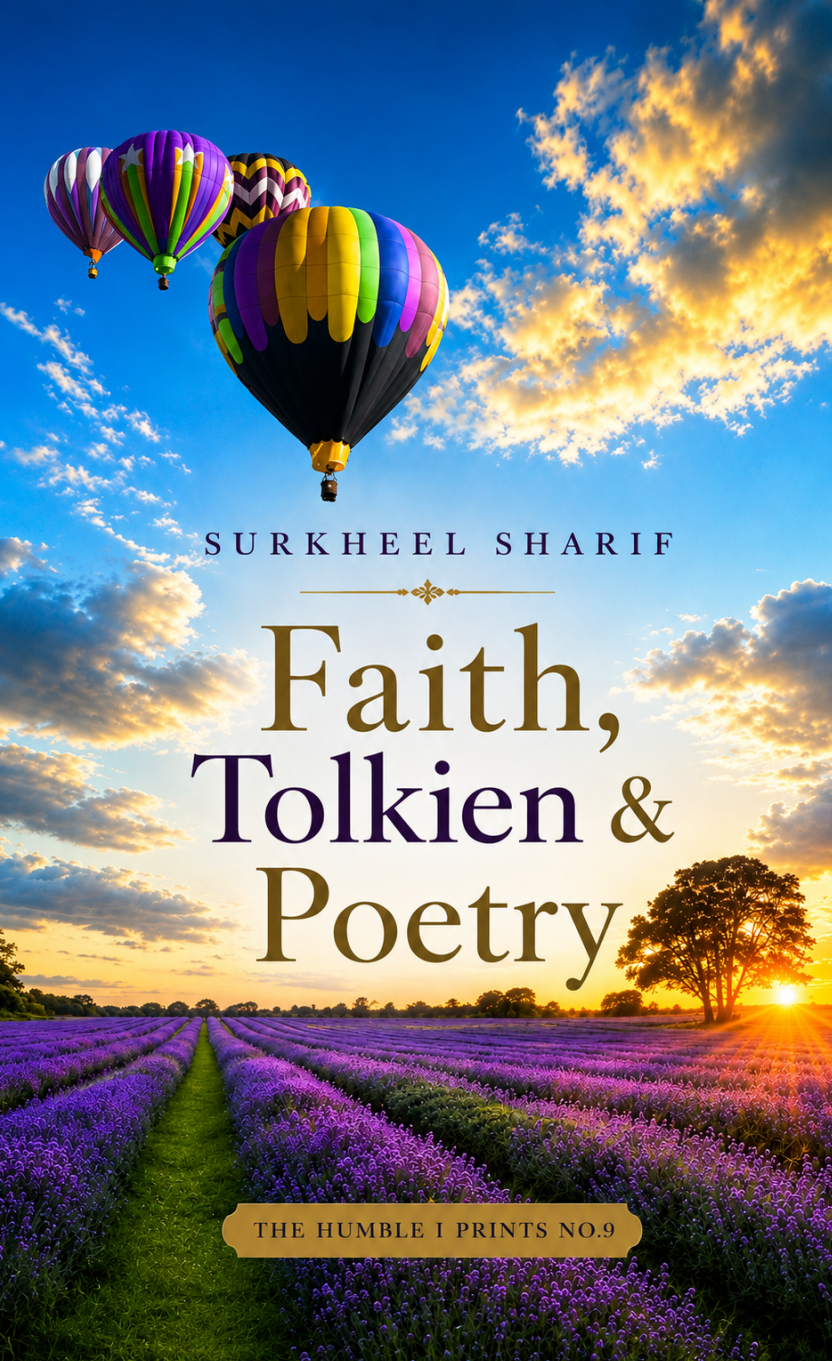

SURKHEEL SHARIF
Faith, Tolkien & Poetry
THE HUMBLE I PRINTS NO.9

Faith, Tolkien & Poetry
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First published in August 2026 by:
www.thehumblei.com

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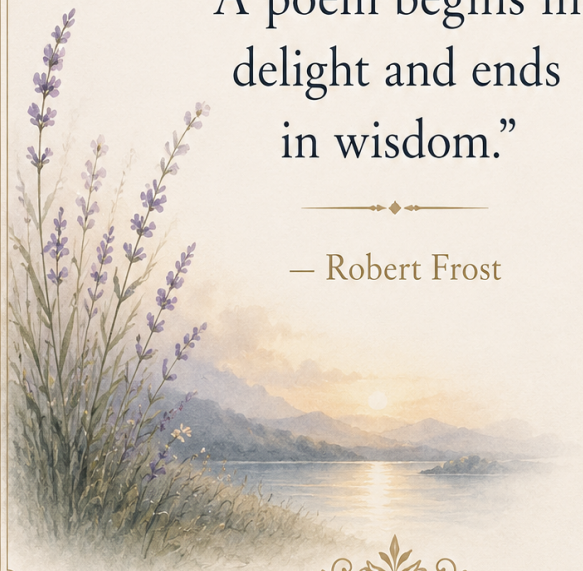
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“Poetry lifts the veil
from the hidden beauty
of the world.”

— Percy Bysshe Shelley

“A poem begins in
delight and ends
in wisdom.”

— Robert Frost



The Prophet ﷺ said: 'Indeed, in some poetry there is wisdom.'[1] Yet there is this prophetic caution too about over-indulging in poetry: 'It is better that one of you fill their stomach with pus than to fill it with poetry.'[2] Thus, taken together, poetry is neither praised nor censured in itself. Instead, its worth lies in what it carries and what it does to the soul. At its best, it awakens wisdom and refines the soul. But indulged in excessively, it can crowd out what is higher or more needful: Allah's remembrance and meditative recitation of the Qur'an. For how many hearts are there filled with poetry, or with song lyrics, but have little of the Qur'an in them?

1. Al-Bukhari, no.6145.

2. Al-Bukhari, no.6155.

Of course, poetry is censured if its content is in any way sinful, obscene, or boastful; or contains amorous verse about a woman who is not lawful to the poet. The Prophet ﷺ taught: 'Poetry is like speech: what is good in it is like good speech, and what is bad in it is like bad speech.'[3]

Good poetry is, in a sense, timeless or immortal. This is not only because it is read and enjoyed by generation after generation of readers, but also because poems, unlike novels or essays, tend to be felt or experienced; and their eloquence and rhyme often contain themes that touch the soul to its very core. It's been said a poem can deliver to a sensitive reader an 'immortal wound' which one may never quite get over. For such can be its potency; its spell-binding nature on the soul.

Poetry can sometimes possess an almost magical touch. A few well-chosen words, carefully crafted,

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3. Al-Bukhari, *al-Adab al-Mufrad,* no.865. It was graded *sahih* in al-Albani, *Sahih al-Jami' al-Saghir* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islami, 1988), no.3733.

can touch the heart in ways that ordinary speech cannot, awakening wonder, sorrow, longing, and hope. Perhaps this is why the Prophet ﷺ said of eloquent speech that: 'Some eloquence is magic.'[4] For words, when given beauty and force, have a mysterious power to move the soul.

This booklet offers some reflections on a few well-known, celebrated poems which explore various spiritual themes that will hopefully resonate with seekers of Allah and the Afterlife. Woven among them are a few musings on a selection of spiritual themes found in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Together, such musings and poetic reflections are meant to stir the imagination, awaken the heart, and offer glimpses of deeper truths by which the soul finds its bearings in its journey to Allah.

Surkheel Abu Aaliyah
Redbridge, London
18th August, 2026

4. Al-Bukhari, no.5767.

One Word is Too often Profaned

One word is too often profaned
For me to profane it,
One feeling too falsely disdained
For thee to disdain it;
One hope is too like despair
For prudence to smother,
And pity from thee more dear
Than that from another.

I can give not what men call love,
But wilt thou accept not
The worship the heart lifts above
And the Heavens reject not,—
The desire of the moth for the star,
Of the night for the morrow,
The devotion to something afar
From the sphere of our sorrow?



Percy Bysshe Shelley
1792–1822

Poetry, it has been said, is: 'the spontaneous overflow of powerful meanings.' As we shall see, our first poem is no exception. For the poem speaks of love beyond all earthly love; of a deep yearning for what can soothe our sorrows. While not at all religious, believers may uncover in the poem profound or powerful symbols of religious sentiment: seeking, yearning, and a love sublimer than any earthly love; namely, the heart's hunger for God.

Our first poem is from one of the leading English Romantics. The Romantics were a late 18th – early 19th century literary movement that valued and prized nature, imagination, emotion and spiritual wonder over what it saw as the Enlightenment's cold rationalism and convention. The Romantics

understood poetry as a language of longing: a way of giving voice to those yearnings which ordinary speech can scarcely contain. Few expressed this sense of reaching beyond one's immediate world more delicately than Percy Bysshe Shelley. In his 1822 poem, *One Word is Too Often Profaned*, this major English Romantic poet wrote – after telling us in the first stanza how the word love has been cheapened by careless use, yet feelings of a deep devotion, yearning and hope remain too precious to suppress:

I can give not what men call love;
But wilt thou accept not
The worship the heart lifts above
And the Heaven's reject not:
The desire of the moth for the star,
Of the night for the morrow,
The devotion of something afar
From the sphere of our sorrow?

Poetry like this often presents us with powerful imagery that can help us to reflect on the theme of Meaning. Shelley sees in the moth's desire for

the star a poignant symbol of the heart yearning for something which is profound and compelling, sustains hope, and can soothe us from *the sphere of our sorrow.*

For reasons we do not fully comprehend, moths have a tendency, an innate, inborn nature, to be attracted to light. Starlight and moonlight attract moths, as do candlelight or floodlights. But there is something of a problem for moths. Light from a candle at night will attract moths, but they end up being consumed in its flame. Floodlights on a football pitch attracts moths too, but will vaporise them on first contact. Thus, the innate hunger of a moth for light, if it is the wrong source of light, can lead to its own destruction!

There is a parallel here with the human situation. Man, too, has an innate hunger for what will truly satisfy him – and that longing Islam tells us is for God. In the Qur'an, one of Allah's Most Beautiful Names is *al-Kafi* – 'The Sufficer', 'He who satisfies all needs'. The Qur'an states: *Is Allah not sufficer*

for His servants? [Q.39:36] The Prophet ﷺ taught us this supplication or *duʿa* – especially if burdened with debt: 'O Allah! Suffice me with what You have made lawful from what You have forbidden, and enrich me with Your grace so that I have no need of anyone besides You.'[5]

Together, these two texts capture something far deeper than Allah just 'providing enough'. They reveal the possibility of the human heart coming to discover that, beneath all of its other longings, Allah is its Ultimate Sufficer.

It follows, then, that whenever we turn our backs on *al-Kafi,* we will continue to remain unsatisfied and unfulfilled.

As human beings, we have an innate hunger for Allah's light, for Allah, and in the absence of that light there is an unfulfilled restlessness within us.

---

5. Al-Tirmidhi, no.3563, saying it is *hasan gharib.* Scholars differ whether *al-Kafi* is a name (*ism*) of Allah or description (*khabr*) of Him. Despite this technicality, they agree He is the Sufficer of all our wants and longings.

Like a moth attracted to harmful sources of light, we too can misdirect our hopes and longings to things that might harm us, as they fail to deliver what we had expected. The objects of our desires have a noticeable tendency to frustrate us in that everything we hoped would bring meaning into our lives ends up disappointing us. The obvious point in case is our current consumer culture and its false promises of fulfilment.

In fact, this deep yearning for Allah may even be subverted or misdirected, so that the heart ends-up making a 'god' out of some created being or force. For whenever the love, longing, devotion, loyalty and submission which properly belong to Allah are ultimately directed to something other than Him, or towards others alongside Him, then that created person, thing or force has been given something of the Creator's due. This, in Islam, is the essence of idolatry: *shirk*.

For whoever or whatever a person loves with an ultimate love, desires as an ultimate end, invests

their deepest hopes and fears in, and which they surrender their heart to independently of Allah, then this, for them, becomes their god (*ilah*); the object of their sacrilegious worship, and around which their inner world revolves. Some there are who make a god of wealth or status, others make gods of other human beings; still others enthrone their own appetites or desires. Hence the Qur'an's piercing question: *Have you seen him who takes his whims for his god?* [Q.25:43]

Of course we have! Moreover, if we are attentive enough to the stirrings of our own hearts, maybe we have seen something of this deification rather closer to home.

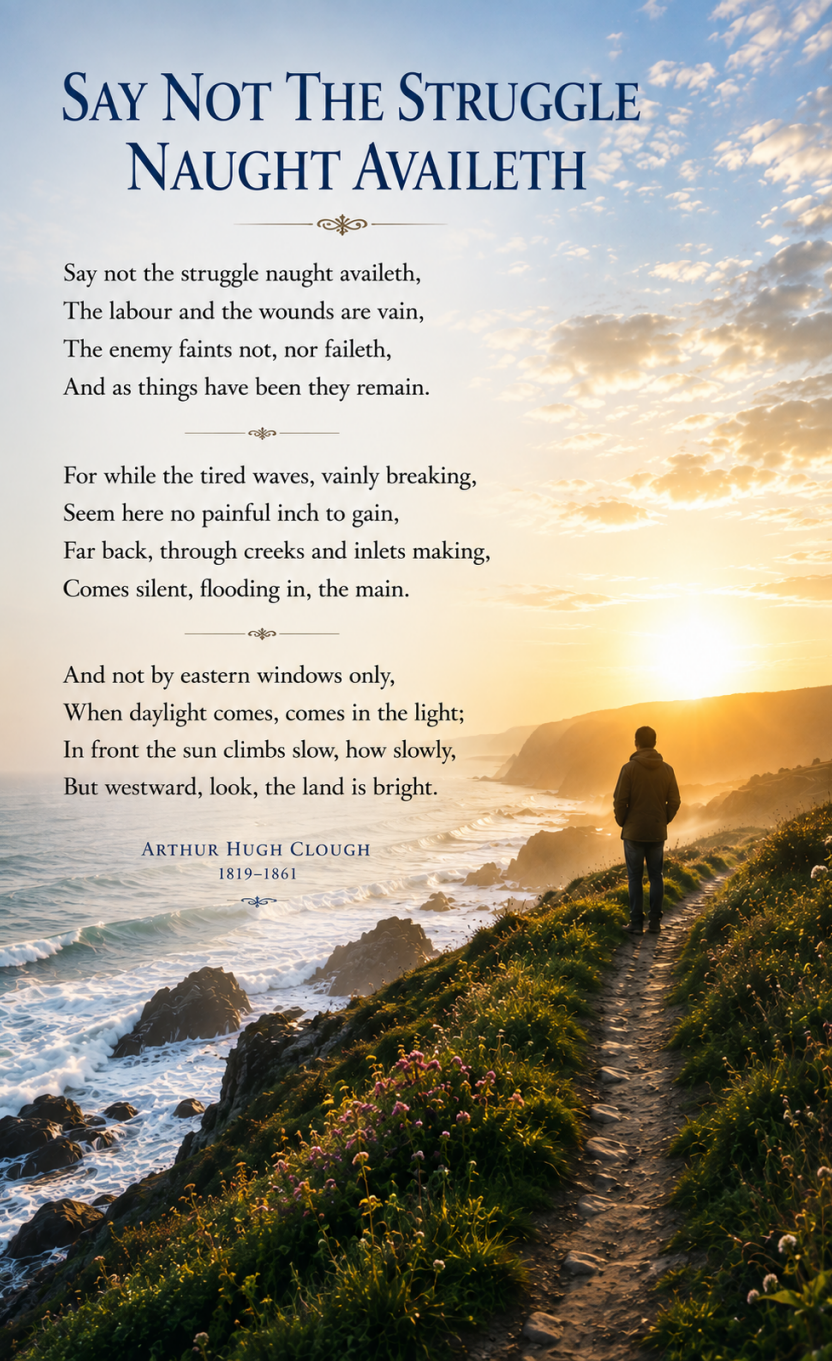
Say Not The Struggle Naught Availeth

Say not the struggle naught availeth,
The labour and the wounds are vain,
The enemy faints not, nor faileth,
And as things have been they remain.

For while the tired waves, vainly breaking,
Seem here no painful inch to gain,
Far back, through creeks and inlets making,
Comes silent, flooding in, the main.

And not by eastern windows only,
When daylight comes, comes in the light;
In front the sun climbs slow, how slowly,
But westward, look, the land is bright.

Arthur Hugh Clough
1819–1861



The next poem up for reflection is Clough's *Say Not the Struggle Naught Availeth* – or to render it into today's English: Do not say that the struggle achieves nothing.

Essentially, the poem is about resilience and hope in the face of what seems like hopelessness and a lost cause. Its central argument is that we should not mistake our inability to see the larger victory or success unfolding for the absence of success.

The author begins his poem inside the mind of a person who has struggled for a long time and sees little change, and is asking: What is the point?

Say not the struggle naught availeth,
The labour and the wounds are vain,
The enemy faints not, nor faileth,
And as things have been they remain.

But the second stanza challenges this outlook or conclusion. Clough writes:

> *For while the tired waves, vainly breaking,*
> *Seem here no painful inch to gain,*
> *Far back, through creeks and inlets making,*
> *Comes silent, flooding in, the main.*

What the poem is getting at is something which most of us have experienced: when you're trying really hard at something, but it feels like nothing is changing. The poet compares this to watching waves breaking on the shore: each one seems to go nowhere, but what we don't see is that the tide is steadily rising. So the deeper movement is still happening; quietly, but out of our sight. Clough, in other words, is saying: don't judge everything by what you see in your immediate field of vision. Change, progress, victory, success might be real, just hidden from your view. What might look like repeated failures, *tired waves, vainly breaking,* can be part of a far larger movement towards victory or success as the tide: *Comes silent, flooding in, the main.* This is the poem's greatest image; its central

metaphor for hidden, out of sight progress. This idea is evolved further in the last stanza with the image of sunrise:

And not by eastern windows only,
When daylight comes, comes in the light;
In front the sun climbs slow, how slowly,
But westward, look, the land is bright.

Given the sun rises from the east, a person facing eastward sees the first rays of dawn sooner than someone facing west. Yet the sun appears to rise painfully slowly. But if you just focus on the slow climb of the sun itself, the event seems incredibly slow. Turn west, however, and you see what that apparently slow-rising sun has already achieved: the whole landscape behind you is filling with the morning light, growing brighter and brighter. The sun doesn't need to be fully above the horizon for its rays to diffuse across the western landscape.

The poet is reminding us: don't stare just at how little progress seems to have been made in front of you; instead, look around at what the struggle

might already have achieved. The poem is saying: don't judge things by what you can immediately see. Progress or success may be real, just hidden from view. So don't say that the struggle achieves nothing. The exhaustion is real. The pain is real. But the poem's point is subtler: We do not know enough to declare our striving and struggle to be fruitless merely because we don't see or perceive its fruits. Hence, we ought to just soldier on with the struggle.

Reading the poem through an Islamic lens, the poem sits comfortably beside the virtues of *sabr* and *tawakkul* – 'patient perseverance' and 'trust' in Allah.

For even though the poem itself is not Islamic, its core idea – i.e. our limited view isn't the measure of what is really unfolding – sits remarkably well with the Quranic vision of striving and *tawakkul*. The poet tells us not to conclude that the struggle is useless only because nothing appears to have changed. Islam similarly requires striving, along

with wisely using the worldly means (*asbab*) then trusting in Allah for the hoped for outcomes. To this end, the Qur'an states: *Then, when you have resolved upon a course of action, put your trust in Allah.* [Q.3:159]

Both the imagery of the waves seemingly gaining 'no painful inch,' while the tide is silently coming in elsewhere, and the image of the sun climbing 'slow, how slowly,' while behind us the landscape is already filling with light, reminds us that reality is that our small patch may be part of a far larger good whose unfolding we have yet to perceive. So the task of the faithful is just to soldier on in their striving, and trust the Good Lord in terms of the outcomes.

Then there's the Islamic motif of *sabr* – patience, steadfastness, perseverance and endurance. The poem does not say to the weary person that the struggle is painless. Rather, it speaks explicitly of 'labours and wounds', tiredness and weariness. *Sabr* is, likewise, not pretending hardships don't

hurt. Rather, it is remaining faithful to the cause that Allah asks of us, even as it hurts, and even if things appear to be going nowhere, while trusting Allah for its success.

So the poem lends itself beautifully to an Islamic reading: the believer employs the means, strives earnestly, is patient and perseveres through any hardships, and depends on Allah in the hoped for results; knowing that Allah's Providence reaches far beyond the small portion of the shore that he or she can currently see.


In sorrow we must go,
but not in grief.
Behold, we are not bound forever
to the circles of the world,
and beyond them is more
than memory.
Farewell!
ARAGORN
- LORD OF THE RINGS -

In Appendix A of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* comes 'The Tale of Aragorn and Arwen.' Prior to this, relatively little is revealed of Aragorn's life and significance beyond his being a Ranger; and touching upon the fact that he is the hidden heir of Isildur, chieftain of the Dúnedain, rightful king of Gondor and Arnor, and a dedicated foe of the Dark Lord, Sauron. The Tail, though, fills in much of the missing background, as well as recounting his future triumph as king, his marriage to Arwen and his eventual death in Gondor.

It is a bittersweet tale that takes us back seventy years before the War of the Ring occurs. Aragorn, orphaned at the age of two, is raised secretly in Rivendell by Elrond, unaware of his true lineage. At twenty, Elrond reveals to Aragorn that he is the

heir of Isildur and gives him the shards of Narsil. The next day, in the woods of Rivendell, Aragorn first encounters Arwen, daughter of Elrond – and for a moment – thinking that he is seeing Luthien Tinúviel, whose song he has been singing, falls in love with her.

The Tale recounts how, after almost thirty years of parting, and spent wandering and fighting the servants of Sauron, they met one another again under the tree of Calas Galadhon in the forests of Lothlorien; and how they betrothed themselves to each other on the fair hill of Cerin Amroth as 'they looked east to the Shadow and west to the Twilight, and they plighted their troth and were glad'.

It goes on to recollect how, at Midsummer, in the year Sauron fell, Aragorn and Arwen were finally wedded in Gondor; how after 'six-score years in great glory and bliss', Aragorn offered himself to death's deep sleep; and how, a short time later, a grief-stricken Arwen, finding death – 'the gift of

the One to Men' – hard to bear, bade farewell to all whom she loved and left at winter's end for a now empty Lothlorien, laying herself to rest upon Cerin Amroth: 'and there is her green grave, until the world is changed, and all the days of her life are utterly forgotten by men who come after.'

Aragorn's love for Arwen sends him upon a long and perilous path, culminating in his protection of Frodo and the Ring. Arwen's love for Aragorn, however, demands of her even more. To marry him, she must forsake an immortal life with her father and Elven-kindred and endure the pain of parting from them forever. In choosing Aragorn and sharing his fate, Arwen chooses a mortal life and makes her own death inevitable.

When, however, the time comes for Aragorn to 'move beyond the circles of this world', Arwen is overcome with grief and begs him to remain a while longer. 'But let us not be overthrown at the final test,' Aragorn counsels her. His last words to her, before willingly surrendering his life, speak

of hope beyond death: of reunion and happiness in a life greater in a world remade: 'In sorrow we must go,' he says, 'but not in grief. Behold, we are not bound forever to the circles of the world, and beyond them is more than memory. Farewell!'

Belief in an Afterlife is a core belief of Islam. The Qur'an states: *The life of this world is but play and amusement. The Home of the Hereafter, that is Life, if they but knew.* [Q.29:64] As Islam sees it, death is not the end of life. For once man dies, he will be raised-up; once resurrected, he will be asked as to how he lived his life; and once judged, he will be recompensed according to his deeds: *It is He Who created death and life, to test which of you is best in deeds.* [Q.67:2] Also in the Qur'an: *Those who believe and do righteous deeds, such are the inhabitants of Paradise; therein shall they dwell.* [Q.2:82] Moreover, the Quranic promise is not merely that those who we love remain in our recollection – as Aragorn says: 'beyond them is more than memory' – but that, by Allah's mercy, the righteous may actually

be reunited: *Gardens of everlasting abode that they shall enter, together with the righteous among their parents, spouses and descendants.* [Q.13:23]

So just as Aragorn trusts that the purposes of the One in regards to Men after death are good ones; and that if he and Arwen bind themselves loyally to that trust they will be reunited with each other in everlasting bliss, then such is the case with the believer when he or she binds themselves loyally to the will and purpose of Allah.

'In sorrow we must go, but not in grief' maps well onto these words of the Prophet ﷺ at the death of his infant son: 'Indeed, the eyes shed tears, and the heart grieves, yet we shall say nothing except what pleases our Lord. O Ibrahim! We sorrow at being parted from you.'[6]

Tolkien seems to be making a distinction between sorrow and grief, even if in ordinary speech they

6. Al-Bukhari, no.1303.

overlap considerably and are interchangeable. So maybe his distinction is less a dictionary one, and more a poetic one. Grief, here, in other words, is being invoked as a heavier kind of sorrow, where one is consumed by the loss, or falls into despair due to it – as if such a loss were final and nothing meaningful lay beyond it. So Aragorn is saying to Arwen that sadly they must leave each other, but not as those for whom death is the end.

Islam, too, permits grief – a heavier sorrow – but not despair. The heart may grieve intensely, while not being consumed by it, and being certain that death is a departure; not an ultimate extinction. Hence, in casting Aragorn's words into an Islamic sentiment, we might say that: We part in sorrow, but not without hope. For we were never made to remain within the bounds of this material world: *We belong to Allah, and to Him we return* [Q.2:156]; and beyond this life lies not only remembrance, but true Life and, by Allah's grace and kindness, reunion with loved ones.

Leisure

What is this life if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare?

No time to stand beneath the boughs,
And stare as long as sheep and cows:

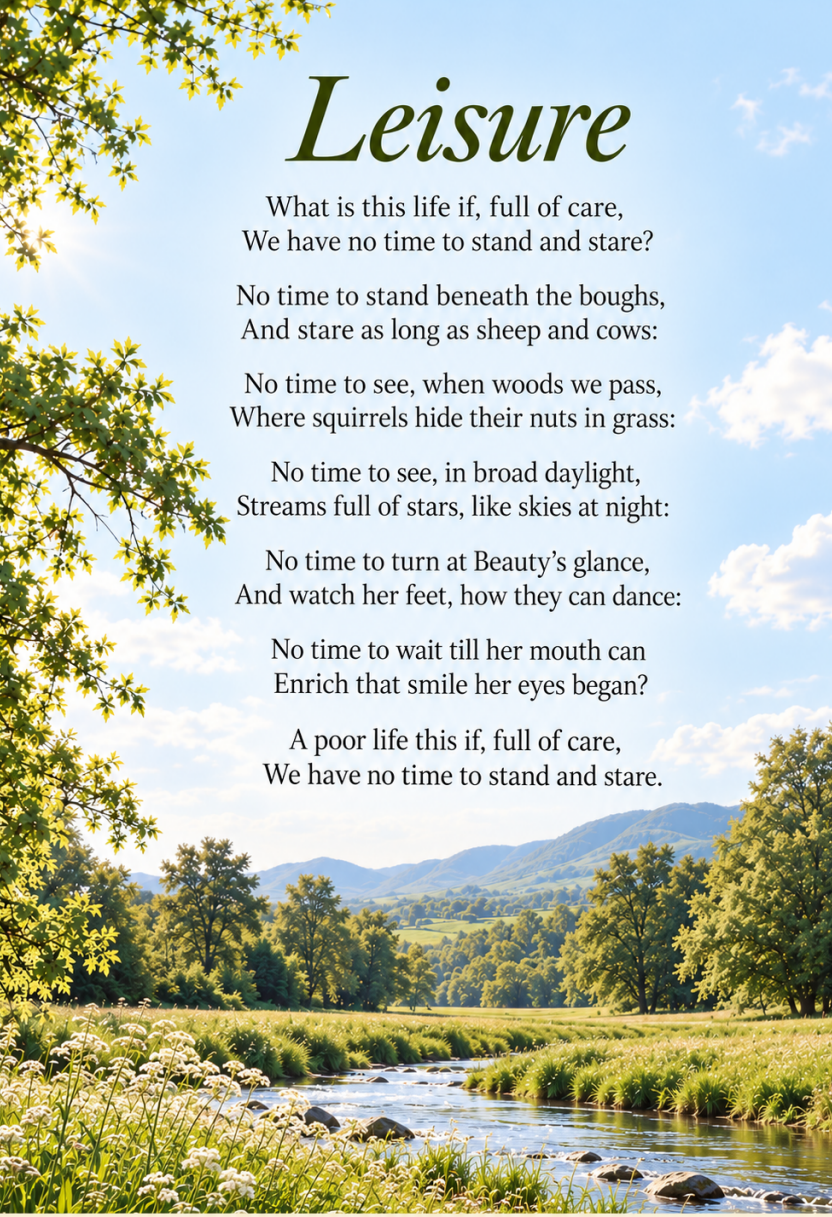
No time to see, when woods we pass,
Where squirrels hide their nuts in grass:

No time to see, in broad daylight,
Streams full of stars, like skies at night:

No time to turn at Beauty's glance,
And watch her feet, how they can dance:

No time to wait till her mouth can
Enrich that smile her eyes began?

A poor life this if, full of care,
We have no time to stand and stare.



William Henry Davies

1871 – 1940

Davies's *Leisure* is deceptively simple. On the surface, it appears to be a complaint about being too busy to even notice the natural world. Beneath it, it asks a much larger question: What is the value of a life in which we are continually occupied, yet scarcely awake to reflecting and to being alive?

The opening line – *What is this life if, full of care, We have no time to stand and stare?* – almost sums up the whole poem. 'Care' here carries the older sense of worldly concern or preoccupation. The poem isn't praising idleness or inactivity as such. Instead, *no time to stand and stare* takes us to the soul of the poem; namely, to pay closer attention to the graces and charms of the world. The poet is urging us all to stop being busied by the world

long enough to behold it. He asks that we recover the art of wonder so as to let our souls soak in the natural pleasures of life.

Again and again, the poet repeats the line *No time to ... ;* almost sounding accusatory. We hurry past trees without pausing to see their quiet, towering majesty; walk through woods without absorbing their hushed sublimity or notice squirrels darting among the shade and branches; or cross streams without seeing the sun conjure a miniature cosmos glittering upon the water.

The tragedy the poem wishes to invoke isn't that these beautiful things are absent. They are there; but it is we who are absent from them!

Such a sentiment sits remarkably well besides the Quranic idea of the natural world being a tapestry of *ayat* or 'signs'. In the Qur'an, the cosmos and the natural world aren't merely scenery. They are something to be gazed upon, pondered and read: *Indeed, in the creation of the heavens and the earth,*

and the alternation of night and day, there are signs for those of intelligence: those who remember Allah standing, sitting or lying on their sides, and reflect upon the creation of the heavens and earth. [Q.3:190]

In Islam's view of things, the poem does not take the next step. Of course, the poem says: *look!* The Qur'an, though, asks that we look – and see what the looking ultimately points towards.

For someone who in the mid-eighties did a GCE in Astronomy, and started a degree in Astrophysics, this is possibly the most enchanting image in the poem: *Streams full of stars, like skies at night.* For in broad daylight, sunlight sparkling upon moving water becomes, poetically speaking, like a second starry heaven. Then our ordinary world becomes extraordinary; but only for someone who pauses long enough to leisurely stare and see.

With its own meaning, the Holy Qur'an says: *How many a sign there is in the heavens and in the earth which they pass by, turning away from it.* [Q.12:105]

This verse could almost be an Islamic epigraph to Davies's *Leisure*. In Davies's imagery, people pass through woods, beneath boughs with squirrels, or besides streams; yet do not see. While the Qur'an laments that people pass through life, and fail to see the signs strewn all about them. The supreme reality to which all these signs point is Allah: His existence, oneness, uniqueness, lordship, power, creativity and perfection. The starry heavens, the earth we now so carelessly tread upon, the trees, streams, animals, our own souls, life, and death are all signs; for they signify beyond themselves: *We shall show them Our signs on the horizons and within themselves till it becomes clear to them that it is the Truth*. [Q.41:53]

From the Quranic perspective, the tragedy is not merely that someone fails to notice the beauty of a tree or the stars reflected upon water. It is that in failing to read the sign, they fail to turn towards the One to whom the sign points. It's this state of heedlessness, or *ghaflah,* that the Qur'an calls us

out for often. Creation is filled with signs, but only a wakeful heart learns to read them: *It is not the eyes [in the head] that grow blind, it is the hearts in the chests that become blind.* [Q.22:46]

The poem then begins to personify beauty in the feminine form: *No time to turn at Beauty's glance, And watch her feet, how they can dance.* Of course, Islamically, one needs to qualify this metaphor of eye-catching beauty whose feet seem to dance as not necessary sensual. Instead, they may suggest movement of beauty throughout creation: water dancing in the sunlight, branches swaying, birds in flight formation, or shadows moving across a field. But if taken literally, the image does evoke the sort of lingering gaze at a non-*mahram* female that the Quranic teaching about lowering the gaze (*ghadd al-basr*) seeks to discipline.

But read purely through an Islamic lens, Davies's personification is a reminder that Beauty doesn't merely arrest the eye; it become an *ayah* inviting the heart to look past the beauty of the creation

to the Beauty of its Creator. The Prophet ﷺ said: 'Indeed, Allah is beautiful and loves beauty.'[7]

The poet mentions something wonderfully warm and subtle here: *No time to wait till her mouth can, Enrich that smile her eyes began.* Before a person smiles, their smile may already have appeared in their eyes. To notice that, though, requires some lingering attention. And that is really the poem's heart; its core theme; namely, that some realities disclose themselves only slowly. You cannot take in everything with quick, furtive glances. Rather, being attentive requires time.

This applies in equal measure to the spiritual life. Reflection (*tadabbur*), contemplation (*tafakkur*) or watchful mindfulness of Allah (*muraqabah*) each resist a permanently hurried consciousness. One can perform many acts of worship and obedience while remaining inwardly inattentive to Allah, or heedless of His presence.

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7. Muslim, no.91.

We can even read into the poem a warning about worldliness (*dunya*). The issue with worldly life is not possessing things or working hard. Instead, it is letting our work and occupations consume our attention until the actual means of living displace the very purpose of living! The Qur'an warns us: *Competition for increase diverts you.* [Q.102:1]

The poem concludes with this: *A poor life this if, full of care, We have no time to stand and stare.* It's an impoverished life – even if bathed in material riches – when someone has lost the capacity for wonder.

An Islamic reading can take Davies a step further. For to stand and stare is not necessarily to waste time. Sometimes it's to recover the proper use of time. To stand under a tree, hear birdsong, watch light move through leaves, see stars reflected in water – allowing these things to awaken a sense of *alhamduli'Llah;* of praising and thanking Allah, within the heart – is not an escape from the real business of life. It may be one of the moments in

which we finally understand what life is for. The Qur'an says: *Our Lord, You have not created all of this in vain.* [Q.3:191] Thus, the poem asks us to stop and look. Islam adds: stop, look, remember, and give thanks.

Ozymandias

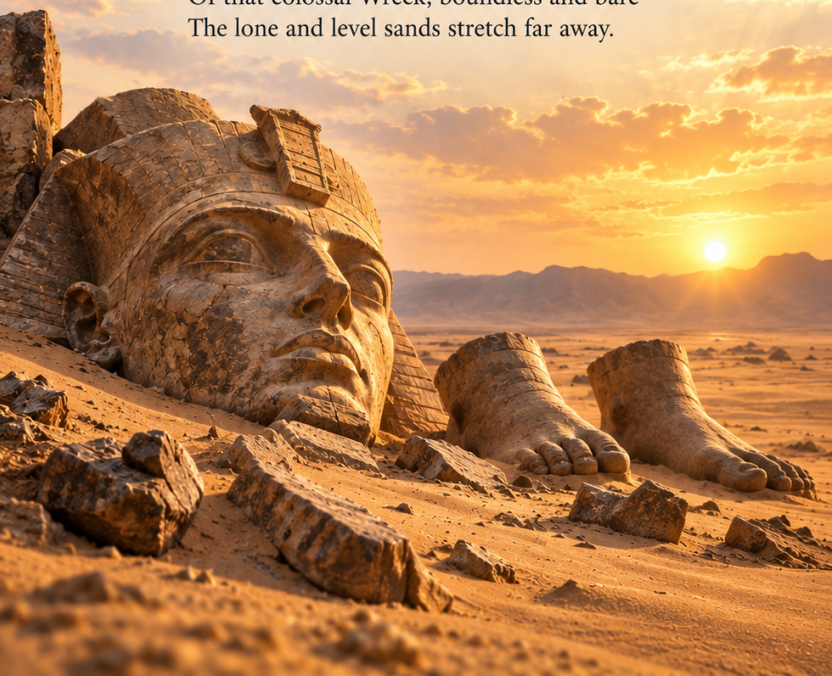
Percy Bysshe Shelley

1792 – 1822

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunkless legs of stone
Stand in the desert. Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed;

And on the pedestal these words appear:
'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings;
Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!'

Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.



Our second poem from Shelly is *Ozymandias,* written in 1817. At its heart, Shelley's poem is about the impermanence of worldly might and hubris.

The poem first depicts *a traveller from an antique land* who comes across the fragmented remains of an imposing, colossal statue in the desert. It is that of the mighty king, Ozymandias – the Greek name for the Egyptian pharaoh Ramesses II.

Near *Two vast and legless trunks of stone* lies the shattered face of the king, half sunk in the desert sand. The poem describes this ruined likeness as wearing an imperious *frown* and *wrinkled,* curled *lip,* and the contemptuous *sneer of cold,* arrogant *command.* This was once a powerful man used to

having his every word heard and obeyed. Such is what his ruined visage conveys, even if the man has long since vanished into the dust of history.

Inscribed on a nearby pedestal are these words; vainly conceited: *'My name is Ozymandias, King of Kings; Look on my Works, ye Mighty, and despair!'* Yet there are no magnificent works to look upon; the sands of time have seen to that. The statue is itself broken and decayed lying, not majestically, but in an empty desert veiled to history. Like so many of the powerful, but deluded, Ozymandias believed his arrogant achievements of grandeur would proclaim his might forever. Time, though, has outlived him, his kingdom, his memorials and his delusion of grandeur. In fact, the poem's end itself dwarfs the ambition of Ozymandias: *Nothing beside remains. Round the decay/Of that colossal Wreck, boundless and bare The lone and level sands stretch far away.*

There's an irony embedded here in that the king's power has vanished, yet the artist's work survives

enough for us to recognise the king's hubris and delusion. Art, it seems, has preserved something that political power could not!

Infusing the poem with an Islamic perspective, its theme of civilisations ruined through hubris and defiance against God and godliness resonate with the Qur'an. Verses like this come to mind: *Have they not travelled through the land to see the end of those before them? They were mightier than them in strength and [left greater] traces in the earth; yet Allah seized them for their sins.* [Q.40:21] Also in the Qur'an: *Have they not travelled through the earth and seen the fate of those before them. They were far mightier than them in power and dug the earth and built upon it more than they did. Their Messengers brought them clear signs. Allah wronged them not, rather they wronged themselves. Evil was the end of those dealing in evil, because they rejected the signs of Allah and mocked them.* [Q.30:9-10] There is this Quranic passage that has an almost Ozymandias-like melancholy: *How many gardens and springs*

they left behind; crops and splendid dwellings; and comforts in which they delighted. Such [was their end]. So We bequeathed it to other people. Neither heaven nor earth wept for them. [Q.44:25-9]

That last part of the verse is a lethal indictment; since: *Neither heaven nor earth wept for them*. The rulers who deemed themselves indispensable or invincible simply disappeared!

The Qur'an doesn't inform us of vanished peoples just to satisfy historical curiosity. Again and again it urges us to look, travel, reflect, remember and take heed. Their ruins are meant to be lessons, or *'ibar,* carrying the heart from what it sees to what it should understand: *Indeed, in their stories is a lesson for people of understanding.* [Q.12:111]

This makes *Ozymandias* unexpectedly convivial to the Quranic way of seeing. The ordinary traveller sees a broken statue in the desert. The reflective seeker sees the end destiny of pride, power and worldly hubris craving permanence.

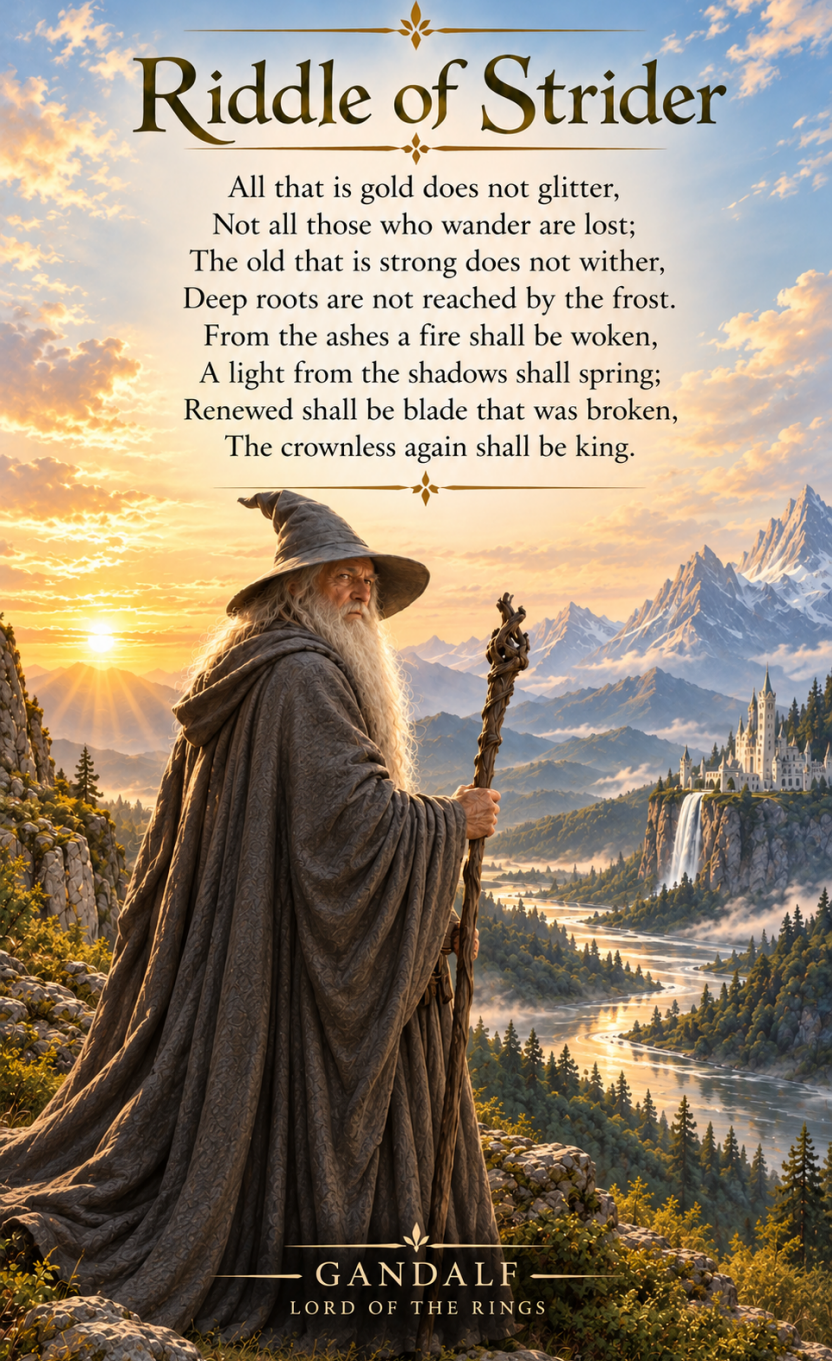
A certain glitzy conceit invariably attends all who wield political or cultural dominance in any age, and our age is no exception. Power has a way of presenting itself not just as power, but as proof: proof of superiority, of progress – even of being possessor of the correct vision of life. Its wealth, military might, technological prowess or cultural reach can give to it an air of invincibility, prestige and permanence.

Believers, however, need not be dazzled by such posturing. Neither should we be enthralled by the superficial glitter of what is, at heart, more or less a materialistic monoculture. And nor be blinded by the glare of its present might. Civilisations rise, swagger across the stage of history, and steadily fade. What once seemed permanent just becomes another dusty ruin from which later generations are expected to take heed. And this, of course, is precisely the conceit *Ozymandias* so memorably reminds us of. The grand boast survives only to mock the boastful.

The Qur'an repeatedly trains the believer to see through such a spectacle of worldly ascendancy, and measure things by a scale radically different from wealth, reach, and temporal power: *Let not the strutting of the disbelievers throughout the land beguile you*. [Q.3:196] The believer, then, is neither overawed by earthly dominance and nor defeated psychologically by it. He affirms its achievements where they exist, but does not equate or mistake this present ascendancy for ultimate truth, moral worth, or lasting permanence.

Riddle of Strider

All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;
The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.
From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
A light from the shadows shall spring;
Renewed shall be blade that was broken,
The crownless again shall be king.



GANDALF

LORD OF THE RINGS

For our last poem, let us return to Tolkien. In *The Lord of the Rings,* Frodo first reads the poem about Strider – i.e. Aragorn – at Bree, in the Prancing Pony.

After Frodo has met the mysterious Strider, but is still unsure whether he can trust him, he reads the letter that Gandalf had written months earlier. Gandalf tells Frodo that the man called Strider is really Aragorn, and includes the poem as a means of identifying him. The poem begins:

All that is gold does not glitter,
Not all those who wander are lost;

In the book, Frodo encounters the poem before he properly encounters or knows Aragorn. At this point, Aragorn looks weather-beaten, wore-torn,

unassuming and rather suspicious – precisely the sort of person whose outward appearance hides his inward worth. But Gandalf is telling Frodo not to mistake hiddenness for worthlessness. *All that is gold does not glitter* is saying that genuine worth need not advertise itself; that Aragorn's greatness is concealed before it is revealed.

In *Appendix A* and *B* of the book, *The Unfinished Tales,* and in some of Tolkien's *Letters,* the life of Aragorn and his heroics are fleshed out in detail. For much of his lengthy life, Aragorn – the heir of Isildur and Elendil, rightful king of Gondor and Arnor, and chieftain of the Dúnedain – possesses neither throne nor public acclaim. He wanders, guards, fights, serves and protects while all those who benefit from his sacrifices seldom know little or nothing of him. His *gold* does not glitter since it does not need the gaze or validation of others to make it gold. Outwardly he appears homeless, crownless and his valour is hidden from the eyes of men; inwardly his road is governed by duty.

This virtue of his is very akin to the Islamic ideal of sincerity and not making a show of our deeds. In Islam, sincerity (*ikhlas*) is that an act is done for its proper and highest purpose, rather than for reputation (*sum'ah*) or ostentation (*riya'*). The Qur'an describes the godly as saying: *We feed you only for the sake of Allah. We desire of you neither reward nor thanks.* [Q.76:9]. Aragorn's world is not, of course, an Islamic one. But his character may illustrate something of this moral disposition: to serve, without the need to be seen serving.

This makes his decades as a Ranger all the more significant. When these events of *The Lord of the Rings* unfold, Aragorn is eighty-seven, and much of his earlier years have been spent in obscurity: guarding the lands of the North, travelling under disguise, fighting the servants of Sauron, serving in Rohan and Gondor, undertaking a dangerous journey to hunt for Gollum, and guarding over peoples' borders who scarcely realise that they are being protected. The Shire folk, for example,

are one such people who distrust the Rangers and view them with suspicion. Yet Aragorn continues guarding them. There's something reminiscent of *ikhlas* here; namely, the absence of any applause does not diminish the duty to do good. Thus: *Not all those who wander are lost.*

From an Islamic perspective, this recalls how the worth of an action lies not merely in its outward form, but in its intention or *niyyah*. The Prophet ﷺ taught: 'Actions are but by intentions.'[8] Hence a journey that appears insignificant to the world may possess immense moral and spiritual worth due to what moves the seeker's heart.

Then Tolkien – putting these words of the poem into Gandalf's mouth – gives us:

The old that is strong does not wither,
Deep roots are not reached by the frost.

The *deep roots* can be read spiritually. For *ikhlas* gives an action roots beneath the surface. It gives

8. Al-Bukhari, no.1; Muslim, no.1907.

the act inner substance. Ibn ʻAta'illah wrote in his celebrated *Aphorisms:* ʻActions are lifeless forms, but the presence of the reality of sincerity in them is what endows them with a life-giving spirit.'[9] So praise does not nourish true *ikhlas* and criticism does not easily kill it, since neither was ultimately the motive for doing the deed. The person whose goodness depends on being praised, admired, or validated is vulnerable to the biting *frost* of *riya'* or *sum'ah*. But a sincere one will continue – even if unnoticed, misunderstood, or unrewarded. It is Aragorn's long hidden years which have precisely this quality of endurance; as ought to be the case for believers in Allah too.

Aragorn's later heroism follows a similar pattern. He does not suddenly become courageous when an audience appears. Thus the man who leads at Helm's Deep, walks the Paths of the Dead, heals the wounded, and marches upon the Black Gate

9. *Al-Hikam al-'Ata'iyyah* (Cairo: Dar al-Salam, 2013), no.10.

of Mordor is essentially the same person who had spent years performing obscure duties of valour in the wilderness. Public greatness is merely the flowering of virtues cultivated privately.

This is where *From the ashes a fire shall be woken* becomes particularly suggestive. For what seems dormant has not been dead. Aragorn's kingship emerges from many decades in which content of the soul has been forged, without the immediate reward of kingship. The crown doesn't make his nobility, it merely reveals it. The crown is almost secondary. Aragorn's true greatness was already present during the long decades when there was no crown, no throne, and scarcely any person to thank him. The coronation merely makes visible what eighty years of hidden service had already shown him to be.

This makes the final line highly appropriate: *The crownless again shall be king.* When read through the lens of *ikhlas,* this almost becomes the moral of Aragorn's life. For he becomes worthy of being

seen because he had learned to honourably serve when nobody was looking.

Islam takes the principle further, For *ikhlas* is not merely indifference to fame: it's an orientation of the heart towards Allah. For *ikhlas* is to do an act solely or exclusively for Allah, neither seeking nor needing the praise of other people. The act may remain veiled from the eyes of others, but never from the sight of Allah; and for the sincere heart, that is enough.