

# JANNAH: FINDING ONESELF AT HOME

BY FAREEHA KHAN, PHD

**Q**uestion: *When I read about the fruits and delights of Paradise, I can't help but wonder: "That's nice, but won't we get bored?" I live a comfortable life with all that I need and want. It has made me realize that things are only enjoyable for a while.*<sup>i</sup>

**A**nswer: Absolutely, things are only enjoyable for a while. The comforts, entertainments and luxuries one has in life do provide refreshment, but eventually their novelty runs out. However, this is true of those "things" that pertain to a strictly materialist perception of the world. Materialism is a strand of philosophy that asserts that all natural phenomena can be explained entirely in terms of matter, i.e. through physical causes.<sup>ii</sup> It is a way of looking at the world that privileges physical cause and effect over all other modes of existing, such as what is spiritual, immaterial or what Muslim scholars refer to as the Unseen. If this is the view that one subscribes to—that there is only my body, the earth, the things I hold in my hand—then one has no choice but to "get the most out of life," since the assumption is that there is nothing much, if anything at all, to come.

The believing Muslim, however, is different. He has hope, because he perceives (to varying degrees, depending on the strength of his relationship with God) a whole universe of knowing and experiencing beyond the physical things in our lives.



Modern Questions, Grounded Answers

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## Material Gains

However, what must first be mentioned is that there will be a type of “materiality” to our existence even in Jannah. Once a man from the People of the Book<sup>iii</sup> came to the Messenger of God (Allah bless him and grant him peace) and asked, “Do you claim those in heaven will eat and drink?” to which he (Allah bless him and grant him peace) replied, “I swear by the One in whose Hand is my soul: a man will be given the strength of a hundred men to eat, drink, and make love.” What this tells us is that we will be in Jannah with our physical bodies, not just our souls, and that we will enjoy of its blessings in a physical way. But this physical way will not be the same as what we experience in our earthly lives. After hearing the Prophet’s reply about eating and drinking in Jannah, the man remarked, “One who eats and drinks has to relieve himself, but Heaven is pure with no impurity” to which the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) offered the clarification, “He will relieve himself via musk-scented perspiration” (i.e. not via excrement).<sup>iv</sup>

Not only will it be changed, but our physical experience will be exponentially enhanced, to be equivalent to that of “a hundred men.” Other material phenomena will be thus enhanced as well, with one day in Jannah equivalent to a thousand years. The exquisite drinks,<sup>v</sup> the luxurious garments,<sup>vi</sup> the handsome servants<sup>vii</sup> and virgin maids<sup>viii</sup> all will have a physicality that will have some resemblance<sup>ix</sup> to what we had on earth, but will be wholly unique and greater.

These material blessings, the “inutterable bliss and mighty dominion”<sup>x</sup> granted to the Muslim in Heaven, are enough to warrant an eternity of gratitude to Allah Most High. The things that

mar the experience of the physical in this world—spoilage, waste, ageing, fatigue, trials—will be non-existent, and whatever we desire will be granted. As Imam al-Ghazali says, “Unceasingly [the people of Heaven] move from one variety of blessing to the next, safe from ever suffering their loss.”<sup>xi</sup> Though we cannot comprehend with our minds the glorious gifts of Heaven, our physical experience of the good of this world allows us to have some sense of what lies in store for the believer in the Next World.

## Spiritual Gains

But the blessing of Jannah does not stop there, at the material. In fact, the greatest gains of Paradise are indescribable precisely because they are immaterial. The spiritual gains to be found therein pertain not to the body, but to the soul, and what we experience through it of spiritual states. And of these latter spiritual states, the human being also has some perception in this world, just as he does of earthly physical pleasures.

As a way to understand this, one might look at the way a spiritual master of Islam, Ashraf ‘Ali Thanawi (d. 1943), explained the following statement of our beloved Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace):

الدنيا سجن المؤمن و جنة الكافر

The world is a prison for the believer, but paradise for the unbeliever.<sup>xii</sup>

His way of explaining the hadith hones in on the matter at hand—that of finding real contentment and not getting bored in Jannah—more closely than any discussion of material gain.

According to my own spiritual temperament, the explanation of the hadith is as follows. The distinguishing characteristic of a prison<sup>xiii</sup> is that one's heart feels constricted in it. Regardless of how comfortable the prison is made for you—it's an A-class or B-class prison, or a prison set within a garden—the heart does not find rest.

Now, just as one does not find comfort in a jail regardless of its accoutrements, one feels rest at home and finds serenity there regardless of any [physical] discomfort. So it is for the believer in this world, who never feels “at home” here regardless of how much luxury he is blessed with. The real meaning of comfort (*itmi'nan*) and contentment (*qana'at*) are unattainable for the believer in this world.<sup>xiv</sup>

Having knowledge of the material gains of Paradise helps us understand the hadith in a quantitative way: there is a lot *more* in Jannah than we can ever imagine (so no matter how much “stuff” one has in this world, the world will always look like a prison in comparison to heavenly pleasures). But Thanawi's commentary goes further to explain the “more” *qualitatively*: not only is there more, but it is of a completely different and higher type than what we know of in this world. He is clarifying that it is a lot more than just “things” that we will find in the Next world. The real satisfaction will

come with our states, with what peace and tranquility will finally occur to our hearts.

Some of this tranquility is attainable for the human being in this world, serving as enticement for what is to come. The metaphor of “home” that Thanawi uses in his explanation of the hadith is particularly apt, because even the non-Muslim knows that “home is where the heart is.” A home is not a well-furnished house, but a place where one finds the love of parents and siblings, the joy of children and the comfort of being in a place where one is buoyed up and secured by the strength of one's most basic, human relationships. The stronger the marriages in that home and the greater the application of human values like generosity, service and good character, the more deeply one experiences its tranquility (*sakina*):

وَمِنْ آيَاتِهِ أَنْ خَلَقَ لَكُمْ مِنْ أَنْفُسِكُمْ أَزْوَاجًا لِتَسْكُنُوا إِلَيْهَا  
وَجَعَلَ بَيْنَكُمْ مَوَدَّةً وَرَحْمَةً إِنَّ فِي ذَلِكَ لَآيَاتٍ لِقَوْمٍ  
يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

*And of His signs is that He created for you from yourselves mates that you may find tranquility in them; and He placed between you affection and mercy. Indeed in that are signs for a people who reflect.*<sup>xv</sup>

Such loving homes produce grounded, content human beings. But to experience even more profound levels of serenity, it is necessary that one know and connect with God. Allah Most High tells us in the Qur'an: “*Is it not by the remembrance (dhikr) of God that hearts find rest (itmi'nan)?*”<sup>xvi</sup> Having that remembrance present at deeper and deeper levels allows one to find serenity in the most unexpected places and situations. An example of that can be found in one of the most stressful moments of the Prophet Muhammad's (Allah bless him and

grant him peace) life, when he found himself with his companion hiding from his enemy in a remote cave. The danger to his life was imminent, but Allah caused “His serenity to descend upon his heart”<sup>xvii</sup> in a way that the Prophet (Allah bless him and grant him peace) no longer feared and was able to give confidence to his companion. Another place that serenity descends is in the middle of the night, when the slave of Allah leaves the physical comfort of his bed to make night prayer (*tahajjud*) and finds spiritual comfort in the company of his Lord. These feelings and “states” are difficult if not impossible to describe to those who have not experienced them. One of the *awliya* (those who are beloved to and close to Allah) described it thus:

If the kings of the earth only knew what we possess, they would fight us for it with their swords.<sup>xviii</sup>

### **The Greatest Blessing**

The experience of the *awliya* of being with Allah Most High, worshipping Him as if they see Him,<sup>xix</sup> allows them to encounter states of tranquility, contentment and joy in the most meaningful and satisfying way possible for a human being in this world. What is interesting to note however is that for those most realized in the knowledge (*ma'rifa*) of God, eventually even these states no longer remain a priority. Through their sincere love and worship of Allah they come to a subtle realization: just as the material gains in Jannah are a mere enticement, meant to urge on the believer to do good works and strive in the way of Allah, so are its spiritual gains. In the end, all of these things lead us to the greatest blessing found in Paradise—the ability to see Allah and be in His presence—for “on that day, faces will be radiant, gazing upon

their Lord.”<sup>xx</sup> The Prophet Muhammad (Allah bless him and grant him peace) himself attested to the fact that seeing Allah in Jannah is the greatest blessing:

The Messenger of God, may blessings and peace be upon him, said: ‘After the people of the Garden have entered the Garden, He Who is Blessed and Exalted shall ask: “Do you wish Me to give you anything more?” And they will reply: “Have you not brightened our faces? Have you not made us enter the Garden and saved us from the Fire?” He will then remove the veil, and nothing they were ever given will have been dearer to them than the vision of their Lord, the High, the Majestic.’<sup>xxi</sup>

Countless Sufi teachings attest to the fact that even this greatest blessing of Jannah has a correlate in this earthly life. For example, the famous Rabi‘a of Basra (d. 185 AH/801 CE) condemned people for serving Allah out of their fear of Hell or their hope for Paradise, as a way to say: “If only you knew what a matchless blessing it is to simply be in the presence of Allah!”<sup>xxii</sup>

### **Cultivating the Desire for Jannah**

Unfortunately, in a world of fractured human relationships, broken homes, and materialist denial of God, such sentiments are hard to grasp. We have barely if ever experienced tranquility, let alone a constant perception of the presence of God. Though we long for something greater than the dry pursuit of material things, our minds have become conditioned to reject the

glorious spiritual realities of this world and the tremendous gains we will find in the Afterlife. It is no wonder that in such a world, the concept of a heavenly abode seems simultaneously mythical and ordinary, and thus our aspiration for it has become weak. We cannot imagine an existence from which we will not eventually tire and get bored, because our perception is confined to the materiality of this world, which is by definition limitary (*fani*).

But it does not have to be this way. We can choose to aspire for something greater than the mundane tediousness of our earthly lives, and thereby cultivate an aspiration for the true and final existence in Heaven that contains contentment that never ends. What we must first do, however, is content ourselves with the reason why we have been placed on earth: to worship Allah, in all that that entails. By choosing to actively remember Allah and submit to His commands, at an individual level and within all our relationships and dealings with others, we will find a taste of serenity in our homes,<sup>xxiii</sup> a light in our breast that will guide us

through the darkness that surrounds us,<sup>xxiv</sup> and eventually, *insha Allah*, a most beautiful experience in Heaven of “what no eye has seen, what no ear has heard, and what has never even occurred to the human heart.”<sup>xxv</sup>

يَا أَيُّهَا النَّفْسُ الْمُطْمَئِنَّةُ  
ارْجِعِي إِلَىٰ رَبِّكِ رَاضِيَةً مَّرْضِيَّةً  
فَادْخُلِي فِي عِبَادِي  
وَادْخُلِي جَنَّتِي

O Soul that is at Peace!

Return to your Lord,

Pleased and well-pleasing [to Him].

Enter thee among My (righteous) servants,

Enter into My Paradise.<sup>xxvi</sup>

<sup>i</sup> Dedicated to a dear relative, for her sincere question posed to me long ago. May Allah grant you and all of us the highest place in Jannah.

<sup>ii</sup> Thomson, Ann, “Materialism,” in *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*, ed. Alan Kors, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003, vol. 3, p. 26.

<sup>iii</sup> I.e. a Jew or a Christian

<sup>iv</sup> Sahih ibn Hibban

وعن زيد بن أرقم قال: جاء رجل من أهل الكتاب إلى النبي صلى الله عليه وسلم فقال: يا أبا القاسم أتزعم أن أهل الجنة يأكلون ويشربون؟ فقال: نعم والذي نفسي بيده إن أحدهم ليعطى قوة مائة رجل في الأكل والشرب والجماع قال: فإن الذي يأكل ويشرب ويكون له حاجة والجنة طيبة ليس فيها أذى قال: حاجة أحدهم عرق هو كريح المسك

<sup>v</sup> Qur’an, *al-Insan*, 76:5-6, 17-18.

<sup>vi</sup> Qur’an, *al-Insan*, 76:21.

<sup>vii</sup> Qur’an, *al-Insan*, 76:19.

<sup>viii</sup> Qur’an, *al-Rahman*, 55:72.

<sup>ix</sup> Qur’an, *al-Baqara*, 2:25.

<sup>x</sup> Qur’an, *al-Insan*, 76:20.

<sup>xi</sup> al-Ghazali, Muhammad Abu Hamid, *The Remembrance of Death and the Afterlife*, trans. T.J. Winter, Cambridge: Islamic Texts Society, 1995, p. 234.

<sup>xii</sup> *Sahih Muslim*

<sup>xiii</sup> i.e. what makes a prison a prison

<sup>xiv</sup> Thanawi, *Malfuzat*, vol. 10, p. 153-4.

<sup>xv</sup> Qur’an, *al-Rum*, 30:21.

<sup>xvi</sup> Qur’an, *al-Ra’d*, 13:28.

<sup>xvii</sup> Qur’an, *al-Tawba*, 9:40.

<sup>xviii</sup> Attributed to the great early Sufi of Balkh, Ibrahim b. Adham (d. ~165 AH/782 CE).

<sup>xix</sup> As mentioned in the famous Hadith of Jibril in *Sahih Muslim*.

<sup>xx</sup> Qur’an, *al-Qiyamah*, 75:22-23.

<sup>xxi</sup> *Sahih Muslim*, as translated by Mostafa al-Badawi in al-Haddad, ‘Abdullah ibn ‘Alawi, *The Lives of Man*, London: The Quilliam Press, 1991, p. 80.

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<sup>xxii</sup> See 'Attar, Farid al-Din, *Tadhkirat al-Awliya* (Urdu), Lahore: al-Faruq Book Foundation, 1997, p. 51.

<sup>xxiii</sup> Qur'an, *al-Rum*, 30:21.

<sup>xxiv</sup> "Can he who was dead, to whom We gave life and a light whereby he can walk amongst men, be like him who

*is in the depths of darkness, from which he can never come out? Thus to those without faith their own deeds seem pleasing."* Qur'an, *al-An'am*, 6:122.

<sup>xxv</sup> Hadith in Bukhari and Muslim.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Qur'an, *al-Fajr*, 89:27-30