

Sweet Mercy and Sour Mercy

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A. Introduction

This report is based on the story of Prophet Musa and the righteous slave of Allah, al-Khidr, as narrated in the Quran, chapter 18, verses 60-82. The story is about a journey of learning and guidance, in which Musa wanted to meet a man whom Allah had given divine knowledge of the unseen, and al-Khidr agreed to teach him on the condition that he would not question anything he did until he explained it to him. This report will answer the following questions:

B. Summary of the Story

- Prophet Musa was asked if he is the most knowledgeable person on earth and he said yes. Allah told him that there is someone who knows more than you. Musa asked Allah to identify him so that he learns from him. Allah told Musa to carry a fish and travel across the coast and when the fish becomes

alive and jumps in the water, this would be the place where you would meet the righteous servant who knows more than you.

- So, Musa set out with his young assistant, carrying a fish in a basket. They reached the junction of the two seas, where they forgot their fish, which miraculously came to life and swam away. They retraced their steps and found the righteous servant, whose name was al-Khidr¹. Musa asked him to teach him from what Allah had taught him, and al-Khidr agreed on the condition that Musa would not question anything he did until he explained it to him.
- They embarked on a ship, which al-Khidr damaged by making a hole in it. Musa objected to this, forgetting his promise. Al-Khidr reminded him, and Musa apologized.
- Then they met a young boy, whom al-Khidr killed. Musa was shocked and protested again, forgetting his promise. Al-Khidr reminded him and Musa apologized, saying that if he asked about anything else, he would part ways with him.
- Then they came to a town, where they asked for food but were denied hospitality. They saw a wall that was about to collapse, and al-Khidr fixed it. Musa wondered why he did not ask for a payment for his service, and al-Khidr said that this was the end of their companionship.
- He then explained the reasons behind his actions: he damaged the ship because it belonged to poor people who were pursued by a tyrant king who seized every good ship; he killed the boy because he was destined to be a rebellious and ungrateful son to his believing parents; and he fixed the wall

¹ Not all scholars agree that the righteous servant was al-Khidr

because it concealed a treasure that belonged to two orphan boys whose father was a righteous man. He said that he did not do anything of his own accord, but by the will of Allah.

C. Analysis of the Story

- Allah sends down his mercy in different ways to manifest his wisdom. One of the ways of sending his mercy down has been using special righteous servants. Brining Allah's mercy down is a divine business that requires a divine knowledge. Allah provides this knowledge to the special righteous slaves so that they can perform their task.
- Al-Khidr was given a jurisdiction to bring Allah's mercy in certain territory for certain period of time. His divine knowledge enabled him to make what-if analysis to be able to make the right decision. It included what would happen if the ship was not ruined, what would happen if the boy was not killed and what would happen if the wall is not fixed.
- Musa did not have the divine knowledge that Al-Khidr had. He knew what Allah had decreed for each situation and acted accordingly. He also knew what was best for each person in terms of their worldly and spiritual welfare. Musa did not have this knowledge and could not understand al-Khidr's actions until he explained them to him.

1. The Types of knowledge:

- The knowledge of **the seen** (al-shahadah): This is what we can perceive with our senses or reason, such as the physical laws of nature, the knowledge of Sharia (rules of do's and don'ts), the history of nations, the languages of people, etc. This type of knowledge is limited and relative, as it depends on

our observation and interpretation. It can also change or vary according to time and place.

- The knowledge of **the unseen** (al-ghayb): This is what we cannot perceive with our senses or reason, such as the divine knowledge, which is the knowledge to see into the future and be able to change what is going to happen as well as knowledge about Allah, the secrets of the hearts, the destiny of souls, the hidden wisdom behind events, etc. This type of knowledge is absolute and comprehensive, as it belongs only to Allah. He reveals some of it to whom He wills among His messengers and servants.

2. The Types of Mercy:

- Classification based on sweet versus sour mercy:
 - Sour mercy comes with pain, such as surgery. It involves some kind of a harm followed by relief. Punishment of the parents and punishment of Allah in this life are other examples of sour mercy also a sour mercy because it involves pain, but it leads to correction and discipline.
 - Sweet Mercy is the kind of mercy that doesn't involve any kind of pain. It is when Allah sends someone to take care of you without you being aware or have to worry about it.
- Classification based on general mercy versus specific mercy:
 - General mercy: This is what Allah bestows on all His creatures, regardless of their faith or deeds, such as the air they breathe, the water they drink, the food they eat, etc. This type of mercy is universal and constant, as it reflects Allah's generosity and kindness. It can also be a test or a trial for some people, depending on how they use it or abuse it.

- The specific mercy: This is what Allah bestows on His believing servants, who obey Him and seek His pleasure, such as guidance, forgiveness, protection, provision, etc. This type of mercy is selective and conditional, as it reflects Allah's favor and grace. It can also be a reward or a blessing for some people, depending on how they appreciate it or thank Him for it.

3. Basis of the Decisions Made and The Corresponding Type of Mercy:

- In ruining the ship, al-Khidr made the decision by himself as he stated in (Kahf 18:79) "I decided to damage the ship." It was a sour mercy because it was based on harming the fishermen who felt bad about their boat until they figured out that they would have lost the boat if it was not damaged. Fixing the ship was much better than losing it.
- The decision to kill the boy was decided by a certain group as al-Khidr stated in (Kahf 18:80-81). He said that they "we worried" about the parents' future having to deal with a wicked son and "we decided" to kill the boy. The use of "we" indicates a special communication and discussion between members of a special committee. It indicates that the comity was made of the following members in addition to al-Khidr:
 - The angel who has the book of the shares assigned to people. In his book it was written that the parents are going to have only one child.
 - Al-Khidr jurisdiction was for a specific period and would not be alive when the boy grows up. So, he needed to communicate with the righteous servant of Allah who would be in charge of brining Allah's mercy down to people.

- The discussion led to a decision made by the group to kill the boy and that was a sour mercy. The parents would suffer for losing their child and they would never know why their innocent child was killed until the day of judgment. They surrender themselves to the will of Allah that comforted them and made them able to handle the situation. In addition, the boy was killed when he was a young child, and he would go to Jannah. If he had lived to become an adult, he would have gone to hell.
- The decision to fix the wall was made directly by Allah as stated by al-Khidr in (Kahf 18:28) that Allah wanted the wall to be fixed. That was a sweet mercy because the two innocent boys did not know about it or suffer to fix the wall. Without their knowledge, Allah sent someone to care for their treasure under the wall.
- The story also shows that the decisions made by al-Khidr were ultimately based on the will of Allah who granted him the authority to perform the task of bringing some of Allah's mercy down to his servants. He was acting as an agent or a tool of Allah's mercy. In conclusion of his journey with Musa, al-Khidr said: "I did not do it of my own accord this the interpretation of what you could not bear with patience" (Kahf 18:82). He was referring to Musa's inability to comprehend or accept his actions without knowing their reasons or outcomes.
- The story shows that the decisions were not arbitrary or random but based on divine knowledge, wisdom, and justice. It was a test of surrendering to the will of Allah to the owners of the ship and the parents of the boy. Allah puts His servants through tests in order to purify them or elevate them in rank. This also also explains part of the wisdom behind bad things happening to good people.

- The story also shows that the decisions made were not cruel or harsh, but compassionate and merciful. Al-Khidr said: "As for the ship, it belonged to poor people working at sea. So I intended to cause defect in it as there was after them a king who seized every [good] ship by force" (Quran 18:79). He was referring to the benefit that he brought to the owners of the ship by saving them from losing their livelihood. He also said: "As for the boy, his parents were believers, and we feared that he would overburden them by transgression and disbelief" (Quran 18:80). He was referring to the relief that he brought to the parents of the boy by saving them from suffering and sorrow.

4. More Lessons to Learn from the Story:

- First, the story shows that there is a difference between human knowledge and divine knowledge. Musa was a prophet of Allah who had received revelation and guidance from Him, yet he could not understand the actions of al-Khidr who had been taught some of Allah's secrets. This shows that Allah's knowledge is infinite and beyond human comprehension. Allah says in the Quran: "And they ask you, [O Muhammad], about the soul. Say, 'The soul is of the affair of my Lord. And mankind have not been given of knowledge except a little'" (Quran 17:85).
- Second, the story shows that there is a difference between human justice and divine justice. Musa was a just and righteous man who followed the law of Allah, yet he could not accept the apparent injustice of al-Khidr who damaged a ship, killed a boy, and fixed a wall without any apparent reason. This shows that Allah's justice is perfect and encompasses all aspects of His creation. Allah says in the Quran: "Indeed, Allah does not wrong [anyone],

[even] as much as an atom's weight; while if there is a good deed, He multiplies it and gives from Himself a great reward" (Quran 4:40).

- Third, the story shows that there is a difference between human mercy and divine mercy. Musa was a merciful and compassionate man who cared for the welfare of people, yet he could not appreciate the hidden mercy of al-Khidr who brought benefit to the owners of the ship, the parents of the boy, and the orphans under the wall. This shows that Allah's mercy is vast and encompasses all things. Allah says in the Quran: "And My mercy encompasses all things" (Quran 7:156).

5. The Prayers (Du3a'a) and the Outcomes:

- The story highlights that sometimes we may ask for something that is harmful for us or detest something that is beneficial for us because we are unaware of what is best for us in this life or in the next. We may be fooled by our wishes or swayed by our feelings or misguided by our lack of knowledge. Only Allah knows what is good or bad for us in every case and condition. He may give us what we request or deny it from us out of His wisdom and justice. He may try us with difficulty or ease out of His mercy and grace.
- Some examples are:
 - A person may wish for wealth or fame or power or beauty or health or children or spouse or anything else that he or she wants in this life, but these things may turn out to be a source of trouble or temptation or corruption or diversion or ungratefulness or tyranny or injustice or jealousy or evil for him or her or others.
 - A person may despise poverty or illness or loss or solitude or hardship or disaster or anything else that he or she hates in this life, but these

- things may turn out to be a source of endurance or thankfulness or purification or reward or guidance or mercy or justice or good for him or her or others.
- A person may ask for a specific result or decision or option or deed or plan or aim or course or way or anything else that he or she thinks is good for him or her in this life or in the next.
 - Response to disasters, happiness and worries. In sad events we are permitted to be sad, but the righteous people would transform their sadness into patience. The disbelievers would transform their sadness into sorrow and blame Allah and develop negative feelings and thoughts about him. In happy events we are permitted to be happy but righteous people will transform their happiness to gratitude, while disbelievers would transform their happiness to arrogance and pride, and denial of Allah's favors. If we are anxious about something, then righteous people will transform their anxiety to Dua'a.
 - The sad story of the mother who left her four kids in the car, started the engine and then went inside to make some quick phone calls. When she returned, she found all four children had died. To cope with her sorrow, she attended grief counseling sessions. The first lesson was that you must submit yourself to the will of "the higher power.", whatever this higher power means to you, there is a higher power that chose to take your kids away and you have no control over it. You will have to accept it sooner or later. It is amazing that this lesson is the sixth pillar of belief in Islam. It teaches that we should accept the decree of Allah as soon as it happens without a delay so that we are accepted by Allah among the patient ones who lost dear ones, which is a high ranking in the day of judgment. They will be compensated with a house called the house of Al-Hamd.

6. Relevant Stories

- One righteous believer used to see the decree of Allah in his dreams as a court that assembles to issue decrees to him. One night he saw the court assembling and decreeing the death of his only cow. Not accepting the decree of Allah, the next morning he took the cow to the market and sold it. He was relieved that he did not lose the worth of the cow. In that night he went to sleep, and he saw the court assembling and discussing that he sold the cow to evade the decree of Allah. So, the court decreed that the death of his only son. In the morning he ran to the market and repurchased the cow so that the decree falls on the cow rather than his son. He slept in the next night to see the court assembled and discussing that he did not learn the lesson yet and still trying to evade the decree of Allah, so the court ruled the death of his only cow and his only son.
- Story of the person who got laid off from his job, and he and his family became devastated. After a while, he calmed down and started thinking about alternatives. He borrowed money and bought a gas station. The project became very successful and he became a millionaire. He is now thankful to Allah that he was laid off from his job.
- Someone was trying to catch the bus and he missed it. He became upset. Later the news came to him that the bus had got in an accident. He became happy and thankful to Allah that made him miss the bus.