

The Gabriel Hadith

Summary

This topic discusses the hadith known as the ‘Essence of the Sunnah’, which concisely covers the main teachings of Islam. The meanings of ‘Islam’, ‘Iman’ and ‘Ihsan’ are thoroughly explained, as well as the nature of worship.

Introduction

Today we will cover a famous hadith from approximately 80 days before the Prophet’s (pbuh) death, which has many chains of narration. This Gabriel Hadith is known as *Umm as-Sunnah* (the Essence of the Sunnah) and is very important as it concisely covers the main teachings of Islam. Ibn Rajab explains that the statement *‘That was Gabriel who came to teach you your deen (religion)’* shows how this hadith encompasses all the different branches of Islamic knowledge: the law, foundational beliefs, and purification of the heart. The term ‘deen’ is also interesting as one of its meanings is ‘debt’. Our lives are loaned to us from God and the method of repayment is to follow the deen of Islam.

Just before the time of the hadith, the Prophet was reported to have told his companions:

‘Ask me, ask me, for, by God, you will not ask me about anything except that I shall tell you about it as long as I am standing in this place.’

However, people refrained from asking because they were overawed out of profound respect for him. Similarly, God says in the Quran, *‘Ask those who do have knowledge if you do not know’* (Surah An-Nahl, 16:43).

The Prophet is reported to have said: *‘Truly, the only cure for ignorance is to ask questions’* (Abu Daud). What types of questions are useful? Useful questions are related to matters which are relevant to our lives. What types of questions may be less useful? Less useful questions are hypothetical questions which have no relevance to our lives, or are questions on trivial matters. So, if we want to learn then it is important that we ask useful questions.

Furthermore, in the particular hadith which we are going to examine today, Angel Gabriel (Gibreel) asks the Prophet (pbuh) a series of questions. From this we learn that questioning is a teaching method: *‘It was Gabriel [the Angel] who came to teach you your religion.’* As questioning can be a means of teaching others, when one asks someone a question which one knows they will answer correctly, this can teach others who are present and may not know the answer.

Questioning is a method for assessing both prior knowledge as well as the knowledge one has imparted in a session. Questioning is a means of encouraging students to think about an issue/topic based on their prior learning. Rhetorical questions are also a means for making a point (when the answer is obvious). God uses a lot of rhetorical questions in the Quran when He encourages us to reflect on His signs or when He makes moral points. For example, in Surah Al Rahman there is the repeated refrain of *‘Then which are the favours of your Lord that you deny?’*, which is stated after mentioning the various blessings given to us by God, to emphasise how ungrateful we can be.

Interestingly, Gabriel also responds to the Prophet’s answers by saying that he had spoken truthfully, which shows the importance of giving positive feedback to students. Students who do not receive positive feedback from their teacher can become demotivated to learn. Remember: we are all teachers on one level or another, as parents, older siblings, friends, bosses, etc.

Other etiquettes of learning mentioned in this hadith are that it is recommended to be presentable and wear clean clothing when seeking knowledge (as a sign of respect), and that we should have a clean heart. Also, we should be eager to learn, which we should demonstrate by sitting close to the teacher and being humble and polite when addressing them.

Text of the hadith

'On the authority of Umar ibn al-Khatab who said: One day while we were sitting with the Messenger of God (pbuh), there came before us a man with extremely white clothing and extremely black hair. There were no signs of travel on him and none of us knew him.

He sat next to the Prophet and put his knees against the knees of the Prophet and his hands on his thighs. He said, "O Muhammad, tell me about Islam." The messenger of God replied, "Islam is to testify that there is none worthy of worship except God, and that Muhammad is the messenger of God; to establish the prayers, to pay the zakat, to fast in Ramadan, and to make the pilgrimage to the House if you have the means to do so." The man remarked, "You have spoken truthfully [or correctly]." We were amazed that he asked the question and then said that he had spoken truthfully.

Then the man said, "Tell me about Iman [faith]." Muhammad replied, "It is to believe in God, His angels, His books, His messengers, the last day and to believe in the divine decree, both the good of it and the evil of it." The man again remarked, "You have spoken truthfully."

Then the man said, "Tell me about Ihsan [excellence]." Muhammad replied, "It is that you worship God as if you see Him, and even though you do not see Him, [you know that] He sees you."

Then the man said, "Tell me about [the time of] the Hour." Muhammad replied, "The one being questioned knows no better than the questioner." Then the man said, "Tell me about its signs." Muhammad replied, "The slave girl shall give birth to her mistress, and you will see barefooted, scantily clothed, destitute shepherds competing in constructing very high buildings."

The man then left. I stayed for a long time. The Prophet eventually said, "O Umar, do you know who that was?" I replied, "God and His messenger know best." Muhammad then told me, "It was Gabriel [the Angel] who came to teach you your religion."

(Muslim)

Islam, Iman and Ihsan

Discussion Point: What is the difference between Islam, Iman and Ihsan?

When the terms Islam and Iman are discussed on their own, they mean both faith and deeds. However, when they are mentioned together, as in this hadith, they point to certain degrees of Islam, as does Ihsan.

Islam

The term 'Islam' means self-surrender or submission. God says in the Quran, *'Who could do better in religion than the one who surrenders to God'* (Quran, 4:125).

'Islam is to testify that there is none worthy of worship except God, and that Muhammad is the messenger of God; to establish the prayers, to pay the zakat, to fast in Ramadan, and to make the pilgrimage to the House if you have the means to do so.'

(The Gabriel Hadith, Muslim)

The above is the most basic level of Islam. The five pillars of Islam are the basis of Islamic law and therefore the outward expression of being a Muslim. Therefore, one is a Muslim if they declare the shahadah. You are *not* a Muslim because you have a 'Muslim' name or Muslim parents. You are a Muslim if you do these actions: saying the Shahadah (that there is no God but the One God, and that Muhammad is His Messenger) and perform the other five pillars of Islam: salah, zakah, sawm (fasting in Ramadhan) and hajj. Scholars differ about the implications of being negligent of salah, zakah, sawm and hajj (when you are able to do them). The majority opinion is that you are a weak Muslim and should make up for the deficiencies.

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Ibn Rajab expanded on this, stating that Islam is made of three parts:

- Actions of the body, for example salah and fasting.
- Actions related to wealth, for example giving zakah.
- Combination of the above two, for example hajj.

He also quoted the following hadiths as supporting evidence:

‘A Muslim is one who avoids harming Muslims by his tongue and hands.’

(Bukhari and Muslim)

When the Prophet was asked by someone for examples of good deeds in Islam, he replied:

‘To feed [the poor] and to give the greeting of salaam to those whom you know and those whom you do not know.’

(Bukhari and Muslim)

Another interpretation is that in shariah there are two types of actions: acts of worship and transactions. Transactions do not just cover matters of finance but also matters such as marriage and political leadership.

Iman

The Prophet explained the term ‘iman’ by listing the six articles of faith.

‘It is to believe in God, His angels, His books, His messengers the last day and to believe in the divine decree, both the good of it and the evil of it.’

Ibn Rajab pointed out that belief in the prophets entails belief in everything which they preached, including the six articles of faith.

However, iman is more than a list of beliefs, as these beliefs should have an impact on one’s life. For example, our goal should be to seek the pleasure of God so that we can be successful on the Day of Judgement (the last day) and reside for eternity in Paradise. In order to do this, we need to follow the divine guidance of the Quran, which was taught to us by the Prophet Muhammad, and follow his sunnah. We should accept that reality is far beyond what we can see; it includes the unseen with God helping us through angels. Having this strong belief in the unseen plants tranquillity in our hearts, helping us to deal with life’s tests constructively. Belief in qadr helps us to accept that there are some matters beyond our control - all we can do is try our best and then put our trust in God.

Iman is also a higher level than Islam, as hypocrites can perform the outward actions of Islam. Iman can have many levels. A Mu'min (believer) is a Muslim with a higher level of iman. For example, in the Quran, God says:

‘The desert Arabs say, “We have faith.” [Prophet], tell them, “You do not have faith.” What you should say instead is, “We have submitted, for faith has not yet entered your hearts.” If you obey God and His Messenger, He will not diminish any of your deeds: He is most forgiving and most merciful.’

(Quran, 49:14)

The above verse tells us that iman is something based in the heart: a hope, an awe, a love of God. God also says:

‘True believers are those whose hearts tremble with awe when God is mentioned, whose faith increases when His revelations are recited to them, who put their trust in their Lord, who keep up the prayer and give to others out of what We provide for them. Those are the ones who truly believe. They have high standing with their Lord, forgiveness, and generous provision.’

(Quran, 8:2-4)

This verse shows us that iman does not just encompass beliefs, but deeds too. There is a well-known hadith:

‘Iman has more than seventy branches, the highest is the confession that there is no god but Allah, and the lowest is removing a harmful object from the road.’

(Muslim)

Therefore, even the smallest good deeds can be a sign of iman. However, we should not be content with having the lowest level of iman – we should be striving to increase it and should try to review our behaviour to check that our iman is not weakening. Here are some signs of weakening of iman:

- Committing sins without feeling guilt.
- Being mean and miserly.
- Feeling lazy about doing good deeds like salah.
- Ordering others towards good actions while not doing good ourselves.
- Feeling pleased at the misfortune of others and not feeling concerned about the difficulties of others.
- Desiring fame and status; being engrossed in ourselves.

Ihsan

The person who practices ihsan is called a ‘muhsin’. Ihsan is a very comprehensive term. It includes all types of goodness to others which should be based on adab or good manners; it implies doing something in the best way, aiming for beauty/perfection. This is because when we do good, we are doing something beautiful. Moreover, when we strive for excellence in something, such as our studies, our jobs, or our treatment of others, then we are also doing something beautiful. Ihsan is also an expression of taqwa - the realisation of God's presence:

‘It is that you worship God as if you see Him. And even though you do not see Him, [you know] He sees you.’

How would we behave if we could see God in this world? How would we treat others? How would we treat the environment? Knowing that everything belongs to God, we need to acknowledge that we are guests in this world and should behave with the excellent manners that a guest would have when visiting someone's house.

Islam relates to the body (actions), iman relates to the mind (beliefs) and ihsan relates to the heart (spirituality). Iman and ihsan should also influence how we see the world and our motivations for doing actions. For example, someone may outwardly do ‘good deeds’ such as salah or helping others, but they may pray to show off or may help someone in order to influence them. However, iman teaches us that we should do these actions for God so that these truly become good deeds which God will reward us for. Ihsan is when our heart becomes engaged, and so our actions are based on taqwa.

Moreover, through the other expression of iman, the stronger our iman will be and the more we will do actions which God will be pleased with.

Increasing Iman and striving towards Ihsan

Discussion point: How can we increase our iman and strive towards ihsan?

Establish the fard actions first. The Prophet said:

‘God said: My servant does not grow closer to Me with anything more beloved to me than the duties I have imposed on him. My servant continues to grow closer to Me with extra good deeds until I love him...’

(Bukhari).

So, for example, there is no point in staying up to do additional salah during the night if we miss the fard prayers. We need to firmly establish the compulsory duties first and then gradually supplement them with extra good deeds. One of the tricks of Shaytan is to encourage us to rush into doing do more and more good deeds so that we become overburdened. Another of his tricks is to discourage us from doing extra good deeds as “they are not important”. That is why we need gradualism in increasing our non-compulsory good deeds so that they become sustainable.

Al-Muhasabah

In order to increase our iman and strive towards ihsan, we need to take account of ourselves. This is essential for developing our Iman. We need to be self-aware, aware of our faults (wrong actions and wrong intentions) so that we can correct them. We also need to be aware of diseases of the heart that we have such as pride, jealousy, greed, laziness etc so that we can endeavour to cure ourselves of them. This is an ongoing lifelong process.

At-Tawbah

The result of al-muhasabah should be that we ask God to forgive us for our shortcomings.

‘Truly, God loves those who repent, and He loves those who cleanse themselves.’

(Quran, Surah Al Baqarah, 2:222)

By sincerely repenting, our hearts are cleansed and therefore our iman increases. Sincere repentance is very humbling and should result in us striving harder to please God, as well as keeping away from actions that displease Him. Other evidence that regular sincere repentance brings us closer to God is shown in the following hadith.

Du’a and dhikr

Communicating with God by asking for His help (du’a) with any challenges we may be facing: with family, friends, at school/college/university, financial matters, in the workplace, and health issues we may be facing etc. This is a very important part of strengthening our iman. God tells us: *‘Call upon Me; I will answer you’* (Quran, 40:60). God will respond in the way which is best for us.

Remembering God (dhikr) also can help us to increase our iman and inner peace: *‘Truly, it is in the remembrance of God that hearts find peace’* (Quran, 13:28). Dhikr can be said in any language if we do not know the specific dhikr which the Prophet taught us. Also, dhikr is a comprehensive concept, for example whenever we pray, fast, recite the Quran or seek Islamic knowledge, we are doing dhikr.

Remembrance of death

‘Every soul will taste death’ (Quran, 3:185). This is the one common experience of everybody. We are surrounded by reminders of death almost every day. We hear on the news or social media of people dying due to accidents, people dying in wars, celebrity deaths etc. So much death, but does it penetrate our hearts? We need to reflect on our own mortality to motivate ourselves to try harder to do something worthwhile with our lives in the limited time we have and to strengthen our iman. Remembering death also makes us humble and motivates us to turn to God in repentance.

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Prayer, recitation, and reflection

As Muslims, we should endeavour to perform our prayers regularly and with humility. We should also have humility while reciting the Quran, reflecting on the lessons given in the Quran and on our accountability for our actions. God says, *'We send down the Quran as healing and mercy to those who believe'* (Quran, 17:82). It heals us and is a mercy in the sense that it provides valuable lessons and guidance for our paths through life.

Reflection (fikir) can also be applied in other aspects of life. We can reflect on the beauty and complexity of nature to remind ourselves of our Creator. We can also reflect on events that we have experienced in our lives and how they are interconnected. The verses *'after hardship comes ease, after hardship comes ease'* (Quran, 94:5-6) can help us to rely more on God, as we recognise that He is looking after us.

Knowledge

We should always seek to increase our knowledge, in both beneficial worldly matters as well as our knowledge of Islam. Knowledge helps us to remove doubts and misconceptions and allows us to defend Islam and its principles: *'How can those who know be equal to those who know not?'* (Quran, 39:9).

It is also important to learn about priorities in Islam so that we practise our deen in a balanced way. To be aware of valid differences of opinion amongst Muslims is also important, in order to strive for unity rather than uniformity. These are also a means of seeking the pleasure of God.

Charity and friendship

Our iman is increased through doing good deeds, including giving charity. It is the sunnah to give charity to those closest to you. Muslims are very generous in sending money abroad to help those in need, however, apart from mosque building, we do not donate much to projects that work to support the Muslim community in the UK, such as community centres, youth projects, refugees, Islamic schools and projects that raise awareness of Islam etc. Financially supporting these projects are also a means of seeking the pleasure of God.

We should also seek to interact positively and make friends with those in our community, whether Muslim or not, as this can be an act of charity. The Prophet taught us that even smiling at someone can be an act of charity: *'Smiling in your brother's face is an act of charity'* (Tirmidhi). If we smile at someone then we are showing interest in them, and it can lift their mood. Smiling can also win over the heart of someone who is hostile to us. The way in which we conduct ourselves in life and treat others is a significant factor in defining our value in the sight of God.

The Hour

Discussion point: What do you think the Hour is and what will happen during it?

The Gabriel hadith also mentions the Hour. When asked when the Hour, or the Day of Judgement, will be the Prophet replied: *'The one being questioned knows no better than the questioner'*, as only God knows when this will be. This teaches us that there is no shame in admitting that you do not know something. We should have the humility to do this, not pretending to know something that we do not know. Humility and truthfulness are important qualities of a believer.

The Prophet mentioned two signs of the Day of Judgement: *'The slave girl shall give birth to her mistress, and you will see barefooted, scantily clothed, destitute shepherds competing in constructing very high buildings.'*

These two signs are open to different interpretations. The first part, *'The slave girl shall give birth to her mistress'*, has been interpreted in previous times in relation to issues related to fiqh regarding slaves. This was

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at a time when slavery was very common, though Islam actually promoted the freeing of slaves. Today, scholars tend to say that slavery is not allowed in Islam. Therefore, the meaning would be that children would have no respect for their parents, treating them like slaves. We should reflect on how we treat our parents. Do we take them for granted? Do we serve them or expect to be served by them?

The second ‘sign’ is that *‘you will see barefooted, scantily clothed, destitute shepherds competing in constructing very high buildings.’* This is usually interpreted to mean that people who do have the experience or skills in handling wealth and power will attain both. As a result, they will not only be extravagant but compete with each other in extravagance, for example in building very high buildings. This can teach us that with wealth and power there comes responsibility to others.

Conclusion

Being a good Muslim is about more than just having faith. We should strive to do good deeds, give charity, increase our knowledge, and purify our hearts. Above all, we should strive to have a positive impact on society. It is the process of doing all of this which demonstrates our faith.

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Handout

Islam, Iman and Ihsan

Islam: The term ‘Islam’ means self-surrender and the five pillars form the basis of Islamic law and being a Muslim. Being a Muslim isn’t determined by having a ‘Muslim’ name or Muslim parents but by your actions and following the 5 pillars.

Iman: The second, higher level is iman, and it can have many levels. A mu'min (believer) is a Muslim with a higher level of iman, which is something based in the heart: a hope and a love of God. Iman isn’t just associated with beliefs, but deeds too.

Ihsan: The person who practices ihsan is called a muhsin. Ihsan includes all types of goodness to others which should be based on adab (good etiquette); it refers to striving for excellence in everything a Muslim does.

Increasing Iman and striving towards Ihsan

Al-Muhasaabah: We need to be self-aware. To be aware of our faults (wrong actions and wrong intentions) so that we can correct them.

At-Tawbah: Al-muhasaabah should result in us asking God to forgive us for our shortcomings. By sincerely repenting, our hearts are cleansed and therefore our iman increases.

Du’a and dhikr: *‘Call upon Me; I will answer you’* (Quran, 40:60). Remembering God ALSO can help us to increase our iman and inner peace *‘Truly, it is in the remembrance of God that hearts find peace’* (Quran, 13:28).

Remembrance of death: *‘Every soul will taste death’* (Quran, 3:185). We need to reflect on our own mortality to motivate ourselves to try harder to do something worthwhile with our lives in the limited time we have; strengthen our iman?

Prayer, recitation, and reflection: As Muslims, we should perform our prayers regularly and with humility. We should, during prayer and while reciting Quran, reflect on the lessons given and on our accountability for our actions. God says, *‘We send down the Quran as healing and mercy to those who believe’* (Quran, 17:82). It heals us and is a mercy in the sense that it provides valuable lessons and guidance for our paths through life.

Knowledge: Knowledge helps us to remove doubts and misconceptions, allowing us to defend Islam and its principles. Contemplation and studying one’s surroundings are also ways people can increase and fortify their iman.

Conclusion

Being a good Muslim is about more than just having faith. We should strive to do good deeds, give charity, increase our knowledge, and purify our hearts. Above all, we should strive to have a positive impact on society, and this is what determines our level of faith.