

With Allah

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Letter No. 8, Amman, Jordan

Dear Believers: as-Salamu ‘alaykum wa rahmatu Llahi wa barakatuh.

In the Name of Allah Most Merciful and Compassionate: Praise to Allah Most High beyond all praise, and blessings and peace upon His beloved Prophet Muhammad, the light of every illumined life.

To commence: Allah has bound up our lives with others’ lives, made our *din* a social *din*, and given incomparable rewards not only for what we do by ourselves, but what we do with others and for others—just as He has imposed appalling punishments not only for what we do by ourselves, but what we do with and to others. He says in verse 4.85 of Surat al-Nisa’:

مَنْ يَشْفَعْ شَفْلَعَةً حَسَنَةً يَكُنْ لَهُ نَصِيبٌ مِّنْهَا وَمَنْ يَشْفَعْ شَفْلَعَةً سَيِّئَةً يَكُنْ لَهُ كِفْلٌ مِّنْهَا وَكَانَ اللَّهُ عَلَىٰ كُلِّ شَيْءٍ مُّقْبِلًا

Whoever steps in to join men upon good
shall be rewarded its full magnificent share;
While whoever steps in to join men upon evil
shall bear its appalling deserts:

Verily Allah was ever an all-powerful watcher and guardian
over the exact due sustenance and requital
of every last thing.

The first words *Man yashfa’ shafa’atan hasanatan yakun lahu nasibun minha*, or “Whoever steps in to join men upon good shall be rewarded its full magnificent share,” are *targhib* or ‘encouragement’ to the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) in the context of this verse and the one before it to rouse true believers to battle in the path of Allah, and encouragement to all of us till the end of time to try to stir others to join in with us to do some particular good together we are trying to accomplish for the sake of Allah. The word *shafa’a(tan)* has both a general meaning in Arabic, and a more specific one in this verse. The root, *shaf’*, means ‘even,’ rather than ‘odd,’ as in numbers that we count; while the more general meaning of the verb *shafa’a*, as Raghīb al-Asfahani says, is “connecting one thing to another in order to help it out”—for example to intercede, mediate for someone, put in a good word for them with someone important, and so forth. But Allah is encouraging the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) in this verse to connect the *Sahaba* or ‘Companions’ to himself in battling together for the cause of Islam, connecting their solitary efforts to those of a unified fighting force, to the benefit of all, in this world and the next. Ibn ‘Ashur says, “Interceding (*shafa’a*) means to verbally interpose so that someone may gain some benefit in this world or the next, or to save him from some kind of harm.” The adjective *hasanatan* or ‘handsome, seemly, good,’ after *shafa’atan* means *fi amrin mashru’(in)* or ‘in something sanctioned by Sacred Law,’ such as fulfilling another Muslim’s right or due for the sake of Allah, not merely for some personal advantage or worldly motive, and not to avert a prescribed (*hadd*) penalty from the guilty, which is *haram*.

So *shafa’atan hasanatan* or ‘goodly intercession’ covers a number of things. One of them is putting in a good word for someone, which the Prophet positively encouraged (Allah bless him and give him peace), for when people of the community used to come to him to intercede to get him to give, grant, or do something for someone they knew—he would tell both them and the *Sahaba* with him at the time: “Intercede and you will be rewarded; while Allah will fulfill on the tongue of His prophet what He wills” (*Bukhari*, 2.140 (1432). S), meaning that Allah rewards intercession whether it succeeds or not, provided the motive is to help someone out for Allah. Other meanings of *shafa’a* include joining others to oneself to attain some praiseworthy purpose together, or urging people to do the right thing, both of which the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) was doing in the verse just before this one by marshaling Muslims to resist the Meccan idolators. I have used the verb “steps in” to translate *shafa’a* because it usually involves speaking or writing to people about something they wouldn’t have thought to do if one hadn’t said something to them. So the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) gained the like of all the rewards of those who joined in with him—because Allah says of both him and anyone else after him sincerely doing the like for Allah as he did: *yakun lahu nasibun minha*, that they “shall be rewarded its full magnificent share.” The indefinite of *nasibun* or “full magnificent share” denotes magnitude and excellence. Note too that this verse is a general precept or rule, as is the usual way of the Quran, in making particular incidents illustrate the will of Allah about all similar matters. Here, such matters include for example the reward of every prophet for all the people guided because they followed him, the reward of the caliphs and leaders who historically gathered whole nations and races under the rule of Islam, the reward of the *A’immatu l-Hudah* or ‘Guidance-giving Imams’ who operationalized the Quran and sunna in our Sacred Law and our *‘aqida* or ‘tenets of faith,’ and reward of the Imams of *Ihsan* such as Junayd, Ghazali, Jaylani, Chishti, Shadhili, and Shah Naqshband, who taught others through their *tariqas* or ‘well worked-out paths’ how to *apply* in one’s life the *Iman*, *taqwa*, and *dhikr* or ‘remembrance of Allah’ that enabled so many Muslims after them to “worship Allah as though you see Him,” as the Prophetic words describe *Ihsan* in *Sahih Muslim*.

Then Allah says, *Wa man yashfa’ shafa’atan sayyi’atan yakun lahu kiflun minha*, “While whoever steps in to join men upon evil shall bear its appalling deserts.” The adjective *sayyi’a* or ‘evil’ derives from *saa’a* which means to be bad, ill, evil; or to pain, vex, trouble, harm, appall, or dismay. So *man yashfa’ shafa’atan sayyi’atan* or “whoever steps in to join men upon evil” includes anyone who recruits people to a purpose that is religiously blameworthy, either directly, or by side effects,

influence, or collateral damage that should have been foreseen and prevented. Allah's choice of the word *kiflun* is to disgust and dissuade people from having anything to do with it, as it is a metaphor (figure of speech) meaning *al-shay'u l-radi'(u)* or 'something vicious, low, base, sordid, malicious, vile, wicked, bad, or evil,' originally deriving from a bad riding animal (*al-markabu al-sayyi'(u)*) whose rider will not last very long on. Biqa'i says the indefinite of *kiflun* or "appalling deserts" denotes an even greater magnitude than that of *nasibun* or "magnificent share." The meaning is thus that whoever steps in to join men upon evil will meet with devastating trouble (*shidda*), as Abu Su'ud says, "a full share of the punishment for its sin." So whoever organizes evil is just organizing a massive punishment for himself for every last speck of evil he causes—which will not lessen any of the individual punishments coming to everyone who followed him. This is why, as Allah says in verse 35.43 of Surat Fatir, "evil plots but encompass those who make them."

In our own day, which in many lands across the globe is coming to a pitched economic battle between ordinary humanity and Big Greed—the corporations whose "evil plots" for profits have left millions penniless, farmless, homeless, jobless, healthless, and even dead—Allah is telling us that full justice will inevitably be done. As the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) told Abu Dharr, and us, and them, "Verily those with the most (*al-mukthirina*) shall be those with the least (*al-muqilluna*) on the Day of Resurrection, except someone Allah has given a good amount to and who lavishly spends it [for Allah] right, left, before him, and behind, and who works great good with it" (*Bukhari*, 8.116–17 (6443). S). Our Quranic verse above applies as well to all lesser evil plots, whose perpetrators will wish they had never even heard of them. This also is particularly telling today, when digital media has made reaching a great many people very easy, and in consequence lies, disinformation, frauds, smear campaigns, character assassinations, and "scaled" (widely multiplied) crimes of every kind abound. Allah is telling us here that no one will be spared from huge punishments for these—fully to scale—except those who had the *taqwa* not to have anything to do with them in the first place.

The verse finishes with *Wa kana Llahu 'ala kulli shay'in muqteetan* or "Verily Allah was ever an all-powerful watcher and guardian over the exact due sustenance and requital of every last thing." This is the only verse in the Quran containing the name of this divine attribute, which is derived from *qut* or 'sustenance necessary for life,' for which *muqteet* is the active participle or *ism al-fa'il* (name of the doer) of the One who alone provides it. So this part of the verse is to inform us that "Allah *kana* or 'ever was and ever will be' *muqteetan* or 'providing sustenance to all things' and hence *shaheedan wa hafeedhan* or 'perpetually watching over and protecting them,'" which entails that He is both *muqtadiran* or 'absolutely all-powerful' over every last thing and *muqaddiran lahu* or 'apportioning its every aspect in precise and appropriate measure,' and therefore is well able to give the *shafi'* or 'whoever steps in to join others upon a matter' either his *nasib* or 'full magnificent share,' on the one hand, or his *kifl* or 'appalling deserts,' on the other—according to the full measure of good or evil deserved by his *shafa'a* or 'influence' on others. May Allah protect us all from His wrath, and make us of those "With Allah."

Question of the Month: I understand that sins are of different levels, some greater, some lesser, as far as displeasing Allah. Is there a list of the greater sins that we must not commit and should avoid? And are all sins, lesser or greater, forgiven repeatedly, although we seek His forgiveness for the same ones repeatedly?

Answer: Allah says in verse 4.31 of Surat al-Nisa', "If you shun the enormities of what you have been forbidden, We shall absolve you of your ill deeds and admit you into an entrance supremely noble." Repentance (*tawba*) is obligatory from every sin, though Allah may forgive lesser sins without it, from *salat* to *salat*, or from *Jum'a* to *Jum'a*, at *hajj* or 'umra, and so forth—while the enormities (*kaba'ir*) mentioned in this verse strictly require *tawba* to be forgiven (even if Allah may forgive them through *shafa'a* or intercession, but this is not in one's own hands). Certain hadiths mention seven great sins, others mention three, others mention others, but Abu Talib Makki relates that when Ibn 'Abbas was asked if they were seven, he replied that they were "closer to seventy." The fiqh book *Reliance of the Traveller* gives, on pages 649–710, Dhahabi's very solid list of 74 enormities, plus his 28 "probable enormities"; while appendix w52.1 gives Imam Haytami's list of 442 enormities, and w52.2 covers Makki's minimalist list of 17. *Tawba* is defined in detail by Nawawi at p77 of the same work, while outstanding debts and damages due to the victim of a sin that are not eliminated by *tawba* are covered in w53. Makki, in his famous *Out al-Qulub* (Sustenance of Hearts), lists the enormities as: worshipping others with Allah (*shirk*); stubbornly persisting (*israr*) in any sin, large or small; despairing of being forgiven through Allah's mercy; feeling secure from Allah's devising against one (*makru Llah*); testifying to a lie; charging someone unproven with adultery (*qadhf*); swearing to a lie; sorcery; drinking; consuming an orphan's property; knowingly giving, taking, assisting, or consuming the proceeds of usury (*riba*); adultery; sodomy; murder; theft; fleeing from combat in *jihad*; and ungracious treatment of parents. Some ulema believe that Allah has made their exact number unclear in order to keep us in *taqwa* about all sins, while others say that any deliberate sin is an enormity. What you should presume is that if the Quran or a *sahih* hadith mentions, of any deed, an explicit threat of punishment by Allah in this world or the next, or "not entering paradise," or the curse of Allah or His messenger (Allah bless him and give him peace), or a prescribed legal penalty (*hadd*), or it involves deliberately not doing something Allah has made obligatory—then it is an enormity (*kabira*). All of which is of the mercy of Allah, for sins poison the whole body, mind, and being.

Till next letter, Allah willing, greetings of peace and felicity to everyone; was-Salamu 'alaykum wa rahmatu Llahi wa barakatuh.