

## Relevance of Surah Al-Kahf in the Search of Knowledge

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### Abstract

An attempt is made, in this paper, to draw a line of relevance of the *Surah* to the contemporary Muslims with particular reference to knowledge. This would enable us to have a look at the encouragements it offers to the people in the contemporary time to have firm resolve, humility, patience and good intention as a bed rock in the search for knowledge. It is on the basis of this that Almighty Allah, at the end of the *Surah*, confirmed that He is All-Knowing and has all knowledge as stated in the following verse:

<sup>1</sup>Say: If the ocean were ink (wherewith to write out) the words of my Lord sooner would the ocean be exhausted than would the words of my Lord even if we added another ocean like it for its aid<sup>1</sup>.

This debunks the claim that our knowledge is abundant hence, in comparison, the divine knowledge of Allah is absolute and our knowledge is very less or rather minimal or limited to that of His. Muslims must have full faith in the wisdom of divine knowledge. This is because, many hidden things had happened between Musa and Al-Khidr (*AS*) that prompted Musa to ask Al-Khidr certain questions not clear or rather hidden to him.

### Relevance of the Surah

A careful study of what ensued between Prophets Musa and Al-Khidr (*AS*) makes people to appreciate the way and manner in which Prophet Musa (*AS*) conducted himself before Al-Khidr, who occupied the position of being his teacher in this context. What could be understood here is that no matter what position or peak of knowledge one attains he should not, in any way, attribute total knowledge to himself or claim to have mastery in every aspects of knowledge. If a person claims to have authority in every aspects of knowledge it means that he is advocating that he has an encompassing knowledge as regards all matters, whether hidden or manifest which could only be attributed to the Creator. Many students today searching for knowledge attribute to themselves the mastery of almost every aspects of knowledge without, necessarily, recourse to the divine knowledge of Almighty Allah which encompasses everything. Instead, one should refer to Almighty Allah who has full knowledge over every thing and should have a reflection of what happened when Musa (*AS*) was asked, while delivering a speech to children of Israel, as to 'Who is the most learned person among the people'. When he answered that he is. Instantly, Almighty Allah rebuked him as he did not refer the knowledge to Allah, an idea which supposed to be imbibed by every students and teachers of knowledge.

Equally, the teacher-student relationship should be checked, analyzed and be improved so as to enhance easy and conducive atmosphere for learning and good understanding of knowledge. When Prophet Musa (*AS*) met his teacher he tries his best to show reverence to him by addressing him politely, gently and in kind manner a position which is different from what obtains in our contemporary situation of learning. This is the manner in which a student is expected to relate with his teacher with ease and kindness rather than in any woeful or forceful manner. Similarly, strategizing some sorts of conditions and discharging them effectively between the teacher and the student is a worthy of note and that forgetfulness in the course of interaction between the two is a thing to be considered.

It should be encouraged however, that unless and only where necessary, student should not cause disagreement or any form of challenge with his teacher on matters that he understood not or not satisfied with.

But, where necessary, the disagreement should come without disrespect and harshness at the detriment of the teacher. It is regrettably noted that many students today cause some kinds of disagreement with their teachers with a view to showing or calling people to know that they have learnt many aspects of knowledge and were, now, bold enough to challenge their teachers. In contrast, Prophet Musa (*AS*) had never tried to prove Al-Khidr wrong or downgrade him in matters hidden to him but rather seeking more and more clarifications as regards to what happens just to enable him add to his knowledge. This emphasizes that it is not befitting for a student to deny something that he has no knowledge of, for there may be something beneficial to him and which requires him to lower down himself and show reverence to his teacher with a view to getting benefit in it. This further reveals that it is a great mistake for anyone to abstain from search of knowledge even though he claimed to have had enough of it.

Relatively, it reveals how important was the statement of Prophet Musa (*AS*) when he said to Al-Khidr that 'May I follow thee on the footing that thou teach me something of the (Higher) truth which thou hast been

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<sup>1</sup> Qur'an 18:109

taught?'<sup>1</sup> Nowadays students use available means and concerted efforts to equate themselves with their teachers on matters of religion and other worldly affairs as well, the act which did not only cause harm to student but also to the teacher himself who may realize that he has now lose regard from his student.

### **Firm resolve in the search for knowledge**

One of the important relevance of Surah al-Kahf to the contemporary search for knowledge is its ability to teach firm resolve in the quest for knowledge which could be learnt by the students. The chapter taught us how Prophet Musa (AS) undertook to travel to far distant area just to meet his teacher, Al-Khidr, who was a model for the true scholar of Islam and more learned than him regardless of all the troubles and difficulties. This reveals that anyone who wants to acquire sound knowledge must undergo this type of tiresome journey as did by Prophet Musa in order to get the correct and sound knowledge to whatever length it may take him. Prophet Musa (AS) was able to attach himself with Al-Khidr with patience until he understood what the teacher teaches him about. This suggests that search for knowledge has no age barrier, since it did not hinder Prophet Musa to come down to Al-Khidr to benefit from what Allah has granted him of wisdom and higher truth. Today, unlike what happened between Musa and Al-Khidr, many Muslims would not find it easy to stay with their teachers to such an extent of understanding all that they are required to know for being either eager and hurry to know certain things in a short period of time or not having competence on the side of the teacher himself. Prophet Musa (AS) had traveled a very long and tiresome journey with a view to meeting Al-Khidr so as to study from him.

This has been the trend among the Sahaba (RA), their followers and the subsequent generations of scholars who followed suit. The Prophet (SAW) encouraged Muslims to pursue knowledge even if it warrants travelling as far distant place as China. He says in the following Hadith:

Search for knowledge even though it be in China<sup>2</sup>

This Hadith suggests that education is so important that Muslims must be prepared to travel beyond their familiar environment to the limit of the known world to achieve it. It also talked about the struggle to become an educated Muslim, thus fulfilling a religious obligation. Students today are so much reluctant in adopting this beautiful trend of leaving their home town moving to other parts of the world to search for knowledge.

They should know more on the importance of leaving one's environment and adopting a new and entirely different location, culture as well as norms and values of other people which vary to some degree with that of his own. This trend is so important as it enables a student know certain things that are not prevalent in his own area and also enhances his ability to face challenges in life particularly on issues that relate to higher knowledge. It will also allow him to refer matters, which are not clear, to knowledgeable ones who are in a position to decide or rule on these matters effectively. Equally, one should not bother as to how long will he get to the new environment or how long will he stay there provided he set out searching for knowledge, the type of which will be a source of comfort and guide not only to him but to the entire society in which he lives.

It is pertinent to reflect on the statement of Musa (AS) discussing with his boy attendant that 'I will not give up until I reach the junction of the two seas or (until) I spend years<sup>3</sup> and years in travel<sup>4</sup>. In his book titled 'Obstacles in the path of knowledge' Shaykh Abdus-Salam Burjis narrated on Al-Farra who mentioned that he verily amazed at one who has chance and ability to seek for knowledge but he refuses<sup>5</sup>. This suggests that no matter how much one acquires or obtains knowledge or even that he has say on the whole stock of knowledge one has to search for more knowledge, especially the one that relates to his present day. This strengthens the fact that our knowledge no matter how peak was not so perfect that it could not receive further additions. In addition to this, constant efforts are to be made while search for knowledge with a view to brace up the challenge and keep our knowledge lively march with the time, particularly the modern time where people arrogate to them selves knowledge of so many things, while in the real sense they knew very little things.

It can also be observed that free time and good health play a very good role in promoting the zeal interest of many students searching for knowledge. We can only appreciate the constant efforts made by the Sahaba (RA), their followers and other Islamic scholars if we study their life and how they acquired the knowledge they had. For instance, Imam al-Shafi'I was said to have toured the world in search of knowledge and that he committed into memory the entire Qur'an at the age of seven, while at thirteen committed ten thousand lines of poetry to memory<sup>6</sup>. On his part Imam Ahmad bn Hambal was said to have compared the effort and care

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<sup>1</sup> Qur'an 18:64

<sup>2</sup> Al-Qurtubi, A.I. *Jami' Bayan al-Ilm was Fadlih*, Mu'assasat al-Rayyan, Vol. 1 P. 25

<sup>3</sup> This means that even if it takes him an indefinite space of time or 80 years as some scholars opined.

<sup>4</sup> See Qur'an 18:60

<sup>5</sup> Shaykh Abdus-Salam Burjis, *Obstacles in the Path of Knowledge*, P. 1 available at [www.salafipublications.com](http://www.salafipublications.com) as at 14<sup>th</sup> August, 2009

<sup>6</sup> 'Aid Abdullahi al-Qarni, *Op. cit*, P. 140

he had for knowledge with that of a mother who searches passionately for her lost child<sup>1</sup>. Similarly, Ibn Rushd had clearly mentioned that he never left reading except on two different occasions; the time his father died and the day he married<sup>2</sup>. The need for constant effort in the search for knowledge has been clearly stressed in the following verses of the Glorious Qur'an where Almighty Allah says:

And those strive in Our (Cause) We will certainly guide them to Our paths: for verily Allah is with those who do right<sup>3</sup>

According to Ali, as soon as one strives with might and main, constancy and determination, the light and mercy of Allah will come his way and this will provide one with the means by which he can raise himself above himself<sup>4</sup>. Almighty Allah mentions in another verse that:

(To his son came the command): 'O Yahya! Take hold of the Book with might': and We gave him wisdom even as a youth<sup>5</sup>

A reflection on the first contact between Prophets Musa and Al-Khidr (*AS*) shows Prophet Musa's constant and insistent effort that Al-Khidr will find him patient and will not disobey him in any command until he explains it to him. Wastage occurs in the lives of students who do not take advantage of both free time and good health to seek for knowledge. All this is done in order to acquire the type of knowledge which brings person near to Allah. It is important to reflect on the following statement by Shaykh Abdus-Salam in which he says:

Verily, the offspring of sin is heedlessness. And verily, this, heedlessness brings about the hardness of the heart. And verily, this hardness of the heart makes a person distant from Allah and verily being distant from Allah brings about the Fire<sup>6</sup>.

The above statement makes us understand that important knowledge is that which repels harm and brings benefit, and that all sins derive their origin from ignorance. Therefore all virtues lie in knowledge and acting upon it.

#### **Humility and patience in the course of search for knowledge**

Part of the discipline which must be established between the teacher and the student is humility and patience. There are numerous verses of the Glorious Qur'an inculcating patience and extolling it. Some of these verses are spelt out below:

Be sure We shall test you with something of fear and hunger  
some loss in goods or lives or the fruits (of your toil) but give glad tidings to those  
who patiently persevere<sup>7</sup>

He says in another place:

O ye who believe! Seek help with patient, perseverance and prayer: for Allah is with those who patiently persevere<sup>8</sup>

He also mentions that:

...those who patiently persevere will truly receive a reward without measure!<sup>9</sup>

In yet another verse He says:

But indeed if any show patience and forgive that would truly be an exercise of courageous will and resolution in the conduct of affairs<sup>10</sup>

And in this verse He explains that:

And We shall try you until We test those among you who strive their utmost and persevere in patience; and We shall try your reported (mettle)<sup>11</sup>

From these verses above we can understand that it is only through humility, patience and practice that a student is likely to get more and beneficial knowledge from his teachers. This is the benefit he will get which will be extended to others who will study under him. Without patience and total commitment from the side of the student he cannot attain the glory of getting the knowledge he is aspiring to get. From the context of Surah al-Kahf, we have seen how Prophet Musa (*AS*) set out to acquire knowledge from Al-Khidr, one of Allah's servants who was granted wisdom and knowledge of so many things by Allah as mentioned in the following verse:

So they found one of Our servants on whom We had bestowed mercy from Ourselves

<sup>1</sup> Ibid, P. 145

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, P. 145

<sup>3</sup> Qur'an 29:69

<sup>4</sup> Yusuf Ali, Op. cit, Note 3502, Chapter 29:69

<sup>5</sup> Qur'an 19:12

<sup>6</sup> Shaykh Abdus-Salam Burjis, Op. Cit, P. 6

<sup>7</sup> Qur'an 2:155

<sup>8</sup> Qur'an 2:153

<sup>9</sup> Qur'an 39:10

<sup>10</sup> Qur'an 42:43

<sup>11</sup> Qur'an 47:31

and whom We had taught knowledge from Our own presence<sup>1</sup>

This confirmed the fact that Almighty Allah granted Al-Khidr knowledge and wisdom to enable him interpret the inner meaning and mystery of events.

Lack of humility and patience like what has been displayed by Prophet Musa (AS) is what hinders students from acquiring different and important branches of knowledge available at their time. On the contrary, the contemporary students will want to acquire certain branches of knowledge at ease without any difficulty.

This seems to be unacceptable and unobtainable in the sense that whoever wants to acquire knowledge must get ready to face difficulties and trials in the course of that. We learnt, in this Surah under review, that Prophet Musa (AS) passes through pitfalls to the extent that the journey was becoming heavier and more fatiguing to him, but yet, endured to the attainment of his set objective. Some examples for the display of patience expected of every student while seeking for knowledge are given by Shaykh Abdus-Salam Burjis who wrote that Ya'qub ibn al-Sufyan mentioned his experience in the search of knowledge to one of his associates that he remained travelling seeking for knowledge (Ilm) for the period of thirty years<sup>2</sup>. This shows that a student will not be able to gain knowledge through resting instead he should strive to the best of his ability to imbibe the spirit of patience while travelling for the search of knowledge.

He should be humble before his teacher and should not differ with his teacher except in matters that go contrary to the dictates of Islamic Shari'ah upon which the Prophet (SAW) says:

There is no obedience to anyone in disobedience to Allah<sup>3</sup>

Moreover, he should take into cognizance that this knowledge will not be acquired through dream, inheritance or through striking it by arrows, so he is expected to make himself ready to face whatever challenge that may come his way. It is only when one understands that there is no greater wealth than the wisdom, nor greater poverty than ignorance, no greater heritage than culture that he will strive hard in utilizing his time, energy and resources to acquire the beneficial knowledge.

We can however appreciate how past Muslim generations experienced hardship in the course of search of knowledge. For instance, Imam Malik who informed what befell Rabi'ah to the extent that he has to sell the beams of his house in order to pay his education dues. He used to say that one cannot attain the heights of intellectual glory unless faced with poverty; for it's the real test of a man, it awakens in him the hidden energies and enables him to surmount all difficulties<sup>4</sup>. Humility and patience in the search for knowledge are regarded as important tools which facilitate the acquisition of knowledge with ease, therefore one needs to be strong enough in that direction. Al-Shaykh Al-Zarnuji explains thus:

Whosoever searches for anything and strive hard in its course will definitely get it... and that whoever knocks at the door, putting utmost effort, will get into it<sup>5</sup>.

Sadid al-Din al-Shiraziyyu added that:

Constant effort brings closer things that are far distant and it opens every door that is locked... do you aspire to become a jurist over night without experiencing any difficulty (hardship)? Then surely madness is of different kinds... if acquisition of wealth becomes a difficult thing, what more of knowledge<sup>6</sup>?

While Imam Abu Nasr al-Saffar elucidates more when he says:

I have not seen any portion given to lazy except remorse and loss of (many) important things...<sup>7</sup>

This can be further explained cogently through a reflection on what Al-Shaykh Burjis says when he mentioned that:

A man said to another man: 'By way of what was it that you obtained this Ilm?' He said: 'I sought it and I found that it was distant (with regards to ones ability to obtain it) and one cannot hunt it with arrows and it is not something that a person can see in his dream and it is not something which is inherited from one's forefathers or from one's uncles. And I reached it by being sheltered in tents and by using rocks as a thing to recline upon and by becoming addicted to staying awake at nights and by making much analysis of books...'<sup>8</sup>

This statement stresses the significance of firm grounding in knowledge which can only be obtained by great

<sup>1</sup> Qur'an 18:65

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, P. 26

<sup>3</sup> Abubakar Abdullahi bn Muhammad bn Abi Shaybah, Musannif Ibn Abi Shaybah, Dar al-Salafiyah Al-Hindiyyah, Vol. 12, P. 546.

<sup>4</sup> I.A. Al-Qurtubi, Op. Cit, P. 97

<sup>5</sup> I.B. A-Zarnuji, Op.cit, P. 22

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, P. 23

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, P. 27

<sup>8</sup> Ibid, P. 27

sacrifice, patience, striving, affordable time, understanding and research. We equally observed how Musa's page<sup>1</sup> was overwhelmed with inertia which made him forget to tell his master that he actually saw the fish swimming away from the sea. It is imperative for students to put dirt on their head with a view to getting humility and this will surely earn them admiration from their mates and the public. Any student who is humble in the search of knowledge will have the most beneficial knowledge among his peers. Students seeking for knowledge have lose interest in initiating and maintaining the required amount of patience for them to succeed in their quest for knowledge which after all, is the main stream line of getting success. It was based on this that Imam Ibn al-Madeenee remarked that:

It was said to Sha'bee (one of the earlier scholars of hadeeth), 'Where have you obtained all of this Ilm from?' He replied, 'by not having any reliance upon anything (other than Allah) and by travelling through the lands and having patience like the patience of a jamaad (a firm structure that is lifeless e.g. A building). And (setting out) early (begin work from the early part of the day) like the (setting out of the) crow'.

It is important to note that Sha'abee is one of the renowned Hadith scholars of the earlier generations who explained the way and manner through which he acquired knowledge pointing out patience among other things, as one of the major factors that facilitates the acquisition of knowledge easily. It is therefore important to reveal here what the great companion of the Prophet (*SAW*) Abu Hurairah (RA) has said about himself in his search for knowledge. He says about himself:

When I was afflicted with severe hunger, I would go to a Companion of the Prophet (*SAW*) and asked him about an Ayah of the Qur'an (and stay with him) learning it so that he would take me with him to his house and give food. One day my hunger became so severe that I placed a stone on my stomach. I then sat down in the path of the Companions. Abu Bakr (RA) passed by and I asked him about an Ayah of the Qur'an. I only asked him so that he would invite me but he did not. Then 'Umar bn Al-Khattab (RA) passed by me and I asked him about an Ayah but he also did not invite me. Then the Prophet (*SAW*) passed by and realized that I was hungry and said: 'Abu Hurairah! At your command. I replied and followed him until we entered his house. He found a bowl of milk and asked his family from where did you get this? Someone sent it for you, they replied. He then said to me, O Abu Hurairah! Go to the Ahl al-Suffah and invite them. Abu Hurairah did as he was told and they all drank from the milk<sup>3</sup>.

It is therefore hoped that students searching for knowledge should rely solely upon Allah, travel to every nooks and cranny and try to develop patience in their mind, the kind of which enables them to overcome all difficulties in the cause of search for knowledge and most importantly setting out as early as possible.

### **Intention as bedrock in the course of search for knowledge**

Intention has been the major step guide towards realizing one's goal in all our actions. This is because of the role it plays in protecting, curing and nurturing actions and deeds from being corrupted. This is what makes a student to achieve his objectives in whatever he intends while seeking for knowledge. The Prophet (*SAW*) was reported to have said in one of his traditions that:

Actions are judged according to the intention (they are made for)<sup>4</sup>

However, Hassan al-Basri, one of the great Muslim scholars, observed that:

Whoever seeks 'Ilm for the world then that is his portion of that 'Ilm. And whoever seeks Ilm for the here after then he will obtain it<sup>5</sup>

It should be noted that the intention for the search of knowledge should be made solely to lift off ignorance, the act which will pave way for acquiring it with clear sightedness and wisdom. Ibn al-Mubarak explained that the beginning of 'Ilm is to have the correct intention then for you to take heed and listen, then understand it, then memorise it, then to act upon it and then to spread it<sup>6</sup>. It has now become known that actions are judged according to the intentions behind them and that seeking the praise of people became one of the greatest obstacles in traversing the path of Allah. However, the life circle of knowledge is to have a pure intention, pay careful attention and listen, understand, memorize, act and then teach it. Contemporarily, many students were found in one way or the other engaging in self admiration and being deceived by it.

This, provably, may lead one to destruction in life and being prohibited from enjoying the fruits and

<sup>1</sup> Yusha' bn Nun

<sup>2</sup> Shaykh Abdus-Salam Burjis, Op. Cit, P. 26

<sup>3</sup> Muhammad bn Fatuh al-Humaidi, Jami'u Bayan al-Sahihain Bukhari wa Muslim, Dar Ibn Hazm, Beirut, 2002, Vol. 3, P. 188

<sup>4</sup> Al-Imam Al-Hafiz Abi Abd Allah Muhammad bn Isma'il al-Bukhari, Op. cit, Vol. 1, P. 4

<sup>5</sup> Shaykh Abdus-Salam Burjis, Op. Cit, P. 8

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, P. 8

benefits of knowledge acquired. It is interesting to however, know that Prophet Musa (AS), despite the fact that he is one of the *Ulul Azm*<sup>1</sup>, surrendered himself before Prophet al-Khidr as a student, the good thing that enabled him to get more and more knowledge.

This suggests that it is important for any student to learn under the supervision and guidance of a scholar or a teacher, so that he attains the understanding and explanation required of him, hence the absence of these makes one prone to many mistakes as witnessed today among many students. Again, many of them indulged in learning the new type of knowledge before they have mastered what they need in the previous ones they were taught. There is no doubt that knowledge is a means to all forms of good in both this world and the next to come and it is through this knowledge that people are raised in levels or degrees by Allah. And that sooner or later, the effect of that knowledge will begin to shine on them as further strengthened by Hassan al-Basri who explained that:

If a person was to seek 'Ilm then it would not be long before you would see the effects of that 'Ilm upon the individual, his *khushoo* and even his sight and upon his tongue and his hands and upon his salat and upon his *zuhd*. If a person is to obtain one aspect of Ilm and he acts upon it, then that is better for him than the dunya and everything that is in it<sup>2</sup>.

Therefore, students should put more effort in ensuring that the knowledge they have acquired benefit them and others and should not let any portion of that knowledge be merely for the seeking of audience making them self conceited.

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<sup>1</sup> This refers to chosen Prophets such as Muhammad, Nuh, Ibrahim, Musa and Isa (AS) who were given high position and dignity by Almighty Allah over other Prophets. See Qur'an 3:37 and 20:115.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, P. 34

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