

One of the Distinguishing Characteristics of a Believer Is Not Resembling the Age of Ignorance

When the Age of Ignorance is mentioned, most people think of the period in which pre-Islamic Arab society lived. Yet ignorance is not merely the name of a historical period. In the Qur'an, ignorance also refers to the understanding and behavior of those who depart from the true criteria revealed by God and take their own lower selves, desires, traditions or society's value judgments as their criteria. Therefore, ignorance is not a form of society that remained in the past, but an understanding that can still emerge today in certain characteristics of man that are incompatible with faith.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of a believer is that he does not resemble the society of ignorance. Faith requires man to shape his life according to the criteria revealed by God. The things people value and the things that are valuable in the Sight of God are not always the same. A characteristic regarded as a sign of superiority in society may have no value whatsoever in the Sight of God. On the other hand, a good moral quality to which people attach no importance may raise a person's value in the Sight of God.



In the understanding of ignorance, a person's value is generally determined according to his possessions, family, social circle, power, appearance or position in society. Under the morality of ignorance, when a person thinks that he is wealthier, more attractive, more powerful or more reputable than others, he regards himself as superior. With such an understanding, a person does not merely benefit from what he possesses, but regards these things as a mark of superiority for himself.

This understanding may also emerge in certain forms of behavior that appear quite ordinary in daily life. For example, deciding whether to be friends with someone by looking at his financial position, forming an opinion about him by looking at his clothing or the house in which he lives, or belittling a person because of his profession or position in society may be reflections of the criteria of ignorance.

A person with such an understanding may begin to see himself as different from and superior to other people. He may not consider certain people worthy of his social circle or the environment he is in and may not regard them as being on the same level as himself. He may try to demonstrate his value through his means, achievements or way of life by bringing these to the fore. Regarding his own possessions as more important and valuable while belittling what others possess is one of the reflections of this understanding in daily life.

The Qur'an, however, does not approve of a person regarding himself as superior in this way. It is revealed as follows in the 18th verse of Surah Luqman:

“Do not turn your cheek in scorn toward people, nor walk in insolence on the earth; for God does not love any arrogant boaster.” (Surat al-Luqman, 18)

The forms of behavior to which attention is drawn in this verse are not merely a particular manner of conduct. Belittling people, admiring oneself and boasting about one's attributes are different manifestations of the same understanding. When a person regards himself as superior to others, he may naturally begin to regard some people as inferior. In the 11th verse of Surat al-Hujurat, people are commanded not to mock or belittle one another:

“You who believe! People should not ridicule others who may be better than themselves...” (Surat al-Hujurat, 11)

Another indication of the habits of ignorance is the tendency to show off and boast. Under the morality of ignorance, a person attaches importance to what he possesses not merely to use it, but to show himself off to others. His clothing, house, car, social circle, means or way of life may turn into signs of superiority for him. The issue here is not simply possessing beautiful things. A person of ignorance tries to prove his own value to others through what he possesses.



Such a person also tries in his conversations to present himself and the social circle in which he lives as different from and superior to other people. He belittles the things he regards as ordinary and presents his own way of life as more distinguished and valuable. When evaluating people's preferences, the places they visit, their clothing or the means they possess, he constantly applies a criterion of superiority. Even if he does not praise himself directly, it can be understood from the expressions he uses that he sees himself as occupying a place apart from other people.

At times, when speaking of the means he possesses, he expresses them in such a way as to make the other person feel his superiority. He particularly emphasizes that the things he uses, the places he visits or the means he possesses are of higher quality and more distinguished, and belittles the things he regards as ordinary. Thus, what he possesses ceases to be merely things that make his life easier or blessings bestowed upon him, and turns into a means of showing that he is more valuable than others.

The Qur'an draws attention to people turning their means in the life of this world into a race for superiority. It is commanded as follows in the 20th verse of Surat al-Hadid:

“Know that the life of this world is merely a game and a diversion and ostentation and a cause of boasting among yourselves and trying to outdo one another in wealth and children...” (Surat al-Hadid, 20)

This verse shows that a person's turning the means he possesses into a means of superiority and boasting is a reflection of the understanding of ignorance. Therefore, what truly matters for a believer is not what he possesses, but displaying the attitude of a believer toward what he possesses. He may be wealthy, but he does not belittle people because of his wealth. He may be attractive, but he does not regard his attractiveness as a reason for superiority over others. He may have received a good education, be successful or hold a respected position in society, but he does not turn any of these into a reason to regard himself as superior to others.

Treating people according to their status is also an indication of the attitude of ignorance. Behaving with the utmost respect toward a person because of his position or financial power, while behaving rudely toward someone who serves him or whom he regards as holding a lower position in society, means valuing people not according to their true worth, but according to the

positions they hold. A believer, however, looks not at the position of the person before him, but at the fact that he is a human being. How he treats a person who is in no position to provide him with any benefit is one of the moral reflections of his faith.



The words of the man with two gardens described in Surat al-Kahf are striking in this regard. Because of the blessings bestowed upon him, he thinks that he is superior to the other and says, **“He was a man of wealth and property and he said to his companion, debating with him, ‘I have more wealth than you and more people under me.’”** (Surat Al-Kahf, 34) Here, the means possessed have become the measure of the value the person assigns to himself.

A believer, however, knows that what he possesses has been bestowed upon him by God. For that reason, blessings give rise in him not to feelings of pride and superiority, but to a feeling of gratitude toward God. What he possesses does not become the fundamental criterion by which he evaluates himself. One of the important distinctions between faith and ignorance emerges here. While a person of ignorance tries to attain superiority by comparing himself with others, a believer does not seek value by comparing himself with people. Nor is there any constant display of superiority, effort to be admired or need to belittle others in his life. He prefers sincerity to ostentation, good morals to superiority and giving thanks to God to boasting. That is because the true criterion revealed by the Qur'an is very clear:

"... The noblest among you in God's Sight is the one with the most piety (who best performs his duty to God)..." (Surat al-Hujurat, 13)

Believers who are devoted to God with love are people who have distanced themselves from the criteria of ignorance and seek their value not in the eyes of people, but in the Sight of God. They feel ashamed to bear within themselves attitudes that God has forbidden. They do not wish to engage in behavior that God dislikes; they wish to put into practice in their lives, with great care, everything with which He is pleased. Indeed, their souls have become so integrated with the morality of the Qur'an that attitudes belonging to ignorance seem very foreign to them. Even if they make a mistake for a moment, they do not wish to persist in it and immediately turn to correcting themselves. Their hearts have turned toward the beauties God loves, and their lives have begun to bear the traces of this love. For them, the greatest beauty is not to appear superior in the eyes of people, but to attain God's approval and love.

