

# ***O My Beloved Son!***

## **The story of Luqmān, peace be upon him.**

### **Introduction**

In the Holy Qur'ān, there is a Sūrah (31) named after a figure in Islām called Luqmān. In this chapter, eight verses are dedicated to the advice tendered by Luqmān to his beloved son. This paper is a brief analysis of the wisdom, intelligence and guidance offered by Luqmān.

### **Who was Luqmān?**

According to Ibn Abbās, Luqmān was a black slave from Abyssinia (modern-day Ethiopia) (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VII, 576). He took his knowledge from Dāwūd (peace be upon him) and worked as a judge for Banī Isrā'īl (*Tafsīr Imdād al-Karam*, III: 1661). There are many opinions regarding his identity:

- \*Wahb states that he was Ayyūb's sister's son (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XIV, 41).
- \*Muqātil states that he was Ayyūb's maternal auntie's son (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XIV, 41).
- \*Some say he was from the children of Āzar, who was the uncle of Ibrāhīm (peace be upon him).
- \*Some say he lived for a thousand years and lived in the time of Dāwūd (peace be upon him) and also took knowledge from him. He would offer religious decrees before the time of Dāwūd. When Dāwūd was sent as a prophet, he stopped offering fatwas (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XIV, 41).
- \*Abd Allāh ibn al-Zubayr said, 'I once asked Jābir ibn Abd Allāh about what he knew about Luqmān. He replied, 'He was short with a flat nose, and came from Nubia (River Nile, northern Sudan & southern Egypt) (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VII, 576).
- \*Reports suggest that he worked as a carpenter.

Perhaps the most famous report stems from Ibn Umar (may Allāh be pleased with him), who reported from the Messenger of Allāh (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) that:

Luqmān was not a prophet but a man of great thinking, of positive thought and someone who loved Allāh and Allāh loved him. Allāh blessed him with *hikma*. He gave him the offer to be a *khalīfa* in order to rule with the truth. He replied, 'My Lord! If you give me the choice, then I apologise and will save myself from this test. And if You want me to undertake this duty, then I am ever obeying and listening, You will protect me [from error].' (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 605).

Imām Khāzin writes that the consensus of the scholars is that Luqmān was not a prophet, but certainly was a saint of Allāh (*Tafsīr Imdād al-Karam*, III: 1661).

Is the identity of this individual gravely important? This is debatable. More important is his advice and conduct, and what we can learn from him.

### **What does *hikma* mean?**

Luqmān was known for his wisdom and one of his titles was *al-Hakīm* (the wise). Ibn Abbās writes that *hikma* refers to intellect, understanding and *firāsa* (acumen, intuition, spiritual insight). Imām al-Rāzī believes it means combining knowledge with action (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 605). In the context of the verse, some have suggested that thankfulness (*shukr*) is *hikma* (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 605).

As for his son's name, many opinions have been given, including An'am (*Tafsīr Imdād al-Karam*, III: 1662).

## The verses mentioning Luqmān

12. And indeed We bestowed Luqmān with wisdom saying 'Give thanks to Allāh. And whoever is thankful than he is showing thanks to himself. And whoever is unthankful then verily Allāh is the All-Rich, the Worthy of Praise.
13. And [O Beloved Messenger (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him)!] Remember when Luqmān said to his son, 'O my son! Do not commit *shirk* with Allāh. Indeed *shirk* is a great wrong.
14. And We have enjoined on man (to be dutiful and good) to his parents. His mother bore him in weakness and hardship upon weakness and hardship, and his weaning is in two years - give thanks to Me and to your parents. Unto Me is the final destination.
15. But if they (both) strive with you to make you join in worship with Me others that of that which you have no knowledge, then do not obey them, but behave with them in the world kindly, and follow the path of him who turns to Me in repentance. Then to Me will be your return and I shall tell you what you used to do.
16. O my son! If it be (anything) equal to the weight of a grain of mustard seed, and though it be in a rock, or in the heavens or in the earth, Allāh will bring it forth. Verily Allāh is Subtle (in bringing out that grain), Well-Aware.
17. O my son! Establish prayer, enjoin good (on people), forbid evil and bear with patience whatever befalls you. Verily these are some of the important commandments [from Allāh].
18. And do not turn your face away from people with pride, nor walk in insolence through the earth. Certainly Allāh does like the arrogant boaster.
19. And be moderate in your walking and lower your voice. Verily the harshest of all sounds is the sound of an ass.

## A brief commentary of these verses

### Verse 12; thanks

*And indeed We bestowed Luqmān with wisdom saying 'Give thanks to Allāh. And whoever is thankful than he is showing thanks to himself. And whoever is unthankful then verily Allāh is the All-Rich, the Worthy of Praise.*

*Shukr* means to make a blessing apparent. The opposite of this term is *kufr*, which means to conceal something. There are three stages of making a blessing apparent (i) to admit in the heart how Allāh has favoured you (ii) to verbally praise the blessing to the people (iii) to show thanks to this blessing with the body, namely by using it to praise and worship Allāh (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 605).

The verse also refutes a possible objection. When people praise us, then it makes us feel better and more powerful and when people refuse to do so, we can feel unwanted and small. Certainly this is not the case with Allāh. If everyone in the entire world pays their due gratitude to Allāh, then it makes no difference to His Sultanate. If not even a single soul thanks Allāh, then again it makes no difference to His Kingdom. He is not in need of our praise, in fact our praise really benefits us. The entire world, down to each grain of sand and star in the sky, praises Allāh Almighty.

### Verse 13; the Arabs and Luqmān

*And [O Beloved Messenger (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him)!]. Remember when Luqmān said to his son, 'O my son! Do not commit shirk with Allāh. Indeed shirk is a great wrong.*

Luqmān is alluding to the fact that all goodness comes from the correct *aqīdah*. This is why the first advice starts with *tawhīd*.

The Arabs knew and respected the name of Luqmān. They knew the name was synonymous with wisdom. The first advice given to Luqmān's son was not to commit *shirk* with Allāh. The Arabs were being told that the Luqmān they loved and respected was the same Luqmān who abhorred *shirk*.

#### Verse 14; obedience to parents

*And We have enjoined on man (to be dutiful and good) to his parents. His mother bore him in weakness and hardship upon weakness and hardship, and his weaning is in two years - give thanks to Me and to your parents. Unto Me is the final destination.*

After the first two verses refer to thanks and refraining from *shirk*, the attention turns to parents. They are worthy of our care and worthy of our thanks. The first right of Allāh is *tawhīd*. The first right of mankind is obedience to parents.

Though both are worthy of thanks and obedience, Islam has placed more emphasis on care towards the mother, because of the extra load she has to burden. If she has been given three extra rights ('your mother' was repeated thrice) it is because she has three duties that the father has little or no say in; the difficulty of pregnancy, the hardship of childbirth and the duties of breastfeeding.

Just as Allāh is deserved of praise, so are our parents. Sufyān ibn Uyayna said (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XIV, 44),

من صلى الصلوات الخمس فقد شكر الله تعالى و من دعا لوالديه في اذبار الصلوات فقد شكرهما

Whosoever performs the five prayers has thanked Allah. And who prays for his parents at the end of the Salahs has thanked them.

On the basis of this verse, Ibn Abbās and other Imāms have deduced that the shortest possible period for pregnancy is six months, because Allāh says elsewhere '...and the bearing of him, and the weaning of him is thirty months' (46: 15) (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VII, 580).

On the commentary of this verse, Pirzada Muhammad Imdad Hussain has written a brilliant analysis on the spiritual and medical benefits of breastfeeding. Please refer to *Tafsīr Imdād al-Karam* (III, 1664-1667).

#### Verse 15; non-Muslim parents

*But if they (both) strive with you to make you join in worship with Me others that of that which you have no knowledge, then do not obey them, but behave with them in the world kindly, and follow the path of him who turns to Me in repentance. Then to Me will be your return and I shall tell you what you used to do.*

The obedience of Allāh is above everything and anyone else. So if non-Muslim parents instruct their child to do something un-Islamic, he/she does not have to fulfill it. As the verse makes clear, the child is still expected to show kindness towards them. Alī (may Allāh be pleased with him) reports that the Messenger of Allāh (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said:

'There are three acts in which there is no loophole [to miss]; kindness to parents irrespective of their faith, fulfilling covenants even with non-Muslims and looking after safekeepings, even if it is that of non-Muslims' (*Tafsīr Imdād al-Karam*, III, 1664-1667).

The maxim in Islam is 'there is no obedience to the creation when it leads to disobedience of the Creator.' (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 605).

Still, the verse shows the value of human relationships in Islam. Islam could have decreed that if parents are non-Muslims, they should be totally avoided and ignored. But our beautiful religion instructs us never to stop doing good to humans; if they are ill, the children are expected to care for

them and if they are poor, the children are expected to provide for them. In short, Islam teaches us to care for even non-Muslims.

Sa'd ibn Abī Waqqās (may Allāh be pleased with him) reports that this was verse was revealed regarding him. He was very caring and kind towards his mother. When he became a Muslim, she became very angry. She told him, 'O Sa'd! What have you done? If you do not leave this new religion then I will go on hunger strike. If I die as a result, then people will call you the murderer of his own mother, and you will be hated in the entire land.' Sa'd insisted he would remain a Muslim but still pleaded with her not to go on hunger strike. She began her hunger strike and became weaker and weaker as a result. Sa'd remained strong on his religion and eventually said to her (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 608):

يا أمه تعلمين و الله لو كانت لك مائة نفس فخرجت نفسا نفسا ما تركت ديني هذا لشيء فان شئت كلي و ان شئت لا تاكلي

'O Mother! By Allāh! You know that if you had one hundred lives and each one of them left your body, i still would not leave my religion for anything. So if you wish, eat and if you wish, don't eat.'

Soon after this resolute statement, she stopped the hunger strike.

As Muslims, we have a requirement to be kind to all, but when it comes to obedience and following, there is a much stricter criteria. Here Allāh asks us to follow those who 'are inclined towards Allāh.' According to one opinion, this verse means Abū Bakr (may Allāh be pleased with him) (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 608). Certainly, he was one figure who was inclined to Allāh and His Messenger (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him). Imām al-Qurtubī writes that this means the path of the 'prophets and the pious' (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XIV, 45).

#### **Verse 16; Allāh the All-Seeing, the All-Aware**

*O my son! If it be (anything) equal to the weight of a grain of mustard seed, and though it be in a rock, or in the heavens or in the earth, Allāh will bring it forth. Verily Allāh is Subtle (in bringing out that grain), Well-Aware.*

After advising his son not to commit *shirk* with Allāh, Luqmān offers proof of His power and knowledge. Imagine the size of a mustard grain seed. With the naked eye, it is only possible to see from close up. Imagine someone hid a mustard grain seed anywhere in the world - even inside the deepest part of a stone - then could anyone ever find it? With all the science and technology in the world, would we be able to trace that particular grain? Yet for Allāh, this is easy.

Another opinion is that what this means is that if a person does an iota's weight of good, then certainly Allāh will reward the agent for it, no matter how hidden it may be from the sights of people (*Tafsīr Imdād al-Karam*, III, 1668).

#### **Verse 17; duties to Allāh and His servants**

*O my son! Establish prayer, enjoin good (on people), forbid evil and bear with patience whatever befalls you. Verily these are some of the important commandments [from Allāh].*

Man has two simple responsibilities. The first is to strive to perfect himself and the second is to inspire others too. For self-perfection, Allāh has decreed *salāh* and to inspire others, Allāh has told us to 'enjoin good and forbid evil.' Allāma Alūsī writes (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 609):

Because striving for self-perfection and preaching to others is very difficult, Luqmān asked his son to have patience in both matters.

Forbidding evil and enjoining good is the hallmark of this Ummah. Once we neglect this, then we are no longer the 'best of communities.' We are the best of all Ummahs because (i) our Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) is the best of all creations (ii) we order good and forbid evil. This practice is one of the most central teachings of Islam. Why is this important?

a. Because there is a great reward for it. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) stated that when whosoever indicates towards a good action, then he too attains the reward. He said: 'The one who indicates towards a good action is like the one who does it himself.'

In fact, in the Holy Qur'ān, Allāh says that the sign of a believer is one who orders good and prohibits evil. Conversely, the sign of a hypocrite is one who encourages evil and stops good.

b. Because this protects one from calamity. The proof for that is the report of Imām al-Tirmidhī, where the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said that if the Muslims do not order good and prohibit evil, then Allāh may send down a punishment whereas we will supplicate but it will go unanswered.

In Bukhārī Sharīf (RS 1: 128), the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) gave the example of people boarding a boat that had two decks. Those on the lower deck had to pass the upper deck to fetch water, which caused inconvenience to them. So they said, 'If we make a hole in the lower deck, we do not have to disturb those on the upper deck.' If the upper deck ones did not speak, they would have all drowned. If they did speak up, all of them would be saved.

c. Many catastrophes happen not because people did not know, but because people did not speak up. The failing of the Staffordshire hospital (2003) where there were countless, unexplained deaths was because the people never spoke out, not because they didn't know.

d. That is why it is said that the a catastrophe is simply explained when the good people do nothing.

e. Imām al-Qurtubī writes that if there are four people in a community, then they will be saved: (i) a just Imām who doesn't commit oppression (ii) scholars on the path of guidance (iii) Shaykhs who enjoin good and forbid evil (iv) women who cover themselves.

### Verse 18; human conduct

*And do not turn your face away from people with pride, nor walk in insolence through the earth. Certainly Allāh does like the arrogant boaster.*

Do not think little of Allāh's creations.

c Rāghib writes that *صعر* refers to an illness that affects camels. When inflicted with this illness the neck of the camel becomes inclined and bent. On this basis, when a person full of arrogance turns his head away from the people, then this term is used (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 610).

Allāma Alūsī gives a possible second interpretation of this verse. He writes that without legitimate reason, do not lower your head in front of someone and bend your neck (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 611).

In Arabic, *مخ* means excessive happiness, the type that exceeds its mark. This would mean happiness that contravenes decent manners and the rules of modesty (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 611)

In Arabic *مختال* means not only a person who is arrogant, but one who loves himself too much too. He is the type who would despise the poor, even if they were his own relatives (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 611)

In Arabic **فخور** means the one who shows too much pride. In particular the term refers to one who shows pride over things in which he had no input in (*Ziā al-Qur'ān*, III: 611)

Once these individual words are defined, then understanding the full verse is easier. Allāh is not asking us to refrain from arrogance, but more so, every type of arrogance, the hidden and the apparent form. Ibn Kathīr writes that the verse means 'Do not turn your face away from people when you speak to them or they speak to you, looking down at them in an arrogant fashion. Rather, be gentle with them and greet them with a cheerful face

### Verse 19; your voice

*And be moderate in your walking and lower your voice. Verily the harshest of all sounds is the sound of an ass.*

## Some of his famous advice

\*Luqmān advised his son, 'O my beloved son! Do not be so sweet that you end up being swallowed; and do not be so sour that you end up being spat out.' (*Tafsīr Imdād al-Karam*, III: 1663).

\*As a black man with large lips, someone once commented on how ugly he was. He simply replied, 'Is this a criticism of the portrait or the Artist?' (*Tafsīr Imdād al-Karam*, III: 1662).

\*Luqmān said: 'O my beloved son! Sit in the companionship of Allāh's pious servants. By sitting with them, you will be blessed. When Allāh's mercy descends upon them, then you will win a share too. And never sit with the evil as you will receive not good in sitting with them. When the wrath of Allāh descends upon them, then you too will be punished.' (*Tafsīr Imdād al-Karam*, III: 1662).

\*Luqman said: 'O my beloved son! If you wish to befriend someone, then see what he is like when he is angry. If he is fair with you despite his anger, then he is worth keeping as a friend.' (*Tafsīr Imdād al-Karam*, III: 1663).

\*One day his master instructed him to slaughter a sheep. He then instructed Luqmān to bring the 'most purest part' of this body. Luqmān brought him the tongue and heart of the sheep. The master asked 'could you not find anything purer?' Luqmān remained silent. He then ordered Luqmān to sacrifice another sheep. He asked him to bring 'the most filthy' part of the sheep. Luqmān brought him the tongue and heart. The master remarked, 'I ordered you to bring the most purest part of the body and you brought the heart and tongue, and then you did exactly the same when I asked you to bring the most filthiest part of it?' Luqmān replied, 'There is nothing more pure than these two, when they are pure. And indeed, there is nothing more filthy than these two, when they are filthy' (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XIV, 42).

\*Luqmān was asked, 'Which are the worse type of people? He replied, 'the ones who do not care when the people see them committing sin' (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*, XIV, 41).

و قيل له اي الناس شر؟ قال الذي لا يبالي ان راه الناس مسينا

\*Luqmān said: 'Wisdom puts the poor in the company of the kings' (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VII, 585)

\*Luqmān said to his son, 'O my son! When you come to a gathering of people, greet them with *salām*, then sit at the edge of the group, and do not speak until you see that they have finished speaking. Then if they remember Allāh, join them, but if they speak of anything else, then leave them and go to another group' (*Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, VII, 585).

## Concluding remarks.

No advice is more sincere than the advice of a father to his child. Advice to others can be seen as worldly, short-termed, sly and insincere. The same cannot be said about a father's advice to his son.

Islam can celebrate a black Abyssinian and even dedicate a chapter in his name. When it comes to race relations, Islam is at the forefront, everyone else is playing catch-up. When you have great characteristics and radiant advice, the outward appearance does not matter. Even a black man becomes beautiful.

Wisdom is timeless. The advice of Luqmān - which was thousands of years even before Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) - is relevant today more than ever.

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