

Fate and Divine Decree

A. Prerogatives of Allah

It was mentioned in Chapter Two (section "C") that there are some aspects of our life which are beyond our will and power. An example was given of getting treatment and recovering from illness; and it was shown that getting treatment is within our power, but being cured is not within the sphere of our activities.

From birth to death, there are hundreds of such conditions which are beyond our power, which are under the absolute control of Allah. A man is born in a wealthy and educated family; another in a nomad family of primitive civilization. Naturally, the first one has more chances of material well-being and intellectual development than the second one.

A man is healthy and strong; another remains chronically sick. One is born blind, another has normal eyesight. Naturally, one can do more work than the other. A man lives up to eighty years, another dies in young age. The first one gets enough time to fulfill his plans, while the second one is not given time even to formulate any plan.

These and many such aspects of life are beyond the control of human beings. These matters are truly subject to "predetermination by God" which is called *qada'* (fate) and *qadar* (divine decree).

Why Allah chooses a certain condition of life for a certain man? It is a riddle which is beyond any solution. Many groups have tried to find answer to this puzzle. But all in vain. No theory solves the problems involved even partially.

When all is said and done, the only answer is provided by the verse of the Qur'an:

"He is not questioned about what He does; but they (the people) shall be questioned." (21:23)

It was perhaps for this reason that Amiru'l-mu'minin 'Ali bin Abi Talib (peace be upon him) said about qadar of Allah that "it is a deep ocean; you should not enter it." [1](#)

However, we can be confident that whatever is decreed is because of some good reason. What is the basis of this assertion? Let us look at those things which we do understand, like the system of universe, co-ordination of different forces of nature, our own biological system and the arrangement which have been made on this earth to make our lives pleasant.

All these things convince us that the Creator has done nothing without a good reason. After this manifestation of His wisdom and knowledge, if we come across some aspects of life which we are unable to understand, it is not difficult to assume that these things also must have some valid reasons.

Before going further, it will be a good idea to refresh your memory by going through Chapter One (sections "B" to "D") again. Then you will know that Allah does nothing without purpose; that we are not in a position to know every reason of every thing in this world; that Allah does whatever is most beneficial to the mankind; that if we were told the reasons for these aspects of our lives, we would admit that they are most appropriate.

B. The Predetermined Measure

Allah says in the Qur'an:

"Verily We have created every thing to a determined measure." (54:49)

So, it is according to His own measure and plan that Allah has created every thing. As I have mentioned previously, we are justified in believing that there is good reason for every aspect of an individual's life as planned by Allah, though that individual may be unable to understand it by himself.

Look at a wrist watch. Some parts are made of gold, others of steel; still others of glass and ruby. There is a flat dial; arrow-like hands; hair-like spring; and axis-like spring-wheel; and various wheels, all of different sizes. The dial is white, the numerals black, the hand of second red and other two hands black. The numbers vary from one to twelve. In short, it takes scores of parts of different type, colour, origin and shape to make an ordinary wrist watch work.

Could the wrist-watch work if all the components were of the same shape, size and design? Can the minute-and-hour hands complain justifiably why they were coloured black while the hand of second was painted red? Can the number 1 complain why it was not given the position of 12?

And if all the numerals were put in one and the same position, could anybody know the time from that watch? If a small ordinary wrist-watch cannot work without different types of parts, is there any reason to believe that the human society could go on without different types of people having various colour, outlook, capacity and ability?

And look at what the critics say. They demand that there should not have been any sickness, any handicap, any financial gaps; people should have been of equal strength, intelligence and wealth.

Now let us look at what it envisages. It means that nobody would have depended upon any other person. Nobody would have done any work, because we have already supposed that one person would have as much money as the other.

Then why should anybody work when his health, life-span, wealth and social status is guaranteed? The world would have remained as it was when Adam came on this earth. No improvement, not even bark-cloth! It would have been like spoon-feeding little children who have to do nothing for their own needs. But this is not the purpose for which we were created. We were created for a higher purpose, not just to eat, drink and breed.

If there was to be any test, there was bound to be some hardship. And that hardship differs from person to person. That test varies from one person to another. And it is because of this variety of test that we find variety of problems.

C. So Where is Equality & Justice?

Question: If what you say is true, then it means that there is no equality between one person and the other. Where is the equality of which Islam is so proud?

Answer: By "equality" we do not mean that all human beings are of equal health and strength; nor that all of them are of equal intelligence; nor that all of them are born with equal eyesight, or hearing capacity; nor do we mean that man and woman are equal in physical capacity and biological functions. What we do mean by "equality" is the equality before the law.

Rich and poor, strong and weak, all are equal in the eyes of religion; all have to follow the same rules and all are governed by the same civil, criminal and ethical codes. There is neither high nor low, neither favourite nor neglected in the eyes of law.

Another meaning is that anybody in Islam can achieve the highest possible honour and office without any distinction of origin, colour or tribe. The criterion of respect in Islam is neither wealth nor strength, neither birth nor colour. The only criterion is the "character." Allah says,

"Verily the most honoured before God amongst you is the most pious of you." (49: 13)

Question: But where is the justice of God when He gives one person normal eyes and deprives another of both eyes?

Answer: You have been told that we are here for test. "The examiner is Allah. It is His prerogative to decide in which way a person is to be examined: The justice is in the fact that the examiner does not burden any one with a test which might be beyond his or her ability. Allah has not given us wings to fly; and therefore, does not ask of us to fly in the air like birds.

This is justice. Had He asked us to fly like birds (without giving us the wings), then it would have been injustice. But can we claim that because He did not give us wings (while birds have got it) we have been wronged by God? No. It is His sole prerogative to decide by which test should a particular person be examined.

And it is His justice and mercy that He does not demand from anyone more than his or her ability. If He has created a man without hands, He at the same time has exempted him from jihad, wudu and tayammum. Had such a person been required to wage war without hands, then we could have rightly complained. But as long as the responsibilities of an individual are tailored to his abilities, nobody can say that Allah has done injustice.

We may sum up this topic in the following lines:

1. This world could not work if all people would have been of the same strength, same ability and same life-span.
2. The working of the world requires people of different calibre, strength and ability.
3. All are equal in the eyes of the religion and laws of religion.
4. Everybody's responsibilities are tailored to his abilities. And that is the only thing demanded by justice.

Imam Ja'far as-Sadiq (peace be upon him) was asked about *qada* (fate) and *qadar* (divine decree). He said,

"When Allah will gather His servants on the Day of Judgement, He will question them about the things which He entrusted them with, i.e., our obedience to the shari'ah which is within our power; but He will not question them about the things which He decreed and predetermined for them, i.e., the conditions of life which are beyond our control." [2](#)

D. Tadbir & Taqdir (Our Plans & God's Decree)

It was mentioned in Chapter Two that though the power and opportunity to do a certain work is given by Allah, the ultimate responsibility is ours because we opt to do or not to do that work by our own free will and choice. Thus, while the tools of our actions are provided by Allah, the final choice is ours.

It is interesting to note that to a certain extent in matter of predetermined measures, the opposite is true, that is, while the preliminaries are provided by human beings, the final decision is in the hands of Allah. (Mark the phrase 'to certain extent'. I have used this phrase because the decree of Allah is not 'always' dependent upon our actions:) In this context, our action and planning is known as *tadbir*, while Allah's decision is known as *taqdir*.

To give you one example, if we want to reap a harvest, we will have to cultivate the land, sow the seed,

irrigate the plants, weed out the grass and remain always on alert.

Still, after doing all that was necessary, we cannot be sure of getting the harvest. A cyclone, a fire or a lightning may destroy the produce; armed gangs of robbers may attack; circumstances may force us to sell the farm just before the harvest, and so on. Thus while the preliminary stages are prepared by us, the final outcome of that venture is in hands of Allah.

Two of the matters which are of day to day interest to the readers and which are under the direct control of Allah, are life and death, and the means of livelihood. In the following pages, some light will be thrown on these two subjects.

1. Life & Death

Allah says,

"He is the one who has created you of clay, then decreed the term; and the predetermined term is with Him; and yet you doubt."(6:2)

In another verse, it is said,

"And ageeth not any aged, nor is reduced from any one's life, but it is all in a Book; verily it is easy for Allah."(35: 11)

These two verses, and especially the last one, show that the life-span of a person is liable to be increased or decreased by the decree of God. And the first verse speaks of a "term" and a "predetermined term" which is with Allah. What do all such references mean?

The idea may be understood easily in the light of the previously mentioned two laws (see Chapter Four). For example, Allah decrees that Zayd would live up to hundred years; but if he behaves badly with his relatives, his life-span would be reduced, lets us say, by thirty years and he would die at the age of seventy.

This is the direction given to the angel of death. The angel of death does not know how will Zayd behave with his relatives. Therefore, he cannot know whether Zayd would live up to hundred years or would die at the age of seventy.

Now suppose Zayd behaves badly with his relatives. At the end of seventy years, the angel of death must seek guidance from Allah about him. Allah tells him to erase the hundred years, and replace it with seventy years. And Zayd dies. [3](#)

Thus the knowledge or information of the angel of death is constantly being updated. This is how the decrease or increase in the life-span of a man is effected. And it is the knowledge of the angel of death which has simply been called as a "term" in the first verse. But what about Allah's knowledge?

Allah knew from ever that Zayd would die at the age of seventy. There was no change in His knowledge. The actual life-span of an individual is known to Allah only; and that life-span has been termed as a "predetermined term" in the first verse

Question: Why Allah did not decree a fixed age for all human beings?

Answer: So far as human being is concerned, Allah has designed everything with only one purpose: to help him to acquire virtues and become an obedient servant of Allah. It is precisely for this reason that he has been informed that his life-span can be effected by his deeds.

When a man knows that, for example, by being generous to his relatives, he will live longer in this world (and that this immediate reward is quite separate from the rewards of akhirah, the hereafter) he will naturally try – to be good to his relatives. And thus he would become a virtuous servant of Allah.

2. Sustenance & Livelihood

Though trying to earn a livelihood is within the sphere of our activities, the final result is not within our power. We see many people endeavouring hard from sunrise to sunset to earn livelihood and still they spend their lives in constant poverty and need. Why is it so? Allah says:

"Allah expands the sustenance for whomsoever He desires and straitens it for whomsoever He desires. " (13:26)

Similar to what we mentioned about human life-span, *sustenance also* may be of two kinds: For example, Allah may inform the angels – that if Zayd endeavours hard he will be given ten thousand doll,. But if he does not eudeavour so hard he will be given five thousand. Allah knows whether or not Zayd will endeavour; He: knows whether finally he will be given ten thousand or five thousand.

But Zayd *himself* does not know and *the angels* who are *able* for his sustenance do not know the final outcome. The purpose of keeping every one in suspense is that because of this suspense, man will always try to work up to his utmost capacity to earn more and more; also he will try as many hopeful lines as he can, because he does not know *whether* he has readied the final stage of his sustenance or not.

He does not know .where his better livelihood lies. Therefore, he will always be on alert to try as many opportunities as will come his way. He will remain active and ambitious, and constantly in search for a better life.

According to the verse of the Qur'an and writings of the 'ulama', I have come to the conclusion that Allah has fixed a maximum limit for the livelihood of every person. Try as he may, he cannot go beyond that maximum limit. As the maximum limit is hidden front our eyes and, as a matter of act, even from the eyes of the angels, we cannot or at least should not sit idle without endeavouring to better our condition.

Also, it has been left to our choice whether we want to reach that goal by lawful way or through unlawful means. If we adhere to the commandments of Allah and to the tenets of religion, we will reach the desired limit and, at the same time, will earn the grace of Allah in the hereafter.

If we choose the unlawful way, we may get that sustenance; but our allotted share of lawful sustenance will be reduced by that much, and by opting the wrong method, we will make ourselves liable to the pent from Allah in the hereafter. [4](#)

It must be remembered that in Islam even a lawful thing becomes unlawful if it is obtained by unlawful means. In Islam, the end does not justify the means. There is no denying that lawful methods sometimes seems to be slow, and therefore those people who want to get rich overnight resort to unlawful means. But such tactics do not benefit very much. The following episode will make my point more clear:

Imam 'Ali (peace be upon him) went to a mosque where he wanted to pray. He asked a man standing nearby to look after his horse. When he came out, he had two dirhams in his hand which he intended to give to that man as reward. But that man was nowhere to be seen. Imam 'Ali came to the horse and found that his rein was missing.

He gave someone the two dirhams to buy another rein. The man went to the market. He saw a man selling a rein and bought it for two dirhams. When Imam 'Ali saw the rein, he recognised that it was his own.

Rein which the supposed guard had stolen. Imam 'Ali had intended to give that guard the same two dirhams as a reward which would have been perfectly lawful for him. But his impatience turned him into a thief and he got nothing except the same two dirhams. His anxiety did not increase his wages at all and made him a criminal into the bargain.

E. Our Prayers & God's Decree

Now you know that the knowledge given to the angels is often conditional. For example, they are told by Allah that "If Zayd does this work, he will prosper; and if he opts for that work, he will lose financially. If he goes to this doctor, he will recover from his illness very soon; but if he goes to that doctor, his sickness will increase."

One of the most important conditions of prosperity, success and happiness is *du'a*, praying to God. If Zayd prays to Allah and seeks His help, his affliction will be alleviated. If he does not seek the help of Allah, he will be left suffering. Thus Allah says:

"Say (O Prophet), had it not been for your prayers unto Him, my Lord would care not for you."
(25:77)

Some people have misgivings about *du'a*. They think that since Allah knows what is good for us, there is

no need to ask for *His* help or assistance; there is no need for *du'a* . *They* say that Allah knows what is best for Zayd and He has already decided how much he is to earn or, for example, whether he will be cured of his illness or not. Therefore, what is the need for *du'a* ? *What* purpose will our *du'a*' serve?

Such people do not appreciate that may be Allah has made Zayd's earning or health dependent upon his *du'a*. May be He has ordered the angels to increase his earnings if he prays to Allah for an increase! May be the condition necessary for recovery from his illness is a certain course of treatment coupled with sincere *du'a*' and prayer to Allah.

It has been mentioned in many *ahadith* that one of the things which affect the life of man is *du'a*'. The other?important thing is his effort and endeavour. We should never minimize the effect and importance of *dua*, or the effect and importance of hard work.

Of course, if one has already reached his maximum age or maximum livelihood, or if, for example, *his* sickness is "firmly decreed" to continue, no amount of *du'a* or effort or treatment can do him any good. But, the point to remember is that nobody knows what is "firmly decreed" concerning his age, livelihood or health. Therefore, we have to do relentlessly whatever is possible to improve our conditions.

F. Tawakkul & God's Decree

Besides *du'a*, *tawakkul* is also a very commendable and highly praised virtue. *Tawakkul* means "putting one's trust in somebody". Allah says,

***"And put your trust in Allah, and sufficient is Allah as the dispenser of the affairs."*(4:81)**

However, putting your trust in God should not become an excuse for idleness. The Prophet said,

"Tawakkul means that you should bind the camel with a rope and then say that you have trust in Allah that He will protect your camel. You should not have confidence in the rope only, because many a camel is stolen. with the rope. But neither should you neglect the rope because binding with the rope is part of tawakkul."

This is the spirit of *tawakkul*. We are to try our best and then we should have trust in God that He will make our efforts succeed. It is a sheer nonsense to sit idle and say that Allah will do all our work for us. He says in the Qur'an:

***"And man can have nothing but what he strives for."*(53:39)**

The highest standard of *tawakkul* was set when Amiru'l-mu'minin 'Ali asked some idle persons as to who they were. "We are those who put their trust in Allah;" came the reply.

Imam 'Ali asked, "How is your confidence in Allah" They said, "We eat when we get food, and we have patience when we do not get it." Imam 'Ali retorted, "Yes, that is the very nature of dog." Stunned, they

asked him to explain the true meaning of *tawakkul*. Imam 'Ali said, "When we get, we give to others; when we do not get, we thank Allah."

It means that we are to try our best to improve our condition. But we should not trust our own power and wisdom only. You must have confidence in Allah that He will make your efforts fruitful. Then if you succeed, try to help your brethren with the fruits of your labour. And if you fail, then also be thankful to Allah.

You may ask why should you thank Allah even when you do not succeed. Yes, you should thank Allah because success or failure is not your responsibility. You were expected to do your best and you did. Be thankful to Allah that you were able to perform what was expected of you. It is your efforts that matters.

Success or failure is not your province. That is the province of Allah. Have trust and confidence in Him that He will not let your efforts fail. But if He, in His wisdom, does not grant you success, thank Him that still you were able to do your duty.

1. as-Sadiq; op. cit., chp. 7, p. 59; al-Majlisi, Biharul-Anwar, vol. 5, p.110.

2. as-Saduq, op. cit., chap. 7, p. 59.

3. al-Majlisi, Biharul-Anwar, vol. 4, p.121.

4. al-Majlisi, Biharul-Anwar, vol 5, p.147.

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