



# A Brief Biography of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi

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(Maryam Jameelah)

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Editor: Havva Kurter

Publication Committee:

Suleyman Kurter

Robert Miranda

Fethullah Canpolat

Imran Kurter

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The Risale-i Nur collection is a six-thousand-page commentary on the Qur'an written by Bediuzzaman Said Nursi in accordance with the mentality of the time. Since in our age faith and Islam have been the objects of the attacks launched in the name of so-called science and logic, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi therefore concentrated in the Risale-I Nur on proving the truths of faith in conformity with modern sciences, through rational evidence and by manifesting the miraculous aspects of the Qur'an that relate primarily to our century. This collection now has millions of readers both in and outside of Turkey. Thanks to the Risale- Nur, the Turks managed to maintain their religion despite the most despotic regimes of the past decades; although its author faced unbearable torments, prisons and exiles and no effort was spared to put an end to his service to faith, he was able to complete his writings comprising the Risale-I Nur and raise a vast group of believers who courageously opposed the oppression and preserved the dominance of Islam in the country.

## WONDER OF THE AGE

Bediuzzaman Said Nursi was born a century ago, in 1873, in a village in eastern Anatolia, Nurs, from which he received the name Nursi. He received his basic education from the best-known scholars of the district. The extraordinary intelligence and capability of learning that he showed at a very early age made him popular with his teachers, colleagues and the people. When he was sixteen years old, he silenced the distinguished scholars who had invited him to a debate (debate was then a popular practice among scholars). This later recurred several more times with various groups of scholars, and he thereby began to be called Bediuzzaman (Wonder of the Age).

The time he spent in education paved the way in his mind for the thought that at a time when the world was entering a new and different age, where science and logic would prevail, the classical educational system of theology would not be sufficient to remove doubts concerning the Qur'an and Islam. He concluded that religious sciences should be taught at modern schools on the one hand, and modern sciences at religious schools on the other. "This way," he said, "the people of the school will be protected from unbelief, and those of the madrasa from fanaticism."

With this idea, he twice went to Istanbul—once in 1896, the second time in 1907—where he sought to convince the Sultan to establish a university in eastern Anatolia, one that would teach religious and modern sciences together. But the sharp words in his conversation with the Sultan caused him to be court-martialed, and during his trial too he did not hesitate to use the same sharpness. Alarmed by this the military judges thought it best to send him to a mental hospital, but the physician who examined him reported, "If there is a grain of insanity in Bediuzzaman, then there must be no sane person in the whole world!"

## **FIRST ACQUITTAL**

To be the object of accusations contrary to his aim and intention was, in fact, an invariable feature of Bediuzzaman's fate. When the uproars of March 31, 1909, took place, he was arrested and court-martialed on the charge of inciting the uproar, although he had tried, and to a degree managed, to calm down the events. While the hanging bodies of the convicts executed were seen through the windows of the court-martial room, Bediuzzaman made a heroic defense and in the end was acquitted.

After the first of a series of acquittals, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi returned to eastern Anatolia, visited the remote provinces and explained to the people that the movement of freedom that was beginning to emerge in the country was not contrary to Islam. He told them that the Sacred Law, which would be nourished and would manifest its virtues in a free atmosphere, rejected all kinds of dictatorship. He later collected these speeches in a book entitled *The Debates*.

In the winter of 1911, Bediuzzaman went to Damascus and gave a sermon at the Ummayyad Mosque to an audience including one hundred well-known scholars, explaining that the true civilization contained in Islam would dominate the modern world. Afterwards he went to Istanbul once again, to continue his efforts to have a university established in eastern Anatolia. As the representative of the eastern provinces, he escorted Sultan Resad on his journey in Rumelia and, when they were in Kosovo Metohija, where the Sultan was planning to establish a university, Bediuzzaman told him, "The East is in more need of a university, for it is the center of the Muslim world." He thus convinced Sultan Resad to earmark a sum of nineteen thousand gold liras, and then went to Van and laid the foundation of the university. Unfortunately, the construction was not completed because of the First World War, which soon broke out.

## **THE FEAR OF THE RUSSIANS**

In World War I, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi served as a commander of a volunteers' regiment on the Caucasian front and in eastern Anatolia. The heroism he demonstrated in battle was highly admired by the general of the Ottoman army, including Enver Pasa, Minister of Defense and Deputy Commander-in-Chief of the Ottoman Armed Forces. Together with his volunteers known as "The Felt Caps," he struck terror into the Russian and Armenian forces. In the meantime he wrote his celebrated commentary on the Qur'an in the Arabic language, sometimes on horseback, sometimes on the front line and sometimes in the trench. This commentary, entitled the Signs of Miraculousness, received immense appreciation from eminent scholars.

In one of the battles against the invading Russian forces, Bediuzzaman and ninety other officers were captured. He was sent to a prisoners' camp in Kostroma, Northwestern Russia, where he spent over two years and once appeared before a firing squad, as a result of insulting the Russian general Nicola Nicolaevich, the Commander-in-Chief of the Caucasian front and the Czar's uncle. One day the general came to the camp for inspection and, as he passed by Bediuzzaman, he did not stand up before the general. When asked, Bediuzzaman explained the reason why he had not stood up in these words:

"I am a Muslim scholar and have belief in my heart. Whoever has belief in his heart is superior to the one who does not. I cannot act against my belief."

He was court-martialed, sentenced to death, and, when the sentence was to be executed, he began his last duty, prayer, in front of the firing squad. The general witnessed the scene and came to Bediuzzaman-this time with an apology. He said that he had now realized that the act of Bediuzzaman was the result of his adherence to his faith, and that the sentence was withdrawn, and apologized to Bediuzzaman because he had bothered him.

Sadly, this virtuousness of a Russian, the long-standing enemy of the Muslims, was never shown to him in his homeland by those who caused him a life full of torments of all kinds.

### **AGAINST THE BRITISH FORCES**

Amid the uproars caused by the communist revolution, Bediuzzaman found a way of escaping and, after a long journey, came back to Istanbul in 1908. He was rewarded with a war medallion and Enver Pasa, Minister of Defense, offered him some position in the government. He refused all these offers; however, upon the suggestion of the army and without his knowledge, he was appointed to Dar al-Hikmat al-Islamiya, the religious academy of the time. He did not object to this appointment, as it was a pure scientific position.

When imperialist forces invaded the country after the defeat in World War I, Bediuzzaman challenged the invading British in Istanbul with bitter attacks that almost cost him his life. He addressed them in his articles in daily newspapers with phrases such as, "You dogs, who are more basely and utterly dog-like than any dog!!" and "Spit at the shameless face of the damned British!" These attacks made him the target of the British, but, with the help of God almighty, he escaped all the plots against him and ran toward the new services that were awaiting him.

In 1922, upon the invitations of the government that recurred eighteen times, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi went to Ankara and was received at the Grand National Assembly with a ceremony. However, he could not find in Ankara what he had anticipated; rather he saw the most of the representatives negligent in their religious obligations. On January 19, 1923, he issued a declaration to the representatives. Upon this declaration more than fifty of them began prayer.

Bediuzzaman spent eight months in Ankara and then left for Van. For two years he lived there in seclusion and was occupied only

with meditation and prayer. Meanwhile the unfortunate events known as "the Eastern rebellion" broke out. The rebels sought Bediuzzaman's help, as he had a strong influence over people, but Bediuzzaman refused their requests, saying, "The Sword is to be used against the outside enemy; it is not to be used inside. Give up your attempt, for it is doomed to failure and may end up in the annihilation of thousands of innocent men and women because of a few criminals." But once again Bediuzzaman was charged falsely and sent into exile in Burdur, western Anatolia. There he was kept under strict surveillance and oppression, but this did not prevent him from teaching the truths of faith to the people around him and collecting his writings secretly in a book. His activities were reported to Ankara, and then a plan was prepared to silence him. They sent him to Barla, an out-of-the-way place in central Anatolia surrounded by mountains, with the thought that Bediuzzaman would eventually die there from idleness and loneliness.

### **THE EMERGENCE OF THE RISALE-I NUR**

In reality, the dissemination of the truths of faith was nothing to be alarmed about, nor was it a crime that would be the cause of plots against a man's life. However, it was an unforgivable crime under the circumstances of the time! For those were the days when despotism had fallen down over the nation with all its darkness and awesomeness; a ban had been put over the adhan (the call to prayer); hundreds of mosques were being used for nonreligious purposes; the plans to cut off all that connects the nation with its past and its moral values were in process; and the mere mention of religion was a matter of great courage. The head of the press department of the government could order the editors of newspapers to cut within ten days all the serials that directly or indirectly mentioned religion, as "it was considered harmful to lead to the emergence of the concept of religion in the minds of youths."

Such were the circumstances under which Bediuzzaman Said Nursi entered the second part of his life which he called the New Said and which was dedicated to the writing and dissemination of the truths of faith. Taking as the aim the revival of faith, which is the first and most important truth of the cosmos, Bediuzzaman said, "I will demonstrate to the world that the Qur'an is a spiritual sun that shall never set and shall never be extinguished." And indeed so he did. Bediuzzaman did not die in Barla, where he had been sent to die alone, but a new Said emerged there, and with it emerged a sun over the world of Islamic faith and science, one that has since been illuminating millions.

In Barla too, an awesome oppression and surveillance were waiting for Bediuzzaman. It appeared that his enemies had not yet come to know him, who, in the World War had been the fear of the Russians, in Istanbul had spat at the face of the British who were in his pursuit, and had several times returned from the gallows. Nevertheless, they later had enough time to know him and in the end found themselves having to say, "Despite all we have done in the past twenty-five years, we have not been able to prevent Said Nursi from his Islamic activities."

During the eight years and a half that he spent under absolute oppression in Barla, Bediuzzaman wrote three quarters of the Risale-I Nur collection. The treatises were being multiplied by handwriting, as neither the author nor his students could afford the printing costs. Even if they had been able to, then again they did not have the freedom. Handwriting was also a dangerous task, for the scribes were being tortured in prisons and police stations, and every attempt was being made to prevent people from contact with Bediuzzaman.

### **600,000 COPIES WRITTEN BY HAND**

Here it must be noted that at that time the writing or dissemination of even a single religious treatise was not anything that anybody dared try, let alone the firm, courageous and continuous

struggle that Bediuzzaman Said Nursi and his students carried out. When these circumstances under which the Risale-i Nur was written and spread all over Anatolia are taken into consideration, one cannot find difficulty in realizing how right was Maryam Jameelah, the well-known American Muslim writer, when she said, "It is no exaggeration to claim that whatever Islamic faith remains in Turkey is due to the tireless efforts of Bediuzzaman Said Nursi." Indeed, those instructed by the Risale-i Nur in lessons of the faith of realization strengthened, in so doing, their beliefs and attained an impregnable Islamic courage and heroism. With Bediuzzaman, who represented in his person the spiritual personality of the Risale-i Nur, as their leader, those hundreds of thousands-now millions-of students of Nur set a pattern for other Muslims and constituted a support for them in those perilous days-like brave commanders encouraging an army with their states. The strength of their beliefs and their continuous struggle against irreligion had wide effects on people, and they thus removed the fears and misgivings from the hearts, rallied the morale of the nation, brought about hope and relief and delivered the Muslims from desperation.

Bediuzzaman was arrested in 1930 with 125 students of his and tried at the Eskisehir Criminal Court. In Eskisehir prison where they spent eleven months during the trial, they had to put up with unbearable torments. They were released the next spring, but not left in peace. This time, again escorted by gendarmes (military police), Bediuzzaman was sent into exile in another city, Kastamonu. There he spent the first three months at a police station, then was transferred to a house opposite to the police station.

Bediuzzaman lived in Kastamonu for seven years and continued to write and disseminate the Risale-i Nur. Because he and his students were deprived of almost all kinds of freedom, they therefore formed their own postal organization called the "Nur postmen." Through the "Nur postmen," 600,000 copies of Bediuzzaman's literature were multiplied by handwriting.

In 1943, he was arrested again, the main reason was that Bediuzzaman had recently published in Istanbul a treatise concerning the existence of God. He was tried at the Denizli Criminal Court together with 126 of his students.

In prison too he did not shrink from continuing his service, just as he never did when he was in exile. He was now reforming the criminals who were considered lost for society. He was also writing new treatises. Paper and pen were not allowed into the prison, so the treatises were written on small pieces of paper torn from paper bags and smuggled out in matchboxes. This way Fruits from the Tree of Light was published.

The trial ended in a unanimous acquittal. But that did not mean that Bediuzzaman would be given back his freedom-upon an order from Ankara, he was sent to another town, Emirdag.

#### **THE ACQUITTAL THAT CAME TOO LATE**

For him Emirdag was just the same as it had been elsewhere: again pursuits, pressures and plots, and despite these, a continuous, tireless service of faith...This period, in the usual fashion, ended in arrest. Together with fifty-three students, Bediuzzaman was sent to Afyon Criminal Court and spent twenty months in Afyon prison. The cruelties they encountered there were even worse than all those before. Bediuzzaman was then seventy-five years old and suffering from various illnesses. Yet he was isolated in a cell with broken windows where he spent two severe winters. And, as if it were not enough to leave him to die alone, he was poisoned too. When he was suffering from the effect of the poison, the students of his who dared to approach him in order to help him were ruthlessly beaten.

The Supreme Court annulled the sentences given; the court, however, took its time in deciding whether to withdraw the sentence or not. After Bediuzzaman and his students had spent in prison the terms specified in the annulled conviction, the court finally

made up it mind and decided that they should be released. After eight years later came the final decision: in 1956, the court announced that those who had under unbearable conditions spent almost two years in prison had now been found innocent!

When the first free and fair elections were held in Turkey in 1950 and the multiparty system was established, the despotism of the Republican People's Party-which was known, and still is, for its hostile attitude toward religion-ended, and thereby freedoms began to be recognized. Thus a new era opened in the history of the Turkish Republic: in the very first session of the new parliament, the ban over the Adhan (call to prayer) was lifted. During the years that followed, Bediuzzaman had only one trial-the only one in which he was not arrested-in Istanbul and was acquitted with a unanimous decision.

#### **WITH HONOR, DIGNITY AND VICTORY**

After completing a lifetime of almost a century, with every minute spent in the service of faith, Bediuzzaman Said Nursi departed from this world on the morning of March 23, 1960, with complete honor, dignity and victory, leaving behind him the Risale-i Nur Collection that would illuminate this and the forthcoming centuries and a love that would be handed over from generation to generation until eternity.



**NUR INSTITUTE OF AMERICA**

[www.risaleusa.com](http://www.risaleusa.com)

E-mail: [risaleusa@gmail.com](mailto:risaleusa@gmail.com)

Milwaukee, Wisconsin USA