

The first pillar

13

Concerning the essence of repentance

Elucidation of the reality of repentance and its definition.

KNOW that repentance is a term whose meaning is ordered and consolidated around three related matters, which are knowledge, condition (*ḥāl*), and action (*fiʿl*). Knowledge is first, condition is second, and action is third. The first causes the second, and the second causes the third, necessarily. The continuity of the *sunna* of God سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى in the earthly and heavenly kingdoms requires [this causation].¹

As for knowledge, it is the recognition of the tremendous harm of sins and their being the barrier between the servant and each beloved.

When he has recognized that with true awareness through an overwhelming certainty in his heart, pain stemming from this knowledge will rise in the heart because of the absence of the beloved. The heart will certainly feel pain when it perceives the absence of its beloved.

If its absence has occurred through his action, he becomes deeply grieved by the action that brought about the absence. His

¹ [Trans. note: As evidence for this, al-Zabīdī in *Ithāf* (vol. 8, 501) mentions two verses of the Qurʾān, 22:54 and 3:153.]

pain that is caused by his action that brought about the absence of his beloved is called regret.

14 When this pain overwhelms and conquers the heart, another condition emerges in the heart from this pain. This is called desire and intent for an action from him that is associated with a changed state, with the past, and with the future.

Concerning its association with the changed state, it is abandoning the sin that has enveloped him.

Concerning the future, it is the determination to abandon the sin that brought about the loss of the beloved until the end of life.

Concerning the past, it is correcting what was omitted by way of restoration and fulfillment, if it is susceptible to restoration.

Thus, knowledge is first for it is the starting point [of attaining] these good actions. What I mean by this knowledge is faith and certainty. Here faith means the verification that sins are destructive poison, and certainty means the confirmation of the verification, the elimination of doubt about it, and the authority of [certainty] over the heart. Then the light of this faith, whenever it shines on the heart, produces the fire of regret. The heart feels pain from it when it observes by way of the illumination of the light of faith that it has become veiled from its beloved. This is like the one on whom the light of the sun shines while he is in darkness. Thus, the light gleams on him through the clearing of the clouds or the removal of a veil. Then he sees his beloved who had almost perished. The fire of love burns in his heart, and by way of this fire, his desire is motivated to hasten to the attainment [of his goal].

Thus knowledge, regret, and intention are attached to abandoning the [former] state, to the future, and to the correction of the past. Three established qualities [are required] for the result, and the term repentance is applied to the totality of them.

15 Often, the term repentance is applied to the meaning of regret only, making knowledge as a precedent and introduction, and abandonment as a result and delayed consequence. In this sense, he صلى الله عليه وسلم said, “Regret is repentance,”² since regret is not devoid of knowledge which necessitates and produces it, and of determination

2 Ibn Mājah (4252) reported it. [Trans. Note: See Ibn Mājah, *English Translation of Sunan Ibn Mājah*, vol. 5 (New York: Darussalam, 2007), 364.]

which succeeds it and follows it. Thus, regret is encompassed by its two ends, by which I mean its consequence and its cause.

In this respect, it is said concerning the definition of repentance that is the melting of what is in the entrails owing to the mistakes he made.³ This certainly alludes to pure pain.

Likewise, it is said that it is a fire that burns in the heart and a cut into the liver that never heals.

In regard to the meaning of abandonment, it is said concerning the definition of repentance, that it is removing the cloak of harshness and spreading out the carpet of atonement.⁴

Sahl b. ʿAbdillāh al-Tustarī said, “Repentance is exchanging blameworthy motivations for praiseworthy motivations. That is not perfected except through isolation, silence, and eating permissible food.”⁵ It is as if he indicated the third meaning of repentance [i.e., abandonment].

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The statements concerning the definitions of repentance have no limits. When you have understood these three meanings along with their requirements and levels, then you have recognized that all of what is said about its definition falls short of encompassing all of its meanings. Seeking knowledge of the realities of affairs is more important than seeking knowledge of mere expressions.

Elucidation of the requirements of repentance and its virtue

17

KNOW that the obligation of repentance is made apparent in the reports [of Muhammad ﷺ] and in the verses [of the Qurʾān]. It is clear by way of the light of insight for the one whose insight has been opened. God has expanded his

3 Al-Zabīdī states that *al-ḥashā* is whatever enters the stomach (*dākhil al-baṭn*), and its melting is the impression of pain in him from the previous errors. See *Ithāf* (vol. 8, 503). [Trans. note: Al-Ghazālī’s statement in Arabic is “*innahu dhawabānu-l-ḥashā limā sabaqa min al-khaṭaʾ*.”]

4 Al-Zabīdī explains that removing the cloak of harshness means that the penitent does not return to whatever distanced him from God, and that spreading out the carpet of atonement means that he remains firm on it. Yet the harshness does not cross his mind until he remembers it. See *Ithāf* (vol. 8, 503).

5 See al-Tustarī in *Tafsīr al-Tustarī* (74), Abū Ṭālib al-Makki in *Qūt al-qulūb* (1/181), and al-Kharkūshī in *Tahdhīb al-asrār* (147).

chest with the light of faith so that he is capable of proceeding with his light that is in front of him through the darkness of ignorance. He has no need of a leader who leads every step. Thus, a traveler is either blind, needing a leader for his steps, or he is insightful, being guided to the beginning of the path and then guiding himself.

Likewise, people on the path of the *dīn* are divided according to this division. Thus, there is a person of limited ability who is not capable of transcending imitation in the steps he takes. For each step he takes, he must listen to a text of the Book of God *سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى* or to a *sunna* of His Messenger *صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ*. Sometimes he cannot find that, and thus he becomes confused. The journey of this [person], even if his life were long and his effort diligent, would be restrained, and his steps limited. Then there is the successful person whose chest God has opened to Islam, and he is upon a light from his Lord. He is aroused by a simple indication to travel a difficult path and traverse wearisome obstacles. The light of the Qurʾān and the light of faith illuminate his heart, and owing to the intensity of his inner light, he is sufficed with the simplest explanation. It is as if his *oil would almost glow even if untouched by fire*. Then when fire touches it, it is *light upon light, God guides to His light whom He wills*.⁶ Thus he is not in need of a transmitted text in every situation.

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The one who has this status, when he wants to know the obligation of repentance, will first look with the light of insight at the exact meaning of repentance. Then he will look at the meaning of obligation. Next, he will combine the meanings of obligation and repentance. Then he will have no doubt concerning his resoluteness for it. That is so because he knows that the meaning of obligation must be an obligation that leads to everlasting happiness and safety from everlasting destruction. Unless happiness and misery are attached to the performance of an act or its abandonment, there is no rational sense to describe [the act] as being obligatory. The statement, “It became obligatory by way of rendering it obligatory,” is meaningless talk (*ḥadīth maḥḍ*). Thus, if there is no purpose for us in doing a thing or abandoning it, in the short term and the long term, then there is no sense in our being occupied with it. Someone else has made it an obligation on us or has not obligated it.

6 [Trans. note: Al-Ghazālī inserted these two phrases from Q. 24:35.]

If a person has recognized the intended sense of obligation, it being the means to eternal happiness; and if he has recognized that there is no happiness in the never-ending abode except in the meeting with God *سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى*, and that each person veiled from Him is miserable without doubt, there being a barren landscape between him and what he desires while he is burning with the fire of separation and the fire of hell; and if he has recognized that the only cause for the alienation from meeting God is following lusts, being affable with this ephemeral world, and being devoted to the love of that from which he necessarily must part; and if he has recognized that the only cause for being brought nigh to the meeting with God is severing the attachment of the heart from the glamor of this world and accepting God totally, seeking intimacy with Him by the constant remembrance of Him and the love of Him by knowing His Majesty and Beauty as best he could; and if he has recognized that sins, which bring about the aversion to God, and following the affections of the devils, the enemies of God, who cause separation from His presence, are the reason for his being veiled and distanced from God *عَزَّ وَجَلَّ*—then he will have no doubt that separating from the path of alienation is obligatory in order to attain nearness. This separation is only completed through knowledge, regret, and resoluteness. Whoever does not recognize that sins are the reasons for alienation from the beloved will not feel the regret or pain caused by his traveling on the path of alienation. As long as he feels no pain, he will not turn back, for the meaning of turning back is abandonment and resoluteness. Thus, there is no doubt that the three meanings [i.e., knowledge, regret, resoluteness] necessitate the attainment of the beloved. This is the faith that is attained through the light of insight.

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As for the one who is not qualified for the likes of this lofty station, his upper limit is within the boundaries of the understanding of most people. By way of imitation and following, he has ample range to attain salvation from destruction. Thus, he must attend to the word of God *سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى*, the word of His Messenger *صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ*, and the word of the righteous predecessors.

God *سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى* said, *And turn to God in repentance, all of you, O believers, that you might succeed* [Q. 24:31]. This is a general statement.

God سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى said, *O you who have believed, repent to God with sincere repentance* [Q. 66:8]. The meaning of sincere (*naṣūḥ*) is purity (*al-khālīṣ*) for the sake of God سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى, being free of any blemish. The word is derived from sincere counsel (*al-nuṣḥ*).

This statement of God سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى indicates the virtue of repentance, *Indeed, God loves those who are constantly repentant and loves those who purify themselves* [Q. 2:222].

The Messenger of God صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ said, “The penitent is the friend of God, and the one who repents for sin is like the one who has no sin.”⁷

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The Messenger of God صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ said, “God is more pleased with the repentance of His believing servant than a man who encamps in an unhealthy perilous land, but he has his riding beast carrying his food and water. He then rests his head and sleeps for a short while. He awakens to find his riding beast gone. He starts looking for it until he suffers from severe heat and thirst or what God willed for him. He then says, ‘I will go back to the place where I was, and I will sleep until I die.’ He rests his head on his forearm, waiting to die. Then he wakes up and finds his riding beast standing beside him with his provisions and water. Yet God سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى is more pleased with the repentance of His believing servant than this man with his riding beast.”⁸ And according to a certain version, he said out

7 This wording is in Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī’s *Qūt al-Qulūb* (1/179). The statement, “the one who repents from sin is like the one who has no sin,” is reported by Ibn Māja (4250). The previous verse indicates the meaning of the first part of the *ḥadīth*. Ibn Abī al-Dunyā in his book *al-Tawba* (183) reports from al-Sha’bī that he mentioned the narration of Ibn Māja, and he recited this verse. He also reported (184) a *ḥadīth* attributed to the Prophet صَلَّى اللَّهُ عَلَيْهِ وَسَلَّمَ in a narration from Anas رَضِيَ اللَّهُ عَنْهُ which states, “God loves the repentant youth.” [Trans. note: Al-Zabīdī in *Ithāf* (vol. 8, 506) states in reference to the first part of the *ḥadīth*, i.e., “the penitent is the friend of God,” that al-ʿIrāqī could not find this wording. Al-Zabīdī then states that the *ḥadīth* (184) reported by Ibn Abī al-Dunya is weak (*ḍaʿīf*). The *ḥadīth* in Ibn Māja is weak. See the comments by Ali Za’i in Ibn Māja, *English Translation of Sunan Ibn Mājah*, vol. 5, 364. Al-ʿIrāqī states that the narration “God loves the repentant youth” is weak. See Zayn al-Dīn Abū al-Faḍl ʿAbd al-Raḥīm b. al-Ḥusayn al-ʿIrāqī, *Al-Mughnī ʿan ḥaml al-asfār fī takhrīj mā fī al-ihyāʾ min al-akhbār*. (Riyadh: Maktaba Dār Ṭābirīyya, 1415/1995), 981, *ḥadīth* #3586.)]

8 Reported by al-Bukhārī (6308) and Muslim (2744).

of intense joy when he wanted to thank God, “O God, I am Your lord, and You are my servant!”⁹

It is reported that al-Ḥasan [al-Baṣrī] said, “When God سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى accepted the repentance of Adam عَلَيْهِ السَّلَام, the angels congratulated him. Gabriel, Michael, and Dardayā’il¹⁰ descended to him and said, ‘O Adam, the coolness of your eye is through God’s acceptance of your repentance.’ Adam عَلَيْهِ السَّلَام said, ‘O Gabriel, if a question remains after this repentance, then where is my station?’ Then God سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى revealed to him, ‘O Adam, you have bequeathed to your offspring difficulty and hardship, and I have bequeathed to them repentance. Whoever among them supplicates to Me with your supplication, I will respond to him as I responded to you. Whoever asks Me for forgiveness, I will not begrudge him because I am Ever-Near, Ever-Responding. O Adam, I will gather the penitents from the graves joyous and laughing, and their supplication will be answered.”¹¹

The reports and traditions concerning [repentance] cannot be counted, and the consensus is settled for the community [of Muslims] that it is obligatory. The intended meaning [for the obligation] is the knowledge that sins and acts of disobedience are destructive and the cause of being distanced from God سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى. This is included in the obligation of faith, but heedlessness can cause diversion from this. Thus, the meaning of this knowledge is to remove this heedlessness, for there is no differing of opinion concerning the obligation [of repentance].

Among the meanings of [repentance] is the abandoning of acts of disobedience in the present, determination to abandon them in the future, and correcting any shortcoming of the past concerning previous conditions. There is no doubt concerning its obligation.

As for regret and sorrow for what has happened, this is obligatory, and [regret] is the spirit of repentance, and by way of [regret] there

9 Reported by Muslim (2747).

10 [Trans. note: This name appears in the Minhaj edition. It is not mentioned by al-Zabīdī in *Ithāf* (vol. 8, 507). I cannot find any reliable information about it.]

11 This wording is reported by al-Kharkūshī in *Tahdhīb al-asrār*, 149. [Trans. note: The statement of God to Adam starting with “O Adam you have bequeathed to your offspring...” is reported by al-Qushayrī in his *Risāla*. See ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Qushayrī, *al-Risāla al-Qushayriyya*. (Cairo: Dār al-Sha‘b, 1409/1989), 185, and in English, *Al-Qushayrī’s Epistle on Sufism*. (Reading, UK: Garnet Publishing Limited, 2007), 116.]

is the completion of redress. Thus, how could it not be obligatory? Nay, it is a type of pain that is obtained inevitably after the realization of knowing what has passed of life and what has been spent in the wrath of God.

If you say, “Suffering of the heart is a necessary matter that is not considered to be a matter of choice. Thus, how could it be described as an obligation?”

Know that the cause [of regret] is the realization of the knowledge of missing the beloved. [Knowledge] has a path to attaining its cause, and through the example of this meaning, knowledge is included as an obligation. This is not in the sense that knowledge is something a servant creates and produces in himself. That is impossible. Rather, knowledge, regret, action, will, power (*qudra*), determination, that which is determined, and all things, are from the creation and action of God. *While God created you and that which you do* [Q. 37:96]. This is the truth according to those who possess insight. Anything other than this is error.

If you say, “Does not a servant have a choice in acting and abandoning?”

We say, “Yes, and that does not negate our statement, ‘All things are from the creation of God *سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى*.’”¹² Rather, choice is also from the creation of God. The servant is compelled concerning the choice that he has. When God had created the sound hand; and had created the delicious food; and had created the desire for the food in the stomach; and had created the knowledge in the

12 [Trans. note: At this point, al-Ghazālī closes this section with a lengthy discourse on the divine decree and determination of all things before starting the next section on the *Elucidation that the obligation of repentance is immediate*. It is an important discussion on the mainstream Sunni beliefs about God’s omnipotence over all things. It is a necessary discussion in the sense of clarifying that a person’s repentance is both an act of God and an acquired act of the person. Al-Ghazālī describes it as a person being compelled to make a willful choice. Then as he explains toward the end of this discourse, most people will not understand the essence of this reality, which appears at first to be a contradiction. The standard Sunni explanation of this is summarized in the statement “without asking how” (*bi lā kayf*). In other words, the human intellect cannot fathom the divine names and attributes. Instead, there must be a spiritual acceptance of this reality. For a more comprehensive discussion of predestination and free will, see al-Ghazālī, *The Principles of the Creed: Kitāb Qawā'id al-aqā'id*. Book 2 of *The Revival of the Religious Sciences*. (Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, 2016), 75–84.]

heart that this food alleviates the desire; and had created opposing thoughts about this food, “Does it contain some harm even though it alleviates desire, and is there, short of eating it [with harm], another objection that prevents eating it, or not?”; and then had created the knowledge that there is no objection; thus, at the gathering of these causes, the motivating will (*al-irāda al-bā'itha*) judges decisively for consumption. So, after hesitating among the opposing thoughts and after [considering] the strong desire for the food, the decisive judgment of the will (*injizām al-irāda*) is that which is named “choice.” Obtaining [the food] is inevitable upon completion of the causes for it. Thus, when the decisive judgment of the will occurs by way of the creation of God *سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى* concerning [the food], the sound hand necessarily moves toward the direction of the food, for after the completion of the will and power, obtaining the action is necessary. Thus, movement occurs, and the movement is by way of the creation of God *سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى* after the attainment of power and the decisive judgment of the will, and both are from the creation of God. The decisive judgment of the will occurs after verifying the desire and the knowledge of the lack of objections, and both are also from the creation of God. However, some of these creations are ranked above others in a manner that follows the *sunna* of God *سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى* concerning His creation. *And never will you find in the way (sunna) of God any change* [Q. 48:23]. [Another example is that] God did not create the movement of the hand for orderly writing without having created an attribute in it which is named power, and without having created life in it, and without having created a decisive will (*al-irāda al-majzūma*). He did not create a decisive will without having created a desire and inclination in the soul. This inclination will not fully emerge so long as He had not yet created knowledge that is in accord with the soul, either presently or in the future. He also does not create knowledge except by other causes relating to movement, will, and knowledge.

23

Knowledge and natural inclination (*al-mayl al-ṭabī'ī*) always entail the decisive will, and will and power always precede movement. This is the orderly rank for every action, and all of it is from the origination (*ikhṭirā'*) of God *سُبْحَانَهُ وَتَعَالَى*. However, some of His creations are conditions for others. For this reason, some creations