



Finding Hope in Faith: An Optimistic Outlook During Hardship

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In the name of Allah, the Most Merciful, the Grantor of Mercy

Given the climate of pessimism and fear that reverberates in modern media and politics, it should come as no surprise that a global study conducted in 2016 by Max Roser, of the University of Oxford and founder of Our World in Data, shows that “pessimism is widespread across the world, particularly in highly developed nations. Merely 6 percent of Americans think the world is improving. Similarly dismal numbers were reported across Europe and in Australia.”¹ Lily Rothman, history and archives editor for TIME, among other authors on the subject, is of the opinion that these negative attitudes are due to the “proliferation of a politics of fear” that is widely exploited today by the media, politicians, and technology.²

But is the picture really that bleak? Even amidst such widespread negativity, there are those voices we all naturally gravitate toward and secretly wish to adopt as our own—those of the optimists who see the proverbial glass as half full. Numerous studies have been, and continue to be, conducted by experts in the fields of psychology, neuroscience, philosophy and religion in an effort to understand the nature of optimism, its sources and its effects on health, happiness and success in life. Professor and co-director of the Center for Philosophy of Religion at Notre Dame, Samuel Newlands stated,

*If you had the ability to choose a single psychological trait that you could improve in yourself, I might recommend optimism because it is correlated with so many other good measures... Optimists tend to have longevity, be very healthy, have great life satisfaction and be successful. And this is holding fixed for economic, religious and socio-status measures.*³

¹ Berezow, Alex. “Only 6% of Americans Think the World is Getting Better.” American Council on Science and Health. July 3, 2016. Accessed February 15, 2017.

<http://acsh.org/news/2016/07/03/only-6-of-americans-think-world-is-getting-better>

² Rothman, Lily. “Why Americans Are More Afraid Than They Used to Be.” Time. January 6, 2016. Accessed February 15, 2017. <http://time.com/4158007/american-fear-history/>

³ Gates, Carrie. “Notre Dame and Cornell awarded \$3.8 million to study hope and optimism.” Notre Dame News//University of Notre Dame. April 23, 2014. Accessed February 15, 2017. <http://news.nd.edu/news/notre-dame-and-cornell-awarded-3-8-million-to-study-hope-and-optimism/>

Newlands suggests that optimism can be chosen and learned. He's not alone. Psychologist Dr. Betty Phillips says,

Many people think that 'the grass is greener' for happy people. Research, however, shows that happy and unhappy people generally have the same number of adverse events in their lives. The difference is in their interpretation of unfortunate life events. Optimistic people are willing and able to make positive life action plans to counteract negative events in their lives, while pessimists are more likely to do nothing, then find themselves sinking into negativism, lethargy, perhaps even depression.⁴

While this gives us valuable insight into human psychology and provides us with useful tools, there is a more fundamental question to ask—the answer to which provides the very foundation and basis for our outlook and behavior as Muslims. What does my faith have to say about optimism? The irony is that much of the fear and pessimism propagated today is at the expense of Islam. Every erroneous and malicious broad-stroked accusation against Islam, attempting to make it the root cause of conflict, evil and violence the world over, thereby rationalizing horrendous policy and governance, only further feeds into the rhetoric of fear with extremism on one side and Islamophobia on the other.⁵

And this is not new—history repeats itself. A brief glimpse into the biography of the Prophet Muhammad ﷺ tells the account of a noble man's struggle to establish justice and peace through worship of the One God against the incessant waves of ignorance, bigotry, persecution, boycott and warfare he and his followers endured. In the end, however, he succeeded in winning hearts and minds, and his mission was ultimately successful because of the message with which he was sent

⁴ Phillips, Betty W. "Optimism and Happiness." Betty W. Phillips, Ph.D., Psychology. February 5, 2017. Accessed February 15, 2017. <http://www.bettyphillipspsychology.com/id15.html>

⁵ Mary Bowerman. "Survey reveals what Americans fear the most." USA Today. October 12, 2016. Accessed February 15, 2017. <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation-now/2016/10/12/survey-top-10-things-americans-fear-most/91934874/>

and the optimism it instilled in him and all those who were influenced by him. Indeed it is Islam itself that necessitates and fuels enduring optimism!

Narrated by Ibn Jaz: “I have not seen anyone who smiled more than the Messenger of Allah.”⁶

We all crave quick and easy solutions and that “go-to” that will lift the weight off our hearts and minds, bringing us relief and joy when we find ourselves facing personal challenges, life’s stresses and even overwhelming fear we may wrestle with from time to time. What follows is the tried and true prescription for one to develop and inculcate lasting optimism, directly from its source—the Qur’an and the Sunnah.

Back to basics

Islam is anchored in mercy, hope and peace. It is through conversation with our Creator, in prayer and in reflecting on His words, that we find our place of comfort—as long as we remain conscientious in safeguarding these acts of worship from becoming mere empty rituals. It was the practice of the Prophet ﷺ that, whenever he felt troubled, he instinctively sought relief and refuge in Allah through prayer.

He is reported to have said, “O Bilal, call *iqamah* for prayer: give us comfort by it.”⁷ Allah tells us the Qur’an is His paramount gift to mankind, one that in and of itself is worth rejoicing over. It is the place of refuge to return to daily for powerful and meaningful counsel from Allah. It brings with it mercy, guidance, relief and comfort for our hearts from doubt, confusion and worry—all of which are in reality the gift of pure and lasting optimism, a gift that ensures a good life while promising us an eternity that surpasses any and all expectations of this world. The

⁶ *Jami` at-Tirmidhi* – Chapters on Virtues English reference: Vol. 1, Book 46, Hadith 3641 Arabic reference: Book 49, Hadith 4002 <https://sunnah.com/urn/635120>

⁷ *Sunan Abi Dawud* – Book of General Behavior (*Kitab Al-Adab*) Hadith 4985. In-book reference: Book 43, Hadith 213 English translation: Book 42, Hadith 4967 <https://sunnah.com/abudawud/43/213>

vast and frequent descriptions of Paradise in the Qur'an and numerous verses of hope that leave no room for despair are in fact distinguishing and critical factors in Islamic doctrine that further establish one's purpose, direction and motivation to worship Allah, seek His pleasure and attain good.

*O mankind, there has to come to you instruction from your Lord and healing for what is in the breast[s] and guidance and mercy for the believers. Say, "In the bounty of Allah and in His mercy – in that let them rejoice; it is better than what they accumulate."*⁸

It is interesting to note that within the same passage Allah goes on to say that despite all that He continues to bless humanity with, most people remain ungrateful.⁹ In this statement, we find one of the key qualities of the believer and the optimist. The one who acknowledges his/her blessings is likely to be appreciative of them and to feel contentment, in turn manifesting gratitude toward Allah in worship and obedience while the one who does not see any good in what he/she has been blessed with will naturally see the world as a place of difficulty and distress, and will fail to recognize the source to turn to. A similarity can be drawn here to the optimist's seeing the glass as being half full while knowing and feeling confident that it will continue to be filled, while the pessimist sees the glass as half empty with no hope of it ever being filled. And although these verses, at the time of revelation, were addressed to the idol worshippers of Makkah,¹⁰ they remain as relevant today in that the vast majority of humanity still remains in pursuit of numerous idols, misguided in placing faith, reliance, and even fear in others; from the people around them to numerous manmade ideologies and material things instead of in Allah Who is the ultimate source of all bounty.

The concept of relying wholeheartedly on Allah to hear one's pleas for help and to believe with certainty that He will respond to them favorably is further established

⁸ 10:57-58 *Sahih International* <http://legacy.quran.com/10>

⁹ 10:59-60 *Sahih International* <http://legacy.quran.com/10>

¹⁰ *Quran Tafsir Ibn Kathir* – None can make Anything Lawful or Unlawful except Allah or Those Whom Allah has allowed to do so. http://www.qtafsir.com/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=2613&Itemid=65

in the following verse in which Allah emphasizes His all-encompassing knowledge of even the most subtle of our affairs. Not even the smallest amount of effort will ever go unnoticed or unrewarded—in fact, it will be recorded; providing a level of satisfaction and comfort even in those moments when the fruit of one's labor is not immediately apparent.

And, [O Muhammad], you are not [engaged] in any matter or recite any of the Qur'an and you [people] do not do any deed except that We are witness over you when you are involved in it. And not absent from your Lord is any [part] of an atom's weight within the earth or within the heaven or [anything] smaller than that or greater but that it is in a clear register.¹¹

Allah concludes with affirmation that people who have chosen belief and righteousness (those who have *taqwa* are conscious of Allah and safeguard themselves against His displeasure in all matters) are so close to Him that they are referred to as *awliya* or close friends and allies of Allah. To them He has promised ultimate relief from fear and grief (two powerful emotions which impede and can destroy optimism), no matter how loud and threatening the voices of harm, dissension, and fear may appear in the moment. In reality, nothing has the power to overcome the optimism of those who recognize Allah as the only One capable of changing outcomes.

Unquestionably, [for] the allies of Allah there will be no fear concerning them, nor will they grieve. Those who believed and were fearing Allah. For them are good tidings [good news] in the worldly life and in the Hereafter. No change is there in the words of Allah; that is what is the great attainment. And let not their speech grieve you. Indeed, honor [due to power] belongs to Allah entirely. He is the Hearing, the Knowing.¹²

¹¹ 10:61 *Sahih International* <http://legacy.quran.com/10>

¹² 10:62-65 *Sahih International* <http://legacy.quran.com/10>

Productive fear —The only thing to fear is not fear itself

No doubt fear is a natural human emotion in situations, both real and perceived, that are potentially dangerous and a cause of pain. Reflect for a moment on the fears you may have lingering in the back of your mind and perhaps kept unspoken to this day. It is likely you are not alone and that we all share in these emotions as they are most often linked to and threaten our aspirations of a good life, particularly the preservation of life itself, our health, mental and social wellbeing, and success.¹³ Islam redirects this fear into something far more productive—for a Muslim, it means channeling one's fear entirely toward Allah with whom lies the ultimate power and capacity to effect outcomes. In this, one is not denying fear—rather experiencing fear and turning to Allah becomes an effective tool to overcome any challenge and unburden oneself by seeking the help of Allah, and more importantly, to get closer to Him through sincere worship and sole reliance on Him.

So where does this self-consuming kind of fear come from? It is mankind's greatest enemy, Shaytan, who is in constant battle with all of humanity, strategically planting destructive thoughts in each of us to stop us in our tracks and derail our efforts to focus on obedience to Allah and seeking His pleasure. The Prophet ﷺ warned us to be acutely aware of Shaytan's subtle presence when he said: "Shaytan flows in the son of Adam like blood flows."¹⁴ Furthermore, the Qur'an sheds light on the psychology of Shaytan in order to both warn us and equip us with the knowledge and tools needed to overcome him. It is through seeking refuge in Allah, showing firm resolve in our thoughts and actions so as to not allow an opening to the door of doubt, while also seeking the company of those who can be consulted for positive and constructive reminders, that we will be successful. Like the optimist who seeks the company and counsel of positive

¹³ Albrecht, Karl, Ph.D. "The (Only) 5 Fears We All Share." *Psychology Today*. March 22, 2012. Accessed February 15, 2017. <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/brainsnacks/201203/the-only-5-fears-we-all-share>

¹⁴ *Al-Adab Al-Mufrad* – English reference: Book 55, Hadith 1288 Arabic reference: Book 1, Hadith 1288 <https://sunnah.com/urn/2212440>

thinkers, while avoiding the company and influence of cynics, we too must be careful of the company we keep.

*Satan threatens you with poverty and orders you to immorality, while Allah promises you forgiveness from Him and bounty. And Allah is all-Encompassing and Knowing.*¹⁵

It is also important to recognize that many of our fears are directly linked to our love of this world (*dunya*).

We were warned of this when the Prophet ﷺ said:

*The people will soon summon one another to attack you as people when eating invite others to share their dish. Someone asked: Will that be because of our small numbers at that time? He replied: No, you will be numerous at that time: but you will be scum and rubbish like that carried down by a torrent, and Allah will take fear of you from the breasts of your enemy and cast wahn into your hearts. Someone asked: What is wahn, Messenger of Allah ﷺ: He replied: Love of the world and dislike of death.*¹⁶

This narration points to the underlying correlation between becoming excessive in one's love of the world and spiritual weakness. One who becomes imbalanced in striving excessively for this material life (*dunya*) above and beyond striving for the everlasting unseen life to come (*akhirah*) becomes vulnerable to falling into despair and fear, and even worse, doubting faith itself, in the face of difficulty and extreme suffering. In contrast, one who is empowered by a heart that is strong in its connection to Allah can continue to fuel faith and optimism in the face of challenge. Spiritual diseases take root within the heart due to diminishing faith and obedience to Allah. The Prophet ﷺ spoke of this condition when he said:

¹⁵ 2:268 *Sahih International* <http://legacy.quran.com/2>

¹⁶ *Sunan Abi Dawud* – Book of Battles Hadith 4297 In-book reference : Book 39, Hadith 7 English translation: Book 38, Hadith 4284 <https://sunnah.com/abudawud/39/7>

*Call upon Allah while being certain of being answered, and know that Allah does not respond to a supplication from the heart of one heedless and occupied by play.*¹⁷

Lessons in spiritual fortitude are taught repeatedly and emphatically through the accounts of the noble prophets whose lives have been documented and preserved in the Qur'an as a means of guidance, motivation and optimism while warning against heedlessness. Each prophet was human, yet sent by Allah to fulfill the lofty task of calling people to His worship alone. Each was faced with seemingly insurmountable trials that would normally lead to tremendous fear and uncertainty. But Allah trained them to rely on Him solely, at times taking away the only sources of worldly comfort and support known to them while instructing them to remain steadfast in calling on Him. He strengthened each with spiritual fortitude and conviction; making them capable of maintaining focus on the mission (the end goal) for which each was sent. They were thereby able to continue to strive, full of hope and certainty in Allah, overcoming fear and becoming exemplary role models for their spiritual strength and leadership, and bringing about tremendous reform and benefit to society at large through the message of guidance. Ultimately these accomplishments were only realized with divine help from Allah. These prophets were never left alone to themselves or abandoned—and neither are we as long as we too call on Him.

Ibrahim (as) left his family behind to travel great distances in the path of Allah. One cannot fathom the enormity of the trials he endured for which Allah blessed him with a legacy of prophets from his future generations; and also for which he attained the distinguished status and title of being known as an intimate friend (*khalil*) of Allah.¹⁸ Yusuf (as), having been abandoned by his own brothers, found himself far away from home in Egypt as a young boy, emerged years later as a noble prophet and leader among the people. He endured a lengthy separation from his beloved father followed by years of unjust imprisonment, yet he never wavered

¹⁷ *Jami' at-Tirmidhi* – Chapters on Supplication Hadith 3479 In-book reference: Book 48, Hadith 110 English translation : Vol. 6, Book 45, Hadith 3479 <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi/48/110>

¹⁸ 4:125 *Sahih International* <http://legacy.quran.com/4>

in his faith and hope in Allah.¹⁹ The Prophet ﷺ, who grew up as an orphan, was rejected and forced out of his home by his own people and tested with the loss of his loved ones—his beloved wife of 25 years, Khadija, and his ardent supporter and uncle, Abu Talib, both were taken from him at the most difficult time of his mission in Makkah. He also had to endure the eventual loss of all but one of his children as well as a number of his closest companions. His faith and optimism were the driving factors that kept him even-tempered and productive in his efforts and led to the establishment of the model community that would become the beacon of guidance for future generations.

The *seerah* is, in fact, replete with examples of optimism shown by the Prophet ﷺ consistently throughout his life: his contentment and grateful demeanor, the manner in which he made *dua*, the way he dealt with people, always assuming the best of them and ever hopeful for them—even those staunchly opposed to him, and in his positive outlook toward the future despite much hardship.

There are far too many to list for the purpose of this article, so I will briefly mention a couple of instances that stand out. Of the most difficult of days for the Prophet ﷺ was when he suffered extremely harsh treatment at the hands of the people of Taif who quite literally hurled stones at him, driving him out of town in a hostile show of rejection. When given the choice by Allah to destroy them, he wanted them spared out of hope that Allah would guide their descendants. Indeed, the people of Taif eventually embraced Islam some years later, during the lifetime of the Prophet ﷺ.²⁰ During his migration from Makkah to Madinah with his close companion Abu Bakr (r) at his side, they both took refuge in a cave to escape those intent on capturing and killing him. It was during those moments of intense fear and concern on the part of Abu Bakr (r) for the life of the Prophet ﷺ that he comforted his companion with the words, “Do not grieve; indeed Allah is with

¹⁹ “...Indeed, no one despairs of relief from Allah except the disbelieving people.” 12:87 *Sahih International*
<http://legacy.quran.com/12>

²⁰ Mubārakpūrī, Ṣafī Al-Rahmān. *The Sealed Nectar (Ar-Raheequl-Makhtum): Biography of the noble prophet*. Riyadh: Darussalam, 2002. Pgs. 163-165 and 522-524

us.”²¹ Some of the most comforting and optimistic verses of the Qur’an were revealed as reassurance during the early days of prophethood:

*By the morning brightness
And [by] the night when it covers with darkness,
Your Lord has not taken leave of you [O Muhammad] nor has He detested [you].
And the Hereafter is better for you than the first [life].
And your Lord is going to give you, and you will be satisfied.
Did He not find you an orphan and give [you] refuge?
And He found you lost and guided [you],
And He found you poor and made [you] self-sufficient.
So as for the orphan, do not oppress [him].
And as for the petitioner, do not repel [him].
But as for the favor of your Lord, report [it].²²*

*For indeed, with hardship [will be] ease.
Indeed, with hardship [will be] ease.
So when you have finished [your duties], then stand up [for worship].
And to your Lord direct [your] longing.²³*

Mercy like no other

A core belief in Islam is that every experience in life occurs ultimately in accordance with the will of Allah and contains inherent good that will far outweigh the evil that seems more apparent at the time. This is due to Allah’s boundless mercy to all of His creation and especially due to His attribute of being the Most Merciful (*Ar-Raheem*) to those who have faith in Him:

²¹ 9:40 Sahih International <http://legacy.quran.com/9>

²² 93:1-11 Sahih International <http://legacy.quran.com/9>

²³ 94:5-8 Sahih International <http://legacy.quran.com/94>

*It is He who confers blessing upon you, and His angels [ask Him to do so] that He may bring you out from darkness into the light. And ever is He, to the believers, Merciful.*²⁴

When faced with situations that appear harmful or when in fear, one finds comfort in reminding oneself of this divine mercy and that there will be benefit and ease in staying the course. It can be likened to the hesitation one feels in anticipation of the bitterness of the pill while realizing the medication it is about to deliver contains relief and cure. Furthermore, it is from Allah's divine wisdom to give us a taste of harm in order that we are able to recognize good when we experience it, that we may in turn show appreciation for it, and strive harder for it that much more.

Surah Yasin tells the story of the believer who tried to convince his townspeople to accept the call of the messengers sent by Allah to guide them. When the town rejected the man, choosing to defend their idolatry and threaten his life, he spoke these words: "Should I take other than Him [false] deities [while], if the Most Merciful [*Ar-Rahman*] intends for me some adversity, their intercession will not avail me at all, nor can they save me?"²⁵ Referring to Allah by His mercy in the same sentence that suggests being afflicted with harm at first glance may seem contradictory, but Allah Himself explains this concept further. His mercy becomes apparent in knowing there is much wisdom and good behind His placing us in adversity.

Firstly, calamity is often a wake-up call to turn back to Allah, particularly for those who have distanced themselves from Him. It illustrates His love for His slaves in wanting good for them—in wanting to purify them of their sins and bring them back to the path of guidance.²⁶

Corruption has appeared throughout the land and sea by [reason of] what the hands of people have earned so He may let them taste part of [the

²⁴ 33:43 *Sahih International* <http://legacy.quran.com/33>

²⁵ 36:23 *Sahih International* <http://legacy.quran.com/36>

²⁶ Philips, Abu Ameenah Bilal. *Tafseer Soorah Yaa Seen – A commentary on the 36th Chapter of the Qur'aan*. Islamic Online University. Pg. 55

consequence of] what they have done that perhaps they will return [to righteousness].²⁷

Secondly, the patience and faith shown at such times are means of reward, a rising in rank and closeness to Allah.

And We will surely test you with something of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth and lives and fruits, but give good tidings to the patient, who, when disaster strikes them, say, “Indeed we belong to Allah, and indeed to Him we will return.” Those are the ones upon whom are blessings from their Lord and mercy. And it is those who are the [rightly] guided.²⁸

No doubt Allah loves His prophets, the noblest of people to walk the face of this earth—yet they were made to endure the most severe tests, showing us that adversity is also a sign of Allah’s immense love for His slaves. Abu Sa’eed Al-Khudri narrated:

I entered upon the Prophet ﷺ when he was suffering from a fever. I placed my hand on him and felt heat with my hand from above the blanket. I said: ‘O Messenger of Allah, how hard it is for you!’ He said: ‘We (Prophets) are like that. The trial is multiplied for us and so is the reward.’ I said: ‘O Messenger of Allah, which people are most severely tested?’ He said: ‘The Prophets.’ I said: ‘O Messenger of Allah, then who?’ He said: ‘Then the righteous, some of whom were tested with poverty until they could not find anything except a cloak to put around themselves. One of them will rejoice at calamity as one of you would rejoice at ease.’²⁹

A third reason can be seen in examples of what on the surface appeared to be evil occurrences, but behind which lay the divine wisdom of averting greater harm. The story of Musa (as) in Surah Kahf contains vivid depictions of the reaction and

²⁷ 30:41 Sahih International <http://legacy.quran.com/30>

²⁸ 2:155-157 Sahih International <http://legacy.quran.com/2> - English translation: Vol. 5, Book 36, Hadith 4024 <https://sunnah.com/ibnmajah/36/99>

²⁹ Sunan Ibn Majah – Book of Tribulations Hadith 4024 In-book reference: Book 36, Hadith 99

subsequent questions that arose from Musa (as) as he witnessed what appeared to him to be a blatant crime when the boat of a poor community was deliberately broken—the divine wisdom behind which was to save it from being seized by their unjust ruler. Likewise, he witnessed the murder of a young boy only to find out later that Allah did not want the boy’s righteous parents to suffer the hardship of a corrupt and disbelieving son had he lived; but rather Allah wished to replace the boy with a righteous child instead. Musa (as) then witnessed the rebuilding of a collapsing wall in a village he came to, whose people had refused him hospitality. As it turned out, the broken wall would have exposed the wealth hidden beneath it which had been left by a pious father for his orphan children to inherit; so Allah willed that it be kept safe until they were able to retrieve it.³⁰

Trials are also a sign of the magnitude of divine mercy in that Allah chooses not to wipe us out altogether when He could easily do so—indeed trials do come from Him and only He can remove them. Through hardship He gives people opportunity after opportunity to stop, reflect, and then to return to Him.

An article published by Public Radio International (PRI) in 2016 looked at the increased rate of conversion to Islam in the United States following the attacks of 9/11, despite the onslaught of negative media coverage and the rise of Islamophobia and hate crimes committed against Muslims. It is this negative attention and hostile climate in the wake of tragedy that became the catalyst for so many to explore Islam only to discover its true essence which encompasses faith and justice with an optimistic outlook.

According to Asma Afsaruddin, professor of Near Eastern Languages and Cultures at Indiana University Bloomington, there has been heightened interest in Islam in the last 15 years precisely because of the publicity surrounding it. ‘Despite Islamophobia, thoughtful Americans who are

³⁰ 18:65-82 *Sahih International* <http://legacy.quran.com/18>

curious about the real nature of Islam might go out of their way to discover the teachings of the religion from reliable sources,' she says.³¹

Allah reveals the innate nature of humanity's need for Him in speaking of those, even farthest away from belief, who will call on Him out of desperation when they find themselves in dire straits.³² Regardless of one's level of piety, the believer is always striving to be closer to Allah and to reflect on his/her responses to the ups and downs of life, choosing to use them wisely to atone for sins, correct one's trajectory and to seek Allah's help and good from every situation. This is a far more productive and practical approach that brings optimism even to the darkest of circumstances, believing wholeheartedly that, "Allah does not charge a soul except [with that within] its capacity."³³ The Prophet ﷺ described this optimism when he said:

Strange are the ways of a believer for there is good in every affair of his and this is not the case with anyone else except in the case of a believer for if he has an occasion to feel delight, he thanks (God), thus there is a good for him in it, and if he gets into trouble and shows resignation (and endures it patiently), there is a good for him in it.³⁴

Hasn't Allah taken care of you all this time? You are still here—no matter how many bumps and scrapes you experienced along the way. Yet in our lowest moments it is easy to forget all that Allah has already blessed us with, and all that He continues to bless us with to the point that we take blessings for granted. This is that lens of pessimism which can only see the glass as half empty. It is important to

³¹ Habib, Samra. "Islamophobia is on the rise in the US. But so is Islam." Public Radio International. September 9, 2016. Accessed February 15, 2017.

<https://www.pri.org/stories/2016-09-09/muslims-america-are-keeping-and-growing-faith-even-though-haters-tell-the-m-not>.

³² And when waves come over them like canopies, they supplicate Allah, sincere to Him in religion. But when He delivers them to the land, there are [some] of them who are moderate [in faith]. And none rejects Our signs except everyone treacherous and ungrateful. (31:32) *Sahih International* <http://legacy.quran.com/31>

³³ 2:286 *Sahih International* <http://legacy.quran.com/2>

³⁴ *Sahih Muslim – The Book of Zuhd and Softening of Hearts* Hadith 2999 In-book reference: Book 55, Hadith 82 USC-MSA web (English) reference: Book 42, Hadith 7138 <https://sunnah.com/muslim/55/82>

remember the pull of Shaytan behind it; always ready and eager to suggest negative thoughts.

He plants seeds of comparison in the mind, beckoning you to look toward those who appear to have material abundance where you might lack it, conjuring up an image and false expectations of a “perfect” life you deserve; eventually trying to lead you to despair in the mercy of Allah as he so infamously did himself.

In reality it is our faith, “There is none worthy of worship other than Allah” (*la ilaaha illa Allah*) that quite literally trumps everything else in this and every universe! How perfect does your life suddenly become when you think of those who appear to have been given far less than you; those who may be missing a critical function in their physical or mental capacity? How perfect does your life appear when you travel abroad to far less developed environments where basic necessities such as clean water cannot be taken for granted? How perfect and blessed is your life when you witness misguidance, injustice, hatred and bigotry around you knowing you have the gift of true guidance and lasting optimism? It is none other than the One who gives life who defines the “good life” as:

Whoever does righteousness, whether male or female, while he is a believer – We will surely cause him to live a good life, and We will surely give them their reward [in the Hereafter] according to the best of what they used to do.

35

The Messenger of Allah ﷺ summarized the true objective of ensuring the best outcome in this life and the next when he said:

Whoever’s greatest concern is this world, Allah will scatter his affairs and place poverty between his eyes, and nothing of this world will come to him except what was already written for him. But, whoever has the next world as

³⁵ 16:97 *Sahih International* <http://legacy.quran.com/16> - Arabic reference: Book 37, Hadith 2653

*his intention, Allah will gather his affairs and place his richness in his heart and the world will come to him submissively.*³⁶

Ibn Qayyim eloquently sums up this concept of Allah’s mercy and love for His slave in the statement,

*Had Allah lifted the veil off the reality of His delicate dealings, [unnoticed] kindness, and how He plans for him in ways he realizes and ways he doesn’t realize – his heart would melt out of love for Allah and longing for Him, and would fall in gratitude to Him. However, the heart has been veiled from witnessing this due to its attachment to the world of lusts and its focus on material factors. By that, it has been barred from its complete bliss, and [even] that is preordained by the Mighty, the All-Knowing.*³⁷

No Room for Despair – The Way Forward

Believing the Qur’an provides the best instruction and counsel, it is important to look at what is prescribed to be the best course of action when the situation one is faced with appears to have no apparent way out—when there is simply no visible light at the end of the tunnel. Such was the case when the tables suddenly turned at Uhud with an unexpected onslaught from the Makkans at the eleventh hour when they charged at the Prophet ﷺ and his companions, causing numerous casualties and chaos among the Muslims to the extent that many thought the Prophet ﷺ had been killed, while others began to flee in sheer panic and confusion. Yet a handful of men remained around the Prophet ﷺ, responding to his call, despite the imminent threat and fear. It is about those companions that Allah said:

Those to whom hypocrites said, “Indeed, the people have gathered against you, so fear them.” But it [merely] increased them in faith, and they said, “Sufficient for us is Allah, and [He is] the best Disposer of affairs.” So they returned with favor from Allah and bounty, no harm having touched them.

³⁶ Jami’ At-Tirmidhi Chapters on the description of the Day of Judgment, *Ar-Riqaq and Al-Wara’* Vol. 4, Book 11, Hadith 2465 <https://sunnah.com/urn/677710>

³⁷ Al-Jawziyyah, Ibn Al Qayyim. *Tareeq al-Hijratayn*. Pg.180.

*And they pursued the pleasure of Allah, and Allah is the possessor of great bounty. That is only Satan who frightens [you] of his supporters. So fear them not, but fear Me, if you are [indeed] believers.*³⁸

These verses instill the importance of keeping one's resolve at the very moment it would be toughest to do so. Though one's circumstances may at times change for what appears to be the worse, possibly requiring deliberate and even immediate response, the heart must remain resolute! Those who stood firm that day with the Prophet ﷺ and chose not to despair of the situation before them gained Allah's pleasure, were increased in faith as a result and came out of it better than they could have imagined. In an unexpected turn of events, the enemy forces chose to retreat—Allah's divine will and wisdom had decreed the best outcome.

While the heart is to remain firm, one must continue to strive both spiritually and practically to move forward in life. This is beautifully depicted in the *hadith* of the Prophet ﷺ in which he likened life to a journey in which this world is but a brief stop for the traveler when he said, "What have I to do with the world? I am like a rider who had sat under a tree for its shade, then went away and left it."³⁹ A powerful image comes alive in visualizing life as a journey. It diminishes the value and thereby attention on this world, and keeps one focused instead on the road ahead to the final destination—and along this road, will, at times, be obstacles. Imagine what would happen if one was to stop moving while trying to cross a river; one would eventually either drown in its depths or be pulled by the strong current in choosing not to at the very least attempt to swim. Similarly, Shaytan's purpose is to distract us, to stall us and eventually to drown us.

As Musa (as) and his followers were making their escape from the Pharaoh's army, they found themselves at the shoreline with the army in intense pursuit at the rear. The reaction of the people shows a collective gasp of fright and resignation in a moment of weakness seeing the deep water before their eyes, but Musa (as)

³⁸ 3:173-175 Sahih International <http://legacy.quran.com/3>

³⁹ At-Tirmidhi – Riyadh as-Saliheen – The Book of Miscellany Book 1, Hadith 486 <https://sunnah.com/riyadussaliheen/1/486>

responded with the necessary resolve and conviction leaving no room for despair—Allah opened the way forward in the most remarkable and unimaginable way.

And when the two groups saw one another, the companions of Moses said, “Indeed, we are to be overtaken!” [Moses] said, “No! Indeed, with me is my Lord; He will guide me.” Then We inspired to Moses, “Strike with your staff the sea,” and it parted, and each portion was like a great towering mountain.⁴⁰

It is human to want the easy way out in any situation; but Allah knows what we are capable of handling—and He may at times decree a more arduous path for us than we would want out of His infinite mercy and wisdom for our own benefit. Clearly our Ummah is currently facing a crisis on many fronts—we are witnessing rampant oppression, injustice and loss of life, leaving many feeling helpless, hopeless, and even questioning the very existence of God in a time of desperate need. The way forward starts with the very same faith, fortitude and optimism Allah guided His messengers and in turn all of us to; we must expect only the best from Him in return. And this is not wishful thinking—Ibn Qayyim defines the distinction between optimism and wishful thinking as:

The difference between it [hope] and merely wishful thinking is that mere wishful thinking involves laziness wherein the person neither exerts himself, nor strives [to achieve what he wishes for]. Hope, however, entails striving, exertion and beautiful reliance. The first is like the one who wishes that the earth would plant and sow its own seeds for him. The second is like the one who [actually] tills the soil, plants the seed and then hopes that crops will grow. This is why the Gnostics (‘arifun) are agreed that hope is not correct, except if accompanied by action.⁴¹

⁴⁰ 26:61-63 Sahih International <http://legacy.quran.com/26>

⁴¹ Madarij al-Salikeen, 2/27-28 – The Exquisite Pearl Al-Sa’di, ‘Abd Al-Rahman. London, UK: The Jawziyyah Press, 2002. Pg. 8

Stay Focused – The Daily Dose

Every prayer, be it the obligatory (*salah*) or remembrance of Allah as taught by the Prophet ﷺ, consistency in one's daily routine in the form of supplication, recitation of the Qur'an, and other acts of worship is designed to bring your attention back to the journey and the way forward. All of these provide you with the road map as well as the ability to detach yourself often, even if momentarily, from the distractions of this world toward the true source of all help, relief, resolve and optimism: Allah!

*And when you have completed the prayer, remember Allah standing, sitting, or [lying] on your sides...*⁴²

Such a bond with Allah enables one to hand over every affair to the Master while staying active and engaged on the course ahead with complete reliance (*tawwakul*) on Allah to direct the best outcome. This is described in a *hadith* of the Prophet ﷺ in which he said:

*Know that if the entire creation were to gather together to do something to benefit you – you would never get any benefit except that Allah had written (it) for you. And if they were to gather to do something to harm you – you would never be harmed except that Allah had written (it) for you. The pens are lifted and the pages are dried.*⁴³

Frequent remembrance of Allah also brings about another key component of optimism discussed earlier—gratitude. Not only is gratitude a rewarded act of worship; but going back to the glass being half full, gratitude naturally fuels a sense of inner peace, contentment and a positive outlook on the future. Allah commands us:

⁴² 4:103 *Sahih International* <http://legacy.quran.com/4>

⁴³ *Jami' at-Tirmidhi* – Chapters on the description of the Day of Judgment, *ar-Riqaq and al-Wara'*- English reference: Vol. 4, Book 11, Hadith 2516 Arabic reference: Book 37, Hadith 2706 <https://sunnah.com/urn/678220>

So remember Me; I will remember you. And be grateful to Me and do not deny Me.⁴⁴ ...And [remember] when your Lord proclaimed, 'If you are grateful, I will surely increase you [in favor]; but if you deny, indeed, My punishment is severe.'⁴⁵

Finally, the significance of supplication (*du'a*) cannot be emphasized enough as the primary means of attaining closeness to Allah by exhibiting hope in His mercy, forgiveness and generosity. *Du'a* is the very essence of worship which demonstrates that only Allah is worthy of worship and it can be understood as the most powerful tool at our disposal with which to seek protection from harm and to secure good in this world and the next. The Prophet ﷺ instructed us to ask from Allah with the certainty of being answered⁴⁶ and that,

The supplication of every one of you will be granted if he does not get impatient and say (for example): 'I supplicated my Rabb [Lord] but my prayer has not been granted'.⁴⁷

One finds optimism and comfort in knowing that Allah will respond:

Is He [not best] who responds to the desperate one when he calls upon Him and removes evil and makes you inheritors of the earth? Is there a deity with Allah? Little do you remember.⁴⁸

When we study the life of the Prophet ﷺ as the living example of how to understand and respond to Allah's revelation, his optimism is seamless and apparent as part of his nature and outlook, and clearly understood to be abundantly supplied by his faith in Allah and reliance on Him for guidance, mercy and all the good of this world and the hereafter. Progress is not measured by the wins of this

⁴⁴ 2:152 Sahih International <http://legacy.quran.com/2>

⁴⁵ 14:7 Sahih International <http://legacy.quran.com/14>

⁴⁶ *Jami' at-Tirmidhi* – Chapters on Supplication Hadith 3479 In-book reference: Book 48, Hadith 110 English translation : Vol. 6, Book 45, Hadith 3479 <https://sunnah.com/tirmidhi/48>

⁴⁷ *Riyadh as-Saliheen* – The Book of *Du'a* Book 17, Hadith 35 Arabic/English book reference : Book 17, Hadith 1499 <https://sunnah.com/riyadussaliheen/17/35>

⁴⁸ 27:62 Sahih International <http://legacy.quran.com/27>

world alone; rather it is weighted heavily in sound intentions and the sincere effort one makes to seek the pleasure of Allah—hand in hand with gratitude and optimism that can only come from true faith and conviction. As we struggle to find our way forward in turbulent times, we hold the belief in a brighter future for humanity.

We continue to make every effort within our means to practically live and share this message of guidance, justice and peace Allah has blessed us with—not only is this the basis for optimism to take root within each of us; but, as the Prophet ﷺ exemplified, it is this optimism that will become apparent and thus the means to win the hearts and minds of others we encounter along the way. As Jabir b. ‘Abdullah reported:

*I heard Allah’s Messenger ﷺ say three days before his death: None of you should die but hoping only good from Allah, the Exalted and Glorious.*⁴⁹

⁴⁹ *Sahih Muslim* – The Book of Paradise, its Description, its Bounties and its Inhabitants Hadith 2877
In-book reference: Book 53, Hadith 100 USC-MSA web (English) reference : Book 40, Hadith 6877
<https://sunnah.com/muslim/53/100>