

# Selections from Nahj-ul-Balagha (Peak of Eloquence)

## Sayings and Maxims of Imam Ali (P)\*\*

**Introduction.** Translating idioms and sayings from the Arabic language and culture into English for the westerner is fraught with difficulties and imperfections. The selected maxims presented here were significantly rephrased in order to convey the essence and intent of what was said. It is hoped that the reader will benefit from the wisdom contained therein.

1. He who is greedy is disgraced; he who discloses his hardships will always be humiliated; he who has no control over his tongue will often have to face discomfort.
2. Pearls:
  - Avarice is disgrace.
  - Poverty often handicaps an intelligent man from arguing his case.
  - A poor man is a stranger in his own town.
  - Misfortune and helplessness are calamities.
  - Patience is a kind of bravery.
  - Piety is the best weapon of defense.
3. Submission to God's will is the best companion; wisdom is the noblest heritage; knowledge is the best sign of distinction.
4. The mind of a wise man is the safest custody of secrets; cheerfulness is the key to friendship; patience and forbearance will conceal many defects.
5. A self-admiring person earns the dislike of others; charity and alms-giving are the best remedies for ailments and calamities.
6. When this world favors somebody, it ascribes the merits of others to that person, and when it turns its face away from him, it snatches away even his own excellences.
7. Live amongst people in such a manner that if you die they weep over you and if you are alive they crave for your company.
8. If you overpower your enemy, then pardon him by way of thankfulness to God, for being able to subdue him.
9. When some blessings come to you, do not drive them away through ungratefulness (to God).
10. One who rushes after inordinate desire risks destruction and death.
11. Overlook and forgive the weaknesses of generous people, because if they fall, God will help them.

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\*The abbreviation (S) represents "peace and blessings upon him and members of his family," as a token of respect.

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

12. Failures are often the result of timidity and fear; disappointments are the result of bashfulness; hours of leisure pass away like summer clouds, therefore do not waste the opportunity of doing good deeds.
13. Giving relief to the distressed and help to the oppressed makes amends for big sins.
14. O son of Adam, when you see that your Lord, the Glorified, bestows His Favors on you while you disobey Him, you should fear Him (i.e., take warning that His Wrath may turn those very blessings into misfortunes).
15. Often, your utterances and expressions of your face reveal the secrets of your hidden thoughts.
16. The best way of service to God is not to make a show of it.
17. Beware, God has not exposed many of your sinful activities, so that it appears to you as if He has forgiven you (i.e., maybe He has given you time to repent).
18. A virtuous person is better than virtue, and a vicious person is worse than vice.
19. Be generous but not extravagant; be frugal but not miserly.
20. The best wealth is to give up inordinate desires.
21. The one who utters unflattering things about others will quickly become himself a target of scandal.
22. Recommended prayers cannot attain the pleasures of God for you when obligatory prayers are ignored (or not accepted).
23. A wise person first thinks and then speaks, whereas a fool first speaks and then thinks.
24. A fool's mind is at the mercy of his tongue, whereas a wise man's tongue is under the control of his mind.
25. One of the companions of Imam fell ill. Imam Ali called upon him and thus advised him: "Be thankful to God. He has made this illness a thing to atone for your sin, because a disease in itself has nothing to bring reward to anyone; it merely expiates one's sins. As far as reward is concerned, one has to earn it with his good thoughts and good deeds. The Almighty Lord grants Paradise to his creatures on account of their piety and noble thoughts."
26. Blessed is the man who always keeps the life after death in his view, who remembers the Day of Judgment in all his deeds, who leads a contented life, and who is happy with the lot that God has destined for him.
27. Certainly, the prize for you to attain is paradise, so do not sell yourself (for this world) except for (attaining) paradise.
28. The sin that makes you sad and repentant is liked by God more than the good deed that causes you to be arrogant.
29. The value of a man depends upon his courage, his veracity depends upon his self-respect, and his chastity depends upon his sense of honor.

30. Success is the result of foresight and resolution; foresight depends upon deep thinking and planning; and the most important factor of planning is to keep your secret to yourself.
31. Real pardon is, when one has power to punish, yet chooses to forgive. The help given after the request would be either out of self-respect, or from fear of being rebuked.
33. There is no greater wealth than wisdom, no greater poverty than ignorance, no greater heritage than culture and no greater support than consultation.
34. Patience is of two kinds: patience over what hurts you, and patience against what you covet.
35. Wealth converts a strange land into homeland and poverty turns a native place into a strange land.
36. Contentment is the capital that will never diminish.
37. Wealth is the fountainhead of passions.
38. Whoever warns you against sins and vices is like the one who gives you good tidings.
39. The tongue is a beast; if it is let loose, it devours.
40. If you are greeted then return the greetings more warmly. If you received a favor, then repay it manifold; but he who initiates a favor, earns greater merit.
41. Do not feel ashamed if the amount of your charity is small, because to refuse the needy is an act of greater shame.
42. If you cannot get things as much as you desire, then be contented with what you have.
43. An ignorant person will overdo a task or neglect it totally.
44. The wiser a person is, the less he talks.
45. Whoever wishes to be a leader should acquire knowledge before teaching others, and practice before preaching to others.
46. Every breath of yours is one more step towards death.
47. Acquire wisdom and truth from whomever you can (even your enemy).
48. Knowledge and wisdom are really the privilege of the faithful. Obtain them, even if you have to get them from one without faith.
49. The value of each individual depends upon the art and skills possessed.
50. Strive to acquire these five things:
  - i) Have hope in God alone.
  - ii) Fear nothing more than sin.
  - iii) Never feel ashamed to admit what you do not know.
  - iv) Do not be ashamed (or be afraid) to learn a new thing.
  - v) Acquire patience, because its relationship to faith is like that of the head to the body.
51. One who presumes to know everything will surely suffer due to ignorance.

52. I value an older individual's cautious opinion more than the valor of a young man.
53. I wonder at the person who loses hope of salvation, while the door of repentance is still open.
54. God in the Qur'an addressed the Prophet (P) and said that He would not punish them (sinners) while the Prophet was among them, nor while they were asking (God) for forgiveness (Qur'an 8:33).
55. Whoever keeps his affairs with God in proper order (obedience to God), God will also put his affairs of the world in order. Whoever arranges affairs for his salvation, God will arrange his worldly affairs. Whoever is a warner unto himself, God will protect him.
56. It is a sign of wisdom and faith not to lose hope in God's mercy, and not to be overconfident about immunity from His punishment.
57. Refresh your tired mind by indulging in sayings and words of wisdom.
58. That knowledge which remains merely on the tongue is just superficial. The intrinsic (real) value of knowledge is that which is acted upon.
59. Do not pray to the Lord, saying, "Lord! Protect and guard me from temptations and trials," for there is none who is not tempted and tried. Beseech Him to guard you against such temptation that may lead you to sins. God says in His Book, "*Know that your wealth and children are temptations*" (Qur'an 8:28).
60. Your welfare does not lie in having abundant wealth and many offspring, but it rests in your being educated, forbearing, and in being proud of obedience to God. If you do a good deed, then thank God for it, and if you commit a sin, then repent and atone for it.
61. To sleep with firm faith in the religion and in God is better than to offer prayers with a shaky faith.
62. Explaining the passage of the Qur'an, "*Verily, to God we belong and to Him do we return,*" Imam Ali said, "Our declaring that we belong to God indicates that we accept Him as our master and owner, and when we say that our return is towards God, it indicates that we acknowledge our mortality."
63. Some people praised Imam Ali on his face. He replied, "God knows me well, and I know myself more than you do." Then he prayed, "O Lord! Make me better than what they think me to be and excuse my weaknesses, which they are not aware of."
64. Help to the needy should possess the following attributes: "You should regard it insignificant regardless of its extent, so that God will grant a high status; give it secretly, so that God will manifest it; and, give it in a timely manner."
65. Whoever likes to gain the pleasures and pomp of this world, will dislike austerity in life, and austerity is necessary to gain salvation.
66. Imam Ali (P) said this about people who wake up at night to pray to God: "Those are the fortunate ones. They adopt the Qur'an and the prayers as their guide and protector. Like Prophet Jesus Christ, they forsake the world and its vain pleasures. Prophet David said, 'This was the hour when prayers of everyone who prayed were accepted.'"

67. Many an educated people have ruined their hereafter because of their ignorance of religion. Their (secular) knowledge was not of any avail to them.
68. A Divine rule can be established only by a man who, where justice and equity are required, neither feels deficient nor weak, nor is greedy or avaricious.
69. Anyone who loves us Ahl-ul-Bayt (family of the Prophet) must be ready to accept a life of austerity.
70. Pointers:
- No wealth is more useful than intellect and wisdom.
  - No solitude is more painful than the one in which people avoid you because of your vanity and conceit.
  - No eminence is more exalted than piety.
  - No companion can prove more useful than politeness.
  - No heritage is better than culture.
  - No guide is superior to the Divine guidance.
  - No deal is more profitable than good deeds.
  - No profit is greater than Divine reward.
  - No abstinence is better than to restrain one's mind from doubts (about the religion).
  - No virtue is better than refraining from prohibited deeds.
  - No exaltation is superior to knowledge.
  - No knowledge is superior to contemplation and prudence.
  - No worship or prayers are more sacred than fulfillment of obligations and duties.
  - No religious faith is loftier than being ashamed of one's wrongdoing and bearing calamities patiently.
  - No eminence is greater than humility.
  - Nothing is more respectable than forgiveness and forbearance.
- No support and defense are stronger than consultation.
71. There are individuals whom abundant bounties of God make them wicked, and there are many more individuals that become vain and fall into self-deception because the merciful God has hidden their weaknesses and vices from others, and people hold them in high regard.
72. Two kinds of people will go astray on my account, those who in their opinion exaggerate my position, and those who berate my position because of jealousy or malice.
73. A lost opportunity results in grief.
74. This world is like a serpent; it is soft to touch, but full of poison. Naive people are attracted by it, but wise ones keep away from it.
75. There is a deed whose pleasure passes away leaving behind pain and punishment, and there is a deed that is unpleasant but it earns divine reward.
76. At a funeral, someone laughed loudly. On hearing that, Imam Ali (P) remarked, "Some of us feel that death comes (only) to others, and we are exempt from it."
77. Blessed is the person:
- Who humbles himself before God;
  - Whose source of income is honest;
  - Whose intentions are honorable;
  - Whose character is noble;

- Whose habits are sober;
- Who gives his wealth to the needy for the pleasure of God;
- Who restrains his tongue from vain and useless talk;
- Who abstains from causing oppression; and,
- Who does not make innovations in religion.

78. I define Islam (submission to God) for you in a way that nobody had done it before me. Islam means obedience to God; obedience to God means having sincere faith in Him; sincere faith means to believe in His Power; belief in His Power means recognizing and accepting His Majesty; acceptance of His Majesty means fulfilling the obligations laid down by Him; and, fulfillment of obligations requires action. (Thus, Islam is not mere faith, it is faith combined with actions).
79. I wonder at a miser who, fearing poverty, resorts to stinginess and chooses to live like a destitute. He desires for a life of ease and abundance, but works against it without understanding. He chooses to live like a pauper, but in the next world, he will have to give an account like a rich person.
80. Pearls.
- I wonder at the arrogance of a haughty and vain person. Yesterday he was only a lowly worm, and tomorrow he will turn into a corpse.
  - I wonder at the person who observes the universe created by God, yet doubts the existence of God;
  - I wonder at the person who sees people die, yet he has forgotten his own end (death);
  - I wonder at the person who understands the marvel of the beginning of life, yet refuses to accept that he will be brought back to life again;
  - I wonder at the man who takes great pains to decorate his temporary (worldly) habitat, yet ignores his permanent abode (The Hereafter).
81. Whoever is not diligent in his work will suffer; whoever has no share of God in his wealth and in his life, then there is no place for him in His realm.
82. If you understand the Majesty of God, then you will attach less significance to lesser beings.
83. If the people of the grave are permitted to speak, they will inform you that the best provision for the next world is piety and virtue.
84. This world is not a permanent abode, it is like a road and you are a traveler.
85. A friend cannot be considered a friend unless he is tested on three occasions: in time of need, behind your back, and after your death.
86. Daily prayers are the best medium through which one may seek nearness to God.
87. Before you pray to God for increase of sustenance, first give something in charity.
88. When someone is sure of the returns, he shows generosity.
89. Help (from God) comes in proportion to one's troubles.

90. He who practices moderation and frugality will never be threatened with poverty.
91. Loving one another is one-half of wisdom.
92. Grant of endurance (from God) is in proportion to the extent of difficulty you are passing through.
93. Many persons get nothing (spiritual) out of their observing (optional) fasts but hunger and thirst; many get nothing out of their night prayers but (physical) exertion and loss of sleep. Wise persons earn recognition (by God) even if they do not observe (optional) fasts.
94. Fortify your faith with the help of charity. Protect your wealth with the aid of *Zakaat* (charity money to purify the wealth). Let your prayers guard you from calamities and disasters.
95. An individual can be evaluated through his speech.
96. One who does not realize his own value is condemned to failure.
97. One who is patient will never be deprived of success, though it may take a while to come to him.
98. One who agrees with the actions of a group is regarded (in the sight of God) as having committed the actions himself. A man who participates in a sinful deed makes himself liable for two-fold punishment, one for committing the deed, and the other for agreeing to participate.
99. You have been shown, if you care to see (goodness); you have been advised, if you care to heed advice; you have been told, if you care to listen to good counsels.
100. One who visits places of ill repute has no right to complain against a man who speaks ill of him.
101. One who acquires power cannot avoid favoritism.
102. One who guards his secrets has control over his affairs.
103. Conceit is a barrier to progress and self-enhancement.
104. Often, a strong desire to secure one gain acts as a hindrance for the achievement of many other gains.
105. One who struggles for Godly causes secures victory over His adversaries.
106. Your supremacy over others is in proportion to the extent of your knowledge and wisdom.
107. The best way to punish an evil person is to reward handsomely a good person for his good deeds.
108. If you want to remove evil from the minds of others then first give up evil yourself.
109. Obstinacy will prevent you from reaching a correct decision.

110. Greed is (in fact) slavery.
111. To keep silent when you can say something wise and useful is as bad as promoting foolish and unwise ideas.
112. Death is never very far.
113. One who forsakes truth earns eternal damnation.
114. O son of Adam, if you have collected (possessions) in excess of your actual need, you will act only as its trustee for someone else to use it (after your death).
115. If you find that a person is not grateful for what you have done for him, then do not get discouraged, because often you will find that someone else feels obligated to you, though you may have not done much for him. Thus, your good deeds will be compensated, and God will reward you for your goodness.
116. The fruit of forbearance is that people will sympathize with you, and they will be against the individual who wronged you.
117. Keys to wisdom and salvation.
  - One who is cognizant of his shortcomings will benefit from it and one who is unmindful of his shortcomings will suffer the consequences.
  - One who is afraid of the Day of Judgment is safe from the punishment of God
  - One who derives lessons from the events of life gains vision; one who acquires vision becomes wise; and one who attains wisdom gains knowledge.
118. Bear sorrows and calamities patiently, otherwise you will remain unhappy.
119. Gain of power often leads to oppression.
120. Adversities often uncover hidden virtues.
121. If a friend is jealous of you, then he is not a true friend.
122. Greed dulls the faculties of judgment and wisdom.
123. Oppression and tyranny are the worst companions in the Hereafter.
124. The best deed is to forgive and forget.
125. Pointers.
  - Silence will earn respect and dignity.
  - Justice and fair play will bring more friends.
  - Benevolence and charity will enhance prestige and status.
  - Courtesy will result in benevolence by others.
  - Service to humanity will secure leadership.
  - Good words will overcome powerful enemies.

126. A greedy person will always find himself in the shackles of lowliness.
127. There are people who worship God to gain His favors; this is the worship of merchants. There are some who worship Him for safety from His wrath; this is the worship of slaves. There are a few who worship Him out of their sense of gratitude; this is the worship of free and noble men.
128. In every blessing, there is a right of God. If one fulfils that right, then God increases the blessings, but if one fails to do so, then he will be in danger of losing that blessing.
129. The sourness of this world is (in fact) sweetness of the next world, and sweetness of this world is sourness of the next world.
130. Anger is a kind of madness the individual subsequently repents; if not, then the madness is confirmed.
131. Love your friend up to a limit, for it is possible that in the future he may turn into your enemy. Similarly, detest your enemy up to a limit, for it is possible that one day he may turn into your friend.
132. When optional acts interfere with your obligatory acts, then abandon the optional ones.
133. It would be obligatory to obey God out of gratefulness for His blessings, even if there were no possibility of punishment for disobedience.
134. God, the Glorified, has fixed the livelihood of the destitute in the wealth of the rich. Consequently, when a destitute one remains hungry, it is because some rich person had denied him (his share). God, the Sublime, will question him (the rich one) about it.
135. Knowledge is of two kinds: one that is absorbed, and one that is merely heard. The one that is heard will not be of benefit unless it is absorbed.
136. It is a major sin in itself to brush off a sin as minor.
137. He who is aware of his own shortcomings abstains from looking into other's shortcomings.
138. He who speaks more, commits more errors, and he who knows that his words are an integral part of his actions, speaks less unless it is purposeful.
139. Contentment is a capital that never dwindles. He who remembers death often is satisfied with receiving small favors in this world.
140. The greatest defect is to point out a defect in others that is actually present in you.
141. It is a way of self-improvement to avoid in yourself what you consider bad in others.
142. O people, be God-conscious, for a human is not created for naught, to waste away; nor has he been left uncared for to commit nonsensical acts. A vain person would not be rewarded with success in the next world.
143. Livelihood is of two kinds: the livelihood that you seek, and the livelihood that seeks you. If you do not find the latter, it will come to you.

144. Words are in your control before you have uttered them, but once you have uttered them, you are under their control. Therefore, guard your tongue as you guard your gold and silver, for often one expression may make you lose a blessing or invite punishment.
145. When you are strong, be strong in obedience to God; and when you are weak, be weak in committing sins (disobeying God).
146. Beware, destitution is a calamity; (even) worse than destitution is ailment of the body; and (even) worse than ailment of the body is ailment of the heart (soul).
147. Beware, plenty of wealth is a blessing; but (even) better is the health of the body; and (even) better than health of the body is purity of the heart.
148. Speak, that you may be known, since an individual is hidden behind his tongue.
149. Asking forgiveness of God requires fulfilling the following six conditions:
1. Repent for the sin committed.
  2. Make a firm determination not to repeat it.
  3. Discharge the rights of others.
  4. Fulfill the obligation ignored.
  5. Consume lawfully earned sustenance, so that the body is cleansed of impurities.
  6. Make the body taste the hardship of obedience, as you had tasted the pleasures of disobedience.
150. Whoever sets right the inner self, God will set right the outward self. Whoever performs acts (of service) for the religion, God will provide the needs of this world. If the dealings of an individual between himself and God are good, then God makes the dealings between that individual and other people also good.
151. Forbearance is like a covering (for the defects), and wisdom is like a sharp sword that kills excessive desires.
152. The lovers of God are:
- Those who look at the inner side of things (while others look at the outer).
  - They busy themselves with the lasting benefits (of the next world), while others seek immediate (worldly) benefits.
  - They suppress those desires that they fear would hurt them (in the next world).
  - They regard accumulation of wealth by others as a matter of lesser importance.
  - They do not regard worldly hopes higher than what they hope to achieve in the next world. They do not conceive a worldly fear greater than the fear of disconnecting with God.

(The End)

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