400709 - What Is Belief in the Unseen?

the question

I heard a shaykh say that if it was possible for us to see Allah, may He be Glorified and Exalted, there would be no test. Thus we may understand His words (interpretation of the meaning): {… who believe in the unseen} [Al-Baqarah 2:3].

As we cannot see Allah, may He be Glorified and Exalted, this is the test. For the person who is not certain of himself, whether he is really a believer or has true faith, is that part of his test? Meaning, for example, `Umar (may Allah be pleased with him) used to ask Hudhayfah (may Allah be pleased with him): am I a hypocrite?

What I mean, for example, is that Imam So-and-so used to say: Every time I think to myself that I am showing off, I do more of that particular good deed, and one of the Tabi`in said: I met a group of the Sahabah, and none of them denied the possibility that he could be a hypocrite. My question is: is this normal? Is it true that no one can be certain that he is a believer?

Summary of answer

Belief in the unseen is the test of a person’s faith. The unseen includes everything that people cannot grasp with their senses. It refers to everything of which the Revelation has told us, what happened in the past and what exists now but is hidden from us, such as the world of the angels, Al-barzakh, and what will happen in the future, such as the Day of Resurrection, and what will happen on that Day of the reckoning, punishment and bliss.

Detailed answer

Praise be to Allah.

What is belief in the unseen?

Undoubtedly belief in the unseen is the test of a person's faith. Allah, may He be Exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

{Alif, Lam, Meem. This is the Book about which there is no doubt, a guidance for those conscious of Allah, Who believe in the unseen, establish prayer, and spend out of what We have provided for them.} [Al-Baqarah 2:1-3]

The unseen includes everything that people cannot grasp with their senses. Here it refers to everything of which the Revelation has told us, what happened in the past and what exists now but is hidden from us, such as the world of the angels, Al-barzakh, and what will happen in the future, such as the Day of Resurrection, and what will happen on that Day of the reckoning, punishment and bliss.

So the unseen has to do with the fundamentals of faith.

Al-Wahidi (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

"The word {… the unseen} refers to that which is hidden from you, so you cannot see it, thus it is unseen. Allah, may He be Exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning): {[He is] Knower of the unseen and the seen} [Al-An `am 6:73]. The Arabs call low-lying land Al-ghayb because it cannot be seen…

Abu Al-`Aliyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said regarding the verse {… who believe in the unseen}: They believe in Allah, His angels, His Books, His Messengers, the Last Day, His Paradise, His Fire, the meeting with Him, and the resurrection after death.

It is as if this is a summary of what is explained in more detail in the verse in which He says (interpretation of the meaning):

{All of them have believed in Allah and His angels and His books and His messengers, [saying], "We make no distinction between any of His messengers." And they say, "We hear and we obey.

[We seek] Your forgiveness, our Lord, and to You is the [final] destination."} [Al-Baqarah 2:285]

Abu Ishaq (may Allah have mercy on him) said: Everything that is hidden from them of what the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) told them is unseen.

This is the way in which the commentators explain the meaning of Al-Ghayb (the unseen)." (Al-Basit 2/68-71)

Al-Qurtubi (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

"This is the prescribed belief referred to in the Hadith of Jibril (peace be upon him), in which he said to the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him): Tell me about faith (Iman). He said: "It is to believe in Allah, His angels, His Books, His Messengers, and the Last Day, and to believe in the divine decree, both good and bad." He said: You have spoken the truth." (Tafsir Al-Qurtubi 1/252)

Shaykh Al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

"The basis of faith is belief in the unseen, as Allah, may He be Exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

{Alif, Lam, Meem. This is the Book about which there is no doubt, a guidance for those conscious of Allah, Who believe in the unseen, establish prayer, and spend out of what We have provided for them.} [Al-Baqarah 2:1-3]

The unseen in which one must believe is what the Messengers have told us of general aspects of belief, which include believing in Allah and His names and attributes, and in the angels and in Paradise and Hell. Believing in Allah, His Messengers and the Last Day includes believing in the unseen, for the message itself is a matter of the unseen, and the details of that include belief in Allah, His angels, His Books, His Messengers and the Last Day, as Allah, may He be Exalted, mentions in the verses (interpretation of the meaning):

{but [true] righteousness is [in] one who believes in Allah, the Last Day, the angels, the Book, and

the prophets.} [Al-Baqarah 2:177]

{And whoever disbelieves in Allah, His angels, His books, His messengers, and the Last Day has certainly gone far astray.} [An-Nisa' 4:136]" (Majmu` Al-Fatawa, 13/232-233)

Belief in the unseen is the test which makes the one who truly believes stand out from the one who is doubtful.

Shaykh `Abd Ar-Rahman As-Sa`di (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

"He says (interpretation of the meaning): {who believe in the unseen}. The true meaning of belief or faith is complete affirmation of what the Messengers taught; this also includes physical actions. It does not refer to believing in things that are visible or may be known through any of the physical senses, because in that regard there is no difference between the Muslim and the disbeliever. Rather the issue here is belief in the unseen, which we cannot see or know through any of the physical senses; rather we believe in it because Allah and His Messenger have told us of it. This faith is what distinguishes the Muslim from the disbeliever, because it is believing and affirming, with no hesitation, what Allah and His Messenger said. So the believer believes everything that Allah or His messenger have told him, whether he sees it or not and whether he understands it and comprehends it or not.

This is in contrast to the heretics and those who disbelieve in the unseen, because their limited intellects could not grasp it, so they rejected what they could not comprehend. Thus their intellect was corrupted and their thinking was flawed, whilst the thinking of the believers, who were guided by Allah, was sound.

Belief in the unseen includes belief in everything that Allah and His messengers have told us about unseen matters in the past and in the future, events of the hereafter and the reality of the divine attributes and their essence. So they believe in the attributes of Allah in a true sense and with certain faith, even if they do not understand their essence." (Tafsir As-Sa`di p. 40-41)

So the one who believes in what the Messengers have told us of matters that he has not seen is

the sincere believer whose faith is proven to be sound.

Allah, may He be Exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

{The believers are only the ones who have believed in Allah and His Messenger and then doubt not but strive with their wealth and their lives in the cause of Allah. It is those who are the truthful} [Al-Hujurat 49:15].

As for the disbelievers, many of them are certain that their Messengers never lied, but they deny the unseen, and they give excuses for that. Then when they see the Angel of death with their own eyes and they see the hereafter, their belief will not benefit them in that situation, because it is faith by compulsion and is not sincere belief. Hence if they were to be sent back to this world, they would go back to disbelief.

Allah, may He be Exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

{If you could but see when they are made to stand before the Fire and will say, “Oh, would that we could be returned [to life on earth] and not deny the signs of our Lord and be among the believers.”

But what they concealed before has [now] appeared to them. And even if they were returned, they would return to that which they were forbidden; and indeed, they are liars.

And they say, “There is none but our worldly life, and we will not be resurrected.”} [Al-An`am 6:27-29]

Ibn Kathir (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“What is meant by saying {But what they concealed before has [now] appeared to them} is that they will not ask to return to this world out of love for faith; rather it will be out of fear of the punishment that they have seen with their own eyes, as a requital for their disbelief. Hence they will ask to go back to this world so as to be safe from what they have seen of the Fire. Therefore Allah says: {And even if they were returned, they would return to that which they were forbidden;

and indeed, they are liars}. In other words, they are lying when they claim that they wish to return to this world because they want to be believers.

Then Allah tells us that if they were returned to this world, they would go back to what was forbidden to them of disbelief and disobedience: {and indeed, they are liars} when they say {“Oh, would that we could be returned [to life on earth] and not deny the signs of our Lord and be among the believers”} and {“There is none but our worldly life, and we will not be resurrected”}. In other words, they would go back to what was forbidden to them, and they are indeed lying when they say {There is none but our worldly life”}, meaning that there is nothing but the life of this world, and there is no resurrection after that. Hence they said {“and we will not be resurrected”}." (Tafsir Ibn Kathir, 3/249)

This does not mean that there is no benefit in seeing the unseen; rather it is beneficial for those with sound hearts who desire and love faith, as seeing it will increase in faith and certainty.

We see this in the story of Ibrahim (peace be upon him), as Allah, may He be Exalted, says (interpretation and meaning):

{And [mention] when Abraham said, “My Lord, show me how You give life to the dead.” [Allah] said, “Have you not believed?” He said, “Yes, but [I ask] only that my heart may be satisfied.” [Allah] said, “Take four birds and commit them to yourself. Then [after slaughtering them] put on each hill a portion of them; then call them - they will come [flying] to you in haste. And know that Allah is Exalted in Might and Wise”} [Al-Baqarah 2:260]

This is also referred to in the Hadith of Abu Hurayrah (may Allah be pleased with him) who said: The Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) said: “Allah has angels who travel about seeking out the people of Dhikr. When they find people remembering Allah, they call out to one another: `Come to what you were seeking.’ Then they encircle them with their wings up to the first heaven. Then their Lord, may He be Glorified and Exalted, who has greater knowledge than them, asks them: `What are My slaves saying?’ They say: `They are glorifying You, magnifying You, praising You and extolling You.’ He says: `Have they seen Me?’ They say: `No, By

Allah, they have not seen You.' He says: `And how would it be if they saw Me?' They say: `If they saw You, they would worship You more fervently, and extol and praise You more fervently, and would glorify You more.' He says: `What are they asking of Me?' They say: `They are asking You for Your Paradise.' He says: `Have they seen it?' They say: No, by Allah O Lord, they have not seen it.' He says: `And what if they saw My Paradise?' They say: `If they saw it, they would be even keener to attain it and would seek it more fervently and desire it more greatly.' He says: `From what are they seeking My protection?' They say: `From the Fire.' He says: `Have they seen it?' They say: `No, by Allah O Lord, they have not seen it.' He says: `And what if they saw it?' They say: `If they saw it, they would be even keener to flee from it, and would fear it more greatly. He says: `You are My witnesses that I have forgiven them.' One of the angels says: `Among them is So-and-so, who is not one of them; rather he came on some errand.' He says: `This is a gathering which no one who joins them can be doomed.'" (Narrated by Al-Bukhari, 6408 and Muslim, 2689)

This indicates that if they saw Allah, may He be Exalted, and they saw Paradise and Hell, that would benefit them by increasing their faith and belief.

The belief of the Muslims nowadays in the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) is a kind of belief in the unseen . Those who did see him, namely the Companions (may Allah be pleased with them), benefitted in terms of their faith.

Sa`id ibn Mansur narrated with a chain of narrators whose narrators are trustworthy, as noted in At-Tafsir Min Sunan Sa`id ibn Mansur (2/544): Abu Mu`awiyah told us, from Al-A`mash, from `Umarah ibn `Umayr, from `Abd Ar-Rahman ibn Yazid, from `Abdullah ibn Mas`ud (may Allah be pleased with him), who said: They were talking about the Companions of Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and how strong their faith was, then `Abdullah said: The matter of Muhammad (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) was very clear to those who saw him. By the One besides Whom there is none worthy of worship, there is nothing better for the believer than believing in the unseen. Then he recited (interpretation and meaning):

{Alif, Lam, Meem. This is the Book about which there is no doubt, a guidance for those conscious of Allah, Who believe in the unseen, establish prayer, and spend out of what We have provided for

them.} [Al-Baqarah 2:1-3]

Ibn Al-Jawzi (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“There are six views regarding what is meant by the unseen … 6. That it is believing in the Messenger, for one who has not seen him. `Amr ibn Murrah (may Allah have mercy on him) said: The companions of `Abdullah said to him: How fortunate you are! You strove in Jihad with the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and sat with him. He said: The matter of the Messenger of Allah (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) was very clear to those who saw him. Rather, what is more amazing than that is people who see a book [the Quran] and believe in him, even though they did not see him. Then he recited (interpretation and meaning), {… who believe in the unseen}." (Zad Al-Masir 1/24-25).

Not knowing one’s status before Allah has nothing to do with belief in the unseen

From the above, it is clear that if a person does not know his status before Allah, may He be Exalted, that has nothing to do with the issue of belief in the unseen which Allah has enjoined upon us and for which He will bring us to account.

Rather that comes under the prohibition on speculating about matters of the unseen and speaking without knowledge . For no one knows to what extent Allah, may He be Exalted, will accept his deeds or what his end will be; therefore no one has the right to praise himself. At the same time, he should not despair of the mercy and kindness of Allah, may He be Exalted, so he should always be in a state between hope and fear.

Allah, may He be Exalted, says (interpretation of the meaning):

{Call upon your Lord in humility and privately; indeed, He does not like transgressors.

And cause not corruption upon the earth after its reformation. And invoke Him in fear and hope. Indeed, the mercy of Allah is near to the doers of good.} [Al-A`raf 7:55-56]

Shaykh `Abd Ar-Rahman As-Sa`di (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“{And invoke Him in fear and hope} that is, that is, fear of His punishment and hope of His reward, hoping that one’s deeds will be accepted and fearing that they will be rejected, not offering supplication in the manner of one who thinks that he is entitled to a response from his Lord, filled with self-admiration and raising himself above his station, or in the manner of one who is heedless and not focusing." (Tafsir As-Sa`di p. 292)

One example of this fear of Allah and of His punishment is the Companions’ fear of falling into hypocrisy. Therefore they did not praise themselves and they were not certain that their good deeds were accepted; rather they feared that they may have committed some infractions that could lead to hypocrisy without them realising, so they did not claim to be infallible.

Al-Bukhari (may Allah have mercy on him) included in his book a chapter entitled Chapter on the believer’s fear that his deeds may be rendered worthless without him realising.

In this chapter he quoted the following:

“Ibrahim At-Taymi said: I never compared my words with my deeds but I feared that I could be a disbeliever. Ibn Abu Mulaykah said: I met thirty of the Companions of the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) and all of them feared that they might be hypocrites; not one of them said that he had attained the level of faith of Jibril and Mika’il. And it was narrated from Al-Hasan [that he said]: No one fears Allah accept a believer and no one feels secure from His punishment except a hypocrite." (Fath Al-Bari 1/109-110)

Ibn Rajab (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

“The reason for that may boil down to what is mentioned above, that hypocrisy has minor and major forms. Minor hypocrisy is hypocrisy in actions; this is what these people feared for themselves and it is what leads to major hypocrisy. So there is the fear that if someone is overwhelmed by the characteristics of minor hypocrisy during his lifetime, that may lead to major hypocrisy, to the extent that he will no longer be a believer at all, as Allah, may He be Exalted,

says (interpretation of the meaning):

{And when they deviated, Allah caused their hearts to deviate.} [As-Saff 61:5]

{And We will turn away their hearts and their eyes just as they refused to believe in it the first time. And We will leave them in their transgression, wandering blindly} [Al-An`am 6:110]."(Fath Al-Bari 1/195)

Therefore it is permissible to say “in sha Allah” in the context of faith, meaning that the Muslim may say, “I am a believer, in sha Allah.” What is meant is that part of faith is actions, and the one who does what is obligatory and refrains from what is prohibited, would fear that he may have fallen short, and would not claim that he has perfect faith, because he cannot be certain about that.

Shaykh Al-Islam Ibn Taymiyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

With regard to the view of the early Hadith scholars – such as Ibn Mas`ud and his companions, Ath-Thawri, Ibn `Uyaynah, most of the scholars of Kufah, Yahya ibn Sa`id Al-Qattan in what he narrated from the scholars of Basrah, Ahmad ibn Hanbal and other leading Sunni scholars – all of them would say “in sha Allah” when asked about faith…

In fact, these leading scholars clearly stated that the reason why one should say “in sha Allah” is because faith includes doing obligatory duties, so they could not testify that they had perfect faith, just as they could not testify that they were righteous and pious. For that is something of which they could not be certain, and it would be like praising themselves without being certain whether they are deserving of that." (Majmu` Al-Fatawa 7/438-439)

He (may Allah have mercy on him) also said:

“Faith in general includes doing everything that Allah has enjoined upon His slave and refraining from everything that He has prohibited. So if a man says, “I have faith in that sense,” then he is testifying that he is one of the righteous and pious who do all that they are commanded to do and refrain from all that they are forbidden to do. In that case, he will be one of the close allies

(Awliya') of Allah. This comes under the heading of praising oneself and testifying concerning oneself regarding something of which one cannot be certain. If this testimony is true, then he should testify that he will be one of the people of Paradise if he dies in that state, and no one can testify that he will be one of the people of Paradise. Thus his testifying that he has faith is like his testifying that he will be one of the people of Paradise if he dies in that state. This is the approach of the early scholars who would say "in sha Allah" when they stated that they had faith. However, they may have regarded it as permissible to not say "in sha Allah" after stating that one has faith in a different sense, as we shall discuss below, in sha Allah." (Majmu` Al-Fatawa 7/446)

But this does not mean that the Muslim should not say definitively that he believes in Islam in principle; rather he must state that definitively and he should have no doubt in his heart that he believes in Allah, may He be Exalted, and His angels, His Books, His Messengers, the Last Day, and the divine decree, both good and bad.

Ibn Taymiyyah (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

"Ahmad and others of the early generations stated it definitively and did not doubt that they had faith in that sense. They would say "in sha Allah" with regard to faith in the general sense, which includes doing what is enjoined." (Majmu` Al-Fatawa 7/450)

Ibn Abu Al-`Izz (may Allah have mercy on him) said:

"As for those who say that it is permissible to say "in sha Allah" or not to say it, they have better evidence than the other two groups, and the middle path is the best. They say that if the one who says "in sha Allah" means that he has doubts about the foundation of his faith, he should be told not to say "in sha Allah." This is a matter concerning which there is no difference of scholarly opinion.

But if he means that he is one of the believers whom Allah describes in the verses (interpretation of the meaning):

{The believers are only those who, when Allah is mentioned, their hearts become fearful, and

when His verses are recited to them, it increases them in faith; and upon their Lord they rely,

The ones who establish prayer, and from what We have provided them, they spend.

Those are the believers, truly. For them are degrees [of high position] with their Lord and forgiveness and noble provision.} [Al-Anfal 8:2-4]

{The believers are only the ones who have believed in Allah and His Messenger and then doubt not but strive with their wealth and their lives in the cause of Allah . It is those who are the truthful.} [Al-Hujurat 49:15], then in that case, saying “in sha Allah” is permissible." (Sharh At-Tahhaawiyyah p. 353)

Fear of hypocrisy

The praiseworthy type of fear of hypocrisy is that fear which motivates one to strive harder in doing righteous deeds. If a person fears showing off whilst he is doing an act of worship, then let his fear be the type that motivates the worshipper to strive against showing off whilst continuing with his worship and doing more of it. It should not be the type of fear that makes him give up on worship and turn away from it for fear of showing off.

And Allah knows best.