

From the Risale-i Nur Collection

THE SHORT WORDS

On the Meaning of Belief
And the Value of Worship

Bediüzzaman
Said Nursi

Translated by
Colin Turner

From the Risale-i Nur Collection,
The Words 1 through 9 of *The Words*

**THE SHORT WORDS: On the Meaning of Belief
and the Value of Worship**

by Bediüzzaman Said Nursi

Translated from the Turkish
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About the Book

The *Short Words* comprises the first ten chapters of the thirty-three-chapter work known as *The Words*, which in turn forms the first part of the *Risale-i Nur* (Epistles of Light) collection, a commentary on the Quran that totals in excess of six thousand pages. The *Risale-i Nur* was written in Turkish by one of the modern age's most significant Muslim scholars, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi (1876-1960). Nursi wrote this monumental work in order to explain the truths and realities of belief, both to his fellow Muslims and to modern humankind in general. In Nursi's view, we are in this modern age confronted by a profound crisis of meaning, and in the face of the assaults of materialist philosophies and ideologies, the question which must be prioritised over all others for Muslims is the saving and strengthening of belief. For it is only in belief in the Creator, the Source of all being, that humankind's true happiness and progress, and the cure for the wounds caused by materialism and misguidance, are to be found. Nursi devoted a whole life of learning and scholarship to realising these aims.

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's treatise *The Short Words* are presented here in its new English

translation with a focus on the communication of meaning rather than on strict, word-for-word equivalence, which often obscures what the author is trying to say and makes reading more of a task for the reader than a pleasure.

The *Short Words* are, as the title suggests, short, simple, reader-friendly pieces describing, through the use of comparisons, metaphors and analogies, the virtues of belief and worshipful action. The *Short Words* showcase Nursi's own unique style of instruction through short, accessible parables on the relative merits and demerits of guidance and misguidance and belief and unbelief, pointing out how alien to human nature the rejection and denial of God really are, and showing how humankind's true happiness and progress can be found only in recognition, acceptance and worship of the Maker of the universe, and in worshipful action on His account.

Colin Turner
Durham, March 2021

THE FIRST WORD

On the Importance of the Bismillah

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

The *bismillah* – ‘In the name of God’ – is at the beginning of all that is good, and we too shall begin in His Name. I remind my soul that this phrase is one of the blessed distinguishing characteristics of Islam, and that it is being recited constantly by all beings, either verbally or through the tongue of their God-given disposition. The *bismillah* is a source of limitless strength and bounty, as you will see from the following parable.¹

Traditionally, the only way that it was possible for someone to make a journey across the deserts of Arabia was by traveling in the name, and under the protection, of a tribal chief; only through this connection to the chief would one be able to avoid being assaulted by bandits and be assured that one’s needs were met. Traveling alone, with no named protector to ward off possible danger, one would perish in the face of numerous enemies and

¹ The word *bismillah* – sometimes ‘*basma*’ – is shorthand for the iconic phrase *Bismillah-arrahman-arrahim* (‘In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate’), which appears at the beginning of all but one of the 114 chapters of the Quran. Muslim believers recite the phrase before certain actions and in certain situations in order to confirm to themselves that what they are doing is being done in God’s name and for His sake. (Tr.)

countless needs.

Bearing this in mind, listen to the story of two men who decided to make that perilous journey across the desert. The first was a modest, humble sort; the other was arrogant and full of conceit. The humble man travelled in the name of a well-known tribal chief, while the arrogant man decided to go it alone, completely on his own steam. The first man was able to cross the desert in safety: whenever he encountered bandits, he said, "I am traveling in the name of so-and-so," and was able to proceed without being attacked or robbed. Furthermore, whenever he came across a tent, its inhabitants would treat him respectfully and show him hospitality on account of the name under which he was traveling. As for the arrogant man, he suffered a number of indescribable calamities as he tried to make his way across. Fear never left him for a second, and he was at the mercy of everything and everyone. He was forced to beg, ending up scorned and degraded as a result.

To my proud soul, I say this: you are the traveller and the desert in the story is this world. Your impotence and your poverty are limitless, while your needs and your enemies are without number. Since that is how things are for you, navigate your way across the desert of life not on your own steam but in the name, and under the protection, of the Eternal Owner and Ruler of the universe. Put your trust in Him so that you do not have to beg from

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everything and everyone, or tremble in the face of hardship and calamity.

Yes, this phrase – *In the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate* – is a treasure so precious, and so blessed, that your impotence will attract His absolute power, while your poverty will attract His limitless mercy. Indeed, your impotence and poverty will act like intermediaries on your behalf, and they will speak up for you at the court of the All-Powerful, Compassionate Lord. Someone who proceeds with the words '*In the Name of God*' is like someone who joins the army. As a soldier, he acts in the name of the government. He fears no-one, since he enjoys the government's protection. Whatever he says or does, he speaks and acts in the name of the law and in the name of the state.

At the beginning we said that all beings say '*In the name of God*' through the voice of their inner disposition. Were you to ask me whether this is really is the case, I would say, yes, indeed it is. Imagine you enter a village and you see that someone has rounded up all of the villagers and forced them to labour in the fields. You would know immediately that this person is acting not in his own name, or through his own power, but in the name of the government, and through the power of the king.

Similarly, all created beings act in the name of God Almighty. Tiny entities such as seeds and grains eventually bear huge trees on their shoulders; they

raise loads like mountains. In one sense, then, all seeds and the trees that grow from them recite '*In the name of God*' constantly, filling their hands from the treasury of Divine mercy and offering their bounties to us. All gardens utter '*In the name of God*' and are thus transformed into banqueting halls where, thanks to Divine power and mercy, numerous kinds of delicious foods are prepared and presented for our enjoyment. Blessed beasts such as cows, sheep, goats and camels all say '*In the Name of God*' and, thanks to Divine compassion and provision, become living milk fountains, delivering stream after stream of fresh, sweet milk, the water of life itself. The soft, silken roots of plants and flowers say '*In the Name of God*' and, thanks to His Mercy, pierce through hard rock and emerge from the earth, still mentioning His Names as everything becomes subjected to them. These roots are able to penetrate rock, producing fruits as easily as those which are produced by branches hanging high above the soil. They also produce delicate green leaves which are able to retain moisture even through the hottest of summers. These abilities really are like a slap in the face for the naturalists, showing that even the hardest rock and the fiercest heat are working under a command. Each of those soft, silky rootlets acts, like the staff of Moses, as though it is responding to the Quranic verse *And We said, O Moses, strike the rock with your staff!* as it pierces the rock. It is as though each of its delicate leaves, like the members of Abraham's body, is reciting, *O fire, be coolness and peace!* as it withstands the scorching

heat of summer.²

Since all created beings say, '*In the Name of God*', bearing and sharing God's bounties in God's Name, it is only right that we too should say '*In the Name of God*'. Furthermore, we should give only in the Name of God and take in His Name alone. And we should not take from heedless people who do not give in God's Name.

Question: When people, who are like God's tray-bearers, serve us with things, we pay them. What price, then, are we expected to pay God, Who is the true Owner of all things?

Answer: The True Giver of Bounties wants only three things in return for the things He gives to us. The first is remembrance; the second is thanks; the third is reflection. To say '*In the Name of God*' (*bismillah*) at the start of an action or an initiative is remembrance; to say, '*All praise belongs to God*' (*alḥamdulillah*) at the end is thanks. As for reflection, that is to think purposefully about the Divine bounties that we are given, each of which is a priceless wonder of artistry and miracle of power,

² The italicised phrases are verses from the Quran (2:60 and 21:69 respectively). The first is God's command to Moses to strike the rock with his staff. When he struck the rock, twelve springs of water gushed forth, representing the Twelve Tribes of Israel. The second was God's command to the fire, which the idolators had made in order to burn Abraham, to become cool. Both are seen as evidentiary miracles, given to Moses and Abraham respectively in order to provide evidence of their prophethood. (Tr.)

bestowed on us by the Unique, the One Whom all things need, but Who Himself needs nothing (*al-Şamad*).³ If the king's servant were to bring you a gift from the king, to show your gratitude by kissing the feet of the servant while ignoring the generosity of the true giver would make you look foolish. How much more foolish would it be, then, to heap praise on the apparent source of life's bounties while disregarding their true Bestower?

So to my soul, I say this: if you do not wish to be considered a fool, give in God's Name, take in God's Name, begin in God's Name, act in God's Name and end in God's Name. And that is it, more or less!

³ The Divine name '*al-Şamad*' has no single-word equivalent in English. It is used only of God and, apart from connoting His eternality, indicates the fact that He is needed and sought by all things, while He Himself seeks, and needs, nothing or no-one. (Tr.)

SECOND STATION OF THE FOURTEENTH FLASH

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

[This treatise, which has been included here because of its relevance, discusses just six of the many thousands of mysteries contained in the *bismillah*, namely, *In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate*. It was occasioned by a bright light which came from the *bismillah*, shining on my dull mind from afar. It concerned Divine mercy and I wanted to hunt it down and capture it, committing it to paper in the form of explanatory notes on twenty or thirty of its mysteries. Unfortunately I have not yet been able to do this, and instead of twenty or thirty mysteries, I have not been able to elucidate more than six.

Throughout the piece, wherever I say, “O man!”, I am addressing myself. Nevertheless, although the piece is addressed to my own soul in particular, I present it as the *Second Station of the Fourteenth Flash* for the perusal and approval of my diligent brothers. I do so in the hope that it may benefit those with whom I am connected spiritually, and whose souls are more discerning than mine. This treatise is aimed at the heart rather than at the intellect, and is written in order to provide spiritual pleasure and perception

rather than rational proofs.]

[The Queen] said: "Ye chiefs! Here is – delivered to me – a letter worthy of respect. It is from Solomon and is [as follows]: In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate."

In this Station a number of mysteries will be elucidated.

First Mystery

One manifestation of *In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate* appeared to me as follows:

One the face of the universe, on the face of the earth and on the face of humankind there are three seals of lordship, one within the other and each including examples of the others.

The first is the great seal of Godhead (*ulūhiyya*), which is made manifest through the mutual assistance, cooperation, support and interdependence that can be seen among all of the beings in the universe. This seal pertains to *In the Name of God*.

The second is the great seal of Divine mercifulness (*rahmāniyya*), which is made manifest through the mutual resemblance and proportionality of all of the

plants and animals on the face of the earth. It is also demonstrated through the order, harmony, generosity and compassion that are evident in the way that the plant and animal kingdoms are created, maintained and administered. This seal pertains to *In the Name of God, the Merciful*.

The third is the exalted seal of Divine compassion (*rahīmiyya*), which is made manifest through the subtleties of Divine beneficence, clemency and compassion, the rays of which shine forth from the face of humankind's comprehensive nature. This pertains to the words *the Compassionate* in the phrase *In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate*.

In short, *In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate* is the sacred title of three seals of Divine oneness (*aḥadiyya*) which form a strong, luminous line or thread on the page that is the universe. Through its revelation from above, the tip of the *bismillah* rests on humankind, which is the choicest fruit of the universe and its microcosm; in a sense it binds the lower world to the Divine Throne, providing a way for the human race to ascend.

Second Mystery

The superabundant multiplicity of creatures in the

universe makes Divine unity (*wāḥidiyya*) apparent. But in order not to overwhelm human minds by the awesomeness of Divine unity, the miraculous Quran constantly points out the manifestation of Divine oneness (*aḥadiyya*) that exists within Divine unity. For example, the sun encompasses numerous things with its light. However, a truly extensive conceptual ability and broadness of view is necessary to see the sun as it is itself, in the totality of its light. And so in order that the sun be remembered, it is displayed in every luminous object by means of its reflection. Then, in accordance with their individual capacities, all of those objects reflect the sun's attributes, such as its heat, its light and the seven colours which exist in its light, together with the manifestation of its essence. In this way, the sun's attributes also encompass everything that faces it.

Divine oneness and eternal *ṣamadiyya* are manifest in all things, as are all of the Divine names.⁴ They are manifest in animate creatures in particular, and especially in the mirror-like essence of humankind.

⁴ The word *ṣamadiyya* is a verbal noun from the same root as *al-Ṣamad* (see Footnote 2). It means 'the state of being *al-Ṣamad*', or, in other words, the state of being eternal and not needing, or seeking, anyone or anything else. 'Absolute freedom from need' would be the closest approximation in English, but since this is rather unwieldy, the translator has opted to use the original Arabic. (Tr.)

Since this is the case, through Divine unity, each of the Divine names connected to beings encompasses all things. And so to prevent minds from being overwhelmed by the awesomeness of Divine unity, and to stop them forgetting God's Most Pure and Holy Essence, the Quran constantly draws attention to the seal of Divine oneness that exists within Divine unity. And that seal, with its three most prominent points, is *In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate*.

Third Mystery

That which makes this boundless universe rejoice is, without a doubt, Divine mercy. And it is Divine mercy that self-evidently illuminates all of these dark creatures that we see before us. That which raises and nurtures these beings, struggling as they are with their endless needs, is, quite clearly, Divine mercy. Divine mercy causes the whole universe to be geared towards humankind, just as the tree with all its parts is geared towards its fruit. Divine mercy causes the whole of creation to look to humanity and to hasten to its assistance. That which fills and illuminates the vast reaches of endless space, filling the empty, vacant world and making it reverberate with joy – that, most certainly, is Divine mercy. And that which deems transient human beings to be worthy of eternity, making them the beloved addressees of the Pre-Eternal and Post-Eternal One is, without a

shadow of a doubt, Divine mercy.

O humankind! Since Divine mercy is such a powerful, sweet, lovable and inviting truth, say *In the Name of the Merciful, the Compassionate!* Say this, adhere to the truth and be saved from absolute desolation and the torment of unending need! Draw close to the throne of the Pre- and Post-Eternal Monarch. Avail yourself of the compassionate rays of Divine mercy and thus become His addressee, His friend, His beloved.

All of the realms of beings in the universe are gathered purposively around humankind. They are made to hasten to meet the needs of human beings with the utmost order and wisdom. Now this arises clearly from one of two situations. Either each of these realms knows exactly what human beings are, and rushes to obey them by giving them assistance – which is as irrational as it is impossible; or this assistance occurs through the knowledge of an Absolutely Powerful One and from behind the veil that is the universe. Because given their absolute impotence, human beings cannot take care of themselves in this regard – at least not without power equal to that of the mightiest Absolute Sovereign. In short, if the different beings in the universe are seen to come to the aid of humankind, it is not because they are acquainted with human beings and aware of

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what they need; rather, it is because they are veils which cover the assistance of a Knowing and Compassionate Maker, who is fully acquainted with humankind and totally aware of what is needed for human subsistence and survival.

O humankind! Come to your senses! The All-Glorious One causes all varieties of creatures to rush towards you with outstretched hands so that they may lend you assistance. Is it at all possible that He may not be acquainted with you? Is it at all likely that He does not know who you are, or does not see you? No, it is quite clear that He knows you; it is clear from the mercy that He shows you that He knows you inside-out. So you should know Him too, and with respect you should let Him know that you know Him too. And you should understand with certainty that what subjugates the vast universe to creatures like you is the truth of Divine mercy. For you are absolutely weak and absolutely impotent; you are needy and ephemeral; you are fleeting and insignificant. It is for this reason that you should realise that what places the universe at the disposal of a creature as wretched as you is the reality of Divine mercy, which comprises wisdom, generosity, knowledge and power.

Most certainly, a mercy such as this requires sincere and universal thanks, as well as earnest and genuine

respect. You should therefore say, *In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate*, which is the expression and the interpreter of that thanks and respect. Make your *bismillah* the means of attaining mercy. Make it an intercessor for you at the court of the All-Merciful One.

The existence and reality of Divine mercy are as clear as daylight. Think of a woven tapestry that is centred on one point and which is formed by the order and placement of the threads of its warp and weft that come from all directions. Similarly, the luminous threads which extend from the manifestation of a thousand and one Divine names in the vast sphere of the universe weave such a seal of compassion, such a tapestry of clemency and such a stamp of benevolence within a seal of mercy, that it shows itself to the human mind more brilliantly than the sun.

The Beautiful, All-Merciful One orders and regulates the sun and moon, the elements and minerals, and all the plants and animals as though they were the warp and weft of one vast, cosmic tapestry, woven through the rays of His thousand and one names; in so doing, He impels them all to serve the cause of life itself. And He demonstrates His comprehensive mercifulness through the sweet, self-sacrificing compassion of

mothers, both plant and animal, and through the subjugation of animate creatures to the needs of human life. In doing all of this He weaves a vast and awesomely beautiful tapestry of Divine lordliness, demonstrating His brilliant mercy and showcasing the importance and centrality of humankind. Consequently, the Most Merciful One has, in the face of His own absolute self-sufficiency, made His mercy an acceptable intercessor for all animate creatures, and for human beings in particular.

O humankind! If you are truly human, say *In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate!* Say the *bismillah* and find that intercessor! For without a shadow of a doubt it is Divine mercy that is behind the creation and maintenance of all living beings. See how it raises, nurtures and administers the innumerable species of plants and animals on earth without forgetting or confusing any of them. See how it tends to everything at the right time and with perfect order, wisdom and generosity. See how it stamps the seal of Divine oneness (*aḥadiyya*) on the face of the earth. The existence of Divine mercy is as certain as the existence of the earth and all the beings on it: those beings offer proofs of the existence of mercy as numerous as they themselves.

We can see that there is this seal of mercy and this

stamp of Divine oneness on the face of the earth. However, there is also a seal of Divine mercy stamped on the face of human nature, and it is in no way inferior to the vast stamp of mercy and compassion that we see on the face of the universe as a whole. Put simply, humankind has a nature and disposition so comprehensive that it is easy to see the human being as the focal point of a thousand and one Divine names. O humankind! Is it at all possible that the One who has given you this face, and who has placed on that face such a seal of mercy and oneness – is it at all possible that He would abandon you? Is it at all thinkable that He would leave you to your own devices, attaching no importance to you and paying you no attention whatsoever? The whole world is geared towards you and the fulfilment of your needs and desires. Is it at all likely, then, that the One who has created the world this way could have created it as something ultimately futile and pointless? Is it at all imaginable that He could create such a tree of creation, yet create it as something rotten, filled with decayed fruit? Would He cause His own mercy to be denied in this way, even though the existence of that mercy is as obvious as the existence of the sun? Would He allow His wisdom to be proven so unwise in that way? Is it at all thinkable that both His mercy and His wisdom, evidence of which is as clear as daylight, could be doubted and proven deficient? No,

God forbid!

O humankind! Know that there is a way to ascend to the throne of Divine mercy, and that this way is *In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate*. If you want to understand the importance of this ascent, look at the beginning of each of the one hundred and fourteen *sūras* of the miraculous Quran. Indeed, look at the beginnings of all estimable books, and at the start of all good works. Clear evidence of the Divinely-determined grandeur of *In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate* can be found in the discourse of Imam Shāfi'i (r.a.), one of the Muslim world's greatest scholars, who said, "*In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate* is only one verse, and yet it was revealed one hundred and fourteen times in the Quran."

Fourth Mystery

Confronted with the awesomeness of the manifestations of Divine unity within boundless multiplicity, the mind wanders, and for many it is impossible to do justice to the phrase *You alone do we worship*. Indeed, one's heart would have to be as broad as the earth itself in order to observe fully the Single One behind the unity of the totality of beings, and thus address Him directly, saying, *You alone do we worship and from You alone do we seek help*.

Consequently, in order that the seal of Divine oneness (*aḥadiyya*) be as apparent on all species and realms of beings as it is on all individuals, thus pointing to the existence of the Single One (*aḥad*), it is shown within the seal of Divine mercy (*raḥmāniyya*). As a result, everyone, at whatever level, may turn to the Most Pure and Holy One (*dhāt-i aqdas*) and, saying *You alone do we worship and from You alone do we seek help*, may address Him directly.

It is in order to express this mighty mystery and point out clearly the seal of Divine oneness that the All-Wise Quran always mentions the smallest sphere and the most particular matter whenever it describes the vastest sphere of the universe. One example, of course, is the creation of the heavens and the earth. It does so in order for the mind not to wander, or for the heart not to be overwhelmed. As a result the spirit is able to find its True Object of Worship directly. For example, when the Quran mentions the creation of the heavens and the earth, it also digresses momentarily to discuss the creation of the different human languages and various other subtle details of the bounties and wise purposes in the different features of humankind. This truth is demonstrated miraculously in the following verse:

And among His signs is the creation of the heavens and

*the earth, and the variations in your languages and in your colours.*⁵

Within the seemingly infinite multiplicity of different creatures, seals of unity exist like so many concentric circles, from the greatest down to the smallest. However, despite the clarity of this unity, it is still unity that exists *within* multiplicity. And it is not that easy for observers to discern this unity directly. There must, then, be a seal of Divine oneness behind this unity so that unity does not automatically bring multiplicity to mind, and so that a direct path may be opened up between the Most Pure and Holy One and the heart of each individual believer.

Furthermore, the seal of Divine oneness has been given a captivating design, a powerful truth and a brilliantly sweet and pleasant beauty – all of which are fashioned in order to direct gazes towards it and to bring hearts into its ambit. Yes, it is the strength of that mercy which attracts the gazes of conscious beings, draws them to it and impels them to attain access to the seal of oneness. Once there, they are able to observe the Single One for themselves, thus truly manifesting the meaning of *You alone do we worship and from You alone do we seek help*.

⁵ Quran, 30:22

It is because *In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate* is the 'index' of *sūra al-Fātiḥa*, and a concise summary of the Quran, that it is the sign and interpreter of this mighty mystery. Anyone who truly embraces this truth may travel at will through the various levels of Divine mercy. And anyone who causes this interpreter to speak may learn about the mysteries of Divine mercy and behold the lights of Divine pity (*shafaqa*) and compassion (*raḥīmiyya*).

Fifth Mystery

There is a Tradition which has it that *God created man in the form of the Most Merciful*.⁶ Some Sufi thinkers have drawn extraordinary inferences from this, interpreting it in ways that really do not align with the tenets of our creed. Some of the so-called 'intoxicated' mystics among the Sufis have even considered humankind's spiritual nature to be in the form of the All-Merciful. Since these are individuals given to constant contemplation, which includes the attainment of various ecstatic 'states', they may be forgiven for confusing matters and holding views that are at odds with true Islamic teachings. However, those who are of sound mind and disposition cannot accept ideas that are contrary to the fundamental principles of belief and thus rightly reject them;

⁶ This Prophetic Tradition has been related by both Bukhari and Muslim. (Tr.)

indeed, to accept them would clearly be wrong.

We know that the Most Pure and Holy One administers with the utmost order the whole of the universe as though it were a house or a palace. He spins the stars as though they were particles and causes them to travel through the heavens with wisdom and ease, employing atoms as though they were His orderly officials. Clearly such a Creator can have no partner, no peer, no opposite and no equal. The verse *There is nothing whatever like unto Him, and He hears and sees [all things]* ⁷demonstrates clearly that He has no form, no like and no peer, and that there is nothing in existence that resembles Him in any way, shape or form whatsoever.

Nevertheless, allegory and comparison may be used when considering His names, attributes and actions; this much can be understood from the verse *And His is the highest similitude in the heavens and the earth, and He is Exalted in Might, Full of Wisdom.*⁸ One of the many things intended by above-mentioned Tradition is that humankind exists in a form that displays the Divine name 'All-Merciful' (*al-Raḥmān*). As we have explained before, this name is manifested through the rays of a thousand and one Divine names on the face

⁷ Quran, 42:11

⁸ Quran, 30:27

of the universe, and is apparent through the numberless manifestations of God's absolute lordship on the face of the earth. Similarly, its comprehensive manifestation is apparent to a certain degree in man's form and disposition, just as it is on the face of the earth and, beyond that, on the face of the universe as a whole.

The Tradition suggests also that the evidence for the existence of the Necessarily Existent One offered by proofs, mirrors and manifestations of the Most Merciful such as animate creatures and human beings is so clear, so certain and so obvious that it simply cannot be denied. One may look at a shining mirror in which the sun is reflected and say, "That mirror is the sun" – thus indicating the clarity of both its brilliance and its proof. Similarly, one may look at humankind and conclude that each individual human being is in the form of the All-Merciful One, so clear is the evidence provided by humankind's 'mirroring' of the Divine. It is as a result of this mystery that the more sober among those who believed in the principle known as 'Unity of Existence' were moved to say, "There is no existent but He". This was how they opted to express the clarity of the evidence.

*O God! O Most Merciful One! Most Compassionate One!
For the sake of the bismillah – In the Name of God, the*

Merciful, the Compassionate – have mercy on us as befits Your compassion; and allow us to understand the mysteries of the bismillah, as befits Your mercy. Amen.

Sixth Mystery

O unhappy soul, afflicted by boundless impotence and endless wants! Consider the following and see how valuable and acceptable an intercessor Divine mercy actually is. For it is a way to know the All-Glorious Sovereign, in whose army both the atoms and the stars serve together with perfect order and absolute obedience. It is a way to know that Glorious Monarch of Pre-Eternity and Post-Eternity, who is self-sufficient and utterly without need. He is limitlessly rich and thus in no way in need of the universe or anything in it. The whole cosmos is under His direction and command; it is utterly obedient in the face of His majesty and grandeur; it is completely submissive in the face of His sublimity. That is Divine mercy for you! Divine mercy allows you to enter the presence of the One who needs nothing – the Eternal Sovereign – and makes you His friend, His addressee and His much-loved servant. But just as you are distant from the sun and thus unable to come close to it, even though it fills your mirror with its manifested light and reflection, you are similarly distant from Him. Yes, you are infinitely distant from the Most Pure and Holy One – the Sun of Pre-Eternity and Post-

Eternity – and you cannot come close to Him either. However, the light of His mercy brings Him near to us. O humankind! Anyone who discovers this mercy discovers an eternally unfailing treasure-trove of light. The way to find it is through following the practices of the Most Noble Messenger (PBWH), who was the most brilliant exemplar and representative of Divine mercy. Yes, he was its most brilliant herald, its most eloquent tongue and interpreter. And he was described in the Quran itself as *a Mercy to all the worlds*.

The way to reach this embodiment of mercy, who is a mercy to all worlds, is to utter the prayer which invokes God's blessings on him. For mercy is at the very heart of that prayer. As a prayer of mercy for that living embodiment of Divine mercy, it is a means of reaching the Mercy to All Worlds, may peace and blessings be his eternally. So make this prayer the means whereby you access the 'Mercy to all worlds' for yourself, and at the same time make him the means whereby you reach the mercy of the Most Merciful One.

The whole Muslim community in all of its vastness utters this prayer, which is synonymous with asking for mercy for the Mercy to All Worlds. The fact that all Muslim believers utter this prayer proves quite

brilliantly that Divine mercy is a most precious gift, with a sphere as broad as the world itself.

To conclude: Just as the most precious gem in the treasure-trove of mercy is its doorkeeper, the Prophet Muhammad (PBWH), its first key is the *bismillah* and its easiest means of entry is the prayer for blessings on the Prophet.

O God! Through the truth of *In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate*, grant blessings and peace to the one whom You sent as a mercy to all the worlds, in a manner befitting Your mercy, and in veneration of him, and to all his Family and Companions. And grant us mercy so that we may be free from want of mercy from all others but You.

Glory be unto You! We have no knowledge save that which You have taught us. Indeed, You are All-Knowing, All-Wise.

THE SECOND WORD

On the Value of Belief

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

Those who believe in the unseen...⁹

There is something so pleasurable and rewarding about belief in God, something so conducive to happiness and ease of mind, that it is difficult to imagine if you haven't experienced it for yourself. If you want to understand exactly how gratifying belief actually is, consider the following parable:

Two men once went on a trip for both business and pleasure. One of them was selfish, conceited and somewhat pessimistic. He set off, clearly with his own self-seeking interests in mind, and ended up in what seemed to him – pessimist that he was – to be a most wretched and inauspicious place. Wherever he looked he saw the powerless and the downtrodden, lamenting in the grip of fearsome, predatory tyrants, weeping at the scale of destruction to which their homeland had apparently been subjected. Wherever he went, the situation was the same, with grief and

⁹ Quran, 2:3

desolation all around. It was as though the whole country was in mourning. The only way that he was able to tolerate the situation was by deadening his senses with alcohol. The whole place was alien to him, and everyone there seemed to be his enemy. He wandered through streets that were full of rotting corpses and desperate, weeping orphans, with his conscience in a state of utter torment.

The other man was a moral, fair-minded man of God, and the road he took led him to a country that seemed to him from every perspective to be the most excellent of destinations. Wherever he went he encountered what appeared to be universal rejoicing, with a festival atmosphere in every street and town square. It seemed that the whole land was a place dedicated to the commemoration of God, for everywhere was overflowing with rapturous happiness. Everyone he met treated him like a relative or a long-lost friend. Throughout the country he witnessed celebration after celebration – the kind of events thrown to mark discharge from military duties or some other such service. Shouts of gratitude and good wishes reverberated around the streets, and he also heard the sound of drums and a band, with happy cries of “There is no god but God!” and “God is Most Great!” Unlike the other man, who was submerged in grief over his own fate and the fate of

all those around him, this second man was pleased both with his own joy and contentment and with the joy and contentment of everyone he met. Furthermore, he was able to enter into a number of profitable business agreements as he travelled around. He was extremely happy with his lot and he offered thanks to God in abundance.

After a while he met up with the other man and, realising immediately from the man's outward state what had happened to him, said: "You must have been out of your mind! You must have projected the ugliness and alienation within you onto the external world. As a result, you imagined laughter to be tears; you imagined the demob celebrations to be a sack and pillaging attack! Come to your senses! Purify your heart so that this calamitous veil can be torn away from your eyes and allow you to see the truth. For the country of an utterly just, compassionate, generous and order-loving king could not be as you imagined it to be. A country ruled by a powerful leader, with clear signs of progress and achievement, could not be the kind of place you seemed to think it was." The unhappy man later came to his senses and repented. He said, "Yes, I was crazy: I was crazy through self-medication with alcohol. God bless you! You have saved me from a state worse than hell!" And so to my own soul I say this: That first man – the

one who had such a terrible time – represents an unbeliever, or someone corrupt and heedless. For him, in his view, the world is from top to bottom a house of mourning. All living creatures from his perspective are nothing more than weeping orphans, grieving over the blows of death and separation. Humans and other animate beings are alone and friendless, waiting to be ripped apart by the talons of death at the appointed hour. As for mighty entities such as mountains and oceans, they are but horrendous, lifeless corpses. This and many other terrifying, soul-crushing delusions are what arise from this man's unbelief and misguidance to torment him.

The other man in the story is a believer – someone who recognises and affirms the existence of Almighty God. In this man's view, the world is an abode where the Beautiful Names of the All-Merciful One are being recited constantly. It is a place of instruction for humankind and other animate beings, and a field of examination for humans and jinns alike. Death is nothing but a kind of demobilization, be it for human beings or animals. Through death, those who have completed their tour of duty in this transient world depart for another world, a realm that is trouble-free and full of pure bliss. They depart this world so that new officials may come here to work. The birth of

animate beings, including humans, marks their enlistment into the army of life; it marks the beginning of their duties on earth. Each living being is a happy soldier, an honest and contented official. All of the voices one hears in this realm are either the voices of those who are glorifying God and reciting His names at the outset and end of their duties, or the songs that people sing as they joyfully go about their work. In the view of believers, all beings are the friends, servants and affable officials of their Most Generous Lord; from their perspective, all beings resemble wonderful books, authored most artistically by their All-Compassionate Owner. Belief reveals and makes manifest many sweet, subtle and sublime truths such as these.

In other words, belief in God is a seed of the paradisiacal Tuba tree, while unbelief conceals a seed of the Zaqqum tree, which burns in hellfire for all eternity. This means that salvation and security are to be found only in Islam and in belief. Since this is the case, we should say, continuously: "Praise be to God for the religion of Islam, and for perfect belief."

THE THIRD WORD

On the Importance of Worship

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

*O people, worship!*¹⁰

There lies great happiness and profit in worship, while in vice and corruption there is nothing but loss and ruin. If you want to understand this a little more clearly, consider if you will the following story.

Once, two soldiers were ordered to proceed to a distant city. Setting off together, they came eventually to an intersection where the road branched right and left. Standing at the intersection was a man, who was happy to give them information about the roads which lay ahead. "Both roads will take you to your destination," he said, "and they are of equal length. However, they differ in a number of important respects. The road which branches to the right is one that will take you to your destination with no problem; in fact, nine out of ten people who take that road not only suffer no loss, they actually make a profit in the process. However, that road is under

¹⁰ Quran, 2:21

military rule, and those who travel along it are forced to carry a heavy kit-bag and a collection of weapons in readiness for any enemies they may meet.¹¹ The road which branches to the left, however, is not subject to military authority and there are no rules or regulations in place at all. But nor does this road have any real benefit. Consequently, while people who take that road may feel a deceptive sense of lightness and ease, nine out of ten of them suffer loss as a result of their choice.”

After hearing this, the more sensible of the two soldiers took the road which branched to the right. While it was true that he had to bear the heavy burden of provisions and weaponry on his back, his heart and spirit were saved from the endless burden of fear and obligation to others. The other soldier was reckless and, not wanting to conform to orders or regulations, chose the road which branched to the left. As a result, he was freed from the heavy burden of carrying a kit-bag and weapons, but his heart was constricted by an endless burden of indebtedness, and his spirit was crushed by countless fears and

¹¹ Nursi says that the kit-bag weighed four *okkas*, while the weapons weighed two *kıyyas*. These are Ottoman weights and measures, with 1 *okka* being the equivalent of approximately 1300 grams or 2.8lbs. A *kıyya* is another name for an *okka*. (Tr.)

anxieties. Along the way he encountered numerous obstacles and was forced to beg and tremble before everyone and everything. And finally, when he reached his destination, he was punished as a deserter for having taken the wrong road. His former companion, whose love of order and discipline had led him to choose the road which branched to the right, guarded his weapons and provisions carefully; as a result, he was able to proceed without fear, obliged to no-one, and with an easy conscience and a calm and untroubled heart. When he reached the city, he was rewarded with honours for carrying out his duty faithfully and to the letter.

To my rebellious soul I say this: one of those two travellers in the story represents those who submit to Divine law, while the other represents those who rebel, preferring their own whims and desires. The road stands for the road of life, which emerges from the world of spirits and passes through the grave, proceeding to the hereafter. As for the kit-bag and weapons, they represent worship and fear of God. There is indeed an apparent burden in worship, but what worship embodies is an ease and lightness that defy description. For in the daily prayers the worshipper says, "I bear witness that there is no god but God." In other words, in everything he sees he finds a treasure-chest of mercy, for he says what he

believes, which is that “There is no creator and provider other than Him; harm and benefit lie in His power. He is All-Wise, doing nothing in vain; and He is All-Compassionate, with a bounty and mercy that are superabundant.” The worshipper knocks on the door with this supplication; seeing that all things are in the hands, and at the command, of his own Sustainer, he takes refuge in Him. The worshipper places his trust in Him, relying on Him for support against every disaster. The worshipper’s belief in Him gives him complete and utter confidence.

Indeed, courage, like every other noble virtue, stems from belief in God and from worship. And cowardice, like every other dishonour, stems from misguidance. In fact, a worshipper whose heart is truly filled with the light of belief is fazed by nothing: even if the earth were to disintegrate before his eyes, it would not scare him one bit; on the contrary, he would watch the explosion with awe-struck delight as an example of Divine power.¹² Compare this approach with the approach of those who are seemingly enlightened of mind yet who are devoid of heart and spirit: if they were facing the possible destruction of earth by a

¹² In the original, Nursi says that the worshipper would watch the explosion with awe-struck delight as an example of the power of *al-Şamad*. For the meaning of this Divine name, see Footnote 3. (Tr.)

giant comet, they would quake with fear and abandon their homes, as was indeed the case in America some years ago.¹³

Yes, humans are in need of numerous things and yet their capital is zero; they are subject to endless calamities, and yet they have no power whatsoever. In fact, their capital and their power extend no further than their hands are able to reach, and yet their hopes and fears, their trials and tribulations, are seemingly endless. Thus only those who are not totally blind are able to see and understand how much profit and happiness there is for the human being's weak and needy spirit in worship, in affirming divine unity, and in relying on God and submitting to Him.

It is obvious, therefore, that a safe path is to be preferred over a dangerous one, even if the odds of arriving in one piece are no more than one in ten. But we are talking here about the path of worship, and we know that for those who take this path there is a nine in ten possibility of arriving safely at the treasure-

¹³ The radio broadcast by actor-director Orson Wells of H. G. Wells's *War of the Worlds* led to mass hysteria, with thousands of panicked listeners across North America convinced that the dramatic adaptation was in fact a real-life news broadcast. Convinced that Earth was under attack by aliens from Mars, many left their houses and sought shelter elsewhere. (Tr.)

house of eternal happiness. Among numerous trustworthy witnesses and experts there is agreement that, apart from being inherently futile, the path of vice and corruption leads nine times out of ten to never-ending misery; in fact, those who have trodden this path bear bitter witness to it. For those who have uncovered the mysteries of creation, such a fate is a foregone conclusion.

And so, in short, we attest that happiness in this world, as in the hereafter, lies in worshipping God and obeying Him with soldier-like obedience. For this we should thank Him that we have submitted to Him, saying, "Praise be to God for obedience to Him, and for success (on His path)."

THE FOURTH WORD

On the Vital Nature of the Prescribed Prayers (ṣalāh)

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

*The prescribed daily prayers are the cornerstone of
the faith* ¹⁴

The prescribed daily prayers are both important and extremely valuable, and their benefits can be attained at very little cost. If you want to understand with absolute certainty precisely how important they are, and why only a dangerous fool would knowingly neglect them, listen to the following story.

A powerful ruler once gave each of two of his servants twenty-four gold pieces and sent them to live on royal farmland thousands of miles from court.¹⁵ “Use this money for your tickets and other travel expenses,” said the ruler, “and spend whatever is left on things you need for your new homes. There is a transport

¹⁴ This is a Prophetic Tradition narrated by Tirmidhi and Ibn Maja, among others. (Tr.)

¹⁵ In the original, the destination was described as being “two months walking distance away”. Two months is equal to sixty days – sixty being at that time the average male lifespan. (Tr.)

hub a day's walk from here: there you will find a railway, road transport, an airport and a harbour; use whichever you can afford."

Having received their instructions, the servants set off towards the station. While the more cautious of the two spent only a little money on the way, his outlay included a business investment – one which impressed the ruler greatly, and which was so successful, it increased his capital by a thousand percent. The other servant was not nearly so astute. He was something of a hapless layabout, and he spent twenty-three of his gold pieces on gambling and other amusements before he had even reached the station. Taking pity on him, the more sensible of the two servants said to his friend, "Spend your last gold piece on a ticket so that you won't have to make your way to the farm on foot. Our master is generous; maybe he'll take pity on you and forgive your faults; who knows, maybe he'll put you on a plane himself. Otherwise you'll be forced to cross the desert alone and with no provisions, a journey of nigh on two months."

Imagine how foolish, harmful and senseless the second soldier would appear if, out of obstinacy, he were to refuse to spend his last gold piece on a ticket, wasting it instead on some ephemeral vice. Even the

most foolish of fools would consider such behaviour to be a form of lunacy.

So to those who neglect the prescribed prayers, and to my own soul, which also tries to avoid praying, I say this. The ruler in the story represents our Creator, the One Who sustains us. As for the two traveling servants, the first represents the devout, who are consistent in performing their prayers; the second represents those who neglect them. The royal farm stands for paradise and the station represents the grave. The journey is humankind's passage to the grave and on to the resurrection and the world to come. People cover this long journey in differing degrees according to their actions and their levels of God-awareness (*taqwā*). Some of the truly devout have been able to cross a thousand-year distance in no more than a day, with the speed of lightning. And some have covered, in a single day, a distance of fifty-thousand years, thanks to the power and speed of the imagination. The mighty Quran alludes to this truth with two of its verses.

The ticket in the story represents the prescribed daily prayers. Just an hour a day is enough time to perform the five sets of prayers, including the preparatory ablutions. Consider, then, the loss that one would incur if one were to spend twenty-three hours of the

day on this fleeting, worldly life, and then fail to spend just one hour on preparing for the eternal life of the hereafter. Would one not be wronging one's own soul? Could that behaviour in any sense of the word be described as reasonable? Imagine that someone spends half of his worldly goods on a lottery ticket that has only a one in a thousand possibility of winning, and yet refuses to give a twenty-fourth of his worldly goods to an eternal treasury where the possibility of winning has been verified at ninety-nine out of a hundred. Surely anyone who considers themselves reasonable could not fail to see how contrary to reason and wisdom this would be.

Furthermore, the mind, the heart and the spirit all derive great ease and comfort from prayer. And it is not at all taxing physically. Moreover, with the right intention, all of the other acts carried out by one who performs the prescribed prayers will become worshipful as a result. Consequently, one will be able to dedicate the whole of one's life capital to the hereafter in this way, thus in one respect transforming one's transient life into a life that is permanent...

THE FIFTH WORD

On the Prescribed Prayers and the Avoidance of Sin

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

Indeed, God is with those who are fearful of Him and who do good¹⁶

To pray the five prescribed daily prayers and to avoid serious sins are part of what it means to be truly human; they are a result of how you have been created. If you want to understand this more clearly, listen to the following parable.

Once, during wartime, there were two soldiers serving in the same regiment. One was well-trained and conscientious; the other was inexperienced and self-centred. The conscientious soldier focused on his training and on the fighting that lay ahead. He didn't think about rations or provisions; he knew that it was the responsibility of the state to feed and equip him, to treat him when he was ill and to take care of his every need – even to the point of spoon-feeding him should the need ever arise. He realised that his

¹⁶ Quran, 6:128

essential duty was to train and to fight. Nevertheless, part of his job was to attend to mess duties, washing pots and pans, and jobs of a menial nature. And he saw this as part of his duty to the state rather than as something he was doing for his living.

The rookie soldier, however, was too fond of his stomach to pay much attention to training and the war ahead: to him, that was the state's business, not his. He thought constantly about his material needs, leaving his duties to spend time shopping in the market. One day his conscientious friend told him,

“Brother, your duty here is to train and to fight; that is why you're here. Trust the king: he won't let you go hungry. The king's duty is to take care of us. Besides, you're weak and needy, and you won't be able to find someone to provide for you regardless of the conditions. The army has been mobilised and we're now at war: if you keep wandering off, you'll be accused of mutiny and you'll be punished. So you see, there are two duties concerned here. One is the king's, and his duty is to take care of our material needs. The other duty is ours: we are here to train and fight, albeit with the king's help at times.”

You can imagine the dangers that this thoughtless rookie would bring upon himself if he were to ignore

the advice of his hard-working, well-trained colleague.

So how are we to understand this story? Well, the turbulent place of war in this narrative is life on earth, with all its trials and tribulations, while the army, with its various divisions, stands for human society. The regiment in the story is the community of Muslims in the present century. The conscientious soldier represents those devout Muslims who know the obligations of their religion and who perform them: struggling with Satan and the deceptions of their own lower selves (*nafs*), they strive to give up serious sins and to do right. The raw, thoughtless soldier in the story represents the corrupt wrongdoers, fixated on the struggle for livelihood in a way that betokens their lack of trust that in the True Provider. They abandon their religious obligations at the drop of a hat and commit any sin that they have to while struggling to make a living.

The military training in the story represents worship, and the prescribed prayers in particular. The war stands for the struggle against the desires of the lower soul, and against the demonic forces among men and jinns; the battles that they fight stand for their brave attempts to avoid sin and loose morals, and to save their hearts and spirits from eternal

damnation. As for the two duties, the first is to give life and to sustain it; the second is to worship the Giver and Sustainer of life, and to approach Him in supplication. It is to trust in Him and to rely on Him alone.

For whoever gave life, which is a most brilliant miracle of Divine art and wisdom, is the one who maintains and perpetuates life through material and spiritual sustenance.¹⁷ It cannot be the work of another. If you want proof, look at the animal world. You will see that the weakest and most unintelligent animals are the ones who are best nourished: fish and fruit worms are good examples. And it is the most helpless and delicate creatures who enjoy the very best of foods: the human infant and other baby mammals are but two examples of this. It is enough to compare fish with foxes, newly born mammals with wild beasts, and trees with four-legged animals in order to understand that licit sustenance is

¹⁷ In the original, the 'most brilliant miracle of divine art and wisdom' is described as belonging to *al-Ṣamad*, namely 'the eternally existent One Whom all things need and seek, but Who needs and seeks nothing'. The Divine name *al-Ṣamad* has no single-word equivalent in English; since long explanations within the text disrupt the flow of the narrative, the translator has opted either to use the Arabic original or, particularly when derivations of the word are used, as in this sentence, to explain in a footnote. This is not an ideal solution, but it is probably the best available. (Tr.)

obtained not through brute force and sheer willpower, but through absolute powerlessness.

The same applies in human society. For example, those who abandon the prescribed prayers in order to seek their livelihood resemble the soldier in the story who abandons the training ground in order to go begging in the market. But if one performs the prayers and then seeks lawful provisions from the storehouse of Divine Mercy, without burdening anyone else in the process, that is actually a kind of worship. And worship is hardwired in the human spirit and soul: it is part of humankind's innate make-up. Besides, with regard to the power and activity needed to make one's way through the world, human beings cannot compete even with the tiniest bird. If humankind is the 'monarch and commander of all creatures', this is with respect only to his knowledge and his worship, which are necessary for his spiritual life and for the life of the hereafter. And knowledge and worship go hand-in-hand with need and supplication.

So to my soul I say this: if you make the worldly life your goal, you will become lower than the lowest bird. However, if you make the life of the hereafter your aim, and this world the means to that end, you will be like a commander of all the world's creatures. If you strive for this lofty goal, you will be a cherished and obedient servant of Almighty God; you will be His honoured and respected guest.

There are two ways open to you, and the choice is yours. So choose carefully, and beseech the Most Compassionate of the Compassionate for guidance and success.

THE SIXTH WORD

On Selling One's Self and One's Property

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the
Compassionate.

Verily God has purchased from the believers their
persons and their property that Paradise might be
theirs.¹⁸

To sell your whole self and all of your property to God
is an extremely profitable piece of business, and to be
His slave and soldier is a great honour. If you wish to
understand how this could be, consider the following
parable.

A king once gave two of his subjects each a large piece
of land, complete with all of the things necessary to
run an estate of that size – buildings, workshops,
machinery, weapons, horses and so on. However, it
was a time of war and instability, and nothing was
safe or immune from attack. The king, famed for his
mercy and generosity, ordered the most noble of his
aides to deliver a decree to each of the two subjects.
The decree, which reflected the king's great
compassion, read as follows:

¹⁸ Quran, 9:111

“In order to save the property that I have entrusted to you from being destroyed pointlessly, sell it to me and I will look after it for you until the wars are over. When peace comes, I will return the property to you in a better condition than when I gave it to you. I will regard the property I gave on trust as your own property, and I will pay you a high price for it. As for the machinery and the tools in the workshop, they will be used in my name and in my workplace, but the value of both parts and labour will increase a thousandfold. And I will give you all of the profit that accrues. You are poor, and without resources, and so you won’t be able to afford the cost of the upkeep and improvements. I will cover the expenses and provide the equipment myself, and I will give you all of the income and profit, which you will keep until peace is declared.

“If you do as I ask, your profits will be multiplied in the five ways I have described. However, if you do not sell me your property, you will lose everything.

“You can see for yourselves that these days, no-one is able to hold on to what he possesses, and if you do not sell me your property, it will be bought not for the high price that I am offering, but for next to no price at all. All of your expensive tools and machinery, all of the precious metals that are waiting to be worked –

they will all lose their value. Furthermore, if you don't sell your property to me, you will have the problem of looking after it and trying to keep it safe, as well as the pain of being punished for betraying your trust. If you don't do as I ask, you will lose out in the five ways that I have described.

"Finally, if you sell your property to me, you will join my army and you will act in my name. In other words, instead of becoming an irregular soldier or a common prisoner, you will become the free lieutenant of an exalted king."

After they had listened to the king's gracious message, the more intelligent of the two men said, "Absolutely! I'm happy and proud to sell, and I offer the king my heartfelt gratitude."

The other man, however, was selfish and proud: his soul had become like the soul of Pharaoh himself.¹⁹ He paid no attention to the terrors and upheavals of the world, and he acted as though he and his property were destined to endure forever. He said, "I don't accept. Who is the king, anyway? I'm not selling anything to him; I'm not going to let him spoil my enjoyment!"

¹⁹ In Muslim scripture, the Pharaoh is seen traditionally as an epitome of egoism, megalomania and tyranny.

Months passed and, as it happened, the first man reached such a high position at court that everyone envied his situation. The king showered him with royal favours and he lived happily in an apartment in the king's own palace. The other man, however, fell so low in the world that no-one envied him; in fact, everyone pitied him, while admitting that he had brought it all on himself. His error had led to the disappearance of his property, his happiness and his peace of mind, and he lived in a state of constant, hellish torment.

Now, we need to address our own souls through this parable, for our souls are full of whims and selfish desires. We need to consider the truth through the prism of this story. Let us unpack its meanings. Firstly, the king in the story stands for the Almighty, the Eternal King, who creates and sustains us. The lands, the machinery, the tools and other equipment represent our possessions while we are in this world, among them the body, the spirit and the heart, together with the outer and inner senses, such as vision, speech, intellect and imagination. The 'most noble' of the king's aides is the noble Messenger of God, while the decree symbolises the all-wise Quran, which describes this metaphorical act of buying and selling in the verse:

Verily God has purchased from the believers their persons and property that Paradise might be theirs.

The battlefield stands for this world, which is a place of constant, violent storms, a place of continuous change and flux, all of which force human beings to think,

“Since everything is bound to perish and leave us, is there perhaps some way that we can transform what we have into something everlasting, so that we may hold on to it forever?”

The answer to this question comes from the heavenly Quran, which assures humankind that there is indeed a way – a way which contains within itself five benefits. The solution is to sell the property entrusted to us back to its rightful owner. Such a transaction will bring the following benefits:

The first benefit - Property that is temporary will become everlasting. This is because when someone gives his short, earthly life to God, Who is Eternal and Self-Subsistent, and spends it for His sake, it becomes eternal. And it will produce eternal fruits. Like seeds and kernels, the moments of an individual's life will appear to rot and vanish. But in reality, they will become flowers of blessed good-fortune that will

open and bloom forever in the world to come. And even in the realm known as *barzakh*, they will give light and reassurance.²⁰

The second benefit – For every life that is given freely to God, paradise will be given in exchange.

The third benefit - The value of each limb and each sense will increase a thousandfold. For example, your intellect is a tool. If you do not ‘sell’ it to God, but employ it instead to serve the desires of your own soul, it will become a toxic, ill-fated instrument that will exist only to torture you. It will torture you by reminding you of the heart-breaking sorrows of the past and the terrifying fears of the future; it will become nothing less than an evil tool of destruction. It is for this reason that sinners often resort to drunkenness or debauchery in order to escape the pains inflicted on them by their intellects. But if you ‘sell’ your intellect to its True Owner and use it only on His behalf, then it will become like a key. And that key will unlock the infinite treasures of compassion and wisdom that are hidden in creation. Sell your intellect to God and it will become like a divine guide, preparing its owner for eternal happiness. If you sell your senses to God, they too will become

²⁰ The *barzakh* is the ‘intermediate realm’ between this world and the Hereafter. (Tr.)

eternal. Vision is a good example. Your eyes are windows through which your spirit looks out onto the world. If you do not 'sell' your eyes to God, but use them instead to serve the desires of your own soul, you will lose out. For if you waste your vision on temporary pleasures, it will sink to a level at which it will serve only to satisfy the lusts and the desires of your lower self. However, if you 'sell' your vision to the All-Seeing Maker, employing it solely on His behalf and within the limits set out by Him, your vision will be elevated to the rank of 'reader of the great book of creation'. Your eyes will be witness to the miracles of divine art, and to all the instances of mercy that are visible in the garden of this earth.

Another example is the tongue and the sense of taste. If you do not sell it to your All-Wise Creator, but use it instead only to satisfy your stomach and the desires of your own soul, it will decrease in value. Eventually it will sink to the level of a simple stable master, watching as you fill the stable that is your stomach with anything and everything. If, however, you sell it to the All-Generous Provider, your sense of taste will become a skilled official watching over the treasuries of Divine mercy; it will become a thankful overseer in the kitchens of God's absolute, eternal power.

And so we must use our intellects wisely, for the

intellect is either a tool of destruction or a key to all existence. And we must use our eyes carefully, for the eye is either a pimp or a learned keeper of the Divine library. And we should use our sense of taste with care, for the tongue is either a mere stable hand or it is the supervisor of the treasury of Divine mercy.

What applies to your eye and your tongue applies to all of your limbs, organs and senses. Understand this and you will see that a believer, through belief, acquires a nature and character that are worthy of paradise. And you will see that an unbeliever, through unbelief, acquires a nature and character that are deserving of hell. This is because the believer uses what God has given him for the sake of God, and within the limits that God has set out, while the unbeliever uses it for the sake of his own lower self, in any way that he wishes.

The fourth benefit – Human beings are helpless, and prone to many misfortunes. They are poor and their needs are endless. They are also weak, and life's burdens are many. Therefore, if they do not rely on the All-Powerful, All-Glorious Creator, they will always suffer. If they do not submit to Him and trust Him completely, their consciences will always trouble them. Endless pain, torment and regret will choke them; they will either intoxicate them or turn

them into beasts.

The fifth benefit - The reward for all of the acts of worship and glorification carried out by your limbs, organs and senses will be given to you when you need it most, in the form of the precious fruits of paradise. Those who have reached a high level of spiritual illumination, and who are able to understand and witness the true nature of reality, all testify to this fact.

If you reject this offer, you will be rejecting the benefits that go with it. And not only will you miss out on the five profits mentioned, you will suffer loss in at least five ways.

The first loss – You will lose everything you hold dear and to which you are so deeply attached: your property, your children, your youth, that capricious soul of yours which you worship, your life – everything you have and everything you are – all of it will vanish without a trace, leaving you nothing in your hands but your own sins, which will hang like a heavy, painful chain around your neck.

The second loss – You will have to pay a penalty for the betrayal of trust, for you will have wronged your own soul by using the most precious tools and

instruments in your possession on the most worthless objects.

The third loss – By reducing all of your God-given faculties to a level far below that of wild animals, you will have made a mockery of God's wisdom by acting against it.

The fourth loss – You are weak and poor, and in need of Divine assistance. And so rejecting this assistance, you will be taking all of life's burdens on your own shoulders. Consequently the transience of life and your separation from everything you love will be a constant source of torment.

The fifth loss – The All-Compassionate One has blessed you with gifts with which to prepare yourself for everlasting life and eternal happiness in the world to come – gifts such as your intellect, your heart, your eyes and your tongue. But you have taken these gifts and transformed them into objects so ugly that the only doors they will open in the world to come are the doors to hell.

Is it really so difficult to sell God's gifts back to Him? It may seem difficult, given the large number of people who refuse the offer. But in actual fact it is not really that hard at all. Those things which God has

allowed us to do are numberless, and so there is no need for us to go after that which is forbidden. The duties that God has given us are few, and they are not difficult. To be submitted to God and to serve Him like a soldier is an indescribably pleasurable honour. Our duty is simply to act at all times in the name of God, like a soldier. Our duty is to give and take for His sake, and to behave, at all times and in all ways, in accordance with His laws. If one errs in one's duty, then one should ask Him for His help and His forgiveness, saying:

"O Lord! Forgive our shortcomings, and accept us as Your slaves. Make us sure guardians of Your trust until the time comes when it is taken back from us. Amen!"

THE SEVENTH WORD

On “I believe in God and the Last Day”

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

The two parts of the phrase “I believe in God and in the Last Day” are like keys to a puzzle: they help to solve the riddle of creation and they open the door of happiness to the human spirit. Reliance on the Creator and taking refuge in Him through patience, through prayer and through appreciation are like beneficial medicines for the soul. And listening to the Quran, obeying its commands, performing the obligatory prayers and abandoning serious sins are all like precious tickets for the journey to eternal life; they are like lights to illuminate the grave; they are like vital provisions for the hereafter. If you want to understand this more clearly, then the following story may help:

A soldier once fell into great difficulty on the field of battle and examination, in the trial of profit and loss. He was wounded, with two deep and dangerous gashes on his right and left sides. Behind him there stood a huge lion, waiting to pounce. In front of him there was a gallows, on which all of his loved ones were being hanged. And it would hang him too, one

day. If this were not enough, he had a long journey ahead of him, for he was being exiled. As this wretched soldier agonised in desperation over his fearful fate, a figure appeared before him, shining with light like Khidr.²¹ Approaching, the figure said, "Do not despair. I will give you two keys and I will show you how they are to be used. If you use them properly, the lion will become a tame horse for you to ride, and the gallows will be transformed into a swing for you to play on. I will also give you two kinds of medicine; if you follow the instructions, they will transform those awful wounds of yours into two sweet-scented Muhammadan roses.²² Finally, I will give you a ticket; with it, you will be able to make a whole year's journey in a single day, as though flying. Try these things if you don't believe me; you'll soon see that they are true." And so the soldier tried them out, and he saw that they worked.

²¹ Though not mentioned by name, Khidr appears in the Quran as the servant of God who accompanied Moses on the latter's spiritual journey, and who was quizzed by him about the apparent unjust actions that he was undertaking. See Quran, 18:65-82. Apparently blessed with supernatural longevity, Khidr is still considered to be alive, albeit on a hidden plane of existence. The figure of Khidr can be found in the religious literature and folkloric history of a number of cultures. (Tr.)

²² The dark-red Damascus rose (*Rosa damascena*), one of the sources of rose-oil and rosewater, is also known as the 'Muhammadi Rose'. (Tr.)

I too, in my misfortune, have tried them, and I can affirm that these things are undoubtedly true.

Later, the soldier met a sly, depraved-looking individual, as cunning as Satan, approaching from the left, loaded with drugs, alcohol, pornography and various other temptations. The individual said, "Come with me and let's have some fun. There's music and plenty of food and drink. What are you waiting for? And what is it you're reciting under your breath?"

"A prayer for protection," said the soldier.

"You must be joking!" said the man. "Stop that ridiculous nonsense and come and have some fun! What's wrong with you? And what's that in your hand?"

"Medicine," said the soldier.

"Medicine?" said the man. "Throw it away, there's nothing wrong with you! You're young and strong and it's time to party! Why are you spoiling the fun? And what are those papers in your hand?"

"A ticket and a ration card," replied the soldier.

“For heaven’s sake tear them up!” shouted the man. “It’s spring and it’s time for enjoyment! You don’t want to travel anywhere when there’s so much fun to be had here.” He tried everything he could to persuade the soldier to join him, and if the truth be known, the soldier was almost tempted. Human beings are weak and easily deceived; I too have been deceived by such cunning.

Suddenly, from the right there came a voice like thunder. “Beware! Don’t fall for this trickster’s deceit! Tell him that if he has the means to kill the lion, to remove the gallows, to defend you from whatever has wounded you, and to render your journey unnecessary, then let him do it. If he can do all of this, then feel free to join him in his so-called pleasures. Otherwise, he should keep his mouth shut and let that Khidr-like figure say what he has to say!”

All of this, I tell to my own soul – the soul that laughed when I was young but now weeps in regret for that laughter. The unfortunate soldier, well, that is me; that is humankind, for we are all the same. The lion is the appointed hour of death. The gallows is death itself – death, decline and separation, taking our friends and loved ones away from us, just as sure as night follows day. As for the two wounds, one is humankind’s terrifying impotence and the other is

our absolute poverty. The journey into exile signifies the long journey of trial and tribulation that begins in the 'world of spirits'²³ and passes through the womb, into childhood and on to old age, and from there to the grave, the 'intermediate realm',²⁴ resurrection and the 'bridge of Sirat'.²⁵ As for the two keys, they are belief in God and belief in the hereafter.

Yes, thanks to that second, sacred key, death takes on the form of a tame horse – one that will take you from the prison that is this world to the gardens of paradise and into the presence of the most Merciful One. Those wise believers who have understood the reality of death have come to love it; they yearn for it, long before it comes. And thanks to the key that is belief in God, the passage of time, which ends in decline, separation and death, takes on a different form. It becomes a means by which we are able to observe and take pleasure in the ever-changing, multi-coloured handiwork of the All-Glorious Creator. It becomes a means whereby one is able to appreciate the wonders of Divine power and the

²³ The 'world of spirits' is the 'intermediate realm' between this world and the next; it is sometimes known as *barzakh*. (Tr.)

²⁴ See above.

²⁵ The 'bridge of Sirat' is said to be a bridge, thinner than a hair's breadth, across which people shall walk on the Day of Judgement in order to enter Paradise. Given its narrowness, the implication is that many will not make it. (Tr.)

reflections of Divine mercy. It becomes a house of constantly moving mirrors which, as they reflect the colours of the sun's light, produce ever-transforming scenes of beauty, like the changing scenes on a cinema screen, each more wonderful than the one before.

As for the two medicines, one is patient trust in God; the other is reliance on Divine power and confidence in Divine wisdom. There is no doubt in this, no doubt at all. After all, the Monarch of all Existence has the power to bring things into being simply by saying, "Be!" What does any impotent creature have to fear, knowing that He can be relied on at all times? In the face of the worst calamities, that creature is able to say, "Indeed, we belong only to God, and our return is to Him" and, with complete assurance in his heart, he is able to place his trust in his All-Compassionate Sustainer. Those with true knowledge actually take pleasure in their impotence, in their fear of God. For there is a kind of pleasure in fear. Small children actually delight in their own helplessness, for they know that they can take refuge in the compassionate embrace of their mothers. And even if the mother chastises her child, the child knows it is not without love or wisdom.

The love and compassion of mothers is but a drop in

the ocean when compared to the extent of God's mercy, of which it is a reflection. It is for this reason that wise believers take pleasure in their own impotence, in their fear of God, for they know that they can take refuge in His compassion on account of their total lack of power. In fact their fear and their powerlessness become almost like an intermediary, appealing to God on their behalf.

The second medicine consists of thankful contentment, of supplication, and of reliance on the mercy of the All-Compassionate Provider. This too is without doubt. For we are guests of an All-Generous Maker, who, in springtime, transforms the earth into a banquet table of fruits and flowers. As such guests, why would we find our poverty, our wants and our needs, to be a burden? Are they not simply a kind of appetite for the bounties yet to come? And would we not want to increase that appetite so that the bounties become even more enjoyable when we eventually get to taste them? The wise have understood how important this is, and it is not for nothing that they actually take pride in their poverty. And this is to be admired. Having said that, it should not be misunderstood. Taking pride in one's poverty means being aware before God that one is, and has, nothing. Taking pride in one's poverty means to petition God on account of it, and not to parade it, like

a beggar, in the presence of people.

As for the ticket and the ration card, these represent the performance of acts of worship, with emphasis on the obligatory prayers and the abandonment of serious sins. This too is without doubt. Those who have uncovered the mysteries of creation can testify to this, as can those who have knowledge of the unseen. They testify to the fact that the provisions needed for the long, dark road to post-eternity can be obtained only through obedience to the commands of the Quran, and through avoiding what it prohibits. Science, philosophy and art are worth nothing on that road: their light may reach the door of the grave, but it goes no further.

My soul is weak, and it is lazy. And it is my soul that I address with these words. How easy it is, in fact, to perform the five daily prayers, and to give up the seven deadly sins. If your powers of reason have not been totally corrupted, you should be able to appreciate how important and extensive the fruits and benefits of the daily prayers really are. And so to the Devil and to all of those who attempt to lead you astray, to corrupt you with vice and debauchery, say this: "If you have the means to kill death, to remove impotence and poverty from human life, to banish decline and transience, and to close the door of the

grave forever, then do so! If not, be silent. Be silent and listen to the Quran, which interprets the universe in this vast mosque of creation. Let us listen to its words; let us be illuminated by its light. And let us act in accordance with its guidance, reciting it constantly. For the Quran is the truth, since it comes from the Truth; it speaks the truth, it shows the truth and it spreads the light of divine wisdom.”

O God! Illuminate our hearts with the light of belief and the Qur'an.

O God! Enrich us with need for You and do not impoverish us with lack of need for You. Free us from the illusion of our own strength and power, and cause us to take refuge in Your strength and power. Position us among those who place their trust in You, and do not leave us to our own devices. Cover us with Your protection. Have mercy on us and have mercy on all believing men and women. And grant blessings and peace to our Master Muhammad, Your Servant and Prophet, Your Friend and Beloved; the Beauty of Your Dominion and the Sovereign of Your Art; the Essence of Your Favour and the Sun of Your Guidance; the Tongue of Your Proof and the Exemplar of Your Mercy; the Light of Your Creation and the Glory of Your Creatures; the Lamp of Your Unity in

the Multiplicity of Your Creatures and the Discloser of the Riddle of Your Beings; the Herald of the Sovereignty of Your Lordship and the Announcer of those things pleasing to You; the Proclaimer of the Treasuries of Your Names and the Instructor of Your Servants; the Interpreter of Your Signs and the Mirror of the Beauty of Your Lordship; the Means of witnessing You and bearing witness to You; Your Beloved and Your Messenger, whom You sent as a Mercy to All the Worlds, and to all his Family and Companions, and to his brothers among the prophets and messengers, and to Your angels and to the righteous among Your servants. Amen.

THE EIGHTH WORD

On the Importance of Religion

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

*God, there is no god but He, the Ever-Living, the Self-Subsistent.*²⁶

*Verily, the religion before God is Islam.*²⁷

The Eighth Word concerns the nature of this world and the place of the human spirit within it. It also concerns the nature of religion and its value for humankind, and how, if true religion is absent, the world becomes transformed into a prison. It explores the idea that, without religion, humans become the most wretched of all creatures. And it concludes that it is only utterances such as *O Allah!* and *There is no object of worship but God* that can solve the puzzle of human existence and rescue the human spirit from darkness and despair. The story below should help us understand this more clearly.

Many years ago, two brothers set off on a long road trip. Approaching an unexpected fork in the road,

²⁶ Quran, 2:255

²⁷ Quran, 3:19

they stopped a serious-looking passer-by and asked him which of the two roads was better. The passer-by said, "If you go to your right, you'll soon come to a place where there is very strict emphasis on law and order. You will have to obey the rules and regulations, and it is not easy. But in that hardship you will find both happiness and security. If you take the left-hand road, however, that will lead you to a place where everyone is free to do as they please. But in that freedom you will find wretchedness and danger. The choice is yours." One of the brothers was of good character and so, saying, "I place my trust in God", he took the right-hand road. Eventually, this led to a place where law and order was valued most highly, and the brother did all that he could to obey the rules. The other brother, however, was basically an immoral good-for-nothing, and he chose the left-hand road, simply because it meant that he would be able to do as he wished. Let's follow him and see what happened.

The second brother set off on the left-hand road, and while at first everything seemed easy, he soon realised that it was actually extremely difficult. He trekked up and down steep hills until he found himself in a stark, desolate wilderness. Suddenly, he heard a roar and, looking around, saw that a lion had come out of some jungle somewhere and was now

about to pounce on him. So he bolted. He ran as fast as he could until he came to a well. The well was about sixty foot deep and had no water. Fearing the lion, he jumped into the well and hoped for the best. Half-way down, his fall was broken by the branch of a tree that was growing out of the wall of the well.

The tree had two roots and, much to his dismay, the second brother saw that two rats – one black, one white – were gnawing through them. He looked up, only to see the lion standing like a guard at the mouth of the well, waiting for him. He looked down; below him was a terrifying dragon. When the dragon raised its head, reaching almost halfway up to where the man was dangling, the man saw that the dragon's mouth was as big as the mouth of the well. He looked at the walls of the well, which were crawling with rabid vermin, gradually gathering around him.

Looking up again at the opening of the well, he spied a fig tree. But it was no ordinary fig tree; in fact, it bore the fruits of many different trees, from walnuts to pomegranates. Since he was a foolish, unthinking man, this second brother did not realise that this was no ordinary situation; nor did he realise that these strange things were not there by chance, or that they all contained mysterious secrets. Most importantly, he had no idea that someone extremely powerful had

the situation in hand and was directing the whole scene. In fact, despite the fact that his heart, his spirit and his mind were in severe torment because of what was happening to him, his evil-commanding soul pretended that it was nothing. His lower self made him close his ears to the screams that were coming from his heart and spirit and, in an act of pure self-deception, he started to eat from the fruits of the fig tree as though it were an ordinary tree in his own garden. Little did he realise, however, that some of the fruits were poisonous and thus harmful. As the Creator says in a *hadith qudsi*, "I am how my servants conceive Me to be."²⁸

And so through his ignorance and lack of trust, the unhappy brother thought that that which he was experiencing was real and true. And because that is how he approached the matter, that is how he was treated. Indeed, if anyone approaches things as he did, they will always be treated how he was treated. Death does not come to save such people from the torment of their own misperceptions, but nor can they be said to live, such is their torment.

²⁸ A *hadith qudsi* or 'sacred Tradition' is a special category of hadith. They are deemed unique because while their content and meaning are attributed to God, the actual wording is credited to the Prophet (pbwh). Technically they are not part of the six-book corpus of canonical Traditions, although their significance is arguably the same. (Tr.)

Leaving this poor wretch to his dire fate, let us now consider the situation of the other brother. Blessed with intelligence and good fortune, this brother travelled without experiencing the kind of distress heaped upon his brother. Thanks to his sound morals, he saw the best in everything and everyone, and was always ready to give things and people the benefit of the doubt. As a result, those things which appeared terrifying to his brother appeared friendly and familiar to him. Furthermore, since he knew the law and was willing to obey it at all times, he suffered none of the hardships that his brother suffered. He found the journey easy and went forward freely, with security and peace of mind. Eventually he reached a garden that was full of beautiful flowers and delicious fruits. However, since it had not been looked after for a while, it also contained much that had withered and gone rotten. As it happens, his brother had entered a similar garden. However, he had occupied himself with eating the rotten fruits and, making himself sick, had left the garden without having rested a while. The sensible brother did not make this mistake: acting in accordance with the principle, 'Always look at the positives', he paid no attention to the withered and rotting things there. Instead, having benefited from the pure and fresh things there, he was able to take a rest before proceeding on his way.

The sensible brother, like his thoughtless sibling, also entered a vast desert, and was similarly stopped in his tracks by the roar of a lion that was about to attack him. And he was scared, but not as scared as his brother. Thanks to his positive outlook, he was able to reason with himself, saying, "This desert no doubt has a ruler, and it is quite possible that the lion is one of the ruler's servants, obeying the ruler's commands." His positive outlook brought consolation, but nevertheless he still thought it best to flee. And so he ran until he came across an empty well, sixty foot in depth, into which he jumped. Down he dropped until his fall, too, was broken by the branch of a tree, which he grabbed with both hands. As he dangled there, he noticed two rats gnawing through the tree's two roots. When he looked up, he could see the lion, and when he looked down, he could see the dragon. Just like his brother, he had been placed in a most bizarre situation. And like his brother he was terrified, but with terror a thousand times less than that of his sibling. Since his morals were sound, his thoughts were sound too, and he always looked at the positive side of every situation. As a result, this is how he reasoned with himself:

"These bizarre events are obviously connected to each other; furthermore, they clearly appear to be happening in accordance with a command. If that is

the case, these events are masking a puzzle. Everything that is occurring here is happening at the command of a hidden ruler. This means that I am not alone. This means that the hidden ruler is watching me and testing me; he is impelling me forward for a particular purpose; he is inviting me somewhere for a reason.

“The fear I feel is not unpleasant; in fact it gives rise to a satisfying kind of curiosity. It makes me wonder who this hidden ruler is who is testing me, trying to make himself known, and for some reason drawing me forward along this strange path.”

Gradually, love for the owner of the puzzle emerged from the desire to know who he was, and from that love emerged the desire to solve the puzzle. Similarly, from the desire to solve the puzzle emerged the desire to acquire good qualities, which would hopefully please and gratify the puzzle’s owner.

Then the sensible brother looked at the tree. Like the other brother, he saw that it was a fig tree, but also that it was bearing the fruits of countless different trees. Immediately, his fear left him, for he realised that the fig tree was a kind of index or exhibition. He said to himself that, by some miraculous means, the ruler must have attached samples of all of the fruits

in the garden to this one fig tree. In other words, the hidden ruler had placed on one tree numerous pointers to all of the delicacies and delights that he had in store elsewhere for his guest. The brother then appealed to the hidden ruler, saying, "O ruler of this land! I find myself in your territory and I take refuge with you. I am looking for you, for I am your servant and I want only to please you." As soon as he said this, the walls of the well parted and he watched as the mouth of the dragon was transformed into the entrance to a peaceful garden of great beauty. The dragon and the lion took on the form of servants, inviting him to enter; the lion even became a friendly horse for him to ride.

Let's now compare the situations of these two brothers and see how good comes from good and how evil comes from evil.

We see that the unhappy traveller who takes the left road is constantly afraid that he will fall into dragon's mouth, while his brother is invited into a beautiful garden full of fruit. All the time, the first brother's heart is pounding with terror and anxiety, while the second brother sees everything, however strange and outwardly frightening, as a valuable learning opportunity. The miserable brother on the left road is suffering the torment of loneliness, alienation and

despair, while the happy brother on the right road is enjoying himself in a place that is full of yearning and hope, and where he feels completely at home. The unfortunate one feels confined, like a prisoner, and subject to attacks from wild animals, while the fortunate one sees himself as an honoured guest, enjoying the banquet in the friendly company of his generous host's strange servants. The unhappy one is actually making his torture worse by eating fruits which, although apparently tasty, are in fact poisonous. The fact is that the fruits are only samples: the guests are permitted to have a tiny taste so that their interest in the actual product will be stimulated; they are not allowed to stuff their faces with them like animals. The fortunate brother understands this, and so he takes only a little, content to wait patiently for the rest. Most importantly, the unfortunate brother is harming and oppressing himself. Through his lack of insight, he is turning truths and realities which are as clear as daylight into dark, oppressive fears and hellish delusions. He does not deserve anyone's pity and he has no right to complain.

For example, let us suppose that someone has been invited to a summer garden party with a few friends. What would happen if, not content to enjoy the innocent pleasures of the party, he were to intoxicate himself on some foul alcoholic concoction of his own

and then start to scream and shout in drunken abandon? What if then, in his drunken stupor, he were to imagine that he was naked in the middle of winter, with only wild beasts for company? Would he deserve our pity? Why would anyone feel sorry for him? For he would be wronging his own soul and insulting his friends by calling them wild beasts.

Such is the behaviour of the first, unfortunate brother. The second brother, however, sees the truth, and sees that the truth is good. Since he understands the beauty of truth, he is being respectful to truth's owner. And such a man deserves mercy. This illustrates the meaning of the Quranic verse, *Know that evil is from yourself and good is from God*. Compare the other differences in the same way and you will understand that the first brother's evil-commanding soul has constructed a kind of hell for him, while the goodness of the second brother's intention, will, character and thoughts have allowed countless bounties to come his way. His virtuous character has allowed him to experience true happiness and prosperity.

And so I say to my own soul, and to anyone else reading this, if you want to be like the fortunate brother rather than the unfortunate one, listen to the Quran, obey its decrees and act in accordance with

them.

If you have understood the truths in this parable, you will be able to see how they correspond to the truths of religion, the world, humanity and belief in the Creator. I will mention the main correspondences and you can work out the rest for yourself.

As for the brothers, one has a believing spirit and a righteous heart, while the other has an unbelieving spirit and a depraved heart. As for the roads, the one on the right is the path of the Quran and belief in God, while the one on the left is the path of denial and rebellion. The garden represents man's short spell on earth in the company of other human beings, where good and evil, the wholesome and the unwholesome, can be found side by side. Bearing in mind that human civilization contains both good and evil, the sensible person is the one who acts in accordance with the old saying, "Take that which is clear and pleasing and leave that which is uncertain and distressing." The sensible person is thus able to go forward with a heart that is at peace.

As for the desert, it stands for this earth, and for the world. The lion represents death and the appointed hour of our departure from this world. The well stands for the human body and the ensoulment of

that body in the womb, with the sixty-foot drop representing the average life expectancy of sixty years. The tree represents a human lifespan and the sustenance needed to maintain it. The two animals – one black, one white – stand for night and day. The dragon is the road to the *barzakh* and the hereafter, while the dragon's mouth is the grave. For the believer, the dragon's mouth is a door which leads one from the prison of this world to the gardens of the world to come. As for the rabid vermin, they are the trials and tribulations of this world. For the believer, however, those vermin represent the warnings of the Creator which prevent one from becoming heedless. The fruits on the tree symbolise the numberless bounties of this world; each fruit is a sample of the fruits of heaven and functions like an index of the bounties that the Absolutely Generous Creator has prepared for believers in the world to come.

As for the puzzle itself, it represents the mystery of the purpose of creation, which can be solved only through the mystery of belief. The key to that mystery lies in the phrases, *There is nothing worthy of worship except God* and *God, there is no object of worship but He, the Ever-Living, the Self-Subsistent*. The transformation of the dragon's mouth into a door leading to the garden means one thing for believers and another for unbelievers. For believers, that door

is one which leads from the prison of this world to the fields of eternal life, from a place of trial and tribulation to the gardens of paradise, and from the hardships of earthly life to the mercy and compassion of the All-Merciful Creator. For the misguided and the rebellious, however, the dragon's mouth is a door which leads to desolation and oblivion, to a grave as dark, narrow and distressing as the stomach of the dragon. The transformation of the lion from a savage beast to a friendly servant and tame steed means that for the people of guidance and the Quran, death is simply the means of joining old friends and loved ones who have already departed for the next world; death is simply the means of returning to their true home of everlasting happiness. It is an invitation for them to leave the prison that is this world and to enter the fields of paradise, where they will receive from the Most Merciful and Compassionate Creator their rewards for serving Him. For them, death will mark their retirement from earthly duty, which is difficult and sometimes painful. For them, death will mean eternal rest from the drills and training of earthly life, with all of the trials and tribulations that come with worship and submission.

For the misguided, however, death means bitter, eternal separation from all of their loved ones; it means their expulsion from the deceptive paradise of

this earthly life into the loneliness and desolation of the prison that is the grave.

In short, if someone makes this short, temporary life on earth his ultimate purpose and goal, he is already in hell, even if he thinks it is paradise. And whoever turns wholeheartedly towards eternal life will receive the happiness of both worlds. For however difficult and distressing he finds this earthly existence, since he sees the world as the waiting-room of paradise, he endures it patiently and with appreciation.

O God! Include us among the people of happiness and salvation, the Quran and belief. Amen. O God! Grant endless peace and blessings to our Master Muhammad, and to his Family and Companions, to the number of all the letters of all the words of the Quran. Have boundless mercy on us and on our parents, and on all believing men and women, through Your mercy, O Most Merciful of the Merciful. Amen. And all praise be to God, the Sustainer of All the Worlds.

THE NINTH WORD

On the Wisdom of the Prescribed Prayer Times

In the Name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate

So glorify God when you reach evening and when you rise in the morning: for all praise is His in the heavens and the earth, and towards the end of the day and when you have reached noon.²⁹

A brother has asked me about the wisdom behind the specified times of the five daily prayers. There are countless wisdoms behind these specific times, and I shall point out one of them.

Each of the specific times of prayer marks the start of an important revolution; it is also a kind of mirror which reflects the Creator's use of power and the universal bounties that emerge from His use of power in that particular way. Human beings have been ordered to glorify and extol the All-Powerful, All-Glorious Creator more at these times, and to praise and thank Him for the countless bounties that are given and received between these times. This, in short, is the goal of the prescribed prayers and the

²⁹ Quran, 30:17-18

wisdom behind offering them at specified times throughout the day. In order to better understand this, listen together with me and my soul to the following five points:

First Point

The meaning of the prayers is the glorification of the Almighty Creator and the offering of praise and thanks to Him. All glory belongs to God, and the prayer is a way of expressing this vocally and actively as one stands before Him in His glory and sublimity; by saying *Subhanallah! (Glory be to God!)* it is to worship Him and to declare Him holy. Furthermore, God is greater than any mind can imagine, and the prayer is a way of expressing this vocally and actively as one stands before Him in His sheer perfection; by saying *Allahu akbar!* it is to exalt Him and to magnify Him. And God is more beautiful in His perfection and absoluteness than any mind can comprehend; by saying *Alhamdulillah!*, one offers thanks with one's heart, tongue and body as one stands before His utterly perfect and absolute beauty. Glorification, exaltation and the giving of thanks are, then, like the seeds of the daily prayers, and it is for this reason that these three phrases can be found throughout the different parts of the prayer, and in all of the actions and words the prayer includes. It is also why these phrases are each repeated thirty-three times after the

prayer, in order to strengthen and confirm its meaning. The meaning of the prayers is reflected in these phrases, which are like concise summaries.

Second Point

The meaning of worship is that the servant should see his own faults, realise his own impotence and poverty,³⁰ and, once he has realised them, that he should prostrate in love and in awe before the perfection, mercy and power of the eternal Sustainer of all things. For the One Who sustains all things is the One upon Whom everything depends, but Who Himself depends on nothing. In His taking care of all things, the Creator is sovereign, and this requires worship and obedience. In His sustaining all things, the Creator is holy, and this requires that the servant sees his faults and seeks forgiveness for them. It also requires that the servant, by declaring *Subhanallah!*, should proclaim that the One Who sustains him is free from all flaw, above all of the false ideas of the people of misguidance, and exempt from any fault or

³⁰ The words 'impotence' and 'poverty' are translations of the terms '*ajz*' and '*faqr*' respectively. The first describes humankind's innate weakness and inability to create; the second describes humankind's lack of any innate attributes of perfection, e.g. wisdom, knowledge, justice etc. The two words appear together often in Nursi's writings. In other words, creationally, man is nothing in and of himself and owns nothing in and of himself. (Tr.)

defect.

Also, in His sustaining all things, the Creator is All-Powerful; to understand this, the servant must first understand his own weakness and impotence, as well as the weakness and impotence of all other creatures. Such understanding demands that the servant proclaim *Allahu akbar! God is Most Great!* in admiration and awe as he marvels at the majesty of the works brought into being by the power of his Creator – a Creator upon Whom all things depend, but Who Himself depends on nothing and no-one. Such understanding demands that the servant bow to Him in humility and place all trust in Him.

Furthermore, in His nurturing all things, the Creator has infinite treasures of mercy at His disposal. Realisation of this requires that the servant reveal his own needs, as well as the needs and poverty of all creatures, through the means of supplication; it requires that the servant proclaim his Sustainer's bounties and gifts through the giving of thanks and through uttering *Alhamdulillah! All praise be to God!*

In short, the words and actions of the prayers include these meanings, and they have been ordained by the Divine.

Third Point

Just as the human being is a reflection in miniature of the whole cosmos, the *Fatiha* is an index in miniature of the whole Quran and the prayer is a luminous representation in miniature of all forms of worship in existence – a sacred map, as it were, indicating all varieties of worshipfulness among all classes of creatures.

Fourth Point

The various hands on a clock face which tell the seconds, minutes, hours and days all look to one another, are all linked with one another, and all follow one another.

The world, too, is like one vast, Divine clock: the alternations of day and night are like its second hands; the years which come and go are like its minute hands; the different stages of a human life represent its hour hands; and the epochs which make up the lifespan of the world stand for its days. These all look to one another, are all examples of one another, all resemble one another and all recall one another. Consider the following examples of the times for the daily prayers:

The time known as *fajr*, or early morning: This time, between the first light and sunrise resembles and

brings to mind the early spring; the moment of conception in the mother's womb; and the first six days of the creation of the heavens and the earth. This time recalls the acts of the Creator present in all of these.

The time known as *ẓuhr*, or just past midday: This time resembles midsummer and the prime of youth. If the lifetime of the earth is seen as a single day, noon is the point at which human beings were created and brought onto the world stage. And noon brings to mind the countless bounties and instances of Divine mercy that these things contain.

The time known as *ʿaṣr*, or afternoon: This time resembles autumn, and old age; it resembles the time of the Final Prophet, known as the 'Era of Bliss' (*ʿaṣr al-sa'āda*); and it brings to mind the Divine acts and favours that are present in all of these things.

The time known as *maghrib*, or sunset: This time resembles the departure of many creatures from the world at the end of autumn; it resembles humankind's death and the destruction of the world at the advent of the resurrection; and it brings to mind the various manifestations of Divine glory, thus waking humankind from the slumber of heedlessness.

The time known as *‘ishā*, or nightfall: This time brings to mind the world of darkness which veils with a black shroud all of the objects of the daytime world; it resembles winter, which hides the face of the dead earth with a white burial veil; it recalls the oblivion into which the works of all human beings will one day pass; it brings to mind the shutting down and closing up forever of the place of examination that is this world; and it announces the awesome and majestic works of the One Who, in absolute glory, overcomes and subdues all things.

As for the night time, this brings to mind the winter, the grave and the intermediate realm. In doing so, it reminds humankind how desperately in need the human spirit is of the mercy of the All-Merciful. If there is one light which humans need to brighten the dark night that is the grave and the intermediate realm, it is the light of the *tahajjud* or ‘night prayer’. The *tahajjud* prayer reminds us of our need for such light, while bringing to mind the endless bounties of the true Bestower and recalling how deserving the Bestower is of our praise and thanks.

Then as the second day begins, the new morning brings to mind the morning of the resurrection. For just as surely as morning follows night, the morning of resurrection follows the night of the grave and the

intermediate realm.

In short, then, each of these five times marks the start of an important revolution, and each of these revolutions recalls other revolutions. And so the countless miracles and gifts of Divine mercy, power and *ṣamadāniyya* ³¹ worked in a single day bring to mind the miracles worked in a year, and the miracles worked in a year recall the miracles worked in every age, and the miracles worked in every age bring to mind the miracles worked in every epoch, and so on. The prescribed daily prayers are an innate duty; they are the basis of worship and a debt that we owe the Creator. And each of these prayers has an allocated time which is most appropriate for it.

Fifth Point

Human beings are innately weak in the extreme: everything affects them, and they are easily upset and saddened. They are utterly devoid of power; even so, the calamities they face and the enemies they have to contend with are without number. They are also extremely wanting, and their needs never seem to end. Humans are lazy and lacking in ability, and yet the responsibilities of life are extremely taxing. Through their humanity they are linked to the rest of

³¹ This is the verbal noun connected meaning ‘the quality of being *al-ṣamad*’. See Footnote 4. (Tr.)

creation, and they find the decline and disappearance of the things they know and love extremely difficult to bear. And while reason shows them many sublime aims and enduring fruits, their reach is short, their lives brief, their power slight and their patience little.

Given that this is how human beings are, the need for the human spirit to approach the All-Powerful One of Glory at the time of *fajr* is shown clearly to be an essential one. Given its innate state, it behoves the human spirit each morning to present a petition at the court of the All-Compassionate, All-Beauteous One through prayer and supplication, and to seek help and success from Him. The *fajr* prayer is thus a vital point of support, enabling the supplicant to face the challenges that lie ahead during the rest of the day and fulfil any duties that come his or her way.

The *zuhr* prayer is offered just after noon when the day is at its zenith and about to begin its decline. This is the time when daily labours are nearing the point of achievement; it is time for a short rest from the pressures of work, allowing the spirit to take a break from the distracted inattentiveness caused by non-stop work. And it is a time when Divine bounties are made manifest. One is thus able to understand how necessary, appropriate and gratifying it is to perform the midday prayer, which is a welcome release from

the pressure of work and the heedlessness it brings. For a short while one leaves behind those meaningless, transient things and approaches the court of the True Bestower of Bounties, the Eternally Subsistent One. There, one raises one's hands to offer praise and thanks for God's gifts and to seek help; one bows down to show one's impotence before His glory and awesomeness; and one prostrates in a proclamation of one's awe, one's love and one's humility. Only those who are not truly human will fail to understand this.

As for the time of the *'aṣr* prayer, it brings to mind the melancholy of autumn; it reminds one of the mournfulness of old age and the sombreness of the end of time. It is the part of the day at which the matters and events of the day reach their conclusion. It is the time of day when the Divine bounties dispensed that day, such as health, well-being and beneficial duties, have accumulated and amassed. It is the time when the sun begins to sink – the time that proclaims, through the sun's hint, that human beings are mere guests-cum-officials, and that everything is transient and temporary. Now the human spirit desires immortality and indeed was created for it. Furthermore, it worships benevolence and is pained by separation. Given this, anyone who is truly human will understand what a sublime duty the *'aṣr* prayer

is, and how appropriate it is as an act of servitude. Anyone who is human will understand what an agreeable pleasure it is to perform the afternoon prayer and how fitting a way it is to repay the debt of having been created. For by offering supplications at the eternal court of the Everlasting, Pre-Eternal One, one is taking refuge in the grace of infinite, never-ending mercy. By offering praise and thanks to the One Who is Eternally Self-Subsistent, by bowing before the might of His Lordliness and by prostrating in utter humility before the eternity of His Godliness, one's heart is able to find true consolation and one's spirit is able to discover true ease. And it means that one has donned the mantle of true worship in the presence of His grandeur.

The time of the *maghrib* prayer, which takes place just after sunset, recalls the sad farewells of those lovely, delicate creatures of the worlds of summer and autumn as they disappear for the winter. It brings to mind the time when, through their deaths, human beings will leave with sorrow all those whom they love and enter the grave. It brings to mind the convulsive death agonies of the earth itself, when its inhabitants will migrate to other worlds and the lamp of this arena of examination will be extinguished. The time of the *maghrib* prayer is a time which issues a

stern warning to those who love and worship that which is transient and ephemeral.

At such a time, then, the human spirit, which is by its very nature a mirror in love with Eternal Beauty, turns its face towards the throne of mightiness of the Eternal, Undying One, the One Who is Enduring and Everlasting. It turns its face towards the One who performs all of these mighty works, and who revolves and transforms these huge worlds. Declaring *God is Most Great* over these transient beings, it then withdraws from them. One clasps one's hands in servitude to one's Lord and, by uttering the words *All praise be to God*, one lauds and extols His absolute perfection, beauty and mercy, all of which are faultless, infinite and without peer. Then, by declaring *You alone do we worship and from You alone do we seek help*, one proclaims one's worshipfulness in the face of God's unassisted Lordship, in the face of God's matchless Godhead and unpartnered sovereignty, and one states one's need for His help and His help alone.

Then the servant bows and, together with the whole of creation, declares his weakness and impotence, his poverty and wretchedness before the infinite majesty, the boundless power and the sheer awesomeness of the Enduring, Eternal One. He says,

All glory to my Mighty Lord, thus glorifying his sublime Sustainer. Finally, he prostrates before the undying beauty of the Divine Essence and before His sacred attributes, which never change. He prostrates before God's constant, everlasting perfection and, casting off all things other than Him, he proclaims his love and worshipfulness while humbling himself in awe. And there he finds the Eternal One, Whose compassion is absolute. And with the words *All glory to my Exalted Lord*, he exalts his most Sublime Sustainer, declaring Him incapable of decline or fault.

Finally the servant bears witness to God's unity and to the prophethood of Muhammad (PBWH). Sitting, he gifts the Undying One of Beauty and Glory the blessed salutations and benedictions of all creatures in the universe, including himself. And through greeting God's Most Noble Messenger, he renews his allegiance to him and declares himself obligated to carry out his commands. In order to renew and illuminate his faith, he observes the wise and purposeful order that is visible in this palace we call the universe, and he bears witness to the unity and oneness of the Glorious Maker. And he bears witness to the messengership of Muhammad the Arabian prophet (PBWH), who is the proclaimer of the sovereignty of Divine lordship. Yes, he is the one who proclaims all of those things that are pleasing to Him,

as well as being the interpreter of all of the signs and verses in the book of the universe.

This is what it means to offer the *maghrib* prayer. The sunset prayer is a serious duty that is fine and pure; it is an exalted act of servitude that is pleasing and agreeable. And in a guesthouse like this which is transient and temporary, the *maghrib* prayer represents words of a conversation that will never end, and a source of happiness that will last eternally. Now, could someone who fails to understand all of this still be considered human?

As the last traces of the day disappear from the horizon, the time of the *'Isha* prayer commences. As the All-Powerful and Glorious One, the *Changer of Night and Day*, turns the white page of day into the black page of night through His mighty acts of Lordliness, the world of night enfolds the universe. One is reminded by this of the Divine activities of that All-Wise One of Perfection when He turns the green page of summer into the cold white page of winter. And as the remaining works of the departed are erased from this world with the passing of time, one is reminded of the Divine acts of the Creator of Life and Death in the passing of those beings to another, quite different realm.

ʿIshā is a time that brings to mind the awesome works of the Creator of the Heavens and the earth, and the manifestations of His beauty through the utter destruction of this narrow, transient and lowly world. One is reminded of those manifestations in the terrible death throes of the world's demise, and in the unfurling of the broad, majestic and eternal world of the hereafter. For the true Owner and Disposer of the Universe, the true Beloved and Object of Worship, can be only the One Who, with utter ease and facility, turns night into day, winter into spring and this world into the world to come. It can only be the One who does this as though turning the pages of a book – a book whose words and letters He writes, erases and changes.

At nightfall, the human spirit, which is infinitely impotent, poor and needy, and which is tossed around by the stormy sea of events against the backdrop of a future which appears dark beyond belief, stands to perform the *ʿishā* prayer. From the *ʿishā* prayer one understands that the human spirit, like Abraham, *does not love those that set*.³² Through the prayer, the spirit seeks refuge at the court of an undying Object of Worship, a Beloved Who is Eternal. In this transient world, this fleeting life, and in the

³² Quran, 6:76

face of a future that is dark and foreboding, the supplicant invokes an Enduring, Everlasting One. And in a conversation that is actually unending, and in a moment taken from a life that is everlasting, the supplicant asks to receive the favours of the Merciful and Compassionate One's mercy and the light of His guidance. For this guidance will illumine the supplicant's world and the future, while healing the wounds that have resulted from the decline and departure of so many friends and loved ones.

Temporarily, the one performing the *'Isha* prayer forgets the world that is hiding in the dark, as it has forgotten him, and empties his heart at the Court of Mercy with his weeping. And whatever happens, before he goes to sleep – for sleep, as we know, is reminiscent of death – he performs his final duty of worship. In order to close as favourably as possible the daily record of his actions, he stands in readiness for the prayer. In other words, he rises to enter the presence of a Beloved and an Object of Worship Who, unlike all of the other beings that he loves, is Eternal. He rises to approach One Who, unlike all of those impotent creatures from whom he begs, is infinitely Powerful and Generous. He rises to ask the help of a Compassionate Protector, so as to be saved from the evil of all the harmful beings before whom he trembles.

He begins the prayer with the *Fatiha*. This means that instead of praising defective, needy creatures like himself, and instead of offering them praise that they do not deserve, he glorifies and praises *the Sustainer of all Worlds*, Who is absolutely Perfect, utterly Self-Sufficient, Most Compassionate and All-Generous. He then progresses to *You alone do we worship*. In other words, despite being small, insignificant and alone, through his connection with the *Owner of the Day of Judgment*, Who is Sovereign of Pre-Eternity and Post-Eternity, he becomes God's indulged guest and an important official in His universe. And by declaring *You alone do we worship and from You alone do we seek help*, he presents to his Lord the worshipfulness and the cries for help of the mighty community and congregation of the universe. And this he does on his own behalf and on behalf of all created beings. And by saying *Guide us to the Straight Path*, he asks to be directed to the luminous path which leads to eternal happiness.

And he ponders the awesomeness of the All-Glorious One and the fact that, like the sleeping plants and animals, the hidden suns and the watchful stars are subjugated to His command, acting as lamps and servants in this guesthouse that we call the world. Declaring *God is Most Great!* he then bows down.

Then he thinks of the vast, collective prostration of all created beings. For at the command of “Be!”, all varieties of creatures are, or will be, discharged from their earthly duties and then sent on to the World of the Unseen. Like a well-ordered army or an obedient soldier, each created being will, through death and dying, lay down its life with complete orderliness, declaring *God is Most Great* as it bows down – metaphorically – in the prostration that is death. This happens to all things, both singularly and collectively, be it every day, every year or every century. And it will happen to the earth and, eventually, the whole universe.

And just like those beings who are raised to life each spring – some in part and some completely – as the rousing trumpet blast of “Be!” awakens them, readying them for service to their Lord, the insignificant human servant follows them, declaring, *God is Most Great!* In the presence of the All-Merciful One of Perfection, the All-Compassionate One of Beauty, he is entranced by the love of God, with a humility that is tinged with a sense of eternity. In an act of dignified self-negation, he prostrates himself in what is actually a kind of spiritual ascension. This will have shown you, for sure, what a fine, sublime act of servitude this *’Isha* prayer actually is. It will no doubt have convinced you, also, that while this act of

worshipfulness is a serious matter, it is also pleasurable in the extreme, and totally appropriate as a duty.

Each of these five times points to an awesome revolution, and is a sign that indicates tremendous lordly activity. Each of these times is also a token of universal Divine bounties. And since this is so, there is perfect wisdom behind the fact that these prescribed prayers, as expressions of debt and obligation, should have been specified at these particular times.

Glory be unto You! We have no knowledge save that which You have taught us; indeed You are All-Knowing, All-Wise.

O God! Grant blessings and peace to the one whom You sent as a teacher to Your servants to instruct them in knowledge of You and worship of You, and to make known the treasures of Your Names; and as a translator of the signs of the book of the universe and as a mirror to its worship of the

THE SHORT WORDS

*beauty of Your lordliness. Bless
his Family and Companions,
and have mercy on us and on
all believing men and women.
Amen. Through Your Mercy, O
Most Merciful of the Merciful!*

The Life and Thought of
BEDIUZZAMAN SAID NURSI

The Life and Thought of BEDIUZZAMAN SAID NURSI

Said Nursi (1878-1960) is a contemporary scholar and thinker who is best known for his monumental work, the *Risale-i Nur (Epistles of Light)*, a six-thousand page thematic commentary on the Quran. Born in Nurs, a tiny village in the province of Bitlis in eastern Turkey, Nursi spent his early and adolescent years studying the classical Islamic curriculum in various traditional madrasas in the area. He was an exceptionally gifted student who excelled in his studies to the extent that he was able to receive his 'finishing diploma' in 1892 at the tender age of fourteen. Later when he went to Van, a province in eastern Turkey, he also studied the natural sciences in the library of Tahir Pasha, governor of the province. By this point, Nursi was so renowned for his intellectual and academic acumen that he had been given the epithet 'Bediuzzaman' (Wonder of the Age).

Nursi realized that one of the shortcomings of the traditional madrasa education was its omission of the modern sciences, which meant that madrasa students were not able to establish harmony between these new sciences and the traditional disciplines. And so it became his ambition, even at this very young age, to establish a university where the modern sciences could be studied alongside the traditional, Islamic disciplines. When the Ottoman Empire collapsed and the Turkish Republic was established in 1923, Nursi was invited to Ankara, where a role in the new government was offered to him. However, he realised that given the turbulent circumstances there, it would not be possible to carry out his original plan. He decided at this point to withdraw from all engagement with politics. He returned to Van in the spring of 1923, referring to himself now as the 'New Said'.

Nursi found that his life was being shaken at this time by the fast-growing current of aggressive secularism that was sweeping the country, and so

during this period of his life, Nursi spent most of his time with his students quietly on Mount Ereğ, where he passed all of his private time in prayer and contemplation. In February 1925, however, his pastoral idyll was shaken by the Kurdish revolt – an insurrection which Nursi had warned everyone not to join and not to support. Despite his warnings, however, Nursi was implicated as a participant in the revolt and he was sent into exile as a result. This exile set an unfortunate precedent, for most of the rest of Bediuzzaman's life would be spent either in exile or in prison.

Following his exile to Burdur, Nursi was exiled to Barla, a village in the province of Isparta, where he lived under house arrest from March 1927 until July 1934. Most of the treatises that comprise the *Risale-i Nur* were written during these comparatively peaceful years in Barla. Along with his students, Nursi was brought to Eskişehir to stand trial, a process which began in May 1935 and lasted almost a year. The standard charge levelled against Nursi and his

students, and indeed against anyone who read and defended the Qur'an at this time, was that of "violating secularism". Prison conditions at that time were horrendous, and Nursi tried to encourage his students to think of their incarceration as a kind of school, one which he called "The School of Joseph" (*Medrese-i Yûsufiye*), in memory of the Prophet Joseph, who had also been imprisoned unjustly, and who taught his fellow prisoners, leading them to belief in God. When Nursi was released he was sent to Kastamonu, where he was detained under house arrest from March 1936 until September 1943.

A significant change took place in May 1950 when the newly formed Democratic Party came to power. The new government was sympathetic towards religion and so Bediuzzaman was able to enjoy a certain amount of freedom, albeit still with a number of restrictions. The last ten years of his life was referred to by Nursi himself as the period of the 'Third Said' (September 1949–23 March 1960). The general amnesty of 14 July 1950 brought with it a

relative freedom and so he decided to settle in Isparta, where he kept with him a small number of young students to assist him and to be trained. He referred to these years as the 'Third Said' years, when he continued to devote much of his time to issues related to the *Risale-i Nur*. He instituted the practice of communal reading (*ders*) of the *Risale-i Nur* that would later become the central activity of the Nur community, and each day would hold readings with the students who resided with him. But by the turn of the decade his health was failing. On 20th March 1960 he set off with three of his students for Urfa in south-east Turkey, where on the 23rd March he died.

Nursi was a passionate advocate of personal rights and freedoms, as exemplified by his saying "I can live without bread, but not without freedom." He objected to any association of Islam with oppression and tyranny, stating that Islam came to this world to end injustice and despotism. He defined despotism as "... the basis of tyranny. It annihilates humanity. It is despotism which reduces man to the most abject

valleys of abasement, causing the Islamic world to sink into abjection and degradation, arousing animosity and malice, poisoning Islam... and causing endless conflict among Muslims.”

Unlike many of his contemporaries who associated Islam with politics, Nursi abstained from mixing religion with politics and remained distant from the notion of ‘political Islam.’ Instead, he focused on personal dimension of belief and religion, stating that saving the faith of even a single person is of the utmost importance. Despite all the injustices and harassment to which he was subjected, he lived by the principle of ‘positive action’ always, never advocating violence. He stressed repeatedly that Muslims must now in this age of enlightenment and civilization fight wars with the pen and not the sword. Moreover, he viewed aggressive atheism as the greatest threat to humanity, stating that Muslims and pious Christians must join forces to overcome this threat, which endangers the eternal life of the whole of humanity.

The hallmark of Nursi's teachings is his emphasis on belief – belief in God and belief in the hereafter, which are tenets shared by all of the Abrahamic faiths. After the formation of the new Turkish Republic in the 1920s and the imposition of aggressive secular policies, Nursi devoted himself to saving and strengthening belief in God and the other principles of faith that were at that time coming under attack. He argues that death is a new beginning and is "... not execution, or nothingness, or annihilation; it is not cessation, or extinction; it is not eternal separation, or non-existence, or a random event, or an authorless obliteration. Rather, it is a discharge from duty given by the One Who is All-Wise and All-Compassionate; it is a change of locations. It is a dispatch to eternal bliss, to your true home." For Nursi, attaining strong belief is like gaining an eternal world. Therefore, these two articles of faith are the foundation of human identity that gives humankind a responsibility in this world to be God's vicegerent on Earth in order to preserve order and prevent corruption (see the Qur'an, 2: 30f).

Nursi points out that human beings have desires and hopes that stretch to eternity, thoughts and imaginings that embrace the whole universe, together with an earnest desire for everlasting happiness and Paradise, and various innate capacities and abilities on which no limit has been placed. People are exposed to attacks from innumerable enemies and to blows from innumerable calamities, despite their countless needs, their weakness and their impotence. Under the constant threat of death, they live out their brief and turbulent lives in mostly wretched circumstances. Nursi believed that the main mission of humankind is “to progress through the acquisition of knowledge”, that is, “to aim at reaching perfection via knowledge”. But the highest aim of knowledge, and the thing which makes it valuable, is the knowledge of God (*ma’rifatullah*).

No matter what we say about scholars it is always best for them to speak for themselves. We thus leave you with this short work here and ask that you judge

the tree by its fruit. For further reading we can recommend the following works about Bediuzzaman Said Nursi's life and ideas: Colin Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed: A Critical Analysis of Said Nursi's Epistles of Light*, Berlin: Gerlach Press, 2013; Şükran Vahide and Ibrahim M Abu-Rabi'. *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi*, Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008.

Nursi Society Editorial Board

The bismillah – ‘In the name of God’ – is at the beginning of all that is good, and we too shall begin in His Name. I remind my soul that this phrase is one of the blessed distinguishing characteristics of Islam, and that it is being recited constantly by all beings, either verbally or through the tongue of their God-given disposition.

Bediüzzaman Said Nursi