



Reaping the Rewards of Patience

By Imam Muhammad Magid with Samuel Ross

In the Qur'an, God Almighty extends to us an extraordinary promise: "those who patiently persevere (al-sabiruna) will truly receive a reward without measure" (39:10). What a generous offer from our Lord is this! Let us take a moment to consider just how happy we would be if God rewarded us with just one thing in our life – a raise in our salary, a new car, a new baby, etc. Most of us would be ecstatic and readily undergo great hardship to obtain such a reward. And yet God has promised an even greater reward than these, indeed a reward so great that mere words and numbers cannot capture it. If we are to harvest the fruits of this offer – something we would be utterly foolish not to do – we must ensure that we know what "patient perseverance" entails and develop a plan to cultivate it.

Let us start, then, by taking a moment to assess our understanding of patience. How would we define patience? When is it important to be patient? Similarly, let us take a moment to assess our own level of patience. Do we generally regard ourselves as patient? When are we patient and when are we impatient? Are we patient when dealing with others, including our spouses, children, and parents? Are we patient with the tasks that matter most? Sometimes, for example, we can endure things of little ultimate consequence, such as standing in line half an hour for a restaurant table, and yet we find ourselves utterly unable to stand for a few moments in salaah. How patient are we at seeking what matters most, success on the Day of Judgment?

The best place to begin our quest for "patient perseverance" is with a definition of sabr, often translated as patience or fortitude. The word sabr derives from the Arabic root sabara, which means to control something. In the Qur'an, God generally uses sabr to mean the controlling of one's self against one's lower whims and desires.

Sabr is one of the most important virtues because nearly everything that we do as Muslims requires it. Even a Muslim with the strongest convictions could still find himself unable to act upon them if he lacked sufficient fortitude. To perform salaah we need sabr to focus our minds. To perform acts of repentance, we need sabr to watch as an embarrassing list of misdeeds is aired before God. To avoid sins we need sabr to remain vigilant over our limbs and faculties. The student of knowledge requires sabr to endure the rigors of study. The sick person requires sabr to not give up on his illness. The wronged person needs sabr to avoid overreacting and committing acts of injustice.

Given its importance, how can we increase in our level of sabr? The first step is to recognize that tribulation is an unavoidable thread that has been woven into our lives by God. He says in the Qur'an: "Surely We shall try you with something of fear and hunger, and loss of wealth and lives and crops" (2:155). From these tests however, we do, nonetheless, profit. As God counsels: "Give glad tidings to those who patiently persevere...They are those on whom (descend) blessings from Allah, and mercy, and they are the ones that receive guidance" (2:155-157).

While it can be difficult at times to know the exact wisdom behind our afflictions, we must remember that God is The Just and that none of our afflictions escape his notice and compensation. Prophet Muhammad (salla Allahu 'alayhi wa sallam) taught that there is no believer who will ever be touched by calamity – not even a thorn in one's foot – without God forgiving his sins! In this regard, we can think of our difficulties as being like a debilitating fever, which, though painful, nonetheless rids our bodies of disease.

We must also recognize the truth in God's statement: "To Allah we belong and to him we return" (2:156). That is, everything we cherish – our health, our wealth, our loved ones, etc. – are all ultimately loans from God. Eventually, like all loaned items, they must be returned to their lawful owner. While it is understandable to feel sad when they depart, we must recognize that their true abode was never with us.

Nonetheless, we must never give into fatalism, whereby we relinquish our capacity to act. God says in the Qur'an: "Persevere in patience...and obey your duty to Allah" (3:200). Among these duties are the duties to remain constant and to stand for justice. To simply endure calamity without striving after what is right is like stepping on a thorn and then refusing to remove it from one's foot! For this reason one of our greatest scholars defined sabr as striving after that which Allah wants us to do, against our lower desires. Of course, in standing for justice we must remember that it is good to forgive: "Whoever forgives and amends, he shall have his reward from Allah" (42:40). Second, we must strive to always "keep our eyes on the prize" by focusing on that for which we are being patient. Consider the experience of waiting for a friend. If we wait for him for an hour, we might become frustrated and tempted to leave. If, however, our friend calls and says that he will be arriving soon, we would probably feel a renewed desire to wait. This is because we have received certainty of his arrival. The same holds true for all acts we perform that require sabr. By achieving certainty of rewards for good deeds and punishments for bad deeds, we can continually revitalize our stores of patience. Indeed Allah has promised a reward for simply showing sabr itself! (39:10)

Third, we should select a role model who helps us to tread the path toward overcoming our difficulties. This could be the Prophet Muhammad, a paragon of patience, who was variously derided as a poet, a magician, and a madman during his lifetime. People threw stones at his feet until they bled. His neighbors left refuse on his doorstep and rubbed camel dung on him as he prayed. Throughout his ordeals he restrained himself, never acting out of personal enmity. It could be

'Ali (rahmatu-Allahi 'alayhi), who was once defending himself physically when he momentarily gained the upper hand. At this point his opponent spat on his face. Ali promptly sheathed his sword and refused to strike him. The man, incredulous, asked, "Why have you spared me, O gracious one?" Ali replied, "When you spat in my face, my selfish anger was aroused against you. If I had killed you, I would have slain you not for God's sake but for my own selfish reason." It could be the Prophet Ayoub (rahmatu-Allahi 'alayhi) who showed us that there is no inherent contradiction between enduring an affliction patiently and calling upon God to release us from it. In the Qur'an, his du'a is recorded: "O Allah, distress has seized me, but Thou art the Most Merciful" (21:83), thereby he entreated God, out of His Mercy, to end his difficulties. Or it could be anyone else that serves as a support for you on an issue with which you struggle. Remember that even Prophet Muhammad was advised by God to take a role model in his quest for patience: "Have patience, O Muhammad, as did all messengers" (46:35).

Fourth and finally, we should recognize that iman, our righteous deeds, and sabr form a spiral staircase that leads to ever-higher levels of all three. When we cultivate our iman, knowing that God sees our condition, understands our suffering, and will compensate us for our difficulties, we increase in patience. When we increase in patience, we perform more righteous deeds because we have the strength to restrain from sin and perform that which is beneficial. When we perform good deeds, our hearts swell with iman, as God as has promised in a hadith qudsi: "If you take one step toward Me, I take ten toward you."

In a beautiful hadith, Prophet Muhammad counseled us, "Wonderful is the situation of the believer. All of his affairs are good (for him)! ... If good befalls him, he is thankful, and that is good for him. If harm afflicts him, he is patient, and that is good for him." Let us take this hadith as our guide. Let us be thankful for our blessings and be patient with our difficulties. If we do so, we will, insha'Allah, "receive a reward truly without measure" (39:10).

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Below are some du'a we can perform to help us cultivate sabr. Please feel free to cut them out and recite them in your home, your car, office, etc.

1. “To Allah we belong and to Him we return” (2:156)
2. “O Allah, I’ve been touched with calamity and you are the Most Merciful” (21:83)
3. “O Allah, reward me for the calamity I’ve been touched with and replace it with something better”