307430 - Which should I allow to prevail: hope and thinking positively of Allah, or fear of Him not accepting your deeds?

the question

I am a human woman and I want to be righteous and follow guidance, and attain Paradise and be a winner in the hereafter. By Allah, I do not seek worldly gain; all I care about is the hereafter and attaining the pleasure of my Lord. But when I read the stories of the early generations and the Companions, I become confused, because despite the glad tidings of Paradise that the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) gave to the Companions, they were anxious and afraid that Allah might not accept their righteous deeds. So where is the sense of tranquillity and reassurance, and positive thinking of Allah, may He be Glorified and Exalted, and putting trust in Him? And what is negative thinking of Allah, may He be Exalted, then? Every time I read that Allah is as His slave thinks of Him, I become happy; I increase my righteous deeds and supplication, my heart is filled with love of Allah, may He be Glorified and Exalted, and I have great hope of entering Paradise. Were the early generations like that? Where am I going wrong in my understanding? If I am sincere to Allah in my intention, and I do righteous deeds and religious duties and avoid what is prohibited, should I not be optimistic and have hope of Paradise? Does the verse {… and who give what they give [of charity], their hearts filled with apprehension, knowing that they will return to their Lord } [al-Mu’minun 23:60] mean that I should be scared and anxious? These feelings really slow me down in doing righteous deeds, and make me severely depressed to the point that I am now anxious and afraid that my good deeds will not be accepted. I have lost my appetite for food and I feel palpitations in my heart. Are the one who is optimistic of attaining Paradise, obeys Allah and avoids what Allah has prohibited, and the one who is also obedient to Allah, but he is afraid that his righteous deeds may not be accepted, both in the right and following true guidance?

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

The believer combines fear, hope and love. Part of hope is thinking positively of Allah, may He be Exalted, and believing that He will accept his righteous deeds, grant reward for them and admit the doer to Paradise.

The texts which enjoin and encourage this state of mind are many.

The Companions used to combine all of that; however, their fear that their good deeds would not be accepted was not what they felt most of the time; rather sometimes hope dominated and sometimes fear.

And this is how you should be. So if you feel motivated to do acts of worship, you should be more hopeful and think positively of Allah.

And when you fall short or commit a sin, then you should make fear dominant, to motivate you to hasten to repent, constantly seek forgiveness and do a lot of righteous deeds.

Undoubtedly, the nafs cannot be in the same state all the time; rather it alternates between feeling motivated and losing interest in worship, between feeling energetic and becoming apathetic, between obedience and sin. The one who is guided knows how to deal with his nafs and discipline it by means of hope and fear. If he thinks of hope only, he will soon become arrogant and develop wishful thinking, and will become reluctant to do righteous deeds, because he has deceived himself by relying too much on Allah’s forbearance and pardon, and relying on his positive thinking of Allah.

Allah describes His prophets and close friends as combining fear and hope, as He says: {So We answered his prayer and We bestowed upon him Yahya, and cured his wife [of barrenness]. Verily, they used to hasten to do good deeds, and they used to call on Us in hope and fear, and they were always humble before Us} [Al-Anbiya’ 21:90].

And He tells us that His close friend Ibrahim (peace be upon him) said: {and I hope that He will forgive me my sins on the Day of Judgement} [ash-Shu`ara 26:82] and {Make me one of the inheritors of the garden of bliss } [Ash-Shu`ara' 26:85].

And His close friend Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: "By Allah, I hope that I am the one who fears Allah the most among you, and the most knowledgeable of that which I should guard against." Narrated by Muslim, 1110.

Ibn al-Qayyim (may Allah have mercy on him) said: Allah, may He be Exalted, refers to these three states of mind when He says: {Those upon whom they call themselves seek nearness to their Lord, [competing to see] which of them will be nearest. They hope for His mercy and fear His punishment} [Al-Isra' 17:57].

Seeking nearness to Allah is the love of Allah that prompts a person to seek to draw close to Him. After that, Allah mentions hope and fear.

This is the way of His worshippers and close friends. One who worships on the basis of love only may end up indulging in prohibited deeds, and say that a sin does not harm the lover. One of them wrote a book about that, in which he mentioned a fabricated report which says that when Allah loves a person, no sin could harm him.

This is definitely false and is contrary to Islam, for sins are inherently harmful to everyone, just as poison is harmful to the body.(*Bada'i` as-Sana'i`*, 3/3).

Some of the early generations recommended that a person should let fear be dominant when in good health, and let hope be dominant at times of physical weakness and when death approaches.

Some of them recommended that they should be at a similar level, but love should be dominant.

Ibn al-Qayyim (may Allah have mercy on him) said: The heart, in its journey towards Allah, may He be Glorified and Exalted, is like a bird:

Love is its head and fear and hope are its two wings.

If the head and the wings are sound, then the bird will fly smoothly.

If the head is cut off, the bird will die.

If the wings are lost, it is vulnerable to every hunter and bird of prey.

But the early generations recommended that when one is in good health, the wing of fear should be stronger than the wing of hope, and when departing this world, the wing of hope should be stronger than the wing of fear. This was the way of Abu Sulayman and others. He said: Fear should be dominant in a person's heart, for if hope becomes dominant, he will become corrupt.

Someone else said: The most perfect condition is when hope and fear are balanced, but hope is stronger. Love is the mount, and hope is the one who calls out for the camel to move on, whilst fear holds the reins, and it is Allah Who will enable [the traveller] to reach his destination [Paradise] by His grace.(*Madarij as-Salikin*, 1/514).

A person knows himself best, so if letting love, hope and positive thinking of Allah be dominant will lead to better results than fear, then there is nothing wrong with letting them be dominant, but at the same time he should not neglect fear altogether, and he should call fear to mind every time he falls short or slips, or sees that he is falling behind in comparison to righteous people.

Allah praises His slaves for their fear, as He says: {and who give what they give [of charity], their hearts filled with apprehension, knowing that they will return to their Lord, * those are the ones who hasten to do good deeds, and they are foremost in attaining them} [Al-Mu'minun 23:60-61].

Ahmad (25263), at-Tirmidhi (3175) and Ibn Majah (4198) narrated that `A'ishah (may Allah be pleased with her) said: I said: O Messenger of Allah, {and who give what they give [of charity], their hearts filled with apprehension}: is this the one who commits adultery, steals and drinks alcohol? He said: "No, O daughter of Abu Bakr – or: O daughter of as-Siddiq – rather it is a man who fasts and gives charity and prays, but he fears that those deeds will not be accepted from him." Al-Albani classed the hadith as authentic in *Sahih Sunan at-Tirmidhi*.

We should not compare the one who has hope and the one who has fear, because this may give

the impression that the one who is hopeful and is always optimistic has no fear, and that the one who is always fearful and apprehensive has no hope. Rather you should know that the believer combines both, even if one of them outweighs the other.

So carry on with what you are doing of righteous deeds; think positively of the Lord, the Most Merciful, the Most Generous. You should interpret what you find about the condition of some of the early generations and what they said about the state of fear as meaning that they were not necessarily in that state all the time; rather fear is a means of correcting one’s course, and it is not possible for a believer to feel no fear at all.

And Allah knows best.