



## A Time for Tawba

By Imam Muhammad Magid with Samuel Ross

**W**ith winter upon us, we experience a veritable similitude of tawba (repentance). Animals retreat to their burrows and plants withdraw their sap, as if to say, “Now is a time for remembering what was and for planning for tomorrow.” Cleansing our city streets, God Almighty sends down blankets of snow that restore the landscape to its primordial purity.

Like nature, we too need God's restoration and forgiveness. The Prophet Muhammad (salla Allahu ‘alayhi wa sallam) observed, “Every child of Adam is subject to sins” and God warns us in the Qur'an: “Anyone who does an atom's weight of good will see it, and anyone who does an atom's weight of evil will see it” (99:7-8). Mercifully, the Most Generous bestowed upon us one of the greatest gifts possible: the opportunity, at any time, anywhere, to be completely purified of our mistakes through sincere repentance. He says: “Those who repent and make amends and openly declare (the Truth): To them I turn; for I am Often-returning, Most Merciful” (2:160). The Prophet clarified, “If you commit sins to the extent that they reach the heaven and then you ask God's forgiveness, He will forgive you.”

The word for repentance used in the Qur'an, tawba, literally means ‘to turn’, which suggests that humans are good by nature and that only when we sin do we deviate from our original orientation. Tawba then is the process of turning ourselves around and restoring ourselves to our primordial state of purity.

Our scholars have identified four steps for successful tawba. The first is to recognize that only God is perfect and that we are fallible beings. Let us honestly acknowledge the mistakes and sins that we have committed today, this week, and this year. We cannot seek forgiveness from At-Tawwab (the Acceptor of Repentance) if we begin by rejecting His status as Al-Alim (the Knower of All Things).

Second, we must feel remorse for what we have done. Occasionally, we may stop sinning without feeling sincere regret. A Muslim might cease drinking alcohol for example, but still talk about it longingly. Repugnance for previous sins is essential because it creates a wedge between them and us. Without distaste, it is very easy to relapse. God says of the penitent: “They will not knowingly repeat (the wrong) they did” (3:135).

Third, we must discontinue wrong actions immediately: “God accepts the repentance of those who do evil in ignorance and repent quickly; to them will

God turn in mercy: For God is full of knowledge and wisdom” (4:17). It can be very tempting to delay repentance and plan to repent on a future timetable. We might say, “I will cease doing such-and-such next month” or “I will repent when I am old.” An unfortunate belief widely distributed in the Muslim world is that old age is the time for making hajj and then becoming serious about one's deen. Planning to repent based on a future timetable rather than seizing the present moment is dangerous because it presumes that we know when we will die. Only God knows this. How many of us know someone whose life was cut abruptly short by a car accident, a heart attack, or disease? Death comes to all and frequently unexpectedly. Can we afford to be taken before we have repented for our mistakes and set right our souls? Can we be certain our desire for change will still be with us if we push it to the side for weeks, months, or years?

Similarly, we may sometimes be hesitant to repent due to social ties. If one has entered into an unlawful romantic relationship or business dealing for example, one might be tempted to say, “I do not want to hurt the other person’s feelings, so I will not end it immediately. Instead, I will wait until the right time comes.” The problem with this reasoning is that it elevates the other person’s interests above those of God, failing to recognize that God is Al-Qadir (the Most Powerful). When we please Him, He makes other people pleased with us; when we displease Him, He makes other people displeased with us.

Finally, we must strive to replace our bad deeds with good deeds. God says, “And whosoever repents and does good, he surely repents toward God with true repentance” (25:71). This helps us forge new habits that will fill the vacuum left by our old ones, thus preventing us from relapsing. If someone developed the habit of watching bad television programs as a way of relaxing after a stressful day at work, he might resolve to replace this activity with a different and more wholesome one, such as performing dhikr or reciting Qur’an. In so doing, the desire to relax is still placated, but in a better, beneficial manner.

Despite all our best intentions, we can still find it hard to succeed in our repentance. One reason so many New Year’s resolutions go unfulfilled is because we fail to develop sufficient motivation to follow through. Our scholars have recommended at least two paths for increasing in motivation. The first is to increase our fear of wrongdoing by recalling the Day of Judgment and God’s punishments. How odd it is that we can be terrified by the fires of this world, installing smoke detectors, fire extinguishers, and elaborate sprinkler systems in homes and workplaces, while we neglect the fires of the next. The second path is to increase our hope of being forgiven. The Prophet said that a sinner who repents to God is more beloved to Him than a camel – that loaded with food and drink and then lost in the desert – is to its owner when he finds it as he is about to die.

Another challenge we can face is blindness to our own sins. We may believe that we have nothing for which to atone. If this is our condition, we should begin by remembering that even our Prophet (salla Allahu 'alayhi wa salaam), whom God protected from all sins, sought forgiveness from God seventy times a day! This

blindness can also be combated with the unchangeable “measuring stick” of our deeds, the Qur’an.

Consider for example someone who has a driver’s license and has been driving for many years. If we were to ask him if he is a good driver, he would most likely reply yes. Yet if he were to pick up the state driver’s manual, he would encounter many signs and rules he has long since forgotten. The same is true of the Qur’an and us.

Another “measuring stick” we can employ is righteous friends who give us sound advice. The Prophet said that the believers are mirrors for one another. When consulted, our friends can like mirrors reveal to us our faults.

The path of tawba, while requiring patient perseverance, leads to great reward. In this world, we feel comforted emotionally, psychologically, and spiritually by lifting the weight of sins off our chest and rectifying our relationships with others. In the next world, we experience Allah’s pleasure. As God says: “God loves those who perform tawba” (2:222). May God make it easy for us to perform tawba and accept our prayers for His forgiveness.

---

We look forward to incorporating your feedback and questions into our future columns. Please send all correspondence to: [foodforthespirit@isna.net](mailto:foodforthespirit@isna.net). Please also visit us at our website where you can download this and previous columns at: <http://www.isna.net/foodforthespirit>

Imam Mohammed ibn Hagmagid is Vice President of ISNA and Executive Director of the ADAMS Center in Sterling, Virginia. His father was an Azhar graduate and a leading scholar in Sudan. Imam Magid studied at the hand of his father and other notable scholars, gaining ijaza in several disciplines, including Maliki Fiqh and Imam Ghazali's 'Ihya ulum Al-deen'. He delivers lectures throughout the United States.

Sam Ross is a student of the Arabic language.

✂ ----- ✂

Below are some exercises we can use to help us perform tawba. Please feel free to cut them out for use in your home, car, office, etc.

1. Obtain a list of major sins and see if we are struggling with any of them. Do we commit backbiting? Are we good to our family? Are we praying on time? Have we paid our zakat?
2. Identify the cause(s) of each sin we commit.
3. Develop a plan to end each sin based upon its cause. For example, if we have difficulty getting up for fajr, let us resolve to use an alarm clock or have our friends call us in the morning.
4. Implement our plan.

5. Ask for God's forgiveness, especially during last third of night. The Prophet said, "God will grant the one who perseveres in asking for forgiveness relief from everything that worries him, a way out of every difficulty, and provision from whence he did not expect it."
6. Contemplate God's mercy to feel more excited about repentance and contemplate His punishments to feel more fear of our own sins.