

## **Everything is committed - to the last drop of blood**

*What would it take for you to be willing to sacrifice your life for a cause? What kind of people continue to volunteer for battle and certain death when they have seen their companions, young and old, brutally massacred? What burden is on the heart of a leader who is asked to give permission to such people to go to their deaths when they volunteer? What about when such men and boys are not just companions and volunteers but sons, brothers and nephews? What does this say about commitment, the significance of the cause and the belief that, ultimately, they will be vindicated?*

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Everyone in the camp of Hussain was awake and alert with the first signs of daylight on the tenth of Muharram 680CE, the Day of Ashura. They all assembled for the morning prayer (*fajr*) and afterwards Hussain gathered them all together. He was surrounded by seventy-two male companions, armed and ready to face an army of around thirty thousand men. Notwithstanding their small number, Hussain assigned them to their places with left and right flanks, and the tents, containing the women and children, to their rear. He ordered that the wood in the ditch to the rear and both sides of the camp should be set on fire to prevent any attack other than to the front of his men.

Umar ibn Sa'd assembled his men, gave them their formation for battle and assigned commanders to each division. When the cavalry began to approach, Hussain raised his hands in prayer: 'O God, it is you in whom I trust amidst all grief. You are my hope amidst all violence. You are my refuge and provision in everything that happens to me. How many grievances: the heart may weaken in it, the means may disappear in it, a friend may desert me in it, and the enemy may rejoice in it. I lay it before you and complain of it to you, because of my desire for you alone. You relieved me of it and removed it from me. You are the master of all grace, the possessor of all goodness and the ultimate resort of all desire.'

Shimr, the man who strengthened the resolve of Ibn Ziyad and challenged Umar to turn over the command of the army to him, came forward to taunt Hussain and his men. One of Hussain's archers asked permission to take a shot at him and hopefully kill him. Hussain refused him permission, saying, 'I am unwilling to begin the fighting against them.'

Hussain addressed the army assembled against him:

O people of Iraq! Listen to my speech and do not make haste until I have given you a piece of advice concerning your duty towards me, and I make clear the reason for my coming here. If you accept my explanation, verify my truthfulness and deal with me with justice, you will attain prosperity, and then there would remain no way for you to fight me. And if you reject my explanation, denying my reason and do not make a fair judgement, 'Then conspire together, along with your partners, leaving

nothing vague in your plan, then carry it out against me without giving me any respite' (Q. 10:71). 'My guardian is indeed God who has sent down the Book, and God takes care of the righteous' (Q. 7:196).

O People! Reflect upon who I am, then look to yourselves and question your thought processes. Do you think it is lawful for you to kill me and to violate my sanctity? Am I not the son of your Prophet's daughter, the son of the trustee of the Prophet and his cousin [Ali], who was the first believer in God, and the first to embrace what his Prophet had brought from his Lord? Has not the statement of the Prophet of God regarding me and my brother reached you, 'These two are the Princes of the Youths of Paradise'? If you do not accept what I have stated is the truth – and it is indeed the truth, for by God, I have never told a lie since I realised that God hates whoever tells a lie and shall defeat the liar – then there are indeed among you some people whom, if you asked, could inform you of this and they will report to you, for they have heard this statement about me and my brother from the Prophet of God. Is this not sufficient to prevent you from shedding my blood?

Hence if you are still in doubt regarding this statement, do you doubt that I am the son of your Prophet's daughter? By God! Between east and west in the world there is no son of the daughter of a prophet except me. Woe to you! Do you want me in revenge for a slain individual I have killed, for a property I have damaged, or for a wound I have inflicted?

At this stage, Hussain called out to four of the leading men of Kufa, who had written to invite him to come to them and who were present, 'Did you not write to me, "The fruits have ripened, the region has become verdant, and you will arrive to find an army ready for you"?''

They replied, 'We do not know what you are talking about!' Then one of the four called out, 'Submit to the authority of your kinsmen (the Umayyads). They have never treated you with anything but what you liked.'

Hussain responded, 'No! By God! I shall never give them my hand in humiliation to make a compromise and shall not evade them in the way slaves do. O Servants of God! "Indeed, I seek the protection of my Lord from every arrogant one who does not believe in the Day of Reckoning" (Q. 40:27).'

Hussain then continued to address the assembled army in general:

Behold! The illegitimate one, son of the illegitimate one [Ibn Ziyad], has pressed me between two choices, war and abasement. And how far is abasement from us! God does not like to see that in us, nor his Prophet, nor the believers. Surely, our chaste mothers, and those with dignified spirits, and the valiant souls of our fathers do not allow us to choose the obedience of the abased over the honourable death of noble men. Be aware that I have informed and warned you! Be aware that I am prepared to fight you with this family of mine, in spite of the small number of my companions and the desertion of those earlier supporters.

‘Indeed, I have put my trust in God, my Lord and your Lord. There is no living being but God holds it by its forelock’ (Q. 11:56).

O God! Deny them rain, give them years such as the harsh years of Joseph, and put in charge of them the ruthless Thaqafid youth [a brutal ruler who came to power only fifteen years later], who will make them quench their thirst with a cup of bitterness where none of them would be left unpunished. O God! They have told us a lie and abandoned us. ‘You God are our Lord, we place our trust in you, and to you do we return’ (Q. 60:4).

When Hussain had finished speaking the army made to advance against his camp. At this point Hurr, the commander of the men who had accompanied Hussain’s party through the desert and had forced them to camp in a land without water, whom we have already encountered, was humbled by Hussain’s speech. He went to Umar ibn Sa’d and enquired if he really intended to fight Hussain. He replied firmly that he did. Hurr, feeling subdued and miserable, broke ranks and rode towards Hussain’s camp and pleaded forgiveness from him. Hussain readily forgave him and welcomed him to his camp. Observing the lack of water in the camp and the thirsty lips and frightened faces of the women and children, Hurr took his stand in front of Hussain’s men to address his former comrades and fellow citizens.

People of Kufa, may your mothers be deprived of their sons and tears come to their eyes. Have you summoned this righteous man to come to you, then, when he has come to you, have you handed him over to his enemies? Did you claim that you would fight with your own lives for him, and then have you begun to attack him in order to kill him? You have laid hold of his life; you have seized his throat; you have encircled him on every side in order to prevent him returning to God’s broad land, from which he came. He has come into your hands like a prisoner who no longer has the power to use his own life and cannot defend it against harm. You have prevented him, his womenfolk, his children and his people from getting the water of the Euphrates to drink. They are likely to die of thirst. How wickedly have you treated the offspring left by Muhammad! May God not give you water to drink on the Day of Thirst.

At this Umar put an arrow to his bow and shot it in the direction of Hussain and his men. He cried out, ‘All of you bear witness to who was the first to shoot.’ At this there was a general exchange of archery. Then, as was the custom, one after the other, champions of both sides came forward for single-handed combat. But the men of Yazid’s army were no match for the valiant and brave-hearted volunteers of Hussain’s camp, who victoriously overpowered and killed their opponents. One of the divisional commanders of the Umayyad army realised that such single combat was futile because the champions from Hussain’s company were pleased to fight to the death and thus to seek martyrdom. He called for a change of tactics. There followed a general attack by foot-soldiers, archers and cavalry. The men of Hussain’s company, although greatly outnumbered, continued to give a good account of themselves but many of them met their deaths. They ranged in age from an old man of around seventy-five years to youths,

some of whom had barely reached puberty. Some were high-born and many were servants, who had performed their duties to Hussain and his family. Hussain would habitually give them their freedom before they entered the field of battle so that there was no question but that martyrdom was their free choice.

On several occasions it was noted that Hussain would rush into the field of battle to bring comfort to men mortally wounded and to strengthen them in their dying moments. The words that Hussain spoke were a mixture of the assurance of Paradise and comfort and strength in their final agony. Hussain did not differentiate according to the class from which each came; there are no class divisions on the field of martyrdom. We read of him going to his dying Turkish-speaking servant, embracing him and putting his cheek on his face. Such a gesture greatly touched the dying man. One further example can be taken from the case of Jawn, a dark-skinned servant, who had experienced racial prejudice in the past. When he came to Hussain to ask for permission to go to the battlefield, Hussain responded, 'O Jawn, you are free to leave me because you have followed us in the quest for comfort, hence do not get yourself into trouble in our cause.' At this it is recorded that Jawn threw himself at the feet of Hussain to appeal: 'O grandson of the Prophet of God! Is it fair that I used to be dependent on your favour in your time of comfort and convenience and leave you alone when you are in trouble in front of the enemy? No, by God! I will never part with you until my blood mixes with your fragrant blood.' At this Hussain gave him permission to go to fight, and as he lay dying Hussain went to him and prayed, 'O God! Lighten his face, perfume him, resurrect him with the nobles, and acquaint him with Prophet Muhammad and the Family of the Prophet.'

The fierce fighting continued until almost midday. When the time came for the midday (*zuhr*) prayer, Hussain sent a message to request a cease-fire so that the prayer could be offered. This was declined. Nevertheless, Hussain and his men assembled for the prayer in spite of a rain of arrows. Some of those who remained of Hussain's party took station in front of him so that he would not be shot with an arrow while at prayer.

Then five hundred archers drew up in ranks and fired salvos of arrows at the men and horses of Hussain. A great many men and horses were wounded. This was followed by fierce fighting on foot. The way in which the companions of Hussain fought, their fearlessness and dedication in the face of an overwhelming army, and the manner of their deaths had an impact on some of the opposing army. One noted archer decided to change sides, took station in front of the tents of Hussain and wreaked havoc on his former comrades with his deadly bow. At one point, Hussain called out, 'Isn't there anyone to help us? Isn't there anyone to sacrifice his life in favour of the families of the Prophet of God?' It is reported that two brothers, who fought with the Umayyad army, were so touched by these words and by the impact that they had on the women and children in the camp of Hussain, that they decided to change sides and rushed to the camp of Hussain. They fought with great valour and both died as martyrs in the cause of justice and truth.

The companions of Hussain, who were not related to him by blood, came to him, one after the other, to seek permission to go forward to meet their deaths in battle. They had pledged not to allow any harm to come to the Family of the Prophet so long as they were alive. Eventually, only the members of the Family of the Prophet remained to stand beside Hussain. There now stepped forward Ali Akbar, the eldest son of Hussain, who was noted for his likeness to Muhammad, both in looks and in his character. It is said that people who had never met the Prophet but wanted to gaze upon him would seek permission to look at Ali Akbar on account of his close resemblance. He went to bid farewell to his father and seek permission to go forward. Hussain gave him permission, but as he was departing, Hussain raised his eyes to the heavens, and said, 'O God! Bear witness concerning this group of people [the Umayyad army] towards whom a youth has gone out bearing the closest resemblance to your Prophet Muhammad in creation, manner, and speech such that when we yearn to look at your Prophet we cast a look at him.' As Ali Akbar was going forward to fight, Hussain addressed directly Umar ibn Sa'd: 'What happened to you? May God break your kinship ties as you have broken your kinship ties with me; you have not considered my blood relationship with the Prophet of God.' The enemy were reluctant to attack Ali Akbar on account of his resemblance to Muhammad. Eventually, he was confronted by a group of men and mortally wounded, having been weakened more by thirst than fighting. As he lay dying, he called out to his father, 'O father! Now my ancestor, the Prophet of God, has just quenched my thirst with a cup of water from Paradise after which there will never be any thirst.' Hussain rushed towards him and gazed at his mutilated body, before exclaiming, 'May God annihilate the people who have slain you. O my dear son! What has made them so forgetful about God as to offend the sanctity of the Prophet of God. May the world be made dust after you.' At this Zaynab, the sister of Hussain, came running out and threw herself on the dead body of her nephew. Hussain raised her up and led her back to the tent. He told some members of his family to carry their brother's body back to the tent.

Ali Akbar was the first of seventeen martyrs related to Hussain to die that day. Zaynab's own sons, called Aoun and Muhammad, were both killed. Three of the sons of Aqil, Ali's older brother, met their deaths at Karbala and two of his grandsons. Three of the sons of Hussain's brother, Hasan, were amongst the martyrs of Karbala. One of them, Qasim, presented a letter to Hussain written by the boy's father: 'My dear son Qasim, when your uncle Hussain is besieged by his enemies from all sides and when every true lover of God and the holy Prophet lays down his life defending the cause of truth, you sacrifice yourself for the cause on my behalf.' At this, Hussain hugged him and both uncle and nephew cried for some time before Hussain allowed him to go to meet his death. The youngest son was Abdullah, who ran to defend his uncle Hussain when he had fallen from his horse and was cut down by a swordsman while so engaged. Five sons of Hussain's father, Ali, also died as martyrs that day, including Abbas, the standard-bearer of Hussain's company.

The youngest child to die that day was the infant son of Hussain, Abdullah Ali Asghar. He was only six-months-old and still at his mother's breast, but owing to the way in which the company had been deprived of water, his mother's milk had dried up

and so she was unable to feed him. Hussain took him in his arms to comfort him and sat with him outside the tent. One of the enemy archers let fly an arrow that struck the baby in the neck and killed him. Hussain attempted in vain to stop the bleeding and in so doing his hands were filled with the baby's blood. He was so moved that he threw the blood towards the sky and said, 'O God! What makes all my afflictions easy is that it is happening before your eyes.' Hussain carried his body to lay it beside the other martyrs in the tent set aside for that purpose.

Abbas, the half-brother of Hussain, a noted warrior, worthy in this regard to be likened to his father, Ali, was the standard-bearer for Hussain's company and always to be seen rallying his men to the fight. As the battle wore on and the thirst of the remaining company was extreme, Hussain asked him to make a dash for the river with the view to bringing back a flask of water for the women and children. His attempt was spotted by some of the opposing cavalry who engaged him in mortal combat until he too was killed. Hussain saw him fall and rushed to his side saying, 'Now my back is broken, my means are diminished and my enemies rejoice.' He then expressed his contempt for those who had killed him: 'With your wickedness, O People, you have acted cruelly and expressed hostility to us and to Prophet Muhammad. Did not the best person recommend us to you? Was not my grandfather Muhammad the best person? Was not Fatima my mother? And my father, Ali the Guided? You have been cursed and will be punished for the crime you have committed!'

On the Day of Ashura, Hussain made two important farewells. First, he bade farewell to his wife and other female members of the family. He advised them to put on their outer travelling cloaks and to prepare themselves, 'Get ready for the calamity and know that God is indeed your support and preserver, God will rescue you from the evil of the enemy and make the end of your affair toward the good. He will punish your enemy in different ways, and will grant you in compensation for this calamity various types of blessings and honour; therefore, never complain or express what might harm your status.' Second, he went to his son Zayn al-Abidin, who was still sick with fever and too weak to take part in the fighting. He was to succeed Hussain as the head of the community and it was one of the last duties that Hussain had to pass on his divine appointment, to inform him on matters that were held secretly by the Imams of the community, and to give him wise counsel. In keeping with the tradition passed on from Muhammad, through Ali and Hasan, that the leaders of the community should always have a particular care for the poor and those in need of support, he said, 'O my dear son! I advise you a statement which my father gave me when approaching death, that he received in turn from his father. Never commit any crime against the person who has no supporter except God.'

When Hussain finally stood alone against the army that had come to kill him, he already bore upon his body various injuries to his throat and head. He mounted his horse, armed himself and set off to engage them to the death. He was but one against the remaining tens of thousands of the Umayyad army, yet his resolve was not diminished. At a certain point in the fighting a group from the army decided that they would make an attack against the tents containing the women and children of Hussain's

company. Hussain called out to them, 'If you do not have any faith whatsoever and are not scared of the resurrection, at least act with dignity in your life.' At this Shimr, who was with this group asked Hussain what he meant. Hussain replied, 'I am the one who is fighting you, and you have decided to kill me; the women have done nothing wrong, so prevent your men from attacking my family so long as I live.' Shimr replied, 'You do have this right, O son of Fatima!' He then turned to his men and said, 'Stop rushing toward the camp of this man; attack him. Indeed, he is a noble combatant!'

The fighting continued but the men of the Umayyad army held back from pressing their attack out of fear and respect for the grandson of Muhammad. Who could be the one to deal him a mortal blow? Shimr shouted encouragement to the men, both cavalry and foot-soldiers; he ordered them not to hold back but to rush Hussain altogether. This they did and he was struck with sword and spear. He fell bleeding to the ground and with his final strength he whispered his last two prayers (in part):

O God, you are close to the one who calls you. Judge between us and our people, for they betrayed us and fought against us, while we are the family and the descendants of your Prophet Muhammad.

O Lord! To me there is no Lord except you and no one deserves to be worshipped save you! I am patient with your decision. Judge between me and them, for you are the best of all judges.

In the name of God, through the help of God, in the cause of God, and on the path of the religion of the Prophet of God.

At this Hussain died.