

EROSION OF FAITH: symptoms | stages | causes | prevention | treatment | cure

There is an outbreak of spiritual erosion in our communities. Its symptoms often follow a predictable pattern. People who had chosen to practice Islam on their own, are now, years later, choosing to drop certain teachings or stop practicing altogether. The phenomenon is neither new nor should it be bewildering - it is simply the manifestation of the weakening of faith.

There was a time when most Muslims had someone to look up to spiritually and many friends to grow with, in belief and practice. Sadly, those times for the most part are gone. Today, as travelers on the path of pleasing our Lord, many of us have no access to mentors who can be our compass, nor peers to whom we can look to for support.

Consequently, there is a need to address this phenomenon of weakening faith. A weakening that affects backsliding individuals on the one hand, and apathetic communities on the other. Communities, who in confusion and impotence, either turn a blind eye to the daze and anguish of their faltering members or treat them with a well-meant harshness which further alienates them.

Awareness of the symptoms, causes and stages, may help stave off the downward spiraling of us as an ummah, allow backsliding individuals to regain lost ground and most importantly enable us to be there for one another. For as Prophet Muhammad ﷺ says, we are as one body when a part of it is in pain the rest of it responds in sleeplessness and fever.

Faith is not lost overnight. It is a process which is not noticed until it has gone too far. Following is a description of this process as it pertains to prayer, behavior and dress.

Symptoms and Stages of the Erosion of Faith

- **Concerning Prayer**

Salat is our first line of defense and our most important protection. In Quran, we are not asked to *perform* prayer (أداء), rather we are asked to *establish* prayer ((إقامة); which means: to perform prayer **consistently**, with **awareness** and in **humble recognition of God's greatness** and **our shortcomings**. Allah ﷻ describes prayer as a 'timed' command. Thus, prayer requires that it be done on time, regularly and with focus. Hence, if any of those conditions is not met, we lose that much protection for our Iman.

Not only is prayer a protection, it is also a *reflection* of our reverence for our Creator, and our interest in direct and private dialogue with God. In that respect, it is an indicator of our relationship with the One we worship.

Prayer is designed to be an active force in our lives. Allah ﷻ says in the Quran:

إِنَّ الصَّلَاةَ تَنْهَىٰ عَنِ الْفَحْشَاءِ وَالْمُنْكَرِ

"Verily prayer prevents from immorality and wrongdoing." In a hadeeth the Prophet ﷺ was told of a man who prayed and would steal. He answered, "His prayer will prevent him." When

prayer is not performed fulfilling its conditions, it ceases to change us for the better, protect us from spiritual harm and fulfill its purpose in general.

Prayer is our constant reminder of what life is all about. It is our source of strength and an eraser of sin. It is distributed throughout the day for that particular purpose. Five times a day the collected sin on our hearts, that warps our view of the truth, is dusted off. Five times a day spiritual pollution is washed away; five times a day we are empowered by coming into contact with the All-Powerful as we seek guidance amidst the noise and confusion we may be experiencing. Most importantly, five times a day we put on our *Akhira glasses* and see life for what it truly is. It follows that any malfunction of this powerful tool will affect our faith and contribute to its decline.

The Deterioration of Salat:

- a. performing prayers late and missing some completely:

The very first sign that something is amiss is that prayers are prayed last minute. At first there may have been a reason to pray one or two, late (by late I mean still within the prescribed time -but towards the end of it). Eventually this becomes a habit: *I am so involved in doing something, or the time and place are not 'prayer friendly' or I just can't work up the energy to pray – now*. I cannot emphasize enough the stage of deteriorating salat - it is so surreptitious. At first, one's thoughts and feelings have not been adversely affected yet, so one thinks nothing of its decline. One may truly believe that she's simply tired or very busy.

Next, comes missing prayers altogether (regardless of whether or not they are made up). In missing prayers, I do not mean the occasional fajr or other prayer that you miss perhaps once or twice a year. Those usually can be quickly connected to a preceding deed, and have served their purpose once one makes amends. Missing prayers in this stage means once or twice (or more) a week. Something that can no longer be considered a warning signal of something wrong we have done (like a fever warns us of a possible infection), rather it is a symptom that prayer has been reduced to an empty ritual that lacks focus, lacks commitment and lacks feeling.

- b. deficient reaction to missing a prayer:

Does negligence of prayer cause one to backslide or does backsliding bring about a carelessness of prayer? Yes, it is a vicious cycle; but it starts with a sin that causes one to miss a prayer. If this danger signal is heeded, if the incident is treated with appropriate shock and the making of amends then it has fulfilled its purpose. Otherwise it will be followed by another missed prayer and yet another. The cause this time being lack of appropriate reaction to something so important having been missed.

This stage has to do with feelings. It is at this point that remorse gives way to a more comfortable feeling of 'there is nothing I can do about this' and 'I'm doing the best I can within my circumstances'. Comparing one's self to those who practice less or who don't pray or who pay lip service to prayer can be a turning point toward losing prayer altogether.

c. rationalizing tardy or missed prayers:

At this point, one begins to justify the missing of prayers. *My job/health/responsibilities do not allow me to do it on time. Prayer is something very sacred, I'm not about to do it when I cannot give it my full attention (at school or at work), I'll make them all up at night when I can focus better, Allah doesn't want us to put ourselves in danger, or God understands.*

One may actually believe she is being flexible and practical by praying in a less conspicuous way. Not realizing how much more important the present life has become to her than the Hereafter. She may actually believe that prayer must be adjusted so that it fits with the times and thus devise her own brand of salat.

d. generally acting defensive, angry or bitter:

As prayer deteriorates and the heart is numbed, one gravitates toward people and actions that represent his or her whims and desires. A person's discomfort around those who do pray or who still practice could make him critical and confrontational, *At least I don't lie/cheat/act vulgar like some of the people that, pray on time/claim they are religious, do.* At this point a person is more focused on judging those who pray or are religious than on their own path of decline.

- **Concerning Behavior**

Sometimes one may actually believe he is being flexible and practical without compromising. He may congratulate himself on finding the perfect formula for living in a non-Muslim society comfortably. Not realizing how vivid and important his present life has become to him and how faint his view of the Hereafter, his lifestyle will begin to mimic that of non Muslims. When a person, distances himself from his practicing Muslim community, whether deliberately or not, his worship suffers. Gradually, he will gravitate toward an environment and company that he feels more comfortable in. One that does not make him feel guilty.

Sometimes within that same Muslim society, people have changed. One family's backsliding can start an avalanche of individuals and families compromising their belief to keep up with their circle of friends. Or perhaps the faith of so many Muslim friends has suffered so that regression is normalized. In time, even previously religious people's behavior may bear little resemblance to what it was before.

- **Concerning Dress**

Islam is a religion of balance and modesty. It is not the conditions nor proof of Islamic dress that I wish to address here, rather it is the idea of *backsliding* in how a person used to dress of their own conviction and accord. As we have mentioned earlier for other matters, this too, happens gradually. The standards of modesty are first violated at home, then once a person gets accustomed to less covering in private, it becomes easy to dress that way outside.

Regarding the violation of dress code, it is usually an attempt to blend in and seem a little less conspicuous or less drab or plain. For women, eye-brows, make-up and nail polish become

essential interests. Clothes are no longer layered or wide. Sleeves and hemlines recede, as does the head cover for those who wear it (allowing the hairline to show and then the neck and ears). For men, it is an obsession with dressing stylishly regardless of how revealing and inappropriate the fashions may be.

Causes of the Erosion of Faith

Circumstances and or actions that adversely affect our faith are obvious in some cases, whereas sometimes they are not. The partial list below addresses some of the most common causes.

1. The hardship of trials: an arduous marriage, severe illness, difficult fate

Sometimes the blow, isolation, shock or weight of a trial can be so great that a person feels their whole life has been altered. Their perspective on life changes and most of what they assumed as givens are now questioned – including their whole belief system at times.

Qadar (fate) has been qualified by the Messenger ﷺ (peace and blessings be upon him) as good or bad. In both cases we are asked to believe it is from God and that nothing happens to us without His will. It is a fact, though, that no trial is sent but with at least double its worth in ease or support, and yet by definition, a trial is a test. Trust in Allah Most High, means that I can interpret the calamity that has befallen me for the best. I can see how it is a blessing in disguise; I can see how it is a warning signal and a wakeup call; I can see how it is a cause for reward through bearing it with patience and a door for a more intense relationship with God, and I can remember that after all this is the fleeting earthly life not the Hereafter where things are fair and permanent.

In some cases, a trial comes to shake those on the fence in terms of their relationship with their Creator. It is a very personal and individualized test of their belief. One tailored to target a person's weaknesses or misconceptions. Following a test, people do not remain their wishy-washy selves. A person is forced into taking a stand. Giving in to feelings of doubt, protest, anger and bitterness can erode one's faith. The beautiful dua of the Messenger ﷺ "...there is no escape or refuge from You but to You," is perhaps the best manifestation of the state of a believer enduring difficulty.

2. Travel: moving to a new state or country and losing one's trifold support

When one travels they lose three defenses: the protection of one's family and home, the protection of one's close circle of friends and acquaintances, and the protection of one's country or society. Liberated from these three 'communities' that reined his behavior, a traveler is left to his conscience and integrity to continue living as he did prior to leaving home.

We truly do not know how much of our faith is deep conviction that has taken hold of our heart and mind and how much of it is adhering to the norms of our society, until we are stripped of

the reinforcement our environment used to provide. For those of us dependent upon extrinsic support, travel can pose a serious strain on our faith.

3. New *positive* circumstances (university, marriage, job)

Newly acquired happy or positive circumstances also have the potential to distract us from worship or focus, thus weakening our faith. In a fulfilling relationship, one can either turn to Allah ﷻ in gratitude, or be so satisfied that they forget the Giver.

Money is a test. Sometimes we notice that when we barely had enough to make ends meet, sadaqa came naturally and easily. Then with wealth or a stable income, the doors of dunia and worldly matters open up, sadaqa is forgotten or a feels like a burden and wealth becomes a distraction.

Lastly, whether you have recently landed a job or just started university, it can be so easy to break the rules of formality in interacting with members of the other sex. It can be so easy to forget to guard one's gaze, and this has a seriously negative impact upon one's heart and faith.

4. Doing dawa unsupported and unsupervised

Calling people to Islam is a noble undertaking but must be done with the greatest of care. Good intention and dedication are not enough. There are many pitfalls and dangers that face the sincerest of da'iyas (callers to the faith):

- One such pitfall is depleting your own spiritual reserves, not realizing that you now need to have extra ibadah (worship), to make up for what you lose in working with those who are distant.
- Spending large amounts of unprotected time with those you are calling to Islam is another. Dropping your guard can cause you to acquire some of their faults and diseases of the heart.
- The worst pitfall is falling prey to the temptation of power and popularity and actually seeing yourself through the eyes of your admirers.

It helps to know the pitfalls of the path. It is vital that one has a support network to fall back on; people he trusts to warn him when he spreads himself too thin and needs a break to replenish his spiritual reserves. A da'iya must realize that to maintain the health of her faith, she needs a mentor to monitor her and peers to bring her down to size.

5. Mountains of minutiae / the smallest sins

Prophet Muhammad ﷺ speaks of what he calls *petty sins*. He compares them to small sticks that, once collected, are enough kindling to cook one's dough into bread. Similarly, these small sins add up such that when one is ultimately held accountable for them, they are enough to lead one to Hellfire.

Dismissal of any sin or infraction as petty and not worthy of worry is in itself a major sin. In doing so one forgets two things, Who he is defying, and the tendency of small sins to add up.

6. New friends or living comfortably (dropping one's guard) in a spiritually toxic environment:

Many people know the hadith of the person who killed a hundred people and asked if repentance was available to him and was told, only if he left the land of the transgressing people. We all believe in the effect of air pollution on our lungs. So too, does spiritual pollution affect our faith. Being away from a Muslim community, you lose track of your spiritual well being, for it is the Muslim community that acts as a mirror for you to see your true reflection in. It is with them that you realize how little Quran you have been reading or how you have ceased to do any form of thikr (remembrance of God).

There are times when one cannot help but be in a spiritually toxic environment. If that is the case then one must stay no longer than he absolutely has to, must stock up on light from extra worship, and must detox as soon as he gets home with some additional ibadah. Letting down your guard Islamically and assimilating into your environment can be comfortable but will wreak havoc on your unique view of life as a practicing Muslim.

Making close friends with those who are distant from Islam is another cause of the eroding of our faith. Prophet Muhammad ﷺ says, "A person is on the religion of his friend, so let each of you be careful whom he befriends." It is neighborly, human, and Islamically proper to have friendly relations with all the people you come into contact with. But close ties and long periods of time must be spent with people you carefully choose. Thoughts, feelings, and beliefs have a way of seeping from one person to another and no matter how amazing the character of your non-Muslim best friend is, the fact remains that she does not believe in Islam nor does she pray. If within a few weeks, your friend has not become more like you, belief-wise, then it is you who is becoming like her.

Progression of deteriorating faith:

There is no *one* pattern that loss of faith follows, but in general many of these stages are often observed. Initially, sin is followed by hardship. At first, nothing quite goes right. This is an opportunity to return to Allah ﷻ. If this period passes and the person does not make amends, then sin becomes easier to do. The last stage is when it seems like the doors to do wrong not only yield to that person but seem to have been flung open.

Prevention of the Erosion of Faith

1. Protective Power of thikr, Quran, wudu, prayer, and worship in general:
 - a. Prophet Muhammad ﷺ says, "Verily Allah Ta'ala has said: '...and My servant does not draw near to Me with anything I love more than that which I have

obligated upon him. And My servant continues to draw near to me with nafl (supererogatory worship) until I love him. When I love him, I am his hearing with which he hears, and his sight with which he sees, and his hand with which he strikes, and his foot with which he walks. Were he to ask [something] of Me, I would surely give it to him; and were he to seek refuge with Me, I would surely grant him refuge.” (Sahih Bukhari). If this hadeeth tells us that worship brings us close to Allah ﷻ, then clearly worship in general is a means of protection from distance; and distance is a sign of weak faith.

- b. Trying to stay in the state of wudu as much as possible is another protection. For one thing, wudu washes away minor sins preventing them from accumulating. For another, it is one of the characteristics of a believer, “Verily, only a believer (strives to) stay in the state of wudu.” (Ahmad and Ibn Majah)
 - c. Prophet Muhammad ﷺ says, “Fasting is protection.” And in another hadeeth, it is referred to as a ‘shield’ for youth unable to afford marriage. Fasting is protection from desire, bad behavior, bad character, sin, and Hellfire.
 - d. Reading Quran is a cause for much reward. Angels gather in the place Quran is read and if Baqara is capable of expelling Shaytan from a home for three days, imagine what it can do for a person.
 - e. Doing istighfar and thikr and various tasbeeh also help. On the authority of Abu Hurayrah (r), “Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said, ‘Take cover and protection.’ We said, ‘From an enemy that has approached?’ He said, ‘No, protect yourselves from Fire; say: subhanAllah, alhamdulillah, la ilaha illal lah and Allahu akbar. For verily these (words) will come on the Day of Qiyamah as your preceders and rescuers and they are the good (deeds) that remain.’”
2. Protective power of knowledge: Prophet Muhammad ﷺ said: “The excellence of a scholar over another (ordinary) worshipper is like the excellence of the full moon over the rest of the heavenly bodies.” (Abu Dawood). To merely follow what anyone tells you can cause you to make mistakes without realizing, moreover to believe that you can interpret the text of Quran and Hadeeth without having the proper prerequisite knowledge is presumptuous. Seeking knowledge is vital and a protection from the harm of semi-knowledgeable people or those with an agenda. The minimum level of knowledge is that which will enable you to tell if what you read or hear is sound or unfounded.
 3. Protective power of good friends: Good friends are invaluable and rare. We should always make dua we are surrounded by those who love Allah ﷻ and care enough about us that they are willing to risk upsetting us to tell us the truth and to save us from backsliding. Good friends check up on each other periodically, make dua for each other, and are willing to go to great ends to help one another stay strong in their faith.
 4. Taking necessary precautions in polluted environments: We need to think of the spiritual environment we venture into in the same manner we think of the weather. Just like you wouldn’t go out into a snowy day without warm clothes and boots, so too, must

you take precautions of extra worship and a guarded heart when spending time in impure surroundings.

5. Realizing that diseases of the heart are contagious: Sometimes it is not the environment, but certain individuals that come into contact with you, around whom you must monitor yourself. Keep in mind that in Islam we never judge a 'person', but we do condemn wrong actions. You must be careful from where the new thoughts and feelings you are picking up are coming.
6. Realizing that Faith is not a one-time decision or act: Faith is an ongoing process that requires continuous tending. In surat Aal Imran we learn the dua, "Our Lord! Cause not our hearts to stray after Thou hast guided us." Prophet Muhammad ﷺ used to make the following dua: "O You who makes hearts steadfast, make our hearts steadfast upon Your religion." And describing the need to tend our faith he ﷺ said, "Verily, faith wears out inside of you as your clothing wear out, therefore ask God to renew faith in your hearts." Ali bin Abi Talib (radiyAllahu anhu), speaking of the vacillation of passion in a believer's heart, instructs us to increase our ibadah when we feel spiritually energetic, so that when we experience a low it doesn't affect our mandatory acts of worship.

Those who believe that being committed to their religion is something that takes place at a certain time in their life, after which they can move on, are gravely mistaken. Neglected faith is susceptible to disease, stunted growth, wilting, and death. Faith must be nurtured regularly. Jumu'a prayer must never be missed without a valid excuse. Weekly or biweekly sessions of learning and remembrance are vital.

Treatment and Cure of the Erosion of Faith

1. Repentance: Allah ﷻ says in Quran, "Verily God loves those who are oft-repenting and those who are oft-purifying." This implies that repentance is not a one-time occurrence. It is a habit we must develop that will keep us on the right track and allow us to grow in stages. For instance, one repents for not praying, then for praying late, then for not praying sunna, then from not focusing in prayer. Our repentance becomes like a zig-zag line bringing us back to where we should be. Prophet Muhammad ﷺ says, "One who has repented from a sin is as one who has no sin." This helps us not give up on ourselves, for we are allowed a new beginning as often as we ask for one.
2. Charity: Charity is defined by our Messenger ﷺ as proof. It is proof of our faith. Charity is atonement for sin and a protection from ordeal. It is also cure for the sick, as in the hadeeth "Treat your patients with sadaqa." At times, we need to treat our sick hearts and sick willpower with charity.
3. The Power of Dua: Be it some desire you are trapped in the addiction to, doubts that will not give you rest, a bitterness toward a destiny you feel you did not deserve, or a deadened heart, make dua. Make dua and complain to Allah ﷻ of your shortcomings and distance. Continue to make dua and never give up on your prayers being answered, no matter how long you have been making them. Find out when the best times, the best

places, and the best manner to make dua are. Dua is what a believer arms himself with. It is a weapon against all that you are suffering from.

4. The Potency of Privacy (both hidden good deeds and what one does in private): Few times are more valued in Islam than the time you spend alone. Few deeds are rewarded as those of which no one knows. In the hadeeth that mentions the people who were trapped in a cave, each of them prays to God by mentioning a 'hidden' good deed they had done. In the seven categories of people that will be shaded under the shade of God on the Day there is no shade but His, one of them is a person who mentioned God in private and wept. Another is one who gave charity with one hand of which the other (hand) was ignorant. Our true colors show when we are in conflict with others, true; but more so when we are alone. How (and with whom) we spend our most private moments is a reflection of our belief in God and the state of our conscience. It is for this reason that those whose private life varies from their public one are called hypocrites. It is for this reason that the most rewarded deeds are those good deeds done with no one but Allah ﷻ the wisest. Prophet Muhammad ﷺ says, "The charity (given in secret) extinguishes the wrath of God."

Final Comment

Loss of faith is NOT irreversible:

This may be the most important point of this whole piece. Sheikh Badruddeen, the famous scholar of hadeeth, used to ask the merchants - that stepped out of their shops and lined up to greet him along his path - for their prayers. They were Jews, Christians, and Muslims (practicing and not). Some of his students felt insulted that their esteemed sheikh would ask these commoners for their prayers. His answer would be, "My sons, do you know how my life will end and how theirs will?" He did not see himself above them with his faith, because as long as one is alive, one can turn to Allah ﷻ with sincerity and gain closeness to his or her Lord.

Among the companions of the Prophet ﷺ were those who lost their faith, and yet with the help of Allah ﷻ and their determination regained it. Umar bin al Khattab says, "We used to say: verily, God will not accept from those who went back on Islam repentance or recompense, a people who knew Allah ﷻ, then reverted to polytheism as a result of tribulation that befell them! And they used to say that to themselves, too. So, when the Messenger of God ﷺ came to Medina, Allah revealed concerning them, and what we said of them and what they said of themselves, {Say: O My Servants who have transgressed against their souls, despair not of the mercy of God for God forgives all sins, for He is Oft-Forgiving, Most Merciful...} So I wrote it by my own hand on a parchment and I sent it to Hisham b. al Aas, and Hisham said, 'When it came to me, I made to read it, and I began to scan it up and down, unable to understand it; I said: O God allow me to understand it. So Allah Most High placed in my heart that it was revealed concerning us, and of what we said of ourselves, and what was said of us, so I returned to my camel, sat upon it, and betook myself to the Messenger of Allah ﷺ.'"

The Messenger ﷺ says, "Verily Allah is more pleased with the repentance of a servant as he turns towards Him in repentance than one of you who has lost his camel in a waterless desert

upon which were all his provisions of food and drink. So, he lies down in the shade of a tree having lost all hope of finding it. Suddenly he finds the camel standing before him. He takes hold of its reins and then out of boundless joy says: O Lord, You are my servant and I am your Lord. He commits this mistake out of extreme happiness.” Such is the hope we are given. Such is the Lord that we worship, such is His love for us and His longing for our return.

May we who were granted intellect to feel the pleasure of reaching solutions, we who were given limbs that we might feel the pleasure of movement, we who were granted eyesight that we may be mesmerized by all the beauty around us, we who were given tongues that we may experience all the wonderful flavors and ears to hear the loveliest of sounds, may we use our knowledge of pleasure to yearn for the pleasure of our heart and souls. May we experience the ultimate pleasure of You, ya Allah, being pleased with us. Ameen.