

Praying for Forgiveness and Repentance

H A R U N Y A H Y A

All through their lives, certain people pursue a flawless image for themselves. Their efforts center around one goal: to be perfect and to look perfect. This is a natural consequence of finding it degrading to make a mistake. The ideal person, they consider, is one who can project an aura of impeccability.

However, this "flawlessness" is an illusionary goal. Neither is it one of the attributes of a believer we find extolled in the Qur'an. We would go so far as to say that such a "believer model" does not exist. For man is inherently weak, humble and helpless before God; and can consequently make mistakes all throughout his life. No doubt, he will always do his best to avoid mistakes and sins, yet, being a frail servant of God, he will not be successful in being free of all mistakes.

In the Qur'an we are informed that man has faults and sins before God:

If God were to punish men according to what they deserve, He would not leave on the surface of the earth one single living creature: but He gives them respite for a stated term: when their term expires, truly, (they will know that) God has in His sight all His Servants. (Fatir, 45)

In accordance with this divine command stated in the Qur'an, the attitude expected of a believer is not that of being faultless or sinless. He is only expected to constantly seek forgiveness from God.

This is actually an attribute which makes the distinction between a believer and non-believer: Unbelievers struggle to cover up their faults and sins. Yet, a believer never tries to do this.

What is important for him is to feel an inner regret and consequently turn to God and seek His forgiveness.

While reading the Qur'an, we see that the willingness to ask for forgiveness is a natural and unfailing attribute of the believers. On that account, we understand that believers never see themselves as beings purified of all sins and faults. On the contrary, they continually seek refuge in God's mercy. In the following verse, turning to God in repentance is regarded as one of the important attributes of a believer:

Those that turn to God in repentance; that serve Him, and praise Him; that fast in devotion to the cause of God; that bow down and prostrate themselves in prayer; that enjoin good and forbid evil; and observe the limit set by God, shall be richly rewarded. proclaim the glad tidings to the believers. (Al-Tawba, 112)

The distinction between and inter-relatedness of the concepts of repentance and forgiveness should be carefully considered.

Asking for forgiveness of God is a regular aspect of worship for believers. Man can ask forgiveness of God all day long for all his sins, whether deliberately or unintentionally committed. Moreover, as well as asking for forgiveness for oneself, one can also do it for other believers, as stated in the Qur'an.

In Arabic, the word for "asking for forgiveness" is "istigfar" which is "asking for God's attribute of Gafur.

(Gafur (G-F-R), in Arabic, means to "cover, protect, hide totally, recover.")

Thus, asking for forgiveness of God is like pledging to purify oneself and hence seeking refuge in the mercy and grace of God. In the Qur'an the believers pray saying, "Our Lord! Forgive us our sins, remove from us our iniquities, and take to Yourself our souls in the company of the righteous." (Al-Imran, 193). The judgement of God regarding this is as below:

I am with you: if you (but) say your prayers regularly, practice regular charity, believe in my messengers, honour and assist them, and loan to God a beautiful loan, indeed I will rid you of your evils, and admit you to gardens with rivers flowing beneath; but if any of you, after this, denies Me, he will truly have wandered from the path of rectitude. (Al-Maeda, 12)

As mentioned above, praying for forgiveness of God may be both for sins, committed intentionally or unintentionally, as well as for the sins of other believers. This is the most important distinction between asking for forgiveness and repentance. Although praying for forgiveness is a regular prayer of the believers, repentance is the steadfast attitude taken towards a particular sin or fault, or the giving of a firm decision not to turn to that sin again.

Repentance is seeking refuge in God for one's sin, promising not to commit that sin again and, to this end asking the guidance and help of God. The exact meaning of repentance is "to turn back". Thus, repentance expresses an absolute commitment not to commit any particular sin again.

The intention behind repentance is not to repeat the same sin. God enjoins the faithful thus: "O you who believe! Turn to God with sincere repentance, in the hope that your Lord will remove from you your ills and admit you to Gardens beneath which Rivers flow..." (At-Tahrim, 8)

However, this is not to say that a believer repents for a sin or fault only once. He may repent on one occasion, and then, in a moment of weakness, repeat the same sin. However, the mercy of God never ceases to encompass him. This is why he can still repent to God and seek refuge in Him. God is always ready to show grace and mercy to the believers. This is stated in the Qur'an as below:

"O my Servants who have transgressed against their souls! Do not despair of the Mercy of God: for God forgives all sins: for He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful." Turn to your Lord (in repentance) and bow to His Will, before the Penalty comes upon you: after that you shall not be helped. (Az-Zumar, 53-54)

Still, there is one kind of repentance God will not accept: the insincere repentance offered when death comes to a man. This is actually the moment a man meets the angels of death. Of this the Qur'an says:

God accepts the repentance of those who do evil in ignorance and repent soon afterwards; to them God will turn in mercy: for God is full of knowledge and wisdom. Of no avail is the repentance of those who continue to do evil, until death faces one of them, and he says, "Now I have indeed; repented indeed" nor of those who die rejecting Faith: for them We have prepared a most grievous punishment. (An-Nisa, 17-18)

In the Qur'an God gives the striking example of such an act of repentance made at the last moment. Pharaoh, who chased Moses and the believers in order to kill them, ended by expressing his repentance while he drowned in the sea, a miracle wrought by God.

"...At length, when overwhelmed with the flood, he said: I believe that there is no god except Him Whom the Children of Israel believe in: I am of those who submit (to God in Islam). (Jonah, 90)

However God's response to him was as follows:

"...Ah now! But a little while before, you were in rebellion! and you perpetrated mischief and violence! (Jonah, 91)

Since repentance is essential to the eternal salvation of man, one should well be aware of its importance and observe this form of worship to the best of one's ability. One may have sinned extensively or have rebelled against one's Creator. Yet, God encompasses His servants with so much mercy that He grants eternal salvation in response to a sincere repentance:

When those who believe in Our signs, come to you say: "Peace be upon you: Your Lord has decreed for Himself (the rule of) mercy: truly, if any of you committed evil in ignorance, and thereafter repented, and mended his ways, he would find God Oft-forgiving and Most Merciful." (Al-Anaam, 54)

Keep in mind that God even forgives unbelievers and hypocrites who fought against Him and His Messenger, if they turn back to God with sincere and true repentance:

The Hypocrites shall be cast into the lowest depths of the Fire: no helper will you find for them; But those who repent, mend their ways, hold fast to God, and are sincere in their devotion to Him-they shall be numbered with the believers. And soon God will grant to the believers a reward of immense value. (An-Nisa, 145-146)

Those who conceal the clear signs We have sent down, and the guidance, after We have made it clear for the people in the Book—on them shall be God's curse, and the curse of those entitled to curse, except those who repent and make amends and openly declare the Truth. Toward them I shall relent; for I am the Relenting one and Most Merciful. (Al-Baqara, 159-160)

This is a great opportunity God grants to His servants. He commands man never to be overwhelmed by despair due to any sin he has committed and always to turn to Him in hope. However, misinterpretation of this concept and an insincere attitude do not earn a man divine approval. Knowing the commandments of God, yet deliberately committing sins, saying "no matter what happens I will be forgiven" shows completely flawed reasoning. Such are the people who "reject faith after they accepted it, and then go on adding to their defiance of faith." Only the repentance of those who out of ignorance commit sins accepted. The repentance of an insincere person who simply take repentance as the freedom to commit sins is, however rejected. Stress is laid on this in the Qur'an: "But those who reject faith after they have accepted it, and then go on adding to their defiance of faith, will never have their repentance accepted; for they are those who have of set purpose gone astray." (Al-Imran, 90)

One point needs clarification here: it is quite possible that, due to ignorance, being in a state of heedlessness or indulging oneself in one's own desires, one may very well commit sins. However, if one realizes one's faults and sincerely repents, God may well be forgiving. However, people who commit sins, although knowing the judgements of God, saying, "I will be forgiven no matter what happens," are merely deceivers. That is why their repentance is not acceptable to God. (God knows the best).

It is hardly necessary to say that heartfelt regret and sincerity are the keys to divine forgiveness. The Quranic injunction: **"Call on your Lord with humility and in private..." (Al-Araf, 55)** also applies when showing contrition asking for forgiveness. While repenting for serious errors especially, deep regret and a sincere attitude are essential. As an example of repentance and forgiveness, the Qur'an cites the case of the three Muslims who were left behind, when all others had gone to fight in the cause of God, thereby committing a great sin;

God turned with favour to the Prophet, the Muhajirs, and the Ansar, who followed him in a time of distress, when the hearts of some of them had nearly swerved from duty; but He turned to them (also): for He is Most Kind, and Most Merciful to them. He turned in mercy also to the three who were left behind; they felt guilty to such a degree that the earth seemed constrained to them, for all its spaciousness, and their very souls seemed straitened to them, and they perceived that there was no fleeing from God and no refuge but in Him. Then He turned to them, so that they might repent: for God is the Forgiving One and Most Merciful. (Al-Tawba, 117-118)

Asking forgiveness of God and repenting one's sins serve as pure expressions of being a sincere servant to God. The believer should be well aware that he may commit sins, but that he should take refuge in the mercy and grace of God. Simply worrying, or feeling grief for one's former sins is quite pointless. Man should consider the story of the messengers who made some errors, yet continued their struggle after sincerely repenting. Man should trust in the forgiveness of God.

In the Qur'an it is mentioned that praying for forgiveness and expressing repentance are ways to eternal salvation:

If it were not for God's grace and mercy to you, and that God is Forgiving and full of Wisdom, (you would indeed be ruined). (Al-Noor, 10)