

The Five Stages of Life

Muaz Billoo

In Surah al-Hadid, ayah #20, Allah ﷻ summarizes the stages of life,

إِعْلَمُوا أَنَّمَا الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا لَعِبٌ وَلَهُمْ وَزِينَةٌ وَتَفَاخُرٌ بَيْنَكُمْ وَتَكَاثُرٌ فِي الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَوْلَادِ ۖ كَمَثَلِ
غَيْثٍ أَعْجَبَ الْكُفَّارَ نَبَاتُهُ ثُمَّ يَهِيجُ فَتَرَاهُ مُمْصِرًا ثُمَّ يَكُونُ حُطَامًا ۖ وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ عَذَابٌ شَدِيدٌ
وَمَغْفِرَةٌ مِّنَ اللَّهِ وَرِضْوَانٌ ۗ وَمَا الْحَيَاةُ الدُّنْيَا إِلَّا مَتَاعُ الْغُرُورِ

Translation: “Know well that the worldly life is but a play and an amusement, and a show of beauty, and exchange of boastful claims between you, and a competition of increase in riches and children. (All this is) like a rain, the growth of which attracts the farmers, then it withers, and you see it turning yellow, then it becomes straw. And in the Hereafter there is a severe punishment (for the disbelievers), and forgiveness from Allah and (Allah’s) pleasure (for the believers and the righteous). The worldly life is nothing but a material of delusion.”

The five stages mentioned above can be summarized hereunder:

1. **لعب (play):** refers to the types of play that young children engage in which doesn’t entail tangible benefits in this world nor in the next.
2. **لهو (amusement):** generally refers to the type of amusement that young teenagers engage in, such as sports. It can entail a form of physical activity, which is actually a good thing, as long as the commands of Allah ﷻ are not violated. For example, if an innocent game of basketball leads to cursing, foul language, or missing the salah, then such play would not be permissible. The same rules can be applied to watching sports. This is pertinent to keep in mind, as currently (November 2022), the FIFA World Cup is taking place in Qatar. Muslims around the world are tuning in to watch and support their respective countries. However, when watching these soccer tournaments, one should remember that these tournaments are not as innocent and harmless as they seem. Immorality and degeneracy has permeated every fabric of society. With the World Cup in Qatar, there is outrage and demand for Qatar to permit the sale of alcoholic beverages, as well as outcries to permit other forms of degeneracy. This is aside the fact that soccer tournaments have a reputation of inciting violence and foul language. A simple internet search will yield numerous cases of riots and death resulting from a particular team losing, or even a particular team winning. When we tune in, we inadvertently open a

gateway for that degeneracy to make its way into our homes as well, thereby exposing our children to it. Furthermore, The National Centre for Domestic Violence in the United Kingdom wanted to conduct a study to raise awareness on the correlation between domestic violence and soccer match outcomes. According to the study, if England loses, **cases of domestic violence increase by 38%** so not everyone looks forward to the game between England and Italy. Domestic violence and football finals are closely related, with **an increase by 26%** of cases recorded if England plays, 38% if England loses and **by 11% the following day** whether they win or lose.¹ Thus, it is unbecoming for a believer to engage in these types of amusements.

3. **زينة (a show of beauty):** as a person further progresses in his teenage years and beyond into adulthood, he wishes to beautify his clothes and his possessions for the world to admire. It should be noted that having good quality items and clothes is itself not a bad thing. The prophet ﷺ once said, “That person who has an atom’s weight of arrogance in his heart shall not enter Jannah.” Upon hearing this, one person inquired, “A man loves that his clothes and shoes are excellent (i.e., so will this count as pride)?” The prophet ﷺ responded, “Indeed Allah is beautiful and loves beauty. Pride is rejecting the truth and looking down upon the people.”² It is clear from this Hadith that there is nothing inherently wrong with adorning oneself with good clothes as long as it is not coupled with arrogance. When people would come to Imam Malik ر.ع.ا (d. 179) to ask questions, he would come out of his house to answer their questions. However, when they would come to him to learn Hadith, then prior to emerging from his house he would first take a bath, apply perfume, wear fresh clothes, don his turban.³ This was done to maintain respect for the words of the Messenger of Allah ﷺ, and not out of pride. Hafiz ibn al-Salah ر.ع.ا (d. 643) was very meticulous about his clothes and appearance when teaching the Islamic sciences. He would expect the same from his students as well, and if any of them came to class unkempt, he would not allow them to sit in his lessons.⁴
4. **تفاخر (an exchange of boastful claims):** as a person grows further beyond his youthful age, he may boast about his accomplishments and characteristics, even if his claims are false. This leads to arrogance, ostentation, self-obsession, and serves as a source of jealousy.
5. **تكاثر (a competition of increase in riches and children):** one may also fall into boasting and competing with others with respect to his wealth and the size and strength of his family, clans, etc. His whole purpose and goal in life falls into amassing worldly riches, and utterly distracts him from the eternal life to come.

¹ <https://www.besoccer.com/new/football-causes-38-increase-in-domestic-violence-in-england>

² *Sahih Muslim* 91

³ *Tartib al-Madarik wa Taqrib al-Masalik* 1:145

⁴ *Al-Isnad min al-Din* pg. 112, quoting from Hafiz Badr al-Din ibn Jama’ah’s *Tadhkirah al-‘Alim wa al-Muta’allim bi Aadam al-Sami’ wa al-Muta’allim*.

These are the stages of life mentioned in the aforementioned ayah. As we move past each stage, we look back at the futile nature of the previous stage. For example, a child considers his toys and games to be the most important things in his life. As he goes into his teenage years, he looks back and realizes how shallow those toys were. He now considers his competitions and sports to be of the greatest importance. As he moves onto his late teenage years and twenties, he realizes now that there are more important things in life than just competition. Perhaps now he focuses on making himself presentable in public. Then as he amasses wealth and property, he starts making boastful claims, coming to the conclusion that this is what is most important. Once he starts having children, he realizes that merely boasting about one's qualities is not as important as having actual tangible wealth and large families. But what comes after that? After we leave this world and transition into the grave and thereafter the plain of resurrection, we will then realize how shallow the worldly life truly was.

To further illustrate the shallow nature of this world, Allah ﷻ then gives the following parable:

“(All this is) like a rain, the growth of which attracts the farmers, then it withers, and you see it turning yellow, then it becomes straw.”

The word used to denote rain in this ayah is غيث, which is not any normal rain, but refers to the kind of rain that comes after a long, extended period of drought that causes the people to have lost all hope of any water,⁵ as mentioned in Surah al-Shura ayah 28:

“And He is the One who sends down rain after they lost hope.”

One can imagine the joy of such people upon seeing the advent of Allah's ﷻ mercy.

The word used to denote farmers in the aforementioned ayah is كَفَّار. The word كَفَر literally means to hide something. Thus, farmers have been referred to as كفار in the Arabic language because they hide seeds in the ground. The disbeliever is also referred to as such due to concealing one's acknowledgment of the oneness of Allah ﷻ.⁶

Interpreting the word to mean “farmers” was the view adopted by a number of commentators such as Imams ibn Qutaybah (d. 276),⁷ al-Baghawi (d. 516),⁸ ibn al-Jawzi (d. 597),⁹ al-Mahalli,¹⁰ ibn Kathir,¹¹ and others. Some, such as al-Alusi (d. 1270)¹² and ibn ‘Ashur (d. 1393),¹³ have attributed this view to ‘Abdullah ibn Mas’ud ؓ although I have been unable to locate a chain of transmission for this as of yet. Some maintain that the ayah directly refers to

⁵ *Tafsir ibn Kathir* 8:61; al-Risalah al-‘Alamiyyah

⁶ For a more detailed analysis of the usage of the word كَفَر, see al-Asfahani's *Mufradat Alfaz al-Qur'an* p. 714

⁷ *Tafsir Gharib al-Qur'an* p. 454 and *Ta'wil Mushkil al-Qur'an* p.75

⁸ *Ma'alim al-Tanzil* p. 1279; Dar ibn Hazm

⁹ *Zad al-Masir* p. 1400; Dar ibn Hazm

¹⁰ *Tafsir al-Jalalain* 3:476; Maktabah Bushra

¹¹ *Tafsir ibn Kathir* 8:61; al-Risalah al-‘Alamiyyah

¹² *Ruh al-Ma'ani* 14:247; Dar al-Hadith

¹³ *Tafsir al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir* 27:404; al-Dar al-Tunisiyyah li al-Nashr

the disbelievers, which is the common usage for the word, as maintained by al-Zamakhshari (d. 538)¹⁴ and al-Nasafi (d. 710).¹⁵ Yet others have mentioned both views without specifying a preference, such as Qadi ibn ‘Atiyyah (d. 546),¹⁶ Qadi al-Baidawi (d. 691),¹⁷ and Imam Abu Hayyan al-Andalusi (d. 745).¹⁸

Some have suggested that even if referring to “farmers,” the word كفار has been utilized to highlight the difference in perception between the believers and disbelievers when witnessing lush greenery. Whereas the believer is overjoyed because he sees it as a great mercy and bounty from Allah ﷻ, and attributes it directly to Allah ﷻ, the disbeliever only increases in his love for this world, attributing none of it to Allah ﷻ.

In any case, the parable iterates how farmers become overjoyed with the advent of rain after a long drought, and it leads to the growth of lush vegetation. In a similar fashion, the disbelievers are overjoyed by the benefits of this temporal world. The believers simply cannot afford to be deluded by this transitory stage. The Prophet ﷺ said,

“This world is a prison for the believer,”¹⁹

The believer lives in accordance with the guidelines set by Allah ﷻ and His Messenger ﷺ, which happen in fact guides him to live his best possible life, and thus the believer cannot entertain his animalistic instincts. He can’t do whatever he wants.

Then the vegetation starts to wither, turning yellow and becoming unusable. Similarly, a person starts off in this world as a young child, then grows into adolescence wherein his body has increased strength, agility. Thereafter he becomes a middle-aged man (30s/40s), wherein his natural disposition starts to change, and his strength begins to fail him. Thereafter he enters his old age, becoming elderly and weak, limited in mobility. Minute tasks become difficult for him. These stages are alluded to in Surah al-Rum, ayah #54,

“Allah is the One who created you in a state of weakness, then He created strength after weakness, then created weakness and old age after strength. He creates what He wills, and He is All-Knowing, All-Powerful.”

The point is that there is an absolute guarantee that we will wither away and die, just as vegetation withers away and dies. What matters is that we look onward, analyze and prepare for the life that will undoubtedly come after death. This world that we live in is, ultimately, not true life. True life starts from the point of death. This world was merely created as a test. Allah ﷻ says in Surah al-Mulk, ayah #2,

¹⁴ *Tafsir al-Kashaf ‘an Haqaiq Ghawamid al-Tanzil wa ‘Uyun al-Aqawil* 6:50

¹⁵ *Madarik al-Tanzil wa Haqaiq al-Ta’wil* p. 1196

¹⁶ *Al-Muharrar al-Wajiz* 5:267; Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah

¹⁷ *Anwar al-Tanzil wa Asrar al-Ta’wil* p. 1013; Dar al-Ma’rifah

¹⁸ *Tafsir al-Bahr al-Muhit* 8:223; Dar al-Kutub al-‘Ilmiyyah

¹⁹ *Sahih Muslim* 2956

“The One who created death and life, so that He may test you as to which of you is better in his deeds. And He is the All-Mighty, the Most-Forgiving.”

We live so that we can prepare for our death. Allah ﷻ has offered us various paths to take in this world. We can either take the path of gratitude to Allah ﷻ, or the path of ingratitude, as mentioned in Surah al-Insan, ayah #3,

“We have shown him the way to be either grateful or ungrateful.”

Gratitude to Allah ﷻ requires striving against our carnal desires; to not give in to every animalistic whim. If we do so, then we are slaves to these very desires. To be truly free and successful, and to live a fulfilling life in this world and in the hereafter, one must learn to sacrifice those desires of which stand contrary to the commands of Allah ﷻ and His Messenger ﷺ. Allah ﷻ says in Surah al-Naziat, ayah #40-41,

“Whereas for the one who feared to stand before his Lord and restrained his self from the (evil) desire, Paradise will be the abode.”

In conclusion, we must realize the short nature of our lives, and that everyone will wither away from this world. Our bodies will decompose one day. On that day, we will truly realize how valueless our pursuits and obsessions behind this world were, and we will truly realize how the only thing that mattered was pleasing Allah ﷻ. The Messenger of Allah ﷺ conveyed the difference in value between this world and the hereafter in the following Hadith,

“The comparison of this world to the hereafter is like a person who dips his finger in the ocean, then let him look: how much water was he able to bring back?”

Compare the oceans of the world to the few drops of moisture one has left over on his finger. When we fill our hearts with the love of this world, we exchange the oceans of the hereafter for the droplets of moisture of this world. May Allah allow us to put our focus and attention into preparing for the hereafter.