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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. Part 2 continues to expound on the importance of suffering and why those who are closer to God may suffer more in this world. This paper is based on the second part of two lectures delivered by the author in Dar al-Zahra in Qum during the Fatimiyyah commemoration, 2011.

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The Islamic Understanding of Hardship, Part 2

Mohammad Ali Shomali

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

Abstract

In the previous part, we studied the fact that suffering is a reality of our life; it is so important that more or less, every religion has given an account of human suffering and pain. In Islam, we find that in the Quran and in the teachings of the Prophet and the Ahlul Bayt, this issue receives great attention. Continuing with our brief account of Islamic understanding of hardship, we continue to expound on the importance of suffering and why those who are closer to God may suffer more in this world.

Suffering: A reality of Life

As said in the previous part, when Adam and Eve descended on Earth, their tests and trials began.

Likewise, there are ongoing tests for us as well. Either we can be thankful to Allah and succeed, or we will show lack of gratitude to Allah and fail:

إِنَّا هَدَيْنَاهُ السَّبِيلَ إِمَّا شَاكِرًا وَإِمَّا كَفُورًا

Indeed, We have guided him to the way, be he grateful or ungrateful. [1](#)

These tests occur at every moment, and cannot be without some difficulty or pain. No test can be passed by all people; otherwise it would not be a test:

أَحْسِبَ النَّاسُ أَنْ يُتْرَكُوا أَنْ يَقُولُوا آمَنَّا وَهُمْ لَا يُفْتَنُونَ

Do the people suppose that they will be let off because they say: ‘We have faith,’ and they will not be tested?[2](#)

So it is not enough to believe and embrace Islam. It is not enough that we that we have managed to become faithful people without expecting that we will be tried again and again. We are always tested and tried. The test is an ongoing one:

أَمْ حَسِبْتُمْ أَنْ تُدْخَلُوا الْجَنَّةَ وَلَمَّا يَأْتِكُمْ مَثَلُ الَّذِينَ خَلَوْا مِنْ قَبْلِكُمْ ۚ مَسَّتْهُمُ الْبَأْسَاءُ وَالضَّرَاءُ وَزُلْزِلُوا حَتَّى يَقُولَ الرَّسُولُ وَالَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مَعَهُ مَتَى نَصُرُ اللَّهُ ۚ أَلَا إِنَّ نَصْرَ اللَّهِ قَرِيبٌ

Do you suppose that you shall enter Paradise though there has not yet come to you the like of (what befell) those who went before you? Stress and distress befell them and they were convulsed until the Apostle and the faithful who were with him said: ‘When will Allah’s help (come)?’ Look! Allah’s help is indeed near![3](#)

Do we expect to be able to enter heaven while we have not experienced what the previous nations have experienced when they were put under pressure? They were shaken to the extent that they said, “When will Allah’s help come?” The fact that they were shaken is very striking. They were moved and shaken by many difficulties to such an extent that their Prophet and messenger, and those who believed in him said, “When will Allah’s help come?”, indicating that they were pushed to the very edge of their patience, which of course, they did not lose entirely.

The necessity of Tests and Trials

Being tested and tried is not to be deemed negatively. Indeed, it offers opportunities. This is very encouraging for people who appreciate it, because we can then seize the opportunity at every moment. For example, sportsmen who want to set a record sometimes have to work for years until the Olympic

Games take place, during which they may be able to set a record. Thus, the practicing and competition they perform in their own country is not counted, because it must be in an international competition where the international referees are present, to register the set records.

However, in our journey towards Allah, we do not need an audience, nor any national or international assembly. At each and every moment, between us and Allah, we can set a record and gain something. Sometimes, we may forget what we have done. Indeed, the believers are those who forget their good deeds, although Allah will never forget. He keeps them for us. So, these tests and trials are an opportunity for those who appreciate that at each and every moment, we can achieve success and make progress.

However, we can also look at this from another perspective, which is that these tests and trials help us detach ourselves from this *dunya*⁴ and the material life. When we are born in this *dunya*, there are elements that make us very attached to it. This physical world is the very first thing upon which we open our eyes to, and for many, the last thing we see. We think this is the only thing we have as we do not see the hidden aspect of the world (*ghayb*).

Many do not experience spirituality or have been in the company of holy people. We begin and end our days thinking about this life and what we are going to do for ourselves and our families. We are so concerned about it, to the extent that Allah says:

﴿ يَا أَيُّهَا الَّذِينَ آمَنُوا مَا لَكُمْ إِذَا قِيلَ لَكُمْ أَنْفِرُوا فِي سَبِيلِ اللَّهِ أَنْتَقَلْتُمْ إِلَى الْأَرْضِ ﴿٥﴾ أَرْضَيْتُمْ بِالْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا مِنَ الْآخِرَةِ ﴿٦﴾ فَمَا مَتَاعُ الْحَيَاةِ الدُّنْيَا فِي الْآخِرَةِ إِلَّا قَلِيلٌ ﴿٧﴾ ﴾

O you who have faith! What is the matter with you that when you are told: ‘Go forth in the way of Allah,’ you sink heavily to the ground?’⁵

Allah asks us what has happened to us that we have become so attached to and fixated with this world, that even when the Prophet invites us to join him in struggling for the sake of Allah, we are fervently attached to this life. It is by no means a perfect life.

Indeed, it is filled with troubles and pains and yet we are still attached to it. Imagine what would happen if this life was free from pain and suffering —if there were no illness, no calamities, no death; if people did not lose their money and go bankrupt or lose their respect, and if they did not become old and weak. If it were like that, who would obey Allah and who would be ready to depart from this world?

As mentioned in hadiths, if there were no poverty, death, and illness, many would not have worshipped Allah.

We also have this tendency to feel self-sufficient:

However, there are mistakes that can be prevented or avoided. If we have an enlightened vision with insight and wisdom, and if our hearts are free from love for this world, many of the mistakes made by individuals or societies can be avoided. The only way to rid ourselves of this *hubb al-dunya* is to give up the material objects we are attached to. For example, we could start with money.

The Prophet and Purifying People

The Prophet was sent to purify people:

خُذْ مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ صَدَقَةً تُطَهِّرُهُمْ وَتُزَكِّيهِمْ

Take charity from their possessions to cleanse them and purify them thereby... [12](#)

وَيُزَكِّيهِمْ وَيُعَلِّمُهُمُ الْكِتَابَ وَالْحِكْمَةَ

...to purify them and to teach them the Book and wisdom... [13](#)

How did the Prophet do so? Did he ask people to become like those who isolate themselves from society and busy themselves with remembrance (*dhikr*), glorification (*tasbih*), and fasting? This is actually *not* how the Prophet purified. He asked the people to be active in their social lives, whilst sorting out their personal and spiritual problems.

People who do not have deep insight want to resolve problems by keeping themselves and others apart from society and by offering physical exercises, while assuming the problem will be solved. However, the Prophet knew better. He traveled around, searching for and finding those who are ill [14](#) as he knew he must sort out the problems in the hearts of people. One of the important lessons taught by the Prophet is asking people to give *khums* [15](#) and charity (*sadaqah*). [16](#)

خُذْ مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ صَدَقَةً

Take charity from their possessions... [17](#)

However, this is not merely because there are needy people. Even if there are no people who are in need, we still have to look for opportunities to give charity. After the Imam al-Zaman (atf) [18](#) comes to establish justice and equity and then there will be no poor people. In order to look for ways to spend charity, people will be in search to spend money for Allah's sake. Thus, the need to give charity is not simply because someone is waiting for our help. What is important is that we need to give. For example, sometimes we donate blood because someone is waiting for our blood, but sometimes we donate blood because we have blood to give even if there is no one in need.

خُذْ مِنْ أَمْوَالِهِمْ صَدَقَةً تُطَهِّرُهُمْ وَتُزَكِّيهِمْ بِهَا

Take charity from their possessions to cleanse them and purify them thereby... [19](#)

So by giving we are purified. If we ask the Prophet to exempt us from giving charity, promising that we will pray, fast, and recite the Qur'an more, it will not suffice. Similarly, if we say we will give as much money as is wanted, but ask to be exempted from prayer and fasting, especially when there are cold nights and hot days, it also does not work. Both must be done together as prayer and giving alms are a summary of Islamic practice:

وَمَا أُمِرُوا إِلَّا لِيَعْبُدُوا اللَّهَ مُخْلِصِينَ لَهُ الدِّينَ حُنَفَاءَ وَيُقِيمُوا الصَّلَاةَ وَيُؤْتُوا الزَّكَاةَ ۚ وَذَلِكَ دِينُ الْقِيَمَةِ

Yet they were not commanded except to worship Allah, dedicating their faith to Him as men of pure faith and to maintain the prayer and pay the zakat. This is the upright religion. [20](#)

There are many practices in Islam, but the most fundamental ones which are the pillars of a Muslim way of life, are prayer and giving alms. A Muslim is the one who is mindful of Allah and tries to benefit others with their money. The one thing we need is to detach ourselves from this *dunya* and free ourselves from our money. Sometimes, we free ourselves voluntarily and sometimes somewhat unwillingly. For example, some give due to bankruptcy or worldwide financial problems such as recession.

Many things can happen, but it is far better to voluntarily give charity rather than facing a problem that prompts us to do so. Sometimes we may wonder why giving *sadaqah* is said to prevent many problems. One reason may be that we have to experience financial restraints so we can choose between giving *sadaqah* and becoming bankrupt. A rational person would surely choose to give voluntarily [21](#) to receive a reward for their action.

Types of Tests and Trials

Allah says in Surah al-Baqarah:

وَلَنَبْلُوَنَّكُمْ بِشَيْءٍ مِنَ الْخَوْفِ وَالْجُوعِ وَنَقْصٍ مِنَ الْأَمْوَالِ وَالْأَنْفُسِ وَالثَّمَرَاتِ

We will surely test you with a measure of fear and hunger and a loss of wealth, lives, and fruits... [22](#)

We get worried knowing that this world does not have permanent peace and security. Though prayers are made for everyone's happiness, this insecurity has occurred throughout the history of mankind. Even in the time of the Prophet, Muslims experienced much fear in Mecca and Madinah. They hardly even

had a short period of complete ease and comfort. They faced many difficulties in Mecca, and continued to do so in Madinah where there were fights with the pagans, problems with the People of the Book who betrayed them, with the hypocrites, and those who wanted to assassinate the Prophet.

Fear, hunger and thirst are parts of the fabric of this life. If we always had security, adequate food and drink, good health, and loaded bank accounts, then we would not be concerned about preparing ourselves for our eternal life. Thus, sometimes we are tested by losing our money, or by losing our beloved ones, or by losing the fruits of our efforts (2: 155).

In the above verse, “*lives*” (“*al-Anfus*”) can refer to either ourselves giving our lives, or the death of our children, parents, relatives or friends. These are all tests for us.

“*Thamarat*” literally means *fruits*, but can also refer to the fruits of outcome of our hard work and efforts in this *dunya*. Sometimes we work hard for many years and establish something good only to see it damaged by someone else. We nurture a project and when it starts bearing fruits, for one reason or another, it is discontinued. We start many projects which are then halted, and we are left with the choice of patiently continuing and refusing to become disheartened or disappointed.

Acquiring Patience as an Outcome of undergoing Tests and Trials

وَبَشِّرِ الصَّابِرِينَ

...and give good news to the patient. 23

All these trials and tests are available to help us achieve patience (*sabr*). No one can achieve it if there are no trials or difficulties. We have to go through difficulties to strengthen our patience. If everything was easy we would not understand of the concept of patience, let alone actually having the quality. Patience is a difficult quality to achieve as it requires practice and hard work. Who are the patient ones?

الَّذِينَ إِذَا أَصَابَتْهُمُ مُصِيبَةٌ قَالُوا إِنَّا لِلَّهِ وَإِنَّا إِلَيْهِ رَاجِعُونَ

...those who, when an affliction visits them, say: ‘Indeed we belong to Allah and to Him do we indeed return.’ 24

This verse confirms that achieving patience requires acknowledging that we are not going to remain here forever. We have come from another origin and we are going back to that origin. This is the concept of achieving patience. If we think that we have always been here and are going to be here forever, thus forgetting that we have come from another dimension of existence and we are going to leave this one to

return to it, then this prevents us from acquiring patience. However, if we realize that this is a temporary life, a transient situation, then we can achieve patience. Remembering death is necessary for everyone desiring patience, because if this *dunya* is the only thing that matters to us, then why would we need to be patient?

The patient ones are those who know and acknowledge that they come from Allah and they will return to Him. For example, we can imagine that we are going for *ziyarah*²⁵ or for Hajj²⁶ which is sometimes difficult. For example, when we are in Mina or in Arafat, life is very difficult, but we remain patient because we know that we have gone there for a purpose, that we have to do certain things there and then we are going to leave.

However, if we forget that we have gone to Arafat or Mina for a purpose and we start to think that we are going to remain there forever, we may wonder how we could manage to survive. Or we may start doing useless things such as building a permanent place or even a palace in Mina completely forgetting that we are only staying there for two or three days. We say that we have to have a palace there and a car, a garden, and servants. We exhaust ourselves, disregarding the rights of other people in order to build because we think that we are going to be there forever. This is the example of life in this *dunya*.

However, if we remember that our life here is only for a short time and we have to work hard to gain something for another world far greater than this, then we can choose to be patient. Thus patience is a great or perhaps the greatest quality.

Patience and Faith

Imam Sadiq is quoted as saying:

الصبر من الايمان بمنزلة الرأس من الجسد ولا ايمان لمن لا صبر له

Patience with respect to faith is like the head with respect to the body. ²⁷

We can have a body without a hand or a leg or even without an eye, but we cannot have a body without a head. Similarly, faith (*Iman*) cannot survive without a head. There must be tests and trials that need painstaking effort to overcome to eventually acquire patience. In this way, we can prepare ourselves to leave this *dunya* at any time; indeed, we will count the days until we leave it because we are not enjoying it, except to gain some provisions for Hereafter (*akhirah*).

Something very beautiful we find in Islam, especially in the school of Ahlul Bayt is that we can have collective hardship. We can share our hardship with each other and as a result, the reward would be shared. The richest people on the Day of Judgment are the people who are patient:

إِنَّمَا يُؤَفِّي الصَّابِرُونَ أَجْرَهُمْ بِغَيْرِ حِسَابٍ

Indeed, the people who are patient would be rewarded without any measure. [28](#)

Can someone be richer than this? On the Day of Judgment, the martyrs will see that a group of people is going into Heaven before them. These martyrs would be surprised and ask to whom those people are. They will say that as martyrs they have given their lives for the sake of Allah. They will be told that those are the patient people (*al-sabirun*). If martyrs died once, these people were dying many times. When we have this problem of suffering, we wish to die soon but we have to wait. So every day and night we are somehow dying. Thus, the richest people are the patient ones who suffered. Among the patient, those at the highest level are the ones who suffered the most in this *dunya*, more than anyone else, from Adam to the last human being. These people are Prophet Muhammad and the Ahlul Bayt, who indeed suffered more than anyone and yet did not deserve to suffer because they never did anything contrary to what Allah wanted and was pleased with.

Before leaving Mecca, Imam Husayn said in his sermon:

لا محيص عن يوم خط بالقلم - رضی اللہ رضانا أهل البيت نصبر على بلائه - ويوفينا أجور الصابرين

There is no way to escape from what Allah has decreed. Allah's pleasure is our pleasure. We are patient. We are ready to endure anything Allah plans for us, and Allah gives us the reward of the patient. [29](#)

The Ahlul Bayt suffered more than anyone else and what is very striking is that their followers can join them in their hardship. And this is open to everyone because it is not based on ethnicity or blood relations. If we have this understanding (*marifah*) and we have the love for the Ahlul Bayt which means that we take their suffering as our own suffering, then we can share with them in their suffering (*musibah*). Then, Allah would register for us the reward of the greatest suffering in the world, which is that of Karbala.

We say in Ziyarah Ashura:

وَاسْأَلُ اللَّهَ بِحَقِّكُمْ وَيَالشَّانَ الَّذِي لَكُمْ عِنْدَهُ أَنْ يُعْطِيَنِي بِمُصَابِي بِكُمْ أَفْضَلَ مَا يُعْطِي مُصَاباً بِمُصِيبَتِهِ

I ask Allah to give me, because of my suffering with respect to you, the greatest thing that He has ever given to anyone who has suffered. [30](#)

What a great tragedy was the tragedy of Karbala and Imam Husayn's martyrdom. And what a great tragedy was the tragedy of the demise of Lady Fatimah. Thus, there is a possibility for us to connect

ourselves to the Ahlul Bayt and to have such unity with them that we are counted as one of them, those whom Allah will reward for sharing in the greatest suffering in history.

- [1.](#) Surah Al-Insan, 76:3.
- [2.](#) Surah Al-‘Ankabut, 29:2.
- [3.](#) Surah Al-Baqarah, 2:214.
- [4.](#) The world.
- [5.](#) Surah At-Tawbah, 9:38.
- [6.](#) Surah Al-‘Alaq, 96:6-7.
- [7.](#) Indeed it is forgetting God that leads to being attached to worldly pleasure or position, which in turn leads to a stronger level of forgetfulness.
- [8.](#) Bihar al-Anwar V.70, P.90 & 119; Al Khisal V. 1, P.25; Kanz al-Fawaed V. 1, P.217; Tafsil Wasail al-Shia Ila Tahsil Masail al-Sharia V. 16, P. 9; Tasnif Ghurar al-Hikam wa Durar ul-Kalim P. 142.
- [9.](#) Mistake.
- [10.](#) Sin.
- [11.](#) The idea is very much accepted by Muslim scholars. Furthermore, in some books, this has been cited as a hadith, but I have not been so far able to find a reference for it in major collections of hadith.
- [12.](#) Surah At-Tawbah, 9: 103.
- [13.](#) Surah ‘Ali ‘Imran, 3: 164, Surah Al-Jumu’a, 62:2.
- [14.](#) Tasnif Ghurar al-Hikam wa Durar al-Kalim p. 109, Nahj ul-Balaghah, Sermin 108. The hadith is as follows:
The Prophet was like a roaming physician who has set ready his ointments and heated his instruments. He used them wherever the need arose for curing blind hearts, deaf ears, and dumb tongues. He followed with his medicines the spots of negligence and places of perplexity.
- [15.](#) One fifth tax.
- [16.](#) Legal alms.
- [17.](#) Surah At-Tawbah, 9: 103.
- [18.](#) The twelfth Imam.
- [19.](#) Surah At-Tawbah, 9: 103.
- [20.](#) Surah Al-Bayyina, 98:5.
- [21.](#) Surah An-Noor, 24:49.
- [22.](#) Surah Al-Baqarah, 2: 155.
- [23.](#) Surah Al-Baqarah, 2: 155.
- [24.](#) Surah Al-Baqarah, 2: 156.
- [25.](#) Pilgrimage.
- [26.](#) Pilgrimage to Mecca (or Hajj), an obligation upon every Muslim to complete at least once in his or her life.
- [27.](#) Al-Kafi, V. 2, P. 87 & 89.
- [28.](#) Surah Az-Zumar, 39: 10.
- [29.](#) Bihar Al- Anwar V.44 P.367, Al-Luhuf Fi Qatla Al-Tufuf P.61.
- [30.](#) Ziyarah Ashura.

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