13835 - It is mustahabb to isolate oneself at times of tribulation when the Muslim fears he may lose his religious commitment

the question

I recently read this hadith which is related by Bukhari but I dont understand its meaning, it goes something like; 'A time will come when the best property of a Muslim will be sheep which he will take to a mountain so as too flee with his realigion from afflictions' Can you lpease try and explain it's meaning to me?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

Commentary on the hadeeth.

This hadeeth was narrated by al-Bukhaari in a number of places in his Saheeh, such as (7088) Kitaab al-Fitan, where he narrated that Abu Sa’eed al-Khudri (may Allaah be pleased with him) said: The Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “Soon there will come a time when the best wealth a Muslim will have will be sheep which he will take to the mountaintops and places where rain falls, fleeing for the sake of his religious commitment from tribulation.” And Muslim narrated a similar hadeeth in his Saheeh (1888), also from Abu Sa’eed al-Khudri (may Allaah be pleased with him), which says that a man came to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) and said, “Which of the people is best?” He said, “A man who strives in jihad for the sake of Allaah with his wealth and his self.” He asked, “Then who?” He said, “A believer in a mountain pass who worships Allaah and leaves the people alone.”

The word sha’af [in the second hadeeth] means a mountaintop. The word shi’b [in the first hadeeth] means a gap or pass between two mountains. Al- Nawawi said in Sharh Saheeh Muslim (13/34): “This does not mean the mountain pass itself, rather what is referred to is being alone

and isolating oneself. A mountain pass is mentioned as a metaphor because it is usually devoid of people."

The hadeeth indicates that it is preferable to isolate oneself from people and not mix with them in cases where a Muslim fears for his religious commitment because of widespread tribulation, where if he mixes with people he cannot be sure that his religious commitment will be safe and that he will not apostatize or deviate from the truth, or fall into shirk or abandon the basic principles and pillars of Islam, and so on.

Al-Haafiz ibn Hajar said in al-Fath (13/42): "This report indicates that isolation is preferable in the case of one who fears for his religious commitment."

Al-Sindi said in his footnotes on al-Nasaa'i (8/124): "This shows that it is permissible to isolate oneself, indeed it is preferable at times of tribulation."

In the second hadeeth quoted above the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) mentioned the believer who isolates himself second in virtue only to the mujaahid who fights for the sake of Allaah. Al-Haafiz said in al-Fath (6/6): "The believer who isolates himself is second in virtue only to the mujaahid because the one who mixes with people cannot guarantee that he will not commit sin, and these sins may be greater in number than the hasanaat (rewards for good deeds) that he gains as a result of mixing with people. But being isolated is regarded as preferable only in cases where there is tribulation."

As for isolating oneself at times other than times of tribulation when a Muslim fears for his religious commitment, the scholars differed in their views in this case. The majority said that mixing with people is preferable to withdrawing from them, and they quoted several texts as evidence for that, including the following:

1 – That this was the way of the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) and the Prophets before him (peace be upon them), and the majority of the Sahaabah (may Allaah be pleased with them). (Sharh Muslim by al-Nawawi, 13/34).

2 – The report narrated by al-Tirmidhi (5207) and Ibn Maajah (4032), which says that the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) said: “The believer who mixes with people and patiently bears their annoyance will have a greater reward than the believer who does not mix with people and patiently bear their annoyance.” (Classed as saheeh by al-Albaani in Saheeh al-Tirmidhi, 2035).

Al-Sindi said in his footnote on Ibn Maajah (2/493): “This hadeeth indicates that the one who is patient and mixes with people is better than the one who isolates himself.”

Al-San’aani said in Subul al-Salaam (4/416): “This indicates that mixing with people whereby one enjoins what is good and forbids what is evil and deals with them in a good manner is better than keeping away from them and not putting up with mixing with them.”

3 – The report narrated by al-Tirmidhi (1574) from Abu Hurayrah (may Allaah be pleased with him) who said: “One of the Companions of the Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him) came upon a mountain pass where there was a small spring of fresh water, which delighted him because it was so good. He said, ‘What if I were to withdraw from the people and settle in this mountain pass? But I will not do it until I seek the permission of the Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him).’ So he mentioned it to the Messenger of Allaah (peace and blessings of Allaah be upon him), who said: ‘Do not do that, for if any one of you remains striving for the sake of Allaah, it is better than praying in His House for seventy years. Do you not want Allaah to forgive you and admit you to Paradise? Fight in Allaah's cause. He who fights in Allaah's cause as long as the time between two milkings of a she-camel will be assured of Paradise.’” (It was classed as hasan by al-Albaani in Saheeh al-Tirmidhi, 1348).

The benefits that the Muslim gains by mixing with people for legitimate shar’i purposes, include establishing the rituals of Islam, increasing the number of the Muslims, spreading all kinds of goodness among them by helping and aiding them etc., attending Jumu’ah (Friday) prayers and prayers in congregation, attending funerals, visiting the sick, attending dhikr circles, etc. (Fath al-Baari, 13/43); Sharh Muslim by al-Nawawi, 13/34).

And Allaah is the Source of strength. And Allaah knows best. May Allaah bless our Prophet Muhammad and all his family and companions, and grant them peace.