

The Straight path: Manifested in the Qur'an

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Millions of Muslims recite the following supplication at least seventeen times daily. On the opening page of the Holy Qur'an we find these verses:

*"Praise be to God, Lord of the worlds;
Most Gracious, Most Merciful;
Master of the Day of Judgment
Thee alone do we worship
And Thine aid do we seek
Guide us to the Straight Path:
The path of those upon whom
Thou hast bestowed Thy Grace
Those upon whom there has been no wrath
And who have not gone astray. "*

This is the best-known chapter (Sura) in the Qur'an, recited by everyone whilst standing in prayer. But what is the Straight Path? It is unfortunate that many Muslims would answer this question with a generalization, saying that the Straight Path is Islam, while others might be more specific, albeit mistaken, saying that it is the path stretched over Hellfire and into Heaven on Judgment Day. Only a few would give the answer from the Qur'an itself. Thus it comes as no wonder that some of us are lost in generalizations, while others are limited by legend. It is distressing to realize that the Qur'an's wonders are lost on so many! The following verses (Holy Qur'an: 6:151-153) reveal the Straight Path, one step at a time.

*"Say, come, I will rehearse what God has prohibited you from:
Do not hold anything equal to Him,
Be kind to your parents,
Do not kill your children for fear of poverty; We sustain you and them,
Do not approach shameful deeds whether open or secret
Do not take life which God has made sacred except by way of justice and law,
Thus does He command you that you may attain Wisdom.
Do not approach the orphan's property except to improve it until he attains maturity,
Give measure and weight with justice,*

We do not impose on any soul but that which it can bear.

*Whenever you speak be just, even when someone close to you
is concerned, and fulfill the Covenant of God.*

Thus does He command you that you may attain Remembrance.

***Verily this is My Straight Path, so follow it, and do not follow other
trails for they will divert you from His Path;***

Thus does He command you that you may attain Consciousness (Heedfulness 'Taqwa').

(HQ 6: 151-153)

These are the steps on 'The Straight Path'; steps that lead to the advancement of Mankind. As we have observed in these verses, after a set of instructions the Qur'an says: Thus doth He command you that you may 'attain Wisdom', then, 'attain Remembrance', and finally, attain Heedfulness (*Taqwa*). These three qualities have been the objectives of many God-given instructions, whether related to social behavior and faith in God Alone, as recited above, or to specific acts of worship such as prayer, fasting etc. The obvious gist is that this bilateral (social and spiritual) pursuit of Wisdom, Remembrance, and Heedfulness generates universal enrichment and well-being. Indeed, when acts of worship take precedence over healthy social behavior they lose their spiritual essence, becoming a mere ritual, a label of identification. That one-legged approach, being a misrepresentation of Faith in God Alone, detains us upon the Straight Path and therefore holds back the progress of our civilization.

Divine religion is, after all, for the benefit of humanity. The fact that much of the world's bloodshed today is due to religious differences shows us that religion has generally been misinterpreted. This is even more obvious when we recognize the fact that all of God's Prophets were united in their mission: the worship of God Alone, and doing good unto mankind. The Opening Sura of the Qur'an indicates that there were those upon whom *was* God's s Grace and Guidance to a Straight Path:

"Guide us to the Straight Path:

The path of those upon whom Thou hast bestowed Thy Grace."

These verses tell us who they were:

"We gave him (Abraham) Isaac and Jacob

All three have we guided, and before that

*Noah we guided, and among his progeny
David, Solomon, Job, Joseph, Moses and Aaron.
Thus do we reward those who do good.
And Zakariya and John, and Jesus and Elias;
all amongst the Righteous;
and Ismail and Elisha, and Jonah and Lot,
To all we gave favor above all nations.
**To them and to their fathers and their progeny and their brethren;
We chose them and We guided them to a Straight Path.**
This is the guidance of God; He guides by it whomsoever He wills of His servants,
But if they were to join partners unto Him - then all their deeds would become invalid.
(HQ 6: 84-87)*

Eighteen Messengers of God here mentioned by name, as well as their fathers, progeny and brethren - who followed their teachings- all were guided by God to a Straight Path!

It is interesting to note that the Path mentioned here is not 'THE' Straight Path, but 'A' Straight Path. That is because the Laws of God had not been fully revealed to the earlier of these prophets (when civilization had not yet developed enough for laws), hence the absence of the definite article 'THE'. These eighteen prophets were sent to teach their people the worship of God Alone (*'If they were to join partners unto Him then all their deeds would become invalid'*), to reinstate upright and virtuous conduct, to deliver them from hardship -in short, to raise their standards of knowledge and of living. The advent of each prophet caused a leap in the progress of civilization. We'll cite Prophet Noah's Message (peace upon him) here as an example. His Message, being the earliest, was very simple: Noah asked his people nothing else besides the worship of God Alone. The punishment they were warned of was something earthly that they could understand.

*"And We had (of old) sent Noah to his people (saying):
I am a clear bearer of warning! That you should not worship
other than God, I fear for you the punishment of a grievous day!"
(HQ11: 25-26)*

They did not understand what he was doing as he built the Ark and thought that he had lost his mind. Nevertheless, he went on with God's revealed instruction '*wahi*', tying the wooden planks of his vessel together with palm-fiber, since neither heavy ropes nor nails had been invented yet (see HQ 54:9-13). Humans then hadn't learned to swim, had no knowledge of floatation, and therefore mistrusted the Ark. Refusing to climb on board with his father, Noah's son said, "*I shall resort to a mountain that would save me from the water*" (H.Q. 11:43). Subsequently those who did not believe Noah were drowned in the Flood while those who did lived on, with the knowledge that they could now navigate both land and sea.

The Messages continued, each Prophet uncovering more of mankind's potential and adding on to mankind's knowledge, until, with the advent of Prophets Moses and Aaron (peace upon them), civilization had developed enough, both to understand spiritual abstracts and to be given laws. The 'Straight Path', comprehensive now with the Law revealed to Moses, merits the definite article, 'the':

*"And We did bestow Our favor upon Moses and Aaron
And We delivered them (both) and their people from a great calamity
And we helped them both so they were victorious
And We gave them both the clear Book
And We guided both to the Straight Path."*

(H.Q.37:114-118)

Finally, centuries later, mankind reached adequate mental development and the Arabic language reached its peak of precision and maturity. That was when the Qur'an was revealed. With the advent of Prophet Mohammed (peace upon him), the standard was set for civilization that was to progress until it became the civilization of today. With the final Divine Revelation of the Holy Qur'an, with its codes of moral conduct, its recommendations towards the attainment of Wisdom, Remembrance and Heedfulness, with its teachings on life and the hereafter, finally, with the Holy Quran the Straight Path becomes manifest, eternally accessible to mankind, beckoning the righteous to pursue it and join the ranks of those upon whom is God's Infinite Grace.