

Imām al-Ghazālī's *Ihya Ulum al-Din* on paradise & hell

A brief biography of Imām al-Ghazālī

Undoubtedly, Imām al-Ghazālī was one of the greatest scholars ever to have lived in the Islamic Ummah. A thousand years later, his works, legacy and thinking continues to inspire Muslims young and old, in all corners of the world.

Hujjat al-Islām, al-Imām Zayn al-Dīn Abū Hāmid Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazālī al-Tūsī, al-Nisāpūrī, al-Shāfi'ī al-Sūfī was born in the town of Tus, the second major town of Khurasan (after Nisāpūr) in 450. According to Ibn Asākir, he began studying Fiqh in his youth and then moved to Nisāpūr, where he continued his studies under Imām al-Haramyn al-Juwaynī. Whilst occupying himself with the formal studies in the morning, he coupled this with learning the inner sciences in more informal settings in the afternoon. In other words, he walked both paths, the outer and the inner sciences of Islam.

He left Nisāpūr and then joined Nizām al-Mulk at the tender age of 28. Many approached him to debate with him and he triumphed over them. As a result, they gave him the post of professor of the Nizāmiyya in Baghdad, where he became famous as a brilliant mind.

Then in the year 488, gave up this revered post to seek refuge in solitude and renunciation. He performed the Hajj, and then journeyed to Damascus, Egypt, Jerusalem before returning to his native Tus in 492. It is here is compiled most of his literary works and taught in the Sufi Khanqahs.

He passed away on the 14th of Jumāda al-Akhira in 505/1111.

Ihyā Ulūm al-Din

Ihyā Ulūm al-Dīn is the magnum opus of Imām al-Ghazālī's literary legacy. For many, it is considered the best Islamic work after the Qur'ān and Sunna and the ultimate Sufi treatise. Imām al-Nawawī stated that 'were the books of Islam all to be lost, except the *Ihyā*, it would suffice to replace them all.'

The opinion of Imām al-Nawawī is perhaps not an exaggeration, since the *Ihyā* is instrumental in covering all areas of Muslim life. The work can be divided into four broad areas, (i) acts of worship (ii) norms of daily life (iii) the destructive matters of life (iv) the saving matters of life. Each of these four sections are divided into ten sub-sections and thus the *Ihyā* consists of forty chapters in all.

Perhaps the main difference between this work and other great works is the depth Imām al-Ghazālī explores in each section. He investigates the outer and the inner. Not only does he explore how to perform *Sajda* but what it entails spiritually. He does not treat death as a biological occurrence but a whole philosophy of life. This is perhaps the reason why the *Ihyā* is like no other Islamic literature in the world.

1.0 Introduction - Why we need to talk about paradise & hell more?

a. Because if we do not, then we are not looking at the bigger picture. It is short-term planning, not long term. This world is merely a temporary shade underneath a tree, as we progress to our real goal in the next life. The more we think of the hereafter, the more we will plan for it now. Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) remarked (*Sunan al-Tirmidhī*):

ما لي و للدنيا ما أنا في الدنيا الا كراكب استظل تحت شجرة ثم راح وتركها

What link do I have with this world? I am not in this world except like a traveller taking temporary shade under the tree, then he resumes his journey and leaves it behind.'

b. To alleviate our sufferings now, and to rectify our behaviour. If we thought about paradise more, then we would tolerate the pains and anguishes of this world much better. If we thought about the hell fire more, then we would think twice about hurting others. When Muslims enter Janna, they will forget all the hardship they had previously, When non-Muslim enter the hell-fire, they will forget all the joys they had in the previous world. One hadīth sharīf (*Ihyā*, V: 227) explain this perfectly, narrated by Anas ibn Mālik (may Allāh be pleased with him):

يؤتي بأنعم الناس في الدنيا من الكفار فيقال اغمسوه في النار غمسة ثم يقال له هل رأيت نعيما قط؟ فيقول لا و يؤتي بأشد الناس ضرا في الدنيا فيقال اغمسوه في الجنة غمسة ثم يقال له هل رأيت ضرا قط؟ فيقول لا

The non-Muslim - who was the most comfortable man in the world shall be brought forth and it shall be said to him, 'Dip him into Hell for one instance! He is then asked, 'Did you experience any comfort in the past life?' He will reply, 'No'. Then the Muslim who suffered most in the previous world is brought forward. It shall be said to him, 'Dip him into Heaven for one instance! He is then asked, 'Did you experience any discomfort in the past life?' He will reply, 'No'.

c. The men of Allāh have always sought protection from the fire and prayed for Janna. It is Sunna. In the words of his blessed grandfather (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him), Imām al-Husayn is a Jannatī. The fire of hell will not touch him. Yet Imām al-Ghazālī mentions a report in *Ihyā* whereby Imām al-Husayn was seen crying uncontrollably in solitude. When asked why he was crying he replied:

أخشى أن يطرحني في النار و لا يبالي

I fear that he may cast me into the fire of Hell and not care.' (*Ihyā*, V: 230).

1.1 What stops us from thinking about the two?

Imām al-Ghazālī certainly thinks the reason is heedlessness and love for the Dunya. The opening words on the chapter on the Hell-fire starts with the following powerful words:

يايها الغافل عن نفسه، المغرور بما هو فيه من شواغل هذه الدنيا المشرفة علي الانتقضاء و الزوال

O the one who is totally heedless of his own state! The one tricked by the occupations of the world! The world which itself is close to its end and extinction! (*Ihyā*, V: 224)

2.0 Description of the Fire of Hell

2.1 The temperature of the fire

Water boils at 100 degrees Celsius. Wood burns at 300 degrees Celsius. Lava can be anything between 700-1200 degrees Celsius. We are told that:

ناركم جزء من سبعين جزء من نار جهنم

The fire of one part of seventy in comparison to the fire of Jahannam.

Imāmal-Ghazālī mentions a hadīth where the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said that the fire of hell burned and stoked for a thousand years till it became red. Then for another thousand years till it became white. Then for another thousand years till it became black (*Ihyā*, V: 226).

2.2 The size of Jahannam

Abū Hurayra (may Allāh be pleased with him) reports that one one occasion a large bang was heard in the presence of the Messenger of Allāh (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him). The Companions did not know what the sound was so he (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) explained (*Ihyā*, V: 226):

هذا حجر أرسل في جهنم منذ سبعين عاما الان انتهي الي قعرها

This is a stone that was thrown into Jahannam seventy years ago. Only now has it reached the floor.

2.3 The severity of the punishment

In short, the inhabitants of the fire will be dead but not dead. They will be a in permanent state of grief. Their skin and senses will continuously be renewed, just so they can feel the punishment.

Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) explained that the least-punished person in the Hell-Fire will be made to wear a sandal of fire. It will be so severe that it will cause his brains to boil. Our Messenger (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said (*Ihyā*, V: 226):

ان أدني أهل النار عذابا يوم القيامة يتنعل بنعلين من نار يغلي دماغه من حرارة نعليه

A tree will exist in the Fire of Hell called Zaqqūm. We are informed that if only one drop of it were to drop into the oceans of the world, then the entire world would perish (*Ihyā*, V: 227). On earth, there is 326 million cubic miles of water.

Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said: 'In Hell there are snakes which resembles the necks of long-necked camels, the bite of which endures for forty autumns. And in it are scorpions like laden mules, this sting of which endures for forty autumns too' (*Ihyā*, V: 228). Imām al-Ghazālī adds that their looseness and terror will be in accordance to how loose the individual was in the previous life.

Abū Umāma (may Allāh be pleased with him) reports that regarding the verse:

ويسقي من ماء صديد يتجرعه و لا يكاد يسيغه

And he shall die given water of pus to drink, which he gulps down, barely able to swallow it (14: 16-17).

It is brought near to him and he is revolted by it, and when it is brought very close its scalds his face so that its skin peels away; and when he drinks of it it tears his intestines...' (*Ihyā*, V: 228)

In order to relieve themselves from the relentless punishment, they will ask for water. The water will be molten lead.

2.4 Changes to the body

Because of the punishment, the inhabitant of the fire will go through horrific body changes:

*His skin will be stretched a three day's journey length.

*His lower lip shall fall down onto his breast.

*His upper lips will be curled back and covers his face.

*Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said: 'Weeping will be let loose on the people of hell, so that they will weep until they are exhausted. After which, they will weep blood until their faces look like great trenches in which ships would float were they to be launched therein' (v: 229)

*However, his skin and flesh will be constantly renewed, just so he can feel the punishment.

2.5 In short....

a. There will no respite. It will be one punishment after the other. There will no break or time-out from the horrendous punishment. They will drown in the sea of fire. Their food is fire. Their drink is fire. Their clothes are fire. Their resting place is the fire. Imām al-Ghazālī writes (*Ihyā*, V: 225):

النار من فوقهم و النار من تحتهم و النار عن ايمانهم و النار من شمائلهم فهم غرقى في النار طعامهم نار و شرابهم نار و لباسهم نار و مهادهم نار

b. The whole time will be spent in regret. Regret that they never won Janna. Regret that they will see Allāh. And regret that in reality, it was not worth it. That only a few days and hours of obedience [in the past life] could have avoided their horrible plight now.

Imām al-Ghazālī asks us to avoid this regret. And he asks a very important question near the end of his section of the fire of hell:

فالعجب منك حيث تضحك و تلهو و تشتغل بمحقرات الدنيا و لست تدري أن القضاء بما ذا سبق في حقك؟

An astonishing thing it is, that you should laugh and play, and busy yourself with the base things of this world, although you do not know what your fate is! (*Ihyā*, V: 231)

3.0 Description of paradise

3.1 The removal of all calamities

What is the cause of our concerns now? Death, hunger, thirst, sadness, worries and misfortune. In short, Janna will be void of all of these things.

This rule applies to the smallest extent. A Nomad came to the Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) and said, 'O Messenger of Allāh! In the Qur'ān, Allāh has mentioned a harmful tree, and I never believed that in Heaven there could be a tree that causes harm.

'Which tree is that?', he (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) enquired? The lote-tree that had thorns. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) reminded him of the verse 'and thornless lote-trees.' (في سدر مخدود) Allāh shall remove each thorn and replace it with a fruit, each of which shall open up to provide seventy-two varieties of food, no two of which shall be the same.'

Anything remotely unfavourable will be removed. The inhabitants will not spit or sneeze. Their sweat shall be musk. They shall not need to go to the bathroom. In its place, they will relieve themselves by means of a sweat which flows upon their skin like musk, after which their bellies become slender once more.'

In other words, people will be able to eat what they want, without fear of bodily-changes.

3.2 The opening scenes

a. A Muslim shall be called to the gates of paradise. He will enter the gate in accordance to his deeds in the previous life. So the people of prayer will enter into the Gate of Prayer and the people of Sadaqa will enter the Gate of Sadaqa.

When Abū Bakr (may Allāh be pleased with him) heard this he commented that any gate is a great honour, but he asked the Messenger of Allāh (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him), 'Will anyone be permitted to enter from whichever gate they want?' Our Messenger (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) replied:

نعم و أرجو أن تكون منهم

'Yes and I hope you are one of them.'

Another person who will be allowed to enter from any gate will be the one who spent his own money in order to get a Muslim man and woman married successfully (*Ihyā*, V: 233).

b. At the foot of the gate will be a tree and two springs. When they drink the first well, then all ill feelings, grief and hurt will disappear. When they drink the second, they will be granted 'the expression of delight' (نصرة النعيم) (more will be said about this later).

c. As they enter, the first words they will hear is Salam from the angels.

d. He will be introduced to his abode, his Houris, his servants and much more. His appearance will be treated like the arrival of an important royal dignitary. We are told that the lowest-ranked resident of Janna will have one thousand servants, each of whom has a different task to serve him/her.

e. The palaces and places of residence will be beyond belief. Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) explained that 'the wall of heaven is of silver and gold bricks, whilst its soil is of saffron and its earth is of musk'.

3.3 The food of Janna

In the commentary of the verse ‘they are served around with trays’, Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) explained that each Muslim will be served seventy trays of food, each of which contains a variety of food the likes of which are not present in the others.’

3.4 The Houris

Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said that if one Houris was to look towards the earth, then the entire earth would be illuminated by that one glance. In the commentary of the verses ‘and wives purified’ Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) commented that they will be free from menstruation, excrement, mucus, semen and childbearing.

3.5 The spaciousness of Janna

Abū Hurayra (may Allāh be pleased with him) reports that the Messenger of Allāh (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said: In Heaven there lies a tree in the shade of which a rider could journey for a hundred years without crossing it. Recite, if you wish, ‘And shade outspread’ (و ظل ممدود)

3.6 ‘Whatever you want’

One man came to the Messenger (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) and asked ‘Will there be horses in Janna, for I like them. The Messenger reassured him and said Allāh will give you a horse of ruby that will fly you around Janna.’ Another man came and said, ‘Will there be camels?’ Again, the Messenger replied in the affirmative.

If a person wants a child, then he will be granted that too. The child’s gestation, weaning and youth shall be a single hour.

3.7 Reminiscing the previous days

إذا استقر أهل الجنة في الجنة اشتاق الإخوان الي الإخوان فيسير سرير هذا الي سرير هذا فيلتقيان ويتحدثان ما كان بينهما في دار الدنيا فيقول يا أخي تذكر يوم كذا في مجلس كذا فدعونا الله عز وجل فغفر لنا

In a Mursal hadith, Prophet Muhammad (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said that when people settle into Janna, then friends will yearn to meet each other. The couch of one will travel to the other and then they will talk, reminisce and laugh together. One conversation they will have is that one will say ‘O brother! Do you remember that day, when we prayed to Allāh together to forgive our sins?’ And then He forgave us?’ (*Ihyā*, V: 241)

3.8 All friendship, no tensions

Imagine Zaid and Hamid were good friends before they had an argument and then hardly spoke to one another. They are both pious. What will happen when they both enter Janna? Will they avoid one another? Will they speak to one another? Will they remember their arguments on earth? Allāh addresses all in this verse.:

و نزعنا ما في صدورهم من غل إخوانا علي سرر متقابلين

And we shall remove from their chests any deep feeling of bitterness (that they may have had).
So (they will be like) brothers facing each other on thrones (15: 47).

In the commentary of this verse (*Tafsīr al-Qurtubī*), Ibn Abbas says that the first thing a believer will do when he enters Janna is drink from two fountains. By drinking from the first, one will have all his arguments and tensions with others removed. By drinking from the second, their faces will shine and their faces will become illuminated.

In other words, Allāh will ensure they will not remember a thing from their disputes. If in the hereafter, there are no grudges and ill-feelings, why are we fuelling them now on earth?

3.9 Salvation from the Fire

In addition to that, the Muslim will be saved from the fire of hell. Is there any bigger gift than that?

فمن زحزح عن النار و أدخل الجنة فقد فاز

So whosoever is kept away from the fire and is admitted to Paradise, then he has succeeded (3: 185).

3.10 The Prophet's ﷺ gift for Muslim in hereafter

Janna is the gift from Allāh. What will the Messenger (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) provide? His very presence in Janna will be the biggest prize for his beloveds. Perhaps this itself is Janna.

Moreover, our Messenger will provide a personal gift to us all Insha Allāh. This gift is drinking from his Hawd. In short, drinking from the Hawd is a personal, intimate gift from the Messenger (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) to you. After which, we will never feel thirsty again.

من شرب منه لا يظمأ أبدا

It is a beautiful touch of compassion and intimacy from him. It is his Hawd and he is given it to you as a gift. The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said 'My Hawd' (حوضي) but he never said 'My Janna', as this belongs to Allāh.

3.11 The ultimate prize of the hereafter

Is paradise the ultimate goal? Is Janna the means or the end? The night of al-Isra wa'l Miraj suggests that paradise is the means, not the end. The end is Allāh and His vision. Consider the following Hadīth:

عن سهيل الرومي عن النبي صلي الله عليه و سلم

إذا دخل أهل الجنة الجنة يقول الله تبارك و تعالي تريدون شيئاً أزيدكم فيقولون الم تبيض وجوهنا الم تدخلنا الجنة و
تنجنا من النار

قال رسول الله صلي الله عليه و سلم فيكشف الحجاب فما أعطوا شيئاً أحب اليهم من النظر الي ربهم عز و جل

The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) said, reporting from Allāh ‘When the people of Janna will enter Janna, He will ask: ‘Do you need anything, I can give you more?’ The Muslims will reply ‘O Allāh! Did you not whiten our faces? Did you not enter us into Janna? And save us from the fire? The Prophet (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) then said, ‘A veil will be lifted. And then they will be given nothing more beautiful than looking towards their Lord, the most exalted.

This is for the believers only. So the Hadīth mentions that this will occur in Janna where only the Muslims will be, not in Ma’shar where all of humanity will gather. The biggest punishment for the non-Muslims in the hereafter is not that they will burn in hell for eternity, but the fact that they will never see their Creator.

Rābia al-Basariyya famously remarked that if she had the choice, she would burn paradise with the fire of hell and extinguish the fire of hell with the cool water of paradise. Why? Because most only worship Allāh for the sake of salvation from the fire and pursuit of paradise. Only the few worship Allāh for the sake of it, because He is our Lord and Cherisher. Only the few yearn for His vision, not the palaces of paradise. She said: (شرح الأحاديث القدسية ٢٨٥: ١)

كلهم يعبدون من خوف نار
و يرون النجاة حظاً جزيلاً
انني لست مثلهم و لهذا
لست ابغي بمن أحب بديلاً

*All of them worship [Allāh] in fear of the Fire
And they see salvation [from the fire] as a great fortune.
Certainly I am not like like, and thus
I don’t want anything else in substitute for the One I love.*

The night of al-Isrā wa’l Mi’rāj teaches us this perfectly. Our Messenger (peace and blessings of Allāh be upon him) in the companionship of Jibril, passed by all seven heavens and did not take interest.

ما زاغ البصر و ما طغي

He met the prophets at each but his goal was something else, the vision of Allāh.

Conclusion

Muslims work on hope *and* fear. Imām al-Ghazālī certainly is an advocate of this. In advising the Muslim he says:

وسق نفسك بسوط الخوف و قدها بزمام الرجاء الي الصراط المستقيم

Drive your souls onwards with the whips of fear, and lead it by the reins of hope along the Straight Path (*Ihyā*, V: 231).