

I briefly mentioned the story that led to the awakening of Siddhartha Gautama, who came to be known as the Buddha, in Chapter 1. According to the tradition, Siddhartha was born to a king. A wise man visited the king and told him that Siddhartha would be disinterested in worldly affairs and give up the kingdom of his father. Instead, Siddhartha would offer a path that would help people deal with their suffering and overcome their greed. Concerned that Siddhartha would not follow his legacy, the king took all the precautions to motivate his son to inherit the kingdom. He did everything in his power to expose Siddhartha to the worldly pleasures in the palace so that the son would not be distracted by the spiritual path.

However, being bored of the inside of the palace, one day Prince Siddhartha ventured out with his charioteer. On their way, they saw “a bent, toothless, and haggard” old man. The prince asked about the person, and the charioteer answered that old age is a stage of life that everyone goes through, including the prince and his family. Siddhartha responded: “So that is how old age destroys indiscriminately the memory, beauty and strength of all! And yet with such a sight before it the world goes on quite unperturbed. How can I delight to walk about in parks when my heart is full of fear of aging?”<sup>1</sup> On the second excursion, the prince saw a sick person and was disappointed to learn that many people often get sick.

<sup>1</sup> Philips Novak, *The World's Wisdom: Sacred Texts of the World's Religions* (New York: HarperOne, 1995), 52.

He said: “This then is the calamity of disease, which afflicts people! ... Since I have learnt of the danger of illness, my heart is repelled by pleasures and seems to shrink into itself.”<sup>2</sup> During the third outing, Siddhartha saw a dead body on the roadside, and he was again distressed and puzzled by the people’s heedlessness. It is difficult to have enjoyment in the world when everything is impermanent and life involves aging, sickness, and death. The prince then pointed out: “Yes, if this triad of old age, illness, and death did not exist, then all this loveliness would surely give me great pleasure. [But] the world looks to me as if ablaze with an all-consuming fire.”<sup>3</sup> On the fourth excursion, the prince saw a monk who seemed to be content with his life. Inspired by the simplicity of the monk’s life, Siddhartha left the palace behind and embarked on a spiritual journey that led him to become the Buddha, the awakened one. However, the goal of his mission was to find spiritual liberation by overcoming suffering.

This Buddhist story captures the Islamic theological approach toward human nature and suffering in many ways. Taking it as our departure point, the chapters in Part II discuss aging, sickness, and death in Islamic theology.

### **An Aging World**

The aging population is growing almost in all countries. According to a study conducted in 2019, one in six people will be over age sixty-five by 2050, making up 16 percent of the world population. It was 9 percent in 2011. The percentage is higher in Europe and North America, where people over age sixty-five are anticipated to make up a quarter of their population by 2050. Another interesting demographic is that the population of people who are aged eighty

<sup>2</sup> Novak, 53.

<sup>3</sup> Novak, 53.

years or over is projected to grow significantly, from 143 million in 2019 to 426 million in 2050.<sup>4</sup>

This dynamic has generated unique challenges for the aging population. First, there are a number of diseases such as cancer, dementia, Parkinson's, osteoarthritis, and hypertension that are associated with old age. They cause pain and suffering. Perhaps no one described the situation in old age more candidly than Philip Roth (d. 2018), an American novelist: "Old age isn't a battle; old age is a massacre."<sup>5</sup> There is both physical and mental decline with old age. Some scholars consider aging itself as a disease and entertain the idea that it can be cured. Many universities and pharmaceutical companies are investing in research dealing with the problems that emerge in old age.

The second major problem among the elderly is loneliness. Individualism, the nuclear family, and scattered relatives increase loneliness among the older population. With the advance of age, many elderly people outlive their companions, including their spouses, friends, and relatives. A study conducted in 2018 reports that one in three US adults age forty-five and older are lonely.<sup>6</sup>

Every year, thousands of individuals over the age of sixty-five make appointments to see their doctors because of loneliness and isolation in the United Kingdom.<sup>7</sup> A study from 2017 found that over nine million adults are often or always lonely in the country. A number of researchers also found that fairly consistent levels of chronic loneliness are common among older people.<sup>8</sup> To address

<sup>4</sup> "World Population Aging 2019," United Nations, accessed February 22, 2022, [www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WorldPopulationAgeing2019-Highlights.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/publications/pdf/ageing/WorldPopulationAgeing2019-Highlights.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> Philip Roth, *Everyman* (New York: Vintage, 2007), 156.

<sup>6</sup> David Frank, "1 in 3 U.S. Adults Are Lonely, Survey Shows," AARP, September 26, 2018, [www.aarp.org/home-family/friends-family/info-2018/loneliness-survey.html](http://www.aarp.org/home-family/friends-family/info-2018/loneliness-survey.html).

<sup>7</sup> "Older People Visiting GPs Due to Loneliness," Age UK, November 15, 2013, [www.ageuk.org.uk/latest-news/archive/older-people-visiting-gps-due-to-loneliness/](http://www.ageuk.org.uk/latest-news/archive/older-people-visiting-gps-due-to-loneliness/).

<sup>8</sup> "Jo Cox Commission on Loneliness," Jo Cox Commission, accessed February 22, 2022, [www.jocoxfoundation.org/loneliness\\_commission](http://www.jocoxfoundation.org/loneliness_commission).

the problem of loneliness, the United Kingdom established the Ministry of Loneliness in 2018. Japan also appointed its first minister of loneliness in 2021 to address the problem of isolation among its aging population. The appointment came after a spike in suicide rates. The period of old age becomes meaningless for many people because of the problems that they face. In 2013, a study was conducted with twenty-five elderly people living in the Netherlands. The participants point out that their lives are “completed and no longer worth living” and stress a number of reasons for their desire to end their lives: “a sense of aching loneliness, the pain of not mattering, the inability to express oneself, multidimensional tiredness, and a sense of aversion towards feared dependence.”<sup>9</sup>

Humans are social creatures, and they love to be in relationships and known. Loneliness can be painful. It can even lead to many illnesses. The findings of a study suggest that “the influence of social relationships on the risk of death are comparable with well-established risk factors for mortality such as smoking and alcohol consumption and exceed the influence of other risk factors such as physical inactivity and obesity.”<sup>10</sup> Some studies indicate that loneliness increases the risk of early death by 26 percent.<sup>11</sup>

Third, the idea of taking care of one’s parents, or filial piety, is waning in many societies as it becomes more difficult to practice. For example, in China, where the teaching of filial piety is very much embedded in the culture because of Confucianism, it is nearly impossible for new generations to take care of the elderly because of their long life spans and the decline of the birth rate.

<sup>9</sup> Anne Goossensen et al., “Ready to Give Up on Life: The Lived Experience of Elderly People Who Feel Life Completed and No Longer Worth Living,” *Social Science & Medicine* 138 (August 2015), [www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277953615002889](http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0277953615002889).

<sup>10</sup> J. Bradley Layton, Timothy B. Smith, and Julianne Holt-Lunstad, “Social Relationships and Mortality Risk: A Meta-analytic Review,” *PLOS Medicine* 7:7 (2010), <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pmed.1000316>.

<sup>11</sup> Amy Sarah Marshal, “Early Depression Is on the Rise,” *UVA Health*, May 31, 2019, <https://blog.uvahealth.com/2019/05/31/elderly-depression/>.

For every young Chinese person, there are six elderly people to take care of.<sup>12</sup>

Given the realities and problems that are associated with old age in today's world, the question is, what should be the ethics of aging? As noted by Frits de Lange: "The existing ethical perspectives – whether they bear a Kantian, utilitarian, or eudaemonistic stamp – cannot stand up to a critical assessment: they all assume an individualist and activist understanding of the course of life and underestimate the moral impact of the fundamental relationality, dependence, and vulnerability of being (very) old."<sup>13</sup> So how should the questions of old age be addressed? In the following, I explore Islam's approach.

### Old Age and Human Nature

A number of verses and hadiths relate to the nature of humans in old age. However, when is old age? Considering that the human life span has extended significantly in the last several decades, there are many answers to this question. It depends on a person's situation as well as cultural context. Many Qur'an commentators define old age as somewhere between seventy-five and ninety years old.<sup>14</sup>

Islamic tradition often emphasizes old age as a time of vulnerability. The Qur'an describes the last stage of life as one of weakness in a number of verses. With the advance of old age, humans experience physical and mental decline. If people's lives are extended, then their development or strength is reversed.<sup>15</sup> The Qur'an then invites believers to contemplate their weakness in old age, a stage that leads to their departure from this world through death. Old age is also a way to reflect on the resurrection. God first blessed people with

<sup>12</sup> Patti Waldmeir, "Escaping Confucian Disharmony," *Financial Times*, December 13, 2011, [www.ft.com/content/a4042d52-24fd-11e1-8bf9-00144feabdco](https://www.ft.com/content/a4042d52-24fd-11e1-8bf9-00144feabdco).

<sup>13</sup> Frits de Lange, *Loving Later Life: An Ethics of Aging* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015), ix.

<sup>14</sup> Maria Massi Dakake, "Commentary on *Surat al-Nahl*," in Nasr et al., *Study Quran*, 676.

<sup>15</sup> Qur'an 36:68.

strength in youth and then weakness in old age. He will then resurrect them.<sup>16</sup> The Qur'an relates the contemplation of the prophet Zachariah on the nature of old age as an example: "My Lord, my bones have weakened and my head is shining with white hair. Yet, my Lord, I have never been disappointed in my prayer to you."<sup>17</sup>

The Qur'an points to old age as a sign of God's power as well. It is the Creator who causes aging: "It is God who created you in the state of weakness, then after weakness gave you strength, then after strength gave you weakness and grey hair. He creates whatever He will, and He is the Knowing, the Powerful."<sup>18</sup> In another verse, the Qur'an reads, "God has created you and in time will cause you to die. Some of you will be brought back to the worst age, so that they will no longer know anything after having had knowledge. Surely, God is Knowing, Powerful."<sup>19</sup> Here the Qur'an indicates that it is not only the strength of people that wanes in old age but also their knowledge. God is the only one who is not subject to such decline.<sup>20</sup>

The scripture also mentions that with old age, unlike the common perception, people are more attached to life and what they own. In fact, wanting to live longer is part of human nature. Satan used humans' longing for eternity to deceive Adam and Eve. He told them that if they ate from the forbidden tree, they would live forever: "O Adam, shall I show you the tree of immortality and an imperishable kingdom?"<sup>21</sup> In other verses, the Qur'an reminds us that people tend to run away from death because of their love of life. However, death will still meet them, and they will be returned to their Creator.<sup>22</sup> People tend to forget their mortality. They constantly work for

<sup>16</sup> Jalal al-Din al-Mahalli and Jalal al-Din al-Suyuti, *Tafsir al-Jalalayn* (Beirut: Dar al-Qalam, 1983), 585.

<sup>17</sup> Quran 19:4.

<sup>18</sup> Qur'an 30:54.

<sup>19</sup> Qur'an 16:70.

<sup>20</sup> Dakake, "Commentary on *Surat al-Nahl*," 676.

<sup>21</sup> Qur'an 20:120.

<sup>22</sup> Qur'an 62:8.

this world as if they will never die: “Do you build fortresses because you hope to be immortal?”<sup>23</sup> According to a hadith tradition, when humans grow, two things will grow with them too: the love of what they own in this world and their desire to live longer.<sup>24</sup>

This sentiment of old age is concisely articulated in a story by Persian poet Saadi Shirazi (d. 1291) in his *Gulistan*. While having a conversation with the scholars in a mosque in Damascus, a person approached Saadi and the people in the gathering. He asked whether anyone spoke Persian among them. Saadi confirmed that he was able to speak the language. He was then taken to a man who was 150 years old. The man could only communicate in Persian and was about to die. They wanted to know the man’s last wishes. When Saadi arrived at the bedside of the person, he was lamenting as follows:

“I said let me say a few words I desire; alas the path of my  
breath is stopped.  
Alas that at the table of good things of life I ate for only a  
moment, before they said,  
‘Enough!’”

Saadi translated the man’s words into Arabic for those who were around him. They all were astonished that the man “lived so long and was still regretful of leaving the world.” Saadi asked the man, “How are you in this state?” The man replied, “What should I say, have you not seen what pain a person suffers when a tooth is pulled from his mouth? Compare that to the state at the moment life departs the body.” Saadi then told the man that they could call a physician for treatment. The man lifted his eyes, laughed, and said: when the foundation of the house (i.e., the body) lost its balance and is in ruin, “neither determination nor treatment can have an effect.”<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Qur’an 26:129.

<sup>24</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab al-riqaq, bab man balagh sittin sanah faqad a’dhar allah ilayhi fil’umur.*

<sup>25</sup> Shaykh Mushrifuddin Sa’ di of Shiraz, *The Gulistan*, trans. Wheeler M. Thackston (Bethesda, MD: Ibx Publishers, 2008), 124–25.

Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that today, so many are invested in meeting humans' desire for immortality. As Lydia S. Dugdale puts it in her *The Lost Art of Dying*: "Scientists and beauty experts alike are striving to find that elixir for infinite youth," now more than ever.<sup>26</sup> There are hundreds of scientific labs that are dedicated to aging. One can hardly find any scientific journal without articles on aging. Major leading academic centers, including Harvard, Oxford, and Stanford, have invested enormously in the question of aging.

While there are societies that venerate aging, our Western society "has a strong preference for youth and therefore, individually, for bodily interventions that preserve the appearance of youth."<sup>27</sup> According to a study released by the American Society of Plastic Surgeons, more than 17.7 million surgical and minimally invasive cosmetic procedures were performed in the United States in 2018. Americans spent more than \$16.5 billion on these procedures. The number is increasing every year.<sup>28</sup>

### Filial Piety and Islam

Many religious traditions teach filial piety to address the needs of the elderly, especially one's parents. Perhaps it is one of the most important teachings of Confucianism. The tradition identifies five criteria for filial piety. First, in their relations with their parents, children manifest the utmost reverence. Second, they aim to nourish them with utmost pleasure. Third, when the parents are ill, they

<sup>26</sup> L. S. Dugdale, *The Lost Art of Dying: Reviving Forgotten Wisdom* (New York: HarperOne, 2020), 28.

<sup>27</sup> Saul Levmore and Martha C. Nussbaum, "What Does It Mean to Age Well? Reflections on Wrinkles, Beauty and Disgust," *ABC*, February 4, 2019, [www.abc.net.au/religion/our-aging-bodies-reflections-on-wrinkles-beauty-and-disgust/10214306](http://www.abc.net.au/religion/our-aging-bodies-reflections-on-wrinkles-beauty-and-disgust/10214306).

<sup>28</sup> "New Plastic Surgery Statistics Reveal Trends toward Body Enhancement," American Society of Plastic Surgeons, March 11, 2019, [www.plasticsurgery.org/news/press-releases/new-plastic-surgery-statistics-reveal-trends-toward-body-enhancement](http://www.plasticsurgery.org/news/press-releases/new-plastic-surgery-statistics-reveal-trends-toward-body-enhancement).



feel the greatest anxiety. Fourth, when the parents pass away, they mourn for them and demonstrate grief. Fifth, to demonstrate their sacrifice for them, they display the utmost solemnity. Once children meet these criteria, they fulfill their responsibility toward their parents. Filial piety is the foundation of every virtue and the source of moral teaching in Confucianism.<sup>29</sup>

Filial piety is also an important teaching of Judaism and Christianity, as honoring one's parents is one of the Ten Commandments in the Bible.<sup>30</sup> The idea of honoring could be rendered as fearing, revering, or respecting one's parents. In order to distinguish honor from fear, a rabbi gave the following example: "As for fear, I mean that a son may not stand where his father stands, sit where his father sits, contradict his father in speech, nor may he be on equal footing with his father. In contrast, honor means that a son must feed and clothe his father and assist him in leaving and coming home."<sup>31</sup> In the Bible, Jesus rebukes those who neglect their parents in the name of religion.<sup>32</sup> Right before his crucifixion, one of Jesus's major concerns was the care of his mother. He asked one of his disciples to take care of her.<sup>33</sup>

Filial conduct remains a key teaching of Islam as well. The following section of the Qur'an is often emphasized in this context: "Your Lord has commanded that you should worship none but Him, and to show kindness to your parents. If one of them or both of them reach old age with you, do not say to them a word of disrespect ('uff'), nor scold them, but speak to them kind words."<sup>34</sup> The scripture then

<sup>29</sup> Ching-Yuen Cheung, "The Problem of Evil in Confucianism," in Jerold D. Gort et al., *Probing the Depths*, 90.

<sup>30</sup> Exod. 20:12; Eph. 6:2–3.

<sup>31</sup> Quoted in Fu Youde and Wang Qiangwei, "A Comparison of Filial Piety in Ancient Judaism and Early Confucianism," trans. Noah Lipkowitz, *Journal of Chinese Humanities* 1:39 (2015): 284.

<sup>32</sup> Mark 7:9–13.

<sup>33</sup> John 19:25–27.

<sup>34</sup> Qur'an 17:23.

reads: “And lower to them wing of humility out of mercy and say, ‘My Lord, have mercy on them, as they raised me when I was a child.’”<sup>35</sup>

There are a number of principles that could be derived from this passage of the Qur’an. First, filial conduct is paired with worshiping God. Associating partners with God or worshiping anyone other than God is one of the most grievous sins in Islam. Stressing taking care of one’s parents along with worshiping God demonstrates the significance of this teaching. There are a number of hadiths that support this instruction of the Qur’an. On one occasion, the Prophet raised a rhetorical question concerning major sins. He said that these sins are associating partners with God and being disrespectful to one’s parents.<sup>36</sup> Pleasing God is connected to pleasing one’s parents. Receiving God’s wrath is connected to the reception of the anger of one’s parents.<sup>37</sup> Filial conduct is often prioritized compared to other teachings of Islam. In one situation, a companion wanted to join the Muslim army for jihad. The Prophet asked him to take care of his parents instead. On another occasion, a man came to Muhammad and asked who deserved his respect and good treatment the most. The prophet answered: “Your mother.” Then who the companion continued, and the Prophet again answered: “Your mother.” The companion asked again, and the Prophet answered: “Your mother.” When the person asked for the fourth time, the prophet answered: “Then your father.”<sup>38</sup> Likely because at the time, women were believed to be more vulnerable and needed more protection compared to men, the Prophet emphasized honoring mothers over fathers.

The respect for one’s parents continues even after their deaths. In one of the traditions from Muhammad, the responsibilities of children toward their parents are emphasized as follows: to pray for

<sup>35</sup> Qur’an 17:24.

<sup>36</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab al-adab, bab ‘uquq alwalidayn min al-kabair.*

<sup>37</sup> *Al-Bukhari, al-Adab al-Mufrad: kitab al-walidayn, bab qawlihi ta’ala, wa wassayna al-insan biwalidayhi husnan.*

<sup>38</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab al-adab, bab man ahaquq al-nas bihusn al-suhba.*

their goodness and ask God to forgive their parents, to fulfill their will (*wasiya*), and to continue to have friendships with their parents' friends as well as their relatives.<sup>39</sup> The Prophet also said that when people die, their deeds end except for three: ongoing charity, knowledge from which benefit is gained, and a righteous child who prays for them.<sup>40</sup>

Second, the Qur'an provides a standard for filial piety. When parents reach old age, the children should "say no word that shows impatience with them, and do not be harsh with them, but speak to them respectfully." To make it more specific, the Qur'an points out that children should not even say "Uff," an "expression of complaint and annoyance."<sup>41</sup> While fulfilling the needs of their parents, children should treat them with patience and tolerance. Some scholars suggest that with "Uff," the verse is "addressing the irritation a son or a daughter might feel in having to assist elderly parents with personal hygiene."<sup>42</sup> It has also been interpreted to "discourage the use of any kind of ugly, harsh, or dismissive expression with parents."<sup>43</sup> Islam teaches being good and respectful not only to one's parents but also to the people of old age in society. The Prophet said: "If young people respect an old person, God will prepare someone who would respect them in the same way when they are old."<sup>44</sup> In another hadith, the Prophet said: "A person who is not compassionate to those who are younger than them and is not respectful to those who are older than them is not from us."<sup>45</sup> Even during prayers, Muhammad asked his followers to be considerate of the elderly. He indicated that those who lead the five daily prayers should try to keep it light, meaning they should not

<sup>39</sup> Abu Dawud al-Sijistani, *Sunan Abi Davud: kitab al-adab, bab fi birr al-walidayn*.

<sup>40</sup> *Sunan Abi Davud: kitab al-wasaya, bab ma ja'a fi al-sadaqah 'an al-mayyit*.

<sup>41</sup> Maria Massi Dakake, "Commentary on *Surat al-Isra*," in Nasr et al., *Study Quran*, 701.

<sup>42</sup> Dakake, 701.

<sup>43</sup> Dakake, 701.

<sup>44</sup> *Jami' al-Tirmidhi: kitab al-birr, bab ma ja'a fi ijral al-kabir*.

<sup>45</sup> *Jami' al-Tirmidhi: kitab al-birr, bab ma ja'a fi ijral al-kabir*.

make the prayer long because among the congregation, there might be the weak, the elderly, and the sick. When the believers pray by themselves, then they can extend the prayers as much as they can.<sup>46</sup>

Third, the Qur'an reminds believers to remember their parents' favor as one of the reasons to honor them. The parents took care of their children; they raised them, and now it is the children's turn. In one verse, the Qur'an points to this reasoning as follows: "We have commanded people to be good to their parents: their mothers carried them through hardship upon hardship, and their weaning takes two years. So give thanks to Me and to your parents. To Me is the ultimate return."<sup>47</sup> In his interpretation of the Qur'anic approach to filial piety, Nursi points out that "the highest truth in this world is the compassion of parents towards their children, and the most elevated rights, their rights of respect in return for their compassion. For they sacrifice their lives with the utmost pleasure, spending them for the sake of their children's lives."<sup>48</sup> Nursi then continues that if the children did not lose their humanity, they would do everything in their power to honor their parents, to please them, and to make them happy.<sup>49</sup>

It is reported that a man came to Muhammad and told him that he carried his disabled old mother on his back for her to make the pilgrimage. He then asked: "Was I able to return what she did for me?" The Prophet responded that by this favor, the man could only return one of her breaths while she was pregnant with him.<sup>50</sup> As part of Islamic law, it is an obligation upon the children to meet the financial needs of their parents. Unlike in the modern law, the parents have a share of inheritance from their children.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>46</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab al-adhan, bab idha salla linafsihi fayudawwil ma shaa.*

<sup>47</sup> Qur'an 31:14.

<sup>48</sup> Nursi, *Words*, 303.

<sup>49</sup> Nursi, 303.

<sup>50</sup> Quoted in Ibn Kathir, *Tafsir al-Qur'an al-'Azim*, ed. Sami bin Muhammad Salamah (Riyadh: Dar tayba lilnashr wa al-tawzi', 1999), 5:67.

<sup>51</sup> Qur'an 4:11.

## Filial Conduct and Receiving God's Grace

Sacred texts of Islam often make a connection between filial conduct and receiving God's grace. The Qur'an, for example, refers to one of the traits of John the Baptist (Yahya) as someone who was kind to his parents.<sup>52</sup> Concerning God's grace, there is a story that is part of the hadith literature and widely known in Islamic culture. Three young people were in a mountainous area when it began to rain. They ran into a cave, but all of a sudden, a big rock fell from the mountain and sealed the mouth of the cave. One of them said: "We should turn to God and pray to him by mentioning the best deeds that they have done for his sake. Perhaps God will then remove the rock from the cave." One of them prayed: "Oh God, I had my old parents when my children were in their early age. I was herding sheep to take care of them. When I would get milk for them, I would first feed my parents." He continued: "One day, I was away, but when I came back, I saw my parents were sleeping. I brought the milk in a cup but did not want to wake them up. While my children were hungry, I did not want to give them the milk either because I wanted my parents to have it first. I waited for them for the whole night with the cup of milk." He concluded: "Oh God, I did it for your sake." The other two companions also mentioned their major deeds in prayer. Not long after, the rock was miraculously removed.<sup>53</sup>

In one of the hadiths, the Prophet states that if it were not for the vulnerable such as the elderly, children, and animals, people would not be saved from disasters.<sup>54</sup> The implication here is that the elderly are a blessing to society. People receive God's mercy and grace through them. In his writings, Nursi points out that he had a

<sup>52</sup> Qur'an 19:14, 32.

<sup>53</sup> *Sahih al-Bukhari: kitab al-buyu', bab idha ashtara shay'an lighayrihi bighayri idhnihi faradiya.*

<sup>54</sup> Abu Bakr Ahmad al-Bayhaqi, *Al-Sunan al-Kubra: kitab salat al-istisqa, bab istihbab al-siyam lilistisqa lima yarji.*

student whose work was in order and he did not have any issue in his life. He later on learned that the student was good to his parents and was taking care of them.<sup>55</sup>

The idea of being respectful and receiving God's grace is related to one's situation not only in this world but also in the hereafter. The Prophet said that one's parents can be the reason a person passes through the gate of heaven. Missing or having this opportunity is up to people's desires. Again, in the hadith, the salvation of people is connected to their treatment of their parents.<sup>56</sup> The Prophet said that heaven is underneath mothers' feet.<sup>57</sup>

### Spiritual Responses to Aging

Islamic tradition offers a number of spiritual responses to the struggles of old age. First, given that most friends and relatives of an old person have left this world, old age can be seen as a stage of being with God and loved ones in the hereafter. Second, suffering during old age is considered worship, and people will be rewarded in the hereafter because of it.<sup>58</sup>

Third, old age is a sign of God's power. If people contemplate God and turn to him with gratitude and prayer, then they will be compensated. In this sense, Islam has a very positive image of old age and offers hope for the elderly. The Qur'an, for example, relates the story of Zachariah, who turned to God in prayer in his old age.<sup>59</sup> He asked God to give him an heir who could fulfill his legacy. Both Zachariah and his wife were of advanced age, and his wife was barren. Yet they were still blessed with a child, John the Baptist.<sup>60</sup> For those who feel

<sup>55</sup> Nursi, *Mektubat*, 272.

<sup>56</sup> *Jami' al-Tirmidhi: kitab al-birr, bab ma ja'a min al-fadl fi rida al-walidayn.*

<sup>57</sup> Nursi, *Mektubat*, 372.

<sup>58</sup> Said Nursi, *Flashes* (Istanbul: Sözlür, 2007), 289.

<sup>59</sup> Qur'an 19:4.

<sup>60</sup> Qur'an 19:5.

lonely and desperate in old age, they can think of God's compassion, generosity, and innumerable bounties manifested in the world.<sup>61</sup> Fourth, old age provides an opportunity for caregivers, including children, to reveal their compassion and generosity toward the elderly. It is also considered a form of worship for them as well as an opportunity to reflect on their own lives. Eventually, everyone will go through the same stage of life, and it is important for believers to contemplate aging for their spiritual progress. The following lines of the Ottoman mystic poet Niyazi Misri (d. 1694) illustrate such contemplation, with which I conclude this chapter:

The sign of death is approaching, but the self is unaware,  
The parts of my body are shaking [aging], but the soul is  
unaware.

Every day a stone from the building of my life falls to the  
ground;  
But the self remains heedless in sleep, unaware that the  
building is in ruins!

While my heart longs for immortality, God wills my death,  
I am suffering from an incurable illness, that even Luqman<sup>62</sup>  
could not cure!<sup>63</sup>

<sup>61</sup> Nursi, *Flashes*, 286.

<sup>62</sup> Luqman is mentioned in the Qur'an. He is described as a righteous man to whom God granted wisdom and knowledge. Chapter 31 of the Qur'an is named after him.

<sup>63</sup> Niyazi Misri, *Divan* (Istanbul: Emniyet Kütüphanesi Mehmed Rıza ve Şürekası, 1909), 25–26 (my translation).