

'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Samurah narrated that God's Messenger said to him:

1

'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Samurah! Do not seek a position of authority;

2

for if you are given it at your request, you will bear the responsibility for it;

3

and if you are given it without seeking it, you will be helped.

4

And if you say an oath then find that an alternative is better, atone for the oath and do what is better.⁽¹⁾

1 Related by al-Bukhari, 6622; Muslim, 1652.

From the Qur'an

- ❦ Do not allow your oaths in the name of God to become an obstacle to your being kind and God-fearing, or to promoting peace among people. God hears all and knows all. ﴿2: 224﴾
- ❦ God will not take you to task for those of your oaths which you may utter without thought, but He will take you to task for oaths which you have sworn in earnest. The breaking of an oath must be atoned for by the feeding of ten needy people with more or less the same food as you normally give to your own families, or by clothing them, or by the freeing of one slave. He who cannot afford any of these shall fast three days instead. This shall be the atonement for your oaths when you have sworn [and broken them]. But be mindful of your oaths. Thus God makes clear to you His revelations, so that you may give thanks. ﴿5: 89﴾

The Narrator

Abu Sa'īd 'Abd al-Raḥmān ibn Samurah ibn Ḥabīb belonged to the 'Abd Shams branch of the Quraysh. He was one of the Quraysh nobility and he embraced Islam on the day of the Prophet's takeover of Makkah. His original name was 'Abd al-Ka'bah, but when he embraced Islam the Prophet gave him his new name, 'Abd al-Raḥmān. He joined the Prophet on the Expedition of Tabuk. He later took part in the conquest of Iraq, and fought in Khurāsān during 'Uthmān's reign. He was the commander of the Muslim army that conquered the Sijistān province and the city of Kabul. He died in Basrah in Year 51 AH, 669 CE.

Summary

To be responsible for people's affairs is a position of great trust, which involves serious risks. Therefore, it is not proper for anyone to seek it. If it is given to a person without seeking it, God will help him to discharge his duties. The hadith also tells us that it is wrong to make one's oath a barrier preventing one from doing what is best. It is better to atone for his oath and do what is best.



Message and Meaning



The Prophet (peace be upon him) makes it clear that a Muslim should not seek a position of authority, such as that of governor or minister. Such a position represents a heavy responsibility and weighty trust. When Abu Dharr requested that the Prophet give him such an appointment, the Prophet said to him: 'Messenger of God, will you not give me some post?' He stroked my shoulder with his hand then said: 'Abu Dharr, you are weak and it is a trust. On the Day of Judgement, it will be a [cause of] disgrace and regret, except for one who rightfully takes it and fulfils the duties incumbent on him through it'.⁽¹⁾



The Prophet then states that when a man requests such an appointment and is given it, he will be left to his own devices, getting no help from God through its difficulties. Thus, in most cases, he will not achieve what he wants. Hence, the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: 'By God, we do not assign such positions to anyone who requests them or is keen to have them'.⁽²⁾

Excepted are the prophets. They are immune to sin, and they do not covet any position of government. Prophet Joseph said to the King of Egypt: 'Give me charge of the store-houses of the land. I am able to look after them with wisdom'. (12: 55) However, a person who is certain that he is well qualified for a certain position and wants to run it fairly and for people's benefit may seek that position.



If a position of authority is given to a person, without seeking it, and he appeals for God's help and exerts his efforts to discharge his responsibilities, God will certainly help him through its difficulties and grant him success in his endeavours.



The Prophet then says that a Muslim should not make an oath he has said a barrier preventing him from doing something good. If he says an oath and then realizes that something else is better, it would be good for him to atone for his oath and do what is better.

A person who swears to do something sinful, such as the severance of a tie of kinship, or staying away from his wife, or to lodge an official complaint against a debtor, or something similar, is advised to atone for his oath and maintain his tie of kinship, stay with his wife, or give his debtor a period of grace. Each one of these is better than sticking to the oath he said.

1 Related by Muslim, 1825.

2 Related by Muslim, 1733.



Implementation

1

Make sure never to seek a position of authority over people. Pray to God to keep you safe and grant you what is good for you. You may be given such a position of authority and find yourself unable to discharge your responsibility.

2

A person who is keen for safety in the life to come must not aspire to high positions in this life. God says: 'We grant that happy life in the Hereafter to those who do not seek to exalt themselves on earth or to spread corruption. The future belongs to the God-fearing'. (28: 83)

3

Beware of the ultimate outcome of high position. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: 'There will soon come a time when a man would wish that he might have fallen from a high planet and had not been in charge of anything of people's affairs'.⁽¹⁾

4

The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: 'Whoever is placed in charge of ten people or more shall be in chains on the Day of Judgement, with his hands tied up to his neck. His piety will release him, while his sin will ruin him. It [meaning a position of authority] invites blame at the beginning, causes regret midway, and ends up with disgrace on the Day of Judgement'.⁽²⁾

5

'Sa'd ibn Abi Waqqāṣ was tending his camels when his son 'Umar came. When Sa'd saw him, he said: I appeal to God for refuge from the evil of this rider. He dismounted, and said to him: Are you looking after your camels and sheep, leaving people to compete for kingship? Sa'd slapped him on his chest and said: Be silent. I heard God's Messenger (peace be upon him) say: "God loves a servant who is pious, content and keeping low"⁽³⁾

6

Those who strive for a position of authority and seek to govern Muslim people should fear God. They hope to be able to satisfy some low desires and have the luxuries of this present low life. God leaves them to their own devices with the result that they are lost and they cause a great loss. Ultimately, they lose both the present life and the life to come.

7

Rulers should not appoint a person who seeks high position, because the ultimate result of appointing such a person is failure. The Prophet (peace be upon him) said: 'By God, we do not assign such positions to anyone who requests them or is keen to have them'.⁽⁴⁾

8

If a high position is offered to you, without you seeking it, and you find that you have the qualities and honesty that enable you to manage people's affairs well, you may accept it, seeking God's help.

1 Related by Ahmad, 1028.

2 Related by Ahmad, 22656.

3 Related by Muslim, 2965. At the time of this incident, Sa'd could have been easily chosen as caliph, had he offered himself. He was one of the two last survivors among the ten of the Prophet's companions publicly given the happy news that they will be in Heaven. He accepted Islam in its very early days, when he was only 16.

4 Related by Muslim, 1733.

9

A ruler should take extra care in choosing his top officials and assistants. He is responsible for their conduct.

10

An idle oath is discounted. A Muslim should not worry about oaths that one unintentionally pronounces.

11

If you swear to do something, whether a good deed or a sinful action or something permissible, then you discover that honouring your oath stops you from doing what is better, you should atone for your oath and do what is better. For example, a scholar may swear not to speak throughout the day, but then realizes that people are in need of a fatwa or advice. He should give his fatwa or advice and atone for his oath.

12

The proper thing is for a person to do as one's oath requires. One should not break one's oath except to take a better course of action. Suppose that a person swears not to wear a particular garment for a week. Honouring his oath is better than breaking his oath and atoning for it. God says: 'Be mindful of your oaths'. (5: 89)



