The Burden of Wealth

Al-Nida', 11 November 1947.

1 Abd al-Rahman ibn Awf was a man of much wealth, extensive riches in his pre-Islamic days, and hastened to embrace Islam when the call to it appeared, among the earliest of those who hastened to it among the foremost; wealth did not make him arrogant, nor did riches turn his heart away from good, nor did he fear, as the affluent wealthy of Quraysh feared, what Islam called for in the way of equality between rich and poor, strong and weak, free and slave.

2 Rather, God opened his heart to Islam; so he turned to it devoted to it, sacrificing in its path what he had amassed of wealth, what he had swelled of fortune, and what he had gained of eminence, prepared to share with his companions in exposure to harm and the endurance of hardship, and he did not hesitate — as none of his other companions hesitated — when the trial grew severe, the persecution grew heavy, and the ordeal grew great, to flee with his religion to where he could be safe in his opinion, his creed, and his worship of his Lord, leaving behind him his abundant wealth, his extensive riches, his lofty standing, and a people of his own household and kin whom he loved most dearly, and upon whom he showered the tenderest affection, granting them the purest of what his heart overflowed with of gentleness, piety, and compassion; so he emigrated to the land of Abyssinia in both emigrations together, then emigrated to Medina when the Prophet took it as a home for Islam, arriving there possessing nothing but his sharp mind, his pure conscience, his jealous honor, and his faith which had filled his soul with trust and certainty.

3 The Prophet paired him in brotherhood with a man of the wealthy among the Ansar, Sa'd ibn al-Rabi' al-Khazraji — may God have mercy upon him — and Sa'd said to him: Look at my wealth and take half of it; and I have two wives, I shall divorce for you whichever of them you find more pleasing, so that you may take her for yourself as a wife! Abd al-Rahman said: God bless you, but when morning comes, show me your market. So when morning came he went to the market and spent the better part of the day there, then returned having bought and sold and gained enough to set himself up, and after a while he came to the Prophet's gathering wearing new clothes, having taken on such adornment as was then permitted to the Muslims.

4 When the Prophet asked him about this, he informed him that he had taken a wife for himself from among the women of Medina, and that he had given his wife as dowry the weight of a date-stone in gold, so the Prophet ordered him to hold a wedding feast for his companions, and he did so.

5 Not many years passed before Abd al-Rahman ibn Awf was among the wealthy of Medina, having gained one fortune in place of another, and multiplied one wealth in place of another, until he was able to marry and give as dowry to his wife thirty thousand; and he used to say: I have seen myself lifting no stone without thinking I would find beneath it gold or silver!

6 Abd al-Rahman, then, was among the great wealthy before the conquest of Mecca; and when the conquest of Mecca was completed, he added his old riches to his new riches, then invested all of this in the best way wealth could be invested, in the very way Quraysh itself used to invest wealth, until one day he found himself among the wealthiest of all the Arabs, and it may be that he was the wealthiest of them all, with none excepted save Uthman ibn Affan — may God have mercy upon him.

7 It might even be said that Abd al-Rahman ibn Awf was wealthier than the treasury of the Muslims in the days of the Prophet, for the treasury in those days stored up nothing, no taxes were collected into it, no weighty spoils were brought to it; rather, only modest booty was gained in the raids, which was then divided among the raiders, with a fifth of it set aside for public needs and works of charity and piety.

8 Alms were taken from the wealthy and divided among the poor, and only the least part of it ever reached Medina; and when it did reach it, it was reserved for the designated purposes that God had made clear in the Noble Qur'an, so that the treasury remained poor. And nothing proves the poverty of the treasury more than the Prophet's insistence upon the wealthy among the people to assist him with their wealth in some of his campaigns: they would give up for him some of their surplus, or relinquish to him some of their principal.

9 The Prophet hated nothing so much as he hated the accumulation of wealth, and he feared nothing for himself and for his companions so much as he feared for himself and for his companions the accumulation of wealth and the swelling of riches; so one day he looked at Abd al-Rahman and said to him: O son of Awf, you are among the wealthy, and you shall not enter Paradise except crawling; so lend to God, that He may free your

feet. Abd al-Rahman ibn Awf said: And what is it that I should lend to God, O Messenger of God? He said: Begin with what you possess this evening. He said: All of it entirely, O Messenger of God? He said: Yes! So Ibn Awf went out intent upon doing so, and the Messenger of God sent after him, saying: Gabriel has said: "Command Ibn Awf to host the guest, feed the destitute, give to the beggar, and begin with those he supports; for if he does this, it shall be a purification of what he possesses."

10 I should like, before anything else, for the reader to pause with me over what this account contains of a marvelous simplicity, or a simple marvel, in both its wording and its meaning, and in the whole of its story: the Messenger of God is concerned for Abd al-Rahman because of his vast wealth and abundant riches, and he pictures this fortune as heavy, burdensome, borne by its possessor upon his shoulder, preventing him from striving and making movement difficult for him, as though he were shackled, unable to walk toward Paradise with those who walk, or run toward it with those who run; yet he does not advise him to lighten himself of this burden by casting it from his shoulder outright, but rather advises him to make this wealth fruitful and not squander it, by lending to God a goodly loan, so that his wealth is not lost to him but rather multiplied for him manifold on the Day of Resurrection.

11 And Abd al-Rahman asks what it is he ought to lend to God of his wealth, and he is told: Begin with what you possess this evening; that is, rise and give in charity all the wealth that has gathered to you as you enter the evening, and know that in doing so you have done no more than make a beginning, and that you will be tested, in whatever wealth gathers to you in the days to come, exactly as you have been tested in what has gathered to you in your days past.

12 The test weighed somewhat heavily upon Abd al-Rahman, and so he asked the Prophet: All of the wealth that has gathered to me? And the Prophet answered him: Yes! And Abd al-Rahman rose, resolved to carry out the command of God and His Messenger regarding this wealth which he had gathered, and upon the gathering and multiplying of which he had spent such effort and time, and in the multiplying of which he had endured such hardship and toil; and there is no harm in his loving wealth, but the harm, all the harm, and the wrong, all the wrong, lies in letting love of wealth prevent him from spending it in kindness toward orphans, the destitute, kinsfolk, and travelers.

13 Has God not made clear to the Muslims that piety is not in turning one's face toward the East or the West, but rather is faith in God, and the giving of wealth, despite one's love for it, to those who are in need of it?

14 Abd al-Rahman, then, rises resolved to carry out the command of God and His Messenger regarding his wealth, but the Prophet sends to him word that God and His Messenger show him gentleness, after having tested him and proven him, and command him instead to host the guest, feed the destitute, give to the beggar, and begin with his own household and dependents; for if he does so, he will have purified himself fully, and cleansed his wealth fully.

15 Firmness in the trial, until the true resolve, steadfast in submission however hard it may be, and in sacrifice however dear it may be, and in effort however heavy it may be, becomes manifest; and once the unwavering resolve is manifest, and the sincere intention appears, then God and His Messenger bear whatever burden there is to bear.

16 God chose His Prophet for His own nearness, and the tidings of heaven ceased, and the Muslims were deprived of this revelation that had accompanied and consoled them, and one day the people found themselves struck by a violent commotion whose echoes resounded throughout the whole of Medina, and Aisha, Mother of the Believers — may God have mercy upon her — asked about this commotion, and was told: This is the caravan of Abd al-Rahman ibn Awf, arriving… And Aisha said: Why, I heard the Messenger of God say: It is as though I see Abd al-Rahman ibn Awf upon the Bridge, swaying to one side at times and righting himself at others, until he barely escapes!

17 And Aisha's account reached Abd al-Rahman — and this caravan was five hundred mounts carrying precious goods from Syria — and when he heard this account he said: It, and all it carries, is given in charity! He was not content with some of what it carried, nor with all of what it carried, nor with it alone apart from what it carried, but gave it and its loads alike in charity. And had the Messenger of God's life been prolonged, and had the descent of revelation and the tidings of heaven to earth continued, it might have been possible for the Prophet to accept from Abd al-Rahman that he give some of his merchandise in charity while keeping back the rest; but Aisha did no more than relate what she had heard from the Messenger of God, and Abd al-Rahman, in his concern, feared that the Bridge might sway with him at one time and

right itself at another until he reached Paradise only after great effort.

18 And Abd al-Rahman was intent that the Bridge be made straight and steady for him, with neither swaying nor turbulence, so that he might reach Paradise without stumbling, without effort, and without toil.

19 Abd al-Rahman — may God have mercy upon him — was among the most charitable of the Muslims, among the most generous with his wealth, among the most attentive to kinship ties, and among the kindest to people. He spent his whole life investing his wealth and giving it in charity, and his giving never diminished his wealth, but rather increased and multiplied it manifold upon manifold, as though God had decreed that his reward for his charity should not be in the Hereafter alone, nor his loan multiplied for him in Paradise alone, but that he should be granted the reward of this world and the Hereafter together.

20 This is an old account, but the days in which we live make it new in every sense, and I set it before those to whom riches and fortune have been granted as they were granted to Abd al-Rahman, or more than was granted to Abd al-Rahman, wishing it to settle in their hearts that if riches weighed heavily upon Abd al-Rahman, even though he was among the earliest of the foremost believers, even though he strove with his own person and his wealth alongside the Messenger of God, and even though there was not a day of his life in which he spent without giving generously in charity—

21 I wish it to settle in their hearts that if riches weighed heavily upon Abd al-Rahman, even though the Prophet had guaranteed him Paradise among a company of the earliest of the foremost believers, then it weighs still more heavily upon them; for they were not foremost in embracing Islam, nor did they strive with their persons and their wealth in the path of God, nor did the Prophet guarantee them anything, except that if they do well in obeying God with their persons and their wealth, nothing of what they have offered shall be lost to them.

22 And if the Prophet feared for Abd al-Rahman that he would not reach Paradise except crawling, and would not cross the Bridge except after great effort, then we are more entitled still to fear for our own wealthy that they may not reach Paradise, whether crawling or not crawling, and may not cross the Bridge, whether striving or not striving.

23 Let our wealthy look, then, at the wretchedness, misery, plague, and death around them, and let them reflect that their wealth is but a

borrowed loan to be returned, and that those who lend to God a goodly loan shall have their loan multiplied for them on the Day of Resurrection, and that those who hoard gold and silver and do not spend it in the path of God have been given tidings of a painful punishment, on the day when it shall be heated in the fire of Hell and their foreheads, their backs, and their sides branded with it, and it shall be said to them: This is what you hoarded for yourselves; so taste what you used to hoard!