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What does insha Allah mean?

Abdul Malik Mujahid : 4-5 minutes

It wasn't until my son, then still a young child, started crying after I used the oft-repeated expression "insha Allah", that I really understood how bad the problem had gotten. What does insha Allah mean?

I had promised to do something for him, and uttered my usual "insha Allah" when it happened. Unbeknownst to me, he had figured out that when some Muslims use this term, often translated as "if God wills", it does not mean the promise is a firm commitment. Rather, it can be translated as "maybe, maybe not" in practical terms, and most usually, "maybe not". It is not something taken very seriously.

I was stunned. So I started observing my own usage of insha Allah.

Not long after that incident, I was sitting in a meeting in Toronto and somehow the conversation turned to use of the word "insha Allah". That's when I mentioned my son crying. A Muslim who was also attending the meeting shared his own experience of a highly educated woman had become Muslim in his city. She asked the Imam to set up an appointment to discuss matters of faith. They agreed to a date and time.

But on that day of the appointment, she did not show up. The Imam was confused. When they met at a later time, he asked her why she had missed the meeting. She explained that since he had used the expression "insha Allah" after setting a day and time, she assumed the meeting was not a firm commitment. As a new Muslimah, based on the deductive knowledge of how Muslims use "insha Allah", she had come to the same conclusion as my son.

This way of using sacred words is actually callous abuse. In Islam, insha Allah is a firm promise, not a casual expression that can be thrown about.

"And never say of anything, 'Indeed, I will do that tomorrow except [when adding], 'If God wills'. And remember your Lord when you forget it and say, 'Perhaps my Lord will guide me to what is nearer than this to right conduct tomorrow,'" (Quran 18:23-24).

This clearly and categorically explains that when a Muslim decides to do anything, he or she should then say insha Allah. It means: I will do everything I possibly can to make sure I do task X. But the rest is upto God who controls all variable known and un-known to us.

Insha Allah is a firm commitment to walk the walk and talk the talk, while simultaneously being an expression of humility and acceptance of God's control over all things.

Insha Allah should not be used as a time-stalling tactic either. I have seen us use the expression when we're not sure we can commit to something, when we need more information or have to check with someone before we can say, "yes, I can do this". If you need more time to decide whether you can do something, just say so. But avoid using insha Allah unless you are sure you will do the task promised.

A Muslim says things only when he or she means them. Allah asks us:

O you who have believed, why do you say what you do not do? Great is hatred in the sight of Allah that you say what you do not do. (Quran 61:2-3)

So if you're planning a wedding and have no intention of starting the event on Friday night at "6 p.m. sharp insha Allah" then don't have the printers put that down on the invitation card. Be straight with people and do what you are originally planning (e.g. " Reception: 7 p.m.; Nikah at 8 p.m. Dinner at 9:30 p.m. insha Allah").

Allah knows our intentions. We need to be clear about them with others as well.

If you are a Khateeb, make the Sharia of insha Allah a topic of your Khutba; if you are a teacher, talk about it with your students; if you are a parent, invite your kids to ask how you are using the phrase insha Allah.