Doing things that bring pleasure of Allah (SWT) will certainly secure the believer a place in the eternal bliss of paradise. Abu Huraira (RA) narrated a hadith where the Prophet (SAW) says: “This duniya is a prison to the believer and a paradise to the disbeliever.” This is because a true believer is a slave of Allah (SWT). Even though the body and the soul demand many things, he has to subdue his nafs in accordance to the will of Allah (SWT) and lead his life within the hudud (limits) prescribed by Allah (SWT). He can’t do whatever he likes. To the disbeliever, however, this world is a paradise because he does not feel himself bound by the laws and limits ordained by Allah (SWT). It is the attitude of prioritizing akhirah over duniya that helps a believer to cope with any type of difficulty or hardship.

Nature of Allah (SWT): Allah (SWT) is the Creator of everything. He has power over everything. He does whatever he wants. Nothing happens without his knowledge. Everything has been recorded in a book even before the existence of man and the universe that surrounds him. “No misfortune can happen, either in the earth or in yourselves, that was not set down in writing before We brought it into being- that is easy for God” (al-Hadid, 57:22). We should always keep these attributes of Allah (SWT) in mind. Allah (SWT) also knows our needs and problems. It is only He who relieves us from our distress; none else. “No affliction can befall man but by God’s permission—He guides the hearts of those who believe in Him: God has knowledge of all things—obey God and obey the Messenger; but if you turn away, remember that Our Messenger is only responsible for clearly conveying the message” (al-Taghabun, 64:11-12).

Another reality is that death is imminent and we all are returning back to Him. We must be conscious of this inevitable reality. Humans are tested variously according to their means, levels of faith, and their status in this world. Tests vary from fear, hunger, shortage of wealth, loss in business, and death. “And We will test you with some fear and hunger, and a shortage in money and lives and fruits. And give good news to those who are patient; who say, when afflicted with calamity: “To Allah (SWT) We belong, and to Him is our return” (al-Baqarah, 2:155-156).

In times of distress, believers are advised by Allah (SWT) to seek assistance through patience and prayer. “O you who believe! Seek assistance through patience and prayer; surely Allah (SWT) is with the patient” (al-Baqarah, 2:153). Reading, understanding, absorbing, and acting upon the teachings of these ayat of the Noble Qur’an go a long way to reduce our stress and keep us in a state of calm and composure in the face of difficulties. Coping with adversity then becomes natural and easy.

God conscious believers are capable in coping with adversity. The Prophet (SAW) in describing such believers once said: “How marvelous is the affair of the believer! Everything that happens to him is good, and this does not apply to anyone except the believer. If something good befalls him, he gives thanks for it, and that is good for him. If something bad befalls him, he endures it with patience, and that is good for him.”

End

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