

Fast 27: Jihād — What is it?

- The word *jihād* does not mean ‘war’. According to classical Arabic dictionaries it means the exerting of one’s power in repelling something bad. It can be against a visible enemy, against the devil, or against one’s own self. This word by itself does not refer to any specific religious duty of Muslims. In Arabic, it can even be said that non-Muslims are doing a *jihād* against Muslims, as the Quran says:

“And We have enjoined on man goodness to his parents. But if they strive (*jāhadā*) to make you set up partners with Me, of which you have no knowledge, do not obey them.”
(29:8, see also 31:15)

وَوَصَّيْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ بِوَالِدَيْهِ حُسْنًا وَإِنْ
جَاهَدَاكَ لِتُشْرِكَ بِي مَا لَيْسَ لَكَ بِهِ عِلْمٌ فَلَا
تُطِعْهُمَا

Here the non-believing parents of a Muslim are said to be conducting a *jihād* against him to make him worship things other than the one God.

- When the Holy Prophet was living in Makkah, and there was no revelation in the Quran relating to fighting battles, the Quran still mentioned *jihād* as being conducted by Muslims. This was in the sense of spiritual striving to attain nearness to God:

“And those who strive hard (*jāhadū*) for Us, We shall certainly guide them in Our ways. And Allah is surely with the doers of good.”
(29:69)

وَالَّذِينَ جَاهَدُوا فِينَا لَنَهْدِيَنَّهُمْ سُبُلَنَا
وَإِنَّ اللَّهَ لَمَعَ الْمُحْسِنِينَ

The result of this *jihād* is stated to be that God guides those who strive in His ways.

- The word *jihād* is used precisely in the same sense, twice, in a previous verse in the same chapter:

“And whoever strives hard (*jāhada*), strives (*yujāhidu*) for himself (i.e., for his own benefit). Surely Allah is above need of His creatures.” (29:6)

وَمَنْ جَاهَدَ فَإِنَّمَا يُجَاهِدُ لِنَفْسِهِ إِنَّ اللَّهَ
لَغَنِيٌّ عَنِ الْعَالَمِينَ

This is a person who is striving, or conducting a *jihād*, to improve himself.

- Again, before the Quran ever mentioned Muslims as having to fight battles, it mentioned their *jihād* of bearing their difficulties patiently in the face of persecution for their faith — the persecution which forced them to flee for their lives:

“Then surely your Lord, to those who flee after they are persecuted, then struggle hard (*jāhadū*) and are patient, surely your Lord after that is Protecting, Merciful.” (16:110)

ثُمَّ إِنَّ رَبَّكَ لِلَّذِينَ هَاجَرُوا مِن بَعْدِ مَا فُتِنُوا
ثُمَّ جَاهِدُوا وَصَبَرُوا إِنَّ رَبَّكَ مِنْ بَعْدِهَا
لَغَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ﴿١١٠﴾

It is wrongly thought that patience and doing *jihād* are opposite things, and that one can either show patience, i.e., do nothing, or do *jihād*. And there is a misconception that at Makkah, before the Holy Prophet’s move to Madinah, the Quran taught Muslims only to show patience (*ṣabr*) under persecution, and not retaliate, but at Madinah it changed this teaching and required them to do a *jihād* of fighting. The error of this view is shown by the verse quoted just now, which was revealed at Makkah. It mentions those Muslims who were migrating from Makkah to Madinah while the Holy Prophet still remained at Makkah. It describes them as doing *jihād* after fleeing the persecution at Makkah and being patient. They certainly were not fighting any battle. They were struggling hard due to having left their homes and they were being patient in that struggle. In fact, they had already been struggling hard, i.e., doing *jihād* and being patient while under persecution at Makkah.

- Yet again at Makkah, Muslims were taught:

“And strive hard (*jāhidū*) for Allah with due striving (*jihād*).” (22:78)

وَجَاهِدُوا فِي اللَّهِ حَقَّ جِهَادِهِ^ط

This is a *jihād* to attain nearness to God. It is called here *ḥaqqā jihād*, meaning the real and true *jihad*, or the “due” *jihād*, the *jihād* as it ought to be done.

- Another revelation at Makkah is as follows:

“So do not obey the disbelievers, and strive (*jāhid*) against them a mighty striving (*jihād*) with it.” (25:52)

فَلَا تُطِعِ الْكَافِرِينَ وَجَاهِدْهُمْ بِهِ جِهَادًا
كَبِيرًا ﴿٥٢﴾

This is a *jihād* which, as the verse says, is to be carried on against the unbelievers. However, it is not by means of the sword but by means of the Quran. The words “with it” mean “with the Quran”. And it is called here “a mighty *jihād*.”

- The last two verses quoted above show that a *jihād*, **in the terminology of the Quran**, is the struggle made to attain nearness to God and to subdue one’s wrong desires, and the struggle made to win over the unbelievers, not by means of force but

with the truths and arguments brought by the Quran. That is the **real, true and greatest** *jihad*.