



LESSONS FROM THE **STORIES OF THE QURAN**

| Ammar Awais

Lessons from the Stories of the Quran

“So relate the stories that perhaps they
will give thought.” (Quran 7:176)

Ammar Awais

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Arabic Names and their English Equivalents

Adam Adam	Majuj Magog
Alyasa Elisha	Makkah Mecca
Ayyub Job	Maryam Mary
Babel Babylon/Babel	Musa Moses
Binyamin Benjamin	Nuh Noah
Dawud David	Qabil Cain
Habil Abel	Qarun Korah
Hajar Hagar	Saba Sheba
Harun Aaron	Samiri Samaritan
Hawwa Eve	Samoeel Samuel
Ibrahim Abraham	Sulayman Solomon
Ilyas Elias/Elijah	Talut Saul
Imran Amram	Uzayr Ezra
Isa Jesus	Yahya John
Ishaq Isaac	Yajuj Gog
Ismail Ishmael	Yaqub Jacob
Jalut Goliath	Yunus Jonah
Jibril Gabriel	Yusuf Joseph
Lut Lot	Zakariya Zechariah
Madyan Midian	

Note on Abbreviations

The following abbreviations have been used in this book to denote salutations.

AS: *Alaibi Salam*, meaning “Peace be upon him/her” – traditionally used alongside names of pious individuals, especially prophets

SAAS: *Sal Allahu Alaibi wa Sallam*, meaning “Allah bless him and grant him peace” – used exclusively for Prophet Muhammad

RA: *Radbi Allahu anhu/anha*, meaning “Allah be pleased with him/her” – traditionally used alongside names of Prophet Muhammad’s companions

Introduction

The Quran was revealed by Allah for the guidance of the entire humanity. While this guidance is often conveyed directly, the Quran also enlightens its readers through narrations and examples from the lives of earlier generations. We tend to learn readily through parables, and the lessons conveyed using narrations often make a lasting impact on our minds. Moreover, people are generally curious about the lives and circumstances of the prophets and others whom Allah honoured. It is for such reasons that stories, quotations, and examples from the past are plentiful in the Quran, with many *ayaat* (verses) and even complete surahs (chapters) dedicated to these.

Allah states in the Quran, **“We relate to you the best of stories in what We have revealed to you of this Quran although you were, before it, among the unaware.” (12:3)** Allah describes the stories of the Quran as the “best of stories”; the corresponding Arabic phrase *absan al-qasas* has alternatively been translated as “the most beautiful of stories”. The purpose of these stories is not to entertain, however.

They inspire us to attain true faith, and motivate us to act righteously under all circumstances. Some of these stories may even appeal to us in a personal way, and give us ideals to follow.

The stories of the Quran are further meant to strengthen our trust in Allah, to highlight the power of prayer, and to demonstrate what great things can be achieved with Allah's help and our own unwavering determination. These stories give us beautiful lessons in courage, steadfastness, love, repentance, truthfulness, and trust in Allah. Indeed, each story has its own set of lessons and insights. We must remember though that the Quran does not mention all the stories of previous prophets and their respective nations; it only speaks about the most important ones, as well as those most relevant for all times and places, in keeping with the universal status of the Quran.

Another important aspect of the stories of the Quran is their varied nature. Musa (AS), for instance, belonged to a tribe in slavery to the Pharaoh whereas Sulayman (AS) possessed a magnificent kingdom; the father of Ibrahim (AS) was a staunch idol-worshipper whereas the father of Yahya (AS) was a prophet with a noble lineage; Nuh (AS) lived for nearly a thousand years whereas Isa (AS)

was raised by Allah at a young age. Some prophets were granted greater authority than others; some were assigned more laborious tasks; and some were honoured by Allah above the rest.

However, all prophets, despite their contrasting circumstances, conveyed the same message of true monotheism, and emphasized good values. They called upon their people to reflect on the universe and recognize Allah through His signs. They informed people about the Day of Judgement, and made clear the consequences of their actions. Moreover, Allah commands us in the Quran to respect all prophets equally and not to discriminate between any of them:

“Say: We believe in Allah and that which is revealed to us and that which was revealed to Ibrahim and Ismail and Ishaq and Yaqub and the tribes, and that which was vouchsafed to Musa and Isa and the prophets from their Lord. We make no distinction between any of them, and to Him we have surrendered.” (3:84)

Although the stories of the Quran mostly revolve around the prophets, they were not the only ones to be honoured by Allah. For example, Allah blew into

Maryam (AS) through His Spirit, miraculously granting her a son, which was a tremendous tribute to her piety and chastity. Similarly, the great strength of Dhul-Qarnayn, the fore-knowledge granted to Khidr, and the resolve of the young men who hid in the cave, all have an honourable mention in the Quran. It is thus clear that any individual can attain a lofty status in the sight of Allah by always being conscious of Him, and remaining steadfast on what is just. The stories of the Quran give us much to ponder over and implement in our lives.

The First of Humanity **(Lessons 1—7)**

Allah created the first human being, Adam (AS), from *turaab* – translated as dust or soil. He then blew into him through the Spirit, and commanded the angels to prostrate to Adam (AS) out of respect, which they did. However, one of the jinn known as Iblis (Satan), present among the angels, refused to do so, and Allah expelled him from the kingdom of heaven for his impertinence. Iblis then asked Allah to grant him respite till the Day of Judgement, so he could try and lead the descendants of Adam (AS) astray. Allah granted his wish, revealing that His true servants shall not be misled.

Meanwhile, Adam (AS) dwelled in the garden of Paradise where Allah created his mate, Hawwa (AS), the first woman, so the two of them could enjoy the blessings of Paradise together. Allah commanded them not to eat from a particular tree, but Iblis caused them to disobey Allah, leading to their expulsion from Paradise and descent on earth. Adam (AS) and Hawwa

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(AS) repented to Allah; He pardoned them, chose Adam (AS) as a prophet, and promised Paradise in the hereafter for whoever among humanity lived righteously.

Let us examine the lessons learnt from this account and analyse its various aspects in detail.

1

Human intellect is a great blessing

Why did Allah command the angels to prostrate to Adam (AS)? What made Adam (AS) superior to such a noble creation as the angels? It was his superior intellect: the higher faculties of thinking, perceiving, learning, and memorizing. That is why when the angels remarked that the human would cause bloodshed and corruption on earth, Allah commanded Adam (AS) to replicate to the angels all the names Allah had taught him, thus proving to the angels his superior intellect. We should, therefore, engage our minds for the purpose of gaining knowledge, researching, reflecting on the universe, and making scientific advancements. Allah repeatedly commands us in the Quran to use our cognitive abilities, frequently asking the rhetorical question, **“Then will you not use reason?” (37:138)**

2

Arrogance brings about one's downfall

When Allah commanded Iblis to prostrate to Adam (AS), he objected, saying, **“I am better than him! You created me from fire and created him from clay.”** (7:12) Iblis's view that he had been created from a superior substance led him to disobey Allah; his arrogance thus changed his status from that of a devoted servant of Allah to becoming an outcast, destined for Hell. Arrogance is an enormous sin that deprives us of Allah's favour, and distances us from Him. Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) said, *“He who has in his heart the weight of a mustard seed of arrogance shall not enter Paradise.”* (Muslim)

3

Love and mercy are basic ingredients of marriage

What was Allah's wisdom in creating the first pair of human beings a male and a female? We learn from the Quran that this was not just so they would procreate, but because they should find comfort and love in each other's company: **“And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates [i.e. spouses] that you may find tranquillity in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy.”** (30:21) This ayah further asserts that Allah has placed love and mercy between spouses as a gift from Him. Hence, the husband and wife should be sincere in their love for each other, and adopt mercy by overlooking each other's faults and shortcomings.

4

Be content with what you have

After Allah had forbidden Adam (AS) and Hawwa (AS) to eat from a particular tree, Iblis approached them and said, **“O Adam, shall I direct you to the tree of eternity and possession that will not deteriorate?” (20:120)** Iblis tried to tempt them with promises of eternal life and kingdom, and succeeded. It is intrinsic in human nature to continuously desire more and not feel satisfied for long. Even though Adam (AS) and Hawwa (AS) enjoyed the great blessings of Paradise, Iblis used trickery to arouse their curiosity, promising them even greater rewards. We should try to be content with what we can lawfully possess – be it little or much – and not be greedy for worldly possessions and luxuries. Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) said, *“Wealth is not in having many possessions; rather, true wealth is the richness of the soul.” (Bukhari)*

5

Allah accepts true repentance

After Adam (AS) and Hawwa (AS) had erred, they became remorseful, and prayed to Allah, **“Our Lord, we have wronged ourselves, and if You do not forgive us and have mercy upon us, we will surely be among the losers.” (7:23)** Because they sincerely repented, Allah turned to them in mercy, and forgave them. Indeed, He loves to forgive, and pardons all sorts of sins, of all magnitudes. As the Prophet (SAAS) said, *“Verily, Allah is more delighted with the repentance of His slave than is a person who finds his lost camel in a desert.” (Bukhari)* We should thus repent to Allah frequently and fervently.

6

Always be on guard against Iblis

Iblis approaches us while concealing his enmity towards us – just as he deceived our forefathers, Adam (AS) and Hawwa (AS), by claiming to be their well-wisher: **“And he swore to them, ‘Indeed, I am to you from among the sincere advisors.’” (7:21)** Hence, we must always be on our guard against the treacherous whispers of Iblis, and strive against him with all our faith, conscience, and will power, while beseeching Allah for aid against his deceptive ploys. Allah has informed us that Iblis’s traps are ineffective when countered with firm resolve: **“Indeed, there is for him [Iblis] no authority over those who have believed and rely upon their Lord.” (16:99)**

7

Do not grieve over your mistakes

It is not wise to keep grieving and lamenting over a mistake. We must accept that Allah's will always prevails, and sometimes, a regrettable situation could not have been avoided. For example, apparently, Adam (AS) and Hawwa (AS) got humanity expelled from Paradise, but in reality, Allah had predetermined the earth to be our abode in this world, as He had earlier revealed to the angels: **“Indeed, I will make upon the earth a successive authority.” (2:30)** Hence, the whole episode of the expulsion from Paradise was merely to demonstrate why humans are not worthy of Paradise without undergoing a trial period on earth. So, just as there is no point in grieving over the expulsion of our ancestral parents from Paradise, we must try to see Allah's wisdom and purpose in seemingly regrettable situations we encounter, instead of bemoaning them.

The Great Ship

(Lessons 8—13)

Nuh (AS) was the next major prophet after Adam (AS). His people became indulged in worshipping idols named Wadd, Suwa, Yaghuth, Ya'uq and Nasr – these possibly being the names of righteous individuals from earlier generations whose statues were made to revere them that were later exalted to divine status. Nuh (AS) preached to his people to worship the only God, and to live righteously. However, most of them disbelieved in his prophethood and ridiculed him; they repelled him and even threatened to stone him to death. Allah commanded Nuh (AS) to construct a ship (or ark) and take the believers on board. Then He sent a severe flood that demolished the city completely. While the disbelievers drowned, the ship sailed to safety.

8

Persevere in the cause of Allah

Nuh (AS) lived for 950 years, most of which he spent trying to persuade his people to accept faith and establish monotheism: **“And We certainly sent Nuh to his people, and he remained among them a thousand years less fifty...” (29:14)** Hence, for hundreds of years, Nuh (AS) persisted in guiding his people, striving in the path of Allah, and facing people’s ridicule. In the same way, we must propagate the oneness of God, share His Word with others, spread goodness, and not feel dejected when others oppose our actions, because it is the effort – more than the final result – that counts in His sight.

9

Recognize Allah through His signs

Since Allah is not visible to us, how do we seek to recognize Him? Through His signs and attributes! That is exactly how Nuh (AS) and other prophets described Allah to their people. Consider the following argument presented by Nuh (AS) to those who opposed his message: **“What is the matter with you that you do not attribute to Allah grandeur? Whereas He has created you in stages! Do you not consider how Allah has created seven heavens in layers? And He made the moon therein a [reflected] light and made the sun a burning lamp. And Allah has caused you to grow from the earth a [progressive] growth. Then He will return you into it and extract you [another] extraction.” (71:13-18)**

We should thus ponder the signs of Allah and His creative wonders all around us, and encourage others to do the same. Knowing more about the universe reveals more about Allah because whatever exists has been created by Him, and reflects His artistic design.

10

Material wealth is immaterial to Allah

While wealth is a blessing from Allah, it is also a test from Him as it may encourage one to forget Him, and act arrogantly. This is the reason why many of the prophets, including Nuh (AS), had a large number of poor followers. The affluent among the nation of Nuh (AS) asked him rhetorically, **“Should we believe you while you are followed by the lowest [class of people]?” (26:111)** What these people failed to realise is that the level of wealth one possesses has no value in the sight of Allah; it is rather one’s faith and conduct that matter to Him.

11

Think before you ridicule

“And he [Nuh] constructed the ship, and whenever the chiefs of his people passed by him, they ridiculed him.” (11:38) The disbelievers felt it made no sense to construct a ship to sail on land, and so they made fun of their prophet. However, soon Allah **“opened the gates of the heaven with rain pouring down, and caused the earth to burst with springs...” (54:11-12)** This resulted in a mighty flood that drowned all except those aboard the ship, thus revealing the purpose for constructing a ship on land! We should try to avoid ridiculing or disparaging others: it could be that we are unable to comprehend the wisdom behind a seemingly foolish act.

12

Treat animals with kindness

Just when the flood was approaching, Allah commanded Nuh (AS), **“Load upon the ship of each [creature] two mates [male and female]...” (11:40)** Hence, along with the believers, a pair of every species of animals in the region was also rescued from the great flood, so that the pair could reproduce and not become extinct. We should similarly be kind towards animals, and protect them from extinction by reducing deforestation, controlling pollution levels, and restricting the slaughter of animals for entertainment or commercial purposes. Animal rights have clearly been prescribed by Prophet Muhammad (SAAS), who was sent as **“a mercy to the worlds” (21:107)** – implying “a mercy for all creatures”. There is a prophetic narration about a sinful woman who was forgiven by Allah merely for taking the trouble to provide water to a thirsty dog.

13

Mere blood relations cannot guarantee Paradise

A son of Nuh (AS) rejected the truth, and so was drowned by the flood despite his father's wish that he be rescued. Allah declared to Nuh (AS) regarding his son, **“Indeed he is not of your family...” (11:46)** This is because he had no faith in Allah and acted arrogantly. Similarly, the wife of Nuh (AS) was also not a believer, and thus suffered the same fate. We therefore learn that being associated with a prophet or righteous person does not automatically lead to salvation. Every person is judged by Allah for his or her own deeds and degree of faith. Allah makes this clear elsewhere in the Quran too: **“And no bearer of burdens will bear the burden of another. And if a heavily laden soul calls [another] to [carry some of] its load, nothing of it will be carried, even if he should be a close relative.” (35:18)**

The Perished Nations

(Lessons 14—19)

After the great flood that destroyed the nation of Nuh (AS), many other nations rose to power, and prophets were usually appointed from amongst those nations for their guidance. The reason for analysing together the stories of four prophets – Hud (AS), Salih (AS), Lut (AS), and Shuayb (AS) – is that they all present a common theme.

In each of these cases, the nation gained power, wealth, and influence that caused it to become corrupt and disregard the monotheistic message of serving only one God. The people started worshipping deities alongside Allah as well as indulged in social and moral evils. Allah appointed a prophet for the reformation of the people but, despite all efforts to convince his people of the truth, the prophet was rejected by the majority, ridiculed, and violently opposed. As a result, Allah destroyed the nation through some natural phenomenon, while allowing the believers to escape the disaster and start a new civilization.

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Hud (AS) belonged to the nation of Aad, while Salih (AS) was from Thamud. Lut (AS), a nephew of Ibrahim (AS), had emigrated from Ur, and settled in a city called Sodom where he preached. Shuayb (AS) was a resident of Madyan. Let us examine some of the lessons we can learn from their narratives.

14

Do not blindly follow your forefathers

When Hud (AS) admonished his people against worshipping false deities, most of them retorted, **“Have you come to us that we should worship Allah alone and leave what our fathers have worshipped?” (7:70)** The residents of Thamud similarly questioned Salih (AS), **“Do you forbid us to worship what our fathers worshipped?” (11:62)** People tend to become emotionally attached to their long-held customs and traditions without reflecting on their desirability or plausibility. Today, we must beware of our own customs and societal norms that are falsely attributed to Islam, and renounce all unfair cultural practices that are being passed down generations.

15

Do not belittle the signs of Allah

The perfect design of this universe, and all that it contains, reflects the dominion and supremacy of Allah. However, many people make the mistake of looking past His signs or denying them altogether. Allah appointed a she-camel as a specific sign for Thamud, but the people ridiculed this sign, and hamstrung her, thus inviting His punishment: **“And We gave Thamud the she-camel as a visible sign, but they wronged her.” (17:59)** We must remember that signs of Allah’s presence and dominion are evident in the tiniest particle of His creation, and not just in the miracles granted to the prophets.

“Indeed, Allah is not timid to present an example – that of a mosquito or what is smaller than it. And those who have believed know that it is the truth from their Lord. But as for those who disbelieve, they say, ‘What did Allah intend by this as an example?’ He misleads many thereby and guides many thereby. And He misleads not except the defiantly disobedient.” (2:26)

16

Be mindful of Allah's favours

In times of affluence and comfort, we tend to forget adversity, and start taking Allah's favours for granted. We believe that our success is due only to our own efforts and expertise; as a result, we act arrogantly, deprive others of their rights, and become indifferent to the will of Allah. Such was the case with the perished nations. Salih (AS), for example, reminded the residents of Thamud that their prosperity could not have been possible without Allah's help and favour: **“And remember when He made you successors after the Aad and settled you in the land, [and] you take for yourselves palaces from its plains and carve homes from the mountains. Then remember the favours of Allah and do not commit abuse on the earth, spreading corruption.” (7:74)** We must express sincere gratitude to Allah for His innumerable blessings in our life.

17

Do not be afraid of people's disapproval

We may perform certain desirable acts that fail to win the approval of those around us. This is because the norms of society are not necessarily based on the commandments of Allah, and may reflect people's own criteria for right and wrong. For this reason, it may sometimes be necessary to go against people's wishes, and end up disappointing those who previously held a high opinion about us. When Salih (AS) rejected the worship of false deities, his people thus addressed him, **“O Salih, you were a man of promise among us before this...” (11:62)** We must be confident about the path we choose, and not let others' uninformed opinions bring us down.

18

Social ills can bring about a society's downfall

These nations were ultimately punished not just for associating partners with Allah but also for their social and moral ills. The residents of Madyan were dishonest and exploited others through deceptive trade practices. Shuayb (AS) warned them, **“Give full measure and do not be of those who cause loss. And weigh with an even balance. And do not deprive people of their due and do not commit abuse on earth, spreading corruption.”** (26:181-183) This makes it clear that dishonesty, especially in earning one’s livelihood, is a major sin, and worthy of the severest punishment.

The men among the nation of Lut (AS) practised sodomy: **“And [We had sent] Lut when he said to his people, ‘Do you commit such immorality as no one has preceded you with from among the worlds? Indeed, you approach men with desire, instead of women.’”** (7:81) The people of Aad were admonished for their military aggression and tyranny, as Hud (AS) pointed out to them, **“And when you strike, you strike as tyrants!”** (26:130)

19

No nation is infallible

These nations possessed great engineering skills as well as military might. Aad, for example, constructed **“lofty pillars, the likes of which had never been created in the land” (89:7-8)** – in addition to their palaces, fortresses, and other landmarks. However, these nations could not withstand the natural disasters through which Allah brought their thriving civilizations to an end. Aad were destroyed by a raging wind that lasted for seven nights and eight days; Thamud and Madyan were both devastated by terrible earthquakes; and the people of Lut (AS) suffered from what has been described as a severe storm of clay stones. Today, we see entire communities and centuries-old landmarks wiped out by earthquakes, tsunamis, and hurricanes, reminding us to always be grateful to Allah and not to consider ourselves infallible.

“As for Aad, they were arrogant upon the earth without right and said, ‘Who is greater than us in strength?’ Did they not consider that Allah who created them was greater than them in strength? But they continued to reject Our signs.” (41:15)

A Friend of God

(Lessons 20—24)

Ibrahim (AS) was one of the greatest and most influential prophets. Allah bestowed the highest honour upon him by making him a **“leader for humanity” (4:125)**, and taking him as **“an intimate friend.” (4:125)**

He was born about four thousand years ago in the thriving city of Ur, in modern-day Iraq. His community was deeply devoted to the worship of idols – a concept he rejected at a very young age. He argued with his people regarding their erroneous beliefs, but after failing to convince them to serve the only God, he migrated to Palestine with his group of followers, including Lut (AS) who was his nephew. Ibrahim (AS) preached Allah’s word far and wide, laying the foundations of monotheism in various lands.

Ibrahim (AS) had two sons, both of whom were later appointed as prophets. His wife, Sarah (AS), gave birth to Ishaq (AS), from whom the tribe of Israel is descended. His second wife, Hajar (AS), gave birth to

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Ismail (AS) from whom many of the Arabs are descended. Ibrahim (AS) and Ismail (AS) constructed the Sacred House (Kaabah) in the valley of Makkah, and established the practice of the great annual pilgrimage (Hajj) – a tradition continuing to this day.

20

Convey the truth using reason and logic

The proper way of convincing people of the truth is through reason and cognition rather than insisting on blind acceptance of faith. This has been the way of the prophets: they always appealed to people's intellect with their preaching, and advised them to reflect on the universe and use common sense. Let us briefly consider three stories from the life of Ibrahim (AS) that illustrate how reason and logic are essential components in understanding the oneness and supremacy of God.

(A) Who is my Lord?

As a young man, Ibrahim (AS) rejected the worship of idols, seeing no sense in this practice. One night, he observed a star in the sky and thought that could be the lord of the worlds. But when the star set, he became convinced it could not be so. He similarly considered the moon and the sun to be his lords, but when they too set, he realised his Lord was the Unseen One who controls heavenly bodies, rather than being one of those bodies. He was convinced it was illogical to take

physical objects as gods. Allah thus guided him to the truth, and revealed the Scripture to him.

(B) Broken idols

Ibrahim (AS) was eager to see his nation abandon idol worship. So, one day, while his people were away, he squashed all their idols except the largest of them. When the people suspected him of the act, he blamed the idol still intact, and challenged the people to question the broken idols if they did not believe him. This made the people realise the folly of their ways, for their gods never could speak! Our egos make us blind to reason, however: the people quickly recovered from their state of embarrassment, and declared, **“Indeed, you know well that they do not speak!”** (21:65) Ibrahim (AS) answered, **“Do you then worship instead of Allah that which does not benefit you at all or harm you? Fie on you and what you worship instead of Allah. Will you not then use reason?”** (21:66-67)

(C) The king’s argument

“Have you not considered the one who argued with Ibrahim about his Lord [merely] because Allah had given him kingship? When Ibrahim said,

‘My Lord is the one who gives life and causes death,’ he said, ‘I give life and cause death.’ Ibrahim said, ‘Indeed, Allah brings up the sun from the east, so bring it up from the west.’ So the disbeliever was overwhelmed, and Allah does not guide the wrongdoing people.” (2:258)

21

Being inquisitive can strengthen your faith

While some aspects of our Creator cannot be grasped by human senses, there is nothing wrong with being inquisitive about His exalted traits and how He ordains matters. In fact, knowing Allah better makes our belief firm, and enables us to serve Him with greater sincerity and devotion. If you are inquisitive about His ways, it may reaffirm your faith in His creative abilities. Consider the following plea made by Ibrahim (AS) to satisfy his heart: **“And [mention] when Ibrahim said, ‘My Lord, show me how You give life to the dead.’ [Allah] said, ‘Have you not believed?’ He said, ‘Yes, but [I ask] only that my heart may be satisfied.’” (2:260)**

22

Treat others with compassion

Compassion is one of the great attributes of Allah which He has also blessed His creatures with. Ibrahim (AS) was extremely soft-hearted, forbearing, and kind. When he learnt of the approaching punishment for the residents of Sodom due to their sins and corrupt ways, Ibrahim (AS) felt grieved for them, and pleaded with Allah to grant them further respite: **“...He began to plead with Us for Lut's people. Indeed, Ibrahim was, without doubt, forbearing, compassionate, constantly repentant.” (11:74-75)** One cannot hope for Allah’s compassion unless one is compassionate towards others.

23

Be willing to sacrifice for Allah

We must be willing to make sacrifices, whether great or small, for the sake of obeying and loving Allah. He shall amply reward us for any hardships we bear in His cause. Ibrahim (AS) was commanded, as a test from Allah, to sacrifice his son. Both father and son readily accepted this command, and when Ibrahim (AS) was fully prepared to make the sacrifice, Allah revealed to him not to proceed further, as they both had emerged successful from the trial: **“And when they had both submitted and he put him down upon his forehead, We called to him, ‘O Ibrahim, You have fulfilled the vision.’ Indeed, We thus reward the doers of good.” (37:103-105)**

It is important to remember that Allah did not want Ibrahim (AS) to slaughter his son, nor did He allow it to happen. He gave such a command to Ibrahim (AS) merely to test how readily he would respond to it and whether he was worthy of the highest status among humanity. Since the prophets were honoured by Allah most, they were also tested most severely.

24

Make your children firm upon monotheism

It is our duty to ensure that our children serve Allah alone and associate none with Him. Praying for help or intercession to others – whether idols, objects of nature, angels, prophets, or saints – amounts to worshipping them, and is the gravest sin in the sight of Allah. It is, therefore, essential that our children firmly grasp true monotheism as prescribed by the Quran. While Ibrahim (AS) could do nothing about his father worshipping idols, he ensured that his children did not follow the same path:

“And [mention], when Ibrahim said to his father and his people, ‘Indeed, I am disassociated from that which you worship, except for He who created me; and indeed, He will guide me.’ And he made it a word remaining among his descendants that they might repent [frequently].” (43:26-28)

The Estranged Brother **(Lessons 25—32)**

The intriguing story of Yusuf (AS) has been described as **“the best of stories” (12:3)** by Allah in the Quran. Born in Canaan (Palestine), he was descended from a line of prophets: his father was Yaqub (AS) (also known as Israel), and his grandfather was Ishaq (AS), the younger son of Ibrahim (AS).

As a young boy, Yusuf’s (AS) righteous conduct earned him the special love of his father which caused his half-brothers to become extremely jealous. They cast Yusuf (AS) in a well from where a group of travellers picked him up and sold him as a slave to a minister (Aziz) in Egypt. As Yusuf (AS) grew to become an extremely handsome young man, the wife of Aziz – and later, other influential women in the city – sought to seduce him, which led to his subsequent imprisonment despite resisting all their advances.

Allah granted wisdom and prophethood to Yusuf (AS), and taught him the interpretation of dreams. After remaining imprisoned for several years, Yusuf (AS)

interpreted a dream for the King of Egypt which saved the country from famine and poverty, and led to the appointment of Yusuf (AS) as the minister responsible for the storehouses, thereby giving him great prestige.

Sometime later, a famine in Canaan forced the brothers of Yusuf (AS) to approach him for trade on lenient terms, not realizing that the powerful Egyptian minister was actually their brother. After several visits to Egypt, when their financial woes finally forced the brothers to approach Yusuf (AS) for charity, he revealed his identity to them. The brothers became remorseful and regretted their crime against Yusuf (AS) which he then forgave. Yusuf (AS) asked his brothers to migrate to Egypt along with their families, where he welcomed them and experienced the joy of being reunited with his parents.

25

Jealousy can destroy any relationship

Jealousy leads to ill-will, and causes a person to take for granted whatever he or she possesses. It creates hostility between siblings, friends, colleagues, and even spouses, and can potentially end any relationship. The half-brothers of Yusuf (AS) resented him out of envy to such an extent that they conspired against him and brutally cast him into a well: **“[The brothers said,] ‘Yusuf and his brother [Binyamin] are more beloved to our father than we, while we are a clan. Indeed, our father is in clear error. Kill Yusuf or cast him out to some land; the countenance [i.e. attention] of your father will be only for you, and you will be after that a righteous people.’” (12:8-9)**

26

Counter tragedy with patience

We all face tragedies and setbacks in life, including parting from our beloved ones. Such circumstances call for remembering and seeking help from Allah, instead of uttering anything blameworthy or acting recklessly. In particular, one must never harm oneself out of grief, as Allah has made human life sacred. Yaqub (AS), upon being separated from his son – an innocent child cruelly taken away from his parents – felt great anguish, but remarked, **“...Patience is most fitting. And Allah is the one sought for help against that which you describe.”** (12:18)

27

Seek Allah's help in overcoming lust

Resisting false desires requires one to be conscious of Allah at all times. That is why a spiritually dead person gives in to all sorts of temptations. The Quran makes it clear that Yusuf (AS) might have inclined to the wife of Aziz, and other women who sought to seduce him, if he did not seek help from Allah in staying resolute: **“And she certainly determined [to seduce] him, and he would have inclined to her had he not seen the proof of his Lord.” (12:24)** Yusuf (AS) similarly prayed, **“...If You do not avert from me their plan, I might incline toward them and be of the ignorant.” (12:33)**

28

Justice should be established, not just imparted

Sometimes, a just outcome alone is not sufficient; justice must also be *seen to be done*. People must be in a position to acknowledge that justice has been carried out and that the ruling has not been biased or unfair in any way. When Yusuf (AS) interpreted the king's dream and saved the people from potential starvation, the king ordered his immediate release from prison. However, Yusuf (AS) refused to come out of prison, despite languishing there for years, until his innocence was firmly established in the king's court, and witnessed by all. It was only after the wife of Aziz testified against her own conduct and rendered him blameless that he left prison, thus proving his trustworthiness and lofty character.

29

Express confidence in your abilities

We should have confidence in our abilities and skills, and not be afraid of accepting responsibility. There is nothing wrong with informing others of our capabilities, and requesting a position of authority on its basis. However, it is important to be honest in appraising ourselves, and not exaggerate or show off. When the King of Egypt decided to appoint Yusuf (AS) for his service, the latter declared, **“Appoint me over the storehouses of the land. Indeed, I will be a knowing guardian.” (12:55)** Yusuf (AS) felt he could do the job well, and he made it known to the king.

30

None possesses knowledge of the Unseen

It is important to remember that Allah alone possesses ultimate knowledge, and no one else. The prophets did not know the Unseen unless they were specifically informed about a matter by Allah. Hence, even they were susceptible to making a misjudgement. When Yusuf's (AS) full brother, Binyamin, was detained in Egypt on the feigned charge of stealing, Yaqub (AS) assumed his sons had harmed Binyamin, but this was not actually the case: **“[Yaqub] said, ‘Rather, your souls have enticed you to something...’” (12:83)** Similarly, Ayesha (RA), the wife of Prophet Muhammad (SAAS), informs us: *“...If anyone tells you that Mubammad (SAAS) has seen the Unseen, he is a liar, for Allah says, None has the knowledge of the Unseen but Allah.” (Bukhari)*

31

Seek Allah's bounty throughout the land

The Quran encourages us to travel in the land for seeking Allah's sustenance. As the example of Yaqub (AS) and his family shows, there is also nothing objectionable about migrating to another land due to financial considerations as long as one is able to observe the teachings of Allah without restrictions in the foreign country. When Canaan was hit by famine, while Egypt remained economically stable due to the foresight granted by Allah to Yusuf (AS), he instructed his brothers: **“And bring me your family, all together.” (12:93)** Hence, they all migrated from their native Canaan and settled in Egypt.

32

Stay resolute in the face of hardships

The life of Yusuf (AS) gives us a great lesson in steadfastness and determination. He was separated from his parents at an early age, thrown into a well by his own brothers, hidden and carried along as merchandise, and sold as a slave for a low price in a foreign land. He lived as a slave for many years, resisted the advances of his mistress, and was then imprisoned on a false charge. Yet, in spite of all these hardships, he remained positive, showing exemplary courage and strength of character, while constantly relying on Allah for help. He ended up acquiring a position of honour and prestige, with his family by his side, and all the blessings at his disposal. We must, therefore, be determined when confronted with hardships, and never despair of help from Allah. As Yaqub (AS) advised his sons, **“...Despair not of relief from Allah. Indeed, no one despairs of relief from Allah except the disbelieving people.”** (12:87)

The Saviour of the Israelites **(Lessons 33—40)**

Musa (AS) is the most frequently mentioned person in the Quran. He was born in Egypt about 3,500 years ago, and belonged to the tribe of Israel that had migrated to Egypt from Canaan during the time of Yusuf (AS). At the time of Musa's (AS) birth, the ruler of Egypt, known as the Pharaoh, oppressed the Israelites, enslaving them and even killing their newborn sons. To prevent her son meeting the same fate, Musa's (AS) mother put him in a chest and cast it in River Nile, from where he was picked up by Pharaoh's household, and Pharaoh's wife adopted the child. Musa (AS) thus had a royal upbringing.

In his youth, Musa (AS) mistakenly killed a man, and the fear of punishment and injustice from a tyrant regime caused him to flee Egypt and settle in Madyan, where he married. About a decade later, while journeying alongside his family, Musa (AS) received his first revelation; Allah spoke to him directly, commanding him to preach to Pharaoh, and tell him to free the Israelites from bondage. Allah further granted

Musa (AS) several miracles as proof of his prophethood, and later, the Torah was revealed to him.

Musa's (AS) brother, Harun (AS), was also granted prophethood and made his assistant, but despite preaching to Pharaoh and his people for many years, they both were dismissed as magicians, and vehemently opposed and threatened. Finally, on Allah's command, the Israelites, led by Musa (AS), fled Egypt to escape bondage; they were pursued by Pharaoh and his soldiers who ended up drowning in the Red Sea. The Israelites, however, were repeatedly ungrateful to Allah, and so were deprived of their native homeland of Canaan for another forty years.

33

Trust Allah to heal your heart

Musa's (AS) mother, who was inspired by Allah to cast her infant son in the river aboard a chest, felt greatly distressed when she did so. She became even more apprehensive when Pharaoh's family picked him up from the banks of River Nile, as Allah says, **“The heart of Musa's mother became void...” (28:10)** However, she trusted Allah to protect her infant son, and Allah not only saved him from death, but also had his mother appointed as his wet nurse! Allah says, **“So We restored him to his mother that she might be comforted and not grieve...” (28:13)** Just as Allah comforted Musa's (AS) mother, ended her distress, and healed her heart, He provides solace to anyone who trusts Him completely.

34

No sin is unforgivable

As a young man, Musa (AS) intervened in a fight, and ended up killing one of the two men with a single blow, without intending to. He then became extremely remorseful, pleading Allah for forgiveness, and vowing never to repeat his mistake: **“My Lord, for the favour You bestowed upon me, I will never be an assistant to the criminals.” (28:17)** Allah not only forgave Musa (AS) but also later made him a prophet. Allah loves to pardon and overlook our sins, and no wrong is unforgivable in His sight. He states: **“Say, ‘O My servants who have transgressed against themselves [by sinning], do not despair of the mercy of Allah. Indeed, Allah forgives all sins. Indeed, it is He who is the Forgiving, the Merciful.’” (39:53)** Turning to Allah with sincerity is all that is required.

35

Never belittle the common courtesies

A good human being is always willing to lend others a helping hand. He or she is never too busy or too shy or to be of use to others, and is ready to extend small kindnesses, even to strangers. When Musa (AS) arrived at a well in Madyan, where the shepherds watered their flocks, he saw two women modestly standing apart and waiting for the men to depart before they could bring forth their own flocks. Musa (AS) immediately offered to water their animals, thus saving them plenty of time and effort. Such is the attitude praised by Allah. As Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) said, *“Do not belittle any good deed, even meeting your brother with a cheerful face.”* (Muslim)

36

Honesty reaps the greatest rewards

We all encounter situations in life where uttering a lie seems the most convenient course of action. We end up convincing ourselves that the lie will not hurt anyone and so it is okay to be untruthful. However, the trustworthy ones are those who speak the truth even in the most precarious circumstances. Musa (AS), for instance, could have told the kind old man he met in Madyan that the murder charge against him was false; he, however, narrated the entire incident of how he unintentionally killed a man, and admitted his guilt. Such honesty earned him the respect of the entire family. As the old man's daughter remarked, **“O my father, hire him. Indeed, the best one you can hire is the strong and the trustworthy.”** (28:26)

37

Do not be hesitant in upholding the truth

Many a times, we are hesitant to speak or acknowledge the truth, thinking it might go against us or harm our reputation. However, a courageous person stands for the cause of truth and justice, even if it means putting one's own life in danger. When the magicians of Pharaoh witnessed the miracle granted to Musa (AS), and realised it was not magic as had been portrayed by the regime, they immediately submitted to Allah, and announced their faith to a stunned public gathering. At this, Pharaoh threatened them, **“I will surely cut off your hands and your feet on opposite sides, and I will crucify you on the trunks of palm trees!”** (20:71) In spite of such unequivocal threats, the magicians did not renounce their faith, and showed exemplary resolve for the cause of the truth.

38

Prefer Paradise over this transitory world

The worldly life is only temporary, and we all shall pass on one day, while the next life shall be eternal. For this reason, when faced with a conflict between this life and the next, it is wise to be hereafter-oriented. Our focus should be on performing the deeds that shall facilitate us on the Day of Judgement. Pharaoh's wife was an exemplary woman who went against her tyrant husband to boldly declare faith in Allah. She preferred the blessings of Paradise to her luxurious lifestyle in this world. She prayed, **“My Lord, build for me near You a house in Paradise, and save me from Pharaoh and his deeds.”** (66:11)

39

Wealth can be a cause of decline

Wealth is a blessing from Allah as it enables you to satisfy your needs and live in comfort. Wealth, however, is also a great trial as it brings with it the added responsibility to share your blessings with others, while remaining humble and thankful. Qarun was an extremely wealthy, yet miserly, Israelite at the time of Musa (AS). He oppressed his own tribe, and refused to help the needy or recognize Allah's favour upon him, proudly declaring, **“This wealth was given to me on account of the knowledge I possess.” (28:78)** Due to his sheer arrogance and excessive love of riches, Allah **“caused the earth to swallow him and his home” (28:81)**, bringing about his eternal downfall.

40

There is good in every happening

There is some hidden benefit or redeeming factor in every tough situation you encounter, even if it is not visible at the time. This is most perfectly illustrated in the mystical journey Musa (AS) took alongside Khidr, who was granted special knowledge by Allah. Khidr made a hole in a boat, killed a boy, and constructed a wall without demanding payment, and Musa (AS) objected each time. Yet, there was wisdom in every one of these acts: the damaged boat would be of no use to the tyrant king who wanted to seize it; the boy, who would have harmed his parents, would be replaced by a righteous son; and the wall would guard the treasure belonging to two orphan children. In the same way, there may be some good behind a seemingly regrettable situation in your life. It is best to place your trust in Allah.

The Warrior King

(Lessons 41—44)

Talut lived about 3,000 years ago, and was the first Israelite king. The Quran briefly describes the appointment of Talut as king, and narrates how the army of true believers led by Talut defeated the far mightier Philistine army of Jalut that worshiped false deities. The effective leadership of Talut, and later, the exceptional bravery of Dawud (AS), led to an unlikely victory for the Israelites, and laid the foundation for the golden period in the history of the tribe.

41

Strength of character is a criterion for leadership

The Israelites were ruled by judges until the time of Prophet Samoeel (AS), when the people demanded to have a king under whom they could fight to regain their lost territories. Allah chose Talut as their king – a very capable man, though neither wealthy nor from a distinguished tribe among the Israelites. The people objected to his selection, saying, **“How can he have kingship over us while we are more worthy of kingship than him and he has not been given any measure of wealth?”** (2:247) At this, Samoeel (AS) replied, **“Indeed, Allah has chosen him over you and has increased him abundantly in knowledge and stature.”** (2:247) This conveys that in the sight of Allah, wealth, caste, or social status is not a criterion for leadership. Rather, one’s strength of character – defined by one’s knowledge, physique, and ability to lead by example – is the true criterion for selecting a leader.

42

Do as the leader says

Obedience to the leader is a prerequisite for an effective and a result-oriented team. While proceeding for battle, Talut and his soldiers came across a river, and Talut forbade his soldiers to drink its water, except for taking a mere sip. However, most of his soldiers drank from it, and then lost courage, declaring to Talut, **“There is no power for us today against Jalut and his soldiers.” (2:249)** In contrast, those who had obeyed Talut were resolute and ready for the battle. Obedience to the leader not only ensures unity among the ranks but also keeps confidence levels high.

43

Optimism opens up new possibilities

It is wise to prepare the best you can, and then be optimistic about the outcome. Losing faith in one's own abilities leads to nothing but ruin. When many of Talut's soldiers lost courage before the battle, there were others who were optimistic about winning, and had complete faith in Allah's help. **“How often a small group has overcome a large group by permission of Allah. And Allah is with the steadfast,”** (2:249) they asserted. These true believers then prayed to Allah with utter conviction: **“Our Lord! Pour forth on us patience and make us victorious over the disbelieving people.”** (2:250) They went on to win the battle.

44

Individual valour can redeem a situation

Victory is often the result of efficient teamwork, but sometimes, even an individual act of valour can go a long way in producing the desired result. Dawud (AS) was an unknown young soldier in Talut's army who fought valiantly and killed Jalut, causing the enemy army to flee the battlefield. Dawud (AS) was later granted prophethood and kingship by Allah. In the same way, your individual act of courage can make a huge impact in any situation, enabling you to realise your own potential and achieve greater things in life.

Two Splendid Kingdoms

(Lessons 45—50)

Dawud (AS) and Sulayman (AS) were two prophets who were granted magnificent kingdoms and wisdom by Allah. Dawud (AS) succeeded Talut as king of the Israelites, and the Psalms was revealed to him by Allah. He was granted eloquent speech and a melodious voice; birds and mountains used to exalt Allah alongside him. Allah further taught him how to fashion coats of armour, using iron, to assist in the battlefield.

Sulayman (AS) was the son of Dawud (AS), and succeeded him to the throne. He had an even more fabulous kingdom, and his era marked the most glorious days in the history of the Israelites. Sulayman (AS) was given command over the wind, and taught the language of the birds. He had mastery over the jinn who constructed landmarks for him, dived in the sea to collect pearls, and performed various other tasks.

45

Eloquent speech is a gift from Allah

The ability to speak fluently, and express oneself articulately, is a gift from Allah. The prophets were under obligation to communicate His word to the people, so they had to be good speakers to fulfil this task. Dawud (AS), in particular, spoke very eloquently, as Allah says, **“We strengthened his kingdom, and We gave him wisdom and a decisive way of speaking.” (38:20)** Speaking with confidence and precision is a natural trait of true leaders. It inspires trust and respect among the followers.

46

Consider both sides to any argument

Once, Dawud (AS) was tested by Allah through two litigants who approached him in privacy. One of them claimed that the other had deprived him of his only ewe, and added that to his existing ninety-nine ewes, at which point, Dawud (AS) condemned the attitude of the aggressor. While there are various interpretations to this parable, an obvious point to note is that Dawud (AS) passed a hasty judgement, without listening to the other litigant, and afterwards repented to Allah. In daily life situations, we tend to be judgemental, and often rush to conclusions. This little episode reminds us to always listen to both sides to any argument, weigh them accordingly, and pass a disinterested judgement after considering all evidence.

47

Beseech Allah for His blessings

There is nothing wrong with seeking Allah's blessings in this life, as long as one does not lose sight of the hereafter. You can ask Allah to provide you with wealth and resources without incurring any blame. Consider the following earnest prayer made by Sulayman (AS): **“My Lord, forgive me and grant me a kingdom such as will not belong to anyone after me. Indeed, You are the Bestower.” (38:35)** Allah accepted this prayer, and bestowed great powers upon him. It is important to have a balanced outlook on life, though, and not fall prey to materialism.

48

Thank Allah in times of prosperity

In good times, we tend to take Allah's blessings for granted, and not thank Him enough. It is important to express sincere gratitude to Him for all that we possess, through both words and deeds. Dawud (AS) and Sulayman (AS) were exceedingly thankful, and used to say, **“Praise be to Allah, who has favoured us over many of His believing servants.” (27:15)** When Sulayman (AS) was able to decipher the speech of the ant, he instantaneously smiled and thanked Allah for His favours upon him and his parents. Similarly, when the throne of the Queen of Saba was brought to him, he immediately expressed gratitude to Allah for the favour.

49

Never force anyone to believe

When Sulayman (AS) was informed that the powerful people of Saba worshiped the sun, he exhibited his own strength and summoned the Queen of Saba to his palace. However, once she arrived, he neither forced her to worship Allah alone, nor disrespected her in the slightest. Instead, he showed her how Allah had blessed him and his kingdom, and appealed to her intellect by disguising her throne and enquiring if that was hers. The Queen of Saba thus believed in Allah – not out of fear of Sulayman (AS) but because she recognized Allah through His signs and munificence. Forcing anyone to believe in Allah is utterly pointless, as He says, **“And had your Lord willed, those on earth would have believed – all of them entirely. Would you then force the people to become believers?”** (10:99)

50

Grandeur can inspire faith

While the wonders of Allah’s creation clearly point to His unconstrained power, even the splendour and magnificence of worldly objects can help inspire faith in some people. Seeing a righteous person possess great blessings can convince people that Allah is the best provider, and encourage them to call upon Him alone. This is best exemplified by how the blessings bestowed upon Sulayman (AS) convinced the Queen of Saba of the truth, summed up as follows:

“She was told, ‘Enter the palace.’ But when she saw it, she thought it was a body of water and uncovered her shins [to wade through]. He [Sulayman] said, ‘Indeed, it is a palace [whose floor is] made smooth with glass.’ She said, ‘My Lord, indeed I have wronged myself, and I submit with Sulayman to Allah, Lord of the worlds.’”
(27:44)

The Man of the Fish

(Lessons 51—54)

Yunus (AS) lived about 2,800 years ago in modern-day Iraq. He was sent by Allah to preach His oneness to the people of Nineveh, the capital of Assyria, which was one of the largest cities in the world, with a population of over 100,000. However, Yunus (AS), fearing the people's hostile attitude, abandoned his mission without Allah's permission. He boarded a ship to take him away but it encountered a storm in the sea. The sailors cast lots to determine who had brought "bad luck" to the ship, and the name of Yunus (AS) came up. He was then cast into the sea where a huge fish swallowed him.

Miraculously, Yunus (AS) survived inside the fish. He became remorseful and repented to Allah sincerely, Who caused the fish to choke him out onto a shore. Yunus (AS) was seriously ill by then, so Allah caused a gourd plant to grow over him, providing him cool shade while he recovered. He then returned to his people who eventually believed in his message, and accepted true faith.

51

Anger is ever a cause of regret

Anger makes you act hastily and irrationally; it causes you to say or do something which you end up regretting. It was anger at his people's disbelief that caused Yunus (AS) to disregard the command of Allah, as He says, **“And [mention] the man of the fish [Yunus], when he went off in anger and deemed that We had no power over him...” (21:87)** It is important to avoid making decisions while in a state of anger or exasperation. Wait until you can think clearly, take a deep breath, and ask Allah to guide you, before deciding upon a matter.

52

No human is beyond erring

It is in human nature to err, and no human being – regardless of his or her level of piety – is perfect or beyond erring. Yunus (AS), despite being a prophet of Allah, made a mistake, which shows a common person is all the more liable to sin. In fact, imperfection in conduct is one of the defining traits of the human being. Allah never expects you not to err, but He wants you to repent to Him after sinning, and not to become a habitual transgressor. For this reason, Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) said, *“By Him in Whose Hand is my life, if you were not to commit sin, Allah would have swept you out of existence and He would have replaced you by those people who would commit sin and seek forgiveness from Allah, so that He forgives them.”* (Muslim)

53

Never despair of Allah's help

Despite being swallowed by the fish, Yunus (AS) miraculously survived inside its belly. However, his physical condition kept deteriorating and there seemed no way out for him. Yet, he trusted Allah to save him and not for a moment despaired of His assistance. He cried out from inside the belly of the fish: **“There is no deity except You; exalted are You. Indeed, I have been of the wrongdoers.” (21:87)** Allah not only forgave Yunus (AS) but caused the fish to choke him out, and restored his health. This indicates that it is always a good time to repent to Allah; it is never too late to admit your sin and hope for His mercy in the remainder of this life and in the hereafter.

54

Make the most of your second chance

Sometimes, having faltered once, you are given an opportunity to make amends, and put things back on track. Never miss that second chance, for it is usually the last one you get. Consider how Yunus (AS) corrected his earlier mistake of forsaking his people in anger: he returned and persisted with them until they believed in Allah. He thus saved one of the great cities of the time from divine punishment – unlike so many other estimable cities that had perished in the past. Allah says, **“Then why has there not been a city that believed, so its faith benefited it, except the people of Yunus? When they believed, We removed from them the punishment of disgrace in worldly life and gave them enjoyment for a time.” (10:98)**

A Miraculous Birth

(Lessons 55—61)

Maryam (AS) was born to a devout Israelite family about 2,000 years ago. Her mother dedicated her, at a very young age, for the service of Allah in the temple where Zakariya (AS), who was her relative and a prophet, was made responsible for her. She was an exemplary young person, growing in knowledge and piety over the years, until one day the angel Jibril suddenly appeared before her in the form of a man, and informed her that Allah had chosen her. He blew into her, and gave her tidings of a son, even though she was a virgin. Maryam (AS) concealed her pregnancy, withdrew to a remote place, and then took the baby back to her city, where the people accused her of fornication. However, her son, Isa (AS), miraculously spoke in infancy, acquitting his mother of blame, and revealing his status as a prophet of God.

Isa (AS) was the last Israelite prophet, and was granted great miracles by Allah, including the ability to cure the blind and the leper, and even giving life to the dead. However, most Israelites rejected him, and opposed the

teachings revealed to him in the form of the Gospel. In accordance with a charge forwarded by the Israelites, their Roman rulers were about to hang Isa (AS), but as yet another miracle, Allah raised Isa (AS) to Himself, and saved him from his enemies.

Let us examine some of the lessons we can learn from the lives of Maryam (AS) and Isa (AS), as well as Zakariya (AS) and his son, Yahya (AS).

55

Provide equal opportunities to sons and daughters

The mother of Maryam (AS), who had pledged her forthcoming baby to the service of Allah in the temple, was faced with a dilemma when she gave birth to a girl – as only sons were customarily dedicated for such service. However, she decided to fulfil her pledge to Allah, praying to Him to always guide and protect her daughter. Allah graciously accepted young Maryam (AS) for His service, as He states in the Quran, **“So her Lord accepted her with good acceptance and caused her to grow in a good manner.” (3:37)** Like Maryam’s (AS) mother, we should provide equal opportunities to our sons and daughters, and apply the same standards while bringing them up.

56

Act wisely in the prime of your life

Those who are conscious of Allah from a young age are highly beloved to Him. Such individuals do not waste their youth by being spiritually unaware or taking this life for granted. Rather, they try to act righteously, make their choices wisely, and are sensitive to the feelings of others. Maryam (AS) has been praised by Allah for being **“devoutly obedient” (66:12)** to Him. As a young woman, her trust in Allah provided her exemplary courage to take on the world. It was indeed her beautiful conduct during her youth that induced Zakariya (AS) to beseech Allah to grant him a righteous child too. His son, Yahya (AS), has also been praised by Allah for being wise and conscientious in his youth: **“And We gave him wisdom [while yet] a boy.” (19:12)**

57

Nothing is even remotely difficult for Allah

Always have faith in what Allah can do for you, because nothing is difficult for Him in the slightest. He does what He sees fit, in the manner He deems best. When Jibril conveyed the news of a son to Maryam (AS), she was taken aback, and prayed, **“My Lord, how will I have a child when no man has touched me?” (3:47)** The angel simply replied, **“Such is Allah. He creates what He wills. When He decrees a matter, He only says to it, ‘Be,’ and it is.” (3:47)** Zakariya (AS) prayed for a child, and was also conveyed the news of a righteous son, Yahya (AS), through angels – but in his old age. He asked, astonished, **“My Lord, how will I have a boy when I have reached old age and my wife is barren?” (3:40)** Again, the reply was, **“Such is Allah. He does what He wills.” (3:40)**

58

Allah provides the means to bear every hardship

During her pregnancy, Maryam (AS) was under a great deal of stress – having to cope with her situation alone and conceal her pregnancy – until at last, **“the pains of childbirth drove her to the trunk of a palm tree. She said, ‘Oh, I wish I had died before this, and was in oblivion, forgotten!’” (19:23)** Allah never burdens anyone with more than he or she can bear, so He was there to help out Maryam (AS). A voice – possibly that of an angel – called out to her, comforting her, and laying out her course of action.

“Do not grieve; your Lord has provided beneath you a stream. And shake toward you the trunk of the palm tree; it will drop upon you ripe, fresh dates. So eat and drink and be comforted. And if you see from among humanity anyone, say, ‘Indeed, I have vowed to the Most Merciful a fast [of silence], so I will not speak today to anyone.’” (19:24-26)

59

Contemplate the everyday miracles in life

The great miracles granted to Isa (AS), such as giving life to the dead, did not convince most Israelites that he was the promised one – just as previous prophets' miracles were denied. Allah informs us, **“And nothing has prevented Us from sending [similar] signs except that the former peoples denied them.” (17:59)** Instead, Allah commands us to reflect on the everyday miracles we encounter: the systematic rotation of the night and day, how the rain-bearing clouds burst forth to revive the seemingly dead earth, the smooth sailing of the ships across the oceans, and so on. There are miracles of Allah as far out in the universe as we can reach, and also within our own bodies: **“We will show them Our Signs in the universe, and in their own selves, until it becomes clear to them that this [Quran] is the truth.” (41:53)**

60

The greater the blessings, the tougher the accountability

When the disciples of Isa (AS) requested a table spread with food from heaven, Allah responded, **“Indeed, I will send it down to you, but whoever disbelieves afterwards from among you – then indeed will I punish him with a punishment by which I have not punished anyone among the worlds.” (5:115)** As the miracle was extraordinary, disbelieving in it would result in the toughest accountability. The same divine law applies to Allah’s other favours; those blessed with the most perfect guidance, in the form of the Quran, will be most answerable for their deeds. Similarly, those enjoying the greatest wealth, but reluctant to share it with the needy, will be most punishable with regard to their possessions.

61

Prophets were no more than human beings

The prophets have often been venerated by succeeding generations as having a share in divinity or possessing the treasures of Allah. In reality, even the greatest of prophets were no more than human beings to whom Allah communicated His messages through an angel, and granted some special favours as proof of their truthfulness. Regarding Isa (AS), Allah says, **“The Messiah, son of Maryam, was not but a messenger; [other] messengers have passed on before him. And his mother was a supporter of truth. They both used to eat food.” (5:75)**

The status of Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) has similarly been clarified in the Quran: **“Muhammad is not but a messenger. [Other] messengers have passed on before him. So if he was to die or be killed, would you turn back on your heels [to unbelief]?” (3:144)**

The Man with the Two Horns **(Lessons 62—64)**

Dhul-Qarnayn is a title, meaning the one “with two horns”. What the actual name of Dhul-Qarnayn was, or when and where he lived, is not certain, although people have equated Dhul-Qarnayn to several historical figures without any convincing evidence.

Allah had granted immense power and substantial means to Dhul-Qarnayn, who remained grateful to Him, and acted according to His will. He used to go on long expeditions, travelling to distant places in both the east and the west. During one such journey, he came upon a primitive tribe residing between two mountains. The people complained to him about two savage tribes, Yajuj and Majuj, that repeatedly ransacked their land, and brought great destruction upon them. Dhul-Qarnayn, at the people’s request, constructed a massive barrier that kept Yajuj and Majuj away, but warned the people that the barrier shall one day be brought down.

Allah informs us elsewhere in the Quran that Yajuj and Majuj shall spread great corruption in the land towards

the end of times: **“Until when Yajuj and Majuj are let loose and they break forth from every elevated place, and the True Promise [of Judgement] draws near...” (21:96-97)**

62

Use your abilities for a worthy cause

Dhul-Qarnayn devoted both time and energy to construct the great barrier, thus protecting the helpless tribe from the tyranny of Yajuj and Majuj. On top of that, he refused to accept payment for his laborious work, saying, **“That in which my Lord has established me is better.” (18:95)** In the same way, we should devote our time, abilities, and resources in helping others, especially the oppressed and the needy, without expecting anything in return from them. It pleases Allah if we play our part – no matter how insignificant that might be – in creating a just and caring society.

63

Hard work and diligence can change your fortunes

Dhul-Qarnayn did not construct the fortified barrier all on his own; he needed plenty of manpower to complete the task, and the tribespeople assisted him continuously. Dhul-Qarnayn instructed them, **“Bring me sheets of iron’ – until, when he had levelled [them] between the two mountain walls, he said, ‘Blow [with bellows],’ until when he had made it [like] fire, he said, ‘Bring me, that I may pour over it molten copper.”** (18:96) Hence, the people, working diligently under a man of expertise, managed to secure themselves from the savagery of Yajuj and Majuj. In any aspect of life, in order to change your fortunes, you need persistent hard work and diligence. As Allah says, **“Indeed, Allah does not change the condition of a people until they change what is in themselves.”** (13:11)

64

Counter injustice through subtle means

The native tribespeople were not capable of defeating Yajuj and Majuj in battle. Hence, they thought of an alternative plan to counter their power: building a barrier to restrain their movement. In the same way, we can adopt a more subtle approach to counter corruption and oppression today. For example, in the contemporary age, where information has become a powerful tool, we can use the media to create awareness about the oppressed people. A significant requisite, though, is to unite for the cause and work earnestly under a competent and honest leader, such as Dhul-Qarnayn.

The Hidden Cave

(Lessons 65—70)

The “Companions of the Cave” were a group of righteous young men who lived at least several centuries, if not more, before the revelation of the Quran. These young men had rejected the worship of false deities, and instead served Allah alone, which enraged the ruling class. In order to avoid execution, or being forcibly converted to polytheism, these men decided to hide in a cave along with their dog, and prayed to Allah for help and guidance. Allah responded by not only ending their ordeal but also making them a sign for future generations: He put them to sleep for many years – possibly up to a few hundred years – and when they eventually awoke and realised what had happened, they were astonished, just as the people of the city were who had converted to monotheism over the years. They revered the Companions of the Cave as true believers.

65

Base your beliefs on evidence

Religious beliefs and practices should be based on clear evidence, rather than blind imitation of ancestral traditions. These young men lamented the fact that their people worshiped multiple deities without any authority from Allah. They wondered, **“These, our people, have taken besides Him deities. Why do they not bring for [worship of] them clear evidence?” (18:15)** We should similarly scrutinize our contemporary beliefs and practices pertaining to religion to determine whether they have a basis in the Quran and the example of the Prophet (SAAS). It could be that certain traditions are simply being passed down generations without any clear evidence.

66

Never compromise on faith

You may encounter a situation in life where your freedom of religion is curtailed or you are pressured to renounce some aspect of your faith. Never settle for such a compromise, and be willing to take substantial measures to defend your freedom to live according to Allah's word. Just as the young men rejected their society and hid in a cave, we should be bold enough to adopt a strong stance, and migrate to a different place if we have to, for openly practising our faith. Allah informs us that those forced to adopt polytheistic ways will say to the angels in the afterlife, **“We were weak in the land.”** (4:97) However, this excuse shall not be accepted, and the angels will reply, **“Was not the earth of Allah spacious, so that you should have migrated therein?”** (4:97)

67

Take the initiative and Allah will help you

Allah responded to the young men when they beseeched Him for help, **“Our Lord, grant us from Yourself mercy and prepare for us from our affair right guidance.” (18:10)** It is important to remember that the young men did not just make this supplication; they took the initiative of leaving the comfort of their homes, and all their possessions behind. This showed their commitment to the cause, and established them as true believers in Allah’s sight. Many a times, we expect divine help while being reluctant to make even a minor sacrifice on our part. We must be action-oriented in difficult times, and willing to take the right initiative, in order to be helped by Allah.

68

Seek the best of Allah's blessings

When the young men finally awoke from their sleep, they said to one another, **“Send one of you with this silver coin of yours to the city, and let him find out which is the best food, and bring some of that to you.” (18:19)** It is encouraged to consume the best quality and purest food, as Allah says, **“So eat of the lawful and good food Allah has provided for you.” (16:114)** Similarly, there is nothing wrong with seeking the best among His other blessings, such as houses, cars, clothes, watches, perfumes, and so on – provided one does not spend wastefully or become arrogant. In fact, Allah encourages us to live according to our means, without being extravagant, as Prophet Muhammad (SAAS) said, *“Allah loves to see the effects of His blessing on His slave.” (Tirmidhi)*

69

Shun arguments that are of no benefit

There were conflicting views about the number of young men in the cave, with three, five, and seven being the popular guesses. Allah thus commanded Prophet Muhammad (SAAS): **“Say, ‘My Lord is best aware of their number.’ None knows them except a few. So do not argue about them...” (18:22)** This is because the number of the young men adds no value to the narrative, whose purpose is to provide useful lessons to us. It would merely seek to aggravate the differences among people, and lead to fruitless debates. Hence, we should avoid indulging in vain arguments, and concentrate on seeking knowledge that is of practical benefit.

70

Allah grants an honourable mention to the righteous

Speaking up for a just cause can invite others' spite and accusations. However, in the long term, those who have dared to differ by upholding the truth are usually held in high esteem by the people. The young men in the cave, who had earlier faced threats of stoning to death, were later commemorated as great heroes. This is evident from their people's desire to pay them a tribute: **"[Some] said, 'Construct a building over them; their Lord knows best about them.' Those who prevailed said, 'We shall build a place of worship over them.'"** (18:21)

Similarly, many of the prophets, who were ridiculed by their people for communicating the word of Allah, were eventually held in great honour. Hence, it is wise to tolerate whatever contempt you are subjected to for supporting what is right. Trust Allah to make people view your efforts in a positive light, and grant you an honourable mention among them.

Conclusion

In the end, let us reinforce a few critical points about the Quran and the narratives it presents.

The lessons we have discussed are by no means the only ones that can be derived from the stories of the Quran. If you read these stories on your own, and ponder them with an open mind, you will discover many more valuable insights. In fact, each time you read the Quran with understanding, you are likely to discover something new and valuable, no matter how many times you may have read that passage before.

It is important, however, that you do not just give a superficial reading to these accounts; instead, read them critically, pause between *ayaat* to reflect on the narrative, re-read the *ayaat* that impact you strongly, and try to picture the events in your mind, to derive maximum benefit from them. There is no story in the Quran devoid of guidance, as Allah says, **“There was certainly in their stories a lesson for those of understanding.” (12:111)**

While you may enjoy a story of the Quran due to its absorbing narrative or historical value, remember that its primary purpose is to make you ponder its events and arguments, which shall provide you with guidance and wisdom. Allah states the purpose of recounting these stories in the Quran: **“So relate the stories that perhaps they will give thought.” (7:176)**

Remember that your ability to reflect on the Quran is a blessing from Allah. You are not required to approach any “higher authorities” to establish a connection with Allah, but can simply read the Quran to know Him. He has made the *ayaat* of the Quran easy to understand so you, as an individual reader, can benefit from the vast majority of its *ayaat* without encountering any ambiguities, as He says, **“Thus Allah makes clear to you the verses [of revelation] that you might give thought.” (2:219)**

Hence, make sure you do not take the Quran for granted by reading it without understanding its meaning, and not pondering over the signs it presents for humanity. Allah censures those who do not think about the meaning of the Quran: **“Then do they not reflect upon the Quran, or are there locks upon [their] hearts?” (47:24)** Allah repeatedly invites us in

the Quran to give thought, reflect, ponder, consider, reason, discern, remember, and be reminded. In fact, the worst creatures in His sight are the people who do not use their *aql* (intellect): **“Indeed, the worst of living creatures in the sight of Allah are the deaf and dumb who do not use reason.” (8:22)**

Lastly, deriving guidance and lessons from the Quran is quite meaningless without benefiting from these in a practical sense. Knowledge is only useful if it makes your actions worthier. Make sure that you implement in your life what you learn from the Quran; it shall not only facilitate you in the hereafter but will also benefit you immensely in this life. Take the prophets and other great personalities of the Quran as your ideals, and seek to adopt their values in your own life.

“[The Quran is] a blessed Book which We have revealed to you that they might reflect upon its verses and that those of understanding would be reminded.” (38:29)