CHAPTER 3

The Path to Paradise from an Islamic Viewpoint

Mahmoud Zakzouk

Throughout the long history of mankind people of various cultures have developed beliefs in the afterlife as a place of reward and punishment. The only remaining wonder of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, the pyramids, are a monument set in stone to this belief in a continuing existence after death. Islam teaches us as well that in the afterlife, on the day of judgment, people will be judged. Faith and good deeds done during one’s lifetime will be rewarded with paradise. If, however, one loved this “transitory world,” as it is called in the Quran (Q 75:20), too much and disregarded the hereafter, then one will be punished with hell, the place of no hope and full of suffering. On the day of judgment it is no longer possible for one to make up for one’s corruption by worldly temptations and for one’s unjust and merciless deeds. The Quran therefore warns again and again to contemplate life and its origin and man’s true destiny. The clear significance of what happens in this life, the Quran reminds us repeatedly, can only be known only in view of the hereafter.

The tenets of Islam with regard to eschatological concepts such as paradise, hell, the day of judgment, and eternity are best explained in view of its understanding of humankind and especially its duties on Earth. Man’s role as God’s vicegerent on Earth, although excellent, is nevertheless limited in scope and power. He is obliged to take responsibility for himself and for the Earth. He is a representative and not an absolute ruler and must obey the instructions transmitted to him. Faith leads him to search for the “face of God, the Almighty.” His living space, the creation which he did not create and which he cannot sustain by himself, has been entrusted to his stewardship. The special position of man in this creation is explained in the Quran as being due to the fact that, in contrast to other creatures which, as the Quran states (Q 3:83) all obey God, man was created a free being. He can therefore freely choose to follow his destiny and therefore follow the straight path which has been determined for him, or he can neglect his human duties and stray onto wrong paths, thus increasingly losing himself. If he follows his destiny, and thus acts responsibly and follows his conscience, he will be richly rewarded (Q 16:30). If he strays onto wrong paths, but recognizes his mistakes and sincerely regrets them, he is granted another chance to live a fulfilled life with a new path being opened to him. “If only he (man) would race up the steep path,” it says in the Quran (Q 90:11), and
strive for good, selfless deeds, patience, and mercy. God’s lifeline (Q 3:103), His guidance, is only received by those who truly regret “what their hands have forwarded,” as the Quran states (Q 78:40), namely their unjust deeds.

However, only in the gardens of paradise in its various chambers (Q 29:58) will people receive all that they desire (Q 16:31). There they will forever live as their souls have desired, as the Quran teaches. Here their search for the “face of God” (Q passim) will finally be rewarded (Q 92:20). Paradise is God’s abode (Q 3:198), the garden of eternity, reward and homecoming (Q 25:15). He who reaches paradise will dwell therein forever and will not wish to leave (Q 18:108). “As We produced the first creation, so We shall bring it back again,” says the Quran (Q 21:104). The eternal delight of the soul, everlasting enjoyment, as the Quran expresses it (Q 9:72), is “God’s good pleasure; that is the mighty triumph.”

1 The Choice of the Path

From a general point of view it seems that there are many paths available to man to achieve the ultimate goal of his desires, the realization of his life in its abundance. However, the issue of their relevance arises repeatedly, especially when we become disappointed again and again in our efforts.

The Quran thus recommends that man develop his reason, the most precious of God’s gifts, in order to think independently and not to follow the masses. Reason, occasionally also referred to as the “heart” in the Quran, is the light that aids us in finding the right path destined for us. “And God summons to the Abode of Peace,” teaches the Quran, “and He guides whomsoever He will to a straight path” (Q 10:25).

God breathed some of His spirit into man when He created him, as the Quran teaches us (Q 15:29). He is closer to us than our jugular vein (Q 50:16), it is explained, and He answers anyone who calls out to Him (Q 2:196). In their search for God, mystics like to refer to the Quranic verse (7:172) which states that God told man when He created him that He is his Lord and Creator, and that man must obey Him. Because of this innate knowledge, man cannot claim on the day of judgment that he did not know his obligation to obey God. The revelations in the Quran remind all human beings of their true Lord and their true destiny, which consists in serving Him (Q 76:29). “Surely this is a reminder,” states the Quran. “So he who will may take to his Lord a way” (Q 76:29). Accordingly, Sufis or Islamic mystics, attempt to submit themselves as unconditionally as possible to the will of God, who, as He transmits in His revelations, only wants salvation and happiness for humankind. The love of the