

To place all one's trust in God

We have all been touched deeply by the sight of men, women and children, often in inflatable boats, trying to cross the Mediterranean Sea to seek safety and a new life in Europe. People risk everything on such a dangerous journey to escape war, hunger, or oppression. They trust in a better future; that God will take care of them. We are disgusted when we hear of human traffickers taking money from people in such distress and then breaking all their promises and leaving them in danger of their lives. Just how much can you trust anyone's promises: politicians, rogues, even friends? Sometimes life can be a choice between good and bad, but sometimes it's a choice between bad and something much worse. What is it to trust absolutely? 'In God we trust' but at the end of the day is it not the economy that makes all the difference?

We know that today there are tens of millions of people in the world who have had to leave the place of their birth. They are driven by war, conflict, hunger, and poverty. Some are in search of liberty; some want to find a better future for themselves and for their children. There are many stories that would break the heart of those who hear them.

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Hussain also felt the need to leave his home city of Medina. What were the reasons? What motivated him? To be a Muslim is to obey the commands of God and avoid those things that God has forbidden. The source of this knowledge is the ethical guidance contained in the Qur'an and put into practice by the Prophet Muhammad. The tyrant permits the things that God has forbidden and neglects those things that God has commanded. He fails to follow and implement that divine guidance. For the faithful Muslim, not to oppose such tyranny would be to abandon the way of God. The Qur'an commands that faithful men and women are 'to promote the good and to oppose the bad' (Q. 3:110). There is no choice in the matter. Hussain felt himself obliged to make a stand, to do whatever it took, to pay whatever price, to protect and to propagate the purity of the message of Islam. This was the motivation that required him to leave his home in Medina.

Before he left Medina, Hussain wrote his last will and testament and left it with his half-brother, Muhammad ibn Hanafiyya; Ali was the father of both but with different mothers. In this he said, 'Indeed, I have not moved out boisterously, insolently, corruptly or oppressively, rather, I have risen up seeking to put right the affairs of the community of my grandfather, and to act in accordance with the conduct of my grandfather and father.' Muhammad ibn Hanafiyya expressed his concern for what would become of Hussain and his family if they left Medina. He counselled that they should go first to Mecca, but if for some reason they were not safe there, they should travel from place to place including as far as Yemen. Hussain responded, 'If there would not be any shelter or place of refuge in the world, I would never make the oath of allegiance to Yazid.'

Hussain wanted to take his leave of his grandfather Muhammad. He visited his grave, which was in Medina. He wanted to pray there for God's blessing and for guidance. It is reported that he prayed, 'O God, indeed I love the good and hate the forbidden. I beseech you, O Lord of majesty and honour, by the honour of this tomb and the one buried here, provide me with a cause with which you and your prophet are delighted.' It was on this occasion that Muhammad appeared to him in a dream and said, 'O Hussain. Set out on your journey, for God has surely willed to see you as a martyr.' When asked why he was taking the women and children of his family with him, he replied that the Prophet also said to him that God has surely willed to see them taken captive.

After the death of their mother Fatima, Hasan and Hussain were looked after by one of Muhammad's wives called Umm Salama. They were naturally very close. Hussain went to bid farewell to her before he left Medina. She expressed her grave concern at what would happen to him and his family if they fell into the hands of the soldiers of Yazid. Hussain responded by saying, 'I am aware that I shall be slain out of animosity and the Almighty has wanted to see my family members disbursed and my children slain and taken captive, bound by chains, while they are crying and appealing for help but they do not find any helper.'

This statement of Hussain pulls us up short. One can imagine those who heard it from the lips of Hussain himself: 'Did he just say that God wills the death and captivity of his children?' We might share that same thought. Can that be right? Consider the case of someone who has a serious and aggressive cancer that will kill them if it is not treated. The treatment is to infuse into their body poisonous chemicals that are designed to hit the cancerous cells so hard that it kills them, but stops short of killing the person. We have all seen the terrible side-effects of chemotherapy. Only the most serious of illnesses could justify such a devastating treatment.

When Shi'a Muslims consider the events that we are soon to explore, in which members of the family of Hussain were either killed or taken captive at Karbala, they too are shocked at the severity of the situation. What kind of an 'illness' could justify such a terrible 'treatment'? The situation was of the gravest kind. The way of life founded on the Qur'an and Prophet Muhammad was on the very edge of being subverted by tyranny and base corruption. If the message was lost, humankind would suffer through lack of guidance to lead people to Paradise. The horror of the events had to be experienced by those involved. With the benefit of hindsight, subsequent generations of Shi'a Muslims can grasp the enormity of the loss that alone could justify such terrible sacrifices.

The tragedy of Karbala cannot have been something that did not touch Hussain himself. We see again the enormity of the situation. It is a sign of the total faith and trust that Hussain had in God. He was called willingly to submit to the will of God, even at such a terrible price. He was to light a beacon of faith and submission to God that would blaze through all future generations. The Qur'an recounts the test of faith and submission of Abraham and his son Ishmael (Q. 37:102–106). Abraham was told to

sacrifice his son. When Ishmael was told by his father that it is the will of God that he is to be sacrificed, he gave his total submission to God and agreed to be the willing sacrificial victim. In this account, the sacrifice was stopped before Ishmael was killed. In the tragedy of Karbala, the sacrifice runs through to its ultimate conclusion. Hussain and two of his sons are killed. His wife and remaining children are taken captive. The beacon lit by such an act of sacrifice is used by God to light the way of faith and submission for all future generations.

It was in the same month in which Mu'awiya had died and Yazid had taken power that Hussain was to set out on the journey from Medina to Mecca. He knew now that this would be the last time that he would be in Medina and so he wanted to go to the cemetery to bid farewell to his grandmother and his brother. Then he gathered his wife, Rubab, his five children, his sister, Zaynab, and other members of his family, together with some of his most loyal supporters. They were to place their trust in God. They were to set out on a five-day journey riding on camels and horses to go to Mecca. The territory through which they would pass would be hostile; they did not know if they would be intercepted by soldiers. Whatever the hardships, it was the will of God. There was no choice but to obey.

On leaving Medina, Hussain recited from the Qur'an the words that Moses said when he was leaving the court of the pharaoh in Egypt to go to the unknown city of Midian. 'My Lord! Deliver me from the wrongdoing lot' (Q. 28:21). Scholars understand that he was drawing a parallel between Moses setting off on a mission that would save the Israelites from slavery and his own mission to save the message of Islam and its people from tyranny and corruption. The five-day journey of 350 kilometres (220 miles) brought them to Mecca. Upon entering the city, Hussain again recited from the Qur'an a verse attributed to Moses as he turned his face toward Midian, 'Maybe my Lord will show me the right way' (Q. 28:22).