

# Repentance (at-Tawbah)

Allah *subhānahu wa ta'ālā* orders all believers to repent:

وَتُوبُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ جَمِيعًا أَيُّهَ الْمُؤْمِنُونَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تُفْلِحُونَ

***"And turn to Allah in repentance, all of you, O believers, that you might succeed."***<sup>1</sup>

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوا تَوْبُوا إِلَى اللَّهِ تَوْبَةً نَّصُوحًا

***"O you who have believed, repent to Allah with sincere repentance."***<sup>2</sup>

And He warns:

وَمَنْ لَّمْ يَتُبْ فَأُولَٰئِكَ هُمُ الظَّالِمُونَ

***"And whoever does not repent – then it is those who are the wrongdoers."***<sup>3</sup>

And He affirms:

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ التَّوَّابِينَ وَيُحِبُّ الْمُتَطَهِّرِينَ

***"Indeed, Allah loves those who are constantly repentant and loves those who purify themselves."***<sup>4</sup>

Repentance is required for all sins, great or small, apparent or hidden. It is for the benefit of man, since Allah Himself is free of need.

The word "*tawbah*" (repentance) literally means "turning back." Since sin puts distance between the soul and Allah *subhānahu wa ta'ālā*, during repentance the servant turns back to Allah, seeking refuge in His forgiveness. And when a soul repents and returns to Him, Allah turns back to His servant in acceptance and forgiveness. Thus Allah has named Himself "*at-Tawwāb*" (the Constant Acceptor of Repentance), sometimes translated as "the Oft-Returning."

Since man is created in weakness and imperfection, error is part of his nature. But all sinners are not the same. They generally fall into two categories: those who follow the path of Shayṭān (who refused obedience and repentance out of conceit) and are thus doomed to the Hellfire, and those who have been promised forgiveness and Paradise:

وَالَّذِينَ إِذَا فَعَلُوا فَحِشَةً أَوْ ظَلَمُوا أَنْفُسَهُمْ ذَكَرُوا اللَّهَ فَاسْتَغْفَرُوا لِذُنُوبِهِمْ وَمَنْ يَغْفِرُ الذُّنُوبَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ

***"...And those who, when they commit an immorality or wrong themselves [by transgression], remember Allah and seek forgiveness for their sin. And who can forgive sins except Allah?"***<sup>5</sup>

A prerequisite to repentance is the knowledge and admission of sin, for ignorance and denial are barriers, preventing return. Knowledge of the consequences of sin, both in this

<sup>1</sup>Sūrah an-Nūr, 24:31.

<sup>2</sup>Sūrah at-Taḥreem, 66:8.

<sup>3</sup>Sūrah al-Hujurāt, 49:11.

<sup>4</sup>Sūrah al-Baqarah, 2:222.

<sup>5</sup>Sūrah Aali 'Imrān, 3:135.

world and in the next, will make one most anxious to escape the result of his carelessness. And where can he find refuge and protection from that except with Allah *subḥānahu wa taʿālā*? Therefore, one should consider the reason he fell into sin, which is that he, at least temporarily, forgot Allah. And when a servant forgets Him and drifts away, Allah removes His protection from that soul, leaving him to depend only upon himself. Thus he becomes prey to his own desires and to the Shayṭān. If he had remembered his Lord at the time of temptation, he would have retained Allah's protection from sin. Indeed, every moment of his life, man is in one of two states: either that of remembrance, holding fast to Allah and thereby placing his soul under His custody, or that of forgetfulness, breaking away from the protective custody of Allah.

A temporary slip into some form of sin is usually checked by the believer before too long. No sooner has he committed the sin than he feels pain. Even the pleasure expected from that sin which initially tempted him eludes him, and he finds in his heart only sadness at the realization that Allah has left him to himself.

Certain souls, however, find pleasure in disobedience. They are like those people who, although harboring a fatal illness, refuse to admit it or to seek treatment. The amount of pleasure reflects: 1) the extent of one's desire for the unlawful, 2) his ignorance concerning Him whom he has disobeyed, and 3) his ignorance of the Hereafter. One's happiness with the unlawful is indeed more harmful to him than the sin itself, for it shows a conscience which is lifeless and devoid of function. When unawareness has reached such a degree that it finally becomes persistence in sin and insistence upon it, Allah's punishment is swift. He allows that soul to fall even deeper into sin until it reaches the state described in the Qurʾān:

كَلَّا بَلْ رَانَ عَلَى قُلُوبِهِمْ مَا كَانُوا يَكْسِبُونَ

***"No! Rather, the stain has covered their hearts of that which they were earning."***<sup>6</sup>

Concerning this, the Prophet (ﷺ) explained, "When the servant commits a sin, a black mark is etched onto his heart, but if he ceases and asks Allah's forgiveness, then his heart is wiped clean. If, however, he repeats it, then it [i.e., the black stain] increases until it eventually envelops the heart. This is the stain which Allah has mentioned in His Book."<sup>7</sup> Qurʾānic commentators describe the stain as sin upon sin, which finally blackens the heart until no light of truth can penetrate into it and until the soul subsequently rejects truth and guidance altogether. The greatest sins, however, are those done publicly. It is then that the offending soul is either in open rebellion against Allah or complete disbelief.

Yet, repentance is always possible. Allah *taʿālā* provides us with hope:

قُلْ يٰعِبَادِىَ الَّذِيْنَ اَسْرَفُوْا عَلٰٓى اَنْفُسِهِمْ لَا تَقْنَطُوْا مِنْ رَّحْمَةِ اللّٰهِ ۚ اِنَّ اللّٰهَ يَغْفِرُ الذُّنُوْبَ جَمِيْعًا ۚ اِنَّهٗ هُوَ الْغَفُوْرُ الرَّحِيْمُ

***"Say, 'O My servants who have transgressed against themselves [by sinning], do not despair of the mercy of Allah. Indeed, Allah forgives all sins. Indeed, it is He who is the Forgiving, the Merciful.'"***<sup>8</sup>

Since repentance is accepted only from a Muslim submitting himself to Allah, the repentance of a nonbeliever or one who has committed *shirk* is accomplished by his entry or

<sup>6</sup>Sūrah al-Muṭaffifeen, 83:14.

<sup>7</sup>Aḥmad, at-Tirmidhī and an-Nasāʾī – ḥasan.

<sup>8</sup>Sūrah az-Zumar, 39:53.

re-entry into Islam. Moreover, since it is, in fact, a return to Allah, repentance requires a knowledge of Him and the knowledge that the erring soul has been very distant from Him. Such a soul has been a prisoner of its enemy, Shayṭān, due to its unawareness of Allah and its own insolence. Thus, it requires an extensive search into how and why that came about and an acceptance of the knowledge that there can be no excuse for disobedience after an order or prohibition is known.<sup>9</sup> It also requires a realization that true repentance is a difficult task, demanding great effort and consciousness, and that the effort must be in direct proportion to the distance of one's deviation from the Straight Path.

Repentance is subject to certain conditions: regret, cessation, apology and rectification. When all of them are met, the servant is considered to have returned to Allah and to the state of worship for which he was created.<sup>10</sup> Each condition will be examined briefly:

1. Regret and remorse must replace the acceptance and satisfaction which allow the continuation of a sin. It is pain felt in the heart at a loss for which there is personal responsibility – a loss that could have been prevented. In this case, it refers to the loss of Allah's protection and the nearness to Him which gives peace of mind. In addition, there is fear following the realization of the seriousness of that offense that has damaged the soul and of the severe penalty of the Hereafter, which can only be avoided through Allah's mercy. As with the loss of a dear one or of a valuable friendship, pain is evident in prolonged sorrow and weeping. The offender wishes intensely that he had never committed such an error and desperately seeks some means to amend the situation.

2. Cessation is imperative. Repentance is not possible while one is still committing the sin. In fact, persistence in a small sin increases it until it carries the weight of a great sin. The offender must desist immediately, determining not to return to that offense ever again. If, however, through human weakness and in spite of earnest effort one should again fall into the same sin, he must repent again and renew his resolve to avoid that error, for Allah never refuses sincere repentance.

3. Apology to Allah is in order. Sin acts as a barrier between man and his Lord; therefore, one must seek forgiveness through repeated prayer and supplication, humbly admitting to Allah his weakness, his need for His mercy and protection, and the gravity of what he has done. Begging Allah to accept his repentance and to return him to His grace through His generosity, the servant is most acutely aware of his dependence and fallibility. After having been seduced into disobedience by Shayṭān, our father and prophet, Ādam, was taught words of repentance by Allah:

قَالَ رَبَّنَا ظَلَمْنَا أَنْفُسَنَا وَإِنْ لَّمْ تَغْفِرْ لَنَا وَتَرْحَمْنَا لَنَكُونَنَّ مِنَ الْخَاسِرِينَ

***"Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves, and if You do not forgive us and have mercy upon us, we will surely be among the losers."***<sup>11</sup>

4. Rectification applies both to the relationship between oneself and Allah *subḥānahu wa ta'ālā*, which must be amended, and to the rights of one's fellow human beings. Certain

<sup>9</sup>Ibn al-Qayyim points out that one who neglects the right of his Lord, blaming his sin on divine decree to absolve himself of responsibility, has committed an additional offense. Would he himself accept this argument from a disobedient wife or from someone who had cheated him? On the contrary, his anger would be further increased by such an excuse so obviously out of place. Yet, he readily uses the same reasoning against Allah *ta'ālā*, who is far above any injustice. See *Tah-dheeb Madārij as-Sālikeen*, page 127.

<sup>10</sup>Allah says: "And I did not create the jinn and mankind except to worship Me." (Adh-Dhāriyāt, 51:56)

<sup>11</sup>Sūrah al-A'rāf, 7:23.

acts (such as violations of *iḥrām*, breaking oaths and accidental killing) require a *kaffārah* (expiation); yet, in most cases involving obligations to Allah alone, the conditions of regret, cessation and apology are the only requirements for forgiveness. However, a person who is especially anxious to regain the pleasure of Allah (fearing a fault in his repentance) can undertake to do extra deeds of righteousness such as additional prayers, fasting or charity – in short, any lawful means of worship. And always, an excellent deed in the sight of Allah is one which benefits others in some way. Indeed, such acts are expiation for sins:

إِنَّ الْحَسَنَاتِ يُذْهِبْنَ السَّيِّئَاتِ

***"Indeed, good deeds do away with misdeeds."***<sup>12</sup>

As for injury done to another party (which is disobedience to Allah as well), the damage must be restored or adequately compensated for whenever possible, or the forgiveness of the other party must be obtained.<sup>13</sup> For example, if property has been taken in an unlawful manner or damaged, it must be returned or replaced (even if this might involve a long search for someone wronged years ago, or if he has died, for his heirs). In the case of harm done by word of mouth (as through false witness or slander), one must make the utmost effort to right this wrong by confessing openly and asking forgiveness of the victim. If it is thought that (as in some cases of backbiting and gossip of which the victim is unaware) admission might lead to further problems, one should certainly take care to speak well of that person on future occasions and ask forgiveness from Allah.

Sometimes it is not possible to restore a right completely, due to the enormity of the offense or the inaccessibility of the victim. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the offender to do good deeds which will benefit the injured party or his heirs. If that, too, is impossible, then he can at least continue to make supplication for the injured party, asking Allah to benefit him (or them) where he himself has failed.

Allah *subḥānahu wa ta'ālā* promises acceptance of true repentance:

كَتَبَ رَبُّكُمْ عَلَى نَفْسِهِ الرَّحْمَةَ أَنَّهُ مَنْ عَمِلَ مِنْكُمْ سُوءًا بِجَهْلَةٍ ثُمَّ تَابَ مِنْ بَعْدِهِ وَأَصْلَحَ فَأَنَّهُ غَفُورٌ رَحِيمٌ

***"Your Lord has decreed upon Himself mercy: that any of you who does wrong out of ignorance<sup>14</sup> and then repents after that and corrects himself – indeed, He is Forgiving and Merciful."***<sup>15</sup>

Yet how easy is repentance of the tongue alone! It would therefore be suspect if sadness is fleeting and quickly forgotten, if pleasure is felt upon remembering the sin, if determination to reform is weak, and if one is immediately satisfied that he has repented and does not increase in righteousness as a result. Repentance is unacceptable if done for any reason other than the fear of Allah, such as outward appearance, avoidance of blame by others, lack of means to continue the sin, or loss of desire due to contentment, illness or age. In truth, one should beware lest his repentance be defaulted.

<sup>12</sup>Sūrah Hūd, 11:114.

<sup>13</sup>Legal punishments for certain crimes serve not only to benefit society but to completely purify a soul which has repented for that sin to Allah. But for an unrepentant soul (or one who regrets only from fear of worldly punishment), legal retribution will not lessen the extreme punishments of the Hereafter.

<sup>14</sup>A believer would not commit wrong deliberately – only through unawareness or forgetfulness.

<sup>15</sup>Sūrah al-An'ām, 6:54.

Thus genuine repentance is recognized by certain particulars. Among them are the fear of a fault which might prevent its acceptance, extreme caution to avoid anything leading back to that sin or something similar, sadness which brings tears, and remorse which prevents pleasure in any of life's activities. Among them as well are the admission that Allah has every right to punish the offender severely, a heart gripped by fear and embarrassment before Allah, and a body burdened under the weight of guilt... And among the signs is the realization that the person is definitely better than he was before the sin was committed.

This is a state which is loved by Allah – the intense longing of His servant for Him and for His acceptance after he has experienced its loss, the need of the servant to return to Him. The Prophet (ﷺ) once said, *"Indeed Allah is happier with the repentance of His servant than one of you would be if he came across his camel after he had lost it in a wide, open land."*<sup>16</sup> And he (ﷺ) affirmed, *"Allah, the Exalted, extends His hand by night for the repentance of he who has sinned by day; and He extends His hand by day for the repentance of he who has sinned by night – until the sun rises from the west."*<sup>17</sup>

The immediate fruit of repentance is a lesson learned and a new awareness and sensitivity. The believer's soul is purified by Allah's forgiveness and acceptance, and his character is improved by the new traits which he has acquired through his experience. His own faults apparent to him, he is not occupied with the faults of others but lives with the words of Allah:

وَلَوْلَا فَضْلُ اللَّهِ عَلَيْكُمْ وَرَحْمَتُهُ مَا زَكَا مِنْكُمْ مِّنْ أَحَدٍ أَبَدًا وَلَكِنَّ اللَّهَ يُزَكِّي مَن يَشَاءُ

***"And if not for the favor of Allah upon you and His mercy, not one of you would have been pure, ever, but Allah purifies whom He wills."***<sup>18</sup>

Thus the believer is comforted and relieved by the knowledge that, in His mercy, Allah has made him aware of his sin so that he may repent; and after exerting sincere efforts in repentance and the performance of righteous deeds, he can trust that the past is no longer a barrier between himself and the pleasure of Allah, who says:

وَإِنِّي لَغَفَّارٌ لِّمَن تَابَ وَءَامَنَ وَعَمِلَ صَالِحًا ثُمَّ اهْتَدَىٰ

***"But indeed, I am the Perpetual Forgiver of whoever repents and believes and does righteousness and then continues in guidance."***<sup>19</sup>

His new relationship with Allah reflects upon and affects all aspects of his life, and his eagerness to preserve that close tie keeps him constantly on guard.

We must remember that the Shayṭān is persistent and slow to give up. If he cannot keep a servant in disbelief, he will make deviation and innovation in religion seem pleasing to him. If he fails in that, then he will try to lead him into a major or a minor sin. If this, too, is futile, then he will seek to occupy one with that which is lawful and permissible in order to keep him from that which is more pleasing to Allah. And finally, when all else fails, he will content himself with leading the servant to the lesser of two good deeds. Yet, for one alert to them, Shayṭān's strategies can be easily recognized and defeated.

<sup>16</sup>Al-Bukhārī, Muslim and others. Allah's happiness is because of His grace, as He is free of need.

<sup>17</sup>Signaling the imminence of the Day of Judgement. Narrated by Muslim.

<sup>18</sup>Sūrah an-Nūr, 24:21.

<sup>19</sup>Sūrah Ṭā Hā, 20:82.

Repentance from sin is a steppingstone to continued righteousness – a return to inner harmony and to Allah.

إِنَّ اللَّهَ يُحِبُّ التَّوَّابِينَ وَيُحِبُّ الْمُتَطَهِّرِينَ

***"Indeed, Allah loves those who are constantly repentant and loves those who purify themselves."***<sup>20</sup>

Taking account of one's self is consistently required in all things, whether apparent or hidden. While ordinary people might regard certain sins as unimportant, the believer, when acknowledging the right of Allah over him and his indebtedness to Him, sees them as ugly and dangerous. As a result, he cannot but see his good deeds as insignificant in this light, and therefore, he strives continuously to increase them. The Prophet (ﷺ) taught the best supplication for forgiveness:

اللَّهُمَّ أَنْتَ رَبِّي لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا أَنْتَ. خَلَقْتَنِي وَأَنَا عَبْدُكَ وَأَنَا عَلَى عَهْدِكَ وَوَعْدِكَ مَا اسْتَطَعْتُ. أَعُوذُ بِكَ مِنْ شَرِّ مَا صَنَعْتُ. أُبُوءُ لَكَ بِنِعْمَتِكَ عَلَيَّ وَأُبُوءُ بِذَنْبِي فَاغْفِرْ لِي فَإِنَّهُ لَا يَغْفِرُ الذُّنُوبَ إِلَّا أَنْتَ.

*"O Allah, You are my Lord – there is no god but You. You created me, and I am Your servant; and I uphold Your covenant and [my] promise to You as much as I am able. I seek refuge in You from the evil I have done. I acknowledge before You Your favor upon me, and I acknowledge my sin, so forgive me. Indeed, there is none who can forgive sins except You."*<sup>21</sup>

Repentance is a new beginning, as illustrated in the saying of the Prophet (ﷺ): "Islam destroys what came before it, and repentance destroys what came before it."<sup>22</sup> Therefore, no soul should ever despair – no matter how great its sin – for Allah is near, ever-ready to receive repentance, willing to forgive, inviting all to forgiveness with His words:

قُلْ يَاعِبَادِيَ الَّذِينَ أَسْرَفُوا عَلَى أَنْفُسِهِمْ لَا تَقْنَطُوا مِنْ رَحْمَةِ اللَّهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ يَغْفِرُ الذُّنُوبَ جَمِيعًا إِنَّهُ هُوَ الْغَفُورُ الرَّحِيمُ

***"Say, 'O My servants who have transgressed against themselves [by sinning], do not despair of the mercy of Allah. Indeed, Allah forgives all sins. Indeed, it is He who is the Forgiving, the Merciful.'"***<sup>23</sup>

<sup>20</sup>Sūrah al-Baqarah, 2:222.

<sup>21</sup>Al-Bukhārī.

<sup>22</sup>Al-Bukhārī.

<sup>23</sup>Sūrah az-Zumar, 39:53.

