Synopsis of the Friday Sermon delivered by Ameer Mustapha Elturk on April 29, 2011

“(I swear) by the time that man is surely in a state of loss, except for those who believe, do good deeds, support one another with the truth, and support one another with patience and perseverance” (al-‘Asr, 103:1-3).

Surat al-‘Asr, which comprises of only three ayat is one of the shortest surahs in the Qur’an. Although we are familiar with it; we recite it in our prayers; we know it by heart; we teach it to our children, and we even understand its general meaning, yet we may not be fully aware of the depth of meaning that this surah conveys so profoundly in a few simple words. Its significance can be appreciated from the sayings of Imam al-Shafi (d. 820 CE) who said that had there been nothing revealed in the Qur’an except Surat al-‘Asr, it would have been sufficient for the salvation of mankind. That is how profound this surah is. The words of this blessed surah are so simple and straightforward that one need not be a scholar or a linguist to understand them. It is Allah (SWT)’s greatness that He conveys His profound messages with utmost brevity.

This surah starts with Allah (SWT) swearing by the fleeting time. Time is a ceaseless flux. It does not stop. It keeps moving incessantly. Once gone, it cannot be brought back. It is the most vital and precious thing that one can have. One cannot afford to squander it. The maxim, “time is money,” is well known in the West. To a believer, it is more than that. The true believers (mu’minun) understand the value of time and are mindful not to indulge in time-wasting, useless, and frivolous activities. In fact, one of their attributes as described in the Qur’an is that they “keep themselves away from vain things” (al-Mu’minun 23:3), and hence they value time as it should be valued. Thus, it is the flight of time by which Allah (SWT) swears in the first aya of this surah. What follows in the next aya is a generic message of truth that all humans are in a state of loss. This universal truth is ordained by Allah Almighty for the entire humanity. However, the third and final aya of the surah exempts all those from this divine decree who believe, do righteous deeds, support one another in propagating the truth, and exhort patience and perseverance to one another in the face of adversities that may befall them.

Imam Fakhr al-Din al-Razi (d. 1209 CE), one of the greatest exegetes of the Qur’an, while expounding this surah said that there was a great threatening from Allah (SWT) because He had already decreed loss to all humanity except for those who fulfill the four requirements mentioned in the surah. It should be realized and understood that our salvation (falah) in the hereafter, which means to be successful in absolute terms, is dependent upon holding on to all the four things without the exclusion of any one of them. It follows; therefore, that iman (faith) by itself is not sufficient for salvation. It is not enough to verbally declare the two testimonies of faith (“I bear witness that there is no deity worthy of worship other than Allah, and I bear witness that Muhammad is His slave and Messenger.”) and be complacent without doing righteous deeds.

What is iman? According to a hadith, “Iman is knowledge in the heart, an articulation with the tongue, and an activity with the limbs.” In its generalized form, the ulama (scholars of Islam) say that iman implies believing in Allah (SWT) as He is in His names and His attributes, and in accepting all His commands and teachings mentioned in the Qur’an and the hadith of the Prophet (SAW). It is only through these original sources from where we get the knowledge of the Shariah (Islamic Law), which unfortunately has become one of the most derogatory, despised, and misunderstood terms in the contemporary Western political discourse. It is incumbent upon us to first educate ourselves and then the non-Muslims about Shariah and its noble objectives (Maqasid al-Shariah).

It is only through conviction of faith in the heart; manifested through one’s righteous deeds (al-‘Amal al-Salih) that
one can be considered to possess true iman. On one occasion the Prophet (SAW) pointed his index finger towards his heart and said “Taqwa (God consciousness/piety/righteousness) is here, in the heart.” And only Allah (SWT) knows what is in the heart of a person. Righteous deeds include obeying all the commands of Allah (SWT) and His Prophet (SAW) through all modes of worship with their ordained rituals, and fulfilling all the rights due to Allah (SWT), to His Prophet (SAW), to oneself, to one’s family members and to others.

It is to be noted that according to Surat al-Asr, even Iman and al-Amal al-Salih in themselves do not guarantee salvation. The third thing that has to be done by the believers is to join together in the mutual teaching of truth, which means, exhorting people to do good and forbidding them from doing evil. “You are the best of peoples, evolved for mankind, enjoining what is right, forbidding what is wrong, and believing in Allah…” (Aal ’Imran 3:110). There is no ummah that is to come after this ummah. There is no Prophet or Messenger who is to come after Muhammad (SAW). But the message of truth is eternal and has to be carried forward. Therefore, after the demise of our beloved Prophet (SAW), the burden of spreading the truth is upon the believers. We are also aware that truth is bitter (مُرٌّ الحقُّ).

Therefore, to tread on the path of truth and to spread the message of truth to others is bound to be accompanied with trials and tribulations from all quarters, especially from the agents of Shaytan (Satan), whether they are from the jinns or the humans. The noble companions of the Prophet (SAW) were persecuted, both verbally and physically, for declaring and preaching the truth of tawhid. According to a Hadith, the greatest jihad is to say a word of truth in front of a tyrant ruler. It is in encountering the opposition, the resistance, and the impediments, which come in the way of saying the truth by enjoining what is right, and forbidding what is wrong that the believers have to remain together, supporting one another with patience and perseverance. This is the fourth criterion or condition that is required for salvation.

It is to be remembered that all the four criteria mentioned in Surat al-Asr have to be met for achieving success and salvation. This phenomenon is very well explained and illustrated by Dr. Israr Ahmed (d. 2010), founder of the Tanzeem-e-Islami through an analogy of a doctor and his patient. If a doctor prescribes four medicines to a patient with his professional and expert advice that all four medicines have to be consumed for complete recovery, then the patient will certainly not recover completely or may even endanger his health or life if he ignores the doctor’s advice and uses his own discretion regarding the medication, taking some medicines and leaving others. Allah (SWT) is our Creator. He alone knows us inside out. He alone knows our weaknesses. He alone knows the best way to our salvation, and hence His prescription for salvation is the only prescription that guarantees our salvation.

What Muslims are currently facing is a chain of trials and tribulations—bigotry, stereotyping, accusations, victimization, blasphemy, Islamophobia, and much more. We are facing these fitan (trials/oppression/persecution) as individuals, as a community, and as an ummah. Perhaps no other time is better for us than now to be united. “Hold fast to God’s rope all together; and do not split into factions…” (Aal ’Imran, 3:103). The turbulence engulfing the world by way of revolutions, disasters, and calamities in diverse shapes ranging from tornados, tsunamis, earthquakes, fires, wars, political unrest, and economic depression around the world, to a general, overall lack of peace and tranquility is a clear sign of God’s wrath and displeasure. We have to realize the exigency of the situation and embark immediately on the path of salvation.

According to the meaning of a Hadith, this duniya (world) was created for us (to use it as a means and not as an end) and we were created for the hereafter. We have to use whatever has been bestowed upon us to reach others by ordaining good and forbidding evil. In this regard, the wise sage Luqman’s sincere advice to his son, as mentioned in the Qur’an may be recalled. “O my son! Establish prayers, and enjoin good, and forbid evil, and endure patiently whatever may befall you. Surely, this is something which requires firm resolve” (Luqman 31:17). Surat Luqman appears to be an elaboration of Surat al-Asr, wherein Surat al-Asr is the bud opening into the petals, depicted by Luqman’s wasiyyah (order/instruction/direction) and nasihah (advice/counsel) to his beloved son.

May Allah (SWT) bless us with the insight to comprehend this blessed surah and act upon its teachings because it is only in doing so that our salvation is guaranteed by the will of Allah (SWT).

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