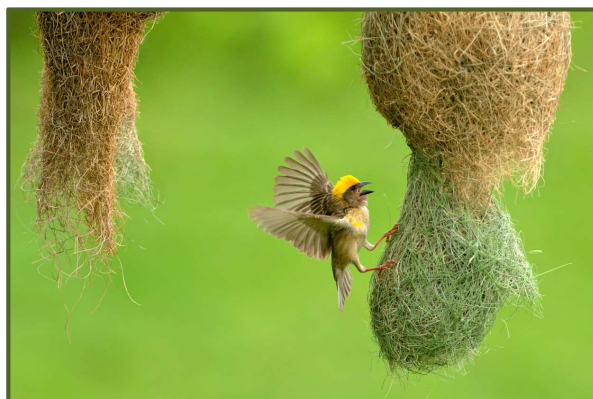


# Ṣabr as a Concept in Islam

By Amena Tanveer

Allah (ﷻ) does not accept words, deeds or attitudes except those which are good. So a believer strives for the best of deeds and words, preferring his Lord's acceptance to his own whims and desires in order to draw closer to Allah. In this endeavour he tries to acquire those traits most beneficial to him, such as gentleness, compassion, honesty and a sincere heart. He guards himself against submission to anyone other than Allah. Practicing ṣabr is of great significance.



The linguistic meaning of the root verb, *ṣa-ba-ra*, is to confine, detain, retain, restrain, restrict or withhold something. Usually, when used in the religious sense, its object is the self or soul. As a concept in Islam, *ṣabr* is often translated as patience, but it also includes aspects of restraint, self-discipline, steadfastness, firmness, perseverance, endurance and determination – depending on the context in which it is used.

It conveys a very active, dynamic, positive quality in Islam. It is the quality of surging forward, striving, and not slackening in our purpose to purify the soul. It is a strong foundation, the firm lowermost rung of the ladder which holds firm come what may.

The Prophet ﷺ is reported to have said, "The helpless one is he who follows his whims and desires and indulges in wishful thinking."<sup>1</sup>

A scholar said, "To have ṣabr means that one's common sense and religious motives are stronger than his whims and desires." And Ibn al-Qayyim wrote: "When a man's patience is stronger than his whims and desires, then he is like an angel; but when his whims and desires are stronger than his patience, then he is like a devil. If his desire for food, drink and physical relations is stronger than his patience, then he is no better than an animal. Lying, cheating and self-admiration are his most common traits and his reason is held prisoner by Shaytan, who directs it to serve evil purposes. The main cause for his sorry fate is that he ran out of patience."

This means that despite what we like and prefer, what Allah wants us to do takes top priority. In obedience to Him is mercy. Our limited minds cannot always comprehend that whatever is given to us is good for us. The trials and difficulties that are destined for us are also good, for they draw us closer to Allah.

**Three aspects of ṣabr have been outlined by scholars for us to comprehend and put into practice:**

Prophet Luqman's advice to his son conveys them:

يُنْيِ أَقِمِ الصَّلَاةَ وَأْمُرْ بِالْمَعْرُوفِ وَانْهَ عَنِ الْمُنْكَرِ وَاصْبِرْ عَلَى مَا أَصَابَكَ إِنَّ ذَلِكَ مِنْ عَزْمِ الْأُمُورِ

*O my son, establish prayer, enjoin what is right, forbid what is wrong and be patient over what befalls you. Indeed, [all] that is of the matters [requiring] determination.*<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> At-Tirmidhi - ḥasan.

<sup>2</sup> Luqman, 31:17.

1. **Ṣabr meaning endurance and perseverance**, which is required to fulfil the commands of Allah. The directing of oneself toward obedience and worship is of benefit to the soul. Knowing that the soul likes ease, comfort and the company of others and dislikes being controlled helps us in managing it with full awareness and resolve; e.g., to establish prayer under all circumstances of heat and cold, busy work schedules and health constraints. Similarly for zakāh, ṣaum, jihād, as well as understanding and implementing all the concepts outlined in the Qur'an in our lives, a determined effort is required.

2. **Ṣabr meaning restraint**, which is required for refraining from what Allah has prohibited and from all kinds of disobedience and sin. Examples of this are pre-marital relations, stealing, cheating, murder, dealings in riba, eating pork, drinking alcohol, backbiting, gossiping, devouring inheritance, not giving rights and injustice in general. Most difficult to overcome among these are the sins that are done secretly and those that others tolerate due to a comfort factor it creates for them.

ʿAbdur-Raḥmān bin Zayd bin Aslam said, "Ṣabr has two parts: patience for the sake of Allah concerning what He is pleased with (i.e., acts of worship and obedience), even if it is hard on the heart and the body, and patience when avoiding what He dislikes, even if it is desired.

3. **Ṣabr meaning acceptance of Allah's decree in our lives**, such as the death of a loved one, illness, the loss of wealth or of a job. Allah reminds us:

قُلْ لَنْ يُصِيبَنَا إِلَّا مَا كَتَبَ اللَّهُ لَنَا

Say, "Never will we be struck except by what Allah has decreed for us."<sup>3</sup>

Harm or injustice done to us by heedless, selfish people, especially those supposed to be dear ones, is the toughest to bear in a composed manner. Allah said:

وَمِنَ النَّاسِ مَن يَعْبُدُ اللَّهَ عَلَىٰ حَرْفٍ فَإِنْ أَصَابَهُ خَيْرٌ اطْمَأَنَّ بِهِ وَإِنْ أَصَابَتْهُ فِتْنَةٌ انْقَلَبَ عَلَىٰ وَجْهِهِ خَسِرَ الدُّنْيَا وَالْآخِرَةَ ذَلِكَ هُوَ الْخُسْرَانُ الْمُبِينُ

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 the other direction]. He has lost [this] world and the Hereafter. That is what is the manifest loss.<sup>4</sup>

Lack of strength and resolve for the deen leads to turning away from Allah by giving up prayer and other duties or complaining about Him instead of complaining to Him, as did Prophet Ya'qub:

قَالَ إِنَّمَا أَشْكُو بَثِّي وَحُزْنِي إِلَى اللَّهِ

He said, "I only complain of my suffering and my grief to Allah."<sup>5</sup>

And some even abandon the deen by denial of Him.

However, ṣabr is not fatalistic resignation to our difficulties. It is not the belief that since everything is written one just has to let time go by – to patiently endure through the unfolding of time. Rather, it is actively tackling life's problems and difficulties and striving to overcome obstacles. It is making choices purposefully and consciously, within the limits of our ability;

<sup>3</sup> At-Tawbah, 9:51.

<sup>4</sup> Al-Hajj, 22:11.

<sup>5</sup> Yūsuf, 12:86.

either living up to our covenants or forgetting and side-lining them. These choices will determine the direction of our souls in life and their destination in the Hereafter.

The only way to proceed through life is to strengthen that first step which has been long neglected and misunderstood: ṣabr.

We can be un-organized and careless, working in a haphazard manner. Or we might be of those who complain, brood, are bitter, reactive and temperamental. Or we might choose to be emotionally wounded and mentally trapped. Or, on the other hand, we can decide to work toward absorbing all those aspects of ṣabr in our lives as our Rabb meant us to do – to be accepting of our decrees, make the best of them and convey this knowledge to others.

### Sabr in the Qur'an:

Allah (ﷻ) has informed us that our life is a test, and that ṣabr will be rewarded:

الَّذِي خَلَقَ الْمَوْتَ وَالْحَيَاةَ لِيَبْلُوَكُمْ أَيُّكُمْ أَحْسَنُ عَمَلًا

*[He] who created death and life to test you [as to] which of you is best in deed.<sup>6</sup>*

وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ حَتَّىٰ نَعْلَمَ الْمُجْتَهِدِينَ مِنْكُمْ وَالصَّابِرِينَ وَنَبْلُوَ أَخْبَرَكُمْ

*And We will surely test you until We make evident those who strive among you [for the cause of Allah] and the patient, and We will test your affairs.<sup>7</sup>*

وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ بِشَيْءٍ مِّنَ الْخَوْفِ وَالْجُوعِ وَنَقْصٍ مِّنَ الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَنْفُسِ وَالثَّمَرَاتِ وَبَشِّرِ الصَّابِرِينَ

*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 (aṣ-ṣābireen).<sup>8</sup>*

وَاسْتَعِينُوا بِالصَّبْرِ وَالصَّلَاةِ إِنَّهَا لَكَبِيرَةٌ إِلَّا عَلَى الْخَاشِعِينَ

*And seek help through patience and prayer, and indeed, it is difficult except for the humbly submissive [to Allah].<sup>9</sup>*

وَاصْبِرْ وَمَا صَبْرُكَ إِلَّا بِاللَّهِ

*And be patient, [O Muhammad], and your patience is not but through Allah.<sup>10</sup>*

إِنَّمَا يُوفَّى الصَّابِرُونَ أَجْرَهُمْ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ

*Indeed, the patient will be given their reward without account.<sup>11</sup>*

وَاللَّهُ يُحِبُّ الصَّابِرِينَ

*And Allah loves the steadfast.<sup>12</sup>*

وَاصْبِرُوا إِنَّ اللَّهَ مَعَ الصَّابِرِينَ

*And be patient. Indeed, Allah is with the patient.<sup>13</sup>*

<sup>6</sup> Al-Mulk, 67:2.

<sup>7</sup> Muḥammad, 47:31.

<sup>8</sup> Al-Baqarah, 2:155.

<sup>9</sup> Al-Baqarah, 2:45.

<sup>10</sup> Meaning that it can be achieved with the help of Allah. An-Naḥl, 16:127.

<sup>11</sup> Az-Zumar, 39:10.

<sup>12</sup> Aali 'Imrān, 3:146.

Abu Sa'eed al-Khudri reported that the Prophet ﷺ said, "No one is given a better and more abundant gift than patience."<sup>14</sup>

Ease and comfort do not give strength as difficulties do. Difficulties make us physically and mentally strong. Too much comfort only weakens us. When we trust in the inherent good of Allah's decrees, we continually prepare ourselves for the possibility of examination through painful experiences. This helps us to practice ṣabr.

How does one attain ṣabr? Through willful training and practice. Early scholars observed that one becomes patient by being patient, i.e., by repeatedly practicing patience and forcing it upon himself in difficult circumstances.

Ṣabr is not just a support to lean on. It is that strength which makes us stand firm against all odds with mind focused and heart striving with faith and trust in Allah – accepting His decrees, His plan for our lives – fully aware that He is Owner of the universe and that His knowledge of khayr for us and His justice are unquestionable, infallible and complete.

Hence, the Prophet ﷺ used to say, "O Allah, I ask You for steadfastness in all my affairs and determination in following the right path."<sup>15</sup>

والحمد لله رب العالمين

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<sup>13</sup> Al-Anfāl, 8:47.

<sup>14</sup> Al-Bukhāri and Muslim.

<sup>15</sup> An-Nasā'i -ḥasan.