

With Allah

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Letter No. 9, 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 limit or compare, and blessings and peace upon His beloved Prophet Muhammad, the resplendent light of immortal success.

To commence: It is hard to think of any blessing equal to deciding to live one’s life for Allah, and then doing it. Allah tells us in verse 41.30 in Surat Fussilat:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ قَالُوا رَبُّنَا اللَّهُ ثُمَّ اسْتَقَامُوا تَتَنَزَّلُ عَلَيْهِمُ الْمَلَائِكَةُ أَلَّا تَخَافُوا وَلَا تَحْزَنُوا وَأَبْشِرُوا بِالْجَنَّةِ
الَّتِي كُنْتُمْ تُوعَدُونَ

Verily those who boldly say, ‘Our Lord is Allah,’
and remain firmly upright ever after,
angels shall descend unto, to
‘Fear not, nor grieve, and rejoice in the paradise
you have so long been promised.’

The context of this verse is Allah’s description just before it of both previous unbelieving nations and the Meccan idolators, who denied that the followers of the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace) had any special reward to expect from Allah for following the *din* of Islam. So Allah is telling them and all mankind till the end of time that the opposite is the truth; and is affirming His limitless favor and bounty for all who sincerely turn to Him with everything they have, beginning with the words *Inna lladhina qalu Rabbuna Llah(u)* or “Verily those who boldly say, ‘Our Lord is Allah.’” He uses the emphatic *Inna* or ‘Verily,’ as Biqa’i and Ibn ‘Ashur note, to both energize His rebuttal of the unbelievers, and underscore the force and importance of the universal rule He is here promulgating. Allah then uses the relative pronoun *alladhina*, instead of just saying *al-mu‘minin* (believers) for example, to identify them as those “who boldly say (*qalu*), ‘Our Lord is Allah.’” Notice that the verb *qalu* is in the *maadi* or ‘past tense’ form (“they said”), but as the ulema of *tafsir* or ‘Quranic meaning’ tell us, in this case indicates not the past, but rather *thubut* or that what they say is ‘undeniably factual and unquestionably solid.’ This use of *qalu*, translated here as “boldly say,” entails first that they disregard all obstacles to come out openly with the truth of this *kalimat al-tawhid* or ‘Word of Unity,’ that “Our Lord is Allah,” which affirms both His *rububiyya* or ‘being Lord and Master over all,’ and His *wahdaniyya* or ‘having no co-sharer or partner in His worship, godhood, attributes, or actions’; and secondly entails that they fear no one besides. The nominal (noun) sentence (in the “X is Y” form) of *Rabbuna Llah(u)* or “Our Lord is Allah” denotes *hasr* or ‘exclusiveness,’ meaning “We have no Lord except Allah”—*exclusively*, categorically, and emphatically. The nominal sentence is stronger here than a verbal sentence would be, and is used often in the Quran to give power, strength, and force to what it expresses. Note also that the word *Rabb* or ‘Lord,’ which is in *Rabbuna* “Our Lord” here, is typically found in Quranic contexts of His nurturing, helping, caring, and showing mercy to mankind—whereas the word *Allah* is used particularly in contexts emphasizing His power, might, and insuperable vengeance against those who defy Him. So *Rabbuna* or “Our Lord” is an acknowledgement, by those who say it, of His blessing, kindness, and bounty in giving us the religion of *Islam*, which this verse sums up in a very succinct way.

Allah then says, *thumma staqamu* “and remain firmly upright ever after.” The word *thumma* here, scholars tell us, means *al-thabat wa l-dawam ila akhiri l-zaman* ‘permanent firmness that persists to the very end.’ The word *istaqamu* is itself a hyperbole (hyPERbole) or super emphatic marked as such by its first two consonants *sin* (S) and *ta’* (T), and it means *‘adamu l-iwajaji wa l-mayl* ‘having no crookedness or deviation (from the right way), or inclining or swerving (away from it) at all.’ Zamakhshari explains that the meaning of *thumma staqamu* is thus *thabatu ‘ala l-iqrari wa muqtadayatih(i)* or “they remained firmly solid upon their affirmation [that ‘Our Lord is Allah’] and all that it implies.” This is the most magnificent destiny anyone can aspire to, since it means following the example of the greatest of mankind—the prophets (on whom be blessings and peace), the utterly true (siddiqun), the martyrs (shuhada’), and the wholly righteous (salihun)—in their works and being inwardly and outwardly with Allah. This is not always easy, for as Sahl ibn ‘Abdullah said, “Pious works are done by both the good person and the scoundrel, while no one shuns the haram but the utterly true (siddiq).” The adjective *mustaqim* or ‘straight’ found in the Fatiha derives from this verb *istaqamu*, and in our prayers we ask Allah to keep us on *al-Sirat al-Mustaqim* or the Straight Way, because no other way leads to everlasting happiness. So this verse summarizes our whole *din*. Sufyan ibn ‘Abdullah al-Thaqafi said to the Prophet (Allah bless him and give him peace), “O Messenger of Allah, tell me something of Islam after which I will never have to ask anyone else.” He said: “Say, ‘I firmly believe in Allah,’ then ever be upright” (*Muslim*, 1.65 (38). S). One could certainly do worse than making this one’s Ramadan intention this year, and continuing forever, not least because Allah helps those who set their hearts on this by sending them His very angels.

Then Allah says, *tatanazzalu ‘alayhimu l-mala’ika(tu)* “angels shall descend unto,” meaning from Him, to reassure those who are *mustaqim* or ‘upright.’ The verb *tatanazzalu* or ‘shall descend’ is in the *mudari’* or ‘imperfect tense,’ that here connotes *time after time*. Two groups of ulema offer different interpretive possibilities as to *when* this occurs. The first group including (1) Biqa’i, Abu Su‘ud, Ibn ‘Ashur, Sayyid al-Tantawi, and Habannaka say it takes place for those of *istiqama* or ‘unfailing uprightness’ first during *this* life, then in the grave, and finally when they are raised from the dead, judged, and enter paradise. The second group of ulema (2) hold that this occurs at death—including Ibn ‘Abbas, Mujahid, Suddi, Qadi Zadah, Ibn Kathir, Alusi, Khazin, and Zamakhshari—who believe this is more consistent

with the rest of this verse. The first group believe their position (that the angels' descent is in *this* life, the grave, and the next life) is stronger, for it is borne out by the angels' own words in the next verse (41.31): "We are your powerful helping friends (awliya) in this life and in the next: And therein [the next] shall you have anything your hearts desire, and therein shall you have anything for which you call." Now, the reassurance of the angels to people in this world, ulema say, consists of a deep feeling of certitude, peace, and joy in the heart concerning Allah and His *din*—just as the *wasaawis* or 'whispered insinuations' of devils (be they jinn or men, as clarified in the Quran's final verse) cause those who listen to them anxiety, despair, and doubts in the heart. Note too that the second group ((2) above) of ulema, who say that the time of the descent of the angels is at *death*, believe that this better fits the words the angels actually say in *this* verse—although they acknowledge and agree with the first group that, in both this world and the next, the angels' *wilaya* or 'being the powerful helping friends' of the person who believes and is *mustaqim* is an unquestionable *fact* proven by the *next* verse. So the difference between the two positions is not actually that great, since it is only about *when* the words in this verse are spoken by the angels, not the *fact* of the angels' *wilaya*, or their help in the *tawfiq* or 'divinely-given success' of the *mustaqim* person. Finally, the word *al-mala'ika(tu)* or 'angels' in this verse simply means a number of them.

Allah next conveys the angels' message *al-la takhafu wa la tahzanu* "to Fear not, nor grieve," the first word of which, *al-la*, is a composite word combining the words *an* or 'that' with the negation *la* or 'not.' The *an* here is termed by Arab grammarians *an al-tafsiriyya* or 'the explanatory *that*,' because it may precede either (a) a direct quote, or else (b) an explanation of the *meaning* of the quote, not necessarily the very words used. The meaning of *al-la takhafu* "to Fear not" is that one has nothing soever to fear in the *future* because one will then be in paradise; while *wa la tahzanu* "nor grieve" means there is nothing either in the *past* to feel sad about anymore, for the ultimate happiness of paradise will make one forget that one ever had a single problem in this world. The incredible relief of such a message can only be imagined, and is also of the fruits of true *istiqama* after Iman. Finally, Imams of Ihsan such as Mawlay al-'Arabi Darqawi believe this relief also comes to the *mustaqim* in this world from a high degree of presence of heart with Allah through His *dhikr* or 'remembrance,' even regardless of the news of the next world.

The angels then add, *wa abshiru bi l-jannati llati kuntum tu'adun(a)* "and rejoice in the paradise you have so long been promised." The command form *abshiru* derives from *bishara* which denotes some news or event so happy that the pure glow of it is visible on the skin (al-bashara), particularly of the face, of the person overjoyed by it. Most of us can tell, for example, when somebody is in love, because they can seldom hide their irrepressible happiness. It is yet another example of how perfect Allah's choice is of the ancient tongue of the Arabs as the language of His final revelation to human beings—among His other wisdoms for doing so—because of its incomparable richness and range in describing the qualities of human beings. In the final part of this phrase *bi l-jannati llati kuntum tu'adun(a)* "in the paradise you have so long been promised," the words *kuntum tu'adun* or "you have so long been promised" mean "time after time in your past life." This refers to the scriptures, preaching, lessons, and so forth by which Allah made known to them the high, high stakes they were playing for—by spiritual work after work they did—when they bet their lives on paradise and keeping out of the hellfire. Ibn 'Ashur notes this is (1) to remind them of the works they did that Allah promised them paradise for; (2) to tell them in advance that Allah is pleased with them, and that they are destined for immortal unfailing happiness as their reward; and (3) that Allah is giving His own sovereign surety that He is going to keep His word in full and more, on every thing He ever promised them. May Allah let every single one of us hear these words.

Question of the Month: Prison is a negative environment with many people given to evil deeds. I am forced to keep company with them, sometimes even sharing a cell with them. How do I protect my heart from such bad *suhba* (company)?

Answer: In this and every trial, the key is to turn to Allah. He wants you always to "hold fast to His protection" (al-i'tisam bi Llah) from everything bad, and this is one of His wisdoms in creating the situation. This protection is called *'isma*, and is what the prayer *Hizb al-Bahr* (Litany of the Sea) asks for at its very beginning. Allah says in Surat al-Nisa', verse 4.175: "So as for those who believe in Allah and hold fast to Him to protect them, He shall certainly forthwith enter them into a mighty due mercy from Him, and surpassing magnificent bounty; And guide them to Himself a lofty straight way." So this is a test from Him, and you should try to see other people as created by Him to test us. I suggest you ask for Allah's help in your prostration in the last third of the night in your *tahajjud*, be a positive person, be polite to everyone and if possible disarm them with humor, be confidently sure (tawakkul) that Allah helps believers, and above all, be with Allah. How? As Abu Madyan said, "He who never forgets remembering you, never forget remembering Him; and He who never forgets showing His gratitude to you, never forget showing your gratitude to Him."

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