Is prison a necessary stage for the Dā’ī (the caller to Allāh)? Is it a praised rank, whereby the one that is included in it is better than the one who isn’t because of having entered this stage?

From what there is no doubt about is that the path of Da’wah is filled with dangers and hardships. Allāh, Ta’ālā, said:

Do people think that they will be left alone because they say: "We believe," and will not be tested. And We indeed tested those who were before them. And Allāh will certainly make (it) known (the truth of) those who are true, and will certainly make (it) known (the falsehood of) those who are liars, (although Allāh knows all that before putting them to test)[1]

That is because the Dā’ī comes to the people with matters that are new, and he calls them to abandon their profits and their agreements, and he is grieved over the course and the path they are upon, and this is a tremendous matter for the people because he challenges their principles and their greatest convictions. Therefore, the Dā’ī is met with vehemence and violence. And for this reason, hardships separate the ranks [of the people], and through them, the people return to their rightful positions without ambiguity or falsification. Trials make the standing of the people known, and endurance is only for one who is patient. Allāh, Ta’ālā, said:

And We made from among them (Children of Israel), leaders, giving guidance under Our Command, when they were patient and used to believe with certainty in Our Ayāt (proofs)[2]

Ibn Taymiyyah, may Allāh have Mercy upon him, said in the exegesis of this Verse, “With patience
and certainty, leadership is attained." So, patience prevents rashness, and certainty prevents despair. So the Dā‘ī has two strengths that fortify him against mistakes. A strength that drives him - and it is certainty, and a strength that bides him time - and it is patience; certainty about the forthcoming promise, and patience in the trials presently occurring.

Tribulations and tests are manifest in every calling, and they surround the insubordinate ones, whether their insubordination was with Truth or with falsehood. It is not only the Prophets or their followers who meet hardships in the path of their Da‘wah, but rather, all those who come to the people with something new. But what distinguishes the people of Truth from others regarding this is that the difficulties [faced by] the Prophets and their followers is for the sake of Allāh:

That is because they suffer neither thirst nor fatigue, nor hunger in the Cause of Allāh, nor they take any step to raise the anger of disbelievers nor inflict any injury upon an enemy but is written to their credit as a deed of righteousness.[3]

But as for the others, their hardships are a plague for them, as Allāh, Ta‘ālā, said:

"Labouring (hard in the worldly life by worshipping others besides Allāh), weary (in the Hereafter with humility and disgrace). They will enter in the hot blazing Fire". [4]

And as He, Ta‘ālā, said:

Verily, those who disbelieve spend their wealth to hinder (men) from the Path of Allāh, and so will they continue to spend it; but in the end it will become an anguish for them. Then they will be overcome. And those who disbelieve will be gathered unto Hell[5]

So tribulations are manifest in the course of the Da‘wāt (callings), because the presence of the enemies are from the indications of Allāh’s Victory to His Awliyā’. Allāh, Ta‘ālā, said:
And so We have appointed for every Prophet enemies - Shayātīn (devils) among mankind and Jinn[6]

And it is one of the implications of the Name of Allāh: Al-Muntaqim (the Avenger).

The disparity amongst people is a cosmic Sunnah, and so is their scrambling so that each one of them achieves the goals he is striving towards. And the equilibrium between the two parties comes through the attainment of the Victory and the defeat extended in the Qur’ān. There is no Divine injunction except that it is an element from the elements of Victory, and there is no violation of the Sharī‘ah except that it is a factor from the factors of defeat.

Prison is one of the manifestations of tribulation, and is one of the forms of torment with which every party threatens the other, as Fir’awn menacingly said to Mūsā, Peace be upon him,

(Qur’ān) said: "If you choose an Ilāh (god) other than me, I will certainly put you among the prisoners."[7]

And it was one of the choices of Quraysh in their torment of the Messenger of Allāh, Peace and Blessings be upon him;

And this is because prison is one of the forms of psychological and physical torment, and it shackles the will of the human being and prohibits him from exercising his civil and human [rights]. And for the Dā‘ī, it is even more unbearable and fatiguing because it separates between the Dā‘ī and the surrounding he needs for his Da‘wah. The work of the Dā‘ī is the light within the people, and [it is] teaching them what is good, and winning followers for his call, and advancing his call to the individuals on the way. So prison is a deprivation for him of all this because the Dā‘ī is isolated from his surroundings so as to prevent him from impacting and acquiring [followers].

In this contemporary estrangement (Ghurbah), the callers began to call to Allāh and the Sunnah of vindication has been completed between the Party of Hāq and the party of Bātīl, and the Tāghūt has filled the prisons with the callers, and the forms of tribulation have recurred. And until now, [many] large groups have been put in prison. But what did prison do to them?
The prison is like a vessel whose colour is established depending on the colour of what is within it. Some of them deteriorated and fell, and usually, those are a minority that are not noticed. But the majority emerged from prison carrying memories of pain and torment, emerging to write to the people Karbala-like memoirs, full of weeping and lamentation, every one of the [writers] attempts to draw the readers’ emotions towards him with his work, and [attempts] to win their pity over it. And there is a form of literature found in the Islāmic libraries that exemplify this form of art, that of weeping and Karbala-like lamentation. And the intention behind this is to hang medals over the chests so as to indicate that this man has been tortured and beaten. And until now, there has not emerged from this afflicted group a work or works resulting from their experience that may be a provision for the coming generation.

So prison is a trial; it will either break [you], or squeeze [you], or profit [you] so that the imprisoned one will emerge purified of all impurities - impurities of thought and impurities within his Nafs, so that his insight ascends, and his Nafs is polished in its development and training. The one that is tested should not be praised except according to the extent he benefited from the trial. He is not praised and sought after in and of himself, for the person might deteriorate within [prison], or he might emerge from it just as he entered it - ignorant, blind, and with bad character, or he might emerge having risen in rank while he was in it. And all of this depends on the person and how he looks at the phases and manifestations that pass him by in life. And prison is not a praiseworthy stage, nor is it something that a person should seek so as to be better than those close to him; rather he should look to the magnitude of benefit to be gained from such an experience.

- Al-Jihād Wal-Ijtihād 102-104

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[3] At-Tawbah : 120
[4] Al-Ghāshiyah : 3-4
[8] Al-Anfāl : 30