In the name of Allah, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

Synopsis of the Friday Sermon delivered by Ameer Mustapha Elturk on March 22, 2013

Be a Stranger in this World

Ibn `Umar (RA) relates that the Prophet (SAW) placed his hand on his shoulder and said: “Be in the world as if you were a stranger or a wayfarer.” In essence, this hadith explains to us the relationship between us and this world (duniya). Allah (SWT) put us in this world for a purpose, and this purpose was told to us through another hadith that says,

“The world is sweet and green (alluring) and verily Allah is going to install you as successors (vicegerents) in it in order to see how you act…” Allah has set us on a path and instructed us what to do. He requires us (1) to worship Him; (2) to call people unto Him; (3) to establish His Kingdom, here on earth, and (4) to construct Islam. These are divine targets for people in general and for Muslims in particular. Hence, there is plenty of work to be done. We should be serious and not get distracted by this tempting world. It is for this reason that the Prophet (SAW) told us to live in this world as strangers.

What is the concept of being a stranger in this world? To understand this, we should first know who we are and what this world is about. The only authentic guidance regarding this comes through the Qur’an and the Sunnah—the primary sources of Islam. All other sources, be they from philosophers, sociologists, psychologists, or other scientists and thinkers can at best be mere assumptions. Therefore we should not be deceived by such conjectures. We have the truth based on divine revelation and not on speculation.

We need to understand that human beings are weak by their very nature. “And man was created weak” (al-Nisa’, 4:28). Among other interpretations, this means that it is very difficult for human beings to control their passions and desires. By the dint of their nature, they also have an excessive craving for wealth. “And you love wealth with inordinate love” (al-Fajr, 89:20).

Generally, human beings are also envious by nature, always wanting to have what others have more than them in terms of worldly possessions. A glimpse of this can be seen in the Qur’anic story of Qarun when he publicly came out in a procession full of pomp and show, to flaunt his huge treasures, and how the people began to be jealous of him. “He went out among his people in all his pomp, and those whose aim was the life of this world said, ‘If only we had been given something like what Qarun has been given: he really is a very fortunate man’” (al-Qasas, 28:79).

Allah (SWT) also explains to us that the love of desirable things is made alluring for people. “The love of worldly desires through women, and children, and heaped-up treasures of gold and silver, and pedigreed horses, and cattle and lands is attractive to people. All this is the provision of the worldly life; but God has the best place to return to” (Aal ‘Imran, 3:14). Horses of high breed and ‘cattle and lands’ may be understood in contemporary times to refer to expensive, luxurious, and stylish modes of transport and sprawling industries re-
We also need to understand that we are here on this earth for a small period of time to contribute towards fulfilling a divine project. Allah (SWT) will claim us back at the appointed time that has been destined for each one of us. “Every human being is bound to taste death” (Aal ‘Imran, 3:185).

What is the reality of this world? As real as it may appear, it is no more than an illusion and a deception. The Qur’an says, “The present world is only an illusory pleasure” (Aal ‘Imran, 3:185). At another place the Qur’an tells us, “The life of this world is not only but an amusement and a diversion. The true life is in the Hereafter, if only they knew.” (al-‘Ankabut, 29:64). This world is temporary; all that is in it will perish and come to an end. It is only the divine countenance that will remain. “All that is on earth will perish. Only the ‘Face’ (Supreme Essence) of your Glorious and Gracious Lord will remain.” (al-Rahman, 55:26,27).

The reality about the impermanence of worldly life, about its glitter and glamour, about the vying with each other and the boasting about one’s worldly possessions that people engage in has been explained in the Qur’an through different examples. In Surat al-Hadid, for example, we have, “Bear in mind that the present life is just a game, a diversion, an attraction, a cause of boasting among you, of rivalry in wealth and children. It is like plants that spring up after the rain: their growth at first delights the sowers, but then you see them wither away, turn yellow, and become stubble. There is terrible punishment in the next life as well as forgiveness and approval from God: the life of this world is only an illusory pleasure” (al-Hadid, 57:20). And yet, it is the passing and fleeting life of this world that the multitude of humanity prefers over the real and permanent life of the hereafter. “But you prefer the life of this world, although the hereafter is better and everlasting” (al-A’la, 87:17). Having understood a little about ourselves and the world around us, we can now appreciate the advice given to us by our beloved Prophet Muhammad (SAW), “Be in the world as if you were a stranger or a wayfarer.”

What does it mean to be a stranger in this world? It is to have a feeling that this world is not our home; that we are aliens and can’t wait to return home. It is to behave in a way that may appear strange to most people. This is because we are engaged in a mission—a divine project that calls for constructing Islam and establishing God’s Kingdom, here on earth. We have to remain focused on this project and not waste our valuable time. We have also to remain wary of those who are always trying to take us away from our real task through various temptations. Our only true friends can be those true believers who, like us, lead their lives as if they were strangers in this world. We are told to be mindful of Allah (SWT) (our obligations toward Him) and be with the truthful ones, “O you who believe, be mindful of Allah, and be in the company of the truthful” (al-Taubah, 9:119).

We learn through a hadith that “Islam began strange, and it will become strange again just like it was at the beginning, so blessed are the strangers.” These strangers are the ones who will re-construct Islam in order to bring back its legacy and honor (‘izzah). They are the ones who adhere to the instructions of Allah (SWT) and His messenger. They are the ones who will follow in the footsteps of the Prophet (SAW) and his noble companions who had so ardently and assiduously constructed Islam. They did not go with the norm. They were looked upon as strangers.

The concepts of an eternal life in the hereafter, of accounting on the Day of Judgment, and of ultimate reward or punishment in shape of heaven and hell are seen today as strange ideas by most people in this largely atheistic and agnostic world. Strangers alone understand these concepts, believe in them, and are in a position to explain them to others. They are serious about constructing the structure of Islam. They know very well that they are aliens here on this earth because it is not their home. Their real home is the abode of peace (Dar us-Salam) which they shall inhabit in the hereafter (al-Akhirah). The world is full of hardship (mushaqqah) where one has to struggle. The believers channelize their efforts in the construction of Islam and in worshipping and obeying Allah in order to seek His pleasure. They are careful not to dissipate their time and energies in things that lead to His displeasure.
In the hadith mentioned above, “the world is sweet and green, and Allah is going to install you as successors (vicegerents) in it in order to see how you act…” The Prophet (SAW) concluded the hadith by saying, “…so fear the world and fear women, for the trial of the Bani Israel had to do with woman.” The temptation of women may divert one from the true path, the path of salvation. There is a possibility that one’s spouses or children also become one’s enemies by becoming an obstruction in one’s journey in the path of Allah (SWT). Believers have to be cautious and careful of this situation and handle matters wisely. They also have to be gracious, kind, and forgiving. “O believers, some of your spouses and children are your enemies, so beware of them! Yet if you forbear, overlook, and forgive, God is indeed forgiving and kind” (al-Taghabun, 64:14).

While believing women do play supportive roles, the work of construction of Islam is mainly on the shoulders of men.

“Be in the world as if you were a stranger or a wayfarer.” While a stranger is one who behaves in contravention to the norm, a wayfarer or traveler is one who goes on a journey. A traveler is always cautious in the land where he goes to. He is careful about his belongings and about his safety. Even though he resides there for a time, he is basically an alien to that place and wants to return back safely to the place from where he came after fulfilling the purpose for which he came to that land. He is watchful about the people of that land, and about their culture and habits. Likewise, the believers should consider themselves as wayfarers or travelers who have come to accomplish a mission here on earth and travel back to their permanent residence in the hereafter.

This phenomenon has been explained profoundly through a saying of Ibn `Umar (RA) who used to say, “When the night comes, do not wait for the day, and when the day comes, do not wait for the night. Take from your health for your sickness, and take from your life for your death.” This means that we should never postpone and delay matters, when it comes to doing righteous deeds. Further, we should take advantage of being able to do righteous deeds with what remains of our health before sickness prevents us from doing so, and we should take advantage of our life before death prevents us from doing so. True believers are conscious of the Qur’anic ayah, “We belong to God and to Him we shall return” (al-Baqarah, 2:156).

The Qur’an warns that on the Day of Judgment Allah (SWT) will forget those people who did not heed to the revelations; forgot that they have to face Allah (SWT) on the Day of Judgment, got deluded by the charms of this life, and remained indulged in the amusement and enjoyment of this world, forgetting and ignoring the project that they had been sent for on earth. “Those who took their deen as a diversion and a game, and were deluded by the life of the dunya.’ Today We will forget them just as they forgot the encounter of this Day and denied Our Revelations” (al-A’raf, 7:51).

Human beings do get influenced by their environment and surroundings. Unless we understand what is in store for us and believe in it, we will not be able to make the desired changes and adjustments in our lifestyles. Rather than Allah (SWT) forget us and humiliate us, we have to gird up our loins and work to build a better world, cooperating with everyone in all that is good and righteoues, and not cooperating with anyone in acts of sin and transgression. Being observant of the Qur’an and the Sunnah, we have to show the world the true path. It is important that we make friends with those who understand us. Let the disbelievers call us what they like; let them be displeased with us. Our goal and mission is to work for Allah (SWT); to seek His pleasure. Don’t be afraid to be that stranger in this world.

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