

To a son⁸ who hopes for what he shall never attain,⁹ who treads on the heels of those who have perished, who is a target for disease,¹⁰ a hostage of time, a target for tribulation, a bondman of the temporal world,¹¹ a merchant [trading] in the [goods of] deception,¹² who owes a debt to fate,¹³ who is a prisoner of death, a cohort for worries, a companion for grief, a target erected for plagues, who has been pinned down by desires, and is heir to the dead.¹⁴

Thereafter, I say: Among the things I have ascertained from the temporal world's retreat, the assault of [the vicissitudes of] time, and the advance of the hereafter, are realities that prevent me from thinking of anyone but myself and worrying about anything beyond my affairs. However, as I stand face to face with my worries—not the worries of others—and my mind speaks to me truthfully and diverts me from my desires, and the very core of my concerns becomes manifest and draws me into a state of seriousness untainted by jest, and honesty untainted by lies, I find you to be a part of me. Rather, I find that you are all of me, such that anything afflicting you would afflict me, as though if death visited you, it would be visiting me. Thus, your affairs concern me as my own affairs concern me, so I hereby write this letter and depend on it [to guide you] whether I remain or perish.

⁸ One only takes admonition to heart if he is humble, willing to take criticism seriously. To foster this attitude in his son, Imām 'Alī attributes to him these strong traits.

⁹ Young people are more imaginative and less aware of life's limitations; accordingly, their hopes are more idealistic. This is a natural tendency fostered by youth, since hopes and aspirations are what drive us to grow and develop. However, when these hopes become far-fetched, they make us lose sight of the ephemeral nature of the temporal world, and make us forget about death and beyond. These are the hopes that are reprehensible.

¹⁰ Saying 191 of *Nahj al-balāghah* reads, "The state of man in this world is that of a target continually shot at by various kinds of death, and booty that afflictions rush to snatch up. With every sip he may gag; with every morsel he may choke..."

¹¹ A bondman or a slave is one who is bound to the will and command of his master. Against his own will, he must submit to his master's whim. Similarly, the lot of man in the temporal world is that of a slave, bound to the will of his worldly master. He must submit to its laws, and may not escape except through death.

¹² This is an allusion to the verse, "The temporal life is nothing but the goods of deception" (Qur'ān 3:185). And since "the temporal world is a market" in which "some have profited and others have lost" (*Tuḥaf al-'uqūl*, the last saying narrated from Imām al-Hādī), all who live therein are merchants dealing in its "goods of deception" that seem so lasting and appealing, but are actually fleeting.

¹³ That debt is his life, which he must give up when his time is over.

¹⁴ Regardless who the specific addressee of this letter is, it addresses all humankind insofar as we are human. What is striking about these introductory phrases is the pessimistic image that they draw of humankind. *Nahj al-balāghah* is filled with such characterizations as is the Qur'ān. For instance, the latter says, "Man was created weak" (4:28). It also says, "Man has always been hasty" (17:11). It also says, "Man was created covetous: fretful when an ill befalls him, and selfish when good reaches him (70:19-21). It also says, "Man has been the most disputatious of creatures" (18:54). It also says, "As for man, whenever his Lord tests him and then honors and blesses him, he says, 'My Lord has honored me.' But when He tests him and then straitens his provision, he says, 'My Lord has humiliated me'" (89:15-6). It also says, "Satan confirmed his conjecture about [humankind] since all of them followed him except for a group of the faithful" (34:20). These verses and traditions are meant to counter the haughtiness that man inevitably feels when he sees his own power, intelligence, and wealth. They remind him that he is nothing without God's guidance and grace and that he cannot attain the goals for which he was created without overcoming his inherent faults (see *Ma'ārif al-Qur'ān* vol.1, p.367-372 and *Hikmat wa ma'ishat* vol.1, p.43-65 for more discussion).