

W6 and W7

Sacred Study - The Heart Knows -Ihyā 'Ulum al-Din

M2- BOOK 32 Steadfastness and Gratitude by Imam al-Ghazali

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BOOK 32 Steadfastness and Gratitude

Steadfastness

Allah frequently praises the steadfast in the Qur'an, linking them to righteous actions and divine rewards. He states that the steadfast will be rewarded endlessly and that fasting demonstrates steadfastness, for which He is the sole rewarder. Allah affirms His presence with the steadfast, granting blessings and mercy, and considers them truly guided.

Steadfastness is a key aspect of spiritual growth and an inherent human trait that sets us apart from animals and angels. It can be likened to an army that remains resolute in battle, driven by a religious purpose to control desires. This internal struggle occurs within each person, with angels supporting the religious goal and devils encouraging desires. Steadfastness is the consistency of the religious motive against desires; when maintained, it shows loyalty to Allah's side, while failing to do so aligns one with the devils. Resisting actions motivated by desires reflects steadfastness, which comes from understanding that desires are opposed to true happiness in this life and the hereafter.

The Terms that Inform Steadfastness According to Its Attachments

Be aware that steadfastness manifests in two primary forms.

The first aspect is physical, involving endurance through hardships and a firm determination to continue. This can be demonstrated through actions like hard work—whether in worship or other activities—or through endurance, such as enduring severe physical trial or serious illness.

The second admirable form is spiritual/inner and relates to unwavering resilience in resisting natural desires and whims. When this resilience pertains to desires of the stomach and sexuality, it is called 'chaste'; if it concerns hardship or suffering, it is known as 'steadfastness'. When linked to controlling wealth, it is referred to as 'temperance' rather than 'hubris'. In warfare, it is called 'bravery' rather than 'cowardice'. Additionally, when it involves suppressing anger and fury, it is termed 'clemency' rather than 'gripe'. These distinctions demonstrate various types of steadfastness, each with a specific focus.

The Subdivisions of Steadfastness

Three different scenarios illustrate how the religious motive relates to the motive of whim.

The initial scenario highlights the victory of the religious motive over the whim-driven motive, which cannot effectively oppose it. This state is reached through unwavering perseverance. The saying "Everything comes to him who waits" aptly reflects this idea. Such individuals are extremely rare; in fact, they are those described as: {Lo! Those who say: our Lord is Allah, and afterwards are upright...}.

The second scenario occurs when whimsical reasons dominate, leading to the complete collapse of religious motives' resistance. This causes individuals to give in to harmful tendencies and surrender out of despair in such struggles. These individuals are often unaware and represent most people whose desires have enslaved them and whose misery has overtaken them. Signs of this include despair, hopelessness, and false hope, making this state essentially foolishness.

The third scenario describes a situation where success fluctuates between the two forces, with the individual sometimes prevailing and other times giving in to their desires. This person is considered a struggler rather than a victor. They are represented by the verse: {They mixed a righteous action with another that was bad. It may be that Allah will relent towards them...}.

The subdivision mentioned above appropriately considers both strengths and weaknesses.

When examining ease and difficulty, steadfastness can also be further categorised as:

The ego faces such a challenge that maintaining diligence requires considerable effort and hard work. This process is called 'nurturing steadfastness.'

Conversely, when this state is reached with little resistance from the ego, it is called 'steadfastness.'

An illustrative example is a wrestler's ability to overcome an opponent: a skilled wrestler can easily defeat a less-skilled opponent, but facing a match against a similarly strong adversary demands significant effort.

Furthermore, it should be acknowledged that, in its legal ruling, steadfastness is classified as **obligatory, supererogatory, and forbidden**.

Maintaining steadfastness regarding prohibited matters is mandatory; it is praised when facing difficulties; however, it is forbidden when it involves causing harm.

An example of the latter is when a person's female relatives face malevolence; yet, his jealousy does not arise, and he stays silent. Such unwavering silence is considered unacceptable.

When is Steadfastness Needed?

Recognise that everything the servant experiences in life falls into one of two categories: either it matches his desires, or he dislikes it because it doesn't.

An individual needs to show perseverance in all situations; thus, firm determination is essential in every case.

The first category, related to natural impulses, includes good health, safety, wealth, status, numerous relatives, a prosperous livelihood, support from others, and all worldly pleasures. It is crucial for the servant to stay firm on these points. If he lacks self-control and succumbs to ego or permissible pleasures, he risks falling into frivolity and disobedience. Humans tend to be rebellious and see themselves as independent. As a gnostic remarked: "A believer can endure hardship, but only a true saint can remain steady in prosperity." The noblest person is one who stays resilient during times of well-being. Being steadfast in prosperity means not overly relying on it, recognising its temporary nature and the possibility of loss, and avoiding obsession with luxury, pleasure, entertainment, or play. Instead, one should focus on fulfilling Allah's rights over His blessings.

Maintaining steadiness in comfort is easier than doing so with capacity. When someone faces hunger and can't find food, they tend to stay steadfast more than when healthy foods are readily available. Therefore, testing true comfort proves to be a more difficult challenge.

The second category involves actions that conflict with a person's personal desires and natural tendencies. It is divided into three types: the first concerns a servant's choice to obey or disobey. Staying firmly obedient is particularly difficult because the ego naturally resists servitude, making it profoundly challenging.

Some acts of obedience, like prayer, are often disliked due to laziness; others, such as zakat, are disliked because of miserliness; and some, like hajj and jihad, are disliked for both reasons. Demonstrating steadfastness in obedience is similar to enduring hardships, while in acts of disobedience, the servant must be even more determined. Allah encompasses all forms of disobedience in His statement: {... and forbiddeth lewdness and abomination and wickedness}. Persisting in habitual disobedience is the most harmful type of perseverance.

Habits and desires are like two armies of the devil that the religious motive may struggle to suppress. When the act is simple to perform, maintaining steadfastness becomes more difficult for the ego. For example, being firm against disobedient acts of the tongue—such as backbiting, lying, arguing, and joking that hurts others—can be particularly challenging.

The level of steadfastness toward acts of disobedience varies depending on the strength of the impulse to act. Thought processes prompted by various suggestions demand less effort than spoken words. Additionally, the inner dialogue of the soul or ego continues when one is alone, and genuine steadfastness in avoiding this discourse can only be sustained if the heart is occupied with a different concern.

The second category relates to assaults not initiated by the servant himself; however, he has the option to retaliate, such as when he is harmed by an action or words, or when his person or property is attacked. Maintaining patience in such situations—by refraining from retaliating—is sometimes required and other times seen as a virtue. Allah, exalted is He, states: {And bear with patience what they utter, and part from them with a fair leave-taking}, and {Assuredly ye will be tried in your property and in your persons, and ye will hear much wrong from those who were given the Scripture before you, and from the idolaters. But persevere and ward off Evil, then that is of the steadfast heart of things,

The third category relates to situations beyond an individual's control, including hardships like losing loved ones, property loss, health decline from illness, limb impairments, and generally, all types of trials. Showing resilience in these circumstances is considered among the highest forms of steadfastness.

According to al-'Abbās: 'Steadfastness in the Quran falls into three categories: diligently fulfilling obligatory duties, avoiding what Allah, exalted be He, has prohibited, and patiently enduring hardships when they occur. True perseverance in suffering is achieved only when a person resists abandoning this steadfastness despite signs of distress, such as tearing garments, slapping the face, excessive mourning, or changing usual dress, seating, or diet. These actions are personal choices and should be avoided. Instead, one should accept Allah's decree, understanding that these trials are temporary trusts given to us, which will eventually be taken back.

It is reported that al-Rumaysa', Umm Salim', may Allah have mercy on her, stated: 'One of my sons passed away while my husband, Abu Talha, was absent. I placed him on one side of the house. Upon Abu Talha's return, I prepared food for him to break his fast. As he ate, he inquired about the boy. I responded that he was in the best condition, thanks be to Allah's praise and blessing. Since his illness, he had never been as peaceful as he was that night. I endeavoured to make myself more appealing to him, even more so than usual, until he fell asleep with me. I then asked if he wondered about our neighbour. He asked why, and I explained that they were entrusted with something that, when asked to return it, they eventually gave it back but were vexed. He said, "Evil is what they did." I then informed him that his son is a trust from Allah, and Allah has taken him back. Hearing this, he praised Allah and said, "We belong to Allah, and to Him we shall return." The next morning, he visited the Messenger of Allah, may Allah's blessings and peace be upon him, and shared what had transpired. The Prophet prayed: "O Allah! Bless their night." The narrator added that I later saw in the mosque seven of their children, all of whom were reciters of the Qur'an."

The pain in the heart and tears from the eyes do not preclude an individual from maintaining steadfastness, as these are inherent aspects of the human condition and persist until death. Consequently, when Ibrahim, the son of Prophet Muhammad, may Allah's blessings and peace be upon him, passed away, the Prophet's eyes welled with tears.

Upon inquiring about this, he clarified: 'This is a sign of mercy, and Allah only shows mercy to His merciful servants.'

You now recognise that the necessity for steadfastness is universally applicable across all states and actions. Even an individual who abstains from desires and resides in solitude cannot do without steadfastness in preserving their retreat and withdrawal from society, as well as in resisting the inner temptations of the devil.

The Cure of Steadfastness and How it is Strengthened

It has been noted previously that steadfastness arises from the conflict between the religious and desire-driven motives. When expecting one to prevail, it becomes necessary to bolster that particular motive while reducing its opposition. Consequently, in this context, it is essential to reinforce the religious motive and lessen the impact of desire.

There are three factors that serve to diminish the motive of desire.

Firstly, it is crucial to acknowledge that food serves as the primary source of desire. Consequently, it is recommended to reduce this influence through practices such as fasting, restricting intake to minimal amounts, and focusing on the quality of food after fasting.

Secondly, to stop the factors that trigger desires immediately, one can use solitude to prevent them entirely.

Thirdly, cultivate the soul by focusing on what is permissible yet closely resembles the desired objects. This approach is effective because all natural desires have permissible alternatives that prevent individuals from engaging in prohibited actions. This method is considered the most beneficial for most people.

To strengthen the religious motive, two approaches can be employed:

To motivate oneself by contemplating the advantages of transcending the ego and its favourable impact on one's Dīn and worldly affairs.

To support the religious motivation in steadily resisting capricious desires, it is crucial to acknowledge that engagement and consistent effort enhance the capacities that generate these actions. Consequently, this approach acts as the treatment method for all types of steadfastness.