

The final ultimatum

What courage does it take to face certain death in a cause that is right? Is there something more important than life itself? Not 'something worth living for' but 'something worth dying for'. If there is something worth laying down one's life for, does this make any sense without a belief in life after death? What kind of a leader gives his men a final chance before the battle to save themselves? Is it not more common that the leader will demand that his men stand their ground and face the consequences with him?

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When Umar ibn Sa'd read the final orders from Ibn Ziyad, that had been brought by Shimr, he was furious. He said to Shimr, 'Shame on you! May God never show favour to your house. May God make abominable what you have brought to me. By God! I did not think that you would cause Ibn Ziyad to refuse what I had written to him and ruin for us a matter which we hoped to set right. Hussain will not surrender, for there is a spirit like his father's in his body.' Shimr asked him if he was going to carry out the governor's orders or if he was going to hand the command of the army to him. Umar said that he would execute the orders himself.

Shimr then went forward so that he could be heard in the camp of Hussain. Umm al-Banin, who was one of the wives of Ali, came from the same tribe as Shimr. Four of her sons, who were therefore related to Shimr, were present in the company of Hussain. Shimr called them by name and they stepped forward: Abbas, Ja'far, Abd Allah and Uthman. He guaranteed them safe passage if they would leave Hussain. The young men responded, 'God curse you and curse the security which you offer without offering it to the son of the Prophet of God.'

Umar gave orders that his men were to march forward towards the camp of Hussain. This was the ninth of Muharram, soon after the afternoon (*asr*) prayer. Hussain's sister, Zaynab, heard the approach of the army and went to alert her brother. Hussain had been taking a rest and announced to Zaynab that he had seen Muhammad in a dream. Muhammad had said to him, 'You are coming to us.' Hussain turned to his half-brother, Abbas, and told him to ride out to meet the army and to ask them what they were going to do. He received the response, 'The command of the governor has arrived that we should offer you the opportunity of submitting to his authority otherwise we must attack you.' When Abbas went back and reported this to Hussain, he was told, 'Go back to them, and if you can, delay them until the morning and persuade them to keep from attacking us during the evening. Then, perhaps, we may be able to pray to our Lord during the night to call upon him and seek his forgiveness.' The request was granted with the caution, 'If you surrender, we will send you to our governor, but if you refuse, we will not leave you any longer.'

At night, the company of Hussain gathered round him and he said to them:

I glorify God with the most perfect glorification and I praise him in happiness and misfortune. O God, I praise you for blessing us with prophethood, teaching us the Qur'an and making us understand the religion. You have given us hearing, sight and hearts, and have made us among those who give thanks to you. I know of no followers more loyal and more virtuous than my followers, nor of any family more pious and more close-knit than my family. May God reward you well on my behalf. Indeed, I do not think that there will be any further days left to us by these men. I permit you to leave me. All of you go away; you are released from your oath to follow me, there will be no further obligation on you from me. This is a night whose darkness will give you cover. Use it to ride away.

Abbas, the half-brother of Hussain spoke up and was followed by all those of the family: 'We will not leave you to make ourselves continue living after your death. God will never see us do such a thing.' There was a general response from the whole group in the same vein. Hussain then turned to the sons of Muslim ibn Aqil, the cousin of Hussain who had already been martyred for the cause in Kufa. 'Sons of Aqil, enough of your family has been killed. So, go away as I have permitted you.' They replied, 'Glory be to God, what would people say? They would say that we deserted our shaykh, our lord, the sons of our uncle Ali, who was the best of uncles. That we had not shot arrows alongside them, we had not thrust spears alongside them, we had not struck swords alongside them. At such an accusation, we do not know what we would do. No, by God, we will not do such a thing. Rather we will ransom you with our lives, property and families. We will fight for you until we reach your destination. May God make life abominable for us after your death.'

One of the sons of Hussain, Zayn al-Abidin, was sick with a fever and being nursed by his aunt Zaynab. They heard the words of Hussain, who was in his tent reciting a poem, which spoke of his own death and that of his companions on the next day. Zaynab jumped up, tearing at her clothes in anguish and went to him. She said, 'Then I will lose a brother. Would that death had come to me before today! It is like the day that my mother Fatima was dead, that my father Ali and my brother Hasan were dead.' Hussain said to her, 'O sister don't let Satan take away your forbearance.' Then tears filled his eyes and he said, 'If the desert birds are left alone at night, they will sleep.' In response, she said, 'O my grief, then your life will be violently wrenched from you and that is more wounding to my heart and harsher to my soul.' At this she began to lament, to strike herself and to tear her garments. Then she fainted. Hussain went to her and bathed her face with water. Then he tried to console her by saying, 'O sister, be patient, and know that all living creatures on the earth shall die, those in the heavens will not survive, everything will perish except God, who created the earth with his might and will resurrect the creatures so they will come into being again. God is alone in this regard. My father was better than me, my mother was better than me, my brother was better than me; they all left this world for the world hereafter. For me and for every Muslim there is a perfect example in the Prophet of God.'

Hussain then addressed Zaynab and his other female relatives: his sisters, daughter, and wife. 'O my sister! O Umm Kulthum! O Fatima! O Rubab! Pay attention to me;

when I am killed, you must not tear your clothes, nor strike your face, nor cry out with grief and loss.’

Hussain then ordered that the tents should be moved closer together so that it would not be possible to ride through them. A trench was to be dug at both sides and the back of the tents and filled with wood that could be set on fire to prevent a surprise attack from the rear. This way any attack must come from the front.

Hussain withdrew to his tent and spent the night in prayer, in reciting the Qur’an, in making supplications to God and seeking God’s forgiveness. Likewise, his followers did the same. One of the verses of the Qur’an that Hussain is reported to have recited on this night is as follows: ‘Let the faithless not suppose that the respite that we grant them is good for their souls: we give them respite only that they may increase in sin, and there is a humiliating punishment for them. God will not leave the faithful in your present state, until he has separated the bad ones from the good’ (Q. 3:178–9).

These verses of the Qur’an set the tone for the day that was to follow. The apparent victory in battle of the forces of the Umayyads: Yazid, Ibn Ziyad, Umar and Shimr, will be a short-lived thing. It will encourage them to sink further into depravity and indeed their final punishment will be all the more awesome. The forces of godliness, of truth, justice, and uprightness will be put to the test, as are all peoples, and although Hussain and his companions will be slain, the victory of submission to the will of God and upholding a cause that is just will act as an example to all future generations.