

*In the name of Allah, the beneficent the Merciful*

## **Imam Husain bin Ali A.S.**

### **The great martyr**

The month of Muharram is the first month of the Islamic calendar year. An important and tragic event took place on the tenth of Muharram that shook the Muslim world. It was the murder of Imam Husain, his family members, and his close friends by the army of Yazid. Yazid was, at that time, the despotic ruler of the Muslim world, who came to power as the self-proclaimed "sixth caliph of Islam" after the death of his father, Mu'awiya. Yazid gave himself the title of *ameer-ul-mu'mineen*, meaning "commander of the faithful."

Husain A.S. was one of the two grandsons of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), and the younger of the two sons of Hazrat Fatima, the daughter of the Holy Prophet. The Holy Prophet loved his two grandsons, Hasan and Husain, dearly, and since he had no surviving sons of his own, he used to call them his "sons," out of affection.

There are numerous traditions, recorded by many historians, which indicate the great love and respect the Holy Prophet had for his grandsons. According to one tradition, the Holy Prophet declared that Hasan and Husain were the Princes of the Youth of Paradise. Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) took his grandsons with him, along with his daughter Fatima and son-in-law 'Ali, to face the challenge of the Christian delegation from Najrain, which had come to dispute with the Holy Prophet about his divine mission. The Christians were awe-struck at the sight of the Holy Prophet and his family, and withdrew the challenge. This event became known as *Mubahila*, and is recorded in the Holy Qur'an, in chapter 3, verse 61.

### **Historical Background**

During the caliphate of Hazrat 'Ali, Mu'awiya mounted a rebellion against him and declared himself the governor of Syria. After the assassination of Hazrat 'Ali by a Kharijite, his elder son, Imam Hasan succeeded him being most qualified, and judged most deserving by the people. By this time, however, Mu'awiya had amassed enough support in and around Syria to declare himself the caliph. In order to avoid bloodshed and to preserve the unity and in fact to save the religion from destruction, Imam Hasan signed a peace treaty with Mu'awiya, including these terms: 1.) That Mu'awiya would be the temporal political head of the Muslim empire. 2.) That Mu'awiya would not appoint his own successor, but would leave the caliphate to the will of the majority (which favored Imam Husain). 3.) And Mu'awiya would allow the Muslims to live in peace, free from oppression, especially those belonging to the Hashimite tribe, to which the Holy Prophet had belonged.

Mu'awiya violated the terms of this treaty and, near his death, designated his son Yazid as his successor. Yazid was an immoral and a ruthless man with no sense of justice. He was addicted to the grossest of vices. He employed bribery and coercion to win support. Imam Husain, who regarded himself as the protector and guardian of the religion established by his noble grandfather, Prophet Muhammad pbuh, refused to swear allegiance to Yazid. Yazid realized that he could never legitimize and consolidate his rule without the allegiance of Imam Husain, the grandson of the Holy Prophet. Consequently, he decided that he would either force the Imam to submit to him, or else he would have him killed.

In the 61st year after Hijra (680 AD), Imam Husain, while performing the pilgrimage in Mecca, received the information that assassins had been sent by Yazid to kill him. Desiring to protect the sanctity of the Holy City, he interrupted his pilgrimage and headed towards Kufa, in the present-day Iraq. He took with him his family members and close friends including Husain's six-month-old infant son, Ali Asghar. His journey to

Kufa was intercepted by a detachment of Yazid's army, led by a commander named Hur. Hur had orders to redirect the Imam to camp in the desert plain of Karbala, on the banks of the River Euphrates. In order to avoid bloodshed, Imam Husain chose not to resist, and instead followed Hur's directions. His was forced to camp at a great distance from the river, which was the only source of water in the area.

On the seventh day of Muharram, Ibn Ziyad, the governor of Kufa, ordered that food and water supplies be blocked from reaching Imam Husain's camp. In the meantime, the ranks of Yazid's army were increasing by the thousands. The blistering sun had scorched the desert sand, and the thirst was becoming unbearable in Husain's camp. The children, especially, were becoming dehydrated and weak, and Imam Husain pleaded with Yazid's army to supply water at least to the children, but to no avail.

On the tenth day of Muharram, Yazid's army was ready to attack the small band of defenders in Imam Husain's camp. One by one, his friends and relatives took permission to go out and fight and each one laid his life in defense of Islam. Two of his nephews, who were only ten years old, were among the brave soldiers who died fighting. Abbas, his brother, was the commander of Husain's forces, who inherited his chivalry from his father 'Ali, the Lion of Allah. Abbas asked Husain's permission to go and fight his way through to the river and bring water for Sakina, Husain's four-year-old daughter, and the other children. The Imam reluctantly gave him permission. Abbas took an empty flask, charged into Yazid's army, cutting through the ranks, and arrived at the river. While he filled the pitcher with water, he himself did not drink a drop, for he reasoned that he could not do so while Imam Husain, Sakina, and the others were still thirsty. Abbas did not make it back to the camp, however. The whole army of Yezid attacked him. He died defending the precious pitcher of water, while returning to the camp.

Imam Husain's six-month-old son, Ali Asghar, was on the verge of death from dehydration. Husain brought the infant out of the tent and showed his pitiful condition to the soldiers in Yazid's army, pleading for at least enough water to save the infant's life. The enemy denied his request. A heartless archer from the enemy army shot an arrow, which struck the infant, killing him in his father's arms.

Soon, Imam Husain was left alone to face Yazid's army, since all the able-bodied male members of his camp had died fighting one by one. He made a final plea to the army of Yazid, reminding them of his close kinship with the Holy Prophet of Islam, the love and respect which the prophet had used to show to him, and the numerous traditions in which the Holy Prophet had warned the Muslims not to disobey or injure him. He reminded them of his desire to uphold the truth and his status as one of the true protectors of the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet. He asked to be allowed to leave the Muslim kingdom, so that Yazid would not perceive him as a threat to his power. Finally, he clearly warned them that by shedding his blood, they would be subjected to the wrath of Allah (SWT) and they would lose any hope of the intercession of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh). The commanders of the opposing army were unmoved, and reiterated their desire to kill Imam Husain unless he chose to submit to the authority of Yazid. Husain was left with no choice but to take firm stand against falsehood, and to fight to protect Islam. He fought bravely, and in the end he achieved martyrdom.

## **The Significance of Imam Husain's Martyrdom**

**Immediate outcome of Imam Husain's actions:** Muslims and non-Muslims alike have acknowledged it that Imam Husain saved Islam from destruction by sacrificing his life. Yazid had been successful in winning over the allegiance of the great majority of the Muslims, and the rest of the Muslim world was in a state of moral slumber. The principles of Islam were being plundered, the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet was being tampered with, and phony traditions were being concocted to justify the rule of Yazid. It was the singular sacrifice of Imam Husain and his faithful followers that shook the Islamic world out of its slumber. The Muslims were forced to ask themselves why the beloved grandson of the Holy Prophet had been murdered so brutally. It then dawned upon the people that Yazid and his supporters were clearly wrong.

**Long term outcome of Imam Husain's actions:** Imam Husain by challenging Yazid and in the process

laying down his life changed the world and re-shaped human destiny forever. Yezid and all future despots were put on notice that they will not be tolerated, that the truth and justice will be upheld and ultimately succeed regardless of costs. The Iranian revolution that overthrew and uprooted an unjust government, and the liberation of Lebanon from foreign occupation are some recent examples of the principles laid down by Imam Husain.

### **Imam Husain's Philosophy:**

Professor Syed Jafar Raza Bilgirammi beautifully describes Imam Husain's philosophy. He stated that at Karbala Imam Husain came to rebuild a system of life. He gave a practical shape to the rational concept of justice. He successfully placed the Spirit (lust for power, war making qualities in man) and the appetite (greed for material things) under the command of reason (Aql). In Karbala he formulated a new code of life to safeguard peace and security of human society for all times to come.

### **Imam Husain's foresight and planning for the battle of Karbala:**

Imam Husain chose not to flee or hide from Yazid, because that would not have exposed Yezid's corruption of Islam and would have legitimized his unjust rule. He knew that by rejecting Yezid's demands he would most likely be killed. He did not want to die like any other martyr. He wanted his death as a starting point of a revolution that will strengthen justice and oppose tyranny for all time to come. This needed planning and wisdom. As pointed out by a scholar, Imam Husain planning was based on three factors.

- [a] Choice of place
- [b] Choice of persons and companions
- [c] Making fool-proof arrangements for passing on the event to the eternal records of history

### **The choice of place:**

Imam Husain chose not to stay in Mecca because he did not want his blood to desecrate the holy precincts. Besides, if he were to be killed by hired assassins, then the killers' motives will not be clear and his death will fade on the pages of history. So he chose to travel to Iraq (the den of the tyrant) where his mission would receive maximum publicity, and Yezid's evil would be exposed. The events of the history proved that Imam Husain was right.

### **The choice of the companions:**

Hujjatul Islam Maulana Ali Naqvi has written that in Karbala largest number of true Muslims had gathered in the entire history of Islam. Imam Husain was not seeking best fighters, since his goal was not to fight to win a war. He was looking for men of principle, true Muslims firm and patient who would go through the utmost hardship successfully.

His companions included men of different tribes, coming from different part of Arabia. It included a companion of the prophet, Liberated slaves, and a young newly married Christian couple. The age of his supporters ranged from six months to a ripe old age.

The heterogeneity of Imam Husain's supporters indicates that he did not want the confrontation with Yazid to be misrepresented as a struggle between two clans, or a campaign for gaining power.

### **Preserving his sacrifice in the annals of history:**

Imam Husain took his children, women, and all family members with him. This strategy ensured that after his death, his message will be spread through his family members, and Yazid will not be able to suppress

the truth, or falsify Imam Husain's motives. History proved that it was a brilliant move. His sister Zainab A.S. through her scholarly and bold speeches, and with no fear of the tyrant Yazid, proclaimed the truth, exposed the falsehood of Yazid. He was speechless and was humiliated. His court was full of dignitaries, local and from other counties, and his supporters. They were all shocked to hear the truth, and many were brought to tears. The same scene was repeated in the Bazaars of the country, and all along the travel route of the "captives." Husain had laid the foundation of the revolution with his blood. His sister Zainab A.S. started the revolution. That revolution changed the world forever.

### **Statements of historians and world leaders':**

This unique historical sacrifice of Imam Husain and his small band of 71 male supporters has caught the attention of historians, scholars, and writers throughout the world, and of all times. Some of the quotes are given below:

*Of that gallant band, male and female knew that the enemy forces around were implacable, and were not only ready to fight, but to kill. Denied even water for the children, they remained parched under the burning sun and scorching sands, yet not one faltered for a moment*

*"Husain marched with his little company, not to glorify, not to power of wealth, but to a supreme sacrifice, and every member bravely faced the greatest odds without flinching."* --Dr. K.Sheldrake

*"If Husain had fought to quench his worldly desires, as alleged by certain Christian critics, then I do not understand why his sister, wife, and children accompanied him. It stands to reason therefore, that he sacrificed purely for Islam."* --Charles Dickens

*"The best lesson which we get from the tragedy of Cerebella is that Husain and his companions were rigid believers in God. They illustrated that the numerical superiority does not count when it comes to the truth and the falsehood. The victory of Husain, despite his minority, marvels me!"* --Thomas Carlyle

*"In a distance age and climate, the tragic scene of death of Husain will awaken the sympathy of the coldest reader."* --Edward Gibbon.

*"The tragedy of Karbala decided not only the fate of the Caliphate, but also of Mohammadan kingdoms long after the Caliphate had waned and disappeared."* --William Muir

*"Imam Husain uprooted despotism forever, till the Day of Resurrection. He watered the dry gardens of freedom with a surging wave of his blood, and indeed he awakened the sleeping Muslim nation. If Imam Husain had aimed at acquiring the worldly empire, he would not have traveled to the way he did. Husain weltered in blood and dust for the sake of truth. Verily, therefore, he becomes the foundation of the Muslim creed "La Ilaha Il-lallah," meaning, there is no deity but Allah (God)."* --Sir Mohammad Iqbal

*"A reminder of that blood stained field of Karbala, where the grandson of the Apostle of God fell, at length, tortured by thirst, and surround by the bodies of his murdered kinsmen, has been at anytime since then, sufficient to evoke, even in the most lukewarm and the heedless, the deepest emotion, the most frantic grief, and an exaltation of spirit before which pain, danger and death shrink to unconsidered trifles"* --Browne in History of Persia

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- References:      \*The Martyrdom of Imam Husain- by Yousef N. Laljee  
                     \*The Spirit of Islam- by Ameer Ali  
                     \*Imam Husain and planning of Incident of Karbala- by S.G. Haider  
                     \*Imam Husain and system of life-by Syed Jafar Raza Bilgiram

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