



The Faithful: A Deeper Understanding of Iman

Allah in Qur'an, says:

They only are believers whose hearts tremble with awe whenever Allah is mentioned. Whose beliefs are strengthened whenever His signs are recited to them, and who put their trust in their Lord, and those who establish the salah, and spend on the deserving out of what they have what We have provided for them, and those are the ones who are the true believers. For them are degrees of honor with their Lord and forgiveness and generous provisions.

Nowhere here does Allah talk about those who have memorized the Qur'an, those who know every rule and every law, those who are the scholars – nowhere, nowhere. Keep that in mind. Then Allah (swt) says in Surah an-Nisā:

And for those who believe and work righteous deeds, We shall let them enter gardens beneath which rivers flow and wherein they shall abide forever. For them are pure mates and We shall allow them to enter into deep shades.

There is the answer. That is the person. These are the type of people. There is no end to talk about the faithful. Many people will tell you what faith is but Allah (swt) just told us what faith is: the doing of good deeds. Before the last quotation, if you read 'āyat 1, it talks about those people who are the bearer of Truth, the people of Truth and the people of untruth. This text about the believers is filled with a lot of information and a lot of guidance for us. Certainly, the subject of *iman* is one that is depthless, and it is very exclusive in defining the *mu'min* here.

The word is widely interpreted as the complete believer. The very idea of completeness in *iman* indicates a kind of dynamism that is again and again underscored in the idea of *iman* as increased or strengthened or extended. It is a dynamic. That dynamism has an evolutionary implication to it. The Qur'an also encourages us to reflect on the nature of the relationship of *iman* and righteousness and righteous acts. It is a relationship we need to recognize as a very critical one, to us especially. There are so many requirements for *iman* that are dealt with in Qur'an. The text that we have just read specifically at the beginning of the Medinan Surah, the Spoils of War, deals largely with the events surrounding the battle of Badr, and the sanctity of treaties, and therefore the importance of the faith of the believers. It is just one example.

The 'āyāt 2-4 are sometimes looked on as a rebuke to some of the Companions of the Prophet (sal) who were displaying a lot of exaggerated interest in the booty. They seemed to develop a degree of resentment or acrimony among some of the companions. They were told that these spoils rightly belonged to the community, and that to be too eager for material gain should not impair the relations between individuals, which we know to this day that it does. The companions were reminded about the nature of faith, and that their faith was being injured by their greed. No matter what they thought they had done to deserve their booty, they are always, in Islam, being reminded or should be reminded of the *jihad al-akbar*.

Certainly, we are all familiar with one or two forms of greed. I know that one or two of you have been greedy once or twice in your life, unlike me, who has been greedy every day. In the ethical and religious terms spoken in Qur'an, *iman* is rarely discussed in regards to etymology. But it serves us well to think about the etymology of the word in the form of the verbal noun: *Alif, mim, nūn*. The root suggests something that faith should always bring, and which also should drive an individual forth in their belief and in their service to Allah (swt). That means being secure and trusting or turning towards, which then follows its meaning of good faith, sincerity, fidelity and loyalty.

The fourth form has a double meaning of “to believe” and also “to give one’s faith.” The primary meaning is becoming true to the trust with respect to the trust that Allah (swt) has confided in us by a firm believing in one’s heart, the *amanat*. But [it is] not just by professing belief, not just by saying, “I believe” with the tongue. But when the *alif, mim, nūn* is followed by the particle “*b*” it means to acknowledge, to recognize. It is also used in the meaning of trust in a sense that when one feels secure upon trusting something, their doubt is held in abeyance. Our faith is secure in our trust of Allah. Allah’s faith or trust in us gives us security. Such is the etymology of this word.

When you look at the Qur’an, you can count approximately 244 times when variations of this word appear. It most frequently appears in expressions like, “O those who have *iman*; O you of faith; those of you who have faith,” over 50 times. This term is essentially used with references to the Prophet’s (sal) followers. About ten or eleven times, it also refers to the followers of Sidna Musa (as); and in twenty other instances, to other prophets and their followers. In Qur’an, there is a sense of being at peace with oneself, a sense of commitment, of contentment, of security and there are many references in Qur’an to that. In Surahs 16, 112, 83, etc., you can find these instances. Just look in the concordance.

There is also a sense of security from external threats. There is also the concept of security and safety that comes from a trust, in the sense of the *amanat*: the trust to have the faith that was given to us, and the trust that we were to give to Allah (swt) to have faith and trust in Him. Here lies our security in this kind of circular process. For each one of us to contemplate when we use the word faith, is very, very important, because we need to distinguish between faith, and belief, and sometimes commitment. Perhaps, we can all factor that in when we think. Someone says, “What faith are you?” it would be really good to pause and say, “What faith have I?” “What do I have faith in?” “Oh you mean, what religion?” “Oh. Oh. I am a believer.” “No, no, no, what religion are you?”

“Well, let’s see. I’m a Jew, I’m a Muslim. I’m a Christian. I’m a Buddhist. I’m a Hindu. I’m a Zoroastrian. Well, I’m a believer. But I take this name to go with it.”

There is also, according to the Qur’an, a way of looking at *iman* as an act of the heart. And when one, with decisiveness and with sincerity, gives up oneself up to Allah (swt) – that is gives up oneself to compassion and to mercy and to tolerance and to love, and to understanding and to patience and to perseverance – one gains peace. One gains security. One becomes sustained, *inshā’a-Llāh*, being a Muslim, *taslim*. What is that faith, and what is that peace, and what is that security designed for? It is a buffer against problems that affect the heart. For those who are in *tariqah*, where the heart is so important—and a very deep subject, a focal point of our lives, *inshā’a-Llāh*—we have to understand that the relationship between *iman* and *qalb* are very important.

It is not just about feeling good, or loving love, or making people smile, or happy, or spinning around, or jumping up and down, and making *dhikr* in an outer form. It is what is happening internally. There are a lot of definitions of *iman*, and it depends on who is defining it, but almost always it includes certain qualities. One is affirmation, silently within one’s own self. Another is affirmation verbally, *dhikr* aloud. Another is righteous actions and good conduct. Another subject of *iman* is keeping company of good people, *suhbat*. Another one is sacrifice and selflessness. There is something that *iman* gives, more than just recognition or verbal testimony. There is a commitment that builds in the heart of an individual towards righteous action, step by step.

So we can try and understand the Prophet Mohammed (sal) as a person who not only had deep and profound faith, and was trustworthy and secure in that trust given to him, but also as a person whose actions are righteous and who conducts himself in a righteous way. Wait a minute, I just changed tenses. I just went from past tense to present tense in English. Didn’t I? Check out the Arabic. This is also a *mu’min*, because wherever there

is a believer and wherever there is the light of Allah (swt), there is the Rasūlu-Llāh. Or I should say: there is the *rasūl*; there is the message. And I can say, on good authority, supported in Qur'an, that the affirming of one's faith and good conduct of an individual increases one's faith/*iman*. The more, the stronger the proof is of one's *iman* in one's actions, the less one has doubt. The greater the affirmation, the more one increases their faith, and the awareness, and the greatness, and the power, and the majesty, and the beauty, and the wisdom, and the love of Allah (swt), and the deeper their ability to serve in a righteous way His creatures.

Why? Because you will find Allah (that is, all those attributes) in the heart of the believer. That is why these references are to the believer in Qur'an. There is always a circular relationship, as I said at the beginning. Our good actions are motivated by our faith. Our security comes from right conduct. The affirmation of our faith, and the safety and contentment we feel in that affirmation deepens our ability to serve His creatures. The deeper we serve His creatures, the more we are committed to the path. The more we are committed to the path, the more opportunities we have, the less doubt we have, the more security we have.

Come on. Jump on the carousel. Pick a horse. You like the yellow one, the red one? You like the white one? They are all going up sometimes and down sometimes, just like we are. The reason for this is explained in Qur'an, where we see that the direct result of our faith is this certainty, in a sense, an anxiousness to be obedient to Allah—certitude affirming piety/*taqwah*, contentment. These are results, and at the same time causes. However, despite the reluctance of some people to limit the definition or understanding of *iman*, we must never leave our understanding of it, which is dynamic and evolving. It is a process.

Often we find among ourselves that there is a relationship between *muhasabat* and *iman*. If you reflect upon yourself and take account of yourself, then you know whether you are

in debt or whether you have a surplus. That is, after all, in modern Arabic, what *muhāsabat* means, accounting. Our ability to reflect on ourselves and to recollect our essential belief and extend that faith and trust in Allah depends on our willingness to reflect on our actions and our relationships and our strengths and our weaknesses.

Perhaps the most important and significant issue when we deeply contemplate *iman* is to what degree do we have personal recognition or awareness of the Divine Presence in the universe around us, in the world around us, in our daily lives. The active aspect of our faith, which is reflected in the *hadith* of Rasūlu-Llāh (sal) ***“The least of iman will save one in the Hereafter. Iman is of various kinds and has seventy branches. The highest is the testimony that there is no deity save Allah. And the lowest is the removal of an obstacle from the road. Even modesty is a branch of iman.”*** When asked what the sign of *iman* is, the Prophet (sal) said, ***“To remove an obstacle from the path of someone.”*** Also, it is the answer to what is *zakat*. So there are levels.

In the ‘*āyat* that I first recited, there is this idea of presentation. Many of us, perhaps, if we are sincere in our belief and in our actions to the point where our faith becomes a conscious part of our day to day expression, we can achieve the state of understanding the Truth, and belief in faith itself. I know that I am mixing two words, belief and faith, despite what I said previously; but also there is a purpose in it. If belief begins as an unconscious act, we have to see faith as being a consciousness of each act in the presence of the Divine Nearness. If belief is something we take as a religious social duty— to pray, to fast, etc. to prove that we believe—we have to also see faith as being that which is at the root of our security, and our safety, and our happiness, and the root of the happiness, security and safety that we provide to others also. So we recognize it and we affirm it. They are not distinctively different; they are just hierarchically related.

In these ‘*āyāt*, we can also safely say that the Qur’an is telling early Muslims, and us early Muslims, that we are going to experience dimensions in our *iman*. We have to be

willing and ready, both for the lessons that are to come to critique our understanding, and the ones to show us that the promise of a deepening faith is the here and the Hereafter. Allah (swt) says in Qur'an, "**O those of you who have attained to faith.**" He is telling us that it has been a process, and for us to put our attention in life in such a way to orient ourselves away from the things that are wrong, that pull us towards the things that affect our weaknesses or affirm our weaknesses, that pull us toward the material world more than toward Allah.

Inshā'a-LLāh, today we have a slightly deeper understanding of *iman*, and we can remember what we want to emphasize: the dynamic aspect of it. Don't have unreasonable expectations, and don't reduce your yearning. The relationships between faith, safety, security, contentment and the deeds we perform in righteous ways are very, very important—not just righteous deeds. It is the way we perform them, our expectations about them, and what we will hold dear to us as proof that we might, maybe, be on the right path. *inshā'a-LLāh*.