وَّعَلَى الثَّلٰثَةِ الَّذِيْنَ خُلِّفُوْا ؕ حَتّٰٓى اِذَا ضَاقَتْ عَلَيْهِمُ الْاَرْضُ بِمَا رَحُبَتْ وَضَاقَتْ عَلَيْهِمْ اَنْفُسُهُمْ
وَظَنُّوْٓا اَنْ لَّا مَلْجَاَ مِنَ اللّٰهِ اِلَّآ اِلَيْهِ ؕ ثُمَّ تَابَ عَلَيْهِمْ لِيَتُوْبُوْا ؕ اِنَّ اللّٰهَ هُوَ التَّوَّابُ الرَّحِيْمُ ۧ ﴿١١٨﴾

[9:118] And He also relented towards the three whose cases had been deferred.[118] When the earth, for all its spaciousness, became constrained to them, and their own beings became a burden to them, and they realized that there was no refuge for them from Allah except in Him; He relented towards them that they may turn back to Him. Surely, it is Allah Who is Much Forgiving, Ever Merciful.[119]

118. These three were among those who came to the Prophet (peace be upon him) to present their excuses for staying behind. More than eighty of them were hypocrites, who put forward lame excuses and the Prophet (peace be upon him) accepted these and let them go. Then came the turn of these three, who were true believers, and they confessed their fault plainly. Therefore the Prophet (peace be upon him) postponed the decision of their case and ordered the Muslims not to have any social relations with them till the decision of their case came from Allah. This verse was sent down to decide their case.

In this connection it should be kept in mind that the case of these three was different from the case of the seven mentioned in E.N. 99. They had inflicted the punishment on themselves before they were called to account for their fault.

119. The three whose condition has been described in this verse, were Kaab bin Malik, Hilal bin Umayyah and Murarah bin Rubai. They were sincere believers, as has been stated above, and had

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made many sacrifices and given proofs of their sincerity before this. The last two had taken part in the battle of Badr also, and therefore their faith was above every kind of suspicion. Though Kaab had not taken part in the battle of Badr, he had accompanied the Prophet (peace be upon him) in every other expedition. But in spite of all these services, they were severely punished for the negligence they had shown on the critical occasion of the Tabuk expedition, when all the able-bodied Muslims were commanded to go forth to Jihad.

When the Prophet (peace be upon him) came back from Tabuk, he ordered the Muslims to break away completely from them; so much so that they should not even respond to their greetings. After forty days of this boycott their wives also were ordered to have nothing to do with them. In short, they were reduced at Al-Madinah to the same sad plight which has been described in this verse. At last, after a boycott of fifty days, this verse was sent down to announce their forgiveness.

The story of the above-mentioned boycott has been described in detail by Kaab bin Malik, who was one of the three. When he became old and blind, he himself told his story to his son, Abdullah, who used to accompany him everywhere. As this story is an excellent lesson for all, it is given below in Kaab's own words:

"When the Prophet (peace be upon him) urged upon the people to get ready for Jihad, I made up my mind to make preparations for this. But when I went home, I became negligent, saying to myself, "There is no hurry. When the time comes I will readily make preparations and start forthwith". In this way I went on putting off my preparations till the time came when the army was going to start on the expedition. As I had made no preparations for the journey, I said to myself, "It does not matter. I will be able to join the army in a couple of days during the journey". But again the same negligence prevented me from putting my intention into practice. At last no occasion was left for me to join the army. To add to my misery my conscience pricked me over and over again that the people with whom I had stayed behind in Al-Madinah were either the hypocrites or those Muslims who were old or otherwise unfit for Jihad.

When the Prophet (peace be upon him) came back from Tabuk, he, as usual, said two rakats of prayer in the mosque. Then he sat there to meet the people. At first, the hypocrites, whose number was a little more than eighty, came to him and offered lame excuses on solemn oaths. The Prophet (peace be upon him) listened to the false story of each of them and accepted their apparent excuses and left the decision about their hearts to Allah, saying, "May Allah forgive you". Then it was my turn to put forward my excuse. I went forward and uttered my salutations. He smiled and said, "Well, what kept you behind?" I hesitated for a moment. By God, I would have invented one excuse or the other to satisfy any man of the world, for I am well versed in the art of conversation. But here was the Prophet (peace be upon him) who was demanding an explanation from me. I believed that even if I succeeded in satisfying him by making a false excuse, Allah will inform him of the truth of the case and I shall again incur his displeasure. On the other hand, if I told the truth, I expected that Allah would forgive me, even though I were to incur his displeasure for the time being. So I replied, "I have no excuse for staying behind. I was in every way able to go forth (to Tabuk)". At this the Prophet (peace be upon him) remarked, "This is the man who has told the truth". Then turning to me, he said, "Go and wait till Allah decides your case".

I rose from there and took my seat among the people of my own clan. They at once began to tease and reprove me because I had made no excuse. At this, I was tempted to go and make some false excuse. But when I came to know that there were also two good people (Murarah bin Rubai and Hilal bin Umayyah), who had told the same thing that I had, I felt satisfied and stuck to the truth.

After this the Prophet (peace be upon him) issued a general order that no one should have any kind of talk with us. The other two confined themselves to their houses but I used to go out of my house and say my prayers in congregation and walk through the bazaars. As nobody spoke to me, it appe

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me that I was a foreigner in some strange city where I had no acquaintances. When I attended the mosque, I would utter the usual salutations and wait in vain for a response from the Prophet (peace be upon him). I would turn stealthy looks at him to read his thoughts in regard to me, but he would turn his eyes away from me, though he had been looking at me while I was engaged in prayer. As this condition became intolerable for me, one day I went to see Abu Qatadah who was a cousin of mine and a friend from childhood. I climbed over the wall of his garden and uttered my salutations, but even he did not make any response to it. Then I said, "O Abu Qatadah! I ask you to tell me on oath whether I love or do not love Allah and His Messenger". But he remained silent. Again I repeated the question but he kept silent. I asked him on oath to answer my question. Then he merely replied, "Allah and His Messenger know best". At this my eyes were filled with tears, and I came back.

Another incident happened during those days. Once I was passing through the bazaar, when a Syrian came to me and gave me a letter wrapped in silk. This was from the king of Ghassan and read like this: We have come to know that your leader is persecuting you these days. As you are not an ignoble person, we will not leave you to rot there. Therefore come to us and we will honor you (as you deserve). I said to myself, "Here is another hard trial for me". Then I threw the letter into the burning oven.

The boycott continued for forty days, when a man brought this message from the Prophet (peace be upon him) that I should separate from my wife. I asked whether I should divorce her but was told that I should only separate from her. Accordingly I said to my wife, "Go to your parental home and wait till a decision comes from Allah."

On the fiftieth day, when after the morning prayers, I was sitting in a state of utter despair on the top of my house, all of a sudden someone cried aloud, "O Kaab bin Malik! please accept my congratulations." Hearing this, I fell prostrate to the ground before Allah, for I understood that the command of my forgiveness had come. After this, people began to pour in, each trying to forestall the other in congratulating me on the acceptance of my repentance. I rose and went directly to the Mosque. I noticed that the face of the Prophet (peace be upon him) was glowing with happiness and in response to my salutations, he said, "I congratulate you on this: it is the best day of your life." I said, "Is this forgiveness from you or from Allah?" He replied, "It is from Allah." Then he recited these verses (117-118). I asked, "O Messenger of Allah! Does my repentance require that I should give the whole of my property in charity?" He replied, "Keep a part of it, for it will be better for you." Accordingly, I kept my property at Khaibar for myself and gave all the rest in charity. Then I solemnly pledged that I would stick to the truth throughout rest of my life, for Allah had forgiven me in return for the truth I had told. That is why I have never uttered a word against reality intentionally up to this time and hope and expect that Allah will protect me from lies in future as well.

This story contains many lessons, and every believer should impress these on his mind and heart.

The first and foremost lesson we learn from this story is that the matter of the conflict between Islam and kufr is so important and delicate that we should take the greatest possible care to be on our guard in regard to this. Not to mention the case of one who takes active part on the side of kufr, if a Muslim shows the least negligence even inadvertently in taking part on the side of Islam once in his life; and that, too, not with any evil intention, he is liable to lose all the lifelong services and devotions rendered by him in the cause of Islam. That was why such a severe action was taken even against those worthy people who had done great deeds of valor in the battles of Badr, Uhd, Ahzab and Hunain, and whose sincerity and faith were absolutely above suspicion.

The second thing, which is as important as the first, is that one should never consider lightly any negligence in the performance of a duty, for this often misleads one to commit an offense that is counted among heinous sins. The fact that one did not commit the offense with any evil intention cannot save one from punishment.

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Lastly, this story presents the true spirit of the society that had been evolved out under the leadership of the Prophet (peace be upon him). On the one side, there were the hypocrites whose treacherous deeds were quite well known to all. They offered lame excuses which were accepted without demur for nothing better could be expected from them. On the other side, let us take the case of Kaab bin Malik, who was a tried believer, and whose sacrifices were above every kind of suspicion. He did not invent any false story to justify himself but confessed his fault quite plainly and clearly. But in contrast to the hypocrites, a severe chastisement was inflicted on him, not because there was any suspicion about his faith but because a sincere believer like him had behaved in a way in which only a hypocrite could behave. Thus the chastisement was meant to remind them: "You are the salt of the earth. But if you, too, become tasteless, from where will then salt be obtained?"

There is another noteworthy side of the matter. The part played by the leader and the follower and the Muslim society in this incident is unique. The leader inflicts the most severe punishment but with the feelings of affection and without any tinge of anger or hatred in it. It is like the punishment which a father gives to his son. It is always understood that the punishment is given for the good of the son, who knows that as soon as he mends his ways, he will regain the fatherly love. And the follower sets an excellent example of obedience under very trying circumstances. He suffers hard from the severity of the chastisement but never thinks of rebelling against the leader because of any false personal or clannish pride; nay, he does not cherish in his heart any complaint against his beloved leader, but begins to love him even more than before. During this saddest period of his life the only thing he yearns for is a look of affection from his leader. For he is like a famine-stricken farmer whose only hope is the piece of cloud which he sees floating in the sky.

Now let us have a glimpse of the Muslim society, which displayed the greatest discipline and the highest moral spirit that had ever been shown by any society. No sooner does the leader order the boycott than the whole community becomes a stranger to the follower not only in public but also in private. So much so that his nearest relatives and closest friends do not even speak to him; nay, his own wife leaves him alone. He implores them on oath to tell him if they suspected his sincerity, but even his lifelong companions make a point-blank refusal, saying that he should ask Allah and His Messenger for that testimony. But in spite of the show of this strict discipline, the moral spirit of the community is so high and so pure that not a single person tries to take advantage of the position of the fallen brother by adding insult to his injury; nay, everyone feels sorry for his brother in disgrace, and is important to embrace him as soon as he is forgiven. That is why the people run in haste to tell him the good news.

The above is the model of the righteous community that the Quran aims.

This background makes it plain why Allah not only forgave them but also manifested His kindness; gentleness and compassion in His forgiveness to these people. It was because of their sincerity which they proved during the fifty days of their chastisement. Had they shown arrogance after the commission of their offense and retaliated by taking angry and hostile actions as does every selfworshiper whose pride is wounded: had they behaved during their boycott in a manner as if they would break away from the community but never bow down before it: had they passed this period in spreading dissatisfaction in the community and gathering around them all the disgruntled people in order to organize a strong opposition against the leader, then they would have most certainly been expelled from the community, as if to say, "Go you now and worship the idol of yourself, for henceforth you will never be given any opportunity for exerting to raise the word of Allah". But these three did not adopt this way though it was open to them. On the contrary, they took a different way, as has been seen, and proved that Godworship had destroyed every idol that might have remained hidden in their hearts: that they had dedicated themselves entirely to the exertion in the Way of Allah: that while joining the Islamic community they had burnt their boats to make it impossible for themselves to go back anywhere: that they would put up with every kind of treatment but

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remain in the community and die as a member of it and would scornfully reject any offer of an honorable place outside it; and would rather bear disgrace in it. That was why they were again taken in the community with the same honor as before. This is the explanation of the kind words of forgiveness: "Then He turned to them, that they might repent." In these concise words, the Quran has depicted the true picture of the matter. The Master had at first turned away His attention from His three servants but when He saw that they had not left His door but had remained there with broken hearts, He again turned to them in appreciation of their fidelity so as to bring them back into the fold.

Surah At-Tawbah 9:111-118 [14/16]