

# Thinking Good About Allah

SCHOLARLY EXPLANATIONS OF THE ḤADĪTH:

« أَنَا عِنْدَ ظَنِّ عَبْدِي بِي »

*"I am as My servant thinks of Me"*

&

« لَا يَمُوتَنَّ أَحَدُكُمْ إِلَّا وَهُوَ يُحْسِنُ الظَّنَّ بِاللَّهِ »

*"Let none of you die except while thinking good about Allah."*

With Explanations by:

Ibn Ḥajar al-'Asqalānī, al-Nawawī, & al-Manāwī

## Table of Contents

<b>The First Ḥadīth</b> .....	2
al-'Asqalānī's Explanation .....	2
al-Nawawī's Explanation .....	5
al-Manāwī's Explanation .....	5
<b>The Second Ḥadīth</b> .....	9
al-Nawawī's Explanation .....	9
al-Manāwī's Explanation .....	11

## The First Ḥadīth

Abū Hurayrah ( رضي الله عنهما ) said that the prophet ( صلى الله عليه وسلم ) said:

« قَالَ اللَّهُ : أَنَا عِنْدَ ظَنِّ عَبْدِي بِي »

Allah says, “I am as my servant thinks of Me.”<sup>1</sup>

### al-‘Asqalānī’s Explanation

*The following is Ibn Ḥajar al-‘Asqalānī’s explanation of this ḥadīth in his book Fath al-Bārī, his explanation of Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī.*

« **Allah says, “I am as my servant thinks of Me.”** » Meaning: I am capable of behaving towards him in the manner he assumes I will behave with him. al-Karmānī said, “In this wording, there is encouragement to give precedence to one’s hope (in Allah) over fear (of Him).” Perhaps he says this as it pertains to the issue of whether one’s hope and fear should be equal. When any rational person hears such ḥadīth, he would not first assume and expect Allah’s threat of punishment, which would be the side of fearing of Allah, because he would not initially choose that for himself. Rather, he would lean more toward expecting Allah’s promise of reward, the side of hoping in Allah.

Similarly, scholars of ḥadīth investigation hold a second opinion, saying that whether one’s hope or fear is stronger depends on the circumstances, and the ḥadīth of Jābir in *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* also supports this opinion:

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<sup>1</sup> Collected by al-Bukhārī, Muslim, al-Tirmidhī, al-Nasāī, Ibn Mājah, Aḥmad, and several other ḥadīth scholars with slightly varying wordings.

« لَا يَمُوتَنَّ أَحَدُكُمْ إِلَّا وَهُوَ يُحْسِنُ الظَّنَّ بِاللَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ »

None of you should die except while he is having good thoughts about Allah

(عزَّ وجلَّ).<sup>2</sup>

Still, there is a third opinion and it is that one's hope in Allah and fear of Him should constantly be balanced and equal.

Ibn Abī Jamrah said that what is meant by « **thinks of Me** » here is his “certain knowledge” like the verse in which Allah (تعالى) says:

﴿ وَظَنُّوا أَنْ لَا مَلْجَأَ مِنَ اللَّهِ إِلَّا إِلَيْهِ ﴾

**They thought (i.e., knew) that there is no refuge from Allah except to Him.**<sup>3</sup>

al-Quṭubī says:

It has been said that the understanding of « **as my servant thinks of Me** » is to expect an answer when calling upon Him, expect acceptance when repenting to Him, expect forgiveness when seeking His forgiveness, and to expect reward when doing any form of worship in which its conditions are fulfilled, based on the belief that His promise is true.

He also says:

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<sup>2</sup> Collected by Muslim.

<sup>3</sup> The Quran, Sūrah al-Tawbah (9:118).

This understanding is further supported by the prophet's ( صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ ) statement in another ḥadīth:

« اُدْعُوا اللَّهَ وَأَنْتُمْ مُوقِنُونَ بِالْإِجَابَةِ »

Call upon Allah while you are certain of the response (from Him).<sup>4</sup>

For this reason, a person must strive to fulfill his religious duties while being certain that Allah will accept them and forgive him because He has promised to do so, and Allah never breaks his promise. Were someone to assume that Allah would not accept his worship or that his worship would not actually benefit himself, then this is a form of despairing of the mercy of Allah which is a major sin.<sup>5</sup> Were such a person to die upon that assumption, then perhaps he would get what he expects as is indicated at the end of some of these ḥadīth such as:

« أَنَا عِنْدَ ظَنِّ عَبْدِي بِي فَلْيُظَنَّ بِي مَا شَاءَ »

I am as my servant thinks of Me, so let him think about Me however he likes.<sup>6</sup>

As for the expectation of forgiveness while continuing to persist on a particular sin, that is pure ignorance and carelessness (of Allah) and such thinking leads to the doctrine of the *Murji`ite* sect.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Recorded by al-Tirmidhī and al-Albānī says it is *ḥasan* in *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Jāmi' al-Ṣaḥīḥ* (no. 245).

<sup>5</sup> About this, Allah says in Sūrah Yūsuf (12:87):

﴿ وَلَا تَيْأَسُوا مِنْ رَوْحِ اللَّهِ إِنَّهُ لَا يَيْأَسُ مِنْ رَوْحِ اللَّهِ إِلَّا الْقَوْمُ الْكَافِرُونَ ﴾

**Never despair of Allah's mercy. No one despairs of Allah's mercy except the unbelieving people.**

<sup>6</sup> This is one of the different wordings of the ḥadīth under discussion; this wording is recorded by Aḥmad.

## **al-Nawawī's Explanation**

*The following explanation is from Yaḥyá Ibn Sharaf al-Nawawī's explanation of Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim.*

Regarding His statement, « **“I am as my servant thinks of Me.”** », al-Qāḍī reports that it has been said to mean he will be forgiven when he seeks forgiveness, his repentance will be accepted when he repents, he will be answered when he supplicates, and he will be sufficed when he asks for what he has to be sufficient for him. It has also been explained as hope and expecting to have one's sins pardoned, and this is more correct.

## **al-Manāwī's Explanation**

*The following explanation is from 'Abd al-Ra'ūf al-Manāwī's book, Fayḍ al-Qadīr, his explanation of al-Suyūṭī's ḥadīth collection.*

His statement, « **“I am as my servant thinks of Me.”** » means: I will treat him as he thinks I will, and I will do with him what he expects from Me so let him have hope. Or: I am capable of treating him as he thinks I am...This is meant to urge one to prioritize his hope in Allah over his fear of Him and to expect good from Him. al-Qāḍī mentioned this meaning and also said:

It may also be explained as one's sure knowledge (of Allah), meaning: I am as he knows Me to be according to his certainty and knowledge of Me in that his

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<sup>7</sup> The Murji'ites (or *Murji'ah*) are an unorthodox theological sect whose primary heresy is a belief in an unaltered, perpetual state of faith that neither grows stronger with acts of obedience to Allah nor weaker with acts of disobedience. Thus to them, the level of faith of a constant sinner committing major sins is the same level of a pious worshipper of Allah, and this is contradictory to the creed of mainstream Muslims.

destination is to Me, his reckoning is with Me, whatever I have decreed to happen to him, whether good or bad, there is no escape from it, and that there is no one who can give what I withhold, and no one can withhold what I give. If a servant achieves pure *Tawhīd*, is firm in his faith, and trusts in Allah ( سبحانه وتعالى ), He will come closer to him and remove any barrier so that if he calls upon Allah, He will respond, and if he asks from Allah, He grant him what he asks.

Some later scholars also assert this second understanding, explaining the meaning to be: I am as he is certain about Me, so let him rely on Me, trust in My promise, fear My threat, and hope for what is with me. I will give him when he asks of Me and respond to him when he calls upon Me – all of that according to his assumption of Allah and how strong his certainty in Him is.

The Arabic word ظَنَّ (ẓann – think, assume) itself could be used linguistically to mean “know with certainty” as Allah ( تعالى ) says:

﴿ الَّذِينَ يَظُنُّونَ أَنَّهُمْ مُلَاقُوا رَبِّهِمْ ﴾

**Those who are certain (lit. “think”) they will meet their Lord.<sup>8</sup>**

In the preceding verse, the word ظَنَّ means “they know for certain.”

*al-Manāwī continues explaining the same ḥadīth but with wording recorded by al-Ṭabarānī in al-Mu’jam al-Kabīr:*

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<sup>8</sup> Sūrah al-Baqarah (2:46).

« إِنَّ اللَّهَ تَعَالَى يَقُولُ : أَنَا عِنْدَ ظَنِّ عَبْدِي بِي إِخَيْرًا فَخَيْرٌ ، وَإِنْ شَرًّا فَشَرٌّ »

Allah ( تعالی ) says, “I am as My servant thinks of Me. If good then good, and if bad then bad.”

Meaning: If he thinks good of Me, I will treat him well, and if he thinks bad of Me, I will treat him badly...

Ibn al-Qayyim said:

One of the greatest sins in the sight of Allah is to assume the worst and have bad thoughts about Him. Were someone to think badly about Allah, they would have assumed things about Him that contradicts His holy perfection and that contradicts the reality of His names and characteristics. In that case, they would be under the same threat Allah threatens others who think similarly; He says:

﴿ وَيُعَذِّبُ الْمُنَافِقِينَ وَالْمُنَافِقَاتِ وَالْمُشْرِكِينَ وَالْمُشْرِكَاتِ الظَّالِمِينَ بِاللَّهِ  
ظَنَّ السَّوْءِ عَلَيْهِمْ دَائِرَةُ السَّوْءِ <sup>ط</sup> وَغَضِبَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِمْ وَلَعَنَهُمْ وَأَعَدَّ لَهُمْ  
جَهَنَّمَ <sup>ط</sup> وَسَاءَتْ مَصِيرًا ﴾

**And (that) He may punish the hypocrite men and hypocrite women, and the polytheist men and polytheist women, those who think evil thoughts about Allah. Upon them is a misfortune of evil. Allah has become angry with them, has cursed them, and has prepared for them Hell, and evil it is as a destination.<sup>9</sup>**

<sup>9</sup> Sūrah al-Fath (48:6).

And He says:

﴿وَذَلِكُمْ ظَنُّكُمُ الَّذِي ظَنَنْتُمْ بِرَبِّكُمْ أَرْدَاكُمْ فَأَصْبَحْتُمْ مِنَ  
الْخَاسِرِينَ﴾

**And that was your (evil) assumption which you assumed about your Lord. It has brought you to ruin, and you have become among the losers.<sup>10</sup>**

*al-Manāwī explains yet another wording of the ḥadīth, this one from Aḥmad:*

«أَنَا عِنْدَ ظَنِّ عَبْدِي بِي فَلْيُظَنَّ بِي مَا شَاءَ»

I am as my servant thinks of Me, so let him think about Me as he likes.

Meaning: I am capable of doing with him what he assumes I will do with him. Or: I am as he knows Me to be, as he has faith in Me to be in what I have promised of accepting his good deeds, pardoning his errors, and answering his supplication sooner or later. Or it means: I am as he expects and hopes Me to be...

It has also been said that there is no sin so great before The Judge that it should cause you to despair of thinking good about Allah. Whoever truly knows his Lord, he would know his sin is insignificant when compared with Allah's generosity.

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<sup>10</sup> Sūrah al-Fuṣṣilat (41:23).



## The Second Ḥadīth

Jābir ( رضي الله عنه ) said: Three days before he died, I heard the prophet ( صلى الله عليه ) say:

« لَا يَمُوتَنَّ أَحَدُكُمْ إِلَّا وَهُوَ يُحْسِنُ الظَّنَّ بِاللَّهِ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ »

None of you should die except while he is having good thoughts about Allah

(عزَّ وجلَّ).<sup>11</sup>

## al-Nawawī's Explanation

*The following is again from al-Nawawī's explanation of Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim.*

Regarding the statement of the prophet « **None of you should die except while he is having good thoughts about Allah** » scholars have said that this is a warning against losing hope and despairing (of Allah's mercy) and an encouragement to have hope especially at the time of death.

Allah ( سبحانه وتعالى ) also said in the previous ḥadīth « **I am as my servant thinks of Me.** » and (considering both ḥadīth) scholars explain that « **having good thoughts about Allah** » means that an individual should expect Allah to have mercy on him and pardon him.

Some scholars have also said that during times of wellbeing and health, an individual should have both hope and fear in Allah and these two feelings should be equally balanced. Others say that one's fear should be more, but when the

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<sup>11</sup> Collected by Muslim.

signs of death approach, a person's hope in Allah's mercy should become stronger. This is because the very purpose of having fear of Allah is to prevent oneself from committing sins and ugly deeds and to increase in obedience and good deeds. And those things are most often not possible during that situation (i.e., during the last moments of one's death).

Instead, in that situation, assuming good thoughts about Allah is preferable which would cause one to have feelings of destitution and submission and to feel oneself in total need of Allah (تعالى). The ḥadīth mentioned by Imām Muslim right after this one also supports this understanding:

« يُبْعَثُ كُلُّ عَبْدٍ عَلَىٰ مَا مَاتَ عَلَيْهِ »

Every servant will be resurrected according to what he died upon.<sup>12</sup>

Scholars explain that it means each individual will be resurrected in the same state in which he died. The next ḥadīth (in Imām Muslim's authentic collection) also supports this:

« إِذَا أَرَادَ اللَّهُ يَقَوْمٍ عَذَابًا أَصَابَ الْعَذَابُ مَنْ كَانَ فِيهِمْ ثُمَّ بُعِثُوا عَلَىٰ أَعْمَالِهِمْ »

When Allah intends to punish an entire group of people, the punishment afflicts them all, but then each is resurrected according to (his individual) deeds.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

And the ḥadīth:

« إِنَّمَا يُعَثُّ النَّاسُ عَلَى نِيَّاتِهِمْ »

People will only be resurrected upon their (individual) intentions.<sup>14</sup>

### al-Manāwī's Explanation

*The following explanation is from al-Manāwī's, Fayḍ al-Qadīr.*

His ( صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ ) statement « **None of you should die except while he is having good thoughts about Allah** » means: Let none of you die under any circumstance except while in the state of thinking good about Allah ( تعالى ) in that He will be merciful with you and pardon you. This is because when a person's time of passing arrives and his journey comes to an end, his fear (of Allah) has no real purpose (to prevent him from bad deeds during life). It would perhaps lead him to despair and to a feeling of restriction of (Allah's) mercy and bounties.

Whoever at that time, even if his heart were laden with major sins, begins expecting the best (of his Lord) and increases in hope, he has then perfected his provisions for his arrival to his Lord...

al-Ṭibī said:

The prophet ( صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ ) instructs one to ensure he does not die in any state other than expecting and assuming good about Allah. And this does not

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<sup>14</sup> Collected by Ibn Mājah and al-Albānī says it is authentic in *Ṣaḥīḥ Sunan Ibn Mājah* (no. 3407).

mean one can change destiny or fate. Rather, what is intended is that an individual is commanded to have good thoughts (about Allah) so that when death overcomes him, he is in such a state.

نَسْأَلُ اللَّهَ الْعَفُورَ الرَّحِيمَ لِتَوْفِيقِهِ عَلَى حَسَنِ الظَّنِّ بِهِ خُصُوصًا عِنْدَ الْمَوْتِ