

Selections from Nahj-ul-Balagha Peak of Eloquence

Chapter 37

His Advice to His Son (Excerpts from Letter 31)¹

Introduction: The following are excerpts from the profound advice that Imam Ali (p)** gave to his son, constituting Letter 31 in Nahj-ul-Balagha. The advice covers many aspects of life, relationship with God, the method of supplicating to God, behavior with other people (emphasizing family, neighbors, friends, even foes), and preparing for the life hereafter. The impeccable character of Imam Ali, his spiritual excellence, his relationship with God, his struggle for justice and his hard-earned lessons are evident from this advice. He practiced every bit of what he preached. The reader is bound to benefit from his advice.

Importance of God-Consciousness:

My first and foremost advice to you, my son, is to be God-conscious. Be His obedient servant. Keep the thought of Him always fresh in your mind. Be attached to and carefully guard the principles (Islam, i.e., submission to God) that connect you with God. Can any other connection be stronger, more durable and more lasting than this, so that you may command greater respect and consideration from God?

Accept good exhortations (advice) and refresh your mind with them. Adopt piety and overcome your inordinate desires with its help. Build your character with the help of true faith in religion and God.

As you are a noble, virtuous, and pious young man, I am sure you will receive Divine Guidance and Succour. I am sure God will help you to achieve your aims in life. I ask you to make a promise to yourself to follow my advice carefully.

The Creator is also the Annihilator. The One who annihilates has the power to bring everything back again into existence. The One who sends calamities has also the power to protect you from the calamities.

Remember, my son, had there been any other god besides the One God, then he (the other) would have also sent his (own) prophets and they would have pointed out to humankind the domain and glory of this other god. Nothing like that occurred. He is the One God Whom we should all acknowledge and worship. He has explained this Himself (in the Qur'an). Nobody is a partner with Him in His Domain, Might, and Glory. He is Eternal, He has always been that way and He shall always be.

He existed even before the universe came into being. His Existence is without a beginning. He shall remain even when every other thing shall perish and His Existence is without end. His Glory and His Existence are pre-eminent, transcendent, and incomparable. He is beyond the grasp of (human) intellect. No one has the ability to understand or visualize Him.

¹ In order to maintain the completeness of his advice here, some duplication of material in other chapters was unavoidable.

(p)** The abbreviation represents "on him be peace" as a token of respect.

When you have accepted these facts, then your behavior should be like that of a person who realizes that his own status, power, and position are nothing compared to that of His Lord. You would want to be the one who desires to gain His Blessings through prayers and obedience, who fears His Wrath and His Punishments and who is absolutely in need of His Help and Protection. Remember, my son, God has not ordered you to do anything but that which is good and which propagates goodness, and He has not prohibited you from anything except that which is evil and which will lead to bad consequences.

Remember, my son, the best of my advices to you is to be God-conscious, to perform the duties made incumbent upon you by God, and to follow in the footsteps of your (noble and pious) ancestors and relatives. Verily, they carefully evaluated their thoughts and deeds and they carefully thought over before saying anything about it, or before taking an action. I advise you to follow their example.

How to Supplicate to God for Your Needs:

Do not seek help or protection from anybody but God. Reserve your prayers, your requests, your solicitations, your supplications, and your entreaties to Him and Him alone; because, to grant, to give, and to bestow, as well as to withhold, to deprive, and to deny lies in His Power alone.

Therefore, the best thing for you is to seek guidance from the One who has created you, Who maintains and nourishes you, Who has given you a balanced mind and a normally working body. Your invocations should be reserved for Him only, your requests and solicitations should be to Him alone, and you should only fear Him.

Realize this truth, my son, that the Lord who owns and holds the treasures of the heaven and the earth, has given you permission to ask and beg (Him) for them and He has promised to grant your prayers. He has told you to pray for His Favors, that they may be granted to you, and to ask for His Blessings, that they may be bestowed upon you. He has not appointed guards to prevent your prayers from reaching Him, nor is there any need for anybody to intercede with Him on your behalf.

He hears you whenever you call Him. He accepts your prayer whenever you pray to Him. Invoke Him to grant you your heart's desire, lay before Him the secrets of your heart, tell Him about all the calamities that have befallen you, the misfortunes that face you, and beseech His help to overcome them. Invoke His help and support in all difficulties and distresses.

Remember that the little that is granted to you by God will be more useful, honorable, and respectable for you than what is granted by a human (even though it is) in abundance. What can a human give you but only that which is from God?

You may implore Him to grant you long life and sound health; you may pray to Him for prosperity; you may request Him for such favors and grants that none but He (alone) can bestow.

Think over it, that by simply granting you the privilege of praying to Him for His favors and mercies, He has handed over the keys of His treasures to you. Whenever you are in need, you should pray and He will confer His bounties and blessings (on you). Sometimes you will find that your requests are not immediately granted, but you need not be disappointed, because the granting of prayers often rests with the true purpose and intention of the seeker. Sometimes the prayers are delayed because the Merciful Lord wants you to receive further rewards for patiently bearing calamities and sufferings, to continue to believe sincerely in (receiving) His help. Thus, you may be awarded better favors than you had requested.

Sometimes your prayers are turned down; this may be to your benefit, because you often unknowingly ask for things that are harmful to you. If your requests are granted, then they will do you more harm than good and many of your requests may be such that if they are answered they will result in your eternal damnation. Thus, the refusal to answer your solicitations is a blessing in disguise. Therefore, you should be very careful in asking God for His favors. Pray for such things that are beneficial to you. Remember, my dear son, that wealth and power (if you pray for them) are such things that they will not always remain with you, and they may bring you harm in the life hereafter.

Know it, my son, that you cannot have every wish of yours granted. You cannot expect to escape from death. Therefore, be realistic in your expectations, desires, and cravings. Be reasonable in making requests.

Virtues of Patience:

Develop the virtue of patience against sufferings, calamities, and adversities. Patience is one of the highest forms of morality, nobility, and the best trait one can acquire. Trust in God and seek His protection in every calamity and suffering, because you will thereby entrust yourself and your affairs to the best Trustee and to the mightiest Guardian.

Life of this World:

Those who have carefully studied the life of this world, they spend their days as if they know that they are travelers here, who have to leave the place that is famine-stricken, unhealthy, and unfriendly. They know that they have to proceed towards the lands (of the next world), which are fertile, congenial, where there is abundant provision of comforts, and pleasures. They have eagerly embarked on the journey, happy in the hope of future blessings and peace. They have willingly accepted the sufferings, troubles, and hazards of the way (in this world), parting with friends, scarcity of food, and lack of comfort during the journey (in this world), so that they may reach the destination (Paradise), a happy place. They do not refuse to bear hardships and they do not begrudge giving charity and assistance to the poor and the needy.

Each step they take towards their goal, however tiring and exhausting it may be, is a happy event in their lives.

On the contrary, the people who are attached to this world are sadly engulfed in its short-lived, fast-fading, and corrupt pleasures. They are like travelers who are in a fertile and happy region and they know that the journey they have to undertake will lead them to an arid and infertile land. Should anything be more loathsome and abhorrent than this journey?

Nothing in this world is useful to you, unless it is of some utility and value to you in the next world. If you lament over things that you have lost in this world, then worry much more about the loss of things of eternal benefit to you (in the hereafter). The past, and almost all that was in your possession in the past, has departed from you. All that is in your possession now will leave you.

The Fate of Humankind:

Subdue your natural self (desires of the heart) with the vision (i.e., thought) of death; make it see the transient nature of life and all of its trappings. Let your natural self realize the inevitability of (encountering) misfortunes, adversities, changing circumstances, and changing times. Study the lives of people gone by. See the ruined cities, the dilapidated palaces, decaying signs, relics of fallen empires, and perished nations. Then meditate over the lives of those people, as to what

they did when they lived and held power, what they accomplished, and what was their contribution to human welfare.

If you carefully ponder over these, you will find that each one of those individuals has parted company with the others, leaving behind all that he cherished and loved and now he is in a solitary abode, unattended. Therefore, (realize) you will also depart (from this world) likewise. Take care to provide for your future abode. Do not trade away eternal blessings for the pleasures of this mortal and fleeting world.

Do not talk about things that you do not know. Do not speculate about and pass verdicts on subjects about which you are not in a position to form an opinion, and are not called upon to do so. Give up the pursuit where there is a possibility of your going astray. When there is risk of your wandering in the wilderness of ignorance and the possibility of losing sight of your goal, then it is better for you to give up the quest than to face unforeseen dangers.

Defend the Cause of God:

Defend the cause of God by all means. When defending the cause of God, do not be afraid that people will mock you, censure your actions, or even slander you. Help (and defend) the truth and justice fearlessly and boldly. Bear patiently the sufferings encountered and face bravely the obstacles that come in your way. Try to be well-versed with jurisprudence and theology and acquire a thorough knowledge of the canons of the religion.

Dealings with Others:

Whatever you like for yourself, like the same for others; whatever you dislike to happen to you, spare others from such happenings. Do not oppress and tyrannize anyone because you surely do not like to be oppressed and tyrannized. Be kind and sympathetic to others, as you certainly desire others to treat you the same way. If you notice objectionable and loathsome habits in others, abstain from developing those habits in yourself. If you are satisfied or feel happy in receiving a certain kind of treatment from others, then treat others in the same way. Do not speak about others in a way that you do not like others to speak about you. Do not speak on a subject about which you know little or none. Avoid scandal, libel, and defamation, as you do not like yourself to be scandalized.

Vanity is a Folly that Brings Harm:

Remember, son, that vanity and conceit are folly. These traits will bring to you serious harm and will subject you to danger. Therefore, lead a well-balanced life (i.e., neither be conceited nor suffer from inferiority complex) and strive to earn an honest living. Do not be a “treasurer” for the others [Note: this is an apt analogy of a miserly person who hoards wealth and dies, leaving behind his wealth to be enjoyed by others]. Whenever you receive guidance from the Lord to achieve a thing you desire, then do not become proud of your blessing, but be humble and submissive to God, realizing that your success was due to His mercy.

Give While You Can:

Remember that your charity and your good deeds are like loans (to God), which He will pay back to you, much in this world and much more in the hereafter. Therefore, when you are affluent and

hold power, make use of your wealth and power in such a way that you will get that returned to you on the Day of Judgment, when you will be needy and helpless. Be it known, my son, that your passage (from this world to the next world) lies through a dreadful valley, an extremely difficult and arduous journey.

In this journey, a man (traveling) with light weight (i.e., fewer sins and liabilities) is far better than an over-burdened person is (with sins and dishonest earnings). The former can travel faster and easier than the latter. You shall have to pass through this valley. The journey will lead you either to Paradise or to Hell. Therefore, it is wise to send your provision beforehand, so that the (good deeds) reach there (to Paradise) ahead of you. Make advance reservation and arrangements for your stay before you arrive, because after death there is no possibility of a second chance, in order to make up for the wrongs.

If you find poor and needy persons who are willing to carry your load (i.e., receive your disposable wealth given in charity) on your journey to the Day of Judgment, then consider this to be a boon. Thus, relieve yourself from the heavy responsibility and liability of submitting an account on the Day of Judgment of how you have made use of God's bounties (i.e., health, wealth, power, and position).

Importance of Self-Respect:

Earn your livelihood through scrupulously honest means and be content with such earnings. Do not let your (inordinate) desires drive you such that you encounter disappointment and loss. Remember that everyone who prays (to God) for a thing, will not always get it. One who controls his/her desires preserves self-respect. At times, you may secure your heart's desires by means that make you lose your self-respect, but nothing in this world can compensate for the loss of self-respect, nobility, and honor.

Take care, my son, and be warned that you do not make yourself a slave (subservient) of another person. God has created you a free man. Do not barter away your freedom in return for anything. There is no good in wealth and power acquired dishonorably.

Greed Leads to Destruction:

Beware, my son, so that avarice and greed may not drive you towards destruction and damnation. Make nobody but God your benefactor. Do your best to achieve this nobility, because God will grant you your share (of bounties) whether or not others help you.

To safeguard your possessions and to economize is better than to ask from others. The bitterness of poverty is in reality better than the disgrace of begging. Often, an individual tries to acquire a thing that proves to be harmful when gained.

Treat Your Family Well:

Do not ill-treat members of your family and do not behave with them as if you are the cruelest person alive. Do not instead run after a person who tries to avoid you.

The greatest achievement of your character is that despite the hostility of your brother, you continue to show friendship to him. Do good to your brother, even when he is bent upon doing harm to you. When he ignores or declines to recognize the kinship (between you), attempt to befriend him, help him when he is needy, and try to maintain a relationship. If he acts miserly with you and refuses to help you, be generous with him and support him financially (in his need). If he

causes you grief or hurt, be kind and considerate to him in return. If he harms you, accept his excuses. Behave with him as if he is the benefactor and you are the beneficiary.

Be mindful that the above statement does not apply when dealing with a mean person.

Treat members of your family with love and respect because they are the wings with which you fly and hands that support you and defend you. They are people towards whom you turn when you are in trouble and need help.

Deal with Your Enemy with Consideration:

Be considerate to your enemy, because it will allow you to rise (morally) above that person and/or it will reduce the intensity of his hostility.

If you want to sever relations with your friend, then do not break them off completely, in case you may want to make up later.

How to Deal with Oppression:

If you are a victim of oppression, let it not worry you excessively, because an oppressor in reality brings harm to himself and he opens ways of (spiritual) good to you.

Pearls of Wisdom and Guidance:

- ◆ A sensible person pays heed to advice and draws benefit from it. Do not be like a person on whom advice has no effect.
- ◆ Beasts are the ones that require coercion to achieve compliance.
- ◆ Overcome sorrows, worries, and misfortunes with patience and with faith in the merciful Lord.
- ◆ One who gives up the straight path (adopts crookedness) loses honesty, rational thought process, and thereby brings harm to himself.
- ◆ A true friend is one who speaks well of you even behind your back.
- ◆ Excessive desires lead to misfortunes.
- ◆ Whoever forsakes the truth makes his/her life constrictive and troubled.
- ◆ Honesty and contentment are assets that bring prestige and safeguard one's status.
- ◆ The strongest relationship is the one between God and His subject.
- ◆ The person who does not care about you is (like) your enemy.
- ◆ If there is likelihood of death or harm in pursuing a goal, then safety lies in avoiding its pursuit.
- ◆ Do not talk about weaknesses and shortcomings (of others).
- ◆ Opportunities do not repeat themselves.
- ◆ Sometimes, the wise fail to achieve their goals, whereas the unwise are able to.
- ◆ Avoiding ignorant persons is akin to connecting with the wise ones.

- ◆ Whoever trusts this world is betrayed by it, and whoever gives importance to it is disgraced by it.
- ◆ Not every arrow of yours will hit the bull's eye.
- ◆ Before buying a house, inquire about the kind of neighbors you will have, even before you inquire about the facilities therein.
- ◆ Avoid ridiculous topics in your conversation, even if you are quoting others.
- ◆ Do not let down a person who has a good opinion about you; do not let him change his opinion (about you).
- ◆ Do not jeopardize your well-being through irrational, unreasonable, and extravagant hopes.
- ◆ Vain hopes are assets of fools.
- ◆ Do not be fooled by flattery.
- ◆ There are two kinds of livelihood: the one you are pursuing and the other that follows you. God has the latter destined for you and it will reach you, even if you do not pursue it.
- ◆ Do not befriend the enemy of your friend lest your friend turns into your enemy.
- ◆ Wisdom is remembering past experiences and benefiting from them.
- ◆ The best experience is the one that offers the best advice and gives due caution.
- ◆ Take advantage of opportunities before you lose them.
- ◆ Not everyone who tries succeeds.
- ◆ No one will return after departing from this world.
- ◆ The worst folly is to waste opportunities in this life and thereby lose salvation.
- ◆ To be submissive and to beg when needy and vulnerable, and to be arrogant and oppressive when one has power and affluence; these are the two very ugly traits of human character.
- ◆ Never ill-treat a person who has done you some good.
- ◆ Remember not to overburden yourself with obligations (i.e., do not commit yourself to too many responsibilities), so that you may not be able to fulfil them honorably.

Concluding Remarks in the Letter:

My dear son! After having given these pieces of advice to you, I entrust you to the Lord. He will help, guide, and protect you in this world and the hereafter. I beseech Him to take you under His protection in both the worlds.

The End

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