

Title: ...As If You Were a Stranger

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...As If You Were a Stranger¹

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¹ Ibn Rajab al-Hanbalī’s book, “Jāmi’ al-‘Ulūm wal-Ḥikam”, is an explanation of the forty-two famous ḥadīth collected by Imam al-Nawawī. The ḥadīth explained in this translations is number forty.

The Ḥadīth

Ibn ‘Umar (رضي الله عنه) said: Allah's Messenger (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) took me by my shoulder and said:

«كُنْ فِي الدُّنْيَا كَأَنْكَ غَرِيبٌ أَوْ عَابِرٌ سَيِّلٌ»

Be in this life as if you were a stranger or a traveler on a path.

And Ibn ‘Umar used to say:

If you reach the evening, do not expect to reach the morning, and if you reach the morning, do not expect to reach the evening. Take from your health before your sickness and from your life before your death.²

² Recorded by al-Bukhārī (no. 6416).

Explanation of the Ḥadīth

This ḥadīth is a foundation for limiting one's hope in this life. A believer should not consider this life as his homeland or permanent residence, his heart being completely tranquil and at ease within it. Instead, he should stay in it as if he were on a journey, preparing himself to leave. The advice of the prophets and their followers encourage this.

Allah said, quoting from a believer at the time of Pharaoh:

﴿يَا قَوْمٍ إِنَّمَا هَذِهِ الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا مَتَاعٌ وَإِنَّ الْآخِرَةَ هِيَ دَارُ الْقَرَارِ﴾

Oh my people, surely this worldly life is nothing but a (quick, passing) enjoyment. And certainly the hereafter, that is the home that will last forever.³

‘Alī Ibn Abī Tālib used to say:

This life has begun moving away, and the hereafter has begun coming forward, and each has its children. So be one of the children of the hereafter and do not be one of the children of this life. For today there is action with no account, but tomorrow there will be account with no action.

‘Umar Ibn ‘Abdul-‘Azīz said in a sermon:

³ The Quran, Sūrah Ghāfir, 40:39.

This life is not your permanent abode. Allah has prescribed that it will come to an end and he has prescribed for its people to depart from it. How often a thriving population has been ruined over something so insignificant (this life), and how often a content resident has been made to depart something so insignificant. So prepare well, may Allah have mercy on you, for the journey with your best preparations. And take provisions, for the best provision is a conscience that is fearful of Allah.

If this life is not a permanent residence or homeland for a believer, then a believer's condition in it must be either one of two states: 1) either as if he were a stranger residing in a strange land with his main concern to take provisions for his return to his real homeland; or 2) as if he were a traveler, in no way residing in it, but instead spending every night and day journeying towards his true land of residence.

For this, the prophet (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) advised Ibn 'Umar to live in this life in one of these two states:

The First State: As a Stranger

In this state, the believer is abandoned as if he were a stranger in this life, appearing to be a resident, yet really in a strange land. His heart is not attached to this strange land. Instead, his heart is attached to his real homeland to which he is returning. He is only staying in this life to fulfill his objective – preparing for his return home.

al-Fuḍayl Ibn ‘Iyyād said:

A believer in this life is concerned, sad. His concern is the objective of preparing himself. Whoever's condition in this life is like this then he has no concern other than taking provisions from what will benefit him during the return to his homeland. He neither competes with the people of the land, among whom he is merely a stranger, in what they consider honorable, nor does he become worried if he seems insignificant among them.

al-Hasan (Al-Baṣrī) said:

The believer is like a stranger. He is neither worried about being insignificant in it (this life), nor does he compete for honor in it. He is in one state while most other people in another. When Allah created Adam (عليه السلام), he made him and his wife live in Paradise. Then he was put out of it, yet promised to return, he and his righteous offspring. So the believer is always longing for this return, his first homeland...

The Second State: As a Traveler

In this state, the believer considers himself in this life as a traveler, not permanently residing in it. He is only moving along at one of the many points of his journey until he ends his travels, the end of which is his death. Whoever's condition is like that then his main concern is nothing more than to acquire provisions for his journey. He is not concerned with an abundance of enjoyment in this life. For this reason, the prophet (صلى الله عليه وسلم) advised a group of his

companions that their main objective in this life should be to obtain the provision of a traveler.

One of the Salaf wrote to one of his brothers:

My brother, it appears to you as if you are a resident. However, you are really only traveling, constantly, and you are moving quickly. Death is heading towards you, and this life is passing behind you. What has passed of your life will not return to you on the Day of Resurrection.

al-Fuḍayl Ibn ‘Iyyād asked a man, “How many (years) have come upon you?” He replied, “Sixty years.” al-Fuḍayl then said, “So then, for sixty years you have been heading to your Lord and you are about to reach him.” The man said, “To Allah we belong and to him we are returning!” al-Fuḍayl then said:

Do you know what that statement means? You are saying, “I belong to Allah as a servant and I am returning to him.” So whoever knows that he belongs to Allah as a servant and that he will return to him, then he should know that he will be stopped. And whoever knows that he is going to be stopped then he knows he will be questioned. And whoever knows that he will be questioned then he should prepare an answer for that questioning.

The man asked, “So what do I do?” al-Fuḍayl answered, “It is easy.” The man again asked, “So what is it?” al-Fuḍayl said, “Do good in what remains (of your life), then what has passed should be forgiven. But if you do evil in what remains, then you could be taken to account for what passed and for what remains.”

Some wise people said, “Whoever spends all his days and nights riding on his animal, then he will be taken to his destination even if he himself never moves.”

al-Awzā’ī wrote to one of his brothers, “You are surrounded from every side. Know that you are moving forward with each day and night. So beware of Allah and of standing between his hands. Your final promise is with him. Peace.”

Explanation of the Ibn ‘Umar’s Advice

As for the advice of Ibn ‘Umar (رضي الله عنه), it is based upon the ḥadīth of the prophet (صَلَّى اللهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) that he himself has narrated. This advice includes a remedy for prolonged, irrational hope. If a person happens to reach the evening, he should not expect to reach the morning, and if he happens to reach the morning, then he should not expect to make it to the evening. Rather, he should suppose that he may reach his end before that. More than one scholar has explained the concept of *Zuhd*, or abstention, in the worldly life with this same meaning.

al-Marwathī said that Abū Abdullah, meaning Imam Ahmad (Ibn Ḥanbal), was asked, “What is the meaning of having Zuhd in this life?” He replied, “Not prolonging hope too much. It is he who says when he wakes up, ‘I doubt I will even reach this evening.’” He then said, “Sufyān (al-Thawrī) said likewise.” Abū Abdullah was then asked, “How do we keep from prolonging our hope too much?” He answered, “We do not know; it is only by success exclusively granted by Allah.”

As for his (Ibn ‘Umar’s) statement: “Take from your health before your sickness, and from your life before your death,” this means: Take advantage of being capable of doing righteous deeds with what remains of your health before sickness prevents you from doing them, and take advantage from your life before death prevents you from doing anything.

In another narration, Ibn ‘Umar said, “Surely, oh servant of Allah, you do not even know what you will be called tomorrow.” Meaning: Maybe tomorrow you will be one of the dead, not the living.

A similar meaning of his advice has been reported from the prophet (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) from a different perspective. In “Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī”, it is recorded that Ibn ‘Abbās (رضي الله عنه) narrated that the prophet (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) said:

«نِعْمَتَانِ مَغْبُونُ فِيهِمَا كَثِيرٌ مِنَ النَّاسِ الصَّحَّةُ وَالْفَرَاغُ»

There are two blessings many people are deprived of: health and free time.⁴

Also, in the “Mustadrak” of al-Hākim, it is recorded that Ibn ‘Abbās (رضي الله عنه) narrated that the messenger of Allah (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) said to a man while advising him:

«إِغْتِيمْ خَمْسًا قَبْلَ خَمْسٍ ، شَبَابَكَ قَبْلَ هَرَمَكَ ، وَصِحَّتَكَ قَبْلَ سَقْمَكَ ،
وَغِنَاكَ قَبْلَ فَقْرَكَ ، وَفَرَاغَكَ قَبْلَ شُغْلَكَ ، وَحَيَاتكَ قَبْلَ مَوْتَكَ»

Take advantage of five things before five other things: from your youth before your old age, your health before your sickness, your wealth before

⁴ Reported by al-Bukhārī (vol. 11, pg. 229) in “Fath al-Bārī.”

your poverty, your free time before you become occupied, and from your life before your death.⁵

The meaning of this is that all these things can delay or prevent someone from doing good deeds. Some things personally preoccupy the person such as his poverty, richness, sickness, his old age, or his death. Others are more general like the establishment of the Last Hour, the appearance of the Anti-Christ, and other disturbing trials as is mentioned in the ḥadīth:

«بَادِرُوا بِالْأَعْمَالِ فَتَنًا كَيْطَعُ اللَّيْلُ الْمُظْلِمُ»

Take the initiative to do (good) deeds before trials come like a dark night
(unexpectedly, unnoticeably).⁶

After the appearance of some of these more general events, no deeds will be of any benefit as Allah says:

﴿يَوْمَ يَأْتِي بَعْضُ آيَاتِ رَبِّكَ لَا يَنْفَعُ نَفْسًا إِيمَانُهَا لَمْ تَكُنْ آمَنَتْ مِنْ قَبْلُ أَوْ كَسَبَتْ فِي إِيمَانِهَا خَيْرًا﴾

The day some signs of your Lord come, no good will it do a person to believe then if he neither believed before nor earned good through his faith.⁷

⁵ Reported by al-Ḥākim (vol. 4, no. 306). He graded it as authentic according to the condition of the two ḥadīth scholars (al-Bukhārī and Muslim) and al-Dhahabī agreed with him as well as al-Albānī in the checking of the ḥadīth of “Iqtidā al-‘Ilm al-‘Amal” (no. 170).

⁶ Reported by Muslim (no. 118).

⁷ Sūrah al-An’ām, 6:158.

In the two authentic collections of ḥadīth (al-Bukhārī and Muslim), Abū Hurayrah (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) narrated that the prophet (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) said:

« لَا تَقُومُ السَّاعَةُ حَتَّى تَطْلُعَ الشَّمْسُ مِنْ مَغْرِبِهَا ، فَإِذَا طَلَعَتْ وَرَآهَا النَّاسُ ، آمَنُوا أَجْمَعُونَ ، وَدِلْكَ حِينَ لَا يَنْفَعُ نَفْسًا إِيمَانُهَا »

The (final) hour will not be established until the sun rises from the west. When it does rise and the people see it, they will then all believe. That is when the faith of a person will not benefit him.⁸

In “Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim”, the prophet (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) said:

« ثَلَاثٌ إِذَا خَرَجْنَ لَا يَنْفَعُ نَفْسًا إِيمَانُهَا لَمْ تَكُنْ آمَنَتْ مِنْ قَبْلُ أَوْ كَسَبَتْ فِي إِيمَانِهَا خَيْرًا طَلْوَعُ الشَّمْسِ مِنْ مَغْرِبِهَا وَالدَّجَالُ وَدَابَّةُ الْأَرْضِ »

There are three events that, when they happen, the faith of a person will not benefit him if he did not believe before or did not earn good by his faith: the rising of the sun from the west, the Anti-Christ, and when the Beast emerges from the earth.⁹

Also in “Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim”, the prophet (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) said:

« مَنْ تَابَ قَبْلَ أَنْ تَطْلُعَ الشَّمْسُ مِنْ مَغْرِبِهَا تَابَ اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ »

⁸ Reported by al-Bukhārī (vol. 8, pg. 296-297) in “Fath al-Bārī” and by Muslim (no. 157).

⁹ Reported by Muslim (no. 158).

Whoever repents before the sun rises from the west, Allah will accept his repentance.¹⁰

Abū Mūsá (صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ) narrated that the prophet (رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ) said:

«إِنَّ اللَّهَ عَزَّ وَجَلَّ يَبْسُطُ يَدَهُ بِاللَّيْلِ لِيَتُوبَ مُسِيءُ النَّهَارِ وَيَبْسُطُ يَدَهُ بِالنَّهَارِ لِيَتُوبَ مُسِيءُ اللَّيْلِ حَتَّى تَطْلُعَ الشَّمْسُ مِنْ مَغْرِبِهَا»

Allah extends his hand during the night to accept the repentance of the sinner of the day, and he extends his hand during the day to accept the repentance of the sinner of the night. This continues until the sun rises from the west.¹¹

So a believer should take the initiative to performing righteous deeds before he is overtaken by destiny and prevented from doing them either because of sickness, death, or by some of these signs reaching him after which no deed will be accepted.

Abū Ḥāzim said, “The merchandise of the hereafter is (unfortunately) in little demand. It is about to be distributed with no one gaining it except a very few.”

If someone is prevented from doing deeds, nothing remains for him except regret and sorrow. He will wish to return to the previous situation in which he was able to do good deeds. But wishing at that time will in no way benefit him.

¹⁰ Reported by Muslim (no. 2703).

¹¹ Reported by Muslim, (no. 2759).

Allah (سبحانه وتعالى) says:

﴿ وَأَنِيبُوا إِلَى رَبِّكُمْ وَأَسْلِمُوا لَهُ مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ يَأْتِيَكُمُ الْعَذَابُ ثُمَّ لَا تُنْصَرُونَ وَاتَّقُوا أَحْسَنَ مَا أَنْزَلَ إِلَيْكُمْ مِنْ رَبِّكُمْ مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ يَأْتِيَكُمُ الْعَذَابُ بَغْتَةً وَأَنْتُمْ لَا تَشْعُرُونَ أَنْ تَقُولَ نَفْسٌ يَا حَسْرَتَا عَلَى مَا فَرَّطْتُ فِي جَنْبِ اللَّهِ وَإِنْ كُنْتُ لَمِنَ السَّالِحِينَ أَوْ تَقُولَ لَوْ أَنَّ اللَّهَ هَدَانِي لَكُنْتُ مِنَ الْمُتَّقِينَ أَوْ تَقُولَ حِينَ تَرَى الْعَذَابَ لَوْ أَنَّ لِي كَرَّةً فَأَكُونُ مِنَ الْمُحْسِنِينَ ﴾

And turn in repentance and obedience with true faith to your Lord and submit to Him before the torment comes upon you, then you will not be helped. And follow the best of that which is sent down to you from your Lord before the torment comes on you suddenly while you do not realize it. (This is) so a person does not say, "Oh my grief, I was undutiful to Allah and was certainly one of those who mocked (the truth)," or (unless) he should say, "If only Allah had guided me, I would have been one of the pious and righteous people." Or (unless) he should say when he sees the torment, "If only I had another chance, I would definitely be one of the good-doers."¹²

And he says:

﴿ حَتَّىٰ إِذَا جَاءَ أَحَدَهُمُ الْمَوْتُ قَالَ رَبٌّ ارْجِعُونِ لَعَلَّيٍ أَعْمَلُ صَالِحًا فِيمَا تَرَكْتُ كَلَّا إِنَّهَا كَلِمَةٌ هُوَ قَائِلُهَا وَمِنْ وَرَائِهِمْ بَرَزَخٌ إِلَى يَوْمٍ يُبَعَثُونَ ﴾

¹² Sūrah al-Zumar, 39:54-58.

Until when death comes to one of them (those who worship others besides Allah), **he says, “My Lord, send me back so I can do good in that which I have left behind!”** No. It is but a word that he speaks, and behind them is a barrier until the day when they will be resurrected.¹³

And he (سبحانه وتعالى) says:

﴿ وَأَنْفِقُوا مِنْ مَا رَزَقْنَاكُمْ مِنْ قَبْلِ أَنْ يَأْتِيَ أَحَدَكُمُ الْمَوْتُ فَيَقُولَ رَبِّ لَوْلَا
أَخْرَّتِنِي إِلَى أَجَلٍ قَرِيبٍ فَأَصْلِقَ وَأَكُنْ مِنَ الصَّالِحِينَ وَلَنْ يُؤْخِرَ اللَّهُ نَفْسًا
إِذَا جَاءَ أَجَلُهَا وَاللَّهُ خَيْرٌ بِمَا تَعْمَلُونَ ﴾

And spend (in charity) from what we have provided you before death comes to one of you and he says, “My Lord, if only you would give me respite for a little while (to return to the worldly life), I would then give charity from my wealth and be one of the righteous.” And Allah grants respite to no one when his appointed time comes. And Allah is always aware of what you do.¹⁴

Therefore, it is incumbent for a believer to take advantage of what remains of his life. In explaining this, some people say, “The remainder of a believer’s life is priceless.”

Sa‘id Ibn Jubayr (رضي الله عنه) said, “Each day a believer lives is a treasure.”

¹³ Sūrah al-Muminūn, 23:99-100.

¹⁴ Sūrah al-Munāfiqūn, 63:10-11.