

Test and Suffering

A. Test & Trial in Man's Life

Now you know that we have been created to acquire virtues so that we may be nearer to Allah. But how to ascertain the standard of our virtues? To make us understand the judgement of Allah easily, He has established a system of tests which determine our spiritual perfection or lack of it, as the case may be. Allah has said in the Qur'an:

Verily, We created man from a drop of mingled sperm so that We may test him; and therefore We made him hearing and seeing. We have indeed showed him the way, now he be grateful or ungrateful. (76:3)

Test will be held for all persons, believers and non-believers alike. Test presupposes that the man is not predestined to go to Paradise or Hell, as some groups of the Christians and the majority of the Muslims suppose. If our place in the hereafter is predetermined, then why should we be given orders to do this and not to do that?

Those who believe that God has already predestined our actions and our ultimate destination, then can neither justify the theory of test which is mentioned in numerous verses of the Qur'an nor can they justify their belief in the Day of Judgement. Why the Day of judgement when everything is pre-arranged? And whose judgement when one does *only* what has been ordained for him by God?

Since we believe that God knows everything, then why should He test us?

The test which we are to undergo is not meant to add to the knowledge of God. Although God knows everything, it still is necessary that all men and women be put to test so that the true form of God's justice and mercy may emerge on the Day of Judgement.

If God were to send all persons to Paradise or Hell according to His own knowledge without putting them to test for their beliefs and deeds, then those sent to Hell could rightly complain that why were they being punished without any sin on their part while others enjoyed bliss of Paradise without any good deed in

their credit? So in order to uphold the principle of justice and fairness, it was necessary for God to test all persons before sending them to Hell or Paradise.

B. Categories of Test & Suffering

The tests and trials may be divided into two categories:

First is the test by the rules of the *shari'ah* and tenets of faith. As already explained, God sent the *shari'ah* with the prophets, and man is expected to believe in the true religion sincerely and obey its rules faithfully.

The second category is the harder one, and that is by sufferings. Allah says in the Quran:

Verily, We shall put you to test with some fear, and hunger, and with some loss of wealth, lives, and offspring. And (O Muhammad) convey good tidings to those who are patient, who say, when inflicted by hardship, "Verily we are of God and verily to Him shall we return;" upon them is the blessings of Allah and His mercy. (2: 155)

There are innumerable miseries, accidents, floods, earthquakes; fires, robbery, war, riot, famine, epidemics—all such things have effect upon our lives: We are being tested as how we react to them. Does our faith remain unshaken?

Have we proved ourselves as pillar of courage to sustain the hopes of others? Have we shown fortitude and patience in face of these disasters? Our ever-lasting happiness depends upon the result of these tests.

Sufferings can be attributed to any one or more of the following three causes:

1. The suffering which is the result of our own negligence or carelessness. A man overlooks the rules of hygiene and falls ill. He himself is the immediate cause of his suffering, and his affliction is the natural consequence of his carelessness. In strict legal sense, there is no sin in it. It is a self-inflicted harm. Nobody else is involved in it. He may, if he wants, blame himself.

2. The second cause of suffering is nature; such sufferings are described by us as 'the act of God.' Earthquake, cyclone, storms and such other natural incidents which are beyond human control come in this category. Such incidents are necessary to run the machinery of the world according to planned and systematic way. Nevertheless, the sufferer and his worth is put to test by these sufferings.

3. The third is the suffering which is caused by other person or persons. This is the most complicated type of suffering. A tyrant ruler, an irritating neighbour, a disobedient child, a heartless enemy, an undisciplined subordinate, a boasting superior, a dishonest customer, a cheating partner, a torturing spouse, an unjust arbitrator—these are some of the examples given at random. A man has to suffer in all

these cases, whether willing or unwilling, often without any fault of his own.

C. What is The Alternative?

God could have made us all like angels, without any independent will or power of our own. But in that case man's virtues would not have been worth any praise. It was and is the plan of God to give us power and will to do as we like, because only then can we be responsible for our good or evil deeds. And only then can we feel that we have achieved something worth its name.

Thus God gave us the will and power to act according to our will. And after this bestowing of power, we were sent to this world to be tested. Try to visualize this world in this light: There is a tyrant king, trying to capture the world and eliminate the God-loving people from this earth. He goes against the requirements of God to rule justly and mercifully He is thus failing in his test.

On the other side are his God-loving subjects. What is expected of them? They are expected to live a virtuous life, and to persuade others to follow their example. They feel that God expects them to warn their tyrant ruler because it is the only way to save him from eternal disgrace, and to save his victims from his cruelties.

If they choose not to interfere, they too will fail in their test. If they opt to follow the command of God they are performing their duty towards themselves, towards mankind and towards God.

What follows now is either of the two things: either the king accepts their advice, heeds their sermons and follows them onto the path of God; or he ignores their warning and returns to his old tactics.

If he follows their advice and returns to the path of God, then it is good for everyone: the virtuous people did their duty by warning him; and he did his own duty by following their advice. All pass the test with flying colours.

But if he ignores their warnings and wants to remove them from his way, then he loses every chance of success in this most important test. But what should be the course of action for those virtuous people? Should they surrender to the king's godlessness, or should they continue in their efforts to make him amend his ways?

If they surrender, the success which they have achieved so far would turn into failure. If they do not surrender, they would have no alternative but to endure the hardships inflicted by that tyrant.

To summarize, we can say that

(1) every person is, being tested in this world;

(2) everybody provides a chance of test for others, as well as for himself.

For example, if an ill-tempered person harms his neighbour, he is failing in his test; but at the same time he is providing a test for his neighbour also. If his neighbour tries to correct his behaviour by his own example, and by persuasion, then he succeeds in his own test, no matter whether his ill-tempered neighbour changes his attitude or not.

By the way, it is for this reason that Islam expects us to perform our duties towards others without caring whether they perform their duty or not. After all, as we are undergoing a test, we are like students sitting in an examination hall. No student would like to ruin his answer book just because his class fellow did not write his own test-papers well.

But why suffer on account of others?

Now comes the other question: Why should we suffer on account of the folly of others? We are not lifeless models; we are human beings. We have got feelings. Why should our feelings be injured just because somebody else is failing in his duties?

Likewise, one may ask: "Why should we be inflicted with injuries or loss of life or property, or with sorrows and gloom, in the-course of what is loosely termed as 'act of God' like flood, earthquake, storms and cyclones?"

All these questions would have been of relevance if the death in this world would have been the end of life, if there had been no Day of judgement. But, at present, the position is as follows:

No matter how great our sufferings, they are not everlasting. We have a sure knowledge that sooner or later, all this trouble will come to an end because our stay in this world will be terminated one day and we will be transferred to another everlasting world. And as soon as we are transferred from this world, our anxiety and trouble will end provided we have prepared ourselves for it.

According to our belief, God rewards man for his sufferings, whether he be a Muslim or a non-Muslim. ¹ Those persons who have committed sins get reward of sufferings in the form of remission of the punishment in the life hereafter. And those who did not commit any sin, like Prophets and Imams, and still suffered most of all, will be rewarded by higher and greater prestige and honor : in the presence of Allah.

Thus according to the Shi'i, a point of view, sufferings of this world ultimately serve to cleanse the man from sins, and to bring him nearer to Allah in the hereafter.

D. Sufferings as Warning or Punishment

It should be mentioned here that sometimes suffering and disaster is used not as a test, but as a warning to sinners or a punishment for transgressors.

Examples of such warnings may be found in the traditions of the Prophet such as the following: "When Allah is displeased with a people [and yet does not want to wipe them out completely], the prices go up and up, life-span becomes shortened, trade brings no profit and the land bears less fruits."

The Prophet also explained that adultery, when practised openly, increases the accidental and sudden death, brings such plagues and diseases which had never been heard of before. When people resort to cheating in weight and measure, warning comes in form of famine, underemployment, and tyrants.

When rich people withhold *zakat*, poverty strikes the community. Imam 'Ali bin Abi Talib said, "If all liable persons paid their *zakat*, there would not be a needy person in the community." These are but a few examples of how God gives us warning so that we may amend our ways. [2](#)

And examples of sufferings as punishment may be found in the stories of Pharaoh (Fir'awn), Nimrod (Namrud), people of Prophets Lot (Lut), Shu'ayb, Noah (Nuh) and Salih. It will not be out of place to mention here that the outright destruction (like that of the people of Lot, Pharaoh and Nimrod) has been removed from the Muslim *ummah* as a respect to the Holy Prophet who was "a mercy to the universe." But the suffering to warn the transgressors continues.

However, one should always remember that God, in His mercy and grace, has hidden the true purpose of a? particular suffering from our eyes. Therefore, we should never say that, for example, a certain person suffering from a chronic disease is a sinner who is undergoing punishment. Why?

Because, he may be a good person undergoing a hard test for his virtues. So we should never judge anybody by his apparent affluence or poverty, by his good or bad luck, by his physical strength or weakness, by his fortune or misfortune. We should, instead, concentrate upon our own spiritual and moral upliftment.

[1](#). Hilli, al-Babu 'l Hadi 'Ashar, p. 52.

[2](#). al-Majlisi, Biharul 'Anwar, vol. 70 (chaps. 137, 138) pp. 308-377 which altogether contain 112 traditions

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