



# “Be a Man!” Constructing Prophetic Masculinity

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## Author Biography

**Shaykh Yahya Ibrahim** started his knowledge journey with the memorization of Qur'ān in his teens and then pursued his studies in exegesis, jurisprudence, and hadith with scholars from the Hijaz and in Egypt as well. Imam Yahya is a registered Teacher and currently an Assistant Principal. He also serves the Muslim community at Curtin University and the University of Western Australia as the Islamic Chaplain and teaches Islamic Ethics & Theology & Exegesis for Al-Maghrib Institute.

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“Be a man, stop this crying right this minute!” These words are familiar to most adult men today as a part of their upbringing, irrespective of their heritage. Undoubtedly, the conceptualization of “manliness” has always been dependent on context. But it seems always to be relevant, whether to conservatives or liberals, as a prominent point in a society’s morality. For many even in our contested society, ‘being a man’ is still a major plank of moral and familial life. To those who see it as such, it is not something bestowed by law on a certain birthday. It is earned and must be continually proven.

How should Muslims in the modern West approach the phrase ‘Be a man’? What does that mean and, more importantly, how do we make sense of the changes that have occurred and seem to be constantly occurring at an even greater rate every day in how the phrase is understood? How can the scriptures of Islam guide us, and what model do they provide?

In this paper three issues will be addressed:

- 1- The usage of Arabic masculine pronouns in the Qur’an;
- 2- A Qur’anic paradigm distinguishing *ar-Rajul al-Kamil*—a Complete (refined) Man—from a genetically male individual; and
- 3- Constructing the Prophetic masculinity.

## The usage of Arabic masculine pronouns in the Qur’an

It is important to note that many Qur’anic verses establish men and women inclusively in the broad terms of “human being” (*insan*) or “people” (*nas*). Although *insan* is grammatically masculine in Arabic, and is often translated as “man” or “mankind,” *insan* and *nas* are semantically gender-neutral in the original Arabic; they apply to women as much as they do to men.

It is important to also keep in mind that when a group includes both Muslim men and Muslim women it is referred to with the masculine collective noun *muslimun*. In most cases, it refers to all Muslims, irrespective of gender.

This is an important clarification for those who can only access the Qur'an in translation or are confronted with a male-centric English translation that does not reflect the reality of the Qur'an in its original Arabic. Where the Qur'an mentions men and women separately, it is clear and unambiguous.

The Qur'an's basic stance is that Muslim men are the religious equals of Muslim women. They assist and protect one another:

*Anyone, male or female, who does good deeds and is a believer, will enter Paradise and will not be wronged by as much as the dip in a date stone.<sup>1</sup>*

*The believers, both men and women, support each other; they order what is right and forbid what is wrong; they keep up the prayer and pay the prescribed alms; they obey God and His Messenger. God will give His mercy to such people: God is Almighty and Wise.<sup>2</sup>*

The Qur'an describes the Muslim marriage in terms of love and mercy interchanged between two separate but equal parts that come into one another:

*It is He who created you all from one soul, and from it made its mate so that [that being] might find comfort in [its pair]: when one [of them] lies with his wife and she conceives a light burden, going about freely, then grows heavy, they both pray to God, their Lord, 'If You give us a good child we shall certainly be grateful.'<sup>3</sup>*

*Another of His signs is that He created spouses from among yourselves for you to live with in tranquillity: He ordained love and kindness between you. There truly are signs in this for those who reflect.<sup>4</sup>*

Further, the Qur'an describes spouses as "garments" for one another:

*You [believers] are permitted to lie with your wives during the night of the fast: they are [close] as garments (libaas) to you, as you are to them.<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>1</sup> Qur'an: 4:124.

<sup>2</sup> Qur'an 9:71.

<sup>3</sup> Qur'an 7:189.

<sup>4</sup> Qur'an 30:21.

<sup>5</sup> Qur'an 2:187.

*Libaas*—become the most intimate garment to your spouse. Muslims are instructed to be their spouse’s armor against hostility, warmth in frigidity, and shelter them from the heat shone upon them by others. Become the sparkle and elegance that they adorn themselves with when sized up by others.

They are garments to you, as you are to them.

There is a clear Qur'anic paradigm distinguishing a male from a female and, as important, a man in attitude and behavior from a male by biological sex.

The books of exegesis of the Qur’an report that while pregnant, Hinna bint Faqudh, the wife of ‘Imran and the mother of Maryam, cried out the following words in anguish and dismay. She had sworn an oath to dedicate her child to the service of her Lord. Her oath presumed that the unborn child growing within her, and an answer to her prayers, was male. Due to the prevailing customs of the time, only boys and men were allowed to worship in the holy spaces of Jerusalem. When she uttered her vow during pregnancy, she had assumed that for her child to be a spiritual authority, he would have to naturally be a male. “...but when she gave birth, she said, ‘My Lord! I have given birth to a girl’—God knew best what she had given birth to: the male is not like the female—‘I name her Mary and I commend her and her offspring to Your protection from the rejected Satan.’”<sup>6</sup>

So the male is not like the female, but the Qur’an teaches us that distinction does not mean disparagement. Whereas Hinna feared that her daughter’s gender would prevent her from achieving greatness, Allah Himself made Maryam a divine sign to the entire universe: that indeed, the male is not like the female.

A female attains an elite, unique position of being capable of piety that many men of our world are unable to attain. Additionally, only through her femininity and womanliness could righteousness and blessing come to fruition in the carrying and nurturing of a new generation.

The Prophet ﷺ said: “Verily, women are the twin halves of men.”<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Qur’an 3:36.

<sup>7</sup> Al-Khattābī, *Ma‘ālim al-Sunan: Sharḥ Sunan Abī Dāwūd* (Ḥalab: al-Maṭba‘ah al-‘Ilmīyah, 1932), 1:79.

## A Qur’anic paradigm distinguishing *ar-rajul al-kamil*—a complete (refined) man from a male in gender

When the word *rajul* (man), or *rijaal* (men), is used in the Qur’an, there is usually a qualification attached as a reason for that designation. In the following verses, a theme of *sidq* (truthfulness), honor, self-restraint, tenacity, inward piety, reverence, devotion, charity, consciousness, focus, resilience, purity, and guardianship are highlighted as ethical behavior consistent among men of God.

*There are rijaal (true men) among the believers who honored their pledge to God: some of them have fulfilled it by death, and some are still waiting. They have not changed in the least.*<sup>8</sup>

*Rijaal (true men) who are not distracted, either by commerce or profit, from remembering God, keeping up the prayer, and paying the prescribed alms, fearing a day when hearts and eyes will turn over.*<sup>9</sup>

*...(Prophet) You should rather pray in a mosque founded from its first day on consciousness of God: in this mosque there are men (rijaal) who desire to grow in purity—God loves those who seek to purify themselves.*<sup>10</sup>

All of those noble characteristics funnel into an oft-contested *ayah* in the Qur’an that highlights *rujula*—masculinity:

*(ar-rijaal qawwamun) Husbands should take good care of their wives...*<sup>11</sup>

The word *qawwamun*, translated by Dr. Professor Muhammed Abdul Haleem as meaning ‘should take good care of,’ and by others as ‘in charge of’ or ‘caretakers of’ or ‘protectors and maintainers’ or ‘managers of affairs’ or ‘shall take full care of’ their wives is linked to the concept of vigilance and standing at attention—*qiwamah*.

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<sup>8</sup> Qur’an 33:23.

<sup>9</sup> Qur’an 24:37.

<sup>10</sup> Qur’an 9:108.

<sup>11</sup> Qur’an 4:34.

*Qawwamun* and *Qiwamah* are mentioned in the Qur'an as recognition of perseverance in the establishment of equitable uprightness and fairness.<sup>12</sup> It is a rallying call to all believing men and women to work for justice, uprightness, and fairness in society.

The word *qawwamun* is the plural of *qawwam*, whose root word is *qama*, which means “to stand or to make something stand or be established.”

*Qawwam* is also an intensive form of the word *qa'im*, which means “one who stands or makes something stand,” a form of “guardianship.” *Qawwamun* suggests a form of *qa'im* that is ongoing, that is, eternal vigilance. It involves legal rights and obligations on the part of both men and women committed to each other in holy matrimony. *Qiwama* necessitates that a woman has the right to security and the luxury of being completely free of the need to support herself.

To understand the verse of *qiwama* accurately, some commentators have established a link between the verse and the *ayah*, “**Let him who possesses plenty spend of his plenty; and let him whose provision is straitened spend of what Allah has given him.**”<sup>13</sup>

In this context the verse becomes the effective cause (*'illa*) that predicates the verse of *qiwama*, ‘Husbands should take good care of their wives.’

Jurists in all the Sunni schools of jurisprudence have inferred that whenever a husband is unable to support his wife and is no longer her caretaker (*qawwam*), she becomes no longer obliged to remain at his side. Particularly in the Shafi'i school, the wife is entitled to have the marriage annulled.<sup>14</sup>

The rationale is that if he is no longer a caretaker, then one of the objectives of caretaking of her by marriage is unmet and she is able to request to exit the relationship.

Moses is a shining example of a husband who was *qawwam*.

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<sup>12</sup> Qur'an 4:135 and 5:8.

<sup>13</sup> Qur'an 65:7.

<sup>14</sup> Ahmad ibn al Naqib al Misri. *Reliance of the Traveller: A Classic Manual of Islamic Sacred Law*. Translated by Nuh Ha Mim Keller. Beltsville, MD: Amana Pubns; Revised edition, 1997. (m11.13, pp. 546-547).

Allah asks Musa عليه السلام, as he stands of the Mount of Sinai:

***“And what is that in your right hand, O Moses?”***

***He said, “It is my staff; I lean upon it, and I manage my sheep with it and I have therein other uses.”***<sup>15</sup>

Musa عليه السلام explains, in detail, the primary uses of his staff. He begins with “I lean on it.” He would rely on his staff in three ways, the first of which is our focus—I lean on it. As the guardian of his flock, he uses it to:

- (a) prevent injury when traversing rugged terrain;
- (b) when worn out and physically exhausted, he would lean on it;
- (c) when injured, he would push along and remain upright and attentive to the needs of his family and flock.

Keep in mind that shepherding a flock has been the vocation of every prophet of Allah and, as such, it is a term often used to describe one’s responsibility to family and society. We are all shepherds over something, having responsibilities over them.

The statement of the Prophet of Allah صلى الله عليه وسلم further enlightens us regarding what it really means to be a man tending to his family:

*All of you are shepherding guardians and are responsible for your flock. The ruler is a guardian of his subjects, a man is a steward of his family, the woman is a guardian and is responsible for her husband's house and his offspring; and so all of you are guardians and are responsible for your subjects.*<sup>16</sup>

## Constructing Prophetic masculinity

Following the *Sunnah* (lit. way, path oft-traveled by the knowing) or habit of the Prophet صلى الله عليه وسلم is the completion of one’s humanity. In adhering to his tradition and lifestyle we find salvation in the Hereafter and felicity in the here and now.

<sup>15</sup> Qur’an 20:17-18.

<sup>16</sup> Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī* (Bayrūt: Dār Ṭawq al-Najjāh, 2002), 2:5 #893.

The path of the Prophet ﷺ is the path of the Prophets. As God says of the Prophet, *'And indeed, you are of a great moral character.'*<sup>17</sup>

Our faith is built on the prayer seeking Allah's guidance to the straight path trod upon by the virtuous from the ancients. We seek in our Prophet ﷺ and through his way the path of Abraham, Moses and Jesus عليهم السلام.

*There has certainly been for you in the Messenger of Allah an excellent pattern for anyone whose hope is in Allah and the Last Day and [who] remembers Allah often.*<sup>18</sup>

The Prophet ﷺ was a builder of men. His compassion, strength, and character were a beacon in the darkness of the prevailing *jahiliyah*. They were also the guiding principles of transitioning from the corruption of the self to its *tazkiyah* and purification.

In understanding his ascendancy to an unrivaled standard of character we can begin to construct a prophetic masculinity. Each of the following incidents or proclamations are milestones on the path to completing our humanity and service of Allah.

*Qatadah reported: I said, 'O mother of the believers, tell me about the character of the Messenger of Allah, peace and blessings be upon him.'* Aisha said, *'Have you not read the Qur'an?'* I said, *'O course!'* Aisha said, *'Verily, the character of the Prophet of Allah was the Qur'an.'*<sup>19</sup>

Every letter of every word and verse of the Qur'an were reflected in his demeanor, disposition, and beauty. The choicest Praise and Mercy of Allah be upon him.

Muhammad ﷺ, the Praised one, is Ahmed, the greatest in Praise of Allah; sublimely appropriate. *Al-Mustapha*, the Divinely Chosen, is real. He was flesh and blood. Human.

He stressed in his mission of calling us to the service of the Al-Mighty the necessity of refinement of character. He would say, peace be upon him:

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<sup>17</sup> Qur'an 68:4.

<sup>18</sup> Qur'an 33:21.

<sup>19</sup> Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim* ([Bayrūt]: Dār Iḥyā' al-Kutub al-'Arabīyah, 1955), 1:512 #746.

*I was sent to perfect good character.*<sup>20</sup>

For some, a robust, relatively good character comes naturally and is a default disposition that can be built upon with ease.

The Prophet ﷺ said to Al-Mundhir al-Ashshajj:

*You have two characteristics which Allah likes: gentleness and deliberation. He asked: 'Have I acquired them or has Allah created (them) my nature?' He replied: 'No, Allah has created (them) in your nature.' He then said: 'Praise be to Allah Who has created in my nature two characteristics which Allah and His Apostle like.'*<sup>21</sup>

In other places he would say, peace be upon him, *"People are like ores of silver and gold..."*<sup>22</sup>

We have established that the separation between real men of God and others is their ethical behavior and outlook, in particular in dealing with those they are required to nurture and shepherd.

Pertinently, there are particular morals, ethics, and attitudes that typify a positive, prophetic masculinity. Conversely, deficiency in them equates to a severance between oneself and the Lord of Mercy.

al- Fudayl b. 'Iyad said: *"Whoever has a deficiency in his character has a deficiency in his religion, his reputation, and his manhood."*<sup>23</sup>

A profound, comprehensive statement of censure and recommendation can be found in the words of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ, *'If you have these four qualities, then you will not worry about what you missed in the world: fulfilling trust, truthful speech, good character, and restraint with food.'*<sup>24</sup>

An honest man is a real man. A real man's word is his bond. If he can't keep a promise, he doesn't give his word.

<sup>20</sup> Mālik ibn Anas and Al-Zuhri, *Muwaṭṭa' al-Imām Mālik* (Bayrūt: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 1993), 2:75 #1885.

<sup>21</sup> Abū Dāwūd, *Sunan Abī Dāwūd* (Ṣaydā, Lubnān: al-Maktabah al-Aṣṣṛīyah, 1980), 4:357 #5225.

<sup>22</sup> Muslim, *Ṣaḥīḥ Muslim*, 4:2031 #2638.

<sup>23</sup> Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Fikr, 1995), 48:414.

<sup>24</sup> Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal* (Bayrūt: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 2001), 11:233 #6652.

A man molded with prophetic masculinity does not break deals and is not chased after to pay his debts.

A real man knows that his words are more powerful at times than his actions and that they must be taken at face value by all. A profound example, once again, can be gleaned from the life of Musa revealed to the Messenger of Allah, peace be upon them both, as an important multi-dimensional lesson central to the noble virtue of *qawwama*.

*Has the story of Moses come to you [Prophet]? He saw a fire and said to his people, 'Stay here—I can see a fire. Maybe I can bring you a flaming brand from it or find some guidance there.'*<sup>25</sup>

### **1- Family comes first**

Musa seeks to ensure his family's safety and comfort by asking them to wait for him in the cold darkness of the night while he departs to investigate the source of fire at a distance from them. Never compromise your family and lead them into the unknown.

### **2- Present danger is better than hidden danger**

Musa knows it is dangerous to leave his family in the dark expanse of the desert that they lost their way in. Yet, that is less a danger than walking into a campfire of what could possibly be a group of brigands who would harm him and his family. The known danger is clear and evident, but at least it is predictable.

### **3- Danger to one is better than exposing many**

Musa instinctively decides that the danger faced by him, alone, is worth the risk of warmth and guidance to safety. Judgment is imperative when a preponderance of danger exists. The less exposure, whether financially, psychologically, spiritually and physically, the better.

### **4- One person makes the final decision**

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<sup>25</sup> Qur'an 20:9-10.

In trying circumstances, defined, clear and unambiguous directions can be the difference between life and death, health and sickness, safety and tragedy. In all decisions, especially within the household, a unified singular voice needs to provide leadership and direction.

#### **5- Leaders consult and explain their decision-making process**

Musa explains, in detail, *why* he has made the decision to investigate the fire and to leave his family behind. It is reasoned, rational, and explicit. Often, complaints arise about a decision being made without consultation and explanation. That contradicts the established Prophetic model. Decisions are not demands and the authority to make them is not inherent to one party over another except by virtue of trust. Trust is lost not by poor decisions but by poor consultation.

#### **6- Speak to all whom your decision impacts**

Musa spoke to *ahlihi* (all his family/people), not just his wife. Taking counsel of your sons and daughters in important decisions is a way of ensuring reciprocation when they reach an age of decision-making ability themselves. If you ignore their voices, then expect them not to share their opinions with you.

#### **7- Don't promise what is not assured**

Musa says, "Maybe/perhaps I can bring you" and does not speak in definite terms. Nothing undermines the credibility of a parent with their children more than unfulfilled promises. The greatest wedge between a husband and wife are vows that are not maintained and assurances not met. Speak the truth and do not embellish.

#### **8- Maximize your benefit from assumed danger**

Musa calculates what he stands to gain—warmth, light, guidance out of the desert, return with a flaming brand, and more. Always seek maximum benefit, even in precarious situations that others may view as a complete loss.

#### **9- Prioritize**

Musa speaks about warmth and a flaming brand to return with and provide comfort and light for his family before he speaks about finding their way. He understands

the greatest need and seeks to fulfill it before other essentials. The adaptation to a bad situation and seeking to minimize its impact has been a hallmark of all of the People of God.

## 10- Take responsibility

Musa says “*Inni* (I can)” to legitimize his decision. He assumes responsibility for the decision and intends a positive outcome, even though he does not guarantee it. Families disintegrate due to a lack of responsibility. Standing up and assuming leadership equally necessitates being responsible when things go bad.

The Prophet, peace be upon him, was a man of action and deliberation. A man nurtured upon the Sunnah of Muhammed, peace be upon him, is durable, courageous, and persevering.

Our Messenger ﷺ experienced in his 63 years of blessed life more tribulation than a whole cohort. He ﷺ was an orphan, a widower, battle-scarred, and unjustly outcast. He outlived many of his children and buried some of his grandchildren. His uncle, the Mercy of Allah be upon him, was martyred and his body desecrated. He ﷺ was defamed, mocked, lied to and lied about. He was poisoned, stoned, and had to witness his companions tortured on account of their faith in his message ﷺ.

‘Alī said: ‘When the war became hot and we met and faced the enemy, we shielded ourselves behind the Messenger of Allah ﷺ, there was no one who was closer to the enemy than he was.’<sup>26</sup>

This strength of purpose did not erode his compassion, empathy, and generous spirit.

*So by mercy from Allah, [O Muhammad], you were lenient with them. And if you had been rude [in speech] and harsh in heart, they would have disbanded from about you. So pardon them and ask forgiveness for them and consult them in the matter. And when you have decided, then rely upon Allah. Indeed, Allah loves those who rely [upon Him].*<sup>27</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, *Musnad al-Imām Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal*, 2:453 #1347.

<sup>27</sup> Qur’an 3:159.

A famous incident is recounted by Imam Bukhari in his *Sahih*.

al-Aqra' b. Habis visited the Prophet ﷺ and saw him kissing his grandson, al-Ḥasan. Al-Aqra' said, 'I have ten children and I have never kissed any one of them!' The Prophet ﷺ replied: 'The one who has no mercy will not be shown any mercy.'<sup>28</sup>

The learned explain that as far as al-Aqra' b. Habis was concerned it was a point of pride that he was not 'soft' but 'tough.' This toxic, fraudulent masculinity was immediately stamped out by the Prophet ﷺ.

A real man is self-sufficient, inward, and pious as described by the Prophet ﷺ. The elite learned this lesson well.

Fudayl b. 'Iyad: 'If you can get by without being known, then do so. What does it bother you that people will not praise you, and what does it bother you that you may be blameworthy in the sight of people if in the Sight of Allah you are praiseworthy?''<sup>29</sup>

Bishr b. al-Harith: 'I do not know a single man who loves fame except that he loses his religion and becomes disgraced.'<sup>30</sup>

He also said: 'A man who loves that everyone should know him will never find the sweetness of the Hereafter.'<sup>31</sup>

Our Messenger ﷺ set a blessed example with the company he kept. The weakest, poorest, and socially downtrodden could access him ﷺ as readily as the chieftains. He sheltered the needy, fed the hungry, protected the vulnerable, guarded others' secrets, and instructed the uninformed. He ﷺ was calm when others were agitated, loving when others were filled with hate, and polite when shown contempt. He ﷺ consistently had the highest standard of character and is the spring of Divinely ordained etiquette.

<sup>28</sup> Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:7 #5997.

<sup>29</sup> Abū Nu'aym, *Ḥilyat al-Awliyā' wa Ṭabaqāt al-Aṣfiyā'* (Miṣr: Maṭba'at al-Sa'ādah, 1974), 8:8.

<sup>30</sup> Ibn Abī Dunyā, *Al-Tawāḍu' wal-Khumūl* (Bayrūt: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmīyah, 1989), 1:90 #72.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: ‘The strong man is not the one who can overpower others. Rather, the strong man is the one who controls himself when he gets angry.’<sup>32</sup>

In another narration, the Messenger of Allah ﷺ said: The strong are not those who defeat people. Rather, the strong are those who defeat their ego.’<sup>33</sup>

He ﷺ dressed similarly to his compatriots. He never owned a throne or regal markings to distinguish himself ﷺ from others. He would walk without an escort and disliked sentries being placed to guard him. He preferred neutral shades of white, green, and black to clothe himself with. When he ate, it was never to his fill, and he always ate while sharing his food with others.

He ﷺ cared for the earth and despised wastefulness and corruption. He was a tree hugger *literally*. He loved animals and instructed his companions to show kindness to them. Today, his way of life and tradition remain intact, preserved not only in print but in conscious spirit.

He loved us so much ﷺ. He would think of those who would believe in him many generations after his generation and weep in longing and hope. He loved us more than some care to consider. Every Messenger of God was allowed a request that would be answered by Allah. All the Messengers utilized their invocation in the worldly life except for Muhammed ﷺ. He ﷺ preserved his invocation to be intercession on the Day of Judgment for those who accept his message!

To ascend we must look back to a man who was sent as the completion of the legacy of prophethood and the perfection of our own individual and collective humanity.

I pray that our character is shaped by his tradition and that our love for him elevates us to his lofty status. I pray we find comfort in this final narration, Ameen.

*A man asked the Prophet about the Hour (i.e., the Day of Judgment) saying, ‘When will the Hour be?’ The Prophet said, ‘What have you prepared for it?’ The man said, ‘Nothing, except that I love Allah and His Apostle.’ **The Prophet** ﷺ said, ‘**You will be with those whom you love.**’ We had never*

<sup>32</sup> Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 8:28 #6114.

<sup>33</sup> Al-Ṭaḥāwī, *Sharḥ Mushkil al-Āthār* (Bayrūt: Mu’assasat al-Risālah, 1994), 4:331 #1645.

*been so glad as we were on hearing that saying of the Prophet (i.e., 'You will be with those whom you love.')* Therefore, I love the Prophet, Abu Bakr and `Umar, and I hope that I will be with them because of my love for them though my deeds are not similar to theirs.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, 5:12 #3677.