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Mohammad Ali Shomali

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Authors(s):

[Mohammad Ali Shomali](#) [1]

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[Ahlul Bayt World Assembly](#) [2]

This article explores the Islamic view of hardship and the meaning of suffering by describing Satan's role in the origin of mankind's hardship, and clarifies the concept of suffering, tragic events, and calamities people tend to face as viewed in the Qur'an and hadith from the Ahlul Bayt.

This paper is based on the first part of two lectures delivered by the author in Dar al-Zahra in Qum in Fatimiyyah 2011.

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The Islamic Understanding of Hardship, Part 1

Mohammad Ali Shomali

This paper is based on the first part of two lectures delivered by the author in Dar al-Zahra in Qum in Fatimiyyah 2011.

Abstract

What is the Islamic view of hardship? Do we suffer because it is a sign of being good or immoral, or does it depend on other factors? This article explores the answers to these questions by describing Satan's role in the origin of mankind's hardship, and clarifies the concept of suffering, tragic events, and calamities people tend to face as viewed in the Qur'an and hadith from the Ahlul Bayt.

It is sometimes wrongly assumed that a person experiences hardship due to his or her own immorality or irresponsibility. Indeed, suffering is a tool for the forgiveness of our sins, and might be a sign of God's love for a person.

Experiencing hardship is a reality of everyone's lives. Sometimes, because we are in tune to what is happening to other people and we judge their lives based on outside appearances, we think that other people do not suffer as much as we do. However, when we come to realise the actual conditions of their lives, we realise that indeed everyone faces hardship, though in different ways. In what follows, Islamic view of hardship will be explored.

Satan's Role in the Origin of Mankind's Suffering

Adam and Eve were given the opportunity to be in a garden which God had made somewhat similar to the eternal heaven, although it was not the eternal heaven. They could live a life without any worries about food, drink, and clothing to the extent that God told them that in this garden they would never become hungry or thirsty, would never feel too hot, would not need to concern themselves about clothing and indeed that everything would be available for them. God also gave them a warning by saying,

إِنَّ هَذَا عَدُوٌّ لَكَ وَلِزَوْجِكَ

“Satan is your enemy and enemy of your wife.” (The Quran, 20: 117)

We sometimes mistakenly take Satan to be the enemy of God; however, in the first place Satan is our enemy and not the enemy of God because Satan cannot harm Him. If God has some kind of problem with Satan, it is because of us. Satan vowed to deceive human beings and to make them suffer, and has therefore declared war against God. The main problem is between human beings and Satan; otherwise Satan had no problem in worshipping God as he did so for 6000 years. This is why God says:

أَلَمْ أَعْهَدْ إِلَيْكُمْ يَا بَنِي آدَمَ أَنْ لَا تَعْبُدُوا الشَّيْطَانَ ۚ إِنَّهُ لَكُمْ عَدُوٌّ مُبِينٌ

Did I not exhort you, O children of Adam, saying, ‘Do not worship Satan. He is indeed your manifest enemy’. (The Quran, 36: 60)

Allah made a covenant with human beings that we must not worship Satan because Satan for us is a clear enemy. How ignorant we are that we obey or even worship our enemy and sometimes we might even wonder if we truly know that God is our Lord when He has done everything possible which is good for us and Satan has done everything possible which is bad and against us and yet we still sometimes follow Satan. This is against the covenant.

وَأَنْ اعْبُدُونِي ۚ هَذَا صِرَاطٌ مُسْتَقِيمٌ

And worship me and this is the right path. (The Quran, 36: 61)

So God told them that if they follow Him, He will show them the path toward happiness and perfection, but if they follow Satan who is their avowed enemy, Satan would not show them anything except loss and a miserable life in this world and the hereafter.

So Allah told Adam:

فَقُلْنَا يَا آدَمُ إِنَّ هَذَا عَدُوٌّ لَكَ وَلِزَوْجِكَ فَلَا يُخْرِجَنَّكَ مِنَ الْجَنَّةِ فَتَشْقَى

This is indeed an enemy of yours and your wife's. So do not let him (Satan, who is their enemy) expel you from this garden or you will be miserable. (The Quran, 20: 117)

Thus, the garden was free of problems and Adam and Eve could enjoy it for as long as they wish, as the Qur'an says:

وَقُلْنَا يَا آدَمُ اسْكُنْ أَنْتَ وَزَوْجُكَ الْجَنَّةَ وَكُلَا مِنْهَا رَغَدًا حَيْثُ شِئْتُمَا

We said: O Adam, dwell with your mate in paradise and eat thereof freely whencesoever you wish... (The Quran, 2: 35)

The garden contains no problems, restrictions, and limitations, but they are warned to be careful because if they go outside this heaven, they would start suffering. Why? Because life in this world cannot be free from suffering. The Qur'an says:

لَقَدْ خَلَقْنَا الْإِنْسَانَ فِي كَبَدٍ

"...certainly We created man in travail." (The Quran, 90: 4)

Thus, the existence of mankind on this earth is mixed with pain and suffering. This is the reality of human life and therefore different schools of thought and religions have tried to develop an understanding of suffering. For some religions like Buddhism, their account of suffering is a central part of their understanding of this world.

The Islamic View of Hardship

So what is the Islamic view of hardship? Do we suffer because it is a sign of being a good or an immoral person? Or does it depend on other factors?

Sometimes people assume that if someone is suffering, it is because they are immoral or at least did not act wisely and carefully. In this way, when people see someone suffering, they assume that person to be

responsible, a view commonly seen throughout history. Even in the Bible we find that when some people saw that Prophet Ayyub (Job) was suffering greatly due to losing his children and his health, they accused him of wrongdoing which led to his suffering. They wondered how it could be possible for a friend and obedient servant of God suffers. It ought to be impossible.

These people accused the Prophet due to their short-sightedness. They thought that a friend of God, who is expected to have received God's mercy, should not suffer physically, nor should he suffer in this world.

However, they did not know that it is more complicated than this. We must not have a simplistic understanding of what happens in this world. Indeed, although we cannot generalize, as read in the Qur'an and hadith, the reality can be the opposite: if someone is suffering there is a great chance that the person may be a good person. Of course, as we will see below, we cannot say that whoever is suffering is definitely a good person. I am simply trying to correct the opposite view – that people tend to think that whoever is suffering is immoral, or has acted unwisely or irresponsibly.

Hardship in the View of the Qur'an and Hadiths

The following will include references to the verses of the Qur'an and hadith from the Ahlul Bayt about the suffering, tragic events, and calamities people tend to face.

In the Qur'an, God tells us that He has no reservations in giving worldly gifts, the possessions of this "dunya," ¹ to people who are not good or even those who disbelieve in Him. Indeed, God says that if it was not for the believers becoming perplexed and somehow in danger of losing their faith, He would have even given them more:

وَلَوْلَا أَنْ يَكُونَ النَّاسُ أُمَّةً وَاحِدَةً لَجَعَلْنَا لِمَنْ يَكْفُرُ بِالرَّحْمَنِ لِبُيُوتِهِمْ سُقُفًا مِنْ فِضَّةٍ وَمَعَارِجَ عَلَيْهَا يَظْهَرُونَ

Were it not (for the danger) that mankind would be one community (a monolithic community of people without faith), We would have surely made for those who defy the All-Beneficent, silver roofs for their houses and (silver) stairways by which they ascend. (The Qur'an 43:33)

Imagine if the world were in such a condition that those who did not believe in God were so rich that they all built their houses with silver whereas the people who believe in God were all poor. How many people would still remain faithful? However, only in order to prevent that from happening, God has not given them much, otherwise He would have no hesitations about doing so, because for Him "dunya" is insignificant and He would give it very easily. God also says:

وَلَا يَحْسَبَنَّ الَّذِينَ كَفَرُوا أَنَّ مَالَهُمْ خَيْرٌ لَأَنْفُسِهِمْ ۗ إِنَّمَا نُمَلِّي لَهُمْ لِيَزْدَادُوا إِثْمًا

Let the faithless not suppose that the respite We grant them is good for their souls: We give them respite only that they may increase in sin... (The Qur'an 3: 178)

In this verse, in addition to some others in the Qur'an, Allah explains that when God gives those disbelievers opportunity, time, and chance to make more out of this worldly life, people should not think that God loves them and is supporting them. On the contrary, God is in fact giving them more opportunities to continue their criminal life and increase their sinful actions. Thus, if they are given longer lives, we must not be surprised.

This fact is also clearly mentioned in hadiths. For example, once person talked to Imam Sadiq about the suffering of faithful people, and the Imam quoted a hadith from the Prophet. According to this hadith, the Prophet was asked as to whom would receive the greatest calamities and to whom the greatest tragedies happen in this world. The Prophet replied that the Prophets (al-Nabiyyun) suffer the most in this world, and then those who most resemble the Prophets suffer the most.[2](#)

Thus, anyone who is closer to the Prophet in rank suffers more. And when someone suffers it is not due to his immorality or because God does not want him or does not love him. Furthermore, when we consider the faithful, everyone would suffer according to the level of their faith (iman) and the amount of good deeds they perform. So if their Iman is stronger and they have more good deeds, they would suffer more. Imam Sadiq also said:

إن لله عز و جل عبادا في الارض من خالص عبادته ما ينزل من السماء تحفة إلى الارض إلا صرفها عنهم إلى غيرهم ولا بلية إلا صرفها إليهم

Truly God has some servants on the earth who are very pure and dedicated to Him. Nothing good comes from heaven to the earth except that God sends it away from them and no calamity comes except that God sends it to them.[3](#)

Thus, sometimes God chooses his best servants and tries them with all kinds of difficulties. Sometimes we see that there are people for whom not a day or a week passes without facing some sort of tribulation. It is as if at least every week something bad should happen to them. This is certainly not a sign of being abandoned or forgotten by God. Indeed, sometimes it is the sign of being treated in a very special and favourable way by Him.

Suffering is a sign of God's love

Imam Baqir says:

عن أبي جعفر عليه السلام قال: إن الله تبارك وتعالى إذا أحب عبدا غتته بالبلاء غتا وثجه بالبلاء ثجا فإذا دعاه قال: لبيك عبدي لئن عجلت لك ما سألت إنني على ذلك لقادر ولئن ادخرت لك فما ادخرت لك فهو خير لك

When God loves one of His servants, He showers calamities upon him and covers him with them. Then when the servant calls God [to remove them], God replies, ‘Here I am, My servant. I can give you what you ask for quickly, but if I save it for you it would be better for you.’⁴

This may be one of the most difficult times for God – if indeed it is possible to say that there is something difficult for God. Although, for example, in some hadiths it does state that it is very difficult for God when He wants to take the life of His good servant who does not want to die. Of course, nothing is either difficult or easy for God; this is the way in which we can explain a deeper matter.

Thus, it is a very difficult situation for God when He observes that His good servant is suffering and praying earnestly to Him to remove these sufferings and calamities. God is so Kind and Merciful that He loves us more than our mothers do. So what does He do? God tells His servant that He is at their service and has not forgotten them. Then God explains that if He quickly grants His servants their desires, then it would be saved for them in hereafter (akhirah) which is indeed the time they will be in a greater need. So God wants to keep the situation as it is and save the reward for His servant’s akhirah.

For example, parents may buy a bicycle for their child as an incentive to work hard for upcoming exams. Before completing the exams, the child asks to be given the bicycle. Though the child is told to first finish the exam he or she objects and cries; however, a wise parent would not give the bicycle until the exams have been completed. Although they may feel sad, they are certain their child will eventually understand and thank them later for it. Therefore, God tells us that He is indeed able to remove all our suffering and has no problem doing so, but He has instead reserved something much better for us, depriving us of which would actually harm us. So He asks us to trust His understanding and decision about what is best for us.

Outcome of worldly suffering on the Day of Judgment

Ibn Abi Yafour, one of Imam Sadiq’s well-known companions, approached Imam Sadiq with a complaint that he was suffering a lot while constantly facing illness and pain. So Imam Sadiq told him:

عن عبد الله بن أبي يعفور قال: شكوت إلى أبي عبد الله عليه السلام ما ألقى من الأوجاع وكان مسقاما فقال: لي يا عبد الله لو يعلم المؤمن ما له من المصائب لتمنى أنه يقرض بالمقاريض طول عمره.

If a believer knew what he will gain because of all the calamities experienced and what God would give them as a result of this suffering, they would wish that their body was cut into pieces using scissors for as long as he or she was alive.⁵

At the moment we do not understand this, though on the Day of Judgment everyone would wish they suffered more as a result of seeing what has been saved for them in their savings account with God.

Why do some people not suffer?

On the other hand, we have hadiths about people who did not suffer, who had everything they wanted though they were wrongdoers. In a famous hadith, Imam Sadiq talks about a person who was visited by the Prophet. While the Prophet was in his house, he witnessed a hen having laid an egg when it was sitting on top of a wall when that egg fell onto a nail in the wall and remained there. Imagine an egg dropping onto a nail without cracking. This surprised the Prophet. This person saw the Prophet's astonishment and proudly said, "By God, Who has truthfully raised you as a Prophet, I have never faced any calamity." The Prophet quickly stood up without having eaten the food, and said, "For the one who does not face any calamity in his life, God has nothing to do with him." The Prophet then left the house.⁶

If you never become ill, if you never suffer, if you never have any problem or loss, it is not a sign that you are a good person – it only means that God has left you to yourself. This is the concept of Imla' as we saw above in the verse 3:178.

Different approaches to a person who suffers

Some believe that people suffer due to their sins, foolishness, irresponsibility, or improper planning. Therefore it is mistakenly thought that the person deserves to suffer, that it was decided by God and consequently they deserve no sympathy.

Others believe that God sometimes deliberately plans for His close servants to suffer as a means for their perfection and upliftment, a reason for giving them more in the hereafter. However, this does not mean that those who apparently do not suffer have a problem, because unfortunately sometimes some people may accuse believers who, according to their understanding, are not suffering.

The truth is, everyone is suffering to one degree or another, but when some people do not observe apparent suffering, they tend to wrongly assume the person is wrongdoer, because hadiths say that the people who are good would suffer. Our role is to be as non-judgmental as possible and leave everything to God. It is not our responsibility to judge who is suffering because they are sinful or pious.

Suffering: A tool for the forgiveness of our sins

There are hadiths that indicate that some people may suffer in themselves or in their children due to their sins. Sometimes we suffer because someone has not fulfilled his responsibilities; there are people who suffer their entire lives because at the time of delivery the nurse or doctor mishandled the baby due to carelessness and unintentionally disabled the infant's life. Sometimes people are injured for life as a result of careless driving. Thus it's imperative to hold an accurate and comprehensive understanding of evil, suffering, and calamities.

Suffering and God's pleasure

According to the Qur'an and hadith, all that befalls us is a test, although this does not necessarily mean that all occurrences please God or He has deliberately planned it. For example, if someone insults me in front of others without a good reason, it does not mean that God is pleased with this, although it certainly is a way God can test us. Every moment of our life is a test, which means every moment of life has the potential to be used as a step towards our progress.

Thus, a criminal or a careless person may harm us, and these are all considered to be tests; however, we are not to say that the perpetrators were agents of God to test us. This is like a driving lesson. During training, we are to remain calm and act wisely if a driver carelessly runs through a red light and accidentally comes close to us. However, the careless driver cannot ask our instructor to pay them or thank them for creating a situation in which our instructor can test us. So these are two different issues.

A believer may suffer due to his carelessness, irresponsibility, or not bothering to consult before making decisions. If we get married without thinking and consulting and then suffer, or we do not take care of our children's health and they become ill, it is wrong to think that God has chosen us as His pure servants and this is why we suffer. On the contrary, we must act wisely, think, plan, and consult to benefit from the experiences of other people, especially the believers. Nevertheless, we will still face many problems we are not in control of. What is then important is to have patience (sabr) to enormously benefit from all tests and suffering. And God chooses those who practice patience, not those who fail.

The Prophet's suffering

As we saw above, the prophets suffered more than other people. Among all the prophets, Prophet Muhammad suffered the most, as he said:

ما أؤذي نبي مثل ما أؤذيت

No Prophet was annoyed like me.⁷

Prophet Muhammad lost his father before his birth, and shortly after his birth he lost his mother. He was then brought up by his grandfather who then also passed away. When he was under great difficulties and pressures, when the Muslims were kept under sanctions in "Shi'b Abi Talib", he lost his greatest supporters, his wife, Lady Khadija, and his uncle, Abu Talib. It cannot be imagined how much he suffered whether for his own situation or because of that of his companions. He even suffered within the four walls of his own house. In several verses of the Qur'an, God mentions some of the Prophet's difficult experiences e.g. suffering in his own family and being ill-treated by some of his own followers who did not appreciate having a Prophet like him.

The Prophet was tolerant among his own followers as well as the unbelievers and enemies who killed many of his companions, including his uncle Hamzah. And many times they have attempted to kill him. For example, sometimes when the followers wanted to meet the Prophet or ask him for something, they would shout using his first name (and not the nickname) from outside his house, asking him to come out. He was still tolerant and patient with this treatment to the extent that God came to support his Prophet:

إِنَّ الَّذِينَ ينادُونَكَ مِنْ وَرَاءِ الْحُجُرَاتِ أَكْثَرُهُمْ لَا يَعْقِلُونَ

“Indeed those who call you from behind the apartments, most of them do not apply reason.” (The Qur’an, 49:4)

Some also used to enter to the Prophet’s house without asking his permission. Nowadays when we want to visit our scholars, we are worried that we may disturb them, and sometimes hesitate before visiting to eliminate putting much pressure on them. However, those people used to go inside the Prophet’s house without permission, and the Prophet, due to his kindness, felt embarrassed to stop them, so then God said:

يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا لَا تَدْخُلُوا بُيُوتَ النَّبِيِّ إِلَّا أَنْ يُؤْذَنَ لَكُمْ إِلَى طَعَامٍ غَيْرَ نَاظِرِينَ إِنَاهُ وَلَكِنْ إِذَا دُعِيتُمْ فَادْخُلُوا فَإِذَا طَعِمْتُمْ فَانْتَشِرُوا وَلَا مُسْتَأْسِنِينَ لِحَدِيثٍ ۗ إِنَّ ذَلِكُمْ كَانَ يُؤْذِي النَّبِيَّ فَيَسْتَحْيِي مِنْكُمْ

O you who have faith! Do not enter the Prophet’s houses unless permission is granted you for a meal, without waiting for it to be readied. But enter when you are invited, and disperse when you have taken your meal, without settling down to chat. Indeed such conduct torments the Prophet, and he is ashamed of (asking) you (to leave). (The Qur’an, 33:53)

Thus, they were told not to enter the house of the Prophet unless given permission. For this reason, nowadays we seek permission when we want to enter the shrines because these are the houses of the Prophet. Furthermore, when those people went to the house of the Prophet, they used to sit there waiting for lunch or dinner because they regarded his food as blessed.

Then after having their food they would want to listen to some hadith. Imagine what the Prophet would have suffered with if all the people of Medina did the same thing. For this reason, Allah instructed them to ask for permission before entering the Prophet’s house; and if invited, to not wait for the food to be served, and if invited for a meal, to kindly leave afterwards instead of desiring to enjoy their time listening to the Prophet (33:53).

Thus, the Prophet suffered a great deal, though he was patient. He did not ask them to be considerate towards him or to do something for him. The only thing that he asked of them was to love for his family, the Ahlul Bayt:

قُلْ لَا أَسْأَلُكُمْ عَلَيْهِ أَجْرًا إِلَّا الْمَوَدَّةَ فِي الْقُرْبَىٰ

“Say, ‘I do not ask of you any reward for it except affection for (my) relatives.’ (The Qur’an, 42: 23)

Indeed, it was God who told the Prophet to inform them that if they want to show their appreciation to him, they should show love towards his family. Note that the question was not to love him; it was to love his household. In other words, they had to prove their love for the Prophet by loving his household.

To show love towards the family of the Prophet, the most natural choice would be Lady Fatimah al-Zahra, because she was daughter of the Prophet and the closest one to him. It is true that Imam Hasan and Imam Husayn were his grandchildren or that Imam Ali was his cousin and son in law, but the closest one to him was Lady Fatimah.

Everyone knew that she was the one about whom the Prophet said that she was not only his daughter, but she was indeed part of him and she was his own soul. For example, Jabir ibn Abdullah al-Ansari reports that just before the demise of the Prophet, Lady Fatima went to see the Prophet and bent over his body and cried. The Prophet opened his eyes and talked to her. Among the things that the Prophet said was:

لأنك مني وأنا منك وأنت بضعة مني وروحي التي بين جنبي

...Truly you are from me and I am from you and you are part of me and my own spirit.[8](#)

However, although this was the only thing the Prophet wanted from the people, some did not even observe this much and therefore knowing what is going to happen to his family and progeny after he passed away, the Prophet during his lifetime suffered for this reason as well.[9](#) For example, the Prophet knew what was going to happen to Lady Fatimah, Imam Ali,

Imam Hasan, and Imam Husayn. Lady Fatimah faced so many tragedies in a very short time after his death that she became very severely ill and frail. During the last day of her life, she had a dream of her father. The Prophet told the Lady in this dream:

هلمي إلي يا بنية فإني إليك مشتاق

My dear daughter, come to me quickly; I am eager to be with you.[10](#)

Lady Fatimah knew that this was a true dream because the Prophet himself had said, “Whoever sees me in a dream he has seen me.”[11](#) Then the Prophet said, “O Fatimah! Tonight you will be with me.”

[1.](#) The world

2. Full text of this hadith in Arabic is as follows:

ذكر عند أبي عبدالله عليه السلام البلاء وما يخص الله عزوجل به المؤمن، فقال: سئل رسول الله صلى الله عليه وآله من أشد الناس بلاء في الدنيا فقال: النبيون ثم الامثل فالامثل، وابتلي المؤمن بعد على قدر إيمانه وحسن أعماله فمن صح إيمانه وحسن عمله اشتد بلاؤه ومن سخط إيمانه وضعف عمله قل بلاؤه.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid. p. 253.

5. Musakkin al-Fu'ad 'Inda Faqd al-Ahibbah wa al-Awlad, p. 125.

6. Al-Kafi, vol. 2, p. 256. The original text is as follows:

قال أبو عبد الله دُعي النبي (ص) إلى طعام ، فلما دخل منزل الرجل نظر إلى دجاجة فوق حائط قد باضت ، فتقع البيضة على وتد في حائط فتبتت عليه ولم تسقط ولم تنكسر ، فتعجب النبي (ص) منها ، فقال له الرجل : أعجبتَ من هذه البيضة ؟.. فوالذي بعثك بالحق ما رُزئت شيئاً قطاً ، فنهض رسول الله (ص) ولم يأكل من طعامه شيئاً ، وقال : مَنْ لم يُرزأ (أي من لم يصاب) فما لله فيه من حاجة

7. Bihar Al-Anwar, vol. 39, p. 55; Kashf al-Ghummah fi Ma'rifat al-A'immah, vol. 2, p. 537.

8. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 28, p. 77.

9. In Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 28, there is a chapter with 43 hadiths on Allahs swt informing the Prophet and the Prophet informing his nation about the injustice and hostility towards Ahlul Bayt.

10. Bihar al-Anwar, vol. 43, p. 179.

11. Ibid. vol. 58, p. 211.

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