

*In the name of Allah, the Beneficent, the Merciful*

## **The Martyrdom of Imam Husain (A.S.)**

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The month of Muharram is the first month of the Islamic calendar year. An important and tragic event took place on the tenth of Muharram that shook the Muslim world. It was the murder of Imam Husain (A.S.), his family members, and his close friends by the army of Yazid. Yazid was at that time the despotic ruler of the Muslim world, who came to power as the self-proclaimed “sixth caliph of Islam” after the death of his father, Mu’awiya. Yazid gave himself the title of *ameer-ul-mu’mineen*, meaning “commander of the faithful.”

Husain was one of the two grandsons of the Prophet Muhammad (S.A.A.W.), and the younger of the two sons of Hazrat Fatima (A.S.), the daughter of the Holy Prophet. The Holy Prophet loved his two grandsons, Hasan and Husain dearly, and since he had no surviving sons of his own, out of affection he used to call them “my sons.” There are numerous traditions recorded by many historians which indicate the great love and respect the Holy Prophet had for his grandsons, not only because they were his grandsons, but because of their spiritual excellence and their sacrifices to come, in saving Islam. According to one tradition, the Holy Prophet declared that Hasan and Husain were the “Princes of the Youth of Paradise.” Prophet Muhammad (S.A.A.W.) took his grandsons with him, along with his daughter Fatima and son-in-law Imam ‘Ali (A.S.), to face the challenge of the Christian delegation from Najrain, which had come to dispute with the Holy Prophet about his divine mission. The Christians were awe-struck at the sight of the Holy Prophet and his family, and withdrew the challenge. This event became known as *Mubahila*, and is recorded in the Holy Qur’an in chapter 3 verse 61.

### **Historical Background**

During the caliphate of Imam ‘Ali, Mu’awiya declared himself the governor of Syria. After the assassination of ‘Ali by a Kharijite, ‘Ali’s elder son, Imam Hasan, succeeded him, being judged as the most qualified and deserving by the people. By this time, however, Mu’awiya had amassed enough support in and around Syria to unilaterally declare he the caliph of whole Islamic world. In order to avoid bloodshed, preserve unity, and in fact to save the religion of Islam from destruction, Imam Hasan signed a peace treaty with Mu’awiya. The treaty included these terms: (1) Mu’awiya would be the temporal political head of the Muslim empire; (2) Mu’awiya would not appoint his own successor, but would leave the caliphate to the will of the majority (which favored Imam Husain); and, (3) Mu’awiya would allow the Muslims to live in peace, free from

oppression, especially those belonging to the Hashimite tribe (the tribe of the Holy Prophet and his family).

Mu'awiya violated the terms of this treaty and, near his death, designated his son Yazid as his successor. Yazid was an immoral and ruthless man with no sense of justice. He employed bribery and coercion to win support. Imam Husain, as the protector and guardian of the religion established by his noble grandfather, Prophet Muhammad (S.A.A.W.), refused to swear allegiance to him. Yazid realized that he could never legitimize and consolidate his rule without the allegiance of Imam Husain, the grandson of the Holy Prophet. Consequently, he decided that he would either force the Imam to submit to his rule, or else he would have him killed.

In the 61st year after Hijra (680 AD), Imam Husain, while performing the pilgrimage in Mecca, received the news that assassins had been sent by Yazid to kill him. Desiring to protect the sanctity of the Holy City, he interrupted his pilgrimage and headed towards Kufa, in modern-day Iraq on invitation of the people there to come and teach them about Islam. He took with him his family members and close friends, including his six-month-old infant son, Ali Asghar. His journey to Kufa was intercepted by a detachment of Yazid's army, led by a commander named Hur. Hur had orders to re-direct the Imam to camp in the desert plains of Karbala, on the banks of the River Euphrates. In order to avoid bloodshed, Imam Husain chose not to resist, and followed Hur's directions. He and his companions were forced to camp at a great distance from the river, which was the only source of water in the area.

On the seventh day of Muharram, Ibn Ziyad, the governor of Kufa, ordered that food and water supplies were to be blocked from reaching Imam Husain's camp. In the meantime, the ranks of Yazid's army were increasing by the thousands. The blistering sun scorched the desert sand, and the thirst was becoming unbearable in Husain's camp. The children especially were becoming dehydrated and weak, and Imam Husain pleaded with Yazid's army to supply water at least to those children, but to no avail.

On the tenth day of Muharram, Yazid's army was ready to attack the small band of defenders in Imam Husain's camp. One by one, his friends and relatives took permission to go out and fight and each one laid down his life in the defense of Islam. Two of his nephews, who were only ten years old, were among the brave soldiers who died fighting. The commander of Husain's forces was Abbas, his brother, who had inherited his chivalry from his father 'Ali, the Lion of Allah. Abbas asked Husain's permission to go and fight his way through to the river and bring back some water for Sakina, Husain's four-year-old daughter, and the other children. The Imam reluctantly gave him permission to go and fetch water. Abbas took an empty flask, charged into Yazid's army, cut through the ranks, and arrived at the river. While he filled the pitcher with water, he himself did not drink a drop, for he reasoned that he could not do so while Imam Husain, Sakina, and the others were still thirsty. Abbas did not make it back to the camp, however. The whole army of Yazid converged upon him. He died defending the precious pitcher of water.

Imam Husain's six-month-old son, Ali Asghar, was on the verge of death from dehydration. Husain brought him out of the tent to show his pitiful condition to the soldiers in Yazid's army, pleading for at least enough water to save the infant's life. The enemy denied his request. A heartless archer from the enemy army shot an arrow that struck the infant, killing him in his father's own arms.

Soon, Imam Husain was left alone to face Yazid's army, since all the able-bodied male members of his camp had died fighting one by one. He made a final plea to the army of Yazid, reminding them of his kinship with the Holy Prophet of Islam, the love and respect which the Holy Prophet had used to show him, and the numerous traditions in which the Holy Prophet had warned the Muslims not to disobey or injure him. He reminded them of his desire to uphold the truth and his status as one of the true protectors of the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet. He asked to be allowed to leave the Muslim kingdom, so that Yazid would not perceive him as a threat to his power. Finally, he clearly warned them that by shedding his blood, they would be subjected to the wrath of Allah (S.W.T.) and they would lose any hope of the intercession of Prophet Muhammad (S.A.A.W.). The commanders of the opposing army were unmoved, and reiterated their desire to kill Imam Husain unless he chose to submit to the authority of Yazid. Husain was left with no choice but to take a firm and final stand against falsehood, and to fight for the preservation of Islam. He fought bravely, and in the end he achieved martyrdom.

### **The Significance of Imam Husain's Martyrdom**

**Immediate outcome of Imam Husain's actions:** Muslims and non-Muslims alike have acknowledged that Imam Husain saved Islam from destruction by sacrificing his life. Yazid had been successful in winning over the allegiance of the great majority of Muslims, and the rest of the Muslim world was in a state of moral slumber. The principles of Islam were being plundered, the Sunnah of the Holy Prophet was being tampered with, and phony traditions were being concocted to justify the rule of Yazid. It was the singular sacrifice of Imam Husain and his faithful followers that shook the Islamic world out of its slumber. The Muslims were forced to ask themselves why the beloved grandson of the Holy Prophet had been murdered so brutally. It then dawned upon the people what the true nature of Yazid and his supporters was.

**Long term outcome of Imam Husain's actions:** Imam Husain, by challenging Yazid and in the process laying down his life, changed the world and re-shaped human destiny forever. Yazid, and indeed all future despots, were put on notice that they would not be tolerated, and that truth and justice would be upheld and would ultimately succeed, regardless of the costs. The Iranian revolution that uprooted and overthrew an unjust government, and the liberation of Lebanon from foreign occupation are two of the more recent exemplars of these principles laid down by Imam Husain.

### **Imam Husain's Philosophy:**

Professor Syed Jafar Raza Bilgiri beautifully describes Imam Husain's philosophy. He states that at Karbala, Imam Husain came to rebuild a system of life. He gave a practical embodiment to the rational concept of justice. He successfully placed the spirit (savage, war-making qualities in man) and the appetite (greed for material things and lust for power) under the command of reason (*'Aql*). In Karbala, he formulated a new code of life to safeguard the peace and security of human society for all times to come.

### **Imam Husain's Foresight and Planning for the Battle of Karbala:**

Imam Husain chose not to flee or hide from Yazid, because that would not have exposed Yazid's corruption of Islam and would have served to legitimize his unjust rule. He knew that by rejecting Yazid's demands, he would most likely be killed. However, he also did not want to die like any other martyr. He wanted his death to serve as a starting point for a revolution that would strengthen justice and oppose tyranny for all times to come. This type of stance needed planning and wisdom. As pointed out by scholars, Imam Husain's planning encompassed three factors:

- (1) The choice of location;
- (2) The choice of companions; and,
- (3) Foolproof arrangements for passing on the event to the annals of history.

#### **The Choice of Location:**

Imam Husain chose not to stay in Mecca because he did not want his blood to desecrate the Holy Precincts. Besides, if he were to be killed by hired assassins, then the killers' motives would not be clear and his death would fade away on the pages of history. So he chose to travel to Iraq (the den of the tyrant himself), where his mission would receive the maximum publicity, and where Yazid's evil would be best exposed. The events of history proved that Imam Husain was right.

#### **The Choice of Companions:**

Hujjatul-Islam Maulana Ali Naqvi has written that in Karbala, the largest number of true Muslims gathered in the entire history of Islam. Imam Husain was not seeking the best fighters, since his goal was not to fight to win a physical war. He was looking for men of principle, true Muslims, firm and patient, who would go through the utmost hardships successfully.

His companions included men of different tribes, coming from different parts of Arabia and beyond. They included, among others, an elderly companion of the Holy Prophet, some liberated slaves, and a young newlywed Christian couple. The age of his supporters ranged from six months to a ripe old age of over 90.

The heterogeneity of Imam Husain's supporting group indicates that he did not want the confrontation with Yazid to be misrepresented as a struggle between two clans, or a campaign for gaining power.

### **Preserving His Sacrifice in the Annals of History:**

Imam Husain took women, children, and all of his family members with him. This strategy ensured that after his death, his message would be spread through his family members, and that Yazid would not be able to suppress the truth or falsify Imam Husain's motives. History proves that it was a brilliant move. His sister Zainab (A.S.), through her scholarly and bold speeches, and with no fear of the tyrant Yazid, eloquently proclaimed the truth and exposed the falsehood of Yazid in his own court. He was speechless and humiliated before her. His court was full of dignitaries, both local and from other nation-states, and his own supporters. They were shocked to hear the truth put forth so forcefully, and many were brought to tears. The same scene was repeated in the bazaars and marketplaces of the country, all along the travel route of the surviving captives. Husain had laid the foundation of the revolution with his blood. His sister Zainab stirred the revolution with her oratory. That revolution changed the world forever.

### **Statements of Historians and World Leaders:**

This unique historical sacrifice of Imam Husain and his small band of 71 male supporters has caught the attention of historians, scholars, and writers throughout the world, in all periods of history. Some of the more notable quotes and insights are given below:

*“Of that gallant band, male and female knew that the enemy forces around were implacable, and were not only ready to fight, but to kill. Denied even water for the children, they remained parched under the burning sun and scorching sands, yet not one faltered for a moment. Husain marched with his little company, not to glory, not to power of wealth, but to a supreme sacrifice, and every member bravely faced the greatest odds without flinching.”* - Dr. K. Sheldrake

*“If Husain had fought to quench his worldly desires, as alleged by certain Christian critics, then I do not understand why his sister, wife, and children accompanied him. It stands to reason therefore, that he sacrificed purely for Islam.”* - Charles Dickens

*“The best lesson which we get from the tragedy of Cerebella is that Husain and his companions were rigid believers in God. They illustrated that the numerical superiority does not count when it comes to the truth and the falsehood. The victory of Husain, despite his minority, marvels me!”* - Thomas Carlyle

*“In a distant age and climate, the tragic scene of the death of Husain will awaken the sympathy of the coldest reader.”* - Edward Gibbon

*“The tragedy of Karbala decided not only the fate of the Caliphate, but also of Mohammadan kingdoms long after the Caliphate had waned and disappeared.” - William Muir*

*“Imam Husain uprooted despotism forever, till the Day of Resurrection. He watered the dry gardens of freedom with a surging wave of his blood, and indeed he awakened the sleeping Muslim nation. If Imam Husain had aimed at acquiring the worldly empire, he would not have traveled the way he did. Husain weltered in blood and dust for the sake of truth. Verily, therefore, he becomes the foundation of the Muslim creed ‘La Ilaha Il-lallah,’ meaning, there is no deity but Allah (God).” - Sir Mohammad Iqbal*

*“A reminder of that blood-stained field of Karbala, where the grandson of the Apostle of God fell, at length, tortured by thirst, and surround by the bodies of his murdered kinsmen, has been at anytime since then, sufficient to evoke, even in the most lukewarm and the heedless, the deepest emotion, the most frantic grief, and an exaltation of spirit before which pain, danger, and death shrink to unconsidered trifles.” - Browne’s History of Persia*

[The End]

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