



Australian Journal of Islamic Studies

<https://ajis.com.au>

ISSN (online): 2207-4414
Centre for Islamic Studies and Civilisation
Charles Sturt University CRICOS 00005F
Islamic Sciences and Research Academy of Australia

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To cite this article:

Keskin, Zuleyha. "Inner Peace in the Life of Said Nursi." *Australian Journal of Islamic Studies* 4, no. 3 (2019): 51-66.



Published online: 30 December 2019



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INNER PEACE IN THE LIFE OF SAID NURSI

Zuleyha Keskin*

Abstract: The best means to understand inner peace is through the lived experience of individuals, where they share the hardships and calamities they have lived through and the processes they followed to cope with those challenges. Said Nursi, a 20th century scholar, regularly talks about the challenges he faced in his life through his writings, the *Risale-i Nur* (Treatise of Light). At the same time, Nursi emphasises how strong faith in God is the source of inner peace since it provides a perspective that helps one better understand those challenges. How does one reconcile the two: hardships and inner peace? This article focuses on three types of calamities faced by Nursi – exile, imprisonment and the death of his spiritual son – after which it analyses Nursi’s thought process on how he responded to these situations as a result of his faith. The article then focuses on Nursi’s approach where everything should be viewed as “other indicative.” In summary, it sheds light on Nursi’s understanding of inner peace and how he sees faith as the ultimate source of that inner peace.

Keywords: *Said Nursi, inner peace, Islamic spirituality, calamities, Risale-i Nur*

INTRODUCTION

A powerful message is one that is lived rather than merely talked about and the message of how inner peace can be attained is not exempt from this principle. As an individual who often spoke about inner peace in his writings, the *Risale-i Nur*, it is important to understand how Nursi perceived his life of turbulence and challenge. The insight provided in this article will put his writings into perspective and provide greater appreciation for his positive approach to a life filled with hardships. Additionally, seeing the theory posed by Nursi of how having faith leads to inner peace will be complemented with his lived experience. Of importance is to understand how Nursi interpreted negative events in his life that caused him suffering. How did he interpret the exiles he was sent on? What was his reaction to imprisonment? How did he respond to the death of loved ones?

Another reason why Nursi’s life is important in the context of inner peace, particularly regarding suffering and evil, is the criticism often attributed to optimists for their lack of appreciation for the real suffering taking place within the world. Critics of optimists or positivists often claim the optimists do not know what it means to suffer, arguing they are protected from such severe challenges and live in a delusional world of bliss. These sentiments are expressed in the words of Schopenhauer (d. 1860), a German philosopher:

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If we were to conduct the most hardened and callous optimist through hospitals, infirmaries, operating theatres, through prisons, torture chambers, and slave hovels, over battlefields and to places of execution; if we were to open to him all the dark abodes of misery, where it shuns the gaze of cold curiosity, and finally were to allow him to glance into the dungeon of Ugolino where prisoners starved to death, he too would certainly see in the end what kind of a world is this *meilleur des mondes possibles*. For whence did Dante get the material for his hell, if not from this actual world of ours!¹

Potentially, this could be considered a valid point: how can the world be viewed positively when someone is aware of such sufferings? How can horrific incidents be explained in a positive way? Particularly so, if one has experienced the reality and pain of such sufferings.

When Nursi's life is considered as a whole, it appears he experienced almost all the sufferings mentioned by Schopenhauer. Nursi explains his personal experiences as:

In my 80 or so years of life I have known nothing of worldly pleasure. My entire life has been spent on battlefields, in prison camps, or in the jails and court rooms of my country. There is no suffering or torment to which I have not been subjected. I have been treated like a monster by military courts, and exiled from place to place like a vagabond. I have been condemned to months of solitary confinement in the country's prisons. I have been poisoned many times, subjected to all forms of insult...²

Nursi endured a lot of suffering through his life, mental and physical, making his response to suffering an essential tool to understand how one can attain inner peace despite the challenges and suffering that may be encountered.

Nursi explains how he intentionally expressed his own sufferings so he can demonstrate how his *tawhīd*-centric³ approach to life became a remedy:

Also, my purpose in showing my worst wound in an extremely grievous and unpleasant way which may upset you unduly and put you off, is to demonstrate what a wondrous remedy and brilliant light is the sacred antidote of the All-Wise Qur'ān.⁴

A common trait one sees in Nursi is his ability to give a positive perspective to everything. There seems to be no event that confused him or left him at a loss. He had an interpretation and explanation for all events and, more importantly, his explanations would console his heart and mind. This article will provide insight into who Said Nursi is, after which some of the major challenges in his life will be studied with a focus on how he responded to them.

¹ Schopenhauer as cited in Eric L Ormsby, *Theodicy in Islamic Thought: The Dispute Over Al-Ghazālī's "Best of All Possible Worlds"* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 10.

² Said Nursi, *Tarihçe-i Hayatı* [Historical Biography] (Istanbul: Sözlür, 1991), 604.

³ *Tawhīd*-centric can be loosely translated as God-centric, but in Nursi's writing, the notion of *tawhīd* is very strong. Therefore, I have chosen to use the term *tawhīd*-centric. For a more detailed discussion of *tawhīd*-centricity in the life of Nursi, refer to Zuleyha Keskin, "Said Nursi's Tawhīd-Centric Worldview and Inner Peace," *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science* 9, no. 2 (2019).

⁴ Said Nursi, *The Rays*, trans. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sözlür, 1995), 314.

SAID NURSI'S LIFE AND THE *RISALE-I NUR*

Said Nursi is a 20th century original Muslim thinker and scholar who made a significant contribution to contemporary Islamic thought through his magnum opus the *Risale-i Nur Collection*. Nursi lived at a time when the Muslim world was undergoing significant changes – intellectually, spiritually, politically and economically. The Ottoman Empire, a civilisation that had been a superpower for hundreds of years, was collapsing while it watched Europe advance in every possible way. “Indeed, up to 1869 the Islamic world could hardly conceive of assuming a subordinate position with respect to Europe.”⁵ But this was exactly what was happening.

Not only was the Muslim world crumbling in front of his eyes, but the identity of his nation was also changing. The country he lived in was being rebuilt so it could take its place in the “civilised” world. This meant rapid modernisation, and modernisation meant Westernisation.⁶ It could be argued Nursi witnessed the greatest revolutions, “not only in Turkish history, but in the history of mankind” during his lifetime.⁷

It was these changes that Nursi was trying to deal with as he knew they had a significant impact on his people, whose faith was greatly shaken by the changes. Religious practises were losing their presence within society, while ideologies opposing Islam’s belief system were creeping into Muslim societies. Through his personal experiences, Nursi knew that political activity would not solve the problems he was witnessing. He saw the solution to the Muslim world’s problems to be in “saving and strengthening religious belief, which would form the basis of renewal and reconstruction.”⁸ This became his life philosophy, which permeated every facet of his life and the life he was encouraging Muslims to embrace.

While Nursi is popular with millions of followers today, he also has critics. For his followers or those inspired by his work, Nursi was the awaited *mujaddid* (renewer) of the 14th century of Islam,⁹ reviving Islam through renewed expression and articulation. He is also acknowledged for playing a critical role in saving the belief of Muslims at a time when the Muslim world was declining; this decline made the Muslim world vulnerable to atheistic materialism, nationalism and ultra-secularism.

Those critical of Nursi have questioned his approach to religious revival, which has been described as passive resistance, particularly his adamant stance against politics. Some have even questioned whether his stance could be considered Islamic.¹⁰ At the other extreme, he has

⁵ Reinhard Schulze, *A Modern History of the Islamic World*, trans. Azizeh Azodi (London: I.B.Taurus, 2002), 15.

⁶ Şükran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Albany, State University of New York Press, 2005), 189.

⁷ Ibrahim Canan, “The Chief Questions Facing the Islamic World and Their Solutions According to Bediuzzaman,” in *The Reconstruction of Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century and Bediuzzaman Said Nursi* (Istanbul: Sözler, 1993), 78.

⁸ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 177.

⁹ Muslims believe a *mujaddid* will appear each century to revive Islam and interpret the Qur’anic principles in accordance with the understanding and demands of the day.

¹⁰ Yvonne Yazbeck Haddad, “*Ghurbah* as Paradigm for Muslim Life: A *Risale-i Nur* Worldview,” in *Islam at the Crossroads*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi’ (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 247.

been accused of opposing the secularisation of Turkey, a change that some believed was essential for Turkey's progress. His lack of formal secular education was also put under the spotlight and used to question his credentials.¹¹

Yet, whether he is thought of highly or not, all agree "Nursi is arguably the most important and influential scholar to emerge from Turkey in the past five hundred years,"¹² leaving his mark on his generation and those to come through his works, namely the *Risale-i Nur*. Nursi's influence has transcended Turkey with his writings being translated into over 50 languages.

The *Risale-i Nur Collection*, a 6,000 page Qur'anic commentary (*tafsīr*), comprises individual treatises with names such as rays, flashes and gleams. Thus, the *Risale-i Nur* "models itself as a sort of hermeneutical prism catching what its author considers to be the effulgence of divine light from the Qur'ān and refracting it as colours visible to, and understandable by, the eye of the human heart."¹³ What is further noteworthy is that the 'flashes' captured from the Qur'ān are those that Nursi believes are most needed to address the problems faced by Muslims of today. Furthermore, he provides a commentary on these verses in a style to which a contemporary person can relate.

While the *Risale-i Nur* is a *tafsīr*, it is not a traditional type. According to Nursi, there are two types of *tafsīr* of the Qur'ān: those that expound on the words of the Qur'ān (*lafzi*) and those that focus on its spiritual meaning (*manawī*). While more than 350,000 *lafzi tafsīrs* have been written, *manawī tafsīrs* are much rarer.¹⁴ The *Risale-i Nur* is believed to be a *manawī tafsīr*, a spiritual commentary, and many would claim it is the most powerful and valuable of this type.¹⁵

As a *tafsīr* of the Qur'ān, the *Risale-i Nur* expands on its teachings by incorporating classical Islamic sciences and modern scientific knowledge, while at the same time refuting the bases of materialist philosophy.¹⁶ It gives priority to the question of certain affirmative belief (*taḥqīqī imān*), also described as 'belief by investigation,' and does this in a way that is relevant to the needs of today.¹⁷ *Taḥqīqī imān*, which is conscious verification of belief, is the opposite of belief by imitation (*taqlīdī imān*). Nursi felt *taqlīdī imān* "could be easily negated by the scepticism of the scientific age."¹⁸ It is common for scholars to criticise *taqlīdī imān* and warn individuals against its potential dangers. However, they have not been as successful in replacing *taqlīdī imān* with *taḥqīqī imān*. Nursi's real difference and contribution has been to

¹¹ Colin Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed: A Critical Analysis of Said Nursi's Epistles of Light* (Berlin: Gerlach, 2013), 2.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 4.

¹⁴ Ahmed Akgunduz, "The Risale-i Nur as a New School of Belief," in *The Reconstruction of Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century and Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (Istanbul: Sözlür, 1993), 149.

¹⁵ Nursi, *The Rays*, 399.

¹⁶ Şükran Vahide, "Towards an Intellectual Biography," in *Islam at the Crossroads*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi' (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 1.

¹⁷ Colin Turner, "Renewal in Islam and Bediüzzaman," in *The Reconstruction of Islamic Thought in the Twentieth Century and Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (Istanbul: Sözlür, 1993), 157.

¹⁸ Şükran Vahide, "A Survey of the Main Spiritual Themes of the Risale-i Nur," in *Spiritual Dimension of Bediüzzaman's Risale-i Nur*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi' (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2008), 6.

not only warn against the potential dangers and shortfalls of *taqlīdī imān*, but to also instil *tahqīqī imān* into hearts, with the full awareness that only *tahqīqī imān* provides inner peace to believers.

Therefore, it was essential to have faith that was grounded on knowledge and could resist all challenges. In his own words, Nursi reflects on how he was searching for a “short way to obtain firm faith and a complete understanding of Islam that would not be shaken by the attacks of the numerous damaging currents.”¹⁹ In response to this search, he explains how the *Risale-i Nur* was bestowed on him, “which is a safe, short way inspired by the Qur’ān for the believers of the present time.”²⁰ Therefore, Nursi emphasises making the Qur’ān the solution for today’s problems, but he also highlights the point that the Qur’ān is explained in a way that addresses the challenges of today.

When Nursi is asked why the *Risale-i Nur* is so popular and has been embraced by so many people like no other book, he responds, “Being a true commentary on the All-Wise Qur’ān through the mystery of its miraculousness, the *Risale-i Nur* demonstrates that in misguidance is a sort of Hell in this world, while in belief is a sort of Paradise.”²¹ This point brings us closer to the topic of this article: Nursi attributes the success of the *Risale-i Nur* to its ability to demonstrate how one can attain a Paradise-like state. This, he explains, is through belief. When Nursi’s works are reviewed, the Paradise-like state he describes is the state of inner peace.

Nursi had the ability to see the positive in everything and relay that positivity to his students during his lifetime and to the readers of his works in today’s time. He also instilled hope at what would be considered the worst of times. Nursi had the formula for inner peace, which he lived by and expressed throughout his writings.

However, Nursi’s style was new and unprecedented. Inner peace had not been such a strong focus for any Muslim scholar before. Nursi focused on matters that needed attention for today’s people, which included explaining how one can attain inner peace.

REFLECTION ON NURSI’S LIFE

If Nursi’s life was scanned with a superficial eye, there would not be true appreciation for his life struggles. This necessitates zooming in on some of his experiences to see how he interpreted difficulties and challenges. It is not possible to encapsulate all the difficulties Nursi encountered in this article; such an effort would take volumes of books. However, it is possible to identify key events in Nursi’s life, to analyse and find a pattern among them. The events that have been chosen are ones that are normally perceived to be ‘negative.’

It is of great benefit to this topic that Nursi wrote of his thoughts and feelings in his works. This provides the opportunity to analyse his thought process when he faced challenges. The

¹⁹ Mustafa Sungur, in Necmeddin Şahiner, *Said Nursi ve Nurculuk Hakkında Aydınlar Konuşuyor* [The Enlightened Ones are Talking about Said Nursi and Nurculuk] (Istanbul: Yeni Asya Yayınları, 1979), 399.

²⁰ Vahide, “An Intellectual Biography,” 167.

²¹ Said Nursi, *The Damascus Sermon*, trans. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sözler, 1989), 18-19.

next section will focus on and analyse four major challenges in Nursi life: the exiles he was sent on, his imprisonments and the death of his spiritual son.

Exiles

When reading the *Risale-i Nur*, it becomes apparent very quickly that exiles are a common theme in the text as a result of the various exiles faced by Nursi. However, as Nursi explained in his own words, the exiles and imprisonments imposed by the government were based on “unfounded suspicions and utilizing ‘possibilities’ instead of facts.”²² From 1925 to 1935, Nursi was kept under strict control at Barla, a very small, mountainous district to the west of Lake Egirdir and forced to live alone. From 1936, at the age of 59, a seven-year exile began in Kastamonu, where he spent the first three months at a police station after which he was transferred to a house opposite the police station. He remained in this house until the Denizli trials²³ and imprisonment from 1943 to 1944,²⁴ after which he was exiled to Emirdag until October 1951, except for the 20 months he spent at Afyon prison. From 1950 to 1960, a close eye was kept on Nursi at all times, not giving him the freedom to move around freely.

Exile (*ghurbah*) is an important theme in *tasawwuf*. Literally, it means the state of being a foreigner, homeless, separated and a stranger in one’s own land.²⁵ In *tasawwuf*, *ghurbah* (separation) has been defined as renouncing the world with the charms to which one feels attachment on the way to God or living a life dedicated to the hereafter, even though one is surrounded by this world and its charms.²⁶ Therefore exile, with its challenges, is considered to be an important part of spiritual growth in Islam as it becomes a means to rely on no one but God, which then bring one closer to God.

There is a famous *ḥadīth* that states “Islam began as something strange (*ghariban*) and will go back to being strange, so glad tidings to the strangers.” When Prophet Muḥammad was asked who the strangers were, he replied: “Strangers who have left their families and tribes.”²⁷ Therefore, there is an indication there is a special place for those who experience exile. However, the key to benefitting from exile is to appreciate what it can offer.

The special place of exile would be due to the closeness to God one achieves through exile. Such an outcome is achieved by the loneliness and alienation experienced with exile; it “sets a paradigm for survival, for seeking solace and affirmation from God by attempting to dwell in His presence. In the process, the experience of *ghurba*, estrangement, is transformed into *uns*, companionship.”²⁸ It forces a person to rely solely on God, since there is no one else to rely on in such a state.

²² Nursi, *The Rays*, 404.

²³ Nursi’s court trials and imprisonments will be discussed in the next sections.

²⁴ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 250.

²⁵ Fethullah Gülen, *Emerald Hills of the Heart: Key Concepts in the Practice of Sufism*, vol 2. (Lanham: Tughra Books, 2007), 70.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Ibn Mājah, book 36, *ḥadīth* no. 62.

²⁸ Haddad, “*Ghurbah* as Paradigm for Muslim Life,” 247.

On one occasion, Nursi mentions how he experienced five levels of exile.

The first: due to old age, I was alone and a stranger away from the great majority of my friends, relations, and those close to me; I felt a sad exile at their having left me and departed for the Intermediate Realm. Then another sphere of exile was opened within this one: I felt a sad sense of separation and exile at most of the beings to which I was attached, like last spring, having left me and departed. And a further sphere of exile opened up within this, which was that I had fallen apart from my native land and relations, and was alone. I felt a sense of separation and exile arising from this too. Then through that, the lonesomeness of the night and the mountains made me feel another pitiable exile. And then I saw my spirit in an overwhelming exile, which had been prepared to journey to eternity both from this exile and from the transitory guest-house of this world. I said to myself suddenly, My God, how can these exiles and layers of darkness be borne?²⁹

Nursi's state sounds very dismal, as he questions how he will bear such exiles filled with layers of separation and isolation. At that moment of distress, Nursi explains how the "light of belief, the effulgence of the Qur'ān, and the grace of the Most Merciful"³⁰ came to his aid. As with other occasions, Nursi draws strength from his belief, he sees it as a saviour that gets him through difficult times. The Qur'ān, being his reference point, is where he looks for guidance, seeking to find a Qur'ānic verse that would help him change the way he views the situation, so the suffering eases and the turmoil becomes peace. However, among all this, Nursi believes this positive change in his state would not happen without the grace of God, referring to God's mercy in this respect.

At a difficult moment when the distress could have led to despair, Nursi finds himself reciting the Qur'ānic verse "God is enough for us, and He is the best disposer of affairs,"³¹ which focuses on the name of God, *al-Wakīl* (the Trustee). Trusting his affairs on *al-Wakīl* was transforming for Nursi so he felt the door of light (happiness) open and all his worries and despairs disperse.³² It was as though Nursi had found God at a deeper level as he contemplated how the one who finds God finds everything, while the one who does not find God, can find nothing.³³ Therefore, being separated from everyone no longer worried him because he had just found God to be his true companion. He states he even understood the meaning of the *ḥadīth* "Glad tidings (happiness) to the strangers (*ghurbah*),"³⁴ since he could now feel the happiness found within exile.

Despite the difficulties that exile brought with it, Nursi "channelled the feelings that arose in exile into an immense spiritual and moral force."³⁵ They were a means of bringing him closer to God. This was made possible by the meaning Nursi gave to the exiles and used this meaning as a source of inspiration.³⁶ Therefore, an 'exile' was what was made of it, the meaning it was

²⁹ Said Nursi, *The Letters*, trans. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sözlür, 2001), 42-43.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

³¹ Qur'ān 3:173.

³² Nursi, *The Letters*, 44.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Ibn Mājah, book 36, *ḥadīth* no. 63.

³⁵ Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi', "How to Read Said Nursi's Risale-i Nur" in *Islam at the Crossroads*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi' (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 70.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

given. Nursi used his exiles as an opportunity to write a large portion of the *Risale-i Nur*. This was enhanced through the treehouses he had made during his exiles, in spots favourable for “reading the book of the universe.”³⁷ These were perfect spots for inspiration for his writings.

Thus, for Nursi, the exiles were an opportunity for him to become accustomed to relying on no one but God, which was an important means for spiritual growth. Nursi found a deeper connection with God as a result of the exiles as he realised that by finding God, he had found everything. Such a view of life inspired him to remember that God is his Trustee (*Wali*), which provided him with the reassurance his heart needed.

Imprisonments

The *Risale-i Nur* became the cause of imprisonment of Nursi and his students on three occasions. The charges were several, such as exploiting religion for political ends “with the idea of political reaction” and organising a group that might disturb public order.³⁸

In 1935, he was arrested along with 125 of his students and tried at Eskisehir Criminal Court. Nursi was imprisoned for 11 months. In 1943, Nursi was arrested once again. While his hearing continued at Denizli Criminal Court, he remained imprisoned at Denizli prison. “If conditions had been bad in Eskisehir Prison, in Denizli they were worse. Nursi said he suffered in one day in Denizli the distress he suffered in a month in Eskisehir.”³⁹ Nursi was acquitted on 16 June 1944.⁴⁰ The final arrest took place in 1948 for 20 months. This was the “third and worst large-scale imprisonment of Nursi and his students.”⁴¹ Now 72, Nursi endured solitary confinement in a cell with broken windows that were not fixed during the two harsh winters he stayed there.⁴²

Despite the imprisonments and court cases, other than two or three matters, six courts were unable to find anything contrary to the law in the *Risale-i Nur*.⁴³ Eventually on “June 1956, Afyon Court cleared the *Risale-i Nur* completely and ruled that all the confiscated copies should be returned to their owners.”⁴⁴ In Nursi’s words, the exiles and imprisonments were an unprecedented wrong and illegal since they were undertaken without reason.⁴⁵

Nursi often talks of his imprisonments in his writings, reflecting on his own experiences and those of others. While he does not omit to mention the harsh conditions faced by him and his students, he also emphasises the positive aspects. No doubt, Nursi was tested by the unjust imprisonments; it was not all calm and glory while he was in prison. Numerous poisoning attempts brought him close to death on many occasions and the solitary confinements as well as the harsh conditions tested him greatly.

³⁷ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 179.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 219.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 257.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 266.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁴² Said Nursi, *al-Mathnawi al-Nuriyya: Seedbed of the Light*, trans. Hüseyin Akarsu (New Jersey: Light, 2007), xvii.

⁴³ Nursi, *The Rays*, 404.

⁴⁴ Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey*, 301.

⁴⁵ Nursi, *The Rays*, 404.

Quite often in his writing, Nursi consoles others about their imprisonment and, by doing so, consoles himself. The most important aspect of the imprisonment for Nursi is the meaning given to the situation; if one becomes bitter about it, the time in prison would be painful and tormenting. Whereas, if one sees opportunities in prison, it provides peace and comfort in a situation that would otherwise cause great inner turmoil. Through this change in perspective, prison could be transformed into a blessed garden that raises seedlings of good character, according to Nursi.⁴⁶ The meaning given to the situation has two levels: personal and communal.

At the personal level, Nursi explains that imprisonment can be a protection from the negativities of the outside world. He explains a person would “probably be happier staying in prison than being free, for outside he is confused and subject to the assaults of sins from all sides.”⁴⁷ When prison is viewed from this protective perspective, Nursi explains it can become like a rest-house.⁴⁸

Nursi believed he and his students should offer thanks to God for the situation they found themselves in, since he saw the time spent in prison as a rewardable investment; he describes each fleeting hour passed in prison as the equivalent of eternal hours passed in worship.⁴⁹ This was very reassuring for Nursi and his students, giving them the strength to patiently endure the hardships they believed to be extremely profitable.⁵⁰

It was Nursi’s belief in the hereafter that really helped him to see prison as a profitable place to be. Otherwise, he explains how being imprisoned unfairly for one day would have been as grievous as death. However, knowing that he and his students would be rewarded in the hereafter for any unjust treatment was extremely consoling. He reflects: “Light and strength of belief in the hereafter afforded me the patience, endurance, solace, and steadfastness; indeed, it filled me with enthusiasm to gain greater reward in the profitable, instructive exertions of this ordeal.”⁵¹ Thus, belief in the hereafter is an extremely important part of being able to peacefully endure calamities and suffering. The belief that justice will prevail in the hereafter and one will be rewarded for any injustices endured in this life becomes a great source of comfort, according to Nursi.

At the communal level, the key to seeing the positive in the situation again was dependent on the ability to turn what appears to be calamity into an opportunity; in this case, an opportunity for learning and growth of the other inmates.⁵² As a result of this approach, Nursi named the prison environments as *Medrese-i Yusufiye* (School of Joseph),⁵³ comparing his and his students’ imprisonment to Prophet Yusuf’s (Joseph) experience. According to the Qur’ān,

⁴⁶ Ibid., 222.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Said Nursi, *The Words*, trans. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sözlür, 1993), 162.

⁴⁹ Nursi, *The Rays*, 478.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 245.

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 497.

⁵³ Nursi, *The Rays*, 246.

Joseph was imprisoned for years after the false accusations of the minister's wife against him.⁵⁴ Although the imprisonment was unjust, this did not phase Joseph, who took the opportunity to teach those in prison and many accepted monotheism.⁵⁵ Besides, in prison, Joseph's spiritual gifts were discovered,⁵⁶ which allowed him to have greater spiritual influence on society as a prophet when he was released.

Nursi was following in the footsteps of Yusuf by seeing the imprisonments as opportunities. After the third imprisonment, he writes to his students, "I offer you not my condolences but my congratulations."⁵⁷ He was congratulating them on their imprisonment, since it meant opportunities. This is of no surprise since Nursi was convinced he was put in jail multiple times to reach out to people whom he would otherwise not have been able to contact, telling his students that "our new brothers here in this School of Joseph are in more need of the solace of the *Risale-i Nur* than anyone."⁵⁸ Reflecting on the three long imprisonments he endured, Nursi was of the view that, without the horrors of Eskisehir, Denizli and Afyon, the beauties of the *Medrese-i Yusufiye* might never have come into existence.⁵⁹

Nursi's ability to change his perception of a calamity into an opportunity was firmly based on his faith. For Nursi, enjoyment, pleasure and happiness have nothing to do with being in prison, but everything to do with belief, as he expressed the following while in prison, addressing those in prison; "I am seventy-five years old, and I know with utter certainty from thousands of experiences, proofs, and events that true enjoyment, pain-free pleasure, grief-free joy, and life's happiness are only to be found in belief and in the sphere of the truths of faith."⁶⁰

As a result of his strong belief, Nursi trusted there must be wisdom in his situation, expressing it as a "wisdom of Divine Determining."⁶¹ To have a greater appreciation of this comment, it is important to refer to Nursi's view of Divine determining, where he states "Divine Determining looks to the true causes and acts justly"⁶² concluding Divine determining is exempt from evil, ugliness and tyranny. He also noted Divine favour manifested on him and his students the meaning of the verse, "It is possible that you dislike a thing which is good for you."⁶³ Nursi truly believed there must be good in his situation, allowing him to embrace it, which allowed him to view prison as a "School of Joseph."

⁵⁴ Chapter 12 of the Qur'an provides a detailed explanation of Prophet Joseph's experiences.

⁵⁵ Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 497.

⁵⁶ Ayize Jamat-Everett, "Prison is a Hell for the Unbeliever," in *Islam at the Crossroads*, ed. Ibrahim M. Abu-Rabi' (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 116.

⁵⁷ Nursi, *The Rays*, 478.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Turner, *The Qur'an Revealed*, 500.

⁶⁰ Nursi, *The Rays*, 477.

⁶¹ Ibid., 478.

⁶² Nursi, *The Words*, 478.

⁶³ Qur'an 2:216.

The Death of his Spiritual Son

One of the most difficult news Nursi had to grapple with was the death of his nephew, who he considered to be his spiritual son, most self-sacrificing friend and bravest friend.⁶⁴ Living in Barla had taken its toll on Nursi; he was suffering from ill health and old age, and feeling extremely lonely and isolated. During this time, Nursi reflects on his state and accepts the loss of his native land, friends and relatives, but there is one person he is unable to forget: his nephew Abdurrahman.⁶⁵ Soon after, he gets the news of the death of his nephew, which shakes him even five years after receiving the news, so much so that Nursi states “Half of my private world had died with the death of my mother, and now, with Abdurrahman’s death, the other half died.”⁶⁶

While Nursi was feeling the sorrow of this great loss, he thought of the meaning of the following verse, which became a source of consolation: “Everything shall perish save His countenance; His is the command, and to Him shall you return.”⁶⁷ This made Nursi realise that everything and everyone was to experience death, including Abdurrahman and himself. Nursi further noted the verse “But if they turn away, say: ‘God is enough for me! There is no deity save Him. In Him have I placed my trust, for He is the Sustainer, in awesome almightiness enthroned.’”⁶⁸ Nursi understood this to mean, if God exists, He takes the place of everything. Since He is enduring, He is surely sufficient. Thus, the name of God *al-Baqi* (the Enduring One) was his consolation during this difficult time. Nursi adds the Qur’ānic verse that commences with “Everything shall perish save His countenance...” saved him from the most grievous and sad state he was in.⁶⁹

Through belief in God, Nursi was able to give meaning to Abdurrahman’s death and everything else that will die, including himself, realising that those who die have completed their duties and departed for other worlds. Thus, Nursi’s positive view of death played a significant role in helping him to be at peace with incidents that were otherwise very painful for him.

In addition to the solace Nursi received from these Qur’ānic verses, he adds God replaced his nephew with 30 Abdurrahmans, referring to his committed and hard-working students. From this, the principle Nursi draws is, if God had healed the most serious of his spiritual wounds, which He did, then he would heal all the spiritual afflictions that Nursi faces.⁷⁰

PERSPECTIVE

With all these incidents of suffering, there was one perspective that Nursi had. In relation to perspective, Nursi makes a significant proclamation about his lifetime learnings where he

⁶⁴ Said Nursi, *The Flashes Collection*, trans. Şükran Vahide (Istanbul: Sözlür, 1995), 310.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 311.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ Qur’ān 28:88.

⁶⁸ Qur’ān 9:129.

⁶⁹ Nursi, *The Flashes*, 312.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 314.

explains, during the 40 years of his life and 30 years of study, he has only learnt four words or concepts: meaning by the letter (*mānā-yī harfī*), meaning by the word (*mānā-yī ismī*), intention (*niyyah*) and viewpoint (*nazar*).⁷¹ Each of these concepts is significant, but the first two are of importance to this discussion.

Mānā-yī ismī, meaning by the word, is known as the self-indicative. *Mānā-yī harfī* is the “other indicative” meaning of things. It is also described as the metaphysical aspect of a thing that looks to its Creator. These two concepts, which originated with Nursi, are profound and comprehensive outlooks for understanding the world.⁷² It was a major finding by Nursi during his intense inner search as the New Said was emerging following World War I. Not only are these two concepts mentioned in *al-Mathnawi al-Nuriyya*, but “it is one of the pivotal concepts of the *Risale-i Nur*.”⁷³ Nursi states:

Every creature has two aspects: one concerning itself and its attributes, and the other pointing to its Creator and His Names manifested on it. The second aspect is more comprehensive. Every letter in a book points to itself only as a letter, while in the book it points to and describes its author in many ways. In the same way, every creature, which is a letter from the book of Divine Power, points to itself and its apparent existence to the extent of its size, while pointing to its Eternal Designer in many respects, and sings the praises of His Names manifested on it.⁷⁴

In other words, events need to be viewed from a broader perspective that takes multiple factors into consideration, while it is common for individuals to see events from one angle, which is often their own biased angle. It suggests the need to have a zoomed outlook to gain better appreciation of what other factors, influences and benefits are to be seen. While this is not easy to achieve, Nursi’s personal experiences help to understand what is meant by the term “other indicative”. In the three examples provided above, Nursi’s ability to see beyond the hardships and sufferings is evident.

While the exiles were isolating, tormenting and unjust, they were a means to bring Nursi closer to God and to rely on no one but God. Nursi was able to greatly appreciate the attainment of this level of conviction in the belief in God and knew the exiles played an important role in achieving this. The imprisonments were also unjust, causing a lot of physical and emotional suffering but he came to see the imprisonments as a source of protection from the negativities of the outside world, which if he were ‘out there’ may have caused ill effects on him.

The imprisonments also became an opportunity to educate several incarcerated men who he spent many hours with as a result of sharing a prison cell, turning them into educated, pious individuals who would go back into society well-reformed. This led him to call these prison

⁷¹ Nursi, *al-Mathnawi al-Nuriyya*, 67.

⁷² Bilal Kuşpınar, “The Fusion of Faith and Knowledge in Finding Solutions for Problems: Nursi’s Illuminative Path,” in *Knowledge, Faith, Morality and the Future of Humanity* (Istanbul: Istanbul Ofset, 2000), 49.

⁷³ Vahide, “A Survey of the Main Spiritual Themes of the *Risale-i Nur*,” 11.

⁷⁴ Nursi, *al-Mathnawi al-Nuriyya*, 351-352.

experiences *Medrese-i Yusufiye*, a name one would give to a school. Further, he saw the time he spent in the prisons as a valuable investment for the afterlife and not merely a waste of time.

The death of his spiritual son Abdurrahman also had a huge impact on Nursi but he came to see it as a means to better understand the reality of death and realise that everything will eventually die. He also was consoled with being provided other helpers after Abdurrahman's death.

Thus, what can be seen at the core of Nursi's life perspective is the notion that everything is beautiful, either in itself or in regard to its results since he is able to view these events as "other indicative":

In everything, even the things which appear to be the most ugly, there is an aspect of true beauty. Yes, everything in the universe, every event, is either in itself beautiful, which is called 'essential beauty,' or it is beautiful in regard to its results, which is called 'relative beauty.'⁷⁵

The Qur'ānic verse from which this principle stems is: "Who has created everything in the best way."⁷⁶ With all the above examples of suffering endured by Nursi, this approach to suffering can be seen in his response. It is this perspective that helped him to be at peace in his life despite the hardships and calamities he endured.

CONCLUSION

Through his reflection on his personal thoughts and emotions, Nursi provides insight to how he responded to afflictions in his life. First, he would identify and express the matter that was distressing him. Second, he would scan the Qur'ān to find a verse relevant to his situation, a remedy from the pharmacy of the All-Wise Qur'ān.⁷⁷ Third, he would apply these verses to his situation, which would give meaning to the difficulties he was enduring. Through this process, Nursi was able to respond to all the hardships he endured with a heart filled with peace and solace.

Not only did Nursi give meaning to events that took place in his life, but he also gave meaning to his life overall. He explains the unfolding of events in his life as:

I am now certain that my life has passed in such a way, beyond my will and power, consciousness and planning and has been given so strange a course, that it might yield the result of these treatises to serve the All-Wise Qur'ān. It is quite simply as though all my scholarly life has been an introduction to them and in preparation of them. It has passed in such a way that the exposition of the Qur'ān's miraculousness through *The Words* [the *Risale-i Nur*] would be its result.⁷⁸

⁷⁵ Ibid., 240.

⁷⁶ Qur'ān 32:7.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Şükran Vahide, *Bediüzzaman Said Nursi: The Author of the Risale-i Nur* (Istanbul: Sözlük Publications, 1992), 223.

This is very significant since Nursi believed all sufferings, challenges and events needed to take place to produce this great outcome in his life: the writing of the *Risale-i Nur*. This suggests, if events did not unravel in his life the way they did, the *Risale-i Nur* may not have come to exist, leading to the acknowledgement of the importance of those events, as difficult as they were to endure. This enabled him to be at peace with his sufferings and even have appreciation for them. Ultimately, he gave them meaning in a way that made him offer 100,000 thanks to God and utter the words:

All this oppression and tyranny of theirs is like pieces of wood for the fire of ardour and endeavour which illuminates the lights of the Qur'ān; it makes them flare up and shine. And those lights of the Qur'ān, which have suffered this persecution of theirs and have spread with the heat of endeavour, have made this province, indeed, most of the country, like a madrasa in place of Barla. They supposed me to a prisoner in a village. On the contrary, in spite of the atheists, Barla has become the teaching desk, and many places, like Isparta, have become like the madrasa...⁷⁹

⁷⁹ Nursi, *The Letters*, 427.

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