

Prophet Musa and Khidr: a Lesson in Patience

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When Prophet Musa met Khidr, he asked if he could follow him, so that the latter would teach him the knowledge and guidance which he had been taught.

Khidr somewhat hesitatingly agreed, but remarked: "Indeed, with me you will never be able to have patience. And how can you have patience for what you do not encompass in knowledge?"

Those words surprised Musa, but only increased his interest and determination. His condition was clearly demonstrated in his response: "You will find me, if Allah wills, patient, and I will not disobey you in (any) order" (al-Kahf, 66-69).

However, Musa proved impatient, cutting short his companionship with Khidr.

It is possible that Musa from the outset knew what was at stake. Nonetheless, he wanted so much to be part of that extraordinary experience and to learn first-hand something new.

Such was his curiosity and thirst for knowledge. Musa did not mind to be the subject of an "experiment", so to speak.

He might yet have known that he will not be able to be patient with Khidr. For that reason did he insert a clause "if Allah wills" (*in sha' Allah*) in his reply. To somehow make up for the downside, he assured his companion that he will not disobey him on purpose in any of his orders.

There is no patience for the unknown or the misunderstood

The story of Musa and Khidr abounds in lessons. One of them pertains to the meaning and significance of patience (*sabr*).

At the beginning of the encounter between the two then wisest and most knowledgeable persons on earth, the essence of the matter has been presented in an emphatic fashion.

Musa, a great prophet, wanted to learn even more from "a servant from among Our servants to whom we had given mercy from us and had taught him from Us a (certain) knowledge" (al-Kahf, 65).

Musa enjoyed all the extraordinary qualities expected from a prophet, including patience, perseverance and courage.

He, for example, said that no matter what, he will continue looking for a location where he was supposed to find Khidr: "I will not give up until I reach the junction of the two seas or (until) I spend years and years in travel" (al-Kahf, 60).

At any rate, Khidr said to Musa that despite everything, he will not be able to be patient accompanying him. He then revealed the reason for that, disclosing at the same time a critical principle of life: there is no patience for the unknown or the misunderstood. Patience is compatible only with the known and the knowable.

Khidr's lesson can be explained as follows.

Patience as a process of containing and controlling the self

Patience as an act of forbearance, self-control, tolerance and endurance in the face of difficult and unpredictable circumstances, challenges, strains and provocations, can be practiced only by those who have adequate knowledge, faith and obedience.

Under those conditions, practicing patience ever draws closer to righteousness, God-consciousness and kindness. It eventually morphs into total optimism, self-confidence and courage.

In the absence of knowledge, faith and obedience, inevitable life challenges that call for patience lead to perennial anxieties, despondency and restlessness. As there are no solutions in sight, psychologically and spiritually they can shake a person's being to its foundations. They then become the source of uncontrollable scepticism and distrust.

Accordingly, patience is perceived as a process of containing and controlling the self (*habs al-nafs*) against the factors and happenings that are bent on affecting it.

Fasting is called *sabr* (patience) in that it signifies containing and controlling the self against eating, drinking and sexual intercourse.

The self is prevented thereby from overreacting as well as misreacting. Needless to say that knowing neither the self nor goings-on is bound to produce poor judgments and exaggerations. Hastiness, impetuosity and thoughtlessness are the outcomes of impatience. So is insolence.

Since there are physical and metaphysical realms of existence, there are likewise different sources of knowledge and wisdom, commanding different levels of faith and obedience as well.

The canvas of life is larger and more complex than what man will ever be able to grasp. Clearly, it is not man who runs the show; Almighty God is. Man is no more than a creation and servant.

The case of believers

As a sign of a person's belief in God, he puts his trust in Him. He obeys Him in such a way that he places the revealed knowledge and guidance above everything else.

Moreover, to God and His revealed knowledge a believing person yet constantly refers the matters that belong to the ambit of his own jurisdiction. He does so for the sake of their ultimate authentication and approval.

This way, there is nothing that is completely unknown to a believing man. If he does not know something, his Creator and Master does. If circumstances and challenges are bigger than him, they are not bigger than God.

The believer entrusts his loving and compassionate Creator to manage his life affairs. God does it better than him. He knows that everything originating from God is good, positive and benevolent.

If superficially things do not look right, the believer knows that in the grand scheme of things and in the long run, they will be just fine.

Practicing patience under those circumstances is not just manageable, but also easy and enjoyable. Being thus patient in addition becomes an unmistakable sign of faith (*iman*), God-consciousness (*taqwa*) and righteousness (*ihsan*).

No wonder that in the Qur'an, patience is often mentioned alongside those and other fundamental virtues of Islam.

Patience enhances the believer's relationship with his self, his surroundings and his God. Patience is reciprocity and rapport. With it, the believer is appreciated and loved. He is a winner.

God ensures man that there is a way to ultimate knowledge, wisdom and faith. There is a way to satiating his greatest yearnings. Hence,

there is a way to forging patience and building happiness. All roads that may lead to ignorance and misunderstanding are blocked.

The believer patiently worships God, patiently shuns His prohibitions, and patiently puts up with life's tests and hardships. He does so only owing to the fact that he knows what he does and why. His beliefs and life patterns are deeply grounded in discernment and knowledge.

The believer's mantra in situations that require patience is: "To God we belong and to Him we shall return". As brief as it is, the invocation encapsulates the entire philosophy of life as well as religion.

The case of non-believers

On the other hand, a non-believing person, torn with uncertainties, doubts and perpetual anxieties, will never be able to effectively command patience. That is so because he will never be in command, neither of his self nor of his surroundings. He will have no recourse to fall back on.

In the midst of life's endless occurrences and phenomena, some of which are known and most of which are unknown, such a person will not have what it takes to forbearingly deal with myriads of unexpected, unusual and unfamiliar events. Such is the feeble human nature that even if he tried his best, he will fall short.

He will fail because man is created to know, but no reliable knowledge about the most critical dimensions of life is forthcoming; man is created to enquire, but no ontological answers are in the offing; man is created to investigate and move forward, but no authentic solutions are on the agenda.

The non-believer will then have no choice but to bemoan and curse when things do not go his way - and they do not most of the time. Such abstract and bogus ideas as luck, accidents, doom, acts of Mother

Nature, karma, superstitions, myths, natural selection, etc., will be called upon.

These are all antitheses of knowledge and truth. As such, in no way do they generate milieus conducive to patience and everything that goes with it.

Here man indirectly confirms to himself that there is no way to ultimate knowledge, wisdom and faith. There is no way to satiating his utmost longings. Hence, there is no way to forging genuine patience and building equally genuine happiness.

The Qur'an states: "And whoever turns away from My remembrance (message) - indeed, he will have a depressed life, and We will gather him on the Day of Resurrection blind. He will say: 'My Lord, why have you raised me blind while I was (once) seeing?' (Allah) will say: 'Thus did Our signs come to you, and you forgot them; and thus will you this Day be forgotten'" (Ta Ha, 124-126).

The non-believer impatiently and irrationally rejects God, impatiently and irrationally courts His prohibitions, and impatiently and irrationally deals with life's tests and hardships, only because he does not know what he does and why. His convictions and life patterns are founded on unfamiliarity and misguidance.

The predicament of lacking patience because of the lack of knowledge leads the nonbeliever to yet a bigger predicament. Which is rejection of truth in the form of God's signs simply because it is bigger than him and because he cannot encompass it with his limited knowledge and experience.

If the lack of (existential) patience due to the lack of true knowledge in this world was a problem, rejecting faith, which is essentially resulting from the former, will be the absolute catastrophe in the Hereafter. Faith is victimized by the pretence and ineptitude of ignorance, for which man will be held accountable.

God will therefore say to non-believers on the Day of Judgment: "Did you deny My signs while you encompassed them not in knowledge, or what (was it that) you were doing?" (al-Naml, 84).

Surely, neither the lack of patience nor the lack of faith could be justified by the lack of knowledge. As the cause of all goodness, God took it upon Himself to reveal to man the necessary knowledge, which inevitably leads both to patience and faith as effects.

Human psychology and epistemology

It follows that the story of Musa and Khidr was not exactly about who knew more, whose knowledge was better, and who was to follow whom. It was a demonstration of what and how much man can know and how he is to behave in accordance with his intellectual capacities.

It was also a lesson in sources of knowledge and how man as God's vicegerent on earth is to relate to those diverse sources.

The story likewise was about patience, not merely in relation to knowledge, but also truth: how all of them are interrelated and how only when unified, they can guarantee man a happy ending in both worlds.

In short, the story was as much about human psychology as about epistemology.