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The theme of our discussion is taken from Surah Ibrahim:

أَصْلُهَا ثَابِتٌ وَفَرْعُهَا فِي السَّمَاءِ

[Its roots are firmly established, and its branches reach into the sky.]

It is a beautiful image. A tree that is firmly rooted in the earth. A tree whose branches reach towards the heavens. A tree that continues to bear fruit.

And, as we shall see, the Qur'an uses this image to teach us something profound about faith, truth, knowledge, righteousness and the human soul.

The Qur'an makes extensive use of figurative language—parables, similes and metaphors. Indeed, the Qur'an itself draws our attention to this method.

Consider Surah al-Rum, Ayah 58:

وَلَقَدْ ضَرَبْنَا لِلنَّاسِ فِي هَٰذَا الْقُرْآنِ مِنْ كُلِّ مَثَلٍ

[And, indeed, We have set out for people every kind of illustration, similitude and parable in this Qur'an to help them understand Essence of the Message.]

The Qur'an also tells us why such parables are presented.

Surah Ibrahim, Ayah 25, states:

وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ

[In this way Allah sets out examples for a people so that they may reflect and believe.]

And again, in Surah al-Hashr, Ayah 21:

وَتِلْكَ الْأَمْثَالُ نَضْرِبُهَا لِلنَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَفَكَّرُونَ

[And such are the similes We cite for a people so that they may reflect and believe in the divine origin of The Qur'an and model their lives accordingly.]

The purpose is clear.

The parable is not merely an ornament of language. It is meant to make us remember. It is meant to make us think. It is meant to take an abstract truth and bring it before our eyes in a form that we can see, feel and understand.

The faithful recognize in these parables a message of truth. Others may question their instructive significance.

But the Qur'anic method is unmistakable: metaphor becomes a bridge to reality.

This pattern of figurative language is not confined to the Qur'an. We find it throughout the Old and New Testaments as well. It may therefore be regarded as an important characteristic of the Semitic tradition.

The Qur'an draws its imagery from a remarkably wide range of human experience. But some of its most powerful images come from the natural world. Rain. The earth. Mountains. Light. Trees. Seeds. Gardens.

These are things we see every day. And yet the Qur'an uses them to illuminate realities that cannot be seen with the physical eye.

The Qur'an compares the life of this world to rain falling from the sky, causing vegetation to grow, only for that vegetation eventually to become dry and scattered by the wind.

Consider, for example, Surah al-Kahf, Ayah 45.

وَاضْرِبْ لَهُم مَّثَلِ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا كَمَا أَنْزَلْنَاهُ مِنَ السَّمَاءِ فَاخْتَلَطَ بِهِ نَبَاتُ الْأَرْضِ فَأَصْبَحَ هَشِيمًا تَذْرُوهُ الرِّيَّاحُ

[And cite for them the likeliness of the life of this world: It is like the water We send down from the sky clouds, and the vegetation of the earth mingles with it. Then soon afterwards it turns into dried stubble to be scattered around by the winds, i. e., the ephemeral character of the things of this world.]

Among the longer Qur'anic parables is that of the two gardens, extending across twelve Ayat in Surah al-Kahf, Ayah 32–44.

Among the most famous are the parable of Divine Light in Surah an-Nur, Ayah 35:

اللَّهُ نُورُ السَّمَاوَاتِ وَالْأَرْضِ مِثْلُ نُورِهِ.....

and the striking image in Surah al-Hashr, Ayah 21:

وَلَوْ أَنْزَلْنَا هَذَا الْقُرْآنَ عَلَى جَبَلٍ لَرَأَيْنَاهُ خَاشِعًا مُتَصَدِّعًا مِّنْ خَشْيَةِ اللَّهِ وَتِلْكَ الْأَمْثَالُ.....

The Qur'an takes things familiar to us and invites us to see through them to something deeper.

And there is another important point. These images can carry both a metaphorical and a literal meaning.

For example, Surah Fatir, Ayah 10, states:

إِلَيْهِ يَصْعَدُ الْكَلِمُ الطَّيِّبُ وَالْعَمَلُ الصَّالِحُ يَرْفَعُهُ

[Good words in matters of faith as well as in general conversation rise up to Him, and deeds of righteousness elevate it – the good word.]

Before turning to our principal theme, let me briefly explain a few terms.

The words مَثَل (mathal) and امْتِثَال (amthal) occur extensively in the Qur'an. The root conveys the idea of resemblance, likeness, comparison or representation. *Mithl* means likeness, similarity or resemblance.

Mathal can mean a parable, similitude, example or proverb.

And the expression ضَرَبَ الْأَمْثَالَ (dharaba al-amthal) means to present parables—to speak through examples.

Another important word is خَبِيثَةٌ (khabithah), which I have rendered as “bad.” But *khabithah* carries a much wider range of meanings: offensive, repulsive, rotten, malignant, wicked and evil.

Then there is the word ثَابِت (thabit). It conveys firmness, stability. Something that is unshakable.

In this context, it expresses the firmness of the كَلِمَةٌ (kalimah)—the word, statement or proposition and connects it directly with the Qur'anic image of the good word and the good tree.

The terms كَلِمَةٌ (kalimah) and قَوْل (qawl) can, in their wider sense, denote a conceptual statement or proposition that is intrinsically true.

And truth, in the Qur'anic perspective, is inseparable from goodness. It calls us towards what is morally good. It is ultimately beneficial. And it endures. Because the call to moral righteousness lies at the heart of every one of Allah's Messages.

And this brings us to the central theme of today's discussion.

أَصْلُهَا ثَابِتٌ وَفَرْعُهَا فِي السَّمَاءِ

These words form part of Ayah 24 of Surah Ibrahim. The Ayah begins:

أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ ضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا كَلِمَةً طَيِّبَةً كَشَجَرَةٍ طَيِّبَةٍ

[Have you not considered how Allah illustrates the example/parable of a good word? It is like a good tree]

This Ayah does not stand alone. It is closely connected with the three Ayat that follow it. Together, Ayat 24 to 27 of Surah Ibrahim present one continuous and remarkably powerful image.

Listen to the progression.

A good word.

A good tree.

Firm roots.

Branches reaching towards the heavens.

Fruit that continues to appear.

And then, by contrast:

A bad word.

A bad tree.

Roots without stability.

A tree that is ultimately uprooted.

And finally: Allah strengthening those who believe in the firm word. The passage reads:

أَلَمْ تَرَ كَيْفَ ضَرَبَ اللَّهُ مَثَلًا كَلِمَةً طَيِّبَةً كَشَجَرَةٍ طَيِّبَةٍ
أَصْلُهَا ثَابِتٌ وَفَرْعُهَا فِي السَّمَاءِ

[Have you not considered how Allah illustrates the example of a good word? It is like a good tree whose roots are firmly established in the ground, while its branches reach high into the sky]

تُؤْتِي أُكْلَهَا كُلَّ حِينٍ بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهَا وَيَضْرِبُ اللَّهُ الْأَمْثَالَ لِلنَّاسِ لَعَلَّهُمْ يَتَذَكَّرُونَ

[It bears fruit at all times, by the permission of its Lord. And Allah offers such examples to people so that they may reflect.]

وَمَثَلُ كَلِمَةٍ خَبِيثَةٍ كَشَجَرَةٍ خَبِيثَةٍ اجْتُثَّتْ مِنْ فَوْقِ الْأَرْضِ مَا لَهَا مِنْ قَرَارٍ

[And the example of a bad word is like a bad tree that has been uprooted from the ground. It has no stability—no firm foundation upon which to stand.]

يُثَبِّتُ اللَّهُ الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا بِالْقَوْلِ الثَّابِتِ فِي الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا وَفِي الْآخِرَةِ
وَيُضِلُّ اللَّهُ الظَّالِمِينَ

[Allah will strengthen and uphold those who believe in the good word, both in this life and in the Hereafter, while Allah allows the wrongdoers to go astray.]

Imam Wahidi, citing Imam Bukhari, reports that the Prophet^(P) identified the *Shahadah* as the “good word” and the date-palm as the “good tree.”

The Prophet ^(P) explained that the date-palm has roots deep in the ground. Its leaves do not fall in either summer or winter. And it bears fruit throughout the year, by the Will of its Lord.

The analogy is profound.

Just as the date-palm is firmly rooted in the earth, so too is the meaning of the *Shahadah* firmly rooted in the hearts of those who believe in Divine Unity. And just as the tree continually produces fruit, so too should faith produce fruit in the life of the believer.

What kind of fruit?

Beautiful words.

Righteous deeds.

Wholesome dealings.

Humility.

And a spiritual disposition that remains productive in every season of life.

This is the meaning of the Qur’anic image.

Faith is not merely something we profess.

Faith must bear fruit.

And then the Qur’an gives us the opposite image.

The bad word is compared to a bad tree.

It is commonly understood as a reference to the hanzal tree, which can be easily uprooted because its roots are shallow and lie close to the surface.

It therefore lacks stability.

It stands in direct contrast to the date-palm, whose roots penetrate deeply into the earth.

The contrast could hardly be clearer.

One tree is firmly rooted.

The other is easily uprooted.

One continually bears fruit.

The other has no lasting stability.

One reaches towards the heavens.

The other cannot remain firmly established upon the earth.

And perhaps this is the most important lesson in the image before us.

A tree needs both roots and branches.

Roots provide stability.

Branches provide reach.

Roots anchor the tree in the earth.

Branches reach towards the heavens.

A tree with branches but no roots cannot endure.
And roots without branches cannot fulfil their potential.

The Qur'anic image therefore brings together two dimensions of human life.
Firmness below.
Aspiration above.

We need roots.
Roots in faith.
Roots in knowledge.
Roots in truth.
Roots in moral principle.

But we also need branches.
Branches that reach outward.
Branches that serve others.
Branches that produce knowledge, compassion, justice and good works.

And above all, we need fruit. Because the purpose of the tree is not simply to stand. The purpose of the tree is to bear fruit.
This message is especially meaningful for us gathered here today—in a university, in a college of medicine, among students, teachers and future professionals.

The Qur'an tells us that the good tree bears fruit:

كُلَّ حِينٍ بِإِذْنِ رَبِّهَا

[At all times, by the permission of its Lord.]

This is not merely a statement about a tree.
It is a vision of the believer.
A person firmly rooted in truth should continue to produce good.
Not only when circumstances are favourable.
Not only when people are watching.
Not only when success is guaranteed.
But in every season.
In times of prosperity.

And in times of difficulty.
In times of recognition.
And in times of obscurity.

The fruit may take different forms.

A kind word.
A helping hand.
An honest decision.
A life-saving skill.
A just action.
A moment of patience.
An act of compassion.
A commitment to truth.
These are all fruits of a good tree.
And sometimes we may not see the fruit immediately.

But a tree does not grow in a day.
Its roots deepen quietly.
Its trunk strengthens gradually.
Its branches extend slowly.
And, in time, it bears fruit.

So too with a human being.
So too with an institution.
So too with a civilization.

Ladies and gentlemen,

The Qur'anic image with which we began is simple:

أَصْلُهَا ثَابِتٌ وَفَرْعُهَا فِي السَّمَاءِ

Its roots are firmly established.

Its branches reach into the heavens.

And it continually bears fruit.

This is the image of a life grounded in truth.

A life guided by faith.

A life nourished by knowledge.

A life expressed through righteous action.

And perhaps this is the challenge that the Qur'an places before each one of us:

Where are our roots?

What are our branches reaching towards?

And what fruit are we producing?

May our roots be deep.

May our principles be firm.

May our aspirations reach high.

And may our lives continually bear fruit for the benefit of humanity.

أَصْلُهَا ثَابِتٌ وَفَرْعُهَا فِي السَّمَاءِ

May Allah ^{swt} make us among those whose roots are firmly established in truth, whose branches reach towards the heavens, and whose lives bear good fruit, generation after generation.

وَالسَّلَامُ عَلَى مَنْ اتَّبَعَ الْهُدَى

Thank you.
