

Letter 31

[The following is] one of his exhortations,¹ which he wrote to al-Hasan ibn ‘Alī² at Ḥādirayn as he returned from Ṣiffīn:

From a father³ on the brink of extinction, who cedes [victory] to time,⁴ who has put a lifetime behind himself, who submits to [the vicissitudes of] time,⁵ who denigrates the temporal world,⁶ who dwells in the abode of the dead,⁷ and shall depart from it tomorrow.

¹ The word *waṣīyyah* is sometimes used for a “testament” written by a dying person to advise his heirs what to do after his death. However, it is used here to mean an “exhortation” or “admonition.”

² Some phrases in the introduction to the exhortation seem inappropriate for an immaculate imam (in particular, “a bondman of the temporal world, a merchant [trading] in the [goods of] deception...who has been pinned down by desires”). Accordingly, some have argued that the exhortation is addressed to Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥanafīyyah not Imām al-Ḥasan, since in some transmissions, it is narrated as being addressed to the former. Others have argued that its being addressed to Imām al-Ḥasan evinces that the imams are not immaculate. The latter conclusion is obviously wrong. We have solid rational and textual proof of their infallibility that cannot be shaken by singular phrases in a tradition. Keeping this tenet firmly fixed in our hearts, we are faced with two solutions to this dilemma: either we must concede that the tradition is addressed to Muḥammad ibn al-Ḥanafīyyah, who, despite his greatness, was fallible; or we must admit that we have not understood these introductory attributes of Imām ‘Alī’s addressee. In any case, what is beyond a shred of doubt is that the exhortation is replete with invaluable wisdom. As one scholar put it, “If it were ever necessary to etch any words of wisdom in gold, it is this exhortation” (quoted in *Bihār al-anwār* vol. 74, p.196, tradition 1).

³ A counselor must possess two important qualifications: intimate experience and a sincere concern for his advisee’s best interests. It is to establish the first of these two qualifications that Imām ‘Alī introduces himself with these seven attributes, which portray him as one who has lived long, faced every trial, and understood his enemy intimately. He establishes his right to the second qualification in the third paragraph where he expresses his strong love and concern for his son. The result of all this is to increase the efficacy of his exhortation on his son, and as a consequence, on us.

⁴ As he is powerless to halt it or turn it back, he concedes to its incessant onslaught.

⁵ By submitting to time, he allows it to do with him as it wishes and to bring with it what death, sickness, and tribulation it may.

⁶ In saying number 131 of *Nahj al-balāghah*, upon hearing a man speak ill of the temporal world, Imām ‘Alī says, “You who denigrate the world, yet are fooled by its guiles and taken in by its false [promises]. Do you let yourself be fooled by the world and then proceed in denigrating it? Are you its accuser or is it your accuser?” It seems strange that he would attribute to himself the very attribute that he censured in that man. However, he did not censure the man for denigrating the temporal world, but for his hypocrisy in denigrating it in public while allowing himself to be taken in by its guiles. He was blaming the world for his own faults and not recognizing its many blessings. Imām ‘Alī, on the hand, denigrates the temporal world without submitting to its trickery and while recognizing and making the best of its blessings.

⁷ One who dwells in the abode of those who have died should expect to encounter a similar fate. The Qur’ān constantly calls on us to realize that the world we live in was inhabited by generations before and will soon pass to subsequent generations. Our stay in it is brief, so we must not put much stock in it. For instance, the Qur’ān says, “...and you dwell in the abodes of those who wronged themselves...” (Qur’ān 14:45).