

Faith and Human Perfection in the Modern Age: Nursi's Aspects*

Dr. Ahmet Kayacık**

Human perfection has been an important problem for centuries. People tried to get a perfectness, but sometimes they could not be successful in getting it. In this age Said Nursi, as an important religious figure, attempted to solve this problem or issue. For his aim is to solve and help the problems about unbelief. He explained his ideas about this subject matter in his book *The Words at the Twenty-third Word*. Just he did in all subjects he used a Quranic verses to explain in this issue. He examine in this chapter the relation between human kind and his perfection in context of belief and expresses his ideas in five points. When he is exposing ideas about the issue he uses metaphors and then go to the realities of these metaphors and we find some comparisons between the believer and unbeliever's circumstances.

بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ

لَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ فِي أَحْسَنِ تَقْوِيمٍ - ثُمَّ رَدَدْنَاهُ أَسْفَلَ سَافِلِينَ - إِلَّا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا وَعَمِلُوا الصَّالِحَاتِ

In the Name of God, the All-Merciful, the All-Compassionate.

Surely We have created humanity of the best stature as the perfect pattern of creation; then We reduced it to the lowest of the low, save those who believe and do good, righteous deeds. (95:4-5)

In the light of above verse he explains five out of the thousands of virtues of belief.

FIRST POINT: We reach the highest degree of perfection and become worthy of Paradise through the light of belief. The darkness of unbelief reduces us to the lowest level so that we deserve Hell.

For belief connects us to our All-Majestic Maker, so belief is a relation and connection. Thus our value derives from the Divine art and the Divine Names that are manifested in us through belief. Unbelief breaks this relation, thereby veiling the Divine art and reducing our value to that of a mere physical entity. Since matter is perishable and physical life is no more than a transient animal life, our value as a physical entity is virtually nothing. We will explain this through a parable.

The value of the iron (or any other material) from which a work of art is made differs from the value of the art expressed in it. Sometimes they may have the same

* This paper is shortened from *The Twenty-Third Word* from Nursi's work *The Words*

* Professor in Erciyes University Theology Faculty, Kayseri Turkey, akayacik@erciyes.edu.tr

value, or the art's worth may be far more than its material, or vice versa. An antique may fetch a million dollars, while its material is not even worth a few cents. If taken to the antiques market, it may be sold for its true value because of its art and the brilliant artist's name. If taken to a blacksmith, it would be sold only for the value of its iron.

Similarly, each person is a unique, priceless work of God Almighty's Art. We are His Power's most delicate and graceful miracles, beings created to manifest all His Names and inscriptions in the form of a miniature specimen of the universe.

If we are illuminated with belief, these meaningful inscriptions become visible, and believers read them consciously. They manifest these inscriptions through their connection with their Maker; that is, the Divine art contained in each person is revealed through such affirmations as: "I am the work of the All-Majestic Maker, the creature and object of His Mercy and Munificence." As a result, and because we gain value in proportion to how well we reflect this art, we move from insignificance (in material terms) to beings ranked above all creatures. We communicate with God, are His guests on the earth, and are qualified for Paradise.

However, should unbelief, which means the severance of this connection, is ingrained in us, all of the Divine Names' manifestations are veiled by darkness and thus non-expressive. For if the Artist is unknown, how can the aspects expressing the worth of His Art be identified? Thus most meaningful instances of that sublime Art and elevated inscriptions are concealed. As regards the material aspects of our being, unbelievers attribute them to physical causes, nature and chance, thereby reducing them to plain glass instead of sparkling diamonds. They are no more significant than any other material entity, self-condemned to a transient and suffocating life, and no better than a most impotent, needy, and afflicted animal that eventually will become dust. Unbelief thus spoils our nature by changing our diamond into coal.

SECOND POINT: Belief is a light. Just as it illuminates human beings and reveals all the messages inscribed in their being by the Eternally Besought One, it also illuminates the universe and removes darkness from the past and future as well.

We will explain this truth through what I experienced regarding the meaning of:

اللَّهُ وَلِيُّ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا يُخْرِجُهُم مِّنَ الظُّلُمَاتِ إِلَى النُّورِ *God is the Guardian of those who believe. He brings them out of the layers of darkness into the light (2:257).*

I saw myself standing on an awe-inspiring bridge set over a deep valley between two mountains. The world was completely dark. Looking to my right, I imagined I saw a huge tomb in darkness. Looking to my left, I felt as if I were seeing violent storms and calamities being prepared amid the tremendous waves of darkness. Looking down, I imagined I saw a very deep **precipice**. I had a torch in the face of this terrifying darkness. I used it and could see a little with its light. A dreadful scene appeared to me in its dim

light. All along the bridge were such horrible dragons, lions, and monsters that I wished I had no torch. Whichever way I directed it, I got the same fright. "This torch brings me only trouble," I exclaimed, angrily throwing it away and breaking it. Suddenly darkness was replaced by light, as if I had switched on a huge light by breaking my torch. I saw everything in its true nature.

I discovered that the bridge was a highway on a smooth plain. The huge tomb was a green, beautiful garden in which illustrious persons were leading assemblies of worship, prayer, glorification, and discourse. The turbulent, stormy, frightening precipices on my left appeared as a banqueting hall, a shaded promenade, a beautiful resting place behind lovely mountains. The horrible monsters and dragons were actually camels, oxen, sheep, and goats. "Praise and thanks be to God for the light of belief," I said, and then awoke reciting: *God is the Guardian of those who believe. He brings them out of the layers of darkness into the light.*

Thus, the two mountains are this life's beginning and end, that is, this world and the world of grave (between death and Resurrection). The bridge is the lifespan, between the two phases of the past (on the right) and the future (on the left). The torch is our conceited ego that, relying on its own achievements, ignores Divine Revelation. The monsters were the worlds' events and creatures.

Those who have fallen into the darkness of misguidance and heedlessness because of their confidence in their egos resemble me in the former state—in the dim light of a torch. With their inadequate and misguided knowledge, they see the past as a huge tomb in the darkness of extinction and the future as a stormy scene of terror controlled by coincidence or chance. The torch also shows them events and creatures, which are in reality dutiful servants or officials of the All-Wise and All-Merciful fulfilling specific functions and serve good purposes, as harmful monsters. These are the people referred to in: *As to those who do not believe, their guardians are powers of evil who institute patterns of belief and rule in defiance of God. They bring them out of the light into layers of darkness (2:257).*

THIRD POINT: Belief is both light and power. Those who attain true belief can challenge the universe and, in proportion to their belief's strength, be relieved of the pressures of events.

Relying on God, they travel safely through the mountainous waves of events in the ship of life. Having entrusted their burdens to the Absolutely Powerful One's Hand of Power, they voyage through the world comfortably until their last day. The grave will be a resting place, after which they will fly to Paradise to attain eternal bliss. If, however, they do not rely upon God, their worldly life will force them down to the lowest depths.

That means, belief requires affirming Divine Unity; affirmation of Divine Unity requires submitting to God; sub mission to God requires relying on God; and reliance on God yields happiness in both worlds.

But do not misunderstand reliance on God; it does not mean ignoring cause and effect and complete negligence of the means to attain a goal. Rather, it means that one should think of causes or means as a veil before the Power's hand. One observes them by seeking to comply with the Divine Will, which is a sort of prayer in action. However, such desire and seeking is not enough to secure a particular effect. We must understand that, in accordance with right belief, the result is to be expected only from God, the All-Mighty. As He is the sole producer of effects, we always should be grateful to Him.

The one who relies on God and one who does not are like the two men in the following parable:

Once two people boarded a royal ship with heavy burdens. One put his burden on the deck immediately after boarding and sat on it to keep it safe. The other one, even after being told to lay his burden down, refused to do so and said: "I won't put it down, because it might get lost. Besides, I'm strong enough to carry it." He was told:

This reliable royal ship, which carries us, is stronger and can hold it better. You will most probably get tired, feel dizzy, and fall into the sea with your burden. Your strength will fail, and then how will you bear this burden that gets heavier every moment? If the captain sees you in this state, he might say you are insane and expel you from the ship. Or maybe he will think you do not trust them and make fun of them, and he will order you to be imprisoned. Also, you will be marked out and become the butt of jokes. Your vanity reveals your weakness, your arrogance reveals your impotence, and your pretension betrays your humiliation. And so you have become a laughing stock—look how everybody is laughing at you. These words convinced him to follow his companion's example. He told him: "May God be pleased with you. I have obtained relief and am no longer subject to imprisonment or becoming a laughing-stock."

So trust in God and come to your senses, as the man in the parable did. Put your trust in God and be delivered from begging from creation and trembling in fear at each happening. Doing so will deliver you from self-conceit, being ridiculous, the pressures of this life, and the torments of the Hereafter.

FOURTH POINT: Belief enables us to attain true humanity, to acquire a position above all other creatures. Thus, belief and prayer are our most fundamental and important duties. Unbelief, by contrast, reduces us to the state of a brutal but very impotent beast.

A decisive proof for this truth is the difference between how human beings and animals come into existence. Almost from the very moment of birth, an animal seems to have been trained and perfected its faculties somewhere else. Within a few hours or days or months, it can lead its life according to its particular rules and conditions. A sparrow or a bee, for example, acquires or is inspired with the skill and ability to integrate into its environment within a matter of twenty days, while it would take a person twenty years to do so. This means that an animal's basic obligation and essential role does not include seeking perfection through learning, progress through scientific knowledge, or prayer and petitioning for help by displaying their impotence. Rather, their sole purpose is to act within the bounds of their innate faculties, which is the mode of worship specified for them.

People, however, are born knowing nothing of life and their environment and so must learn everything. As we cannot do this even within twenty years, we must continue to learn until we die. We are sent here with so much weakness and inability that we might need as many as two years to learn how to walk. Only after fifteen years can we distinguish good and evil. Only by living in a society can we become smart enough to choose between what is beneficial and what is harmful.

Thus the essential and intrinsic duty of our existence is to seek perfection through learning and to proclaim our worship of and servanthood to God through prayer and supplication. It is to seek answers for such essential questions as: "Through whose compassion is my life so wisely administered? Through whose generosity am I being so affectionately trained? Through whose favors and benevolence am I being so solicitously nourished?" It is to pray and petition the Provider of Needs in humble awareness of our needs, even a thousandth of which we cannot satisfy on our own. In short, it is flying to the highest rank of being worshipful servants of God on the wings of consciousness of our innate impotence and poverty.

And so our purpose here is to seek perfection through knowledge and prayer. Everything is, by its nature, essentially dependent on knowledge. And the basis, source, light, and spirit of all true knowledge is knowledge of God, of which belief is the very foundation.

After belief, prayer is our essential duty and the basis of worship, for despite our infinite impotence, we are exposed to endless misfortune and innumerable enemies, and despite our infinite poverty, we suffer limitless need and demands.

Children express their need for something they cannot reach with words or tears. Both are a sort of plea or prayer, in word or deed, with the tongue of weakness. Eventually they get what they want. Similarly, we are quite like a beloved child in the world of living beings, who should either weep at the All-Merciful and Compassionate's

Court through our weakness and impotence, or pray through to our poverty and need, so that our need may be satisfied. In return, we should perform our duty of gratitude and thanksgiving for this provision.

FIFTH POINT: Belief requires prayer for attainment and perfection, and our essence needs it. God Almighty says: Say (O Muhammad): “My Lord would not concern Himself with you but for your prayer” (25:77), and: Pray to Me and I will answer you (40:60).

Question: If you say that you pray so many times but that your prayers are unanswered, despite the assurance given in the above verse, the answer would be as follows:

The Answer: An answered prayer does not necessarily mean its acceptance. There is an answer for every prayer. However, accepting the prayer and giving what is requested depends upon the All-Mighty’s Wisdom. For example, a sick child asks a doctor for a certain medicine. The doctor will give either what is asked for or something better, or he will not give anything. It all depends upon how the medicine will affect the child. Similarly the All Mighty, Who is the All-Just and Omnipresent, answers His servants’ prayer and changes their loneliness into the pleasure of His company. But His answer does not depend on the individual’s fancies; rather, according to His Wisdom, He gives what is requested, what is better, or nothing at all.

Moreover, prayer is a form of worship and worship is rewarded mainly in the Hereafter. Worldly needs and purposes are only causes or occasions for prayer. For example, praying for rain is a kind of worship occasioned by the lack of rain. If rain is the prayer’s only aim, the prayer is unacceptable, for it is not sincere or intended to please God and obtain His approval.

Sunset determines the time for the evening Prayer, while solar and lunar eclipses occasion two particular kinds of worship. Since such eclipses—the veiling of two luminous signs of day and night—are two means of manifesting Divine Majesty, the All-Mighty calls His servants to perform a form of worship—the Prayer of Eclipse—particular to these occasions. This Prayer has nothing to do with causing the eclipse to end, for this is known already through astronomical calculations. Similarly, drought and other calamities are occasions certain kinds of prayer. At such times, we best realize our impotence and so feel the need to take refuge in the high Presence of the Absolutely Powerful One through prayer and supplication.

If a calamity is not lifted despite many prayers, we should not say that the prayer has not been accepted. Rather, we should say that the time for prayer has not yet ended. If God removes the calamity because of His endless Grace and Munificence, this is light upon light, profit upon profit, and marks the end of the special occasion for prayer.

Praying is a mystery of servanthood to God through worship. Worship is done solely to please God and for His Sake. We should affirm and display our poverty and weakness, and seek refuge with Him through prayer. We must not interfere in His Lordship, but rather let God do as He wills. We must rely on His Wisdom and not accuse His Mercy.

Every creature offers its unique praise and worship to God. What reaches the Court of God from the universe is prayer.

- One kind of prayer is that which is done through the tongue of potential. Plants pray through the tongue of their potential to achieve a full form and manifest certain Divine Names.

- Another kind of prayer is expressed in the tongue of natural needs. All living beings ask the Absolutely Generous One to meet their vital needs, as they cannot do so on their own.

- Yet another kind of prayer is done in the tongue of complete helplessness. A living creature in straitened circumstances takes refuge in its Unseen Protector with a genuine supplication and turns to its All Compassionate Lord. These three kinds of prayer are always acceptable, unless somehow impeded.

- The fourth type of prayer is the one done by humanity. This type falls into two categories: active and by disposition, and verbal and with the heart. For example, acting in accordance with causes or fulfilling the prerequisites is an active prayer. We try to gain God's approval by complying with causes or fulfilling the prerequisites, for causes alone or the fulfillment of prerequisites cannot produce the result—only God can do that. For example, plowing the soil is an active prayer, for this means knocking at the door of the treasury of God's Mercy. Such a prayer is usually acceptable, for it is an application to the Divine Name the All-Generous.

The second type of prayer of humanity, done with the tongue and the heart, is the ordinary one. This means that we ask God from the heart for something we cannot reach. Its most important aspect and finest and sweetest fruit is that we know that God hears us, is aware of our heart's contents, that His Power extends everywhere, that He can satisfy every desire, and that He comes to our aid out of mercy for our weakness and inadequacy.

And so, O helpless and poor person. Never abandon prayer, for it is the key to the Treasury of Mercy and the means of gaining access to the Infinite Power. Hold on to it. Ascend to the highest rank of humanity and, as creation's most favored and superior member, include the whole universe's prayer in your prayer. Say, on behalf of all beings: *From You alone do we seek help* (1:5), and become a beautiful pattern for creation.