

And [mention, O Muhammad], when Abraham was tried by his Lord with commands and he fulfilled them. [Allah] said, "Indeed, I will make you a leader for the people." [Abraham] said, "And of my descendants?" [Allah] said, "My covenant does not include the wrongdoers." [2:124]

Today's topic will address one of the severest of trials a believer can face - doubt and uncertainty which causes someone to lose their faith in Islam. There seems to be a rising trend of people, young and older, who are turning away from Islam. Some of the main reasons for this are:

- Influence of atheist dialogue questioning the belief in God
- Questions about Allah(SWT) such as His Justice when there is injustice in the World
- Why am I being tested?
- Desire to be "free" of boundaries set by Islam

Today is also the first day of Hajj - Yawm ut-Tarwiyah, the 8th of Dhul Hijjah. This is relevant because these days are the best days of the year, following in the footsteps of our forefather Ibrahim (AS) and we have specifically been told to follow the millah of Ibrahim - the original belief - inclining to the truth. We even make prayers (durood) upon the Prophet Muhammad(SAW) in comparison to Prophet Ibrahim(AS) - *...kamaa salayta 'alaa Ibrahami* (like the prayers and blessings upon Ibrahim(AS). And Ibrahim(AS) is the standard for even the Prophet(SAW) to follow

"There has already been for you an excellent pattern in Abraham" (Surah Al-Mumtahanah: 4)

"And strive for Allah with the striving due to Him. He has chosen you and has not placed upon you in the religion any difficulty. [It is] the religion of your father, Abraham. Allah named you "Muslims" before [in former scriptures] and in this [revelation] that the Messenger may be a witness over you and you may be witnesses over the people. So establish prayer and give zakah and hold fast to Allah . He is your Protector; and excellent is the Protector, and excellent is the Helper."
[Surah Al Hajj: 78]

So, we are instructed to look to his good example and reflect on how his legacy answered each of these doubts which are present today. Ibrahim(AS) taught us a number of key lessons, namely:

1. Use your intellect to come to Allah(SWT)

As a young child, Ibrahim (AS) questioned the way of his people, even his own father, who made and sold the idols which the people worshipped.

26:70

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إِذْ قَالَ لِأَبِيهِ وَقَوْمِهِ مَا تَعْبُدُونَ ﴿٧٠﴾

Sahih International

When he said to his father and his people, "What do you worship?"

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قَالُوا نَعْبُدُ أَصْنَامًا فَنَنْزِلُهَا عَكَفِينَ ﴿٧١﴾

Sahih International

They said, "We worship idols and remain to them devoted."

26:72

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قَالَ هَلْ يَسْمَعُونَكُمُ إِذْ تَدْعُونَ ﴿٧٢﴾

Sahih International

He said, "Do they hear you when you supplicate?"

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أَوْ يَنْفَعُونَكُمُ أَوْ يَضُرُّونَ ﴿٧٣﴾

Sahih International

Or do they benefit you, or do they harm?"

In Surah Ash-Shu`arā` he began to ask 'How can you worship that which you made with your own hands? Do they hear you when you call to them? Do they benefit you or harm you?'

There are many idols propped up today, perhaps not as physical statues which people prostrate to, but definitely things which people are devoted to or obsessed with, as was the response of the people of Ibrahim (*lahaā`aakifeen*). This includes:

- Worship of the Self: fittingly captured in the selfie culture
- Power or fame: Like devotion to a celebrity - adulation at concerts similar to monarchs or Pharaohs of the past or sports matches sacrificing sleep, wealth and effort
- Money: endless hours in the office/cab to acquire the same phone, car or lifestyle as someone else

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الَّذِي خَلَقَنِي فَهُوَ يَهْدِينِ ﴿٧٨﴾

Sahih International

Who created me, and He [it is who] guides me.

26:79

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وَالَّذِي هُوَ يُطْعِمُنِي وَيَسْقِينِ ﴿٧٩﴾

Sahih International

And it is He who feeds me and gives me drink.

26:80

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وَإِذَا مَرِضْتُ فَهُوَ يَشْفِينِ ﴿٨٠﴾

Sahih International

And when I am ill, it is He who cures me

26:81

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وَالَّذِي يُمِيتُنِي ثُمَّ يُحْيِينِ ﴿٨١﴾

Sahih International

And who will cause me to die and then bring me to life

26:82

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وَالَّذِي أَطْمَعُ أَنْ يَغْفِرَ لِي خَطِيئَتِي يَوْمَ الدِّينِ ﴿٨٢﴾

Sahih International

And who I aspire that He will forgive me my sin on the Day of Recompense."

Surat Ash-Shu`arā' shows how he(AS) questioned things we all experience day in, day out which inevitably lead one to the conclusion that Allah(SWT), rather than an idol is in control of our creation, our food, drink, health and life. Surely, Allahu Akbar - Allah(SWT) is Greater - than all else and is the only One who sustains us. Isn't it amazing that

- In one day, blood travels in our body a total of 12,000 miles, that's further than Luton to New Zealand, past Australia
- Your heart beats about 100,000 times in one day
- The human eye can see 7,000,000 - 7 million colors.
- 28,800 times in a day blinking and naturally washing your eyes, 20 times a minute

without you even thinking about it

- You take 20,000 breaths a day

Who else could make this happen and to whom should we show gratitude and devotion?

Later on, the Qur'an captures how he came across a people who worshipped the sun, the moon and the stars (superstars). However, through simple reflection, he realised each set and therefore was limited and therefore not worthy. Similarly, these celebrities who we are constantly watching and are obsessed with what they say, do or wear - their time will also pass and we'll realise that only Allahu akbar - He is the Greatest which never sets.

Just reflecting on these celestial bodies is enough to make us appreciate His Greatness:

- If the Earth were an inch closer to the sun, the oceans would boil away. If it were farther away, the oceans would freeze.
- The earth is moving about the sun in a very nearly circular orbit at a speed of nearly 67,000 miles per hour, while you sit here still, not recognising the turning of the Earth and its shuttling through orbit. That's more than 200 times faster than the world's fastest car - a Venom F5 or a Bugatti.

Similarly, when Ibrahim(AS) came across the king of his time, he questioned his power, fame and money by reminding him of the one who gives life and causes the sun to rise from the East, so make it rise from the West.

To summarise, our intellect should suffice us to know we are dependent on Allah(SWT) and He is showing us these miraculous signs every day through this intelligent and precise design of the world around us.

2. Where does the role of the intellect stop?

Ibrahim(AS) then also showed us that once we have reached the conclusion that there is nothing greater than Allah(SWT), we submit entirely to His plan and judgement. Throughout time, man has wondered about the nature of God, trying to rationalise His being - if He is Just and all-Powerful, why is injustice in the World? If He (SWT) can do anything, why not just get rid of disbelief, disobedience and wrongdoing?

However, by us recognising the Creator is the Greatest who cannot be limited like the creation, otherwise, would also be dependant on others, we also accept that our mind is incapable of understanding Him. The analogy which is given is of standing by an ocean and digging a hole in the sand, the depth of a finger and diameter of a small coin. Then

attempting to place the ocean in that hole would be impossible. So too, the mind of man is incapable of understanding Allah(SWT), rather, we can only learn from Him that He has attributes - Ar-Rahman, Al-Maalik, Al-Qayyum.

If you saw a baby playing with a knife, you'd immediately rush to remove it even if the baby cried and was upset. Why? Because you know what the child doesn't. Similarly, Allah(SWT) in His Justice and complete Knowledge tells us He knows what we do not.

After being detained, tortured and prepared for execution by his people, even his own family members, Ibrahim(AS) never gave up on his certainty about Allah. The fire which was prepared was so huge that even birds flying overhead were fried and even the elderly and sick contributed to its firewood, so much so they couldn't approach it after setting it alight and needed to construct a catapult to send him through the air. Allah(SWT) sent the Angel Jibreel (AS) who asked Ibrahim(AS) if he was in need of anything to which he replied "Not from you". Even as he was being catapulted through the air, his reliance was entirely upon his Lord, the One who never sets because Allahu Akbar - He (SWT) is the Greatest and He has created fire and so his words as recorded in Bukhari from the Prophet(SAW) were "Hasbunallah wa ni'mal Wakil - Allah is sufficient for us and how excellent a Protector!" (Bukhari). Once, he came to the conclusion that there was none Greater than Allah(SWT), he placed his complete reliance upon Him(SWT) - this is Iman - belief in Allah(SWT)'s who is the Most Able (Al-Qadir) and the Creator of all things (Al-Khaaliq) without rationalising how it was possible when fire is known to burn.

And all the gathered people watched, waiting for the fire to consume him to ashes. Allah, the Lord of creation, Guardian and Protector of believers, commanded,

"O fire, be coolness and safety upon Ibrahim." (Surah Al-Anbiyaa 21:69)

By one of the greatest miracles of all time, Ibrahim AS emerged from the fire safe and unharmed - it's related that the fire was so large, it burned for 40 days and nights, so how could the people of Ibrahim(AS) after seeing this miracle not believe? So too, we see the signs of Allah(SWT) around us - the extreme heat we have experienced and our dependence on rain and coolness from the Only One who can provide it.

Ibrahim(AS) taught us that we cannot comprehend Allah's(SWT) Majesty, His Knowledge, or His Ability, for He is Unique and beyond our ration.

What is the wisdom behind tests and trials?

Ibrahim(AS) showed us that this life is a life of trials and belief is not something that is entered through mere lip-service. It is developed through trials. It's not just in the gym that there is no gain without pain. Tests are a means of assessing and building Iman.

And so his trials continued one after the other.

- Exiled from his people and with only his nephew and wives as followers
- At the age of 84, he is given glad tidings of a child at an age where most are unable to have children. Once that child has been born, leave him and his mother, in a barren desert. Similarly, Hajar being left in the desert questioned why she was being left behind but knowing that this was a command of Allah(SWT), accepted. Ibn Abbas narrated: "... Ibrahim took Hajar and their son, Ismail while she was suckling him, to a place near the Kaaba under a tree on the spot of Zam-Zam, at the highest place in the mosque. During those days there was nobody in Makkah, nor was there any water. So he made them sit over there and placed near them a leather bag containing some dates, and a small water-skin containing some water, and set out homeward. Ismail's mother followed him saying: "O Ibrahim! Where are you going, leaving us in this valley where there is no person whose company we may enjoy, nor is there anything (to enjoy)?" She repeated that to him many times, but he did not look back at her. Then she asked him: "Has Allah ordered you to do so?" He said: "Yes". She said: "Then He will not neglect us." and she returned (to her child) while Ibrahim proceeded on his way. On reaching the Thaniya (mountain) where they could not see him, Ibrahim faced the Kaaba, and raising both hands, invoked Allah saying the following prayer: "O our Lord! I have made some of my offspring to dwell in a valley without cultivation, by Thy Sacred House; in order, O our Lord, that they may establish regular Prayer: so fill the hearts of some among men with love towards them, and feed them with fruits: so that they may give thanks." [Surah Ibrahim 14:37]..." [Sahih Bukhari Book# 55, Hadith# 583] She too in the midst of a parched desert, seeking out of desperation someone to help her - a caravan perhaps sighted from the top of the hills of Safa and Marwa, was helped by Allah(SWT) from a place which she could never imagine. Beneath the feet of her baby son, Allah(SWT) caused water to emerge which until today suffices millions - King Abdullah Zamzam Water Factory produces 200,000 water bottles a day and the well actually provides 11- 19 litres of water in a second - a miracle in its own right.
- Then when his son is running around he has spent his early years playing with him, he sees a repetitive dream to sacrifice his son. We can't part with a penny, yet he is asked to part with the one who has waited so long for.

Punishment, purifying or elevating

According to the Quran and Hadith, suffering can also be for the following reasons:

1. We, as individuals or as a nation, are being punished for our wrongdoings; thus we see the negative consequences of our evil actions in this world. For the intelligent, this is a warning to restore our broken connection with Allah.
2. It is a means through which our sins are purified. As a result, a person is cleansed in this world of some or all of their sins and will not have to face the consequences in the hereafter.
3. It raises our ranks in the hereafter. As a result of enduring the suffering with patience and gratitude, we may be elevated to a station in Jannah which otherwise would not have been possible based solely on our deeds.

How can a suffering person determine which of the above is applicable to them? The answer lies in the person's response to the suffering: if they complain and become impatient then it may be a punishment for them; if it drives them to acknowledge their shortcomings and sincere repentance, then it may be to purify their sins; and if they are patient and increase in their gratitude towards Allah, then it may be to raise their ranks.

Indeed Ibrahim (AS) was an entire nation

And so we come to the last of the stated causes for people to lose their faith - seeking to break out from the limits of Allah(SWT).

Inna Ibrahima kaana Ummah - Indeed, Abraham was a [comprehensive] leader, devoutly obedient to Allah , inclining toward truth, and he was not of those who associate others with Allah. (Sūrat l-naḥl: 120)

Ibrahim (AS) was an Ummah. The word Ummah has numerous meanings, which include a courageous and worthy leader - someone who didn't follow the crowd and was an example for us all. Another meaning is that he embodied the best of manners in concern for others and good conduct.

We live in confusing times and many of us aspire to be like those around us - just fitting in, afraid of being left out (FOMO) and spending most of our life trying to conform to what is fashionable. In the bagginess or tightness of our jeans, the size of our haircuts, even the games we play and the places we spend our time. If we took lesson from the example of Ibrahim(AS), we would question our place in the world, recognise we are dependent and needy on the One who has no need, Allah, and then rely on him through our trials, care-free from those around us who are uncertain about their identity, sexuality, political leaning or

purpose.

When our phone stops working and we have exhausted all the youtube fixes and cheap workarounds from local shops, we know we have to return to the manufacturer - a Samsung dealership or Apple store. So what about the One who has created and sustained each of us? Follow the One who set the rules and the manual for how to live our life to achieve peace of mind and peace for mankind.

To end, I'll share a story about a man went to a barber shop to have his hair cut. He started to have a good conversation with the barber who attended him. They talked about so many things and various subjects. Suddenly, they touched the subject of God. The barber said: "Look man, I don't believe that God exists as you say."

"Why do you say that?" asked the client.

"Well, it's so easy, you just have to go out in the street to realize that God does not exist. Oh, tell me, if God existed, would there be so many sick people? Would there be abandoned children? If God existed, there would be no suffering nor pain. I can't think of loving a God who permits all of these things."

The client stopped for a moment thinking, but he didn't want to respond as to cause an argument. The barber finished his job and the client went out of the shop. Just after he left the barber shop he saw a man in the street with a long hair and beard (it seems that it had been a long time since he had his cut and he looked so untidy).

Then the client again entered the barber shop and he said to the barber, "You know what? Barbers do not exist."

"How can you say they don't exist?" asked the barber. "Well I am here and I am a barber."

"No!" the client exclaimed. "They don't exist because if they did there would be no people with long hair and a beard like that man who walks in the street."

"Ah, barbers do exist, what happens is that people do not come to me."

"Exactly!"- affirmed the client. "That's the point. God does exist, what happens is people don't go to Him and do not look for Him. That's why there's so much pain and suffering in the world."