NEW MUSLIM ACADEMY

PROTECTION FROM DECREASE

A GUIDE TO STEADFASTNESS AND SPIRITUAL PRESERVATION

Based on the Webinar 'Protection from Decrease' by Shaykh Ahmad AlKurdy

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INTRODUCTION: THE COMPLETE WAY OF LIFE

Bismillah. We start and begin with Allah's name, asking for His help, for His blessings, and for His protection. *Alhamdulillah*—all praise, thanks, and glory belong exclusively to the One True God, Allah. We ask Him to bless, honor, and compliment His Messenger ﷺ, to shower him with protection and grace.

Welcome, my brothers and sisters, to this eBook. We are exploring a theme that is the single most important theme in the life of all Muslims, but especially for those who have newly embraced this faith: the theme of steadfastness, and what we call "Protection from Decrease."

In our work at the New Muslim Academy (NMA), we focus on several key areas. We connect with the Quran, study the virtues of specific chapters, explore the stories of the Messengers of God, and look deeply into the supplications of steadfastness. Today, we are focusing on a particular prayer that carries a massive punchline.

You may have heard that Islam is a complete way of life. When we say that, we don't just mean it as a slogan. It means Islam includes and guides all of our activities in life—from the moment we wake up to the moment we go to sleep. In fact, it covers the human experience from before our very conception, to the moment we are born, to the moment we die, and everything in between.

So, it is no surprise that there are specific etiquettes and prayers for traveling. It is within the Book of the Etiquette of Traveling that we find our key to understanding how to protect our faith from unraveling.

THE TRAVELER'S REFUGE AND SEEKING PROTECTION

During the life of Muhammad ﷺ, the Messenger of God, people traveled on camels, horses, mules, or donkeys. That was their mode of transport. Before getting on any animal, even for local travel between neighborhoods, the Messenger ﷺ would say a particular prayer. But when embarking on a long, extended journey, he would recite a different type of supplication.

Whenever he proceeded on a journey, the Messenger ﷺ would seek refuge in Allah. Seeking refuge means turning to God to protect us from anything we worry about. It could be the devil's whispers, road accidents, a bad outcome, or bad people. Anything that brings you worry, you should turn to God and beg for His protection.

On a journey, the Messenger of God ﷺ specifically sought refuge from several distinct dangers:

1. **The hardships of the journey:** A journey is inherently hard because you are leaving your comfort zone, your bubble. There is always a level of difficulty. Even today, with advanced means of transport, there are security gates and long lines. Even on private planes for the filthy rich, the possibility of accidents and unexpected hardships is always there.

2. **The supplication of the oppressed:** Seeking protection from ever wronging or oppressing anyone. If you abuse, transgress, or wrong someone—whether they are Muslim or non-Muslim—their prayer against you will be answered by God. If they pray against you, God will take their side and be against you. You want God on your side, not against you. Even if the oppressor is a Muslim who thinks they are a righteous person, God takes the side of the oppressed. Be careful never to oppress others.

3. **Unpleasant events in one's family and property:** Seeking protection from any negative things happening to your family, wealth, or property while you are absent.

4. **Deviation after guidance:** This is our core focus today. This is the ultimate spiritual "decrease" that we must seek refuge from.

THE UNRAVELING TURBAN (AL-HAWRU BA'DA AL-KAWR)

The specific part of the traveling prayer we are focusing on is "against deviation after guidance." In another translation, this is rendered as "seeking refuge from loss after plenty."

Linguistically, this phrase comes from an incredibly eloquent Arabic expression used by the Messenger of God ﷺ: *"Al-hawru ba'da al-kawr"* (or *"A'uthu biKa minal hawri ba'da al-kawr"*). I don't have the intention to teach you Arabic, but I want you to appreciate the depth of these words because they act like a beautiful, vivid idiom.

- **Hawr (Decrease/Relapse):** Means to return to something, to go backwards, or to suffer a deficiency or decrease. In our relationship with God, going backward is highly dangerous. We should all want to keep moving forward.
- **Kawr (Increase/Plenty):** Originally relates to the act of wrapping a turban around one's head.

Consider this analogy: In ancient Arabia, people wore turbans to protect themselves from the desert elements, from sand, dust, and the heat of the sun. Tying and wrapping the turban perfectly represents a state of completion, safety, wellness, and beauty—where everything is intact and secure.

But when you untie, unwrap, or unravel that turban, it falls apart. You are suddenly left exposed, vulnerable, compromised, and unsafe in the harsh desert.

When you first wrap yourself in faith, you are in a state of safety, protection, and spiritual wellbeing. When you seek refuge from relapse after health, you are crying out: *"O Allah, protect me from unraveling, being compromised, and losing my safety and spiritual wellbeing after having been intact."*

We hope to always grow, develop, flourish, and excel.

Consider a small, personal example. A few weeks ago, I visited a local mosque, and a brother noticed that I looked like I had lost weight. He asked me, "Are you intentionally losing weight, or is this happening not by design but because of illness?" I reassured him that, by God's grace, I was healthy and the weight loss was intentional. Still, it illustrates how people who care to notice naturally become concerned when they see someone physically shrinking.

But while people worry about physical shrinking, we are looking at something much more serious today: *shrinking in faith*. We do not want our faith to shrink.

THE DANGER OF ISOLATION AND LEAVING THE FLOCK

The biggest gift God has given you is the gift of faith (*Iman*) and being Muslim. You embraced Islam, you made a conscious decision to turn to God. But this gift can be stripped away, which is why you have to constantly beg God to protect it.

Working with the new Muslim community is my primary occupation, and I have deep love for those who embrace Islam. I understand the challenges they face, and I want to offer them as much empathy and support as possible in their beautiful journey. But one of the most devastating, painful experiences is watching a brother or sister turn their back on faith: going into decrease instead of increase, and untying the very knot and ribbon of faith they worked so hard to wrap.

Why does this happen? One of the primary reasons is *isolation*.

Many new Muslims decide to practice Islam entirely on their own. This is exactly why the New Muslim Academy (NMA) was established: to support those who come to Islam virtually, through the internet. Such folks risk making their entire practice of Islam a solitary experience . If you are in a remote area, completely on your own, and you try to jump into the deep end of the ocean, you will drown. It is not a lack of intelligence or ability—it is simply that you will get exhausted.

There are harsh elements, dangerous things, sharks, and predators out there. We are strengthened by virtue of one another. To leave the congregation and your family of faith and venture completely on your own is to leave the safety of the community.

Think of a flock of sheep. The wolf eats from the stray sheep that wanders off. The job of a shepherd—and all the messengers of God were shepherds early in their lives as part of their Divine training—is to keep the flock together and safe. The flock might see green grass on the other side and wander off to explore, only to be shocked by a wolf waiting to consume them.

During a walk around the university campus with one of my students, we came across two coyotes. I joked that they were probably thinking, "What are these people doing in our territory?" But the reality is that if I had been completely vulnerable and alone, a pack of hungry and aggressive coyotes could easily have harmed or attacked me.

When you leave the flock of believers to do Islam on your own, you become vulnerable. You should ask Allah to protect you from leaving the community of faith and venturing into isolation, because isolation is a primary source of decrease.

This happened to a beloved sister close to our family. She had been Muslim for twenty-three years—a dedicated servant of God whom we all looked up to and trusted. When she went through an especially difficult phase in life, facing immense challenges and spiritual attacks, she chose to isolate herself instead of seeking the help of those she trusted, pushing away the people around her. We watched her faith unravel before our eyes. It was an incredibly painful thing to witness—but it does not have to be that way.

THE MESSENGER'S HUMILITY AND THE CHANGING HEART

If you think you are safe because of your intelligence, your natural gifts, your life experiences, or your wisdom, you are making a grave mistake. We must have an attitude of deep intellectual and spiritual humility.

Think about the Messenger Muhammad ﷺ. He was someone who received Divine communication. God spoke to him, exposed him to the unseen, showed him Paradise and Hell, and took him on a miraculous Night Journey from Mecca to Jerusalem, and then up through the Seven Heavens to receive direct commandments. He was not on his own, he had the Pure Spirit, Gabriell the Angel of God as his mentor and support.

Yet, with all of that unparalleled spiritual awareness, one of his most regular, constant prayers was:

> *"O Controller of the hearts, keep my heart steadfast and firm on Your faith."*

He begged God: "Please allow me to remain faithful to You. Don't let me lose this gift."

His closest disciples were shocked. They said, "O Messenger of God ﷺ, we believe in you, we accept you and what you brought. Are you worried about us? Do you fear for our faith?"

He replied, "I sure do, because the hearts are constantly changing." He explained that the hearts are under the control of God, and He changes and alternates them.

You are not in control of your own heart. When I asked that sister what was going on with her life, she simply said, "I had a change of heart." She meant a change of heart toward relationships, but my deeper worry was a change of heart toward God, His commands, and His Way. People can change their minds, they can come and go, and we cannot control that. But the truly frightening prospect is a change of heart and mind toward God. Do not let that happen. Beg Him to protect you from decrease.

RELAPSE, REPENTANCE, AND CONSEQUENCES

Spiritual decrease is a relapse. In English, a relapse is defined as a deterioration in a person's state of health after a period of temporary improvement. It comes from a Latin root meaning "slipped back," and historically referred specifically to returning to heresy or wrongdoing.

When you come to Islam, you are becoming healthy, whole, and guided. You are stepping away from bad behaviors and addictions. But you must understand the relationship between forgiveness of sin and the natural consequences of actions and behaviors.

It is true that God forgives everything you did before Islam. Islam completely erases what came before it, leaving you with a clean, pristine slate. Spiritually, you are born again like a newborn. But practically, you are a conscious adult, and the earthly consequences of your past decisions do not magically disappear.

Consider the story of Adam, the first human being. In Islam, we do not believe in original sin; we believe in *original repentance*. Adam made a mistake, disobeyed God's command, and ate from the tree that he was instructed to stay away from. He then repented, sought forgiveness, and God completely forgave him.

Yet, there were still consequences to his action. He was taken out of the garden of ease, where everything was prepared for him, and sent to Earth to live a life of struggle, toil, and tribulation. He was forgiven, but the physical consequence remained.

When a convert comes to Islam, they have a clean slate with God. But if you have spent years developing bad habits or addictions, the remnants of those decisions are still in your life. You have to struggle gradually to detox them out of your system.

I knew a brother who had been a convert for 15 years. He reached out to me, crying, "Shaykh, my life is unraveling. I divorced my wife, my daughter won't talk to me, and my addictions and demons are back."

He told me, "When I embraced Islam, I left alcohol. I have been dry and clean for 15 years. But I am realizing now that I have been a 'dry drunkard'."

I asked him what that meant. He said, "The same sicknesses, the same anger, rage, negativity, and depression I had when I was an active alcoholic, I still have. I stopped consuming the substance because Islam forbids it, but my body and mind still have those underlying tendencies."

This is why gradualism is so important. When you skip the essential stages of spiritual growth and detox, you cause yourself self-inflicted wounds. And self-inflicted spiritual wounds can cause you to die spiritually.

RECIDIVISM, ENVIRONMENT, AND THE TRAP OF RAW INTELLECT

As part of my voluntary ministry, I visit prisons. In the U.S. prison system, Islam has a massive conversion rate—it is the biggest religion inside. When I ask the prison staff if they have complaints about the Muslim inmates, they tell me, "The Orthodox Sunni Muslims are the most disciplined, upright group we have in prison. Our only issue is that they want to congregate and pray together, which poses a security risk we have to navigate."

These men are disciplined, faithful, and focused while incarcerated. But what happens when they are released?

If they go straight back to their old neighborhoods, their old friend circles, and their old environments, they relapse. The rate of recidivism among the formerly incarcerated is incredibly high because they return to the exact environment that bred their bad habits.

The same rule applies to your faith. If you hang around bad company, they will drag you down.

There is a famous story in Islamic history of a brilliant man who chose to spend his time with atheists and people who spoke ill of God and religion. People warned him, "Why are you exposing yourself to this?"

When people asked this brilliant historical figure why he kept visiting atheists, he said, "I just want to know what they are talking about. I want to be exposed to it."

He exposed himself to those doubts until he eventually lost his faith and became an atheist.

Commenting on this man, a scholar made a very serious statement:

> *"This man was a genius. May God damn intelligence that does not have faith associated with it, and may God be pleased and bless the simple mind if it has piety and righteousness."*

I tell new Muslims the exact same thing: *Do not unnecessarily expose yourself to attacks against Islam.* That is just the devil messing with you to make you lose faith. Do not go looking for trouble or searching out doubts sown by the enemies of Islam. The devil is not happy with your conversion, so he will expose you to doubts way beyond your spiritual pay grade until you get confused and disheartened. Do not go back to things you left behind to appease others and relate to those weak in resolve. You will risk your spiritual wellbeing for temporary pleasures and eternal regrets.

Never look down on someone who is spiritually simple or unsophisticated. Look at famous atheists like Richard Dawkins or elite physicists who reject God. What did their intelligence help them with in the end? Even the devil himself is extremely intelligent and incredibly smart—but it is useless, rather, harmful intelligence. If you think you can outsmart God, you are on a very bad trajectory.

THREE CATEGORIES OF SPIRITUAL DECREASE

Those who suffer from the disease of decrease and relapse generally fall into three categories. We ask God to protect us from all of them:

1. **The Apostates:** Those whose relapse is so severe that they turn against God completely, leaving the faith, doubting the hereafter, resurrection, Paradise, Hell, and rejecting any act of devotion.

2. **The "Muslim, But..." Category:** Those who identify as Muslims but constantly pick and choose what they want to follow based on their desires or modern sensitivities. They say, "Yes, I'm a Muslim, *but* I don't like this rule," *or* "I don't like that teaching." They try to trim Islam to fit their lives instead of trimming their lives to submit to God.

3. **The Indulgent:** Those who do not leave the faith, but they no longer feel bad about going against God's commands. They openly indulge in vice, sin, and their personal desires without any remorse or guilt.

To protect ourselves from falling into these traps, we must turn to God and constantly beg Him for steadfastness.

AVOID THE COUNTERCULTURE TRAP

In Chapter 29 of the Quran, titled The Spider, we find:

> *"Do people think they're going to be left alone to say, 'We believe,' and they will not be tested and tried? We surely have tested those who came before them, in order for God to manifest who are the truthful ones and who are the liars." (29:2-3)*

When a convert comes to Islam, they are often happy and excited, feeling a massive burden lifted. But as one of my teachers would tell brand-new converts right after their conversion and declaring the statement of faith: "Now that you have come to Islam, I want to be honest and truthful with you. The tests are only about to begin."

That is the nature of this life. It is full of trials and afflictions. You are not the first convert to face these. You are not the first person to feel like a stranger in your own family or to live in a small, rural town with no other Muslims around. There have been many before you.

The danger is when people come to Islam with the wrong motivations—looking for instant gratification or riding a trendy wave.

Sometimes, conversion to Islam is experienced as a countercultural decision. In the 1960s, we had the hippies who went against the dominant culture by promoting anti-war movements, free love, smoking marijuana, and traveling to the East seeking spiritual enlightenment to become Buddhists or Hindus. In the 1980s, it was punk rock, vegetarianism and goth clothing. It is a tendency for some humans to want to go against the dominant culture.

Some people are drawn to Islam because they see Western culture responsible for unjust wars, apartheid, or genocidal regimes, and they adopt the faith as a badge of anti-establishment protest. This is really a subtler version of the "white man's burden"—a sense of pity for brown and Black people, who make up the majority of the world's Muslims, paired with a desire to step in and "save" them.

Islam is not a countercultural statement, and it should never be treated as one. A faith adopted as protest, rather than conviction, will be fragile and not survive the first real test.

Embrace Islam solely for God Himself. Accept it because you believe it is the truth. Humble yourself spiritually and intellectually, and remain dedicated to Him whether things are easy or difficult, healthy or sick, going your way or not going your way.

Conclusion: Guard the Knot You Have Tied

We desire to be in a state of wholesomeness—wrapped, secure, and whole. The danger was never in the healthy state. It is in what comes after relapse: the slow unraveling, that can undo years of seeming sincerity if left unguarded.

This book has traced where that unraveling begins—in isolation, in false confidence, in impatience with the stages of gradual growth, in the wrong company, in a faith worn as a badge instead of held as conviction. None of this is meant to frighten you away from the path. It is meant to keep you on it. Even the Messenger of God ﷺ, with all his certainty, begged constantly for a steadfast heart.

So return, as he did, to the traveler's prayer. Ask God for refuge from deviation after guidance, and say, as he taught us to say:

"O Controller of the hearts, keep my heart steadfast and firm on Your Way of Obedience."

"O Allah, protect me from unraveling, from being compromised, and from losing my safety and spiritual wellbeing after having been intact."

Wrap the turban. Tie the knot. And keep asking Him, every day, to protect you from decrease, deviation and relapse.