

'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd narrated: God's Messenger, the truthful and who is given the truth, said:

1 The creation of any one of you is brought together in his mother's womb for forty days, then he is a clinging cell mass for a similar period, then he is an embryo for a similar period.

2 Then God sends him an angel who is commanded to write four words: he writes down his means of livelihood, lifespan, actions and whether he is happy or unhappy.

3 Then the breath of life is blown into him.

4 Any one of you may behave like the people of Hell until there is but an arm's length between him and it, but that which has been written overtakes him. He will behave like the people of Heaven and thus he enters it.

5 And any one of you may behave like the people of Heaven until there is but an arm's length between him and it, but that which has been written overtakes him. He will behave like the people of Hell and thus he enters it.¹

1 Related by al-Bukhari, 3332; Muslim, 2643.

From the Qur'an

﴿Indeed, We create man out of the essence of clay, (12) then We place him, a gamete, in a safe place of rest. (13) Then We create out of the gamete a clinging cell mass, and out of the clinging cell mass We create an embryo. Then We create within the embryo bones, then We clothe the bones with flesh. We then bring this into being as another creation. Exalted be God, the best of creators. (14) And then, after all this, you are destined to die; (15) and then, you shall be restored to life on the Day of Resurrection.﴾ (23: 12-16)

﴿[It is God], the Almighty, the Ever-Merciful, (6) who makes most excellent everything that He creates. He begins the creation of man out of clay; (7) then He causes his progeny to be begotten out of the essence of a humble fluid; (8) then He fashions him and breathes into him of His spirit. Thus He endows you, mankind, with hearing and sight and hearts. Yet seldom are you grateful!﴾ (32: 6-9)

﴿They question you about the spirit. Say, 'The [knowledge of the nature of the] spirit belongs to my Lord alone. You, [mankind], have been granted but little knowledge'.﴾ (17: 85)

﴿Some people worship God on the border-line [of faith]. If good befalls such a person, he is content; but if a trial assails him, he turns away utterly; thus losing this world and the life to come. This is, indeed, a loss beyond compare.﴾ (22: 11)

﴿Never will God let people go astray after He has given them guidance until He has made plain to them all what they should avoid. God has perfect knowledge of all things.﴾ (9: 115)

The Narrator

In this hadith, the Prophet mentions some stages of the development of a human pregnancy and when life is blown into it, as well as the writing of what God has determined for it.

The Prophet (peace be upon him) then mentions that the final deeds a person does determine that person's fate in the life to come. Whoever concludes his life doing what the people of Heaven do will be in Heaven and whoever concludes his life doing as the people of Hell will join them there.

Summary

Abu 'Abd al-Raḥmān 'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd ibn Ghāfil ibn Ḥabīb who belonged to the Hudhayl tribe was one of the very early companions of the Prophet (peace be upon him). He was the first to recite the Qur'an in public in Makkah. He migrated to Abyssinia, then to Madinah and took part in the Battle of Badr and all other military expeditions with the Prophet. He took care of the Prophet's sandals, helping him to wear them when he moved, and kept them for him when the Prophet sat down. He died in Madinah in Year 32 or 33 AH, 654 CE.



Message and Meaning

'Abdullāh ibn Mas'ūd is narrating here a hadith that includes some matters that are known only to God, as they relate to the realm beyond our human perception. Therefore, Ibn Mas'ūd describes the Prophet as 'the truthful, and who is given the truth'. This applies to whatever he tells of this world or the world beyond.



1

The Prophet (peace be upon him) mentions the stages of development of a human embryo during its mother's pregnancy. It starts as the woman's egg fertilized by the man's sperm in the mother's body. As it reproduces, it becomes a cell mass that clings to the uterus. It then develops into an embryo.



2

When it has become an embryo, God commands the angel who looks after pregnancies to write down what is assigned to that person: its livelihood, life span, actions and whether happy or unhappy.

The angel writes other things as well, such as whether the embryo is to be a male or female,⁽¹⁾ its physical form, temperament and manners.⁽²⁾ However, the hadith mentions only the first four because they are the most important, while the others are incorporated to them.

What the angel writes is different from what God has written in the Imperishable Tablet kept with Him. The angel's writing is liable to be erased, changed or replaced for reasons God determines, such as answering prayers and the person's good deeds. What God states in the Imperishable Tablet, which is also called *Umm al-Kitāb* or the Mother Book, is never changed. God says: 'God annuls or confirms what He pleases. With Him is the source of all revelation'. (13: 39)



3

After this, God blows the spirit into the embryo and it becomes alive by God's will. How the spirit is blown is something that God keeps to Himself. He has not given us any information about it. He says: 'They question you about the spirit. Say, 'The [knowledge of the nature of the] spirit belongs to my Lord alone. You, [mankind], have been granted but little knowledge'. (17: 85) We believe in what Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) has told us as given by God and we most certainly believe in God's limitless power, as He describes it: 'When He intends something to be, He only says to it, 'Be', and it is'. (36: 82)

This occurs when the embryo has taken human form. God says: 'Mankind! If you are in doubt as to the resurrection, remember that We have created you out of dust, then out of a gamete, then out of a clinging cell mass, then out of an organized and unorganized embryo, so that We might make things clear to you'. (22: 5) The organized embryo is that which has been given human shape and form, while the unorganized one is an embryo that has not yet been given complete form.



4

The Prophet (peace be upon him) then tell us that man's deeds are considered on the basis of his final ones. What is decided is what God had originally known and willed for a person of happiness or misery. Thus, a person may for a long time do what the people of Hell normally do, but when his time of death draws near, repentance is facilitated for him by God, and He accepts such repentance. That person then concludes life with some good deeds and, therefore, he is

1 Related by al-Bukhari, 3333; Muslim, 2646.

2 Related by Ishāq ibn Rāhawayh in *al-Musnad*, Vol. 2, p. 344; al-Ajiri in *al-Sharīah*, P. 365.

admitted into Heaven. This is in line with what God has written in the Imperishable Tablet for that person, and what the angel writes when God sends him to the embryo which is still in its mother's belly.



The reverse is also true, with a person doing like the people of Heaven for a long time, but when he draws near to it, as his time of life is approaching its end, he is overtaken by what God had written for him. He will then do like the people of Hell and die doing such deeds. As such, he goes to Hell.

This does not mean that a believer may unintentionally go astray after having followed God's guidance, having done nothing wrong. It is an act of God's wisdom and justice. For example, such a man may worship God in ignorance and for personal gain: if he feels that he is given in plenty, he will express thanks, but if his circumstances are straitened, he will deny God's favour and be ungrateful. God describes such a person thus: 'Some people worship God on the border-line [of faith]. If good befalls such a person, he is content; but if a trial assails him, he turns away utterly; thus losing this world and the life to come. This is, indeed, a loss beyond compare'. (22: 11) Another example of such a person is that of a hypocrite, as the Prophet says: 'A person may appear to people to do what the people of Heaven do, but he is really one of the people of Hell; and another may appear to people to do what the people of Hell do, but he is really one of the people of Heaven'.⁽¹⁾

That a person turns into someone who does badly after having being thought to be pious is very rare. Nonetheless, it does happen, demonstrating that the determining factor is the type of deeds one does towards the end of one's life. Therefore, no one should think too highly of one's own deeds. All this is an aspect of God's favour and abounding grace. People change course starting to do good after having done badly, and this happens frequently. As for abandoning what is good and picking up evil, this is very rare. Otherwise, people would be tempted.⁽²⁾

What happens frequently and consistently is that the happy people naturally choose to do good deeds, while the wretched immerse themselves in sin. 'Alī narrated that the Prophet (peace be upon him) said: 'For every one of you, for every created being, God has assigned its place in Heaven or Hell, and has been recorded either wretched or happy'. A man said: 'Messenger of God, should we not, then, be resigned to what has been recorded and exert no effort?' He said: 'Whoever belongs to the people who will be happy will turn up doing as the happy people do, and whoever belongs to those who will be wretched will turn up doing as the wretched people do. Therefore, do what you can, as everyone's way is facilitated. Those who will be happy are inclined to do what happy people do, and those who will be wretched are inclined to do what wretched people do'. He then recited: 'As for him who gives and is God-fearing and believes in the truth of the ultimate good, We shall smooth the way to perfect ease. But as for him who is a miser and deems himself self-sufficient, and rejects the truth of the ultimate good, We shall smooth the way to affliction'. (92: 5-10)

1 Related by al-Bukhari, 2898; Muslim, 112.

2 Ibn Daqīq al-ʿĪd, *Sharḥ al-Arbaʿīn al-Nawawīyah*, p. 39.

Implementation

1

Referring to the Prophet, Ibn Mas'ūd described him as 'the truthful who has been given the truth'. This indicates total belief in him, confirming and believing in what he says, even though it may be contrary to logic or cannot be proved or disproved. This is an example showing the fact that the Prophet's companions were the best of people, apart from prophets. They provide the example to follow in their belief in the Prophet and adherence to his guidance.

2

The Prophet (peace be upon him) mentions the stages a human being goes through during pregnancy, long before the development of medicine and the use of advanced technology. Yet all these recent developments and advanced knowledge confirm the accuracy of what he said. A believer's faith is thus strengthened by the confirmation of advanced, modern knowledge of Qur'anic and Hadith statements.

3

Reflect on God's limitless power and how He takes an embryo stage by stage until its full formation, and how He determines everything. This should inspire belief in God Almighty and His great power and submission to Him.

4

If something happens to you in your work or livelihood, or if you wish for something different to what you do, do not waste time remonstrating with the divine will, or lamenting your lot. Accept what God has willed for you, and know that He determined it before you were born, and even before that. Hence, you can do nothing better than submit to God's will and do what pleases Him.

5

No one may say that any particular person will be in Heaven or Hell. This is determined by God alone. It is He who determines how everyone will end. A person who is now wretched may become happy, while the one who is now happy may later be wretched.

6

Man should never feel assured that his deeds are fine, taking things easy and slackening. It is the final deeds that determine results. Sufyān al-Thawrī used to weep and say: 'I fear lest I am written 'wretched' in the Imperishable Tablet'. He also said: 'I fear that I may be denied faith before death'.

7

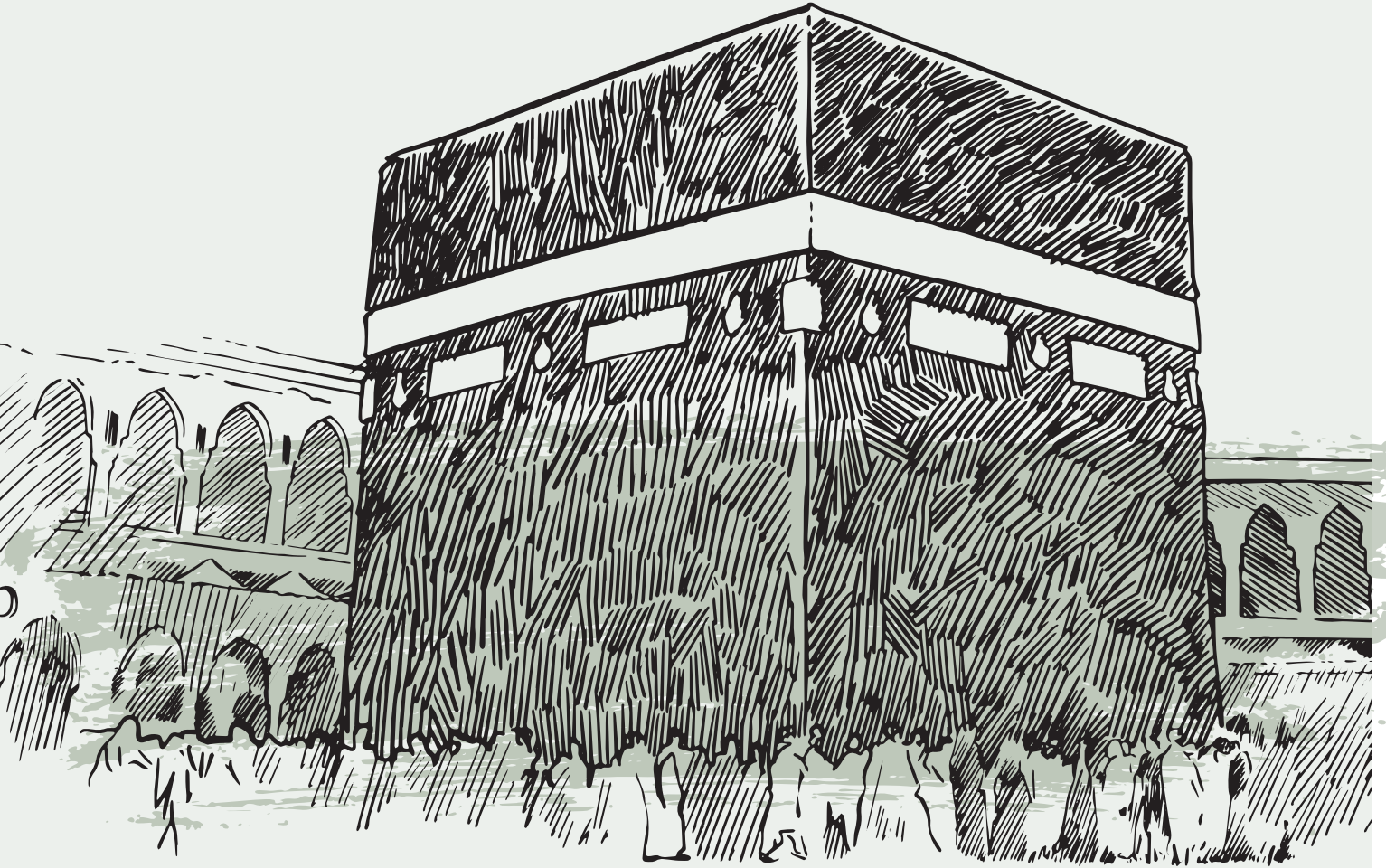
A Muslim should always include in his supplication the prayer that God keep him firm in doing what pleases Him, and that he does not leave him to go astray. The Prophet often said in his supplication: 'My Lord who turns hearts over, confirm my heart in Your faith'.

8

God's Messenger (peace be upon him) mentioned that 'a certain person said: By God, God shall not forgive so-and-so. God, the Exalted, said: 'Who is this one who is swearing concerning Me, saying that I must not forgive so-and-so? I have forgiven so-and-so and reduced your own action to nothing'.⁽¹⁾

9

'Alī ibn Abi Ṭālib said: 'Beware of following other people. A person may do what the people of Heaven do, but then may change, because of what God knows of him. He will then do like the people of Hell and die as one of the people of Hell. A man may do what the people of Hell do, but then may change, because of what God knows of him. He will do like the people of Heaven and die as one of the people of Heaven. If you have to emulate others, then choose some deceased people, who are no longer alive'.⁽²⁾



1 Related by Muslim, 2621.

2 Ibn al-Qayyim, *I'lam al-Muaqqi'in 'an Rabb al-'Alamin*, Vol. 2, p. 135.

