

Chapter 3, Verse 185: The Ultimate Success

Description: Three sentences that describe a basic pillar of faith, belief in the Hereafter.

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"Every soul will taste death and you will be paid in full only on the Day of Resurrection. Whoever is kept away from the Fire and admitted to the Garden will have triumphed. The present world is only an illusory pleasure." (Quran 3:185)

This essential verse from the Quran comes from the closing verses of the third chapter. Verse 185 also comes towards the end of the fourth of four discourses that make up an interconnected whole of Chapter 3. Aal-Imran (The family of Imran) contains 200 verses and was revealed in Medina. As with all Medani chapters it is primarily concerned with the building and sustaining of a morally sound Islamic nation.



The whole chapter can be considered a sequel to the previous chapter Al-Baqarah (The Cow). In chapter 2, the Muslims had been declared the best nation and entrusted with the responsibility to reform and guide the humankind. Here, according to some scholars, they are being warned to guide against weaknesses that surfaced after the pivotal Battle of Uhud. The Muslims are being encouraged to overcome worldly weaknesses and nourish the virtues that enable them to carry out their obligations.

From the moment we are born we are moving inexorably towards death. There is a quote from American statesman Benjamin Franklin that says, "Nothing can be said to be certain except death and taxes". The certainty of death is something that is known and acknowledged by all races and religions but humankind is very good at putting things away in the back corners of their minds. Verse 185 begins with a clear and forceful statement. Every soul shall taste death. Make no mistake about it; death is a foregone conclusion for each and every member of the human race.

God says clearly and concisely that each one of us will die and on the Day of Judgment

we will be judged according to how we lived our lives and recompensed with exactly what we deserve. Those whose actions throughout their lives serve to keep them away from the Fire are the ones who will be considered truly successful. The Day of Judgement will be a day of victory and celebration for them as they are ushered into the gardens of Paradise.

This verse represents one of the basic pillars of the Islamic faith, the belief in a Hereafter. In other words, death, though inevitable, is not the end; rather it is the beginning of life everlasting. Success in our earthly life does not necessarily mean the ultimate success in our next life. Being wealthy, or having a large family, or a prestigious job or title, might sound like a reward for a successful life. However unless a person uses these things for the pleasure of God, they are nothing but trappings that may well shackle a person to the fires of Hell.

The ultimate success is not found in amassing riches, status or commodities. In fact these worldly goods and aspirations are illusions. They can create false impressions and mislead us into thinking that the criteria of right and wrong can be based on success or failure in worldly pursuits. This is wrong and it is a misconception perpetrated by Satan to lead us away from the straight path to success.

In the authentic traditions of Prophet Muhammad, may the mercy and blessings of God be upon him, we can find many sayings that reinforce the emphatic message of verse 185. He said that Paradise is surrounded by hardships and Hellfire is surrounded by temptations[1]. Hellfire is surrounded by tempting things and sin appears attractive but it actually leads to horror and doom. While Paradise is surrounded by difficult things such as sharing wealth and exercising self-control it leads to beauty and happiness.

Prophet Muhammad was concerned about his followers when he saw that many of them were deceived by the pleasures and ideals of this worldly life. He said, "By God, it is not poverty that I fear for you, but I fear that this world will be spread out in front of you as it was spread out in front of those before you, and then you will vie for it as they vied for it, and it will destroy you as it destroyed them"[2]

When people become engrossed by success in this life they are in danger of becoming heedless of their obligations and responsibilities to God, and their fellow human beings. Losing the Hereafter is the price paid for losing oneself in the illusions of this world. Islam does not expect us to withdraw from the life this world offers but it does expect us to use the success we have in this world to benefit others and to please God. Success obtained by ignoring the commandments of God is not really success at all.

Before receiving revelation, Prophethood Muhammad was a successful business person who dealt with worldly affairs just like the other Meccan merchants. After prophethood he utilised all the resources that God put at his disposal to honour and please Him. Our obligation is to strike the right balance. We can lead an honourable life in this transitory place by keeping our hearts and minds focused on God. We can use our worldly success to catapult us into the ultimate success. Because, as this verse emphasises those admitted to the Garden are the ones who have triumphed.

This world, Prophet Muhammad told us, is a prison for the believer and a paradise for the disbeliever.[3] We, the believers, are forever surrounded by distractions and illusions. However, we know that this place is not our forever home, it is little more than a transitory stop on our journey to the Hereafter. It is a place of tests and trials. Those who are tested via worldly prestige and wealth often find the test more difficult than those who are tested with poverty or illness. The present world is nothing but an illusion and real success can only be measured by a person's status in the Hereafter. A person can only claim success when they are being led into the gardens of Paradise.

Endnotes:

[1] *Saheeh Muslim*

[2] *Riyad as-Salihin* (The Meadows of the Righteous) by Imam Nawawi

[3] *Saheeh Al-Bukhari*

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