

# Patience (aṣ-Ṣabr)

إِنَّمَا يُؤَقِّ الصَّابِرُونَ أَجْرَهُمْ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ

***"Indeed, the patient will be given their reward without enumeration."*<sup>1</sup>**

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It has been pointed out that patience is a particular characteristic of human beings; it is not generally found in animals due to the dominance of their instincts, nor is it present in angels, who, by their nature, are free from desire. As for man, he is created in the early stage of life like the animal, with instincts dominant and little ability for patience. Then as his mind awakens and develops understanding, he is guided to the advantage gained by patience in many situations, although this is incomplete guidance and does not go beyond the benefits of worldly life. Then, if he should come to know the guidance of Allah *subḥānahu wa ta'ālā* and what relates to the Hereafter, his motivation for patience is strengthened further. However, his nature still inclines towards what he likes, causing that inner struggle in which patience is described as "the firmness of the religious incentive in the face of an onslaught of passions." This type of resistance is what is particular to believers and is a primary cause for entry into Paradise.

Patience or forbearance has been mentioned in some 90 places in the Qur'ān, and it is considered a duty upon every Muslim by the authority of the Qur'ān, the Sunnah, and the consensus of scholars. Yet it is one of the most difficult forms of worship for man if he has not already accustomed himself to it or practiced it regularly to gain competence. If his nature pulls him towards that which he likes, then patience requires that he experience and accept that which he dislikes. Thus, compensation in the Hereafter is promised to be far beyond what the servant deserves, continuing on and on with no account being taken of Allah's unlimited generosity.

The linguistic definition of *ṣabr* is "restraint and confinement" – restraining the soul from panic, anger or greed; restraining the tongue from complaint; and restraining the limbs from improper action. Islamic scholars have generally divided patience into three categories:

1. Patience to obey Allah in what He has ordered – Patience in obedience is required since the human soul seeks comfort and ease, is reluctant to give it up, and by nature, dislikes subjection. Laziness and love of possessions must be overcome by patience in such duties as prayer, *zakāh* and *jihād*. When performing any deed for the acceptance of Allah, one must be patient before beginning it by perfecting the intention and opposing the urge to show off. He must be patient during the deed itself not to forget Allah and to make the deed as good and complete as possible. And finally, he must be patient afterwards in avoiding pride or expecting gratitude from fellow men.

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<sup>1</sup>Sūrah az-Zumar, 39:10.

وَأَصْبِرْ نَفْسَكَ مَعَ الَّذِينَ يَدْعُونَ رَبَّهُمْ بِالْغَدَاةِ وَالْعَشِيِّ يُرِيدُونَ وَجْهَهُ

***"And keep yourself patient [by being] with those who call upon their Lord in the morning and the evening, seeking His face [i.e., acceptance]."***<sup>2</sup>

2. Patience to refrain from disobedience – The Prophet (ﷺ) once said, "The world is the believer's prison and the non-believer's paradise."<sup>3</sup> For those who have been accustomed to living a lifestyle far from the Straight Path, patience is required after repentance in order to keep the Shayṭān at bay. Indeed, each new temptation must be resisted vigorously. The most difficult in this category is the avoidance of those sins – such as backbiting – which are committed easily and not always deplored by others, as well as those sins which are usually committed secretly.

3. Patience in the face of problems or afflictions – This category includes all that happens to one against his own will, such as the loss of property, the death of loved ones, illness, or harm done to him by others – the most difficult of all to bear gracefully! Allah ta'ālā tells us:

وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ بِشَيْءٍ مِّنَ الْخَوْفِ وَالْجُوعِ وَنَقْصٍ مِّنَ الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَنْفُسِ وَالثَّمَرَاتِ وَبَشِّرِ الصَّابِرِينَ  
الَّذِينَ إِذَا أَصَابَتْهُمُ مُصِيبَةٌ قَالُوا إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاغِبُونَ. أُولَئِكَ عَلَيْهِمْ صَلَوَاتٌ مِّن رَّبِّهِمْ وَرَحْمَةٌ  
وَأُولَئِكَ هُمُ الْمُفْتَخِرُونَ

***"And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits, but give good tidings to the patient, who, when disaster strikes them, say, 'Indeed we belong to Allah, and indeed to Him we will return.' Those are the ones upon whom are blessings from their Lord and mercy. And it is those who are the [rightly] guided."***<sup>4</sup>

Such trials from Allah – no matter how distasteful to the servant – are, in reality, opportunities for him. The Prophet (ﷺ) reported, "There is no disaster which befalls the Muslim by which Allah does not remove sins from him – even [as little as] the thorn that pricks him."<sup>5</sup>

Patience in the face of mishaps and difficulties and acceptance of Allah's will and wisdom in such matters are proof of faith. This does not mean that dislike of what has occurred is wrong, for feelings of loss, frustration and pain are a normal part of human life.

لَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ فِي كَبَدٍ

***"We have certainly created man into hardship."***<sup>6</sup>

It is imperative to remember that although feelings will not be judged, reactions will be. In the words of the Prophet (ﷺ): "Allah will not punish for tears in the eyes nor for sadness in the heart; but He will punish for this [and he pointed to his tongue] or

<sup>2</sup>Sūrah al-Kahf, 18:28.

<sup>3</sup>Muslim.

<sup>4</sup>Sūrah al-Baqarah, 2:155-157.

<sup>5</sup>Al-Bukhārī and Muslim.

<sup>6</sup>Sūrah al-Balad, 90:4.

grant mercy."<sup>7</sup> At the death of his son, Ibrāheem, he (ﷺ) said, "The eye weeps and the heart is sad, but we will not say except what pleases our Lord."<sup>8</sup>

Undoubtedly, those whose faith is weak will show it in times of severe trial. Protest against divine decree, anger against Allah, turning away from Him through neglect of prayer and other duties, or outright denial of Him are all signs of damage to one's soul.

وَمِنَ النَّاسِ مَنْ يَعْبُدُ اللَّهَ عَلَى حَرْفٍ فَإِنْ أَصَابَهُ خَيْرٌ اطْمَأَنَّ بِهِ وَإِنْ أَصَابَتْهُ فِتْنَةٌ انْقَلَبَ عَلَى  
وَجْهِهِ خَسِرَ الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةَ

***"And of the people is he who worships Allah on an edge. If he is touched by good, he is reassured by it; but if he is struck by trial, he turns on his face [to unbelief]. He has lost [this] world and the Hereafter."***<sup>9</sup>

In contrast, when patience is practiced, seeking blessing and reward from Allah, and when the servant is certain of the positive results, it will turn into acceptance, which overcomes bitterness in the soul.

Obviously, it is not fitting that a servant complains to others about Allah; but, on the contrary, complaints directed to Allah about certain oppressors or difficult circumstances are an indication of trust in Him. Prophet Ya'qūb said:

قَالَ إِنَّمَا أَشْكُوا بَنِي وَحُرْنِي إِلَى اللَّهِ

***"I only complain of my suffering and my grief to Allah."***<sup>10</sup>

Supplications for help or relief do not indicate impatience, but rather, they are pleasing to Allah; and at such times response is very near. Additionally, the unlimited reward awaiting those who show forbearance, only seeking refuge in Allah, is such that it gives the greatest comfort to the believer. In the Qur'ān we are told:

قُلْ لَنْ يُصِيبَنَا إِلَّا مَا كَتَبَ اللَّهُ لَنَا

***"Say, 'Never will we be struck except by what Allah has decreed for us.'"***<sup>11</sup>

Note that He *subḥānahu wa ta'ālā* does not use the words "upon us" or "against us." Indeed, affliction is dreaded and disliked because it is most difficult to bear; yet He who loves His servants and cares for them absolutely has chosen to give them opportunities for eternal Paradise. In essence, He has decreed such trials *for us*, if only we would reflect.

Not only does a servant obtain additional reward through his afflictions, but upon being disabled either temporarily or permanently, one continues to gain that which he was accustomed to earning through his usual righteous deeds and actions previous to the disability. For the Prophet (ﷺ) informed us that Allah commands the recording angels,

<sup>7</sup>Al-Bukhārī and Muslim.

<sup>8</sup>Al-Bukhārī.

<sup>9</sup>Sūrah al-Ḥajj, 22:11.

<sup>10</sup>Sūrah Yūsuf, 12:86.

<sup>11</sup>Sūrah at-Tawbah, 9:51.

*"Register for My servant during every day and night whatever good he used to do for as long as he is confined in My restriction."*<sup>12</sup>

A question to be considered at this point is: "What is the manner in which a Muslim should face a situation requiring patience?"

When one acknowledges the right of Allah to manage His creation, perceiving the benefit of His divine decree, he will always be prepared for the possibility of a trial through distressing occurrences. In fact, this expectation helps him to retain control in the crucial period specified by the Prophet (ﷺ) in the ḥadīth: *"Patience is [necessary] at the first shock."*<sup>13</sup>

In times of trial one should turn to Allah for consolation and compensation. Umm Salamah reported that she heard the Messenger of Allah (ﷺ) say, *"No servant is struck by affliction and then says, 'We belong to Allah and to Him we will return; O Allah, reward me in my affliction and follow it up with something better for me,' without Allah rewarding him in his affliction and following it with something better for him."* She added, *"So when Abu Salamah passed away, I said as the Messenger of Allah had ordered, and Allah followed that up with what was better for me than him – the Messenger of Allah [himself]."*<sup>14</sup>

One of the Prophet's companions, Sa'd bin Abī Waqqāṣ, once asked, "O Messenger of Allah, which people are most severely tried?" The Prophet (ﷺ) answered, "The prophets, then the righteous, then those following them in degree. A man is tried according to his religion. So, if there is firmness in his religion, then his trial is increased; but if there is weakness in his religion, then it is lightened. Verily, tribulations remain with the servant until he walks upon the earth having no sin left upon him."<sup>15</sup>

A point worth mentioning is that affliction is not always in the form of sudden disaster. It might be a prolonged state of difficulties such as illness, poverty or oppression by others. Again, believers find aid during such trials by doing the following:

1. Remembering the great reward awaiting those who practice patience and forbearance – Imagine yourself receiving a compensation of such magnitude as to overcome all that you have suffered.
2. Looking forward to relief from the difficulty as well as planning for that time, which lightens the burden of waiting – Trust that you are close to Allah during this period, that your supplication is being heard, and that He will certainly support you.

فَإِنَّ مَعَ الْعُسْرِ يُسْرًا. إِنَّ مَعَ الْعُسْرِ يُسْرًا

***"For indeed, with hardship [will be] ease [i.e., relief]. Indeed, with hardship [will be] ease."***<sup>16</sup>

3. Trusting that however distasteful certain experiences seem to be, there is good in them according to the perfect knowledge of Allah *subḥānahu wa ta'ālā*.

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<sup>12</sup>Al-Hākim – *ṣaḥeeḥ*.

<sup>13</sup>Al-Bukhārī and Muslim.

<sup>14</sup>Aḥmad and Muslim.

<sup>15</sup>At-Tirmidhī – *ḥasan-ṣaḥeeḥ*.

<sup>16</sup>Sūrah ash-Sharḥ, 94:5-6.

وَعَسَى أَنْ تَكْرَهُوا شَيْئًا وَهُوَ خَيْرٌ لَكُمْ وَعَسَى أَنْ تُحِبُّوا شَيْئًا وَهُوَ شَرٌّ لَكُمْ وَاللَّهُ يَعْلَمُ وَأَنْتُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ

***"But perhaps you hate a thing and it is good for you; and perhaps you love a thing and it is bad for you. And Allah knows, while you know not."*<sup>17</sup>**

4. Counting the blessings which Allah has bestowed – great and small, obvious and subtle – When one finds himself unable to account for all of them, the difficulty is lightened in his eyes. Reward is gained by praising Allah in every circumstance, especially when realizing that the blessings retained after a loss are still far greater than those of which one was deprived. Indeed, one appreciates his own condition more when comparing it with others whose afflictions are greater than his own. The Prophet (ﷺ) taught that upon seeing the suffering of others, one should say to himself, *"Praise be to Allah, who has exempted me from that by which He has tested you, and who has favored me with preference over many of those whom He has created."*<sup>18</sup> He (ﷺ) further advised, *"Look to those below you [i.e., those with less than you] and do not look to those above you [i.e., those with more than you], for this makes you less likely to underestimate Allah's blessings upon you."*<sup>19</sup>

As well as the aforementioned statements, it is necessary to remember that appreciation of blessings is complementary to patience. Many servants of Allah are tested through His favors upon them, and this might be, in fact, the most difficult of trials; for one who constantly turns to Allah while seeking relief in hardship might well forget Him once the crisis has passed and he is once again secure. Additionally, he might also forget that thankfulness is not merely *"al-ḥamdu lillāh"* pronounced by the tongue alone; but rather, it is proven by obedience to Allah and by sharing one's blessings with those in need. In reality:

وَقَلِيلٌ مِّنْ عِبَادِيَ الشَّاكِرُونَ

***"And few of My servants are grateful."*<sup>20</sup>**

One should be aware that in every case of poverty, illness, fear or loss there are points to remember which require gratitude to Allah:

1. That He prevented the ordeal from being greater than it was
2. That since it was decreed for the servant and therefore inevitable, it has now occurred and is no longer before him
3. That this trial was an expiation for sins, and as such, the penalty was not postponed until the Hereafter, where it would have been much more severe
4. That even in one's own lifetime, certain benefits may be gained from such an experience, for example, the strengthening of character or a lesson learned – In any case, the reward is always greater than the adversity.
5. That the casualty was not the servant's religion, i.e., he did not lose his faith or his resolve – Once when a man said to Sahl bin 'Abdullāh, "A thief entered my house and

<sup>17</sup>Sūrah al-Baqarah, 2:216.

<sup>18</sup>At-Tirmidhī – ḥasan.

<sup>19</sup>Muslim and others.

<sup>20</sup>Sūrah Saba', 34:13.

stole my property," Sahl replied, "If the Shayṭān had entered your heart and spoiled your faith, then what would you have done? One who deserved to be beaten one hundred lashes and got off with only ten certainly ought to be thankful!"

There has been much speculation about which is best – patience or thankfulness – but, in reality, there are degrees of each. Patience begins with control, but acceptance is better; and gratitude for recognized blessings is good, but thankfulness during trials of hardship is better. Thus, patience and thankfulness merge at the highest level in the soul of the Muslim believer whose hope lies in Allah and the Last Day. And to Allah is due all praise and gratitude.

لَئِنْ شَكَرْتُمْ لَأَزِيدَنَّكُمْ<sup>ط</sup> وَلَئِنْ كَفَرْتُمْ إِنَّ عَذَابِي لَشَدِيدٌ

***"If you are grateful, I will surely increase you [in favor]; but if you deny, indeed, My punishment is severe."<sup>21</sup>***

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<sup>21</sup>Sūrah Ibrāheem, 14:7.

