

# Module 1: Understanding Islam through the Hadith of Jibrael

## Lecture Notes

Umar Ibn Khattab (R.A) narrates: “While we were sitting with the Prophet (S.A.W) one day a man came up to us whose clothes were extremely white, whose hair was extremely black, upon whom traces of travelling could not be seen, and whom none of us knew, until he sat down close to the Prophet (S.A.W) so that he rested his knees against his knees and placed his two hands upon his thighs and said, ‘Oh Muhammad (S.A.W)! Tell me about Islam.’ The Prophet (S.A.W) said, ‘Islam is that you testify that there is no god but Allah (S.W.T) and that Muhammad (S.A.W) is the Messenger of Allah (S.W.T), and you establish the prayer, and you give the Zakat, and you fast in Ramadan, and you perform the Hajj if you are able to take a way to it.’ He said, ‘You have told the truth,’ and we were amazed at him asking him and [then] telling him that he told the truth. He said, ‘Tell me about Iman.’ The Prophet (S.A.W) said, ‘That you believe in Allah (S.W.T), His angels, His books, His messengers, and the Last Day, and that you affirm the Decree, the good of it and the bad of it.’ He said, ‘You have told the truth.’ He said, ‘Tell me about Ihsan.’ The Prophet (S.A.W) said, ‘That you worship Allah as if you see Him, for even if you don't see Him then truly He sees you.’ He said, ‘Tell me about the Hour.’ The Prophet (S.A.W) said, ‘The one asked about it knows no more than the one asking.’ He said, ‘Then tell me about its signs.’ The Prophet (S.A.W) said, ‘That the female slave should give birth to her mistress, and you see poor, naked, barefoot shepherds of sheep and goats competing in making tall buildings.’ He went away, and I remained silent some time. Then the Prophet (S.A.W) asked, ‘Umar, do you know who the questioner was?’ I said, ‘Allah (S.W.T) and His Messenger (S.A.W) know best.’ He said, ‘He was Jibrael who came to you to teach you your Deen’.” [Sahih Muslim]

The above-stated hadith of the Prophet (S.A.W) is known as the Hadith of Jibrael. It is considered by many scholars to be one of the most important ahadith of the Prophet (S.A.W) because it summarizes the whole Deen of Islam in a few sentences. The words of the Prophet (S.A.W) when he said: “He was Jibrael who came to you to teach you your religion,” are enough to attest to the significance of the hadith. Due to its importance the scholars of hadith have named this hadith as Umm us-Sunnah meaning the mother of all the ahadith or the essence of all the ahadith. For the same reason, major compilers of hadith have included the Hadith of Jibrael in their collections. It is included in important compilations like Sahih Bukhari, Sahih Muslim, Musnad Imam Ahmad Ibn Hanbal, Jami Tirmizi, Sahih Ibn Hiban, Sahih al-Hakim and Arba'een Imam Nawawi. The hadith has been narrated by a number of companions including Umar Ibn al-Khattab, Abu Huraira, Abdullah Ibn Umar and Abdullah Ibn Abbas. Having a significant number of narrators in the companions adds to the importance of this hadith.

In the Hadith of Jibrael the Prophet (S.A.W) was basically asked four questions by Angel Jibrael (A.S). In order to understand the reality of Islam explained in this hadith it is important to analyze all the questions and the answers in detail. The first three questions were about the three dimensions of Islam namely: Islam, Iman and Ihsan. Before we go into this discussion it is pertinent to clarify that in the context of this hadith the word Islam should be understood in two slightly different ways. In one way Islam can refer to the name of the whole Deen or religion followed by the Muslims. In another sense Islam is also one of the three aspects or dimensions of

our Deen. So Islam, Iman and Ihsan are all parts of the Deen of Islam. This is a case where Islam is the name of a whole as well as a part of the whole. These two distinct uses of the word Islam should be kept in mind to avoid confusion that may arise after reading these lines.

The first question asked by Angel Jibrael (A.S) was about Islam and in reply the Prophet (S.A.W) mentioned, what are known as, the five pillars of Islam: testimony of faith, daily prayers, zakat, fasting and hajj. So in this sense Islam refers to obedience of the commandments of Allah (S.W.T) and practicing all the rituals set forth in the religion. An important thing to take note of here is that the dimension of Islam includes three types of acts of worship (ibaadaat). The testimony of faith is an act of worship committed by the tongue, daily prayers and fasting are acts of worship associated with the body and the limbs and Zakat is an act of worship which is performed by the spending of wealth. However Hajj is a unique form of worship which includes all three types of acts of obedience. By mentioning all the possible categories of obedience the Prophet (S.A.W) has indicated that a Muslim is supposed to comprehensively devote his life to the worship of Allah (S.W.T). It is reported in the books of ahadith that when the Prophet (S.W.T) went on the night journey of Isra and Mi'raj and came in the presence of Allah Almighty he praised and glorified the Almighty with words which later became part of the daily prayers performed by the Muslims. While glorifying Allah (S.W.T) the Prophet (S.A.W) exclaimed in a state of awe: "To Allah are devoted all the acts of worship – those committed by the tongue (At-Tahiyyaat), those committed by the body (As-Salawaat) and those which are done by the spending of wealth (At-Tayyibaat)". On that occasion also the Prophet (S.A.W) mentioned all the three types of worship which are also included in the Hadith of Jibrael as part of the definition of Islam. So Islam is the name of absolute and comprehensive devotion to God Almighty which includes all possible types of worship.

The second question in the hadith was about Iman and in reply the Prophet (S.A.W) outlined the basic beliefs in Islam namely: belief in Allah (S.W.T), the angels, the books, the messengers, the last day and the decree. These six are the fundamental articles of faith in Islam which are also included in the detailed proclamation of faith known as Iman-e-Mufassal. The only difference is that in Iman-e-Mufassal the belief in the last day is subdivided into a belief in the resurrection of the dead and the Day of Judgment. Having a firm faith in all the aforementioned beliefs is a basic requirement for a person to be called a Muslim.

The third question was about Ihsan and the Prophet (S.A.W) stated that Ihsan is that a person worships Allah (S.W.T) as if he sees Allah (S.W.T). In this statement the Prophet (S.A.W) was pointing to the importance of having the right feelings during worship. This means that during worship a person's humility and attention towards the Creator should be at such a level that would be there if that person would be directly witnessing the Lord of all the creation. Ihsan refers to the inner dimension of Islam. Having righteous deeds and authentic beliefs is important for a Muslim and so is to have proper feelings, emotions and inner personality traits. In the Qur'an the dimension of Ihsan is also referred to as Tazkiyya (purification) because Ihsan requires purification of the inner aspects of human personality. Therefore Ihsan means to adorn oneself with noble inner attributes like love for Allah (S.W.T) and the Prophet (S.A.W), humility, gratitude and getting rid of evil attributes like arrogance, jealousy and hatred, etc.

It is now sufficiently evident that the three dimensions of Islam namely: Islam, Iman and Ihsan actually refer to actions, beliefs and inner feelings or emotions respectively. If understood in the context of the words of the Prophet (S.A.W) when he said at the end of the hadith: "He

was Jibrael who came to you to teach you your deen (religion)”, it is easier to infer that the hadith teaches us that in the religion of Islam actions, beliefs and inner feelings of a person are all important. Islam, Iman and Ihsan altogether complete the true picture of our Deen. This hadith helps us develop a complete understanding of our religion. Islam in Arabic literally means submission and in the context of the teachings of Qur’an and Sunnah it means absolute and total submission to Allah (S.W.T). A true Muslim is the one who completely surrenders himself to the Will of Allah (S.W.T). Proceeding from this point, it can be said that the Hadith of Jibrael explains the nature and the extent of a Muslim’s submission to the Creator. The hadith connects the idea of submission to all the three aspects of human personality namely: practical, intellectual and emotional. Islam, Iman and Ihsan respectively mean a person’s practical, intellectual and emotional submission to the Lord of all existence.

Islam, Iman and Ihsan can also be understood to relate with the three degrees of excellence in our religion. The most fundamental requirement for a Muslim is to submit physically to the Divine Will. It would mean outward obedience to the commandments of Allah (S.W.T). But outward obedience to God does not come without a basic level of belief in the Eternal Being. At this point we are talking about a rudimentary level of belief in God which is necessary to characterize a person as Muslim. However when a person submits physically to Allah (S.W.T) he will proceed to a deeper level of belief which is referred to as Iman in the Hadith of Jibrael. At this stage the belief seeps to a deeper level so much so that a person believes in the existence of God to the level of certainty. If a person adheres to this degree of Iman and perpetuates himself in this condition he advances to the highest level of excellence in faith known as Ihsan. At this stage a person has achieved such a level of certainty about his Creator that he is deeply aware of His existence in all forms of worship. The three degrees of excellence in Islam are referred to in the Qur’an in the following verse:

لَيْسَ عَلَى الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ جُنَاحٌ فِيمَا طَعِمُوا إِذَا مَا اتَّقَوْا وَآمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ ثُمَّ اتَّقَوْا وَآمَنُوا ثُمَّ اتَّقَوْا وَأَحْسَنُوا ۗ وَاللَّهُ يُحِبُّ الْمُحْسِنِينَ

*There is no blame on those who believe and do good deeds for what they ate in the past, provided they remain pious, and believe and do righteous deeds, then remain pious and believe, and then remain pious and attain Ihsan. For Allah loves the people of Ihsan. [Al-Maida: 93]*

This verse indicates that the believers are absolved of blame as long as they remain on course to attain the highest level of submission. In this journey of submission there are three stages: The first one is occupied by those who “remain pious and believe and do righteous deeds”. This stage corresponds with Islam i.e. righteous actions for which some basic level of belief is also required. Then there is the stage of Iman and at this stage are the people who “remain pious and believe”. At last there is the stage of Ihsan with which are identified the people who “remain pious and attain Ihsan”. The people of Ihsan are those who receive the love of the Sustainer. The three dimensions of Islam, Iman and Ihsan are shown as lying in successive levels of progress in the religion of Islam.

Towards the end of the hadith the Prophet (S.A.W) was asked about the Day of Judgment. Both the signs of the Day of Judgment mentioned by the Prophet (S.A.W) can have multiple interpretations. The first sign was that the slave-girl will give birth to her mistress. Some scholars say that this alludes to the widespread conquests of the Muslims. When the Muslims conquered different areas many of the subjugated nations accepted Islam. Although the subjugated people were in one sense the slaves of the Muslims but their later generations became the rulers of the Muslims. This is a figurative interpretation of the idea of a slave-girl giving birth to her mistress. Some other scholars say that it means that the children will become disobedient to their parents so much so that the children will treat their parents as slaves.

The second sign of the Day of Judgment mentioned in the Hadith of Jibreel was that the poor shepherds will construct tall buildings and compete with each other. An obvious example of how this saying has come to be true can be seen in some Arab countries today. In the time of the Prophet (S.A.W) areas like Dubai and Abu Dhabi were inhabited by Bedouin shepherds who were poor and insignificant. But now the same areas have seen such development that the tallest buildings in the world are being constructed in those areas. The shepherds of the past are actually competing with one another in constructing tall buildings. Another interpretation is that the case of shepherds making tall buildings is a metaphor to indicate that incapable and corrupt people will become rulers. Some scholars are of the opinion that both the above-stated signs of the Last Day contain anomalies which are either impossible or unlike to occur in normal circumstances. A general interpretation of the two signs is that the social order will collapse. Human beings will deviate from their true nature and it will have serious repercussions for the social life. As a result the human society will be in chaos and turmoil. It is undeniable that we are witnessing times when the tyranny and injustice in the society is unprecedented. The signs of the Last Day are coming to be true but only Allah (S.W.T) has the ultimate knowledge about the exact time of the Final Reckoning.

It is obvious that the Day of Judgment is not a separate dimension like Islam, Iman and Ihsan. Rather a belief in the Last Day is a part of Iman. Then why is the Day of Judgment mentioned in a hadith which was meant to teach the Muslims about their religion? One of the ways in which this question can be answered is that in the Hadith of Jibreel the importance of time is being conveyed to the Muslims. The idea being presented here is that a Muslim is supposed to keep striving for excellence in his submission to the Divine but he must also take into consideration the constraint of time. A Muslim must know that he is given a limited time and he must then return to his Lord Who will judge him for the life that he has spent. Time is an asset that the humans must value and use it to fulfill the purpose for which they are brought into existence. The purpose is none other than the worship and the glorification of the Almighty and total submission to the Divine Will. The greatest tragedy is that many people fail to realize the value of passing time. It is for this reason that Allah (S.W.T) swore by the time to declare that humans are in utter loss:

وَالْعَصْرِ إِنَّ الْإِنْسَانَ لَفِي خُسْرٍ

*By the time through the ages, surely mankind is in a state of loss. [Surah al-Asr: 1, 2]*

Same as in the Hadith of Jibrael, the importance of time and the return to Allah (S.W.T) has been pointed out in many other verses of the Qur'an:

يَا أَيُّهَا الْإِنْسَانُ إِنَّكَ كَادِحٌ إِلَىٰ رَبِّكَ كَدْحًا فَمُلَاقِيهِ

*O man! verily you are ever toiling on towards the Lord painfully toiling  
but you will meet Him. [Al-Inshiqaq: 6]*